

## Responses to Manushi

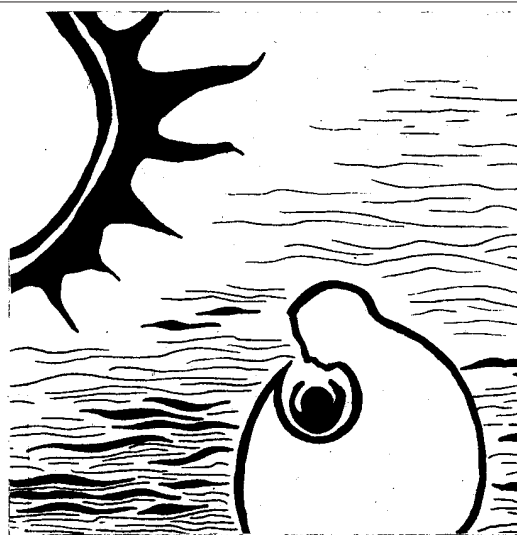
### Mothers to Daughters

My article *Mothers to Daughters*, in **Manushi** issue 84, is just a summarised exposition of a few facts on the Kerala *Marumakkathayam* system about a matriarchal people in an essentially patriarchal country.

In the article, I did not advocate any parochial approach for the revival of a way of life which has already succumbed to the socio-economic changes during the last 40 years. *Marumakkathayam* of the original style in Kerala would be an anachronism. All that is left of it today is the principle of lineage through the mother as well as property rights and equal status for women.

The *Tharavad* came into existence when men of the family were fighting wars; women, children and the aged grouped together for security and solidarity. A woman had a right in the family property not only for herself, but for her children as well. Sisters depended on their brothers for protection. The eldest woman was the head of the family and the eldest male had managerial responsibility. Though women had the right to own property, they were in a man's world and needed a brother's help. The ties with husbands or fathers were minimal. Children had no need to seek a patrimony. The *Tharavad* gave them shelter and care.

My article was not an attempt to create a rosy picture. In most other parts of the country, women had no property rights; in a *Marumakkathayam* society, women could own land, inherit family property and even purchase or sell property. When husbands proved troublesome, women could ask for a verbal divorce. She had only to tell the



eldest male member and he would tell the husband on her behalf: "Don't come anymore." That was the end of the alliance.

Even the divorce laws during British rule were easy and could unilaterally end a union. The elders of the family fixed marriages; boys and girls did not mingle with each other freely. But a girl had the right to give

her opinion if she disliked a proposal and it would generally be dropped. There was no dowry given or, in case of divorce, no alimony.

With the inevitable restrictions imposed by land legislation, the family members soon disintegrated into nuclear families and the pattern of a single *Tharavad* family home changed. Husbands for girls came from far and near, as well as from outside the family circle, and the exodus of couples from the family home started with the husbands working away from home. The Hindu Inheritance Law gave Kerala women only equal shares with the men in the property which was a come-down from getting additional shares for her children.

In *Anuloma* marriages, among important families, bridegrooms from a higher caste were preferred. It was believed that the *Anuloma* union produced better children.

'Sex mad and promiscuous' men, like Soori Namboodiri in the Malayalee novel *Indulekha*, the critique concludes, is a general pattern. Such a behaviour pattern is not common. In *Indulekha*, she had the right to refuse the proposal, which she used. There are sex-mad and promiscuous men in every community.

In a *Tharavad* with so many of the woman's relatives living in her house

where the husband comes wife visiting, no husband dared to ill-treat his wife at her home or try to subjugate or sexually exploit her. "Subjugation and sexual exploitation" are said to be the hallmarks of the *Marumakkathayam* system. On the contrary, it was the very opposite.

The *Marumakkathayam*, in its old form, with every member of the family including women having property rights, was an example of a cooperative way of life. The system extended not only to Nair families, but Thiyyas and some Muslims as well. The break-up of the system has not destroyed the fundamentals. The lineage is still traced through the mother for the Marumakkathayees. Kerala women, it is believed, are so much

better educated than women of other Indian states as a result of the equal place and dignity of the Marumakkathayam woman.

**Leela Damodara Menon, Cochin, Kerala**

### Unwanted Daughters

In Madhu Kishwar's article, *When Daughters are Unwanted* (Manushi 86) she has stated that communities with low sex ratios tend to be more misogynistic and those with high sex ratios allow for greater female autonomy. I think this statement needs to be slightly altered. It is misogynist communities that have a low ratio and communities where there is a strong matriarchal system, or who value female dignity, have higher ratios.

This distinction, though apparently small, is important. A drastic socio-cultural and attitudinal change will first be needed to help raise the sex ratio in misogynistic communities. Earlier, even in non-matrilineal societies, female children were not unwelcome because of the merit attached to *Kanyadaan* (I am not arguing in favour of this social practice and attitude, but merely stating a fact). With dowry having assumed malignant proportions, this has changed.

When the sex ratio falls, incidents of rape and sexual violence will assume even more alarming dimensions. I agree with you that the problem is complex and there are no easy solutions.

**Kamala Jaya Rao, Hyderabad, AP**

### Subscription Correspondence

In all your correspondence with us, including your subscription renewals, please write your full address CLEARLY. When renewing subscriptions, please include your subscription number. This number appears on the top left hand corner of the envelope in which each copy is mailed to you. This helps us process your subscriptions promptly.

### Write For Manushi

Our readers often write and ask if they can write for Manushi. We are happy to consider the writing of even those who have never written before. When sending us manuscripts, please send us two copies with a self addressed stamped envelope.

### Among Others Manushi is available at:

#### THIRD WORLD BOOK STORE

Above Mapusa Clinic  
Mapusa,  
Goa 403 507

#### ALTER MEDIA

Utility Bldg., Nehru Bazar,  
Thrissur 680 001

#### MANNEYS BOOK SELLERS

7 Moledina Road,  
Poona 411 001

#### GEETANJALI BOOKS

Luzginza,  
140 Royapettah High Road,  
Madras 600 004

#### PEOPLE TREE

8 Regal Building,  
Parliament Street,  
New Delhi 110 001.

#### M.S.P. RAO

W & D Micron Mica Co. Pvt. Ltd.  
17/736, Rangeen Mahal Street,  
Nellore 524 001

### Notice to British and Irish Subscribers

Kari Shah of Surrey is no longer handling our subscriptions for England and Ireland. If you have issued any cheque to her please cancel and issue a fresh cheque. You can either send the cheque directly to Manushi or to Sandra McNeill who has volunteered to handle subscription queries from now on. Her address is:

**Sandra McNeill, 3 Upland Crescent, Leeds LS8 2TB West Yorkshire, England.**

### FOR OVERSEAS SUBSCRIBERS

You can also order subscriptions from the following Manushi distributors:

**In the USA :** R. Narang  
75 Fieldston Terrace  
Rochester, NY 14610

**In Canada :** Khursheed Ahmed  
96 Haddon Ave.  
Hamilton, Ont.  
L8S4A5

**In Australia:** Jennifer Severn  
4 Hale St  
Kew East VIC 3102