



# Letters To Manushi

## In Turmoil

My mind has been in turmoil after reading Shail's story in **Manushi** No. 24. The male dominated attitudes of the courts are a slap in the face of social justice and equality. The only ray of hope was Shail's courageous fighting back and her parents' acceptance of her. Women's organisations the country over should press the supreme court to restore Shail's possessions to her. Shail's parents should keep up the struggle, considering it not just a matter of their own honour, but a matter of doing justice to the anger of many girls like Shail...

The reportage of the Delhi anti-Sikh riots shook me up. It seems that those who organised this violent orgy think it more important to raise slogans of national unity, and to decide on which brand of car should be sold, or which media can best reflect their faces than to provide for the rehabilitation of victims...

Gujarat is overwhelmed with blood and smoke. Maharashtra too is coming under the same shadow. The isms of caste, religion, community, region and language have become much more important than human beings. These isms are kept alive at the cost of human life...

**Lata Pratibha Madhukar, Bombay**  
(translated from Hindi)

## Reaction To Reviews

I just received **Manushi** No. 27. The review of *Khandhar* was enlightening. Congratulations to Sujata and Prabha. To be frank, after reading the rave reviews of *Khandhar* in the press, when I saw the film, I was shattered by the depressing depiction of women's world.

I concluded that this was not my cup of tea. Such films are anathema to womankind.

The review of *Kamla* was to the point and relevant. I had always felt guilty that in so called political action, I had "used" poor, illiterate women on whose behalf protests were launched. I felt that the case of *Kamla*, exposed by Ashwini Sarin, brought only a momentary awareness: "Oh, such things really do happen!", and had more sensational value. But I think the unearthing of the Mathura rape case did bring about a new era in women's struggle. I have also realised that everybody exploits somebody and everybody is exploited by somebody. Only the degrees differ..

**Usha Desai, Bombay**  
**Widows' Plight**

The position of widows in our society remains deplorable... I was shocked to hear Sarla's brother accusing her of bringing him ill fate and spoiling his peace. If one's own brother speaks in this manner, can one blame society alone?...

Razia was brought up in extreme luxury and happiness. After marriage too she was happy until her husband suddenly expired after a heart attack. She was forced to wear black clothes and forbidden to look at any member of the other sex. She was not even allowed to look at her own husband's photo.

A woman from the Oswal community lost her husband within one month of her marriage. She was subjected to severe harassment and rude remarks. All her jewellery and ornaments were taken away. Even the medical store owned by

her husband was passed on to his younger brother. She was given leftovers to eat only once a day and two old sarees to wear. Her parents were not allowed to take her back until about six months after her marriage.

In such a situation, what course of action should a woman take?...

**Hemlata Talesra, Udaipur**  
(translated from Hindi)

## Reluctant Allies

From time to time, the point is made that women must join ranks with other oppressed classes, for example, the blacks in the USA, the working class everywhere, and the dalits and tribals in India. We are told that unless we fight shoulder to shoulder with other oppressed groups (of men) we shall not win. But the oppressed groups themselves often have a strong antipathy to women, both to those within their ranks and to those outside. They are not averse to beating up their wives. Every now and then some dalit woman, some woman labourer gets up in a meeting and asks why the men who are agitating for their rights continue to treat the women badly. Generally, this embarrasses everyone and the woman is told that "this is not the place for this question."

In 1982, **Manushi** had filed a writ petition in the supreme court on behalf of the women of the Ho tribe, challenging the denial of land rights to tribal women. Among many tribal communities, women are not allowed to inherit parental property nor do they have secure rights as wives in the husbands' property. They are at most allowed a maintenance right as widows and unmarried daughters

Even this is often denied to them. If a widow is childless or an unmarried woman has no brother, her relatives often drive her out or even kill her so that the men may get the property.

The file of this case was misplaced in the supreme court registry and the case has not yet come up for final hearing.

In February this year, I had gone to Ranchi to a seminar of tribals who are threatened with displacement by the Koel-Karo hydro electrical project. No tribal women attended the seminar. In detailing tribal grievances, no one mentioned the increased problems women face in fetching fuel and water, after displacement.

The climax came, however, when the demands of the dam oustees were being discussed. The peasants wanted land for every son, who was over 18 years of age. Kusum Karnik and I suggested that a daughter who was over 18 years of age should also get land. To our shock and surprise, the male peasants became very hostile and upset. "Why do girls need land?" they asked, "They have no problems." I said that there were cases where the women had been beaten up, driven off the land and even killed. I added that a case had been filed in the supreme court on this point. The peasants became even more angry: "We know all about this case. That Madhu Kishwar has written all lies. She does not know anything, and she is creating trouble. We will not give land to women."

This month I went to another seminar in eastern U.P. Here, the problems of people displaced by industrial projects were being considered. There is no doubt that the government and its agencies have been unjust and inhuman in dealing with the displaced persons whose lands they have acquired. Many of the actions of these agencies have been downright illegal and even criminal.

The displaced persons who spoke at the seminar were all upper caste men who had been peasants.

Not a word was said of the problems of women, not even the problem of procuring fuel and water. One point was made in response to something said. I

had remarked that women and dalits made some gains from the shift from the small, closed village society to the more open, urban industrial environment where the options were numerous. My observation was not liked at all. In fact, a socialist activist replied that women lost out in this shift. "Our women used to be kept in parda. Not even the sun was allowed to touch them. Now we sit with



them to see films in which naked women dance and sing. This is how industrialisation degrades them." No one cared to remember that while men can choose the films they see, women have no choice about remaining in parda. There are ways in which women in industrial towns suffer. But a glorification of parda and virtual slavery is surely not the answer to these problems.

It seems to me that of all the battles, the one hardest to win is the one of women. They may wish to join hands with oppressed men, but then men do not really want this alliance.

#### **Vasudha Dhagamwar, Delhi Needs Monitoring**

This is in response to the article on Telugu Desam's policies for the poor and women, published in *Manushi* No. 26. Although my knowledge is limited, I would like to express a different viewpoint. It amounts to nothing but

naivete to believe the manifestos and propaganda material of electoral parties.

If Telugu Desam can really implement its declared policies, what is it that inhibits the Congress(I) from doing the same? There must be a hitch somewhere—lack of finances or different priorities, for Congress(I) too would like to capture the vote bank of women. Rama Rao has said that Telugu Desam can implement these programmes only if the central government gives them sufficient help to acquire the resources.

Provision for equal property rights is no doubt a progressive step on paper—like the abolition of untouchability and prohibition of dowry. But what about women from poor families? What shares can they inherit? Women from the rich and middle classes are given adequate or rather, huge dowries, though a dowry does not amount to a share in the property. Further, only when women go to court can this policy be implemented even if it does become an Act.

Similarly, Telugu Desam intends to introduce reservation for women within the reservation for backward classes. The backward classes were supposed to benefit from the reservation policy which, initially, was meant to continue for only ten years. Do you think that reservations have induced an upward movement of backward classes over the 35 years of their implementation? It appears to be a vote catching device. Although individuals from scheduled castes and tribes may have benefited, this policy will not benefit them in the long run. The same can be said of reservations for women.

Rama Rao's regime has become notorious for its police repression of left and democratic movements. The centre sees eye to eye with the state government when special battalions and funds are requisitioned to curb the "naxalite menace". Such a regime's "progressive policies" towards women will always be under suspicion.

*Srjana*, a Telugu literary monthly, carried two articles on the treatment that women get from the police (*Srjana*,

March and April combined issue). One is the experience of women delegates returning from the All India Revolutionary Student Federation Conference at Hyderabad and the second is the sexual abuse of women by police as a means of terrorising the activists of left organisations. The editor of the magazine, Ms P. Hemlata, was arrested for carrying these articles and also an editorial comment on the banning in Punjabi of "Who Are The Guilty".

Though your article was well intended, it sounded like party propaganda and I hope immediate amendments will be made.

**Suresh, Pipariya**

*We had only commented on what was promised in their manifesto. In fact, we had very clearly stated that a party's character cannot be judged by what it promises, but by its actual performance. That is why we had made it a point to invite readers from Andhra Pradesh to send us reports evaluating the actual progress made in the implementation of those programmes.*

—**Manushi**

### Widening Circle

...In each issue of Manushi one comes across one or two articles which deserve praise. However, issue No. 27 contains numerous articles which are of an exceptionally good standard. It is difficult to choose the best article in this issue, as the ones dealing with police and prostitutes, with wife murder, with Stridhan, and the ones entitled "Risking Life To Give Life" and "In Prison For No Fault of Theirs" are of a very good quality.

Possibly, the outstanding article is the film review. The analysis and critique of *Kamla* and *Khandhar* are brilliant and raise points which most people would have either ignored or taken for granted.

I am one of the very few subscribers to **Manushi** here. Each issue that I receive is widely circulated amongst women and men activists and is greatly appreciated. I feel that your magazine plays an important part in raising the

consciousness of people, wherever they may be.

### S. Akbar Zaidi, Karachi A Mother's Vow

...I have vowed to get my son and daughter married according to their choice, and without dowry. I have tried to bring up my children with an understanding of social evils. I am confident that I will be able to find them suitable life companions, if not in our



caste, then in some other caste.

My in-laws are not critical of the idea of marrying my son without dowry but they think it is absurd to hope for a bridegroom for my daughter who will not take dowry. They ask whether I want to keep her unmarried all her life. My husband too thinks there is nothing wrong in giving her a dowry if we can afford it. But I feel that our property should be given to them equally but not in the form of dowry.

I read in **Manushi** a letter from a reader, describing the mourning rituals women are forced to observe. The same custom prevails in our community. I find it very unjust that only women are expected to observe all the restrictions

of wearing white, staying indoors and so on, when a relative dies, whether the person who dies is her relative or her husband's relative. When my husband's sister lost her small daughter, she had to stay confined to the house for a long time while her husband was free to move around, see films, eat and drink normally. Why this distinction?..-

**Leena, Bombay**

(translated from Hindi)

### Whose Fault ?

The story of 20 year old Bharati Thakkar, a bride who, four months after her wedding, turned to kerosene and match for her final liberation, made horrifying reading. What caught the eye in this case was that Bharati's older sister-in-law had been "driven out of the house for five months as an anticipatory punishment if she gave birth to a baby girl."

It appears that her in-laws are not even aware of the fact that the "fault" of giving birth to a female child rests with the X sperm of the husband. If a Y sperm fertilises the female egg the resultant embryo develops into a male child. The report goes on to say that fortunately for the sister-in-law the child was a boy so she was allowed to return.

Perhaps the fact that she did return was most unfortunate. Are parents blind, deaf and impervious to their daughters' welfare ? Were not Bharati's parents aware that their daughter would fare no better than had the older daughter-in-law ? Abusing the in-laws or even dragging them to court now is not going to bring Bharati back to life. May be a great part of the fault lies with the young women and their parents who agree to dowry in the first place. Why should parents consider it imperative to get their daughters off their hands before they die, even if it means the daughters may precede them to heaven ?

**Sangeeta Bagga, Bombay**

### Feedback Needed

I am a reader of **Manushi** in a far away corner of the country. I first came across the magazine as I was completing my MA from Jadavpur university. Since then, I

—**Joke**

have taken a constant interest in it—

I would like to offer a humble suggestion. Although **Manushi** more or less well represents most parts of India, Assam or the whole of the northeastern region is barely represented in it. I am a resident of Assam and have visited Nagaland and Manipur. I am therefore particularly aware of the manifold social problems faced by women in these regions and would like to see them covered in **Manushi**.

**Sumana Das, Gauhati**

*We do feel unhappy that **Manushi** is not able to give information about the situation in the north eastern region. Since we do not have paid correspondents, we are dependent on voluntary contributions coming in from readers and supporters of **Manushi**. So far, very few copies of the magazine have managed to reach the northeast. This may be one reason why we get very little feedback. We would be happy if readers in that area make a special effort to overcome this limitation, and to write about the situation there.*

—**Manushi**

### **Subtle Exploitation**

I wish to bring to your attention a kind of subtle exploitation of women by their parents, particularly by fathers. When there are two or three girls in a family or the girls are older than the boys, the girls are sent to work in order to supplement the family income and educate the younger children.

Gradually, the father finds this income very profitable so he scuttles all marriage proposals for the older working girl so as not to lose her earnings. He makes the excuse that the younger girls have to be married and the boys have to be put through college.

In our society, girls cannot go about looking for husbands. So the poor girl is left to become an unwilling spinster while her earnings are taken away by the father who by this time, has retired. In the end she finds herself all alone, after her parents' death, while her sisters and brothers are happily married on her earnings.

I personally know three such women, all graduate teachers, who are now retired, and very bitter about the way they have been treated.

**N. Shanmugasundram, Madras  
Of Husbandhood**

...In Kalthoriya village, in our district, there is a girl named Shubhankari Devi who was married at the age of 10 to one Ramdev Yadav of Raundhiya village. She is a very pretty girl. The principal of



Leelavarani middle school, Keshav Mehto, aged 50, used to give private tuitions in this village. He became interested in Shubhankari and bribed her father to dissolve her earlier marriage. Then he married her himself. She was 16 years old at that time. She was unwilling to marry him but had no say in the matter.

Keshav Mehto treated Shubhankari very cruelly. He was extremely possessive and suspicious of her. He used to lock her up all day in a room while he went to school. If she spoke to anyone, he would beat her. He was a diseased man and Shubhankari got infected by him. One day, he found her talking to her sister's husband. He spread scandal in all the surrounding villages

that she was having an affair with her brother-in-law.

Shubhankari is now living with her parents and says she would rather die than go back to Keshav Mehto. He has filed a number of false cases against her to pressurise her into returning to him. He says he will see that she is unable to remarry.

Keshav Mehto has been married twice before—once in his childhood and once later, when he lived with a woman for 12 years and then threw her out. He also has illicit relations with other girls...

**Dilip, Manoharpur**

*(translated from Hindi)*

### **Widespread Inequality**

I have been talking to women in the unorganised sector and have found some interesting facts. In the weaver caste, here, women are forbidden to do the weaving and marketing. They can only spin the yarn for which they are paid Rs 5 a kilo while men are paid Rs 8 a kilo for doing the same work.

In the shoemaker caste, men make the shoes, while women are allowed to embroider them for which they are paid Rs 3 a pair. There are a few educated manufacturers who employ women to make shoes otherwise women have no opportunity to learn this skill.

Women are not allowed to be blacksmiths, to make utensils, cupboards, cages, iron stoves and so on. In most government organisations here, food is prepared by men at the rate of Rs. 20 a day and women at Rs 11 a day. Similarly, even a woman tailor who is highly skilled is paid only 40 paise per petticoat while a man is paid Rs 1.50. Thus, women are paid unequally in many fields of work

**Manu, Jodhpur**

*(translated from Hindi)*

### **Father Or Jailer?**

Cruelties on women in India enjoy social acceptability, with the result that cases of cruelty come to light only when they acquire frightening proportions. Unfortunately, this means that public attention gets diverted from the real issue of women's rights to the immediate one of an individual man's crime.

My 20 year old niece, Neema Jha, was brought to my house by her father T.N. Jha, in 1982, and left under the guardianship of my husband and me. He asked us to teach her modern ways and English conversation so that he could marry her off to an I AS officer. He proudly declared that he would give whatever dowry was demanded.

We gradually discovered that Neema had potential for real education, the ability to think and act independently. When her father visited us after months, he was shocked to see the change in her, and he took her back to his village Barain district Saharsa, Bihar. He forced her to stay there for over four months...

She wrote us dozens of letters urging us to take her back to Delhi. We managed to fetch her with the blessings of her grandfather since her father was not present in the village at that time.

But after some months, Neema's father sent her uncle and mother to abduct her. We were not in the house. The neighbours told us that she was dragged out of the house and whisked away...

When I visited her village again, I found that she was under terror, and was abused and threatened. She was also stopped from writing letters to us and all our letters to her were intercepted...

I became terribly anxious when I got no news of her for a year. When I visited her in 1985, she told me that she was being forcibly shown to boys, and was to be married off against her will. She urged me to take steps to rescue her from this bondage. She signed a statement saying that she wanted to live with us in Delhi and educate herself, and did not want to live with her father—I am determined to do all I can to get her out of the clutches of her tyrannical family. I would like **Manushi's** help in this.

**Rama Jha, Delhi**

*We met Rama Jha and discussed the case with her. **Manushi** lawyers will help her file a habeas corpus petition against Neema Jha's father so as to get her*



**Neema Jha**

*released from the family's unlawful custody.*

**Manushi**

### **Mental Harassment**

I was working with a Kannada daily newspaper called *Samyukta Karnatak* since 1971. I joined with the intention of cultivating literary activity. I used to write short stories, book reviews and feature articles but they did not give me an opportunity to do editorial work.

In 1983, I underwent a major operation and the doctors suspected a cancerous tumour. I was very weak. When I resumed duty, the management asked me to resign. They said the medical report was faked. The atmosphere became very unpleasant. I was shifted from one department to another, and given peon's work to do. I was asked: "If you die, who will remove your dead body?" This kind of mental harassment is difficult to substantiate in a court of law...

**K. Tara Bhat, Bangalore**  
**Women In The Family**

One frequently hears people say that the joint family is breaking up because of women. They imply that women, because of their narrowly selfish tendencies, fail to live together. Is this really the case ?

For a man, the home is not the ultimate testing ground, but for a woman, the home is supposed to be the only field of

action. Yet the woman has to leave her own home and prove herself in an alien home, her husband's. He is linked to that house by a chain of memories and emotions but she has a place there only through him, not in her own right. Naturally, she has to expend all her energy to use him as her representative in the family arena and this gives rise to distortions.

It is not easy to develop relationships. It takes time and requires a free, relaxed atmosphere. If people are forced to develop relationships with strangers in an atmosphere of inequality, the repressed anger is bound to burst out somewhere, and it bursts out on other women. The women in a joint family are strangers to each other. Each one comes from a different family which has its own culture. Sometimes it happens that two sisters who marry into one family and become sisters-in-law develop conflicts and tensions. This is because the relation of two sisters-in-law is built on the relation of the concerned men, the brothers, not on the women themselves.

Further, a woman's status depends on her reproductive capacity. One who gives birth to daughters only is laughed at and mocked by other women. Thus, a woman is not evaluated on the basis of her innate abilities or her actions but on the basis of her husband's status. As she has no control over these things, it is inevitable that she waits on fate for her happiness. Women are fatalistic because only chance can give them a good husband or in-laws. They have no active choice in the matter. This is the meaning of festivals like Teej when women pray for good husbands.

Only when woman's sphere expands beyond the home so that her personality develops and she is not dependent on a man to decide her life, will the family cease to be a political arena for women, where they must struggle to protect their identity through kinship ties.

**Kalpna Shastri, Bihar**  
*(translated from Hindi)*