



Letters to Manushi

Not So Bleak

This refers to the article "Women Workers In Free Trade Zones" by E. Sudworth in **Manushi** No. 22, 1984.

The problems the writer raises are applicable to all assembly line, monotonous factory work, in fact, every kind of work where women are primarily employed, and not necessarily to work located in the free trade zones. I do not condone exploitation and I agree that women must organise for better work conditions whenever possible. But I do not think the author is justified in mixing up the nature of mass production and the idea of a free trade zone. 'Readers would have been more enlightened had the writer analysed how government policies regarding free trade zones make women's work more intolerable than work outside free trade zones.

If Hongkong and Singapore are giant free trade zones, then let me share a personal experience. Besides Japan, nowhere in Asia have I seen working class people look healthier, or better dressed, housed and clothed.

Women workers in free trade zones come predominantly from rural areas. Had they stayed back, they would have faced poverty and stagnation. According to reports both from India and Thailand, if they move out, especially with the help of men, they end up in urban brothels. I would rather be lured to the city by factories in a free trade zone than by a pimp.

Rehana Ghadially, Bombay

Woman To Come

...The cover photograph of No. 22 is very very expressive. Though *pardanashin*, the girl's eyes are very eager to know the world around, and she is in a gay mood. It is a hopeful picture of a woman to come. I would like to know more about the photograph, the person...

Meera Sant, Kolhapur

Not All Positive

I just received **Manushi** No. 21 with the interesting article on the impact of new technology on the lives of Kerala fisherwomen, by Leela Gulati. I feel that the article shows the new technology in too positive a light. That mechanised fishing, especially with big trawlers, has had a different impact on the Kerala fishing population as a whole, can be clearly seen in the recent, now suspended struggle for a ban on mechanised fishing during the monsoon in Kerala. Quite a few women took part in the struggle because for them it is a question of life or death.

I admit that the prescribed changes in the project villages are mainly positive ones, but even there adverse developments took place. As the author has pointed out, the prosperity gap between country craft fishermen and those owning mechanised crafts has widened. Greater extremes, both in poverty and wealth, appeared, as happens in all places where excessive mechanisation and industrialisation take place.

The main problem created by the introduction of mechanised fishing is the overexploitation of fish resources and the uneven distribution of profits. From 1963 to 1974 fish production was steadily increasing but not thanks to mechanised fishing. For example, in 1974, 4.48 lakh tons fish were caught, of which 21 percent was caught by mechanised boats. Since then, the number of mechanised boats has increased inflationally whereas the number of traditional, crafts has remained the same. And since then, the fish catch has been declining with a yearly minus growth of 1.5 percent. In 1981, only 2.74 lakh tons were caught but out of this 40 percent was caught by mechanised fishing while the share of the static number of traditional fishermen has come down from 3.18 lakh to 1.44 lakh tons. This shows that a few rich people who can afford mechanised boats, which they do not use themselves but lend out, thus creating dependency of poor fishermen on the fishing barons, are taking away the only income source of about seven lakh human beings, that is, one lakh fishermen and their families.

If mechanised fishing goes on in the same manner with an unchecked number of boats operating in an uncontrolled area, it will have an even more serious impact on sea ecology as the declining fish catch, declining size of fish and prawns caught, increasing input of energy in terms of men and fuel per unit caught, proves. We are threatened with a final destruction of fish resources.

Therefore, I would say that the mechanisation of fishing, in Kerala and elsewhere, has worsened the life of most poor fishermen, has been advantageous only for a few individuals, and is endangering the future existence of many.

As for the much praised export of prawns, I consider it a crime in a country like India, where so many people are suffering from protein deficiency, to hunt in excess and to export such a high protein source, only for the profit of a few people who thereby earn foreign exchange.

One fact in Leela Gulati's article which I found very interesting is that in the project villages Christians were poorer, more conservative, and had a higher illiteracy rate than the relatively progressive Hindus. I had always thought it the other way round. Most people in Kerala told me that the high literacy level in the state is only due to the high percentage of Christians in Kerala.

Irene Kamm, Bangalore

Worst Sufferers

The 10 day's rioting in Bombay, Trombay, Bhiwandi and nearby areas, completely smashed the image of Bombay as the most cosmopolitan and liberal city in the country. Together with the image, were shattered the lives of thousands of people belonging to a significant minority of the country—the Muslims.

The communal riots followed different patterns in different areas. In certain areas, Hindu youths were supposedly given to understand that Hindus were being massacred by Muslims in other parts of the city. These rumours were fueled further by chauvinistic reportages, for example, the murder of constable Ghulam Sheikh was reported as the murder of Gulab Rao. In areas like Bhiwandi, the communal riots had another dimension, the recent organising of powerloom workers and the threat that posed to the superexploitation by powerloom owners.

One common pattern that emerges from all the various patterns, however, is that these riots were an attack on the poor, unorganised, helpless sections of

the Muslim population, sections which were incapable of immediate retaliation and hitting back, sections without any political power or political pull.

This massive carnage was not merely the handiwork of a few callous fanatics. Unfortunately, it received the passive support of a majority in the city. That is the most dangerous aspect of the situation. Little do these passive supporters realise that if this vicious attack is allowed to go unchecked, it is going to boomerang, next time not only against the Muslims, but also against the dalits, the tribals, non Maharashtrians, against particular communities, weaker

recent human carnage and the tendencies that support and inflame it.

Pamela, Vibhuti, Shiraz, Sujata, Nandita G., Sandhya, Gayatri, Chayanika, Veena, Nalini, Shehnaaz, Sakina, Flavia, Nirmala, Kalpana, Susheela, Achamma and others from the Forum Against Oppression of Women, Bombay.

“Civilised” Marriages

For the last few years, I have been boycotting dowry marriages. Many people who profess to be radicals, even women who participate in meetings and



sections and so on. It has to be nipped in the bud now or else there will be no end to the confidence of the callous chauvinists. Concrete plans at the level of residential areas and workplaces need to be chalked out in order to get rid of this ever increasing menace to a peaceful life.

The Forum feels that the women of the minority community are the worst sufferers. They have to, on the one hand, struggle against the oppression that is specific to them as women of that particular community, and on the other, fight against the brutalities of the men of the majority community. We women from the Forum support the Muslim women in their dual efforts and struggle. The Forum also categorically condemns the

rallies against dowry, do attend marriages of their friends and relatives who take dowry, just so as not to offend them. I do not think this dual attitude can conduce to building a real anti-dowry movement. I am confident that if about half the invited guests openly boycott such marriages, pressure will be created against the system.

Among the tribals there is a system of bride price. The boy pays bride price in the form of cattle to the girl's parents. When people are very poor a token amount of Rs 5, 7 or 11 is paid. The tribal groups amongst whom I am at present working, Kherwars and Korwas, are badly affected by the customs of high caste Hindus. Some Kherwars even wear the sacred thread and adopt titles like

Singh.

Dowry in the form of cattle, watches, bicycles, radios, has begun to be given to boy's families. Instead of playing their own drums and having their own tribal dances, they have started getting Kahars to beat drums, and bringing a microphone for Hindi film songs. About 30 percent of the 150 bonded labourers I talked to had got into bondage due to marriage expenses. While this exploitative process is on the advance, I was recently invited to witness a unique marriage. Sivnath Korwa, son of Lallu Korwa, got married on May 5. Lallu knew that the girl's parents were poor so he told them to keep the expenses to a minimum. The total expenditure was Rs 475 and 40 kilos of rice. Lallu contributed Rs 100 to the expenses.

We, the middle classes, who look down on tribals, and call them uncivilised, should take another look at our so called civilisation, and should not destroy the "uncivilised" customs of tribals.

Meghnath, Bihar
(translated from *Hindi*)

The Trauma

On April 19, a letter from me to the editor of *Indian Express* appeared in that paper under the heading "Malady of Rape." On April 30, I received a postcard. The card was crammed with thin small lettering. A few words had been squeezed in the skimpy margins. The letter was anonymous. It revealed how a 15 year old girl, the letter writer's daughter, was kidnapped. Unable to trace her for six days, he became frantic. In a frenzy of grief, he left no stone unturned to recover his child. He reported to the police and even "touched the feet" of "notorious" characters. He spent Rs 6,000 in the process.

A few days later, some "business boys" and government employees were arrested, only to be later let off. They were let off despite the fact that they had admitted taking the girl to "several places" and then having put her on a long route bus. She was discovered in a pitiable physical and mental state, drugged, at a bus stand. The culprits allegedly had "connections" with highly



placed individuals. The girl's father was threatened. He and his daughter were arrested. He was forced to withdraw his first information report on the pretext that his daughter had run away of her own accord.

Today, the girl is studying in a remote place and the man is paralytic. Unfortunately, the wounds have not healed. The man states that they weep on meeting and when apart. "We beat our chests" is his pathetic statement. The question troubling him most is "Who will marry her?"

I am still in my teens but I feel my fortitude to face these ugly aspects of life is fast running out, what with my senses being pummelled by them day in and day out.

The strange paradox is that a rape victim in our society is pitied but not accepted. She is recognised as innocent yet remains essentially a social outcast. No man is willing to accept a nonvirgin as his wife, unless there is huge compensation in tow.

But need the father of the girl be worried about her marriage right now? Is it not more crucial for the family to stop scraping the wound, not to relive the experience every time the girl comes home? Can she not be allowed a chance to forget (repress, to be realistic) the experience? Is not life worth living without marriage? Cannot we dispel our fixation about virginity and marriage? If we do, rape will not be as traumatic for the Indian woman as it is now. Without

the social condemnation, the pain would certainly lessen over the years...

Sumita Dawra, Chandigarh

Maze Of Restrictions

I am writing from Udaipur city which seems fairly advanced as far as higher education is concerned. There is a medical college, a home science college, a law college and many other colleges too. On the other hand, the situation of women here gives one much to think about. These are a few cases which illustrate the kind of restrictions with which women have to live. .

Pushpa had been married a year and was seven months pregnant when her husband died in a bus accident. Pushpa was forced to sit in a corner of a closed, damp room in her in-law's house. She was kept veiled and not allowed to move. She could not even unveil to talk to her own father or brother. Due to her constantly sitting in one posture, the child in her womb ceased to move. Yet she was neither taken to hospital nor was a woman doctor called. The child died in her womb.

Six months later, Pushpa stepped out on to the verandah of the house and was immediately rebuked by her parents-in-law. If any member of the family was going out and Pushpa by mistake happened to cross their path, they would postpone their departure, since the sight of a widow was considered highly inauspicious. Finally, Pushpa managed to get admission in college. Her in-laws threw her out of the house and she returned to her parents. Today, she has completed her MA and PhD and is a lecturer in a teachers training college. Her in-laws have now taken her back into their house but a major reason for this change of heart is the fact that Pushpa is earning a sizeable income.

When her father-in-law died, Mira had to remove the symbols of her marital status just as her mother-in-law had to. For a whole year, she did not apply *sindur*, or *bindi*, nor did she wear more than a couple of bangles. She did not go to her parents house for a year. On being questioned, she said mildly "These customs are being observed from the time of our fathers and grandfathers so it is our duty to observe them. If we do not,

the men will be disgraced.”

When Radha's father died, her mother was sitting surrounded by women mourners and there was a strong wind blowing. So her mother got up to close the window. Immediately, the women began to criticise her, saying : “It is not even a day since the man of the house died and she is closing the window. She is moving about all the time.” Widows are not supposed to move around during the mourning period or even to stand up.

When Dipika's father-in-law died, her mother-in-law forced her to sit at one spot without moving for a whole month. Dipika is a teacher in a government school and had exhausted her casual leave. So she had to take a month's leave without pay.

As soon as anyone in the family dies, the women cannot stir out. The widow cannot even stand up, let alone move around during the mourning period. On the other hand, the men can continue to visit the cinema, play cards and meet their friends during this period. A man can remarry three or four days after his wife dies. For a widow even to think of remarriage is sinful. Girls of 15 or 16 have to lead an austere life, and forgo simple comforts if they are widowed.

Apart from restrictions on widows, there are numerous restrictions laid generally on women of Oswal, Porwal, Narsinghpur, Gupta and Aggarwal communities here. A woman must not go out of the house alone, her mother-in-law will decide what she must wear each day, she must not eat before her husband has eaten, she must eat only in the unwashed plate in which he has eaten and so on, endlessly. The question is, how many people are fearlessly working against such practices ?...

Hemtata Talesra, Udaipur
(translated from Hindi)

Layer Within Layer

In the hospital where I work, a woman called Veniben was admitted, in an advanced stage of lung tuberculosis. She had three children. Her husband was a sports teacher in a semigovernment college. They belonged to the harijan weaver caste. Veniben stayed for three months in the ward and we all knew that she had little chance of survival.

During my rounds in the ward I met Kavita. She had come to visit Veniben. On inquiring I found that she was a primary school teacher and was doing B Ed. She belonged to the sweeper class and both her parents were sweepers in the municipality. I congratulated her and wished her all the best.

Thereafter I saw Kavita many times on my rounds. Each time I would see her doing something for Veniben. I used to see her combing her hair or giving her fruit juice. Veniben got very fond of Kavita. Kavita would at times even go to Veniben's house, bathe and dress the kids and bring them to the hospital.

During the last days of Veniben's illness Kavita came more often, with the children or with the husband. Veniben was happy to know that her husband loved Kavita.. She requested Kavita to take care of her children after her death as she was convinced that her children would be properly looked after by Kavita.

One night Veniben died, after which I did not meet Kavita. A few years later I met her in a bus. I enquired whether she was happily married to Veniben's husband. I saw tears in her eyes. She said that the teacher, after promising her marriage, went to the village and got married to a harijan weaver woman. Kavita, who could not believe this, went and asked him why he had ditched her. He said : “How can I marry you ? You belong to the sweeper class. What will my status be in my community?”

From this true story about dalit society, we see that class distinctions prevail even among harijans.

Shailbala Motiwala, Ahmedabad

Another Elizabeth

This is the story of Elizabeth, a young girl from Goa, who is about to leave for Kuwait where she will work as an ayah in a Kuwaiti household...

Almost unlettered and brought up in abject poverty, the only thing Elizabeth had in common with the queen of England was her name. She was married off to a fitter in Bombay. She was in her teens and he in his midthirties. He would beat her up whenever he was not drinking or fathering the four children they had in quick succession. Though his pay packet was sizeable, she saw very little of whatever remained after the

giant's share found its way into the bottle. Life went on somehow and Elizabeth pulled on. She had little time to reflect, in any case, as, between her backbreaking household chores, she was busy carrying, delivering or nursing babies.

Calamity struck when Elizabeth was expecting her fourth child, Her husband met with a near fatal accident in his factory. He had to be hospitalised for three months. The factory refused to reimburse the medical expenses because he was drunk at the time of the accident. Elizabeth sold the little gold and silver she had received at her wedding and paid the doctor's bills. Her husband recovered but not fully. His brain was partially damaged and he lost the use of his right leg. He was little more than a walking vegetable and was incapable of productive work. When he came home, Elizabeth entered the maternity ward for the fourth time.

On her return, Elizabeth was determined to change the sorry state of her life. She contacted her elder sister's relatives in Kuwait for any kind of job they could get her. Soon she was busy appearing at interviews, fulfilling passport formalities, trying to get a visa. Since her employers could not accommodate her family, Elizabeth began to arrange for the placement of her children during her absence. Her mother in Goa arranged to take the three older children on condition their mother provided for them. Her elder sister in Bombay accepted the nine month old baby. Elizabeth will pay for the baby's upkeep too. Her husband went to stay with his parents.

Elizabeth is now waiting to fly off with her younger sister, to begin a new life among strangers who speak a strange tongue. Her contract is for seven years, to begin with, and she will not be allowed to return before five years. When she comes back, her children will not be able to recognise her because the eldest is just five years old. The question is: “will she come back?”

Most of us have the irksome habit of sitting in judgment on women who leave their children and go to work in a foreign country. Next time we sit in judgment, let us remember Elizabeth.

Shoma Chatterji, Bombay