

Letters to Marushi

Brainwashed

I could not visit Mr. Ramaiah to express my condolences, although my heart was full of sympathy for him for having lost his wife due to her sheer stupidity. When he reported for duty after all the ceremonies were over I went to see him in his office. I was taken aback for a second when I saw his stoic face. For I had expected him to be totally depressed and dejected at the untimely death of his wife. I quickly attributed his facial expression to his awareness that death was inevitable for her and his consequent mental pre-paredness. Mr. Ramaiah politely thanked me for my call and then went on to tell me about the entire story of her ailment leading to her death. His story included some self-praise, as well as praise for his wife. I will put it in a nutshell.

His wife was extremely pious and had been devoted to her husband. She enjoyed sound health without any major ailments. When she had some gynaecological problems for the first time in her life, a specialist was consulted immediately. Cancer was still in an initial stage when it was diagnosed. The top gynaecologist of the city confirmed it. A hysterectomy was advised. But no one on earth could convince her to undergo surgery. She consistently maintained that she would not remain a woman if she allowed her womb to be removed.

He expressed regrets that because of her superstitious and conservative outlook he had to lose her when her death was so untimely. Mr. Ramaiah repeatedly and emphatically told me that he took her to the best specialist

and admitted her in the best nursing home in the city. He also claimed that he nursed her towards the end of her life with such care that out of supreme gratitude she told him, with folded hands, "It was my great fortune to get a husband like you; all women are not as lucky as I am. May I get you as my husband in my next life too - that is my last prayer to God."

Mr. Ramaiah also told me about her last wishes. She wanted certain things for her children and the house, etc. He told me that he had already fulfilled those wishes so that her soul rests in peace.

My sixth sense told me that there was something wrong somewhere. From repeated mention of how he looked after her and also from his recital of her last prayer to God I inferred that he was suffering from a guilty conscience for some reason.

In any case my doubts were dispelled within a few months by the news that he married again. I also came to know from a reliable source that he had been friendly with his new wife even when his first wife was alive.

When I saw the healthy and smart fifty-year-old Mr. Ramaiah walking down the street confidently with his head held high hand in hand with his newly married wife, I felt tempted to ask, "Who brainwashed your first wife to believe that a woman ceases to be a woman if her uterus is removed? Did you do it yourself or through some agent?"

But I have not been able to ask. Even now, a sense of guilt still pains me whenever I see him.

Basanti Devi, Mysore

A Social Contract

I feel that marriage is a social contract. It has to be governed by a Uniform Civil Code which is just and honours human dignity. This is important because both marriage and its dissolution involves responsibilities, rights and transactions. Religion is a "personal" and not a "social" entity because India is a secular state and societies here have evolved organically and include a whole range of shades in faith, language, culture, class and occupation. A marriage may or may not be totally dependent on the contracting parties. This makes prior registration of all marriages a must. Unregistered marriages thus will not be held legal and the "contract" will not be honoured by a court of law in case of any dispute later.

As in most situations, if such change is made in the law, for a long time to come women will suffer because marriages will continue to be performed with religious rituals alone and men will take advantage of the "non-marriages".

The change should perhaps be introduced in stages. First of all, registration of all marriages must be made mandatory within a stipulated period of time after the marriage ceremony. Personal Law in case of Muslims could be amended to include:

- Specification of the preferred form *ditalaq* by the two contracting parties in the *nikahnama* itself.

- The right of the wife to appeal to the Civil Court (either for seeking a

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divorce or for maintenance and custody of the children, as the case may be) when there is a violation of any aspect of the *nikahnama* by the husband.

Finally, the most important thing is to educate and empower women so that they are freed of the social and emotional dependence caused by economic dependence.

Kajoli K. Krishnan, Ahmedabad

Responsible Choices

I read your reflections on Love and Marriage in the last issue (no. 80) of Manushi with great interest - and with growing disagreement! Your point of view is that arranged marriages are not in any way inferior to 'love marriages', and in fact may offer better security for women. In fact you point out - and rightly - that so called 'love' marriages are in actuality 'self' arranged marriages, and the self interest of the dominant partner (usually the man) plays an important role in sustaining the relationship, as well as breaking it up.

I want to develop a different angle to the whole issue. Like you I dislike the term 'love marriage' as misleading, and opt for 'marriage of choice' instead. What we are witnessing slowly and steadily all over the world (even in traditional societies, though obviously at a much slower pace) is the widening areas of choice for more and more people, specially the hitherto oppressed sections of society, especially for women. I think more and more women in India today have the capacity to choose - their jobs, whether they will have children and when, whether they will be married and to whom. This would be

unthinkable even fifty years ago! And even when particular choices are bad, the real capacity for choice is a good thing.

Your piece points out strongly the defects of love marriages. In as much as it is a corrective to the unrealistic romanticism of teenagers and Hindi films, it is all right. But as they say, "hard cases make bad law". It serves little purpose to pile up instance upon instance of breakdown of marriages built on choice (always sensationalised by the tabloids) and to ignore the fact that millions of arranged marriages are built upon the silent suffering of the woman. As I like to say of Catholic Christian marriage: The stability of marriage and family is based upon the oppression of the woman.

To choose responsibly, that's the question; and it is one where families and society at large must assist young people. Western society with its individualism has no answer for the crisis of the modern family; nor I believe, does the traditional extended family which places family before person. The answer lies in a dialectic between the two, and the means to this is increased freedom to choose.

Myron J. Periera, Bombay

Fatal Neglect

I was very moved by Mridula Garg's article, "Death by Oversight - Plea for Road Safety."

Being an American national I always have to be careful not to hail the west's ways as best. However, one of the first things I noticed was the total lack of road safety in Bangalore where I've been for 7 months.

In addition to no seat belt laws,

the continuous on again off again helmet law for two wheelers boggles my mind. But even with the driver wearing a helmet, his passengers (usually a wife riding side saddle, a child standing in front of him or sandwiched between mom and dad) are not expected to wear helmets. Are their skulls and spinal cords stronger than the drivers'?

Also the positioning of the women and the children is a disaster waiting to happen. As if these things weren't bad enough, it seems as if the drivers are unaware of their brakes. Rather, they will lean on their horn to get you, a pedestrian, to stop or run out of the way. This applies to two wheelers, tongas, double decker buses, as well. Even turning a "blind" corner, does not cause drivers to slow down and move with caution.

To make matters worse, traffic lights are few and far between; a traffic cop's only recourse against an errant driver is to impotently blow his whistle as he watches them zoom by. And finally from 9pm on there are no traffic lights but plenty of traffic.

My deepest sympathy to Mrs. Garg at this tragic and unnecessary loss. There must be many deaths as a result of these lax laws. Can something be done to change things?

Janet Scarpati, Bangalore □

