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‘A Child Widow’s Story’: An Idealism of Woman

Abstract

Monica Felton, the biographer of Sister Subbalakshmi, had recounted Sister Subbalakshmi’s sterling idealism in *A Child Widow’s Story* (1966). Her story is an account of sorrowfulness, determination, hard work and a remarkable social reform. All her life, she courageously claimed the fundamental rights for women and the necessary improvement in the status of widows, particularly in the Madras Presidency under the rule of British India. She had devoted a great deal of her time to find the employment for needy women and girls. Most of women who, were taking shelter in the Sister Subbalakshmi’s care at that times, were virgin widows whose husbands had died while they were still strangers. Many widows who had been left with young families and without the means to bring them up had been helped by Sister to place their children where they would be cared for their well-being in the society.

Keywords- social reform, status of widows

There wasn’t any smooth sailing for Sister Subbalakshmi and she was subjected to a variety of criticism for daring to give the young widows their freedom and a good chance to have a good life of their own. She tried throughout her life to champion the lives of hundreds

of innocent women. She always thinks that being useful to others is the only thing that matters, but not to be made herself is important. This ideology had been brought up by Sister Subbalakshmi throughout her life, for the welfare of women and other child widows.

As her life begins, Sister Subbalakshmi's social revolution began showing concrete results. She had not only given the unfortunate girls a chance to live with dignity, but also helped them to raise their head with pride. The work which Sister Subbalakshmi and the other women of the generation had pitched themselves into with such pioneering ardour produced remarkable results. Many of their pupils, men and women in other parts of India too, had been fired with ambitions as burning and selfless as their own. Then the fire seemed to be smouldering towards the great social reform.

This was not only the own story of Sister Subbalakshmi, but also the stories of some of the many hundred of girls and women whom she had helped to save from the living death of poor and innocent. In South India, child marriages were not very much a thing of the past. They do take place now. The average age at which girls marry is still far too young. In those days, it was a very great disappointment to everyone in the family that the newborn child was a baby girl. It is certainly in these days too in many parts of our country. It was generally believed and most of Hindus still believe today, that a woman who failed to bear sons was punished for the sins, which she had committed in a previous existence. The first duty of a Hindu wife was to be the mother of sons. Because, they believe that only the sons, not the daughters, are permitted to perform the annual *shradha* ceremonies of the souls of the dead in the family. A man whose wife failed to bear him a son was not only an unfortunate thing to himself, and this misfortune would certainly condemn to his eternal torment in the births to come in his future life. To the predictions of the reputed astrologer, Subbalakshmi was born on the dark side of the moon, it was between 'the waning of the old moon and the waxing of the new', a child with exceptionally obstinate character. She was named after her great

grandmother, Lakshmi, and it meant that it was the goddess of wealth and prosperity. Unfortunately, Sister Subbalakshmi thought that they were just sounds without any meaning in her own life. In the coming days of her life, the mere words of her name proved to be real as she stood like a goddess of wealth and prosperity for the sake of hundreds of women especially virgin child widows.

Sister Subbalakshmi's father and mother were learned parents and they decided that she should go to a school for her early education. Other relatives were rather shocked that she should be allowed to do so. This was because not only she was a girl, but also the headmaster of the school was nadir Christian, who was regarded as very low caste and untouchable. The orthodox relatives and friends felt bad that a child from a respected brahmin family put under the care of such people and they thoroughly criticized that the decision of sending her to such school would definitely reflect the image of their caste and religion.

In her childhood, Sister Subbalakshmi tried to get the answer to a certain strange question that her close associate and her aunt Chitti, who dressed always in a sari of the plainest white cotton, with nothing whatever underneath it. It was unlike her mother and all the women who came to their house wore silk saris in beautiful, bright colours with nicely made blouses underneath. Their hair too was fastened in a heavy, shining knot at the back of their heads. Only the old aged grandmother dressed like Chitti, but she could not understand why her dear Chitti, so energetic and young should be dressed in such a horrid way. Sister Subbalakshmi wanted to know the reason why Chitti did not have hair. Subbalakshmi's mother was a helpless woman, she burst into tears, and she too could not answer all the subtle questions posed by Subbalakshmi at that point of time.

One day, when she was still young, she heard a loud and pitiful scream outside the room. She found that there were seven big girls, who were standing in a circle around a

baby of hardly three years age. The little girl was in heavy sobs, while the older children making fun of her because she was a widow “Janaki hasn’t got a *taali*, Widow! Widow! Widow! You wicked, wicked girl not to have a *taali*!” Subbalakshmi could see that all the older girls wore gold chains with a *taali* around their necks, the symbol of sacred marriage. The baby cried and cried, struggling to escape, while the older girls moved faster and faster, shouting the same words again and again. Then, at last, baby Janaki managed to flee from them. After watching the whole incident, Subbalakshmi was in a shock.

Sister Subbalakshmi recounted her own past when her own ‘calamity happened’ in her life. However, she took it as an opportunity not mere a calamity in her life. Her marriage was not even a dream when she had been eleven years of age. The horoscopes were exchanged and the astrologer predicted that the bride would enjoy a usually happy and fortunate life. However, the future would definitely be knowing the fact that no doubt that the astrologer’s prediction had been fulfilled. She could not even remember whether her husband was tall or short for his age, fair or dark. The only thing she could remember only the beauty of her wedding sari, which was bordered with a pattern woven in threads of gold. She felt the thrill of certain ownership for a moment. She did not realise at the time that the thrill would be vanished forever from her life. Immediately after the few weeks of her wedding, she was told about the big calamity in her life, the news of the death of her husband. Subbalakshmi in fact felt nothing, because there was nothing to feel for herself. The relatives and visitors streamed into the house to offer their sympathy to the little widow. They bitterly thought that she was such a good little girl and it was very difficult to believe that she could ever even in her previous birth, have committed any sin grave enough to deserve the lifelong punishment that was now in store for her in this present life. The punishment was inescapable.

The widows were cut off forever from the joys of being a woman, of becoming a mother, of managing a household. In any conceivable circumstance, they were not allowed to remarry and most of the simple pleasures of life would be denied to them. Their head would be shorn and they had to stop wearing blouses, they were allowed to wear only one garment that would be a sari of plain white or unbleached cotton. They would be allowed to eat only once a day that was the plainest food, and never anything. They were not even allowed to go out of the houses except occasionally to visit a temple. It would be their duty to keep as far as possible out of the way of other people, because even the sight of the widow was known to bring bad luck to others. Most of the widows were condemned to be mere household drudges, slaving away from morning till night. They would be on the verge of starvation with never a kind word from anybody. The most for which they might hope and pray was a happier fate in their next birth.

Subbalakshmi's parents and her aunt, the little widow Chitti, decided firmly in saving the little girl from her fate. They tried well to save her from the prying eyes and easy tears of their sympathizers. Although she could not feel any sadness for herself, the sight of such grief made her almost unbearably miserable. The future of every country, they believed, depended on the level of education of its girls and the status of its women. They encouraged her to take part in education once again, to learn English besides violin. It was unthinkable that a girl from a brahmin family should make such a breach with tradition. Her family had broken many conventions for the sake of her education. But it was shocked her grandmother, an orthodox woman, and she had been far from pleased by the decision to give Subbalakshmi an education of a kind that was not really suitable to a virgin widow. Ever since, they had begun to educate their widowed daughter, they had lived under a constant fire of criticism from their orthodox friends and relatives. They felt it as defiant of an ordinary custom and the will of god, nothing but to go beyond the bounds of mere eccentricity. The family had

made great sacrifices for her, and they were so proud of her success in her education. Her mother looked at her in astonishment that no brahmin woman, much less a widow, had ever become a teacher.

Miss Christiana Lynch, an Irish woman, an ardent feminist, who was passionately in love with India and she had been an inspector of female education in the district for the past four years. She had realized that there were few educational opportunities for Indian women and girls. In the year 1901 there had been, in the Madras Presidency alone, 22,395 brahmin widows between the ages of five and fifteen. She had worked out a scheme for a small, government managed home for young brahmin widows who were willing to be trained for the teaching profession. Miss Lynch was fascinated and attracted with the ardent courage shown by Sister Subbalakshmi, who wanted to be a sister to all the young widows.

In 1912, they formed Sarada Ladies' Union and they had begun holding regular weekly meetings. They often discussed social problems such as education of girls and future of the child marriages. The members of the union were eager to see the establishment of a home for young brahmin widows. They had also urged the parents of the young virgin widows and the orthodox Hindu society that the young virgin widows should be allowed to remarry. The real obstacle was that the orthodox people regarded the remarriage of widows, even the young virgin widows as a grave sin. They were very much criticised by the orthodox brahmins at the times. They might agree with the social reformers that it was harmful to the health of young girls to allow them to become mothers before they attain the age and their own bodies were fully developed. In spite of the ardent criticism from the orthodox sections of the society against to the welfare of the child widows, the social reformers of those times believed strongly and argued publicly that it was right that the virgin widows should be given a second chance of happiness in their life. The Madras government finally agreed to pay the

rent to the widows' home and to grant three scholarships to young widows who were willing to be trained to become teachers.

When it comes to an end, Sister Subbalakshmi was happy. Sister Subbalakshmi encouraged hundreds of child widows to study and she had helped them to develop their own beliefs and ideas. After the strong support given by the Home, many of those girls were women and their ambitions were being realized practically. Subbalakshmi was reminded the preaching of Lord Krishna from the Bhagavad Gita, "Do thine ordained work, with this comfort ye the gods, and let the gods comfort you; comforting one another, ye shall get supreme bliss. For the gods, comforted by the sacrifice, shall give you the pleasure of your desire." She was relentless in her efforts for a smouldering cause throughout her life. She would be able to do for the best of the child widows exactly what she had dreamt of doing.

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