Mettlesome Manushi
Category : May 1995
Published by Anonymous on May. 01, 1995

Mettlesome Manushi

Don't Let the Editor's Winsome Smile Fool You-She's a Tigress

Poornima Narayanan, Delhi

On a mild winter evening I walked into the home of Madhu Kishwar-social activist, intrenational lecturer and editor of Manushi, India's only "serious" magazine about women. The apartment is cozy, very Indian, with soft ikat prints, oil paintings and book-lined walls. Madhu herself, dressed in bright ethnic colors, is a petite figure. Behind her unusually expressive, soft amber eyes, I see the trenchant mind that unnerves even the boldest bullies who attempt to defend or excuse India's blatant social abuses, especially those who denigrate her women. Over tea, we talked about her personal life, her journal's birth, its tremulous adolescence and more recently, its heart-warming recognition as one of India's most intelligent and informed voices of social conscience and sensible religio/political debate.

Founded in 1978 by a group of women in Delhi, "Manushi was conceived to exist for a cause, for causes, and serve as a catalyst to make our society more just and humane," Madhu summarizes. "Our task is not just to passively put together articles that come to us but to initiate positive corrective change, improvement."

For this reason, the Manushi world is far more than printed words and meeting bi-monthly deadlines. Always the printed word is their most powerful tool, but Manushi's action pallette includes all kinds of strategies and endeavors-legal aid service, human rights campaigns, book publishing, even street plays, whatever.

Exposing the discrimination of-and demoralizing minimalization of-women in Indian society is the tempest that thrsuts against Manushi's sails. But there is so

much more. This is definitely not a for-women-only, feminists' empowerment manual. Manushi is very much every thinking man's magazine too. Muslims love it. Though Hindu, Madhu routinely comes down hardest on her own co-religionists when they can't even live up to the most basic Hindu teachings of love and respecting God in people of all faiths.

In fact Manushi's elusive editorial mind-set disorients even the most loyal readers who think they have Madhu and Manushi pigeon holed. Readers were stunned when Madhu came out supporting arranged marriages (still not condemning love marriages) in a long, logically reasoned out, article (for which she interviewed 1,715 adults). Fearing she had sold out to the arch-conservative medievalists, or entrenched patriarchalists she was supposed to be emancipating her country from-or just getting old and unromantic-readers stormed her mailbox with letters crying betrayal. She stood her ground.

It All Began With Rs 500

The story of Manushi's early years is the story of all "little" magazines with a conscience-uphill, bumpy, lots of begging, never enough readers. "Our initial capital consisted of no more than Rs. 500 (US$15) collected from early volunteers," Madhu reminisces. "Oftentimes we would have no money for postage, and an issue had to be put together through loans. We could not even afford a typewriter. In those early years, Manushi was on the verge of dying every day." It was daringly decided at the outset to not accept grants and advertisements. And still does not. "All our activities-including research, investigations, legal aid, etc.-are funded from subscriptions and single copy sales," Madhu proudly shares."In India, if people see that you're not in social work for personal gain-that it's not a money-making enterprise-you get a lot of affection and respect."

Manushi has an impressive 6,000 subscribers-parliamentarians to housewives -and has spread wings to Europe, America, Africa and Australia on a pauper's promotional budget. Manushi sells itself. Inspired readers are its invisible sales force.

The editorial focus is an evolving thing. Early issues dealt with specific social issues and hot-button incidents, notably atrocities against women, rural labor

disputes, the landless poor, tribal rights, etc. However, Madhu soon realised that it was critical that readers first fully understand the subtler forces within Indian societal fabric in order to meaningfully assess any event or issue. She did not want the journal to become simply a bullhorn for "propaganda-oriented reports of struggles by different organizations."

This brought a new energy to Manushi. How-awful-everything-is metamorphsosed into more of a let's-see-what-we-can-actually-do-to-help attitude. Readers responded and subscriptions jumped. New articles appeared with a marked cultural/religious focus, reflective, more philosophical. There came inspirational people profiles, presentations of Indian traditions, tribal rituals and their meaning, even humor (the hardest emotion for die-hard social activists to express.) Readers died laughing when editors ran a piece on the superiority of Indian-style over Western-style toilets! Their tenth anniversary issue,"Women Bhakta Poets"-a masterfully crafted 108 pages on the female songsters and saints who helped shape India's spiritual landscape was a masterpiece. In every issue there is always a deep-research piece by Madhu herself. "In her "In Defense of Dharma" [issue #60] she outlined a down-to-earth, yet visionary 10-point plan to strengthen Hinduism. It included the return of temples to their earliest design as potent cultural education hubs. Readers love her high-minded, lucid writing style-so refreshing in India where British-era-styled journalists still delight in floral, Victorian phrases of such hollow substanceon matters of such social consequence.

Poetry, film reviews, book reviews, fiction stories and analyses of social trends and political events-with usually an angle on women-spiced up the magazine a lot.

Madhu also realized that in order to accomplish real social reform in India, it was essential to factor in unique, geographic, religious values and village customs -and never formulate a fascile, one-solution-for-all approach-so often artificial, imposed, unwanted, alien and delusively panaceaic in nature. For this editorial accomplishment, she has won major journalism awards.

People, Not Laws, Dictate Justice

In the spirit of Gandhi, peaceful protest has been one of Manushi's most

effective wedge in leveraging truth, compassion and justice. One demonstration outside the home of a young victim of dowry murder (husband torched wife with kerosene because not enough dowry was paid) sparked off hundreds of similar protests all over India. Madhu precisely pinpoints its unprecedented success: "This form of protest has certain peculiarly Indian characteristics. In our society, social opinion matters far more in regulating social behavior than do laws."

Since many of her articles carry in-depth information about the legal aspects of social issues, I was curious to know if Madhu, an ex-professor, had any legal background. "No, I have no legal background at all," Madhu replied. "In fact, I believe that the present day legal profession is devilish." The fire I have heard about her flares. "They make people fight, and then drag them into interminable conflicts. When Manushi got started, a lot of abused wives came to us, right to our door, to seek help. We had perforce to go and look for lawyers who could help them. In the process, we saw how very limited were the existing laws in helping women and how limited the legal machinery is in giving people justice.There's something terribly wrong with this so-called modern system of jurisprudence that the British gave us."

One issue extensively covered by Manushi is the Ramjanmabhoomi movement that culminated in massacre and bloodshed in the aftermath of the destruction of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya in December, 1992. Madhu gets forceful: "The secular intellectuals argue that religion is unduly interfering in politics. In fact, it is the other way around. Politicians are taking over religious institutions and religious symbols with the sole aim of grabbing political power in the crudest possible fashion. I think a real believer would define religion, dharma, as a space for altruism, where you forget your self-interest in the name of God, where you seek no recognition, reward, no monetary or political gain. It's simply labor for God. Religion, or dharma, to me begins where self-interest ceases to exist. That's what makes it sacred. My mother tells me how stressful it has become for her to go to the local Arya Samaj Mandir, because, she says, they start giving political speeches against Muslims and for-or-against certain political parties. They do it even at shraddh ceremonies. She says it's where we go to seek peace, we don't go to listen to political speeches!"

One would assume an opinionated magazine like Manushi would attract enemies. Strangely, it's not. "Only two kinds of people are perpetually annoyed with Manushi," Madhu relates. "One is a section of the feminist lobby in India and the other, one section of Marxists, who've been traditionally hostile." "What's their grouse ?" I ask. "That we exist," Madhu responds with a smile. "Other than that, well, in 16 years of our existence, we have so far received only one hate letter, and

that from an NRI in America who never read the magazine. His fiancÃ©e was a Manushi subscriber and since she was not super-submissive, he thought Manushi was spoiling her. Other than this, Manushi has mostly evoked love and affection. I would not have survived but for this."

It has been a special evening getting to know Manushi and its charismatic editor, her courage and conviction. I leave Madhu's home with good wishes for Manushi's future, inspiring Hindu society to honor women as a precious strength and better dignify their position in the home, society and workplace.

Address: C/202 Lajpat Nagar 1, New Delhi, 110024 India Tel: 6833022 (Sub. Rs 60 per year) or R. Narang, 75 Fieldston Terrace, Rochester NY 14610 USA (Sub. $29/one year airmail)

Sidebar: Compassionate Mettle

Interview by Poornima Narayanan

Hinduism Today: Is your feminism a reaction to a patriarchal family structure?

Madhu Kishwar: So often-even in your question-people presuppose that I take an interest in women's issues because I came from a patriarchal family filled with male or fatherly oppression. For me, it's been the contrary. I think the reason I came to take such an active interest is that since I never was treated badly, I cannot bear to see others maltreated. To me it's an aberration.

It was only after I joined college that I began to see how women grow up with such low self-esteem and therefore allow others to treat them shabbily. As a woman student trying to participate in university politics, I became more sensitive to the kind of pressures women confront. But not raised to accept an inferior, meek position, I would put my foot down and say, `No, this [mistreatment of women]

cannot happen.'

HT: Please tell us something about your family background.

MK: There's nothing exceptional about my family background. My father worked for Life Insurance Corporation. He is now retired. My mother is a housewife. I have two younger brothers. Perhaps the only exceptional thing-which I never realized then, but I appreciate now when I see the lives of other women, in India and other parts of the world-is the amount of unconditional love support and freedom-rarely given to kids-I got from my family, no matter what I did. Not just from my parents but also my grandparents, aunts and uncles. It is the foundation of my strength and self-confidence. This has contributed the most to my ability to stand by my own beliefs and convictions. In fact, without their continued affection, I couldn't live. I think I would just wilt and die. I consider it one of the biggest blessings of my life.

HT: Who are your most forceful critics, toughest challenges?

MK: The only kind of women I have had problems with are Indian feminists who are overly tuned to Westernized feminism and have very little respect for their own society and people. For some reason they're the only ones who can't stand Manushi. Nothing satisfies them. I don't understand what they want, which is one of the reasons I distance myself from the Westernized feminist movement in India. I have an uneasy feeling they dislike Indian women as they are and want to remold them into creatures alienated from their own social environment.

I chose not to get married. I am happy in the life I've chosen, and enjoy the work I do. It's hard, but very challenging. Yes, stressful. I'm overstressed. I'm overexhausted. I'm overworked. I also take so many pungaas, you know. I'm inviting trouble all the time.

I am always calling upon my family to help out. My father will rarely walk out of the house without a copy of Manushi in his bag to get subscribers. If I asked them all to even sit on the street to polish shoes to do fundraising for Manushi, they would do it. That's the kind of unconditional love and support that surrounds me.

Which is equally true for most of my friends and volunteers-males and females.

HT: How do you relax-yoga or hobbies?

MK: I have a lot of interests. Music is something that interests me profoundly. Theater, good cinema but, unfortunately, I have very little time for those. If I had lived in a more sane world, a more sane society where there wasn't so much injustice around, then perhaps I would have made more time for other pursuits. If I could, I would have spent my entire life on two things-music and yoga-and learning Sanskrit. But I don't have those luxuries available to me. At least not in this lifetime.

HT: I know you meditate. Can you say something about this?

MK: The time I spend on yoga, mediation, is, you could say, my puja time. When you're doing breathing control, you're controlling your mind, focusing it. I don't do any ritualistic pujas as such. My family inculcated this idea very strongly in all of us that doing good karma is the best puja. Also, to be honest, I haven't fully sorted out my relationship with God. The only kind of God that is acceptable to me (and luckily, our Hindu faith teaches it) is the idea that God is sarvavyapi, all pervasive, and indwelling-one who lives in every living being, connects all forms of life to each other-us to trees, plants, rivers, mountains, birds, animals. I am unwilling to ever consider God as an external creature sitting in the heavens, telling people what to do, punishing them, frightening them into submission.