



# Basic Human Rights Violations in Sudha Murty's *Three Thousand Stitches*

Abirlal Mukherjee

Department of English, Bankura Christian College, Bankura University, Bankura, West Bengal, India  
Email: abirlal55@gmail.com

Received: 30 Mar 2022; Received in revised form: 14 April 2022; Accepted: 23 April 2022; Available online: 29 April 2022  
©2022 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**Abstract**— A Padma Shri awardee, chairperson of Infosys Foundation, and an active member of public health care initiatives of the Gates Foundation, Sudha Murty, is a multidimensional character. Her journey of coming from a small town in Karnataka to becoming the first female engineer hired at TELCO, itself is a story of breaking stereotypes and fighting gender inequality. *Three Thousand Stitches (Ordinary People, Extraordinary Lives)*, an autobiographical writing, was published in 2017. The book has eleven chapters, among them "Three Thousand Stitches", "How to Beat the Boys", "Cattle Class", "No Place Like Home", "A Powerful Ambassador" and "I Can't, We Can" deal with basic human rights violations, devadasi culture, female health, communal animus, social judgement. The article looks into the social animus and social judgement along with human rights issues in the text. Sudha Murty recorded the real-life incidents from her own experiences in these chapters which are studied to understand the social beliefs of the time and to identify the instances of basic human rights violations.

**Keywords**— Human rights, Social judgement, Devadasi culture, Communal animus, Gender bias, Women.

## I. INTRODUCTION

### Background of the Project:

Sudha Murty is a prolific writer in Kannada and English and a social activist. *Mahashweta*, *The Day I Stopped Drinking Milk: Life Stories from Here and There*, *House of Cards: A Novel*, *Gently Falls: The Bakula*, *Dollar Bahu*, *The Mother I Never Knew*, *Wise and Otherwise: A Salute to Life* are some names of her book titles which deal with different social issues including gender bias, inequality, urban lifestyle, poverty and human rights violation.

*Three Thousand Stitches* is a collection of eleven short stories sketching Sudha Murty's real-life experiences as a student, and chairperson of Infosys Foundation. In chapter one of the novel *Three Thousand Stitches*, Murty talks about the age-old devadasi tradition. And throughout her narration, we find images of multiple basic human rights violations.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The name of the book's title is taken from the title story, the title story deals with the lives of devadasis from the northern belt of Karnataka, or sex workers as their fortune led them. Young Sudha Murty brought different changes in their lifestyle and became their dear 'Akka', meaning 'elder sister'. Different book reviews illustrated this book in different ways:

A review by Seemita Das in Times of India of *The Three Thousand Stitches* on 2nd November 2017 identified the book as:

The book, *Three Thousand Stitches* is much like its title - a couple of events on the same canvas, each adding some value to the canvas it helped weave and in the end, giving a texture that is fine and coarse, in parts.

Suktara Ghosh's article was published in The Quint, on 18th August 2017, with the title 'Three Thousand Stitches: Sudha Murty Roots Her Book in Reality', which noted:

The stories can be clearly divided into two sections - personal and philanthropic. And what's interesting is how often her personal interactions and chance encounters lead to identifying "problem" areas, which can be addressed through the aegis of Infosys Foundation.

Sudha Murty is appreciated throughout her career and all of her works are specimens of social reflection, most of them are based on real-life experiences:

Her writings are embedded in Indian Culture and incidents are drawn from day to day realities, events, and experiences. These realities reveal that women are unable to speak out on what they richly deserve. Passive sufferings, stoic sacrifice, family relationships, silence, social indifference, negation, loneliness, fear, isolation, rejection, failure acceptance, individualism, loud protest, violating the social norms have remained dormant. (Alyahya 667)

Women characters like Mahasweta, Shrimati, and Mridula are the victims of human rights violations and social justice.

In all her writings, Sudha Murty felt that a woman has to break the barricades of psychological capacity situated within. Enclosed domestic restrictions suppressed the lives of women and exploited female subjectivity forms the basis in all these novels. (Alyahya 667)

In the first two chapters: *Three Thousand Stitches* and *How to Beat The Boys* we find evidence of male-dominated ideologies and restrictions. Sudha Murty is a successful writer to establish her position in a challenging society. Dr Vanshree Godbole identifies the purpose of *Three Thousand Stitches* as:

Her language is simple first-hand experience with no ornaments used; purpose is to be understood by masses. Other women writers at large are concerned with the inner world, psychology, inner consciousness, and little emphasis is laid on social needs whereas in this particular book only social reforms, social set up is of major concern. (851)

### III. RESEARCH QUESTION

Almost all the research works on Sudha Murty and her social novels address the women's question and their

status, and challenges in society. In this paper, the reflection of human rights violations and devadasi tradition is studied in the select chapters of *Three Thousand Stitches*. The article looks into the above mentioned social issues in the chapters: "Three Thousand Stitches", "How to Beat the Boys", "Cattle Class", "No Place Like Home", "A Powerful Ambassador" and "I Can't, We Can" and establishes the fact that in this novel basic human rights violations in different ways are reflected and addressed.

### IV. REFLECTION OF BASIC HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN THREE THOUSAND STITCHES

The Sanskrit word 'devadasi' means "female servant of deity or handmaiden of God". The real-time of the beginning of this tradition is not definite but sometimes around the 3rd century or 5th century A.D. Devadasi tradition is very old and going on for ages. Indian states like Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra have a long drawn history of the tradition. From the research entitled *Exploitation of Women as Devadasis and its Associated Evils* by Dr V. Bharathi Harishankar and Dr M. Priyamvada, submitted to the National Commission for Women, New Delhi, we come to know how young girls were dedicated to temples and with time how they were abused:

Majority of girls who were dedicated are from the Schedule Cast, dedication is a forced act, poverty is a significant factor which aids dedication. Poverty, illiteracy, heredity, caste system combine together and facilitate dedication. Begging and prostitution are two important social evils resulting out of devadasi system. Many devadasis work in commercial sex industry and practice prostitution till the age of 40. Devadasis are subject to different forms of abuse, children of devadasis face problems, such as branding and stigma. There are no uniform policies, programmes and schemes for the welfare and benefit of devadasis in the four states. There are no policies, programmes and schemes for children of devadasis. Lack of awareness is the major reason for the poor/non implementation of legislations. Rescue and rehabilitation become problematic because dedications happen within the closed family unit. Devadasis are not ready to reintegrate into the family and society because it is their family which forces them into the evil practice. (4-5)

In ancient times, devadasis had seven different categories, but in present, we find most of them as "Dutta Devadasi",

"Hruta Devadasi", "Bhakta Devadasi" but regardless of their categories, their ultimate fate and lifestyles were no different, they all had to suffer different human rights violations:

In ancient times, devadasis were divided into seven categories. When a man offered his daughter to temple, she is called as "Dutta Devadasi". When a lady is kidnapped and made as a devadasi, she is called as 'Hruta Devadasi'. When a is sold to temple for the purpose of being a devadasi, it is called as "Birkrita Devadasi". If a woman voluntarily becomes a devadasi, she is known as "Bhrutya Devadasi". When a woman is devotionally offered as devadasi, she is called as "Bhakta Devadasi". When a woman, after a degree of competence, is offered as devadasi, she is known as "Alankara Devadasi". If a devadasi gets payment for her dance and music, she is known as "Gopika" or "Rudraganika". (Harishankar and Priyamvada 12-13)

Crime and judgement are undefined and dynamic, uniform judgement as a legal task of courts is a new development. But society is the ultimate judge and determines which is good and bad, acceptable and not. For hundreds of years, judgement was dictated by the kings and emperors based on the ongoing traditions, and several unrealistic social animuses were found in their judgements. Judgement and logos have close relations with each other. And being indefinite crime was judged based on practice, tradition, religion, sex, and personal point of view until people went for a judiciary system for all. But still, social judgement, gender bias, communal animus are present in society.

The first chapter of the book is the title chapter in "Three Thousand Stitches". It deals with devadasi culture. The devadasi culture is as old as the Chola empire. In Tamil, Devadasis were known as Devar Adigalar. Both male and female Devadasi were dedicated to the service of a temple and its deity. (Temple Run)

The word devadasi means 'servant of the Lord'. Traditionally, Devadasis were musicians and dancers who practiced their craft in temples to please the gods. They have a high status in society. We can see the evidence of it in the caves of Badami, as well as in stories like that of devadasi Vinapodi, who was very dear to the ruling king of the Chalukya dynasty between the sixth and seventh century in northern Karnataka. The King donated enormous sums of money to temples. However, as the time went by, the temples were destroyed and the tradition of the devadasis fell into the wrong hands. Young girls

were initially dedicated to the worship and service of a deity or a temple in good faith, but eventually, the word devadasi became synonymous with sex worker. (Murty 2)

Devadasis were exposed to different social evils like prostitution, prostitution can not be defined easily because of its multiple characteristics, and reasons, but it is an engagement in sexual relations for some desired gains.

Prostitution is defined as "the act or practice of a person, female or male, who for some kind of reward - monetary or otherwise - engage in sexual relations with a number of persons, who may be of the opposite or same sex" (Moni 36)

The reason for the sacrifice was normal and curable diseases like hair infections or ringworm. The culture of devadasi emerged out of a lack of education, where the innocent girls had to go through multiple difficulties and even involved in sex for survival. Their basic human rights like the right to equality, freedom from discrimination, right to life, liberty, personal security, freedom from torture and degrading treatment, right to fair and public health, right to marriage and family, right to opinion and information, right to social security, right to desirable work and to join a trade union, right to adequate living standard, right to education, right to participate in the cultural life of community were violated immensely in the hand of society, on the other hand, the same society left no chance to judge them fiercely. The development of the idea of basic human rights and fundamental rights gave us a new way to look into the tradition and examine their problems differently and liberally. All these basic human rights in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) as UN Resolution A/RES/217(III) [A] on 10 December 1948 are newer developments in comparison to the age-old devadasi tradition. But modern study finds a higher level of violation of them in devadasi tradition. Murty said, "Prostitution was carried on in the name of religion." (Murty 2). Initially, the devadasis did not allow Murty to interfere in their private life, they threw chappals and then tomatoes to her to avoid the interference. Thinking of her as a journalist they said, "She'll write about us and make money by exploiting us" (Murty 5) Their initial behavior towards Murty decodes that they lost their belief in social good and humanity to some extent.

To build an initial connection with the devadasis the author following her father's advice wore a two hundred rupees shari, mangalasutra, a big bindi, and glass bangles instead of a t-shirt or jeans. She sat down on the floor and ate local foods. Once the connection was built the author came to know their life stories:

Innocent girls had been sold into the trade by their husbands, brothers, fathers, boyfriends, uncles or other relatives. Some entered the sex trade on their own hoping to earn some money for their families and help future generations escape poverty. (Murty 9)

After joining the devadasi community with time their difficulties get more prominent:

'Our greatest difficulty is supporting our children's education.' they said. 'Most of the time, we can't afford their school fees and then we have to go back to what we know to get quick money. (Murty 11)

With the help of Murty, they managed to get loans from the local banks, and the education expenses of their children were taken care of, and they said no to their sex work. It resulted in an acid attack on three of the devadasis, which is a strong reflection of the communal animus that the devadasis must and only live their lives by prostitution, and any attempt to develop their lifestyle is not acceptable from the social end in ease. This is an instance of basic human rights violation, particularly the violation of the right to life, liberty, personal security, freedom from torture and degrading treatment, right to social security, right to desirable work, and right to adequate living standard. With time they started a bank and 3000 devadasis changed their lifestyles as prostitutes and welcomed a more acceptable future.

The second chapter of the book *How to Beat the Boys* is a true journal to reflect gender biases and communal animus. Gender inequality, right to privacy, right to education, and right to dignity, right to liberty are seen to be violated in this chapter. Murty completed her pre-university exam with excellent marks and expressed her desire to pursue engineering, and that resulted in unexpected and demotivating responses from everyone. Murty narrated the gender inequality present at that time. Engineering was taken solely as a male task:

Engineering was clearly an all-male domain and hence considered a taboo for girls in those days. There was no questioning the status quo, wherein girls were expected to be in the company of other female students in a medical or science college. The idea of a woman entering the engineering field had possibly never popped up in anyone's mind. (Murty 19)

Murty's family members responded differently, the grandmother with a look of disdain said, "If you go ahead and do this, no man from north Karnataka will marry you.

Who wants to marry a woman engineer? I am so disappointed in you." (Murty 19) In her statement the objectification of women in contemporary society is evident. It was believed that the ultimate goal of a girl is to get married somehow.

Her grandfather who was a history teacher said, "My child, you are wonderful at history. Why can't you do something in this field? You could be a great scholar one day. Don't chase a dry subject like engineering" (Murty 19)

Her mother was well versed in mathematics, she said 'You are good in math. Why don't you complete your post-graduation in mathematics and get a job as a professor? You can easily work in a college after you get married instead of being a hard-core engineer struggling to balance family and work" (Murty 19)

Her father, a professor of obstetrics and gynecology in Karnataka Medical College at Hubli, a liberal man who supported education for women said, "I think that you should pursue medicine. You are excellent with people and language. To tell you the truth, I don't know much about engineering. We don't have a single engineer in our family. It is a male-dominated industry and you may not find another girl in your class."

B.C. Khanapure, the principal of Basappa Veerappa Bhoomaraddi College of Engineering and Technology in Hubli, said to Murty's father in person, "As a father of two daughters, I am concerned about yours too. Can you tell her to change her mind for her own sake?" (Murty 21) Later he also added:

I have a small request. Please ask her to wear a sari to college as it is man's world out there and sari will be an appropriate dress for the environment she will be in. She would not talk to the boys unnecessarily because that will give rise to rumours and that's never good for a girl in our society. Also, tell her to avoid going to the college canteen and spending time there with boys. (Murty 21)

Because of some established myths or beliefs her right to equality, right to education, right to liberty, right to participate in the cultural life of community, and right against discrimination are violated. Though the words of the principal may sound innocent, they are as prejudiced as a person without having any formal education.

When Murty got a key to a special room for her from B.C. Khanapure, she found it dusty, the cleaner said to her:

I'm so sorry. Principal Sahib told me yesterday that a girl student was going to join the college today, but I thought that he was joking. So I didn't

clean the room. Anyway, I will do it right now.  
(Murty 24)

The college experience at the beginning was not pleasant as her male classmates of Murty couldn't accept a girl at a glance, and there we find the communal animus regarding male supremacy, even in the youth, they called her 'Ms Flowerpot' (Murty 26), and even expressed their opinions written in paper, throwing on her, "A woman's place is in the kitchen or in medical science or as a professor, definitely not in an engineering college." (Murty 26) Some even wrote with reference to Hindu myth: "We really pity you. Why are you performing penance like Goddess Parvati? At least Parvati had a reason for it. She Wanted to marry Shiva. Who is your Shiva?" (Murty 26) These comments from the learned youth classmates are really brainstorming and establish the fact that women are made to perform household work, take care of children and can not compete with men in skillful domains like engineering. Women are objectified in the last comment as it denotes clearly that a woman is born to marry and reproduce and for a man's service only. Though Murty explained a probable reason for that saying:

I Know that my classmates were acting out of reason. It was not that they wanted to bully or harass me with deliberate intention as in the norm these days. It was just that they were unprepared - both mentally and physically to deal with a person of the opposite sex studying with them. Our conservative society discourages the mingling of boys and girls even as friends, and so, I was as interesting as an alien to them. (Murty 28)

In the annual 'fishpond' (Murty 26) activity where anonymous notes (fishes) were kept in a bowl (pond), Murty faced humiliation from almost every participant, they wrote different mocking texts about her:

Mom Mom, there is a sweet potato,  
Please give me a black sari and send me to my  
husband's house,  
This is because I'm always wearing a white sari.  
(Murty 27)

This text is the English translation by Murty of a Kannada limerick, originally:

Avva genasa,  
Kari seeri udisa,  
Gandana manega kalisa. (Murty 26)

Some modern movie songs from movie like *Teesri Kasam* were modified and written to attack her:

Dear, come on, don't lie

I want to go to Sudha  
I neither have an elephant nor a horse  
But I will go walking (to her). (Murty 27)

Overcoming all these obstacles, and without having any privacy on the campus as she said "I have absolutely no privacy" (Murty 28), Murty finally broke the myth and realized that engineering is not a man's domain, "Over the course of my studies, I realized that the belief engineering is a man's domain is a complete myth." (Murty 28)

At Heathrow International Airport Murty faced humiliation for her dress, her class was determined by two luxurious ladies who judged her as 'cattle class' and asked her several times to go for the economy class instead of the business class. One of them said, "It is hard to argue with these cattle class people." (Murty 67) Social animus or judgement is evident in society in different ways, and most of them are direct attacks on one's basic rights.

In the same chapter Murty shares another experience at one upscale dinner party where she happened to talk in Kannada, as she always preferred to talk in her mother tongue if one understands the language. (Murty 67) A man wanted to introduce himself in English, and as Sudha asked him to go ahead in English, the man replied, "Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you weren't comfortable with English because I heard you speaking in Kannada." (Murty 67)

This reply is brainstorming because people are too quick to judge a person, and the seemingly smart man represents society.

Murty left India to deliver some speeches in the middle eastern countries and Dubai and Kuwait. During that time she came across experiences of some women who were abused by their agents or employers. One of them was Gracy from Kerala, an educated, well-spoken and beautiful lady who got a job as a tutor to children in the abroad country. She wanted to earn money to get married and build a house of her own. After some years, the teen male students started abusing her physically and mentally, tried to kiss her and when she confessed that to one of them, he replied, "I can't blame my friend for not being able to control himself. If you were ugly like the cook, Fatima, then nobody would want you." (Murty 100) This reply to one's teacher is honest, at the same time makes us think that how deep-rooted the objectification of women is in a society, a teacher's identity does not matter to a student, rather the physique matters. Then we also find two women who were raped by their employers:

Roja from Tamil Nadu and Neela from Andhra Pradesh - shared their stories with bouts of tears. Their experiences were worse. Each had travelled

a different path but both had been raped by their employers. (Murty 101)

Their stories show the violation of the right to life, liberty, personal security, freedom from slavery, freedom from torture and degrading treatment, right to fair public health, right to free movement in and out of the country, right to marriage and family, freedom of opinion and information, right to social security, right to rest and leisure, right to adequate living standard.

Murty liked to watch movies, but they were allowed only to "see religious and inspiring movies such as Sri Krishna Tulabharam, Rama Vanavasa and Girija Kalyana." (Murty 106) It was taboo to watch romantic scenes in a movie for teenage girls, girls were kept innocent, a virgin and a pious one just for their future married life and their husband. Murty confessed:

And yet, the taboo remained - a teenage girl shouldn't see romantic scenes. So while I happily saw them when I went with friends, I had to listen to my aunt and close my eyes when I saw the same scene with her or other senior members of the family. (Murty 106)

And for these social taboos and animus about girls, the author found a communication gap developing even among friends, "All of us had secret crushes on the heroes but we felt awkward sharing this with each other." (Murty 107)

Murty met a young petite girl named Jaya, her father was an alcoholic. In her story, the social perspective and animus regarding a married Indian woman's life are reflected. Man can abuse his wife physically and mentally, and it seems not abnormal in married life, marital crimes are not considered in society but girls are asked to adjust to all that. Jaya narrated, "He would often get drunk and abuse my mother. She went through so much, and I had no idea what I could do to help her. I grew up scared of my father's temper and in an unhappy and tense atmosphere." (Murty 197) Murty replied, "I think I can understand your mother's concerns. Many in our society still judge women who are separated from their husbands and she's probably concerned about how that might impact her daughters' marriage prospects." (Murty 157) The institution of marriage is the only destiny of many women even in today's society. And if a woman is living on her own without her husband's company, it is judged by society and the imaginative blames are thrown towards the woman only. In the narration of Jaya, the violation of her mother's right to dignity, right to life, right to free movement in and out of the country, freedom from torture and degrading treatment are significant in the hands of her husband and society.

## V. CONCLUSION

Throughout her life Sudha Murty came across several incidents of human rights violation, gender inequality, social animus and social judgement, she became the victim of all of these multiple times. In a short story titled 'Appro J.R.D' Sudha Murty voiced against gender discrimination when she went through a job requirement notice by TELCO:

It stated that the company required young, bright engineers, hard working with excellent academic background, etc. At the bottom, there was a small line: 'Lady candidates need not apply. (Murty 19)

Murty addressed human rights violations and social justice in her different writings, she identified the social judgement regarding a woman without a child. In her short story collection *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read and Other Short Stories* (1st ed., Vol 1). we find:

In India, particularly in villages, even a few decades back, women without children were looked down upon. Such women were not invited for naming ceremonies and were taunted as barren women. (Murty 45)

The article establishes that in Sudha Murty's novel Three Thousand Stitches chapters titled: "Three Thousand Stitches", "How to Beat the Boys", "Cattle Class", "A Life Unwritten", "No Place Like Home", "A Powerful Ambassador", "I Can't, We Can" deal with the same issues of human rights violations, social judgement, communal animus.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Alyahya, Rimah Saleh. "The Social and Ethical Values in The Select Novels of Sudha Murty". *Humanities & Social Science Reviews*, eISSN: 2395-6518, Vol 7, No 5, 2019, pp 667-673. Url <https://doi.org/10.18510/hssr.2019.7579>
- [2] Darity, William. *Social Judgment Theory*. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA. pp. 601-602, 2008.
- [3] Godbole, D. V. Sudha Murty's 'Three Thousand Stitches': A Chronicle of Social Reformations. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences (IJELS)*, 5(4), 2020. Retrieved from <http://journal-repository.com/index.php/ijels/article/view/2211>
- [4] Griffin, Em. *A First Look at Communication Theory*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill. p. 195, 2012.
- [5] Harishankar, V. Bharathi, and Priyamvada M.. *Exploitation of Women as Devadasis and its Associated Evils*. (Submitted to National Commission for Women. New Delhi)

- [6] Hovland, Carl I., Sherif, Muzafer (1980). *Social judgment: Assimilation and contrast effects in communication and attitude change*. Westport: Greenwood. ISBN 0313224382.
- [7] Moni, N. Anthropological Perspectives on Prostitution and AIDS in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2001.
- [8] Murty, Sudha. *Three Thousand Stitches*, Penguin Random House India, 2017.
- [9] Murty, S. *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read and Other Short Stories* (1st ed., Vol 1). New Delhi, India: Puffin Books, 2004.
- [10] Ramtek, Esther, Disha. "Women in Sudha Murty's Short Stories". *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences* Vol-6, Issue-3; May-Jun, 2021. <https://ijels.com/>
- [11] "Temple Run: The Sacred Structures of the Chola Dynasty in Tamil Nadu". *Natgeotraveller.in*. Retrieved 20 November 2021.