

Letters to Manushi

—Reservation for Women—

I would like to share my impressions of women's participation in Zilla Parishads (district boards) following the 30% reservation for women in the local bodies in Maharashtra. I had a very short tenure of about three months in the Zilla Parishad at Nanded in Marathwada area of Maharashtra when I was posted there as the Chief Executive Officer. My impression is that the women members in the Parishad were mere substitutes for their husbands, fathers-in-law or other male relatives who had failed to obtain tickets and they had no interest whatsoever in the local affairs or the development programmes. Occasionally, some of them would come to my office to air grievances of their constituency accompanied by the male relatives, and would sit silent, head demurely covered in shining polyester sarees. All the talking would be done by the man and only when I would specifically ask the males to allow her to speak, would she speak out. This was repeated in the meeting of the committees of the Parishad, where too they were silent backbenchers, and their male relatives would unauthorisedly be present and insist on being allowed to speak. In private conversations with me, some of the lady members felt that involvement in the Parishad or Panchayat Samiti was an additional burden thrust on them. Their domestic chores allowed no respite and on top of that they had to travel all the way to the district headquarters to attend meetings. Given a choice, they would

resign their seats and certainly would not be interested in a second term. However, there were some vocal lady members who were active in local politics. Most of them had come up independently of reservation from previous elections and in manipulative politics. They were not active in



development issues in any positive way, but they were no worse than their male colleagues.

However, there was another facet to this issue, which could make the entire principle of women's reservation in local bodies go awry, as it has gone for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes i.e. of forming interest and pressure groups solely for the purpose of obtaining patronage from developmental programmes without being gender sensitive in any way. One of the sub-committee of the Zilla Parishad is the Manila Bal Kalyan

Samiti which has a lady chairman and 7-8 lady members. The demands raised by them included vehicles for each member, allowances, etc. This is simply following in the footsteps of their male colleagues for whom access to power means more vehicles, newly decorated chambers and distribution of patronage. However, when it comes to "development of women" they cannot think beyond distribution of sewing machines and setting up of health camps to treat pregnant and lactating women.

More autonomous centres of power among women may come up at the local level in the near future, but their chances of being gender sensitive and open to development initiatives to help their sisters is remote. I would not say my experience is typical. Firstly, Nanded is in the backward Marathwada region; the experience in the more developed Western Maharashtra region may well be different. Secondly, the period of my work in the Parishad was very short. What I have narrated is only a personal experience and not based on any research. It would be interesting to conduct a deeper study into this.

Jayshree Mukherjee, Bombay

Law and Activism

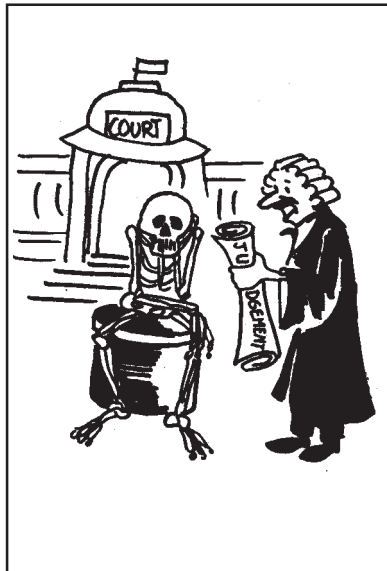
The article in **Manushi** 81 on Public Interest Legislation has spurred me to write about our own experience with the law courts. I am a part of the team which has been working with the stone quarry workers in district Chittorgarh of Rajasthan. The working conditions in quarries of Chittor are as pathetic as elsewhere. Labour laws are unheard of,

near bondage conditions prevail and the quarry owners frequently resort to violence. We began work hoping to form a union. We did get a union registered, but most workers were reluctant to formally join the union. However, we were approached by a number of workers in extreme distress. We then had to take resort to the law courts.

Most of what the author says about the law courts is obviously very true — the delays, the anti-poor bias and a final denial of justice. We experienced all this. However, we were also able to procure some relief for our workers through the law courts. Over a period of four years we have filed 100 cases under the Bonded Labour Act while registering a number of FIRs with the police. This has put the fear of the law in the minds of the quarry owners. Most of them have begun to respond to the union notices. A number of cases now get solved outside the law courts. Thus, while unionisation has not taken place, the level of violence has come down. There has been some improvement in the situation.

Ours could be cited as a special case. The owners were small entrepreneurs from village background and not very conversant with the law. We had the benefit of some excellent community organisers coupled with a long presence in the district. Still I think that law can be utilised in favour of the poor at times. The point was brought home to me forcefully by a local lawyer when I was ranting against the legal system in front of him. He said, all you say is fine but you would not be able to stand here in the court but for the very same law. The point is that vast parts of the country and vast sections of our population continue to be beyond the pale of any law. In such a situation any law is a good law.

Part of the problem lies with us



activists, as correctly pointed out in the article. We seek solutions through the judiciary, which it cannot provide (the ultimate example of this trend was illustrated during the Babri Masjid demolition when the highest executive authority of the country passed on the buck to the Supreme Court instead of exercising its own authority!). If a law has to be changed, two methods come to mind. One is to build public opinion, and mobilize the people so that the legislature is forced to take notice. The other is to simply file a writ petition in the High/Supreme Court. In Maki Bui's case, as in most other conflicts, two options present themselves. One is to fight it out at the local level, the other is to go and file a petition in a higher court. It is easy to see why most urban middle class activists take the second route. Lacking roots in the local society and unwilling to meet the hardships involved in developing these roots in a local milieu, they resort to writ petitions which provide a short cut. **Manushi** at least has the courage to admit these hard facts. But this admission is of little value — as proven by the new petition being filed in the Supreme Court.

I know the answer will be that but

this is only a part of the effort. After all we cannot do everything. Therein lies the tragedy. We have a plethora of groups working at the policy level staffed exclusively by the *savarna* (upper caste) middle classes. Even when these efforts percolate down a little lower, to the numerous voluntary organisations, the *savarna* middle classes retain control. The actual beneficiaries appear only as guides or footrunners. In a deeply segmented society like ours, this means that these groups will never acquire a mass base, a constituency amongst their target group. The result, therefore, as the article correctly points out, is much noise but little substance.

Sudhir K. Katiyar,
Dist. Chittorgarh, Rajasthan

*The petition that is now being filed by **Manushi** does not involve any vulnerable individual or group but is an attempt to focus on judicial reform in general. Accepting our limitation in helping vulnerable individuals, especially if they are situated far away, **Manushi** would from now on try to concentrate on figuring out ways of making our legal system truly functional and accountable. It is our failure in this direction which forces the poor and vulnerable groups to rely on the educated elites as mediators when dealing with the government machinery. How do we, the urban educated elite, become dispensable? That in our view is the real challenge before not only the urban activists but also those like you who have chosen to work in rural areas.*

-Editor

== **Free From Euphoria** ==

I am a regular reader of **Manushi**. I have never written to you so far about my great appreciation of (the balanced and urbane tone of the journal and also its innovative reassessment, for

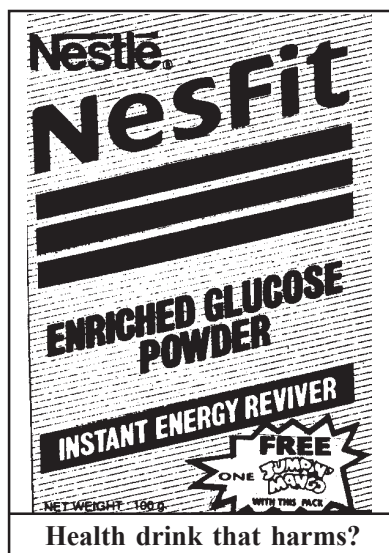
example, the volume on Bhakt poets and articles such as- *Experiencing the Goddess* by Thomas B. Coburn (Manushi 80). The latter seemed to me a richly potential piece capable of significant appropriation in terms of the ideas it articulates.

I am, however, writing this to express my special appreciation of the review by Leela Gandhi of *Women's Writing in India Vol II* (Manushi 81). As far as I know this is one review which is uniquely free from (the feminist?) euphoria that the two volumes generated. It looks at the issue in an amazingly comprehensive and detached way. Amazing, because not many have interrogated the 'ideological grid' - let alone the editorial claims the volumes reflect.

For instance, going into ecstasies about the uninhibited eroticism of the Telugu writer, Muddupalani (Vol. I), is perfectly warranted but to see this as a great symbol of patriarchal conspiracy of suppression of entire women's psyche is a sweeping generalisation which hardly sustains a whole edifice of gender theory! Similarly, defining gender ideology conveniently for oneself and excluding all those who are opposed to it, seeing it as 'complicity and alliance which repressive dominant ideologies' (to quote the reviewer's sane observation) is an old, old hat of logic: 'all intelligent people will agree with me'. No surprise given such a premise (for want of a better word), 'ahimsa' is dismissed as 'exclusively imperialist inheritance.' Finally, the editors' opinions on Aurobindo are just those: opinions and nothing else to merit scrutiny.

But this is not to denigrate the worth of the volumes. In any sense, they are valuable source books but sources which can do well, by and large, without the ideological resources of the editors.

**M Sivaramkrishna,
Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh**



— Inaccurate Facts? —

Recently I have become a member of an email based group of south Asian women called S AWWNET-South Asian Women's Network. Contents published in Manushi do get referred to on the S AWWNET digest every once in a while. In your recent issue (No 77) I came across a one page write up in a feature on health, talking about liquid glucose intake and its harmful effects. I must say that I found myself disagreeing with quite a few statements in that piece. I felt that the article seems to suggest that regular, frequent intake of liquid glucose is very harmful and leads to the development of diabetes. It also suggests that such intake leads to formation of sorbitol crystals in various tissues leading to tissue injury. To the best of my knowledge it is necessary to have very high levels of glucose sustained over a prolonged period to develop this effect. Only if there is a major kidney damage hampering excretion of glucose will such high levels be maintained in the blood in the first instance. For tissue damage to take place one will have to keep drinking glucose drinks continuously, a non practicality. Even

for the development of caries, a prolonged contact period of material containing high levels of sugar is necessary. There is no doubt that chocolates and candies contribute significantly to such process but I am not sure drinking glucose like this will contribute significantly to caries development. Even in the case of sweetened herbal tea causing many side effects, it is necessary to ascertain that the side effects are not due to the herbal extracts per se. In case you have consulted some recent scientific reports which clearly suggest what is mentioned in the article, I would like to know about them out of curiosity.

I am a medically trained person though not practising as a doctor for the last so many years. I have been working as a scientist in immunology for (the past 15 years and have got into the habit of drawing cautious conclusions based on the data available. In that context I felt that the article seems to say that glucose drinks are very harmful to the body. I will certainly be against calling them as 'health' drinks but the picture that has been portrayed is probably not based on complete facts.

Vineeta Bal, New Delhi

As certain medical facts contained in the article were disputed, both the article and Dr. Vineeta Bal's letter were sent to a medical expert on the subject. We reproduce below the reply received from Dr. Michael Craft who is a consultant to the School Health Action and Training (SEHAT) project in Delhi and a member of 'Action and Information on Sugars (AIS), London.

-Editor

I have read both the Manushi article and the letter from Dr Vineeta Bal. Essentially the article is correct:

a) glucose, as a sugar, can provide energy, although not as quickly as is often claimed for it.

b) if consumed in quantity and especially in liquid form, it can certainly lead to dental caries (in the most severe form), hypoglycaemia and diabetes, and overweight or obesity. The evidence for this is strong. Evidence that it is linked to heart disease or blood vessel damage directly is less sure. Indirectly, of course, obesity contributes to high blood pressure and therefore heart diseases, as does diabetes. Although tissue damage through the crystallisation of sorbitol is possible, it is probably rare.

c) the marketing of so called 'Health Drinks' is pernicious. The evidence is that this has led many mothers to give such drinks on a regular—and therefore very frequent or even continuous basis—to very young children, with often disastrous consequences. Rampant caries of the primary dentition is extremely painful and requires total extractions—certainly a scarring experience, which

as the article says, has other very undesirable consequences. The Milupa case is famous and is leading that company to totally changing its policy. Through AIS I have had something to do with this case.

d) the basis of the harm is that sucrose (table sugar including *gur*) and glucose (its direct derivative) are broken down in the mouth and gut as an interaction between sugar and bacteria, with acid as a by-product. It is the acid that does the harm. This is the case with all sugars but much more so with these two — the main ones used in food and drinks. Artificial sweeteners are clear of harmful effects so far. Dr Bal is therefore wrong — glucose is no better than chocolates and candy.

Brushing teeth is not helpful since the bristles cannot reach the pits, fissures and between the teeth - the primary sites for decay. The answer is to limit sugar intake.

e) energy, however, is derived from

all foods — most readily from carbohydrates, and all foods are first broken down into glucose in the gut. So the 'energy' salespitch is a nonsense! We need to advocate a normal balanced diet - which the traditional Indian diet is (easy on the *gheel*)

f) the real problem I think is that the poor (especially children) have such a depleted diet that they actually benefit from consuming sugar in any form for the calories that it gives them. So the article really does not address the needs of the poor but of a more middle class audience. The development task, perhaps, is to introduce other readily available carbohydrates to the poor from the trad diet. Know of any?!

The most readily accessible review of the evidence is in: *Sugars. Committee On The Medical Aspects Of Medicine*, Department of Health, London. It was published in 1992.

Michael Craft, London, England