

Letters



To Manushi

Fire Them

I read **Manushi** No. 47. First I thought I would not read the same old story of cholera deaths, but I am happy that I did read it. I just loved Madhu Kishwar's comment: "If every drain in the country must wait for a prime minister before a pretence is made of cleaning it then..." I suggest that you send copies of this issue to these high level officials, including the prime minister.

After reading so much about the epidemic, one can conclude that nothing affects the government or the authorities. The last laugh comes when the concerned authority resigns and everything becomes all right automatically.

You talk of people getting organised and taking responsibility. I agree, but before that let us fire all the public servants who cannot perform their duty. Why should these people keep on getting precious public money month after month, without doing anything ?

I live in an "authorised", quite proper, upper middle class locality, where every road, corner, drain and gutter is dirty. The housewives, early in the morning, clean the area outside their house and the sweeper pays a monthly "share" to his supervisor and does private jobs in his duty time.

Can we once and for all stop this game of passing the buck, and take responsibility for our individual fields? I could go on and on. Thanks again for realistic reading.

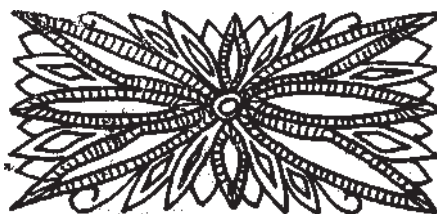
Suman Sharma, New Delhi

Polygamy Rampant

Your survey on polygamy in a Maharashtra village "Who Can Stop A

Man?" by Chetna in **Manushi** No. 46, highlights the plight of Hindu women in rural India. As an activist, I have travelled extensively in rural Tamil Nadu and have found polygamy rampant amongst Hindus. The trendsetter in Tamil Nadu was its late chief minister M. G. Ramachandran who left two squabbling wives as his legacy. At one time, at least three women were publicly associated with the chief minister. In several cases, Hindu men in this state marry two sisters, which is not permitted in Islam although Muslims are allowed to practise polygamy.

All this makes one conclude that it is not the law which needs to be debated in our country. It is the attitude to life and the ethos. Nothing bars a Hindu husband from being a de facto polygamist while remaining a monogamist de jure, that is from legally marrying one woman but illegally marrying or living with several. The recent court verdict waiving the responsibility of maintaining the second wife after divorce on the grounds that the second marriage was illegitimate, gives



further licence to Hindu men to indulge in polygamy.

P. Susheela Ramanathan, Faridabad

Why It Happens

The special double issue No. 42-43 is a superb production, in terms of both content and format. The discussion with Romila Thapar is enlightening...

The article on Roop Kanwar is frightening. One is shaken to the core by the morbid frenzy at Deorala. But I feel the strong preoccupation with the phoniness of the whole thing might have blocked a breakthrough in understanding the issue from the point of view of the people directly involved.

Our society is getting more and more ostentatious in its religious rituals. People seem to need pomp, show and loudness in the name of religion. I feel we need to understand the perceptions of the people who support such things. It is important that we understand why various temple coffers are overflowing, why numerous new gods, godlings and cults are cropping up and are sustained, and why people contributed the Rs 1,300,000 collected by Roop Kanwar's in-laws.

The other two articles, on Sati were also good. Shekhawat's was helpful in understanding some aspects of Rajashtani culture; Yang's lifts the cloud of gross generalisations such as that Sati is a Rajput or a high caste custom.

K. Krpa, Bangalore

Sahu Sisters Film

...I happened to be in Kanpur a few days after the joint suicide by the Sahu sisters. With some activists of the Mahila Manch, I met the Sahu family. Both parents

spoke to us, although the mother has not spoken to any journalist. Subsequently, we discussed the case with women in various colonies. We had made a small play based on the incident, and this facilitated discussion.

Five months after the suicide, Doordarshan screened a documentary on the incident. This film gives the viewer no clue to the personalities of the three women. It does not, for instance, tell us that the elder two were extremely withdrawn and hardly spoke to anyone outside the family. Or that the three did not share feelings with their parents but shared a lot with each other. They would finish the housework and then go up to the terrace to study and to chat. They had their own little world which no fourth person could enter.

The film does not tell us that all three were very religious. Or that they used to be very moved by news of crimes against women, for instance, by the 1987 Sati episode. The film glosses over the education the three were undergoing. The eldest was doing a course in stenography, the second was doing MEd. Their father was actively encouraging them, with a view to their taking up jobs. Yet, the eldest was not confident about working.

It seems, then, that the film makers were not interested in an indepth study of the situation. They were interested simply in making a film that would sell. They pinned the father down as the villain of the piece, interviewing him under great pressure.

Praveen Kutnar, who had joined Cine India International, the company which made the film, resigned after doing background research for the film, because he did not like the methods used to induce the griefstricken Mr Sahu to give an interview. After he refused to accept money (first he was offered Rs 10,000 and later 25,000), police personnel threatened to reopen the case if he did not give the interview. Finally, he agreed to give only an audio, not a visual, interview. Thus, the camera was used invasively and against his will.

The film suggests that the father was

wholly to blame for his daughters' deaths because he wanted to arrange their marriages and pay dowry. It does not consider the fact that he wanted his daughters settled—whether in respectable marriages or in jobs. This should have been explored in depth.

The other main interview, with Seema, a friend of the youngest Sahu girl, Alka, also isolates and harasses the interviewee. The interviewer pressures her to declare a preference for love marriage over arranged marriage, but he fails in this. The high point of the farce occurs when she caves in under pressure to give him the answer he wants to his question regarding the preferred gender of the child she might have after marriage, and says: "I would like a girl."

The film posits a false dichotomy—traditions entrap people and modern values liberate them. This fails to appreciate the mix of the traditional and the modern in the actual situation. The film treats people, including the three women, with incredible disrespect. For instance, it says that only immature (*kache*) minds could have taken the step of committing suicide, and crassly compares Seema with her dead friend, asking Seema whether she would have killed herself were she in Alka's situation, and treating her "No, never" with great approval.

All in all, the film reeks of self righteousness. It fails to expose the dynamics of women's oppression or to indicate the possible directions from which change can come.

Deepthi Priya, Delhi

Against Equality ?

Having silently suffered abominable treatment at the hands of men, women have now mustered courage to demand just and humane treatment, the right to be treated as an equal member of society. In the political sphere, women have attained the right to vote, in the economic sphere they have earned the right to equal wages for equal work, and in the legal field they now enjoy complete equality. All this is most encouraging.

However, in some situations, it seems that women want to be discriminated

against and favoured for their own convenience. In DTC buses, seats are reserved for ladies. And, recently, DTC has granted women the privilege of boarding the bus from the front door. Instead of denouncing this discrimination, women have coolly lapped it up as a privilege due to them. If a woman claims that she can perform any task, why does she mar this feeling of being an equal by demanding a seat? After all, the man sitting on it may have worked as hard as she has.

Women's fight for equality has largely borne fruit. Having attained the basic constitutional equality in all spheres, we must not cling to such petty privileges as ladies' seats and special ladies' queues. If we expect male chauvinism to die, we must also be ready for the demise of male chivalry. An equal is not expected to offer a seat to another equal. A man does not offer a seat to another man, nor does a woman to another woman.

Such allowances only constitute proof of the weakness of the fair sex. In fact, women are not weaker than men. If a man can bear to stand in a bus after a hard day's work, so can a woman.

Manpreet Sachdeva, New Delhi

We are surprised that you think that woman have achieved "complete" or even an "encouraging" degree of equality. The majority of women in our country suffer deadly forms of discrimination in the allocation of resources such as food, education, health care and employment. This inequality is reflected in the higher mortality and morbidity rates amongst women and girls and the growing gap between male and female literacy rates. Constitutional and legal equality remains largely on paper, for instance, most labouring women do not get an equal wage for equal work. Many laws, for instance, those relating to inheritance of property and guardianship of children, blatantly discriminate against women. It is also a fact that most employed women have a double workday as men do not share equally in housework and childcare.

As far as the question you raise is concerned, the question is wider than one

of reservation of seats. The DTC bus service is of an appalling quality, not only because of shortage of buses and their poor maintenance, but because of the staff's callous disregard of commuters' needs. DTC buses have come to constitute a serious danger to the life and limb of commuters, especially those not equipped for physical combat. Old people, children and the disabled are rarely able to get on to buses because of the overcrowding, and the failure of buses to stop at the bus stands and to wait for people to get in.

Any woman who travels by DTC knows that sexual harassment of the most humiliating kind is almost unavoidable on the buses, and is aggravated by the overcrowding. Given these conditions, it is not surprising that some women should seek some short term and inadequate relief through such measures as separate seats and entrances for woman. A long term solution, however, must involve an adequate number of buses so that they are not so crowded, and steps to ensure that buses stop at the bus stands and wait for people to get in.

Manushi

Baby Girls

This is to request you to help us to adopt a baby girl. We are an atheist, secularist couple, both employed, who have had an intercaste marriage, and are working amongst tribals. We had an only daughter, Srjana, who was bitten by a scorpion in June 1985, in her fifth year, and died due to the three hours' delay in treatment by negligent doctors. We lost our whole lives with her. We remember her and long for her every moment.

When Srjana was five months old, Nataraj underwent vasectomy. In 1986, he underwent recanalisation, but it seems to have been a failure.

Now, we have decided to adopt a girl. We took this decision because girls are unwanted in our society. At Rajahmundry recently, a boy was abandoned at a hospital. Many childless couples came and quarrelled with each other for him, and at last he was auctioned for Rs 10,000. But girl babies are often murdered and thrown in dustbins.

We are finding it very difficult to get a baby girl for adoption. We thought of adopting a tribal child but gave up the idea because it seemed cruel and inhuman to snatch a child away from its beautiful natural life in an innocent community and bring it into a self centred, money and caste minded cement forest. We came across a woman who wanted to sell her baby but this seemed unbearable to us, as a baby is not a thing or an animal, but a human being. So we request you to help us.

Nataraj and Sujatha, Visakhapatnam Rural Women No Freer

Many of those who today seek the "rural origins of women's liberation", and are trying to mobilise rural women, labour under a misconception that women of lower classes and castes are freer from shackles of orthodox norms than women of upper castes and classes, since divorce is freer and remarriage is easier. It is often claimed that since the majority of poorer women earn wages they have a more egalitarian status in the family.

My experience with labouring women in rural Gujarat has convinced me that this view is not only incomplete, but is a distortion of reality. Statistics on divorce, remarriage and employment give no sense of the quality of choice available to a labouring woman who wants to escape a violent marital situation. The choice of whether to leave or not is never a choice made by the woman about her life. These decisions are made by her kin.

I came across many cases of women facing acute violence from husbands, wanting to leave but having nowhere to go, since the father or brother refused to provide support. Women who left the marital home and lived at the parental home, where they contributed all their income to the family, bore the brunt of verbal violence, and had to validate their existence by working twice as hard in the house.

The flat statement of an 18 year old Rohit woman: "I don't know for what I am living" indicates the hopelessness of her position. Asked whether she wanted to remarry, she said: "In our community, the girl's family does not make a marriage

proposal. The boy's family proposes. Until then, what? One has to live like this, eating half a piece of bread."

It was usually the man who sought divorce, not the woman. All he had to do was to pay back the bride price. Bride price, not dowry, is still the norm among the lower castes. The assumption that bride price raises the status of a woman is wrong. In a society where relations are almost completely commoditised, bride price reduces woman to the level of merchandise. This is reflected in the language: "You have bought and brought home the bride."

The relatively recent and unequal access to educational opportunities also places stress on already unequal relations between the sexes. I came across many cases amongst the Vankars, Vagharis and the Rohits, of an educated young man seeking out a nonmanual job and refusing to live with the illiterate woman to whom he had been married at an early age. In such cases, the easy dissolubility of the marriage does not reflect a real choice for women.

Within a month and a half of living in a village, I came across two incidents of suicide by labouring women. This, after I had been duped by statements made by Dalit women: "In the Patidar community women are burnt to death. But amongst us, this does not happen - no one even commits suicide."

It was difficult to find out more about the suicides. I had met both of the women—Pani, a 25 year old vegetable vendor, with two young children, and Kashi who lived outside the village centre. Kashi was very young, she looked about 17, and lived a very isolated life. Her husband had been married earlier, and had divorced his first wife. We had laughed together at the fact that I was still "alone." Comments on her death: "What do we know? She lived on the out-skirts of the village. A snake may have bitten her. Or, she may have been possessed by Mataji." Both women's bodies were cremated in haste and no investigation took place.

Gandhian social workers to whom I related these incidents expressed surprise:

“We thought a labouring woman would never commit suicide. A Vaghari woman may drive someone else to suicide but not kill herself.” Whether or not these were suicides will never be known. The fact remains that there was violent oppression which brought about death.

Parita Mukta, Surat

Careers And Jobs

Although economic independence is a cornerstone on which women’s freedom rests, yet it alone is not enough. In many homes, even today, a woman’s entire income is deposited with the husband or mother-in-law and a meagre amount meted out to her for expenditure. Even when the salary appears to be at her disposal, decisions are often subject to the husband’s whims and fancies.

Marriage often stands in the way of a career. There is an important distinction between a career and a job. Many women work but few have careers. A career implies involvement and ambition. To commit oneself wholeheartedly to both marriage and a career is difficult. For most women, marriage assumes the form of a juggernaut, to which they must willingly sacrifice ambition. A job, however, may be viewed as a means to add to the family income, and it remains subsidiary to the husband’s occupation. It is because of this assumption that working women continue to perform household chores single-handed.

Does marriage indeed afford superior satisfaction to women? Or is it just a face saving agreement which provides her with social status and often ends up being a hallowed sepulchre?

Bishakha Saha, Orissa

Murderous Attack

On October 2, 1988, an attempt to murder Mahendra Chaudhary, Srilata Swaminadhan and Pannalal Rawal, three leaders of the Rajasthan Kisan Sangathan, was made by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, RSS and Bharatiya Janata Party. When this attempt failed, the house office in Ghantali village (Banswara district) were ransacked, and thousands of rupees worth of books, medicines and equipment systematically destroyed.

Mahendra Chaudhary and his wife Srilata live in Ghantali. The organisation houses a large workshop where tribal women are taught weaving and tailoring, and also a dispensary and large library.

On October 2, Gandhiji’s birth anniversary, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad held a public meeting in the school grounds at Ghantali. Hundreds of men from neighbouring areas were brought in by truck for the meeting. They came armed with swords, *lathis*, machetes and bows and arrows. They shouted slogans like “Srilata Hai Hai” and “Mahendra Chaudhary Hai, Hai”. In the police station adjoining the ground, the SHO of Peepalkhunt with half a dozen constables sat, watching. They did not take any action at the provocative slogan shouting of these armed outsiders.

The meeting began at 1 p.m. with about 1,000 persons attending. While the meeting was in progress, some of the outsiders proceeded to the house of Mahendra and Srilata. They threatened the tribals there and demanded to know the whereabouts of Srilata. After searching for her, they returned to the meeting, conferred with the leaders on the dais, and then returned to the house with 15 more armed men.

They then broke into the workshop, systematically smashed up everything there, including sowing and knitting machines, looms, blackboards, furniture. They next went to the main house, broke doors and windows, broke open cupboards, destroyed about Rs 15,000 worth of medicines, smashed typewriters, amplifier, solar cookers, and tore books and files of the Sangathan. They also made off with a tape recorder and Rs 1,650 in cash. It is strange that amongst the books that the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, self styled defenders of Hinduism, tore up and trampled on were copies of *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, Tulsi’s *Ramcharitmanas* and the works of Sant Mavji.

Meanwhile, at the meeting, BJP and RSS leaders made highly inflammatory speeches, accusing Mahendra and Srilata of being Christians leading the tribals astray (a complete lie since neither of them

is a Christian), and threatening to smash them. Other groups of armed outsiders went searching for activists of the Sangathan. Fortunately, they were warned by local tribals and went into hiding. The police did not stir out of the station all this time. When the looters got back to the ground, the meeting broke up in a hurry with an announcement that they would return on October 4 to raze the organisation to the ground.

There is no doubt that had Mahendra and Srilata not been away at Udaipur to attend a Dalit Maha Sammelan, they would not have been alive today. The police, when informed, failed to take any action, and also tried to persuade eyewitnesses to distort facts for the record. The SHO, Peepalkhunt has been spreading the story that Sangathan activists staged the attack themselves, and has even attempted to arrest some of them.

The real reason for the attack is that tribals of Peepalkhunt have been economically exploited by landlords, traders and moneylenders. Tribals have been bonded to work as slaves, their land has been mortgaged at backbreaking rates of interest (over 200 percent in six months). The Sangathan has fought this exploitation by implementing the Bonded Labour Act and Moneylenders Act, has filed cases against exploiters, helped tribals recover their land, and, as a result, has earned the enmity of the exploiters who have joined the BJP and VHP. For instance, Om Prakash Paliwal, Banswara BJP secretary, who was involved in the attack, has swindled over 60 poor tribals on the pretext of getting them bank loans.

We appeal to all concerned citizens to protest to the Rajasthan chief minister, demand that the guilty be brought to book, and also to contribute towards replacement of the medicines, books and equipment that were being used for the tribals and Harijans.

Rajasthan Kisan Sangathan

*On the tribals’ fight for famine relief, organised by the Sangathan, see Srilata’s “Letter from Jail”, **Manushi** No. 40, 1987, pp. 4-5. □