



## The Alliance

A Short Story by Kusum Chandragupt

AMRINDER was in a hurry. She had to draw water, heat it, bathe, and then get dressed. In an hour or two, the guests would be here. Today she had to look beautiful. At the thought of the guests, she could barely contain her pleasure and she reached the well, as though on winged feet. Surjit *bhabhi*, the wife of neighbour Gurprit, was standing at the well with a heap of clothes.

Surjit was surprised that Amrinder had no clothes to wash. But she said nothing. Today, the sight of the pretty and delicate doll like Surjit did not cause a twinge of regret to arise in Amrinder's heart.

Was Surjit the only one to get married? Others too get married and not

only to villagers, but to wealthy people from the city.

"*Bhabhi*, let me draw water first. I'm in a hurry", she said, unwinding the rope. She wanted Surjit to question her but Surjit said nothing. Amrinder was irritated. Why couldn't she speak? She was nothing but a wax doll, always afraid lest her mother-in-law see or hear her talking. Why live in such fear of anyone? If she had been in her place, she would not have tolerated such tyranny.

"Guests from Delhi are coming to negotiate", she said, even though Surjit had not asked.

"Has your marriage been arranged? When?", Surjit asked, casting a glance of dread towards her house.

"Last month, my aunt in Chandigarh

conveyed an offer from one of her acquaintances."

Amrinder had filled her two waterpots. "Will you fill a little water for me?" Surjit asked.

"For you?" Amrinder looked at her in surprise.

"Sh, softly..." Surjit looked around and spoke in an even lower voice. "My back is aching today."

Amrinder felt like saying: "Am I your maidservant?" but when she saw the sadness on Surjit's face she quietly lowered the bucket into the well.

"Isn't it time for you to go to your parents' house? Hasn't your brother come to fetch you?" she asked, looking at Surjit's large stomach. Her elder sisters used to come home soon after pregnancy

began, and used to stay for seven or eight months.

“He did come. But... “ Surjit said no more, and with bent head, began washing the clothes. Amrinder did not wait for a reply but set off home,

“Mother, *bhabhi* next door looks so unhappy. Why aren’t they sending her to her parents ?” Amrinder asked.

“Probably because she is the only daughter-in-law”, said her elder sister who was suckling her baby. “Why are you jealous ?” She knew that Amrinder had once had a soft spot for Gurprit so she was teasing her.

“Why should I be jealous ? What kind of daughter-in-law is she ? At work 24 hours a day !” Amrinder was annoyed that her sister should have referred to a confidential matter in the presence of their mother.

“Yes, poor Surjit has a hard time”, their mother put in. “But what is that to you ? Get ready fast. Do you want to appear before the guests looking as shabby as this ?”

Amrinder hoped that Gurprit and his mother would see the guests who were coming to her house. They had refused to consider Amrinder as a bride for Gurprit, saying she was like a daughter of their house. But that was only a pretence. Actually, they wanted a fat dowry which they could not demand from neighbours. Well, it was for the best— now, she would go to a wealthy family in the city. Surjit was beautiful and came from a rich family yet Amrinder was going to make a better match !

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After the guests had left, the elders sat together to discuss the matter. Amrinder lay on her bed but could not sleep.

“All of them liked her. But—” she heard her father say.

What did he mean by “all”? The one who should have seen her had not even come. She was exhausted with the effort of appearing humble and keeping her head bowed before so many elders. What would he be like to look at ? This thought caused her some anxiety. Rita’s husband was bald and had slanting eyes.

“They are making very big

demands.”

“Somehow or other, we must finalise the match. She is the only one left. And she is no longer so young.”

This remark from her father’s younger sister made Amrinder feel very annoyed. They had told a lie about this aunt’s age in order to get her married. Now that she had two children, she thought she was very smart !

“We’ll have to give all the usual things, jewellery, furniture, refrigerator, clothes, but they are also asking for

At the well, she began to fill Surjit’s waterpots without being asked. When no one was watching, she even washed a few of Surjit’s clothes along with her own. She felt sorry for Surjit when she saw how hard it was for her to wash clothes in an advanced state of pregnancy.

“*Bhabhi*, how does Gurprit Singh behave with you ?”

Surjit looked up, startled. “What do you mean ?”

“I mean, you are newly married”,

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*“of course, I swear. Don’t worry!”  
A nameless fear arose in Amrinder’s heart*

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cash..-”

“How much ?”

“They gave Rs 50,000 to their son-in-law. So they will take atleast Rs 75,000 from us. And this is their only son..-”

Amrinder’s heart missed a beat. Rs 75,000 ! Rita’s parents had given only 25,000. Even Gurprit could not have got so much money from Surjit’s parents. The thought of Surjit made her feel uneasy. Rita always said that after marriage a man and his wife have a good time. But she well knew that Gurprit and his wife never talked or laughed together. He always talked only to his mother. And all that his mother said to her daughter-in-law was: “Do this, do that. How slow you are. Has your mother taught you nothing ?” She used such abusive language that anyone who over heard her words felt embarrassed. One never heard a word from Surjit. She felt relieved that she had not married Gurprit. Who would want such a horrid mother-in-law ? Who knew what her own mother-in-law would be like ? All night, she had strange dreams.

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After her engagement, Amrinder’s resentment of Surjit began to melt away. She had only Surjit to talk to, after all. Rita had gone to her husband’s house. Amrinder’s sisters and sisters-in-law were busy with their children and with housework. Her nieces were much younger than she was. Amrinder began to feel closer to Surjit.

Amrinder said, blushing.

Surjit understood. “The marriage is old now”, she said.

“Don’t evade the question like that. You’ve been married only eight months. How can it be old?”

“I feel as if it’s been eight years”, Surjit said, and then suddenly she caught hold of Amrinder’s hand.

“Amrinder, swear to me that you will never tell anyone what I said. Swear to me !”

“Of course, I swear. Don’t worry.” A nameless fear arose in Amrinder’s heart. Immediately after her marriage, Surjit had seemed so bright and cheerful. How long was it since she had last laughed? Such a, change due to marriage !

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When no message came from the Delhi people, the family became agitated. They enquired and found that dowry was the problem.

“We did not offer any specific sum that day”, said Amrinder’s uncle.

“We’ll send Joginder tomorrow with an offer”, put in an aunt.

“But where will we get Rs 75,000 from ?” Amrinder’s father was worried.

“We’ll have to give it, somehow or other. The girl is no longer so young.” Who could that be but younger aunt ? “And our daughter is no beauty.”

“Even beauties have to give dowry”, Amrinder felt like screaming. “Look at *bhabhi* next door.”

“We have to remember that Nabi and

Jaswant have to be married too.” Father was referring to Amrinder’s nieces.

“There’s plenty of time for them. And there will always be girls in a big house. We can’t afford to lose this opportunity”, declared the older uncle.

“*Bhabhi*, how much dowry did you give ? The people from Delhi want more than 50,000.”

“Rs 75,000.”

When she heard this, Amrinder was dazed. Even after giving so much, Surjit was in this condition ! She must be the daughter of a very wealthy family.

“Does your family have a lot of land?”

“They did.”

“Did ? You mean they don’t have it now ?”

“I am my father’s third daughter. He had to mortgage the land.”

“What will he do now to marry your younger sister ?” Amrinder asked, half afraid.

“God knows. She’s dark, too.” There was despair in Surjit’s voice.

By chatting with her every day, Amrinder had come to know a lot about Surjit, Gurprit was the only son of well off parents, he was good looking too, so Surjit’s father had chosen him even though it meant giving more dowry.

“The teeth which are for show and the teeth used to chew are very different, Amrinder. At the time of the wedding ceremony, these people suddenly demanded a lakh of rupees and harassed us a lot. We had mortgaged our land, our fertile land, yet they were not satisfied.”

When Surjit was in the sixth month of pregnancy, her brother came to fetch her, according to custom. But her mother-in-law refused to send her, because the dowry demanded had not been paid.

“Do you think it costs nothing to feed her ? And now a child is on the way. Her father and her brother should give some jewels and Rs 10,000 or so for the child. But you haven’t even given a complete dowry as yet”, Surjit’s mother-in-law had scolded him.

“Surjit’s son will be ours too. We will give whatever we can to him, as soon as possible. As soon as the youngest girl is married, everything else belongs to Surjit.” Surjit’s brother was taken aback

by her mother-in-law’s taunts but for the sake of his sister, he replied mildly. But Surjit’s mother-in-law grew more enraged.

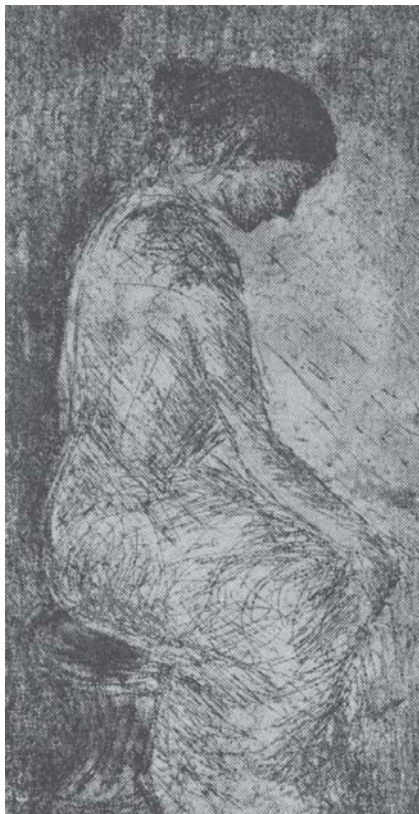
“You paupers ! You are a cheat and your father a bankrupt. We will not send her until you pay the last *paisa*.” As she narrated this exchange, Surjit’s eyes filled with tears.

Amrinder fell into thought. They say a daughter is another’s wealth. Instead, why not say a daughter is a mine of wealth for another? That is how in-laws treat her. But how happy her own sisters-in-law were!

She remembered that after Surjit’s brother left, Surjit’s face was swollen. Her mother-in-law said it was a mosquito bite but how could there be mosquitos around in winter ?

“After my brother left, they beat me a lot.” Surjit spoke as if she was relating a story from a book.

Amrinder felt an emotion rise in herself towards Surjit. She could not understand what it was, so she said nothing. She stood silent, with Surjit’s hand in her own.



The next day, when Surjit came to the well, she set to work without speaking to Amrinder. There were black and blue marks on her hands. “What marks are these, *bhabhi* ?” “I am very slow at work and I talk a lot so...” There were similar marks on Surjit’s lips too. As she spoke, tears rolled down her cheeks. “I can’t bear it any more. Who knows when my brother will come ? Perhaps he won’t come at all.” Surjit had completed eight months of pregnancy. Amrinder wondered how she would manage to keep working through the last month.

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“Mother, do talk to Gurprit’s mother, please. They have beaten her black and blue.”

“Daughter, this is a woman’s life. How can we keep complaining about this one and that one? By god’s grace one gets a good family. She is ill fated. What can we do ?” “But, mother...” “One should not interfere in other people’s family matters. One will bring dishonour on oneself.”

Having given her daughter the advice born of experience, the mother set to work. She had no time for futile conversation. Also, it was hardly proper for the daughter-in-law next door to reveal such matters outside her house !

Surjit’s face was growing thinner and more sallow each day. She looked like a helpless cow left to die by the wayside. One day, she was overcome by dizziness and fell down at the well. After that, perhaps for fear of what people would say, she was no longer sent to wash clothes. Amrinder was happy for Surjit, but she missed talking to her. Gurprit’s mother came to the well but Amrinder could not work up the courage to ask her anything. She felt like visiting Surjit, but her sister-in-law said: “Why should we be so foolish as to go to their house?” Once or twice, when Gurprit’s mother went out, Amrinder went to have a look but found the door locked. Surjit was locked in.

There were only two days to go for her own marriage. Amrinder was sitting in the backyard, embroidering the words “Good night” in pink roses on a



pillowcase when Surjit suddenly came in.

“Amrinder, have pity on me and post this letter to my brother” she said, thrusting a paper and an eight anna coin into Amrinder’s hands.

“*Bhabhi*, how are you ?” cried Amrinder, casting away her embroidery.

“Sh, listen to me. I have written the address at the back. Buy an envelope

was worrying her. People misunderstood her uneasiness and began to tease her.

“Don’t worry, only two days are left. They will pass soon.” Yes, two days will pass soon. But after that, will I have to feel as if each month that passes is as long as a year ?

“What is on the fire ? These women, how careless they are !” remarked younger uncle.

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*The black scars swam before her eyes...  
She now understood clearly the nature of her alliance*

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and post it today. Don’t let anyone else lay hands on it. I’ll be very grateful to you.” Surjit was breathless with haste.

“Why...what has happened, *bhabhi*.”

“All this time, I kept my lips sealed. But yesterday he took a cigarette and...” Sobbing, she lifted up her shirt, and showed round black marks all over her stomach. “I can’t complete all the work because of this child in my womb. So this punishment. Today, they went out and forgot to lock the backdoor. They’ll be back any moment.” Arickshaw was heard approaching, and Surjit ran away, saying: “Post the letter, Amrinder. Swear by me you will post it.” Putting the letter into her sewing kit, Amrinder went into the house. She knew something must be done for Surjit but she did not know how to go about it. Nor could she decide whom to consult. First, she must post the letter. She combed her hair and began to put on her shoes. Suddenly, her grandmother came in.

“You are to be married day after tomorrow and where are you setting off to now ? Daughter-in-law !”

Both her grandmother and mother scolded her so much, that Amrinder could not help but stay at home. All the women of the house began to keep strict watch on her. They could not afford to annoy grandmother.

The house was full of commotion— children running about, relatives joking, women talking, but Amrinder was not happy. She could hear the elders conferring in under-tones, could see the anxiety on Papa’s face. And Surjit’s letter

Younger aunt and mother ran to the kitchen but there was nothing on the fire.

“It’s something outside.” They went to the backyard. It was difficult to stand there. “It’s something next door. Look at the smoke. What a horrible smell!”

At her mother’s words, Amrinder ran out of the house, crying “Mother... *bhabhi*, *bhabhi*.-” She ran to the neighbours’ house. The door was bolted from within. The black scars on Surjit’s stomach and lips swam before her eyes.

“*Bhabhi*, *bhabhi*, open the door.” Amrinder banged wildly at the door and windows. Neighbours began to collect.

“Break down the door.”

“Fetch water.”

“Call the police.”

“What’s the matter ?” Gurprit asked, opening the yard door. His mother was with him.

“Is your nose blocked or your eyes sealed ?” yelled a neighbour. Gurprit took a key from his pocket and opened the door. Filthy smoke billowed out. Everyone rushed in.

“*Hai*, *hai*, my darling Surjit, what is this ?” Surjit was lying in the bathroom. It was hard to recognise her.

Gurprit and his mother began to beat their breasts and wail.

The police came and the post mortem was performed. But people were saying all kinds of things. Some said Surjit had committed suicide because she was fed up with her mother-in-law.

Others said she was mentally disturbed. Some said it was an accident.



But then how could she have got burnt in the bathroom ? Those who had seen the state of the bathroom knew it was neither an accident nor suicide. But a suicide note had been found in her room. How to explain that ?

“Each one’s fate !” said Amrinder’s mother. “She was a good girl. She has written a note. But how could she have tied her own hands and then set fire to herself ?”

Amrinder thought this was the time to tell her about Surjit’s letter. “Mother, she had written a letter to her brother and given it to me yesterday. Shall I show it to you ?”

“Quiet, daughter. You are to be married tomorrow. As it is, there are so many problems. Who wants to get into trouble with the police ? Throw away the letter. The poor girl has gone to god. What’s the use now ?”

Amrinder’s heart rose in rebellion. Surjit had given the letter with trust but she had not been able to do such a small thing for her. She knew that Surjit’s brother could not have reached in time to save her even if the letter had been posted, yet her heart rebuked her.

That night, when she could bear it no longer, she went into the bathroom and read the letter.

Her mother had told her to throw away this letter. This letter was the last effort of a prisoner to obtain release after the death sentence has been pronounced. It was a desperate plea for

rescue.

Amrinder felt like banging her head on the walls. If only she had read the letter yesterday and informed her father, he could have done something. He could have spoken to Surjit's in-laws. That would have deterred them, perhaps. May be Surjit's mother-in-law had come to know about this letter and that was why... These thoughts drove Amrinder wild.

"Amrinder, are you bathing at this hour?" Her mother's voice. Amrinder controlled her tears and came out.

"You silly girl, so upset at leaving home? If you cry so much now, where will you find tears when you actually leave?" said her sister.

"When you reach Delhi, you won't even miss you, silly girl", put in her sister-in-law, her own eyes wet.

"Leave her alone now." Amrinder's mother intervened. She understood the real reason for her daughter's grief. She was very attached to that girl next door. She was talking about a letter. She was the youngest daughter. But now she must become tougher. If she remained so sensitive, how would she manage in her in-laws' house? This thought was worrisome.

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The bridegroom's party arrived but stopped outside. Uncles and brothers who had joyfully gone out to welcome them began to come indoors, one by one, with sorrowful faces. The bridegroom's party were saying that the sum being given was not enough to maintain their honour. They were demanding one lakh. Otherwise, they threatened to go back.

"Oh god!" Amrinder's mother cried. "How can we produce the money at this moment? Son, go and tell your father to ask for some time. We'll sell my jewels and give the money later."

"If they go back, it will be a terrible disgrace." Aunt was in-furiated.

"May these people's greed burn in hell."

"Tell them we don't have a money bearing tree."

Amrinder, dressed in bridal finery, sitting amongst the women, heard her

brother's words and remembered Surjit, lying half clothed, hands tied with rope, bereft of her jewels. The uneasiness she had so long felt crystallised around the memory of Surjit. She felt her brother's words were Surjit's words.

She remembered the terrible sight of Surjit's burnt face. Had that face been anyone else's it would have looked the same. All burnt faces look alike. Gurprit's bridal party had also stopped like this and demanded more money.

Amrinder stood up and walked out. Seeing the bride suddenly emerge, everyone fell silent.

"Father, break off this alliance.

I will not go to the house of such



greedy people and become another Surjit."

Everyone heard these wotcts, spoken in a loud, clear voice. "What shamelessness! We don't want this alliance. File a case of defamation against the father of this shameless girl." The bridegroom's party set up a hubbub.

"Forgive us. She is of an immature age."

Amrinder's father folded his hands.

"Has she gone mad? Take her inside"

Everyone was against her. Her mother laid hold of her and began to weep. Amrinder stroked her mother's back. When the commotion subsided, she began to think what she should do with Surjit's letter, whether she should send it to her brother or give it to someone else. She had now understood clearly the nature of her alliance with Surjit *bhabhi*.

*(translated from Marathi to Hindi by Latika Salgaonkar and from Hindi to English by Manushi. Originally appeared in Marathi in Stree)*

## The Great Communicators

*"Sticks and stones*

*May break my bones*

*But words can never*

*Hurt me..."*

This ditty, remembered from long ago fights at school, hummed in my mind as I listened to the fisherwomen of Nadukuppam and recorded on a dictaphone their account of the curses showered on them by policemen on December 4, 1985.

These women had been beaten on the breasts, thighs, backs, and hips with *lathis* and rifle butts, and even with branches broken off from the drumstick trees in this fishing colony off Marina beach in Madras. Their houses had been broken into, looted and burnt down, they had lost all their possessions, from land ownership documents to the last aluminium tumbler. To us, members of a fact finding committee appointed by the Democratic Women's Organisation, they spoke in detail of the things that had happened to them between 11 and 12 that forenoon, when policemen entered Nadukuppam, in pursuit of fishermen after that morning's violent clash on the Beach Road.

They found almost no fishermen. Only women, and a few others who had nothing to do with the morning's trouble. Only half of the approximately 1,654 families in the colony derive their livelihood from fishing and allied occupations. Many are petty traders and vendors, selling small quantities of dried fish, sweet pancakes, fruit, vegetables, and snacks like coconut slivers. A few are harbour workers. Regardless of their occupation, all the residents of Nadukuppam fell prey to the police. We saw for ourselves the losses they had sustained, and many of the injuries. We examined whatever medical records were available.

Of the 200 people whom we interviewed, some stand out in my mind. The pancake vendor Bhanu whose

thumb was battered by a police rifle butt and spilt blood over the pancakes which then had to be thrown away; the fruit seller Vasantha who ran into her blackened hut and brought out a charred bundle of Dipavali finery, purchased a few weeks earlier; the fishseller Dhanabhagyam whose dried fish smouldered for days after her hut had been burnt down, raising a terrible stink; the weight of a child's crutches, fitted with special boots, twisted and blackened by the fire; the old woman who carefully unwrapped a piece of rag to show us a few stubs of melted gold, retrieved from the fire; the deep gash on Uma Devi's head, with seven stitches on it. Behind these are others crowding around, each with a private tale of shock and suffering. Our report and assessment of losses and damage, enclosing a letter from committee chairman, retired Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer, has been sub-mitted to the chief minister of Tamil Nadu. What the "*Meenava Nanban*" ("friend of the fisherfolk", one of MGR's sobriquets derived from his film roles) will do with the report remains to be seen.

But what really made the women raise their voices to an agonised shriek., as they recounted to us the events; of that morning, were the name they had been called. Although at first they hesitated to repeat the words, merely saying that they were "dirty" and "bad", they were finally persuaded to re-cord what had been said to them. They were the usual epithets, aimed at the female anatomy, at the sex act, and at every intimate human relationship.

It is not that these women have never heard or used such words. But, as one woman said: "It is one thing to hear these words from one's own husband or other members of the family, or even from one's neighbours. When our husbands curse and beat us, we pay them back in their own coin. But who are these policemen to talk to us like this? We don't know them, we are nothing to them!" To be cursed by faceless authority, intent on terrorising them, not only with physical weapons but also with psychological

ones, has been a searing experience.

How does one measure the effect of an accusation like this one: "So you have sent away your cowardly menfolk and are waiting for us? We'll give you what you want!" This is what the police shouted as they entered the streets of Nadu-kuppam, following it up by chasing the women into their houses, breaking



Sorting fish

down doors and tearing away the upper part of saris, to shower *lathi* blows on exposed chests. The sight of a TV, a radio or a cycle in one of the houses provoked the policemen to scream: "Ah, this is how you help your men to make extra money! You filthy fisher-women, how have you come by the money for such luxuries!"

Perhaps laws relating to libel and slander cannot be applied here, where the only witnesses to the verbal assault were other residents of the colony and, of course, other policemen. One young woman who was being savagely beaten up by a policeman reported that another policeman restrained him. But would such a person testify against his colleague? By and large, the policemen could not be identified, so swift and unexpected was the attack. According to the residents, they did not belong to

nearby areas but were probably outsiders. "What can one see beneath those caps? They all look alike to us" was the general remark. But one young boy did say that the policemen who beat up his mother held "something round" before their faces. Shields, perhaps?

All these uncertainties make it practically impossible to fix

compensation, especially for verbal abuse. Invisible wounds caused by words cannot be healed in any material sense. □

—Vasantha Surya

## Follow Up

In *Manushi* No. 30, 1985, we had reported that additional sessions judge, Bhatinda, Dina Nath Sharma, while acquitting the husband and in-laws of Paramjit Kaur, who were accused of having murdered her, had made defamatory remarks against Mr Ved Parkash Gupta, general secretary of the Punjab Human Rights Committee, accusing him of being a blackmailer and of having concocted the case against Paramjit's husband and in-laws. We are glad to report that the committee fought the case in the high court and the defamatory remarks have been expunged from the court records.