

## Escaping Slavery, No Betrayal

As a reader of *Manushi* I have often been enriched by the original points of view presented in your articles. Reflecting on “Reimagining Religious Freedom” (*Manushi*, No. 150, Sept-Oct 2005, p.4), I have this to say:

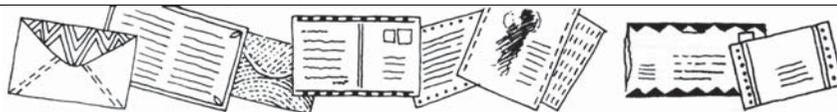
Maybe if the world went along with the ideology of “Re-imagining Religious Freedom” nobody would have chosen to live by any new idea, belief, ideology, inspiration but the one she or he is inducted into by reason of birth. That does not deny the “asymmetry” of influences that bear upon our lives. Majority religions (not just the Baptists of the West) or those which have political clout, as well as ideologies, political systems, scientific and economic theories are everywhere to be contended with by minorities or weaker sections. To suggest that changing religion, ideology, outlook, is always a betrayal of human worth is to condemn human beings to the slavery of custom and tradition—which is not always benign.

**Fr. Godfrey D’Lima, via email**

### Brutally Honest

I found the article “Hypocritical Morality” on the plight of Bombay’s bar dancers in issue no.149 rather interesting. Many years ago, I had a lengthy and intimate relationship with a ‘bar dancer’ and subsequently came to realize that very few who ‘dance’ in such establishments do so for any other reason than that of economic necessity.

Most dancers are from the lowest rung of the social-economic ladder. Bar dancing, be it semi-nude or totally nude, was just about the only employment that offered substantial wages for those who simply did not possess the education or vocational skills that enabled a wage capable of sustaining a lifestyle which transcends cradle-to-grave economic



## Readers’ Responses

despair. Additionally, more than a few dancers used their wages to not only pay for food and rent, but many were also paying for college tuition from those wages. Such jobs were the only viable option left open to those who sought to escape the soul-killing class poverty they were born into, within the so-called equality of America.

My profession, which required extensive travel to all four corners of America, led to visiting countless dance bars. As the years passed, I came to know many dancers. It would be no overestimate that over 98 per cent of dancers were just like Gabriel, my old girlfriend, and all of those described within issue No.149. This statement also conveys the universal corruption of police. Gabriel and most dancers (and bar owners) I came to know also had to deal with “protection” pay-offs to police or face possible raids and the repeated revocation of licences. Dancers were routinely subjected to exceedingly intrusive police inspections which usually amounted to nothing less than rape if any objected; arrest was all but certain under manufactured prostitution charges. Yet, our American society condemns dancers who are only making an escape from the entrenched class poverty they inherited. Likewise, we glamorize the corrupt police who extort money (and sex) from bar owners and dancers while the sanctimonious politicians and church clergy sit at home watching pornographic movies. Hypocritical morality reigns supreme in America. In actuality, bar dancers

are just what they are and do not hide behind any official police authority or self-proclaimed politico-religious moral superiority. Perhaps that is why I always gave dancers an ample tip. Bar dancers were brutally honest about who they were, unlike the ruling elite.

**Timothy Eby, Texas Prison, USA**

### Trivialising Indic Traditions?

I read your article “Manushi Swachha Narayani Descends to Protect Street Vendors” at the Sulekha website. Your work is commendable in almost all respects, however, I do have reservations about your cooking up a deity.

By creating this “Swachha Narayani...whatever”, you are trivializing Indic traditions. Your intentions may be good, the result is trivialization, just like when a temple is built in the name of filmstars like Nagma. Your goddess has a broom in one hand, clock in another, and so on. I must admit that you do have a mighty good imagination, but I am not certain that it is good for *dharmic* traditions.

Maybe you can also create a devi for the Delhi upper crust such as an “Alankruta-Narayani” with a Gucci bag in one hand, an Amex card in another. By creating a ‘Swachha Narayani...’ you probably think that the naive natives will somehow be fooled into becoming cleaner. Is this not a sign of a superiority complex to fool the unclean natives? Is this not a sign of an orientalist mentality? I would have thought that this would be exactly what a feel-gooder

American academic would have done; I certainly did not expect this from a person like you. I do know the work you do, and I am certain that this trivialization may not be intentional, but unintentional trivializing does lead to unintended consequences.

In conclusion, I must also add I do agree with a lot of what you write about and we are on the same wavelength on most issues. However, I do feel that I should let you know my absolute disagreement with your cooking up a so-called Swaccha Narayani. I request that you drop this effort to cook up a devi. Yet I wish you all the best in the other positive efforts that you are involved in.

**S.Subrahmanya, Austin, USA**

*I appreciate your feedback on our work with street vendors. I am glad to know you appreciate at least in some part the work we are doing. The freedom to relate to the Divine in diverse new forms is an integral part of our faith traditions. If you don't feel comfortable with any particular form, you don't have to relate to it. After all I am not too enamoured of the Kali roop of devi since I instinctively revolt at the sight of blood and gore. But I do not object*

*to others worshipping her in that roop. However, I am both surprised and disappointed at your use of the colonial term "natives" for fellow Indians.*

**Madhu Kishwar**

#### **Response from S.Subrahmanya**

I am afraid you have not answered the main question. Sure, it is a free country, anybody can worship anything—from a tin can to any supernatural form. Nobody can issue a *fatwa* against it. That is beside the point. But, the fact remains that you have cooked up a deity to try and influence the natives. That is the underlying issue—is that ethical? Are the assumptions/presumptions that you are acting under correct? Or are you contributing to trivialization/comic-ization of Indic traditions? Would it have been possible for you to inform people in another manner and not cook up a deity? If you wanted to use a "religious" framework—you could potentially have used a Lakshmi or Saraswathi and still sent the same message. The means to an end are sometimes more important than just the end in itself.

It is all the more tragic that a person such as yourself, who is fairly

sympathetic to the Indic culture, falls into the trap of trivialization and cheapening of fundamental Indic values. I myself have greatly benefitted from some of your perspectives and your writings have definitely informed me. I would like to invite you to try and consider the other possibilities, rather than assuming that natives can be convinced into believing something by using not so fair means.

*If I have failed to convince you thus far, it is unlikely that you will find any further arguments convincing. I will do a serious rethink on your suggestions and request you to do the same with regard to Manushi's endeavours. In the meantime, let us agree to disagree.*

**Madhu Kishwar**

#### **Giving Voice to the Voiceless**

Thank you for all the trouble you take to bring to light the exploitation of vulnerable groups and to inspire that life could be different than what it is. May you succeed in your mission to make this world a better place to live, especially for the voiceless.

**Sr. Mary James Monteiro, Patna, Bihar**

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