



Set the child free

GL Krishna, Ayurvedacharya (BAMS)

Ayurvedic physician and independent researcher, Bengaluru.

Corresponding Author:

G L Krishna,
Godavari apartments, 9th main road, 9th cross,
Malleshwaram, Bengaluru - 560003, India.
Email: gl dot krishna at yahoo dot com

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Some months ago, a 16-year-old boy was anointed as the presiding monk of a traditional monastery in Coastal Karnataka.[1] Although there were a few hushed-up whispers of protest, the news was by-and-large greeted with joy by the monastery's followers.[2] The boy's fondness for Vedic studies coupled with astrologers' pronouncements on his fitness for monkhood were cited as the criteria that made him eligible for the holy office.

The event caused me to feel greatly disturbed. If child-marriage is an assault on personal liberties, isn't child-monkhood even worse? Given that the adolescent psyche is characterised by likes and dislikes that are markedly fluid, how can a teenager be expected to be fit enough to decide if he wants to remain single for the rest of his life? Sexual companionship is a deep-seated human need that cannot be easily wished away. Wouldn't it be amoral, nay cruel, to delegitimise this natural human need by administering monastic vows to an unsuspecting child?

As a physician practising at the primary care level, I routinely see patients with emotional malaise. While some of them suffer for being caught in noxious relationships, many others suffer due to

loneliness and lack of companionship. Fortunately, they have the freedom to acknowledge their distress and explore solutions. What if even this freedom is snatched away in the name of divine ordainments? "To grunt and sweat under a weary life" would then be the only option left. If such a person were to seek release from the understandable frustrations of premature monkhood, our society would respond only by seeing a scandal in it!

The practice of *bala-sanyasa* (child-monkhood) has a hoary history. Adi Shankaracharya (8th century CE), perhaps the most well-known of Hindu Sanyasis, is said to have volitionally become a monk at the age of eight. The current Dalai Lama, the religious head of Tibetan Buddhists, is known to have embraced monasticism when he was a child. Many well-known religious leaders in traditional monasteries across India are monks since their childhood. This antiqueness and the ubiquity of the practice has, in fact, greatly contributed to its legitimacy in the public psyche.

The practice has nevertheless drawn flak from within even orthodox circles.[3] Those who were child-monks have themselves

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come out strongly against the custom. For instance, Sri Vishvesha Tirtha Swamiji of the Udupi Pejawara monastery, at one time a bala-sanyasi himself, was candidly against it. It is time society woke up to the inhuman character of this tradition. Religious faith and traditions can function freely so far as they don't trample upon basic human rights. Wherever such trampling ensues, religious codes must be statutorily forced to recede, making way for empirical ethics. Common moral experience must trump theological beliefs, setting every human being free enough to achieve their fullest self-expression. If a child demonstrates monastic interests, they might be left free to pursue them; thereafter, the formalisation of monastic vows should require a legal stipulation that they have reached adulthood.

The Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929, also called the Sarda Act, was the brainchild of the noted jurist Har Bilas Sarda. About a hundred years ago, introducing its precursor at the Simla Legislative Assembly, he spoke with passion about the importance of protecting child rights.[4] His words can be our beacon light:

"In order to protect the inalienable rights of innocent children and to concede to them the right to live their lives, it is necessary that child marriages must come to an end at once...The State with any pretensions to civilisation will deem it its duty to protect them, without heeding the vagaries that masquerade in the guise of social customs."

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