

One BRIDE for ANOTHER

In a tribal settlement near Porbandar, there's a different kind of len-den that goes on in the marriage arena: a woman is married into a home only if the latter gives a bride in return

Mansi Choksi | TNN

Under the kaleidoscopic shade of a Banyan tree in a remote corner of the thick Barda Wildlife Sanctuary in Gujarat, a tribal woman with green eyes dangles her bawling baby at her knee, tapping her furiously sparkling gold earrings to distract her. Two young girls, with sun-bleached hair and sporting grungy shirts and skirts, are clapping and making funny faces. "Ready for this?" asks Hathiben, sending the girls into irrepressible chuckles.

Hathiben and the two girls, 12-year-old Sooluben and 11-year-old Ramiben, share a re-

lationship which is unusual by any standards. Hathiben's marriage to the girls' brother Parbatbhai has translated into a tacit agreement in which Sooluben and Ramiben have been promised to Hathiben's brothers Shokhabhai and Sejabhai. There's a bit of mathe-

EXCHANGE OFFER

matics here too: the cumulative age of the two girls is roughly equivalent to that of Hathiben, who's 30.

The reason for this strange amalgamation of marriage ties and arithmetic lies in the skewed male-to-female ratio

in Dharmni, the *ness* or forest settlement where Hathiben and many others like her live: a shocking 107:83. Centuries of systematic gendercide and preference for a male child in Barda, barely 50 km from Mahatma Gandhi's birthplace in Porbandar, has meant that there are fewer girls than boys, forcing hundreds of men to remain unmarried.

In the extraordinary marriage custom in Barda, thus, a bride is treated like insurance. A girl is married into a home only if she can be exchanged for another. If the bride is older, like the 30-year-old Hathiben, two young girls whose cumulative age is equivalent to



FAMILY TREE Women in Barda have clearly demarcated duties like collecting firewood, finding fodder for cattle and filling water which could mean travelling on foot for over three hours to find a source of water

the bride's, are promised to two young men in return.

If a young man doesn't have an eligible sister or cousin, he most likely ends up remaining a bachelor. Hiriben, an elderly Maldhari tribal woman from Bandhana *ness*, has been weaving and collect-

ing colourful *razais* to be given as part of bride price for years in the hope that her son, 40-year-old Kanhabhai, will one day get married. "It depends on what the *mawdi* (tribal deity) has meted out for him," she says somberly. "But he is getting old now and our hopes of

seeing him married are diminishing." Kanhabhai now works with a local not-for-profit called Jan Adhikar Sangh which focuses on ameliorating the lot of the tribal people, especially the girl child.

Women have an important role in the sustenance of the

forest community in Barda and have clearly demarcated duties like collecting firewood, finding fodder for cattle and filling water which could mean travelling on foot for over three hours. Phuawara *ness*, (Phuawara is 'fountain' in Gujarati) got its name when an angry Maldhari, in a show of defiance, punctured a water pipeline that directed water from a dam to a cement factory

If the bride is older, like in 30-year-old Hathiben's case, two young girls whose cumulative age is equivalent to the bride's, are promised to two young men in return

situated barely five minutes from the reserve forest area. "This pipeline is our only source of water. When forest officials dump garbage here to harass us, I have to walk so much that my legs hurt," says 11-year-old Baghiben.

These verdant forests have not only this unique marriage custom but hundreds of stories that stand testimony to blatant human rights violations. With no hospital nearby, pregnant women have to be ferried to hospitals on camel-back. Some don't make it back

alive. Children can only study till the fifth grade. Villagers claim they are treated like encroachers and often roughed up by forest officials. There is no village panchayat to address civil and criminal disputes. There is almost 100 per cent incidence of child labour and one of every two children is married off before reaching the legal age. There is only one public distribution shop, five kilometres outside the 192sqm forest area. And the nearest police station is 10 km away.

Grappling with a seemingly endless loop of landlessness, excessive dependence on livestock and extreme poverty, some young Maldharis started mobilising their community under the banner of Jan Adhikar Sangh with a renewed focus on the girl child. Since 2009, they have ensured the opening of eight new public healthcare centres in the area, advocated the opening of schools and initiated groups that have 322 children partnering them in their activities.

Virabhai, the young community worker from Bala, has managed to enroll his sister in the tenth standard at a school near Porbandar city—getting there means a six-hour walk for the child. "She is the only girl to have studied this much," he says. "I won't get her married till she wants to, even if that means that I have to be a bachelor forever."

My friend, GANESHA

Sharmila Ganesan-Ram | TNN

He did not have to drink milk or tolerate the cacophony of mandal remixes to convince Rama Shah. A simple guest appearance in her dream 11 years ago was enough.

That night in March 2000, Shah saw the elephant-headed lord reclining sideways on a cushion, a bit like Lord Vishnu. He sported heavy ornaments and looked as enormous as the radiant sky behind him. Shah was mesmerised and for days, could not shake off the desire to convert that vision into something concrete. Her eureka moment arrived while designing a clay pot for her handicraft class. She decided to make an idol of Ganesha in the same form, if not size, that he had appeared to her.

Today, the living room of this simple Jain housewife looks like a Ganesha cloning laboratory. As if proving his omnipresence, her favourite deity occupies almost every inch of the room—be it the glass shelves, the teapoy, the showcase and even the dining table. Amazingly, in the 11 years after she saw that divine vision, Shah has managed to create over 1.5 lakh handmade Ganesha idols, many of them with her eyes closed.

"It has become a form of meditation for me," says the 50-year-old who makes these idols almost every night in the isolation of her bedroom while listening to the Navkar mantra and chanting to herself. After creating the basic structure with a combination of materials that she does not want to disclose for reasons best known to her, Shah paints them in multi hues the next day. She uses only her fingers, empty ballpen refills and her imagination. This incessant



SHAPE SHIFTING Rama Shah makes Ganapati idols while chanting blindfolded

habit has seen her win not only the trophies displayed proudly next to her sofa but also several national and international records, right from the one she got for making 9999 idols in 99 days in the year 2000 to her recent successful attempt at creating 999 idols in 24 hours without consuming food or water. "Nine is my lucky number," beams Shah.

But what she finds truly rewarding is periodically referring to the 20-odd visitor books in her living room filled with comments such as "I could feel the positive vibrations in your house". Shah even has photo albums showing Jain *gurus* looking on as she creates an idol in front of them blindfolded. "They have always encouraged and appreciated my talent," says the devotee who can create a medium-sized flawless Ganesha idol in ten minutes flat. Her speed and efficiency can perhaps be traced back to her childhood in Gujarat where, as the eldest of six siblings, she had to grow up before her time. "I used to make

A Jain housewife has made over 1.5 lakh Ganpati idols in the 11 years since the god appeared to her in a dream. She even makes them blindfolded

60 chapatis in just one hour," she recalls, crediting her grandmother with giving her what she calls "family values".

These come in handy at the various exhibitions and NGO meets Shah addresses, where men sometimes ask such questions as, "Why aren't we blessed with a steady supply of money?" Shah, in return, asks them to treat women with respect. "Otherwise, how will goddess Laxmi like to enter

BLIND FAITH

your house?" she says. Certain visitors even come to her with deeper domestic issues and Shah happily fulfils the role her favourite lord is most known for—"a remover of all obstacles". After dispensing general pieces of wisdom such as "respect your elders", she hands them idols fortified with the chanting of a host of problem-specific mantras. For husband-wife squabbles, she hands out Ganesha idols in cool colours such as blue and green, for financial issues she

prescribes idols in peach, orange or cream and those with infertility problems get a shiny stone cut in half which houses a mini-Ganesha.

People of all faiths, including a Muslim woman from Vashi with marital issues, have come to her seeking an idol of the deity and his blessings. Some, to her surprise, even fall at her feet and call her "devi".

It's evident that this faith of Shah—who recently even created an idol dedicated to Anna Hazare—has percolated to her family of five. "Even when I pack my suitcase, I make sure I put an idol in first," says Shah's daughter Riddhi, a fashion designer. Her son Harsh, when he was just two, used to carry a Ganesha idol in his pocket all the time. When people asked him why, the toddler would respond, "It keeps me from falling."

Shah's husband, Satish, sums up the changes in the past ten years in one sweeping line. "We have had no problems," he says.

Mohammed Wajihuddin | TNN

On Eid, the usually skinny Urdu newspapers in Mumbai looked fat and prosperous. A closer perusal of the pages gave away the reason: politicians cutting across parties had placed ads greeting Muslims on the occasion of Eid. The gesture is perhaps laudable but it also points to a fast-growing trend: the broke Urdu media's growing dependence on political patronage.

Today, Urdu and the writers and journalists who communicate through it are reaping like never before the fruits of canny politicians' new-found "love" for them. Newspaper and magazine anniversaries, book launches, mushairas—virtually every Urdu function these days is bankrolled by the political brigade. The mantra among Urdu writers is: if you want to hold an event but don't have the wherewithal, don't worry. Call a politician.

LIP SERVICE

Recently, Lucknow-based Urdu writer Faiyaz Riffat flew into Mumbai with his new compilation of Shahid Ahmed Dehlvi's essays called *Dilli Jo Ek Shahar Tha*. Keen on having a book launch in Mumbai, he contacted a friend who introduced him to ex-MLA Yusuf Abrahni. Without batting an eyelid, Abrahni bankrolled the event, which included a lavish dinner at Islam Gymkhana. "Urdu dailies and writers highlight the Muslim community's issues like no other media does. If we don't help them, who else will?" asks Abrahni.

Few have benefited more from political benevolence in recent months than a Nagpada-based Haj-Umrah tour operator who also edits the Urdu monthly *Huda Times International*. In June, when the magazine turned three, Makki discussed his plan to celebrate its anniversary with a friend who took him to Congress MP Sanjay Nirupam. Nirupam immediately promised to book a club in Andheri for the event but subsequently changed his mind—since it was an Urdu magazine function and the audience would be mostly Muslim, the MP espied an opportu-

The politics of language

Virtually every Urdu function these days is being bankrolled by a politician, including those who have no love lost for the language



URDUPHILES ALL (From left) Subodh Kant Sahai, Prithviraj Chavan, Sharad Pawar, Vilasrao Deshmukh and K Rahman Khan at the golden jubilee of 'Urdu Times' celebrated recently

nity to show the Muslim voters in his constituency that he cared for their language. He roped Aslam Sheikh, an MLA from Malad, into the project and invited Union law and minority affairs minister Salman Khurshid as the chief guest.

On June 2, as the rain gods conspired to spoil the event at a maidan in Malad, the venue was hurriedly shifted to a nearby community hall. Makki, who would perhaps have not got Khurshid as a guest without Nirupam's involvement, even felicitated the senior minister with his magazine's 'Pride of the Nation' award. When asked what exactly Khurshid had done for the nation to merit this award, Makki rationalized that he was from a family of freedom fighters. However, he is a bit miffed now that the politicians ended up "hijacking" his programme.

For many, these events are also a means to get close to in-

"Minority politics has turned Urdu into 'Musalman'. Urdu does not belong to Muslims alone, it is a product of India's composite culture"

fluential politicians. "Such functions may not benefit Urdu but certainly benefit many unknowns who get themselves photographed with the politicians and preserve the pictures as trophies," remarks senior Urdu journalist Khalil Zahid who has been jobless ever since his own once-powerful weekly *Akhbar-e-Alam* folded up in 1992. "A big politician had promised to fund it if I turned it into a daily, but he never kept the promise and I incurred huge losses," he says.

Why the mad rush for polit-

ical patronage? Can't Urdu and its writers survive without the latter? "Corporate houses don't give us advertisements. We will die if political patronage stops," admits Sarfraz Arzoo, editor-proprietor of the daily *Hindustan*. When Arzoo's paper celebrated its platinum jubilee a couple of years ago, a dozen big politicians attended it. Arzoo denies that they funded the function, but a veteran city scribe provides a perspective. "A politician may not directly fund Urdu newspapers' functions, but he asks moneybags like builders and other wheeler-dealers to bear the cost," he says. "The moneybags can refuse the paperwallas but can't refuse their *mai-baap* powerful politicians."

And of course minority politics has to play a role in politicians' increasing patronage to Urdu papers. "Minority politics has turned Urdu into 'Musalman'," observes poet Nida Fazli. "The Maharashtra government has shifted the Urdu Academy from the cultural department to the minority department as if to confirm the ludicrous myth that Urdu belongs to Muslims alone. They have forgotten Urdu's tall Hindi writers like Premchand, Ratan Nath Sarshar and Dayashankar Naseem. Fazli adds that if any language belongs exclusively to Muslims, it is Arabic, not Urdu, because the Quran is in Arabic while Urdu is a product of India's *Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb* (composite culture).

True to type, politicians make big promises at Urdu functions but seldom keep them. When *Urdu Times* celebrated its golden jubilee at a five-star hotel on April 24 this year, many political bigwigs of Maharashtra, including Sharad Pawar and chief minister Prithviraj Chavan, attended it. The neta shailed Urdu's beauty and announced several sops. "The CM announced autonomy to the state Urdu Academy. But he hasn't kept his promise," complains Intiaz Ahmed, the proprietor of *Urdu Times*.

The function did not ameliorate the problems faced by the Urdu language, but it certainly showcased politicians' "concern" for it. Which, in the final analysis, is what the show seems to be all about.

Joanna Rebello Fernandes | TNN

Kids say the darnedest things. Here are a few gems: "If adults don't stop corruption, children will learn bad things from them." "People should do their own work, and not make others work for them by giving them money." "If you can't give people homes, why worry about progress?" "Progress is when people in the country are happy."

These were sixth-graders from Navy Children School, Colaba, responding to questions on their opinions and solutions to corruption. The interrogator was Manju Singh, veteran actor and TV producer who these days drops by schools with handpicked documentaries, music videos, even Youtube videos, the likes of which most schoolkids have never seen. To the inattentive eye, Singh's films provide nothing more than entertainment. But closer inspection shows these to be contemporary lessons in life skills and value education—the new and improved version of stiff old moral science.

The old textbook on right and wrong, good and bad, has not been scrapped (moral science is still a subject in schools), but progressive

schools today are keen to contemporise value education and integrate it organically with the rest of the syllabus. For added effect, some schools have been co-opting external experts like Singh, bringing in atypical tools such as films, creative theatre and the outdoors into character-building. And children can't have enough of them.

Singh's screenings are part of a programme called 'Lessons in the Dark' under the mantle of her non-profit called WorldKids Foundation (WKF). The organisation believes that value-based global cinema provides entertainment and 'value education' in equal parts.

It also opens up global cultures to children and coaxes them to cogitate on issues that may not necessarily be native to their syllabus. After each session, Singh holds a class in critical thinking. "We leave the floor open for the children to interpret the films in their own way without imposing judgment or censure," she says.

What emerges is a panoply of views. "There's no right or wrong in these debates. For example, after screening Kailash Kher's music video on Anna Hazare, a question like 'Do you

Lessons in the park

Cinema, theatre, games, nature trails, visits to villages—value education for children has never been more fun

think India will ever rid itself of corruption?" will be thrown to the kids. And it will receive both optimistic and contrarian responses, with both sides presenting their arguments reasonably," she says. WKF programmes screenings for each school around topics in their particular syllabus. The perky short *Ruby Who* by Hailley Bartholomew is about a covetous girl who ends up with the things she wants but is eventually miserable for it. "We connected the film to capitalism and consumerism that older children were studying, and to issues in identity when we speak to younger children," says Singh. If not ethics, the



TALK TIME Former Doordarshan newsreader Manju Singh interrogated sixth-graders from a school in Colaba on their opinion on and solutions to corruption recently

children at least take home an education in aesthetics and film criticism.

It's not just organisations tailored for children that are getting into the act. TEDx, the 'glocal' ideas network, has a spin-off called 'Teducation' that takes TED videos of presentations on Technology, Entertainment and Design, and also innovations in leadership and stories of inspiration, to

schools. Yashraj Akashi, curator of TEDx, Mumbai, says they have been trying to popularise the programme in city schools (including BMC ones) in the last year. "For schools unfamiliar with TED programmes, we select pertinent videos to be screened; in other cases, we give the school 50 videos from which they chose five. The screenings are usually followed by student engage-

ment," says Akashi, who mentions that several interactions held at Dharavi Labour Camp School went down well with the children.

Some extra-curricular organisations take their classes indoors; others locate their learning in the wilderness. Magic Bus, for one, conducts sessions in experiential learning at their Centre for Learning and Development, on a 25-

acre residential campus in Karjat. The centre is a subsidiary of Magic Bus, and a revenue generator for their Sport for Development programme. It is situated in a naturally wooded area with adventure ropes courses, football and volleyball fields, camping areas,

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nature trails and a perennial river. "It gives children a chance to be stimulated by mud, grass, mountains," explains Vikramjeet Sinha, Programme Head, Magic Bus Centre. Sinha, who is an art-based therapist certified by the World Centre for Creative Learning, says experiential learning is a bridge between the outdoors and personal development.

The Centre creates programmes that assist children

in developing personal and social skills through individual and group activities (among other benefits, the latter help newcomers integrate into the established order). The basis of the programme is to guide children towards discovering meaning in the method, and method in the madness, so a mountain trek, for example, becomes more than just a sweaty schlep. "We get the children to think about what a mountain may represent to them (say, a particular difficulty); what tools they would use to scale the mountain (drawing parallels with skills that would help them overcome that problem); and so on," offers Sinha.

Schools have recognised they need something outside formal education to assist their children today. Some schools approach Magic Bus with a wish list—areas they'd like the programme to work on. "They may want new kids to connect with older kids or want their kids to become more sensitive and responsible to larger society, to go beyond I Me and Myself," Sinha says. In fact the programme also takes children into neighbouring villages for lessons in community action and trans-cultural work. It's experiential learning and it's fun. It's also value-addition at its best.