



Readers' Forum

== Grieving for the Legacy of Gandhiji ==

All the newspapers report nothing but wholesale glee among the people of India following the government's underground nuclear blasts. Yet, I am quite sure that you must be grieved and deeply concerned about this tragic turn in India's course. I share your grief for the people of India and for the legacy of Gandhiji.

All the foolish remarks I read,—"Now people will know Indians are not eunuchs", "I am so proud that it was done by Indians, in India"—and so on and on. Most of us who have observed India over the decades had assumed it could explode nuclear devices, and refrained from doing so for well understood ethical and long range political priorities.

Now it looks like the era of corruption has eaten into the very heart of India. More than ever, I look to MANUSHI for its courage and clarity of vision rooted in the highest ideals of India's women. I am sending a small check and a large hope and prayer that your work will continue to expand in order to restore the deep keel India seems to have lost.

Joanne Black, Santa Rosa, California, USA

==== Men Have Problems Too =====

We men have problems too, however minor. I make bold to write about them after many months of hesitation. For these issues are nothing compared to the much greater ones faced by women, and to which MANUSHI is devoted. But the female of the species, at least the ones who do read English, could as well start learning about them. I am sure that will help foster gender equality. Two or three personal experiences would illustrate them. After I grew up into my teens, I felt most hesitant to call any woman by her first name. For many months I could not even call my wife by her first name. She once complained that a common friend mostly omitted to greet her and she considered it most rude. On introspection, I realised I was similarly "rude" to most young women I knew. Would it not be taken as a sign of

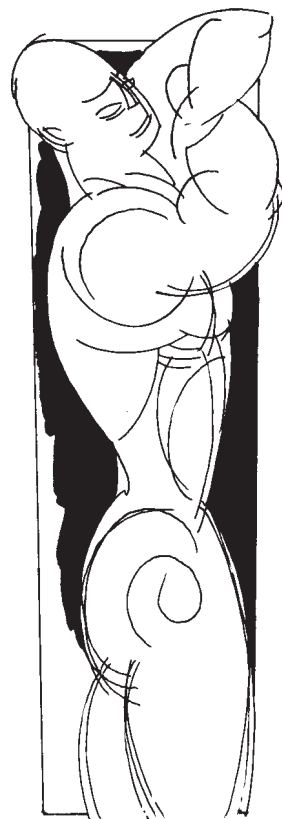
excess of familiarity? (In fact I have added "ji" to your name even though I have known you for so long and you are so much younger). Even today at 70, I only address students and much younger women, where there might be no suspicion of undue familiarity with a view to sexual advantage, by their first name without the suffix.

Which brings me to a second point. Is the sexual advantage only one-sided? Cannot and does not either side seduce? And how will love ever sprout beyond residing in one's breast, if neither side took the first step? And who knows if it is a step or a misstep or plain coercion or blackmail? And how? I recognise these are "small" problems compared to the larger ones which yet have to be battled even moderately successfully and to which you and Indian women's movement pay attention. They are real and trouble not just a few men. But a large number of men and women alike, of differing social classes and strata. Some attention is due.

Suresh Shukla, New Delhi

==== Choice, Space and Freedom =====

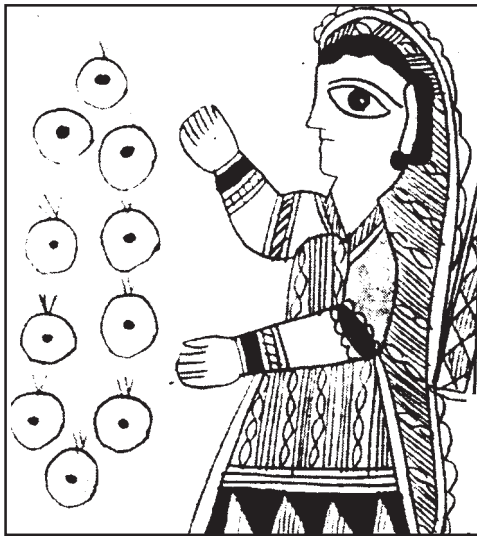
Yesterday a boy at the shelter where I work asked me almost shyly if I had any children, a question frequently asked, and one that is loaded to bursting and which usually points out the huge cultural chasm



that separates me from my questioner. As usual, I answer in the negative and for the sake of clarification, for my own pride and by now almost by habit, I add, *Waddu*, which means 'don't want'. This is, unfortunately the closest I can get in Telugu to what I usually say in English, "By choice."

The English words imply that I have chosen a different and, to me, preferable way. When I say the Telugu 'don't want' I feel a tiny frustration at how I seem to be perpetually defining myself in negatives here. I know that the things I have not done and not acquired are because in the not doing/acquiring I have left a huge delicious space and freedom in my life which I am happily using and filling with my variously approached explorations of the species I belong to, of my own individual existence and of my existence as a member of the species. And that my husband and I are happy to be together as lovers and best friends and feel no emptiness at not also being parents. There is a certain amount of defiance and a dash of righteousness in my 'by choice' answer as well. I know well by now that most people in this culture (even women living in severe poverty with numerous children) have no category for what I have said I am and what I have implied thereby that I also am - a woman who is childless by choice and does not regret that choice. Vimala, my Telugu teacher, soon to be married to a man her parents have chosen, was relentless: "You can't be happy! That is no life!" She was prepared to accept me as a woman denied children by fate or by 'god' as she understands it, and suffering at least somewhat from the resulting pointlessness of my existence. But, by choice? Happy? I am happy, I insist to her, laughing. But I know that in the end I am seen to be either lying or deeply disturbed —or both. Though her vehemence on the subject made me fleetingly wonder whether this was a case of 'protesting too much'.

This topic, engaged in regularly, and often with strangers, plunges me for an instant into a level of intimacy with people that, by my cultural standards, is an invasion of my privacy. I need the defiance, also then, to give me a little necessary distance from



myself. If they want to pursue the topic I lay it on about the almost one billion people in this country and the overburdened planet, which is not my reason but at least should suggest to them that there is a larger sociological and environmental picture and that, within that picture, my decision is not necessarily so perverse. Sometimes, bizarrely, the person's thoughts have leapt to my methods of preventing conception and then, possibly because I am a foreigner, possibly because of this

instant intimacy that has been established by their questions, and maybe just because their curiosity has made them forget their manners, they begin to ask me about my methods of birth control. This I firmly nip in the bud. One man I had chatted with only briefly on the train asked me outright whether I was on the pill. One lady bus conductor on the city bus, after taking the empty seat beside me and collecting my fare and information about my marital and maternal status, poked me jokingly in the ribs with her elbow and positively leered: "Taking those pills, eh?!" I almost expected her to add, "Say no more say no more." She went off to collect more fares and I was left amused and shaking my head in exasperation.

That 'by choice', which my pride and my feminist politics require me to add (my defiance of being defined by my reproductive capacity) very occasionally reveals a similar choice or point of view in the woman I am talking to. It seems that being childless by choice or remaining unmarried and struggling to feel whole and worthwhile in this society is a position that must be fought for daily, often without support and against constant pressure from parents, family, everybody. When I explain that my childless state is not denigrated in my culture and that lots of couples and individuals have made a similar choice, they marvel. This definition of myself-by-negatives here is something that I look at curiously and with detachment because my true point of reference is elsewhere and because, from that reference point there is nothing intrinsically contradictory in being both childless and happy. Women here who make a similar choice must

withstand the crushing weight of societal opinion that entertains no alternatives to the definition of woman as childbearer, that locks childlessness to pointlessness and unworthiness and throws away the key. And this in a country bursting at the seams, with a huge percentage of its families floundering in poverty and a large number of the women in those families suffering from anaemia and exhaustion and ill health as a result of too many children, the oldest of which have often conceived and carried when the woman was too young and too undernourished to be doing so and the youngest when she was too old.

Poverty breeds poverty and exhaustion breeds a constant passive repetition of unhealthy patterns. And the good education and income that might lift them out of those patterns is not available. But when this boy, in the street shelter in Hyderabad, who has run away from his home because of “constant beatings by his father”, a construction labourer earning probably Rs 50- 60 per day, asks me this question, he comments with amazement and a touch of reproach, “But, madam, children are good!” May be what he wants to say is “I am good”, and that by my choice not to reproduce I am implying that I think he shouldn’t have been born.

Vera de Jong, Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh

===== **Through the Colonial Visors** =====

Western misconceptions about India pre-date its actual contact with modern Europe (media came much later) and it took Columbus to the other end of the planet which he mistook for India. Under that mistaken notion, he called the local natives “Indians” and even today they are known as American Indians or just Indians while Indians from India have to be distinguished from them as Indian Indians. As a further consequence of his misconception, a large part of the world in the archipelago of Central America extending from Florida to Venezuela, which includes countries like Cuba, Hispaniola, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, Leeward and Windward isles, Bahamas, Dominican Republic, Haiti, and the Virgin Islands is still collectively known as the West Indies, though they have had no historical or cultural links with India whatsoever. Some descendants of Indians (called coolies) shipped there as indentured labour to replace the Negro slaves and save the Caribbean sugar industry from early 19th century onwards (1833-1917) are indeed scattered here and



there in some of these countries mostly Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago. But that is quite another story.

The quincentennial anniversary of the discovery of the New World by Columbus was celebrated in the western world with great fanfare and pomp a few years ago. But the New World was already quite old when it was discovered by the seafaring pirates of Europe. It was new to the discoverers, not the discovered who have since then grown accustomed to looking at the outside world and even themselves, encumbered with the ignorant perceptions of the West, the conquerors of the New World. And Columbus, however courageous and adventurous, was a greedy and ruthless sea pirate first and last, whose discovery of the New World triggered an unparalleled rape of old peace loving civilisations worldwide through colonisation and enslavement. Francis Drake and other dreadful pirates were not only lionised but also duly beknighted and officially patronised to an extent that it was virtually a state sponsored, free for all and fierce race in international piracy which, with both regal and papal sanction as well as an unequivocal and open support, led to many bloody wars over establishing colonial hegemony worldwide in Asia, Africa and both Americas. The West has excellent reasons to deifying Columbus and others who placed a whole new world before them to subjugate, exploit and enslave.

The real surprise is why no one in the Third World has been able to call the bluff. The Dark Ages in the

West were full of light in Asia, and long before the western world woke up to adventure on the seas, foreign trade and settlements abroad, primarily by the pirates, the scum, the scourge and sundry other fugitives from law in the medieval Europe, India had a flourishing and legitimate foreign trade over land and sea with the part of Europe which was then civilised enough for such trade, with China and countries in South Asia. Many prosperous Indian traders not only settled down in countries like Cambodia, Indonesia and Malaya but also founded empires which ruled that part of the world for the better part of the first millennium AD through several dynasties. They are now collectively called, as a justification for the irrevocable faux pas five centuries ago, the East Indies though unlike the West Indies the natives there were never colonised, conquered or exploited by Indian settlers, traders or rulers. Instead through centuries of intimate commercial contact they developed a natural affinity and love for the land and its people, endeared themselves to them, won their hearts and trust, freely mingled with them and got assimilated there. Today they are indistinguishable from the rest. They never claimed to have civilised them, though the indelible impact of Indian culture and tradition is there for all to see even today after well over a 1,000 years. Far from assuming airs usually associated with erstwhile alien rulers, an average Indian is scarcely aware of the past glory and his attitude towards these countries has been anything but patronising or condescending.

By contrast, India remained under the British crown for barely 90 years from 1858 to 1947. Notably, the crown took over the reins of power after the Great Mutiny or the first war of Indian Independence in 1857, and faced a series of rebellions, mass movements, stiff opposition and open hostility from all sections of the population barring a handful of time servers all the way right up to the end. It was a Raj with a difference, if you remember that not only the Mughals, even many other Muslim rulers had won the love and respect of their subjects and a number of Rajput kings fought fierce battles on their side, sometimes against their own kinsmen, and remained a tower of strength to them. But we are still constantly looking at things and events through a prism fashioned by centuries of western disinformation.

By military conquest or moral assertiveness, the West imposed upon the rest of the world its own parochial perceptions, created an enduring mindset of servility, and invented theories, myths and immutable grooves which keep playing endlessly like a record stuck in them. From the ancient times to the middle of the 18th century, India's fairy tale model of fabulous prosperity and not abject poverty, attracted the pirates and the bandits from all over the world. If that global perception was transformed, it was only during the last 200 years of merciless colonial exploitation. Unless we get rid of the colonial visors it is not realistic to hope to perceive anything, particularly anything Indian, correctly.

Shivendra K. Sinha, Patna, Bihar □

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