Part VI

Society
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Marriage is regarded as child marriage when girls are married off before attaining puberty. Child marriage in India apparently aligns with pre-capitalist economic mode and indicates a form of commodification of women. It is assumed that child marriage not only adheres to retaining cultural traditions, but has political and economic overtones as well. Given the cost–benefit analyses in the social realm, the patronization of child marriages in India can be interpreted in line with the expansive capitalist development.

Child marriage is observed in the Indian subcontinent, sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and in the Caribbean (Levine et al 2009). Although there are instances of child marriage in India, it is not widely practiced (Dutta 2002; Nagi 1993). The custom of child marriage originated in the early medieval ages (Birodkar 1994), when the legal framework of marriage was not developed. At that stage, the powerful despotic monarch and patriarchs acted according to their whims. The prevailing law and order favored the autocratic dictators and fulfilled their wishes only. As against modernity, it is comparable to the feudal authority but concomitant to the political economy of world-systems (Frank 1967; Wallerstein 1976), because instituting child marriage involves economical aspirations.

The practice of child marriage in India is deeply rooted in cultural values and grounded in social structures. Though forbidden, the existence of child marriage is still a reality in India. A recent estimate shows that in Rajasthan, about 80 percent of marriages among girls involve those under the age of fifteen (Gupta 2005: 2). However, in civil societies, child marriage is viewed as a curse because it violates child rights. Despite legal prohibition, child marriage continues in India and elsewhere. It is argued that child marriages are common in sub-Saharan Africa and in rural South Asia for “safety issues,” that is, the fear of AIDS/HIV, avoidance of pre-marital sex, and also an extension of the economic security of the parents.

From a male perspective, child marriage in Indian society has a significant role in the continuance of marriage rituals of the dowry-demand system. The dowry system provides economic incentives to the boys’ parents and influences child marriages for young girls and boys at a tender age (Nand 1989). Despite laws prohibiting child marriages in India (Lahiry 2004), the pre-fixing and quick realization of dowry demand indirectly violates the law. Further, child marriage is patriarchal in nature because the demand is essentially met for the bridegroom only.

The rigid Hindu caste system contributes to the continuance of child marriages in India. Since the caste identity and hierarchy are based on birth, they do not allow inter-marriages.
between different castes in order to maintain purity and avoid pollution of the caste hierarchy (Dumont 1972; Srinivas 1969). This caste authority can easily be applied to the children, whereas adults are likely to violate such injunctions (Birodkar 1994) in the wave of post-modernity.

Child marriage is socially and culturally accepted in both rural and urban India. Despite continued resistance by the government and non-government organizations, the promotion of child marriages is observed. The following reasons of promotion are outlined below:

1. Patriarchal value: girls have limited access to opportunities in family and social life and hence should remain subservient to men for life.
2. Safety issues: child marriage emphasizes virginity, fear of pre-marital sex, incidence of sexual violence, elopement, and kidnapping, thereby upholding family prestige.
3. Economic reasons: child marriage alleviates the economic liability of the parents of girls from poverty and unemployment.
4. Caste system: child marriage helps to maintain caste purity against caste pollution. Hindus believe in and strictly value the caste priority and hierarchy.

Further, the political and economic affairs under the caste system tend to corroborate a sense of “deliberate control by political authorities over economic affairs” emphasizing economic well-being in society (Friedman 2002: 196). Child marriage also affects girls’ individual experience as social actors. Early marriage negatively affects girls’ social networks, decision-making power, and ability to negotiate with partners (Bruce 2007).

The patriarchal structure of child marriage (Sagade 2005) in India (according to ancient scriptures, early marriage for girls is preferable either before puberty or immediately after their first menstruation) exists on the face of the feminist movement along capitalist expansion all over the world. Nonetheless, the existing social custom of child marriage is powerful enough to prolong the economic motif of dowry demand system in India. The system of demanding dowry as well as realization of it in the form of money and material goods should be understood as a prelude to expanding the capitalist system.

References

