



## Readers' Responses

### **Change Comes Slowly**

The article in Issue 154 on the work of the Shervani family in promoting education among Muslims was superb, well researched and an empowering model that shows change does not come overnight. In addition to being a righteous cause, it needs a long-term well-thought out sustained effort as is being done by Shervanis.

It was great that Madhu Kishwar picked one of my favourite themes: the English language as the cause of a major divide in India "English Language Defines the New Brahmins and the New Dalits of India". The other day somebody brought a movie from India in which all characters were talking in English. The caricature like confused identities that we project of ourselves, or perhaps we are, just looked pathetic. As you point out that people consider this state of affairs so normal that this is not even seen as a matter of concern or alarm.

Looking forward to reading the report on the *Jansunvayi* of street vendors.

**Balwant Bhaneja, Ottawa, Canada**

### **Unaware or Indifferent?**

This is in response to reading reports of the difficulties faced by MANUSHI in the implementation of the National Policy for Street Vendors. The problem is that the Ministry of Urban Development is so busy handling bungalows for VIPs that it has no time to go into the nitty gritty

of investing in creation of grassroots' plans through community convergent action in the urban local bodies which are constitutionally empowered under the 74th amendment to the Constitution to do this but lack the expertise.

While the *Panchayati Raj* Ministry has, through the V.Ramachandran expert group, gone into great details of how this can be done at the *gram panchayat* level, the Ministry of Urban Development is not in the least concerned despite the constitutional provision that each district plan must integrate municipal plans developed through ward committee consultations with the citizens, with the 3-tier *panchayat* plans.

I made this point to the Planning Commission team that was in Kolkotta for eastern regional consultations for the XI Five Year Plan held from 17-19 July, as did my Planning Minister. The off-the-record reaction I got was that

the problem lay with the total lack of awareness on the part of the Urban Development Ministry of its responsibilities beyond doling out VIP accommodation!

**Pradip Bhattacharya, Kolkatta**

### **New Brahmins & New Dalits**

The article "English Language Defines the New Brahmins and the New Dalits of India" in issue No. 154 is very relevant in today's times, particularly from the rural perspective.

In my villages in Medak district of Andhra Pradesh, I see and feel the impact of the dominance of the English language every day. Young rural girls and boys, who have studied until 10 or 12th standard braving immense economic difficulties and, in the case of girls, despite constant social pressures - do not find any jobs - because they do not speak English and do not understand people who use English while interviewing them.

In the local schools, where I have held classes for both students and teachers, I have observed the poor teaching quality of English language teachers, who themselves have little knowledge of English and can not speak it either. Rural students, therefore, have hardly any motivation or possibility to learn the English language. I tell them to first learn Telugu, the regional language and then English and Hindi, so that they can also speak with the urban elite, as well as communicate with the



majority of Indians outside their region.

The Government Polytechnic Sangameshwar, which is situated near our village, teaches all technical subjects in English. The rural boys and girls cannot access the polytechnic, because even the application forms are in English and so unless someone helps them they do not know how to apply. Therefore, it is again the relatively privileged ones from nearby cities like Gulbarga and Hyderabad, who get admissions to the rural Polytechnic here. They might as well have the polytechnic in an urban area.

One other example of how the use of English at various places hinders the access to information for the rural people is that most of the signboards, even the traffic signboards, use English words and so the rural people remain ignorant of the various important bits of information on the road which are meant to save their lives. How do they expect the villagers to understand road signs that read, "Men at Work", "Drive Slowly" or "Slope Ahead" etcetra? I get the feeling that many an accident could have been avoided if the board signs were not in English, but either in local regional language or with appropriate symbols and/ or in graphics.

As you have pointed out, the medicines that doctors prescribe to the rural people, are labeled in the English language, so too the accompanying literature. Very often the medicines are packed in silver foils with minutely written English texts, which even I have difficulty reading. I am sure that the rural patients cannot possibly remember the oral instructions, if any, given to them by the doctor hurriedly. I myself have to look at the medicines whenever I fall ill, to check which one I have to take when. A lot must be going wrong

with the health of our rural population just because our government does not care to insist on the pharma industry to use local language and packing in such a way that the text and symbols can be deciphered. The patient has a right to be informed in an intelligible manner what medicines he/she is being prescribed and what dose and accompanying precautions needs to be taken.

One more very important message in your piece is that even the corruption and unaccountability that persists in our country is related to the language issue. Because the poor do not understand rules and regulations written in English, they become helpless and dependent. They have got used to paying bribes and getting the work done by those who are a little more informed, just because they have some knowledge of English. I have until now believed that it is the institution of marriage and family, which discourages us to speak against anyone of the family members, that allows the culture of corruption to flourish in our country. But your piece provides another valid insight.

Truly, as you say, "there are not many other countries in the world where people suffer such severe deprivation and disability within

their own motherland for having failed to acquire education in a foreign language." Even in Germany (where I lived for many years), the majority of educated people do not speak fluent English, because they speak in their mother tongue German and refuse to speak in another language, even if they learn it as a second language for years together at school.

Let all of us Indians together make a resolve to stop "prostrating before the soul-destroying hegemony of the English language"!

I know they will say, she is idealistic, she is a bit mad etcetera but I will reply: "Let mad people like us grow exponentially..."

**Asha Kachru, Andhra Pradesh**

### **Blatant Double Standards**

I wholeheartedly support your mission to get due recognition for the rights of street vendors. If we can have land for car parking and for building big shopping malls, why can't we have place for street vendors? Our government says it wants to encourage private entrepreneurship. Why then are these hard working people denied the space to set up small stalls and earn their livelihood?

**IP Shah, New Delhi** □

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