

KNOWLEDGE OF AND ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE LEGISLATION ON AGE AT MARRIAGE AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON IDEAL AGE AT MARRIAGE

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This study deals with the knowledge and attitude of 360 rural respondents—240 caste Hindus and 120 Harijans—towards the recent (1978) legislation on raising the age at marriage. The results revealed that, though the knowledge of the legislation was poor, when informed most of them were in favour of the minimum age at marriage prescribed in the legislation. Those who already had a knowledge of the Act had a favourable attitude towards it, and preferred a higher age at marriage for boys and girls. However, caste Hindu respondents were more knowledgeable and favourably inclined towards the legal ages than the Harijans, who were still in favour of an early age at marriage, especially in the case of girls.

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Introduction

Passing a legislation in order to raise the age at marriage is seen by demographers as one of the 'Beyond Family Planning' (Berelson, 1969) policy interventions, that might be able to lower the fertility wherever the practice of family planning is largely absent. The Government of India passed the Child Marriage Restraint Act, commonly known as the Sarda Act, in 1929, and fixed the minimum age at marriage for girls as 14 years and for boys as 18 years (Agarwala, 1962: 74). The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, subsequently, raised the minimum marriage age for girls to 15 years. The marriage act has been further amended by the Child Marriage Restraint (Amendment) Act, 1978, in which the minimum marriage age for girls has been raised to 18 years and for boys to 21 years (Government of India, 1978). In spite of all these legislations, the actual marriages of both boys and girls in several parts of India, especially in rural areas, continue to take place at lower ages than those allowed by the Act. This shows the ineffectiveness of social legislation in raising the age at marriage.

In this context, it is worthwhile to know how far the people in rural areas are aware of and favourably inclined towards the recent legislation on the age at marriage. A few studies (Murthy *et al*, 1980; II PS, *et al*, 1982; Saksena, 1982-83; Saksena and Sharma, 1983) were already conducted in this direction, and showed that the knowledge about the legal age at marriage was very poor. However, this paper aims at the following objectives:

1. To study the knowledge and attitude of the respondents (belonging to the Caste Hindus and the Harijans) towards the recent legislation on the age at marriage.
2. To study the opinions of the respondents about the ideal ages at marriage for boys and girls, in the respective cultural groups.
3. To assess whether the knowledge and attitude of the respondents towards the legislation on the age at marriage will have any influence on their opinion about the ideal ages at marriage.

Methodology

To examine the above stated objectives, 360 rural respondents—240 caste Hindus and 120 Harijans—were selected from two villages of the Chandragiri Community Development Block in Chittoor District, Andhra Pradesh. The stratified proportionate random sampling technique was adopted for the selection of the sample. The data were collected through a personal interview schedule. For obtaining the information, regarding the knowledge and attitude about the recent legislation, the following questions were asked: (1) Do you know the recent legislation (1978) which was passed by the Government of India to raise the minimum age of marriage for boys and girls? (2) What is your opinion (Desirable/Undesirable) regarding the marriageable ages stipulated in the recent legislation, i.e., 21 years for boys and 18 years for girls? Regarding the ideal age at marriage, the question to the respondents was, "In your opinion, what is the ideal age at marriage for a boy and for a girl?". All these responses were analysed with frequency tables. Then the knowledge and attitude of the respondents (Independent Variables) towards the legislation on the age at marriage were cross-tabulated with their opinion on the ideal age at marriage (Dependent Variable) for boys and girls by controlling their caste background. To know the relationship between the independent and dependent variables, the chi-square (χ^2 -test) test of significance was used.

Results

Knowledge about the Legislation

It is of immense value to know as to how many respondents of the sample area are aware of the recent (1978) legislation on the age at marriage. Table 1 shows the distribution of respondents by caste and their knowledge about the recent marriage legislation.

Table 1

PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS BY CASTE AND KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE RECENT LEGISLATION ON AGE AT MARRIAGE

<i>Knowledge about the recent legislation</i>	<i>Caste</i>		<i>Total</i>
	<i>Caste Hindus</i>	<i>Harijans</i>	
Yes	28.8 (69)	5.0 (6)	20.8 (75)
No	71.2 (171)	95.0 (114)	79.2 (285)
Total	100.0 (240)	100.0 (120)	100.0 (360)

Figures in the brackets denote the sample size

Analysis of the responses revealed that only one-fifth (21%) of the respondents were aware of the recent legislation on the age at marriage. Conversely, nearly four-fifths, (79%) of the respondents of this area were unaware of this legislation, even after two years of the passing of the Act. Moreover, caste differences in this matter are found to be significant. Out of every six knowledgeable respondents one was found to be a Harijan (5%) and the rest Caste Hindus (29%). Thus, the poorest level of knowledge is predominantly amongst the Harijans, who practise early marriage fairly extensively. The reason for this poor knowledge may be their poor educational status, less exposure to mass media and limited urban and social contacts.

Attitude towards the legal ages at marriage

Table 2
PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS BY CASTE AND THEIR ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE RECENT LEGAL AGES AT MARRIAGE

<i>Attitude towards recent legal ages at marriage</i>	Caste		<i>Total</i>
	<i>Caste Hindus</i>	<i>Harijans</i>	
Desirable	73.3 (176)	60.8 (73)	69.2 (249)
Undesirable	26.7 (64)	39.2 (47)	30.8 (111)
Total	100.0 (240)	100.0 (120)	100.0 (360)

Table 2 depicts the distribution of respondents by their caste and their attitude towards the recent legislation regarding the ages at marriage. Though the knowledge of the respondents in this regard is very poor, most of them (69%) are in favour of the prescribed legal minimum ages at marriage for boys and girls. Conversely, slightly less than one-third (31%) of the respondents believed that the mentioned ages at marriage are not desirable for the present society. Considerable caste differences are also noticed in this regard. Nearly three-fourths of the Caste Hindus (73%), and slightly more than three-fifths (61%) of the Harijans, stated that the suggested ages in the marriage act are desirable for the present society. Of the respondents who mentioned that the legal ages at marriage are not desirable, the proportion of the Harijans (39%) exceeded the Caste Hindus (27%) considerably. Thus, this analysis reveals that there exists a favourable attitude towards the legal ages at marriage.

Reasons for desirable/undesirable responses for the legal ages at marriage

The respondents were asked to state the reasons, if any, as to why they find the prescribed minimum ages at marriage desirable/undesirable. The important reasons cited by the respondents for finding it desirable are as follows: to have good maternal and child health; to reduce maternal, infant and childhood mortality; to improve the educational status of the girls; to attain not only biological maturity but also psychological maturity before entering married life, and for limiting the family size. Opposing the legal ages at marriage, the respondents mentioned the following reasons: higher ages at marriage as prescribed in the legislation may create new social problems like increased pre-marital sex relations, causing illegitimate pregnancies and demoralizing the younger generation. Further, society would also look down upon the persons who remained unmarried for long.

Ideal Age at Marriage for Boys and Girls

Table 3

**PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS BY CASTE AND THEIR OPINIONS
ABOUT THE IDEAL AGE AT MARRIAGE FOR BOYS AND GIRLS**

<i>Ideal age at marriage</i>	<i>Caste</i>		<i>Total</i>
	<i>Caste Hindus</i>	<i>Harijans</i>	
<i>For boys:</i>			
Early (20 years or less)	13.3 (32)	36.7 (44)	21.1 (76)
Late (21 years and more)	82.1 (197)	52.5 (63)	72.2 (260)
Will of God	4.6 (11)	10.8 (13)	6.67 (24)
χ^2 -results		1%	
<i>For girls:</i>			
Early (17 years or less)	30.4 (73)	62.5 (75)	41.1 (148)
Late (18 years and more)	65.0 (156)	26.7 (32)	52.2 (188)
Will of God	4.6 (11)	10.8 (13)	6.67 (24)
χ^2 -results		1%	
Total	100.0 (240)	100.0 (120)	100.0 (360)

Note: same as given in the note of Table 4.

Respondents' opinions about the ideal age at marriage for boys and girls are shown in Table 3.

On the whole, nearly three-fourths (72%) of the respondents were in favour of a late age at marriage for boys as against only 52 per cent of the respondents in the case of the girls. Conversely, the respondents who opted for an early age at marriage for girls were double (41%) as compared with the respondents who were in favour of early ages at marriage for boys (21%). However, 7 per cent of the respondents gave their opinion as "Will of God", regarding the ideal age at marriage for both boys and girls. The age at which a boy and a girl should get married, as stated by the respondents, ranged from 15 to 30 years and 12 to 25 years, respectively.

Significant caste differentials are also noticeable in this regard. The proportion of the Caste Hindu respondents, who opted for late ages at marriage for boys and girls, was very high (82% and 65%, respectively) compared to the proportion of the Harijans (52% and 27%, respectively). Conversely, the proportion of the respondents, who favoured early ages at marriage for boys and girls, was considerably high among the Harijans (37% and 62%, respectively) compared to the Caste Hindus (13% and 30% respectively). Moreover, slightly more than one-tenth (11%) of the Harijans and a negligible number of Caste Hindus (5%) reported that the marriage age of boys and girls was not in their hands, but depended only on God. The relationship between

caste, and the respondents' opinions about the ideal age at marriage, is statistically significant at 1 per cent level both for boys and girls.

Since there exists significant differentials by caste in the opinions about the ideal age at marriage for boys and girls, for the remaining part, the caste analysis has been considered as a control variable. Further, the respondents who expressed their views as "Will of God", are deleted from the respective samples for consistent results.

Knowledge about the Legislation and Ideal Age at Marriage

Knowledge about any aspect of a subject will generate the way to think and act about it. So, the hypothesis made here is that the respondents who are aware of the recent legislation on the age at marriage will prefer late ages at marriage both for boys and girls.

Table 4

PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS' OPINIONS ABOUT IDEAL AGE AT MARRIAGE FOR BOYS AND GIRLS BY CASTE AND THEIR KNOWLEDGE ABOUT RECENT LEGISLATION ON AGE AT MARRIAGE

Knowledge about the recent legislation on age at marriage	Ideal age at marriage for boys						Ideal age at marriage for girls					
	Caste Hindus		Harijans		Total		Caste Hindus		Harijans		Total	
	Early	Late	Early	Late	Early	Late	Early	Late	Early	Late	Early	Late
Yes	15.6 (5)	32.5 (64)	4.5 (2)	6.3 (4)	9.2 (7)	26.1 (68)	15.1 (11)	37.2 (58)	6.7 (5)	3.1 (1)	10.1 (15)	31.9 (60)
No	84.4 (27)	67.5 (133)	95.5 (42)	93.7 (59)	90.8 (69)	73.9 (192)	84.9 (62)	62.8 (98)	93.3 (70)	96.9 (31)	89.9 (133)	68.1 (128)
Total	100.0 (32)	100.0 (197)	100.0 (44)	100.0 (63)	100.0 (76)	100.0 (260)	100.0 (73)	100.0 (156)	100.0 (75)	100.0 (32)	100.0 (148)	100.0 (188)
X ² results: (Significant level)	5%		NS		1%		1%		NS		1%	

Note: NS: Not Significant; 1%: Indicates significant at 1 percent level. 5%: Indicates significant at 5 percent level.

Table 4 shows the distribution of the respondents' opinions about the ideal age at marriage for boys and girls by their caste and their knowledge about the recent legislation on the age at marriage. Among the total sample, the respondents who were not aware of the recent legislation, uniformly preferred early and late ages at marriages for boys and girls. Of the respondents who knew about the legislation, the proportion that was in favour of late ages at marriage for boys and girls was higher (26% and 32%, respectively) compared to the proportion which opted for early ages at marriage (9% and 10%, respectively). This type of trend is more conspicuous among the Caste Hindus compared to the Harijans. Among the Caste Hindus, who were more aware of the recent legislation, a considerably higher proportion of the respondents, were in favour of late ages at marriage for boys (32%) and girls (37%) as against a much lesser proportion of respondents who were in favour of early ages at marriage for boys (16%) and girls (37%). However, among the Harijans almost all the

respondents were in favour of early ages at marriage for boys and girls, irrespective of their knowledge about the recent legislation. This may be due to the poor knowledge of the Harijans about the recent legislation. The relationship between the respondents' knowledge about the legislation, and their opinions about the ideal age at marriage for boys and girls, is statistically significant at a 1 per cent level of the total sample. Amongst the Caste Hindus this is true only for the girls, and at a 5 per cent level for the boys.

Attitude Towards the Legal age at Marriage and Ideal age at Marriage

It is hypothesised that the respondents, who are in favour of the recent Act regarding the age at marriage for boys and girls, will prefer late age at marriage for both boys and girls. Table 5 gives the information about the percentage distribution of the respondents' opinions about the ideal age at marriage for boys and girls by caste and their attitude towards the legal age at marriage. It is very interesting to note that an overwhelming proportion among the total respondents, who were favourable towards the prescribed legal age at marriage, were in favour of a late age at marriage both for boys (81%) and girls (88%). Likewise, among Caste Hindus as well as some Harijans, an overwhelming proportion of the respondents, who desired the legal age at marriage, had expressed their desire for late ages at marriage for boys and girls. However, among the Harijans it is worthwhile to note that a little higher proportion of the respondents were in favour of the legal age at marriage, and were also in favour of early age at marriage, both for boys and girls, as compared to their counterparts, i.e., respondents who did not favour the legal age at marriage. This may be due to a long tradition of early marriages. The relationship between the attitude towards the legal age at marriage and the opinions about the ideal age at marriage for boys and girls, is statistically significant at a 1 per cent level for the total sample and for Caste Hindus, and at a 5 per cent level for the Harijans.

Summary and Implications

The preceding analysis reveals that the respondents' knowledge about the recent legislation on the age at marriage is poor in general, and negligible among the Harijans. However, most of the Caste Hindu and Harijan respondents were in favour of the prescribed minimum legal age at marriage for boys and girls. A higher proportion of the Caste Hindu respondents opted for a late age at marriage for boys and girls, whereas, a higher proportion of the Harijans are still in favour of an early age at marriage for girls. Only amongst the Caste Hindus did the knowledge about the recent legislation significantly (at 1 per cent level) influence the respondents' opinions towards, the legal age at marriage for boys and girls. However, the attitude towards the legal age of marriage significantly influenced both the Caste Hindu (at 1 per cent) and Harijan (at 5 per cent) respondents towards preferring a late age at marriage for boys and girls.

In the light of these findings, it may be suggested that for creating awareness, particularly amongst the rural poor, wide publicity about the recent legal age of marriage is urgently needed. The mass media like films, television, radio, newspapers and magazines, can be used extensively for this purpose. The National Adult Education Programme (NAEP) is an appropriate way to educate the adult population on the various beneficial aspects of late marriages. The programme can also educate

Table 5

ATTITUDE ABOUT THE RECENT LEGAL AGES AT MARRIAGE AND IDEAL AGES AT MARRIAGE

Attitude about legal ages at marriage	Ideal age at marriage for boys						Ideal age at marriage for girls					
	Caste Hindus		Harijans		Total		Caste Hindus		Harijans		Total	
	Early	Late	Early	Late	Early	Late	Early	Late	Early	Late	Early	Late
Desirable	37.5 (12)	82.7 (163)	56.8 (25)	74.6 (47)	48.7 (37)	80.8 (210)	50.7 (37)	88.5 (138)	60.0 (45)	84.4 (27)	55.4 (82)	87.8 (145)
Not desirable	62.5 (20)	17.3 (34)	43.2 (19)	25.4 (16)	51.3 (39)	19.2 (50)	49.3 (36)	11.5 (18)	40.0 (50)	15.6 (5)	44.6 (66)	12.2 (23)
Total	100.0 (32)	100.0 (197)	100.0 (44)	100.0 (63)	100.0 (76)	100.0 (260)	100.0 (73)	100.0 (156)	100.0 (75)	100.0 (32)	100.0 (148)	100.0 (198)
X ² results (Significant level)	1%		5%		1%		1%		5%		1%	

Note: Same as given in the note of Table 4.

them on the salient features of the 1978 legislation on the age at marriage in order to motivate them towards later ages at marriage for both boys and girls. Introducing population education, a special subject, will help the students to learn and thereby decide about the right age at marriage. It is also better to offer incentives to those who marry late, as in the case of China. Moreover, provision for better educational facilities and occupational alternatives are also needed for young rural girls, if their age of marriage is to be raised.

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