

Incidence of Child Marriage in Five Grampanchayats of Koraput District of Odisha

SILI ROUT[†]

*Department of Anthropology, Central University of Orissa,
Koraput 764021, Odisha
E-mail: sili.rout1990@gmail.com*

KEYWORDS: Child marriage. Girl child. Social maladies, Adverse effect. Grampanchayats. Koraput. Odisha.

ABSTRACT: Child marriage is one such practice which is one of the most serious social maladies affecting the lives and future of India's youth. Child marriages are serious social problem still prevailing in 21st century where we are in the age of globalization and information technology. The government of India has taken several steps and has made many legislations to root out this evil practice from the society. In spite of many laws and legislations the practice of child marriage still prevails in rural India which is a cause of serious concern for the government. The present study has tried to assess the incidence of child marriages, specially related to the girl child, in Koraput district. The study also examines the underline causes and adverse effect of child marriage in rural areas. The present study was carried out in 28 villages of five Grampanchyats of the district Koraput of Odisha, namely Umuri, Deoghati, Lankaput, Kumaragandhana, Badasuku Grampanchyats where incidences of child marriages are high.

INTRODUCTION

Child marriage is a marriage in which one of the partner (most often the girl) is below the age of eighteen years when the marriage is performed. Child marriage is a universal phenomenon, it is found all over the world and is much common in some developing countries like India, Indonesia, and various countries of Sub-Saharan Africa. A significant number of these countries are parties to different international conventions and have been granted various rights of children, including the recommendation of the legal minimum marriage age as 18 years for girls. In spite of this, a shocking 62 per cent of women are already married by the age of 18 years. According to a recent UNICEF report (2005) the percentage of girls aged between 15 years and 19 years who are married in

different countries are as follows: in Congo (74%), Niger (70%), Afghanistan (54%), Bangladesh (51%), Iraq (28%); while in Nepal 40% girls get married before they turn 15 years. Child marriages have been made illegal for decades, but it is still in practice and is much prevalent in India. India has one of the highest numbers of child brides in the world. In India, two in five women aged between 20-24 years have already been married by the age of 18 years (National Family Health Survey (NFHS), 2005-06).

In many parts of the country girls tend to be perceived as a 'burden' and from a very young age are considered only fit to be married off. The perception of women's role in society, the value given to girls, structural and economic factors combined with social and religious practices around marriage all interact as determinants of child marriage. Available government data shows that 43% of women

[†] Research Scholar

in India were married before the age of 18 years. The consequences of child marriage for girls are multifarious including early pregnancies, high risk of death during delivery, intergenerational transfer of nutritional deprivation, limited opportunities for education and absence of economic empowerment leading to an adverse impact on psychological well-being. Child marriage is rampant in many part of India such as in Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar, Rajasthan, Odisha, Haryana, Assam and Uttar Pradesh among some other States.

Situation in Odisha

An annual health survey conducted by Social and Rural Research Institute (IMRB International) in the year 2010-2011 in Odisha, reported that about 6% of rural women in Odisha get married earlier than the legal age of 18 years. The survey also revealed that the marriage of girls below legal age is rampant in rural areas. The survey found that about 6.5 per cent girls in rural areas and 3.2 per cent girls in urban areas had got married when they were below 18 years during 2007-2008.

CHILD MARRIAGE AND INDIAN LAW

Child marriage is complex subject under Indian law. Child marriage is an age-old practice that has both social and religious sanction and cuts across all sections of society. Recognizing child marriage as a social evil, the Child Marriage Restraint Act (CMRA) 1929, popularly known as the Sharda Act, prohibited child marriages of girls below the age of 15 years and of boys below the age 18 years. That law was subjected by Muslims, then superseded by personal law applicable only to Muslims in British India with Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Application Act of 1937, which implied no minimum limit and allowed parental or guardian consent in case of Muslim marriages. The 1929 law for non-Muslims was revised several times after India gained its independence from the colonial rule, particularly in 1978 when the marriage age was raised by 3 years each for men and women. The applicability and permissibility of child marriage among Muslims under the 1937 Act, under India's Constitution was adopted in 1950, and thus it remains a controversial subject, with a series of Supreme Court cases and rulings

The definition of child marriage was last updated by India with its The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act of 2006, which applies only (a) to Hindus, Christians, Jains, Buddhists and those who are non-Muslims of India, and (b) outside the state of Jammu and Kashmir. For Muslims of India, child marriage definition and regulations based on Sharia and Nikah has been claimed as a personal law subject. For all others, The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act of 2006 defines "child marriage" means a marriage, or a marriage about to be solemnized, to which either of the contracting parties is a child; and child for purposes of marriage is defined based on gender of the person — if a male, it is 21 years of age, and if a female, 18 years of age.

The objectives of the present study are as follows: a) to assess the prevalence and incidence of child marriages specially related to the girl child in Koraput; b) to examine the underlying causes of child marriage in Koraput; c) to know the adverse effect of child marriage in Koraput; and d) to give appropriate and suitable suggestions to minimize child marriage in Koraput.

Significance of the Study

Child marriage is one of the most serious social maladies affecting the lives and future of India's youth. Child marriages are serious social problem still prevailing in 21st century where in we are living in the age of globalization and information technology. It is one of the primitive practice that existed during ancient and medieval periods due to illiteracy and other social causes. The government of India has taken several steps to make many legislations to root out this evil practice from the society which is still existing. In spite of many laws and legislations the practice of child marriage is still present in rural India which is a serious cause of concern. In this context for any nation the growth and prosperity and development is measured by the parameter of citizen and society. If the child marriages are rampant the society will definitely produce unhealthy citizens which is one of the major hindrance for development work of a nation if not checked in time. For the healthy nation and society there is a need to completely abolish child marriage by creating awareness among the rural folk through various awareness programmes.

Keeping this in mind the present study has been conducted in Koraput region of Odisha.

The present study was carried out in 28 villages of five Grampanchayats of the district of Koraput in Odisha. The five Grampanchayats are Umuri, Deoghati, Lankaput, Kumaragandhana, and Badasuku, where incidences of child marriages are high. The communities involved in this study includes Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe (Paraja, Gadaba, Kondha) and Other Backward Communities of the Grampanchayats.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Traditional anthropological tools and techniques were used to collect both primary and secondary data sources for this research and analysis. This empirical study is based on the situation analysis, which relies on a combination of focused group discussions (FGDs), interviews, structured questionnaires, case studies and observations. The secondary sources of information were drawn from various government departments for statistical and policy information, Census of India, National Family Health Survey (NFHS-I, II and III), and Judgment /Acts relating to child marriage, and research reports, etc.

For collecting the primary data, interview schedules were carefully prepared, pre-tested, coded and administered with 859 children which includes the children of those families married below 18 years in case of girls, and 21 years in case of boys. The interviews were conducted with the head of the households. Further for Focus Group Discussion (FGD) separate guidelines were also prepared which highlighted the issues like causes of child marriage, attitude, views of community people towards child marriage, legal awareness among community people related to child marriage etc. To collect qualitative data and to be familiar with psychological activities of children, observation method was employed for further analysis.

SITUATION OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN GRAMPANCHAYATS

The child marriages in the study areas in Koraput is unique as both the bride and the groom are very much underage mostly below ten years as we find from the figure (Fig. 1) presented below.

The interview schedules were administered to 859 children to know the situation of children of aforesaid grampanchayats. 107 child marriage cases were observed and recorded from these 5 panchyats, and the families were interviewed for 107 cases separately to know the reasons of the child marriage.

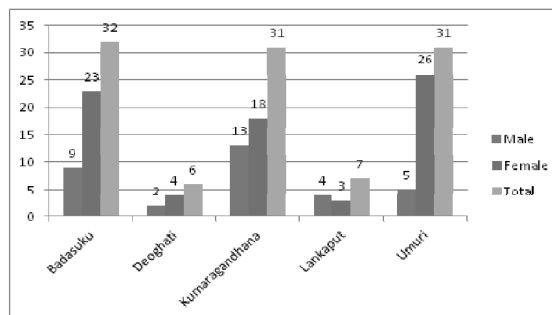


Figure 1: Distribution of child marriage in 5 panchayats

Panchayat-wise distribution of child marriage

TABLE 1

Distribution of child marriage in 5 panchayats

Panchayat	Male	Female	Total
Badasuku	9	23	32
Deoghati	2	4	6
Kumaragandhana	13	18	31
Lankaput	4	3	7
Umuri	5	26	31

TABLE 2

Gender-wise segregation of child marriage

Total child marriage	107	100
Female	74	69.15
Male	33	30.84

The practice of child marriage has been rooted in the traditions of many communities for generations. The above data shows that in the study area total 107 child marriages were recorded out of which 30.84% are male and 69.15% are female. Thus girls are more prone to child marriage than that of boys. The cause for this situation is that girls are considered as burden on the family so the parents decide to get their daughters married before they reach the adult age. Girls are more vulnerable as they are only the mute and silent spectators of this maltreatment by the society, as they do not have voice to oppose it.

Age-wise Distribution of Child Marriage among Boys and Girls

Pertaining to age-wise distribution of child marriages in the sample it reveals that 9.09% boys and 9.49% girls falls in the age-group of 12-14 years and 9-11 years respectively. Under the age-group of 15-17 years and 12-14 years, it was seen that 42.42% boys and 24.32% girls respectively marry before the legal marriageable age. Finally 48.48% and 66.21% of child marriages take place when the boys are in the age-group of 18-20 years and girls are in the age group of 15-17 years respectively.

TABLE 3

Age-wise distribution of girl child marriage in the five panchayats in the years 2013-2015

Age-groups (in years)	Number of girls married	
	Abs.	%
Total	74	100.00
9-11	7	9.45
12-14	18	24.32
15-17	49	66.21

TABLE 4

Age-wise distribution of boy child marriage in the five panchayats in the years 2013-2015

Age-groups (in years)	Number of boys married	
	Abs.	%
Total	33	100
12-14 yr	3	9.09
15-17 yr	14	42.42
18-20 yr	16	48.48

The Tables 3 and 4 clearly indicates that the marriage age falls below the one legally defined for both the sexes. It is also observed that 15-17 years and 18-20 years age is the high risk age because the most of the marriage have taken place in this particular age-group among both the sex. These age-groups can be treated as critical, as in this phase chance of misleading is expected to be high. Peer persuasions also play an important role in giving rise to early marriage in these particular age-groups, as normally the teenage mindset always runs after materializing those things which gets visualized in their minds. Peers being of the same age groups, mentality and many of

their traits matching, they all think alike most of the times. And this equal standard understanding brings them quite closer to each other and it is often observed that the percentage of discussion relating to sensual pleasure is higher than other discussions. Generally adolescent boys and girls feel the attraction towards each other as that is a natural phenomenon. And in due course, they come so close to each other that they, being under the influence of temporary excitement, come in physical contact with each other and when the matter reaches a climax point with pregnancy of the girl child, they are forced by the family members or the community to get married, irrespective of their ages, just to avoid social stigma.

Why Child Marriage?

Early marriage is like an epidemic and its alarming spread in the rural communities is heading towards a future of uncertainty where there is only poverty, hunger and disease. As per the survey through Focus Group Discussions with the Impact and the Target groups the following causes (Table 5) seem to be the most propelling elements:

TABLE 5

Causes of child marriage

Causes of child marriage	Number of child marriages	
	Abs.	%
Eloped without parental consent	49	45.79
With parental consent	7	6.54
Arranged marriage	32	29.9
Financial constraint	11	10.28
Migration	9	8.41
Total	107	100

The above Table 5 shows that out of 107 samples 56 (52.33%) were recorded as child marriage through elopement, among them 45.79% child marriages were known to be through elopement without knowledge and consent of their parents, and the rest seven i.e. 6.54% child marriage had taken place through elopement with due consent of the parents after coming back to home. Only 29.9% marriage took place with due mutual consent of both the parents of the bride and t hegroom and they never felt guilty about this act. This suggests that the parents as well as the community members are unaware about the evil

consequence of child marriages. About 10.28% child marriages that have taken place are due to various socio-economic factors prevailing in the community. It is believed by them that the child marriage will increase the man power in family, and that in turn will help them to increase the earning amount in the family. When the family size is big and the number of earning members is less, the family's earning members don't want to take the responsibility of the teenage children and plans to separate them and force them to get married. They feel that it will not only lessen their burden of managing the family, but it will also give rise to the economic growth of the family, as the teenage married couple will feel the pressure of their responsibility and go for earning livelihood.

About 7.47% child marriages that had happened is considered to have taken place when the families were in course of migration to other places. When teenager boys go to the alien lands in search of greener pastures due to growing unemployment, they are likely to come in contact with the girls of same age in the same working environment. Frequent meetings at the workplace, almost every day, vibrate the tender youth mindset and they are likely to develop physical relationship and are later forced to marry each other under unfavorable conditions. This apart the migrated youths often come across adult male persons. Being a teenager, a child's immature mind fails to decide what is right and what is wrong and fails to resist his passions for sex relationship. And such act of him often put him in great trouble, and then the boy is forced to get married with the girl of that community in that alien land.

Apart from the above mentioned causes some other underlying causes have also been recorded which have come out through the group discussion during the course of investigation in the study area which are silently contributing their role in the child marriages in the communities of that area. They are as follows:

a) *Respecting the wishes of the elderly members in the family:* Sometimes the teenagers fall prey to the stubbornness of the older members of the family. Their wishes seem quite peculiar as they wish to see their children getting married even if they have not yet reached the marriageable age. The senior

members of the family, sensing their days are numbered due to disease or any other reason, nurture such harmful wishes which in the long run bring sorrows to the minor members, who are compromising their own future for the sake of the ageing members of the family.

- b) *Impulsive youth behavior:* Normally the youth's immature mentality, at times, takes sudden decisions basing on abstracts notions. They just don't think about the future consequences. They only think about meeting physical needs of each other and at that time they just ignore the social dangerous consequences lurking in every bend of life. Sensing the family's interference in their happiness, they just elope and after some time they come back and then the family members are forced to perform marriage rituals as per the tradition although they do so with hesitation.
- c) *Watching excessive porn:* Being inspired by the peers, teenagers often tend to watch porn which evokes a sort of interest in adult activities and they often dream of putting those activities into practice. The pictures formed in their mind often give fillip to their interest and as a result they search for a life partner defying the family consent, social impact and the age criteria.
- d) *Fear psychosis:* It happens only in case of teenage girls. The family members, sensing threat to girl's life being at stake, think of giving her hand in marriage. Even if neither the child nor the family members want the marriage to take place so early. The fear factor in them forces them to do so. It happens in case of boys as well, when the family gets wind of the boy going astray or leaving the house.
- e) *Bride price:* In tribal areas the custom is that the family of the bride gets a handsome amount presented by the groom's family. So bride's family considers it as a financial benefit opportunity. So when any groom of a well-to-do family comes with a sound financial proposal, the bride's family doesn't want to let that opportunity go and gives the

girl's hand in marriage without caring for her age and after marriage consequences.

- f) *Unrestricted premarital sex:* Despite intensive awareness campaigns by the NGOs and government, this practice still exists. Such things are normally ignored by the members of the society in the initial stage but when the situation aggravates when the girl child conceives, then the parents are forced to arrange the marriage of the girl with the boy even if they are not of the marriageable age.

Other Effects

In fact, this early marriage has come out successful in snatching away the rights of the children and playing a spoilsport in marring their childhood.

Right to education: This practice undoubtedly affects the study aspect of the child as the age which was meant to be used for obtaining knowledge through learning process, got spoiled and tangled with family affairs. The education that could have helped them to become responsible citizens and build up healthy society got wasted in compromising with the worries and anxieties of conjugal life.

Right to enjoyment of highest attainable standard of health: Actually the health aspect of a girl child married before the marriageable age is always at risk because the girl child is not quite physically matured enough for having a fetus to be developed properly inside her body. Thus it is not only adversely affecting the mother's health but also posing a threat to the life of the unborn child. Moreover, the mother's life is also at a stake as she is likely to suffer from deficiency diseases like anemia, and other nutritional deficiencies, which generally affects the health status of the married girl at her younger age.

Right to be protected from physical and mental violence: At the teenage, the mind is said to be not that much adaptable to adverse situations. In the family you have to live in harmony with other members. Otherwise you are likely to be blamed by them and that may result in the disturbance of the peaceful environment of the family. This apart there are chances of being victim to sexual exploitation and abuse, rape and violence. Such incidents will definitely have an enhanced negative effect on the child who has married early.

Right to rest and leisure: Married life is not at all a child's play. It is entangled with many great responsibilities and one has to devote a lot of time in household chores. So getting sufficient rest and leisure is sometimes a rarest phenomenon in married life. In many families the members expect a lot work from the newly married girl. After the marriage, everybody looks upon you as a major member of the family and according to that their expectations also get multiplied and demand more engagements with household chores starting from dawn to dusk. Thus the underage newly married girl finds herself in a state where taking rest is forbidden and this becomes too strenuous for the girl which effect her health.

Right to not be separated from parents: Every child has the right to be properly taken care of by the parents, but these incidents deprive them of this very right of theirs. A consistent and compassionate care which could have brought development in a child's life falls short of the requirement and thereby one suffers from mental pressure and the situation throws him/her into a state of depression and trauma.

Right to protection against exploitations affecting any aspect of the child: The child needs to be protected from all sorts of exploitation, but a teenager, especially a married one, is often made to be subject the subject of exploitation at home and institution level. Normally the society does not treat them with sympathy, generally they are treated harshly. Such things dampen their courage to even dream of becoming persons of some importance and brings them to a distraught state weakening their mental capabilities.

Right to eventual employment: A child, whose potentiality could have been utilized for a healthy and sustainable livelihood, gets spoiled due to marriage in the childhood stage. Due to lack of adequate educational qualification the child often fails to get any work which requires skill training and less physical labour. He or she is rather asked to do menial work that brings little money and little respect. This attitude of the society and of the parents lead the married children to spend a miserable life, and then they are being looked down by the society, but for the situation which is not the creation of the children who got married.

CONCLUSION

The finding clearly indicates that the marriage age in most of the families in the grampanchayats villages of Koraput district fall below the one legally defined marriage age for both the sexes. Girls are more prone to child marriage than that of boys. The cause for this result is that girls are considered as burden on the family so parents choose to marry their daughters before the prescribed age. It is also observed that 15-17 years age for girls and 18-20 years age for boys is the high risk age because the most of the marriage have taken place in this particular age-group among both the sex. The field visits and discussions with community leaders have elicited a number of reasons that help sustain and even encourage the custom of child marriage. Broadly, the reasons are five, they are — psychological, historical, socio-cultural and economical reasons. Existing laws and the awareness campaign taken up by the government and the NGOs from time to time against this harmful practice of child marriage have failed to diminish the fervor of the communities in these villages even in this 21st century.

Some suggestions: It is not that steps are not being taken or efforts not being made in this regard. Non-government and government organizations have been taking many productive initiatives to keep tab on this practice, which has been instrumental in pushing up infant and maternal mortality rate in the state. Hence, deep introspection and careful strategies are urgently required to bring an end to this harmful practice in the communities.

Awareness generation: All stakeholders, including parents, relatives, panchayat members, the police, NGOs, social workers, district magistrates, etc should be sensitized and convinced about the negative impact of child marriage and about protecting the sexual and reproductive health and rights of girls and young women.

Gender sensitization programmes: Gender training programmes should be spread all across the district for the police forces, NGOs and other stakeholders alike. They should be trained about the risks and disadvantage of child marriages and also through such trainings the primary and secondary education of girls should be promoted.

Life skill training: Life skill training should be organized separately for the boys and girls in the rural areas. They should be trained how to take decisions in an adverse condition and to raise voice against any undesirable happening. They should be trained to control their expression and actions in a convincing way that such undesirable practices like child marriage and other evil practices are not followed by the members of the community concerned.

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