

Parvathi's Marriage

It was in 1948, in the early days after India got Independence from colonial rule, as people were still struggling to establish their livelihood, when I turned eight years old. I was playing in the open space outside my house when my father, who was the most highly respectable man in the village, came home along with an elderly person. My father called me in, and I ran into the house giggling, expecting some candies to eat or dolls to play with. I jumped onto my father's lap, and I looked into his eyes. They were filled with pain, pity, disappointment and despair. I lost all my courage and felt as if my protector had fallen. I was vulnerable to all kinds of danger.

I did not understand what had happened to him. I could not collect the strength to look him in the eyes anymore. I started to look around in the room for what was troubling him. Suddenly, I observed that the elderly man who had come along with my father was staring at me with a curious look. I did not understand at first instance why he was looking at me that way. Then I understood that my father was not worried about himself, but he was worried for me. With a frightened heart, I stood up from my father's lap and went and stood behind him, trying to hide from the sight of that elderly man. He called me forward by hand gestures. I stepped slowly towards him. He asked me my name, and with a shivering tone I responded "Parvathi". He looked a little upset. He took my hands in his and pressed them. I cried out in pain. He repeated this at my wrist, forearm and shoulder. Tears started pouring out, but I was so afraid I could not utter a word. I looked at my dad for help, but I saw him looking at what was happening in helplessness.

The elderly man held my face with his hands and started examining every bit of it thoroughly and then pressed my cheeks with his thumb and finger and started checking my mouth. Then he opened his eyes wider and asked me in a furious tone, "Are you always playful and naughty, or do you listen to elders?" I looked at my father for help, with tears coming out of my eyes. The elderly man shook me with force and said: "Don't look at him; answer me." I told him "No, I am not". Then he took his hands off me, and I immediately ran to my father. My father told me to go to my mother, so I ran to her, crying. Looking at me, she also started crying, holding me close to her heart. That was the first time I saw her cry. But I was unable to understand who that man was or why he was creating terror in my life, in my whole family.

After a few minutes, my mother stood up and slowly walked to the door of the kitchen, stood behind it and started looking towards the hall trying to listen to the conversation between my father and the elderly man. I stood behind her holding her legs very tightly as if I would fall off a cliff if I left her, and I slowly peeped into the hall to see what was happening. The sight shook me and scarred me for life. My hero, my savior, the most powerful man I had known on earth, my father, had fallen onto the other man's feet, crying and pleading. After few minutes, that man signaled my father to rise. My father stood up with shivering body, folding his hands, and he started nodding his head for whatever that man was saying. Suddenly, that man stopped and looked towards us and observed me standing there. He narrowed his eyes and gave me a serious glance with a very angry face. I got scared and hid behind my mother. Slowly, I moved towards a corner of the kitchen and sat there trying to gather myself. After a while my mother realized I was not standing by her. She looked around the kitchen and came to me. She sat beside me, and I lay down, keeping my head in her lap. With painful eyes and a heavy heart, I slowly fell asleep.

I woke up in the late evening. I stood up and looked for my mother, forgetting everything that had happened in the morning. My mother ignored me and started preparing food for us as usual. Everything was happening according to the normal routine, but I felt dried tears on my face. With painful eyes, I felt confused. Finally, I consoled myself with the thought that all that had happened was just a nightmare, and I might have cried in my sleep. I picked up my favorite best friend, "Gudiya" from the shelf. "Gudiya" was a girl doll, with which I always played. It was the only doll I ever had. My mother always made a similar dress for me and my "Gudiya". Whatever my mother told me, I told my Gudiya. Gudiya was my best pal in my happiness and in sorrow. I took Gudiya with one hand, and I went to my mother asking her to bathe me. She took me along with Gudiya to the back yard, took water from the vessel, and bathed me. In parallel, I did the same with Gudiya. We three went inside the house. My mother tied my hair, and I did it to Gudiya.

My father entered the house from somewhere. Looking at him, I breathed a deep sigh of relief, confirming to myself that whatever had happened was a nightmare and that my father had just now come home. I jumped up from my mother's lap and went and hugged my father, but he pushed me away angrily, and I fell on the ground. He had never behaved like this with me before, and it did not take time for me to realize that

everything I was experiencing was not from a nightmare and that the moment had not passed. I sat down in a corner of the hall, while my mother poured water for him to have a bath. After his bath, she served my father dinner, and he called me. I went to the kitchen slowly and stood by the door. He looked at me seriously and walked towards the stool on which he sat every day to eat his dinner. As he passed me, I ran to my mother and sat beside her, holding onto her. She was about to place food in my mouth. My father shouted at her, "Stop! From today she should eat by herself, sleep by herself, and bathe by herself. She should do everything by herself. Also, teach her the household works. Make her do everything. Don't pamper her with your love. She should be able to handle everything." I felt confused. But I understood one thing: that elderly man was the reason for this calamity.

After a five minutes' pause, my mother started a conversation.

Mother: *Is that visitor the cause of all this?*

Father: *Yes, he is. Parvathi, Look at me. The man who came to our home this morning was Raghavayya Garu (Mr. Raghavayya). Whenever you see him, you shall fold your hands with respect and salute him with "Namaste", and you will take his blessing by touching his feet. And remember you will always address him as "Sir".*

Mother: *What happened? Why are you angry at Parvathi?*

Father: *Yes, it is my mistake to be angry at Parvathi because the mistake is yours. You pampered and spoiled her. Now they are demanding three times the dowry that I expected initially.*

He stared at my mother for a second and continued.

Yes, Parvathi is getting married. She will become Raghavayya's daughter-in-law. He is the head of a nearby village, and I met him at a conference of intellectuals which he was heading there. Afterwards, he came and spoke to me, thanking me for my participation. He asked me about my family, and I told him about you – about how cultured you are and how I am a successful leading man in my village. Then I spoke about Parvathi – about how well-nourished and well-mannered she is. He immediately asked her hand for his son.

For a moment, I did not understand what was happening. Then he told me about his son who is 23 years old and said they are looking for a bride for him. Their family is very

orthodox and more traditional than us. Moreover, they are very well acclaimed and well established. I was overwhelmed and could not deny the offer. Immediately, I invited him to our house, so that he could receive our hospitality and look at the girl, bless her and appreciate her.

When Raghavayya arrived here, Parvathi was playing with children of another caste, and he was horrified at the sight. I called him in and offered him a seat and a hand fan. Looking at his worried expression, I tried to divert him by calling Parvathi inside. She did not wash her hands and legs with water. She came running in and shamelessly jumped into my lap. First, she should show her respect to all elderly people. She cannot behave like a child. She is already eight years old, and now that she is getting married, she should serve her husband and perform the duties of a wife. Did you see, when Mr. Raghavayya asked her name, she reluctantly said: "Parvathi" without adding "Sir" out of respect? And when he was carefully checking the condition of her health and trying to find out whether she is fit to serve his son, she started crying. It was a very embarrassing situation for me.

Then, as she ran inside, he started shouting, calling me a liar. He said "she is not well nourished; she doesn't have proper manners. If she comes to my home, instead of her serving my son, we must look after her. If she becomes my daughter in law and continues to act this way, my relatives and guests will criticize us. She did not touch my feet to take my blessings, nor did she even offer me water to drink. Listening to you talk about your family at the conference, I was happy hear you express your opinions and talk about your values. But now that I have found out your true colors, I shall spread the word across the villages about your hypocrisy, and I will shame you for life."

I was speechless. I started shivering, and I fell to his feet pleading to him to forgive us for her mistake. I pleaded with him, telling him, "Before her marriage, I shall train her to be however you want her to be. I will not make her disappoint you. If you spread the word as you have said you said you shall do, nobody will marry her. And in this society, if a girl doesn't get married at a certain age, every man tries to put his hands on her body. As I would not be able to tolerate such a situation, my entire family would have to commit suicide. Please forgive me and my daughter for our ignorance!" Then he asked me to get up and told me not to look him in the eyes.

Then he said, "From now on you will look only at my feet. You have lost the respect to look in my eyes or my son's eyes or even talk to me. Once your daughter enters my house, neither you nor any of your family members will ever be able to enter my house. This will be forbidden for your shameless family. If you want to meet her, you should come and ask me first. If I allow it, then you can come and see your daughter standing in the back yard of the house, but only at a time which I'll tell you. You must pay me a dowry of 15,000 Rupees and 10 acres of land. Then only can your daughter step into my house."

I tried to tell him the amount is very high. But when I tried to open my mouth, he shouted "Shut up, you shameless creature", and then he looked inside at Parvathi very seriously and walked outside angrily. I followed him, carrying his bag. I called a horse carriage, paid the driver and told him to take Mr. Raghavayya safely to his village. After boarding the carriage, Mr. Raghavayya said, "keep the money ready. I shall discuss with the priests and fix a date for the marriage and will inform you. If I find any lapse in the arrangements or any shortage of money, I'll humiliate your entire family and will burn you alive." I nodded in agreement and went to the temple and tried to pull myself together from all that had happened since morning. I could only pray to the gods for a better life and for less trouble for our daughter."

Then my mother and father had another short but serious conversation.

Mother: How will you pay the dowry? Also, they have not mentioned it, but we must arrange gold ornaments for our daughter and sisters of the groom. We must also buy clothes for their relatives and for our daughter. We must make so many other arrangements, besides. The money we have saved--will it be sufficient?

Father: I will take out a mortgage on this house, and I will take out a loan from the merchant. If we cannot proceed with the marriage. I cannot imagine the consequences.

Then my father looked at me in pity, cleared his tears with his hands, washed his hands and got up from the stool without completing his dinner. I continued looking at him without understanding much at all of what was happening. The only thing that I could understand was my father was in trouble and worried because of me. He was crying because of me.

The next few days rushed by quickly. I wasn't allowed to step out of the house, and Mother did not speak to me. The only conversation she had with me was about what work I

should do and about how happy she was with the work I had done. If she thought my work was good, she let me have my favorite food. When she was disappointed, I either received a curry I did not like or I was left starving. I did not understand why she was punishing me. In the beginning, I took liberties and asked her why she was punishing me. She said I would be leaving home and would start living in another house, so I should learn to manage all my responsibilities myself. I asked her whose house? Where am I going? When will I come back? She shouted at me to shut up and then immediately hugged me, crying heavily. Then she slowly wiped away her tears with the edge of her saree. Then she said, “now that older man’s house is going to be your home. You will not be our daughter anymore. You shall become their daughter-in-law. And your responsibility will be to respect your new family. Obey the orders of your in-laws, and obey the orders of your husband. Serve him the best, and satisfy everyone with your decent and dignified behavior. From today onwards, you will always wait until last and give more importance to everyone else in your family.” I asked my mother if she would come and live with me. She shook her head in denial.

I went and slept with Gudiya.

Some days later I got married, with relatives pouring into my house, and every woman from my family came to me and praised me for looking like a princess. Everyone from my in-law’s family enjoyed our hospitality and at the same time searched out every minor lapse to take the opportunity to hurt my father by insulting him in front of everyone. As promised, my father handed over money and property to Mr. Raghavayya. Then he signaled the priest to start the marriage ceremony. I watched all this from the window. My father felt a great sigh of relief and rushed inside, asking my relatives to bring me to the dais. On the dais, there were two stools facing each other. On the left side, the priest was oiling the ritual fire. I sat on a stool, and then two people came and held a white cloth like a curtain in front of me. I vaguely made out some motions on the opposite side of the cloth. A man came and sat on the other stool. I could not see him, but I could see through the transparency of the white cloth in the sunlight that this man was very tall and was younger than my father. Then my father came and sat next to me. The priest gave me a leaf with jaggery and uncooked rice on it. I did not know what to do. My father caught hold of my wrist, pulled my hand to the other side and made me hold that leaf on that man’s head. I could not reach him properly, and my hand and shoulder were in pain from

the force of my father's arm. However, I did not cry, as I knew it could create a ruckus in front of all the people. That was the first time in my life I tried to stop my tears. I kept my hand on his head even though I had the painful sensation of my hand separated from my body. After chanting few prayers, the priest signaled something, and then that man held a similar leaf on my head. At that point, everybody started throwing spiritual rice and blessing us, with good wishes for my father and mother.

Later, the curtain was removed, and we both sat next to each other facing the fire. The smoke of that fire caused an itching and burning sensation in my eyes. And when the priest poured oil on it, the fire started to dance ferociously, and it frightened me. But what could I do? Everything was a disaster threatening to ruin me. After some time, that young man tied a yellow thread with a turmeric stick hanging to it around my neck. And then my mother told me to hold the stick with both hands and by closing my eyes touch it to my eyelids. I did as she directed me to. Then I was told to touch the young man's feet with my hands to take his blessings. I did as I was told. After the ceremony, I was told to eat out of the same leaf from which he was eating his food. Everybody had food along with that man. But by the time my turn came, there was not much food left, so I ate a banana and left. Then we both were asked to touch everyone's feet and take their blessings. We followed these instructions, and this proceeded for almost one hour. Then my mother came and hugged me and told me "I am very happy today; you have made us proud. Finally, you have got married. Thank you, my child." That was when I came to know that I was married to that young man. However, though, I had absolutely no idea what getting married meant.

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