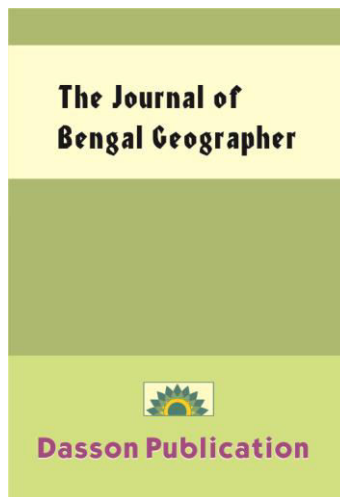


The Journal of Bengal Geographer



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Prevent child marriage: an essay with special reference to Kanyashree Prakalpa of West Bengal

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Abstract

Child marriage is one of serious social crisis in the world today. A marriage is regarded as a child marriage in technical sense when the matrimonial tie occurs between a minor boy and a minor girl or one of them does not reach at the legal age of marriage. Practically it is a form of early and forced alliance that is unfortunately considered to be a traditional norm and practice. Child marriage is a serious human right violation because it has a debilitating impact on the lives specially of girls. It occurs particularly in developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. South Asia accounts for almost half of all child marriages that occur globally. India is one of the countries in this region where girl child marriage is an unbending social problem. In spite of taking some legal and regulatory measures the prevalence of girl child marriage a concern for India till today. In some states in India more than 50% girls come in laws' house in their childhood. West Bengal is one of those states. The present Government of West Bengal in order to prevent the prevalence of girl child marriage and to the holistic development of girls introduced KanyashreePrakalpa in the year 2013. It is a State Government sponsored conditional direct cash transfer scheme for underprivileged girls. The scheme is designed in such a way that reducing the tendency of drop out from school; it motives girls of poor families to pursue higher study and at the same time protect them from the harmful social custom of marriage at young age.

Key words: 1. Prevent Child Marriage, 2.Special Reference, 3.Social crisis , 4.Childhood.

Introduction:

Marriage throughout the world is regarded as a moment of celebration and a milestone in adult human life. Generally marriage is the union of a man and a woman who makes a permanent and exclusive commitment to each other of the type that is naturally fulfilled by bearing and rearing children together, and renewed by acts that constitute the behavioral part of the process of reproduction. The institution of marriage binds a man and a woman in a social hypothecated relation and gives them scope to fulfill their physical and psychological desires which are socially acceptable. It validates the sexual relation between a man and a woman. Human race from the very beginning of the civilization realizes the importance of marriage custom and regards it as one of the key components of society. Practically marriage is a socialcontract between a man and a woman, through which they willingly takes responsibility of each other for mutual benefaction. That is why the marriage is considered to be a significant part of human life and a moment of joy. Sadly the practice of early marriage gives no such cause for celebration. Child marriage is a serious human rights crisis and one of the most pressing development concerns in the world today. Child marriage, a form of early and forced alliance, is nothing but a steep harmful traditional norm and practice, which has a debilitating impact on the lives specially of girls. It is a harmful practice that significantly undermines

the best interests of the girl child. The occurrence of child marriage is greater in poorer families and those with lower levels of education.

Child marriage prevalence in india:

It occurs specially in developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. South Asia accounts for almost half of all child marriages that occur globally.² India is one of the countries in this region where girl child marriage is an unbending social problem. As per the National Family Health Survey, 2005-06 a slight improvement occurs during last two decades in the prevalence on child marriage in India but the fact is that the improvement occurs mainly in urban areas; the situation in rural India remains as it was. The incidence of child marriage in rural areas is alarming as it stands at 52% when compared to urban average of 28%. These numbers are shown to be particularly high in states such as West Bengal, Bihar, UP, MP, Rajasthan, Chattisgarh and Jharkhand.

Child marriage prevention acts and regulatory steps in india:

The adverse effect of child marriage was recognised in India long time back at the British colonial period. The then administration of India in order to restrain child marriage introduced Sarda Act in 1929 aiming to prevent marriages of girls below the age of 15 years and of boys below the age of 18. It is the first law in India for restraining child marriage. In 1978, the law was amended in order to make it more effective and the minimum age of marriage were raised by three years i.e. from 15 to 18 years in case of girls and from 18 to 21 years in case of boys. The amended law came to be known as the Child Marriage Restraint Act. In 2006, the old law was repealed and new one brought, called the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 with stringent measures against those indulging in such practices and a provision of a cadre of officers called the Child Marriage Prohibition Officers, to stop child marriages from taking place. Moreover, in order to protect the occurrence of child marriage certain provisions have been introduced in The Indian Penal Code (IPC) to book a case of child marriage or forced marriage. Compulsory marriage registration is another tool of the preventing child marriage. The Supreme Court of India reiterating its earlier judgment of February 14, 2006, present the verdict that marriages of all citizens of India, irrespective of their religion, have to be compulsorily registered in the States where the marriage is solemnised. This is a major step forward to prevent child marriage, as it makes it mandatory to give age at the time of marriage. However, even today, after six decades of independence and despite various initiatives both on the legal as well as policy and programme levels, the condition of girl children remains a cause of concern in the country. The statistics emanating from various censuses, surveys and administrative records underlines this.

Child marriage a concern for west bengal:

It is clearly visible that the state of West Bengal is one of those states in India which had done miserable performance in prevention of child marriage. It is a great shame for Bengal. It was Bengal (undivided Bengal) that one led India to its modernity by making various socio-cultural reforms. From the beginning of 18th century to middle of 20th century under the leadership of distinguish personalities and social reformists, like Raja Rammohan Roy, Sri Iswar Chandra Bandhpadhaya (Vidyasagar), Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda, his Iris disciple Sister Nivedita and many others, Bengal was the place in India for women right movements. As the consequences of those movements the cruel Hindu ritual of Satidaha was abolished, widow marriage was legalized and women in India got their right to education. The golden era of Bengal has been passed. Unfortunately the present Bengal (West Bengal) is lagging behind among states in India regarding the significant

social issue of preventing child marriage. Inaction and lack of effective measures during last three decades pushed West Bengal out of the track.

The early betrothal and marriage of children continues to be a norm in the West Bengal. According to the District Level Health Survey – 3, 2007- 08, the state ranks fifth highest in the country when it comes to the prevalence of child marriage. It is vital to note that: While all-India trends show that families are slowly delaying the betrothal and marriage of their girls, in West Bengal, almost every second girl is a child bride - over 54.7 % of the state's currently married before they reached the age of 18 (as compared to all-India figures of 43 %).

Survey reveals that Murshidabad, Malda, Birbhum, Purulia, Bankura, DakshinDinajpur, South 24 Parganas, Nadia and Cooch Behar are more vulnerable districts where the highest incidence of child marriage in the state. The most important factor which to be noticed in this context that even in non-slum areas in the heart of the city of Kolkata, where families are wealthier and girls are likely to be better educated, more than a quarter of girls are married before they reach adulthood. It signifies that till today in West Bengal child betrothal and marriage is considered to be a gendered practice. An overwhelmingly large percentage of girls are married at before reaching adulthood and only a miniscule percentage of boys are subjected to the same fate. That is nothing but a backwardness of mind set of the people. It reflects the absence of effective social awareness programme in this state.

Negative impact of child marriage:

1. School dropout:

Child marriage leads to girls dropping out of school, which limits their scope of future development. In West Bengal, girls' attendance in school in the age group of 6-10 years a healthy 85% which drops significantly to 33% in the age group of 15-17 years.⁶ After the implementation SarvaShikshaAbhiyan (SSA) towards universalization of elementary education, significant progress has been noticed among girls, both in terms of enrolment and completion rate at the elementary level. However, the transition from elementary to secondary school levels remains a concern. At the time of secondary level girls generally belong to the age group of 12-17 years and at that crucial period of life it is found that a significant percentage of girls drop out from school. The discontinuation of school education primarily lies in two factors. One is the poor economic condition and another is the age old backward mindset of people. Girls at this stage are often taken out of school to get married, in other cases, when girls do not do well in studies or are not academically inclined; marriage is seen as the only viable alternative for them. According to a study entitled 'Final Study Report on Restructuring of School Education System in West Bengal' by IIM Calcutta, the percentage of girls enrolment gradually falls at the secondary and higher secondary level. It is at this juncture, when children are between the age of 17 and 18 that most of the girls are compelled to leave school and parents start negotiating for their marriage.

2. Child and maternal ill-health and mortality:

Child marriage is one of the deterrent factors which hamper the progress of maternal and child health and improvements in the nutritional status of children in West Bengal. Child marriages result in early pregnancies, which in turn lead to high maternal and infant deaths, and are also a leading cause for malnutrition among children. Owing to the marriage at early stage girls becoming mothers at that period when they are not out of childhood themselves. It is a matter of concern that among teenage girls aged 15 – 19 in West Bengal, one-fourth have already begun child-bearing, a

percentage that is much higher than the national average (16%) and also higher than all other Indian states except Jharkhand.

3. Trafficking:

Child marriage is one of the lures that the human exploitation rackets often use to entice poor parents. There is no concrete data of how many numbers of young girls who have gone missing because of child marriages. Simply because such marriages are arranged by fraudulent means and there is no data of it.⁸ It is significant to note that the districts which rank the highest amongst all districts in the state for child marriages, namely, Murshidabad and Malda, are also considered the most vulnerable to trafficking. In many cases girls who drop out of school are sent away by parents to earn their dowries by working as child labour, which also makes them vulnerable to traffickers.

4. Psychosocial disadvantage:

The loss of adolescence, the forced sexual relations, and the denial of freedom and personal development attendant on early marriage have profound psychosocial and emotional consequences. The impact can be subtle and insidious and the damage hard to assess. Marriage in childhood force girls to confinement themselves to the home and to household roles which simply deny their mobility and intellectual upbringing. It also shuts down their opportunity to be self-dependent. Obviously there is a marked lack of data in these areas, and social researchers have failed to examine the impacts of early marriage in this context. Most girls who are unhappy in an imposed marriage are very isolated. No one come forward to support them. Indian researchers on child marriage point out that inadequate socialization, discontinuation of education, physiological damage and repeated pregnancies devastate these girls at very early age.⁹

Kanyashree prakalpa:

Human rights research shows that the greatest obstacles to girls' education are child marriage and subsequently pregnancy and other domestic chores. Naturally to ensure that girls stay in school would be an effective protective measure against child marriage. And in order to do in an effective way what the state needs a government sponsored social welfare scheme for girls that directly helps and motivates students to continue study. The present Government of West Bengal, just after coming into the power in the year 2012 under the leadership of Smt. Mamata Banerjee, has taken special initiative for compulsory female education and in order to support it under the supervision of the Department of women Development and Social Welfare, West Bengal (DWSW) introduced in the year 2013 the KanyashreePrakalpa – a conditional cash transfer scheme with the aim of improving the status and well-being of the girl child in West Bengal by incentivizing schooling of all teenage girls and delaying their marriages until the age of 18, the legal age of marriage. KanyashreePrakalpa is a West Bengal Government sponsored scheme which presently is implemented in all districts of the state.

Scheme benefits and eligibility criteria:**Annual scholarships (K-1):**

The scheme assures an annual scholarship of RS. 500/- To girls based on the following eligibility criteria:

Age	Between 13 and 18 years of age	Copy of Birth Certificate issued by Municipal or Panchayet authorities and attested by the Appropriate Certifying Authorities OR Certificate of age issued by the Head of Institution of Education or Training where the girl is enrolled
1. Marital Status	Unmarried	Declaration by applicant's parent / guardian and attested by the Appropriate Certifying Authorities
2. Education	Enrolled in classes VIII-XII in Govt. recognized regular or equivalent open school or equivalent vocational/technical training courses	Certificate of enrolment and attendance by Head of Institution of Education or training.
3. Family Income	Less than or equal to R.s. 1,20,000/ per annum.	For Self-employed parent/guardian : A declaration by the parents / guardian stating definite income from all sources, attested by the Appropriate Certifying Authorities. For self Employed parents /guardians: copy of Income certificate furnished by employer, attested by the Appropriate Certifying Authorities
4. Family Income waiver	a) girl is physically handicapped	For waiver in case the girl is physically handicapped: Copy of Certificate of Disability furnished by appropriate authority and attested by the Appropriate Certifying Authorities

	b) both parents are deceased	For waiver in case both parents of the girl are deceased: Declaration by guardian and attested by the Appropriate Certifying Authorities
	c) The applicant's daughter/Ward is already a recipient of the scholarship and is applying for a renewal of the benefit.	For waiver in case of renewal: Declaration by parent / guardian and attested by the Appropriate Certifying Authorities

One-Time grant (K-2):

The scheme assures a **One-Time grant of R.S. 25,000/-** to girls based on the following eligibility criteria:

1. Age	the girl has reached the age of 18	Copy of Birth Certificate issued by Municipal or Panchayata authorities and attested by the Appropriate Certifying Authorities OR Certificate of age issued by the Head of Institution of Education or Training or Institution of Higher Education where the girl is enrolled
2. Marital Status	The girl was unmarried on attaining the age of 18	Declaration by applicant and attested by the Appropriate Certifying Authorities
3. Occupation	Enrolled in and regularly attending an Institution of Education or Training or a Institution of Higher Education	Certificate of enrolment and attendance by Head of Institution
4. Family Income	Is less than or equal to Rs. 1,20,000/- per annum	For Self-employed parents / guardians: A declaration by the parents / guardian stating definite income from all sources, attested by the Appropriate Certifying Authorities. For Employed parents/guardians: Copy of Income certificate furnished by employer, attested by the Appropriate Certifying Authorities

5. Family income waiver conditions	a) girl is physically handicapped	Copy of Certificate of Disability furnished by appropriate authority and attested by the Appropriate Certifying Authorities
	b) both parents are deceased:	For waiver in case both parents of the girl are deceased: Declaration by guardian and attested by the Appropriate Certifying Authorities
	c) The applicant is an inmate	Statement by superintendent of the home

Effectiveness of kanyashree prakalpa:

Fulfill the lacuna of sarvashikshaabhiyan and ascertain universalization of education:

The Government of India introduced Mid-Day Meal scheme across India in order to success Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. The scheme though had been implemented with a noble motive but unable to reach its desire goal just because of involving an inner weakness. India is a one of the poorest country in the world. As per the economic data less than 6 percent of Indians, which comprise just 7 cores people, belong to middle class and only 1.5 cores people belong to upper middle class. Together, they account for just 8.5 cores people out of total 110 cores population. The rest belong to lower income group. That is almost 100 cores. For the financial year 2009-2010, the official poverty line in rural India is Rs. 672.8 per capita per month and the urban poverty line is Rs. 859.6 per capita per month. As per the economic survey on that financial year almost 354.7 million people lived below India's poverty lines. It signifies that a major section of Indian population struggling for survival.¹² The economic condition of the state of West Bengal is evenworse. Where parents are struggling to fulfill their daily needs of living owing to extreme poverty it is nothing but a dream to assume that just one time meal for a day attracts children of poor families to the school or the family encourages children to attend the school and continue the study. The real fact is that neither the girl student nor her guardians willing to continue the study. It does not mean for them. They are much willing to involve some kind of activities which earns money. Money is the prime importance for them, and obviously it would be. It results that the girl child discontinues her study and drops out from school and as it generally happens in poor countries like India that the school dropout, inexperienced, needy girls fall victim of the harmful custom of marrying at their childhood. The present Government of West Bengal recognizes the social problem and through its KanyashreePrakalpa fulfills the lacuna of the Sarvasikshaprogramme. KanyashreePrakalpa is a conditional direct cash transfer schme for young girls of lower income families. It has two wings K--1 and K--2. K-1 is applicable to Girl aged between 13 – 18 years and studying in a Government or Government undertaking school. K-2 is applicable to girls who are enrolled in a government or Government undertaking college aged between 18-19 years. As per the scheme K--1 Rs 500/- has been credited to the beneficiary account in each year up to the age of 18. The amount in some extent will meet the recurring expenses of education but more importantly it motivates girls of poor families to come to school. It reduces the tendency of drop out from school. Moreover, as per the scheme K-2 a beneficiary will receive Rs 25000/- as a onetime grant. Which is Rs 8333/- per year. It motivates girls of poor families to higher education after completion of school education. A college girl with this amount can easily bear it

recurring expenses in gradation level. So a girl who at the age of 13 comes under the purview of KanyashreePrakalpa can easily continue her study up to Graduation without facing any financial obstacles. It relieves parents of economical weaker section to bear the expenses of girls' education and also motivates them to encourage girls to attend the school and after completion of school education to pursue higher study.

Creating a large number of beneficiaries:

Another important fact is that the annual family income is decided Rs 1.20, 000/- per annum which is well above the national status of lower income group. In West Bengal the annual income more than 90% families are lower than the income which is stipulated in the scheme. It results that a large number of girls would come under the purview of KanyashreePrakalpa and able to continue their study with the help of public money. The effectiveness of the Prakalpa immediately appears just after the implementation of Kanyashree Prakalpa-2013 across the state. The number of girls almost 26 lakh have been registered in the Prakalpa (including both K1 and K2) and presently studying through public money. It obviously reduces the tendency of girls in weaker section to discontinue the study and drop out from school.

Preventing girl child marriage:

KanyashreePrakalpa not only minimizes the tendency of girl students to dropout from schools in early age at the same time it will make a positive impact of the prevention of girl child marriage. A precondition of the Prakalpa is not being married. A girl who gets the benefit of the Prakalpa (K-1) will enjoy the benefit till she is reached at the age of 17. Survey reveals that during a significant percentage of girl child marriage occurs during the age of 15 to 17. In most of the cases the marriage is organised by family. Parents of the girl through this marriage off load a liability. But after implementation of KanyashreePrakalpa families think twice to marry their girl at early age. After that marriage the girl will not be a beneficiary. The amount of Rs 500/-per month means a lot to a poor family. Moreover, after completion of the school when the girl enrolls herself with a college she will get another opportunity to get the benefit of the scheme (K-2). The benefitted amount this time is higher than the previous one and its preconditions are

(a) being unmarried and (b) the minimum age should be 18 and not more than 19. For obvious reasons the girl herself and her family would like to get the benefit and its result is that the family would not arrange the marriage of the girl before her age of 18. It obviously reduces the prevalence of child marriage in the state.

Conclusion

Early marriage is closely associated with poverty. Some interventions on behalf of adolescent girls have focused on improving their economic situation as a means of granting them higher status and more control over their lives including their options in marriage. This scheme is expected to bring about measurable improved outcomes for the education, health (especially infant and maternal mortality) and empowerment of the state's girls, their children and immeasurable benefits for larger society. The children of today are the future of tomorrow. The statement means a lot where the child is a girl. A girl on provision of a conducive and an enabling environment may blossom into an ever fragrant flower and to shine in all spheres of life. So KanyashreePrakalpa is not just a social welfare scheme it is a future.

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