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## A Scholarly Gem

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I would like to thank MANUSHI for publishing Pradip Bhattacharya's unique mind-expanding five-part series "Five Holy Virgins, Five Sacred Myths". This is a rare, scholarly gem. The five essays have greatly enhanced our understanding of women and religion in ancient India. This provides us rich material to recalibrate our traditional views of religious female icons of India. Because of absence of rigorous scholarly scrutiny, and a tendency towards caricaturized mythologies, the deeper qualities of these Indian women of strong character and resilience have been ignored. The five *Kanyas* define noble female attributes of women from Vedic times and also reveal the hypocrisy of power-wielding sages and kings, men with uncontrollable anger and sexual lust, whom these women confronted. The diligent analysis and research of Bhattacharya should inspire scholars, policy makers and readers in shaping the next generation of scholarship as well as feminine role models.

**Balwant Bhaneja, Ottawa, Canada.**

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## Questions about Sources

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This is with reference to Ruth Vanita's paper "The Hero Bhagiratha – Born to Two Mothers" in issue No. 146. One would like to know what editions of Krittivasa's Bangla "*Ramayana*" she is referring to. Her paper does not provide any information about this in the notes. My copy, edited by the great scholar Ramananda Chattopadhyay (8<sup>th</sup> edition, B.S. 1353, i.e. 1956 CE) is innocent of anything beyond Dilipa dying in infructuous austerities to bring down Ganga and Brahma worrying about how Vishnu will be born in the dynasty and so sending Shiva to bless both sorrowing queens that one of them will have a son. There is no description of any love-play, only the delivery of a lump

# Readers' Responses

of flesh that is transformed into a beautiful youth by Ashtavakra.

I wonder why Vanita does not mention that a similar incident happens with Bhagiratha's great grandfather, childless Sagar (after whom the sea got called '*sagar*') who is blessed by Shiva that he will have 60,000 sons. He has two queens, Keshini, whose son is Asamanja, and Sumati who delivers a ball of flesh that Sagar splits into pieces, cursing Shiva in anger. From this 60,000 oil-seed sized sons appear who are placed in as many pots of milk and grow to full size. Here, too, I find no reference in the text to any same-sex love. Rather, the husband is very much alive and yet a lump of flesh is the result. Both incidents appear to hint at a family taint more than same-sex impregnation.

The difficulty in producing children is common in both the Solar and the Lunar dynasties. Dasharatha, a descendant of Bhagiratha, despite having numerous wives fails to produce a son and a special ritual has to be arranged for this. There is no evidence of any same-sex love among his three chief wives during their childless period, or after his death.

Vanita does not refer to the parallel of Gandhari delivering an iron-hard lump when she aborts herself in fury on hearing of Kunti having delivered a son. Perhaps that is because it would contradict her carefully built up theory of lesbian intercourse leading to birth of boneless infants. Gandhari has no co-wife and Dhritrashtra is the engenderer of this embryo.

Debjani Chakravarty's article on "Girl Friend" ought to have compared "Fire" where there is also a lesbian relationship handled very differently. One would have liked to know her take on this.

**Pradip Bhattacharya, Kolkata.**

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## Grounded in Reality

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Madhu Kishwar's article "Why Fear People's Choice?" (Issue No.131) proposing a new plebiscite formula for Kashmir is both visionary, in the best sense of the term, but also deeply grounded in the political realities of Kashmir. It is one of the more compelling proposals to save us from the quagmire we are in. I hope it gets taken up seriously. I am glad you had the courage to write it, and more importantly make the argument so well.

**Pratap Bhanu Mehta, New Delhi.**

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## When Banks Discriminate

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Since you are concerned about the problems of the underprivileged, I want to bring the following problem to your notice:

As you know, workers in the unorganized sector are highly exploited. Domestic servants are a prime example of this. It has come to my notice that most of them do not want monthly payment. They want the accumulated amount after six months or so, when they go to their village. Quite a few employees go on stalling the payment or do not pay the full amount.

To avoid all such hassles and also to enable them to earn some interest,

I have been trying to open savings bank account in their names. Banks refuses to do so for specious reasons. With great difficulty, I was able to open a joint account with my old maid. After she left, I have been trying to open another such account for my new maid. My bank absolutely refuses to open even a joint account.

The government claims it wants to encourage savings, especially among the lower socio-economic class. Why then do even nationalised banks make it impossible for the poor to open savings accounts?

**R.S. Devi, New Delhi.**

### **Making Common Cause**

While I was visiting my mother in Bhopal in December last year, I read your magazine MANUSHI, which contained an article on hawkers and street vendors. Your article reminded me of the following incident which may be of some interest to you:

I live in a flat in Patparganj, Delhi, which is very close to the Mother Dairy Plant. Behind our housing complex there is a lane where several vegetable and fruit vendors sell their wares. Once, while I was buying vegetables and fruits from these hawkers, they suddenly and in great haste started packing up their goods. I asked them what the commotion was all about and why they were leaving. I was told that the "Committee *walas*" were coming. I asked them who the Committee *walas* were and what they would do. I was told that the Committee *walas* were "MCD officials", who, whenever they came, took away most of the vegetables and fruits and what they could not take away, they would scatter all over the road by overturning the vendors' carts.

Being a lawyer by profession, I told them that even if they were violating any law or MCD regulations, the MCD officials could, at best issue them *challans*, but had no business

to take away or vandalize their property. I told them to stay where they were and that I would speak to the "Committee *walas*" and if anybody touched their fruits and vegetables, I would personally see to it that the official was taken to task. The hawkers were very grateful for my offer of help, but refused to let me interfere saying "Madam, you are here to protect us today, but you cannot come to our aid everyday. What will happen on a day when the municipal officials come again and you are not here? Then they will harass us even more to settle scores for today."

I also recall having read somewhere in one of the volumes of your magazine that MANUSHI had taken up the task of assisting hawkers and road side vendors, so as to enable them to function without becoming victims of MCD officials and other authorities.

My efforts to help directly having failed, I would like to make a contribution to your efforts, for which I enclose a cheque of Rs. 2,000.

**Ritu Singh Mann, New Delhi.**

*Ritu has subsequently lent support to MANUSHI's endeavours by filing a case on behalf of Nehru Place vendors who have been facing almost daily assaults by officers of the Delhi Development Authority. MANUSHI has been lobbying with DDA on behalf of these vendors for the last two years. We have finally been asked by the Vice Chairman, DDA to prepare a plan for accommodating these vendors in Nehru Place on the Sewa Nagar model. However, even while those preparations are on, junior level employees continue to confiscate the goods of vendors on a daily basis, as well as harassing and abusing them in numerous other ways. Therefore, we approached Ritu to file a criminal complaint against the specific officials of DDA who want to displace the existing group of vendors by force. I in their stead, they want to bring in their own people so that the vending spaces remain in their grip and provide them regular income.*

**- Editor** □

## **Roshni**

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