

Responses to Manushi

No to Past, Yest to Future

I read the article *Reaching the Unreached, Enabling Dalit Girls to Get Schooling* by M.V Sreedhar in MANUSHI 111. It was, indeed, a very good presentation of ISDGEI's work in Kolhapur. This institute seems to have evolved a somewhat original approach for dealing with the special situational needs and problems of the Dalit girls, such as attaining proof of birth, need for transfer certificate, inconvenient school hours, etc. Having been a teacher of physics myself, I highly appreciate their educational philosophy.

Contextualising Vande Mataram by Man Ahmed (MANUSHI 111) seems to me the outpouring of a confused mind who has chosen to harp on past enmities and blow them out of proportion rather than look forward. As far as I remember, the recent controversy which Ahmed talks about was over the compulsory singing of *Saraswati Vandana* in the government-run schools, and not over *Vande Mataram*. The controversy arose when a number of education ministers walked out of a conference convened by the HRD minister in October 1998, thus showing their opposition to a formal invocation to Saraswati, the goddess of arts, science and culture.

I read a Hindi translation of Bankim Chandra's *Anandmath* when I was about twelve. I remember being deeply stirred by the book even at that tender age, but without having felt any acrimony towards Muslims. Now fifty-two years later, though I

remembered the story, I could not remember the exact context of *Vande Mataram*. So I bought a recent Hindi translation of *Anandmath* and read it all over again. I also read the history of Bengal for the second half of the 18th century - the period in which the book is set. I would, now, like to make the following points.

1) Irfan Ahmed admits that *Vande Mataram* was written earlier than *Anandmath* and was inserted later on. The song was, indeed, just an expression of the writer's intensely reverential feelings for his motherland. The song should be viewed as such, without any connotation.

2) As regards the actual context of the song, Bhavanand (one of the main characters of the book) is deeply moved by the beauty of the land, hills and the river in the moonlit night. He is so overwhelmed by the breathtaking splendour of the ambience that he wants to share

these overpowering emotions with Mahendra, whom he has just rescued from the soldiers. Since Mahendra is still wondering about Bhavanand's identity and bonafides, he does not respond. Unable to contain his feelings, Bhavanand bursts into singing *Vande Mataram*. So contextwise also, this song was initially just an outpouring of overpowering devotion and not a war cry.

3) Irfan Ahmed says, "Second, it was not only a rallying cry for the nationalists in the anti-colonial struggle but also a powerful Hindu slogan sung during Hindu-Muslim violence." In this context I would like to point out some historical facts of violence between Muslims. The battles between Timur and Mohammad Tughlak in 1398, between Babar and Ibrahim Lodhi in 1526, and between Nadir Shah and Muhammad Shah were fiercely violent, as all wars are wont to be. The fact that these battles were fought between Muslims didn't make them any less ferocious. The invading conquerors, especially Timur and Nadir Shah, were guilty of cold-blooded, ruthless and relentless massacre (*qatle-aani*) of the unfortunate people of Delhi. *Allah O Akbar* was the slogan used by the two warring groups, both the sides being Muslims. Is this slogan to be trashed because it was used (and is still used) as a battle cry in fights leading to terrible violence and untold misery - or is it to be spared because it was a battle cry during violence between Muslims? *Allah O Akbar* means 'God is great' - and this is a profound



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truth. Hence the slogan by itself can't be objected to.

If only we would look forward to a shared prosperous future, instead of gloating over past animosities, then there may still be hope.

Lakshmi Bhargava, Bhopal

Benefits for War Widows

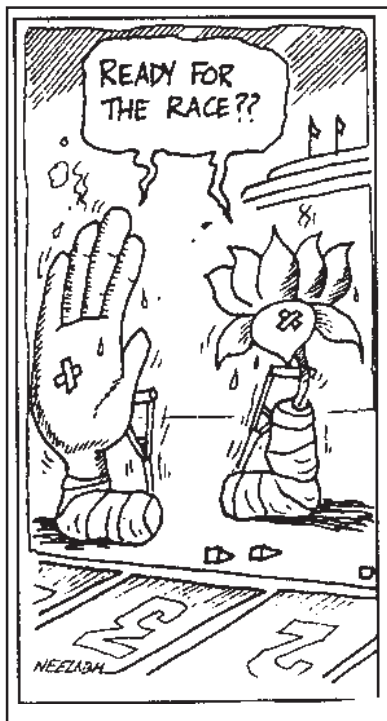
Casualties of the Kargil war and earlier cases of battle casualties have left behind young war widows with dependent children. The wills and nominations of many deceased soldiers did not include their wives. Regardless, military commanders have ensured that the benefits somehow reach the young widows. Also, there is a clause that the continuity of family pension is valid until death or remarriage of the widows. Military rules state that the benefits go to the immediate dependents of the incumbent who died in the field. If the dependent chooses to remarry, then her new husband cannot just usurp the sacrifice of her deceased husband. An exception is made in some cases if she remarries her husband's brother.

It must be made clear that the deceased should leave the entire benefits to his dependent wife. How she uses it, in the exercise of her best conscience, should be left to her only.

Mythili S., Chennai

A Belated Prescription

Madhu Kishwar's article *The BJP-Congress Tussle for Power* (MANUSHI 114) made me recall another article entitled *Looking Glass War* by Rudranshu Mukherjee, which appeared in *The Telegraph* dated December 4, 1999. The very last sentence in it is: "Indian liberalism, long dead, is now buried." There is a great deal of irony here, since we have not yet heard anyone declare the death of Indian liberalism. And yet, we hear



voices of anguish when the burial of an obviously putrid body is taking place. One would have thought that it is only after giving a perhaps decent burial that we might see the rise of a new and true liberalism.

However, for argument's sake let us assume that the following statement of Kishwar is true:

"The Sangh Parivar, with its crude, poorly conceptualised, and highly discriminatory political agenda of *Hindutva*, has produced very few, if any, intellectuals or academics of worth. The institutions founded by the Sangh Parivar, including their schools, are not known for producing excellence in any field."

I do not know how many others would agree with such a damning statement, but many might agree with the following statement of Kishwar:

"From Nehru's time onward, the major recruiting centres for the Indian Civil Service, as well as the Foreign Service, have been institutions like St. Stephen's College (Delhi) and Presidency

College (Calcutta), which have specialised in producing Marxists of various hues. Jawaharlal Nehru University was consciously created as a citadel of leftist intellectuals, where bright and promising students come from all over India to pick up the right doses of leftist jargon that has somehow become part of the expected qualification for those entering the IAS exam."

The essential difference between the institutes set up by the Sangh Parivar and these other institutions, particularly JNU, is that the former were set up with the help of resources mobilised from society, while the latter have been set up with state funds. Hence, the accountability of the latter has to be of a higher degree than the former. And in this respect, I am sure Kishwar will agree with me that the latter have failed. For the sake of finding solutions to conflicts, it is necessary to apportion the blame in appropriate measure. This is to be done, not with the intention of imposing any sort of legal punishment, but so that those who are the culprits are not permitted to make future mistakes. And we should learn from the mistakes made by these culprits, so that others do not become parasites on society.

While the Sangh Parivar may not have produced people whom Kishwar would recognize as being 'intellectuals or academics of worth,' many who have had very little association with the Sangh Parivar in the past have now come to accept that solutions to the myriad problems faced by the country may arise from within the parameters of *Hindutva*. I am sure no one would accuse me of being pre-sumptuous if I recognise these individuals as being 'intellectuals or academics of worth.' Some of them were known to be proponents of Marxism in the past. It would be unfair to withdraw recognition merely because they are

now votaries of *Hindutva*.

If the ideology of *Hindutva* is 'crude' or 'poorly conceptu-alised,' then it is a wonder that these people have come to in-ternalise the paradigm. It is time that the present intellectuals and academics of worth should inquire why this strange phe-nomenon has occurred.

It would seem that the arrival of *Hindutva* ideology to centre stage has made people think of the mistakes of the past. This is a major step that may enable society to achieve at least a decent level of sanity in the future. At the same time, let us recognise that it is a sad reflection that intellectuals have not been able to comprehend the flaws in our system without the assistance of those sitting at the bottom of the intellectual ladder, as Kishwar suggests.

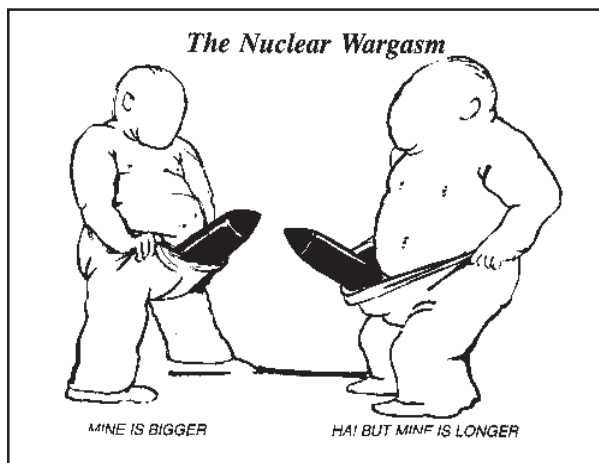
The prescription that Kishwar now wants to put in place - namely "that we create autonomous but democratically responsive structures that will enable our educational and cultural institutions to recruit capable, earnest, and independent people who have the authority to protect their organisations from the depredations of the politicians and the bureaucrats" - if this prescription had been put in place a long time ago, many of the serious problems now facing our country would have been addressed on the basis of merit and would perhaps even would have been solved by now.

**Ashok Chowgule, President,
Vishva Hindu Parishad, Mumbai.**

Rethinking Fire

I enjoyed reading Rima Banerji's critique of *Fire* in MANUSHI 113 and especially agreed with some of the distinctions she makes between myth and "everyday experience."

Rereading my letter to you, I'd like



to clarify that my intention was not to posit some "true Indian essence" of Hinduism (in contrast to western misreadings or versions of Hinduism). I feel a bit uncomfortable that the letter might read like that. I was trying, instead, to move away from that sort of simplistic dichotomy and to speak of Hinduism as a range of lived differences (stable or not), not always "religious" in a narrow sense. I (mis-?) used words like "authentic" or "realistic" to point not to some pure essence, but to a range of social/ economic/historical/ personal/material experiences.

I wrote of the film not being "realistic" enough. I don't believe that "realism" is the only valid way of revealing social issues, but I saw the film attempting a sort of "realistic myth".

I'd also like to apologise for the complicated syntax that meant you had to heavily edit the 2nd paragraph on page 22! I'd like to rephrase it to make my meaning somewhat clearer: "*Fire* tried to show true integrity (or compassion-in-anger) towards Mundu, but despite its insistence on non-obliteration of men's sexual needs, I saw it as crude: sexist towards the mother-in-law, patronising towards Mundu, and unfair to lesbian rights. The film again tried to show religious choice through a (not-neutral but still neutral?) non-Hindu, Muslim space as refuge or threshold, but this struck me as an

appropriation and erasing of Muslim women's own complexity. All this seemed to arise out of an abiding but transformed (more universal), secular, personal, women's Hinduism, which could console western viewers about the continuing dangers and internal, self-correcting strengths of Hinduism, at the same time as it discarded contemporary institutionalised, male defined Hinduism."

Mita Datta, Oxford, UK

A Question of Taste

I was surprised to see a cartoon published in MANUSHI 112, on the inside cover, entitled *The Nuclear Wargasm*, which I feel is in very bad taste and objectionable. I do not expect such cartoons in your magazine. We do not think it proper (even in the name of 'fun cards') for you to publish such cartoons. Are you short of cartoons or serious literature?

Dr Kishor R. Mahabal, Nagpur

We are sorry that you were offended by the wargasm cartoon. However, many other readers have told us that they found this the most apt statement for the ongoing nuclear race, not just between India and Pakistan but equally true for the US, China, Russia and other nuclear powers.

*Both Indian and Pakistani spokesmen have time and again made statements to confirm the point made by this cartoon. To give a recent example: after receiving the Tenth Doctor Y. Nayudamma Memorial Award, the Atomic Energy Com-mission Chairman, Dr. Chidambaram justified India going for nuclear weapons, declaring: "We don't want to become nuclear-impotent." (*The Hindu*, November 27, 1999.)*

– Editor