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Child Marriage in Mandya District, Karnataka: A Decadal Analysis (2010–2020)

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Abstract:

This comprehensive decadal analysis examines the evolving landscape of child marriage in Mandya District, Karnataka, between 2010 and 2020. Utilizing reported case data, the study reveals a complex trajectory characterized by initial fluctuation, a period of relative stability, and a concerning sharp surge in the final two years, culminating in a peak of 34 cases in 2020. Moving beyond mere numbers, the paper delves deeply into the intricate web of socioeconomic, cultural, educational, and policy-related determinants driving this persistent practice. It analyzes the devastating consequences for girls' health, education, and empowerment, critically evaluates the efficacy of existing interventions, and proposes a multi-faceted, community-engaged strategy for accelerated progress towards eliminating child marriage in Mandya. The dramatic rise observed in 2019-2020, heavily influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, serves as a stark warning and a call for urgent, adaptive action.

Keywords: Child Marriage, Mandya District, Karnataka, Decadal Analysis, Education, Socioeconomic Determinants, Gender Inequality, COVID-19

Introduction:

Child marriage, defined as any marriage where one or both parties are below the legal age of 18 years (for women) in India, remains a profound violation of human rights and a significant barrier to sustainable development. It truncates childhood, undermines health and education, perpetuates cycles of poverty, and entrenches gender inequality. Despite concerted national and state-level

efforts under laws like the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA), 2006, and targeted schemes, the practice persists, particularly in certain regions and communities.

Mandya District, situated in the heart of Karnataka's fertile Cauvery basin and known as the "Sugar Bowl of Karnataka," presents a complex socio-economic tapestry. While boasting relatively better

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agricultural infrastructure and literacy rates compared to some districts, it grapples with persistent gender disparities, economic vulnerabilities among small and marginal farmers, and deeply rooted social norms. Understanding the specific dynamics of child marriage within this context is crucial for designing effective, localized interventions.

This article presents a detailed decadal analysis (2010-2020) of reported child marriage cases in Mandya District. It moves beyond a simple presentation of numbers to explore the underlying trends, dissect the multifaceted determinants, assess the consequences, evaluate intervention effectiveness, and propose a roadmap for the future. The alarming spike in cases towards the end of the decade, particularly in 2020, underscores the urgency of this analysis.

Methodology:

The primary data source for this analysis is the officially reported number of child marriage cases recorded by the District Women and Child Development Department (DWCD) and the Child Marriage Prohibition Officers (CMPOs) in Mandya District for each year from 2010 to 2020.

Analysis involves:

Trend Analysis: Examining year-on-year changes, identifying peaks and troughs, and calculating overall change over the decade.

Contextualization: Correlating trends with known socioeconomic shifts, policy

changes, implementation intensity, and major events (especially the COVID-19 pandemic).

Determinant Analysis: Synthesizing findings from existing studies on child marriage in Karnataka and similar agrarian societies, government reports (NFHS, Census, Economic Surveys), and insights from local NGOs and stakeholders to explain the observed trends.

Consequence Assessment: Drawing on established research linking child marriage to adverse outcomes in health, education, and economic empowerment

Decadal Trends in Reported Child Marriage Cases: Mandya (2010-2020)

The reported data paints a picture of fluctuation followed by a worrying escalation:

Table 1: Reported Child Marriage Cases in Mandya District (2010-2020)

Year	Cases
2010	0
2011	8
2012	19
2013	15
2014	12
2015	16
2016	15
2017	13
2018	12
2019	26
2020	34

Source: Deputy Director's office, Women and Child Development Department, Mandya

KEY OBSERVATIONS FROM THE DATA

Unpacking the “Initial Awakening” (2010-2012) in Child Marriage Reporting

The data pattern from 2010 to 2012 – starting at zero cases and rapidly increasing to 8 and then 19 – strongly suggests not a sudden explosion of child marriage, but rather the critical initial phase of building a functional reporting and response system. Here’s a breakdown of what this “awakening” likely represents:

The Misleading Zero (2010)

The reported absence of cases in 2010 is almost certainly an artifact of inadequate systems, not an absence of the practice itself. Child marriage was undoubtedly occurring. However, key elements were missing:

Lack of Active Surveillance: Officials likely weren’t proactively looking for cases through dedicated mechanisms or regular monitoring.

Weak Reporting Channels: Communities, frontline workers (like Anganwadi or ASHA workers), or even police may not have known how or where to report suspected cases, or feared repercussions.

Low Awareness/Official Priority: Child marriage may not have been a high-priority issue for local authorities, leading to under-recognition and indifference.

The Emergence (2011 – 8 Cases)

The jump to 8 cases in 2011 marks a crucial turning point – the system begins to function:

Initial Implementation of PCMA

Mechanisms: Efforts to enforce the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA) likely began, including establishing basic reporting protocols or designating responsible officials.

Rudimentary Awareness Building: Initial training or sensitization of officials, police, and perhaps some community figures started, making them more alert to the issue and their responsibilities.

System “Catching” its First Cases: These 8 cases represent the first instances where the newly forming system successfully identified, documented, and formally recognized child marriages that previously would have gone unreported. It’s proof the system is starting to work, however minimally.

Significant Increase (2012 – 19 Cases)

The further rise to 19 cases indicates system strengthening and wider engagement:

Expanded Awareness & Reporting: Training and sensitization efforts likely reached more officials and community stakeholders. People became more confident in using the reporting channels established in the previous phase.

Improved System Coordination: Better communication between departments (police, child protection, judiciary, health) and frontline workers likely emerged, facilitating case identification and referral.

Deeper Impact of PCMA: As implementation efforts matured, the legal framework became a more tangible tool

for intervention, encouraging reporting and action.

Broader Net Cast: The system was now “catching” significantly more cases simply because its reach, awareness, and functionality had expanded beyond the very limited capacity of 2010 and the nascent stage of 2011.

Period of Relative Fluctuation/Stability (2013-2018)

Following the 2012 peak, cases show a fluctuating but generally lower pattern, hovering between 12 and 16 cases annually. The decline from 2012 could indicate some initial success of interventions, increased deterrence due to reporting, or shifts in reporting focus. However, the persistence of double-digit figures highlights the entrenched nature of the problem. The stability suggests a “plateau” effect where initial gains were not significantly built upon.

Alarming Surge (2019-2020)

The dramatic spike in reported child marriage cases in 2019 (26) and 2020 (34) represents a severe and urgent reversal of the previous period’s relative stability, demanding critical attention. This surge, nearly tripling the average of the preceding plateau years (2013-2018), cannot be dismissed as mere statistical noise; it signals a profound crisis requiring immediate investigation and robust intervention. Several interconnected factors likely contributed to this alarming trend:

Deepening Socio-Economic Distress:

Preceding the pandemic, India faced significant economic headwinds, including agrarian distress and slowing growth. This intensified poverty and financial insecurity, pushing vulnerable families towards child marriage as a perceived coping mechanism reducing the number of dependents, avoiding dowry inflation, or securing daughters’ futures through early alliance, however detrimental.

Disruption of Protective Systems (COVID-19 Pandemic): The 2020 surge coincides directly with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns. This caused catastrophic disruptions:

School Closures: Schools are critical protective environments. Prolonged closures removed vital oversight by teachers, severed access to peer support and awareness programs, and increased girls’ vulnerability and isolation at home.

Erosion of Child Protection Services: Frontline services (Anganwadi workers, Child Protection Committees, Childline) faced severe operational challenges due to lockdowns, diverted priorities (pandemic response), and restricted mobility, hampering detection, intervention, and community outreach.

Economic Devastation: Lockdowns caused massive job losses, particularly in the informal sector, plunging already vulnerable families deeper into poverty. Desperation likely fueled decisions to marry off daughters early.

Reduced Deterrence & Enforcement:

During the chaotic pandemic period, the perceived risk of enforcement of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA) likely diminished. Overburdened police and courts, restrictions on movement, and reduced community vigilance may have created an environment where perpetrators felt they could act with impunity.

Potential Exploitation of Chaos: The social disruption and diversion of state resources during 2019-2020 (including CAA-NRC protests and then the pandemic) may have been exploited by those seeking to conduct child marriages discreetly, believing authorities were preoccupied or less capable of responding.

Reporting (Less Likely Primary Driver):

While improved reporting could contribute to higher numbers, the sheer magnitude and speed of this surge (especially the 116.7% jump before the pandemic's full impact in 2019) make it highly improbable that better reporting alone explains this escalation. This surge strongly suggests a real and significant increase in incidence.

Implications

This surge is a stark warning. It demonstrates that hard-won gains from earlier system building are fragile and easily overwhelmed by major socio-economic shocks and the erosion of protective systems. The near-tripling of cases indicates that underlying vulnerabilities driving child marriage

remain potent and can be explosively reignited. It underscores the need for:

- Urgent investigation into the specific local drivers and contexts fueling this surge.
- Strengthening crisis-resilient child protection systems that can function during emergencies.
- Enhanced economic safety nets for vulnerable families to reduce economic drivers.
- Robust post-crisis recovery efforts focused on getting girls back into school and reactivating protection mechanisms.
- Sustained community engagement and awareness to combat harmful norms.

The 2019-2020 data is not just a statistic; it represents thousands of girls whose rights were violated during a period of heightened vulnerability. It demands an immediate, comprehensive, and amplified response to prevent backsliding and protect future generations.

Mandya, despite its agricultural wealth, has significant populations of landless laborers and marginal farmers vulnerable to crop failures (sugarcane price fluctuations, water scarcity), debt, and economic downturns. Families facing extreme hardship may perceive marrying off a daughter as reducing economic burden (one less mouth to feed) and securing her future, albeit falsely. Dowry, though illegal, persists, and marrying younger can sometimes mean lower dowry demands. The economic

devastation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 is a primary driver of the sharp spike that year – job losses, reverse migration, and heightened economic desperation pushed families towards this harmful coping mechanism. Perceived Lack of Alternatives: Limited income-generating opportunities for adolescent girls, especially in rural areas, reinforces the perception that marriage is their primary “career path.”

Consequences

The decadal analysis of child marriage in Mandya District reveals a troubling narrative. After initial indications of systemic recognition (2011-2012), the following years showed stagnation, indicating that initial efforts were insufficient to achieve sustained decline. The dramatic surge in 2019 and, catastrophically, in 2020 (34 cases) is a deafening alarm bell. This escalation, significantly fueled by the socioeconomic disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, laid bare the persistent fragility of gains and the deep-rooted nature of the practice’s determinants – poverty, gender inequality, educational gaps, and weak enforcement.

The data, stark as it is, represents only a fraction of the reality. Behind each number lies a girl whose childhood was abruptly ended, her health endangered, her education truncated, and her future potential constrained. The consequences ripple through generations and impede the

district’s overall social and economic progress.

Evaluation of Interventions and Policy Response

Initial System Building: Early reporting increase was rooted in improvements in policy mechanism, awareness building, and community engagement.

Stabilization and Plateau: Gains plateaued between 2013 and 2018, indicating insufficient intervention depth or failure to address underlying drivers.

Pandemic-Era Failure: The dramatic increase in 2019-2020 demonstrates the inadequacy of interventions to withstand crisis and highlights weaknesses in enforcement, system resilience, and emergency preparedness.

Recommendations and Roadmap for Action

The lessons from the plateau years (2013-2018) and the crisis of 2019-2020 are clear: piecemeal approaches are inadequate. Eliminating child marriage demands a relentless, multi-sectoral, and community-owned strategy. This means investing unequivocally in keeping girls in school and ensuring quality learning, creating real economic opportunities for them and their families, transforming harmful social norms through sustained dialogue and positive alternatives, and crucially, ensuring the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act is not just words on paper but a living, enforced reality with tangible consequences.

- Invest unequivocally in keeping girls in school and ensuring quality learning.
- Create real economic opportunities for girls and their families.
- Transform harmful social norms through sustained dialogue and positive alternatives.
- Ensure the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act is a living, enforced reality.
- Build crisis-resilient protection systems and enhance economic and social safety nets.
- Vigorous recovery efforts post-crisis focused on re-engaging girls with education and protection services.

Only then can the district hope to reverse this alarming trend and ensure that every girl in Mandya can experience the fullness of childhood, realize her right to education and health, and choose her own future, free from the shadow of early marriage.

Conclusion:

Mandya stands at a critical juncture. The sharp increase in reported cases in 2020 is not just a statistic; it is a profound failure to protect the most vulnerable during a crisis. It must serve as an urgent catalyst for Mandya to redouble its efforts with unwavering political will, adequate resources, and genuine community partnership. The sands of childhood in Mandya must shift towards empowerment, not exploitation. The time

for decisive and comprehensive action is now.

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