



## Responses to Manushi

### Politics of Bans

I am afraid I don't agree with the views of a reader reproduced under the heading, *The Beauty Business*, in MANUSHI 109, even though I have no interest or in association with beauty pageants. Those protesting against the use of womens' body images to sell products have not built a strong case, but continue demanding bans in yet more strident tones. My disagreement with such protests, whether from the right or the left, are as follows:

Is the actual exploitation of women in our society (not of their images), especially of poor women, not more worthy of our attention?

Does not the beauty business create openings for more women to support themselves, though admittedly they are likely to be from an upwardly mobile class?

Isn't the beauty business being enlarged on professional lines where personal exploitation of women may be comparatively less? Are not the fees likely to be more fair and the terms of work more professional than many other businesses?

Beauty pageants are really a joint advertisement campaign by cosmetic manufacturers, those associated with the garments business, etc. Similar images as those projected by the pageants are used in other campaigns by such manufacturers on television and in print. Even manufacturers of pressure cookers use images of

womens' bodies to emphasise, say, the sleekness of their products. Why then is so much energy being misspent protesting against beauty pageants?

Mainstream films, blue films, mainstream magazines and sleazy magazines all use womens' images to sell themselves, in far more derogatory and damaging ways than beauty pageants. The reach and influence of these media is far beyond that of beauty pageants. Why have not those protesting against beauty pageants moved against these media in the same way? And is banning, censorship or violent disruption the way to educate the general public on these issues? Or do we need to make greater efforts through the education system, the general

media and social associations to enhance life-positive values? Are those who threatened to disrupt the Bangalore Ms World pageant all that different from those who disrupted the screening of the film *Fire*?

Is it because beauty pageants are a softer target, being a new media, and also that protesting against them is likely to get one comparatively more publicity? Is it that it is easier to organize protests against them or even disrupt proceedings, because they are event-based? For example, would protesting against a film which used vulgar and demeaning images of women need fewer organisational skills? Is it that those who are the most visible faces of the beauty business (leading models, manufacturers and promoters of pageants) may more likely want to be politically correct, and thus grant a few concessions to those protesting, without any real gains being made for any worthwhile cause?

Why is the use of womens' images more derogatory, than say, the use of images of men? Both types of images want to make you think of the human body as something to be enjoyed, divorced from the person whose body it is. The advertising industry today uses images of the 'sexiness' and 'virility' of anything, not just humans—even of tyres and washing machines! It isn't just the human form that is being misused—the over-emphasising of sex and



beauty, in any form, in any gender, human or non-human, as the touchstone of finding happiness and loving, connecting and serving, are not dwelt upon by the advertising industry as much. Perhaps these notions could help communicate about products in a better way. Is there then a case for educating the industry rather than merely reviling it?

The pre-eminent role in beauty pageants belongs to a newspaper group, which built a successful marketing strategy around these events, tying in other product manufacturers with these events. The group violated the norms of a national newspaper by consistently reporting the build-up to the pageants, the pageants themselves, and the after-events, on the front page or opposite the editorial page. By no stretch of imagination was it national news, but the group used news-space for an advertising campaign of one of its products, the beauty pageant. It simultaneously added several features to the main newspaper which sold sex and glamour in the guise of world-snippets. That strategy was so successful with readers that other leading newspapers and national news-magazines fell over themselves to turn into what would essentially be called 'yellow' or 'rag' products. Those protesting against beauty pageants did not take notice of these strategies when it was their task to have done so. They only moved in to join in occupying some of the spotlight on the beauty business created by these moves—each side peddles its own distorted version of what it means to be a human being. The beauty (and advertising) business at least goes about its concerns in a legitimate space provided by our polity. But leading media which dwell too much on this business, and those who

mindlessly (and violently) protest against the business, do more damage to the democratic space of our polity.

**Anjana Mehta, Delhi**

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### Regret the Error

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In the latest issue of MANUSHI, in the article on *Fire*, you mentioned Vijaydan Detha's story *Naya Gharvaas* in which two women marry each other and set up a new kind of household. I've been fascinated by this story even since I saw the play in Delhi some years ago, but I've never found it anywhere. Can you help me? You say it's in MANUSHI 98, but it is not! I have most of the back issues and have looked up No. 98—no luck!

Can you tell me which issue carried it? Or the name of the collection and publisher? Or send me a xerox? Please help—it's an old quest.

**Mina Swaminathan, Chennai**

*We regret the error. Instead of No.98, you will find that story in No.17 of 1983. The story also appears under the title Off the Beaten Track in the MANUSHI collection, The Dilemma and Other Stories by Vijaydan Detha.* **Editor**

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### India Bashing

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In your numerous articles, you bash India's economy and the existing political structure. While your analysis is true, you never comment on the changing economy in India.



To give you an example, in *The Economist* article, "Which Way to Capitalism?" they comment on the changing Indian economy and mention three forces that liberalization has unleashed;

(i) the pressure on firms to put capital to more efficient use;

(ii) the springing up of entrepreneurs from all social classes and castes all over India; and

(iii) the pressure on industrialists from consumers for more change and innovation.

According to the magazine, "Some of the firms are big, with sales of \$500 million a year or more, and others are smaller with sales of \$100 million." These firms are actually willing to pay taxes and keep accounts in order to receive credits for expansion. And unlike the sons of big business clans, they did not inherit their fortunes, nor did the government help them much in accumulating their wealth.

According to the magazine, these firms are concentrated in such areas as computer technology and car parts. Not only that but the magazine says that purchasing power is rising in rural India, and that agricultural output is rising and the prices for manufactured goods falling. The magazine even says, "You can find farmers from Tamil Nadu in the south to Punjab in the north who control tracts of land as large as 20,000 acres and are well versed in crop rotation, but also in business. Many are using profits from farming to diversify." According to the magazine, the rural areas have been the biggest buyers of consumer goods, "Benetton says that 75 per cent of its expansion will be in small towns." Not only that but many of the big business firms (like the Tatas) are starting to change, and reform their business practices, so that they are in line with practices in the west. You never even mention these things

in your articles. Why is this, are you not aware that this is going on in India?

**Prita, received via e-mail**

*There has indeed been a very small amount of change ever since our government launched a half-hearted agenda of economic reforms. However, the picture is nowhere near as hopeful as you assert. **The Economist**, whose authority you cite, has itself carried numerous articles which point to a rather grim economic picture. Financial deficits*

*are rising, the economy is losing ground, and the government is showing no signs of controlling its incredibly wasteful and corrupt spending.*

*Agricultural incomes are mostly stagnant as is agricultural production. Industry has been in deep recession for a long time now. Foreign investments have slowed been no more than a small trickle. Many of the international business houses now realise to their dismay that they had overestimated the*

*size and purchasing power of the Indian market.*

*The focus of writing in MANUSHI has been the harassment and extortions that the citizens have to face routinely at the hands of government officials in undertaking any economic activity. This not only thwarts economic initiative and sucks citizens into a web of criminality, it also discourages investment from many possible sources.*

**Madhu Kishwar** □

## Ice

*Ice is her husband's anger.  
She cooks, cleans, irons  
summer clothes. Puts them  
away.*

*She think the washerman  
has too much to do.  
The cook is too frail a lady.*

*To the helper boy she says:  
**study, don't waste time.***

*Then, there is  
that old anger wearing  
the shape of a man.*

*Her back is straight;  
it wears a face. A yellow face  
with blue-black eyes.*

*She takes the anger  
for granted. It is like air  
and water*

*when they are contaminated  
and we live as if everything  
is fine.*

*Eyes bent  
over some task at hand  
she muses, forgives.*

*Look, the moon is now  
a frozen pond  
over which an old oak  
casts ominous shadows.*

*It is a giant frog  
waiting for the worm.*

*Today's ice is draped  
in thin layers of snow,  
white as indigo rinsed  
sheets of long ago.*

*The angry man  
bought them;  
she washed off  
the rancid smell.*

*The rust of the weave,  
the roughness.*

*In a new home, she thought,  
anger will not be a welcome  
guest.*

*It came with the food  
he bought, the firewood,  
cans of sugar and ghee.*

*What he did at his office  
bred the monster.  
It is now a fattened animal.*

*Somebody must find it,  
bind it, kill it, make a sacrifice  
or a new kind.*

**Lalita Pandit**