



Letters To Manushi

Female Infanticide

...I am in Dindigul where I am working on the women's literacy programme. I have had two interesting discussions in the past week with a Brother James Kimpson who has worked in harijan villages around here for 27 years. He can name several villages around here who practice female infanticide on a large scale. They use oleander plant juice and are quite open about it... Yesterday, I spoke with other activists and they told me that it is quite common in Tamil harijan villages. The methods they use are oleander juice, thick goat's milk, unhusked rice in milk.

One young girl, Rosamal, told us that she was the fourth daughter so her mother had not fed her. Occasionally, she was given cow's milk. She was unwanted and unloved. Now, her mother openly says that this happened yet the girl lived and is now the one child she has who is happy and useful....

Jan Orrell, Tamil Nadu

Not Unwelcome

I am prompted to write this after reading the story of baby Manushi, "They called her a stone", in No. 33, 1986. In southern India, in most families, there is no disappointment if the firstborn is a girl. Of course, there is greater jubilation if it is a boy. However, the rites, rituals and celebrations following the birth of the eldest child are done with equal

enthusiasm, irrespective of the sex of the child. When the firstborn is a girl, she is considered to be Lakshmi and is believed to bring good luck and prosperity to the house.

This, however, does not mean that later in life she is given the same treatment as her younger brothers who get preference in education, the freedom to go out and so on.

As in other parts of India, the family wants more than one son. This is for security in old age, so that even if one son dies or deserts the parents, there will be at least one more to take care of them. Also, more sons would mean more income.

However, all couples want at least one girl. The reason given is twofold. Both parents feel that when they die, no one will mourn their death or weep over the body, as they put it, if there is no daughter. The mothers feel it is more fun to dress up a female child.

The lot of a daughter-in-law and a wife is, however, as difficult and trouble ridden as that of any woman in India. The fact I wish to point out is that a girl baby is not unwelcome when she is the firstborn, or when she is the only female child.

Kamala Java Rao, Hyderabad

Somewhat Confused?

I have just finished reading the very interesting article "Pro Women Or Anti Muslim?" in *Manushi* No. 32, and would like to react briefly.

It seems to me that you are somewhat confused. The Shahbano judgment upholds section 125 of the Criminal

Procedure Code under which divorcees get maintenance regardless of their religion. The reform in the sense of change would be brought by the Muslim Women's Protection Bill, and, ironically, it would be a parliament with a majority of non Muslim MPs which would have to pass it. The question is of retaining section 125 and not of reforming Muslim law.

On the issue of reform, you give what appear to be parallel situations from British India. You say the British called Hindus "backward" and "uncivilised" (your quotation marks) because Hindus practised Sati, child marriage and female infanticide. Quotation marks, as you know, are used to indicate that the speaker does not agree with the opinions of the person he or she is citing. Do you feel, then, that these customs were not a sign of backwardness? Had you been around in the 19th century, would you have sided with Raja Ram Mohan Roy or with those who opposed the abolition of Sati on the ground that the government was interfering with Hindu religion? If a racist Englishman had favoured abolition of Sati, would you have opposed the Bill on that ground? On the question of age of consent, would you go with Tilak who opposed it as interference in the affairs of Hindus or with Agarkar, Gokhale and other reformers? Before the age was fixed, a child bride could be raped by her husband with impunity.

When cases of Sati used to come to *Foujdari Adalat*, English judges used to say that this was the custom of the Hindus, however barbarous, and it must be

respected even though live women were burnt. And so their relatives were not punished. Do you think the judges were right?

If no outsider may interfere in the alleged customs or religious practices of any group, then we cannot interfere with any caste or community where men have traditionally lived on their women's earnings as prostitutes. The Garhwali women, the *devdasis*, *kulwantins* of Goa and *tawaifs* are all in that situation. Those of us who are Hindus but not of their communities must then stop "interfering."

Incidentally, it seems you have not met Shahbano. I suggest you talk to her. Indore is not that far. Is it the case that Hindus were about to riot to uphold the Shahbano judgment? This is not my information. On the contrary, orthodox Muslims have stoned *morchas* of *talaq* affected women and children in Maharashtra.

Vasudha Dhagamwar, Delhi

It appears that you have not read the article under question, but are conducting an off the mark polemic, refuting various arguments which we never put forward. The article nowhere mentions the Muslim Women's Protection Bill, which had not been introduced at the time we went to press. The article's emphasis was on the need to reform maintenance laws for all women, since section 125 provides inadequate relief to a divorced woman of any community. Nowhere in the article was it said that "outsiders" should not "interfere" with the practices of any group. On the contrary, it was suggested that an egalitarian civil code be provided as an option to all communities.

Your string of rhetorical questions relating to a number of murderous practices requires no answer since Manushi would not be in existence if we upheld these practices. Shahbano's case was not in itself unique. We have met hundreds of women of different communities in situations similar to hers. The judgment in her case was made a pretext for the whipping up of anti Muslim

sentiment and self righteousness on the part of other communities for which there was no valid basis. It was on this that we commented. We did not say Hindus were about to riot to uphold the judgment. The same issue of Manushi also carried a report of the Talaq Mukti Morcha and the opposition to it.

—**Manushi**

No Better

The article regarding Shahbano and Muslim personal law in Manushi No.32 was very informative and well written. We



were under the impression that Shahbano was the first Muslim woman to approach the common law regarding maintenance. The press had really given that impression. Further, your comparing the Muslim personal law to Hindu law was also very good. It showed that our law is no better than theirs.

E. Roopa Rao, Kunita

The article about Shahbano controversy was really very interesting. It helped to clear my doubts about Muslim laws. ...

Smitha N., Kerala

Your write up on the Shahbano case was the best one I have read on the subject. It was informative and objective. I do not have any criticism. I almost entirely agree with your views...

Syed Fazal Alimed, Patna

Crucial Information

Navneet Sethi's letter on body education in Manushi No. 32 shook me up. I fully agree with her that it is crucial to give women information about their bodies. Mental development will spontaneously occur when they begin to understand their

physical make up. They will then be able to look men in the eye with confidence.

I think you should carry a column on women's physical structure, explaining the differences between men and women....

Prema Ramaswami, Calcutta
(translated from Hindi)

Communicate Facts

....None of the copies of Manushi which come to me stay intact. They are circulated among so many people that by the time they return to me, I have to patch up the covers. I usually read and discuss the magazine outside class with some of my interested girl students.

The article on and interview with Sant Longowal in No. 30 was very moving, sensitive and illuminating. Truly, one who is really religious cannot be communal, and those who are communal are not religious. Your attempt to help others understand Longowal is praiseworthy.

It is strange that as the slogans of unity are growing louder, the lava continues to flow and spread more widely. As you noted, a generation ago, it was hard to differentiate between Sikhs and Hindus. Today, the need to raise the slogan "Hindus and Sikhs are brothers" should make us hang our heads in shame. Our only hope is that the few who understand the facts should take it upon themselves to communicate the facts clearly to many more people....

Manju Rani Sinha, Calcutta
(translated from Hindi)

Scientific Attitude?

....I read Manushi regularly and am grateful for having the chance to get to know the lives of so many women all over the country. Of course, being a journal about women and society, I daresay you have your limitations and cannot give the positive perspective for which many readers look. I miss a scientific attitude in your approach to women in society.

I cannot get enthused about your fantasy on Sonia Gandhi. I expected something better from you. There is nothing Hindu or traditional in such a relationship and their marriage and

personal relations could serve as an example for many a young couple who get married on the basis of love. I do not find anything wrong in looking up to one's husband if he is worthy of it and vice versa. I wish you had a marriage and life partner worthy of you, perhaps then your approach would be better balanced.

I feel that under Congress rule women have been given greater opportunity to become conscious of their rights and make progress, much more so than in many western countries where the feminist movement is rather hysterical.

Having gotten this off my chest, I shall continue to read Manushi with great interest....

R. Kamath, Bombay

Ordinary Women

...I like **Manushi** very much. Nowhere else can one get so much information about ordinary Indian women's lives. I work in the Oriental Institute here.

People of our country are interested in India. It is important to show them a true picture, a picture in which the Indian woman is not just a beautiful eyed angel or a crushed slave but is a **Manushi**....

Dagmar Markova, Czechoslovakia
(translated from Hindi)

Fight For Shelter

I am writing to bring to light the events which took place on March 7, 1986, at Sadhana Kutir, working women's hostel, Shankurapuram, Bangalore. This has been a place of shelter for almost two decades for women who come to Bangalore for employment. On this eventful day, the belongings of the hostel inmates were forcibly thrown on the road by the landlady, Mrs Lakshmiddevamma, and some coolies.

This unfair and inhuman turn of events had its roots in conflicts between the inmates and the hostel management, which resulted in the inmates taking sole responsibility for hostel affairs for the past two years.

The landlady, being unsatisfied with the prevailing conditions, filed a suit for



retrieval of the hostel building for her own occupation and succeeded in getting an eviction order. The inmates were kept in the dark about this move and were not given prior notice to vacate the premises. They were thus taken by surprise when, on returning from their jobs in the evening, they found themselves shelterless. Being on the road, in this helpless condition, they were left with no option except to find alternative shelter for the night.

Consequently, the women appealed to the high court for justice and have been able to get entry into the premises as per the *status quo* order passed by the court. They have also reported the incident to the crime branch for investigation.

K. Sharada Bhat, Bangalore

Double Benefit

Despite the amendment of the Dowry Prohibition Act, it is evident from press reports that brides are being tortured and murdered daily. There must be an even larger number of unreported cases....

The evil of dowry has assumed such alarming proportions that young men today want only employed brides, particularly those who are government, LIC or bank employees. This has placed poor and unemployed girls in a disadvantageous position while young men have the double benefit of having an employed bride as well as a dowry....

P D Sharma, Delhi

Our Protectors

Recently, I happened to read the article "A Party With A Programme For Women" in **Manushr** No. 26. I am sorry to say that Telugu Desam is just another political party with catchy slogans and unfulfilled election promises. Although N.T. Rama Rao in his speeches emphasises the plight of Telugu *adapaduchulu*, the equivalent of *bahu betiyan*, in practice, police atrocities on women continue unabated in Andhra Pradesh.

In January 1985, Sattamma, the wife of a political activist, was raped in her house by police (see **Manushi** No. 26). Stri Shakti Sanghatana filed a case on her behalf in the supreme court. But, recently, Sattamma filed an affidavit withdrawing her charges against the police. It is anybody's guess what pressures were put on her to compel her to take this step.

Apart from a number of police rapes, harassment of prostitutes by police is also widespread. In Mahboob Ki Mehndi, a redlight area in Hyderabad, the police, who have, for years, been extracting money from the women, started raiding their homes, looting their valuables and beating them up. Often, they would be locked up for days without being produced in court. They were told to vacate their houses. Finally, in October 1985, these women demonstrated outside the Charminar police station, demanding licences.

Another attempt to "protect the morality" of society was made at Vijayawada. On the night of February 8, 1986, Padma, a woman in the ninth month of pregnancy, was arrested on a charge of prostitution. She and three other women were locked up and tonsured. Padma's husband stood helplessly outside the police station. When the press reported the incident, superintendent of police, Vyas, threatened Padma and her husband with dire consequences if they pursued the matter. They were forced to sign a statement saying that the police had not tonsured Padma but she had offered her hair to a deity. In spite of this, Padma took the case to court and the government of Andhra Pradesh gave a compensation of Rs 2,000 each to Padma and the other three

women who were tonsured. The guilty officers were suspended. They were not arrested or charge sheeted, although, they had committed several criminal offences.

Y. Nirmala, Hyderabad

Gender Bias

Advertisements that show a man and woman together fall into three groups :

- those which show the man in the dominating, superior position, giving no respect to his female companion. She, on the contrary, is depicted as humble and submissive, sometimes looking up at her male companion with the adoring gaze of a spaniel at his master.
- those which show mutual regard as between equals, neither being depicted as superior or inferior to the other.
- those in which the two parties appear indifferent to each other.

The first type is the most obnoxious, the second the ideal, and the third, although somewhat colourless and ineffective, certainly better than the first.

A recent news item from Pune about a women's rally was accompanied by a picture showing six men and not one woman! Why must women's functions be inaugurated or managed by men? Is it suggested that women are incapable of doing the job themselves?

I say that at all functions held for women, let men keep strictly away except in the capacity of invited and privileged guests.

Tom Gay, Pune

Why? Why? Why?

...From early childhood, a girl is told to be meek, submissive, do what her parents and brothers tell her, and above all, to look beautiful. Her worth, even as a child, is measured by her looks. When she grows a bit older, she is made, to perfect all the household tasks. While boys of her age go to play, she is made to sit at home and knit or stitch. Why should boys not be taught to cook and sew so that they can do their own work?

The main reason girls in higher classes do not do as well as boys is that besides studying, they have to be moulded into good housewives to suit the husband's convenience. I am a student and I have noticed that up to class ten, girls are the toppers in almost every subject. After that, boys start stealing the show and by the time they reach university level, only a few girls are toppers. Boys may help a bit with marketing but girls have to do all sorts of housework ranging from dusting to washing of clothes and cooking...

Even if a woman is employed, she will be praised not for her intelligence or her work in the office but only if she prepares a good dish or manages the home well. In fact, if she becomes very successful in her career at a young age, people will suspect her of being bad charactered whereas a man in such a situation would be considered very dynamic.

Women are constantly made to believe that their life is useless and incomplete



without a man. This is a complete misconception. Women can live without men. Whether men can do without women is another question. But I think some persons by temperament prefer to stay on their own. If there are some women who cannot stay alone there are an equal number of men who cannot stay alone.

...Some people think women's liberation is round the corner. I think this is absurd. It is not enough for some women to get some privileges. What about our sisters in villages and those who work for more than eight hours a day and are paid

less than men and those who are maltreated by husband and in-laws? To achieve liberation means to achieve it for all. So we should continue to work for that goal but should not start beating our drums so loudly that our voices are drowned in our own applause.

Manisha Shelly, Jammu

Women Police Cell

The move to establish a special women's police cell in Karnataka to look into criminal offences against women, is a progressive step in the direction of women's welfare. In the past, women accused of certain crimes were held in the police station even if no female constable was present. In delicate cases like rape and prostitution, women felt embarrassed to express their genuine feelings, which would not have happened if they were interrogated by a female officer.

Paradoxically, in many reported cases of rape, the accused is a man in uniform, who found the situation "ripe" and knew that it would be difficult to level charges against him. Reports of such incidents of atrocities against women by the police are becoming increasingly frequent.

Merely having a policewomen cell is not going to solve the problem. Women do not get justice either at police stations or at courts of law because the laws are framed, administered, implemented and enforced by men, and for men.

To solve this problem, the policewomen cell and the courts of law should be dependent on each other. To effectively implement this, it is essential to appoint women lawyers, legislators and administrators who have special knowledge of women's problems and a sensitive and understanding outlook to prevent crimes perpetrated on women by men. It is equally important that women judges be appointed in the high court to hear such cases so that the wronged litigants do not lose the battle at the last stage.

Heera Nawaz, Bangalore

Psychology Of Violence

We need to examine the motivation

behind the process of dehumanisation in which one group starts to feel that they have the permission to harm others.

Those who indulge in social destructiveness get a sanction from other people for their action. They do not act alone. Social destructiveness changes into violence when it gets approval of the authorities. Killing of innocent people in India appears to be socially sanctioned. It may be done by a mob or by a highly disciplined group like the army or police force.

Because most cultures and religions prohibit killing people, the process of defining some people as subhuman is necessary to justify what could otherwise be considered murder. All of a sudden, normal people get perceived as devils, monsters, menaces to national unity. The recently changed perception of Sikhs in the minds of the legitimised mob is a case in point. Social destructiveness has a desensitising owner. Sometimes, even the victims may fail to realise what is being done to them.

The emergence of a structurally superior group in governmental positions can lead to the oppression of a powerless minority. The case of Muslims who are very poorly represented in government positions in India can be cited.

The common person has been desensitised to indiscriminate killing by rationalisations like it never happened and “they deserved it.” Such justification can take the form of blaming the victims. Such phrases as enemies, subnormal, for the sake of national unity, “When a great tree falls, the earth is bound to shake” are intended to produce distortions leading to mitigation of sadism.

Surinder Sodhi, Canada

Trainee Nurses

I wish to share my experience as a nurse undergoing A grade training. This training is available in most medical colleges and some hospitals run by wealthy missionaries in Bihar. There are three kinds of training given to nurses in Bihar— ANM training given to matriculates, A grade training given to

intermediates, and BSc in nursing. The ANMs or assistant nurse midwives have the hardest time because they have to work in rural areas and are exposed to ruffianism there.

There are, however, many problems that trainee nurses have in common. First, the medium of instruction continues to be English even though most of the trainees have been educated in Hindi. ...The trainees have to do eight to nine hours of day duty and 12 to 13 hours of night duty a week. They are not given even a couple of hours’ rest between classes and duty hours. The stipend ranges from Rs 26 to Rs 200 a month, and from this they have to pay for uniform laundering, torches and food in the hostel which is of a very bad quality.

The trainees are treated like bonded labour in the hospitals and also in the hostels. If their guardians happen to come to visit them outside the stipulated visiting hours the watchmen have to be bribed to allow them in. The trainees are not given advance information of when their off day will be, so they are unable to arrange to meet their friends or relatives. Most of the trainees are between the ages of 16 and 30; many of them are married. These rules breed a lot of frustration.

Further, the trainees are ordered about and overworked both by the doctors and by the staff nurses. They are blamed if medicines or materials run short. Patients blame them and so do doctors. So they are always in a tense state of mind. They are also sexually harassed by attendants, wardboys, interns and house surgeons. Doctors are often heard saying that they can have any nurse they want, any time they please. Do they think we have learnt nothing from the rape cases of Sunaina,

Mary, Sucheta, Niroj and Ramshringari ?
Surendra Bismil, Bihar
(translated from Hindi)

Prearranged Existence

...I find **Manushi** incomparable in terms of its contents. For the first time, I felt, on reading a magazine, that a beginning has been made in working for women’s advancement, with a definite perspective and a definite programme

You have taken up many problems of working class women. But there is a class of women who have high degrees, but are helpless. Confined to the four walls of the house, they have nothing except mental suffocation to call their own. Life for them means arranged education, arranged marriage, children and a dragged out existence. Their abilities do not find any meaningful direction. Please write and do something for these, women too....

Manjit Kaur, Haryana
(translated from Hindi)

Unemployed Women

I have been reading **Manushi** for the last three years. It has made me aware of the problems of women. I feel that the main problem is the economic one. Whether a woman is widowed, divorced or single, harassed for dowry, educated or uneducated, her primary need is for decent employment. What can be done for such unemployed women?

I am an unemployed woman. Even though I am an MSc, B Ed, I am unable to get a good job. I get work off and on in private organisations which pay about Rs 200 a month...

Chanchal Chopra, Bhopal
(translated from Hindi)

Manushi Needs Your Comments

Please send us your reactions to **Manushi** for the letters pages. Instead of simply saying you like the magazine or a particular number, do send more detailed comments and criticisms on specific articles and features. We would like the letters pages to develop in the direction of ongoing debate and discussion of ideas and issues. Also, such feedback is helpful to those who write in **Manushi**.
