

Child Marriage in Rajasthan

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The Context of Rajasthan

In choosing to look at the age of marriage, the study was conducted in the impoverished communities of Doroli of Alwar district and the Kathaputali colony, a slum area of Jaipur, the capital city of Rajasthan. Both areas are relatively well educated, although illiteracy is higher among women.

Despite the legally permitted age of 18, there were many child marriages in both places in past years. Among women over 19 today there were a few infant marriages (below 5 years of age), but the majority of the marriages took place when the women were between 6-11 and 12-15. The number of marriage below the age of 15 in Doroli village was 502 (80.6 percent) and in the Katha putali Colony it was 177 (72.5 percent).

The Tradition of Gauna

Given that girls married before reaching menarche and are not physically mature enough to consummate the marriage, customarily Gauna (beginning of effective married life) is performed sometime after the girl has reached menarche. Therefore, data about age at Gauna was also collected. The age at marriage and age at Gauna data are compared in the following table to show how Gauna is not helping to prevent risky teenage pregnancies:

It seems that Gauna does not function to protect young girls as only 5 to 10 percent of girls consummate their marriage after 20. In Doroli village 94.7 percent and 91.7 percent of the marriages in Kathaputali colony expose young girls to the risk of teenage pregnancies (Table 1).

Whether Gauna has been performed or not, even just the fact of being married completely changes a girl's life. From wearing a bindi on her forehead, covering her head, wearing metal rings on toes to focusing on domestic chores, all these signs mark the girl as at a different life stage from her non- married friends.

The Frequency of Teenage Pregnancies

Out of 599 married women in Daroli who had undergone Gauna, 548 (91.5 percent) had become pregnant. Corresponding figures for the Kathaputali colony area were 233 and 211 (90.5 percent). There were 72.6 percent of teenage pregnancies in Daroli village and in the Kathaputali colony 71.6 percent.

Though for health reasons it is important to change this situation, the issue goes deeper than just providing better sex education, deep cultural and religious attitudes would have to change. Life in these areas assumes early marriage and early pregnancy. The birth of the first child is keenly awaited and delay in the pregnancy causes anxiety for the spouses and their families. This explains why, despite the Child Marriage Restraint Act (which legislates against marriage of a boy of less than 21 and a girl of less than 18), on the statute book since 1930, child marriages continue. The Act provides for fine and imprisonment for three months for those actively involved in performing the marriage, but it is not a recognized offence and, in keeping with the sacrament of a Hindu marriage that spouses are separated by death alone, child marriages are not declared void.

Akshya Tritiya (Akha Teej): a Day of Marriages

Among Hindus, date and time for the marriages are decided in consultation with a pundit who after the study of almanac and determining the position of planets, fixes the date. However, the marriages can also take place on Akshya Tritiya (locally called Akha Teej), the third day of the bright fortnight of Baishakh, the month of the Hindu calendar generally falling in May every year, without consulting a pundit. Large numbers of marriages, including large numbers of child marriages, take place on this date. In May 1997, according to The Hindu (New Delhi's daily) of 10 May 1997, thousands of children were married despite the efforts of the state administration and appeal by the Chief Minister of the state. According to another daily The Rajasthan Patrika (10 May 1997) published in Jaipur, hundreds of marriages took place and child brides and grooms dressed in marriage costumes touched the marriage arch (Toran) lifted by uncles.

Table 1: Marriages Exposed to the Risk of Teenage Pregnancy

Age at Marriage	Doroli Village		Kathaputali Colony	
	Marriage	Gauna	Marriage	Gauna
0-5	17 (2.7%)	-	20 (8.2%)	-
6-11	229 (36.8%)	35 (5.8%)	70 (28.7%)	10 (4.3%)
12-15	256 (41.1%)	325 (54.3%)	87 (35.6%)	121 (51.9%)
16-19	88 (14.1%)	189 (31.6%)	48 (19.7%)	77 (33.0%)

Marriages free from the risk of teenage pregnancy

20 and above	33 (5.3%)	50 (8.3%)	19 (7.8%)	25 (10.8%)
Total	623	599	244	233

Conclusion

The Child Marriage Restrain Act has only cosmetic value. For effective implementation compulsory registration of marriages should be made and violation of the Act be made in recognized offence. Besides this, a movement for raising the age of marriage should be launched by NGOs together with religious leaders.

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