

# Learning to take People Seriously

by

Madhu Kishwar

Two years ago I was invited to read a paper on the theme of "The Subjectivity of the Researcher versus the Subjectivity of the Researched" organised by the department of sociology, Delhi School of Economics. I was asked to describe and discuss my experience as an activist doing investigative work for **Manushi**. I used the occasion to make explicit some of the rules of thumb I had evolved over the years, learnt through exposure to a wide variety of often puzzling and difficult situations. This is a revised version of that paper. I am not a sociologist. This article may appear simplistic and amateurish to those who have been tarained in methods of research and investigation which are reputedly more sophisticated. However, my main reason for publishing it in **Manushi** is to initiate a dialogue with other activists who are also involved in trying to puzzle out what is going on in our country.

ONE of the most important things I have learnt is that even the most well meaning efforts to help improve people's lives can end up in disaster if you do not take people's own lives and perceptions sufficiently seriously, or fail to understand the effects of any particular effort at change on other parts of a complex situation and society. Contributing to social change involves deliberate attempts at mobilising opinion in particular direction - but if the conclusions are predetermined by the activist's own predilections and ideas, without taking into account the situation, perceptions, wishes and aspirations of those on whose behalf we seek to help bring change about, we can easily end up either being irrelevant, pompous impostors or authoritarian manipulators. One reason for the failure of the antidowry campaign during the years since independence is that it was a well intentioned effort at social change based on an inadequate understanding of social reality.

Before we can effectively intervene to help bring about the desired social changes we need to understand why things are as they are and not as some group or theory tells us they are. Only a more accurate understanding of what is really going on can enable us all to help concerned activists create a relevant and meaningful agenda for improving the lives of women and other oppressed

groups. The task, though not easy, requires us to maintain a degree of scepticism regarding predetermined explanations and political formulae. Reality rarely matches up well with available preconceived notions, whatever their origin.

The researcher needs to be sensitive to unexpected information and to what may appear to be puzzling contradictions. If the people who could provide firsthand information of the situation are unwilling to talk to the researcher, this must be seen as a sign that greater care and effort is required to make sense of the situation. The researcher has to be alert not only to explicit cues but also to implicit ones regarding people's experience and conclusions they have drawn from their experience.

## Many Sided Truth

A common dilemma relates to how much one should tell one's informants in advance about what one is trying to do. By withholding from them one's assumptions, is one acting under false pretences? The first time I had to deal with this problem was when I was assisting a colleague with a Punjab based village study documenting the lives of women of peasant and landless poor households. One important aim of our study was to try to explore the reasons for the unnaturally low sex ratio in Punjab and how this was connected

to women's status in the village (see **Manushi** No. 11, 1981).

The investigators found that the villagers were extremely cooperative and helpful. This was chiefly because a revered local leader had introduced the investigating team to them. The team gathered detailed information that included the daily caloric intake of male and female members of a small sample of households and surveyed a larger sample about facts such as the hours of work put in by women, the nature of women's labour contribution, marriage practices, dowry, decision making in the household, domestic violence and women's mobility. Apart from an overall census and detailed interviews with a sample of women, the investigators spent a substantial part of their time in the village recording and discussing women's situation with knowledgeable villagers not included in the formal sample.

However, when we came to interpreting the information, we faced serious dilemmas to the point of almost abandoning the report. The overall picture that emerged portrayed the village as abounding in wife beaters, drunken husbands and opium addicts. Daughters appeared somewhat less likely to survive than sons. Very few positive features emerged in our description of women's status. Clearly, this was not the whole truth about the community,

although the team had been fairly careful in gathering the information.

We had relied principally on information from discussions with women, without men ordinarily being present, on male-female relations within the family. This was necessary since we feared we would fail to get much of the information we sought if men provided or monitored the answers. Objective information such as the exact caloric intake of males and females, the body weights and measurements of men and women belonging to different strata of the society was collected by actual observation and measurement. Yet, we could not escape the feeling that in a few important areas our results read like an oversimplified version of a complex reality.

We were left with many unresolved questions. Did the women view their relations with men of their families as merely exploitative? Would they recognise our picture of women's place in the village? If not, what would be the reasons for any divergence between their version and our interpretation? Also, if they did not agree with our description of reality, they were less likely to agree with our prescriptions for change.

Further, could the men's version be totally dismissed? Were there not fathers who got heavily indebted to raise dowries for their daughters and did not they and their daughters genuinely believe that this was done out of love? Could we dismiss altogether the image of a fair number of these Punjabi farmers as industrious, good natured, warm hearted, supportive and family minded men? Did not the generosity, hospitality and openness that we observed and benefited from, in itself shed light on an aspect of reality and of interpersonal relations that had not emerged in our study? That depended to a great extent on prestructured questions addressed to the women alone. No doubt, an out of the way effort to obtain women's version of reality helped us get important glimpses of village and family life which are often overlooked. But a more



authentic version would be far more complex and derive from many additional sources of information.

#### **Which Women, When?**

While in some ways women's lived experience may be said to be different from that of men as a group, it took me a long time to realise how diverse women's perceptions are. A woman's version of social reality varies substantially depending on where she is placed. I am referring not just to differences in caste and class, which do matter a great deal, but also to the differences that separate women within the same family. For instance, when gathering information about women's labour contribution, one has clearly to assess who is talking about whom. A woman often describes her own workday very differently from that of her daughter or daughter-in-law.

So also, a woman is likely to give one sort of description of how much dowry was given at her daughter's marriage and another of how much dowry her daughter-in-law brought. This is not at all to suggest anything as simplistic as that her account will be more accurate for her own dowry, exaggerated for her daughter's dowry, and underestimated for her daughter-in-law's. The

description one gets in any one of these three situations is likely to be influenced by a complex set of criteria related to family politics, status considerations and numerous other factors.

#### **Woman to Woman**

For years, as an activist, I had simplistically assumed that women's experiences would be more accessible to me because I am a woman who professes to be somewhat sensitive to women's predicament. I continue to believe that, as a woman, I have certain advantages in gaining access to a woman's world. However, these advantages can be offset by several limitations.

In a society like ours, where women's subordination and exclusion often assumes fairly extreme forms, women are frequently not allowed to share their experiences, perceptions and opinions with other women, particularly those who are seen as outsiders to the family. Such sharing is seen as a kind of defiance and therefore a threat to family honour. Women are required to funnel their opinions and experiences to outsiders through the men of the family.

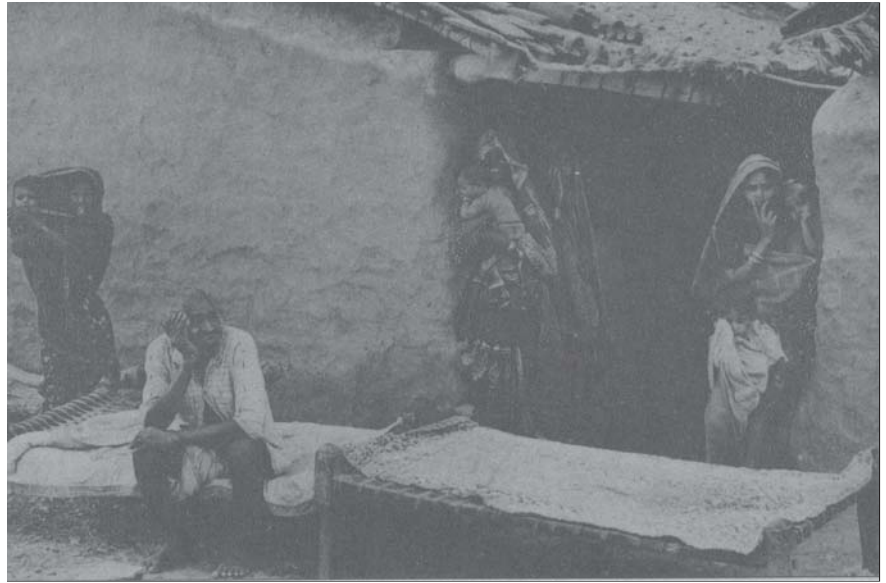
For instance, when conducting a survey of marriage practices in a Madhya Pradesh village, I found that women very

often answered my questions regarding the amounts and items given and taken at their children's marriages with the remark: "I don't really know. Ask the men - they arrange it all. They know." This could easily be interpreted as duplicity, since I know they were not really so ignorant. It could also be seen as their ignorance, springing from their isolated housebound role, which prevented them from acquiring basic information regarding their own lives. This perception was doubtless part of their own self-view too, linked somewhere to the sentiment that respectable women do not engage in economic deals pertaining to the public arena, that being men's domain.

One reaction to these problems in investigations might be to stop asking women and ask only men, since men tend to be more forthcoming. This, however, does not mean they are necessarily more accurate in their descriptions. One could also see the woman's response as meaningless stupidity and hence neglect to report it at all in one's writing.

It took me a while to figure out that even in not divulging information the women were in fact divulging an important aspect of their situation within marriage and the family. This aspect was that of their lack of authority to decide on their own whether I, a stranger, should be told anything at all about complex internal interrelationships and economic matters. Even if it were all right to say something it might be even harder for them to take responsibility for how much I should be told and in what ways. Men took these decisions without consulting women and gave me a version which was carefully tailored in different ways. But women did not feel certain that they could undertake to do this tailoring without the men's approval. Hence they felt it safer to refer me to the men even though most often they did have the details themselves.

It is significant that the only woman who was forthcoming was a woman who had entered into an open confrontation



**Women's experiences and opinions funnelled to outsiders through men of the family**

with the men of her marital family. She had been able to do so because she had the backing of the men of her natal family who were powerful and wealthy and lived in a nearby village.

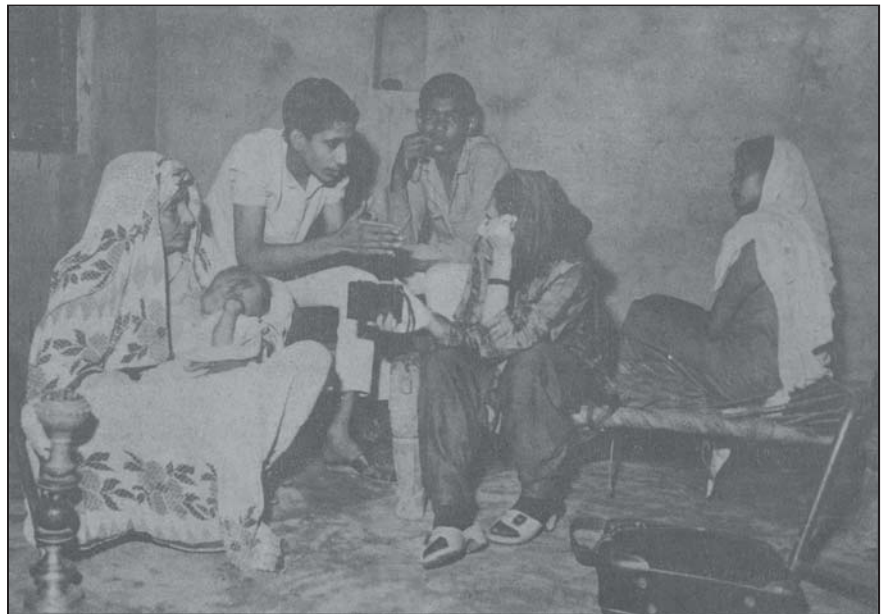
Men may not be physically present but the fear of their power often acts as an effective censor in women's minds. My initial access to women's lives is almost always in some important ways determined by how far men of the

community decide to cooperate. There is rarely any way I can reach women by bypassing men. This is especially the case in rural areas.

#### **The Question of Timing**

The hold that men have over women's minds and over women's perceptions of their subjective experience tends to get weakened under certain circumstances. It has often been observed that women's participation in

**Young grandson intervenes and takes over**



political movements tends to get a fillip during phases of repression, because that is when men feel compelled to bring the women out. In their own interest, they often loosen the traditional bonds, so as better to combat outside forces such as the repressive arms of the State.

Similarly, men are compelled to loosen their control over what women will say and how they will describe their experiences to each other and to outsiders, during phases of extreme crisis. I have noticed this during different investigations of massacres, whether unleashed by the State or by other forces.

After the November 1984 anti Sikh pogrom in Delhi, I began to interview members of the Sikh community. This was within three or four days of the events. The entire community, including the men, was in a state of trauma. Therefore, I did not once face a situation of the men of a family saying: "Why ask women? We'll tell you better." Women poured out their experiences of personal humiliation, sexual assault, gangrape, even in the presence of men.

However, whenever I have investigated such atrocities a couple of weeks or a month after the event, women's voices are always more subdued. Men take over literally as well as in women's minds. The male defined censorship norms of the community get to be imposed again once the men have regained some of their lost composure. Women's experience gets to be pruned and edited automatically without any formal decisions necessarily having been taken in this regard.

In Meerut, which in 1987 witnessed a large scale massacre, our team, which arrived a couple of weeks after the violence, did not come across any women narrating their experiences. Women would tell how male relatives had been killed or arrested and tortured, or at most how the police had beaten, shot or killed a particular woman.

Does one assume that women were not sexually assaulted because they did not talk about it? I think that assumption

would not be justified. The one woman who described to us the sexual brutality she had suffered was lying wounded in hospital. She had lost all the members of her family. Her vagina had been ripped with a knife up to her stomach and her intestines had spilled out. I recalled the very telling comment of Gurdeep Kaur, a woman victim of the November 1984 violence in Delhi: "Why should I hesitate to tell? I have no one left." She meant that all the men of her family were dead and there was now no one for the sake of whose "honour" she should censor details. The female members of her family had all survived.

On another occasion, in 1980, when investigating cases of police atrocities in a tribal area, we were baffled by the fact that the political activists at district level who had invited us to the area to conduct an investigation were full of stories of police and Bihar Military Police (BMP) gangrapes of women. Yet in the villages hardly any women or families stated that they had been victims of such assault. They would always evade the question by saying it happened in other neighbouring villages. From that response some of the members of our team concluded that all the stories about police rape and atrocities were politically motivated and therefore, needed to be

discounted. I was also puzzled and felt that the silence on the subject of rape needed to be further investigated, especially since all of the other allegations of police atrocities had been corroborated by the victims without any hesitation.

On further perseverance, one episode shed some light on the situation. At one of the villages on the Gua-Manoharpur road we interviewed a group of women who all denied that they had suffered any personal indignity but told us in detail about the beating up and arrest of the men and the looting indulged in by the BMP. At the next village, the account was the same. We expressed our confusion and inability to write the report we had come prepared to write, since no woman was forthcoming about what had happened to women. As we were leaving, a young man quietly came up and said he would take us to meet his sister. He brought us back to the village we had left and introduced us to one of the same women who had denied that she had been molested. He was at least 10 years younger than his sister. But when he told her to tell all, she did so, not just about herself but also about other women.

The reason she had withheld this information earlier was that she feared

#### Tribal women victims of BMP atrocities



that her husband, who had been arrested and for whose release she had sold her jewellery and her family's animals, would ask her to leave his house if he got to know she had admitted to being raped by BMP men. Yet, even the support of a younger brother was sufficient for her to risk talking about her experience to us.

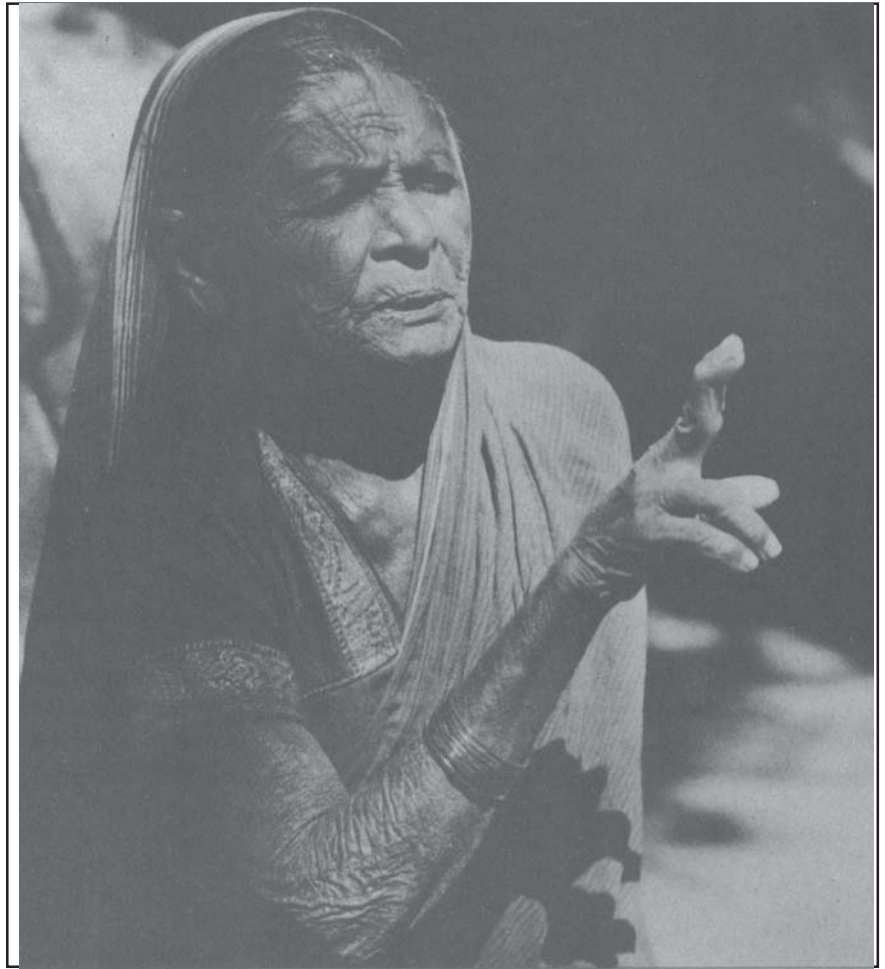
In this area, only two other women were also willing to describe their experience. They did so because a revered trade union leader of the village persuaded the men of the family that the women should be allowed to speak of this to our team.

My woman to woman communication thus has limited possibilities, because it is almost always the men of a community who directly or indirectly decide how much of a woman's experience is allowed to be expressed. This is primarily because the collective and individual power of men comes to determine what the consequences of that talking will be for women.

All writing is inherently selective and interpretive. However, interpretation is different from distortion. One needs to be careful that prior to offering an interpretation one does not distort facts, for instance by leaving some out, in order to reach a conclusion that suits one's own political predilections.

I am not arguing in favour of becoming apolitical, because the supposedly apolitical also have their unstated political prejudices. I am suggesting that (a) as far as possible we should make our political assumptions explicit (b) we should search out and have the courage to face those facts that go contrary to our predilections, and then root our conclusions in the facts, and (c) we should review any investigation sceptically which neatly confirms our original premises without offering any surprises.

One way of combating the tendency to impose one's preconceptions on the facts is to make a special effort to elicit as many versions or interpretations as possible of a situation from the different



persons involved in it as participants or observers. The realisation that there are usually a variety of versions that may be relevant some easily available and others that require more probing, will determine how carefully we weigh, sift, crosscheck, and give meaning to what we hear and see. It is true that no matter how careful we try to be, it is still likely that a lot will be missed. Nevertheless, in general, the more sources we are able to query on the same issue or set of known events, the more likely we are to get a more sensible view of the situation.

Let me give an example of the limitations of hearing only one version, even when it is that of a quite knowledgeable local observer. In the course of a village study on women's land rights, the woman social worker who was helping me gather data informed me with great enthusiasm that for the first

time in the 12 years she had lived in the village as a social and political activist she had witnessed a spontaneous case of "class struggle." She was referring to the case of a tribal man who, along with his sister, niece and other relatives, had beaten up a tribal woman of the same village who had worked as the recruiting agent for a contractor who supplies tribal labour to brick kilns around Calcutta. The reason for the outburst was that the niece of this man had returned pregnant from one of her migration trips to Calcutta and the recruiting agent who took her from their village had not helped or protected this young woman. The political activist who informed me of the case interpreted his beating up of the agent as a case of revolt against capitalist exploitation. She saw the village based recruiting agent as a symbol of the system - the last and lowest link in the

chain of exploiters.

When I talked to the wife of the man who had given the agent a beating, she saw the matter very differently. She had always complained that her husband was a good-for-nothing who beat her up often and snatched away the little she earned. While she toiled and starved, he drank rice beer and had fun at the weekly market. Others confirmed her description. Now that he had got into a fight, a police complaint had been made against him and he had to pay a bribe of Rs 1,000 or else go to jail. Much against his wife's wishes, he had mortgaged a part of their agricultural land in order to pay the bribe. His wife said she would rather went to jail for a few months than that the family land be mortgaged. How would they survive if they lost part of the little land they had? She saw the beating as another example of her husband's irresponsible behaviour.

The woman who was beaten up and her mother were angry and bitter at being thus assaulted. Part of their anger arose from their perception that this man would only dare beat them up because they had no adult males in their household - they were three sisters living with their widowed mother. Like most such female headed households, they had hardly any land. The mother had been widowed when her daughters were small, therefore she had not been able to retain her share of the family land which was grabbed by her husband's male kin.

The other villagers saw the affair as family matter springing from the outrage felt against the woman contractor who, although she belonged to the same *killi* or clan as the young woman, had not adequately protected her. But they were not as perturbed by the pregnancy or the beating in themselves. They were much more perturbed that the beating had led the woman to go and lodge a police complaint. The villagers panicked lest the police descend on the village. Police entry into the village signified for them indiscriminate extortion of bribes from all and sundry. Therefore, the elders got together and prevailed upon the

accused man to go to the police station and voluntarily surrender before the police came to the village.

The man who did the beating did it because he felt his family honour was involved. He had expected a member of their *killi* to take special care of his niece while she was working away from home. It was not as if he had any grouse against the contracting system. Far from leading any "class struggle" against the system, in all likelihood, he would not have been averse to acting as a recruiting agent himself.

Thus, the imposition of a formula, in this case that of class struggle, acts as a distorting rather than an illuminating factor, and can lead one to adopt inappropriate political strategies.

### **Keeping Prejudices in Check**

All of us have certain culturally inherited prejudices which we may not be able entirely to overcome. Negative prejudices of this kind among higher status groups often take the form of considering lower status groups as irrational, unaware of their own interests, culturally backward or otherwise deficient and inferior. Europeans and Americans tend to have such prejudices against Africans and Asians; upper castes against lower castes; Hindus against Muslims; the rich against the poor. These prejudices may not always be stated. They could take the form of patronising condescension towards those perceived as backward. One may see oneself individually as being above prejudice, but if one belongs to the hegemonic community, which has a strong antipathy against the other community, one has to be particularly vigilant. It is not sufficient merely to accumulate the versions of more and more individuals when an entire community has begun to parrot a received version. In a situation where the two communities do not normally socialise, one's access to the other community in day to day life is in any case limited, no matter how liberal or radical one considers oneself. Having a few friends from the other community

does not materially alter the fact of one's essential distance from its felt life. Therefore, whenever violent conflict occurs, it is important to get the versions of ordinary members of the other community, as well as to have sufficient command over the available facts. In order to have a better chance of obtaining the facts, one should reach the site of violence as quickly as possible, before the actual evidence has been removed.

Take the example of the communal violence in Meerut in May-June 1987. A team of us from **Manushi** visited Meerut a few days after the violence, when curfew had been somewhat relaxed. Since all of us were non Muslims, we did not have automatic access to Muslims. We had to seek it out. The few contacts we had in the city were with Hindus. Muslims are concentrated in certain areas of the city, and most Hindus we met warned us against going there, telling dreadful stories about the dangers that awaited Hindu women who dared enter Muslim areas. We were solemnly told that we would never return alive. The police and administration were also extremely hostile to the idea of our entering Muslim areas. Their ostensible reason was that they would be blamed if we came to harm there. The real reason was that the law and order machinery had been actively involved in a large scale massacre of Muslims and did not want reporters to meet the victims.

Had we gone only by the versions given by the people we spoke to, we would have been confronted with two diametrically opposed versions - one from Hindus and the other from Muslims. Simply believing the majority would have meant accepting the Hindu version since they were in a majority. Otherwise, one would have ended up in confusion, not knowing whom to believe.

Nearly all Hindus we met believed that most of the victims of violence had been Hindus and that Hindus had lost more lives as well as more property than Muslims had. Most Hindus also believed that government was prejudiced in favour

of Muslims, and that had it not been for the PAC's protective role, Hindus would have suffered still more terrible losses. This version was repeated by almost every Hindu, educated or uneducated, rich or poor, man or woman, almost as if they had memorised a taperecorded message.

One had to be wary even of supposed eyewitness accounts. The killers often masqueraded as eyewitnesses but the inherent absurdities of the stories they told alerted us. Some Hindu eyewitnesses told bizarre stories of how Muslims had burnt their own homes in order to claim compensation, and how Muslims burnt to death accidentally and their corpses spontaneously leapt into distant wells; or that Muslims were the aggressors even in areas where only Muslims had died.

We had to adopt different methods to arrive at an estimate of the situation. First, we made a special effort to visit Muslim areas in the face of hostility and obstructionism from police and the Hindu population. As soon as we did so, we came face to face with certain inescapable facts. For one thing, we saw a much larger number of Muslims with injuries and broken limbs than amongst Hindus. Whereas, in Hindu areas, we mainly heard rumour based stories of Hindu deaths, but rarely met the families of any dead persons, in Muslim areas we met numerous families that had lost members, killed by police or who "disappeared" after arrest.

Second, we attempted a citywide survey of damage done during the violence. In the more seriously affected parts of the city, we did a house by house and shop by shop count to see how many establishments belonging to Hindus and how many belonging to Muslims were damaged. These areas included the major markets of the city, where Hindu and Muslim shops were cheek by jowl. In each case, we also noted the nature and extent of the damage. The shops had not yet been cleaned up, and the wreckage was clearly

visible. The results clearly showed that an overwhelming majority of damaged shops, houses and vehicles belonged to Muslims. These ranged from small to medium sized shops and stalls, manufactories, home based weaving establishments and restaurants, rickshaws to scooters to buses, huts to three storeyed houses. In comparison, the number of Hindus who had suffered losses was much smaller. In one area, a dozen large factories belonging to Hindus had been burnt, and in another, a petrol pump and a few nearby shops. The factories constituted a large visible loss which made a big impact in the local papers and on people's minds.

But thousands of Muslims, most of them poor and lower middle class, had lost their means of livelihood, and many were rendered homeless. These losses were downplayed in the local Hindi press, read by most Hindus, which was violently anti Muslim in its tone. Also, since Muslims generally lived in separate colonies, the wreckage in the interior of these colonies was not visible to Hindus, who never enter these colonies especially at such times. Hindus dismissed the losses of Muslims with a contemptuous: "What do those wretched rickshaw pullers have to lose anyway?" Even on the main roads, it was clear that Muslim establishments had been targeted for destruction. Neighbouring Hindu establishments were either untouched or slightly damaged, the latter damage generally due to proximity. Most Muslim establishments were reduced to ashes and rubble, while in some areas whole colonies of Muslim homes were devastated as though by war, roofless and wrecked, while the adjoining Hindu colony was untouched. Yet most Hindus seemed not to see even such visible patterns.

We tried to get a community by community breakdown of deaths and arrests but the administration was extremely unwilling to disclose their figures. This reluctance was natural, given its complicity in the violence, and

its consequent desire to let rumours favourable to the police version have a field day. After much persuasion, we were allowed to look at some of the lists for a couple of areas. A simple count of Hindu and Muslim names confirmed the impression we had formed from surveys of Hindu and Muslim areas - that far more Muslims than Hindus had died, yet simultaneously, far more Muslims than Hindus had been arrested as rioters.

If we had reached Meerut too late to see the evidence of the damage, and had been compelled to trust the versions given by the local people, the local media, the government and the press, we would have been led to believe that this was a riot between Hindus and Muslims in which Muslims had incited and led the violence. Examining the evidence with our own eyes showed us another reality.

From this experience, the realisation hit us forcefully that even so called eyewitness accounts may not serve as an adequate basis for research in a hate charged atmosphere wherein people's subjectivity is coloured by self interest or manipulated and distorted by politicians over so long a period and so systematically that they have lost the ability honestly to register what they see and hear, and instead merely parrot the version that is transmitted to them by their incriminated leaders and by biased media, a version that conveniently falls in with their immediate self interest.

Even more caution in observing and listening is required when the two communities are unevenly balanced in political power and economic resources. The dominant community's hegemony in the bureaucracy, police, government and mass media makes its version the authoritative and dominant one. When the researcher's own inherited bias coincides with the bias of the State machinery and of the majority of the population, it is often no longer safe to go by the "people's version", namely, the version put forward by the majority of the people. How the majority version becomes the received version is evidenced also in the November 1984

massacre of Sikhs in Delhi still being referred to in documents and in the press as a "riot" even though it is clear that it was an organised one way attack on the Sikhs by armed gangs with the support of leading Congress (I) politicians and the assurance of non interference by police.

Therefore, any description of a riot or massacre should include a realistic assessment of the relative strength and influence of the two communities. For instance, many Hindus are convinced Muslims are a pampered minority, but statistics and facts point to a situation of systematic discrimination against Muslims in most of northern India. If one does not have an accurate overall picture, one is unlikely to get facts at the ground level right.

### **What People Want**

What then do I mean by emphasising the need to take people seriously, when I am at the same time arguing that people's version of their own lives as recounted to an activist is often insufficient in and of itself to establish what is happening? Here, I distinguish between two kinds of information while one needs to be sceptical, although not dismissive, about what people choose to reveal or conceal about themselves, their neighbours, relatives and friends, one needs to take people very seriously when they talk about what they want, what will improve their lives, what they need in order to live with dignity, even to survive.

We must be careful that the questions we ask regarding this last set of aspirations are relevant to the options available to a person, and not unrealistic or wholly imaginary. For instance, if a woman says she needs to have three or more children it is wrong to attribute this to her ignorance and to insist, without careful consideration, that it is in the "national interest" as well as in her own long term interest to have no more than one or two children. In the case of such a conflict of interests, one must consider whether by "nation" one does not actually mean contrary interests out to

thwart the woman's own self interest. When one seriously listens, it may become evident why she needs three, four or five children. If one reason turns out to be that she knows half of them are likely to die of malnutrition and related factors, one could begin by trying to help her fight against poverty and child disease - not as a bargaining point for a one-child family, but because that is what she needs and says she needs.

To take another example, when surveying the lives of maltreated wives, it is easy to assume that when a brutally maltreated woman says she wants to go back and live with the husband who beat her up and threw her out, this is solely because she suffers from lack of awareness and has low self esteem, or to believe that she should be persuaded, in her own interest, not to go back to him. It takes some time to realise that the woman's perception of her future, given her circumstances, could, in all likelihood, be the more realistic one, that, in many instances, she would end up leading a less dignified life in her parents' home, at the mercy of brothers and sisters-in-law, or as a single woman living on her own, than in her marital home where she might have at least some slightly enhanced socially acknowledged rights and status.

### **Some Suggestions**

The following are some tentative rules of thumb evolved from the experiences described above, which may perhaps help us avoid making some of the same mistakes over and over. I do not intend to imply that I have discovered a foolproof systematic new method of doing research, but merely to indicate some common and some more difficult areas where we need to be more vigilant.

1. When we begin to investigate a situation, we naturally have a set of expectations or notions about what the results might be. If the research ends up so completely confirming these notions that we could have written the report without having gathered any information, we should suspect that we are likely to have

made some fundamental error. We should then review the entire process; the questions asked, the observations included, the respondents chosen, and the way the questions were formulated and the answers interpreted. It is possible that our preconceptions prevented us from asking searching enough questions, or led us unwittingly to give the respondents some nonverbal signal that we preferred a particular type of response. We may also have excluded from the group of respondents certain relevant people who might have upset our preconceptions.

2. If at all possible, we should carefully discuss the various drafts of the report with the different groups of informants to see if it makes sense to them. Even if one believes that certain of the respondents may have biases that tend to distort their opinions, we should nevertheless listen to them carefully and take them seriously. They are likely to be able to uncover complexities in the situation (including in our preconceptions) of which we were unaware.
3. We should avoid premature categorising of anticipated or actual respondents according to preconceived categories, for example, we cannot assume that most women will primarily or automatically describe their experience from the perspective of their status as women. Other classifications may have far greater salience - for example, their religion, caste, landholding, relationship, as mother, mother-in-law, daughter, wife, to other family members. One has patiently to untangle the crosscutting allegiances and identities that even the most downtrodden member of a society maintains, in order to arrive at the information relevant to the category of most interest to one's investigation.
4. If the respondents do not respond in a way we expect them or would like them to respond, we should avoid assuming that the reason is that they



are stupid, uneducated, ignorant or that they are at a low level of class (or any other kind of) consciousness, or that they are deliberately trying to mislead us. While these explanations are always possible, and some times, though rarely, true, it is far more likely that it is the investigator who lacks mental flexibility. The unexpected and difficult answers are often the most fruitful clues to what is happening,

5. It is a mistake to think that we have a better comprehension of people's options and best interests than they do themselves. We should be particularly careful to take people seriously when they talk about what it is they consider most important to improve their lives, and what is necessary for their survival. These are areas in which almost all of us end up being something of an expert regarding our own lives. We are not likely to be able to offer them greater wisdom on what their real options are, given the particularities of their own situation.

6. We should not assume that because we have some things in common with our informants we automatically have greater insight into their lives. The investigator and the person interviewed may both be women, Dalits, teachers, mothers, but this commonality may not be the most salient factor influencing the investigation on a particular subject. The investigator's dissimilarities from the respondents may often be even more significant than the similarities. Similarities with respondents may be helpful but cannot be a substitute for taking seriously respondents' perceptions when they differ from our own.

7. We should also not assume that because we subscribe to an ideology that we believe is in the best interests of the people whose lives we are looking into, or because we genuinely believe we have their interests at heart, this will automatically give us greater insight into their situation, or that our



perceptions are necessarily superior to their own, regarding the possible solutions to their problems.

8. When the people we want to help and understand are dependent on others who may want to influence their replies we have to develop better techniques to get as forthright answers as possible. One way to do this is to inform the respondents, in explicit detail of the ways we will ensure confidentiality. We must then be compulsive in abiding by our explicit or implicit promises.

Despite this, we need to maintain proper scepticism about the answers received from those respondents who are in a relatively powerless position and who could be injured by their answers becoming known to those on whom they are dependent. By the same token, it is equally essential that we cross check the self serving responses of the powerful who have much to gain from their version of events.

9. One of the most difficult decisions for an investigator to make is what to do with information provided in

distorted, even falsified, ways, in a situation of hatred and stereotyping between groups. While discarding the falsified picture of events when trying to understand what in fact happened, it is nevertheless important to include the hateful prejudices and stereotypes prevalent, as a crucial part of the situation prevailing. The existence of these hate inducing myths is an important factor causing a certain kind of event, for example, a so-called riot. Therefore, knowledge of these myths is vital for those who try to find ways to improve the situation.

All of this is not to suggest that we at **Manushi** have found foolproof methods of eliciting accurate reliable information. But we hope that what we have learnt from our experiences and mistakes over these years will help us improve the quality of our report and of our suggestions for change.

