

# Letters to Manushi

## === The Recent Plague ===

So much has been written about the plague in recent days that one must justify the need for yet another piece on the disease. It appears to me that the views of the administration, the "experts," and on-site correspondents need buffering, or at least, some cautious footnotes.

People took to wearing masks as a preventive measure as if they help. The masks are a physical expression of panic, and a relic from the days of London's Great Plague and India's own frequent encounters with the scourge. Those immediately involved in the care of the infectious cases of course need, such sterile barriers, but such measures by the fellow on the street are neither useful nor necessary.

The organism that causes the plague is no exception. It must be present in a critical number before a person's defences are overwhelmed. Needless to say, this concentration is less for those with a lower resistance.

The body deals with a host of microscopic mercenaries with success daily and the fact that the body can handle isolated intrusions of the plague well has been overlooked. Consequently, the fear psychosis has caused patients to flee from the foci of infection. This is likely to frustrate every effort to provide advanced medical care for those infected.

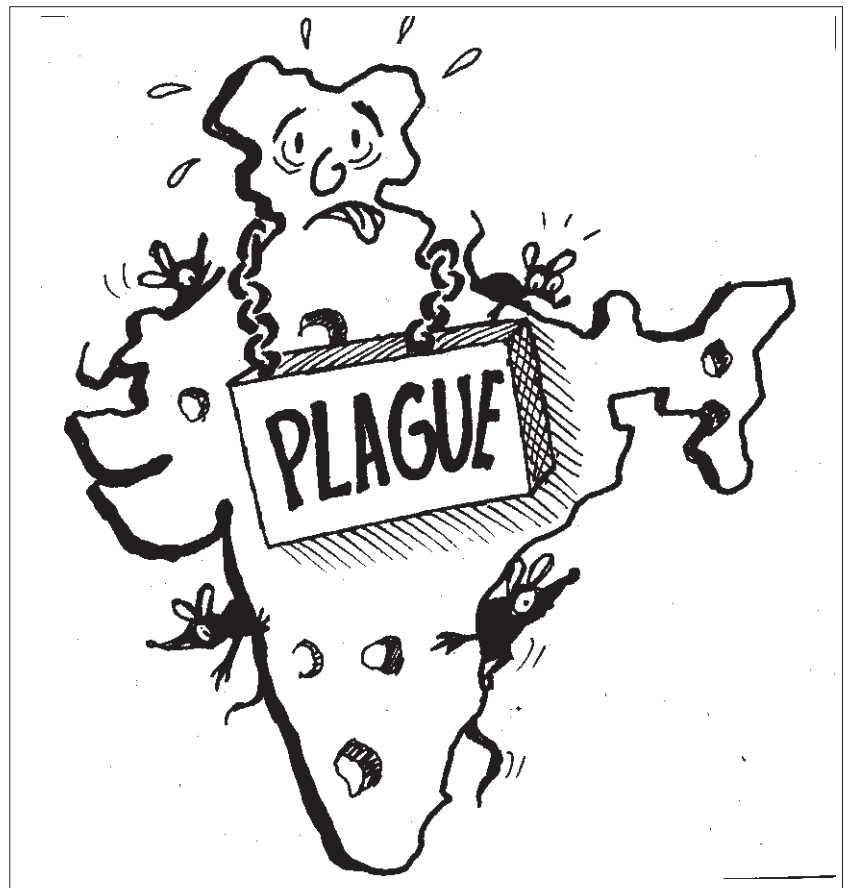
Robert Koch, a German bacteriologist, laid down four conditions that ought to be satisfied before a disease is said to be caused by a particular organism. Since the plague

is a bacterial disease with a short incubation period (the time lapse between infection and the apparent clinical symptoms) of two to seven days, Koch's conditions should be easy to fulfill. They are:

- The micro-organism must be regularly isolated from cases of the illness.
- It must be grown in a pure culture (that is, multiplied into a colony).
- When such a pure culture is inoculated into a susceptible animal species (in this case, rats), the given disease must result.

○ From the experimentally induced disease, the micro-organism must again be isolated.

Since the outbreak of the epidemic, no one in India has proved all four of these postulates. It is through the same postulates that the plague was assigned its causative organism in the first place. Nor are there a rigorous set of conditions as far as this disease is concerned. It is not even necessary to declare an outbreak, but they do reflect the pathetic state of the National Institute of Communicable Diseases and other reference



laboratories.

I cannot think of a newspaper that has not talked about the virtues of tetracycline and any word of caution about the drug has appeared too late. Tetracyclines are a family of closely related compounds, none of which have identical properties. Thus the medication's effectiveness and side-effects vary greatly. Clearly, promoting the over-the-counter sale of a prescription drug is succumbing to journalistic instincts.

Many of tetracycline's side-effects are immediate, but some take years to develop. For example, they cause permanent discoloration of the teeth in growing children. Whether the press will take responsibility for this is open to speculation.

This does not mean that other players should be let off lightly. If the press has exceeded itself by prescribing medication on its front pages, a good number of doctors have done even worse. They have pulled every political string at their command to avoid being sent into the affected areas. The annals of medicine are replete with examples of eminent men who risked their lives by deliberately infecting themselves to study a disease. The man who gave us chloroform, the molecule that defined surgery from butchery, died of its overdose. Few of those examples can be found today.

The administration's role is dubious. The first statement that there is no need to declare an epidemic came from the chief minister of the state concerned. The man has prerogatives attached to his office, but one wonders if his perceptions reflected those of either the state's Director of Health Services or the Director General of Health Services, India.

Many lame excuses have been trotted out to explain why the

outbreak wasn't preempted or prevented. Such arguments are transparently dishonest. The WHO recommended in 1970 that surveillance of plague be regularly done in endemic areas (areas where the disease persists at a definite, subtle level). In India, such surveillance need have only been done in some selected pockets in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka. The plague is a notifiable disease, and it should be interesting to know why it wasn't monitored, considering the burden it is now imposing on the health budget and the loss it's costing in human life and to industries, such as tourism.

The possibility of a plague outbreak after major earthquakes and floods increases and factors such as overcrowding, poverty, lack of hygiene, predispose India to the disease. However, little attention has been paid to these facts.

Another important factor in the human plague is contact with "wild" and "domestic" populations of rodents. Yet the extent to which such contact is promoted by our mega-hydel projects with their submergence of vast tracts of natural habitats has not been studied by anyone. Even now, the relationship of rodent control (in agriculture) to incidents of plague remains unexamined. The world's highest incidence of the human plague is in Burma and Burmese refugees are routine in the east. But immigrants have not been screened for such diseases.

India signed the Health for All by 200 A.D. Declaration of Alma-Pita in 1978. The document identified at least eight minima of Primary Health care. I reproduce the five that are relevant to the plague in the hope to show the government's failure to prevent this epidemic.

○ Education about prevailing health

problems and methods of preventing and controlling them.

○ Promotion of food supply and proper nutrition.

○ Immunization against infectious diseases.

○ An adequate supply of safe water and basic sanitation.

○ Prevention and control of endemic diseases.

There will certainly be incidences of the plague again. If it happens soon, it will be controlled. If it reoccurs much later then the typical shortsightedness may leave the ground ripe for other infectious diseases born of similar factors. The present cycle of denial, hysteria, overreaction, and brief introspection will be faithfully repeated.

But for now, the plague would have played its part if it depleted even marginally this nation's vast reserves of apathy.

**Amandeep, Chandigarh**

### ≡ Language and Identity ≡

I would like to congratulate you on the article on "*Kashmir and Kashmiriyat*." Both Pakistan and India have in a way colluded with each other in opposing any movement towards Azad Kashmir. Yet in your article you show quite clearly that any Kashmir identity based on the use of the Kashmiri language at the present time is unrealistic. The reason why those who speak Kashmiri are unwilling to write and read it is because they do not recognise that the right to speak, read and write their own natal language is a Human Right.

The only countries in the world where there is a recognition of the right of every child to speak his or her own language are Australia, Canada and perhaps Taiwan. My daughter is a senior teacher in a

primary school in Marrickville, Sydney where the children speak 18 languages from Tongan and Serbo-Croat to Italian and Russian. Where minority children form a large number in a state school, special extra teachers are employed to teach the children their own language. Parents are specifically asked not to speak to their own children in English at home. In some parts of Australia where there is a majority of speakers of a particular aboriginal language in the school, the primary school has produced special general textbooks in that language for the first three years of primary school. In French Canada the same policy has been adopted except that in the first few years of primary school, English is not allowed to be taught. In Taiwan up to last year, the only language allowed to be taught in primary schools was *gwo yu* and no other language used in Taiwan was allowed to be written in any script other than an unsuitable useless Chinese phonetic script. There is now an extremely strong movement in Taiwan to allow any language found in Taiwan to be used in schools or on TV or the radio. There are at least twenty languages in Taiwan and there is a strong movement to call all the languages spoken naturally in Taiwan as Taiwanese languages.

If one wishes to preserve one's own native language from babyhood, three things are necessary;

- the child must speak it easily in the home and in pre-school;
- the child must use the language almost exclusively in the first three years of primary school, not as a special subject but for subjects like arithmetic, story telling and spelling;
- the language must have a written script.

In Taiwan there is a great shortage of secular literature and an abso-



lute shortage of primary school material. In Australia the three or four primary aboriginal languages have their own primary school material. European languages in Australia also have suitable textbooks found in their own country. The most advanced country in respect to support of minority languages in primary school is probably Canada. In New Zealand English and Maori have both been elevated to the position of national languages and it is hoped that by 2010 everyone will speak both languages. The special feature about New Zealand however is the existence of a special pre-school movement called the Te Kohanga Reo movement which only uses Maori.

For a policy of language retention to be successful, the native language must be taught exclusively in the first three years of primary school and parents must not use English or Hindi or Urdu in the home. In experiments in Canada and in Australia it has been shown that children who are not brought up on the dominant language

do not suffer later in learning the dominant language from the upper levels of primary school.

When I first started working and living in Brahmaur in Gadaren (Gaddiland) many years ago before it became part of Himachal, the rajah in Gaddiland used to run special schools out of his privy purse for Gaddi students who used to read and write in the Tarkara script. These schools were dissolved when Chamba became part of the Republic of India. Gradually a small number of very poor quality primary schools were established in the upper reaches of the Ravi valley. At that time the teachers were all Punjabis and the students were all taught popular Punjabi songs and dances. The teachers could not speak Gaddi. They used to laugh at younger children who were dancing and singing Gaddi-style. As far as a I can tell, traditional Gaddi culture has been almost completely destroyed now.

I taught for a while at Gandhi College in Jammu when Sheikh Abdullah was Chief Minister. The language of instruction was Urdu to the strong objection of the students who wished either not to have a national language or to use Hindi. They wanted each of the three main parts of Jammu and Kashmir to use its own language.

The method of teaching and retaining one's mother language and one's native language is fundamentally different because of the different language psychology of children and adults. But once one's own native language is retained by having it written down, then the special concepts and way of thinking in one's own language are also retained and form a sound basis for learning a second or third language. How fortunate the Kashmiris are to have their own script, language and literature.

I believe it is possible to be a Kashmiri whether one be a Hindu or a follower of Islam or indeed any other religion. The ability to be able to use and handle one's own culture through one's own language should be the only criterion of national identity. To make religion the basis of nationalism whether through Islam or through becoming a supporter of Hindutva is equally wrong. But unless all children speak, read and write the same language as their parents, the basis of national identity is lost.

As a matter of interest, I was born in Varanasi in 1922 and my birth certificate is written in Persian and in court Urdu although logically I suppose my birth certificate should have been written in Sanskrit with Hindi sub-titles as Varanasi can be said to be the centre of Hindu culture.

The important thing is to speak and handle one's own culture, which one inherits from one's parents. Standardization reduces options of behaviour.

Although I believe that over 50% of the population of Ladakh is Muslim, the culture of Ladakh is certainly Tibetan yet all State schools teach Hindi. This is disgraceful as Tibetan is the basis of Ladakhi identity.

**William Newell, Sydney, Australia**

### == Partners in Struggle ==

Friendship thrives on mutual respect and trust. There is nothing as much fun as being with a friend. If I treat my wife as a friend I create a lifelong relationship of love, respect, trust, caring, and above all fun. It is as simple as that.

Why do I, as a man, have such a hard time comprehending this simple concept? The man of the '90's needs guidance. **Manushi** should make men

partners in fighting injustice. If you fight men alone in such a world — this is a man's world — your odds of winning the battle are 50/50. Men have a very strong hold on society and its tradition. If men come to the realisation that they are the perpetrators of crimes against women and start feeling guilty for their sins, they will join hands with you in your quest for the end.

**Afzaal Mahmood, Austin, USA**

### == Police Terror ==

In Andhra Pradesh the police have targeted women to unleash terror against democratic organisations fighting for a better way of life. In Andhra Pradesh arrests, torture, disrobing, rape, summary liquidation of activists and unconnected persons have become the routine practice of the police and paramilitary forces, with the judiciary and the civil administration actively abetting these outrages. The POW (Stri Vimukti), along with AIFTU and APRCS, decided to hold a two-day convention on February 13 and 14 in Karimnagar town to focus on the violation of human rights by the state. The District Civil and Police Administration, acting under the direct order of the Chief Minister, Kotla Vijayabhaskar Reddy, resorted to terror tactics to disrupt the convention. Activists pasting up posters were arrested and tortured, those raising donations from the public were arrested, the small change they'd collected in their collection tins was seized and cases of "forcible extortion" were foisted against them. Almost 500 delegates on their way to the meeting hall were arrested and let off at far away places. Hotels were raided to arrest more delegates and people were stopped on the outskirts of the town and intimidated. Members of the Reception Committee of doctors,

lawyers, lecturers, freedom fighters, sarpanches, and elected representatives of the people were also summoned and threatened with dire consequences if they assisted in hosting the meeting in any way. Many of them were kept in custody on February 12 and 13. Activists of the three sponsoring organisations divided into 35 propaganda teams, and covered more than 500 villages. All of them were arrested at different times, some of them repeatedly. The women in these teams were abused with the filthiest language. Mr. Ahuja (an advocate, and convenor of Human Rights Trust, Delhi), a special invitee, was arrested along with Vimala, our General Secretary. When he wanted to know the nature of the case and asked to see the warrant, the Police Superintendent replied — "This is Karimnagar. Here what we say and do is the law". Despite this terror, some delegates managed to enter the hall and the meeting concluded successfully on February 14. That evening we decided to go silently to the Collectorate and register our protest against this terror.

Some managed to come out of the hall. The police closed the gates behind 39 of us. Six people, including an MLA of Karimnagar District, were arrested. We women, mostly girls of 18 years and below, were beaten with lathis and rifle butts, thrown on the ground, and kicked; our clothes almost pulled off. We were pawed at, jostled and dragged by the hair and feet and bodily hurled into a waiting lorry. All the while filthiest abuse and were showered on us. Hundreds of people watched the scene in horrified silence.

Santosh Singh, a press photographer from the Telugu daily, *Andhra Prabha* (Indian Express group), was hit with a rifle butt. His camera was snatched away and smashed. The



Deputy Superintendent of Police, Rajiah is the prime accused in the murder of Ghulam Rasul, a journalist who had investigated and exposed illegal deals of prime land in Hyderabad, involving Rajiah.

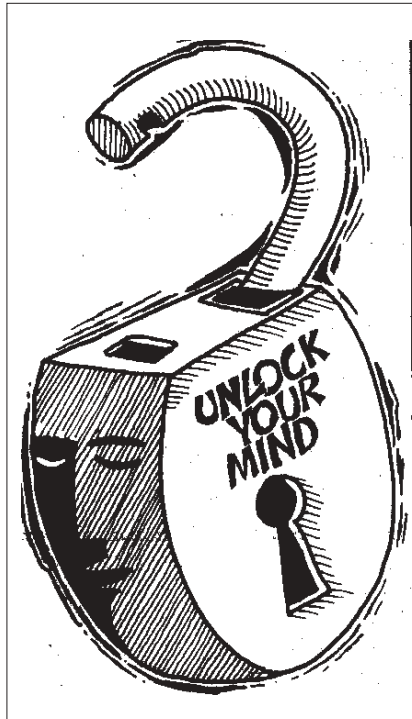
Among us were a woman four months pregnant, a high blood pressure patient and a tuberculosis patient who was poked in the chest with a lathi making him cough blood. There was one with a heart ailment, another with a kidney ailment. Vijaya, barely 17-years-old, was poked in the lower abdomen with a lathi, and to this day she passes blood.

We were produced on false charges before the magistrate at 1:30 in the morning. He bluntly refused to listen to us or receive the memorandum we wanted to give to the Collector. He ordered that the MLA and others be removed from the premises and we were sent to jail. Those with illusions of an independent judiciary will surely have their eyes opened by this open collaboration and collusion of the judiciary with the police. In jail too, we were further humiliated by being stripped for a "check".

After we were arrested and taken away in a lorry, two lorry loads of BSF men descended on the meeting hall. Books worth Rs 25,000 brought for sale by Bala Sahiti and Navodaya Publications were seized.

However, after some persuasion, the Collector agreed to see that the remaining 500 delegates were sent back safely to their destinations. But in pouring rain, the lorry bound for Warangal was made to change course half-way and stopped.

While the administration and the police went out of their way to ensure the success of a Congress Party Convention in several towns in the state, to the extent of providing buses,



depriving hundreds of villages of bus service, commandeering private services and paralysing public life in these towns, in Karimnagar they overstepped all bounds of law and humanity to stifle a voice of dissent.

Last but not the least, the Kotla Government has proved that it has criminal tendencies. It is responsible for the shooting at Nellimarla Jute Mills, violence in Karimnagar and in Nalgonda in Kurnool, countless encounters and custodial deaths, factional violence, and rampant corruption. Hence the Kotla Government should step down!

**Ambika, Stri Vimukti  
Hyderabad, A.P.**

### === Enslaved Minds ===

I am the father of two youngsters studying in IInd and Nursery class in a public school of Delhi. I would like to initiate a discussion on Change Through Education.

Under the present system all of us

are too willing to allow them to wrong us without our protesting. No matter how much injustice we face, we as a people and as individuals simply do not react. The system of formal education was supposed to promote a spirit of questioning and free enquiry - but what our children are learning is only how to act like memory banks; it seems "education" is the biggest barrier in the development of our society. We had Tulsidas, Kalidas, Kabir.... up to Premchand and it seems the hundreds of universities have yet to produce fractional equivalents. Is this a sign of the slow death of our language, culture, and educational system?

A thought producing environment demands firmness, straightforwardness and fearlessness in all spheres of life. But during my school days the key comment that I remember is 'Keep Quiet', we are trying to learn information rather than understand it.

In this decade 70 per cent of our population will be under the age of 35. The time is ripe for change. The system has to think of change, to accelerate the rate of change. Start questioning the existing systems and authorities. The industrial revolution bypassed us five hundred years ago and subsequently. We were enslaved by the Britishers.

The new information technology should not be allowed to pass us by. Everybody should have access to the new sources of information and must reach out for it. The politicians of all hues think that individuals do not exist. The fact is that the authorities rule because the people accept it. Of the thousands that might be harassed at the hands of various public officials not a hundred get together and rally to stop it. The level of our acceptance is thought to be limitless. And all this

originates because we are taught to submit starting at school level.

No matter what, the authorities are supposed to be right. The individual does not even have the right to question. The basis of the Tax System? Even the ministers and Tax Commissioners do not have a clear idea of what to believe of inspectors. The public, chartered accountants, lawyers? Universities are quietly generating only black rooted penguins rather than graduates with knowledge.

I have not studied world history but my knowledge of Indian history tells me that we produced stalwarts in the fields of medicines, metallurgy and architecture, and craftsmen of the highest calibre because people questioned the ideas, the work ethos, and changed the world.

Nothing dies faster than a new idea in a closed mind. Compel the so called authorities to keep off the individual's right to question. Among the means our rulers use to keep us in subjugation, our education system is perhaps more harmful than any other aspect in our society. The institution which should be teaching us to stand up for our rights is merely stopping us from thinking. The schools ask us to memorise 'the fundamental rights' while at the same time demonstrating that we don't have any.

The educationists must analyse and understand that the number pounds of books the child carries is not proportionate to the child's knowledge of life management.

I have said much that might seem appropriate but that decision I leave to you.

Anil Goswami, New Delhi. □

## POEM

# *An Ode and a Palinode*

## *To the Lonely Grey Hair*

*Caught between  
my forefinger and thumb  
you now stand shivering  
you bend in shame  
begging my pardon.*

*Have I ever kept my head shaggy?  
Have I ever kept it uncombed?  
Speak, O hair, speak.*

*I oiled you.  
Now and then  
shampooed you  
and kept you always trim.*

*Killer dandruff  
never dared to attack you.  
Nits and lice  
you have never heard of.  
And you know not  
unpleasant odours.*

*Why then did you turn unfaithful?  
Who bribed you, O hair,  
to change your colour?*

*The dishonest and the unfaithful  
deserve no place in my realm.  
Out you go,  
O, my one time friend  
and now my foe.*

## *To the Poet from his Hairs*

*Are we your slaves  
to dance to your comb?  
On your head we sit.  
Who else can be your masters?*

*To change colours  
is our birthright.  
And you can't stop us  
from bidding adieu to you  
when we feel like doing so.*

*You have no right to call us  
'dishonest', 'unfaithful' and  
above all 'bribed'.*

*Apologise and behave yourself.  
lest we should desert you  
with our kith and kin  
and give pension to your comb.*

P. Raja