

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 all their desires for many children. It is like 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 I saw these children sitting in a corner like little pigeons – withdrawn and sad.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 a 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 or ridicule them.

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

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

So often, while we in the cities sip a cup of morning tea and read the newspaper, a news item might catch our attention – ‘One more girl takes her life

due to child marriage’, ‘Another girl becomes a victim of sexual violence’. We feel temporary shock and outrage. Meanwhile, despite such news reports, this social custom continues uninterrupted in the villages, in the name of culture, tradition or poverty, as 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 their 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, the possibility of girls getting into relationships of their choice or eloping – these and many more reasons abound in the short narratives 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 may be fixed over casual



conversations during a social function. The marriage of a 15-year-old girl was arranged at her grandfather's retirement party.

Three-and-a-half-year-old Anu was married off along with her three older sisters just because some "wise" village elders believed that "3" was an inauspicious number. They advised Anu's father to marry her off too, so that there would be four brides instead of the inauspicious "3". And this is how the traditions continue in our villages. The "learned" priests only strengthen 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- or 15-year-old daughter-in-law who will do the household chores – that's exactly why 14-year-old Babli was married.

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

That being said, a few do feel enticed by 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 up in all the excitement of the moment – the preparations and ceremonies. Not that they fully understand all the implications of being married.

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

Fifteen-year-old Narendra's engagement had been fixed only a few days before my visit. He was clearly 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.' While chatting with Narendra, when I asked him if he was aware of the many responsibilities that came with marriage, he shook his head and said, 'No'.

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









Wistfully

recalling the courage she had shown, 16-year-old Haseena smiled, 'I even called the 1098 helpline and pleaded with them to stop my wedding.' But then 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 option but to get married, as my older sister is married into the same house,' she said softly. 'If I had said "no" to the marriage proposal, they would have sent my sister back, along with her three-year-old son.'

Peeping over Haseena's shoulder was 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 nobody had heard their wishes.

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

A campaign on child marriage and its ill effects was organised to spread awareness through street plays, folk songs and films, targeting children like Haseena and Nazma, who are already married but still live in their natal homes. 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 may enjoy their childhood a little longer. Eventually, they will have to be sent off. We can only hope that some people are listening, and will understand the plight of these girls – that the smile on Nazma's face while watching the puppet show 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 become of 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 as well as uncertainty.

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







Sharda

stood surrounded by a group of giggling friends who seemed to be teasing her and bombarding her with questions that she was shyly trying to evade. Perhaps they were curious and wanted to know about her experiences in her *sasural* (marital home) after her *gauna* (being sent to live in her *sasural*).

We don't know what she told her friends, but what she shared with us did not go with 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 wanted to continue studying, but her father-in-law had refused permission. On being asked why, 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 can't study

either... that's just the way it is... when the boys quit school, their brides must do the same...'

Suddenly, tears welled up in her kohl-lined eyes. They clung to her eyelashes as they rolled down her cheeks, washing away her dreams. With a very sad, faraway look, she gulped back her tears and said, 'I have studied till the 9<sup>th</sup> standard, and I really want to continue my studies.'

Perhaps it was her tears that caused one of her friends to come up and tease her. Suddenly, giggles filled the air, and she joined in like the child that she is – except that she would not have her friends around for much longer, nor the laughter. Instead, housework and babies are what await her. 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.







*It's about  
boys, too*

Chubby

12-year-old Punaram was annoyed. He 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 ourselves dancing. We also get to sit on horseback and wear fancy clothes. However, if you get married as a child, none of this happens. Instead, you have to hide in a room or get married in some remote place, because your parents are constantly worried that they may be arrested if someone informs the police. The grown-ups also ensure that none of the children divulge anything to anyone... so it's all hush-hush, and boring.'

Punaram, who had joined us again by then, admitted, '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 we turn 21... We are well aware of the legal repercussions.'

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

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

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





## Girls blooming and withering

“But

I am only 14!’ Aarti had protested to her mother, in despair.

It hardly mattered whether anyone else 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 had 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 in her heart of hearts, she 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 off. Aarti explained, ‘*Mausar* is a long-standing tradition in our community, in which someone’s death must 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, 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 are changing, and everyone now acknowledges and appreciates Aarti’s prudence, especially her female cousin who was married off instead. After the initial excitement of the wedding, married life has lost its sheen and charm.


Aarti went on to say, ‘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 do.’

Later that evening, sitting on the terrace with friends, Aarti jokingly admonished Nirmala, ‘I will call 1098, the childline number!’ Nirmala quickly asked her to hush, and the girls broke into quiet and nervous laughter as the evening sun sank below the horizon.









An oath:  
not me, not  
us, never

'We

will never, ever... get married in childhood,' 10-year-old Maya, studying in the 7<sup>th</sup> standard, could be heard saying. She was part of a group of school children that had gathered under the *peepal* tree, in the scorching heat of May, to take an oath not only not to get married themselves, but to also to work to stop child marriage by trying to convince others.

And then Maya asked loudly, 'But why should there be no child marriage?' Suddenly, the other children fell silent. When nobody responded, Maya decided to answer her own question: 'Because then we cannot continue studying... We have to go to our in-laws' house.' Immediately, fearing she may have said something wrong, she quickly and nervously covered her mouth.

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

Seeing how sad Maya was, the schoolteacher 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.'



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 practices. No one could stand up to her arguments or contradict her.

Sitting and chatting with Shanti and some other women labourers who were resting in 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 nearby and listening in on our conversation called out, '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 in agreement, one of them said, picking up from the earlier conversation, 'You see, it is less expensive to

get them married early... that's why we marry off our children young.'

Shanti could not let this pass. 'What? Get the children married when they are five years old? And look after the girls until they are considered old enough to go stay with their in-laws? While spending all that money to send gifts to the child's in-laws for festivals and celebrations, deaths, and other rituals? Doesn't that mean 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' home!' said an elderly man.

Shanti was silent for a moment. Then she said, 'I got my daughter married at 21, 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. They come back home.' Placing a hand on her heart, she gently added, 'Seeing their children so sad breaks the parents' hearts. Is it not better that we let them make their own choices, and avoid all that heartache?'

Let them  
make their  
own choice







## Hide & seek

The veil over her head reaching down to her chest, 18-year-old Lakshmi was speaking non-stop. It was as if she wanted to lighten the weight of her veil, and of the memories it carried. Her sister Aarti and she had paid a heavy price indeed for their father's alcoholism and their mother's indifference. They might as well have been orphaned as soon as they were born.

'The house was sold and our *bu*a (father's sister) took the money, promising to look after us girls-' Lakshmi suddenly paused, then softly went on, '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, neglected 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, Lakshmi seemed filled with loneliness.


She continued 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 18? My mother-in-law does not allow me to bring her here. She's afraid to have such 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 ago... anyway dates don't matter. He is mentally retarded... but at least I got a house to live in.' At these words, she lifted her veil, and a smiling face peeped out, as if a huge weight had been lifted from her. But just then, she saw some people looking out of a window, and covered her face again, and once again her life was trapped behind her veil.

She sat quietly for some time – as if waiting for someone to ask her some more questions, that would allow her to talk and ease her burden a little more. She mumbled, almost to herself, 'Those childhood memories...' and then suddenly grew quiet, as if lost in her thoughts.







## Caught between the veil and the well

'He doesn't like it,' said Anita, who loves dancing, glancing away and growing quiet. Then almost as an afterthought, she said, 'But he loves me a lot!' It was past dusk, and she was on her way to fetch water from the well. On being asked why she was headed out in the dark of night, she said, 'There is a honeycomb near the well. I am scared. But the bees go to sleep as night sets in.' And throwing her head back, she closed her eyes and began to laugh.

Spontaneously, she went on, '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 walked through uneven terrain to collect water from the well, her face remained covered. 'You have to hide your face all the time. Otherwise, all hell breaks loose in this village. People hurl abuses. No one appreciates married women who expose their faces.' Blushing, Anita suddenly

peeped out from under her veil, and her face seemed just as it must have been six years earlier – innocent... beautiful.

'I was married at 16. And yes, I have not changed a bit since... I always stay happy.' Having filled three pots of water, she tightened her saree end around her waist, balanced two pots on her head and one against her side. As she started her journey back home, her friend Nirma took one pot from her as they walked. Like Nirma, all Anita's friends are children from the neighbourhood. They all call her *didi* (older sister) and help her with her chores. It is only after finishing all the housework – the ironing, cooking and cleaning – that Anita is finally able to relax.

It is hard to tell that Anita's schooling was only till the 8<sup>th</sup> standard. 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 blows on everyone in its path,' said the worried grandfather of Kismat and Priyanka. 'We are all farmers and have to go out to work... how do we keep an eye on these girls?' Railing at the law against child marriage, he said, 'Now I'm stuck! Kismat is of marriageable age, but Priyanka is only 16. If I attempt to get them married at the same time, I will get into trouble with the law. But everything is so expensive... we do not have the resources to do two separate weddings. One wedding for both girls would mean just one **mandap** (canopy). 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 waiting impatiently for Priyanka to turn 18.

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

From somewhere a loud voice burst upon them: 'Aren't you ashamed of

yourself? Laughing and giggling in public like this?' The girls turned their faces away and, smiling to themselves, began watching the squirrels playing around them.

Looking up with that special smile, Kismat said, 'I had quit my studies after the 5<sup>th</sup> standard, and Priyanka is now in the 10<sup>th</sup>.' Sitting behind them was their **bhabhi**, their sister-in-law, who added, 'This is typical of what happens in our villages. The older girls take care of domestic chores, while the younger ones continue studying.'

When asked about her marriage, Kismat blushed and said, looking away shyly, 'That's for the family to decide.' But her forehead glistened with beads of sweat as she went on to say, 'I don't want to get married, I like it here in my house. I 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 older sister – maybe Kismat had the answers she didn't!







Flowing  
like a  
stream

"The

blessings of *kanyadaan* (the custom in which a girl is given away by her father to her husband) are bestowed not just on the girl's parents, but on the entire community,' said Sita, the village *up-sarpanch* (Deputy Head). And she continued, 'Our culture has a tradition of marrying off girls early. When she is a girl, she is pure. Once she "starts bathing" (menstruating) she becomes a woman. It is our religious obligation to get the girl engaged before her periods begin. After that, the parents' only responsibility is to get her married. It is not a question of whether you should get them married early or late, because couples are pre-matched – whether they are human couples, birds, animals, plants, or even trees. We have a banyan tree and a *peepal* tree in our village – they were 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 fruit, so they could no longer be married. The wedding of the two trees had to be called off.'

Sita went on: 'When a girl gets married, she receives gifts from her parents, relatives and community members. When a girl's nose and ears are 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, then added, 'Along with parents, the entire community creates the pressure for child marriage.' As Sita stopped speaking, another woman seated nearby 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. However, this is not a tradition in the *Rajput* community, where a widow may not remarry for the rest of her life, but a husband may 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 lets loose his goat to graze here?

Everything will be over.’ With these words, plump Guniram in his red turban started off a discussion.

Joining in, Gheesaram said, ‘The whole universe is balanced around the bull and the girl. The entire universe is doomed if you leave these two 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 in your religious obligations and lose your honour.’

Everyone was gathered under the *neem* tree. Once the discussion started, there was no end to it. Although the original topic was child marriage, the underlying issue was clearly “the character of girls”. All those sitting there 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 start menstruating, they are not aware of what love is. Parents must ensure that they send the girl to her in-laws before her periods start, so that her mind does not wander and she settles into her marital home. And when the “feelings and desires that arise with periods” start to come, they can be satisfied right there. This will prevent her from running off or coming into contact with another man. It is because girls are not sure when their parents will get them married that they end up meeting other men and “doing something”.’ Some women, who had been

standing in their doorways and listening to what the men had to say, retreated indoors at these words.

Burying his still-burning cigarette in the sand, an elderly man emphasised, ‘Until the girl reaches puberty, it is not even necessary to match her horoscope with her groom, because children are innocent in the eyes of God. The horoscopes need to be matched only once the girl attains sexual maturity, because the girl’s stars should not be better than 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 covered woman pass by in the distance, one man commented, ‘Look at how our girls cover their heads and faces with *chunnis*. They are respectful and shy. Now *this* is our culture! This is only possible when girls are married young and sent off to their in-laws’ homes. Our girls do not even make eye contact with us.’

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 together. Can you guarantee that girls will not elope? If you can, then we will agree to get them married only once they turn 18.’

Turbaned Kalyanji got up and walked away, muttering, ‘There’s no problem in falling in love or having a romantic relationship. The problem arises when the boy is from a different caste or clan, which makes them marry in secret and elope.’

Wise men,  
“unfaithful”  
women





Jagdish

and his wife Ratni were very happy as they showed their daughter's framed photograph. A sharp ray of sunlight fell on the photo, and Jagdish quickly covered it with the edge of his wife's sari, her *pallu*. Looking into her husband's eyes with a smile, Ratni pressed the photograph to her chest, and went inside to put it away.

The village folk often acknowledged that there was something "different" about this couple – that they were unique parents. But this was not always the case. At first, Jagdish and Ratni had to face a good deal of ridicule. Many criticised them for having bought their daughter a mobile phone and for sending her to a faraway village to study. In their Bhil tribal community, girls 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 in competitions.'

Echoing her husband, Ratni added poignantly, '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 whose branches are lost in the clouds. We have not only challenged, but also broken such a deeply entrenched custom.'

They still vividly remember the way the members of the village *panchayat* had humiliated 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, Jagdish said, 'All this talk about not educating girls or allowing them to leave the house is all nonsense. These villagers 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.' Ratni added, 'If parents love their children, nourish and care for them, why would they run away or get into bad habits?'









Sita

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

Sita wants to study. Every day, with a bag on her back, Sita rides a bicycle to school, across the seven kilometres of unpaved roads that connect her village to the town. She worked as a labourer during her summer break to earn enough to pay for her school expenses. Her efforts have paid off, and she is recognised as the only girl of the village to have finished high school. She dreams of joining the police as a constable.

Smiling, but firm, Sita scolds her sister for bringing up the topic of her marriage. She does not like the fact that girls are married off young, and then forced to return to their parents' homes because of the domestic violence and abuse they suffer. She worries about the kind of husband she will get.

She was once engaged, when she was still in the 8<sup>th</sup> standard. As the sun's rays filtering through the trees 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 had been fixed. But the bride's parents made it a condition that

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

Sita, however, being her resilient self, did not passively accept the arrangement. Instead, she asked her mother to find out whether her future parents-in-law would allow her to continue her studies. When they refused permission, Sita insisted her mother call off the engagement. Her mother was supportive, and the wedding was cancelled. Sita is very grateful to her mother for this.

Sita is deeply disappointed that she could not prevent her friend, Rinki, from falling victim to child marriage. The family had planned a retirement party for Rinki's grandfather, but the event had to be postponed because he was granted an extension of two years. Since all the party arrangements had already been made, and because the parents did not want their money to be wasted, they used the occasion to get their 13-year-old daughter married.

Sita has now taken on the responsibility of reaching out to parents, and encouraging them to educate their daughters. As a result, five girls from the village have been re-enrolled in school, and are the best of friends.





## Difficult 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 had no idea he was to be married. It was his elder brother whose engagement had been fixed. Suddenly his brother's in-laws insisted on getting their younger daughter married to Firoze, who was only 14 at the 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 the 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 my engagement... I had grown up since... I also had a girlfriend. My life was going on in full swing, when suddenly I learned that I was to be married. I got very scared and did not know what to do. My refusal to go ahead with the wedding would have jeopardized my older brother's wedding plans.'

Resting 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 it was all over for him.

Two years had passed since the wedding. With a sad smile, Firoze said, 'She is a nice girl. As soon as I complete my BA and begin to earn, I will start living with her and encourage her to continue her education.'







Suresh

and his new bride had been brought to seek blessings at the temple.

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 a representative of some non-government organisation, he began to quickly herd the group out of the temple. Afraid that they could be reported to the police, he pulled off the *sehra*, the wedding turban, from Suresh's head.

Clearly, he knew of the law banning child marriage, and was fully aware that he had broken it by marrying Suresh off. Which was why, despite everyone's assurances that there was no one watching or complaining, he pushed everyone back onto 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, a bunch of relatives had come along. Two young girls in this group could be heard discussing how Radha had fallen off to sleep in her mama's (maternal uncle's) lap while the wedding ceremony was on and slept right through it all... and how she didn't even know when the *pheras* (the ritual walk around the fire in the Hindu wedding ceremony) happened. Just then, another relative spoke up. 'The *kanyadaan* (giving away of the bride) was on... 100 rupees from the *mausi* (mother's sister), a buffalo from her mother, a fan from her *chacha* (father's brother)... but the *bitiya* (little girl) doesn't know anything about her gifts... she would have been happier sucking on an orange lozenge!' And everyone burst into laughter.

But how could the wedding rituals take place if the bride was fast asleep? 'Radha was in her uncle's arms as he walked around the fire carrying her,' they said. Why didn't her mother carry her? The whole group burst out laughing again. 'That would mean the mother would have been married again,' they

explained patiently. 'It's always the men who help such small children with the *pheras* – mama (maternal uncle) or *phupha* (paternal 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* they had received at the temple, two young girls spoke up. 'The only reason her mother is accompanying her today is because she cannot come without her. Radha will stay 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...' It all seemed so normal and simple for them.

Sitting on the steps of the temple and lost in the memories of her own wedding was 75-year-old Kanti Bai. 'I was three or four years old when I was married. I was piling up neem leaves on a mound of sand, and he kept spreading them around and spoiling it all. 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 a stream of newly married child couples arrived at the temple to be blessed. As they came and went, one could not but wonder how such disparate worlds co-exist – the world of the children in this village, where they are caught in the shackles of these deep-rooted practices, and that of all those children in a completely different world, far away from 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 some attendees were not in favour of this discussion because they felt it would have a negative impact on their young boys and girls, others were of the opinion that this sort of a conscious awakening was imperative. However, because cultural norms and practices are so firmly rooted, it is difficult to bring about a socio-cultural transformation and displace deeply entrenched traditional beliefs in a short time.

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 events. They feared that the MJAS team members might be working as informants, and that such bold discussions could only ruin marriages. Then someone explained, 'These people 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 the discussions – one that perceives child marriage in the broader context of an individual's entire lifespan. A debate broke out over this new approach: some key issues have been highlighted in these short stories.

Through my interactions, I learned, 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 a hesitation to take on the responsibility of becoming change-makers was also evident. 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 this theme in focus, and encouraging a more inclusive audience of children, adolescents and women, let us take these conversations forward, and initiate further discussion on key issues.

*Child Marriage: A game for adults.*

*Lost in this circus of tradition*

*Are my youth and childhood.*

*Who cares how I feel...?*



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