



Sheela, an eight-year-old bride, sits beside her 14-year-old groom Daulat Ram during their marriage ceremony in the Rajgarh district of Madhya Pradesh on Sunday. The practice of child marriages continues despite a government ban.

Minors wed sans major outcry

By Suchandana Gupta
TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Rajgarh: "I cannot walk anymore," squealed six-year-old Jiten. A few hours after she married 10-year-old Raju, the couple, accompanied by their relatives were on their way to the Jalpaji Mandir to invoke the blessings of the goddess.

Jiten's uncle, a farmer in Singapura village of Rajgarh district, promptly picked her up. It was now Raju's turn to complain. "We've been walking a long way. My feet are tired, too. I cannot climb any further," he said. But no one was willing to pamper the newly-married 'man'. "You have to walk," his grandfather Ramlal said.

Inside the temple, seven-year-old Pannibai sat before the deity. Her 16-year-old husband held her by the hand lest she grab the white sugar balls kept as offering for the goddess. As the priest chanted the mantras, Pannibai's eyes darted from the sugar balls to a

plate of coconut kernels kept before the deity.

In less than two minutes, the puja was over and the priest blessed the couple before shouting "next". There was a long queue of newly-weds awaiting their turn.

Thousands of children aged two and above tied the knot in Madhya Pradesh on the occasion of Akshaya Tritiya, which fell on Sunday. Mandsaur, Neemuch, Shajapur, Rajgarh, Guna and other areas bordering Rajasthan saw many such marriages. Tractors carrying *baraats* dotted the highway.

The state administration appears reconciled to this blatant violation of the law. "It happens every year. Child marriages are common in the bordering areas of Rajasthan," a senior official said. "No one thinks this is illegal or a crime here. It is part of a centuries-old tradition."

Every year, the government distributes pamphlets against child marriages but few pay any attention.