

LETTERS TO MANUSHI

A Woman's Identity

...I am feeling strangely restless after reading the interview with Pushpaji in **Manushi** No. 9. What power of endurance women have, but also what power of resistance! This was the insight I got from reading this interview. And though forced to remain silent, a woman does take her revenge. If she did not, life would become unbearable. How clearly she is able to think and how clearly she expresses her thoughts! I was amazed, inspired, and deeply relieved. Through all those years, she preserved a sense of herself, of her identity, above all, her desire to live a meaningful life. How strong, how true, how profound that desire must have been. I want to congratulate her on her successful struggle to preserve her identity. Will you convey my congratulations to her?...

Jyotsna Milan, Baroda
(translated from Hindi)

Latest Insult By DTC

Recently, a new slogan has appeared in Delhi Transport Corporation buses: "*Bhaichara kiske sang; Nari, bache aur apang*" ("To whom should you show brotherhood? To women, children and the disabled.") Is this not enough to make one's head reel? Clearly, this slogan is for men only. It is yet another attempt to convince us that we are helpless and dependent on others, as children and disabled people are supposed to be. We need something to prop us up—and of course, we can get it only from the brotherhood of men! I can't think of anything more insulting than this implication.

The same questions arise once again in my mind. How long will the male species continue to be frightened, threatened and enraged by our achievements and capabilities?

Shashi, Delhi
(translated from Hindi)

Our Iranian Sisters

As Iranian feminists, we were very happy to see your beautiful magazine **Manushi**. Not just because it is the first Indian feminist magazine but because it is so militant in its fight for women's rights and pays so much attention to publishing the words of oppressed women.

Iranian women too are being extremely oppressed under the Khomeini regime. When they fought during the revolution, they wanted to build a totally new human society and not limit themselves to the overthrow of the Shah's government. They showed their early resistance to counter-revolution when they came out into the streets less than one month after the revolution, and chanted: "In the dawn of freedom we have no freedom."

We were full of joy when we saw that in India too women have organized and are fighting a system that is not only oppressing them but the whole society. Your descriptions of the struggles of women in India are very much like those of women in Iran...

We believe that in order for Iran to have a genuine social revolution, we need the struggles of women and all the forces of revolution such as workers, minorities and peasants who each bring

a totally new dimension to the struggle. But since we have experienced male chauvinism even within the left organizations, we have seen the need for an autonomous women's committee as the only way we can develop our creativity and discuss our special needs...

Anjuman for Liberation of Women

Disowned By Hindus And Muslims Alike

I am a regular reader of **Manushi**, and I want to write briefly about a woman who is being tortured and destroyed, here in Sanjauli, Simla.

This woman is known as Shanti among Hindus and Fatima among Muslims. She grew up in a Hindu harijan family, was not educated, but married off to a harijan young man. She faced many problems in this marriage and finally to preserve her self-respect, left that prison which went by the name of home. She tried to live as a self-dependent woman but it was difficult for her to live alone in this society...

Finally, she was forced to marry a Muslim contractor, who offered her food, clothing and shelter. But after marriage, when she did not have a child, he began to starve her and beat her with a stick every day. He tortured her in every possible way and finally told her to get out of the house. That house was worse than a stable for her, but where could she go now when no Hindu would have anything to do with her, and all the Muslims were sympathetic to her husband?

She approached everyone, from the

Sanjauli police to the courts, but finally the top government authorities in Himachal told her they could do nothing to help her. It is now one and a half years since her husband threw her out, she has no means to feed herself and finds it difficult to protect herself from assault, living in a deserted kind of shed. She has often told me that she is tired of this life and wants to end it. I encourage her to continue her defiance of society. But I don't know how long she will be able to fight hunger and fight society, reduced as she is to a skeleton...

This is her story. Please print it in **Manushi** so that it can reach other women like her. Perhaps only they can find a solution...

Kiran Kapoor, Simla
(translated from Hindi)

Strength Of Women

I have just received **Manushi** No. 7, 1981, in Hindi. I feel whatever I say about this magazine which works for the liberation of the world's women, will not be adequate. You sell a copy which costs Rs 4 for Rs 1.50, and send free copies to brothers and sisters like me. In this situation, it is the duty of every reader to regularize the magazine. I request readers to give this as a gift to their friends, mothers, sisters, because it will reinforce their strength. After all, what is **Manushi**? It is that strength of women which springs from their experience and brings them together for struggle.

I will definitely say that whoever asks for dowry is a beggar. I feel that the editorial of No. 7 pointed towards the correct path of struggle. For women struggling all over the world, the police are not protectors but enemies. Women do not get justice in courts, they only get insulted. Why should women be insulted or be the slaves of men ?...

K. Rajanna, political prisoner,
central jail, Hyderabad
(translated from Hindi)

Sanctity Or Sexism ?

A national daily reports that "The Akhil Bharata Ayyappa Seva Sangh has decided to stop females aged between 10 and 50 from entering the Ayyappa temple at Sabarimala to keep up the sanctity of the Sastha temple."

Though I don't believe in the existence of god, I am very annoyed at the inhuman bar on women having the darshan of Ayyappa. After all, this bar is not the intention of "Ayyappa" but of his male devotees who have their own vested interests to protect...I have seen many of Ayyappa's devotees visiting prostitutes. What kind of sanctity is this?

I hope **Manushi** and other women's organizations will raise their voice against this sort of unconstitutional and unjust behaviour...

G.T. Nagaraju, Chitradurga

Agony And Ecstasy

I have to read and re-read **Manushi** and other literature on women's liberation. Maybe it is because I am slow, or more because I have to undo and



unlearn all that I learnt in the first 30 years of my life. My re-education process started rather late, and all that I have learnt always stands as a mental block in the way of my remembering and imbibing the new truths about myself. My pre-conditioning would always take over at the moment of the least bit of struggle, were I not so persistent in my effort to adopt and practise the new truths.

I wonder how many of us face a similar situation. But I must share here that though it is an agonizingly slow process, it is also exhilarating to know that even now I can hope for a better and fuller life...

Shashi Sail, Raipur

A Male Reader Replies

Ever since reading the letter from Kalpana Jawlekar in **Manushi** No. 10, I have been wanting to write to you...She says that it is unfair and very

irresponsible to say that any man can rape, and that rapes occur in political activist circles. She then goes on to make the very irresponsible statement that women are completely safe in the company of communist men...

As for the statement that any man can rape, I see no reason to object to it. I don't think any one except possibly the man himself, can know with certainty that he cannot be a rapist. The point is, suspicion is usually cast on a woman who accuses a man of rape, on the specious ground that the man is respectable and cannot possibly do such a thing. Whereas in fact anyone from a professor to a political activist could do it. I deliberately say "professor" because I know several cases of such "respectable" persons being implicated in attempted rape or sexual harassment. No woman is unjustified in feeling unsafe or being on her guard in the company of a man, however respectable or politically conscious he may be. I would not feel offended in the least if a woman decided to take care in my company.

She declines to discuss the question of making the man prove consent. She calls it a complicated question but I think it is perfectly simple. People have been complicating it by saying that it means the man must prove his innocence instead of the prosecution having to prove his guilt. This is a deliberate misrepresentation. All it means is that if sexual intercourse is established as having taken place, the woman should not also have to prove lack of consent. It would still be open to the man to prove that consent was given if he wishes to prove this. In no other crime theft, assault—does the victim have to prove lack of consent... It is ordinarily assumed that consent was not given.

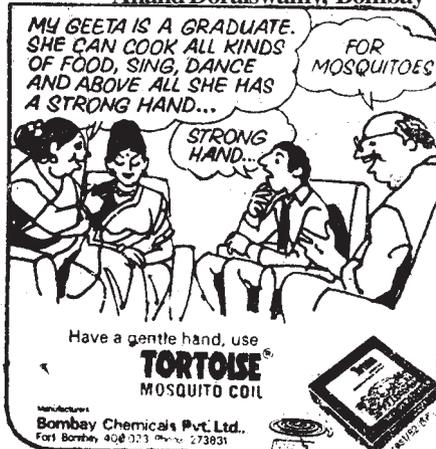
The real thrust behind the argument is that political activists, among others, could be "framed" for rape. If a rape case is concocted (though an actual intercourse must have taken place and been proved first) it would be the simplest thing to concoct evidence of lack of consent...

Ms Jawlekar also talks about the reactionary way in which relations between communist men and women are depicted by bourgeois papers and fiction. My reading is that communist

men are not immune to male chauvinism. In fact, if one scratches the surface, they are no different from other men. My experience, confirmed by admissions of other activists, is that in double standards of sexual morality male activists have the same prejudices as other men...

Finally, regarding the suggestion in two other letters that Manushi is anti-men or female chauvinist, I have never been conscious of any such reaction on my part, as a man...to what Manushi says. I have always considered such reactions to Manushi a proof of male chauvinism in those who express them. In fact, I am only conscious of a desperate feeling in me that male chauvinism will never die out of men's minds, particularly because so-called progressive minds pretend to themselves and to others that they are free of it...

Anand Doraiswamy, Bombay



Weakening Our Hands

I read an article in an early issue of Manushi on how women are exploited through advertisements. I am sending you a recent advertisement which seems to advise women to let their hands stay delicate. The advertisement tries to establish strong hands as a symbol of masculinity...In many communities, able-bodied men sit at home while women do all the agricultural and other work, including gathering fuel and fetching water. Is all this the work of delicate hands? But anti-women advertisements want to deny facts and reinforce prejudice...

Radheshyam Tripathi, Varanasi
(translated from Hindi)

Inspiring Each Other

We are very happy that at last we have a magazine championing the cause of women by bringing to light various problems faced by them in a male-dominated society. Our struggle to obtain social justice will necessarily be a long-drawn-out affair. It will involve not only exposing the difficulties experienced by women but also convincing them that they are not inferior to men in any respect, except that of physical strength. While Manushi is dealing admirably with the former, we feel it can also help in the latter. The conviction of the majority of women (even the educated ones) as regards male superiority is born of the constant brainwashing that they receive from childhood onwards from their families, teachers and others, leading to the belief that a woman is best fitted for work which needs no originality. To support this view, it is pointed out that there has not been a brilliant artist or an excellent composer or a distinguished scientist (Madame Curie excluded, of course) amongst women.

These views are indeed false. There has always been a deliberate attempt to underplay women's achievements in arts, humanities and sciences, both in this country and elsewhere. It would, therefore, be nice if your magazine could publish articles on the life and achievements of women who have made significant contributions in these fields. Reading such articles will instil a sense of confidence in women, ridding them of their inferiority complex. Such talented women would also be looked up to as models by the younger generation, inspiring and encouraging them to strive for excellence in their own chosen fields. We wish Manushi a bright and useful future.

Shantoo Gurnani, K. Usha Deniz, Bombay

Freedom Is Taken, Not Given

Everyone loves freedom. We women spend our lives in slavery, longing for freedom. We are given a secondary status from the moment we are born. Our natural development is curbed by restrictions on our speaking, laughing, playing, jumping...When we are married, we are told that our place is now at our husband's feet. We have no identity

apart from his. We have to use our husbands' or fathers' names even when writing our names. We are dressed and decorated, and under the title of queen of the home or goddess, we are reduced to being objects of consumption. *Sindur* is supposed to be the sign of marriage for a woman but why is it that men do not need any such sign ?...

A woman is considered an object to be given as a gift. This is the meaning of *kanyadaan* which is part of the wedding ceremony. We are veiled so that we should not be able to see the world properly, we are locked up at home so that we should not be able to breathe freely; we are constantly harassed on the streets, in markets, in the fields and lanes, so that we should not be able to move about...

When land is redistributed in the course of people's movements, it is given in men's names, not in women's names. This is true of every such attempt at land distribution, from the land reform schemes to the ongoing land struggle in Bodhgaya. It is thought that there is no need to give women land formally and in writing. Women serve men, so it can be assumed that they use men's land. Women's participation was more militant than men's participation in the Bodhgaya struggle. Women carrying their babies, went to prison, faced lathis and bullets, played a heroic and active role. But what happened to their share in the land? The Bodhgaya struggle is a blatant example of how women are deprived of their rightful share when land is being distributed to the toilers...

Only when women unite to struggle for our social, political and economic rights, can we win our freedom. Only when women awaken can a society free from exploitation be constructed...

Nadira, Bihar
(translated from Hindi)

Reclaiming Our History

"The Rise of Buddhism As Experienced By Women" by Uma Chakravarty in Manushi No. 8 was an article of substance. The analysis of women's social situation in a historical perspective will make us more aware of our present situation. Brahminism is the foundation of today's male-dominated society. Buddha tried to replace the Brah-

minical double standards of morality with rational standards which gave a firm base to women's equality...Women still had to struggle within the new framework which also laid restrictions on them. But at least the new way of thinking gave women the status of human beings rather than of property.

We can move towards independence only by attacking the religion which considers us the property of men...I think **Manushi** will play an important role in this movement, and in changing the present reality.

Kiran Dutt, Patna
(translated from Hindi)

A True Occurrence

This is a true occurrence...We seem to have become hardened or used to hearing about dowry victims...The most that happens is that we shake our heads and cluck in disapproval and then change the topic of conversation, to movies, politics, real estate. Anything to get away from the problem of finding a solution. The worst part is that girls are expected to carry on with their marriages. The idea of a girl breaking her marriage because of dowry demands, is frowned upon until it is too late.

It happened to Shiela. She is from a middle class family. Her parents saved and collected things for her. She was married amid all the pomp and glory they could afford. She looked forward with stars in her eyes to her new life. Her husband was an engineer stationed in the USA. A week after the marriage, Shiela's bubble burst. Her husband without her consent handed over all her possessions to his parents. The explanation given was that since they were leaving the country, it would be difficult to cart everything with them.

The second week brought another disillusionment. The husband and in-laws wanted her to get Rs 5,000 more from her parents. This time the excuse was his inability to pay for her ticket to the States. This is the time when they should have put their foot down. But they paid the money, hoping it would result in their daughter's happiness. Shiela's unhappiness increased because her husband was now treating her with the utmost indifference. Apparently he was not keen on taking her with him.

Finally, after much persuasion from her parents, he reluctantly agreed to take her. She was allowed to pack very few of her clothes. The rest were given to her husband's two sisters. Shiela wanted to object but was hushed by her parents. They hoped the marriage would stabilize once they went abroad. Shiela kept quiet but the stars had gone out of her eyes.

The final blow was yet to come. They reached and he took her to his flat. He decided to be frank. She was told that he was already married and had two sons aged seven and five. When asked why he had married her, he shrugged and said that his parents wanted money so he had supplied them with her dowry. They knew about his previous marriage. He then magnanimously stated that she could continue staying with them as a domestic help.

Shiela, who was near collapse by now, rang up her uncle, who happened to be living nearby. He came and took her away. She has returned to her parents, and is trying to pick up the threads of her shattered existence. The culprits have escaped with nothing worse than a few disapproving clucks from society...The question to be answered is, should such people be allowed to go unpunished? Unfortunately, they do, and we as a society are to blame for this.

Rita Marya, Delhi

Something Has To Be Done

...I came across a copy of **Manushi** and was very pleased to see that such a magazine is in existence...I am a 74 year old woman but still do a lot of work and travel. I have been in India twice...and have travelled a great deal in your country, of which I am very fond and in whose art I am deeply interested. I also know many of the problems about which I read in your magazine from what my late husband told me (he lived in India for eight years), from much I had read as well as from television and films.

...Until just over two years ago, I would not have called myself a feminist though I have always been in favour of equal rights and full equality in all fields for women. I became a feminist on September 13, 1979, when I read a very good article on genital mutilation in many Arab countries and in vast parts of

Africa. I decided that something had to be done about it—but what and how? I did not know anybody or any organization dealing with these problems. So I had the article photocopied and sent it out in a dozen or more letters to prominent people. Needless to say, I did not get replies from most of them or only negative ones. But I got in touch with some people and organizations and now have so huge a correspondence that I can hardly cope with it. Slowly, other problems became equally important to me—the saving of Arab girls and women who are being killed by their families on the slightest suspicion, very often unfounded, that they may have lost their virginity. Even when the suspicion has some basis, the girl has usually been raped within the joint family, by her father, brother or cousin...Knowing about these things, I think one MUST become a feminist...

Herta Haas, Germany

WHEN IS DEATH NOT CRUEL?

In his special report entitled "Of Inhuman Bondage" (*India Today*, March 31, 1982), Chaitanya Kalbag describes how bonded labourers in district Rewa, Madhya Pradesh, are forced to work on the landlords' fields, in exchange for kesari seed which they have to eat as their staple food. This seed causes an incurable disease known as lathyrism, which cripples and finally kills its victims. Kalbag comments: "Lathyrism is doubly cruel because it rarely strikes women. Most of its victims are able men between the ages of 16 and 30. Only two girls in Panasi, below the age of 12, had fallen victim to the disease. In any case, it seemed to strike women either before puberty or after menopause. Moreover, the women usually eat very little, preferring to give most of the available seed to their menfolk—and this in itself is a kindness fraught with cruelty."

We received a money order for Rs 14 from Satish Aggarwal, Rafi Marg, T.H. Bhawan, New Delhi. However, when we sent him a receipt, the post office returned it with the comment: "No such address." We request him to write and give us his complete address.