

WHY DOES CHILD MARRIAGE PERSIST IN WEST BENGAL

Speaker : **Dr Deepita Chakravarty**

8 June 2018

Department of History

Diamond Harbour Women's University

The Department of History of **Diamond Harbour Women's University** organized a special lecture on 8th June 2018. The theme of the special lecture was '**Why does child marriage persist in West Bengal**'. The resource person for this lecture was **Dr. Deepita Chakravarty**, Professor of Economics at Ambedkar University, Delhi..

In India, marriage of girls below the age of 18 years is barred by law but the incidence of marriage of girls below that age is notably high. About 40 percent girls in the state get married below the age of 18 years followed by early motherhood. Dr Chakravarty explained in detail the reasons why child marriage is still practised in West Bengal, and why the state is a chart topper in this respect. She also highlighted whether there has been any change in the rate of child marriage as a result of government schemes such as Kanyashree. Finally, it concluded with a question-and-answer session. She compared the situation in West Bengal with that of Bangladesh, where the average age of marriage is relatively higher.

She said among the major reasons cited for the persistence of underage marriage of girls in West Bengal are endemic poverty, illiteracy and lack of employment opportunities. Existing literature also highlights the increasing incidence of dowry even among the lower strata of Indian society and the continued observance of age-old cultural traditions that lead to child or adolescent marriages in West Bengal. Lack of a viable alternative future could also be considered a reason for clinging to old habits and traditions. The unavailability of new employment opportunities in a poorly performing economy, particularly in the industrial sector, assumes special significance in the absence of women-oriented state initiatives, where there are few or no employment prospects, there is little incentive for parents to continue the education of their daughters to higher levels, leading to the persistence of the old tradition of early marriage.

She has shown that in the absence of new economic opportunities both in the urban and rural areas, schooling till a higher age has not been seen by families as essential for girls. In the

rural areas, apart from agricultural work younger women mainly participate in home-based manufacturing which is considered to be appropriate for women who are housebound and 'domesticated' by custom and tradition. In the urban areas. Women's work is mainly dominated by domestic service seen as an extension of what women are 'born to do'. None of these occupations requires any levels of schooling nor is incompatible with early marriage and motherhood.

In 2005-2006 when every state showed a decline and that to quite notably in some cases, WB showed almost a 10 percent point increase and had moved up to the fifth position. The speaker recently conducted primary survey in four districts of WB and indicates that the mean age at marriage is now around 15/16 years in the rural areas. These primary investigation also suggest that around 10 years ago the mean age at marriage was generally lower. It has been noted that in recent years adolescent brides have attended school till the 8th standard. Secondary data show not only a 100 percent school enrollment for girls in WB but also a significant decline in the dropout rates at the secondary level. According to the NFHS (2015-2016), in rural WB around 20 percent girls attain ten years of schooling. Anecdotal evidence suggests the likely positive role of the 'Kayslee' policy of the State Government in encouraging the schooling of girls. It has been found the parents are willing to invest in daughters' education as long as there is some direct support from the state. Thus, it appears that improvements in girls' education in terms of enrollment and retention and a higher age at marriage exist side by side with a slower rate of decline in underage marriage among girls in WB.