

Child
marriage
no
never

Without
my
consent
never
ever



Rajasthan

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*Child Marriage No Never,
Without My Consent Never Ever
Rajasthan*

Rohit Jain



महिला जन अधिकार समिति
MAHILA JAN ADHIKAR SAMITI

Note from the photographer

Thinking about child marriage has made me realise that it is the end of desires for many children. It is stealing away their dreams from them. I saw these children sitting in a corner like little pigeons –withdrawn and sad. Some believe child marriage is necessary ritual and others that it is thoughtfully planned fate. Either way it is a given and a must. Those who do not adopt this ritual and fate for their children have to hide themselves from society - bow their heads in embarrassment avoiding everyone else. They are forced to walk the village lanes in the darkness of early mornings or late nights when no one can see them or ridicule them.

I found it shocking that both the young and the old men did not understand the alarming health – physical and mental, consequences of child marriage on their sisters and daughters, and the kind of lives they are forced to lead as result of that.

Many girls are forced to push aside their desires and happiness, and live with the consequences of premature marriages for the rest of their lives. In the end their body and mind gives up on them. Some girls get tired and break; some even just drop dead.

So often, while sipping a cup of morning tea and reading the newspaper in the cities- a news catches our attention - “One more daughter takes her life

due to child marriage... Another daughter becomes a victim of sexual violence...” There is momentary shock and outrage.

But, despite such news reports, this social custom continues uninterrupted in the villages- in the name of culture, tradition or poverty, yet another child is married off .

After having visited around 20 villages in Ajmer district there was only one thought that ran through my mind. There seems to be a constant hurry about who can get rid of the burden of their children first- yes burden! Hard to believe-but that’s what children seem to be for them.

The elders say- “Once you get them married quickly, you are free of your responsibility ... Otherwise be prepared that they will create trouble once they grow up and begin throwing tantrums and making their own choices!”

There are a number reasons that the villagers give for justifying child marriage- poverty, religion and tradition, possibility of girl getting into relationships of their choice or eloping, There are these and many more reasons that you will read in the short stories in this book.



The way these matters are decided, it almost appears that marriages are a joke- to be taken lightly. So much so that marriages are fixed over casual conversations during a social function. A marriage of a 15-year girl was fixed at her grandfather’s retirement party.

Three-and-a-half-year-old Anu was married off with her three other sisters just because some clever village elders felt 3 is an auspicious number. They advised Anu’s father to marry her off too so that it would be 4 instead of the inauspicious 3. And this is how the traditions continue in our villages. The ‘learned’ priests only add to these deep rooted traditions by adding a few more rituals.

Some girls are married off early simply because there is no one to do the housework in some families. Bring in a 14-15-year-old daughter-in-law who will do the household chores- that’s exactly why 14-year-old Babli was married.

Some children married off as breast-feeding infants, while others though a little older, are clueless of what is happening- but are helpless to speak up and protest. They just keep quiet and accept their situation silently.

That being said, there are a few who are excited at the prospect of being married- by all the new clothes and jewellery, the wedding arrangements, the food and

drinks, the singing and dancing. They are caught in all the excitement of the moment -the preparations and ceremonies. Not that they fully understand the full implications of being married.

While some of those married off young are able to make peace with the situation and carry on their life, there are others who are deeply disturbed by their situation and perplexed about how to carry on with it. Some marriages break up because the boys after growing up are unemployed or take to drinking, or the couple find they do not like each other and cannot live together.

Only a few days before my visit, fifteen-year-old Narendra’s engagement was fixed. He was clearly very excited. His younger sister, Varsha whispered to me, “My brother asks me to bring money to recharge his phone so he can talk to his fiancée.” When while chatting with Narendra, I asked him if he was aware of the many responsibilities that come with marriage, he shook his head and said ‘no’.

I have tried to weave many such stories together. In doing so I realised that for children, marriage is both a romantic thought as well as a fearful one. While the complete obdurance of adults pains me it is the children and what they say that gives me hope.





Impending Uncertainty

Wistfully recalling the courage she had shown, sixteen-year-old Haseena smiled, "I even called the 1098 helpline and pleaded with them to stop my wedding." But as soon as she said this her face fell. Someone had told her that she could call that number for help, but all she got from the other end was a voice that said 'wrong number'.

The smile on her face faded. "I had no other option but to get married as my elder sister is married in the same house", she said softly "If I said no to the marriage proposal, they would send my sister back along with her three-year-old son".

Peeping from over Haseena's shoulder is her seven-year-old sister, Nazma who recalled shyly, "I was only a breast-feeding infant...I did not even know what was happening when they got me married." Then, nervously hiding her face in her scarf, she whispered something into her sister's ears...We could not hear what she said, just as then no one had heard them.

She then lifted her head and continued sadly, "What will being married so young give us? Only burden of children and work?"

A campaign on child marriage and its effects was organized to spread awareness through street plays, folk songs and movies targeting children like Haseena and Nazma, who are already married but still with their parents. The aim is to convince parents and communities to delay the 'gauna' (the sending of young girls to their marital homes) so that these girls can enjoy their childhood a little longer. Eventually they will have to be sent off. Hopefully someone is listening, will understand the plight of these girls ...the smile that came up in Nazma's face on seeing the puppet will remain there a little longer

"We want to go to school! We want to study! If Haseena is sent off to her 'sasural' (marital home) now, what will happen to her education?" asked Nazma plaintively.

The sisters had gathered so many emotions into their little eyes, a little bit of laughter and a little joy, a lot of sorrow and most of all huge questions and uncertainty.

They were aware that their childhood was on the verge of being destroyed, and yet they hoped that it would be rescued.



Deserted Dreams and Desires

A little

far away stood Sharda surrounded by a group of her giggling friends who seemed to be teasing her and seemed to be bombarding her with questions which she was trying to avoid shyly. Perhaps they were curious and wanted to know about her experiences in her '*sasural*' (in-law's house) after her '*gauna*'.

We don't know what she told her friends, but what she shared with us did not match the smile on her face that she kept wearing even after her friends moved away a little - "I don't know anyone there. I only eat if someone asks me to do so...or I keep waiting till someone takes notice and offers me food or even tea."

Sharda wants to continue studying, but her father-in-law has clearly refused to allow her to do so. Why? When she heard this question she anxiously wrapped the corner of her *dupatta* around her fingers and said, "My husband has quit his studies. Since he is

no longer studying I have to too... that's just the way it is... when the boys quit school, their brides must do the same..."

Suddenly tears welled up in her kohli filled eyes. They clung to her eyelashes as she watched her dreams fade away, washed down by her tears as they rolled down her cheeks. With a very sad and faraway look she gulped in her tears and continued "I have studied till 9th grade and I want to continue studying."

Perhaps it was on seeing her tears, that one of her friends came and teased her ...suddenly giggles filled the air and she joined in like the child that she is...except that she will no longer have her friends with her...nor this laughter. Hereon it's going to be housework and babies. She will have to push her own dreams and desires aside...

Perhaps in these changed circumstances, as she brings up her children, she will also learn to look after herself as well.



Twelve

-year-old chubby Punaram, got annoyed, mumbled something under his breath, and ran away when some of his unmarried friends began to tease him about being married.

His friends, exhausted after all their play and mischief, were seated on tree branches like monkeys.

"Getting married after growing up is a lot of fun", they said. "A DJ is invited and we thoroughly enjoy dancing. We also get to sit on horseback and wear attractive clothes of our choice. On the contrary, if you get married as a child, none of this happens. Instead, one has to hide in a room or get married in some remote place because parents are constantly worried that they may be arrested if someone reports to the police. The parents also ensure that children do not divulge their marriage arrangements to anyone....so it's all hush-hush and boring."

It's about boys too

Punaram, who had joined us by then confessed, "Child marriages continue... but in a very hushed manner. We continue to attend our friends' weddings even though we have been told at school that marriages should only be solemnized after twenty-one years ...We are well aware of the legal repercussions."

Sitting in the group was Ram Niwas, Punaram's friend. He suddenly remarked, "One tends to lose interest in studies after marriage...Your life is pretty much ruined." It's amazing how small children sometimes articulate the wisest of things

On being asked if he has seen his wife, Punaram replied with a light smile, "No-I feel shy. Also I don't feel like seeing her".

Just then school bell rang. The boys noisily jumped off the tree and ran towards their classroom.



Girls- Blooming and Withering

“But

I am only fourteen”, Aarti told her mother, in despair.

It had hardly mattered whether someone else had heard her or not, because in her heart she knew it was not right. With just a day to go for the big wedding day, Aarti decided to call it off. It was as if an earthquake had hit the village. All hell broke loose. Everyone was now discussing her dark deeds.

But Aarti was undeterred. Deep down in her heart of heart, Aarti was happy and confident that the step she had taken was the right one.

It was when her grandfather died that it was decided that she and her cousin sister would be married. Aarti explained, “Mausar is a long-standing tradition in our society in which someone’s death has to be followed by a wedding ceremony. Since I did not have a father, my aunt thought it was wise to get rid of me by marrying me off. My mother, suddenly widowed and alone felt helpless and gave in to family pressure.”

“But I had made up my mind. Two years have passed since that incident...”

Times have changed and now everyone acknowledges and appreciates Aarti’s prudence, especially her cousin sister who went on to be married. After the initial excitement of the wedding, married life has lost the sheen and charm.

Aarti then shared, “My friend Nirmala whom you met yesterday, is also getting married. I tried to talk her out of it. I asked her not rush into marriage, but I don’t think she was convinced... I think she wants the marriage just as much as her parents.”

Later in the evening sitting on the terrace with friends, Aarti jokingly admonished Nirmala, “I will call 1098, the child line number!” Nirmala quickly asked her to hush up and the girls broke into a quiet and nervous laughter as the evening sun sank in the horizon.



Right or Wrong - Who Decides?

“We

will never, never ever ... get married in our childhood”, ten-year-old Maya studying in class seven could be heard saying. She was part of a group of school children who had gathered under the *Peepal* tree in the scorching heat of May and were taking an oath to not only will not get married, but to also work to stop child marriage by trying to convince others.

Just then Maya asked loudly, “But why should there be no child marriage?” Suddenly all the children fell silent. Seeing no one was responding, Maya herself decided to answer her own question, “Because we cannot continue studying...We will have to go to our in-laws’ house”. Then immediately, fearing she may have said something wrong, she quickly and nervously covered her mouth....

Someone from the group asked Maya if she was married. She shut her eyes, took a deep breath, dropped her head and said in soft sad voice “Yes, I was married off when I was five-years-old”.

Seeing how sad Maya was, the school teacher standing nearby tried to buck her up “Our Maya is very bright...she also sings and dances beautifully. Look how confidently she shouted the slogans today!”

Maya mumbled to herself, “They get us married in our childhood.... And we don’t even know that we are married”.



They too Have a Choice

Bold

and outspoken, Shanti was not a woman to be put down and subjugated. She was the informal leader of the women labourers. Be it an old woman or a man- if they did or said something wrong, Shanti would protest against injustice and wrong practice. No one could stand up to her arguments or contradict her.

Sitting and chatting with Shanti and some women labourers who were resting under the shade of a mango tree, Padma didi asked, "Why do you all get your daughters married at such a young age?" An elderly woman replied, "Because girls run away."

Padma then asked, "But, why do they run away?"

Even before the woman could answer, some elderly men sitting behind us hearing this conversation said loudly, "First take away their mobile phones!"

Pat came Shanti's response- "Why don't you first stop the men from drinking and take away the purdah (veil) from the women's heads? At least the mobile comes in handy for us women when we are in trouble...". While the other women nodded their heads in agreement, one woman picking up from the earlier conversation said, "you see, it is less expensive to get them married early...that's why we marry off our children young".

Shanti could not keep quiet. "What? get the children married when they are five-years-old?, and look after them until they are considered old enough to go to stay with their in-laws?, at the same time spending all that money to send gifts to the child's in-laws on festivals and celebrations, deaths, and other rituals at the in-law's residence – doesn't that mean that your expenses actually increase? What have you saved? And what if the girl is unhappy with her marriage when she grows up and doesn't want to stay in it?"

"Why wouldn't she? We will beat her to death and compel her to go to her in-laws", replied the elderly man

Shanti was silent for a moment. Then she said, "I got my daughter married at the age of twenty-one, after she had completed her studies and after consulting her on her choice. Often if you get children married young, they do not like the person they were married to once they grow up. That is why many marriages fall apart and the children are unhappy and sad. They come back home". Placing a hand on her heart she said gently, "watching children like this breaks the parents' hearts. Is it not better that we let them make their own choice and avoid all this heart ache and pain?"



Hide -&- Seek

Covered in veil that reached her chest, eighteen-year-old Lakshmi kept speaking non-stop. It's as if she wanted to lighten the weight of the veil and the memories it carried. She and her sister Arti had to pay a very heavy price for her father's alcoholism and the mother's indifference. It was as if they were orphaned as soon as they were born.

"The house was sold and the bua (father's sister) took the money promising to look after us girls" ...Saying this Lakshmi suddenly paused. Then she started softly, "little did we know that our aunt would treat us worse than her animals...she didn't care for us at all...treated us very strangely and indifferently".

While they were growing up in a dirty and deserted part of the house, Lakshmi was sold into marriage for thirty-five thousand rupees and nine-year-old Aarti was sold for twenty-five thousand.

As she spoke, she looked up and a strange loneliness came into Lakshmi's eyes. She continued speaking in a sad voice, "Aarti was thrown out of her in-

law's house. She was out herding the buffalo and she started playing. She lost the buffalo... She now lives in a children's home. But what will happen to her when she turns eighteen? My mother-in-law does not allow me to bring her here. She's scared of having a young woman in the house...thinks it's a burden ...I don't even remember when I got married. I think it was four or five years back... anyway dates don't matter. He is mentally retarded...but at least I got a house to live in..." Saying this she lifted her veil, and a smiling face peeped out, as if a huge weight had been lifted from her. But just as she saw some people looking out of a window, she pulled back her veil and covered her face again and her life once again got trapped behind it.

She sat quietly for some time – as if waiting for someone to ask her some more questions, those that would allow her to talk and lighten her burden a little more. And then she mumbled to herself almost, "those child hood memories..." and then suddenly she became quiet, as if lost in her thoughts.



Life caught between the Well and the Mountain

“He doesn’t like it”- saying this Anita who loves dancing, glanced away and became quiet. Then suddenly, almost as an afterthought she added, “But, he loves me a lot!” It was past dusk and she was on her way to fetch water from the well. On asking why she was heading out in the darkness of the night she said, “There is a honeycomb near the well. I am scared. But the bees go to sleep as night sets in.” Saying this she put back her head, closed her eyes and started laughing.

She spoke up on her own. “Yesterday, there was a function in the village. All the women were dancing. I just covered my head and face with a veil and danced with them....”

Even in the dark, as she headed to collect water from the well through an uneven terrain, her face remained covered. “You have to hide your face all the time. Otherwise, all hell breaks loose in this village. The villagers hurl abuses. No one appreciates married women who expose their faces.” Blushing, Anita suddenly peeped out of from under her veil, and it seemed as though her face

was just what it would have been six years ago - innocent...beautiful.

“I was sixteen when I got married. And yes, I have not changed a bit since... I always stay happy.” Having filled three pots of water, she pulled and tightened her saree end around her waist, balanced three pots on her head and one against her waist. As she started her journey back home, her friend Nirma took one pot away from her and they started walking. Like Nirma, all her friends are children from the neighbourhood. They all call her *didi* (older sister) and help her with her chores. It was only after finishing all the housework, and ironing, cooking and cleaning, that she finally relaxes.

Looking at Anita, it is hard to tell that she had studied only till the 8th grade. It’s as if she knows the whole world. And tomorrow she will be going to teach at the village nursery school, accompanied by her five year old daughter and carrying her one year old son!



Gone with the Wind

“When the wind blows, it takes everyone in its stride...”, said Kismat and Priyanka’s grandfather, worried about his granddaughters. “We are all farmers and have go out to work...how do we keep an eye on these girls?” Irritated with the child marriage law he said, “Now I’m stuck! Kismat is of marriageable age, but Priyanka is only sixteen years old. If I attempt to get them married at the same time, I will get into trouble with the law...but everything is so expensive... and we do not have the resources to do two separate weddings. Organising one wedding for both the girls mean one *mandap*. The members of our community taunt us- “are you blind...can you not see that the girls are grown up... why are you not marrying them off?” He has been impatiently waiting for Priyanka to turn 18.

Sitting at a little distance, the two sisters who were more like best friends, were communicating through signs and suddenly burst into a soundless laughter, their hands covering their mouths, their eyes filled with mischief and mirth.

From somewhere a loud voice burst upon them- “Why- aren’t you ashamed of

yourselves-laughing and giggling in public like this?” The girls turned their faces away and with a slight smile and began watching the squirrels playing around them.

Looking up with that special smile Kismat said, “I had left my studies after the 5th grade, and Priyanka is now in the 10th.” Sitting behind the girls was their *Bhabhi*, their sister-in-law. She added, “this is what typically happens in villages. The older girls take care of the domestic chores, while the younger ones continue studying.”

When asked about her marriage, Kismet blushed and looked away and said shyly, “that’s for the family to decide”. But, her forehead was glistening with beads of sweat as she continued, “I don’t want to get married, I like it here in my house. You can laugh and roam about freely, talk about anything, and enjoy the company of everyone here. What will I do there?”

And Priyanka looked with hope at her elder sister- maybe Kismat had the answers she didn’t!



Flowing with the Stream

“The

blessings of *'Kanya-daan'* (the custom in which a girl is given away by her father to her husband) is bestowed not just on the girl's parents, but also the entire society”, said Sita, the village *up-sarpanch* (Deputy Sarpanch). And she carried on explaining, “there is a tradition of marrying off the girls early in our culture. When she is a girl, she is pure. Once she ‘starts bathing’ (the code word for menstruating) she becomes a woman. It is our religious obligation to get the girl engaged before she gets her period. After that, parents only have to deal with the responsibility of getting her married. It is not a question of whether you get them married early or late because couples are pre-matched... whether it is human couples, birds, animals, plants or even trees. We have a banyan tree and a *peepal* tree in our village –they are to be married according to our faith and belief. But when the villagers decided to marry the two trees, they saw that the banyan tree had started bearing fruits- so they could no

longer be married. The wedding of the two trees had to be called off.”

Sita continued...“when a girl gets married, she receives gifts from her parents, relatives and community members. When a girl's nose and ears pierced, it is the responsibility of the parents to put a stick through the freshly pierced holes. This is how the girl's purity can be ensured.”

She thought for a moment and began speaking again, “ along with parents the entire society puts pressure for child marriage.” As Sita stopped speaking, a lady sitting said, “remarriage or *nata* is also a custom in our society. This can happen when the husband or the wife dies or the relationship falls apart. This however, is not a tradition in the *Rajput* community where a widow cannot remarry for the rest of her life, but the husband can do so if he loses his wife.”

Traditions like these keep flowing like a stream... no one knows how far they will flow.



“Here

I am worshipping the Tulsi plant, but what if someone leaves his goat to graze? everything will be over” ...saying this plump Guniram wearing a red turban, started off a discussion.

Joining the discussion Gheesaram said, “The whole universe is balanced around the bull and the girl. The entire universe is doomed if you leave both of them untethered. Bulls symbolize hard work, but if you let them loose in the open, who will do the hard work? Similarly, if you leave a girl unprotected, you fail your religious obligations and lose your dignity.”

Everyone was gathered under the neem tree. Once the discussion started, there was no end to it. Although the discussion had started off on child marriage, the underlying issue, was the ‘character of girls’. All those sitting around the tree began to speak in riddles and similes! Someone said, “Everyone needs fresh air. Similarly, men and women have their needs too.” With each sip of tea, the conversation became more candid. “There is no self-control in one’s youth. Until girls reach puberty and don’t start menstruating, they are not aware of what love is. Parents must ensure that they send the girl to her in-law’s house before she gets her period so that her mind does not wander and she can settle in in her in- laws house. And when the ‘feelings and desires that arise with periods’ start to come, they can be satisfied there itself. This will prevent her from running off or coming in contact with other man. It is because girls are not sure when their parents will get them married that they meet other men and do ‘something’....”

Wise Men, “Unfaithful” Women

Some women who were standing in their doorways and listening to what the men had to say, retreated indoors when they heard this.

Burying his still burning cigarette in sand, an elderly man continued, “Until the girl reaches puberty, it is not even necessary to match her horoscope with her he groom because children are innocent in the eyes of God. The horoscopes need to be matched once the girl attains sexual maturity, because the girl’s stars should not be ahead of the boy’s. If that were to happen, then when a man asks his wife for food, she will shut him up.”

Seeing a fully dressed woman pass by in the distance, a man commented, “Look how our girls have covered their heads and faces with chunnis. They are respectful and shy. Look this is our culture... this is only possible when girls are married young and sent off to her in-law’s house. Our girls do not even make eye contact with us.”

Then suddenly another man spoke up angrily, “You know all this dressing up and make up that the girls do- this is all to lure boys. Then they fall in love and run away with them. Can you guarantee that girls will not elope? Then we will get them married only once they turn eighteen.”

With a red turban on his head, Kalyanji got up and mumbled as he walked away, “There’s no problem in falling in love or having a romantic relationship. The problem is when they marry into a different caste and gotra, which forces them to marry on their own and elope.”



Cold Drinks in a Tea Cup ???

Jagdish

and his wife, Ratni were very happy as they showed their daughter's framed photograph. A sharp ray of sunlight fell on the photograph and Jagdish quickly to covered it with the edge of his wife's saree, her *pallu*.

Looking into her husband's eyes with a smile, Ratni pressed the photograph to her chest, and went in to keep it away inside the room.

The village folk acknowledged that there was something 'different' about this couple. In fact they often said that they were unique parents.

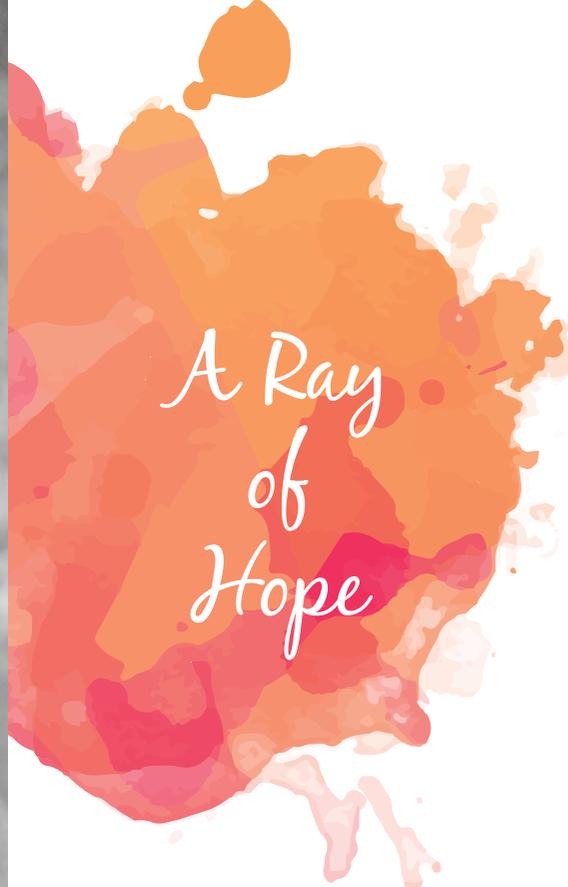
But this was not always the case. To begin with, Jagdish and Ratni had to face a lot of ridicule. Many criticised them for having bought their daughter a mobile phone and for sending her to a far-away village to study. They are Bhils and girls in this tribal community are not encouraged to study. Instead, child marriage is the norm.

Standing by the windowsill and staring into the distance, Jagdish said, "Today we can say with great pride that our daughter is a nurse, and that two of her friends from nearby villages play kabaddi and swim competitively."

Echoing her husband was Ratni who added in a poignant manner- "the customs and traditions in our village are like a tree that is very old- but has also become powerful and dangerous- a tree whose roots have got buried in the earth and branches that are lost in the clouds. We have not only challenged, but also broken this deeply entrenched custom."

They still vividly remember the way the members of the village *Panchayat* had ridiculed and sneered at them. Today, those very people come to Jagdish and Ratni to seek advice regarding their own children and grandchildren.

As they talked, Jagdish and Ratni took out some tea cups and began pouring cold drinks into them. While sipping on his tea cup, Jagdish said, "All this talk about not educating girls or allowing them to leave the house is all nonsense. These regressive people of the village spread such regressive and wrong notions. On my part, I strongly believe that girls and boys should be treated alike; they should be given equal opportunity and respect." Then Ratni added, "If parents love their children, nourish and care for them, why would they run away or get into bad habits?."



Sita

was looking beautiful in her red outfit, just like her colourful dreams. Sita loves to dress up and see new places. Without a moment's hesitation, she said, "I have also been to Delhi once." She loves meeting new people and listen to what they have to say.

Sita wants to study. Everyday, with a bag on her back, Sita rides a bicycle across seven kilometres of rough and unpaved roads that connects her village to the town where her school is. She has even worked as a labourer during her summer break to earn enough money to pay for her school expenses.

Her efforts have paid off as she is recognised as the only girl of the village who has finished high school. She dreams of joining the police as a constable.

Smiling, but firmly Sita scolds her sister, when she brings up the topic of her marriage. She does not like the fact that girls who are married off young are forced to return to the parents' house after facing domestic violence and abuse. She worries about the kind of husband she will get.

She was once engaged when she was in class eight. As the sun's rays filtered through the trees and fell on her face, she said, "Marriage is like a game in our village. My engagement was also nothing but a game. My neighbour's son's marriage was fixed. But the bride's parents

put forth a condition that they would only go ahead with the wedding if the groom's parents were able to find a bride for their son. My neighbour took my mother's consent and fixed my marriage in that family."

However, Sita being her resilient self, did not passively accept the arrangement. Instead she asked her mother to seek the permission from her future parents-in-law to allow her to continue her studies. She asked her mother to call off the engagement when they refused to let her do so. Her mother supported her and the wedding was called off. Sita is very grateful to her mother for this.

Sita is deeply disappointed that she could not prevent her friend, Rinki from becoming a victim of child marriage. The family had organised a retirement party for Rinki's grandfather, but to their surprise, the event had to be postponed because he got an extension of two years. Since all the party arrangements had already been made, and because the parents did not want their money to go to waste, they used the occasion to get their thirteen-year-old daughter married.

Sita has now taken on the responsibility to interact with the parents of the village, and encourage them to educate their daughters. As a result of this, four girls from the village have been re-enrolled in school and they are now all best of friends.



Conflicted Negotiations

He

had just finished talking to his wife on the phone when there was a sudden thunderstorm followed by a heavy downpour.

Firoze had no idea he was to be married. It was his elder brother whose engagement had been finalised. Suddenly his brother's in-laws insisted on getting their younger daughter married to Firoze who was only fourteen years old at that time. He recalls a very odd fluttering in his stomach. He was quite excited. Quietly, in his heart, Firoze was looking forward to all the wedding fun and celebration with his friends.

Little did he realise then that as he grew older and understood the consequences of this early marriage, it would lead to conflicts inside him, and that his attitude to this marriage would change.

Firoze's eyes were red. He had not slept all night. "I am a professional wedding photographer and I have just returned after completing an assignment", he said.

"Playing with the keys of his motorbike he murmured, "it had been three years since I was engaged..I had grown-up since...I also had a girl friend. My life was going on in full-swing when suddenly I came to know that I was getting married. I got very scared and did not know what to do. My refusal to go ahead with the wedding would have also jeopardized my elder brother's wedding plans."

Resting himself against the bed frame he said, "I had no choice but to marry her. I was quite disappointed when I saw my wife for the first time because I had dreamt of marrying a smart and well-educated girl." Feeling helpless, he thought that it was all over for him.

Two years have passed since the wedding. He said with a sad smile, "She is a nice girl. As soon as I complete my B.A. and stand on my feet, I will start living with her and encourage her to continue her education."



Progressively Backward

Suresh

had come to seek blessings at the temple with his new bride.

Accompanying them were his mother, father, brother, sister, and relatives - all tightly packed in one tractor-trolley. All of a sudden Suresh's father noticed that they were being photographed. Thinking that it must be a government official or representative of some non-government organisation, he began to quickly herd the Suresh and all the accompanying group out of the temple. Afraid that this may be reported to the police, he quickly pulled off the wedding turban, the *sehra* from Suresh's head.

Clearly he knew the law on child marriage and was fully aware that he had broken the law in marrying Suresh off. That is why despite all assurances that there was no one watching or complaining, he pushed everyone on to the tractor trolley, set the gear, put his foot on the accelerator and drove off... all in a matter of minutes.

Just as the tractor was fast disappearing into the horizon, and even before the dust from it had settled down, Radha - a two (or perhaps three) year old bride was carried into the temple by her mother. Accompanying them was her

little bridegroom, Golu, who walked in holding his father's hand. They had been married the night before.

As with Suresh, there were a bunch of relatives who came too. Two young girls in this group could be heard discussing, "Radha had fallen off to sleep in her mama's (maternal uncle's) lap when the wedding ceremony was on and slept right through it all....she didn't even know when the *pheras* (the walk around the fire that is the most important part of the Hindu wedding ceremony) happened". Just the another relative spoke up, "the kanya daan (giving away of the bride) was on...100 rupees from the *mausi* (maternal aunt), a buffalo from her mother, fan from her *chacha* (paternal uncle)...but the *bitiya* (child) doesn't know anything...what she got...she would have been happier sucking on an orange lozenge...". And then everyone burst into laughter.

But how could the wedding rituals take place when the bride was fast asleep? "Radha was in her uncle's arms as he walked around the fire carrying her", they explained. But why did her mother not carry her. The whole group burst into laughter. "That would mean the

mother would have been married again”, they explained patiently, “its always men who help such small children with the *pheras* – mama (maternal uncle) or *phupha* (maternal aunt’s husband)...after all a child that small cannot be walking around the fire on her own, can she?”.

Their mouths filled with the *prasad* received from the temple, two young girls explained, “the only reason her mother is accompanying her here is because she cannot come alone. Radha will stay here at her in-laws house for a day or two so that all the necessary rituals can

be completed. She will go back with her mother after that...” For them it was all so normal and simple.

Sitting on the steps of the temple and lost in the memories of her own wedding was 75-year-old Kanti Bai, “I was 3 or 4 years old when I got married. I was piling up neem leaves on a mound of sand, and he kept spreading it around and spoiling it. I was very angry and complained to my mother that a boy was teasing me. Instead of reprimanding him, everyone burst into laughter. It was only after several years that I found out that

the mischievous boy was my husband.”

The conversation and stories kept flowing as more and more newly married child couples kept coming to take blessings from the temple. And as they came and went, one could not but wonder how such disparate worlds co-exist- this world of children in this village where they are caught in these deep rooted practices and those of all those children in a completely different world outside of this.



Child Marriage No...Never, Without My Consent Never Ever

Keeping this slogan in mind, Mahila Jan Adhikar Samiti (MJAS) organized an awareness campaign in two blocks of Ajmer District in Rajasthan. The campaign initiated an inter-generational dialogue on child marriage; present there were several children, adolescent boys and girls, parents, and other elderly village members. While on the one hand, some attendees were not in favor of this discussion because they felt it would have a negative impact on their young boys and girls, some others were of the opinion that this sort of a conscious awakening is imperative. However, because these cultural norms and practices are so firmly-rooted, it is difficult to quickly bring about a socio-cultural transformation and displace such deeply entrenched traditional beliefs.

Many community members actively participated in the discussions and raised some pertinent issues, but there were also several others who prevented their children, adolescent boys and girls, and women from attending the campaign. They feared that the MJAS team members might be working as informants, and that such bold discussions would only ruin marriages. Then someone explained, “They don’t call the police... they only provide a platform for open discussion because they want to improve the situation.”

Conversations continued around this theme and the campaign carried on with music and play performances, slogan chanting,

poster displays, and propaganda. A new perspective evolved over the course of these discussions; one that perceives child marriage in the broader context of an individual’s complete life-span. A debate broke out over this new ideology, and some key issues have been highlighted in these short stories.

Through my interactions I learnt, that everyone carried hopes and dreams regardless of their age, caste, religious association, or gender. I could tell that everyone across generations was looking forward to change, but there was also an apparent hesitation to take on the responsibility of a change maker. Some wanted to continue oppressing their children and the community with their deep-seated conservatism, while some others wanted to liberate themselves from this backward attitude.

Keeping the theme intact, and encouraging a more inclusive audience of children, adolescents and women, let us take this conversation forward and initiate further discussion on key issues.

*“Child Marriage: A game for adults
Lost in this circus of tradition
Is one’s youth and childhood
Who cares how I feel about this...”*



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