

Responses to Manushi

Torture vs Rights

The APCLC report on Kashmir (MANUSHI 104), particularly the section concerning torture was disturbing, though, unfortunately, not surprising. I see no moral or legal justification for torture. However, the exact legal status of police or military torture has never been quite clear to me. Is India like Israel, where some degree of torture in custody is considered legally acceptable? Or is torture simply a case of assault under the law which is rarely prosecuted because of lack of evidence? It may be helpful to have a debate on the issue, going into questions not only of human rights, but also of the problems of obtaining evidence from suspects, viewed from a police point of view.

I was touched by S.A. Owais's letter about the killings of Pandits in Ganderbal. Unhappily, the recent killings in Prankot (Jammu) have given Owais more to torment his spirit. All I can say to him is that a lot of us do try and look at people as human beings instead of simply tokens of a particular religion, race or nationality; but only a few speak up as openly and articulately as he has done.

Madhu Kishwar's diatribe against the "divine" Nehru-Gandhi family was mildly entertaining but ultimately defeated by its heavy-handedness. There is not a little irony in the preoccupation of journalists of stature with lightweights like Sonia Gandhi and the Congress Party's ridiculous dependency on them. Isn't the

attention paid to them by MANUSHI a testament to their power? What if Sonia and her brood preened and postured for power but no one important paid them any attention?

K.V. Bapa Rao, Los Angeles, USA

If Sonia Gandhi is a lightweight in the Congress Party, who do you think is a heavyweight?

Madhu Kishwar

Settlement in Kashmir

Madhu Kishwar's *The Tragedy of Kashmir* (MANUSHI 103) was another well-written and studied article from her deft hands. As well informed as she always makes sure to be, I was surprised by her mention of the "plebiscite promised at the time of accession". It was only after the Pakistan attack on Kashmir that India agreed to hold a plebiscite and this is part of the UN resolution. The plebiscite was conditional on Pakistan withdrawing its troops from occupied areas of Kashmir. India never got a chance to hold a plebiscite. Pakistan attacked Kashmir just when Maharaja Hari Singh, the ruler of Jammu and Kashmir (father of Karan Singh), was making up his mind about whether to join India or remain independent. Assuming that, because the Maharaja was a Hindu, he would join India, Pakistan attacked Kashmir with the newly acquired arms flowing from their military alliance with the US. Nehru made the mistake of taking the matter to the UN. I say mistake, because the Indian Army was (according to our generals) capable and willing to repel the Pakistani

aggression in Kashmir. A chance to prevent Pakistan from permanent occupation of one third of Kashmir was thus lost, and the "issue" got mired in the UN mess.

At the UN, India agreed to a plebiscite only after Pakistan vacated the occupied areas of Kashmir. Since Pakistan never withdrew its forces, India could never hold a plebiscite in a unified Kashmir. Pakistan has over the years used every international forum to accuse India of not holding the plebiscite, conveniently ignoring the condition to such a plebiscite. The western countries have joined in that chorus because Pakistan is their political ally. But I am surprised that Madhu Kishwar fell for this canard despite her usual thoroughness before writing any article, especially on such a politically charged issue.

The other issue is Article 370. It was a mistake to promise such an arrangement only to one state. If we talk about Kashmir being an integral part of India and at the same time promise special arrangements like Article 370, we indulge in double-talk that will only boomerang on us. And it has, as India's post-1950 history shows. Yes, you are right in saying Article 370 should be applicable to all states, not just Kashmir. There should be the same amount of political autonomy for all states and a unified civil code for all religious communities. There should not be double standards either in politics or in religion. In the US, all states have the same rights in relation to the federal

government. There is also a uniform civil code there for all religious groups and the Muslim community has not made an issue of it. Obviously the uniform civil code hasn't interfered with their religious freedom in the US.

I am no BJP sympathizer. Its past shenanigans and the recent accession to power have proved it is capable of the same political prostitution, double-speak and deceit that began in India with Indira Gandhi. Only Nehru and Shastri were above it. Nehru didn't need it. Shastri would never do it, even if he needed it. No, I have no sympathy for any party in India but certain mistakes from the past have to be corrected. Different religious codes only mean prostitution of the Constitution.

I agree with the five-point solution Kishwar suggested for an honourable settlement in Kashmir. Such a settlement will also help the rest of the Indian states in their relations with the Centre. Although your social and political acumen is sharp and admirable, I realise that a person like Madhu Kishwar would, in all likelihood, shun politics. But she would have my vote for the prime minister's office.

**D.V. Gokhale, Los Angeles,
USA**

Tyranny of Angreziat

The articles *Destroying Minds and Skills : The Dominance of Angreziat in Our Education and Dependent Yet Estranged* (MANUSHI 102) describe the existing conditions truly and accurately. Countless number of times have I argued against this *Angreziat*. And I have argued in English just to impress that I do not subscribe to *Angreziat* not because I do not know English, but because in spite of being able to express myself reasonably well in English and in spite of being

reasonably well read in English I dislike a slavish attitude. Dislike is perhaps too mild a word. Detest would be a better suited word. I have been to Pochumpalli village near Hyderabad once. I have seen for myself the miserable living and working conditions of these weavers of the famous Pochumpalli saris. And after all this I must admit that I would have liked very much to write to you in Hindi. The only thing that prevents me from doing so is the thought that you would then be burdened with translating my letter into English.



The write-up *Far Reaching Reforms : Legal Rights of Women in Turkey* by Canan Arin (MANUSHI 104) is interesting as well as informative. It is really nice of you to invite your readers to write about societies they know well. I look forward to reading something similar about our immediate neighbours—Nepal, Bhutan, Burma, Sri Lanka and Pakistan also.

You have published a translation of Saadat Hasan Manto's story *The Return* (MANUSHI 104). I have read a number of Premchand's stories and I think that he is one of the best short story writers of all times.

The review of Mina Singh's *A Partial Woman* in the same issue was fun, but Latika Padgaonkar was

rather severe. Publishing the prices and names of the publishers of the books reviewed would help readers interested in buying them.

**Lakshmi Bhargava, Bhopal,
Madhya Pradesh**

Title Trouble

I do wish, you'd kept the original title or checked with me before calling my article *The Meos of Mewat: Synthesising Hindu-Muslim identities*, (MANUSHI 103). For specific reasons which I have elaborated elsewhere, I have deliberately avoided using terms such as syncretic, synthesis, composite, etc. These terms tend to reduce the entire complex fabric of the history of intercommunity relations to some sort of mechanistic, acculturation. As a result the role of human agency in negotiating difference and resolving conflict, and the exchanges that take place in the process of living together and cultural encounter get completely negated. I stand by my original title *Representing the Hindu-Muslim civilizational encounter: The Mahabharata of a Community of Muslims*.

**Shail Mayaram, Jaipur,
Rajasthan**

Eye Opening

Shyam Kumari's piece *Harmful Ads* in Readers Forum (MANUSHI 102) made me think hard and better. She has brought forward an ignored but really condemnable aspect of the costly advertising industry. This has brought about a revolutionary change in my thoughts and ideas. Being a commerce student I was planning a career in advertising and marketing but then Kumari's critique has put me to thought.

I hope we keep getting the same stimulating thoughts in future also.
Manveet Bhatia, Sangrur, Punjab

Deeply Disappointed

This letter is inspired by Dipa Suri's letter (MANUSHI 100). I appreciate the editor's open-mindedness in choosing to publish what was quite obviously a scathing attack on what Dipa calls MANUSHI'S 'leitmotif'.

Dipa's letter was interesting and addressed some crucial issues. I feel encouraged and emboldened to put forth my own views and hope that the editor will receive them in the same liberal spirit.

Lately I have been nursing a deep disappointment at the obvious anti-west ideology that has been echoing a trifle too loudly in many of the write-ups appearing in MANUSHI. I seriously fear a hidden danger in carrying this philosophy too far. I speak for myself and many of my friends who too are a little disturbed at this 'flavour' that MANUSHI has acquired. The philosophy that 'western' (e.g. western individualism) is to be condemned and 'Indian' (e.g. traditional Indian family values) is to be embraced is, in my opinion, too simplistic and definitely biased. Many of MANUSHI's articles seem to reflect the former as a sinful 'black' and the latter as a virtuous 'white'.

I think both cultures have their share of merits and demerits and it's unfair and dishonest to make it MANUSHI's philosophy to highlight only the negative aspects of western 'values' and only the positive aspects of Indian 'values'.

It is true that for many women (and men) in India the family is the greatest source of support, care and security and most of us draw

comfort and solace from our families. In that sense, strong family ties, which we pride ourselves in having in this country are indeed a positive factor. In contrast, the high-paced and consumerist, materialistic and sometimes extremely individualistic culture and a strong professional attitude to life in many western nations have weakened family ties and often leave some people devoid of such 'cushions' of comfort and interpersonal bonding.

However, aren't we being blind in conveniently ignoring the fact that most of our families function according to patriarchal 'traditional values' which have *also* been responsible for the subordination and exploitation of women for ages and still continue to do so in the name of tradition? Indian family values do not necessarily spell comfort and security for women. For many, they spell repression, denial of basic freedom, individualism and independence. For the more unfortunate it also means torture, subordination and exploitation.

How many women in this country have the total freedom to lead their lives exactly as they want in spite of having greater family ties than their western counterparts? How many families treat their grown up daughters as responsible adults in their own right and let them take decisions for themselves? How many women live respectable lives simply by being themselves, as individuals, without being expected to assume one of the few respectable feminine roles allowed by society—of mother, wife, and sister? Isn't it true that many women who defy the tradition and do not conform have to suffer at the hands of patriarchy, are victimized both by men and women and condemned? Is it right for MANUSHI to ignore the other side of the coin

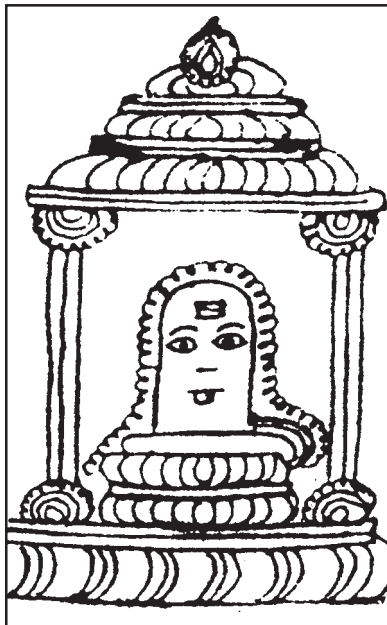
and take such biased stands time and again?

I would particularly want to refer to the article by Madhu Kishwar, *Women, Sex and Marriage: Restraint as a Feminine Strategy* (MANUSHI 99), which I think reflects in some ways this biased stand. The writer seems to believe that the Indian woman's rejection of western feminism (read sexual liberation) because of its individualistic tone is a carefully thought of, conscious decision and choice on her part. It's rather hard to believe that this could happen in a country where most of the women are illiterate and hardly aware of their basic rights as human beings and brought up from childhood to believe that they are secondary to men. They would hardly have ever heard of western feminism leave alone thought about it. For many of them it's a deeply ingrained fact that a woman's position in the family and society is subordinate to men and they have come to believe it like gospel truth which must never be questioned or challenged.

Most women in this country live their lives in the only way they know and are allowed to by society. In most cases it's not a choice they've consciously thought of and exercised. I think, therefore, that it is erroneous to conclude otherwise. It seems to me that the writer is merely trying to rationalise and justify status quo as in existing traditional ways of living merely because that is *our* way and so is the *right* way since it's *our* culture. In the same vein the writer conveniently picks up only the negative aspects of the western way of living, western feminism, sexual liberation and goes to town highlighting and criticising *their* way. It is disappointing to hear such a coloured *us -vs -them* stand from MANUSHI.

The concept of MANUSHI is precious. It is perhaps the only journal of its kind as it provides a platform for important, serious and analytical articles which raise crucial points about us and the society. I understand that it was conceived with the aim of mobilising opinion and bringing about positive changes in our society where much has gone wrong. To quote Madhu Kishwar: "Let us not take anything for granted. Let us not only re-define ourselves, our role, our image—but also the kind of society we want to live in." Raking up epic characters like Sita as role models and teaching women methods of surviving patriarchy and male dominance through restraint seems a far cry from the goals echoed above. This illusory repackaging in the name of our culture will only serve to stagnate the Indian society and make women more and more resistant to a change for the better. It will kill women's sense of questioning and thinking and close our minds from accepting positive ideas and ideologies, many of which may well originate and develop in the western world.

It is true that the extreme individualistic, materialistic and self-centered cultures in some of the western societies are worth criticising and we must be concerned if society around us begins to look like that some day. However, a downright rejection and condemnation of individualism is like throwing the baby out along with the bathwater. If anything, I feel the Indian woman can do with a bit of individualism and a feeling of self worth and self esteem. It's high time she was perceived as an individual in her own right with a mind of her own. Her role in the family and society are meaningful only if she is respected and is free as an individual. As for sexual liberation...



in a country where female sexuality is hardly ever acknowledged or is at best equated with sexual promiscuity... where there is rampant ignorance about women's health... where a repressed movie audience finds gratification in graphic rape scenes and vulgar dances while censors are quick to snip away any scenes of mutual physical intimacy between a man and a woman...where films like *Bandit Queen* and *Kamasutra* need special 'women-only' screenings... where it is more dignified to remain in a bad and abusive marriage rather than bear the stigma of being divorced or single... where it is still a woman's job to cook and clean and rear children... my dear Madhu, we could definitely do with some "liberation". In a recent issue Kishwar echoes the sentiment that she is wrongly accused of west-bashing...and whether 'self-hating' is the only way to acknowledge that MANUSHI is not anti-west. I think that she has somewhat misunderstood the normal recent reactions to MANUSHI's 'west-bashing'. It is my sincere opinion that 19 years of MANUSHI's critical

approach towards the oppressive aspects of our culture is hardly any justification for this recent relentless attack on the West. If anything, such a biased attitude could well bring to naught all impact and purpose of the writings of the past years.

The problems of society and women are universal. They vary in degree from the extreme and cruel control and domination of women in Taliban's Afghanistan to the battered women in Africa to the double standards and hypocrisy of American society. We need a better vantage point to look at this global problem than the narrow confines of just our culture. Condemning the West and fooling ourselves into believing that we are better off is an attitude we can well do without.

Lakshmi Bhargava's optimistic sentiment in a letter in the last issue that India is just an 'eclipsed sun' that will shine again is well-taken but I hope she realises that such nationalistic rhetoric will not bring about any positive change in society. We need a more dispassionate, critical introspection and analysis of where we stand vis-a-vis the rest of the world and the courage to admit what we lack rather than gloat over what we are quick to presume is our superiority over others.

**Anu Venugopalan, Ahmedabad,
Gujarat**

A Powerful Story

I read with great interest Balwant Bhaneja's short story *Under the Starry Night* in your journal (MANUSHI 102). It is indeed a powerful story, the like of which I have not read in many years. It celebrates the Indian woman in her totality.

Motilal Jotwani, New Delhi □