

## Protecting and empowering girls for a brighter future

*On the occasion of National Girl Child Day, which is celebrated every year on 24 January, the author argues that a lot more needs to be done in this country to weed out the menace of child marriage.*

By: **Kreeanne Rabadi** - January 26, 2019 – Sunday Guardian

Never in my life did I imagine meeting Sangita, or anyone like her for that matter. I was born in privilege—there was nothing in my childhood remotely similar to the children to whom I have dedicated my life at this point. I grew up in South Mumbai, and was educated at a reputed school, followed by an equally well known college. To be honest, I was never a particularly engaged student. I did not work hard, often skipping classes in college to sit in the canteen and have intense existential debates with my friends. I took so much for granted, yet here I am today, at the helm of operations for Western India at the organisation called (CRY), having the opportunity to voice my opinion. More importantly, I have the privilege to amplify Sangita’s voice, and that of many others like her.

Let me introduce Sangita to you. She is all of five, a Pardhi tribal girl from Ahmednagar district, just a few hours away from Mumbai. Her parents are poor landless labourers—and of course, she is not as lucky as me. Yes, I used the word “luck” simply because I know that the course of her life is determined at birth—by her gender, by the community she is born into and the economic status of her family.

Post-Independence, India has made progress in several areas, rising to become a significant power in the world, both in the economic and political spheres. Yet, we continue to face many challenges in protecting and empowering our girls. If they are lucky to be born, then they are married off early. If they manage to get enrolled into schools, then they drop out somewhere in the middle, to work, to take care of their siblings, or simply because it is more important for their brothers to study. Millions of girls in India are silenced with the argument that at the end of the day, their only objective in life is to support their family, to marry and raise children. While successive governments over the years have introduced schemes for the growth and development of the girl child, there have been many loopholes in their implementation that have reduced their impact.

As part of its endeavour to tell the story of children in India, CRY recently published a report, “ChilDESCENTS In India: We Are Children Too!”, on the status and situation of education, health and protection of children between the ages of 15 to 18 years. The report revealed that our country has nearly 100 million chilDESCENTS between 15-18 years, and at least one billion children are expected to pass this life stage in the next decade. It is thus, quite evident why the need to focus on this population is critical.

But when it comes to the situation of chilDESCENT girls, the report uncovers some worrisome statistics. 55% of married women in India were married between 14-19 years of age, and 3.7 million girls between 15-19 years are married and working. Coming to underage mothers, 3.4 million girls between 15-19 years are mothers and more than 400,000 girls between 15-19 years have three or more children.

For child brides, the dangers are many. Often uneducated, these girls end up becoming victims of domestic violence and have no freedom to make their own choices. Statistically, one in every five

married girls between 15-19 years experiences violence at the hands of her husband. Only 30% of married women between 15-19 years enjoy complete freedom of movement.

And it's not just about numbers. While working with marginalised children of all genders for four decades now, our experiences have brought us to give focused attention towards the girl child. To give every girl the childhood she deserves, CRY works on the grassroots level to create solutions together with communities—from ensuring access to equitable and quality education, to building the agency of girl children, to enabling all the stakeholders that influence their lives to discover their capacity for transformative action. A significant part of the groundwork includes building awareness among parents on the importance of education and the consequences of child marriage, and influencing attitudes related to gender.

Often these untiring and persistent efforts create impact that end up surprising us too. In the severely drought-affected region of Parbhani district for instance, young girls have been successful in advocating the issue of doing away with child marriage through their group Savitribai Chya Kanya or Daughters of Savitribai (named after the social reformer Savitribai Phule). The group was the brainchild of CRY partner Sankalp Manav Vikas Sanstha (SMVS).

Child marriages are the highest in the regions of Marathwada and Vidharbha, which has seen a high number of farmer suicides and large scale migration of families in the past years due to severe droughts. Owing mainly to migration, a large number of families marry off their teenage daughters much before they even turn 16, thus forcing them to drop out of schools as well.



Savitribai Chya Kanya has been active for the past six years. The group has around 20 girls from each village aged between 14 to 18 years. They meet once a week to share updates and often voluntarily talk to the parents of underage girls whose marriages are finalised without their approval. The group has been successful in saving the lives of many girls who are at the risk of being married off without consent. Rani Manchak Kale from Savli village recalls how she narrowly escaped being married off a week before her 16th birthday. Her parents, both farmers, had decided to migrate to the city, to look for work, with the entire family (which included Rani's two young brothers) before Rani was married off.

“I wanted to finish school and did not want to get married. My parents told me that they would not be able to take care of me in the city as they would be busy looking for work and hence they thought that by getting me married off their obligations towards me would be over and that I would be protected. I managed to convince them that I wanted to continue my studies for a few more years. I took help of my friends from my group who met and convinced my parents and they finally agreed,” she told me.

While Rani had her happy ending, the same cannot be said for millions of girls across the country who are struggling against traditional mindsets that hold them back from having a voice, achieving their aspirations of completing their education and leading a life of freedom—the freedom to make their own choices.

The National Girl Child Day is celebrated just two days before the Republic Day in India. And this 70th Republic Day is itself testimony to what girls can achieve if they get the opportunity. While earlier in January, Lieutenant Bhawna Kasturi shattered the glass ceiling in the Indian Army to lead a contingent for the very first time in the Army Day Parade, this will also be the first Republic Day when an all-women contingent from any Indian paramilitary force will be marching. As the women officers from Assam Rifles create history, we can only hope that it doesn't take another 70 years of waiting for Sangita and her peers to create history, to shatter stereotypes and to realise their dreams. All they need is literally a chance.