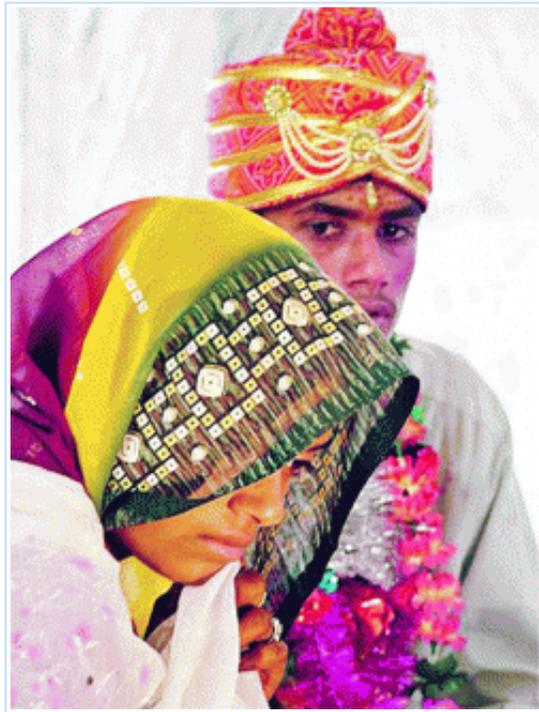


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ENDING CHILD MARRIAGES

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Nationwide drive needed to check the menace

Certain parts of the recently-released official data for 2001-2011 on married Indian women, should cause deep trouble to our policymakers, non-Government organisations and society in general. According to the figures, one-third of Hindu and Muslim women had been married off before reaching the legal marriageable age of 18; six per cent of Hindu girls and five per cent of Muslim girls were married before they could turn 10 years of age. The only consolation in the study released by the Union Ministry of Home Affairs is that womenfolk from the Sikh, Christian, Buddhist and Jain communities fared far better. The biggest takeaway from the shocking figures is that the existence of stringent laws against child marriage has not made a significant impact in containing the social ill. This can be attributed largely to the laxity of the law-enforcement authorities who turn a blind eye to such incidents. But the role of individuals in society too has contributed. Few people in the know of a child marriage happening, report to the police or file a complaint; certainly those that are part of the marriage

celebration don't. Then again, society elders who have the moral stature to make a difference, especially in rural India, are either complicit in the conduct of child marriages or are simply content to look the other way. Nearly all of such marriages take place in families that are not economically robust, are educationally weak and socially struggling. It is difficult to understand how, in this day and age when media promotion and publicity have taken awareness about the scourge of child marriages to the lowest administrative units across the country and in every home, poor or self-sufficient, underage marital relationships should continue to be constructed. It's true that relative figures do show a decline in incidents of child marriage over time, but the prevalence in absolute numbers that are big enough to cause concern, cannot be brushed aside. As per the data, there were 15 million child marriages during the last decade.

It's clear that, with or without support from sections of society, the law-enforcement authorities have to pull up their socks. According to one source, a mere 280 cases across the country were registered under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act of 2006; this is a ridiculously low number given the overall incidents of such marriages. Worse, just 15 out of a little over 100 cases the courts handled, saw convictions. With such an abysmal track record, it is not surprising that the fear of the law simply does not exist. It's time to both enforce the act stringently and, if need be, bring amendments to the law to render it more effective and deterrent.

The adverse impact of child marriages is obvious enough and it has been hurting both our social and economical sectors. Underage marriages disrupt the education of children and create health issues for them. The tragedy is more acute for the girl child, who is in any case already disadvantaged in social and educational matters. An uneducated and under-developed girl bride is more vulnerable to domestic

violence at her in-laws' place; besides, she faces serious health risks during pregnancy. The Government must launch a nationwide programme on the lines of 'Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao', to check child marriages.