

## **Child Marriage in Rural West Bengal: Status and Challenges**

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### *Abstract*

*Despite legislations and some efforts by government and non-government agencies to educate the people about the dangers of early marriage, prejudices and beliefs underlying the preference continue in India. In West Bengal too, there is a silent complicity to child marriage; many rural and backward communities treat it as normal and routine. This paper, based on field research, Census data and other secondary sources tries to analyse the gravity, causes and consequences of child marriage in the state with particularly reference to rural South West Bengal. It also attempts to suggest possible strategies and action plan to tackle the social evil.*

Child marriage represents one of the most prevalent forms of sexual abuse and exploitation especially of girls. Due to gendered nature of early marriage, a significant number of girls are married before reaching adulthood<sup>1</sup>. Child marriage serves as a means of perpetuating power imbalances between men and women, both in the home and outside. The practice is widespread in India as also in many other parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Protecting the girl child is today an issue of major concern for all the developing countries and, therefore, it is necessary to tackle child marriage more effectively, efficiently and practically. However, there is no international consensus on defining the age of a 'child' even though attempts have been made all over the world to legislate on the age at marriage to control the social evil (Sagade 2005: XV). In India, *The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006* has for the first time declared child marriage voidable. It however continues to set 18 as the minimum age for marriage of girls and 21 for boys even though the age of a child or adult person is affirmed differently in several other context<sup>2</sup>. The new law has replaced the earlier law (The Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929) that the British Government had enacted following the recommendations of the *Sharda Committee* appointed in 1927 under pressure from the then social reformers. The

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minimum age of marriage for girls was then fixed at 14 and for the boys it was 18. This Act was amended first in 1949 lifting the age for marriage of girls to fifteen and again in 1954 when the Special Marriage Act was passed and finally in 1978 through an amendment of the constitution thereby raising the minimum age of marriage to 18 and 21 for the girls and the boys respectively. As compared to the new Act, however, the Act of 1929, did not declare child marriages illegal or invalid even though the violation of the Act prescribed penalty. As the name suggests, the Child Marriage Restraint Act did not focus on the status of marriage and the rights of the parties once they were married. But even after the amendment to the colonial law in recent times and certain efforts by government and non-government agencies to educate the people about the dangers of early marriage including sporadic attempts by adolescent girls to prevent or protest against child marriage, prejudices and beliefs underlying the preference still continue in India, especially in the rural areas and among the backward communities. There is a silent complicity to child marriage and even today many rural and backward communities treat it as normal and routine in India.

Child marriage is objectionable for several reasons. As marriage is almost a destiny and non-marriage considered an oddity for many South Asian girls, parents/guardians often deem it a compulsion to marry off daughters at a very young age, sometimes just after puberty. This is one of the contributing factors to poor reproductive health of women in India. Child marriage typically results in early pregnancy, which poses great health risks to both the mother and the child. This is because a girl normally requires at least five to six years for proper development of her body and organ after first menstruation. Fixing of 18 as the minimum age at marriage of a girl therefore appears to be a justified decision as Indian girls mostly attain puberty by the age of 13. But when this 'natural order' is superimposed by a 'social order' of early marriage, the loser in the end is invariably the girl child. A study of rural Maharashtra shows that as many as 64 percent, 47 percent and 24 percent of prospective mothers aged 14, 15 and 18 respectively are at obstetric risks with very low body weight and less than 145 cm in height (Acharya 1998). The extra-nutritional demands of pregnancy come at the growing stage of the adolescent; a period that itself requires additional nutritional inputs. Any shortfall results in the further depletion of the already malnourished adolescent. As an outcome of these conditions, pregnancy at an early age with underdeveloped physical growth normally results in severe damage to the reproductive tract (Ramchandran 1989), increased risks of maternal mortality, pregnancy complications, prenatal and neonatal mortality and low birth weight (Jejeebhoy and Rao 1995). It may further be noted that an estimated 14 million adolescents

between 15 and 19 in the world give birth each year and girls under 15 are five-times more likely to die during pregnancy and childbirth than women in their twenties. Also, if a mother is under 18, her baby's chance of dying in the first year of life is 60 percent greater than that of a baby born to a mother older than 19 (UNICEF 2006: 4).

Child marriage contributes to many other social problems as well. In quest for a life that virtually has no future, a young married girl also gets encircled by a host of intellectual and emotional strains. The practice contributes to their lower level of educational attainment, limited economic or employment opportunities, domestic and sexual violence, widowhood, divorce or desertion, etc. Child marriage violates the human rights of young girls and the material cost of the consequences of such a practice is far exceeded by the more intangible costs relating to quality of life and the denial of women's potential to participate in the process of nation building. Social reforms that encourage man and woman to marry and bear children in somewhat mature stage of their life are largely positive for women and for society as a whole. There is, therefore, every need to argue for the special needs and rights of adolescent girls. This paper tries to combine field experiences with information and analysis provided by other sources in explaining the gravity, causes and consequences of child marriage in West Bengal with particularly reference to rural South West Bengal.

### **Survey Location and Methodology of Data Collection**

The present study was conducted during July-December, 2005 in the rural areas of six districts of Burdwan zone, located in the South West Bengal commonly known as 'Rarh Bengal'<sup>3</sup>. The districts are: Burdwan, Bankura, Birbhum, Hooghli, Medinipur (West) and Purulia. The survey was conducted in 22 villages within the jurisdiction of 12 police stations (two police stations from each district). We collected our primary data from the following sources:

- a) Household survey of 600 families (50 households from each Police Station area) with the help of a semi-structured interview schedule using a purposive sampling in order to cover different sections of rural society and to include households where marriage has taken place in the last 5 years.
- b) Information provided by the representatives of local bodies, police, ICDS workers, teachers, social workers and politicians, through another set of semi-structured questionnaire.
- c) Focused group discussion with the local people, panchayat members, ICDS officials, teachers, social workers and eminent personalities of the locality.

We have utilized the results of the focused group interactions to draw a total and comparative picture about the extent and nature and cause of the problem as well as to devise future action plan and strategies to tackle the social evil. The data thus collected from a large (2445 married people) and diverse sections of rural population, were analysed qualitatively and quantitatively.

### **Child Marriage in India**

The tradition of child marriage can be traced in India since time immemorial. It is however argued that in the Vedic period, post-puberty marriage was the rule and a man could marry at the age of 20 or more after completion of education and girls were equally not married at a tender age. But from 400 B.C, the marriageable age of both boy and girl got lowered gradually and tendency to arrange marriage preferably between eight and ten years became popular (Ahuja 2008: 160). Though there are several explanations<sup>4</sup> regarding the rise of early marriage among the Hindus in post-Vedic society, the factors that seem to have encouraged pre-puberty marriages at that time are: the joint structure of family, endogamous restrictions on mate selection, and the socio-historic factors in medieval times that prompted the Hindus to begin early married life to protect the chastity and virginity of the girl. Accordingly, one can trace early marriage in the life of even eminent and literary persons of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>5</sup>. As a corollary, the 1931 Census reported that more than 72 per cent of the girls in India were married before attaining the age of fifteen years and nearly half of them (34 per cent) were married before ten years. Twenty years later, the 1951 Census reported that the median age at marriage in India is 14.5 and 20 for the girls and boys respectively. While spread of literacy and other indexes of development during the last 100 years or so have gradually weakened notions like pre-puberty marriage, 'child marriage' is practiced by a large section of particularly rural population in the country even today.

Thus, according to Census 1991, the percentage of married women under the age of 18 was 53.3 in India. The situation however did not change substantially in the following decades. Thus, the National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-2 of 1998-99 (IIPS 2000) found more than 34 percent of married girls in the age group of 15-19 years. In the RCH (Reproductive and Child Health) survey conducted during the same period, 36.9 percent of women below the age of 18 were found married. In the 2001 Census, the percentage of married women under the age of 18 has come down to 43.5 percent for all categories and 47.5 percent for rural women. Notwithstanding nearly 10 percent reduction in the rate of child marriage during the last two Censuses, the latest NFHS - 3 (IIPS 2007) data rather indicate that an increasing

number of girls, irrespective of regional, community or rural-urban backgrounds, are 'married off' at an early age in India today. Thus, the NFHS-3, carried out in 29 states during 2005-6 shows that more and more women in the states like Arunachal Pradesh, Punjab, Mizoram, Sikkim, Tripura and West Bengal are being married off while they are 15. On the whole, nearly 45 percent women in the country, aged between 20-24 years, were married off early. This is in spite of the fact that many marriages are either not counted as part of any standard data collection system or kept secret by the parents. Hence, the national statistics often disguise significant rates of early marriage (Sagade 2005: XXIV).

The practice of child marriage is prevalent in all the Indian states in varying degrees. The problem is however more acute in certain Northern and Central Indian states. It has generally been noticed that incidence of child marriage varies inversely with the level of development within the state (Sagade 2005: 6). It is therefore not a mere coincidence that states like Rajasthan<sup>6</sup>, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand and Haryana together account for 63 percent of all under-age marriages in the country (Krishna Kumar and Rajalakshmi 2005: 20). Contrarily, states like Kerala, Nagaland, Punjab, Sikkim, Goa, Mizoram and Manipur have fared better in this respect. Thus, only 10 percent of adolescent girls in the corresponding age group in these states are currently married (NFHS-2, Supra note 24 at page 56). NFHS-3 has equally found the more than half of women marry before reaching the legal minimum age at marriage in eight Indian states namely, Bihar (64%), Jharkhand (60%), Rajasthan (58%), Andhra Pradesh (56%), West Bengal (53%), Madhya Pradesh (53%), Uttar Pradesh (52%) and Chhattisgarh (51%). The proportion of women marrying before 18 is lowest in Goa (11%), Himachal Pradesh (14%), Manipur (14%), Jammu & Kashmir (16%), Kerala (17%), and Mizoram (19%) (IIPS 2007: 166). While high female literacy and other indices of socio-economic development are found helpful in controlling child marriage in several parts of the world, there are many regional, cultural and historical reasons behind the prevalence of the social evil. Thus, the case of Maharashtra may be cited as an example. The state, being one of the developed one in the western region of the country with a moderate level of female literacy, has a long history of social reform movement. Yet, 40 percent of women below the age of 18 are found married in 2005-6 (NFHS-3). Similar is the case with Karnataka (41%). Moreover, the tribal dominated North Eastern states have build up a strong tradition of late marriage even though the practice of child marriage is widespread among a good number of tribal communities in the country. Again, relatively prosperous states like Punjab, Haryana, Delhi, Himachal Pradesh and Gujarat that have performed quite satisfactorily in tackling child marriage over the last few years, are faced with the

problem of declining child sex ratio during the same period. The decline has been attributed to the twin factors of increasing masculinity of sex ratio at birth (SRB) and continued neglect of girl child after birth as traced through higher age-specific death rate of girls in the age group of 0-9 (Premi 2001). These regional and socio-cultural variations should be kept in mind while analyzing the performance of West Bengal.

### **Major Indicators of Gender Development in West Bengal**

West Bengal has been under a stable Left Front Government for more than three decades and the state has witnessed several programmes like land reforms, decentralised planning at the district and Panchayat level, introduction of 33 percent reservation for rural women in the local bodies, etc. The state government has also spent a substantial proportion of its budget provisions towards social uplift of weaker section and particularly for educational expansion. Consequently, the demographic profile of the state shows certain upward trend to some extent (Bagchi 2005:15). West Bengal's rank in the general sex ratio as well as in child (0-6) sex ratio has been six and two respectively in the country in 2001. The state also has consistently had lower levels of Infant Mortality Rate (IMR), a vital indicator of the quality of life in a society. In 2001, West Bengal's IMR for the girls was 49 which ranked fourth in the country after Kerala (9), Himachal Pradesh (36) and Maharashtra (48). The comparative figure for the country as a whole was 66. It is true that greater population pressure has put inevitable stress on basic infrastructure as well as on the provision of health and education services in West Bengal. Yet, the state has been successful to bring down both the birth and death rates significantly. The decline in the birth rate has been nearly the double that of the national average over the period 1990-2001. West Bengal's rank among 15 major states in the country in birth (22.7) and death (8.3) rates were seven and two respectively. So far as the crucial index of women literacy is concerned, West Bengal's literacy levels have always remained above the all India equivalent. In 2001 the state could achieve the highest decadal percentage increase of 13.05 percent and reach the rate of 59.61 as against the all India equivalent of 54.16 percent. This enabled the state to skip the ladder by one position leaving Gujarat behind as compared to 1991 and become fifth among 15 major states. Over and above, West Bengal is one of the better performing states in respect of Life Expectancy at Birth (LEB), and LEB for women has gone up from 54.70 in 1981 to 64.19 in 1996-2001.

Table 1 gives a brief idea about the comparative standing of West Bengal, the fourth populous state in the country<sup>7</sup>, in certain selected aspects of gender

development. The table is self-explanatory as it identifies the major areas where policy decisions and action plans are to be strengthened to achieve gender justice. As it appears, there are some vulnerable areas of concern for us. Thus, enrolment ratio for the girls is not impressive in the state and there is a sharp decline in the male to female ratio in respect of enrolment to class VIII from 78.3 percent in 1973 to 55.8 percent in 1993 notwithstanding gradual increase in Gross Enrolment Ratio in the state (Bagchi and Guha 2005: 53). In the 2001-2 academic session, the percentage of girl students in a class of 100 was 48.08 in the primary, 42.66 in the middle, 40.42 in the secondary, and 37.08 in the higher secondary sections (Census 2001). According to a study, the mean years of schooling for girls and boys in West Bengal during 1998-99 was 3.5 and 5.2 respectively and these figures just come close to the national average of 3.4 and 5.3 for girls and boys respectively (Tilak 2006: 37). According to NFHS-3 (2005-6), attendance of girls in school drops from 85% in the age group of 6-10 years to a mere 33% in the age group of 15-17 years in West Bengal. This gender differential in education explains our failure particularly in checking high dropout rate for girls in spite of some efforts through special schemes. It may also be noted in this context that only 18.03 percent of the female literates in the state as per the 2001 Census could study up to Madhyamik or beyond.

Again, low rate of employment generation have had particular impact upon the conditions of women (GWB 2004: 7). A significant part of the state is relatively more backward economically and also tends to be less advanced in terms of human

**Table 1**  
**Major Indicators of Gender Development in West Bengal**

Indicator / Year	Rate in India	Rate in West Bengal	Rank by Percentage Share
Sex Ratio, 2001	933	934	6
Child Sex Ratio, 2001	927	963	2
Female Literacy, 2001	54.16	59.61	5
Gender Disparity in Literacy Rates, 2001	0.216	0.167	11
Enrolment Ratio for Girls, (VI- VIII), 1997	40.1	40.5	9
Female Life Expectancy at Birth, 1996-2001	64.20	64.19	9
IMR for Girls, 2001	66	49	4
Under Five Mortality, 1997	95	68	4
Neonatal Mortality, 1998-99	43	32	3
Work Force Participation Rate for Women, 2001	25.68	18.32	15
Crime Against Women, 2007	185312*	16544*	3
Population Below Poverty Line, 1999-2000	26.10	27.02	6

\* Relate to incidence

Source: Census, 2001; Social Development Report, 2006; and NCRB, 2005.

development. Moreover, NCRB data show that incidences of crimes against women in the state have increased profoundly from 6811 cases in 1998 to 16,544 cases in 2007 (143 percent increase within the last decade) while total IPC crimes have increased by only 19 per cent (from 67950 cases in 1998 to 81102 cases in 2007) in the state during the period. It may be noted that incidences of crimes against women in the country as a whole have increased by only 37 percent (from 131475 to 180009 cases) during the last decade. West Bengal accounted for 8.9 percent of crimes against women in the country in 2007 as against 7.8 percent in the preceding year. As a corollary, the state has moved up the ladder from 6<sup>th</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> position in the country as per percentage share of crime against women in the country. Gender crimes like rape, dowry death, cruelty by husband and relatives, and molestation are increasing in a much greater proportion as compared to cognizable crimes under IPC in general. The growing reportage of crimes against women may be attributed to greater awareness of rights among women. While it is positive to note that violence against women do not go unnoticed in West Bengal, it cannot be the only explanation for rising incidences of gender violence in the state. Because in many instances crimes like child marriage, domestic violence, dowry torture or trafficking also remain unreported due to social stigma attached to the life of women. Although a general discussion on increasing crimes against women in West Bengal is beyond the scope of this paper, it can be argued that the need for greater protection and safety of our mothers, sisters, wives and daughters have increased many fold these days. In a world that stresses too much on 'market globalism' through liberalization, privatization and withdrawal of state initiative in the social sector, we need to specially look into gender based disparities for the emergence of a truly developmental state in active participation with the civil society organizations. Let us now concentrate on the problem of child marriage in West Bengal.

### **Age at Marriage and Child Marriage in West Bengal**

There is a silent complicity to child marriage in West Bengal; many rural and backward communities treat it as normal and routine. Parents know about the legal age of marriage and that there are laws to prevent and restrain child marriage and even to punish the guilt for violating the law. Yet only six cases were registered under the relevant Act in 2008 in West Bengal. It is worth noting here that in between 1994 and 2002, West Bengal did not register a single case of child marriage. But, in between 2003 and 2008, a total of 32 cases were registered in the state. Hence, the issue remains one of major concern in many parts of rural Bengal.

Historically, however, the problem of early marriage of girls was very acute in Bengal due to factors like hypergamy, foreign invasions and the growth of a very

strong patriarchal social structure. The issue therefore had drawn the attention of the social reformers like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Raja Ram Mohan Roy in early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Rammohan, Vidyasagar and others reflected the ideologies of Bengal Renaissance. These reformers persuaded a Law Commission in 1846 to make the sexual right of a husband over his child wife an offence. Owing to their efforts, the colonial Government was forced to pass a law in 1860 to deny sexual right of a husband over his child wife (below 10 years) (Kapadia 1966: 146-7). This ‘law of rape’ posed for the first time the problem of infant marriage in its grim reality. It also gave momentum to the reform movement and encouraged the intelligentsia to organize movements on similar issues even though reform movement in Bengal remained confined within the urban educated section of society. In spite of such valued efforts, the Singulate Mean Age at Marriage (SMAM) in Bengal during the entire Census period (starting from 1891) had remained below the national average till 1961 (Agarwala 1962). However since 1971, the SMAM in West Bengal increased steadily well above the all India figure for both men and women (see Table 2). It may be noted that in 1991, only 0.6 percent of women were married in the age group of 0 to 14 in the state. In the age group of 15-19, this figure was 33 percent as against 35 percent for India as a whole. Surprisingly, as Table 2 shows, the female mean age at marriage for West Bengal has started showing some ominous signs since 1991 and the state could not maintain its earlier lead. In the Rapid Household Survey (1998-99) conducted under the Reproduction and Child Health (RCH) programme also 51 percent of the currently married women are found to be under the age of 18 in West Bengal. The performance of the state in this respect is quite poor considering the fact that it ranked 12 among the 15 major states<sup>8</sup>.

**Table 2**  
**Singulate Mean Age At Marriage by Sex In India and West Bengal from 1961 to 1998-99**

Place	1961 Census		1971 Census		1981 Census		1991 Census		NFHS-2	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
India	21.9	15.9	22.6	17.2	23.5	18.4	24.0	19.3	24.9	19.7
WB	24.3	15.9	24.6	18.0	26.0	19.3	25.9	19.7	26.2	19.6

Source: NFHS-2, 1998-99, Table 2.4; Census of India 2001 (electronic data)

Note: NFHS-3 calculated a Median age at marriage of 17.2 for the women and 23.4 for men in the country in 2005-6.

In the 2001 Census also West Bengal had 28.73 percent of married women in the 15-19 age group as compared to the national average of 24.5 percent in the same category (see Table 3 and 4). Table 3 shows that the mean age at marriage for women in West Bengal is much lower than the national average during 1991-2001 and 1996-2001, even though the corresponding figures for West Bengal’s men are

better. The state had 1,47,16,567 child marriages during the last census decade and that accounted for nearly 48 percent of marriages among the females and 40 percent of all marriages. The figure marginally declined to 37.16 percent for the females and 33.47 percent for all the currently married persons during 1996 - 2001. Quiet apparently the higher rate of child marriage among the females in the state explains why the state has experienced a backward trend in respect of age at marriage in

**Table 3**  
**Mean age at Marriage of Currently Married Persons (0-33 age group) by Sex in India and West Bengal during 1991- 2001**

Place	Married During 1991-2001		Married During 1996-2001	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
India	22.6	18.3	23.5	19.6
West Bengal	23.47	17.77	23.87	18.92

Source: Compiled from Census of India 2001

**Table 4**  
**Age at Marriage of Currently Married Persons by Age Group in West Bengal, 2001**

Age Group	All Duration (%)		Married during 1996-2001(%)	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Less than 13	195639 (1.05)	1322490 (7.16)	1105 (0.04)	33202 (1.25)
14-15	144189 (0.78)	3330822 (18.03)	8980 (0.35)	248257 (9.35)
16-17	453211 (2.44)	4203689 (22.76)	62346 (2.44)	704854 (26.56)
18-19	1569948 (8.46)	4264806 (23.09)	236561 (9.28)	807141 (30.41)
20-21	3496579 (18.85)	2448561 (13.26)	446465 (17.51)	357336 (13.46)
22-23	3115827 (16.79)	1024388 (5.55)	473602 (18.57)	217256 (8.19)
24-25	3253220 (17.54)	669651 (3.62)	397482 (15.59)	128541 (4.84)
26-27	1739563 (9.38)	281941 (1.53)	297421 (11.66)	71984 (2.71)
28 +	3960116 (21.34)	380809 (2.06)	626382 (24.56)	128541 (4.84)
Age not stated	625353 (3.37)	542965 (2.94)	0	0
Total	18553645 (100)	18470122 (100)	2550344 (100)	2654167 (100)

Source: Compiled from Census of India 2001

recent years. The findings of the latest NFHS-3 further reveals that West Bengal, along with five other states, has experienced rise in under-18 marriages of women. It reports that the percentage of such marriages in West Bengal has increased from 45.9 percent to 53.3 percent since 1998-99. More surprisingly, the survey reveals that 21 percent of women aged 20-24 at Kolkata are married before 18. The DLHS-3 survey (IIPS 2008), conducted during 2007-08, has equally observed a rising trend, as 54.7% of currently married women in West Bengal age 20-24 are found married before the legal age of 18. It appears that there is a reversal of trend towards child marriage in the state and we need to explore reasons for this. In a recent survey by the Centre For Women's Development Studies among 900 tribal women of Medinipur district it was revealed that insecurity and rising expenses are forcing mothers who themselves married after the age of 18 to marry off their daughters before 18 (quoted in Rajalakshmi 2005:14).

**Table 5**  
**Singulate Mean Age At Marriage in West Bengal by Sex, District and Residence, 1991**

	Male (T)	Female (T)	Male (R)	Female (R)	Male (U)	Female (U)
W.B. Total	25.9	19.7	25.2	18.9	27.7	21.8
24 Parg. North	26.9	20.6	25.3	18.7	28.3	22.2
24 Parg. South	25.7	19.1	25.4	18.8	27.5	21.2
Bankura	25.5	19.4	25.3	19.2	27.8	21.6
Birbhum	24.4	18.6	24.2	18.4	26.3	20.2
Burdwan	25.6	19.5	25.2	18.9	26.6	20.6
Coochbehar	25.9	18.7	25.6	18.3	26.8	22
Dinajpur (Com)	25.8	19.2	25.4	18.7	28.3	21.8
Darjeeling	25.9	21.4	25.3	20.9	27.1	22.4
Hooghli	26.7	20.3	26.3	19.7	27.8	21.7
Howrah	27.2	20.9	26.7	20.1	27.6	21.6
Jalpaiguri	25.9	20	25.5	19.8	27.6	21.1
Kolkata	28.1	22.8	28.1	22.8	28.1	22.8
Malda	24.7	18.5	24.4	18.3	27.3	20.3
Murshidabad	24.2	18.2	23.9	18	26	20.1
Nadia	25.7	19.3	25.1	18.7	27.6	21.3
Midnapur (W+E)	25.4	19.2	25.2	18.9	27.3	21.1
Purulia	24.4	18.3	24.1	18	27.1	20.6

Source: Census, 1991

It should however be kept in mind that Census, NFHS or RCH statistics are for the state as a whole and the age at marriage in rural areas is much lower. Thus, the SMAM for rural women in the state in 1991 was 18.9 as compared to the state

average of 19.7 for the same category. Table 5 shows the comparative SMAM by sex, district and residence in West Bengal. It is evident from Table 6 that in the rural areas of the state, the rate of child marriage is at least five percent more than the state average. It is interesting to note here that in one micro study, 72.63 percent of the women folk artists, most of who belonged to SC category, were found to be married before the age of 18 (Bhattacharya 2005).

**Table 6**  
**Currently Married Women in West Bengal by Districts who married before 18**  
**during 1996-2001**

AREA	Currently Married Women (0-4 Duration)				Rural Women who married below 18	
	Total	< 18	Percentage	Rank	Percentage	Rank
West Bengal	2654167	986317	37.16	NA	43.0	NA
Burdwan	230056	81250	35.32	12	39.95	11
Birbhum	106494	50133	47.10	3	48.18	5
Bankura	106573	40617	38.11	10	39.03	12
Medinipur (E+ W)	341708	134817	39.45	9	40.71	10
Howrah	135265	33650	24.88	16	29.52	15
Hooghli	168863	49136	29.10	14	33.33	14
24 Parganas (N)	293565	95732	32.61	13	48.42	3
24 Parganas (S)	236093	95808	40.58	8	43.92	9
Kolkata	119864	18310	15.28	18	00	18
Nadia	160402	68274	42.56	6	46.36	6
Murshidabad	201204	106343	52.85	1	54.71	1
Dinajpur (N)	73957	26373	35.66	11	37.23	13
Dinajpur (S)	50959	23194	45.51	4	48.30	4
Malda	108621	53170	48.95	2	50.52	2
Jalpaiguri	111000	31410	28.30	15	29.43	16
Darjeeling	51979	10799	20.78	17	22.31	17
Cooch Behar	81716	34664	42.42	7	44.53	8
Purulia	75848	32637	43.03	5	44.76	7

Source: Compiled from Census of India 2001 (data in electronic form).

There is a strong relationship among age at marriage, female literacy level and other indices of development in different districts. The districts with low SMAM for women also have low rate of female literacy and urbanization. The 2001 Census data reveal that nearly 60 percent of girls marrying before 18 in West Bengal were either illiterate or just literate. Again, even if child marriage is prevalent in urban areas, the more urbanized (and literate) districts of the state like Kolkata, Hooghli and Darjeeling have lesser incidences of child marriage as compared to predominantly rural districts like Murshidabad, Malda, South Dinajpur, Bankura, Birbhum, Purulia, Coochbeher and Medinipur.

### Child Marriage in Study Areas: Gravity and Magnitude

The survey of 600 households in 28 rural settlements involving 2445 married family members has revealed that knowledge about the legal age of marriage of a girl or a boy is not unknown to many of the parents. Parents preferring early marriage have rather attempted to argue that rural girls appear (as we took some photographs of them) much younger than their actual age. In several instances, however, the father or the mother could not tell the exact age of their children. Confusions regarding the exact age of a girl or boy also have cropped up due to the facts that they either did not attend school, took late admission, dropped out after a stage or failed in one or more class / classes.

**Table 7**

**Mean Age at Marriage by Sex and Percentage of currently married (2000-2005) women with age at marriage below 18 in Rarh Bengal**

Area	Mean Age at Marriage		% of women married before 18 during 2000-2005 as per Survey	% of women married before 18 during 1996-2001 as per 2001 Census
	Male	Female		
Rarh Bengal	20.40	17.31	47.36	37.16
Burdwan	20.41	17.26	46.61	35.32
Birbhum	20.35	17.08	48.81	47.10
Bankura	20.29	17.25	47.34	38.11
Hooghli	20.45	17.38	46.85	29.10
Medinipur (W)	20.44	17.43	46.83	39.45 (E&W)
Purulia	20.33	17.22	48.01	43.03

Source: Field & Census Data

Table 7 shows the mean age at marriage by sex and percentage of currently married (2000-2005) women with age at marriage below 18. It demonstrates that our survey results have identified a higher proportion of child marriage in rural areas than those reported by the 2001 Census. This may be due to the following factors:

- i) Non-inclusion of hidden cases of child marriage in the Census data;
- ii) Reversal of trend towards early marriage in very recent years due to rising insecurity and rising cost of marriage (dowry), and
- iii) Collection of our data from the remote and sensitive rural areas where the proportion of child marriage is comparatively high that the general average suggested by Census through head counts on a much larger base.

Notwithstanding the deviation from the latest Census data, it can fairly be argued that even within a district where the mean age at marriage is otherwise 'normal', there are child marriage prone areas or localities. In such localities the social custom or tradition favours early marriage of girls. For instance, in some of the rural settlements under the Muraroi Police Station (Birbhum district) or Jamboni Police Station (Midnapur district), the practice of child marriage has become a 'norm' with nearly 90 percent of the families following it. In each of the 12 police stations where the survey was conducted, more than one localities of such nature can be found. Among certain castes like *jeley* (fisherman) and *muchhi* (cobbler) child marriage is a normal practice. These factors, however, hardly explain the magnitude of child marriage in the entire state. But, indeed, it has become a cause of concern for all.

Table 8

**Mean Age at Marriage by Sex and Percentage of Child Marriage by Social Category**

Social category	Mean Age at Marriage		Percentage of currently married women with the age of marriage below 18
	Male	Female	
All combined	20.40	17.31	47.36
SC	20.06	16.70	48.01
ST	19.52	15.91	57.27
General	20.81	17.88	44.39
Muslim	20.31	16.97	51.68

Source: Field Data

Table-8 further explains that villages inhabited by people belonging to general caste category have lesser number of child marriages as compared to those inhabited by Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes or Muslims. This also corroborates the higher proportion of child marriage in West Bengal as 54 percent of its population is from such communities. The high proportion of early marriages among the Scheduled Tribes has baffled us as we went to the field with the notion that tribes generally do not practice child marriage. In the 2001 Census, ST women (Rural) have recorded a higher (18.3) mean age at marriage as compared to the overall figure of 17.9 in the corresponding category for the country as a whole. We have also mentioned earlier that tribal dominated states like Nagaland, Sikkim, Mizoram and Manipur or areas like Darjeeling in West Bengal have attained higher age at marriage. We propose to explore the reasons for the prevalence of child marriage in rural areas in general and among certain communities in particular in the next section.

### **Who do people practice Child Marriage today?**

Our survey has identified several overlapping factors responsible for the practice of child marriage in rural areas and its large-scale prevalence and sustenance. These factors collectively have produced an ‘iron cage of culture and tradition’ in rural society, which either forces the parents to ‘marry off’ their daughters early or inspire them to support the practice of child marriage blindly. Let us now discuss these factors in brief.

(i) *Patriarchal values undermining the role of a girl child:* The patriarchal social structure of Bengali society that emerged since the seventh century has given its sanction to the practice of child marriage. Patriarchy operates at every level and even the mothers, who are socialized into such age-old values, argue for early marriage of their daughters. We are surprised to find out that it is the mothers who first raise the issue of early marriage in the family circle. Rural girls also grow up with the notion of their ‘temporary membership’ in the natal home. This is because patriarchy defines women’s role basically in terms of marriage and reproduction. These roles are considered not ‘productive’ economically. Patriarchy, therefore, makes women dependent on men for livelihood and security and this further reinforces their subordination in family and society. Since marriage is viewed as ‘essential’ for a girl, parents consider them a liability. This again creates a ‘culture of child marriage’ because parents feel relieved by ‘sending off’ the daughters as early as possible.

Patriarchy also creates gender inequality through its control over female sexuality. The desire and concern for the preservation of virginity and chastity of women strongly results in post-puberty marriage as this allows little scope for any suspicion about the ‘character’ of a girl. Earlier pre-puberty marriages were common among certain upper castes and the process of ‘Sanskritization’ has contributed to the spread of this evil among the lower sections of Indian society as well. Apart from caste, religious sanctions have also favoured child marriage. In the Muslim Personal Law, for instance, the age of puberty is identified as the right age of marriage.

(ii) *Notion of Marriage as Parental Responsibility:* Marriage in India is considered a religious ceremony and sacred duty of the parents rather than a matter of personal choice and preference. Here again patriarchal values deprive the girl from choosing her life partner based on the value of freedom. From this point of view, both inter-caste and love marriages are censured and rebuked. Parents often consider it safe to arrange early marriage for their

daughters before they become independent to press for their own choice. This is not to deny the fact that under aged boys and girls do sometimes develop preferences for each other and some of the early marriages are results of love affairs. In recent years, video halls showing different qualities of films are inducing alternative preferences and value frames among rural boys and girls. The concerns for the 'security' of the girl and the fear of premarital sexual relationship in a transitional society are pushing some parents to opt for early marriage.

There is another dimension to the trajectory of child marriage in rural society. Since late marriage is almost a stigma here, parents find it difficult to keep unmarried daughters at home. The problem of finding a suitable match in future may loom large if the number of girl child exceeds two. The fear of social ostracisation for 'careless' parents works as a deterrent. We have detected a number of cases where the wider family circle or neighbourhood had pressurized the guardians to go for early marriage. The 'match-makers' in rural society particularly play a negative role by building a continuous pressure on the prospective parents. It is due to such social pressure that opposition to child marriage is almost uncommon in rural society.

(iii) *Economic Reasons*: Apart from socio-cultural barriers, economic factors also contribute to this practice. Poverty, unemployment and rising cost of marriage are some of them. Our survey has demonstrated that in the economically and socially backward communities, child marriage is widespread. Thus, nearly 80 percent of families favouring early marriage of girls in rural Bengal belonged to BPL category. Even though poverty alone cannot explain this, poor tribal and lower caste families prefer sending off daughters as early as possible. This is partly due to the fact that a girl is considered economically unproductive and consequently a 'burden' to these cash starved families. As for the boy's family, it gets an 'unpaid servant' to do the household chores, often along with dowry. It is interesting to note here that dowry transactions in early marriage vary between Rs. 5000 and 20,000. Women are the best source of cheap labour in rural society and lack of alternative income opportunities for them, conduce to their subordination.

Along with poverty, unemployment problem and escalating demands for dowry also help in perpetuating child marriage<sup>9</sup>. The institution of marriage itself has become a problematic today as job loss, job insecurity or agricultural stagnation has reduced the number of prospective grooms in Bengal. As a

result, dowry demands of educated, well-placed bridegrooms have augmented many times. Today dowry has replaced social practice like bride price and other social criterion for settlement of marital ties and early marriage only partially help the parents to escape the iron grip of dowry. The reversal of trend towards child marriage may be attributed to these changes.

(i) *Factors Related to Schooling*: Illiteracy or lower levels of educational attainment deeply influence the age at marriage of girls. Formal education normally delays the process of fixing marriage. Hence, whenever a girl remains illiterate or withdraws herself from the school after the elementary stage, the gap between her actual age and the legal age at marriage widens. Inversely, the concern for protecting the girl at home if both the parents work outside looms large. Marriage then appears to be the only alternative available as other constructive opportunities are almost absent. The low level of literacy particularly among the SC (46.9 %), ST (29.15 %) <sup>10</sup> and Muslim (49.75 %) females in the state is a major factor promoting child marriage. And in rural Bengal, these figures are much lower <sup>11</sup>. As per the NFHS-3 data, 67.9 percent of the women marrying before 18 in Bengal were illiterate. Our survey also reveals that more than 78 per cent of girls married before the age of 18 were either illiterate (39.26 %) or have studied up to the primary level (38.45 %). Only 13.84 percent of women in this category have crossed the Secondary stage. This means that very few of the girls are withdrawn from schools just before the marriage. Rather drop-out from school due to factors like poverty, long distance of the secondary school, poor transportation, absenteeism from school due to household chores, poor performance in school examinations and unwillingness of the parents crucially influence the institution of marriage. For children in the 10-14 age group, withdrawal of educational opportunities also makes them vulnerable to iniquities like child labour and trafficking.

(ii) *Lack of Awareness*: Lack of proper awareness about the adverse effects of child marriage particularly on the health of the adolescent girl is a major concern for us. Adequate and accurate information about sexual and reproductive health is not available to the adolescents. Simultaneously, the parents and the social circle that justify child marriage are hardly impressed about the reason for delaying marriage up to 18 (for girls) and 21 (for boys). This is because marriage is considered necessary in rural society after a girl attains certain physical growth. The notion that a girl loses her physical attraction after a certain age following puberty is very profound among many illiterate or semi-literate parents. Hence girls above 14 and boys above 17 are scrutinized consistently as prospective bride or bridegroom in rural society. The social pressure that builds up due to these negotiations makes the logic

and scientific reasons behind legal marriage quite obscure and weak. As the legal definition of a 'child' in India also varies among the ages of 14 (for child labour), 18 (voting age for adult) and 21 (legal age of marriage for the boys), confusions tend to flourish. Often the health consequences of early pregnancies or childbirth to a young mother are attributed to non-age factors like carelessness or work pressure. As a corollary, cultural and religious preferences opposing or ignoring the legal prescriptions of marriage continue unabatedly.

(iii) *Miscellaneous Factors*: Child marriage is the combined effect of many socio-cultural, economic, demographic and psychological factors. Hence, the reasons listed above cannot be the only explanations for child marriage in rural West Bengal. Thus, lower age at marriage for boys, trafficking in women and children, family size and religious reasons should also be taken into consideration for explaining child marriage. A boy, who starts working at an early age after leaving the school, is considered 'adult' by the time he becomes 17 or 18. Income earning capacity of those child labourers also enhances by that time and the parents start thinking of his marriage to put him 'under control'. In the rural areas of 'Rarh Bengal', a large number of boys marry before the age of 20. The lower age at marriage of the rural boys, therefore, inversely limits the possibility of delayed marriage for the girls. The risk involved in such delay restricts even women panchayat members to protest against child marriage.

Similarly, child marriage is one of the easiest modes applied by the traffickers to send young girls from one place to another. In traditional village community, there is a stigma attached to single woman. Inability to arrange marriage of daughter is a cause of embarrassment and matter of shame for the parents. In this situation, when the traffickers approach the poor families with marriage proposal (sometimes with cash reward between Rs.1000-5000 on an average) minus dowry, the parents find it hard to refuse the offer. After marriage, the girl is sold and resold, until she reaches the ultimate destination. The method of marriage to traffic a girl has one great advantage. It protects the husband and the recruiter from the immediate accusations of trafficking. The *dalals* also shame and silence the parents efficiently by offering a share in the benefit of their daughter's sale. Again, large size of the family and particularly the number of girl child intensify the risk factor. In some rare instances, the death or illness of the father have also resulted in early marriage of daughters. Migration from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand has spatial

impact on the prevalence of the social evil in the bordering areas of the state. Furthermore, lack of initiative and action on the part of civil society and administrative machinery has provided sustenance to the social practice of child marriage.

### **Tackling Child Marriage**

Tackling child marriage and other forms of gender exploitation is an uphill task as it would ultimately tantamount to challenging those age-old institutions, practices and values that have deep roots in Indian society. Achieving this goal would require structural changes at every level as well as establishment of mechanisms to monitor and enforce relevant laws. Consequently, the strategies that we are recommending to 'control' child marriage would produce long term and enduring impact to challenge gender inequality. Hence, we would expect that a total and all-out attempt be made to implement the following steps:

- Regular and vigorous campaign to create public awareness about gender issues in general and the negative consequences of child marriage in particular should be launched. It is imperative to provide young women with information regarding the dangers of early pregnancies and related health problems. It is not sufficient to say that 'Marry after 18 or 21'. The campaigning should make use of documentary films and other publicity materials to show why the legal age at marriage is scientific and desirable. A network of government, non-government and professional agencies including Social Science departments of various colleges and universities should be developed to lead the campaign.
- Steps should be taken to make registration of marriages compulsory in the state. Very recently our Supreme Court has asked the relevant governments to do this. We propose that the Panchayat and other local bodies should be involved in the process since it would be difficult for the governments to employ required number of marriage registration officers to cover the entire population. The fees charged for such registration should also be minimal so that the poor parents can afford to pay it. These steps would expedite and popularise the process of compulsory marriage registration in villages. The law enforcing machinery should be activated to take proper action against the lawbreakers in this respect.
- At the same time, registration of birth should also be made compulsory in the country and the process involved in such registration should be decentralized by empowering the hospitals to issue necessary document.

- Support mechanisms to ensure 100 percent enrolment at the primary level have already been intensified in the state. Steps like *Sarbasiksha Abhijan*, mid-day-meal, etc., have by now begun paying dividends in the rural and backward communities. What is needed now is to ensure more years of schooling for both boys and girls at the Secondary and Higher Secondary level. Upgrading all the existing primary and secondary schools to the next stage of schooling may partially do this. Also steps like scholarship for girls belonging to poor SC, ST and other BPL families, employment of at least 33 percent women teachers in schools, improved quality of education, vocational courses for the dropouts should be taken.
- Alternative strategies for women's empowerment are needed to improve the conditions and status of rural women. Such empowerment may begin with awareness generation, motivation building and adult literacy. It is necessary to create alternative avenues of employment and earning for poor women through micro-credits provided to self-help groups. The experience of the working of such groups in West Bengal in recent times has proved to be very encouraging and positive. Simultaneously, more attention should be paid to rural industrialization and development of infrastructure in remote areas.
- The current family welfare programme should be linked up with certain incentives for achievement and disincentives for failure. Smaller size of families would help the poor people to afford necessary education and training for a limited number of children.
- A compulsory Social Science Subject should be introduced at the school level to impart value education related to social life, social problems, gender issues, reproductive and health matters, human rights and the like. School children should be informed about the rights and duties of citizens of the country, laws regarding child marriage and child labour.
- Following the experience of Unicef in Murshidabad's Jangipur subdivision (West Bengal) where a 'Sishumitra Project' has been recently initiated (Unicef 2005), model type of child friendly villages should be set up in different parts of the country. These child friendly villages would be a place where all births are registered, all children are fully immunized, all children in the age group 6-14 years are enrolled and retained in school, and no girls to be married before 18 years of age.
- Finally, the society at large, the media, the political parties, and the NGOs - all have a critical role to promote the rights of powerless, non-vocal and

vulnerable group of society. We strongly believe the a strong political will and community action would go a long way in establishing gender justice and gender equity in contemporary Bengali as well as Indian society.

### *Notes*

1. As per NFHS-3 (2005-6), one out of every five girl got married in West Bengal by the age 15. By contrast, only one out of hundred boys did so. Not only are the girls married at a much earlier age than boys, many girls are married to men much older than them. For instance, more than 25 per cent of girls in West Bengal are married to men who are ten or more years older. A study by Sanlaap (2007) has found that marriage of girls as young as 9 years took place in every single block in the eight districts of West Bengal.
2. It is also argued that the legal age at marriage for both boys and girls should be fixed at 18 as a person becomes an 'adult' to vote in elections by that age. But considering the social preference of marriage of a younger wife to an older husband in India, the gap between the marriageable ages of boy and girl is maintained. There are however genuine doubts about the seriousness of our lawmakers to restrict child marriage as the term 'child' is defined differently in different places giving rise to confusions in public mind.
3. The Women and Child Development and Social Welfare Department, The Government of West Bengal, and UNICEF sponsored the survey. The authors are grateful to all concerned for their cooperation and help.
4. See K.M. Kapadia (1966) and Bali Raj Pande (1949) for details.
5. For instance, Rama Krishna Paramhansa married a girl of six years; M.G. Ranade married a girl of eight years; Marahshi Karve married a girl of nine years (Ahuja 1993: 164).
6. In Rajasthan nearly 50,000 children are married every year on a religious occasion called 'Akha Teej'. The state had 68.3 percent of women married under the age of 18 in 1998-99 (NFHS-2).
7. The state accounts for 7.8 percent of country's population having a share of only 2.7 percent of the total geographical area. Consequently, the density of population in the state is 903 in 2001, and it is highest among the Indian states. This 'demographic compulsion' is accompanied by a 'social compulsion' of nearly 54 percent of its population being socially and economically backward (SC, ST and Minorities together).
8. Kerala, which topped the list, had only 9.1 percent of women marrying under the age of 18.
9. In our survey 73 percent of marriages were found to be involved in transacting dowry and income level does not seem to be a bar for such endeavours.
10. Arun Kumar Ghosh (2007: 118) has shown that gender disparities in education among the STs is higher in West Bengal as compared to even Jharkhand and such disparities increase at the higher levels of education. It may be noted here that as compared to the all India achievement of 34.76 percent literacy among the tribal women in 2001, only 29.15 of West Bengal's tribal women are literate.

11. As per the 2001 Census, the female literacy rate in rural Bengal is at least 6 percent lower (53.2 %) than the state average of 59.6. It is a matter of serious concern that SC women have literacy below 30 percent in as many as 54 CD Blocks in the state in 2001. More surprisingly, the literacy rate of ST women for the same year is below 20 percent in 62 CD Blocks in the state.

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