



# Letters To Manushi

## The Dream Killers

...What a tragedy that those fellows who are talking about nation, national integrity, constitution and all that, have trampled these concepts under their feet. But it is our national tragedy that we suffer in silence and dare not say what all of us are feeling.

After having seen *Damul* on television last month, and having read the election commission's report on Bihar the next day, the only question that is troubling me is: what is the government doing about this naked terrorism which is the order of the day in rural India? Why talk only of terrorism in Punjab? Under the garb of patriotism, a handful of rulers can do whatever they want because they are the law makers, and, as Austin said, law is simply "the will of the political superior over that of the political inferior."

In one of my poems, I have written:  
*Why do you parcel out the earth  
 and break hearts to pieces ?  
 For the sake of different  
 coloured rags,  
 why do you tear dreams  
 to fragments ?*  
 (translated from Punjabi)

But these are questions which no one either asks or answers...

**N.S. Rattan, Chandigarh**

## Of Good Taste And Bad

I am writing to cancel my subscription. I have thought for some time that the articles were much too negative. Women

in India do have a hard time but there are also a lot of good things happening in India for women. It is a pity you always focus on the difficult and negative side and do not put in more positive. I find the magazine is often very depressing and gives no hope. If we do not have hope we cannot accomplish anything.

The thing that finally made me decide was the article about Mrs Sonia Gandhi. I thought it was slanderous and if something like that had been printed in the West, the magazine would have been sued for libel. I was so terribly disappointed that the editors did not have the good taste to see that it was not published that I have decided that **Manushi** is not the type of publication I wish to have sent to me.

**Mrs B. Holmberg, Kodaikanal**

## Insult Or Irony ?

On the whole, I liked the fantasy interview with Sonia in **Manushi** No 29. But some of your notions about Hindi are insulting. By calling Hindi the language of slaves, you have given another weapon to the opponents of Hindi —It is not only Hindi speaking people who feel inferior to the powerful, English speaking people. Tamil, Marathi, Bengali and other regional languages also have an inferior status to English.

As far as the Hindi press is concerned, there should be no objection to Sonia's having given her first interview to a magazine in the national language. It is true that this is a mere farce, a fraud perpetrated

by those in power. But it is not true that the Hindi press is more servile than the English or the other regional languages press. During the emergency, many Hindi periodicals put up a very brave fight.

**Usha Chattopadhyay, Bombay**  
 (translated from Hindi)

*The reference to Hindi being the language of slaves was meant to be ironical and was placed in the mouth of the person interviewed, not the interviewer. The intention was to expose the hypocrisy of those in power who make a pretence of deference to Hindi and other regional languages, but perpetuate a power structure which gives overwhelming predominance to English educated people. The unfortunate fact is that even today, nearly four decades after independence, a person who is not well versed in English is hardly considered educated.*

—**Manushi**

## Do I Wake Or Sleep ?

...The fantasy interview with Sonia Gandhi was very good. Your thus waking in dreams awakes others too. My friends and I enjoyed it greatly. Pushpa Bharti must have inherited some tendencies from the age of *bhakti* or worship so what can she do if in the twentieth century her god or goddess has changed ? But you, awake even in dreams, have displayed an extraordinary ability to analyse the phenomenon.

**Manju Rani Sinha, Calcutta**  
 (translated from Hindi)

## Seven Years Old

It is a joy to feel that **Manushi** is a seven year old child. But, as the Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral says :

*We are guilty of many crimes  
but our greatest crime  
is the neglect of the child.  
Right now is the time  
when her bones are being formed,  
her brain is developing,  
and her body needs food.  
To her we cannot say, 'tomorrow',  
Her name is 'Today.'*

If we dare to help her today, there may be a morrow and I appeal to all women to help **Manushi** today.

I loved **Manushi** No. 30, especially Madhu Kishwar's article on her visit to Sant Longowal's village *gurudwara* and her interview with him. We are grateful to you for bringing his life alive to us.

"My Champa's Husband" by Umashankar Joshi was a very enlightening story. He is a very well known Gujarati poet. I still remember his poem :

### *The Fire Of Hunger*

*Build, build houses that kiss the sky,  
Build high palaces, build minarets,  
Adorn them with marble, hang  
chandeliers :  
Let fountains spout, flushed in varied  
hues.  
Lay out gardens with sandal trees,  
Pitch vast domes in many shades,  
Build pleasure grounds and moonlit  
terraces.  
These heart crushing rocks—  
Will Time tolerate them for long ?  
To devour these mockeries,  
These games with the life of the poor,  
The fire of hunger,  
Spreading its myriad tongues,  
Will rise.  
Not an atom of the ruins will  
remain.*

This is still true for us in India after 53 years. It has a lyrical rhythm and is quite often sung in demonstrations. In fact, when his collected poems were released, Umashankar Joshi said: "When I was vice chancellor of Gujarat university, the workers were on strike and came shouting:

"The fire of hunger, spreading its myriad tongues, will rise."

I liked the analysis of *Devi Mahatmya* and I especially liked the letters of Anuradha Aggarwal and Shikhi Sharma for they gave constructive suggestions. Manisha's letter was inspiring—full of passion, On the whole, I am really delighted with the way **Manushi** is evolving ...

Usha Desai, Bombay

## Free To Disagree

I have to ask you a few questions. Can I disagree with you on some important issues and yet be associated in some way?...Firstly, I disagree with your political perspective. I think oppression of women is a structural aspect of existing political systems therefore isolating particular personalities and parties does not serve much purpose. It may also place women who wish to be actively associated but happen to be employed in the government or public sector in a rather awkward situation ...

When you attack a party or a person, the final objective is replacement. Are you sure other parties and persons are any better ? Is there a third alternative ?

Further, any realistic assessment of the situation reveals that women, on their own, have not yet coped, with any degree of success, with a drunken truck driver, or even a mean husband. How then do you propose to take a swipe at the single greatest monolithic concentration of coercive power—the state, or the powers that represent that coercive core, and get away with it ?

I wish to emphasise that there are various levels of political activity, some more sensational, others more effective. The most effective is building and consolidating politically conscious women's groups. I also disagree with your understanding of Punjab and the late Shri Longowal. I do not think he was a saint, his getting shot notwithstanding. I would not have been a part of any meeting which he addressed...

Shikhi Sharma, Lucknow

*We have never attempted to enforce any one set of opinions upon those who*

*are associated with Manushi. We wish to keep the magazine open to all shades of opinion as long as they are not blatantly opposed to human freedom and justice for all. Therefore, you are quite free to disagree on certain issues and yet continue to help, as long as you wish to do so.*

*While we agree with you that oppression of women is structured into existing political systems, we also feel that certain parties and individuals representing them are, in fact, more repressive in their ideology and practice. When this becomes blatantly obvious, as it did in the role played by the ruling party during the November 1984 riots, it is important that the guilty be exposed, particularly when the guilty are using their positions of power to silence honest purveying of information.*

*Many of those associated with Manushi are working in government and semigovernment sectors. It is up to each individual to decide how far they should silence themselves in the interest of their jobs. However, since their salaries are actually being paid from taxes paid by the people, there is no reason why they should sell their souls and consciences to the government. If everyone who has a government job has to accept all government policies, however unjust, this would mean that government employees could riot demand their own rights. By logical extension, it would mean that no employee is entitled to have an opinion that is in contradiction to that of the employer. Since most employed women work under men who do not espouse the cause of women's equality, this would imply a bleak future for this cause as well. If reading, writing for or supporting a magazine like Manushi puts a government employee in an awkward situation, our so called democracy must be hollow indeed.*

*You say that women have not been able to cope with individual problems. First, many women have coped, even on their own, with such problems. However, Manushi works towards collective resistance. Building politically conscious*

women's groups includes struggle against the various levels of oppression women face in the family, in the workplace and as citizens. Merely struggling within the family will be ineffective at a moment when the state machinery is turned against a whole community, and is bent upon crushing it.

Alternatives have to be built by us, the people. This will not happen as long as we take the fatalistic approach of accepting the given, just because no readymade alternative is available to us. Further, one need not put up with repression on the ground that a satisfactory replacement to the existing government is not available. Would you say that a brutal husband should be put up with because an ideal alternative may not be immediately available to the wife? Our objective need not be to remove coercive powers from the hands of one set of persons and place them, unchanged, in the hands of another. Our objective could be to empower the people at large, and lessen the coercive powers at the disposal of this highly centralised state machinery.

On Sant Longowal, we feel it is somewhat unfortunate that you should refuse to attend a meeting to listen to someone you disagree with. If we dismiss another point of view without even hearing it, is our opinion then based on the actuality of that view or on prejudice—in this case, received from the government dominated mass media ?...

—Manushi

## Muslim Women Speak

...Today, the supreme court judgment in the Shah Bano case, awarding maintenance to a divorced Muslim woman, is being opposed by some Muslim men on the ground that this is an interference in Muslim personal law. I wish to ask these self styled protectors of religion a simple question. Does Islam allow dowry to be taken at the time of marriage? If not, why have not these men organised against dowry, and refused to solemnise weddings where dowry is given or taken? Further, Islam forbids rape, theft and other such misdeeds. Are those taboos implemented?



Why then misinterpret religion to deny a Muslim woman her legitimate right ?...

Apart from a few religious leaders and politicians with vested interests, all Muslims have welcomed the supreme court decision. We should not view this judgment as in any way connected with religion but should see it as a step forward in improving the condition of women. ...

I appeal to all my Muslim sisters who quietly bear the cruelties of men, to come forward to confront those selfish elements who are raising the cry of "Islam is in danger." Islam has given women many rights and placed many restrictions on men, but these are not implemented today. Therefore, it is for us, Muslim women, to break all those traditions and customs which favour men and discriminate against women.

**Sabiha Husain, Delhi**  
(translated from Hindi)

## No More Mr Meeras

I am a government servant and I find it very humiliating to be constantly crossexamined about my marital status. Whether a woman writes her name as B. Das or Bonani Das, the reply is invariably addressed to Mr Das unless one writes Ms in brackets. Why should one have to do so ? Do men write Mr after their names?

If a woman is in a position of authority, correspondents are even more prone to assume that she must be a man. Even if she has an unambiguous name like Meera, 95 percent of correspondents add a Mr before the name I find that people will not

rest without finding out the marital status of a woman they are introduced to, and, next, the occupation of her husband. It is as if the identity of the woman remains a blur without these dimensions.

The use of Ms seems a strident declaration of foreign origin. I think the word Srimati should be used for all women, married or unmarried. In Bengali, as in the original Sanskrit, Srimati does not connote marriage. It simply means someone possessing Sri or grace, and is the feminine equivalent of Sriman, used for a man.

Kumari stinks with its spinsterish connotations, and associations of youth, the desirability of the married state, purity and so on. For an adult woman to be addressed as Kumari is a slap in the face. It is time we devote some thought to the issue. I suggest that on envelopes the name should suffice or Sri/Sm should be written, if the identity of the person is not known. Letters may be addressed to Sir/Madam.

Where the person is known to be a woman, she may be addressed as Sm, without fussing about her marital status. Incidentally, and purely coincidentally, Sm is an inversion of Ms....

**Kalyani Chaudhuri, Calcutta**  
**From Rural India**

...Some time ago, I was appointed as a programme officer of a one day family welfare camp in a village. I met many women from lower income groups there. I found that they had devoted their lives to their so called husbands who had treated them

as objects. They have no one to listen to their problems. This leads them to believe that they must tolerate all the troubles they face. All of us who are educated women should work for rural women and communicate with them. This is essential because women's liberation is most needed in rural areas.

**Rajshree Bhavad, Kolhapur**

### **And More. . .**

In districts Dehradun, Tehri, Pauri, Chamoli and Uttarkashi, women suffer many specific problems. First, women do most of the agricultural work. Very few girls are sent to school. From the age of four or five, they are trained in field-work. A woman works about 16 hours a day, in this area.

Amongst some tribes in this area, polyandry is practised. In others, polygamy is allowed. Men prefer to have several wives so that they have more labourers in the field. Another reason is the desire for sons. When men migrate to the city, they often remarry there. Bride price is another problem. The girl is viewed as an economic asset by both father and husband. Sometimes, men from the plains come to the hills, buy wives and then resell them in the cities at a profit.

Often, fathers sell off their small daughters to elderly men. Thus, in one village, I found a large number of very young widows. I also found that 40 percent of wives were 30 to 40 years younger than their husbands. If a woman wishes to divorce her husband, she has to return the bride price, often, with interest. Sometimes, greedy men force their wives to get divorced. Women here are conscious of their oppression and are restlessly looking for a way out.

**Anita Sajwan, Dehradun**  
(translated from Hindi)

### **Suicide Among Ho Women**

Even though I have lived among the Hos, a tribe in Singhbhum district, Bihar, for a long time, I was not aware of the high rate of suicide amongst Ho women. It was when three women around our village decided to end their lives within the same month that I became aware of this.

Somvani Gundua, a woman aged about

60 years, of village Golosai, went early in the morning to pay a short visit to all her neighbours and friends. She told them: "Maybe, tomorrow we won't have the chance to meet each other again, therefore, I have come today to see you." At 7 a.m., when Gitanjali express passed near her village, she threw herself before it on the railway line.

Suru Maggi, a young girl of village NilaiGol, went early in the morning to the forest and ate some poisonous plants. Her family thought she must have gone to Rourkela to her oldest sister's house. Only two days later, her body was found in the forest.

Rani Bodra, a middle aged woman, mother of six children, chose to hang herself inside the house. She was alone at the time and her husband thought she was pounding rice.

In each case, the explanation given by the family was: "a small quarrel at home." I wondered at the sensitivity of these women who bear so much hunger, any amount of physical work, heat, thirst, exhaustion, I not think there was any "mental imbalance" which is mentioned as the cause of death in police reports. These



**A Ho woman**

women had, very consciously, decided to end their lives.

It seems that suicide has a long history in Singhbhum. According to *A Statistical Account Of Bengal* by W.U. Hunter, written in 1877: "In 1871, 54 persons destroyed themselves, 23 of whom were males and 31 females." After making enquiries, the deputy commissioner reported that 23 persons destroyed themselves in consequence of family differences, 19 on account of sickness, old age and weariness of life. It was observed that in Singhbhum, old people frequently put an end to themselves when they find that they are becoming a burden to their relatives.

A harsh word to a woman never provokes a retort but leads to a sudden depression. In all relations of life, their manner is gentle and kind. I have never seen women quarrelling or saying unkind things to each other. The only exception is when they believe a woman to be a witch.

As D.N. Majumdar writes in *The Affairs Of A Tribe*: "A Ho wants to live, wants to enjoy life, she is unmindful of her future, she lives in the present and she does enjoy life and when she is face to face with realities she escapes from the situation. She does not always fit in and when she does not, she finds suicide the panacea for her ills."

Suicide always contains an element of relatedness to the individual's social environment, a lack of integration of the individual into the society. This is especially so in societies with very strict moral codes and social pressures. Anyone who breaks the code is boycotted. Finding herself isolated, the individual has no alternative but to commit suicide. The women who decide to end their lives are rebels of a kind. They could not adapt themselves to the situation and found no other viable way to emerge from it except to end their lives. I wish that the rebelliousness could be directed towards a strong determination to change the situation.

**Pilar, Bihar**