

Each house in this village has ten members!

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MATUK BIGHA (NAWADA): Matuk Bigha village in Nawada district is woefully short on baby girls. For, they have either become wives, or mothers!

Situated between Nawada and Gaya, the village has a mixed population of around 2000 people, where 90% of the girls in the age group of seven to 14 years have been married off. Some of them have already delivered babies, while others are pregnant. Yet some others are waiting to join their husbands.

Sample the case of Babita, who was married at the tender age of 10. She does not know the

name of her husband, nor has she any clue about her in-laws.

"She is deranged and doesn't understand anything," said her mother Ishwari Devi.

Then, why did you marry her off? To that question, she says: "Because, I can't rear her and bear the burden of her treatment," without showing any sign of repentance on her face.

The saddest part of the story is, that since her marriage, Babita's husband has never visited his wife. Wrapped in a torn red sari, she listlessly wanders about in Matuk Bigha.

But Babita is not alone. There are many like her in the village, who have become victims of the age old practice of child mar-

riage, which is deep rooted in Nawada.

Sanju is another hapless girl, who was married at the age of 12. One of 10 siblings, including eight sisters, she, however, defends the decision of her parents to marry her off at such an early age. "My poor parents had no other alternative but to marry me off," said she.

She is expecting her 'gauna' to take soon place.

Reams of pages would be filled up with such examples in Matuk Bigha, which though located on the main highways passing through the district, has failed to attract the attention of policy makers.

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■ Girls who had been married at an early age along with their mothers and relatives (standing) at Matuk Bigha in Nawada district.

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It also belies the administration's claim to have addressed the problem of the burgeoning population in the state. For every family in the village has on an average 10 members.

"Poverty caused by population explosion, has sustained the practice of child marriage," said Jageshwar Choudhary, who teaches in the state-run primary school at Matuk Bigha. Refuting the opinion held by some others, he said that tradition, caste or creed had no role in the promotion of the practice.

"Combined with literacy, poverty is at the root of the problem," he

insisted.

The case of Moni Kumari substantiates the argument of Choudhary.

Her father Ram Dev Yadav has fixed 10-year old Moni's marriage at a nearby village, as he is no longer in a position to bear the burden of his daughter.

"I have already paid around ₹15,000 to her would be in-laws and the marriage would take place in a months time," he said.

Like Matuk Bigha, there are many villages in Nawada district, where as per official records, 65% of girls are married before 18 years of age.



■ **Moni Kumari (right) with her father Ram Dev Yadav, whose marriage has been fixed.**

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