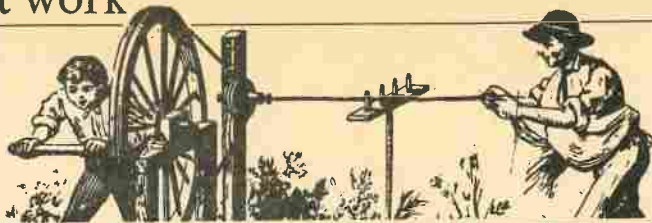


Society at work



A Sikh girl's bridal path

Madeleine Fullerton

One morning at school Ranjit, a 15 year old Sikh girl, fought with her elder sister in the corridor. Teachers couldn't separate the normally quiet and well-behaved girls. They tore each other's hair and clothes and swore they'd never speak to one another again.

Afterwards, the headmistress questioned Ranjit. She seemed more angry than distressed, and said she wanted to leave home immediately. Then, at the end of the school day, she refused to go home. The head telephoned my office, asking for a social worker to come and chat to Ranjit.

Ranjit was slumped in an armchair in the head's study. She sat up straight when I entered, and her face lit up in the expectation that I could help her. I would not have guessed she came from an orthodox Sikh family. She wore a T-shirt and jeans, and her hair was loose around her shoulders instead of being fastened in tight braids. She'd cut a shaggy fringe at the front and streaked it unevenly with henna.

She confidently repeated her request to leave home. She had been thinking it over for some time and, having now made her decision, she was waiting impatiently for someone to tell her how she should go and where. I explained that it was not quite so simple. For a start, there were no grounds to take her into care without her parents' consent. There were no relatives who would have her. I asked her what made living at home so unbearable. She told me her sister had discovered she was seeing a Pakistani boy after school. As a result, she was confined at home, except to go to school. Her sister was supposed to report back to the family any contact Ranjit had with male or female Pakistani students. This was the cause of the fight that morning.

Ranjit said her parents were particularly upset that she was seeing a Pakistani boy (an English one would not have been such a crime). At first, she argued with them, insisting that their attitude to Pakistanis was old-fashioned and rooted in a history that bore no relevance to her in Britain today. This forceful defence of her actions alarmed her parents still further and she was beaten. She responded by running away, only to be brought home by the police. The more she was punished, the more convinced she became that life in her community had little to offer her.

She insisted she had considered the consequences of leaving home and how she

would feel if her family and community rejected her. She wanted to live in a children's home, and thought she had plenty of friends to support her—Indians, Pakistani, English and West Indian. Race did not matter to her as it did to her parents. She didn't know if she wanted to stay on at school, though her work was good enough to take A levels if she wanted to.

She enjoyed playing sports, especially tennis, and wanted to go disco-dancing with friends. She criticised her parents for insisting she was more profitably engaged cooking and sewing at home in preparation for her vital, but narrowly defined, future in the family. She admitted she would miss the closeness and security of her family life, but on the whole she had lost sight of its strengths. She saw only the restrictions it placed on her as she grew older.

I suggested that if we could gain her



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parents' trust, we could try to negotiate more freedom for her. I hoped to avoid a confrontation in which she would be forced to reject her family, or they would be forced to reject her. Ranjit argued passionately that her parents were not open to compromise. She had brought too much shame on them, and they would never trust her again. As a white person, she said, I could never understand the significance of that loss of trust.

I changed my tactics, and asked her how much freedom her 17 year old sister was allowed. She obeyed her parents and they trusted her. So she was allowed to stay on at school and would be encouraged to find a job. I suggested this might be a more effective way of gaining lasting independence, but Ranjit wanted her freedom immediately, not in the dim future.

Ranjit's parents didn't speak English, but they refused to allow me to bring an interpreter because of the shameful and private nature of their problem. Ranjit herself wasn't allowed to be present. Her parents insisted on using their 18 year old son to interpret. This presented two problems for me. First, I had to be careful not to over-identify with Ranjit, simply because communication was difficult with her parents and so easy with her. Secondly, the son did not translate directly what his parents said, but simply repeated his own **condemnation** of his sister for not obeying his parents or himself. Judging by his clothes and hairstyle, he conformed to western youth culture himself. He smelt of alcohol and told me he had recently been released from borstal. As the eldest son, he was afforded a great deal of freedom and respect, but here he was telling me how the family intended to send Ranjit back to his parents' home village to be married. He insisted that Ranjit should not know. She deserved everything that was coming to her.

I had to resort to the nine year old for a more accurate picture of how the parents saw the problem. They understood that their daughter had gone "mad" under the influence of a spell put on her by the young Pakistanis she'd been mixing with at school.

They felt that she could not be blamed for her "strange behaviour," and believed the spell could be broken by marriage.

I felt out of my depth. Any attempts I made to arrange a compromise could only be meaningless and ineffectual. I found it hard to understand or sympathise with the point of view of the parents or the eldest son. I offered to return if I could get Ranjit to back down on some issues and agree to attempt negotiations with them. They then agreed that I could bring a community worker, Amarjit, to act as adviser and interpreter. Over the next few weeks, things seemed to improve. The family decided that Ranjit's behaviour was not bad enough after all to warrant expulsion to India. They believed she had stopped seeing the Pakistani boy and agreed to allow her to go to the sports centre twice a week with her sister when she agreed to stop dyeing and cutting her hair.

But then the day Amarjit and I were told

that Ranjit was no longer allowed to go to school. She had been seen again with the Pakistani boys and girls. When I saw Ranjit, all her spontaneity and determination seemed to have disappeared. She was vacant and depressed. She stared straight ahead and hardly bothered to answer my questions. She repeated that she wanted to get away, but that since the police and I had told her there were no grounds for removing her from home, she saw no further point in Amarjit and me trying to help her.

Shortly afterwards, her mother approached Amarjit and confided that Ranjit was going to India to be married at the end of the week. She and the two sons were also going. The flight was booked and the marriage had been arranged for some weeks. Amarjit strongly advised the mother to discuss the marriage with Ranjit and argued that further shame could be brought on the family if the marriage ended in divorce. The mother was convinced, however, that only marriage could break the spell on her daughter. She asked Amarjit not to tell her husband she had discussed their plan.

A welcoming mood

When we next visited, only the father agreed to see us. He was in a welcoming mood. When we warned him that the school was about to follow up Ranjit's absence, he politely explained that she was going to visit relatives in India with her mother at the end of the week. She would return to school in September.

The door was closed on us. If we told him we knew what was really planned, his wife would be in trouble for telling Amarjit. Ranjit had been right—there never had been any room for compromise.

We returned to discuss what should be done with the area officer. Lawyers advised that there were no grounds for a care order, or even ward of court proceedings, to stop her leaving the country. Marriage is legal at 14 in India, so it was debatable whether any offence was being contemplated. I asked if she could live at home under a care order, applied for on the grounds of moral danger. But even if it could be proved that a marriage was intended, it would be difficult to argue she was in moral danger within the context of a culture where arranged marriages are a way of life.

Once legal action was ruled out, we discussed whether we should tell Ranjit what we knew to give her the opportunity to run again. I felt she should be told. I could not accept that anyone's wishes should be entirely overruled by their family. Ranjit was being denied any autonomy, not only for the present but in the future as well.

Amarjit argued against breaking the mother's confidence and telling Ranjit. She felt that the importance of a Sikh girl's family throughout her life should not be underestimated. She regretted the family's secrecy and use of force, but was convinced that if we encouraged Ranjit to run, she would find herself adrift and isolated, and unable to return to her family even if she

did change her mind later on. She argued that if the marriage did not work out, she could obtain a divorce when she was mature enough to understand what cutting links with her family would involve.

The area officer pointed out that we were inevitably assessing the problem from a western viewpoint. This argument convinced me that Amarjit must be right. But I was confused. While I thought I respected traditional life-styles which were different from my own, I also believed that women should not be denied autonomy in the cause of not interfering in those cultures. Rather than work through the conflict, however, I found it easier to rest with the safe assumption that, as a westerner, I could not possibly judge the situation correctly.

We returned to the house. While Amarjit argued with her about the wisdom of the step the family were taking, Ranjit's mother showed us a profusion of gold bangles and other jewellery, secure in the belief that I would not understand their significance. My presence was clearly awkward, so I was invited to see Ranjit alone. I found her even more distant and withdrawn than before. She understood she was going to India to stay with relatives. Although I had been instructed not to tell her what we knew, I wanted to give some indication of what would happen.

I asked her if she had heard of girls being married by their parents in India. She had, but she thought her parents would never do such a thing to her. I asked her how old she would want to be when she married. She answered listlessly that she would prefer not to marry for at least another ten years, as there were so many things to do. Who were the wedding bangles for? She believed they were for a relative she had never met. Finally, I asked whether she had considered running away again. She reminded me it was I who told her she would only be brought back and, anyway, she had no money and her parents hid her shoes.

Had she understood?

The family left for India and Ranjit did not return with them in September. Why had she not run? Had she understood the hints I gave, or were they not strong enough? Had she understood, but felt, deep down, that she should obey her parents? Or, seeing no means of escape, had she lapsed into despair? I felt that despair seemed the most likely explanation. I had opted out of helping her on the grounds that, somehow, she was different. Her race and culture meant that I had allowed myself to respond differently to her request for help than I would have for a woman of my own race and culture. On the grounds that I was unable to understand, I had refused the help my personal principles should have led me to give.

An interpreter later told me she believed that more local girls were being sent to India to marry. Could the social services help them? I had to answer no. I wished I had given Ranjit shoes, money and advice to run the night before the flight.

Notes



Low pay

Step by step

DAVID THOMAS writes: Several major unions have re-thought their attitude to low pay at this year's round of union conferences. But ironically they've been moving towards a policy—a statutory minimum wage—which has been removed from the immediate political agenda by the election.

The white-collar union, ASTMS, the shop-workers' union, USDAW, and David Bassett's pivotal General, Municipal and Boilermakers Union (GMB), all voted for a statutory minimum wage for the first time at their conferences this year. This week, COHSE, the health service union, are likely to follow suit. NALGO's executive are recommending their conference, in session in the Isle of Man, to accept a national minimum wage with statutory backing.

The sorts of reasons why unions are changing their policies are set out in the report, *A New Strategy on Low Pay*, adopted by the GMB conference earlier this month. The GMB stress that past drives against low pay have largely failed. The latest New Earnings Survey shows that over six million workers were paid less than £90 a week in 1982. The limits of a collective bargaining approach to low pay are seen most clearly in unorganised industries and companies, many of which are among the worst paid.

The GMB believe that the low pay target should be two thirds of median male earnings (about £92 a week in 1982). But they think that a statutory minimum should at first be set below that level—probably around half the median—and would approach the target in stages.

Drawing together all the ways in which the low paid could be helped by collective bargaining is the second element in the GMB's strategy. To tackle the problem that most of the low paid are women, for example, the GMB say unions should negotiate equal pay for work of equal value.

The GMB also want the TUC to issue a collective bargaining checklist on low pay. Here, they are pushing at an open door. Next month, the TUC's economic committee will discuss a paper drawing conclusions from unions' replies to a TUC discussion document on low pay. Many unions asked the TUC to issue detailed bargaining advice and the economic committee will probably agree this. A TUC campaign on low pay would be modelled on the successful TUC working time campaign, which has pushed basic weekly hours for two thirds of manual workers below 40.

The main civil service unions, NUPE, the