



Letters To Manushi

Bridging The Divide

Your piece on the Delhi riots is an excellent one —It is extremely important that Sikh masses in Punjab should know that it was not Hindus in general who were responsible for the massacre of Sikhs in Delhi and that it was an organised affair.

Moreover, the fact that a large number of non Sikhs are in the forefront of exposing the criminal designs of those who organised and abetted the violence tends to change the complexion of the whole situation. It helps to weaken the communal divide. PUCL-PUDR report and your report occupy an important place in this context...

Pritam, Chandigarh Massacre Of Innocents

Your cover story "Gangster Rule" in Manushi, No. 25, 1984, is one of the most courageous, authentic and moving pieces of writing I have ever come across. By printing it, along with the copy of your petition to the supreme court, you have — served the cause of humanity as a whole--

One has reason to hope that your independence and determination will be matched by the judiciary which is the citizens' last refuge in a democracy, for the general moral insensitivity to the tragedy of the Sikhs was strikingly symbolised by the parliament's refusal to mourn the massacre of the innocents even as it sorrowed for the dead in Bhopal.—

Saran Singh, Calcutta

....I tried to circulate issue No. 25 as widely as possible so as to involve people in looking at issues beyond their

immediate concern. But fear is a very negative emotion and somehow no other issue mattered. I think we should all meet and reflect not only on what has happened in the last three months but also how little we really understand the pulse of the people, and the extraordinary complex equations of parliamentary politics and its absorption powers.

Vikasbhai, Varanasi At Our Peril

I have always admired your journal and the ideas that motivate and inspire you. But your issue dealing with the massacre of the Sikhs has increased my admiration for you several hundredfold. Not only is it superb journalism; it is the anguished personal account of a sensitive, courageous and civilised human being. You bring a sense of perspective, sanity and concern, your analysis is thoughtful and calls both for soul searching and for action.

...We, as Indians, will ignore the riots at our peril. If citizens can so arbitrarily be deprived of their most fundamental right—the right to live —the society is devoid of even minimal pretensions to the ideals so eloquently expressed in articles 13, 14, 19, and 21 of the Constitution. You had pointed this out in your writ petition...

Bindu Desai, USA

...We appreciated **Manushi No. 25**, and are glad the Hindi version has come too, so that people can read and discuss it.

As Rajni Kothari said in his article in *Illustrated Weekly*, it is ironic and horrifying as well, that the result of the massive violence in the wake of Indira's

assassination, which was largely instigated by Congress (I) functionaries, was an equally massive wave of support for the Congress (I) in the name of national unity.

Other reports of the violence in Delhi have not brought out the violence against women, which you have highlighted and which fills out the picture of male power, wreaked by one community on another. Here, we had the same Congress (I) led ruffianism, which primarily took the form of looting and destruction of Sikh property. Figures of those killed are not accurately reported, but it seems that only 10 to 15 Sikhs were killed, and perhaps as many non Sikhs, during the looting and associated violence and arson...

Corinne Scott, Jabalpur Empowering Women

I wish to express directly to you and to Rinki Bhattacharya, the tremendous impact of the interview she gave in Manushi No. 23, 1984. The courage and strength of her life, to endure with perseverance her husband's assaults and to build her future with a new definition of herself—have deeply touched me.

I have worked over the years with women and girls withstanding abuse, and I myself have survived violence, so the realities are not new and the facts are not shocking. But the dignity with which Ms Bhattacharya has expressed her thoughts and traced her feelings, and her goal to find channels for her own creativity and to work in support with other women seem so potently stated and so important for each of us to hear and to respond to, personally and

politically.

I would like to thank Rinki for sharing her pain and her strength. Her story is now being read by women who are survivors of family violence and who volunteer to help other women like themselves at a local safe home project. Their ethnic and cultural backgrounds express the diversity of the New York community. They include women from Palestine, Turkey, Nigeria, and Vietnam. Understanding our own experience in relation to the broader community of women throughout the world can only empower all of us. And, perhaps, for Ms Bhattacharya, knowing from this letter that she has encouraged and touched the lives of even more women, will give her further reason to continue.

Madelyn Miller, USA

Extend Opportunities, Not Bans

The discussion with the labour commissioner on Doordarshan on the evening of January 22, 1985, raised some important questions relating to employed women. The labour commissioner advocated extending a ban on the working of women in night shifts, on the ground that they are subject to exploitation on night shifts.

The exemption which had earlier been granted to women employees in the hotel industry has been withdrawn recently, with the exception of cloakroom attendants, telephone operators, *ayahs*, housekeepers and artistes performing cabaret, who, for some strange reason, are considered not exploitable.

It was interesting that the majority of the working women who were interviewed and who had experience of working on night shifts displayed a professional attitude towards the issue and emphasised the normalcy of working on night shifts. They did not support the ban on night shifts as they felt such a ban would not be in the larger interests of working women.

The answer, therefore, lies not in extending bans but in guaranteeing an atmosphere of security for women employees on night shifts. The areas of employment for women have to be

increased. No longer can women be content to compete only in "safe" professions. They must widen their horizons...

We have to change our attitude about being weak and vulnerable and have to emphasise our strength and ability to compete as equals. We have to emphasise our competence in the job market in order to be taken seriously. Therefore, instead of supporting the ban on women working on night shifts, we should support contractual conditions which require employers to guarantee



transportation. Let us support expansion of opportunities for women, not work towards limiting them further.

Kiran Datar, Delhi

Reaching Each Other

I want to reach **Manushi** to every woman but I don't understand why even educated women submit to oppression. I too was like that, an 18 year old idiot, gullible, but feelings of rebellion kept growing in me, and today, I have the strength to take decisions on my own. One cannot achieve anything by remaining silent and shedding tears. One has to take one's rights.

I want to gift a subscription to my sister-in-law on her birthday because whenever she tries to answer back my brother, who is younger than I am, he

always says : "So, you are being influenced by my sister, are you ?" Or he teases me, saying I am like the sister in *Hum Log*. Well, I am able to defeat him in argument but I do think it is difficult if not impossible to convince all the men in our society. So I feel if **Manushi** reaches every woman, at least some improvement may take place...

Leena, Bombay

(translated from Hindi)

New Inspiration

...My friendship with **Manushi** is three years old now. I don't say each and every issue is packed with excitement and new hopes for its readers. Yet I draw a kind of new inspiration from your articles and reports. All I can say at the moment is that you must please remember that there are thousands of girls and women like me in every corner of India who always look forward to a new approach to study the new or the oldest aspects of a woman's life in the present social set up—you are reaching many hearts and souls craving for individuality and social equality.

Yet I would be doing a disservice to **Manushi** if I failed to point out the partisan outlook showing itself in some of your reports and reviews. In fact, if I happen to show this magazine to a male friend and ask him to subscribe, the inevitable answer is : "What for ? Just to see in how many more ways men can, be blamed?" I hate such questions especially when I find that my explanations fail to convince them. Of course, this is not true of all males...

S. Aparna, Chittoor

Memories

Memories flit through my mind.—I sip my tea and allow the past to unfold.

I like being alone. People call me eccentric. Long ago, I gave up worrying about social opinions and taboos. My life is settled. I am at peace.

I have enjoyed being a woman, despite the hardships encountered. If I had the choice, I would opt over and over again for a woman's role. It is so much more colourful, dramatic and full of ups and downs which a man does not

experience...

The marriage ceremony unfolds like a joined video film... The stranger sitting beside me was pronounced my husband. I wondered, why him and not anybody else? It made no difference since I did not know him.

He made a very bad husband. He was exceptionally possessive. He was obsessively suspicious. Besides these wonderful qualities, he was also a cruel and selfish man.

I wanted to leave him. The arguments expounded against this were: he is good looking, he comes from a good family, he is financially well settled—what more can a woman possibly want? Men are like that. Women must put up with their whims and fancies. After all, he feeds and clothes her. I left him despite the very good reasons given for not doing so.

Hearing that I was a divorcee, the majority of men I met automatically presumed I would be easily available. Housewives were suspicious that I might have designs on their husbands. I had a number of unpleasant experiences.

The one thing that kept me going was my firm belief that there was good in life, there were good people around and life was worth living for and fighting for—I wanted to work. I liked to travel. Whenever I could afford it, I did. I wanted to become a member of a club in my own right. I did.

Relatives clamoured: “Get married again. Settle down. A woman cannot manage alone.” I was open to the idea. But I was clear that the man should also want me as a partner. I was not going to settle for less. I did not find such a man. Men wanted me because I was good looking. I did not want them. I did not find a man for whom it seemed worth-while to give up my independence.

The sunset years are ahead of me. I am at peace with myself, for not having compromised. People call me an idealist and a fool. May be I am. It is better to be a fool at peace than to be a fool in agony.

Uma Marya, Delhi

Judge Her Not

Often, when we blame women of the

older generation for having accepted their lot, we pass judgment on them unfairly. One is wont to declare: “Had I been in her place, I would have left him. I would have raised my voice.” Yes, today, with my education, my liberal upbringing, my earning capacity, my participation in outside activities, my mixing with men, my ability to take decisions, and the support of my parents, I would certainly go in for fair treatment.

But had I been denied all these resources, I am sure I too would have been in the same boat as my predecessors.

The average Indian middle class woman, about 50 years ago, was married at a young age, and led a very sheltered life... Her world lay within the circumference of marriage. To keep her world intact, she had to be obedient to her parents-in-law, whatever the provocation...

Though there were exceptions who led fulfilled lives, the average woman led a life of nonexistence. Never having dealt with the outside world, she could not conceive of making a life of her own. Trained from childhood to believe that she must be loyal to her husband's family, she was chary of discussing her problems with out-siders, even with her parents.

If she tried to assert herself, she would be branded a selfish troublesome homebreaker. In trying to find an outlet for their frustration, women usually took it out on each other. The mother-in-law, the daughter-in-law, the sisters-in-law, harassed each other and look advantage of any slight privilege their situation afforded them vis-a-vis each other.

Except for the very courageous who were prepared to face any consequences, was there any avenue for a woman to escape? Could she decide whether or not she wanted the marriage to continue? It is the duty of all women who have been fortunate enough to an education to fight for the cause of their sisters. In this way, they can pacify the souls of those unknown martyrs—

Ratna Sen Gupta, Bombay

A Mixed Bag

A letter by Joy Deshmukh in, Manushi No. 20 caught my attention. She commented on the admiration men have for their women, colleagues. Having worked in a male dominated profession for the last few years, I can say that it was almost as though she had voiced my opinions.

One comes across all kinds of men—some who go in for flattery, which is sometimes false and occasionally embarrassing, some who love mocking women, and some who are just plain jealous. There is a category who are candid enough to admit that they love the company of “intelligent, aggressive, aware” women, but would not have the courage to marry one of that kind... Others pretend to conduct discussions on burning issues which, according to their notions, they cannot do with a wife. There is usually attempt at conquest, largely to feel a sense of power over someone who is remote yet attainable.

Perhaps, marriage is not the main priority in the life of these women, but what are they doing? Is this not a politer form of prostitution? They do not even get paid for their services, and also have to develop a deaf ear for nasty comments and rumours. All this is oppression in a more subtle but certainly not gentler form. One wonders whether one should stop talking to men.

After I came to this country, I tried to get an idea of the social attitudes of different cultures here. On glancing through an Indian newspaper published here. I looked at matrimonial columns to see whether the advertisements were as ridiculous as the ones in India. They were one better—eager men blatantly demanding a beautiful immigrant or green card holder wife. To be fair, there were some ads placed by women wanting green card holder husbands although these were fewer. What it boils down to is that marriage is a competitive market. With due respect to happily married couples and those who think they are in “love”, one wonders whether marital relationship should get first priority in the law...

Poonam Murgai, USA

Dumb Girl Raped

A strange silence pervades the muddy, wet, hutment colony of Karakolly near Cheengeri at Wynad. This colony consists of 92 tribal families living in small huts. In one single room hut live 11 people, among them a 16 year old dumb girl.

Three of the 11 members of the family are dumb. The family lives by daily wage work. The three dumb women work as maidservants. The 16 year old girl worked as a maidservant for four months. Then she returned, pregnant. When asked about the pregnancy, she explained in sign language that the employer had come up to her from behind when she was cooking, and had caught hold of her.

The employer was Ealias, a local merchant. When the news of the girl's pregnancy spread, some politicians came to the colony, but none of them were eager to take up the case, because Ealias is wealthy and influential.

Adivasi Sangam thrice took out a protest march to the house of Ealias, with the dumb girl in the forefront. But the house was well protected by the local police, so they had to return, disappointed. The girl's father also gave a petition to the tribal development officer, Wynad. But the authorities remained silent.

This is not an isolated case. Hundreds of so called illegitimate children are born to tribal girls in this area. The Thirunelli *panchayat* office has registered many births of such children, with tribal mothers and nontribal fathers.

The tribal department at Thirunelli received reports of 60 cases of sexual exploitation but directed the police not to take action, saying that the cases are compounded with other offences so the women should go directly to court to take legal action. The women cannot afford to go to court so they prefer to bring up the children on their own.

As I write this report, I have come across another case in a local newspaper. A 16 year old tribal girl of Puthankunnu, returning from a festival at the village



The Adivasi Sangam demonstration, with the victim, holding the flag, in the forefront.

temple, was forced to drink liquor by the liquor shop owner and his two companions. They then attempted to rape her but fortunately, she escaped with the help of some others, and had to be admitted to hospital. The police registered a case against the three men but was not willing to arrest them because they are influential.

T.P. Radhakrishnan, Koliyadi Not Much Difference

...I read about Shahnaz Shaikh's petition in the supreme court, challenging Muslim law as violative of the fundamental rights of women. She has taken a very bold step and we should support her.

She has mentioned in her petition that Hindu women are not discriminated against in law the way Muslim women are. It is true that differences exist but it cannot be said that Hindu women have anything but rights on paper. She has mentioned the *parda* custom. True, Muslim women wear burkah but Hindu women wear the *ghunghat*. The custom of secluding women in one way or another is prevalent in most villages of India.

So also, it is true that Hindu men are prohibited by law from committing bigamy. But many men maintain extramarital relations and even boast of them to their wives, thus perpetrating mental cruelty.

Under Hindu law, women have the right to divorce but because of social pressures, many women, despite suffering insult and oppression in marriage, are not able to work up the courage to get divorced.

Hindu women have the right to inherit parental property as equals but this is only on paper, not in practice. Apart from a few exceptional cases where a woman inherits as an only child of her parents, women get no share of parental property. If a man does pressurise his wife to demand her legal share, the result is that her relations with her natal family are severed.

All progressive women should stand up with Shahnaz because her struggle is not just for women of one religion but for all women who are living an oppressed life...

Harcharan Kaur, Bhatinda
(translated from Hindi)