

Understanding the Intersectionality of Girl Child Marriage in India through the National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS) Data: Current Trends in High Prevalence States

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Abstract: This article examines girl child marriage in India through an intersectional lens, moving beyond single factor explanations to consider how caste, religion, education, wealth, and place of residence jointly shape early marriage outcomes. Using National Family Health Survey 5 data from 2019 to 2021, the analysis focuses on five high-prevalence states, West Bengal, Bihar, Tripura, Assam, and Jharkhand, and draws on a sample of women aged 20 to 24 who were married before the age of 18. Descriptive analysis highlights a steady national decline in child marriage over recent decades, while also revealing sharp regional and social disparities that persist beneath this overall progress. The findings show that girls from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, those with limited education, those from poorer households, and those living in rural areas face a markedly higher risk of early marriage. Religious identity further intersects with local economic and cultural contexts, producing varied patterns across states. Taken together, the study underscores that child marriage in India is sustained by overlapping social and economic disadvantages, suggesting that policy responses must address these interconnected conditions rather than treating early marriage as an isolated cultural practice.

Keywords: child marriage in India, intersectionality, socio economic factors, NFHS 5 data, girl child marriage

1. Introduction

Child marriage in India is a social concern that has been rooted in Indian society since time immemorial. It becomes worse among girl children. The previous governments and the judicial mechanism have built up measures to overcome the menace of child marriage in India. Although recent records show a visible decline in the cases of child marriage in India from 47.4 per cent in 2005–06 to 26.8 per cent in 2015–16 (UNFPA, 2022: 1), the issue still becomes recurrent in many states in India. It was noticed that over the last few decades, more than 85 per cent of such cases of girl-child marriage in India often occur only in a few states. As notified in the National Family Health Survey (5), West Bengal, Assam, Bihar, Tripura and Jharkhand are the top five states contributing to child marriage in India. The acute problem of girl-child marriage is often discussed through customs and traditions in India and is often discussed about patriarchy (Seth et al., 2018; Forbes, 1979). However, it is to be understood that child marriage is not only a problem that can be understood through the prism of patriarchy alone, but it also has a connection with other socio-economic concerns as well. Here lies the importance of an intersectional understanding of girl-child marriage in India. Previous studies show that the problem of child marriage is linked to many intersectional concerns, such as poverty (Paul, 2019; Lal, 2015), illiteracy and less education (Paul, 2019; Raj et al., 2014), caste (Saxena et al., 2013), and religion (Vishwakarma et al., 2019). It proves that the problem of girl-child has a more profound interconnection with the issues mentioned above. The paper analyses the

intersectional understanding of such concerns in India and its recent trends.

2. Objectives

The paper has the following objectives:

- 1) To understand the recent trends of intersectionality of caste, religion, poverty and literacy in girl child marriage in India.
- 2) To evaluate the interconnection of these sections in the top five states of child marriage cases in India.

3. Data and Methodology

This study utilises data from the National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5), 2019-2021, to accomplish the above objectives. It focused on 10,951 individuals from the 20-24 age group who got married before the age of 18 years, among the five states with the highest prevalence in India. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW), the Government of India, and the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS), Mumbai, conducted this survey. The NFHS-5 survey employs a stratified two-stage sampling process, with the 2011 census serving as the sampling frame for selecting Primary Sampling Units (PSUs). PSUs were villages in rural areas, and census enumeration blocks (CEBs) were in urban areas (International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF 2021). The NFHS-5 is a national-level representative survey that covers all 28 states and eight union territories of India. It generated data on various topics that reflect socio-demographic and health concerns. The survey protocol of NFHS-5 has been

reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Boards of the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF (International Institute for Population Sciences, 2021).

The scope of the present study is confined to five selected states: West Bengal, Bihar, Tripura, Assam, and Jharkhand. The selection of these states was predicated on the prevalence of early marriage among girls, despite the fact that they are at different stages of demographic transition. The study aims to examine the potential correlation between child marriage and socio-economic as well as demographic factors within each of these states. The primary variable of interest (dependent variable) in this research is child marriage in India, which, in accordance with the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, stipulates that the minimum legal age for female marriage is 18 years. Notably, this legislation was amended in 2021, increasing the minimum age to 21 years. Consequently, women are categorised based

on their age at first marriage into two groups: (a) child marriage (below 18 years) and (b) adult marriage (18 years and above). The present study, however, focuses solely on the percentage of child marriage rather than adult marriage. The findings presented in the subsequent section are derived from descriptive statistical data analysis methods.

4. Analysis

With the assistance of data on age at first marriage, the NFHS survey rounds have extensively examined the trend of girl-child marriage in India. The NFHS surveyed women who married before the age of 18, and according to government records, they are classified as minors. Analysing the three most recent NFHS reports will facilitate a comprehensive understanding of this trend.

4.1 Girl Child Marriage in India: A Decadal Trend

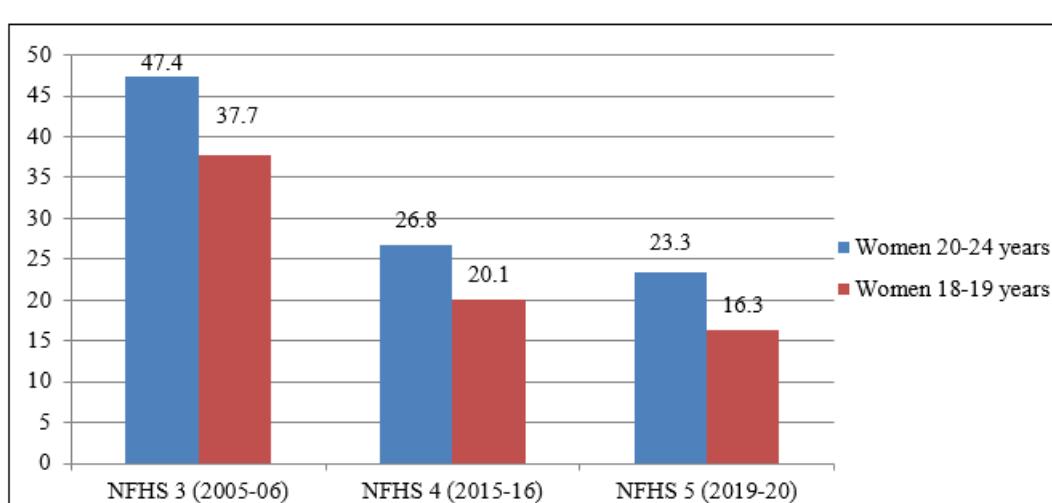


Figure 1: Percentage of women married before 18 years in India NFHS 3, 4 & 5

Source: (UNFPA 2022)

Figure 1 indicates the following trends: Child marriage reduced from 47.4 per cent in 2005–06 to 26.8 per cent in 2015–16 and 23.3 per cent in 2019–20, registering a decline of 21 per cent during the first decade period, and further, it declined by 3.5 per cent in the next five years. It indicates that the average age (median age) at first marriage of women aged 20 to 24 has also, interestingly, increased by 2.0 years during the last decade and a half. Similarly, their age cohort of sample studies, from 18 to 20 years of age, also shows a noticeable decline in the cases of child marriage in India. Fig. 1 shows that 37.7 per cent of reported child marriage during the research year 2005–06 has come down to 16.3 per cent in 2019–20. This indicates a total decline of 21.4 per cent. According to the Child Marriage Data Portal report, 17 per cent of women in India got married within 15 years in 2006, which declined to 4.8 per cent in 2021 (Child Marriage Data Portal, n.d.). The portal expected that this would decrease to zero by 2030. However, the state-wise reflection of the dataset is above the national average for many states. If we investigate the details of decadal growth in cases of girl-child marriage in Indian states, we show different statuses, which are discussed in detail below.

4.2 Intersectionality in Girl-Child Marriage

As mentioned above, child marriage among girl children in India can be understood with an intersectional study of different socio-economic indices. Among them, the caste & tribal status, access to education, economic condition, religion and place of residence brought divergence in the problem of child marriage practices. Detailed analysis of the same has been made below:

a) Caste, tribal identity and Child Marriage among girls

One of the significant social categories among the people of India is the caste and tribal affiliations. Association with caste and tribal affiliations has been considered primordial among the tribes and caste groups in India. Such affiliations are generally regarded as endogamous, and very limited intertribal or inter-caste exchanges are practiced. Consequently, the closed nature of practices among tribes and caste groups is often viewed as a factor influencing marital decisions and family patterns. Lower caste groups and tribes are also known as socially and economically marginalised groups and typically face discrimination and marginalisation from other caste groups and non-tribal communities. As a result, the Constitution of India explicitly recognises Dalits as Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Adivasis as

Scheduled Tribes (STs). The deepening marginalisation and increasing poverty render these groups more susceptible to child marriage. The following table from NFHS-5 further illustrates how caste or tribal identity influences instances of child marriage in India.

Table 1: Child marriage among Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in India

State	ST	SC	OBC
West Bengal	44.6	39.9	36.1
Bihar	50.1	37.7	40.7
Tripura	43.7	40.1	41.4
Jharkhand	37.0	27.7	33.8
Assam	28.6	24.0	25.6
National	25.8	26.3	22.4

Source: NFHS-5

The above table indicates that the cases of child marriage among girls belonging to the SC and ST categories in many states surpass even the national average. The table presents data on the top 5 states where the age at first marriage is below 18 years, according to the records of NFHS-5. It proves that the intersection of caste and tribal affinities is still prevalent in child marriage among girls in India. The table indicates that cases of Child marriage among STS in Bihar, West Bengal, Tripura, Jharkhand, and Assam showed 50.1 per cent, 44.6 per cent, 43.7 per cent, 37.0 per cent and 28.6 per cent, respectively, which is far more than the national average, which is 25.8 per cent. Similarly, Tripura, West Bengal, Bihar, and Jharkhand recorded higher child marriage cases among the SCs, which are higher than the national average, i.e., 40.1 per cent, 39.9 per cent, 37.7 per cent, and 27.7 per cent, respectively. However, the case of OBCs, as the table indicates, shows an overall higher percentage of child marriage cases among girls above the national average. Therefore, in India, one can assume that caste and social affiliations still have a significant role to play in growing cases of child marriages.

b) Religion & Girl Child Marriage

Like caste and tribal affiliations, religion also significantly influences cases of child marriage in India. Addressing this issue necessitates an understanding of the predominant role religion plays. Historically, religious affiliation has frequently been a reference point in child marriage cases across India. According to historical records, the incidence of child marriage has been higher among the major religious communities, namely Hindus and Muslims. However, recent trends in child marriage demonstrate different patterns, as evidenced by the data presented in the table below.

Table 2: Religion-wise breakup of girls who get married before the age of 18

State	Hindu	Muslim	Christian	Sikh	Buddhist	Others
West Bengal	40.3	45.2	15.0	52.2	0.0	25.6
Bihar	41.7	36.5	72.4	31.5	NA	NA
Tripura	39.7	44.9	33.9	NA	44.8	NA
Jharkhand	33.2	34.2	16.7	0.0	NA	26.0
Assam	25.2	40.3	22.3	2.5	16.6	50.3
National	23.2	26.4	15.2	8.0	16.1	17.6

Source: NFHS-5

Table 2 presents data from NFHS-5 on the percentage of women married before age 18, categorised by religious

group, in the five most populous states of India. The data indicates significant intersectional variations in the occurrence of child marriage based on religious identity, thereby highlighting how religion influences marriage practices. For instance, in Bihar, notable disparities exist in the prevalence of child marriage among various religious groups. According to the data in Table 2, 72.4 per cent of Christian women were married before the age of 18, compared to 41.7 per cent of Hindu women and 36.5 per cent of Muslim women. This trend is particularly noteworthy, given that Christianity is generally associated with advocacy for women's rights, education, and socio-economic upliftment. Yet, in Bihar, the proportion of Christian women married before 18 exceeds that of other religious communities in the state. Similarly, in Assam, 40.3 per cent of Muslim women are married before the age of 18. This suggests that child marriage results from the intersection of religious identity with local cultural and economic contexts. Conversely, in Tripura, the prevalence of marriage before 18 years across different religious groups is nearly uniform. It is also important to note that the national averages for child marriage among Hindus and Muslims are similar. Nonetheless, regional disparities reveal that child marriage within religious categories varies significantly across regions.

c) Education background & Girl Child Marriage

Education seems to be another variable that influences the first age of marriage for girls. Access to education has a direct connection with child marriage in the world in general and in India in particular. Prior studies show that cases of child marriage in India have been high among those who have no access or have minimal access to education until the primary level (Paul, 2019; Modak, 2019). The level of education, therefore, appears to be directly associated with the age at first marriage among women in India. To consider it differently, a recent report by UNICEF indicates that literacy and girls' education limited the risk of child marriage in India, decreasing from around 47 per cent in 2005-06 to 27 per cent in 2015-16 (UNICEF, n.d.). With the expansion of education, cases of girl-child marriage are decreasing in India.

Table 3: Educational status and age at first marriage of Girls

State	No schooling	Less than 5 years	5-9 years complete	10-9 years complete	12 or more years complete
West Bengal	57.7	59.3	64.1	47.1	11.2
Bihar	63.2	56.8	50.7	34.8	16.9
Tripura	50.0	66.2	51.6	31.7	4.7
Jharkhand	51.5	48.3	47.4	36.1	11.8
Assam	41.7	44.8	34.7	20.2	6.6
National	47.9	47.9	38.1	28.5	7.3

Source: NFHS-5

The table displays the percentage of girls whose age at first marriage was below 18 across various educational levels in high-prevalence Indian states for child marriage, according to NFHS-5 statistics. It demonstrates a distinct association between educational attainment and the likelihood of early marriage. In the states of West Bengal, Assam, Bihar, Tripura and Jharkhand, girls with minimal education (no schooling or less than five years) are more prone to marry

before the age of 18. In contrast, those with higher education (12 years or more) exhibit markedly reduced rates of early marriage. In Bihar, 63.2 per cent; in West Bengal, 57.7 per cent; in Jharkhand, 51.5 per cent; in Tripura, 50 per cent; and Assam, 41.7 per cent of uneducated females were married before the age of 18. However, this percentage decreases to 16.9 per cent in Bihar, 11.8 per cent in Jharkhand, 11.2 per cent in West Bengal, 6.6 per cent in Assam and 4.7 per cent in Tripura for those who completed 12 or more years of education. At the national level, this tendency corresponds with the state data. The table shows that at the national level, 47.9 per cent of females with no education got married before 18, but this figure decreases to 7.3 per cent for those with 12 or more years of education. The evidence undoubtedly indicates that higher education serves as a protective factor against child marriage.

d) Wealth & Girl Child Marriage

Wealth is another critical condition that has a direct impact on child marriage. Households with the poorest wealth conditions are most likely to be exposed to the early marriage of their girl child. Poverty is hence considered the underlying factor behind child marriage. A report by the United Nations Population Fund (UNPA, 2013) noted that many parents believe marrying off their daughters early will secure their futures and protect their best interests. In some cases, girls are viewed as an economic burden, a commodity, or a means to settle debts or disputes, or to secure social, economic, or political alliances (Loaiza & Wong, 2012). The report also discussed how different parts of the world, particularly from developing countries, have a connection between wealth (poverty) and child marriage. NFHS-5 also found a similar trend, which is discussed as follows:

Table 4: Wealth in Girl Child Marriage

State	Poorest	Poorer	Middle	Richer	Richest
West Bengal	59.8	50.8	45.7	33.8	16.0
Bihar	55.9	52.7	47.3	35.9	18.9
Tripura	44.9	48.7	45.4	38.7	23.7
Jharkhand	41.2	36.3	38.2	30.9	17.0
Assam	36.0	34.1	33.2	29.5	19.9
National	39.7	30.9	23.4	16.0	7.5

Source: NFHS-5

According to NFHS-5 data, Table 4 presents the percentage of girls married before age 18 across wealth quintiles in states with high prevalence. The data reveal a distinct correlation between wealth status and early marriage, indicating that households with higher economic conditions exhibit a lower incidence of child marriage. This trend is consistent across all high-prevalence states namely, West Bengal, Bihar, Tripura, Jharkhand, and Assam, as well as nationally. Specifically, in West Bengal, 59.8 per cent of girls from the lowest income quintile were married before the age of 18, compared to 16.0 per cent in affluent households. Similarly, in Bihar, these percentages are 55.9 per cent and 18.9 per cent, respectively; in Tripura, 44.9 per cent and 23.7 per cent; in Jharkhand, 41.2 per cent and 17 per cent; and in Assam, 36.0 per cent and 16.0 per cent. Nationally, 39.7 per cent of girls from the poorest households are married before age 18, whereas this figure drops to 7.5 per cent among the wealthiest families. The data suggest that economic status has a significant influence on the likelihood of early marriage. Notably, in states such as

Tripura and Jharkhand, although percentages across middle-income quintiles vary marginally, a clear downward trend in early marriage is evident, consistent with rising wealth.

e) Residence & Girl Child Marriage

Girls who are poor but live in rural areas seem to be more prone to child marriage. Reports also indicate this. The UNPA report noted that among girls who married before 2000 and 2010 in developing countries, 44 per cent were from rural areas, while only 22 per cent were from urban regions (Loaiza & Wong, 2012). The following table highlights the residential engagement of child marriage cases in the top five highly prevalent states as per the NFHS-5 data.

Table 5: Residential status of Child marriage cases

State	Urban	Rural
West Bengal	26.2	48.1
Bihar	27.9	43.4
Tripura	33.7	42.4
Jharkhand	19.4	36.1
Assam	23.4	31.6
National	14.7	27.0

Source: NFHS-5

The table illustrates the proportion of girls who marry before the age of 18 across various residential areas (urban and rural) in several Indian states, based on NFHS-5 data. The data consistently indicate that child marriage is more prevalent in rural regions than in urban ones across all specified states, namely, West Bengal, Bihar, Tripura, Jharkhand, and Assam, as well as at the national level. Nationally, the disparity between rural and urban areas persists, with 27.0 per cent of rural females married before the age of 18, compared to 14.7 per cent in urban regions. The higher incidence of child marriage in rural areas can be attributed to various factors, including limited access to education, economic constraints, strong adherence to traditional customs, and insufficient awareness of legal protections. In West Bengal, 48.1 per cent of females in rural areas were married before age 18, whereas the figure in urban areas was 26.2 per cent. Similar disparities are observed in Bihar, where 43.4 per cent of rural girls marry early compared to 27.9 per cent in urban areas. In Jharkhand, the occurrence of child marriage is nearly twice as high in rural regions (36.1 per cent) as in urban regions (19.4 per cent). Assam also exhibits a comparable trend, with 31.6 per cent of rural females married before the age of 18, compared with 23.4 per cent in urban areas.

5. Conclusion

The research thus demonstrates that instances of child marriage in India involve an intersectionality that affects the girl child in diverse ways across multiple levels. Furthermore, it is essential to recognise that these intersectional factors have cascading effects, thereby creating additional elements that exert further influence. Caste and religious affiliations, economic circumstances, educational attainment, and, critically, the place of residence, collectively exert a compounded impact on girl-child marriage in India. Additionally, it is noteworthy that these intersectionalities have variably influenced child

marriage across the most affected states in India, as discussed previously.

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