

BALIKPHABA (MENARCHE) AND THE CALL FOR CHILD MARRIAGE

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Abstract

The paper explores the prevalence of child marriage among women in Manipuri Muslim community and the way which attaining menarche acts as a contributing factor for it. Particular emphasis has been given to the married adolescent girls in this community who are presently experiencing the lived realities of being a child bride. Attaining menarche, commonly referred to as *balikphaba* among the Manipuri Muslims is not only a biological but also a cultural experience to an adolescent girl. It is the social marker of a girl's transformation from a carefree child to a complete human being bounded by restrictions and obligations. The mean age at marriage is low in the two Muslim localities selected for this study indicating the presence of child marriage through generations. Their traditional beliefs and the cultural experiences after menarche provoked child marriage in combination with factors like low educational and economic level. The study also found a decrease in the incidence of child marriage in the present context due to increase in educational level.

Keywords:

Menarche,
child marriage,
adolescent,
tradition,
education.

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1. Introduction

Menarche is the first menstrual period, or first menstrual bleeding in the females of human beings. From both social and medical perspectives it is often considered the central event of female puberty, as it signals the possibility of fertility. As a proxy indicator of adulthood and a traditional announcement of a girl's sexual availability, menarche brings on an array of negative practices including sexual harassment, withdrawal of economic support from home, and sudden pressure to marry, to take a boyfriend (for economic reasons), or to leave the community to find work [1].

The pressure to marry after menarche is still prevalent in many societies. According to UNICEF, child marriage is defined as a marriage of a girl or boy before the age of 18 and refers to both formal marriages and informal unions in which children under the age of 18 live with a partner as if married. Adolescence, defined as the transition period between childhood and adulthood doesn't last long for girls who marry early since they become wife and mother directly after childhood. Despite national laws and international agreements forbidding child marriage, social norms and religious values in many countries dictate the practice. South Asia has the highest rate of child marriage in the world and India has the largest number of child brides in the world which is one-third of the global total [2].

The present study which is conducted among the Manipuri Muslims of Manipur, India is an attempt to explore the way in which menarche, locally known as *balikphabaled* to child marriage among the women in this community. Particular emphasis has been given to the married adolescent girls in this community as they are the ones enduring the phenomenon of child marriage in the present context.

2. Research Method:

Two Muslim localities in Manipur are chosen as field sites for this research. Minuthong, HattaGolapati in Imphal East district is chosen as the urban locality as it is the most important and prominent Muslim urban areas in Manipur. Kwakta, which is one of the most important Muslim localities in Bishnupur district, is chosen as the rural field site. Purposive sampling is used in this study and data has been collected via household census, questionnaire, semi-structured and in-depth interview, Focus Group Discussion and non-participant observation

method. There are 22 married adolescent girls in Golapati and 40 in Kwakta. A mixed questionnaire with both open ended and closed ended questions is employed to them. Interview of the 62 married adolescent girls along with 16 married women above the age of 18 is also conducted. 6 local club members, 8 community leaders/social workers (male), 2 ASHA (*Accredited Social Health Activists*) health worker (female), 3 social worker/ women leaders (female), 4 anganwadi teachers (female), also participated in the structured interview. 1 Focus Group Discussion is also held with female anganwadi teachers and health workers in Kwakta. 4 focus group discussions with married adolescent girls and 4 focus group discussions with married women of age group of 24-65 are also conducted. The data has been analyzed using Microsoft excel and grounded theory.

3. Results and Analysis:

The results and analysis of the present study is presented in the following sub-sections. Tables have been incorporated at appropriate places.

3.1. Becoming *balikhaba* and beliefs associated with it

Among Manipuri Muslim of Golapati and Kwakta, a girl is considered as *balikhaba* when she attains menarche. *Balikhaba* signifies that the girl has become a complete human being with matured reproductive organs. They believe that a girl's sexual desire and tendency to mingle with opposite sex increases after becoming *balikhaba* making her prone to deviant behavior like courtship and premarital sexual initiation. Engaging in deviant behavior is considered as *gunah* (sin/crime).

Various codes of conducts are introduced to guide a *balikpharabi*'s (one who has attained menarche) interaction with elders and the opposite sex. Her interaction with the opposite sex is scrutinized and restrained, especially with men who are strangers and not closely related. She is expected to become more religious and adopt modesty in her words, behavior and physical appearance. A *balikpharabi* can no longer depend on her parents for basic amenities as it is considered as sinful. Parents have the foremost duty to teach proper behavior to their daughters and help her in reading the Quran. It is usually believed that having a husband would ensure the morality of a *balikpharabi* since he would satisfy all her basic needs, including sexual needs.

3.2. *Balikphaba* and child marriage

Due to their traditional belief that marriage protects a *balikpharabi*'s chastity, morality while directing her to more positive social goals, child marriage is usually favored with the onset of menarche. Majority of the religious and community leaders of the two localities also endorse this belief. However, there are also a couple of religious and community leaders who do not favor child marriage owing to the hardships it can entail to an adolescent girl though they advocate controlling female sexuality after menarche. Such beliefs is reflected in the following statement by a 58 year old community leader, who says,

“When a girl child becomes *balikphaba*, she metamorphoses into a *leishabi* (maiden/ full grown woman). You cannot consider her as the same innocent child. Due to physical maturity, she will start having the needs and desire of a *leishabi* which is quite different from a child. She might misuse her matured reproductive organs before marriage if she is not controlled. Marriage is the only way to control her and to keep her chastity intact. Those who can control themselves can avoid marriage as marriage can also give domestic hardships to a young girl in this modern world”.

The statement of the community leader reflects how a pubertal body is viewed as a sexual body which is bound to give away or submit to its biological needs sooner or later. In a society where modesty, chastity and morality are held at high esteem, marriage is considered as a protective shield against deviant behaviors. With increase in awareness and a modern tinge whereby the hardships of child marriage is recognized, early marriage is however relaxed for those who can control their pubertal body. It is only favored for those who have the tendency to give in to their biological needs and desire caused by puberty.

Interview of the married adolescent girls in the two localities revealed that the romanticized culture of elopement and marriage after *balikphaba* tempted and incited them. They were driven by the desire to live the experiences of other adolescent girls who were already dating or had eloped and married right after menarche. The desire to maintain their chastity before elopement and marriage is however consistent in all of them. Due to this desire, they underwent sexual

initiation through *chenba* (elopement) and *yum panba* (marriage) which is legitimate in their society. Other than following the tradition of child marriage, the cultural changes experienced after becoming *balikphaba* provoked many of them to elope and get married. They complained about their lack of personal freedom after attaining menarche. There were also changes in their parents' attitudes towards them. They were no longer treated like a child and at the same time, were restricted to live a normal teenaged life. It made them frustrated and provoked some of them to elope with their lovers. A fight at home, being blindly in love or a nosy relative were reasons enough to trigger them to elope and get married. Along with this, their traditional belief that it is ideal to get married after menarche encouraged them take the plunge without any hesitation. Many of the married adolescent girls had the opportunity of *nupakoinaba* (dating and courtship) and most of them eloped in order to get married as love marriage is a common practice in their society. Previous study [3] also reported that love marriages (78.8%) occupied a major chunk of all the early marriages among Manipuri Muslim women in their study. Married women in the two localities above the age of 18 who had child marriage also voiced the same opinion and experiences as that of the married adolescent girls.

The traditional prevalence of child marriage in their society is shown by the low mean age at marriage for women of all age group which is 17.5 for women in Golapati and 16.9 in Kwakta. The high prevalence of early marriage among the Muslim women in Manipur has also been reported in earlier studies [3, 4].

Table 1. Mean age at menarche and marriage among the married adolescent girls

| Mean age at | Golapati (N=22) | Kwakta (N=40) |
|-------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Menarche | 13 | 12.6 |
| Marriage | 16.3 | 14.9 |

Table 1 shows the mean age at menarche and marriage among the married adolescent girls. The mean age at marriage of the married adolescent girls is 14.9 in Kwakta followed by 16.3 in Golapati. All of them were married before age 18, the legal age for marriage in India. They got

married a couple of years after menarche revealing that they underwent child marriage after becoming *balikhaba*.

The phenomenon of child marriage among the adolescent girls can be discussed further with the help of certain facts and figures pertaining to their educational and economic status in order to get a deeper understanding of it. Table 2 and 3 shows the household income level and educational level among the married adolescent girls. Household income is calculated based on the quintile levels for annual household given by the National Council of Applied Economics Research (NCAER), 2012 and Planning Commission, India. According to the planning commission, those households that are in bottom and 2nd Quintile belong to poverty line, 3rd Quintile in lower middle class, 4th Quintile in upper middle class and top Quintile in upper class.

Table 2. Household income level of the married adolescent girls

| Household Income | Golapati (N=22) | | Kwakta (N=40) | |
|--------------------------|--------------------|------|------------------|----|
| | f | p | f | p |
| Bottom Quintile | 10 | 45.4 | 12 | 30 |
| 2 nd Quintile | 0 | 0 | 10 | 25 |
| 3 rd Quintile | 8 | 36.4 | 8 | 20 |
| 4 th Quintile | 2 | 9.1 | 2 | 5 |
| Top Quintile | 2 | 9.1 | 8 | 20 |

f= frequency and p= percentage

Table 3. Educational level among married adolescent girls

| Educational Level | Golapati (N=22) | | Kwakta (N=40) | |
|-------------------|--------------------|------|------------------|------|
| | f | p | f | p |
| Illiterate | 16 | 72.7 | 22 | 55 |
| Primary level | 2 | 9.1 | 13 | 32.5 |
| Secondary level | 4 | 18.2 | 4 | 10 |
| Higher secondary | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

| | | | | |
|-------------------------|---|---|---|-----|
| <i>Moulvi</i> education | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2.5 |
|-------------------------|---|---|---|-----|

f= frequency and p= percentage

As seen in Table 2, 8 (20%) married adolescent girls in Kwakta and 2 (9.1%) in Golapati belong to upper class or well to do families. Besides, 4 (18.2%) married adolescent girls in Golapati and 4 (10%) in Kwakta completed secondary level of education before marriage. It points to the fact that factors other than educational and economic status also contributed to child marriage as those from higher economic background and schooling also enter into it. From their varied narratives, it is revealed that their traditional beliefs about *balikhaba* and the cultural realities experienced by adolescent girls are important contributing factors in their early marriage. 18 year old W who married at the age of 14 was able to shed light on this issue. She narrates on what provoked her into getting married early. She says,

“When I became *balikhaba*, I became anxious, thinking that my marriage clock has started ticking. I did not want to get the tag of being unattractive and a *leishabiaribi* (spinster) which may happen if I delay my marriage. Moreover, I was fed up of the continual scrutiny of my neighbors on my simple interaction with male friends from our locality. I know my limits! People were becoming so nosy after I became *balikhaba*. It was frustrating. I thought it was best to get married”.

The frustrations and desire after *balikhaba* provoked W to get married early. The frustration is over her lack of freedom and the distrust over her chastity from the society after becoming *balikhaba*. It is accompanied by the desire to prove her attractiveness and demand in the marriage sector. Such desire arises due to the traditional endorsement of child marriage which makes her afraid of being left behind as spinster. Early marriage is a means to obtain a positive image and increase one’s value in the society for the married adolescent girls.

Having said this, there are also many adolescent girls who avoid child marriage. The number of unmarried adolescent girls exceeds the number of married adolescent girls in the two localities. There are 156 unmarried and only 22 married adolescent girls in Golapati. In Kwakta, there are 204 unmarried adolescent girls and 40 married adolescent girls. Many of the unmarried

adolescent girls are in college and career oriented without any plans to get married early. The high number of unmarried adolescent girls is a contradiction to the low mean age at marriage for women of all age group in the three areas. It may point to the fact that lesser number of adolescent girls in the three localities enter into child marriage nowadays. An earlier study [5] also observed that there is a delay in the age at marriage, age at first conception and reduced mean live birth and mean conception in the last one decade among Manipuri Muslims.

However, illiteracy rate is still high among the unmarried adolescent girls as 39.8% of the adolescent girls in Golapati and 34.3% in Kwakta are illiterates. These categories of girls with low educational background are still prone to child marriage. This is because, although traditional influence on child marriage is prevalent, educational and economic status seems to play an important role in delaying early marriage to a certain extent.

Conclusion:

Balikphaba or attaining menarche is not only a biological but also a cultural experience to an adolescent girl in the Manipuri Muslim community. It is the social marker of a girl's transformation from a carefree child to a complete human being bounded by restrictions and obligations. The traditional beliefs related with *balikphaba* and the cultural experiences after menarche provoked child marriage when combined with factors like low educational and economic level. Earlier study [4] also found out that low family income, lack of further education among females and parents' illiteracy are associated with higher prevalence of female early marriages among Manipuri Muslim women. The high number of unmarried adolescent girls with higher educational level shows that improved educational level can play an important role in minimizing child marriage to a great extent. There is a need for increasing accessibility of government owned educational institutes in order to encourage girl's education and prevent dropouts. More poverty alleviation programs should also be implemented. Efforts should be intensified in rural areas like Kwakta where there is paramount lack of socio-economic facilities.

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