

Maneka in Perspective

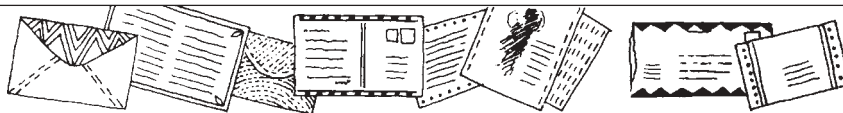
This is in response to your article "Lack of Gender Solidarity" in issue 130. I was particularly interested in your focussing on Maneka Gandhi and her fine work. I must confess that I have been rather prejudiced against her, seeing her as a bit of a crank given her obsession with animals, which I thought meant her neglecting the concerns of humans. I saw her as excessively self righteous. Your article has put her work in better perspective for me. It is indeed a shame that women politicians are discriminated against because of their gender. It is a bigger shame that there is no solidarity among them.

I also read issue No. 128 cover to cover. Shankar Sharma's tribulations and the torture he was subjected to by the government has subjected him to could have been out of Orwell's novel, 1984.

Syed Anwar Owais, Srinagar, J&K

Media's Half Truths

This is in response to your article on the plebiscite in J&K (issue No 131). Here in Australia we have some good current affairs programmes that I watch on television. When they show something on Kashmir, unfortunately, the impression one is left with is that the Indian government is so adamant to hold on to Kashmir that it would use any means, however brutal, to do this. This is sad and it is surely not the whole story. I was aware that there is a group who wants independence from both India and Pakistan, but I was not aware that their number is as high as you mentioned in your article. I was also aware that there was a promise of a plebiscite, but was not aware that Pakistan is bluffing in demanding it and that the Pakistani army does not want it, or that the plebiscite must also be held in Hindu and Buddhist



Responses to MANUSHI

dominated areas, if it is going to be held at all, or that Pakistan should withdraw its army from the region before a plebiscite can be held.

These are important conditions and facts that one usually does not hear about. All one was led to believe is that with a majority Muslim population, if a referendum is held in Kashmir, Pakistan would win, which is why India does not want it. But this is obviously not quite true. You have made some good suggestions as to how this problem can be solved. For example, the Indian army should not force people to vote, or there must be a period of preparation if a plebiscite is to be held to allow for integration of the two Kashmirs, or that an election is another alternative. Another very important point you mentioned is the necessity for the Indian Government to stop fighting a defensive battle and instead actively work towards a new deal.

Nusheen Vahdat, Brighton, Australia

Welcome Support

I am not sure whether the major parties will finally agree to enact MANUSHI's Alternative Bill for the Enhancement of Women's Representation in Legislatures, endorsed as it has been by the Chief Election Commissioner. However, you have my full support in principle. Very wisely, your proposal places the onus of due representation of OBC's or for that matter, of minorities on the

parties. Reservation or sub-quota for women belonging to OBC and minorities can come later, when there is a consensus on reservation in legislature for the OBC's and for religious minorities.

But there is one flaw. A party cannot be forced to contest all seats in any legislature. So the Bill should oblige each party to field women candidates in one-third of the total number of constituencies that each party decides to contest in any state/UT. I wish your Bill success.

Syed Shahabuddin, New Delhi

Our proposal does not expect every party to field candidates in all the seats available for contests. Therefore, the one-third quota for women in ticket allocation is to be calculated as per the total number of seats being contested by each party. However, in order to prevent sabotage of the purpose and intent of this measure for affirmative action, we have built in safeguards to prevent parties from fielding women from only weak constituencies where defeat is a foregone conclusion. We seek your help in spreading awareness about this Bill among political leaders and MPs.

-Editor

Unfair Generalisation ?

This is in response to Tabish Qureshi's letter in No.130, entitled "Unfair Generalisation?"

Firstly Tabish claims that "The culture of the (Sikh) community is such that Sikhs find business more lucrative

and they are undoubtedly good at it". How did he conclude this? His remarks on people choosing their professions make sense if the opportunities are, indeed, available to them.

It is really difficult to believe that some men and women would choose to bribe contractors and become sweepers for a very small pay if they could choose to become scientists. Had there been a state of Dalits, with as many research institutes of Physics as West Bengal has, wouldn't there be as many Dalit physicists as Bengali physicists?

Since there isn't a state of Dalits, and clearly Dalits are under-represented in Mathematics/Physics, should one not at least try to address it some way or another? This requires us to think of what we can do as opposed to what *they* choose.

If we have summer-programmes for Dalit students at even one research institute, say for five years, surely we will have some Dalit students for the Ph.D. programme very soon.

The way things are set up (as I see it, at least in Mathematics), if one has a foreign-degree, then one has more opportunities open up in India. Next in queue are Ph.Ds from research institutes, and, next, those from universities. One hardly ever sees Ph.Ds from universities getting jobs in research institutes, while the reverse is common. So, if research institutes generate Dalit Ph.Ds, would they not get jobs in universities?

Tabish writes that "... weak students have to be supported from below, and not pulled from above." If opportunities are made available, then students themselves will be interested in joining these institutes, and will be spared the indignity of being pulled or supported.

From my personal experiences, I can say that the BSc college I

attended, has a lot of students going for MSc in IIT Bombay, simply because a few students before them did. Having a few role-models can create the desire or self-confidence to work towards higher studies.

Summer programmes in institutes are already being held and, those programmes are very useful for students, allowing them to interact with established scientists and to access their recommendations. Just participating in these programmes improves one's vita and even being able to step into the institutes and seeing all the facilities available can generate interest.

Tabish writes "... we ensure that only good and serious students go to such programmes..", all I ask is that if a programme is created only for Dalit students, then Tabish will have to send "only good and serious" Dalit students. All one has to do is to have more such programmes where all the participants are only Dalit students, only female students, or only students from religious minorities, thereby creating special space for students who feel inhibited in the presence of students.

About needing domestic help, yes, I can understand the need, but I do not understand why the government has to pay for it. Why should post-doc and Ph.d housing be cleaned by institute sweepers?

Permanent sweepers may or may not do a good job of cleaning, just as permanent researchers may or may not. Researchers are very fortunate that their job-description is set by other researchers, unlike cleaners, bus-drivers and other low paid service providers.

Tabish notes that some scientists at the Institute of Mathematical Sciences, Chennai, are very sensitive to these issues and more. They are indeed, admirable people and such

exception exist in many institutions. They are admirable because they are very few in number and it is difficult to be them.

Contract-workers or under-representation of communities in one's work place is very much a professional concern that needs to be addressed by every scientist, and not just by the *mahatmas*.

The few people who approached me for a signature campaign against astrology as a science, did not take stand against nuclear weapons, and also did not even attend meetings to address the contract workers' issues.

I have noticed that in living-room discussions amongst scientists, everything under the sky is commented upon. Dalit rights, women rights, muslim rights, Dalit-Muslim-women's rights, but when it comes to actually sharing one's own resources with the under-represented, hardly any action is taken. I do not at all suggest that action is easy. I have tried and failed. Hence my letter to MANUSHI.

A comment on an aside from Tabish:

"So, if Uma is seriously concerned about doing something for students from weaker sections of the society who are not getting into research, I would urge her to come and join a university in India, and she would have ample opportunities to help them."

Is this a "foreigner" vs "insiders" issue, or did Tabish sense my letter to MANUSHI as an arrogant note from outside, which he obviously did not like? People go abroad for several reasons, some personal, some professional. I would very much like to work with concerned scientists like Tabish than be considered their opponent.

Uma Iyer, Indiana, USA □