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AGE OF MAN

A daddy at 19 could augur the dawn of a brave new world. The latest law commission report on the age of marriage heralds that possibility with its suggestion that men can marry at 18, there being no scientific reason against it. The age of marriage for men in India is at present 21, and that of women 18. This could have been a way of keeping the population under control, although cultural assumptions have been inscribed into the difference in the respective ages of marriage. The problem with scientific reasons, of course, is that marriage cannot be extricated from social and cultural assumptions. Neither can it be stripped of a society's unwritten ideas about adulthood—manhood in this case—for marriage requires the acceptance of certain specific responsibilities. Those are not quite the same as being able to vote responsibly. Then there are practical issues too. The period of education has lengthened as employment requirements have become more demanding. Eighteen, in this context, is a worryingly youthful age for both men and women.

Any law that prescribes the age of marriage is somewhat arbitrary. In the United States of America, the legal age of consent for marriage is 18 for both parties in most states, although in Mississippi it is 21 and in Nebraska 19. But the US has a provision for 'parental consent', in which the age may drop to as low as 14. This is supposed to be one of the ways to deal with teenage pregnancy, but it remains the source of great confusion. France, too, leaves a loophole for the magistrate's permission in case of "well-founded or legitimate reasons" for men and women who wish to marry before they are 22 and 18 respectively. China sticks firmly to 22 for men and 20 for women. None cites "scientific" reasons; here science would tend to throw society into total confusion. In India, layered and overlapping laws complicate the situation. Child marriage is illegal, but it is legal to have sex with a 'wife' below 15, although criminal law prohibits sex with a girl of that age. The last may be increased to 16, that is, to the age of consent for sex. The commission's suggestion of declaring marriages below 16 void is welcome but puzzling. What happens between 16 and 18? Sorting out contradictions of this kind would be truly useful, especially in a country where there are groups, for example among tribal populations, whose customs remain innocent of legal requirements. Daddies of 19 are quite common among them.