



## SARDAR PATEL'S THOUGHTS on CHILD-MARRIAGE IN PRESENT CONTEXT

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One does not get details about the period during which the practice of child marriage started in the Indian society. The practice of child marriage is a social evil, as innocent children of about age 12-13, are forced to marry. In some of the communities, marriages of the children were fixed when the mothers were pregnant by putting holy marks on bulging stomachs of pregnant mothers and asking them to perform marriage rituals around the holy fire. Such pre-mature marriages invited lot of problems for all. The child couples were ignorant about their responsibilities towards the relationship and rights they had. In a case, when the child-groom died at an early age after the marriage, the girl child married to him had to lead a miserable life as a child-widow for her entire life. Considering such a child widow to be an inauspicious and a bad omen, she would be restricted to a life in solitude and would be prevented from living a normal social life. As there was a strict prohibition to widow remarriage such a child-widow lead a pathetic and disrespectful life till her death.

During the olden times, female-education was not normally encouraged. After completing his education, the child-groom often disliked or disapproved his illiterate wife and deserted the marriage. In such a situation, deserted woman had to live a life of destitute at her parent's home. Such circumstances created lot of misery for the woman due to the evil tradition of child marriage. The difference in educational qualification between the couple led to creation of an obstacle for well-being of a married life. With no strong attachment to each other in absence of mental, educational and ideological equality, their life dragged like a dragged cart.

In order to reduce the misery of such women, social reformers made efforts to educate the society and eradicate the social evil of child marriage. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel though more known as freedom fighter and national level political leader was a great social reformer too. He envisioned that if the society is not liberated from

monstrous evils, then its political independence alone will not be able to bring peace and prosperity to the society. So in order to attain the freedom in the real sense he emphasized also on the abolition of social evils which proved draconian for the women.

The Philosophy of liberals is based on values of equality, freedom and humanity. With the concept of skill based education system, employability driven education has gained importance in the modern world and hence thrust on humanity and value based education system has taken a drop. Philosophy of liberals is based on values of equality, freedom and humanity, having science and constitutional laws as their principal elements. Modern ideologies stress on preference to human skills as compared to status acquired through birth. Liberals attacked all established systems which were based on virtue of status attained through birth. They accorded importance to actions based on wisdom and exhibited special attention towards eligibility. They preached against social actions blindly followed based on traditions and religious practices. Hence, a new way of thinking developed in place of a belief that "everything said by a priest or a religious head is truth and rest is untrue." An effort to test the social, political and religious beliefs through a scale of wisdom was undertaken. Liberalism advocated the right to freedom in individual's life. During this phase of rising voice of liberals and a new wave of reformist thinking, social reformers got additional support and recognition and they through their efforts empowered the struggle against evil practices in the society.

It is observed that the evil-custom of child marriage must have been initiated during the medieval period as in the case of vedic-age there are tales of "Swaymwar" in which a woman had an option to select a husband with her own wisdom. This arrangement indicates that woman used to marry at a mature age when she could decide for herself. She had the freedom to marry or not. During the medieval period after the invasions of Muslims and especially Mughals the age of marriage was repeatedly brought down. Certain customs prevailing in particular period have to be viewed with the socio-political conditions of that period. If such traditions & customs are not reformed with passing time, then they are evaluated as social-evils in changed socio-political conditions. It is important to view the social practices which prevailed in medieval period such as sati, child marriage, and widow remarriage prohibitions with socio-politics conditions that prevailed during that period. During the medieval period with the influx of Islamic invaders, and their victorious geographical intrusions deep into the Indian subcontinent brought many cruel and inhuman practices adopted by the victorious ruler, which included enslaving the defeated males and sending the females to their palaces as physical slaves. After capturing the sorted out beautiful woman, they kept them under strict captivity and were often abused physically by the king and their subjects. Hence, the women of the defeated areas were thrown into a dark state of insecurity. This sense of insecurity brought about several social changes in the living pattern of the woman in Indian society. They were restricted to move out of house in order to avoid abductions. They were restricted and made secured in the

four walls of the house. The woman of ancient India which chanted vedic mantras became confined for the sake of security, in medieval period, deprived of the right to freedom. In order to ensure safety and security of the adolescent girls and female children, the tradition of child marriage came into practice. Eventually, it became widely accepted custom.

During the latter part of the medieval period and in the beginning of twentieth century, some of the Indians attained foreign education and due to this, they became familiar with foreign culture and their social structure. On comparison, they found the status of Indian social structure more primitive and inferior. The age old customs and traditions were being looked as hindrances for social development. Some of the leading reformers during this period started their efforts for establishment of a society based on social equality opposing the evil-traditions. Many of the reformers worked for abolition of child marriage tradition, as this evil led to several other problems, namely creation of child-widows, high rate of infant-mortality and child-mother mortality. The condition of a young girl as child-widow deteriorated to the lowest level as widow remarriage was prohibited. Hence, this prohibition to widow remarriage gave birth to other social problems, due to which every social reformer concentrated on eradication of child-marriage tradition.

#### **Liberal thinkers and Child Marriage:**

Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar was one of the greatest liberal reformers of his era who was deeply pained by the event of a child-girl left behind as widow by his deceased Guru (Teacher) who had married to a very young girl at his age of 70. The agony and sufferings of the child widow ignited a strong determination in the mind of Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar to work for eradication of Child marriage tradition.

He took seven views for himself, that:

- (1) Will encourage his daughter to acquire sufficient education.
- (2) Will not decide for her marriage before she is 11.
- (3) Will not give importance to wealth while deciding life partner for her.
- (4) Will allow her daughter to remarry on her will if she becomes a widow.
- (5) Will not arrange son's marriage before he is 18.
- (6) Will not marry a second woman if his wife exists.
- (7) Will not arrange the marriage of his daughter to a male who already has a wife.

Accordingly, Ishwarchandra not only championed the fight against the custom of child marriage but also against the social evils like widow remarriage, Aristocracy,

polygamy and brought about a considerable revolution. Another liberal social reformer Behramji Malbari wrote a note in 1884 against child marriage and forced widower-ship and said that child marriage was a disastrous obstacle for both types of marriages, either happy or painful, as in case of painful marriage, the couple is unhappy and forcibly stayed connected while in case of happy marriage, the male had to relinquish education incomplete. Due to his efforts the committee for child marriage passed 12 resolutions in 1890. They were:

- (1) The consent age for marriage for woman should be raised to 12.
- (2) In case of delay in approving the marriage by the male, the child marriage can be dissolved.
- (3) The draconian act abolished by all other countries on fulfilment of marriage rights may not be introduced in India.
- (4) All the impediments in the legal provisions of widow remarriage should be removed.

Behramji Malbari was a great social reformer best known for his ardent advocacy for the protection of rights of women and for his activities against child marriage, for his assertion for consent age and widow remarriage. As Mahadev Govind Ranade had suggested that the marriage age for males be 18 and that of female should be 12, it implies that child marriage would have been widely prevalent during that period.

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel was one of the freedom fighters who also had a soul of a social reformer. He very bravely challenged the age old customs and traditions in his lectures. He emphasised importance to eradication of evil tradition of child marriage in public communications and discourses.

#### **Sardar Patel and Child Marriage:**

Social reformer and internationally known saint Swami Vivekanand also raised an objection to child marriage by and had once written: "I must set my foot to the best of my ability upon this devilish custom of child marriage "(Source: his letter to sharat 23/12/85, 228 West 39th street New York to Swami Sardanand. Vol 8 forth series). Even Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel had once said that the parents that sacrifice their children to the Kali Goddess on advice of Brahmins are animals. <sup>1</sup>Such advisor Brahmins are monsters. Even the religious and social leaders had opposed child marriage as a religious customs, as it deprives them from basic education and lack of basic education made their living miserable for the entire life. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel always had pain for the social evils and its sufferings. Child marriage, according to him was primarily responsible for deprivation of basic rights of children.

In his victory lecture in Bardoli, he had said: "Can the welfare of a community happen on making the small children marry? Will a community indulge in child marriages, which claims to be ready to accept bullets on its chest? And has the Government to make laws to decide the age for child marriage prohibition? How can we fight a government who has to make laws for our social reforms?"<sup>ii</sup>(2) Sardar Vallabhai Patel was a political leader. He fought against the British for Indian Independence, and for him to request them to make laws for efficient administration of society and abolition of evil customs and tradition, was against his self-respect. In order to abolish the tradition of child marriage he took to making efforts for education among the society. He believed that the awareness, required to control the evil social customs and especially child marriage, can only be spread successfully through education. He said: "Your children require education which teaches them to deny marriage proposals at a younger age".<sup>iii</sup>

Sardar Patel was a son of a farmer and he knew the plight of farmers. He had sympathy towards their pains and worked for removal of these pains. Child marriage was the biggest drawback of farmers. Pointing towards this, he once said: "The biggest drawback of farmers is that they fix marriages of their children at a very young age. It is as good as killing a child, when they are married at young age and are burdened with the responsibility of family affairs at a tender age. The standard in farmer's progeny is deteriorating day by day. It is shameful for us that the government had to enact child marriage abolition act. This is considered to be one of the factors which affects our eligibility for independence. We are defamed in the world due to our defect. Our enemies defame us in the world by projecting our defects. Even the animals follow the natural laws and what right do we have to claim to be farmers if we cross the limits followed by animals also? It is the religion of farmer to develop wisdom to save their children from this disaster by relinquishing the weaknesses and removing the stigma."<sup>iv</sup>

This is where Sardar Patel looks at child marriage as the obstructing element for attaining independence. Entire society is affected by child marriage practices, as they are carried out at a very tender age in a life stage of ignorance. So at a later period when a mature age is attained, if one of the partners does not accept the marriage, then the other has to suffer a miserable life as re-marriage restrictions were in place. Considering this aspect, Behramji Malbari had once said in the second resolution of child marriage committee that if a bridegroom does not accept the marriage in time then the child marriage becomes null and void. Marriages at a tender age affect the education of the child partners. Female children did not have much opportunity for education but the male child had to desert the education midway due to family responsibilities arose out of an early marriage.

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel told farmers "Improve your progenies" and it meant that the children should be educated. They could reform themselves if they marry at an appropriate age. Married children were not capable to carry on social

responsibilities. They become parents before they understood the roles and responsibilities of husband and wife. The female child was neither capable physically to attain motherhood nor was aware of the responsibility of a mother. On the other hand, even the male child neither had competence to understand the role of father nor had capacity to carry that responsibility. He did not have the capacity to carry out economic responsibility, arising of the child marriage.

Infant mortality increases in the society due to child marriage. Physically weak child mother gives birth to a mal-nutritioned infant who does not survive for long and hence the infant mortality and mother mortality rates increase. Deprivations of the education affect their life adversely. Subsequently, they are deprived of revolutionary changes and employment opportunities.

In a nation, individual's development contributes to the community development and ultimately to nation's development. Sardar Patel once told "Enemies defame us in the world by projecting our defects. It is being projected against our eligibility for independence. This was said by Sardar Patel during the struggle for independence. However one must not disregard the fact that this evil existed as a community specific evil. Indian constitution came into existence after the independence and laws of equality were available for all sections in the constitution. Child marriage customs in India has been since ages as it has roots imbibed in tradition, culture and religion. Even though Older child marriage prohibition act has been revised as the prohibition of child marriage Act, 2006, the prohibition has not been completely effective.

There have instances of child marriage even after 67 years of independence. As per the figures for the state of Gujarat, published by National Crime Records Bureau for child marriage reported are :16 cases in 2014, 9 cases in 2015, 12 cases in 2016. In these three years 899 such cases were registered in India, of which 280 cases in 2014, 293 cases in 2015 and 326 cases in 2016. As per the census-2011, 6.49 lakh children were involved since 2003, below the age of 18. Out of these 6.49 lakh marriages, 1.98 lakh marriages took place were in urban areas. So on an average, 30% child marriages took place in urban areas. Child marriages are still prevalent in spite of a prohibitory act in place, as many times such customs get support from traditions, culture and religious beliefs. Indian constitution is supreme and its laws are equal for all communities and religions. Every religion has its own laws and rules sometimes strong belief systems in religious laws sometimes strong belief systems in religious laws and in absence of common civil code, child marriages cannot be eradicated completely. Child marriage is a blot on modern human society. It not only hinders individual's progress and well-being, but it also harms and destroys nation's development and affects the status of a democratic development nation worldwide.

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, along with his effective participation in struggle for independence, was equally aware about the existence and impact of evil-customs in

society. He was of the opinion that if these evil-customs and traditions are not eradicated even after independence then there is no meaning of such independence where people are still slaves of draconian customs and atrocious traditions. These practices hinder the social development and hence weaken the foundation of a strong society, which is required for building a strong nation.

Sardar Patel was not only a political leader but a social reformer too. He spent a large part of his life to create awareness among the people practicing termite like social-evils like child marriages which destroyed the possibilities of a healthy society. His beliefs and visionary thinking about its priority is seen expressed in his speeches. Sardar Patel had the vision required to understand the damage that a evil social tradition could do in the longer run and had also the courage to challenge these traditions fearlessly, even during those times when there were strong opposition and resistance to any effort of change. His utterances still stand true and appropriate in today's era.

#### **Reference List:**

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