



PILAR

The Way It Has Always Been...?

I LIVE and work in a tribal village in Singhbhum, Bihar. Traditionally, tribal men and women choose their own marriage partners whom they encounter at festivals, fairs or markets. A majority of marriages still take place in this fashion, where the man and woman run away together, and the feast to celebrate is held later. A number of tribal women also stay unmarried. However, of late, the situation seems to be changing under the oppressive influence of nontribal culture.

This is an account of the most painful wedding I have ever attended and which I think needs to be analysed to understand the society we live in. Here are the facts.

About a month ago, a young woman, Mukta,* had gone with her cousin, Laxmi, to a fair in another village. She stayed in a relative's house, and suddenly, without taking her consent, these relatives put *sasan* (symbol of marriage) on her. In the night, when everyone went to sleep, Mukta decided to run back home, so she called Laxmi and they slipped away. They had to pass through the jungle in the darkness and they were frightened but managed to reach the main road by the time the sun rose.

They reached home but after a few days Mukta overheard people saying that the boy's family was coming to "take" her and if she did not go, her

"name would be spoilt." For a few days, she hid herself in another village. She stayed there until the storm was over and the boy's family went back. However, both families discussed the matter and agreed to the marriage. Mukta's mother told them: "We like it...you can take her from anywhere you find her."

When Mukta came back to her parent's house I asked her: "Do you like the boy?" She said: "No." "Why not?" She said: "He is illiterate. I would like someone who could teach me a little every day. I want to study." She has never been to school though she has managed to learn some reading, writing, stitching and nursing through informal education.

She also said: "His family believes in the spirits and the days they make *puja* women are supposed to fast all day long. I won't be able to bear it. Nor will they allow me to take any medicine when I get sick."

After a few days, some men in the village called her for a meeting, and asked her why she did not want to get married to that boy. She did not answer. "I did not dare to tell them" she told me, "that I would like to marry an educated boy. They would immediately have asked me how educated I am." They went on asking her: "Then you are not at all interested in getting married?" "I'll see later", she replied. "Who will look after you when you are old?" they asked.

After a few days, she again overheard people say that a few men had gone to the boy's family to invite them to come and take her. She said: "Unless they come to take me and have some celebration I will not go." By this she meant to tell them that she was worth something and if they wanted to take her they should pay for it. She was also very



sure that they would not be able to bear any expenditure for celebration at this time of the year when most families have consumed all the rice.

At that stage, every time we met, I tried to communicate to her that she was responsible for her own life, that her future was in her hands and no one could force her to do anything she did not want to do. She kept repeating: "I can't bear everybody getting angry at me. And later on, if I am in any difficulty, they will leave me alone. They will not help me because they will say I did not listen to them. So

I will have to go." I could see the struggle going on inside her.

After a few days, she saw her family making the rice beer and that was the sign that they had decided to send her to the boy's house. The day of the wedding came. When I reached her house she was crying loudly and bitterly, as women usually do at a burial ceremony. She was being pushed away by a group of people. It was very painful for her to leave her friends, her village, her home, and nothing, absolutely nothing, attracted her on the other side.

All the villagers gathered near her house. She bade farewell to every child and everyone present there. Some young girls and some men went along with her and left her at her husband's house. I heard some men telling her: "This is our custom. Women have to leave the natal village. This is the way it has always been in our society." Mukta's feet would not move. She was reluctant to go. Men were trying to make her hurry. "Women always cry", they said.

This is the patrilineal, patrilocal, patriarchal society—so cruel to women. I have never seen such a painful wedding day. After she left, one man came to our house and said: "Men only thought of themselves. They thought that at the wedding they would get free rice, beer and meat. They can eat and drink as much as they like. What happens after that does not matter." He also gave me some clue as to what lay behind the social pressure to get Mukta married.

Mukta's father has a brother. A few months ago, the two brothers divided up the inherited land between them. Mukta's father died after that. Mukta is the oldest of the six children in her family. She was supporting the whole family and managing the cultivation so that the family had enough to eat the year round. Now that she has been sent away, the family will be forced to start taking loans from the better off families in the village—those who arranged the marriage. When Mukta's family are unable to repay the loans their land will be mortgaged and lost to those better off families.

I know that some men of the village are blaming me because they think I am "teaching" the women things that "take them out of their customs." □

FOLKLORE

The Four Travellers

ONCE upon a time, four travellers set out for a strange land. As they walked along, they grew thirsty. They reached a village where they saw a woman drawing water from a well. They thought that if all of them approached together, she might refuse to give them water. So they decided to approach one by one. The first man went to the well and asked the woman to lend him her vessel to draw water.

"Who are you?" asked the woman.

"I am a traveller", he replied.

"Travellers are but two", said the woman, "One is the sun and the other is the moon. How have you, a third traveller, appeared? Tell the truth, who are you? Otherwise, sit down here."



The traveller could find no answer so he sat down.

Then the second traveller came up. When the woman asked who he was, he said: "I am a forgiver."

The woman replied: "Forgivers are but two. One is mother earth, the other is woman. Who are you? Either give me an accurate answer or else sit down here."

Since he could not answer, he too sat down there. Then the other two travellers approached one by one. *One* said he was poor and the other said he was a fool. The woman replied: "There are only two who are poor. Who are they?" He could not think of an answer. The same happened to the other man.

The woman drew water and then set off for home, taking the four men with her. She knew that they were hungry so she thought she would feed them before she gave them water. On the way, they met her husband. When he saw his wife being followed by four men, he flew into

a rage. Without stopping to enquire or to say a word, he fell on them and began to belabour them.

Just then, a police constable happened to pass by. When he saw the fight, he arrested all five men, took them to the police station and put them in the lock up. When the woman heard that her husband had been arrested she went to the police station and asked the policeman: "Why have you arrested them?"

The constable said: "Because they were beating each other up."

"Did you ask them why they were beating each other?" said the woman.

"No", said the constable.

Then the woman narrated all that had

occurred at the well.

"If that is so", said the constable, "Answer the four questions that you asked."

"I have already answered two", said the woman, "You too may hear the answers. There are two travellers—the sun and the moon. They never rest. They are always on the move. The earth and woman are forgivers. They forgive everyone. Two are poor—a goat and a girl. Any kind of treatment may be meted out to them. Fools are two my husband and you. One began to beat the travellers without making any enquiries, and the other took them into custody without conducting investigations. I was taking them home as my guests."

The constable released all the men and asked the woman to pardon his mistake.

(from Kar Bhala, Hoga Bhala, Maithili folk tales, edited Bhagwanchandra Vinod, translated from Hindi by Manushi)