

India's Innocent: Secret Weddings of Child Brides

Every year, millions of Indian girls are married as children. In some instances the brides are no more than 4 or 5 years old.

Child marriages are illegal in India, but the practice is flourishing.

Rajasthan is the epicenter of India's child marriage. More than half of girls born in the area become **child brides** before the age of 15.

"The life of a child bride is very sad," said Prem Dabi, who's studying the impact of child marriage on Indian society.

"The moment she gets married, from a physical, mental, emotional and educational perspective, her life becomes very challenging," Dabi added.

Most of India's rural poor live on less than \$1 a day. Marrying off a daughter means one less mouth to feed.

Dinesh Shur is a village pastor.

"Girls are seen as a liability and burden," Shur explained. "The girl's family is responsible for the paying [of] the dowry, so the longer they wait to get the girl married off, the more they'll have to pay the future-in-laws."

Secret Weddings

April and May are popular months for marriages in Rajasthan. Villages will hold thousands of ceremonies, the majority of them between minors.

"Every year you'll see the images of parents holding their children, sometimes as young as 4 or 5 years old, in their lap

as they get married,” Dabi said.

India first introduced laws against child marriage in 1929, and back then the legal age for marriage was set at 12. It was eventually increased to 18 years old in 1978.

To evade the law, families often perform marriages in secret, usually late at night. Outsiders are rarely allowed to attend these ceremonies, let alone film them.

Rajma Patel’s parents made an exception, giving CBN News permission to film their son the night before his wedding.

“I am becoming a man tomorrow,” Patel laughed on camera.

His parents insist that he’s 21. But his friends told CBN News off camera that he’s only 10. His young face covered in traditional makeup, he wears a special suit with flashing colored lights.

“I want the youngsters in the village to follow my example,” Patel said.

The entire village spends the night before the wedding drinking and dancing.

“Under the influence of alcohol, these dance rituals become sexually charged and often you’ll see young boys and girls joining in. It becomes a place to find potential child suitors,” pastor Shur said.

Loss of Innocence

CBN News wasn’t allowed to film Patel’s bride, who is said to be no more than 8 or 9 years old.

“The parents always lie about the child’s age,” Dabi said. “Families know what they are doing is not right but because of culture and economic reasons, the parents will marry their children off at a young age.”

CBN News was allowed to film Veena's wedding. Her wedding took place during the day, which is very uncommon.

"We've been preparing for this wedding for nearly a year," Veena's father, Kehra, said. "I've invited the entire village to come for this happy occasion."

Veena tried to look her best as she prepared to teeter down the aisle of her house. But she was anything but happy.

In between combing her hair and putting on jewelry, she sobbed uncontrollably. The family tried to console her. When CBN News asked her why she's crying, she refused to talk.

"She has no idea what it means to be a wife, how to take care of a family. But because this has been forced upon her, she has to go along with it. I think she's a little scared," Veena's aunt Jeetha said.

Veena's family insisted she's 18. But she looks 7 or 8.

"I also got married when I was very young. She will adjust," Jeetha said.

No End in Sight

India is only one of many countries where child marriage is thriving. Each year, some 10 million girls are married before they turn 18. The practice is most common in Africa, the Middle East and South Asia.

"The girl is married then moves in with her husband's family," Dabi explained. "She's not allowed to go to school to get an education. As soon as she reaches puberty she's expected to have children."

And the ripple effects of these young marriages are devastating. Research shows that girl brides are more likely to:

- Die during pregnancy and childbirth.

- Lose her child before it's born.
- Be infected with HIV.
- Have three or more births.
- Undergo multiple abortions.

In the village, Veena's soon-to-be husband, Darji Damor, arrived in a bus with his family. Wearing a special crown with flashing lights, he joined a procession of villagers making their way to the bride's home.

His face was partially covered by a multi-colored mask worn until the ceremony is over. His family also insisted he's old enough to legally marry.

"I am ready to be a husband," Darji said.

Weak and exhausted from her emotional preparation, Veena had to be carried down the aisle by her father.

She sobbed through the two-hour ceremony.

"It is heartbreaking to watch," Dinesh said. "These are children, little children getting married."