

# Letters To Manushi

## For Freedom

The article "Dowry : To Ensure Her Happiness Or To Disinherit Her ?" in **Manushi** No. 34, is a thought provoking analysis of the whole system. More and more educated families allow their daughters to study and take up jobs. But the girl is made to feel so incomplete until she marries that she can barely concentrate on her studies or job, and, ultimately, feeling that her lack of concentration is due to her lack of completeness, she either succumbs to an arranged marriage or forces herself to fall in love with whichever man is around...

I agree that parents should view their daughter's future in terms of her education, job, business or other forms of security, as they do a son's. A woman needs the sense that she belongs to her parents, irrespective of whether or not she marries. I am sure, once a girl is given an opportunity to become economically and emotionally independent, is allowed to think and exercise a choice as to what she wants to do with her life, alternatives will emerge.

Today, a woman's life is seen as marriage and then children. She may do other things if her husband does not mind, but they are not necessary. She is not given the right to refuse marriage. If she refuses marriage and stays with her family, she is made to feel grateful that her brothers tolerate her, as a crippled child is tolerated.

If one is given a choice, life is not easy because one has no one to blame but oneself for one's wrong choices and mistakes. But from one's own mistakes and experiences emerges an identity. The process is painful, but necessary if one wants freedom. Freedom is not happiness, freedom has to be earned ...

**Usha Desai, Bombay**

No. 34 was an excellent issue. The article on dowry was very different and enlightening. But you have not mentioned the lower middle class dowry practices where dowry has to be given even if the family has no property. **Manushi** should carry an article on property rights of women in other countries, not only in law but in practice. An article on the equal property rights enacted by Telugu Desam government in Andhra Pradesh should be written. Nobody knows what the provisions are and how it is getting implemented, if at all.

**Vasantha, Hyderabad**

**Manushi** No. 17 carried an article on the equal property rights bill in Andhra Pradesh. Readers in Andhra, particularly in rural areas, are requested to undertake surveys on the implementation. Write to us if you would like to do such a survey.

## In Perspective

This is to complement the account of women and the DUTA strike in **Manushi** No. 34. Although I do not, strictly speaking, fall into the category of a DUTA activist, I have actively participated in every strike of the DUTA for the last 15 years. I have also agonised over the strike question, but over the years have developed a perspective that has helped resolve some doubts.

Some of the problems that are mentioned in the article like the doubts of women teachers about the trade union type activities of DUTA were problems even 15 years ago.

I remember vividly that the 1972 strike occasioned our first rupture from senior teachers of our college\* who disapproved of our participation. I remember how one senior colleague, who was a nonconformist in her personal life and a member of the socialist party,

insisted that teachers must not strike, demonstrate or shout slogans..

The 1972 strike was against the proposed change in the federal structure of the university. The DUTA agitation resulted in the move being dropped. This was the first occasion for definite political action in my career.

The strike marked a decisive turning point in the lives of some of us, junior teachers, who had, up to then, put our energies into social work type activities such as collecting funds for relief during the Bihar drought or the Bangladesh war. These activities had absorbed our energy and also allowed us to win the principal's approval. After the fatal plunge, we were always viewed with a tinge of suspicion by the authorities....

In 1975, a bill was introduced in parliament which made it possible for teachers to be suspended for "good and sufficient reason." Teachers worked both in and out of the DUTA to organise protest, and the bill was allowed to lapse.

In June, the Emergency was declared and 200 teachers from Delhi University were arrested. This was terribly traumatic for all teachers. Involvement with the university community naturally extended to involvement with civil rights issues in general. When the Emergency was lifted, many teachers became closely involved with the civil rights movement. When the women's movement began to revive, many of us went into it via DUTA and the civil rights movement.

It was thus, through involvement with our professional organisation . that a sensitivity to democratic rights and an awareness of the lack of such rights amongst women was born. It is not

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The writer teaches in the same women's college as three of the authors of the article.

unlikely that the same kind of interconnections will be made through the experience of this strike by the current generation of women teachers....

Many teachers interviewed in the article had criticised DUTA for becoming politicised. All of us have come across innumerable instances of political manoeuvring taking place around us. We either ignore such political activity or accept it as inevitable. Most of us only treat organised political activity as “poli-tical” and tend to see it as a bad thing. But it is important to understand that open political activity in defence of justice and human rights at all levels should be pursued. We need not be defensive about espousing it....

We should analyse the disapproval of “political activity” by some women teachers in the perspective of the widespread recognition by other women that everything is political, even so called personal issues actually are political. It is covert forms of political activity which are dangerous, because some individuals use these for their own personal ends, to climb the ladder into the ranks of the authorities....

**Uma Chakravarty, Delhi  
Women And Politics**

Ratai D. Patell’s letter “No Need For Politics ?” in No. 33 made amusing reading. Thank god the writer did not suggest that **Manushi**, being a women’s journal, should carry cookery columns too. A number of people, like Ratai, clearly demarcate certain areas of social operation as male preserves, thus reducing woman to the position of a robot, remote controlled by a male, even a male child.

Male domination, cleverly camouflaged by shallow but high sounding slogans that put woman on a pedestal has become a habit both with men and women, and, like any other habit, it will die hard. To achieve self respect and equality with men, women will have to shed the complexes that male society has fed them over the centuries. They should not expect that male feminists, like me, will come to their help. They will have to fight their own battles.

For we, the men, whether or not we pose as feminists, are culled out of the same “male” stuff.

**Balvinder, Chandigarh  
Answer Questions**

...Ratai D. Patell says that **Manushi** should not be political. I do not agree with this. Because **Manushi**, or a woman, wants political, social and economic equality and freedom. Only when she gets it, can the country progress and oppression be ended ..I suggest that **Manushi** should have a regular column to answer readers’ questions.

**K. Rajanna  
(translated from Hindi)  
Exclude Them ?**

I was disappointed with **Manushi** for observing international women’s day on March 7 instead of March 8. The reason given was that as March 8 happened to be Shivaratri, women would be busy on this day and would be unable to attend the function. Shivaratri is observed in many parts of India mainly by women who would like to have a husband like Shiva. Women fast and pray on this day to achieve this desire. As **Manushi** is fighting all kinds of discrimination against women it should have observed March 8 as international women’s day in spite of the anticipated low turnout for the function. It is not the quantity but the principle that matters. Men in our society never observe any fasts or *vrats* for the welfare of women. It is always the women who suffer this unnecessary bondage.

I am also very happy to note that the articles in **Manushi** are becoming more political. I feel that both social work and political initiative are necessary for improving the social position of women. So it is correct that you are now projecting your thoughts not only socially but also politically.

**Nilina Abraham, Cochin**  
*The March 8 celebration was organised jointly by many organisations. Some of them felt that their members would like to attend but would be unable to come, because of Shivaratri. Organisations cannot afford to ignore the constraints faced by*

*women members, until these wo-men are themselves in a position to resist such constraints.*

—**Manushi**

**Be Assertive**

**Manushi** deserves a lot of praise, especially in a world which still looks down upon any effort to get women a better deal.

I read **Manushi** No. 32 and was particularly struck by a letter of Kirtida Surti from Ahmedabad. She very rightly says that despite the fact that women today have done exceedingly well in academic and other spheres, the attitude towards them still remains that of “one down.”

In the popular cinema and even in the so called progressive cinema, which claims to portray reality in the starkest form, a woman is almost inevitably portrayed as someone who is inferior. A few films of the latter category which have tried to portray women as assertive and independent have done so very halfheartedly. A woman takes a new, unconventional decision only when she has been rejected by her husband or male friend.

In spite of numerous examples of intelligent, competent women in almost every field, the media still insists on advertising women either as taking immense pleasure when they can wash clothes as white as a laundry does or cook delicious food which their sons and husbands devour with gluttonous greed. Most advertisements are also incomplete without the presence of a dumb looking, goggle eyed female who is most irrelevant to the product.

We have to do our little bit towards the elimination of these positively humiliating portrayals. Awareness, therefore, is a very important factor. Awareness—not only of the fact that we are equal but also of the injustice which can be inflicted on us in the absence of an assertive attitude..

**Tanuja Srivastava, Ghaziabad  
Simone de Beauvoir**

Simone de Beauvoir passed away on April 14. Her book, *The Second Sex*, published in the 1940s, marked a

revolutionary watershed in the world feminist movement... For her, woman has remained hitherto an “inessential other”, an object to man, irrespective of whether she is a princess or a pauperess. But woman, according to de Beauvoir, is not condemned to eternal bondage. She can, if she wishes, choose to transcend the limits of her oppressive immanent situation and become a “subject” and an “essential species being.” The central message she labours to communicate to her fellow women is “Don’t wait for a fundamental change in the system, don’t look for the charity of males ; assert your independence.” She asserts that marriage and mother-hood are not real fulfilments of a woman’s life though they are thrust on women in the interests of patriarchal domination....

**Chittaranjan Behera, Calcutta  
A Suggestion**

Are too many subscribers using the subsidised rate—including employed persons who could pay the unsubsidised rate ? Then change the wording ! Call these rates “standard” and “poverty.” This will preserve subsidy for the poor, while encouraging others to pay their full share.

**G. Tahanga, Australia  
Is It A Crime ?**

One hundred years after May Market, Chicago, it is still a crime to celebrate May Day. That, at least, appears to be the opinion of DIG police, Nagpur, Subhash Malhotra and DSP Chandrapur, Raj Khilnani, who, on May 1, this year, launched a massive crack-down on worker, student and civil-liberties activists in Chandrapur district, Maharashtra.

The major arrests were on May 1 at Rajpura. At the centenary celebrations, police arrested Susan Abraham, freelance journalist and activist of the Committee for Protection of Democratic Rights, Krishna Reddy, general secretary of the same organisation, and several members of Vidyarthi Pragathi Sanghatana and Navjawan Bharat Sabha, youth organisations.

The 25 persons arrested were

charged with sedition. The evidence cited included a pamphlet on the importance of May Day, books containing revolutionary songs, and books containing writings of Marx and Mao. The police indiscriminately dubbed all these individuals and organisations “naxalites” simply because they had been taking up issues of peasants and workers, such as the hydel project scheme in Gadchiroli which will inundate 150,000 hectares of land belonging to tribal farmers. ...

There were a number of irregularities in the legal procedures adopted against the arrested persons. Chandrama and Jaya were arrested on April 16, kept in police custody for over a month and charged with 72 unestablished crimes including housebreaking which had to be dropped as unproved, before they were transferred to jail.-.

On May 12, Susan Abraham stated in court that no policewoman was present when she was arrested. She had been subjected to a number of late night interrogations when no policewoman was present. She was also denied treatment for ailments that developed due to the poor conditions in the police lockup....

The arrested persons were made to sign bonds of good behaviour amounting to Rs 15,000 each, on the recommendation of the police. This was an attempt at harassment as even in serious cases like murder, bond amounts rarely exceed Rs 7,000. On application to the high court, the bonds were reduced to Rs 500, which only points to the absurdity of the whole exercise....

**Nistha Desai, Bombay  
Determined Resistance**

At midnight on May 8, 1986, Teresa Tirkey, a tribal social worker in Jashpurnagar, Raigarh, was arrested in an illegal manner. Policemen entered her hut without warning and dragged her, clad in a blouse and petticoat, into a waiting jeep where she found seven of her colleagues, also under arrest. The jeep then proceeded at a furious speed along the dirt roads. Teresa

who was two months’ pregnant, began to suffer intense pain. The police men ignored her pleas to reduce the speed of the jeep and laughed at her, saying she was only pretending. On May 10, Teresa suffered miscarriage and haemorrhage, and had to be hospitalised.

What was Teresa’s crime ? She was arrested in a move to disrupt a rally planned by tribals for May ! to demand minimum wages. In Raigarh district, the only employer available in the summer months is the plucking and processing of *lendu* leaves. This work is given out by contractors for extremely low wages. Recently, some educated tribals have begun to organise the labourers to demand payment of the statutory minimum wage....

The administration ignored the demand, labelling the struggle a law and order problem. They also falsely accused the organisers ( being “Christian conspirators” plotting to convert Hindus, whereas in fact, tribals were united across religious lines, for a common demand....

Despite the machinations of the administration, about 6,000 tribals peacefully marched to the district headquarters, Kunkuri, on May ! They demanded that the collectors receive their memorandum. Five delegates proceeded to Jashpurnagar to hand the memorandum to him. The rest of the processionists decided not to disperse until the delegate returned. All of them, young and old, including nursing mothers, stayed overnight in the open. Food was provided by surrounding villages.

Meanwhile, at Jashpurnagar, the collector had refused to give an assurance to the delegates and the superintendent of police had threatened to arrest them. The processionists then prepared to march the 40 kilometres to Jashpurnagar. The authorities bowed before the people power and the collector came to Kunkuri and promised to see that minimum wages are paid. It remains to be seen whether the promise is kept....

**Shashi Sail, Raipur  
(translated from Hindi)**