



Child Marriage: Its Origin and Prevalence in India

Dr. Sambodh Goswami

Associate Professor, Dept. of History, SPNKS Govt. PG College, Dausa, Rajasthan, India

ABSTRACT: The practice of child marriage, as we all know, is one of the several social maladies, that has affected the destiny of the Indian women from the last 2000 years and is still prevalent, even in the 21st century, in the Indian society. The aim of this research paper is to trace the origin and the development of this social custom from the historical point of view .

KEYWORDS: child marriage, vedic period, Indian society, origin, development

I. INTRODUCTION

In the Vedic period, the practice of child marriage was not prevalent in India. A perusal of the marriage hymn in the *Rig Veda*, which reflects a great deal on the status and age of the bride, shows her to be fully grown and mature at the time of her marriage. Similarly, at other place in the *Rig Veda*, mention is made of “beautiful damsels who selected their own life partners”. The tradition of imparting education to the girls and the freedom enjoyed by them in the selection of their husbands, coupled with the respect and love they enjoyed, created an atmosphere of enlightenment in the society and as such child marriages did not show their ugly face at that time. There are many hymns in the *Rig Veda* which clearly show that marriages were held, when both the parties were quite grown up. “With her body slim and soft, like the lines of sixteen sweet ; with her youthful, budding breasts aloft, the lady like dawn, a youthful feast. With her glances glamorous, rolling her tender lips, rosy smiling. She approached her husband, pining to meet her, with fervent love, madness for her. Adept in love and household wisdom, a queen, so stately in her kingdom. With all hilarious, her youthful wine, married life she makes paradise so fine (sic).” (R.V.I.123.10.)¹

Eminent historian R.C.Majumdar² observes that ”the frequent mention of unmarried girls like Ghosha, who grew up in the houses of their parents (1.117.7;X.39.3;40.5),the references to the ornaments worn by the maidens at festival occasions in order to win lovers (1.123.11;V11.2.5), to a youth’s courtship of the maiden he loves (1.115.2), to the lover’s gifts’(1.117.18), to their mutual love (1.167.3;1X.32.5,etc.) and to the spell (V11.55.5.8) by which a lover hopes to lull the whole household to sleep while he visits his beloved—all this evidence speaks in favour of the custom of girls normally marrying long after they had reached puberty(sic).” The very use of different words for marriage like *udvaah* (i.e. carrying away,) *parinay*, *upayam*, *pani-grahan* etc. in Sanskrit language suggests of post-puberty marriage. In the *Rig Veda*, a hope is expressed that the bride would immediately take over the command, not only of the entire household, but also of the relatives. This naturally implies that the bride must be mature enough to handle all the affairs of the family, otherwise such thing would not have been said there. Likewise, there are several *mantras* in the *Atharva Veda* through the use of which women’s hearts could be captured; also there are *mantras*, the recitation of which ensured a sooner marriage and there are *mantras*, to increase the reproductive power of both males and females, as well as to keep away the ‘other’ man or woman from mutual love or married life. These references again contradict the possibility of child marriages in the Vedic society.[1-10]

In the Vedic age, as already discussed, women used to be well educated, well cultivated and were refined in their manners and etiquettes. Some of the hymns of the *Rig Veda* bear testimony to the above mentioned fact. According to the orthodox tradition recorded in *Sarva-anukramnika*, there are as many as twenty women among the authors of the *Rig Veda*;³ this fact demonstrates a healthy tradition of imparting training to daughters, equivalent to that of sons. The initiation ceremony of girls used to take place as regularly as that of boys.⁴ The *Vedas* unequivocally underline the



International Journal of Advanced Research in Electrical, Electronics and Instrumentation Engineering

(An ISO 3297: 2007 Certified Organization) | Impact Factor: 1.342 | A Monthly Peer Reviewed & Referred Journal |

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indispensability and significance of education for maidens and also about marrying them at an appropriate age. Some of the verses, which present this aspect of the *Vedas*, are given below:

“An unmarried young learned daughter should be married to a bridegroom who, like her, is learned. Never think of giving in marriage, a daughter of very young age.”⁵ “A young daughter who has observed *Brahmacharya* i.e. finished her studies should be married to a bridegroom who, like her, is learned.”⁶

Similarly, the *Atharva-Veda* advocates female education as well as the grown-up marriages.

“A king by observing *Brahmacharya* can protect his kingdom easily. An *Acharya* can impart education to his students, if he has himself observed his *Brahmacharya*. A young daughter, after the observance of *Brahmacharya* should be married to a young man”.⁷ In the famous marriage hymn of the *Atharva Veda*, it is told that the bride was fully mature and quite grown-up at the time of marriage; there she is described as blooming with youth and craving for a husband.⁸ In the same chapter, a hope is expressed that the bride would take over the reigns of the household from her parents-in-law.⁹ This taking over the reigns of the household would have only become possible if the brides were mature enough to handle the responsibilities of the household.

Some scholars, in order to prove the existence of child marriage in Vedic society, have misunderstood the word *arbha* mentioned in the *Rig Veda* (1,51,13,1) to be the indicator of minors, who were married or going to be married. But the word, according to Dr. A.S. Altekar, has been used to denote the bride and the bridegroom and the meaning of *arbha* there is tenderness rather than childhood.¹⁰ In the same book, a hero *Vimada*, is described as *arbha* bridegroom, who has defeated his rivals and has won the hand of the bride. Thus if *Vimada* were a minor, then it would not have been possible for him to defeat his rivals and thereby laying his claim before the bride. Similarly, at another place in the *Rig Veda*,¹¹ mention is made of a wife, who is praying for the growth of hairs on her body. But in the same chapter it has been mentioned that the cause for this prayer was not her childhood, but a skin disease from which she was suffering. Similarly the word *amajuh*, which occurs very frequently in the Vedic literature, is also misunderstood. Dr. A.S. Altekar opines that the word *amajuh*, denotes an old maid of the house.¹² The usual cause that forced the maidens to remain unmarried was some serious physical defect or disease. The literature of ancient Persia¹³ reveals that maidens were wedded there at the age of 15 or 16 and since the ancient Persians were related with their Aryan cousins of India, the same can be said about the age of marriage in the Vedic period.

This normative ideal of a Hindu woman, however, did not last long and from 1000 B.C. onwards, tendencies, which accelerated women's subordination, began to make their appearance. The subjugation of the non-Aryans led to the introduction of slavery, which in turn diminished the importance of women as productive members of the society. This period also witnessed the erosion of women's educational privileges, since Vedic studies was now a long and complicated process, covering a period of 12 years.¹⁴ The introduction of non-Aryan wife into the Aryan household, the evolution of the theory of transmigration and the consequent assumption of immense religious significance by the son, considerably lowered the status of women.¹⁵

In the age of *Sutras* (i.e. the period from 500 B.C. to 100 A.D.)¹⁶ new negations and new restrictions were further imposed on women. In the *Baudhayan Dharma-Sutra*, it is said that, “Let him give his daughter, while she goes still naked, to a man who has not broken the vow of chastity and who possesses good qualities, or even to one destitute of good qualities; let him not keep the maiden in his house after she has reached the age of puberty. “In the same book an exhaustive list of do's and don't's has been given, which was expected to be followed by the society of the times, vis-à-vis their relationship with women.¹⁷ The writers of other *Dharma-Sutras* went a step further and insisted upon pre-puberty marriages and held widow remarriage in disrepute.¹⁸ The insistence and introduction of pre-puberty marriages, soon found new supporters and slowly and gradually became the order of the day. But opinions of the scholars were divided on this issue. While *Vasistha*¹⁹ and *Baudhayan*²⁰ recommended that girls may be kept unmarried for a period of three years after their puberty, if there was some difficulty in getting proper husbands for them. But on the other hand, *Gautama*²¹ and *Vishnu* recommended that marriages must be celebrated within 3 months of puberty at the most, otherwise it is better to celebrate them before the time of puberty. The *Baudhayan Dharma Sutra* even went to the extent of declaring that the corpse of a maiden can be burnt only after a formal marriage even after death.²² Some thinkers pointed out that life was transitory, and if marriage was intended to ensure the continuance of the family, the bride should not be too young, when it is performed. Others contended that absolute chastity was to be most desired,



International Journal of Advanced Research in Electrical, Electronics and Instrumentation Engineering

(An ISO 3297: 2007 Certified Organization) | Impact Factor: 1.342 | A Monthly Peer Reviewed & Referred Journal |

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and so we should select a bride, who should not have even dreamt [10-20] of sexual love. In *Griha-Sutras*,²³ it has been laid down that the bride should be a *nagnika* at the time of her marriage. The later commentators have interpreted this word, to suit their own interests. They believed that the term *nagnika* denotes a girl of five or six years, who has no sense of decency and who moves about, without properly covering her body. But this was not the original or real meaning of the word, for the Mahabharata describes a bride of 16 as *nagnika*, and the *Gobhil Griha Sutra* itself mentions that the *nagnika* bride should also be a virgin at the time of her marriage.²⁴ But Matridatta²⁵ clarified this term in the later period as he said that the term *nagnika* refers to a woman who is fit to welcome her husband in privacy, after her marriage.

During the period 400 B.C. to 100 A.D., the marriageable age was lowered by the scholars and it was felt that girls should be married about the time of their puberty. The period from 200 A.D. to 1000 A.D. was again a period of deterioration for the position and status of women, as the *Smriti* writers, who flourished at this period, imposed many new restrictions upon the body, soul and the very existence of the women of the day. Manu, for example, believed and insisted that women should never be allowed a free and independent status. In her childhood, she should remain under the control of her father, in her youth, she should remain under the control of her husband and in her old age, she should remain under the control of her sons.²⁶ Manu believed that women have been given birth by the Almighty to procreate and as such if suitable groom is available, they should be married, even if they have not attained the age of marriage.²⁷ But Manu advised that they should be allowed to remain unmarried all through their lives, in the absence of any suitable groom, but in no circumstance they should be forced to marry an unsuitable or un-worthy groom.²⁸ It will be interesting to note that Manu respected and held women in high esteem, despite of all his negative injunctions against women. He believed that, "God dwells in, where women are loved and respected and where they are harassed, tortured, insulted or mal-treated; there peace, prosperity, happiness and wealth can't remain."²⁹ The happiness of a man and that of the family, depends upon the happiness of women in that family; if the women are happy, then everything will be well and fine but if they are unhappy then their curse will ruin the entire family.

According to Parashar, a girl of eight is called *gauri*, of nine *rohini*, and of ten *kanya*; beyond this she is *rajaswala*. The parents and the eldest brother of a girl who is unmarried, when she becomes *rajaswala*, go to hell. Parashar marks the real beginning toward pre-puberty marriage because it was he who enjoined that a Brahmin who marries a *rajaswala* girl should not be spoken to or admitted to a dinner in the same row with other Brahmins. He becomes the husband of a *vrishali*, (o"kyh) i.e. low caste woman. Parashar makes such a marriage an extremely sinful act, and consequently the husband is condemned and socially ostracized. Yajnavalkya, another *Smriti* writer, insisted that girls should be married before the age of puberty, otherwise every month their guardians will be guilty of the destruction of an embryo.³⁰ Yama, who came about four hundred years later, stated that even if a suitable match is impossible, the girl should be married before she comes of age, even to an unsuitable husband. The view of Yama was much more orthodox than Manu, as the latter was willing to allow a girl to remain unmarried even to the end of her life, if a proper husband could not be secured. Whereas the former did not mind a girl being chained to an unsuitable and undeserving husband for her whole life, if there was the least danger of the fatal line of the age of puberty being crossed before marriage. In *Yama-Smriti*³¹ it is mentioned that if an unmarried girl of twelve years, remains in the household of father, than her father is guilty of *brahma-hatya* (i.e. the sin of murdering a Brahman).

From about 500 A.D. to 1000 A.D., *Smriti* writers began to encourage pre-puberty marriages and held that a girl should be regarded as having attained puberty at the age of ten and therefore her marriage must be celebrated by that time.³² At this time, it was held that marriage of the girl, was equal to the *upanayan-sanskar* (i.e. wearing of the sacred thread ceremony) of the boy and if the appropriate age for the later was eight years then the marriage of the girl should also be celebrated at that time. A girl of eight was believed to be like *gauri* (goddess Parvati) and was therefore suitable for marriage. In *Harit Smriti*³³ it is mentioned that if a girl has her first menses in her father's home, then she becomes *vrishali* (o"kyh) and anyone who marries a *vrishali*, will be held as impure and will not be allowed to participate in the religious ceremonies.



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II. DISCUSSION

Similarly, the Marichi Smriti³⁴ held that anybody who arranges the marriage of his *kanya* daughter is sure to go to *brahma-lok* (the abode of gods) and those who arrange the marriage of their *rajaswala* daughter (i.e. one who had her first menses in her father's home), are liable to go to *raurav-narak*. On the same lines, the Sankhya Smriti held that the elder brother, the father and the mother of the *rajaswala* girl are liable to go to hell³⁵ and that the sin that follows thereafter, can never be wiped.³⁶

Though the *Smriti* writers and the writers of *Dharma-sutras* have condemned the post puberty marriages, even then it was popular among the Brahmans alone and was not practiced by other castes or *varnas* in the beginning. Heroines of many of the Sanskrit dramas, written during the period AD 300 to 1200 A.D. are grown up brides at the time of their marriages. Thus Vasavdatta of *Swapna-Vasavdatta* (written by Bhasa in the Gupta period), Kumar Devi – the wife of Chandragupta-I, Dhruvadevi – the wife of Ramgupta (son of Chandragupta), Rajya-Shri-the sister[20-30] of Harshavardhan, etc. were all of marriageable age at the time of their marriages.

Thus, from the above account, it becomes quite clear that because of the emphasis laid down by the religious scriptures of ancient India, the evil of child marriage got firm roots in the Indian social system. Later on because of continuous foreign invasions and interstate and intra-state wars, things took a bad shape and the people in order to save their women-folk, from being dishonoured at the hands of the invaders, took recourse to child-marriages. This is the very reason, why practices like *sati* and *jauhar* developed in the Indian society. Thus to summarize, the notions of purity and pollution, the fear and the challenge imposed by the new religions (Jainism, Buddhism and Islam), the socio-political and the economic circumstances of the age, forced the thinkers to lower the age of marriage, which slowly and gradually became the order of the day.

Apart from the factors, discussed above, the prevalence of infant and child marriages in India can be attributed to some other factors, which forced the people to opt for this practice. The introduction of child marriages in India, was a result of the gradual deterioration of the position and status of women, from one of veneration and independence to sheer dependence on males, was a process that started right from the post-Vedic period.

Writers like M.N. Srinivas,³⁷ S.Das,³⁸ Prabhati Mukherjee,³⁹ Rama Joshi,⁴⁰ Joanne Liddle, Neera Desai,⁴¹ Maithreyi Krishnaraj,⁴² Veena Das⁴³, have highlighted the role of caste system and the imposition of Brahmannical austerities in the post Vedic period, which according to them, had serious implications, with regard to the position of women. Rise of Brahmanism not only entailed caste rigidity but also emphasized the superiority of males at the expense of females. These factors restricted the social space of women and forced the people to opt for the practice of child marriage. Any caste, which wished to raise itself up the social ladder, found it necessary to conform to the marriage of girls before they reached the age of puberty and prohibition of their remarriage, even if widowed in infancy. Thus, according to them, any rise in caste hierarchy entailed numerous hardships for women.

Renowned sociologist M.N. Srinivas has described this change of lifestyle of any upwardly mobile caste as "sanskritization". According to him, this process resulted in harshness towards women in the form of prohibition to remarry, arrangement of pre-puberty marriages and several other constraints.

Similarly, Shukla Das⁴⁴ has opined that during the Vedic period, when the laws which minutely regulated the rights and duties of the numerous sub-castes, as well as their inter relations with other castes, were being formulated, the Brahmans realized that there still remained one group which retained "uncertain and incalculable elements." Their greatest rival in influence and spiritual power were women and they felt, that there could be no uncontested and secure supremacy for Brahmans until women lost their revered position. Thus, according to Shukla Das, attempts were made to degrade them, to brand them as inferior beings, and to mould them into mindless slaves through the clever use of religious dictums.

Joanne Liddle and Rama Joshi⁴⁵ have also supported this view. According to them, the *Smriti* writers considered women as probable competitors and therefore to wipe out the probable competition that they might face in future, they



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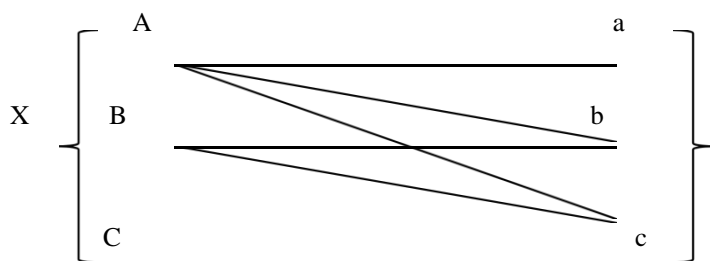
(An ISO 3297: 2007 Certified Organization) | Impact Factor: 1.342 | A Monthly Peer Reviewed & Referred Journal |

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grouped women with Shudras, considered them as private property of men and advocated “strict caste and sex orthodoxy”.

Veena Das⁴⁶ has put forward another view and she believes that women were literally regarded as ‘points of entrance,’ as gateways to the caste system. If men of ritually low status were to get sexual access to women of higher status, then not only the purity of the women, but that of the entire group would be endangered. Since the main threat to the purity of the group, came from female sexuality, therefore it became vital to guard it and most groups solved this problem by the custom of pre-puberty marriage. Thus, according to Veena Das, marriage at an early date, marriage within the caste and even in the sub- caste, prohibition of *pratilom* marriage (where a woman of higher caste, marries a man of lower caste), marriage as a sacrament whereby a woman is tied in wedlock till she dies, were all practices which suggest the control of female sexuality. Likewise, Freidrich Engles, in his seminal work, *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, writes that “the overthrow of Mother Right was the world’s historic defeat of the female sex”. It was replaced by Father Right through the establishment of patriarchal families which made man the lord of the house and an absolute owner of all the movable and immovable property. It also made man as husband, the owner and proprietor of his wife. In the process, the woman was reduced from an independent human person to a mere reproductive being whose sole purpose in life was to produce legitimate heirs (obviously sons) for him. This created a structure of unilateral and stringent standards of monogamous marriages for women accompanied by the concepts of virginity of the girl and of chastity and fidelity of the wife.

Regarding the origin of infant or child marriages, Nesfield⁴⁷ has given a different opinion. He believes that the practice of infant marriages arose from the desire to protect a girl from the stain of communism within her own clan so long as she remained there and from the risk of forcible abduction into an alien clan where she became the wife slave [30-40] of the man who captured her. Risley,⁴⁸ however, while conceding that this theory might account for the institution of infant marriage under certain social conditions, is of the opinion that the origin of infant marriage is to be traced to the custom of hypergamy and in illustration of the working of this custom, gives the following diagram and explanation which are reproduced *in extenso* from his *Castes and Tribes of Bengal* :-



Let X represent a caste divided into the three hypergamous groups A, B and C. Within each group, the capital letters stand for the marriageable men and small letters for the marriageable women of the group. The horizontal and diagonal lines connecting the capitals with the small letters show what classes of men and women can intermarry. It will be seen that a man of the A group can marry a woman of his own group or of the two lower groups, a man of B group can marry into B or C, while a man of C is confined to his own class, and cannot marry a woman from either of the classes above him. Conversely, a woman of the C class can get a husband from A, B or C, and a woman of the B class from A or B; but a woman of the A class cannot find a husband outside her own group. Excluding polygamy or polyandry, and supposing the women to be evenly distributed among the groups they are entitled to marry into, the result of the first series of marriages would be to leave two thirds of the women in the A-group without husbands, and two-thirds of the men in the C- group without wives. The women of all the groups, and especially those of A, will compete for husbands, and the men of C-group for wives. But the fact that the social status of a family determined not so much by the class from which it takes its wives, as by the class from which it gets its husbands, would put the men of the lowest class and the women of the highest at a great comparative disadvantage and would thus tend to produce infant marriages. For the number of possible husbands being limited, the natural tendency is to endeavor to secure them as soon as possible. Again, when the custom of infant marriage had once been started, under pressure of social necessity, by the families of



International Journal of Advanced Research in Electrical, Electronics and Instrumentation Engineering

(An ISO 3297: 2007 Certified Organization) | Impact Factor: 1.342 | A Monthly Peer Reviewed & Referred Journal |

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the highest group, who had the largest surplus of marriageable daughters, a sort of fashion would have been set and would be blindly followed through all the grades. Two forces are thus at work in the same direction, both tending to disturb the balance of the sexes and to produce abnormal matrimonial relations between the members of different social groups. Enforced competition for husbands on the part of the higher groups, and the desire to imitate their superiors which animates the lower groups, combine to run up the price of husbands in the upper classes, while the demand for wives by the men of the lowest class, which ought by rights to produce equilibrium is artificially restricted in its operation by the rule that they can under no circumstances marry a woman of the classes above their own. These men, therefore, are left very much out in the cold, and often do not get wives until late in life. An unmarried son does not disgrace the family, but there is no greater reproach than to have a daughter unmarried at the age of puberty. Husbands are bought for the girls, and the family gets it money's worth in social estimation. Bargains, however, must be taken when they are to be had, and no father dare run the risk of waiting till his daughter is physically mature. He is bound to be on the safe side, and therefore he marries his child as she may be, whenever a good match offers."

Dr. N.K. Singhi⁴⁹ another renowned sociologist, believed that the emergence of certain social practices, customs, rites, rituals, conventions are the resultant phenomena determined by situational contextuality. According to him, the emergence of "child-marital ceremony" was the situational response to eliminate rising expenses in marriage, fulfillment of responsibilities, amidst increasing uncertainties of life due to constant battles and external invasions. Child marital ceremony, according to him, was an arrangement of group marriage leading to one-time expenses, elimination of futuristic worries, and elimination of dowry. It helped in building community ethos, and provided collective security.

Prejudices were also responsible for the origin of child marriages. Conventions and customs that accompanied the caste system made it obligatory for the parents to settle the matches for their children at the earliest, within the same caste and of equal or superior status. To the Hindus, the rules of caste rendered marriage beyond the sub caste, almost a social sin. Along with this, factors of family connection, pedigree, religion and customs were also taken into consideration. Care was taken to marry into the families of the same status. This led to paucity of matches, making the field of selection narrower and thereby, encouraging a keener competition, resulting in child marriages. The anxiety to get the best matches left the parents no option but to marry off their daughters at an early age.

III. RESULTS

The severe standard of morality set by society for women was another contributory factor for making the system of child marriages popular among the Hindus. It was beneficial for the parents who thought it advisable to hand over their daughter to her husband, before she blossomed into her youth. Any chance of pre-marital love or sexual life, apart from her conjugal life, was thus minimized by the early marriages. Virginity and modesty of the girl were deemed to be her inalienable virtues and therefore the parents took additional care to check them.

Early marriages were further preferred by the parents, for dowry demanded at an advanced age was much more. An added impetus was given to the practice of child marriages, when it acted as an indicator of one's prestige. Moreover, the eagerness to have a son at the earliest possible moment to ensure proper performance of family ceremonies, and the belief that the son alone had the right and power to perform funeral sacrifices – strengthened the practice of child marriages.

Since the various native States of India had to involve in constant wars, which ultimately made the lives of women insecure, the desire to protect girl's virginity drove many parents to force their daughters into marriage at an extremely young age. In rural communities, fetching water and firewood were usually chores undertaken by young girls, which was a cause of constant fear for the parents. In many communities (and especially among the Rajputs) indecent behaviour with a girl or rape was considered as derogatory, a humiliation for the entire family of the victim. Moreover the instable political condition of the various native States created a terror in the hearts of the parents about the safety, security and honour of their family members. They had to face the onslaught of the foreign invaders, time and again, which disturbed the social, political and economic fabric of the society. The invasion of the foreign invaders and their consequent loot, plunder, mass destruction and the prevalent practice of carrying away the women of the invaded country, forced the people to opt for this heinous practice. Legend has it that the invaders raped unmarried Hindu girls



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or carried them off as booty, prompting Hindu communities to marry their daughters almost from birth to protect them.[40-50]

The age old belief of Hindus ‘to marry off their children within their life-time and the feeling of relief, the feeling of getting free from this worldly duty was one of the main reasons of infant and child marriages. Even today in the 21st century, Indian parents are bothered by the same considerations, which haunted their ancestors a thousand years ago. And when this was enjoined by some injunctions of the holy *Shastras*, it became a driving force. Again, the desire of the parents or some old members of the family to partake the pleasure of seeing their children united in bonds of matrimony lent support to the continuance of this practice. It was believed (and is still accepted in the traditional circles,) that one who sees his great grand children (i.e. fourth generation) and especially the male children, is very lucky and is sure to go to heaven. This desire of the great grand parents, motivated the entire family to make way for their wishes so that they may enter the land of the *pitras* (i.e. ancestors).

Moreover, in earlier days travelling to religious places and coming back safe was considered as an achievement. So, when people returned safely from pilgrimages, marriages of daughters were considered auspicious. Since friends and relatives would gather at that time, match-making became easier. Thus, developed the custom to celebrate marriages after returning from a pilgrimage. Similarly, it was considered auspicious to marry a girl child on the death of some elderly person in the family.

Apart from this, many caste organizations had also prescribed certain rules and regulations regarding the age of marriage and the members of that caste had to abide by the orders of their caste *panchayats*. The fear of social boycott or of other punishment by these caste *panchayats*, forced the members to comply with them. Even today, many such incidents come to our knowledge about the social boycott of an individual or a family in the country (and especially in Rajasthan). The offenders are left to their fate and no one in the entire village or the region maintains any relation with them. They call this *hukka-pani band karna*. The offenders are denied access to public places like the village *chaupal* (i.e. meeting place of the villagers), the village-well, the local *mandi*, etc. Rules regarding marriage (endogamous, exogamous, hypergamous, isogamous) made the field of selection narrower and encouraged competition which ultimately resulted in infant or child marriages. The difficulty of finding a suitable match, with regard to age and position, became all the more difficult in proportion to the growing age of the girl, which left the parents with no other option but to select a match at the earliest.

Further the belief that to save the family name, it was better to tie the daughter into the marriage knot, before she blossomed into womanhood gave support to the practice of child marriages. For the husband, the pre-puberty marriage was a guarantee of the virginity of his wife and for the bride’s side this was a guarantee that the early marriage of the girl, would save their family honour from any scandals, which may arise in future.

Economic reasons also motivated the people for early marriages, since early marriage provided one more member to the family to work in the fields, and early marriage ensured early motherhood. In order to curtail the marriage expenses, the guardians and parents were (and are still) keen to marry all their children on the same day or in the same *mandap*. This curtailment of marriage expenses, forced them to opt for child marriages, as it was convenient for them as well as for their relatives. This is the very cause for the prevalence of child marriages amongst many castes, and is specially so amongst Gujars⁵⁰ and Rebaris⁵¹ (or Raikas, as they are known in Marwar) in Rajasthan. On the occasion of *baavanni* or *mausar* (i.e. feast given by the family members to the community members, after the death of someone), when the community members belonging to the Gurjar caste of 52 villages gathered, child marriages were (and are still) performed by them. On such occasions, it was compulsory for them to tie their children in the marriage knot, even if they were one or two months old. Moreover, the dowry demanded at the time of early marriages was very less, as compared to marriages at the later stage because certain factors like qualification of the groom, income, education etc. were not taken into consideration in infant or child marriages, which later on could possibly create hindrances in the process of selection of bride or groom. The dread of famines or the hope of good harvest also motivated the parents to seek alliances for their sons or daughters. “It is probable”, observes Abbe, J.A. Dubois⁵², “that the original reason why the Hindus selected these four months (March, April, May and June) as most auspicious for marriages, is that during



International Journal of Advanced Research in Electrical, Electronics and Instrumentation Engineering

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these months all agricultural work is either finished or suspended on account of the great heat, and also because the crops, which have just been gathered in, help to defray the expenses of the wedding(sic).”

IV. CONCLUSION

Moreover the prevalence of joint family system, where three or four generations lived together ,under one roof, and where the eldest male member of the family took all the important decisions related to marriage, education, job etc. of his children or of his grand children, also favoured child marriages. The unquestioning obedience to the head of the family, who enjoyed complete powers, enormous responsibilities and who controlled the financial matters, indirectly worsened the independent position of the woman. The joint family system, still prevalent in the Indian society, assured the family members of their daily bread and provided them shelter as well. When two or three or four generations lived together in a house, it was the duty of the elders to meet out the demands as well as needs of each and every member of the family. Thus the younger ones, whether they were married or unmarried, were looked after by their elders, and they were free from any worldly tensions. The elder members were of the view that they need not labour, as long as there were other family members to shoulder the responsibilities of the household. Writing about this aspect of Hindu family ,P.Thomas⁵³ observes ‘‘A Hindu gentleman’s household is a miniature state of fifty to hundred men and women....As regards property, a sort of communism prevails in the joint family. Every member of the household whatever his calling or occupation, is required to hand over his income to the head of the family and it goes into the common pool...It is the economic structure of the joint family that makes the Hindus marry young, regardless of the question whether or not they are able to support wives and children.’’

The family traditions and the examples of child marriages, within the family, motivated the members of the family to advocate child marriage. If some marriage occurred in the family or in the village, wherein the bride or the groom was minor, then such examples are cited by the elder members of the family, to support their views.

Beside these factors, having an unmarried daughter at home, was considered as an anathema by the people for they were very much concerned about the safety and security of the virgin girl. Any scandal could bring disgrace to the entire family and to rule out this possibility, people resorted to child marriages. ‘‘Under these circumstances’’, observed Risley⁵⁴, ‘‘when in the case of a daughter, parents see that, unless they marry her at once ,the one or two bridegrooms that are open for their selection would be availed of by others, and that they would be disabled from marrying her before the eleventh year, and that they would thereby incur a religious sin and social degradation as regards the caste, they would seize the opportunity to marry their daughter, quite disregardful of the evil effects of infant marriages.’’ Under the operation of these forces, child marriages became the order of the day and the practice became so widespread and compelling that non-conformity to it, came to be regarded as a matter of social disgrace.[50-54]

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and also, B.D.S., IV.1.12-14
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“=hUdqekjh _rwurhR; Lo;a ;qT;srkfuUfnrsu mRl`T; fi`kuyadkjkUA”
22. B.D.S., V.9.
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“ekrk pSo firk pSo T;s”Bks Hkzkrk rFkSo p =;Lrs ujda ;kfUr n`"Vok dU;ka jtLoykeAA”
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ISSN (Print) : 2320 – 3765
ISSN (Online): 2278 – 8875

International Journal of Advanced Research in Electrical, Electronics and Instrumentation Engineering

(An ISO 3297: 2007 Certified Organization) | Impact Factor: 1.342| A Monthly Peer Reviewed & Referred Journal |

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