

Child Marriage in India: Factors and Problems

B. Suresh Lal

Department of Economics, Kakatiya University, Warangal-506009, TS, India

Abstract: Marriage is one of the important social institutions and it is a means of establishing a family through which the society perpetuates. This social process is expressed in the form of rituals and symbols. In India 45 percent of girls are wedded below 18 year. The Niger is top country (74.5%) in the world for child marriage below 18 years of the age, followed by Chad, Mali, Bangladesh, Guinea and Central African Republic, their percentages are 71.5, 70.6, 66.62, 63.1 and 57 respectively. Majority of girls who were married below 18 year are from poor and below poverty line (BPL) families. Nearly 80 percent girls are facing the domestic violence (beaten, slapped or threatened), health problems. Most of the girls who are married before 18 year are likely to get pregnancy problems and there were death case reported. Girls younger than 15 are five times more likely to die in childbirth than women in their 20s. The age group below 18 year has high fertility. Child brides often show signs symptomatic of sexual abuse and post-traumatic stress such as feelings of hopelessness, helplessness and severe depression.

Keywords: Poverty, domestic violence, health problems, ignorance and depression.

1. Introduction

Child Marriage is one of the burning problems of Indian society. In India, despite amended laws advocating 18 as the legal minimum age at marriage for females, a substantial proportion i.e. every third adolescent girl in the age group of 15-19 year is married and every second married adolescent girl has given birth to a child. According to the Registrar General of India (RGI) Report (2001) Rajasthan has the highest (40.8) percentage of females ever married among 15-19 year old girls as compared to India (24.9 %) followed by Bihar (39.6 %), Madhya Pradesh (34.1%), Jharkhand (32.9%) and Andhra Pradesh (32.3%). Among the various districts of Rajasthan, Bhilwara is at the top with 61.9 percent.

Child marriage in India has been practiced for centuries, with children married off before their physical and mental maturity. The problem of child marriage in India remains rooted in a complex matrix of religious traditions, social practices, economic factors and deeply rooted prejudices. Regardless of its roots, child marriage constitutes a gross violation of human rights, leaving physical, psychological and emotional scars for life. Sexual activity starts soon after marriage, and pregnancy and childbirth at an early age can lead to maternal as well as infant mortality. Moreover, women who marry younger are more likely to experience domestic violence within the home.

2. Objectives & Methods

To study the socio-economic conditions of the child family, to identify the factors influence the child marriages and to examine the implications of the child marriage. To analyze constitutional and legal measures against child marriage and their implementation.

The present study analyzed based on the primary and secondary data, covering various issues like poverty, domestic violence, poor understanding, their health problems, level of management and their living standard of the wedded girl children.

3. Indian & World Scenario

In the medieval ages, law and order was not yet a universal phenomenon and arbitrary powers were concentrated in the hands of a hierarchy led by a despotic monarch. In India the Sultans of Delhi who held the place of the despotic monarch, came from a different type of culture. Orthodox in their beliefs with a fanatical commitment to their religion there was a ruthless method in its propagation. Intolerant as they were to all forms of worship other than their own, they also exercised contempt for members of other faiths.

As usual, women were the victims during any war, arson, plunder, etc. During the reign of the Delhi Sultans, these were the order of the day and the worst sufferers were Hindu women. During these dark days were spawned customs like child-marriage and selection of women from the rest of the society, wearing of the Ghungat (veil). This age also perpetuated customs like Sati and looking upon the birth of a female baby as an ill omen, even killing newly born baby girls by drowning them in a tub of milk. Amidst the feeling of insecurity, the presence of young unmarried girls was a potential invitation for disaster.

The predatory Saranic feudal lords and princes of Saranic origins who stalked all over India in the middle ages were a source of constant threat. A girl at home was an invitation for disaster. As such, parents would seek to get over with the responsibilities of their daughters by getting the custom of child marriages with the 'bride' and 'groom' still in their cradles was a culmination of this tendency. This way the danger to a growing girl's modesty was somewhat reduced.

Along with this principal reason, there were a few other reasons arising from the nature of the feudal society which were conducive for the prevalence of this practice. In a feudal society, qualities like rivalry, personal honour, hereditary friendship or enmity are rated very highly. Because of this, military alliances play a very important role in preserving or destroying the balance of power between the various kingdoms and fiefdoms. To ensure that the military alliances entered into were observed by

both parties, practices like exchanging juvenile members of the respective families who were educated and brought up at each other's palaces were followed.

They were considered to be captives who were held to ensure that the military alliances between the two kingdoms or clans were honoured. But, a more lasting bond that could back up military alliances was matrimonial alliances between members of the two families. But such matrimonial alliances could be worked out smoothly only if the bride and groom were ready to accept each other. Young men and women of marriageable age are bound to be choosy. This difficulty could be avoided when the marriage was between two children or babies where there was no question of their having any sense of choice as to who their partners in life should be.

The caste hierarchy also perhaps had its role to play in perpetuating such a system. Caste which is based on birth and heredity does not allow marriages between members of different castes. But as youngsters whose emotions and passions could be ruled by other considerations might violate this injunction. Out of the necessity to preserve itself, the hereditary caste system could have helped in nourishing the practice of child-marriage.

Among other subsidiary considerations which could have helped to preserve this custom might be the belief that adults (or adolescent) boys and girls would indulge in unhealthy moral practices. This consideration would have been more relevant in the context of the puritanical and orthodox environment of the bygone ages. The practice could also have been perpetuated, especially among- the economically weaker sections, by the consideration of keeping marriage expenses to a minimum. A child-marriage need not have been as grand an affair as adult marriages.

World Scenario: The Niger is top country (74.5%) in the world for child marriage below 18 years of the age, followed by Chad, Mali, Bangladesh, Guinea and Central African Republic, their percentages are 71.5, 70.6, 66.62, 63.1 and 57 respectively. In India 45 percent of girls are wedded below 18 year.

Current Scenario: The legal age for marriage in India is 18 years for a female and 21 for a male as per Section 6 of the Hindu Marriages Act, 1956. Any marriage of a person younger than this is banned and punishable in India under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006.

But child marriages still take place in India, particularly around the Hindu holy day of Akshya Tritiya. Normally Hindus decide the date for marriages based on horoscopes interpreted by pundits. Some dates however are considered so auspicious that no pundit needs to be consulted. One such day is Akshya Tritiya (also known as Akha Teej), the third day of Vaishakh, and the month of the Hindu calendar generally falling in May. During this time lots of marriages take place. Unfortunately, many of them are child marriages. It is a religious tradition in many places in India and therefore quite difficult to change.

And that is really the crux of the problem- child marriages are a reflection that, like sati, women and girls are seen as property that 'belongs' to someone: her family, her husband, her in-laws. If her marriage is left too late, she is considered a burden to her own family. In some communities where child marriage takes place, instead of dowry there is a system of 'bride price' where, when the girl gets married, the husband's family has to pay a sum of money in exchange for the bride. Instead of making things better, this system also means that families are eager to get their daughters married off so they can bring in money.

In any case, child marriages are worse for girls than for boys, since the girls are usually younger than the boys. Marriage also puts an end to any education girls may have been receiving. And if they get pregnant while still young, their health gets much worse since their bodies are often not ready to bear children. According to the United Nations, maternal mortality (which indicates the number of women dying in childbirth or from pregnancy-related causes) is 25 times higher for girls under 15, and two times higher for 15-19-year-olds.

Interestingly enough, around the same time as Akshya Tritiya in 2010, the United Nations had just concluded a special session on children where they adopted 21 child welfare goals for the next decade. One of these was to end "harmful traditional or customary practices such as early and forced marriage.

4. Review of Literature

According to Saraswat (2006) Child Marriages exist in feudal societies where the Nagnika concept was prevalent. Parents were made to believe that if they did not get their daughters married off before puberty, they would go to hell. Indian tradition places a high premium on virginity before marriage. This applies to women and to some extent men too. In a culture where premarital chastity is valued, one of the easiest ways of achieving this is to get the young girls married in their childhood.

A number of social, health and economic disadvantages are associated with early marriage. While existing data do not draw conclusions regarding whether early marriage alone causes these adverse outcomes, it is likely that the links between early marriage, poverty, low educational attainment and other variables in diverse settings have found that married girls are likely to have frequent unprotected sexual relationships.

According to Miller and Lester, (2003), Marriage dramatically increases the likelihood and pressures of childbearing. The first-time mothers below the age 16, in addition to the normal risks and responsibilities of child bearing, face an increased risk of maternal and infant mortality.

Married girls typically have low levels of educational attainment, limited or even absent peer networks, restricted mobility and less access to mass media such as T.V., Radio and Newspapers as compared to boys or unmarried girls Haberland & Bracken, (2004).

In India, the age of marriage of girls has shown a marginal increase over the years. Nevertheless it continues to be much lower than the legal age and still a large number of girls continue to be married at very young ages Karkal & Rajan, (1989).

The problems include soaring birth rates, grinding poverty and malnutrition, high illiteracy and infant mortality, and low life expectancy, especially among rural women Burns, (1998).

Child marriage covers a myriad of social situations. There are betrothals of tiny boys and girls, some of them asleep, unaware of what is happening. Then two families may promise to arrange the marriage of their yet unborn children in case they happen to be of different sexes. Then, there are marriages of teenagers who consummate their relations a couple of years later, in comparison to those marriages which are consummated almost a decade and a half later Srivastava, (1983).

Despite laws to the contrary it is seen early marriage continues to be the norm and once married there is a tremendous pressure on young wives to bear a child. Early sexual activity also exposes adolescents to a greater risk of contracting Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), including HIV/AIDS. Early marriage and pregnancy is one of the major causes of maternal mortality in India Yadav, (2006).

As a result of child marriage, the girl child's reproductive and sexual health is affected the most. These girls suffer from high rates of obstetric complications, intrauterine growth retardation, pregnancy induced hypertension, premature deliver, higher mortality rates, high incidence of RTIs and STI and fetal wastage (miscarriages or still births). The neonatal and infant mortality rates are also high along with incidences of premature delivery and low birth weight of the newborn child Bhat, (2005).

The risks of early marriage are not just limited to the girl child alone, but also to the child that is born to her as a result of an early pregnancy. One in 15 children in India dies before their first birthday as compared to 1 in 200 children across the industrialized world Agrawal & Mehra, (2004).

According to a recent report by UNICEF (2005), almost 50% of women aged 20-24 are married by 18 years in India. Child marriages have been a practice since centuries and people practice it strictly.

In India, pre-adolescent and adolescent girls who constitute a sizable segment of its population constitute a vulnerable group on account of practice of early marriages, potential exposure to a greater risk of morbidity and mortality Verma, (2004).

On the contrary, young brides are pressurized to prove their fertility as soon as possible after the marriage and to produce children especially sons. "A young girl with minimal or no education, raised to be submissive and

subservient, married to an older man, has little ability to negotiate sexual activity Khan, (1996).

High fertility rate is attributed to an early marriage i.e. child marriage. The earlier a time a woman marries the more likely she is to give birth to a larger number of children, consequently placing a high demand on her health Bhat, (2005).

Studies have shown that early marriages tend to place the woman under male control with no choice over birth control, education, and health leading to a life of domestic and economic subservience. It is observed that children are put to work at an early age in most caste groups to an extent, that economic value of child labour was a contributing factor to child marriages.

5. Findings and Discussions

5.1 Factors Motivating Child Marriages

Women stand at the cross roads between production and reproduction, between economic activity and care of human beings and therefore between economic development and human development. They are workers in both spheres. But discriminations against women are pervasive. It begins from womb and ends with tomb. The discrimination reflects in education, employment, work place, family and socio-political sphere. The child marriage system is also a reflection of discrimination against women. There are many factors that are responsible for child marriage.

A) Avoiding expenditure on female education: Human resources development plays an important role in economic development, effective use of physical capital depends upon efficient human resource or human capital. Education is one of the key determinants of human capital formation. Productive capacity of a person depends upon levels of education attainment. Investment levels on education determine educational attainment and human capital development and thereby promote economic growth and development. Expenditure incurred on a person's education determines his or her capacity building. In all developing countries female receive less education, career development opportunities than men. A country spends more on education when only it recognizes the importance of developing human resources. Same is applicable to individuals and families. Generally families discriminate between boys and girls (Males and Females) in investment on education, male children are treated as future assets and economic base of the family where as female children are treated as burden on the family economic base and they are treated as someone else's asset as they are to be given to someone in marriage. Due to this discrimination in spending on children education, female children are given less or no priority. An observation of the enrollment of children in AP shows how discrimination against girls is practiced. About more than 90% of Govt. schools in AP enrolled with more number of girls than boys and in the private schools boys are enrolled more than girls. People think how to avoid spending on girl's education and find marriage as an easy solution.

B) Minimizing Marriage Expenditure: Generally husband is attributed higher status than wife in the family. Naturally he is expected to have more capabilities than his wife. If it is translated to educational status, husband is supposed to have more educational qualification than that of wife. It is the experience of many, more often, to find bridegroom to match the bride in terms of educational qualification and if found bridegrooms with higher qualification demand more dowry and other things. If girl is educated groom should be more educated than bride and more dowries are required. So more the girl is educated more is the marriage expenditure. This is one side of the picture on the other side, due to prevailing defective education system, educated people are alienating socially and culturally, losing integrity and blindly following/adopting extravagant life style and marriage ceremonies of educated people turned expensive luxurious in the name of fashion and modern culture. More often educated girls are too due to demonstration effect, dictating marriage celebrations according to their wills and fancies and making them expensive and luxurious. Thus educating girls is increasing marriage expenditure. So people think it is easier or lessees burden to get marriage of girl done soon after attaining puberty or even before, at younger age of 13 or 14 or below that, than to educate her.

C) Avoiding share in Ancestral Property: Right of female to share ancestral property is also one of the factors responsible for encouraging child marriages to some extent. If marriage of girl is done at early age she as a child would not demand for her share. For benefiting male heirs female heirs are denied property rights in practice, in spite of statutory provisions, by resorting to early child marriage.

D) Poverty of Family: Women and female children are often denied equal access to common resources when a family is in poverty. Female members, mainly female children are victimized by poverty of the family. A poor family naturally jeopardizes female children. Every chance is used for avoiding burden of female. So poor families naturally resort to child marriage to avoid all sorts of burden of female child. Sometimes it can also be perceived that poor families selling girls and the child marriage is a hidden form of selling girl. Marring child to gods as a tradition is also originates from family poverty.

E) Social Insecurity: Social security is also one of the social factors responsible for child marriage system. It is general perception that a married woman is safer against offenses than an unmarried woman. People (men) view married women differently than unmarried girls. Unmarried girls are viewed with malafied intentions. It is the malafied intentions that lead to crimes against unmarried girls/females. To be secure from offences, assaults, teasing against unmarried girls, parents are in a hasty to give away girl in marriage soon after she attains puberty or earlier.

F) Single Parent Families: Some of families are single parent, it compel them to reduce the burden by performing marriage to their below 18 years girl child. It is only excuse.

5.2 Problems

A) Heavy burden in in-laws family: Women's work in the house hold involves a wide range of activities such as processing and pounding new grains, tending live stock, cooking and looking after children and elderly persons. They have to put several hours of strenuous efforts to collect firewood and water from distant places. They also engage in household production for supplementing family income, involve in increasing household asserts by raising livestock, produce vegetables for household consumption. They play major role in cultivation too. In many families women undertake more strenuous work but men control assets and income giving less freedom to women. The problem of married child in in-laws house is very burdensome "As a female member of the family she has to play multiple role in the in laws family. They earn for supplementing family income by engaging in productive activities. Maintenance of the family and children is another strenuous burden on the married child. Being a child she has to play role of a grown up women. Family responsibility is troublesome if she happens to be elder in the in-laws family. Family members expect more but she cannot reach up to their expectations. She has to attend needs of elderly persons and other persons in the family as per their exceptions which are often beyond her capabilities.

B) Early Pregnancy-Health complications: Child marriage naturally leads to early pregnancy resulting into many health complications. Without proper knowledge about physiological condition, she cannot cope with changes in her body during pregnancy. Elderly women are too not in a position to guide her properly. In the olden days elderly women used to monitor the situation perfectly during pregnancy, during delivery and post delivery times. But now-a- days elderly women neither have knowledge as did women in olden days nor have positive attitude to approach proper medical people. This type of situations sometimes leads to depend on local quakes in emergency.

C) Fall in the High Fertility Age Group: When a female is married below the age of 16 years normally tend to have more children, unwanted pregnancy. Lack of access to modern medical facilities to avoid/post phone pregnancy, women are forced to have pregnancy and carry the child.

D) Inability to Plan or Manage Families: Statistically, women who marry early are likely to bear more children. Among our respondents, those married under 15 averaged 4.96 children; those married between 15 and 17 had 4.15, and those over the age of 18 averaged 3.12 children. Young mothers exercise less influence and control over their children and have less ability to make decisions about their nutrition, health care and household management.

E) Desire for Male Child: Due to desire for male child women are forced to conceive as many times as she can till she gives birth to a male child.

F) High difference in age between bride and bridegroom: Generally there is a lot of age difference between bride and bride groom. In most of the child

marriages it is bride who is child and not the bride groom. When bride is child she naturally does not have any freedom to express her opinions on any of family life and she has to blindly obey orders of husband.

G) Impact on sexual health of women and girls: Young girls can face considerable physical pain associated with sexual intercourse as a result of the physiological immaturity of their sexual organs. Complications due to pregnancy at a young age frequently include obstetric fistula (perforation of the bladder or bowel, due to prolonged labour).

H) Vulnerability to HIV infection: A girl is physiologically more prone to contracting HIV than a male, as her vagina is not well lined with protective cells and her cervix may be penetrated easily. Young women are several times more likely than young men to contract the disease through heterosexual contact. Also, deeply entrenched socio-economic inequalities further compound their risk. Marriage can increase married girls' exposure to the virus, especially as older husbands may engage in unprotected sexual relations with other partners. The risk of HIV infection is higher among the poorest and most powerless in society, and, as such, married adolescent girls will be more at risk of infection than unmarried girls who are not having sexual intercourse. Married adolescent girls' inability to negotiate safer sex and other social pressures represent a critical channel of vulnerability.

6. Conclusion and Suggestion

Elimination of early marriage is a clear starting point. The outcomes from this study suggest the following strategies to address this problem:

1. Challenge the traditions that surround early marriage. Inform parents, community members, and youth about the negative consequences of early marriage.
2. Create a supportive network of (religious) leaders and teachers who can empower girls to negotiate with their parents.
3. Expand training for health and community workers on the dangers of early marriage, engaging them as advocates and change agents in their communities and institutions.
4. 4.Strengthen and establish community networks and partnerships involving girls clubs, teachers, elders, local government officials, women and youth groups, community and religious leaders, etc., that jointly work towards ending early marriage.
5. Strengthen the role of the judicial system particularly the police, judges and persecutors through training on enforcement of the law against early marriage.
6. Develop strong support systems to keep girls in school. Provide scholarships where necessary and encourage teachers to support girls.
7. Bring leading professional women to communities to talk to girls as role models and a source of inspiration.
8. Finally, given the factors motivating child marriages, all efforts should aim at change the gender biased attitudes of parents and society by imparting proper

education on one hand and eradicating poverty on the other.

References

- [1] Agarwal, Deepti & Mehra, Sunil. (2004). Adolescent Health Determinants for Pregnancy and Child Health Outcomes among the Urban Poor, Indian Pediatrics – Environmental Health Project, Special Article Services, Volume 41, New Delhi.
- [2] Bhatt, A. Sen and U. Pradhan (2005) "Child Marriage & the Law in India", Human Rights Law Network, New Delhi. p.259
- [3] Biswajit Ghosh, (2006): Trafficking in Women & Children, Child Marriage and Dowry: A Study for Action Plan in West Bengal, Dept of Women & Child Development & Social Welfare, Govt. of West Bengal & UNICEF.
- [4] Child and Law, Indian Council for Child Welfare, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India, 1998, page 210.
- [5] Child and Law, Indian Council for Child Welfare, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India, 1998, page 218.
- [6] Haberland, N. & E. Chong. (2004). „A world apart: The disadvantage and social isolation of married adolescent girls“, Population Council, New York.
- [7] Ibid.
- [8] Ibid.
- [9] Ibid.
- [10] Implementation Hand Book for the Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNICEF.
- [11] Lal B. Suresh and G. Kavitha, (2013): Economic Impact of Inadequate Sanitation on Women's Health: A Study in Warangal District, International Journal of Environment & Development, Vol.10, No-2, July-December: ISN: 0973-3574.
- [12] Lal B. Suresh, (2010): Economic and Health Status of Women Ragpickers: An Empirical Study in Andhra Pradesh, India, paper Presented at International Conference held at Beijing, China on Economic and Business, on 7-11 September, Organized by European-Asian Economics, Finance, Econometrics & Accounting Science Association (EAEFEASA).
- [13] Lal B. Suresh, (2010): The Economic Impact Of HIV/AIDS: A Study in Tribal Areas in Andhra Pradesh, Indian Journal of Millennium Development Studies: An International Journal, Volume 5 • Numbers 1-2 • January & June, 2010; pp. 139-146, ISSN: 0973-3981.
- [14] Lal B. Suresh, (2012); Current Health Scenario of Subaltern Communities: A Review in Rural India, in Dimensions of Female Sex- Ratio Inter State Variations in India Issues and Challenges, Serial Publications, New Delhi.
- [15] Lal B. Suresh, (2012): Combating the Child Labour In Andhra Pradesh- India: An Investigation, paper presented at 3rd European Asian Economics, Finance, Econometrics and Accounting conference held on 5-8 September, Taipei, Taiwan.
- [16] Lal B. Suresh, (2006): Health Status and Health Practices among the Tribals: A Case Study in AP, Journal of Social Anthropology, vol-3, No.2 Dec, Serials, New Delhi. P.no.233-239, ISSN: 0973-3582.
- [17] Lal B. Suresh, T. Joga Chary, (2006): An Empirical

Study on Child Ragpickers in Warangal City, Indian Journal of Human Rights & Justice Vol-2, No. 1-2, p.no. 39-48, Serials, New Delhi.pp.39-48, ISSN: 0973-3418.

- [18] M.E. Khan (1996) 'Sexual Violence within Marriage'.
- [19] Miller S. & F. Lester (2003) 'Improving the health and well being of married young first time mothers', W.H.O
- [20] NIPC, (2000): National Institute for Public Cooperation and Child Development, GOI, Note No. NI/PC/SAP/132/2000/908, dated July 31, 2000, page 4.
- [21] NTK Naik and Lal B. Suresh, (2013): Impact of Alcohol Consumption on Health and Economy (A Focus on Mc Dowellization of World); IOSR Journal of Nursing and Health Science (IOSR-JNHS), Volume-1, Issue-5, Jul-Aug, e-ISSN: 2320-1959, ISSN: 2320-1940, PP 18-23.
- [22] Saraswat, Ritu. (2006). 'Child Marriage: A Social Evil', Social Welfare, April, 2006.
- [23] Savitri Goonesekere, (1998): Children, Law and Justice: A South Asian Perspective, SAGE, page 141.
- [24] Srivastava, K. (1983), 'Socio-economic Determinants of Child Marriage in Uttar Pradesh', Demography India, New Delhi.
- [25] The National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development (NIPCCD),
- [26] UNICEF (2005) Early Marriage: A Harmful Traditional Practice: A Statistical Exploration.
- [27] Verma, A. (2004). Factors Influencing Anaemia among Girls of School Going Age (6-28 Years) from the slums of Ahmedabad City, Indian Journal of Community Medicine Jan-March, XXIX (1).
- [28] Yadav, K.P. (2006). 'Child Marriage in India', Adhyayan Publishers & Distributors, New Delhi. p.303.

Author Profile



B. Suresh Lal is an Associate Professor. He has 19 years of research and teaching experience. Dr. Lal is a reputed scholar on Health & Environmental Economics, Agricultural Economics, Tribal Studies and Development Economics. He is an editor of International Journal of Environment & Development, New Delhi. He has published 70 articles in international and national journals.

Dr. Lal is life member of several professional associations such as, Indian Society of Information Technology in Agriculture, Society of Environmental Education, AP Economic Association, International Health Economics Association (USA) and European Asian Economics, Finance, Econometrics and Accounting Science Association (Greece).

Dr. Lal is recipient of the President's Lifetime Achievement Award-USA, Indira Gandhi NSS Award-India, Best NSS-Programme Coordinator Award, Indian Red Cross Society Gold Medal, Global Environmental Excellence Award, Mother Teresa Gold Medal Award, Jewel of India Award.