

Readers' Forum

Readers' Forum is a new feature in Manushi. Readers often send us long letters sharing their thoughts and providing new insights into issues or situations that Manushi may not have dealt with before. Often these submissions do not fit the format of articles. Therefore, we are introducing a Readers' Forum - a space in which you can share thoughts, views and experiences with others. Letters that come to us in response to specific Manushi articles or to the magazine itself will be published separately under the new title: Responses to Manushi.

Marketing Ploy?

The sweeping of the Miss Universe and Miss World titles by Indian women, including a Miss World runner-up last year, has led to a national euphoria and the emergence of new role models for many young women in India. Questions have arisen about the ethics and credibility of international beauty contests. Are Sushmita Sen and Aishwarya Rai representative of a new confident breed of cosmopolitan and intelligent Indian women, or do they in fact highlight the growing chasm between the westernised Indian elite and the mass of neglected and subordinate Indian women?

Ironically, along with some emphasis on a more complete and intelligent female personality, a shift has occurred so that the Miss World and Miss Universe contests and their winners are being promoted and marketed as mega-events and as commodities. This massive globalisation and commodification is inevitable in the age of satellite television and in a growing free market world. It has been argued, for instance, in the columns of the *Economic and Political Weekly*, that it is a coincidence that almost all winners and runners-up in international beauty contests now tend to be from developing countries,

just when the developed nations are avidly seeking markets in the developing world. The winning of beauty contests has generated a huge demand for foreign consumer goods in countries like India, such as designer clothes and shoes, cosmetics, health club equipment, hair styling machines, and stitching machines. The beauty queens have become heroines whom self-respecting women are expected to emulate. The writer in the *Weekly* concludes that selecting beauty queens out of developing countries is turning out to be a highly successful marketing ploy for creating an effective demand for

imported goods from rich countries.

The winner, with her glamour and ostentatious life-style, becomes a role model for millions of young women who wish to ape her beauty and consumerist life-style. In order to sell herself, the winner is asked to humanise her commodification by promoting charitable functions and United Nations' objectives. A dose of national pride is injected by meetings with heads of states and by promotion of the belief that 'our women are the best'. It is often forgotten that the rules of the game serve in advancing a western cultural and commercial life-style. The beauty



crowns being awarded to India may also serve to co-opt the country within the western-dominated globalisation and free market regime, thereby strengthening its legitimacy.

Perhaps the most glaring fact highlighted by the rise of this new breed of world-class fashionable elites is the huge gap that has opened up between beauty queens and the vast majority of poor and deprived Indian women. The life of the average Indian woman is symbolised more by systematic discrimination. She has one of the lowest levels of education, health care and life expectancy among women of the world. She lives in another age and universe than Miss Universe and Miss World. She can never aspire to become one of them. The talk of beauty queens, with their expensive make-up kits and wardrobes, becoming role models for the masses of oppressed and undernourished Indian women would be amusing if it were not so cruelly insensitive. Elite India's achievements in beauty contests may well serve to cover up and disguise the plight of the majority of women.

Indian middle-class women have been very adept at reconciling within themselves the dichotomy of traditional roles and values as well as the attraction of a modern, western and commercial life-style. But the phenomenon of the affluent life-style of internationally successful beauty queens promoted by globalised economic policies and satellite television is making it difficult for middle-class women to reconcile their split personalities. It is also likely to lead to the problems of fulfilling the rising consumerist expectations triggered by this new phenomenon.

Yet pressures unleashed by the globalised elite can also be a positive factor in prompting many middle-



Paige Passano

class women to become more resourceful and independent. There is the risk that Indian women may move from one extreme of traditional values to the other extreme of western, materialistic trendy fashion. It is sad that the outer symbols of western culture and materialism like fashion, accent, and walk are imitated more than some of the positive and essential western values like individual independence.

**Prahled Singh Shekhawat,
Jodhpur, Rajasthan**

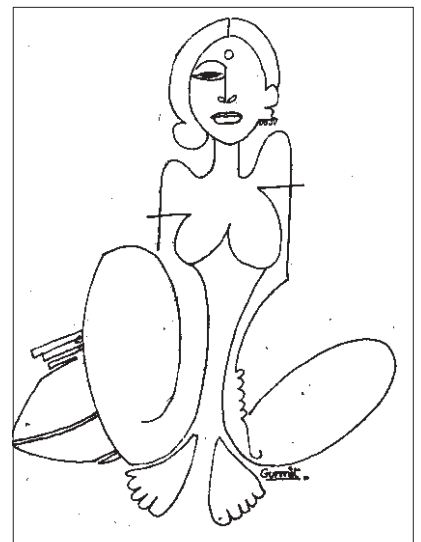
== Handling Menopause ==

As an older woman I've come to realise the significance of menopausal problems very closely. I am suffering a lot from body, bone and joint pains. For some time I've had lower abdominal pains as well as a burning sensation in my urinary tract and on the soles of my feet. I consulted homeopathic and allopathic doctors, underwent many tests (blood, urine, etc.) ultrasonography, X-rays and an electrocardiogram. The doctors couldn't find anything but two small

cysts on the ovary and kidney, which they said were too small to worry about. But the female gynaecologists were clear about one thing: that I needed to undergo a hysterectomy (removal of the uterus and some cervical part) because, as they said, I was still bleeding in my 50s. They wanted to remove the ovary, too, even though no malignancy was found!

Fortunately, later, a male gynaecologist, after doing his own D and C operation, said that no hysterectomy was required. He wanted me to come for a check-up in two to three months. He prescribed tablets for the bleeding problem. I've taken antibiotics for three weeks, but my pains are still there.

What helped me most in the situation are the books on menopause by American women's groups. I discovered that bleeding in one's 50s is not very unusual (the average age of North American women at menopause is 50 years). I've also learnt that the removal of the uterus and ovaries means a significant intervention in the process of production of hormones: male, female and sex hormones. I am surprised at the lack of sensitivity even female



gynaecologists display when they advise the removal of ovaries without hesitation. Is it because women's bodies are seen as mere baby-producing machines? When will we start taking action, having comprehended that there is a direct relationship between one's mental health and the internalisation of social roles and responsibilities thrown upon us?

Did you know that :

- Removing the ovaries of women is analogically equivalent to removing the testicles of men?
- Menopause is described as a

deficiency syndrome in some medical textbooks?

■ During menopause there is more chance of urinary tract infection as the vagina becomes less acidic?

■ The female hormone, estrogen, keeps the mucus membrane of the vagina elastic and well-lubricated, as well as protecting against osteoporosis (loss of bone density)?

■ Androgen, the sex hormones in women, are produced by the ovaries and the adrenal glands?

My joint, back, and overall body pains are due to my menopausal

phase. So having stopped doing exercises during all those months while I was undergoing tests only served to worsen the situation. For three weeks now I've been doing my yoga and walks, as well as dance exercise again, and I am already feeling much better. The pains in the lower abdomen region have lessened. I have also begun to accept that I am growing older. I can't move around as frequently as I did earlier, but I am surely not any less happy because of that.

**Asha Kachru,
Ranjhole Medak District, A.P.**

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