

The Practice of Early Marriage and Its Effects: A Study Conducted in the Nayagarh District of Odisha

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ABSTRACT

Early marriage has many problems for girls in the world in general and in developing countries in particular. It results in the health, and socio-economic aspects of girls; mistreatment, marginalization and denying basic human rights of girls. Early marriage also limits many girls' mobility, self-esteem, ability to seek profitable employment, and household decision-making power, and increases their vulnerability to violence. Each of these factors has a potent effect on a girls' ability to access healthcare, compromising not only her health but that of her children, and not being competent in economic and social affairs. This paper aims to examine and investigate the prevalence of early marriage in the study area (Nayagarh District, Odisha); identify the causal factors of early marriage in the study area, and examine its associated problems that its impact on the health and socio-economic condition of girls. In Nayagarh district, children marry early due to different reasons. Among the identified factors some are as a matter of their tribal tradition, fear of premarital sex and pregnancy, parents' interest in following the consent of relatives, afraid of losing a financially sound bridegroom etc. The low economic status of parents and lack of knowledge are the main causal factors of early marriage in the area. The main consequences of early marriage identified in the study area are girls' college dropout, marriage instability, early pregnancy, maternal mortality, and increased number of children.

Keywords: Early Marriage, Spouse, Drop-Out, Education, Conflict, Burden

INTRODUCTION

Early Marriage is one of the burning problems of Indian society. In India, despite amended laws advocating 18 years as the legal minimum age at marriage for females, a substantial proportion i.e. every third adolescent girl in the age group of 15-17 years is married and most of the married adolescent girl has given birth to a child in their second year of marriage. It has been practiced for centuries, with children married off before their physical and mental maturity. This problem of early 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, girls who marry younger are more likely to experience domestic violence within the home.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

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 girls. (Burns, 1998).

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).

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 report by UNICEF (2005), almost 50% of girls 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)

As a result of early 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).

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).

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).

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. Despite the legal sanctions against marriage before age 18 and the growing awareness among leaders and educators that it is harmful to girls and their families, parents continue to insist upon marrying their daughters in their mid-teens and go to some lengths to resist all opposition. More than 80% of early marriage conducted is due to the tradition that peoples adhere to (UNFPA, 2006).

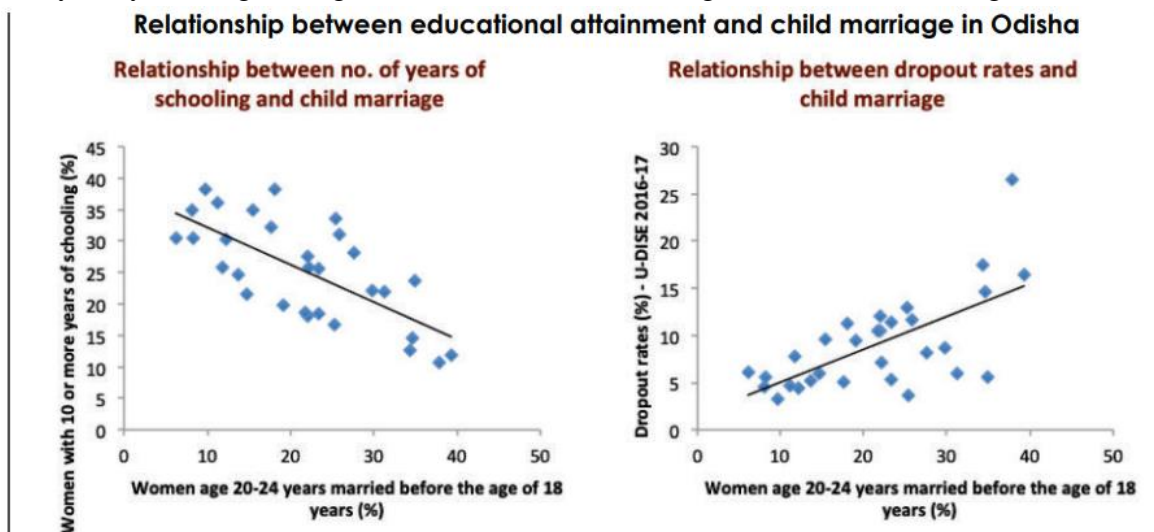
There is little doubt that parents are well aware of the negative consequences of early marriage, which are commonly discussed in communities. Though many condemn it in public, they seem compelled to continue its practice. This pursuit of tradition in the face of compelling negative evidence is common to most cultures and must be well understood when developing social change programs. (Bogalech, 2006).

In Wars and civil conflicts, parents resort to child marriage as a protective mechanism or survival strategy. Displaced populations living in refugee camps may feel unable to protect their daughters from rape, and so marriage to a warlord or other authority figure may provide improved protection. For young girls, orphans or children separated from their parents or relatives, the only way to survive and to get protection is to get married (Integrated Family Health Program, 2009).

REVIEW OF THE SCENARIO OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN ODISHA

Early marriage is a violation of human rights that deprives young girls and boys of their childhood, education, and skills, thereby limiting their opportunities to optimize their potential to lead a fulfilling life. Adolescents, especially girls trapped in such marriages are often sub to violence, exploitation, abuse, and neglect, leading them into a vicious cycle of malnutrition and poverty, and generating high development costs for communities & early marriages are a huge challenge for the attainment of Sustainable Development Goals. The prevalence of early marriages among girls in Odisha was reported to be 21.3 percent against a national average of 26.8, whereas for boys it is only 11% against the national average of 20.3 percent (NFHS-4, 2015-16). Odisha witnessed a decline of nearly 16 and 11 percentage points (between NFHS 2005-06 and 2015-16), for girls and boys marrying before the legal ages of 18 and 21 years, respectively. Still, one in every woman aged 20-24 years was married before the age of 18 in Odisha. On the other hand, one in ten men was reported to have been married before 21 years indicating that early marriages in girls are twice as compared to that of boys. Therefore, there is a need to put a more strategic focus on reducing marriage among girls than boys. As a direct consequence, early marriage among girls leads to adolescent pregnancies having serious implications on the maternal and child health indicators of the state. In Odisha, 7.6 % of girls (15 to 19 years) were reported to be already mothers or pregnant as per NFHS-4. While the state has been able to reduce adolescent pregnancies by half (from 14.5% to 7.6%) between NFHS-3 and 4, in terms of absolute numbers it is still high

Early marriage has a significant negative impact on an individual’s physical, mental, emotional, and social development, and on education and economic opportunities. As highlighted, both girls and boys are affected by early marriage, but girls are affected in much larger numbers and with greater intensity.



Source: National Family Health Survey-4 (2015-16)

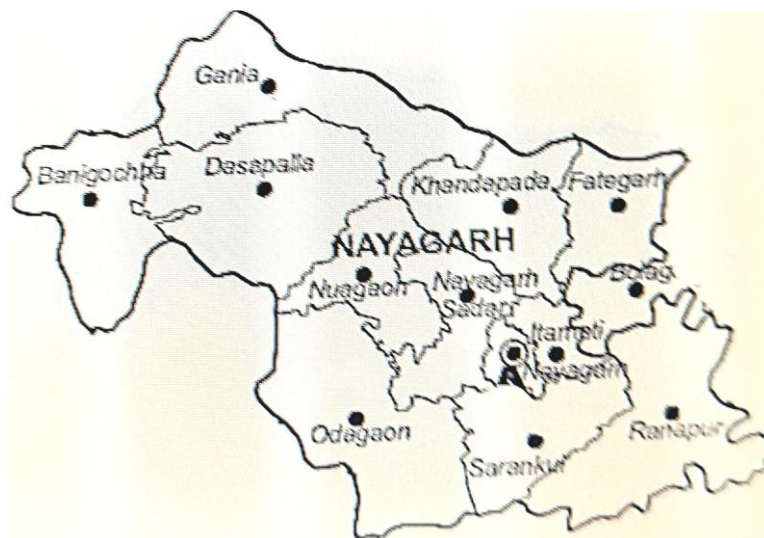
Situational analysis of the prevalence of early marriage varies widely between districts of Odisha. Malkangiri (39%) reports the highest in the state followed by Nabarangpur, Mayurbhanj, Koraput, and

Rayagada, where over one-third of all girls get married before attaining adulthood. In Nayagarh, Ganjam, Kendujhar, Baleswar, Dhenkanal and Gajapati, over one-fourth of all girls, are married before the age of 18. Secondary data analysis also indicates that there is a high prevalence of early marriages in districts that have a higher concentration of tribal communities. Early marriage also has a strong correlation between low levels of school attainment and high dropout rates.

The review of literature shows that a very few studies have been conducted for the prevalence and effects in Nayagarh District of Odisha. That's why the research has been taken into consideration.

ABOUT THE NAYAGARH DISTRICT

As an Administrative District of Odisha, Nayagarh District was created in 1st April 1993 when the erstwhile Puri District was split into three distinct Districts. The District of Nayagarh is bounded by Cuttack District on the North, Kandhamal District on the West, Ganjam District on the South and Khordha District on its East.



Nayagarh District consists of the four ex-states Ranpur, Nayagarh, Khandapara and Daspalla. The aboriginal Savaras and Kandhas are the indigenous people of Nayagarh District. Nayagarh District lies between 19 degrees 54' to 20 degrees 32' North Latitude and 84 degrees 29' to 85 degrees 27' East Longitude. The District is situated on the hilly ranges in the West and its North Eastern parts have formed small well cultivated fertile valleys intersected by small streams.

Nayagarh District Covers a geographical area of 3890 sq km and consists a total of 962789 population as per the 2011 census. The total male population of the District is 502636 and the female population is 460153. As per the administration is concerned, the District has one sub-division namely Nayagarh. There are 8 Tahasils, 8 Blocks, 14 Police stations, 194 GPs, and 1702 villages functioning in the District.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- To identify the prevalence of early marriage in the study area of Nayagarh District, Odisha
- To investigate the impacts of early marriage on girls' socio-economic, health condition, access to and control over resources in the study area;
- To explore the root causes and local contributing factors for its long existence and prevalence;
- To investigate the nature, magnitude, and context of early marriage in the study area; and
- To suggest possible way-outs and solutions with appropriate strategies.

METHODOLOGY

Sampling

The universe of the study included 100 early married girls, selected randomly from different villages of the Nayagarh District of Odisha.

Tools of Data Collection

Questionnaire and discussion methods have been adopted for the collection of data from the samples. The questionnaire contained both open-ended and close-ended questions. The discussion followed with the focused group. The discussion emphasized on different aspects of the positive and negative effects of early marriage and related dimensions.

Method of Data Analysis

Descriptive and analytical methods have been adopted for data analysis on different points related to early marriage, its causes and problems.

DATA ANALYSIS

Classification of the Respondents Age-wise

The respondents have been divided in to various age groups. Maximum respondents found from age group of 17-19 years who are already married since a year or alike.

- 55% of the respondents have been married in their 17-19 years
- 22% of the respondents are married in 19-20 years.
- 13% of the girls have been married in their age of 20-21 years
- 10% of the respondents have got married in their 15-17 years of age.

Age	Number of respondents	% of respondents
15-17	10	10%
17-19	55	55%
19-20	22	22%
20-21	13	13%
Total	100	100%

Level of Education of the Respondents

- 40% of the respondents are married in their 2nd year of under-graduate.
- 22% of the respondents said they got married in their 3rd year of under-graduate.
- 15% of the respondents married at their 1st year of under-graduate.
- 10% respondents have married during their intermediate
- 13% respondents told that they have been married just after their matriculation.

Education	Number of Respondents	% of respondents
After matriculation	13	13%
Intermediate	10	10%
Under- Graduate 1 st year	15	15%
Under- Graduate 2 nd year	40	40%
Under- Graduate 3 rd year	22	22%
Total	100	100 %

Age Difference between the Spouses:

- 35% of the respondents are found an age gap of 9 years from their spouse.
- 30 % of the girls are having the age gap of 8 years from their spouse
- 20% of the girls have the age gap of 6 years.
- 10% of the respondents have the gap of 10 years.
- Only 5% of the respondents have the age gap of 4 years.

Age gap	Number of respondents	% of respondents
4 years	5	5%
6 years	20	30%
8 years	30	20%
9 years	35	35%
10 years	10	10%
Total	100	100%

Marital Status of the respondents

- 40% of the respondents have been separated from their husbands due to regular conflicts and misunderstanding and living with their parents.
- 30% of the respondents have been separated from their in-law’s family due to various disputes.
- Only 25 % of the respondents are living happy married life.
- 5% of the respondents have been divorced.

	Number of respondents	% of respondents
Living happy married family	25	25%
Separated from family	30	30%
Separated from husband	40	40%
Divorced	5	5%
Total	100	100%

Causes of regular conflicts among the spouses of early marriage

- 35% of the respondents answered poverty as the main cause of their regular conflict in between the spouses.
- Due to lack of education 25% of the respondents feel insecurity about their consistent marital relationship which leads to conflict.
- 20% respondents answered misunderstanding between the spouses as the reason of conflict.
- According to the other 20% of the respondents, patriarchy and gender inequality are the causes of conflict among them.

	Number of respondents	% of respondents
Poverty	35	35%
Lack of education and insecurity	25	25%
Misunderstanding	20	20%
Patriarchy and gender inequalities.	20	20%
Total	100	100%

Consent for Marriage

- 35 % of the girls have been married with the consent of their parents.
- 30% of the girls got married with the consent of their relatives.
- 30% of the girls have been forced for marriage without their consent.
- Only 5% of the respondents had their consent before the marriage.

	Number of respondents	% of respondents
With the consent of the girls	5	5%
Without the consent of the girls	30	30%
With the consent of relatives	30	30%
With the consent of parents	35	35%
Total	100	100%

FINDINGS

In this study, it has been found that, in the Nayagarh District about 55% of girls get married at the age of 17-19 years. The early marriage system is also a reflection of discrimination against girls. After the focused group discussion with the respondents, it is found as below:

- **Factors that are responsible for early marriage:**

In the focused group discussion, the respondents explained different reasons for their early marriage as the following.

Avoiding expenditure on female education: Parents think about how to avoid spending on girls' education and find marriage as an easy solution.

Minimizing Marriage Expenditure: It is the experience of many, more often, to find a bridegroom to match the bride in terms of educational qualification and if found a bridegroom with a higher qualification, they demand more dowry and other things. If girls will be educated groom should be more educated than her and more dowries are required. So the more the girls are educated more the marriage expenditure. So people think it is easier or less burden to arrange the marriage of girls soon after attaining puberty, at an early age of 15 or 16, than to educate her.

Poverty of the Family: Girls and female children are often denied equal access to common resources when a family is in poverty. Female members, mainly female children are victimized in the poor family. A poor family naturally jeopardizes female children. Every chance is used to avoid the burden of females. So poor families naturally resort to early marriage to avoid all sorts of burdens related to the female children.

Social Insecurity: Social security is also one of the social factors responsible for the early marriage system. It is a general perception that a married woman is safer against offenses than an unmarried girl. People (men) view married women differently than unmarried girls. To be secured from offenses, assaults, and teasing against unmarried girls, parents are hasty to arrange a marriage for the girls soon after they attain puberty or within a few years after that.

- **Effects of Early Marriage:**

Heavy burden on the girl in her in-laws' house: The respondents opened up that, after marriage, in the in-law's household daily work involves a wide range of activities such as processing and pounding new grains, tending livestock, cooking, and looking for after children and elderly persons. They have to put in several hours of strenuous effort to collect firewood and water from distant places. They also engage in household production to supplement the family income, are involved in increasing household assets by

raising livestock, and produce vegetables for household consumption. They play a major role in cultivation too. The problem of the early married woman in in-laws' house is very burdensome. As a female member of the family, she has to play multiple roles in the in-laws house. Instead of a girl, she has to play the role of a grown-up woman.

Early Pregnancy & related health complications: Early marriage naturally leads to early pregnancy resulting in many health complications. Without proper knowledge about physiological conditions, she cannot cope with changes in her body during pregnancy and childbirth.

Conflicts: A high difference in age between bride and bridegroom with a immature mind of the early married girl leads to misunderstanding and regular conflicts.

DISCUSSION

Early marriage has a high prevalence rate in the study area i.e., Nayagarh District of Odisha, because of deep-rooted traditional norms. According to the respondents, their families face strong social pressure from their near relatives to conform marriage of the girls. There is also a personal interest mostly among fathers to create bonds or relationships with families of choice. In some cases, in the study area, community members could not imagine marriage above the age of 17 years. Most of these people are not literate enough; hence, they do not know the negative consequences of early marriage well. As a result, they also make their daughters marry early at the age when it is time to get their education.

Poverty is a critical factor contributing to early marriage and a common reason why parents may encourage a child to marry. Where poverty is acute, a young girl may be regarded as an economic burden, and her marriage to a much older sometimes even an elderly man is believed to benefit the girl and her family both financially and socially.

CONCLUSION

Elimination of early marriage is a clear starting point. The outcomes from this study suggest that awareness should be created among the parents, community members, and youth about the negative consequences of early marriage. A supportive network of leaders and social workers should come forward who can empower girls to negotiate with their parents.

Community networks and partnerships should be established and strengthened involving women's clubs, teachers, elders, local government officials, youth groups, community and religious leaders, etc., that jointly work towards ending early marriage.

The role of the judicial system should be very vigilant in the enforcement of the law against early marriage. Girls should be encouraged to higher education as the Government encourages with many facilities for them. Efforts should be taken to change the gender-biased attitudes of parents and society by imparting proper education on the one hand and eradicating poverty on the other hand, to reduce the rate of early marriage to a greater extent.

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