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Why Is School Dropout Still a Challenge in West Bengal?

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West Bengal's dropout rate for secondary schooling is the worst in India, despite similar rates in lower grades. Early marriage, migration and frequent natural disasters play a role.

India has made significant improvements in school enrolment over the years. While at the national level, the dropout rate has significantly reduced over the years, there is considerable variation among states.

Amidst this diversity, West Bengal presents a worrying picture. At the preparatory and middle levels, the state's dropout rates are almost identical to the national average, data from the Unified District Information System for Education (U-DISE) show. However, at the secondary level, the rate is more than twice the national average for both boys and girls: once in classes between 9 and 12, a fifth of West Bengal's children drop out of school.

> A common perception among parents is that marriage is the ultimate goal of a girl's life and that delaying it beyond a certain age reduces her "value" in the marriage market.

Secondary school completion is critical for a successful transition to life. West Bengal's poor showing here is particularly worrying given that it has traditionally been known for a relatively stronger education system than many other Indian states. A closer look at trends also suggests the state is witnessing a backslide, with more children being pushed out of classrooms than before. In 2022-23, the dropout rate was 6.6% for boys and 4% for girls, which has increased to 23% for boys and 17.8% for girls in 2024-25. Moreover, dropout rates are consistently higher among males than among females in all three years (Figure 2).

Table 1: Dropout rate in India by gender, from 2022-23 to 2024-25

Year	Preparatory (Class III to V)			Middle (Class VI to VIII)			Secondary (Class IX to XII)		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
2022-23	8.6	8.7	8.7	7.9	8.3	8.1	14.8	12.6	13.8
2023-24	3.9	3.5	3.7	5.2	5.3	5.2	12.3	9.4	10.9
2024-25	2.7	1.8	2.3	4.1	2.9	3.5	9.7	6.6	8.2

Table 2: Dropout rates in top 10 states/union territories by gender, 2024-25

Preparatory (III to V)				Middle (VI to VIII)				Secondary (IX-XII)			
State	Boys	Girls	Total	State	Boys	Girls	Total	State	Boys	Girls	Total
Bihar	12.9	9.8	11.4	Mizoram	12.8	10.3	11.6	West Bengal	23.0	17.8	20.3
Mizoram	8.0	7.8	7.9	Bihar	11.9	6.6	9.3	Arunachal Pradesh	14.6	13.6	14.1
Meghalaya	7.7	5.0	6.4	Meghalaya	9.9	6.0	7.8	Gujarat	15.5	11.4	13.6
Ladakh	7.9	4.0	6.0	Madhya Pradesh	6.7	5.9	6.3	Jammu and Kashmir	14.1	11.3	12.8
Assam	4.8	2.6	3.7	Gujarat	5.4	6.3	5.8	Mizoram	14.4	11.4	12.8
Arunachal Pradesh	4.2	2.9	3.6	Arunachal Pradesh	4.9	5.3	5.1	Karnataka	16.0	8.6	12.3
Rajasthan	3.6	3.6	3.6	Assam	7.0	3.2	5.0	Madhya Pradesh	14.2	10.2	12.3
Manipur	3.5	3.5	3.5	Nagaland	5.6	3.8	4.7	Assam	12.9	11.6	12.2
Punjab	2.6	2.4	2.5	Ladakh	5.3	3.7	4.5	Chhattisgarh	15.7	8.8	12.1
Sikkim	3.8	1.2	2.5	Andhra Pradesh	4.7	2.6	3.7	Andhra Pradesh	13.8	8.5	11.2
India	**2.7**	**1.8**	**2.3**	**India**	**4.1**	**2.9**	**3.5**	**India**	**9.7**	**6.6**	**8.2**

Figure 1: Dropout rate at various educational levels by gender in WB and India, 2024-25

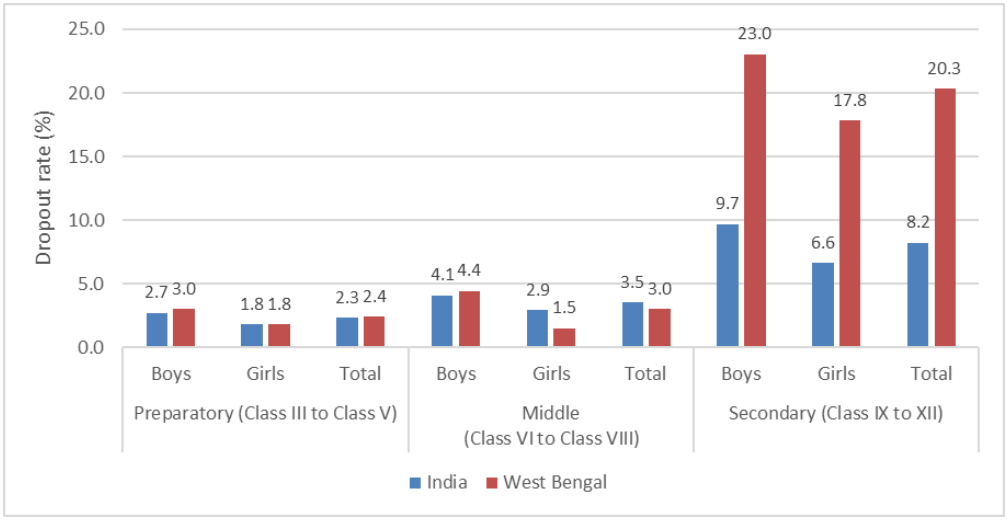
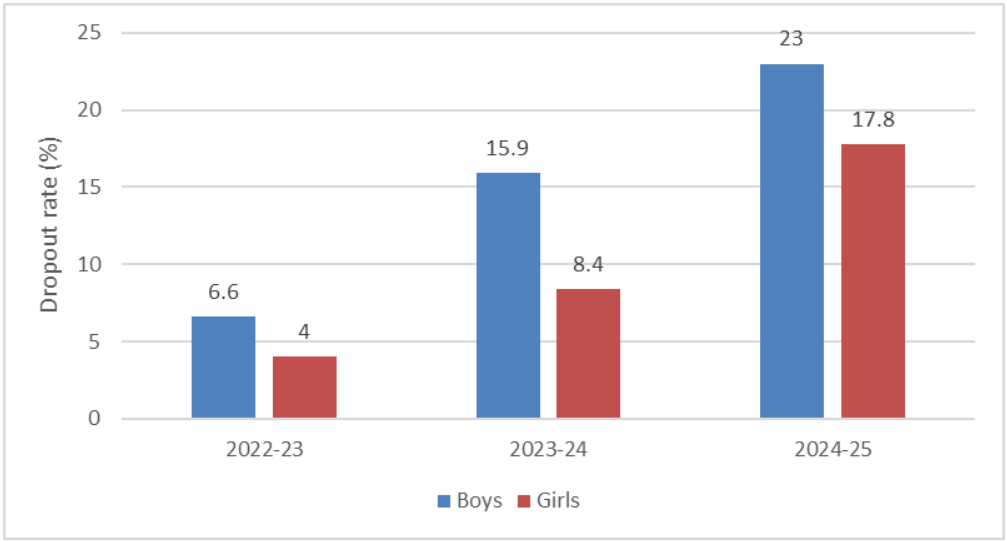


Figure 2: Dropout rate in West Bengal at the secondary level (IX-XII), from 2022-23 to 2024-25



The drivers of school dropout in India are well-documented. Studies have highlighted structural and socio-economic factors such as caste, religion, gender, and poverty as the primary deterrents to schooling (Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2010; Goel & Husain, 2018; Kumar et al., 2023; Garg et al., 2024; Paul & Thapa, 2024). Evidence indicates that children belonging to marginalised caste groups (i.e., SC/ST), Muslims, and from economically disadvantaged families are more likely to drop out of school (Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2010). Some studies also reported inadequate school infrastructure, low-quality education, and poor governance as the main barriers to educational access (Prakash et al., 2017; Paul, 2025a).

What explains the picture in West Bengal?

Poor Education and Migration Pressure

Historically, West Bengal has had a better schooling system than many other north Indian states. However, in recent decades, the quality of education has not kept pace with the socio-cultural transformation. Schools have a shortage of teachers. According to U-DISE data, WB had 6,482 single-teacher schools in 2024-25, up from 2,290 in 2023-24. Schools also have inadequate physical infrastructure. According to the ASER 2024 report, over one-third (33.8%) of schools still lack functional toilets for girls.

With a perceived decline in the quality of education in government schools, families increasingly prefer private schools. However, when the costs of private schooling become unaffordable, many poor households choose to withdraw their children, particularly girls. In such cases, daughters are often pushed into early marriage or domestic work, while sons enter the informal labour market.

> Lack of employment opportunities for girls further discourages parents from educating their daughters.

In many rural families, early entry into the labour force is a prominent driver of school dropout to support their families. Boys are often compelled to engage in child labour due to household poverty. In such circumstances, labour out-migration becomes prominent in rural areas.

Such migration is prevalent in West Bengal, particularly in rural areas. A significant proportion of people seasonally migrate to other states in search of better employment opportunities. When whole families migrate for work, children face significant disruptions in schooling (Smita, 2008).

Seasonal migration of children with their families leads to irregular school attendance and increased dropout rates due to frequent movement between native regions and destinations (Shah, 2021). A study of seasonal migration in rice fields in WB found that migrant children from primary school were absent during cultivation seasons (Rogaly et al., 2001). When they return to their native places after several months, many of these children are unlikely to return to school. Even children whose families have migrated for more extended periods are often out of school in their destination places, as they also work alongside their parents and become child labourers. They typically work long hours in unsafe environments-such as brick kilns, construction sites, agricultural fields, and factories-making schooling difficult (Paul, 2025b).

Early Marriage

For girls, the most significant reason for dropping out is the widespread prevalence of early marriage. According to the National Family Health Survey (2019-21), 42% of women, aged 18-29, still marry before the age of 18 in WB (IIPS & ICF, 2021). The recently released Sample Registration System (SRS) report 2023 also revealed that WB had the highest rate of child marriage (below 18 years) among all states in India (6.3% for WB vs 2.1% for India). Once a girl reaches puberty, she is generally married off at a very young age, and her schooling usually ends. Overnight, studies give way to household responsibilities, childbearing, and the demands of a life she did not choose. Teenage motherhood is also high in the state, where 16% of women aged 15-19 have had a pregnancy or given birth in 2019-21, compared with the national average of 7% (IIPS & ICF, 2021).

A common perception among parents is that marriage is the ultimate goal of a girl's life and that delaying it beyond a certain age reduces her "value" in the marriage market. Parents raise and prepare their daughters to become "ideal brides" in the marriage market, rather than educating them. Many parents expressed fear that an unmarried daughter beyond her mid-teens might elope or engage in premarital relationships, which could "dishonour" the family. In such a social context, early marriage is seen as a means of control and protection. Additionally, some communities believe that educating girls beyond a certain level might make them "less desirable" as brides. These regressive attitudes continue to limit aspirations and opportunities for girls, particularly in conservative rural pockets (Ghosh, 2011).

Beyond early marriage, entrenched gender norms shape everyday choices that drive girls out of school.

Families often see daughters as destined to marry and leave their natal family. Investing in their education is considered less valuable than investing in sons. The recent *Comprehensive Modular Survey: Education (2025)* highlights that the hidden costs of education-tuition, uniforms, travel, and exam fees-are more likely to be considered 'wasted' on daughters.

> Collaboration between schools, local governments, and civil society can create an enabling environment that supports children from disadvantaged families.

Girls are expected to shoulder household chores and care for younger siblings, while boys are allowed to prioritise studies. The recent Time-Use Survey (January-December 2024) indicates that women aged 6 years and older spend 289 minutes per day on unpaid domestic work, compared with 88 minutes for men. In addition to domestic chores, women devote 137 minutes per day to caregiving activities, including caring for children and the elderly, whereas men devote 75 minutes. The lack of employment opportunities for girls further discourages parents from educating their daughters (Chakravarty, 2018). For them, keeping a girl at home or marrying her early feels like a more rational choice, however misguided.

Contextual vulnerabilities also exacerbate the risk of dropout for girls.

Many districts in Bengal experience recurrent flooding due to the large number of rivers, disrupting children's schooling. Girls are often compelled to take on additional household responsibilities during such crises, increasing the likelihood of dropping out of school. They often face harassment in rehabilitation shelters, and concerns about their safety and security restricts their mobility, including to schools. The vulnerabilities from disasters (Bhattacharjee & Behera, 2018) prompt families to use early marriage and migration as a coping mechanism to manage instability (Paul, 2025c).

Policy Implications

The state government implemented the *Kanyashree Prakalpa* (a conditional cash transfer scheme) in 2013 to address the high dropout rate and widespread practice of early marriage among girls. Although evidence suggests that this scheme has some positive impact on tackling these issues (Dey & Ghosal, 2021; Sen & Thamarapani, 2023), it has been insufficient to reduce the high dropout rates, as reflected in recent data. A comprehensive, multipronged strategy is needed to address this crisis. The state government must adopt a multi-pronged approach. Strengthening secondary education through adequate teacher recruitment, regular attendance monitoring, and community-based awareness campaigns can help reduce dropouts. Creating local job opportunities for youth can encourage parents to send their children to school. Expanding scholarship programmes and livelihood-linked skill training may also motivate older students to stay in school. Furthermore, collaboration between schools, local governments, and civil society can create an enabling environment that supports children from disadvantaged families.

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