

Is “Right to Education (RTE) Act” key to recent decline in early marriage among girls in India?

Introduction

Early marriage, that is, marriage before age 18, has been a key social evil that plagued India for decades. National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data showed a fairly constant rate of early marriage during 1992-2006 (women aged 20-24 married before age 18: 54% in 1992-93, 50% in 1998-99 and 47% in 2005-06). However, the most recent round of the national level survey shows a sharp decline in early marriage during 2005-2016 – the national prevalence plummeted to 27%, i.e. a decline of 20 percentage points (or 43% compared to 2005-06 survey) during these years. This sharp decline, as expected, raised several questions such as quality of marriage age data, increasing awareness about law affecting reporting of marriage age etc. However, recent investigations on marriage data quality and contributors to decline show that the decline is for real and the main contributor to the decline is increasing girls’ education in the country (Kumar et al. 2018, Zavier et al. 2017).

In the past two decades, there have been extensive policy and program discourse in India related to early marriage. Several key national policies including the National Population Policy 2000, the National Youth Policy 2003, the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women and, most recently, the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006 have been formulated. Each of these policies advocated for special programmatic efforts to help families delay marriage of their minor daughters and to enforce existing laws against child marriage. In some states, conditional cash transfer programs were also launched to encourage parents to delay marriage of their daughters to after 18 years (Nanda et al, 2016). Recognizing the fact that keeping girls in school could be the most effective way to reduce prevalence of child marriage, several state governments had initiated programs such as providing bi-cycles to girls who enroll themselves in class IX. However, a major push to primary education came when the Right to Education Act (RTE), 2009 - that aims to ensure that every child aged 6-14 years is in school – came into effect in 2010.

A strong positive relationship between schooling and timing of marriage has been reported in several literatures, although not many have explored the causal relationship of education and timing of marriage because of the inherent problem of controlling the unobserved factors that affect both schooling and timing of marriage (the endogeneity problem). This paper explores whether increased schooling after the RTE Act was responsible for sharp decline in early marriage in India by using the policy change as an instrument in the analysis.

The Right to Education Act (2009)

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act or Right to Education Act (RTE), was enacted by the Parliament of India on 4 August 2009. The Act describes the modalities of providing free and compulsory education for children aged between 6 and 14 years in India under Article 21A of the Indian Constitution.

The Act that came into force on 1 April 2010, makes education a fundamental right of every child aged between 6 and 14 years and specifies minimum norms in elementary schools. The Act also stipulates that no child shall be held back, expelled, or required to pass a board examination until the completion of elementary education. There are also provisions for special training of school drop-outs to bring them up to par with students of the same age. With this India became one of 135 countries to make education a fundamental right of every child.

Data and Method

In this paper, we used data from the last two rounds of National Family Health Survey conducted in India during 2005-06 (NFHS-3) and 2015-16 (NFHS-4). The information used in this paper is available in two schedules - the 'household questionnaire' responded by the head of household and the 'women questionnaire' responded by the eligible woman. While the former collects basic demographic information (including marital status) of all household members and the characteristics of the household, the latter collects detailed information on demographic variables including the timing of marriage and reproductive history of eligible women aged 15-49. Right to Education Act came into force in April 2010 – the midpoint between the two surveys (NFHS-3 and NFHS-4), hence, these two data points are used to compare enrollment rates among girls before and after the RTE act.

Using information on year of birth and age at marriage in NFHS-4 data, an event history was prepared for each married woman. Since only 1% of girls were married before age 13 and almost 95% of girls were married by the age 25, we used 13-25 year as exposure period for marriage. If a woman got married between 13 and 25 years of age, she exited at age of her marriage and censored if she does not get married by age 25.

For examining effect of RTE on probability of getting married before age 18, a dummy policy variable was created on the basis of women's birth cohort. All women were categorized into two groups: (i) birth cohort not covered by the RTE Act (born before 1997) and (ii) birth cohort covered by the RTE Act (born in 1997 and onwards, as these girls would be aged less than 14 years at the time of the enactment of RTE Act). Cox proportional hazard model was used to examine the effect of RTE on the probability of getting married before age 18. All the analyses were weighted using sample weights available in the dataset.

Results

A substantial change in enrollment rates can be seen before and after the enactment of Right to Education Act in India. Between the two surveys, girls' enrollment increased by 60%, 26%, and 19% at ages 6,7 and 8. There was an increase of 10-23% in enrolment for ages 9-14 (Table 1). State-wise analysis of increase in school enrollment rates showed that in states like Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh, the increase was 20-62% in the age group of 6-14 years (Figure 1). There is also substantial increase in many other states. Figure 1 also indicates that in the states where there was substantial change in girls' school enrollment, there was a large change in proportion of girls aged 13-17 who were married, hinting a causal relationship between education and marriage. Data presented in Figure 2 show that the

increase in enrolment was substantially higher among girls from poor families, those from backward castes (scheduled caste/tribe) and rural areas compared to their counterparts.

While in-depth multivariate event history analysis is ongoing, preliminary cox-proportional hazard regression results indicate that the implementation of RTE Act had indeed an effect on probability of marriage before age 18, reducing it substantially. The adjusted hazard ratio of marrying before age 18 years was as much as 78 percent lower for girls covered by RTE Act compared to their older counterparts.

Conclusion

While the primary aim of the RTE act is to increase literacy in the population, the paper shows that its benefits extend far beyond that. Our findings indicate that apart from increasing school enrollment among young girls, RTE Act also helped reduce early marriage in India. States with high prevalence of early marriages, had particularly gained from this Act. However, the Act only covers education up to middle school (children aged 6-14 years). Given our findings on the kind of effect it had on reducing prevalence of early marriage, government should consider extending the coverage of the Act to include children of higher age as that can help India achieve the target of eradicating early marriage by 2030.

Table 1: Enrollment rates by age for girls aged (6-14 years), India

	2005-06	2015-16	Percent change
6	53.3	85.1	59.7
7	74.2	93.4	25.8
8	79.8	94.8	18.7
9	87.1	96.3	10.6
10	82.2	95.2	15.8
11	86.2	95.8	11.2
12	77.7	92.9	19.6
13	73.1	90.0	23.2
14	71.0	87.3	22.8

Figure 1: Percentage change in enrolment rates for girls aged 6-14 years and in proportion of married girls aged 13-17 years between NFHS-3 and NFHS-4, selected states of India

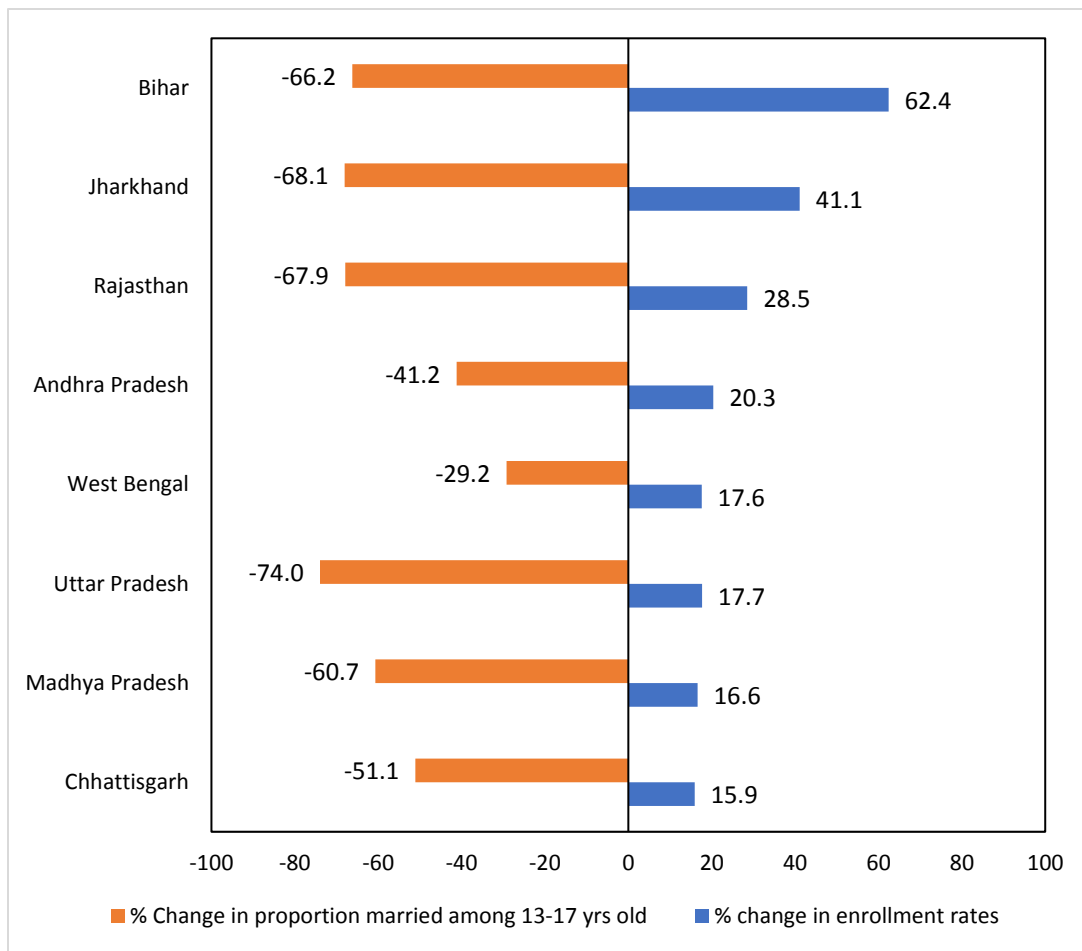


Figure 2: Change in enrollment rates for girls aged 14 years, India

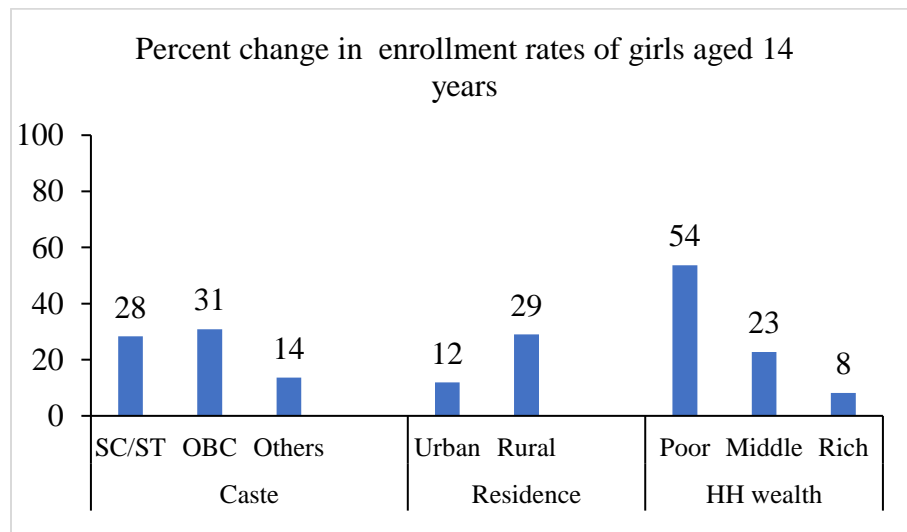


Table 2: Adjusted hazards ratio for the probability of marriage before age 18 years

	Hazard Ratio	CI
Birth cohort not covered by policy (ref)	1	
Birth cohort covered by policy	0.22*	0.22,0.23

*Note: Other covariates include wealth indices; *indicates significant at 5% level of confidence*

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