

## The White Sari

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Based on a story told me by an Indian colleague friend,  
Shakuntala, who taught at The University of the South Pacific  
in Suva, Fiji. She said she was told the story by her  
grandmother and vouched her its truthfulness.

Cast:

POOJA - a young girl and later as an adult woman. Two different actors are required.

BIMAL - an old man

RAJESH - a young man

SITA - a young woman

PUNDIT - an adult man

ACOLYTE IN THE TEMPLE - a young man

MAN ONE and MAN TWO - two young men

This film is set in the 1920/30s in a poor village in Bengal, India. At the time Mahatma Gandhi was involved in a campaign to stop people using British manufactured cotton, which many Indians called 'Manchester'.

**Notes for consideration by the Director .**

*This script should be produced with Hindi speakers and subtitles for viewing by non-Hindi speakers. Music should be played on either a tabla drum or a sitar.*

INT. DAY. A SMALL VILLAGE IN BENGAL

A young girl, POOJA is laying a small fruit gift before a household god. She prays. We hear her voice.

POOJA (VOICE OVER)

I will marry and have many children. I want only boys as a girl child will be expensive when she has to find her husband. I see my husband in my head. I see him, mighty Krishna. I know what my wedding will be like.

He is a handsome young man.

We hear the sound of an Indian wedding and we see in Pooja's mind a young good looking bridegroom covering his face with a Sehra (a face cover). It then changes back to the young Pooja praying.

POOJA

I am not a strong girl, and I am not beautiful, but I will always be beautiful for my husband. I will dress for you, my husband and cook for you. I dream of you, my husband.

DISSOLVE TO:

A Bengal village. There is not much to see in this village. A few mud huts. A few trees. A water well. Chickens. Goats. A cow wandering about. Children playing. We hear the sound of a woman praying. The camera settles on a small ragged looking hut with a water can outside the front door. The sound of praying stops and a woman slowly emerges from the hut. She is possibly around the age of thirty years, but she has had a hard life and looks older. Her clothing is a dirty white sari and her head has been shaved. This is POOJA. She is frightened and looks around as if someone might appear to shout or attack her. She covers her shaved head and goes back inside the hut.

POOJA (V.O.)

That is me now, Pooja. I was a little girl once. Now, I am adult and I am Pooja, the widow of Bimal, my husband. He died. I pray every day of my husband. He was a good man, he gave me food and never beat me.

(MORE)

POOJA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

But he was old, ugly and so fat. When he died it took four strong men to lift him from his bed, as he was so heavy. When I saw him dead I started to cry. I remember the day we were married. I saw him for the first time at our the wedding ceremony.

CUT TO:

**INT. DAY. THE VILLAGE**

The wedding ceremony. POOJA is in her wedding dress and has her face covered according to tradition. She is next to her newly wedded husband and looks to see if she can see his face, but she cannot. He is wearing a Sehra (a face cover). She is wearing a ghungchat (a face cover). We hear the sound of Indian wedding songs.

POOJA ( thinking to herself V.O.)

I am so happy to become a wife. Perhaps he is a young rich man with good looks and much kindness. But, that is too much to hope. He may be a poor man too. I want us to have many children, all boys. I will make him happy. He has a beautiful sehra. The flowers are so fresh. I smell their sweetness. I will remember this day for ever, my beautiful husband. I love you. I want to see your face, my husband.

The music stops and we see Pooja's face without her ghungchat and then we see her husbands's face without the sehra. He is old, fat and ugly.

DISSOLVE TO:

**INT. DAY. HOUSE OF BIMAL.**

BIMAL, the husband of Pooja is asleep in a chair. Pooja enters and kneels at his feet and waits. A few moments later Bimal wakes up and looks at her.

BIMAL

Pooja. I need children. I need a son. My two other wives died and I have no children from them. It is your duty to give me a son. We have been married now for over a year and you have not given me anything. How can I live and have no son to honour me in life? It is your work to give me a son. That is what a good wife does. Is it not?

POOJA

I am a good wife, husband. I please you in all my ways. I lie in bed and I dream and pray for children. But, I have none inside me yet.

BIMAL

You do not deliver, wife. I must have a son. We will wait for a short time more, then I must do something if there is no fruit from your tree. I will speak with the Pundit and you will go to the temple. We will pray for help. You will pray in the temple and then bring me a son into this world.

**EXT. EVENING. A ROAD NEAR A HINDU TEMPLE.**

Pooja is walking along this road. She enters the temple. An acolyte approaches to talk with her. We cannot hear the conversation. She follows him into the temple.

**INT. EVENING. A ROOM.**

Pooja is kneeling on the floor and covering her head so her face cannot be seen. A PUNDIT enters.

PUNDIT

Your husband says you not producing a child.

POOJA

I have tried. I pray and follow all our customs.

PUNDIT

Yes. But still there is no child. How long have you been married?

POOJA

Nearly two years.

PUNDIT

That is why he has sent you here to the temple. He wants you to give him the promised child.

POOJA

I try, I try and pray every day for a child. But there is none.

PUNDIT

Tonight, Pooja, you will be alone in a room in the temple and you will pray. I will pray too and we hope that great Shiva will help us to make a child for your husband Bimal. Now. Pray.

He beckons to the young acolyte.  
 Pooja follows him out of the room  
 and down a corridor and into  
 another small room . It is dark.  
 The door is closed. Pooja is  
 alone. She kneels and begins to  
 pray. The sound of her voice  
 changes into that of a sitar  
 playing a slow tune. The room goes  
 into total darkness. There is more  
 music and the light comes up. It  
 is dawn. Pooja is praying and the  
 door opens. The Pundit enters.

PUNDIT

Pooja. You have been here all night  
 praying.

POOJA

All night I have praying to him.

PUNDIT

Did the God come to you?

Pooja nods

PUNDIT

And did he speak to you?

Pooja nods

PUNDIT

And what did the God say to you?

POOJA

He spoke with your voice.

PUNDIT

Did you see the God and did he help you ?

POOJA

I did not see him. It was so dark.

PUNDIT

That is good. Go home now to your husband,  
 Bimal. Tell him to bring a gift here to the  
 temple. In nine months you will have a  
 child.

The Pundit turns and leaves the  
 room.

CROSSFADE TO:

**EXT. DAY. OUTSIDE A SMALL HOUSE.**

Pooja is washing metal plates and  
 bowls.

Her husband comes out of the house and Pooja puts the washed dishes down and kneels before her husband.

BIMAL

Pooja. you must go again to the temple and pray to great Shiva. You will stay there for several days. Lord Shiva may speak to you. You have given me a daughter, but I need a son.

CUT TO:

**EXT. DAY. OUTSIDE THE TEMPLE**

Pooja enters the temple. As she enters we see the Pundit watching her from a distance. He beckons to a young priest who comes close to him. The Pundit points towards Pooja who is entering the temple. The young priest nods.  
DISSOLVE TO:

**EXT. DAY. OUTSIDE THE SMALL HOUSE OF BIMAL**

A small girl is playing. Pooja talks with her and make her hair neat. Bimal exits from the house and looks with indifference on the girl. His wife goes towards him.

BIMAL

I am getting old. Soon it will be time for me to go. I still have no son. Only Sita. After so many years of marriage. Of what use is she? A daughter. Who will help me on my sacred journey when I must die. You have not given me a son, Pooja.

DISSOLVE TO:

**EXT. DAY. OUTSIDE THE SMALL HOUSE OF BIMAL**

Outside the house of Bimal and Pooja. A funeral procession is starting to take Bimal to a funeral pyre. He is carried away.

**EXT. DAY. OUTSIDE THE TEMPLE**

Pooja is wearing bracelets and they are being broken by the pundit.

**EXT. DAY. FUNERAL PYRE**

The pyre is set on fire.  
DISSOLVE TO:

**EXT. DAY. OUTSIDE A SMALL OLD HUT**

The door opens and Pooja exits from the house. She now has a shaved head and wearing an old white sari. She washes a dish and re-enters the hut

**INT.DAY. HOUSE OF POOJA IN THE VILLAGE.**

A young woman, Sita, hands Pooja some rice and bowl .

SITA

Ma. My husband is away working in the city.  
He says we will provide you food each week.  
Ma. You now a widow. When I see you it will  
be for a short time only. I go now. My  
husband or I will leave food at your door.

**EXT. DAY. THE VILLAGE.**

Daily life is going on the village. Two young Indian men enter the village on bicycles. They are well-dressed. From their voices we sense they are strangers, educated and from a town or city. They stop and look around at the people, who also looking at them.

MAN ONE

The Great Saint sent us.

VILLAGER

Saint. Great Saint. What are you saying? You are from the city .

MAN ONE

You do not understand. We have been sent her to help you. The great Mahatma wants us to go everywhere to help people.

VILLAGER

This is a poor village. We need help, yes. No-one has money.

MAN ONE

Have you not heard of the great Saint?

VILLAGER

He has not been here. We would know if the Great Saint come. We respect the Gods.

MAN TWO

You are so ignorant. But, the Great Saint will save you. He has sent us here to do his work.



VILLAGER

Then you must tell us who the Great Saint is.

MAN ONE

It is the Mahatma.

MAN TWO

Mahatma Ghandi. He has been sent to save us? You know him.

VILLAGER

I have heard his name. But, I have not seen him. He not come here.

MAN ONE

Our instructions are to destroy all Manchester.

VILLAGER

We have no Manchester here. We are a poor village.

MAN TWO

You lie. The shirt you wear. Where did you get that?

VILLAGER

It is an old shirt. See the holes. I got it from another man who came from the city. He got it from the white man he worked for.

MAN TWO

It is the Manchester you wear on you.

VILLAGER

What you mean. Is only shirt. When it was good, it belonged to the white man. When it got old, he gave it to his wallah. Now, I have it when it is more old.

MAN ONE

It is made from Manchester. You must take it off and burn it.

VILLAGER

It is mine. I will not burn it. I have no more shirts.

MAN TWO

You must. The Mahatma said we must not have anything on our bodies which comes from the England, from the Manchester.

VILLAGER

But the Mahatma is a Saint. You said so. He is a good man. Why would Saint want to destroy my shirt? I am poor man. Mahatma, he know all. He know that.

The two young men grab the old man and start to rip his shirt off. He is shocked and so are the other villagers who quickly run away to their huts. The young men take out a box of matches and try to burn the shirt, but it does not burn well, so they throw it on the ground and stamp on it. As they are doing that an OLD MAN approaches them. He is the village chief.

VILLAGE CHIEF

You. Both of you. Why are you here? I am chief of village.

MAN ONE

We have been sent by the Mahatma, the Saint.

VILLAGE CHIEF

I know of him. A good man. What do you want?

MAN TWO

People in village are wearing Manchester. It is British. The Englanders bring it here and the Mahatma is angry.

VILLAGE CHIEF

The Mahatma is peaceful. He wants goodness and wealth for all India, is so, is it not?

MAN ONE

It is so.

VILLAGE CHIEF

He would not like you attacking a villager.

MAN ONE

He wants to get rid of all Manchester. Mahatma say we have plenty cotton in country and we will make own clothes. Get rid of Manchester. That is what Mahatma says? All India must be one. All share. Jai Hind.

VILLAGE CHIEF

Then you will be generous. You have two bicycles. You have shoes. You are carrying bags. In this village we have little. The Mahatma is poor too. You are rich. You give village one bicycle and you give shoes. The Mahatma and I would bless you for your kindnesses.

The villagers around the Village Chief and start laughing. Immediately the two men get on the bicycles, ride away and exit the village.

DISSOLVE TO:

It is later in the day and the village is quiet. Few people are around. The two men have returned to the edge of the village and are waiting and watching. They see an old hut and a woman slowly emerging from the door. It is POOJA. She is extremely thin and wearing an old dirty white sari.

MAN ONE

You. Old woman. Come here.

POOJA stops and looks at them. She is perturbed and does not know what to do.

MAN ONE

I said come here!

MAN TWO

Do you know who we are?

POOJA does not reply and shakes her head.

MAN ONE

So, you have no answer. I will tell, you. We come from the great Saint, the Mahatma.

MAN ONE

You don't even know who he is, do you. Ignorant woman?

POOJA turns to walk into her house.

MAN TWO

Stop when we speak to you. Oh, I see why you want to run away. Look. Manchester. Is Manchester sari you wear.

POOJA stops and looks at the two men.

POOJA

I respect the saints. I am a devout woman. Since my husband died I have prayed and prayed. Each day I pray for him, I pray for Bimal.

MAN ONE

Yes, yes. I see you are widow. But are wearing Manchester.

MAN TWO

The Mahatma says we destroy all Manchester.

POOJA

What you say?

MAN ONE

Take it off, now. The Mahatma said so.

POOJA

My husband died a long time ago. I have nothing. I am poor.

MAN ONE

Take it off.

POOJA is upset and confused.

MAN TWO

Then we will do it.

The man rushes at her and rips off her sari. She screams and runs into her house. The two men laugh.

MAN ONE

It is hardly worth burning it is so old. But, come. We will go. There are more villages near and we must cleanse them of Manchester before we return to the Mahatma.

They ride off on their bicycles dragging the old white sari in the dirt.

**EXT. DAY. ANOTHER HOUSE IN THE VILLAGE.**

A man comes out of the house. He is in his forties. A woman also comes out of the house.

RAJESH

Sita, I will call on Ma first to give her food and rupees to go to the market.

SITA

It is three days gone and no-one has seen. Ma might be sick. I am worried.

RAJESH

I go now.

He walks away and Sita re-enters the house. As he goes through the village he greets people in a friendly way.

**EXT. DAY. ROAD OUTSIDE THE VILLAGE.**

The two young men from the city are on their bicycles and riding slowly down the road. Some teenage boys emerge from behind a tree and confront the two men. The boys are carrying sticks. The two young men stop, get off their bicycles and look at the boys. The boys attack the two young men hitting them with sticks and breaking the bicycles. As the men run away the boys shout at them.

VOICES (mocking)

Manchester. Manchester. Manchester

**EXT. DAY. OUTSIDE HOUSE OF POOJA**

Sita's husband, Rajesh, arrives at the old house where Pooja lives. He stops and calls out to her.

RAJESH

Pooja. Pooja. It is I, Rajesh. Sita has food for you. I stand here. You come.

He waits and there is no answer.  
He calls again.

RAJESH

Pooja. It is Rajesh. I have food.

He waits and hears a sobbing noise.

RAJESH

Pooja. Are you ill? I hear you make noise. Come. Get food. Pooja. I not want to hear this. I am coming in house. What wrong?

We hear a disturbed voice and a muffled scream.

RAJESH

It is I, Rajesh.

He slowly enters the hut and we hear the sobbing become stronger. Pooja is shouting and crying. We do see pooja.

POOJA (shouting )

Go. Do not shame me more.

Rajesh comes out from the hut. He stops, turns and throws his scarf into the hut. His face is pale and he is shocked.

RAJESH

I get Sita now. I get Sita now.

He begins walking and breaks into a run as he hurries home. We hear the sound of a musical instrument, the sitar, playing a fast rhythmic melody. Sita is running from her house holding a white sari. She arrives at Pooja's home and goes inside. As she enters she sees the naked feet of Pooja . Pooja is dead, hanging from the scarf.

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