

Child
marriage
no
never

Without
my
consent
never
ever



West Bengal

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Published by :

HAQ: Centre for Child Rights, New Delhi

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*Child Marriage No...Never,
Without My Consent Never Ever
West Bengal*

Rohit Jain



Note from the photographer

15-year-old Abida shuts her eyes tight, as if trying to unsee some dreaded scenes from her past.

This is the story of a sordid drama that unfolds in the dark of night – as men play with the bodies of young girls held captive in the grip of marriages for which they are wholly unprepared in every way. These girls, who are yet to know their own selves fully, find themselves in unfamiliar homes, creeping about furtively like thieves. Thieves to whom a crumb might now and then be thrown and who, when night falls, must hide from even themselves.

Abida's story, then, is a story of child marriage. A little girl who can barely comprehend what "marriage" means but who is burdened with the roles and duties of wife, daughter-in-law, mother. She must leave behind her studies and, indeed, her childhood. And grow up as a woman deprived of all agency, powerless.

Of course, the ruthless trap of child marriage does not spare young boys either. All the stories in this book, however, are about young girls in the villages of West Bengal's Birbhum and Murshidabad districts – where minor girls are often married off to men who are twice as old as them, if not older.

What explains why child marriages are so common even now, in our rapidly developing society?

The question leads us to seek answers in those communities where the practice is prevalent. For whether the setting be urban or rural, we do know that a large section of people still adheres to the old traditions, which dictate that women must remain in purdah, and which perpetuate many forms of gender inequality. The main difference between city and village is that city-dwellers have learned to whitewash the truth, whereas poor villagers often lack the wherewithal, even, for such whitewash. Economic hardship, fears and notions instilled by patriarchy, the anticipated burdens of dowry demands – all these *lead* them to marry off their girls much too early. Once a girl child becomes a young woman, there's deep insecurity – better to get her married before some man "does something" to her. And so, when a girl of "marriageable age" is still single, still living in her natal home, criticism pours in from every side about this deplorable state of affairs. Many even believe that sending a girl to school is asking for trouble – before you know it, she'll start dreaming of impossible (meaning forbidden) things.



Yet the picture is not always so bleak. People *are* beginning to think differently. Many community elders, parents, and teachers have done their bit to foster greater equality, and to oppose both gender discrimination and oppressive traditions. Girls and women, too, are breaking the shackles of the past and are everywhere overturning the notion that they are too weak to stand on their own feet – they are, in fact, beginning to fly on the wings of their own aspirations and desires. Some are struggling with obstacles within themselves, others are working hard to overcome family poverty, and many are taking their cry for freedom into the very heart of their families and communities. These battles do not mean that they cease to care about those to whom they are close. They are simply fighting for their rights and their dreams – often undeterred by the risks involved.

Like unstoppable ocean waves, they speak from the depths of their being, 'We know that what we are doing is right and is just, because it cannot be that we were created to destroy ourselves with our own hands, or to hide our heads in our laps and suffocate, weeping helplessly that this is our destiny, and so we can't alter it.'

Now let's look at the other side of the coin. Society thrives, and keeps going, even as injustices and inequalities multiply – because many of us grow used to things being the way they are. And thus we believe that each person must get married by a certain age, and then be obliged to live with all the problems that might ensue. Not so different, then, from those people who think child marriage is good and who lead their lives based on that belief – for that is what they have grown accustomed to. Now and then, when we manage to put a halt to this practice, we suddenly acquire a success story to share – but what is our understanding of the many struggles involved? And how do we look at the ground realities?

None of this is to suggest that child marriages are fine. Rather, if we truly wish to uproot this troubling phenomenon, we will need to address all its surrounding factors, and strive to change many of those as well.

The stories in this book show us the ill effects of child marriages, while each protagonist reveals to the reader different aspects of the situation.





'High

*the walls, the lanes are narrow,
Long the road, but there's no sorrow.
On feet with blisters, on I go –
I go to fight... for freedom tomorrow.
I want to live without fear
A life of freedom so dear,
I want to live without fear
A life of freedom so dear.'*

Along the edge of the dirt track stretching away into the distance stands the yellow brick structure from which the song emerges and mingles with the air. 'I want to live without fear/ A life of freedom so dear,' sing the girls as Anita Didi, in a yellow sari, accompanies them on the harmonium. You might wonder, what's so special about this, why bother to speak of something so ordinary? But hang on, dear reader! These singing girls are not in some urban classroom, but at a school in Vasova village deep in the interiors of West Bengal. Spare a moment to think of how, were it not for their school, these girls might still have sung songs, but only while sweeping the floor or scrubbing vessels, or perhaps as a lullaby as they rocked little brothers to sleep on their own childish laps.

As the last words of the song trail off, the girls break into giggles... when a voice is

heard, 'I'm teaching you to stand up for yourselves because I'm here with you right now. But I won't be there with you when you're being married off, young as you are, and when your in-laws beat you or try to burn you alive. You'll have to fight on your own. Don't just hum this song I've taught you, fill it with fighting spirit, rise up and proclaim, "I will fight, I shall survive!" '

At these words, the tears glistening in Arpita's eyes spill over. In a choked voice, the 9th standard student says, 'Didi, in our neighbourhood there's a man who beats his wife every day. I don't ever want to get married...!' Anita Didi comes closer, and cups the weeping face in her palms. 'Dear girl, to marry or not to marry is a measured decision. Marriage is not a bad thing in itself, but we've let relationships go bad. I'm simply asking you to make yourselves so strong that nobody can raise a hand against you... so strong that you don't depend on anybody else for food and clothing, not even your husband.'

At the teacher's affectionate touch and tone, the girl's sad face blossoms into a smile. The truth of the matter is that along with an education, each of us also



*I will fight,
I shall survive*

needs an Anita in our lives, someone who can lift the darkness from our hearts and fill them with the zest for life. Anita says, 'These children used to be so afraid and anxious, it seemed as though they'd forgotten how to laugh and play. Even while at school, they'd be scared that their fathers, or an uncle or a brother, might spot them playing and running about in the grounds, or peep through a window and see them swaying as they sang in class.'

It was as if the patriarchal mindset had turned these young girls into slaves. But the coming of a single Anita has ushered in a sea change, even though the entire village has turned against the school and its Didi. The families in the village have stopped inviting the school's teachers to weddings, particularly when a girl of barely 14 or 15 years is being married off.

Kuntalashree, the school's Principal, explains, 'The villagers are afraid that as soon as they send the school an invitation card, we'll have the wedding stopped. Nowadays, if they marry off young girls, they have to do it on the sly, and in some other village.'

Anita narrates an incident. 'I'd gone to attend a wedding in the village, when some of my students' mothers began looking for me, asking, "Which one is Anita Didi?"

I said, "I am."

Then they berated me – "Why have you been creating all this chaos?"

"What chaos?" I asked.


They told me how their daughters had all been insisting, "We'll first become financially independent, and only then think of getting married." The mothers added, "Your job is to teach... please confine yourself to the school subjects, and stop filling our daughters' minds with all this nonsense!"

Anita Didi is not one to be intimidated by such words, however. The next class she takes is dance class, and it's clear that the hopes born in the girls' minds have now begun to dance their way into the open. Anita says, her voice filled with pride, 'When these young girls get up on stage before an audience of a thousand people, and dance to Kazi Nazrul Islam's

poem *Rebellion*, they dance with every pore and every limb!

She has every reason to speak of her young charges with pride. After all, she brought them all into school, going from door to door in the village, rescuing them from the relentless grind of housework and introducing them to the world beyond their thresholds. She got them to open up so that, along with singing, they learned to express their innermost thoughts. She gave their feet footballs to kick, so that they would be able to deal in similar fashion with the obstacles that blocked their way. She helped lift the gloom that shadowed their very faces. And the girls acquired a mirror called Anita, into which they could look, and ask their most urgent questions.

Of course, this is far from being enough. Many more villages are still waiting for a school, and for an Anita of their own. '*I had set out all alone towards my destination / Others joined me on the way, and the caravan kept growing.*' We need many such caravans.



*We want a
poor, less
educated
bride*

Anindita was just 16 and Arijit 18 years old, when they were forced to marry one another. This was not a union chosen by the two, but a bargain between wealth and poverty.

In her marital home, Anindita speaks to us, eyes downcast in her mother-in-law's presence, 'I cherished my dream of becoming a teacher, and supporting my family. But my father did not believe I could do it.' Indeed, daughters are usually not taken seriously. Talking about her pain eases Anindita's numbed mind and heart a little. 'How does it happen that we are considered a burden from the moment we are born?' she wonders, her eyes moist.

Arijit's parents did not want a daughter-in-law so much as a full-time maid, and so they got their son married. They did not care to ask him about his wishes. His mother self-righteously says, 'We needed someone to take care of the home. Arijit's father and I both go out to work, and the house is left empty. Besides, there are household chores to be done, meals to be cooked – how much can I be expected to do on my own?' Anindita's ghunghat may hide her face, but it

certainly does not block her ears. As the young girl listens to the older woman's words, we can only imagine what she must be going through. Her father-in-law chips in, his voice piling on another layer of justification, 'Our only condition was that our son's bride must be from a poor family and not very educated. Our son was studying in the 11th standard, and we could hardly have his wife continuing with her own studies after marriage.'

Anindita pulls her ghunghat taut around her face, as if to shield herself from the sharp sting of these words. Oblivious to her distress, Arijit's father carries on, 'We thought that if we married Arijit to some well-educated girl from a well-to-do family, she would lead him a merry dance. A girl from a poor family would be much easier to control.'

Clearly, they wanted a daughter-in-law who would dance to their tune, instead. The boy's parents may be pleased about having got the "right kind of bride" for their son, but the two young (and too young) people actually in the marriage have not had it easy. They've been married three years already, and have a one-and-a-half-year-old child.




The husband and wife, left with no option, have gradually come to accept the situation, and each other. They are able to share their thoughts and feelings with one another, and want to move towards a life that will be lived on their

own terms, and nobody else's. A life of starry night skies, with no ghunghat blocking the view; a life in which the dictates of family elders are not allowed to throttle youthful dreams. They want to go far away somewhere, perhaps by train

– because Anindita dislikes travelling by the state transport buses, and Arijit is keen to fulfill her desires.







Between the pots and the books

It must have been around two in the afternoon. 16-year-old Disha was finishing the cooking, transferring the vegetable from the pan into a smaller vessel. Just then, her mother, face beaded with sweat, returned from her rounds selling fish in the nearby villages. Disha had to serve the family their meal, and she longed for them to hurry so that she could finish her chores and settle down to study. After three o' clock, her time and attention were reserved for her books.

That day, however, she was not in a good mood at all. Her 10th standard exam results had been declared, and she hadn't got the marks she'd expected in Maths. Her expression was stormy, and finally she said, 'I don't want to study just for the heck of it, I want a good education and I want to do my 11th standard in a better school. But I don't know if I'll get admission.'

It was going to be an uphill task. 'I don't have the wings of a bird, after all. I can't just fly off when and where I please,' she reflected. 'I'm the eldest among my siblings, and I have to think about

them, too...'

Her eyes closed for a few moments. 'I know the situation at home isn't great. If I wish to study further, I will have to do my share of the housework as well.'

The hot winds of May were gusting through the backyard. Holding out a palm, as if to halt their progress, she said, 'Mother encourages me to make a better life for myself. But when I look around me in the village, I no longer see any other girls my age. My friends have all been married off.' Suddenly her gaze fell on the group of emaciated-looking elders squatting there. And perhaps sensing their thoughts – 'Such a big girl and her parents haven't got her married yet!' – she swiftly changed the topic.

A grouchy old woman in a white sari began to mutter irascibly, 'If we don't marry off our girls, are we to keep them at home? As it is, we barely have rice to eat.' Her angry retort was not totally unwarranted. An uncomfortable silence fell. No longer was it a question of their being narrow-minded or not – their economic state is so fragile that despite all the hard labour they put in, their

anxieties revolve around having enough to fill their stomachs. Disha's mother, too, confessed, 'We are hardly able to think about our children's education, or at what age to get them married. This is a luxury that city people enjoy, because girls there study and also find jobs. They can stand on their own two feet.'

It had begun to grow dark. Disha's eyes still showed her disappointment over her low marks, and now there was not much time left for studying – she had to start preparing the evening meal.

Disha went off to cook, and found herself caught once again between the rattle of the pots and pans in the kitchen, and the fluttering pages of her books in the almirah – both demanding her attention.





Upbringing

Sitting

on a fallen branch by the garden pond, 15-year-old Sulekha is busy writing a poem when her *abbu*, home from his shop, comes and sits beside her.

She has titled her poem 'Upbringing'. Sulekha is proud of the fact that she has been brought up with more freedom than most other girls in the village enjoy. Spontaneously, she exclaims, 'I feel a sense of belonging in every corner of our home! I like to spend all my time in these spaces.' Caressing the petals of a yellow rose from their garden, she muses, 'There are so many girls who don't feel at home in their own homes, because they grow up being told that they must go to "their own homes" when they reach a certain age. Who knows if that new home will feel like home, either? But I feel this is my home, where my own people live – my ammi, my abbu, my older sister. I can talk to them about everything.'

Just then, Sulekha's mother and sister join us. Her *ammi* says in laughing, affectionate tones, 'This father-daughter duo is happy to while away the whole day lost in their poetry, and in watering

the garden.' Everybody guffaws. In the midst of the merriment, I softly ask Sayaf Ali, Sulekha's father, 'When do you intend to get Sulekha married?' He answers with alacrity, 'Not before she considers herself ready.'

On the outside, Sulekha might seem as tranquil as the unruffled surface of the pool by which we are all sitting, but she is bubbling over within. She announces without hesitation, 'Even 18 is too young to get married.' Her father agrees. He says, 'The years from 13 to 23 are like quicksilver. It's a period when we change our minds about many things.' Sulekha jumps in with, 'And girls! They get so infatuated with boys they can barely see their own noses. Everything is about the guy, it's like the girl has no life of her own. It makes me so angry!'

Sulekha is popular among her girlfriends, many of whom come to her for advice when faced with knotty problems. Still waters run deep, indeed.

Sayaf Ali recalls, 'When Sulekha was little, I'd seen something written on a door of the school – "A good mother is better than a hundred teachers."



That was when I asked myself, "What makes a good mother?" 'After a moment of reflection, he says, 'I realised that our young girls, who are tomorrow's mothers, must be well-educated if our society is to make any progress at all. My wife and I decided to begin with our own home.'


Now Sayaf Ali's wife smiles, and makes a remark that is both simple and beautiful. 'If a person cannot be friends with herself, if she lacks the spirit to think for herself, she will always be a weakling.

That's why it's important that we teach our daughters to keep their self-esteem intact when they get married and go to live with their in-laws. They can develop that self-esteem only if we educate them, raise them to be courageous, teach them to be independent.' Sulekha's sister, absorbing everyone's words, speaks up too. 'Child marriages happen because there is no respect either for mothers or for their daughters. It's good that nowadays there are not as many child marriages in our village as there used to be.'

The exam results were declared recently, and Sulekha cleared the 10th standard with distinction. We heard the good news from her father, who wasn't able to study beyond the 8th standard himself. He likes to hear English being spoken, and listens with great interest when Sulekha reads her English textbook aloud for him. He, in turn, reads the Quran to his daughter. Sulekha, too, reads the Quran, while her father explains the *ayats* or verses to her.







Crossing the threshold

'She

still goes to school, even though she's a mother herself. As she tells us how people in the village tease her, 22-year-old Mamooni breaks into embarrassed laughter, which she stifles with the edge of her sari. But her smile returns when she declares, 'I don't pay them any attention.'

'I like to study. I was in the 8th standard when I was married off... I wasn't even 16.' Her gaze travels from the narrow road opposite her home towards a young girl filling water at the pond. The way Mamooni alternates between bouts of shyness and giggles, it might appear that this is her nature, and all is well with her. However, things are not at all fine. Her bright face belies her troubles.

'A year later, I had a child.' And now a note of anguish creeps into her voice. 'One evening, when my son had turned three, I told "him" I wanted to go back to school.' "He" – her husband Hriday – agreed, though he said he would have to ask his parents. And soon Mamooni had gained admission into the 9th standard, in a distance learning programme! Now every Saturday and Sunday, like

clockwork, she cycles four kilometres to the bus stand, from where she catches a bus to her school, 35 km away. Telling us all about it, she darts into the other room and returns with her books, which she wants us to see. 'I wanted to study further because my education had been cut short, but I find Science and Maths too difficult to learn on my own,' she confesses, pulling a wry face.

Mamooni's friend and neighbour, who has been sitting there and listening, says, 'Mamooni is the only girl in our village to continue her education after being married. In fact, she's the only one, even if you take into account all the nearby villages!' It wasn't quite clear whether the other young woman spoke with pride or sarcasm, but certainly Mamooni had set an example that might offer some hope to others.

'Why do families marry off their daughters so young, anyway?' Mamooni asks suddenly, and then answers her own question, 'When a girl grows up, which means once she's 14 or 15, the people around all keep remarking on how she isn't married yet. And her

guardians are constantly worried – “What if someone molests her?” That’s the problem.’

Her son Abhay appears, his face smeared with mango pulp and juice, and clings to his mother. ‘Who takes care of your child while you’re studying?’ we want to know. Mamooni kisses her son and says, ‘He comes and sits by my side, and keeps peeping into my books.’

‘How about your husband?’ ‘In the evenings, once I’ve finished cooking and he’s back from the fields, he goes off to

meet his friends in the village square, and I get some time to study.’


‘And if I could have my way, I’d ensure that nobody could be married before they were 18,’ she adds fiercely. ‘I was married off when I was too young. Not only did my education suffer, it affected my health. I feel unwell all the time.’

Dark clouds have gathered overhead, and it seems like it might rain any time. We need to cross the river on foot to reach another village. As we say our farewells, I cannot help asking, ‘How far

do you think you will study?’ She stands there, one foot on the road outside and the other in the yard of their house, and smiles in her characteristic manner. ‘I’m the daughter-in-law. This is my in-laws’ home. I don’t think I’ll be able to study a great deal.’

If only she had the opportunity, she might do so many things! How can we enable young girls and women to leap across these obstacles that hold them back?





Two exams at the same time

A month or so had gone by. Like a tiny bird testing its wings for flight, 12-year-old Antara too wanted to fly away but her confidence seemed to have gone missing. Her wedding was just 10 days away.

As the day drew closer, she slowly gathered together the bits and pieces of her scattered courage... there, she had found one fragment! It was from the day she had confided in her schoolfriends, 'They've fixed my marriage. But I don't want to go live in somebody else's home. I'm scared.' The other girls had admonished her, 'Are you crazy? Don't you get married! This is the time to study.' Then one friend suggested, 'Why don't you go tell Madam (the teacher)? Remember how Madam explained to us that it's not good to get married before you're 18?'

Next morning, Antara left for school, where two test papers awaited her. Her 6th standard exams were on. However... the real test, the one that would affect her life, lay ahead. And so she decided to go and talk to Madam. Her tears flowed freely as she walked.

On seeing her in such a state, Madam asked, concerned, 'What's the matter?'

'My parents are getting me married. I'm only 12.'

'For when has it been fixed?' Madam wanted to know.

'Three days from now.'

Madam immediately made a call to a local group of social activists.

And the outcome was that Antara, who is now 14, continues to live with her parents. She is in the 8th standard, and her aim is to study up to the 11th or 12th.

Why not study even further?

'Father doesn't have a lot of money. I have four other sisters. How will he educate them?'

It was one in the afternoon. Under the scorching sun, a skinny man came and sat down in the yard. Antara introduced us, 'This is my father.' His skin was deeply tanned, and his face shone with beads of sweat. He earns Rs 200 in daily wages as a farmhand.



'Would you mind if I asked how much you manage to earn every month?' I asked. He said, 'Most months, I get only about 15 days' work.'

'Rs 3000, then?'

'Yes... sometimes it might be more, and it's good when that happens.'

In the midst of this exchange, I said, '*Baba*, excuse my asking, but did you feel bad when Antara's wedding was stopped?' 'At first, yes. But now it seems right that we did not marry off our little girl. The organisation and the BDO (Block Development Officer) both explained to us how early marriages adversely impact health. Girls have a hard time when they become pregnant, and later as well.'

Then he looked at Antara and said, 'She is much happier now. And she's

won many prizes!' Some trophies, now adorning a corner of Antara's room, were awarded to her as tokens of appreciation for preventing a child marriage – her own.

'What was the reaction of the intended groom's family?'

'Oh, they were quite upset. Both families had made preparations for the wedding, and a lot of money had been spent already.'

'So then?'

'We had given them Rs 50,000 as dowry. We asked them to return 40,000, and let them keep 10,000 to pay for their expenses.'

Antara was rattling something around in her bag. Pulling out a handful of

drawings, she spoke shyly, 'I really like to draw.' And she burst out laughing, a pencil wedged between her teeth. For the first time in the course of our long conversation, she was smiling unreservedly. She said, 'I've participated in drawing competitions at the block level and even the district level... but now I can't go to competitions anymore because there just isn't enough money.' Clearly, though, she hasn't given up hope, for she quickly added, 'Next time around I'll surely take part!'

May the fragile hopes of these little girls never be crushed, but spur them on to climb ever higher.





Jasmeena

was 13 when she was married off to 20-year-old Shiraz. At 14, Jasmeena gave birth to their first daughter, Shukrana. Riya, their second daughter, was born two years later. And when Jasmeena was 18, Shiraz married again – and Jasmeena came back to live with her parents. But the carefree days of her childhood were long gone.

When Jasmeena had first arrived at her marital home, she had learned that her husband was in a relationship with another woman. The newly married Jasmeena was so young – what could she say, what did she even comprehend? Shiraz used to abuse her, verbally and physically. Whenever she visited her natal family, she would weep helplessly, and tell her sorrows to her cousin, Kavita Bibi. Now Kavita, sitting with us, indignantly recalls, 'Jasmeena had just given birth to Shukrana... and was weak and ill. But Shiraz forced himself on her all the time, and she couldn't do a thing about it.'

By and by, Shiraz began to bring the other woman to their home. Wearing a red *dupatta*, her smallest child Riya in her lap, Jasmeena tells us, 'One day, he brought her home. And asked me

to take Shukrana outside...' Jasmeena's mind, already so scared and scarred by the abuse, went numb. Her sobs were trapped deep within her. Holding Shukrana in her arms, she simply shut her eyes, unable to act and unable to react.

She tells us how, on the one occasion that she gathered the courage to try and talk to Shiraz about the situation, he caught her by the throat and began to burn her eyelashes with his cigarette lighter. Jasmeena shudders as she narrates this incident, and is unable to speak any further. Kavita strokes her shoulder gently, and takes up the wretched tale – 'Her mother-in-law, too, began to threaten her, warning her not to say a word to anyone, and her husband declared that he would kill her if she opened her mouth.'

Wiping away Jasmeena's tears, Kavita continues, 'When her youngest daughter Riya was born, things became much worse. Now they started packing Jasmeena off to her parents' home from time to time. Especially if she was ill, and when she had her monthly period, they didn't want her around.'

Hopes
never
their die

Shiraz had married again, and had moved to Bombay with the new wife. Jasmeena had been sent back to her parents. But he took the oldest daughter, Shukrana, with him. When Jasmeena's father tried to reason with Shiraz, he was threatened with dire consequences – Shiraz's brother is a well-known local goon, and these were no idle threats.

Jasmeena's family stood with her, and stayed supportive, but they were all helpless.

'Why did you marry her so young?' we ask Jasmeena's father. He replies in despairing tones, 'I used to work in Delhi as a driver. Jasmeena's uncles phoned me one day and said they'd found a match for her. And so the marriage was fixed.' 'But didn't you object?' 'Well, they said we had to go ahead, as they has

already given their word to the groom's family... They said they would cut off ties with me if I refused. So we went ahead with the wedding. Now I truly regret it. Now when we are in difficulties, none of those relatives are to be seen.'

Some two months ago, Shiraz visited Jasmeena's home in order to return Shukrana to her. The child had a deep gash on her head. He said, 'Her new mother dislikes her.' Then he went on to talk nicely, and even spent the night. 'We thought he would take Jasmeena back,' recalls her father, 'We were even willing to accept that he would live with both his wives.' However, something unexpected occurred that night. As soon as Shiraz forcibly pulled Jasmeena towards himself, she freed herself and ran out into the yard, trembling.

Jasmeena's tears have dried up. Now she speaks with conviction – 'I don't ever want to go back to him. I'm scared he might kill me, and sell off my daughters.' She sits up straight as she speaks.

Yet her tears are not far away – they begin to fall again, like autumn leaves, when her father says they plan to get her remarried... Jasmeena is anxious about her daughters, and what will become of then in such a scenario. She sobs, 'My father is very poor, how long can he look after all of us? But if I am married again, who can say if those people will accept my children or not?'

It's hard to tell what kind of path this is, on which we are walking. Our souls seem to have shrunk into some darkness, making us most cruel to those who are closest to us.





Munni, who lived in a small Indian village, had been selected for football training in Germany.

Deer-like in speed and elegance, she would chase after the football on the green. Bobby would come by every day, just to watch her, and over time they began to chat. Once her practise session ended, they would roam about together, and he would drop her home on his motorbike. Before she knew it, Munni had fallen in love with Bobby – and isn't that how love works, often? Getting deep inside a person, with all its joys and sorrows?

Joy filled Munni, like the fragrance of a jasmine flower – which blooms in the morning only to wither away by nightfall. Barely had she celebrated being selected to go to Germany, when Bobby insisted they get married. Munni was equally firm in saying that they should wait till she returned from Germany, but Bobby refused to listen. She recalls how he threatened to kill himself if she didn't marry him right away.

We have been sitting and talking in the shade, under a jackfruit tree. Still half-

asleep, Bobby decides to join us. He is visiting her at her parents', where she has come to stay for a while because of tensions in her marital home. What sort of tensions? Bobby shushes Munni before she can utter a word in reply. When asked again, she whispers indistinctly, 'My in-laws are displeased by our marriage.' There is a deeper sense to her words that is muffled by her tone, but we can't help realising that Bobby, too, has been harassing her in some way. In fact, Munni's mother, standing under the tree just behind Bobby, makes a gesture to imply as much.

By then, we are joking around with Bobby, asking questions like, 'Were you afraid you'd lose her if she went off to Germany?' At first he is silent, his face devoid of expression. Then, on being further prodded, he simply says a curt 'Yes.' And so Munni, daughter of a farmer and labourer, and Bobby, a truck driver, were married. However, Munni had laid down certain conditions – that she would continue to play football, and that she would go to Germany as planned. To her relief, Bobby had agreed. But once they were married, the sighs of relief soon turned into harsh, uneasy breaths.



All preparations were complete for Munki's trip to Germany. But 20 days before her flight was due to take off, her in-laws laid down the law, 'No more of this football. Aren't you ashamed to run around wearing shorts and a T-shirt? Girls must stay at home and take care of household chores.' Her eyes brimmed over with tears, and her dreams lay smashed on the floor when Bobby, instead of standing up for her, stood by his parents.

'You'll remember these football grounds one day,' her coach had said to her –

words that pierce her deep inside when she recalls them now, leaving her eyes moist... and what is her life like, today? She has a four-month-old child, and must contend with all the ups and downs of married life. Sitting on the ground and digging a hole with her fingers, she says, 'I made a huge mistake...' Munki's sister, hovering nearby, interrupts with, 'Everyone says so, afterwards!' Munki looks down at the hole in the ground.

Memories fill her mind. Even the football jersey that she gazed longingly at every day has been claimed by a friend, who

said, 'It's not like you're going to play any longer.' Munki, who played in the half-back position, now says, 'But I miss it so much! I want to get back to playing.'

And as she gazes skywards for several seconds, it seems she is not ready to give up that hope... just one opportunity, she seems to be thinking, and she'll overcome every obstacle in order to get the ball into that goal.







Sometimes
losing,
sometimes
winning

When

Garima's unemployed husband threatened Garima with extreme physical violence a year and a half into their marriage, she shrank down into a corner, silent and afraid. Everything was fine at first – they loved one another. Love is all very well, but people in love must understand what it means. Garima was just 16 when she fell in love. She met Ashish at a wedding, and he proposed to her right away. In a couple of days, she had said yes to him. They boarded a bus, and eloped together.


It feels so good to be loved, Garima must have thought. *'I dreamed we'd have a home/ In a city of flowers, to call our own'*. Romantic film songs of this kind fill our heads, but life is no Bollywood film. The runaway couple had no idea of what might lie ahead. They arrived in Murshidabad, where Ashish found short spells of paid work, interspersed with forced labour. A few months down the road, the romance and dreams began to cave under the pressures of their circumstances. Garima was pregnant, and one day her anxieties pushed her to ask her husband angrily, 'What will we eat if you don't earn?'

... All that was four years ago. Standing in her parents' yard, Garima's eyes gaze upon emptiness until they fill up. Brushing away the tears with her *dupatta*, she bends to pick up a football.

'Catch catch catch!' And she throws the ball to her son, as if having lost one of life's rounds she hopes to win another. She is no weakling and never was, it's just that youthful immaturity and haste have brought her to this crossroads where the way forward is unclear. Today, she has a modest job that is helping her secure her child's future. Her eyes are sorrowful, but they still contain dreams – and she plans to complete her education so that she may fulfill these dreams. It's a blessing that Garima's parents have been caring and supportive. Otherwise who knows what might have become of this young woman, alone and helpless in Murshidabad.

As she plays football with her son, whose shrieks of delight fill the yard, I am witness to this precious moment, and I hope earnestly that this delight never fades out of their lives.





A young girl fights the system

'I don't even like the guy... How can I make my life and home with him? I will get married only after I've turned 18, and will choose my own partner. I want to graduate – get my BA degree, and become economically independent.' The Block Development office room where 16-year-old Noorjehan Khatun made this announcement was packed with people. She was then giving her school finals, and even as her exams were underway, her family had fixed a match for her, as well as a wedding date – 22 February.

Noorjehan had attended a programme in school which had inspired her to jot down certain important phone numbers in her notebook. A few days before the wedding, she called one of these numbers, but when four whole hours had passed and the police had not yet arrived, she became increasingly anxious. She tried the number a couple of times more, and then just slipped out of home and went straight to the BDO – where she demanded that her forced, underage marriage be prevented. When her parents were called and questioned, she felt somewhat reassured. 'I'm her mother, and I've never come in the way of her desires – why didn't she confide in me?' her mother asked in hurt tones.

Noorjehan, tightly gripping her younger sister's hand for support, explained, 'I'm afraid of my father, and my mother is unable to speak out against him. I wasn't at all confident that she would be able to do anything about the situation.'

The family took their copy of the ban notice and went away, while Noorjehan was sent to a shelter home. A difficulty arose when, on 16 February, she needed to sit for her practical exam. She couldn't leave without a permission order from the Child Welfare Committee, and the Chairperson was away in Delhi. If Noorjehan failed to appear for the exam, she would lose a whole year. Sarjina, working for the rights of adolescent girls, ran from pillar to post, knocking at all doors – from the DCPU (District Child Protection Unit) to the school administration – till word reached the external examiner, who said he would go to the children's home himself to take Noorjehan's practical exam.

Nobody could have been happier for Noorjehan than Sarjina, and Noorjehan's sister. But a few days later, when Noorjehan was released back into the custody of her family, her two sympathisers were worried that she

might once again be pushed to get married, and how then would she be able to fulfill her dreams?


When they got home, however, Noorjehan's mother – who looks more like an older sister – seemed full of joy. She began making celebratory sweets, and said with pride, 'This daughter of mine is quite unique while still so young. In my time, we never had the opportunity to study, my family was poor. I'm so glad that she decided to raise her voice.'

Hearing that Noorjehan was back, the entire village began to gather, and their home was soon surrounded by curious women and men. All of a sudden, her mother gave in to the social pressure and began to wail, 'Oh! We've lost our honour, and suffered financial ruin!' But the girls sat it out, fearlessly. Noorjehan's father was away at work.

Of course, it's of utmost importance that girls not be married off too young, but it's equally crucial that they are able

to follow their own hearts, make their own decisions, pursue their dreams and determine the course and conduct of their lives – so the question really is, what else in our social structure and systems needs to change so that our girls, besides refusing early marriage, are able to achieve these things? How do we work to reduce societal and family pressure, and bring some relief to young girls and women? These were the questions Sarjina was grappling with in her mind.





Two birds that learned to fly

'As

long as its light is on, the shadows of the house opposite mine dance on the wall of my home. Two pet birds fly out, and bump against my wall. It seems as if the cage that hangs there is hanging in my own home.' – Gulzar

Such was the situation in the village where 15-year-old Merina and 13-year-old Golapi lived, when the two fledgling sisters refused to be married. They were trying their best to soar, but they kept bumping up against their mother's apathy and the village's notions of honour. So hostile had their mother become that she had locked them both in a cage – a room – and threatened to disfigure their faces with acid. The two sisters were struggling to stay courageous, because they knew the night, with its artificial light, had to end, and a new dawn break. When that happened, they would trick their own shadows and take wing, fly far away. Which was precisely what happened, when they managed to break out of captivity and go to the police for help.

'Go to the Block Development Office,' the police advised them. At the BDO, Merina narrated the entire tale – 'Ten

days ago, my mother fixed my marriage. When I said I wouldn't get married, we had a huge fight. Not only did she stop speaking to me, she arranged to marry off my younger sister as well – to the same boy to whom I was going to be married. And so we've both run away from home.'

The Block Development Officer sent for the girls' mother, questioned her, and got her to sign a statement saying, 'I will not get either of my daughters married before they turn 18.' Having no option but to comply, she declared angrily, 'Why 18, let them turn 36, see if I ever bother to get them married now!' She added, 'Their father suffers from a mental illness. How long can I take care of them by myself?'

Little Golapi cringed in fear as she listened. Merina put a protective arm around her sister and spoke up, irritated, 'Don't treat us like burdens you can get rid of by marrying us off!' And then, taking a deep breath, she added more calmly, 'We can take responsibility for ourselves. And what you did with us wasn't right, was it?'



Standing in a corner of the room, Merina continued to speak – ‘It’s been two whole years. Nobody else knows what I’ve been through and how I’ve had to keep fighting.’ Tears, long held back, now threatened to gush from her eyes as she recalled her tribulations.

However, Merina is made of stern stuff. Eight months ago, she moved out of her mother’s home and now lives with her sister Golapi in a tiny room of their own. They fend for themselves with money earned from rolling *beedi*. The troubles

they have faced and overcome have made Golapi, too, a pillar of strength. Golapi smiles at the recollection of ‘that time, when I caught hold of Merina *Didi*’s hand and we ran away,’ and then her eyes grow moist. A tiny smile, a sliver of pain cross her face – and she says, ‘If not for Didi, I would probably have been sweeping some stranger’s home right now, with a veil over my face.’

Merina is fasting, as she does each day during the holy month of Ramzan. She has come to the BDO office with Golapi,

cycling three km in the harsh sun to meet a benefactor, an ‘uncle’ figure who has been looking after their needs over the past two years and who helps them out financially. This was where I first met the two sisters. Merina has given her 12th standard exams this year, and Golapi her 10th standard exams.

‘Allah listens to us all, and sends us the courage we need to look after ourselves,’ says Merina, her voice tinged with hopes for the future.







Life beyond marriage

'I so

envy those birds – how free they are!' said Nafisa with sudden emphasis, as she watched a flock of birds flying high up in the sky. Her friends, gathered about her on the terrace, giggled in amusement. The girls, all studying in the 9th or 10th standard, had gathered on the terrace of Ayesha's home, near the pond, for some fun time together. Some hugged each other affectionately, others teased one another. Laughter and jokes, catching up on news – it seemed they could carry on endlessly.

'Are you long-lost friends who've been reunited after years?' The teasing question won a quick response from Supriya – 'Brother, we see each other every day. But very rarely like this, when it's just us friends together and we're free to enjoy ourselves whole-heartedly.'

We had, in fact, gathered there to discuss child marriage, but the topic that had surfaced was that of the girls' own wishes, their private thoughts, their personal freedoms. When asked how true it was that girls their age tended to fall in love and elope, some of them shyly said this was not so, and that people just

liked to spread silly rumours, especially about girls.

Ayesha spoke up, loud and firm, 'Women are prey to so many unjust laws and unfair customs, while anything a man does is excusable!' In a calmer tone, she added, 'Even if a few girls do elope now and then, let's also ask why? It's not just about being madly in love. Families keep daughters imprisoned within the walls of their homes. Do they ever ask a girl what she thinks, or what she desires? Then maybe the girl falls in love with someone with whom she can share her innermost thoughts. This shows her another world, in which she can be herself more fully, and then she isn't scared to run away from the life that suffocates her.'

If families cared to understand their girls, they would realise that a young woman's world cannot be limited to the home and its yard. And even so, before running away with someone she loves, she hesitates, thinks, reconsiders – wondering if she can really leave her family behind, and whether it will mean she is betraying her loved ones.

Reshma's red *dupatta* flapped in the breeze as she declared, 'We, too, have desires. We, too, have feelings.' Ayesha interrupted, 'It's equally important that we don't lose our self-esteem, and exercise some restraint. Else we might just find one day that we have lost our own selves... even if you fall in love, and get carried away by the sheer momentum of things, and run away and get married, you might find yourself under your husband's thumb. And then there's no easy way back out of the mess.'

Supriya had been listening quietly, and now she left the group to go and sit by herself in a corner of the terrace that

looked out over endless fields. 'Is Supriya all right?' I asked Sulekha, who revealed, 'Her father and her brother-in-law are determined to marry her off. They've already considered some two dozen matches. But she wants to continue her education. She's under a huge amount of pressure – and although her mother is on her side, she too has to put up with everybody's insults and abuses.'

On being asked at what age they might be willing to get married, Chanchal said, her blue *dupatta* wrapped around her, 'Well, 18 is the minimum age but I wouldn't want to be married at 18.' Several of the others chipped in, chorusing, 'We first want to become

financially independent!', 'Else we'll be trapped inside our marital homes!', 'We'd like to be free, and not tied down to home and hearth!'

The sun was going down in the reddened evening sky as though it, too, were embarrassed by the inequalities and injustices faced by these young girls. And with sunset, the curtain began to descend on those precious hours of freedom, as each girl turned her face homewards. Yet, in the still clear sky, a lone bird that had drifted away from the flock was searching out its own path through the gathering gloom...





*"Child Marriage: a game for adults.
Lost in this circus of tradition
Is my youth and childhood.
Who cares how I feel?..."*





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