

The marriage age misconception

Addressing poverty is the key to improving the health and nutritional status of mothers and their infants



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From the ramparts of the Red Fort on Independence Day, the Prime Minister declared that the government is considering raising the legal age of marriage for girls, which is currently 18 years. He said, "We have formed a committee to ensure that daughters are no longer suffering from malnutrition and they are married off at the right age. As soon as the report is submitted, appropriate decisions will be taken about the age of marriage of daughters." The Committee in question is the task force set up on June 4, announced earlier by the Finance Minister in her Budget Speech. It is widely understood (but not officially stated) that the task force is meant to produce a rationale for raising the minimum age of marriage for women to 21, thus bringing it on a par with that for men.

Population control

Since there is no obvious constituency that has been demanding such a change, the government seems to be motivated by the belief that simply raising the age of marriage is the best way to improve the health and nutritional status of mothers and their infants. Because it flies in the face of the available evidence, we need to ask where this belief is coming from.

One plausible source could be those who advocate for population control and who are influential and whose research is well-funded. Consider, for example, an article published in the prestigious journal *The Lancet Child and Adolescent Health*, by Nyugen, Scott, Neupane, Tran and Menon, on May 15, 2019. It was funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. This article analyses data on stunting in children and thinness in mothers (as measures of undernourishment) in the latest round of the National Family Health Survey 4 (2015-16). The paper uses rigorous methods to chase a flawed hypothesis. The authors examine the strength of the association between many different causal factors (the mother's age at childbearing, her educational level, living conditions, health conditions, decision-making power, and so on) and the health status of mother and child. As it turns out, the poverty of the mother plays the greatest role of all by far – both in relation to her undernourishment and that of her child, but this is not acknowledged. The authors only concede that their cross-sectional design (using data from a single time period) "reduces causal inference. For example, becoming pregnant early might lead to reduced education or wealth; however, a woman from a poor background and lower education might be more likely to become pregnant early." In other words, instead of early pregnancy causing malnourishment, they may both be the consequences of poverty.

The stated concern of the study was to find ways to break the "in-



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tergenerational cycle of undernutrition". Surely the best way to go about breaking such a cycle would be to pick the factors that are playing the strongest role in perpetuating it. In this case, it would be to address the poverty of the mother, which could be done in a myriad ways, beginning with the most direct method of nutritional programmes for girls and women through a range of institutional mechanisms from Anganwadis to schools. However, the authors choose to concentrate on delaying the age of pregnancy, even though this is the weakest link of all. In fact, age only begins to have some real significance when pregnancies are delayed to ages of 25 and above, which is true of only a minuscule proportion of women in India. The article is unusually generous in its use of the usual scholarly caveats, but leaves itself open to being co-opted by larger agendas driven by the doctrine that "over-population" is the root of all evil in poor countries.

Declining fertility rates

It is unfortunate that such thinking is finding a home in the highest office of the Indian government. Just

a year ago, from the ramparts of the same fort, the Prime Minister bluntly declared that "population explosion" was one of India's major problems. As he put it, "with an ever increasing population, we have to think, can we do justice to the aspirations of our children? Before a child is born in our home, we must ask if we have prepared ourselves to fulfil the child's needs, or are we going to leave the child to its fate?" Perhaps he (or his advisers) were influenced by the many international reports making alarming predictions about future dystopias that would result if child marriage were not swiftly eliminated in countries like India, which is home to the largest number of underage marriages in the world. It is a pity that those who have the Prime Minister's ear did not bother to seek the advice of our own demographers who have been studying the apparent link between early marriage and escalating fertility rates for decades. As it turns out, India's fertility rates have been declining to well below replacement levels in many States, including those with higher levels of child marriage. This could be the reason why those advocating population control have chosen to shift from fuelling fears about booming populations to expressing concern for the undernourishment of children.

Costless and effortless

Perhaps there is a more cynical reason at work. Raising the age at marriage by amending the law is costless and can be effortlessly achieved by legal fiat. Why not claim that doing so will enhance

the welfare of women and children, since addressing the true causes of the poor health and nutrition of mothers and children is too difficult a task? The government will not incur any financial costs for raising the age of marriage of girls from 18 to 21 years. But the change will leave the vast majority of Indian women who marry before they are 21 without the legal protections that the institution of marriage otherwise provides, and make their families criminalisable. Those who fervently believe that the minimum age of men and women should be the same in the name of gender equality can suggest that India follow global norms of 18 years for both.

Given the present climate, it could even be that this move is partly prompted by a vague belief that child marriage is more prevalent among Muslims and helps them reproduce faster. The evidence shows that this is not true, but such prejudices are inoculated against all evidence. In this context, it is interesting that the States with high mean ages at marriage of 25 years are erstwhile Jammu and Kashmir, Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur and Goa. Even Kerala (22 years) and Delhi (23 years) have significantly lower mean ages at marriage.

The proverbial "thinking Indian" – fast becoming an endangered species – has now become accustomed to watching helplessly as acts of state folly unfold. She can also continue to hope for miracles.

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