

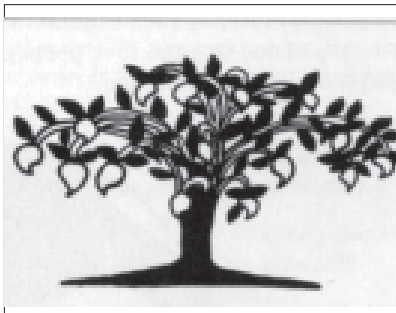
## Responses to Manushi

### Flaws of Indian Democracy

“Our democracy will remain seriously flawed if it fails to yield space to women” — Madhu Kishwar (*Out of the Zenana Dabba - Strategies for Enhancing Women’s Political Representation*, **Manushi** Issue 96). This is only partially true because our democracy will remain seriously flawed if it fails to yield space not only to women, but to all the disadvantaged sections of society. The gender-based handicap, although important, is not overridingly so. Because our multi-dimensional society is in constant motion and is interconnected in complex ways, it can perhaps be better understood if looked at holistically, rather than in terms of a simplistic gender dichotomy.

As a social category, Indian women are as highly differentiated as our society as a whole is. Socio-economic interests influence our perception and priorities more than our gender does. For example, there is no appreciable tilt of women either in favour of or against a political formation that condones *sati* or other such issues which are generally biased against women. So, if Jayalalitha rules Tamil Nadu or if Indira Gandhi becomes our Prime Minister, the lot of Indian women remains unaffected. Whether there are more women in politics or not, it is not likely to make any material difference to most Indian women.

The disadvantaged sections of our society, including a large body of women, are in a great majority, but the reins of power elude them. Despite our democracy, a large number of Indians live in sub-human conditions, whereas a small minority continues to lead a life of wasteful affluence.



The disadvantaged sections’ only strength lies in their large numbers because they will never be able to match the ruling class in terms of resources. In terms of forces, the greatest power is an idea that can catch the imagination of the people, because only then can it transform into a mighty material force that can overthrow the most powerful ruling class. Therefore, the most fundamental battle should be fought in the realm of ideas — and organisation.

In fact, the basic issue is not that of enhancing women’s political representation, but of enhancing the awareness, level of education, employment opportunities, and potential for inde-

pendence of the disadvantaged sections of the society, including women. The real issue is not the number of women in politics, but the content of politics, the quality of life and the type of society we live in.

With the highest literacy rate and the distinction of having the first fully-literate district, Ernakulum, the state of Kerala presents us with an alternative. Kerala has a strong library movement run by Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishat. One can find the women of Kerala working not only in every nook and cranny of India, but also abroad. Another unusual fact is that in Kerala, until recently, prostitution was not visible. Kerala ranks so high on the Human Development Index, that it can be compared with highly developed countries. On a visit to Kerala a couple of years ago, I found that even roadside eating joints served boiled water for drinking. I also noticed a camp set up by the youth wing of a political party, although no elections were scheduled. When I reached the guest house of Idukki Dam at 9 p. m., I found a two-day conference of women political activists from the neighbouring areas in progress, with neither male volunteers nor party bosses around. It was an all-women affair.

The above observations may not be directly linked but they are interconnected and present a picture of a

society which contains a large body of literate, educated, socially aware, and active citizens who form the bedrock of its democratic polity. In Kerala, women are active in the political arena and their status is much better than elsewhere in India.

Madhu Kishwar concludes: "The license-permit-kickback *raj* has to be thoroughly dismantled before democracy can work in this country and we can begin to live as free citizens and participate effectively in the governance of our country." I disagree with this statement. What has the dismantling of a similar regime in the erstwhile Soviet Union, or present day Russia, resulted in? Organised crime seems to be the most thriving industry, despite the fact that their society was much more educated and developed than its Indian counterpart.

This is not the place, nor am I competent, to discuss the socio-political dimensions of our society. However, access to information and transparent functioning is the first step towards the effective participation of people in their governance. Transparency alone can make democracy meaningful for the dispossessed millions. This should be our second freedom struggle.

**Hasan Abdullah, New Delhi**

*What we are witnessing in Russia today is not primarily a consequence of liberalisation but in large part a product of more than seventy years of a state-controlled economy and polity which functioned more like a tyrannical empire than a democracy. Transparency is indeed a necessary component of democracy but accountability is the ultimate litmus test. A government could be transparently corrupt and oppressive as is increasingly the case in our country. Bribes are being taken openly and brazenly. Citizens are being harassed and robbed in full public view. There is*

*very little secrecy being maintained in the day-to-day extortion rackets run by government employees.*

**Madhu Kishwar**

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### A Wife's Response

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I have to write this letter after coming across your last issue of **Manushi** (Issue No. 96) which carries an article by Professor Sah. This article really depicts our society well and carries a message for the women of today.

So girls, it augurs well to look at the bank balance and station in life first, and then consider matrimony. Not just 'two meals and love' which was the folly of my time, which deprived you of both 'Maya and Ram'.

So girls, banish the dreams of the Taj Mahal and Mills and Boon from your minds, love as such is nonsense. The Taj Mahal that the love poets go ga-ga over is just a mirage.

We ought to thank Professor Sah for his broadminded article. Now he carries this one step further — marriage is just a contract for living together and having sex. That brings up another thought: can a dissatisfied wife sleep around till she gets satisfaction? As Professor Sah seems to have window shopped for the love which he never found, I feel it's almost the same, or is that a man's prerogative?

The man likes to have his say on women's lib and women's rights, while the little woman is pottering in the garden or getting roasted in the kitchen and is presumed to be happy minding her own business. This also shows that the only options women have are the ones given to them by men; all their civil codes and rights fall flat.

**Nalini Sah, Kanpur,  
Uttar Pradesh**

