

# Letters to Manushi

## Search For Justice

I am a school teacher working at Gopalapuram in Hanamkonda Mandal, Warangal District, Andhra Pradesh. I have two daughters who are less than two years of age. Ours is a middle class rural family. My husband Narra Prabhakar Reddy, 35, a lawyer, was shot dead by plainclothes policemen on December 7, 1991. As the state government is evidently very reluctant to apprehend the killers and prosecute them, I am addressing this letter to you in the hope that you will help in getting justice done.

My husband practised law at the District and Sessions Court, Warangal. He was unanimously elected General Secretary of the District Bar Association for the year 1991-92. From 1987 he was sarpanch of his native village, Veldanda in Narmetta Mandal, Warangal district, where I am at present staying in his father's house. He was elected as an independent candidate, and his gram panchayat has been adjudged a model panchayat by the state government.

My husband was also active in the civil rights movement. He was one of the two convenors of the Warangal district unit of Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (APCLC). As civil rights activist, as lawyer and as sarpanch of the village, he fought unremittingly for the protection of the rights of the poor and the oppressed. Warangal is one of the districts where the rural struggles led by the CPI-ML groups, also called Naxalites, are widespread. The landless and poor peasants are involved in a struggle

for land, fair wages and an honourable life. While never supporting or condoning the violent methods used by the Naxalites, my husband worked tirelessly to protect the legal and constitutional rights of the rural poor who are being brutally suppressed by the government and the police in the guise of suppressing 'extremism'. He was especially active as a lawyer, appearing in court on behalf of people



accused under the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act (TADA). He appeared and obtained bail for nearly 700 rural youth and peasants for TADA offences over the last two years. He never charged fees from the poor peasants for whom he appeared. Our family was financially affected by his service to the poor and yet he never gave up his humanitarian attitude.

As a civil rights activist he also helped the district administration to solve many social and civic problems. The administration never hesitated to

ask him, and he never refused help.

However, the humanitarian service my husband rendered to the poor angered the police a lot. Responsible police officers of Warangal district openly said that they had a 'hit list' of persons giving help to persons whom they regarded as extremists, including civil liberties activists and lawyers, and that Prabhakar Reddy was first on the list. A sub divisional police officer complained in public that Prabhakar Reddy was getting TADA prisoners released on bail without charging any fees as fast as the police filed their remand reports, and threatened that the police would not keep quiet. My husband brought these threats to the notice of the Bar Association, which in turn informed the district collector of Warangal, who is also the district magistrate. About four months prior to his murder, my husband was implicated by the police in a false case of land grab. He was accused of abetting and encouraging scheduled castes of his native village to encroach upon and occupy the land of some farmers. This false allegation was made against him only because he appeared in court on behalf of those landless persons who were arrested for illegal encroachment. At that time the APCLC made a public statement of its apprehension that Prabhakar Reddy would be further harassed or physically assaulted by the police.

On December 7, 1991, at about 7.30 a.m., four people in plain clothes came to our house in Subedari police station limits, in the town of Warangal. They asked to see my husband, and as soon as he came into the drawing



room to meet them, they shot him in the head and killed him instantaneously. My neighbours and I saw the murderers and we are convinced that they were policemen in plain clothes. The Warangal District Bar Association sent a delegation of senior lawyers to Hyderabad to meet and submit a memorandum to the Governor, Krishna Kant. In the memorandum, the Bar Association raised the following points:

(1) Though the neighbours who heard and saw the incident rang up the Subedari Police Station by 7.45 a.m., the police did not come there till 9.30 a.m.; the police station is hardly half a kilometre from Prabhakar Reddy's house.

(2) Having come there, the police completely cordoned off the house and did not allow anybody, whether friends, relatives, fellow-lawyers or fellow-civil liberties activists, to come near the house. The police explained this by saying that an inquest was being held, but no inquest was held at all, which leads to the suspicion that their real purpose was to obliterate all evidence of the crime.

(3) Much before the murder, a representation had been made by Prabhakar Reddy to the District Bar Association about possible attacks on him by the police. In view of these three points, the senior office bearers of the District Bar Association felt that there was reason to suspect the hand of the police in the killing of my husband.

Unfortunately, the Governor avoided meeting

the delegation, though they had obtained a prior appointment. And though more than two months have passed since my husband's murder, there has been no progress in the investigation by the police.

**N. Sharada, Narmetta Mandal,  
Warangal district**

*We call upon our readers to send letters of protest to the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh demanding that the guilty be brought to book.*

—Editor

### Bread Envy

I read with enormous interest the article by Madhu Kishwar and the others about caste and the decisions of the Mandal Commission (Manushi No. 63-64). I think one should talk about caste dispassionately. It is no use just being for or against it, as one has to acknowledge the existence of this social system. For years I have been trying to explain to people that caste is not equal to class. This is extremely difficult for Europeans to understand. If one fights for a rise in the level of education and propagates

lifelong learning, one must, in my view, be entirely in favour of these recommendations. I have a strong feeling that the opinion of the forward classes resembles that of anti-Semites everywhere. At the bottom of it is nothing but envy and the fear that the others— either members of the backward castes or the Jews — might snatch the best posts. In German one calls it "bread-envy". Upto a certain degree I can understand this phenomenon in India as there are fewer advanced posts than applicants. Nevertheless all people should consider the advantages of a generally higher level of education and performance.

**Herta Haas, Germany**

### She's No Outsider

There is one major transition which has been accepted as totally normal, but which in fact has been the root cause of many troubles for the Indian woman—her 'transfer' from the natal family to the matrimonial family at the time of her marriage. *Kanyadaan*, which appears to be a simple customary ritual during

weddings, is nothing short of excommunication of the daughter from her natal family. Getting the daughter married is unquestionably accepted by all Indians as the last responsibility of the parents towards her. She is repeatedly reminded that she is only a 'guest at her natal home', 'a bird which eventually flies away', 'someone else's property kept in the safe custody of her parents till her



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wedding' and so on. One may argue, "Isn't this the truth after all? The woman does, for all practical purposes, go into a new family, and she is factually away from her natal family." True, she does have fewer contacts with her natal family, but so does a son, for example, who works in another place. We cannot afford to be naive enough to believe that physical distance is the only reason for delinking the woman from her parents. The repercussions of this distancing are serious and numerous—having a deep impact on all aspects of her life—economic, social, political, and her very identity itself.

The very upbringing of the girl child by her parents is greatly influenced by the ultimate goal of marriage. Her education is limited to the extent considered adequate for a 'homely' bride by that section of society. Even if the daughter is educated in more than the basics it is generally only because men prefer educated wives these days. Hence the needs and capacities of daughters are ignored while educating her. Further, her style of dressing, her circle of friends, her sources of entertainment, are all decided by her parents keeping in view the likes and dislikes of prospective in-laws.

On marriage, the entire identity of the woman changes, starting from something as intimate as her name. Her surname changes from that of her father's to her husband's. This apparently inconsequential change has serious repercussions on her

status. She now 'belongs' to her husband. By affixing a new surname in the place of her father's, the last links with her father are impliedly cut off, suggesting that she no longer belongs to her natal family. She is, for all purposes, an outsider, even when



visiting her parents on festive occasions or childbirth. This necessarily leads to the further inference that her parents too owe no moral or legal duty towards their daughter once they 'marry her off' except for the customary gifts given to her. Sometimes, even her first name is changed by enthusiastic in-laws, and a lot of time is spent deciding a name for this "new entrant". Highly affectionate and innocent though it may seem, such attitudes are very inhibitive for the woman who is confused about her identity, how it has changed and why it should change at all.

The woman is hit economically by this notion of delinking from her natal home. She is not given her due share

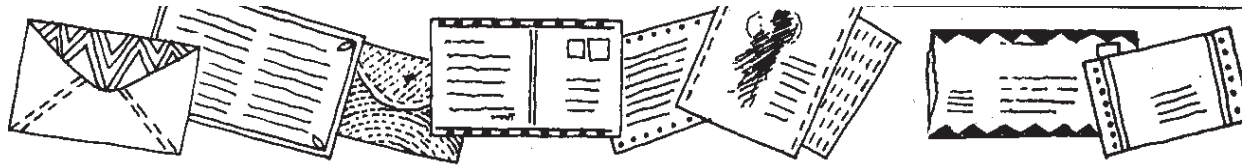
in her natal home's property as she is now considered as a member of another family. Women have internalised this concept to such an extent that, given a law conferring equal property rights to women, many would not enforce such rights as they feel that the expenditure on marriage is their only share in the natal property. But such expenditure (including dowry) is not her rightful share in the property, as the actual beneficiaries of such expenditure are others, not her. Hence, there is a need for legislation conferring equal property rights (even if it has the capacity of granting only formal equality), as it would help drive home the fact that the parents' obligations towards their daughter do not end with her wedding.

Has the woman at all got a right to decide how she should lead her life? If she does not wish to continue living with her husband, can she convert this wish into reality, given the fact that most Indian women are made economically dependent on others, and that the doors of her natal home are shut forever? The natal home is looked upon as a temporary resort when the spouses have a tiff, but not as a permanent home for the married daughter.

**M.G. Poojitha, Bangalore**

### Bouquets

Let me congratulate Rustam Vania for the beautiful graphics. They very appropriately capture the spirit of my story, 'The Chai - Bagaan Express', (No.67).



Even my high school going son Raoul couldn't stop reading 'Captive People but Free Trade?' in the same issue, and is referring to the article (and some of the graphics) in a paper he is writing for his class project on Technology Transfer and the Bhopal Tragedy.

**Balwant Bhaneja, Canada**

### **Killed For Convictions**

There are people who face death with strength and conviction. One such person was Jamnibai Bambre, 25, who fell victim to police bullets in Chamarshet, Bhusarpada, a small village located in taluka Jawahar, Thane district in Maharashtra.

Jamnibai's life was like that of any other poor tribal woman. She had four children, the youngest one was still being breastfed at the time of her death. From dawn to dusk she would be engaged in strenuous activity: food processing and cooking, washing, fetching water, hard agricultural activities varying according to the season, maintenance of the house, and rearing of children.

She also had to go to the jungle in search of fuel and fodder. Her contact with the outside world was through occasional visits to the weekly market in a nearby place. Here she often took some jungle products to sell and bought small items for family consumption. The low agricultural productivity meant seasonal migration for the family after harvest. She would go to brick kilns or construction sites or do any manual labour that came her way. However hard she worked, it was difficult for the family to make ends meet. Her life was a constant struggle to maintain her family on meagre resources.

On February 10, 1987, around 300 armed State Reserve Police and officials from the forest department swooped down on the small hamlet of 35 houses where Jamnibai lived. The reason: Thane district, once thickly wooded, is notorious for illegal tree felling by contractors in connivance with the local forest department. The forest around Chamarshet was no exception. The tribals of Chamarshet, Bhusarpada, decided to revolt against this massive illegal tree felling, a revolt which grew out of an increasing consciousness of their close links with the forest. When the tribals of the village decided to protect their jungle with women in the lead, the plans of the local contractor received a severe setback. Even the local forest officials stood in danger of being exposed.

The forest department responded in the only way it could—by brute strength to crush this small hamlet under the pretext that the villagers were building houses by indulging in illegal tree felling. The police entered the village with their guns blazing to pre-empt any resistance. Jamnibai's house was the first of several tribal homes to be dismantled. The women, however, assembled to protest against this state lawlessness. While the women stood their ground, the forest officials starting loading the wood in trucks. Jamnibai came forward and clung to the timber of her house, refusing to let it go. That act sealed her fate. She was shot in cold blood. Sitibai, who ran to Jamnibai's side with an infant in her arms, received the second bullet. She managed to survive the bullet injury in her shoulder.

The armed attack on the village

has exposed the hollow commitment of the forest department to the well being of the forest and forest dwellers and that of the state towards safeguarding the fundamental rights of citizens. Dismantling of wood of standing houses was an open attack on the fundamental right of citizens to property. Further, the state has a responsibility to protect and improve the environment, to safeguard forests and wildlife, as enshrined in the directive principles of state policy (Article 49). On the other hand, the assembled women were peacefully performing the solemn fundamental duties of citizens as enshrined in the constitution of India.

Three years after her death, the executive enquiry conducted by the subdivisional magistrate wound up with a single line judgement—that the firing was warranted. The proceedings, the fabricated evidence, and the bogus judgement makes a mockery of justice.

This year international women's day (March 8) was celebrated by thousands of tribal women in Jawahar in memory of Jamnibai and many other women martyrs. The assembled women went back with a solemn resolution to take the struggle for a better human society qualitatively forward.

**Supriya Akerkar,  
Kashtakari Sanghatana, Thane**

### **Raw Deal**

You can call me a male feminist but inside me there's a male chauvinist struggling to get out. I do believe in women's rights yet I do cheat on my wife in many ways because it suits me. I am a hypocrite like a good number of men but a watered down

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version, maybe. I remember trying to persuade my wife to visit **Manushi** and get to know more about herself and womanhood. She retorted, "I have such a wonderful husband, why do I need to go there?" That was a big lie; she said it to please me though both of us knew the actual truth.

Women are easily subjugated and taken advantage of because they love and care too much. It is a universal truth that women give of themselves more and sacrifice more. For men lust is lust and love is love; they are two distinct, different things. For women, they are inseparable. That is why men are capable of forcing themselves on their wives when they must have sex. Bad luck if she's not in the mood or is too tired or sleepy. I should know: I have been guilty of such an act a number of times. I only hope I don't repeat such a thing in future.

Men get a lot more out of marriage than women. Invariably, all women are happier before marriage than after. Men get sex (most important), get children (without all the labour) and not to forget, a cook, washerwoman, general handy woman and someone who genuinely feels for him in all life's ups and downs and cushions him against hurts and disappointments. A tall order which a wife fills with ease while, strangely, it is the man who gets (I think) more of the blood pressures and heart attacks and bald spots and strokes and what not. God made women of sterner stuff but they suffer throughout life nevertheless, physically and emotionally.

Women suffer in silence, men make a big issue of things. It's a universal truth that softer, milder people are

always taken advantage of and exploited. That's why men will always continue to give women the raw end of the stick unless society slowly wakes up and controls them. This is a long drawn out process because men are in no hurry to change since they have the whip hand, the upper hand. If they stand to gain through domination and coercion, why not continue that way?

Do you know why all well known philosophers, writers, scientists, inventors and composers are men? Because women were denied the opportunity to decide their own course, and were tied down with

children and domestic affairs. If women were totally unfettered, they would make better doctors, stateswomen, authors, bus conductors or whatever.

The murder and mayhem one sees all over would be unthinkable if women were at the helm of public affairs. Can women maim, and kill, rape and loot like men? Arrogance, vanity and ego are more pronounced in men. If mothers-in-law make impossible demands, it's because they are bad human beings who just happen to be women. The real fault lies with the cowardly, selfish son who allows his wife to be sacrificed thus.

**Ramdas, Hyderabad**

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