

Letters to Manushi

From an Arya Samaji

We had ordered 3 cassettes of *Manushi Geet*. We really liked those songs. The people in Buxar are also very pleased with them. Everyday at 4 a.m. at sunrise, we play the cassette from the Arya Samaj *mandir*. If you have made more song cassettes, please inform us. Also write and tell us whether sisters from your organization go for *prachar* work or not. We would like to invite you for the annual function of Arya Samaj.

(translated from Hindi)

**Ram Kumar Arya, Arya Samaj
Buxar, Bhojpur**

Molesting Our Minds

A few months ago, I had tried to get some tips on how to defend myself from probable rapists. Unfortunately, I could not get any. Probably, that is a problem yet to be solved. I was reminded of that quest by an incident yesterday. At about 8.30 p.m., my mother and I were returning from a vegetable vendor about 10 yards away from our house. The road is quite dark. However, we could see the road in the moonlight. I was walking to my mother's right. Suddenly a scooter came rushing past us from behind, and a hand squeezed my right breast. The man vanished in front of us. I could do nothing except cry out. My mother had not noticed what happened. She thought the man was about to cause an accident. Such things happen in the daylight too. The other day I went to post a letter at 7 a.m. On the way back a scooter with two men on it came towards me and the driver extended his hand to my chest. I moved away in horror. The most interesting thing is that my

breasts are so underdeveloped that I have developed an inferiority complex and always use my *chunni* to cover them. I've heard many ugly comments like "Hey chaps, find out if that is a man or a woman," "Poor girl, she has a barren land" and so on.



What can be the remedy for molestation attempts? I can think of nothing except permission to women to carry loaded guns. I am 22 and an MBA in search of a job. Had I complied with my parents' wishes, I would have been married off at 18. After yesterday's incident, I am almost losing confidence in my ability to lead an independent life.

**Ranjita Kumari Sahoo,
Bhubaneswar**

Strengthening Women

I was somewhat depressed by your article on "Women's Organisation: The Pressure of Unrealistic Expectations." (*Manushi* No. 59) While, undoubtedly, public disapproval can be a strong deterrent,

women's organisation should also organise demonstrations of disapproval. You gave the example of a woman who was not able to follow your advice to lodge a police complaint. Was it not possible for you to locate the woman her husband was intending to marry bigamously, and explain to her that her marriage would be invalid?

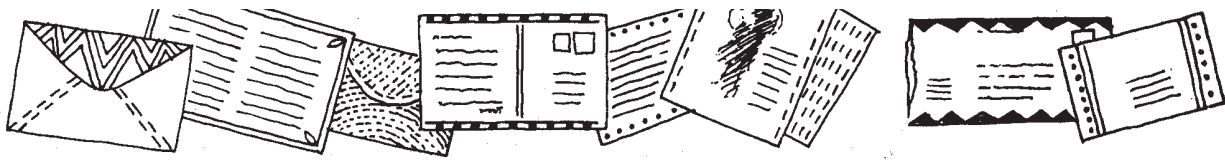
These are a few suggestions for strengthening women's legal rights. At the time of marriage, women should get their share of parental property, excluding such things as the residence or family business. I know of a case where a man married without disclosing his previous marriage, and on his death, his second wife got nothing. I suggest that a civil marriage should be considered valid under all circumstances without invalidating any previous marriage. Women then can protect themselves by insisting on a civil marriage.

So-called dowry harassment is really a postmarital demand for money. Any dowry demand before marriage is really unobjectionable because the woman is free to refuse the alliance. Demands after marriage put her in a spot.

Any demand made after marriage should be sufficient ground for divorce. The man should not be allowed to remarry for three years after divorcing his wife, or after her death.

In cases of rape, the assailant must be made to marry the victim if she so desires. Otherwise, he must pay heavy damages, equivalent to the amount to which a divorced wife would be entitled.

There should be a reservation of at least 10 percent in all categories of



jobs for single, divorced and widowed women above the age of 25 years and below the age of 35.

Ten percent of a man's provident fund should be payable to his wife or wives, irrespective of any nomination to the contrary.

J.B.Rao, Secunderabad

Evaluating our own work

I wish to share my thoughts in the context of the thought provoking article "Women's Organisations: The Pressure of Unrealistic Expectations" in **Manushi** No. 59. In our country anyone who works genuinely is recognised and also arouses expectations. Women's organisations work genuinely on women's questions. That is why they arouse expectations which women's wings of political parties do not.

It is true that some expectations are unrealistic, but some we are unable to fulfil due to our own weaknesses. Our first mistake was in taking too much on ourselves. We took the responsibility of solving the problems of women which are mainly within the family — battering, dowry murders, denial of property share, bigamy. We also took the responsibility to get the laws changed and give women justice in society. We have failed to give women social justice because changing laws does not change social reality. I remember having taken part in demonstrations against dowry murders. The women's family joined us but we did not succeed in getting the man's community to boycott him. Social defamation is not equivalent to a boycott. We could not make the community aware of its responsibility.

I agree with Madhu Kishwar that we have to change our strategy.

Our second mistake was that we drew certain conclusions about women's situation which are not true. There is not one formula to solve women's problems, especially in our country, where regional and community variations are so great. When I came to Maheswad district where bigamy is quite widespread, I called a women's meeting to discuss ways of solving the problem. The women were aware of the injustice done to them by their husbands but they were not willing to go to court to claim maintenance because they did not want to leave their husbands. They felt living with their parents or brothers would be even worse than living with co-wives. Nor did they want to ask the *panchayat* to give them plots of land as abandoned wives, because this would cut them off from their community. They felt if their husbands gave them a plot of land it would make them feel secure. We then called a men's meeting and explained to the men that they should give their wives a share of land to make the women's future secure. Some men were convinced and did so. In our country no social life is possible outside of the family. Women's groups cannot provide an alternative social life to women.

Our ways of organising have also not been able to set up channels of communication with people. In 1984 a ladies' panel stood for election to the *panchayat* in Palashi village. Although this engendered debate on women's questions and the women had a new experience, they got hardly any votes; nor did women's situation

change in any way. When programmes do not have social initiative behind them, they cannot be effective. Similarly, in 1985, Sangharsh Vahini conducted a women's march from Alwar to Delhi. Here, too, the individual women who took part had some interesting experiences, but we could not communicate much with the women in the districts we passed through. We have experienced much in this decade and I trust we have evaluated our work. I hope we will be able to share our views on the subject through **Manushi** in a continuing way.

**Chetna Gala,
Satara**

(translated from Hindi)

Soul Searching

I read **Manushi**, especially the film reviews. This is the year of the girl child. You have been writing on this question for years, yet I suggest that you have a special issue on it. I do not read **Manushi** from cover to cover. I get very upset when I read or hear the stories of unhappy women. I feel something needs to be done to change the viewpoint of young people like me. I mean this seriously. When I think of my attitude, I ask myself why it is that I who call myself progressive, read other magazines like *India Today*, *Illustrated Weekly*, *Frontline*, and newspapers too, but am less inclined to read **Manushi**, which is concerned not only with women but with society as a whole. Truly, it is hard to travel from the pen to the broom, from the armchair to the floor. I do enjoy doing housework and cooking sometimes, but not every day. The work I dislike, women do. This means that we men snatch from women

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the most important right in life - the right to freedom. Do we perhaps need a "mother of the nation" to introduce reform in this sphere? In most progressive homes, the gross injustice of women doing all the house work prevails like a law inscribed on a rock. Although I do not have the strength to break the rock, I would like to erase one or two words from the inscription.

**Anand Vardhan,
Ahmedabad**

(translated from Hindi)

True Goddesses

I would like to applaud the young man who identified religious and social customs as a crucial factor in the discrimination against women. Raised in the USA, I have observed Indian women here unwilling to accept assistance from friends, government or women's groups when they are being battered or blackmailed in marriage. Women's families too are prevented from intervening as this is looked down upon in India. Tradition is so strong that it is adhered to even when one could adopt new means to deal with the problems. Some Indians become even more conservative than they would have been in India because they feel a desperate need to preserve their heritage and they do not want to be criticised by other Indians as having become too American.

Although I am an adult living alone and everyone in my family knows I plan to marry my American friend, the family continually engages in the farce of recruiting suitable matches for me. They will not acknowledge my choice. From time to

time my father has threatened to disallow my mother from speaking to me, and has given my dowry jewels to my married sister as a symbol of his disapproval. My father would find my friend acceptable if he was an Indian, everything else being the same.

I wish you would devote an article to how religious and cultural ideology hinders a woman from functioning successfully in the modern world. My exposure to Hindu religion has given me the image of a dutybound and silently suffering woman as the ideal. The only examples of heroic women are goddesses, not real women...

It is wonderful to read in Manushi how women are organising despite the opposition they face. They are the true goddesses, the ones to be admired and learned from. It proves that the desire for freedom and dignity must be in the heart because some Indian women live in the US as if a women's movement had never happened, yet in India many women risk all for freedom. I am sure if the Indian government was in the hands of women India would no longer be called a third world country. The oppression of Indian women is the oppression of India as a whole. India cannot reach its full potential without the full participation of women.

Neelu Susemani, USA

Across Continents

I'm a 43 year old German woman, married, with three nearly grown up children, a boy aged 21 and two girls aged 16 and 15.

As a young girl (1963-68) I had an Indian pen-friend from Bombay named Shobha Kulkarni who died in

a car crash in 1968. After Shobha's death I had no more contacts with Indian women until I visited India in January 1987 (Delhi and Rajasthan) for the first time. Thereafter, I read everything about India I could get hold of. In a book by Christa Diehterich called 'Stree-Shakti' I found an article about **Manushi**. Since then, I tried to get your journal and in November, 1989 I was finally successful.

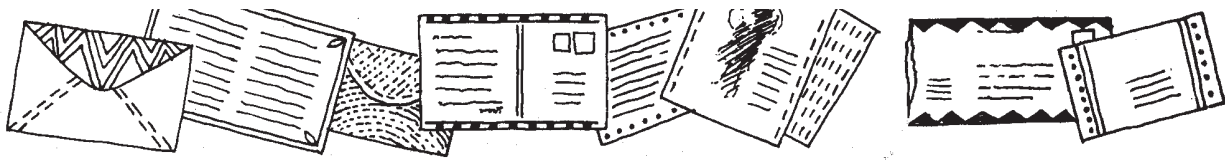
Whilst reading the article 'The Cover-up' by Shashi Samundra in **Manushi** No.56, I couldn't stop crying, as I was reminded of my own childhood in the countryside. My father died when I was 10, and I then had nobody to talk to or get some help from. My beloved mother only cared for her son, an "imperfect, self-assertive daughter" she never wished to have.

When I was 18, I married, and I always wanted to give my children the same and equal education. Still nowadays, although things and situations for girls have changed, I often hear from members of our family and others that a good education (school) is not so important for girls as they will marry. I don't agree with them and try to ignore their advice.

In August 1990 I took up my studies again. Though I am 43 years old I am a student again. In three years I can do my examinations and hope that I'll be successful.

My writing in English is very bad as I did not use it for 24 years, but I can still read and understand Manushi (with a dictionary besides me)!!

So, you see, your magazine also encouraged a German woman. My



son, a 21 year-old politician, specially engaged in achieving the rights of children and women, also reads Manushi from time to time, and we then talk about it. Sometime, my daughters will also start doing so. I hope!

Hildegard Hiepen, Germany

More Complex, Less Militant?

I read the articles in your issue on women *bhakta* poets with particular interest, as well as your approach to dowry and to religion. It seems that you have become more "liberal" as you have gone deeper into the analysis of women's issues and culture. Your approach has become more complex, nuanced and intellectually convincing. On the other hand, it tones down your militancy, as (in my opinion) militancy requires a simplification of the issues to a point of Manicheanism (identify the enemy, see him as the cause of all evil and eradicate it). Once you start thinking that things are not as simple as that, once you decide to hear the voices of the "enemies" and of the "oppressed" alike, the complexity reached by a mature thinking tends to blur the lines and inhibit action. (Is this why real, drastic movements are brought about by young people? May '68 in Europe, the students in Czechoslovakia.) In my opinion, we need both the simplifying activists and the mature analysis to induce progress in society.

Maroussia Ahmed, Canada

Twain Shall Meet?

In *Manushi* No. 56, there is a letter about marriage, "New Ceremonies."

It is an interesting and thought provoking view on that delicate subject. That version of a wedding ceremony sounds to me more meaningful than our Swedish equivalent. If ever I happen to enter marriage, I would prefer something like that—a synthesis of Indian and Swedish ceremonies.

Sweden is not only the land of Bofors guns. Sweden also means people like me, filled with deep interest and admiration for your country, your efforts and ambitions. My travels



have given me an abiding fascination for the people of India.

Anders Fugelstad, Sweden

Reader Responds

In their article on inheritance rights for women in *Manushi* No. 57, Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita have clearly shown that commonly expressed fears with regard to women inheriting property are just myths without even the slightest relation to reality. I would like to know about the rights of married women and of children. What happens if a father refuses to provide for his children's education and daughters' marriages?

I suggest that you start a regular column in *Manushi* giving advice on women's and children's legal rights. It would be a real help as many of us do not have easy access to a lawyer...

"Going back to more Civilised Warfare" in No. 58 was both amusing and interesting. Archana Varma's poems in the same issue were touching. With regard to the rape of five year old Farida reported in No. 58, I would say that the way AWAG dealt with it was surely one of the right ways. Whether this is the only method left to women to fight violence, I am not sure. The doctors who refused to check up Farida and the policemen who refused to register the complaint were lynchings of the law. So if AWAG did any lynching it was not lynching of the law but lynching the lynchings...

I am a 55 year old housewife with grown up children. I am an MSc in physics but have been out of touch with my subject and cannot go back to it. I am trying to find something to do which will give me a feeling of fulfilment. I have tried to express my struggle in the following lines:

*When I was born of my mother
The pangs of birth were hers.
All the pain was borne by her.
If I suffered anything I don't remember.
Now as I give birth to my own self.
I suffer the pangs of my own birth.
The pain which tears my heart,
my body,
My mind and soul, my whole being.
Is a thousand times more than that
Which once tore apart my body.
I don't want to be aborted or
stillborn.
I am determined to be born again.
I am determined to live again.*

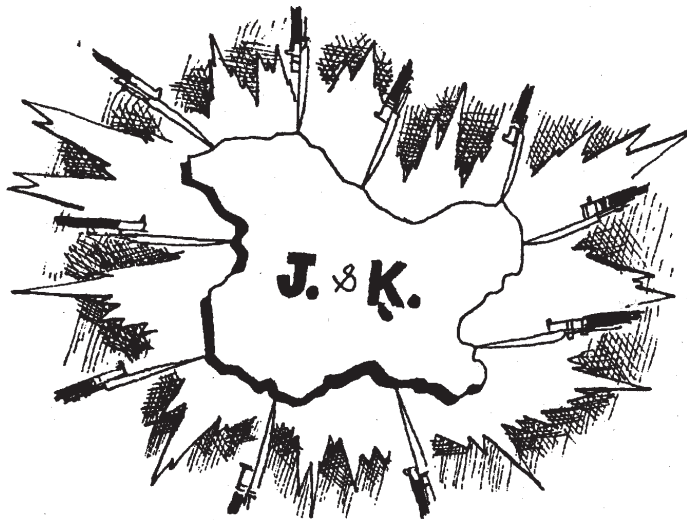
**Lakshmi Bhargava,
Secunderabad**

Letters to Manushi

In Defence of Constitutional Rights in Jammu and Kashmir

The government of India recently declared most areas of Jammu and Kashmir “disturbed.” This declaration places large areas of Jammu and Kashmir under the control of armed forces and gives powers to all but the lowest level personnel of the armed forces:

- to fire upon or otherwise injure any person, even to causing of death;
- to destroy any structure they may “suspect” as being in use for attacks against them;
- to arrest anyone without warrant;
- to enter and search any premises without warrant;



The new law also stipulates that anyone acting in exercise of the powers conferred by it cannot be prosecuted.

The practical consequences of the new orders will be nothing new for the people of Jammu and Kashmir. Already, numerous instances of shooting of unarmed demonstrators have been reported by journalists and human rights groups; entire villages have been gutted in retaliation for the actions of a few armed militants; scores of people have been arrested and kept in detention without trial, some of them for several years; the paramilitary forces have been entering and searching premises in entire neighbourhoods for a long time now.

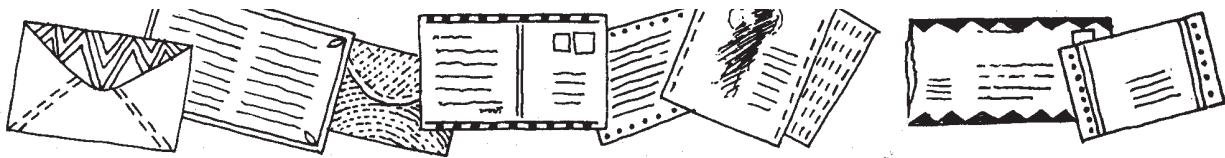
What is new for the people of Jammu and Kashmir is that the lawlessness of the security forces is now legal. What is more, they will have absolutely

no recourse whatsoever to the courts to seek protection from state repression or seek redress for their grievances against the armed personnel.

Laws such as the ones now used in Jammu and Kashmir have been used elsewhere in India before to quell popular unrest. The meaning of such laws has been clear to the people of the northeastern states, Andhra Pradesh and Punjab, and each time the attempt has been to legalise the application of brute force to counter popular unrest. As a human rights group once observed, the government has every time sought “to win over the recalcitrant citizens’ loyalty to the Constitution of India” by denying them the fundamental rights guaranteed by the same Constitution.

Every time the government tried to suppress popular discontent with force, with laws that deny its citizens their fundamental rights of life, privacy, freedom of speech and freedom of movement, it only strengthened the hands of the militants, and alienated large masses of common people. This was the pattern in the northeastern states, in Punjab, and now, in Jammu and Kashmir. While terrorism for political gains must be condemned by all people, it is abundantly clear that the government’s repressive techniques aimed at curbing terrorism are counterproductive. In retrospect, it seems only natural that this should be so. Which people can respect a government that arrests and shoots at them for no fault of theirs, searches their homes without a cause, and curtails their freedom by placing them under indefinite curfew?

We, as concerned citizens of India, appeal to the government of India to withdraw the notification and implementation



of the Disturbed Areas Act, to stop the security forces from the using repressive measures against the people of Jammu and Kashmir, and take steps to restore the confidence of the people and resolve problems through peaceful means. Specifically, we appeal to the government to:

- withdraw the Disturbed Areas Act in Jammu and Kashmir immediately;
- investigate the excesses committed by the army and the CRPF personnel and punish the guilty;
- take immediate steps to restore normalcy in Jammu and Kashmir;
- release political prisoners who were arrested without a warrant, or who are held without a charge; and
- resolve the genuine grievances of the Kashmiri people through peaceful negotiations.

We appeal to fellow citizens of India to bring pressure on our government and our representatives to respect the constitutional rights of the people of Jammu and Kashmir and to work towards a peaceful resolution of the current crisis.

Arun Achayuthan, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada
Madanlal Ahuja, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA
S. Bapiraju, Arlington, Texas, USA
Srinivas Budhiraja, Madison, Wisconsin, USA
Chaganti, Arlington, Texas, USA
Dr Venu Dasigi, Dayton, Ohio, USA
Abhijit Ghosh Dastidar, Columbus, Ohio, USA
Samar Dey, Franklin Park, New Jersey, USA
Bidyut Dutta, New York, New York, USA
Swaminathan Gopalaswamy, Berkeley, California, USA
Dr D.N. Jayasimha, Columbus, Ohio, USA
S. Krishnaveni, Parsippany, New Jersey, USA
Munira Majmundar, Los Angeles, California, USA
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