

Letters To Manushi

A Light Eclipsed

In **Manushi** No. 29, we saw the picture of Sant Longowal, with the family of Prabhu Dayal. Sant Longowal was a sun who lit up the path of human values in a burning Punjab, but was swallowed up in the darkness on the evening of August 20. Lakhs of people poured forth to have a last glimpse of him. In village Longowal, the village with the highest population in Punjab, all the fires were cold that night, even though the majority in this village are Hindus.

About two kilometres away from the village, stands the Kebiwal *gurudwara* in the midst of green fields. It consists of half a dozen rooms surrounded by a wall. In Santji's room, there was a wooden bed and a chair. The leaders of various national parties were amazed that he had led the Akali party for four years from this isolated spot. This was the place where Sant Longowal used to retire for a few hours' rest after the day's work. The agricultural labourers from nearby villages used to come here to do voluntary work.

Santji's love for the poor was evident in a conversation overheard amongst some owners of small teashops from these villages. They said : "We have closed our shops but these vendors of roasted gram should have set up their barrows so that the people who have come from a distance for the funeral could have eaten gram and drunk water." To which the vendors replied : "We loved the Santji even more than you did. We will not ply our trade for two days."

There is no doubt that the government had provided the Sant with a guard. But his sister's cry before his pyre was lit: "Your being a sant was your destruction,

brother, the world has so many security arrangements but you could not be protected, brother", was an unwitting exposure of the government's inadequate security arrangements...

Jaspal Kaur Namdev, Patiala

(translated from Hindi)

Nasty Or Needed ?

...Your fantasy interview with Sonia Gandhi was, I am afraid, downright nasty. Why ? **Manushi** does not need to be nasty at all. You make your points very well without that sort of thing.

Please do not try the sort of stuff that is strictly for gossip and film magazines. It leaves a bad taste in the mouth and, so far, yours has been a refreshing taste. Somewhat bitter, but wholesome and invigorating, a little tart, plenty of salt and, in spite of yourself, more than a dash of sweet. You cannot help being compassionate and warm, as befits your name — **Manushi**, the human woman.

Please do not disappoint your readers by focusing on nonpersons and nonissues and, worse, focusing with a malicious squint.

Vasantha Surya, Madras

...I was deeply impressed by your fantasy interview with Sonia Gandhi. The way Mrs Bharti had sung the praises of Rajiv and Sonia Gandhi in *Dharmyug* was reminiscent of worship offered to feudal lords and kings. Further, Sonia's sayings took us back hundreds of years to the most reactionary kind of thinking.

I wrote a critical letter to *Dharmyug* but they did not find this bitter fruit worthy of the tray in which sacrificial offerings were being offered to the deities, and only

those worshipful letters were published which blessed and praised these glorious personalities...

Meena Arora, Allahabad

(translated from Hindi)

...I read the fantasy interview with Sonia Gandhi. It was much discussed in Bihar. It was after a long time that one came across such a telling and sharp satire. I liked it very much...

Manimala, Jaipur

(translated from Hindi)

I have not read the interview with Sonia Gandhi by Pushpa Bharati but I read your interview with her. My two teenaged daughters and I had a good laugh on reading it. The caption of the accompanying photograph was quite clever and witty—.

Pushpa Bhargava, Bikaner

Women Lose, Men Gain

...I was grieved to read about Vasudha Lamba's plight in **Manushi** No. 28. ...The fact that the Lambas are trying to hush up the case by greasing some palms speaks volumes about our legal and police system...

However, as a young girl who is vulnerable to social pressures regarding marriage, I would like to express a viewpoint which is hardly highlighted by antidowry agitations. Undoubtedly the law is lax and the pressures to marry severe. But what do young unmarried girls do about it ? How many girls refuse to get married with dowry ? If girls put their foot down and insist that they will not marry if dowry is demanded, do you think all the men will remain unmarried ? I deliberately use the word "demanded" because many girls believe that gifts voluntarily given

by parents are not dowry—a notion with which I wholly disagree.

...Why do girls not realise that while they lose everything in marriage, except for social recognition, men gain everything—a free slave and constant companion, a house-maid and a bedmate. If marriage was of no use to him, the selfish male would never get married. So all this talk of marriage being a social necessity for girls is stupid...

I feel angry with girls who continue to be goody goody, nice girls, complacent and subservient... I think we should stop pitying the poor benighted girls and give them a jolt or two to awaken them...

I am sorry to sound so harsh. But dowry is an issue I feel very strongly about, especially as I am besieged by, and am resisting, such pressures, since I am of a marriageable age.

Anuradha Aggarwal, Allahabad

Resisting Molestation

Amina Sherwani's letter in **Manushi** No. 28 was refreshing. Just 2 weeks before I read it, I had seen, in a DTC bus, a woman most determinedly shake off not just a molester but also the men who, as always, tried to pacify her.

Over the past several years I have intervened in order to protect women from molesters. I know of at least a few other men who do this. It usually takes the form of physically interposing oneself between the two ; it almost always leads to arguments and sometimes ends in a scuffle.

Conductors and male passengers regard these as minor disturbances. Going to the nearest police station would, after all, waste their precious time. On the two occasions on which I did succeed in diverting the buses, no complaints were recorded—the women in question were “persuaded” to go home quietly, mainly by our khaki garbed protectors.

A little over a month ago, I tried to stop two toughs from assaulting two women. A knife injury and mild concussion were the immediate consequences for me. The women refused to come with me to hospital or to a police post. They did not

give me their names and addresses, saying that their families would be annoyed. Many fears and ideological bonds must go before other women in substantial numbers can act as Amina did.

Name withheld by request, Delhi

Challenge Prejudice

Doordarshan has registered a distinct improvement lately. There is an attempt to educate as well as entertain the viewers. A number of good serials like *Basanti* and *Rajani* are being screened.

On Sunday, September 15, in the serial *Rajani*, the heroine intervened to stop an employer from beating up his servant. The employer's mother had lost her ring and the servant was immediately, without any evidence, accused of having stolen it. The serial effectively exposed the injustice against domestic servants in our society.

But the script writer seems to be only partly aware of the injustice done to women in this society. On the one hand, through the figure of *Rajani*, there is an attempt to show woman as a thinking and active being who can try to change conditions around her. But on the other hand, when the ring is found to have been misplaced in the house by its owner, an onlooker immediately comments : “Just like a woman. First, they misplace things and then create problems for everyone else.” Had *Rajani* retorted to this comment, existing prejudices against women could have been countered. But since *Rajani* says nothing, the comment goes unchallenged and seems to be the serial maker's comment....

Kusum Kohli, Delhi

(translated from Hindi)

Never Too Young

I am a 14 year old girl, studying in class 10. I came to know about **Manushi** through my maternal uncle, who considers himself pro women's liberation...

I debate on women's issues with my friends. But they do not take me seriously and think I am too young to be so staunch. They say they are in favour of equality and freedom for women but will practise it when they grow older. I don't believe in this. I think everyone, especially girls,

should fight whenever and wherever they encounter injustice...

Manisha Shelley, Jammu

Discrimination

...I wish to draw your attention to the fact that Chandresh Sharma, sentenced to life imprisonment in the Vibha Jain murder case, has now been in prison for more than 10 years. The chief accused in this case, Vibha's husband, Dr N.K. Jain, also sentenced to life imprisonment, was released on July 23, 1985. But Chandresh's application for release has been three times rejected by the supreme court and also by the board on the ground that her release will have a bad effect on society. This is despite the fact that women undergoing life imprisonment are usually released after 10 years.

Chandresh is poor and her family is not influential. Also, she is a woman. Clearly, she is being discriminated against on these grounds...

Tara Chaturvedi, Dehradun

(translated from Hindi)

As we go to press, it is reported that Chandresh has been released by a high court order in her favour.

Counter Antiwomanism

You are doing a good job. Congratulations. Like so many other women, although I realised that a lot had to be done, I did not know where or how to begin. I felt I was just being a bit lazy. Now I know it is criminal, so here I am...

While going through some commercial magazines, it struck me that every day, so many unilateral declarations, aggressive and unsubstantiated, are being made against women... I think apart from getting wider readership for **Manushi** so as to counter these allegations, we should also counter them in the columns of the papers which make them.

I think it would be a good idea for some of us to get together, make a list of magazines to be monitored, and regularly send them our comments on important issues. Organised protest reaches the right people.

Shikhi Sharma, Lucknow

Encouraging Murderers

...Sometimes, I feel deeply despairing when I consider conditions in our society, particularly the condition of married women. One example of what women suffer is that of 22 year old Indu Singh who was shot and killed while in bed with her husband on the night of July 20 in Nansa village, Faizabad. The in-laws claim she committed suicide because she was an MA, and did not like to live in the village.

Her parents say this is not true as she had been brought up in a village. In any case, her husband, Shailendra Singh, who had just got a job in ONGC through the efforts of Indu's father, was due to go to Calcutta in two months' time. On June 15, Indu had written a letter to her aunt and her father, in which she says: "My in-laws are not good. They were given so much dowry yet they are not satisfied. It may be difficult for me to continue living here. It seems they are not interested in keeping me. How can I stay under such circumstances?... Only god knows what the future has in store..."

If no steps are taken against the culprits, such cases become an example to be emulated by cruel people and thus such incidents increase in number. Women's oppression also increases because such examples can be used to threaten them and warn them against revolting...

Tripti, Lucknow

(translated from Hindi)

Chhabirani's Case

The gang rape and murder of Chhabirani Mohapatra, a rural journalist for *Durmukha*, an Oriya monthly, and wife of Nabakishore Mohapatra, also a journalist, on the night of October 3 1980, created a stir all over the country, particularly amongst journalists. (See **Manushi** No. 7)

The case, which was neglected for some time by local police, was later taken up by the crime branch. On the basis of their investigations, the additional sessions judge, Cuttack, convicted the eight main accused of rape and murder, and sentenced them to life imprisonment. They appealed to the Orissa high court.



Chhabirani

On July 1, 1985, the high court acquitted all the accused on the grounds that there was no eyewitness of the rape and murder of Chhabirani, and that the two main witnesses contradicted their own earlier statements.

It is illogical and impractical to look for an eyewitness to the tragedy which took place in the late evening on the bank of a small river in the rural interior. In the absence of an eyewitness, circumstantial evidence, which was very strong in this case, is usually taken into account. The contradiction in the statements of the witnesses may have been the effect of pressure by the culprits, some of whom are and some of whom have the protection of, socially and politically influential men of the area.

The high court judge has also stated that "it was not youthlike on the part of Shri Mohapatra to run away with his baby son, leaving his wife alone in the hands of the attackers." Mr Mohapatra had run to the nearby village to call a few more people, while Chhabirani, who was faint with hunger, and wearing a sari, was unable to keep up with him. Would it have been "youth like" on the part of Mohapatra and his baby son to have entered into singlehanded combat, unarmed, with eight

men, on a deserted river bank ?

Gopika, Cuttack

Rape Victims Jailed

In September 1984, the shocking fact of rape victims being kept captive in jails in West Bengal was brought to public attention. (See **Manushi** No. 27) Maya Barui, a rape victim, had written to an advocate, pleading to be freed. Enquiries revealed that Maya was jailed in September 1980. The persons charged with raping her were acquitted on March 31, 1983. Maya was kept in jail despite repeated petitions for her release.

Further investigations revealed that there were 32 rape victims in these jails. Violence against women is the only crime where the victim has to prove that she has been raped ; and now it seems to be the only instance where the victim is jailed. Mr Debabrata Bandopadhyay, minister for jails and social welfare claimed that the rape victims were kept in jails for their "own safety" as they were the prime witnesses in their cases. Are there no protective and welfare homes where these women can be sheltered ?

Reports in newspapers reveal that 11 women were detained in the Presidency jail, six in Midnapore jail, four in Berhampore jail, five in Hooghly jail and three each in Howrah and Burdwan jails. Three women were detained in the Presidency jail since 1982, one since July 7, 1982. A woman in Burdwan jail was detained since March 22, 1980. The most outrageous case is that of a deaf and dumb victim of rape. She was raped in a village near Mogra in Hooghly and sent to jail on July 14, 1981. The jail authorities have no record of her name or address and she will probably spend the rest of her life in "safe custody."

Kamala Das was released from jail by the court and sent to the government reception home at Liluah. Kamala, who worked as a maidservant in a house in the Bally Ihana area, was allegedly raped by her employer. Sent to jail on April 18, 1983, she gave birth to a girl while still in detention. Malati Vaskar, a resident of Tangakhali in Canning went shopping and

was raped inside a stall by its owner. Jyotsna Mistry, aged 15, detained in jail for seven years, was not even produced before the court. The court treated many of these hapless victims like ordinary criminals and some were set free on a personal bond of Rs 200 which the advocate paid. It is not only rape victims who are jailed but also noncriminal lunatics. In 1983, a male lunatic, Santosh Bag, died at the Dum Dum central jail.

In 1984, six lunatics died in jails, most of them from anaemia, some from anaemia and TB. The Presidency jail had 254 women lunatics in 1984 with only two general physicians to attend to them, although the sanctioned number is five. Convicts are appointed to look after the patients. Patients are often starved and get no medical treatment as prescribed, since these convicts are not trained to handle them.

In Calcutta, the Nari Nirjatan Pratirodh Manch held a convention to focus attention on the condition of women detained in jails. The convention passed a resolution urging the unconditional release and rehabilitation of all innocent women prisoners.

Recently, in Thane district, Maharashtra, the free legal aid and advice committee appointed a panel of 28 lawyers to visit jails in the area every month to look into the grievances of undertrial prisoners. Such panels should be on the look out to see that no innocent victim is imprisoned, and to inform the people and the courts when such cases do occur.

Beena Sorab, Bombay

Regional Variations

I was really very pleased to see your review of *Rakku's Story* in **Manushi** No. 28. I appreciated the detailed way in which you highlighted many key issues in the book, and also how you pointed to some of the important gaps, but in a constructive way. So let me convey sincere appreciation. But could I also add a few thoughts which came to mind as I read your comments? Please bear with me if they seem off the mark.

It seems important to mention the

“southern perspective” regarding the question of gender differences in child care. That is, the apparently significant differences in the care allotted to female children in the southeastern regions of the country compared to the north and northwestern states. I believe this should be stressed, not in order to defend the shortcomings of *Rakku's Story*, but rather because I sense that such differences are extremely important and useful for feminist analysis generally in the country.

During my years in the 25 project villages east of Madurai, I saw very few instances of females receiving significantly less health care, attention and even food than their brothers, at least as young children. To the point where, knowing the subordinate social position of women generally, I was at times quite surprised, happily, that parents, including fathers, went to seemingly equal lengths to save a tiny daughter. I know these are only personal impressions. I am sure that there are also examples of the opposite. Though I was curious to read in Barbara Miller's *The Endangered Sex* that her enquiries of health workers in southern India produced responses similar to mine.

SRS (Sample Registration Survey) data also seem to bear this out: that age specific death rates in young children in the south and southeastern regions of the country show relatively little gender differences especially when compared to rates in, say, Punjab, Haryana and UP. And certainly, census sex ratio data reflect this. The following is 1981 census data: TN.-978 Punjab -886 Kerala -1034 Haryana-877 Andhra -975 UP-886 Orissa-982

Differential mortality still exists in the first group, obviously, or sex ratios would all be the more natural rate of 1050-60—though to a limited degree the deficit in the southeastern states also represents continuing high maternal mortality.

There are still many puzzling aspects to such data, especially when specific studies such as Sen and Sengupta's “Malnutrition of rural children and the sex bias”, *EPW*, Annual No. May. 1983, show significantly greater levels of malnutrition in young girls from three months of age

onward in West Bengal, compared, that is, to the 1970 SRS data showing 0—4 years female mortality in West Bengal as 97 percent that of male mortality.

Still, I think the general pattern of regional differences is clear and therefore important, precisely because it points to possible explanations which shed light on and strengthen fundamental feminist arguments. By this, of course, I mean the general correlation of more natural sex ratios in those regions where historically, women, at least working class women, have been economically active by participating in agricultural labour, particularly, though not exclusively, in the rice growing regions, hence, regions where the differences in male-female earnings have not been so absolute. I realise you are probably familiar with all of this and much more. I scribble this down simply to stress the importance of regional childcare differences for feminist analysis. I am embarrassed to admit that when writing *Rakku's Story* in 1981, I was quite unaware of these differences, which points to the enormous hazards of generalising from one's own experiences! Perhaps it would be useful if a future issue of **Manushi** could focus on analysis of these regional differences—and also hazards!

In writing this, I don't in any way mean to imply that women and their daughters in Ramnad district, Tamil Nadu receive absolutely equal health care and nutrition to males. Nor that they are not socioculturally oppressed and subordinated. They are. But it seems that such subordination is expressed in a less physically victimising, still potentially psychological, way for rural labouring women. Bride burning, of course, for the urban middle classes, seems as rampant in Madras as in Delhi.

In other words, I don't suggest that women's struggles are any less important in Tamil Nadu than in the north. But in spite of the complexity of the subject, I think it is legitimate to highlight the example in our midst, so to speak, of the importance of economic issues for women's survival and, one can hope, eventual well being.

Shiela Zurbrigg, England