

Letters to Manushi

Self Sufficiency

I am enclosing some thoughts that crossed my mind as I read Madhu Kishwar's "Rethinking Dowry Boycott" in Manushi No. 48 and her later "Towards More Just Norms of Marriage" in No. 53. I felt that the latter lays down her position more clearly and I was much more comfortable in supporting it. These thoughts of mine were broadcast on public forum electronic media called Soc. Culture. Indian which is a free newsgroup for discussing subcontinental issues, subscribed to by Indian graduate students all over North America and Europe. We sometimes reproduce articles from **Manushi** on it in order to start discussions. I first learnt about **Manushi** through this group...

In many ways "Rethinking Dowry Boycott" was troubling for me. I see that making an out of context value judgement on daughters who take dowry is meaningless. As long as society is willing to enforce dependent roles for women and as long as not marrying is not a viable proposition, saying "Don't give dowry" in a dogmatic fashion is not a viable solution to the problem... I also agree with the analysis that in cases of so-called dowry deaths, dowry itself does not constitute the sole reason for the death, and the reason it is perceived as such is that society is not ready to condemn as wrong the pervasive inequality and dominance in marriage...

However, after reading this article, I felt it might mislead people into thinking that equal inheritance is by itself a complete solution to the problem. We cannot afford indirectly to endorse the view that women will always have to

enter bad marriages and that all we can do is make life a bit more bearable inside such marriages.

The article seemed to start and end with making life somewhat bearable for the current generation and not to really go towards longterm equality....

However, "Towards More Just Norms for Marriage" which defended her position in the earlier article, did advocate norms that would effectively break all the sacredly preserved moulds of marriage. I was also pleased at the suggestion that even a few radical, really equal marriages may set much needed examples of reform.

Another point which comes out clearly in the latter but not in the former article is that she does not endorse the practice of dowry but wants to redirect agitational energies into equal inheritance demands rather than into dowry boycott....

However, I still suspect that while this is a good step, it too will never be enough. Unless women are self sufficient to begin with, the fact that they have some inheritance coming at the end of their parents' life is but a scant ray of hope for them. Inheritance helps and we probably should fight for it, but it cannot be the sole or even the most important message that we spread....

I feel that our goal should be economic independence and self sufficiency for women. This does not necessarily come from equal inheritance rights. It comes from an awareness of parents that daughters and sons are equally eligible for all opportunities that can be afforded....

Equal inheritance and money in the

bank would definitely give a woman in an abusive marriage some morale to come out of it. But at every point along the line we should constantly remind ourselves as well as others that the ultimate goal is not equal inheritance but equality and self sufficiency....

Subbarao Kambhampati, USA

Savitri Phule

Apropos the article "Putting Herself into the Picture" in **Manushi** No. 56, I think mention must be made of Savitribai Phule (1831-1897), wife of the great Maharashtrian reformer, Jyotiba Phule, founder of the Satyashodhak Samaj. Savitri was married to Jyotiba at the age of nine. Both belonged to the Mali caste.

In 1848, the first girls' school was started with Savitri as a teacher. There were six girls on the roll. She had to suffer mudslinging at the hands of orthodox Pune Brahmans and others, and is said to have carried an extra *sari* with her to school, to change the mud-spattered one.

The Phules also started the first school for untouchables in 1851, and then an asylum for women of all castes, and even an orphanage to prevent female infanticide. Though she has not written an autobiography, her letters, poems and speeches are available, and deserve a mention....

Asha Rajwade, Amravati

Love for India

By fighting for women's rights, you are doing a great patriotic duty. I thank everyone who loves India should read your magazine and persuade others to do so. I shall do my best in this respect.

Manmohan Singh, Patiala



Anita's Life



For several years I have read and admired every copy of Manushi that has come to my attention. What particularly strikes me about your magazine, especially apparent in the ongoing discussion of dowry, but elsewhere in the magazine too, is the inclusion of editorial staff, writers and readers in a community of feminist concern. This is sharply different from Western models of journalism, where writers often strut and perform before their passive readership, who merely applaud or mutter in rage - while the main business is really the advertisements.

What impels me now to write is the article in Manushi No. 53 by Poonam Kaul on "Anita: A Working School-girl." Familiar with some Western sociological literature, I do not hesitate to label this article a classic of what has been called "thick description." It gives the reader a clear, detailed, unsentimental picture of the daily routine of this vividly portrayed 10 year old, the work routine and the family system that shapes it. The treatment of Anita's current life and her future prospects is evidently deeply informed by a sure grasp of the class and gender systems manifest in her life at school and at home in west Delhi. The accompanying photographs by Sue Darlow greatly enrich the already superb piece, especially for non Indian readers.

The discussion of the barely disguised paternalism of the school environment and its reproduction of the

patterns of oppression that have shaped (and will, unfortunately, probably continue to shape) Anita's life are angering and extremely moving. Teachers in training and those responsible for designing texts and curricula should learn much from it. But whether they will is another question.

I was excited when, with attention focused on her in class because of the presence of Poonam Kaul, Anita gained confidence and began to speak up and raise her hand.

Not only did I learn much from this article, I wept on reading it. I salute not only the author, photographer and editorial staff whose collaboration produced this extraordinary article, but the Manushi community which it also reflects. I also cannot help but express the hope that in her later life, and in other ways, Anita will find the strength to continue to "speak up and raise her hand."

M.E. Gettleman, U.S.A

Imprisoned on March 8

I am a volunteer of Mahila Samuh, Ajmer, and am also employed as a *pracheta* in the Women's Development Programme, a government programme. On March 8, 1990, many women's organisations decided to have a joint rally. However, the government organised a separate programme on March 7 and also on March 8, The collector and other government officials were invited to this function. As I wanted to join the rally by women's organisations I applied for leave but it was not sanctioned. I received a letter saying "You are a salaried worker of the

Women's Development Programme. It is your duty to participate sincerely in the programme organised by WDP. Hence it is not possible to grant leave on 8.9.90."

I was crying from within since my mind was with the Mahila Samuh rally. I was aware that the rally was to pass by the hall where the government function was organised. I was immediately shouted at and sent inside the hall by the research assistant. I had never faced such restrictions even at the hands of my parents.

In spite of the restrictions I found my Way out through the back door. Many of the village women who had been brought for the function also wanted to step out and see the rally. But they were insulted and pushed inside. From behind the shut gate I saw the rally passing by and I showed my solidarity by shouting loudly: "Even though today I am imprisoned I am with you."

In the programme in which I work there is a lot of talk about women's equality, freedom and fighting injustice. There was a time when this was the reality of the programme. But the enthusiasm with which the programme was started five years ago has faded into rigidity. Priorities have shifted from village activity to merely keeping the programme alive. Functions are organised to build the programme's image rather than to show the strength of the village women.

Kiran Dubey, Ajmer
(translated from Hindi)

Mahila Panchayat

A Mahila Panchayat was organised at Raipur, Madhya Pradesh, on March

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30, 1990, to conduct an open hearing on the case of Rajkumari Motwani who has been a victim of violence by husband and in-laws.

Chhatisgarh Mahila Jagriti Sangathan and chhatisgarh Mahila Mukli Morcha decided to organise the women's court because they found that in Rajkumari's case, as in many others, while the legal process drags on, the woman is deprived of redress while the man has even dared to remarry and have a child by his second wife. Ashok Motwani and his family have also defied the attempts of their community organisations, Sindhi Panchayats, to arrive at a settlement.

Married in 1979, Rajkumari is a BSc BEd. She had a daughter, Vijaya, in 1983. Ashok Motwani and his parents, sister and brother used to frequently beat Rajkumari and throw her out of the house. They threatened neighbours who tried to intervene. They demanded large amounts of money from Rajkumari's parents. In July 1988 Rajkumari's mother in law attempted to burn her. Four criminal cases under section 498-A (cruelty to wife) are pending against Ashok yet he has illegally remarried, and in 1990 has filed for divorce, falsely alleging that Rajkumari is schizophrenic. He has stopped maintaining Rajkumari and threatens to throw her and Vijaya out of his house where they have a legal right to stay as members of the joint Hindu family.

Prominent women activists and representatives of women's organisations of the area were invited to serve on the Mahila Panchayat which was held at Gandhi Maidan. The Motwanis though invited to present

their case, did not appear. Rajkumari and Vijaya courageously made their statements. After examining all the evidence in the presence of many observers, the members prepared recommendations which were shared at a public meeting in which about 5,000 women participated. The recommendations were:

1. That the Molwanis desist from inflicting violence on Rajkumari.
2. That their house be transferred in Rajkumari's name within a month.
3. That she be given Rs 150,000 as settlement towards maintenance, and until this is done, be paid Rs 1,000 a month.
4. That her dowry articles be returned to her.
5. That Ashok Molwani await the outcome of the divorce suit filed by him, or, on the basis of the settlement outlined above, reach an agreement with Rajkumari for divorce by mutual consent.
6. That the district administration take steps to protect Rajkumari, Vijaya, and others who have been threatened by the Motwani family.

**Shashi Sail, Sarita Sharma,
Raipur**

Enforced Voluntarism

For the last 15 years, the government has been implementing the Integrated Child Development Services Scheme (ICDS) for the poor children up to the age of six years. Almost every village with a population of 500 or more is covered by ICDS.

Government has a strange policy whereby the officers and supervisors of ICDS are paid employees of the state government but the *anganwadi* women

workers, on whom the success of the scheme depends, are categorised as voluntary workers, not paid employees.

The *anganwadi* workers have to do a lot of work. They have to provide nutrition, immunisation and preschool education to the children. In some places, they prepare the food themselves from locally available food grains. They have to keep a record of the weight, height and other developments of the children. They have to organise regular health camps for pregnant women. They have to contact every family of the area and prepare them for family planning, and also record all malaria cases and births and deaths. According to a project officer, a worker has to maintain 14 registers for all this data.

The workers have to submit monthly progress reports and answer the questions of the concerned authority. Though clearly treated as employees of the lowest level, they get no wage but only a meagre sum known as honorarium, which ranges from Rs 110 to Rs 275 a month, and is thus in all cases below the government prescribed minimum wage. A worker who has passed matriculation gets Rs 275, one who has failed the matriculation gets Rs 225 and a helper gets only Rs 110. The workers are not entitled to any leave or provident fund, and have no job security. If they are absent for one or two days, the honorarium is cut.

It is heartless to extract work from the poor in the name of serving the poor, without paying even the minimum wage. *Anganwadi* workers must be treated as government employees like other employees of the ICDS project.

Dhananjay Kamble, Aurangabad



Denied Maternity Leave

Today, when some countries have already instituted paternity leave, and others are considering it, the Indian government is moving towards denying maternity leave to women having two or more surviving children. In June 1988, the central government sent a memorandum to the government of Tamil Nadu, quoting the recommendations of the fourth central pay commission, that maternity leave and additional leave should be granted only to mothers with less than two surviving children. In October 1988, the Tamil Nadu government, then under president's rule, decided to implement this recommendation.

Women government employees today tend not to have more than two children. Therefore the government move is unnecessary apart from being offensive in its violation of the individual's rights. The woman is penalised even though the decision to have a child is rarely hers alone; it is more likely to be her husband's decision.

Women government employees are already discriminated against in many ways. A woman clerk can claim LTC and medical benefits for herself and her parents only if she is the only earning member of the family. This is not the case for a man. A woman whose husband has already taken a housing loan, cannot apply for a loan in her own right. There are several other such discriminatory rules implemented by banks.

Maternity leave is a right won after long trade union struggles. Government, which is the single largest employer in the country, is setting a bad example to other employers by trying to deprive women of their right to maternity leave.

The order is illegal and unconstitutional.

It should be immediately withdrawn.

Pennurimai lyakkam, Madras

Strength of Spirit

A story of a week ago shows the strength of the tribal women. Two university students came here. They are in the final year of BA, with government scholarships and come from poor homes. They were called to Patna for an interview for a job as stenographer. They were studying stenography in their free time. Since they had no money at home, they asked for a loan for bus fare. Patna is 350 kms from here. They said they would take the night bus to Patna, arrive there in the morning, take the test at 10 a.m. and return by bus the same evening because the day after they had a BA examination. I told them to get some money from home for breakfast and lunch but they did not want that nor did they want a bigger loan: "We can easily manage to stay without food for one or even two days, no trouble what-soever." They appeared for the test, returned, took the exam, and came to inform me that they had returned. Yes, they were very hungry....

George Zwijzen, Ranchi

Police Rampage

On April 1, 1990, the government of India announced that the year 1990-91 would be celebrated to remember Dr. Ambedkar's ceaseless struggle for Dalits and tribals. The police of Udaipur district began this celebration by sending a force of about 200 police armed with guns, teargas and *lathis* to villages Hadmatia, Dhavda and Ghatet, south of Udaipur, where they went on a rampage.

The incident happened on April 2

without any warning. The police surrounded the villages, fired indiscriminately, and ruthlessly beat up any tribal they caught. Many women were stripped naked and beaten with *lathis*. Many people were seriously injured. The police also broke into houses, smashed utensils, roofs and implements.

The trouble began when in March tribals of Hadmatia went to cultivate plots of land near their village which they have been traditionally cultivating. A powerful moneylender called Tasdook Husain tried to stop them and threatened them with reprisals. On March 8, he filed a report with the police that the tribals and someone from Rajasthan Kisan Sangathan (RKS) had forcibly entered his fields and stolen his crop. The police immediately went to the village and attacked the women working in the fields. A skirmish followed, and the women used *lathis* and stones to drive out the police. The SHO filed a report accusing 33 tribals of having attempted to murder policemen. On March 10 three tribals and RKS activists met the district collector who promised an enquiry into the incident. The enquiry was to begin on April 4 but before that, the police attacked the tribals on April 2, and then promptly filed another FIR, saying they were forced to fire because the tribals attacked them.

We demand an immediate judicial enquiry into the firing, atrocities on women by the police, immediate suspension of the SP and ASI, Udaipur, withdrawal of all false cases against tribals, and compensation to all victims.

**Srilata Swaminathan, RKS,
Banswara**