

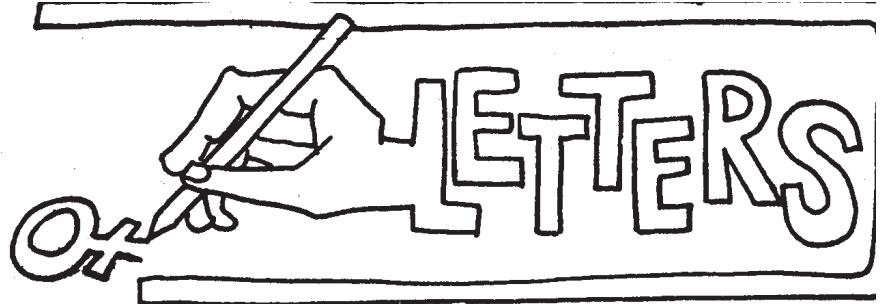
Becoming Stronger

...I become stronger and gain more confidence in myself and marvel at the courage and daring shown by so many women as reported in your magazine. When I could not see any of your magazines around I was anxious that you had stopped due to lack of funds. Now my brother has received the latest issue. I too would like to subscribe to your magazine and undertake to distribute ten copies of the magazine.

I would like to share my experience of being a "woman." I am the ninth child of my parents and have three older sisters, four older brothers and two younger brothers. Ours is a middle class Christian family. Through many hardships and struggles my parents have managed to get all of us educated and with good jobs. There is a very progressive atmosphere in the family, though my parents object to some ideas such as atheism and Marxism. All the marriages in the family were conducted without the giving or taking of dowry. When my sister left her husband, my family gave her full support. She went through a terrible struggle in defying traditions and her husband's family. Now she has emerged strong and I derive a lot of strength and understanding from her.

About myself—I joined the medical college after my B.Sc. Previously I had been exposed to Marxist thinking and a shaking of all my dearly held values about god, marriage, sex, boys. I was very religious. However, I always thought it would be all right to have sex with the man whom you love before marriage. I always used to go to get-togethers or functions with my sisters, parents or brothers. For the past two years my brothers were my ideals....

I had three very good girl friends, but I never had the superficial girlish relationships which most girls go through and by which they learn most of the "feminine behaviour." Unknowingly I was trying very hard to be a boy among the girls. My reasoning was that boys got to do everything they wanted to. They are more aggressive, jovial, good at story telling etc. I also noticed that as soon as there were boys on the scene the attitude of girls changed immediately.



They would become passive and coquettish, always trying to please. I vowed I would never become like this.

When I entered medical college I was thrilled, not wholly believing that I had succeeded. However, the sudden proximity of so many boys who did not behave like brothers, a male cadaver to dissect on, very few number of girls, started an emotional and psychological upheaval. I also had my first boy friend for a period of ten days only. One of the other boys told me that he was out for fun so I broke off with him. Later I wanted to make up with him since the physical contact I had with him left me unsatisfied. I did not realize it at that time but I literally chased him because I wanted to discuss "relationships" with him. I was condemned by the girls as well as the boys for this behaviour. I could see the contradiction...boys can chase girls, but girls chasing boys, never! One of the girls told me in class, where all the others could see my reaction, that he was not interested in me. You can imagine my shock and humiliation. After this rejection by both boys and girls I went into depression. I grew fat and did not bother about my personal hygiene.

The stiff competition and the rigours of a professional course like medicine began to take their toll on me. I am also very idealistic and I found that I had gone against all my principles—enjoying my first taste of western bourgeois culture, like parties and dances and boy friends—when I had vowed to fight for the poor and work for the liberation of women.

I started having breakdowns or episodes where I lost control over my inhibitions and said and did things which normally I would not have been allowed

to do or lacked the courage to fight for. I spoke to the senior boys and girls during these episodes. I wanted my body to be pliant and enable me to dance the way I wanted to, play music, perform acrobatics. In short, I was trying to prove that girls can be as good or even better than boys in a negative way. I enjoyed myself during these episodes and later regretted them since the others around me started making fun and ignoring me. I was also trying hard to be accepted but ended up by alienating them.

I have never been so alone and rejected. My psychiatrist said that I must learn to control myself and grow up. He failed to see the discrimination around me which was provoking me to reject my body and assume a male form. Since we are medical students we are trained to observe an individual's state of mind and my classmates soon discovered my problem and began to make fun of me, which worsened the condition. I found myself being attracted to men and women indiscriminately. My sexuality was aroused but there was no outlet for it. During one of the episodes I had told one of the boys I'd like to have sex with him, not knowing what I was truly searching for.

During all these episodes and later, none of the girls could truly understand or sympathize with my point of view. I had lost favour with the influential boys in college and so I was considered a non-entity. It was also useful to the girls since I ceased to be in the competition for being the most popular girl. I found no one ever is.

How I envied the other girls for being able to accept their roles instead of constantly complicating their lives by asking unpopular questions. They are steeped in upper class tradition and I do

not know how successful I will be in making them see the social, economic and political relations of health and disease...

At the moment I have shifted to another male doctor and have had my mental disturbance diagnosed as major psychosis with mental breakdown. I will be taught to "adjust" to my environment more effectively. No thought or treatment for the roots of my disease buried in the system! The college authorities are taking a serious view of my losing control on these occasions and may terminate my studies. I intend establishing my credibility with the college and student community by not having any more episodes and doing well in my exams. I want to be able to fight them on their own terms. And any hint of extra-curricular activity now would not encourage them to listen to what I have to say to them.

Dear **Manushi**, your magazine, is truly wonderful. Don't ever let it die for lack of funds. My complete support and love to all my sisters in the collective and its supporters everywhere.

Kavita

Journeying Together

...Part of this is my story; part my views developed from experience which I want to share with your readers. I will try and keep this as short as possible but there seems to be much to say.

...At the end of my studies, I married. I was (still am) romantic and silly enough. Waited for him to come home, even if I was hungry, just to share the meal with him. But I did not ask his permission to go out visiting or for a walk. For convenience, I would tell him where I was going or when I would return, but never sought permission. This independence did not suit him....

He had volunteered to marry me. I thought the volunteering was love, for I was an attractive girl and had no problems because of my physical handicap. If someone said "you cannot do it", I had to do it. Later I realized, as he told me, that he married me out of pity...I stayed seven years, taking beatings, confused by my love, though fast decreasing, for him, and my

revulsion to his behaviour. When he used harassment of the child as a lever against me, and my revulsion to a man enjoying my body after thrashing it just an hour before, became too much to stand, I quit. He did not expect it. Believe me, no Indian husband expects it. So secure they are in their tradition. He begged me to come back, wept at my feet. (Like Saratchandra's heroines, I had washed his feet with my tears for years.)

A come-back to give another chance to the marriage did not help for the harm was done. I no longer loved him so how



to live and sleep with him? And for what reason? Just for security, shelter and food? I would be bartering myself then. What else? Tradition? Society? If these are so important, what am I then? A non-entity? I left home, filed a suit for separation and later for divorce and got the legal right to see my child. To get a job without experience of any kind in 1972 was difficult. I worked at different temporary, underpaid jobs.

I am now unemployed a second time. I live alone. My parents died long ago and my only sister lives in north India....It actually takes only one bold step to freedom. From then on events necessarily follow, and one becomes committed to what one has begun—the journey along the new road. We discover a strength we did not know to be within us, and once we recognize this, we are surprised by it and become bolder and

freer to go along the way we choose....

Whatever way one chooses, it is necessary to be bold and honestly open, to have a conviction in one's own actions. Disapproval of society is one fear that deters most of us. Society watches you with disapproving indifference upto midstream, starts grudgingly encouraging and cheers you to the other end. But to that point you must swim alone and in doing so, in that loneliness, you will know yourself better.

It is no longer such a lonely road either. Many are venturing forth into new experiences of freedom, and they need the encouragement of knowing that others are similarly experimenting. More of us must come forward to share our experience...

M. Satya, Madras

In The Midst Of The People

We were very glad when we received **Manushi**. It is a good journal and reflects the problems of women very well. Though we have been separated from people for a long time, your journal reminded us of many stories of women we have known in the past. We have numerous stories of women to tell, but we can't do so at present. If there is any possibility, we will certainly write to you in future. While reading your journal, we felt that we were in the midst of the people.

My opinion is that your journal should deal with old traditions and habits which fetter women mentally. We are expressing our heartfelt gratitude for your immediate response to our request, despite your economic difficulties.... Please continue sending the journal regularly. Thanks to the sisters, who are fighting against the oppression and atrocities on women, from a poor brother of yours, with feelings of fraternity,

M. Malleswara Rao, political prisoner, Andhra Pradesh

We Are Not Alone.....

I am so glad that you are starting a health column, unlike the usual health columns in other women's magazines. I feel that we have to erase in ourselves centuries of fear, superstition, guilt and a terrible thing which is the combination of all these. I want to tell you about an

experience which strengthened this realization in me.

About a month ago, I was on a 611. It was evening—the after office hour, there was a young woman sitting next to me. About 30, obviously recently married, middle-middle class. A bright sari, lots of bangles. I took all this in. I like looking at people but normally look away if I think that they might feel uncomfortable. I thought this woman would feel uncomfortable so I looked away, but something inside me told me to look again. I looked, but this time at her face—it was tense and pale, the only colour being her lipstick and the *sindur* in the parting of her hair. This colour heightened the pallor of her face. There was anguish, hurt, humiliation in her eyes, fine lines at their corners, blue shadows beneath them. Her mouth drooped as though she wanted to cry but was holding the tears back. Her fists were clenched, her back and neck stiff. Our eyes met. I looked at her and smiled. She smiled a half-smile and looked down as though she were ashamed — maybe she felt she'd been “found out.”

I decided this woman needed someone more than anything. I asked her where she worked. She was a typist, she said, a lower division clerk. Then she said : “It is so difficult to make decisions, isn’t it?” I nodded in agreement but added that it depends on the nature of the issue. She didn’t seem to be listening to me at all. I touched her and said : “But when one has made a decision, one looks more confident, relieved, not so tense. I don’t think you have made one.”

“Oh but I have and a good one too. I’m leaving.” “Leaving what ?”

“My home, my work, my husband, (she winced) my life”.

I wasn’t sure whether her husband was her life or her children or what, so I asked her what she meant. She hadn’t heard me. She said : I’ve always scorned these suicide stories. Look at the irony, I’m going to be one now.”

I was upset from within for her. I can’t tell you how many thoughts and images rushed into and out of my mind in a split second. “Don’t you have any friends ?” I asked her. “Not really—no one.” She smiled—not a horrible smile but a sad

one. Then she turned and with an intensity I cannot describe, grabbed my hands and said : “But the smile you gave me, I’ll remember you.” She said she wanted to tell me all before she went. And this is what she told me.

She had been in love with a young man. She was 20 when she met him. She was very orthodox, she wanted to be “pure” for her husband so she never let the young man touch her. She knew him for three years. There was tremendous opposition from her family but she fought with them, defied them, and continued to see him. Finally they resigned themselves and consented to the



marriage. The engagement was performed in great style. Her parents lavished money, gifts, none of which they could afford. Her fiancee now said : “We are going to get married so why can’t I sleep with you now ?” She didn’t give in but held on to her little bit of tradition — she couldn’t do *that*. But after three months she gave in : “I sacrificed a belief for him and you know, two weeks before the set date of marriage he told me it was all off.” And the reason was horrifying — it was that she wasn’t really pure. All the pressing and coaxing was nothing but a Test, he said—one which she had failed.

I felt a murderous rage swell within me and noticed an inane thing—my stop had passed. She learnt that his parents had found someone else for him — someone who could “give more.” For two years she lived, trying to reconcile herself. Her mother went around with a “See, you should have listened to us” look on her face and her brothers

mocked at her. She had the job and that was all. No friends, no one to talk to. Her parents kept urging her to marry, they found someone for her and she got married.

Her husband seemed to be a nice, understanding person and after four months she thought she ought to tell him so that she wouldn’t feel she was cheating him. So she did. She was met with stony silence. And after that, every day he taunted her, flung humiliating words at her, made references to her private parts as though she were dirt. He would make brutal love to her and keep asking : “Is this what he did ? Or is it this?” And then begin tormenting her all over again. “It’s good I have a job — but when I reach back home, he teases me about the men in the bus, the men in my office...”

She endured this man for some time and then decided to take her own life because, she said, she would not suffer a complete “spiritual death at the hands of a scoundrel. He killed a lot — the first man, but my husband killed more. But I had enough spirit and strength left to decide to leave. But it is very hard to make decisions...”

I’ve always cursed the 611 for the unnecessarily long route it takes but here I was feeling so thankful for it. I talked to her, tried to analyse her experiences and show her that she was not at fault in any way, that she had shown great strength of spirit and character. I focused on herself as a woman. I also asked where she was going. We were almost at the bus terminal by now. I could see that she was now in two minds about her decision.

I got off with her and said I would’nt leave her till I felt I should. We sat on the pavement and talked some more. I talked about all kinds of things, especially about her body, sex taboos, and came back to the point about her spirit. Finally I asked her : “Now what are you going to do?” “I’m not going back home —not to my husband, not to my parents.”

I asked if she knew someone outside Delhi. She had a cousin sister in Gurgaon. I told her to go there for a while, reminded her that she was educated, a qualified, experienced typist and that a job should be no real problem even if she left Delhi.

And that she was much better off than a lot of other women were. I told her I wasn't deciding for her but was trying to suggest a new line of thought. I gave her my address and told her to get in touch whenever she felt like it. Then I put her on the bus to Gurgaon and went home.

I didn't hear from her at all. But last week, in Connaught Place, someone tapped my shoulder and I turned to see her — looking vastly different, happier, healthier and very much Alive ! "I lost your address. I am going to Lucknow for an interview." I was really happy and told her I was sure she'd get the job and she must keep in touch.

I am telling you this because I feel the issue of women's health, bodies, sexuality, is very important, especially in a country like ours. You see, this woman, after all that humiliation, was beginning to believe that she was dirty and repulsive....

Our struggle is going to be long and hard ...And a feeling of aloneness in times of distress is terrible. We have to tell each other that we are not alone.

Gargi Balakrishnan, Delhi

Comments on previous issue

...I liked very much the latest issue of Manushi—including the criticism of women's calendar. But I felt that the criticism's presentation was too harsh for a first attempt made by some other women's group.

The poems from *Khunte* by Ramanika are powerfully expressive, subtle and moving. I really eagerly look forward to such strong expression from women, in Manushi. Perhaps, without Manushi we would not have learnt of the existence of a book like *Khunte*.

The review of *Insaaf ka Tarazu* was more positive than I had expected. The story of this movie poses the problem of rape in such a way as if stricter laws and better courts can prevent rape! On the one hand rape as an extreme manifestation of dominating attitude of men to women is not at all depicted and on the other hand the myth that stricter laws is the answer to this problem is reinforced.

Also, do we have nothing to say

against the exposure of the body of the heroine of a movie, which is supposed to be dealing sympathetically with a burning problem of women ? Cannot the main character—a model, be shown without really exposing her ?

Jagruti Bhatt, Baroda

I was deeply pained on reading the piece on "A Women's Calendar" in the latest issue of Manushi. The more I read, the more I was convinced that such indulgence in criticism of an action of another women's group is not a very healthy exercise. I had seen the calendar some time before you had published your article. My first impression was that here is a novel idea of spreading the message. I did not take it as a document in history as you seem to do and so had no quarrel with it. Nor did I see it as something that women would contemplate every morning to sustain their belief in themselves.

It will be a long time before we have an accurately documented history concerning events pertaining to women's struggles. Till then, whatever efforts are made by any group ought not to be discouraged. As to your criticism of the knowledge displayed, all I want to say is that the knowledge of each one of us is quite limited. There is only a difference of degree in knowledge or ignorance. Even while reading your article casually, I could spot two mistakes. One is in para 3, your sentence : "On the other hand, is it not strange that legislation which was fought for by women, like the Age of Consent Bill and the Sharada Act is nowhere mentioned ?" Your spelling of 'Sharada' alerted me and I looked up some references. Shri Har Bilas Sarda had introduced a bill which was later accepted as Child Marriage Restraint Act XIX of 1929. It established minimum ages for marriage, 18 for males, 14 for females.

Another tiny error has crept in under the subtitle : "Incomplete to the point of absurdity." Your question and comment : "What was Bande Mataram ? Most people have heard this name only as Tagore's song." Correction, please. It is the first stanza of a song inserted in the novel *Anandmath* by its author Bankim Chandra Chatterjee.

You know, it is difficult to organize a group of like-minded persons, and equally difficult to achieve one thing or the other. This group has a tangible achievement and it deserves to be encouraged and praised for its efforts. If we do not have words of praise, let us not spend our ire on them.

Ila Pathak, Ahmedabad

We feel that criticism of each other's work is not only healthy but essential if the women's movement is not to stagnate in self-congratulation. We find that a great deal of criticism, instead of being openly voiced, goes on in the form of whisper and slander campaigns. This criticism tends to be directed against individual persons rather than against their work. We feel that women's groups need to guard against this dangerous tendency which could well destroy the movement in its infancy. Instead, isn't it better to generate debate in our own women's media ?

Some women have told us that they agree with what we said about the calendar but maybe we shouldn't have said it because after all, "it's a women's group." Firstly, we feel that not every group of women is a feminist group, and it is only by analysing the work done by a group that we can begin to identify and come together with each other.

Secondly, it is neither possible nor desirable for women's groups to be uncritical of each other. We feel that the tendency to impose a kind of self-censorship on each other's opinions is unhealthy as it deprives us of the opportunity for self-criticism, debate, discussion and development.

We were not criticizing the calendar only for its many distortions and omissions of fact (which are important, since the writing of Indian women's history has scarcely begun), but more importantly, for neglecting to explain its purpose and for its often anti-women tone. If, as you say, the calendar is neither meant to document women's history nor to inspire women visually, then what is it for ? Also, the idea of a women's calendar is by no means "a novel one." Women's calendars have been regularly brought out by feminist

groups in Europe and America for years now. The idea has been hastily imported without enough thinking on the question: "What is the significance and purpose of such a calendar ?"

We regret our mistake regarding Bande Mataram. As for Sharada, this name is spelt in many different ways. Though the bill was introduced in parliament by a man, it was preceded and made possible by a long struggle by women such as Rakhmabai whose historic refusal to go and live with her husband (for which she was sentenced to imprisonment) sparked off the age of consent and child marriage controversy. That is why we consider the bill a landmark in women's struggle.

—Manushi

Need to Discuss

I am writing to congratulate you on the most remarkable job of bringing out a magazine like Mamishi.

I am 16 years of age. My family is very much aware of equality between men and women (including my brother, excluding my father!) I study in Aga Khan School which is a top bourgeois school. You see, I am always discussing feminism with my sister and brother who are six and five years older than me respectively. My friends in school do not bother about fighting for their rights.

I have the need to discuss such matters with someone my age. In this way I can learn about my country and the struggles going on there, and you can learn about us here in Kenya. I come from a working class family but live in a very rich atmosphere in school and amongst my friends. Keep up the feminist struggle. You have our support.

Femida Rajan, Kenya

Protect our forests

I was prompted to write this letter on perusing the article on the Chipko movement. An article put forth by the 'Astra' centre from the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore entitled, "Cooking in the Ungra area: fuel efficiency, energy losses and opportunities for reducing firewood consumption" (Feb. 1981) concerns itself with the domestic *chula* used in the Ungra village of Karnataka...

The cooking session averaged 1.24 hrs. and it is reported that on the average there are two daily cooking sessions. From this

one concludes that on an average a person ate about one kilo of food, consuming about one kilo of fuel everyday. For the 68 crore population we have now, we need 680,000 tons of wood or its equivalent just to have one's daily mess of pottage. What does this mean in terms of growing stock in standing forests?

The planning commission's estimate in 1972 was 1,727 cubic metres or 1,362 million tons. If we take the Ungra study to base our all India consumption level, firewood consumed in the year comes to 248 million tonnes. If we depended upon the forests alone for this basic need, the rate of extraction comes to about 18 per cent of the growing stock. This is a slaughter rate and we are paying the penalty in the increasing frequency of floods and droughts. So the instincts of the Chipko pioneers are on the right lines. In India, the domestic sector consumes about 57 per cent of the energy consumed in the total economy. The pressure on our forests and other growing trees will increase with the galloping population increase, and unless we wake up in time and set about correcting this disease, the poverty at grass root level will worsen.

We must conserve our firewood by more efficient and economical management and use. To burn firewood neat as we do is not the best way. By converting it to charcoal, we can reduce the overall consumption substantially. Although some of the wood has to be burnt, the resulting charcoal is a far superior fuel and when burnt in a *sigri*, results in an efficiency approaching 30 per cent. Charcoal making using efficient modern kilns would bring in the additional cash the villagers so sorely need. Firewood is our ultimate standby after the exhaustible fossil fuel resources are gone. Fuel wood has to be grown instead of being gathered from the forests. We need more of the Chipko type movements spread all over India.

E.G.K. Rao, Karnataka

Confirming Sisterhood

...The past year has been a very difficult one for me, a culmination of several years in which I have gradually found my health deteriorating at the same time as I began to pay the usual price for being a radical

socialist....insecurity, financial and otherwise (spied on by police etc). 'But the climate in general in this country has also deteriorated : the poor are being pushed to the wall by dreadful inflation ..violence has become even more the "American way of life" in the urban areas; to live in the cities one must live with paranoia and triple locks ; crimes against women have increased drastically ; an enormous thrust of right-wing forces has taken place (a particularly insidious kind of American fascism with its overtones of fundamentalist and puritanical religious fervour and arrogant imperialist threats to the rest of the world); racist violence, always present, has also increased, with blacks being murdered systematically in several urban areas, not to mention the rise again of the Ku Klux Klan... I have also experienced this violence, "these times" in my own life, on my own person.

Last year, my small house and studio was to have been displaced. With literally nowhere to go...since the kind of space an artist needs was not available for a modest rent, I waged a long and tough struggle to fight the speculators...

...I was able to keep my studio — a triumph of sorts. But just as I began to plan for projects and work, and to go forward again, I was nearly killed by a rapist who broke into my house while I was asleep, beat me about the face severely (he was much stronger and had me pinned down so that resistance was impossible), and raped me. He tried to kill me. A crazed individual.

In fact, I had been raped and assaulted before on the street—but since I no longer went out after dark, trying to live with a stupid curfew, I thought I was "safe" !

I am recovering and healing—physically. And I am now attempting to make my house secure—literally. Unfortunately, my house is out of the way and I am a woman living alone—a "mark", it seems !

I have a great relish for life and much work to do...One never fully overcomes the violation of rape, the insufferable vulnerability or the rage which comes with it. My work and political activism helps and also telling my story to other women and confirming sisterhood...

Selma Waldman, USA