

# 'Over 50 pc of girls marry before 18'

ajita singh

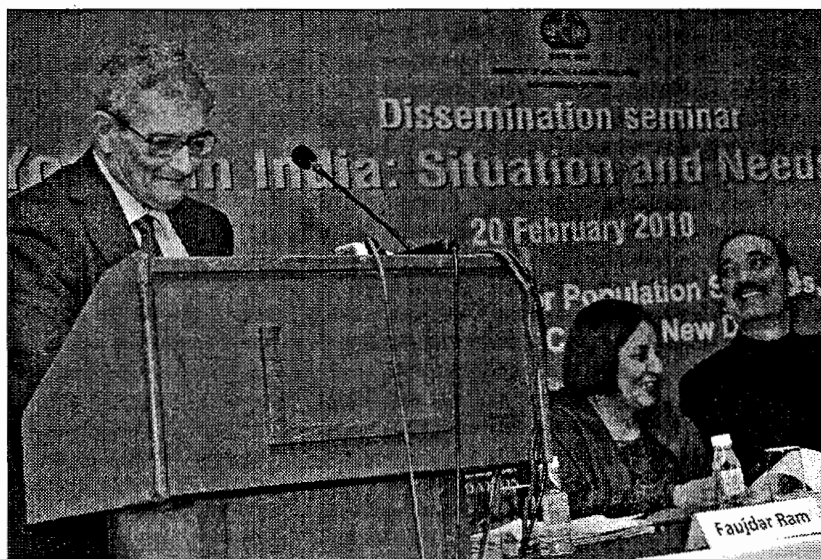
NEW DELHI, 20 FEB: Not only do a large number of adolescents in India, who represent almost one-third of the total country's population, drop out of school, get married early, work in vulnerable situations and are exposed to peer pressure, many young boys and girls indulge in high risk behaviour, according to "Youth in India: Situation and Needs Study" conducted by International Institute for Population Sciences and Population Council of India.

India has to learn to look after its girls better if it has to pursue its inclusive agenda of social development, the Union minister of health and family welfare, Mr Ghulam Nabi Azad, said after releasing the report here today.

Nobel Prize winning economist Professor Amartya Sen, who was also present at the report release function, expressed shock at the finding that 25 per cent of India's women have not gone to school at all.

The diversity of India is reflected in the diversity of challenges across states, Mr Azad said, and added that serious gender gaps in the parameters of education, work status and economic dependence have been found to affect young people in India who face multiple risks associated with sexual and reproductive health. A lack of knowledge about reproductive health is resulting in exposure of youths to increased health risks, he said, pointing to the startling revelation in the report that only 37 per cent of young men and 45 per cent of young women knew that a woman can get pregnant after her first sexual encounter.

The study conducted in six states — Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu — between 2006 and 2008, involving



Prof Amartya Sen at a seminar in the Capital on Saturday. SNS

over 58,000 youths in the age group of 15-29, exhibits the need for life skills and vocational education across all states. Rajasthan faces most of the challenges of gender inequality, Bihar and Jharkhand exhibit the large unmet educational need of young people.

Child marriage continues to remain a big problem in the country, with half the women getting married before attaining the minimum legal marriageable age of 18, Mr Azad said. "Findings reveal that the situation was worst in Bihar — 77 per cent of women were married before the age of 18," he said and added that "early marriage, followed by early pregnancy — almost 47 per cent of young women had their first pregnancy before they turned 18 — results in pregnancy related morbidity and mortality.

"Data from the states shows that while only 27 per cent of the youth in the 15-29 years age group have comprehensive correct knowledge about HIV/AIDS transmis-

sion and prevention, one third of the total reported AIDS cases are below the age of 29 years and more than 8 per cent of young people in the age group of 15-19 years have been found to be experimenting with sex either before or outside marriage."

The health minister held the media responsible for influencing the behaviour, style of dressing of the country's youth and effecting a change in their temperament which was leading to aggression. "About 37 per cent of alcohol and cannabis users took to the vice before the age of 20 years as increased peer pressure leads to increased risk-taking and vulnerability of youth to alcohol and tobacco use which is further enhanced by large scale media and commercial campaigns about alcohol and tobacco," he said.

"Over 54 to 62 per cent youth have acknowledged the influence of media on their behaviour, style of dressing and extent to which they exhibit aggression," he quoted from the study.