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INTERNATIONAL WOMENS DAY CELEBRATIONS

on 8th March 2007

Panel Discussion on Child Marriages

Programme Presented on MAA TV



JHANSI : MAA TV Extends a warm welcome to all the viewers.

Though many laws have come into force since 1929, with a no. of amendments, child marriages continue to be a menace threatening our society.

The life of a girl child is nipped in the budding stage itself with marriage at an early age.

Lets not forget that a child marriage is not only a bad practice but it also opens a Pandora box of problems for the girl child.

Gender discrimination, inequality, maternity deaths, ill health, lack of education the list goes on. Shall we just keep quiet and pretend that every thing is fine...

SONG

*Oh dear mothers, fathers,
Brothers and sisters
Your caressing hands
Looked after us
Your tender hearts sheltered us
Listen to our pleas
Relieve our sufferings
Do not crush the blooming buds
Do not pluck the tender fruits
Let the cheering children resonate with joy
Let them be beacons of light tomorrow*

JHANSI : Before they blossom, their lives are being nipped by marrying them of at a very tender age. Lets join together and do what we can. It is with this pious intention 'MAA TV' organised a panel discussion focussing on this theme. We have with us people's representatives, people from administration, social activists and many others. Let me introduce them all to you

Sri J.C. Diwakar Reddy, Minister for Panchayati Raj,
Smt. Mary Ravindranadh, Chairperson Mahila Commission,
Smt. Anuradha, Director Women and Child Welfare dept,
Vanaja garu, Advocate from DISA, Centre for Social Justice,
Sri Murali, from Sadhana Child Rights & Director - 'Samisti',
Akhilandeswari garu of Deccan Herald Media Personality,
Prof. Galib from Center for Economics and Social Studies,
Dr. Prakasamma garu who has been working on maternal mortality and infant mortality,
Dr. Mamatha Raghuvveer of Taruni,
Sri Vikas Varma, Piyush Antony from UNICEF.

We also have with us volunteers from Samishti, Panchayat ward members and children.

JHANSI : Before we begin the discussion, let's know the status of Andhra Pradesh in child marriages.

Prof. Gaib has been working in this direction of behalf of Center for Economic and Social Studies (CESS). Lets know from him with the available statistics what is the rank of Andhra Pradesh in child marriages?

GALIB : When we speak of child marriages, statistics points out that Andhra Pradesh is one of the states where there is a high incidence of child marriages. Nearly 54.7% of women are getting married below the legal age of marriage.

It we examine, over the years whether there is any change in the trend or the society remained static, the present data in comparison with the data 4 years ago indicates that there is a decline in the incidence of child marriages.

But this decline is not as fast as in some states like Kerala, where there is a high level of awareness or Panjab, where there is a high growth rate.

JHANSI : Mamata Garu on behalf of Taruni you have been working at field level in Warangal Dist. On an average how many incidents of child marriages do you see in an year.

MAMATHA : Our survey reports that around 1500 marriages are taking place in an year in Warangal Dist.

JHANSI : is there any decline in that ?

MAMATHA : The decline if at all there is any, very little, almost insignificant. We are almost equal to Rajasthan. But there is one difference.

There is an improvement in the age now. Earlier it was 13 years. Now it is around 16 years. That may be because there is free education upto 10th class now, by which time these girls will be completing 15 years and after that getting a daughter married of is quite frequent.

JHANSI : Akhileswari garu we feel we have made some progress in raising the average marriage age from 12 to 14 and may be slightly higher. But we do not feel guilty that we are marrying off a girl at just 17 years and we also do not feel that we are committing a crime, and in the process we are taking away the childhood of a girl.

Surprisingly the neighbouring community also does not bother to point out this fact... what do you say madam.

AKHILESWARI : I do not agree with the view that the awareness has gone up. May be the awareness levels have gone up in girls, thanks to NGO's, Governmental efforts, Women's dept., but in the system are the MROs aware, is the govt. aware, are the police aware... Awareness means that they should do something about it.

I tell you what happened recently in Mahaboobnagar. An NGO tried to stop 5 marriages from taking place and nobody helped the NGO people. They were almost beaten up. They told these NGO people about the expenses they incurred and the humiliation they are facing. In fact the people from this NGO were locked up.

Neither the MRO nor the police intervened. The local representative of the panchayat did not come to their rescue. The govt. organs have to be sensitized, because we have to work through them Law is implemented through them.

REACTION OF A GIRL :

After watching the 'Malli' programme I cried and told my parents that I will not marry. My parents accepted my plea and when some of my friends were to be married, we told their mothers not to marry them off. But they were not happy with our advice and vent out their anger on us. Ofcourse that did not dampen our courage.

JHANSI : Murali garu how many of us – the elders have an understanding about child rights... how many of us really realize that we are taking away their childhood in the name of marriage.

MURALI : In the areas where there has been campaigns on the ill effects of child marriages, yes there is some understanding in the elders. Today we have hundreds of sarpanches in A.P. who can speak with authority on child rights.

We all feel that childhood ends with the age of 14, but we also signed an international convention, where it is agreed upon that childhood is upto 18 years. But in reality this notion is yet to gain its full acceptance among people. Similarly all our acts consider children as only upto 14 years the international convention of 18 years is still to finds its roots among Sarpanches, villagers and elders.

The 2nd aspect is nothing has been planned by either the govt. or the NGOs in the form of schemes, model development plans for the children in age group of 14 – 18 years, like when the marriages are prevented a rehabilitation plan in the form of education or any such step. On the other hand for children below 14 years there are RBCS', there is National Child Labour predict, NGOs run homes for them.

I feel this critical adolescent age of 14 – 18 years is still to be focused and understood by the elders.

JHANSI : Anuradha garu, for calculating the age, birth registration is a critical input. We only talk about marriage registration. What about birth registration.

ANURADHA : Our anganwadi workers take care of the pregnant women. They register their names. They look after their immunization, when she left for her parents home, when she came back and the baby is a girl on a boy, all these details, are maintained in an exclusive register. But the actual registration of a birth is done by the revenue dept. Yes we need to coordinate on this aspect. This is a must.

JHANSI : When this law on child marriages is passed in 1929 what is the prescribed age then. What do they amendments say and what is the law that we fought for and which is now in force.

VANAJA : This law preventing child marriages was made in 1929, much before independence, since then it has been amended 7 times. In all these only age has been raised from 14 years to 18 years.

In real sense there is no updation of the law. Till the year 2004, when supreme court passed an interim order on this, we never knew. We always felt that only police or magistrate can prevent a marriage, the women & child dept., the Mahila commission on political parties have no stake.

JHANSI : Minister sir, we know child marriages are in vogue since Vedic times yet the incumbent govts never focused their attention seriously on this problem. Have we subconsciously accepted child marriages.

J.C. DIWAKAR REDDY, Minister :

I don't think I can agree with you. As Mamatha rightly said, it is difficult to bring a change in the society with law alone. Awareness has to come from within the society.

When a child marriage happens if does not directly affect the neighbours in the community. It is perceived as an issue between two families. It we see the evolutionary process of any change, it becomes obvious that only when there is a revolution from people, the govts, the NGOs and everyone will take notice and focus their attention.

VANAJA : The act is made in 1929. We still continue to feel the pain of a child marriage. Unfortunately it has the ingredients of all the crimes... there is trafficking, there is violation of rights, illegal confinement, all the sections of IPC can be applied to a child marriage. It is such a ghastly crime.

JHANSI : Umapathi garu who is punishable in a child marriage and what is the level of punishment.

UMAPATHI : It is a cognizable offence. Anybody can report this matter to a police station even a complained received over phone can be made as an

FIR. A complainant need not come to police station and complaint.

If the bridegroom is 21 year old and the bride is below 18 years, in such a situation the punishment meted out to the boy is 3 months imprisonment and fine. If the boy is below 21 years and the girl is below 18 years then there will be a punishment of 15 days imprisonment and also a fine.

In addition to the pundit who performs the marriage, the intermediaries responsible for the marriage will also be punished under section 5. Section 5 stipulates an imprisonment of 3 months. That's why it is the responsibility of the pundit to question the age of bride and bridegroom.

Similarly the bride and the grooms parents, relatives are covered by this section. Then section 6 covers guardians in the absence of parents with the same punishment. The 1964 amendment appoints preventive officers but this provision some how is not going well.

REACTION OF A GIRL CHILD :

I studied upto 10th class. Due to our bad financial conditions my parents wanted to perform my marriage. I have a sister also. Initially I said yes to my marriage but later when the 'Samishti' volunteers came to our village and made a survey.

I was asked to be a volunteer of the survey and when I went to a training given by them, there I understood the ill effects of a child marriage.

JHANSI : Marriage registration is compulsory now. Is it a State act or a Central act.

VANAJA : It is a state act. In 2002 compulsory registration of marriages act has come into force. This act makes collector responsible for its implementation. The G.O. has come in 2006. Has it been implemented atleast since 2006, many child marriages would have been stopped.

If they concentrate on this aspect, something could be done. Unfortunately that is not reality.

JAMUNA : We have been discussing a law which was passed in 1929 and which is now so antique with all its amendments. What I feel is we should have a new law in its place which voids child marriages.

JHANSI : Vanaja garu, is there any such provision.

VANAJA : There is the second aspect of the law – which states...

JAMUNA : If a girl after attaining the age of 18 years, requesting for cancellation of her marriage is not the right idea.

That's why a marriage has to be registered in a village panchayat office and similarly a birth also should be recorded there itself. The panchayat secretary and sarpanch should shoulder that responsibility.

PRAKASAMMA: In our state, and also universally the thumb rule is that a girl should become pregnant within 6 months of marriage. A girl who gets married at a tender age of 16 years, hardly knows anything about pregnancy. There are still births, maternal deaths, lack of immunization knowledge, are all common sights.

Then there are the unwanted caesarian births. Seeing all these I believe we have to address this issue with more concern and understanding. Lets not be complacent. We have the minister here, there is also women's commission here..... lets take things more seriously.

JAMUNA : Again I repeat, we are only discussing the amendments, but in reality how many of us register a marriage. To quote my own case I registered my marriage only when I needed to go aboard I only say one thing.

The marriages below 18 years should be declared as void and we should all fight for this Law It requires lot of courage to do that.

MARY RAVINDRANADH :

I personally feel, only when there is pressure from the top, the people in the lower rung respond and initiate action. Some how this is lacking at the top.

This negligence must go. In our commission what are all the steps that are possible we have been taking. We instruct all the section officers to act promptly.

We did stop some child marriages from taking place. What surprises me is that we receive phone calls from villages where there are instances of child marriages. It shows how anxious people are to stop such marriages.

JHANSI : When we buy a vehicle, unless it is registered we are afraid to take the vehicle on to the road. In the same way when a marriage is performed unless it is registered, it does not have a validity.

Such a fear should be created in the minds of people. Can we attempt such an idea? Since our minister is with us, Let's ask him. Sir since you know the pulse of the people at the grass roots, you have the entire system of panchayati raj with its elected representatives at your command, if you can build pressure from their side, perhaps it may not be a tough task to achieve sir. We can prevent the nipping of blooming buds.

MINISTER : On the occasion of International Women's Day.

I want to share this with you. As you all said registration of marriages has been of top most priority to us, from 1st April onwards or we fix a date in the 1st week of April. From that date onwards if the panchayat secretaries fail to register the marriages they will be punished.

If necessary, we tell them clearly that they will be dismissed from service. We are very clear and we make this very clear to them. We wanted time till April so as to communicate the circulars, and instructions to them.

JHANSI : Thank you so much sir. We only hope in this summer many blooming buds will blossom to their full potential.

SONG

*Oh dear mothers, fathers,
Brothers and sisters
Your caressing hands
Looked after us
Your tender hearts sheltered us
Listen to our pleas
Relieve our sufferings
Do not crush the blooming buds
Do not pluck the tender fruits
Let the cheering children resonate with joy
Let them be beacons of light tomorrow*