

## Agony of Child Brides : Stance of the Women Reformers

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*Nineteenth century played a significant role in the transformation of women in particular in the larger context of gender restructuring under colonialism. Many aspects of subalternity of 'the second sex' were addressed by the society ignited by the presence and intervention of the 'Progressive – white-masculine' British. Though women and women reformers were treated as 'other' in the midst of their own 'brownmen' and the dominant 'whitemen', a reading through the lines of the autobiographical accounts of the women reformers echoes the voice of dissent and agony that they had experienced being child brides. Being subaltern, they were given only the chance to be represented in the discourse of 'women's question'. Men, both Indian and British debated and took decision on behalf of women ; but the first-hand experience of being child brides places their voice something above representation. It expresses their 'selves' and the mere rhetoric of male reformers on behalf of child brides were endorsed often by the personal experience of women reformers. The paper examines the experiences of child brides and how these experiences make the stance of the women reformers on the issue unique and different from male reformers.*

**Key words:** Child bride, representation, self, other, subaltern

Child marriage was prevalent in India and widely practised in the society. The question of child brides assumed priority in the debate on widowhood. Their sufferings were highlighted in the entire discourse on widowhood. Their agonies were well illustrated by the works of Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, one of the prominent women reformers of the nineteenth century. The reason of the presence of an unusually large number of child widows was attributed to the custom of child marriage. Naturally, the movement against the custom of child marriage followed by the age of consent controversy made it an important issue to be debated in the public.

Women's discourse on child marriage assumes a special significance as most of the women reformers of the nineteenth century had entered into married life at a very young age. This provides an opportunity to depict their experience as child wives. These accounts articulate the anxiety of the parents. As soon as the girl crosses seven or eight years of age, their frantic efforts in search of bridegrooms have had its bearing on the girls. In the words of Rukhumabai: "A robust promising youth gets a rickety consumptive wife, while an unintelligent girl gets an inferior husband."<sup>1</sup> Pandita Ramabai also supported this view. She said: If the parents are not wealthy enough to provide dowry, they overlooked the negative points of the match like the advanced age of the bridegroom, his appearance and bad habits. Parents are more concerned to settle the marriage before the girl attains puberty. So long as they have fulfilled the custom, and thereby secured a good name in this world and heavenly reward in the next, their minds are not much troubled concerning the girl's fate. Dr. Ananandhibai's (first lady doctor from Maharashtra) marriage with Gopalrao Joshee, was arranged by parents in spite of them being informed of the bridegroom's eccentric ideas of reforms. Gopalrao was a twenty seven years old widower and the parents found in him a potential match to their nine year old daughter as it exempted them from affording dowry, and relieved them from the concern of the dire consequence of arranging marriage of their daughter after puberty in view of their daughter's physical growth at the age of eight. Dr. Haimabati Sen's case seemed even more deplorable. At the age of nine, she was married to a forty five year old widower. In her

autobiography, she explains about her prospective bridegroom who was hurriedly selected by her family. The groom was a Deputy magistrate in Jessore and his brother was a police inspector of Khulna. The prospective bridegroom was kulin-kayastha by caste and forty five years old. He had two wives as was now planning a third marriage. He had two daughters by his first marriage; the son of his second wife had died with his mother. Two other children, born to the first wife, were also dead. This was the groom everyone approved of.

Interestingly, Haimabati Sen did not know that she got married as she was sleeping at the time of her wedding. She narrated the embarrassments the child bride in her autobiography in the following manner: “In the month of Sravan (July-august), I was given in marriage to that handsome groom. I was asleep at the time of the wedding. When I woke up I found that instead of my elder grandmother, a strange man was lying on the big bed.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed the opinion of the girls of eight or nine years of age had no relevance either in the settlement of marriage or about their bridegrooms. The parents settled it. The memoirs of women about their marriage show that they happily participated in the marriage festival as they had not reached the age to understand the exact meaning of marriage. In her work , High Caste Hindu Woman, Pandita Ramabai testifies the festivities associated with marriage as the prime reason to make them feel happy about the prospects of their marriage. “What can be more tempting to a child’s mind than these? In addition to all these, a big elephant is sometimes brought on which the newly married children ride in procession amidst all sorts of fun. Is it not grand enough for a child!” She also portrays the child brides’ imaginations thus “Oh-,I shall ride on the back of the elephant, thinks the girl, and there is something more besides, all the people in the house will wait on me, will make much of them; everybody will caress and try to please me.”<sup>4</sup> Sister Subhalakshmi, woman reformers from Madras Presidency who was married at the age of eleven soon forgot about her marriage. In her interview with Monica Felton, Shubalakshmi recalled about her marriage thus: ‘I forgot about my marriage afterwards as completely as I forgot whether my husband was tall or short for my age, fair or dark. The only thing I remember was the beauty of the wedding sari.’<sup>22</sup>

The only instance of an unexpressed defiant feeling of a child bride against her parent's selection of her bridegroom is given in the autobiography of Parvati Athavale. She was married at the age of eleven, indeed an advanced age compared to the prevailing norms of the age of marriage of girls. When she came to know that her parents arranged marriage with the man who was lame, she was not at all pleased with the decision of parents. She said, "I was not at all pleased with this marriage arrangement, but I said nothing. From the discussions that took place in the family I learned that the man was lame. He received only fifteen rupees a month. He had no relatives living with him. There would be no father or mother-in-law. Girls of eleven years of age may perhaps feel a certain joy in the thought of the music and the glare of the wedding festival but I felt no joy. I did not have the moral strength to say whether I wished or didn't wish to be married."<sup>2</sup> Rarnabai Ranade was also a girl of eleven years when she got married Ranade, a widower of thirty-two. She did not express her opinion about the marriage with Ranade in their reminiscences although she was mature enough to express her opinion. Rarnabai's parents agreed Ranade as the groom for their daughter, with their complete knowledge of the fact that Ranade was highly reluctant to marry and he was forced to marry. Ranade's words to his future father-in-law who approached him to propose his daughter are enough to drop the idea of a marriage. Ranade said. 'why do you think I will be an appropriate match? You belong to an ancient family. I am a reformer in favour of widow remarriage. I look hale and hearty but I have weak eyesight and am also hard of hearing. Besides, I am planning to go England. I shall not undergo any prayashcitta after I return. You should consider all this and then decide.'<sup>3</sup> Pandita Ramabai's narration of her mother's marriage with her father Anant Shastri can be taken as on the best example of the ill assorted, careless way of arranging the marriages of infant daughters in the nineteenth century. Lakshmibai, a girl of nine years old was given away in marriage to Anant Sahstri, a forty five years old. The future of the girls was simply left at the mercy of the God and their luck.

A girl was treated as an outsider in her natal family after marriage. Therefore, they were supposed to put up with all kinds of

hardships in their in-law's family. Considering this aspect of the Indian marriage system, one gets struck by the way the parents give away their daughters in marriage without making adequate enquires regarding the future life of their daughters in their in-laws' house.

One of the disasters of child marriage was the exposure of young girls to sexual harassment by their matured husbands. Women's writings do not throw much light on this very personal aspect of their lives. Cases of sexual harassment by husbands of their young wives got publicity in the nineteenth century when the wives had succumbed to the injuries of forceful cohabitation. When girls of tender years were married off to matured men of thirty or forty years old, there was every chance of sexual harassment. Among the personal narratives of nineteenth century women, the autobiographical accounts of Haimabati Sen are exceptionally open about the early exposure to sexual life. Whether they are mature or minor, girls are supposed to co-operate with their husbands in sexual matters. Advice of the elderly women used to equip them with sufficient knowledge in this matter. When Haimabati Sen screamed on her husband's attempt to expose her to early sexual life, other women in the family interpreted it as unwifely. A woman relative advised Haimabati Sen thus: Why don't you let your husband touch you? Was it proper to scream like that? Don't you understand that people will speak ill of you? Your husband was crying on Harish Babu's shoulder today and said, 'My wife is a savage': and so many things, don't behave like that anymore. Listen to what he says and don't disobey him. Otherwise he will turn you out. Try and act like slave. If you do what he asks, he will give you so many clothes and ornaments.<sup>7</sup>

While she did not comment on her early exposure to sexual life, Anandihbai Joshee expressed her displeasure to her husband about his treatment of her as child wife. She said: "Hitting me with broken pieces of wood at the tender age of ten, flinging chairs and books at me and inflicting other strange punishments on me when I was fourteen - all these were too severe for the age, body, and mind at each respective stage. In childhood the mind is immature and the body undeveloped." One can presume from the above description that his punishment included sexual harassment also as she gave birth to a

dead baby at the age of twelve. Though a victim of early marriage Anandihbai did not agree with the well-circulated notion among the Europeans about the nexus between ill health of Indian women and early marriage. She pointed out that the practice of early marriage is not prevalent in many countries and yet the women there often are weak and ill constituted as Indian women. In a letter sent to Mary Carpenter, in 1881, she remarked, "Early marriage is no doubt a bane. When we deviate from the laws of nature, we must suffer the consequence."<sup>5</sup> She also recommended the interference of government in abolishing the custom. Unfortunately, in a lecture delivered in 1884 before one of the missionary societies on the subject of child marriage, Anadihbai spoke in favor of the custom. Those who were disappointed in her pronouncement naturally concluded that her emancipation from the thralldom of custom was not completed."<sup>9</sup> Bodley L. Rachel, Dean of women's Medical College of Pennsylvania also supported the view by emphasizing the absolute impossibility of a high caste Hindu woman to speak otherwise.'

Pandita Ramabai's critical evaluation of the custom of child marriage in *The high caste Hindu woman* provides the stance of the women reformers. It also reveals how different was their stance on child marriage compared to that of male reformers was. Rather than seeking the validity of *sastras* for the custom, they relied on their own experiences and it formed their rational in abolishing the child marriage and raising the age of marriage too. Commenting on the prevailing low age of marriage, she remarks, "A great many girls are given in marriage at the present day literally while they are still in their cradles. Five to eleven years is the usual age for their marriage among the Brahmins all over India." The prevailing custom of the early marriage of boys and girls, according to her, did not fulfil the exact purpose of marriage. In her opinion, the early marriage denies proper education for, the period in a person's life from the age of eight to twenty is suitable for acquiring knowledge. In addition to it, the progeny produced out of this immature wedlock will be weak, dull and unintelligent. She considered that marriage was a union of two mature individuals and emphasized perfect freedom in the choosing of partners. She asks, '-In this world, even animals have the freedom to establish

a male-female relationship according to their own wishes, why then should human beings not have this freedom?"<sup>10</sup> When the male reformers set the marriageable age as low as possible to compromise with the public opinion, Ramabai preferred twenty years as the marriageable age. Unlike the male reformers who did not have the experience of the matured relationship in their own life, Ramabai had the advantage of setting her life as example to the public. She married at the age of twenty-one, a very advanced age for a girl to marry at a time when the parents lost their sleep if their daughters crossed seven or eight years of age. Her marriage with Bipan Bihari Medavi was in many respects an exception to the prevailing practice of the society. Not only was Medhavi the husband of her choice, he did not belong to her caste or state. Ramabai discussed the practice from a historical perspective and pointed out the comparative dwindling of freedom of women with regard to the institution of marriage over the course of years. She blamed the customs that evolved over centuries for the present degradation of early marriage of girls. While *sastras* had placed her in a better position, the customs stripped her off these rights and left her unprotected in relation to the privileges of men: which were acquired in the name of custom. She observed that though the *sastras* prescribe early marriage for girls, it forbade parents to give away daughters to worthless men and preferred girls to remain at home if good suitors were not found. "But, alas", she laments, - here too the law is defined by cruel custom." She describes the unsympathetic nature of custom towards women and the gender discrimination involved in it thus: It allows some women to remain unmarried, but woe to the maiden and to her family if she is so unfortunate as to remain single after the marriageable age. Although no law has ever said so, the popular belief is that a woman can have no salvation unless she is formally married. It is not, then a matter of wonder that parents become extremely anxious when their daughters are over eight or nine and unsought in marriage.

### Endnotes:

- 1 Sudhir Chandra: *Enslaved Daughters. Colonialism, Law and Women's Rights* (New Delhi: OUP, 1998) 2 13.
- 2 Geraldine Forbs and Tapan Raychaudhuri, *The Memoirs of Dr.Haimabati Sen* (New Delhi: Roli Books. 2000) 70

- 3 Meera Kosambi, ed., *Pandita Ramabai Through Her Own Words* (New Delhi: OUP: 2000) p.70
- 4 Monica Felton, *A Child Widow's Story* (London: Victor Gollancz Limited, 1966) 26.
- 5 Parvati Athavale, *Hindu Widow (an autobiography)*. Trans. Rev.Justin.E.Abbott (New Delhi: Reliance Publishing House, 1986) 12.
- 6 Ramabai Ranade. *Ranade. His Wife's Reminiscences*, Trans. Kusumavati Deshpande (New Delhi: Publications Division, 1963) 3 5.
- 7 Geraldine Forbs & Thapan Ray Chaudhuri, *Memoires of Dr. Haimabati Sen* (New Delhi: Roli Books, 2000) 92.
- 8 Meera Kosmabi, ed., *Pandita Ramabai Through Her Own Words* (New Delhi: OUP, 2000)113. 56
- 9 E. F. Chapman, *Notable Indian Women of the 19'" Century* (London: W.H. Allen and Company Limited. 189 1) 62.
- 10 Bodley L. Rachel, '*Introduction*' *The High Caste Hindu Woman by Pandita Ramabai Saraswathi* (Philadelphia, 1888) iii.

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