



Letters To Manushi

Determined Resistance

On Sunday, May 5, at about 1.15 p.m., I was travelling on a DTC bus, *teevra mudrika* No. DPH 3978, from Ashram to Moolchand. At the PGDAV college stop, a crowd got on the bus. Among them was a man who came and sat on the seat behind me. As soon as he sat down, he leaned over the backrest, sighed and exclaimed: "*Hai zalim.*"

I was reading and, although I heard him, I did not say anything. He then put his head over my shoulder next to my face and started reciting verses. I told him to be quiet and behave himself. He immediately sprang into violent action and hit me on the back of my head. I turned around, screamed at him and hit back as hard as I could. He then caught hold of my neck and twisted it viciously. He also hit me on the shoulder and twisted my right arm. He threatened me, saying: "*Mein teri izzat kharab kar dunga.*" (I will spoil your honour).

At this, I shouted to the driver and the conductor to stop the bus as I wanted to take this man to the police station. A few of the other male passengers caught hold of me and tried to remonstrate with me. They also made an ineffectual attempt to hold the molester, but did not succeed in preventing him from hitting me. He was much taller and physically sturdier than I am, but he seemed quite taken aback by my determination not to let him get away with misbehaviour. One other passenger, a slightly built young man, tried to intervene in my favour, and got slapped by the molester.

When the bus reached the Defence Colony police station, he got off and called the police. The other men on the bus tried to save the molester by hiding him and lying to me, saying he had run away. Finally, I had literally to drag him out of the bus. Then the police came up and took him into custody. The police took my statement and that of my witness, but did not give me a copy as they are supposed to do. They were surprised by my insistence on registering a complaint.

The next day, I met **Manushi** lawyers who advised me to get a medicolegal case registered at All India Institute of Medical Sciences, which I did. The medical report showed that I had sustained simple injury with a blunt weapon. Despite being rung up twice by the constable at the AIIMS control room, the subinspector of the Defence Colony police station did not come there, as he was supposed to do. I had to go to him again, the next day, and demand a copy of my report from the SHO. The police tried their best to evade giving it to me, saying that my father did not want me to file the case. This was absolutely untrue, since my parents had clearly told the police that they supported me in my fight.

On May 6, the molester, Rakesh Malik, who claims to be a resident of Barot, district Meerut, even though he was travelling on a DTC pass that he says is his brother's, was produced in the court of magistrate O.P. Gupta at Patiala House. The first question the magistrate asked me was whether I knew the molester before this incident. He was

then released from custody.

On May 29, my statement will be recorded in court. Rakesh Malik claims that he was merely reading my book over my shoulder and that I am an immoral woman who attacked him for no reason. The passenger who helped me out is willing to appear as a witness in the case, which has been filed under section 354 of the Indian Penal Code—assault on a woman with intent to outrage her modesty.

Although my parents supported me, they were worried lest I be exposed to harassment in the police station or elsewhere. However, I am determined to fight the case, despite the possible risks, because I feel I should not allow myself to be intimidated into accepting such molestation as part of life.

Amina Sherwani, Delhi
Real Unity

...The comparative analysis of the covers of **Manushi** No. 1 and No. 25, published in the latter, with the depiction of women's condition in this system, was true and touching. The title of Madhu Kishwar's article "Gangster Rule" was significant. All so called riots under this rule are, in fact organised and planned. It was unfortunate that Sikhs happened to be the victims of this planning.

A few days ago, I happened to interview a young Sikh man of my neighbourhood for All India Radio. He had recently married a Bengali brahman girl of the neighbourhood. Both belong to respectable families. They had a civil marriage. The marriage sparked off a big uproar. The boy and his wife were turned

out of his house. They were both unemployed and had to face considerable financial difficulties. I had just recently moved into this locality. I used to watch the happenings from my flat.

The first 10 months of their married life were beset with hardships. When I interviewed them, the girl said that her parents had arranged her marriage to another man and were completely opposed to her marrying a nonbrahman.

Then they told me what happened during the anti Sikh riots. They were living in a rented room in another neighbourhood. The attackers came and tried to capture the man, Surendra Singh. Apu, the woman, clung to him. In the ensuing tussle, Apu received a severe blow near her eye. She began to bleed profusely and fell unconscious. At this moment, the women from neighbouring houses emerged, armed with sticks, brooms and household implements. They demanded “*Bau ke keno marlo?*” (Why did you hit the young wife?)

The hoodlums took to their heels. The girl was picked up and conveyed to her father’s house while Surendra Singh was helped to escape by two Bengali young men. They took him swimming down the river and hid him in a distant place.

When the news reached our neighbourhood, a number of local young men went and brought Surendra Singh back. They then got the couple a room on rent in our neighbourhood, where they now live. Surendra Singh has decided to forget about respectability, and has opened a teashop. He says that he is not eager to get his patrimonial and ancestral property. Apu is a graduate but she is still convalescent and cannot take a job just now. Her eyes are so badly affected that she cannot see anything in the sunlight or any other bright light.

It was fortunate that Bengalis of the area came to Surendra Singh’s aid. His brother, who lives right next door to him, did not try to help him because he was infuriated by his marriage.

Surendra Singh has not been able to study much. I was happy to hear him

say: “No one thinks of the country. Punjabis want Punjab, Bengalis Bengal, and now Jharkhand is being demanded in Bihar”...

Manju Rani Sinha, Calcutta
(translated from Hindi)

A New Language

...Despite having great respect for **Manushi**, I must put down my dissatisfaction with your film reviews. Although I cannot give a concrete example, I would like to communicate the general impression which I have received over the last few years.

When we speak of films we have to distinguish between commercial cinema and new wave cinema. The latter attempts to create a language of cinema. Our attempt should be to make this language known to the readers. The problem with all leftists and feminists is that we tend to read cinema too literally. We tend to understand cinema only through the dialogue, rather than through the structure. So we easily characterise a film as revolutionary or reactionary, feminist or anti-feminist.

It is necessary to sharpen our understanding of these categories in a period when issues like untouchability, dowry, rape, women’s cause have become saleable products in the market. Otherwise, how do we account for the sudden boom of these films in the market?

I will give an example. In *Trishul*, there is a scene where Amitabh and Rakhee are standing near each other, facing the camera. Suddenly, Amitabh comes forward, covering the whole screen and Rakhee is not to be seen in the background. Horrible, simply horrible. The way women are dominated here lies in the structuring of the scene, lies in the head of the director who allows Amitabh to come into the foreground. Amitabh’s dialogues alongwith this kind of structured shot have a cumulative effect of male domination on the psyche of the audience.

The audience does not simply hear dialogue but experiences a film. So we have to go deep into the experience. In the shot described, the domination would

not have been possible without the extreme close up of Amitabh.

New experience has to have a new language for its expression. This is true of all other arts like painting, music, fiction, poetry, and also of film. The real contradiction in today’s society is, as Goddard says: “A film which is in the real interest of the working class may not be liked by them.”

Vinay Samant, Thane

Literacy Needed Too

...I just received **Manushi** No. 26 and have read part of it. Kamla Bhasin’s article was enlightening but raised many questions. I agree illiteracy is a symptom of the disease of poverty and exploitation, but if one cannot cure a disease at the present time, like cancer,



that does not mean we should not treat symptoms like pain with painkillers.

Once, a friend of mine was suffering from a peptic ulcer, the root cause of which was mental worry due to a land dispute in his village. I gave him antacids and the pain was relieved. But when he kept coming back, I felt I was helping the status quo and was not eradicating the cause. I felt like giving up. He asked me if I had suffered from a peptic ulcer. I said: “No.” He said: “Well, I know that when the pain comes, I want to die. It is only antacids and other drugs which relieve the pain and give me hope to fight on to eradicate the root cause. So you are not helping the status quo. You are keeping me alive so that I can hope to continue the struggle.”

So, while I agree that eradication of poverty is the need of the hour, I feel

eradication of illiteracy is as important. Eradication of caste domination, male domination, illiteracy are supportive measures.

Kamla quoted a tribal who said: "We are not as afraid of wild animals as we are of educated people." In that case, if tribals are educated, rulers will be afraid of them, or at least, tribals will not need to be so afraid and easily exploited. Tribals, the poor, women, can be "educated", that is, politicised, through literacy groups. Some of us should write primers which cultivate a questioning attitude, self respect, confidence. May be we can persuade the authorities to use it. If not, political activists can use it.

...I know many women who cannot become full time activists but would like to do some useful work. They could use such primers to impart literacy to other women. A friend of mine who had to stop professional work when she developed heart trouble, began to teach children from a nearby poor locality. I am sure there are many women who do the same.

The Brazilian teacher, Paulo Freire, discovered that any adult can begin to read in a matter of 40 hours if the first words he or she deciphers are charged with political meaning. So a woman can be made literate in 40 hours if the primer gives a political message that improves her personal life. So a primer should be written by a group of enlightened women, and maybe it can be serialised in **Manushi**...

The review of *Aj Ki Awaz* was lengthy but justified. This particular film stayed in my mind longer than most films do, because it is sleekly made, short, and without frills. The repeated flashbacks of the raped girl emphatically intimidate women. The film is not about a saviour of women but about how to keep women in fear. Fear is the key way to keep women down...

**Usha Desai, Bombay
Break The Silence**

...When I read the letters in **Manushi**, I get the feeling that these women, who are able to raise their voices today, must definitely have resisted oppression in

their lives earlier too...

I was married at the age of 18. I spent my childhood in rural areas. Many restrictions were placed on my movements. Hatred against men built up in my mind but since I had never learnt to speak out, I fought lone battles in my mind. I thought such oppression would not exist amongst educated people. But I discovered otherwise.

My husband is an engineer. He was not physically violent towards me. But I had to suffer much mental violence. Usual male behaviour—treating the wife as a maid-servant who has no right to speak, to buy anything, or to give an opinion. He was always right and I was always wrong. I bore up all this, because I had never learnt to answer back. Two children were born.

I began to write all my thoughts down in a diary, which is still my companion today. I suffered a lot during those years but there was no one I could tell. I did not want to upset my natal family. To talk to my husband or in-laws was useless. I had no friends. My children were small. The diary was my only outlet.

Finally, the mental volcano exploded. I began to fight for my rights. I began to read journals and found out about women's legal rights. I began to live for myself instead of living only to serve others. I argued with my husband and warned him to behave properly. At last, he began to understand that I would not be suppressed any longer. I too understood that everyone tends to domineer over one who suffers silently.

Today, I can do whatever I want. No one can stop me. Although I did not face extreme oppression, the way I was treated was wrong in my eyes. So I refused to put up with it for ever. I think women should speak up and fight back. This will enhance their self confidence. It is also essential for them to acquire skills and become economically independent. Once they pluck up courage and refuse to be slaves of men, no one will dare attack them.

It is our silence which encourages men in their behaviour. Once we resolve

not to put up with injustice, our strength to resist will definitely grow. That is my experience which I want to communicate to my sisters.

Leena, Bombay
(translated from Hindi)
Promises Unfulfilled

This is with reference to our article "The Struggle To Make Government Fulfil Its Promises" in **Manushi** No. 26. The editorial footnote says "As of the end of January, all except two of the cases taken up by this group had managed to get compensation." The truth is that a very large number of victims have yet to get their compensation.

For example, there are about 70 injured persons of Trilokpuri who have not received compensation. If this is the state of affairs in the worst affected area, which received the most publicity, one can imagine the condition elsewhere. Again, more than two dozen victims have not got compensation for damage to their huts at P-I Jhuggis Sultanpuri. Likewise, death compensation claims of widows who had earlier left for Punjab and Rajasthan are pending.

We, the volunteers who have taken up the task of monitoring the claims, are continuing our work...

Names withheld on request, Delhi
Latent Communalism

I hope current thinking in India is moving towards a reappraisal of the last few years and a more rational attitude, even though most people seem to be divided on communal lines. It is tragic that the left parties, which should provide leadership in such moments of crisis, again failed. Their leadership seems to be a victim of its own self contradictory analysis, and completely divorced from reality...

Your article about the post assassination riots had a sobering effect on whoever read it, including myself. It is revealing to realise how easy it is to be affected by latent communalism when one is constantly exposed to a certain view. This seems to be acutely true for both the Sikh and the Hindu communities here.

Shelley Kant, USA

Women's Birthright

From the time of the Vedas, considered to be about 5,000 years old, a girl has been given away by her father to her husband as *kanyadan*. This is supposed to be the highest form of *dan* because a human being is gifted away. In our Puranic *dharm*, a person cannot go to heaven unless a son offers *pind* to ancestors and unless a daughter is given away in marriage.

...The fact that a girl is transferred by one person to another as property means that she has no right in either place. She has to be obedient to her husband's every wish in order to retain her status. She is presumed to have broken all links with her parents except those of love, so she cannot go back to them if thrown out of her husband's house...

The basic evil is to consider a girl her father's property. This divests her of social, economic and legal rights. She has only a moral right which can be ignored on one pretext or other.

According to law, a girl has equal right to inherit her father's self acquired property. But in many cases, the father makes a will, excluding her from the inheritance. In others, especially when land is in question, brothers, through threat of bodily injury or severing friendly relations, make the girl relinquish her share.

Laws should be made more strict to ensure that whatever money or land is given to a girl remains her property and is not transferred to her husband or in-laws. If she dies before her husband, he should be an equal inheritor with her parents, sisters and brothers, but not the sole heir. The abolition of *kanyadan* as a necessary rite in marriage and making the girl a full inheritor of her father's property will make her feel more confident...

Kaushalya Malhotra, Hissar Very, Very Unrealistic

We are writing to express the outrage felt by most of us who watched the ridiculous programme "It's A Women's World" broadcast on television on Sunday at 1.15 p.m. We have written an

open letter to Simi Garewal, the producer, Vimal, the sponsors, and Doordarshan.

...With Doordarshan generously throwing its doors wide open to sponsorship from big, financial houses, the dull grey propaganda has given way to the more seductive, slick world of advertising. In this programme, the traditional Sitas and Savitris have given way to an alien creature who is the "new" role model for the Indian woman, who is "economically independent", "progressive", "ambitious", and "very, very feminine." The words are all proper but very, very glib.

The understanding of women's



situation in India is totally hollow... Why is woman projected as a mindless physical entity who is so "emancipated" that life for her is merely a series of aerobics, facial masks and off the shoulder dresses ?

If Simi is genuinely concerned with highlighting issues related to women, she should take the trouble to step out of the glamour world of sauna baths and fashions, to observe and understand the life of the average Indian woman. Her greatest contribution to the cause of Indian womanhood would be to ensure that this programme goes off the air.

Vimochana forum for women's rights, Bangalore Women In Madhya Pradesh

Madhya Pradesh is a backward state

as regards women's situation. The proportion of women to men is declining, just as it is on the all India level. In 1901 there were 990 women per 1,000 men in the state but in 1981 there were only 941 women per 1,000 men. It is noteworthy that the proportion of women is higher in tribal areas. In Kalaghat there are 1,006 women per 1,000 men and the highest proportion is in Rajnandgaon where in 1981 there were 1,020 women per 1,000 men. In Morena where women are bought and sold on a large scale, the sex ratio is 835 per 1,000.

The government releases misleading statistics. For instance, it says that women constitute 50 percent of all adult literacy classes attendance, but the figure for women's literacy has not risen from less than 20 percent in the decade from 1971 to 1981. Adult literacy classes exist only on paper in tribal areas...

The government declares that the state is making rapid progress. On August 1, women's day was celebrated in memory of Kamla Nehru. In September 1984, the state government announced that a state level committee had been set up for the welfare of women and children.

Yet 44,000 out of 70,000 villages continue to face the problem of non availability of drinking water. The women have to walk an average of four kilometres to get water from streams. Most of the streams and canals are polluted by industrial waste. Fuel is also scarce and tribals who collect wood from the forests are often sexually exploited by forest officers...

Women are supposed to be given priority in employment as school teachers. But recently, in Satna district, 25 teachers were declared unfit for employment on the ground that they were pregnant.

The Madhya Pradesh high court had advised that only women judges should hear criminal cases involving women. But the reality is that there are not even 20 women judges in the state, whereas reports of crimes like rape and dowry deaths fill the paper...

Radheeshyam Tripathi, Shahdol

(translated from Hindi)



A Woman

*A woman is rinsing clothes,
Rinsing them
Through centuries,
Spreading them to dry
Between earth and heaven.
On a line of heat.*

*Deprived of the sky
Of air and of light,
A woman is kneading
Mounds of flour.*

*A woman is threshing the fields
With the flail of the four winds,*

*A woman is fording
The river of time,
Wearing out her feet
On the midday stones,
Through age after age.*

*Clasping the world to her breast,
A woman is letting flow
Rivers of milk.*

*A bundle of grass on her head,
A woman is pacing the earth,
Since time immemorial.*

*A woman is lying in the dark
Beside a snoring man—
A woman unclothed, sleepless,
Through centuries.*

*A woman's body
Wanders amidst milling crowds.
Her hands
Search for her face,
Her feet
Search for their place.*

—Chandrakant Devtale

*(translated by Manushi from the Hindi
original in Stree Sangharsh)*