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Socio-Cultural and Contextual Drivers of Child Marriage: Some Reflections from the Field in Rural Malda, West Bengal

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Abstract

Child marriage remains a persistent socio-cultural issue in rural India. West Bengal is one of the most highly prevalent states of child marriage in India. The practice has been deeply entrenched in society for many years. This study explores the underlying drivers of child marriage based on a field visit conducted in rural Malda – a socioeconomically disadvantaged region in West Bengal. The study identified multiple socio-cultural and contextual drivers that are intermeshed with one another to perpetuate the practice. Findings reveal that limited access to education, economic constraints, gender norms, dowry demand, male out-migration, fear of elopement, concerns related to safety and security, and natural disasters such as floods are the major drivers of child marriage in rural Malda. Experiences from the field visit reveal that girls' schooling is often discontinued due to financial hardship, gendered expectations, safety concerns, or lack of infrastructure in the school. At the same time, prevailing patriarchal norms devalue girls' education, limit their economic participation and prioritise early marriage. Household poverty combined with increasing dowry demand and environmental disasters compelled families to marry off their daughters at a young age to minimise the financial burden on the families. Fear of elopement and concerns over family honour, safety and security issues due to the absence of male members in the family can further accelerate marriage decisions. Findings highlight that child marriage is not merely a result of economic deprivation but is deeply entrenched in socio-cultural norms and systemic gender inequalities. Child marriage elimination efforts, therefore, address underlying patriarchal gender norms that devalue girls' education, restrict their mobility, and prioritise marriage over personal development.

Keywords

Child marriage,
Dowry, Elopement,
Education, Family
honour, Household
poverty, India,
Patriarchal norms.

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Introduction

Child marriage remains a major challenge globally and a violation of human rights. It disproportionately affects girls and limits their educational attainment and economic opportunities (UNICEF & UNFPA, 2018). Child marriage has far-reaching consequences, including poor health, elevated risk of intimate partner violence, and erosion of autonomy and dignity (Paul, 2018; Verma & Choudhury, 2024; Raj, 2010; Priyadharshini & Karthiga, 2026). According to recent estimates, approximately 640 million women were married before turning the age of 18 years worldwide, with South Asia accounting for a substantial share of the global burden (UNICEF & UNFPA, 2018; UNICEF, 2023). Although considerable progress has been made in reducing child marriage over the past two decades, the practice remains widespread in many low- and middle-income countries, particularly among socioeconomically disadvantaged populations (UNICEF, 2018; Liang et al., 2021).

Historically, child marriage is deeply entrenched in Indian societies. The practice is closely interconnected with patriarchal family structures, concerns related to female sexuality, caste endogamy, dowry practices, and socio-religious norms (Chowdhury, 2004; Jejeebhoy, 2019). Recognising its adverse consequences for girls' health, education, and overall well-being, India has progressively strengthened its legislative framework to curb the practice. The first legal intervention, the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 (also known as the Sarda Act), sought to restrain the solemnization of child marriages and set 14 years as the minimum age for marriage. This was subsequently strengthened through the Child Marriage Restraint Amendment Act in

1976, when legal enforcement was initiated to increase the marriage age from 14 to 18 years for girls. Furthermore, the Child Marriage Restraint Act was replaced by the Child Marriage Prohibition Act, 2006, which recognised child marriage as voidable, provides legal remedies to affected children, and prescribes penalties for those facilitating such unions. Under the current legal framework, the minimum age of marriage is 18 years for women and 21 years for men. Despite these legal measures and sustained policy efforts, child marriage remains a significant social challenge. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-6, 2023–24), approximately one in every five women aged 20–24 years (20.1%) was married before attaining the age of 18 years (IIPS, 2026). Although the prevalence of child marriage has declined over time, substantial geographical disparities persist across states and districts (Paul, 2020; Srinivasan et al., 2015; Gausman et al., 2024).

West Bengal consistently reports one of the highest levels of child marriage in India. According to NFHS-6, nearly 36.4% of women aged 20–24 years in the state are still married before turning 18. The practice is particularly alarming in rural areas, where 41.5% of women were married during childhood (IIPS, 2026). During the nineteenth century, Bengal was a main hub of social reforms. Social reformers such as Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar campaigned against child marriage and promoted women's education. Nevertheless, the practice continues to persist in several parts of the region. West Bengal is not the worst-performing state in terms of gender development indicators. The state holds a better-off position in terms of gender ratio, female education, maternal and infant mortality, as well as women's status in

society (Ghosh & Kar, 2010). Thus, the persistence of child marriage in West Bengal presents an important *paradox*: improvements in social development indicators coexist with high rates of early marriage. In response to the alarming rate of child marriage, the Government of West Bengal introduced the *Kanyashree Prakalpa* programme in 2013, which provides conditional cash transfers to encourage girls to remain in school and delay marriage until adulthood. The programme has contributed to improved school retention and increased awareness regarding the legal age of marriage (Sen & Dutta, 2018). However, recent evidence suggests that child marriage continues to occur in several districts, particularly among socially and economically marginalised populations (Sen et al., 2024; Roy & Chouhan, 2021).

Malda district represents one such setting where child marriage remains highly prevalent (Roy & Chouhan, 2021). According to NFHS-5, nearly half (49%) of women aged 20–24 years in Malda were married before reaching 18 years of age, making it one of the worst-performing districts in West Bengal (IIPS & ICF, 2021). The district is characterised by high levels of poverty, educational disadvantage, seasonal male out-migration, overwhelming dependence on agriculture, and recurrent flooding (Development & Planning Department, Govt. of West Bengal, 2007). These socioeconomic vulnerabilities coexist with deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and dowry practices, creating conditions that may perpetuate child marriage. Relatively few qualitative studies have examined how local social, cultural, and contextual factors shape decisions surrounding early marriage.

Previous studies have identified poverty, low educational attainment, gender

inequality, social norms, and limited economic opportunities as important determinants of child marriage in West Bengal (Roy & Chouhan, 2021, 2022; Paul, 2026; Sen et al., 2024, 2026; Ghosh, 2011a, 2011b; Ghosh & Kar, 2010; Chakravarty, 2018). Although some efforts have been made to explore local contextual drivers and community norms related to child marriage in the Malda district (Ghosh, 2011a; Ghosh, 2011b; Roy & Chouhan, 2021), there has been limited understanding of the lived experiences, perceptions, and contextual realities that influence marriage decisions within rural communities. Understanding these local dynamics is essential for designing effective interventions and policies. Against this backdrop, the present study explores the socio-cultural and contextual drivers of child marriage in rural Malda, West Bengal, through a field-based qualitative study. Specifically, it seeks to understand how poverty, education, gender norms, migration, dowry, and environmental vulnerabilities interact to shape marriage decisions in rural communities.

Data and Methods

Study Setting

This study was conducted in the rural areas of Malda district. Malda district was purposively selected because it records one of the highest prevalence of child marriage in the state and presents a unique context for understanding the persistence of the practice. According to the NFHS-5 (2019-21), nearly half (49%) of women aged 20–24 years in the district were married before attaining 18 years of age, substantially higher than the national and state averages (IIPS & ICF, 2021). The district is also characterised by low female educational attainment, with

only about 30% of women having completed ten or more years of schooling. Furthermore, Malda is marked by widespread poverty, with approximately 15.6% of the population multi-dimensionally poor (NITI Aayog, 2023).

Fieldwork was particularly undertaken in two villages of the Gazole block: Bartali and Paschim Kasba. The villages were purposively selected owing to their socio-economic and educational disadvantages, which are closely associated with the persistence of child marriage. Both villages have a primary school. For high school, children need to travel to the neighbouring village. As per the 2011 Census, both villages have a high concentration of Scheduled Caste (Bartali: 35%; Paschim Kasba: 33%) and Scheduled Tribe (Bartali: 50%; Paschim Kasba: 42%) population – groups that have historically experienced social and economic marginalisation. Female literacy levels are relatively low, particularly in Paschim Kasba (53%), compared with Bartali (63%). Given their disadvantaged socio-economic profile, limited educational opportunities, and high vulnerability to poverty, these villages provide an important context for understanding the socio-cultural and structural drivers of child marriage in rural Malda.

Agriculture is the main occupation and primary source of livelihood in the study region. Apart from farm activities, *beedi*-making, weaving, and daily labour work in the informal sectors, such as construction, are supplementary sources of income. Seasonal male out-migration is common due to limited local employment opportunities. The district is also highly vulnerable to recurrent flooding caused by the Mahananda, Kalindri, Tangan, and other river systems, which frequently disrupt

livelihoods and exacerbate household economic insecurity (Development & Planning Department, Govt. of West Bengal, 2007). These socio-economic and environmental vulnerabilities make Malda a particularly relevant setting for examining the factors that sustain child marriage.

Study Design and Participants

The study adopted a qualitative research design using semi-structured in-depth interviews to explore the socio-cultural and contextual factors associated with child marriage. This approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of lived experiences, social norms, and decision-making processes that are often difficult to capture through quantitative surveys. Data collection was conducted between March and April 2021. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of individuals with direct experience and knowledge of child marriage practices. The study included women who had been married before the age of 18 years and parents of adolescent girls residing in the study villages. Efforts were made to include participants from diverse socio-economic, religious, and caste backgrounds to capture a wide range of perspectives. A total of 30 in-depth interviews were completed. Interviews continued until thematic saturation was achieved, that is, when no substantially new information or themes emerged from subsequent interviews.

Data Collection

The interview guide covered topics such as educational experiences, perceptions of girls' education, household economic conditions, livelihood opportunities, dowry practices, gender norms, migration, safety concerns, marriage decision-making, and personal

experiences related to child marriage. All interviews were conducted in Bengali by the author with the help of a female researcher, who is quite familiar with the local context and culture. Interviews were carried out at locations convenient to participants and lasted approximately 20–30 minutes. Prior to data collection, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews commenced. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy. Detailed field notes were also maintained to capture contextual information and non-verbal observations that complemented the interview narratives.

Data Analysis

The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim in Bengali and subsequently translated into English. The translated transcripts were reviewed multiple times to ensure accuracy and familiarity with the data. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the qualitative information following an iterative process of coding, categorisation, and theme development. Initially, transcripts were read repeatedly to identify meaningful units of information related to child marriage experiences and perceptions. Similar codes were grouped into broader categories, from which key themes and sub-themes emerged. The coding process focused on identifying recurring patterns, shared experiences, and contextual explanations of child marriage. Themes were continuously reviewed and refined through repeated examination of the transcripts. Illustrative quotations were selected to support the interpretation of each theme and to preserve participants' voices.

In presenting the findings, participants' ages were used to maintain confidentiality while providing contextual information.

Drivers of Child Marriage

The tradition of early marriage is deeply entrenched in rural Malda. Despite improvements in girls' educational participation and growing awareness of the adverse consequences of child marriage, the practice remains widespread. The persistence of child marriage reflects the intersection of economic vulnerability, gender inequality, and entrenched socio-cultural norms. In this predominantly agricultural region, daughters often occupy a lower social status and have limited access to higher education and gainful employment opportunities. Consequently, parents frequently view marriage as the most viable pathway for their daughters. Economic hardship, landlessness, dowry obligations, social pressure, concerns regarding girls' safety and sexuality, and fears of elopement further reinforce the practice, contributing to the continued prevalence of child marriage in the study area. In the following sections, I discuss how economic vulnerabilities, gender norms, and broader socio-cultural contexts intersect and mutually reinforce to perpetuate child marriage in rural Malda.

Devaluing Girls' Education

Education is a key route towards the upliftment of an individual, a community, and society. It serves as a pathway to change or break the harmful norms that exist in society. Education acts as a protective factor against early marriage among girls. Girls with secondary or higher levels of education are significantly more likely to postpone marriage. However, the unfortunate reality is that fewer girls can attain secondary and

higher levels of education in rural parts of Malda. There are several reasons for low levels of education among the participants: lack of access to schooling/no high school within the village, limited spending on girls' education, constraints from parents/family, and the burden of gendered roles (domestic workload). Parents of adolescent girls stated that the education of daughters is less desirable, and for them, educating girls yields no returns for their family.

Educating girls is a waste of money and time; it has no practical use. Instead, girls should be married off when they seem mature enough to take responsibility for their in-laws' families. (IDI, a father of an adolescent girl)

Parents and elder members of the family are the primary decision-makers for daughters' marriage in rural Malda. As a corollary of the gendered responsibilities of women in rural households, parents choose to send their sons to school and prepare their girls for marriage. They are reluctant to spend money on their daughters' education because they believe such expenses are unnecessary and unwise. In rural Malda, it is common for girls to drop out of school after a certain number of years of education, especially after completing 10th or 12th grade.

Child brides expressed how a lack of access to education leads to their discontinuing secondary education. Further, fear of eve-teasing and sexual harassment works as a compelling factor for the early marriage of girls. A young married woman stated:

In my natal village, there was only one primary school. There was no high school nearby in our locality. I had to go to a neighbouring village by bicycle

for my high school studies, which was 5 km away from my home. My parents decided not to send me to school after the 10th-grade examination. At the same time, my parents felt that going outside was not safe for me because there had been eve-teasing and sexual harassment cases in our locality. (IDI, 21-year-old woman)

Several women described leaving school following parental death, illness, or financial crises that forced them to assume household responsibilities. A young bride left school due to her father's sudden death and the burden of domestic responsibility:

I [the girl] could not complete my education and left school when I was 14 (Class 7). After my father's death, my mother and I took responsibility for my younger brother's education. I used to help my mother with household chores. My marriage was fixed when I was 16, as soon as the groom's family agreed to a smaller amount of dowry. (IDI, an 18-year-old woman)

Participants also expressed the disadvantages of education. Some believed that continued schooling could negatively affect girls' marital prospects because of the fear of dating relationships and pre-marital sexual involvement, which could potentially damage the chances of marriage and family dignity. Others expressed the view that older and more educated girls are often considered less desirable in the marriage market, thereby reducing their chances of securing a suitable match.

Girls should not learn in the same way that boys do because if they complete their education, they will grow older and may not be able to find a husband because their marriageable age will

have elapsed. It is harder to learn after marriage since married women are bullied by society if they study after marriage. (IDI, a mother of an adolescent girl)

A woman who has a daughter stated that an educated girl is less desirable, and prospective grooms want less educated brides as life partners. She expressed that:

Typically, boys drop out of school and start working in the agricultural fields. Some boys migrate to other places for work. Boys often prefer a girl who is less educated than they are. (IDI, a 27-year-old woman)

School dropout is a significant problem in the rural areas of Malda. Factors such as poor road connectivity and a lack of educational infrastructure are key deterrents to girls' educational attainment (Ghosh, 2011a). The marriage of girls is typically delayed by formal schooling beyond the secondary level. Therefore, the process of fixing marriages for females beyond the age of 16 is expedited by the limited availability of higher secondary schools in the village or nearby and the perceived poor quality of education. The dismal performance of many students in the secondary examination is another factor contributing to early school dropout. There are several reasons why parents may be inclined to withdraw their daughters from school. These include long distances from school, unsafe roads connecting to school, remoteness, and failure in a specific class, which can lead to repetition (Ghosh, 2011a, 2011b).

Observations from the field visit also reveal that despite the presence of schools in villages and colleges in nearby places, girls are still married off early. Such an observation is noted in the study villages,

where a primary school and a high school are located within one km distance, and a college is also found within 3 km. Most of the girls in these villages are enrolled in school till second level. Despite easy access to college, only a few girls were able to attend college, and the majority dropped out during their studies. Therefore, it is not education, but rather household composition and constant social pressure, that perpetuates the practice of early marriage in these villages.

Limited Employment Opportunities

Participants also pointed out lower job prospects for girls as one of the reasons for marrying at an early age. Formal education significantly delays the age of marriage for girls. However, parents in rural areas do not wish for their daughters to pursue higher education beyond secondary schooling because employment opportunities are limited for young girls. Chakravarty (2018) in her study also found that a lack of formal employment opportunities could exacerbate the risk of early marriage among girls. Parents often cited that they do not send their daughters outside of their locality due to a lack of safety and security for girls and a high risk of sexual harassment. Most families were engaged in agricultural activities. Families work primarily on their farming land or as agricultural labourers for wages. Women are mostly homemakers, as well as working in the agricultural field as cultivators or daily wage labourers. Apart from farm activities, *beedi-making* and weaving are the primary sources of livelihood for women. This low-paying occupation was unable to ease the parents' financial stress. Therefore, getting a girl married off is viewed as "getting rid of daily spending on her". In rural Malda, parents used to withdraw their daughters from

school before and after the secondary examination. The father of an adolescent girl stated that girls should assist in household chores. In his words:

Girls should assist their mothers in household tasks, and they must learn household work (cooking) at home. They should be married off as soon as a suitable groom is found, and they should take responsibility for the in-laws' family (IDI, a father of an adolescent girl).

Stereotypical thinking about women's roles in economic activities further exacerbates the susceptibility of early marriage among girls. Many parents believe that girls should do domestic tasks instead of studying. If their daughters can perform household chores properly and take responsibility for their in-laws' families, it will save the reputation of the giver's family. Gendered roles and a lack of education constrain women from gainful economic activities. In patriarchal societies, the division of labour leads to limited opportunities for women to work outside, and therefore, they become economically dependent on men. Sen and Ghosh (2021) noted that women in many poor families are absorbed into marriage at a young age for the requirement of domestic duties like cooking, cleaning, and taking care of elderly persons in the family. Parents believe marriage is the ultimate solution to live a better life for their daughters.

Household Poverty and Environmental Vulnerability

Financial constraints of families are cited as a major driving force behind the practice of child marriage in the study setting. Despite some efforts, "poverty regimes" are pervasive in rural Malda. Most of the

families are engaged in agricultural activities as daily-wage labourers, followed by construction and other informal sectors. Several earlier studies have identified poverty as a primary driver of child marriage (Ghosh 2011a, 2011b; Sen et al., 2024).

The financial hardship of families often forces their daughters to marry early instead of educating them, due to the high expense of education and the rising demand for dowry at a later age. Daughters are considered an economic burden among many families in the study region. To alleviate the financial strain on the family, parents feel pressured to arrange marriages for their daughters at an early age. In poverty-stricken families, the marriage of daughters is perceived as a way to escape challenging economic and material circumstances, as well as a way to meet their most basic requirements.

Financial constraints often lead to dropping out of school, resulting in girls having low levels of education and a lack of economic opportunities. Such conditions encourage child marriage practices. Child brides with limited economic opportunities and engagement in unpaid domestic work further increase the risk of falling into poverty. Therefore, the practice of child marriage works as a trap for falling into poverty.

A child bride stated how financial hardship forced her to marry at an early age. In her own words:

I [the participant] was only 16 years old when I was married to my husband [Amit]. My father was working as a daily wage labourer in the agricultural field, and my mother was involved in

beedi-making. We were two sisters and one brother. I was the elder daughter in our family. It was very difficult for my parents to bear the educational expenses for all of us. Suddenly, a marriage proposal came through my relatives when I was in 9th grade. At that time, my parents arranged my marriage because they thought they would not get a suitable groom for me in future. I had to agree with my parents' decision because our financial condition was not good at that time. (IDI, 26-year-old woman)

Another woman who was married during her childhood noted that she married her cousin-brother to avoid dowry payments. She said:

I was married when I reached my 15th birthday. My parents fixed my marriage with my cousin-brother because there was no dowry [demand] from their side. I also agreed with their decision. (IDI, a 24-year-old Muslim woman)

Findings demonstrated that household poverty, coupled with dowry demand, escalates the practice of child marriage. Early marriage is encouraged by poverty and related issues since poverty puts restrictions on a family's ability to pay for necessities like clothing, maintenance, and education. Because poor people typically live in temporary housing and parents work long hours away from home to support their families, there is an added reason to worry for the girls' safety and security in this situation. Escalating the demand for dowry is another reason why many families in rural Malda opt to marry off their daughters at a young age.

Household composition further plays an important role in determining the practice of child marriage among economically poor families. In large families, when there is more than one daughter, parents are often pressured to marry off their daughters as early as a prospective bridegroom is found. In families with many siblings, the elder daughter is generally married off very soon. Parents start searching for prospective grooms early because they wish to complete the "essential duty" of marriage for all daughters before they die. Participants indicated that taking care of younger siblings and the burden of household chores contributed to school dropout and subsequently accelerated marriage. A child bride who has two younger sisters stated how she married at an early age due to the economic hardship of the family:

I was forced to marry when I was 15 years old, studying in class eleven. I had two younger sisters. My father was working as a construction worker. Our economic condition was not suitable for all three of us to continue our studies. I was taken away from school before completing my secondary education. My parents arranged my marriage soon after an appropriate bridegroom was found. (IDI, a 22-year-old woman)

It is observed that girls with large sibling groups face greater difficulties in accessing education, particularly when the family's economic condition is poor. In such families, the elder daughter often marries early, as there is a need for a few years of interval to arrange the dowry for the younger ones. On the contrary, families tend to place more value on the education of their sons than their daughters, as they believe that daughters' education yields no tangible

benefits for their families. Families often consider early marriage for their daughters as a strategy to alleviate the financial burden on the family.

Many participants stated that they often face economic shocks when they have low agricultural productivity due to the frequent occurrence of natural disasters such as floods and droughts. Since the agricultural productivity in this region entirely depends on monsoon rain, frequent disruption of rain can cause significant loss in productivity. The region lies in the flood-prone zone of several perennial rivers. Many villages in the study region experience flooding almost every year. The crops are severely affected due to floods that occur in many places. Due to the devastating flood, there have been losses of life, property, agricultural lands, and crops, as well as human habitations in this region. Rural populations whose livelihoods depend on agriculture certainly fall into poverty due to such natural disasters. In these circumstances, they are often forced to marry off their daughters due to extreme poverty and food insecurity in the household. Such experiences are also reflected in a prior study (Roy & Chouhan, 2021). Early marriage of daughters serves as a coping mechanism to mitigate the economic shocks caused by the flood.

Dowry as an Economic Driver

The practice of dowry is widespread in rural Malda. Dowry is exchanged in most marriages. In the guise of gift-giving, the bride's family is often pressured to pay a dowry, which has evolved into a requirement for marriage (Paul, 2025). Despite the law against the dowry practice (*Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961*), it is prevalent among all communities, irrespective of

socioeconomic status. However, the practice of 'bride price' — transfer of gifts/wealth from the groom's family to the bride's family — was also observed among the study households, particularly among the tribal communities. Dowry demand is one of the most important reasons for the early marriage of girls in the studied villages.

Respondents are aware of both the adverse health effects and the legal repercussions of dowry practices. Before or during the wedding ceremony, the bride's family was supposed to send the dowry to the groom's family. As a result, the bride's family was under considerable pressure to provide a substantial sum of money, as well as high-quality gifts. Participants stated that insufficient gifts not only caused physical injury to young girls but also caused psychological trauma.

Participants reported that dowry is exchanged in almost all marriages, with the dowry amount (cash or similar assets) determined by two factors: the bride's personal features, such as looks and age and the bridegroom's qualifications. The dowry grows in proportion to the bride's age. If the bride is older, there will be a larger amount of dowry. A woman expressed that the demand for dowry from the groom's family escalates if they educate their daughters and delay the timing of marriage.

If we do not marry off our daughters at a younger age, the groom's family will likely ask for a higher dowry. That is why it is better not to keep a girl in the house when a suitor asks for her hand.
(IDI, a 29-year-old woman)

At the same time, if a girl is thought to be unattractive, for example, if she has a darker skin tone, the payment for dowry increases.

It works in the same manner with the bridegroom's qualifications, such as his educational level, income, or natural beauty. A woman expressed how a younger bride is tortured in the marital home when the dowry demand is not met.

Everything must be provided in accordance with the needs of the family. If someone fails to give half of the items, the bride is tortured by the husband and his family. It is not surprising for the bride to commit suicide as a result of this. In many circumstances, the bride either returns to her family or is divorced. The young bride is frequently tortured by the husband's family solely for the dowry. (IDI, a 34-year-old woman)

If the bride was not explicitly requested for a dowry, she was frequently forced to deal with the consequences later. The bride and her family were apparently required to offer gifts every year following the wedding, which was sometimes exacerbated by the gift-giving customs of other brides in the community.

We have to pay them an extra amount of dowry if the groom's family does not ask for anything. We are attempting to give them more because they do not ask. We will give if they do not ask, and we must give if they do. It has now evolved into a social custom. It is assumed that if you do not offer your daughter anything, you do not love her. It has become a social requirement. (IDI, a 31-year-old woman)

Younger brides are preferred due to their long reproductive span, and therefore, they will have enough time to give birth to a son, as there is a demand for sons to support the family. The demand for dowry increases

with the higher age of girls. In order to pay fewer amounts, parents marry off their daughters at an early age instead of educating them. Participants stated that groom's families are less likely to prefer girls with high levels of education for marriage. The reason behind such preferences is apparent. That is, educated girls cannot be easily controlled, and they are concerned about their rights; thus, patriarchal expectations cannot be fulfilled.

Many families want their daughters to have financially secure husbands. Most of the brides' parents, on the other hand, do not have a choice when it comes to dowry. These households either incur significant debts to provide an adequate dowry or spend their entire life resources. When parents are unable to provide a sizable dowry, they often choose to marry their daughters off to much older or less desirable men who do not require large dowries and are therefore considered "less desirable." If families arrange marriages for their daughters with older spouses, they can settle the marriages with a reduced dowry payment. This finding is corroborated by earlier studies conducted in West Bengal (Ghosh 2011b; Roy & Chouhan, 2022). In extended Indian households, a young woman is expected to be submissive not only to her husband but also to all of the elders in the household, including her in-laws.

Love Marriages, Elopements, and Family Honour

Participants reported increasing incidences of love marriages and elopements in the study area. There are also instances of semi-arranged marriages in which daughters have some degree of ability to choose their partners. Elopement marriage offends the parents and becomes a topic of discussion in

the community, bringing shame and dishonour to the family. Most of the time, such marriages are eventually accepted by the parents. Some parents are reluctant to accept due to fear of social embarrassment and reputational damage. Sometimes, poor parents (of daughters) accept eloping as a way to avoid the high costs of marriage/wedding, even if they are unhappy and reluctant. Some parents accept elopements and perform all relevant rituals and ceremonies, including dowry payments. A female respondent reported that her daughter eloped and married secretly at the age of 16 years. The girl ran away, but her mother claimed that since she had already been married, there was nothing left to do but bring her home and conduct a real ceremony.

Parents are worried that if their daughters run away before they can arrange their marriage with a 'good' bridegroom, it will compromise the family's 'honour'. Among Hindus, the marriage of daughters is considered a parental duty. The father performs *Kanyadaan* — gift of a virgin daughter — a crucial ritual in Hindu marriage (Chakraborty, 2018). Before a daughter falls in love and wants to take control of her own marriage decision, her parents want to marry her off. The mother of an unmarried girl stated:

My brother's daughter ran away with a boy who does not have a good job. It is better to marry off girls as soon as possible, before they can elope and ruin our reputation in society. I am a mother of two daughters. My elder daughter is studying in the eighth grade, and my younger one is in the fifth grade. I will not make the same mistake. If I listen to any such relationship with a boy, I will only

marry her off that day. (IDI, mother, 33 years old)

Some participants mentioned that it is even more shameful when an upper-caste girl marries a lower-caste boy. Caste and social status play an essential role in the acceptance of love and eloping marriage. In that case, the groom's family generally accepts their relationship, but the bride's family does not readily accept the relationship/marriage. If the girls choose a boy from the same caste or a family with better economic means, their parents readily accept their marriage. Since there are incidences of elopement in the villages, parents are more anxious about their daughters, and they start searching for prospective bridegrooms for their girls from an early age. They marry off their daughters as soon as a suitable groom is found. Roy and Chouhan (2022) in their study found that fear of love marriages, particularly inter-caste marriages, can escalate the practice to save the family reputation.

Male Migration and Reproduction of Child Marriage

Male members in rural Malda frequently migrate to other states for work. The region has become a hub of out-migration for the male youth. Migration is most common among economically disadvantaged and landless families. The lack of viable economic opportunities and poverty forces them to migrate and work for low wages in other states. In households where male members have migrated for work, parental concerns regarding daughters' safety, social reputation, and family honour often intensify, increasing the likelihood of early marriage (Breakthrough, 2012).

In the study context, male members' migration has a damaging impact on girls'

education. A girl is often withdrawn from school when her father migrates to other places. At the same time, parents worry about their daughters' safety and security once they attain puberty, particularly when the father is away from home. Despite women taking over household decisions when men migrate, girls have limited educational opportunities due to the burden of household tasks, lack of safety and security, eve-teasing, and the risk of sexual harassment. Men continue to be the primary decision-makers in the household, including decisions related to children's education and marriage. It is also observed that migrated members send their earnings to support their families. When there is an unmarried girl in the family, the remittance sent by migrants is used for the payment of dowry and marriage purposes, and sometimes used for the payment of debts that occurred during the marriage. In such circumstances, poor families prefer to marry off their daughters early.

It is also found that male youth from rural Malda migrated to other states to find jobs and employment. After some years, when they returned home with accumulated savings, they were often viewed as desirable prospective grooms. In such cases, the demand for dowry is comparatively less because the boy has the money to perform the marriage ceremony. When such marriage proposals come from a boy who migrates to other places for work, poor parents generally do not reject the proposal. If the daughters' families do not accept the proposal, they sometimes elope with the girls. In such circumstances, girls often get married at a young age. Therefore, the migration of male members in rural Malda may reinforce conditions that sustain the practice within rural communities.

Study Limitations

Limitations of the study should be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted in selected rural villages of Malda district and involved a relatively small sample of participants. Therefore, the findings are context-specific and cannot be generalised to all districts of West Bengal or India. Second, the study relied on self-reported information and retrospective accounts of marriage experiences, which may be subject to recall bias. Third, given the sensitive nature of child marriage, dowry, and family decision-making, some participants may have been reluctant to disclose certain experiences or opinions, resulting in the possibility of social desirability bias. Fourth, the study primarily reflects the perspectives of women who experienced child marriage and parents of adolescent girls; the views of husbands, community leaders, teachers, and local government officials were not included and could provide additional insights into the persistence of child marriage.

Conclusion

Child marriage is deeply entrenched and widely practised in rural Malda. The region is disadvantaged in terms of education and economic opportunities for women. People are primarily engaged in farming activities. The region has witnessed high levels of illiteracy and extreme poverty. In addition, socio-cultural norms and cultural bias against women are highly persistent. Child marriage of girls has become a cultural practice in rural Malda.

Findings reveal that societal, cultural, and economic drivers are deeply intertwined to perpetuate the practice of child marriage in this region. Educational disadvantage, limited employment opportunities for

young women, household poverty, dowry obligations, concerns regarding girls' safety and sexuality, fear of elopement, male out-migration, and recurrent flood-related livelihood insecurity shape parental decisions regarding the timing of marriage. These factors reinforce one another, creating a cycle in which poverty, gender inequality, and early marriage are mutually reproduced across generations.

In rural Malda, daughters are viewed as economic and social responsibilities. Marriage is widely perceived as the most appropriate pathway to social security and respectability. Efforts to reduce child marriage must therefore extend beyond educational interventions and engage with the underlying gender norms that devalue girls' education, restrict their mobility, and prioritise marriage over personal development.

Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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