



Letters to Manushi

No Such Law

Male domination in society shows itself everywhere. These traditional men not only dominate their wives, daughters and sisters, but also other women who want to fight for their identity as independent women with equal status.

In August 1982, I visited the assistant passport officer in the regional passport office at Ahmedabad. I had applied for a passport when I was unmarried but now I am likely to join my husband abroad, I explained to the officer that I desire to keep my maiden name and do not want to change it.

After hearing me out, the officer replied that according to Indian law, it is necessary to change the woman's surname after marriage, otherwise what is the proof that she is married? I repeatedly asked him whether the marriage certificate was not enough to prove that I was married but he was not convinced. I then insisted that he tell me precisely to which "Indian law" he was referring. At this, he lost his temper and flatly refused to tell me about the law—as in actual fact, there is no law making it necessary for a woman to change her surname after marriage. All he would say is: "I am an Indian government servant and I have respect for our Indian laws. You seem to know more than I do about this matter. It seems I am talking to a lawyer."

With the help of my brother and sister-in-law, I consulted reliable legal sources in Ahmedabad, Surat and Bombay, and found out that there is no law which requires that a woman change her name after marriage. I then sent a registered letter to the superintendent and assistant passport officers at the

Ahmedabad office, asking them why I had been denied the right to keep my maiden name in the passport while recording my marital status. There was no reply for more than five weeks. My advocate, who is a women's rights sympathizer, then took legal action on my behalf. He claimed that the assistant passport officer had discriminated against me on the basis of sex alone, thus violating my fundamental right as a citizen to equality before the law. Within two weeks of this preliminary legal action, I got a reply from the passport office, acknowledging my right to keep my maiden name.

Mohini Avasthi, Surat

How Injustice Operates

...While trying to study and understand injustice against women, I myself was made the victim of such injustice. On August 5, I suffered from food poisoning and fell seriously ill. I was saved by the courageous and prompt action of the hostel girls, who, within five minutes, had me on a stretcher and in the hospital, where I was treated and put on the road to recovery. When the warden heard that I had been poisoned by some foodstuff, she immediately declared it to be a case of attempted suicide. She did this to save the hostel administration from being blamed for the food poisoning.

This led to a great deal of humiliation and disgrace for me. My family and all my relatives were convinced that I had attempted suicide. If I had died that day, perhaps the administration and the doctors would have colluded to declare it a case of suicide, so as to save the hostel and the university from being

blamed. I had to appear for the examination under such uncongenial conditions, and then wage a battle at home, because after this scandal, my parents were not willing for me to continue my studies here.

Madhu Aggarwal, Varanasi
(translated from Hindi)

Standing Together

There is little left that can shock any more. So many new ways are ingeniously devised to squeeze more, more and still more from women. I think Sudarshan, the lady you fought alongside of, was marvellous in that she was ready to stand and confront Batra, and it was equally terrific that so many others stood up with her. Maybe a leaflet could have been sent to the parents of Batra's pupils, so that they could put pressure on his employers, and on the education ministry...

You might be interested to know that when one of our preachers was to give a sermon on the subject of women, I handed him two copies of **Manushi**. I believe he spoke well!

Jamila Verghese, Delhi

Facing Reality

...We have been working to support the textile workers in their strike. We formed groups and held weekly meetings, with the aim of raising the average political consciousness, and economically supporting the workers. I am in charge of the Women's section which consists of women textile workers and wives of men textile workers. We distributed pamphlets at local stations, and organized collection drives there. When the men were busy with the *jail*

bharo andolan, the women's enthusiasm at the meeting was fantastic. They used to speak, even though with stage fright, and join in slogans and songs. I invited local feminists to speak to them and sing songs to them. I also them them Hindi **Manushi**. The enthusiasm could not be sustained, however. Women ceased to come for meetings, after men came back from jail...

We also sold **Manushi** near the local station, put it into the local circulating library, and sold it in my college. I gave some copies to an interested boy to sell in the men's hostel. However, some women feel that the attitude of **Manushi** is too severe against men. I told them there is not even a word against men in the magazine, but they do not agree. One lady doctor literally sent me out of her house, when I happened to visit her some months after I had sold her a copy. I didn't argue but left the place in tears.

I think the reality of women's situation is so bad that nobody can face it, or accept it...

Alfie, Bombay

All Over India

...I am working as a clerk in the post office. I have been reading **Manushi** for a long time. Sisters, I like this magazine very much because it is the only magazine which is for women, and which tries to understand the problems of women all over India. I have difficulty in reading it out to illiterate sisters in villages because I have to first to translate it from Hindi into Punjabi. However, I will try to reach it to as many women as possible.

Sisters, whenever a girl in our society tries to stand on her own feet, and do something for society, or to exercise some measure of freedom for herself, she has to face many problems and bear all kinds of insults and abuses. She wants to make others understand her, but she is unable to do so and falls silent. That is why I want you to write a lot about women, which may inspire women to take their fate into their own hands...

Harcharan Kaur, Bhatinda
(translated from Hindi)

She Remade Her Life

This is the story of Hiranmayee Majumdar, one of my patients who has

become a friend and has told me about her life. In 1944, when she was 15 years old, she was married to 22 year old Anil Majumdar, a clerk at Calcutta. From the beginning, her mother-in-law disliked her dark complexion and her looks, and she was scolded every day. She had to stay with her in-laws while her husband was always working in other places. After the partition in 1947, as the poverty of the family increased, they began to accuse her of being ill fated, ugly, worthless, and of bringing them bad luck. She bore it all silently, consoling herself with her little daughter Kana.

In the meantime, Anil, who was now



in Tripura, remarried without Hiran's knowledge, though her in-laws knew about it. When her mother died, Hiran went home for a short time. During this period, her in-laws shifted to Tripura without informing Hiran of their whereabouts. Five years passed away. Hiran lived with her father but she got no news from her husband. Her father divided his property among his sons. He gave Hiran an equal share with her brothers.

Hiran's sister's husband happened to be transferred to Tripura and he came to know that Hiran's husband had there remarried and had two sons. Hiran went to meet him. Anil was perturbed. His neighbours did not know that he had a first wife and a daughter. They gathered to watch the fun. Hiran's brother-in-law was a high official, so Anil could not behave rudely. Anil refused to talk about

his remarriage, but he told Hiran to go and live with his parents. He was not ready to keep her with him. During the conversation, two little boys came into the room. Seeing them, Hiran grasped Kana's small hand and silently left the house.

Hiran did not want to return to her father's house which was in a remote village. Destitute, she came to her brother-in-law's house in Agartala. Friends advised her to sue her husband in court, but she decided that it was no use trying to live with her in-laws again. She would only be starved and oppressed, and would not be able to bring up her daughter properly. She wanted to be economically independent.

Leaving her daughter with her sister, Hiran joined a government home for destitute girls, where she studied, and also learnt weaving. In 1964, she got a job as a nursery school teacher. Today, Hiran is living in her own house in Agartala with her daughter, who is a teacher, and who is married to a lower caste boy of her own choice, and has two children. Hiran now has no worry or anxiety. She hardly ever thinks about her husband. She has heard that he is almost paralysed by arthritis, and is weighed down by anxiety for his unmarried daughters and oppressive, unemployed sons. News about him leaves her indifferent today...

Sreekala, Agartala

Women In Poland

...You are probably aware of *the* situation in Poland. Many voluntary associations have had to stop their activities. Therefore all our plans and programmes had to cease and our correspondence was discontinued. All our information about Polish women has thus been reduced to our own individual observation. We can, however, firmly say that the burden of the crisis in our country has fallen on the Polish women, both psychologically and physically. It is enough to look around on the streets and see who stands in the queues, and carries the food in bags. Childcare facilities are not being developed and the traditional views on women's place are being upheld, virtually forcing women to work 24 hours a day...

Research surveys show that in

Poland the institution most highly valued is the family. This tradition of our society has been strengthened during the crisis. The partnership marriage exists still only within some sections of society. The dominant pattern is that of the patriarchal family, and, unfortunately, the authorities seem to be propagating it as a solution to the problem of unemployment. They are beginning to say that the only really valuable occupation for a woman is that of being a housewife.

Among women, the most heavily burdened are single mothers. Running a household is very difficult when your shopping is based on food stamps and when you bear the social stigma of being alone, and thus not deserving any assistance.

...There has been one good result for women of the state of war in Poland. Due to the street patrols there has been a rapid decrease of violence on the streets, this including violence against women on the streets. However, we do not have any data on violence against women in the home. It is only our hypothesis that this has risen. Alcoholism is a problem in Poland, and since there are no other forms of recreation for people, especially those of the lower strata, we think that violence against women at home could have risen.

However, people are focusing mainly on the political and economic crisis. The women's problem is not seen as important. Even women do not see their problem as something that needs to be solved, or that can be solved. We will be trying to concentrate on individual activities, in an informal, unofficial manner...

Barbara and Krystyna, Warsaw

Give Women The Choice

Ever since the World Health Organization code was adopted in 1981, tremendous efforts have been going on in many countries towards establishing a permanent switch from bottlefeeding to breastfeeding of babies. Yet merely campaigning against bottlefeeding or against promotion of baby food by multinational companies, can serve no purpose unless governments take action to make breastfeeding possible for labouring women.

Few governments have introduced

the legislation needed to ensure that women enjoy adequate maternity benefits and creche facilities that will make breastfeeding possible. Feminists have pointed out the dangers of promoting breastfeeding without simultaneously fighting for maternity benefits and creche facilities. The possible backlash of merely campaigning against bottlefeeding is that women may be urged or compelled to drop out of the labour force so as to ensure that babies are not denied their mothers' milk. This is the danger of promoting a golden myth of maternal care at home, without paid employment for women.

While the sales promotion tactics of babyfood companies have contributed to the switch to the bottle, the compulsions for labouring women to abandon breastfeeding, against their will, have arisen from the fact that the demand for maternity benefits has never been high on the priority list of the trade union movement.

Governments should apply international labour organization conventions relating to paid maternity leave, job security after delivery, facilities for childcare and breastfeeding at the workplace, and nursing breaks without loss of pay...

Vimal Balasubrahmanyan, Calcutta

On The Look Out

...At present, my husband and I are active in the general working class movement but I am always looking for women's issues. Two other women and I have formed a sort of autonomous group for dealing with women's issues; but our major drawback is that we are short of hands. However, we do manage to bring out a bimonthly wall journal called *Vartika*. One is put up in the girls' hostel, one in the student nurses' hostel and one in the staff nurses' hostel. In the last issue we highlighted the issue of the misuse of women in the advertising media. We intend to highlight the misuse of women in films and literature in future issues, so that it becomes a series on the misuse of women in the media. The girls have responded quite enthusiastically...

Ujjwala, Varanasi

Film Worth Seeing

Recently I saw a Kannada film *Mooru Darigalu* (Three Ways) directed by

Girish Kasaravalli, based on a short story by Yashavanta Chittala. The film deals with the life of Nirmala, a college student. Every one around her, except her cousin, suspects her of having been seduced by a studio photographer, the brother of her classmate.

When false rumours are spread against her, Nirmala boldly tries to refute them. Her father does not believe her, and makes arrangements to dispose of her in marriage. Her proposed bourgeois husband tries to prove what a model husband he will be, by "forgiving" her, in the face of her denying the allegation. She rejects his mercy and refuses to marry him. Finally, persistent harassment by her father and by society in general drives her to commit suicide. The film is worth exhibiting at women's conferences...

G.T. Nagaraju, Chitradurg

Industry Or Temple?

We are sending you extracts translated from Gujarati, of a newspaper advertisement for recruitment of piece wage workers at Shri Mahila Griha Udyog, Lijjat Papad, and of the pledge required to be signed by each worker who joins the Udyog:

"This is an organization of women, for women and by women, voluntarily managed by 7,000 women all over India...One can make from Rs 6 to Rs 20 with self respect by working here daily...

The pledge : I shall consider all work at the Udyog as service to god, and whatever I get as *prasadam* (gift of god) will be happily accepted by me. Neither I nor any other person in my family will make *papad* or any other things made by the Udyog. I shall consider the Udyog a temple of god... I shall accept the wider meaning of joint ownership. Just as at a family dinner one does not count or take note of the number of *chapatis* in anybody else's plate, I shall also never count or take note of the distribution of quota or additional quota to anyone else...If I have to leave the Udyog for any reason whatsoever, I shall have no rights or dues against it, because god's temple or its idol cannot be divided into pieces. Whatever temporary or permanent rules are made from time to time in the interest of the Udyog shall be obeyed by me."

Apparently, these women have to buy shares to become "joint owners" of Lijjat Papad, but the pledge they are made to sign tells another story. The concepts of religion are evoked to make the women give up most of their rights as workers. For instance, a woman has to be satisfied with whatever quota of work she is given, but even if it is not enough to support her or her family, neither she nor anyone else in her family can take a similar assignment from anywhere else. It is difficult to understand how all members of the family can be made to give up their rights to earn wages from the whole *papad* making industry, when only the woman who signs the pledge gets paid by this particular organization...

Vibhuti Patel, Flavia D'mello

Life Without A Man

...**Manushi** No 10 carries a long article as well as interviews with women on the Hindu marriage amendment bill, which proposes to introduce irretrievable breakdown of marriage as a ground for divorce. As always, I was struck by the fact that practising lawyers have a better grasp of the facts than do others. Thus, the women lawyers interviewed have pointed out that the bill does not make divorce all that easy since the breakdown has to be proved to be irretrievable, to the satisfaction of the court. They also pointed out that rural, illiterate women or men do not in fact come to court or use the Hindu marriage act...It is ironic that some of the other women interviewed sounded in places like bad old Manu who intoned that a woman cannot be free...

Whether or not the bill is passed, the thing that worries me is the trend in the women's liberation movement, The opponents of the bill seem to expect that not only will women always remain insecure, but that they must do so. They even suggest that all socio-economic reforms must take place before legal changes may be introduced. Had social reformers over the last century acted on this basis, none of us would have gone to school, got jobs or be publishing **Manushi**. An unshaven or remarried widow in the house led to complete social ostracism in the days when caste society was all powerful. Yet people showed courage which we seem to lack...

These so-called champions of women point to the rustic women as a reason for opposing the bill. However, the demands of society on these women are quite different, though just as cruel. They must have a man. No woman shall live without a man, but he need not be her husband. The women in slums and villages who live with their brothers-in-law in the absence of their husbands, are not ostracised by their societies...

I have some experience of both rural and urban women, and have worked on divorce amongst Hindu women. To my dismay, I found that the educated, professional women were the most in need of marital status. They put up with everything, ranging from sexual perversion to violence, infidelity and financial hardship. Their only request was that the husband keep up the pretence of a happy marriage. Let these women come out and say frankly that they are afraid for themselves, and let them not hide behind the labouring women...

Vasudha Dhagamwar, Bihar

Why Women Leave Jobs

...I have been wanting to write to you for a long time, but have been unable to, because I am so overworked. I work as an assistant nurse midwife (ANM) in a rural area. These days, the government is laying stress on family planning. Every month, the SMO scolds us, saying that our family planning work seems to be nil, and that whenever we are on duty, we should make a record of family planning cases.

Each ANM has to look after 5,000 people. There are 1,100 people in the area where I reside. The rest of the people allotted to my care live in a village five kilometres away. There is no bus plying between the two villages so one has to go on foot. I am a native of Ludhiana so this area is unfamiliar to me, and it is dangerous to move around alone here. Every time I meet the SMO, I ask him to send a midwife to assist me, but he ignores my request. He is interested in family planning because it affects his post and promotion.

Parents think that if a girl trains to be an ANM, she will have a better life, but I would never wish my daughter to be an ANM. One has to live in danger and

under very difficult conditions in rural areas. Often, when I have to travel long distances by myself, I feel like leaving the job...

B. K. Gosal, Jhuniir
(translated from Hindi)

Brief Chronicle By Candle Light

*Children torn by the winds,
married women burnt
in their own homes.
I thought I had seen it all that night
as I lit a candle at my door.*

*In the brief chronicle of candle light
I cried out as a child might
to all the night creatures I know—
jackal, cobra, the thousand eyed owl.*

*I thought the wind howled
in the badam tree.
In a forest of bamboo
once bent to a storm
I heard hundreds of whispering feet.*

*Countless women, their hours lent
to pounding grain,
massaging the ankles of strangers,
their necks spent
with bearing bricks, sticks, straw
for fires that could one
day consume them.*

*Would they perish at the muddy
centre of all our gathered lives ?
I tell you I watched them that night.*

*Very simply they set their feet to
the waiting trees and climbed them.
They wandered in the night sky
telling the stars in wonder,
wrapping us for we were cold that night*

*in a true story,
a benediction that called up the cobra
from its hole under the stones.
It danced on its tail
in a future light.*

*The jackal pranced
by the ancient stones,
delighting the sleepy children.
Like a raw creature
the owl cried out, "tweet tweet."
All its thousand eyes could not
drink up the moving women.*

—**Meena Alexander**