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### **Putting the Clock Backwards: Covid Pandemic & Reverse Trend in Child Marriage**



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Gender-based violence is undoubtedly a highly mutating virus that rapidly changes its structure and content at any given time and space. Covid has seriously impacted the life and livelihood of people globally. The 'shadow pandemic' of spiralling Gender-based violence also caught our attention. However, the least documented consequence of the Covid-19 Pandemic in India is a spurt in the early marriage of girls. Humanitarian crises due to natural disasters, civil wars, or pandemic situations often led to spike in child marriages. Its reflections have been observed among the Rohingya and Syrian refugees, in civil-war torn South Sudan and Yemen, during the Ebola outbreak in Liberia, and among the flood and drought-hit states of India, and so on.

According to the statistics provided by UNICEF, over 2011–2020, 110 million child marriages took place globally. Nevertheless, an estimated 25 million were averted too. Child marriage

influences children's rights to education, mental and physical health conditions, autonomy, security, and protection. These consequences impact the girl directly and her family and community. After marriage, there is every likelihood that a child bride is more likely to drop out of school, often forced to work as child labour in disguise within the four walls, experience domestic violence, and beget a child while she is still a child herself. Child marriage enhances the risk of early and unplanned pregnancy manifold, thereby increasing the risk of both maternal and infant complications and mortality.

This social evil has been around in Indian society for a long time. One way to combat this was legislation. The British brought one of the first legislation on this issue, the Age of Consent Act, 1891. In 1889, the brutal death of an 11-year-old Bengali girl named Phulmoni Dasi after being mercilessly raped by her 35-year-old husband, Hari Mohan Maitee, culminated in legislation. The Age of Consent Act was enacted on March 19, 1891, and the age of consent for sexual intercourse for all girls, married or unmarried, was raised from ten to twelve years in all jurisdictions. Its violation was made subject to criminal prosecution as rape. The Child Marriage Restraint Act, brought in 1929, was purely criminal legislation. It dealt with the penal consequences of males below twenty-one years of age marrying a child, adult males above twenty-one years of age marrying a child, or any marriage to which either of the contracting parties is a child. The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006 replaced the earlier child marriage legislation. For the first time, this law combined both criminal law provisions by encouraging increased punishment and allowing children to annul their marriages and be declared void. However, lag in law and popular cultural discourses often make effective implementation daunting.

Post-pandemic witnessed a reverse trend, where UNICEF projected that up to 10 million or more girls are at risk of being child brides in 2021–2030. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) estimated that the Covid-19 Pandemic would result in 13 million more child marriages globally over the 2020-2030 decade. A recent report by *Save the Children* has estimated that child marriages will significantly increase in South Asia. They have anticipated 191,200 in a single year and 956,000 in five years. India is no exception, leading to a 50% surge in child marriage cases in 2020. According to National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), in the pandemic year of 2020, a total number of 785 cases were registered under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act. Amongst the Indian States, Karnataka registered the highest number of cases amounting to 184, Assam at 198, West Bengal at 98, Tamil Nadu at 77, and Telangana at 62. In 2019, 523 child marriages were recorded, while in 2018, the data stood at 501, in 2017 was 395, in 2016 was 326 and in 2015 was 293. India undoubtedly is the home to the most significant number of child brides globally. According to the fourth National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4), in India, nearly 1 in 4 girls were married by 18 years (27 per cent). However, we have to keep in mind that a higher number often results from better vigilance and improved reporting as often surfaced and reported cases are just the tip of the iceberg.

The Pandemic-induced lockdown intensified the severe economic distress of the low-income families who wanted to get rid of their 'paraya dhan' at the earliest. Marriage at an early age demands lower dowry and dissipates the concern catering around the security of the girl child and restoration of family honour. School teachers and peers often play a catalysts' role in preventing child marriage; however, prolonged closure of educational institutions increased the vulnerabilities of the children. Often child marriage is a form of disguised trafficking, which increases manifold when the poor face death and despair grappled with job loss and economic insecurities. Pandemic led travel restrictions, and physical distancing made it impossible for girls to access health care, intervention services through State or NGO run institutions and community support that protect them from child marriage, unwanted pregnancy, and gender-based violence. Some child rights activists have drawn attention towards women's agency issues by distinguishing between child marriages and child-led marriages where young girls have conscious collaboration in their elopement.

As part of one of the Sustainable Development Goals, India, a member of the United Nations, aspires to eliminate the practice of child marriage by 2030. Pandemic has thrown significant challenges towards accomplishing this goal and pushed us somewhat backwards with a sudden spurt of cases. For reinventing the clock, the state and civil society must work in tandem to empower the girls and enhance their agencies through access to quality education, credible information, and economic independence through skill development. We need to build an effective and easily accessible support network and rehabilitation measures for survivors of child marriages. From the available data, identifying the trend in terms of caste, community, locality, community-based awareness drives at the grassroots need to be augmented to prevent such evil practices. Indeed, *personal is political* and considering the social cost involved in child marriages, India requires to work on war footing to reverse the trend.