

Letters to Manushi

Catalysts of Change

I agree to some of the views and suggestions forwarded by you in the article "Ways to Combat Communal Violence" which appeared in **Manushi** No 62. Being a woman I am very disturbed by the increasing violence in our society. The fact that over the years women's participation in politics has declined proves how the spread of violence can lead to a deterioration in women's status. Today women, especially those of the middle class, dare not enter Indian politics which is ruled by money and muscle power. Those who are in the field are, with a few exceptions, daughters or wives of politicians or belong to the privileged class.

You have rightly contended that women's and human rights organisations need to be localised to be effective and popular. Most women activists belong to the privileged class. They work on a project basis. That is why they have failed to mobilise people.

But I don't think that control of the police force by elected representatives can be a solution. Elected representatives are at the forefront of any attempt to incite communal violence as they seek electoral gains. If the police is controlled by them, they will use it for their own ends.

Vidya Vati, Delhi.

Marry in Haste....

Recently, yet another Indian woman I know has been married to an Indian man living in the US. The entire process of the meeting and marrying, followed by the groom's hasty return to the US took just over two weeks. Indian men in the US appear to have no qualms about taking two weeks off during the Christmas break to acquire 'lifelong partners'.

It is the women who have to pay the price for such hasty marriages. Shelters for victims of domestic violence among Asian and south Asian women in the US have been swamped by Indian women who arrived in the country after quick arranged marriages. Of course only a tiny minority actually report violence because of their economic dependence and emotional isolation. The gamble to find a man who respects and supports women in their work is hard enough in India;



across continents and at very short notice, the odds are impossibly high.

Life in the US is often held up to be the happier, more liberating alternative, away from the rigid rules imposed by in-laws, where domestic chores are easier and one is financially likely to be less strained. But the convenience of the laundry machine and vacuum cleaner and frozen foods do not balance the equation: the family income, though higher, is typically in the man's control, and the woman becomes dependent on this stranger for her very survival in an

alien country where she is isolated from her natal family and friends. The husband usually has prior connections in the US and his friends and relatives are unsupportive about making an issue of violence or excessive control on his part.

For women to be free of this extreme vulnerability, both the unseemly haste and the secondary status of women in the marriage need to be dealt with. A lifelong relationship must be given time and nurturance, including giving the woman the opportunity to form an opinion of her future husband and a sense of the new milieu. Secondly, women should not have to compromise their own professional achievements, be completely financially dependent and cut themselves off from their support systems.

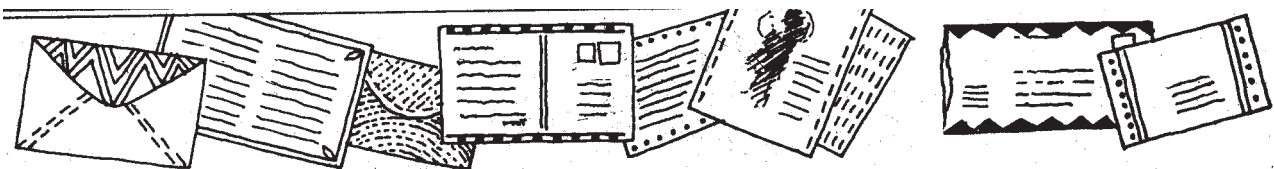
It is important for a woman to have support systems such as family and close friends not originally connected to the husband. At a minimum she should have independent access to funds that can get her away from the man to a safe place. But ultimately, the status of the wife in the family and the status of her work need to be transformed to ensure that women can indeed make truly liberating choices about their lives.

Srimati Basu, USA.

New Thinking

Your article "Why I am not a Feminist" in **Manushi** No 61 has set me thinking in new directions. Let me narrate a small incident that occurred recently at home.

One day my daughter told her mother not to curl her hair as the boys in school would pull the curls and cause much discomfort. On closer questioning she revealed that the teacher herself told the boys to pull her curls when they had a complaint against her.



Generally one would not read too much into the above incident and brush it aside as a commonplace event in any school. However with my limited acquaintance with your writing, I began to empathise with my daughter. The next day itself I had her hair cut.

In our homes we condition our girls differently: 'Don't laugh loud', 'Sit properly', to cite a few examples. The harm done to the girl child by the disciplining to condition her and prevent her from being herself is realised by a parent only if one is exposed to feminist ideas.

I have some reservations on your distancing yourself from the term 'feminist'. Refusing to be labelled 'feminist' would mean discrediting the good work done over such a long period of time in so many different parts of the world.

It is better to build upon an existent base rather than start afresh, unless it seriously affects any constructive work.

S.V. Anbazhagan, Kudremukh

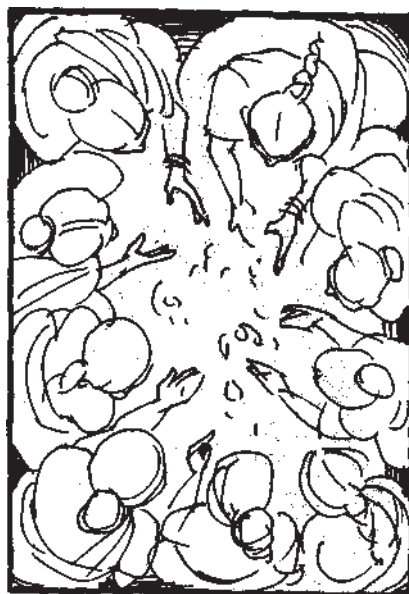
Women Take Charge

In taking on the *Saal Beej* buying contract from the government in June 1990, the women of Asna village decided to kill two birds with one stone. They not only succeeded in finding an important source of income generation, which hitherto used to be the preserve of local businessmen, but ensured that the tribals were not cheated of the money due to them. As a result, they have succeeded in collecting over 600 quintals of *saal beej* during that season, which is more than that of all the other buying centres in the *tehsil* put together. Because of their unusual honesty, tribals from far away villages falling under other collection centres are flocking to Asna.

A year ago, 15 women of Asna

village, in the Kondagaon *tehsil* of Bastar district, decided to form a women's co-operative, under the "Dokra" scheme (a development scheme for rural women). They started off with training their members to weave rope mats, but this year decided to expand their horizons and contract with the government as agents to buy *saal beej* from the tribals.

Along with *tendu patta*, the



collection and sale of *saal beej* is an important source of additional income for the tribals. Preparation of the seeds is a very arduous task—the pods have to be collected, dried, broken up, and the kernel extracted. All these tasks are mostly performed by women. On an average, a good day's collection would be 5 kg. *Saal* seeds are used to provide oil for chocolates, cosmetics and other luxury products, and thus constitute fairly lucrative raw material. The government rate for buying the seed is Rs 1.15 per kg; the buying agent gets a commission of approximately Rs 4 per quintal.

There is plenty of scope in the whole

buying process for cheating the tribals—for example, the seeds are underweighed, less money is given out as payment than the amount entered in the books. What with the usual collaboration and cuts between the agents, forest officers, and local politicians, a *saal* buying contract is much sought after. The tribals, being illiterate, find it difficult to check the process.

Knowing these problems first hand, the Asna women's co-operative decided to apply for the contract and run it honestly for once. Seven members of the original women's co-operative formed a *Mahila Samuh*, with Kalavati, a tribal woman, as president. The money was shared equally among all the members. The women faced stiff competition and political difficulties—one displaced contractor complained to the local MP, Dinesh Kashyap, that the women were engaging in malpractices and demanded that they be removed and someone else appointed. The minister actually wrote a letter to this effect, without any prior investigation. Undaunted, the women got the village notaries to observe the buying procedures and certify to their honesty. The women are now considering challenging the MLA in court for having written a defamatory letter without investigation.

All the women are illiterate except one, who maintained the accounts. Despite this, there were no discrepancies in accounting and the tribals were paid every paisa owed to them. In some cases they were asked to come back the next day, if even a small bit of change was not immediately available. The *Samuh* employed a couple of local men to help with the weighing and reading of slips. The work of filling gunny sacks at the end ready for loading and transportation to godowns, which is usually carried out

Letters to Manushi

by men, was undertaken by the women themselves this time. In the process they also earned some extra money.

The women faced a number of problems in running the buying centre apart from the political obstacles. The flow of money from the administration was not enough to keep up with the amount bought every day, and the women were often forced to send people away with promissory notes, or count out sums of Rs 60 in 25 paise coins. Other problems included a leaking school roof (where the collection centre is housed), and the possibility of theft before the administration arranged to have the seeds transported to a godown. The women had to employ chowkidars to guard the stores.

On the whole, however, work progressed smoothly, and the experience brought the women close together. It also showed people that exploitation by local contractors and officials can be bypassed by taking up one's own cause. The women of the village have a long tradition of fighting for their rights and taking independent stands. This year's effort at *saal beej* buying will be an addition to this inspiring history.

Nalini Sundar, USA.

M.A. Iqbal, Asna, Bastar

Child Prostitution

I recently read *Manushi* No 10 which featured Chinnammu Sivdas' report and interview. I am full of admiration for this woman who has single handedly waged a battle against the government and administration for women's rights and to end atrocities against women. This has created a deep impression on me. I am giving you my own report of incidents of prostitution in Rajasthan.

Dholpur district in Rajasthan is well

known for its trade in women. Young girls are kidnapped and brought here from all over the country. They are then forced into prostitution. The police department abets the trade because it gets them a hefty bribe every month.

Some years back, a High Court judge treated a series of newspaper articles on the subject as a writ petition. He appointed two court commissioners and some senior police officers to investigate the matter. But this petition has been



gathering dust for the last four or five years.

My husband is a freelance journalist. He had done some investigation into the flesh trade and successfully brought this matter to the public notice through newspaper articles. But he finally suffered defeat at the hands of the police who gave full support to the culprits. We were forced to leave the city. My husband had to give up journalism.

In Rajasthan's Sawai Madhopur district, at the entrance gate of the city

and outside the hospital and police station there is a *Kanjar basti*. At any given time, 20-25 girls aged between three and eight years can be found here for prostitution.

Prem Vishwakarma, Jaipur.

(translated from Hindi)

Time for Introspection

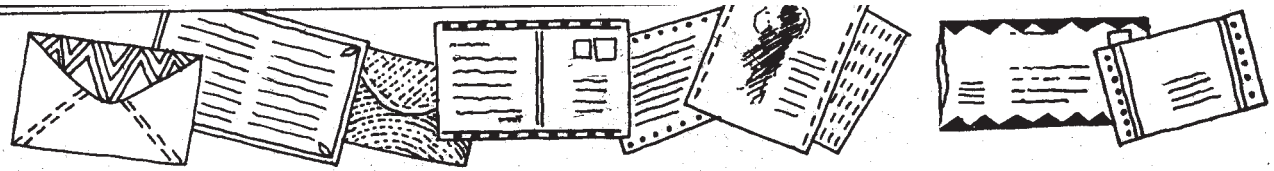
The feminist movement has come into the limelight because of the Shah Bano, Roop Kunwar and most recently the Ameena case. However, on a closer look we find that these cases made news purely by accident.

'Ameena is saved' was a recent newspaper headline when the young girl was rescued from the clutches of an elderly sheikh to whom she had been married off by her parents. Personally I appreciate the press and the organisations who are fighting for her free of cost. But her rescue does not mean that they have succeeded in their objective.

Women's organisations waged a battle to sever Ameena's relationship with the sheikh. But where were they sending her? From one hell to another—which is what the Nari Niketans have become.

Similarly the intelligentsia made a hue and cry about Roop Kunwar's *sati*. But did they consider the options before her? A young widow in our society, particularly in villages, continues to be discriminated against. She cannot take part in community activities. She wears white saris and is regarded as a woman of easy virtue.

Women's organisations and media should not sensationalise issues. Roop Kunwar made news because she committed suicide. Ameena was in a plane so the news broke. In villages



thousands of Ameenās are being bought and sold but nobody expresses concern.

It would be better if women's organisations became more people oriented. Only conferencing in auditoriums and airconditioned halls will not solve the problems of women.

V. B. Rawat, New Delhi.

Universal Concerns

I teach sociology and courses on women in comparative perspective at a small liberal arts college in New York. While students are generally misguided, misinformed and too middle class to relate to issues of social injustice here and elsewhere, they do have the capacity to empathise and rally on the side of justice.

In this context, I use **Manushi** and other publications to expose them to global realities and hope they will become less selfish and materialistic.

Maryann Caputo-Nimbark, USA

Helpful Insights

The last issue of **Manushi** (No 63-64) on the reservations controversy was very informative. Here in the West, where only brief notices were given in the newspapers about the student immolations, it was all quite incomprehensible.

Your issue was very helpful in giving insights into what was happening, as well as providing an introduction to the complexity of the issue of reservations. I agree with the view that if India is going to persist in pursuing the complex course of reservations, efforts have to be made to extend the principle to women. Also the exit principle should be clearly spelled out and protected from the political influence of castes who have benefitted from reservation.



Apart from the reservation issue, as a historian of religion with a special interest in Indian religions and women's studies, I have long admired the penetrating analysis of **Manushi**. The special issue on women saints in the Bhakti tradition (No 50-52) continues to be a resource for my teaching and research.

Catherine Wessinger, USA.

An Objection

This is regarding your article "Why I do not call myself a Feminist" in **Manushi** No 61. Although we would like to respond to the whole article, we are here confining ourselves to your analysis of the campaign against injectible contraceptives.

The accuracy that is generally exhibited in **Manushi**, was remarkable by its absence in the one paragraph on page 7 referring to the campaign. We would like to bring to your attention certain facts which you have not taken the trouble to ascertain before writing the said paragraph.

The campaign against injectible contraceptives was not launched merely through newspaper articles. On April 1, 1985, some activists and doctors from Stree Shakti Sanghata attended the inaugural camp of Phase IV trials of the injectible contraceptive Net-En at Patancheru primary health centre near Hyderabad. It was discovered that women had been rounded up by the health centre staff for administering the drug on the strength of the statement "Injection le lo, baccha nahi hoga." This was part of an ongoing multi-centre trial being carried out in 45 primary health centres in India, by the government. This was the final phase of the trials, after which Net-En was to be introduced into the national family planning programme. In order to prevent the introduction of this contraceptive into the family planning programme, a writ petition was filed in the Supreme Court in April 1986 by three women's groups and several individuals on the following grounds:

- Net-En, the injectible contraceptive in question, disrupts the hypothalamic-pituitary functions, causing extensive endocrinological disorders in the body.
- Animal studies indicate real possibility of cancer occurrence.
- Because it is excreted through breast milk, there is a possibility of its effect on the development of breast-fed infants.
- Animal studies also indicate the

Letters to Manushi

masculinisation of the female fetus during in-utero exposure.

● Although it is recommended for use as a spacing method, it in fact could produce sterility after use.

Net-En trials were being conducted in an unethical manner without the informed consent of the women involved. Given the state of our rural health care services, Net-En cannot be administered according to its recommended norms. Further, since it can be given without the women being fully aware that it is a contraceptive, Net-En has tremendous scope for abuse in the context of our target oriented family planning programmes. Through extensive library research, reviewing studies conducted by ICMR and its associated centres, and from published material of WHO and others, a well documented case was established, which could stand scientific and legal scrutiny.

A recent application filed in the Supreme Court has expanded the scope of the ease against Net-En to include newer invasive contraceptives such as implants, anti-fertility vaccines and hormonal vaginal rings. All these will be introduced into the national family planning programme for widespread administration. We have found evidence that more than 12,000 women have so far been subjected to these hazardous drugs, without their informed consent or adequate medical back-up facilities.

We are surprised that you seem to be mouthing the World Bank line that deaths due to pregnancy and related causes account for the high rate of female mortality. Maternal deaths account for only 11 percent of the total deaths of the female population (women and children). The maximum deaths occur before the

age of 15 years, and not during the reproductive period. (Health Statistics of India).

We would also like to draw your attention to the campaign against the coercive and oppressive population policy of the government in the *bastis* of Delhi. The campaign carried out by *Sabla Sangh*, a Delhi based group working in four resettlement colonies, was based on a systematic survey of the medical and sociological consequences of tubectomy. When the campaign culminated in a demonstration in New Seemapuri, an invitation was sent to your office. Unfortunately, you did not care to participate. If you had, you would realise that work is indeed being carried out on what you refer to as "higher priority issues".

Finally, you of all people should know that no funding agency will fund anti-population control campaigns, because it is directly against the interests of imperialism and capitalism. Thus, the campaign against injectible contraceptives has been sustained through individual efforts and personal contributions. Paucity of resources has in fact been one of the realities of this campaign which we have been forced to operate under.

We are happy to inform you that we have been unmoved by swinging fashions and have resolutely been compiling more information on hazardous long-acting contraceptives which are going to be dumped on poor working class women in India, especially in the light of the recent census figures. The desperate race to stabilise the population by 2000 AD is resulting in coercive and anti-women policies. Everyone concerned about women and democratic rights had better recognise

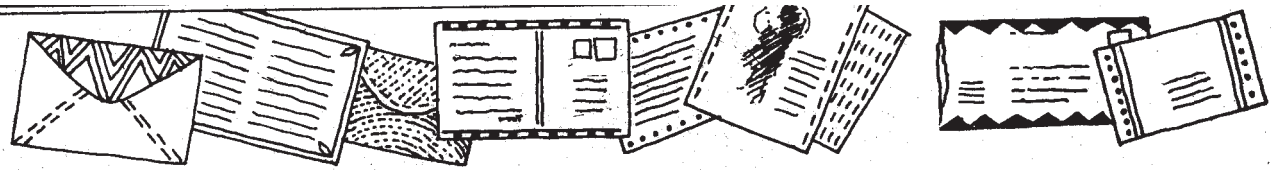
this as one of the most important issues of the coming decade.

We have consistently sent you information on the campaign. However, you have chosen to neither acknowledge nor publish this material. We trust you will print this letter without editing, otherwise we will be confirmed in our opinion that Manushi no longer welcomes debate, and is confined to representing sectarian, uninformed views.

Lakshmi, Ranjana Padhi (for the Saheli Collective)

Thank you for your comment about "the accuracy that is generally exhibited in Manushi." We try our best. However, we do get concerned when, at the end of your long letter, you leave us as editors with the dismal choice of publishing in full your superficial description of the campaign against Net-En or forcing you to be "confirmed in [the] opinion that Manushi no longer welcomes debate, and is confined to representing sectarian, uninformed views."

No magazine worth its while can subject itself to such ridiculous tests to prove its credibility. Your letter is being printed in full so that our readers can examine an example of the invective so many movement people unfortunately adopt with each other. As a rule, no reader has the right to arrogate to himself or herself the right to give or deny character certificates to publications solely on the basis of whether their letter or article is accepted or rejected and the editor asked to surrender all editorial prerogatives. Magazines espousing social causes are expected to blindly accept the role of becoming an unthinking house organ for various activists and groups in the movement



and attacked ferociously if they maintain an independent judgement. That is why movement papers rarely survive for any length of time and fewer still are able to ensure publishing good quality writing. **Manushi** has *never* tried to assume the role of acting as a spokesperson for women's organisations. It is not a newsletter reporting each and every activity of women's organisations. It describes itself as **a journal about women and society** and publishes reports on women's organisations only, when in its judgement, the report sent makes a sufficiently large contribution to debate on important issues.

I am not pro this or that contraceptive. It is my impression that very little work has been done at the ground level on this subject involving the comparative risks involved in various contraceptives available. Some of you may have got involved in this campaign in 1985. But it started much earlier. My own exposure to it dates back to 1979-80. Most of the information on the medical aspects and risk factors comes from the partisan literature produced by the advocates and opponents of these contraceptives in the West. Their response to any questioning voice (even when the person concerned is not opposing them) is like yours—immediately accuse people of “mouthing the World Bank line.” I personally do not understand how “anti-population control campaigns” are “directly against the interests of imperialism and capitalism.” It's certainly not self-evident.

In my article I did not anywhere say that maternal deaths are the biggest killer in India, as you allege. I merely

said “millions of deaths are being caused in India due to lack of availability of safe contraceptives for the majority of women and the government pushing sterilisation operations as the preferred method of contraception and performing them under extremely unsafe and unhygienic conditions is causing serious health problems for hundreds of thousands of poor women.” It is no consolation for me that “maternal deaths account for only 11 percent of the total deaths of the female population.” The maternal mortality rate in India is one of the highest in the world. Simply because still more females die even before they reach the age of 15, is no reason to dismiss this slaughter so lightly.

As for your complaint that we have not published the campaign updates you send us, **Manushi** considers for publication only articles specially submitted to us for the purpose. We routinely receive hundreds of circular letters from all over the country and even abroad, giving information about the activities of various groups. We learn a lot from reading them. But, as a rule, we do not publish such circular letters. We would have no space for anything more substantial if we began printing even a small number of circulars thus received. That would reduce us to a glorified photocopying machine and distribution service.

However, if any of you had written an article specially for **Manushi**, reviewing the work you have been doing in the resettlement colonies of Delhi, we would have happily considered it for publication. Several times in the past we have asked women who have been associated with **Saheli** during its different phases, to write for

Manushi. Many showed willingness, but unfortunately nothing came of it.

One final point: while World Bank and population control lobbies may not be willing to finance campaigns against this or that contraceptive, it is not quite correct to say that other western funding agencies have refused to support such campaigns. I know of several groups in the subcontinent who have received financial support from western agencies for what you consider as “anti-imperialist” work. Even **Sabla Sangh** works on the basis of such support, as you yourself admit.

Even in the West, feminist groups opposing contraceptives and related technologies have received a good deal of support from a variety of sources, including pro-life organisations connected with the Catholic church, all of whom take a strong stand against abortion, and oppose free access to contraceptives.

Madhu

