



-Nilima Sheikh

BIRIL KERKETTA

She Was A Daughter-in-law

THE tempo stood at the stand, awaiting passengers. When the driver called out “Baregora”, I got in and sat down. After a while, a woman came and sat next to me. She was fair and slim, between 17 and 19 years of age. She was wearing a yellow *chikan* sari and had her face half covered. Her *sindur*, nose ring and forehead ornament indicated that she was the daughter-in-law of a respectable family.

Soon, an elderly man appeared, holding a year old girl child in his arms. “Come home at once”, he said to the woman. “Is this the way daughters and daughters-in-law are supposed to behave ? How can you leave home and go off like this ? Come on ! First, come home, and then we will take you wherever you want to go.”

I realised that this man was her father-

in-law. With her face still covered, the daughter-in-law replied in a barely audible voice : “No ! I won’t go home. Let me go.” And she tried to take her child from her father-in-law’s arms. But he would not hand over the child. The child began to cry loudly. A group of curious onlookers began to collect. I could not help speaking. I said to the woman : “What is the matter ? Is there a quarrel at home ?”

“No”, she said. The father-in-law continued to persuade her. She attempted to jump out of the tempo. I caught hold of her hand and said : “Please ! Come down. Don’t create a scene. Where do you want to go ? Tell me.”

“Baregora”, she said.

“Is that where your parents live ?”

“No. My husband’s sister lives there.”

I addressed the man: *Babuji*, she wants

to go to her sister-in-law. After all, she is going to your own daughter’s house. Please let her go.”

“What ? How can she go off like this? It has not been talked over or decided. There is no one to escort her. What will people say ?”

I felt sorry for this respectable man. “Well, what is the use of making such a fuss in public ? It is better that you allow her to go. Or why don’t you go along with her ?”

But he was a man, after all. How could he give in ? The driver began to support him : “Sister, go home.”

Everyone was united in sending her home. No one cared to understand what was going on in her mind. I was an outsider. What could I say ? Suddenly, that man and the driver signalled to each other.

The man climbed in next to the driver. The tempo turned and began to pick up speed. The daughter-in-law suppressed a scream. She caught hold of my arm and clung to me.

I was speechless. In a few minutes, the tempo came to a halt in front of a house. The driver and the other man smiled triumphantly.

I was now an unwilling participant in events. The daughter-in-law was crying in a mad despair : “Why have you brought me back ? I will go to Baregora.” Hearing the noise, the neighbours collected. The door of the house was flung open. An old woman and a 14 year old girl emerged and began to drag the daughter-in-law from the tempo. The daughter-in-law clung to me : “Look, look. See what they are doing to me.”

I shook off the old woman’s hand. “Mother, stop, please wait.” I alighted from the tempo. The old woman looked at me with surprise. Finding that I was a stranger, she became slightly discomposed. Then she became tearful and began to complain: “Daughter, what can I tell you ? Nothing has happened. Yesterday, there was a small quarrel. She did not eat anything at night. In the morning, while I was cooking, she opened the door and ran out. In our old age, this daughter-in-law is disgracing us.”

Putting my hand on her shoulder, I said

: “Mother, I am a stranger. I should not say anything about your family affairs. But, after all, she wants to go to your daughter’s, house. Let her go. When she calms down, you can fetch her back.”

No one paid any attention to what I said. “What? A daughter-in-law showing such obstinacy?” All the women standing around began to exclaim against her. “A woman acting so uppity? A daughter-in-law of a brahman family running away from home? *Chhi, chhi*. This girl has dishonoured them.”

At this point, a small man wearing a lungi kurta emerged from the house. His eyes were red. He was her husband. He shouted at his mother: “*Arre!* What are you standing there for? Pull out the bitch and lock her in the house.”

The women began to drag her out. I screamed at them: “Do you think she is an animal to be treated like this?” She caught hold of the tempo. The women were not

able to drag her away. Her husband came forward and slapped her twice or thrice. “Your womanly obstinacy is not going to work here. I’ll kill you and bury you here.” Her bangles broke, her *mangalsutra* came apart. The daughter-in-law wept aloud.

The father-in-law was a sensible man. He did not want to extend this scene in the presence of the neighbours. He disapproved of his son’s crudity. Pushing him aside, he addressed the daughter-in-law: “Daughter-in-law, you are our daughter. Don’t be obstinate. Come down now. In the morning, we will take you wherever you want to go.”

The daughter-in-law was sobbing aloud: “No, I won’t go home. I don’t have anyone of my own here. I won’t stay here.”

I tried once more: “*Babuji*, do listen to her too. Let her go.” He glared at me and signalled to his son. The father and son caught hold of the daughter-in-law’s arms and dragged her out of the tempo.

With her head hanging backwards, she

kept crying pitifully like a goat being dragged by butchers. Her eyes, desperately searching for support, met mine, and my blood ran cold. They dragged her away, into the house.

The driver turned the tempo around. “Master Didi, come along.” I remained silent throughout the journey. The driver understood what I was thinking.

When we reached our destination, I paid the fare. I said: “Brother, you did your duty. You took the daughter-in-law to her in-laws’ house. But what if tomorrow those people kill her, bum her?”

The tempo driver laughed, comfortably. “*Arre*, why should those people kill her? Why should she not hang herself? Master Didi In our village, such obstinate daughters-in-law are buried in a pile of wood and killed. A waterpot will be tied to her waist and she will be flung into the Ganga one night. No one will even come to know that she died.”

(Translated from Hindi)