

THE FUTURE IS OURS ▶

Kanyashree Prakalpa

Breaking Barriers and Marching Ahead





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The Government of West Bengal stands resolutely for fulfilment of the right of every girl to education, and the right to complete it without fear that it will be brought to an abrupt halt by child marriage.

'Kanyashree Prakalpa' is the most significant step taken by the Government of West Bengal for the prevention of child marriage and the all-round empowerment of adolescent girls. This path-breaking cash transfer scheme is the brainchild of the Hon'ble Chief Minister of the State, Smt. Mamata Banerjee, and has received several national and international awards for its design and good governance.

On 23rd June 2017, 'Kanyashree Prakalpa' was awarded the prestigious United Nations Public Service Award 2017 for reaching the poorest and most vulnerable through inclusive services and participation. In the presence of dignitaries from all over the world, our Hon'ble Chief Minister received the award at a glittering ceremony held at The Hague, Netherlands, on the occasion of United Nations Public Service Day, 2017.

It is three years later to the day as I write this, and I take pride in placing further evidence that the Government of West Bengal's flagship scheme against child marriage has taken huge strides in transforming gendered perceptions and attitudes towards adolescent girls.

Today, Kanyashree girls are everywhere, countering age-old biases through their actions and achievements.

This publication contains fifteen stories of girls shaping their own lives and creating a ripples of change around them - a record of how the transformation of each individual girl contributes to the collective transformation of girls and women in the state.

Dr. Shashi Panja

Minister of State (Independent Charge),
Department of Women and
Child Development and Social Welfare,
Government of West Bengal.



The problem of child marriage, is a social custom deep rooted in the patriarchal foundations of society, has been central to UNICEF's discourse on the rights of the girl child for a decade and more. As the Government of West Bengal's trusted partner in promoting child rights, UNICEF has strongly supported Kanyashree Prakalpa on its eight-year journey towards ending child marriage in the State.

"Kanyashree" Prakalpa has been ably steered by the Department of Women and Child Development and Social Welfare, Government of West Bengal. What is particularly commendable is that while the Department has designed the scheme's conditional cash transfers on global and national evidences, it has wisely allowed local innovations to respond to the needs of its primary stakeholders – adolescent girls - when it comes to cash plus interventions. "Kanyashree" Prakalpa received Global recognition with United Nations Public Service Award at The Hague in 2017 as a Flagship Social Protection Program towards adolescent empowerment and ending Child Marriage.

Social change takes place slowly and imperceptibly. It is often a sociological process, a shift in attitudes and perceptions, and then in behavior and practice. Through these stories in this publication, we offered a few glimpses of social changes in action.

With this publication, UNICEF renews its commitment towards ending Child Marriage through the empowerment of adolescent girls in the State.



Mohammad Mohiuddin
Chief, UNICEF Office for West Bengal



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FOREWORD

One of the most significant policy measures taken by the Government of West Bengal for the empowerment of women is its flagship scheme, **Kanyashree Prakalpa**.

The genesis and design of the scheme is based on the government's understanding that child marriage is one of the major causes of socio-economic backwardness, not just of women, but of their families, their children and future generations.

Kanyashree Prakalpa uses the globally proven strategy of social transfers and incentives to persuade families to invest in their daughters' future through education, not matrimony.

Kanyashree Prakalpa has two conditional cash transfer benefits that are designed to discourage child marriage and incentivize education. The first is an annual scholarship of Rs. 1,000 for girls between the ages of 13 and 18 years for every year that they remain in education, provided they are unmarried at the time. The second is a one-time grant of Rs 25,000 for girls between the ages of 18 and 19, again, subject to the same conditions. The term 'education' encompasses secondary, higher secondary and higher education, including technical and professional education. The scheme's benefits

are paid directly to bank accounts in the girls' names, thereby laying the foundation of their financial inclusion.

Kanyashree Prakalpa, however, is not just a social protective mechanism: it has a vision of independent girls, girls who are self-assured, creative and have a significant place in society, girls with knowledge and skills. Girls who become agents of social change.

The scheme therefore complements its cash transfers with a range of 'cash plus' initiatives to enhance the wellbeing of adolescent girls. These initiatives focus on themes of menstrual hygiene management, life-skills and health training, awareness and activism related to social issues, citizens' rights, and de-mystifying public institutions through facilitated exposure visits.

Child marriage prevention, of course, is a theme that runs through all activities. Often, adolescent girls are the first informants in a child marriage case, either their own, or of their peers.

Kanyashree girls are at an age when, given encouragement and peer support, are extremely articulate about their own needs and aspirations and desires, and are active participants in their own development. Peer group formation and activism is central to the process, and the government has established school-based and community-based groups of adolescent girls.

When these girls turn 18, they have the freedom to decide what they want to do with the Rs 25,000 they receive as a one-time grant. Many girls have used this money to fund their higher education. For others, it has become an asset—to be spent on starting a business, or to be invested in a fixed deposit.

It does not matter what these girls do with the money; what really matters is that through Kanyashree, they have a choice

and they have influence. They have a power they would not have had if they had succumbed to child marriage.

This volume of case studies bears testimony to the coming-of-age of Kanyashree – the scheme, and its beneficiaries.

Sanghamitra Ghosh, IAS

Secretary,
Department of Women & Child Development
and Social Welfare,
Government of West Bengal.



When these **girls turn 18**, they have the freedom to decide what they want to do with the **Rs 25,000** they **receive as a one-time grant**.





Adolescence is the period of life when several key developmental experiences occur, such as acquiring a degree of social and economic independence, development of identity, acquisition of skills needed to carry out adult relationships and roles, and the capacity for abstract reasoning.

It is a period of preparation for adulthood. Educational institutions – schools, colleges, vocational training centres – and their social environs provide a safe space for adolescents to prepare for the tasks of adulthood.

Adolescence is also a time when gender roles diverge sharply. While both boys and girls experience social and economic restrictions, girls are far more constrained in their ability to move freely and in making decisions affecting their lives. In India, the vulnerability of adolescent girls is exacerbated by domestic work, sexual abuse and exploitation, domestic violence, early dropout from education, anaemia and poor health. And the root of all such social evil is child marriage and teenage pregnancy.

What do we know about child marriage? We know that it condemns girls, as young as 12, 14, and 15, to sexual

slavery, usually to men much older than them. We know that instead learning to negotiate the transition from childhood to adulthood, they are forced into domestic servitude – looking after home and hearth, and their husbands' families. At an age when they are children themselves, they become pregnant and have babies, giving birth to weak and severely underweight infants. Some of these infants die in less than a month, as do some child-mothers as well. Those who survive enter a downward spiral of poor health, illiteracy and find it difficult to climb out of poverty.

Child-brides have very little influence in their families even later on in life; their lack of education gives them very little negotiating power in their families or in the marketplace. Society loses sight of them, and is poorer for that. Not just in terms of individual lives of poor quality, but in economic terms. In addition to harmful effects on girls' health,

education, rights and wellbeing, the economic impact of child marriage, from the individual to the national levels, has far-reaching consequences. In particular, the cost of child marriage through just two pathways – increased population growth and reduced educational attainment, is significant.

Kanyashree Prakalpa has a simple message for every adolescent girl in West Bengal: “Say YES to education, NO to child marriage.” While culture and tradition push to keep adolescent girls trapped in untimely and unequal marriages, the stories in this collection show that Kanyashree girls are pushing back barriers, each one contributing a tiny but significant shift in familial dynamics and social norms.

The stories are spread across Murshidabad, Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri and Purba Bardhaman. Each is a story of change that Kanyashree Prakalpa helped bring about. One way or another, these stories also reflect the special features of the district. Take Murshidabad for example. Three of the stories are of Kanyashree Yoddhas, who despite all odds completed their school education and are studying in college. Two of them are also earning and have become role models for adolescent girls in the community. This special group of Kanyashrees, known as Yoddhas, are unique to Murshidabad district.

In Cooch Behar, we get to meet a feisty young woman who leads the Anganwadi-based group of Kanyashrees of the village. Cooch Behar was one of the seven districts where the West Bengal government piloted the scheme for the formation of an Anganwadi-based peer group for adolescent girls. Today, Anganwadi-based groups of adolescent girls exist in every Anganwadi centre in West Bengal.

In Jalpaiguri most school authorities emphasize that Kanyashree Prakalpa has helped to retain girls in school. The boys, however, are still out of school as they start working very early. A teacher in Jalpaiguri city said, ‘Ours is a co-ed school, but if you step into the senior classes, you will think it is a girls’ school. The boys are missing because they start working by the time, they are 14 or 15.’

On the other hand, a Kanyashree nodal teacher in Bhatar block in Purba Bardhaman said that about 10 per cent of the girls whose marriages they prevent escape the vigil. The families take the girl to another area and get her married even after they have signed an undertaking to not get the girl married before 18.

The following sections give a brief contextual description of each of the four districts and the Kanyashree scheme.

Murshidabad

Located on the India-Bangladesh border, four major rivers criss-cross the district, creating vast outlying areas. Every year these areas remain under floodwaters for about a month, making it a nightmare for the district administration to traverse the difficult terrain. Preventing child marriages in the remote areas is a challenge for block teams even during good-weather months, because it can take a police vehicle at least two hours to reach certain Gram Panchayats (GP). Under these circumstances, the district felt the need to



Preventing child marriages in the remote areas is a challenge for block teams even during good-weather months, because it can take a police vehicle at least two hours to reach certain Gram Panchayats (GP).

address the issue locally. That is how Kanyashree Yoddhas (warriors) initiative was started in 2014, just a year after the launch of Kanyashree Prakalpa. Kanyashree Yoddhas were the brainchild of the then District Magistrate of Murshidabad.

Kanyashree Yoddhas are present in all the blocks of the district. Since 2017, the Social Behaviour Change Communication Cell of the district administration has been training them on various government schemes and entitlements related to safe sanitation, safe motherhood, among others. Their prime role, however, is to combat child marriage, child abuse, child trafficking and facilitate the return to school of dropouts.

There are children who are out of school in many parts of the district. Driven by poverty, families engage children in bidi making from the time they are 11 or 12 years old. A child that age can earn around Rs 4,000 per month from making bidis and without leaving the house at all. The bidi agent brings all the raw materials needed – the leaves, tobacco and thread – and collects the finished goods, paying cash upfront. Bidi making is a major cottage industry in the villages of Murshidabad. It is also the reason why children drop out of school. Many present-day Kanyashree Yoddhas were school dropouts once, as their families depended on the money they earned from bidi-making.

A Kanyashree Yoddha is someone who represents her Panchayat member's area (or seat) within the GP. Two Kanyashrees represent each seat; one among them is also a member of the Village Level Child Protection Committee (VLCPC) along with a boy from the village. Since a GP has 15 to 20 seats, there are 30 to 40 Kanyashree Yoddhas in each. This group is a powerful social capital and change agent. Yoddhas are the block's foot soldiers and play a pivotal role in the village level implementation of the state government's other social programmes – like sanitation, malnutrition and dengue/malaria control, to name a few. As some of the stories show, a village's Anganwadi worker and health worker

both welcome the support they receive from Kanyashree Yoddhas.

Block Development Officers (BDO) also appreciate the help they receive from Yoddhas. When an educated girl of the village comes to the doorstep and explains the need for say, children's immunization or describes how to prevent breeding sites for mosquitoes, it has a greater impact, says the BDO of Murshidabad's Khargram block. He ropes in the help of Kanyashrees to spread the word in their villages against open defecation and mosquito-breeding sites to prevent dengue/





malaria. 'We call them Yoddhas (warrior) because they battle against social evils,' he adds.

Talking about how block officials are supported by Kanyashree Girls for information on child marriages, the BDO of Khargram block said, 'Kanyashree girls are one of our main sources of information.'

There is another problem though. 'According to law, we are supposed to arrest the fathers of both the girl and boy and take legal action, but we don't do that on humanitarian grounds. Some of the parents then take the children to a relative's house in another block or district even, and get them married there,' said the BDO.

In Suti 2 block, the BDO said he intervenes to stop five to six child marriages every week. Giving his reason for this trend he said, 'When a poor family has, say, six girls, the parents will start getting them married early. They cannot wait till the girls are 18.' The good news is that such cases are more exceptions and not the rule, he adds.

Cooch Behar

Cooch Behar is located at the foothill of the Eastern Himalayas. The climate here is much cooler with winter temperatures dipping as low as 10 degree. Seeing small children suffer in the cold a Kanyashree Club in Cooch Behar opened a bank for recycled garments where they receive, refurbish and distribute these clothes.

Cooch Behar is largely a rural district and has 12 blocks. It was also among the seven districts where the state government conducted a pilot of Anganwadi based peer group of adolescent girls. This village group of girls meet at the Anganwadi centre once a week, and under the guidance

of the Anganwadi worker discuss various issues and carry out activities. The problems they discuss can range from the individual to the community for example, reproductive health problems which an adolescent girl may feel shy about discussing at home, or a social map of the village marking houses that have girls who are anaemic or out of school, vocational courses available to girls after they complete Class 12, and so on

Jalpaiguri

Lying between Bhutan, Assam and Bangladesh, Jalpaiguri is dotted with tea gardens. The lush green bushes look beautiful, but they hide a grim reality. Boys start working very early in these tea gardens. Tea gardens are the main employers in this largely rural district. Teachers and block officials said there are more girls in the higher classes in schools, and very few boys, because they start working as early as 14 or 15 years.

Purba Bardhaman

Most schools in the district are focussed on bringing Kanyashree beneficiaries out of the classroom to find wider roles for themselves. They put up plays on prevention of child marriage, they campaign on the importance of menstrual hygiene, and in one school they even run a successful adult education programme for older women.

The district administration encourages these activities to be organized during Kanyashree Day with much fanfare every year on August 14. Through cash awards and other forms of recognition this annual event has helped young girls come out of their shell to discover new leadership skills in themselves.

What has Kanyashree Prakalpa achieved?

School teachers in Murshidabad and Cooch Behar vouch that if there were more than 20 married girls in a batch of 100 girls in Class 12, even five years ago, today hardly two or three girls are married. 'Only a few years ago, most girls would be married by the time they were 15,' said the Kanyashree nodal officer of Rainagar block in Murshidabad. 'Today, however, child marriage is more of an exception than the norm. Even in pockets that were prone towards it,' she adds emphatically.

Everyone agrees child marriage is on the decline. Teachers, BDOs, Kanyashree girls will readily say so. Yet there are the missing Kanyashree girls who are taken to another area to be married off, away from the watchful eye of their Kanyashree peers and the administration. These girls remain a matter of serious concern. The district nodal officer of Cooch Behar said that not all Kanyashrees enlisted at 13 years finally claimed their one-time K 2 grant after they turned 18. This goes to show girls are still getting married before 18, he adds.

'Under the circumstances, raising awareness on negative consequences of child marriage is the only long-term solution,' believes the principal of Barabelun Debibala Girls' School. Street plays, she says, are a powerful tool to convey the pitfalls of early marriage. Kanyashrees of her school have been putting up a play at village homes and street corners. It is guaranteed to create fear of child marriage in anyone who watches it, the principal adds.

1
Najema Khatun, 21,
Kanyashree Yoddha, Suti 2,
Murshidabad

THIS FORMER CHILD BRIDE IS NOW A CRUSADER

**Najema leads the battle against child marriage
in her community.**

Najema is a Kanyashree Yoddha. She has led her group of Yoddhas to stop several child marriages; the group also helped school dropouts to go back to formal education. Yet, just eight years ago, Najema was a child bride herself. Her family got her married when she was barely 13 years old. She was in Class 5 at the time and had to drop out of school when she got married.

Najema grew up with her grandparents. When her father married a second time, her mother moved to her maternal home with Najema, her two sisters and brother. 'Those days people were not aware of the ill effects of child marriage or about the legal age of marriage. Nobody in my family is educated; they can't even sign their names,' says Najema. 'I saw everyone around me getting married at a very young age. That was prevalent social norm,' she adds.



Najema's marriage lasted only two months. On a visit to her family, she disclosed that her husband, who was around 16 years old, was in love with someone else and made it clear that he did not think much of his wife. Najema's mother-in-law made her do all the household chores, including washing everyone's clothes, cleaning utensils morning and evening, besides keeping the house clean. The 13-year-old worked from dawn to dusk, doing as she was told. Evenings were worse because Najema's husband and father-in-law sat together and drank alcohol. This came as a shock to Najema because she had never seen anyone drink at home before this. After a few glasses, father and son would break into a tirade of abuses against her. Sometimes her mother-in-law too would join them. Najema froze in fear when the three ganged up against her and hurled verbal lashings, using language most foul. And this was routine; it happened almost every evening. 'They did not beat me up physically, it is true, yet they made me suffer so much. It was as if I was afraid to even breathe in that house,' recalls Najema.

When Najema told her grandparents about her married life during her first visit home, they realized they had made a big mistake. The grandparents decided they would not send Najema back to her husband's family. They took the matter to the Islamic clergy, who granted Najema a divorce.

Najema was now back to her old life in the village, with her mother and grandparents. She, however, stayed at home and did not return to school. Her fortune turned when the block coordinator of a local NGO spotted her while conducting a house-to-house survey to identify children who had dropped out of school. With the NGO's support she completed a bridge course under a government programme on non-formal education and re-joined her former school in Class 8. Now that she was back in school, she enrolled in Kanyashree. Today, Najema is studying for a bachelor's degree.

Najema adds that when she was around 16, her grandparents brought another marriage proposal, but this time she

Her fortune turned when the block coordinator of a local NGO spotted her while conducting a house-to-house survey to identify children who had dropped out of school.



Najema conducting house to house visit to spread awareness to prevent child marriage



Najema with her Biranga Award (top),
Kanyashree Yoddhas (bottom)



knew better. She was a Kanyashree now; through the programme she had become aware of the ill effects of early marriage. What is more, Najema also had the support of her school to help her resist such a marriage. Najema flatly refused to get married; she explained to her grandparents and mother about the legal age of marriage and why they should not think of getting her married so early. She also got her school's Kanyashree nodal teacher and principal to speak to her family. 'Since then my family has not bothered me about getting married,' Najema said.

Since January 2020 Najema has been working with Action Aid, a non-profit organization, on a village-level programme for adolescent girls. Here too she will continue to do what she has been doing as a Kanyashree Yoddha – prevent child marriage and help school dropouts to go back to formal education. Flexible working hours allow her to continue studying for her college degree, something Najema says she is determined to complete.

Najema's family is justifiably proud of her, and her achievements. Her uncle points to several trophies decorating the walls of their home, and with evident pride in his voice says, 'Najema has won all of them.' Her mother gets emotional and adds, 'Who would have thought my daughter would be earning one day? She is no less than a son.'

Most of these awards are for prevention of child marriage. 'We have stopped many, many child marriages,' says Najema. She has received many awards and felicitation certificates. She has also won the prestigious Birangana Award, for her efforts to raise awareness on prevention of child marriage. The award is given by the West Bengal Commission for the Protection of Child Rights.

2

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Shantanur Ahasania, 19,
Kanyashree Yoddha,
Kalinagar village, Rainagar,
Murshidabad



'I AM A WARRIOR GIRL'

Shantanur and her group have prevented 12 child marriages in their area.

As a Kanyashree girl who is 18 years plus, unmarried, and still studying, Shantanur has just received Rs 25,000, the Kanyashree one-time grant. She is studying for her bachelor's degree at present and has taken up physical education as a subject because she dreams of joining the police force one day. She is the leader of Kanyashree Yoddhas in her area. Together the group has stopped 12 child marriages in the past three years. When she became a Yoddha in 2016, she was a student of Komnagar High Madrassa School.

Shantanur takes a big risk when she confronts families to prevent child marriages. Her father lives in Chennai, where he works as a mason. He is away nine months in a year. It is just Shantanur, her mother and older sister at home. 'My neighbours tell me I should give up being a Yoddha as I upset many families. They may cause us harm, particularly since our father is away in Chennai most of the time. But I don't pay heed to all that,' says Shantanur. Clearly, she is fearless and has a fighting spirit.



‘Earlier, this area had a large number of child marriages taking place. Almost every girl got married when she was barely 13 or 14 years old. But all that has changed now with Kanyashree Prakalpa.’

– The Kanyashree nodal person.

TIME FOR ACTION



Shantanur with her mother and father

Shantanur says she has the phone numbers of the BDO and the officer-in-charge of the local police station on her mobile phone. That gives her a lot of courage. The first child marriage she stopped was in 2017. A group of eight Kanyashree Yoddhas from her school went and met the family of a 16-year-old girl who was to get married. The parents became aggressive and said they would go ahead with the marriage and that the Yoddhas should leave, as it was none of their business. ‘They used foul language and behaved roughly with us. Their logic was the legal age of marriage does not take into account the fact that a girl is attractive and can get a good match when she is younger,’ said Shantanur. Unable to prevent the marriage on their own, the Yoddhas then called the BDO who sent his team along with police officials to prevent the wedding.

‘I am a Yoddha, a warrior’ says Shantanur. ‘My weapons and shield are the help I get from the block administration and police officials’. The Yoddhas are now well-prepared; if they feel that they cannot handle a situation on their own, they call for help from the BDO and police.

The Kanyashree nodal person in the block office said: ‘Earlier, this area had a large number of child marriages taking place. Almost every girl got married when she barely was 13 or 14 years old. But all that has changed now with Kanyashree Prakalpa.’

About five or six years ago, there were very few girls who studied up to Class 12. And then too, most were married. ‘Today though, out of the 100 girls in Class 12 in Komnagar High Madrasa School, you will find only two or three are married,’ the block nodal person said.

3

Sahanara Khatun, 22,
Kanyashree Yoddha, Suti 2,
Murshidabad



ONCE A DROPOUT, NOW TEACHER FOR CHILDREN OUT OF SCHOOL

**Her life has come a full circle as she now helps
other children to re-join formal education.**

Sahanara Khatun is a persuasive speaker. When she talks of the importance of school education at community gatherings, people listen to her intently. The community holds her in high regard and takes her seriously. They have seen her intervene in several child marriages; a phone call from her can mobilize district officials and the police to come to their village and stop a child marriage. Yet, like so many children in her community, Sahanara was a school dropout. Fortunately, after a gap of about four years she was able to go back to school and complete her higher secondary education and is now pursuing a college degree.

Sahanara's travails began when she was in Class 5. Circumstances forced her to start contributing to the family income by rolling bidis because her parents were dirt poor. Naturally, this meant no school for her since those days the school did not provide free notebooks and stationery as it does today; only some of the books were distributed free.



A role model for adolescent girls in her area, she earns Rs 6,000 per month and is an established leader in the village. It was however a long road for Sahanara, to be where she is today.



Bidi-making is common across Murshidabad district, fetching Rs 150 for every 1,000 bidis rolled

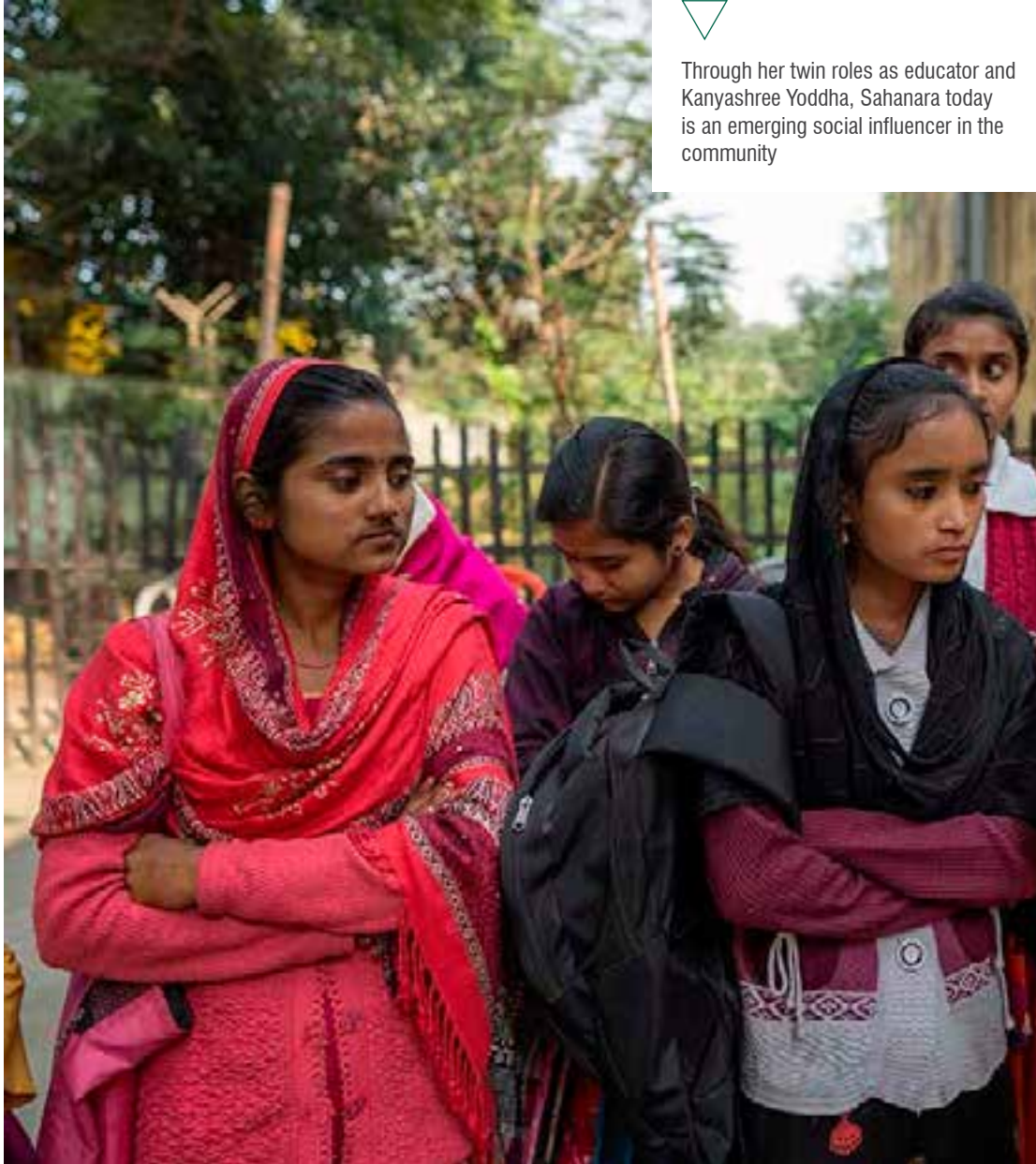
The rest cost money. Sahanara had nine sisters and two brothers. With 14 mouths to feed, all the children had to start earning from a very young age. Bidi-making is common across Murshidabad district, fetching Rs 150 for every 1,000 bidis rolled. A child therefore can easily make anywhere around Rs 4,000 in a month.

When a local NGO identified Sahanara as a school dropout during a survey, they told her parents that they would tutor her free of cost, as well as provide books and stationery. Sahanara pleaded with her parents to allow her to study. She negotiated with them, promising she would continue to roll at least 1,000 bidis everyday. Her parents relented. She joined the NGO's coaching centre and continued to earn for the family. At the end of two years, Sahanara successfully completed the bridge course and was ready to return to formal education. Unfortunately, her application was rejected as she had crossed the age limit.

'I cried a lot when I learnt that I could not go back to school,' recalls Sahanara. The rejection came as a blow, but Sahanara was not going to give up without trying. She gathered the courage and went and presented her case before the Block Development Officer (BDO). 'Please let me join school; it is my dream,' she pleaded with him. Walking up to the block office to meet the BDO was a giant step for Sahanara. Moved by her desire to study, the BDO wrote to the school to allow her admission as a special case.

Sahanara's life has come a full circle today. Apart from her own college studies, she teaches school dropouts at a local coaching centre, so that they too can go back to formal schooling. A role model for adolescent girls in her area, she earns Rs 6,000 per month and is an established leader in the village. It was however a long road for Sahanara, to be where she is today.

As a Kanyashree Yoddha, Sahanara is in the forefront of the battle against child marriage. She narrates an incident from



Through her twin roles as educator and Kanyashree Yoddha, Sahanara today is an emerging social influencer in the community

four years ago when 15 Yoddhas, including herself, reached the home of a young girl who was to be married. As they tried to reason with the family, the girls were roughed up and pushed out. The Yoddhas then got in touch with the BDO and came back with the block team and police personnel in tow.

A year and a half later the same family thanked the Yoddhas for preventing the wedding from taking place. They said they were paying the price for having their other daughter married at 16. The unfortunate girl conceived soon after her marriage and delivered a stillborn child. She became pregnant again within a short span of time and gave birth to a baby with extremely low birth weight and suffering from severe acute malnourishment.

This is just one example, says Sahanara. There are many other families that regret having their daughter married too early, as they now realize it brings a whole host of problems. High-risk pregnancies are a common problem in the area among young mothers, who are also prone to anaemia. Sometimes these cases can become fatal, and lead to death during delivery, adds Sahanara.

Through her twin roles as educator and Kanyashree Yoddha, Sahanara today is an emerging social influencer in the community. The village health worker and Anganwadi worker both seek her cooperation and ask her to speak on anaemia management for girls, safe motherhood, prevention of malaria and dengue at gatherings. As a Yoddha she regularly talks to men and women in the village about why formal school education is important for children and the ill effects of child marriage. The fact that Sahanara is able to have the community's attention on these matters says a lot about her stature in the community. 'For that the entire credit goes to Kanyashree Prakalpa,' says Sahanara. 'The grooming I received through the activities under this programme, when I was in school, helped me become the person I am today. It gave me self-confidence and taught me how to talk to families on social issues,' she adds.

4 Rumi Khatun, 16,
student of Class 10,
Sherpur Higher Secondary
School, Khargram,
Murshidabad



GIRL WHO CAME BACK FROM JAWS OF CHILD MARRIAGE

Fiercely determined, Rumi prevented her own marriage twice.

In a village where most houses are made of brick and mortar, Rumi Khatun's family lives in a mud-and-thatch hut. She is the youngest of nine children. All her siblings – five sisters and three brothers – are married. So when her father's cousin came home and said his son wanted to marry Rumi, her father's first response was that she was studying; they are not thinking of her marriage right now.

The son had seen Rumi a day earlier when she had gone to the market with her mother. He followed them home and met Rumi's family. Rumi's family knew the man, being related. They were impressed with him because he earned well. The following day the man's father arrived with the marriage proposal and even offered gold jewellery as bride price. What he did not tell the family at the time was that the man already had two wives.



Although Rumi protested, her father gave in under pressure from his own son. He told Rumi that marriage might not be such a bad idea since he was getting on in years. But Rumi was adamant. She just did not want to marry – not before she completed school at least.

The next day at school she spoke to her close friends and together they discussed the matter with the Kanyashree nodal teacher and principal. When the school telephoned the BDO's office to report that a child marriage was being planned, the block team along with police personnel reached Rumi's house. 'The block team was prompt in taking action. They reached Rumi's house within half an hour,' said the school's principal.

Rumi was relieved; she was certain that danger had been averted. But was the trauma really over for her? 'Three days later, my brother and his wife beat me up. They told me I could not go to school anymore because I was to get married the following week,' said Rumi. Her brother's wife tried to convince her that it was a good proposal as the man was offering gold jewellery. That evening Rumi called up the BDO from her father's cell phone.

'I requested two police officials to visit her house once more. They were there the next morning. This time they were stern with the family. They told them about the law that prohibits the marriage of girls under 18 years,' said the BDO who remembers the incident very well. They reminded the family that the father and brother could even go to jail, the BDO added.

Today Rumi's parents are firm about letting their youngest daughter study. Her mother Razia Bibi said, she gets everything from school – books, notebooks, uniform. 'Why should we then not let her study?' she added.

And Rumi can relax now. A keen student, Rumi may look small for her age, but she is full of spunk. Even though six

Today Rumi's parents are firm about letting their youngest daughter study. Her mother Razia Bibi said, she gets everything from school – books, notebooks, uniform. 'Why should we then not let her study?' she added.



Rumi and her classmates are not thinking of marriage at the moment. Their top priority is to complete Class 12 and study further.



Rumi with her parents (top) and friends (bottom)



months have passed since the incident, she is still angry that a man with two wives should dare to marry again. Rumi's parents say their son wanted the marriage to take place because he believed it was a good match. He liked the groom because he had relatives in Saudi Arabia and made business trips to the kingdom once or twice a year. Rumi's brother saw an opportunity for himself in the match. Rumi's mother added that she liked the man because he was a relative and she believed Rumi would find a good home.

It was only later the truth about the man's two wives emerged, when people started talking, following the visit by the police team. Neighbours and relatives dug deep and came up with details of the man's life.

The young girls in the neighbourhood are happy that Rumi escaped a marriage that would have destroyed her life. These are girls who go to school with Rumi. These young women are not thinking of marriage at the moment. Their top priority is to complete Class 12 and apply for the Rs 25,000 incentive under Kanyashree Prakalpa when they turn 18. They said they would like to use the money to study further.

Marriage is not part of Rumi's plans either. 'It is something that will happen when the time is right. I want to stand on my feet first,' she says. With quiet determination in her voice, she adds, 'Earning brings respect.'

5

Rubaiya Parvin, 18, leader of village girls' group, Pashchim Kalabari Ghat Anganwadi Centre, Sutkabari GP, Cooch Behar 1 block, Cooch Behar



AN AMBASSADOR FOR KANYASHREE PRAKALPA

In the forefront of her village's battle against child marriage, she is on her way to financial self-reliance.

Rubaiya Parvin is a Kanyashree poster girl. A 2nd year student of BA with philosophy honours, she can impress with her understanding of Kant and Descartes. Alongside the degree course Rubaiya is also completing her internship as trainer in e-learning/e-commerce and soft skills, for which she has to travel to other towns in neighbouring districts. Rubaiya says that she will earn Rs 10,000 once she becomes a full-fledged trainer. She used a sizeable amount of the Rs 25,000 grant she received from Kanyashree Prakalpa for admission into this course.

Even as she is on her way to becoming financially self-reliant, Rubaiya is a crusader and well-known as someone who will help stop a child marriage. Her reputation precedes her. She gets text messages from unknown numbers, from girls she does not even know, who seek her help to stop an impending wedding. Even Panchayat members, who want to stop an illegal marriage in their own families, take her help so that they are not seen as troublemakers by relatives.





Rubaiya with her peer group conducting her regular session with villagers.

Rubaiya with Anganwadi workers



Rubaiya has been battling child marriage since she enrolled in Kanyashree Prakalpa at age 13 and became a member of the Anganwadi-based girls' group in the village. The group has 75 members at present; all are enrolled in Kanyashree, as this group has successfully ensured no one in their village is out of school.

The group elects a leader (Sakhi) and her deputy (Saheli) every year. Rubaiya has been the Sakhi for two consecutive years. She and her Saheli were given a two-day training on life-skills education, nutrition-health education and adolescent reproductive and sexual health. The purpose of this training is to build up the Sakhi and Saheli as peer educators who would then work under the guidance of the village Anganwadi worker.

Pointing to a hand-drawn social map of the village, Rubaiya said the group uses it to track girls who are malnourished or school dropouts. They regularly measure the height and weight of group members and calculate their body mass index (BMI). The Anganwadi worker and Rubaiya, as the group leader, are authorized to officially refer common gynaecological problems to the nearby adolescent friendly health clinic.

The Anganwadi worker and Rubaiya periodically conduct learning sessions through Khelay Khelay Shekha, which is a module of participatory learning games for adolescent girls. Khelay Khelay Shekha— which translates as Learning through Play – has short, fun-filled sessions on a variety of topics. While each of the sessions can be used as a stand-alone activity, these are designed to build on each other. The early sessions focus on so called “safe” topics, such as nutrition and handwashing, during which participants build self-confidence and trust in one another. Once they have attained a certain comfort level and begun to enjoy the sessions, the facilitator guides participants to more “sensitive” topics in later sessions, such as reproductive health, elementary family planning and HIV/AIDS.



While the girls put up a play on child marriage awareness on the occasion, the officials felicitated them because they had stopped 11 child marriages that year.

Rubaiya and her team-mates have also formed a community forum with men and women in the village. The formation of the forum was facilitated by a local NGO; it is still at a nascent stage. The girls' group tries to convene a meeting once a month to discuss topics that concern village residents. At the meetings, they talk about their rights, entitlements and the due procedure in matters related to land ownership, banking, housing schemes for the poor, toilet scheme under Nirmal Bangla Abhijan, among others. The Anganwadi worker is present during these meetings to lend support.

Clearly, Rubaiya is emerging as leader. People who come to these meetings are much older than her, yet they listen to her every word with attention. They also respect her because she is educated and empowered. She stands out in her village for her self-confidence and determination to carve a better life for herself, despite all odds. Rubaiya not only knows about the subject under discussion, she also has tremendous oratory skills, something that she is able to sharpen at the e-learning/e-commerce institute where she is an intern.

Rubaiya is the soul of the girls' group operating from the Anganwadi centre. 'I have been coming to this centre since the time I was a toddler – for a meal of khichari (rice-and-lentils cooked together) and a boiled egg,' she says, referring to the government child health and nutrition programme for children up to six years. Talking about challenges that come her way in preventing child marriage, she says, 'It is much more difficult to prevent a child marriage in our Muslim community. A wedding can be organized within hours. A child can be married even before we learn about it,' she says. That is exactly what happened a few months ago. Aware that there is resistance in the village, a minor girl's family asked the groom's family to come over around midnight. They also asked them to bring along the Qazi, who was to conduct the wedding.

Rubaiya got wind of the midnight ceremony and duly informed Childline, the government helpline for children in distress.



When the Childline team reached the house, they were told there is no wedding. And it did not look as if a wedding was on. 'Frankly, they were irritated. They telephoned me and said that I had dragged them out of bed so late in the night on a false alarm,' remembers Rubaiya. Acting on a hunch, Rubaiya requested the Childline team to go and check once more. The team was surprised to see that all the arrangements of a wedding were in place, including the Qazi. They reached just in time to prevent the child marriage.

Even though Rubaiya and her girls' group have been working for the prevention of child marriage for a few years now, the community did not take them seriously – at least not until a few months ago. The community's perception changed when the additional district magistrate and officials from the block attended a function organized in the village by the girls' group to commemorate Child Rights Week of 2019. While the girls put up a play on child marriage awareness on the occasion, the officials felicitated them because they had stopped 11 child marriages that year. The presence of government officials at the village function made the residents sit up and take the girls' group more seriously. Their status in the village catapulted overnight.

6 Panchami Mullick, 16,
student of class 11, Kaljani
Shahjahanuddin Higher
Secondary School, Cooch
Behar 2 block, Cooch Behar



VICTIM NOW CHANGE MAKER

**On the verge of being married off a year ago,
she now campaigns against child marriage**

'Not a single girl in our school is married at present,' proudly declares the school nodal teacher for Kanyashree Prakalpa. He remembers when he joined in 2005, at least 25 girls would get married every year. Today former girl students of this co-ed school are pursuing careers as police constables, nurses and several as primary and high school teachers. The times have changed, and Kanyashree Prakalpa was the game changer.

The Kanyashree nodal teacher enjoys telling the story of a former student he ran into recently. She is a police constable in nearby Siliguri town; not long ago, when she was in Class 10, the school's Kanyashree team had prevented her from getting married. When this former student ran into the teacher, she sought his blessings and said 'Sir, I want to thank you for stopping me from getting married as a child. Otherwise I would not be where I am today.' A school Kanyashree team is usually led by the Kanyashree nodal teacher and includes one or two other teachers and a few Kanyashrees studying in senior classes. As a first step, they talk to families and try to persuade them against child marriage. If the family still wants to go ahead with it, the team then takes the BDO's help to prevent the child marriage.



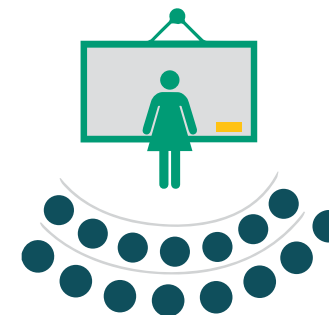
Panchami Mullick was on the verge of getting married about two years ago, when she was barely 15 years old. Today, thankfully, she is still unmarried and continuing her education because the school's Kanyashree team had stepped in. Not just that, she is also preventing the marriage of other children. During a recent incident, she spoke to the girl and held out her own example and presented a strong argument against child marriage before the parents.

This is what Panchami said about her own experience: 'It was 2018, and I was in Class 9 when my parents decided that I should get married. I did not want to marry. I liked to be in school and study with friends. Who doesn't like that? But my parents thought otherwise. The marriage had been finalized and was to take place the following month. My teachers came to know about the marriage from girls in my neighbourhood.'

'They came home, along with senior Kanyashree girls from my school. I was at home at the time, but did not go into the drawing-room, where my teachers and Didis sat and spoke to my parents. I listened to their conversation from another room. They first explained the physiological problems that could arise if a girl marries before she is 18. They also told my parents that I could one day have a future and stand on my feet. My teachers reminded them that I would get Rs 25,000 from Kanyashree Prakalpa when I turned 18, but only if I was still in school and unmarried. Finally, they told my parents about the law and its punishments. My parents were very upset, naturally. They told my teachers that they were not aware that the police could come home to stop a child marriage. They did not want the public shame such an event would bring. My parents acknowledged that they did not realize the seriousness of the offence and promised that they would wait till I was of the legal age.'

'I am glad I did not have to get married. I want to study and become a college lecturer one day. And then think of marriage.'

'I am glad I did not have to get married. I want to study and become a college lecturer one day. And then think of marriage.'



Panchami Mullick with Kanyashree Group

7 Ushashi Kanyashree Club
Nilkuthi Sister Nivedita Girls'
Higher Secondary School,
S.N. Road, Cooch Behar city,
Cooch Behar



KANYASHREE CLUB RUNS CLOTHES BANK FOR THE POOR

They started by collecting used garments from their homes; now the school is a place where the needy go for recycled clothes that look like new.

They call themselves the Ushashi Kanyashree Club. The members run a clothes bank – collecting used but wearable clothes, refurbishing them and then donating them to extremely poor children and adults.

The idea for the clothes bank came to them last winter. The girls said that on their way to school every morning they would see small children suffering for lack of clothes. With no sweaters on their back, and no socks to keep their feet warm, the little ones shivered in the cold Cooch Behar winter. The girls talked about it in school. They shared their concern with teachers, and from there the clothes bank began to take shape.

In the beginning they collected old clothes from their homes. Teachers also began to donate clothes. As the word spread,



Die hard campaigner for prevention of child marriage

Jaba Das is an active and articulate member of Ushashi Kanyashree Club. She is relentless in her campaign for the prevention of child marriage. She never loses an opportunity to spread the message.



A student of Class 12, she goes from house to house along with her fellow Ushashi Kanyashree Club members and talks to families about why they should get their daughters married only after they reach 18. She does not miss an opportunity to remind them of the financial support the government provides for further studies in the form of Kanyashree's one-time grant. She talks to boys too during these visits, explaining why they should not marry a minor.



It was a proud moment for the school when in 2019, Jaba Das was decorated with the prestigious Birangana Award for her efforts to raise awareness on prevention of child marriage. The Birangana (for girls) and Birpurush (for boys) awards are given by the West Bengal Commission for the Protection of Child Rights for efforts in protecting.



Handmade jewellery items by Kanyashree club (top) and Washed clothes for donation (bottom)



When the girls hand over clothes to someone they give a small chocolate along with it. This never fails to bring a smile on the receiver's face.



relatives and neighbours started dropping old clothes to the school. The school then brought out advertisements in the newspaper asking people to donate clothes. The advertisement also urged those who needed garments to collect them from the school. The club then put up a notice on the school gates stating that clothes are distributed every Saturday. As a result of all these efforts, there is now a steady stream of givers and receivers at the gates.

When the girls hand over clothes to someone they give a small chocolate along with it. This never fails to bring a smile on the receiver's face.

The clothes that are donated, though recycled, have the appeal of new garments. Club members work hard, cleaning and ironing the clothes, to bring a shine on them, before giving them away. To raise money for detergent and soap, they make costume jewellery items and sell these at various fairs organized by the district administration.

8

RAISING AWARENESS ON MENSTRUAL HYGIENE

Ayesha Sultana makes sure that every girl in school knows how to stay free from infection



Ayesha Sultana became the school menstrual hygiene activist when her Kanyashree nodal teacher singled her out to raise awareness on menstrual hygiene among her peers. The teacher selected her because Ayesha speaks slowly and with confidence, compelling her audience to listen with interest.

Ayesha talks to girls about the advantages of using a sanitary napkin. She tells them that these are affordable and can be obtained from the vending machine installed in the school. 'I also talk to them about how to maintain menstrual hygiene if they are using cloth, so as to remain free of infection,' Ayesha adds.



Ayesha takes pride in pointing out that her school has a sanitary napkin vending machine, which is installed near the washroom. Most girls know how to use the machine, but usually a non-teaching member of the school staff helps girls when they need a sanitary napkin.



Ayesha has noticed that as a result of the menstrual hygiene campaign more and more girls are now using sanitary napkins. Some use napkins for the first two days and cloth for the remaining days, when the menstrual flow is less.

Ayesha likes to paint and is in the fourth year of an art course conducted in affiliation with the Bangiya Sangeet Parishad Academy of Fine Arts.



It is her dream to study in the renowned Government Art College in Kolkata one day. She says she also loves life sciences. She dreams of specializing in zoology, do a PhD and become a professor one day. At the moment, these are her two dreams about her future.



The girls of this school discuss menstrual hygiene management once a month. Their life science teacher facilitates the discussion; she shows videos on menstruation and its various aspects during these sessions. Ayesha makes sure the girls who are absent do not miss out on what was discussed by briefing them at a later date.



Ayesha's mother was her first guide who taught her about menstrual hygiene. With her mother and teacher's support, Ayesha once spoke on a taboo subject like menstrual hygiene on stage during a government function. She confidently stood up before a hall full of people – consisting of other adolescent girls, some men and women – and spoke on healthy menstrual practices.

9 Ribina Toppo, 18,
student of Class 10
Ananda Bidyapeeth Higher
Secondary School, Dak Bunglow
Neech Colony, Mal Bazaar
municipal area, Jalpaiguri



RESCUING SMALL CHILDREN FROM NEGLECT

**Rehabilitating small children in Anganwadi centres,
Ribina ensures they have a better future.**

Ribina Toppo is an orphan child, growing up in her uncle's family in the tribal pocket of Jalpaiguri. Her aunt and uncle work in the tea gardens, as do most other people living in the area. In several families both parents go to work, and small children are frequently left unsupervised as the older siblings are either in school or working.

When Ribina comes across small children loitering about, she rounds them up and takes them to the area's Anganwadi centre. Anganwadi centres are government-run community centres where all children under six years in a GP are entitled to spend their mornings under supervision, are given nutritious food to supplement their diet, and are provided early childhood education according to a prescribed syllabus.

So far, Ribina has helped enrol six children in the Anganwadi centre in her village. With the help of the Anganwadi worker she visited the homes of the children and explained to the



parents how they would be better cared for if they joined the centre, which is free of cost. Ribina has fond memories of the time she went to such a centre everyday till she was six years old. She made a convincing case and was able to persuade the parents to leave their small children at the Anganwadi centre before going to work.

Ribina vividly recalls the hot cooked meals and the toys. 'I also remember the Didi who made us play so many educational games; I learnt my ABC's and numbers at the Anganwadi centre,' she says. With a fearlessness that reveals her social worker's zeal, she says 'I explain to the parents that if the government is doing so much for your children, why can't you simply drop them to the centre before going to work. It will give them a better future.'

She understands so well why a child fares poorly in school later on. The Anganwadi early childhood education curriculum equips children to start from Class 1 in a primary school. If they miss out on this phase they will be forever struggling to catch up with the rest of the class. 'I know many such children in our school. Some of them cannot even read or write properly,' she says. 'If a child does not go to an Anganwadi centre he or she will start school life with a handicap,' says Ribina.

Ribina is a member of the Kanyashree Club in her school. She says the club's activities taught her to think in terms of the community. It motivated her to help the small children in her area. 'I have not come across any case of child marriage where I live. But after I became a Kanyashree Club member I realized that children dropping out of school is a problem, and that I needed to do something about it,' says Ribina.

When Ribina comes across small children loitering about, she rounds them up and takes them to the area's Anganwadi centre.



Ribina with her school teachers

10

Reshma Parveen, 20,
village Ghasmary Basti
Nagrakata, an Open
Defecation Free (ODF) block,
Jalpaiguri



HER BLOCK IS PROUD OF HER

Reshma's efforts to build a toilet for her family contributed to Nagrakata's ODF status.

Within a year of getting Rs 25,000 from Kanyashree Prakalpa, Reshma Parveen built a toilet in her house.

Talking about how she decided to use her Kanyashree money to build a toilet for the family in 2018, Reshma said, 'I hated going out into the fields for defecation. It is embarrassing.' The family had moved into a new pucca (brick-and-mortar) house a few months earlier. They built the house with the financial support provided by the government's housing scheme. 'But we ran out of money and could not build a toilet,' said her father.

Reshma's mother Johura Begum however feels it is a question of priority. 'Men don't feel the need for a toilet as much as we women do. It is a matter of our dignity,' she adds. So, when Reshma suggested they build a toilet with her Kanyashree grant money, her mother agreed readily.

There were other factors at play too. Reshma's family shares the compound with her grandparents and uncle who live





Reshma felt more embarrassed and envious because of her aunt and cousins. They all used a pucca toilet while she had to defecate in the open.

in a house with a toilet. They built the toilet with financial support from the government's safe sanitation programme. Unfortunately, when Reshma's father branched out of the parent family and built his own house, he was not eligible for support under the programme as it allocates one toilet per household. Reshma felt all the more embarrassed – and envious too – because her aunt and cousins all used a pucca toilet while she had to defecate in the open.

It was also the time when the block was very close to attaining open defecation free status. Almost every household had a toilet and very few people went out into the open. The village najardari committee, a community monitoring group

The green toilet that Reshma built is helping the family in their farms as well. The toilet uses the twin leach pit technology, which converts the sewage into compost. The government promotes this low-cost technology under its Nirmal Bangla Abhijan, the safe sanitation programme to make the state free of open defecation.

Reshma's father said he has emptied the pits only once – he used the compost to grow organic vegetables. 'The vegetables taste so much better when we use compost. It is good for the soil too,' he says and adds that he also saved the money he would have spent on chemical fertilizers.





Reshma with her mother and sister

formed to prevent open defecation, was also on a strict vigil, blowing whistles at defecation sites in the mornings. Clearly, the pressure to build a toilet was increasing. This was also the time when the entire country was racing towards attaining Open Defecation Free (ODF) status; there was, therefore, pressure on each district, each block to meet their goals.

Today, the block is proud of Reshma. 'Her awareness and efforts to build the family's toilet have helped the block attain its ODF status,' said the nodal officer for Kanyashree Prakalpa in Nagrakata block office.

A student of Class 12 at present, Reshma is firm about studying further. She would like to complete her bachelor's degree at least, she says. When her parents brought a marriage proposal a few years ago, she put her foot down and firmly told her family that she is not in a hurry to marry. 'My first priority is to complete my education,' she says.

DOOR-TO-DOOR DENGUE PREVENTION

Kanyashree Club members cover a large number of houses in their efforts



Before the onset of monsoon Kanyashree girls of this school drum up awareness of dengue prevention in the area around the school, covering about 30 houses. Add to this the homes of each Kanyashree and her neighbours.



The result is a sizeable number of houses that the Kanyashree Club covers under its dengue prevention efforts. Most of the girls in the school are from the tea garden area, and live in rural slums. Usually both parents work as daily wagers.



The girls have been preventing dengue by controlling mosquito-breeding sites. Once every week they set out in a group, carrying placards with Kanyashree Prakalpa messages; besides the placard on dengue prevention there are other messages, like legal age of marriage and Kanyashree support for girls' education.



Once every week they go into the area near the school and try to cover five houses on each visit. They gather everyone present and read out a prepared message on what causes dengue and how to prevent it.



They also explain how stagnant water, in discarded coconut shells, old tyres, plastic jars or tins lying around the courtyard collect rainwater and later become breeding sites of mosquitoes.



They ask people to remove these from their premises and then sprinkle bleaching powder on the drains, explaining that the bleaching powder kills mosquito larvae.

12

Anjali Das, 21,
entrepreneur
Ex-student of Sannyasikata
Higher Secondary
School, Rajganj block, Jalpaiguri



KANYASHREE GRANT MONEY LAUNCHED HER AS A BUSINESSWOMAN

The runaway success of her shop drives Anjali to expand further.

Anjali Das is a role model for the girls in her former school. She is also someone whose life has been shaped and taken forward by Kanyashree Prakalpa. In April 2018 she and her brother set up a shop on a plot of land her family owned but had not put it to use. When Anjali received her Kanyashree grant money on turning 18, she invested all of it in buying goods for the shop. Her brother invested an equal amount and together started on this business partnership.

The shop is located strategically, right across the school gate. 'It was my dream to start a shop here because our family already had this plot of land. I knew if we sold earrings and cosmetics, and other such items that appeal to girls, we would do well. Girls come from far-off places to the school. Having a shop right across, makes it convenient,' says Anjali.

They started off with lipsticks, nail polish, small earrings and cosmetics, but responding to customer demand soon





Through her twin roles as educator and Kanyashree Yoddha, Sahanara today is an emerging social influencer in the community.

Inside the school, many girls said seeing Anjali they too want to start a small business with the Kanyashree grant money they will get on turning 18.



Anjali (left) with her brother

included notebooks, pens and other stationery items. Now she is planning to expand further and open a beauty parlour at the back of the shop. And she is going about it one step at a time. She has completed a course in bridal make-up and is already freelancing as a bridal make-up artiste. Well groomed, with subtle eye make-up, Anjali is walking advertisement for her business.

'When I got the Kanyashree grant money, I wanted to put it to good use. I talked to my brother first because I knew I could not do it alone. He was willing and so was my family,' said Anjali.

It helps to have her brother's support, says Anjali. The two of them take turns to sit at the shop and this leaves her free to complete her college education. It is quite evident that the shop does brisk business. The signs of success are there on the shelves as they are filled with attractive goods. And the shop is crowded with customers.

Inside the school, many girls said seeing Anjali they too want to start a small business with the Kanyashree grant money they will get on turning 18. Polly Das of Class 11 even has a business plan. 'I will buy a cow, which costs around Rs 9,000. I will nurture it for a year and sell it when it is pregnant, at Rs 15,000,' she says with confidence in her plan. A few girls said they too want to open a shop like Anjali with their Kanyashree grant money.

13

Kanyashree Club, Teiganj
Higher Secondary School
Burdwan 1 municipal area,
Purba Bardhaman



MOTHERS AND GRANDMOTHERS LEAP TOWARDS LITERACY

The adult education programme is empowering older women to do their own bank work.

The two oldest students in this classroom are 82 years old and the youngest are 30 something. Those in between are in their 40s, 50s and 60s; there are mothers and grandmothers in this group. Come Saturday, they clutch a red shopping bag and walk briskly to school to learn reading, writing and a little arithmetic. Each shopping bag contains an alphabet book and another on elementary maths, two notebooks, a pencil, an eraser and a sharpener. School is the higher secondary school where their children/grandchildren study. The young ones have now taken on the role of teachers of the older women and are liberating them from illiteracy.

This weekly school, called Alor Disha (towards light), runs from 2 to 3 pm every Saturday in a classroom on the ground floor. The Kanyashree Club started the programme in 2017 with 27 students, who are continuing even today, nearly three years later.





The young ones have now taken on the role of teachers of the older women and are liberating them from illiteracy.

The club's current leader, Tanu Das, and club member Sohini Das, both students of Class 11, take turns to conduct the lessons. Other members of the club spread out among the students to give personal attention to each individual. Each adult learner has a Kanyashree assigned to her for support during class. When they started in 2017, the girls had to start from scratch, teaching the learners how to even hold a pencil.

Today, some of them can read without halting. Take Malati Paul, who is 60 years old. She can add, subtract and read fluently. When she started coming to Alor Disha, she could not even sign her name.



Kanyashree girls teaching old women to read and write



Tanu Das, Kanyashree Club leader teaching in the class

Arati Raha, 62, sits in class with Trisha Raha, her granddaughter and Kanyashree Club member; Trisha watches over her grandmother as she writes in her notebook, lending a helping hand now and then. Arati said, 'At home, I usually hang my schoolbag on a wall near my bed. Every evening, when Trisha sits down to study, I too sit with her and go over my lessons or practise handwriting.'

Arati then goes on to add that learning to read and write has made her more self-reliant. Earlier she used to plead with her daughters-in-law or grandchildren to help her fill up a bank withdrawal form. Once at the bank, she would have to put her thumb impression on the form to draw money. Today, Arati fills up the form, scribbles her signature and withdraws money, all on her own.

This is not just Arati's story. It is the story of all the 60-plus women in class, who need to go to the bank to withdraw their government old-age pension. Then there are those women whose husbands work in another state and send money back home electronically.

Alor Disha was in fact born out of these older women's sense of quandary each time they visited a bank. Explaining the genesis of the adult learning programme, Tanu says: 'Whenever we went to the bank, we saw that older women had such a difficult time. They would ask people to help them fill up the withdrawal form. Even if someone decided to lend a hand, he or she would soon become impatient and express irritation.' Moved by the plight of these older women, the girls talked among themselves and decided to teach them how to fill their own bank forms. They approached their Kanyashree nodal teacher and discussed the idea with him. The school expanded on their ideas and arranged for funds to provide each adult student with books and stationery. That was how Alor Disha came to be. It was the beginning of a new journey in the lives of so many women.



Shankari Pal, 75, and Tara Pal, 30, are mother-in-law and daughter-in-law; both are adult learners. Shankari has been a student since 2017 while Tara, a vegetable vendor, felt the need to join Alor Disha a year ago to improve her accounting skills. Earlier, she would hesitate to go too far with her pedal-cart of vegetables because she was afraid she would not be able to find her way back. All that is in the past now, because not only can she read road signs, she is no longer afraid to ask for directions. 'I have lost my fear,' says Tara, breaking into a smile.

Now that they have all learnt to read and write a little, the students of Alor Disha said they would like to be rewarded with a proper school bag, one that has the Kanyashree emblem.



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Kanyashree Club,
Barabelun Debibala
Balika Bidyalaya
Bhatar, Purba Bardhaman

A PLAY THAT PUTS THE FEAR OF CHILD MARRIAGE AMONG PARENTS

Girls perform the play to make the community aware of the dangers.

The Kanyashree Club of this school is so active that everyone above Class 9 wants to do something or the other under its banner. The girls have been planting and nurturing trees to promote afforestation; they also visit nearby villages, going door to door to spread awareness on dengue and malaria prevention.

The club's central activity though is a play on the pitfalls of child marriage. The play tells the story of a girl who got married as a child and had children before she was 18. Within a few years her husband leaves her for another woman, and then her in-laws drive her out. The girl and her two young children have nowhere to go. She comes back to her parental home, but she is not welcome here either. Her brothers, who are married by now, have families of their own. Because she is uneducated and unemployable, the girl ends up as an unpaid domestic help, washing and cleaning for her brothers' families, so that she and her children can have a roof over their head.



The play then cuts to what would have happened if the girl had continued going to school. It tells the audience about the annual scholarship that Kanyashree gives an unmarried student between the ages of 13 and 18, and the one-time grant of Rs 25,000 at 18, if she is still unmarried and continuing in an educational institution. This money could help her study further, do a vocational course if she so chooses, and stand on her own feet. The play also talks of other possibilities – it shows girls winning awards for excelling in sports and in academics, and so on. In short, the play projects the good life that is possible if a girl continues going to school instead of getting married as a child.

The club takes the play to villages that are particularly vulnerable to child marriage. They have been putting it up for the past four years, in courtyards and in street corners. They perform the play in school uniforms, not costumes. The story of the girl who marries young and her suffering resonate among the audiences because it is a common occurrence, particularly in the vulnerable pockets.

It was also the story of Rina Khatun's sister. Rina's sister got married as a child, like so many girls in her village; she became a mother at a young age, and was abandoned by her husband and his family. Her sister's misfortunes triggered Rina to make it her life's mission to not allow a child marriage to take place.

'I will do everything to stop another child marriage from taking place'

Rina Khatun is an ex-student of the school. But her former teachers cannot cease talking about her. She was an active Kanyashree Club member and very keen that the play was performed in her area frequently.

'I will do everything to stop another child marriage from taking place.'

– Rina Khatun



A scene of a classroom created through drama



Kanyashree Girls with School teachers (Top and Bottom)



‘She wanted to drive the message home, good and proper,’ her former principal commented.

Just as it happened to the girl in the play, Rina Khatun’s sister, who was married when she was 15, returned to her parental home with a baby in arms after a short-lived marriage. She had been driven out by her in-laws. Seeing her in that crushed state, Rina vowed she would not allow another child marriage and do everything in her power to stop it. With the help of her teachers, Rina Khatun prevented three child marriages in her area.

One of the weddings she intercepted was that of her neighbour. When her cousin, who ran a backyard poultry in their neighbourhood, dropped in and casually mentioned that the girl’s family had bought three hens from him that morning, Rina’s detective nose smelt a rat. Something was not quite right; three hens could only mean the guests were very special. And sure enough, a little investigation revealed that the neighbours were going to serve the chicken to a prospective groom’s family.

The following day Rina reported the matter to her nodal teacher, who then mobilized the block team and prevented yet another child marriage. Rina Khatun is something of a legend in her former school. Everyone remembers her crusader’s zeal about fighting child marriage. Her former teachers never fail to take every opportunity to quote her example.

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Leena Mukherjee, 17,
student of Class 11
Amarun Station Siksha
niketan, Bhatar, Purba
Bardhaman



SHE HAS LED HER KANYASHREE CLUB TO PREVENT 3 CHILD MARRIAGES

A visit to the block office made her realize her social responsibility.

Leena Mukherjee first had the desire to forge ahead as a Kanyashree girl when she represented her school at an exposure meeting with the BDO in Bhatar block. The visit was her first big step into the world of grown-ups. It was 2018, Leena recalls; she was 16 at the time and studying in Class 10. She had just been appointed leader of Kanyashree Club in her school. 'It was Leena's indomitable spirit that made us select her as the leader,' said the school's principal.

The school's Kanyashree nodal teacher had arranged for the exposure visit to the office of the BDO. He accompanied Leena and another Kanyashree club member to the meeting. There, Leena listened to teachers from other schools talk about the achievement of their girls – how they had prevented girls below 18 years from getting married. 'I realized then that there was so much we could do as Kanyashree girls. The visit made me realize my social responsibility,' Leena said.



‘I realized then that there was so much we could do as Kanyashree girls. The visit made me realize my social responsibility.’

– Leena



Anjali (left) with her brother

The visit to the block office is the local administration’s effort to establish direct contact with Kanyashree Clubs in the block. The aim is to help the clubs understand how serious the government is about curbing child marriage. The block office encourages such meetings as it can track progress on Kanyashree activities in the school. These meetings also empower Kanyashrees to stop a child marriage, as they come back armed with various phone numbers they can call if they hear of any marriage plans among peers. It also gives them the courage to mobilize the government machinery.

‘In the beginning I did not really understand what I was supposed to do as a Kanyashree Club leader. But listening to the BDO that day I realized, with all the support made available by his office, there was so much I could do to help girls who were being married at an early age,’ said Leena. She listened carefully and made note of the phone numbers of the Kanyashree nodal person in the block office and Childline, a national helpline for children in distress.

Leena and her fellow Kanyashree Club members have prevented three child marriages in less than two years. The first one was in Amarun village, located two km from the school. Leena remembers the moment, when she and her fellow Kanyashrees were coming out of geography class, the school’s guard came and told them that the family of a girl in Class 8 was getting her married the next day. Leena immediately went to the school’s Kanyashree



Leena with her mother and Grandmother.

Leena and her Kanyashree group



nodal teacher and with his help called the Kanyashree nodal officer in the block office. The block team reached the school along with two police personnel; Leena and her nodal teacher got into the vehicle and reached the house of the girl who was to be married the next day.

The family was practically ready for the event; even the sweets to be served to guests had been bought. The block officials and the police explained to the girls' parents that the marriage would be illegal as their daughter was only 15 years old; even the groom-to-be was below the legal age for marriage. The parents said they were getting their daughter married because they did not want to take any risk. They feared if they did not get her married now, she might end up eloping with some unsuitable boy and bring shame to the family.

Following this incident Leena and her fellow Kanyashree Club members prevented another marriage that was to take place two days later, also in the same village. The girl who was to get married broke down crying during the lunch break and asked for help. Leena and her Kanyashree friends then mobilized block officials and with their help persuaded the parents to delay their plans.

The third child marriage Leena helped prevent was in her own village. The girl met Leena in the neighbourhood and said, 'I want to study. I don't want to get married now. Please do something.' Leena set in motion the now familiar chain of events, and the marriage was stopped.





