

On The Occasion Of The Presentation Of The Smt. Chameli Devi Jain Award To Manushi

IT is an honour to receive this award instituted in the memory of Smt. Chameli Devi Jain, a committed freedom fighter and worker for women's rights. She represents the era when women, through their active participation in India's struggle for freedom, won significant battles for women's freedom as well.

I would like to thank the Media Foundation for this gesture of support to Manushi which I see as an extension of the love and care that so many people have poured into Manushi ever since it started in 1979.

Manushi has tried to avoid a "ladies' compartment" approach to women's issues, that is, confining its concern to problems like dowry, rape, abortion. To limit women's concern to these would be to accept society's ghettoisation of women, to accept that we are powerless to change and redefine the world. Therefore, Manushi attempts to explore and analyse as many as possible of the significant things happening around us, from the point of view of women, particularly women of oppressed groups and communities. It tries to develop a vision of an oppression free world, not just a strategy for tackling isolated issues.

In some ways, Manushi could be called a success, since it has managed to survive and retain its independence without accepting institutional funding, without relying on advertising, but remaining dependent only on the love, labour and support of its readers. However, since

Manushi is not a commercial venture, in the ultimate sense its success cannot be measured merely by the growth of its circulation or the recognition it gets. We would like to measure its success by the causes for which it stands.

In the last few years, the content of Manushi has reflected the fact that the scale of injustice and violation of human rights is rapidly escalating. There is a growing collusion of authority with the violators of human rights. For example, while the victims of the anti-Sikh violence in North India in November 1984 are still suffering from its aftermath and living in fear, the organisers of the massacre move around freely and continue to terrorise many of their victims.

On the other hand, a more routine form of the same collusion with oppression is displayed by the government's indifference towards the millions who suffer from chronic malnutrition and sickness because the rulers deny them the basic prerequisites for a dignified existence. While large parts of the country are in the grip of a severe drought, the government is busy selling grain overseas and buying sophisticated and incredibly expensive weapons, but providing only token relief to drought hit people. Many of us are busy applauding the aggressive posturing of our rulers. There is much euphoria regarding the vast expansion in expenditure on weapons, but basic requirements for a decent human life for all our people is just not on the agenda. The

anti-human values being developed were reflected in a recent statement of the chief minister of Maharashtra whereby he is reported to have said that ensuring sufficient food to save people from dying of hunger was less important than national unity and integrity. The government version of "one nation, one people" is essentially a call for repression, by actual or threatened violence, of all dissent in the country.

Today, we are also confronted with the distressing spectacle of women's issues being used to whip up hatred between communities. In the name of protection of women's rights, the Shahbano controversy was used to stir up anti Muslim feeling, and the government took advantage of this to introduce a Bill which is driving a further wedge between different communities. In all of this, it is clear that what matters to those in power is how they can consolidate their power. This is what all the talk about national unity amounts to. Human life, liberty and dignity are not thought worth even a mention, let alone any action for their furtherance.

These very disturbing signs of the times prevent us from feeling a sense of achievement, and lead us to wonder whether we will be equal to the task before us. Only unflinching efforts by all of us, many more efforts, can shift the balance in favour of human rights, dignity and freedom.

—Madhu Kishwar
April 15, 1986

Appeal

We have an urgent need for small reliable taperecorders operable on both battery and electricity. They should have condenser microphones and external microphones. They should be capable of recording interviews accurately even under difficult conditions and must be able to stand up to beat, dust and rough handling

We also badly need a typewriter, either standard or portable, preferably an electronic one, operable, on rechargeable batteries and regular AC current.