

Responses to Manushi

A Roof Over Her Head

I have just read your article, *Who am I* in Issue 94 with much interest. I was reminded of the prayer that I do every morning that ends with:

*Tad Brahma nishkalmah
Na cha bhutsandha*

(I am not just a heap of body.
I am Brahma.)

These are my favourite lines.

Anyway, the reason that I am writing to you is to reiterate the need to have “a roof over her head” that SEWA tries to address. Perhaps you know that 40 percent of the SEWA bank’s loans are for housing and insisting on women’s ownership. Our thrust is not only to promote ownership of housing but also ownership of all kinds of assets — land, workplace, cattle, equipment, shareholding of cooperatives, savings, and even identity and ration cards.

While reading the part on the havoc of nationalism, I liked the probing questions you asked, such as, are Kashmir Muslim women determining the choice of their refuge? One must find out more.

**Ela R. Bhatt,
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Most Unsporting

I agree with the views expressed by Professor Bharat R. Sant in his article, *Dangerous Seduction*, in Issue 94. At a time when there is a greater all-around awareness of cigarette smoking’s serious ill-effects, at a time when a global war has virtually been declared against smoking, it is quite unfortunate to find some vested

interests putting so much time and money into negating all efforts at minimising (even if it cannot be eradicated) this evil. It is disturbing to find such rampant back-door promotion of cigarette smoking along with total insensitivity and apathy by the powers that be.

As has been rightly pointed out by Professor Sant, “It does not require a great knowledge of psychology to realise the profound impact the word ‘Wills’ was making on the minds of the young people,” especially when the word appears on the uniform of their sports heroes.

The results of the mini-survey cited by the author, including the possibility that some youngsters believe “that smoking improves the performance of players”, are quite alarming.

Furthermore, the contention of the tobacco industry that its “advertisements are not aimed at teenagers and preteens” and are “designed only to get existing smokers to switch brands” is not only misplaced, but unacceptable. Our own experience shows that more often than



not, young minds do get influenced by their role models (whether it is their favourite film stars, sports heroes, or someone else) in the choice of a particular brand — be it a toilet soap, a two-wheeler, or even a cold drink.

As Professor Sant correctly stated, it is an undeniable fact that “tobacco is inextricably linked to a number of health problems.” And more than the active smokers, the “passive smokers” are exposed to the highest health risk. Thus even if the smokers wish to claim the right to smoke themselves to a quick death, they certainly have no business or mandate to kill the passive smokers by their indifference and insensitivity. Nor can the tobacco industry claim the fundamental right to propagate its business when that right so clearly transgresses onto the very health of the people.

As for the so called “statutory warning” printed on cigarette packets, it is a big joke. Sometime ago, I published a satirical short story in Telugu on this subject. The point of the story was: “If the government and the industry are really serious or concerned about it, where is the need to use the prefix ‘statutory warning’ — to the actual warning ‘cigarette smoking is injurious to health’?” Does this implicitly tell the people that this health warning is printed only because it is made mandatory by the statute, and that they do not really mean it? Are the government and the industry trying to fool the people?

If a ban on tobacco cultivation is likely to affect “more than 45 lakh people”, perhaps the government can put the money that could be saved on treatment of smoke-related disease to

good use. If a ban was instituted, the money saved due to the decline in cancer cases, etc., could be used to rehabilitate those whose livelihood will be adversely affected.

As has been aptly pointed out in *Dangerous Seduction*, we as a nation appear to contradict ourselves. How can we explain the rationale behind the support and patronage extended to Wills to publicise itself in such a grand way under the guise of popular sports — while we ban advertising for the promotion of cigarettes? And although “there was hardly a murmur of protest from any quarter about Wills’ sponsorship of the World Cup”, it is indeed most unsporting on the part of Wills to have used sports for its promotion. Unlike Professor Sant, apparently not many people could see the evil in disguise; or even if they had realised it, were afraid of raising their voices of protest for fear of being branded as “unsportive” and “anti-cricket”!

This article exposes the intentions of those who are insensitive to the health of the people — and the world as a whole. It should set the intelligentsia thinking. I only hope that those who have the power to do something will take positive action. I compliment Professor Sant for writing such an educative and informative article.

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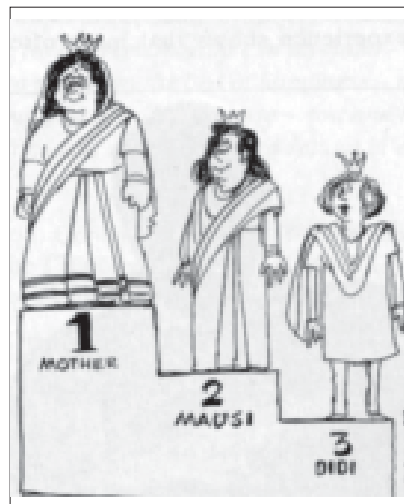
Extending Apnapan

This is with reference to Ms Lakshmi Bhargava’s response to my letter to **Manushi** in Issue 94. I wish to defend my stand and hope that Ms Bhargava will see my point without any biases. It is natural for any Indian who has grown up in the “cocoon of our culture” to feel indignant against any show of disrespect towards our values and traditions. But Ms Bhargava has

clearly misunderstood my intent, which was to point out the dangers of the hypocrisy and double standards that are likely to be concealed within them.

Madhu Kishwar, in her article, *When India “Missed” the Universe*, (Issue 88) also advocates using these *didi/amma* moulds in order to escape the “sexual” role and therefore gain respectability. I object to such an attitude requiring only women and not men to conform to certain set norms if they want to be treated with respect. It is a warm and positive part of our tradition to address friends and neighbours with familial expressions like *didi*, *amma*, or *bhaiyya*.

However, I would like to ask Ms Bhargava what happens to our *apnapan* when a young European woman decides to travel in India in one of those very “warm” and “friendly” second class compartments in shorts and a T-shirt, which her culture finds perfectly normal and acceptable? It is highly probable that some of these “respectful” young boys and men won’t think twice before leering at the foreign woman, passing lewd comments, and even harassing her. Why? Because she is nothing like the *didi/amma* that they know and hence not qualified for the same respect or because she doesn’t know even how to “pose” as a *didi* or *amma*?



Are her concerns, attitudes, and sense of morality not “sisterly” enough? Isn’t this the same attitude these nice young men have towards “non-traditional appearing” Indian women?

Wouldn’t it be so much better if this *apnapan* could be extended beyond our own cultural confines to encompass the world at large and not just be reserved for people who fit into our traditional moulds and notions of respectability?

It is obvious that Madhu Kishwar’s interaction with the drunk man on the road is a classic case of her realising that the situation could be saved only if she appears to him as a *didi*. . . I am sure her image as a *didi* is more important from the point of view of the drunk man than for herself.

Most of us know that the terms “*auntyji*” and “*uncleji*” are typically Indian phenomena. In the West children do not refer to friends and neighbours as “uncle” and “aunty” in this way. I fail to understand then why Ms. Bhargava finds *babuji/bhabhiji* warm and acceptable but *auntyji*, *uncleji* cold and unfeeling (sic). (Is *mummyji* acceptable?) While it is true that in many Indian homes, the maid “servant” (sic) calls the lady of the house “*mummyji*” and the rest of the family members likewise, it is also true in most places that at tea time, the maid squats on the floor, unlike *Mummyji* and the rest. *Apnapan* does come with its own terms and conditions. It’s good to keep in mind the flip side of such loaded coins.

India has a rich and wonderful cultural heritage. We have more than enough to feel proud about. Let us not make the mistake of being proud of the wrong things — it will only serve to close our minds further.

**Anu Venugopalan,
Bombay** □