

# Pregnant twice before attaining 16!

**Binod Dubey**

■ htpletters@hindustantimes.com

**SALEHPUR (NALANDA):** It took the life of their only son to make them understand their grave mistake. But by that time, the die had been cast. Six of their seven daughters had already been married off at an age, when they ought to have gone to schools or play with toys.

“My son died apparently because he could not stand the mental trauma he had to suffer after getting married at a very tender age,” said Damyanti Devi of Salehpur village in Nalanda district. Her son Bablu had committed suicide, a few days after his marriage, when



■ **Damyanti Devi with her daughters, who were married off as minors.**

BINOD DUBEY/HT PHOTO

he had just joined secondary school.

“We married him off thinking he would settle early in his life,” said she adding, “But we couldn’t comprehend the vices

attached with child marriage.” “I am also a witness to the sufferings of my six daughters, who were married when they had no clue about the commitment,” said Damyanti, whose husband

is a farm labourer and somehow manages to eke out a living. The plight of Damyanti’s family is not an isolated instance in Nalanda, which has earned the notoriety of being one of the few districts in Bihar, where child marriages still thrives.

Surveys conducted by various organisations suggest that 64% of women below the age of 18 and 58% males below the age of 21 are married in the district, which was once the cradle of education and ancient Indian culture. However, there are certain villages in the district, where 90% of children get married before they attain the legal age of marriage.

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Jatipur village is one such example, which has glaringly defied the provisions of the Child Marriages Act.

"A majority of the students studying here are married," said Roshan Kumar, who teaches in the Jatipur primary school. "What is more alarming is that the situation on the child marriage front has not changed since I joined the school," he claimed.

A visit to the village in the Chandi block of the district revealed, that most of the children who were married did not remember when their marriage took place. They did not even know the whereabouts of their life partners and were thoroughly disinterested in their future.

Sample the case of Santosh, a school dropout. Hardly in the age group of 14 to 16, he does not remember when he married. When asked to name his in-laws place, he was not sure whether it was Patna or Begusarai. He did not show any interest in his wife, with whom he would live his life.

Three of Santosh's five sisters were also married when they were in primary schools. His other two sisters younger to him are awaiting marriage,



which their parents have already fixed. Reena Devi is the other sufferer of the age-old practice of early marriage. Her child-like form looked quite odd, as she was wrapped in a sari, an adult garment. She moved listlessly trying to hide her pregnancy with the drape of her oversized sari.

Married at 14, she got pregnant immediately afterwards and subsequently delivered a premature baby. "My mother-in-law wants me to deliver another baby," said a frail Reena. Tears rolled down her eyes, as she was quizzed on her marriage.

The interventions of some non-government organisations like that of Mamta and the Gramin and the Nagar Vikas Parishad, have indeed brought some changes in the psyche of the people but they are not enough to herald a change in the age-old practice of child marriage.