

Discussions on Child Marriage in *Kudiarasu Magazine*

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Abstract

Marriage is the first social institution which basically is a means “of establishing a family through which the society perpetuates”. It started during the emergence of surplus value and private property in the society. The rules and regulation were framed accordingly. Though the laws prevent marriage before 18 years, the reality gives a different picture. Majority of the girl children who were married below 18 years are from the poor and below poverty line families. In India, the child marriages were started in large scale even from the dawn of Christian era as per the sacred works of literature among the high castes. The holy Sastras also stressed the need for puberty marriages. Before independence, many social reformers fought for the abolition of child marriage. Periyar E.V. Ramasamy is a pioneer among them. The Sarada Act 1925 was passed, fixing minimum marriage for girls as 14 years with stiff resistance from orthodoxy. The consequences of this marriage are very pathetic- domestic violence, health and pregnancy problems and frequent deaths during childbearing, early widowhood etc. The inhuman treatment and denial of a remarriage at tender ages make the life of girls miserable. This paper deals with the situation prevalent during the Vedic and non-Vedic times. The contributions of Periyar to eradicate this social evil through his ideas are discussed in detail.

Keywords: Child marriage, Thanthai Periyar, Kudiarasu, Magazine, Poverty, domestic violence, Caste system.

Introduction

The printing machine, the subsequent reach of education to all sections, the entry of westerners and their cultural impact, the English Education given by them and the opportunities got by Indians to go to European countries for higher education, the sacred texts that were hitherto inaccessible getting translated by English and German scholars. The European Christian Missionaries that were started in 1600 AD and their growth, the services rendered by them here for 300 years, created huge impact in Indian social life. People started questioning many practices that were hitherto considered as sacred. A few learned people who had a humanitarian outlook towards the society, were frustrated over many of the practices followed by Indians being against nature and worse than animals. They started to work for reforming the society.

Child marriage is one such practice that had been sanctified. It is a peculiar cruelty. It was being practiced by the Vedic-religion for long, but we come to know that it was not so prevalent among the people of non-Vedic religions until 17th century. We cannot find any other practice that has destroyed the life of a girl as much as this practice followed by the people belonging to Indian Vedic-religion. The subsequent raise of Independent struggle in India created the ground for some imminent changes. One among them is the abolition of marriage before the girl attaining puberty.

But the proponents of Vedic rituals vehemently opposed this. They created havoc by saying that the father of the girl will get Bramhahathi Dosham (a bane acquired for the sin of killing a child by cutting its head) and he cannot attain salvation after death.

This practice was not being followed in the Varna system and Kshathriya system since the beginning. It looks like this practice was created by Vedic-religion only to prevent women from converting to Buddha and Jain religions. Since only the Vedic scholars were dominant in all spheres of life across the nation, they created an impression that Child marriage was common for all. They vehemently opposed the judicial bills to abolish Child marriage. Newspaper, the only public medium of that era was almost entirely controlled by them. With that, they could easily project their problem as the problem of the entire society.

Child Marriage in the Society

‘In the Vedic religious life, Child marriage or pre-puberty marriage came in to force from 400 BCE, which was the period of the creators of Dharmasastras. Though some of them have different opinions people like Yajnavalkya of 200 CE strongly advocated pre - puberty marriages. He insists that girls should be married before the age of puberty; otherwise every month their guardians will be guilty of the destruction of an embryo which is treated as great sin,’ says A.S. Altekar. [2016]

It seems this early marriage was also an act of precautionary method of the parents of Vedic religion; to prevent their daughters, stepping into the Buddhist and Jain nunneries against their wishes. ‘The popularity of early marriages therefore went on increasing in medieval times. Some enlightened rulers like Akbar disliked them and recommended to their subjects that marriages should be performed after the girl attaining puberty’ A.S. Altekar quotes from Ain-i-Akbari [2016].

In the beginning, the custodians of the Vedic religion, the Brahmins only followed this, and in later years all other castes started to adopt the system slowly. ‘In Deccan also during the Vijayanagar rule while pre-puberty marriages were common among the Brahmanas, post puberty ones were frequent among the non-Brahmanas’ A.S. Altekar quotes Venkataramanaiyya’s studies in Vijayanagar history [2016].

Child Marriage or the Balya Vivaha is an important culture in this Vedic tradition of this country. That is the marriage is conducted before the bride attains puberty and adulthood. Such marriages only considered as virtuous ones approved by Sasthras. In other words, those marriages that happen before the bride attains eight years of age were only considered virtuous. Others were considered sinful. Such marriages were praised heavily by Manu and the authors of other Smrithis.

The Vedic religion has prescribed the ages of the bride and bride groom for marriages. Such prescriptions were generally disadvantageous to the girls According to Pulavar Imayavaramban “A 25year-old Vijan (Twice-born) should marry a girl of eight years. A man whose age is below 30, should marry a girl aged nine years. Aswalayanar says a girl should be married after ten years and before attaining puberty. Brahaspathi says a 30year-old man should marry a ten year old girl.” [2013]

Vedic Sastra’s Endorsements

Why weddings should be conducted at such a young age? What will happen if weddings are not conducted as per the ages prescribed? According to Parasasmrithi, "A man who marries off his

daughter at the age of 8 will attain Swarga (Heaven). If the girl is married at the age of 9, her father will attain Vaikunta (The abode of Lord Vishnu) and if the girl is married when she is 10 years old, her father will attain the Brahma Loka (Lord Brahma's place) Parasara further says that a man who marries of his daughter beyond these age limits, will reach the hell called as Rouravathy. (2013). Another Dharma Shasthra says "One who fails to conduct the wedding of his daughter before her first menstruation acquires the sin of killing a foetus-Brahmahathi Dosha".

Sathankulam A. Raghavan explains what Sasthras tell about Child Marriage. In the previous Yugas, weddings were conducted according to what has been said in Manu Smrithi. In this Kaliyuga, Manu Smrithi has been abolished and Parasara Smrithi has to be followed. In the fourth chapter of its Prayachitha Kaandam, Parasara Smrithi says that an eight year-old girl is Gowri, nine year old is Rohini, ten year old is Kannika and a girl beyond ten years of age in Rajaswalai.

Gowri, Rohini and Kannika are acceptable as bride. Rajaswalai is inappropriate for a wedding. The one who gives her off in a marriage will reach the hell according to Brahaspathi. A father, mother who has seen their daughter and a brother who has seen her sister as an unmarried Rajaswalai will reach the hell. The ancestors of that girl's father will also be thrown into the hell (2015).

Child Marriage in Non-Vedic Traditions

We can understand the respectable treatment accorded to women in Tamil tradition with the prevalence of worshipping Mother Gods. However, in the Vedic-religion women and children are always considered as a burden. Raghavan points out how girl children are described in the Vedic tradition. "When girls attain the age of carnal desires, Somdeva starts enjoying her (Gowri stage). She will be enjoyed by Gandharva in Ritu Parva (post-puberty) and Agni Deva enjoys her when her breasts starts growing. Hence according to Samvardhanar, a father should marry of his daughter to a virtuous man before she becomes Rajaswala. "The one who marries off his daughter at the age of 8 will attain Swarga (Heaven). If the girl is married at the age of 9, her father will attain Vaikunta (The abode of Lord Vishnu) and if the girl is married when she is 10 years old, her father will attain the Brahma Loka (Lord Brahma's place). A man who marries of his daughter beyond these age limits, will reach the hell' [2015].

As explained in the previous paragraph, these weddings were appropriate only to Twice-born called Dwijas. This is no way connected to the ancient Dravidian race. But with the passage of time the Vedic tradition made it common for all. There was no difficulty to convince other caste people to accept this practice as everyone had the desire to attain heaven and the fear on hell.

Even Periyar. Gandhi and Ramakrishna (who married Sharadamani when she was five years old) could not escape this practice. Such young age marriage should have spread among the intermediate castes when Buddhism and Jainism completely lost their influence and the Vijayanagara Empire was influential.

We can see in the entire history of Tamil society, the practice of Child marriage was not prevalent. The practice of Child marriage should have gradually spread here among the Shudra upper castes after the advent of Vedic religion and increased only at the dawn of 17th century. This practice was rarely prevalent among the castes of people belonging to labour class. Even

Aruthukattudhal (widow marriage) was easily followed by these people. The Vedic sacredness could not influence these people so easily

What Periyar wrote in 1928 is noteworthy: “The Sastrigal of Sri Sankara Mutt and the Pandits of Jeeyar Mutt and their disciples are against the law of age of consent. They are citing Hindu puranas and epics to substantiate their argument that if girls are not married before attaining puberty, Hinduism will be destroyed. So, it becomes clear that pre-puberty marriage is related to Vedic religion.”

Periyar spoke and wrote extensively to abolish the Child marriage and increase the age of marriage. But Vedic scholars vehemently opposed it. According to Ku. Ve. Ki. Aasan (1993), “In the 1930s the supreme members of Hinduism who called themselves as Sanathanis conducted Yagas to defeat the Sharada Act. Already the Vedic scholars conducted Sathrusamhara Yaga to destroy the peaceful struggles of Periyar during the period of Vaikom protest. Periyar survived this”. A struggle was conducted under the leadership of Periyar to achieve the rights of the people belonging to the oppressed castes to walk in the streets of Vaikom that came under the reign of Thiruvangoor kingdom. The struggle was a success. During that protest, a Sathrusamhara Yaga was conducted with the support of the King. But it was the King who died after that. This time also such Yagas became futile. Sharada Act was passed successfully.

Nearly 90 years ago in 1929 in the first Self-Respect Conference which was held at Chengalpet under the chairmanship of W.S. Soundarapandian, the following resolution was passed. ‘The age for a girl’s marriage should be above 16, that if the husband or the wife disliked the alliance and wanted the marriage to be cancelled, he or she should be given the right to get it cancelled, that widows should be helped to get married again and that men and women should be given the right to choose their partners without attaching any importance to religion or caste’ [2010].

Methodology of the Study

The research is based on a technique named ‘qualitative content analysis’ as it seeks to take the contents of comments/articles/thoughts which appeared in many issues of the journal *Kudiyarasu*. As researchers of yore had widely followed this technique while conducting a deep study of contents of journals, this research also follows the same mode of operation mainly for the relevance of the technique. Thus, issues relating to Child Marriage, as they appeared in various issues of the journal, have been deeply researched with linguistic dimensions.

Child Marriage Descriptions

Periyar's observations about child marriage comes out of its practical consequences, its evil effects in the society, his experiences from his own life and out of his humanity. [2008] “From our life experience we have been observing daily that People getting married at a very young age that is at an inappropriate age, knowledge and emotions wreaks havoc to the development of human society and production. We are also taking all efforts possible to stop this (Periyar, 2008).

Periyar has firsthand experience of Child marriage. At the age of 19, he was made to marry Nagammal who was then 13 years old. It was a love cum arranged marriage. In 1909, Periyar’s younger sister had a daughter who was ten-year-old. That girl was married off to a boy aged 13 years. Within a month, the girl’s husband died. That girl who was motherless asked “Mama, did I ask you to conduct my marriage? You have thrown a rock on my head.” The girl broke down with

tears and dejection. That small child had known the pathetic state of widowhood. Periyar was shattered by his niece's tears. Writing about this in a later stage, Periyar had said "While lifting that child who had fallen down I decided that I should conduct her remarriage", notes Arunan. [2008]

Periyar conducted the marriage of his niece as he had decided. His parents who were entrenched in traditional values were shocked by this. Periyar's caste declared him as an outcast. This outcast status was withdrawn only when Periyar became Erode Township President after nine years. Hence Periyar understood the devastating effects of Child marriage and the actions of dominant caste people to uphold it, from his own life experiences.

Periyar was deeply committed towards eradicating Child marriage. But the Vedic religion was having the dominant hand. So, it was not easy for him. He himself has said this. "We have been speaking about this in many social conferences and passing resolutions. But if we try to implement them, religion comes in between and destroys such efforts. We know that this has become a recurring circle. This is the reason why we have been telling that the anti-human religion and their blind principles should be completely dismantled, and we have also been taking efforts for that. Irrespective of whoever opposes this effort, we have been completely ignoring them and going ahead with speaking that the religions and gods that are against such efforts should be destroyed"

Periyar's opposition to religion and God stems from this reason. He did not oppose anything for the sake of opposing. That's why when someone tried to confront him by asking "you have been propagating that there is not God, what you will do if God appears in front of you?" he very simply and casually said "I will tell God is there".

Periyar reminds us what he had written when Sir A. P. Bathro, a former Minister from the Non-Brahmin party had spoken in deviation from the party's stand during the debate in Madras Legislative Assembly on bringing an act to ban Child marriage. He had written that "Bathro should resign his post in the Non-Brahmin party and should join the Brahmin party. He had also said that calling Bathro as a member of Non-Brahmin party was an insult to the entire Non-Brahmin community (Kudiyarasu, 23-09-1928).

Further Periyar wrote, "meanwhile we come to know that when the bill to raise the marriageable age was taken for debate in the Indian Legislative Assembly, the Brahmins of Tamil Nadu vehemently opposed it and many of them had given individual notices for the same with the signature of some Mohammedians (Muslims); we also learn that many Shankaracharyas, Vedic scholars, Kings who conduct 'Ramarajya'."

Some Mohamedian members also joined in the group of Vedic scholars who were opposed to raising the age of marriage of girls, Periyar wrote about this too. "That some Mohamedian members had also joined this chorus is not only an insult to their community but also an act that is harmful to the equal rights of humans is what we think" (Ku.23-09.1928).

Periyar further writes about a member who spoke against the bill to ban Child marriage that was forwarded in Indian Legislative Assembly. The Tamil Nadu representative M. K. Acharyar, who is also a representative of the Hindu Varnashrama, while speaking against this bill, had said that 'women remaining chaste is not possible if there is no child marriage', that 'the life of women will be spoilt', that 'the family life will become miserable and will always be vulnerable to hazards', that 'at a time when men are being jailed (it was during Independence Struggle) the conduct of women will become deplorable' unless Balya Vivaha is retained it is impossible to preserve the true good

conduct in life.” These have been published in Sudhesamithran newspapers and the reporter of ‘Sudhesamithran’ has supported and praised Mr. Acharyar for his speech. [Ku.23-09-1928]

Periyar presents his criticism regarding this: “The readers should think how evil it is to brazenly state that chastity of women will be spoilt if Child marriage is not retained and life will become miserable. We don’t have much problem if Mr. Acharyar had spoken like these exclusively for Brahmins or Iyengar community. But since had talked like this as a representative of all of us, we cannot refrain from condemning it.” [Ku.23-09-1928]

Periyar also points out that such practices were not prevalent among predominant ‘Shudra people’. We could also see how the Caste dominance created a strong impact even on the non-Vedic society. Periyar says “All of us know that most of us leave our daughters unmarried even until the age of 20, that only in recent times many of us have become slaves of Brahminism and copying them out of the urge to be respected as Upper caste we have started marrying of their daughters at a very young age” (Ku.23-09-1928).

“If we go by the statement of Mr. Acharyar, the impression we get is that the girls who are married off two years or four years after attaining puberty were married off only after they have become prostitutes. If Mr. Acharyar says that he was not talking about other communities and he was talking only about his own community, we have to infer that he thinks women of his community cannot remain chaste after attaining puberty if they are not married off. This means he has insulted the entire women society.’ [Ku.23-09-1928] Writing this, Periyar further adds, throughout the ages, the first Varna has been like this - imposing its values on others for its own selfish needs,

“While the fundamentals of Hindu religion. Vedas, Puranas, Vedic tradition and Varna system are rooted in enslaving and insulting women, there is no surprise on or Indian Legislative representatives speaking like this.” [Kudi Arasu 23-9-1928] Periyar writes thus and points out that this is the natural act of the defenders of Vedas.

Child marriage was rampant in Madras Presidency. Looks like Vedic tradition was strongly implemented here Dr. Macphail is a woman who involved herself in medical service in India for over 50 years. Pulavar Ko.Imayavaramban quotes, “I have treated girls of various ages such as 12, 13, 14 etc. It was a terrible sight to see those delivering babies. Due to this, the upper caste girls live with a weak body, puny physique, under grown body parts throughout their lives. We know that the menace of Child marriage is severe in Madras Presidency. We also know that it is more severe and rampant in rural parts.” [2013 page 34]

On 1.2.1927, Raj Sahib Haribilas Sarada, a scholar elected as a representative for the Delhi Legislative Assembly proposed a bill titled “Hindu Children marriageable age reform bill” in the Indian legislative assembly. It was taken for debate on 15.9.1929

This shook the Vedic Brahmins again. The then Shankaracharya sent a Telegram to the Viceroy saying that if marriages are allowed to be conducted after the age of 12, the Hindu religion will be ruined. Page 37 of the aforementioned book ‘Varalaaril Pen Kodumaigal’ (‘Atrocities against women in the history’) explains how the Vedic Brahmins projected as staunch Nationalists created roadblocks for this bill. Imayavaramban recalls how The Hindu which called itself as a Reformist newspaper wrote about this in this way. “What we see as marriage of 10 or 12 years-old girls are not exactly weddings. They are like betrothals. The First night where the bride and groom are made to consummate their wedding can only be considered as marriage.” [2013 Page 40]

“If the Government starts interfering in Hindu marriages, the Hindu religion itself will be ruined. Sage Parasara has written that girls should be married off before the age of 10, 12 and failing to do so will make a person sinful. Should we fear for the sin or to your laws?” This was the argument of Sathyamoorthy Iyer of Tamil Nadu in front of Equal Age committee. [2013 page 39]

What we have to keep in mind here is that Smrithis have prescribed Balya Vivaha was prescribed only for the twice born. Shudras-Draavidians are not twice-born.

According to the Census of 1921, 24 percentages of Hindu girls between the age of 10 and 15 were married. It is not correct to state as is so often suggested that only selected castes like Brahmins or Vaishyas observe the practice of early or pre-puberty marriage. In fact, the high percentage of 24.5% is a sufficient proof that where these two communities form less than 4% of the population. Many others must have adopted or should be following the customs of early marriage. [Report of the Age of Consent Committee, P.94. 1928-1929 Calcutta. Govt of India page 53]

In this connection Periyar says that there is no harm in allowing a young widow to remarry. Periyar says that a husband who has lost his wife should marry only a widow. In the same way the widow should be married off to a widower only. [1974. P145-146.] Periyar and his movement conducted many remarriages to young widows.

By giving detailed statistics of the 1921 census report with the total number of all the Hindu widows 3711788 age wise Gandhi says, ‘alas my heart throbs like a mother’. Here is the detailed information. This state of affairs deeply hurtled Periyar. He experienced this in his family in 1909 at the age of 30. He writes, ‘I am deeply disturbed when I realize that among the widows in India, 11,892 are little children below 5 years and the young widows below 15 years numbering 2, 32,147 are denied the pleasures of life. Which civilized country will accept this wretched widowhood’ (Kudi Arasu 22.8.1926]

Gandhiji was deeply pained on seeing the injustice done to the child widows; he is for the remarriage to them, he said: I want the households containing young widows to arrange their marriage. This is not remarriage as they were never properly married. [Mahatma Gandhi, Women in the Society, Madurai, 1984, p.34.]

Conclusion

Child marriage has been abolished by law but even today we come across news reports on incidents of child marriage. Most of these are conducted with girls who are below the age of 18 or before attaining puberty. This practice is mostly found among Farm labourers and those who are dependent on jobs related to Agriculture. The Coimbatore edition of Deccan Chronicle dated 16-08-2018 has reported statistics regarding this. These details pertain to Tamil Nadu alone. The statistics report informs that in the years 2015-16, 2016-17 and 2017-18 1867, 2169 and 2807 respective child marriages have taken place. The report further notes that such marriages happen in the backward districts which lag behind in industrial growth. But the report has not dwelt into the reasons for this. Since the Agriculture has been failing, many people dependent on that are migrating to other cities in search of jobs. During such times the families marry off their daughters in view of security. This worrisome trend is on the rise. This condition will not change unless and otherwise the Government provides adequate education and security to these girls.

In the ancient traditions of India, especially in the societies that speak Dravidian languages, women were treated with greater respect. But the Vedic religion and traditions have been ruling for a very long period of time. Hence the Vedic practices such as male chieftainship, male god worship have acquired a dominant and primary space in Indian society. Girls were denied education and married off when they are very young in order to prevent them from joining the non-Vedic religions.

The child marriage was rampant until the Sarada Act was implemented though many have struggled to abolish child marriage; the contribution of Periyar who hailed from the Non-Brahmin tradition is spectacular. He considered human beings as more important than anything else. So, he followed that principle and vehemently opposed Child Marriage. He called it as an evil against the human race and was a frontrunner among those who struggled to abolish the practice. Today, the Child Marriage has again started among people who shift from one place to another in search of livelihood. The Governments should stop this by implementing adequate Social Security schemes.

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