

Readers' Forum

== What's in a Surname? ==

I got married recently and am working in a central government department. I strongly object to having to change my surname, but everyone is saying that if I do not change it, I will face many problems in the future regarding leave, finance and loans.

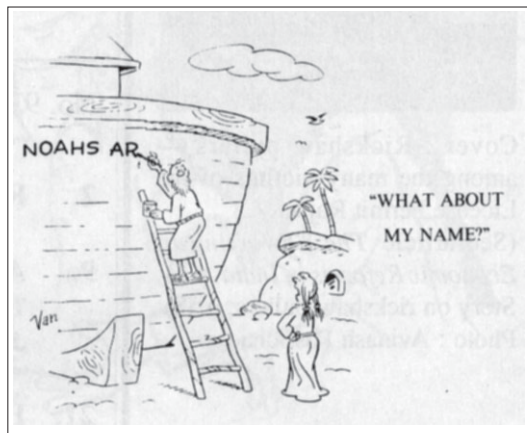
Please tell me what I can do to retain my father's surname because whatever I have become at this stage is because of my father's effort. It has nothing to do with my in-laws. If I do retain my surname, what are the likely problems that I will face in the future? If I retain both surnames — Dr Geeta Shukla Chaturvedi — will this solve the problem? This may seem like a small matter for many, but it is very important for me. Not only are my in-laws against this, but nobody is supporting me, not even my father and relatives from my father's side. Please suggest the name of a good lawyer who can guide me.

Geeta Shukla, Allahabad

The tradition of surnames came with British rule. The colonial government introduced a great deal of bureaucratic formalities into the system of governance requiring people to fill out forms for everything. These forms were drafted on the assumption that everyone has a "first name" or "Christian name" and a "second name" or surname following the pattern followed by certain

*dominant groups in England. Most of the newly adopted surnames appear to have been newly coined. People took their caste, village, occupational name or father's first name as a surname and Christian converts adopted Biblical names or the name of the missionary who had converted them. You might want to read the article, Was Sita Mrs Ram? in *Manushi* No. 39 of 1987 for a more detailed analysis of the impact and consequences of this change brought about by the British.*

In the South, even today, it is a common practice to attach the father's initial before the child's name — e.g., K. Murthy or S. Radha. This does not change after marriage. In some places, people are frequently identified by their place of origin, such as Surjit Singh Barnala, where the last name is that of his village. But for his wife to be called Mrs Barnala is somewhat ridiculous, for that would imply that she is the wife of the village Barnala. Nurjahan was never called Mrs Shahjahan nor was Sita called Mrs Ram, but referred to as Janaki (daughter of Janak), Maithili (hailing from Mithila), or occasionally even wife of Ram, just as Ram would be referred to as husband of Sita. Kunti's sons are called Kaunteya.



In my view, for a daughter to carry her father's name after marriage is a bit inappropriate if her father believes in disinheriting her in favour of her brother, and she is considered paraya dhan. Denying daughters an inheritance share amounts to declaring that she is not a full member of her parental family; her rights cease to exist and are henceforth transferred to her husband's family. If inheritance is to come to a woman only from a husband, then maybe it is more appropriate to adopt his name to signify her full claim to her rights in that family.

-Editor

== Actions Against Liquor ==

The global problems of drug-abuse and alcoholism have long been inextricably linked with the destruction of family and community, crime, personal and public health

problems. India, too, is far from free of this problem.

In India there is a constitutional provision under Article 47, dealing with illicit drug use and alcoholism. But because this issue is dealt with at the state level, it has been implemented in various ways by different states at different times. It was Mahatma Gandhi, an advocate of total prohibition, who as part of the freedom struggle encouraged women to protest against alcoholism and its related issues, from 1930 onwards. Recently, news from various corners of India indicates that women are again fighting against alcoholism.

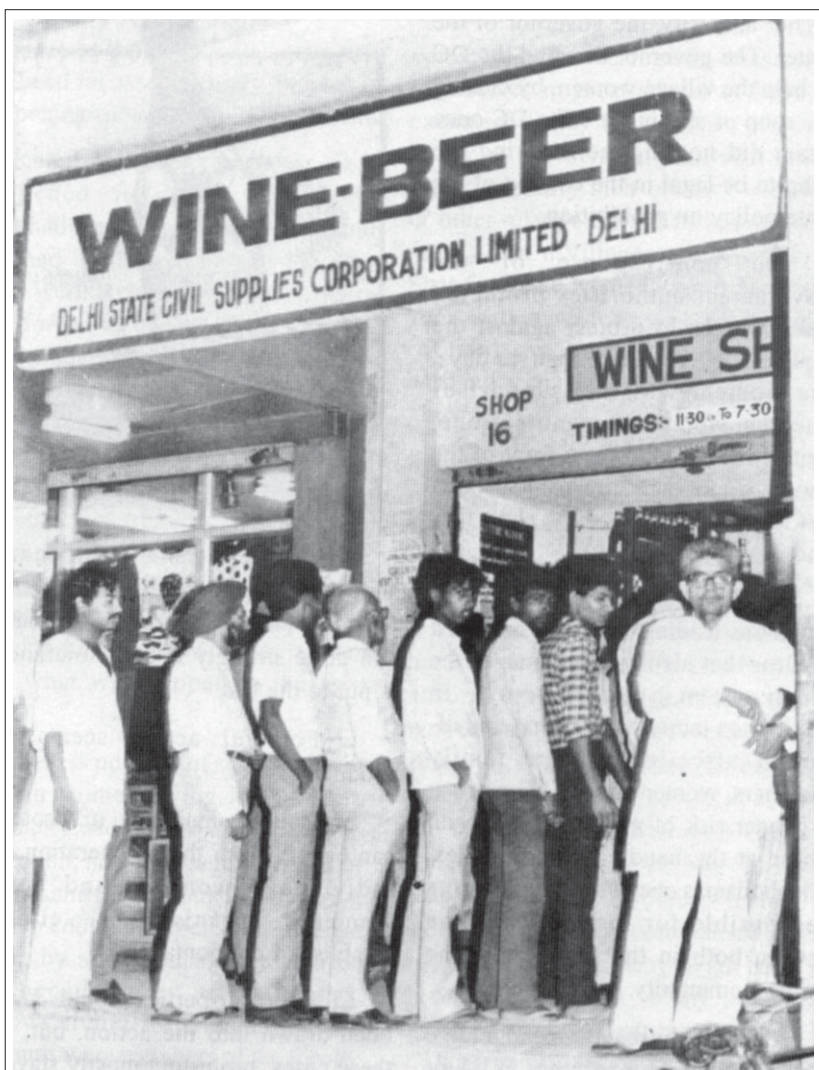
Andhra Pradesh is a wet state in southern India. Rural and poor women of AP have been victims of domestic abuse intensified by heavy drinking among their men. Being poor and illiterate, the women tolerated this behaviour for a long time but then suddenly revolted. It so happened that several girls in a school class of a small village, while hearing the story of a female victim whose husband was a drunkard, perceived the story as their own life story. Women of the village widely protested — not only against the alcohol policy of the state and the issuing of liquor-selling licenses to contractors in the village, but also against the drunkard males. Their demand was simple: “No selling and no drinking”. Male drunkards were garlanded with shoes and onions, and made to ride donkeys through the village. Women armed with wooden sticks collectively stormed liquor shops and destroyed bottles of alcohol, beating those who got in their way. In spite of the hurdles, they did not give up and finally won the battle in the village. Though all of this occurred at the micro level, stories of their success

travelled like wildfire, influencing women in other villages, and eventually it turned into a revolution covering about 500 villages in eight districts in AP. They received co-operation from various organisations and individuals. It is also interesting to note that auto-rickshaw drivers and taxi-drivers, though said to be partners in the alcohol trade in my part of the region, co-operated with the women, refusing to take drunkards as passengers.

In Manipur, a wet state of eastern India, male drunkards, instead of earning for their families, were

drinking and beating their womenfolk. In protest, about 3000 women organised themselves into squads. These squads stormed liquor shops, brought out the men, stripped them naked, and paraded them through the village tied to donkeys until they promised to give up drinking.

The village Pathar of the Saharanpur district of the wet state of Uttar Pradesh has a population of 10,000. In this village, one indication of the high level of liquor consumption was the daily profit of one five year old liquor shop:



Rs 10,000 per day! Both men and children spent more on alcohol than they earned. To bridge this gap, men were selling kitchen utensils from their homes, and stealing household money. Children looted the cashbox of a grain shop three times to purchase alcohol. Sexual assaults also took place; women found it dangerous to move about in the village after dark. All these situations forced the women to view the liquor shop as their enemy. First they approached the district collector (DC), requesting that he either close down the shop or shift it out of the village. When the DC did nothing, the women approached a higher authority, the governor of the state. The governor directed the DC to help the village women, by closing the shop or shifting it. The DC once again did nothing, considering the shop to be legal in the context of the state policy on prohibition.

The non-response of the government authorities prompted these women to protest against the liquor shop. For more than 40 days, the women, with the support of various women's organisations, agitated with a slogan in front of the shop, "Come here, my sisters, let us get together to destroy the shop first and liquor bottles next."

From the above descriptions of the situations leading to protest action, it is clear that alcoholism damages the family system in numerous ways. In addition to increasing poverty and ill-health affecting all the family members, women and children are at a greater risk of physical and sexual abuse at the hands of drunk males. Alcoholism is one of the major factors responsible for increasing crime levels, both in the family and the larger community.

Alcoholic husbands spend a large percentage of their earnings in liquor

shops. When money gets scarce, many of them take their wives' personal income, savings, jewellery, or household items to sell at a reduced price to support their habit. If women resist, they are likely to be heavily beaten. The economic burden of trying to meet the bare needs of the family falls heavily on women's shoulders.

A few inferences can be derived from the cases described:

□ The protests against alcoholism have emerged in wet states in villages and rural poor women have played a key role.



□ Despite their traditional stereotype of being weak, docile and fearful, women can be aggressive and can unite strongly if their tolerance is put to the test.

□ Forceful action seems to produce results.

□ Isolated incidents of protest can benefit from the co-operation of individuals, women's and non-women's organisations, either established or spontaneous.

□ Political parties could have been drawn into the action, but, in these cases, protestors mostly stayed

clear of any such politics and political parties.

In the Sixth National Conference on Women's Studies in India, I was responsible for the sessions on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse. In one of the sessions, Ms Radha Bhatt, activist and social worker, described her protest activity and its success in North India. She added that the success of her protest could not be sustained for long. This raises the following questions which need further study:

□ How can the success of these cases be sustained and extended?

□ How do these current protests differ from those that were undertaken by women during the freedom struggle?

□ What was the background of the women who got involved in these protests?

□ What are the conditions that impel women to unite and act forcefully?

□ Why do we hear only about rural women, and not urban women, acting so forcefully?

□ What could be done to extend the influence of these cases to cover all of India?

□ How can women's action groups take up this issue to improve the quality of life for their fellow women?

Haribhai G Patel, Gujarat

Ants in the Pants

In 1986, the Supreme Court struck down the Travancore Christian Succession Law which stated that:

A daughter shall inherit one fourth the share of a son or Rs 5000.00, whichever is less.

It was automatically replaced by the Indian Succession Act by which intestate property is equally divided among sons and daughters and the widow inherits a one-third share.

It is extraordinary that in 1995, the Christian male-dominated community in Kerala, assisted by the chauvinistic church and the chauvinistic legislature, continues attempting to water down the Supreme Court judgement and to revalidate and revive the old gender discriminatory law.

At the same time there are demands by women's groups all over India for a uniform civil code, in order to ensure a better deal to women who have been discriminated against by the personal laws of their religions.

In Kerala, there was not a murmur of dissent during the last hundred years when women were cruelly discriminated against. But now, every couple of months, the government is made aware of the "inconvenience" caused to Christian males. In fact, Minister K.M. Mani feels that if legislation is delayed, an ordinance must be passed to revalidate the old Succession Act for a retrospective period of thirty years! The Church is obviously suffering from a bad case of ants in the pants, and Minister Mani feels that his solicitous care of Christian males is necessary to get himself re-elected.

Mary Roy, Kerala

== Afghan Women's Rights ==

Front page headlines report about the battles going on in Afghanistan. But what is happening to the people of Afghanistan, particularly the women, who have suffered the most in this ongoing civil war? Although there are regular reports about violation of women's human rights in

Judek Maiwand, Courtesy: UNHCR



Wreckage of Kabul

Bosnia and India, very little attention has been focussed recently on what is happening to women in Afghanistan.

Kabul residents remember what happened in 1992, when the mujahadeen were fighting in Kabul and had destroyed most of the city. Girls were abducted by commanders and forced into marriage and some commanders were reported to have as many as ten "wives". If the girls or their families objected or resisted they were often killed. Many families sent their girls and women away, often to Pakistan. Some families in Kabul fear a repeat of the violence of 1992. One Afghan woman described the women in Kabul as "like the living dead, with no hope for tomorrow. They are not sure what will happen in the next hour."

There is no hope of safe return for Afghan women living in Pakistan, especially widows. Widows have no protection, no right to employment or benefits and no guarantees of security. Women could be targeted for revenge killing by a particular party or tribe just because they are educated. Widows living in Pakistan, whose husbands were members of the former

communist-backed regime, consider themselves in great danger of being executed if they try to return home. Many widows in Afghanistan are forced to marry their brothers-in-law or other relative from their husband's family. In a village near Mazar-i-Sharif, village women claimed that a year ago a widow was hung for refusing to marry her deceased husband's cousin.

In Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif, women are working in offices, schools and government agencies. However, they feel insecure as there is no legal protection of women's human rights, and no guarantee of personal safety. In the past, many Afghans assumed that women would be protected by the cultural traditions that respected women as wives and mothers. However, with the disintegration of society during the long period of civil war, traditions which had established some respect for women have disappeared. As no women's human rights have been institutionalised by law, women have nothing to fall back on and no protection. Many women in Kabul, especially educated women and widows who feel more vulnerable,

fear that if the Taliban comes to Kabul, women will be forced to remain inside their homes. In Kandahar and Herat, the Taliban have already forbidden women to work outside their homes and have closed all schools for girls. Boys' schools have also been affected because many of them have female teachers who have been forbidden to work by the Taliban. Female Afghan community health workers employed by Emergency Relief Unit (ERU), an NGO in Taliban-controlled Jalalabad, have been harassed by *shura* (council) members for working in the displaced persons camps. One female health worker who was being driven to a camp was stopped by the local militia and her driver was arrested for suspected immoral activities, (that is, driving a car with a woman in it who was not related to him). The woman was also threatened. In July, 1995, the *shura* in Jalalabad forbade the ERU's 300 female community health workers to continue working. This had happened earlier in the year, when women employees from office workers to cleaners were suspended by the UN on the order of the *shura*.

As a result of these recent restrictions, UNICEF decided to suspend programs in Taliban-controlled areas unless girls were allowed to go to school. Some international NGOs have also suspended their work because of their belief that development work is impossible without including Afghan women and girls. Hermione Youngs, the director of ERU's women's programmes, responded by suspending the sanitation programme which employed 2,000 men. When the men complained, she asked them to talk to the *mullahs* and the *shura*. Because of community pressure to restore the sanitation programme, Youngs was told by the *shura* that she

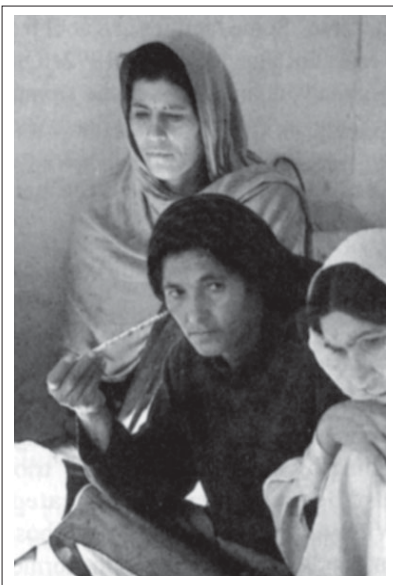
could re-open the women's community health programme as long as the women workers dressed and behaved appropriately, that is, wore the *hijab* and did not wear any makeup.

Though there are a few women in the government in Kabul, they are rarely consulted and are not part of the decision-making process. The Cooperation Center for Afghanistan (CCA) held a seminar on October 15-19, 1994, in Mazar-i-Sharif calling on the UN to include women representatives in the peace talks and on advisory committees. The seminar passed 23 resolutions against all decrees contrary to women's human rights, including the protection of widows, the disabled, and the displaced. This seminar also called for the following measures: ensuring the presence of women in future legislative bodies, securing through legislation a woman's right to choose her spouse, protecting her ownership rights and other social rights in accordance with Islamic principles, and ensuring that men provide equal opportunities for the care and

education of female and male children.

The UN Human Rights Committee is urged to investigate the women's rights situation in Afghanistan and to monitor the peace process to ensure the active participation of Afghan women and the institutionalisation of women's rights in any transitional accords. The Committee should consider appointing a female counterpart group or a special commission to work with UN Special Envoy Mahmoud Mestiri, which would concentrate on making contact with Afghan women from all ethnic, tribal, religious groups and social classes to ensure that they are heard and given due consideration. Women need to get better organised so they can document what is happening to Afghan women and girls, as well as to obtain more training in communication and leadership skills, such as organising meetings, workshops and news conferences, and writing letters, articles and reports. Since women are more committed to working towards peace in Afghanistan, a lasting peace is not possible without their active participation.

**Pamela Collett, Islamabad,
Pakistan**



== Women in Black ==

The former Yugoslavia is a great place to learn about hope. In the face of an absurd war, with barbarous acts of the worst kind, there are groups of courageous people, mostly women, working to heal physical and emotional wounds, to learn and teach practices of non-violent conflict resolution, and to protest against the war.

To be a woman refugee in this war is to live with painful memories, deep

questions and boundless loneliness. Many feel neglected, judged harshly, and misunderstood by the outside world. For a reason incomprehensible to most of them, they have been through a deeply traumatic time and now find themselves severed from everything familiar. For women of all sides, the war has marched through their living rooms; armed men came home with their weapons, swaggering with their own power, or cowering from the guns of others. These men who have been wandering about, raping and pillaging, have brought their brutality home. Family violence has risen markedly. On all sides of the war, some men have returned (if they are so lucky as to come home) with internal wounds and bearing guns which are now directed at the women who must live with them. In addition to the actual wounds experienced by the women, there is a pervasive fear of rape and violence as they feel the instability in the men with whom they live. Nothing is at all "like it used to be." Refugees are assigned to live with families; and the economy is riddled with inflation due to smuggling. It is safe to say that the war has intimately affected the lives of all women and men in the Balkans.

In Belgrade an interesting group called Women in Black exists, which dares to object to the war. Composed of an ethnically mixed group of feminists and refugees who have come to Belgrade from Bosnia/Herzegovina and Croatia, Women in Black is loosely aligned with similar groups protesting against violence directed at women and war in general all over the world. Since the cost of gasoline is prohibitive and buses are often over-crowded, some of the women walk many miles to come to these demonstrations and to work in the office. In all of the former Yugoslavia,

Women in Black is the only women's group steadily standing on the streets against the war. Every Wednesday in Belgrade their offices begin to hum. Women dressed in black come and go, bringing signs, leaflets, and food. At 3 o'clock they start moving towards Republic Square where they will stand silently for one hour with a large sign, "Women in Black Opposed to War". The women also carry signs reading,



"No Forced Mobilisation", and, "Desertion is an Alternative to War". Often one woman moves among the passing citizens talking with them, handing out the leaflet for the day.

From Women in Black's pamphlet *We Are*, written in 1994:

"We are a pacifist women's group founded on October 9, 1991, in Belgrade. Dressed in black, every Wednesday we silently protest in downtown Belgrade against the war, militarism, nationalism, ethnic cleansing, rape of women in war and sexism.

Since the beginning of the war in ex-Yugoslavia most members of pacifist organisations have been

women. Women's participation in such organisations is taken for granted in the sense that activities such as caring for others, healing the wounded, giving shelter and consolation are considered their "natural" role. Having realised that these feminine traits are misused in a militarist society such as ours and that even the democratic opposition and the peace movement repeat

patriarchal models, we decided to make our resistance to war public — not as a part of our "natural" role but as a conscious political choice. We wanted to express our non-violent opposition to a militaristic regime, compulsory mobilisation and war-mongering as well as to express our respect for ethnic, confessional (religious), ideological and sexual difference.

We wear black clothes as a sign of mourning for all the known and unknown victims of this and all other wars, for the destroyed cities and disrupted inter-ethnic and inter-cultural relationships.

Black clothes are a warning to those who initiate wars.

Black clothes are an expression of our resistance to war. We refuse to be hostages of a militaristic regime. We refuse to be reduced to the role of helpless victims.

Why are our protest rallies conducted in silence?

Words are superfluous in this horrible tragedy and silence is the best expression of our indignation against militaristic regimes, especially the Serbian one, as well as against war-mongers and those who incite hatred.

The lives of most Serb citizens are marked by silence; the regime-controlled media have silenced them. But our silence is **VISIBLE**; it is an invitation to everyone to think about themselves and about those whose lives and homes have been destroyed: about the dead, about abducted, missing and imprisoned persons, about raped women

Our **VISIBLE, PERSISTENT, NON-VIOLENT** protest is at the same time our way of telling a regime which has abrogated the right to speak on behalf of the entire "Serbian ethnic collectivity": **DON'T SPEAK IN OUR NAME, WE SHALL DO THAT!"**

In 1995 Women in Black wrote in *Women for Peace*:

"We are still, after three and a half years, in the streets of Belgrade. When it rains, when the city is chained in frost, when the summer heat simmers, and when we rejoice in the spring flowering, and when the autumn brings sadness..."

Sometimes there are only a few of us. But we know that those who are not present, those who are physically unable to come, are with us... While we stand on the Square, we have quite often witnessed the various forms of

verbal warfare in the different reactions to our protest. These reactions reflect the political events and currents as they are presented in the mass media's manipulation of the public opinion, with great precision. These reactions almost completely correspond with the attitudes instigated by the regime media (which prevails in Serbia) about everyone dissimilar. The prevalent position in the said media is that the entire anti-war movement, equated with the independent media, is "bribed and traitorous"... Political police quite frequently summon us for the so-called "informative briefing"; a few times we were also ordered to appear in front of the local courts, supposedly for the "breaking of public peace and order".

But we, *the small yet determined feminine opposition to war*, shall still remain in the public streets."

Fran Peavey, California, USA

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