



KISSA KAHAN

A toolkit of stories from the youth workers of *Girls Not Brides* member organisations in India





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ABOUT THE TOOLKIT

The Kissa Kahani curriculum explored storytelling as a means to understand underlying concepts and structures that lead to child marriage and also deconstruct the social perceptions and popular influences that impact individuals across all genders in our society. The curriculum was originally designed in August 2020 as a pilot with GNB and UNICEF State Office Rajasthan and then underwent three more iterations in Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal before reaching this final version.

As an outcome of the workshop, 100+ youth workers from Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal were trained to create and use stories to have more engaging and meaningful conversations in their adolescents and youth groups. During the workshops, all participants had to create and share one story based on a topic relevant to their work on gender in their local contexts. From these submissions, we selected 35 stories to feature in this toolkit.

Every story is written by a youth worker and then edited by the Master Trainer of this project, Ms. Angana Prasad, who has been creatively using stories as a means to drive change for almost a decade, through her work in Uttar Pradesh.

HOW TO USE THE TOOLKIT

- All stories have been categorized based on the states their participants are from and then arranged alphabetically. However, you can find some stories from the toolkit as complementary to another from a particular state. So, feel free to choose the sequence in which you want to use the stories.
- Every story is followed up with a series of reflective questions. In order to ensure the best use of the stories, it is imperative that you have debriefing discussions. Feel free to use the list of questions as suggestions and come up with your own ones if needed.
- The italicized texts are notes for the facilitator to either keep at the back of their minds or bring into their conversation with their adolescent groups.
- It is important to note that certain stories might take the participants to some deeply personal moments which might bring a surge of emotions or might make shut them down to sharing or listening to others. In order to effectively deal with either of this, it is important to create a safe space in each of the sessions. The following are some tips for the creation of safe spaces:
 1. Make efforts to know everyone's names and address them with it.
 2. Acknowledge every question asked. If you can answer them, answer and if you cannot, then let the group know why.
 3. In case someone asks a question that you don't have the answer to, then you can learn the answer and respond to them in the next meeting.
 4. Your questions should be ranged from simple to complex so that participants from a range of intellectual capacities can engage with you.
 5. Appreciate everyone who answers or tries to answer your questions.
 6. In case someone gives a wrong answer, instead of calling them out or laughing or saying it is wrong, it is important that you acknowledge their effort and craftily direct them to the correct answer.
 7. Acknowledge individuals who might understand a concept but do not want to share with the group.

STORIES FROM RAJASTHAN

1. Brother No.1 - Ms. Manoj Kanwar
2. Life Partner - Ms. Jamna Chauhan
3. Skills and Skin - Ms. Kavita Dhavlesha
4. The Bicycle - Ms. Kamini Kumari
5. Value of Education - Mr. Hemant Sharma
6. What Should Mahi Do? - Ms. Neelam Gandhi
7. Who is Small and Who is Big? - Ms. Anita Sen
8. Why be Self-dependent? - Mr. Munawwar Abdullah
9. You are not my SON but my DAUGHTER - Mr. Deepak Sharma



BROTHER NO. 1

- Ms. MANOJ KANWAR

Aloo and Mirchi were two siblings, who were dearly loved by their families. One day, Mirchi came running to her mother and shared “Mummyyyy!! I have been selected to play for the local Hockey team!” and the mother was overjoyed with this announcement. Just then, Mirchi’s grandfather, who was walking past, asked “What is this excitement about, someone tell me soon!”

Mirchi jumped with excitement and shared, “Dadu! I have been selected to play for the local Hockey team!”

“This indeed is wonderful news Mirchi!”

“I will be travelling to play at the District tournament.”

“Where exactly? You travel locally anyway.”

Mirchi, still very excited, “For this tournament, I will need to travel outside our village. The exact address hasn’t been shared with us yet.”

With a sharp change in tone, her grandfather exclaimed, “Outside our village! Girls from our families do not travel outside our village and definitely not to play in a sports team.”

Mirchi, still a young girl brimming with confidence and hope exclaimed, “but when Bhaiya was selected for the same tournament, the entire family went to the local bus stop to see him off. Why are you behaving differently now that it is my turn?”

Starting to lose his cool, her grandfather said, “Your brother is a boy and therefore free to do whatever he wants. He can travel by himself and also stay in a different town by himself. You are a girl. Girls from our family do not wander around like this. You have to get married off one day. If the groom’s family learns about your adventures, they wouldn’t want anything to do with an ‘uncultured girl’ like you. With no one willing to marry you, we will lose face in the community. So, I will not let you go outside our village to play in any tournament.”

Audience to the conversation so far, Mirchi’s mother tried to represent her, “The world is changing around us...”

This angered him even more and he cut her sentence midway with, “Who asked you to intervene? You are a woman yourself and know how things work in our society. It is better if you make your presence felt in the kitchen and not in such conversations.”

Mirchi's mother walks back to the kitchen. Mirchi knew that she was right, but she also knew that her mother would be on the receiving end from her grandfather if she continued for a little longer, so she held back her anger and walked into her room.

Just then, Mirchi's brother, Aloo, walks into the room, and seeing her in tears, he says, "Hey! How come the Mirchi that talks others' brains off and makes them cry is herself seen crying today?"

Their mother walks into the room with a glass of water for Mirchi and shares "She has been selected to play for the Hockey Team at the district tournament..."

"And that makes her cry? Isn't this something we should all celebrate today?"

Mirchi shares the entire conversation from the morning and her brother decides to help her. Aloo walks into their grandfather's room and gives him a warm greeting which immediately cheers him up and he goes on to say how he is the future of the family who will carry their name and their lineage forward and how only seeing Aloo's face brightens his day.

Aloo, who was aware of the negative exchange from a while back carries on the warmth and positivity of the moment and asks his grandfather if he has heard about Mirchi's selection to the local Hockey team.

"Dadu, did you hear about our little Mirchi's selection in the Hockey Team?"

"Ha-ha! Yes, she did mention that."

"Isn't it exciting that both your grandchildren would have played at a district-level tournament?"

"Hmmm"

"Hmm? Do you not want her to play?"

"Oh no! I never stopped her from playing. She can play in the local matches or in school. She is required to travel for this tournament and girls from our families do not travel outside their village for a sports tournament, therefore, I can't allow her..."



“But *Dadu*, our Mirchi has competed against so many girls of her age to win this spot and you are barring her from taking her opportunity...”

“Aah! You stop advocating for her. I understand how this society functions much better than you do.”

“I agree that you know much more than me, but you have always inspired us to be progressive. A lot of our neighbours and extended family members would not have allowed their daughters to play a sport, but you did and now that it is Mirchi’s time to shine, you are holding her back. You have used examples of Sania Mirza, Saina Nehwal, and P.T. Usha positively, but just imagine if they did not have the support from their families, would they have won so many accolades for our country? They are females too, but where have they not traveled to and left a mark for themselves?”

Seeing his own lessons being used by his grandchild to make a point to him was a moment of pride while also an embarrassing one for being shown a mirror to his hypocrisy. The grandfather replied meekly, “but she is a girl and if something goes wrong in this trip, how will we ever face the society?”

Even though Aloo was still a child, he had understood that his grandfather loved him a lot and he could use this position of being the favourite grandchild to ensure his sister gets the opportunity she has earned for herself. He says “but if you think of it, girls have been to space and back and you are restricting Mirchi from joining a local tournament, where she is going to travel with people known to us. Our Mirchi has definitely proven to be a responsible individual. Anyway, if she doesn’t play at the District tournament, she will only remain a recreational player, and that too with no fault of her own. So, if she isn’t allowed, I will stop playing Hockey competitively too.”

The grandfather knew how much Aloo enjoyed playing Hockey and wasn’t comfortable with the fact that his favorite grandchild will give up on his passion because of a restriction that he had imposed. He asks Aloo to bring Mirchi over to his room.

Mirchi comes running to her grandfather’s room, slows down right outside his door, and acts as if she knows nothing about the change of heart that he has had. She meekly says, “yes *Dadu*, you asked for me?”

“Yes. Do you really want to participate in that District tournament?”

“Yes, *Dadu*! I really do!”

“Hmm... OK. I will let you go, but on one condition. You have to promise me that you will play with all your heart, irrespective of your team’s winning or losing status.”

“Of course, *Dadu*!! I will play with all my heart and hopefully will continue to advance to the next level of the sport too... Thank you, *Dadu*!”

Points for Discussion:

- Why was Mirchi happy?
- How did her mother respond to this news?
- Why did her grandfather's reaction start with encouragement and end with restrictions? What was he scared of?
- What was Aloo's reaction to Mirchi's selection? What do we learn about him as a brother through this?
- How did Aloo take advantage of his position as the favourite grandchild?
- Generally, if someone enjoys a position of importance, they mostly try to use it to their advantage. However, Aloo used his position to get more exposure for his sister. Have you seen something like this in your real life? Elaborate on your example.
- We generally speak about gender-based discrimination at home but do not acknowledge the important role that the favourite son of the house can play. Make a list of things that a boy enjoying this position can do, to help the cause of gender equality within their own household?

LIFE PARTNER

- Ms. JAMNA CHAUHAN

Once upon a time, there was a girl named Radha, who lived in abject poverty along with her five siblings and mother. She was only 2-years-old when her father passed away. In order to save costs, Radha was married off in the same ceremony as that of her elder sister. At that time, Radha was only 5-years-old and both families had agreed for Radha to stay at her mother's house. However, as soon as she turned 13, people from her in-laws' family kept coming over, pestering her mother to send Radha to them. Finally, Radha's mother gave in and she was sent to live with her in-laws.



As soon as she reached there, Radha was handed a long list of chores to do at home and then was sent to work on their farmland. Her entire day was spent doing chores, both inside and outside the house. She was so caught up with her work, that the food that she cooked every morning for her family, she wasn't able to find time to eat it! Soon the stress of all the chores and the lack of nutrition began showing on Radha. She lost an unhealthy amount of weight and although she was just a young girl, she had sunken eyes with dark circles.

One day her mother came to meet her and just by looking at her she knew that things were not right here. Radha's mother-in-law refused to leave them alone for a minute. It was only when a neighbour came to their house for some work that she left Radha and her mother alone. Finding her opportunity here, Radha shared how she was overworked and underfed at her in-law's house and how badly she was treated. Radha's mother teared up and decided to take her daughter away. She went to Radha's mother-in-law and shared about an upcoming puja at home that would require Radha's presence. Being a religious person herself, Radha's mother-in-law agreed to let her go.

At her mother's house, Radha was still helping out with all the chores, but at least she was happy and well treated. She was nurtured back to good health. However, her in-laws started getting restless to bring her back again, to which Radha's mother vehemently opposed, sharing that she will send her daughter only when she turns 18 years of age and threatened to get the police involved. Grudgingly, her in-laws agreed.

When Radha turned 18, her in-laws returned to take her back and her mother was out of reasons on why she should stay, so she gave in. This time Radha returned to her in-law's house only to find her husband had become an alcoholic. He was angry that Radha had been away for all these years, so had started beating her up often and no one from his family ever intervened. Within a week, Radha found this torture unbearable and was back to her mother's house. Her in-laws followed, but this time they started coming to her house with the Panchayat heads of their community, who insisted that either Radha be sent back to her husband or the marriage can socially be called off by Radha's family paying her in-laws an amount of Rs.5,00,000. Radha's family was poor and couldn't afford that amount, but they knew that in order to live in peace, they would need to do as the community heads decide.

While thinking of ways to do away with such torture and also not have to pay that heavy amount, Radha recalled that she knew someone who worked in the Mahila Manch, an organization that worked for oppressed women. Radha reached out to the lady from Mahila Manch, who readily took her to their organization's office, where Radha was told that the new government laws allow the annulment of child marriages. Radha liked this option and immediately decided to apply for annulment of her marriage and visit the court to submit the application. On learning about the same, Radha's in-laws lost their cool and returned with their community heads to harass her family. Coincidentally, some women from the Mahila Manch were also there at her home, who stood up to this group. They warned to take legal action against the family that could actually lead all of them to be arrested, especially so, because this was a case of child marriage. Radha's in-laws realized that they were dealing with an aware and vocal group of women here, so decided to back out and not come back for her.



Eventually, Radha's marriage got annulled and she went on to join the Mahila Manch where she worked day and night to bring oppressed and victimized women to justice. She also decided to resume her education and her dedication and sincerity got her multiple promotions at her work. She started to be known for the work she did to empower oppressed women and give them a new lease of life and also received multiple awards and recognitions from the local government. **A lot of people around her expected her to find a life partner of her own choosing and settle down with him, but, she had already built such a strong identity for herself through her work, that she decided to commit to her work as her life partner instead of finding one in a human being.**

Points for Discussion:

- Why was Radha married away at such a young age?
- Did Radha's mother leave her side after she got married?
- If the mother was actually so concerned, then why did she marry her off in the first place?
- What kind of people did Radha's in-laws turn out to be?
- The in-laws felt no affection towards Radha, yet, why did they keep coming back to get her to their house?
- What kind of help did Radha find at the Mahila Manch?
- What would have happened if Radha's mother had not been supportive of her?
- Why are we pressurized to get married?
- Radha eventually went on to be committed to work and not a romantic partner. What are your thoughts on this?

SKILLS AND SKIN

- Ms. KAVITA DHAVLESHA

Neelam and Shyama were two sisters. Neelam was the older one, she was fair-skinned, beautiful and everyone's favorite, and Shyama the younger sister, had sharp and beautiful features too, but was dark-skinned. Sadly, neither among family nor friends was Shyama popular. Everyone loved the fair-skinned Neelam more. Whether someone wanted to take the children out for something or bring gifts back for them, Neelam was the chosen one. No one really liked seeing Shyama's face and she was usually asked to stay in her room. In fact, Shyama was considered so ugly that she wouldn't be allowed to join any family member to go out of the house, lest the people around mock the family for birthing such an ugly-looking child. Everyone who visited home remembered to get a gift for Neelam and even if Shyama stood right there, people would always look past her. Their grandparents had a special dislike for Shyama. The grandmother was a follower of Goddess Durga but despised the excessively dark-skinned grandchild that looked like Kali, one of the many avatars of Durga. Their grandfather always said that he had only one granddaughter, Neelam.

Back then, both sisters were little girls and they barely understood how social standards of beauty were playing up in their family's treatment towards them. Neelam, like any other child, would adore her sister, but she had started to understand how people disliked Shyama and it was in her best interest to stay away from Shyama too, in order to continue to be everyone's favorite.

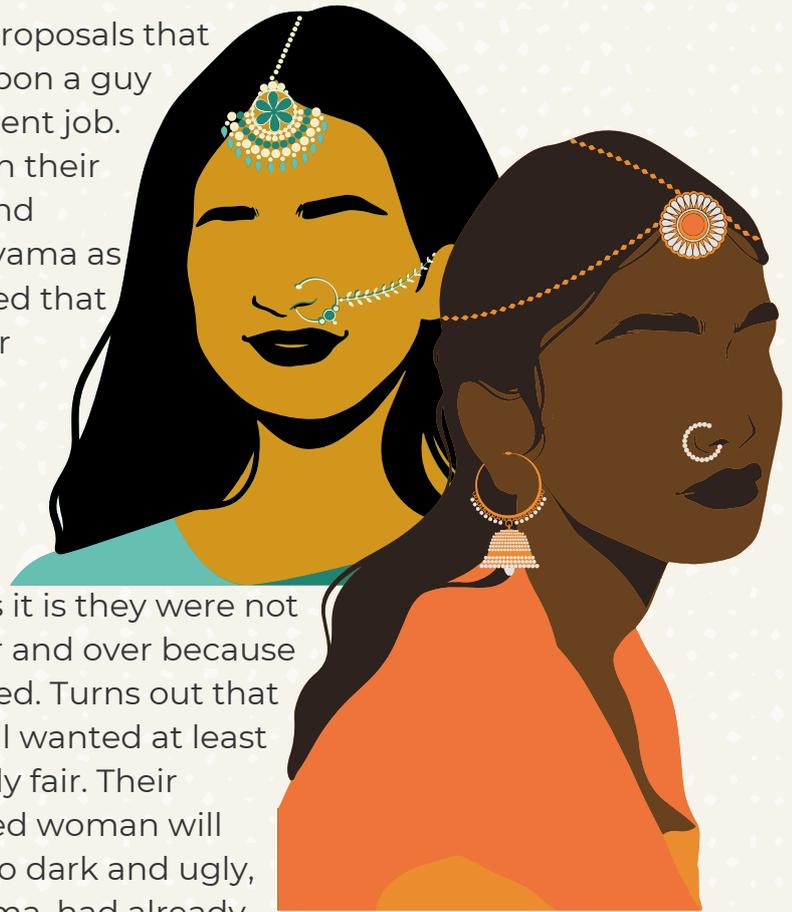
Like at home, in her school too Shyama was looked down upon. Neelam was only a year older than her, therefore she was her senior in school. Anytime any teacher or staff or any student learned that Neelam and Shyama were sisters, they would exclaim in disbelief to the latter that "Oh! YOU are Neelam's sister?!"

In class, Neelam was always found in the first row, year after year, and Shyama, despite being a bright student was made to sit in the last row of her class. Neelam was often forced to participate in the school's extra-curricular activities, even though she might not be too keen on it and Shyama, who loved to sing and dance and act, was never selected to perform. Unlike Neelam, no one would sit with Shyama or have a meal during recess with her. Eventually, Shyama started keeping a meek personality at school. She often wondered why people always behaved differently with her and being unable to find concrete answers, Shyama started believing that she might not be good enough.

Both girls grew up with a good education, but prejudices for and against them continued to increase. They were now of marriageable age and the family found it

difficult to choose from the numerous proposals that came for Neelam. Finally, they zeroed upon a guy from a rich family and a stable government job. Originally, they had intended to get both their daughters married off together in a grand ceremony, but no one really wanted Shyama as their wife or their daughter-in-law. Scared that they would lose out on a good match for Neelam if they kept them waiting, they married her off at the earliest most auspicious date they were suggested.

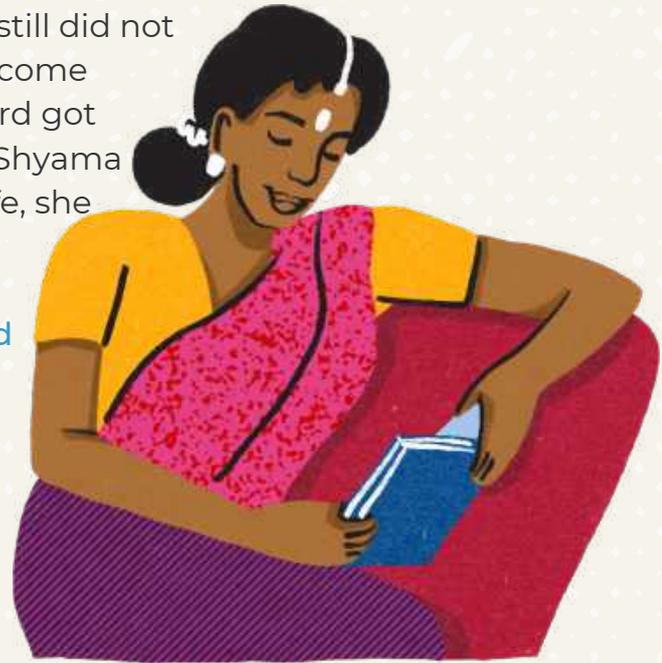
A few more years went by as the family kept looking for a groom for Shyama. As it is they were not very fond of her, but being rejected over and over because of her got the family even more frustrated. Turns out that no matter how the groom looks, they all wanted at least a wheatish-skinned girl, if not completely fair. Their reason – “A good looking and fair-skinned woman will bear good looking children. Shyama is so dark and ugly, her children will look just as ugly!” Shyama, had already accepted that she was ugly and undeserving of love and anything good in life.



Shyama had always sought solace in her school and college library. Being rejected by family, friends, and even strangers, because of the colour of her skin, she had created her own little family in the world of books. One day, as Shyama was playing with her second-hand smartphone in her room, she came across a pop-up that said that a particular TV show was running an online challenge, where anyone who answered correctly within 5 seconds of the question showing on the screen, would win Rs.15,000. It took Shyama a minute to realize that all through her school and college days, she wasn't allowed to participate in extra-curricular events because of the colour of her skin, but this was an online event and no one would know how she looked like. Finally, she went ahead and clicked on the question, she knew the answer and went on to win Rs.15,000! She shared her happiness with her family, who was dumbstruck because they had never expected anything positive from Shyama. Winning the contest, however, brought a big change in her. She felt a new wave of confidence in herself. The same girl who spent a lot of time cursing herself and crying alone in her room had finally felt she was worth something. For the first time in all these years, Shyama felt love for herself.

With the Rs.15000 that she had won, Shyama went ahead and bought a brand new smartphone for her use and gave her mother the rest of the money. Even then, her mother taunted her back. But, this time, her mother's words did not affect her because now she wanted to make something out of her life. Shyama was really

amazed by the concept of working and earning online, where she could be known for her work and not her looks. Shyama would like to read a lot, especially academic readings, so she started looking for online teaching opportunities. She cleared her interview in one such place, who took her on a trial basis for 3 months, after which she was to get a better salary. Shyama was to teach a group of school-going children a variety of subjects, which she was good at. She impressed her employers within the first month itself, after which her job was confirmed and she was given the promised salary that was to come after three months! Shyama had never been as happy and confident as this. Her entire salary would get deposited in her bank account, from which, she would withdraw a small amount and give it to her mother as her contribution for running the house. Her parents still did not feel much affection for her, but on seeing her become independent, they did feel a little relieved. As word got out, more families in the neighborhood wanted Shyama to tutor their children. Since she had no social life, she could have taken this up, but was scared she would be hurt by their mean comments again. However, **she also understood that if she needed to change how society judged people's worth based on their skin colour then children would be the perfect group to work with and she took this opportunity up.** Now, Shyama would teach children in her online classes in the morning and in-person classes in the evening. Shyama loved spending her time with children and since she had a fun and engaging way of teaching them, the children also loved her back. While her main job was for academic teaching, she would often take time out to teach her children how physical beauty is meaningless and people should be known for their thoughts, actions, and skills. She always encouraged the children to strengthen their skillsets and capacities instead of just obsessing over their looks.



Shyama is currently one of the most well-respected teachers among all the neighbouring villages. The same girl whom no one wanted to see nor be associated with was now very popular and everyone wanted to be her friend...

Points for Discussion:

- What was the difference between Neelam and Shyama?
- Till the point that the two sisters had become of marriageable age, did we get to learn anything additional about them apart from their beauty and looks?
- In real life too do we see people get judged based on their looks over their skills and capacities? Give examples.
- In this story, dark skin has been equated to ugliness and fair-skinned to beauty. Does this actually happen in our society too? What do you feel it should actually be like?
- Generally, in stories highlighting discrimination, the character on the receiving end has to do something extraordinary to show the world that they are deserving of love and respect. In our story, Shyama did nothing like that. Instead, she continued to put her head down and work. Share your thoughts on this decision of hers.
- Apart from the colour of the skin, what are some other ways through which we discriminate? Have you ever propagated such discrimination? How did being the person in power make you feel? How do you think the person on the receiving end felt?
- Is it important to understand how our words and actions impact other people? Why?
- In this story, we saw the elders of the family reject Shyama based on their discriminatory thinking. As the sister, could Neelam have done things differently? If yes, what could she have done?
- Is it important to speak up against prejudiced practices or is it a better idea to be quiet and comply? Share your thoughts as descriptively as possible.

THE BICYCLE

- Ms. KAMINI KUMARI

In a short but dense tree, there lived a bird couple. The husband's name was Sawan and the wife's name was Bahaar. Within a few months of being together, they had four children – the two girls were named Kamla and Vimla and the two boys were named Subhash and Prakash.

Sawan and Bahaar loved their children and always maintained equality in how they encouraged all four of their children to take opportunities and get exposure. In fact, unlike other bird couples in the area, these two were the only parents to get all four of their children admitted to the same

school for their education. Subhash and Prakash were two diligent children. They worked hard in school, then would return home and take care of all the household chores, and also finish their homework on time. Kamla and Vimla, unlike their brothers, were least interested in studying, would love to loiter around, and were always keen on knowing what others around them were up to. Both sisters would often bunk school and follow other birds around, especially the male ones. They were known to tease male birds who flew by the trees around their house.

Sawan and Bahaar were usually away from home. Almost their entire day would be spent collecting worms for their family. They did not want their children to be burdened with taking care of themselves, instead, they wanted them to study and make something out of their lives. Kamla and Vimla would take undue advantage of their parents not being at home. They had seen in the other nests how the women were dominating and the men would have to do as asked by the women. Although their parents would practice equality among the siblings, the two sisters would often be found trying to control their brothers' lives.

One day, when Kamla and Vimla went out with their friends, as always everyone teased them for their parents treating their brothers equally. One of their friends said "Why do you even send your brothers to school? Why do they need to be educated? Ultimately you girls will be earning and feeding the family and your brothers will be married off to another family, so the money you invest in their studies will actually be a waste for you. You need to keep your brothers under stricter control. They are allowed to go to school and everywhere else outside your house! What if someday some girls rape them? All this will bring a bad name to your family and no boy from a decent family will be interested in being your boyfriend either."



Kamla and Vimla were enraged with such a lecture from their friends. They were already irritated with their brothers for outperforming them in school, and now because of them, even their friends were making fun of them... Enraged, Kamla and Vimla went back home and forbade their brothers from going to school and barred them from ever going out of the house without either of the sisters. Prakash and Subhash were quite scared with this sudden show of rage. They were also confused as to why their movements should be restricted because someone else would want to harm them...

Now both Subhash and Prakash were wondering how to keep themselves engaged at home. Apart from sharing cooking responsibilities, they also decided to take care of the family accounts. Prakash wanted to improve his stitching and embroidery skills. He became so good at it that other birds started to offer him money to stitch clothes for them. As Prakash started earning, Kamla and Vimla got even more furious saying "How low do you think our family is that we need our sons to work and earn money to run our house?" With this, Prakash's stitching endeavours were crushed.

Eventually, despite being born to a family where the parents practiced gender equality, Kamla and Vimla learned from what they saw in society and promoted oppressive matriarchal control on their brothers, barring them from getting an education and even earning a living.

One day Sawan and Bahaar found an old fridge for their nest. They worked hard to catch more worms than normal, to keep in their fridge so that they get to spend more time with their children. This is when they saw that their home was not running based on the values that they had been teaching their children. They saw their sons living in fear, who, although would love going to school had now suddenly dropped out. Kamla and Vimla too seemed very different, much more short-tempered than before. This is when Sawan and Bahaar asked their sons what had been happening. Subhash and Prakash shared everything about how their sisters had started controlling what they did and where they went, barred their schooling, and also did not allow them to leave the house without a female company. Both Sawan and Bahaar were upset with this update. They had thought they had raised their children well, different from how the others around them had. However, Sawan and Bahaar decided to speak with Kamla and Vimla too, to understand their side of the story. They learned how both girls were subjected to ridicule and hurtful comments by their friends for treating their brothers as equals. So, in order to fit in, both sisters began acting like their other friends and tried to control their brothers' lives.

Sawan and Bahaar decided to help their children understand a lesson, but not through their words. Instead, they asked them to get a cycle from the neighbour's nest. Then, they asked Kamla and Vimla to ride the cycle forward, one at a time. After

both girls followed, the parents removed the back tyre and asked them to do the same again. Both Kamla and Vimla failed to do this task. That is when Sawan and Bahaar explained to their daughters that **this bicycle is representative of the society and its two tyres are girls and boys. Just like this cycle is considered damaged and can't do its job without either tyres, our society will be dysfunctional too if either of the sexes is left behind.** Therefore, functionally too, girls and boys are of equal significance.

Then Sawan and Bahaar asked their sons to sit on the bicycle one at a time and pull it forward without paddling it. Neither brother could do as asked. The parents took this chance to explain that **“if individuals have dreams and aspirations, they cannot achieve them without struggling and putting efforts into doing it.** You will need to fight for your dreams and not give in to the first sight of someone trying to control you. Just because some people believe that boys are only capable of doing household chores and caring for their families, you believed it too and did not fight for your right. It is important to fight for your beliefs. Sometimes you will succeed and sometimes you won't, but either way, should we ever stop trying?”



All four children understood what their parents were trying to say. Kamla and Vimla understood that it was wrong to restrict their brothers based on their gender, and Subhash and Prakash realized that they could have at least tried to negotiate for a better situation without just giving in. All four siblings hugged each other and decided to only work as a team going forward, supporting and encouraging each other through every step of life.

Points for Discussion:

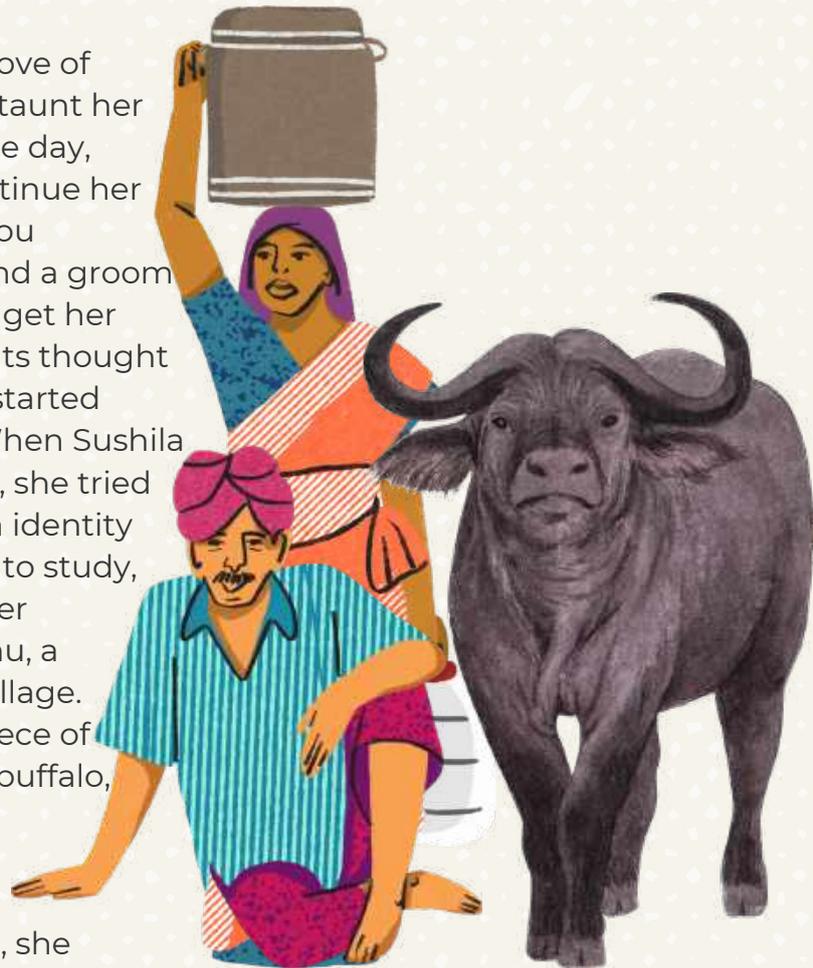
- On what values would Sawan and Bahaar run their house?
- What reason did Kamla and Vimla's friend give for discontinuing their brothers from going to school?
- If other girls would want to tease Subhash and Prakash on the way to school, why should the latter be stopped from getting an education?
- Why did Kamla and Vimla stop Prakash from stitching clothes?
- Do you think Kamla and Vimla's controlling behaviour towards their brothers was normal? Why or why not?
- Have you seen anyone in your life being treated like how Subhash and Prakash were? Elaborate with details.
- In this story, if Kamla and Vimla were at the receiving end, instead of Subhash and Prakash, would the plot have seemed as odd as it does now?
- Sawan and Bahaar had promoted values of equality in their family, yet their daughters got influenced by the beliefs of their society. How easy or difficult do you think it is for individuals to protect their progressive minds in a regressive society?
- What did you learn from the cycle that Sawan and Bahaar brought to teach their children a lesson?
- Sometimes there are obstructions in the path of fulfilling our aspirations that no matter what we do, we cannot conquer. Sometimes it is important to fight for your dreams and at other times, it is important to realize your capacities and limitations and give up at the right time. What are your thoughts on these sentences?

THE VALUE OF EDUCATION

- Mr. HEMANT SHARMA

Sushila is a 17-year-old girl and the oldest among the three sisters. She studies in class 12, helps her mother at her work, manages the household chores, and also tutors her younger sisters. Her parents are daily wage labours, who brought just enough food on the table, if not extra.

Her neighbours in the village did not approve of Sushila's education and would constantly taunt her parents for sending her to high school. One day, someone convinced her parents to discontinue her education, saying, "How much more will you educate your daughter? It is not easy to find a groom for an over-educated girl. It is better if you get her married off as soon as possible." Her parents thought that this person's words made sense and started looking for a suitable groom for Sushila. When Sushila learned of this new development at home, she tried to argue that she wanted to build her own identity in their community and therefore wanted to study, but her parents were determined to get her married. Soon, she was married off to Ramu, a 35-year-old man from the neighbouring village. Ramu was a farm labourer, with a small piece of land of his own, and their family-owned a buffalo, whose milk Ramu's mother used to sell in order to earn a living for them.



Once Sushila got settled in her new house, she spoke to her mother-in-law about continuing her education while also doing all the household chores. As a response, Sushila's mother-in-law didn't just scream and shout at her, but also put her in charge of all the household chores, along with milking the buffalo and selling its milk. Being a diligent girl, Sushila took on all responsibilities well and would spend money given to run the family, efficiently, so that she could save some money in her bank account, to use in case of distress.

One year, they lost all their crop when a drought hit the region. Having run out of their family savings, they were completely out of money. As the last resort, Ramu and his mother decided to sell their buffalo to get some money to run their family. Sushila heard this conversation and said, "We do not need to sell our buffalo. In the last couple of years since I have been selling buffalo milk, I have been saving some money in my bank account to be used for a time like this."

Ramu, who had no idea about banking and was illiterate himself, suddenly realized the importance of education in making a person aware and also prepared for practical situations that might come up in one's life. After taking the necessary help from Sushila, he decided to continue her education and also ended up encouraging more of their friends to educate the women in their house. Once Sushila graduated college, she was appointed as a teacher in the local school and their family income now came from three sources – Ramu's farming, their buffalo, and Sushila's teaching job, which brought better times for their family. They were able to save better and always had enough to eat and spend.

Points for Discussion:

- What kind of a family did Sushila belong to?
- Why did her parents stop her education all of a sudden?
- After their wedding when Sushila tried to discuss resuming her education with her mother-in-law, how did she react?
- What kind of distress does her family get into?
- What solution did Sushila give?
- What is the similarity between education and farming? *(Help the group understand through this question that just how you do not reap a crop the exact next day of sowing seeds, similarly you do not get educated or reap the fruits of education the very next day of going to school. You get to see the positive impact of it in the decision your make and the manner in which you respond to various situations in your life).*
- Everyone in Sushila's life was against her getting educated, but it was her education that actually helped her and her family out in their moment of distress. Have you experienced something similar in your life? Elaborate with details.

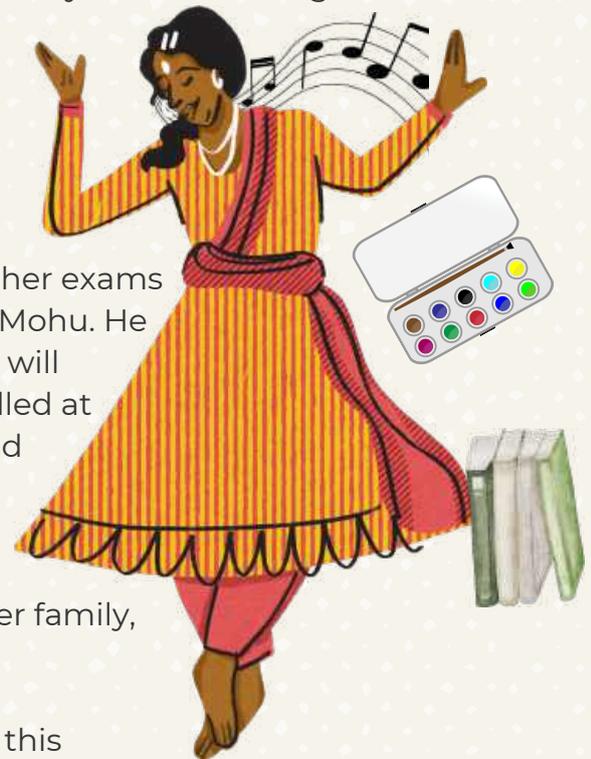
WHAT SHOULD MAHI DO?

- Ms. NEELAM GANDHI

Little Mahi was born in a village where the birth of a girl child is considered inauspicious. Her mother had borne her for nine months in her womb and was happy that the baby, irrespective of its gender, was a healthy one. Unfortunately, Mahi's grandmother was furious and within minutes of her birth, she had humiliated Mahi's mother for birthing yet another girl child!

While Mahi was growing up, she was constantly made to feel unwanted. There was always something that someone said at home that made her feel like a burden. One day Mahi was having lunch with her brother and her grandmother exclaimed "My god! how much more are you going to eat!! leave some for your brother at least, or are you going to eat up everyone's share??" Mahi left her food midway and locked herself in her room. As her eyes welled up, she began thinking if she was actually so undeserving of affection or if life on earth was just as hard for everyone...

Mahi was brilliant in academics. She would score good marks in class and also participate in extra-curricular activities like singing, dancing, and painting in school. One day, Mahi's father got a call from her teacher, who shared "Your daughter has performed outstandingly in her exams this year; unfortunately, we cannot say the same about Mohu. He is weak academically and also seems disinterested. You will need to pay more attention to him." Their father had yelled at Mohu after this call, who went straight to his mother and grandmother and started screaming and crying about how he was humiliated by his teacher because Mahi keeps studying all the time. He also went ahead and asked, "when this girl is to be married off into some other family, why does she need to be sent to high school?"



The grandmother, who had always despised Mahi, took this opportunity to clip Mahi's wings and said "Absolutely correct! Mahi has already graduated standard eight. I think she has had enough schooling; we should start looking for a groom for her now so that she can be married off into a good family. She spends her entire day with books, this is not how girls are raised. We need to get her involved in taking care of the household so that she is ready for her marriage, otherwise, her in-laws will ruin our name in the community for not raising our daughter like how she should have been." Mahi wasn't in the room but could hear this entire conversation. She was getting angry with the thought that she scores high marks because she also studies hard. If Mohu would have put in the same efforts, he would have done well too. Anyway, the family had decided to discontinue Mahi's education and get her involved with managing and doing the household chores. She was now allowed to get out of the house only to buy vegetables.

In the shop that Mahi used to buy vegetables from, she had noticed a young man. He was probably a helper there, and his name was Ram. Although they did not really speak, Mahi felt a connection with him and she had no explanation why. As time went by, they both felt comfortable in each other's presence and eventually started speaking. One day, Ram asked, "Why do you always look so sad?" Mahi wasn't used to being noticed and got flustered with this question. She left without answering but felt happy that there was someone who was concerned about her. After that, they started meeting more often and for longer. If Mahi left her home for 30 mins, she would finish off her errands within 15 mins and spend the rest of the time with Ram. They started spending time under a tree next to the shop, sharing everything with each other. These 15 mins that Mahi spent with Ram became the source of her happiness for her to survive the rest of the time till they meet again. Also, the only time she cared about how she looked was when she had to step out of the house to buy vegetables.

Mahi's grandmother was the first person to observe this change in her demeanour. She often thought "How come Mahi stays so happy these days? What must she be up to?" One day, she decided to go to Mahi's parents, to share her concerns. She said "You need to tighten the noose as your young girl is getting out of our hands. It is my duty to warn you about this change in her, which I am doing, so you better start looking for a good match for her, as she is seventeen already. Don't cry to me later that your daughter has tainted your name in the community." Mahi's father reflected upon his mother's words and agreed that her concerns were genuine.

While all of this was happening at home, unaware, Mahi spoke to Ram for the first time about spending the rest of their lives together. Ram had had similar thoughts too. So, Mahi returned home happy, only to see a prospective groom's family sitting in the living room. It seemed like the families had already fixed the match without even speaking to her once. That very day, Mahi was forced to exchange an engagement ring with a man who was about 10 years older than her.

Now that Mahi was engaged to be married, she wasn't allowed out of the house. Mahi was barely 17 years and 5 months old, not yet a legal adult. She was distraught and out of all ideas to win her life back from this situation. She was desperately thinking of ways to reach out to Ram and let him know about everything. On the other hand, Ram was heartbroken with the assumption that Mahi had ditched him after he shared his intentions to marry her.

One day, by chance, when Ram was cycling through the lane that Mahi lives in, she happened to be sitting by the window. That was the first time they spoke after over a month and Mahi quickly shared her situation. Ram replied, "Let's elope!"

Mahi still had four months till she turned 18 years of age, and be legally ready for marriage. She had two options- either she gives up on all her aspirations and marries a man who is ten years older than her or else she chooses Ram and the promising life that can be hers with him as a life partner. So what should Mahi do?

Points for Discussion:

- What kind of relationship did Mahi share with her family?
- Why did Mahi's grandmother dislike her so much?
- When Mahi was doing well in academics, why was her schooling discontinued? What do we learn about her family's thought process since this incident?
- Mahi wasn't even consulted as her wedding got fixed. What are your thoughts about this?
- Despite being a woman herself, Mahi's grandmother's sole job in the story seems to be to clip her wings. Have you seen similar people around you, do share examples.
- What are your thoughts on Mahi and Ram's relationship?
- We stopped the story at the exact point where Mahi needs to make a decision. What would you decide for Mahi and why?
- Mahi was 17 years and 5 months old, a minor. Legally a girl is considered an adult who can make her own decisions at the age of 18 years. Just because of the 7-month gap in becoming an adult, does Mahi's right and capacity to decide for herself become meaningless.
- Does age decide a person's maturity?

WHO IS SMALL AND WHO IS BIG?

- Ms. ANITA SEN

Once upon a time, there lived a young girl named Pallavi, along with two of her brothers. Her older brother used to work multiple jobs as labour and her younger brother would study. Pallavi herself used to do odd jobs to add to the family's income. The three children were orphans.

One day, a boy named Rajesh had come to live in the neighbouring village. He was an orphan too but was very rich, but lived a humble life.

Coincidentally, both Rajesh and Pallavi used to go vegetable shopping at the local Friday market. That is how they first saw each other. They started noticing one another week after week and finally spoke to each other one day. Soon, it became a regular thing. Every Friday, both would meet at the market and spend some time talking to each other. They really enjoyed each other's company and eventually, they fell in love. Considering that both did not have families to convince, they got married soon after. After their marriage, Rajesh had arranged for Pallavi's brothers to stay with them as well. He got Pallavi's elder brother a job at a local factory and got the younger brother enrolled in a better school in the neighbourhood. With a series of such positive events happening in their lives, the three siblings started staying happier and felt hopeful about their future...

One other thing that Pallavi realized was that being in love with someone we meet only for a couple of hours in a day or week is very different from being married to them and living in the same house, spending the maximum amount of time together. After her marriage, she saw a new side to Rajesh's personality. He used to spend most of his day with his friends, drinking and enjoying life instead of working even on regular weekdays. Often Rajesh would fall sick owing to his alcoholism.

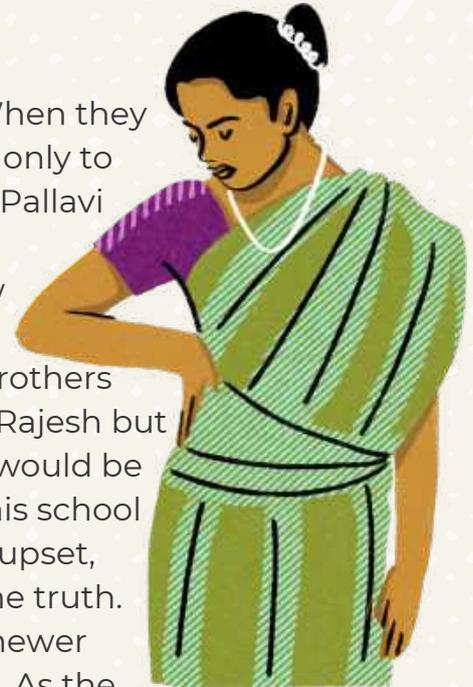
After letting things be as they are for a few days, finally, Pallavi decided to confront Rajesh, "You have been drinking a lot lately. We are also forced to stay up till late, waiting to have dinner with you. Also, your health, in general, seems to be declining. You keep sick all the time."



Rajesh was enraged with this. He shouted back saying, “How dare you to question me? You and your brothers had been living in poverty. Now you have a big bungalow to stay in and your brothers are well taken care of, yet you come and question me!”

Pallavi was hurt by this reaction. In her village, she had heard multiple stories of rich men marrying poor women so that the latter could serve the family and not question much, but never in her wildest dreams had she imagined Rajesh speaking to her in this manner. She also felt that her poverty never allowed her to continue with her education and because of that, her identity remains at being someone’s wife alone, whose opinions do not matter.

Both her brothers had heard Rajesh yell at Pallavi. When they saw him leave the house again, they went to Pallavi, only to find her crying in her room. The older brother asked Pallavi as to what had happened. Initially, Pallavi refused to answer. The brother said, “We are all grown-ups now and can share with each other about what is bothering us.” After Pallavi finally opened up, both brothers shared how they had tried having a discussion with Rajesh but were humiliated and threatened that the older one would be thrown out from his job and the younger one from his school if they tried to control his life. All three siblings were upset, but they also knew that what Rajesh had said was the truth. Having Rajesh in their lives actually had brought in newer possibilities. The three of them decided to stay quiet. As the days went by Rajesh’s alcoholism got worse and he used to be angered by the smallest things that Pallavi said.



Owing to alcoholism, Rajesh's health was deteriorating rapidly. The doctor that Rajesh would often visit had given him a serious warning about the failure of his kidneys and his liver. Rajesh quickly retorted, “I have enough money to nurse myself back to health. I don’t need to hold back.” The doctor was quick to remind “Money can’t buy you everything. Definitely not health. You have no way out of this, except by stopping your intake of alcohol completely.”

Rajesh, as expected, had ignored all advice and was eventually hospitalized. Pallavi’s elder brother had taken up the responsibility to do all the running around for Rajesh’s medical needs. A lot of money was spent on Rajesh’s medication, his own as well as that of Pallavi and her brother’s savings. However, as predicted by his doctor, no amount of money was able to help Rajesh recover. He reached a point where walking or even sitting without support was not possible. On realizing his depleting finances, Rajesh reached out to his friends on whom he had spent lots of money on

food, alcohol, and travel. Unfortunately, none of his friends, who knew about his situation received his calls or called back and the ones who did receive never got back with any real help.

One day, when Rajesh was feeling better, he saw Pallavi's brother walk in with some fruits and immediately lost his cool, "I've taken such good care of you all this while and you are back with just a handful of fruits for me?!" Pallavi stepped in and shared how all of Rajesh's money had exhausted over two weeks back and since then, his medication is being taken care of by all the savings that Pallavi and her brothers had. This piece of information hit Rajesh hard. He said "I understand about your brother, but how do you have any savings? You don't earn money." Pallavi shared "**I used to save a little bit of money from what you used to give me to run the expenses of the household. I thought it would be a good idea to have some savings of my own, to contribute in case of an emergency.**" I would also make my elder brother deposit his entire salary in the bank because you would take care of all our needs, so he didn't need to spend his own." Learning all of this and having the kind of experience he did with his friends, who never had his back, Rajesh quietly went back to his room. He felt really small about how it was his decision to bring Pallavi's brothers to stay with him and get them better opportunities, but he kept rubbing his offer in their faces to belittle them again and again. Even then, they took care of him in his toughest times. He did not know if his apologies would make a difference, but he promised himself to change his ways and be more loving and available to his family, more importantly, he will never again think of them as less deserving than him.

Points for Discussion:

- What kind of a family did Pallavi and her brothers belong to?
- What kind of a family did Rajesh belong to?
- Where did Rajesh and Pallavi first meet?
- Why did the discord increase between the couple after their marriage?
- Is being in love and being married the same thing?
- When an unmarried couple gets married, what are some of the new information they begin to get about themselves? Why don't they learn these things about each other during their courtship?
- Why would Rajesh belittle Pallavi and her brothers?
- What did Pallavi and her brothers do to help Rajesh realize that he was a much smaller person than he thought he was?
- Does financial richness ensure a richness of heart? Why or why not?
- Is financial stability important for individuals? Why or why not?

WHY BE SELF-DEPENDENT?

- Mr. MUNAWWAR ABDULLA

Hi! I am Suhana. My mother was always mature, even in her childhood. She was efficient at her domestic chores and spent the rest of her time practicing her stitching and embroidery skills. My maternal grandparents were a regular middle-class family who had enough to eat and drink. My mother wasn't very keen on her education. Although my grandfather had enrolled her in a local school, she dropped out of it within a year. One day, when my mother was returning home from a relative's house, she found a torn and tattered teddy bear in the garbage dump. My mother felt drawn towards it. She felt a mix of love and sympathy for the poor little teddy bear. She picked it up and brought it home.



She returned home and showed her new toy to her mother, who merely said "OK!" and got back to her work. My mother then stitched the teddy up and gave it a shower and by the end of the day, it started looking like a brand-new teddy bear! My mother loved her new toy and started spending all the time with the teddy. She decided to name it Lucky because she felt both were lucky to have found each other.

One day my mother saw a middle-aged couple at home, who had come from a far-off village. She heard one of them say, "My daughter is married off in a good family and it feels like a burden has been eased. Now the last wish left is to find a beautiful and dutiful wife for our son." My grandfather seemed delighted at the latter half of the sentence. He knew that this family was financially better off than them. They had a thriving business that always had customers walking in and out of the store.

My mother shares that since that day, she started being fed whatever she loved to eat, was given clothes that she liked to wear and newer clothes got stitched for her. She saw her house being redecorated, guests started pouring in and the entire surrounding got a festive look. She realized that a wedding was to happen and as she got dressed up, she realized it was her wedding! All her excitement had drained out. She had hidden her Lucky behind her embroidered dupatta. She was scared that like with her family and her house, her Lucky will also be left behind in this wedding... and unfortunately, this is exactly what happened...

Suddenly, everything was new for her. She was in a new house, with a new family, and with new responsibilities. My mother soon got busy with her new life. Apart from taking up responsibilities, she also had the pressure to forget her old life and quickly get acquainted with the new one. Despite being a young girl herself, my mother had decided to devote her entire life to the wellbeing of her new family.

At the age of fourteen, my mother got pregnant with her first child. But, owing to malnutrition, she had a miscarriage. My mother wasn't physically fit enough to bear a child, anyway, after her first miscarriage, she often remained unwell. She birthed me at the age of 16 years.

The entire journey of her second pregnancy, giving birth, and then raising me was incredibly difficult. Anyway, she had vowed to not lose me like she had lost Lucky and her first child. My mother was determined to raise me as a good human being, to begin with. She had stitched a brand-new teddy bear for me, just like her Lucky. Now, I had my own Lucky and I was my mother's Lucky. Our trio was inseparable and very happy in each other's company.

My mother had never shared this with me, but her married life was not smooth sailing. I had often seen how my father and the rest of my family would harass my mother and subject her to humiliating and abusive language. This also was a reason why our own little world just comprised the three of us and we never felt the need to allow anyone else in.

One day, my mother packed up her belongings and my clothes and we went to my maternal grandparents' house. She shared everything with her parents, who, after listening to her, said, "Girls always have to adjust in their in-law's house. Just because your in-laws have scolded you a bit, you cannot leave everything behind and come back." My grandfather was OK with her staying there for a few days, but not as a permanent solution. He wanted her to go back to her in-laws. This lack of support from her own parents had hurt my mother's feelings. She agreed to stay for a few days and during that time, tried looking for a job for herself. Unfortunately, owing to a lack of education, she found no decent job anywhere. She went to all kinds of places and was open to any kind of job available, but to no avail. She had also lost touch with all her friends, so never got their support either. Finally, admitting defeat, she was forced to go back to her in-law's house, back to her life of oppression and humiliation.



Points for Discussion:

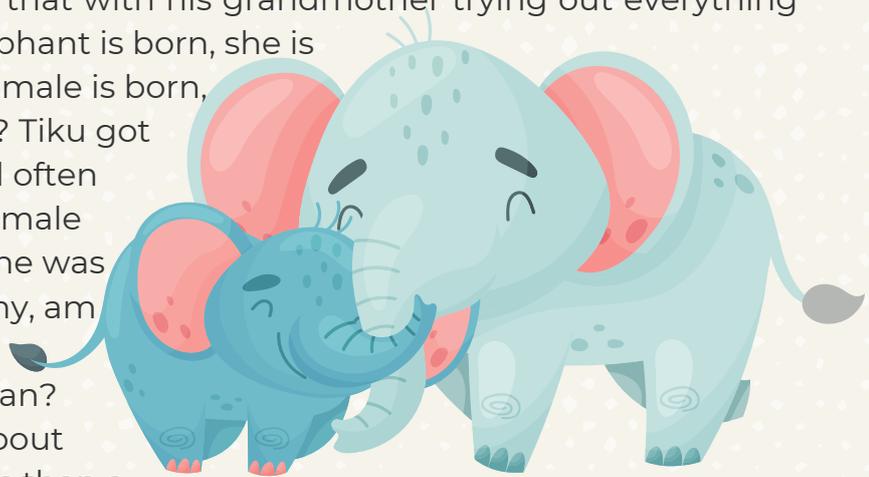
- How was her mother as a child? Why was she not educated?
- What did she see on her way back from her relative's place? What did she do with it?
- On what basis did Suhana's maternal grandfather decide to get her married to the visitor's son? What are your thoughts on people getting married off on this basis?
- Why was Suhana's mother upset on the day of her wedding?
- Why did Suhana's mother have her first miscarriage? How did that affect her body?
- Why did Suhana's mother leave her in-law's house? What was Suhana's grandfather's reaction to this?
- If a married woman decides to leave her in-laws' house owing to harassment, what do you think her parents should react like?
- Why didn't Suhana's mother not get a job despite trying so hard?
- Had Suhana's mother been educated, would it have been comparatively easier for her to get a job?
- It is absolutely right for an individual to want to change their present situation to something better. However, what skills do you think one needs to have in order to be able to do this?
- Had Suhana's mother possessed even two of the skills listed above, how different do you think the conclusion of the story would have been?

YOU ARE NOT MY SON, BUT MY DAUGHTER!

- Mr. DEEPAK KUMAR SHARMA

Once upon a time, there lived a family of elephants in a jungle, an elephant couple, their mother, and their baby boy. One day, the young couple learned that they are going to be blessed with a new addition to their family. Generally, news like this brings great happiness to a family and the same thing happened here as well, till the grandmother exclaimed her happiness with, "This time, I am sure you will birth a female elephant!" On listening to this, the pregnant elephant's happiness fades away and she wonders what will happen if she births a boy instead...

As the due date comes closer, the grandmother goes from pillar to post, trying to learn of ways that can ensure the birth of a female elephant. On certain days she visits temples in the farthest corners of the jungle and on other days she offers sugarcane at the local mosque, to ensure gods of all religions bless her with a girl child. She often returned home with various leaves and unknown fruits to feed her pregnant daughter-in-law, with the hope that it would ensure the fetus is a girl. While the grandmother was excited about all the different things she was trying out, sure that at least one of them would work, her son and daughter-in-law were miserable. On noticing how sad his parents were, their three-year-old son Tiku asked "Isn't a baby a big enough reason to feel happy and hopeful about, why do you look so sad then?" Tiku's mother shared that with his grandmother trying out everything possible to ensure that a female elephant is born, she is worried about what will happen if a male is born, will the family not love him enough? Tiku got visibly upset on hearing this. He had often heard his grandmother wish for a female child and that made him wonder if he was not good enough. He asked "Mummy, am I not lovable? Can I not do everything that a female elephant can? Why is grandmother so obsessed about getting a female child? Am I any less than a female elephant my age? Are male and female elephants not equal? Why does she have to be so discriminatory! I'll ask this to her directly." Saying this, Tiku stormed out of the room, despite his mother's multiple appeals to stop him from confronting his grandmother.



Although Tiku was in no mood to listen, he understood that he doesn't need to add to his mother's stress and gave up on the idea instead.

However, as days went by, he couldn't help but notice and get bothered by his

grandmother's obsession with a female child, and one day he confronted her – "Granny! Why have you been after my mother's life to give birth to a daughter? **Do you even know that whether the child will be a girl or a boy depends upon the male and not the female? Shouldn't you be getting after my father's life instead? Anyway, more importantly, girls and boys are equals.** Have you seen how worried and stressed my mother looks because of what you have been saying and doing lately?"

Tiku's grandmother smirked at seeing her little grandson get so angry and replied "Oh! So you are here to teach me? Do you know that daughters carry the family name forward? So, if we do not get a daughter, our family line will end." Tiku replied "How does this make sense? If all the elephant families in the world birth daughters and not sons, how will there be any elephant left in this world?" At this point, the grandmother found her little Tiku cute and laughed at him and asked him to go out and play with his friends, but Tiku refused to go, and eventually, she left the room.

Finally, the due date was here! Tiku's mother went into labour and all the adults of the family rushed her to the hospital. While Tiku's mother was still in labour and his grandmother was outside, waiting anxiously, a little birdie stopped by and asked "Hi aunty! Is everything OK? What are you doing in the hospital?"

Tiku's grandmother said "Oh no! Nothing to be worried about. My daughter-in-law is in labour and we are waiting for the good news. But do pray that the baby born is a girl."

"That is wonderful news! Congratulations! By the way, I was hoping to visit you sometime soon."

"Oh, why? Is Tiku being his mischievous self again?"

"No no! In fact, he showed great strength and courage by pulling a buffalo out of a quicksand! The poor buffalo was stuck in it for a while and was ready to give up, but Tiku used his presence of mind to knot his trunk into the buffalo's tail and pulled her out. He in fact motivated the other animals to join in too. He is a really smart and empathetic boy! It was unbelievable what this little boy was able to do."

The entire family had gathered around by then and were filled with wonder and disbelief. They started murmuring things like "how could a child have done this and that too despite being a boy!" "This is incredible, considering that he is just a little boy." "You expect such acts

of bravery from girls, but this boy is exceptional!" Tiku's grandmother asked for Tiku to be brought to her, and then she hugged him tight and said, "today onwards, you are not a son to me, but a daughter..."

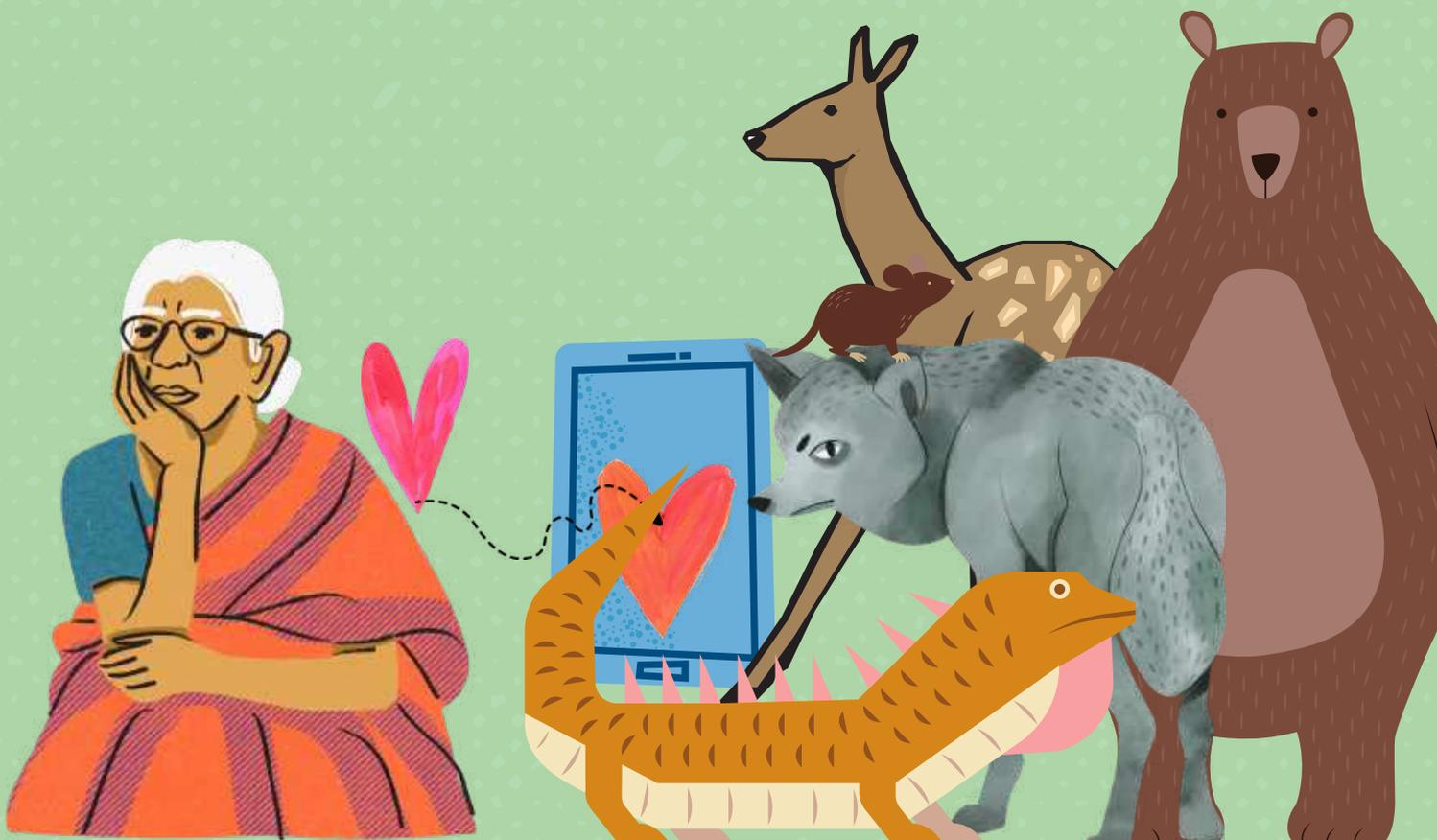


Points for Discussion:

- What kind of a family did Tiku belong to?
- What hopes did the grandmother have for the baby that was to be born?
- Why was the grandmother obsessed about having a girl child?
- How did the grandmother's words make Tiku's mother feel?
- Have you ever heard such things in your house or your community?
- How did the grandmother's words impact Tiku?
- Had Tiku not shown exceptional courage, would he still have received such respect and recognition from his grandmother? Is it necessary for someone to do something exceptional to deserve the other person's respect?
- The story ends with the grandmother saying that Tiku was "not a son, but a daughter" to her. Did she intend to say this as a compliment or was she being demeaning?
- If you think about the above line reflectively, will you consider this as a compliment?
- Have you seen or experienced similar situations in your own house? Elaborate with some examples.
- In our houses and communities, girls are often complimented with "you are my son and not my daughter". After listening to the story and going through the reflective discussion, would you still consider this a compliment? Why or why not?

STORIES FROM JHARKHAND

1. Cyber Love - Ms. Manju Kumari
2. No Little Girl in Chunni's World - Ms. Pooja Kumari
3. The Clever Doe - Ms. Sushma Kumari
4. The Little Mouse - Ms. Jiya Naaz
5. Topsy Turvy - Mr. Pradeep Kumar Kole
6. Wolves and Herd Mentality - Ms. Kiran Kumari
7. The Residents of Chhipkalinga - In honour of Mr. Birendra Kumar, father of Ms. Sudha Kumari

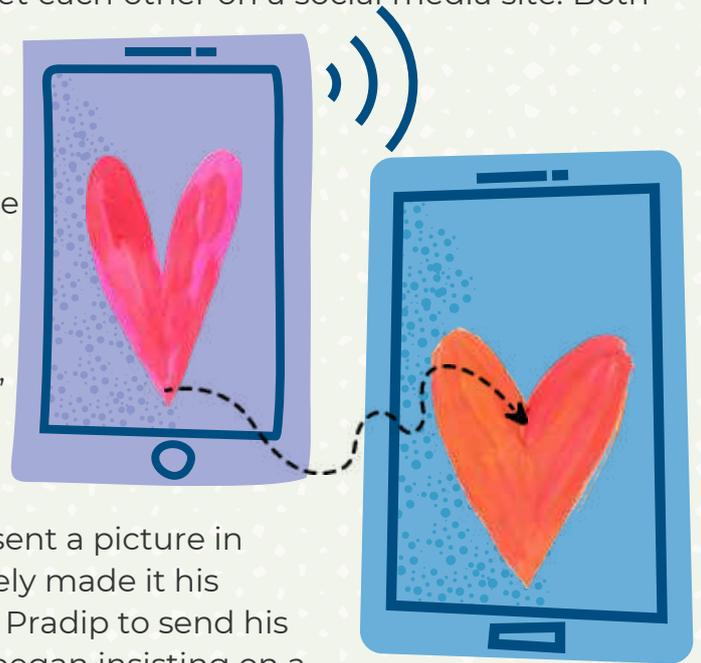


CYBER LOVE

- Ms. MANJU KUMARI

Pradip's father was a farmer and his mother a vegetable seller. Mala's father was a driver and her mother used to run a small eatery.

Both their parents were always busy working hard, to make ends meet and barely got enough time together as a family. Both of them, in their respective homes, would go to school and then for their tuition, and in between they would spend all the time online. Ever since their classes started happening online, both parents worked extra hard to get them their smartphones. Initially, both of them would use the phones for studies but soon realized that their parents are completely illiterate and will not get to know how they use the phone. Both of them used this realization to use their phone for further explorations. On one such day, they met each other on a social media site. Both were strange to each other. They lived in different cities and had no common friends. Yet, they connected on social media and began sharing everything about themselves with each other. Soon Mala and Pradip became good friends. They spent hours speaking to each other. They knew each other's friends, everything about their families, likes, dislikes, and their exact daily routines. As days went by, they fell in love with each other.



One day, Pradip asked Mala to send a picture of herself. Mala saw nothing wrong with it, so sent a picture in which she looked gorgeous! Pradip immediately made it his wallpaper on his smartphone. Mala also asked Pradip to send his photo to her, which he obliged, and then she began insisting on a video call. Pradip would often dodge the request with excuses like – there are other people at home, there is no electricity at home, he is outside and the network is weak and such. Then, one day he asked her to send a nude picture of herself if she really loved him. Mala had a good laugh at it because the ask was so ridiculous, she thought that he was joking.

As days went by, the fights between them had started to increase. Mala often complained that if Pradip really loved her then he would have got on a video call with her at least once and Pradip would respond saying that if she had genuinely loved him then she would have sent him the photo that he had asked for the other day. Their fights went on for the next few days and after getting tired of it, Pradip proposed that if Mala sent a nude picture of hers, then Pradip will come to her city to meet her. Mala loved this idea and got excited about it! However, she also realized that Pradip was a minor, so how would his family allow him to travel to a strange city? Pradip chose to

tellin

reply to this with an image of a train ticket and Mala was thrilled with the sight! She was going to meet the first love of her life! Now, Pradip brought the conversation back to the topic that he was more interested in and said, "I love you truly and therefore have lied to my parents to come and meet you, but you never loved me back as much because you have not yet sent me the one thing, I asked you for."

Mala felt horrible about this accusation. She thought that Pradip had proven his love for her by buying a ticket to visit her and she was hesitating in sending him a simple picture! Anyway, everything that she had, now belongs to him, because she belonged to him. Mala did not spend more time thinking about it and sent Pradip a nude picture of herself. After this, both came even closer to each other, and then they decided that when both meet, they will go to a temple and get married. Mala was thrilled!

Finally, it was the day they were meant to meet. Mala was excited! She had finished all her domestic chores in half the time. She had been to the parlor just a week back and her face was glowing! She dressed up in her favorite clothes, set her hair, put *kajal* on her eyes, and put a tiny *bindi* on her forehead. Today was the day she would submit herself wholly to the love of her life. She was beyond herself with happiness.

Mala's phone rang, and it was Pradip. He asked her to meet him outside a hotel close to her house. Mala reached there the fastest that she could and called Pradip back, who started guiding her to the exact spot where he was. **Mala was so carried away with the thought of finally meeting Pradip, that she did not realize when she went off the main road and into a lonely alley.** Pradip guided her to the door of a specific house over there, where she reached and called for him. However, it seemed like some other man had opened the door saying, "come inside Mala."

Mala walked in and asked "How do you know my name? Where is Pradip?"

"I am Pradip" is what he said with a smile on his face and another person locked the door behind her.

Points for Discussion:

- What occupation did Mala and Pradip's parents have?
- Where did Mala and Pradip meet and how did their relationship evolve?
- Why did Mala readily agree to send a picture of herself to Pradip? *(It is of great importance that you sensitively handle this question by highlighting that Mala was in love with Pradip and sometimes when we are in love, we do things based on blind trust. If you make fun of Mala in this situation, there is a possibility that the adolescents will not discuss with an open mind.)*
- Why do you think Pradip would make excuses every time Mala asked him to come on a video call?
- The story here is left incomplete. How would you conclude this story from the point when the door got shut?
- Do you know of someone who has fallen in love online? How did this experience turn out for them?
- Ensure that you discuss within your groups how young girls are trapped in the promise of love and are then trafficked. In the case of cyber love as also when a couple is together in person, girls often send personal photos and videos of themselves, which are later misused by boyfriends, after a breakup or are used to blackmail them if they refuse to comply with the needs of the boyfriend. It is also of immense significance to share how it is easy for people to assume different identities online, which makes it difficult for someone to understand who the real person on the other end is. Downloading someone else's photos and claiming them to be one's own is among the easiest things to do online.

NO LITTLE GIRL IN CHUNNI'S WORLD

- Ms. POOJA KUMARI

Chunni was a young girl full of life and a lot of courage. She had a young friend named Tunni, who was just as much a coward as Chunni was courageous. Tunni was very scared of the cockroaches and the rats in his house, on the other hand, Chunni loved playing with them.

One day, while Chunni was playing with Tunni and her other friends were playing outside, she heard her mother asking her to come back in. She shouts "coming", says bye to her friends, and rushes home. The first thing she does is lovingly run towards her mother and carefully sets herself on her lap. Chunni's mother was pregnant.

Her grandmother, who walks in the room, towards the mother and daughter, says, "Be careful Chunni, you might end up hurting your little brother". Chunni jumped off her mother's lap and exclaimed, "my brother should not face any troubles!" Chunni walks up to her grandmother and asks her to make her plaits and both begin to sing their favourite song together. After a while, the entire family has their dinner together and goes to their rooms to sleep.

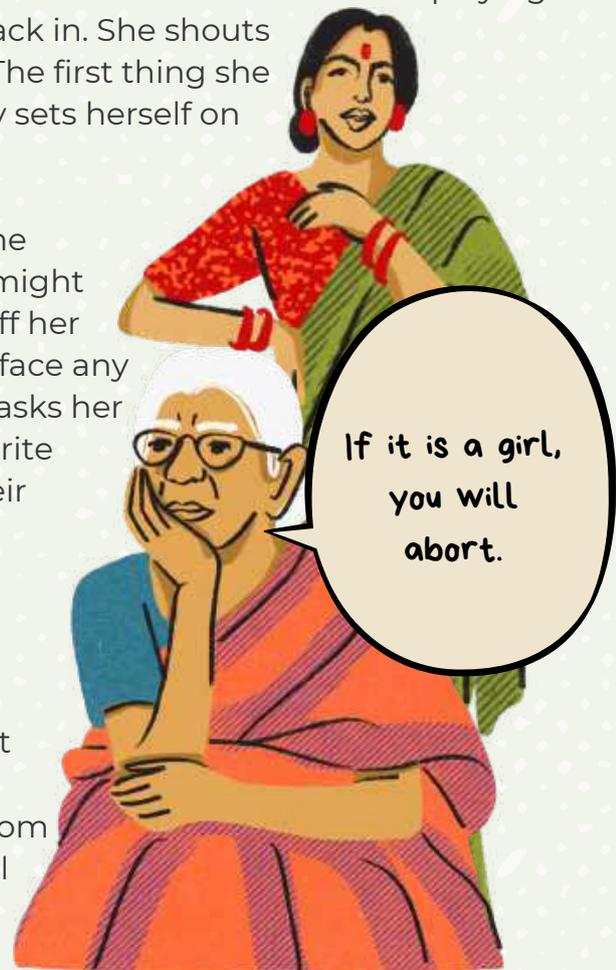
Within just a few minutes of sleeping, Chunni wakes up to the sound of a heated conversation.

Grandmother – "If the foetus is a female, we will abort the child at the hospital itself." Chunni's mother was quietly sulking. After a while, she returned to their room and Chunni asked what was wrong. "Nothing" was all the response she got and was then asked to sleep.

Chunni, while going back to sleep, asked her mother, "Maa, I heard granny ask you to abort the child. What does abort mean?"

The mother asks her to go back to bed but Chunni keeps pestering for an answer. That is when her mother breaks down and shares, "I don't understand why people think girls are not as worthy as boys. Most families want their daughters-in-law to birth sons." Chunni had no clue what her mother meant, so asked her to explain. Her mother replied, "If the doctor examines me tomorrow and shares that I am pregnant with a girl child, then the child will be killed by tomorrow itself."

Chunni innocently asks, "So this means that granny decides who should be born in our house and who should not?"



Mother – “Yes, you can probably say that.”

Chunni immediately said, “Wow! So, this means granny is like God! You have always said that the gods decide what should happen in this world and what not and seem like the grannies of the world decide the same. This means that girls are not weak! My granny is a girl but she gets to decide who should live, which means girls are strong and powerful too! One day, I will also grow up to be a strong girl like my granny.”

This conversation with her mother had impacted Chunni deeply. The next few days she shared with all her friends how grandmothers are as powerful as god because they decide who should live and who should die.

Since the last conversation with her mother, Chunni never had a sibling again. Every time her mother would get pregnant, the grandmother would take her for a sex determination test and every time the foetus would be a girl, and therefore aborted. Although Chunni was excited about having a sibling, she longed for a brother and therefore sided with her grandmother.

As time went by, Chunni got closer to her grandmother and farther away from her mother. She was often troubled with how both her mother and grandmother are women, but one seemed powerless and had no voice, the other was powerful and the decision-maker of the house. Chunni’s mother was able to love each of her foetuses as much, irrespective of knowing its sex, but grandmother was clear about wanting only a grandson for the family. Sons are the ones who carry the family name. They are the ones who marry someone else’s daughter, bring her home and get her pregnant with a child who becomes the next generation for the family...

Many years went by. Chunni was now an old lady and exactly like her grandmother – powerful. Like her grandmother, Chunni too insisted that her daughter-in-law only bear a son, and every time the foetus was a girl, they would get it aborted. Eventually, Chunni did get a grandson, who became the apple of her eye. On her grandson’s 25th birthday, the family decided that they will start looking for a suitable bride for him. The grandson, who loved Chunni just as much, said that he was happy to get married to any girl that his grandmother chose for him.

Chunni was delighted with this response and set to action right away. Days turned to months, months to a year, yet they found no match for the grandson. It was not like they were meeting girls and rejecting them for random reasons, but there actually were no girls left in their community.

Chunni was only 8-years-old when she learned about her grandmother’s ‘powers’. She was so deeply influenced by it that she went on to share this thought with all of her friends, who went on to influence their friends and families, who carried the influence within their extended networks. It only took two generations for all the girls in their society and community to disappear completely, because everyone wanted a grandson...

Points for Discussion:

- What were Chunni's mother and grandmother discussing that night when she suddenly woke up?
- Why was Chunni so impressed with her grandmother's thoughts?
- What was the problem that Chunni faced while looking for a suitable granddaughter-in-law? Why did that problem occur?
- Chunni was influenced by her grandmother, and her friends were influenced by Chunni. What are some other practices that we start picking up from other people that we know?
- Do you think that female foeticide exists in our society?
- Imagine a world without girls. What will it look like?
- Can the family name of any boy be carried forward without a girl helping out with it?
- Imagine a world without boys. What will it look like?
- Based on the last few questions asked here, reflect and share if it is fair to credit either girls or boys alone for carrying the family name or the generation or the world forward.

THE CLEVER DOE

- Ms. SUSHMA KUMARI

In a dense green forest, there once lived an intelligent little doe along with her family. Her family comprised her parents and her three elder sisters. All three sisters were married off much before they turned adults. Since our doe was the youngest, she also had the most amount of freedom. She was a clever young girl and could run as fast as lightning. She loved to study and would go to school on her cycle. She wanted to represent her jungle at an international event.

Every evening, our little doe would go to the playground wearing shorts and short sleeve t-shirts, to play football. Although she loved it, her neighbours often subjected her and her parents to taunts and comments like – “her parents have raised such an uncultured girl”, “she wears shorts only to entice young boys in the jungle”, “she plays a boy’s sport!”, “she is such a characterless girl!” and such.

Although they started out by being supportive of their daughter, the parents had started getting influenced by what other people in their community had to say about her. They started getting bothered by her from playing football, from wearing shorts and t-shirts, and even from cycling to school. However, the neighbours continued pressuring her parents to discontinue her schooling, with words like, “Nature has not created female deer bodies for playing a sport, so how can you send your daughter for it? Instead, train her to be good at domestic chores and become a good housewife. Train her to sweep and mop the house and with other tasks that women need to do at home.”

Time went by and the little doe turned 14-years of age. One fine day, her parents made a firm decision to find a good match for her and get her married off. The doe put all her strength together to oppose her parents’ decision. She shared how she wanted to continue with her education and also about her dream to represent India internationally in a sporting event. She goes ahead and also shares that if and when she gets married in the future, she will do so with a partner of her choice.

Her parents are enraged with this idea and refuse to support her in this. The next day, the doe visits her school and shares her ordeal with her teachers. She requests them to speak to her parents and support her in her fight for her education and her intentions to play football. Her teachers were part of the same community as the doe and they knew this would be a futile effort, so they simply replied with “this is how things function in our forest” and refused to speak with her parents.

The doe was disappointed to find herself alone in her struggles, with not a single deer to lean on for support, and that is when she was reminded of a story she had read in school. The story talks about a rope being way more fragile than a cemented wall yet

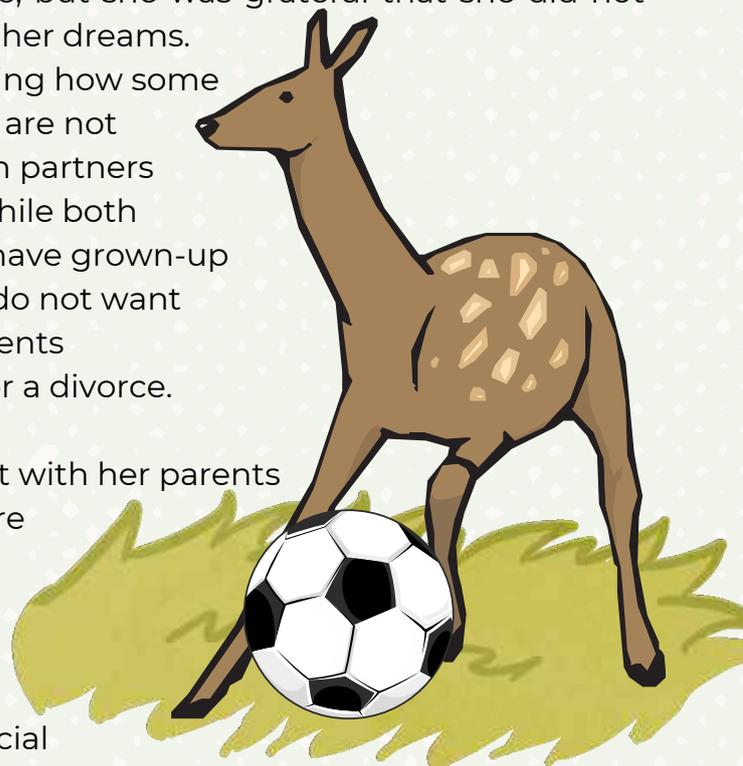
with time, as the rope is used to pull buckets of water out of a well, the cemented wall around it starts to show a dent. Inspired by this, the doe came up with her plan.

She also realized that her parents had too many people telling them what to do and how to think and what the doe's actions made them feel, but she herself had never shared much about her life or her aspirations with her parents. So now, instead of fighting her parents and opposing their views, she started sharing with them how her day went by. She hoped that eventually, she would be able to win her parents' trust that she is still the same young girl that her father used to love and adore. The results started showing in a month! With a reduced number of quarrels at home and a calmer exchange of how each other's day went like and also the doe's interest in her parents' life improved their relationship. This minor change for the better got the doe even more determined to continue to work on her scheme. As they started spending more time talking, they started to understand and know each other better. The doe took the chance to share beyond her daily routine and discuss her goals, ambitions, and dreams with her parents, who had by now started realizing how full of potential their daughter was, and there is nothing wrong with what she was trying to do.

With a firmer trust built between her parents and her, the doe started sharing incidents happening in her friend's place. She shared how some of her friends would lie at home to come for their football practice, but she was grateful that she did not have to because her parents are supportive of her dreams.

Within a few days of this, she also started sharing how some of her friends who got married at a young age are not happy in their marriages. She shared how both partners were forced to get married by their parents, while both were very young and now that both partners have grown-up and started to have a mind of their own, they do not want to stay with each other anymore and their parents are not supporting them with their decision for a divorce.

The doe went on to build a relationship of trust with her parents and with a lot of love and care was able to share her fears against child marriage and her inability to accomplish her dreams. Although this entire process took about 7-8 months, her parents were finally able to understand her. They decided that they will not bend to the social pressures and push their daughter into a world of sadness and broken dreams.



Points for Discussion:

- What kind of a family did the doe belong to?
- What was the doe's dream?
- What did the people from the community have to say about the doe's interest in playing?
- At what point did her parents stop supporting the doe and why?
- What was the doe's first reaction to her parents forcing her to get married?
- What idea did the doe come up with, to deal with her parents?
- Often, we see young girls getting into fights and arguments with their families when it comes to education or marriage. Alike the doe in our story, what are some steps that young girls can take to carefully win their parents over to their side of the argument.

THE LITTLE MOUSE

- Ms. JIYA NAAZ

A little mouse lived in a small hole with her parents and two brothers. While one brother was older than her, the other was younger. Financially, the family was not very well off.

The little mouse was still very young when she started to run out of her hole and play outside with the other mice in the neighbourhood. Her brothers completely despised it and would often scold her for the same. Sometimes they would even beat her up for playing outside. As she grew up, even her mother began to stop her from going outside the hole. Her mother started insisting that she wears clothes that cover her body completely and also wears a *dupatta* with her clothes. She was now being stopped from interacting with the boys in the neighborhood too! The environment at home had started to deteriorate and that was all because of the little mouse. There were too many restrictions being imposed on her and she remained confused about what was happening. She saw that things were completely different for her brothers. They would come and leave the hole at their will and would spend time with whomever they wanted to, without being kept an eye on by her parents.

One unfortunate day, the little mouse's father passed away. That really affected the family massively. It suddenly seemed like their father was the glue that held them together and without him, the entire family seemed to have separated. Both her brothers were unemployed, her mother had never worked outside the house to earn a living and the little mouse wasn't even allowed to step out of the house, let alone her find a job to sustain the family! The family had almost finished off the little savings their father had left behind. The mother stayed more stressed than ever before, not knowing where their next meal will come from and the brothers started feeling more detached from the family and their situation. The little mouse desperately wanted to help make things better, but she was being held back by the mother, whose health was deteriorating as the days went by. Eventually, the younger brother ran away from home after a big fight with the mother and the elder one got married and separated from his mother and sister, to live with his wife. All of this had impacted the mother's health even more.

After having enough of this misery, one day the little mouse walked up to her mother and said, "we will change nothing by sitting at home and waiting for things to happen. I will go out and earn a living for us. I am tired of sitting and waiting for someone to come and help us. Instead, I want to step out of the house and earn a living for you and me."

The mother was enraged at this and shouted back, "Are you out of your mind? What will others say about this, that I am living off my daughter's earnings? No! I am never going to commit this sin."

The little mouse was in no mood to listen. She went against her mother's wishes and got a labourer's job for herself. She worked hard to feed her mother and herself. She was smart with handling money, so very soon started using up the extra money to make their home look better. The mother started being more considerate towards her, she began understanding where her daughter was coming from and therefore stopped restricting her anymore. She used to leave for work in the morning and return by evening.

As her mother began getting more supportive of her work, she started being subjected to the ridicule of their neighbours. Male mice found her an easy target of their teasing and passing vulgar remarks. Her relatives had started to pile on her mother to get her married off as soon as possible. Her mother had started resisting such voices. She felt pride in the fact that her daughter was now earning and was independent. **This irked the extended family and they came down on the mother with stronger pressure to get the little mouse married as she was growing older, with their strongest argument being, "if you don't get your daughter married in time, then you will not find a suitable match for her."**



The mother would only respond with this one line, "she is not my daughter, but my son."

Points for Discussion:

- How was the little mouse's family?
- What were the things that the little mouse did that become an eyesore for her family?
- What happened that brought a world of sadness to the little mouse's house?
- How did the three siblings respond to the unfortunate event at home?
- When the little mouse had offered to work to support her mother and her, despite having no one else even wanting to support her, what made the mother restrict the mouse?
- The little mouse can be considered stubborn by us, but who benefitted from this stubbornness?
- Personally, do you think the little mouse was doing something right or was she wrong?
- How do you feel by the reactions that others had to the little mice working for a living?
- Sons are considered to be the ones who support their parents at old age. As woes hit the family, the two sons were the first to leave to fend for themselves, but the little mouse stuck to supporting her mother. Yet, it is girls who try to earn a living for their families who get mocked. How do you feel about this?
- The mother had shared that she thought it was sinful to live off her daughter's earning. Then, when she was being pressurized by her extended family to marry off her daughter, she said that the little mouse "is not her daughter, but her son". Do you think this statement is actually a compliment for the little mouse or just another way through which society establishes that boys are more worthy than girls?

TOPSY TURVY

- Mr. PRADEEP KUMAR KOLE

In a dense green forest, there lived a bear couple, along with two of their children. The daughter was named Shaloo and the son was named Aloo. The couple had enrolled both Shaloo and Aloo in the same school, hoping that both would go to school together and thus will save the parents a lot of time.

The school wasn't very far away from the cave, so the couple had bought them a cycle. Shaloo would drive the cycle and Aloo would sit at the back. Sometimes, Aloo would ask Shaloo if he could ride the cycle too, but she would shut him up by saying, "boys in our forest do not ride a cycle. If anyone sees you do this, it will bring our family a bad reputation." Shaloo was right in what she had shared. Girls and boys are not given the same kind of freedom to do things. Keeping this in mind, Aloo would not argue with Shaloo at all.



Aloo would always leave home for school in a rush and on most days, would also get late for school. He used to wake up very early in the morning, clean up the cave, take a shower, and then would cook the day's meal for everyone. Shaloo on the other hand had no such responsibilities to take care of. She would wake up, brush her teeth, shower, get ready for school, do her homework, have her breakfast and be ready to leave for school. Shaloo would often stay irritated with Aloo for this very reason. She disliked how Aloo was almost always late and if she waited for him, then she would be punished in school too for coming in late. Aloo wouldn't talk back to Shaloo on these days. He would silently agree that it was all his fault. There also were days when Shaloo would leave for school without Aloo, making him even later than he already was.

One day, Aloo put together all the courage he had to speak to his mother, "Ma, can I please get a cycle for myself too?" His mother was enraged at this and angrily retorted, "How and why on earth will you ever need to ride a cycle? Do you know how this will tarnish our image in society? Anyway, it is one thing that you brought this request to me, don't even think of bringing this up with your father. Let alone talking to you about a cycle, your father will make sure that you are not even going to school. It was right then that his father walked into the room and asked, "so, what is it that both of you are talking about today?" Aloo's mother passes it off as a random conversation and started talking to his father about other things. Aloo leaves the room and quietly walks off to the kitchen to do his chores. In a little while, the family can hear someone calling for them outside the cave, it sounded like their children's school principal, Mr. Wolf.

“Mr. Bear! Mr. Bear! Congratulations!” shouts Mr. Wolf and comes closer to the cave while riding a new cycle, with a newspaper in hand. The bear couple comes out to greet him and offer a seat, asking what brings him there today.

Mr. Wolf shares, “Congratulations to the two of you! Aloo has done wonders in his recent exams and brought a good name to our school by outdoing every other student his age in our forest! Look, there is a picture of him and our school in the newspaper! We are very happy with all the efforts that this boy has put into his studies and the school management wanted to reward him with a new cycle.”

The couple turned red with anger, and said, “What is wrong with you? How are you expecting Aloo to cycle to school? It is completely against the traditions of the forest. No good girl in our community will ever want to marry a shameless, cycle-riding boy.”

Mr. Wolf was taken aback by this reaction. He took a moment to control his anger and calmly tried to explain, “Brother, the times are changing. You have two children of your own now and yet you are trying to discriminate between the two of them. By holding on to regressive practices, you are clipping the wings of your children. Instead, you need to be the wind below their wings. Nature is never unjust to us. The forest does not discriminate among us; then why should we discriminate against others?”

Listening to Mr. Wolf, both parents felt a lot of things that they wanted to say, like, “**how are girls and boys the same? We send both our children to the same school, is that not enough that now we need to get both of them their personal cycles? Schools can just come and share all the knowledge of the world, but families like us are part of society. Even we would want a good girl to marry our son, but which girl would want to be with a boy who rides a cycle?**” Anyway, both of them knew that Mr. Wolf was a respected person, so it wouldn't be nice to argue with him. They accept the cycle from him and prepare to say goodbye. While leaving, Mr. Wolf says, “Mr. Bear, I hope tomorrow onwards I will get to see both your children riding their own cycles to school.”

As soon as Mr. Wolf left, Aloo and Shaloo came outside their cave. They had hidden inside as they realized their headmaster was at their door. On noticing the brand-new cycle and the newspaper in their father's hand, they asked what the matter was. Their parents shared the whole thing. While Aloo was quiet all this while, he kept smiling in his head, but Shaloo was furious. As it is that Aloo gets her late to school, how is it fair that he now gets to ride a new cycle? She immediately changed her tone and lovingly shared with her father, “Papa, I have been riding a cycle for a while now and can do it well. Isn't it better if I ride the new cycle and Aloo gets my old one? He can't ride the cycle yet, so will be prone to falling down much more and then will get scratches on the new one.”

Both parents loved the idea and immediately gave the new cycle to Shaloo and while giving the old one to Aloo, they said, “You asked for a personal cycle today and here we are giving one to you right now...”

Points for Discussion:

- How would Shaloo and Aloo go to school?
- Why would Shaloo get irritated with Aloo while going to school?
- Why would Aloo get late to school on most days?
- How did the bear couple react to the good news shared by Mr. Wolf?
- What did the parents do with the new cycle?
- What do you feel about Aloo having to do all the domestic chores before school and Shaloo having to do none of it? Do you see something similar happening around you?
- A lot of what girls experience in their real lives, we have flipped the roles for the boy to face in this story. How did you feel about how Aloo was treated by his family?
- What do you feel about the last line of this story?
- What can we do to end such kinds of discrimination happening around us?
- Aloo and Shaloo were sent to the same school for their education, which seems like a progressive move from their parent's side. Yet, we see through the story how regressive their mindset actually is. Have you seen similar things around you?

WOLVES AND HERD MENTALITY

- Ms. KIRAN KUMARI

Once upon a time, there was a small community of wolves that lived in a dense forest. There lived a she-wolf named Manu, along with her parents and younger sister Minu. Manu was a fun-loving and chirpy girl, who loved playing all kinds of games, be it football or cricket or even Gilli-danda. However, her favourite activity to participate in was hunting with the male wolves of the community. Unfortunately for her, her community was extremely regressive...

The community there was stuck to old norms that had no place in the current world, where men and women are considered not equals. One of the specific restrictions that women had was that they were not allowed to hunt. They thought it was shameful and an exhibition of uncultured mannerism for she-wolves to join male packs for hunting. Since Manu loved hunting with the other men of their community, her mother would frown upon it and often greeted her with beatings after her rebellious hunting trips.



Manu would often ask her mother why the male wolves were allowed and the female ones weren't when it came to hunting. She asked why the rules were different for girls and for boys. Questions like these would often irritate her mother and her only response would be "Hunting is a man's job." This abrupt dismissal by her mother would often cause Manu a lot of pain.

There were two groups of wolves in the community that would go out hunting. On holidays, Manu would wait for opportunities to join the group in which her father was not a member. The other wolves in that pack welcomed Manu wholeheartedly. They were excited to see a young girl, so agile and focused at her job, and encouraged her to join them. Manu's father knew that the other group had a girl join the pack, but was not aware that it was his own daughter. Manu, however, had often heard her father get miffed at this 'uncouth' girl in their community who ran around with men and boys.

Generally, the two wolf packs would head for their hunt in different parts of the forest, but one day it so happened that while Manu's father was returning with his pack, they crossed paths with the second group. Although Manu hadn't seen her father, her father saw her with the pack and lost his cool. He returned home furious and complained to his wife. Manu's mother was upset with all of this and in a fit of

rage,

rage, she took a stick and ran towards the direction where the pack had gone hunting. As soon as she saw Manu, she beat her up black and blue and dragged her back to their cave. There was a huge drama that day in the presence of all the wolves in the community and no one came to support Manu. From that day onwards, Manu did not step out of her cave and kept hoping that another animal bites her father because he was the one who caused all of this to happen.

In a few days, Manu's thoughts had come true. While out on a hunting trip, her father got bitten by a poisonous snake and within minutes, he lost his life. Manu was shaken by this incident. It is true that she had hoped for her father to get bitten, but never in her wildest dreams meant for any of it to be fatal. However, she felt immensely guilty about causing her father's death and withdrew herself from all interactions with her family.

Her father's death led to a very difficult time for their family. They were on the verge of running out of food and since there was no male member left in the family, no one could go hunting. Manu was in deep sorrow after her father's death, and in a way, she had given up on life, but seeing her family's struggle, she knew she had to find a way to help. She had already learned how to hunt but was aware of her mother's reactions too. She decided to go hunting at night, catch a rat or a bird, leave the carcass at the door of the cave and get back to sleeping in her room. Every morning when her mother woke up, she found an animal left at the door and assumed that a helpful neighbour was trying to look after them.

One unfortunate day, Manu's mother felt ill. Not knowing better, she called the she-wolves who lived around her cave. When they met her mother, they knew that the only way to save her was the fresh meat of a rabbit. But, the men of the community had already left for their hunting trip and would not return before evening and by then, it will be too late for her mother. Manu immediately shouted, "I'll get it!"

This annoyed the she-wolves. One of them said, "it is exactly for this kind of shameless behavior that your father is dead and now your mother is on the verge of dying!" and took the rest of the she-wolves away.

Manu did not care for the wolves who left her cave, she only wanted to save her mother and said again that she will get the rabbit meat and her mother meekly replied, "I'll die but will never eat meat hunted by my daughter. Didn't you just hear how the other wolves talk about you?"

Manu took a moment to think – if a bad thought that came to her mind, had the power to take her father's life then a good thought to help her mother can surely save her life! Manu retorted, "No mummy, I won't listen to a thing that you say today. I will do whatever it takes to save your life."

Her mother said, "I understand, but we are being ridiculed by everyone in our community. You just saw how the ladies left me to die by getting irritated with your stubbornness."

Manu calmed down a little and explained to her mother that "We are wolves, but why is it that when it comes to traditions, we start behaving like sheep and show herd mentality? Anyway, none of our community members came to our aid when we were struggling after father's death, then why are you thinking about them now?"

Her mother said, "this isn't true! We have been living off the kindness of someone from our community, who has been leaving carcasses at our door."

Manu laughed at it and said, "I was the one leaving the carcasses outside our door. I knew you wouldn't allow me to help, so I would go hunting at night so that the three of us could have food to eat." After this, Manu did not wait for any response and ran outside to hunt for a rabbit.

Within 15mins Manu was back with a dead rabbit between her jaws. She cleaned it well and fed pieces of it to her mother, little by little. Her mother's health improved after every intake. By the evening, her mother was absolutely fine. Manu and her mother did not speak to each other that evening.

The next morning, her mother gave her a bottle of water and said "your father used to go out hunting by carrying this around his neck. From today onwards, you will be carrying it to your hunting trips."

Manu teared up with happiness and asked "and what about your community and their opinions?"

Her mother smiled and said, "it is everyone's job to speak about others, you do what you do..."

Points for Discussion:

- What kind of a wolf was Manu?
- What do we learn about the other wolves in Manu's community?
- How did the male wolves feel about Manu joining them for hunting?
- What did Manu's parents feel about her interests in hunting?
- How did Manu's father die? What was Manu's reaction to this?
- Often at a moment of rage, we think bad things about people. How would we feel if one day one of those bad thoughts actually came true for someone? How can we escape this guilt?
- What plan did Manu come up with to help her family after her father's death?
- Even though Manu's mother seemed like she was on her deathbed, the other wolves were more concerned about her following social norms. What are your thoughts about this? Have you seen something similar happen in your communities?
- If you have to choose between saving someone's life and sticking to social rules and norms, then what will you choose and why?
- Think and share examples around you where girls were discriminated against and not given enough freedom to accomplish their dreams, yet they overcame all obstacles with determination and grit.
- Now, also think and share about men who went against social norms to support the dreams of the women in their families.

THE RESIDENTS OF CHHIPKALINGA

- INSPIRED BY THE STORY OF MR. BIRENDRA MALI, FATHER OF MS. SUDHA KUMARI

A long time ago, there was a beautiful place named Chhipkalinga, reigned by King and Queen Lizard. Although they were lizards, their just and impartial way of running their kingdom had brought them fame, and animals and birds of all species loved to live under their rule.

The beauty of this kingdom was that the Lizard King and Queen had stated no rules for their residents. They always encouraged everyone at Chhipkalinga to be responsible for their own actions. They

strongly believed that the well-intended animals of Chhipkalinga, when given complete freedom, would make wise choices between right and wrong. The animals in Chhipkalinga too responded to this show of trust by taking full responsibility for themselves. This actually led the kingdom to be crime-free! There was no sense of insecurity in Chhipkalinga. There were no rich or poor families, no one was big and no one was small. They all lived together as a community, supporting each other.

There was no other kingdom in the world like Chhipkalinga. Not just the rulers of the city but all residents had come together to make it the greatest city in the world. Animals and birds from far and near would come to visit the city, to see for themselves how a beautiful community functions. Among these animals who came to visit this kingdom, was a magician Dinosaur! Unlike others, he did not just come down to see how well everyone lived together but to also test the intentions of all the residents of Chhipkalinga to believe that they all know what they are doing and this is exactly how they want to live.

One of the first things this Dinosaur did, was to place a juicy bone in the middle of a public park and hide behind the bushes to see what happens. Multiple dogs and tigers had crossed that path, but not one of them had looked at the piece of bone with greed. They knew well that they shouldn't take what does not belong to them. An entire day went by but nothing happened, so now the Dinosaur decided to get two neighbours to fight each other. He hypnotized one animal to borrow their neighbour's cycle and by using magic, got the same one to forget about the cycle after being given one. About a week had gone by and the neighbour came by to get



his cycle, but, contrary to the dinosaur's expectations, the one who owned the cycle, had no sense of anger or irritation, and the one who had borrowed apologised for delaying the return of the cycle. The Dinosaur was getting increasingly frustrated with not being able to get even a single animal to do something wrong. While still scheming through his devious plans, it occurred to him that these animals seem well trained when it came to their social behaviour. He must find out how their mind works because that is where they might be thinking of their most original feelings. He went back to the park where he had dropped the juicy bone. It was still lying there, without anyone having touched it. He used his magic to hear the thoughts of the animals who were passing by and he was proved right! Most animals wondered why no one was picking that bone up and since no one wanted it, would it be wrong to pick that up for themselves? However, none of them acted on this thought because their sense of right and wrong was very strong. With this newfound information and after observing multiple animals and birds in the kingdom, the Dinosaur realized that they felt a strong sense of equality among themselves, which discouraged them from acting selfishly. So, now the new plan was to help the animals of Chhipkalinga realize how each one is different from the other and one deserves more importance than the other.

To act on his plan, the Dinosaur opened a little magic stall for the parents of Chhipkalinga. The parent pairs had to fulfill just one condition for being selected – they had to bring in food for the Dinosaur and in return, he would teach them the spell that could make them anything that their children needed them to be. Considering that he would need three meals a day, the dinosaur met only three pairs of parents each day.

Initially, only a handful of parents came to visit the Dinosaur, but each of them left happy and satisfied with the trick they had learned. Every time their children wanted ice cream, these parents used to become one, the children would eat till their heart's content, and once done, the parents would get back to their animal forms. Anytime a child wanted to study, the parents would turn into stationery that the children could use. The happiness quotient in the kingdom had doubled! The children were happier than ever and their parents were committed to keeping them thus. As the days went by, more and more parents started lining up at the dinosaur's stall.

However, as attractive as this new trick sounded, it had ruined the sense of equality that had existed in Chhipkalinga. Parents started looking at themselves as the more powerful ones and demanded that their children obey everything that they say. Another thing that disrupted the normalcy in the kingdom was that the parents who did not have children started to detest the ones who did because they could never get the opportunity to learn magic! The Dinosaur was on the path of successfully

completing his mission, and the last thing he did was that when about half the parent population of the kingdom had learned magic, the magician disappeared from Chhipkalinga without anyone getting to know of it.

As time went by, things began to change in Chhipkalinga, even among the happier families. What started with parents using magic to make their children happy, ended up with parents becoming sticks or chappals to punish their children when they were disobedient. Unfortunately, this is not where things end, even the couples who had learned the magic together had started fighting. Most mothers complained that the fathers were being extra strict with their children and most fathers felt the same way about the mothers. As tension between both parents kept increasing, a new wave of thought emerged that since the male animals and birds looked more attractive than the female ones, their word would be taken as the final. It did not take long for this thought to become a norm. The females of Chhipkalinga were hurt with the shift of power from both of them to only their male counterparts. Although half the adult population was upset about this change, no one could really do much about it.

Among all these families, there was one parrot family of Mr. Birendra Mali. Birendra was among the few parents who had learned the magic trick from the Dinosaur. Birendra had heard about this new wave of patriarchy in his city and had also started seeing the changes that it brought along. He felt that what was happening in society was wrong. **Birendra and his wife still used their magic powers in consultation with each other. They never felt the need to impose their wishes on their children and their children too always responded with responsible behaviour. If at all there was a point where the family disagreed with each other, they handled the situation with maturity and figured out a win-win solution. Birendra still felt and treated everyone in his family as equals. He still used the magic powers for the benefit of his children.** Sometimes he turned into wings if his children wanted to travel somewhere and sometimes became books that his children could read or toys that they could play with. He maintained that everyone in the family should benefit from magic and magic should be used for the benefit of everyone.

Neighbours and friends often laughed at Birendra behind his back. They ridiculed him saying that when he has the chance to become the head of the family like everyone else, why is he still striving for equality in his family and making himself a commoner. Birendra was well aware of how they had been speaking about him, but he also knew that a family can only be truly happy when everyone feels they have a say in things. If there is only one person who will run a family, then can we really say they are all happy?

Points for Discussion:

- What was so special about Chhipkalinga?
- Why did the dinosaur come to Chhipkalinga?
- What were the schemes that the dinosaur used initially?
- What was the final plan implemented by the dinosaur?
- How did the parents make use of the magic spell in the beginning?
- How did the concept of big and small, powerful and powerless, etc come into Chhipkalinga? What happened as a result of that?
- Why do you think Birendra did not jump into the patriarchal wave that seemed to be coming into Chhipkalinga?
- Based on the incidents shared in the story on how certain people felt powerful and imposed the same on the powerless ones, can you think of similar examples from the society you live in?
- Do you know more people like Birendra in your society, who dare to rise above the power dynamics and encourage others, especially women to do better for themselves?

STORIES FROM UTTAR PRADESH

1. Be a Man - Ms. Priti
2. Cock-a-doodle-doo - Ms. Pratibha Singh
3. Dark and Lovely - Ms. Kajal
4. Football or Freedom - Mr. Manjeet Kannaujia
5. Half Housewife - Mohd Faraz
6. Molu and Moli - Ms. Shweta Kharwar
7. Princess Lioness - Ms. Rajani Singh
8. Rani and Her Father - Ms. Archna
9. The Tale of 2 Pots - Ms. Sanjana Chakravarti
10. Who is at fault? - Mr. Vikram Namdeo



BE A MAN

- Ms. PRITI

There once was a lioness who lived in a forest with her husband, named Samsheer, three daughters, Meera, Prema, and Isha, and a son named Jaggu. The lion was revered by everyone at home, they were scared of the immense power he had but also loved him back dearly. They obeyed every word that came out of his mouth and his choices automatically became the choice of the household. There wasn't a single animal who dared to go against anything that Samsheer said.

Jaggu was the youngest in the family. He was adored by everyone and he loved everyone back just as much. He loved playing with dolls and helping his mother and sisters in the kitchen, but his father would detest it. Every time that Samsheer saw Jaggu playing with dolls or doing 'feminine' chores at home, he would often shout at his wife and sometimes even beat her up for not being able to handle her son well. Jaggu completely disliked this behaviour and every time he tried having a word with his father, Samsheer simply replied "Be a man."

All his life Jaggu noticed that in the garb of asking him to be a man, his family basically expected him to stop emoting. If he ever got hurt and he cried with pain, his family would say, "Don't cry, men don't feel pain." Anytime that he played with dolls along with his sisters, everyone around would laugh at him and ask him to play 'masculine games'. Jaggu loved cooking and every time he did there was always someone saying that "cooking is not a man's job". Fed up with all these restrictions for being born a male, Jaggu had decided that he will never grow up to be a man, but will focus on being a good lion instead. He had started to understand that having conversations with his family to convince them of his point of view was a waste of time and in return, it was his mother who continued to get blamed and humiliated for his lack of manliness. So, Jaggu started maintaining a diary where he would note down everything that he will change once he became the king of the forest. Till then, he had vowed to just put his head down and work hard to earn his place as the king and avoid his mother from being at the receiving end for his audacity to think differently.

About ten years later, when Jaggu was anointed the king of the forest, a week-long celebration was called. Everyone was excited to have a new king, as warm and considerate as Jaggu. As soon as all the animals went back to their normal lives, Jaggu made the first decree calling for an abolition of all man and woman roles and encouraging everyone to be whatever they wanted to be in their words, actions or dreams. The older generation wasn't too happy about this massive change, but the younger generation welcomed this with open arms. Soon, a lot of things began changing. The forest school started enrolling children of all genders, and everyone

who aspired to be something started receiving education for the same. All of this welcomed a new era in the forest, male animals interested in handcrafts were receiving the training for the same, newly married couples were jointly taking responsibility for their babies, and managing household chores. There was a huge impact on the way in which animals got married. The ritual of *kanyadaan* (where the parents of a female animal officially gave away their daughter to her partner's family) was stopped, and couples began to decide mutually on where they wanted to live post-marriage. Sometimes the male animal would move into the house of the female one if the latter's parents were older and more in need of support than the former's and sometimes the couple decided to move to a third forest altogether that would be central to both their workplaces.

There was a wave of change that engulfed the forest and a shift in which power was distributed. No male animal would now get violent over their female counterparts, they began seeing each other as equals. Everyone would take full responsibility for their actions and have also started becoming more considerate of each other. Gradually, Jaggu was able to create the exact world for himself that he had already dreamt of.

Jaggu was often reminded of instances where his father would ask him to 'become a man', but with age, Jaggu had figured that there was no one way to become a man and violence definitely wasn't a key factor in defining masculinity. A violent animal is simply a violent animal and not a man.



Points for Discussion:

- What kind of a child was Jaggu?
- How was Jaggu's father?
- Why would Jaggu's mother get beaten up? What were Jaggu's thoughts about this?
- What are masculine and feminine chores at home? What will happen if people from one gender did a chore assigned to the other gender?
- What kind of pressure would Jaggu experience at his house?
- What made Jaggu stop fighting at his house?
- What changes did Jaggu bring to the forest after being made the King? What impact did that create?
- Like Jaggu, do we also find ourselves in situations in our house or in society where we feel frustrated about many things happening around us? In situations like this, what is our reaction generally like?
- What kind of fruits can we bear by handling a situation with patience?
- What can we learn from Jaggu?

COCK-A-DOODLE-DOO

- Ms. PRATIBHA SINGH

Bittu loved to spend her time playing with her friends and studying. Her best friend was a little cock named Pankaj.

It wasn't common in their society to have a young girl and boy befriend each other, but both were little children at this point, so no one made a big deal out of it. Here, cocks go out to earn for their families and women would look after the household. Hens weren't even allowed to go to school. It was only recently that some progressive parents had started enrolling their hens in schools. Bittu was one such lucky hen, whose parents would send her to school.



On being encouraged by her parents, Bittu had started dreaming of a career beyond just her studies. She wanted to grow up to become an alarm cock in a rich person's house. Her job then would be to scream cock-a-doodle-doo early morning at sunrise, to wake everyone up in the family, and then again scream at sundown to let everyone know of nightfall. In Bittu's village, only cocks were given this job and not hens, because the latter's voice was considered to be weak. Bittu was well aware of this belief, but she also knew that not too long-ago hens were considered to have weaker brains and therefore were not sent to schools, but all of that is changing. Hens are going to school. Based on this, Bittu decided that she will practice her scream till she gets it right and for that, she will seek Pankaj's help. Pankaj immediately agreed to help her out.

After school, Pankaj would take Bittu home where they would practice their call together. Though they did not find enough time to practice on the first day, Bittu promised to make more time and practice with much more sincerity. On her way out from Pankaj's place, a neighbour saw Bittu and rushed directly to her house to create a scene, "Hey Bittu's father! You show off a lot about how progressive you are in letting your daughter go to school. Just go out and see what your girl is up to. She has gone somewhere else after school and that too with a cock!" With this, the neighbour stormed out and Bittu's father just sat down on the floor, shocked. After a while when Bittu returned home, he asked, "Why are you late today?"

Bittu had never lied to her parents before, but she really wanted to surprise her father by being able to call like a cock, so she said, "Nothing really happened daddy, I had just stopped by to play with my friends."

Father (angrily), "I got to know that you had gone somewhere else. If I ever get to know that you left school to go somewhere else, then I'll break your legs."

The next day Bittu was looking really low in school and Pankaj asked her what had happened.

Bittu, “yesterday I had come to your house for practice and someone told my father about it. He got angry with me about this and now I don’t know how I can practice with you anymore.”

Pankaj, “Hmmm... don’t worry about it. We can bunk school once in a while and stay at my house for practice. No one will see you then. Whatever work we miss from school, I will get an update from my friend and share it with you too.”

Bittu got happy about this suggestion. Both bunked school once in a while and practiced calling together. On one such day, Bittu’s father saw her walk out of Pankaj’s house during school hours. He was still fuming with the humiliating words of his neighbour, so, on actually seeing Bittu with Pankaj, he lost his cool and immediately decided to marry Bittu off at the earliest.



The next day, Bittu woke up to see her parents busy with arrangements. She assumed that probably someone was visiting today and happily joined her parents in cleaning up the house. While cleaning, she asked her father who was coming. “A family is visiting today to consider you as a bride for their son.”

Bittu immediately stopped smiling and asked, “But daddy, you have always been different from all my other friends’ dads. You always wanted to educate me, then why are you marrying me off now at such a young age?”

Father, “I’ve already educated you as much you should be educated. Most of your friends are doing well in their marriages, and so will you.”

Bittu, “and school?”

Father, “You can go to school today, but that will be the end of it.”

Bittu found it difficult to deal with the sudden change in her family’s outlook. She was confused about what might have happened. At school, she shared everything with Pankaj, who asked her to file an FIR against her family, because child marriage is illegal. Bittu refused to do that, as she did not want to go against her family. After school, she returned home to try to convince her mother to call off the marriage too, but her mother was too excited to take this request seriously. She was elated to find such a decent boy from such a reputed family to have agreed to marry her daughter. Giving up on her conversation with her mother, Bittu asked if she could go out and play with

her friends one last time. Her mother agreed. That day, instead of actually playing, she gathered all her friends and said, "See girls, I am about to be married off as a child now, but if you all want to study and don't want the same done to you, you will need to help me..." Bittu was still speaking, when her father came along and heard everything. He was furious and began beating Bittu, then dragged her home.

After having enough of such erratic behaviour from her parents, Bittu asked her father what actually had happened that made them sway from being progressive parents who wanted their daughter to study to the kind of parents who marry their daughters off at a young age. Already enraged, Bittu's father shared how he went against everyone in their family and neighbourhood to send her to school, but Bittu let him down. Instead of going to school, she was visiting houses of different boys. He shared how he was still hurting from the words of the neighbour who had seen Bittu with some boy. Bittu finally understood what was happening and immediately shared her side of the story as to how her best friend Pankaj was helping her get her call right so she can get a job as an alarm cock and bring a comfortable life for her parents. Then, to prove her point, she called like a cock as loudly as she could.

With this, **Bittu's parents had teared up. They were cursing themselves for doubting their wonderful daughter who only wanted to give them a better life. But were also sad that it was too late to change anything. The to-be groom's family was visiting the next day and to back out now would ruin their reputation in their society. With much thought, Bittu's father came up with a brilliant idea.**

The next day Bittu and her father went to the market to buy sweets for the groom-to-be's family. He told her that the Superintendent of Police (SP) of their city was a female, so Bittu should stop the car right outside the police station and go straight to the SP to speak to her. That is exactly what Bittu did. Right outside the police station, she asked for the car to stop so she could relieve herself. Bittu rushed to the SP's office and narrated the entire story to her, along with the strategy to be followed. The SP was taken aback by this entire episode but was happy that a family was taking a stand against child marriage, to undo their mistake while also maintaining their reputation. So, the police had also agreed to support them. Around 10 am that day, the groom-to-be's family came to Bittu's house, and around the same time, a police van reached there too. The police scolded the families involved and threatened to arrest them if they proceeded with this marriage, as both partners were minors. By then, a number of families from the neighbourhood had assembled too, to whom the police announced that this particular village will now be on their radar against child marriage, and if anyone dared to get their children married off, then the entire family and extended family would get arrested.

As the police left, Bittu's parents exchanged a look of happiness and victory, but also got back to their character and pretended to be hurt and insulted by the incident, but as law-abiding citizens, they decided to call off the alliance. The neighbours were also jolted by the police's visit, but the little chicks were happy that now they could have a few more years of education and not be worried about being forced to get married.

Points for Discussion:

- How were Bittu's parents different from the other parents in the story?
- What did Bittu want to do for them? Whose help did she take for this?
- What did Bittu's neighbour do when he saw her with Pankaj?
- Although both her parents were progressive, what impact did the neighbour's words have on them?
- Why did Bittu lie to her father when he asked her where she was after school?
- Why did the father think of Pankaj and Bittu's relationship in a negative light? Have you seen similar instances around you where a girl and a boy's friendship were viewed in a negative light? Share examples.
- What did Bittu try to do along with her friends to stop her wedding?
- How did Bittu's parents realize their mistake?
- What solution did Bittu's father come up with to amend his mistake? What do you feel about this thought of his?
- Do you know of families around you where the parents came up with creative strategies to stop their children from being married off? Share examples.

DARK AND LOVELY

- Ms. KAJAL

Munnu and Tunnu were two crows, Munnu was the father and Tunnu was the son. A couple of years back, Munnu's wife had thrown both out of her nest. There were rumors that she was enticed by a younger, more handsome crow! **Husbands who have been rejected by their wives have a tough time in this society. Everyone assumes that there must have been something wrong in him that he couldn't keep his wife happy.** Munnu, like most other men, was barely literate, so after his wife threw him out, he used to do odd jobs to feed himself and his son. To make matters worse, both Munnu and Tunnu were pitch black in color, which made them look exceptionally beautiful and therefore made them the cynosure of female crows' eyes.

One day when Munnu was out for work, Tunnu went out to roam about. He had flown just a few meters away when Tina and Meena, who lived in a neighboring nest, started teasing him, singing obscene songs, and following him. Munnu was frightened and flew as fast as he could to return to the nest. In the evening when Munnu came back, Tunnu started crying and narrated the incident to him. Munnu was petrified and wanted to protect his son's dignity at all costs. After much speculation, he finally decided to move to another place with him.

The next day, they packed all their belongings and left to live in another forest. After reaching the forest they first found a tree where they could make their nest. Then Munnu decided to paint Tunnu white so that he does not attract the attention of the female crows. They started living in the forest and Munnu even found work for himself in a rich crow's nest as a house help. One day Munnu fell ill and Tunnu had to go out to buy him medicines. Just then it started raining and the white paint from his body got washed away. There were a few female crows that spotted him and started following him. Tunnu flew as fast as he could and went to a police station. In the police station, he narrated the entire incident to Inspector Crow. Inspector Crow was so dazzled by Tunnu's beauty that she kept staring at him. After listening to the entire incident, Inspector Crow promised to help him and chased the female crows that were following him. She personally went to drop Tunnu at his nest.

After meeting Munnu, the policeman directly asked him for marrying Tunnu. Munnu was stunned, but then he composed himself and refused, saying that Tunnu was too young to be married.

Inspector Crow was not used to taking no for an answer, she was furious and said that by asking Munnu, she was just being courteous, but Munnu's response is an insult to her. Munnu panicked and explained that Tunnu is still a minor and therefore not of marriageable age. Inspector Crow could not handle the disdain and set Tunnu on fire in front of Munnu, saying, "If I can't have him, I will not let anyone else have Tunnu either."



Points for Discussion:

- What did beauty mean in Tunnu and Munnu's world?
- Why did Munnu's wife leave him?
- In this story, how does the world view a man without his wife and a son without his mother? How do you feel about this?
- Why did Tunnu and Munnu have to leave their nest?
- What did Munnu do to Tunnu after coming to the new place and why?
- What happened on a rainy day?
- What did the Policewoman do to Tunnu and why?
- How many people enjoyed hearing this story and found it funny that girls tease boys and boys run to save their honour? Explain in detail why it felt like this?
- Does this happen in our society as well?
- In what spirit did the Policewoman burn Tunnu? Have you ever heard anything like this around you or on TV? What do you think about this?
- The Policewoman was not able to handle Munnu's response, even though the latter was speaking respectfully. Why do you think this happened? Have you seen people around you who fail to acknowledge 'no' as an answer?
- When we ask someone something, we should also respect when they say "no", but often we are not able to accept a negative answer. To help an individual accept a refusal what are some of the things that we can teach them since their childhood?

FOOTBALL OR FREEDOM?

- Mr. MANJEET KANNAUJIA

A group of girls were playing football on the field, when Mohan runs up to them to ask, "I also want to play football with you. None of my friends can play with a ball. I love watching you all play. Please let me also join you."

The girls burst out laughing and say, "go play with your dolls! Football is a women's sport, and not meant for boys to play." They shoo Mohan away from the ground and get back to their game.

Heartbroken, Mohan returns home, only to see his friends play with the dollhouse. He asks them again, "Will you play football with me?" His friends immediately retorted, "Why are you trying to talk like girls now? Why should we play football? Come join us in playing with the dollhouse. We will make you the father this time. OK?" Mohan is distraught with his experiences from the day. Like his sister, he too wants the freedom to dress as he likes, play football, go to the nearby city for his education, etc. but he is barely understood by his own friends, so wonders if at all he should have any expectations from his parents.

Eventually, Mohan starts getting a bad name in society. Even his parents are widely criticised with comments like, "What kind of a feminine son have you raised who always wants to wear shorts like girls and play football with them! Things can still be brought back in control. You need to get him married off to a girl from a decent family while you still have time, if you delay then word will spread and no one will ever want to have such a shameless son-in-law for their house!"

Dealing with immense pressure from the community, Mohan's parents finally gave in to the idea of getting him married. However, by then, Mohan's progressive thoughts had already tainted his marriage prospects, as no one wanted to bring home a son-in-law like that. Facing rejections from one family after the other had made his parents more bitter about him. They were immensely frustrated with the entire deal and had decided that now they will marry him off to any girl or woman who might have the slightest interest in him. Almost about a year from then, finally a marriage proposal had come for Mohan. That woman was about 40 years old and had lost her husband just a few years back. And although Mohan was only a 12-year-old boy, his reputation in the community forced his parents to marry him off with that woman. Mohan was completely against the alliance, but in a woman-dominated society, who really wants to listen to a 12-year-old boy?



Points for Discussion:

- Why did Mohan want to play football?
- Why did the girls not allow Mohan to join them?
- Why would Mohan's friends not play football with him?
- What did Mohan want?
- Why did Mohan get a bad reputation in the community?
- What kind of comments would people from the community pass at Mohan's parents?
- Why did Mohan's parents want to marry him off?
- Finally, who did Mohan get married to and why?
- What are your thoughts about Mohan's marriage?
- What can we gather about the society mentioned in this story? Have we seen something similar happen around us? Share with examples.
- How did we feel about everything that happened to Mohan in this story? If this story was about Mohini and not Mohan, would we have felt the same way? Why or why not?
- Share a few points from this story where we can see how the petty thoughts of a society lead to gender discrimination and eventually to child marriage?
- Do we see the same points playing out in our own societies?
- How can we change these things in our own lives?

HALF HOUSEWIFE

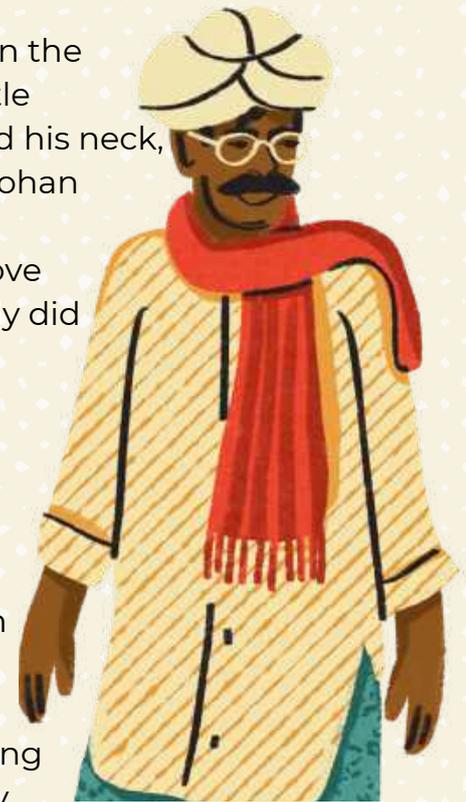
- MOHD FARAZ

In a village in Uttar Pradesh, lived a small family comprising a mother and her two daughters Meena and Anu. After the death of the father, the three women took care of things very well. The mother used to work in a self-help group in the village, the elder daughter, Anu, used to work in a factory nearby and Meena, along with her studies, used to tutor the children staying nearby.

Anu fell in love with a boy named Mohan, who used to work in the factory with her. In his spare time, Mohan liked chewing beetle leaves, riding the bike with his friends with a scarf tied around his neck, listening to Bhojpuri songs, and praying to mother Ganga. Mohan was the apple of his family's eyes, everyone's favourite in the factory, and was a cheerful and decent boy. Mohan used to love Anu a lot, especially respected the fact that she and her family did not give up after her father's death. Instead, they found opportunities in adversity to empower themselves and take charge of their lives. Anu was the head of her family, as she earned the most amount of money and was also the most educated one at home, therefore would take most decisions for the family. Well aware of Anu's position in her own family, Mohan had decided that after their wedding, the couple with continue to stay at Anu's house, to ensure that life remains smooth for her mother and her sister. Mohan's family was upset with his decision because the idea of a son-in-law staying at the wife's house is not looked upon very well by our society.

Mohan was aware of his family's emotions but also knew that he was the third son of his family. He convinced them that the other two were there to look after the parents and their needs. The family did not like this logic, but Mohan was their favourite son, and once the favourite child has set his mind on something it does not take much to convince the family with that.

Within the next few days, Anu and Mohan got married with pomp and they started living in Anu's house. Mohan had fitted very well in his in-law's house as well. He had become the beloved son that his mother-in-law never had! Everyone was very happy, except Meena. She was very uncomfortable around Mohan. Mohan was a jovial boy and he knew that the relationship between a brother-in-law and sister-in-law is that of teasing and mischief. He would often hold Meera's hand whenever he passed by, sing a romantic song for her or just casually tease her. According to Mohan, he wasn't doing anything wrong. He knew that the relationship between a woman and her



brother-in-law is all about banter and teasing. After all, that is what he had seen in the movies, and his brothers, father, and uncles all did the same.

Meena was troubled by the actions of her brother-in-law. She wanted to stop him but Anu and Mohan were newly-married and he was also being so supportive, understanding, and loving towards her family, so she wondered if talking about her discomfort was worthy of risking all the nice things that the alliance with Mohan was bringing. She thought about the consequences of confronting Mohan. What if he felt bad? What would happen to Anu? After suffocating with all the conflicting thoughts in her head, Meena finally mustered all the courage she had to discuss her situation with Anu. In the evening when both the sisters were on the terrace, Meena burst into tears. Anu was confused, it seemed like Meena was upset about Mohan's behavior but Mohan was such a good man! How could he do something wrong? She tried to calm Meena down and skillfully tried to sweep the conversation under the rug. Mohan, who was standing near the stairs had heard everything was upset that Meena had misunderstood his actions and was now defaming him. He was fuming but then controlled himself and went back to his room. He kept thinking as to what might he have done to cause Meena to be so upset, but he couldn't think of anything reasonable. In the end, he decided to confront Meena directly.



Finding Meena alone the next day, Mohan went ahead to confront her. Meena was frightened at first, but Mohan assured her that he just wanted to understand the problem. Meena then started telling Mohan about how she has lost her father at a very young age and wasn't used to a man living with them in the same house and to make the matters worse, Mohan's teasing her, holding her hand, and even singing to her caused her more discomfort. She also shared how at some point she started looking at herself with disgust that such a nice man, who is so different and more progressive a partner than most others she knows about, is teasing her, which means that there is definitely something wrong with her. Mohan was taken aback by all this. All his life he has seen men tease women but he had never stopped to wonder how the women felt. He immediately apologized to Meena and promised to never tease her again. He also made her promise to always come to him and talk to him directly if anything he said or did, did not sit well with her. Meena was really happy about this conversation and promised that she would speak to him directly from now on. And thus, they grew from a family of three to a family of four where everyone loved and respected each other...

Points for Discussion:

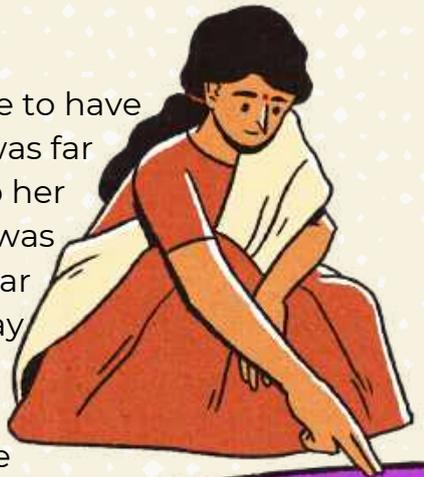
- What did Anu, Meena, and their mother do after Anu's father's death?
- Where did Anu and Mohan meet?
- What kind of a person was Mohan?
- How did Mohan break a major custom of society? What was his parents' reaction and how did Mohan persuade them?
- How was Mohan and Meena's relationship initially?
- What problem was Meena having with Mohan?
- Why could Meena not tell Mohan about her problem?
- What did Mohan do after knowing Meena's problem?
- There may be times that the person in front is doing something with a good heart, but we do not like that thing. What can we do then?
- Mohan did not touch Meena inappropriately, just held her hand sometimes still Meena did not like that. Is it right or wrong to make boundaries for your body, like Meena did?
- Meena said that when Mohan used to tease her, she used to hate herself. Why do you think she felt that way?
- Often in our society, love is associated with flirting and even the relationship between a woman and her brother-in-law. What can we learn from the story of Mohan?

MOLU AND MOLI

- Ms. SHWETA KHARWAR

Molu and Moli were two siblings from a middle-class family, where the mother was a housewife and the father worked in an office.

Although both children were sent to the same school to be able to have similar opportunities for a brighter future, the reality at home was far from this. Moli, who was the daughter of the house, had to help her mother out with domestic chores before and after school. She was just a year younger than Molu, so would also always have to wear his hand-me-down clothes. Molu was allowed to go out and play with his friends, but Moli was allowed to play with her friends only if they came home. Her family believed that the son of the house should get the first serving of a meal cooked, irrespective of how hungry the women at home might feel, and if at all chicken was cooked, Molu would be the one eating the leg piece. Moli failed to understand why the rules were so different for her and her brother and every time she tried asking her parents about this, they would shut her up for being disrespectful.



Eventually, Moli figured out that her brother had more influence and power in the house than her, and it was a waste speaking to their parents, so she decided to let her brother know how all of these discriminative experiences make her feel. Molu heard everything and said that he will do something about it.

The same night, as Moli was studying in her room, her mother called for her. Moli was



excited because she knew that her brother had spoken to her parents and things were to change today! However, when she entered her parents' room, the scene was completely the opposite. Her mother was furious with her for some reason and this time she didn't just get shouted at but also received a few slaps. She wasn't given an explanation. She just saw that things got even more worse for her since the

following day – Moli would only go to school and stay at home the rest of the day, helping her mother out with domestic chores. Moli had been keeping very sad when finally, one day she found Molu by himself. She

immediately asked him as to what he had said that infuriated her parents so much. Molu said that he had told their parents exactly what Moli had asked him to. Moli trusted him and went back to her room to study while Molu went out to play with his friends.

The next morning, when Molu woke up and went to brush his teeth, he was furious to see Moli there and yelled, "what are you doing in my bathroom at this hour?!" It took him just a moment to realize that it wasn't Moli but his own reflection that he had seen in the mirror! He had long hair and in fact the exact same face as Moli. He got scared and screamed loudly, only to have his mother run to his room.

Mother, "You are up Moli? Go freshen up and have the breakfast I have kept for you outside on the table."

Molu, "Mummy, I am Molu, not Moli. She is sleeping on her bed."

Mother asked Molu to wash his face because she still seemed to be dreaming that she is her brother. When Molu kept insisting that he isn't Moli but Molu, his mother slapped her across her face and yelled, "there is a limit to all the shamelessness that you are up to. First of all, you try to get a bad name for your brother in school, you pester us to give you the same freedom as him and now you have started claiming that you are your brother! Now go take a bath and change for school, if you keep talking, we will stop you from going to school too." In the meantime, Moli had woken up with all the noise in the room. She had noticed how her brother now looked like her and was scared, she had heard what her mother just said about going to school, so thought it would be better to just keep quiet. When Molu came out after his bath, Moli asked him how their bodies got swapped. Molu was much relieved with this question! He knew that if both of them went to their mother and shared about their swapped bodies, she will have to believe them, but Moli refused to help. She asked him to explain why their mother said that Moli was spoiling Molu's name in school. Molu fell silent with this; he quietly went on to wear Moli's clothes. As Molu went out to the dining table, he saw that not one item was of his choice, so he asked his mother where his breakfast was and got only an angry reply of "just eat whatever is served to you and go to school."

Molu saw his breakfast plate and felt miserable about the idea that this plate was originally meant for Moli, so why should he have it? He had no option but to eat it, which he did and then realized that Moli had got the breakfast that she liked. In the next few days, Molu realized that all the clothes he was wearing as Moli were actually the ones that he had discarded over the years. In fact, now that Molu had become Moli, he was in charge of doing all the household chores and wasn't allowed to go out and play with his friends. One day when the chicken was cooked for a meal, Molu wanted the leg piece as usual and Moli, who was now Molu, was given the same, but

not him. Gradually, Molu began seeing how despite being siblings in the same family, Molu and Moli's lives were so different. Molu would help out with multiple chores, but the food was never cooked based on his liking, he was never given the leg piece that he loves and neither was ever allowed to meet his friends. Molu began regretting his actions towards his sister and one day decided to apologize to her for everything. He shared with her how he broke her trust and when she had asked him to speak to their parents for her, he actually went and told them how Moli beats him up and threatens to defame him in school by telling everyone that she does all his homework if he does not speak to their parents to grant her more freedom. Molu was crying inconsolably to Moli and apologized for his insensitivity too. He also shared how he realized that being discriminated against in the same family where her brother gets all the privileges and she does not, must have been such a difficult task for her. He was now worried as to how he can make amends, now that their bodies had swapped. Moli consoled her brother and let him know that she will definitely find a way out to help him and lovingly put him off to sleep.

The next morning, both of them woke up in their original bodies. Molu looked like Molu again and Moli like Moli! Everything was back to being how it used to be, except for Molu's heart. He had had a change of heart in light of his recent experiences. Molu rushed to his mother and showered her with love. His mother was already worried about the changed behaviour in both her children in recent times, so she was just happy that he was back to being normal. Within the next few minutes, Molu explained how he had unfairly lied against Moli to their parents and that she had never threatened to defame him, and how in the last few days he has reflected on the manner in which he and his sister get treated at home. **He pointed out discriminatory behaviour that he feels strongly against them and asked his mother to change things as soon as possible. His mother wasn't very pleased with the conversation so tried to rubbish it but their darling boy had already set his heart to getting his sister treated equally and wasn't willing to let go. Within the next week, a lot of things had started to change. Like her brother, Moli too had started going out to play with her friends from the colony and now there were four leg pieces brought with chicken, one for each member...**

Points for Discussion:

- What kind of a family did Molu and Moli belong to?
- In what all things would both siblings get equal treatment and in which would they get treated differently?
- How would Moli feel about this discrimination? What did she do about it? How did her parents react to this?
- What help did Moli ask from Molu? What did he do about it?
- Why do you think Molu and Moli's bodies got swapped?
- What all did Molu learn after his body got swapped? What impact did this have on him?
- After what did the bodies get swapped back to their original owner? How did this experience change them?
- Is it only the job of the discriminated to fight for equal rights?
- In families that practice discrimination internally, what role does a favoured party have to play in bringing equality?

PRINCESS LIONESSE

- Ms. RAJANI SINGH

Long long ago, there lived a lion and a lioness who ruled the entire forest. They were a nice couple and all the animals adored them, so much so that any time that the lion or the lioness felt hungry, an animal would offer themselves to them. To add to this happiness, the couple were blessed with a little Princess and the entire forest joined in to celebrate!

As the Princess grew older, she was sent to the same school as her brothers, where she learned to hunt, to roar, and also to solve problems peacefully and with love. The Princess took all her lessons with full sincerity and was the perfect student that one could ask for.

As the Princess came of age, she began working with her parents in governing the forest. Life went on as normal, till word spread that the neighbouring forest had a young Prince, pretty much like our Princess, not just in age but also in how sharp his mind was and how clean and full of love his heart was. All the animals in his forest adored him. When word reached the lion and lioness, they spoke to their daughter regarding her plans to get married. Princess lioness had promptly agreed, but on the condition that her partner needs to be one, who does not restrict her mobility and is supportive of her whenever she wanted to come home to take care of her aging parents. The King and the Queen felt immensely lucky on hearing this. They sent a big buffalo and four deer to the neighbouring King as a gift and to initiate wedding talks with their son.

The neighbouring King responded within a day with an array of gifts for the family. They were excited about the alliance too. Both families met with their son and daughter and it was decided that the Prince and the Princess would court each other for a month before they finally decided to get married to each other.

In the next month, the Prince and the Princess met frequently. They spent a lot of time trying to know each other, getting their partner to meet their friends, share their life goals and their ambitions. Princess lioness also discussed with the Prince how she did not want any restrictions whenever she wanted to visit her parents. She shared with him how her parents were old and would need her support from time to time. The Prince loved this thought and promptly agreed. Within the next few days, they learned more about each other and finally were convinced that they were compatible enough to spend their lives together. They informed their parents about the decision, both of whom were elated. Both families decided to spend equally for

the wedding festivities and it was also clear from the first day itself that dowry in any form was out of the question. The King and the Queen were very happy to associate themselves with this family, they definitely seemed different from the others that they have known.

Both families got busy preparing for the festivities. All the rituals were to be followed with pomp. On the day of the wedding, everything was moving smoothly, the Prince and his family got a grand welcome, both walked around the fire seven times and vowed to be with each other all their lives. Then, it was time to offer prayers at the feet of the newlyweds. The King and the Queen walked up to the couple and the Princess screamed, "What are you both doing? You have raised me saying that we should look up to and respect all adults in our lives and now you want me to disrespect you by allowing you to touch my feet?!"



The King replied, "No child, this is an old tradition. Right after getting married both you and your husband are equal to Gauri and Shankar, our deities, and thus it is normal for your mother and me to offer prayers to both of you."

Princess Lioness had started to lose her cool at this. She had never seen her parents act so irrational. This chaos had also upset the Princes' parents and their guests. There was a lot of chatter about how this incident just goes on to show that girls should not be educated the same way as boys. 'If she was shown her place from her very birth, she would not have brought such humiliation to her parents as well as her parent-in-laws'.

However, the Princess refused to budge from her stand. She felt that what she was saying was right and therefore did not need to get bothered with what others had to say. She did not mind fighting the good fight by herself. Her parents tried hard to convince her to stop being so stubborn and to respect the traditions that her family believes in but to no avail.

All of this went on for about 10 minutes. The Prince was quiet all this while. He got up to speak to his in-laws asking, "You insist on offering prayers to your daughter and my feet because after taking our vows we are now the animal forms of Lord Shankar and Goddess Gauri, right?"

The King and the Queen said "Yes!"

The Prince promptly replied, "Ok great! In that case, my parents should join this ritual too. We have been fortunate to have our wedding blessed by our Gods, so it is highly discriminatory to have only the Princess' parents get the opportunity to offer their prayers to them. I insist that my parents join in too."

By the time the Prince finished, there was pin-drop silence. Only the Princess had a big smile across her face. Both parents realized their stupidity in how they had broken numerous traditions to treat their sons and daughters as equals but submitted to this exceptionally regressive tradition that puts the girls' parents as weaker than the couple themselves. Both families applauded the questioning abilities of their children and their commitment to lead a gender-equal future.

Points for Discussion:

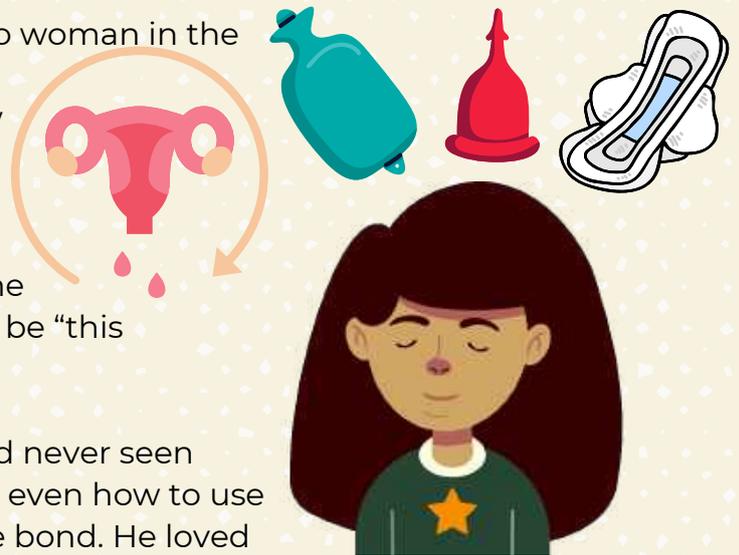
- How was the jungle like?
- How were the princess' parents? What do we learn about their mindset?
- How was the princess?
- What did both families allow their children to do before getting married? What do you feel about this?
- For what ritual did the princess put her foot down and refuse to cooperate?
- The King and the Queen are established as broad minded individuals, yet, how was their reaction to their daughter's protest? Why do you think this happened?
- What solution did the prince come up with?
- If the prince was not equally progressive, how differently do you think our story would have ended?
- Is the struggle to end gender discrimination only meant for women to fight? What role can men have in this fight?

RANI AND HER FATHER

- Ms. ARCHNA

Once upon a time, there lived a man named Hariya, with his young daughter Rani. Rani had lost her mother while she was still a little girl. She was growing up into a smart and intelligent young girl. Rani would take care of all the domestic chores, look after her father and also manage her studies in school. Every day Rani would finish her chores and run out of home to join her friends to go to school. In the evenings, she would sit with her father and tell him everything that she had learned in school.

One day, Rani got her periods. There was no woman in the house to guide her through this. However, since she was a school-going girl, she knew that young girls get periods, during which they need to wear a piece of cloth in their underwear. She thought of reaching out to one of her female teachers in school, but she also knew that their standard response will be “this happens to every girl.”



Rani had heard about sanitary pads but had never seen one. She did not know where to find one or even how to use one. Rani and her father shared a very close bond. He loved her and cared for her enough to never let her feel the absence of a second parent. However, today, as she entered adolescence, she experienced a strange kind of hesitation and shame in sharing about her periods with her father.

The next day in school, Rani stained her skirt because she hadn't placed the cloth piece properly and was embarrassed about the entire incident. She then decided to never go to school on days that she was on her periods. The very next day, when her friends came to call her for school, she refused to join them claiming that she was sick. Her friends let her rest and left for school.

At lunchtime when Hariya returned home, he was surprised to see Rani there, and asked, “how come no school today?” Rani responded, “I am not keeping too well so decided to not go to school today. Your lunch is kept in the kitchen, you can take it from there.” While having lunch, Hariya wondered what must have happened to his little Rani who refused to miss school even when she was down with fever.

After lunch, he went to ask Rani which part of her body was exactly making her feel sick. Rani replied that she had a headache, so he lovingly got her a pill for headaches, but Rani got worried about taking a medicine for an ailment she did not have. She stuttered, “No, actually not a headache, I am having a backache.” On sensing a newly found sense of shame in her eyes and hesitation in her tone, Hariya warmly asked his

daughter, “are you on your periods?” Rani got embarrassed and began howling. Hariya calmed her down and asked her to talk to him calmly and openly. Rani took a few minutes to compose herself and shared how she got her periods for the first time only two days back and just the day before she stained her skirt in school and was very embarrassed about it so had decided to not go to school when she is on her Periods.

Hariya, warmly, “And why did you not share this with me two days back? I thought we kept no secrets between us.” Rani remained silent.

Then Hariya asked her what cloth she had used to manage her periods.

Rani, “the rags that are kept in the kitchen, I have been tearing them up and using them in the last two days.”

Hariya, “never do this again my child! **You should always use a clean piece of cotton fabric during your periods, that is dried in the sun. The sun is actually the best disinfectant that one can find. Using dirty cloth during periods will only make one feel worse and prone to more diseases.**”

Rani, “But daddy, everyone says that Periods are actually the dirty blood coming out of a girl’s body. We should always use a dirty cloth to clean something dirty right?”

Hariya, “Oh no! Who said that periods are dirty blood from a girl’s body? This is completely false. Period blood is actually the purest and most nutritious blood that leaves a human’s body. It is only after this blood is exposed to the chemicals in the pad and other gases in the air that it begins to smell.”

Rani, “hmmm... I am hearing someone say this for the first time.”

Hariya, “Yes Rani, **unfortunately, no one speaks about periods openly, which gives rise to multiple myths.** Did you know that a menstrual cycle starts from the egg cell leaving the ovary, travelling through a thin fallopian tube, reaching the uterus, staying there for a while, and then leaving the body along with the egg cell, a little bit of blood, and a lining? But all we get to see from our naked eyes is blood.”

Rani, “Really? And I had no idea about all of this! But how do you know all of this?”

Hariya, “I learned it all from your mother. Sadly, I did not know all of this while I was much younger, otherwise, I could have helped my sisters live a more comfortable life during their periods. I feel bad though that you did not share this with me right away, but am thankful that I know of it at least now! In the future, if there is anything that you need or have any troubles with your periods, you will come straight to me and let me know. For now, I will give you some of your mother’s old cotton sarees. You need to cut them to pieces, wash them and dry them in the sun before you start using them.”

Rani gave a grateful look to her father, then both went to take old sarees out from the cupboard.

Points for Discussion:

- What do you know about Rani's family?
- What kind of a relationship did Rani and her father share?
- Why did Rani stop going to school?
- Why did Rani refuse to talk about her periods to the female teachers in school?
- Why did Rani not tell her father about her periods?
- How did Hariya find out that Rani was on her periods? How did he handle the situation then?
- What did Hariya share about using pieces of cloth?
- Where did Hariya learn about Periods?
- Should boys know about Periods? Should they be educated about Periods?
- What role does a man play in a woman's experience with her periods – respond to this by reflecting on experiences of buying a certain pad or experiencing pain, etc.

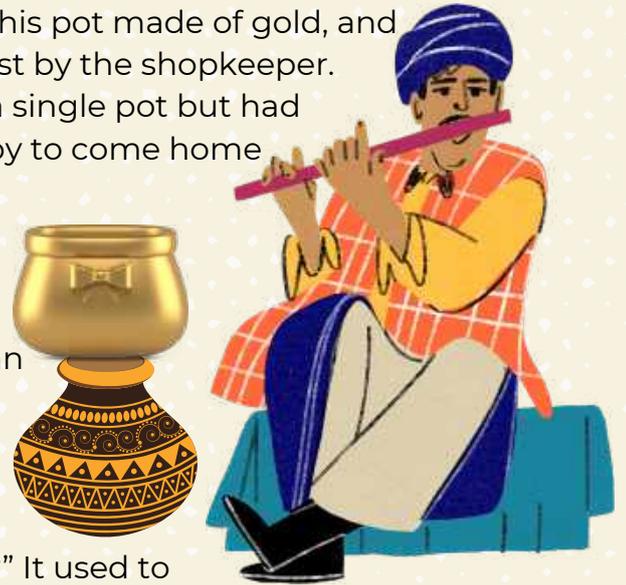
THE TALE OF TWO POTS

- Ms. SANJANA CHAKRAVARTI

Once upon a time in a faraway village, there lived a woodcutter named Ramu. On a cold winter day, Ramu went to the market and bought two pots. He named the pot made of gold Heera and the earthen pot Meera.

Heera, evidently, was dearer to Ramu. Being from a poor family, Ramu had had to work hard for many years to save up the money to buy this pot made of gold, and Meera, the earthen pot was given to him free of cost by the shopkeeper. Ramu, however, was ecstatic that he went to buy a single pot but had come back with two! Both the pots were also happy to come home with Ramu.

At home, Ramu took a lot of care of the gold pot, after all, he was able to own it after years of hard work. On the other hand, Ramu would neither clean Meera nor take care of her. Seeing this distinction, Meera used to feel very sad and think to itself, “the owner has so much love and care for Heera because it is a pot of precious gold, but I am just a small earthen pot, why would the master love me?” It used to feel very sad thinking of all this, but it accepted its luck. Still, sometimes it used to think that one day the owner will take care of it in the same way as he takes care of Heera.



As time went by, seasons changed but things in Ramu’s house were still the same. Meera continued to be ignored by Ramu, and the latter was still working hard to make ends meet. On a hot summer afternoon, Ramu was returning home, exhausted and almost gasping for breath and thinking, “Once I reach home, I will drink water to my heart’s content and then lie down.”

Ramu did not have a refrigerator and depended upon Heera for his supply of cold water. Upon reaching home, Ramu rushed to Heera and poured out a glass of water for himself. As soon as he took the first sip, he spat it out and even threw away the water that was left in the glass. Due to the scorching heat, Heera, the golden pot had become hot and the water inside was almost boiling. Disappointed, Ramu turned towards Meera and started drinking water from it. Meera was an earthen pot and its porous body could keep the water cool even on a hot summer day. Ramu drank water till his thirst was quenched and then began to feel guilty about all the times that he ignored Meera for Heera. His love of gold had always made him love Heera more but he had forgotten that the actual job of a pot is to provide cold water even during summer days. And the pot that can provide him cold water on a hot summer day is the best pot irrespective of what it is made of. With this realization, Ramu changed his thoughts and actions towards the pots and started treating them equally.

Points for Discussion:

- What did Ramu bring from the market?
- How was his behavior towards both?
- How did Meera feel about Ramu's behavior?
- After which incident did Ramu's thinking finally change?
- What did Ramu understand in the end?
- Do you see the discrimination between Heera and Meera in your own family or society as well? Share with clear examples.
- Is it right to decide the significance of a pot just from its make? Now, keeping this in mind, share some of the reasons that prevent people from moving forward in society?
- At what point do we need to bring our society's thoughts to be able to affect change in its discriminative mind? *(In this question, explain to the children that Ramu has learned that whether the pot is made of gold or clay, its job is to keep the water inside it cold, so the one which can give him cold water in summer, that is important for him. We weigh people in society on the basis of their gender or religion or caste or any other criteria, instead of that we should respect the human being by their actions. If we have had an accident on the road and a person from a caste lower than ours takes us safely to the hospital, then that is the best for us. What is the use of being in the company of a higher caste person if s/he cannot help another person in need?)*

WHO IS AT FAULT?

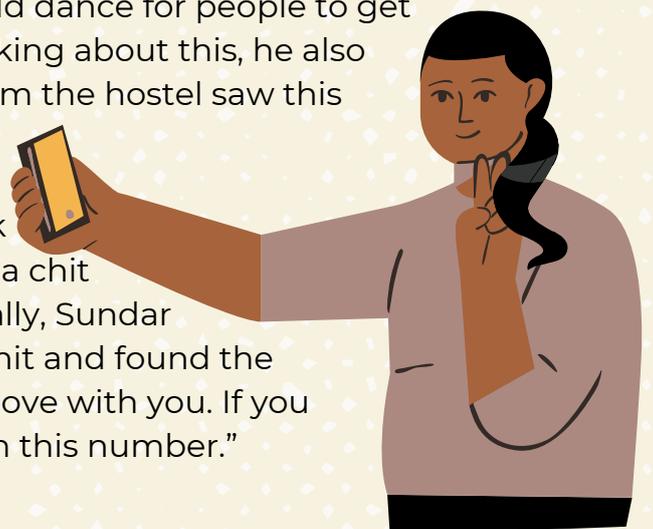
- Mr. VIKRAM NAMDEO

There once was a boy named Sundar. He had very little facial and body hair in general. Also, his voice was really soft, and he loved to keep his hair long. Everyone in his village would call him 'Silky' and he would also always get the female roles in his school's theatre productions. Sundar would never get flustered by all of this. In fact, at a very young age he had figured that people derived a lot of fun from his soft voice and almost hairless skin, so, he tried to work things in his favour by asking for a rupee or two whenever someone asked him to dance or talk or act like a girl. He would use the same money to buy ice cream for his friends. His friends adored him and more so because he was really clean-hearted and the fact that he had a great sense of humour too, made him everyone's favourite.

He belonged to a family of farmers, but they barely earned enough to support their own needs. Therefore, as soon as Sundar turned 15-years-old, he decided to travel to the nearby city to find a job opportunity to support his family.

Sundar found the job of a cook in a big household in the city. Not very far away from the house, there was a boy's hostel, where boys from the neighbouring villages who had come to the city for their studies would stay.

Sundar would often come to the roof after finishing off all his chores to talk to his family and his friends. The boys from the hostel would spot him on the roof and make sounds to gain his attention. Since the distance between both buildings did not allow the boys to see Sundar very clearly, they assumed from his long hair that he was a girl. One day, while talking to a friend from his village, Sundar was reminiscing the days from his childhood and how he would dance for people to get money to buy everyone ice-creams. While talking about this, he also performed a dance move. One of the boys from the hostel saw this and lost his heart to him. He changed his clothes to come towards Sundar's house. At that point, Sundar was standing with his back against the railing on the roof. The boy threw a chit rolled up like a ball at him and ran away. Initially, Sundar got a little worried, but then he opened the chit and found the number of a boy with a note, "I have fallen in love with you. If you want to know more about me then call me on this number."



Suddenly a bulb went on in Sundar's head! Just like how he used to act like a girl to get money for his and his friends' ice creams, he found a similar opportunity here. He used to feel bad that he could only get a minimal recharge done every time which barely gave him enough talk time to speak with his friends and family, also, he would only wear hand-me-down clothes. He found the perfect opportunity to exploit the prejudices in another's mind for his own benefit. He immediately messaged the number saying "I would love to speak with you but

have no balance in my phone. If you can get my recharge done, then I can call you at night as and when I get a chance." Within minutes a message notification went off and Sundar saw that his recharge was done! Sundar was elated and gradually began to speak with more boys from the hostel. Sometimes they got his recharge done, sometimes they got him good food, sometimes perfume, soaps, shampoos, and even good clothes. Since they would gift him women's clothing and perfumes, he would post them off for his mother, sister, and sister-in-law. His family was very happy with him and so was Sundar. Finally, he was able to send gifts back home along with his salary.



One evening while Sundar was talking over the phone, his master happened to come to the roof too. At that exact minute, a boy threw a chit at the roof asking Sundar to meet him tonight. The master was furious at reading this. He immediately looked over the railing, only to find a young boy walking out of the lane. He assumed that Sundar was gay and beat him black and blue. He was disgusted with Sundar, thinking of his choices as unnatural, and was worried that he will wrongly influence the children in the neighbourhood, so threw him out of the house that same evening. Sundar had tried his best to explain the situation to his master, who refused to listen to anything at all. Sundar finally gave up and returned to his village after failing to find another job within the next few days.

Points for Discussion:

- In this story, what was different about Sundar?
- How would other people entertain themselves at Sundar's cost?
- Sundar could have felt bad about the teasing, but how did he learn to take advantage of their pettiness?
- At what age did Sundar go to the city and why?
- Why would Sundar go to the roof in the evenings? What impact did that have on the boys from the hostel?
- How did Sundar take advantage of the boys from the hostel?
- Is it good to take advantage of someone?
- Sundar and his family were barely able to make ends meet with their current income and hardly had any money left to buy the things they desired. If you were in Sundar's position, and there was a chance for you to receive gifts for free, how would you have responded?
- Is policing someone morally, as easy or as difficult as actually practicing what one is preaching? Explain with reasons.
- In this story, who would you say is the one at fault – Sundar, who took advantage of the lust that the young boys had in their mind or the young boys, who thought they saw a young woman on the roof and thought it was all right to flirt with her?
- The master assumed that Sundar was gay and threw him out of the house after beating him up. What are your thoughts about this?
- Take the opportunity to shed some light on homosexuality. Let the group know that homosexuality is as natural and normal as heterosexuality. Our society currently does not acknowledge homosexuality as normal, but it only requires small actions in the present to change our perspectives in the future. Homosexuality is not a disease and no one wakes up one day to decide which gender they will start getting attracted towards. In the context of this story, Sundar was addressed as 'Silky' and he spoke with boys to get gifts, but he wasn't a homosexual person.

STORIES FROM WEST BENGAL

1. A Mother's Love - Mr. Somnath Das
2. Dark Night - Mr. Biltu Dhibar
3. Existence - Ms. Susmita Dey
4. Inspirations - Ms. Sanchari Chakraborty
5. Is this love - Ms. Rashina Khatun
6. Love Aaj Kal- Mr. Surojit Sen
7. Love Blinds - Mr. Biswajit Mukherjee
8. Love is Love - Ms. Kavita Kanwar
9. Made in Heaven - Ms. Bandana Mandal
10. Mishtu – the gents in a girl's school - Ms. Susoma Das



A MOTHER'S LOVE

- Mr. SOMNATH DAS

Once upon a time, there lived a little birdie named Tuntun. Tuntun belonged to a poor family where no one ever knew when and where their next meal would come from. In order to help her family, Tuntun was desperately looking for jobs. One day, some birds came into her nest to share how an Eagle had come to the neighbouring trees, offering jobs to young girls. Tuntun flew to the eagle right away to understand more. The offer seemed exciting. A group of female birdies will be taken to the city where they will be given a nest in the lush green trees and they will have to keep the entire tree, the nests in it, and the area under it clean. Tuntun jumped at this opportunity and immediately signed up for it.

Within a week everything was set up and all the birdies flew with the Eagle to the city. As they reached there, these birdies were taken by a big man, and the eagle was given some money in return. This man put all the birdies in a tiny cage, which barely had enough room for them, it was unclean, and also barely enough food was given to them. Tuntun was miserable. This wasn't the job they were promised, she wasn't allowed to make any money and send it back home, she wasn't even allowed to speak to her parents over the phone. Day after day people would come to see them in their cages, but nothing changed. At this time, she saw other birdies get pregnant and have their babies hatch in the cage itself, but there barely was enough space or food, which caused them to die. Living life like this, Tuntun finally got pregnant one day, but instead of rejoicing, she was worried about the life she would give to her child. She requested a parrot, that often walked free in that area, to open the cage at night, so she could fly away and lay her egg in a nearby nest, where children who were not wanted or couldn't be kept by their parents were raised. The parrot obliged and Tuntun flew out at night, laid her egg, and came back to the cage.



The egg hatched within a couple of days. The owners of the nest lovingly called him Polly. Polly grew up with the other birds who were left behind in that nest. Tuntun would try to visit Polly once in a while and gift him a juicy worm or two. Polly thought the world was a kind place as this strange lady brought gifts for him from time to time, little did he know that she was his mother! As Polly grew up, he learned that Tuntun was actually his mother, who was living in a different place and had left him alone to grow up with a bunch of strangers.

Within the next few weeks, Polly lost a lot of his friends. A lot of the other little birds' mothers came back to take them away to live with them, but Polly's mother did not. She continued to come with a juicy worm once in a while, but never took him back with her. Polly started avoiding meeting Tuntun and eventually, the latter stopped coming. This upset Polly even more! He probably expected his mother to pursue him a little more, but the mother herself was ridden with guilt and couldn't bear to face her disappointed son time after time.

Polly continued to feel lonely. All his friends were gone. The bird who took care of the nest was strict. Polly wanted to go out and play with the other birds in the nearby trees, he wanted to take dance lessons but was scared to share that with him. Polly had felt a lot of resentment against his situation, but also did not know what he would do otherwise. One fine day, this caretaker fell sick. Polly did everything he could, but couldn't save him. With the death of the caretaker, Polly seemed to have finally found the freedom he was seeking but realized very soon that he went back to being the orphan that he used to be. Unhappy with how his life was turning out, Polly decided to finally take charge of it and make the best that he could. He decided to restart the big nest for mothers to leave behind their little ones. He cleaned up the big nest and the little ones around it and announced to the world that his shelter nest is open. Polly was looking forward to this new chapter in his life, with the determination that he would be the kind of fun and caring caretaker that he always wanted, but did not get. However, there was also a sense of bitterness he carried against his mother, which made him vow to never do to his children what his mother did to him- abandon them.

Points for Discussion:

- What kind of a family was Tuntun from?
- What promise did the eagle make?
- Why did Tuntun get carried away with the promise that sounded too good to be true?
- What happened to Tuntun and her friends when they reached the city?
- Have you heard of similar stories where young people were tricked into believing that they will get a job, and then cheated?
- What are some of the steps that one can take to avoid getting caught in such scams?
- Why did Tuntun not want to lay her egg in the cage?
- What would Polly think about the world when he saw Tuntun come with worms to meet him? Why did this perception change as he grew older?
- Why could Polly not share his deeper thoughts/ intentions with the caretaker?
- What did Polly do after the caretaker passed away?
- Often, a mother is seen as a figure who loves and nurtures her family. In our story, Tuntun made a huge sacrifice to leave her son in a different place, in order to get him a better life. Yet, Polly resented her. Why do you think she never told Polly the truth?
- Why do you think Polly never tried to understand his mother? Do you think things would have changed if he would have tried?
- Tuntun's show of love was different than what Polly had expected a mother's love to be like. Can you think of more examples from your life where your parents way of expressing love was different from your perception of it?

DARK NIGHT

- Mr. BILTU DHIBAR

****TRIGGER WARNING – CONTAINS EPISODES OF SEXUAL ABUSE.****

I just finished lighting the *diya* under the holy *Tulsi* plant. It was unusually dark today. It seemed as though the darkness right under the well-lit *diya* had engulfed every shrub, every bush around, and even the night sky was dark, with only a bright slit for a moon.

I, Manimala, am sitting at the edge of my bed with a diary and a pen in hand. It was just as dark that night. The crescent of the moon was the only relief in that dark dark sky, the rays of which entered through my little window and fell lightly on my bed. My parents weren't home that night. It was just my little brother and me. Oh yes! My cousin was home too. He was a few years older than me and had arrived just two days back. This was the first time that I was alone at home without my parents. It felt strange that day, but I was relieved with the thought that at least my older cousin was here with us.

That night, it was just the three of us in bed – my cousin on one side, my little brother in the middle, and then me to the right. Finding comfort in the idea of having another person older than me at home that night, I was starting to fall asleep. Not much later, I started to feel gushes of hot breathing on my neck, it was fast, it was heavy. I felt a hand on my chest and someone's leg as if they were hugging me but also as if they were pinning me down on my bed. I wanted to scream, I wanted to shout. I wanted to run away, but all I could actually do was stare at the ceiling and make sense of what is happening. Was it a mistake? Am I overthinking it? My cousin felt like my guardian tonight, could he actually be doing this? I was rationalizing everything, ticking out reasons as to how it was all in my imagination because my own cousin could never do something like this to me. As I continued to grapple with my thoughts, suddenly I felt the breathing move up from my neck to my ears and back down to the base of my neck, the hand started to crawl between my breasts. **I don't know what happened, I don't know where all the strength came from, but I pushed that evil weight from my body with all the strength that I had and ran out of the room.**

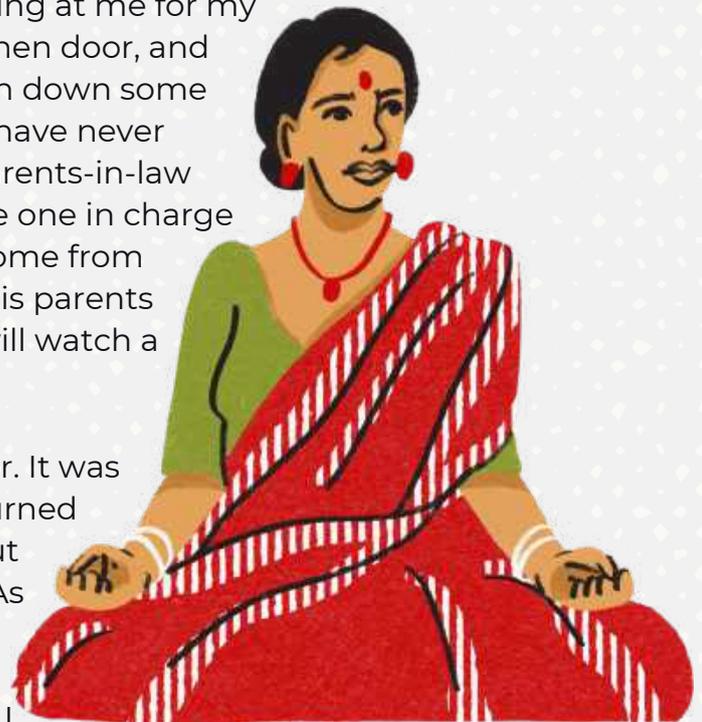
Points for Discussion:

- Who all were in Manimala's family?
- How did the night feel like?
- Who else was in the house apart from Manimala and her younger brother?
- Why was Manimala feeling scared? What comforted her that night?
- What woke Manimala up?

- Was Manimala enjoying the experience?
- Why could she not stop it?
- Was the cousin hugging her by mistake? (If the group says that it was a mistake, remind them how both of them were sleeping on two different ends of the bed with the younger brother in between, so the cousin would have had to deliberately wake up and come next to Manimala.)
- Do you think what the cousin did was wrong?
- Why do you think Manimala was confused and trying to give her cousin the benefit of doubt?
- Have you had similar experiences where someone you knew or trusted did something bad with you and yet you got confused and wanted to give that person the benefit of doubt?

I got pulled out of this darkness by the sound of some falling vessels. I rushed towards the kitchen. It was a cat that needed to be shooed. The cat was trying to drink the milk I had left on the slab. I was lucky that my mother and father-in-law were not home that night, otherwise, they would have been screaming at me for my carelessness. I put the cat away, locked the kitchen door, and came back to my diary and pen to hopefully pen down some of these things from the adolescent days that I have never shared with anyone before. Tonight, with my parents-in-law not at home, I felt a little scared about being the one in charge but was happy that my husband will be back home from work and he'll be the older one at home. With his parents not around, he had promised that tonight we will watch a movie of our choice.

A little while later, someone knocked at the door. It was my husband. I ran out to greet him. He had returned home much before time and I was excited about what else he had planned to surprise me with. As I opened the door, he almost fell on his face. He was smelling of alcohol and barely seemed to have control of himself. He said something that I did not understand. I helped him inside the house, then helped him to freshen up and change. I asked him to rest as I went and made him his favourite *masala chai*. I hoped that he would feel better enough after tea so we could enjoy our movie together. When I returned with a cup full of tea, he pulled me towards himself. I barely managed to put the cup down, I have no recollection of what happened after that. But I remember waking up into a dark night, with the crescent moon's beam making its way through the window falling gently on my bed, a body right next to me, breathing heavily on my neck, his hand on my breast and his leg on my body, which seemed like he was hugging me but felt it was pinning me down on my bed. Could he actually be doing this? I was rationalizing everything, ticking out reasons as to how it was all in my imagination because my own husband could never do something like this to me.



Points for Discussion:

- Where is Manimala now?
- Why was she excited? What was her plan with her husband for the night?
- What happened when he actually returned home?
- The story doesn't share what happened between Manimala and her husband from the time she brings him tea till she wakes up. What do you think has happened?
- Is there any similarity between Manimala's experience with her cousin as a young girl and her husband as an older woman? What are some parallels that you can draw from the second scene and the first?
- Do you think what the husband did was wrong?
- This story has two scenes and, in both times, Manimala got violated by the men in her life. How many of you blame Manimala for it? Why or why not?
- Do you think a husband can violate his wife?
- Use this story and the conversations started in the debriefing discussion to share with the group about the concept of Consent. Consent means permission from all parties involved in an act or a task. So, if it was wrong of the cousin to touch her body without Manimala's consent, it was also wrong of her husband to do the same without her consent. Sure, Manimala loves him and he loves her back and both would have sexual relations in the past, but if at a given time even one person is not interested in a sexual act, the other person going ahead with it will still count as rape.

EXISTENCE

- SUSMITA DEY

****TRIGGER WARNING – CONTAINS EPISODES OF PHYSICAL AND SEXUAL ABUSE.****

Inspired by Anne Frank, I had started writing a diary from a very young age in my life. The experience was therapeutic. It was as if I had a best friend with whom I can share everything. Finishing up a minimum of one diary each year, I like storing them in different parts of my room, just so one day I stumble into it as I clean up that corner, and that day becomes a little peek into a previous year, with a younger me!

This is exactly what happened today! I was cleaning up my bookshelf when I found a diary from a couple of years back in my hand. Strange how I had forgotten about it but looking through it seemed so familiar! Suddenly, my eyes got stuck on the highlighted date on one of the pages... 13th December 2010. I let out a huge sigh and turned back to some previous pages.

1st May 2010

Dear Diary,
I have a new tuition teacher now, Manas *da*. My parents found him to tutor me. I am looking forward to how this turns out.

15th May 2010

Dear Diary,
Manas *da* is the best. He is kind to me. He gives me chocolate when I do well in my tests. Today, he even caressed my head lovingly when I was able to answer his questions correctly. It felt good.

10th June 2010

Dear Diary,
Manas *da* can get really angry! When he is upset about something his face distorts with rage. He looks monstrous. And then he hits me. He was angry with me about something today and he hit me with a stick and I have got blood clots on my thighs. It hurts a lot, and I don't know whom to share this with, but I sure cannot share this with my parents. I've heard that they are waiting for me to turn eighteen so they can marry me off to Manas *da*!

16th June 2010

Dear Diary,

I don't see you as a friend anymore. I don't feel like sharing things with you. I don't feel like getting out of bed. I don't feel like breathing. Everything seems like a task and I feel like a burden on everything and everyone. I am struggling with my studies too and every time I fail to give the correct answer, Manas *da* touches me. He touches me in places that he is not supposed to touch. I feel disgusted. I am hurting. I want to share this with someone. I want my parents to save me. I want to tell them but I am scared. They trust Manas *da* more. If I even open my mouth, they will thrash me. I wonder how I can save myself now. I wonder if suicide is a way out.

23rd June 2010

Dear Diary,

I am in Kolkata for a relative's wedding. There is a boy here that I like very much. I think he likes me too. I've caught him staring at me quite a few times. His name is Sujan. We have been exchanging looks for the last few days and then exchanged our phone numbers. He has always spoken to me with a lot of respect and love. I like talking to him. He is very aware of what I like and dislike and careful not to hurt me.

30th June 2010

Dear Diary,

We've decided! Sujan and I will be running away from this mad world! We will build a small house for ourselves, have small pots with plants on the balcony, have pet birds. We will name our house '*Khwaab Ghar*' (the house of dreams). It will be our home. It will be my home. My current house is not my home, it is more like a jail, difficult for me to even breathe in peace, my parents who don't understand me, relatives who want to keep talking about my marriage, and Manas *da*! I cannot take this anymore.

28th July 2010

Dear Diary,

The car is ready. I am ready to go live the life of my dreams with Sujan. I will leave this diary behind on my table so my parents can read it and know what I have done.

13th December 2010

Dear Diary,

It has been a while since I have shared it with you. I don't think I have much left to speak and the bit that I do, I do not want to. The man of my dreams had actually tried to sell me off in a red-light area in Kolkata. I was rescued by the police and brought back home. Even on that day my parents did not touch me with affection and let me

know that it will all be OK... They did not hug me, did not calm me down, did not let me know that my nightmare is over. But yes, my father did share a piece of his mind, "You've brought shame to this family! I would have preferred that you were brought back as a dead body. I would have quietly thrown your ashes in the river Ganga." This was the first time that I talked back to my father! "You don't get to speak to me like this! Where were you when I needed you the most? Where were you when I tried to share some of the most difficult parts of my life in the best way I could? How did you not notice the scars in my body, how much I receded since you brought Manas da into my life? The fact is that you never had time for me. You never understood me. All you wanted is a puppet for a child, someone who does exactly what you say and sits still in a corner when you are busy. You want nothing to do with a living, thinking, feeling human that you have yourself created."

20th December 2010

Dear Diary,

I don't feel like living anymore. What I am doing is not what we call living a life! I was taken to a therapist for some counseling sessions recently. After the first few sessions, it seemed that there was still some hope as the doctor prescribed some medicines, and my therapy sessions were booked for the next few months. I like talking to her, it feels like my head is a messed up yarn and my therapist helps me sort it all out. I feel understood, I feel heard. Getting into therapy is probably the best thing that I could have done.

Points for Discussion:

- Why does the narrator write a diary?
- What do you learn about her parents from the story?
- Who was Manas *da*?
- What would Manas *da* do that made the narrator uncomfortable with him?
- Why did the narrator's parents want her to marry Manas *da*?
- Where did the narrator meet Sujan? What made her fall in love with him?
- What did Sujan do to her?
- How did the narrator's parents react when she was rescued and brought back home? How did she react to this?
- Have you heard of similar stories where individuals were cheated in love in a life-threatening manner?
- How many other manners are you aware of in how people have cheated their romantic partners? (*Do not talk about cheating by having an affair with other people while being in a relationship*)
- What can we do to be more careful in what we do for or with our romantic partners?
- In the context of this story, how do you feel about the narrator's decision to elope with Sujan, who she hasn't known for a very long time?
- Do you think she would have done the same if she had had a better relationship with her parents?
- Many of us are often heard telling a young person in love, if they are willing to forget the amount of love, they have received from their parents for the romantic love they have experienced just for a few days. Keeping this story in mind, can we say the same? Is it true that every parent always loves their children a lot? In case an individual does not feel that their parents love them, will they go around announcing it to their world or try to deal with this themselves? Since we do not know individual relationships between parents and children, is it right to make passing statements like these?
- Is there any shame in taking help from therapists or counsellors or psychologists? How do you think this story would have ended if the narrator had not met a therapist that understood her?

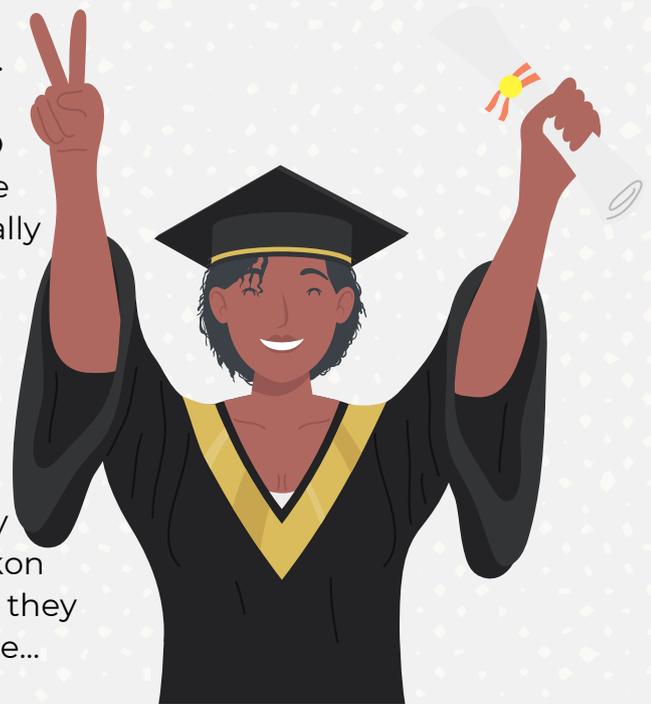
AGNIKANYA, BORN OUT OF FIRE...

- SANCHARI CHAKRABORTY

****TRIGGER WARNING – CONTAINS EPISODES OF MARITAL RAPE.****

Mohua -

Today I cleared my exams and as soon as I got my results online, I messaged Sabyasachi. Sabyasachi is an MBA graduate but he has immense respect for the field of social work. The next person I called was my mother; my mother is the woman I idolize. Every time I look at her I think of myself to be the luckiest girl in the world. She started her own NGO twenty-two years ago and it is only through her life that I understand what woman empowerment really means. Even before I could have completed my MSW, I had my first job and volunteering experience with her in her NGO, and mind you, I did not have it easy. I had to work very hard to prove myself.



My father is the branch manager at a bank and my mother owns an NGO. They are both forces to reckon with in their respective fields, but for some reason, they end up being opposite forces in their own marriage...

On most days when I come back from work, I like to lay my head on my mother's lap and share everything from my day with her. I feel like my day will be incomplete without this ritual, after all, she is the woman I idolize, she is the woman who taught me about woman empowerment, she is the one whose examples I live by. In all these years, I have never seen my mother stand and watch any injustice happen. She is always the one to protest and she has never let anything go without a fight. Just when I was sharing this with her, I could feel shivers in her body and her face turned stone cold for a moment. My mother looked at me and smiled as if nothing had happened and she said, "You are right, you shouldn't let go of anything wrong without a fight, after all, you have my blood running through your veins." My mother looked at me as if she was expecting an answer, but I kept quiet, and then my mother held my hand and said, "It is very late and you must eat something. I feel a terrible body ache and must go to my room to get some rest."

Madhurima's story -

Madhurima walks back to her room lost in the thoughts about the conversation she just had with her daughter Mohua, a daughter who idolizes her, a daughter who has seen her mother as a rebel, a daughter who would do anything to be like her mother.

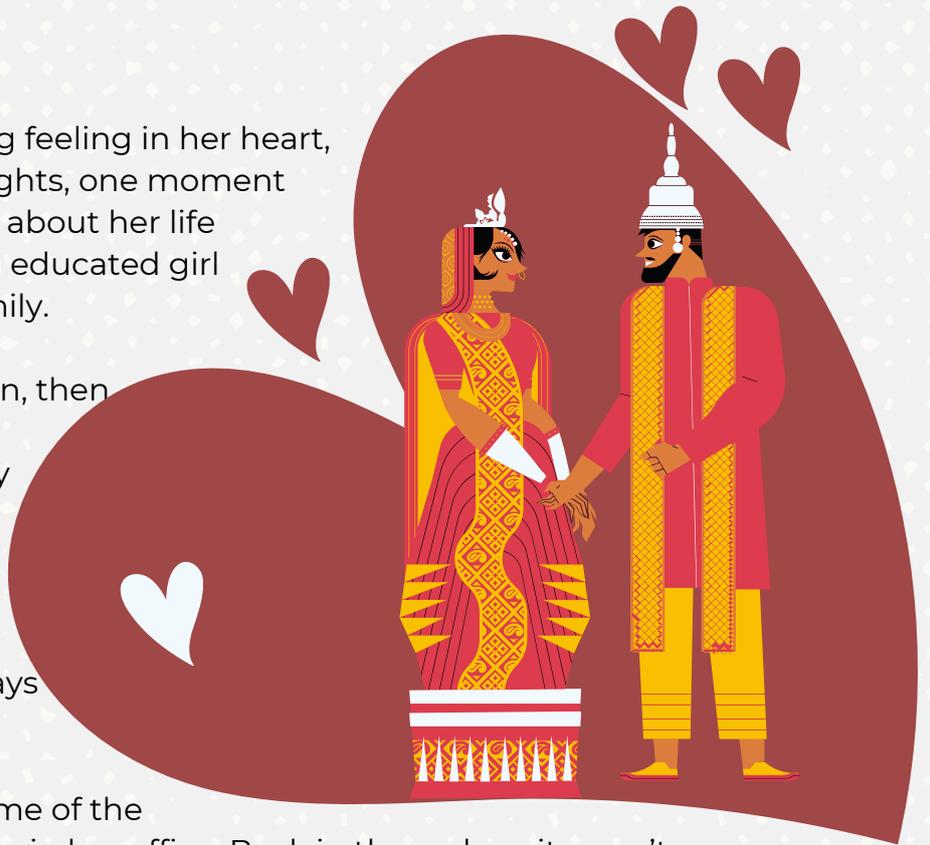
She closed her eyes with a sinking feeling in her heart, going back and forth in her thoughts, one moment about her daughter and the next about her life twenty-four years ago as a young educated girl who was the only child of her family.

Madhurima had a great education, then found a good employment opportunity, fell in love with a boy who understood her ambitions, and got married. Her in-laws never had a problem with her decision of working after marriage. In fact, her in-laws always respected her choice and voice.

24 years ago, around the same time of the year, Madhurima was working late in her office. Back in those days, it wasn't common for women to work and this was evident in her office which had seventeen employees and only two of them were women. Among the men who worked there, there was one named Mr. Mukherjee. He used to live in the same colony as Madhurima. That day, since they were all stuck in the office till late, he offered to drop Madhurima back at her house. At first, Madhurima hesitated but then Mr. Mukherjee told her that if he doesn't drop her back then she will reach home no earlier than 9:30 pm and that is not a time a newlywed woman should enter the house. Madhurima immediately agreed.

That day when she reached home, it was pretty late. As expected, everyone was waiting for her, and even before she could say anything, the questions started – why are you sitting on this man's scooter? Where are you coming from? How did you get late? She explained that Mr. Mukherjee lives in the same locality and if it wasn't for him, she wouldn't be able to come back home by this time. Her answers seemed to have settled things for the moment, but Madhurima's husband had neither asked her a question nor seemed to care for her answer. He silently sat in the living room taking sips from his glass of alcohol.

Two days later, Madhurima had to work till late again and Mr. Mukherjee offered to drop her back. When she reached the house, she knew in her heart that there will be questions today too, probably much worse than the last time. However, when she did reach home, things seemed eerily calm, quite like the calm before a big, bad storm. Her father-in-law opened the door and walked back to his room without a smile. Her mother-in-law, who was otherwise always stationed before the television set at this time was not in sight. Madhurima's husband took one big sip from his glass of alcohol and walked into the room. Afraid of what awaited her, she walked into her bedroom. As she stepped in, she couldn't see her husband, so went to look for him in the bathroom.



That is when he walked from behind her, violently shutting and locking the door. “So, other men have started to drop you home, huh? You think of this as your home or as a brothel?” Taken aback by this kind of rage, Madhurima could barely speak. His eyes were blood red, his face distorted in anger. She barely remembers much from that night except for a tight slap, then being thrown on the bed and her husband holding her throat tightly as he unzipped his pants.

When Madhurima finally got out of bed, she didn't know if she was alive or if this was a dream nor had any recollection of anything that might have happened since she reached home. She wanted to wash her face, but as she managed to stand up, she felt a lot of pain between her legs, on her wrist, on her chest. She dragged herself to the bathroom to take a shower, hoping she could rub the dirt off of her body and feel lighter, probably a little better. But that night became the first of countless nights when Madhurima struggled to wipe off the dirt that her husband spewed on her...

That night everything changed. She did not show up to her office because she could barely get out of bed. Not in a position to inform them either, Madhurima got fired. Tying herself mostly to her bed, Madhurima felt like she had lost all will to live, after all, this wasn't an arranged marriage. This was a man she had chosen to be her partner for life and he treated her in the worst possible way. That night actually changed her relationship with her husband too. Everything became very mechanical. The role of consent was lost in their marriage, so the husband would impose himself as and when he felt like. Madhurima did not have the last bit of life to fight back.

Life went on like this for the next few months till Madhurima found out that she was pregnant. Irrespective of whether it was a girl or a boy, she did not want her child to see such a lifeless marriage between their parents, a monstrous father who thinks nothing of their mother, a set of grandparents who let the worst kind of evil happen under their own nose but never stopped or questioned their son. This pregnancy was all it took for Madhurima to take a stand for herself. She reached out to her parents. They bluntly refused to support her and instead scolded her for wanting to leave her husband for something absolutely normal between a husband and a wife. Madhurima was determined. She reached out to Mr. Mukherjee to help her get her old job back, which wasn't very difficult because Madhurima was excellent at her job. As soon as she got done with the paperwork, she moved out of her in-law's house into a rented room for herself.

All of this wasn't easy. Madhurima's parents were against her, her parents-in-law had started badmouthing her and Mr. Mukherjee in her colony, her husband would show up at the office to create ruckus and threaten her with a divorce. Madhurima went ahead with the divorce proceedings and filed an FIR against her husband to keep him at bay.

Madhurima found all this strength from the conception of her daughter. Mahua, who lives her life by Madhurima's example is actually the one who inspired her mother to become the woman that she is...

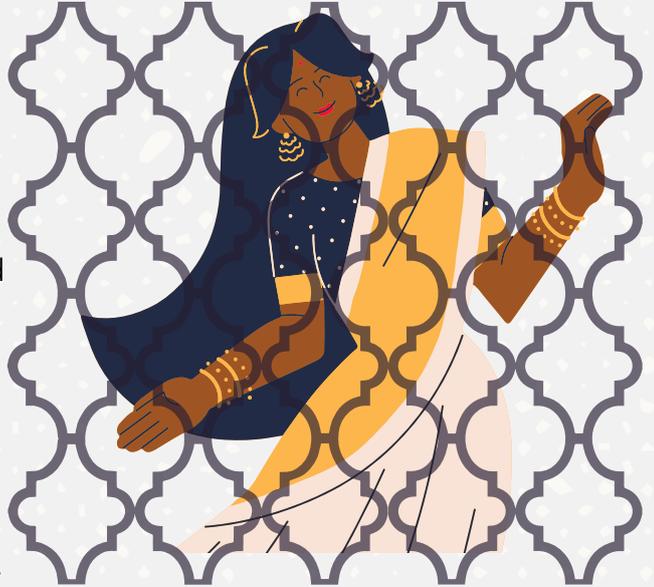
Points for Discussion:

- What do we learn about Mohua?
- Why would she idolize her mother?
- What memories blind Madhurima as she walks back to her room?
- How did Madhurima get married- love or arranged?
- If Madhurima had selected her husband, courted him for sometime before getting married, how did things still go bad?
- Madhurima's parents-in-law were happy about her working after marriage, but how did they start getting annoyed?
- Why would Madhurima return home with Mr. Mukherjee?
- Based on what is mentioned in the story, what do you think of Mr. Mukherjee? Was it nice of him to offer to drop Madhurima home or should he have let her return home alone late evening?
- What did her husband do when Madhurima came late the second time? Why do you think he needed to do that?
- How did Madhurima and her husband's relationship change after that night?
- Why is Madhurima's spirit broken?
- What brings back her inspiration to live happily in Madhurima's life? Why does this happen?
- What is rape? *(When an individual, irrespective of their sex or gender is forced to have sex with another person, it is called rape. Show this video to help explain what Consent means - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u7Nii5w2FaI>)*
- What is marital rape? *(Help the group understand that when an individual does not take consent before being physically intimate with their married partner, it is called marital rape. Marital rape is not yet considered a crime by the Indian law, but actually is just as bad as any kind of rape that we outrage about.)*

IS THIS LOVE?

- Ms. RASHINA KHATUN

Pari was the apple of her parent's eyes. The only daughter among four brothers, she was adored by everyone in the family. She had a protected upbringing. All her needs and wants were taken care of. She just had to say the word and everyone in the family would make things happen. Her parents, very aware of how beautiful she was, so had barred her from interactions with any boy outside the family. She would be dropped to an all-girls school and brought back by one of her brothers on their motorbike.



Once, in her tenth standard, one of her brothers was to get married and a lot of work was to be done at home. For this, some labourers were allowed to come to the house. Pari had never met strange men before. She had found herself to be particularly attracted towards one of them. He was young, had a muscular body, and seemed to get along well with everyone in the house. The young man had figured he was the subject of Pari's attention, but he was also aware of how possessive this family was about their daughter, so decided to stay away from trouble and avoided even looking at her.

During her time in high school, Pari was forbidden to wear sleeveless clothes at home. She was also often stopped from joining festival celebrations in case her older and unmarried male cousins joined the family. **Slowly, what initially seemed like love from her family and made her feel pampered, started feeling like an unbearable sense of control over her life, as if she were in jail. She was barred from interacting with one entire half of the world's population! She wanted to go out to have *gol gappe*, but her brothers would pack it for her and bring it home. She realized soon that even the shops she went shopping would have only female salespersons at the desk!**

Pari still was the apple of everyone's eyes. Everyone in her family still fulfilled every wish of hers. She still only had to say the word and the whole family would be set out to make it happen. But despite all of this, Pari stopped being happy.

When Pari graduated high school, she wanted to become an Air Hostess, but her family wasn't supportive of it. Instead, they convinced her to study in a local all-girls college, from where one of her brothers would drop her off and pick her up to bring back home.

After her first year of college, when she turned eighteen, her family brought to her the photo of a young man whom she was to get engaged with within a week and married within a month's time. That guy was from a decent family, was well educated, ran his own business, and was also a caring and affectionate person. Her family believed that he would protect her and take care of all her needs just as her family has done so far.

Points for Discussion:

- How was Pari?
- What do we know about her family?
- How do we know from this story that she was a pampered young girl?
- What did her family do to show their love towards him?
- What are your thoughts on this kind of love?
- Place yourself in Pari's shoes, how would you see this kind of love from your family as?
- Why do you think the family felt the need to protect Pari?
- Pari once felt romantic attraction towards a labourer. Why did he stay away from it?
- Why was Pari asked to study in the local girls' college?
- After being protected from every man in this world, Pari was suddenly being asked to take a strange man as her husband. Place yourself in Pari's shoes. What were her fears? Do you think she was excited? Do you think this was fair to her?
- Pari would initially love being pampered this way. Why did she suddenly start feeling suffocated about it?
- We spend a lot of time talking about romantic love. What does love within a family mean?
- Can feelings of love only make someone sacrificing and giving or does the feeling of love also evoke a sense of possessiveness? Elaborate on your answer.
- How and when does (familial or non-romantic) love become toxic?
- What are some of the checks that we can keep on ourselves to ensure that our love does not seem like a trap to the other person?

LOVE AAJ KAL

- Mr. SUROJIT SEN

Jeet and Aditi are a young couple. They have been dating since they were still in school. They went to the same school, studied in the same college and are now working in two different companies in the same city. They had practically grown-up together. This couple was like soulmates, the kind of partners that make the world believe in happily ever afters...



Jeet and Aditi were both twenty-five years of age and belonged to a regular middle-class family. They had big dreams for themselves and also what they wanted to provide for their families, which made them work harder, smarter, and even more sincerely than most other young people their age. They were both ambitious and also valued their personal time with friends and family. It wasn't like both were perfect and they were able to strike the perfect balance between work and life, but every time one of them went off-balance, the other one brought them back to stability. Neither of them blindly supported each other, but since they understood what each of them valued, they were able to ask questions or make points that helps the other person see situations with much more clarity.

One day, both met at a local tea stall for a quick date and started talking about how things have been at home. Aditi was dealing with a lot of pressure to get married.

Aditi – “My parents have really been after my life to get married! They say that I am twenty-five years of age, which is already too late for a woman to get married!”

Jeet – “ha-ha! Really? If I start talking to my parents about us getting married, they say you are just twenty-five years of age, which is too young for a man to get married!”

Aditi – “Ha-ha! You're too young and I am already too old for getting married, and we are both the exact same age! The world we live in! Phew! I have been stalling them saying that I haven't reached the place in my career where I feel ready to settle down. I want to be able to take my parents out of our rented apartment and buy them a house of their own and make at least one solo international trip before I get married.”

Jeet – “I know and I love you for the aspirations you have. I have shared this with my parents too and they get annoyed at why you would need to earn so much money! You are already earning more than me. They insist that you slow down with your career and I speed up my growth path to be able to be in a higher position and earn more money than you. As for the solo trip, they don’t understand why you would want to go anywhere without me!”

Aditi – “Hmm... My parents feel the same way, so if they don’t understand me, I do not have very high expectations from your parents in this regard.”

Jeet – “Hey! You don’t need to worry so much about this. I get you. **I completely understand and support your intention of buying a home for your parents before settling down with me. And I trust you with the solo trip too, also, I feel it is very important to be by yourself and just reflect if this is the life you have wanted for yourself and I really really really hope that the answer is yes! We’ve been together for so long, I don’t ever want us to be together out of habit, but because we genuinely want to be together.**”

Aditi – “You are the best boyfriend ever!”

Jeet – “Hey Aditi! I also wanted to discuss something important with you.”

Aditi – “Sure, go ahead.”

Jeet – “I have been doing well at work and might have a promotion coming up. The deal is that I will need to move to Delhi to take up this position and I might need to stay there for a few years. I know that your family is here in Kolkata and how much you want to be around them, but to move up in my company, I need to be in Delhi and I don’t want to do it without discussing with you, because this will also mean that if we get married in the next couple of years, then I will not be living in Kolkata at that point.”

Aditi – “Hmm... we’ve always been together so sounds a bit difficult to imagine this city without you, but you should definitely take this up. I could come to meet you on a few occasions and you could come down to Kolkata on a few others. We will make it work! And as for when we get married, my company has a Delhi office too, so I can apply to be transferred there. My parents are old, but not completely dependent on me yet, so I can still be more flexible about where I am. Nice of you to discuss this with me.”

Jeet – “**Of course, I would have discussed. You would have done the same with me. We are life partners after all.**”

Points for Discussion:

- Who are Jeet and Aditi?
- Since how long have they been together?
- Both are of the same age, yet do they receive the same lectures when it comes to getting married? Why do you think that is?
- What does Aditi want to do before she gets married?
- What is Jeet's parents' reaction to it? What is Jeet's reaction to this?
- What does Jeet say about Aditi going for a solo trip before marriage?
- Why does Jeet face more pressure from home regarding his earning?
- How do we speak of men who earn less than their female partners? What do you think about this pressure?
- Why do you think Jeet is comfortable with Aditi earning more than him?
- Why does Jeet need to discuss a forthcoming promotion with Aditi?
- In our society, which gender is conditioned to think of their partners before making any decisions regarding a transfer to a separate city? Why is this expectation not there for the other gender? How do you feel it should be like?
- Do Jeet and Aditi seem like an odd couple to you or do they sound like any normal couple in the beginning of the story?
- Through the story we see how secure their relationship is and how much they trust and respect each other. Is this how we see most other couples that we know?
- What role do you think the society plays in the power dynamics between a couple? Do you think this can be changed? How?
- We listen to a lot of happily ever stories and watch movies about the same, but almost all of it misses out on practical things that a couple needs to do to be happy together. According to you, what are some of these practical considerations that a couple needs to make to be happy together?

spark in her eyes that she could resume studying too, but the family discussed how difficult buying a smartphone will be and Paramita immediately shared that she was happy to drop out this year and resume studies next. Paramita's mother had seen how responsibly her daughter was behaving, so, discussed with her father, and the next day got her a second-hand smartphone to surprise her. Paramita was beyond delighted! She never thought her parents would surprise her this way. Paramita had vowed to be the class topper this year and work as hard as possible to balance her studies as well as helping run her house. She would do her classes diligently, submit her assignments on time and then put her phone away to help her parents. However, the smartphone is way too enticing! Thanks to her friends, within a week, Paramita was on WhatsApp and by the next day had a Facebook profile too. The world of Facebook is unbelievable! Paramita was able to befriend some of the first friends she made in school who had left the city a long time back. She also found new friends on Facebook. She was careful though to only add girls. She did not know any boys as such and also did not think a boy would want to be her friend. In another week's time, Paramita got a friend request from someone named Mithun and boy was he handsome! She couldn't believe from his profile picture that a good-looking boy like him would want to befriend her! Unaware of how bad things can get with online friendships, Paramita began talking to him almost on a daily basis. These chats then went on to become WhatsApp messaging which then evolved into video calls. Paramita felt love for the first time. She had often heard her classmates talk about boyfriends, but never had one before, until this moment.

Paramita was madly in love with Mithun and seemed like Mithun loved her back too. Both spent a lot of time talking together and Paramita's illiterate parents thought that their little girl was studying.

As days went by like this, Paramita's neighbour came with a wedding proposal for her. The boy was a government employee and did not want any dowry. The neighbours loved Paramita and felt that he would be the best fit for her. Paramita's parents refused to get their daughter married before she turned 18 and without finishing high school. The neighbours convinced her parents about how lucky they were to find a groom like this, who just wanted their daughter without a dowry. They vouched for the family to be kind too. After a lot of conversations, Paramita's family agreed. However, no one so far had bothered to speak to Paramita herself!

On learning about this new development, Paramita called Mithun to say how much she loved him and would choose death over living a life without him. Mithun had expressed his love for her too but also asked what she would like him to do. Paramita shared that she would like to elope with Mithun. Mithun seemed to be against it but by the end of the call, she was able to convince him for it. Within two days the plan was set to motion. Both of them met at a common spot, then went to the nearby temple to get married. Paramita had never met Mithun before, yet everything seemed just right to her as if even the gods had wanted their union. After they got married, Mithun took her to a friend's house because his parents were not ready to accept their marriage. Paramita

understood the situation and did not fuss. That night was the first one that Paramita spent with a man. Mithun was very respectful and said that he wanted to give her time to open up to him. Paramita couldn't believe how lucky she was to have met him.

Within the next few weeks, Paramita and Mithun lived in marital bliss, without a care for the world. By the end of the month, Mithun told Paramita that they both needed to leave for Delhi, where he has got a job. He said that taking this job will help his family see how Paramita inspires him to do better in life. Excited and hopeful for what the future had for them, both left for Delhi.

In Delhi, Mithun took Paramita to a house that he said belonged to his elder sister. They had planned to stay there till Mithun got his first salary and then they would both move out. For Paramita, all of this was like living a dream. She still couldn't believe how lucky she had been.

The first two days in Delhi went well. On the third day, Mithun was to start work in this new place, so he left the house. Paramita had made him eat a spoon full of yogurt before he left, for good luck. From then on, she waited for him to return so she could hear all about his day. Minutes turned to hours, the day became night, but Mithun had not come back. Around 7 pm, Paramita wanted to go out and look for herself, in case Mithun had met with an accident, but as soon as she stepped out of her room, she was taken over by an overwhelming smell of jasmine flower, there were strange-looking men with lusty eyes and saw Mithun's sister flirt with some of them, and scared girls looking through the distant doors with dead eyes. Anyway, she decided to deal with this later, instead, she wanted to go out and look for her husband, but as soon as she reached the staircase, a man grabbed her from behind. She protested and pleaded but he did not let her leave. She kept crying and shouted to be allowed to go out to find her husband, but to no avail. She then ran to Mithun's sister and shared her situation. The woman laughed back saying **she was not Mithun's sister and neither was Mithun, Mithun. He was a pimp who trapped girls in the pretense of marriage and sold them off in her brothel. She was the owner of that brothel and Paramita now belonged to her.** She couldn't believe what she was hearing. How could the love of her life cheat her? How could this happen to her? She had always been a good girl; then why did she deserve this? With all these thoughts running across her mind, she found her eyes closing as she got dragged into a room by the same man who had grabbed her on the stairs...

Points for Discussion:

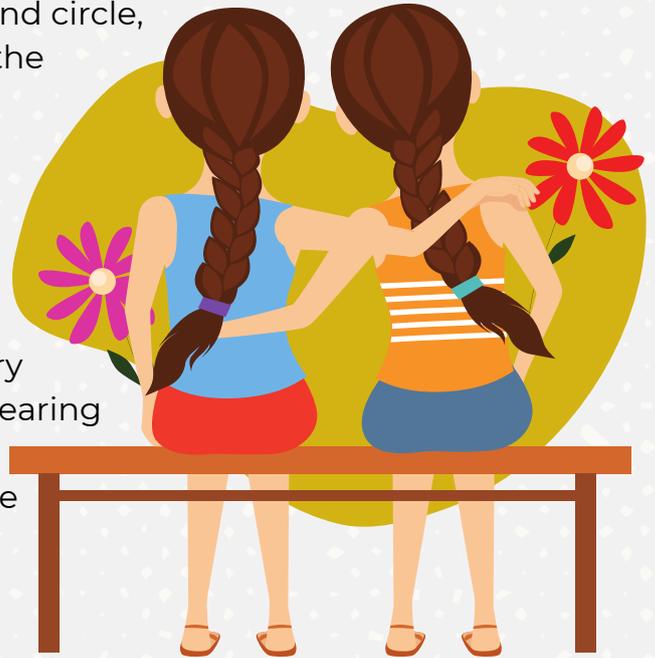
- Who was Paramita?
- How were her parents?
- How was her family's financial condition?
- Why did she love going to school?
- What happened because of the pandemic?
- Why did her mother choose to surprise her with a phone?
- How did Paramita reciprocate for the surprise? Why did she change within a week?
- How did Paramita and Mithun meet?
- Why did Paramita decide to elope with Mithun?
- By the end of the story, we learn that Mithun was a pimp and he has done similar things to other girls. Enlist the things that Mithun does to win Paramita's trust.
- What happened in Delhi?
- Towards the end, Paramita wonders why such horrible things should happen to her. She had always been a good girl. Think honestly, if a girl decides to elope with a boy, despite having a loving family and we hear about the boy cheating her, what is our general reaction like? Do we sympathize with the girl or do we think she deserved it for defying her parents? Would you have used all your resources to rescue her or wanted her to suffer as a result of her own actions?
- If you were in Paramita's place, what would you have expected from life, from God or from your parents on learning that your partner has cheated you this way?
- What can we do to be more empathetic and less judgemental towards women like Paramita?

LOVE IS LOVE

- Ms. KAVITA KANWAR

Growing up in the same neighbourhood, studying in the same school, going to school on the same bus, having the same friend circle, and also being born in the same month and the same year, Rani and Sreeja were inseparable!

Although they were always found together, they were both growing up as different individuals – Sreeja remained fascinated by her mother’s sense of style, she tried to keep her hair long and tied up into a high bun, carry a dupatta with no matter what dress she is wearing just to look like her mother and also wear sandals the kind her mother wore. Rani on the other hand preferred to keep her hair short and wear shorts or jeans with t-shirts. Both were ardent believers of *Ma Durga*. During *Durga puja*, both would actively help out the *puja* committee of their colony to raise money for the festivities and participate wholeheartedly in every religious and cultural event that followed.



As both girls started growing into young and beautiful teenagers, they often heard how their friends started sharing about their crushes, or how happy and giggly they felt when they saw their special someone. They spoke about feeling butterflies in their stomach and how their hearts would race when they saw a particular boy. Rani and Sreeja found all of these conversations a little strange. They never felt this way in the presence of any boy, but yes, some of this sounded familiar. Both Rani and Sreeja felt that way with each other – their hearts raced when they were with each other, minds stopped working and they knew what they wanted to say but could barely share enough, each other’s touch brought them goosebumps, and together, they both brought the best out of each other! However, knowing that almost every other friend of theirs had been crushing on boys, they found it strange that they were the only ones who had a crush on a girl. Fearing they will be laughed at and judged by their friends, both avoided talking about this. Since both Sreeja and Rani had not spoken to even each other about this, they were worried that out of everyone, what if their best friend stopped talking to them. With exactly the same fears, both Sreeja and Rani started to withdraw into their shells. Both girls remained lost in their thoughts, both had started meeting a little less frequently and also stopped playing with their friends as regularly as they normally would.

One day, Sreeja and Rani finished their tuition and were walking back silently, till Rani asked Sreeja how she was. Sreeja longed to share her innermost thoughts, every bit of confusion and turmoil that she had been facing all these days, but fearing losing Rani, she ended up giving only short and generic answers for the most part of the conversation. Rani, who was feeling a little low herself, felt bad that while she was busy with her confusions, she did not offer the support that Sreeja might be needing. Putting her struggles aside, she finally asked Sreeja how she really was. Initially, Sreeja hesitated, but eventually, she burst out crying. Rani got worried and asked her to take her time. Slowly, Sreeja opened up about how she felt confused that all their friends had crushes on people from the opposite sex, but she would feel exactly the same way for Rani. She was scared to share all of this with her friends for the fear of being judged and them not wanting to be friends with her. Rani's heart skipped a beat. She couldn't believe what she was hearing! She leaped with joy and hugged Sreeja tightly, saying "we're soulmates!" Rani went on to share how she felt exactly the same way for Sreeja.

Finding comfort and support from each other, both girls were back to being their cheerful selves. As years went by, they both went to different cities to pursue their respective career paths but their love remained unchanged. Of course, there were fights and arguments and days that went by where they did not speak with each other, but whatever lows there might be, there was a lifetime of history they had shared together, years of love and friendship and they knew it for a fact that no one else could love them or see them or support them as they do for each other. As their families began talking about marriage and their intentions of finding both girls good grooms, they felt it was time to let their families in on their secret.

Sreeja and Rani decided to come home for Durga puja that year. They organized for both families to come together for dinner and once everyone was settled, having a good time with each other, Sreeja and Rani nervously shared how they have always loved each other and now that their families want them to get married, they want them to know that they want to be with each other. As soon as this sentence finished, the room was taken over by absolute silence. Sreeja and Rani did not know what to expect, their eyes were glued to the floor, but they were also sure that they were not guilty. They hadn't done anything wrong.



They recognized how their families are much more conservative and might have been pained by this announcement, but by not sharing their truth, they would have been unfair to themselves, to each other, to their families, and to the people they would have married.

Their families were definitely not expecting an announcement like this to happen! They had saved money all their lives to gift their daughters the grandest wedding possible with a groom that matched well with them, but here they were with their daughters who were letting them know that there will be no groom. While everyone was trying to make sense of what has happened, Rani's grandfather walked up to her, opened his arms, and said, "so this means, we don't have to do your *vidaai*?" Rani couldn't believe her ears! She hugged him back tightly. This first step of approval was all that it took for both families to come back into the festive mode, their daughters had chosen each other to become life partners! And sure, this is strange, they do not know of any lesbian couples, but they do know their daughters and if their daughters have chosen each other as their life partners, why should the family have anything to complain about.

Through dinner, the family wanted to know what had happened, how they knew they loved each other, and everything that happened up till that evening. Rani and Sreeja shared everything they've felt in the last decade that they have been together, especially the part about feeling different and confused, fearing judgment if anyone ever figured out that they both loved girls and not boys. **Sreeja's mother silently pushed her chair behind, walked up to Sreeja and Rani, kissed both of their foreheads, then hugged them gently and said, "we are sorry you did not feel safe sharing your confusions with us. You are not weird. You are normal. Your love is just as valid and important as that between a girl and a boy."**

Points for Discussion:

- Who are Rani and Sreeja? Do they sound like any other girls that you might know?
- How was their relationship as little girls?
- Why did both girls feel weird and confused as they became teenagers? What did they do about it?
- Why did Sreeja and Rani not share their confusions with each other?
- What happened when Sreeja and Rani finally shared their feelings with each other?
- Who did Sreeja and Rani's family want to get them married to? What did both girls do then?
- How did Sreeja and Rani feel after coming out to their families? What were the thoughts running through their minds?
- How did their families react to this?
- What would have happened to Sreeja and Rani if their families had opposed their relationship?
- How would you react if you were Sreeja or Rani and your family wanted you to marry someone you are not comfortable with? Would you like to be heard or be forced to do what the society thinks is right?
- How does our society's ideas of love and relationship make life difficult for individuals, share with example?

MADE IN HEAVEN

- Ms. BANDANA MANDAL

Anam was born into an affluent family, where she was sent to a good local school, but wasn't encouraged to study further. Girls in her family do not get educated to make careers out of their life, they study just enough to be able to do basic counting, reading, and writing. Her family let her pursue a general degree in bachelors with the understanding that she will stop studying and get married as soon as the family found her a good match.

Anam was a beautiful young girl, just the kind that society approves of. She was slim, not thin, just tall enough to look good next to a well-built man, but not so tall to make him feel uncomfortable. She had long hair and beautiful wheatish skin. Thus, it did not take her family very long to find her a groom. The groom was a government employee. His father was a government employee too. They had a big house in Kolkata city and acres of land in their native village.

And the best thing was that they did not ask for anything at the wedding! Finding a government employee who only wanted a life partner and wasn't hungry to extract money made Anam's parents think that they had hit a jackpot!

All arrangements were made in a jiffy and within two months, Anam got married.

Her married life felt like heaven. She had found a loving mother in her mother-in-law, a doting father in her father-in-law and her husband was the best friend that she never had. Unfortunately, for her, this bliss faded away from her life like the henna from her hands.

Within a matter of weeks, her mother-in-law had expected her to take over all the responsibilities of the household. Their eating habits were also different here than it was with her parents. Back at home, everyone ate everything. Here though her mother-in-law ate vegetarian food without onion and garlic and her father-in-law loved spicy food, especially nonveg. She often found herself cooking double meals. Even tea time wasn't that simple. Her mother-in-law only had milk tea, her father-in-law liked to drink black tea and her husband wanted coffee, and all of them wanted to spend tea time together every evening, so she was busy making three different beverages every time.



Things were equally bad with her husband, Hamid. He started out being her best friend and wanted her to share everything with him every day, but soon started being irritable and accused her of cribbing and complaining against his family. He started taking overtime work at the office and constantly came late and would often travel for work too. While traveling, his calls at home were for general updates. He spent more time speaking with his parents than with his wife. Anam had started suspecting that her husband was probably having an affair. She had heard him speak over the phone very late at night and sometimes when he was in the bathroom. She tried discussing this with Hamid but he would shout back in rage. Anam had considered sharing her situation with her parents, but they were so blinded by the first impression that her in-laws had created that they could not even imagine that their daughter was miserable. The few times that they felt she sounded sad, they encouraged her to get over things and instead focus on getting pregnant now.

As days went by, things only got worse. Her husband was never at home and her parents-in-law constantly picked on everything she did and burdened her with more work. None of this stopped the neighbours and other relatives from pestering her about getting pregnant. Very soon, her in-laws joined in pestering her for a baby too. Out of frustration, Anam talked back at them saying, "your son is never home and you know it. How can I produce a child on my own?" Taken aback, her parents retorted with much more disgust and anger, "if you were a good wife, you would have known how to keep your husband coming back to you." That night was the first time that Anam got beaten up by Hamid. He was upset about her misbehaviour with his parents.

Three years went by, nothing much had changed. Anam continued to expect very little from her in-laws and the world kept pestering her for a child. No one wanted to believe that it was about family planning anymore. They knew that something was wrong with Anam, so different relatives started taking her to different gynecologists and priests to get her tested and to get her blessed. None of the priests' blessings worked. Test after test, Anam was told that she was infertile. Anam wanted to read one of these tests reports herself to see what was written, but Hamid and his parents always had an excuse on why she couldn't see it. Anam figured out that something was wrong. Once, she called her mother to come to visit her in Kolkata and then take her to a gynecologist. She told her in-laws that she was taking her mother to a nearby temple and left the house. She went to the doctor for her fertility test. The doctor was given Anam's mother's phone number for updating about the report. The next day she learned that her reports were good and she is fertile enough to bear a child. She immediately realized what was happening. She had often wondered why her in-laws never showed her the reports and also why only she was being tested and not Hamid. One time when they did listen to her and got Hamid tested, her in-laws said that Hamid's report was positive and Anam's negative.

Anam thought of a plan that would help her get out of this situation and also show her parents what Hamid and his family were like. She invited her father over to take her mother back home. That evening, Hamid, his parents, and Anam's parents all sat together for tea. Anam was missing. After a while, Anam comes running into the room to share the good news that she was pregnant. Her parents jumped with joy but Hamid's parents' jaws had dropped and Hamid particularly was raging. Anam went to Hamid to share her happiness, but he threw his cup of coffee away and angrily asked "Whose child is it?"

Anam hugged him in front of everyone and said, "who's else?"

Hamid pushed her away and slapped her in front of everyone accusing her of an extra-marital affair. Anam kept crying and pleading that this was all a lie and she has been truly faithful to him alone. This went on for a while where Hamid kept coaxing Anam to share the truth and Anam kept saying it was his child. In a fit of rage, Hamid pushed Anam on the sofa and yelled that "this cannot be my child because I am infertile."

There was pin-drop silence in the room. Hamid's parents had hung their heads in shame and Anam's parents couldn't process what was happening. Anam stood there firm, silent tears rolling off her cheeks. Years of sarcastic comments, run to the doctors, blessings from the priests, and humiliating taunts from her in-laws kept running through her mind. Today, she finally got to prove to herself and her parents that it was indeed Hamid's fault. Hamid walked up to her and shook her again for the truth. Anam sternly said, "I am not pregnant. I just wanted you to say the truth." Hamid was left red-faced.

That night Anam left with her parents. However, contrary to her expectation, her parents did not comfort her for long. In just two days' time, they asked her how she planned to go back and settle things with her husband. They said that matches are made in heaven and marriages are meant to last a lifetime. Divorce was not an option, she needed to go back to her real family. **Anam had had enough of doing as she was told. For once she wanted to live for herself. She told her parents, "Indeed matches are made in heaven like my spirit was matched with my body." And I will show respect for this match over anything else.** Just let me stay here for a couple more weeks, I will figure out ways to earn money for myself and live by myself, on my own terms." Her parents did try to make her understand a lot of things about people and needs and society, but who can come in the way of a determined person?

Points for Discussion:

- Who is Anam?
- Why did Anam's family like Hamid and his family?
- How were things when Anam and Hamid had just gotten married?
- How had things changed within weeks of their marriage?
- What was so wrong in their marriage?
- Why could Anam not tell her parents about her condition?
- Why was only Anam being tested and not Hamid?
- In our country, when a couple can't bear a child, among the two, who is blamed? Why are men not blamed or not forced to appear for tests?
- What idea did Anam come up with? How did that work for her?
- Now, at the end of the story, what do you think about Hamid's family not taking dowry?
- Have you heard or seen similar instances play out in your neighbourhood? How did the story end with them?
- When Anam's parents saw how things were for their daughter, why did they still insist on her going back to them?
- In India, how do we look at single or divorcee women? Do you agree to this?
- Often marriages are said to be matches made in heaven. Which match does Anam talk about and what does she want to do with it?
- What do you feel about Anam's stand at the end?
- If you were in Anam's place, what would you do?

MISHTU – THE GENTS IN A GIRL’S SCHOOL...

- Ms. SUSOMA DAS

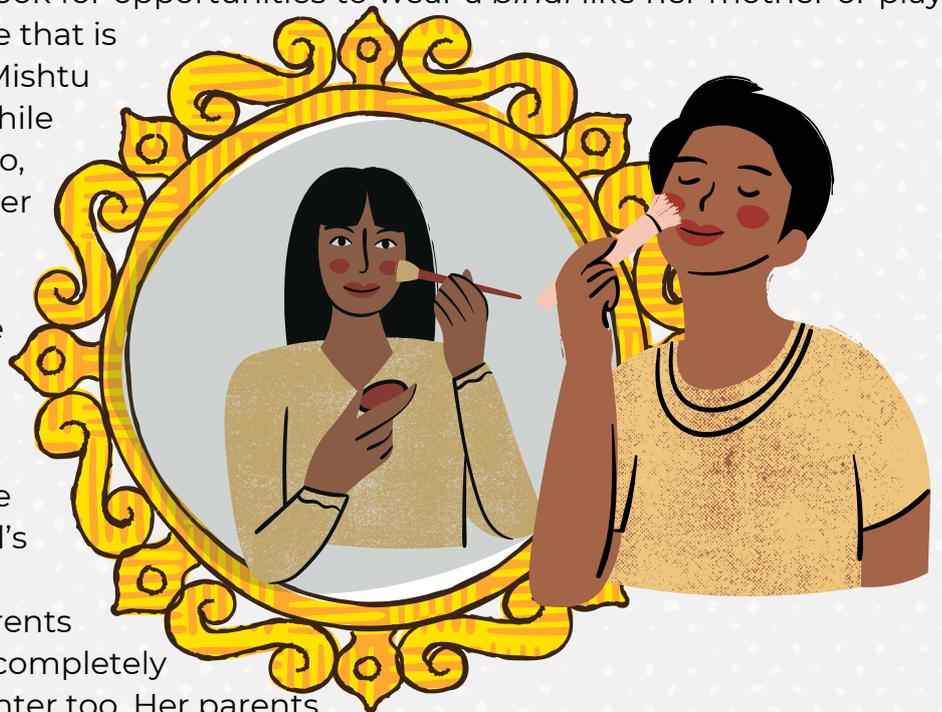
Mishtu was the youngest of three daughters in the Mukherjee family. Mr. and Mrs. Mukherjee had always longed for a son. They had initially planned for a single child, but their want for a son made them have two more children. Thinking of the financial implications of a big family, the couple decided to not try to have more children, and instead, raise their youngest daughter as their son.

From the beginning itself, Mishtu was given toys like cars and guns, while her sisters were gifted dolls to play with. While her sisters would be sent to dancing and singing school, Mishtu was sent to the local Karate and Football clubs to play. Her parents would keep her hair short and almost always buy boys’ clothing for her. Her sisters on the other hand were allowed to keep long hair and wear the most colourful skirts and tops that they liked. Mishtu loved the special attention she would receive from her parents but would always look for opportunities to wear a *bindi* like her mother or play doll with her sisters because that is

what she saw girls do and Mishtu knew that she was a girl. While she loved to play football too, she felt she was more like her sisters than the boys she played football with. One day, when her parents were out for some work, Mishtu asked her sisters to dress her up in their clothes like a beautiful little girl, complete with earrings, *bindi*, and girl’s shoes. While her sister was still dressing her up, her parents

reached home. Forgetting completely that Mishtu was their daughter too. Her parents

shouted at all three siblings, especially the older two for dressing their brother as a girl! Her parents were horrified with what they had walked into as if their worst fears had come true, that their son wasn’t really their son! This incident had horrified Mishtu too, but she now knew that she was a boy and shouldn’t even think to be like her sisters!



Mishtu and her sisters were sent to the same school. It was co-educational till the fourth standard and after that, it was an all-girls school. The first five years in school were fine. Alike Mishtu, many other girls had short hair, although their reasons were all different – some had short hair because it was easier to manage, some because of bad hair health and some others had short hair because their parents feared their daughter would get lice. Mishtu had short hair because her parents raised her as a boy and boys in their town only had short hair. In junior school, everyone wore a unisex uniform

and no separate ones for girls and boys. Also, in junior school, all children had access to the same toilet, so nothing stood out as different for Mishtu. The problem started when Mishtu reached the fifth standard and stepped into her senior school. Fifth standard onwards girls had to wear a *salwar kameez* to school, a form of clothing that Mishtu used to initially be interested in but was conditioned by her parents to stay away from. However, since that was the best school in town, her parents chose to dismiss her concerns and force her to continue to study there. Going to school in a *salwar kameez* was a big struggle for Mishtu and she still carried the traumatic experience from her childhood for wanting to dress like a girl. Mishtu was miserable. Her discomfort in her clothing was evident in how she carried herself in school, where she found other girls teasing her by calling her 'gents' every time they saw her. Well, all the girls in that school were not as bad, some of them even felt a lot of love and attraction towards Mishtu for being the closest thing to a boy that they could find in their school. They showered her with gifts and attention, but even this made Mishtu uncomfortable because she knew that she wasn't a boy. Every day in this school pushed her further into darkness because she remained confused about who she was. She knew from a very young age that she would like to play with and dress up like her sisters, but her parents always encouraged her to take up 'boyish' activities. She was addressed and treated like the son of the house, but here she was in an all-girls school, which meant that she was a girl! Some girls teased her for being a boy and some others loved her for being a boy, but deep down Mishtu knew that she really was a girl.

Mishtu did try to reach out to her parents, but they could not understand her. While they continued to send her to an all-girls school, they still addressed Mishtu as their son and Mishtu continued to feel lonelier and more misunderstood than ever before. During this time, Mishtu met Sanjana, one of the kindest people that she had come to know. Sanjana studied in the same class as Mishtu. She had often seen Mishtu sit by herself in class during lunch breaks and also noticed how she got bullied by the other girls at school. However, unsure if she could help, Sanjana had never reached out to Mishtu. However, today a line was crossed in school- some of the girls barged into the toilet cubicle that Mishtu was using to check if she was a girl or a boy. She was left much embarrassed and in a state of tears. When school got over, Mishtu was the last person to leave the classroom and Sanjana too had waited along with her, just to apologize on behalf of her entire class. It had no effect on Mishtu. She had silent tears rolling down her cheeks. Sanjana decided to not leave her friend alone today and walk her to her house. This was the beginning of their friendship.

Within the next few months, Mishtu tried to share her reality with Sanjana, how she was a girl and had always been one, but her parents have raised her like a boy, only to put her in an all-girls school and how much she got bullied for how she dressed. Sanjana would listen to all of this empathetically and all she said was that Mishtu truly is what she feels, believes, and sees herself in the mirror and no one can take that away from her. **It wasn't like the other girls in school stopped bullying her and it wasn't like Mishtu had forgotten the humiliation she had faced the other day, but just having a friend who understood her was enough to make her feel seen and heard.**

Points for Discussion:

- Who was Mishtu?
- Why was she raised like a son?
- What happened when her parents had left the house one day and she was alone with her sister? What impact did this incident have on her?
- Mishtu had been studying in the same school from the beginning. Why wasn't she bullied in junior school?
- How did Mishtu feel once she stepped into senior school? Why do you think that happened?
- How would the other girls bully Mishtu?
- What happened in school that made Mishtu feel humiliated?
- Why was Sanjana nice to Mishtu?
- Sanjana could not make Mishtu's problems go away, yet, how did she prove to be helpful for Mishtu?
- Mishtu was a female who also identified as a girl. Why was she still called 'gents'?
- How much influence does upbringing and conditioning have on an individual? Answer this based on how Mishtu was raised against how her sisters were raised. If Mishtu was sent to the same co-curriculars as her sisters and allowed to play with dolls then would she have still been different or the same as her sisters? *(Take the group through a conversation on how Mishtu herself had no gender identity crisis, but it was something forced upon her by her parents. Mishtu was not a transgender. The conflict in her identity was because of how her parents has always dressed her up and addressed her as a boy and also treated her as their son who was given more freedom than her sisters. If her parents had simply raised her like her two other sisters, this conflict in her identity would not have risen.)*



About *Girls Not Brides* -

Girls Not Brides is a global partnership of more than 1500 civil society organizations from over 100 countries committed to ending child marriage and enabling girls to fulfill their potential.

Members are based throughout Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and the Americas. We share the conviction that every girl has the right to lead the life that she chooses and that, by ending child marriage, we can achieve a safer, healthier, and more prosperous future for all.

Stronger together, *Girls Not Brides* members bring child marriage to global attention, build an understanding of what it will take to end child marriage, and call for the laws, policies, and programmes that will make a difference in the lives of millions of girls.

About Project KHEL -

Project KHEL is a unique non-profit initiative based out of Lucknow, India that works towards empowering children, paving the way to a more equal and inclusive society. We impart 21st-century life skills to transform children into informed and gender-sensitive citizens, leaders in their communities, prompt societal change and widen the scope of their opportunities in the future.

Harnessing the 'power of play,' we create safe play spaces and implement holistic, interactive, and experiential learning methods through sports, story-telling, crafts, action songs, and games.

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