CHILDHOOD INTERRUPTED

Ground Reports on Child Marriage in India



laadli

Celebrate Her Life

An Initiative by Population First

A Compilation of Laadli Fellowship Articles: 2026

Supported by

UNFPA

Population First

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Foreword

The stories in this Fellowship 2026 collection remind us that child marriage is not an isolated issue affecting only a few communities or regions. It is deeply connected to poverty, climate change, migration, gender inequality, poor access to education, weak governance systems, and long-standing social traditions that continue to limit the lives and choices of girls across India.

Through these powerful reports, our fellows have travelled to some of the most vulnerable and underserved regions of the country to document realities that often remain invisible in mainstream conversations. From flood-affected char areas in Assam and climate-hit regions of the Sundarbans to migrant settlements, tribal communities, and rural villages across India, these stories bring forward voices that are rarely heard with dignity and depth.

The fellowship reports show how girls continue to lose access to education, health, safety, and childhood because of circumstances beyond their control. They reveal how families facing economic distress, displacement, and social pressure often see early marriage as the only available option. At the same time, the stories also expose the failures of institutions and systems that are meant to protect children and uphold their rights.

Yet, this collection is not only about suffering and loss. It is equally about courage, resilience, and hope. Across these pages, we also meet girls who continue to dream, activists who challenge harmful customs, teachers who encourage education, health workers who support young mothers, and communities that are slowly beginning to question traditions that have existed for generations.

The Laadli Media Fellowships continue to encourage sensitive, ethical, and gender-aware journalism that goes beyond headlines and statistics. The work of our fellows demonstrates the importance of field-based reporting in helping society understand the complex realities behind child marriage and gender injustice.

We hope this collection encourages deeper conversations, stronger policies, greater accountability, and more compassionate engagement with the lives of adolescent girls and vulnerable communities across India.

Most importantly, we hope these stories remind us that every girl deserves the right to education, dignity, safety, health, and the freedom to shape her own future.

Population First

Preface

The Laadli Media Fellowships 2026 were initiated with the belief that journalism can play an important role in bringing attention to issues that often remain hidden behind silence, stigma, and social acceptance. Child marriage is one such issue. Although laws exist to prevent it, the practice continues across many parts of India, affecting the lives, health, education, and futures of thousands of girls.

This fellowship brought together 14 journalists and 28 stories from different regions, languages, and media backgrounds to document the realities surrounding child marriage in contemporary India. Their stories go beyond statistics and policy discussions to focus on lived experiences — of girls forced to leave school, families struggling with poverty and climate disasters, young mothers facing health risks, and communities shaped by patriarchy and social pressure.

The reports in this collection show that child marriage cannot be understood in isolation. It is closely linked to economic insecurity, migration, displacement, weak governance systems, lack of educational opportunities, gender discrimination, and climate vulnerability. Through field-based reporting from Assam, Bihar, Rajasthan, Jammu & Kashmir, Odisha, Haryana, Tamil Nadu, Delhi, West Bengal, and other regions, the fellows reveal the many layers behind the issue and the ways in which it continues to affect vulnerable communities.

At the same time, these stories also document resistance and change. Activists, teachers, ASHA workers, women's groups, community leaders, and young girls themselves are questioning harmful traditions and creating pathways towards education, dignity, and independence.

This book is not only a collection of stories — it is also a record of voices that often remain unheard. It reflects the power of ethical and gender-sensitive journalism in creating awareness, encouraging dialogue, and influencing change.

We hope this collection encourages readers to engage more deeply with the realities faced by adolescent girls across India and inspires greater commitment towards ensuring their rights, safety, education, and freedom.

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About Population First

Population First is a social impact organisation committed to promoting gender equality and social development through advocacy, awareness, research, and communication initiatives. For over two decades, the organisation has worked towards challenging gender discrimination and harmful social norms by engaging with media, youth, institutions, policymakers, and communities across India.

One of Population First's most recognised initiatives is the Laadli Media & Advertising Awards for Gender Sensitivity, launched in 2007 to encourage gender-sensitive reporting and storytelling in media and advertising. Over the years, the Laadli initiative has evolved into a larger platform that works with journalists, filmmakers, students, communication professionals, educators, and young leaders to promote more balanced and inclusive narratives around gender.

Through awards, fellowships, workshops, masterclasses, campaigns, and community engagement programmes, Population First continues to use media as a powerful tool for social change and public awareness.

About the Laadli Media Fellowship

The **Laadli Media Fellowship** is an initiative of Population First that supports journalists in producing in-depth, gender-sensitive reporting on critical social issues affecting women and girls in India.

Launched as an extension of the widely recognised **Laadli Media & Advertising Awards for Gender Sensitivity**, the fellowship encourages journalists to go beyond headlines and explore the structural and social realities that shape gender inequality. Each year, the fellowship brings together reporters from diverse regions, languages, and media platforms to investigate a specific theme related to gender justice through field-based reporting.

The **Laadli Media Fellowship 2026** focused on the theme:
"Child Marriage in India: Exploring Its Gendered and Intersectional Dimensions."

Through this fellowship, journalists travelled across different states and communities to document how poverty, climate change, displacement, migration, social customs, governance gaps, and limited access to education and healthcare continue to influence the persistence of child marriage in India.

Featuring reports by fellows including **Mahesh Deka, Himanshu Praveen, Suhail Bhat, Ramiz Raja, Vanita Bhatnagar, Pramila Krishnan, Sharvan Kumar, Sumitra Sahoo, Gurpreet Kaur Cheema, Shweta, Gaurav Prabhat Pandey, SUBAIR P KHADER, Swapnil Shinde,** and **Amarendra Kishore**, this collection reflects the importance of ethical, empathetic, and deeply reported journalism in strengthening public understanding of gender-based issues.

Overview of the Fellowship for 2026

For the 2026 edition of the **Laadli Media Fellowship**, Population First received 75 applications from journalists across the country. After a detailed review process, 14 journalists from nine states were selected for the fellowship.

The fellows produced 28 in-depth stories under the theme:
"Child Marriage in India: Exploring Its Gendered and Intersectional Dimensions."

The stories were reported from Rajasthan, Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Delhi, Bihar, Odisha, Assam, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra, reflecting a wide range of regional realities and perspectives. Covering both urban and rural communities, including remote and mofussil regions, the reports explored how child marriage intersects with poverty, climate change, migration, education, health, patriarchy, governance, and social inequality.

Published in five languages — English, Hindi, Marathi, Odia, and Malayalam — the fellowship stories reached audiences through diverse media platforms and newsrooms, including *The Print, Madhyamam.com, Dainik Jagran, Youth Ki Awaaz, The Chenab Times, Feminism in India, Mooknayak, 101Reporters, Northeast Now, The Federal, Desert Trail, Sakal,* and *Zee Media Digital.*

Out of the 28 fellowship stories:

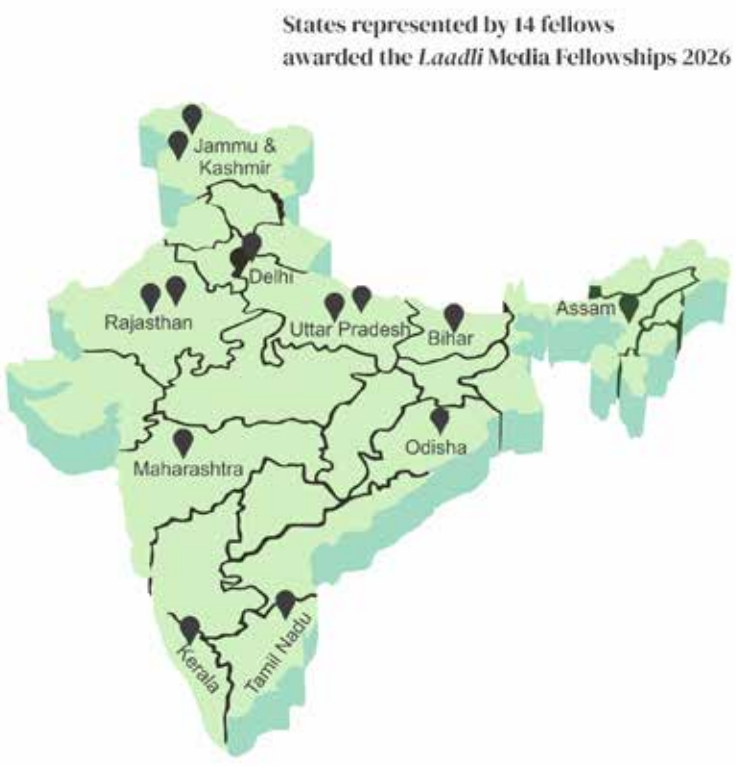
- 26 stories were published on digital platforms,
- 2 stories were published in magazines,
- and 2 stories appeared across both digital and print platforms.

The fellowship brought together journalists from varied professional and linguistic backgrounds, strengthening the diversity of perspectives represented in this collection.

Language-wise Break-up of Fellows

- **English** – 7
- **Hindi** – 4
- **Odia** – 1
- **Malayalam & English** – 1
- **Marathi** – 1

Through field-based and deeply reported journalism, the fellows documented not only the realities and consequences of child marriage but also the voices of resistance, resilience, and change emerging from communities across India.



Introduction

Child marriage continues to affect thousands of girls across India, especially in communities struggling with poverty, climate disasters, migration, lack of education, and gender inequality. The Fellowship 2026 stories bring together voices from different states and regions to show how child marriage is not only a social issue, but also deeply connected to health, livelihood, displacement, patriarchy, governance failures, and economic insecurity.

Across these stories, girls are forced to leave school, take on family responsibilities at a young age, and enter marriages before they are emotionally or physically ready. Reports such as **Mahesh Deka's** *When River Steals Childhood*, **Himanshu Praveen's** *Childhood Swept Away by the Ganges*, and **Amarendra Kishore's** stories on climate crisis and survival marriages reveal how floods, displacement, and environmental vulnerability are reshaping childhoods in many communities.

Other stories, including **Ramiz Raja's** *Between Poverty and Pressure*, **Gaurav Prabhat Pandey's** reporting on migration and false promises, and **Shweta's** work on child marriage among migrant families, examine how economic hardship, migration, and social insecurity continue to push vulnerable families towards early marriage.

The fellowship also highlights the impact of interrupted education and early motherhood through stories by **Vanita Bhatnagar, Sharvan Kumar, Suhail Bhat, Sumitra Sahoo, Pramila Krishnan,** and **Swapnil Shinde**, which document how girls are forced to leave school, face adolescent pregnancies, and lose opportunities for independent futures.

Several reports by **Gurpreet Kaur Cheema, Subair P Khader, Ramiz Raja,** and **Himanshu Praveen** further expose the role of patriarchy, governance failures, social customs, trafficking risks, and weak systems that allow child marriage to continue despite legal protections.

At the same time, these stories also highlight resistance and hope. Activists, teachers, ASHA workers, women's groups, journalists, and young girls themselves are working within their communities to challenge harmful traditions and protect the rights of children.

To help readers better understand the larger issues emerging from these reports, the stories in this collection have been organised into six broad thematic sections — Climate Crisis & Displacement; Poverty, Migration & Survival; Education Interrupted; Health, Trauma & Early Motherhood; and Patriarchy, Governance & Social Control.

1. Climate Crisis & Displacement

Climate change is no longer only an environmental concern — it has become a social and human crisis affecting the lives of vulnerable communities across India. Floods, cyclones, river erosion, salinity, droughts, and displacement are destroying homes, livelihoods, schools, and social support systems. In many regions, families struggling to survive after repeated climate disasters are being pushed towards difficult decisions, and girls often become the most vulnerable in these situations.

The stories in this section explore how environmental disasters are directly linked to rising child marriages in flood-prone and disaster-affected areas. From Assam's char regions and Bihar's riverbank communities to the climate-sensitive Sundarbans, the reports show how displacement and uncertainty force families into survival mode. When schools shut down, agricultural land disappears, or migration becomes necessary, girls are often pulled out of education and married early to reduce economic pressure on families.

These reports also reveal how climate vulnerability increases risks of trafficking, unsafe migration, and exploitation. In communities already struggling with poverty and weak infrastructure, climate disasters deepen gender inequality and reduce opportunities for girls to continue their education or dream about independent futures.

At the same time, the stories highlight the emotional and psychological impact of repeated displacement and loss. Young girls growing up in unstable environments often lose their childhood much earlier than expected.

Through deeply reported ground stories, this section shows that climate change is not only damaging land and livelihoods — it is also reshaping social structures and affecting the lives, safety, and futures of adolescent girls. The reports remind us that any conversation on climate justice must also include gender justice, child protection, and the rights of young girls living in vulnerable communities.

2. Poverty, Migration & Survival

Poverty continues to remain one of the strongest drivers of child marriage in India. Across many rural and marginalized communities, families struggling with unemployment, debt, migration, food insecurity, alcoholism, and unstable livelihoods often see early marriage as a way to reduce responsibility or ensure social security for their daughters. In these situations, girls are forced to sacrifice education, freedom, and childhood for survival.

The stories in this section explore the difficult realities faced by families living under constant economic pressure. Whether in tea plantation communities in Assam, migrant families in Haryana, or rural households in Jammu & Kashmir, the reports show how financial hardship shapes decisions around girls' lives and futures. In many cases, promises of education, safety, or a "better future" through marriage hide the deeper realities of exploitation and loss of agency.

Migration also emerges as an important issue across these reports. Families moving in search of work often lose access to schools, government support systems, and community protection networks. Girls from migrant families become especially vulnerable to early marriage, trafficking, and unsafe working conditions. The instability caused by migration often interrupts education and increases social pressure on families to arrange marriages at a younger age.

Several stories also show how adolescent girls themselves begin to carry adult responsibilities far too early. Many are expected to contribute to household labour, care work, or agricultural work instead of continuing their studies.

Together, these reports reveal that child marriage is closely tied to economic insecurity and social inequality. They show that preventing child marriage is not only about legal

enforcement, but also about improving livelihoods, strengthening education systems, supporting migrant communities, and creating economic opportunities that allow girls to continue their childhood and education with dignity and safety.

3. Education Interrupted

Education is one of the most powerful tools for preventing child marriage and creating independent futures for girls. However, across many parts of India, thousands of girls continue to drop out of school because of poverty, migration, climate disasters, lack of transportation, unsafe travel routes, social customs, and pressure from families. Once education is interrupted, the possibility of early marriage increases significantly.

The stories in this section focus on the many barriers that prevent girls from accessing education and continuing their studies. In several regions, girls must travel long distances to reach schools or colleges, often through unsafe roads, forests, rivers, or highways. Families worried about safety, honour, or financial burden frequently choose marriage over education for adolescent girls.

The reports also highlight how migration and displacement disrupt learning for children from vulnerable communities. In nomadic and migrant populations, regular schooling becomes difficult, and girls are often expected to support household responsibilities instead of pursuing education. Climate disasters and economic hardship further increase dropout rates, especially in rural and tribal areas where educational infrastructure is already weak.

These stories also reveal the emotional impact of losing access to education. Many girls dream of becoming teachers, nurses, or professionals, but social expectations and financial struggles force them to leave school and enter adulthood too early. The loss of education not only affects their personal growth, but also limits future employment opportunities, decision-making power, and independence.

At the same time, some stories highlight the determination of girls, families, and activists who continue fighting to keep education alive despite difficult circumstances. Their struggles remind us that education is not only about classrooms — it is closely linked to freedom, confidence, dignity, and the right to choose one's own future.

4. Health, Trauma & Early Motherhood

Child marriage has serious and long-lasting physical, emotional, and psychological consequences for young girls. Many girls who are married early are forced into motherhood before they are mentally or physically prepared. Early pregnancies increase risks of maternal health complications, malnutrition, anaemia, unsafe childbirth, and poor health outcomes for both mothers and children. Alongside physical health challenges, girls also experience emotional isolation, trauma, depression, and loss of childhood.

The stories in this section explore the hidden health crisis connected to child marriage across different communities in India. Several reports focus on adolescent pregnancies and the pressure young girls face to immediately take on adult responsibilities after

marriage. Many are expected to manage households, bear children, and care for families while still in their teenage years.

The section also highlights the emotional and psychological impact of forced marriages. Girls who are removed from school and separated from their support systems often struggle with loneliness, fear, anxiety, and helplessness. In some communities, the trauma of child marriage continues across generations, becoming a cycle that is normalized within families and society.

Health workers, activists, and community organisations featured in these stories also point towards the gaps in healthcare systems, counselling services, and reproductive health awareness for adolescent girls. In remote and marginalized regions, access to proper healthcare remains limited, making young brides even more vulnerable.

These reports remind us that child marriage is not only a violation of rights but also a major public health issue. Protecting adolescent girls requires better healthcare access, reproductive health education, mental health support, nutrition programmes, and stronger community awareness around the physical and emotional consequences of early marriage and motherhood.

5. Patriarchy, Governance & Social Control

Child marriage continues to survive because of deeply rooted patriarchy, social customs, fear of dishonour, and weak implementation of laws. In many communities, girls have little control over decisions related to education, mobility, employment, or marriage. Families, local leaders, and social structures often decide what is considered acceptable for girls, while their own aspirations and choices are ignored.

The stories in this section examine how social pressure and governance failures allow child marriage to continue despite legal protections. Several reports reveal how fake documents, weak monitoring systems, political silence, and lack of accountability make it easier for underage marriages to take place. In some areas, local customs and caste-based traditions continue to override the law, normalising the practice across generations.

The reports also highlight how ideas around “family honour,” safety, and social reputation influence decisions related to girls. Families worried about social judgement or economic burden often see early marriage as the safest option. Girls who wish to continue education or delay marriage frequently face resistance from within their own communities.

Many stories also expose the silence surrounding child marriage in urban settlements, migrant communities, tribal regions, and rural villages where systems meant to protect children often fail to reach those most in need. Weak coordination between schools, local administrations, and child protection systems further increases vulnerability.

At the same time, the stories reveal the courage of individuals challenging these structures — activists, journalists, social workers, and young girls themselves who continue to question harmful traditions and demand accountability.

Together, these reports show that ending child marriage requires more than laws alone. It requires social change, stronger institutions, gender-sensitive governance, community awareness, and greater respect for the rights, dignity, and voices of adolescent girls.

List of Authors Featured in Fellowship 2026

1. Mahesh Deka



Mahesh Deka is the Executive Editor of *Northeast Now* based in Guwahati. With nearly 15 years of journalism experience, he reports on conflict, environment, politics, and land issues. He is also associated with *Land Conflict Watch (LCW)* as a data researcher and has received fellowships from NFI, REACH, and Google's AI Skill Academy.

"The Laadli Fellowship has been a meaningful platform that reinforced the importance of gender-sensitive journalism. It encouraged me to look beyond the surface of stories and highlight voices that are often unheard, strengthening my commitment to responsible and inclusive reporting."

2. Suhail Bhat



Suhail Hussain Bhat is an independent multimedia journalist and filmmaker based in New Delhi with over 10 years of experience. He reports on gender, environment, minority rights, and politics, and has contributed to platforms including *Al Jazeera*, *BBC*, and *The Guardian*. His work focuses on powerful visual storytelling for global audiences.

*"The **Laadli Media Fellowship** was a very meaningful learning experience for me. Through the mentorship during the fellowship, I learned how to report on sensitive topics like child marriage and gender inequality with care and responsibility. The mentors helped me understand how to approach communities respectfully and tell women's stories without harming their dignity. While reporting, I saw how strong patriarchal norms, poverty, and lack of awareness still shape the lives of many girls. Many women hesitate to speak openly about their problems because of social pressure. The fellowship also helped me see the gaps in systems like healthcare, education, and legal awareness that make these issues worse. It encouraged me to look beyond one person's story and understand the bigger social reality. Overall, the fellowship strengthened my belief that journalism can give voice to unheard people and bring attention to important social issues in a responsible and humane way.*

I am truly happy to be part of the Laadli Media Fellowship by Population First, which has been consistently advocating for women's rights and gender equality across India."

3. Ramiz Raja



Ramiz Raja is an independent multimedia journalist from Jammu, Jammu & Kashmir. His work has been featured in platforms including *The Times of India*, *The Logical Indian*, *Youth Ki Awaaz*, *Daily Excelsior*, and *The Chenab Times*, among others.

"My experience during the Laadli Media Fellowship 2026 was truly meaningful and transformative. Working on the sensitive issue of child marriage gave me the opportunity to understand the realities faced by many young girls in our society. During the reporting process, I met several victims and heard many emotional stories that deeply affected me.

The journey was not always easy. At times it was difficult to obtain official records related to child marriage from Mission Vatsalya, and many survivors I met were hesitant to share their experiences because of fear, stigma, or the belief that speaking up would not change anything. One of the most challenging and emotional moments for me was interviewing a young victim in Nagrota. Listening to her story was heartbreaking, and there were moments when I felt helpless hearing such painful realities.

Despite these challenges, the fellowship strengthened my belief in the importance of responsible storytelling and journalism. I feel proud that through this platform I was able to highlight an issue that can inspire women and young girls to raise their voices against injustice and child marriage.

I am deeply thankful to the Laadli Media team for selecting me for this fellowship and giving me this opportunity. A special thanks to Yogesh Pawar for his constant guidance, encouragement, and valuable feedback throughout the process. This experience will always remain a special and inspiring milestone in my journey."

4. Vanita Bhatnagar



Vanita Bhatnagar is a journalist and lawyer whose work focuses on social justice, gender, business, and public policy. A former staff writer at *The Ken*, she explores how institutions and systems shape people's lived experiences. She is also an Aspen Fellow and a 101 Climate Change Fellow.

"When I began working on child marriage during the fellowship, I assumed that everything that could possibly be said about the issue had already been reported. I wondered what more I could meaningfully discover or add. The issue persists, of course, but I questioned whether there was still space for a new lens. For a long time, I struggled with this.

Working on the story gradually changed that assumption. I began to understand the role of geography, how location shapes vulnerability, silence, enforcement, and even perception. In some places, because the numbers appear smaller, the urgency feels diluted. Yet even when something is not statistically "large", it still demands attention.

I also realised how reporting can act as connective tissue. It can bring together community members, administrators, activists, and researchers who are often working in parallel but not always in conversation. In that sense, this story felt like more than documentation; it felt like an effort to bring different voices into the same space.

The fellowship also reinforced an important lesson about sensitive reporting, understanding when to include a voice, and equally, when to leave someone out of the reportage. I also realised that some issues need to be spoken about repeatedly; we cannot afford to lose sight of them amid the constant noise of the news cycle.

Thank you to the Laadli team for encouraging us to go deeper, question our assumptions, and stay with the discomfort of complexity. And to my fellow fellows, I have learnt immensely from your stories. I am deeply grateful for this opportunity."



5. Pramila Krishnan

Pramila Krishnan is Assistant Editor at *The Federal*, covering social issues, gender, and politics. With experience across print, radio, TV, digital, and social media, she has consistently focused on ground reporting, especially on social issues, gender, human interest, and heritage stories. She believes that in the AI era, original reporting will become premium journalism, and fellowships like Laadli will play a key role in supporting such work.

"Right from my early days in journalism, I covered social issues and particularly women, children and senior citizens. But the space to cover issues related to women and children is associated with crime stories these days. I'm glad Laadli media fellowship has set the focus to report stories affecting women and children based on migration, livelihood and social factors. During the fellowship I had travelled to a reserve forest, interacted with tribal families in Sathyamangalam in Erode district in Tamil Nadu. The journey helped me to understand the connection between migration, livelihood and child marriage. I focussed on teenage pregnancies in the second story. This story exposed how child marriages that were not called off resulted in an increase in teenage pregnancies. The training session helped me to understand how the reporting and writing should not blame victims but focus on social conditions and governance. Thanks much."

6. Sharvan Kumar



Sharvan Kumar is a 23-year-old independent journalist from Western Rajasthan. He holds an MA in Culture and Media Studies from CURAJ and a BA in Journalism and Mass Communication from IGNTU. He is currently Bureau Chief (Balotra District) at *Mook Nayak*. He has received multiple fellowships, including the Laadli Media Fellowship (UNFPA), MSF Without Borders International Media Fellowship, 101 Reporters Fellowship, and Voice Fellowship. His work focuses on gender, child rights, climate change, and rural storytelling.

"Being part of the Laadli Media Fellowship 2026 was truly eye-opening and transformative for me. Covering sensitive issues like child marriage, "atta-satta" traditions, and social practices in Rajasthan gave me a firsthand understanding of the challenges faced by many young girls in rural communities. During my reporting, I met survivors and families, heard deeply personal stories, and felt the weight of these traditions on their lives.

The journey wasn't easy. Sometimes, accessing official records or convincing families to speak was a challenge. Some survivors were hesitant, worried about stigma or fear of speaking up. One story that stayed with me was of a girl in Balotra whose engagement happened when she was barely 14 due to the "atta-satta" practice. Ashish Devasi, whose life and marriage were disrupted by this system, shared how the tradition destroyed his family's happiness. Listening to their stories was heart-wrenching, but it made me even more determined to bring these realities to light.

Despite the challenges, this fellowship strengthened my belief in empathetic and ground-level journalism. I feel proud to have highlighted stories that matter—ones that can inspire change, protect girls' education, and challenge harmful practices.

I am deeply grateful to the Laadli Media team for trusting me with this fellowship and supporting me throughout. A special thanks to ***Pooja Nagdev*** *and* ***Yogesh Pawar*** *for their guidance, encouragement, and feedback—it made this journey even more enriching."*

7. Sumitra Sahoo



Sumitra Sahu is a reporter with the Odia daily *The Sakala*, with over 6 years of experience, and previously worked for 5 years with *Nitidin*. She covers departments including Tourism, Women and Child Development, SC/ ST & Minorities Development, BMC, and social issues, with a strong focus on women's rights and gender-based reporting.

The Laadli Media Fellowship helped her deepen her understanding of child marriage and adolescent motherhood in Odisha through grassroots reporting, offering new insights into their causes and lived realities.

"I am deeply thankful to the Laadli Media Fellowship Team for selecting me. And giving this opportunity to work with your organisation. This Fellowship was a great initiative that empowers journalists to tell impactful stories from the grassroots level. It was a very meaningful learning experience for me. During this time, I got the opportunities and learned how to report from the grassroots. The fellowship also helped to know the gaps in systems like healthcare, education, and legal awareness and also good parenting. I am Very happy to be part of the Laadli Media Fellowship by Population First, which has been consistently advocating for women's rights and gender equality across India.

Thank you so very much the fellowship team"



8. Gurpreet Kaur Cheema

Gurpreet Kaur Cheema is a journalist with *Dainik Jagran (Digital)*, where she heads the North Desk covering Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, and Jammu & Kashmir. With over 10 years of experience since 2016, she specializes in research-based explainers on complex issues and also works in video storytelling. Her work focuses on accurate, in-depth, and unbiased reporting with strong editorial leadership.

"The Laadli Fellowship provided me with an important platform to research and write about the serious and often silenced issue of child marriage. This experience not only deepened my conceptual understanding but also brought me closer to the ground realities.

During this period, participating in a seminar on the sensitive issue of female genital mutilation (FGM) was extremely thought-provoking for me. It offered me a new perspective to better understand the lesser-discussed social, cultural, and health aspects associated with this harmful practice.

Overall, this entire process turned out to be a unique opportunity for reflection and learning for me."

9. Shweta



Shweta is a journalist from Delhi who studied Journalism at Jamia Millia Islamia and is currently pursuing a PhD in Diaspora Studies at the Central University of Gujarat. She is interested in reporting on issues related to women and marginalized communities.

"Writing a report for the Laadli Fellowship was my first experience of working under a fellowship. Through this journey, I realized that reporting from the ground on a sensitive issue like child marriage is both challenging and emotionally demanding. Interacting with affected families helped me understand that the condition of many women in our country still remains deeply concerning. While conversations around feminism are gradually taking place in urban spaces, in many rural areas even the basic awareness of such ideas has not yet reached. This experience strengthened my belief that journalists and writers must continue to report and write about women's issues with persistence and sensitivity. Only through continuous documentation and dialogue can we hope to bring about meaningful and lasting change."

10. Gaurav Prabhat Pandey



Gaurav Prabhat Pandey is a multimedia journalist and Digital Vertical Lead for Delhi-NCR and Haryana at Zee Group. With around eight years of experience, he has worked with *India Today*, *Hindustan Times*, and *Network18*, reporting on politics, sports, gender, and social issues through ground reporting. He studied journalism at IIMC, New Delhi, where he received a journal award on the "Future of Indian Languages in Journalism."

"*The Laadli Fellowship provided an opportunity to go beyond routine reporting and engage deeply with stories of girls and women at the grassroots. Reporting these stories was not just about documenting an issue, but about listening to voices that often remain unheard. The Fellowship strengthened my belief that journalism can bring visibility to deeply rooted social challenges."*

11. Subair P Khader



Subair P Khader is a Senior Sub Editor at Madhyamam Daily in Kerala, with around 15 years of experience in journalism. His work includes editorial strategy, content design, editing, and reporting. He focuses on health and development journalism, human rights, social justice, community journalism, and gender-sensitive reporting.

"Being part of the Laadli Fellowship and Population First has truly been an honour and a valuable learning experience for me. During the fellowship, I got to engage in depth with issues surrounding gender equality, particularly in the persistent problem of child marriage. When reporting on issues such as child marriage, I realised that it is important to go beyond merely presenting facts and to respect the emotions and dignity of the people involved. This project also made me realise the complex realities faced by many girls whose aspirations are often curtailed by poverty, lack of legal awareness, and entrenched patriarchal norms. One of the most valuable aspects of the fellowship was the mentorship it provided. The guidance helped me learn how to approach sensitive social issues with care, ethical responsibility, and a strong sense of dignity toward the people whose stories are being told. I feel humbled to have had the opportunity to be part of this remarkable fellowship that strives to build a media culture grounded in gender awareness and women's rights."



12. Swapnil Shinde

Swapnil Shinde is a seasoned sub-editor with the Sakal Media Group and a journalist with over 12 years of experience. He focuses on social issues through ground reporting, covering rural development, water conservation, and environmental concerns. His writing emphasizes human values and aims to build deeper awareness of social realities.

"My experience during the Laadli Media Fellowship 2026 was truly meaningful and transformative. Working on the sensitive issue of child marriage gave me the opportunity to understand the realities faced by many young girls in our society. During the reporting process, I met several victims and heard many emotional stories that deeply affected me."



13. Amarendra Kishore

Amarendra Kishore is a senior development journalist, gender and social justice reporter, and documentary researcher based in New Delhi, with over 35 years of experience. His work focuses on women and marginalized communities, covering issues of gender, health, labor, environment, climate, and social justice through field-based reporting. Formerly Managing Editor of *Development Files*, he now leads its Hindi digital platform on YouTube. He has also worked on documentaries and research projects on unwed mothers, Tiger Widows, tribal communities, and climate-linked livelihoods. His contributions have earned several honours, including the Kalam Ka Sipahi Award and Hindi Academy Award.

"My experience with the Laadli Fellowship has been both demanding and deeply enriching. The subject itself posed significant challenges, and working at the grassroots level to collect authentic data was far from easy. There were moments of uncertainty—how to begin, what direction to take, and how to shape the reports within a fixed timeline. The pressure to complete and submit them on schedule was real, yet it was met with your remarkably calm and supportive approach.

Even in the remote stretches of the Sundarbans, where mobile networks were often unavailable, I was given the space and trust to work independently. What stood out most was the balance you maintained—generous appreciation for the work done, coupled with gentle and constructive suggestions for improvement. This reflects not only professionalism but also a refined sense of leadership.

The encouragement, guidance, and thoughtful advice I received from all of you mean a great deal to me. I sincerely value this association and would like to remain connected. I am deeply grateful to the Laadli Fellowship team for their collaborative spirit and for making this journey so meaningful."

14. Himanshu Praveen



Himanshu Praveen is a freelance journalist based in Patna with over 17 years of experience in mainstream media. His work focuses on climate change, social justice, rural development, health, and politics, with a special focus on marginalized communities. He is also a recipient of the EJN (Earth Journalism Network) Fellowship 2026.

"To me, journalism is a tool for social accountability. The Laadli Media Fellowship has provided me with a vital platform to explore how systemic issues like child marriage are deeply linked to political landscapes and environmental shifts. It has been a privilege to give a voice to these critical yet overlooked narratives."

●●●

1. Climate Crisis & Displacement

Introduction

Climate change is no longer only an environmental issue. Floods, cyclones, river erosion, salinity, droughts, and displacement are changing the lives of vulnerable families across India. In many disaster-prone regions, families lose their homes, livelihoods, schools, and sense of security. During these difficult situations, girls often become the most vulnerable, and child marriage is seen as a survival strategy.

These stories show how climate disasters and displacement are increasing school dropouts, migration, insecurity, and early marriages in some of the most vulnerable communities in the country.

Articles Under This Theme

1. Mahesh Deka – *When River Steals Childhood: Floods, Displacement and Child Marriage in Assam's Char Areas*
2. Himanshu Praveen – *Childhood Swept Away by the Ganges*
3. Amarendra Kishore – *Poverty and Climate Crisis Fuel Child Marriage*
4. Amarendra Kishore – *When Climate Collapse Turns Daughters into Survival Bargains*
5. SUBAIR P KHADER – *Climate Change: A Precautionary Lens on Child Marriage*

Story 01

When River Steals Childhood: Floods, Displacement and Child Marriage in Assam's Char Areas

By Mahesh Deka | nenow.in

Arranged child marriages have declined significantly since the Assam government launched a crackdown in 2023 under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA)



In the char areas, the Brahmaputra does more than reshape land. It reshapes lives. Image credit: Rafiqul Islam

Rowmari (Barpeta): The sun had just slipped behind the horizon when 39-year-old Bobildul Haque and his wife returned home from the paddy fields of Rowmari Char in Assam's Barpeta district. Their feet were heavy with mud, their bodies exhausted after a long day's work. In the fragile world of the char — the shifting sandbars of the Brahmaputra — evening brings not only darkness, but uncertainty.

But as they stepped inside their modest home, they realized that something was wrong.

Their eldest daughter, 14-year-old Rehena Khatun (name changed), was missing.

They asked their three younger children. The siblings said Rehena had stepped out in the afternoon, telling them she would return soon. She never did.

Panic set in. Bobildul ran from one neighbour to another, asking if anyone had seen her. One man said he had spotted the girl riding pillion on a motorcycle with a boy, heading towards nearby Mahmora Char.

After hours of searching and desperate enquiries, Bobildul confirmed what he had feared: his daughter had eloped with Saifiqul Islam from Mahmora Char.

Rehena, the eldest of four siblings, had dropped out of school a year earlier after floods wreaked havoc in the area.

Her story is not an isolated one. Across lower and central Assam's char areas — especially in Barpeta, Bongaigaon, Dhubri, South Salmara, Darrang, Nagaon, and Goalpara — adolescent girls are dropping out of school and eloping or marrying before they turn 18. In these fragile landscapes, where land disappears overnight, childhood often disappears with it.

The Numbers Behind the Stories

According to the National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5, 2019–2021), 31.8 percent of women aged 20–24 in Assam were married before the age of 18, significantly higher than the national average of 23.3 percent.

District-level data from NFHS-5 reveal a troubling concentration of child marriage cases in Lower Assam. Dhubri records the highest prevalence in the state at 50.8 percent, followed by South Salmara Mancachar (44.7 percent) and Darrang (42.8 percent). Other districts with high prevalence rates include Barpeta (40.1 percent), Goalpara (41.8 percent), Bongaigaon (41.7 percent), and Nagaon (42.6 percent). Morigaon and other Lower Assam districts also record high levels.

A clear pattern emerges. Most of these districts contain large riverine char populations. Activists and teachers say this overlap is not accidental — it reflects structural vulnerability rooted in geography.

"The char areas are hotspots of child marriage. When education collapses, marriage becomes the default option," said Rafiqul Islam, coordinator of Anchalik Gram Unnayan Parishad, who works in minority-dominated areas of Barpeta and Dhubri to curb child marriage.

Living on Land That Disappears

Flood and erosion are annual realities in Assam. For char dwellers, displacement is routine.



Each displacement disrupts children's education. Image credit: Rafiqul Islam.

"Due to floods and erosion, we have to migrate from one place to another," said 42-year-old Ainal Haque. "In my lifetime, I have changed my home three times. I was born at Dharmapur Char, which was washed away by the Brahmaputra. Then we moved to Sukhajhar — that too was swallowed by the river. Now we live in Rowmari."

Each displacement disrupts children's education.

"When we move, we have to change their schools. In new places, sometimes there is no school nearby. So they leave school. When they don't go to school, they mix with boys and ultimately elope," Haque said.

His words reflect a harsh reality. In char areas, floods do not simply damage crops; they erase entire villages.

During the monsoon months, floodwaters cut off villages for weeks. Roads disappear. New water channels form. Boats become the only mode of transport. For many children, especially girls, travelling several kilometres to school becomes impossible.



During the monsoon, boats become the only mode of transport. Image credit: Mahesh Deka

"In many char villages, there are no high schools within four to five kilometres," said 57-year-old Muslimuddin, a teacher at Moamari ME School in Baghbor. "After missing classes for months due to floods, students lose the habit of going to school. Eventually, they drop out," he said.

Once out of school, early marriage or elopement often follows.

"They have grown up seeing early marriage as normal in their communities. The desire for physical intimacy also plays a role. After puberty, adolescents undergo both mental and physical changes, which naturally lead to the development of such desires," said Muslimuddin.

Crackdown and Its Limits

Arranged child marriages have declined significantly since the Assam government launched a crackdown in 2023 under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA). The law defines child marriage as marriage involving girls under 18 and boys under 21. The state has adopted a strict legal approach, aiming to make Assam "child marriage-free" by 2026.

A 2025 report by Just Rights for Children titled "Tipping Point to Zero" noted that Assam recorded an 84 percent reduction in child marriages among girls and a 91 percent reduction among boys between roughly 2022 and 2025 — one of the steepest declines in the country.

"Child marriage has declined following the strict crackdown by the government in 2023. Now parents are afraid to organize the marriage of a girl before the age of 18 and a boy before 21," said Alamin Haque, a leader of the Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS) and a resident of Baghbor.

However, while formally arranged child marriages may have reduced, elopements continue.

The practice has shifted form rather than disappeared.



Child marriage has declined following the strict crackdown by the government in 2023, says Alamin Haque, a leader of KMSS. Image credit: Mahesh Deka

Elopement: A Social Complication

"Now, when girls elope, parents try to bring them back, but due to taboo, this creates problems. Society is hesitant to accept them, and the practice continues covertly to some extent," said Rafiqul Islam.

In conservative rural settings, if a girl spends time alone with a boy, it is often assumed that a sexual relationship has occurred. This stigma discourages families from bringing daughters back home, he said. "Marriage becomes the only socially acceptable solution."

Economic hardship remains central.

"The first thing is economic," Islam explained. "Financial conditions are very poor. Parents migrate for work and struggle daily for survival. They do not get time to monitor their children's education. Due to low literacy, they also do not fully understand the harmful effects of child marriage."

He added that certain religious interpretations also influence attitudes.

"Some believe that after puberty, marriage is acceptable. There is no fixed lower age in their understanding," he said.

"Another misconception persists. Boys want to marry girls at an early age, thinking that if

they marry very young girls, they will get a virgin bride. This is also another reason for the prevalence of child marriage," he said.

A Cycle of Poverty and Tradition



Abida Khatun, 25, mirrors this cycle: born in 2001, she was married at 14 in 2015 after dropping out in Class V because the school was four kilometres away, following her parents' decision to arrange her marriage. Image credit: Rafiqul Islam.

Abida Khatun, 25, mirrors this cycle. Born in 2001, she was married in 2015 at the age of 14. She dropped out in Class V because the school was four kilometres away from her home, and her parents arranged her marriage.

"Our parents believe that once a girl attains puberty, she should be married," she said softly.

Today, she is a mother of two.

Her story reflects how distance, poverty, and tradition combine to shape a girl's fate. When schools are far and floods are frequent, education weakens. When education weakens, early marriage strengthens.

The Deeper Crisis

The crackdown has reduced openly arranged child marriages. Fear of arrest has changed behaviour. But structural drivers remain.



For families struggling to survive on fragile sandbars, marriage often feels like security. Image credit: Mahesh Deka

Recurrent floods and erosion continue. Poverty remains entrenched. Schools are distant or damaged. Transport is unreliable. Social norms are deeply rooted. Exposure to the outside world is limited.

In the char areas, the Brahmaputra does more than reshape land. It reshapes lives.

For families struggling to survive on fragile sandbars, marriage often feels like security. For girls like Rehena, it marks the quiet end of childhood.

"The light of education has not fully reached the char areas," said Hamid Ali, another schoolteacher in Barpeta. "Until schools are accessible, until livelihoods improve, the problem will remain," he said.

This report was produced under ***Population First's Laadli Media Fellowship 2026****.*

Mahesh Deka *is the Executive Editor of Northeast Now, a news website covering Northeast India, and is based in Guwahati. With around 15 years of experience in journalism, he specializes in in-depth reporting on conflict, environment, politics, and land issues, while also serving as a data researcher associated with Land Conflict Watch (LCW). He has received fellowships from the National Foundation for India (NFI), REACH, and was a fellow at Google's AI Skill Academy. He is also associated as a data researcher with Land Conflict Watch (LCW).*

https://nenow.in/north-east-news/assam/when-river-steals-childhood-floods-displacement-and-child-marriage-in-assams-char-areas.html

Story 02

Childhood swept away by the Ganges Publication: 101Reporters

By Himanshu Praveen | 101reporters.com

Patna, Bihar: “Ganga Mai ab hamni ke chhati par aa tikal badi.”

“Mother Ganga is now knocking on our chest,” said Sunaina Devi of Badhara block of Bihar’s Bhojpur district, standing beside the tarpaulin shelter where her family now lives after river erosion forced them from their village.

Devi is among many residents of the district whose lives have been upended by the shifting course of the Ganges. Across villages such as Piparpati and Balua, families displaced by river erosion now live under temporary shelters pitched along embankments. In these settlements, insecurity and poverty are pushing parents toward decisions they once resisted: marrying their daughters early.

“When the house itself is gone, where will we run with a young daughter?”, Devi told 101Reporters. “Sleeping a young girl under a tarpaulin is like inviting danger. That is why we got her married.”

Residents across the erosion-hit belt say the fear of losing their homes, and the inability to ensure safety for adolescent daughters in temporary shelters, is leading to a rise in early marriages. What is unfolding in Badhara is not an isolated phenomenon. A 2021 evidence brief by the United Nations Population Fund noted that environmental crises often disrupt livelihoods and displace families, with early marriage sometimes emerging as a coping strategy as households try to manage the loss of assets and income.

Among those living along the embankment in Badhara is Kajal (name changed), who passed her matriculation examination two years ago. Her father, Ramji Singh, once owned more than 300 bighas of farmland along the river. Over the past decade, he says, erosion gradually consumed his fields. “My daughter was very bright and passed matriculation,” he said in Bhojpuri. “I wanted her to study further. But when the Ganges swallowed our land, everything changed.”

As the farmland disappeared, so did the little money that the family would earn through agriculture. Although their house was not entirely destroyed, Singh told 101Reporters that the fear of further erosion forced them to leave their village. Today the family lives

under a tarpaulin on a raised embankment. To support the household, Singh now works as a daily-wage labourer in nearby villages. Keeping an adolescent daughter in such precarious conditions felt unsafe, he said. “If something happened, whom would I answer to?” he said. “So with a heavy heart, I arranged her marriage.” Kajal, sitting beside him, said. “I really wanted to study,” she said. “But now it’s all over.”

To arrange the wedding, Singh borrowed Rs 50,000 from local moneylenders at 5% monthly interest. “When there is no roof over our head, where can I invest money?” he said. “Getting my daughter married into a house with a proper roof is the only security I can give her.” The marriage has been arranged with a man from a neighbouring district who has a permanent house. Singh said he had never met the groom’s family before agreeing to the match. The wedding is scheduled for June.

Prabha Devi, who now depends on fishing to feed her family, said that the erosion left them with little choice. “Machhri maar ke pet bhartani ja,” she said. “We somehow survive by catching fish. There is no grain in the house.” Her family also decided to marry their daughter early. “We thought it was better to marry her so that she at least gets two meals a day,” she said.

Experts said that the crisis unfolding in Badhara reflects a broader pattern of erosion along the Ganges. Sanjay Kumar, head of the geography department at Maharaja College in Arrah, said that silt accumulation in the river has made it shallower, increasing the speed and unpredictability of its flow. “The character of the river has changed,” he said. According to Kumar, thousands of acres of fertile farmland in Badhara and Shahpur blocks have been lost to erosion over the past decade. In villages such as Jawania and Neknam Tola, hundreds of houses have collapsed. “When the economic base disappears, the first impact is often on girls’ education,” Kumar said. “Families begin to see early marriage as a way of securing their daughters’ future.”

Teachers in the region said the consequences are already visible in classrooms. Rakesh Singh, principal of Balua High School, said the number of married students has increased in recent years. “Every year, around 5% of the girls applying for classes 11 and 12 are already married,” he said, estimating that roughly 10 girls in each batch fall into that category. He said the trend has intensified over the past four to five years, particularly in villages affected by erosion and displacement. In some cases, Singh added, girls are found to be married even during Class 9 registration. Many parents, he said, hesitate to send daughters to school from temporary settlements because the routes are isolated and unsafe.

Government data suggested that child marriage remains common in the region. According to the National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-21), 34.7% of girls in Bhojpur district are married before the age of 18. Although the rate has declined from 46.1% recorded in NFHS-4, activists said displacement caused by river erosion is creating new pressures on vulnerable families. Social activist Raghuveer Singh said that he has seen several such cases in recent years. “In the past five years, I have seen around 30 marriages in erosion-affected settlements that were directly linked to displacement,” he said.

Gaps in monitoring Officials said that they act when they receive information about child marriages. Ravishankar Verma of the district's Additional District Child Protection Unit said the administration coordinates with block officials when such cases are reported. "Whenever we receive information about child marriage, we inform the BDO of the respective block," he said. "The BDO serves as the Child Marriage Prohibition Officer."

But local officials acknowledge gaps in monitoring. Mohit Bhardwaj, the block development officer of Badhara, said that the administration often depends on external information to identify cases. "When journalists or citizens inform us, we investigate," he said. He also acknowledged that the block administration does not have a dedicated data cell or monitoring mechanism to track child marriages in displaced settlements.

Local panchayat representatives say the erosion crisis has created deep insecurity among families. Rahul Pandey, the mukhiya of Balua panchayat, said residents have repeatedly raised concerns about the lack of rehabilitation for erosion-affected communities. He added that in some cases families attempt to bypass child marriage laws by altering age details in identity documents. According to Pandey, some local cyber centres allegedly change birth dates in Aadhaar records for Rs 300 to Rs 500, allowing underage girls to appear legally eligible for marriage.

https://101reporters.com/article/environment/Childhood_swept_away_by_the_Ganges

Story 03

Poverty and Climate Crisis Fuel Child Marriage

By Amarendra Kishore | Desert Trial- Fortnightly from Jaipur

Sundarbans emerges as the country's disturbing epicentre of child marriage, with the situation increasingly slipping beyond control.

AMARENDRA KISHORE, *from Lahidipur, Patharpratima Block, South 24 Parganas district, Sundarbans, West Bengal.*

The Sundarbans is the only region in the country where the voice of the river resounds louder than the law. Recognized as Asia's largest delta and a global center of extraordinary biodiversity, life here remains precariously tethered to the rhythms of the tide. Every advancing high tide places lives in peril; every receding ebb carries away not merely soil, but childhoods, dreams, and entire futures. As a result, islands are either slipping into watery graves or slowly dissolving into the currents.

At the confluence of the Ganges, Meghana, Brahmputra and the Bay of Bengal, within a dense labyrinth of mangroves and tidal waterways, recurrent cyclones, rising sea levels, and creeping salinity in agricultural fields are shaping a deepening social tragedy—one for which policy responses have yet to provide an adequate remedy. In several riverine villages, a single lament echoes with painful clarity-- cyclones do not merely destroy homes; they fracture futures. As fish stocks decline, land turns barren, and livelihoods grow increasingly uncertain, many families begin to perceive child marriage as a strategy of survival. When crops fail and incomes collapse, the question—how to feed another mouth—becomes a devastating calculation, often answered at the cost of a young girl's childhood.

Madhuri Das, an Accredited Social Health Activist in Kumirmari, prevented three child marriages last year, each directly linked to post-disaster impoverishment. When Cyclone Amphan struck in 2020, numerous families lost everything. Amid mounting debt and despair, daughters increasingly came to be perceived as burdens—mothers silently surrendered their children's childhoods, while fathers sank deeper into financial ruin. Schools were abandoned, migration intensified, rations dwindled, and fragile protection mechanisms weakened further, rendering adolescent girls even more vulnerable to exploitation and early marriage.

Launched in 2013, the Kanyashree Prakalpa scheme of the Government of West Bengal sought to curb child marriage and retain adolescent girls in education through targeted financial assistance. Yet, despite its stated objectives, the initiative has not produced

a decisive transformation in ground realities. Data released in 2025 by the West Bengal Commission for Protection of Child Rights indicates that 55 percent of families acknowledged a rise in underage marriages over the past decade, with climate-induced disasters cited as a principal driver. The Sundarbans delta region of West Bengal comprised 19 administrative blocks across two districts—South 24 Parganas and North 24 Parganas. In South 24 Parganas, the blocks include Basanti, Canning I, Canning II, Gosaba, Jaynagar I, Jaynagar II, Kakdwip, Kultali, Mathurapur I, Mathurapur II, Namkhana, Patharpratima, and Sagar. In North 24 Parganas, the blocks are Haroa, Hasnabad, Hingalganj, Minakhan, Sandeshkhali I, and Sandeshkhali II.

The administration of the Sundarbans is conducted through these nineteen blocks. In Gosaba block alone, with an estimated population of approximately 250,000 across 51 villages, 76 cases were officially recorded between 2024 and 2025—figures widely believed to represent not even one-third of the actual incidence. “The persistent rise in child marriage reflects how irregular livelihoods and male out-migration have further complicated the crisis,” observes social worker Soumyajit Mondal of Hingalganj.

Anil Mistry is a prominent environmentalist of the Sundarbans, actively working for mangrove conservation, climate change awareness, and the rights of coastal communities. According to him, “The mother whose childhood remained incomplete becomes the future of her daughter.” This cycle, passing from generation to generation, first devours education. Prasenjit Mandal of the Sundarban Foundation on Bali Island says, “When one generation falls out of school, the aspirations of the next generation also shrink.”

Kaustubh Mandal from Garjontola village in Satjelia says, “In the face of poverty, compromise has become a way of life here.” In the absence of a culture of resistance, this practice gains social acceptance.

The same pattern is visible in flood-affected areas of North 24 Parganas, such as Sandeshkhali and Tipligheri, where after disasters, school attendance becomes irregular by up to 70 percent and dropout rates reach as high as 27 percent. In Sagar Island of South 24 Parganas, adolescent girls aged 14–15 are being taken to states like Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu on false pretexts of jobs or marriage. An 18-year-old young woman from Kultali recounted that, lured by the promise of food after a cyclone, she fell into the trap of brokers and, upon regaining her senses, found herself in a brothel. In Basanti, 13-year-old Anima was taken to Bihar under the pretext of love and marriage, where she was pushed into sex work—later, she was rescued. These incidents are not exceptions but signs of a growing trend.

According to the National Family Health Survey-5 (2019–21), 41.6 percent of women aged 20–24 in West Bengal were married before the legal age of 18. The prevalence is even higher in vulnerable blocks such as Patharpratima and Basanti in South and North 24 Parganas, where rates exceed 50 percent, and in areas adjoining Murshidabad, where figures reach 55–58 percent. In 2025, in the aftermath of disasters, 73 percent of married minor girls were reported to have migrated without verification, significantly heightening the risk of trafficking. The impact of Cyclone Remal in 2024 further intensified this insecurity, exposing the deep intersection between climate vulnerability and child marriage.

“The solution lies not merely in legislation but in a comprehensive, multi-layered response,” says Darbar Mondal of Bhadri Purba Para Anandamayi Sangha in Herobhanga. He emphasizes the urgent need to strengthen legal awareness of the Prohibition of Child

Marriage Act and to equip ASHA workers, panchayat representatives, and local police with the training required for proactive monitoring. Climate-resilient livelihood options—such as saline-resistant crops, fisheries, and skills development—can help ease economic distress, a key driver of early marriage. Ensuring safe access to schools after disasters, expanding scholarship support, and reinforcing community-level vigilance mechanisms are equally critical to preventing further vulnerability.

Environmental activist Anil Mistry underscores that meaningful change in entrenched social norms requires sustained engagement of adolescent groups and community-based organizations. However, participation alone is insufficient without transparency and accountability. "Social media campaigns and formal meetings cannot substitute for grassroots empowerment," he notes. Durable progress will depend on evidence-based policymaking grounded in credible data, combined with institutional responsibility and community ownership to protect adolescent girls from exploitation and systemic neglect.

In the words of an elderly resident of Satjelia, "The river takes away our land; society takes away our daughters."

The remark captures the stark reality of the Sundarbans—a fragile delta where environmental degradation and entrenched social inequities converge to erode the futures of young girls. Unless poverty, climate vulnerability, and gender discrimination are addressed simultaneously and structurally, successive generations in the Sundarbans will be compelled to accept deprivation as destiny. The urgency of the moment demands that policies move beyond paper commitments and translate into tangible, community-level action. Only then can this rising tide of tragedy be confronted with resolve and accountability.

As climate change steadily engulfs one island after another, unchecked population pressures, farmlands left saline and uncultivable for years after repeated cyclones, chronic poverty, shrinking livelihoods, and dwindling natural resources have combined to intensify distress across the delta. In such circumstances, child marriage is increasingly perceived as a coping mechanism—an illusory "solution" to deep-rooted economic and social insecurity. This anguished reality, affecting nearly 4.5 million inhabitants of the Indian Sundarbans, exposes a profound contradiction within a nation committed to constitutional equality and child protection.

The crisis is not merely environmental; it is profoundly developmental and moral. When families see early marriage as a shield against hunger, displacement, and social stigma, it reflects systemic failure rather than cultural inevitability. Sustainable change will require integrated climate adaptation strategies, diversified livelihoods, strengthened social protection systems, and robust enforcement of child rights frameworks. Without such coordinated intervention, the combined forces of ecological collapse and social neglect will continue to silence the aspirations of half the population in one of the world's most climate-vulnerable regions.

(The author is a Population First Laadli Media Fellow. The views expressed above are personal to the author. Laadli Media and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) do not necessarily endorse these views.)

Story 04

When Climate Collapse Turns Daughters into Survival Bargains

By Amarendra Kishore | Desert Trial- Fortnightly from Jaipur

In the Sundarbans Delta, rising seas, salt, storms, poverty, and failing systems turn daughters into survival bargains, forging child brides and vanishing girlhoods amid climate collapse.

AMARENDRA KISHORE *writes from Balihakhola on Gosaba Island in South 24 Parganas District, West Bengal.*

The air carries the salt of the sea, the churn of rivers, and the quiet despair of childhoods cut short. Weeks of wading through mangrove mazes leave boots caked in mud that never fully dries, and notebooks smeared with the spray of tidal waves.

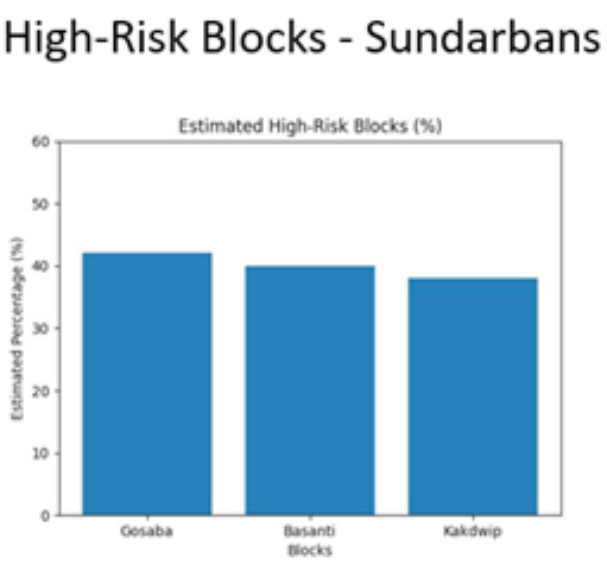
But in the Sundarbans, where the Ganges Delta meets the Bay of Bengal in a tangled embrace of water and wilderness, the crisis hits differently. It's not just about lost homes or failed crops—it's about stolen futures, etched in the faces of girls too young to bear the weight of womanhood. Amid the rising tide and battered embankments, 14-year-old girls are hurriedly wed under flickering kerosene lamps, their childhoods vanishing as quietly as the salt-laden mist over the mangroves.

The latest data underscores this tragedy. The National Family Health Survey–5 (2019–2021) painted a grim canvas-- nearly 42 percent of women aged 20–24 in West Bengal were married before turning 18, almost double the national average of 23.3 percent.

More recent figures from the Sample Registration System (SRS) 2025 reveal West Bengal topping India with 6.3% of all current marriages involving girls under 18, nearly triple the national average of 2.1%. In those island clusters, the situation in Gosaba block is dire, where even adolescent girls face the harsh fate of child brides.

Zooming in on the Sundarbans' heartland—South 24 Parganas, where proportions hover between 39 and 42 percent; North 24 Parganas, crossing 30 percent. In Gosaba block, where rivers gnaw at embankments like hungry ghosts and homes cling precariously to mud banks, the numbers spike higher. One can sit with families in these villages, sharing cups of brackish tea under leaky thatch roofs, listening to whispers of weddings that happen in the dead of night.

UNICEF estimates West Bengal accounts for 13–15 percent of India's child marriages, a staggering slice of a national shame. Here in the Sundarbans—from the labyrinthine waterways of Gosaba to the storm-battered shores of Basanti, Kakdwip, and Namkhana—hundreds of adolescent girls are married off every year between 15 and 17.



In 2023, district authorities reported having prevented over 1,500 child marriages and registered nearly 900 FIRs. However, local activists caution that most ceremonies remain informal, invisible, and unrecorded. These marriages often go untracked, slipping through the cracks like silt that clogs the rivers. The true scale of the crisis is far greater than official figures suggest, hidden within the unspoken agreements and desperation of the communities affected.

In Bara Mollakhali village, the case of 14-year-old Anju Bagdis illustrates this grim reality. With her mother unable to provide for three daughters amid relentless poverty, Anju was forced to leave home. Her wedding feast consisted of a single bowl of salted fish, consumed under a sky heavy with monsoon clouds, highlighting the stark deprivation and vulnerability faced by young girls in the delta.

Poverty and climate-induced disasters in this delta region have entrenched child marriage as a survival tactic, viewing daughters as economic burdens amid escalating hardships. Recurrent cyclones like Aila (2009), Amphan (2020), Remal (2024), and Dana (2024) have devastated agriculture and fisheries, salinizing lands and displacing communities, with South 24 Parganas reporting some of West Bengal's highest child marriage rates—over 55% of households noting a rise in underage unions in the last decade.

Families, mired in debt and hunger, marry off girls as young as 14 to cut costs, exacerbated by cultural norms of dowry and patriarchal pressures that frame daughters as liabilities, leading to school dropouts and perpetuated cycles of dependence.

Child marriage in the delta region is sharply stratified by education, income and social identity. Data from the latest round of the National Family Health Survey show that in West Bengal, 58% of girls with no schooling were married before 18, compared to just 4% among those with higher education. Poverty deepens the divide--56% of girls from the poorest wealth quintile married early, against 13% from the richest. Rural prevalence (48%) is nearly double the urban rate (26%). Incidence among Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes stands at 44%, though caste disparities have gradually narrowed. Significantly, SC/ST communities constitute roughly 36–44% of the population across the Indian Sundarbans spanning North and South 24 Parganas, amplifying structural vulnerability in the region.

Governance failures compound this, with West Bengal's *Kanyashree scheme*—touted for cash incentives to delay marriages—failing to reach remote islands or marginalized groups due to bureaucratic loopholes and limited outreach.

Systemic lapses in West Bengal's administration have undermined child marriage prevention, allowing the practice to surge despite laws and programs. Police often fail to register underage cases or support survivors, while weak enforcement and political will leave communities vulnerable, as seen in accusations of inaction amid climate-driven trafficking risks.

Over two-thirds of child brides in the region link their unions to prior disasters, yet governance shortcomings—like inadequate resources and civil society gaps—hinder interventions, fostering violence and early pregnancies.

NGOs report spikes post-cyclones, but state failures in education and safety nets erase girlhoods, with experts decrying a broader collapse in protecting children from normalized early marriages.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, school closures disrupted key protective mechanisms—those dusty classrooms offering a brief respite from domestic drudgery—while unemployment pushed families toward early marriage under the guise of "security." Registered cases rose from 68 in 2019 to 159 in 2020, with no significant post-pandemic decline. The virus receded, but its scars linger in hurried weddings and silenced dreams.

In a hut in Dulduli village, Hingalganj block, a father fixes a wedding date for his 13-year-old daughter, Debolina Bera—the week after floodwaters drowned his paddy fields. One less mouth to feed, one fragile bargain with fate. The air was thick with the smell of wet earth and resignation.

In Pathankhali village, Gosaba block, 14-year-old Kalyani Gayen left school quietly, her books tied in a faded cloth bundle, as her mother tallied the debt a failed harvest cannot repay. I followed her path to the riverbank, where she stared at the swirling waters, her future as murky as the tide.

"Promises from distant offices melt like silt in the tide. Cyclones come and go, naming and renaming grief. Salt creeps into ponds and fields, turning green into grey," Pratik Ganguli, a social worker in Hingalganj, told as we navigated a narrow boat through crocodile-infested creeks.

"Hunger settles at the hearth; debt sleeps beside it. Survival is standing upright when the ground refuses to stay." His words lingered as we passed villages where homes teetered on eroding banks, bearing witness to the delta's relentless rhythm.

In Madhupur Dhela, sixteen-year-old Priya Jana lost her home to the 2024 cyclone. As floodwaters swallowed walls and salt destroyed fields, her parents, almost mechanically, decided to marry her off. The decision came under a flickering kerosene lamp; the family huddled in a makeshift shelter of plastic sheets.

In Chhota Mollakhali, fifteen-year-old Shanti Bauri faced the same fate.

“If she needs a proper roof, marriage is better,” her father said, hands hardened by fishing nets that now yield nothing. School was no longer an option, “First, learn the household,” he insisted.

In remote coastal villages, relentless cyclones, floods, and saltwater intrusion devastate livelihoods, plunging families into debt and hunger. Climate shocks accelerate child marriages, mostly informal and unregistered, escaping official records.

Girls aged 13-14 abandon schoolbooks for bridal roles overnight, as parents weigh survival by reducing mouths to feed or easing dowry burdens. Social workers note sharp spikes after major disasters, with nearly all unions remaining hidden from authorities. Here, childhood dissolves abruptly in a landscape ruled by nature’s fury and failing governance, futures rewritten in the grim calculus of desperation.

The Sundarbans, home to around 1,100 villages, sees many child marriage cases confined to families and resolved locally. Formal complaints are seldom filed, and incidents often go unrecorded, causing underrepresentation in official statistics. Experts from Kolkata academics to grassroots organizers note this reflects the difficulty of documenting in remote areas with limited monitoring. Roads turn to rivers during monsoons; officials arrive by boat, if at all.

In Sandakphana, a remote riverine village in South 24 Parganas, The tale of 13-year-old Rina Sardar, wed to a man twice her age after a cyclone washed away the family’s rice fields. Surrounded by tidal creeks and fragile embankments, Gora village in Gosaba block—comprising islands such as Gosaba and Satjelia—faces recurrent cyclones, saline intrusion, and erosion.

Walking its muddy paths, speaking to survivors who rebuild only to brace for the next storm, is unique experience. Futures shrink to ritual, innocence bartered to settle hunger and fear. Wedding drums beat softly, almost apologetically, while a mother’s eyes remain dry—her tears long spent. Storms and tidal surges spare nothing—not even classrooms.

Rajat Jubilee High School in Lahidipur, now in ruins, its walls cracked like the earth after a drought. The cooperative school on Mausuni Island, romanticized as Virgin Beach, stands gutted; Buraburir Tat Junior High School in Govardhanpur bears flooded floors and missing blackboards. Books rot in salt, pages curling like defeated flags. For many girls, that was the last day of school—their education washed away with the tide.

“Enrolment has collapsed. Child marriage waits at the doorstep; menstrual hygiene is absent; chores multiply as crops die under salt after Amphan and Yaas,” Dr. Animesh Ray, who works on sustainable livelihoods, fisheries, and forest dependence, explained during a field visit to a salinity-affected farm.

“With livelihoods gone and boats scarce, families make their hardest bargain,” he added, pointing to a distant horizon where mangroves stand sentinel. A daughter leaves school quietly. Education feels like a luxury deferred in daily survival.

On these islands, truth flows in lived pain—child marriage is not culture; it is collapse made intimate. In Gosaba and Kumirmari, children row five to six kilometers through cold, grey water, schoolbags held aloft, wading through marsh and memory. A missed tide means a missed class; a broken boat ends schooling.

At dawn, child rowers slice through mist-shrouded channels, fragile boats carrying schoolbags like fragile hopes—tides, not teachers, dictate their day. State helicopters buzz post-cyclone, cameras flashing over tarpaulin handouts and hollow vows, then vanish. No bridges rise, no clinics endure, no livelihoods revive. In the void, report cards yield to wedding rings; school journeys morph into bridal processions.

Salinity poisons soil, turning farming into cruel lottery—crops wither, wells turn brackish, young men flee for wages, dumping burdens on women and girls. Daughters morph into liabilities; early marriage, the cold calculus to shed one mouth, buy illusory honour or protection.

"Law rots in neglect—poverty, illiteracy, fragile traditions, insecurity," says Supriyo Biswas, teacher in Pakhiralay's modest classroom, maps of the crumbling delta pinned behind him. "Forged papers, zero enforcement—families cling to myths of safety."

In Gora village, Meena rocks her infant, eyes distant on the classroom she never reclaimed. Childhood isn't stolen by custom—it's crushed under collapse-- one storm, one failed harvest, one desperate bargain at a time.

"Marriage meant a safer roof," Sapna recalled, her voice barely above the lapping waves. Drowned crops, breached embankments, and mounting debts consume aspirations across Sundarbans villages. Under the vast night sky, personal losses merge with collective tragedy.

"The Child Marriage Act survives on paper; schools and health centers are distant, understaffed, and unreachable when rivers swell," noted activist Sarmishtha Dutta Gupta, highlighting the enforcement gap. Under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, minimum ages are 18 for girls and 21 for boys.

Since 2013, the *Kanyashree* scheme has supported over nine million beneficiaries, offering financial incentives to retain girls in school and delay marriage. Yet paradoxes persist-- despite such expansions, West Bengal's child marriage rates remain high, and programs like Rupashree, which aid marriage expenses, send conflicting signals.

Climate-induced poverty, unstable incomes, and social pressures exacerbate early marriages. Weak panchayat monitoring and low awareness persist. Tidal floods and storms convert statistics into stories of crushed adolescence. "Dropouts, hunger, homelessness, absent healthcare push early marriage," explained Dr. Sipra Mukherjee of West Bengal State University.

Young brides face health risks, halted education, psychological strain, and domestic confinement. Yet resistance emerges-- Noor returned to school; Rupa Devi gains independence via self-help groups; Salvina stopped two marriages; Anjali collaborates with police to rescue girls. Courage shines amid cycles of fragility.

Solutions require systemic alignment--emergency relief, uninterrupted education, economic opportunities, adolescent health, and resilient infrastructure. Laws remain cosmetic; reports ceremonial. "Child marriage stems from climate collapse, marginalization, patriarchy, inertia," noted Dr. Mukherjee.

Girls like Priya, Shanti, Meena, and Sapna embody these crises. Without investment in disaster-resilient infrastructure, livelihoods, education, and protection, generations inherit despair. Rising tides, spreading salinity, recurrent cyclones, and eroding embankments deepen risk, warned Dr. Subarna Karmakar.

Branding child marriage as "tradition" is cruelty. Celebrating relief while classrooms remain empty reflects systemic failure. Survival without dignity is tyranny by neglect. Children deserve childhood, education, and self-determined futures.

"The calculation is merciless—poverty, environmental devastation, and weak governance together give birth to child marriage. Ignore even one, and the cycle tightens faster; ignore them all, and this delta turns into a factory churning out lost childhoods," Dr. Karmakar warned.

This sharp alert lays bare the ruthless reality of fragile delta regions. Cyclones, salinity, and erosion shatter livelihoods, fueling debt and hunger. Governance fails to deliver strong embankments, schools, or jobs, forcing families to gamble their daughters' futures for fleeting relief. Poverty deepens the squeeze; patriarchy seals the deal.

Child marriage is not tradition—it is the direct outcome of triple catastrophe-- nature's wrath, economic ruin, and institutional neglect. Every overlooked factor tightens the noose—crops fail, migration surges, laws remain miles from enforcement. Childhood is pawned away.

Yet small sparks of resistance endure-- some girls return to their desks, some women forge paths to self-reliance. Without systemic change—resilient infrastructure, accessible education, strict enforcement, economic support—this horrific assembly line will not stop. What is needed is concrete action, not empty promises.

Effective intervention must be multidimensional-- resilient infrastructure, accessible education, women's security, adolescent health, enforceable protections, and empowerment. Less is mere theatrics. As landscapes punish and institutions falter, girls like Noor and women like Rupa sustain resistance, but defiance is fragile without support. Rising waters, cyclones, and crumbling embankments underscore urgency. Childhood and dignity must be protected; policy must translate into practice to prevent generations from inheriting despair.

Experts tie harsh realities to grim official numbers-- in disaster-ravaged communities, recorded child marriage rates already spike, yet the true scale cuts far deeper. NGOs sound the alarm—without restored livelihoods, uninterrupted schooling, and ironclad protection, the entrenchment only hardens.

Climate change doesn't merely worsen vulnerabilities; it supercharges them. Rising seas, fiercer cyclones, and saline wastelands shred incomes, shatter safety nets, and ignite desperation. The fallout surges-- child labour explodes as families scramble, trafficking networks exploit the chaos, and early marriage surges as the quickest, cruellest escape hatch from hunger and debt.

Every ignored storm aftermath, every failed crop, every absent classroom tightens the vicious loop. Childhood isn't fading quietly—it's being ripped away in real time, traded for bare survival in a world that refuses to stabilize.

Story 05

Climate Change: A Precautionary Lens on Child Marriage

By Subair P Khader | Madhyamam.com

"Rains in Kerala were once romanticised. The association of rain and the warm feelings they evoke have changed for communities being repeatedly struck down by its wrath. Here, fear replaces nostalgia and calmness."

Child marriages continue to exist in some parts of the world and are largely driven by poverty, gender inequality, limited access to education, and, in some cases, cultural practices. These risks intensify during any crisis. Climate change, which was once spoken of as a distant threat, is now a lived reality marked by displacement, livelihood loss, and repeated disasters. Beyond visible damage, these events create fear, insecurity, and psychological stress within families. In such uncertain conditions, some may view early marriage as a way to manage hardship and protect daughters, thereby increasing the risk of child marriage.

The Psychological Aftermath of Climate Fury

The psychological aftermath is one of climate change's least visible consequences. Anxiety, anticipatory grief, survivor's guilt, and recurring trauma quietly settle into communities that live in disaster-prone regions. Over time, the environment itself becomes a trigger. Survivors, especially children and adolescents, may experience loss of a sense of safety and uncertainty about the future. In such situations, parents may go to great lengths to protect their daughters from perceived threats, even if those actions risk compromising the child's well-being.

According to Mr Junaid Kaippani, Ex- Chairman, Wayanad District Panchayath Welfare Standing Committee, "in a crisis of the intensity which we have witnessed at Wayanad, we must have more sustained follow-up support in terms of psychological aid, since even after the immediate needs are taken care of, the psychological wounds continue to bleed".

It is a well-known fact that women and girls are disproportionately affected by disasters and experience higher levels of post-traumatic anxiety and emotional distress. Their vulnerability is exacerbated in displacement settings such as temporary shelters, where the risk of domestic and sexual violence increases. In extreme cases, they may be compelled to enter exploitative situations to secure necessities, including food and shelter.

The Unholy Nexus

The link between child marriage and climate change has only recently begun to be recognised. While disasters do not directly cause early marriage, they exacerbate existing drivers such as poverty and gender inequality, increasing the likelihood that families will marry off daughters early. Repeated disasters further heighten this risk. In some cases, families marry daughters to shield them from harassment or sexual violence in camps or insecure settings created by disasters. This illustrates how the hidden psychological and social impacts of climate events can indirectly contribute to higher rates of child marriage in affected communities.

Patterns Across Countries and India

According to the Times of India, a 2023 systematic review published in *International Social Work* by the researchers from The Ohio State University, found that extreme weather events, such as droughts, floods, heatwaves, and cyclones, in low- and middle-income countries are associated with increased rates of child, early, and forced marriages.

A report titled *Indian Ocean Tsunami Through the Gender Lens* documented that more girls, particularly those aged 17–14 years, were married before the age of 18 after the 2004 Tsunami, thus linking the rise to economic stress from lost livelihoods, disruption of girls' education, safety concerns in temporary shelters, and social pressures such as dowry. The report also notes that these marriages were largely absent from official statistics because post-disaster systems did not actively monitor early marriage. Overall, the findings highlight that disasters tend to intensify existing social and gender vulnerabilities, with child marriage emerging as a distress-driven response in vulnerable families.

In Bangladesh, it was found that during years with heatwaves lasting more than 30 days, girls aged 11–14 were about 50% more likely to be married, and those aged 15–17 were about 30% more likely to marry compared to other years. Evidence from contexts such as droughts in Kenya, Cyclone Aila in Bangladesh, and other flood and heat-related shocks further supports this link between climate stress and increased child marriage. Families are pushed to marry off daughters not merely from tradition, but as a survival tactic, as reported from the drought-affected parts of **Marathwada, Maharashtra** (Down to Earth, 2023).

A 2023 scoping review in *PubMed* confirms that environmental crises worsen key drivers of child marriage — asset loss, income insecurity, displacement, school disruption and fear of sexual violence. S*ocio-cultural practices such as dowry and gender norms further shape this impact.*

While global studies show a pattern, what does the evidence reveal closer to home?

The Kerala Context

Kerala has traditionally reported lower rates of child marriage compared to many other Indian states. However, certain tribal and economically vulnerable communities — including some in Wayanad — have seen instances of the practice over the years. The

Kerala High Court in March 2025 directed the State authorities to conduct awareness programmes to prevent child marriage among tribal communities in Wayanad. The Court observed that although child marriage may be a longstanding custom, tradition cannot justify practices that harm children's health, education, and autonomy. The court had stressed the need for long-term measures, such as community-based awareness programmes in schools, settlements and community centres. to prevent child marriage among tribal populations in Wayanad.

Data Gaps in Disaster Monitoring

Recent government data from the Kerala Women and Child Development (WCD) Department indicates a slight rise in reported child marriages in the state. In the year up to mid-January 2025, **18 child marriages** were officially recorded across Kerala, compared to **14 cases in 2023–24** and **12 cases in 2022–23**. While exact figures for the 2025–26 period are not yet officially published, the recent government data reported that Kerala recorded **18 child marriages** between April 2024 and January 2025 — the highest in the recent three years

Fiscal Year	Reported Child Marriages	Child Marriages Prevented
2022–23	12	108
2023–24	14	52
2024–25*	18	48

*Data for 2024–25 is up to mid-January 2025.

The data also shows that the number of child marriages being stopped has gone down, even though more cases are being reported. In **2022–23**, officials prevented **108 child marriages**. In **2023–24**, this number fell to **52**, and in **2024–25** (up to mid-January), **48 marriages** were stopped. (The New Indian Express).

Of the 18 cases reported in 2024–25, only **one case was recorded in Wayanad district,** while higher numbers were reported in districts such as Thrissur and Malappuram. Although the statewide figures show a gradual increase, this dataset does not provide evidence that the Wayanad landslide has directly led to any surge in child marriages in the district.

The data indicated that while reported child marriages are rising slightly, the number of marriages being prevented has decreased over time, highlighting the need for stronger monitoring and intervention.

According to a report published in The New Indian Express on October 11, 2025, the reported rise in child marriages in Kerala appears to stem from multiple factors rather than a single cause. While improved reporting and surveillance have increased detection, experts point to deeper issues such as post-pandemic economic stress, persistent gender norms, and the continued social acceptance of early marriage in some communities.

Cultural practices, social media influences and gaps in parenting also contribute to the trend.

Wayanad After the Landslides

The 2024 Wayanad landslides, caused by heavy monsoon rains, were among Kerala's deadliest recent disasters, killing over 400 people and displacing thousands and where rehab works are still going on. News and relief sources have highlighted the human toll of devastated families and instances of children left orphaned in the relief efforts and rehabilitation. However, no major media coverage in English or Malayalam has reported a rise in child marriages directly linked to the Wayanad disaster. Similar situations where disasters are known to increase vulnerability, but limited or unavailable local statistical evidence, are quite common in disaster research.

Although no specific data shows a rise in child marriages in Wayanad after the disaster, the slight increase seen at the state level in Kerala suggests that post-disaster situations should be closely monitored. This also highlights the need for better data collection and disaster-sensitive/gender sensitive social tracking to fully understand how climate crises may influence vulnerable practices such as child marriage

While India has strong laws against child marriage, these do *not yet integrate climate adaptation strategies*, thereby leaving a gap in preventive frameworks that address the *root causes* triggered by an environmental crisis. As Kerala prepares for the next monsoon, the state cannot focus solely on dams or flood barriers. Without connecting climate action with child protection, families may start seeing early marriage as a way to manage disasters

Rains in Kerala were once romanticised. The association of rain and the warm feelings they evoke have changed for communities being repeatedly struck down by its wrath. Here, fear replaces nostalgia and calmness.

"We have lost everything. Only my daughter and I remain. We now have a secure home under the government scheme. Even then, whenever I hear the sound of rain, I feel uneasy, my heart starts to pound heavily, and an unexplained fear grips me. Right now, my biggest worry is my daughter. I must secure her future as soon as possible, because if I am gone, she has no one else." A mother broke down, holding her 14-year-old daughter close to her.

It is within this altered emotional landscape that practices like child marriages can emerge more as a response to fear and a desire to protect daughters in an unpredictable climate.

https://madhyamamonline.com/ZS-marriage-1500031

2. Poverty, Migration & Survival

Introduction

Poverty remains one of the biggest reasons behind child marriage in India. Families facing unemployment, debt, migration, alcoholism, and livelihood insecurity often feel pressured to marry their daughters early. In some communities, migration breaks social support systems and increases the risk of exploitation and unsafe marriages.

These reports explore how economic hardship and migration continue to force girls to sacrifice education, freedom, and childhood in order to support family survival.

Articles Under This Theme

1. Ramiz Raja – *Between Poverty and Pressure: Why Child Marriage Still Exists in Jammu & Kashmir?*
2. Mahesh Deka – *From Jhumur Dance to Motherhood at 17: Hidden Child Marriage Crisis in Assam's Tea Plantations*
3. Gaurav Prabhat Pandey – *"Come to Your In-Laws' Home… You Can Study There": Poverty, Migration and False Promises Push Girls Into Child Marriage*
4. Shweta – बाल विवाह की बदलती कहानी: जब पलायन ने *12* साल की बच्ची को बनाया दुल्हन
5. Swapnil Shinde – *The Burden of Life is Increasing in Adolescence*

Story 06

Between Poverty and Pressure: Why Child Marriage Still Exists in Jammu & Kashmir ?

By Ramiz Raja | chenabtimes.com



Child marriage may be declining in official records, but on the ground it still shapes the lives of many girls. In parts of Jammu and Kashmir, especially in rural and economically weak communities, early marriage has not completely disappeared. The latest data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019–21) shows that around **5% of women aged 20–24 in Jammu and Kashmir were married before the legal age of 18**, a decline from previous years. The median age at first marriage for women aged 25–49 stands at **23.6 years**, indicating improvement.

These numbers suggest progress. Yet statistics alone cannot reflect the emotional cost carried by young girls whose education and childhood are cut short.

A Visit to Village Korga, Dansal

During field visits in one of the backward rural villages of Jammu district — Village Korga, Dansal — we spoke with a young woman who agreed to share her story. She was once a student of Government Girls School, Korga, studying in the 11th class. She was the eldest in her family. Her younger sister, aged 15, is speech-impaired, and her little brother is 13 years old.

She remembered the day her life changed.

"One day after school, I came back home and everyone was smiling and looking at me happily," she said. "I asked my mother what happened. She said, 'We have fixed your marriage.' My father showed me the photo of the groom."

When she saw the picture, she froze.

"He looked like my father's age. He was 37 years old — almost double my age. I was in shock. I left the kitchen and went to my bedroom. That night I cried a lot. I had so many dreams for my life. I wanted to study, maybe go to college. But everything crashed in one moment."

When she asked her mother why they had made this decision, her mother replied emotionally, "I don't know how many years I will live. Before I die, I want to marry you with my own hands."

Her father, she said, struggled with alcohol and smoking and rarely cared about the children's needs. Her mother worked in other people's homes to earn money. Poverty and insecurity shaped every decision.

"I accepted it after that. I never asked again," she said quietly.

Poverty, Pressure, and Silence

The family did not have enough money for the wedding. They approached the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board for assistance, which provided financial help. They also applied for a government marriage assistance scheme and received ₹50,000. Neighbours contributed ration and small items for the ceremony.

"No one came to our house to ask why we were marrying me at this age," she said. "No one questioned it."

On the wedding day, she recalled another painful moment.

"The groom asked for a gold ring. We did not even have money for daily expenses. My mother somehow arranged it. I left my home with many questions in my heart."

She became a mother at 18. Today, she has a baby girl.

"Life goes on," she said, holding back tears. "But sometimes I think — if I was born in a rich family, maybe I would be in college now, studying and following my dreams."

At that point, she began to cry, and we stopped asking further questions.

Why Early Marriage Still Happens

Her story reflects several realities that continue in some communities:

- **Poverty:** Families struggling financially may see marriage as a way to reduce responsibility.
- **Parental insecurity:** Illness, fear of death, or uncertainty about the future pushes parents to marry daughters early.
- **Addiction and neglect:** In some homes, fathers dealing with substance abuse fail to take responsibility for children's welfare.

- **Lack of questioning:** Neighbours and relatives often remain silent instead of intervening.
- **Cultural pressure:** Marriage is treated as a priority over education, especially for girls.

While awareness campaigns under initiatives like *Bal Vivah Mukt Bharat* and the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao program are active in many rural parts of Jammu division, changing deep-rooted thinking takes time.

Government departments and NGOs regularly organize village seminars explaining the legal age of marriage, the importance of girls' consent, and the health risks of teenage pregnancy. These efforts have contributed to the decline shown in NFHS data. However, stories like the one from Korga remind us that social change does not happen overnight.

The Larger Context

Historically, child marriage has been more common in rural India. A 2009 report by the Registrar General of India showed higher rates in states such as Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Assam. Though Jammu and Kashmir currently reports relatively lower percentages compared to many states, isolated cases remain.

The concern is not just about numbers. It is about age gaps, forced consent, financial desperation, and emotional trauma. When a 16-year-old girl is married to a man twice her age, the issue is not only legal — it is about power imbalance and lost childhood.

Moving Forward

Reducing child marriage further requires continued effort at every level:

- **Regular community dialogue:** Parents must be engaged repeatedly, not just once.
- **Stronger school retention:** Girls should be encouraged to complete higher secondary and pursue college.
- **Economic support for families:** Poverty often drives such decisions; sustainable livelihoods can change outcomes.
- **Encouraging intervention:** Neighbours and relatives should not stay silent.
- **Listening to girls:** Consent must be meaningful, not forced.

The NFHS-5 data shows that Jammu and Kashmir has made progress. But progress must reach every village and every household.

As the young woman from Korga said before we left, "If parents understand what early marriage does to a girl's life, they will think differently."

Her voice represents many others who never get the chance to speak.

Disclaimer*:* To report a child marriage, dial helpline: 1098, Police helpline 100) This report was filed under Population First's Laadli Media Fellowship 2026.

https://thechenabtimes.com/2026/02/27/between-poverty-and-pressure-why-child-marriage-still-exists-in-jammu-kashmir/

Story 07

From Jhumur dance to motherhood at 17: Hidden child marriage crisis in Assam's tea plantations

By Mahesh Deka | nenow.in

In Upper Assam's tea estates, rising teenage elopements, alcoholism and school dropouts are quietly fuelling a cycle of child marriage and early motherhood



Most women in the tea estates are busy plucking tea leaves and doing other work, and they hardly get time to take care of their children. Image credit: Prarthana Tanti Satnami

Lahowal (Dibrugarh): The *madol* drums rolled through the evening air as the *Karam* tree stood decorated with flowers and coloured threads in the middle of the labour line at Greenwood Tea Estate in Assam's Dibrugarh district. Women in bright sarees formed a circle, their feet moving in rhythm on the dusty ground. Among them was -15year-old Sunita Hasda (name changed), her hair neatly tied, silver bangles clinking as she danced the traditional Jhumur. For a brief moment, under the festival lights and the open sky, she was just a carefree teenager.

Then she noticed him.

He was standing near the edge of the crowd — tall, wearing jeans and a blue T-shirt — watching her with quiet attention. Their eyes met more than once. After the dance ended, he walked towards her with a hesitant smile. They spoke for a few minutes. Before leaving, they exchanged mobile numbers.

The calls began that night.

What started as shy conversations slowly turned into hours of talking. Within months, Sunita left her home at Greenwood Tea Estate in Lahowal and eloped with the boy from nearby Dikom Sessa Tea Estate.



A labour line at Jalan (South) Tea Estate in Dibrugarh. Image credit: Mahesh Deka.

Months later, when she went to the tea garden hospital for an injection, members of a local women's group noticed her visibly pregnant belly and young face. Suspicion led them to ask for her Aadhaar card. She was 16 years and 11 months old — and eight months pregnant.

There was little space left for intervention. Soon after turning 17, Sunita became a mother.

Her story is repeated quietly across upper Assam's vast tea belt.

A Silent Crisis in the Tea Gardens

Upper Assam — particularly Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Jorhat, Sivasagar and Golaghat — is home to nearly 70 percent of Assam's more than 800 tea estates. Behind the lush green plantations that fuel India's tea industry lies a harsh social reality: high school dropout rates, alcohol addiction, poverty and early elopement among teenagers.



The women's wing of the Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS) in Dibrugarh has undertaken various activities to curb child marriage in tea plantations.

In many estates, arranged child marriages have reduced significantly in recent years. Instead, what has increased is teenage elopement — relationships formed through mobile phones, social media or local festivals, leading to early pregnancy and marriage-like arrangements.

"Earlier, families used to arrange early marriages. Now most cases are elopements," said Dipali Tanti, an ICDS worker in a tea estate. "When girls fall in love, they become emotionally attached and leave home without thinking about consequences," she said.

Alcohol: A Colonial Legacy with Damage

One of the most deep-rooted problems in Assam's tea gardens is alcoholism.

"Parents consume alcohol, especially fathers," said Prarthana Tanti Satnami, secretary of the women's wing of Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS) in Dibrugarh. "While mothers go to pluck tea leaves, many fathers sit at home drinking. Some die early due to excessive alcohol consumption," she said.

Locally brewed liquor such as *haria* and illicit country spirit, often called *sulai*, is widely available in labour lines. Many families prepare and sell country-made liquor to supplement their income.

Vijay Singh, a former senior official of Assam Company India Limited, who has over 37 years of experience in the plantation industry, said alcohol use among tea workers dates back to colonial times. British planters introduced liquor to labourers to help them cope with trauma, displacement and harsh working conditions.

Today, the impact is devastating. Addiction rates remain high. Illicit and toxic alcohol has caused several mass poisoning incidents in tea gardens over the years.



Women tea garden workers attend an ACMS awareness meeting at a tea estate in Dibrugarh.

"When fathers drink, they fight. Children grow up seeing daily quarrels. Many girls feel unhappy at home. They think if they go away with a boy, they will find peace," said Dipali Tanti.

Neena Patar (name changed), 15, a Class IX student from Jalan Tea Estate, echoed this sentiment. She had eloped with a 27-year-old casual worker from a nearby tea estate.

"My father is an alcoholic. He quarrels with my mother every evening and beats me sometimes. I felt I would be happier away from that environment," she said softly.

After intervention by the ACMS women's group, she was brought back home and has resumed her studies.

Education Slipping Through Fingers

Poverty tightens its grip on education in tea estates.

The daily wage of a tea plantation worker is only Rs 250. For families with three or four children, survival often takes priority over schooling. When fathers spend earnings on alcohol or gambling, the financial burden falls entirely on mothers.

"Many girls drop out in secondary school. Primary schools are nearby, but high schools are far from the labour lines. Transport costs and safety concerns stop parents from sending daughters," said Joymoti Mahato, a member of the ACMS women's group.

Some families initially enrol children in private schools, hoping for a better future. But as expenses increase, they withdraw them. "Those children do not want to shift to government schools. Finally, they stop studying," she added.



According to a study over 63 percent of children in at least 70 tea gardens across seven districts of Assam dropped out to support their families financially. Image credit: Prarthana Tanti satnami

A study titled *Child Welfare Situational Analysis in Tea Gardens in Assam* by Bal Raksha Bharat found that over 63 percent of children in at least 70 tea gardens across seven districts of Assam dropped out to support their families financially. Many begin working in tea gardens as early as 11 years old.

According to the study, parents often see tea plucking as a skill that must be learned early. Poor infrastructure, a shortage of teachers, and economic hardship further discourage education.

Ashok Gowala, a teacher at Dewan Bagan Primary School near Lepetkata in Dibrugarh, said many children leave school after failing exams in high school. "They do not get guidance at home. Parents themselves are uneducated and struggling for livelihood."

He added that children from relatively educated and financially stable families rarely drop out or elope. "Awareness and stability make a difference," Gowala pointed out.

Mobile Phones and Peer Influence

Even in extreme poverty, mobile phones are common in tea estates, unlike in most other areas.

"Almost every boy and girl has a mobile phone now. They connect through missed calls, social media or at local events," said Prarthana Tanti.

She estimates that about 60 percent of girls elope within the same estate or community. Inter-community marriages are rare.



Even in extreme poverty, mobile phones are common in tea estates.

"Based on our field experience and cases handled by the women's group, we estimate that about 60 percent of girls elope within the same estate or community, while roughly 40 percent marry into other tea estates," she said.

"When one girl elopes and appears happy, others follow. They think it is normal," Prarthana Tanti said.

Most girls elope between 15 and 17 years of age. Boys are usually older, often between 19 and 21.

Under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 (PCMA), marriage is illegal if the girl is under 18 and the boy under 21. Many couples wait until they reach legal age to avoid police cases. Some marry within days of turning 18 or 21.

In 2023, Assam saw a major crackdown against child marriage in char areas under the PCMA. However, activists note that tea garden areas did not witness a similar focused enforcement drive, despite long-standing concerns. According to several activists working in Upper Assam, political considerations may have played a role.

They argue that the ruling party enjoys a strong support base among tea garden communities, and a large-scale crackdown similar to that in char areas could have triggered social backlash and potentially affected electoral prospects.

Breaking the Chain

According to Prarthana Tanti Satnami, from 2017 to 2025, the women's wing of ACMS has stopped at least 500 child marriages in tea estates across Dibrugarh district through counselling, family discussions and police intervention.



Tea garden worker Umesh Tanti said that with the consent of the boy's family and the intervention of the women's group, she was brought back.

Rinki Tanti (name changed), 16, from Jalan Tea Estate in Dibrugarh, was one such case. A Class IX student, she eloped with a boy from Jokai, four kilometres from her home. Her father, Umesh Tanti, said friends informed him about her whereabouts. With consent from the boy's family and intervention by the women's group, she was brought back. She now stays with her parents and continues school.

"Earlier, people did not know the legal age of marriage. Now awareness has increased. But children grow up seeing early marriage as normal. Changing mindset takes time," said Ashok Gowala.

Beyond Individual Choices

In the labour lines of Assam's tea estates, early elopement is not just a story of teenage love. It is shaped by poverty, addiction, poor schooling, lack of supervision and a long history of marginalisation.

Children grow up in cramped quarters, witnessing domestic violence, financial stress and limited opportunities. For some girls, elopement feels like an escape — a promise of a different life.

But often, it leads to early motherhood, health risks and continued economic hardship.

On some evenings at Greenwood Tea Estate, the *madol* drums still echo across the labour lines. Younger girls gather in circles during festivals, their silver bangles flashing under strings of coloured lights. Among the women watching from the edges are those who once danced the same steps — now balancing infants on their hips, their festival nights shorter than they once imagined.

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https://nenow.in/top-news/from-jhumur-dance-to-motherhood-at-17-hidden-child-marriage-crisis-in-assams-tea-plantations.html

Story 08

“Come to Your In-Laws’ Home... You Can Study There”: Poverty, Migration and False Promises Push Girls Into Child Marriage (Translated from Hindi)

By Gaurav Prabhat Pandey | Zeenews.india.com



The irony is hard to ignore. The layers of child marriage run deeper than they appear. In Haryana, A minor girl was told her marriage would allow her to continue studying at her in-laws’ home. Cases from districts like Nuh, Karnal, Kurukshetra and Kaithal suggest this is not an isolated story. A case from Dhand village in Kaithal shows how false promises can push families into marrying off a 13-year-old girl. Whether driven by financial distress, social pressure or the hope of education, such decisions rarely appear in official records, yet their consequences shape the lives of countless girls.

But for many girls, that promise becomes the beginning of the end of their childhood.

This case also illustrates how poverty, migration, social pressure and lack of awareness can combine to push families toward decisions that put young girls at risk. At the same time the case also raises difficult questions about whether existing monitoring systems are capable of identifying vulnerable children before a marriage actually takes place.

A village that looked like all rural villages of India. But not...

Dhand village lies roughly 23 kilometres from Kaithal town and about 28 kilometres from Kurukshetra. At first glance, it resembles any other rural settlement in Haryana. Fields stretch across the outskirts of the village, narrow paved and unpaved roads connect clusters of homes, and daily life revolves around agriculture, small shops and wage labour.

The panchayat building and a primary school stand not far apart. On winter afternoons, children can often be seen playing cricket or running across nearby fields. For visitors, there is little to suggest that the village would soon become the centre of a case that reflects a much larger social problem. But on May 12, 2025, a quiet marriage ceremony involving a minor girl changed that perception.

A migrant family on the margins

The girl at the centre of the case belonged to a migrant family originally from Bihar. According to local officials, the family had moved to Dhand nearly 15 years earlier in search of work. Since then, they had been surviving largely on daily wage labour.

The father's monthly income was reportedly between ₹5,000 and ₹6,000. The household was large: four daughters and a son. With irregular work and limited income, managing basic expenses had always been difficult.

About a year before the incident, the family had married off their eldest daughter. Soon after, attention turned to the second daughter.

At the time, she was studying in Class 6 at a local school. Then suddenly, she stopped going to class. School records later revealed that the girl was born on June 5, 2013. That meant she was just over 12 years old when her education was interrupted. According to officials, the family soon began arranging her marriage with a 17-year-old boy from neighbouring Kurukshetra district.

Inside the family, the decision was presented as something that would not harm the girl's future. She was told that she would continue studying after marriage.

The promise of education

The promise that the girl would be allowed to continue her education appears to have played a crucial role in convincing her and possibly other family members.

During later counselling sessions with officials, the girl reportedly said her parents had assured her that she would still be able to attend school after moving to her husband's home. Such assurances are not unusual in cases of early marriage.

In many rural communities, parents who feel economic or social pressure to marry their daughters early often justify the decision by suggesting that education will continue after marriage. In practice, however, the opposite frequently happens: girls are pulled out of school permanently.

In this case, the marriage preparations moved quickly. On May 12, 2025, after a small religious ceremony and basic rituals, the girl was sent to Kurukshetra with her husband's family. For a brief moment, it appeared that the marriage had gone unnoticed. But someone had informed the authorities.

A last-minute intervention

Soon after the ceremony, the Women and Child Development Department in Kaithal received information about the marriage.

Child Marriage Prohibition officials, accompanied by a police team, began verifying the details. Officers contacted both families and asked them to produce documents confirming the ages of the bride and groom.

School records provided the answer quickly. The girl was only 12 years old. The boy was reportedly around 17.

Under Indian law, the minimum legal age for marriage is 18 for women and 21 for men. That meant the marriage clearly violated the **Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006**. Authorities declared the marriage invalid. Police registered a case against the fathers of both the girl and the boy. According to local officials, both men were detained during the investigation.

The girl was taken to a One Stop Centre (OSC), a facility designed to support women and children facing crisis situations. There she received counselling before being returned safely to her mother.

Officials also informed the Child Welfare Committee, which began monitoring the case to ensure that the girl could return to school.

Silence inside the village

Despite the intervention, speaking openly about the incident proved difficult. When reporters visited the girl's home, family members were reluctant to discuss the case. They said only that "everything is fine now." The girl's parents were reportedly away at work when the visit took place.

Some neighbours suggested that the marriage had been arranged deliberately by the girl's father, possibly due to financial stress. Others hinted that a middleman might have been involved in arranging the match with the boy's family.

A woman associated with the village's anganwadi network, speaking on condition of anonymity, claimed the family may have received money for the marriage.

Such claims could not be independently verified, but they reflect the suspicions that often surround child marriages in economically vulnerable communities.

Education that stops too soon

Local teachers say the story of the girl's interrupted schooling is far from unique. One teacher who tutors children in the area said that in many families girls rarely study beyond Class 8 or Class 10.

"Very few households continue a girl's education after that," he said, requesting anonymity. "If education stops, then early marriage becomes normal."

The link between education and child marriage is widely recognised by researchers. Girls who stay in school longer are far less likely to be married before adulthood.

But for families struggling with unstable income, the cost of continued education—books, uniforms, transportation—can feel like an additional burden. Marriage, by contrast, is sometimes seen as a way to reduce that pressure.

Health systems that miss the signs

Local health workers say they often face similar challenges when trying to monitor the well-being of adolescent girls.

An ASHA worker from the area explained that it can be difficult to track cases of anaemia, malnutrition or other health problems among teenage girls. Many families rely on nearby medical shops instead of visiting government health centres.

Record-keeping is inconsistent, and migrant families in particular may fall outside regular monitoring systems. As a result, early warning signs such as a girl dropping out of school or preparing for marriage can go unnoticed.

The numbers behind the problem

While the Dhand case drew attention because authorities intervened, many similar marriages remain hidden. According to Kaithal's Child Marriage Prohibition Officer Sunita Sharma, the district received 67 complaints related to child marriage over the past three years.

Of those cases:

- 37 marriages were stopped before they could take place
- 18 cases led to police complaints
- The remaining cases were handled through counselling and ongoing monitoring

Officials say awareness programmes are conducted in schools, panchayats and religious spaces to educate communities about the law and the risks associated with early marriage. There is also an online system through which people can report suspected child marriages. But authorities acknowledge that many cases are never reported.

A wider national challenge

The problem extends far beyond a single village.

Data from the **National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019-21)** shows that around 13 percent of women aged 20–24 in Haryana were married before turning 18.

In some districts, the numbers are even higher:

- Nuh: 28.7 percent
- Palwal: 23.8 percent
- Gurugram: 20.7 percent

Although official crime statistics show an increase in cases registered under child marriage laws, the number of convictions remains relatively low.

Experts say this gap reflects the difficulty of proving offences, especially when families and communities are reluctant to cooperate with investigations.

When poverty and migration intersect

In the Dhand case, migration added another layer of vulnerability.

Families that move across states often lack stable documentation, social networks and knowledge of local government programmes. They may also struggle to access welfare schemes designed to support education or child protection.

Without those safeguards, girls in migrant households may face greater risk of early marriage.

A social worker associated with a local rural NGO said that poverty, lack of awareness and social pressure often converge in such situations.

"When families have many children and limited income, they start thinking about marriage early," he said. "If society also pressures them saying the girl is growing up, then they see marriage as a solution."

A system that depends on information

The Dhand case ultimately raises a fundamental question about the effectiveness of child protection systems.

India has laws, monitoring committees and awareness campaigns aimed at preventing child marriage. But these mechanisms often depend on receiving information from the community.

If no one reports a suspected marriage, authorities may never know it is happening. Several villagers admitted that if the Dhand wedding had not been reported in time, the marriage might have continued without intervention.

That reality suggests that the system often acts only after someone sounds an alarm.

A childhood paused

For now, the girl at the centre of the case has returned to her parents' home. Officials say they are conducting periodic home visits and monitoring her educational status. The goal is to ensure that she resumes her studies and does not face further pressure to marry.

But the broader questions remain unresolved.

How many other girls are leaving school quietly?

How many marriages take place without anyone reporting them?

And how many promises of "continuing education after marriage" end up closing the door on a girl's future?

The answers may never appear in official records. But across villages like Dhand, they continue to shape the lives of girls whose childhoods are cut short long before they are ready to become adults.

https://zeenews.india.com/hindi/india/delhi-ncr-haryana/haryana/child-marriage-reflects-how-minor-girls-are-being-hunted-by-poverty-migration-and-false-promises-case-study-in/3124790

Story 09

बाल विवाह की बदलती कहानी: जब पलायन ने 12 साल की बच्ची को बनाया दुल्हन

By Shweta | Youthkiawaaz.com



बिहार में हर साल हज़ारों परिवार पलायन करने को मजबूर होते हैं। वजह अक्सर बेहतर रोज़गार और जीवन की तलाश होती है, लेकिन कई बार मौसम की मार, जैसे- बाढ़, सूखा और खेती से घटती आमदनी, लोगों को गांव छोड़ने पर विवश कर देती है। इस आर्थिक और सामाजिक अस्थिरता की सबसे बड़ी कीमत अक्सर लड़कियां चुकाती हैं।

केंद्रीय स्वास्थ्य और परिवार कल्याण मंत्रालय की ओर से जारी राष्ट्रीय परिवार स्वास्थ्य सर्वेक्षण-5 (एनएफएचएस-5) के मुताबिक, बिहार में अब भी लगभग 41% युवतियों (20–24 आयु वर्ग) का विवाह 18 वर्ष से पहले हो जाता है।

पलायन ने 12 साल की बच्ची को बनाया दुल्हन

मधुबनी ज़िले के एक छोटे से गांव की रहने वाली नूर की शादी 2015 में तब कर दी गई, जब वह महज़ 12 साल की थी। आर्थिक तंगी ऐसी थी कि नूर कभी स्कूल नहीं जा पाईं। पिता सिलाई का काम करते थे, जिससे पांच लोगों का परिवार बहुत मुश्किल से चलता था। कई बार दो वक्त का खाना जुटाना भी मुश्किल हो जाता।

बढ़ते कर्ज और घटती आमदनी के बीच पिता ने पटना जाने का फैसला किया। लेकिन शहर में बसने की अनिश्चितता और आर्थिक दबाव के बीच गांव के लोगों ने सलाह दी, 'एक बेटी की शादी कर दीजिए, एक जिम्मेदारी कम हो जाएगी।'

परिवार को यह सलाह व्यावहारिक लगी। उन्हें लगा इससे बेटी का भविष्य 'सुरक्षित' हो जाएगा। इसी सोच के तहत नूर की शादी उससे दोगुनी उम्र के 25 वर्षीय आदमी से कर दी गई। नूर का परिवार मुस्लिम समुदाय से हैं, जबकि उनका विवाह हिंदू समुदाय के युवक से हिंदू रीति-रिवाज के साथ हुआ।

14 साल में मां, 23 की उम्र में भी असुरक्षित

नूर बताती हैं, 'जब मेरी शादी हुई, तब मुझे समझ भी नहीं थी कि क्या हो रहा है। मैं सिर्फ 12 साल की थी। मुझे लगता था कि मेरी शादी से मम्मी-पापा का बोझ कम हो जाएगा।'

14 साल की उम्र में वह पहली बार मां बनीं। दहेज को लेकर ताने और मारपीट शुरू हो गई। बेटियों को जन्म देने पर अपमान और बढ़ा, 'जब दूसरी बेटी हुई तो मेरे पति ने कहा- इस बच्ची को फेंक दो, मुझे बेटा चाहिए।'

2023 में बेटे के जन्म के बाद कुछ समय के लिए हालात सुधरे, लेकिन हिंसा फिर शुरू हो गई। धर्म को लेकर भी ताने देना आम था।

'एक बार इतना मारा कि पूरा शरीर नीला पड़ गया। बाद में मैंने उन्हें फोन पर किसी से मेरी हत्या की बात करते सुना। उसी दिन मैंने अपनी मां को बुलाया और पटना आ गई।'

अब ससुराल वाले वापस बुला रहे हैं, लेकिन नूर नहीं जाना चाहतीं।

पलायन और बाल विवाह के खतरे

बाल विवाह पर चर्चा अक्सर गरीबी और पितृसत्ता तक सीमित रहती है। लेकिन हाल के वर्षों में जलवायु संकट और उससे जुड़ा पलायन एक अहम, लेकिन कम चर्चा में आने वाला कारक बनकर उभरा है।

स्कूल ऑफ ग्लोबल डेवलपमेंट में वरिष्ठ शोध सहयोगी और 'क्लाइमेट ब्राइड्स' नामक ओपन सोर्स मल्टीमीडिया प्लेटफ़ॉर्म की संचालक रीतिका रेवती सुब्रमणियन कहती हैं कि जलवायु परिवर्तन सीधे बाल विवाह नहीं 'कराता' है, बल्कि वह उन परिस्थितियों को बदल देता है जिनमें परिवार विवाह के फैसले लेते हैं।

वह बताती हैं, 'हमारे शोध और क्लाइमेट ब्राइड्स प्रोजेक्ट से पता चलता है कि जलवायु संकट परिवारों के श्रम, देखभाल और गतिशीलता के पैटर्न को बदल देता है। महाराष्ट्र के सूखा-प्रभावित मराठवाड़ा में हमने देखा कि 'गेट-केन' शादियां (गन्ना कटाई के लिए कराई जाने शादियां) कर दी जाती हैं, ताकि किशोर दंपति एक साथ गन्ना काटने के लिए प्रवास कर सकें। यहां शादी सामाजिक परंपरा भर नहीं, बल्कि श्रम-संगठन की रणनीति बन जाती है।'

यानी शादी एक 'सांस्कृतिक घटना' से ज्यादा एक 'आर्थिक रणनीति' बन जाती है।

पलायन, शिक्षा और बढ़ता जोखिम

रीतिका कहती हैं कि जलवायु से जुड़ा पलायन अक्सर लड़कियों की शिक्षा को सबसे पहले बाधित करता है, 'जब परिवार मौसमी काम के लिए या बाढ़-साइक्लोन के बाद विस्थापित होते हैं, तो लड़कियां स्कूल छोड़ देती हैं। वह नए और अस्थिर सामाजिक माहौल में पहुंचती हैं, जहां विवाह एक स्थिर विकल्प की तरह दिखने लगता है।'

उनके मुताबिक, विस्थापन अपने आप बाल विवाह नहीं कराता, लेकिन यह धीरे-धीरे उन रास्तों को संकरा कर देता है जो लड़कियों को शिक्षा और रोज़गार की ओर ले जा सकते थे।

नूर के मामले में भी यही हुआ। वह कभी स्कूल नहीं जा पाईं। अगर शिक्षा जारी रहती, तो शायद विवाह को ही 'एकमात्र विकल्प' न माना जाता।

'शादी सुरक्षा देगी' – एक सामाजिक भ्रम?

रीतिका बताती हैं कि पर्यावरणीय आपदाओं के बाद कई परिवार शादी को सुरक्षा के रूप में देखने लगते हैं, '2004 की सुनामी के बाद तमिलनाडु में हमने देखा कि कई किशोरियों की जल्दी शादी कर दी गई, क्योंकि परिवारों को लगा कि अनिश्चित हालात में शादी सामाजिक सुरक्षा देगी।'

यह निर्णय महज़ परंपरा का परिणाम नहीं, बल्कि सीमित विकल्पों के बीच परिवारों द्वारा लिया गया एक 'समझौता' होता है। बिहार जैसे राज्यों में, जहां हर साल बाढ़ और कृषि संकट से आय प्रभावित होती है, यह पैटर्न अलग रूप में दिखता है- पलायन से पहले या पलायन के दौरान शादी।

नीतियों में 'बाल संरक्षण' का लेंस गायब

रीतिका के अनुसार, 'अगर जलवायु नीतियों में जेंडर समानता और बाल संरक्षण को शामिल किया गया, तो यह सुनिश्चित किया जा सकता है कि पर्यावरणीय बदलाव का बोझ चुपचाप लड़कियों के भविष्य पर न डाला जाए।

कई विशेषज्ञ यह मानते हैं कि भारत में आपदा राहत, जलवायु अनुकूलन और पलायन नीतियां तो मौजूद हैं, लेकिन उनमें बाल विवाह रोकथाम को स्पष्ट रूप से जोड़ने की पहल सीमित है।

ज़मीनी हकीकत: कानून और समाज के बीच अंतर

पटना निवासी सुनीता, जो पिछले 12 वर्षों से रेनबो फांउडेशन (एनजीओ) के साथ जुड़कर बाल विवाह समेत कई मुद्दों पर काम कर रही हैं, बताती हैं कि बाल विवाह को रोकना केवल कानूनी लड़ाई नहीं, बल्कि सामाजिक संघर्ष भी है।

वह कहती हैं, 'हम लगभग 600-700 बच्चों के साथ काम करते हैं। अभिभावकों के साथ संवाद करते हैं, चाइल्डलाइन, पुलिस और अन्य संस्थाओं से समन्वय करते हैं। लेकिन कई बार शिकायत के बावजूद इसे 'परिवार का मामला' कहकर टाल दिया जाता है.'

उनके अनुसार, गरीबी, असुरक्षा और सामाजिक दबाव बाल-विवाह का मुख्य कारण हैं। जलवायु संकट और पलायन से जब आर्थिक अस्थिरता बढ़ती है, तो परिवार बेटियों की शादी को 'सुरक्षा' के रूप में देखने लगते हैं।

वह एक और जटिल पक्ष की ओर इशारा करती हैं- भावनात्मक दबाव।

'कई बार जब लड़कियां खुद शादी से इनकार करती हैं, तो माता-पिता कहते हैं – हमने तुम्हें इतनी मेहनत से पाला है, अगर तुम शादी नहीं करोगी तो हम आत्महत्या कर लेंगे। ऐसे में बच्चियां अपराधबोध में झुक जाती हैं। इस स्थिति में उनके अधिकारों की रक्षा करना और भी चुनौतीपूर्ण हो जाता है।'

बिहार में बाल विवाह स्थिति

एनएफएचएस-5 के आंकड़ों के अनुसार, बिहार में बाल विवाह में पिछले डेढ़ दशक में गिरावट आई है, लेकिन स्थिति अब भी गंभीर बनी हुई है।

एनएफएचएस-5 के सर्वे के मुताबिक, 20-24 वर्ष आयु वर्ग की लगभग 41% महिलाओं का विवाह 18 वर्ष से पहले हो चुका था। राज्य में पहली शादी की औसत आयु 2005-06 में 15.1 वर्ष से बढ़कर 2019-21 में 17.4 वर्ष हो गई है, फिर भी यह राष्ट्रीय औसत से लगभग 1.8 वर्ष कम है।

आंकड़े बताते हैं कि बाल विवाह का संबंध गहरी सामाजिक-आर्थिक असमानताओं से है। जिन लड़कियों की शिक्षा नहीं है, उनमें 63% का विवाह 18 वर्ष से पहले हो गया, जबकि उच्च शिक्षा प्राप्त करने वाली लड़कियों में यह अनुपात केवल 12% है। इसी तरह, सबसे गरीब तबके की 54% लड़कियों की शादी बालिग होने से पहले हो जाती है, जबकि सबसे संपन्न वर्ग में यह आंकड़ा 9% है।

ग्रामीण-शहरी अंतर भी स्पष्ट है- ग्रामीण क्षेत्रों में 43% लड़कियों की शादी 18 वर्ष से पहले हो जाती है, जबकि शहरी क्षेत्रों में यह अनुपात 28% है। अनुसूचित जाति/जनजाति समुदायों में यह दर 49% दर्ज की गई है।

जिलावार स्तर पर भी असमानताएं दिखती हैं। सुपौल जैसे जिलों में बाल विवाह की दर 56% तक है, जबकि सिवान में यह लगभग 21% है।

ये आंकड़े संकेत देते हैं कि बिहार में बाल विवाह केवल परंपरा का प्रश्न नहीं, बल्कि शिक्षा, गरीबी, ग्रामीण पिछड़ेपन और सामाजिक असमानताओं से गहराई से जुड़ा मुद्दा है, जिसे समझे बिना समाधान अधूरा रहेगा।

बाल विवाह खत्म होने में 300 साल लग सकते हैं

बाल विवाह पर वैश्विक स्तर पर प्रगति के बावजूद तस्वीर चिंताजनक बनी हुई है। यूनिसेफ़ (UNICEF) की 2023 की रिपोर्ट 'इज़ एन एंड टू चाइल्ड मैरिज विदिन रीच?' के अनुसार, मौजूदा रफ्तार जारी रही तो बाल विवाह को पूरी तरह समाप्त करने में लगभग 300 वर्ष लग सकते हैं।

दुनिया में आज करीब 64 करोड़ महिलाएँ और युवतियां ऐसी हैं जिनका विवाह 18 वर्ष की उम्र से पहले हो चुका था। इनमें लगभग 29 करोड़ दक्षिण एशिया में रहती हैं, जो वैश्विक कुल का लगभग आधा है। भारत में अकेले लगभग 21.7 करोड़ महिलाएँ ऐसी हैं जिनका विवाह बालिग होने से पहले हुआ था।

पहचान गोपनीय रखने के लिए बाल विवाह की शिकार हुई बच्ची का नाम बदल दिया गया है।

(बाल विवाह की सूचना देने के लिए चाइल्ड हेल्पलाइन 1098 या महिला हेल्पलाइन 1091 पर संपर्क करें।)

यह रिपोर्ट पॉपुलेशन फर्स्ट की 'लाडली मीडिया फेलोशिप 2026' के अंतर्गत तैयार की गई है। इस रिपोर्ट में व्यक्त विचार और मत लेखक के निजी हैं। लाडली तथा यूएनएफपीए (UNFPA) इन विचारों का अनिवार्य रूप से समर्थन नहीं करते हैं।

तस्वीर प्रतीकात्मक है।

https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/02/2026/%E%0A%4AC%E%0A%4BE%E%0A%4B%-2E%0A%4B%5E%0A%4BF%E%0A%4B%5E%0A%4BE%E%0A%4B-9%E%0A%95%4E%0A%-80%5E%0A%4AC%E%0A%4A%6E%0A%4B%2E%0A%4A4%E%0A%-80%5E%0A%95%4E%0A%4B%9E%0A%4BE%E%0A%4A%8E%0A-80%5%E%0A9%4C/

Story 10

The burden of life is increasing in adolescence (Translated from Marathi)

By Swapnil Shinde | Sakal

Types of 'secret child marriage' under the guise of love; The increasing rate in the district is worrying

Satara, 24: In Maharashtra, more than 30 thousand cases of missing or abduction of minor girls have been registered in the last two years (2024-25). This rate is also increasing in Satara district, which is a sign of a major social crisis. It is observed that many cases of missing girls end in secret child marriage. The silent consent of the society to child marriage under the pretext of 'love affair' and the apathy in the system are the reality that the progressive steps of the state are being set back.

The rate of missing girls in Satara district has increased continuously between 2022 and 2025. In Satara district, 277 cases have been registered in 2022, 292 in 2023, 316 in 2024, and 287 in 2025. Interestingly, in most of these cases, school and college girls have eloped and married. This is not just a 'love affair' but a burden of life that was imposed on them at a young age due to social and family pressure.

According to the latest report of the Women and Child Development Department, the administration has succeeded in preventing as many as 6,428 child marriages in the state in the last seven years. Although administrative vigilance has increased, the mentality in urban and rural areas has not changed. Where only 187 child marriages were prevented in 2018-19, this number has reached 1,533 in 2024-25. That is, the rate of child marriage prevention has increased eightfold. In Satara district, 22 child marriages were prevented in the district from September 1, 2023 to February 1, 2026, while 17 cases were registered in 2024 and 13 in 2025. In the eight months from April 2025 to November 2025, 945 child marriages were prevented in the state. However, the shocking thing is that in only 97 of these cases (about 10 percent), cases were registered against the parents. In the remaining 800+ cases, the parents were released only after taking a 'guarantee'. Due to the lack of strict action, many parents are secretly getting remarried without the administration's notice.

Although it is a success of the administration to prevent six thousand child marriages in a developed state like Maharashtra, on the other hand, as long as the kidnapping of a minor girl is ignored as a 'love affair' and secret child marriage, such 'missing' victims of the dreams of the virgins will continue to be victims.

Lack of coordination in the system

To prevent child marriage, Gram Sevak, Anganwadi Sevika and Police Patil have been appointed as 'Child Marriage Prevention Officers' in every village. However, in reality, this chain seems to be broken. Local leaders in the village often attend such marriages, due to which the administrative staff is afraid to provide information. The rate of registration of cases after marriage in the village is zero percent. Due to this, 'Child Marriage Free' committees are actually existing on paper.

Where to complain?

If child marriage or child prostitution is taking place in your area, immediately contact Child Helpline: 1098 (toll free) and website: stopchildmarriage.wcd.gov.in. The name of the informant is kept completely confidential.

"Currently, a new 'trend' of child marriage is being seen, which is largely due to social media and television media. The level of attraction among minor boys and girls has increased, and the escape from it is ultimately becoming the cause of child marriage. Just filing a case is not the solution. Unless the administration and society work towards the same goal, our girls are not safe. A policy change is needed to stop this trend."

-Adv. Dr. Suchitra, Ghogre-Katkar, (Child Rights Advocate)

https://www.esakal.com/premium-article/saptahik/rural-maharashtra-faces-rising-child-marriage-rates-due-to-poverty-seasonal-migration-and-lack-of-accessible-educational-facilities-amp17

3. Education Interrupted

Introduction

Education is one of the strongest protections against child marriage. However, many girls are forced to leave school because of poverty, migration, unsafe travel routes, lack of nearby schools, climate disasters, social customs, and pressure from families. Once girls drop out of school, the chances of early marriage increase significantly.

These stories focus on the barriers that prevent girls from continuing their education and building independent futures.

Articles Under This Theme

1. Vanita Bhatnagar – *2 Girls, 15 km, A World Apart — The Distance Between School and Child Marriage in Rajasthan*
2. Sharvan Kumar – हाईवे के उस पार कॉलेज, इस पार बाल विवाह का दबाव: पढ़ाई बचाने की जिद पर अड़ी *16* साल की दुर्गा
3. Sumitra Sahoo – *Child Marriage Rising in Odisha Due to Dropouts*
4. Suhail Bhat – *'I Missed My Childhood': Inside The Silent Reality Of Early Marriage Among Gujjar–Bakarwal Girls*
5. Swapnil Shinde – *Books are Out of Hand, Dreams are also Shattered!*

Story 11

2 girls, 15 km, a world apart — the distance between school and child marriage in Rajasthan

By Vanita Bhatnagar | theprint.in

There are grants and govt schemes galore but keeping girls out of child marriage is still an unfinished fight in Rajasthan. 'You cannot just give information about a scheme.'



Zayda at her study table in Jaipur, preparing for the Rajasthan Administrative Service (RAS) exam. She returned to school with support from Alwar Mewat Institute of Education and Development (AMIED) | Photo: Vanita Bhatnagar | ThePrint

Alwar: In Sorkha Khurd, one lament often comes up in everyday conversation: *"Beti jawaan ho jaaye toh ghar wale chain se nahi baithte"*—once a daughter comes of age, families cannot sit in peace. And when there are two daughters close in age, families often prefer to marry them off at the same time.

Barfina, 15, with radiant eyes and a long golden-brown braid, sits cross-legged on a woven charpai in the courtyard of her family's home. Her head is modestly covered, her back straight.

"I don't go to school now," she said quietly. "I used to go to madrasa. But when no other girl was coming, I stopped."

Barfina's sister, Alifna, is only a year older. Conversations about Alifna's marriage have already begun, and by extension, so have the unspoken assumptions about Barfina's future. Barfina still wants to study, but she doesn't know how to pick up the thread again.

"I don't know how or where to restart," she said. "There isn't enough money, and with this education gap, I don't think I would fit into the regular system. Anyway, in my house, marriage is seen as more important than education."

In their Meo community, the onset of puberty marks a girl as ready for marriage, irrespective of her chronological age.

Across town in Kishangarh Bas, Zayda's life once moved along a similar edge of inevitability. She left school after primary classes, but her fate changed about 10 years ago.

On a hot summer evening, she recalled, workers from a local NGO began going door to door in her village, speaking to parents who had never attended school themselves and urging them to send their daughters back to school. The workers spent evening after evening persuading families who believed education beyond a certain point was unnecessary or even dangerous for girls.

You cannot just give information about a scheme. You have to show them what it looks like

-Noor Muhammad, member secretary of AMIED

Slowly, the resistance of several families began to ease. Zayda eventually completed her Class 10 board examinations through the open school system. She now lives in Jaipur and is preparing for the Rajasthan Administrative Service (RAS) exam.

Zayda's story shows what is possible through sustained grassroots effort, yet the reach of these interventions remains limited. For every Zayda, there are still girls like Barfina who slip through the cracks.

The two live just 15 kilometres apart. The distance between their lives — and between a childhood and a child marriage — came down to who arrived at their door and then kept showing up.

"My father was against girls' education," Zayda recalled. "But after speaking with one of the grassroots workers, he began to reconsider and started thinking about the possibility."

Who gets a knock on the door?

Zayda's return to school after dropping out did not happen overnight. It was the result of a methodical, persistent campaign.

Field workers from the Alwar Mewat Institute of Education and Development (AMIED) became fixtures in her life, arriving in the evenings to sit with her parents and neighbours. Rather than just extolling the benefits of an education, they mapped out how girls who had dropped out could return through bridge courses or open schooling.

Gradually, the conversations began to have an effect.

“A few other young girls from my neighbourhood also started going back to school,” Zayda said.

Organisations such as AMIED have been working steadily across villages in the region for years, trying to counter a pattern where girls’ education is cut short by poverty, social expectations, and the looming prospect of early marriage.



Girls aged 12-16 who had dropped out of school take part in a district-level leadership programme organised by AMIED in Alwar | Special arrangement

It’s built up an extensive network, covering more than 350 villages in the Ramgarh, Kishangarh Bas, Umrain, Laxmangarh, and Tijara blocks of Alwar. Beyond the district, they also operate in Sapotra, Hindaun, and Karauli, reaching hundreds more villages.

Their teams navigate communities with large Dalit, tribal, OBC, and minority populations where multiple vulnerabilities— poverty, early marriage, educational exclusion — converge. The work begins with identifying girls who have slipped out of the education system, and then negotiating with parents. They visit homes repeatedly, countering fears about “safety” or “honour”, and reframing education as security rather than rebellion.

The organisation receives support from a mix of international philanthropy, domestic non-profits, and institutional partnerships, including Plan India, ActionAid Association, American Jewish World Service, Population Foundation of India, Childline India Foundation, Azim Premji Foundation, IPE Global, Nasim Foundation, and UNICEF Rajasthan, along with contributions from private family trusts.

Families say, 'Anyway, education will not change anything for us. Why take the trouble?'

-Seema, ASHA worker in Alwar

It all pays off when there's a story like Zayda's. Persistent engagement shifts family attitudes, a bridge course closes the learning gap, and an open school exam becomes a turning point.

But scale remains a challenge. For the hundreds of villages covered, there are thousands that have not been accessed. Barfina's village, Sorkha Khurd, is just 15 kilometres away from Kishangarh Bas, but it has never been reached.

Moreover, funding is precarious — grants tied to project cycles of three or five years, renewed only if donors are satisfied with outcomes.

The reach of government schemes is also patchy. Rajasthan's flagship incentive for girls, Laado Protsahan Yojana offers families up to Rs 1.5 lakh in direct transfers across seven milestones — from birth through to graduation or age 21— and has reportedly benefited lakhs of girls since it was rolled out in August 2024. But Barfina has never heard of the scheme.

The ASHA worker for her block, Seema, said families are informed about such schemes. But information alone is insufficient. When Seema tries to tell parents about restarting schooling through alternative routes, they often push back.

"Families say, 'Anyway, education will not change anything for us. Why take the trouble?'" Seema added.

Persistence makes the difference

The problem is not the absence of a scheme, but the lack of a ground force for persuasion.

Noor Muhammad, member secretary of AMIED, has worked in these blocks for decades. Most families here are first-generation learners, he said — for them, education is not a lived reality but an abstraction.

"You cannot just give information about a scheme. You have to show them what it looks like," he said.

In his experience, visible role models matter more than pamphlets.

Muhammad has observed anecdotally that fathers who work as drivers are often more willing to keep their daughters in school.

"Drivers travel. They see other towns, other families, other possibilities. Their horizon is slightly wider," he said.



Adults attend a community workshop organised by AMIED in Alwar to raise awareness about the importance of education | Special arrangement

Families rooted entirely in agricultural labour or confined to a single locality, however, often have no reference points for imagining different futures. In these communities, many students also struggle to adjust to a regular school environment. During moments of friction, encouragement and affirmation become the only things keeping a girl in the system.

AMIED's workers act on that insight. When a girl from the village scores well in Class 10, they carry that news door to door. When someone secures a job, however modest, they cite her as proof of what is possible. They repeatedly reassure families and girls that their effort matters, that progress is possible, and that education can still open doors.

Zayda is the embodiment of these possibilities, studying on a government scholarship, with her RAS tuition sponsored by AMIED. Her journey shows that the model works when the support is comprehensive.

How can scale be achieved?

Social norms do not transform on grant timelines. This is where innovative financing, such as outcome-based investing, could help drive long-term change.

"From my experience, girls' education and delayed marriage can be framed as investable impact outcomes, but not as conventional market opportunities," said Srichandana Nagoji, a CSR professional who has advised philanthropy and community initiatives across India and the APAC region. "Outcome-based and blended finance models, where the emphasis is on paying for verified social outcomes rather than financing activities or infrastructure, can be a strong model for CSR to explore."

In other words, programmes that keep girls in school and delay marriage can attract impact investors because the results are measurable, even if they do not generate commercial profits.

There is reasonably strong evidence that continuity in education is one of the most reliable protective factors against early marriage, according to Nagoji.

Issues like child marriage or girls' workforce participation don't resolve in 18-36 months. This creates a mismatch between social reality and financial design

-Srichandana Nagoji, CSR professional

National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) data shows that girls who complete secondary or higher education are far less likely to marry before 18 than those who finish only primary school. In Rajasthan, attendance drops sharply between ages 15 and 17—the same period when the risk of marriage spikes.

From a CSR and impact-investing perspective, this makes education retention, learning outcomes, and post-school transitions measurable outcomes that can be funded. In such models, funding is tied to results, organisations have flexibility to adapt programmes locally, and credible third-party verification ensures accountability.

One example is the Educate Girls Development Impact Bond (DIB)— the world's first DIB in education. Launched in 2015, the goal was to improve access to quality education for marginalised girls in rural Rajasthan. The model tied funding directly to outcomes: the UBS Optimus Foundation provided upfront capital of US$ 270,000 to the service provider, Educate Girls, while the Children's Investment Fund Foundation acted as the outcome payer, promising repayment with returns if agreed-upon targets were met.

Over three years, the programme worked across 166 schools in 140 villages, reaching 7,300 children. The results exceeded expectations: 116 per cent of the enrollment goal was achieved, bringing 768 out-of-school girls into the education system, while learning targets were surpassed by 160 per cent, with students showing gains equivalent to an additional year of instruction compared to their peers.



The central govt's 100-day Bal Vivah Mukt Bharat public awareness campaign was launched at Vigyan Bhawan in New Delhi in December 2025. It aims to make India child-marriage-free by 2030 | Photo: X/@@WCDRajasthan

But Nagoji warns that outcome-based financing is not a silver bullet.

"These models work best when outcomes are carefully chosen to avoid perverse incentives, the hardest-to-reach girls are not excluded, and rights-based safeguards are built into both design and monitoring," she said.

Despite clear successes, the model has not scaled widely so far. The structure is complex, requiring coordination between multiple stakeholders and careful programme design. Designing an outcome-based model requires legal structuring, outcome pricing, performance management, independent verification, and coordination across funders, implementers, and evaluators. Building governance systems for these interventions is expensive, and the overhead costs discourage traditional funders who prefer most funding to be spent directly on activities or beneficiaries, Nagoji said.

In this scenario, CSR capital is particularly well-suited to absorbing early risk, supporting experimentation, and funding the underlying systems that make such models viable.

"In India, governments and CSR funders are still more comfortable funding activities than paying explicitly for outcomes," Nagoji added. "Issues like child marriage or girls' workforce participation don't resolve in 18-36 months. This creates a mismatch between social reality and financial design."

Beyond schooling, Nagoji noted that skills-to-livelihood models are critical. In rural India, families often see limited economic returns to girls' education beyond a certain point, which weakens resistance to early marriage. Linking training with credible employment pathways, placement, and retention— rather than mere skill acquisition—can shift household decision-making around marriage.

The accountability vacuum

A sarpanch or ASHA worker may know a child marriage is being planned in their village but do nothing because of personal belief or social pressure. Similarly, there may be no one to monitor if a girl is coming to school or not.

Even when laws, schemes, and funds exist, enforcement often collapses at the village level.

"It's not so much a question of funding, it's a social issue," said Shireen Vakil, who has worked with philanthropic organisations and impact initiatives.

Large government campaigns struggle with the same problem. Under the "Bal Vivah Mukt Bharat" initiative, which aims to reduce child marriage by 10 per cent by 2026 and eliminate it by 2030, Alwar district has launched a 100-day campaign. The district administration and the District Child Protection Unit are coordinating *nukkad nataks*, conducting awareness drives at schools and anganwadi centres, and dispatching Jagrukata Rath (awareness vehicles) covering the entire district.



A nukkad natak (street play) staged as part of the 100-day Bal Vivah Mukt Bharat campaign | Photo: Vanita Bhatnagar | ThePrint

But Ravikant, the District Child Protection Officer, acknowledged that the campaign's success hinges on the same ground-level functionaries — sarpanches, patwaris, village development officers, Anganwadi workers — who are already inconsistently engaged. There is no standardised training programme for any of them on child marriage prevention.

"Each department conducts its own sessions, such as GPDP [Gram Panchayat Development Plan] training for sarpanches, regular workshops for Anganwadi workers, and occasional other training," Ravikant said.

Programs often operate independently, with no standardised metrics to measure success or overlapping benefits. Multiple schemes target the same groups—pregnant women, adolescent girls, or school-going children—making it difficult to measure which interventions are working. Experts agree that better data sharing across health, education,

and welfare systems would help establish robust investment tracking mechanisms for transparency and accountability. Funding operational research is also crucial to estimate the actual effectiveness of interventions and further tailor programs.



A Jagrukata Rath (awareness vehicle) travels across the district as part of a campaign against child marriage. Enforcement, however, is often hindered by ingrained social norms | Photo: Vanita Bhatnagar | ThePrint

Lacunae also exist in consequences for inaction on the ground.

In Alwar, the jati panchayat often intervenes when a child marriage is annulled, sometimes ostracising the family from the community. Ravikant said he was not aware of a single case where a sarpanch or local official faced consequences for failing to report or prevent a child marriage.

Vakil said what's needed is a system that doesn't rely on individual initiative. Birth registration, school enrolment records, Aadhaar-linked age data, and marriage registrations could be layered to automatically flag girls at risk of early marriage. Anonymous reporting mechanisms would let people raise concerns without exposing themselves to community pressure. Village-level dashboards could recognise communities that successfully prevent child marriage, linking tangible rewards, grants, infrastructure, recognition to positive outcomes. Further, random social audits, modeled on MGNREGA processes, could independently verify cases and create fear of detection for those ignoring the law.

Zayda was married at 20 and widowed within a year. But her education became her anchor, giving her the ability to support herself and pursue her own aspirations even after a crisis. Barfina, meanwhile, is still waiting for someone to knock on her door.

This story is part of a series on child marriage reported under the Laadli Media Fellowship 2026, supported by UNFPA. Read part 1 here.

(Edited by Asavari Singh)

https://theprint.in/ground-reports/2-girls-15-km-a-world-apart-the-distance-between-school-and-child-marriage-in-rajasthan/2872160/

Story 12

हाईवे के उस पार कॉलेज, इस पार बाल विवाह का दबाव: पढ़ाई बचाने की जिद पर अड़ी 16 साल की दुर्गा

By Shravan Kumar | Mooknayaknews.com



Brooms-made-by-Durga-and-her-family-are-stacked-along-the-roadside-ready-to-be-sold-to-earn-a-living-scaled.jpg

यह लेख **श्रवण कुमार** द्वारा लाड़ली मीडिया फैलोशिप के अंतर्गत लिखा गया है। लाड़ली मीडिया और UNFPA द्वारा समर्थित यह फैलोशिप मीडिया में लैंगिक समानता, लड़कियों की शिक्षा और बाल विवाह जैसे मुद्दों पर संवेदनशील और जमीनी रिपोर्टिंग को बढ़ावा देती है।

इस लेख में व्यक्त विचार लेखक के हैं। लाड़ली मीडिया और UNFPA इन विचारों से आवश्यक रूप से सहमत हों, यह आवश्यक नहीं है।

राजस्थान के बालोतरा में सिणधरी जाने वाले हाईवे के किनारे बसी बागरिया समुदाय की एक अस्थायी बस्ती में रहने वाली 16 साल की दुर्गा ने बाल विवाह के दबाव के बावजूद पढ़ाई छोड़ने से इनकार कर दिया है। दसवीं में 76 प्रतिशत अंक लाने वाली दुर्गा आज झाड़ू बनाते हुए भी अपनी पढ़ाई फिर से शुरू करने का सपना देख रही है।

प्लास्टिक में संभालकर रखी एक मार्कशीट
करीब दस बाई आठ फीट की झोपड़ी के अंदर दुर्गा चटाई पर बैठी है। सामने खजूर के सूखे पत्तों का ढेर पड़ा है।
वह पत्तों को बराबर करती है, उन्हें मोड़ती है और मजबूत धागे से कसकर बांध देती है। थोड़ी देर में एक झाड़ू तैयार हो जाती है।
इसी ढेर के पास एक प्लास्टिक कवर में रखा कागज दिखाई देता है।
यह उसकी दसवीं कक्षा की मार्कशीट है।
उसमें 76 प्रतिशत अंक दर्ज हैं।
दुर्गा उसे संभालकर रखती है।
वह कहती है,
“मैंने 11वीं में साइंस ली थी। बायोलॉजी पढ़ना चाहती थी। डॉक्टर बनना चाहती थी।”
यह कहते हुए उसकी नजर अनायास ही सामने खड़े कॉलेज की ओर चली जाती है।



Durga-smiles-her-short-hair-a-symbol-of-her-choice-to-delay-marriage-radiating-happiness-at-the-chance-to-continue-her-education-

पढ़ाई शुरू हुई, लेकिन बीच में रुक गई

दुर्गा का परिवार मूल रूप से भीलवाड़ा जिले की आसिंद तहसील के पराग गांव का रहने वाला है।
रोजगार की तलाश में परिवार कुछ साल पहले बालोतरा आ गया।
दसवीं कक्षा पास करने के बाद दुर्गा ने वहीं 11वीं कक्षा में दाखिला लिया था और पढ़ाई शुरू कर दी थी।

लेकिन अर्धवार्षिक परीक्षाओं के दौरान उसके दादा का निधन हो गया।
परिवार की परिस्थितियां अचानक बदल गईं।
इसके बाद दुर्गा को पढ़ाई बीच में ही छोड़कर बालोतरा अपने माता-पिता के पास लौटना पड़ा।
यहीं से उसकी पढ़ाई रुक गई।



Durgas-younger-brother-who-has-never-been-to-school-helps-with-broom-making-beside-her-showing-the-challenges-of-continuing-education-in-their-community-scaled

झाड़ू बनाकर चलता है परिवार

दुर्गा के बड़े पापा 65 वर्षीय पेमा राम बताते हैं कि उनका परिवार बागरिया समुदाय से है और पिछले लगभग पांच साल से बालोतरा में झाड़ू बनाने का काम कर रहा है।उनकी ही समुदाय के करीब 10 से 15 परिवार सड़क किनारे इस बस्ती में रहते हैं।
यहां लगभग 30 से 35 बच्चे 18 वर्ष से कम उम्र के हैं।
ज्यादातर बच्चे परिवार के साथ झाड़ू बनाने के काम में हाथ बंटाते हैं।
दुर्गा उन बच्चों में से एक है जिसने दसवीं कक्षा तक पढ़ाई पूरी की है।



Durgas-Elder Uncle -Pema-Ram-sells-brooms-on-the-roadside-working-hard-to-support-the-family-amidst-daily-struggles-scaled.

बस्ती जहां स्कूल से ज्यादा काम दिखता है

इस बस्ती में शौचालय नहीं हैं।
पीने का पानी लोगों को पैसे देकर टैंकर से खरीदना पड़ता है।
बिजली के कनेक्शन भी अस्थायी हैं।
सबसे नजदीकी सरकारी स्कूल लगभग तीन से चार किलोमीटर दूर है।
पास के दुकानदार गिगू खान बताते हैं,
"यहां पानी भी पैसे देकर लाना पड़ता है। बिजली भी ठीक से नहीं है और शौचालय की कोई व्यवस्था नहीं है।"
बस्ती के पास होटल चलाने वाले मंगलाराम कहते हैं,
"मैंने यहां के बच्चों को कभी स्कूल जाते हुए नहीं देखा। ज्यादातर बच्चे परिवार के साथ काम में लगे रहते हैं। कई बार प्रशासन के लोग आते हैं, लेकिन पढ़ाई की बात करने के बजाय इन्हें यहां से हटाने के लिए कहते हैं।"

पढ़ाई रुकी, तो शादी की चर्चा

जब दुर्गा की पढ़ाई रुक गई तो घर में उसकी शादी की चर्चा शुरू हो गई।
परिवार के लोग कहते हैं कि वह अब बड़ी हो रही है और उन्हें "घर की इज्जत" का भी ध्यान रखना पड़ता है।
भारत में बाल विवाह निषेध अधिनियम, 2006 के अनुसार लड़कियों की शादी की न्यूनतम उम्र 18 वर्ष है।
इसके बावजूद राष्ट्रीय परिवार स्वास्थ्य सर्वेक्षण (NFHS-5) के अनुसार राजस्थान में 20 से 24 वर्ष की आयु वर्ग की लगभग एक चौथाई महिलाओं की शादी 18 वर्ष से पहले हो चुकी थी।



Sharvan-Kumar-sits-with-Durga-and-her-family-talking-to-them-about-their-lives-and-Durgas-story.

दुर्गा का फैसला

दुर्गा ने शादी के प्रस्ताव को स्वीकार नहीं किया।
वह कहती है,
“मैंने साफ कह दिया — पहले पढ़ाई करूंगी, शादी बाद में।”
जब परिवार का दबाव बढ़ा तो उसने अपने बाल छोटे कर लिए।
फिलहाल उसकी शादी तय नहीं हुई है।

प्रशासन का पक्ष

इस मामले में बालोतरा के उपखंड अधिकारी (SDM) अशोक कुमार कहते हैं कि प्रशासन झुग्गी बस्तियों में रहने वाले बच्चों को शिक्षा से जोड़ने की कोशिश कर रहा है।
वे कहते हैं,
“हम प्रयास कर रहे हैं कि झुग्गी क्षेत्रों में रहने वाले बच्चों को स्कूल से जोड़ा जाए। नगर पालिका को भी निर्देश दिए गए हैं कि ऐसे परिवारों को शिक्षा से जोड़ने में सहयोग करें।”
हालांकि वे यह भी मानते हैं कि सड़क किनारे बसी अस्थायी और प्रवासी बस्तियों तक लगातार पहुंच बनाए रखना आसान नहीं होता।
उनके अनुसार,
“इन परिवारों का अक्सर स्थान परिवर्तन होता रहता है। ऐसे में बच्चों की पढ़ाई को लगातार ट्रैक करना चुनौतीपूर्ण हो जाता है।”

एक सपना जो अभी बाकी है

दुर्गा फिर झाड़ू बांधने लगती है।
काम करते हुए वह धीमी आवाज में कहती है,
“मैंने 76 प्रतिशत अंक लिए हैं। इसका मतलब है कि मैं पढ़ सकती हूं।”
हाईवे के एक तरफ कॉलेज खड़ा है — अवसर का प्रतीक।
दूसरी तरफ झोपड़ियां हैं — अस्थिर जीवन का प्रतीक।
इन दोनों के बीच बैठी एक किशोरी अपनी शादी टालकर सिर्फ एक मौका मांग रही है।
दुर्गा कहती है,
“शादी इंतजार कर सकती है, लेकिन पढ़ाई नहीं।”

बाल विवाह रोकने के लिए काम कर रहे सामाजिक संगठन

बालोतरा और आसपास के क्षेत्रों में बाल विवाह की समस्या को लेकर कुछ सामाजिक संगठन भी सक्रिय हैं। इनमें से एक है **Sharsathi Foundation**, जो समुदाय स्तर पर बाल विवाह रोकने और जागरूकता फैलाने का काम करती है।

संस्था से जुड़े प्रतिनिधि **Mahesh Kumar** बताते हैं कि पिछले कुछ वर्षों में लोगों में कानून को लेकर जागरूकता बढ़ी है, लेकिन सामाजिक दबाव अभी भी एक बड़ी चुनौती है।

वे कहते हैं,

“अब ज्यादातर परिवार जानते हैं कि लड़कियों की शादी की कानूनी उम्र 18 साल है। लेकिन जब कोई लड़की पढ़ाई छोड़कर घर पर बैठ जाती है, तो परिवार और समाज दोनों की ओर से शादी का दबाव बढ़ने लगता है।”

वहीं लड़कियों की शिक्षा को बढ़ावा देने वाली संस्था **Educate Girls** से जुड़े फील्ड कोऑर्डिनेटर **Krishna Kumar** का कहना है कि माध्यमिक शिक्षा के बाद का समय लड़कियों के लिए सबसे संवेदनशील होता है।

वे बताते हैं,

“कक्षा 10 के बाद अगर किसी कारण से लड़की की पढ़ाई छूट जाती है, तो कई परिवारों में शादी की बात जल्दी शुरू हो जाती है। इसलिए लड़कियों को स्कूल में बनाए रखना बाल विवाह रोकने का सबसे प्रभावी तरीका है।”

https://www.mooknayaknews.com/2026/03/%E0%A4%B9%E0%A4%BE%E0%A4%88%E0%A4%B5%E0%A5%87-%E0%A4%95%E0%A5%87-%E0%A4%89%E0%A4%B8-%E0%A4%AA%E0%A4%BE%E0%A4%B0-%E0%A4%95%E0%A5%89%E0%A4%B2%E0%A5%87%E0%A4%9C-%E0%A4%87%E0%A4%B8-%E0%A4%AA%E0%A4%BE/

Story 13

Child Marriage Rising in Odisha Due to Dropouts (Translated from Odia)

By Sumitra Sahoo | Thesakala.in

- **Social customs and traditions are one of the major reasons**
- **Nabarangpur and Nayagarh lead the list**

Bhubaneswar (Sumitra Sahu) — The Odisha government is implementing various schemes to completely eradicate child marriage. Crores of rupees are being spent from the state treasury for this purpose. However, due to a lack of sincerity in implementation and the indifference of administrative officials, Odisha's average child marriage rate remains ahead of the national average, setting a dubious record. If this trend continues, questions arise over whether the government's target of making Odisha a "child marriage-free state" by 2030 can be achieved. According to information provided by the Odisha government in the ongoing session of the Legislative Assembly, based on the National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5) report, while the national child marriage rate stands at 23.3%, 12 districts in Odisha have even higher rates. The districts recording alarming figures include:

Nabarangpur	: 39.4%
Nayagarh	: 35.7%
Koraput	: 35.5%
Rayagada	: 33.2%
Malkangiri	: 32.4%
Mayurbhanj	: 31.3%
Keonjhar	: 29%
Gajapati	: 28.1%
Balasore	: 26.4%
Boudh	: 25.3%
Angul	: 25%

Over the past 6 years, 8,159 child marriages have been recorded in the state. Ganjam district reported 966 cases, Koraput 636, while Nabarangpur topped the list with 1,347 cases. Notably, districts like Ganjam and Gajapati, which were once declared child marriage-free, are again seeing a rise in cases due to the reasons mentioned above.

Reasons for the Increase in Child Marriage:

Despite laws and schemes, child marriage is increasing rather than decreasing due to multiple social, economic, and traditional factors. In Nabarangpur district, which leads in child marriage cases, school dropouts are a major cause. According to the NFHS report, only 15% of girls in the district pursue higher education after matriculation. This has two primary reasons. First, social customs and traditions. The district has 13 major communities and sub-communities (including Bhadr, Gond, Paraja, etc.), totaling around 28 groups, many of them tribal. Various tribal customs and traditions prevail. For example, families often rush to marry off girls as soon as they turn 15, believing that marrying at this age secures the girl's future, prevents her from eloping, and ensures a suitable groom is available. Delaying marriage is seen as risky.

In some communities, elopement (locally called "udulia") is accepted or even viewed positively by families, unlike in mainstream society where it is considered shameful. Second, educational infrastructure issues. Schools are not available in every village. Children, especially adolescent girls, must travel long distances through forest paths to attend school in other villages. Parents often hesitate to let girls go alone due to safety concerns, leading to dropouts and early marriage. The number of higher secondary schools is low, and colleges are distant with limited seats in Nabarangapur district. Every year, about 15,000 students appear for matriculation exams, but total seats in government and private colleges are only around 9,000. Of the remaining 6,000, about 2,000 affluent students go outside the district for studies, leaving around 4,000 who pass matric but drop out due to lack of opportunities, often becoming victims of child marriage. Some migrate to neighboring Chhattisgarh for chili farming or to Hyderabad for plumbing work. Boys and girls live together there; when they return and the girl is found pregnant, families are forced to arrange marriage. Festivals like Chaiti and Mandei are considered auspicious for marriage, so many adolescents elope during these times, and families readily agree.

Government Efforts to Curb Child Marriage:

The government has launched several programs, but they are not yielding desired results. Accurate data on dropouts is not provided by the education department. The "Adwika" program is held every Saturday to train and raise awareness among adolescents on various themes (12 themes over 12 months). Meetings are held with community leaders and the District Collector to inform them about the ill effects of child marriage and direct them to sensitize their communities. However, some leaders remain silent to protect their positions, and sarpanches do not oppose villagers due to vote considerations. Instructions have been issued to temples, mosjid's, and churches to verify the ages of bride and groom during marriages. Those providing false information or solemnizing such marriages face legal action. Despite these measures, dropout rates remain high in the district, and social customs continue to be a major driver of child marriage. In Nayagarh district, child marriage rates are also rising, primarily due to elopements (girls running away with boys). Boys also engage in similar acts, but such cases are underreported. Many leave the village under the pretext of work or visiting relatives. Often, unwanted newborns (girls) from neighboring districts are abandoned in Nayagarh, tarnishing its image. The District Child

Protection Officer states that, high elopement rates contribute to child marriages. Parents are held responsible, as despite awareness efforts, their indifference prevents children from becoming aware. Many refuse to send children to hostels for education and prioritize marriage instead. Awareness programs are conducted in schools, communities, blocks, and districts, along with reviews through PLCPC, BLCPC, and task forces. In February 2026, the District Collector directed suspension of frontline workers (Asha, Anganwadi, ANM) if they fail to report planned child marriages or pregnancies, as they are in direct contact with families.

Adolescent girls (10–19 years) are tracked via the "Aliva" register at 1,584 Anganwadi centers to prevent them from leaving the district before age 19. Marriage registers have been provided to 250 temples, 7 masjid's, and 1 church.

Dropout figures remain high: last year, 1,024 students dropped out in the district. Deputy Chief Minister and Minister for Women & Child Development, Smt. Pravati Parida, highlighted five key reasons: social customs and traditional beliefs, gender inequality, poverty, social insecurity, and lack of education among adolescent girls.

Natural disasters increase migration during droughts, disrupting education and leading to dropouts and early marriages. Some cases involve attraction to neighboring boys, leading to relationships and forced marriages. Experts like ACTIONAID's national project head Ghasiram Panda note that economic distress is a major cause. Fear from cases like Nirbhaya or Abhaya makes parents marry daughters early to protect family honor. Inter-caste relationships or college education raise fears of elopement. Compared to neighboring states like Jharkhand, Bihar, and Chhattisgarh, child marriage is lower in Odisha.

Success Story in Preventing Child Marriage:

-2year effort prevented 15 child marriages.

In Sahaspur village, Ganjam district, Asha Sahu courageously stopped her own child marriage and prevented over 15 others. Despite family opposition, community criticism, and threats, she pursued her dream of becoming an IAS officer. She now participates in "Adwika" programs to raise awareness about the physical and mental harms of child marriage. Her efforts have inspired local youth to prioritize education over early marriage. She has been honored for her courage.

Government's Goal and Programs by 2030:

The target is to make Odisha child marriage-free by 2030. The «State Action Plan to End Child Marriage» began in October 2019. Special campaigns include «Nirbhaya Kadi» in Ganjam, «Sankalp» in Subarnapur, "Aparajita" in Koraput, etc.The focus is on addressing root causes through preventive activities. The Odisha Child Marriage Prohibition Act exists, with District Collectors as nodal officers.The "Adwika" program has spent ₹12.49 crore in the last 2 years.

Legal Framework:

The Odisha Child Marriage Prohibition Act2006- (amended in 2019) includes task forces at panchayat level, quarterly reviews, awareness in Anganwadi centers, police assistance, campaigns on Akshaya Tritiya, etc. CDPOs, BDOs, hostel wardens, etc., are designated as Child Marriage Prohibition Officers (CMPOs). School principals and college heads also share responsibility.

Research Conclusions and Recommendations:

Government schemes spend large amounts, but their district-level effectiveness and review are lacking. Illiteracy hinders message delivery. Lack of education and awareness leads girls to view marriage as life's ultimate goal. In patriarchal society, many girls cannot raise their voice. Economic distress, customs, traditions, and culture promote child marriage, forcing girls to accept it unwillingly. Economic hardship in families is a major driver. To achieve the 2030 goal, stronger administrative and policy actions are needed: direct interaction with recorded cases, accurate cause analysis, policy recommendations, warnings, exemplary action, and strict penalties for duty lapses. Only then can Odisha realistically become child marriage-free by 2030.

https://www.thesakala.in/latest-odisha-news/child-marriage-on-the-rise-in-odisha-due-to-dropouts/article-45157

Story 14

‘I Missed My Childhood’: Inside The Silent Reality Of Early Marriage Among Gujjar–Bakarwal Girls

By Suhail Bhat | Feminisminindia.com

How poverty, gender norms, and tribal marginalisation shape the lives of young Gujjar–Bakarwal girls in Jammu and Kashmir.



Married at 15, Salma Banu now lives in a small wooden house with her husband and three children.

It is seven in the morning in Aragam, a tribal village in north Kashmir’s Bandipore district. The temperature hovers around 2°C. In an open cowshed, 19-year-old Razia Hussain stands wrapped in a faded woollen shawl, scattering fodder before two cows. Her fingers are stiff from the cold. She pauses briefly to rub her hands together, then resumes.

This is how her day begins. Every day.

After feeding the cattle, she walks straight to the kitchen. The water is boiled for the tea, and the dough is kneaded for the flatbread. The utensils have been scrubbed, and the floors are swept. By the time the sun rises over the village, Razia has already been working for hours.

'*There is no fixed time to rest*,' she says. '*From morning till night, I keep working.*'

Razia studied until class 9. She says she enjoyed school and imagined a different future for herself. '*I wanted to become a doctor,*' she says, her voice steady. '*In our Gujjar community, we don't have enough doctors. I wanted to help my people.*'

Even illness does not interrupt Razia's routine. '*Whether I am sick or tired, I have to wake up early*,' she says. '*There is no one to share the work with. Everything falls on me.*'

At the age of 17, her marriage was fixed. Soon after, her books were packed away. '*I cried a lot when I left school,*' she recalls. '*I didn't want to get married so early.*' Now 19, she says, '*I feel my childhood ended very quickly*. *Sometimes I see girls going to school, and I remember my own days as a schoolgirl.*'

Even illness does not interrupt Razia's routine. '*Whether I am sick or tired, I have to wake up early*,' she says. '*There is no one to share the work with. Everything falls on me.*'

A village-wide pattern of child and early marriages

Aragam has more than 400 households, and many belong to the Gujjar community, which is part of the larger Gujjar–Bakarwal tribal population that makes up nearly 11.9 per cent of Jammu and Kashmir's residents. Known for their pastoral livelihoods and seasonal migration between hills and plains, the community has preserved its distinct cultural and social practices.

Among these social practices is the early marriage of girls, which is found in several pockets.

Jammu and Kashmir reports relatively low numbers of registered child marriage cases compared to several other Indian states. However, local activists and researchers caution that these figures may not capture the full picture in remote tribal belts, where age documentation is inconsistent, and marriages are often informal.

Official data presented in the Parliament in recent years shows that Jammu and Kashmir reports relatively low numbers of registered child marriage cases compared to several other Indian states. However, local activists and researchers caution that these figures may not capture the full picture in remote tribal belts, where age documentation is inconsistent, and marriages are often informal.

Further, in migratory communities, the absence of birth certificates can make age verification difficult, and the enforcement of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act uneven.

In villages like Aragam, girls often leave school not because of academic failure, but because marriage is seen as the natural next step.

Sent 250 kilometres away

Salma Banu was only fifteen-years-old when she was married. She was a class 10 student at the time. Salma grew up in Rajouri, but her marriage took her nearly 250 kilometres north to a village in Baramulla district.

'*I was still playing with children of my age,*' she recalls. '*I didn't even understand what marriage truly meant.*'

'*My favourite subject was Urdu*,' she says. '*I loved reading and writing. I thought I would study further*.' Instead, she was sent to a new household in a different district. '*I was still playing with children of my age,*' she recalls. '*I didn't even understand what marriage truly meant.*'

The transition was abrupt, both geographically and emotionally. '*Everything happened very fast,' she says. 'I was not mentally prepared*.'

For seven years after her marriage, she did not conceive. In her husband's village, questions followed. She describes a period marked by medical visits, whispered conversations, and incessant scrutiny of her body.



Married at 15, Salma Banu now lives in a small wooden house with her husband and three children, carrying responsibilities she took on too soon. *Image Credit: Suhail Bhat*

'There was weakness in my body,' she says. 'I was very young and not strong enough.'

In those years, the pressure she faced was not about education, like it was for the other girls her age, but about fertility. She gradually learnt to do household work, adjusting to expectations she says she barely understood at first.

But she does not frame her regret in dramatic terms. Looking back, she says, 'If I had continued my studies, maybe my life would have been different.' Adding, 'Girls should not be married when they are still children.'

Her family, like many others, struggled financially. Marriage was not only viewed as security, but also as reducing financial responsibilities at home by one.

Mobility, schooling, and implementation gaps

For Gujjar–Bakarwal families who migrate seasonally with their livestock, access to schooling is already precarious. Children may enrol in one school during winter and miss months during the summer move to higher pastures. Some districts operate seasonal schools, but continuity isn't a guarantee. Given this context, girls' education is often the first to be interrupted, and often permanently so.



Gujjar-Bakarwal families sit outside their makeshift tarpaulin shelters, soaking in the afternoon sun at the end of February in Tapper village, Baramulla. With limited protection from the cold, they spread blankets on the bare ground while children play nearby. Image Credit: Suhail Bhat

In several tribal hamlets, teachers and activists say that once a girl crosses mid-adolescence, concerns about safety, family honour, and economic strain converge. The decision to marry becomes a pragmatic concern. Boys, by contrast, are more likely to continue their education or seek wage work.

***Access to health services** adds another layer of complexity. Primary health centres are frequently located far from migratory routes. Adolescent pregnancies, local health workers say, can **carry higher risks** of anaemia and complications, though systematic data specific to nomadic populations remain limited.*

Climate pressures, such as shrinking pastures and unpredictable weather, have further strained pastoral incomes. In years of loss, early marriage is often viewed as a means of reducing financial burdens.

An attempt to shift the conversation

In Bandipora, 26-year-old Shahida Khanum, herself married at 18, has been working within the community to delay marriages and encourage girls to remain in school.



Shahida Khanum stands inside her tribal museum, where she teaches young girls knitting, Sozni embroidery, and the craft of making traditional Laska caps. Through skills and education, she is on a mission to empower girls in her community and discourage child marriage. Image Credit: Suhail Bhat

'I have seen how early marriage affects girls,' she says. 'It stops their education.'

Khanum visits tribal hamlets, speaking to parents and elders. Alongside these conversations, she runs small craft sessions for young women, teaching them beaded jewellery making, knitting, Sozni-style embroidery, and traditional Laska cap-making.

Her approach is pragmatic. Families, she says, respond more readily when they see income possibilities. 'When girls earn something, even a small amount, people start looking at them differently,' she says.

Progress is gradual. 'Change does not happen in one day,' she notes.

The law and its success in preventing child marriages

At the district level in Jammu and Kashmir, Child Marriage Prohibition Officers have been appointed to monitor violations and counsel families. Cases can be reported through the child helpline (1098), now linked to the national emergency helpline 112. Government campaigns under schemes such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao and Mission Shakti promote girls' education and awareness of legal age requirements.

Identifying underage marriages depends heavily on local reporting. In areas where marriages are conducted within tight-knit networks and documentation is sparse, detection is difficult.

Yet implementation in migratory and remote communities remains complex. Officials acknowledge that identifying underage marriages depends heavily on local reporting. In areas where marriages are conducted within tight-knit networks and documentation is sparse, detection is difficult.

Activists argue that enforcement alone cannot address the issue without parallel improvements in schooling access, transport, documentation, and adolescent health services tailored to pastoral life.

Before sunrise

Back in Aragam, the morning cold lingers in the cowshed long after daylight spreads across the fields.

Razia has finished feeding the cows. In the kitchen, dough rests beneath a cloth before being rolled into flatbread. Her schoolbooks, she says, are still somewhere in a trunk.

Occasionally, when she sees girls in uniforms walking down the road, she thinks about the white coat she once imagined she would someday wear. Then she takes a long breath and turns back to the mud stove.

https://feminisminindia.com/2026/03/05/child-marriage-in-kashmir-among-gujjar-bakarwal-girls/

Story 15

Books are out of hand, dreams are also shattered!

By Swapnil Shinde | Sakal

The burning of child marriage in Maharashtra

On one hand, we are talking about 'Digital India', on the other hand, in the rural soil of Maharashtra, even today, leaving the notebooks in the hands of a young girl, mehndi is being painted on her hands for premature marriage. The 'Balika Vadhu' serial on TV may have ended, but the 'Anandis' in real life are still around us. At an age when the burden of school and college bags should have been there, the heavy burden of life and motherhood is being placed on their shoulders.

Just to get rid of the wrong eyes, in the name of social security or to get rid of poverty, we are withering away a life that is blooming like a flower. It is true that the administration has prevented 6,428 marriages in the last 7 years, but the question remains whether we have been able to wipe away the fear in the eyes of the girls whose wedding pavilions were uprooted? Or did the law escape their dreams once again?

There are two main government sources regarding child marriage statistics in India. One is that according to the NFHS (National Family Health Survey), the rate of child marriage in India has decreased significantly, yet the figures are still alarming. In NFHS-4 (2015-16), 26.8 percent of women were married before the age of 18. In NFHS-5, this rate has decreased to 23.3 percent. This means that even today, about 1 in every 4 girls in India gets married before the age prescribed by law. Although the situation of child marriage in Maharashtra is slightly better than the national average, this rate is still alarming in some districts. According to the NFHS-5 (2019-21) report, the rate of marriage of girls under the age of 18 in Maharashtra is 21.9%. The same rate is 28.1 percent in rural areas. While it is 14.7 percent in urban areas. In 2015-16 (NFHS-4), this rate was 25.3%, which has now increased to 21.9%. That is, there has been a decrease of about 3.4% in Maharashtra. In some districts of Maharashtra, the rate of child marriage is much higher than the state average. This problem is more serious mainly in Marathwada and North Maharashtra. It is mainly in Parbhani (44.1%), Jalna (41.2%), Beed (39.8%), Aurangabad (37.8%), and Nanded (36.5%). Due to the vigilance of the Maharashtra Police and the Women and Child Development Department, the rate of registration of crimes has also increased. According to the NCRB, an average of 100 to 150 crimes are registered under the Child Marriage Prevention Act in Maharashtra every year. Mass marriages on Akshaya Tritiya and other auspicious occasions are a big challenge for the administration.

When the statistics are analyzed, it is seen that the highest rate of child marriage is in Marathwada. As many as 2,645 child marriages have been prevented in this division. On the other hand, Pune division is at the forefront in the implementation of the law, with the highest number of 153 crimes registered here. Beed district has topped the state in preventing child marriages, with the administration having succeeded in stopping 611 marriages in Beed alone.

According to the NCRB (National Family Health Survey), the number of cases registered under the 'Prevention of Child Marriage Act (PCMA), 2006' has increased in the last few years. This may mean that people are now coming forward to report such incidents. 523 cases were registered in 2019, 785 in 2020, 1,050 in 2021, and 1,002 in 2022. (The full reports for 2023, 2024, and 2025 are still in process, but as per the available information, the number is stable around 1000.)

There is a huge gap between the NCRB figures (1,000 cases) and the NFHS figures (23% of the population). This means that many child marriages are still being done secretly and are not registered with the police.

Every year after Dussehra, lakhs of sugarcane workers from Maharashtra migrate to sugar factories in western Maharashtra and Karnataka. This 6-month migration fuels child marriage. Parents fear for the safety of young girls while living in the migrated areas. Therefore, they tend to arrange the marriage of the girl before migration. The most important factor to prevent child marriage is the availability of educational opportunities near home and in the village. However, darkness begins with this basic need. On the contrary, at the government level, the provision of education is seen as an 'expense' and there is a tendency to close schools due to cluster or lack of expected numbers. When a school closes, the right of the children of that village to education is taken away. If you want to go to a distant school, you have to find a travel option that matches the time calculation. Only if that option is affordable, the chances of continuing education increase. If the school moves outside the village, often children have to stop their education and carry the burden of work like brick kilns and farm labor. For girls, this path is even more difficult. The possibility of continuing their education is almost over. That is why, rather than taking the 'risk' of sending a girl to a distant school, they would rather involve her in housework, agricultural work, and arrange marriages based on 'suitability' without considering her age. Education can increase the understanding of girls and empower them to think about good and bad. However, even today this fundamental need has not been fulfilled. There is also the thought that if a girl is married off to an economically weaker section, there will be fewer mouths in the household that will be the breadwinners and the cause of expenses.

(Interview with a girl whose child marriage was stopped)

Sona (name changed) | Age: 21 years | District: Beed

"When I was 15, I was in 10th standard. My father is a sugarcane worker. Every year after Kojagiri, he has to leave the village. When I went there, he used to fear for my safety. 'The girl has grown up, make her hands yellow,' relatives used to say. The marriage was arranged against my will. But the police came home and made my father afraid of the law.

Varsha Deshpande of the 'Lek Ladki Abhiyan' took responsibility for my education. Today, I have completed my nursing education and am working in a big hospital in Pune. With Varsha's support, I was able to fulfill my dream."

(A girl whose child marriage was stopped once, but was secretly arranged again six months later)

Sheetal (name changed) | Age: 16 years | District: Satara

"When I was in 9th standard, my parents had arranged for my marriage. The police stopped the marriage. My father wrote to the administration that he would not marry until he was 18. Six months later, when a meeting of the people of the community was held, my parents, fearing that 'it is better to get married than to listen to the people', took me to another district and secretly got me married. Today I am the mother of a baby. The law saved me once, but my fate and circumstances gave up again."

In view of the dire situation of child marriage in the state, a 100-day special campaign is being implemented in all districts. This campaign has started from December 4, 2025, and the district administration has been ordered to make special efforts for a child marriage-free India by March 2026. Along with them, social organizations like Janardan Waghmare Vikas Sanstha (Beed), Koro India, Kaypalat (Beed), Advocate Varsha Deshpande under the leadership of Ladki Abhiyan, UNICEF Maharashtra etc. working at the ground level have developed many models with the government for the 'Child Marriage Free Maharashtra' campaign. Some villages in Beed have resolved to be 'Child Marriage Free Villages'. While Divad Gram Panchayat (Tan. Maan) in Satara has presented a great model of a women and child friendly Gram Panchayat. The work done by this village to prevent child marriage and for the education of girls has been recognized at the national level. Although these efforts initiated at the government level against child marriage are positive, their comprehensiveness and concrete action are not yet visible. In a country of 130 crore citizens, there is a need to think of a larger picture while formulating awareness policies. There needs to be a capable working mechanism that can directly reach the villages and reach the villages. That is why the government needs to come out more aggressively and insist on implementation on this front. The statistics of child marriages from various surveys conducted by the government and social organizations are alarming. Although the rate of child marriage has reduced relatively, the challenge remains huge considering the target of 2030.

Important Points

- 5488 child marriages were prevented in the state in the last six years.
- 415 cases were registered against those violating the law.
- The highest number of 2645 marriages were prevented in Marathwada division.
- The highest number of 611 child marriages in the state were prevented in Beed.

Sugarcane workers and migration

In Beed and Jalna districts, families migrating for sugarcane harvesting have a high rate of child marriages for the safety of their daughters. Many NGOs have stated that during the lockdown in 2020-21, due to poverty and school closures, there was a temporary increase in the incidence of child marriage in Maharashtra. During Corona, the state transport department had stopped many buses at the Agar, which have not yet fully started. Also, due to the privatization of the ST Corporation and the decline in the number of passengers, the ST service in rural areas is running at a loss, due to which the decision was made to close the trains. Due to this, many people in remote and rural areas do not have means of communication, so the education of girls has stopped. Once school is over, the option of marriage seems close to parents. The rate of child marriage is highest among girls whose education has stopped at the secondary level.

Child marriage under the guise of love affairs

The significant increase in the cases of kidnapping of minor girls in Maharashtra in the last two years is a serious reminder not only of the law and order situation, but also of the collective failure of society. Looking at the available statistics, more than 31 thousand minor girls have been reported missing or kidnapped in the police department in the two years 2024 and 2025. This figure should be a warning bell for any sensitive society. In the year 2024, 485 cases of kidnapping of minor girls were registered and in the year 2025, 526 cases were registered.

It is clear that this number is increasing steadily compared to 2023. Notably, the proportion of girls aged 14 to 17.5 years is higher among the kidnapped girls. The main reasons behind this are love affairs, identification created through social media, and parental neglect. Shocking facts emerge from the girl's statement that the kidnapped minor girls got married after the police traced them.

"The 100-day special campaign launched by the administration from December 4, 2025 is welcome. But just demolishing the wedding pavilion does not mean stopping child marriage. Only when the government and society ensure that the education of the girl whose marriage is stopped continues, she gets safe travel from the village to school and her parents get financial support, will a truly child marriage-free Maharashtra be realized. Preventing child marriage does not mean just stopping a ceremony, but measures should be taken to restore her lost future to a girl." Adv. Varsha Deshpande, Lek Ladki Abhiyan, Satara

"In child marriage, the body of the girl is not fully developed. Especially the uterus and pelvic bones are immature. In such a situation, forced sexual intercourse not only causes physical pain, but also causes vaginal tearing and severe bleeding. This is a kind of silent sexual violence. If a teenage girl gets pregnant, her body is not able to sustain it, and the mother's own blood supply is low, so the fetus does not get any nourishment. The risk of maternal death due to high blood pressure increases twice during pregnancy at a young age. Also, such children are often underweight and malnourished. In this way, poverty and malnutrition are passed on from one generation to the next. " Dr. Mohan Sukhtankar, Senior Obstetrician and Gynaecologist.

4. Health, Trauma & Early Motherhood

Introduction

Child marriage has serious physical and emotional consequences. Young girls often face early pregnancies, maternal health risks, anaemia, depression, emotional isolation, domestic violence, and long-term trauma. Many are forced into motherhood before they are mentally or physically prepared.

These reports highlight the hidden health crisis connected to child marriage and the emotional struggles experienced by young girls and women.

Articles Under This Theme

1. Suhail Bhat – *Child Marriage Is Driving A Silent Health Crisis Among Tribal Women And Girls In Kashmir*
2. Pramila Krishnan – *A Troubling Blind Spot in TN's Maternal Health Success — Teen Pregnancies*
3. Sumitra Sahoo – *Adolescent Motherhood Rising in Odisha Due to Child Marriage*
4. SUBAIR P KHADER – *The Not-So-Desired Inheritance*

Story 16

Child Marriage Is Driving A Silent Health Crisis Among Tribal Women And Girls In Kashmir

By Suhail Bhat | Feminisminindia.com

In the lush green mountains of Jammu and Kashmir, young women and girls face a silent health crisis due to child marriages, early pregnancies, and poverty.



In a village in Baramulla, Jammu and Kashmir, Gujjar–Bakerwal families live in makeshift tents built from tarpaulin and scrap material

On a cold February morning in Kashmir, 35-year-old Myuna Akhtar walks towards a hand pump near her temporary shelter. Her back is bent, and it is difficult to discern her age. Her day starts by washing utensils in the cold water; she then collects firewood and prepares food for her children. Myuna is fasting, but she ensures her children are fed.

Myuna was only thirteen when she was married to a man nearly twice her age. She says that her father left her no other choice.

Myuna was only thirteen when she was married to a man nearly twice her age. She says that her father left her no other choice. She smiles weakly and says, 'I was just a child. There was family pressure. But I didn't even understand what marriage meant.'

Out of her thirteen pregnancies, four of her children died due to preterm births and illness. With tears in her eyes, she says, 'I am thankful to Allah that nine of them survived.' She describes her life as a constant cycle of pregnancies. 'I feel like I was born to give birth and feed them,' she says. Quietly adding, 'No one asked me if I was ready physically or emotionally to have children.'

Myuna's pregnancies have taken a toll on her health. 'I am no longer able to stand for long hours. I don't know who will care for my kids now.' Doctors warn that repeated, closely spaced pregnancies weaken the spine and pelvic muscles, especially when nutrition is poor. Myuna suffers from many health issues. She experiences constant back pain, fatigue, and anxiety. But she has little time to address her health. 'I am in pain all the time,' she says. 'But I still have to cook, clean, fetch water, and look after the children and my husband. If I stop, everything stops.'

"There isn't enough space. Sometimes I feel that I have been living in hell all these years."

Today, Myuna shares a home with 11 family members. The cramped living quarters afford no safety or privacy, and offer few opportunities for rest. 'One child is crying, another is asking for milk, and another is making a mess,' she says. Adding, 'There isn't enough space. Sometimes I feel that I have been living in hell all these years.'

Myuna was only 13 when she was married. She remembers the pain she experienced in the days after her wedding. 'Our shelters are close to each other. Even if I wanted to scream, I couldn't because everyone would hear it,' she says. Quietly remarking, 'Who could I complain to?'



Thirty-five-year-old Myuna Akhtar prepares bread over a mud stove as her children wait nearby inside their temporary shelter. Image Credit: Suhail Bhat

Myuna belongs to the Gujjar-Bakarwal community, who practice seasonal migration. The community migrates from Pir Panjal in Jammu to the higher pastures of Kashmir with their cattle in the summer. In the winter, they return to their homes. They live on small pieces of land, setting up temporary shelters made of tin sheets and plastic.

She says that within the community, girls are often seen only as future wives and mothers. Their age is rarely taken into account, and their consent isn't sought. 'No one asks us what we want,' she says. She adds, 'If a boy is born, there is a celebration. But when it's a girl, they begin to think of her marriage.

*Myuna says that a girl's entire life can be changed by **child marriage**, before she even understands the weight of this decision that has been made for her. But Myuna's story is only one of many.*

Shabnam's story

50 kilometres away, in another village in Kashmir's Bandipora, 27-year-old Shabnam Akhtar is wearing a faded green pheran. Inside her small, dark shelter, smoke from a mud stove is spreading across the room. She and her children are coughing. The children have soot on their bodies. They walk barefoot and without proper clothes.

Shabnam was married at seventeen-years-old. 'My aim was to study more,' she says. 'But marriage has ruined my dreams.' Shabnam became pregnant in the first year of her marriage. She didn't have regular medical check-ups because the hospitals were far and hardly affordable. 'Sometimes I did not have the money for the commute,' she says.



Twenty-seven-year-old Shabnam Akhtar sits by the river holding her child, taking a brief pause amid the daily struggles of life in the settlement. Image Credit: Suhail Bhat

'I still remember when I experienced pain during my first pregnancy; there was no doctor nearby,' she recalls. 'I thought I would die, but someone managed to arrange a car.' She says medicines were also often unavailable. Sometimes she relied on home remedies, sometimes she would simply wait for the pain to pass.

Early marriage, she says, brought health problems she still carries. She doesn't feel strong enough to manage her household. She says, 'My body feels much older than that of someone my age.' But the impact is not just physical. 'Mentally, I feel tired all the time,' she says. 'There is constant pressure to manage the house, the children, and the animals. There is no rest. Sometimes I feel anxious for no reason, and I cry alone.'

Child and early marriages have robbed many women and girls of their professional aspirations and impacted their personal lives. Shabnam says, 'I lost everything, my health, education, and future.'

'I get anxiety attacks, and I am depressed sometimes,' she says. Adding, 'I work day and night without any rest. I cry alone, but who would listen to my problems?'

Child and early marriages have robbed many women and girls of their professional aspirations and impacted their personal lives. Shabnam says, 'I lost everything, my health, education, and future.' She asks, 'How can a 17-year-old girl raise a child when she is a child herself? How is it justified to expect a child to be a mother?'

In the Gujjar-Bakerwal community, the intersection of tradition with poverty, lack of healthcare access, and lack of education leads to child marriages, leaving young brides to face pregnancies, childbirth, and emotional stress without any familial or institutional support.

Health risks associated with child marriages and early pregnancies

Child and early marriages expose girls to major health risks and complications. Early pregnancies carry increased complications, such as anaemia, obstructed labour, premature birth, low birth weight, and even maternal death.

*In developing countries, about **90 per cent of births to adolescents** occur within marriage. Complications from pregnancy and childbirth remain among the **leading causes of death** for girls aged 15–19. Early marriage also increases the risk of repeated pregnancies, miscarriages, untreated infections, and long-term reproductive health problems. Girls married before 15 also commonly face **intimate partner violence**, which adds deep **psychological trauma** to their already fragile health.*

Dr Yasmeen Abdullah, a Delhi-based gynaecologist who has worked with Gujjar and Bakarwal families in Kashmir for many years, and with underprivileged people in many parts of India, says that the girls who live in remote mountains are at higher risk of facing health issues and health neglect. 'In Gujjar and Bakarwal communities, where families migrate seasonally and trek long distances in the Zabarvan Mountains, access to basic care is extremely limited,' she explains.

'There is less health screening or nutritional support. Most young brides in the community conceive within the first year of marriage.' She adds, 'A girl's pelvis is often not fully developed

at 14 or 15. Early pregnancy can lead to obstructed labour, severe bleeding, and long-term complications like uterine prolapse. These are not rare cases; we see this happen frequently.'

Dr Abdullah also notes that the lack of awareness about sexual and reproductive health makes the situation worse. 'There should be government awareness programmes on a community level. People in these communities are not taught about contraception, spacing of pregnancies, or warning signs during pregnancy. And by the time they reach the hospital, it is often too late.'

Health experts say that child marriage is not only a socio-cultural issue, but it is also a public health crisis and needs to be addresed at the grassroots level.

She also highlights that anxiety, depression, and emotional withdrawal are common, but they are rarely diagnosed. 'In remote communities, mental health has never been discussed,' Dr Abdullah says. Health experts say that child marriage is not only a socio-cultural issue, but it is also a public health crisis and needs to be addressed at the grassroots level.

On the ground, Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) workers, who are trained female community health volunteers, bridge the gap between rural communities and public health services. ASHAworker Fatima Begum has dedicated her life to serving the community. She works with Gujjar families and tracks pregnant women, and maintains their health records.

Fathima says, 'This community is more vulnerable in terms of living conditions and health, they live in temporary shelters far from medical centres. She also says it is difficult to follow a case to its end because members of the Gujjar-Bakarwal community migrate to higher pastures, even during treatment, making them unreachable.

Fatima also points to deeply rooted patriarchy. 'Women in these communities do not openly share their problems. And they rely on men financially and for mobility. In these communities, men are decision makers, and women have little say. They also fear social consequences and abuse from male family members,' she says.

Sometimes perceived as a protective measure against kidnapping or sexual violence in unsafe areas, families think marrying girls early will keep them safe. However, they don't consider the severe health consequences of the decision.

She notes that early marriage is often justified as a means of protection during migration. Sometimes perceived as a protective measure against kidnapping or sexual violence in unsafe areas, families think marrying girls early will keep them safe. However, they don't consider the severe health consequences of the decision.

Poverty, mobility, and marginalisation

Activists who work with these communities believe that child marriage is a structural vulnerability. Darakshan Hassan Bhat, founder of the Kashmir Women's Organisation, says early marriage among Gujjar-Bakarwals cannot be reduced to tradition alone. 'Early marriage is not a single cultural choice,' she says. 'It is shaped by poverty, seasonal migration, tribal marginalisation, and entrenched gender norms.'

Financial insecurity plays a big role in the decision as well. 'Marrying off a daughter is seen as reducing economic burden and transferring responsibility,' Darakshan added. She further notes that education systems fail to match the community's patterns of mobility. 'There are often no schools on migration routes, or sometimes even where they live,' she says. Adding, 'Many children drop out because their pattern of migration does not match the academic calendar. And language is also a barrier that keeps them away from schools.'

In tribal communities, school dropout rates are high. Children between the ages of 10 and 18 often don't receive an education due to the widespread practice of conducting child marriages.

Further, children born during forest migration do not have birth certificates and other documents through which their ages can be ascertained or they can access government schemes. 'Without proof of age, how can authorities legally establish if a child marriage has occurred?' says Darakshan.

*In tribal communities, school dropout rates are high. Children between the ages of 10 and 18 often **don't receive an education** due to the widespread practice of conducting child marriages. As per a **2015 survey** by the Tribal Research and Cultural Foundation (TRCF), 89 per cent of people marry their children between the ages of 14 and 18 among tribal populations in Jammu and Kashmir.*

Darakshan advocates for mobile solutions, such as mobile health clinics, mobile anganwadi centres, and mobile schools that track seasonal movement to address the issue of child and early marriages. She also says, 'When there is proper documentation of birth, there is more accountability. Community members must also be taught about sexual and reproductive health and legal rights, which will slowly shift mindsets.' She also highlights the need to make legal literacy more accessible by providing it in the native language of the community.

The cycle continues

Inside the shelter, Myuna looks outside as her 13-year-old daughter plays with the other children. This year, her father has decided she will be married. Myuna doesn't want her daughter to marry so young, fearing for her health.

'But I cannot take that decision,' she says. The family plans to move to Rajouri after Eid in March, where preparations for the wedding will begin. Teary-eyed, Myuna says another child marriage will soon take place.

https://feminisminindia.com/2026/03/09/child-marriage-is-driving-a-health-crisis-among-girls-in-kashmir/

Story 17

A troubling blind spot in TN's maternal health success — teen pregnancies

By Pramila Krishnan | Thefederal.com

Teenage pregnancies surge 20 pc in 5 years, exposing the stark lacuna that school dropouts, child marriages, and poor sex education leave behind



School retention remains the single most effective safeguard against early marriage and adolescent pregnancy. Representational image: iStock

Over the past five years, Tamil Nadu has recorded a steady decline in the overall number of pregnancies, yet a troubling trend has emerged in the form of teenage pregnancies. The number of teenage pregnancies has surged by over 20 per cent in these five years, exposing gaps in underreported child marriages and failures in providing awareness on sex education among teenagers.

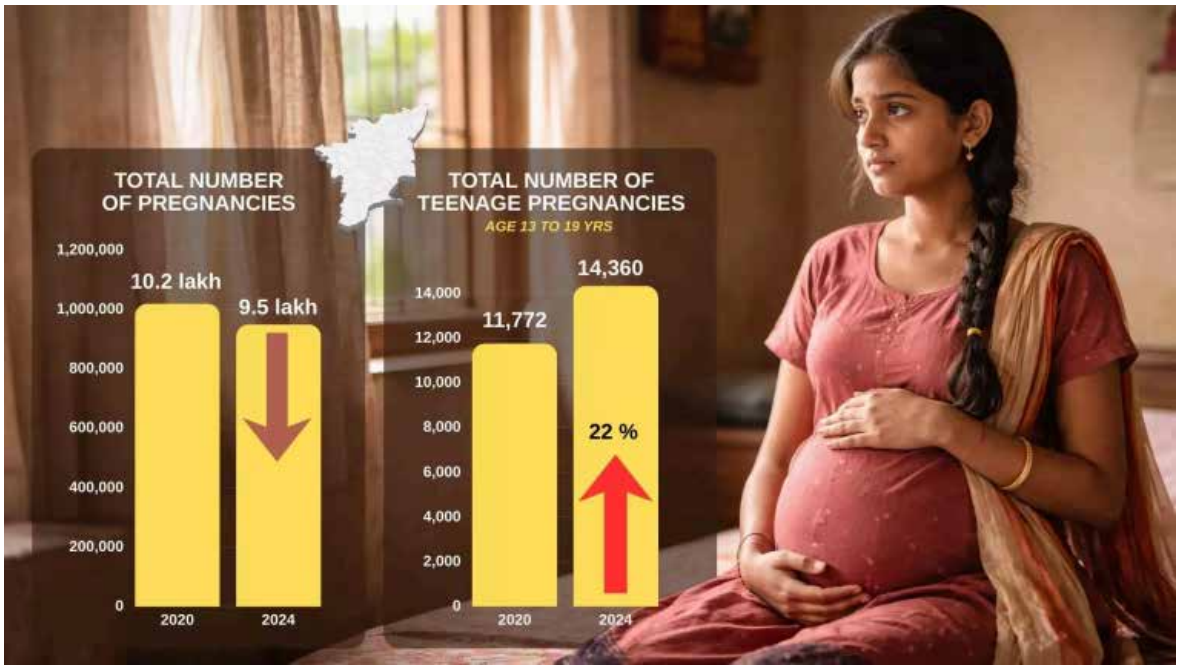
Data from the Tamil Nadu Health Department shows that the total number of pregnancies in the state fell by nearly 7 per cent, from 10.2 lakh in 2019-20 to 9.5 lakh in 2023-24. In stark contrast, the number of girls aged 13-19 who conceived rose from 11,772 to 14,360 during the same period, an increase of nearly 22 per cent.

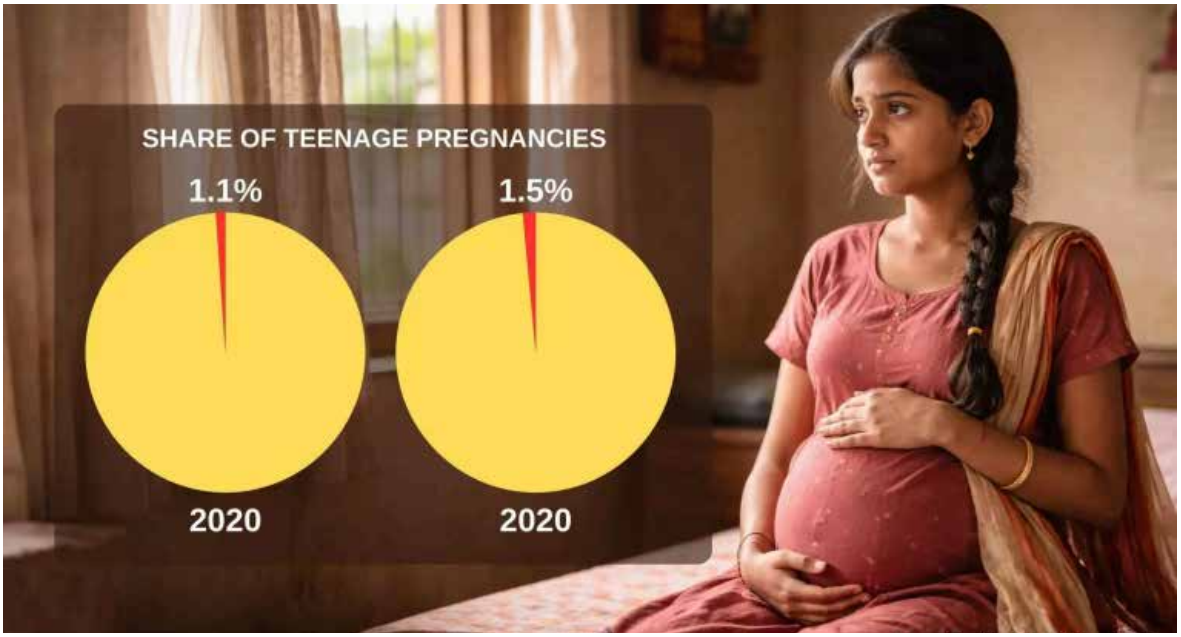
Shocking statistics

Data revealpoint out that teen pregnancies now account for 1.5 per cent of all pregnancies in Tamil Nadu, against 1.1 about five years ago. Public health experts warn that even a fractional rise is significant, given the heightened risks adolescent mothers face, including anaemia, preterm births and maternal complications.

While the overall government data includes teenagers ranging from ages 13 to 19, with 18 being the legal age of marriage for Indian women, official records in districts such as Nagapattinam, Tirunelveli, Tiruchi and Vellore have documented hundreds of births to girls under 18 within limited reporting windows.

An RTI response from Tirunelveli district earlier revealed that 1,448 girls under 18 gave birth over a 34-month period in 2021-23. Activists attribute many such cases to informal child marriages that go unregistered and unreported.





Social pressure and fear of scandal

In a coastal village near Vedaranyam in Nagapattinam district, 17-year-old Kavya (name changed) dropped out of Class XI last year. Her family, dependent on seasonal fishing income, grew anxious after rumours circulated about her friendship with a neighbourhood youth.

Within months, she was married off in an unregistered temple ceremony. By early 2025, she was pregnant. A village health nurse familiar with cases in the region said such patterns are common.

“When girls discontinue school, families often feel pressure to get them ‘settled’ quickly. Even suspicion of a relationship can trigger marriage. By the time we intervene, the girl is already pregnant,” she said.

Though Kavya delivered her baby safely in a government hospital, her education has not resumed. School dropouts, early pregnancies

Women’s groups say the data mirrors what they have been observing on the ground, a strong link between school dropouts and early pregnancies.

Speaking to The Federal, a senior advocate and member of All India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA), who organised a stakeholders’ meeting in Tiruchi on teenage pregnancies, said, “There is a strong link between the dropout rates of girls and early pregnancies. Failure starts with not arresting dropout rates. There are some hotspots in each district, and identification of those regions and sensitising children to report such events would help us reduce teenage pregnancies. In cases of abuse or consensual relationships, instead of accusing the child, sensitive steps need to be taken to address the issue in each case.”

Nirmala recalled how several schoolgirls in Madurai who were abused by a headmaster were married off once the case was filed in court. “Families were anxious about the future of the girls and married them off. They were not ready to send those children back to school. Failure in admitting those children to a different school and providing them counselling pushed them to become child labourers and teenage mothers,” she explained.

Slowdown of societal development

Tamil Nadu Health Minister Ma Subramanian has publicly acknowledged that there is a rise in teenage pregnancies in the state. He told The Federal that the health department produced a documentary film on the ill-effects of underage marriages and pregnancies, and officials have been asked to screen the film in schools to spread awareness among teenagers.

“Though overall pregnancies have dropped by 7 per cent in the past five years, teenage pregnancies have increased by nearly 20 per cent. In 2023–24 alone, 14,360 girls aged between 13 and 19 became pregnant,” the minister said.

He attributed the increase to early marriage, sexual abuse, and limited awareness of reproductive health. “Teenage pregnancy does not affect just one family. It slows down

societal development," he said, adding that the department has launched awareness campaigns targeting adolescents in schools.

What needs to be done?

Tamil Nadu has long been regarded as a frontrunner in maternal and child health indicators, with high institutional delivery rates and declining infant mortality. But experts caution that strong hospital-based systems cannot compensate for failures in prevention at the community level. School retention, they say, remains the single most effective safeguard against early marriage and adolescent pregnancy.

Child rights activist A Devaneyan argues that district-specific strategies are urgently needed. According to him, when the state celebrates declining fertility rates, the steady rise in adolescent pregnancies should be considered an alarm. "Hotspots must be identified. Reducing school dropouts is key. A one-size-fits-all approach will not work; vulnerable regions need focused intervention," he told The Federal.

To report child marriage, dial helpline: 1098, 1091

Police helpline: 100

(This report was filed under Population First's Laadli Media Fellowship 2026.)

https://thefederal.com/category/states/south/tamil-nadu/teen-pregnancies-in-tamil-nadu-teenage-school-dropouts-232988

Story 18

Adolescent Motherhood Rising in Odisha Due to Child Marriage

(Translated from Odia)

By Sumitra Sahoo | Thesakala.in

- **Elopement Becoming a Barrier to Education**
- **Lack of Awareness and Non-Compliance with Government Rules**

Bhubaneswar (Sumitra Sahoo): In Odisha, adolescent motherhood is not just a family and social issue; it is also linked to the national picture of health welfare and development. While the main cause of adolescent motherhood is child marriage, factors such as economic problems, lack of awareness in the education sector, social customs, religious traditions, concerns over the safety of girl children, dowry burden, lack of morality in families, insensitive administrative systems, etc., are increasing the rate of motherhood among adolescents. In most cases, legal information does not reach them, and the necessary guidance during the physical and mental changes of adolescents is not available to them. As a result, they establish relationships without hesitation and become mothers. Consequently, very young girls are suffering the pains of pregnancy at an immature age.

The state government has formulated various laws and schemes to stop the rate of motherhood among adolescent girls. However, while the laws remain on paper, the rate of adolescent motherhood is increasing in various districts of the state. According to the annual report of the Odisha Department of Women and Child Development, in the financial year 2021-22, the number of adolescent motherhood cases in the state was 24,355, which decreased to 23,485 in 2022-23. However, in 2023-24, this number rose again to 31,605. In 2021-22, Mayurbhanj district had the highest number of adolescent motherhood cases, followed by Sundargarh in second place, Nabarangpur in third, and Ganjam in fourth. In 2022-23, Mayurbhanj remained first, with Kendujhar second, Sundargarh third, and Koraput fourth. In 2023-24, Ganjam district had the highest number, with Kendujhar second and Ganjam third. Similarly, according to the NFHS-5 (2019-21) report, adolescent motherhood has increased compared to NFHS-4 (2015-16). In the 15-19 age group, Mayurbhanj district has the highest rate of adolescent motherhood in the state. It rose from 16.1% in 2015-16 to 17.2% in 2020-21. In Nayagarh, it increased from 10% to 15.2%, in Malkangiri from 11.7% to 13.8%, in Kendujhar from 12.2% to 15%, and in Boudh from 8.2% to 13.7%. Districts like Koraput, Balasore, Rayagada, Nabarangpur, Dhenkanal, Kendrapara, etc., have also seen an upward trend in adolescent motherhood rates.

Major Causes of Adolescent Motherhood:

While the rate of adolescent motherhood is increasing in the state, Mayurbhanj district ranks first. The primary cause here is child marriage, but questions have also arisen about the education system, as dropout rates are rising in the district. The state government has launched many schemes to ensure no child is deprived of education, providing textbooks, school uniforms, shoes, socks, and nutritious food in schools. However, no significant results are visible. It is not possible to bring all children in the district to school. Most children attend regularly only up to Class 8. Due to the pass-fail system starting from Class 9, many fail and lose interest in further studies. Dropout rates increase significantly after Class 8. Teachers in government schools claim they teach properly, yet the question remains why children fail. After failing, incidents occur where children run away from home after a few days or get married with family consent. In the tribal communities residing in the district, marrying at a young age is considered appropriate. As a result, the number of adolescent motherhood cases is increasing.

One such incident is from Kuchilaghati village near Similipal Sanctuary in Shamakhunta block of Mayurbhanj district, involving a 15-year-old girl Sukanti (pseudonym/pen name). In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many families began marrying off their adolescent daughters to reduce economic burden. Sukanti lost her father two years earlier. Her mother Sabitri (pseudonym/pen name) sustained the family by collecting and selling forest produce in the local market. But during COVID, when her mother fell ill, she became worried about her daughter and decided to marry her off. Sukanti, who was studying in Class 8, was married to Narayan (pseudonym/pen name) from Baripada. Narayan worked as a migrant laborer in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. After marriage, Sukanti's education stopped completely, and a few months later, she became pregnant. Worried about handling motherhood at such an immature age, she approached a local ASHA worker to request an abortion. However, due to lack of family support, she gave birth to a girl child. She has said that at that time, she faced many physical and mental problems.

Similarly, in Sundargarh district, which ranks second in adolescent motherhood, a similar situation prevails. Most people here work in industries or migrate as laborers to Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. Away from family, both adolescent boys and girls establish physical relationships. Additionally, 63% of the district's population has converted to Christianity. It is said that they openly establish physical relationships to increase their community size, which can be considered a major cause of adolescent motherhood. In the current digital age, everyone has a smartphone. Despite awareness campaigns in various places about using contraceptives during physical relationships, they are not used, leading to easy pregnancies among adolescent girls.

Choosing partners according to school norms is another major cause of adolescent motherhood. Not receiving acceptance at home also forces girls to bear the burden of motherhood. One example is Renu (pseudonym/pen name) from the Santali community in Ganjam district. Her father worked as a vehicle repair mechanic in the local town and supported a family of five. Despite low income making family life difficult, he encouraged

his children to study and supported their education. As the eldest daughter, Renu thought of completing her own education to help her two younger siblings fulfill family responsibilities. However, she developed a love relationship with a boy at school. While studying in Class 9, both eloped. Later, the boy's family accepted Renu as a daughter-in-law, and at an adolescent age, she became pregnant, creating obstacles in both their studies.Similarly, due to being alone at home, many times adolescent girls have to bear the burden of motherhood.

One such incident is from Baniyamal village in Kendrapara district. The village's 17-year-old Sonali (pseudonym/pen name) lost her father in childhood, while her mother works as a laborer in the local area. After school, Sonali stays alone at home until her mother returns from work. During this time, she started interacting with a young man from the neighboring house. Gradually, they established a physical relationship. A few days later, when her mother found out Sonali was pregnant, the young man had already left the state. To avoid social stigma, her mother took Sonali to an unknown place. However, Sonali did not receive medical treatment or advice from the local Anganwadi ASHA sister. As a result, both Sonali and her child's condition remained critical.

Youth Group's Opinion

During discussions with youth in Mayurbhanj district, they said that career counseling, life skills, and awareness about other government schemes are not being provided as required. The regular 'Adwika' program is being organized, but if skilled trainers conducted sessions instead of Anganwadi workers, it would attract adolescents and encourage participation. Even if they want to continue studies after marriage and motherhood, social stigma forces them to drop out of school. This also makes livelihood difficult for them. If the government or administration provides vocational or skill development training, it would help them earn a living. Additionally, those interested in continuing studies should be supported by the government. Pregnant adolescents and adolescent mothers say psychological support is extremely necessary, as they face immense mental stress during this time. Parents opine that for victims of adolescent motherhood, the government should provide economic assistance, awareness programs, career counseling, life skills, and awareness about other government schemes.

The research findings in this report can be adopted as a positive approach to address adolescent pregnancy. It requires active participation from family, community, and government. Especially, interventions to increase access to education for girls are urgently needed. Teachers should visit and inquire with parents of children absent from school for 15 days or more, which is not happening properly in these districts. Similarly, the 'Adwika' program held every Saturday at Anganwadi centers is not yielding results. When such social and awareness programs are organized for adolescents, they cite various excuses and do not attend. As a result, they cannot become informed on any subject, and proper guidance is not available to children. Since parents easily accept open mixing of girls with male partners at a young age, elopement numbers are also rising. After girls run away from home, families happily accept them instead of opposing, which is another major cause of adolescent motherhood. This year, 64 cases have been registered under the

POCSO Act in the district. Therefore, family members must first become aware, and elders in various tribal communities here should urge and sensitize their communities on this issue. Greater awareness is needed about how adolescent motherhood affects mentally and physically, and how essential contraceptive use is during physical relationships, along with regularizing girls' education. This can prevent dropouts, delay child marriage, and pregnancies. Especially in rural and economically backward areas, priority should be given to educational efforts to make secondary education accessible and attractive. By involving government, civil society organizations, local leaders, parents, and adolescents in community-led initiatives, this problem can be reduced significantly. Targeted economic schemes to break the poverty cycle, scholarships for girls, etc., will be effective in delaying marriage and promoting education. Also, while marriages are performed in various temples, churches, etc., in the district, registers are maintained to collect all information. However, making Aadhaar card along with birth certificate mandatory during marriage is necessary. This will clearly establish both parties' exact ages. Preventing adolescent pregnancy requires not just the government but multifaceted and continuous efforts from all sections of society. Especially, parents must take a leading role.

https://www.thesakala.in/latest-odisha-news/teenage-motherhood-is-increasing-due-to-child-marriage-in-odisha/article-45203

Story 19

The Not-So-Desired Inheritance

By Subair P Khader | Madhymamonline.com

"In Kerala's shadowed margins, child marriage seeds generational trauma as a mother's stolen childhood hardens into vigilance and control, shaping her daughter's self-harm, fractured love and inherited fear, until unhealed wounds reverberate through marriage, motherhood and yet another trembling child."

Meena was sixteen when she first cut herself.

Her mom saw it first, and after shouting at her and thrashing her for doing it, she tied the bloodied area tight with a cloth. That was it- she let her off with a warning that if Meena ever did it again, she would kill herself. Meena was bemused by the irony of it. Although she expressed only anger, Meena could sense the immense fear beneath her mom's anger. She knew how to read the tightness in her jaw and the weight of her silence. Afterall, she had always been trained to be a sponge, soaking in every tremor and every sigh in her mother's voice.

Their neighbourhood's cool bar guy had told her dad that he had seen Meena laughing and walking with a boy. She was in love, and love, in her world, was an offence.

But Meena's story did not begin with that boy. It began a generation earlier.

Meena's mother had been married as a child. She often used to reminisce about her carefree days in her hometown- laughing with friends, running across the fields- until the day a proposal came from a wealthy family. She used to remember how the harvest had failed for them that year, and how her parents talked in hushed tones of the debts that lingered. She was pulled out of school and married off.

At first, she felt relieved to escape exams and studies. She looked forward to a cinematic life ahead. But reality was far from that. She realised that life after marriage is not all a bed of roses. The rules of her new home were strict. She had to wake up early, make food, and help in the kitchen, as well as with their acres of agricultural land, collecting the produce and preparing it for sale. She did not have a choice.

Her husband and new family were used to everything done perfectly and in a particular way different from how she lived at her home. She soon realised that control was her only protection. By managing every detail of the household, she learned to anticipate their moods and keep tension at a distance. The home became a tightly run system, held together by routines she followed with precision — because as long as nothing slipped, she was fine.

Over time, vigilance became the norm. She woke before everyone else, running through the day in her head before her feet touched the floor. She noticed everything — misplaced objects, unfinished tasks, changes in tone.

When she became a mother to Meena, that vigilance did not soften—it shifted.

She told herself she was preparing her daughter for life. She believed that by sharing her own hardships, she was strengthening Meena. She made Meena her confidante when she was barely five years old. She leaned on her for emotional comfort. She told her it was her responsibility to keep the family together. She told everyone proudly that she was Meena's best friend!!

To her, this was bonding.

To Meena, it was a childhood quietly disappearing.

Meena soon forgot what it was like to be a child. She became an adult in a small physical body. Her psyche craved attention and play, but instead, she was drowned in adult problems.

Meena's mother had thought all was well. But for Meena, it was hell.

At eighteen, she eloped with the boy she believed was hers forever.

The marriage did not last. She returned home divorced, carrying shame over unresolved trauma. At twenty-four, she remarried, this time through an arrangement chosen by her parents. Everyone believed this would "fix" her.

But trauma does not disappear with a ceremony.

Now thirty-five, Meena lives with the consequences of wounds that began before she was born.

Adverse Childhood Experiences — commonly referred to as ACEs are potentially traumatic events that occur before the age of eighteen and overwhelm a child's developing nervous system. For Meena's mother, child marriage functioned as an ACE. She was removed from school, an abrupt loss of peer relationships and attachment. She was placed in an adult role before her brain had fully developed its autonomy. Her survival depended on pleasing, anticipating, and controlling her environment. Her own needs were rarely acknowledged, and she had to put in long hours of work and little rest. Exposure to chronic stress and household conflict became a daily pattern. The loss of choice over her body, education, and relationships doubled the trauma, leaving her with few coping skills. Child marriage robs children of their childhood, forcing them into adult roles and exposing them to chronic stress. Research shows that these experiences profoundly shape emotional regulation, stress responses, attachment patterns, and long-term mental health.

Meena did not experience child marriage herself, but she inherited its emotional and psychological legacy. Growing up, her nervous system learned to anticipate danger before safety. She may feel anxious, cautious, or be constantly alert in relationships—not because of her own experiences, but because of the trauma passed down to her. Her nervous system mirrored her mother's—always alert, always scanning for danger. Meena's fragile sense of belonging began to shatter at the slightest hint of disapproval. Self-harm began as a way to "feel" something in the numbness. Later, it became a way to cope with overwhelming emotions like anger, fear, rejection, and abandonment. Pain became something predictable as well as controllable.

This is not the story of one person. It reflects the experiences of many who have been trapped and funnelled into child marriage by circumstances beyond their control—poverty, family pressure, rigid traditions, and coercive environments. The impact does

not end with the individual. Even when the next generation does not experience child marriage directly, the consequences can ripple forward.

Clinical Psychologists who work with children and adolescents say that when a child is forced into adult roles too early, it is also known as parentification. Here, there is a role reversal where the child is forced to assume adult responsibilities, be it emotional or physical as taking care of others. It is considered a childhood trauma. Although these children are often described as "good girls/boys" or "mature beyond their age" or "strong and responsible", inside they carry anxiety, hypervigilance, guilt/shame, difficulties with boundaries and fear of abandonment. Besides, early trauma teaches children that their feelings don't matter or that expressing themselves is unsafe. All these carry on to their adulthood, and they might have difficulties in emotional regulation since they were never allowed to be children themselves. Trauma can also influence parenting practices and attachment. The higher the presence of adverse childhood experiences, such as emotional and physical neglect, physical abuse, divorce/separation, poverty, discrimination, lack of opportunity, and racism, the higher the chances of developing anxiety, depression, PTSD and even chronic illnesses, such as cardiovascular diseases and diabetes.

In this way, child marriage can contribute to intergenerational cycles of disadvantage—affecting futures well beyond those who found themselves in it without real choice. Recognising it is not just about laws or statistics; it is about seeing the silent, enduring impact of early trauma and taking responsibility—not to punish, but to prevent. Thus, recognising child marriage as an ACE transforms prevention into an intergenerational intervention. It acknowledges hidden suffering, disrupts cycles of trauma, and creates pathways for long-term psychological wellbeing—for survivors, their children, and future generations.

For Meena, her mood swings intensified, and her fear of abandonment deepened. She oscillated between clinging and withdrawal, between hope and despair. Hospital visits became frequent, though always far from home, since seeking psychiatric care locally carries stigma. Although Kerala has seen huge strides with technology, mental health was something which is still talked about in hushed tones.

Meena's husband, once steady and patient, now feels anxious most of the time, never quite sure what mood he will come home to. Their nine-year-old child has begun bedwetting again after years of dryness. When Meena locks herself in her room during an emotional meltdown, her child experiences panic attacks- curling up on the floor, trembling and refusing to go to school for days.

The cycle has become visible.

[Disclaimer: This story may include events or experiences inspired by real people, but all identifying details have been changed to protect privacy and confidentiality]

https://madhyamamonline.com/opinion/article/the-not-so-desired-inheritance-1498264

5. Patriarchy, Governance & Social Control

Introduction

Child marriage continues because of deeply rooted patriarchy, social customs, fear of dishonour, and weak enforcement of laws. In many communities, girls have little control over decisions related to education, mobility, or marriage. Political silence, fake documents, poor monitoring systems, and social pressure also allow the practice to continue.

These stories examine the social structures and governance failures that silently support child marriage even where laws exist to prevent it.

Articles Under This Theme

1. Vanita Bhatnagar – *'I Am Not Afraid of Death'—One Woman's War on Child Marriage in Rajasthan*
2. Himanshu Praveen – *Ballot Blessing: How Vote Bank Politics and Fake Aadhaar Cards are Legalizing Child Marriage in Bihar's Bhojpur*
3. Ramiz Raja – *THE SILENT SHACKLE: DISMANTLING THE SHADOW ECONOMY OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN RURAL J&K*
4. Sharvan Kumar – बेटी के बदले बेटी: देवासी समाज में न्यात, आटा-साटा और बाल विवाह की जमीनी हकीकत
5. Shweta – 'इज्जत', गरीबी और पितृसत्ता: क्यों नहीं रुक पा रहा बाल विवाह?
6. Gaurav Prabhat Pandey – *The Many Layers of Child Marriage in Haryana: When Laws Exist, Where Does the System Fail?*
7. Gurpreet Kaur Cheema – खिलौने छूटे, चूड़ियां खनकीं... बाल विवाह में सिसकता बचपन; अररिया से बंगाल तक डर और दहेज में जकड़ी पीढ़ी
8. Gurpreet Kaur Cheema – दिल्ली का 'सिलबट्टा' और पिसता बचपन! 5G के दौर में बाल विवाह की कड़वी हकीकत और बस्तियों का अंधेरा
9. Pramila Krishnan – *Why Child Marriages Persist in TN Tribal Heartland Despite Stringent Laws*

Story 20

‘I am not afraid of death’—one woman’s war on child marriage in Rajasthan

By Vanita Bhatnagar | theprint.in

Kriti Bharti has annulled 53 child marriages in Rajasthan. She’s battled death threats, families hiding weddings, and panchayats that fine dissenters Rs 20 lakh.



Kriti Bharti, psychologist and founder of Saarthi Trust, was the driving force behind India’s first formal child marriage annulment in 2012. ‘It is my way of making amends for my own lost childhood,’ she said | By special arrangement

Khairthal, Rajasthan: Both Sarjina and her mother insist there is nothing unusual about child marriage. In their community, girls are wed by fifteen. That is simply how things are done. Yet two years after giving birth, Sarjina has only stayed with her in-laws for a few short stretches.

Sitting on a small mound of construction sand in the open verandah of her parents’ house in Khairthal, Sarjina, now in her late teens, recalls the wedding food, the guests, and her brand-new bottle-green outfit but not much else.

"I could have been eleven. Or thirteen," she said haltingly, as the soft bleats of the two goats tethered at the end of the courtyard punctuated the stillness of the afternoon. "In our community, girls are married by fifteen. What else are we supposed to do?" Her 22-month-old son played beside her, scooping sand into a battered steel bowl with his tiny hands.

Sarjina's voice carries a neutrality of habit, as if she were simply describing the changing of seasons. Her mother remembers it differently though.

"She was upset," her mother said, lowering her voice slightly. "Of course she cried. All girls cry." Then, after a pause, she added, almost to herself, "But this is our custom. *School jake kya hi kar leti?* She had to marry one day, so better sooner than later."



Sarjina's younger sisters walk through the courtyard of their home in Khairthal. Both fear they could be married before turning 15 | Photo: Vanita Bhatnagar | ThePrint

Since the marriage, Sarjina has spent most of her time in her parents' house, a patchwork of living and unfinished work: a single room, a kitchen, the open verandah, and a thatched enclosure off to the side, patched with tarpaulin and strips of old cloth. It is part storage, part shelter, part improvisation, walls cracked but standing, like the fragile rhythm of life

inside them.

Her father works on batai, cultivating someone else's land for a share of the produce. They belong to the largely agrarian Meo Muslim community of the Mewat region, negotiating a complex inheritance of faith and custom. Within their world, the logic is airtight. Early marriage is the only visible path. For this community, and others in the region, questioning it would demand a language they have never been taught.

Some orthodox families will go to any lengths to protect their deep-rooted traditions. I've received more than 50 threats from families warning me of dire consequences, even death, if I interfered in their personal affairs

-Kriti Bharti, founder of the Saarthi Trust

But hundreds of kilometres away in Jodhpur, child psychologist Dr Kriti Bharti is dismantling that logic, one case at a time. For over a decade, Bharti's name has become synonymous with a fearless, unflinching fight against child marriage in Rajasthan. She has overseen the annulment of 53 child marriages, halted over 220 others, rehabilitated more than 30,000 women and children, and trained judges and officers to wield the law with nuance and sensitivity. Her pioneering work has earned global recognition and is now woven into the CBSE curriculum, inspiring future generations to confront this enduring injustice.

"I work on options for children who are stuck in child marriage. They can come out from these handcuffs," she said.

Bharti, 38, knows the suffocating helplessness of childhood all too well herself. Poisoned by a relative at the age of ten and bedridden for years, she faced the same sense of being trapped that she now fights to dismantle for others.

"Although my experience was different in many ways, I can deeply relate to the victims of child marriage and the grief they feel for their lost childhood," she said.

Opening a door for the 'trapped'

While the law on child marriage allows for annulments, it had never been tested in court before Bharti's first case in 2012. She describes that petition as "a stab in the dark."

"It felt like entering a pitch-black room and pressing every button in the hope of finding a light switch," she said.

Bharti had been working with communities and counselling families when a young woman called Laxmi Sargara approached her. She had been married at the age of one to a three-year-old boy, Rakesh, but only discovered this at the age of 18, when her in-laws arrived to take her to their house.

"I was unhappy about the marriage. I told my parents who did not agree with me, then I sought help," Laxmi told Agence France Presse at the time, reported BBC.



Kriti Bharti with child marriage survivors in Rajasthan | By special arrangement

While Rakesh initially wanted the marriage to continue, counselling by Bharti and her organisation Saarthi Trust got through to him.

Bharti weighed every legal angle under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act and decided to proceed with annulment. In April 2012, Rakesh and Laxmi signed affidavits before a notary declaring the marriage void. It made international headlines as one of the first known cases in India of a childhood marriage being legally undone at the request of the couple.

Though child marriage rates have fallen sharply—with 53 per cent of girls marrying before 18 in 1996 compared to 23 per cent in 2021—the problem has not disappeared. India is still home to the largest number of child brides in the world, with one in three living here, according to a May 2023 United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) report.

"In our society, once a child is married, it is treated as an irreversible fate. But it should not be so," said Jyoti Ahuja, a member of the Child Welfare Committee. "If a child is married at the age of one, how can they exercise their own choice at 18 if no mechanism exists to enable it? Most efforts so far focus on preventing child marriage or providing education, both essential, but almost nothing has been done to create pathways for those already trapped."

Seeking an annulment, however, is just the beginning, Bharti said. It is a glimpse of possibility, not a guaranteed path.

"The annulment is like the Taj Mahal. You can see it, but getting there is another story," she added.

Death threats and khap 'punishments'

In practice, annulments are rarely straightforward. Legally, a birth certificate or school record is sufficient proof of age. Yet, as Bharti notes, even this seemingly simple process can stretch from three days to over two years, with obstacles arising where law and social realities collide.

Families attempting to extricate children face resistance from unsensitised communities.

"Nothing has changed in the environment," said Poonam, an ASHA worker in the Meo Muslim community. "They don't like it if we tell them their customs are wrong. If we try to counsel them, we will be denied entry even for vaccination or other schemes. They won't let us do our work."

Bharti has learned to navigate these terrains with caution.

"Some orthodox families will go to any lengths to protect their deep-rooted traditions and wouldn't think twice about hurting, or even killing, anybody who stood in their way," she said. "I had to be careful. I've received more than 50 threats from families warning me of dire consequences, even death, if I interfered in their personal affairs."

Once cases reach us, we are able to take action and stop the marriage. But many times, we don't even know that a child marriage is taking place. Nowadays, these ceremonies are often held quietly in another village, sometimes late at night. Occasionally, there isn't even a wedding card

-Ravikant, District Child Protection Officer, Alwar

Legal victories are never simple triumphs. They are negotiated acts of courage, contested at every step by tradition, fear, and social sanction. Bharti herself is a living example of this resolve. Raised by her single mother, she grew up learning to weather life's blows. Her father abandoned them when she was just two, and throughout her childhood, she faced the sting of being bullied for this.

"I had a tough childhood," Bharti said. "I am not afraid of death. I have faced it before. My protector is God, and as long as I live, I will continue my work."

But not everyone has the resources to fight the system. For most, the process of annulment remains inaccessible unless a supportive environment is built around them — one that provides protection, guidance, and the social and legal backing necessary to navigate the system safely. Without such an environment, the path to reclaiming their lives can seem impossible.

Another hurdle is the coercive role of local governance structures with regressive agendas.

In Rajasthan, these are known as Jati Panchayats, and in neighbouring Haryana as Khap Panchayats. They wield immense influence, though they hold no legal authority. Leadership is determined by age, with the eldest member becoming the sarpanch.

"These bodies remain one of the most formidable obstacles to eradicating child marriage in the 21st century," Bharti said.



Women and girls working with Bharti take an oath against child marriage in Rajasthan | By special arrangement

Families who resist the practice or challenge "age-old traditions" risk severe punishment. Fines can reach Rs 10-20 lakh, without consideration of a family's means. Beyond financial penalties, families are socially ostracised, often cut off from their communities and even denied access to grocery stores.

Under this pressure, parental support often crumbles. Bharti recalled instances where families initially backed efforts to annul child marriages, only to withdraw when faced with the panchayat's relentless threats, abandoning their children to the very system they sought to escape. In many cases, families also struggle to divide the costs of the marriage, or exchanged assets such as land and jewellery, after annulment.

And then there's the narrow legal window. Under the law, survivors whose marriages were solemnised before the legal age have just two years after reaching adulthood to seek annulment.

Weddings in the shadows

Families have grown savvy in conducting child marriages. They avoid photographers, print no invitations, and keep the guest list minimal. Without tangible evidence, proving that a marriage took place becomes nearly impossible — a challenge acknowledged by officials across the board, from the District Child Protection Officer to Child Welfare Committee members and child marriage lawyers.

In Alwar, between October 2025 and February 2026, the District Child Protection Office recorded 13 cases of child marriage. Of these, 11 were successfully intercepted and prevented, while two turned out to be false reports.

Even in this short span, the numbers show both the vigilance required and the gaps in detection. Many more cases likely go unreported, hidden from authorities and the public eye.



Ravikant, District Child Protection Officer in Alwar, says child marriages are often held in secret, making them difficult to detect | Photo: Vanita Bhatnagar | ThePrint

“Once cases reach us, we are able to take action and stop the marriage. But many times, we don’t even know that a child marriage is taking place, and that is where the real challenge lies,” said Ravikant, District Child Protection Officer, Alwar.

“Nowadays, these ceremonies are often held quietly in another village or even another jurisdiction, sometimes late at night. Occasionally, there isn’t even a wedding card, and if there is, it might carry someone else’s name.”

Even a successful police intervention isn’t always effective. Bharti said that she has seen many cases where the ceremony takes place a few days later anyway.

"That is why I believe strict follow-up is essential. Once a wedding is prevented, the administration must continue to monitor the children involved until they reach the legal marriageable ages of 18 and 21," she added.

The lack of evidence is often exploited. Bharti recalled a case where a girl's father, a known criminal, claimed the gathering was merely an engagement. Not a single villager would testify against him for fear of violent retribution.

Obtaining annulment in such cases becomes difficult, but Bharti is steadfast. She has encountered brides as young as 34 days old and has secured annulments in as little as three days, the fastest on record.

"Every time I am confronted with a challenge, I remind myself why I do this," she said. "There was no one to save me. I am doing this for these children. It is my way of making amends for my own lost childhood."

'I fight every day'

The first steep climb is securing the annulment. The law puts the onus on victims to initiate legal proceedings, which most cannot do without the help of the very family that arranged the marriage. Court fees and travel costs can run into lakhs, far exceeding what most can afford.

Even after the order is granted, survivors require a lot more help. They need protection, counselling, education, and guidance on how to sustain themselves. Many hesitate to challenge the system at all because they are not educated and financially dependent on their families.

"Many young brides, even when they want to annul their marriage, aren't able to do it without systemic support," said Noor Mohammad, Member Secretary, Alwar Mewat Institute of Education and Development (AMIED).

I fight every day. I am the first girl from my village to pursue higher education. Now I'm preparing for the UPSC. Sometimes I don't know whether I'm fighting my own home, or the competition out there. The system doesn't make it easy

-Zainsta, who narrowly escaped child marriage

Through awareness campaigns and legal aid, AMIED works to prevent child marriages, promote girls' education, and empower communities to challenge social norms. The organisation also provides counselling, rehabilitation, and training for parents, educators, and local officials to ensure interventions are sustainable and culturally sensitive.

Similarly, Bharti, through her NGO Saarthi, has designed rehabilitation programmes to help girls build independent lives. Many have gone on to complete their education and pursue careers in medicine, engineering, or nursing. Some now work with Bharti to support other former child brides. Saarthi Trust has also administered oaths against child marriage to over 25,000 villagers and students across Rajasthan.



Noor Mohammad, Member Secretary of Alwar Mewat Institute of Education and Development, works to prevent child marriage in the region | Photo: Vanita Bhatnagar | ThePrint

Parents sometimes marry off their daughters out of fear that, as teenagers, they may enter romantic relationships and bring shame upon the family. Peer pressure is another factor. Families worry that if they delay, they may not find a suitable match.

“Not every child succeeds academically. When a girl struggles in school, families ask what is the point of educating her anyway when the ultimate goal is marriage?” said Ahuja.

Mohammad, who has worked with first-generation women learners, added that parents often view education as an “investment” rather than as a way to broaden horizons or cultivate critical thinking.



Zainsta with friends at AMIED in Alwar. All are first-generation learners from their community | Photo: Vanita Bhatnagar | ThePrint

At 22, Zainsta is one of the first girls from her village in Tijara to attend formal schooling. Once facing the prospect of child marriage, she entered formal education after Mohammad took her under his wing. She won a scholarship and completed her higher education, but she still contends with the tension between her community's expectations and her own ambitions.

"I fight every day. I am the first girl from my village to pursue higher education. Now I'm preparing for the UPSC. Sometimes I don't know whether I'm fighting my own home, or the competition out there. The system doesn't make it easy," she said, voice tinged with both defiance and fatigue.

Several former child brides who spoke to ThePrint said the same thing in different ways: the law alone cannot end child marriage. The change has to come from within society.

"'Beti Bachao, Beti Padho' is only the beginning," Zainsta said. "Real change has to start in the community. People need cultural sensitivity training. They need to be brought out of the patriarchal mindset. Otherwise, laws and schools alone can't protect us."

For Ahuja, counselling at the individual, family, and community level—including education and career guidance— is essential but is largely "missing" on the ground.

Back in Khairthal, Sarjina plucked the steel bowl from her toddler's hands and set it deliberately on the kitchen counter.

She is negotiating her reality in the only way she knows how—through small acts of defiance. For one, she has no plans to visit her in-laws' home for Eid.

"I like it here, with my sisters," she said firmly. "I don't want to go."

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(Edited by Asavari Singh)



The yard of Sarjina's maternal home in Khairthal. She has no plans to return to her in-laws' house anytime soon | Photo: vanita Bhatnagar | ThePrint

https://theprint.in/ground-reports/i-am-not-afraid-of-death-one-womans-war-on-child-marriage-in-rajasthan/2865983/

Story 21

Ballot Blessing: How Vote Bank Politics and Fake Aadhaar Cards are Legalizing Child Marriage in Bihar's Bhojpur

By Himanshu Praveen | themooknayak.com

When the surging waves of the Ganges swallowed the lands of panchayats like Nathmalpur and Sinha, thousands of families were forced to settle on embankments and elevated roads. In these makeshift settlements, it wasn't just homes that collapsed; the social fabric that once protected young girls from the scourge of child marriage was also torn apart.

Displacement here is not merely about losing a roof over one's head; it is the erosion of dignity and the fading fear of the law that these families once possessed on their own land. However, the darkest aspect of this tragedy isn't poverty, but a calculated administrative and political 'silence'—which, in the language of systemic failure, can be termed as a 'Ballot Blessing'. Here, child marriage is not just a social compulsion; it is a legal deception crafted through the tacit consent of local representatives and the organized forgery of Aadhaar cards.

The Pact of Silence and Vote Bank Politics The very shoulders responsible for stopping child marriage in these displaced areas are now the ones nurturing it. Bootan Singh, the former Mukhiya of Nathmalpur, admits this bitter truth with startling bluntness. He says, "In today's time, no representative wants to interfere in anyone's personal household matters. Everyone cherishes their vote bank. During elections, every single vote counts. If a Mukhiya or Sarpanch stops a child marriage, the entire family, their relatives, and the whole clan turn against them. Fearing the loss of votes, people knowingly turn a blind eye."

Administrative proactiveness is also non-existent. The former representative further adds, "The reality is that we never receive clear instructions or orders from the Block (BDO) or Zonal (CO) offices to conduct rigorous monitoring of child marriages in our panchayats. When there is no administrative pressure from above, why would any local leader risk ruining their vote bank?"

Fake Aadhaar Cards Sanctioning Child Marriage The most shocking discovery of this investigation is the manipulation of Aadhaar cards. It is no longer just an identity card; it has become a master key to legitimize child marriages. Vishwanath Pratap Singh, a social activist and veteran leader, launches a direct attack on this system. He describes how 10 to 12-year-old girls are turned into 18-year-old adults on paper overnight. "This is impossible without the collusion of local representatives," says Vishwanath Singh. "Documents issued

from the Mukhiya's office and their signatures are used to increase the age on Aadhaar cards. It is a web where middlemen and Aadhaar center operators change a girl's age for a few hundred rupees. By the time the wedding card is printed, a new Aadhaar card is also ready, so that if the police or administration arrives, they can be shown 'legal' proof."

The Veil of White Lies: Apathy of Representatives When these grave allegations were presented to Dhanji Shah, the current Mukhiya of Sinha Panchayat, there was only a veil of white lies. Contrary to the ground reality, Dhanji Shah claims, "There is no such problem here. We are aware and are fully following the government's schemes. We haven't received any complaints of child marriage happening anywhere." When questioned sharply about the Aadhaar fraud and the involvement of middlemen, he dismissed it entirely. This 'all is well' attitude of those in power is the primary reason why the roots of child marriage are deepening.

Administrative Helplessness and the Grassroots 'Darkness' The role of the district administrative machinery remains the most questionable. A detailed conversation with the Assistant District Child Protection Officer (ADCPU) of Bhojpur highlighted the hollowness of the department. The officer admitted that senior officials sit at the headquarters, but there is no independent staff for monitoring at the sub-division level. They rely entirely on 1098 (Childline) or external tips.

However, the ground reality of the 'information network' that the administration talks about is quite different. The statements of Ramawati Devi, an Anganwadi worker from Balua Panchayat, clearly state, "We have not received any specific instructions or orders from the department or district administration to monitor or report child marriages." This 'connectivity failure' between the administration and the field proves that news of marriages in displaced settlements rarely reaches the headquarters. The officer admitted that the department lacks a 'Special Monitoring Unit' for high-risk areas like displaced settlements.

In these displaced settlements of Bhojpur, child marriage is no longer just a social evil. It has become a lethal cocktail of vote bank politics, administrative apathy, and technical forgery. Displacement evicted them from their land, but this political and administrative collusion has robbed them of their identity.

https://en.themooknayak.com/women-news/ballot-blessing-how-vote-bank-politics-is-legalizing-child-marriage-in-bhojpur

Story 22

The Silent Shackle: Dismantling the Shadow Economy of Child Marriage in Rural J&K

By Ramiz Raja | Youthkiawaaz.com



High in the jagged, snow-dusted highlands of the Jammu division and deep within the sequestered, emerald valleys of Kashmir, a parallel legal system operates in the long shadows of the Indian Penal Code. While the Union Territory has undergone a massive administrative and legal overhaul following the abrogation of Article 370, a disturbing, archaic reality remains entrenched in the soil. In the far-flung, "backward" rural belts, the law of the land is frequently subordinate to the whim and decree of the village Sarpanch.

This investigation dives into the heart of the "Omertà"—a code of silence—that shields child marriage in Jammu and Kashmir. It is a world where girls as young as 14 are traded into matrimony under a "mafia-like" village structure that effectively suppresses reporting, intimidates whistleblowers, and defies direct administrative intervention.

The Statistical Mirage: Why Numbers Lie

The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) presents a seemingly optimistic trajectory for the region. Official data records that approximately **5-6%** of women aged 20–24 in Jammu & Kashmir were married before the legal age of 18. This is a marked decrease from the **9%** recorded in the NFHS-4. On paper, J&K is winning the war against early marriage.

However, for those on the ground, these figures are a "statistical mirage." In rural divisions, child marriages are almost never registered with civil authorities. The survey relies on self-reporting—a method easily manipulated by a profound fear of legal repercussions and the dread of social boycott. When a community decides to marry off a minor, it enters into a collective pact of silence. Consequently, official data reflects only the high-profile cases that "escaped" the village boundaries, leaving hundreds of others hidden behind the thick curtain of "tradition" and "poverty."

The gap between the NFHS-4 and NFHS-5 data suggests progress, but experts argue this is partly due to the shift in how data is collected and the increased fear of reporting under stricter central laws. In reality, the "shadow economy" of marriage—where girls are viewed as assets to be transferred to reduce family liability—continues to thrive in pockets where the reach of the school bus is shorter than the reach of the local village council.

The Constitutional Shift: Before and After Article 370

One of the most significant changes in the fight against child marriage has been the legislative landscape. Before the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019, Jammu and Kashmir operated under its own set of state laws, which often lacked the teeth of central Indian legislation.

The Pre-2019 Era: A Fragmented Defense Before the transition to a Union Territory, child protection was governed largely by the *J&K Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2013*. While well-intentioned, the reporting mechanisms were fragmented. The **Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006)**—the landmark central law—was not directly applicable in the same way it is today. Local "Customary Law" and the influence of village councils often took precedence over state statutes. Data from NFHS-4 (2015-16) showed a child marriage rate of **9%**, reflecting a period where administrative surveillance was sparse and local elders operated with near-total impunity.

In those years, a child marriage case would often be "settled" within the village. If a complaint reached the local police station, the Sarpanch would often intervene, calling it a "private family matter" or a "religious obligation." The police, often coming from the same social fabric, were frequently hesitant to disrupt the village's internal peace.

The Post-Abrogation Reality: A Uniform Hammer Following the abrogation, the **Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006** was fully extended to the Union Territory. This brought uniform penalties: two years of rigorous imprisonment and a ₹1 lakh fine for any adult or facilitator involved. Furthermore, the implementation of **Mission Vatsalya** (a central sponsored scheme) replaced the older, less-integrated state child protection schemes.



Muzaffar Ahmad Malik (KAS), the former District Child Protection Officer for Anantnag, confirms this shift. "Before 2019, reporting systems were significantly weaker and state-specific laws were limited in their scope. Now, central laws and Mission Vatsalya are implemented comprehensively. Surveillance has strengthened, and communities are gradually—though very slowly—becoming more cooperative."

The data shows a downward trend to **5-6%**, but the intensity of the struggle has increased. Under the new regime, the law is no longer a suggestion; it is a mandate. However, as the law became stricter, the practice went deeper underground.

THE VOICES OF AUTHORITY: EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEWS

To map the depth of this crisis, we conducted detailed interviews with the frontline leaders of J&K's child protection machinery. Their testimonies reveal a system struggling against a wall of cultural resistance.

I. The Administrative Strategy: Rehana Batul (Addl. Sec. Social Welfare)

Additional Secretary **Rehana Akhtar Bijli**, provided the high-level roadmap for the government's efforts.



"Records indicate a spike during the pandemic years (2020–2022). School closures and economic distress made girls more vulnerable," Batul noted. She emphasized that the department is now moving toward digital reporting and district-level convergence. "Child Helpline 1098 maintains total anonymity. Confidentiality is our strongest tool against village-level retaliation."

She acknowledged that in rural areas, families often view early marriage as "economic relief," a mindset the government is trying to break by linking girls with scholarships and vocational training. The goal is to move from a "reactive" system—stopping marriages at the altar—to a "proactive" one where the girl is too empowered to be married off.

II. The Poonch Corridor: The Violent Reality of Intervention

Perhaps the most harrowing account comes from **Mehboob Murtaza Nawab**, a Protection Officer with NIC Poonch. His testimony strips away the bureaucratic polish and reveals a dangerous, physical struggle in the border districts.

"Issues *bahut saaray hain* (there are so many issues) that we have to face every day," Nawab says. "Local people simply do not cooperate. They hide the children; they conduct the marriages in the dead of night. If we receive a tip-off and arrive on the spot during the wedding, they don't just resist—*marrty lag jaty hn* (they start hitting us). We face actual physical violence just for trying to uphold the law."



Nawab points out that despite endless awareness programmes, the feedback from the community is often nil. One of the most chilling cases he encountered involved a massive age gap. "I have seen a case where the girl's age was 14 years and the bridegroom's age was 40 years. This isn't just a 'marriage'; it's the destruction of a life. Most of these cases involve very poor families in rural areas who feel they have no other choice."

Adding to this, Mehboob shared a recent encounter: "We recently intervened in a child marriage case in a rural area. Upon reaching the spot, we found that the marriage was scheduled to take place at that very moment. We successfully rescued the girl; however, tragically, her grandmother passed away later that same day."

Nawab is vocal about the failures of local leadership. "The main reason these marriages continue is the cooperation of the Sarpanch and the 'marriage fixers' who support them. The administration's role is sometimes limited because the Social Welfare Department wings and Mission Vatsalya are left to handle the heat. Every district has a Child Marriage Prohibition Officer (CMPO), but we aren't even able to inform him daily—we only go to him for the most critical cases because the resistance is so high."

The "Sarpanch" Hegemony: Rule by Decree

In many remote villages, the social fabric is governed by an iron-clad patriarchal culture. Here, the Sarpanch acts not just as a representative of the government, but as a local monarch. If a girl reaches the age of 16 or 17, the pressure to marry her off "ASAP" becomes a collective community mission, often orchestrated by the village headman himself.

The Sarpanch often uses "protection" as a justification. They argue that in remote areas, marrying a girl early "safeguards" her from social stigma or "outside influences." This logic, however, is a thin veil for maintaining patriarchal control.

"It is a mafia-like grip," says a local field worker. "The Sarpanch decides the marriage, and no one dares to say anything. If someone even thinks of dialing 1098, they know they will be identified and exiled from the village social circle. The fear of the neighbor is greater than the fear of the police."

The Core Conflict: Fear vs. The Law

The persistence of child marriage in J&K is rooted in a paradox of fear. Parents are technically scared of the law, but they are far more terrified of their own community. The "old culture" perpetuated by village elders dictates that a girl's "shelf-life" ends at 18. To them, the law is an "outsider's" interference in their "private" and "religious" customs.

In many cases, the "marriage fixer"—a local middleman who scouts for grooms—works directly with the village headman. They identify families in deep debt or those with multiple daughters and present marriage as a "solution." This turns the life of a minor into a debt-clearing transaction.

The Frontline Shield: A Guide for Village Workers

To bridge this gap, this investigation has compiled a professional protocol for the unsung heroes—the ASHA workers, teachers, and Anganwadi staff who are the only eyes and ears inside these closed communities:

- **Mandatory Reporting:** Under the POCSO Act and the JJ Act, failure to report a known crime against a child can lead to legal action against the official. Silence is complicity.
- **The Anonymity Clause:** Calling 1098 does not require a name. You can report anonymously to protect yourself from local backlash. This is vital in small villages where everyone knows everyone.
- **Direct Escalation:** If the local Sarpanch is the one facilitating the marriage, do not

go to the local authorities who might be under his influence. Go directly to the CMPO, the DCPU, or the District Magistrate.

- **The School Dropout Marker:** Watch the registers. The first sign of an impending marriage is almost always a girl stopping her education. A sudden dropout in the 9th or 10th grade should trigger an immediate welfare check.

CONCLUSION: BREAKING THE SHACKLES

The eradication of child marriage in Jammu and Kashmir cannot be achieved by FIRs alone. It requires a total dismantling of the "Old Village Culture" and the shadow economy that feeds it. While the post-Article 370 legal framework provides the tools—moving the needle from 9% to 6%—the remaining 6% represents the hardest, most resistant core of the problem.

The "Mafia" hold of the village elders must be broken through direct, uncompromising accountability. If a child marriage occurs in a village, the Sarpanch must be held legally responsible for failing to prevent it. Their position of power should be revoked if they allow a 14-year-old to be married to a 40-year-old.

We must also address the "Marriage Fixer" networks that operate across district lines, moving girls from poor families in one district to older men in another to avoid local detection.

Only when the cost of silence becomes higher than the cost of speaking up will the children of rural J&K truly be free.

This is a call to the youth of Jammu & Kashmir: Do not let tradition be a cage. Do not let the "fixers" decide your worth. Report. Protect. Save a childhood. The future of the valley depends on the girls who are allowed to grow into women on their own terms.

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2. **https://earlytimes.in/newsdet.aspx?q=398233**

Story 23

बेटी के बदले बेटी: देवासी समाज में न्यात, आटा-साटा और बाल विवाह की जमीनी हकीकत

By Shravan Kumar | Mooknayaknews.com | March 14, 2026



Child Marriage Awareness Campaign by Sharshti Foundation.

राजस्थान के अजमेर जिले के एक छोटे से गांव में कुछ महीने पहले एक परिवार में शोक का माहौल था। घर के बुजुर्ग दादा का निधन हो गया था। कुछ समय बाद परिवार ने समाज के लोगों को बुलाकर **"न्यात"** करने का फैसला किया। यह एक सामुदायिक भोज होता है जिसमें रिश्तेदार और समाज के लोग शामिल होते हैं।

न्यात की तैयारी चल रही थी। घर में लोगों का आना-जाना लगा हुआ था। इसी बीच परिवार के बुजुर्गों ने एक और फैसला किया—घर की **15 साल की लड़की की शादी भी उसी मौके पर कर दी जाए।**

कारण साधारण था।

“जब पूरा समाज आ ही रहा है तो शादी भी कर देंगे, अलग से खर्च क्यों करना,” परिवार के एक सदस्य ने कहा।

लड़की की उम्र 18 साल से कम थी, लेकिन गांव में यह बात किसी को असामान्य नहीं लगी।

राजस्थान के कई ग्रामीण इलाकों में, खासकर **देवासी (रायका) समाज** में, ऐसी घटनाएं देखने को मिलती हैं जहां सामाजिक परंपराएं और आर्थिक कारण मिलकर कम उम्र में लड़कियों की शादी का रास्ता बना देते हैं।

न्यात: एक परंपरा, जिसमें कई फैसले साथ हो जाते हैं

देवासी समाज में जब किसी बुजुर्ग—जैसे दादा या दादी—का निधन होता है, तो कुछ समय बाद परिवार समाज के लोगों को बुलाकर सामूहिक भोज करता है। इसे स्थानीय भाषा में **न्यात** कहा जाता है।

इस आयोजन में पूरा समाज शामिल होता है। कई बार परिवार इसी अवसर पर दूसरे सामाजिक काम भी एक साथ करने की कोशिश करते हैं।

स्थानीय लोगों के अनुसार कई बार ऐसे मौकों पर **कम उम्र के बच्चों की शादियां भी तय कर दी जाती हैं।**



राजस्थान में देवासी समाज की शादी

गांव के निवासी **मनीष** बताते हैं:

“गांव में कई बार ऐसा होता है कि न्यात के समय रिश्तेदार भी आते हैं और समाज के लोग भी। तब परिवार सोचता है कि शादी का खर्च अलग से करने के बजाय उसी समय कर दिया जाए।”

लेकिन कई बार इस प्रक्रिया में **लड़कियों की उम्र और उनकी पढ़ाई जैसे मुद्दे पीछे रह जाते हैं।**

आटा-साटा: बेटी के बदले बेटी

देवासी समाज में एक और प्रथा देखने को मिलती है—**आटा-साटा**।

इस व्यवस्था में दो परिवार अपनी बेटियों का विवाह आपस में करते हैं। यदि एक परिवार का बेटा दूसरे परिवार की बेटी से शादी करता है, तो बदले में उस परिवार की बेटी की शादी पहले परिवार में कर दी जाती है।

ग्रामीण इलाकों में इसे अक्सर **"बेटी के बदले बेटी"** कहा जाता है।

परिवारों का कहना है कि इससे दहेज का दबाव कम हो जाता है और दोनों परिवारों के बीच संतुलन बना रहता है।

लेकिन कई बार इस व्यवस्था में **लड़कियों की उम्र और उनकी इच्छा पर ज्यादा ध्यान नहीं दिया जाता।**

एक अधूरी कहानी: आशीष देवासी की पीड़ा

जोधपुर जिले के **बिलाड़ा क्षेत्र के एक छोटे से गांव** के रहने वाले **आशीष देवासी** की कहानी इस प्रथा के असर को करीब से दिखाती है।

आशीष बताते हैं कि उनकी सगाई उन्हें याद भी नहीं है।

"मेरी सगाई बचपन में ही कर दी गई थी। मुझे तो यह भी याद नहीं कि मेरी सगाई कब हुई," वे कहते हैं।

उनकी बहन की सगाई भी उसी समय **आटा-साटा प्रथा** के तहत की गई थी। यानी जिस परिवार में उनकी बहन की शादी तय हुई थी, उसी परिवार की लड़की से आशीष की शादी भी तय कर दी गई।

कुछ साल बाद आशीष की शादी हो गई, लेकिन उनकी बहन की शादी बाकी थी।

फिर अचानक एक घटना ने सब कुछ बदल दिया।

जिस युवक से उनकी बहन की शादी होनी थी, वह मानसिक तनाव के कारण **आत्महत्या कर बैठा**।

आशीष बताते हैं:

"मेरी पत्नी आने वाली थी, लेकिन आटा-साटा के कारण उन्होंने उसे रोक दिया। इसके बाद हमारी शादी टूट गई।"

अपनी कहानी बताते हुए उनकी आवाज धीमी हो जाती है।

"कैसे भी करके यह प्रथा बंद होनी चाहिए। सरकार को इस पर ठोस कदम उठाने चाहिए ताकि मेरे जैसे लोगों की जिंदगी बर्बाद होने से बच सके," वे कहते हैं।

लोक कविता में भी झलकती है पीड़ा

राजस्थान के ग्रामीण समाज में आटा-साटा प्रथा के सामाजिक प्रभावों को लेकर लोक कविताओं में भी दर्द दिखाई देता है। सामाजिक कार्यकर्ता और लोक कवि **मुकेश खारवाल** अपनी एक कविता में इस पीड़ा को इस तरह व्यक्त करते हैं:

"साफा वालो सिर नीं दिखे,
मिनख मूंछ रा काईं मरगा रै।

लोई मरगो, मुंडो रो,
ओ जमाणो कैडो रै।

आटा-साटा रा चक्कर में,
माई-बाप, भाई-बहिण रा रिश्ता मारे रै।

रिश्तां में कोढ़ उगड़ ग्यो,

महाभारत आ घर-घर चालै रै।”

यह कविता उन सामाजिक तनावों को दर्शाती है जो कई बार **आटा-साटा जैसी परंपराओं के कारण परिवारों और रिश्तों में पैदा हो जाते हैं।**

शोध क्या बताता है

ग्रामीण समाज में **आटा-साटा या एक्सचेंज मैरिज** को लेकर कई शोध किए गए हैं।

International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy में प्रकाशित अध्ययन
“Women in Exchange: Atta-satta Marriage” में इस प्रथा के सामाजिक प्रभावों का विश्लेषण किया गया है।

अध्ययन के अनुसार ऐसे विवाहों में दो परिवारों के रिश्ते आपस में जुड़े होते हैं और कई बार एक परिवार में होने वाला विवाद दूसरे परिवार की महिला के जीवन को भी प्रभावित कर सकता है।

आंकड़े क्या कहते हैं

राष्ट्रीय परिवार स्वास्थ्य सर्वेक्षण **NFHS-5** के अनुसार राजस्थान में **20 से 24 वर्ष की लगभग 25 प्रतिशत महिलाओं की शादी 18 वर्ष से पहले हो चुकी थी।**

हालांकि पिछले वर्षों में इसमें कमी आई है।
NFHS-4 के समय यह आंकड़ा लगभग **35 प्रतिशत** था।

विशेषज्ञों का मानना है कि शिक्षा, जागरूकता और सरकारी कार्यक्रमों के कारण स्थिति में धीरे-धीरे सुधार हो रहा है, लेकिन कुछ ग्रामीण समुदायों में सामाजिक परंपराएं अभी भी मजबूत हैं।

सामाजिक संगठनों की पहल

बाल विवाह को रोकने और लड़कियों की शिक्षा को बढ़ावा देने के लिए कई सामाजिक संगठन गांवों में काम कर रहे हैं।

Sharshti Foundation के सामाजिक कार्यकर्ता **महेश कुमार** कहते हैं:



श्रृष्टि फाउंडेशन और बालोतरा जिला विधिक सेवा प्राधिकरण के सहयोग द्वारा समाज में जागरूकता अभियान

“हम देखते हैं कि परंपरा और आर्थिक दबाव के कारण कई परिवार कम उम्र में लड़कियों की शादी कर देते हैं। हमारा प्रयास है कि लड़कियों को पढ़ाई और सुरक्षित भविष्य मिले। Awareness campaigns और workshops के जरिए हम परिवारों को सही जानकारी देने की कोशिश करते हैं।”

कानून और सरकारी प्रयास

राजस्थान सरकार ने बाल विवाह को रोकने के लिए **“बाल विवाह मुक्त राजस्थान अभियान”** शुरू किया है।

इसके तहत गांवों में जागरूकता कार्यक्रम, स्कूल एनरोलमेंट अभियान और समुदाय स्तर पर बैठकें आयोजित की जाती हैं।

विधिक सेवा प्राधिकरण के अधिकारी **राजेंद्र जी** कहते हैं:



बालोतरा जिला विधिक सेवा प्राधिकरण के मुख्य कार्यकारी अधिकारी श्री राजेंद्र जी से बाल विवाह मुक्त राजस्थान की जानकारी लेते हुए श्रवण कुमार

“Bal Vivah Mukt Rajasthan Abhiyan के तहत हम communities में legal awareness फैला रहे हैं। Aata-Sata और न्यात जैसी प्रथाओं के बारे में परिवारों को समझाना जरूरी है ताकि लड़कियों को सुरक्षित और शिक्षित जीवन मिल सके।”

बदलती सोच

हाल के वर्षों में देवासी समाज के भीतर भी कुछ बदलाव दिखाई दे रहे हैं।

कई परिवार अब अपनी बेटियों को स्कूल और कॉलेज भेज रहे हैं। गांवों में पढ़ाई करने वाली लड़कियों की संख्या बढ़ रही है और युवा पीढ़ी अपने भविष्य को लेकर अधिक जागरूक हो रही है।

सामाजिक कार्यकर्ताओं का मानना है कि **शिक्षा और जागरूकता के माध्यम से धीरे-धीरे समाज में बदलाव संभव है।**

परंपरा और बदलाव के बीच

राजस्थान के ग्रामीण समाज में परंपराएं गहरी जड़ें रखती हैं। लेकिन बदलते समय के साथ कई परिवार यह समझने लगे हैं कि **लड़कियों की शिक्षा और उनका भविष्य भी उतना ही महत्वपूर्ण है।**

देवासी समाज में भी अब कई लोग यह सवाल पूछने लगे हैं कि क्या परंपरा के नाम पर कम उम्र में लड़कियों की शादी करना सही है।

बदलाव धीमा जरूर है, लेकिन यही बदलाव आने वाले समय में **बाल विवाह जैसी प्रथाओं को खत्म करने की दिशा में एक महत्वपूर्ण कदम** बन सकता है।

यह लेख **श्रवण कुमार** द्वारा **लाड़ली मीडिया फैलोशिप** के अंतर्गत लिखा गया है।

लाड़ली मीडिया और **UNFPA** द्वारा समर्थित यह फैलोशिप मीडिया में **लैंगिक समानता, लड़कियों की शिक्षा और बाल विवाह** जैसे मुद्दों पर संवेदनशील और जमीनी रिपोर्टिंग को बढ़ावा देती है।

इस लेख में व्यक्त विचार लेखक के हैं। **लाड़ली मीडिया और UNFPA** इन विचारों से आवश्यक रूप से सहमत हों, यह आवश्यक नहीं है।

https://www.mooknayaknews.com/03/2026/%e%0a%4ac%e%0a%87%5e%0a9%4f%e%0a%-80%5e%0a%95%4e%0a%-87%5e%0a%4ac%e%0a%4a%6e%0a%4b%2e0%a%-87%5e%0a%4ac%e%0a%87%5e%0a9%4f%e%0a%-80%5e%0a%4a%6e%0a87%5%e%0a%4b%5e%0a%4be%e%0a%4b%8e%0a%-80%5e%0a%4b8/

Story 24

‘इज्जत’, गरीबी और पितृसत्ता: क्यों नहीं रुक पा रहा बाल विवाह?

By Shweta | Youthkiawaaz.com



भारत सरकार ने 2030 तक बाल विवाह समाप्त करने का लक्ष्य तय किया है। कानून मौजूद है, बाल विवाह प्रतिषेध अधिनियम, 2006, जो लड़कियों की न्यूनतम वैवाहिक आयु 18 वर्ष और लड़कों की 21 वर्ष निर्धारित करता है। फिर भी ज़मीन पर तस्वीर पूरी तरह बदली नहीं है।

केंद्रीय स्वास्थ्य और परिवार कल्याण मंत्रालय की ओर से जारी राष्ट्रीय परिवार स्वास्थ्य सर्वेक्षण-5 (एनएफएचएस-5) के आंकड़े बताते हैं कि लगभग हर चार में से एक लड़की की शादी 18 वर्ष से पहले हो गई थी।

ग्रामीण इलाकों, गरीब परिवारों और सामाजिक रूप से हाशिये पर मौजूद समुदायों में यह अनुपात अधिक है। आंकड़े एक सच बताते हैं। लेकिन आंकड़ों के पीछे छिपी ज़िंदगियां उस सच को और जटिल बना देती हैं।

यह कहानी उन्हीं ज़िंदगियों की है, जो कम उम्र में ब्याह दी गईं, जिन्होंने हिंसा, असुरक्षा और अपमान झेला, और फिर उसी अनुभव को अपनी ताकत में बदल दिया।

‘मुझे तो शादी का मतलब ही नहीं पता था’

मध्य प्रदेश के राजगढ़ की 22 वर्षीय सुजाता आज बाल विवाह रोकने का काम करती हैं। लेकिन कभी वह खुद बाल विवाह का शिकार थीं।

वह कहती हैं, ‘पैदा होते ही मेरी सगाई कर दी गई थी। मुझे कुछ भी पता नहीं था।’

सुजाता करीब तेरह साल की थीं, पाँचवीं कक्षा में पढ़ती थीं, जब उनकी शादी कर दी गई। दरअसल उनकी सोलह वर्षीय बड़ी बहन, जो आठवीं में पढ़ती थीं, का विवाह 32 साल के आदमी के साथ हो रहा था। गरीब माता-पिता ने बड़ी बेटी के मंडप में छोटी बेटी से भी ‘मुक्त’ होना ठीक समझा। विवाह के वक्त सुजाता के पति की उम्र 16 साल थी। यह फरवरी 2013 की घटना है।

शादी सुजाता के लिये ‘गुड्डे-गुड़िया का खेल’ था। नए कपड़े, रस्में, उन्हें बस इतना ही समझ में आया था। विरोध का विकल्प नहीं था, न समझ थी।

शादी के आठ दिन बाद लड़के को पढ़ाई के लिए इंदौर भेज दिया गया। लड़की का ससुराल और मायके के बीच आना-जाना चलता रहा। जैसे-जैसे सुजाता ‘बड़ी’ हुईं, ससुराल का व्यवहार बदलने लगा।

‘मुझे काम के लिए प्रताड़ित किया जाता था। खेत का काम, घर का काम और मवेशियों का काम मेरे ऊपर डाल दिया गया था। तब मैं साड़ी भी ठीक से नहीं संभाल पाती थी और सलवार-कमीज पहनने की मनाही थी।’

दहेज को लेकर ताने मिलते, ‘क्या ही दिया है तेरे बाप ने तुझे।’ पिता शराब पीते थे और ज़मीन बेच चुके थे, ‘मेरे पास कोई सहारा नहीं बचा था।’

पति से पहली बातचीत

सुजाता बताती हैं कि उन्होंने अपने पति को पहली बार 2016-17 में तब करीब से देखा और थोड़ी बातचीत की, जब वह दिवाली पर घर आए थे। इससे पहले उनकी कभी बातचीत नहीं हुई थी।

वह बताती हैं कि उनके पति को यह जानकारी नहीं थी कि वह पिछले कई वर्षों से ससुराल में ही रह रही हैं। उनके ससुराल वालों ने पति को इस बारे में कुछ नहीं बताया था। जब भी पति घर आता था, ससुराल वाले उन्हें मायके छोड़ देते थे। पति एक-दो दिन रुककर वापस चला जाता था, फिर उन्हें वापस ससुराल लाया जाता था।

मेरी सास मुझे मेरे पति से बात नहीं करने देती थी। वह हमें मिलने भी नहीं देती थीं। उनका कहना था कि अगर हम दोनों मिले और हमारे बीच कुछ हो गया, तो उनके लड़के की पढ़ाई छूट जाएगी। जब पति एक बार घर आया था, तो मेरी सास उस दिन मेरे साथ कमरे में सोई और उसे छत पर सुला दिया। हमारा घर मिट्टी का था, बिजली भी नहीं थी। कई बार चूहे मेरे ऊपर चढ़ जाते थे। मैंने बहुत कठिन जीवन जिया है। वह चार दिन के लिए आया था। उन चार दिनों में हम खुलकर बात भी नहीं कर पाए। आख़िरी दिन, जब सब लोग सो गए, तब वह मेरे पास आया और तब जाकर हम दोनों ने बात की।

16 साल की उम्र में गर्भावस्था

सुजाता बताती हैं कि जब वह 16 साल की थीं, तब उन्हें दूसरी या तीसरी बार पीरियड्स आया था और इसी दौरान वह गर्भवती हुई थीं।

पति के लौट जाने के कुछ दिनों बाद सुजाता को एहसास हुआ कि उनकी माहवारी समय पर नहीं आई है। वह बताती हैं, ‘वह चला गया और मुझे पीरियड्स नहीं आए। पंद्रह दिन से ऊपर हो गए थे। मुझे तो यह भी नहीं पता था कि मैं गर्भवती हो गई हूं। मुझे कुछ समझ ही नहीं आया। फिर मेरी मां मुझे गांव की आशा दीदी के पास लेकर गईं। मैं खुद बच्ची थी, मैं बच्चे के बारे में क्या सोचती। मुझे बहुत रोना आ रहा था, समझ नहीं आ रहा था क्या करूं।’

वह आगे बताती हैं कि उन्होंने फोन के ज़रिए अपने पति से संपर्क किया, 'मैंने उसके दोस्त को फोन लगाया। उसने बात करवाई तो वह बहुत चिल्लाया। बोला, 'ये कैसे हो गया? मैं तो शर्म के मारे मर जाऊंगा। गांव में क्या मुंह दिखाऊंगा? अभी तो क्या ही उम्र है।' मैंने कहा मेरी क्या गलती है? तो उसने कहा चिराग से टैबलेट भेज दूंगा। अभी सिर्फ 15 दिन हुए हैं, दवा खा लेना, पीरियड्स हो जाएंगे, बच्चा नहीं होगा। मैंने पूछा कुछ होगा तो नहीं? उसने कहा- नहीं।'

सुजाता के मुताबिक, उन्होंने किसी को कुछ नहीं बताया, 'उसने मना किया था कि किसी को मत बताना और ससुराल मत आना, मायके में ही रहना। मैंने दवा खा ली। दवा खाने के बाद मेरी हालत बहुत खराब हो गई। बहुत ज्यादा ब्लीडिंग होने लगी।'

दवा से पूरी तरह गर्भपात नहीं हुआ। इसके बाद उन्हें राजगढ़ ले जाकर गर्भपात कराना पड़ा, 'मुझे बहुत दर्द हुआ। मैं बिल्कुल टूट गई थी। मैंने तभी बोल दिया कि कुछ भी हो जाए, मैं ससुराल नहीं जाऊंगी।'

सुजाता ने अपने पिता से भी साफ कह दिया कि वह अब ससुराल नहीं लौटेंगी। सुजाता बताती हैं कि उस समय वह मजदूरी करती थीं, जबकि उनके पिता खेती करते थे।

बाद में ससुराल पक्ष की ओर से तलाक की बात उठी, 'ससुराल वाले आए और बोले कि तलाक चाहिए। मेरे पापा ने कहा, हम दूसरी जगह शादी तो कर नहीं रहे, फिर क्यों तलाक दें? लेकिन उसने मुझे तलाक दे दिया। और बात वहीं खत्म हो गई।'

दूसरी शादी-एक और जाल

पहला विवाह टूट गया। लेकिन 18 की होते-होते सुजाता की दूसरी शादी कर दी गई। पिता ने दो लाख रुपये लेकर एक शराबी के हवाले कर दिया।

वह बताती हैं कि उन्हें इस शादी के बारे में कोई स्पष्ट जानकारी नहीं थी। जिस व्यक्ति से उनका विवाह हुआ, वह पहले से शादीशुदा था और शराब का आदी था।

सुजाता का मानना है कि इस शादी के पीछे पैसों का लेन-देन भी जुड़ा था, 'मेरे पापा ने उससे दो लाख रुपये ले रखे थे। अगर मैं शादी के लिए मना करती तो दो लाख रुपये कहां से देते? घर बेच देते तो मेरे छोटे-छोटे भाई और मां कहां जाते? मेरे पास कोई विकल्प नहीं था।'

बाद में उन्हें पता चला कि कुल पांच लाख रुपये की बात हुई थी, जिनमें से दो लाख रुपये दिए जा चुके थे और तीन लाख सात महीने बाद देने थे। सुजाता का कहना है कि ससुराल में उनका जीवन बेहद कठिन रहा। वह बताती हैं कि पति अत्यधिक शराब पीता था और शारीरिक व मानसिक प्रताड़ना आम बात थी।

एक घटना का जिक्र करते हुए वह कहती हैं:

मैं छत पर बैठकर बुआ से बात कर रही थी। तभी ससुराल वाले आ गए। फोन छीन लिया और मेरा हाथ गर्म दूध में डाल दिया। मैं रोती रही। उस वक्त जीने की मेरी इच्छा खत्म हो गई थी और अपनी जिंदगी खत्म करने के लिए मैं छत कूद गई, लेकिन बच गई।

वह बताती हैं कि इसी दौरान उनकी किसी परिचित युवक से कभी-कभार बात होने लगी, जिससे उन्हें मानसिक सहारा मिलता था, 'उसने मुझसे कहा, तू ये सब क्यों झेल रही है? तेरे पास दिमाग है, तू कुछ कर सकती है। लोग तो वैसे भी बदनाम करेंगे। मर जाएगी तो भी लोग बातें करेंगे।'

आख़िरकार वह सब कुछ छोड़कर अपने गांव लौट आईं और करीब डेढ़-दो साल वहीं रहीं। 2023 में उनके पति की मौत हो गई, 'वो शराब पी-पीकर ऐसी हालत में था कि अपने पैरों पर खड़ा नहीं हो पाता था। उससे क्या ही उम्मीद रखते। उसके बाद उसकी मां भी गुजर गई।'

अब सुजाता बाल विवाह रोकती हैं

गांव लौटने के बाद सुजाता मजदूरी करती रहीं। फिर एक स्थानीय संस्था के माध्यम से प्रशिक्षण का अवसर मिला। शुरुआत में तीन महीने बिना वेतन काम सीखा। पहली बार 300 रुपये मिले, 'इतनी खुशी हुई थी कि क्या बताऊं।'

आज वह कई काम करती हैं और 25-30 हजार रुपये प्रतिमाह कमाती हैं। एक चाइल्ड लाइन से जुड़ा है। चाइल्डलाइन 1098 भारत सरकार द्वारा चलाया जा रहा है एक 24×7 आपातकालीन हेल्पलाइन सेवा है, जो संकट में फंसे बच्चों को सहायता प्रदान करती है।

सुजाता सबसे अधिक इस बात से खुश लगीं कि वह अब बाल विवाह रोक पाती हैं। बतौर फील्ड वर्कर, 'मैंने 20 बाल सगाई और 20-25 बाल विवाह रुकवाए हैं।'

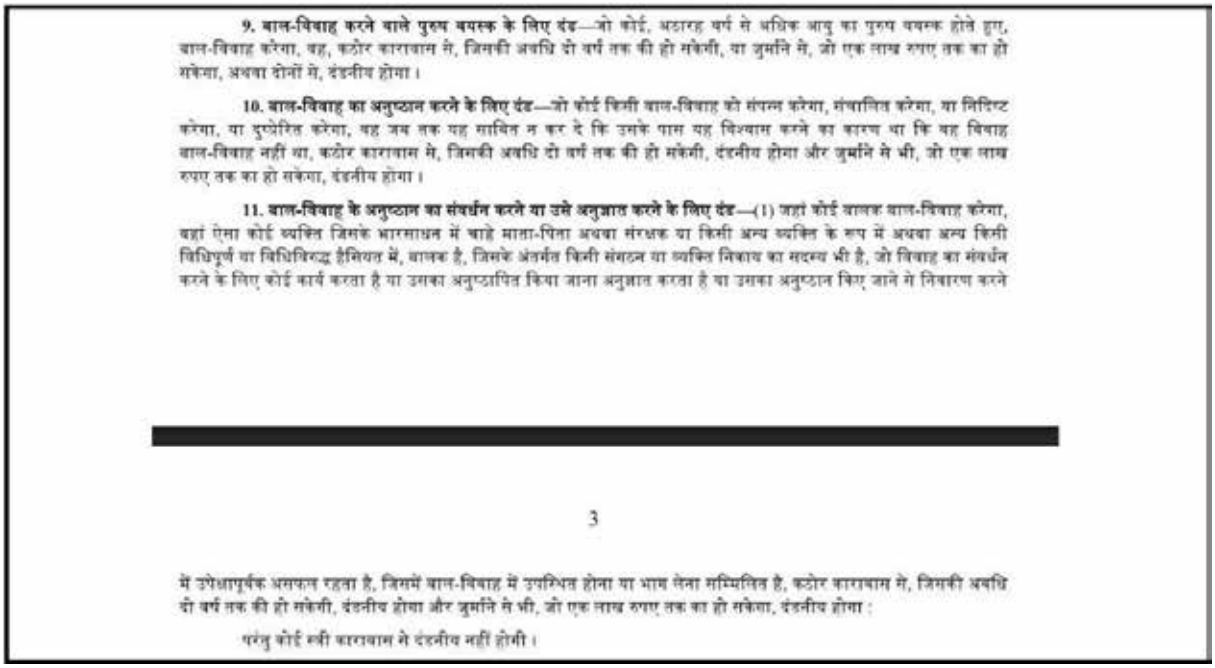
एक 12 साल की लड़की की शादी की सूचना मिली। सुजाता मेहमान बनकर पहुंचीं, कार्ड लिया, जानकारी जुटाई और एनजीओ व पुलिस को सूचना दी। एफआईआर हुई, शादी रुकी, 'मैं सिर्फ शादी रुकवाकर नहीं छोड़ती। मॉनिटरिंग करती हूं। बाद में पता चला, जिस लड़के से शादी हो रही थी वह शराबी था। लड़की अब पढ़ रही है।'

आज वह कहती हैं, 'जो मेरे साथ हुआ, मैं नहीं चाहती किसी और के साथ हो।'

आज 22 साल की सुजाता के पास शादी के कई प्रस्ताव आते हैं। लेकिन उन्होंने अब शादी न करने का फैसला किया है।

सुजाता की कहानी इकलौती नहीं है। देश भर में ऐसी कहानियां फैली हैं, क्योंकि भारत में बाल विवाह अब भी एक गंभीर सामाजिक समस्या है, जो कानूनी रूप से प्रतिबंधित होने के बावजूद लाखों लड़कियों और लड़कों को प्रभावित करती है।

1929 के बाल विवाह निषेध कानून की कमियों को दूर करने के लिए 2006 में बाल विवाह प्रतिषेध अधिनियम लाया गया था, जो 1 नवंबर 2007 से लागू है। इस कानून के तहत दो वर्ष के कठोर कारावास और एक लाख रुपये के जुर्माने का प्रावधान है।



9. बाल-विवाह करने वाले पुरुष वयस्क के लिए दंड—जो कोई, अठारह वर्ष से अधिक आयु का पुरुष वयस्क होते हुए, बाल-विवाह करेगा, वह, कठोर कारावास से, जिसकी अवधि दो वर्ष तक की हो सकेगी, या जुर्माने से, जो एक लाख रुपए तक का हो सकेगा, अथवा दोनों से, दंडनीय होगा।

10. बाल-विवाह का अनुष्ठान करने के लिए दंड—जो कोई किसी बाल-विवाह को संपन्न करेगा, संचालित करेगा, या निदिष्ट करेगा, या दुष्प्रेरित करेगा, वह जब तक यह साबित न कर दे कि उसके पास यह विश्वास करने का कारण था कि वह विवाह बाल-विवाह नहीं था, कठोर कारावास से, जिसकी अवधि दो वर्ष तक की हो सकेगी, दंडनीय होगा और जुर्माने से भी, जो एक लाख रुपए तक का हो सकेगा, दंडनीय होगा।

11. बाल-विवाह के अनुष्ठान का संवर्धन करने या उसे अनुज्ञात करने के लिए दंड—(1) जहां कोई बालक बाल-विवाह करेगा, वहां ऐसा कोई व्यक्ति जिसके भारसाधन में चाहे माता-पिता अथवा संरक्षक या किसी अन्य व्यक्ति के रूप में अथवा अन्य किसी विधिपूर्ण या विधिविरुद्ध हैसियत में, बालक है, जिसके अंतर्गत किसी संगठन या व्यक्ति निकाय का सदस्य भी है, जो विवाह का संवर्धन करने के लिए कोई कार्य करता है या उसका अनुष्ठापित किया जाना अनुज्ञात करता है या उसका अनुष्ठान किए जाने से निवारण करने

[redacted]

3

में उपेक्षापूर्वक असफल रहता है, जिसमें बाल-विवाह में उपस्थित होना या भाग लेना सम्मिलित है, कठोर कारावास से, जिसकी अवधि दो वर्ष तक की हो सकेगी, दंडनीय होगा और जुर्माने से भी, जो एक लाख रुपए तक का हो सकेगा, दंडनीय होगा :

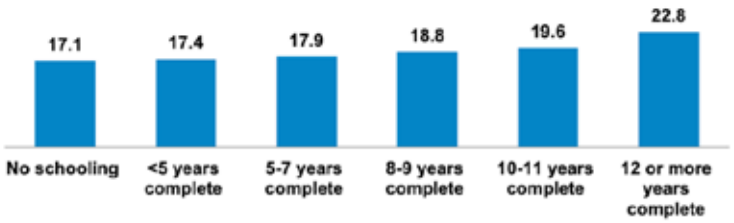
परंतु कोई स्त्री कारावास से दंडनीय नहीं होगी।

बावजूद इसके, आंकड़े बताते हैं कि समस्या पूरी तरह खत्म नहीं हुई है। एनएफएचएस-5 (2019-21) के अनुसार, 18 से 29 वर्ष की करीब 25 प्रतिशत महिलाओं और 21 से 29 वर्ष के लगभग 15 प्रतिशत पुरुषों का विवाह न्यूनतम आयु से पहले हो चुका था।

- Women in the highest wealth quintile marry much later (21.1 years) than women in other wealth quintiles (17.5-19.3 years).
- Twenty-five percent of women age 18-29 and 15 percent of men age 21-29 marry before reaching the legal minimum age at marriage. About two-fifths of women marry before reaching the legal minimum age at marriage in West Bengal (42%), Bihar (40%), and Tripura (39%), and about one-third of women marry before reaching the legal minimum age at marriage in Jharkhand (35%) and Andhra Pradesh (33%). The percentage marrying before the legal minimum age is 32 percent in Assam, 28 percent in Dadra & Nagar Haveli and Daman & Diu, 27 percent in Telangana, and 25 percent each in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. The percentage of women marrying before reaching the legal minimum age of 18 is lowest in Lakshadweep (4%); Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh (6% each); Himachal Pradesh, Goa, and Nagaland (7% each), and Kerala and Puducherry (8% each) (**Table 6.4**).

***Figure 6.2* Women's Median Age at First Marriage by Schooling**

Among women age 25-49



एनएफएचएस-5 यह भी दिखाता है कि शिक्षा का सीधा संबंध विवाह की उम्र से है। जिन महिलाओं ने 12 या उससे अधिक वर्ष की पढ़ाई पूरी की है, उनकी पहली शादी की औसत आयु 22.8 वर्ष है, जबकि जिनके पास औपचारिक शिक्षा नहीं है, उनकी औसत विवाह आयु लगभग 17 वर्ष के आसपास है। यानी स्कूल में टिके रहना ही बाल विवाह के खिलाफ सबसे मजबूत सुरक्षा कवच साबित होता है।

लेकिन यहीं पर गरीबी, सामाजिक व आर्थिक असमानता और महिलाओं से जुड़े अपराध की भूमिका महत्वपूर्ण हो जाती है, ये परिस्थितियाँ बच्चियों को स्कूल में टिकने ही नहीं देते और वह बाल विवाह की चपेट में आ जाती हैं।

ऐसी ही एक बाल विवाह पीड़िता हैं कंचना सौरभ।

कंचना सौरभ: 16 की उम्र में दुल्हन, अब हेल्पलाइन काउंसलर

हरियाणा के पलवल जिले की रहने वाली कंचना सौरभ आज बाल विवाह रोकने के काम में सक्रिय हैं। लेकिन उनकी अपनी शादी 16 साल की उम्र में हो गई थी।

कंचना पांच भाई-बहनों में दूसरे नंबर पर हैं। पिता कॉटन मिल में काम करते थे और करीब 2,500 रुपये महीना कमाते थे। मां गृहिणी थीं। आर्थिक स्थिति कमजोर थी, लेकिन कंचना की पढ़ाई अच्छी चल रही थी, वह प्राइवेट स्कूल में पढ़ती थीं।

फिर अचानक पिता गंभीर रूप से बीमार पड़ गए। फैक्ट्री बंद हो चुकी थी, दूसरी जगह काम करते हुए गैस लीक की घटना में उनकी तबीयत और बिगड़ गई। परिवार पर संकट आ गया।

कंचना 10 वीं में थीं, तभी रिश्तेदारों ने सलाह दी कि कम-से-कम एक बेटी की शादी कर दी जाए, 'पापा की हालत ऐसी थी कि बचेंगे या नहीं, कोई उम्मीद नहीं थी। मैं 16 साल की थी और मेरी शादी कर दी गई।'

साल 2005 में उनकी शादी 25 वर्षीय युवक से कर दी गई, जो गुरुग्राम में काम करता था। शादी के बाद 11वीं की पढ़ाई छूट गई, 'मैं अभी भी बच्चों जैसी थी। छोटी-छोटी बातों पर अड़ जाना... ये सब मां-बाप समझ सकते हैं, लेकिन ससुराल वाले नहीं समझते। वे कहते थे कि ये घर नहीं बसा पाएगी।'

शादी के तुरंत बाद वह गर्भवती हो गईं। दिसंबर 2005 में पहली बेटी का जन्म हुआ, 'मुझे गर्भवती होने की खुशी नहीं थी। मुझे खुद समझ नहीं था कि मेरे साथ क्या हो रहा है।'

गांव में घर, खेत और पशुओं का सारा काम उन्हीं के जिम्मे था। पहली बेटी के छह महीने बाद ही वह फिर गर्भवती हुईं, जिसे डॉक्टर की सलाह पर 'गिराना' पड़ा। 2008 में दूसरी बेटी हुई। दूसरी बेटी के जन्म पर समाज के ताने शुरू हो गए, 'इसे तो बेटियां ही होंगी।'

परिवार में भी तनाव बढ़ रहा था। एक बार देवर ने हाथ उठाने की भी कोशिश की। पति से शिकायत की, लेकिन बात उलटी पड़ गई। धीरे-धीरे कंचना को एहसास हुआ कि शिक्षा ही रास्ता है, 'मैं मार्कशीट और 3,500 रुपये लेकर मायके आ गई। बच्चों को भी नहीं लिया। मैंने मामा के बेटे से कहा कि मेरा फार्म भर दो, मुझे पढ़ना है। अगर पढ़ लूंगी तो शायद नौकरी मिल जाए।'

2009 में उन्होंने ओपन स्कूल से 12वीं का फॉर्म भरा। पति ने शर्त मानी कि वह पढ़ाई जारी रख सकती हैं। वह वापस लौटीं, लेकिन इस बार अपने लिए खड़ी होकर।

पलवल में किराए के घर में रहने लगीं। एक एनजीओ (अभिव्यक्ति फाउंडेशन) में आउटरीच वर्कर के रूप में काम शुरू किया। एचआईवी और महिला स्वास्थ्य से जुड़े प्रोजेक्ट पर काम किया। साथ ही बी.ए. और बाद में एमएसडब्ल्यू की पढ़ाई पूरी की, 'डायरेक्टर ने कहा – आगे पढ़ोगी तभी तरक्की होगी। मैंने जॉब के साथ ग्रेजुएशन और फिर मास्टर्स कर लिया।'

इसके बाद वह चाइल्ड हेल्पलाइन 1098 से जुड़ीं और काउंसलर बनीं। बाल विवाह के केस उनके पास आने लगे, 'जब पहली बार बाल विवाह रुकवाया, तो लगा कि यही मेरा काम है।'

रचना 2016 की एक घटना बताती हैं, जब उन्होंने पलवल के बिलौजपुर गांव में एक नाबालिग लड़की की शादी रुकवाई थी, 'लड़की के परिवार वालों ने धमकी दी कि तुम्हारा पता भी नहीं चलेगा। लेकिन मैं डटी रही। आखिरकार 16 साल की लड़की की शादी रुक गई।'

2017 में एक और मामले में उन्हें और उनकी टीम को कमरे में बंद कर दिया गया था, 'महिलाएं ईंट लेकर खड़ी हो गईं, कहने लगीं बदनामी कराने आई हो।' फिर भी कंचना पीछे नहीं हटीं।

वह बताती हैं कि अब तक 50 से अधिक बाल विवाह रुकवा चुकी हैं और हजारों परिवारों से बाल विवाह न करने का संकल्प पत्र भरवा चुकी हैं।

2022 के बाद वह शक्ति वाहिनी एनजीओ से जुड़ीं। अब वह विक्टिम सपोर्ट कोऑर्डिनेटर हैं – पॉक्सो, बाल विवाह, ट्रैफिकिंग और बाल मजदूरी के मामलों में बच्चों और परिवारों को काउंसलिंग और सरकारी योजनाओं से जोड़ती हैं।

कंचना अपनी बेटियों को उच्च शिक्षा दिलाने की ख्वाहिश रखती हैं।

कंचना की कहानी सिर्फ बाल विवाह की कहानी नहीं है, यह उस यात्रा की भी कहानी है, जिसमें एक किशोरी दुल्हन ने शिक्षा को हथियार बनाया, आर्थिक आत्मनिर्भरता हासिल की और अब दूसरों के लिए भी रास्ता खोल रही है।

अंत नहीं, शुरुआत

सुनीता अब शादी नहीं करना चाहतीं।

कंचना अपनी बेटियों को उच्च शिक्षा दिलाना चाहती हैं।

इन महिलाओं ने अपने जीवन की सबसे कठिन घटना को अपनी पहचान नहीं बनने दिया। उन्होंने उसे अपना औज़ार बना लिया।

लेकिन बाल विवाह का संकट इतना विराट है कि ये कहानियां अपवाद लगती हैं। बाल विवाह की हर पीड़िता के पास सुनीता, कंचना और रोशनी जैसा उजला वर्तमान नहीं है। ऐसे में यह सवाल बना रहता है कि बाल विवाह का अंत अब तक क्यों नहीं हुआ?

बाल विवाह क्यों होते हैं?

रिसर्च डिपार्टमेंट, इंडियन सोशल इंस्टीट्यूट (दिल्ली) की सीनियर प्रोफेसर डॉ. साबिहा हुसैन, जो पूर्व में जामिया मिल्लिया इस्लामिया के सरोजनी नायडू सेंटर फॉर विमेन स्टडीज़ में प्रोफेसर रह चुकी हैं, बाल विवाह को केवल 'परंपरा' मानने से असहमत हैं।

उनके शब्दों में, 'बाल विवाह सिर्फ एक परंपरा नहीं है। इसके पीछे एक पूरी संरचना काम करती है, और यह संरचना लैंगिक असमानता पर आधारित है।'

डॉ. साबिहा के अनुसार, इस संरचना का सबसे मजबूत आधार पितृसत्ता है।

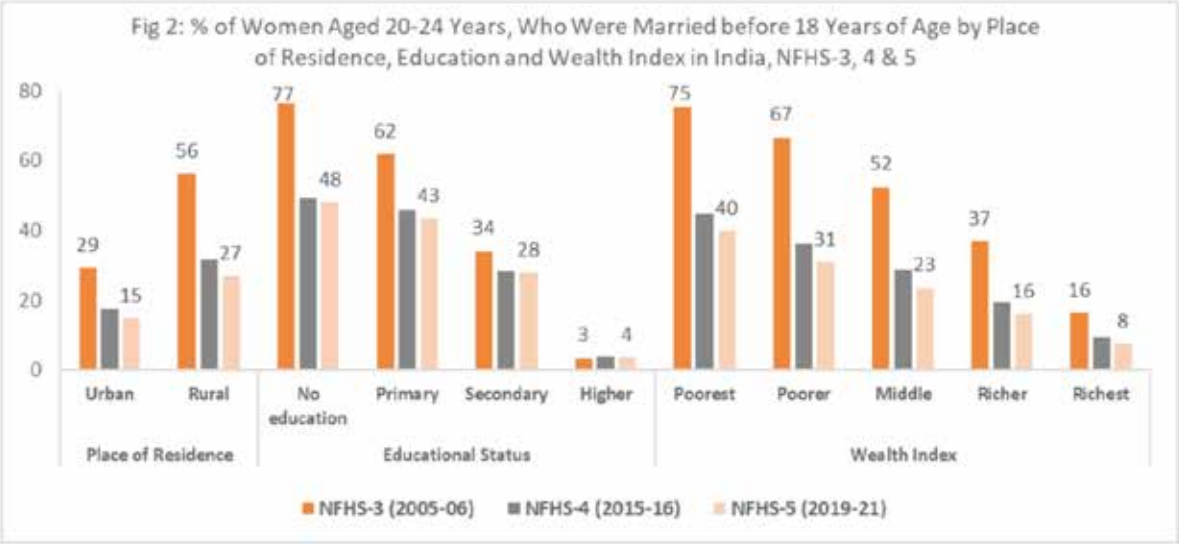
'पितृसत्तात्मक सोच महिलाओं की देह, उनकी यौनिकता और उनकी पसंद – तीनों को नियंत्रित करने का तरीका है। यह केवल शरीर का नियंत्रण नहीं, बल्कि उनकी 'चॉइस' का भी नियंत्रण है।'

आर्थिक कारण: सीमित आय और दहेज की चिंता

डॉ. साबिहा बाल विवाह के पीछे आर्थिक कारकों को भी उतना ही महत्वपूर्ण मानती हैं।

'जब परिवार की आय सीमित होती है, तो सबसे पहले लड़कियों की शिक्षा पर असर पड़ता है। परिवार सोचता है कि पढ़ाई में भी खर्च और शादी में भी खर्च। ऐसे में जल्दी शादी कर देना 'व्यवहारिक समाधान' समझ लिया जाता है।'

उनके मुताबिक, अगर परिवार को लड़के और लड़की में से किसी एक की पढ़ाई चुननी हो, तो अक्सर लड़की की पढ़ाई छूट जाती है। शादी को एक अनिवार्य सामाजिक संस्था मानते हुए, गरीब परिवार इसे जल्दी निपटा देना बेहतर समझते हैं, क्योंकि कम उम्र में दहेज भी अपेक्षाकृत कम देना पड़ता है।



एनएफएचएस-5 के आंकड़े भी डॉ. साबिहा के तर्कों का समर्थन करते हैं, जिसके मुताबिक, 'सबसे गरीब परिवारों की लगभग 40% लड़कियों की 18 साल से पहले शादी कर दी जाती है। जबकि सबसे अमीर परिवारों में यह आंकड़ा सिर्फ 8% है।

लेकिन दूसरी तरफ बाल-अधिकार कार्यकर्ता कृति भारती का मानना है कि भारत के अलग-अलग राज्यों में बाल विवाह के कारण अलग-अलग हैं। उनका कहना है, 'राजस्थान में बाल-विवाह को केवल गरीबी से जोड़कर नहीं देखा जा सकता। यहां समृद्ध परिवारों में भी यह प्रथा जारी है। असल वजह 'सांस्कृतिक और पारंपरिक मान्यताएं' हैं।'

वह बताती हैं कि राज्य में आटा-साटा जैसी परंपराओं के दौरान सामूहिक रूप से बाल-विवाह करा दिए जाते हैं। हालांकि वह भी मानती हैं कि बिहार और झारखंड जैसे राज्यों में आर्थिक कारण अधिक स्पष्ट दिखते हैं।'

'इज्जत' और सुरक्षा का तर्क

डॉ. साबिहा कहती हैं कि परिवार की 'इज्जत' का बोझ भी लड़कियों पर डाल दिया गया है, 'फैमिली ऑनर को मेंटेन करने की जिम्मेदारी लड़कियों पर डाल दी जाती है। उनसे पूछा ही नहीं जाता कि वे क्या चाहती हैं।'

कृति भी इसी तरह के एक सामाजिक डर की ओर इशारा करती हैं, 'लड़कियां कहीं प्रेम-विवाह न कर लें, या घर से भाग न जाएं, इस आशंका में परिवार जल्दी शादी कर देते हैं।' कृति के मुताबिक यह प्रवृत्ति सिर्फ राजस्थान तक सीमित नहीं है; देश के कई हिस्सों में 'परिवार की 'इज्जत' और यौनिकता पर नियंत्रण' बाल-विवाह को बढ़ावा देता है।

डॉ. साबिहा जोड़ती हैं कि सुरक्षा का सवाल भी एक प्रमुख कारण है। ग्रामीण इलाकों में स्कूल दूर हैं, परिवहन के साधन नहीं हैं, रोजगार के अवसर सीमित हैं। ऐसे में परिवार सोचता है कि न पढ़ाई संभव है, न सुरक्षित आवागमन, तो शादी ही कर दी जाए।

डॉ. साबिहा के अनुसार, बाल विवाह के तीन प्रमुख कारण हैं-

1. **पितृसत्ता और स्त्री की देह पर नियंत्रण**
2. **आर्थिक असुरक्षा**
3. **'परिवार की इज्जत' और सुरक्षा का डर**

समाधान: कानून से आगे बढ़कर जागरूकता

डॉ. साबिहा मानती हैं कि केवल कानून बना देने से समस्या का समाधान नहीं होगा, 'एसी में बैठकर नीति बना देना काफी नहीं है। जरूरत है समुदाय के बीच जाकर काम करने की।'

उनके अनुसार, कम उम्र में शादी के स्वास्थ्य, शिक्षा और मानसिक प्रभावों पर स्पष्ट जानकारी समुदाय तक पहुंचानी होगी। इसके लिए मैनुअल, कैंप और स्थानीय स्तर पर जागरूकता अभियान चलाने की जरूरत है।

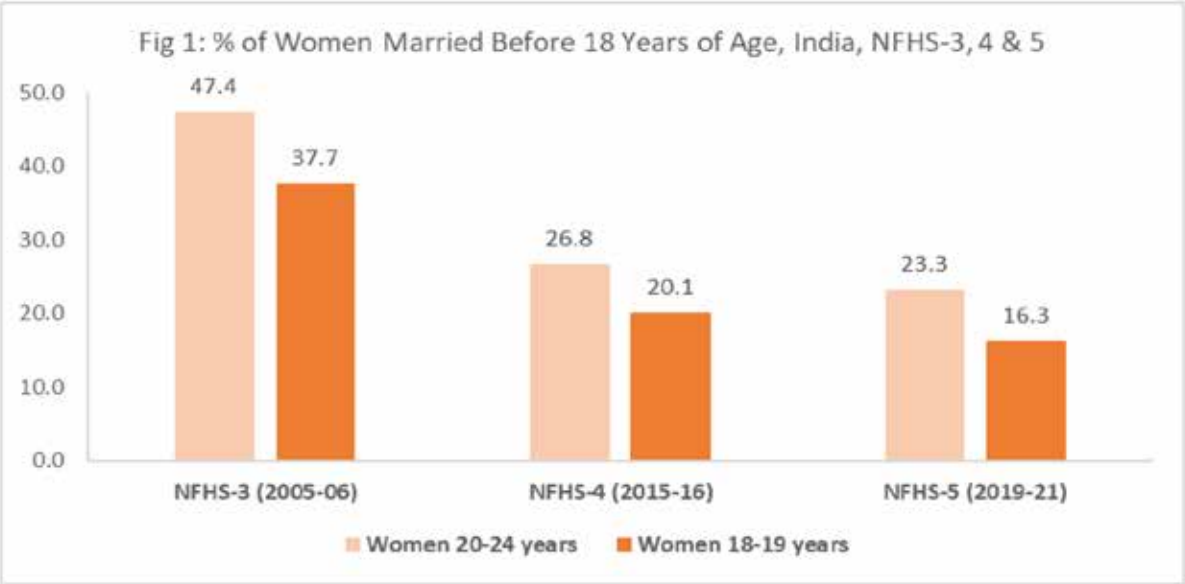
वह कहती हैं, 'बिना समझाए सीधे पुलिस ले आना समाधान नहीं है। पहले परिवार को नुकसान समझाना जरूरी है। बदलाव एक दिन में नहीं आता, धीरे-धीरे जागरूकता से ही संभव है।'

उनका मानना है कि नागरिक समाज, गैर-सरकारी संगठन और आम नागरिक – सभी की जिम्मेदारी है कि जहां भी बाल विवाह की सूचना मिले, पहले संवाद के जरिए परिवार को समझाएं और जरूरत पड़ने पर कानूनी रास्ता अपनाएं।

डॉ. साबिहा के अनुसार, 'कानून का दायरा जरूरी है, लेकिन उसके साथ मानवीय समझ और सामुदायिक हस्तक्षेप भी उतना ही जरूरी है, तभी बाल विवाह जैसी जटिल सामाजिक समस्या को कम किया जा सकता है।'

क्या बाल विवाह कम हुआ है?

एनएफएचएस-5 के आंकड़े दिखाते हैं कि भारत में शादी की औसत उम्र धीरे-धीरे बढ़ रही है। इसी तरह बाल विवाह में भी कमी का दावा किया गया है।



एनएफएचएस-5 के मुताबिक, 2005-06 में 20 से 24 वर्ष की 47.4% लड़कियों ने बताया था कि उनकी शादी 18 साल से पहले हो गई थी। 2015-16 में यह घटकर 26.8% रह गई। 2019-21 में और घटकर 23.3% हो गई। यानी सरकारी आंकड़े कहते हैं कि पिछले डेढ़ दशक में बाल विवाह में काफी कमी आई है।

लेकिन बाल-विवाह के मुद्दे पर ज़मीनी हस्तक्षेप के लिए पहचानी जाने वाली कृति भारती केंद्र सरकार द्वारा बाल-विवाह के मामलों में कमी के दावों को चुनौती देती हैं। उनका कहना है, 'डेटा में कमी दिखना, हकीकत में कमी आना नहीं है।'

कृति को भारत में बाल-विवाह निरस्त कराने वाली अग्रणी हस्तियों में गिना जाता है। वह न केवल कानूनी हस्तक्षेप करती हैं, बल्कि अपने संगठन सारथी ट्रस्ट के माध्यम से पीड़ित बच्चों और महिलाओं के दीर्घकालिक पुनर्वास, शिक्षा और परामर्श पर भी काम करती हैं।

सरकारी आंकड़ों में बाल विवाह में कमी आने के कृति दो प्रमुख कारण गिनाती हैं-

रिपोर्टिंग का अभाव: 'कई मामले दर्ज ही नहीं होते। सर्वाइवर और सूचनादाता को धमकियां मिलती हैं। जब रिपोर्ट नहीं होगी तो डेटा में भी नहीं आएगा।'

फॉलो-अप की कमी: 'कई बार प्रशासन मौके पर पहुंचकर शादी रुकवा देता है, लेकिन बाद में तारीख और स्थान बदलकर वही शादी करा दी जाती है। प्रशासन अपने रिकॉर्ड में उसे 'रुका हुआ' दिखा देता है, पर वास्तविक फॉलो-अप नहीं होता।'

वह यह भी बताती हैं कि कई मामलों में बाल-विवाह रात में खेतों या दूर-दराज़ स्थानों पर करा दिए जाते हैं। 'जिसे आप 'रुका हुआ' बता रहे हैं, वह बच्ची अक्सर उसी परिवार के पास रहती है। उसे सुरक्षित आश्रय या समुचित पुनर्वास नहीं मिलता। ऐसे में काग़ज़ी सफलता, ज़मीनी हकीकत को नहीं बदलती।'

अपने फील्ड अनुभव के आधार पर कृति कहती हैं, 'मुझे ज़मीन पर मामलों में कोई वास्तविक कमी नज़र नहीं आई है।' हालांकि वे एक सकारात्मक बदलाव की ओर संकेत करती हैं, 'अब सिर्फ लड़कियां ही नहीं, लड़के भी बाल-विवाह के खिलाफ आवाज़ उठा रहे हैं। वे किसी न किसी माध्यम से सूचना पहुंचाते हैं।' इस तरह के बदलाव की जानकारी पलवल की कंचना सौरभ ने भी दी।

कृति भारती का काम बाल-विवाह होने के बाद उसे निरस्त कराने पर भी केंद्रित है। वह कहती हैं, 'शादी हो जाने के बाद भी कानूनी रास्ता मौजूद है, जरूरत है साहस और सहयोग की।'

रिकॉर्ड स्तर पर बाल-विवाह निरस्त कराने और हजारों मामलों को रुकवाने का दावा करने वाली कृति के मुताबिक, 'सिर्फ आंकड़ों से तस्वीर साफ नहीं होगी। असली बदलाव तभी आएगा जब सामाजिक मान्यताओं को चुनौती दी जाएगी, रिपोर्टिंग सुरक्षित होगी और हर 'रुके' हुए मामले का ईमानदार फॉलो-अप होगा।'

सरकारी आंकड़ों में बाल विवाह के मामलों की रिपोर्टिंग कुछ बढ़ी है, हालांकि, विशेषज्ञ उसे इस विराट समस्या की पूर्ण तस्वीर नहीं मानते। राष्ट्रीय अपराध रिकॉर्ड ब्यूरो (एनसीआरबी) 'क्राइम इन इंडिया' रिपोर्ट में बाल विवाह प्रतिषेध अधिनियम, 2006 के तहत दर्ज मामलों का डेटा प्रकाशित करता है। यह रिपोर्ट वर्ष 2021 तक उपलब्ध है।

एनसीआरबी के अनुसार 2019, 2020 और 2021 में क्रमशः 523, 785 और 1050 मामले दर्ज किए गए।

केंद्र सरकार का कहना है कि 'मामलों की संख्या में वृद्धि का मतलब यह जरूरी नहीं कि बाल विवाह बढ़े हैं, बल्कि यह बढ़ती जागरूकता और कानून के बेहतर पालन का परिणाम भी हो सकता है।'

क्या भारत हासिल कर पाएगा 2030 का लक्ष्य?

केंद्र सरकार जहां 2030 तक बाल विवाह समाप्त करने के लक्ष्य की बात करती है, वहीं जमीनी स्तर पर काम कर रहीं कृति भारती इस दावे को लेकर गंभीर सवाल उठाती हैं।

कृति कहती हैं, 'अगर सही दिशा में काम किया जाए तो 2030 क्यों, एक साल में भी बड़ा बदलाव संभव है। लेकिन समस्या यह है कि हमारी दिशा ही ठीक नहीं रही।' उनका तर्क है कि 1929 में शारदा एक्ट आने के बाद से लगभग एक सदी बीतने को है, 'करोड़ों रुपये खर्च हुए, कई कानून बने, लेकिन बाल विवाह खत्म नहीं हुआ, इससे साफ है कि रणनीति में बुनियादी खामी है।'

वह बाल विवाह को 'सांस्कृतिक प्रथा' कहे जाने पर आपत्ति जताती हैं। उनके शब्दों में, 'यह प्रथा नहीं, अपराध है। जब तक हम इसे अपराध की नजर से नहीं देखेंगे, इसे खत्म नहीं कर पाएंगे।' कृति के मुताबिक प्रशासनिक प्राथमिकताओं में भी यह मुद्दा अक्सर हाशिये पर रहा है।

कृति यह भी रेखांकित करती हैं कि शिक्षित और प्रभावशाली वर्गों में भी बाल विवाह के प्रति सहानुभूति या समर्थन देखने को मिलता है, जो समस्या को और जटिल बनाता है। वह कहती हैं, 'सिर्फ कानून बना देने से बदलाव नहीं आता, सामाजिक सोच बदलनी होगी और जवाबदेही तय करनी होगी।'

2030 के लक्ष्य पर उनका आकलन साफ है, 'अगर वर्तमान प्रक्रिया ही चलती रही तो लक्ष्य हासिल करना मुश्किल है। सही दिशा, सख्त अमल और सामाजिक मानसिकता में बदलाव के बिना यह संभव नहीं।'

बता दें कि भारत ने सस्टेनेबल डेवलपमेंट गोल्स-5 के तहत 2030 तक बाल विवाह और जबरन विवाह जैसी प्रथाओं को समाप्त करने का संकल्प लिया है। हालांकि, इस लक्ष्य की जिम्मेदारी को लेकर केंद्र और राज्यों के बीच स्पष्ट खींचतान दिखाई देती है।

महिला एवं बाल विकास मंत्रालय का तर्क है कि संविधान की सातवीं अनुसूची के अनुसार 'पुलिस' और 'कानून-व्यवस्था' राज्य सूची के विषय हैं, इसलिए बाल विवाह रोकना मुख्यतः राज्य सरकारों की जिम्मेदारी है।

केंद्र का कहना है कि उसने बाल विवाह प्रतिषेध अधिनियम, 2006 लागू किया है, जिसके तहत राज्यों को बाल विवाह प्रतिषेध अधिकारियों की नियुक्ति और कानून के क्रियान्वयन का अधिकार है।

मंत्रालय यह भी रेखांकित करता है कि वह जागरूकता अभियानों, 'बेटी बचाओ, बेटी पढ़ाओ' जैसी योजनाओं, राष्ट्रीय बाल अधिकार संरक्षण आयोग की पहलों और 24×7 हेल्पलाइन 1098 के माध्यम से सहयोग करता है। लेकिन सवाल यही है कि जब लक्ष्य राष्ट्रीय है, तो जवाबदेही किसकी है?

नोट – पहचान गोपनीय बनाए रखने के लिए गांवों का नाम नहीं लिखा गया है। साथ ही बाल विवाह का शिकार हुईं स्त्रियों के नाम भी बदले गए हैं।

(बाल विवाह की सूचना देने के लिए चाइल्ड हेल्पलाइन 1098 या महिला हेल्पलाइन 1091 पर संपर्क करें।)
यह रिपोर्ट पॉपुलेशन फर्स्ट की लाडली मीडिया फेलोशिप-2026 के तहत तैयार की गई है। इस रिपोर्ट में व्यक्त विचार और मत लेखक के अपने हैं। लाडली और यूएनएफपीए (UNFPA) इन विचारों का समर्थन नहीं करते हैं।

मुख्य तस्वीर प्रतीकात्मक है, जिसे लेखक द्वारा तैयार किया गया है।

https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/02/2026/%e%0a%87%4e%0a9%4c%e%0a8%5d%e%0a9%4c%e%0a%4a%-4e%0a%97%4e%0a%4b%0e%0a%80%5e%0a%4ac%e0%a%-80%5e%0a%94%4e%0a%4b%-0e%0a%4aa%e%0a%4bf%e%0a%4a%4e%0a5%83%e%0a%4b%8e%0a%4a%4e%0a8%5d/

Story 25

The Many Layers of Child Marriage in Haryana: When Laws Exist, Where Does the System Fail? (Translated from Hindi)

By Gaurav Prabhat Pandey | Zeenews.india.com



In rural parts of Haryana, an old saying is often repeated: *"Debt may not burden a father, but even one daughter can."* The phrase reflects a troubling mindset. It is deeply ironic that such a belief continues to exist in a state whose daughters have brought international glory in sports and education. Yet the persistence of this thinking reveals a social contradiction, one that continues to shape the lives of many girls.

Cases of child marriage in Haryana illustrate how deeply rooted the practice still is. In Kunjpura village of Karnal district, a 16-year-old girl was married in December 2024. About a month later, she reportedly suffered a miscarriage. Even confirming the details

officially took time, reflecting the complexity of such cases and the difficulty of establishing facts in rural communities.

A Marriage in Kunjpura

Kunjpura village lies about 12 kilometers northeast of Karnal. At first glance, it appears like many semi-developed rural settlements gradually transitioning toward urban life. A vegetable market stands at the main intersection, the local police station is nearby, and narrow lanes branch into fields and clusters of homes. At the edge of the village, a group of children play traditional games like *gilli-danda* on an open ground. Farmers and shopkeepers move through the dusty roads on motorcycles and tractors. The setting looks ordinary.

It was here, on **13 December 2024**, that the marriage took place.

According to official investigations, the girl was about **16 years old** at the time, while the groom was **22**. School records later confirmed that she was a minor. A complaint was sent to authorities via email, prompting an inquiry. Following the investigation, an **FIR was registered against 13 people who attended the wedding under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act**, while the groom was also charged under the **Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act**. Recently, the young man was arrested and is currently in jail.

This is not an isolated incident.

Voices From the Village

When reporters attempted to speak with the girl's family, they declined to comment. Other villagers, however, shared differing perspectives, requesting anonymity.

One middle-aged man said bluntly, "The boy trapped the girl."

A young man standing nearby responded immediately, "No, the girl went willingly."

Between these two statements lies the complicated intersection of law, love, social pressure, and community structures that often define such cases.

Assistant Sub-Inspector Sudarshan of Kunjpura police station, who is involved in the investigation, confirmed that the girl's age was verified during the inquiry. "Under the POCSO Act, the consent of a minor cannot be legally recognized," she explained. According to police findings, the boy worked as a painter in Karnal, while the girl's parents are daily wage laborers. The family's economic situation is fragile, and education was not considered a strong priority.

During the investigation, officials also learned that the girl had been **pregnant for about a month** after the marriage. When her health deteriorated, she was taken to a hospital, where a miscarriage was later reported. Although the hospital shared only limited details, the matter was subsequently referred to the women's police station.

This development adds another dimension to the case. It is no longer merely a legal violation; it also raises serious questions about **adolescent health and reproductive rights**.

The Health Risks of Early Marriage

Data from the **National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019-21)** show that around **6-7 percent of women aged 20-24 in Haryana were married before the age of 18**. While this figure is lower than the national average, the proportion tends to be higher in rural areas.

Early pregnancy carries significant health risks. Adolescents face greater chances of **maternal mortality, anemia, and complications during childbirth**, while newborns may experience higher risks of low birth weight and other health problems.

International organizations such as UNICEF and the World Health Organization have repeatedly warned that mothers aged **15 to 19 face disproportionately higher health risks**. Experiencing marriage and pregnancy at the age of 16 can disrupt education, affect mental health, and limit long-term social and economic opportunities.

"If Studies Don't Continue, What Else Is There?"

On a large playground near the village, local youths were asked why early marriage still seems necessary in many rural communities. One young man responded candidly:

"If studies don't continue properly, what else should people do except get married?"

The answer is unsettling but revealing. It reflects a reality where **disrupted education, limited job opportunities, and economic insecurity combine to make marriage appear like a practical solution**. In some cases, that solution becomes child marriage.

Kunjpura has two primary schools. Yet when inquiries were made at the school where the girl had studied, younger students were unaware of the incident. The village panchayat office was found locked during the visit.

One resident who spoke about the village's situation mentioned allegations of corruption against the local sarpanch, who is reportedly under investigation and suspended over accusations involving financial irregularities. Another young villager said educational standards in the area remain weak, though many families rely on agriculture for their livelihood. The village population includes members of the Rajput, Khatik, and Valmiki communities, along with other groups.

Perhaps more striking was the fact that several individuals connected to the local panchayat said they were unaware of the marriage. This raises an important question: **Is the traditional system of community monitoring weakening?**

Economic Pressures and Social Silence

A woman associated with the local anganwadi centre offered a perspective, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"Economic hardship can make people do many things," she said. According to her, the girl's parents are poor laborers who struggled both to support her education and to guide her through adolescence. Speaking about the boy, she remarked that the widespread use of mobile phones has also changed how young people interact and form relationships.

Her comments reflect a broader shift in rural India, where changing social dynamics often intersect with traditional expectations.

Official Response

Savita Rana, the Protection Officer and Child Marriage Prohibition Officer based at the women's police station in Karnal Civil Lines, said the case originated during the tenure of her predecessor but is now under her supervision.

She revealed that another similar case had recently emerged from a village near **Sectors 32-33 of Karnal**, where the boy involved was also found to be a minor.

"On average, around ten such cases come to our notice every month," she said.

Many involve migrant families who have lived in Haryana for years. Authorities conduct awareness campaigns in schools, gurdwaras, panchayat offices, and block development offices. According to Rana, these outreach programs function as an **early warning system**, encouraging communities to report suspicious cases before marriages take place.

However, the number of cases reaching authorities also suggests that many more remain unreported.

What the Data Show

According to the National Crime Records Bureau, between **2017 and 2021 Haryana recorded an average of 20 to 33 child marriage cases annually** under relevant legal provisions.

These numbers likely represent only a fraction of the actual incidents. Many cases are never reported, either because families settle the matter privately or because community members hesitate to involve law enforcement.

Under the **Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006**, child marriage is a punishable offense in India. In 2021, the central government also proposed raising the legal age of marriage for women from 18 to 21, though the proposal remains under discussion.

Campaigns such as *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* have contributed to improvements in Haryana's gender ratio. Yet changing social behavior takes time, and laws alone cannot immediately transform entrenched norms.

Structural Inequalities Beneath the Law

Caste dynamics also play a role in cases like the one in Kunjpura. Both families involved reportedly belong to the same caste group. Had the marriage been inter-caste, the social backlash might have been far stronger. Instead, the absence of strong opposition from the community suggests a degree of tacit acceptance.

In other words, the community may have informally approved the union before the state intervened.

Narendra Soni in Panipat who works with a rural NGO, says that silent consent from families often complicates such cases. Teenage relationships are increasingly common in rural areas, he explains, and mobile phones have transformed how young people connect with each other.

However, when **age differences, economic pressures, and lack of education** intersect, the situation becomes legally and socially complex.

The law is clear: the consent of a girl under 18 is not valid. But from a sociological perspective, the question remains whether decisions made within deeply unequal circumstances can truly be considered voluntary.

An Unfinished Story

The case of the Kunjpura girl reflects more than a single criminal incident. It mirrors the layered inequalities present in many rural communities where poverty, gender norms, limited opportunities, and social expectations intersect.

Education often breaks down midway, families struggle financially, adolescent relationships develop, and only later does the legal system intervene.

Access to adolescent health services and counseling also remains limited in rural areas. Properly functioning **adolescent-friendly health clinics and school-based awareness programs** could help prevent such situations before they escalate.

For now, the story of the minor girl from Kunjpura remains incomplete. Legal proceedings continue, while the village returns to its routine rhythms of daily life.

Yet cases like this leave behind a persistent question:

Will someone knock on the door before the next child marriage takes place? Will counseling happen in time?

Will the community intervene?

Until schools, panchayats, families, and authorities work together proactively, the law may continue to arrive only after the wedding rituals are over.

https://zeenews.india.com/hindi/india/delhi-ncr-haryana/haryana/child-marriage-in-haryana-kunjpura-karnal-reflects-how-the-layers-are-so-deep-to-understand/3120132

Story 26

दिल्ली का 'सिलबट्टा' और पिसता बचपन! 5G के दौर में बाल विवाह की कड़वी हकीकत और बस्तियों का अंधेरा

By Gurpreet Kaur Cheema | Jagran.com

दफ्तर की थकान और दिल्ली के ट्रैफिक से जूझते हुए मैं ऑटो से घर लौट रही थी। प्रेम नगर के पास अचानक नजर बाहर की ओर गई। लोहे की कड़ाहियां, औजार, सिलबट्टे और मटके सजाए कुछ झोपड़ियां। मन में ख्याल आया, चलो आज 'सिलबट्टा' ले ही लेते हैं, मिक्सी के जमाने में हाथ का स्वाद भी चख लेंगे।

ऑटो से उतरी तो मंजर कुछ और ही था। दूर तक झोपड़ियों का अंतहीन सिलसिला, जैसे दिल्ली के दिल में एक छोटा सा 'कस्बा' बसा हो। तभी दाईं ओर से आवाज आई, "हां मेरी बेटी... क्या लेना है?"

सामने 50-60 साल की एक अम्मा थीं। चेहरे पर झुर्रियों से ज्यादा वक्त का तजुर्बा था। मैंने पूछा, 'अम्मा, आप यहां कब से हैं?' जवाब मिला, "बहुत साल हो गए बेटा, चित्तौड़गढ़ (राजस्थान) से आए थे, तब से यही बर्तन और पत्थर बेचकर गुजारा कर रहे हैं।'

अम्मा से बात करते हुए मेरी नजर 4-5 झोपड़ी दूर दो युवतियों पर पड़ी। चूल्हे पर हांडी चढ़ी थी और सोंधी सी खुशबू हवा में तैर रही थी। मैं उनकी तरफ बढ़ी, "दीदी... कैसी हो?"

हंसकर बोलीं, 'हम एकदम मस्त हैं!'

बातों-बातों में पता चला कि वे राजस्थान से नहीं, रायबरेली (उत्तरप्रदेश) से हैं और सालों से दिल्ली में उनका परिवार दिहाड़ी मजदूरी कर रहा है। मैंने उनकी आंखों में झांकने की कोशिश की, जहां सपनों की जगह बस जिम्मेदारी की 'धूल' जमी थी।

मैंने पूछा, 'शादी कब हुई?' 25 साल की रेशमा (सांकेतिक नाम) ने बड़े इत्मीनान से कहा, '2016 में।'

मेरा दिमाग चकरा गया! 2026 चल रहा है, उम्र 25 है, यानी 2016 में वह महज 15 साल की रही होगी! जिस उम्र में लड़कियां इंस्टाग्राम फिल्टर और स्कूल के प्रोजेक्ट्स में उलझी होती हैं, रेशमा के गले में मंगलसूत्र और हाथों में चूल्हे की कालिख थमा दी गई थी। उसकी 22 साल की देवरानी का हाल तो और भी 'एडवांस्ड' था, उसकी शादी महज 14 साल की उम्र में ही कर दी गई थी।

वहां 4-5 साल के बच्चे धूल में खेल रहे थे। मैंने पूछा, 'इन्हें स्कूल क्यों नहीं भेजतीं?' जवाब वही पुराना और घिसा-पिटा, 'सरकार हमारे लिए कुछ नहीं करती। न आईडी कार्ड है, न ठिकाना। आज यहां, कल वहां।'

पीढ़ियों का 'डेथ वारंट'

जब मैंने उनसे पूछा कि आप खुद क्यों नहीं कमातीं, तो उन्होंने मासूमियत से एक ऐसा फैक्ट बताया जो हमारे 'डिजिटल इंडिया' के मुंह पर तमाचा था, 'दीदी, हम पढ़े-लिखे नहीं हैं। न कोई हुनर है, न कागज। और हमारे यहां औरतें बाहर काम नहीं करतीं, बस घर संभालती हैं।'

कलेजा मुंह को आ गया। 'पढ़े-लिखे नहीं हैं'??? यह सिर्फ एक जुमला नहीं, एक पूरी पीढ़ी का 'डेथ वारंट' है। शिक्षा के बिना बाल विवाह वहां एक 'रिवाज' नहीं, बल्कि 'सर्वाइवल' का तरीका बन गया है। वे लड़कियां जो खुद अभी ठीक से बड़ी नहीं हुई थीं, अब माएं बनकर अपनी अगली पीढ़ी को भी उसी अनपढ़ अंधेरे की ओर धकेल रही थीं।

वहां से लौटते हुए मेरे एक हाथ में भारी सिलबट्टा था और दूसरे में 5G वाला स्मार्टफोन। विडंबना देखिए... दिल्ली टियर-1 शहर है जहां पिज्जा 10 मिनट में आ जाता है, लेकिन इन झोपड़ियों की दरारों से 'शिक्षा' का सूरज अंदर झांकने में आज भी दशकों पीछे है।

सिलबट्टा तो घर आ गया, पर ये सवाल आज भी मन में वैसे ही खड़ा है, क्या इन बस्तियों के नसीब में सिर्फ लोहा कूटना ही लिखा है, या कभी इनके हाथों में स्कूल की कलम का भी नंबर आएगा?

उस रात सिलबट्टे पर पहली बार हरी मिर्च और लहसुन पीसते हुए उसकी खुरदरी आवाज कानों में गूंज रही थी, ठक... ठक... ठक... हर चोट जैसे एक सवाल बनकर उभर रही थी। क्या सच में 'सरकार कुछ नहीं करती', या इन लोगों तक उसकी आहट पहुंच ही नहीं पाती?

रेशमा कभी स्कूल गई ही नहीं। न पहली कक्षा, न मिड-डे मील की घंटी, न कॉपी पर अपना नाम लिखने का अभ्यास। बचपन सीधे जिम्मेदारियों में बदल गया। जब मैंने उससे पूछा, 'पढ़ना चाहती थीं?' वह हल्की मुस्कान के साथ बोली, 'हमारे यहां लड़कियां पढ़ती नहीं... जल्दी शादी हो जाती है।'

यही वाक्य बाल विवाह की जड़ है।

क्या कहता है NFHS-5 का आंकड़ा

National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) के अनुसार, भारत में 20-24 वर्ष की करीब 23% महिलाओं की शादी 18 साल से पहले हो चुकी है। दिल्ली में यह प्रतिशत राष्ट्रीय औसत से कम है, लेकिन खत्म नहीं हुआ। आंकड़े साफ बताते हैं जिन लड़कियों ने माध्यमिक या उच्च माध्यमिक शिक्षा पूरी की, उनमें बाल विवाह की दर बेहद कम है। यानी शिक्षा सिर्फ किताब नहीं, सुरक्षा कवच है।

दिल्ली में सरकारी स्कूलों में नर्सरी से 12वीं तक ट्यूशन फीस नहीं है। किताबें, यूनिफॉर्म, मिड-डे मील सब उपलब्ध है। आर्थिक रूप से कमजोर वर्ग के लिए निजी स्कूलों में 25% सीटें आरक्षित हैं। लेकिन रेशमा जैसी लड़कियां स्कूल के दरवाजे तक पहुंचती ही नहीं। वजह?

परिवार की आर्थिक अनिश्चितता

स्थायी पता और दस्तावेज़ों की कमी

'लड़की को ज्यादा पढ़ाकर क्या करना' जैसी सोच

और सबसे बड़ा कारण 'परंपरा'

जब लड़की कभी स्कूल नहीं जाती, तो उसके सामने विकल्प ही नहीं बनते। न कौशल, न रोजगार, न आत्मनिर्भरता। ऐसे में शादी ही एकमात्र 'सुरक्षित' रास्ता समझा जाता है। बाल विवाह वहां किसी उत्सव का नाम नहीं, बल्कि असुरक्षा से बचने की रणनीति बन जाता है।

कम उम्र में शादी का असर सिर्फ एक लड़की तक सीमित नहीं रहता। जल्दी गर्भधारण से स्वास्थ्य जोखिम बढ़ते हैं। आर्थिक निर्भरता बनी रहती है। और जब मां खुद अनपढ़ हो, तो अगली पीढ़ी की शिक्षा भी अक्सर छूट जाती है। यही चक्र पीढ़ी दर पीढ़ी चलता रहता है।

रेशमा की देवरानी, जिसकी शादी 14 साल की उम्र में हुई थी, अपने बच्चों को स्कूल भेजने की बात पर हिचकिचाती है।

'कागज नहीं हैं... आज यहां, कल वहां,' वह कहती है। यहां समस्या सिर्फ फीस की नहीं, पहुंच और भरोसे की है। योजनाएं हैं, कानून है- 18 साल से पहले शादी अपराध है। पर जागरूकता और समुदाय तक सीधी पहुंच के बिना नियम कागज पर ही रह जाते हैं।

रेशमा की यह बेबसी 'जस्ट राइट्स फॉर चिल्ड्रेन' के राष्ट्रीय संयोजक **रवि कांत** की बातों को पुख्ता करती है। वे कहते हैं, **'बाल विवाह का सबसे बड़ा कारण गरीबी है।'** यह एक कड़वा और स्थापित सत्य है। दिल्ली की इन बस्तियों में रहने वाले प्रवासी मजदूर गरीबी, अशिक्षा और असुरक्षा के त्रिकोण में फंसे हैं। यहां परिवारों को अपनी बेटियों के सुनहरे भविष्य से ज्यादा उनकी 'सुरक्षा' की चिंता सताती है। कानून-व्यवस्था की कमी और बढ़ती असुरक्षा के कारण उन्हें बेटियों को बाल विवाह के दलदल में धकेलना ही सबसे सुरक्षित 'विकल्प' लगने लगता है।'

5G शहर में 19वीं सदी की सोच

दिल्ली जैसे टियर-1 शहर में, जहां तकनीक 5G की रफ्तार से दौड़ रही है, कुछ बस्तियों में लड़कियों का बचपन अब भी 19वीं सदी की सोच में अटका है। फर्क सिर्फ इतना है कि अब झोपड़ी के बाहर स्मार्टफोन दिख जाता है, लेकिन भीतर सोच वही पुरानी रहती है।

उस रात घर आकर जब मैंने सिलबट्टे पर पहली बार हरी मिर्च और लहसुन पीसा, तो उसकी 'ठक... ठक...' की आवाज़ रसोई से ज्यादा मेरे ज़हन में गूंज रही थी। हर चोट जैसे एक सवाल पूछ रही थी मसाला तो पिस रहा है, पर क्या इन बस्तियों में बचपन भी ऐसे ही पिसता रहेगा?

15 साल की 'रिटायर्ड' दुल्हन

अजीब विडंबना है! हमारे टियर-1 शहरों में 'पिज़्ज़ा' 10 मिनट में डिलीवर हो जाता है, लेकिन 'शिक्षा' को इन झोपड़ियों तक पहुंचने में दशकों लग रहे हैं। हम ड्राइंग रूम में बैठकर 'वीमेन एम्पावरमेंट' पर भारी-भरकम चर्चा करते हैं, और यहां 25 साल की रेशमा 10 साल पहले ही 'रिटायर्ड दुल्हन' बन चुकी थी। 15 साल की उम्र में, जब हम स्कूल के क्रश और होमवर्क के बहानों में उलझे थे, रेशमा के हाथों में गृहस्थी का भारी-भरकम 'कड़ाही-मसाला' थमा दिया गया था।

मैंने उससे पूछा 'पढ़ना चाहती थीं?' उसने ऐसी मुस्कान दी जैसे मैंने मंगल ग्रह पर प्लॉट खरीदने की बात कर दी हो। बोली "हमारे यहां लड़कियां पढ़ती नहीं, बस विदा हो जाती हैं।"

वाह! क्या गजब का लॉजिक है। नेशनल फैमिली हेल्थ सर्वे (NFHS-5) के आंकड़े चिल्ला-चिल्ला कर कह रहे हैं कि देश में 23% लड़कियां 18 से पहले ही 'मिसेज' बन जाती हैं। दिल्ली में भले ही ये आंकड़ा थोड़ा कम हो, लेकिन खत्म नहीं हुआ है। यहां 'मिड-डे मील' की घंटी से ज्यादा तेज़ 'शादी की शहनाई' बजती है।

समस्या क्या है?

1. **डॉक्यूमेंट का लोचा:** 'आईडी नहीं है, कागज नहीं है।' भाई साहब, स्मार्टफोन चलाने के लिए डेटा है, पर स्कूल फॉर्म भरने के लिए एड्रेस प्रूफ नहीं।
2. **शॉर्टकट वाली सोच:** 'पढ़ाकर क्या करना है?' सही बात है, पढ़ लिख गई तो सवाल पूछेगी, और सवाल पूछना तो परंपराओं के खिलाफ है!

3. **5G बनाम 19वीं सदी:** झोपड़ी के बाहर लड़के हाथ में लेटेस्ट स्मार्टफोन लेकर रील देख रहे हैं, और झोपड़ी के अंदर लड़कियों की किस्मत 19वीं सदी के 'बाल विवाह' वाले मोड पर हैंग (Hang) हो रखी है।

कानून कहता है 18 से पहले शादी अपराध है। सरकार कहती है स्कूल फ्री है। लेकिन हकीकत यह है कि इन बस्तियों के लिए कानून और स्कूल दोनों उतने ही दूर हैं जितना दिल्ली से न्यूयॉर्क।

सिलबट्टे का मसाला तो बारीक हो गया, पर समाज की ये खुरदरी सोच कब पिसेगी? क्या टियर-1 शहर का मतलब सिर्फ ऊंची इमारतें और चमकती मेट्रो है या कभी इन 'अदृश्य' गलियों में भी शिक्षा का 5G नेटवर्क पकड़ेगा?

चटनी तो तीखी बन गई, पर सोच कब पिसेगी?

अगली बार जब आप प्रेम नगर से गुजरें और सिलबट्टा खरीदें, तो याद रखिएगा उस पत्थर की खुरदरी सतह पर सिर्फ मसाला नहीं, कई बचपन भी पिसे हुए हैं।

अफसोस की बात यह है कि हम जिस दिल्ली को 'स्मार्ट सिटी' कहते हैं, उसी की छाती पर ऐसी बस्तियां बसी हैं जहां बचपन आज भी 'मैनुअल मोड' पर चल रहा है। रेशमा और उसकी देवरानी के लिए 5G का मतलब शायद सिर्फ तेज़ रफ़्तार वाली रील देखना है, लेकिन उनके बच्चों के लिए शिक्षा की रफ़्तार आज भी 'बैलगाड़ी' से भी सुस्त है।

अजीब विरोधाभास है, जिन हाथों ने चित्तौड़गढ़ के किलों जैसी मज़बूती और रायबरेली की मिट्टी की सोंधी खुशबू को समेट रखा है, वे ही हाथ आज दिल्ली की धूल में अपने वजूद के 'कागज़' ढूंढ रहे हैं।

सिलबट्टे की वह 'ठक-ठक' अब मेरी रसोई से निकलकर मेरे ज़हन के बंद दरवाज़ों को पीट रही है। वह पूछ रही है क्या अगली बार जब मैं वहां से गुज़रूंगी, तो रेशमा का 5 साल का बेटा पत्थर तोड़ रहा होगा या किसी सरकारी स्कूल की 'कागज़ की नाव' लेकर बारिश के पानी में अपनी किस्मत ढूंढ रहा होगा?

शायद जवाब उस सिलबट्टे की तरह ही खुरदरा और कड़वा है, जिसे हम हर बार 'चटनी' का स्वाद लेकर भूल जाते हैं।

https://www.jagran.com/news/national-the-bitter-truth-of-child-marriage-in-delhi-the5-g-era-amid-the-darkness-of-urban-slums40160314-.html

Story 27

खिलौने छूटे, चूड़ियां खनकीं... बाल विवाह में सिसकता बचपन; अररिया से बंगाल तक डर और दहेज में जकड़ी पीढ़ी

By Gurpreet Kaur Cheema | Jagran.com

भारत के कुछ हिस्सों में शादी कोई उत्सव नहीं, बल्कि एक 'मैनेजमेंट टास्क' बन गई थी। लोग बेटी को 'पराया धन' ऐसे समझते थे जैसे कोई एक्सपायरी डेट वाला डिस्काउंट कूपन हो कि जितनी जल्दी रिडीम (विवाह) कर लो, उतना ही फायदा!

गांव में ढोल बज रहा है। रंग-बिरंगी पगड़ियां, हाथों में मेंहदी, और पंडाल के नीचे बैठे दो बच्चे जिनमें एक की ऊंचाई माइक तक नहीं पहुंचती, दूसरी की चूड़ियां उसकी कलाई से फिसल रही हैं। पुजारी मंत्र पढ़ रहा है, और भीड़ ताली बजा रही है। कोई कहता है "आज अक्षय तृतीया है, आज के दिन शादी होगी तो सात जन्म का बंधन पक्का।" बच्चे समझ नहीं पा रहे कि खेल कब खत्म हुआ और शादी कब शुरू हो गई।

यह कोई कहानी नहीं, बल्कि उन सामाजिक परंपराओं की झलक है जो दशकों तक भारत के कई हिस्सों में सामान्य मानी जाती रहीं। बाल विवाह का चेहरा सिर्फ आंकड़ों से नहीं समझा जा सकता... इसके पीछे मिथकों, डर, धार्मिक प्रतीकों और सामुदायिक दबाव की परतें हैं।

हरियाणा, राजस्थान, बिहार और पश्चिम बंगाल जैसे राज्यों में यह प्रथा अलग-अलग सामाजिक रंगों में दिखती है। कहीं 'इज्जत' के नाम पर, कहीं 'पुण्य' के नाम पर, तो कहीं 'गरीबी से राहत' के बहाने।

"52% की चुप्पी" अररिया की सच्ची तस्वीर

कल्पना कीजिए कि आप बिहार में अररिया जिले के एक गांव में हैं। गली में बच्चे खेल रहे हैं, पर कुछ-कुछ घरों में तूते-फूते ढोल की आवाजें आ रही हैं। नये दूल्हा-दुल्हन की चल रही रस्में... एक तस्वीर जो आम होने की वजह से किसी को अजीब नहीं लगती।

केवल अजीब इसलिए नहीं कि शादी है, बल्कि इसलिए कि वह लड़की अभी बच्ची है। यहां बच्चों के साथ खेलते-हंसते-कूदते-फांदते हुए बड़े ही सहजता से शादी का मंच सजता है।

पिछले कुछ सालों में इस जिले में बाल विवाह की दर लगभग 52% तक पहुंच गई है। यानी हर दो लड़कियों में से एक की शादी 18 साल से पहले हो चुकी है जिसे स्थानीय लोग सामाजिक चुप्पी की वजह से स्वीकार कर लेते हैं।

अररिया में यह सिर्फ दर नहीं- एक जीवन-धारा बन चुकी है। स्कूल से लौटती लड़की, रोज़ सुबह खेत में काम पर जाने वाली किशोरी, 16-17 की उम्र में सगाई-शादी के रस्मों से जूझती-सी दिखती है। प्रशासन ने अब **बाल विवाह मुक्त अभियान** शुरू किया है, और पुलिस-प्रशासन के साथ वकील और जागरण समूह गांव-गांव जाकर इसे रुकवाने की कोशिश कर रहे हैं।

सबसे बड़ा आश्चर्य यह है कि NFHS के बाद भी कुछ जिलों में बढ़ोतरी दर्ज हुई है, जैसे अररिया में 48.9% से बढ़कर 52% तक।

भारत में कौन सबसे ज्यादा पीछे?

अगर आप सोचते हैं कि यह सिर्फ अररिया जैसी जगहों तक सीमित है, तो आंकड़े बताते हैं कि देश के कुछ राज्यों में बाल विवाह की दर आज भी बहुत ऊंची है:

- **पश्चिम बंगाल:** सबसे ऊपर है, लगभग 41.6% महिलाओं की शादी 18 से पहले हुई। कुछ ज़िलों में यह दर 55% से भी ऊपर है।
- **बिहार:** लगभग 40.8% महिलाओं की शादी भी बच्ची उम्र में हो जाती है।
- **राजस्थान:** इसके साथ-साथ अन्य पूर्वोत्तर/उत्तर राज्यों में भी यह समस्या गंभीर बनी हुई है।

ये संख्या आज भी राष्ट्रीय औसत (लगभग 23.3%) से कहीं ज्यादा है। यह सवाल खड़ा करती है कि इतने भारी कानून और अभियान होने के बावजूद क्यों इतनी बड़ी संख्या अभी भी बाल विवाह की गिरफ्त में है।

'बालिका वधू' और ड्राइंग रूम की क्रांति

सोचिए, जिस समाज में घूंघट की मर्यादा पर घंटों चर्चा होती थी, वहां **'आनंदी'** ने आकर सबके चाय के कप हिला दिए। टीवी सीरियल **बालिका वधू** ने पहली बार मुख्यधारा के दर्शकों को यह दिखाया कि एक बच्ची का विवाह सिर्फ रस्म नहीं, बल्कि उसके बचपन का छिन जाना है। "आनंदी" का किरदार काल्पनिक था, लेकिन उसकी परिस्थितियां काल्पनिक नहीं थीं। सीरियल ने गांवों के भीतर की उस चुप्पी को तोड़ा, जिसे अक्सर "परंपरा" कहकर ढक दिया जाता था।

इतिहासकारों का 'पोस्टमार्टम'

इतिहासकार उमा चक्रवर्ती की बात मानें तो यह सब **'कंट्रोल'** का खेल था। उनकी पुस्तक Gendering Caste बताती है कि भारतीय समाज में स्त्री की यौनिकता और विवाह को नियंत्रित करना जाति व्यवस्था के संरक्षण से जुड़ा रहा है। कम उम्र में विवाह, स्त्री की स्वायत्तता सीमित करने का एक उपकरण बन गया, जिससे परिवार और समुदाय सामाजिक "शुद्धता" बनाए रख सकें।

दिलचस्प बात यह है कि प्राचीन वैदिक ग्रंथों में विवाह की आयु हमेशा बहुत कम नहीं थी; मध्यकालीन अस्थिरता और जाति-आधारित सामाजिक संरचना ने बाल विवाह को अधिक संस्थागत रूप दिया। यानी, जिसे हम 'सनातन परंपरा' कहते हैं, वह अक्सर मध्यकाल की 'सामाजिक असुरक्षा' की देन थी।

आंकड़ों का 'स्कोरकार्ड': गिरावट तो है, पर खेल अभी जारी

अगर हम National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) को एक रिपोर्ट कार्ड मानें, तो भारत ने पिछले कुछ सालों में काफी सुधार किया है। 2019-21 के आंकड़े बताते हैं कि 20-24 वर्ष की लगभग 23% महिलाओं की शादी 18 से पहले हो गई थी।

हालांकि NFHS-4 के मुकाबले यह ग्राफ नीचे गिरा है, जो कि अच्छी खबर है!, लेकिन क्षेत्रीय असमानता अभी भी वैसी ही है जैसे किसी फिल्म के विलेन का डर कहीं बहुत ज्यादा, तो कहीं बिल्कुल नहीं।

मेडिकल बुलेटिन: 'अभी तो मैं बच्ची हूं!'

मेडिकल जर्नल्स और विश्व स्वास्थ्य संगठन (WHO) की रिपोर्ट्स किसी डरावनी फिल्म की स्क्रिप्ट जैसी लगती हैं, अगर उन्हें नजरअंदाज किया जाए।

- **मातृ मृत्यु दर:** 15-19 साल की उम्र में मां बनना वैसा ही है जैसे किसी कच्चे घड़े में भारी सामान भर देना। शरीर पूरी तरह विकसित नहीं होता, और नतीजा? जानलेवा जटिलताएं।
- **अगली पीढ़ी का हाल:** कम उम्र की माताओं के बच्चे अक्सर कुपोषण और कम वजन (Low Birth Weight) का शिकार होते हैं। यानी एक गलत फैसला, दो पीढ़ियों का नुकसान।
- **मेंटल हेल्थ:** अचानक 'गुड्डे-गुड़ियों' वाले हाथों में 'घर की चाबियां' थमा देना किसी को भी अवसाद (Depression) और अलगाव के अंधेरे में धकेल सकता है।
- **टीनएज प्रेगनेंसी:** 15-19 साल की लगभग **6.8%** लड़कियां या तो मां बन चुकी हैं या बनने वाली हैं। यह किसी डरावनी वेब सीरीज से कम नहीं कि जिस उम्र में हाथ में 'बोर्ड परीक्षा' का पेन होना चाहिए, वहां 'बच्चे का पालना' आ जाता है।
- **अच्छी खबर:** किशोर गर्भधारण की दर **51 से गिरकर 43** (प्रति 1000) पर आ गई है। यानी धीरे-धीरे सही, पर समाज को 'बायोलॉजी' समझ आने लगी है।

भारत का 'मैरिज रिपोर्ट कार्ड': प्रोग्रेस तो है, पर 'ए-ग्रेड' अभी दूर!

अगर हम भारत की तुलना एक ऐसी फिल्म से करें जो धीरे-धीरे सुधर रही है, तो NFHS-5 के आंकड़े कुछ इस तरह का 'ट्रेलर' दिखाते हैं।

- **फ्लैशबैक (2005-06):** तब हर 2 में से 1 लड़की (करीब **47.4%**) का बचपन मंडप की भेंट चढ़ जाता था।
- **क्लाइमेक्स (आज):** अब यह गिरकर **23.3%** पर आ गया है। यानी अब 2 में से 1 नहीं, बल्कि **हर 4 में से 1** लड़की इस चक्रव्यूह में है।
- **बॉयज क्लब:** लड़के भी पीछे नहीं हैं; करीब **17.7%** लड़कों की 'सफेद घोड़ी' 21 साल की उम्र से पहले ही सज जाती है।

क्या कहते हैं ये बदलते समीकरण?

इन आंकड़ों की गहराई में उतरें तो समझ आता है कि बदलाव की रफ्तार हर जगह एक जैसी नहीं है। जहां कुछ राज्य 'स्मार्ट सिटी' की तरह आधुनिक सोच अपना चुके हैं, वहीं कुछ इलाके अब भी 'कबीलाई' सोच के साए में हैं।

- **जागरूकता का जंक्शन:** शिक्षा ने लड़कियों को 'सवाल' करना सिखा दिया है। अब वे सिर्फ घर की चारदीवारी का हिस्सा नहीं, बल्कि अपने भविष्य की स्क्रिप्ट खुद लिख रही हैं।
- **प्रशासनिक मुस्तैदी:** अब शादियों में सिर्फ पकवानों की खुशबू नहीं, बल्कि 'पुलिस की सायरन' का खौफ भी रहता है। यह डर ही है जो कई बार मासूमों को मंडप तक पहुंचने से रोक लेता है।
- **आर्थिक सुरक्षा का भ्रम:** लोग अब धीरे-धीरे समझने लगे हैं कि बेटी की जल्दी विदाई 'जिम्मेदारी से मुक्ति' नहीं, बल्कि एक नए आर्थिक और स्वास्थ्य संकट का निमंत्रण है।

छत्तीसगढ़: उम्मीद की मिसाल

जहां एक तरफ देश के कई हिस्से आंकड़ों के जाल में उलझे हैं, वहीं छत्तीसगढ़ ने 'बालोद' और 'सूरजपुर' के जरिए यह साबित कर दिया है कि अगर समाज ठान ले, तो मंडप से बचपन की विदाई रोकी जा सकती है।

1. **बालोद जिला: द फर्स्ट चैम्पियन**

   बालोद ने वह कर दिखाया जो मुमकिन नहीं लगता था, यह भारत का पहला बाल विवाह-मुक्त जिला बना। PIB की रिपोर्ट के मुताबिक, लगातार दो साल तक यहां बाल विवाह का 'शून्य' (Zero) मामला दर्ज हुआ।

0. **सूरजपुर: "पंचायतों की पावर"**

   यहां की 75 पंचायतों ने खुद को 'बाल विवाह-मुक्त' घोषित कर एक नई लकीर खींच दी है। इससे सीख मिलती है, जब पंचायत के बड़े-बुजुर्ग खुद पहरेदार बन जाएं, तो किसी कानून की किताब की जरूरत नहीं पड़ती। यहां जागरूकता अब पगडंडियों से लेकर चौपालों तक दौड़ रही है।

लब्बोलुआब

यह वाकई सोचने वाली बात है कि हम एक ऐसे दौर में जी रहे हैं जहां हमारी उपलब्धियां और हमारी सामाजिक हकीकतें एक-दूसरे को चिढ़ाती नजर आती हैं।

हम अंतरिक्ष में रॉकेट भेज रहे हैं, मंगल ग्रह की धूल में पानी के निशान ढूंढ रहे हैं और आर्टिफिशियल इंटेलिजेंस से दुनिया बदलने का दावा कर रहे हैं। लेकिन कड़वा सच यह है कि आज भी इसी ज़मीन पर 23% लड़कियों के लिए उनका 'बचपन' किसी लग्जरी से कम नहीं है।"

जिस उम्र में उन्हें यह तय करना चाहिए कि वे बड़ी होकर 'साइंटिस्ट' बनेंगी या 'आर्टिस्ट', उस उम्र में समाज उनके लिए 'लाल जोड़ा' तय कर देता है। यह विडंबना नहीं तो और क्या है कि हम '5 ट्रिलियन इकोनॉमी' बनने का सपना तो देख रहे हैं, पर अपनी एक-चौथाई किशोर आबादी को घर-गृहस्थी के चूल्हे में झोंकने की तैयारी भी साथ-साथ कर रहे हैं।

https://www.jagran.com/news/national-the-stolen-childhood-decoding-the-realities-myths-and-progress-of-child-marriage-in-india40157495-.html

Story 28

Why child marriages persist in TN tribal heartland despite stringent laws

By Pramila Krishnan | Thefederal.com | 23 Feb 2026

Poverty, migration and entrenched custom are driving school dropouts and early marriages among tribal communities in the Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve region



When children drop out of school, they often get married off. To prevent this, Erode-based tribal rights NGOs, supported by the government, are offering free van services to take children living in remote areas to school, so that they can continue with their education. Photo: Nataraj

Deep inside the Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve, 500 km from Chennai, live 19-year-old Ravi and 18-year-old Radha (names changed). They dropped out of school, got married, and are expecting their first baby in four months. One pair of parents was migrating to neighbouring state for livelihood, and hence the teenage couple tied the knot in a rush.

Their story reflects a systemic crisis in the region. For, despite stringent laws, the intersection of poverty, migration, and tradition continues to fuel school dropouts and early pregnancies among tribal communities.

Like Ravi and Radha, numerous tribal children in the hills drop out of school and slip into child labour or child marriage. Many face a stark choice: stay in a government residential hostel to continue studies, or migrate with parents to cities and enter the workforce as child labour.



No big plans for the future, say this young teenage couple who will turn parents in 4 months. Photo: Pramila Krishnan

There are 11 tribal villages spread across this tiger reserve region in Tamil Nadu. An eerie silence hangs over them, as houses are located far away from one another.

Thwarted ambitions

Ravi and Radha, seated outside their mud house, spoke with The Federal. “We decided to stay on in our village and tend to the farm lands. We have not planned anything major about our life,” said Ravi. “We want to build a big house. Unlike many other marriages, our marriage was solemnised by our parents. There was no dowry exchange. We followed the practice of our ancestors.’’

At a later stage, the two plan to move to Tiruppur, the knitwear hub located 100 km from their village, to make a living. “We have no other plans about our future,’’ said Radha, who’s readying for motherhood.



There are 11 tribal villages spread across Tamil Nadus Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve. Photo: Murali Krishna

Radha and Ravi's wedding happened despite stringent measures taken by the state government. Erode district has recorded nearly 250 child marriages in the past three years, with 55 held in 2025 alone.

According to Tamil Nadu's Economic Survey (2025), child marriages continue to be rampant, with the state average hovering at 12.8 per cent against the worrisome all-India average of 23.3 per cent. The statistic is defined the percentage of women aged 20-24 years married before the legal age of 18.



Tamil Nadu's child marriage rate is far lower than the national average, but that's little comfort, since the numbers are rising steadily every year. In rural areas, the proportion of child marriages is 15.2 per cent, compared to 10.4 per cent in urban areas.

Major drivers

Experts say parental migration and entrenched cultural practices are the major drivers. The 2011 Census shows Tamil Nadu's Erode district had one of the state's lowest rural literacy rates at 65.4 per cent, with even lower rates in tribal belts. Girls in these regions often drop out after Class 8, experts noted.

Erode district collector S Kandasamy told The Federal that efforts are on to address the lack of economic opportunities for the parents of the children who dropped out of school in recent years. When parents migrate and are absent from their lives, these children tend to drop out of school, he added.

Social workers and teachers are working hard to bring these children back to schools. For instance, government school teacher P Poongodi walks through forest patches to trace the children who stopped attending the Bejeletti Government Tribal Residential Middle School.

Teachers go beyond their brief

"Some parents who migrate to neighbouring states leave their children under the care of relatives or neighbours. For want of monitoring at home, some of these children stop attending school. Sometimes, we convince the children and they show up for a day or two, but again they disappear," Poongodi told The Federal. "I continue to visit their homes, scour farm fields, the forest and local temples to bring these children back to school."

There are days when Poongodi has even had to comb and plait the hair of her students, as their parents had migrated for work. "In many families, parents marry off their daughters once they complete class 10. They do not want girl children to stay in residential school complexs," she said.

"Some tribal families want to stick to their cultural practice of child marriage. Though people are aware that child marriage is illegal and they will be punished under the law, they argue that their cultural values are much more important. It's a big struggle to call of these marriages,'' pointed out Poongodi.



Social workers interact with the parents of the children in the tribal area. Photo: Karuppusamy

She added that many tribal children are introverts and hesitate to interact as they speak a Telugu dialect. "I tried to learn their dialect and make an effort to interact with them. Some of our efforts have paid off as four students from our school cleared the exams and got enrolled in a prestigious government model school this year. This has recently attracted attention among the students.

But a few parents told me that they would not send their children to a farway school,'' she said. Instead, they preferred to migrate to cities.

Intervention in the form of van

Erode-based tribal rights activists R Karuppusamy of READ NGO and SC Nataraj of Sudar NGO have stepped in with a new effort to bring the children back to school. They have introduced free van services in the hilly stretches of the Sathyamangalam reserve and Bargur hills in recent months, which they say has improved attendance in the schools.

They noted that some children who preferred returning home rather than staying in residential schools dropped out mainly due to lack of transport. Amid risks such as wild animals, rain and fog, the van service has enabled students to attend school regularly.



Parents are being honoured for sending their children back to school

S Annadurai, Director of the Tribal Welfare Department, told The Federal that steps have been taken to ensure regular transport from tribal villages to government schools. "We tied up with voluntary organisations in hill stations and engaged vans to pick up students from their doorsteps. Recently, 100 school dropouts were sent for a two-day tour-cum-counselling session with the Erode district collector. The majority of students showed up at school the same week," he recounted.

"The parents believe they should follow their cultural values. I stayed at the Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve region for a day and interacted with the villagers. We are looking to improve the livelihood of parents and reduce emmigration so that children will be continue to be under their care," Annadurai said.

When the parents do send their children back to school, the local administration makes it a point to honour them, to set an example for the others.

SOP yet to take off

In 2021, the Tamil Nadu government formed a committee to draft a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) to prevent child marriages, as the TN Prohibition of Child Marriage Rules lacked clarity on stakeholder roles. Sources confirmed to The Federal that although the SOP was formulated, it has not yet been released or implemented.

Until systemic changes arrive, the burden of keeping children in school falls on a handful of officials, activists, and teachers — each making their way, often on foot, through forest and field.

(To report a child marriage, dial helpline: 1098, 1091; Police helpline 100)

This report was filed under Population First's Laadli Media Fellowship 2026.

https://thefederal.com/category/states/south/tamil-nadu/child-marriages-tamil-nadu-tribal-heartland-231128

About UNFPA

UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, is the sexual and reproductive health agency of the UN. It works to uphold the rights and choices of women, girls and young people across more than 150 countries. Our aim is to ensure that every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe, and every young person can fulfil their potential.

Website- https://india.unfpa.org/

Afterword

The stories in this collection leave us with an important reminder: child marriage is not merely a tradition that belongs to the past. It continues to exist in the present, shaped by poverty, climate change, migration, social inequality, and deeply rooted patriarchy. Behind every statistic is a girl whose education was interrupted, whose childhood ended too early, or whose future became limited by circumstances beyond her control.

Across these pages, we meet girls who dream of education but are forced into marriage, families struggling to survive after floods or displacement, young mothers facing health risks, and communities where social pressure continues to silence individual choice. At the same time, we also encounter courage — in girls who resist early marriage, in journalists who document difficult realities, and in communities slowly beginning to challenge harmful norms.

The Fellowship 2026 stories demonstrate the importance of field-based journalism in helping society understand the human realities behind policy discussions. These reports move beyond numbers and headlines to show how child marriage intersects with climate injustice, governance failures, education gaps, labour insecurity, and gender discrimination.

They also remind us that ending child marriage requires more than legal action alone. Sustainable change will only be possible when girls have access to quality education, healthcare, social protection, economic opportunities, and safe environments where they can make choices about their own lives and futures.

Most importantly, this collection reminds us that every girl deserves the right to grow up with dignity, safety, freedom, and hope. Protecting that right is not the responsibility of governments or institutions alone — it is a collective social responsibility.

As readers close this book, we hope these stories continue to stay with them — not simply as reports on a social issue, but as urgent calls for empathy, accountability, and action.

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