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ANCHOR

# Bengal school takes on child marriage — with a parent's promise

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"I will not get my daughter married before she reaches the age of 18. She will not be a school dropout. I will educate her and after she attains the age of 18, I will arrange for her marriage." THIS IS the text of an undertaking for parents of girl students at a school in West Bengal near the Bangladesh border. The goal, teachers say, is clear: Empower girls, prevent dropouts and eradicate child marriage.

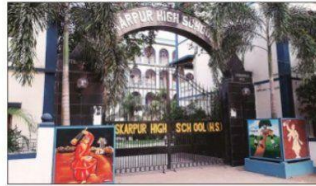
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The voluntary one-page undertaking, in Bengali, was handed out last month and, officials say, 1,800 parents have already signed up at the Lashkarpur High School in Lalgola, Murshidabad. The

school has 1,957 girls, well over half the total strength of 3,205 students hailing from the 22 villages in the area.

The initiative comes months after the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights released a report, based on the National Family Health Survey-4, which shows West Bengal topping states in incidence of child marriage, with 25.6 per cent of girls aged between 15 and 19 — and Murshidabad heading all districts, with 39.9 per cent. The national average is 11.9 per cent, according to the survey con-



At Lashkarpur High School in Lalgola, Murshidabad. Express

ducted in 2015-16.

"The undertaking is a part of a process of awareness and in some cases, intervention by the school. We are not forcing anyone to sign, and we will not take any action against parents who refuse... we will counsel them. However, we are yet to find a parent who has not agreed to sign," says Jehangir Alam, headmaster, Lashkarpur school.

Officials and teachers say school authorities have also formed a Kanyashree group, in line with the state government's project for school girls. Members

of the group maintain vigil in the villages and report any move by parents to conduct child marriages. The school's teachers then step in to speak with the parents and, if needed, take the help of police and the district administration.

"This a unique initiative that will go a long way in curbing the menace of child marriage. Since 2013, we have been organising awareness campaigns and parent-teacher meetings focusing on prevention of child marriages, which were once common here," says Samsujjaman, Block Development Officer, Lalgola.

"Every month, we get around 10 calls alerting us to the possibility of a child marriage. We speak to the mothers of girl children. We talk about the ill-effects of early marriage on the girl's health, pregnancy, etc.," says Sushil Ari, physical education teacher at the school.

According to teachers and officials, the fathers of most students are migrant workers, employed as masons and labourers in other states, and the mothers are mostly engaged in "rolling beedis" at local units.

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## Bengal school

"There is a trend of early marriages in these parts. Since the men remain outside for work for most of the year, the mothers take care of the girls. They find it convenient to get their daughters married early," says Alam, the headmaster.

In Lalgola, parents and guardians are slowly warming up to the initiative.

Beli Pramanik, whose husband runs a small electrical shop in Lashkarpur, says she has signed two undertakings — one each for her two school-going daughters. "It is a noble idea and like other parents, I support it. I will allow my daughters to study first. Their marriage will be held at an appropriate time," she says.

"I have three sons who work outside as masons. I have five daughters, of whom four have been married off. But now, I have signed the document and support it totally. I will let my youngest daughter, who is in the high school, pursue higher studies. I had two offers for her marriage which I have rejected. Let her cross 18 now, we will think about it," says Abdul Hai, from Shisha Ramzanpur village.