

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](#)