

Responses to Manushi

A Waste of Energy

I was appalled to read about Dr Sushama Merh's struggle against Mr Bhatia in Issue 94. (He doesn't deserve to be called a doctor anymore.) His name is a shame, not only to the academic profession but to mankind. If all men were like him, there wouldn't have been a Ram, a Lakshman, a Shivji, or a Vivekanand. Everyone responsible for delaying action in this matter should be immediately relieved of his current duty, title, and position. I could not believe that it took so long for the powers that be to do what should have been done promptly.

Congratulations on your excellent article in the same issue entitled *Who am I?* Like all your previous articles, I am amazed at your knowledge and reading and at your capacity to start with one subject and cover a whole gamut of subjects — from Sita to non-resident Indians (NRIs) to political identities to Hindutva to Pakistan — under an all-pervasive title like *Who am I?*

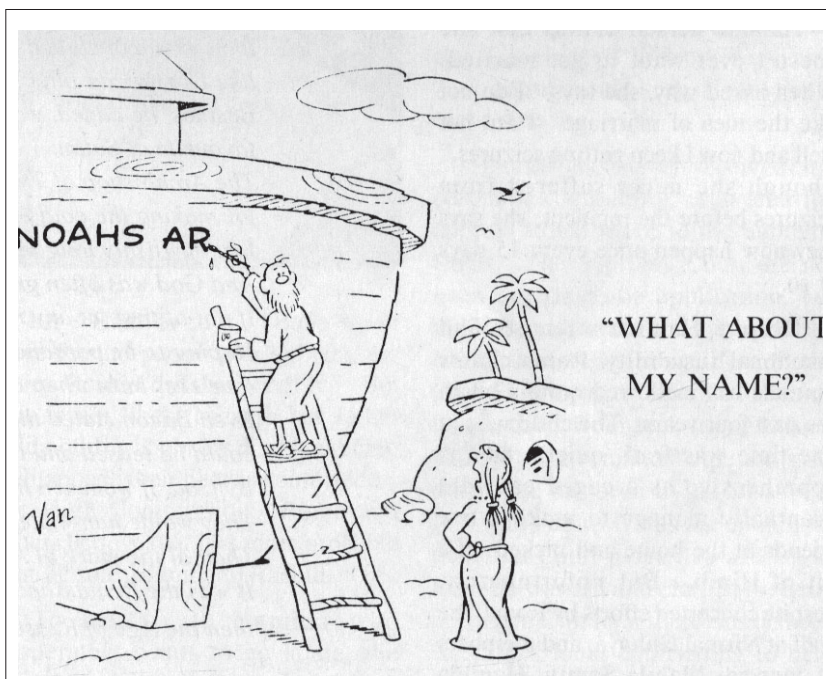
I have one point of disagreement with you. You connected the post-marital name changes to a 'loss of identity' complex. I think Freud was the greatest fraud to have emerged out of western civilisation and we, in India, would do well not to follow the West blindly in this area of identity assertion through choice of names. I



am sure that you are aware that since the 1960s, this name change solution has been tried by many women in the West. It hasn't worked. The practice of retaining one's maiden name hasn't yielded any improvement in women's social status or treatment, which isn't

surprising, since this is a band-aid type of solution to the real problem of the injustice against women in society.

And where do you stop with this type of solution? What about the children from the marriage? Are they going to bear their father's last names or their mother's? If they bear their father's last name, we are back to the problem of the feeling of insecurity among mothers and daughters. Otherwise we are going to give hyphenated last names to the children. In the West, the hyphenated names didn't change anything for women. They still had to fight with the same social stumbling blocks, only with longer last names.



These days, many women are going back to changing their last name after marriage. On a personal note, I changed my first name a couple of times upon coming to the US because I couldn't stand its mutilation by non-Indians. Changing my name didn't cause me any loss of identity. I was still me by any other name.

If you want to change this man's world to make it gender-neutral or 'women-friendly', you're picking the wrong fight. The fight to retain your maiden name isn't going to change anything, not even your sense of insecurity. Look somewhere else for your feeling of powerlessness in this male-dominated world and change those very things that make it a man's world.

People like you who can affect a change should concentrate your efforts on fighting injustice, changing laws where necessary, and most of all fighting against inequality at every level, especially for women. You are doing an excellent job to increase the awareness among men and women about women's plight. Don't waste your valuable time and effort on things like first names and last names. Don't fall into the western trap.

**D.V. Gokhale, Los Angeles,
California, USA**

The Only Solution?

Manushi carries a lot of informative and interesting material in every issue (Asha Kachru's article is one example) but it is for thought-provoking articles like *Who am I* that I personally value **Manushi** most. These articles articulate the concerns to which most of us would give very high priority but are not fortunate enough to be able to devote our undivided time and attention to. It is not only the choice of the theme of



Sue Darlow
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'*Who am I*' that is so impressive but also the organisation, the treatment, and above all, the tone of moderation that is unexpected in a person apparently fired by missionary zeal for causes so grossly abused. Perhaps the voice of a conservative rebel has a better chance of being heard in India, though at times one wonders whether this does not imply making concessions where none are deserved. A practical solution may sound an eminently more sensible thing than a radical one, but in Indian society it is status quoism that often masquerades as practicality. I don't say that this is what you are doing when you say that the solution to the question of an Indian (Hindu?) woman's identity is for her to secure and strengthen her rights in her parental home rather than with her husband and in-laws, but I do wonder why you think the solution does not lie in strengthening the nuclear family. Why must the "key

element" of the woman's secure identity, "a roof over her head that she can call her own" be sought either in the parental or in the in-laws home, the two "key elements" that have been responsible for the destruction of the Indian woman's identity in the first place? Western society found the solution to the problem of a woman's identity in the nuclear family, and to me, it appears that it is the only workable solution. A women's identity has a much better chance of survival in a family that she helps to create and in which the contending forces are more manageable. The nuclear family provides a potential framework in which decisions such as whether or not to adopt the husband's surname have the likelihood of being viewed more rationally. In fact, the relatively more level playing field of a nuclear family may even ensure, as it seems to have done in the West, that the question of "Whose surname?"

ceases to be significant and plays no role in determining the *de facto* identity of a woman, and presents no obstruction to her economic independence, so crucial to her independent identity. But central to those rights in the case of a large majority of Indians is the right to equal education and equal nourishment rather than the right to property.

You have been very restrained in your assessment of the India-baiting NRIs. They can let go of India, but as you point out, does India let go of them? While your explanation that the negative reactions of these people to their own country may be accounted for by their lack of cultural and

emotional roots in their country, it does not quite explain how a human being can survive in an emotional and cultural airlock.

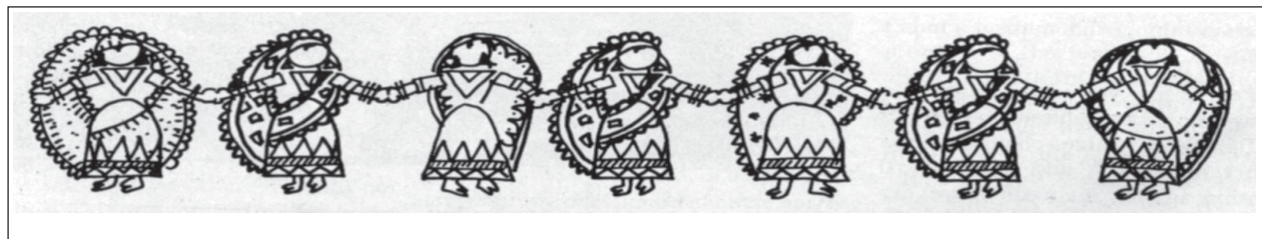
PP Sah and Nalini Sah, Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh

I don't think the western woman has solved her identity problems through nuclearisation of the family. The rapid breakdown of families in the West and the emotional, economic, and social stress that it has caused (not just for women but especially for children) shows that they are nowhere near a solution. They are just confronting a different set of

problems. Moreover, for women pursuing careers outside the home, a nuclear family set-up is far more difficult than a joint family set-up, especially when the latter plays a supportive role.

I am well aware of the abuses of our joint family system but we need to also acknowledge its advantages. I firmly believe that a family which has no place for old parents is no family. I will return to this theme at greater length in another article because you have raised a complex issue which I cannot answer adequately in this response.

-Madhu Kishwar



Tell us a Story

Each of the regional languages of India has a vast and rich repertoire of grandmother's tales, folk stories, poems, sayings, jokes, witticism, etc. Unfortunately, these are inaccessible to those of us unfamiliar with languages other than our own mother tongue.

We invite **Manushi** readers to share with us what has struck you as significant from this repertoire in your mother tongue, that has not previously appeared in English. Please send us the original with a fresh English translation, identifying its oral or written source.

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