



Letters To Manushi

Polygamy On TV

...On February 15, a film, *Prastav* which was nothing but a justification of polygamy, was shown on TV. In this film, a man falls in love with a girl from Uganda. Because of a political coup, she returns to Uganda and he loses track of her. Meanwhile, his mother wants him to marry an orphan girl she has brought up. He feels sorry for the girl and marries her. Seven years later, the girl from Uganda returns. After a long drama, he decides to live with both women. His wife suggests this solution to the problem.

Today, women should be educated not to accept such injustice, rather than to accept polygamy happily. The second, more serious question is: why are women always shown as if the only aim of their lives is to get married? A government which talks so big should not use the medium it controls to harm the interests of women. Doordarshan should apologise publicly to women.

Jyoti Prakash, Delhi

Year Of Rape

Nari Adhikar Swarakha Shaniti is a social voluntary organisation in the district of Koreput where most of the people are tribals and Harijans. Though the UNO has declared this year the year of housing, in the district of Koreput it has turned out to be the year of rape of Harijans and tribals.

Nearly 10 cases of rape have been registered in the district in the month of January 1987 in certain cases, government servants like block development officers and police officers have raped girls.

An example is rape case No. 1/87 PS Kundra, registered against the BDO of Kundra in the files of the subdivision magistrate at Jeypore. The BDO has proceeded to obtain anticipatory bail from the high court. The petition under section 438 CrPC has been rejected by the district judge, Jeypore. The name of the victim is Dumai, a Harijan of Dangarpauochi. The accused is Lakhon Kumar Samataray, a Brahman.

The need of the hour is to gather women's voluntary organisations to protect the victims...

Sailabala Das, Koraput

Women Of Kodaikanal

Kodaikanal in Tamil Nadu is a beautiful hill resort. In April and May, it witnesses an influx of tourists. This time is locally termed "the season." Now, with the boom of tourism, the season extends to cover almost the whole year.

In spite of the heavy rains in this area, Kodaikanal has very inadequate arrangements for supply of water. In villages such as Anna Nagar and Indira Nagar, tucked under the hill there is one tap for every 100 houses. In some areas there are no taps at all. At the peak of the season, the local lodges and hotels siphon off much of the water. Water reaches the village taps only once in three days. The pressure is so low that only 16 families a day can get water, from the taps. The women of other families must walk over the hills to a distant stream or to the town lake to get water. There are no wells in Kodaikanal.

In times of drought, the township may

send trucks to deliver water to the affected villages. But it is not uncommon to see women in these villages waiting and waiting for a truck that never comes. A lodge owner, who has difficulty meeting the needs of his tourist customers, will have paid the truck driver to deliver the water to his lodge instead of to the village.

Women complain that they cannot afford to use water to wash clothes or bathe their children. All the water they can find must be kept for cooking—if there is anything to cook. There is a high incidence of skin disorders and other health problems created by scarcity of water during the season.

Another major problem during the season is the increase in prices of food. Bad rice, which usually costs Rs 3 a kilo suddenly rises to Rs 7 or 8. Good rice, the staple diet of the local people, becomes unavailable to the poor. The prices of vegetables, fruit, oil, sugar and other basic food items also rise.

Tourism in Kodaikanal has not created stable employment for the local villagers. A few may get jobs as waiters or nursemaids in hotels or homes of summer residents but their employment is shortlived and salary pitiful.

Harassment of women also increases during the season. Young men in groups, when away from their native places, feel free from the controls of their community and begin to harass women and girls on the streets both physically and verbally.

In all this, women are the worst affected. They are the water carriers and food buyers. They are the ones who will

be shunned if they get pregnant as a result of rape.

Name withheld, Tamil Nadu

Hypocrisy Kills

India Today last year carried a report on the recent development of female infanticide amongst the Kallars, a community of marginal farmers and landless labourers in Madurai.

Dowry demands in this community have so devalued women that parents see no alternative to killing their female offspring. Coincidentally the day before I saw this report, I was offended by an advertisement I happened to see in Femina. It showed a middle aged couple in a shop being shown a variety of stainless steel utensils, The text read; "Naturally enough, parents are thrilled when their daughter is about to get married. We're no exception. We're getting our daughter married soon and that means a lot of running around, from hiring the best marriage hall to mailing invitations. And a hundred other details that make you wonder if marriages are really made in heaven."

"And then there's shopping, shopping, and more shopping. Specially woven silk saris, gold ornaments designed by our talented daughter herself. And a long, long list of other things. The only easy part was when we went shopping for utensils — made out of Salem Stainless. Utensils that don't corrode, stain or develop black spots. Keep their shine even after years of hard use. And strong enough to last a lifetime. Well, isn't marriage for a lifetime?"

What is this but an explicit endorsement of dowry? The very people who lay out heavily on "a long, long list" of things when their daughter marries, and who expect to receive the same when their son marries, are the ones who will most loudly condemn the doings of other groups like the Kallars.

I decided to write to the Steel company which had placed the advertisement and to the editors of Femina. I looked up the ad again and was terrified to find that it was placed by Steel

Authority of India Ltd, a government of India enterprise based in Salem, Tamil Nadu, The incredible hypocrisy of the government of India in enacting farther legislation against dowry while one of its enterprises sponsors ads that encourage the practice and suggest that its product is an essential item in the dowry, cannot be condemned too strongly. Many more people read full page ads in glossy magazines than read laws, I hope readers of Manushi will make their views known to the government of India, the Salem steel plant and the editors Femina.

Lucy Carroll, Austin

Divorced Women's Rights

...After divorce, a woman should have the right to use her father's surname again, if she wishes to do so. Her employers should agree to alter records accordingly. On the evidence of the decree of divorce. It should not be necessary for her to place an advertisement in the newspaper. In one government department here, there is a dispute of this nature going on, The authorities are refusing to alter a woman officer's surname. I think, after divorce, such alteration is a woman's legal right

A divorced woman should also have equal rights to custody of her child. To deprive her of this right is to indirectly punish her for having gotten divorced. The court does not even take responsibility to ensure that the mother's right to visit and meet her child is honoured.

Manorma, Jaipur
(translated from Hindi)

Parents' Responsibility

..Today, many organisations are trying to fight against dowry. But the results are not satisfactory because this is not a problem that can be resolved by building up external pressure or by passing laws against it. These pressures are also required. But the main need is to build up girls' self confidence. This is the parents' responsibility. They should give equal rights to their sons and daughters, and spend equally on the development of

both. It is not only in-laws who treat a girl unjustly. The injustice begins in her own parents' home. When equality does not begin in the parental home, how can equal rights and respect be given in the marital home? Parents should spend the money collected as dowry on making the girl self reliant. ...

Krishna Bhat, Delhi,
(translated from Hindi)

Girl Child

Even today, I shudder when I remember that incident of my childhood. I was 12 years old. My elder sister was getting married. The house was full of guests. At night, I suddenly awoke to realise that someone was stroking my chest. I sat up with a start and saw someone running away. Who was it?

My uncles and brothers were the others sleeping in that room, I began to feel suffocated and did not know what to do. I went out into the verandah where my sister was sleeping, lay down and shut my eyes. But I could not sleep all night. In the morning, I wondered whether I should tell anyone but I could not work up the courage. What could I say? Even today, when I remember that incident, I begin to feel nervous and suffocated. But today I have the confidence that someone can understand my feelings, I am able to express myself in words and lighten my heart.

Chetna, Bombay
(translated from Hindi)

Register Marriages

The question is, what is the remedy for the dowry evil? I suggest that all



marriages be registered, and a marriage be considered solemnised only when registered in court. Any giving and taking after that will have to be notified. Committees should also be set up to interview men and women as to the way they are leading their lives...

Daughter Murdered

I would like to bring to your attention the kidnapping and murder of my daughter by the religious leaders, and the feudal interests of the Dharamsthala temple near my village. This temple and most of the land around it are owned by one Veerendra Heggade. I have every reason to believe that my daughter was murdered to take revenge on me for organising the farmers of this village, in my capacity as president of the Ryotu Sangham. I had worked actively for the CPI(M) and wanted to contest the elections but was prevented from doing so.

On December 22, 1986, my daughter, Padmalatha, aged about 17, a student of Sri Dharmasthala Manjunatheshwara college went for the college day celebrations but did not return home, I searched for her everywhere but failed to find her. On December 25, when I went to file a complaint at the police station, the SHO, Stanley Mendonca, refused to register it, and also abused me. So I had to approach the police through some influential people to get the complaint registered.

When I approached the principal of my daughter's college, Shri Prabhakar, for help he abused me and told me to get out, saying communists should not enter his college.

Despite my giving the police several clues, they took no action at all. On February 16, a body was discovered under a bridge nearby. The hands and feet were bound, all the flesh had disintegrated and it was only a skeleton. It was identified on the basis of the clothes, jewellery and watch,

Very powerful and influential people are behind the murder of my daughter, and the police and administration are under

their influence. I fear that the lives of myself and my family members are in danger.

M.K, Devanand, Karnataka

Changing Social Order

..We see many cases of exploitation in all forms. But it is so much a part of our lives that it no longer has the power to shock us. Take the case of Rani, a woman who ekes out a living by ironing

clothes. Married at 12, she is the mother of three children at 18, A casual observer would justifiably place her age at close to 30, At an age when a person should concentrate on growing up and realising her potential, Rani is raising a family....

At the other end of the social ladder, there are girls who have access to nutrition and education, and an acceptance, however grudging, of their basic rights. Yet, they are subject to a degree of subtle exploitation. Even while they are "permitted" to choose a career, they are indoctrinated to accept that they are



inferior to men and that they should not compete with the men of the house. Even if they are employed, they should fulfil their domestic obligations. Outside, they may be career women; inside, they are housewives—a term denoting their links with the house and their subordinate position in the household hierarchy...

There is no way out except to fight the social system and to change it. The fight may be difficult, it may not yield immediate results. ...The question that confronts us now is : which weapons should be used to fight the social order?...

Geetanjali Gangoli, Delhi

Woman's Life

Woman's life is like a pack of cards. She may be dealt bad cards or good ones. A good player can make the best even of bad cards and win the game. But, today, even highly educated women are often driven to suicide by husband and in-laws. This may be because women are only given bookish knowledge, not practical knowledge, in school and college. From childhood, they are prevented from mixing freely with outsiders. They are prepared to become machines to do housework and produce children. They are thus rendered unfit to take decisions or manage any task independently.

What is required is that women organise themselves to become strong. There should be local organisations to help women who are unjustly treated. Men have to be rid of the illusion that they are born to rule society. They must be made to understand that woman did not give them birth in order that they might snatch her rights. The universe has created all beings with the same pulse but men have stamped some as men and others as women, certifying the former as strong and the latter as fragile and self sacrificing. We have to come together to erase this stamp . . .

Sarita Rai, Bihar
(translated from Hindi)

Use Of Laws

Many laws are being formulated for the benefit of women. But how many know about these laws ? A girl grows up with a feeling of insecurity inculcated in

her mind. She is told that in order to survive she will have to find security which can only be respectably found in a husband's house.

For this security, a woman undergoes endless tortures at the hands of her husband and in-laws. The fear of being thrown out of home and society prevents her seeking justice from the courts of law. Then what is the use of laws formulated to give women justice? It seems as to me that mental emancipation must precede social emancipation...

Kavita Bahl, Delhi

Women's Day In Lucknow

On March 8, 1987. Lucknow University Thinkers Council held a meeting at which dowry deaths and the exploitation of women workers were discussed. An exhibition of posters and paintings was held.

The speakers emphasised the distressing lack of protest against the various forms of exploitation of women prevalent in the region. Apart from the hill regions, there seems to be not much activity amongst women in UP, Even when incidents in UP, like the police rape of Maya Tyagi or the police molestation of a Vahini woman activist in Agra, aroused protest by women in other parts of the country, women in UP remained silent.

It was decided to initiate action against the exploitation of thousands of women in the Lucknow *chikan* embroidery industry. These women are brought by contractors from Bilaspur and are exploited both economically and sexually. A subcommittee was formed to start work with these women on issues of unequal wages and lack of accommodation and childcare.

Ambrish Kumar, Lucknow

In Bangalore

International women's day was jointly observed in Bangalore by groups like Vimochana, Joint Women's Programme, Women's Voice, Sthree Jagrithi Samithi and Bandhavi by demonstrations and debates on women's issues on March 8.

Vimochana also organised a women's



festival. On March 9, a procession was taken out from Bowering hospital to the secretariat and a memorandum submitted, to the chief minister of Karnataka. There were exhibitions and documentary film shows throughout the week in different parts of the city.

K. Sharada Bhat, Bangalore

In Gadchiroli

Gadchiroli is a backward tribal area of Maharashtra. There are several Mahila Mandals here which have been mainly concerned with organising religious programmes. This year, about 15 women got together and planned a programme for March 7 and 8 to celebrate women's day. Gadchiroli Mahila Sangathan and Search were the two organisations also involved.

On the evening of March 7, a meeting of women only was held in Shivaji college. Women from all walks of life, such as nurses, doctors, lawyers, home guards, social workers, bank workers, vegetable vendors, food vendors and housewives, were present. One by one, they talked about their life experiences, at home and at work. After this a slide show on women's health was presented. It attempts to combat prevalent myths about women's bodies.

On March 8, a mixed seminar was held on the topic "Women have been given responsibilities but they want rights too."

Male police officers, journalists, lawyers and teachers were asked to speak along with the women. The men adequately lived up to their role as representatives of conservative society. They made statements like: "Women's main function is to produce children; A cow remains a cow and a bull a bull; If women start demanding rights, children will be on the streets like piglets; Women have inferiority complex; Women's liberation is nothing but inciting women against men."

There were more women than men in the meeting and they expressed their surprise and opposition to these sentiments. Some women were heard saying that such irresponsible speakers should be pulled down from the stage. Finally, a woman came on the stage and made a suitable reply to the male speakers. The result of these anti-women speeches by men was that women pledged to build and maintain their unity.

The meeting ended with songs on women's awareness and two plays, one against superstition and one on national integration.

On March 9, a women's meeting was organised at which it was decided that women would meet every Tuesday to discuss their problems and plan programmes.

Jamuna Dagavkar, Yamini Choudhry
(translated from Hindi) □