

The last few issues of MANUSHI have evoked a whole range of enthusiastic, puzzled and worried responses from our friends, well wishers and critics. For the first time, most of those who responded conveyed their concern by telephone rather than through letters. The most anxious and concerned enquiries have come in response to the heavy coverage of the *Tehelka* sting in our last issue. Some of our friends and well wishers have expressed apprehension about what might happen to MANUSHI for taking such an active part in the campaign against corruption in Defence procurement deals. Friends ask whether we have thought through the dangers it might involve. Some of our readers think we might be jeopardising MANUSHI's very existence by taking on the NDA government on an issue that is so sensitive and so vital to the NDA's political survival. Given the vindictive way in which the government clamped down on the First Global couple, Shankar Sharma and Devina Mehra, who helped finance *Tehelka*, even the big newspapers have decided to play it safe and are for the most part dutifully serving as vehicles of the government's misinformation campaign. Why then is MANUSHI rushing in where others fear to tread?

Yes, we are aware that if MANUSHI has to face the wrath of the political establishment, we may not survive the onslaught. But to refrain from taking a stand at a time when most sections of the media have been effectively silenced, would be to betray MANUSHI's mandate. Democracy can only be kept alive if we exercise our fundamental rights, including the right to dissent, to demand accountability from those in

No Political *Burqas* for Us Responding to Your Concerns

○ Madhu Kishwar

power, and to insist that they respect the rule of law. No democracy, no matter how well grounded, can survive if its citizens surrender their rights, if they shut their eyes to criminality out of fear or apathy. MANUSHI's raison d'être is to help mobilise public opinion to safeguard and strengthen the roots of democracy, to catalyse citizens into being active participants in governance and participate in defining the political agenda for the country.

The manner in which the NDA government first responded to the exposé, and later to the communal violence in Gujarat, are serious danger signals for our country. For the first time, the danger of fascist rule looms large on India's political horizon. This is no time to "play safe" or maintain a discrete silence.

At such a time we would do well to heed the warning of Pastor Martin Neimoller:

"First they came for the Communists, but I did not speak

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up because I was not a Communist. Then they came for the Jews and I did not speak up because I was not a Jew. Then they came for the Catholics and I did not speak up because I was Protestant. Then they came for me. And by that time, there was no one left to speak for me." (1945)

Vast government corruption and failure to protect minorities from pogroms (indeed, even government participation in carrying them out) are sadly not new in India. The Congress Party, in fact, showed the way in terms of corruption and massacres. Its leaders have instigated and orchestrated many a communal massacre with the active connivance of the police and local administrations. But since the Congress instigated riots as a part of the cynical electoral game, the party could be shamed and its criminality could be moderated to an extent when it kept swearing by secularism. As opposed to this, the members of the Sangh Parivar seem proud of their role in fomenting communal violence and using mobs, the police and the administrative machinery as their tools in their war against the unprotected minorities.

No matter which party is in power, taking bribes while handling Defence procurements is routine. The Congress Party was the first to

institutionalise the practice of cuts and commissions in Defence deals. As a result, this became a well-established means of collecting party funds and making personal fortunes for those in high positions in the ruling party and government. But what is new and dangerous is the arrogant, systematic, planned manner in which the Sangh Giroh has shamelessly gone on the offensive against the media after the sting and witch hunted the financiers of *Tehelka*, instead of trying to cover up when exposed. It is a sign that these champions of corruption and hate-soaked politics feel invulnerable. If we fail to bring the Sangh Giroh to task for jeopardising the security of our nation, it could well lead to damaging the fabric of our democracy beyond repair.

Showing Ingratitude?

Some readers ask: why is MANUSHI taking such a hostile stand against the NDA government on the issue when Prime Minister Vajpayee has personally responded so favourably to MANUSHI's campaign supporting the right to a livelihood for street vendors and rickshaw pullers? Especially since he even issued a policy statement explicitly supporting our position in very strong terms. Are we not expressing ingratitude as well as jeopardising our vital campaign to help the oppressed by opposing him so strongly? Why do we not at least observe a diplomatic silence on the issue in order to avoid embarrassing a government that has offered us such vital support?

Others take a very different view. They wonder: how is it that the Prime Minister's Office has adopted many of MANUSHI's arguments and issued such a favourable policy statement for street vendors and rickshaw

pullers, given our long track record of having consistently opposed the politics of the Sangh Parivar? These friends express apprehension that this may be a BJP ploy— that they're probably dangling a carrot before MANUSHI to neutralise our hostility to their politics in the hope of co-opting us to their side. They urge us to be more wary of accepting such support on this issue in view of the BJP's anti-minority policies.

The sudden and unexpected intervention for the rights of the self-employed urban poor by the Prime Minister was indeed a surprise. We never once thought of approaching Mr. Vajpayee since municipal policies and laws are not within the Prime Minister's official jurisdiction. The Prime Minister, apparently on his own initiative, read about our campaign in the newspapers and decided to act in our support. We have no idea what prompted the Prime Minister to intervene so decisively in defence of rickshaw pullers and street vendors. We do not have any direct line of communication with him, nor have we met him since the announcement of his New Policy. Some friends who claim to be close to the Prime Minister's household tell us his policy intervention came about because for many years, Mr. Vajpayee had been sympathetically following several of MANUSHI's campaigns for social justice and wanted to show his support for our

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work for the self-employed poor. We have no way of knowing if this is true.

One possible reason for such a fine tuned policy statement could well be that the official in the PMO, Mr. Prodipto Ghosh, who was assigned the job of drafting the policy, has a remarkable grasp of the issues and is strongly pro-reform. We lavished praise on the PM's statement because, whatever the catalyst, the PM's policy directive turned out to be closely supportive of our demands and is far reaching in its potential impact. Welcoming a specific policy intervention by a section of the ruling party does not mean wholesale endorsement of the politics of that party. Similarly, our critical stance opposing the BJP's *hindutvavad* does not mean that we are attacking the BJP on all fronts as a sort of religious compulsion. We try to remain focussed on issues and keep our communication channels open with whoever is willing to engage with us on those issues. For example, while Mr. Vajpayee has responded with such a fine-tuned policy for street vendors, his party MPs, MLAs and Corporators have actively sabotaged that policy. We have pleaded with them as well as attempted to counter them but with little success. Thus we welcomed the PM's new policy, but did not hesitate to battle with his party men when they began sabotaging our project. On the other hand, Congress Chief Minister, Sheila Dikshit, has responded with great enthusiasm to our proposal for building model markets for hawkers and providing them with security of livelihood.

However, there are many in the Delhi government who are against any improvements in the system.

Govt's Duty, No Favours

Using the same yardstick, there is no reason why we should feel so grateful and beholden to Mr. Vajpayee that we refrain from opposing his party when it endangers the well being and security of the people of India or when his party men act in collusion with the police and MCD inspectorate in harassing and fleecing vendors. It is the job of democratically elected governments in power to respond to the legitimate demands of its citizens and redress their valid grievances. Correcting a distorted policy by lawful means is their duty. It ought not to be seen as a favour or concession to any person or group. To be in agreement with some aspects of the government's economic reforms agenda (e.g., allowing competition in the telecom sector, ending government monopoly in food grain procurement, and delicensing the cycle rickshaw sector) does not oblige us to support or turn a blind eye to the terrible harm done to divide the people of our country by the Sangh Parivar and some of the BJP's NDA allies in the ruling coalition.

Turning pro-Rich?

Certain friends and critics of MANUSHI also feel uneasy about the fact that we are taking up cudgels on behalf of corporate successes like Shankar Sharma and *Tehelka* CEO, Tarun Tejpal. They feel we should not be wasting time on the "rich and wealthy" who can "take care of themselves." Some readers also feel that Indian business houses tend to be active players in corruption and therefore neither need nor deserve any sympathy.

We do not agree with this partisan view. Firstly, the First Global couple

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happen to be among the few corporate players who made their millions through honest and legitimate means. That is why their's is the first and only Asian company after those from Japan to be a member of the London Stock Exchange— a privilege granted only after a company has been put through a stringent evaluation of its compliance with international rules. They are among the top 25 taxpayers in the country and have no history of evasion of our onerous tax system and other laws in the entire ten years they have been doing business. They achieved success without any political godfathers. That is why they were easy targets of attack. If we allow the honest among our corporate sector players to be hounded out of business, then we are strengthening the popular perception that it is impossible to earn a good living in India through honest means. That message is lethal for the economic and moral health of our society.

More importantly, we believe that, as far as protection of fundamental rights is concerned, all citizens, rich

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and poor, ought to be treated equally. Paying special attention to the violation of the rights of the poor and vulnerable groups does not mean neglecting the basic rights of the economically advantaged. If the rights of the rich and wealthy can be violated with such impunity, the poor become that much more vulnerable. On issues concerning human rights and citizenship rights, we need the widest possible alliance between the rich and poor, between the educated and illiterate, the rural and urban, among citizens cutting across all religious, class and ethnic divides. During our freedom movement, Gandhi was able to forge such an alliance. Its breakdown in post-Independence India has narrowed the constituency for the defence of human rights and weakened our resolve as a society to effectively resist *sarkari* tyranny.

It is noteworthy, that the arbitrary and high-handed actions of the government in violating the right to life, liberty and property of these two leaders of the corporate world was not very different from the behaviour of government agencies towards street vendors and rickshaw pullers, whose rights MANUSHI has been fighting for. Shankar and Devina were also expected to bribe their way out of the trap laid for them by power wielders in the government, just as street vendors buy a measure of protection or reprieve by allowing themselves to be fleeced by agents of the *sarkar*. The property of Shankar and Devina was seized with the same impunity, using the might of the Indian state and its lawless legal machinery that municipal and police authorities use when they seize cycle rickshaws or the goods and *rehdis* of poor street vendors.

It just goes to show that both the rich and poor in India are comparably vulnerable when facing the wrath of our political and bureaucratic masters. Neither the rich nor the poor have much legal redress available to them when their rights are trampled upon, unless they bribe their way out. Even if the First Global couple manage to prove their innocence, all those responsible for wrongly wrecking their business, reputation and peace of mind will not be called to account in any way.

This sense of immunity enjoyed by our government functionaries is dangerous and needs to be fought with determination. If we want to win this battle, all sections of society must unify for this common cause.

Winning over Opponents

A number of MANUSHI friends have also been puzzled at the inclusion of several individuals chosen to preside at the Public Hearings on the struggle for a livelihood of rickshaw pullers and street vendors. The presence of Mr K.P.S Gill, the ‘supercop’ of Punjab who is alleged to have smashed terrorist groups through illegal strong arm methods including custodial deaths and staged “encounters” on the panel as well as the inclusion of the editor of *Organiser*, the mouthpiece of the RSS, were met with a great deal of disapproval by some of MANUSHI’s friends.

Most progressive and left groups who organise campaigns and public hearings to highlight human rights violations, tend to select people who are known sympathisers of progressive causes. The list of speakers is always predictable and limited to the same people who preside over all such causes and campaigns. Only the already “converted” are approached and

come to attend such meetings. No new friends are won, no new goodwill generated.

Unfortunately, all too often the like-minded then start fighting with and undermining each other. Once you get habituated to talking only to like-minded people, your ability to communicate with people who see things differently, who do not share the same assumptions, begins to diminish fast. Consequently, your positions get more and more rigid. Narrow sectarianism and intolerance of dissent easily flows out of such a politics of inbreeding.

Beyond the ‘Converted’

We have worked hard to break out of this narrow mould. If one believes in the rightness of one’s cause, one must have faith that others will agree to it too, including those who are currently on the opposite side. You have to leave room for them to change their position. We see MANUSHI as a forum where even fundamentally different views can peacefully confront one another. Consequently, MANUSHI gets issue based support from a large spectrum of people— stretching from the extreme left to the extreme right, as well as from the various shades in between. Equally important— at a personal level, lots of those who adhere to enormously divergent ideological beliefs express a great deal of goodwill and affection for MANUSHI, including many whose politics we have openly fought against.

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In all the meetings we organise, we make a special effort to include and reach out to people who are not among the “converted”. That is why even the panel of people we put together to preside over the Public Hearings include many who are not usually associated with progressive causes but whose opinions nevertheless carry a lot of weight among the power wielders of today. Mr. K.P.S Gill happens to be one such person. Given that much of the problems of street vendors and rickshaw pullers emanate from the hostile and tyrannical attitude of the police, it is important for us to have at least some people from within the police establishment to stand up for the rights of these despised and tyrannised people. Mr. Gill did so very willingly and gracefully. Taking his support for street vendors and rickshaw pullers does not obligate us to defend his record on human rights violation while combating terrorism in Punjab. No such quid pro quo was expected and none was offered. (Incidentally, today he has won admiration for providing succour to the terrorised people of Gujarat, by making the police act in a non-partisan, professional manner to protect the minorities.)

The panelists we chose represented diverse shades of opinion— from known leftists like Rajdeep Sardesai of NDTV, Om Thanvi of *Jansatta*, Dinesh Mohan of IIT Delhi to confirmed right-wingers like Mr. Sheshadri Chari of the *Organiser*. They also included human rights activists like Rajya Sabha MP Kuldeep Nayyar, Dhirubhai Sheth of CSDS and Rani Jethmalani as well as liberals like Dileep Padgaonkar of *The Times of India*, columnist Tavleen Singh, Ajeet Gulabchand, a leading figure from the corporate sector, S. P.

Shukla of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce, and Dr. Vijay Sheel Kumar of Apollo Hospital.

Wide Spectrum Support

The format we chose for our public hearings required the panelists to sit and listen to the accounts of the victims for hours, to see their problems through their eyes. We chose not to feature lectures and speeches to impose our views on the vendors and rickshaw pullers. At the end, after the victims had their say, each of the panelists took no more than five to seven minutes to respond. And all of them were moved enough by the accounts they heard to be un-equivocal in their support for a rational and humane policy for street vendors and the rickshaw sector.

We also got exceptional support from a mass circulation Hindi daily *Punjab Kesari* that is not normally associated with progressive causes. This paper gave prominent front-page coverage to a series of MANUSHI reports on street-vendors. The backing given by *Punjab Kesari* proved crucial in reaching out to lakhs of street vendors in Delhi and in other north Indian cities. Similarly, the RSS mouthpiece *Organiser's* coverage of the two *Lok Sunwayis*, was among the best and most comprehensive. At the other end of the spectrum, we received similar enthusiastic backing from a distinctively progressive left leaning paper like *Jansatta*. Similarly, we have tried to build bridges with more thoughtful elements within the bureaucracy, even while battling the obstructionists at the ground level. Very few of our progressive and radical friends object to our seeking support among senior bureaucrats, despite the fact that many of these bureaucrats are just as responsible

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as the politicians for the corruption and abuse of power. Yet many are upset if we engage with the RSS or BJP to raise the very same issues.

No Political Burqas for Us

We intend to continue to establish communication channels with and make time for lecture invitations from organisations which are not known for progressive causes, as long as they do not object to our stating our viewpoint freely. During the heyday of the Sikh terrorist movement, we addressed numerous meetings in North American *gurudwaras*, which were then dominated by Khalistani hot heads. We took a forthright stand against terrorist politics, and yet were able to engage them, and even win over a section of those audiences to our viewpoint.

Similarly, we have eagerly accepted lecture invitations at meetings of Muslim organisations, which take a conservative anti-women stand on many issues. Likewise, we would never say “No” to a discussion with Shiv Sainiks, Bajrang Dalis or other members of the Sangh Parivar, whose politics of hate and aggression we deeply mistrust and abhor. Aversion to engaging with people who have an opposing viewpoint is a sign of low self-confidence. It is like putting women in a burqa for fear that

exposure to men would tempt them to go astray. MANUSHI needs to wear no political burqas to keep its commitment to democracy, freedom and secularism firm.

Consensus on the Basics

Stable democracies are those where, amidst the varying shades of opinion, there is an overall consensus on some basic issues among all significant elements from the left to the right. That is the kind of stable consensus we need to work out in India by involving the entire spectrum of political opinion. For example, the sanctity of the right to security of life and livelihood, equality before the law, and respect for due process ought all to be treated as fundamental givens by all shades of political opinion. In India, this consensus is threatened not so much from fringe radical groups as from mainstream political parties who do not hesitate to use criminal means in their pursuit of power. They work hard to spread hate and mistrust among significant sections of our population.

It is not just a Bal Thackeray or Narendra Modi who are guilty of fomenting communal massacres to win elections, Congress leaders in the past have done it time and again. Moreover, the Sangh Parivar has been able to win over large sections of the population to endorse its hate soaked politics and overlook its criminal acts. Therefore, it is imperative that we engage with all our political parties and compel them to affirm their commitment to the fundamental rights enshrined in our Constitution and refrain from using violence and crime—no matter what the contours of their politics and ideology. It is even more important that we enshrine principles of accountability within our institutions of governance so that

those in power do not enjoy a sense of immunity from the law as they do at present. Political parties have been emboldened to use communal riots as an instrument of consolidating vote banks because no significant politician has ever been punished in India for leading and carrying out communal riots in India.

Need to Depolarise

Today, mistrust and estrangement between Hindus and Muslims has reached dangerous levels. While it is very necessary to demand legal punishment for all those who actively engineer communal riots as did the Narendra Modi government in Gujarat, the problem cannot be solved by merely targeting a few individuals for punitive action. The communal riots in Gujarat witnessed large-scale participation by all strata of citizens, including many who are well-off, educated and middle-class, as well as Dalits and Tribals. The Sangh Parivar has been able to win over such a large spectrum of people by engineering a sharp polarisation between Hindus and Muslims. Similarly, the Pakistani intelligence agencies have been able to bring under their payroll, a good number of obscurantist Muslims as well as anti-social elements who have taken to terrorist politics and do all they can to sharpen the communal divide. Any further polarisation will only

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lead to a civil war in India. The need of the hour is to build bridges, to depolarise our polity and to ensure that those guilty of murder and mayhem are effectively punished and marginalised, no matter which community or political formation they belong to.

At the Cost of Women ?

Finally, some of our readers also want to know why we give such prominent coverage to economic and political issues at the cost of “women’s issues.”

MANUSHI has consistently avoided what we call the *zenana dabba* approach to women’s issues. MANUSHI’s role model for women’s activism is a woman like Aung San Suu Kwei of Burma, who has provided leadership to her entire society while adding a distinctly compassionate feminine vision to her politics. We believe women, as a group, must play a meaningful role in society and public life. Women will remain marginalised in society and politics if they do not assert their rights and take responsibility as citizens. While it is important to pay special attention to specific gender-based concerns of women, getting narrowly confined to feminine concerns would amount to ghettoising women’s politics. Women find it very hard to strengthen their rights within the family and find opportunities for meaningful participation in social and political affairs in societies where power wielders do not respect the rule of law, where citizenship rights do not rest on a secure footing, where the state machinery is easy to manipulate for personal, partisan ends, where those who hold the reins of power enjoy total immunity and can get away with loot, rape and murder, as is happening in Gujarat today. Women

also suffer disproportionately when the economy is stagnant, when avenues of advancement are closed for the vast bulk of the people, when the power wielders put enormous hurdles in the way of ordinary people earning a dignified livelihood.

That is why from very early on, MANUSHI’s primary focus has been reform in governance so as to make it accountable and non-partisan. We cannot even begin to effectively deal with simple problems like domestic violence if our police protects criminals and wife murderers, if adequate employment and housing remains out of the reach of most women, or if streets are so dominated by anti-social elements that women feel afraid to step out of the house without male protection. That is one of the reasons MANUSHI emphasises economic and political reforms that aim to decriminalise our economy and polity and remove needless hurdles placed by our bureaucracy in the way of our people’s economic initiatives.

Some Thumb Rules

We have found the following rules of thumb useful in framing our choices in politics as well as in our editorial policies. We offer them for discussion with our readers:

- ➔ Keep the focus on issues rather than on personalities. When you criticise some wrongdoing or take a stand against some injustice, try keeping personal prejudice, animosity or favouritism out of it. Focus on ways to solve problems and resolve conflicts rather than be content with opposing and critiquing.
- ➔ Keep your mind doors open for dialogue, especially with those with whom you differ.
- ➔ Be willing to make the necessary adjustments and corrections in

your own stand on issues that are not matters of principle to accommodate and make possible a consensual approach. Do not needlessly take such inflexible positions that you are forced to choose- win all or lose all.

- Do not confuse rigidity of opinion and stance with radicalism. Be the first one to admit a mistake. If you find yourself in the wrong, admit it quickly, openly and gracefully rather than cover up by acting defensive or aggressive.
- Avoid needlessly escalating the scale of confrontation, especially when dealing with the problems of very vulnerable groups. Do not lead them into confrontations, which they cannot sustain and which make their position more vulnerable than it is already. While it is brave to take personal risks, it is irresponsible to make others take risks for which they are not prepared or willing to undertake.
- Be willing to take one step at a time toward your objectives as long as it is a step towards greater freedom for the people on whose behalf you are fighting the battle.
- Do not be afraid of being in a minority, or even standing alone, if you find that going with the majority involves negating important principles of freedom and human dignity.
- Avoid demonising your opponents. If you give them a fair hearing and readily concede to the demands/ criticism of even those whose politics you differ with, you are more likely to get a fair hearing and the required credibility to resist/oppose the harmful and illegitimate aspects of their politics.

meeting

on

Tehelka Exposé and Gujarat Carnage

On May 14, 2002, MANUSHI in collaboration with India International Centre organised a meeting to review the aftermath of the *Tehelka* exposé and its linkages with the Gujarat massacre.

The *Tehelka* exposé documenting corruption in Defence deals shook the nation and caused a countrywide uproar. Since the BJP prides itself on its “nationalist” credentials, many people expected that the *Tehelka* exposé would lead to an Operation Clean-Up, accompanied by measures to bring about greater transparency and accountability in the working of the Defence Ministry. Instead, those found compromising the country’s security and jeopardising the lives of our soldiers are being protected with the entire might of the Indian state, while those who brought those facts to light are being defamed and hounded.

The aftermath of Operation Westend is no less shocking than the original exposé. The government has reacted with unprecedented viciousness. In the Commission of Enquiry set up to find the truth, the government filed affidavits only against *Tehelka* not against those it had found guilty of wrongdoing. The witch-hunt of Shankar Sharma and Devina Mehra of First Global, whose only fault is that they had invested in the *Tehelka* portal, tells a story far more chilling than anything that happened during the Emergency. (For a detailed account see Issue No 128 of MANUSHI)

The same kind of intolerance is being demonstrated again in even more frightening dimensions with the

recent events in Gujarat. As evidence of an unprecedented state-sanctioned pogrom mounts, instead of curbing and punishing those involved in the violence, the government has transferred honest officers, physically intimidated journalists, and accused the media of inciting communal tensions by giving prominent coverage to the pogrom and blamed the victims for the violence perpetrated on them.

These are serious danger signals for our fragile democracy. Instead of acting as guardians and protectors, those in power are posing serious threats to the safety and security of our country and its citizens. Our meeting on May 14 also aimed to explore how we as citizens should ensure that the guilty are brought to book and how we can bring about greater accountability and transparency in government functioning.

The meeting was unprecedented for both the large number of people who attended as well as the level of response. The conference room overflowed its capacity and numerous people had to sit on the floor while many more stood. Others stood in the corridors outside the conference room for almost three hours listening to the proceedings inside through speakers installed in the hallway. Dozens of people called to say that they had to go back because they could not even find a place to stand. We apologise to all those who braved the heat wave to come for the meeting but had to leave disappointed due to lack of space.

Our panelists that evening included among others Mark Tully, Alyque Padamsee, Prashant Bhushan, Mahesh Bhatt, Tavleen Singh, Shiv Visvanathan and Ashok Desai. Their speeches were convincing enough to enthuse the audience to respond with keen insights and comments. The highlights of the meeting however, were the personal accounts of the First Global couple, Shankar Sharma and Devina Mehra. Devina first narrated in detail, the manner in which they had been hounded out of business and were subjected to indignities and defamation. Shankar Sharma's account focused on his experiences in jail, the horror of it all laced with dark humour. He spoke of fellow prisoners who could not afford bail and had been languishing in prison for more than seven years on charges as petty as stealing seventy rupees. As Sharma cited the examples of the many prisoners who were chance victims to police harassment.

The overwhelming response of the audience and applause to Shankar and Devina, both testified to the fact that despite the systematic misinformation, not every one has been taken in by the government's propaganda machinery. There is great anxiety and concern about serious threats being posed to our national security by those in power. Though newspapers are not providing adequate follow up information on the rampant corruption and naked abuse of democratic principles by those in power, citizens are willing to stand up against the brazenness with which ministers and other government functionaries are looting the public exchequer through phoney and corrupt Defence deals that are putting the whole nation at risk.

Several notable names from leading dailies too were present that evening. And yet there was not a

mention of the event in the press. This curious silence of the media prompted the following comments from former editor of *The Indian Express*, Mr. Ajit Bhattacharjea, in an article entitled "One Spoon of News, Three Spoons of Colour", that appeared on the op-ed page of *The Asian Age* on May 28, 2002:

Our big newspapers, that like to describe themselves as national, compare favourably with the best in the world in make-up, design, typeface, colour-printing (sometimes overdone)—everything that contributes to appearance. Much money is spent on the latest hardware. But they are miserly in investing in content. Precise figures are not available, but from all accounts it seems that less than 10 percent of their revenues goes to news gathering...

Today, routine local coverage seems to be ignored, even if a nugget of news may be uncovered.

This came home to me a few days when Madhu Kishwar, the indefatigable editor of MANUSHI, organised a meeting at the India International Centre providing first-hand evidence of the manner in which *Tehelka* and its financiers were being persecuted for the national service of exposing high level defence and political corruption on film. The press was invited. Shankar Sharma and Devina Mehra of the First Global investment company appeared personally to detail the numerous measures taken by Indian tax and other authorities to derail their business, the only Asian business to be a member of the London Stock

Exchange. Their offices had been shut, travel overseas banned, properties attached, bank accounts sealed, Shankar Sharma jailed, all without a charge-sheet. Their crime: First Global had 14.5 percent shares in Buffalo Networks, the media company owning *Tehelka*.

The hall was crowded, with people standing in the corridor. Sharma and Mehra were repeatedly cheered. The audience clearly believed the story of the with-hunt and showed their sympathy. Tarun Tejpal of *Tehelka* described how his business was suffering. He too was cheered. What a story! Specific details were provided in MANUSHI. But not a line in the national papers the next day.

Laziness? Lack of news sense and social responsibility? Or the chilling conclusion reached by some observers? This was that the heavy damage done to First Global and *Tehelka* by official persecution had scared the press from following up and ensured that nobody would finance another *Tehelka* ...

However, MANUSHI continues to receive a lot of positive feedback about the meeting. The following resolutions received near unanimous support. MANUSHI invites readers to endorse these resolutions and also encourage others to do so.

Please photocopy the facing page and encourage others to sign this petition as well and send these to MANUSHI.