

# Letters to Manushi

## Rational Religiosity

The views expressed by Madhu Kishwar and Dhirubhai Sheth concerning the mode of divorcing a Muslim woman (**Manushi** No 77), in my view, deflect our attention from the real problem of Muslim women. What needs to be challenged frontally is the prerogative of the Muslim male which allows him to take this very serious conjugal relationship—contractual or otherwise—so casually. Traditions are meant for enriching and nourishing the society. Should people continue to carry the

religious establishment.

The issue is not under what circumstances a Muslim man can divorce his wife on saying 'talaq' thrice—whether at the same time or with a certain interval in between pronouncements, or whether such a problem can be treated under a common civil code or personal laws of a community.

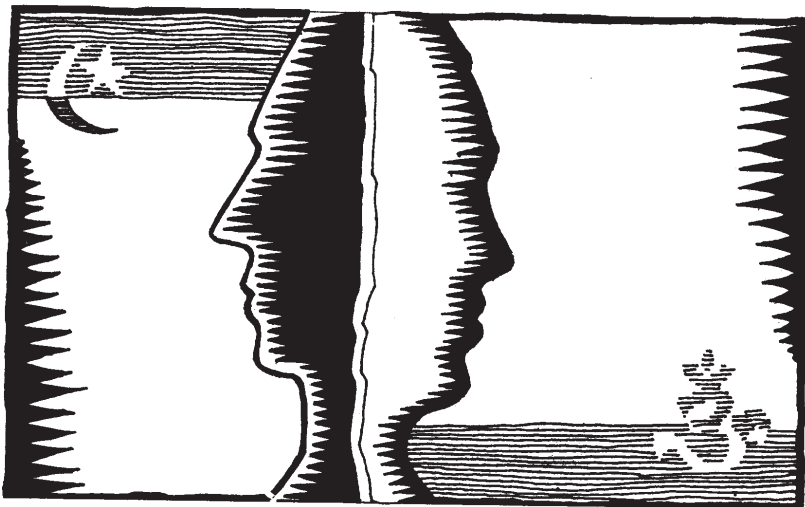
The issue is whether a practice, justified either by law or custom, which is so unfair to women, should be preserved in the name of religion. The crude and one sided manner in

relationship, the institution of marriage becomes subject to the laws of the jungle and not of religion. In such a situation, the state cannot abdicate its role in deference to whims of males of any community—whichever that community. Traditions connect and bind people. They survive through adaptations and prevent a religion from becoming a dogma.

What we require is Gandhiji's spirit of rational religiosity. While commenting on the practice of untouchability in Hindu tradition, he had said that he did not believe that any tradition can ever recommend such inhuman treatment of its members, and if it does, it should be rejected; even if such a practice is believed to be sanctioned by the scriptures.

The current practice of *talaq* should not be considered as an issue of either secularism vs communalism or of preserving the religious identity of people. It is an issue of restoring dignity and human rights to women. The protest should, of course, come also from Muslim women who are affected most.

They ought to be educated to understand that reforming this practice does not threaten their true religious identity—not doing so, might. This kind of provision which lends power to man's impetuosity, anger and aggression and does not require even any 'good reason' to be produced by way of justification for his act of 'giving *talaq*', needs to be condemned on grounds both of civility and religiosity. Any attempt to justify the provision of *talaq* by suggesting ways to preserve it



burden of traditions which have become stagnant and hence oppressive? Kalidasa had rightly said "*puranamityeva na sadhu sravam.*" (every thing does not become good by virtue of being old). Even the so-called community identity—whether of a Hindu caste or an Islamic community—need not be considered sacrosanct if such an identity is used as a pretext for maintaining social dominance of one set of members over others or for defending the

which Muslim marriages are dissolved today very clearly suggests that the practice has become oppressive and inhuman and should be treated akin to other such Indian practices like dowry killings, *sati*, untouchability or preventing Catholic Christian women from adopting modern means of birth control. Marriages when dissolved unilaterally by males in a casual manner cease to be a part of any great religious tradition. When it disregards even the contractual basis of a

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through slight modifications is only an attempt at condoning an evil that has crept into tradition.

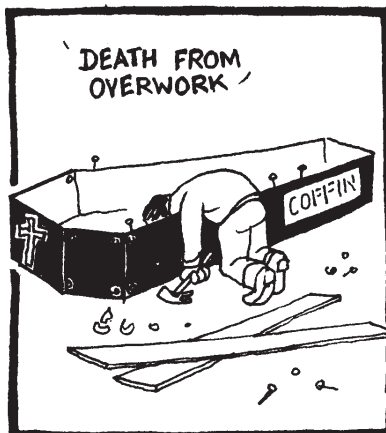
**Surabhi D. Sheth, New Delhi**

## Lessons from Japan

In mid-August, seven women of the Tokyo-based Pacific-Asia Research Centre (PARC) and the Freedom School of Japan, an adult learning centre, visited Goa. Their mission: to understand the lives and problems of this area and to build up stronger people-to-people contact. All of them were young women and some were teachers.

While they were in Goa they told us about what life is like in Japan. "It is not a politically open society," says team leader and PARC leader Inoue Reiko. She believes that the laws in her country can be repressive. Even compared to a poorer country like India there is less freedom of information.

No doubt, the Japanese bureaucracy is very efficient, schools stress discipline and there is hundred percent literacy in society. But there is also the hidden underside of Japanese society, point out these women. Among the negative aspects of Japanese society are: "overwork deaths", excessive regimentation in schools and unfair global trading terms, such as large scale timber imports that deplete the forests of other countries. Other phenomena that worry them are skyrocketing divorce rates, reduced social interaction, and the country's weak agricultural base. The delegates sound a note of caution to Third World societies which are eager to emulate Japan by pointing to the pitfalls of the latter's way of life.



The team also visited mining-scarred regions in Goa's little known hinterland. Most of the ore from here is exported to Japan, depleting India's non-renewable resources.

Says Reiko: "We could share the feelings of villagers in each village that we visited. In Arambol, women told us they never expected such giant projects in their villages. They say that farming and fishing are enough to support their lives. They don't want their paddy fields and coconut trees to be taken away by foreigners."

Given the far from ideal conditions that prevail in Japan, we should listen to such voices of sanity rather than learn our lessons the hard way when it is too late.

**Pamela D' Mello, Goa**

## Silent Agony

The women of the Uttarkhand hills in UP have a very difficult existence. Barefoot and sickle in hand, these women travel through deep jungles to collect firewood and fodder for their cattle.

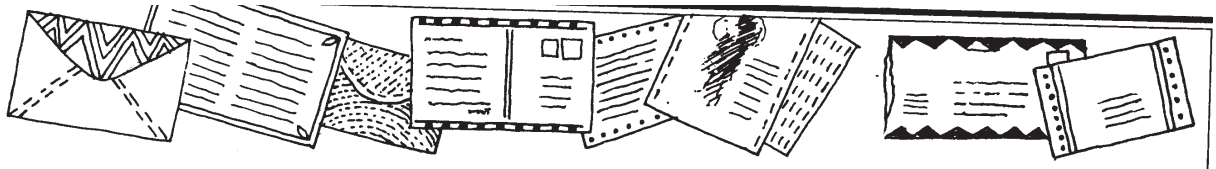
The story of Geeta Devi exemplifies the silent agony of many of the women in the hills. Geeta's

husband was away when their first child was born. Like many other men of the Kumaon hills, he was a jawan in the Kumaon Regiment. Geeta could, therefore, be with him only during his two months' annual leave. As was the custom in the Uttarkhand hills, Geeta was allowed very little rest after the birth of her son. Her in-laws were elated at the birth of a grandson, but after five days in bed with little nourishment on account of the family's poverty, she was on her feet again, climbing trees, plucking leaves and cutting wood.

One morning, soon after the birth of her son, Geeta left early along with her friends to begin the arduous task of cutting wood. As she climbed the first tree, she used considerable force to cut an unyielding branch. Immediately, she felt a sharp pain in her abdomen. Her legs felt weak and she fell from her perch to the ground. Her friends helped her reach home.

Geeta's travails began from that day. She felt something move out of her vagina, but she was not able to determine what it was. She was also too shy to tell the elder members of the family about it. There was also profuse bleeding but she dismissed it as the normal post delivery syndrome. Slowly, Geeta felt the protrusion grow bigger but continued doing her daily chores. Because of the persistent pain, Geeta's in-laws reduced her workload but, fearful of village gossip, forbade her from staying indoors.

Apprehensive about the growing protrusion and with no local doctor, Geeta showed it to a village *dai*. The village elders asked her to squat on hot mustard oil or brandy. The *dai* tried to push the uterus inside, but told Geeta that it was too late to do



anything for her.

For one year, Geeta went around in this abnormal condition, resorting only to home remedies. Finally, she overcame her initial shyness and wrote to her husband about it. He came home and had her operated on at a civil hospital in Ranikhet.

However, although the uterus was put back in position, all is not the same for the 22-year-old Geeta. The doctors have advised her not to do hard labour or lift weights. She also has severe pain during intercourse and dreads it. Another baby is completely out of the question. Her weak physical condition is manifested in abdominal pain, fainting and profuse bleeding. The family has incurred a heavy expenditure of Rs 1,000 on pain killers and drugs.

At her young age, Geeta is thinking of getting her uterus removed. At present her husband is posted in Meerut Cantonment, a family station, where she is staying with him for the first time. Once she goes back to the village, she says she will not be able to rest at all and she lives in fear of the future.

It is an anomaly that despite all the progress of our civilisation, neglected women of the hills, such as Geeta, carry heavy loads on their head and walk many a mile in search of fuelwood and fodder.

**Bharathi Vasanth, Meerut**

### Ray of Hope

The letter "A Father's Lament" (Manushi No 76) was very moving. Despite the horrible consequences of the demolition of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya, I felt happy that a little girl—the future of this country—was reacting to these events. As her father

says, "If the votaries of Hinduism had one-tenth the compassion of my 10-year old daughter," we would be saved. Thank you for giving us hope that we still have human beings and hearts among us.

**Usha Mataji, Virajpet**

### Women and Rape

Like child marriage, bride burning and acid throwing, rape has become a serious issue of our times. This form of sexual violence is carried out not only on women of all ages and classes, but even on female infants.

For any woman, rape is worse than the hangman's noose. The rapist is at an advantage—a raped woman will think twice before reporting the case to the police unless she has the full support of her parents or of an established social organisation. Even if she does so, she has to be mentally prepared for all kinds of obstacles in her way. She has to be strong to face character assassination. She will also definitely be pressured to change her statement or even paid a large sum to take back her charges.

Of late, the Indian film industry has attempted to justify rape in some

films. Rape is depicted in its most brutal form.

The recent Bombay riots revealed the encouragement given to men by women to rape women belonging to a different religion. What does this attitude imply? That we don't have any unity amongst ourselves and will go to the extent of dragging members of our own sex into a state of total degradation? Does women's liberation have a chance to move forward when the feeling of solidarity is missing?

It is easy for representatives of social organisations to stand on a dais and deliver speeches or carry out demonstrations against sexual violence on women, but it is very difficult for them to act on what they say.

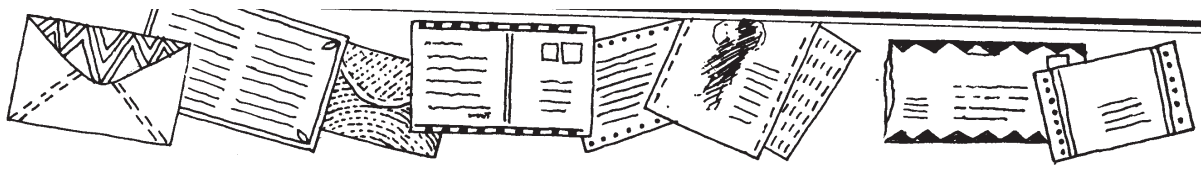
There are numerous rape laws but nothing has effectively been done to stop this barbaric act. Usually the culprit gets a mild imprisonment of a few years behind iron bars, or life imprisonment which can be relaxed depending upon the behaviour of the criminal. All these forms of punishment can be avoided either by using one's connections in high places or with bribes to a greedy policeman or a scheming judge. I strongly feel that castration is the only punishment that is appropriate, given the agony of a woman who has been raped.

**Hilda David, Pune**



### Campaign for Nature

In May 1993, our Sujana Nature and Children Club, based at Vishakhapatnam, launched a campaign by publishing an appeal to elders to change their personal lives. The aim is to safeguard the rights of



children and nature.

The major appeals are:

\*Live and let live through vegetarianism.

\*A request to doctors and parents against brutal killings of babies through the amniocentesis test.

\*Plantation of trees for school going children.

\*Prohibition of smoking for the sake of children's health.

The above appeals have evoked a good response and have made the people active in condemning the brutal killings of animals and babies in our country. Many trees have been planted by people in their own villages. Our children's club members also planted 210 trees. Many people have requested us not to stop these appeals since they are necessary for our society.

Though it is somewhat difficult to bear the expenses for our activities, my wife and I decided to do so by stopping unnecessary expenses. We, therefore, stopped our newspaper, stopped purchasing audio-cassettes and books, and minimised our outings to the cinema. Other measures that we adopted to curtail our expenses were to stop purchasing unnecessary goods and the disconnection of two lights and one fan.

**Nataraj, Vishakhapatnam**

### **Common Concerns**

I became familiar with **Manushi** in the mid'80s. The Girls' Hostel at IIT Kanpur where I studied for my masters and doctorate in physics was a regular subscriber. **Manushi** was not the most popularly read journal in the reading room but it was read by

quite a few women who related to and supported the themes and realities that were discussed in **Manushi**. I did not, in those days, read **Munushi**, principally because I spent very little time in the reading room and did most of my non-academic reading in my room.

However, in the last four years I have been reading almost every issue of **Manushi**. I am thankful for this to a friend (who remains anonymous to this day) who gifted a two-year subscription of **Manushi** to us at our wedding. Subsequently, we extended the membership by two more years and this year we decided to become life-members.

I agree with the broad philosophy I think **Manushi** conveys—that of humanism within the framework of society, religion, gender and economic relationships. That perhaps is the single most reason as to why I like reading everything in **Manushi**—The articles, poems, letters and stories. The articles like those on patents, Dunkel draft and its possible effects on indigenous farming practices, rise of Hindu fundamentalism, causes and consequences of rioting, sexual harassment at the work place and the environmental crisis that have been written about in the last one or two years reflected an analysis that roughly coincides with my own views on the issues. It is very reassuring to find that there are people, and especially women, who feel as I do.

I grew up, studied and have worked in environs where my gender has very rarely been explicitly questioned. However, there have

certainly been occasions when one has had to counter sentiments like "Girls who live in hostels have questionable morals", "Girl X gets the best grade because she slogs and not because she is the brightest in class", "Many women do not take their profession seriously because they get involved in family life." In many ways most of my personal conflicts have probably been quite different from that of a typical educated and working Indian woman. I strongly believe that personal experience is not essential for an individual to take an interest in issues that may not directly concern them. A certain degree of sensitivity in such people can come from the kind of socialisation they undergo right from their childhood—the kind of people they grow up with, meet and their preoccupations. So, for me though **Manushi** does not directly reflect or resolve my questions, it helps me to know, understand and appreciate many other realities. And I like it that way.

You could perhaps encourage the readers to contribute articles and their views on a particular subject and thus initiate a debate in order to make the journal more participatory.

**Kajoli Banerjee, Ahmedabad**

