

PREVENTION OF CHILD MARRIAGES : A REPORT ON AWARENESS IN RURAL ANDHRA PRADESH

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The Government of India has enacted several laws to prevent child and pre-adolescent marriages. The Child Marriage Restraint Act prohibits the marriage of boys and girls below 21 years and 18 years respectively. But, the situation in rural India still remains the same. The marriages at a very young age are still common due to the traditional practices among rural people and the weak enforcement of laws relating to the marriageable age.

However, it is interesting to note that an effort by the enlightened girls of Shakunala village in Kurnool district of Andhra Pradesh could prevent such child marriages.

Shakunala village is an example of social transformation taking place in the lives of rural women and, has attracted the attention of social reformers because of the on going activities to empower the women through self-help groups. Shakunala like any other village, with its traditional and cultural activities related to the role and status of women, practices the traditional marriage system.

As part of UNDP activities (Poverty alleviation programme) a 'Balika Sangham' was formed with 15 adolescent girls who were strong and committed to the activities related to the importance of their socio-economic status. This group was exposed to information about the marriageable age, reproductive health, hygiene and self employment activities. Continuous interactions with social organisers and Podupulakshmi groups gradually created awareness about their rights and opportunities. They used to receive financial assistance from Podupulakshmi groups for their activities.

As usual, the age at marriage is still

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lower than the stipulated age. In consonance with these practices, nine year old Thimmakka's marriage was fixed by her parents with a boy of 14 years, which was supposed to take place after two months. Thimmakka was not convinced with this idea of marriage and disagreed with the proposal, but, her parents took it casually and subbed her for entertaining such ideas.

Frustrated Thimmakka confided with her friends, who were members of **Balika Sangham**. These members were quite aware of early marriages, hence, they prevailed upon the parents not to celebrate the marriage which is against the law and also the health hazards the young couple has to face. But, the parents were adamant over the issue. Hence the **Balika Sangham** took up the issue with the other leaders of village and put forth their point against this child marriage. They even threatened to lodge a complaint with the police, if this marriage was performed. There was a lot of interaction among Podupulakshmi groups, social organisers, leaders and others who finally had to yield to the social pressure.

Since, the village leaders explained the parents about the consequences and also the wishes of majority of villagers being important for the prestige of the village, the parents of Ms. Thimmakka finally relented. They put off the marriage and promised not to get her married until she completed 18 years of age. Later Thimmakka herself became a member of **Balika Sangham** and picked up the handicrafts like Tailoring and Basket-making. She gradually started earning through her skill.

The social transformation, the rise in the level of knowledge of adolescent girls and the leaders in this case was possible through the activities of Podupulakshmi groups, **Balika Sanghams**, self-help groups and the

relentless efforts of various social organisations.

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