



A SOCIO-LEGAL ANALYSIS OF LEGISLATIVE REFORM AND ITS IMPACT ON CHILD MARRIAGE PREVENTION IN ASSAM: THE TRANSITION FROM THE ASSAM MOSLEM MARRIAGES AND DIVORCES REGISTRATION ACT, 1935, TO THE ASSAM COMPULSORY REGISTRATION OF MUSLIM MARRIAGES AND DIVORCES ACT, 2024, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO JORHAT DISTRICT, ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

Child Marriage, where any one of the contracting parties is a child, is a denial of good health, education, economic and social development. It curtails time to enjoy life as a child. Section 8 of *The Assam Moslem Marriage and Divorce Registration Act, 1935* permitted child marriages in Assam. On 28th August 2024, the Assam Legislative Assembly repealed the 89-year-old Act. It simultaneously enacted *The Assam Compulsory Registration of Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act, 2024* with a view to improve the socio-economic and health status of Muslim women and decreasing the rate of child marriages in Assam. This is a significant transformation from community-based personal law administration to state-controlled legal regulation. This reform is a complete abandonment of a colonial personal law statute, which eliminated the Kazi-based registration system in favour of a state-controlled register system. This reform may primarily be a preventive and deterrent mechanism for child marriage.

Analysis of data on child marriage from NFHS -3 to NFHS-6 shows a gradual declining trend [13.4%] in the number of child marriages in Assam. The district assessment in July 2024 showed that two districts, Jorhat and Nagaon, had achieved complete elimination of reported child marriages. A substantial majority (approximately 72%) of Muslim women in Jorhat believe that child marriage can be eliminated with the combined effort of legislative reform taken by the Assam Government and administrative enforcement and increased social awareness. Jorhat district in Assam can be an ideal example in this regard. This study also proved that legal change becomes most effective when supported by strong implementation and public awareness. The need of the hour is to work together as individuals or with the public to create a world free from child marriage.

Keywords: Repeal of Act, Muslim marriage, Child marriage, Marriage Registration, Jorhat.

1. Introduction:

As a significant reform in the regulation of Muslim Marriage in Assam, on 28th August 2024, the Assam Legislative Assembly repealed the 89-year-old *The Assam Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act, 1935*¹ (the Act of 1935) and simultaneously enacted *The Assam Compulsory Registration of Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act, 2024*² (the Act of 2024). The advocate of this legal reform opined that making registration of Muslim marriages compulsory will improve the socio-economic and health status of Muslim women and will decrease the rate of child marriages, adolescent maternity deaths and will act as a protection against violations of human rights of Muslim women in Assam.

During the year 2021-2024, it was highlighted that the old Act of 1935 allowed registration of marriages involving minors. Hence, this Act was unable to provide adequate safeguards against child marriage. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child³ (UNCRC) in 1989 described a child as a person who is under the age of 18 years. In the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women⁴ (CEDAW), in its general recommendations (No. 21& 31), opined that the minimum age for marriage should be 18 years. This was followed by the Committee on the Rights of the Child⁵, which stated that the minimum legal age of marriage for both girls and boys should be 18 years. This obligation has been followed by Mali, Bangladesh, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Jordan, Vietnam, Germany, Kyrgyz Republic, United States and India. In India, the *Child Marriage Restraint Act*⁶ was enacted by the British government, where the minimum legal age for marriage for boys was fixed at 18 years and for girls at 14 years. In 2006, this Act was replaced by the *Prohibition of Child Marriage Act*⁷ (PCMA).

According to Traditional Islamic Law, there is no fixed universal age for marriage. In Islam, the minimum age is fixed as the time of attainment of puberty by the parties to the marriage. Although the legal age for marriage is fixed in different countries depending on the geographical and socio-economic conditions of the country, still, as per health science, neither boys nor girls are physically, mentally, psychologically and emotionally fit to live a married life below 18 years of age. Therefore, internationally, the minimum age for marriage should be accepted as 18 years under any law in every country.

Islam was introduced in Assam by Arabians and Persian traders, sailors, maritime merchants and Sufi Saints during the 7th century.^{8, 9} The first Muslim in Assam was a converted Muslim named Ali Mech, a Mech chieftain who converted to Islam during the expedition of Delhi Sultanate General Muhammad Bin Bakhtiyar Khalji to capture Tibet in 1206. The first Muslim family was brought by the first Ahom King Sukafa during his entry into Assam through Patkai Hill. After the Yandaboo Treaty, when the British occupied Assam, they brought several Bengali immigrant settlers who were mostly Bengali Muslims from the Eastern Bengal region, now known as Bangladesh. As Assam is a fertile land, these immigrants encouraged other Bengalis to come and settle in Assam. With the passage of time, the Muslim population in Assam had increased so much that the British Government had to enact *The Assam Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act of 1935* to regulate the registration of Muslim marriages and divorces in Assam as an effort to streamline Muslim culture in Assam¹⁰. This Act was published in the Assam Gazette on 19th February 1936 and was in force throughout Assam till 28th August 2024. This Act established a mechanism of registration of marriage and divorce amongst the Muslim by a Register commonly known as 'Kazi'.

The problem with this Act of 1935 is that this Act did not specify any minimum age of girls for marriage, and it allows the marriage of a minor girl. Every child has their dreams and the freedom to learn, grow, and decide their own future. When Children are forced into adulthood too soon, they are forced to go to hell as child marriage ruins the dreams of the child before they are ever spoken.

The need of the hour is that every individual and the general public should be keen to prevent every underage marriage to provide hope for a better future for the child. The registration of marriages under the newly enacted *Assam Compulsory Muslim Marriage and Divorce Registration Act, 2024* requires strict proof of identity, age and residence of the parties to the marriage. This requirement is expected to act as a step towards the prevention of Child Marriage in Assam. This study is designed and carried out to see the Impact on Child Marriage Prevention in Assam as a result of the transition of the registration process for Muslim marriage under the *Assam Moslem Marriages and Divorces Registration Act, 1935*, to the *Assam Compulsory Registration of Muslim Marriages and Divorces Act, 2024*.

1.1. Review of literature:

B. Suresh Lal¹¹ (2015) in the article “Child Marriage in India – Factors and Problems” stated that 45% of girls belonging to poor families and below the poverty line are wedded under the age of 18 years. Most adolescent girls (80%) are facing domestic violence, health problems, pregnancy problems, sexual abuse and post-traumatic stress, for which they undergo strong depression.

Sanjai Kumar¹² (2016) tried to trace out the levels and trends of Child Marriage at national and sub-national levels in India and opined that estimation of child marriage from Census data at the district level is associated with large confidence intervals which might be one of the major issues to trace changes in child marriage rate at the district level from survey data, unless careful statistical tests are done to detect significant decline from its previous values.

Naina Kumar & Kanika Bajaj¹³ (2016) stated that Adolescent pregnancies are serious health problems for both the adolescent mother and the newborn babies. Though the rate of wed and unwed adolescent pregnancies in developing countries is declining, it remains a matter of great concern.

Dr Dilip Kr Kalita et al.¹⁴ (2019) opined that teenage girls are physically and physiologically immature for reproduction, and pregnancy at this age leads to morbidity and mortality of both the teenage mother and the newborn baby. Further, such teenage pregnancy may also cause pre-eclampsia, low birth weight (LBW) and prematurity, low educational level, poor socioeconomic position, and inadequate parental care.

Risha Singh¹⁵ (2020) states that the level of child marriage in India is still high, though the rate varies across states. The problems of teenage pregnancy are not only associated with the health issues of the adolescent mother and the newborn babies; it also affects the girls’ educational attainment and their chance to participate in the labour force and finally affects the national economy.

Neeti Pandey¹⁶ (2020), discussing about empowering Indian Muslim women, stated that though the Indian constitution guarantees the protection of equal rights to all citizens, underneath this claim there lies the cruel underbelly of discriminatory and tyrannical personal laws, which is a challenge to the foundation of the concept of equality.

Dr Jayashree Mukharjee¹⁷ (2024) defined child marriage and stated that child marriage is a heinous and serious crime that violates child marriage rights, and discussed the reasons, consequences, problems, and its probable solution arising from child marriage.

1.2 Research Gap:

Most of the reported studies on child marriages are focused on national or state-level trends. District-specific research on child marriages in Assam, particularly in Jorhat district, remains limited. There is no adequate empirical evidence that demonstrates the effectiveness of legal enforcement, marriage registration, community perceptions, and institutional responses about marriages and divorces among the Muslim community in Assam. This gap justifies the need for further socio-legal research on child marriage in Assam.

1.3 Objective:

The main objective of this study is to identify and discuss the socio-legal impact of the replacement of the *Assam Moslem Marriage and Divorce Registration Act, 1935*, by the *Assam Compulsory Registration of Muslim Marriages and Divorces Act, 2024*, for the registration of Muslim marriages on the present trend of child marriage in Assam.

1.4 Research Methodology:

The present study has adopted a socio-legal empirical research methodology. Primary data were collected through a field study by using structured questionnaires, interviews, and/or observation, whichever was applicable. Secondary data were collected from reliable sources, such as census data, judicial decisions, government reports, books, peer-reviewed journals, and research articles, in accordance with strict ethical guidelines. Data collected from the field were classified, coded, tabulated, and analyzed with the help of descriptive statistical techniques such as percentages, tables, and bar diagrams, etc. The findings of this study were interpreted as per existing literature and the applicable legal framework.

1.5 Limitation:

During the study, reliance was put on secondary data collected from old records. The primary data were collected from respondents with different standards of living. Here, various factors, such as literacy, socio-economic conditions of the respondents, cultural sensitivity, limited control over data quality, lack of updated information, and non- and under-reporting of data, may limit the findings of this study.

2. Occurrence of Child Marriages:

Depending on the geography and socio-economic conditions of the country, different countries have fixed different legal ages for marriage. Some countries set the legal age for marriage to be 14 years, while some countries have fixed it at 21 years. In these countries, internationally adopted legal ages for marriage are not strictly enforced. Thus, in some countries, child marriage is legally encouraged, resulting in the solemnization of child marriages.

Table1. Minimum legal age of girls for marriage fixed in different countries: Source: Feeney R., AgeFinder.org¹⁸

Country	Minimum Legal age for marriage	Country	Minimum legal age for marriage
Ethiopia	15	Turkey	17
North Korea	16	Niger	15
Bolivia	14	Afghanistan	16
Iran	13	Sudan	10
Chad	15	Brazil	16
Pakistan	16	Mali	16

Nawal M. Nour¹⁹ stated that over 60 million marriages were entered into with girls under 18 years, which includes 31 million child marriages in South Asia, 14 million in sub-Saharan Africa and 6.6 million in Latin America and Caribbean states.

Africa witnessed a high rate of girl child marriage. Sources show that Mali witnessed 65% of child marriage, Mozambique 57%, and in India, it is 45.50%. Excluding Asia, the world accounts for 55% of child marriages, while excluding India, the other part of South Asia accounts for 11% of child marriages. India accounts for 34% of the world's total child marriages. As per the International Centre for Research on Women, India has the fourteenth-highest rate of child marriage in the world.²⁰

Amongst all widespread religions, Islam states that for marriage, the bride and bridegroom should attain a comprehensive maturity which is called "Bulugh" or "Puberty". According to Islam, girls attain puberty when they begin menstruating or when their age becomes 9 - 13 years old, and for boys when they first have a nocturnal emission or pass 15 lunar years. So, Muslim law never forbids solemnization of marriage before attaining the legal age of 18 years. Only the legal necessity is that, in case of an underage bride, their guardians, known as "Wali", should agree to the marriage at such age. In Iran, Syria, Jordan and Bangladesh, in the absence of the guardians, the court may give consent for marriage at an early age. However, in Morocco, the consent of the guardians is mandatory in case of underage marriage.

In India, the occurrence of Child Marriage is expected to be the maximum in five states: Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh being at the top. But State-Wise analysis of Child Marriage Cases registered under the PCMA during the years 2017 to 2022, with reference to the year 2025, shows that the highest cases under PCMA were registered in Assam, followed by West Bengal.²¹ This may be due to differences in legal awareness of people in different states. Further, the increased number of cases under PCMA in Assam is due to the decision of the Assam Government to crack down on child marriages and to investigate child marriages in January 2023, including those that occurred over the previous 7 years.²² Moreover, Assam is the highest Muslim-populated state after Kashmir. This increased population of the Muslim community may be another reason for the increase in child marriage in Assam, as Islam does not specify any minimum legal age for marriage.

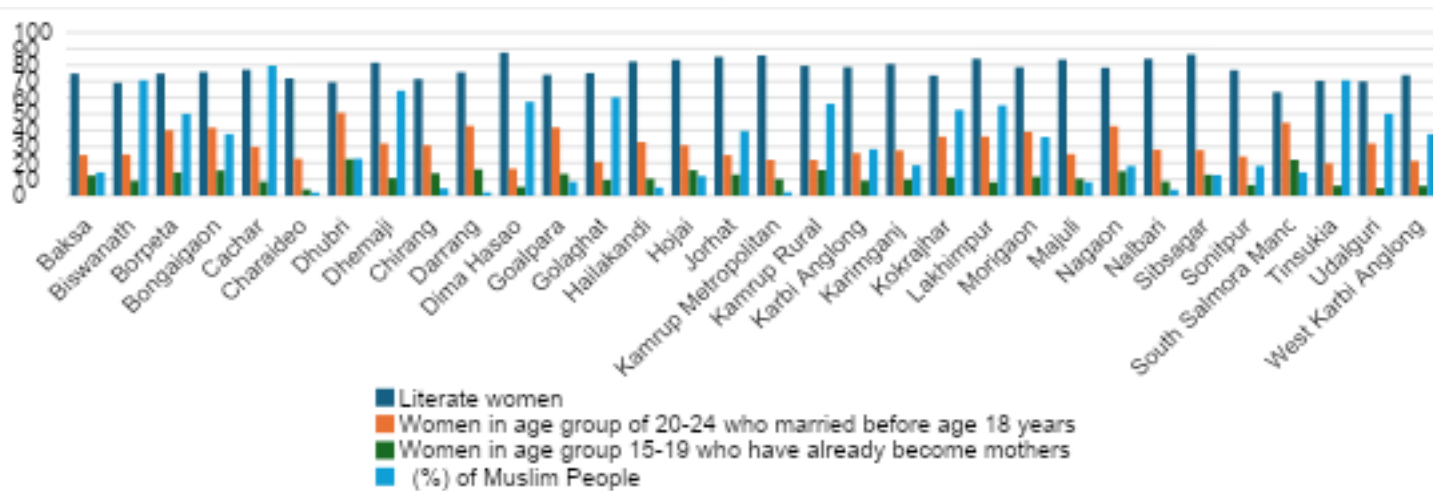


Fig. 1. District-wise literacy, child marriage, adolescent pregnancy and % of Muslim women in Assam²³

The above data shows that Child Marriage prevails in the Muslim-majority districts of Assam, with prevalence ranging from 10 % to 40%. Goalpara, Dhubri, Hailakandi, Nagaon, Borpeta, and some western districts exhibit comparatively higher rates of child marriage.

The above diagram also shows that the rate of Child marriage as well as adolescent motherhood decreases with the increase in the literacy of women. Jorhat shows a high literacy rate (around 80-85%) and a comparatively low number of women (around 20-25%) who got married before attaining 18 years of age. The number of women in Jorhat in the age range 15-19 who have already become mothers is also very low in comparison to other districts of Assam. Thus, the performance of Jorhat regarding female education, child marriage and adolescent motherhood is far better than that of other districts of Assam

3. Act of 1935 & Child marriage:

In India, the substantive law regarding Muslim marriage and divorce is derived from *The Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Application Act, 1937* and *The Dissolution of Muslim Marriage Act, 1939*. In Assam in the late colonial period, the British enacted *the Assam Muslim Marriage and Divorce Registration Act, 1935*, to create an official system for recording Muslim marriages and divorces in the British-occupied Assam without disturbing the Muslim personal law. By this enactment, the British adopted legal pluralism, introducing a procedural system for recording marriages and divorces solemnized under Islamic law. It enhanced the documentary evidence for judicial proceedings to reduce the number of disputes relating to marital status amongst the Muslims in Assam without codifying the Muslim personal law. Thus, the legislative intent of the colonial Government was neither reformist in a substantive sense nor purely neutral. Instead, this enactment was a strategic intervention designed to harmonise Muslim personal law with the evidentiary and administrative requirements of the colonial state.

The problem with this Act of 1935 is that this Act did not specify any minimum age of girls for marriage. Section 8 of this Act allows the marriage of a minor girl. According to this section, the application for registration of marriage had to be made jointly by parties. The only conditional requirement is that for a minor bride or bridegroom (if any); the application should be made by their lawful guardians on their behalf. Even if the bride was a “pardanasheen” woman, the application could be filed by her duly authorized Vakil (i.e. legal representative).

Section 10 of this Act provided that if any party to the marriage was a minor, the marriage Registrar (Kazi) was to be signed by the lawful guardian for and on behalf of that minor. For “pardanasheen” women, a duly authorized ‘Vakil’ had to sign for and on behalf of her, with a condition that two witnesses had to attest the signature of that “Vakil”.

Of course, there was a provision that before registration of marriage, the Muslim register (Kazi) had to satisfy himself that the person appearing for and on behalf of the minor party to the marriage was legally entitled to represent the said minor, and if he could not satisfy himself about the registration authority, he could cancel the registration of the marriage. Thus, this Act of 1935 did not independently regulate the validity of marriage or determine the competency of the persons to act as a guardian. Indeed, this Act provided an important instrument for protecting women’s rights but allowed solemnization of child marriage amongst the Muslim people of Assam. However, this Act did not pressurize the parties to a marriage to register their marriage compulsorily. Thus, after the repeal of this Act, the question arises whether making Muslim marriage registration compulsory by enacting the new Act of 2024 regarding Muslim marriages would be more effective than the previously existing permissive Act. Therefore, the principal issue at hand in this research work would be whether the repeal of the Act of 1935 and the enactment of the Act of 1924 have produced measurable improvements to prevent child marriage in Assam or not.

4. The declining trend in Child marriage:

Analysis of the NFHS data²⁴ on child marriage shows a gradual declining trend [13.4% from the year (2005-06) to (2024-25)] in the number of child marriages in Assam.

Table 2.. NFHS data

NFHS Round (Survey Years)	(%) of Child Marriage
NFHS-3 (2005-06)	38.0
NFHS-4 (2015-16)	32.6
NFHS-5 (2019-21)	31.8
NFHS-6 (2023-24)	25.3

This decline, observed before the introduction of the Compulsory Registration Act in 2024, indicated long-term social and legal reforms in Assam. The large-scale crackdown on child marriage secured during 2021-2025 is due to police action against child marriage under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 (POSCO) Act & PCMA, where 51348 people were arrested, and 51842 criminal cases were registered in Assam in three phases: February 2023, October 2023 and December 2024²⁵. It has been reported that there 81% reduction in the number of child marriages in Assam during 2021-22 to 2023-24, where Jorhat witnessed a 100% reduction in reported child marriages during this time.²⁶

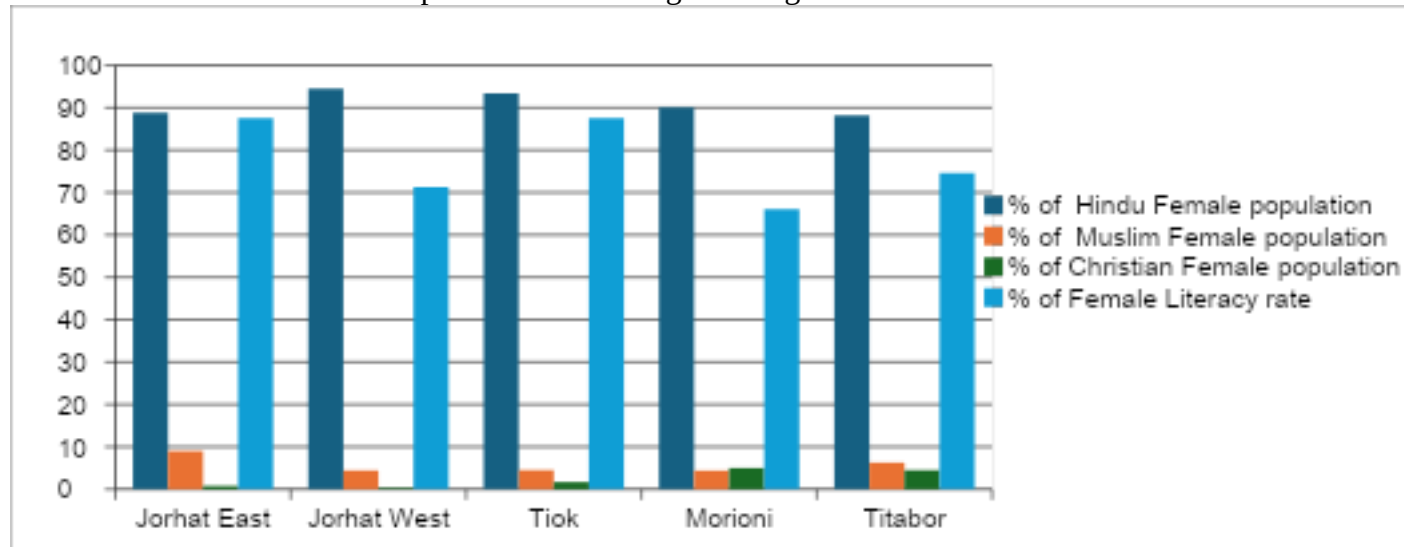


Fig. 2: Revenue circle-wise demography of Muslim women and total women literacy rate in Jorhat district²⁷

The above graph reveals that the Hindu female population predominates in all five revenue circles. Jorhat West (about 94%) is the highest, and Titabor (about 88%) has the lowest Hindu female population. On the other hand, the Muslim female population is a relatively small proportion in each revenue circle. Jorhat East contains the highest Muslim female population (around 9%), while Jorhat West and Teok have the lowest (around 4% each) population of Muslim women.

Jorhat East and Teok have higher female literacy than Marioni and Jorhat West circles. These variations demonstrate that educational development among women does not depend on the religious composition of the population but is also determined by other socio-economic and infrastructural factors.

During this study, a field survey was conducted among 180 Muslim women (107 from rural areas and 73 from urban areas) in Jorhat to know about their views towards the repeal action of the Act of 1935, the enactment of the Act of 2024, and child marriage, which is shown below.

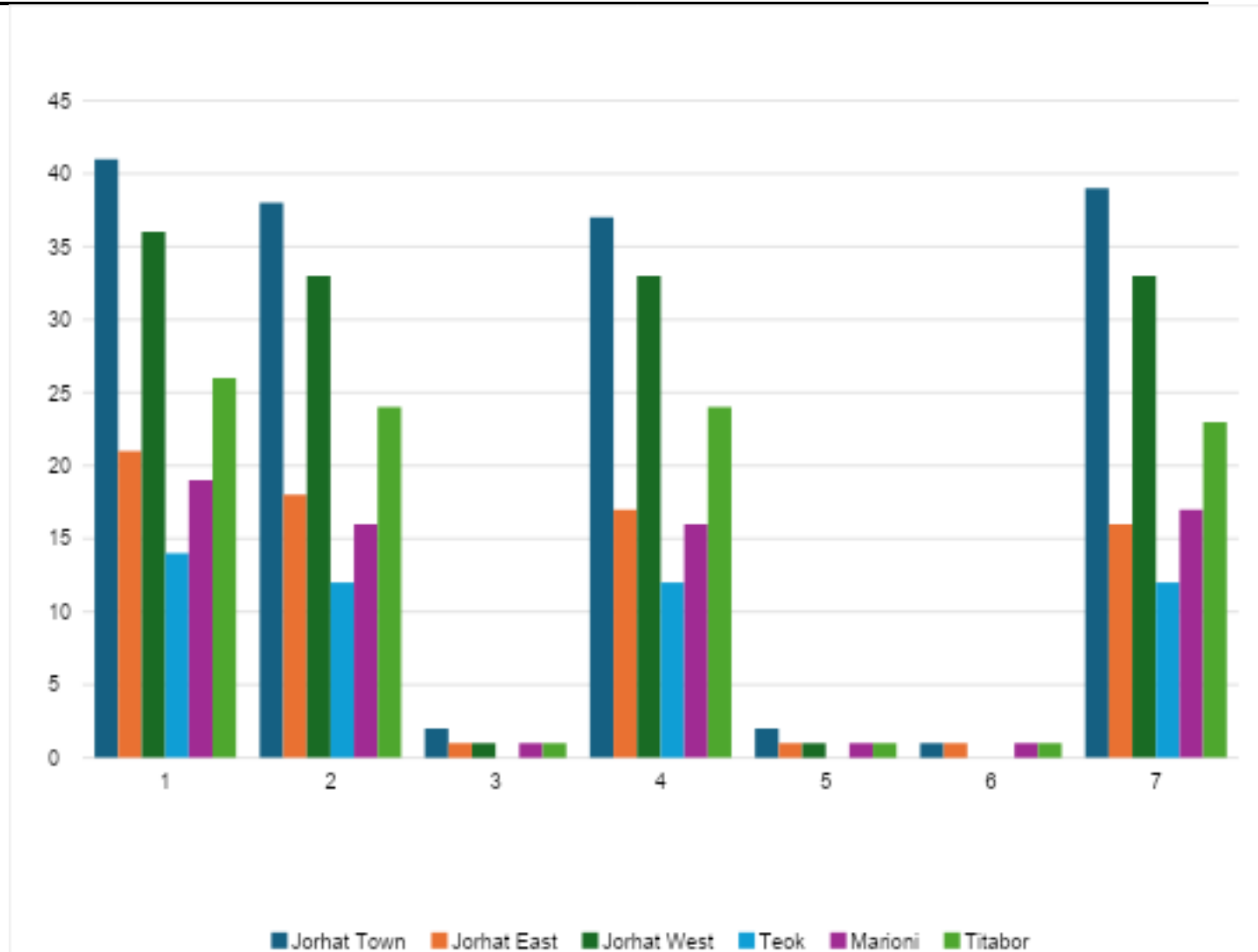


Fig.3: Revenue circle-wise view of the Muslim women about the Acts of 1935, the Act of 2024 and child marriage. Source: Field study

The graph clearly shows that Muslim women in all six revenue circles overwhelmingly support the repeal of the 1935 Act and the enactment of the Assam Compulsory Registration of Muslim Marriages and Divorces Act, 2024. They also strongly oppose child marriage. These findings suggest that the Muslim women in Jorhat favour the legal reforms promoting compulsory registration of Muslim marriages and divorces and measures aimed at preventing child marriage. This is a sign of growing awareness of women's legal rights and the importance of protecting girls from early marriage.

The district assessment in July 2024 showed that two districts, Jorhat and Nagaon, had achieved complete elimination of reported child marriages in the period of the survey. Regarding this achievement, a field study has been done to determine whether the complete elimination of child marriage has been achieved due to the legislative reform or the Police action taken by the Assam Police under the POSCO Act and PCMA, which is demonstrated below.

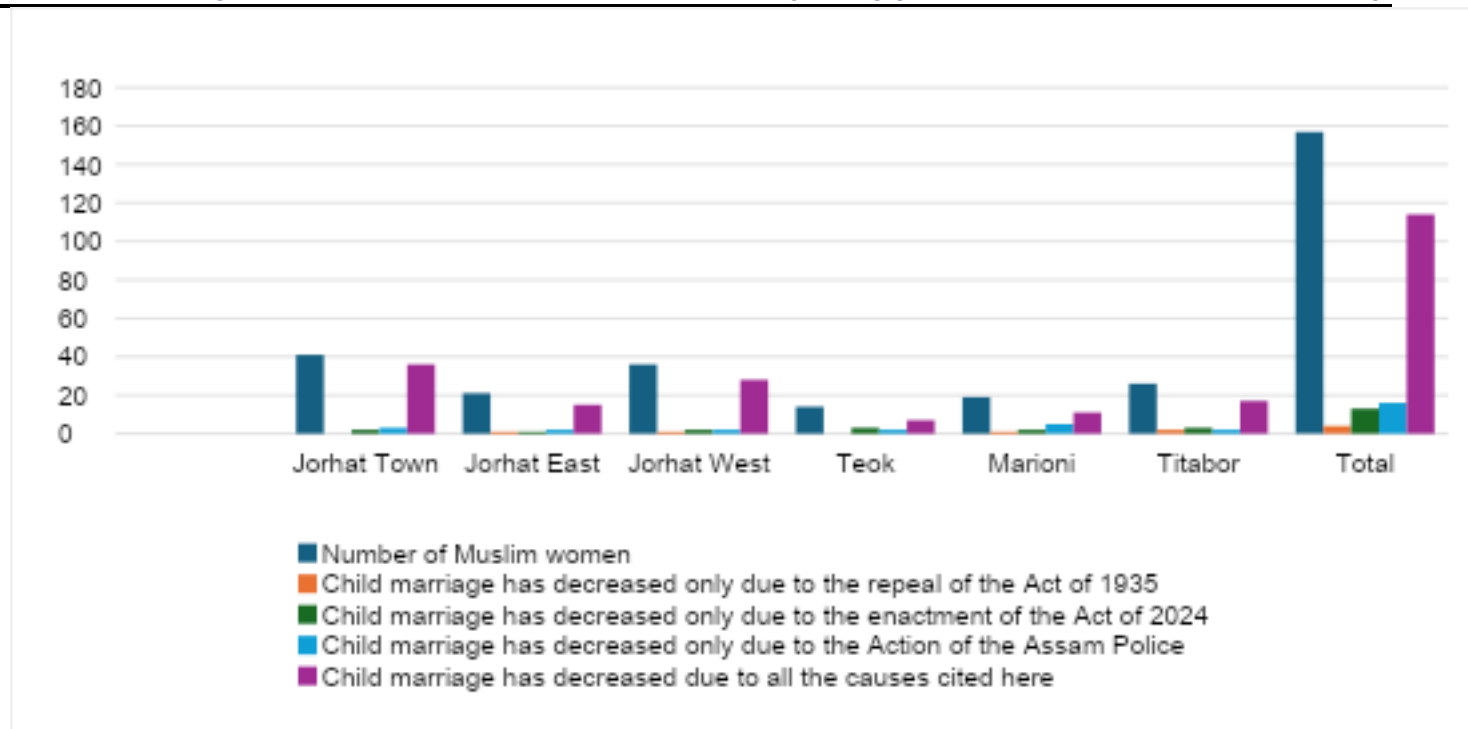


Fig.4: Revenue circle-wise comment on reason for decreasing trend in child marriage in Jorhat district. Source: Field study

The survey findings demonstrate that in Jorhat district, very few respondents believed that any of the above-mentioned factors alone was sufficient for the prevention of child marriages. A substantial majority of Muslim women (approximately 72%) perceive that the reduction in child marriage is the result of a combined effect of legislative reform taken by the Assam Government and strict administrative enforcement, i.e. the repeal of the Act of 1935, the enforcement of the Act of 2024, and the preventive actions undertaken by the Assam Police. This indicates that legal change is considered most effective when it is supported by strong implementation and public enforcement.

It is also reported by Tripura Times that more than 3,000 proposed child marriages were prevented during 2023-24 in Assam. Thus, a view towards the complete elimination of child marriage was necessary. The question of whether child marriage can be removed permanently needs an answer.

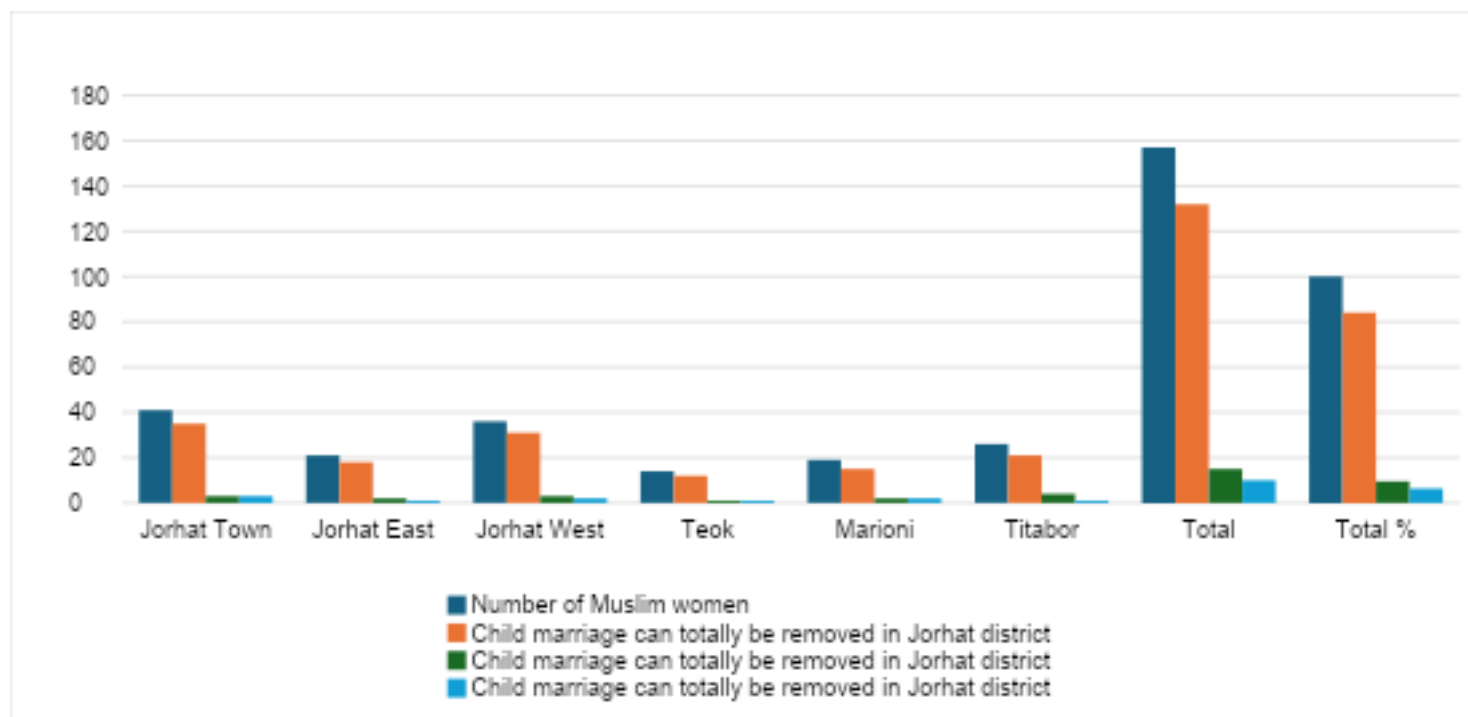


Fig. 5: Expectations of Muslim women in Jorhat on total eradication of child marriages. Source: Field study

The above survey reveals that 84.6% of Muslim women in Jorhat district believe that child marriage can be completely eradicated, while only 9.0% believed otherwise, and 6.4% of Muslim women remained uncertain. This demonstrates that Muslim women in Jorhat district deserve widespread confidence in the effectiveness of legal reforms, stricter enforcement by the authorities, and increased social awareness. The high level of

optimism has been felt in all the revenue Circles in Jorhat district, which suggests that the Muslim women in Jorhat district perceive child marriage as a preventable social evil that can be eliminated through sustained legal, administrative, and community-based interventions.

5. Constraints in the complete eradication of child marriage:

However, the legal reform achieved as a result of the repeal of the Act of 1935 and the enactment of the Act of 2024 has been seen to suffer some disadvantages due to the following possible facts.

- i) Even after such legal reform and strong enforcement of the law, if the registration of marriages takes place after solemnization of the marriage ceremony, then the legal framework will not be capable of preventing child marriage from occurring.
- ii) In remote areas, even today, marriages are solemnized traditionally outside the purview of the registration system, leading to an increase in unregistered marriages.
- iii) In Assam, every childbirth is not registered, and so sometimes it becomes difficult to determine the actual age of the parties to the marriage. Further, the parties to the marriage may produce a false birth certificate or manipulated school records as proof of their legal age for marriage.
- iv) The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, poverty, and lack of education may also contribute to an increase in child marriages despite such legal reforms.
- v) Lack of legal awareness and the prevalence of a conservative mindset are also causing hindrance towards the complete elimination of child marriage in Assam.

6. Recommendations:

To prevent child marriage;

- i) Every individual, families, communities, local groups, and the general public should be ready to educate families and communities who encourage child marriages, describing the evil consequences of Child Marriage by organizing awareness campaigns, community meetings, programs in schools and social media publications.
- ii) Religious leaders, village heads, teachers, and social workers are to be motivated to speak out publicly against Child Marriage and to support Laws and Policies against Child Marriage.
- iii) Society should be encouraged to treat boys and girls equally within homes and communities, and discourage traditions that devalue girls, but to promote their education at least up to secondary.
- iv) Speeches, posters or slogan ideas, skills training programs, and sports on the prevention of child marriage should be published among school students.
- v) General people and active individuals should keep themselves alert to notice and inform the concerned government officer if there is any marriage going to be solemnized for a girl or a boy under the legal age of marriage. If such a marriage is actually going to occur, then they should inform the local authorities, Child protection officers, Child help lines, NGOs working on child protection, etc.
- vi) Individuals and the general public should offer emotional support and guidance to children who fear being forced into marriage.

7. Conclusion:

The repeal of the Act of 1935 is a transformative and structural reform. It is a significant transformation from community-based personal law administration to state-controlled legal regulation. This reform is a complete abandonment of a colonial personal law statute, which tries to eliminate the Qazi-based registration system in favour of a state-controlled register system.

Child marriage ruins the dreams of the child before they are ever spoken. Hence, it is time to act against child marriage to create a world free from child marriage. From the legal perspective, the repeal of the Act of 1935 and the enactment of the Act of 2024 are primarily a preventive and deterrent mechanism for child marriage. It cannot be a direct prohibition for child marriage unless the process of registration of marriages is integrated with robust birth registration, digital verification of documents, improved community maintenance systems and timely intervention by concerned child protection officers.

The Religious Demography of Assam 2001-11 showed a 29.59% growth rate in the Muslim community during that decade. This may be more in the years afterwards. In such an alarming situation, we need to create a public awareness programme, especially for Muslim women in Assam, and work to ensure the effective implementation of the alternative to the repealed Act of 1935 by providing useful and necessary support to stakeholders as well as Government officers. It is a duty on the individuals, families, religious leaders, communities, local groups, social workers and the general public to publish, demonstrate and inform about the evil consequences of child marriages by organizing awareness programs, community meetings, social media publications, and encourage the common people to treat boy and girls in equal standard within their home, communities and work for improvement of girls education at least up to secondary level to reduce the occurrence of child marriages.

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