



Readers' Forum



==== Mother Courage =====

As a geneticist, I help a voluntary organisation which is working for the welfare of mentally challenged children. Presently, it is run from a rented premises. The Delhi Development Authority (DDA) allocated us a piece of land last year in Vasant Kunj to build our own building. As we were about to start construction, we came to know that Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) has already built a solid structure there—a garbage dump! Unfortunately, we had not kept a *chowkidar* on the plot to keep vigil. Now the real run around starts for us. It is more than a month since they built the garbage dump. We have written letters and are desperately trying to meet the authorities concerned. I was reminded of this incident from my childhood. I really marvel at my mother who single-handedly achieved the impossible.

Mother was in her 60s and father was in his 70s then. A small house in a middle class colony had been their abode for the last 15 years. The house had a lovely garden around it, which mother tended with devotion and care. They were having a quiet retired life when suddenly their peace was shattered.

A truck arrived one morning carrying some men and stopped near their house. The men got down and walked towards the empty corner plot adjoining their house. Mother got curious, peeping out of the window, she saw them clearing stones and junk strewn around the plot and fencing it. "Good idea, now the place would look clean and neat," mother said to herself.

Next day the truck arrived again. She saw children's play equipment in the truck. Sensing some trouble, she inquired. The MCD had decided to convert the empty plot into a children's park. Working full steam ahead, they readied the park in just two days. Soon word spread around and children started arriving in floods. The street

urchins joined in too. Suddenly the place which had been desolate all these years was abuzz with activities from early morning to late in the night, as children screamed, cried and shouted. But this disrupted my parents' life. The trouble was that this small plot was just 10 feet away from their bedroom windows. Why this plot in the middle of the colony was not in the colony control always remained an enigma to them.

One week passed, but for my parents it was a nightmare. They were unable to sleep with the constant din and noise. Father was not well. The thought that this children's park was going to be a permanent nuisance horrified them. Upset and angry, Mother said, "We must do something otherwise we both will go insane". Father commented: "It is the corporation's decision. They won't close it down just because we are disturbed." Father was not at all inclined to pick up cudgels against the DDA. "Well, I am not going to take this lying down," asserted Mother.

"It is not easy to take on the corporation," said Father whose scepticism annoyed her. Fearless and strong-willed, Mother always stood up for



Irfan Hussain

what she considered right. "The corporation has no right to do things like this without even informing the colony residents. Whatever may come, I am going tomorrow to see the officer in charge," she announced. Next morning, she went alone to the MCD office. The maze of office corridors exasperated her. Locating the officer in charge was not easy either and finally, when she did, the officer was on leave that day.

Undaunted and unfazed, mother reached the office well before time the next day. While she waited patiently, she saw a bespectacled, well-dressed young man approaching the office. He stopped, threw a glance at her and walked in the room. "Please come in," came the voice from inside. She stepped in, folded her hands in greeting and took her seat with trepidation.

"Can I help you?" The gentle voice was enough to give her courage. She narrated at length their week long trauma.

"I do understand your problem, but..." Interrupting him, she said, "My husband is 78 years old and not keeping well. We built this house with our hard-earned money thinking we will have a nice, quiet life in our old age. But now you have put this park next to our house and robbed us of our peace of mind. Besides, the colony already has three playgrounds. At this age, do you want us to leave this house and look for a place somewhere else?" Striking an emotional cord, she added, "We live by ourselves. Our two children are settled abroad. If they were here, then things would have been different. Now tell me where you want us to go."

Mother's forceful arguments made the young officer absolutely speechless. Seeing him quiet, she continued, "Just imagine, if your parents or grandparents were in our place, what would you have done then?"

"Please, you need not worry. I will see to it that something is done soon." The officer tried to calm her down. "Not soon, I want it done today," mother retorted.

"Today!" the man's eyebrows arched in total surprise. "Impossible," was his terse reply. "I know, once I leave this place, nothing will happen," Mother said.

"But this is something which cannot be done that quickly," he argued.

"I don't know about that, but I am not leaving this place until you send someone right away to dismantle the park." Mother was adamant. The officer pleaded with her to give him some more

time, but no amount of pleading would change her decision. She was firm like a rock. She would not leave the room. Puzzled and perplexed, he pondered for a while. "I think I will have to do something." He looked worried. He then got up, rushed to another room and came back with a document and a few men in tow. "I am sending these men to clear up the place." Shocked and bewildered, she looked at him in total disbelief. "Yes, I mean it. We have never done something like this before but then, we never had a visit from a gutsy woman like you." He had a big grin on his face. "What you have done is befitting a son. I don't know how to thank you," she almost choked while uttering these words.

When mother returned home, the park was getting dismantled. She couldn't believe her eyes. As she stepped in the house, she saw a large number of neighbours in her drawing room. Looking around, her eyes landed on Father, who was sitting in a corner, speechless, probably still not believing what his wife had achieved. Suddenly he began clapping and she stood there beaming, with tears in her eyes.

Puloma Shah, New Delhi

==== The Beauty Business ====

Every year, Mumbai is caught up in acquiring a face-lift in order to be able to receive the most beautiful women of the subcontinent. Through all the hysteria that has greeted the Miss India pageants, including women threatening to immolate themselves, the question that arises is: What are the issues that women's organisations are protesting against? And why exactly are we protesting an event which, after all, is no more demeaning to women than the obscene and vulgar images being peddled by Hindi filmdom, the fashion industry and global satellite television networks?

Our protest is not against beauty per se, nor even the different ways in which it is sought to be judged or appreciated. We take up cudgels against the new multinational culture, marketing beauty pageants on a mega scale, not with the intention of appreciating but of appropriating beauty. Our contention is that this culture is marketing a beauty myth that is not only distorting beauty but glamorising an elitist global ethos that is far removed from the harsh realities of life for most people, even while making a mockery of their existence.

Therefore, if we protest against this exploitative global culture of beauty, we do not do so in the language of the self-appointed defenders of Indian culture whose role in the increasing communalisation of our society has shown that they are bothered about neither the culture of India and her people, nor her women. The wonderfully diverse ethos of our people is being sacrificed at the altar of a hegemonic Hindu nationalism, while the women remain trapped in a patriarchal system.

We protest against the increasing legitimacy of this new, supposedly international, secular, liberal and corporate culture that acknowledges women only insofar as they are subordinate and willing partners in the promotion of the great global market. Here, womanhood is iconised as a product for the male entrepreneur or consumer. Her femininity and aesthetics are determined by the needs of the market which focuses on beauty criteria that can be packaged and sold by the cosmetics industry, through a fragmented view of the woman in terms of her hair, skin, teeth, toe nails and so on. For, it is only upon the foundations of her body parts that great cosmetics empires are built.

The homogenised and universalised cosmetics culture negates the diverse notions of beauty in a heterogeneous ethos. In some, the ideal is fleshiness, thick sensuous lips, very dark skin; in others, a big nose is not to be sneered at. What beauty pageants do is to reduce and standardise all notions of beauty into a universal ideal, which, of course, is white, blonde, blue-eyed and svelte. And, let us not get carried away when occasionally, a dusky Sushmita Sen or a Diana Hayden is crowned. It is naive to presume that globalisation of culture implies an end to racism.

What is shameful is that such an exercise in deception, patronised by business tycoons, also enjoys state patronage in a country like India, where the right to basic livelihood is denied to a majority of people. The state which has failed to provide basic amenities such as water, electricity, food and healthcare to a multitude of its citizens, does not stint in proffering a glut of the same to the corporate world.

In 1994, a women's group in the Philippines, Gabriela, protested the holding of the Miss Universe pageant in Manila with harsh words: "The Ramos regime is catapulting us into the status of a world-class pimp." These words were less harsh than the condition of women in this part of Southeast Asia, who are being forced into sex-trafficking and prostitution.

Nelia Sanchio, a one-time beauty queen from the Philippines and, at present, a strong voice in the



women's rights movement and coordinator of the Asian Women's Human Rights Council, Manila, says in a statement: "After being crowned Queen of the Pacific in an international beauty contest held in Australia, I was thrown into a dizzying world of travel and excitement. But also of drudgery and humiliation. As I went from one place to another and met different kinds of people, it became more and more evident that people only expected me to smile and look pretty; nobody expected me to have any intelligence at all, and after the preliminary greetings, nobody tried to have any sort of intelligent conversation with me. That was when I began to see that people saw me as nothing more than a pretty object to beautify a room, or add atmosphere to a gathering or event.

"The most eye-opening experience of all is the way in which I had to promote one product after another, which made me start to question the woman-product equation. After my reign, I began to study the link between the market economy and the profit motive behind beauty pageants, with the objectification of women. Women, in a global market economy set-up, are just another commodity to be bought and sold at a price."

Gagan Dhir, Mumbai □