



# Role of Academics in Developing Resistance towards Social Customs like Forced Marriages and Dowry System

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**Abstract:** In this paper, an attempt is made to highlight the role of academics in providing the strength to fight against the evil customs of society. The autobiography of Rekha Kalindi, a nine year old Bengali girl, justifies the statement. The different parameters that promote dowry, forced and child marriages have been discussed throughly.

**Keywords:** Dowry, Child Marriage, Forced Marriage, Academics

Since prehistoric times, the practices of dowry, forced marriages and child marriages have been prevalent in India. In fact, they are deep seated into the psyche of Indian people. A. S. Altekar in the book *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization* has mentioned the history of pre-puberty and post-puberty marriages. He has stated that before the introduction of Western ideas and civilization “8 or 9 was the usual marriageable age of girls” (Altekar 73). The Indian government has taken various measures to enlighten the natives against the drawbacks of these practices. The country has collaborated with the United Nations’ agenda of seventeen sustainable development goals out of which one is gender equity. The endeavour is being made to meet the goals by 2030. Therefore, the holistic development of women is being encouraged so that the gender differences could take a back seat; but still “more than 40 percent of the forced marriages in the world take place in India (Kalindi vii)”. In order to substantiate the factors that come in the path of progress and the role of academics in discontinuation of the long held beliefs, the paper has taken into account the autobiographical work of Rekha Kalindi.

Marriage is an institution in itself. It is defined as the union of two human beings. Unfortunately, this idealistic definition ceases to exist with the addition of some more words into it: the union of two human beings (a male and a female) having same caste, religion & status. In order to prevent any kind of outrage, parents of boys and girls take marrying their wards into “suitable” families as the prime purpose of their lives. The word “suitable” despite the requirement of above mentioned measures hides the “approachable” demand of dowry in itself. The practice of dowry is opposite to the related concept of bride price; where the groom pays the price to the family of the girl at the time of marriage. In Urdu, the word “*Jahej*” is used for dowry or trousseau and ‘*haq mehr*’ is for bride price. Among these two, the practice of dowry is prominent in India. Altekar has discussed that out of the eight forms of marriages in the prehistoric times, the most approved was *Brahma* marriage. In this one, “the bride, properly bedecked and ornamented, is offered to the bridegroom... (54).<sup>1</sup> The continuous practice of this custom

<sup>1</sup> The forms of marriages discussed in the book *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization* are: *Brahma*, *Daiva*, *Arsha*, *Prajapatya*, *Asura*, *Gandharva*, *Rakshasa*, and *Paishacha*. Out of these the first four are approved marriages.

*Brahma*: a girl properly ornamented and bedecked is offered to the bridegroom

*Prajapatya*: “the bride is offered according to due rites, but with an injunction to the couple that they should be always inseparable companions in the discharge of their religious duties (54).”

*Daiva*: in this marriage the daughter is given to the officiating priest by the sacrificer

*Arsha*: in this a father of a bride can take a cow and a bull from his son in law for performing a sacrifice.

*Asura*: the husband gets the bride by paying the reasonable amount.

has normalized it to such an extent that it does not seem objectionable to the twenty-first century people.

The act of marriage becomes burdensome for the parents of low income strata. Moreover, birth of a girl child becomes a nightmare for parents and hence dowry is highly responsible for the rise in female foeticide cases as well. The dowry system began with the feeling to help the girls in starting their married lives by providing the basic necessities to them. Later, the intention or the love of girl's parents got amalgamated with the greed of boy's parents. Without any hesitation, the groom's acquaintances put their demands in front of the bride's family. In addition to this, the well to do families take pride in announcing the price of dowry. Even women take active participation in its making. Whether educated or illiterate, women consider it a matter of privilege to showcase their 'gifts'. According to the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961; the giving and taking of dowry is highly offensive. Therefore, the people have started using its euphemistic term 'gift'. It is a more acceptable word, hence girls remain unable to realize the drastic impact their approvals can cause on the system. They are unintentionally strengthening the old system and making it difficult to uproot by the government. This association of pride with the practice has toughened the process of its eradication.

Despite dowry, the other two prevailing malpractices in marriage institution are forced marriages and child marriages. Forced marriages are mistakenly taken under the term arranged marriages. As in the latter one, the consent of a boy and a girl is taken into consideration whereas forced marriages do not include it. It is not necessary that every human becomes successful in finding a life partner. In Western countries, people wait to fall in love before exchanging rings whereas in India; if the cupid did not hit till a certain age, one must succumb to the wish of elders and give them the authority to seek an "appropriate" partner for him/her. The conditions in which forced marriages can take place are:

1. A girl or a boy likes someone outside the caste.
2. The family status of one does not match with the other.
3. The family of one is particularly against the concept of love marriages.
4. The family is against the education or higher education of girls.
5. Parents of a girl are very poor and they want to reduce the 'burden'.

All these points somewhere lay the foundation of child marriages too. The fear of being victim of any of the above 1-4 points threatens the parents to marry their wards at their young ages so that they could curb all the so called evil instincts in the bud. But unfortunately they do not realize that their decision will ultimately bring the package of worries in their lives. The responsibilities and pregnancy complications cause a huge impact on the lives of girls. The immature reproductive systems lead to the chances of miscarriages and still born or the birth of short life span child. Girls face a lot of physical, psychological and societal problems because of these untimely taken or thrown responsibilities. As per the report "Child Marriage and Health" by International Centre of Research on Women (ICRW):

Adolescent childbirth is dangerous for the infant as well as the mother. The underdeveloped bodies of girls can lead to complications during childbirth and the death of the child. Infants born to adolescent mothers are much more likely to die than those born to women in their 20s.

According to the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA), the legal age of marriage in India for girls is 18 and for boys is 21. The marriages below the given ages are condemnable. As per Tarushi Aswani's article, the Indian government has taken the decision to make amendments in the earlier mentioned act and raise the marriageable age of girls to 21. It will definitely help the girls from falling prey to all those medical ailments but it will not be enough to remove the element of 'force' and 'dowry' from marriages. In a state like Punjab, students just want to study till grade twelve and after that their sole purpose is to go abroad either by taking study visa or by getting married. Parents' of girls hesitate to send them alone therefore they put the option to get married first. Such adjustments have encouraged the early marriages. Shireen J Jejeebhoy in *Ending Child Marriage In India: Drivers and Strategies* has mentioned the need to promote education among girls as well as to spread the idea of egalitarian society among the boys. The requirement is to disperse the zero tolerance towards gender disparity. Among the many strategies, Jejeebhoy has stated the requirement to keep girls in schools and to build agency in them.

*Gandharva*: "a marriage which was consummated before the due performance of sacred rituals (50)".

*Rakshasa (or Kshatra)*: The bride is taken away by the victor as the prize of War.

*Paishacha*: This one is the most condemned one as in it the bride is either duped or physically overpowered by the bridegroom.

Indeed, academics play a critical role in bringing change in society. The proper implementation of laws do save lives from becoming victims of these customs. A tremendous strength is required to go against the dominant culture. The autobiographical account of Rekha Kalindi “The Strength to Say No: One Girl’s Fight Against Forced Marriage” indicates the complications faced by girls because of the prevalence of cultures like forced marriages and dowry practices. A nine year old Bengali girl Rekha suddenly became a national figure with her one speech against forced marriage. She was heard and appreciated not just because of her speech but also because of her courage to raise her voice at the age of nine. This text represents the clash of dominant and emergent cultures. Rekha with the awareness of emergent ideas develops the resistance towards the societal cruel behaviour with the young girls.

All the discussed problems that young girls face because of conditioned mindset get validity with Rekha’s account. Her consistent negation strengthened her to stand against the practice of child marriage otherwise she could have become another Josna; her elder sister who was married at the age of twelve and in consequence meted the pangs of multiple miscarriages. The narrative brings out the two stories of two girls of one family. Josna, who followed the dominant culture, did not gather the courage to go against the wishes of her parents therefore she said nothing to their wish to marry her off. Rekha’s parents were eager to send the girls to ‘their houses’ because of their inability to feed a big family. Josna suffered a lot because of this hurry. At the age of twelve, she had her first marriage which did not last long. Her husband left her after two weeks of marriage which made Josna more vulnerable as she was considered ‘impure’ (23). In order to get rid of the shame, the parents planned her second marriage with the proposal of a ten thousand rupees dowry. They gave the same amount at her first marriage as well. At the age of twelve and half years, she conceived for the first time. Her weak body was unable to bear the changes which resulted in the birth of an unhealthy child who died after a few weeks. She met the same fate four times. Her in-laws suggested the couple to “separate so that their youngest son could marry a fertile woman capable of bearing a child” (27). Rekha closely observed her elder sister’s sufferings and was aware about the consequences of early marriage. Therefore, she was adamant to not fall into the same pit.

Apart from her first hand encounter with the troubles of early marriage, she had an advantage of education. The academic assistance rescued her. Rekha being an intelligent and hard working girl took part in competitions. The appreciation of her teachers made her more inclined towards the school. She just does not want to leave her school in any case as she used to feel “a sense of liberation (49)” in its premises. Therefore, she strongly opposed her mother’s proposal for marriage at the age of ten. She did not pay attention to all the pleas made by her mother and father. The following lines represent the emotional torture which many young girls like Rekha go through:

‘Don’t be selfish. Think of your family. You think that your father can keep on working in these conditions? His back hurts constantly and he has trouble breathing because of inhaling tobacco for years, he does all that to feed you. Do you realize the sacrifices that he has been making all the time? (44)

‘Be reasonable, Rekha, this marriage offer is a chance for you. You ought to seize it, both for your own good and for the good of your family. Think of your brothers and sisters, please, (45)

All these pleas went in vain when she confidently said no to the boy and his parents, “your son is an idiot! I won’t marry him whatever my parents say!” (48). She was completely unaware that her persistent negotiations would get the International appraisals. Upon accepting the opportunity to speak out all the complexities that the girls of her village were constantly facing, she unknowingly became a sensation. She got accolades from the international intelligentsia. On the contrary, her father and villager’s treated her with cuss words like ‘little hussy’ (69) and ‘worthless brat’ (74).

The academics do help in developing the resistance by igniting the minds to question the worth of unnecessary customs. As per the article of “India Today”, the 2020 data of National Crime Records Bureau tell that a total of 785 cases were registered under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act. It has further given the names of the states with the number of registered cases “the highest in Karnataka at 184, followed by Assam at 138, West Bengal at 98, Tamil Nadu at 77 and Telangana at 62). Further, the outbreak of COVID 19 has more intensified the problem. Neeta Lal in her article “Early Marriages in India: No Child’s Play” has stated the rise in child marriages during the pandemic. The distance from schools has proven fatal for the bright future of children.

The aspiration to change the nation is not enough. The need is to work on Mahatma Gandhi’s words “be the

change that you wish to see in the world". The Indian government has again taken the initiative to upgrade the old trends of education. The National Education Policy of 2020 has stated its vision is:

to instil among the learners a deep-rooted pride in being Indian, not only in thought, but also in spirit, intellect, and deeds, as well as to develop knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions that support responsible commitment to human rights, sustainable development and living, and global well-being, thereby reflecting a truly global citizen.

Now, it is the responsibility of academicians to execute the policy in such a way that more students like Rekha Kalindi could understand their rights and lead happy and healthy lives.

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