

# Child Widowhood in Rajputana : A Forgotten Tale

## Abstract

Child marriage is a practice that is widely practiced in India and especially in Rajasthan (earlier known as Rajputana). One of the ill effects of child marriage was child widowhood. It is painful to note that while remarriage of the child groom, whose child wife died because of any reason, was performed by his relatives several times but this was not so with the child bride. She was considered as 'apshakuni' or ill omen and had to live a life of widow. Many negations on her dresses, food habits, ornaments, living style, etc. were imposed by the society. This research paper explores their numbers in various communities of Rajputana.

**Keywords:** *Akha-Teej (Akshaya Tritiya)*, Rajputana, Sarda Act, Census Reports of 1911, 1921 and 2001, Child Marriage, Child Widowhood.

## Introduction

A little girl below five years of age, dressed in colourful bridal costume and a boy, almost around the same age, in equally colourful clothes, with a sword hanging by the side on his waist, being tied into wedlock, surrounded by a horde of merry making relatives, is a common sight in some parts of the country and especially so in Rajasthan on the occasion of *Akha-Teej (Akshaya Tritiya)*.

*Akha Teej*, or the third day of the bright fortnight of *Baishakh*, (the month of the Hindu calendar), generally falling in May every year, is a time of rejoicing in Rajasthan. This day is considered as the most auspicious day for marriages, as marriages on this day can be performed without consulting a *pundit* or astrologer (*aboojh sawa*)<sup>1</sup>. On this day practically everywhere in Western Rajasthan, Bikaner, Tonk, Jhalawar, Jodhpur and Jaisalmer marriages including infant and child marriages are performed in large numbers, openly as well as clandestinely, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to a report published in Dainik Bhaskar, on 15<sup>th</sup> of May, 2005, (p.6), several child marriages were performed in Jaipur (in the villages and *dhanis* of Chaksu, Faagi, Garjeda, Didawata, Chakwara, Madhorajpura, Neemeda, Maujamabad, Sawarda etc.); in Tonk (at Jagatpura, Niwai, Uniara, Natwara, Parana, Siras, Nala, Chironj, Duni, Todaraisingh, Peepal, etc.); in Jalore (at Kuobar village of Umedawas, Sayala tehsil, the border areas of Jalore-Barmer) and in Alwar (Thanagazi, Rajgarh, Raini, Kotwali etc.) According to the *Hindu* of 10 May 1997, thousands of children were married in Rajasthan despite the efforts of the State administration and appeal by the then Chief Minister of the State to refrain from child marriage. Similarly, according to the *Rajasthan Patrika* (of 10 May, 1997), hundreds of marriages took place and child brides and grooms dressed in marriage costumes touched the marriage arch (*Toran*) lifted by uncles. According to the report of UNFPA (The United Nations Population Fund)<sup>2</sup>, released on 12<sup>th</sup> of October 2005, 50% of the girls in India are married before the age of 18. The Census report of 2001<sup>3</sup>, also reveals that there were 1 crore and 17 lacs boys and girls in India, who were below the age of 21 and 18, at the time of their marriage and whose marriage was not according to the minimum marriageable age as was laid down by the law, and also that there are nearly 3 lac girls, below 15 years of age, who have already given birth to at least one child. Ironically child marriages are rampant in a State where the child marriages restraint Act, popularly known as the Sarda Act, was first conceived. Shri Har Bilas Sarda, who had given concrete shape to Sarda Act, was a native of Ajmer in Rajasthan. It will be relevant here to glance through the pages of history, to understand the enormity of this problem in Rajasthan.



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According to the *Census of 1901*<sup>4</sup> (*Rajputana and Ajmer-Merwara*), the highest proportion of both married males and married females of under 10 years of age, in the Rajputana and in the British administered territory of Ajmer-Merwara, was found in Marwar where out of every 10,000 boys and girls, 580 boys (5.8%) and 1,118 girls (11.18%) respectively were married. The State of Kishangarh showed the next highest ratio with 249 married boys (2.49%) and 901 married girls (9.01%); then came Dholpur, Lawa and Shahpura. In each of these States and Estates there were a large proportion of the higher classes which practiced early marriage. In the Bhil States of Banswara and Dungarpur, and in Jaisalmer, Bikaner, Alwar, Karauli, Bundi, and Kota the ratios were low. Pratapgarh had only a small number of married boys at this age but its ratio of young married girls was higher than those of Bundi and Kota. For the period 10 to 15, Dholpur with 2184 (21.84%) had the highest proportion of married males; Marwar was next with 2,126 (21.26%) and then came Bharatpur, Kishangarh, Shahpura, and Karauli. The States with the lowest ratios were Jaisalmer (351), Banswara (428), and Dungarpur (472). Bundi, Bikaner and Kota had also low ratios. Among girls at this period, the states of Dholpur, Bharatpur, Jaipur, Jhalawar, Karauli and Kishangarh (all in Eastern Division) showed the highest proportion of wives: their ratios varied from 6,575 in Dholpur to 4329 in Kishangarh. The lowest ratio of the wives between the age of 10 and 15 was found in Banswara (1426), Dungarpur (1777) and Jaisalmer (1926). The *Census of 1901*<sup>5</sup> also reveals that the marriage of children under 10, among both sexes was more common in the Western Rajputana than in any of the other Divisions, and especially among the Hindus. It is noteworthy that this practice was not common in both sexes in the Southern Division, which was greatly due to the very large proportion of Animists and Jains in the population, among whom, the average age of marriage was much higher than among the Hindus or the Muslims. There were only four units, including the Ajmer District, where the proportion of married females, under 10 years, was as high as that of Marwar; while on the other hand, the other two States in the Eastern Division –Jaisalmer and Bikaner, were among the first eight with the least tendency to child marriage. The proportion of married women under 5 years of age in Marwar was 17 per 1000, and in the age group of 5-9, 90 per 1000, and in the age group of 5-9 90 per 1000, compared to 13 and 77 respectively for the whole of the Western Division. The State of Jhalawar had the

largest proportion of married females in 1911 i.e. out of every 1000 girls, 83 were married which was strikingly opposite to the lowest figure of only 3 in Kushalgarh. It is however not so striking as the Marwar figures of 1901, where there were 123 out of every 1000 girls of this age who had been married. It is noticeable that both in 1901 and 1911 Shahpura, Marwar, Dholpur, Kishangarh and Jhalawar have been the five States with the highest proportion of child wives. In both years, Kushalgarh and Banswara had the smallest proportion and Alwar and Dungarpur were among the first five in both the years. In 1911, Kota, Bundi and Jhalawar alone showed a larger proportion of child-wives than they did in 1901. Of the two British Districts, Merwara ranked among the 6 units with the least and Ajmer among the 4 units with the greatest tendency to child marriage, despite the fact that it was administered by the British Government and despite the fact that it was the centre of higher education, as well as the centre of Arya-Samaj movement in the Rajputana. In their relative position to other units as regards absence of child marriage, Dungarpur, Jaisalmer, Merwara, Mewar, Tonk, Shahpura, Marwar, showed a better state of affairs and Alwar, Kota, Bundi, Karauli, Pratapgarh, Bharatpur, Ajmer, Dholpur, Kishangarh and Jhalawar a worse one; the remaining five showed a stable condition.

#### **Prevalence of the Practice of Child Marriage Amongst Certain Castes**

According to the *Census of 1911*<sup>6</sup>, in the Provinces of the Rajputana and in the British administered territory of Ajmer- Merwara, the highest proportion of married males under 5 years, was in the Gujars, Jats and Balais of Ajmer-Merwara and the Bhambhis and Rebaris of Rajputana; and that of females, among the Rebaris, Bhambhis, Kasais, and Jats in the Rajputana, and the Jats, Gujars and Kumhars in Ajmer-Merwara. Between the age of 5 and 11 period, the Jats, Gujars, Kumhars, Balais, Charmakars, Nais and Malis of Ajmer-Merwara, and the Rebaris, Kasais and Bhambhis of Rajputana had the highest proportion of married males; and the Jats, Gujars, Malis, Kumhars, and Charmakars of Ajmer-Merwara, and Kasais, Rebaris, Jats, Gujars and Rangrez of the Rajputana, that of married females. Excluding Christians, the Bhils, Meos, Mahajans, Rajputs, Kayamkhanis and Rawats were among those who showed the least tendency to childhood marriage in the Rajputana among both sexes, and the Saiyads among females. In Ajmer-Merwara, Mers, Rawats, Merat Kathats, and Mahajans had the lowest proportions of married and widowed children of either sex.

Caste	Locality (Rajputana / Ajmer- Merwara)	Number of married and widowed per 1000 of same age.			
		0-4		5-11	
		Males	Females	Males	Females
Balai	A.M.	8	18	58	138
Bhambhi	R.	9	25	61	134
Charmakar	A.M.	5	12	55	161
Gurjar	R.	2	5	40	156
	A.M.	10	34	109	229
Jat	R.	3	11	50	160
	A.M.	10	41	138	257
Kasai	R.	3	21	91	242
Kumhar	A.M.	3	20	72	209
Mali	A.M.	-	17	50	216
Nai	R.	1	4	26	105
	A.M.	2	13	55	147
Rangrez	R.	2	7	57	147
Rebari	R.	6	30	93	196

A.M. = Ajmer Merwara

R = Rajputana

Source = *Census of India 1911, Rajputana and Ajmer- Merwara, pp. 161-162.*

#### Prevalence of Baby Marriage and Pre-Natal Betrothal in Certain Communities

According to the *Census of 1911*<sup>7</sup>, out of every 1000 children in the Rajputana among those under 1 year of age, there were 52 married and 2 widowed males and 135 married and 2 widowed females. Nearly all of these were among the Hindus. In Ajmer-Merwara there were only 10 females and 1 male of this age returned as married, and none as widowed.

It is significant to note that the practice of infant marriage was prevalent among the Kunbis (Kurmis) of Jhalawar, Kota and Marwar; the Chaubes of Karauli; the Bhambhis, Jats, Kumhars, Malis, Nais, Rebaris and very occasionally among the Brahmans and Maheshwaris and others of the higher castes, in Marwar; and, in Ajmer-Merwara, it was prevalent among these same castes as well as Rawats and Mers. In most of these cases the custom meant nothing more than this, that in two families of great intimacy, should the wives become pregnant, an agreement was made between the parents that should the children be of opposite sexes, they would be betrothed to each other. In one caste in certain parts of Gujarat it was said that the practice had its origin in the custom of celebrating marriages in the whole caste on one day only, once in every ten or twelve years; the unborn babies were, therefore, trapped into the marriage net. This, however, did not apply to the Rajputana. But among the Chaubes in Karauli the practice was said to be due to a system of exchange which had grown up from scarcity of females. Accordingly, when A married his daughter to B's son, B promised to give his daughter in return to A's son. But, should B have no daughter at the time, he promises to give one when born. Should no daughter be born to him, he must find a wife for A's son from among his nearest relatives.

#### Number of Married Children (Under 1 Year of Age) in the Rajputana: Religion Wise

Religion	Married		Widowed	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
All religions	52	135	2	2
Animists	1	2	-	-
Hindus	46	123	2	2
Jains	-	2	-	-
Muslims	5	8	-	-

Source: *Census of India, Rajputana and Ajmer-Merwara 1911, pp.161-162.*

It is striking to note that the practice of child marriage was prevalent in almost all of the native States of the Rajputana, but it had firm roots in Marwar, Mewar, Sirohi, Jaipur, Kishangarh, Bikaner, Jhalawar, and Tonk and in the British-administered territory of Ajmer-Merwara. According to the *Census of 1911*, in Marwar there were 3299 children (780 were male and 2519 were female), in the age group of 0-4 years, who were found married and out of them 91 (45 were male and 46 were female) were child widows and child-widowers. In Mewar, in the same age-group, there were 666 children (212 were male and 454 were female) who were married and out of them 30 children (7 male and 23 female) were widowed. Similarly in Jaipur, 566 children (159 male and 407 female) were married and out of them 20 children (3 male and 17 female) were widowed in this age group. While in Kishangarh, 187 children (44 male and 143 female) were married and out of them 10 children (7 male and 3 female) were widowed. The same is the case with Sirohi, Tonk and Ajmer. In Sirohi, 343 children (70 male and 273 female) were married and 7 children (1 male and 6 female) were widowed. In Tonk, 413 children (130 were male and 283 were female) were found married in the age group of 0-4 years and out of them 26 children (11 male and 15 female) were widowed. It is remarkable that this practice was also prevalent in the British administered territory of

Ajmer-Merwara, despite the works of Christian missionaries & Arya-Samaj and despite the fact that it was a centre of higher education in those days. *The Census of 1911* reveals that there were 489 children (98 male and 391 female) who were married in the age group of 0-4 years and out of them 15 children (4 male and 11 female) were widowed. Similarly, in Merwara, 79 children (32 male and 47 female) were married and there were no child-widows and child-widowers in this age group. According to the *Census of 1911*, none was found married in the age group of 0-4 in the states of Bundi, Karauli and in the Chiefship of Kushalgarh.

If we take into account the *Census of 1921*, the same picture emerges. The States of Marwar, Mewar, Jaipur, Bikaner, Kishangarh, Kota, Sirohi and the British administered territory of Ajmer-Merwara figure prominently as the places, where child marriage was widely practiced while in Kushalgarh, Lawa Estate, Bharatpur, Karauli, Jaisalmer, Dungarpur, Abu, Bundi, it was less prevalent. In Marwar, in the age group of 0-1, there were 20 children (13 male and 7 female) who were married. While in the age group of 1-5, there were 700 children (130 male and 570 female) who were married. Similarly, in the age group of 5-10, there were 16982 children (4432 male and 12550 female) who were married. The number of widowed children in Marwar, in the age group of 0-10 years, was 968 (383 male and 585 female), which was highest in all the native States of the Rajputana. In contrast to it, in the states of Bundi, Dholpur, Dungarpur, Bharatpur Jaisalmer, Jhalawar and Karauli; and in the Chiefships of Kushalgarh and Lawa, there was not a single incident of marriage in the age-group of 0-1 years. Similarly, only 40 cases of marriage were registered in Banswara, 5 in Bharatpur, 2 in Abu, 8 in Bundi, 8 in Dholpur, 13 in Dungarpur, 16 in Jaisalmer, 5 in Kushalgarh & 6 in Lawa Estate in the age –group of 1-5 year; which was in sharp contrast to 700 in Marwar, 2280 in Mewar, 321 in Sirohi, 380 in Tonk, 683 in Ajmer-Merwara, 118 in Shahpura, 195 in Kishangarh, 641 in Alwar, 459 in Bikaner & 1352 marriages in Jaipur in the age group of 1-5 years.

From the above description we can see, that the practice of child marriage was widely prevalent in Rajasthan, not only in communities which were considered as backward and under-privileged but also in upper castes.

### Conclusion

The evil custom of child marriage puts forth many new challenges to a bride (more than the groom) who is physically and psychologically ill-prepared for responsibilities. By getting married as a child, she is denied her right to be a child and enjoy her childhood, as her brothers do. The very experience of being uprooted from her parental home and going and living in her in-laws home is a traumatic experience for her, as various kinds of duties, obligations, negations etc. are imposed on her, which causes strain and frustrations in her personality. Marriage at an

early age, denies children (and especially the girl child), the opportunities to have education, training and income-generating skills and thus creates difficulties in their way in attaining maturity, self-confidence and an all-round development of personality. The joint family system, in which three or four generations of the family lived together under the same roof, also undermined the position of wives, including child wives. Such joint living involves the need for tremendous discipline, conformity and self-effacement and greatly lessens a woman's chance of developing any sense of independence or responsibility. As a child bride, she is totally dependent on her husband and her in-laws, and thus her whole existence merges with that of her family, and her wishes, her desires become secondary. The denial of the opportunities mentioned above, indirectly deprives her of her right to utilize her potentialities and to live healthily, which in turn affects her whole life adversely.

These Census reports reveal that female children were married earlier than most of their male-counterparts and also that the number of child-widows was much more than child widowers, in most of the States. It also forces us to think about the sad plight of child-widows, as the society at that time allowed only the male-members to remarry and felt uneasy at the mere thought of widow-marriage. The deplorable condition of the widows and the various restrictions imposed on her regarding eating, dressing, social intercourse, as well as the feeling of inauspiciousness attached with her, perhaps forced some of them to opt for Sati, in the medieval periods.

### References

1. The other aboojh sawas, according to Hindu astrology are, Chaitra Shukla- Ramnavmi; Jyeshtha Shukla-Nirjala Ekadashi, Gangadashmi; Asadh Shukla-Bhadlya Navmi; Kartik Shukla-Dev uthani Ekadashi; Magh Shukla - Suraj saten, Basant Panchami; and Falgun Shukla-Fulera doj.
2. Cf. Hindustan Times, 13 October, 2005, p.11.
3. Cf. Rajasthan Patrika, 31 March 2005, p.8.
4. Census of India, 1901, Vol. XXV, p.89. For more details, readers are requested to consult Goswami, Sambodh, Female Infanticide and Child Marriage, Rawat Publications, Jaipur (Rajasthan), 2007.
5. Cf. Census of India, 1911, p.158.
6. Ibid; pp.161-162.
7. Ibid.