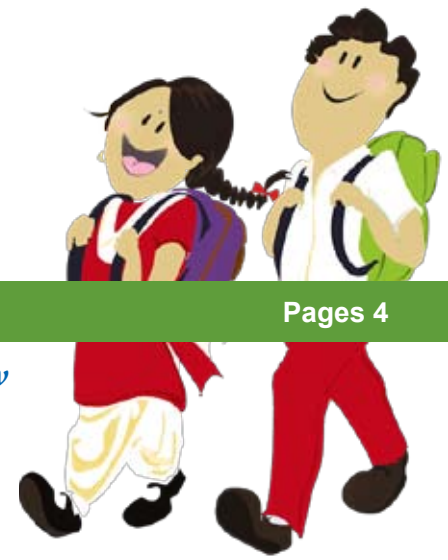




# The Peace Gong



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## Happiness and Child Rights



Visualized by Pankaj, The Peace Gong Modinagar, U.P.

"Happiness may have different meanings for different people. But we can all agree that it means working to end conflict, poverty and other unfortunate conditions in which so many of our fellow human beings live," rightly pointed out the Secretary General of the United Nations, Mr Ban Ki Moon.

March 20 is celebrated every year as the International Day of Happiness -- and as a run up to it, *The Peace Gong* Kashmir team explored the link between happiness and child rights.

Commemorating this day in 2014, the UN Secretary General said, "Happiness is neither a frivolity nor a luxury. It is a deep-seated yearning shared by all members of the human family. It should be denied to no one and available to all."

Many of the children, to whom *The Peace Gong* team spoke, felt that being rich was

not an important condition to be happy. They felt when there is lack of trust, when they are bullied in either schools or neighbourhoods, or are not treated with dignity and fairly, they feel unhappy.

Students felt that if they are given opportunity to express themselves, or contribute in their own small way to different things, it makes them happy. Also, giving them a say in their own lives makes them happy. On the other hand, if they are not heard, or taken seriously, they feel deprived and unhappy.

All the 15 students to whom *The Peace Gong* team spoke felt the rights of the child were linked to their happiness. Some said excessive competition to perform well in exams made them unhappy.

Carrying heavy schoolbags, and having no time to be creative, too were important

reasons of depression in some children.

An important issue was news of violent incidents against children, which made them feel sad -- and this was a major reason of them becoming afraid of the world around.

Munissa Lateef, a Class 12 student, said that news of children being killed or exploited made them feel that the world was unfriendly to them. Violence against children in any part of the world was a significant reason of many children having anxiety and unhappy, she said.

She also talked about the quality of life as an important point to make children happy. "When there are deprivations around and you see your family struggle, how can you be happy," she questioned.

Another student, Basit, felt that too much scolding, either in school or at home, disturbed the children and made them unhappy. By making children comfortable and addressing their concerns sincerely, schools and parents can make children happy, he said.

Basit felt that if parents and teachers have any issue between them, they should discuss or argue in privacy. A child has a sensitive and innocent heart which reacts very immediately in such situations.

All the children felt that emotional exploitation has no remedy. It creates anguish in the hearts of those children. They become angry with the passage of time. Such children always carry the darkest future with them, and can never be happy.

**Mehak Manzoor**  
Class X

Awantipora, Jammu & Kashmir



**Reality Check: West Bengal*****Shishu Panchayat* acts against child marriage**

**M**ouldang, a village in Birbhum district of West Bengal. Just a few kilometres away from the world renowned cultural hub, Sriniketan, this place is cursed by the demon of child marriage along with many other problems like poverty and lack of education.

A 'Reality Check' conducted by children of Mouldanga *Shishu Panchayat* looked at the reasons of the growing number of child marriages in the village. Illiteracy was found to be the main reason. Due to lack of education, people are not aware of the correct legal age of marriage, and the harmful consequences of child marriage.

Poverty was another reason for the parents to give away their girls in marriage. The children are forced to get married by their families, so that they can get rid of the burden of responsibilities as early as possible. Most of these families are debt-ridden and haven't been left with many options.

The team came across two incidents of child marriages in the village. One girl described how she was married off at a tender age, got separated from her husband within 15 days of marriage, and then was forced to re-marry another minor boy from the same village -- which didn't last either. The girl even attempted suicide, but survived.

Another incident was of a family with four

sisters. One of these sisters was burnt to death for dowry. Another got married and became a mother at a very young age, and now she suffers from a disease.

At a tender age when they should be playing and studying, these children are imposed with the responsibilities of the household and even babies. Their innocence is being snatched away. Child marriage is a social evil which causes domestic violence, health issues, lack of education and sometimes even death. There is an utmost need to demolish this ill practice.

Mouldanga *Shishu Panchayat* has resolved to work against child marriage - by taking up major awareness programmes that will educate people, especially the girls. Our team members have started teaching the women of the village to read and write, and teaching *Bratachari* to the children of Mouldanga.

We should find a solution of the adverse effects of this social evil by creating more awareness. The society should fight this social monster and make the country a better place to live in.

(Translated from Bengali by local coordinator)

**Mala Khatun**  
Class X, Mouldanga  
Birbhum, West Bengal

**Child marriage rampant**

An English philosopher had famously said, "If you want to examine a country, examine its youth."

It is the youth who have the potential to change their country and bring about a revolution. Today, the children are being brought up well by their parents -- giving them the best education possible. Unlike the past, children now enjoy very little restrictions in the family, and know how to exercise their freedom of expression.

While most of the parents apply the modern methods of upbringing, there are still quite a few who think otherwise. That's why every year there are 15 million children who are being forcefully married at a very young age by their guardians.

This oppressive practice denies children their right to education, health and opportunity. Child marriage is one of the biggest problems faced by the South Asian societies. The marriage of minor children - mostly girls -- by their fanatic parents is rampant in the tribal areas, where girls are forced to marry even at the age of just eight or nine.

These victims of child marriage, who just like anybody else, have a million dreams to achieve. But, unfortunately, she is robbed of these dreams in her early childhood. This phenomenon, which affects the country's progress, also has a devastating effect on the child's life. First of all, neither physically nor emotionally she is ready to become a wife or a mother.

Moreover, these girls are at far greater risk of suffering from dangerous complications in pregnancy and childbirth, or becoming infected with HIV/AIDS, and from domestic violence. With little access to education and economic opportunities, they and their families are more likely to live in poverty.

Child marriages in India are often dubbed with historical, traditional and social reasons.

One of the worst excuses, unfortunately, is that in some villages children are forced to marry because if the girl isn't married by a certain young age, the whole family is ostracized by the village.

If we don't do anything to stop all this, our society is bound to face turmoil in the days to come. The best way is to empower and educate girls -- offering them opportunities to gain skill that provide support networks. Creating 'safe spaces' where girls can gather outside their homes does help the girls to assert their right to choose when they will marry.

There are laws to curb child marriage. But laws alone won't help. There are innumerable instances where the legislations are not enforced, as many local authorities are reluctant to be seen as interfering in the private affairs of families. Many are simply unaware of the scale of child marriage, and the harmful impact it can have.

If we consistently work hard to educate society about Child Marriage through any means we can offer, then quite soon this menace will only be in our history books.

Sheikh Meelad  
Class XI,  
Srinagar, Jammu & Kashmir

**Reality Check****Child Marriage, Widows & Little Education**

Conducted by Child Volunteers of Vikalp - Jodhpur

**Reporters**

Saroj Jat: Class XII : Village Bhavi  
 Nirma Bhandari : Class XII : Village Buchakala  
 Manisha Kanwar: Class XI :Village Buchkala  
 Pooja Duktava: Class IX : Village Jaliwada

Pramila Choudhary: Class XII: Village Buchkala  
 Shanti Tanka: Class XI : Village Buchakala  
 Lakshmi Tank:Class X : Village Buchkala



**Debasree Goswami, Peace Gong Sualkuchi, Assam**

Kacha Basti in Mandor area is just 4 km from Jodhpur city in Rajasthan. But a 'Reality Check' conducted by the child volunteers of Vikalp, a voluntary organisation working to prevent child marriages, made the Basti seem to be locked away in another era.

The three-day workshop *Meri khushi ... Meri shadi abhi nahin ... Balvivah kabhi nahin* (My happiness ... My marriage not now ... child marriage never) was to train the child volunteers of Vikalp.

This exercise was a part of the Peace Gong Media and Information Literacy Training Programme (November 8-9, 2014) conducted by Prof T K Thomas, Chairperson, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore Foundation.

**What came out after the 'Reality Check' was quite shocking:**

- There were 29 young women in the Basti –all of them illiterate – and they had been married off when they were minors. The age difference between them and their husbands was more than 15 years on an average.
- Shockingly, 17 of these 29 women are widows today!

Their husbands – like most of the men of the area -- worked in stone quarries, and were addicted to alcohol and drugs.

Their untimely death was due to what the families think - Tuberculosis.

The surviving men are also suffering from respiratory problems and are addicts, unable to do any work.

So, the women -- widows and wives -- look after their families by rearing chicken.

Some also work in the stone quarries, hammering away to make stone chips from the quarried stones.

The second part of the findings-- of the families of these 29 women -- are equally startling!

- There are 31 boys and 32 girls in these 29 families.
  - 24 boys and 14 girls -- much below the legal marriageable age of 21 for boys and 18 for girls respectively -- have been married off.
  - Only 16 boys and 6 girls of the remaining children go to school.
- In all, 77 people were interviewed – who have 146 children.
- Out of these 146 children, 20 girls and 26 boys (total 46) have been married off as minors.
  - Only 20 girls and 45 boys (total 65) of the 146 children go to school.
  - Of the 60 married women interviewed, 17 are widows.
- All the women interviewed blamed their parents for not sending them to school -- and for getting them married so early.

**In a vicious cycle**

Ganga Devi is 50 years old. When she was a minor, her parents got her married to a man 15 years her senior. She was illiterate and her husband used to beat her mercilessly. He worked in the hazardous stone cutting industry. He was also addicted to alcohol and drugs and suffered from tuberculosis.

When he died quite young, of TB, Ganga Devi was left to fend for the family. She eked out a living by doing odd jobs, but could not send her three children to school. She got her 14-year-old daughter married to a grown up man. Both her teenaged sons too are working in the stone cutting industry.

GangaDevi burst out crying while speaking – and lamented that had she been sent to school, her life would not have been so miserable.

**- Shobha Choudhary & Sanju Choudhary**  
**Vikalp volunteers / Class XII students**  
**Gana Magra, District Jodhpur**





The Peace Gong Manipur Bureau has initiated a campaign on child trafficking. They are using both the social media and other communication tools like posters and street plays to create awareness on the issue. Please visit <https://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Peace-Gong-Manipur-chapter/1587938398104187?fref=nf>

## A small step to Freedom or a huge Blunder?

“To err is human.” We all make mistakes. But who knows whether it will turn out to be a major or a minor one! Mistakes always come with penalties or costs. This is a story about a ‘mistake’ that cost a 14-year-old girl her dreams, her education, and ultimately, her freedom...

Nilima, a student of Class 8, lives....no, lived.... in Rajabari Chapori. Though thin as a stick and tiny, she was very fond of dancing. So she sought permission from her widowed mother to learn the art. But the mother, who could barely arrange two square meals a day and the school expenses for Nilima, firmly said no.

But Nilima’s liking for dance grew. One fine day in November 2014, instead of returning home after school, she decide to stay back at one of her friend’s house to rehearse some dance steps --whichthey were planning to perform during a school event.

Nilima had not informed her mother about her plan – and had thought of calling her mother’s mobile phone later. But her mother, unaware of the development, had gone over to her own mother nearby – without her mobile phone.

When it grew dark, Nilima rang her mother again and again. But there was no response. Meanwhile, Nilima’s maternal uncles, whose homes were adjacent, became worried.

As the hours went by, the entire family was desperately searching for Nilima. But they had no clue. That night, her mother and her maternal uncles searched all over the village – calling all their relatives to ask if she was with them.

The next morning, Nilima’s mother and one uncle met the Coordinator of *Surovi*, who called up four more volunteers to help in the search. This group went over to each of Nilima’s friends – and finally managed to track her down at the home of the friend where she had spent the night to learn a few dance steps.

Naturally, Nilima’s mother and uncle were very angry after getting to know what had actually happened. *Surovi*’s coordinator followed them home and tried to pacify them. Initially, they seemed to have calmed down. But later we came to know that Nilima was not allowed to attend school for a week. She had also lost the freedom to go about with her friends.

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But what we didn’t come to know at first was that the family had fixed her marriage -- as a permanent punishment for staying one night away.

Nilima’s husband was much elder to her and had little education. His home was in a riverine area on the opposite part of the mighty Brahmaputra river. Soon, a sobbing ‘teen bride’ departed with her husband.

Sad, is not it? Here we find ourselves in a position where we cannot blame anyone entirely for whatever happened. But why did her family members act so immediately, getting a 14-year-old girl married against her wish?

Their answer is that Nilima should have known how to behave. Despite being poor, the family did support her to study. But she was more interested in dance – and didn’t even care to inform that she was staying the night with her friend.

This made them insecure -- and they thought it was better to get her married, rather than bring shame to their family. “Who knows some day she may run away with someone unknown, or she may fall victim to some predator who takes advantage of her behaviour.”

If we look at the situation from Nilima’s point of view, we see that her small mistake -- or ignorance about the future consequences -- brought her to a situation where she never wanted to be.

In conclusion, we are left with a few questions. Is the penalty on Nilima, imposed by the family, justified? Shouldn’t they have been a bit more forgiving? Most importantly, shouldn’t we blame the families more who support and encourage child marriages? Aren’t they looking for a loophole to impose their ego on their own children?

Friends, well-wishers, followers and readers of *The Peace Gong*, please help us to find an appropriate solution to this dilemma.

**Team *Surovi***

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Guwahati, Assam