

High Child Marriages in West Bengal

Why in News?

A recent study published in the Lancet noted overall decrease in child marriage in India except 4 States.

What are the key findings of the Lancet report?

- **India** - **1 in 5 girls** are still married below legal marriage age.
- **Skewed achievements** - Some States have achieved dramatic decreases while other states like West Bengal have struggled.
- **Bihar (16.7%), West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, and Maharashtra** accounted for more than half of the total headcount burden of child marriages in girls.
- **West Bengal** - It has the largest absolute increase in headcount representing an increase of 32.3% in headcount with over 5,00,000 more girls getting married as children.

What is situation of child marriage in West Bengal?

- **Statistics** - The National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5) carried out in 2019-20, points out that the women aged 20-24 years who were married before the age of 18 years **remains one of the highest in the country at 41.6% same as NFHS- 4**.
- The all-India figure of women aged 20-24 years getting married before they turn 18 is pegged at 23.3%.
- **Policy interventions** - 2 schemes were introduced to curb child marriages situations in the state.
 - **Rupashree Prakalpa** - A cash incentive scheme for marriage of girls who are above legal marriage age in India.
 - **Kanyashree Prakalpa** - A conditional cash transfer scheme aimed at incentivising the schooling of all teenage girls between the ages of 13 and 18, and simultaneously discouraging child marriage.

Kanyashree Prakalpa

- **Established in** - 2013
- **International recognition** - Received the United Nations Public Service Award 2017
- **Coverage** - 81 lakh girls as per the State budget for 2023-24
- **Impact** - The school enrolment of girls has increased in the State.
- In 2023, the Class XII board exam, saw a 14.84% increase in female candidates.
- The number of girls appearing in the examination was 1.27 lakh higher than boys and totalled 57.43% of the total candidates.

- **Challenges** - Cash incentives and existing laws have failed to check child marriages in West Bengal.
- **Poverty** forces the family to continue with the custom of child marriage.
 - Murshidabad, economically poorer district of the State, has one of the highest numbers of child marriages.
- A significant population of the State go out to work (**migration**) in other States and they don't want to leave unmarried daughters at home.
- Despite high literacy, the incidence of child marriage is also disproportionately high in some districts.
 - For example, the Purba Medinipur district with over 88% literacy rate has the highest incidence of child marriage of more than 57.6% as per NFHS- 5.
- Certain families avail cash benefits of both the schemes to organise marriage of girls, sometimes *soon after cashing in on the school scheme*.
- Lower number of cases registered under [Prohibition of Child Marriages Act, 2006](#) due to the lack of awareness.
 - In 2021, *West Bengal registered only 105 cases* whereas States like Assam with smaller population and lesser instances of child marriage registered more cases in the past 5 years.

The Prohibition of Child Marriage (Amendment) Bill, 2021 introduced in Parliament in 2021 for raising the age of marriage of women to 21 years to bring it on par with the men has been referred to a Parliamentary Standing Committee.

What lies ahead?

- **Promote decentralised planning** - In 2022, the West Bengal government called for a district action plan to curb child marriage and issued necessary guidelines.
- **Enhance political will** - This will effectively enforce the existing laws to control the child marriages.
- **Develop social campaigns** - Involve all stakeholders including panchayats, schools and local communities to improve the situation as rapidly as in other States.

References

1. [The Hindu| Higher Child Marriages in West Bengal](#)
2. [The Indian Express| Child Marriages situation in India](#)