

Assessing the Impact of Kanyashree Prakalpa on the Social Development of West Bengal

Joy Karmakar¹

Abstract

Introduced by the West Bengal government in 2012, Kanyashree Prakalpa (KP) is unique. A conditional cash transfer program for adolescent girls ages 13 to 19. This program has two purposes. Promote secondary education for women and end marriage for girls before the age of 18. This paper attempted to see the impacts of the scheme on the social development of the state. From the analysis, it is revealed that after the introduction of the program child marriage significantly decreased in a few districts but it is still practiced in most of the districts. In addition, the scheme failed to reach the remote corners of the districts and to the marginal groups.

Keywords: Child Marriage, Kanyashree, Social Development, Conditional Cash Transfer.

One of the significant impacts noticed during and after the COVID-19 pandemic was the growing number of child marriages and child trafficking in West Bengal. It was reported in the popular daily newspaper that school closures due to COVID-19 have forced so many boys and girls out of school. COVID-19 has led to an increase in child marriage and trafficking in districts like South 24 Parganas, Dakshin Dinajpur, Malda, and Murshidabad (Singh, 2020). More than 500 cases of child marriage have been reported in the state since mid-March of 2020, when the nationwide COVID-19 lockdown was enforced. State govt. officials claimed that in most cases, underage girls were married off to families who had lost their income due to the complete shutdown. Although travel and movement were restricted, child marriages have not decreased amidst the lockdown as well in the post-lockdown period. Some girls marry young because families find it difficult to bear their expenses, while others

¹ Lecturer, Serampore College, Hooghly, India
Joykarmakar49@gmail.com

flee from home to tie the knot with partners of their choice. The situation has become even more critical for communities living in the ecologically fragile Sundarbans delta region, where agriculture has become impractical as water salinity increased due to sea level rise. As a result, people try to marry off their young daughters, believing that it will help them settle down and also relieve them of the "burden" (PTI, 2020). In fact, the Calcutta High Court showed concern over growing numbers of child marriages and noted the sensitive role of the *pradhans* and members of *panchayats* in protecting children and preventing child marriages (Singh, 2020).

Introduced by the West Bengal government in 2012, *Kanyashree Prakalpa* (KP) is unique. A conditional cash transfer program for adolescent girls ages 13 to 19 that offers two tiers of scholarships. This program has two purposes. Promote secondary education for women and end marriage for girls before the age of 18. The scheme has two power components. The first is a cash benefit paid annually to girls in the target age group for each year of continued education, provided that they are unmarried at the time. The second benefit is her one-time grant paid to unmarried girls between the ages of 18 and 19 who are enrolled in an educational institution. *Kanyashree Plus* makes the program even more effective through the graduation strategy. Graduation is defined as the process of reducing vulnerability so that people can transition from providing social protection to productive and resilient lives. Therefore, it is apparent that there is an effort on behalf of the State government to change the social situation in the state. In 2019-20 the program sanctioned more than 3 million scholarship (Including K-1 and K-2²) grants for unmarried girls across the state.

Within this background, this paper tried to understand whether the *Kanyashree Prakalpa*- a conditional cash transfer program, made any difference to improve the situation or not. In addition, it will try to understand the regional differences that emerged after the introduction of *Kanyashree Prakalpa* in the province. After the introductory section, the second section explains the methodology of the paper, which includes the study area, data, and methods. The third section conceptualizes the *Kanyashree Prakalpa* as part of social development and analyzes how 'intervention' played a crucial role in reducing social ills like child marriages. The fourth section examines the situation of child marriage in the state before and after the introduction of *Kanyashree Prakalpa*. The fifth section discusses the challenges of the scheme and thereafter, a conclusion is made based on the above analysis.

Data and Methods

The paper is based on the state of West Bengal. Currently, it has 23 districts and the child population is unevenly distributed among the districts. The rural population in

² K-1 is Annual scholarship of INR 1000 to unmarried girls aged 13-18 years enrolled in Grades VIII-XII or equivalent from August 2018. K-2 One-time grant of INR 25,000 to unmarried girls aged 18 years pursuing education, vocational / technical training / sports

the state is more than 68 percent. There are more than 18.2 million people who belong to the age group of 10 to 18 years of age. Data has been collected from different sources, including the Census of India, the National Family Health Survey (NFHS), the Annual report of *Kanyasree Prakalpa*³ and the Unified District Information System for Education Plus. To understand the effectiveness of the *Kanyasree Prakalpa*, at first the situation before the introduction of the scheme has been analyzed through indicators like the prevalence of child marriage. Since one of the objectives of this scheme was to curb child marriage, gender-based distribution of child marriage, rural and urban distribution of child marriage, child marriage across religions as well as district-wise distribution of child marriage are examined. From 10 to 19 years age group of people is considered as child and marriages within that age group are considered as child marriage. In India official age of marriage for women begins from 18 and in the case of men it is 21 years but sometimes it varies with religion. Thereafter, the availability of funds for *Kanyasree Prakalpa* and its distribution across the district has been analyzed. To understand the situation after the introduction of *Kanyasree Prakalpa* several other indicators have been taken into consideration. The following indicators are used to assess the situation across the district.

1. Female population age 6 years and above who ever attended school (%)
2. Women age 20-24 years married before age 18 years (%)
3. Women aged 15-19 years who were already mothers or pregnant in 2019-20

Some of the above-noted indicators are supposed to be affected directly by conditional cash transfer while other indicators indirectly affect the situation. These indicators are created by NFHS and data collected in 2015-16 and 2019-20. Therefore, a comparison between these two years will help us to distinguish the impact of the project.

Conceptualizing Social Development

At the center of the development debate is the idea of social change and how it impacts societies. Sen (1999) describes the development in terms of human capabilities and sees it as a bundle of freedoms. He identified five types of freedoms: 1. Political freedom, 2. Social opportunities 3. Economic Facilities 4. Transparency guarantee 5. Protective security. Development is achieved through the eradication of poverty, social deprivation, tyranny, and lack of economic opportunities. Also, it is important that public policy promotes human capabilities and material freedom in general and works through the promotion of interconnected instrumental freedoms.

³ In this scheme two conditional cash transfers are provided - an Annual Scholarship of Rs. 1,000/- to girls between the ages of 13 and 18, and a One-Time Grant of Rs. 25,000/- to girls who have reached age 18. The cash transfers are contingent upon the girls being in education and unmarried at the time.

“Social development” refers to many of the non-economic processes and outcomes of development including reduced vulnerability; inclusion; well-being; accountability; and a human-centered approach and freedom from violence (The World Bank, 2021). It fundamentally deals with human rights, formal and informal power relations, inequality, and opportunities to create more equality between individuals and groups within society. Development actors have attempted to integrate the lens of social development through approaches such as human rights-based approaches, political economic analysis, inclusive institutions and good governance. The literature advocates cross-sectoral approaches, such as working with governments and other sectors of society to address impacts outside the human development sector.

Midgley (2014) identified various aspects of social development: First, social development must focus on social transformation. Second, the process of social change in social development is gradual in nature. Third, the social development process is part of a multifaceted process consisting of social, political, economic, cultural, environmental, gender and other dimensions integrated and harmonized. Fourthly, the process of social development is interventionist which requires human agency in the form of projects, programmes policies and plans that achieve social development. Fifth, intervention in the social development process is acting as an investment that positively contributes to economic development.

Therefore, *Kanyasree Prakalpa* is a project equipped as an ‘intervention’ to achieve social development gradually. It is an investment that is supposed to positively contribute to economic as well as social development in the state. However, there are definite concerns about its ability to curb child marriage. There is a consensus among experts and activists that simply providing cash benefits is not enough when it comes to underage marriage, a multifaceted and complex phenomenon. It's not hard to see why. On the one hand, overlapping problems such as poverty, a deep-seated lack of security, and a lack of bodily autonomy make young girls vulnerable to early marriage (Telegraph, 2019).

Situation Before and After ‘Intervention’

It is well known that social development begins with an analysis of the pre-existing situation that social development seeks to change. Many scholars use the term underdevelopment to connote such a pre-existing situation. Proponents of social development do not believe that social development occurs naturally but that it requires intervention by the state or some other agency. Modernization theorists like Nurkse (1953) argued that economic growth can only occur if radical measures are introduced. Others have placed more emphasis on removing strictures of the traditional culture which hinder progress. Therefore, conditional cash transfer is a radical measure taken by the government of West Bengal to change the prevalence of child marriage. Following Table 1 is the overall child marriage situation in the state.

Table 1: Gender-wise distribution of Child Marriages in West Bengal

West Bengal	Age between 10-19 Years			
	Currently Married	Widowed	Separated	Divorced
Total in percentage	8.82	0.13	0.08	0.04
% of Female	14.95	0.20	0.11	0.06
% of Male	3.05	0.06	0.05	0.01
Population between 10-19 years of age	18214554			

Source: Census of India, 2011

An overview of Table 1 shows that out of the total population of 10-19-year-olds in West Bengal, 8.82% are currently married, 0.13% are widowed, 0.08% are separated, and 0.04% are divorced. Furthermore, the table also gives the percentage of females and males in each marital status category. Among females in the 10-19 age group in West Bengal, 14.95% are currently married, 0.20% are widowed, 0.11% are separated, and 0.06% are divorced. Among males, 3.05% are currently married, 0.06% are widowed, 0.05% are separated, and 0.01% are divorced. The above figure indicates that in West Bengal under-age girl marriage is one of the highest in India. Table 2 shows the spatial distribution of child marriage in the state.

Table 2: Rural and Urban Distribution of Child Marriages in West Bengal

West Bengal	Age between 10-19 Years			
	Currently Married	Widowed	Separated	Divorced
Rural Area	9.41	0.12	0.08	0.04
Urban Area	7.33	0.16	0.10	0.03

Source: Census of India, 2011

It is evident from Table 2 that child marriage is highly prevalent not only in rural areas but also in urban areas. However, the proportion of child marriages in rural areas (9.41%) is comparatively higher than in urban areas (7.33%). The share of divorces is slightly higher in rural areas compared to urban areas. The percentage of widowed individuals in this age group is very low, with only 0.12% and 0.16% in rural and urban areas respectively. Similarly, the percentages of separated and divorced individuals are also very low, indicating that marriage dissolution is rare among this age group.

Table 3: Religious Distribution of Child Marriages in West Bengal

West Bengal	Age between 10-19 Years			
	Currently Married	Widowed	Separated	Divorced
Hindu	8.53	0.14	0.08	0.03

Muslims	9.52	0.10	0.08	0.05
Christians	6.46	0.16	0.11	0.03
Others	7.51	0.15	0.08	0.05

Source: *Census of India, 2011*

The above data shows that a higher percentage of Muslims aged between 10-19 years are currently married (9.52%) compared to Hindus (8.53%), Christians (6.46%), and Others (7.51%). The percentage of widowed individuals is very low across all religious groups, ranging from 0.10% to 0.16%. It is clear from the data that child marriage is prevalent across all the religions in the state. However, it is the highest among the Muslim population, followed by the Hindu and Christian populations. Likewise, cases of divorce are relatively higher among Muslims, followed by Hindus and Christians.

Table: 4 Child Marriage across the Districts of West Bengal

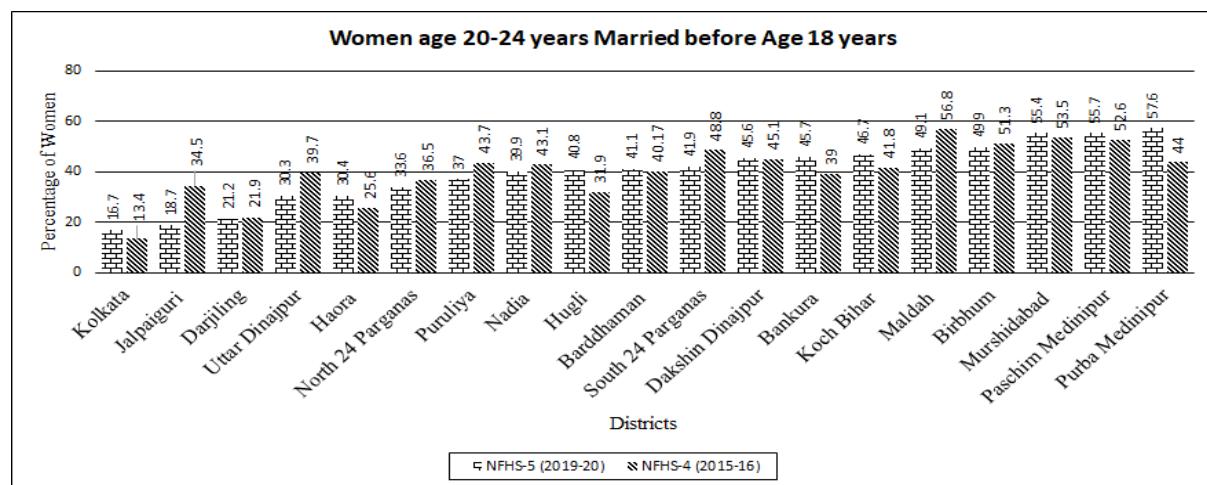
District	Rural Area		Urban Area	
	Male Married (10-19)	Female Married (10-19)	Male Married (10-19)	Female Married (10-19)
Darjiling	13.02	50.04	8.87	44.78
Jalpaiguri	11.20	60.37	7.94	55.33
Koch Bihar	11.49	71.21	5.83	52.21
Uttar Dinajpur	9.91	64.16	7.38	52.65
Dakshin Dinajpur	12.43	72.64	5.75	55.32
Maldah	13.10	70.84	10.77	61.40
Murshidabad	17.84	76.78	13.57	67.09
Birbhum	13.65	74.20	9.83	62.75
Barddhaman	11.76	72.87	8.63	55.25
Nadia	12.30	74.39	6.86	60.79
North 24 Parganas	12.94	73.41	5.87	47.05
Hugli	8.43	69.42	6.64	51.09
Bankura	9.65	70.22	6.06	55.29
Puruliya	12.43	66.09	8.99	55.61
Haora	7.87	66.67	7.03	52.12
Kolkata	NA	NA	7.60	39.44
South 24 Parganas	13.07	72.09	8.72	56.75
Paschim Medinipur	9.80	72.21	6.60	53.47
Purba Medinipur	8.53	75.97	8.44	74.84
Mean	11.63	69.64	7.97	55.43

Source: *Census of India, 2011, Figures are in percentage*

It is important to note that across the district, child marriage varies both in terms of gender and space (table 4). Child marriage is higher among girls across all the districts of the state. In fact, it is 5 to 10 times higher among women compared to men. Child marriages among girls are the highest in rural areas of Murshidabad, North 24 Parganas, Birbhum, Koch Bihar, Maldah, Nadia, Barddhaman, South 24 Parganas, Paschim Medinipur and Purba Medinipur district. These are the districts where more than 70 percent of women in rural areas get married when they reach between 10 and 19 years of age. Child marriages among girls are the lowest in rural areas of Darjeeling district. Almost similar picture can be seen in urban areas. The lowest number of child marriages among girls in urban areas can be seen in Kolkata, followed by Darjeeling and North 24 Parganas. Apart from these three districts, child marriage among girls in other districts is more than fifty percent. The average number of child marriages among girls in rural and urban areas is 69.64 and 55.43 percent respectively.

From the above table 4, it is evident that child marriage among girls are more prevalent in West Bengal before the introduction of the *Kanyashree Prakalpa*, a conditional cash transfer program to curtail child marriage among underage girls. Now it's necessary to examine the impacts of the conditional cash transfer program through various indicators.

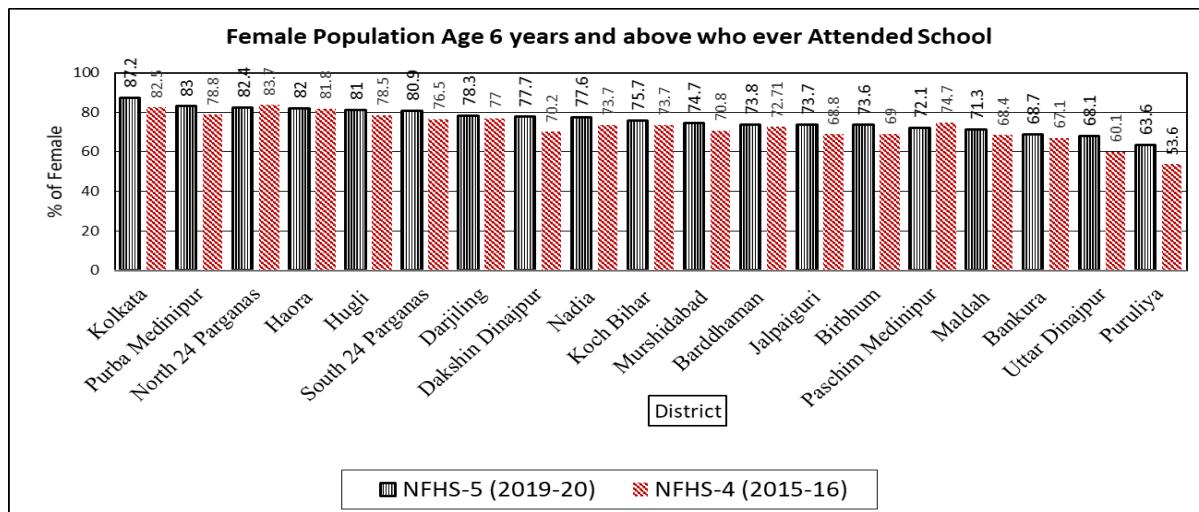
Figure 1: Women aged 20-24 years married before the age of 18 years



Source: NFHS, 2019-20

NFHS data clearly pointed out that the number of child marriages among girls has reduced in a few districts after the introduction of the program. However, there are some districts where child marriages did not decrease. In the case of Haora, Kolkata, Hugli, Bankura, Koch Bihar, Murshidabad, Purba and Paschim Medinipur, cases of child marriage among girls did not diminish, but rather increased as per NFHS data. Child marriages among girls have significantly decreased in Jalpaiguri, Maldah, and Uttar Dinajpur districts.

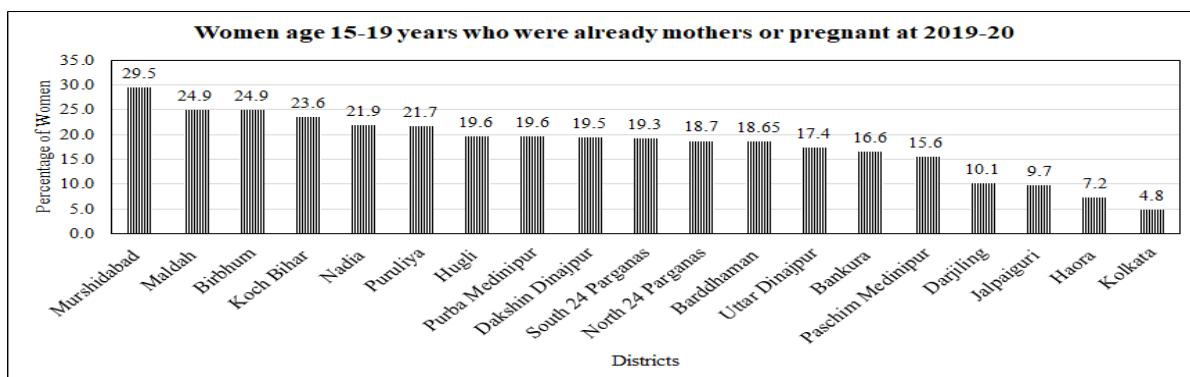
Figure 2: Female Population age 6 years and above who ever attended school



Source: NFHS, 2019-20

Attending school is another indicator of social development. It has been noticed that attendance in schools by females has increased in almost all the districts after the introduction of the program except in Paschim Medinipur. Another important question in the NFHS data was the number of women who were already mothers or pregnant at age 15-19 years in 2019-20. It has been found that in Murshidabad, Birbhum, Maldah, Koch Bihar, Nadia, and Puruliya districts more than 20 percent of women under the age of 15 to 19 are either already mothers or pregnant.

Figure 3: Women aged 15-19 years who were already mothers or pregnant in 2019-20



Source: NFHS, 2019-20

The above figure 3 shows that less than 10 percent of women are either mothers or pregnant under the age of 15 to 19 years in three districts, namely Jalpaiguri, Haora, and Kolkata. This figure confirms that child marriage under the age of 15 to 19 still continues but is significantly reduced. It is worthwhile to note here that in early childhood, gender disparities start out small. However, the onset of adolescence can bring significant barriers to girls' well-being.

Gender norms and discrimination heighten their risk of child marriage, teenage pregnancy, high-risk childbirth and malnutrition. There is further scope to reduce the number of child marriages and teenage pregnancies. Therefore, conditional cash transfer alone is not enough to completely eliminate child marriage.

Figure 4: Correlation between Female Child Marriage and Sanctioned Scholarship 2019-20

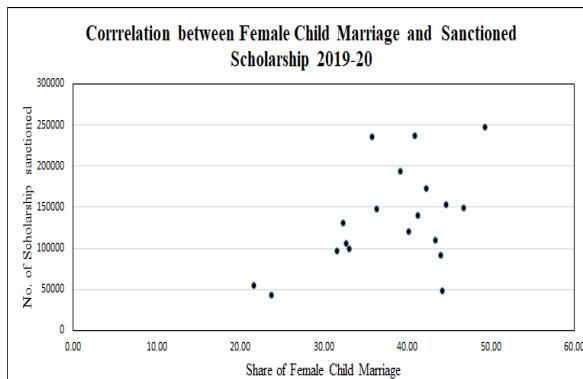
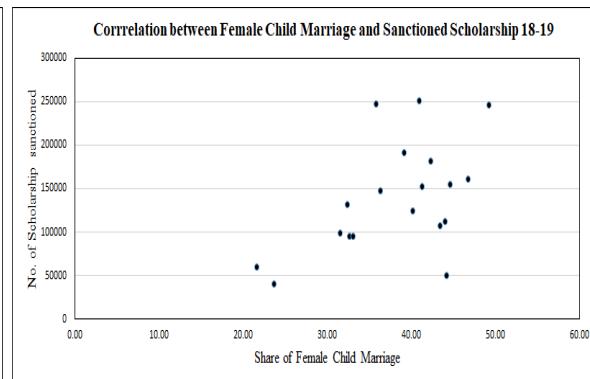


Figure 5: Correlation between Female Child Marriage and Sanctioned Scholarship 2018-19



Source: Dept. of Women and Child Health and Social Welfare, Govt. of West Bengal

An overview of the correlation (Figures 4 and 5) indicates that conditional cash transfers have happened more in those districts where child marriages are prevalent. But it is remarkable that in Kolkata, Kalimpong (Parts of Darjeeling district earlier), and Jhargram district (Parts of Paschim Medinipur earlier) the number of enrolled people for scholarships is more than the target number of scholarships in the district. On the other hand, the amount of enrollment for the scholarship is less than 90 percent of the total targeted number in districts like Paschim Medinipur, Purba Medinipur, South 24 Parganas, Uttar Dinajpur, and Purba Burdwan.

However, the number of enrolments for scholarships and the total targeted number across the district varies over the years. In fact, sanctioned scholarship numbers are always less than the enrolment number. Exclusion from the scheme is not always a function of supply-side barriers but also demand-side constraints. Pratichi Institute in 2017 reported that among Scheduled Tribes the rejection of this scheme is highest. It could be due to poverty, a preference for marital security over the chance of a job, or resistance to perceived state interference in their personal lives. Moreover, they also note that Muslim girls also reject the scheme, for the same reasons, and possibly also due to religious beliefs. Some urban girls and their families perceived the scheme as suitable not for themselves but for rural girls from poorer families (Pratichi Institute, 2017).

Discussion

In mapping the causes of child marriage in West Bengal it is evident that the trends of child marriage in the state is still prevalent in all districts. Girls tend to get married at a younger age than boys on average. According to NFHS-4 data, twice as

many girls in the state were married before the age of 18 compared to boys who were married before the age of 21. The age disparity observed in child marriages is an indication of the patriarchal system, which is a significant underlying cause of this practice. In his paper titled "Early Marriage of Girls in Contemporary Bengal: A Field View" (2007), Ghosh (2011) examines the reasons behind child marriage beyond the commonly cited factors such as poverty and tradition. Ghosh analyzes economic decision-making patterns, such as families investing in land/property instead of their daughters' education, and draws upon the narratives of the affected children. The prevalence of child marriage in relatively affluent families and their prioritization of economic decisions suggest that poverty, while a significant factor, may also serve as a disguise for patriarchal attitudes. This is supported by the high level of awareness about the illegality of child marriage (Ghosh^a, 2011). The criticism of child marriage highlights that such marriages impede a woman's ability to develop her skills to earn a livelihood, ultimately portraying her as a financial liability that must be supported by the groom's family and repaid through dowry. However, this critique presumes that the care work, domestic labor, and farm work she provides are not deserving of compensation.

In the past, child marriage was a customary practice among the upper castes, intended to secure same-caste marriages prior to individual choice becoming a factor. However, in modern-day Bengal, the persistence of this practice in other societal groups is due to deprivation within those communities. According to 2011 census data, marriages before the age of 14 are most prevalent among Muslims, followed by scheduled tribes and then scheduled castes. Additionally, marriages before the age of 18 are most common among scheduled tribes, followed by caste Hindus and then Muslims (Ghosh^b, 2011, Sanlaap, 2007).

Some argue that the negative impacts of child marriage extend far beyond health concerns, but such harm is often overlooked. Even if the health consequences are recognized, there is a lack of societal acknowledgment. Most families are unaware that child marriage and the pressure to prove fertility are direct causes of maternal and infant mortality (Sagade, 2005). The significant prevalence of teenage pregnancies in West Bengal (18.3%) can lead to obstructed labor, hypertension, obstetric fistula, HIV, premature birth, and low birth weight due to incorrect feeding practices, among other complications (IIPS, 2020).

Conclusion

The *Kanyashree Prakalpa* initiative has had a significant positive impact on reducing child marriage in West Bengal. Through financial incentives and educational programs, the initiative has empowered girls and their families, increasing awareness about the harms of child marriage and promoting girls' education. The result has been a marked decline in child marriage rates across the state. The success of *Kanyashree Prakalpa* serves as a model for other regions to follow in the fight against child marriage and the advancement of gender equality. While the

Kanyashree Prakalpa initiative has been successful in reducing child marriage rates in West Bengal, there are still challenges that need to be addressed. One such challenge is ensuring that the program reaches all girls in the state, particularly those in remote and marginalized areas. Additionally, there is a need to address the persistence of patriarchal attitudes and norms that perpetuate child marriage. The economic and social pressures that lead families to choose child marriage also need to be addressed. Finally, sustained efforts are needed to monitor and evaluate the impact of Kanyashree Prakalpa to ensure that it continues to be effective in reducing child marriage rates.

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