

# Letters to Marushi

## The Girl Child

We would like to share with you the findings of our exploratory study on the status of the girl child. The attitude of parents towards the male and the female child, respectively, in terms of education, health, status and labour, is affected by the income, caste, religion and employment status of mothers. The majority of our respondents (71.66 percent) were Hindus; 31.66 percent of the mothers were totally illiterate; 47 percent of the respondents were doing skilled work; and 37 percent were engaged in un-skilled work. The skilled work of the respondents included tailoring and knitting, while unskilled work included cleaning of utensils and washing of clothes. The mean income of the mother was Rs 284 per month.

We investigated parents' attitudes toward working children's education, health, labour and size of the family. 48.33 percent parents felt that if the money is limited, it's better to spend the same on boys. Fifty percent of the respondents felt that if girls are sent to school, they won't do the household chores. And 33 percent felt that it is not safe to send them to school.

Fifty percent of the respondents felt that boys should be in better health as they have to do outside work and 28 percent felt that girls should be treated only at home if they fall sick. This is because they think that girls always live longer than boys and they won't die if they are not provided medical care.

Of the respondents, 38.33 percent felt that the best job for girls is domestic work at home; 26 percent felt that girls should not work outside; and 30 percent felt that girls should do nothing except household work. S. Jain's (1990) report says that boys worked for the wages in order to supplement the family income, but though the girl child worked much more than the boy, it was not



considered labour in market terms. The girl child performs a major part of the domestic chores, from cooking, fetching fuel, food and water, looking after younger siblings, to doing farm jobs, but the labour is undervalued.

Family income was not the decisive factor, but the caste or community and occupational status did influence attitudes towards daughters. For instance, skilled workers had positive attitudes.

**Kamala Srinivasan and Santosh Kumari, New Delhi**

## Changing Focus

According to many psychologists, if you constantly try to be "nice", put others before yourself and are extremely flexible, you will prevent yourself from achieving your true potential and perhaps even threaten your own mental well being.

Nice people do not make waves. In fact, you hardly know they are there. Nice persons will remain silent when a protest is required. They do not fuss over disappointment, but keep anger to themselves and have a cry when no one is looking. Being nice at all times sets persons on a path which leads away from their goals. Try as they may, these people can never achieve their ideal of "nice" perfection, because they spread themselves too thinly. Nice people fear that they may not be able to keep everybody happy and, when the inevitable occurs, they punish themselves for their failure to service all the needs of others with cruel, merciless criticism.

If you happen to meet this description, you do not need to immediately assume that you are just a loser. Quite the opposite. You are likely to be a very competent, motivated person who has learnt that it is your personal duty to provide emotional services to the people in your life.

However, the danger is that continual self-sacrificing behaviour can predispose you to extremely low self-esteem, depression and other

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emotional difficulties. The answer? You need to invest time and energy in yourself. It is not easy, but you will be better off in the long run.

**Ann McGown, Canberra, Canada**

### From Rural Maharashtra

The second conference of Stri Mukti Sangharsh Chalval (SMSC) was held on February 7 in Islampur in southern Maharashtra. Over 250 delegates from 29 villages in four districts of Satara and Sangli resolved to take a stand against the efforts of brahmanic Hindutva to reimpose slavery on them and resist the politics of riot and plunder. They also resolved to carry on the struggle of *parityakta* (abandoned) women by occupying plots for houses in villages in the region; to organise a self-reliant agriculture free from dependence on chemical inputs; to fight for water and toilet facilities in every village; equal wages for women agricultural labourers; and against alcoholism, particularly the sugar factories' role in spreading it.

SMS was founded in 1985. Though its activists carried out one of the first struggles for political power for women by organising an all-women panel for gram panchayat elections in Indoli (Karad taluka) that year, its main work for the first two years was in the drought-stricken taluka of Khanapur in Sangli district where, along with activists of Mukti Sangharsh, a peasant and agricultural labour organisation, it fought for alternative development. Women were active along with men in the struggle for the Bali Raja Memorial Dam, a

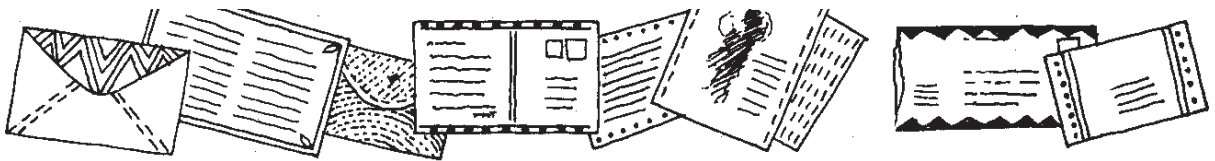
peasant-built small dam. They gave the slogan: 'We will not break rocks, we will not lay roads; we will not stop without eradicating drought.' It expressed their resolve not to continue as labourers engaged in drought relief work but to initiate a developmental process that would alter the drought-inducing economy itself.

From 1988 SMS took up the cause of abandoned women, with a conference at Vita (Khanapur), where it resolved to struggle for women's right to housing and social recognition of single women. In the wake of a *janm* in front of the district collector's office by 301 women from 36 villages in Sangli in February 1989, the collector agreed to many demands. The chief of these were granting of ration cards to divorced and deserted women and widows, which meant an effective recognition of these women as household heads; and setting aside two *guntas* (1/20 acre) as plots for housing for women in the villages where *gaathan* land was available. This unleashed a long struggle, mostly under local leadership and against the local bureaucracy, for ration cards. In several villages there has been formal recognition of the right to housing plots though actual implementation has been stalled. In village Bahe, 23 women were given plots in their names and now hold the legal rights, but the case has been stayed in the Bombay High Court by peasants who claim the right to this land which they cultivate.

SMS's activists are not paid workers and the women come to all

programmes at their own cost. There is usually no organised group of male activists to escort them to meetings. SMS has outgrown its initial links to the Mukti Sangharsh of Khanapur taluka. For, in some areas women activists are connected with the Dalits' Republican Party; in some villages of this area Shetkari Sanghatana is also active. In all cases there are male peasants who cooperate with the women, though in most areas where SMS is active, there is no political presence except that of the Congress.

The village-level units of SMS consist mostly of women involved in officially registered *mahila mandals*. In southern Maharashtra such *mandals* began to be formed around 10 years ago, whereas the earlier rural *mahila mandals* formed after independence mostly consisted of middle class women (usually of Brahman and merchant castes), who met for semi-religious programmes and occasionally received a sewing machine as a government gift for occupations fit for women. Most urban *mahila mandals* still have this character — the new ones are different. Normally, an energetic woman, often from a poor and even Dalit background, takes the lead; subscriptions are collected and a large number of poor women join in the hope of getting access to government 'schemes'. This has entailed, for many women, activism, entrepreneurship, and, occasionally, corruption, as the leading women often join up with Congress politicians. But there is no denying that it represents a new



struggle for rights as we as the rising consciousness of rural women.

These *mandals* view SMS as an agency for struggle while they maintain their links with the government. Most, though, are frustrated with the process of trying to get access” to government schemes. Dozens of women in every village want to apply for and are eligible for such schemes as the Sanjay Gandhi Niradhar Yojana (Rs 50/100 per month for the elderly without other support) or the Swayamrozgar Yojana (Rs 500 for self-employment). But women are beginning to feel that the meagre sums allotted are not worth the time and effort spent in getting the sanction through.

The government allocates money sufficient to meet only a tiny fraction of the needs of those who apply, and a significant part of even this goes in ‘kickbacks’ to the politicians and government officials through whom the schemes are channelised. A few women, some of whom become local leaders, are directly in league with politicians; numerous others are beguiled through the hope of getting money. A large number of women have consequently become disillusioned.

Thus, the focus of SMS has gradually shifted to ways to help rural women become economically self-reliant within the framework of the life they lead. Efforts are being made not only to help *parityakta* women get two *guntas* of land for housing but shares in village common land so that they can take part in alternative development programmes. For

peasant women the focus is shifting to experiments with low-input farming. A beginning has been made by an SMS unit in the village of Tandulwadi, where peasants are just starting to get water from the Bali Raja Memorial Dam. Here men have agreed to allocate plots for growing vegetables to the women.

**Gail Omvedt, Kasegaon,  
Maharashtra**

### **Hoodlum Brigade**

For the last few months Shiv Sainiks have begun openly to indulge in hoodlum acts against the people of Mahaswad and the neighbouring villages. They have begun collecting protection money from shopkeepers and street vendors. They go about threatening people who they think might report to the police. We went to let the police know what the Shiv Sainiks were doing to the people. The police told us they hadn’t received any complaints.

On April 20, 1993, Shiv Sainiks were collecting money from Mahaswad shopkeepers in the name of Shiv Jayanti. They demanded Rs 51 from one shopkeeper. He was only willing to give them Rs 25. They beat him up very badly, as well as his wife and mother.

The residents of Mahaswad were gripped by fear and panic. Soon after this episode, my husband, Vijay, I and three other people took the shopkeeper to the police station to lodge a complaint. While we were in the police station, making the complaint, the Shiv Sainiks kept threatening the police, telling them

not to accept our complaint. The police advised the shop-keeper: “Why do you insist on a police complaint? You will be the one to suffer.”

Despite this police warning, we went ahead. When the other Shiv Sainiks were informed about what had happened, they got together two jeeploads of hoodlums from some place outside Mahaswad and attacked the local Jain temple, breaking the lights and other things. The shopkeeper who refused to give them the Rs 51 belongs to the Jain community. Hence the attack on the Jain temple. This made the villagers very angry. About a hundred of us gathered at around 10 p.m. and went to the police station, demanding that the hoodlums be arrested. However, by the time the police began to attempt the process, the fellows had run away. The villagers kept awake all night. They managed to catch hold of four of the hoodlums and got them arrested.

All during this period, the Shiv Sena people continued with their threats, vowing that they would not spare any of us who had persisted in opposing them. The police advised Vijay and me to accept police protection. To tell the truth, I felt really frightened. I have been on several *morchas* where police were present with their guns. However, I’ve never before felt as afraid as I did this time because we could see that there are no laws that work against these goondas.

Nevertheless, we decided not to accept police protection because we

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felt that if we took their protection, the rest of the village would get even more frightened and demoralised. The next day the people of Mahaswad declared abandh against the goondaism of Shiv Sena. It was a total success.

Witnessing the success of the bandh, I felt that if we could organise even a small women's public conference on the occasion of Shiv Jayanti, it would help us shed some of our fears. The police asked the villagers not to have any public programme on Shiv Jayanti. But we persuaded the police to give us permission to organise a women's meeting on April 24, which was attended by 60 to 70 women.

I will send you a more detailed report later. For now I just want you to know that the fight against the Shiv Sena will require us to be far more organised and hard working. I also became aware that the fearlessness that one needs to fight against violence does not come through morchas. However many morchas are taken out, people still are too frightened to intervene or protest when goondas come and beat up their neighbour.

In a couple of days the Shiv sainiks will be released; let's see what happens next.

**Chetna Galla, Mahaswad,  
Maharashtra**  
*Translated from Hindi*

### A Father's Lament

We sat in front of the T.V. set. It was the night of December 7. The news was pouring in... Riots erupt in

Bombay... parts of Delhi under curfew... death toll mounts. I glanced at my 10-year-old daughter. Her eyes were brimming with tears. I put my arms around her. What could I say to a 10-year-old?

She turned to me and asked: "Father, why are people killing each other?" Simplifying, I said: "A mosque has been broken in Ayodhya and so, some Muslims are angry and demon-strating and some Hindus are also fighting with them."

She obviously found this too simplistic. "But why does the police fire bullets at people?" "Because, beti, sometimes the police has to do this to stop riot." But children seem to know more than we suspect "But, father, it is horrible to kill people. What will their children do now?" A tear rolled down her cheeks.

I hugged her tighter. "But, father, why should Muslims be killed by guns when their mosque has been broken by Hindus?" I had no answer. "Beti, it's very complicated."

We sat quietly holding hands. I could sense she was very agitated. The news ended. She turned to me and said "I don't want to be a Hindu." I asked "Then what?" She got up, looked me 42 straight in the eye "I don't want to be anything." and left the room.

We haven't broached the subject since then. I really don't know how to discuss these issues with a ten year old. She obviously doesn't know how difficult it is not to belong. How difficult it is to take decisions on your own without a group to follow. How lonely it is.

I have mulled over the events of

that evening many times. If I wanted her to be a "good" Hindu what role models could I suggest for her?

Could I point to Uma Bharati as a sanyasin she could emulate? Or to Sadhvi Rhitambara as a decent political worker? Maybe she could seek someone older as a model for "Hindu" womanhood—Vijayraje Scindia, who is reported to have justified the molestation and beating up of women press reporters?

Should she go and learn lessons in Hindu norms of honesty from businessmen like Vishnu Hari Dalmia or Ashok Singhal? Or, should she take lessons from Shri L.K. Advani on respect for scientific facts? Would Murli Manohar Joshi be the ideal person to teach her Hindu ideals of forgiveness? Maybe she could focus on religious gurus. Could she go to Shri Vishweshwara Thirtha Swamiji of Udipi's Pejawar Mutt, who had this to say of those killed in the riots: "Death is inevitable in any struggle." Or learn about justice from Sankaracharya Sri Jayendra Saraswathi Swami of Kamakoti Peetam, who has opposed the rebuilding of the mosque but never publicly opposed its destruction?

I was really at a loss. So I decided to ignore the issue. Then yesterday she came and gave me a short essay titled "The Badness Done to Muslims". The contents would have to remain between her and me. All I can say is that if the votaries of "Hindutva" had one tenth the compassion of my 10-year-old daughter, we wouldn't be in 10 percent of the mess we are in.

**Dinesh Mohan, New Delhi**