



Letters To Manushi

All Too Common

Thank you very much for giving us the interview with Ms Rinki Bhattacharya in **Manushi** No. 23. You have done a good job by bringing yet another “common matter” to light. “Common” because maltreatment of women in our society has become as real as the heat of the sun or the salinity of the sea.

While going through the interview, I felt ashamed not only because I am a Bengali but also because I am a male, to which category Mr Basu Bhattacharya claims to belong. To prove his maleness he had to stoop so low as to beat his wife...It is true that males are proud of being male. Perhaps males could prevent women from being tortured by refusing entry to men like Basu Bhattacharya in the category of “male;” because they do not bring glory but shame to us...

Ms Bhattacharya has admitted that she was not courageous enough to break up the marriage earlier. On the contrary, I would say that she was very courageous and revolutionary in trying to keep the family as one unit... Finally, a few words about Mr Basu Bhattacharya. I have always been a great fan of his. I still consider him one of the best directors in the film industry. But from now on, I will definitely feel a pang inside me whenever I watch his films. What an irony ! He discovered so many beautiful little things in married life in his films but he failed to discover them in his own life...

Parikshit Dhar, Ahmedabad

It was really disturbing to read the interview with Rinki. Kudos to Rinki and to Manushi for having come out openly against this man who has been torturing her for years. I hope her interview will inspire many other women in similar situations to break the chains of an oppressive marriage and to come out openly to discredit their “respectable” husbands.

Recently, a case of sexual harassment was reported to the Forum Against The Oppression Of Women. Vijayalaxmi and her sister, both unmarried, were working as typists in an automobile shop in Opera House for the last two years. They have three brothers, all of whom are married and live separately. The brothers do not contribute any money to their aged parents’ upkeep so the two sisters share the responsibility of supporting the parents. Knowing this, one day, in her sister’s absence, the shop owner Mr Surinder Singh Chaddah, tried to make advances to Vijayalaxmi. She rebuked him. Since she needed the job badly she could not resign right away. Later, on a flimsy pretext concerning her work, Mr Chaddah abused her, physically assaulted her, threatened to kill her, and made her leave the shop. All this happened in her sister’s absence. The other workers present were all men and none of them came forward to support her. She made a police complaint immediately.

Vijayalaxmi is firm in her determination to pursue the case even though she faces the threat of further harassment from

Chaddah, and she and her sister are now unemployed. The Forum has written Chaddah a letter demanding Vijayalaxmi’s last month’s salary and an apology. If he does not respond, we plan to stage a demonstration at his also to publicise his deeds in the neighbourhood by putting up posters and wall writings.

Mangala Nori, Bombay

Compelling Courage

...The interview with Rinki Bhattacharya has so exposed the agony of woman, the anguish buried in her being, and the injustice done by man that this reality not only startles one but wrenches one’s heart and compels one to think, to act...

Sushila Joshi, Ahmedabad

(translated from Hindi)

...I liked your interview with Rinki Bhattacharya in **Manushi** No. 23. I wish more women from her background would come forward and articulate their problems. It helps us males to understand.

Sumanta Banerjee, Delhi

I read with much interest and sorrow your interview with Rinki, daughter of Bimal Roy and wife of Basu Bhattacharya. Though the narration of incidents of cruelty by her husband is very vivid, in-depth and convincing, it would have proper to invite Basu to respond to the main charges briefly.

The immediate reaction of a friend, of course, a male, was in favour of Basu. He opined that she must be out to character assassinate him.

The relationship of wife and husband

should be an adult one. But in practice, it is more like the relationship of parent and child because the male chauvinistic society develops an authoritarian streak in the husband which, unfortunately, is even expected of him, and approved of by women in general.

Basu's actions and violent outbursts should be condemned in the strongest terms and active women's organisations should stage demonstrations in front of his residence. On second thoughts, even this, though proper, seems insufficient. A patch up cannot cement the relationship and legal separation can be the only alternative.

Dankesh Oza, Gandhinagar Getting Free

We would like to seek some legal advice for a woman who works as cleaner in our office, a government organisation. She has been married to her first cousin for the last four years and has a two and half year old daughter. Life since marriage has become a nightmare for her. She was continuously tortured by her mother-in-law, sister-in-law, sister-in-law's husband. Her husband was a silent spectator of this ill treatment. One day, she was kicked by them, fell on a burning stove and was hospitalised for two months. She was agonised by fear of being crippled for life.

The police kept demanding a statement from her but she could not make any allegations against her in-laws as she was dependent on them. She had a faint hope that things would improve after this episode, but was disappointed. So she took the decision to become economically independent. She returned to her parents' home with her child and registered herself with the employment exchange. She was appointed in our department at about six months ago and gets a salary of Rs 600 a month.

A working wife is a golden goose to the majority of men. Her husband, who has no income of his own, and is a drunkard, now wants to grab her salary. He reported to a social organisation that she was staying in her natal home, and he insisted

that she should live with him. When summoned by them, the woman said she should return to him only on condition that her in-laws should leave the house and not live on her income. This idea is not acceptable to her husband.

He daily confronts her at bus stops and railways stations when she is returning home from work. He threatens her. Last week, he beat her mercilessly on the road. She immediately lodged a complaint at the local police station. The police beat him and gave him a serious warning. Now he has taken her child away. She would like to know on what grounds she can file for divorce, who would be the legal custodian of the child if divorce is granted, would the child be entitled to maintenance from the father, can she mention the incident of her burning as proof of cruelty though there are no



records of it with the police, and what is the minimum duration of separation required before the suit is filed ?...

Malathi and Rosy, Bombay

We are very glad that you are helping the woman in her struggle. If she and her husband are Hindus, she can file a petition for divorce on grounds of desertion and cruelty. A suit for divorce on ground of desertion can be filed two years after the desertion takes place. She should be able

to get custody of the child since the child is under five years of age, and the father is a drunkard and unemployed. In her petition she should describe the cruelty meted out to her and the child. She has a good chance of getting custody since legally, the mother is considered the natural guardian of a child under the age of five. She will probably not be able to get maintenance unless her husband is earning something. She should mention all the incidents of maltreatment including the burning incident. She should try to get the medical records from the hospital where she was admitted. Even if records are not available, she can state the facts in court. If all she wants is that he should not harass her, she need not file for divorce since in the event of divorce, her husband could sue for maintenance just to harass her. Instead of suing for divorce, she can send a telegram to the police or file a report apprehending danger to life and limb from him. If he harms her in any way, she should go to the police and insist that a case for causing simple or grievous hurt be registered against him.

Manushi

Blind To Emotions ?

The interview with Indumati Patankar in **Manushi** No. 20 made fascinating reading. I object to your comments about "getting married and having and rearing a child" meaning "an end to her active involvement" and "her return to politics" having been "following her son's involvement."

This kind of discounting of people is frequent amongst armchair revolutionaries who are blind to human emotions that are really the determining factors...

At any given point of time a person's achievement can only be assessed within the socioeconomic context of that person at that time and not what we might think ought to have been possible, detached from those circumstances. If you are making a historical observation regarding the status of women who participated in the freedom movement, it is a different

matter.

By any and every scale Indumati comes across as a woman of phenomenal integrity, strength and sound sensibility. Taken in the context of her time and the caste and class she belonged to, she is doubtless a revolutionary.

Her staying with two other men in a house, her organising women's camps lasting three weeks and her taking up a teacher's job against the wish of her husband are no mean achievements.

Her "losing" if one may term them so, like the three marriage ceremonies she underwent, only indicates a person of strength who will lose on smaller matters and stand firm in matters of consequence. Do we not know any number of "radicals" who put up a fight over trivial symbolic things while compromising on major issues?

Her acceptance of her son's ways ("I knew he was right yet I could not help feeling upset"), her statement about Shramik Sangathana's achievements, her concern for beyond Kasegaon (one can imagine the kind of claims a voluntary organisation, for instance, would have made in her stead) and her dissatisfaction with the lot of women indicate a person of high integrity...

Such a person's coming back into activity does not seem to me to be a chance happening. Whether she became visibly public again or not, she would have been outstanding in her own right. Her eclipse from public life, though coincidental with her child being born, seems but inevitable considering the trauma in her personal life and the precarious state, especially economic, of her life at that time. Surely she could not have salvaged herself in a jiffy.

To what extent one breaks rules and norms and risks rejection by one's own people depends on the security one has and feels. The sanction to question and not conform really comes from within one's own familial culture. The germ of nonconformism and ability to stand by one's own convictions would have been

sown by one's ancestors. One sees the roots of rebellion in Indumati's mother and grandmother.

In my observation of marital tortures and dowry deaths, the parents of the woman, however outraged they might appear at the final incident, would have themselves provided no model for the woman to fight indignity. No amount of sloganmongering or going on demonstrations can give this strength to a woman who has no rudiment of the rebel in her.

I think that when women's groups think of taking up the cause of a victimised woman they should identify and build on the strengths of that particular woman before chalking out political programmes. Impersonal approaches conceived by ideology oriented minds might only leave the person even more alienated...

Kripa, Bangalore

We are really puzzled by your objections since everything you say about Indumati is a repetition of points already made, explicitly or implicitly, by the interviewer. The long sections on Indumati's family background, her mother's and grandmother's life, and her relationship with her son, were included specifically to set her life and struggle in their appropriate context, with all its strengths and limitations. If we had any doubts regarding her integrity we would surely not have interviewed her at such length.

Our comments about her marriage having coincided with her withdrawal from active politics and her return to politics having followed her son's involvement were not criticisms of her but were statements of fact which she herself had made. It was also clear that we were not only presenting Indumati as an isolated individual but as a freedom fighter, aspects of whose life were revelatory of the status of women in the national movement. Indumati herself was very pleased with the way the interview was conducted and presented, and raised no objections to the analysis offered.

As for being "armchair

revolutionaries", we sit on chairs (with arms or otherwise), as often as anyone else, perhaps less often, since we have an acute scarcity of chairs in Manushi office and have to do a great deal of work on the floor.

—**Manushi**

Then And Now

When I remember my childhood and youth of 50 years ago, and compare it with that of my granddaughter, I feel that my daughter's outlook as a parent is more liberal than mine was, just as mine was more liberal than that of my parents.

When I was young, girls were not supposed to drink milk which was reserved for boys. My grandmother used to get very annoyed if I drank milk. She said I would become fat and turn barren. My mother was 18 years old when I was born, and when I was nine years old all my relatives began to worry about my marriage. My father insisted on letting me study and somehow, I managed to complete my matriculation. I was married at the age of 16 which was considered shamefully late. When her marriage was being discussed and arranged, a girl was supposed to stay out of the room.

When I reached my in-laws' place I was not supposed to come in front of my father-in-law. My husband, after much pleading with his parents, got me enrolled in college but when my daughter was born a year later I had to discontinue my studies because it would not be considered proper for a daughter-in-law to study while her baby was looked after by others. Women were not supposed to sit on chairs. My mother-in-law's friends used to criticise me for sitting on a chair, but my mother-in-law ignored their comments. Even though I was my parents' pet, they did not have the courage to resist social pressure in this matter of my marriage.

Women in those days had to observe parda. Even as a little girl, I had to wear a sari and keep my head covered. My mother went out in a closed buggy and when she alighted she was heavily wrapped in two shawls. I am happy that things changed in our family. My younger sister-in-law who

was married 15 years after I was, studied medicine after marriage, and also talks freely to my father-in-law. My daughters were able to study further than I, and were married at a later age than I was. I hope that things will improve still further for the generation of my granddaughter, that women in future will not have to suffocate in the four walls of the home but will be able to develop their full potential.

Saraswati Nath, Patna
(translated from Hindi)

In The South Too

...Generally, people have the feeling that the dowry problem is not so severe in south India. But this is a misconception. Large amounts of dowry are demanded in the south.

I read the article in **Manushi No. 21**, entitled "Fisherwomen In Kerala" in which it was said that the age at marriage for women has always been higher in Kerala than the rest of India. I think today, one reason for this may be that parents are unable to fulfil the dowry demands so daughters remain unmarried. You will be surprised to know that they demand about 15 *tolas* of gold and about Rs.5,000 in cash. In the south there are many families in which only one daughter gets married the rest remain unmarried. The parents have to give such a huge amount to get one daughter married that they just cannot afford to get the others married. So I feel the antidowry movement should be very active in the south.

Geeta Nair, Delhi
Impeccable Logic

For six years, I have been living and working amongst the poor in a small tribal village. Four years ago, we started an organisation called Gramin Vikas Samiti. We tried to organise people against all kinds of injustice, economic, social and political.

In the beginning, men were more active, in meetings, in demonstrations and in decision making. Gradually, we tried to awaken them to women's problems. Of late, women have begun to come to meetings and they have begun to believe that they

can get justice from the Samiti's meetings. I want to narrate a recent incident which exemplifies this process.

Kalya is a tribal woman. Three years ago, her husband, Rakma, and his mother threw her out of the house, calling her a witch. She, and her two small children, went to stay at her parents' house. After three years of this bitter experience Kalya came to the Samiti and asked us to help



her get divorced from Rakma.

The Samiti called both husband and wife and tried to reconcile them. Both of them wanted a divorce and the Samiti too agreed to this decision, after hearing both versions of the story.

Negotiations were proceeding harmoniously and Rakma did not refuse to pay maintenance. It was over the issue of who should have custody of the children that conflict broke out. Kalya firmly said that she would keep the children with her and would never let them go to Rakma. Some male members of the Samiti tried to explain to her that Rakma too had a right to custody of the children. Kalya refused to accept this, and said that she had taken sole responsibility for their upkeep for the last three years. Where was Rakma all that time?

Finally, Kalya said something which

silenced all the men and compelled them to agree with Kalya. Kalya is an illiterate tribal woman and when she saw that negotiations were about to break down over the issue of the children, she said very forcefully and angrily : "I will keep the children. Why should I give them to Rakma? If you ask your neighbour for a little bit of curd to set milk, and afterwards, when your milk has set into curd the

neighbour claims that all the curd belongs to him because he gave the curd to set it, will you give him all the curd ?"

Srilata Swaminathan, Banswara
(translated from Hindi)

Fetter By Fetter

I am doing BA in literature. One day, I saw a copy of **Manushi** in my professor's hand. I took it from her and had a look at it. Certainly there was something in it which compelled me to go through the whole magazine at a sitting. **Manushi** is a concrete step towards the presentation of the problems and attempts to find solutions. Yet I feel that it becomes dry and bitter at times. Women have been enslaved for centuries so they will have to break each fetter separately, not all at one go...

Uma Sharma, Calcutta
(translated from Hindi)