

PRACTICE OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN THE HARINSHIKARI TRIBALS AND ITS IMPACT ON WOMEN

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Abstract

Indian population comprises of many tribes or the aborigines. Harinshikari's are one such group. This tribe is found spread in most part of India especially in states of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. The tribe is known or identified by various names like, Neer shikari, Bagri, Vagri, Fans fardis, Fans Podri, Telavchenayya Padri, Chigari Betegar, Adavi chincharu, and Harin Shikari etc. The term Harin-shikari means: Deer Hunter and this particular community is found to reside at various districts of Karnataka.

This tribe is included in the list of scheduled tribes in Karnataka since the tribe is nomadic. It does not have any particular place of origin or settlement. It is only due the recent initiatives by the Government that the people of this tribe can be found settled in some areas notified for them. Their living standards are far below the rest of population and are brought under the category of BPL [Below Poverty Line]. They are at the nadir of social structure politically, economically and educationally. The status of women in this tribe is very pathetic for various reasons, and the practice of child marriage is one of the reasons. Thus, it is necessary to understand the negative impact of this practice on society and its women folk in particular.

This essay is based on the study of women who underwent child-marriage of this tribe residing at Vijayapur District in Karnataka state. The study has two main objectives.

1. To understand the reasons for this practice of child-marriage and.
2. To understand negative impact of on the health of women due to child-marriage.

The essay contains information on the subject pertaining to the local area. The study-which has been obtained through interviews, and case studies

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Introduction

The study of any social issues begins from the understanding of the concept 'family' in that society. The quality of life of women is heavily influenced by the family. Sociologists like Talcot Parsons and Robert F Bells [1955] State that "family is the basic unit of social structure. In a family men, women, children and elderly persons stay together in harmonious bonding based mutual love, trust and responsibilities towards each other. A family provides food, shelter and sexual life -the basic needs. Also, it brings a feeling of unity and respect for mutual relations among its members. It protects its members during periods of pain, sadness and illness. Members of the family experience, happiness, love, sadness, affection and hate within the family. A family becomes the first school for humans, where they learn and understand and how to face life as they grow. The tone and quality of such learning much depends on the cultural values, moral and philosophical mooring of the society". Further, Parsons and Bell, add that "a family is the

foundation on which successful management of human resources of its members, division of labour, marital behavior, rights, responsibilities and duties is dependant.

Feminists admit that the predominant role played by the family is to ensure effective control over its females. Control over their sexuality is the prime objective. Such a control over her ensures that a female stays within the bounds of family sway throughout her life span. Such control ensures that a female in a family does not dare to cross the patriarchal norms established by the family. In this process the focus of female control will revolve around her [sexual] purity and [docile] behavior.

Layman understanding of the term “marriage” is that it is founded on the necessity of a male and female union with mutual agreement. However, in practice, this ‘necessity’ is turned in to a social norm where marriage provides an authority to the husband to treat her as his subordinate. The social structure in India provides ample freedom to a male to make choice on the issue of marriage but, for a woman ‘marriage’ has become a necessity. She cannot escape it. When a man chooses marriage, there is no stringent binding on him to be faithful to his wife. He can involve himself in other social institutions while being married. However, women are denied such freedom of choice equal to males. Marriage is a must for women, and she is expected to achieve temporal and spiritual goals within the bounds of marriage. On the face of it, the institution of marriage gives a semblance of providing great security and protection to a female. However, just underneath this ‘noble’ covering, lies, gender inequality resulting in women facing many problems. It is said that ‘marriage’ by itself is one of the major hurdle a woman faces, because, upon entering the wedlock she is deprived of all her concerns. And because the institution of marriage does not [normally] allow any simple and easy alternative method for change or withdrawal from it, it generates a host of issues like option to marry or not, age of marriage, status of an ‘ideal wife’ and continuance with in marriage, and loss of partners etc.

A woman’s future stands on this foundation of marriage. Although the same applies to man, it is easy for him to come out from the shackles of marriage, than it is for woman. She is fated to remain within the wedlock and suffer the pain and spend all her life in toil. Women irrespective of their social strata, colour, religion and faith are facing one or the other problem in the bonds of marriage. Also, in any dispute arising in the bonds of marriage, it is the woman who is the first or prime victim. Women of Harinshikari tribe are no exception to this. It is very common to find child or early marriages in this tribe. A girl must get married within the age of 14-15 years, or else she will remain unmarried forever. No male comes forward to marry a girl crossing 18 years of age. This mindset has resulted in the tradition of early marriage in this community. Many women have become the victims of this tradition. Some of the problems faced by such women can be better understood by case studies.

Case study-1

Savita (27) who resides at Harinshikari Lane in Vijaypura is one such victim. Her husband Ramesh does not do any work. The couple has five children, 3 female and 2 male. Savita was married by her parents at the age of ten, soon after her menarche to Ramesh who is a distant relative. The reason for such early marriage by her parents is was “who will keep watch on her after menarche?” She is the eldest of three daughters to her parents. Both the mother and father of Savita go for work and to not stay at home during the day. “It is difficult to keep girls alone at home. There are bad elements in the neighborhood. “What will we do if some spoils them?” They lament. Savita became a mother when she was just thirteen year old. Her labour during her first child birth was very painful not just because of young age, but due to horrific traditional among the Harinashikari tribe. According to the customs of community the woman in labour pain cannot be assisted by any one-male or female. They believe that touching a woman during labour will contaminate them and would have the curse from the family deity. Therefore, the young and innocent Savita upon the birth of the child, tried to cut the umbilical cord with a glass piece. Now, some portion of the umbilical cord remained in womb causing needless misery and suffering. Excessive bleeding during this

period results in her becoming unconscious. All this is seen by the family, yet none came to assist her or take her to hospital for the fear of curse of family deity. Having undergone this trauma in her first delivery, Savita has had subsequent deliveries done at the Government Hospital much to the chagrin of the family.

She owns the entire responsibility of home, and leads her life by brewing liquor which is a family occupation.

CASE-2

Pavitra is now 28 years old, resides at Harinshikari Lane at Vijaypura. She is victim of child marriage. She is mother to five children, 3 boys and 2 girls. The children study at Government schools. Pavitra was married when she was just 12 years old, by her father. She becomes pregnant after a year at the age of 13 years. During her delivery, as she had to take care for herself, she tried to hold the head of the baby but accidentally it slipped from her hand. The baby suffered head injury and died. The loss of her first child has caused her much agony. Later, she learns from the elder ladies of the community as to how manage labour, when and with what sharp material the umbilical cord to be cut etc. Subsequent deliveries she has managed herself.

She manages her home by the earnings through the sale of liquor, which she brews at home, as it is a family occupation. Her husband does not work. He spends his time drinking liquor and gambling. Under the influence of liquor, he fancies that his wife has (illicit) relationship with customers at home who come for a binge. He beats her and abuses with most foul words.

The irony is that the same Pavitra, having suffered so much due to her childhood-marriage is eager to arrange marriage for her 13 year daughter. She wants to conduct the marriage this year. When we ask her why such decision? She replies "our society is bad. They are always eager to spoil the reputation of young girls. Ever when our daughters explicitly and vehemently tell that they do not love any of the boys, these young boys come with our daughters name tattooed on their arm and declare their love." When enquired with Pavitra's daughter if she has agreed to the marriage proposal, she answered is in the negative, and adds that she is compelled to agree for the marriage.

The above cases bring out the realities in a patriarchal family setup. These realities are the undue fear about the 'purity' of women, and 'conjugal fidelity' towards husband. This thought process cuts across, all class and religious groups. Protecting the virginity of women and ensuring her fidelity to her husband has become the main responsibility of the parents. This burden is heavy on their shoulders. Therefore they want to get rid of this problem by marrying off their daughters soon after their menarche and leave her alone to fend for her life.

In the Harinashikari tribe, the women are subjected to take onerous domestic responsibilities and also silently suffer domestic violence at home at a very tender age due to child marriage. At an age when these girls should be joyful and playful, this society gives them "a crying baby" to care because of early marriage. Child marriages result in the negation of protection provided under Human rights and depriving them of proper utility available under women and child Rights.

This study brings out the following points.

1. Women in this community are prone to become prematurely old.
2. At the age of 20, they are already mothers of 3 to 4 children.
3. Heavy family responsibility is thrust on them because the men folk are addicted to drinking.
4. They have no proper knowledge of pregnancy and delivery complications. The women are pushed to battle between life and death as they have to undergo their labour all alone.

5. During labour they need rest, but due to their customs they have to care for themselves sometimes to the peril of their life.
6. The notion that touching a woman in labour would contaminate others and bring divine curse is a cause for such suffering by the women during delivery.

Conclusion

Child marriages continue to occur unabated in the Harinshikari tribe despite various acts and laws to contain this practice. This male dominated society thinks that it is of utmost importance to protect virginity and conjugal fidelity of its women to save the honour of the family. On the very same logic, they are ready to sacrifice the very life of its female members. To escape from the responsibility of caring for their daughters, they just marry them off. There are instances when a daughter is still in the cradle she is married off. This is called “cradle marriage”. It is said that marriage promises are made even prior to the [possible] birth of a daughter. Such androcentric thought of the need to marry off daughter in childhood itself has axed the very process of normal physical and emotional growth of its women. It would not wrong to say that perhaps this is deliberately intended, such that women should not progress in life so that she remains subjugated to men.

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