

Pinjra Tod Kar

Marriage most foul: The story of Hyderabad's contract marriages

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The year was 1991. India had just entered the age of globalisation, but was still struggling to come to terms with long-standing societal issues like child marriages, female foeticide and poverty. It was around this time that Ameena, a young girl from the Old City who had been forcefully married to a 60-year-old Arab Sheikh, was rescued by an alert Air India hostess Amrita Ahluwalia. She found the child crying inconsolably and, when queried, Ameena revealed that her parents married her off to 60-year-old Saudi national Yahya Al-Sagih. On landing in New Delhi, Amrita alerted the police, preventing the girl from being flown to the Gulf. The Saudi man was arrested.

Soon her story became an internationally watched news story and eventually she became almost an icon in the renewed movement against child marriages. Fast forward 29 years. India is now a popular global destination and Hyderabad, the hub for many multinational corporations. Ironically the city continues to battle the very same issues that dogged it 29 years back - child marriage and poverty. And 'contract marriages' like the one Ameena was forced into in 1991. Amidst all this, the fate of Ameena remains unchanged. According to members of Shaheen Women's Resource and Welfare Association, Ameena continues to live in abject poverty and leads almost a hand-to-mouth existence. Ameena, on her part, refuses to meet or talk to the media, saying she stopped being a person as soon as she became an 'example' for contract brides.

“मां को तकलीफ न हो। मां को तकलीफ न हो। हर्ष का कोई बोझ न हो। मेरे भाइयों के लिए एक मैं तारा चमके। मेरे जाने से मेरे घर में उजाला आए। मेरे जाने से मेरे घर में उजाला आए। घर में चूल्हा तो जलेगा नए कपड़े होंगे। दिल ने सोचा चलो सौदा कर लें। दिल ने सोचा चलो सौदा कर ले। ईंट में थी 16 की वो था 65 का मैं थी 16 की वो था 65 का ईंट पर ईंट रखे एक नया छत बन जाए रात ही रात मेरा घर महल बन जाए। दिल ने सोचा चलो सौदा कर ले। नया टीवी नई गाड़ी, नया टीवी नई गाड़ी नया मोबाइल मिले सारा घर नाच उठे खुशियों का सागर उबले दिल ने सोचा चलो सौदा कर लें। रात आई थी बहुत रातों के बाद आई थी, रात आई थी बहुत रातों के बाद आई थी रात आई थी लम्बे की सौगात लिए ख्वाहिशों की नई बारात लिए, एक तूफान सा उठा था दिल में नई चाहत बनकर। एक तूफान सा उठा था दिल में नई चाहत बन कर पास आया ही था वो जोश जुनून ठंडा हुआ। रात भर सुन्द पड़ी तकिया मेरा रोने लगा आंख जो मूंद ली। बिस्तर दोस होने लगी। देखती क्या हूं मेरे बाजू मेरे हाथ बने रेत का ढेर, देखती क्या हूं मेरे बाजू मेरे हाथ बने रेत का ढेर मेरी रग रग में सीमेंट फैल गई दीवारें खड़ी होने लगीं एक नया महल बना, नगर बना, शहर बना, मेरा मासूम बदन महल तले, नगर तले दफन हुआ।”

Welcome to episode 5 of Pinjra Tod Kar. I am Padma Priya, editor for Suno India, this podcast is conceived and produced by Goethe-Zentrum Hyderabad with the support of Suno-India and Bol-Hyderabad. In this episode, Tasleem Begum tells us her story of being married as a 14-year-old to a 62-year-old man and how she broke free from the clutches of the lucrative “Sheikh marriage business”. The historical roots of this “tradition” -now a business, goes back to the 18th century when elite Yemen men came to Hyderabad and held high positions in the Nizam’s army. The community called as Choush Arabs maintained its links with their homeland through marriage alliances. Soon local communities in Hyderabad noticed that the Choush Arabs did not have a dowry tradition but had a custom of paying bride price. That is each bride was paid a price; what this meant was that for the local communities, suddenly young women were viewed as an asset whereas the dowry system portrayed them as a burden. This bride tradition is still alive among these Arabs and it has given rise to a “marriage market”. It is the ugly mix of sex tourism and trafficking though it is not viewed as such.

Before I begin, I want to take the listeners through the lanes and bylanes of Hyderabad’s Old City. A confluence of old and new, Hyderabad’s Old City carries its own charm. From the Chudi Bazaar to the piping hot biryani, this tourist hotspot also hides amidst its abject poverty. It’s population is a mix of long-established elites and migrants, who have more recently arrived from rural areas and are often poor. It is this abject poverty that drove Tasleem into the clutches of a ‘broker’ who arranged young brides for Sheikhs.

Tasleem was 13-years-old when she first heard her neighbour talk to her mother about Sheikh marriage. At that time, she had dropped out of schooling due to financial troubles with her mother being the sole breadwinner, she tells us.

Ghar mein financial problem bohot zyada rehta tha. Mere mummy logo ke gharo mein domestic worker karte the. To iss wajah se mummy ki tabyat bhi theek nahi rehti thi. Aur ghar bhi hum log ka own nahi tha, rent pe rehte the hum log. Toh ghar ka kiraya dena woh sab mumma ke uppar hi chagi thi responsibility pura burden unke uppar ho gaya tha. Toh aise hi humare ghar ke paas jo neighbour rehte na toh who advice kare the waisa ki dusri country se jo log aate.. Sheikh marriage aap log suna..jaise ki dusri countriyan se kuch aadmiyan aate aur shaadi kar liye toh ghar dilate, paise dete, sona dilate bolke woh log aisa offer kare the. Tabh main chote rehne se main ghar ke problems dekhte rehti thi. Mere mummy se zyada tar mere mummy ye sab responsibility uthathe, mere papa kuch nahi karte. Tabh main bhi mere mummy un logo ke liye kuch karna, mere family ke liye kuch karna bolke hamesha aisa sochthi thi main.

Tasleem saw what her neighbour told her mother about being married to a wealthy sheikh as a way of bringing her family out of poverty.

Tabh aisa phir baad mein jo neighbour bole the na, mere dimaag mein woh baith gaya tha ki main aisa shaadi kar lungi toh ghar mein problem kum hojayengi, kahi na kahi mere mummy bhi kaam pe nahi jayenge, wo ye bolke main sochi. 1 Jo ghar ke paas neighbor the mere meri friend Mona bolke the unki mummy ke pas unki behen ati thi jo ki shadi krke kunte pe diye the toh matlab broker hi thi toh ek bari dekhi thi unki behen merko hum log aise hi khel rahe the pakaane ka khel rahe the tab wo log aaye the tab dekhe the toh uske bad unko humari ghar ki financial problem ka maloom tha mere papa drink krke aake pukarte karte aur sab maloom tha wo bole merko aisa aisa hai aisa aisa hai tumhare ko ghar dilata sheikh wo abi paisa data sona dilata merko ye offer kar rahe the log. Soch ke baad phir uss din gaye the hum loga, jo broker rehta na uske ghar pe gaye the hum log. Toh woh log le gaye the. Already 5 ladkiyan the wahan pe. Jab meri age 14 thi, merko utni knowledge nahi thi tab log kya bolke, woh yeh capture kar lete..mera mind, uske hisaab se chal rahi thi main. Toh already 5 ladkiyan the wahan pe. 5 ladkiyan the wahan pe, matlab woh log bhi chote chote the. Ek 13 ke the, koi 12 ke the, koi 14 ke the, aisa kum aage ke the ladkiyan. Woh broker ka ghar tha, tab main aisi hi, mere paas acche kapde bhi nahi the, main aisi normal kapde mein gayi toh phir wahan pe jaane ke baad merko frock pehenaye the, pehenakar tayaaar kare the woh. Phir ek bada hall tha, bade hall mein matlab woh dusri country ka Sheikh aaya tha. Toh bithai uske saamne. Bithai baad uss hall mein Sheikh ko bithai aur brokers bhi the. Ek one by one ladki ko bulake bata rahe the, woh Sheikh ko. Toh woh..matlab woh Sheikh select karte the woh 5 ladkiyan, woh 5 aur mai, mila kar 6 ladkiyan se jo pasand hai woh ladki se uno Nikkah karte hai bolke bole the. Tab woh pure ladkiyon ko bataye phir merko bhi bataye. Phir return merko dubara baar bataye, phir bataye baad phir chalke dikhao bolke matlab wo nikal ke dikhaye the. Dikhane ke baad woh Sheikh merko pasand kar liye the.

According to house surveys by independent NGOs, close to 30-35 such marriages take place every month in the Old City. For many people living here, having a daughter means a possible bankruptcy, thanks to the growing dowry demands. The girls, often aged between 11-18 years, are scouted by the neighbourly 'aunty' who might be a family friend. These female brokers often scout within their extended family or neighborhood for young girls and persuade the parents to get them married to wealthy Sheikhs from Sudan, Nigeria or Arab nations. Oftentimes, parents are promised that their lives will get better if their daughter is sent along with these Sheikhs. They are also paid an amount ranging between Rs 50,000 to Rs 1 lakh. The younger and fairer the girl, the higher the amount a family can expect. These brokers, according to Shaheen members, are present in every locality of the Old City, especially in areas inhabited by the poorest sections.

Tasleem told me that once her mother met the 62-year-old "groom", she objected to the marriage & insisted that Tasleem go back to school.

Mere mummy is ke liye agree nahi the, koi zaroozat nahi hai, ino dada ki age ke hai, kaisa soch ke tum decision lete, ye wrong hai, nakko, tum study karo bolke mere mummy force

kare merko. Koi zaroorat nahi, chalo yahan se bolke mere mummy la liye wahan se. La liye baad, phir wh neighbour log the na, woh phir aaye humare ghar ko, aake force karne lage the merko, “dekho wo ghar dilate bolke bolre, tumhare mummy ki tabyat bhi theek nahi rehti. Tum tumhare family ke barein mein socho, ek hi ladki nahi hai, aur ek ladki hai, aur bhi bhayyan hai,” wo ye bolke bole merko. Toh phir main mere mummy ko force karne lagi thi, mummy nahi merko kar lena toh kar lena hai, apni ghar ki life bhi change ho jaati, apne ko ghar aata, kiraya bhi nahi dena padhta, wo dilate bolra na, apni life puri change ho jaati, wo ye bolke main mere mummy ko bohot force kari. Force karne ke baad mere mummy maanre ich the, toh phir main wo jo bolre the na, unko bula ke wo mere mummy ko convince karne lage mere mummy ko, mummy ko samjhai, “nahi mummy aap maan jao” bolke bohot try kari main. Mere mummy ko do din lage samjhane ke liye.

Jameela Nishat, founder of Shaheen told us in Episode 1 of this podcast how exploitative these “contract marriages” become and recounted the case of a young girl called Rehana who was married 17 times, each time, making her family richer. As the eldest daughter of a family with 4 daughters, Rehana bore the burden of pulling her family out of poverty.

“लेकिन 2007 में there was one case where the girl was married 17 times, and she was actually in the gulf country, she had a daughter, her name was Rehanna. And she wanted to come back and live a normal life with her parents and her parents refused to take her back. We don’t know what happened to her now. She wrote a letter to her mother, those days we didn’t have mobile or anything. So, she wrote a letter to her mother. आपको 17वां दामाद मुबारक।” (From Episode 1, Jameela’s part”) All other sisters which were elder, normally the eldest of the family, the eldest sister gets this, has to sacrifice her life this way. Then all the others are married off, because she keeps sending money, others can marry, to get married. So, this girl when she came back here, she was staying in a hotel and our girls met her and she gave a whole story and her mother refused to meet her because they didn’t accept her as she was married 17 times. जो रेगुलर उसका पैसा आ रहा था वो खा रहे थे। वो अच्छी लग रही थी। जब उसने बताया कि वो उसको एक मर्तबा शादी हुई तो she was rejected| then she was totally hurt and she went back and she never came back. मगर उसके बाद मैं।

So how are these girls identified and found by these brokers? The modus operandi of these brokers is actually very well-planned. The Old City has a number of beauty parlours and mehendi training institutes which offer a six month diploma to young girls seeking to build their skill sets. It’s at these training institutes that the ball is set in motion by the women running the institutes for short-listing young girls as prospective brides. The aunty at the institute will begin by asking about the girl and her background - how many siblings does she have, especially how many sisters and what her parents do. Slowly, over the month, the trainer goes on to talk about the benefits of being married to a rich Sheikh and convinces the girls to send their photos and biodata to the prospective groom. A little about the groom is told to the girl, and once convinced, the ‘nikah’ is performed over phone or sometimes at midnight meetings in lodges which are sometimes owned by

brokers themselves. Incidentally, these brokers have their own 'Qazis' who perform such weddings. Oftentimes, the girl is asked to sign a blank document. Once, the Sheikh-husband is done enjoying her, and before he leaves to his country, he sends a 'Talaqnama' to the girl, leaving her in dire straits. Sometimes, they are left upon becoming pregnant. And even worse, sometimes, the Sheikh "husbands" sell them to other Sheikhs trapping them in a vicious cycle of sex trafficking. There are many such brokers who are working in the Old City in an underhand manner. The female brokers are headed by male brokers. Often, the female brokers were themselves contract brides or child brides in the past. Jameela Nishat says every contract marriage benefits 5-6 families in all.

For Tasleem her belief that a marriage with a wealthy sheikh stemmed from her "neighbour" who had convinced her that it was the way out of poverty. Tasleem continues and tells what happened after the "marriage" was finalised. The Sheikh, Tasleem says, had married another 14-year-old that morning and she only found out about it soon after.

Contract marriage hui thi ye. Uno dhoke se already ek ladki se shaadi kare the, wo bhi 14 years kit hi. Aisa morning unke saath hui, afternoon mere saath hui. Mere mummy disagree the na, tabhi un log dusre ladki ho dekhke, pasand karke uss din hi shaadi kar liye kathe. Matlab wo log lodge mein, hotel mein rakhe the, morning mein wo ladki bhaag gayi toh afternoon mein mere se shaadi kare the. Eighty thousand diye the sheikh, contract par sign le leke, contract papers pe. Toh forty thousand meri mummy ko diye the, forty thousand broker liye the, forty thousand mein se ten thousand police wale liye the. Nahi ten thousand wo log liye the passport banana ke liye brokers. Thirty thousand mere mummy kan the, phir uske baad merko lodge pe leke gaye, lodge lekar gaye, aur chodh diye. Chodh deke chale gaye mere mummy loga, Lekin jaane ke baad, mere mummy loga jaate aisa door lock kare koi, kart eek mirror tha door ko, uno jaake dekhke.. Chodh ke jaane ke baad, matlab door lock kare, aur door lock kare toh wo jaa kar pehle mirror mein dekhe, dekhke kaafi kuch khush ho gaye uno. Toh main boli kya hua, bolke bole tho phir uno kholte side door ek ladki aayi andhar. Andhar aane ke baad uno door phir se laga diye baad uno bohot khush go gaye. Uno morning mein jo shaadi kiye, wohi ladki wapas aa gayi bhaag ke phir unke paas. Abh do do ladkiyan hai, do do ladkiyon ko use karenge uno do do ladkiyon ke saath enjoy karenge bolke uno sochke bohot khush ho gaye. Wo jaane ke baad wo ladki unhe kaafi gaaliyan de rahi thi, matlab bohot zyada ghalat behaviour kar rahi thi. Toh main puchi kaun hai aap boletho phir wo ladki repeat kari, aap kaun hai bolke, toh main boli main inki biwi hoon, ino merko shaadi karke lelke aaye bolke boletho, wo ladki matlab hasne lagi, "tum itne age kea admi se kaise shaadi kar liye? Budde se" wo ye bolke boli.

Soon after police barged into the lodge, Tasleem recounts and found the Sheikh with two minor girls- Tasleem and the other 14-year-old. The police arrested the Sheikh, the broker involved and also Tasleem's mother.

Phir jaake door kholte saahi police aa gayi andhar. Aate saari puro ko pakadli. Sheikh ko pakdi, jo bhi uska saman tha, phir main bhi aa gayi. Police wale puche, tum kaun hai boletho, main afternoon mein shaadi karke laye mereko bolke main boli. Toh phir police wale baatan kare, baatan kare, toh main rone lagi, phir merko bitha ke uske saath le leke aaye Bahoorinagar mein leke aane ke baad, tab merko bhi bohot gussa aaya unke uppar. Meri mummy samjha rahi the nakko, study karlo bolke, toh main kahi na kahi mere ghar mein financial problem door hota, support hota mere mummy ko bolke main ye step uthai. Toh mere saath dhoka hua bolke, main bhi police walo ke saamne usko kench ke behri maari, merko dhoka kare humare saath bolke. Kahi na kahi main dekhi bhi nahi ki uno itne age ke the, unke 62, mere dada ke age ke the. Toh bhi main ek kuch sochi nahi, mere ghar ke liye wo step uthai. toh wo dhoka diye toh mai unko maari maari police wali maarte lage puche wo ki kyun maari bolle mai boli aisa sa ghar ke problems ki wajah se maine ye step liya but ye aadmi aisa dhoka diya bolke fir merlo gussa aane ki wajah se mai complaint kari uski upar fir poore brokers ko pakda. Meri mummy ko bhi arrest krliye the police wale.

She says that in the ensuing commotion, the police had asked where she was from and which school she had studied in. The police then went to the school and found her address and arrested her mother in front of the entire community. She says this step brought a lot of shame to the family and her extended family soon shifted her to a shelter home.

uske bad mere mummy log jail ko chale gye the toh mai mere aunty ke ghar reh rahi thi wahan pe bahot problems ho gye the na toh bezati ho gyi thi toh mai aunty ke yahan reh rahi thi toh fir police wale daily call kar rahe the merko humare aunty ke pas jo number deke aaye the police walo ko call kar rahe the. Arre ladki ko award aya aisa aisa bol rahe the bula rahe the toh hum log bole koi zarurat nahi hai nahi hona award bole toh fir waise hi daily phone krte the aap aao aur aake leke jao. Fir hum log wahan gaye the wo ek ladki jo aur ek ladki thi case me wo ladki ko bhi bulaye the merko unko shelter home me dal diye the sab dhoke se bula ke shelter home me 15 days thi mai wahan pe wahan ka shelter home ka bhi kuch bhi acha nahi tha.

It was here at the shelter home that Tasleem met Jameela Nishat who heard her story. Tasleem sought her help and she says within 15 days her father came and took her out of the shelter home. Tasleem's mother spent 3 months behind bars and Tasleem says she worked in a factory to earn the bail money required to get her mother released from jail. But the shame and stigma of being a child bride to a failed Sheikh marriage plagued Tasleem and her family for years to come. While Tasleem was blamed by her family for bringing shame to the family, the family was shamed for selling their daughter to an old Arab man. The police's constant follow ups, Tasleem says made matters worse.

Working along with police is critical in cracking down on these kinds of contract marriages, says Jameela.

पहले पहले हम लोग पुलिस को इन्फॉर्म करते थे कि ऐसे ऐसे हम लोग स्टिंग ऑपरेशन कर रहे हैं, you please come and support us, at least arrest that man that sheikh. They would say, नहीं मैडम आपके पास तो ऐसा होता ना it's allowed in your religion. So, we had no way to say. But because we were continuously working on this issue, we did not leave that issue, then police started accepting and thanks to some of DCPs who took it seriously and started arresting the sheikhs.

According to the police, the bridegrooms often come from the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Sudan and Somalia in search of girls. They usually come to Hyderabad on visitor's visas or sometimes on medical grounds. They have local contacts to help them arrange visas and hotel stay, the police say.

At times like these we take help from organizations like Shaheen Women and Welfare Association in providing counselling services. At the same time when we get cases related to women and marriages we take their help. In this way, the police department and Shaheen Women and Welfare Association, we coordinate with each other and try to resolve issues. We also provide additional services like patrolling services and we will continue to support them.

Soon after, two other members of Shaheen followed up on her and insisted she visit their centre. Once she went there, She joined tailoring classes and saved up money to finish her tenth class. Tasleem says that Shaheen and the solidarity she got from the other women there saved her life and transformed her life.

Shaheen se ek new zindagi mili pehle toh do bar suicide krne ki koshish ki thi meri life aisi ho gyi meri life waisi ho gyi matlab jo bhi close friends the zada time bachpan me mai friends ke sath time spend krta thi sameera bolke ye haste ki wajah se uskimummy bhi ignore krne lagi thi avoid krta thi ki nahi baat karna tum wo ladki se baat karogi toh mohalle me log hain wo kya bolenge ye wo bolke, friends poore chhoot gye the mere jo school time me 8th me the tab ye haadse ki wajah se chhoot gye the fir ab mai yeh apni study continue kri fir activa li aur job bhi kar rahi hun bolke fir new friends ban gye jo chhoot gye the wo bhi friends wapas aa gye fir mai 4 wheeler seekhi yahin shaheen se hi fir license bhi mila merko pass ho gyi mai usme bhi aur government se award bhi mila mrko beti bachao beti padhao ka aur fir 25,000 bhi mile the government se.

In 2017, following many such instances coming to light, the police cracked down on the entire network of people fueling this ugly practice. The crackdown led to the arrest of some grooms, brokers, lodge owners and Qazis in Hyderabad. The police also opened suspect sheets against 38 local brokers and four lodge owners and also against Qazis who were resorting to illegal activities. The lodges were also geo-tagged by the city police to keep an eye of operations there. This is what Mahendra Reddy DGP had to say in 2017.

Ye poore 20 aadmi ko giraftaar kiya hai, isme hum dekhe toh ye bada network hai jab bhi ye gulf countries se ye sheikh jab aate hain wo jab airport me land hote hain unko receive krne ke liye kuch brokers rehte hain, transportation arrange krne ke liye brokers hain, aur accomodation arrange krne ke liye brokers hain, unko guest house me lodges me rakh ke local areas me jo poor families me rehte unko shaandaar future bolke, minor girls ke parents ko convince krne ke baad, ye sheikhs ke paas leke jaake usko interview kra rhe hain, jab ye interview chal rha tha, hum raid kiye hain aur 12 minor girls ko rescue kiya hai, aur ye poora network me ye brokers bahot zada money kama rahe hain, parents ko future acha, paisa dikha ke unko mesmerise krke unko cheat kr rhe hain aur ye old age sheikhs ko minor girls se marriage krane me ye brokers aur qazis ka bahot important role hai. Ye Hyderabad city me jo brokers hain ye brokers me se kuch log ye aadhar certificate me jo date of birth hai wo minor dikhayi de rha hai, aur ye minor ko major krne ke liye ye aadhar me date of birth badla hai aur uske baad birth certificate liya hai uske bad passport ke liye apply kiya hai. Aise ye poora fake documentation se ye brokers, qazis ke sath aur ye local brokers aur ye gulf countries ke brokers ye contact me reh ke ye kaam kar rahe hain.

In 2017, the Telangana State Minority Welfare Department prepared an ordinance not only to control the growing number of the Arab marriages, but also to regulate services of Qazis in the State. But the ordinance is yet to be passed. One of the suggestions made in the ordinance to curb these contract marriages was that a foreigner should obtain an NOC from his country and that the age gap between the bride and groom should not be more than 10 years, apart from stating that the bridegroom has to deposit Rs 10 lakh in the name of the bride. A face to face programme between the victims of such marriages and Minority Welfare Department was also planned to help the government machinery understand the situation. So deep-rooted is this problem, that despite all these efforts, nearly 2000 such marriages were recorded in 2017 alone (and a similar number in subsequent years) and Shaheen with the help of police could only stop 156 such marriages. The police believe that the crackdown in 2017 helped reduce the number of such marriages but Jameela Nishat believes that it is a case of these criminals changing their modus operandi.

For now Shaheen Women's Resource and Welfare Association continues to work relentlessly in counseling the families in Old City, making them aware about this social evil & more importantly pushing for young girls and women to be empowered through education and skill development.

Merko ek ghar banana hai jise ki mai soch ke kari thi na sheikh marriage jo kari thi ek ghar hoga aisa aisa bolke kari thi abi merko na mera dreams aur goal yehi hai ki mai apne parents ke liye ghar banau mai mehnat krke acha un logon ke liye ek chota sa room hi bana ke rakhun unko.

Bit by bit, these young women like Tasleem are breaking through the barriers of poverty and gender discrimination & are rising like the phoenix, from the ashes, stronger and more resilient.

Thank you for listening to this episode of Pinjra Tod Kar. This podcast is conceived and produced by Goethe-Zentrum Hyderabad with the support of Suno-India and Bol-Hyderabad. You can listen to all the episodes of Pinjra Tod Kar on our website SunoIndia.in or any other podcasting app of your choice. The podcast is also available on Goethe Zentrum Hyderabad and Bol Hyderabad websites. You can also find additional resources on our website www.sunoindia.in