



No More Child Brides

Proclaiming that ‘no form of culture or religion should exploit women and children,’ one determined woman fights child marriages in India

SAVITRI* WAS NOT EVEN 3 YEARS old when she was ceremonially married to a boy three years older. Since she was just a toddler, she wasn’t told that she’d been married—she didn’t find out until after she got her first menstrual period.

“I was surprised when I learned about my marriage, and didn’t want to go to my husband’s home. My parents did not heed my objections, and also pointed out that our family would be ostracized if I did not agree. I met Kriti *didi* [sister] during this time,” says the now-22-year-old, referring to Kriti Bharti, a rehabilitation psychologist and women’s rights activist from Jodhpur, in Savitri’s home state of Rajasthan. Bharti

helped annul Savitri’s marriage in 2022—now Savitri is studying for her bachelor’s degree in education with the goal of becoming a teacher.

Bharti founded her nonprofit, Saarthi Trust, in 2011 to fight child marriage and empower women and girls. Since then, she has helped legally annul 49 child marriages and prevented 1,700 more from being “solemnized” in ceremonial engagements. She says she has aided in the rehabilitation of 20,500 children and women, and has conducted orientation programs that resulted in 35,000 villagers taking oaths to resist child marriages.

With 15.6 million child brides, India has the highest number of such marriages in the world. Minor girls as young as a few days old are married to older boys, the matches arranged by their parents. Once the girls reach puberty, they are forced to live with their husband’s family. Despite laws outlawing the practice, child marriages are still common in India, leading to sexual and domestic abuse, underage pregnancies, school dropouts, dowry-related violence and deaths.

“I’m working on eradicating the disease of child marriage,

SAARTHI TRUST

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Kriti Bharti, founder of Saarthi Trust; opposite page, from left: Bharti poses with girls her organization has aided—most were child brides; Bharti attends the wedding ceremony of a woman she helped to escape a child marriage.

which is steeped in tradition. I don't consider this a part of culture because no form of culture or religion should exploit women and children," Bharti tells *Ms.*

To annul a child marriage, she speaks to both families, counseling and encouraging them to break up the arrangement mutually. She explains that it's detrimental to the health and well-being of the children, and that the match was made without the consent of the couple. If this doesn't work and the families don't come to an agreement, Bharti turns to the law for help in obtaining an annulment. It can take a few days to several months to annul a child marriage in India, depending on the circumstance and

complexity of each case.

For her efforts, Bharti is often threatened with rape and death, and multiple attempts have been made to kidnap her. Yet she's undeterred. "Someone can kill me only once," she says. "I'll have to be born again to be killed a second time. And by the time I'm killed, I will have saved 10 more lives."

Bharti had a difficult childhood, which she believes prepared her for activism. "You must be brave to be in this kind of work," she says. "I didn't choose this field. This field chose me."

Her father abandoned her mother before Bharti was born. Most of her mother's relatives wanted her mother to abort the fetus and remarry, to avoid the societal stigma of giving birth to a child whose father had left them both. But Bharti's mother resisted this pressure.

Bharti was born prematurely with a number of medical complications. At age 10, she was poisoned by a relative who considered her to be a curse. She was in acute pain, almost paralyzed, and bedridden for more than two years. Her mother tried allopathy, homeopathy and ayurveda, and Bharti visited many doctors and hospitals in the country, but there was no improvement in her condition. Finally, nine months of continuous Reiki therapy helped her heal. She says she learned to sit, crawl and walk again as a 12-year-old.

"I experienced hardship in childhood so that I could be strong. Perhaps nature was preparing me for this work," she reflects.

After she had healed, Bharti made a decision against the wishes of her family. Her original surname was Chopra, but she officially changed it to Bharti, which means "India's daughter." In India, surnames are usually indicative of one's identity in

terms of caste, religion and social hierarchy. By changing her surname, she was attempting to create her own unique identity, devoid of any markers: "I just want to be known as the daughter of my country."

During her youth, Bharti worked with several nongovernmental organizations, through which, she says, she learned about rampant social injustices and the value of service to society. She worked with rape survivors, HIV/AIDS patients, children with disabilities, and victims of child labor and child marriage. Soon she realized that there was hardly anyone working at the grassroots level to stop child marriages.

For her work through Saarthi Trust, Bharti has received numerous awards. She has been honored as a changemaker by the organization Girls Not Brides. In late 2022, she was presented with the Youth Human Rights Champion Award by the Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue. Still, she says it is challenging to run an organization like Saarthi with limited funds: "When a girl comes to me, her livelihood, education and shelter ... everything becomes my responsibility. Counseling is just a small part of the whole process." Despite this, she says she's never turned down a request for assistance from any girl. Her only condition is that the girls must go back to school to complete their education.

Bharti dreams of a time when child marriages are known only as a terrible thing of the past. "One day," she says, "we should be able to say, 'Once upon a time, there was something called child marriage.'"

—ARUNDHATI NATH

**Her name has been changed to protect her identity.*