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Child marriages up; panel sleeps on the job

Mandya, Shivamogga, Belagavi account for one third of 119 cases

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BENGALURU, DHNS

Incidents of child marriage rose in Karnataka in 2018-19, with Mandya, Shivamogga and Belagavi accounting for one third of the 119 cases, while five cases in Bengaluru Urban district brought shame to the state capital.

Shocking as they are, the numbers provided by the Women and Child Development Department do not give the full picture as most child marriages go unreported.

Mandya stayed on top of the ignominious list with 18 reported incidents though the number was lower compared to the previous year (21). Together with Mandya, Chief Minister B S Yediyurappa's home district Shivamogga (13) and the recent political epicentre Belagavi (12) accounted for more than a third of the total incidents in 2018-19.

Activists and experts said the numbers are just the tip of the iceberg. "It is impossible



Members of CRY raise awareness against child marriage on Church Street in Bengaluru on Sunday. DH PHOTO/S K DINESH

to believe that only six child marriages took place in Koppal. The number is as far from the truth as the zero incidents recorded in the district in 2017-18," an expert said.

An activist involved in the field for over two decades said the complexity of society, regardless of whether it is urban or rural, makes it near impossible to quantify unreported

incidents. "However, going by the data of the National Family Health Survey-4, we can say child marriages form roughly 23% of all marriages".

Panel met only twice

Though a panel was formed in 2018 to prevent child marriages, one of the members said it has met only twice in over two years. "The meetings happen only after pressure from the panel members who represent the civil society. There is hardly any follow-up done," he said.

A major cause of concern, the department data shows, is officials didn't book the accused in over half of the cases.

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State saw more child marriages...

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Only 48 cases were registered in 2018-19 against the 119 incidents of child marriages that came to light. In comparison, 61 cases were registered against 102 reported incidents the previous year. This decline is worrying, said activists.

The expert who spoke to DH on condition of anonymity said officials refuse to register cases saying that such a move will disturb the social fabric. "They justify their actions by citing the law that terms child marriage a void ab initio. If we press them to book the culprits under harsher laws like Pocso, they say it will disturb the sensitive social fabric," he said. Director of the Depart-

ment Dayanand K A could not be reached. However, an official said the department is working under high pressure due to the increasing number of vacancies. "Additionally, promotions have been stalled for more than six years for now. Most of the employees are overworked and demoralised by the attitude of higher-ups," an official said.

Echoing the sentiments of an activist, the official said the rural population has high aspirations thanks to access to education but the department could not meet their demands. "The number of calls alerting the childline (1098) about child marriages is increasing. But it is nowhere enough to prevent the crisis."