



## Responses to Manushi

### Reactionary Recipe?

I have the deepest respect for spiritually-motivated sexual abstinence in Indian culture. But I was appalled by Madhu Kishwar's article romanticising the virtue and power of Indian women's sexual restraint in all domains of life (*Women, Sex and Marriage, Manushi No. 99*). In a country where marriage is early and more universal than anywhere else, it makes little sense, however, to suggest that spiritually motivated abstinence is at all representative of the motives in most of the self-imposed abstinence instances she describes. Indian traditions of marital property and inheritance make it very difficult for women to inherit under the best of circumstances, as Bina Agarwal's work has pointed out. Women remarrying often face the prospect of being completely disenfranchised from the assets of their parents and the families of their first husbands. The point is that women often face a rather stark choice between sexual independence and access to family and material resources. A cultural ideology which interprets that kind of abstinence as a virtue fails completely to locate it in the inequitable economic and social power relations which bring it about. Her eagerness to bash Western feminism makes her lose sight of some basic sociological realities.

It is simply inaccurate to assert that in the West women who show sexual restraint are necessarily ridiculed and scorned. To the extent that

western women avoid the unsatisfying, exploitative marriages Kishwar describes, they show an autonomy and self-determination that most Indian women can only dream of. For some of them it is a spiritual choice; for others, a consequence of growing older and being widowed. And as for the power of maintaining low-key sexual restraint within marriage, there are myriad examples of women who have done this in the West when their husbands have strayed. Eleanor Roosevelt and Hillary Clinton immediately come to mind.

Madhu Kishwar's reactionary article sets Western ideas up as monolithic, and crudely contrasts Indian ideas with them. And she romanticises Indian ideas in part simply because they are not Western. I would be interested in knowing what Madhu Kishwar's colleagues working with victims of domestic violence think of her essay, since it seems to advocate a numb subordination, self-abnegation and the acceptance of disparities in power.

She might be interested to read Nancy Scheper-Hughes' book titled *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*. In it, the author distinguishes between "strategy" and "tactic", the former being the plan of someone with considerable control over her own life, and the latter being the reaction to circumstances of someone for whom there are few options. It seems to me that she describes defensive and tactical behaviour, and elevating it to something much greater.

I found Madhu Kishwar's article very provocative, as I often find the contents of **Manushi**.

**Margaret Greene, Washington D.C., U.S.A.**

*I was not romanticising; I was describing the actual life decisions taken by the women I interviewed. They have a strong notion of what among their actual choices in life will comport best with their own integrity, and a view of how to lead a good life that is rooted in their own spiritual heritage. They did not advocate "women's sexual restraint in all domains of life". Where do you find this notion in what I described?*

*Nowhere in my article is sexual abstinence derived from "numb subordination, self-abnegation, and the acceptance of disparities in power" elevated to a desirable outcome for women. In fact, for the women I describe, the situation is quite the opposite from what you theorise. They make a careful distinction between mutually desired relations, including sexual relations, between two people who treat each other with respect, and "the numb subordination, self-abnegation and the acceptance of disparities in power" that so frequently results from making sexual fulfillment some absolute measure of a life worth living that it has become in so many Western cultures we call modern.*

*What the women in the article demonstrate is that there are many things dear to them besides the*

opportunity to have sex under circumstances and at phases in their life histories where those relations can be undermining other elements of their life that are more vital for them and for those they hold dear.

If you had the least acquaintance with my work and my life it would rapidly disabuse you of the notion that I am one to underestimate basic sociological realities. If you were to look more closely at the work of Bina Agarwal that you use as an authority, for example, you would find that many of the key elements of the activism, research and theory building that she relies on come from work I, along with other like-minded Indian women, pioneered. It might interest you to know that when in the early 80s **Manushi** took up the issue of property rights, especially with regard to land, many of the feminists who are today upset and angry at my ideas on sexuality were even more vigorously opposed to property rights issue. They dubbed it as proof of my "bourgeois feminism". Property, they argued, was a bourgeois disease which ought to be abolished rather than strengthened. I am glad that property rights issue has finally become fashionable among the feminist establishment.

That very many women in the West suffer scorn and ridicule if they are not engaged in whatever is currently defined as a "fulfilling sexual relationship" is not disputed by most western women I have read on this topic, nor by those with whom I have discussed these issues; but the issue is not central to the validity of the descriptions of the lives of the women given in my article. I admit that what I describe may not fit in with some recent views in the world media that focus obsessively on self-development as the ruling goal of life for both men and women, to the exclusion of many other considerations that are more

valued by those not so immersed in that culture. Perhaps that by itself is sufficient to qualify me as a "reactionary".

In any case, many of my colleagues (including a fair number from the West) involved in opposing domestic and other violence against women have commented on my article. A few have echoed your concerns. But the large majority indicated to me a sense of relief that their own experiences, trials and achievements were accurately reflected in some of the lives I recounted. They were happy to read that, for these women, and also for themselves, I was openly showing that a self-determined life does not have to be ruled by fashions regarding sex but can be decided in terms of each woman's most dearly held values.

I join with Nancy Schepper-Hughes and so many other women in hoping, and struggling for the day when women all over the world, living West, South, and in every other direction, will be unchallenged in possession of all the elements necessary to live a life of meaning, dignity and independence. No choices made



by women in this terrible world will be truly free until that day.

**Madhu Kishwar**

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### Thought Provoking

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I really appreciated well-researched and thought-provoking article *Women's Marginal Role in Politics* (**Manushi No. 97**). The factors responsible for the marginalisation of women in post-independence Indian politics and the detailed documentation on parties and female MPs was what directly caught my interest. Madhu Kishwar's remarks on the correspondence between caste and openness to a gender perspective was something of an eye-opener for me. I didn't realise that *savarna* castes with their background in the 19th century reform movement are on the whole more open to women's issues than BCs and OBCs which lack this historical experience. I guess this was the reason why the UF-government was reluctant to launch the reservation bill. The phenomenon has its Swedish parallels; in the early 20th century the liberal bourgeois parties put the fight for equal citizenship for men and women high on their agendas whereas the socialist parties stressed the class-perspective at the cost of a gender perspective.

**Eva Hellman, Stockholm, Sweden**

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### Fair Portrayal

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This is in response to the article on Kashmir: *We Need a Surgeon's Knife...* in **Manushi No. 103**. This report has touched upon most of the aspects of militancy in Kashmir, including a fair analysis of what led to militancy and terrorism in Kashmir. Madhu Kishwar is absolutely right when she says that the promised plebiscite should have been held in Kashmir. It is a bit arrogant to expect the Kashmiri people to have the same kind of amnesiac atti-

tude towards the question as the politicians ruling India have.

She has also written about how every election in Kashmir has been rigged except the one that was held when Morarji Desai was the prime minister. Indeed, the people of Kashmir have a lot of respect for Morarji Desai. Unfortunately, the fact is that no other Indian politician has shown the same kind of fairness towards the people of Kashmir and most educated Kashmiris believe that Kashmir has always been treated like a colony by New Delhi.

I think, however, that Madhu Kishwar's article would have been even more accurate and revealing had she talked to the Kashmiri Hindu community and gathered their views on various issues. Had she visited their dwelling places in Jammu (which for most parts are tents), she would have got an idea of the kind of sufferings they are going through. Also, several other aspects of the current turmoil would have come up. Of course, communal divide should not be made the focus of the Kashmir, but it seems fair enough to get the point of view of all the parties concerned.

I am quite impressed with **Manushi's** journalistic insight except the journal seems a wee bit conservative to me. For instance, isn't it good that grown up people should choose their own mates, rather than let their parents do it for them? Is it really a debate? However, **Manushi** stands apart from the other magazines because it is not a glossy product churned out to rake in money.

**Syed Anwar Owais, Srinagar,  
Kashmir**

*You have correctly pointed out to a serious limitation of my report. I regret that I failed to include an account of the very special problems being faced by Kashmiri Hindus. We hope concerned Kashmiris like you will help fill this gap.*

**Madhu Kishwar** □

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