

The Vice of Child Marriages ("*Balyo-Bibaher Dosh*") by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagarⁱ

According to the *Smriti-Shastra* scriptures, when eight year old girl-children are married off, her parents attain the *punya*, that is, the sacred piety of *Gouri-daan* – The Giving of *Gouri*, when nine year old girls are wedded away, their parents attain the sacred piety of *Prithvi-daan* – The Giving of the Earth, when ten year old girls are put to marriage, their parents attain the rite of passage to holy realms in afterlife. Enchanted by the thirst for such imaginary attainments, the people of our country have introduced and continued with the custom of child-marriages, paying no heed towards consequences.

Who has not felt, nor been aware of, sweeping damage that has occurred because of this? The writers of such *Shastra*-scriptures have not only sought to establish child-marriage. They have also laid down rigid dicta to prevent waiting until post-pubescence when it comes to marrying girl-children off. Thus, if a girl is still unmarried and at her paternal home when she begins to menstruate, it is considered as a grave sin not only of the parents but also of seven generations of their predecessors – who all go to hell because of such transgression – as the scriptures lay down. In such a situation, both the parents become 'impure', have to perform penance all their lives and are to be humiliated, ostracized and considered 'untouchable' to such extent that they cannot be allowed to have food sitting beside other people of the society. A girl who thus turns into a woman without getting married is thus considered as a source of odious opprobrium and ignominy for her parents and for the society at large.

Even if indignation against this swells up in the heart of some good person, such a person can hardly speak out or take action in opposition to such rigidly enforced social diktat. Such thoughts, despite all earnestness, rise like streaks of lightning, merely to fade to the timid darkness within.

Tied to such widely prevalent and thoroughly enforced codes of conduct mandated by the *Shastra*-scriptures, we have been witnessing and suffering from the harm of child-marriages since ages. Boys and girls, getting married before ideas of love develop in their minds, thus get denied and, in turn, deny themselves of the sweet fruit of marriage that love is. Families, thus, instead of living in the harmony that love brings, live through discord and disaffection. Children borne and brought up in such families thus fail to receive harmonious upbringing and grow up through harsh and rugged family environments. Newly wedded boys and girls keep themselves busy learning of words of seduction, try all the time to learn and practice the arts of titillating, arousing and entertaining each other sexually and such becomes the sole source and purpose of their childhood and adolescence in entirety. As a result, they get denied of all other education which is necessary for all humans to develop themselves as wholesome human beings. With their minds thus deprived of opportunities to develop, they turn into beings with human forms but bereft of all humanity and human qualities necessary to stake claims to the human identity.

The root of all happiness is physical health. Even that faces severe detriment from the practice of child marriages. Thus, undoubtedly, this harmful custom of child marriages is also the primary reason behind the abysmal and lamentable condition of physical and mental capacities of the people from our country when compared with likewise capabilities and faculties of people from other human races.

Alas! How long must we suffer till providence rescues us from such plight? How long must we wait? In any case, presently, a movement has arisen on this issue, which is a good thing to happen. Perhaps, one blessed day, this custom shall be abolished and the people of this country shall be able to find relief and respite.

These days, much is being written and read about this and other harmful habits affecting society. Thus, undoubtedly, positive steps shall one day be taken towards amelioration and abandonment of such detrimental customs. If the earth is dug long enough, water is bound to come up. If two pieces of wood are rubbed against one another for long enough, sparks are bound to fly and fire is bound to begin burning. Likewise, if the truth is sought for long enough, the same cannot stay entrapped forever within the nets woven by falsities.

Such thoughts have played in my mind for long. So, I embark upon this voyage of writing my two bits on the issue of child marriages.

Among almost all creatures on the earth, the creator has created the male and the female species. Among all such creatures, the female and the male unite to beget, that is, to create progeny. In this way, new life is born and the species survives and sustains itself. Pertinently, among human beings, one female and one male, acceding to each other's requests, given to each other's love and the good rules of nature and instincts, unite so as to give birth to new human beings, thereby preserving the human order.

It is difficult to say how long since the creation of the world that the human race had come to be. It is as difficult to ascertain how long since the arrival of the human race that the custom of marriage evolved. However, it can be stated without doubt that, when clear ideas of matter, property and ownership were conceived, when political notions of power and rule began to rear their strong heads, when, ideas of demarcation between the self and the other evolved along with those of conscience and conscientiousness, and, when it was realized by many human beings that, without affection, empathy, kindness, mercy and pride, it is impossible to continue with the journey as human beings in the human community and society, that marriage becomes one of the prime causes behind origination and development of such sentiments – the concepts of wedding and matrimony evolved.

The system of marriage and married life has, ever since, evolved and made itself better, more humane, in all countries. However, in our country, far from evolving into better conditions, the system of wedding has worsened and fallen such that, through veritable discretion and consideration, it can be realized that the present rules of marriage that society binds us to have been the reasons behind the rueful plight of this country today.

Here, parents of daughters seek to marry their child off at an early age. Either they search for the groom by themselves or through others. The only perceived quality that they seek as 'ideal' in the groom is that of being high-born, that is, born in a high-caste family. If this condition is satisfied, then it does not matter if the soon to be groom is illiterate or if he has not yet attained any age of maturity that would,

in more hopeful circumstances, been deemed ideally suited for marriage. Thus, such parents pay no heed to their daughter's happiness or otherwise in her future, that is, married life. In this human world, conjugal bliss is one of the primary fountainheads of happiness. When such bliss and happiness are impeded, the wedded couple spends the entirety of their conjugal and familial life in utter sorrow and dismay. Alas, for such is a matter of much sadness! The happiness of the husband on the wife depends on how much love one has for the other. If both are good, kind and of firm character, then the conjugal bond becomes a happy one. If such qualities and virtues are amiss, both lead lives drowned in sorrow. If no consent from the woman, the girl, is deemed necessary, if she is to give herself to her husband's sexual needs irrespective of his character, inconsequential to how much love he has and expresses towards her, then, is there any scope of happiness for such a couple in their conjugal life?

Roots of love lie in the unity of minds. Such unity depends on many factors such as age, situation, looks, virtues, character, external and internal volitions etc. In this country, boys and girls, prior to their weddings, do not get to know anything about each other's intentions, hearts, characters or material conditions. They are denied all opportunities of getting to know one another in person, to befriend or converse with. They are even denied all opportunity of meeting or looking at one another. Instead, it is their parent's penchant and volition, dependant on the words of apathetic socially sanctioned matchmaker – '*GhaTak*' – determine the staunch, inalienable and absolute laws of matrimonial bonding that are to bind them for their lives in entirety. This is the reason why, in our country, we find no love between the husband and the wife in relations of marriage. The husband merely performs his social functions as the money earner. The wife stays subjugated to the social functions that necessitate her performance as the one who maintains & upkeep the domestic householdry.

Wise practitioners of the medical sciences, who were well versed with the theories, practices and philosophies surrounding the human body, have said that a child, conceived and born when its parents are yet to attain the complete physical maturities that can develop only after such human beings attain a certain age, is prone die in infancy. Even if such a child does not die at childbirth, even if the child grows up till a certain age, such a child is often found to be of infirm health and natural dispositions. Such a child suffers much from physical ailments and afflictions and stays incapable of many humanly functions. Soon, as it is seen quite often, even such a child falls to the throes of death, despite having lived for some years. The institution of marriage and conjugal relations had evolved to ensure and sustain new lives and generations keep on coming up, so that the humans survive and function as societies. The custom of child marriage, the way it has evolved in this country, by contributing to the ever burgeoning rates of infant deaths, has ensured that the basic purpose and function of marriages and conjugality gets and stays severely hampered.

The people of our country are often seen as the most meek, cowardly and of feeble mental and physical dispositions in comparison with those from all the other places and races of the world. Since a very early age do the people from our country become incapable of and inept at all forms of toil involving agility and hardship. Listless weariness sets in. There might be multiple inter-connected reasons behind this. However, with deep and insightful search, it can be established that the widespread prevalence of child marriages is one of the definitive causal factors behind such lamentable conditions. If the parents are not strong, if they do not possess firm, stable physical dispositions, it is impossible for them to conceive

and beget strong children. Everyone shall agree to this that weak causes cannot lead to strong effects. For instance, if we plant good quality seeds in lands of inferior quality, we cannot harvest good crops. The harvest is bad even when the field has good, fertile soil but the seeds are of bad quality. Likewise, children begotten when the bodies of their parents have still not developed all functions involving childbirth to their full extents of maturity cannot have nature on their side.

The situation was not like this in the olden days. It is not so that India – *Bharatvarsha* – had a dearth of heroes and brave people. Scriptures record annals of children born in the *Kshatriya* and, at times, even in the Brahmin caste grew up to have their glorious deeds of valour, as put on display, often, through adept skills in warfare, remembered in history. Histories embedded into mythic tales establish that once there used to be so many heroes, that is, *Veer-s*, in India that it had held the epithet *Veer Prasavini* – the Begetter of Heroes. Even today, in countries that lie in the western climes of the Indian subcontinent, we see many people who, through their deeds, actions and vocations, uphold the truths behind such historically documented gallantry of their ancestors. And yet, Hindu people born in these more eastern parts of the same subcontinent have fallen to such feeble constitutions and dispositions. Is the widespread prevalence of the custom of child marriages not one of the main causes behind such dereliction? In the olden days, people from all castes and races – *jaati-s* – would marry only after attaining ages of maturity. The *shastra* scriptures speak of eight types of marriages. However, the most prevalent were four customs – *Gandharva*, *Asura*, *Rakshasa* and *Paishach*. Other than these, the custom of *swayamvara* was also prevalent, by dint of which brides would get to choose and select a suitable groom among a host of prospective ones who would arrive at the pre-determined place at an agreed upon time for the ritual to commence with. None of these types and forms of marriages would happen until both the bride and the groom had attained ages of maturity. Further investigations make us realize that, in the places that lie more towards the western parts of the subcontinent, even till date, no wedding happens until the bride and the groom have fully grown up. Children borne & brought up by such grown up parents show no mental or physical infirmity. They grow up to become mighty and courageous. This is proved by the fact that, when denied of opportunities to take up any alternative mode of employment, they take up professions as soldiers of royal forces or as gate-keepers and security guards of wealthy people. People from Bengal, on the other hand, would rather and much readily take up far hideous and repulsive vocations than undertake tasks that necessitate courage and strength. This is the reason why we see no Bengali person in the royal armies. It is said that the people from *Utkala* – Odisha – also possess very feeble physical and mental strength, just like the Bengalis. Even Bengali people denigrate people from the *Utkala* countries for their perceived lack of valour and courage. The custom of child marriages, unlike in the western provinces of the subcontinent and akin to Bengal, is also very much present in Odisha. The people from Bengal and Odisha – where the practice of child marriages is rampant – are perceived as weak and cowardly. On the other hand, those from the more western parts of the subcontinent, where such heinous a custom is not encouraged in society, are considered strong and courageous. Can we still not see how people born in places where child marriages are an everyday, happening reality are far more feeble and of weak bearings and dispositions compared to those born in places where the same are not in practice?

Had women's education been prevalent in our country children could have begun to learn many things and receive education from their mothers from a very tender age. Children are closest to their mothers during their earliest years. Children, during that phase of their lives, do not feel as much proximity with their fathers or with other relatives as they do with their mothers. During such ages, sweet words, spoken with love, stir deep feelings and emotions in children; words of moral advice do not resonate as much. So, children, during their most tender ages, feel happier when they are with their mothers and other women in the family and society, as compared to when they are with men. So, children who begin to hear words learning and education spoken with kind love and fondness as soon as they quit drinking their mothers' milk become well educated at a very young age. Mothers' advices can make deep-seated impacts within the minds of young children. No other teacher's advice can ever have even a fraction of such impact in them. In Europe, women's education is widespread. There, women are able to bestow educational advice to their children. Thus, European children, from a very tender age, become well-educated and civil in disposition. Such benefits can never happen to our country unless the prevalence of child marriages is not curbed and the same is not abolished. We have come to know that some people from educated families do seek to educate their girl-children on par with their boy-children from an early age. However, by the time such girls even get to learn the alphabet, the hour for their nuptials arrive. Their education comes to a halt. After that, such girls have to go to their in-laws' place and stay there. Therein, they have to make themselves adept at homemaking skills such as caring for their in-laws, sweeping and cleaning the house, preparing the beds for sleeping, cooking and serving food and such other domestic chores. Every day, they have to make themselves acquainted with pots, pipkins, kettles, ladles, spoons, crockery and cutlery; they have to become skilled at using the same to perform their social functions as housewives. Thus, before long, whatever little education they receive at their parental abodes before their weddings wither away from their minds. Had the parents of girls in this country not been so obedient to these custom of marrying their daughters off even before their education has barely begun, such daughters could have learned more, could have imparted better advice to their children and turn such children into educated beings from a very young age. So, we appeal to the learned people of our civil society today – if you wish to work on the spreading of women's education, please also endeavour to eradicate the custom of child marriages – for, if women are married off at such tender ages as they are today, it is impossible to ensure education for them.

Marrying at a tender age can only disturb and distract us. This is because, firstly, childhood and adolescence – which is the primary age for receiving education – gets spent in the sensual fun, frolic and merriment that the conjugal life brings. Then, before we are capable of earning, we become parents of children. As a result, we become desperate to solicit money from whichever source possible. For, the whole world seems empty to a householder faced with abject penury. Even works that are dishonest or criminal in nature become very much feasible and doable for them. In fact, the tendency to partake in such loathsome work rises in such conditions. We have even seen this on many instances that people, of otherwise honest predispositions, when faced with situations of pennilessness and when surrounded by people in their families and society who are incapable of earning honest livings or partaking in honest livelihoods, turn to commit heinous works all for the sake of some money. At times they lead their lives with their father's money and properties, at times they mooch off from their brothers, at times they live off their relatives. Such parasitic existence leads to them being and feeling humiliated and insulted at

every step, and their lives wither away in such disgraceful a manner as is unbecoming of any productive member of the human race. The custom and wide-spread prevalence of child marriages lies at the root of such indignant life and living for so many. Is it thus not for the sake of broader, bigger and wholesome benefit of the society that this evil custom is discarded forthwith?

Some people argue in favour of child marriages – stating that, if the custom is abolished, young boys and girls will take to licentious activities from a very young age. This argument cannot be discarded in entirety. However, it is clear that, if childhood and adolescence is spent in receiving worthwhile education – then it is impossible for such young men and women to turn to such prurience, because, through education, it is ensured that such base and vile intentions do not take root in their sensitive minds. Through education we get to learn what is right and what is wrong – what brings benefit and what causes harm – we learn what honest work is and what constitutes dishonesty. Thus, education strengthens the moral and conscientious foundations of our characters. Thus, if we discern with logic and reason, if we think of the role of education in character building, such arguments about child marriages keeping young men and women at bay from taking to prurient, lascivious and debased lifestyles cannot arise.

If we approach the issue from the perspective of mortality rates, we discern that the chances of human beings who are not senile dying are the highest between the ages of zero and twenty. Thus, if the custom of child marriages is abolished, the number of widows is also bound to come down. Even parents of girls will not have to worry about their daughters becoming widows at a tender age in such situations. Who is not aware of the austere penances that the scriptures and customs of this country impose on widows? Lives of widows are weighed down by immense sadness. This strange humanly world is but a forest devoid of human beings for a widowed woman. All her happiness ends with the life of her husband. With the grief of having to lose her husband arrive all other sorrows. Her penances include fasting without water on regular occasions. If, during the performance of such penances, she finds herself on the throes of death out of thirst or illness, our heartless societal customs permit not for a single drop of water to be poured on her dried and shriveled up tongue, nor for a single morsel of medicine to be given to her. Child marriages increase the chances of even young girls becoming widows while they are still young and increase the chances of them having to lead their lives at the crushing anvil of woe and penitence. Whose plight can be as lamentable as theirs are? Such vows and penances that bring pain which is unbearable even for grown up people. Can there be anything as cruel as making young women, even ill-fated little girls, go through such harsh pain and suffering - something that is so widespread in our society? Child marriages, by increasing the risk of the girl child becoming a widow while still at a tender age, thus hurls such a girl child before the grinding wheels of the juggernaut of social and scripture-ordained customs – wherein she has to spend her entire life through such burning pain and suffering. Words do not suffice to narrate the full extent and intensity of this suffering. We have witnessed with our own eyes how, on nights of such fasting and penitence, hundreds of luck-bereft young girls – widowed at a tender age – become half-dead with thirst, their tongues and entire bodies dry up, all strength departs their limbs, and yet, nobody shows the courage to break such rigidly clamped social and scriptural norms, to give them, out of sheer empathy if nothing else, a drop of water to drink or a little bit of food to eat. Such customs become so firmly entrenched even in the minds of the

young widows who fast and perform such severe penances that, even when they reach the very doors of death, even when life becomes all set to depart from their persons, they do not seek to drink a drop of water – even they do not dare to breach the stern rules that hold our society in throe today. It indeed is extreme injustice that, when little girls should have grown up at their parental homes, should have found environments suited to the natural development of their minds and bodies – they are sacrificed at the altar of betrothal, thrown into households of people who were strangers to them until they married into those families, into such vast an ocean of sadness as this woe of leading the life of a widow is in this society. As it can easily be discerned, families where there are widowed women living fear the risk of grave sins being committed. Such widows, driven by the bodily instincts of nature, can engage in secretive, licentious relationships. If they get impregnated in process, the heinous sin of feticide can also cast its long malevolent shadow on such households. All in all, the arrival of widowhood at young and tender ages bears a direct causal link with the tyrannical atrocity that the custom of child marriages is. So, we appeal before all the civil people of this country to unite and work towards ensuring that this inequity that child marriages is wiped away from the face of society in entirety.

The thoughts and arguments that we publish in this magazine today against the evil of child marriages is barely the beginning. It is akin to an introduction. Much of logic and reason, as well as exemplary, anecdotal and empirical expositions against the social ailment of child marriages lie yet to be placed. With time, we shall keep no stone unturned in our endeavour to write and publish more and more on this topic.

ⁱ Original Article Published in 1850 in Calcutta based Bengali language periodical *Sarva Subhakari*. As it has been established by literary historians (Gopal Halder, 1972), this happens to be the very first among a multitude of articles and monographs that Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) had penned in course of his life as a tireless and pioneering social reformer of Bengal and India.