

Letters to Manushi

Rehabilitation Problems

I write in connection with the After Care Home for Women in Patna and as convenor of the Inter College Women's Association. This association has several social work projects, one of which is work for the After Care Home for Women.

A big problem we are facing is the rehabilitation of women who should not be in this home at all—either because they have served three years of their sentence or because they are over 18 years old and have been kept in the home only for shelter, with no case against them. We have been trying to have a half-way house opened here, but it is taking a long time and meanwhile these women are languishing.

I write particularly about the women who are deaf and dumb. There are eight of them between the ages of 20 and 36 who have been begging us to have them released. Is there any place that would take them? They are not criminals and can do good embroidery work and so on. Also, is there any half-way house or other facility for the other women who can be released to start life on their own but have nowhere to go?

Sister M. Carol, Patna

We hope some of our readers know of institutions where such rehabilitation work is carried out. Please do send us their addresses. We request you to refer only those which you personally know to be reliable.

Editor

Degrading Practice

I have become a regular reader of Manushi after my wife started

subscribing to it at the request of our daughter in the USA.

For the past several months, I have been drawing the attention of the public and persons of authority to the inhuman and denigrating practice of using human beings to enter blocked drainage manholes to remove blockages. I have sent a note on the subject to the president, the prime minister, the vice-president, the governor of Tamil Nadu, leading intellectuals of the country and some well known journalists who are known champions of human rights. There has been no response from any of them. I sent a repeat copy of the note by registered post to the prime minister and it has been received in his office with no further response.

In Madras, it is common to see human beings neck-deep or even plunged into drainage manholes full of filth and human faeces to remove blocks. Even when mechanised equipment is employed, humans are used to insert the pipes and rods into the manholes. The men who do this for their livelihood are invariably drawn from disadvantaged communities. A field supervisor of Madras Metropolitan Water and Drainage Authority told me that it is becoming increasingly difficult to get

men from these communities for the job and he feared that if an alternative is not found soon, the drainage system will break down.

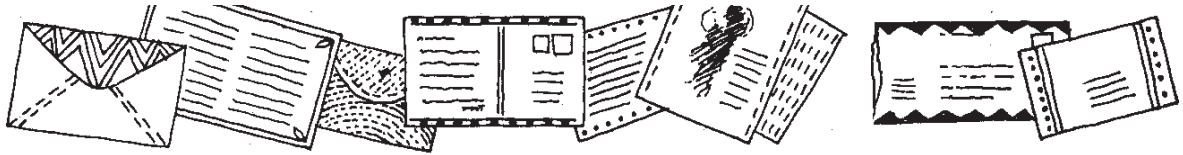
It is indeed a matter of great shame that after nearly half a century of Independence, on the threshold of the twenty-first century, such inhuman exploitation of human beings is allowed to take place. In Madras, two drainage workers have died due to asphyxiation in manholes. This has not caused any ripples in a city which prides itself on culture. The government has recently proclaimed its intention to eliminate the practice of scavenging. Making human beings carry nightsoil on their heads is bad enough, the above mentioned practice is infinitely worse. A country which boasts the third largest reserve of scientific manpower in the world and has launched its own satellite, can surely develop simple, workable mechanical devices to do the dirty job.

J. N. Iyer, Madras

Difficulties with Manushi

I have a problem—that is, I do not have enough information about Indian society to always understand your articles. For example, the “Political Background” section in the article on the Surat riots (No 74-75), lists “sections” of Muslim and Hindu people as “Memons, Patni, Dawoodi Bohras and Khojas” and “Kanabi, Khatri, Ganchi, and Gola Rana”. I can't tell from the context if these refer to occupations, caste divisions, family names, or religious groups. If I am one of only a few of your readers who are ignorant of these matters, please could





you refer me to a good source of information about Indian social structures? Or, if there are enough readers who are also likely to be ignorant of these matters, would it be possible for you to print an article or glossary to help us out?

Ruth Ingram, England

*We greatly appreciate your letting us know about the difficulties readers have with **Manushi**. Letters are one of the best ways for us to keep in touch with our readers, so we encourage all readers to write and let us know about any problems they may have. This will help us improve the magazine.*

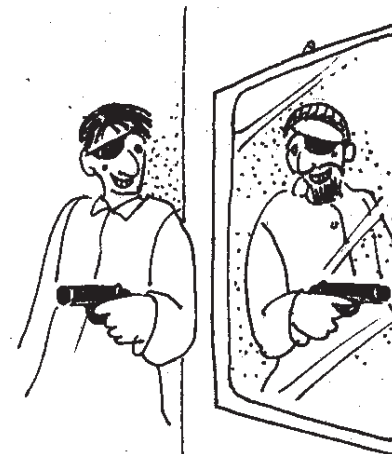
Editor

Parallels with Pakistan

I am writing to thank you for your double issue on communal violence in which you presented detailed investigative accounts of the communal kill-ings in Bombay and Surat. The analysis of the role of communal fascist gangs, sections of the press and, above all, that of state agencies, was a most welcome departure from the confusion which has been allowed to surround these and other related events. I find myself in wholehearted agreement with the view expressed in your journal that the mass terrorisation of the population and the widespread acts of savagery against women, men and children, as were witnessed in the two cities you chronicled, are not possible without the complicity of state agencies including the police, armed forces and administration.

It might come as a surprise to you

and your readers that very similar political conditions have prevailed for some years in a situation with which I am somewhat more familiar: Karachi and Hyderabad in Pakistan. There appear to be many parallels between the rise of the Mohajir Quami Movement (MQM) and other 'ethnic' groups in Karachi and Hyderabad (Sindh) and the Shiv Sena in Bombay. There are important differences between the politics of Bombay and Karachi, of course, but what I would



like to draw attention to is the remarkably similar anatomy of fascism in the two places. Ethnic politics was sponsored directly and indirectly by the martial law regime of General Zia from the mid 1980s onwards in Sindh, as a counterpoise to the popularity of the anti-martial law movement led by the Pakistan People's Party and other parties in the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD). When electoral politics were finally resumed in 1988, ethnic parties that had been turned into veritable armies, were in place to poison the political

atmosphere and to create perpetual pretexts for the disruption of democratic processes.

The rise of the MQM and other similar groupings can be seen, in retrospect, as a result of two related tendencies: the inability of the state (administration, police, army, legal system and establishment political parties) to tackle basic economic and social problems, and the resort by the state and "mainstream" political leaders to the insecurities, apprehensions and prejudices of sections of the people.

Until about a year ago, the political atmosphere in Karachi was probably very similar to your description of Bombay in the recent months: a major metropolis held hostage by criminal gangs and violent ethnic parties; nexus between political groups, criminal groups and the police; openly manipulative reporting by sections of the press; censorship imposed upon the press and other media by ethnic parties using their hoodlums; control and neutralisation of working class institutions like trade unions by these parties. There is also a gruesome similarity in the savage crimes committed against women, men and children, the systematic targeting of particular sections of the people and their properties.

At the time when the worst crimes were being committed, there was often much confusion about the true nature of the problem. There was pressure to bow to various lines: the MQM had set up a state-within-a-state in areas under its control; the MQM was more powerful than state agencies

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including the army; ethnic politics and ethnic violence merely represented peoples' own ethnic prejudices; violence and riots were simply a cover for gangland criminal activities. While there was a grain of truth in many of these views, all these lines of analysis served to obscure the role played by the state and its agencies in the development and sustenance of ethnic politics, violence and the brazen activities of what can only be described as fascist gangs.

Paradoxically, it was the army crackdown on the MQM, which began last year, that made it clear to all as to where the real power lay. It was felt by sections of the army that the MQM was getting too big for its boots, and its activists had actually started believing rumours of their own omnipotence. Within a matter of days, the army sent the "state-within-a-state" scurrying underground, captured their arsenals, and effected splits within their once "formidably disciplined" ranks. Criminal cases were registered against the top leaders. The MQM leader, Altaf Husain, who had hitherto been receiving glowing compliments from "respectable" politicians (including the prime minister and various chief ministers), was labelled a scoundrel of the worst kind and went into hiding in London.

Trade unions were suspended in many important sectors on the pretext that they were controlled by the MQM supporters, and a new round of violations of rights began. People with alleged links to the MQM, and their family members were harassed

and arrested. Karachi University, which was once a virtual fortress of the MQM, was given over to paramilitary troops which resorted to extra-judicial beatings, torture and public humiliation to run their writ. It is not clear as to how many of the people who were maltreated were actually armed gangsters of the MQM or other parties. I rather suspect that there was a great deal of "collateral damage". Such harassment of alleged and real supporters (not just proven criminals), incidentally, is likely to boost the MQM's flagging credentials as a serious political party.

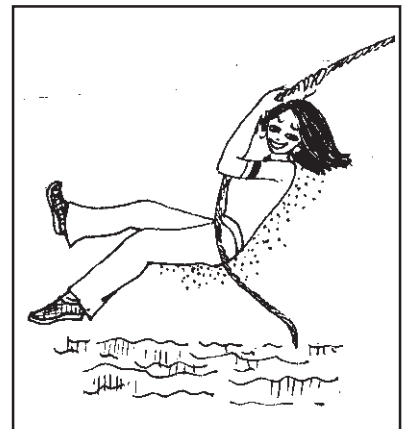
Contrary to what is believed by some of the people who opposed the ethnic and fascist politics, army action was no solution to the problem. It did serve to highlight the real source of fascism in society. The very agencies that once helped the monster of ethnic violence and ethnic politics to come into being, are not about to undo their work. They still would like to have an MQM, and they want to control it more effectively than before.

Just like the MQM in Karachi, it appears from your reports that communal fascist groups that operate in Bombay could not have committed savage crimes against people but for the protection offered by state agencies, and the blessings of mainstream and "respectable" political leaders. Nowhere in the world has fascism succeeded without the support of state agencies, and from what we have observed in Karachi, and indeed Bombay, our region is not likely to be an exception. There is still time, I believe, to avoid our having to find out the really hard way.

Haris Gazdar, England

Physical Prowess

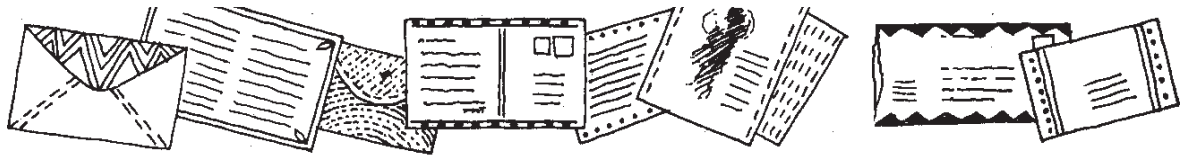
I was watching a programme called "Crystal Maze" on Star TV the other day, along with a 10-year-old boy. That's the show where a group of six people play various games that they must complete in about two minutes. The captain of the group selected a woman to play a 'physical' game — she had to swing herself across a pond using ropes. The boy at my side immediately said: "The



captain should've picked a boy to play this game. Girls can't do that!" Several responses sprang to my lips, but none were polite.

There are many instances showing the physical competence of women. Maybe we, kids and adults, just don't know enough of them. Here are just a few examples.

In the 1800s, Mary Kingsley, an English author, visited West Africa, explored part of the Congo, negotiated the rapids of the Ogowe River in a canoe and climbed the Great Cameroon, the highest mountain in West Africa.



In the same century, Lucy Atkinson travelled with her husband through Siberia to the border of China, covering nearly 4,000 miles. En route she had a baby.

In the early 1900s, Alexandra David-Neel, a French explorer, made several journeys in Central Asia. And at the age of 55, she disguised herself as a Tibetan beggar and travelled to Lhasa.

Around the same time, Ella Maillart, a Swiss Jill-of-all-trades, travelled alone through Russian Turkestan.

Gertrude Bell, an English Jill-of-all-trades, travelled throughout Persia and crossed the Syrian Desert in 1911.

Towards the end of World War I, Beatrix Bulstrode of England journeyed through Mongolia with her travelling companion, Edward Gull, whom she later married.

Jan Morris, of Welsh origin, has travelled extensively and written books about it too. She also took part in the 1953 expedition to Everest.

Another author/traveller is Dervla Murphy of Ireland. In her book, *Full Tilt*, she tells of her solo trip from Dunkirk to Delhi on a bicycle. In 1978, when her daughter, Rachel, was nine years old, they both hiked 1,300 miles through the Peruvian Andes with a pack mule. That story is recounted in a book called *Eight Feet in the Andes*, the eight feet being her own, those of Rachel and the mule.

Recently, three Indian women climbed to the summit of Mount Everest. Among them was Santosh Yadav, the first woman to have climbed up twice.



By the way, in that episode of "Crystal Maze", the woman did successfully complete the game. She swung across the pond using the ropes, got the crystal and came back — with a minute to spare.

H. K. Ranjani, Bombay

Blatant Misuse

In 1972, I left for the USA to join my husband in New York. I had a doctorate in genetics and, luckily, I got a chance to work in the exciting field of human genetics at a well known medical centre.

Genetic medicine was emerging as a powerful discipline, with an increasing ability to detect, diagnose and treat genetic diseases. For years, parents with a family history of hereditary diseases or birth defects, had worried about the outcome of a pregnancy. Some were lucky to have a healthy, normal child but some were not. Then everything changed.

Amniocentesis had heralded a new era in the field of prenatal diagnosis. Roughly 20cc of yellowish amniotic fluid, drawn from the womb around fifteen weeks of pregnancy, could diagnose a large number of genetic diseases, including all chromosomal disorders, certain structural defects of the brain and spinal column and scores of metabolic disorders. Thanks to this comparatively simple technique of diagnosing problems in the foetus before birth, thousands of couples, who would not otherwise have dared to risk another pregnancy under ordinary circumstances, have now had one or more healthy children; others, less fortunate, have been spared the birth of a child with a tragic genetic disease.

Our human genetics department offered genetic counselling and pre-natal diagnosis to couples who had a family history of genetic defects or when a woman was in a high risk category of producing a defective child, like women who were above 35 years (the risk of producing a Down's syndrome child increases after this age). It was never done to know the sex of a child except in sex-linked diseases such as haemophilia. Although the sex of a child is added information in the course of the test, it was up to the parents if they wanted to know. Interestingly, many couples did not want to know because they wanted a surprise at the end of the pregnancy.

During the 10-year period when I was with this department, we conducted and analysed about 3,500 amniotic fluids. In other words, 3,500

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patients came for the amniocentesis test. The patients came from all walks of life. Some were well off and some had moderate incomes, some were highly educated and some had only high school degrees. There were people of different faiths who came for this test: Muslims, Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus and others. Also, there were people with different ethnic backgrounds, like Spanish, Chinese, Russians, Italians, Blacks, Hispanics and others. The knowledge that they could consider the possibility of having normal and healthy children changed their lives and that made my work so rewarding. The thought that in my own way I was helping them, gave me immense satisfaction.

Since a large number of cases were of women who were above 35, many already had a family ranging from two to six children. And yet nobody ever thought of aborting the female foetus when the test results were given out. The birth of a girl child was happily accepted even though they had more than one daughter, because they were more interested in being assured of the health of a child.

Unfortunately, out of a total of 3,500 cases, two couples decided to abort the female foetus once they came to know of the results of the test. (Abortions were performed somewhere else and we came to know of them later on). One couple was Indian and the other was Chinese. (Among the Chinese also, boys are the preferred sex). Though highly educated and earning large salaries,

they opted for abortion just because it was a female child. In fact, in one of these two cases, the husband was a doctor of medicine.

In another case involving an Indian couple where the wife was 38 years old, we were told that they would abort the foetus if the test revealed that it was a girl. However, the test result indicated a male foetus and they continued with the pregnancy. The attitude of Indians towards female children surprised everybody in the department, even though six Indian couples had come for this test during a 10-year period. I, who had always boasted about Indian women's progress and participation, citing examples of a woman prime minister, women governors, chief ministers and our highly successful professional women, did not know what to say at this juncture.

Officially in the USA, the American College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology does not approve of the use of amniocentesis for sex selection. Child psychologist Dr Lee Salk of the Cornell University Medical College has said, "When people feel so strongly about the gender (sic) of their child as to abort the unwanted sex, they really ought to reexamine their motivations for having children in the first place." Most doctors involved in prenatal diagnosis in the USA feel strongly that they don't want to get involved in helping parents "choose" their baby's sex via amniocentesis and abortion.

So when I read in the newspapers about some doctors starting sex

determination clinics in India, I was shocked. How could one exploit this useful technology for killing female fetuses? Evidently, some doctors had gone to the USA and UK to learn this technology and had started these clinics in India. Yes, I remember a doctor from India had also come to our department to team about this new technology. Little did we know at that time that the person was interested in opening a clinic in India where sex determination would be done and, one day, the same doctor would be championing the use of amniocentesis for female foeticide as a solution to India's increasing population!

Around the mid '80s, we moved to India and settled down in Delhi. Newspapers kept reporting on the mushrooming of such clinics in northern and western India. In our Indian society where the male child is favoured, many doctors see amniocentesis as good business. Knowing my background and experience in prenatal diagnosis, quite a few people advised me to start a sex determination clinic. "There is lot of money in this. You will mint money," they told me. But to me, amniocentesis was a horrifying and abhorrent practice, undermining the dignity and status of women. It was an insult against half of the country's population. It became clear to me as to what I should be doing and I began to campaign actively against the misuse of this highly use-ful medical technology.

Dr Puloma Shah, New Delhi