

Child Marriage: The Curse of India by Mrs. Ada Lee (1898) Quotes

Childhood is said to be the happiest period in life. So it should be. Every child has the right to be born happy. The sunshine of love is as necessary to the development of the child's nature as the sunlight is to the unfolding of the rosebud. But how different is the fact! Those who suffer the most in India are the little children. They are the victims not only of bad food, impure air, and neglect but also of superstitious fear and the vilest practices of Hinduism! Oh, the cruelty suffered by little girl wives, the hunger and thirst of Child-widows! May God look in pity upon the suffering masses of little children in this great city! (Calcutta.) How my heart has gone out for the children of India! How many times has it been made to ache by what I have seen and known of their suffering, and how powerless to relieve it. How I thank God for the movement set on foot to day for the prevention of this cruelty?¹

But let me give you a few facts. I have not time for other than facts. Let me draw them first from the Hindu community of this city. During the last four months, there have been at least six little Hindu girls married who attend our mission school... The youngest of these is not seven and the eldest not more than nine years of age.

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They represent at least four different castes—one of them belonging to the highest in Hindu society. The little girls were never consulted as to their desire in the matter. One on hearing that arrangements were being made for her marriage, begged her parents with tears to wait another year and let her attend school awhile longer, but without avail. These children never saw or spoke to the man who was to be their life-long lord and master. The first time they ever behold him was during the marriage ceremony. If he be blind or crippled, deaf or dumb, tottering with age or a sensual beast as he often is, he must be her husband, her god, and she his wife, his faithful devoted servant, and she dare not raise a dissenting voice; thus setting aside the heaven born right of every woman to say who shall be the father of her children. But some will say, "It is only betrothal." Those of us who are acquainted with the people and their customs know it is not betrothal. It is binding for life. Should the husband die the next day, she is a widow, bound by all the cruel and senseless rules of Hindu widowhood, and can never remarry. She may be permitted to return to her father's house a few days after her marriage and remain some months, or in some cases, a year or two, the girl even allowed to attend school in rare cases, although not regularly; but we who know, know it is so binding that her husband can claim her at any time, control her, and her parents' action concerning her. Even the law fixing the age

of consent at twelve years, many of us know, is violated in this city every day of the year.²

I have been present at the marriage ceremony and to me one of the most disgusting sights is to see the officiating Brahman priest lift the screaming frightened child and by the help of a relative place her in the arms of the man who is to be her husband and while two or three strong men (for no woman is allowed present at this part of the ceremony) hold the struggling child, the priest pronounces the final words which make the objecting child his wife forever. Is this something for a nation to be proud of? And not only this, but this ceremony, performed in the eyes of man, that ought to be depicted as a disgrace to humanity and an outrage on innocent, helpless childhood which would be punishable by law in the same lands as the vilest of crimes. Many a life is lost that never comes to light, but now and then a case has been made public, like one a few years ago here in this very city which caused a great deal of agitation among the people. And we had hoped it would result in genuine reform. But alas! the same awful cruelty still continues all about us. The system of early marriage is against the better sense of many of the Hindu people. The more intelligent are ashamed of it and wish it were otherwise. And yet the masses are in favor of it. As the women in the Zenanas often say to us, "Our worst enemies

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are our own people.” It thwarts their own plans. It interferes with physical and mental as well as moral improvement. It saps the spiritual life. For there is nothing pure, ennobling, nor elevating in it but on the contrary, it is the great enemy of the race, causing its deterioration. I am sorry to say this sinful, cruel custom is not confined to the Hindu community, for child marriage is practiced to a large extent among our native Christian people.³

Another girl was taken from one school and married in a Christian church in this city at the age of twelve, and I can show the records to prove her age and the date of her marriage. A woman, a member of another city church who can neither read nor write, is a mother of three children before she is sixteen years old. The life of the oldest child was sacrificed as well as that of the mother's, as in nine cases out of every ten with child mothers. If this is not cruelty to children, I do not know the meaning of the word. But some of our missionary friends say that owing to existing evils, child marriage must be resorted to; that the leading native church officials demand it for the good of the people. And yet those very officials are one with us in wishing to build up a noble self-supporting church in India. Pray tell me how can this ever be done when young girls are compelled to marry at the age of thirteen men who are not able to support them and their children? They have nothing to start with

and contract debt at the very beginning from which many never extricate themselves. I know men who earn no more than five or six Rupees (about \$2.00) per month with no hope of ever earning more, who have a family of six or eight children. Think of feeding, clothing, and schooling six children on two dollars per month. It is not enough to feed a dog upon, let alone six human beings. And yet we expect such people to support the church? I believe it is criminally wrong to compel a girl to marry under such circumstances. I know many who are willing to work and would rather do any kind of work to earn their own living than to do it. They often say: "I have seen too much of my own mother's suffering; I have seen my brothers and sisters go hungry too often to want to go into the same myself"⁴

Read online: <https://archive.org/details/ChildMarriagePdf/mode/2up>

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