



Letters to Manushi

Body Education

I want to share with **Manushi** some revelations of the cruel results of the conditioning of women's minds.

The daughter of our sweeperess, Munni, is just 17 years old. But, weighed down by the responsibilities of matrimony, she looks older. Her vivacious laughter is always suppressed under the grinding stone of work—be it the drudgery of cooking amidst fumes, or waiting hand and foot on the in-laws and, of course, her husband.

Munni cannot read or write. The consequence of her inability to communicate through letters became evident recently. Despite her poor health made worse by malnutrition, her mother-in-law forced her to do all the household chores from dawn till midnight. Her parents, also illiterate, had no way to find out Munni's condition. It was only when Munni was on the verge of a physical and nervous breakdown that her brother came for her.

I cannot get over the agony suffered by this wisp of a girl who was married, as always happens, without her consent. Her mother, having suffered similar treatment, including physical violence, believes that Munni too can endure such a life. Munni was swaying unsteadily with illness and exhaustion. Her eyes were wide with fear. Her hands were trembling. Was this the outcome of the "happy marriage ideal" inculcated in us since childhood?

At her mother's home, Munni started recuperating. Her father-in-law came to

offer apologies and extracted a promise that they would send her back. Before she returned, her mother brought her to our place. I discovered with dismay what deep-rooted abhorrence Munni had towards her body.

She was reticent at first on issues like menstruation, her desire for education, and her life at her in-laws' home. Gradually, she opened up, hesitantly at first, but later with unconcealed heaviness of heart.

In her childhood, she never had the "sense" to know that education was necessary. Her parents never made her aware of the need for it. Now she realises that had she been educated, she could at least have written to her parents about the treatment meted out to her. She did not know that her parents had borrowed Rs 10,000 for her marriage. Her mother's monthly income was Rs 200, her father's Rs 450. Out of this they have to repay their debts, educate their youngest son and meet their basic needs.

Munni flinched when I asked her how she coped on days when she had her periods. She had to do all the work without rest or help from anybody. When I asked what she used during her periods Munni was scandalised. "*Chhi,...Ap aisi bat mat karo*" she said in a hushed whisper. Later, Munni confessed she had never talked about these things with her mother. She did not know the reason for menstruation. Like many others, she had been plagued by fears that it was due to god's wrath on her for being a girl. She was relieved to learn the physiological reasons from me.

There are thousands of Munnis who are not allowed any information about their body functions. They are conditioned to think that their bodies are a slur on them, an object to be used by their families and husbands. It is quite meaningless to talk to them about the women's movement

when they do not know that first their bodies and then their minds are the basic means used by men to ensure complete slavery.

I strongly feel that educating women on their body functions would be the basis to evoke independent ideas. Once a woman begins to feel that the body is essential to her, she will have no shame in taking care of it, which will ultimately lead to coherence of thought.

I would like to know more about the book *Where There Is No Doctor* and how to use it, to help girls like Munni to shed their fears.

Navneet Sethi, Kanpur

Attitudes Towards Women

I would like to share two experiences that support the arguments made by Charu Sehgal in her article "Handicapped By Gender Or By Men's Attitudes" in **Manushi** No. 29.

The first was in a municipal hospital in Ahmedabad. I was sitting in front of a senior medical officer in her cabin. A male doctor was sitting next to me. An illiterate villager knocked on the door and, looking in, asked the male doctor for permission to enter. Next, he showed his case papers to the male doctor even though his case had been specifically referred to the lady medical officer. The male doctor had to insist that the villager's case would be dealt with by her.

This kind of thing, the lady doctor later explained, happened often with male patients if a male doctor was in her cabin, and it had ceased to surprise her.

The second incident took place at my office. I was discussing some work with a senior male colleague when two visitors came to see him. Just then, my colleague had to leave the room to attend to a phone call, so he could not introduce us. I was

writing something in my diary when one of them asked in English whether transactions in the office took place only in Gujarati. I replied, "Yes." His next questions were "Do you take dictation also in Gujarati? Do you know Gujarati shorthand?" I had to control my temper and told him I was a research officer in the organisation.

Such incidents happen daily. Women, even if highly educated or holding a high position, are always underrated. Men, whether illiterate, as in the first incident, or urbanised and well educated, as in the second incident, are unable to acknowledge her status. There are many men secretaries and even male nurses these days, but the words "secretary" and "nurse" are always referred to by the pronoun "she."

People should be evaluated by their qualifications and professional designation, not by mere sex.

Kirtida Surti, Ahmedabad

Witch Hunt

No less a person than the minister of telecommunications has recently had an order passed whose only purpose is to bring to book unwed mothers in his department. All field units have been instructed to refuse maternity leave to these women. When questioned in the Lok Sabha as to whether there was any rule demanding such action, the minister admitted that neither the Employees State Insurance Act nor the Maternity Act had framed any such rule.

In the world's largest democracy all—barring women—are entitled to exercise their rights, so Sri Ram Niwas Mirdha has exercised his rights and framed his own rule for his employees. If the order is discriminatory, obnoxious, anti-women, if it leads to a witch hunt to ascertain which woman is married and which not, which woman though married has kept her maiden name and become pregnant "virtuously"—the minister could not care less.

Maternity leave is not a favour. It is a right that every pregnant employee,

wedded or unwed, must enjoy for her own health and for the well being of the unborn child.

Can it be that in the Hindu State of the 21st century we shall preserve only the tiny Hindus born to virtuous women legally married to virtuous men while the rest swell the figures under infant mortality? But one thing is certain. In that State, unwed fathers will have nothing to fear. They will go on sowing seeds on the sly, as merrily as they are doing today.

Amiya Rao, New Delhi

Law And Dowry Deaths

Dowry deaths have become so frequent that one no longer reacts with disgust and anger. What follows a case of



bride burning is the tangle of deathbed statements and ensuing cases in the courts to prove or disprove whether the death of a young bride was murder or suicide.

The fact that the victim had to endure ill treatment, mental torture and harassment by the husband and in-laws culminating in suicide or murder is the real point. The husband is most guilty as without his tacit consent no in-law would venture to abuse the bride.

In most cases, by hook or by crook, the accused get acquitted by establishing that the victim committed suicide. The process of law from sessions Court to High Court to Supreme Court is tedious. We cannot wait and look on while women are being snuffed out like candles.

A majority of Indian women accept the husband as the dominant partner in marriage. But to take this domination to

the extent of burning or driving the spouse to be burnt is unpardonable. The loopholes of law should be so plugged that any husband or member of his family who harasses a woman for dowry should be suitably punished. It is because bride burners get away with juggling the law that the tragedy keeps repeating itself. Instead of analysing whether a dowry death is murder or suicide, laws should be so framed as to stop the hand which pours the kerosene or lights the match.

Poonam Bindra, Ludhiana

Punished With Starvation

I wish to draw the attention of readers to the plight of some women workers in Idar, Sabarkantha district, Gujarat. Since 1962, a cooperative factory has been operating in Idar. Of the 800 workers, the majority are women. For many years the women had been exploited and oppressed. Instead of an eight-hour shift, they were made to work for 12 hours. They were not permitted to take any time off to attend to their infant children. They even had to work on night shifts and had permission to go to the toilet only once during the shift. Those working in the cotton factory had cough and other respiratory diseases. No medical services were provided and the wages were very low.

After enduring these hardships for many years, finally, in 1984, the women staged a two day strike against poor wages, long hours and oppressive conditions of work. They were successful in having the wages increased. But abruptly, this year, all those who had participated in the strike were dismissed. Over 250 women, many of whom had put in many years of service in dismal conditions, were affected. They are now in dire straits and face starvation. In their place, the contractor has brought workers from outside.

The management of the cooperative is utterly heartless. They have fattened themselves over the years on the sweat and blood of these poor women. The abrupt dismissal of the women, just because they fought for their rights, is totally unjustified.

Is it wrong to fight for one's rights? Then why this harsh punishment of unemployment and starvation? Justice must be sought for these brave women. I have appealed to the government on their behalf.

Taruna Gurjar, Idar

(Translated from Hindi)

Wife The Loser

... I was glad to see my letter printed in No.30 but you printed my name wrong, Pushpa Bhargava instead of Lakshmi Bhargava. Kudos to Shanti Devi. Such courage and perseverance are rare indeed.

I liked Leena's "My Husband and I" very much. I could add at least a dozen lines more but to sum it up:

Heads—the husband wins,

Tails—the wife loses.

Best wishes to **Manushi** for a happy and successful new year.

Lakshmi Bhargava, Madras

Who Is The Father?

Among the Ho tribe of Singbhum, Bihar, when a woman becomes pregnant outside marriage, it becomes a social problem and there is a meeting of all the village men to decide who is the father of the child.

The problem comes down to: if the child is a boy, whose land will he have the right to inherit when he grows up? There is not such a problem if the baby is a girl as she will become the "bonded labourer" of the family which adopts her. She will give them free service until the day she disappears from the house to get married.

Often enough, the pregnant woman, sitting in front of all the village men, has not the courage to reveal who is the father of the child, and her own family will then take the responsibility for the child.

Often enough, too, the children born out of wedlock die by a kind of silent infanticide. If it is found that the father is a *diku* or non-tribal, the woman is absolutely ostracised. She is not allowed to take water from the well, not allowed to join the feast dances, not allowed to talk to anybody, until she pays a heavy penalty of Rs. 5,000,

five vessels of rice beer, and a goat. But a man is never punished.

Sona was a clever woman. So when the father of the child denied in front of everybody that he was the father, she ran away to Calcutta to the brick kilns, leaving the child at the door of its father's house.

Women are aware of the double standard in tribal society. They say: "We also should have a meeting and punish the father of the baby." So far, these are only words, but the undercurrent is growing.

Pilar, Bihar



Not Passive Acceptance

On April 14, 1984, Surji approached the Mahila Kalyan Samiti, Jamshedpur, for help. Surji is a poor labourer. Her husband, Jathuram, is unemployed. Their 13-year-old daughter, Gauri, has been working for the last five years as a maidservant in the house of B. N. Sinha at C-157, Sonari West. Sometimes when there was a lot of work, Gauri used to be made to stay overnight at the Sinhas' house, and a message would be sent to her parents. They were happy that their daughter was at least getting enough to eat.

On March 30, Gauri told her mother that her stomach was swelling up and she was feeling uneasy. Surji took her to the doctor and found that she was eight months' pregnant. On being questioned, Gauri revealed that the Sinhas' 22 year old son, Vipin, frequently used to call her to his room to do various odd jobs and then used to rape her. He had threatened to kill her and her parents if she told anyone

about this. When Gauri tried to avoid going to his room, his mother insisted that she do so. Gauri did not know that sexual intercourse may result in pregnancy.

When Gauri's parents approached the Sinhas they declared that Gauri was lying. After much argument, the Sinhas offered to pay for an abortion but the doctor said that abortion would lead to Gauri's death. Finally, Gauri's parents went to the police. The police refused to register an FIR and threw them out. The Mahila Samiti decided to take up the case. A meeting was held where it was decided that Vipin should either marry Gauri or should deposit Rs 10,000 in her name. But Vipin's parents absolutely refused to consider either suggestion. They said it was impossible for a respectable man to marry a low class maidservant. At the most, they were willing to give Rs 300 to Gauri but the Samiti refused this offer.

The Samiti then approached the police who arrested Vipin on April 20. Gauri was medically examined and declared to be about 16 years old. We had no evidence of her age and, ironically, the testimony of her mother, who gave birth to her, does not seem to carry any weight. After a fortnight, Vipin was released. In May, Gauri gave birth to a beautiful son but she is being socially ostracised, because the child is supposed to be illegitimate.

The Samiti has filed a petition for compensation in the high court and is also applying for maintenance for the child.

Renu Dewan, Jamshedpur

(Translated from Hindi)

With Open Eyes

I am an eleventh grade student. I was introduced to **Manushi** through my mother who is a regular subscriber. I find the magazine an eye opener, very informative and revealing facts of which one is unaware.

I realise that at this age, there is not much I can do for the upliftment of women, but at least I can be aware of their conditions. I have been able to persuade our school library to subscribe, as I feel there are many who need to be brought

out of their ivory towers, and get an insight into reality today....

...Normally, boys' families are criticised for demanding dowry and harassing girls. I feel girls' families are also largely responsible—It is most important that a girl be well educated before marriage and that she be able to stand on her own feet. Woman's economic dependence is like oil in the fire of oppression.

Since I am a woman, I will make every effort to empower women in this male ruled society...

Namita Devidayal, Bombay

Whose Sin?

I am an eleventh grade student in Guru Harkishan Public School. Today, it is said that we are going through a period of modernisation and are progressing towards the twenty first century. But are we fully modernised? The answer is No. Man thinks woman is his servant. He wants his wife to obey his every whim. He does not know that she too is modernising herself...

In ancient times, it was said that it is a sin to be a woman. Today, I say that to be a man is a sin because he tortures woman as if she is an animal...

Harjeet Kaur, Delhi

Why Did Umabai Die?

On September 28, 1984, activists of Stri Manch, Nagpur, read in the papers about Umabai's death and went to Civil Lines to investigate. Civil Lines is a colony where central government officers reside. There are about 100 servants' quarters in the colony.

On enquiry, we learnt that on August 31, a theft took place in the house of Mr Shukla, an officer in the Indian Bureau of Mines. He told the police that he suspected the maidservant, 35-year-old Umabai and her 17-year-old son, Raju, of the theft. The police searched the house of Umabai and her neighbours but found nothing. Umabai continued to work for the Shuklas. However, Shukla then complained to the crime branch police who came to Umabai's quarter on September 21 and

hurled filthy abuse at the women residing in that area.

They arrested Umabai, her husband, Hiralal, Raju, and two other men from the area. That night, Umabai and Raju were insulted, humiliated and tortured at the police station. Raju was stripped naked and mercilessly beaten in front of his mother. Umabai was also beaten and her



bangles were broken. Finally, they were released with the threat that if they did not return the stolen goods by the following morning, Umabai too would be stripped and beaten.

Even though she had not committed the theft, Umabai was very afraid of what the police might do to her and decided that death was preferable to such humiliation. So she poured kerosene oil on herself and set herself on fire. She was

taken to hospital where she lay in agony for three days. The police filed a criminal case of attempt to commit suicide against her, Umabai died on September 25. In her dying statement, she said : "I thought it was better to die than bear police tortures."

On September 30, 200 people from the area went in a demonstration to the police commissioner who assured them that action would be taken against the guilty policemen within eight days.

On October 11, Stri Manch took a rally to the police commissioner's office. In the preceding days, activists went to a number of slums, distributed Marathi leaflets and explained to women the need to protest against State and police violence.

On the morning of October 11, the police went to the slums and warned the people not to take part in the rally. The police also told Stri Manch activists that prohibitory orders were in force in the city and anyone taking part in a rally would be arrested. Finally, permission was obtained for the rally and about 200 people participated, most of them women.

A delegation met the commissioner and demanded that the guilty policemen be suspended, an identification parade take place to identify the guilty, a judicial enquiry be held into the incident, police repression in the slums be stopped. Outside, people raised slogans and sang songs of struggle.

The commissioner agreed to hold an identification parade on October 12 and to complete the enquiry by the 20th. But, when the parade took place, only low ranking policemen appeared. The guilty officers were not paraded. Therefore, another delegation met the commissioner on the 19th. He now behaved as if we were unnecessarily harassing him and he had better things to do. On November 4, a *dharna* was held at his office, and poster campaigning continued in the slums.

The residents of Civil Lines servants' quarters have decided to boycott the Shukla family and today, no maidservant is willing to work in their house.

Chandra, Nagpur
(Translated from Hindi)