

# Letters to Manushi

## Supportive In-laws

Shantha and I studied together in school and college. After finishing college, I took up a government job and Shantha's parents arranged her marriage with an engineering graduate. I went to her wedding along with a group of common friends. It seemed to be a good match and they made a handsome couple.

Shantha and I did not meet for 14 years since we were both preoccupied with our own lives. Later, through a common friend, I learnt that Shantha's husband had left her and that she was staying very near to where I lived. I called on her the same evening. She lived in a very small house with her two charming children, a girl of ten and a boy who was eight years old. Though I had noticed two pairs of men's shoes under a table, I did not ask her about them until much later. She told me that she had kept them there to maintain the appearance that her husband was still living with the family. It was easy to understand why she had resorted to this ruse. She was still in her early 30s and very attractive. People would have made life difficult for her if they knew she lived alone. At that time she was teaching in an upper primary school. She was also giving tuitions and selling sarees at home to make ends meet.

The subsequent years were eventful for Shantha. Her daughter got married, she became a grandmother to a baby girl, visited the US and her son completed his engineering degree. He got a job in a nearby city. Shantha was now the headmistress of the school where she

used to teach. Though she was alone now, she was happy that she had been able to fulfill her responsibilities.

Despite my long association with Shantha, I knew very little about her life. Now that she had come through her trials, I asked her to tell me how she had coped with the break-up of her marriage. From her account it emerged that contrary to the stereotype, her in-laws had played an important role in helping her build an independent life.

After her marriage, her husband and she lived with her husband's parents. Her parents-in-law were friends of her parents and were very nice to her. Soon the children were born. They went to school and she decided to do her B.Ed. A week after she had joined the college, she learnt through an acquaintance that her husband was involved with another woman. She had entertained no suspicions since he had recently been transferred to another place. She was very upset but decided to concentrate on her studies.

Her in-laws too were very disturbed. Her father-in-law's efforts to persuade his son's mistress to keep away had drawn a blank. He decided to sever all relations with him and asked his wife and children to do the same.

The next year Shantha got a teacher's job in a school through a person known to her father-in-law. Since her in-laws were not at fault for her husband's errant behaviour, she decided to continue staying with them. Unfortunately her father-in-law's death changed everything. To get over the shock, her mother-in-law

was sent to her other son's house in Madras. It was then that Shantha decided to set up her own house. On one of the rare visits of her husband, she told him that either he should break off his relationship with the other woman and stay with her or not come to her house at all. He stopped coming altogether. Shantha was glad because she disliked a half-hearted relationship.

However, Shantha was full of praise for her in-laws. They had supported her on every occasion and even helped her financially in buying an independent house for herself. It was they who had found a match for her daughter and played a major role at the wedding. Her husband's brother had discharged the duties of a father at the wedding.

**B.S.Ahalya, Mysore**

## Biased Theology

I have been reading *Manushi* for the last two years and have a high regard for the magazine. It is almost like a gospel for me. I read everything carefully, take notes and return it to our college library. The problems you deal with are concrete and existential. I appreciate the yeoman service you have rendered in covering women's issues. In fact, I am going to dedicate my whole life to the women's cause.

I am currently studying for priesthood in the Catholic Church. At present I am in my third year of theological studies. It will take me two more years to be ordained as a servant of the people. I plan to study law after becoming a priest so that I am better equipped to combat the wrongs done to women.



As you know, our theology itself is male-biased, Devotion to Mary is one reason for women's subjugation. I am now working on a fairly vast topic, "Women's Oppression in the Church", in Tamil, my mother tongue. I make use of my Sunday sermons from the pulpit to speak about women and their problems. I always end my sermons with a special reference to feminist issues.

**Brother P.A. Jacob, Madras**

### **A Let Down**

The films shown by Doordarshan (and, of course, films in general) are full of male chauvinistic ideas. For this reason I usually avoid watching them. And on the rare occasions that I do, I wilfully dull my sensibilities so that I don't get too agitated.

But on November 14, I was looking forward to a change when I sat down to watch the Hindi film on television, titled *Thodasa Romani Ho Jayen*, as it was directed by no less a person than Amol Palekar. And in the beginning, my expectation seemed to be justified. The heroine Binny (well played by Anita Kanwar); had been brought up by her liberal-minded father to be a "person" and not a "woman". Both father and daughter were quite happy, in spite of all the criticism levelled against them by society: that Binny was not womanly, that he had not got her married yet and so on. It was a pleasant change to see her happily and successfully repairing cars. So far so good. Then a match-maker arrives on the scene and when Binny rejects the proposals suggested by her, the matchmaker

curses Binny and stamps out. From that point onwards everyone seems to lose their senses! The father becomes contrite that he has not found a bridegroom for his daughter. The daughter becomes painfully aware that she is not attractive to men, regrets that she is not a "woman" and feels that she is not beautiful.

The father accepts the plan suggested by his friend to bring his daughter and the district collector together so that love may blossom. The latter is a divorcee pretending to be a widower. (The father is aware of this!) The father invites the collector for dinner. The collector refuses the invitation, saying that he doesn't want to be trapped into marrying Binny whom no one is ready to marry. The father and Binny's brother get angry. The brother tries to hit the collector and is beaten by the collector. Binny is very disappointed that the collector did not turn up for dinner. She goes around mourning that she is not beautiful and that she is not a woman, till one day she is mesmerised by a stranger into repeating loudly, "I am beautiful" several times and starts believing it. (According to the stranger, "every woman is beautiful"). She is so transformed that the collector finds her "different" and becomes friendly with her and she and her family are thrilled! (There were other points made in the film, which I have not mentioned since they are irrelevant to the present context.)

The film made me feel very angry because it promised to be different from the usual but finally went on to the well-beaten-track, trying to say

that marriage is the only salvation for a woman and that beauty, as defined by men, is a necessary and sufficient condition for being a woman and also for her eligibility for marriage. Another point which shocked me was the following: Binny is a spinster and the collector a divorcee. The collector is shown to be a prude. He is upset because his wife ran away with a mere primary school teacher. Binny is shown to be a sensible and sensitive girl, who realises that his wife may not be fully at fault. While rejecting the dinner invitation, he was unparadoxically insulting and the father and brother appear to be sensitive to this. In spite of all this, Binny and her family are only too eager to accept his friendship (and, if one may guess, love) for Binny. The moral of the story seems to be that a woman who is not "beautiful" and not very young should be grateful to have a man, irrespective of anything else. It was quite disgusting.

The film was produced by Doordarshan — all the more reason for unhappiness. My only request to directors is that if they decide to show women in the usual light, let them not lead us up the garden path in the beginning. For then, at least the pain will be less.

**Vatsala, Madras**

### **To a Daughter**

Manushi No 71 has published several articles which left me deeply perturbed. But now I only want to send a letter to the "daughter in distress". As her name and address have been withheld, and rightly so, I think

# Letters to Manushi

Manushi is the right forum to enable me to share my thoughts. It is a letter from a much worried Father to the Daughter in the distant land.

You have not stated why your marriage has gone on a wrong tangent. Didn't you or your parents find out the facts and fiction around the boy? I presume that your husband is well educated with a good income.

If he says you have ruined his life have you ever asked him where and how you have failed him? It is really sad that he physically harms you, but if that is the case why don't you hit back and see the reaction?

Having spent long years in Kolhan area of Singhbhum district of Bihar, I have seen drunken menfolk sober up immediately on being at the receiving end of beatings.

But whatever may be the cause of his ill treatment, you need not feel neglected. You have to take your story to the neighbourhood, to your friends, to your husband's workplace, if possible. And what about the local press? It would also help to maintain a diary.

Please do not lose heart. There are many like you. You should never feel empty and try to abandon the world. Meanwhile tell us more about yourself. You are not alone. We are with you as long as you want.

**Sarbakinkar, Calcutta**

## Fulfilled its Promise

I like the variety in Manushi: a coverage of individual women's achievements, stories and poems, scholarly research made accessible,

well thought through political analysis. From my point of view, Manushi has not changed as much as fulfilled its promise: to take women in society seriously and examine all political problems from the view of women.

Issues that stand out in my mind include Manushi's analysis of the "communal riots" that followed Mrs Gandhi's assassination. By detailed examination of what went on you were able to prove that this was a planned reprisal on Sikhs by the Congress party. In a similar way you later examined so-called 'dowry murders' to show that many factors besides dowry demands led to women's deaths. The demand for more dowry was just one of them. Other factors such as a general acceptance of acts of violence, in many cases, against wives, and the refusal of their own family to take them back even though they are being abused affect the women more, but are generally ignored.

Besides exposing violence against women—rape, beatings and murders—you also show us fighters and activists who can make some changes in our lives. In short, I look forward to getting Manushi which inspires and encourages me.

I read with interest your article on why you do not call yourself a feminist. I do know what you mean. One does tend to get stereotyped. I can't recall the times people have said to me, "How can you... go on a diet/go and see the film Superman etc.... and call yourself a feminist. If you are

a feminist you should... blah blah blah." (I take no notice). Of course what we don't get as white British women is an accusation that "feminism is just a western thing" (untrue anyway). We do of course get told it is bourgeois. I do however call myself a feminist, particularly so now, when to say so is more difficult than 10 years ago. I hear people say "well we are equal now" and "feminism is out of date", just like they used to say in the 1960s. So I hope you will forgive me if I encourage my friends to read Manushi by telling them it is the best feminist magazine in the world.

My main involvement is with a group called Women's Campaign for Justice for Women. We want to change the law on provocation which allows men to kill their wives and girlfriends and say, "She provoked me, she nagged, she taunted me, so I snapped and strangled her/kicked her to death." Such men commonly walk free or get a small sentence. Usually we find they have been violent to the women for years and often kill them when the women leave or ask for a divorce.

I am still working for the Leeds City Council Women's Unit. I don't know how much longer such things will last. In the meantime, I am trying to get off the ground a Women's Safe Transport Service: minibuses you book in advance to take women door-to-door after dark. This is meeting with a lot of resistance as you can imagine. The latest round of objections is to the buses having women drivers.

**Sandra McNeil, England**