



Letters To Manushi

Other Dimensions

Madhu Kishwar's article on dowry in No. 34 was very revealing. However, there is a dimension I would like to add to the question of why parents give dowry. When the girl's parents got married, the father would have accepted dowry from the mother's parents and, in certain cases, even demanded it. When his daughter gets married, how can the same man deprecate dowry, having welcomed it earlier?... So, giving dowry becomes a sort of justification of what girls' fathers themselves had done earlier...

Neeti Bhatia, New Delhi

...Dowry comes about through the traditional system of the arranged marriage. Whenever parents look for a girl for their son, they look for money, prestige, status. But when a young boy looks for a girl as a life partner, he looks for love, compassion, commitment, character, companionship, above all, the smile on her face.

Love marriage is the best solution to eradicate the dowry system in our society. Why should we young boys and girls, allow someone else to select our life partner? If we accept this solution, I am sure that dowry system will not have a place in marriage.

S. Irudaya Rajan, Bombay

We have come across many cases of harassment for dowry even when the marriage was self-arranged or a so called love marriage. There is no evidence that young men look for different qualities in women than do their parents. The evidence suggests that most men and their parents look for submissiveness and servility in a

woman. Further, dowry is only one of the pretexts used to maltreat married women. In countries where the "love marriage" is the norm, maltreatment by husbands continues to be a widespread phenomenon.

—**Manushi**

No. 34 was an excellent issue. The article on dowry was very different and enlightening. But you have not mentioned the lower middle class situation where daughters are given dowry even if the family does not have any property. I request you to write an article on property rights of women in other countries, not only in law but in actual practice.... I think an article should be written on the equal property rights law enacted by N.T. Rama Rao's government in Andhra Pradesh. Nobody knows what the provisions are and how it is getting implemented, if at all...

Vasantha, Hyderabad

The provisions of the amendment to the Hindu Succession Act in Andhra, relating to Hindu women's property rights were presented and analysed in Manushi No. 17. See also No. 30. We hope to carry reports on implementation or the lack of it, in later issues. Readers in Andhra are requested to send us any information they may have, or to volunteer to collect information.

—**Manushi**

Better Wealth

In Madhu Kishwar's article on dowry, what has been said is well said but I think something basic has not been dealt with in detail: "A woman's due is whatever she requires to construct an independent secure life of her own." Most middle class people do not have property that can be inherited by its wards to sustain them throughout their life. Even when property

is given to the daughter, she is not trained to manage her financial affairs. Hence, how she is brought up is more important.

Even in communities like the kshasis and nairs, where property is inherited by women, it is men—the maternal uncles—who manage the property. The woman is still dependent on men. At times, the property can be "managed" in such a way that she is deprived of it.

So, in this society, where the majority of people are not propertied, it is more important to train the girl, as boys are trained, to look after herself and live independently. If the father takes the son to his shop and to other places where the financial affairs of the family are transacted, the daughter should also be exposed to such transactions.

Frequent admonitions like "Be a girl, don't run. Be a girl, don't climb trees", keep her from developing natural physical powers. "Be a girl, don't talk back to your brother. Be a girl, don't fight. Be a girl, don't shout." Her strength to shout and seek help when assaulted is reduced so that she becomes an easy victim.

Families which cannot afford to give a girl wealth or higher education, can give her the better wealth which is natural physical growth mental courage and strength not to barter self esteem...

Kamala, Delhi

Perfectly Free?

As a non Indian, I found the article "Dowry—To Ensure Her Happiness Or to Disinherit Her?" in No. 34, 1986, particularly enlightening. It explained a phenomenon that has always perplexed me - bride maltreatment by in-laws.

However, I disagree with the author, Madhu Kishwar's claim that offending female in-laws should not be held responsible for their actions.

She says: "Dowry...is a war declared by men against women, using women as pawns. It is unfortunate that women themselves act as soldiers and shed their own blood."

First, the female in-laws hurt the bride but do not "shed their own blood." Second, as the article explains, in-laws often benefit directly by depriving the bride of her possessions. Third, these women are perfectly free to behave decently in the absence of their male relatives.

Furthermore, to stay within the context of Kishwar's analogy, soldiers are personally responsible for the ferocity of their fighting and even, to some extent, for their very participation. Conscientious objectors exist. And there have been cases of active soldiers having refused to obey their leaders. During the first world war, Russian peasants laid down their weapons and returned to their homes and, on the western front, some entrenched French and German soldiers would shoot above each others' heads to prevent further killing.

As the article clearly explains, women, neither brides nor in-laws, can be blamed as the "major" perpetrators of dowry. But neither should female in-laws escape the blame that they have earned.

Narda Melvin, London

Essential For Life ?

The article on dowry in **Manushi** No. 34 was a good analysis of the historical and sociological aspects of the dowry practice, but the suggestions for eradicating it were not practical or reasonable.

You have suggested that daughters be given the right to inherit equally with sons.... This suggestion is an example of capitalist thinking which upholds the right to personal property. If the right to hold personal property is done away with, not only the problem of dowry but also the problem of the gap between the rich and poor, which is the root of all social evils, will disappear....

Your second suggestion is that the attainment of adulthood rather than marriage be the occasion for giving to daughters. But marriage is a necessity for

both boys and girls. Neither man nor woman can live without marriage. Amongst tribals, and so called lower castes, where women take part in production, they have a respected status in the family. Dowry is practised only by the new rich in towns and cities. So it is essential that men and women choose their marriage partners and their parents' despicable conspiracies be hatched. Parents should have no role in arranging children's marriages...If these two changes take place, no further changes will be required to get rid of dowry....

Suresh Pandit, Alwar



(translated from Hindi)

Tamil Women

Congratulations on the piece on Tamil maids in No. 35. In the 1961 census, I found a large number of Tamil speaking women living in Shahdara on the east bank of the Yamuna, Delhi. I commissioned someone to investigate but he did not write. They have been coming to Delhi from Tamil Nadu as far back as 1958 to 1960...

**Asok Mitra,
Calcutta**

To Live Freely

...Women's lives have changed to some extent, but women, to whichever class they belong, still remain oppressed. Until women learn to live without a man, on their own strength, they will continue to be exploited. Men as a group exploit women for their own convenience, and they will continue to do so.

Every human being has the right to

live freely. We have to struggle for this right ...It is surprising that we have become so used to being exploited that we do not even realise our condition and, even more surprisingly, the exploiters too do not realise they are exploiting because they think it is their right...

Jayanti Bhattacharya, Patna

(translated from Hindi)

Strengthen Womanhood

My salute to **Manushi** for its endeavours. It is obvious that instead of begging for rights from a male dominated society, it is better to strengthen womanhood to get rights. Concessions are never remedies. Fighting spirits have to be developed.

Hardev Singh Baria, Delhi

Television Blues

Daily, I want to blast off my television screen.

Daily, my senses get offended.

Women are either shown dancing erotically or sobbing aloud like frail children, or fainting the moment they are told that something adverse might have happened to their sons or husbands.

How long does Doordarshan want to go on with this feudalistic way of life? At Doordarshan, who selects what is right for the country's families to see on Sundays? Has Doordarshan ever offered funds to writers of merit or outstanding women directors who may offer something that may help us understand the new woman, her needs, her problems?...

...No doubt *Agnisnan* was a superbly acted and directed film; the theme was also not too bad. However, in the end, the film lapsed into a male world's wishful thinking. The saintly first wife gets impregnated by another man without seeking any pleasure from the relationship, thereby reassuring the husband that she will not desire another man. To add insult to injury, she goes on to exonerate her husband by saying "You can go on giggling all night" with the second wife. By implying that his relationship with the second wife will no

longer hurt her, as she has become a stone, she gives him the freedom to enjoy his second wife without suffering any pangs of guilt.

She will even keep his honour intact. No one will know that the child she is expecting is not his. Everyone will think that all is well on the home front.

Like *Agnisnan*, *Mayuri* has a modern theme, showing what happens to the wife in a small unitary family system where, as the husband's career gets set and the children grow up, she becomes an unimportant person in the household.

Why was she neglected in the first place? Why don't the father or the children get neglected?... They are active in the outside world and therefore more interesting people. The film does not attempt to solve this problem.

The housewife needs to be given a material status first. She is to be made to participate actively in the outside world's activities. Men and children must share

the housework, and the housewife freed even physically so that she may be able to go out, away from her home surroundings, to meet people, to participate. My landlady tells me: "My husband's student was getting married but I didn't go. What should I do there? All I do is remain dressed up, standing by my husband, or sit with other women with whom also there is nothing to talk about, since each one leads a life limited to her own home and family."...

Mayuri dribbles off into an imaginary, eternal love syndrome as if the man's learning to share the woman's joys and sorrows is a solution to the problem.

I am not signing this letter in my first name because I have already faced enough problems dealing with outdated, feudalistic males. One bank manager did not consider my loan application because a woman's rejection of his point of view angered him.

Name withheld, Delhi

The Name They Forgot

The day I was born there was joy. Grandpa consulted the stars and chose a pretty, small name, easy for young and old to call. After the christening day, everyone forgot that I too have a name. They started calling me "Baby."

Whenever people saw me, they exclaimed: "Oh, you are so and so's daughter." I remained so and so's daughter. Years passed. My only brother, younger than I, grew up. At social gatherings, I became so and so's sister.

Within a week of marriage, when I was still heady with the feeling of a newly wed, my husband introduced me to somebody: "My wife", as if I had no name. I was elated that day for I was his own and only wife. But today, I know very well that I am only his wife. In the in-laws' house, I am so and so's daughter-in-law. When I become mother, shall I become so and so's mother?

Vani Jain, Delhi

Sangita's Story

Some idea of the dangerous possessiveness men may have for "their" women can be gathered from the life and death of my friend, Sangita Bose, a beautiful Bengali girl who was recently murdered by her husband, Jagadish Bhattacharjee.

The story begins with their meeting in Calcutta in 1979. Sangita was studying at Women's Christian College in south Calcutta, when she became friendly with Jagadish. I advised her not to mix with this boy because not only was he ugly and far less educated than she (in themselves, not necessarily in qualifications), but also rough spoken and known to be violent at times. He was not studying or employed either. However, these warnings had no effect. In fact, Sangita told me to desist from my attempts to separate her from Jagadish, saying she feared Jagadish would kill her and me too if she were to leave him. Sangita and he were often seen together in the park near the college, and their

relations led to marriage in 1983.

At the end of 1984, a child was born. By this time, Jagadish had started work as a salesman but, as his income was insufficient, Sangita got herself a job at Johnson and Johnson. Meeting her again in 1985, I observed how thin Sangita had become. We met again by chance several months later, and, seeing Sangita's deteriorating health, I asked her if anything was wrong. Sangita told me that after she had joined the private company, her husband had started to doubt her. He was suspicious that because she was educated, attractive and earning money, she was involved with another man. Sangita moved to her parents' home with her little girl after much beating and harassment from her husband.

After some time, Jagadish went to fetch her back. Glad to see him, and hoping for a reconciliation, Sangita's parents told her to go back with him, which she did. On reaching the house, Jagadish

told her to prepare tea and, while she was bending over the stove, is alleged to have thrown kerosene over her and set her on fire.

Two local youths saw this from outside the house and managed to extinguish the flames and take Sangita to the P.G hospital in south Calcutta where she died. Though Jagadish had absconded, the CID eventually traced him and today he is in jail.

If Sangita had registered a case of torture and beatings by her husband at the local police station and warned Jagadish, then he would have thought twice about killing her. In a situation where girls are usually reluctant to inform even their parents, let alone the public, about such matters, it becomes very difficult for anyone to help and protect them. The lack of strong local women's committees trained to deal with broken marriages and wife beating is also one reason for the daily incidents of wife murder in West Bengal and elsewhere.

Nibedita Bhattacharjee