The Child Marriage Menace

Mains: *GS II – Population and Associated Issues*

Why in News?

Recently, The Union government marked the first anniversary of its Bal Vivah Mukt Bharat Abhiyan earlier this month with a 100-day awareness campaign for a country free of child marriage, as part of its commitment to the UN to end child marriage by 2030.

What is the global situation?

- **SDG 5** – The fifth UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) is to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
- Within this SDG, Target 5.3 is to eliminate all harmful practices, including child marriage, as well as early and forced marriages, and female genital mutilation.
- **Indicators** – Progress on child marriage is monitored using the indicator of the proportion of women between the ages of 20 and 24 years who were married before they turned 18.
- **UNICEF data** – In 2023, estimated that 64 crore girls got married in childhood, with a whopping third of them in India alone. It added that progress needs to happen 20 times faster than it has been to reach the 2030 target.
- **Prevalence** – Globally, 19% of young women aged 20-24 were married as children, a decrease from 23% a decade ago.
- **Regional Burden** – Nearly half (45%) of all child brides live in South Asia, primarily driven by the numbers in India, which alone accounts for one-third of the global total.
- **Highest Rates** – Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest prevalence rate, with one in three girls marrying before 18, and at the current pace, the region is over 200 years away from ending the practice.
- **Stagnation and Reversal** – Progress has largely stagnated in Latin America and the Caribbean and the Middle East and North Africa, with crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, conflicts, and climate change threatening to reverse gains made in other areas.

What is the situation in India?

- **NFHS data** – India has made tremendous strides in reducing child marriage, *dropping from 47.4% in 2005-06 to 26.8% in 2015-16*, a sharp decline of 21 percentage points over a decade, according to data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS).
- Progress slowed thereafter, with child marriage rates dropping just 3.5 percentage points over the next five years to reach 23.3% in 2019-21.

- **Higher rates** – The highest child marriage rates among women aged 18 to 29 years was seen in:
    - West Bengal (42%),
    - Bihar (40%), and
    - Tripura (39%),
    - Jharkhand (35%),
    - Andhra Pradesh (33%),
    - Assam (32%),
    - Dadra & Nagar Haveli and Daman & Diu (28%),
    - Telangana (27%),
    - Madhya Pradesh (25%), and
    - Rajasthan (25%).
- **Lowest rates** – The percentage of women marrying before the legal minimum age of 18 years is lowest in:
    - Lakshadweep (4%),
    - Jammu & Kashmir (6%),
    - Ladakh (6%),
    - Himachal Pradesh, Goa, and
    - Nagaland (7% each).
- **Disparities on the basis of higher education and income** – The UN Population Fund's analysis of NFHS data shows that 48% of girls with no education were married below 18 years of age in comparison to only 4% among those with higher education.
- Also, 40% of girls from the lowest quintile of the household wealth index married before they became adults, in comparison to just 8% of those from the highest quintile.

What action is being taken?

- **Legal measures** – *The Prevention of Child Marriage Act* was passed in 2006, and national child marriage rates have halved since then.
- The *Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012* has also helped prevent child marriage.
- However, experts note that legislation has a limited impact without a shift in social norms, especially with respect to the education of girls, which has the highest impact on raising the age of marriage.
- **Minimum age for marriage** – The Union government proposed to raise the minimum age of marriage for women to 21 years to bring them at par with men, and to pave the way for women to complete their higher education, and have greater skills, maturity and independence when they get married.
- **Bal Vivah Mukt Abhiyan** – The *Bal Vivah Mukt Abhiyan* portal records that, as of December 20, 54,917 child marriage prevention officers have been appointed across the country to conduct awareness activities and act on child marriage complaints.
    - **Child marriage prevented** – In the year since the campaign began, *it has prevented 1,520 reported* instances of child marriage either through persuasion or administrative action, with Madhya Pradesh and Haryana recording the highest figures.
- However, it also records that *198 child marriages were not prevented, resulting in police complaints,* reports to the Child Welfare Committee or the provision of

annulment.
    - **Collaboration** – The campaign has partnered with faith leaders, youth groups and community networks that hold real influence at the grassroots-level to change the narrative on child marriage and encourage timely reporting and prevention.
- **Beti Bachao Beti Padhao scheme –** The Centre's flagship aims to address the declining child sex ratio through empowerment measures, especially promotion of education, though effective implementation has been patchy on the ground.
- **Laadli schemes** – It offer financial support to families with girl children from birth, and steps are being taken to increase the enrolment of girls in school, with measures such as cycles for safe transport to better sanitation in schools.
- **Efforts of states** – A number of States offer financial aid for girls' education.
    - **For instance,** West Bengal's Kanyashree scheme, which offers low-income families ₹1,000 per year to educate their girls between the ages of 13 and 18, along with a one-time grant of ₹25,000 for 18 and 19-year-olds, provided that girls pursue higher education and delay marriage.
- Some women's activists, however, say that the State with the highest rates of child marriage is sending mixed signals with its Rupashree scheme, offering ₹25,000 to low-income families at the time of a daughter's marriage, though the stipulation is that she has crossed 18 years.

What lies ahead?

- The Union government could increase the participation of women in the labour force and improve maternal and child health.
- However, Opposition MPs sought greater scrutiny of the Prohibition of Child Marriage (Amendment) Bill.
- Critics warn that without social reform, a mere legal change could simply criminalise many communities, given that a staggering 61% of women aged 20 to 24 years married before they turned 21 years.
- *Girls Not Brides*, a global partnership, warns that the child marriage target will also impact other SDGs.
- Unless we make significant progress on ending child marriage, we will fall short on at least nine of the SDGs, including those related to poverty, food security, health, education, gender equality, economic growth, climate action, and peace and justice.

Reference

The Hindu| Child Marriage

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