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THE QUIET GOOD NEWS

A MONTHLY FROM MISSION SAMRIDDHI

CELEBRATE

CONNECT

CATALYZE

SECURING CHILDHOOD

CHILD MARRIAGE FREE VILLAGES



**NEARLY 35.5% OF
GIRLS IN SITAPUR
DISTRICT ARE MARRIED
BEFORE THE AGE OF 18,
A PERCENTAGE MUCH
HIGHER THAN THE
NATIONAL (26.8%) AND
STATE (21.2%)
AVERAGES.**

<https://www.indiaspend.com>

One of the aspirational districts, the development indicators of Sitapur district in Uttar Pradesh are numbingly disturbing and debilitating. Only 90kms from the state capital of Lucknow, Sitapur is notorious for its high average incidence of child marriages and violence against women.

Child marriage violates a child's right to a healthy and happy childhood; exposing them to violence, abuse and exploitation. Early marriage compromises a child's education and health, especially of the girl child, making her even more vulnerable to the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, frequent and untimely pregnancies and domestic violence. Maternal deaths are higher amongst mothers under 18 years of age and so is infant mortality, according to WHO.



"ESTIMATES SUGGEST THAT EACH YEAR, AT LEAST 1.5 MILLION GIRLS UNDER 18 GET MARRIED IN INDIA, WHICH MAKES IT HOME TO THE LARGEST NUMBER OF CHILD BRIDES IN THE WORLD - ACCOUNTING FOR A THIRD OF THE GLOBAL TOTAL.

NEARLY 16 PER CENT ADOLESCENT GIRLS AGED 15-19 ARE CURRENTLY MARRIED."

[HTTPS://WWW.UNICEF.ORG/INDIA](https://www.unicef.org/india)



Fathoming the intensity of the issue of child marriages in Sitapur district, Mission Samriddhi, in collaboration with Jeevaniya Society and Lokswaraj Trust initiated a campaign to stop child marriage.

Jeevaniya Society is a Voluntary support organization working for more than 20 years as part of a movement to revitalize Local Health Traditions and Traditional Indian Systems of Health Care for Holistic Health. It has been working for rural industrialization and related programs to ensure better life, particularly for the rural poor, besides initiating and organizing programs of utilizing scientific prowess for the same.

Lokswaraj Trust is a charitable trust committed to rural development. With a vision to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, Lokswaraj trust is working towards empowering the elected village representatives, women and youth to improve health, education and livelihoods in the district. Lokswaraj Trust has been working against the practice of child marriages since 2008. Two years back Lokswaraj Trust was successful in stopping child marriage in Village Chhatwan in Sitapur district. ***"We had informed the police about the wedding involving children. The police intervened and the marriage was stopped. This triggered a discussion around the subject and dissuaded others from marrying their children below 18 years of age"*** told Ashok Kumar, field coordinator with our partner organisation Lokswaraj Trust. Both, the girl and the boy are currently going to school and leading a carefree life of childhood. This incidence set the background for the current campaign on child marriage free villages in the district.

The campaign - 'Child Marriage Free Villages', is slowly gaining momentum in three of Mission Samriddhi Clusters in Sitapur district. Discussions were held with the elected representatives of the village panchayat to understand the reasons for child marriages. One of the primary reason for the early marriage of a girl child in the area is the fear of sexual violation. With ever-increasing instances of sexual harassment of girls, including rape, the families prefer getting 'rid' of their daughters by marrying them early to avoid the risk of compromising 'family honour'. Dowry is yet another reason attributed to the early marriages of girls. 'Older the girl, higher is her dowry', tells Ashok Kumar, field coordinator with Mission Samriddhi partner organisation, Lokswaraj Trust. **The prevalent social norms, poverty, lower status of women, lack of education and social awareness are some of the many reasons for child marriages that emerged during these discussions.**

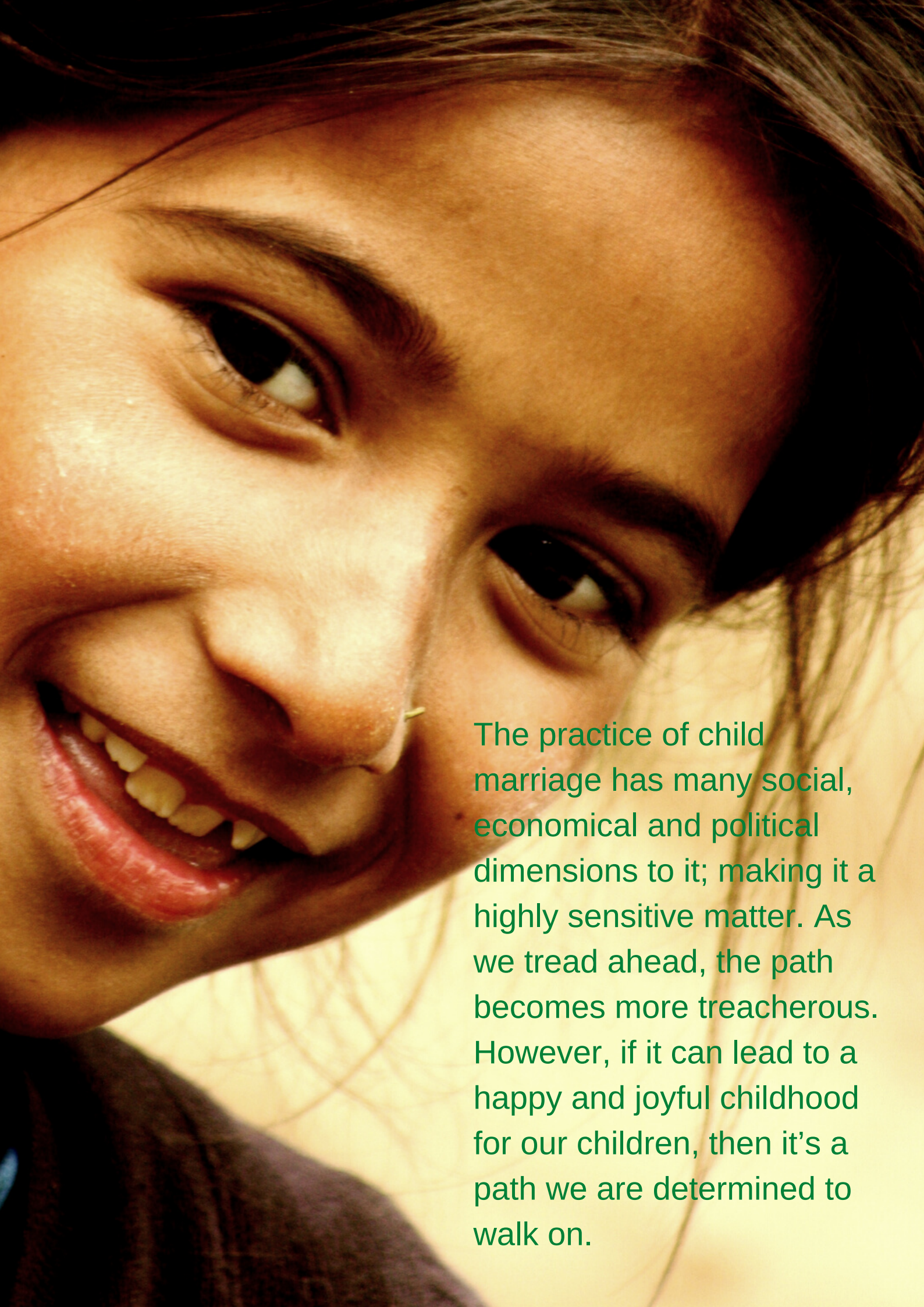
Mission Samriddhi's campaign against child marriage focuses on building normative consensus to look critically at the existing norms which perpetuate the practice of child marriage. The strategy is to bring about a normative shift through education, awareness and exposure. The campaign involves all stakeholders including children themselves. Though in its initial stage, the campaign is gaining community support and participation. A group of volunteers, comprising of children and youth have been trained to create awareness on the issue, using Nukkad Natakk or the street plays. Various media are being used to effectively communicate the ills of child marriage and its social and legal implications to bring about a mindset change. The team is also identifying vulnerable families and children at risk, to proactively support them. Advocacy with the district administration is an integral part of the campaign for greater accountability and to build the trust of people in the administration.

"We face considerable animosity and resistance from the villagers. But, they are changing, slowly. Our strategy is to engage with all stakeholders to make them realise the negative impact early marriages has on children. We engage directly with the children who are most vulnerable and empower them. We visit the homes of children who have dropped out of school and motivate them to join the school. Last month six families in village Meenapur pledged that they will stand against child marriage in their village and see to it that none of the children in their extended families are married before the age of 18", told Ashok.



Currently, the campaign covers three clusters - Dhanawan in Sakran block, Newada in Hargaon block and Jahangirabad in Biswan block covering ten-gram panchayats in each of the three clusters. Forty young adults have been trained in street play performance to create awareness on the issue of child marriage and the group has performed 21 street plays across 6-gram panchayats in the last four months. Six hundred thirty wall paintings on the issue of child marriage have been created and 36 group meetings held with different stakeholders. Over 900 household meetings were held during the first eight months of the ongoing campaign.

As a result of the consistent efforts of our partner organisations, 17 families from three villages have pledged to stop child marriages in their own families and community. More and more individuals, including women, young adults and children are boycotting weddings involving child marriage.



The practice of child marriage has many social, economical and political dimensions to it; making it a highly sensitive matter. As we tread ahead, the path becomes more treacherous. However, if it can lead to a happy and joyful childhood for our children, then it's a path we are determined to walk on.