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

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