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Raising marriage age for girls must be welcomed

December 26, 2021, 3:46 PM IST / Jagdish Batra in Cultural Inputs, India, TOI

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Jagdish Batra

Dr Jagdish Batra is a senior academic, currently working as Professor of English at O.P. Jindal Global University, India. He has nearly four decades of

The central government deserves compliments for bringing in legislation to raise the age of marriage for girls from 18 to 21. It is indeed a revolutionary measure to empower women by providing them enough time to complete education and build a career. As it has been referred to the standing committee of Parliament to counter the allegation of hasty passage

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which is all to the good, it is believed that the committee will consider the pros and cons and probably also invite public opinion.

Meanwhile, some opposition leaders have voiced reservations about the move and advanced the specious plea that when an 18-year old is considered mature, has the right to vote and enter into any agreement for all other purposes, why is then the age limit for marriage raised to 21. Also news has come in about opposition to the bill from the Kahp Mahapanchayat held at Jind in Haryana. The leaders at this event reportedly demanded law to allow marriage after the age of 18 with the permission of parents only.

Now, equating age for marriage with the age to vote or sign other agreements does not fit in here because marriage is considered a life-long settlement in our society for which both the boy and the girl have to be mature in mind and body. It is not like vote which one has to cast every five years or entering into any business agreement which can be revoked anytime. If the opposition takes a technical view of maturity, then it can be held guilty at the same time of flouting the hallowed principle of equality of sexes. So, if boys can get married at the age of 21,

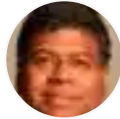





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why should girls be given a different treatment?

Secondly, to divest girls of their right to decide about marriage and give it to parents is a retrograde measure not in sync with the present times, and society has to change its mindset about this issue. It is, therefore, better for girls as also boys to avoid entering into wedlock unless they have attained better maturity to take the life-lasting decision. It might help them to appreciate the parents' decision better at that age and even bring down the cases of elopement which become the major cause of inhuman honour killings.

Thirdly, Haryana inspired by the Prime Minister's slogan "Beti bachao, beti padhao" has taken the lead in the matter of raising sex ratio and educating girls. The number of girls getting selected in civil services has been rising over the years and there is a good percentage of girls coming from rural areas. The track record of girls in the field of sports including wrestling, which was once a taboo, is there for all to see. Girls in Haryana have brought honour to their families, state and the country through such achievements. Now, when girls wish to go in for higher studies or research or eye a career in civil services or sports, they do require time to prepare. Marriage

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comes in the way in such cases whereas raising of the age limit will allow them this valuable space to rise in life. Yet another reason to go in favour of the proposed law is to put a stop to malpractices like child marriage which still exists in some areas in the country. Last but not the least, even though terming the below 21-year person a child will raise heckles of the committee members, the bill fulfils the spirit of the Constitution as its provisions shall apply to all communities “irrespective of any law, custom, usage or practice governing the parties” as the bill mentions it.

A silver lining is seen in the survey conducted recently by a Hindi daily which approached 5000 persons in rural and urban areas. Some 80% men/women are said to be in favour of raising the age limit whereas around 15% were against it. The survey also says that grandparents wanted an early marriage for the girls, probably because they wish to “see” the marriage – something based purely on selfish interest rather than the interest of the girls. Now that the bill is before the standing committee and there is time, the government will do well to encourage public debate lest it also meet the fate of the farm laws!

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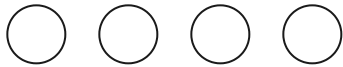
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