

Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*India and China: Some
Comparative Thoughts in
Relation to Child
Marriage*

REPORT

Speaker :

Mary E. John

13 December 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Prof. Mary E. John opened the session by noting that although India and China shared a history of social reform in the 19th century, their paths diverged significantly in the 20th century, impacting contemporary marriage practices. This holds especially true concerning “early marriage”, and alternative term for “child marriage”.
- The speaker argued for a reconsideration of the terminology used for “child marriage” in India, given that “adolescent” or “early marriage” was a more accurate description, thereby emphasising the need for a nuanced understanding of these unions, whether arranged or chosen by the individuals.
- The current marriage and family dynamics in China and India have distinct focal points. According to the speaker, China grapples with imbalanced sex ratios, while India is confronted with the continuous challenges of early marriages.
- Noting that there is significant under-reporting of underage/teenage marriages in certain Chinese provinces, the speaker highlighted the importance of exploring and understanding media representations of the same in both countries. The speaker further stressed the need for more comprehensive and accurate comparative frames for analysing marriage practices in these contexts.

REPORT

INDIA AND CHINA: SOME COMPARATIVE THOUGHTS IN RELATION TO CHILD MARRIAGE

Speaker: Prof. Mary E John, former Professor, Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi.

Chair: Prof. Govind Kelkar, Visiting Professor, Council for Social Development and Institute for Human Development, New Delhi; Adjunct Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Date: 13 December 2023

Venue: Zoom Webinar

Prof. Mary John offered a comprehensive exploration of child marriage in India and China, dissecting historical contexts, legislative changes, and societal intricacies. She began with a brief account of the colonial era's influence on social reforms. The significance of the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1927 in reshaping India's approach towards early marriage was underscored. Simultaneously, Prof. John critically examined the limitations of legal solutions, emphasising the profound impact of poverty on women's well-being, thus diverging from the predominant discourse.

Moving over to China, Prof John unpacked the complex interplay between political ideologies and historical upheavals, which have shaped marriage norms. Delving into the annals of China's history, her arguments shed light on the transformative changes initiated by the Communist Party of China during the mid-20th century. These reforms, strategically implemented amidst sweeping economic restructuring, also provided insights into China's political landscape and its profound effects on societal norms, particularly regarding marriage. The Communist Party's initiatives in reforming marriage laws, according to Prof. John, were not merely legal amendments; they mirrored broader societal and ideological transformations. At the same time, these reforms were not isolated actions. Rather, they were integral components of China's ambitious social and economic restructuring. They reflected the Party's endeavour to redefine social structures, redistributing power dynamics within familial realms, and redefining gender roles within the complex fabric of Chinese society.

The speaker further underscored the significance of these reforms as catalysts for multifaceted societal changes. The marriage laws became symbolic of China's societal aspirations, representing not just legal factors but ideological markers, indicative of a transformative socio-political landscape. The comparative analysis between India and China also highlighted disparities in societal attitudes and state policies. India's struggle with legal frameworks and societal pressures, emerged in sharp contrast to China. This divergence underscored the need for a deeper exploration into how historical legacies intersect with contemporary societal attitudes towards early marriage.

The speaker stressed the need to transcend narrow paradigms, advocating a holistic understanding that goes beyond mere legal frameworks. Her presentation highlighted the burdens borne by women in contemporary India due to marriage, contrasting it with China's evolving scenario, where marriage assumes a less foundational role.

In her concluding remarks, Prof John challenged the extant conventional paradigms, and highlighted the need to question the effectiveness of legal remedies, examine the pervasive influence of poverty on early marriage in India as well as explore the multifaceted landscapes of child marriage in India and China. India's historical struggle against entrenched practices, juxtaposed against China's transformative reforms amid ideological shifts, offered a compelling narrative of divergent strategies to address early marriage.

This report was prepared by Supradip Das, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies.

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