

Child Marriage and Kanyashree Prakalpa: Exploring Perception and Attitude Changes among Adolescence Girls

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Abstract:- Child marriage is a complex international issue from both gender and child right perspective. Though child marriage adversely affects both boys and girls, the practice has more adverse consequences for girls than for boys. Realizing the fact that reduction of child marriage would not be possible unless it included education as a gateway, the West Bengal Government introduced Kanyashree Prakalpa as a means of inclusive development and women empowerment. The programme was launched to prevent girls from being married off at a young age by encouraging education. The present study explores the perception and attitude changes among the adolescence girls covered under this scheme with an impact assessment viewpoint. The study also finds out the interrelationship between perception about early marriage and the different socio-demographic factors. Among the different factors participant's age, education level have significant relationship with participant's perception about early marriage. It is not only a policy of enhancing women education through enrollment and retention, but also a policy of changing the perception about the importance of women education in curbing child marriage in West Bengal.

Keywords:- Conditional Cash Transfer, Early Marriage, Kanyashree Prakalpa, Women Education.

I. INTRODUCTION

Child marriage is a social and cultural concern in many parts of the world with higher occurrence in Asia and Africa. In South Asia and in Sub-Saharan Africa, an estimated 50 per cent and 40 per cent girl respectively marry before 18 years. This amounts to 39,000 children being married every day (Hodgkinson et al. 2016). It is a complex issue with international implications - both from the gender and child rights perspectives. Conceiving its sternness, 2015 sustainable development goals pledged to "eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage" (UNDP, 2015). Child marriage is a type of forced marriage. There is no question of consent as the girl child is incapable of giving a valid legal consent due to her immature physical and mental growth. Even when she is able to express her will, she is not allowed to express it or is forced to act against her wishes. They are compelled to step from childhood into womanhood directly. How can be a child is

the bride to a marriage, when she is unable to understand the nature and consequences of it? There is not enough awareness about the adverse effects of child marriage on the lives of young girls, on the part of the guardians. Though child marriage affects both boys and girls, the practice has more adverse consequences for girls than for boys. It affects the health of young girls, particularly their reproductive health, as their mind and bodies are not physically matured to accept the burden of child-bearing. They are double burdened by the productive and reproductive activities. Because of child marriage, girls are deprived of their educational opportunities. Due to lower level of education they are deprived of their future opportunities of gainful employment as well as of personality development and therefore the happiness of life. In spite of having such severe consequences on the life of young girls, the practice of child marriage is still justified in the name of culture, religion and morality (Sagade, 2015). Girls are still viewed as economic burdens because it is costly to raise daughter when the money can be better utilized on sons who will be the care givers to their old age. Surprisingly, educational opportunities are not denied to boys even if they are married off at a young age. Girls with a secondary school education or higher are much less likely to marry early than those with primary education or less. There is also a strong correlation between poverty and child marriage. Further the strong association between the increased female school drop-out rates and child marriage in India is also an established fact. Girls from the poorest households are much more likely to marry early than those from the richest quintiles (UNICEF, 2016). It has also identified "access to safe, affordable and good quality secondary education" as one of the main driving force towards reducing child marriage in India. In such a situation, the Government of West Bengal has initiated Kanyashree Prakalpa – a conditional cash transfer scheme with the aim of promoting a conducive environment for enhancing girls education and improving the status and well-being of the girl child in the state. The programme was launched to prevent girls from being married off at a young age by encouraging education, and has benefited almost 63 lakh girls, since its launch in October 2013 (<http://wbkanyashree.gov.in/index.php>, 2020). The present study aims at to find out the perception changes of the young adolescence girls of two districts of West Bengal after the introduction of this project.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Child brides are less able than older or unmarried girls to access schooling and income-generating opportunities or to benefit from education or economic development programmes. Married girls usually have low level of educational attainment and economic status, restricted mobility, limited access to mass media such as newspaper, radio, T.V. as compared to boys and unmarried girls (Hoberland et al., 2003). Access to schools in rural India is not always easily available to girls, because schools are often located long distances away from homes and parents are fearful of their daughters' commute and potential for sexual assault or involvement with men. Household responsibilities, childrearing and other social restrictions prevent them from taking advantage of education and work opportunities (Mathur et al., 2003). Though the age of marriage of girls in India has shown an upward trend over the years, but it still much lower than the legal age and a large number of girls continue to be married at very young ages (Karkal and Rajan, 1989). Early motherhood and childrearing is also associated with lower level of education and higher level of poverty (Singh and samara, 1997). Early marriage also implies lower status and power within households and is more likely to experience domestic violence, sexual abuse and isolation from family and community (UNICEF, 2005; Jensen and Thornton, 2003). International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) (2005) survey in India found that girls who married before 18, experiencing physical and sexual violence twice as often as girls who married at lower age. Lower status in the home also leaves married girls with less ability to influence decisions about their own lives. Studies show that higher level of schooling for girls decrease their risk of child marriage. Girls with eight or more years of education are less likely to marry young than girls with zero to three years of school (UNICEF, 2005). Education is recognised as the most significant factor for delaying girl's age of marriage. Parents have realized the value of education for their children and are willing to postpone the marriage of their daughters, so that they can attain higher level of education (Malhotra and Schuler, 2005). It is believed that education enhances girls' autonomy, giving them negotiation skills in choosing a partner and influencing the timing of marriage (Lloyd and Mensch, 1999). A study by (Ghosh and Dutta, 2017) showed that income acts as an important determinant in reducing adolescence girl's dropout in West Bengal. In their study (Sen and Dutta, 2018) have shown how this project is different in its approach from other conditional cash transfer schemes in India that aimed at improving the education level of girls and reducing child marriage. Another study by (Samsujjaman and Halder, 2018) showed that interest on higher education among girls of West Bengal has increased after the implementation of this scheme.

III. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The key objective of this study is to conduct an assessment of the implementation of the Kanyashree Prakalpa in West Bengal in relation to child marriage. It is also an effort to reach out and understand perceptions of existing and potential beneficiaries on child marriage after the introduction of this project.

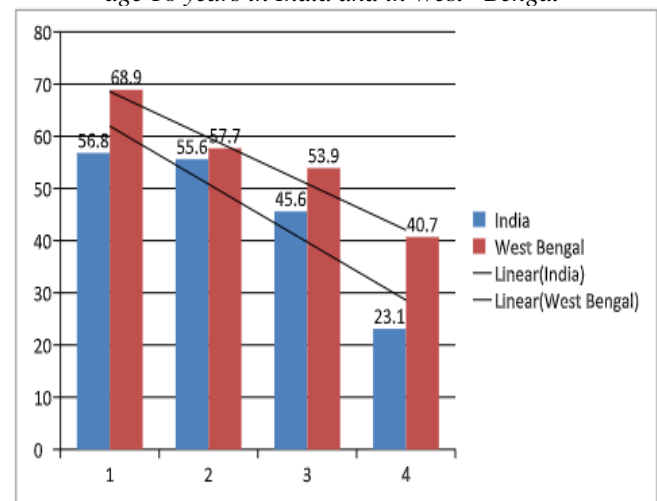
The assessment has focused its enquiry on:

- The socio-economic status of the families covered under the scheme.
- To assess the impact of Kanyashree Prakalpa on girl's education and child marriage.
- To review the perception of the students, their future plans, their views to prevent the child marriage.

IV. SEVERITY OF THE PROBLEM:

In the Child Marriage Prohibition Act, 2006; child marriage is defined as a union where either one or both parties are under the legal age of marriage, which is below 18 years for girls and 21 years for boys in India. The 2011 census estimates nearly 17 million children in the age group of 10-19 years to be married. According to NFHS-4 (National Family Health Survey) (2015-2016), 11.9 per cent of women in the age group of 15-19 years were reported to have married before attaining the age of 18. The picture is worst in West Bengal, where 25.6 per cent of women in the same age group got married before the legal minimum age (Refer to Fig.1).

Fig.1: % of women in the age group 20-24 married before age 18 years in India and in West Bengal



Source: Different reports of NFHS, Govt. of India.

Note: Figures are expressed as percentage (%)

V. REASONS FOR SUSTENANCE OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN WEST BENGAL

The main reason behind the persistence of the practice of child marriage is the prevailing pressure of patriarchal values and institutions. As “marriage is essential for girls” their preferences get obstructed by such social values and attitudes. Subordination and under valuation of the role of girl child within and outside family appears to be one of the major reasons for the continuation of child marriage even today (Ghosh, 2011). Besides, other socio-economic constraints like illiteracy, unemployment, poverty and rural infrastructure also aggravates the problem of child marriage. Due to the greater influence of patriarchy, the mother supports the father and elder members of the family in enforcing the ideology of child marriage for daughters. Within this social structure daughters find it difficult to persuade their illiterate or semi literate parents about the modern values and practices learnt at schools. The guardians become fearful and concerned about their daughter’s relationship with known or strange young boys. In such a situation the traditional role of father as ‘advisor’ and mother as ‘nurturer’ should be revised.

While these traditional factors form the base of child marriage, some modern factors and constraints strengthens such a tradition. It has been noticed that lower the value of development index (in terms of education, income and employment) of a society, the higher its members become susceptible to child marriage. Formal education generally delays the process of marriage particularly beyond the secondary stage. Absence of higher secondary schools within the vicinity of local area accelerates the process of marriage fixing for 14-15 year girls. Gender differential in education is an important factor for higher dropouts of girls. The parent does not prefer to continue their daughter’s education when the school is far away, absence of well developed communication system, fails consecutively in a certain class. Among other factors affecting the child marriage large family size, lower age at marriage of boys and trafficking of girls are important. Besides, apathetic attitude of the police and administration, lack of political will are also important in strengthening the practice of child marriage.

VI. ABOUT KANYASHREE KRAKALPA

In order to change the status of girls, belonging to lower income group in West Bengal, state government introduced the Kanyashree Prakalpa on October 1, 2013. It is a conditional cash transfer (CCT) scheme for underprivileged girls who are often forced to leave schools even without completing elementary education. It has attempted not just to promote gender equality in education, but to empower girls and women through and beyond education. With this scheme the Government is trying to break the circuits of educational failure, poverty, economic and social exclusion.

There are two categories under this scheme: K-1 and K-2. K-1 assures an annual scholarship of Rs. 750 per month with the eligibility criteria that the girl should be between 13-18 years (enrolled in class VIII to XII) and studies in a government or a Government undertaking school. Besides, the girl should be unmarried belonging to a family with an annual income of less than or equal to Rs. 120000 per annum. On the other hand, K-2 is applicable to those girls who are enrolled in an institution of education or training or an institution of Higher Education with the other eligibility criteria as in K-1. As per this scheme each incumbent will receive Rs. 25000 as a onetime grant. The main reason behind the introduction of the project is twofold – one is the prevention of girl’s dropout from school and the other is the reduction of girl child marriage. The presumption is that K-1 will meet some recurring expenses of education which will prevent the girls of poor families to discontinue the study at early stage of education. Again K-2 will motivate the girls to pursue higher education after completion of school education by meeting the recurring expenses at college level. So a girl who comes under the purview of Kanyashree Prakalpa can continue her study up to the college/university level without facing any financial obstacles. This will have an indirect positive effect on the status and well-being of the girl child of the state. The basic objective is to delay the age at marriage of girl child up to the age of 18 and to encourage them to continue their education till they are engaged in any gainful employment. It is expected to result in improved outcome on health of adolescent girl, literacy level and engagement in sustainable social and economic development. It will also encourage the parents of economically weaker section to motivate their girls to attend the school/college and this will automatically prevent them from getting their daughter’s early marriage. As the annual income of more than 90 percent of the people in West Bengal comes under the purview of this scheme, a majority portion of poor family girls would come under the umbrella of Kanyashree.

Kanyashree Prakalpa has been linked with other state Government projects like Sabla. While the former provides adolescent girls with support to stay in education, the latter provides them nutritional supplements and life-skill and vocational training. It has enhanced skill-development through vocational training in soft-toys, tailoring or through short term courses on food processing and digital competency to enter the job market. It also helps them to build self-esteem and confidence. West Bengal government celebrates Kanyashree Day on 14th august, a day before India’s independence Day, with the believe that India can be truly independent when its girls are free from societal shackles of discriminatory behavior, free to live life to their own potential, free from fear and looking forward with hope and confidence.

VII. RESULTS

1. Study Design and Population

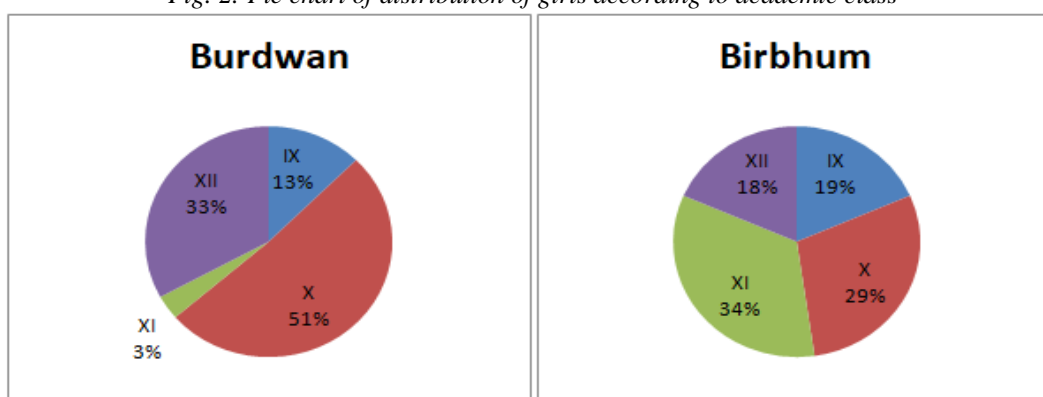
For the present study information was collected from the schools of two different districts of West Bengal namely Burdwan and Birbhum. Descriptive type of cross-sectional study was conducted in the selected schools of both the districts in the academic year 2016-17. Altogether 153 girls were interviewed, of which 88 from Burdwan district and 65 from Birbhum district. The inclusion criteria were i) girl students aged 13-18 years, studying in classes IX to XII ii) those who were present in the school during the period of study and come regularly in the school and iii) who participate in the study willingly as well as were given informed consent. The exclusion criteria included: girls below 13 years of age, were not present during the time of

data collection and were not willing to participate in the study. For sampling method, purposive sampling was used. For identification of appropriate participants, class teachers of the respective school helped me. A semi-structured questionnaire method was followed as a data collection tools. Information was collected through face to face interviewing technique.

2. Participant's Background Characteristics

The age range of the respondents was 13-18 years with mean of 15.72 years \pm 1.51. Those having age of 15 years were the most represented (25.5 per cent) and age with 13 years was least represented (8.5 per cent). Class-wise distribution of the girls in the two districts is as follows (Refer to Fig. 2)

Fig. 2: Pie chart of distribution of girls according to academic class



Source: Primary Survey

Most of the respondents belong to the Hindu community 75.1 per cent (85.2 per cent in Burdwan and 61.5 per cent in Birbhum) and 24.9 per cent belong to the Muslim community (14.8 per cent in Burdwan and 38.5 per cent in Birbhum). Among the different caste General caste figures the most 48.4 per cent (55.7 per cent in Burdwan and 38.5 per cent in Birbhum) followed by OBC 26.1 per cent (19.3 per cent in Burdwan and 35.4 per cent in Birbhum), SC 22.2 per cent (25 per cent in Burdwan and 18.5 per cent in Birbhum) and ST 3.3 per cent (nil in Burdwan and 3.3 per cent in Birbhum) (Refer to Table 1).

Table 1: Religion and Caste of the Respondents in the two districts

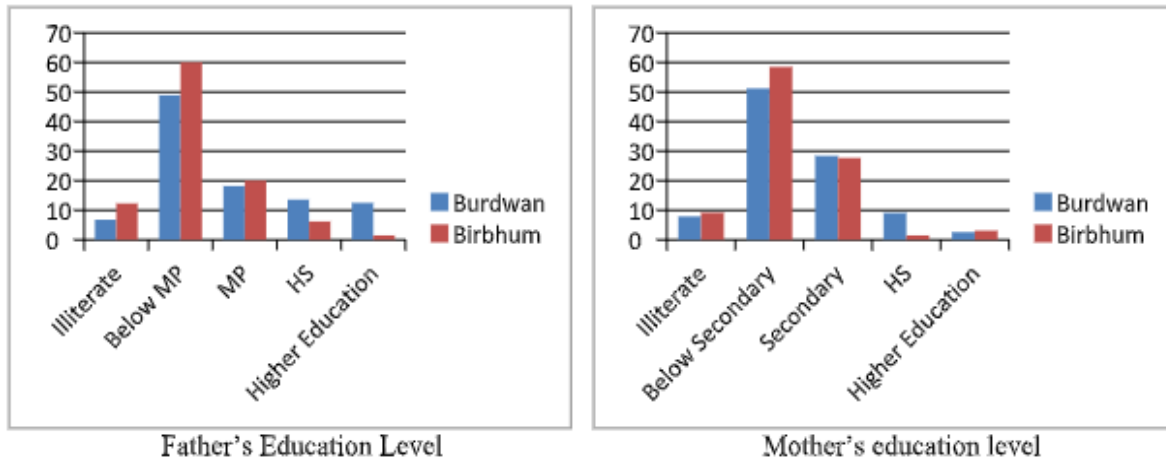
	Burdwan	Birbhum	Total
Religion			
Hindu	75(85.2)	40(61.5)	115(75.1)
Muslim	13(14.8)	25(38.5)	38(24.9)
Total	88	65	153
Caste			
General	49(55.7)	25(38.5)	74(48.4)
OBC	17(19.3)	23(35.4)	40(26.1)
SC	22(25)	12(18.5)	34(22.2)
ST	0(0)	05(7.6)	05(3.3)
Total	88	65	153

Source: Primary Survey

Note: Figures in the bracket represent percentage of total respondents.

The majority of the participant's father had education level below secondary level 53.6 per cent (48 per cent in Birbhum and 60 per cent in Burdwan), followed by secondary level 18.9 per cent (18.2 per cent in Burdwan and 20 per cent in Birbhum), higher secondary 10.5 per cent (13.6 per cent in Burdwan and 6.2 per cent in Birbhum), illiterate 9.2 per cent (6.8 per cent in Burdwan and 12.3 per cent in Birbhum) and higher education 7.84 per cent (12.5 per cent in Burdwan and 1.54 per cent in Birbhum) (Refer to Fig. 3). The majority of the participant's mother had education level below secondary level 54.2 per cent (51.2 per cent in Burdwan and 58.5 per cent in Birbhum), followed by secondary level 28.1 per cent (28.4 per cent in Burdwan and 27.7 per cent in Birbhum), illiterate 8.5 per cent (7.9 per cent in Burdwan and 9.2 per cent in Birbhum), higher secondary 5.9 per cent (9.1 per cent in Burdwan and 1.5 per cent in Birbhum) and higher education 3.3 per cent (2.61 per cent in Burdwan and 3.08 per cent in Birbhum).

Fig. 3: Educational level of the respondent's father and mother in the two districts



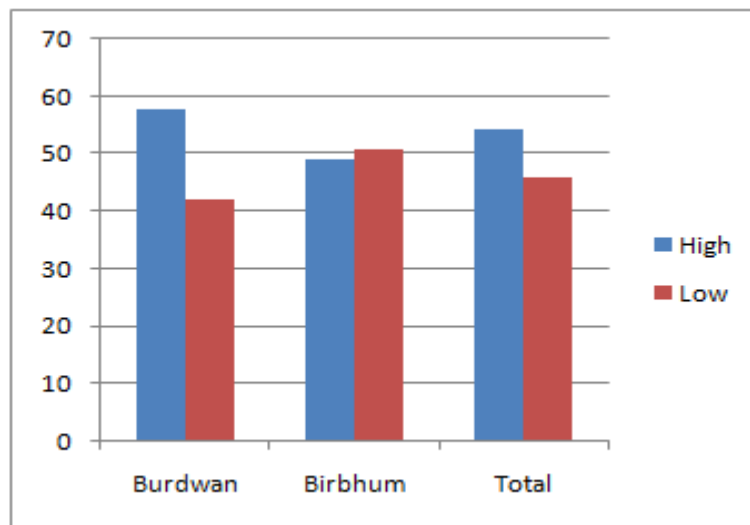
Source: Primary Survey

3. Perception of the participants about child marriage:

A large part (54.2 per cent) of the participants (83 out of 153) is aware of the negative aspects of early marriage. This awareness level is higher in Burdwan district (57.9 per cent) as compared to Birbhum district (49.2 per cent) (Refer to Fig. 4). The participants believed that negative consequences of child marriage are affected by social norm

and regulations. They reported that early marriage is also associated with a number of health problems related to delivery, maternal and infant mortality. They are also aware of the fact that early married women suffer from more health problems than others who are marriage after the minimum legal age.

Fig. 4: Participant's knowledge level about early marriage in the two districts (expressed as percentage of total)



Source: Primary Survey

Note: Values are expressed as percentage of total

In order to find out the relationship between level of knowledge about early marriage and the different socio demographic factors (like age, educational level, father and mother's educational level, and father's occupation), chi-square test is used.

Among the different factors, participant's age (with $\chi^2 = 5.982$, $p = 0.014$) and caste (with $\chi^2 = 10.986$, $p = 0.011$)

were statistically significant with level of knowledge about early marriage (Refer to Table 2). Again one important finding is that there was a statistically significant relationship between participant's education level and level of knowledge about early marriage ($\chi^2 = 4.122$ and $p = 0.042$). Age is significantly related with the perception because with higher age and advance level of education, their perception about child marriage inevitably increases.

Table 2: Factor influencing the perception of the girl child about early marriage

Variable	Perception on early marriage		Test statistics
	Yes	No	
Age (years) >13≤15 >15<19	31 52	40 30	$\chi^2 = 5.982$ p = 0.014
Education level Below secondary Above secondary	41 42	46 24	$\chi^2 = 4.122$ p = 0.042
Religion Hindu Muslim	67 16	48 22	$\chi^2 = 3.003$ p = 0.083
Caste General OBC SC ST	48 20 15 0	26 20 19 5	$\chi^2 = 10.986$ p = 0.011
Father's education level Illiterate Below secondary Secondary Higher secondary Graduate Post graduate	3 44 17 9 8 2	11 38 12 7 2 0	$\chi^2 = 10.695$ p = 0.057
Mother's education level Illiterate Below secondary Secondary Higher secondary Graduate Post graduate	6 39 28 6 3 1	7 44 15 3 1 0	$\chi^2 = 6.249$ p = 0.282
Father's occupation Farmer/Labour Business Service Self-employed Unemployed	56 15 1 10 1	50 8 0 8 4	$\chi^2 = 7.581$ p = 0.108

Source: Calculation from primary survey

Note: Results are expressed as frequency.

They can realise the importance of higher education and the evil aspects of child marriage. They can also apply their own sense in determining their future goals and the importance of self-reliance. Again the presence of a higher percentage of upper caste girls indicate that with higher social-economic and education level, perception level increases.

Further the association between participant's knowledge about early marriage and participant's religion ($\chi^2 = 3.003, p = 0.083$), participant's father level of education ($\chi^2 = 10.695, p = 0.057$), mother's level of education ($\chi^2 =$

6.249, $p = 0.282$) and father's occupation ($\chi^2 = 7.581, p = 0.108$) and were statistically insignificant. As the education level of both father and mother are lower, they have deficiency in their perception on this particular issue. So they fail to play any significant role on their daughter's perception about early marriage. By the same reason, fathers with low occupational status (consequently low income level) fail to significantly affect the perception level of their daughters. It may be inferred from this result that increased educational and income level of the parents can enhance the perception level of the adolescence girls.

VIII. CONCLUSION:

Child marriage of girls is a relatively overlooked social problem in India and is given much lower importance by policy makers, law enforcement machinery of the government, and academicians. It is regarded as a violation of girl's right because they cannot complete their education to the desired level. In India it is extremely difficult to continue their education once they get married. Kanyashree Prakalpa has introduced at a much needed situation when underage marriage and school dropout of girls is much higher in West Bengal as compared to the rest of the India. Its appeal has not only spread to the guardians, but also to the adolescent girls who are the coadjutor of this scheme. This study finds considerable evidence towards empowerment of adolescent girls who pluck up courage to take decision about their marriage. It is not only a policy of enhancing women education through enrollment and retention, but also a policy of changing the perception about the importance of women education in curbing child marriage in West Bengal.

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