

Childhood in Rajgarh: Too Young for Wedlock, Too Old for the Cradle" by Rajeshwar Chandrasekhar. Economic and Political Weekly. 31(40); October 5, 1996.p.2721-2722.

Childhood in Rajgarh: Too Young for Wedlock, Too Old for the Cradle

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Till recently child marriages flourished in the backward district of Rajgarh in western Madhya Pradesh. But a concerted campaign against child marriages by the district administration for past the three years has resulted in averting 90 per cent of engagements from culminating into child marriages.

Rajgarh district in western Madhya Pradesh is a typically backward district with poor resources and people. The district comprises of six blocks with a total population of 9,92,764 as in 1991. The district is situated just 150 kms from Bhopal, the capital of MP and 250 kms from Indore, the district with the highest human development index (HDI) in MP. It lies on the Bombay-Agra national highway and is well connected to the main islands of development. In spite of having locational advantages, Rajgarh is on the hinterland of development. Much remains to be done in terms of its human development. According to the MP human development report 1995, the district ranks 43rd among 45 in the state. Even among the seven districts of the Bhopal division, Rajgarh ranks last. This is an obvious inference to its relatively poor levels of human development.

Rajgarh is commonly known for its 3 N's, ie, 'naru', 'nukta' and 'natra'. While the first is a typical health problem, the latter two are entirely social issues. Naru is guinea worm in the local parlance; the district used to be endemic to guinea worm incidence. Today, due to efforts of the district administration, the problem has been eradicated completely. However, the other two problems continue and are deeply embedded in the society.

Among many other reasons for Rajgarh's low human investment is its caste-ridden society with distinct vertical and horizontal hierarchies. These boundaries affect the entire social fabric of the district. One of the basic tenets of this casteism is the system of early marriages. For times immemorial, young children were bonded to each other's families in marriage alliances. Another disquieting feature is the practice of the sale of the women to other men in return for a handsome price. The natra, as it is locally called, is closely linked to the child marriage issue. For unless a boy is committed to early marriage, he cannot indulge in natra. Thus, child marriages is a passport to natra. Natra is a status symbol; a macho symbol.

Nukta is connected with rituals after the death of a person while natra is a ritual done to a woman during her lifetime itself! Women are accorded secondary status in society; there is nothing peculiar to Rajgarh alone. But what makes the difference is the ritual of selling the woman many times over to the highest bidder in order to prove machismo. The largest beneficiary is the father of the girl who uses her to gain a neat sum. Men are prepared to pawn their goats, cows and buffaloes, and in well-to-do households, even gold and silver to get a woman. In all these transactions the woman is never in the picture - she accepts the deal as Part of her womanhood!

Closely connected to the issue of sale and resale of women is the century-old custom of child marriage. Rajgarh occupies a unique position in the map of MP because of its proximity to the bordering state of Rajasthan. In fact all the three N's mentioned above are not originated in Rajgarh itself. The influence of the bordering state is conspicuously visible for there is a constant migration of population from and to Rajgarh from across the border. Indeed the habits and (mis)deeds of the border state have a telling effect on the district. Child marriage is no exception.

Table 1: Incidence of Engagements by Major Castes

Name of Block	Castes			
	Chamar	Dangi	Sondhwadi	Dhakkad
Biora	35	80	43	5
Sarangpur	68	3	17	73
Rajgarh	24	29	69	11
Jeerapur	1	3	5	-
Khilchipur	10	13	13	-
Narsingpur District	45	25	5	39
Total	183	153	152	128

The custom of early marriages is deeply entrenched in the society. It is an age old custom which has been carried forward to generations from times immemorial. These marriages are not round the year. There is an auspicious time in the almanac when it is considered good to perform the marriages. This date is locally known as 'akshaya tritiya'. Ironically it coincides with the agricultural season of harvesting when the major crop is cut on its maturity. The children too are considered mature enough to enter wedlock on this holy day! According to the local custom, every moment in the day is considered auspicious enough to get married.

Table 2: Gender Gap in Engagement

Mean Age of Engagement (Boys)	Mean Age at Engagement (Girls)*					
	Khilchipur	Rajgarh	Biaora	Jeerapur	Narsingpur	Total
Less than five years	1.27	2.26	4.44	1.27	2.14	2.0
5.01-10.00	5.94	5.84	7.00	4.84	5.89	5.90
10.01-15.00	10.13	9.98	9.32	9.64	10.08	9.83
15+	14.37	13.77	13.04	13.67	13.40	13.65

*data for Sarangpur not available.

Positive Interventions

The last three years have witnessed an annual campaign by the district administration around the time of the akshaya tritiya. The last year's campaign was with a difference. Caste based sammelans were organised along with the women's groups who had recently been freed from the bondage of illiteracy. These samaj sammelans and the mahila sammelans added a lot of difference to the routine campaign. Their appeal made better impact on the masses in terms of delaying the marriages.

How old are the children? Are they from all castes and classes? Are they everywhere in the district and in the panchayats? What has been the impact of the campaign against child marriage? These were the questions that come to everybody's mind. An evaluation of the campaign of such a sensitive issue is indeed difficult. Nobody likes to hear advice on stopping or delaying marriages. More so when it comes to actual collection of data. But it was becoming increasingly imperative to assess the progress and the qualitative impact on the families, if any.

It was therefore decided to develop a data base on the child marriage scenario in a time frame and social background. A set of questionnaires was printed and information sought from all the households in all villages of the district on the age and sex distribution of children to enter to wedlock. This data base sets the benchmark for all future comparisons and analysis. (it must be remembered that since this was the first time that a format was prepared, there were certain limitations on the data. These will be taken into account in the next year's survey.)

The average age of engagement of girls in the district is seven years and for boys nine years. Between the blocks, Khilchipur and Jeerapur record the lowest average for boys (8. 1) and girls (6.4) years respectively. Narsingpur with an

average of 10 and 8 years for boys and girls respectively is the maximum age limit for engagement.

While the age of engagement is low, what makes it worse is that they were conducted two-three years ago. It is surprising that even toddlers (of one-two years) have tied the marital knot. These children remain in the parental home till they come of age and then join the marital home.

Are these marriages predominant in all castes? Is it an annual practice? No. For data reveals that there are certain-castes in the districts where majority of child marriages take place. These are chamar, dangi, sondh-wadi, dhakkad and loda. An analysis of last year's child marriage/engagements shows that chamar topped the list (183) with dangi (150). Among the four major castes where these occurrences take place, this pattern was visible in all blocks. In Sarangpur, mali castes ranked first with 93 engagements while Biora and Khilchipur were ranked first for dangri samaj. The chamars in Narsingpur and the sondhwadis in Jeerapur and Rajgarh blocks were the foremost in the list.

The child marriages are an annual feature - however, there has been a sharp decline in the last year in terms of number of castes involved in child engagements and its quantum. In Narsingpur, most of the castes (98.5 per cent) who had been in practice since long continued it in 1995. It was only in Khilchipur that the incidence was lowest (22.2 percent) as compared to last five years. This in itself is an improvement as it indicates a movement towards lesser number of castes and lower incidence thereby.

One would naturally expect that with this number of child engagements, marriages would also be conducted in equal numbers. In Rajgarh, thanks to the mounting of the literacy campaign with anti-child marriage, engagements were not fructified into marriages. Less than 10 percent of panchayats witnessed child marriages. In 90 per cent of them, child marriages were averted because of social pressures. However, in Sarangpur block, the proportion of marriages averted is comparatively lower than in the rest of the district.

A trend analysis over five years indicate that while the peak was attained in 1990s and a plateau had been maintained till 1994, there has been a sudden decline in 1995 indicating the impact of the campaign. To elaborate, in Dangi caste, while 297 engagements were held five years ago, the number steadily declined to 168 in 1992 and finally dropped to 80 in 1995. This was true in all blocks of the district.

In about 15 per cent of castes, the average age of engagement of girls is within six years of age. The proportion more than doubles (44.2 per cent) for the next age

group, i.e, six-nine years. About 60 per cent of girls are engaged by age of nine years. No girl remains to be engaged after 15 years of age.

The picture is dramatically reversed in the case of boys. Less than 30 per cent of boys below nine years are engaged while their proportion is more (63 per cent) among those aged 9-15 years. Thus, early engagement syndrome affects a girl more than a boy. The matrix for boys versus girls' age at engagement shows that there is not much gender gap (Table 2).

However, if the present age of boys and girls is compared with their mean age at engagement, it is found while 48 per cent of girls under 10 were already engaged, the proportion is lower (43 per cent) in case of boys for the same age group. Similarly while over 41 per cent of girls above 11 years are engaged, nearly 58 per cent of boys are in this age group. Thus, childgrooms do exist but they are relatively older. The brides are numerically stronger in the younger age groups.

The above analysis shows the condition of the children in Rajgarh district. These children, especially the girls, are robbed of their childhood at an early age. The humdrum of preparing for their new life takes over and they fall into the same trap as did their forefathers. The boy play around and joke about their fiance while the girls hold their husbands in awe-for very soon their routine will begin of a new home, albeit temporarily and new relationships. Every akshaya tritiya will go down in the annals of history of Rajgarh as a day for the children to remember and rejoice. But at what cost is this rejoicing?