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AGE OF MARRIAGE OF FEMALES: A CROSS SECTIONAL STUDY IN BANKURA DISTRICT, WEST BENGAL: CHILD MARRIAGE IS STILL HIGH

Dhruba Mandal¹, Abhijit Ray², Arpan Kumar Goswami³, Dolon Champa Pal⁴, Panchanan Kundu⁵

HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Dhruba Mandal, Abhijit Ray, Arpan Kumar Goswami, Dolon Champa Pal, Panchanan Kundu. "Age of Marriage of Females: A Cross Sectional Study in Bankura District, West Bengal: Child Marriage is Still High". Journal of Evolution of Medical and Dental Sciences 2015; Vol. 4, Issue 11, February 05; Page: 1852-1857, DOI: 10.14260/jemds/2015/264

ABSTRACT: CONTEXT BACKGROUND: Age at which a female marries has a great impact on her reproductive life. Women who marry before the age of 18 years suffer from higher maternal morbidity and mortality than women who marry after 18 years of age. Still the girls who marry before 15 years of age have highest risk of maternal morbidity and mortality. This group (<18 years of age) of women suffer more from pregnancy hypertension, pre-eclampsia, eclampsia, postpartum hemorrhage and more. The babies born by these mothers also suffer from increased morbidity and mortality. Marriage before the age of 18 years is called child marriage. Previously child marriage was in vogue all over the world including India. Due to occurrence of several adverse outcomes, marriageable age is gradually increasing, forbidding child marriage. Still there is high prevalence of child marriage in many states of our country (India), including West Bengal. In our study we want to find out the age of marriage in different age group with special emphasis to child marriage, in a mixed population of Bankura district, West Bengal, India. Lastly we also calculate the average age of marriage irrespective of different age group. **SETTING:** Sub-divisional hospitals in Bishnupur, Bankura, West Bengal. **DESIGN:** Simple random sampling method. **DURATION OF STUDY:** One year. **METHOD:** 1150 married women attending the antenatal outpatient department, meeting the deserved criteria are selected. **STATISTICAL ANALYSIS:** The selected women are grouped as stated later. Percentage of married women in different age group calculated. Lastly average age of marriage is calculated. **RESULT:** We found highest percentage (36.8%) of marriage occurs in 18 to 21 years of age group. But marriage between 15 to 18 years is also very high (36.5%). We got 3.7% marriage occurs in less than 15 years of age. So the child marriage is still very high (40.2%). Average age of marriage is 18.76 years. **CONCLUSION:** Child marriage is still highly prevalent in a region of Bankura district. It may reflect that in other regions of West Bengal, the child marriage may also be high. **KEYWORDS:** child marriage, legal marriage, trend of marriage.

INTRODUCTION: A great proverb goes that a female's mortality and morbidity remains intact if she is married off early. At an age where a child should be gaining education, playing games, young girls are married off before they become physically and psychologically mature. Marriageable age (age of marriage) is the age at which a person is allowed by law to marry. Definition of child marriage was last updated by India with its 'The prohibition of Child Marriage Act of 2006' which defines "Child marriage" means a marriage or a marriage about to be solemnized to which either of the contracting parties is a child and "Child" for purpose of marriage is defined based on gender of the person – if male, it is 21 years of age, and if female, 18 years of age.¹

As per census of India 2011, the overall percentage of female married under 18 years of age is 3.7. The states with higher observed marriage rate under 18 years for girls in 2009, according to a

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Register General of India was Jharkhand (14.1%), West Bengal (13.6%), Bihar (9.3%) and U.P. (8.9%).²

The Register General of India collected data on fertility on a national scale, and found that females who marry before the age of 18 gave birth to a large number of children than those who marry after.³ Some demographers have estimated that if marriage was postponed from the age of 16 to 20-21, the number of births would decrease by 20-30 per cent.³

Early marriage is a long-established custom in India. In 1929, the Sarada Act was enacted forbidding the practice of child marriage. The census data reveals that prior to 1951, the average age of marriage for girls in India was 13 years. There is however, gradual rise in the age at marriage. The Child Marriage Registration Act of 1978 rose the legal age of at marriage from 15 to 18 years for girls, and from 18 to 21 years for boys. Studies indicate that in many states, the mean age at marriage for girls has already moved up to 20 years in 2006, and many others are very close to this. The national average for effective marriage is 20.5 years. The exceptions are the rural areas, where a substantial proportion of marriages continue to take place when the girl is around 16 years of age.⁴ Data indicates that 60 percent of girls aged 15 to 19 years are already married.

UNICEF defines child marriage as marriage before 18 years of age.⁵ According to UNICEF 2010, 47% of girls are married by 18 years of age, and 18% are married by 15 years of age.⁶ Latest data in the "State of the World's Children report 2012" released by UNICEF shows that almost 22% women in India, who are now aged between 20 and 24 years gave birth to a child before they turned 18.⁷ However the latest available government survey found 48% of women (aged 20-24) were married or are in union before the age of 18, and almost one in five was married or in union before she turned 15.⁸

The latest demographic data provided by the health and family welfare ministry reveal that the national average age of marriage for girls was 20.6 years in 2008, up from 18.3 years in 2001.

Early marriage and motherhood has been correlated with high maternal mortality (hypertensive disorder, pre-eclampsia, eclampsia and post-partum hemorrhage),⁹ and infant mortality, domestic violence, illiteracy and exposure to various STD. Girls who marry earlier are less likely to be educated or taught about their reproductive issues and due to this pregnancy related death are known to be the leading cause of mortality among married girls between 15-19 years of age.¹⁰ These girls are twice more likely to die in childbirth than women between 20 and 24 years of age.¹¹ Girls younger than 15 years of age are 5 times more likely to die in childbirth.^{12,13}

Infant mortality rate is 60% if they are born to mother less than 18 years of age. Even, the surviving children are more prone to suffer from low birth weight, malnutrition and late physical and cognitive development.^{5,13}

Rising the age of marriage may improve education, and thereby improves safe pregnancy and childhood. Higher age of marriage may reduce early widowhood of women, maternal mortality, birth rate and thereby growth of population.

In our study, we want to find out the prevalence of age of marriage in different age group with special emphasis to prevalence of child marriage, in a mixed population of Bankura district of West Bengal, India. We also show the average age of marriage in that population (irrespective of age group).

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HISTORY OF CHILD MARRIAGE: In Ancient Rome, it was very common for girls to marry and have children shortly after the onset of puberty. Roman law said the brides should be at least 12 years old.¹⁴ Among ancient Germanic tribes, the bride and groom were roughly the same age and older than their Roman counterparts. It is said that most ancient Germanic women were at least twenty years of age when they married and were roughly the same age as their husbands.¹⁵

The first recorded age-of-consent law dates back 800 years in England, in 1275, as a part of rape law. Jurist Sir Edward Coke interpreted the meaning the age of marriage, which at the time was 12 years of age.¹⁶

In the 12th century Gratian, the influential founder of Canon law in medieval Europe, accepted age of marriage over 12 years for girls and over 14 years for boys.¹⁷

In medieval Eastern Europe, tradition was early and universal marriage (usually of a bride aged 12–15 years).¹⁸ Still, in most of Northwestern Europe, marriage at very early ages was rare; one thousand marriage certificates from 1619 to 1660 in the Archdiocese of Canterbury show that only one bride was 13 years of age, four were 15, twelve were 16, and seventeen were 17 years of age while the other 966 brides were at least 19 years of age at marriage. And the Church dictated that both the bride and groom must be at least 21 years of age to marry without the consent of their families; in the certificates, the most common age for the brides is 22 years and for the grooms 24 years is the most common age, with average ages of 24 years for the brides and 27.75 for the grooms.¹⁹

In America, Mary Hathaway (Virginia, 1689) was only 9 when she was married to William Williams. Sir Edward Coke (England, 17th century) made it clear that “the marriage of girls under 12 was normal”.²⁰

In France, until the French Revolution, the marriageable age was 12 years for girls and 14 for boys. Revolutionary legislation in 1792 increased the age to 13 years for girls and 15 for boys. Under the Napoleonic Code in 1804, the marriageable age was set at 15 years for girls and 18 for boys.²¹ In 2006, the marriageable age for girls was increased to 18, the same as for boys.

Reliable data for when people would actually marry is very difficult to find, because most of the people did not bother about the age of marriage. For this reason data on history of child marriage in India is lacking.

In India, Child marriage, also known as Bal Vivaha, is believed to have begun during the medieval ages. At this time, India was ruled by Delhi Sultans who practiced child marriage. Thereafter child marriage was in vogue in India.²² Parents thought child marriage may protect their daughters from social violence like rape. They also think virginity of their daughters may remain before marriage if they become married early.²³ Poverty is another very important factor precipitating early marriage.

Child marriage is especially prevalent in India where one third of all brides are child.²⁴

At present legal marriageable age is in India, Bangladesh and Nepal is 18 years for girls & 21 years for boys, in China it is 20 years & 22 years, in Pakistan it is 16 years & 18 years, in Sri Lanka it is 18 years for both boys & girls.

MATERIALS & METHOD: The study was conducted in a mixed population of Bankura district, West Bengal, during the time period of January 2013 to December 2013 (one year). Total 1050 married women were selected in the antenatal outpatient department (AOPD), of Subdivisional Hospital,

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Bishnupur, Bankura. They are verbally asked about their age of marriage. This was correlated with their apparent age. The women were selected irrespective of their socio-economic status. Whether they reside in urban or rural area is not considered in our study. Literacy was also not considered except women who are extremely fumbled about their age, are excluded from our study.

INCLUSION CRITERIA:

1. Married women.
2. Apparently healthy.

EXCLUSION CRITERIA:

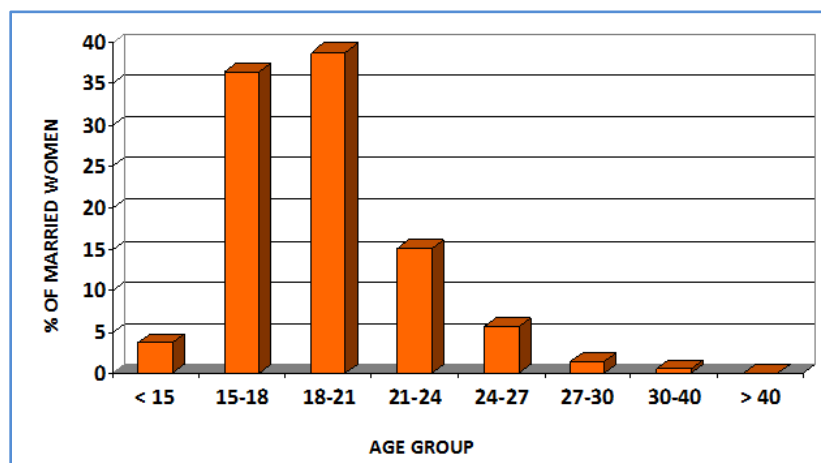
1. Very much fumbled about their age.
2. Grossly handicapped.

Thereafter we divide the age group as <15, 15-18, 18-21, 21-24, 24-27, 27-30, 30-40, >40 (in years). Numbers of women married at the specific age group are plotted, their percentage is calculated. At last average age of marriage is calculated irrespective of age group.

OBSERVATION:

Age group (in years) ▶	<15	15-18	18-21	21-24	24-27	27-30	30-40	>40
No. of women ▶	39	384	187	159	60	15	6	0
Percentage ▶	3.7	36.5	36.8	15.1	5.7	1.4	0.57	0
Average age of marriage (in years) irrespective of age group ▶				18.76				
Total no. of women= 1150								

TABLE shows percentage of married women in different age group;



Graph 1

Bar diagram shows percentage of married women in different age group

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In our study, we found highest rate (36.8%) of marriage occurs in 18 to 21 age group. But marriage between 15 to 18 years is also very high (36.5%), close to that of 18 to 21 age group. We got 3.7% marriage occurs in less than 15 years of age. So the child marriage is still very high (40.2%). Another finding is that maximum (73.3%) marriage occurs 15 to 21 years of age group. Marriage beyond 30 years of age is negligible (0.57%) and beyond 40 it is practically nil.

Average age of marriage is now calculated irrespective of age group. It is 18.76 years.

DISCUSSION: Early marriage or child marriage (age <18 years) has a great impact on reproductive life of the women. This leads to increase maternal and child morbidity and mortality. The child marriage is more prevalent in rural than urban area. It directly varies with the parent's education as well as social environment including their economic status. Child marriage leads to so many adverse consequences. To reduce these adverse situation people requires more health consciousness and awareness. Child marriage should be regarded as social disease. To eradicate child marriage we should create an action plan that includes female child schooling and also help their parents by supporting them economically by integrating them in different Government programmes. One has to mobilize parents, children, teachers, village health workers against child marriage. We doctors should have great role in this respect, as the doctors are very close to the people or patients; so they are the main messengers in this respect.

CONCLUSION: Enormous effort is going on from Government and non-government side to reduce child marriage, and thereby to reduce complications related to child marriage. Incidence of child marriage is no doubt reduced in all over India, yet it is still high in some part of India. So more health consciousness is required especially in those areas where child marriage is high.

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AUTHORS:

1. Dhruba Mandal
2. Abhijit Ray
3. Arpan Kumar Goswami
4. Dolon Champa Pal
5. Panchanan Kundu

PARTICULARS OF CONTRIBUTORS:

1. Associate Professor, Department of Anatomy, Bankura Sammilani Medical College, Bankura, West Bengal, India.
2. Associate Professor, Department of Anatomy, Bankura Sammilani Medical College, Bankura, West Bengal, India.
3. Assistant Professor, Department of Anatomy, Burdwan Medical College, Burdwan, West Bengal, India.

4. Assistant Professor, Department of Anatomy, Calcutta National Medical College, Kolkata, West Bengal, India.
5. Professor & Medical Superintendent cum Vice Principal, Bankura Sammilani Medical College, Bankura, West Bengal, India.

NAME ADDRESS EMAIL ID OF THE CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Dr. Dhruba Mandal,
Rabindrapalli, Burdwan P. O & District,
West Bengal-713101, India.
E-mail: mandaldhruba@yahoo.com

Date of Submission: 15/01/2015.
Date of Peer Review: 16/01/2015.
Date of Acceptance: 27/01/2015.
Date of Publishing: 04/02/2015.