Introducing Manushi: An Indian Feminist Journal

Tobe Levin

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq

Part of the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq/463
And that is the state of feminist publishing in Israel.

We are probably in a situation not very different from that of most small countries removed geographically and by language from the major centers of feminist activity. Israeli feminists are a small, isolated, and alienated group, surviving from year to year in spite of widespread distrust and fear of our nonconformity. The committed can be counted in the tens. There is no women's studies here, though there are a handful of women struggling to teach at least one women's course a year. There are no large organizations or widespread grass-roots support giving us legitimacy. We fight, always, with our backs against the ropes, not because we have been driven there, but because, really, we have not yet managed to come out of our corner. However, those of us that are today actively committed to writing, translating, publishing, and distributing feminist literature believe that that is the key to raising consciousness and to developing a broadly-based grass-roots movement. At the opening of Woman's Voice in Haifa, one of the speakers declared the moment "historic." But, as the speaker who followed commented (a 92-year-old feminist, Rachel Kagan): "Let's wait a few years and see."

Marcia Freedman, former member of the Knesset (Israeli parliament) and founder of the Women's Party, lives in Haifa.

A Note on Jewish Women's Studies in the United States

As Israeli feminists attempt to connect with the women's movement outside Israel, Jewish feminists in the United States are attempting to connect with them and with the Jewish heritage both groups share. Due to the peculiarities inherent in that heritage, "Jewish Women's Studies" in the United States is as much in its infancy as feminist publishing in Israel. This past year, however, at the First Annual NWSA Convention, a session on Jewish Women's Studies: Theory and Practice took place, as well as a roundtable discussion on Feminism and Judaism, and a spontaneously organized Shabbat service that was inspiring for those who attended.

One of the participants in the session has been collecting syllabi for Jewish women's studies courses that have been offered thus far in various colleges and universities. A booklet containing these syllabi can be obtained, for $2.50 postpaid, by writing to Edward R. Levenson, Dept of Religious Studies, Villanova University, Villanova, PA 19085.

Probably the most valuable source available for those attempting to pursue Jewish women's studies and needing a place to begin is the latest edition of Aviva Cantor's classic Bibliography on the Jewish Woman, available for $3.00, postpaid, from Biblio Press, PO Box 22, Fresh Meadows, NY 11365. The bibliography is divided into sections listing nonfiction books, articles and book chapters, and works of fiction on such subjects as Jewish Women's History; Religious Life and Law; the United States and Canada; Israel; and the Holocaust. There are also sections for Children's Books and for Poetry.

—S.F.

BOOKS NEW AND RECOMMENDED:

Introducing Manushi:
An Indian Feminist Journal
By Tobe Levin

'Liquor, the slaying of women and Shudras... are all minor offences," according to Manu, the Hindu lawgiver. "To rape is human," asserts Mr. Joshi, Chief Minister of the province of Madhya Pradesh.

V. Meera calls on these voices of tradition to open her article, "Prisoners of Inequality: Sexual Abuse of Dalit Women," in an excellent new feminist bimonthly magazine called Manushi: A Journal about Women and Society. Manushi, whose title means "woman" in Hindi, first appeared in January 1979, as the pioneer publication of its kind in India. It is produced in Delhi by an independent feminist collective committed to breaking the long silence of Indian women, who are among the most brutally oppressed in the world today. They are victims not only of sexism, but also of caste divisions, class hatred, poverty, and feudal social relations. For the uninitiated Western reader, a journey through the pages of this journal may be an excruciating experience.

For in India to talk about women's oppression is to talk, literally, about death: torture, starvation, infanticide, suicide, murder. Here we find young brides sprinkled with kerosene by their mothers-in-law and set ablaze if they fail to bring a sufficient amount of money and goods as dowry for the groom's family. We read the "Letters Written at Death's Door," three suicide notes from a young woman who, as the fourth daughter in a family of limited means, was unable to produce a dowry large enough to satisfy her husband's greed. His incessant reproaches drove her, on July 21, 1978, to douse herself in kerosene and light the match. The custom of burning widows alive has been outlawed for more than a century, but fire still seems to be a favorite tool of vindictive in-laws. As Shabha Sadagopan and Radha Kumar report in their article on marriage customs: "In 1975, three hundred and fifty women were burnt to death in Delhi alone. These were reported as suicides to the police. But in reality they were dowry deaths. . . ."

Gynocide, however, is not restricted to young brides. In an article on sexism in the family planning movement, we learn that among female infants the mortality rate is significantly higher than for male babies. A greater incidence of malnutrition also occurs among women, which in turn contributes to the ill-health of both mother and child. Hospitals, too, fail to provide a sufficient number of maternity beds, which increases the risk of death for parturient women. In fact, the life expectancy for females in India has not risen at the same rate as it has for males, and India is one of the few countries in the world where the ratio of women to men has actually been shrinking: at present,
there are 930 females for every 1000 males. In 1901, there were 972 women per 1000 men.

And when women do survive, the lives they lead are rarely free of constraint: the confinement of middle-class women, including female students, is acute. A survey of women's university hostels shows that women are literally locked in: they are spied upon, forbidden to smoke, to drink, or to receive female guests in their rooms. They are even discouraged from whistling or singing, all in the name of "morality" and "protection." Needless to say, similar restrictions do not weigh upon the male students, nor are Victorian standards expected of working-class women.

Several articles are devoted to the increasingly militant efforts of women employed in factories and on the farms to organize effective labor unions. Working women are the victims of industrialization, which prohibits them from entering the new technical professions while rendering their traditional sources of income obsolete. As a result, women are either thrown out of work entirely, or forced to suffer under the abominable conditions of early capitalism. The major trend, however, is toward female unemployment. As Manushi points out, in 1901 there were 525 women workers per 1000 men, while in 1971 that figure had fallen to 210 women per 1000 men in the workforce. And unemployment in a developing country often means starvation.

The editors of Manushi address the plight of working-class women in their introductory remarks: "Manushi is a journal about women," they write, "but is it possible to talk of women as an undifferentiated mass? Isn't life very different for a tribal woman, a Dalit woman in rural India, a factory worker, a clerk, a doctor, a university student, a middle-class or working-class housewife, an air hostess, a nurse, a woman in purdah, or a common prostitute?" Their answer: Yes, there are a lot of factors dividing women from each other—class, caste, religion, race, education (or the lack of it), one's field of work (in the house or out of it) and many other complex historical forces. Yet if we look at the nature and basis of women's oppression, we discover that our sex determines our common predicament in a very fundamental way. (p. 2)

The need to relate feminism to class and caste is combined in Manushi with a radical feminist view of the common condition uniting all women.

As the very existence of Manushi testifies, one can suggest that Indian women are farther away from defeat today than they have ever been before. The fact that a feminist movement is evolving in India is highly encouraging. Female voices are now demanding to be heard: the voice of "Kesari," for example, the fifty-year-old migrant worker who describes her life in the pages of Manushi, a life illuminated by a growing awareness of the sources of women's oppression. This insight, in turn, is increasing the will to fight. As Marzieh Ahmadi Oskooii proclaims:

I am a woman
A woman for whom
in your shameless vocabulary,
There is no word
Corresponding to my significance,
A woman in whose chest
there is a heart
full of the festering
wounds of wrath,
A woman in whose eyes
the red
reflection of the bullets
of liberty are waving,
A woman whose hands have
been trained
through work, to pick up
THE GUN.

Manushi, in sum, is a very important journal. Published in two separate editions, English and Hindi, it is priced "at half the cost (in India) because (the editors) want to reach as many people as possible." However, in order to grow, they need help. The editors are interested in receiving "articles, interviews, personal accounts, short stories, poems, reviews, paintings, sketches, photographs." Subscriptions for one year (six issues) cost $3, plus $8 air mail postage. Surface mail is considerably cheaper and is available on request. Single issues may also be ordered for $0.50 per copy plus $1.20 air mail postage. Write Manushi c/o Ms. Madhu Kishwar, A-5 Nizamuddin East, New Delhi 110013, India.

Tobe Levin is an American who lives in West Germany. Her article about women's studies there appeared in our Winter 1979 (Vol. VII, No. 1) issue.