



—Purnima

### **Our Right to Live, to Love**

I was very happy to hear about you from a woman friend and decided to write to you immediately. I feel as if I have found friends at last and would like to tell you about my life...

When I was in high school and learning music as well, I met a boy for the first time and I liked the way he talked. This liking developed into love. When my mother came to know that I was mixing with a boy she stopped me from going to school or music classes and I could not leave the house at all. It was very painful to remain shut up in the house and I felt absolutely helpless.

After two years I promised that I would not meet any boys and got permission to resume my school and music lessons. But surely you understand that I am a woman and I have a right to love. Why did my parents not understand this? Anyway, I started meeting my lover once more. However my parents caught me—they scolded me beat me and ultimately called the boy to our house. My mother asked him whether he would marry me but he refused. What could be more cruel? If he did not want to marry me, why did he pretend to love me? Why did he not consider my feelings at all?

I felt I could not stay at home any longer so I started living with relatives in another town. They found a boy to marry me off to. I did not like him at all but I was afraid of my mother so I did not voice any

# LETTERS TO MANUSHI

opinion. My future in-laws promised to let me learn music but after marriage, far from keeping their promise, they subjected me to unspeakable oppression. By nature, I enjoy mixing freely with people but nobody understood me or even tried to understand me. My in-laws accused me of being immoral. They started accusing me from the very night of my marriage. What hurt me most was that even when I tried to love people, nobody reciprocated my feelings. I sacrificed a lot to win the love of my husband but I got nothing in return.

But now I am not afraid or ashamed. My only concern is to live and to educate my two daughters, to make them strong women, capable of facing up bravely to the world. But this needs money and courage: I have courage but where will I get money? I do not want to beg. I want a job because only when I earn, can I get independence, bring up my daughters and start living again.

If I met you personally, I would have discussed in more detail. But this is unfortunately not possible in a letter. I send this letter with love...

**A sister**

### **Woman Baiting**

...Woman has been treated as a commodity ever since human beings became “civilised”... Be it Pipra or Belchhi or any other place, it is the same story. At Belchhi, where 11 poor peasants were killed by a landlord in 1977, Singhwa, the courageous Harijan leader too thought in terms of “our women” (Harijan women) and “their women” (upper caste women).

To pay back the Kurmi landlord who molested Harijan women, Singhwa lured

an innocent Kurmi girl from the landlord’s family and developed intimate relations with her. Later he deliberately exposed the relationship which shocked the landlord. “Their woman” had lost her chastity to a Harijan...The landlord hired goondas to liquidate Singhwa and his associates, and roasted them to death on May 27, 1977.

In Parasbigha too, women were doubly assaulted—first sexually, then physically. After this incident, Yadavas of surrounding villages launched an attack on a Bhumihar (high caste) village Dohiya to avenge the Parasbigha carnage. The men fled and the Yadavas found only the women. When I visited the village, I came to know that two young women are missing from the village but this has not been reported to the police. The husband of one woman has refused to “accept” her, suspecting her “purity.”

In Pipra, a Harijan woman Taramoni who had relations with a landlord was asked to leave the village because the Harijans did not like one of “their women” be the concubine of a kulak. When she left the village, kulaks decided to teach the Harijans a lesson because they were challenging the right of upper caste men to use low caste women. On February 26, 1980, they launched an attack on Pipra and brutally killed several villagers. The extent of sexual tyranny in parts of Bihar is such that a landlord thinks it is his right to sleep with the bride of a low caste villager on the wedding night.

These days much hue and cry is being raised over “Harijan baiting” and atrocities on backward castes. But why do we never hear anything like “woman

baiting"? It makes little difference to a woman whether she belongs to the upper or lower caste class. She is universally degraded, the ultimate victim of never-ending oppression.

**Y. S. Gill, Jamshedpur**  
**The Compassion of Men?**

In Issue No.4 of **Mannshi**, the following sentences have been attributed to me on page 76: "Have you ever seen two women shouting at each other and tearing each other's hair? Our politicians are doing the same..."

I have never said or written anything of this kind. As far as I can make out, the sentences are a perversion of a quotation from an article of mine: "But this is politics", says my friend. "It is prostitution", I scream. "The way you throw the word 'prostitutes around,' he says, "shows that you know nothing about prostitutes! Have you ever seen prostitutes tear each other's hair out the way these politicians are doing? Not prostitutes, my dear fellow, but *spent* prostitutes. None of them can reconcile himself to the fact that it is his dilapidated condition which is keeping customers away. Each is convinced that it is the hag across the street that is doing so. Not prostitutes, my friend, but *spent* prostitutes."

You'll fault us for not being compassionate to prostitutes who are much more helpless than our politicians. But surely you won't fault us for smearing women. Booking us for the wrong charge, then?

**Arun Shourie, Delhi**

*We took the quotation from the pilot issue of "Contour" Weekly dated September 30, 1979. On page 11 of this issue, you have been quoted in the column "People Feel" as saying: "Have you seen two women shouting at each other and tearing each other's hair? Our politicians are doing the same. This has driven the people to such disgust that they have lost all faith in democracy."*

*We might also point out that prostitutes are women and an attack on them is an attack on all women. In fact,*

*their predicament represents in the most undisguised form the predicament of all women, the contempt which our society has for women. Men first reduce women to prostitutes for their own pleasure, and then call them names and have them ostracized from society. As women, therefore, we don't plead for your "compassion" but demand justice.*

**Manushi Collective**  
**A Signal Failure of the Left**

I am a student of Jadavpur University and have been involved in the left students' movement for nearly three and a half years. I want to tell you some of my experiences as a girl in the movement.

I was born and brought up in a family which has a large collection of Marxist books and where discussions take place



-Purnima

very often. I read elementary books on Marxism and found satisfactory answers to many of the questions I asked. So after the emergency was lifted, when the left and democratic students of Jadavpur University came "together to form a Preparatory Committee, I joined them.

I find that a large section of the women cadre is recruited in a disgusting manner. Very often, if a girl has an intimate relationship with a boy, he misuses her personal trust in him to brainwash her and make her a member of his organization without trying to genuinely politicise her. Marxism, which I believe to be creative thought par excellence is degraded into an article of dogmatic belief, resting on personal relationships. Isn't it strange that these young men who supposedly have such a high regard for workers and peasants, can treat their women friends in

such a callous way ?

Now about my personal experience. A close friend of mine believes in a particular school of Marxist thought. But he has not tried to brainwash me. However, most people take it for granted that I am a staunch follower of his beliefs, and even attack me personally on these grounds!

They want to consider us only to increase the number of voters or members. They do not try to or want to politicise us.

Another problem I face is the general belief that a girl should never get involved in politics, unless she, having otherwise failed, wants to get a suitable husband! I can chat well, so my classmates often talk with me for long hours. We can talk about saris, filmstars, ornaments, lovers, sex (of course in restrained language), cinema, debates, T.S. Eliot, recent depression, contemporary Bengali literature, and even politics provided it is far from Jadavpur campus, say in Delhi or in the West Bengal cabinet. But I should never ask her to come closer to the Students' Union!

Because then she will be asked to agitate, to sign petitions and resolutions. She cannot do this because any person living in her locality may find out and report to her family. In the bus, if I talk about the political situation in our college, the other passengers look queerly at me. My neighbours disapprove of me: "You are involved in Union activity! What a bad girl!" They tell their children to avoid me. All this in Calcutta, one of the most politically conscious cities in India !

It seems to me that it is a signal failure of the left movement that in the long decades of its existence it has not been able to introduce more than formal equality among men and women even in its own ranks. I often feel very cynical at this unhappy state of affairs and wonder how long it will continue...

**Saswati Ghose, Calcutta**  
**Women's Enormous Strength**

...I've been working in the women's movement for about six years in Canada. For the past three years I am giving lectures about the violence done to

women, and am giving basic and advanced courses in Wen-Do, a self-defence specialized for women's bodies, muscle structure, and designed to help overcome the psychological difficulty we have in defending our selves. How come a woman develops enormous strength and fury if it comes to defending her child but if she herself is attacked, she freezes on the spot, not even capable of running? Isn't this a psychological rather than a physical barrier?

Just a 12-hour basic course — no martial art, no need to be physically fit — a course any woman from 9 to 99 years can do. Very basic techniques and many consciousness-raising discussions. The impact these courses have had is amazing. Last year, I went to Germany, introduced it and finally formed eight instructors over there. It's just starting and already they can't keep up with the demand . . .

I'm trying with three other women to make a women's hostel where women can relax, vacation or take courses in Wen-Do... I'm full of ideas and ideals. I'm anxious to create a women's world around me and grow within it (her) !...I'm so excited you exist. If I can be of any help to you, please let me know.;

**Gitta Ridder, Canada**

### **Sexist "Progressive" Men**

It was really heartening to read the article "Hitting Out At Women— humour as a weapon of oppression." It is high time we feminists take seriously the issue of sexist humour and wage a war against it. Many progressive leftist men are quite sensitive about casteist and communalist jokes but when it comes to sexist jokes, they enjoy them thoroughly. So often, my male friends, political activists, greet me with : "Hi ! You seem to be more 'equal' today !" because I am fighting for women's liberation. Whenever I object to their sexist jokes which usually attack women as "fat", "unattractive" or "jabbering", they all brand me as lacking a sense of humour.

Recently, while collecting signatures and funds for the Mathura rape case campaign, I came across one such "intellectual and progressive" male. I asked him for some more contribution. He could not miss this opportunity to display his

"sense of humour." So he said : "After some more cases of rape occur, I will give you more contribution." I was stunned! We come across many such instances every day of our lives...

**Vibhuti Patel, Bombay**

### **A Plant Taking Deeper Root**

Each issue of Manushi makes deeper my faith in women's struggle. Before, it was just a vague idea germinating in my mind but now it is a plant which is taking deeper root day by day. I have distributed some pamphlets advertising Manushi through the newspaper sellers who put it into the newspapers, and posters are proudly pasted on walls, beckoning to every passer by to stop, read, think and



act.

In the report I wrote on the dowry death of Manorama in Amritsar which was published in Manushi No. 4, her house number has been wrongly given as 72 B, Rani ka Bagh whereas it is actually 42 B, Rani ka Bagh. I apologise sincerely...

**Vandana Chatrath, Amritsar**

### **Friendship Without Rules**

...I come from a working class family with five sisters and no brothers. My parents are socialists and were rather critical of men's behaviour against women and the subordinate role of women in our society. Perhaps because of that, perhaps because of my nature, I could not behave as a young man should behave according to the unwritten rules. But when the women's movement in Holland became stronger, I felt that I could behave more as I wanted to, and that I was more free with the women involved in the movement, as from both sides we did not behave according to the rules, and the friendships were based on human values. So the women's movement was good for me too...

**Bas de lege, Holland**

## **Kali to Krishna**

*We were both counterfeit ;  
Couldn't you taste the bitter  
Lead within the silver?*

*And I, was I blind  
To that extra dazzle  
With which only  
fool's gold can allure?*

*O Krishna, black as true gold,  
Though I submerged myself  
in your dusky warmth,  
I was never anyone's milkmaid,*

*And highborn,  
Cannot smile that shyness  
Even Radha feigned.*

*You never saw  
The skulls around my neck, never  
Moved the sickle,  
Sought the fire in my hand.*

*Arlene says :*

*It may be that even Siva cannot be  
(despite persistent legends)  
the only one passionately  
true to Kali.*

—Arlene Zide