

BOOK SYNOPSIS

WHEN CHILDREN HAVE CHILDREN

TIPPING POINT TO END CHILD MARRIAGE

“I was married when I was 12. I had my first child, a daughter, at 14. She died after six days. I had four more children, but they all died within a few days of being born.”

- Shakuntala, 50, Delhi

Shakuntala is not the only one to have experienced the agony of child marriage. Her sister was married off when she was nine. She lost five of her first children within days of their births.

Around 15 lakh (1.5 million) girls are married off in India every year, before they turn 18, making the country home to one third of child marriages in the world.

This book shows the path to eliminating child marriage in India within the next decade. And the path of eliminating this social evil and crime, globally.

Child marriage results in child rape, resulting in child pregnancy, and in a large number of cases, may lead to child deaths. For decades, we have been losing generations of our children to child marriage.

This book presents an action plan to eliminate child marriage in a holistic and time-bound manner.

Why End Marriage?

There are multiple reasons why India and the world cannot afford to overlook this practice anymore.

Violation of Law/Criminal Justice Issue:

While child marriage is a crime under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 (PCMA), we continue to be apathetic towards this practice which, in its crudest form, is socially sanctioned child rape.

Multiple communities and sects continue this practice due to the larger perception that personal laws supersede PCMA, despite multiple High Courts stating the contrary.

Health Crisis: Child marriage has devastating and irreparable consequences on the health of both mother and child. When children, especially girls, are married before the age of 18, they have children at younger age, leading to poor maternal health, undernutrition, infanticide and foeticide.

Impact on Education: Child marriage drastically reduces the chances of a girl finishing her school education and acquiring livelihood skills. Child marriage and pregnancies are both the cause and consequence of dropping out of school.

Human Rights Crisis: Child marriage violates almost all the rights of a child. It deprives children of autonomy and choice over their bodies and lives. Child marriage is one of the most appalling forms of gender-based violence that could constitute sexual abuse and torture.

Prerequisite to Achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): India cannot achieve at least 11 SDGs without eliminating child marriage. These include Goal 1 (no poverty), Goal 2 (Zero Hunger), Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) and Goal 4 (Quality Education), among others.

What is the Tipping Point to end Child Marriage?

There has been a marked progress in reduction in child marriage in India but the tipping point is yet to be reached.

Between 2005-06 and 2019-21, there was over 10 percent reduction in the rate of adolescent girls who married by the age of 15 years (NFHS-5), indicative of the impact of the Right to Compulsory and Free Education Act.

Current projections by UNICEF estimate that child marriage in India will come down to six percent by

2050 if the progress of the last 10 years continues. This book proposes a plan of action to achieve and better the target by 2030. This translates into protecting roughly 30 million girls from getting married.

By adopting a systematic, highly focused, and intensive intervention model, it is possible to reduce the national child marriage prevalence levels to 5.5 percent by 2030—the threshold beyond which the prevalence is anticipated to diminish organically with reduced reliance on targeted interventions.

Adopting PICKET Strategy to Achieve the Tipping Point

The PICKET strategy takes into account and aims to address the causal factors for the existence of child marriage and their consequences. These include, amongst others, the lack of law enforcement efforts, gap in capacity of institutes, lack of accountability of agencies, gap of resources, non-existing infrastructure, lack of resolve at scale, and missing convergence in action between national, regional and international bodies.

The urgency and prioritisation deserved by the issue of child marriage requires the PICKET strategy to be the default setting for the society. The time is here and now to revisit our tactical approaches and have a national strategy to eradicate child marriage. For India as a nation to end child marriage in India by 2030, the PICKET strategy would entail the following:

Policy for prevention, protection, prosecution
It is important to ensure parity in the enforcement of laws, and special laws must prevail over customary or personal laws.

The effective implementation and enforcement of existing laws and policies that prohibit child marriage along with swift and decisive justice delivery mechanism are most important steps in checking the prevalence of this crime against children.

When prevention of crime is incorporated as a policy, it ensures that the state machinery as well as citizens feel responsible and accountable to prevent child marriage.

Investment in infrastructure, incentivisation and institutions

Investing in child protection institutions, education, healthcare, justice delivery, and rehabilitation framework builds layers which work to prevent and protect children from abuse and exploitation apart from providing legal and mental health support for girls in child marriages.

Infrastructure to support girls at imminent risks of marriages, like institutional alternative care and residential educational facilities are urgently needed to stop their marriages, abuse and exploitation, and provide them with resilient alternatives.

Incentives in the form of conditional cash transfers have shown impact in communities to keep girls in schools delaying marriage decisions. Universalization of these to at-risk families has the potential to stop child marriages and trafficking and abuse of girls for both labour and sexual exploitation.

Convergence of departments, governments and stakeholders in the community

All schemes and interventions geared towards the protection, prevention, education, health and awareness of children and adults affected by child marriage need to operate in sync with each other. Child participation and empowerment is at the core of such convergence aimed at child centric community development.

Knowledge which equips all the stakeholders to combat child marriage

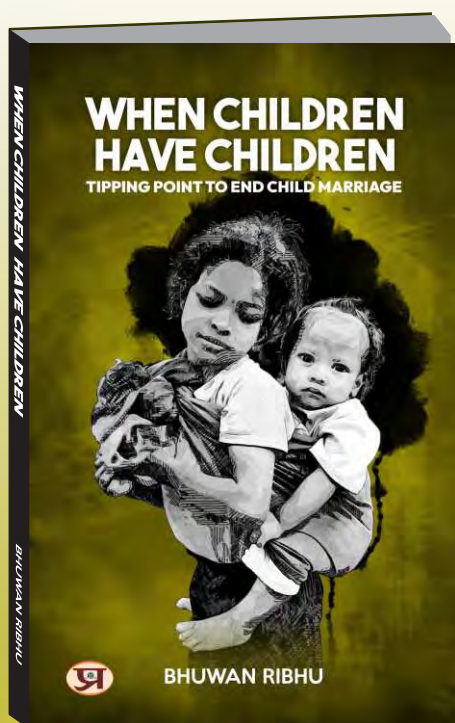
Enhancing knowledge empowers children, especially boys, to say no to child marriage. When a young man refuses to marry a minor girl, he breaks the cycle of generations of conditioning. It also gives agency to girls to raise their voice and complain when they are forced for marriage against their will or in violation of law.

When children, parents, community members and stakeholders participate in decision making equipped with correct and latest knowledge, it can lead to collective action to prevent child marriage.

Ecosystem where child marriage does not thrive Central to the PICKET strategy is an ecosystem where child marriage is non-existent. In a society where child marriage is pervasive, multi-pronged intervention at all levels is required. To change the societal perception, behaviour and acceptance towards child marriage, the response at scale requires and ecosystem level retaliation.

Technology for monitoring and deterrence to combat child marriage.

Enabling real-time attendance data analysis will help reduce child trafficking, child marriage and drop-out rate in schools. Different states are already using technology for awareness campaigns, supporting and monitoring programme interventions, augmenting education and skills outreach. The use of machine learning and artificial intelligence needs explorations in support of child protection and creating a safe and harm-free ecosystem for children.



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