Marriage means (the) legally or formally recognized union of two people as partners in a personal relationship. It is regulated by laws, rules, customs, beliefs, etc. As marriage is a social system, it changes its form in every era by every nation and religion. Marriage system and practices vary by region, caste and tribe. Child marriage in India, according to Indian law, is a marriage in which either the woman is below the age of 18 or the man is below the age of 21. Most child marriages involve girls, many of whom are in poor socio-economic conditions.

After having an idea about marriage the next issue arises about the age limit of marriage. India is a vast country with different people having different social system. As our topic focuses on child marriage we look in the back. At the time of Rigveda there was no system of child marriage. On that time girls were not married off before 16 or 17. They were given proper education. At that time Aryavatta was rocked by the invaders like Sakas, Huns etc. It was quite impossible to protect the women. The males dominated the society. The women were confined unseen by outsiders.

Early marriage is a harmful practice that denies girls their right to make vital decisions about their sexual health and well-being. It forces them out of education and into a life of poor prospects, with an increase risk of violence, abuse, ill health or early death. UNICEF defines child marriage as a formal marriage or informal union between 18 years of age, because it can lead to a lifetime of suffering for girls due to drastic violence or due to complication in pregnancy and childbirth. UN Women proposes that child marriage be defined as a forced marriage because they believe children underage are incapable of giving a legally valid consent.

In the Middle Ages the system widely spreaded specially in Bengal. According to Raghunandan’s words “Girls should be married off before they reach the age of puberty. Raghunandan’s code was followed till the end of the 18th century. It was believed that if the daughter was married at the age of eight then her ancestors of both maternal and paternal side would have the right to live in heaven for all times to come”. In the pre-Muslim and Muslim period child marriage was very popular. Girls were given marriage even at the age of 5. But 7 was considered the best age. An important point of child marriage was that boys were no exception. The famous Ain-i-Akbari forbid the boys from marrying till they become 16th or 17th. But finally it was decided that 10 should be the proper age.

It is to be pointed out here that Vidyasagar expressed the truth that the rules of marriage became better when
human race realized love between marital relation, filial affection and qualities of mercy. In our country the bride’s parents were always concerned about the lineage of the bridegroom not about his lack of education or concerned about his good qualities. The brides’ parents were unaware all about this which led the couple to a miserable life. In our country, these marriages were led to a miserable relationship without love. The offsprings of child marriage were generally not in good health. They were physically weak, which ended their lives early. So if the purpose of child marriage was child-bearing, it was totally a failure. Our country was once renowned for having brave and courageous sons, it gave birth to the Brahmins and Kshatriyas led a good success in the battlefield. We still find their successors in the western part whereas in Bengal the Hindus are becoming weak despite of having such ancestors. May be child marriage is responsible for this. In remote past, the marriages took place between older couples. The rakshasa marriage, the asurik marriage, the pisach marriage and the Swamvara system all were possible because both the bride and bridegroom were matured. This system in the west resulted in vigour and strength. The soldering profession was prevalent in the west but not in our country, though we were capable of taking any means of livelihood. Vidyasagar revealed the truth that if the women are educated their children will learn more things from them as the children are closed to mothers than fathers. But child marriage stands for a great obstacle on the path. He continued to say, “We give birth to children before we are able to earn for ourselves and this makes us worry about money. The family man knows he has to earn money, even by dishonest means if needed, just to maintain the family. They have to sacrifice everything and spend their lives in agony. Some may argue that without child marriage the boys and girls may go astray. A marriage after twenty may well mean a lesser number of widows which will also reduce the parents’ worries on that score.”

Vidyasagar was also married in his childhood like other significant personalities -- Raja Rammohon Roy, Debendranath Tagore, Bankim Chandra Chottopadhyay, Jyotirindranath Tagore, Amrit Lal Bosu and others. Rammohon was married thrice at his childhood. Later on, the experiences of such people made them to express the dark side of child marriage. In 1850, Vidyasagar wrote an article in Sambad Provakar, which focused on social reforms and was historically significant. After this publication Vidyasagar sustained for another 41 yrs, but he never wrote again on this issue. But what is the cause behind his silence on this particular issue? Because he realized that his writings had no impact on society which made him not to write again on child marriage. Others like Kailashbashini Devi condemned child marriage as the root of all evil or other problems. Some exceptions took place in society when Ramtanu Lahiri’s daughter was married at the age of 16 in 1868. Then his niece Annadayini was married to age of 20. Ramtanu’s youngest daughter died at the age of 21, she was unmarried. Annadacharan Khastogir’s daughter Soudamini was married at her age of 16. But these cases were exceptions. In Dhaka Professor Somnath Mukherjee resisted strongly against this child marriage system under his leadership. In this context Ramchandra Dutta wrote a play on child marriage. But it was so astonishing that Vidyasagar was totally silent on this issue. Renowned physician Mahendralal Sarkar strongly protested against child marriage and said that it was dangerous for girls to be married before the age of 16. Those who strongly supported the child marriage system propagated the system by arguing that these child marriages had a longer period which led love to grow.

Protagonist like Debendra Nath Tagore strongly supported the child marriage system. His son Rabindranath Tagore married an eleven year old girl when he himself was 23. In the next generation his daughters also were married in their childhood. All happened in the early years of 20th century. Second daughter of Rajnarayan Basu was married when she was only 13.
Early age marriages by celebrated personalities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Bridegroom</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Bride’s age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Debendranath Tagore</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keshab Chandra Sen</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bankim Chandra Chottopadhyay</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jyotirindranath Tagore</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhudev Mukhopadhyay</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satyendranath Tagore</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rabindranath Tagore</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nabin Chandra Sen</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amrit Lal Basu</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The legislation of 1872 was failed to prevent child marriage. There were cases in Sankari Bazar of Dhaka where brides were sitted in a basket as they were too little to sit. This news was published in Education Gazette. In this age also child marriage is still prevailing particularly in rural areas. The most disappointing issue is that there is self contradiction in reformers themselves. Hoogly was the topmost district where child marriages took place most. Raja Rammohon Roy and Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar both were married in their childhood but they were great social reformers. Vidyasagar felt proud when his son was married to a child widow. Perhaps he thought that he liberated a widow - age was then secondary issue.

Mention should be made of social reformer like Kishori Chand Mitra who strongly blamed child marriage. Though Hoogly was a district where child marriage were at large number but Hoogly was the same place where people were determined to put an end to it also. India now fixed the marriage age at 21 for men and 18 for

Fig. 3: In 1533, 17 year-old Princess Emilia of Saxony was wed to George the Pious, Margrave of Brandenburg-Ansbach, then aged 48 years.

Fig. 4: Child marriage in Rajasthan, India

Fig. 5: Mass child marriage in Bhilwara, Rajasthan on the occasion of Akshya Tritiya, India

Fig. 6: Child marriage in Africa
cases registered were the highest in Karnataka (184), followed by Assam (138), West Bengal (98), Tamil Nadu (77) and Telangana at 62. According to the data, the number of cases registered under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act in 2019 was 523, in 2018 was 501, in 2017 was 395, in 2016 was 326 and in 2015 was 293. About 50% rise in the cases of child marriages has been recorded in 2020 over the previous year according to NCRB data.

Child, early and forced marriages or unions are a global problem across many different countries, culture, religions and ethnicities. According to UNICEF, early marriage and forced marriage is highest in Sub-Saharan Africa where 38% of girls become child brides. Among girls growing up in South Asia, 30% experience early marriage, compared with 25% in Latin America and the

India has the 14th highest rate of child marriage in the world, according to International Center for Research on Women. Rates of child marriage are higher in the North-West and lower in the South-East of the country. The states with the highest rates of child marriage (50% and above) are Bihar, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. The worst state for child is Bihar where nearly 70% of women in their early twenties reported having been married by the age of 18, the best is Himachal Pradesh at 9% according to District-level Household and family Survey (DLHS) data,

According to NCRB (National Crime Records Bureau) data of 2020, a total of 785 cases were registered under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act. The number of cases registered were the highest in Karnataka (184), followed by Assam (138), West Bengal (98), Tamil Nadu (77) and Telangana at 62. According to the data, the number of cases registered under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act in 2019 was 523, in 2018 was 501, in 2017 was 395, in 2016 was 326 and in 2015 was 293. About 50% rise in the cases of child marriages has been recorded in 2020 over the previous year according to NCRB data.

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Fig. 7: Child marriage in Nepal

Women. But it is not applicable in the communities like Kurmi, Bhambi and Jath. In Rajasthan also child marriage takes place. In West Bengal many cases are found where 6 months Gouri was married to 6 yrs. old Goutam. It took place in Srirampur village in Midnapur in the year 1990. Same incident occurred in Jhargram district where the bridegroom was 16 and the bride was 12 yrs. old.

Fig. 8: Girl child’s wedding in India

Fig. 9: Child marriage in Bangladesh

Fig. 10: Rana Prathap Kumari, aged 12, married Krishnaraja Wadiyar IV, aged 16 on 6th June 1900. Two years later, he was recognized as the Maharaja of Mysore under British India.
Carribbean. Rates are 17% in the Middle East and North Africa, and 11% in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

Before the industrial revolution, in many parts of the world, including India, China and Eastern Europe, women tended to marry immediately after reaching puberty, in their mid-teens. Societies where most of the population lived in small agricultural communities were characterized by these marriage practices well into the 19th century. In ancient and medieval societies, it was common for girls to be betrothed at or even before the age of puberty. In ancient Israel the marriage of a young girl was the undisputed prerogatives of her father. Most girls were married before the age of 15, often at the start of their puberty. In Ancient Greece, early marriage and motherhood for girls existed. Even boys were expected to marry in their teens. In Ancient Rome, females could marry above the age of 12 and males could marry above the age of 14. In the Middle Ages, under English Civil laws that were derived from Roman laws, marriages before the age of 16 existed. In Imperial China, child marriage was the norm.

Child marriages have been common throughout history and continue to be fairly widespread, particularly in developing countries such as Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Latin America and Oceania. However, even in developed countries such as the United States legal exceptions still allow child marriage in 46 US states. The incidence of child marriage has been falling in most parts of the world. 2018 data from UNICEF showed that about 21% of young women worldwide (aged 20 to 24) were married as children; which is a 25% decrease from 10 years previously. The countries with the highest observed rates of child marriages below the age of 18 were Niger, Chad, Mali, Bangladesh, Guinea, Mozambique and Nepal with rates above 50%. Globally, an estimated 12 million girls annually are being married under the age of 18.

Child marriage is still legal in only six countries i.e. Equatorial Guinea, Gambia, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen. Children can marry with the permission of their parents and other family members in Iraq, Jamaica and Uruguay. UN launched an initiative to protect girls from child marriage. The devastation of child marriage effectively ends a girl’s childhood. About 40 million girls ages 15-19 are currently married or in a union worldwide. Each year, some 12 million more girls will marry before reaching age 18; and of those, 4 million are under age 15. If the current trends continue, the number of girls who will lose their childhood due to child marriage will reach 150 million by 2030. Marriage before the age of 18 is a fundamental violation of human rights. Globally it is a very complex subject under law. The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 came into force on 1st November 2007 in India. In October 2017 Supreme Court of India gave a landmark judgement criminalising sex with a child bride.

Child marriage threatens the lives, well-beings and future of girls around the world. Child marriage is often the result of entrenched gender inequality, making girls disproportionately affected by the practice. Globally the prevalence of child marriage among boys is just one-sixth that among girls. Because child marriage impacts a girls’ health, future and family, it imposes substantial economic costs at the national level, too with major implications for development and prosperity. This despicable system of society can be uprooted only by proper education, which is still lacking in India. Only education can lead us to an enlightened society, can lead all the girls from slavery.

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