



-Purnima

### A Tribute to a Mother

On the occasion of the third death anniversary of my mother. I am sending a cheque of Rs. 1,000 for **Manushi** as a fitting tribute to Ba – my mother. Ba was the gentlest soul I have ever known. Anyone who came in contact with her felt this gentleness. Though she was maimed by smallpox and multiple pregnancies, somehow she radiated a serene beauty which is difficult to describe.

She was intelligent and had a vivid imagination. Her brother who is now a well-known Gujarati poet, says that if she had been allowed to study, Ba would have been a great writer. But she was not sent to school because her in-laws objected to the idea. She was married off at the age of four. My maternal grandmother had been widowed at the age of 20 so Ba had to help her in the fields, milk cows and stitch clothes to earn money.

My paternal grandfather was in British Government service so he disapproved of my father's political involvement and expelled him to Africa with nothing but one set of clothes. Two years after this expulsion, my mother who was then 12 years old, had to go and stay with her in-laws. She had to look after my father's six young brothers and sisters. After 10 years, my father returned and took Ba back with him to Africa.

In the course of 16 years, she had nine pregnancies and eight of us

survived. As there was no high school for non-whites in Rhodesia and my eldest brother had to be educated, Ba had to stay in Ahmedabad with eight children. At the age of 35 she courageously stayed alone in a bungalow.

My father had taken two brothers with him and tried to establish a business for them. He failed and lost a lot of money so he could not send money regularly to Ba. To top it all, these ungrateful uncles of mine started spreading rumours that my father had gone bankrupt. This was too great a shock for Ba and she suffered a nervous breakdown.

By this time, a high school for non-white children had been established in Rhodesia, so my father took Ba and the younger children back with him. We older ones were left in India as he thought the change from Gujarati to English would hinder our education. This separation from her children was too much for Ba and she fell prey to an acute depression psychosis for which she was given electric shock treatment.

The years of separation had created a communication gap between her and my father. Also her younger sister-in-law was hostile to Ba. She was alienated from everyone, financially dependent, far from us and kept in the house like a captive. This was her reward! In her last days she used to cry out: "Oh God! This body of mine has become old! It is of no use to anyone. Why don't you take me away and give me a new life?"

So I am sending you this donation in fond memory of my mother who suffered because she was a woman in this male-dominated society. May be this will appeal to the sentiments of others. May be instead of putting an advertisement in the newspaper "In fond memory...", they will try to constructively remember

the departed soul by helping **Manushi** – womanhood.

**Usha Desai, Bombay**

### A Jarring Note

The only jarring note in an otherwise excellent and inspiring issue was the article entitled "Children of the Dream" on the role of women in Israeli kibbutzim. While applauding the progress made on this front, the article should not have ignored the basic injustice on which Israeli society is based – the occupation of Palestine. How many Palestinians – women, men and children – have been killed, jailed, tortured, made homeless, in order to build the present day State of Israel? Can "the good society" be built on such a foundation of injustice? Surely the least that can be done to mitigate this wrong is the creation of an independent Palestinian State from out of the West Bank and Gaza. Without this there can be no peace, justice and no "good society" for Israel.

**Anand Patwardhan, Canada**

### Women's Circumcision

I read Dr. Nawal El Saadawi's book *The Hidden Face of Eve* and then its excerpts in *Spare Rib* (a British feminist magazine) with their comments on the whole question of women's circumcision as practised in some countries including those of the Middle East. This brought to my mind the fact that a considerable number of Muslim girls from India are married to men from the Middle East... A niggling fear arises as to the effect of the life and customs there on these girls. Fears arise not only for the present generation of girls but for their daughters and granddaughters who may have to undergo humiliations including physical violation like circumcision.

I wonder if any work has been done to find out about this. Many of these girls come home at intervals to see their

parents. Can contact be made with them to find out ? Some of them may be suffering the indignities in silence while others may be fighting this custom and are in need of support, or even better, some may be setting an example that gives confidence to women in the Middle East to take a stand against this centuries-old custom...

**Asima Kemal, UK**

### **Why Do women Insult Themselves ?**

What is the Bharatiya Janta Party's women's unit trying to prove by presenting Delhi's Lt. Governor Jagmohan with bangles? The implication is that any man who is inefficient and incapable deserves to be bracketed with women. The gesture appears all the more deplorable because these women are supposedly championing the women's cause! If these are their mental attitudes, they can only look forward to further humiliation and degradation. It shows how women hold their own kind in contempt. As so-called leaders, they would be doing more justice to their role if they worked towards changing anti-women attitudes instead of reinforcing myths that insult women.

**Nagmani Rao, ISI, Delhi**

### **Starting in School**

I have read **Manushi**. How I felt after reading it, I will not be able to express. My poor language can't express it. You will be surprised to know that some of us here were thinking about just this kind of a magazine and had decided to name it Typhoon. So you can imagine our reaction when we got your magazine. Before this letter, I wrote a number of letters and spoilt many papers of our exercise books. Before I begin, I will ask my sisters to excuse me for my poor English and over excitement.

It makes me terribly depressed when I see too many girls around me who are well-educated but let themselves be exploited by their husbands and family members. My own elder sister, who was a brilliant student, studied abroad and then returned to Calcutta to get married.

Just imagine how much money father had spent on her education! And then he was asked for a huge dowry. My sister silently observed how they squeezed father.

But the most irritating thing is that when my sister's husband found out that she was earning a higher salary than he was, he ordered her to resign from her job – which she obediently did. Now she is very badly treated. She does nothing except household work so I do not know why she wasted so much money on higher education. Now she doesn't even read a story book.

My mother is not educated but she always inspires me. But many of my friends' mothers teach their daughters how to attract boys, how to put lipgloss over lipstick. I do not think it is bad if girls wear trousers and shirts – In fact I prefer it because I feel wearing saris means hiding in *purdah*. But I hate to see girls painting their faces. Some people say it is an art to beautify yourself. But to me it seems nothing but an attempt to attract men. I become very depressed when we go for a programme to a boy's school, and my friends are



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busy combing their hair, wearing lipstick and even our teachers are doing the same. So when I got your magazine I felt very happy. My sisters, can't you make it a rule that **Manushi** women will not put on lipstick, bindi or eyeshadow? I and my friends will gladly accept it as a *brata* (pledge).

Sisters, can't we publish **Manushi** in Bengali? We are all willing to help you. After a month, after our school final exams, we will be absolutely free to start this work. Please do not hurt us by underestimating us. Though we are school students we are more energetic because we are young. If you are interested, we will definitely publish **Manushi** in Bengali. Students of different schools of Calcutta will work for **Manushi**. We know girls in other schools who are eager to work. If you say so, we will contact students of different schools and colleges. We can do all kinds of work.

### **Paramita Mukherjee, Calcutta** **When Women Work Together**

I got your address from **Off Our Backs**, a US feminist newsletter... I am an Indian student and am working on my doctorate. I've been afraid to come back and give in to the pressure of social life at home. In the last few months I've heard of a women's studies programme at the SNTD University, Bombay, and now I've heard of **Manushi** and I have taken heart. If I do not get a job here, I shall be ready to come home – no longer afraid. Thank you for existing. As a poor student, I cannot send you a cheque, only my good wishes and a hope that if I come to India, I shall find my way to Delhi to work with you on the magazine... Tell me, is it possible for a single woman to live alone in Delhi and make a living?... I would like to work with you all in my spare time. You seem to be carrying on a monumental job – quite effectively – as is bound to be, of course, when women work together...

**Veena Kashyap, USA**

### **Is She Your Sister ?**

...I think one of the things we must really fight is the harassment that we have to put up with everywhere – not just on buses. (And the stupid, farcical slogan that sniggers quietly on buses: "Eve teasing is an offence" makes me so angry, I can't tell you)... It hurt and angered me to the extreme the other day when I saw a 12 to 13-year-old girl being pinched and poked by some idiot who

looked old enough to be her father. I told the guy to lay off her and that he should be ashamed of himself. He looked at me and smiled an oily smile and the woman sitting next to me said: "Why are you worrying yourself? Is she your sister? She doesn't seem to be – forget it." This is what I mean – the indifference and total lack of fellow-felling...

**Gargi Balakrishnan, Delhi**

### **Moving Backward**

News from the UK is grim. The cuts in public expenditure which the conservative government is making, hit women very hard indeed, perhaps harder than they hit men. For example, they are making cuts in the hospital and health services. This means women's job as nurses, auxiliary health workers, cooks, cleaners, are affected. They are cutting the education service – another area where women have been employed in large numbers. When they close down places like old people's homes, homes for handicapped children, or places for the mentally ill, this too affects women, for it is women who have to care at home for the old and disabled who now have nowhere else to go.

As if all this were not enough, they are giving a great deal of help to a Private Member's Bill to reduce abortion facilities and restrict access to abortion. For 10 or 12 years, we have had a half-decent abortion law in this country – not a good law but better than nothing. For instance, a woman can get an abortion on social grounds – it doesn't have to be a medical question of danger to her or her baby. Now all this will be swept away by the new bill which is being discussed in parliament.

We shall return to the bad old days, when poor women had to resort to illegal backstreet abortionists who took advantage of their desperation. And rich women will still be able to buy abortions, just like they could before, provided they are prepared to pay enough for it – pounds 300 or pounds 400. I don't believe that any woman, rich or poor, should be put in this position...

**Janet Hadley, London**

### **Asserting our Identity**

Lately, I was put in a predicament very much like one of those described by Kamla Bhasin in her article "Madam Chairman, Sir..." In the second issue of **Manushi**. I received an appraising letter from a leading Bombay magazine, acknowledging my response to one of its articles, and addressing me with a male prefix. Though the letter referred to me, I felt uneasy; it was like reading a letter addressed to someone else. In my letter I had written just my name without a feminine prefix. Obviously the person at the other end had assumed that the writer of such a letter must invariably be male. Once before, when I prefixed my name with Ms. I was addressed as M/s – the big difference !

**Lakshmi Iyer, Cuttack**

### **Need to Translate into Oriya**

...**Manushi** has been an eye-opener to all of us who were saturated with the "feminine" stuff and wondered whether the real condition of woman was portrayed in that kind of writing. Most of us feel that the articles in **Manushi** should be translated into Oriya. This desire in itself speaks of the problems women face here – from eve-teasing to the pernicious dowry system – and of the realization that we must raise our voice against them...

The survey report on women working in coal mines ("They give us light but live in darkness") only indicated to us how much in darkness we are regarding the plight of working women and how much remains to be brought to light. The reviews of books and films are well done. In this context, should we not protest against the pornographic stuff that some journals are doling out, for instance the centrespread of *Sunday* weekly, February 17, which is supposed to be a family magazine ?

**Manushi**, to our surprise, is being extremely well-accepted even in what we consider to be the most orthodox and conventional circles, which goes to prove that a long-suppressed voice has ultimately found utterance...

**Malabika Patnaik, Cuttack**

### **"You Know It Can Happen..."**

...I have been working on a paper entitled "Why the feminist movement fails to mobilize mass support". A part of it deals with why violence against particular communities for example Blacks, motivates group action, while violence against women (rape) does not – at least not to the same extent. To try to find a single answer would be an oversimplification of the problem but one of the answers lies in the psychology of the rape victim and the myths that surround the term.

Many women who had been raped, when I talked to them, said they were "ill-fated". Many of those who had not been raped, did not feel directly threatened. One girl said : "It's like the fear of ghosts. You know something can happen but you also know that it really can't"...

**Shikhi Sharma, Lucknow**

### **Breaking Silence**

The self-appointed guardians of mental health have always told us that lesbianism is some sort of mental sickness but in spite of all the ideological bombardment through the centuries, lesbianism has survived. In our country, lesbians are found spending their lives as somebody's mother, sister, wife or daughter. While lesbians are "coming out" and openly stating their identity in their parts of the world, very little has been thought about it in India.

As one engaged in the serious study of male and female homosexuality in India, I wonder whether any of your readers will care to communicate through a newsletters which I publish from time to time – and try to find out more about each other ? This newsletter called *Gay Scene* is a non-profit venture. It is meant for communication with a view to raising consciousness and fighting ignorance with knowledge of reality. Complete anonymity of the correspondents will be maintained whenever desired. Postage for reply will be appreciated.

**Dhruva Roychowdhry, Calcutta**