

MARRIAGE TRENDS AND THEIR DEMOGRAPHIC IMPLICATIONS

By MURARI MAJUMDAR

Indian Statistical Institute
and

AJIT DAS GUPTA*

Calcutta

SUMMARY. Marriages in India are nearly universal particularly for women and most marriages occur at ages close to the start of the reproductive period. Formal marriage does not, however, necessarily coincide with the start of reproductive life because of a common custom which delays cohabitation, when the marriage takes place below the age of puberty.

The trend in marriage ages after adjustment for differential survival probabilities of couples married at different ages shows only a slight increase since the start of this century though the rise is a little higher in the urban areas. Though the average marriage ages are low there is considerable variation in the ages by residence and socio-economic characteristics particularly by wife's educational level.

The labour force participation rate among women at higher ages varies according to marital status in the urban areas, the rate being much lower for the married though the overall urban rate for women is much smaller than the rural.

The number of children ever born declines systematically with a rise in the wife's age at marriage though the reduction in total fertility is not large when the latter advances by only a few years from the current low average. The differences are, moreover, considerably narrowed when the children surviving in place of those ever born are taken into account.

Marriages start the reproductive life cycle in human society; and though births outside marriage have risen to levels as high as 25 per cent in a few cultures, in most cases it is enough to consider married fertility alone in studying population trends. In India, in particular, births outside marriage are insignificant in number and marriages though mostly not registered are more stable than registered marriages elsewhere. Study of married fertility termed couple fertility by us¹ is therefore very appropriate for India.

The importance of the study of fertility of couples is not generally appreciated even now and fertility is studied by age and other characteristics of women only, though couple characteristics are readily available. Couples are formed by marriage and changes in age at marriage will be reflected in the rates of formation of couples. They are marriage cohorts and the duration since marriage is known to be a most efficient determinant of the interval to first few child births to the couple. Study of couple fertility will, therefore, assume greater importance for the controlled fertility conditions which we are striving to attain quickly.

*Murari Majumdar works with the Indian Statistical Institute and Ajit Das Gupta as an independent consultant; the views expressed here are those of the authors in their individual capacities.

¹ Ajit Das Gupta, Ranjan Kumar Som, Murari Majumdar and Samarendra Nath Mitra (1955): *Couple Fertility*, National Sample Survey, 7, Government of India.

In couple fertility studies, not only duration since marriage receives primacy, but characteristics of the husband also come in. Consideration of characteristics of the husband is essential when genetic factors come under examination.

The age of the husband is relevant to fertility performance, and his education and socio-psychological background to practice of family planning. In male dominant societies, the attitude of the husband may again be the most important determinant of emerging fertility performance. Projections of births are often based on age-cohort fertility of women; if the age difference between husband and wife changes in future, the wife will have altered risk of widowhood and only a projection based on couple fertility allowing for the changes in age difference will correctly indicate the perspective. From the standpoint of sociology too, the couple approach to family building, where the husband's characteristics could be correlated with other variables, is essential.

Marriages in India are characterised not only by their near universality,—nearly 97 per cent of men and over 99 per cent of women being returned as ever married among older cohorts in the 1961 census,² but the bulk of them take place at ages quite close to the start of the reproductive age span of women. The age at marriage is an important element in determining the level of fertility performance though formal marriage does not necessarily coincide with the start of the reproductive life because of a common custom whereby the bride does not come to live with her husband until after another ceremony (return marriage) sometime after formal marriage. The interval to effective marriage, that is, to actual consummation, will naturally be longer and is related to wife's age at marriage, being extended even to years for marriages below the age of puberty. The following figures from the eleventh round (1956-57) of the National Sample Survey (NSS) show the intervals in months to return marriage of 1930-49 marriages.³

WIFE'S AGE AT MARRIAGE

	under 15	15 and above	all ages
rural	27.6	3.2	16.0
urban	19.2	1.8	8.7

Since India is one of the countries with lowest marriage ages of the wife, it is pertinent to speculate how the practice of early female marriages may come to prevail. When the sexes are evenly matched in number at marriageable ages, marriages will conceivably take place between partners of nearly the same age. If the proportion of females in the young adult age groups becomes smaller whether from higher female mortality or female infanticide, marriageable man will have to seek their partners at younger ages. Taboo on remarriage of widows or polygamy will have similar effects. This is a cumulative process which increases the range of disparity between the ages

² Based on *Census of India, 1961, Vol. I, Part II-C(i), Social and Cultural Tables, p. 19.*

³ Murari Majumdar (1962) : *Vital Rates, National Sample Survey, 64, Government of India, p. 24.*

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of husbands and wives until stability is reached; with sustained rapid population growth, as the age pyramid widens, the demand for younger female partners is met from the next few ages. Under slow growth conditions, the demand will reach down to very young ages and result in early female marriages. If the population starts growing faster at this stage, the number of early female marriages will diminish and the average age at marriage of females move up, as might be actually happening in India recently. The dependence of the age at marriage on the sex-age structure of the population and the population growth rate, aside from cultural-social factors, is thus clearly indicated.

Divorce was not legally permissible among a major segment of the population until the mid-1950's though, in practice, separation and remarriage were not wholly uncommon even before this date and while according to the 1951 census, the proportions of the divorced in the general population were 0.30 and 0.64 per cent respectively for males and females,⁴ these were respectively 0.39 and 0.61 per cent in the 1961 census (Table 1). Also, the proportion was considerably larger in the rural areas particularly for males, the respective percentage for males and females being 0.43 and 0.63 in the rural compared to 0.22 and 0.43 in the urban areas.⁵ These figures do not, of course, take account of those remarried by the time of the census. The proportion divorced is also comparatively larger for certain age groups as Table 1 shows.

TABLE 1. PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION BY MARITAL STATUS FOR SELECTED AGE GROUPS BY SEX

age (years)	male				female			
	never married	married	widowed	divorced and separated	never married	married	widowed	divorced and separated
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
1. 10 — 14	93.15	6.60	0.07	0.08	80.45	19.22	0.13	0.12
2. 15 — 19	76.14	23.27	0.30	0.22	29.19	69.57	0.63	0.64
3. 20 — 24	43.84	54.60	0.90	0.60	5.97	91.76	1.30	0.89
4. 25 — 29	17.71	79.71	1.68	0.85	1.80	94.17	2.89	0.87
5. 30 — 34	7.75	88.74	2.62	0.84	1.04	91.43	6.42	1.04
6. 35 — 39	4.59	90.93	3.87	0.77	0.74	87.01	11.15	1.03
7. 40 — 44	3.91	89.32	5.99	0.74	0.62	77.66	20.66	0.99
8. all ages	52.92	42.96	3.69	0.39	42.34	46.28	10.82	0.81

Source: *Census of India, 1961, Vol. I, Part II-C(i), Social and Cultural Tables, p. 10.*

Polygamy was until 1956 permissible among Hindus and is still legally valid among Muslims but in practice the custom has not been widely followed. In the NSS sixteenth round (1960-61), the proportion of currently married men having more than one wife came to be only 0.8 per cent. Polyandry, though confined only to a very small section of the population, has been reported to be prevalent in certain tribal areas.

⁴ Based on *Census of India, 1951, Vol. I, Part II-A, Demographic Tables, pp. 164, 166 and 230.*

⁵ Based on *Census of India, 1961, loc. cit.*

Religious mores have not generally been favourable to remarriage of widows and data concerning such marriages are also rather scanty. But the findings from a survey in six rural communities of Western India in 1954-55 indicate that the practice of widow remarriage may not be infrequent at least among certain sections of the population. Of 11,716 women aged 13 years and over covered in the survey and 3,131 ever widowed among them, the proportion ever remarried among the ever widowed came to 25.6 per cent.⁶ While the proportion was found to depend largely on the age at widowhood, some other factors were also important, it being, for example, larger among younger cohorts and smaller among upper caste Hindus.

Though marriages occur at an early age, because of a young age structure, the crude marriage rate, that is, the number of marriages per 1000 population, is rather low,—it came to 7.1 in the rural and 5.5 in the urban areas in the seventh round (1953-54) of the NSS.⁷ The age-specific marriage rate for men in the rural areas reached the highest value in the age group 17-21 while for women the peak was reached even earlier in the age group 12-16, being cut down to less than half at 17-21 years. It is also evident from Table 2 that the decline at higher ages was much slower for men. If only first marriages and the corresponding exposed to risk, the population never married are taken into account, the change in the rates is much more pronounced for women. The exclusion of the ever-married from the base population results in an appreciable rise in the female rate even at ages 12-16 while it rises precipitously at ages 17-21.

TABLE 2. NUMBER OF MARRIAGES PER 1000 PERSONS AND FIRST MARRIAGES PER 1000 NEVER MARRIED PERSONS IN A YEAR BY SEX AND AGE, ALL-INDIA RURAL : NSS SEVENTH ROUND, 1953-54

age (years)	male		female	
	all marriages	first marriages	all marriages	first marriages
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
1. 0—11	8.1	4.7	12.0	11.8
2. 12—16	32.7	37.3	66.5	109.1
3. 17—21	54.8	99.6	28.8	310.2
4. 22—26	27.4	94.8	1.4	129.9
5. 27 and above	4.8	42.0		
6. all ages	14.1	22.4	14.4	31.9
(no. of persons)	(20,994)	(10,654)	(20,484)	(8,081)

Source : Murari Majumdar (1962) : *Vital Rates*, National Sample Survey, 54, Government of India, pp. 40-41.

⁶ Kumudini Dandekar : *Widow Remarriage in Six Rural Communities in Western India*, International Population Union Conference, New York (1961), Proceedings of Sessions, Vol. II, pp. 191-206.

⁷ *Vital Rates*, loc. cit., p. 38.

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The NSS survey and reports are the only direct source of information on all-India ages at marriage and differentials, particularly by socio-economic characteristics and the relevant data classified by marriage cohort, regions and socio-economic classes were first analysed and presented for India in *Couple Fertility* (1955). The average ages at marriage for different marriage periods as presented in Table 3 show that these have been higher in the urban than in the rural areas, the difference being larger for the husband. The data in the first part of the table are based on the record of the extant couples, a couple, in this context, referring not only to husband and wife but also to either of the partners when surviving alone; but for all the marriage cohorts, couples married younger had a greater probability of survival upto the survey period. The ages were therefore adjusted for varying survival probabilities of different age groups at marriage by the formula shown below, the independence of survival of husband and wife being assumed :

$$C_{ij}^{Y:Y+n} = \bar{C}_{ij}^{Y:Y+n} (m_{N_i}^{Y:Y+n} + f_{K_j}^{Y:Y+n} - m_{K_i}^{Y:Y+n} - f_{N_j}^{Y:Y+n}),$$

where $\bar{C}_{ij}^{Y:Y+n}$ is the number of couples formed of husbands and wives married in the age groups i and j respectively in the calendar years Y , $Y+n$ and $C_{ij}^{Y:Y+n}$ the corresponding number of couples surviving in 1952 estimated from the survey, $m_{K_i}^{Y:Y+n}$ and $f_{N_j}^{Y:Y+n}$ being respectively the probability of survival of husband and wife. The ages at marriage data so adjusted and corrected are presented in the second part of Table 3.

TABLE 3. AVERAGE AGES AT MARRIAGE OF HUSBAND AND WIFE FOR DIFFERENT MARRIAGE COHORT GROUPS, ALL-INDIA RURAL AND URBAN; NSS FOURTH ROUND, 1952

partner	sector	marriage period					
		before 1910	1910-19	1920-29	1930-39	1940-45	1946-51
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
1. husband	rural	18.0	19.5	19.4	20.4	20.3	20.2
2. "	urban	20.6	21.4	21.7	21.9	22.5	22.0
3. wife	rural	11.9	13.0	13.3	14.1	14.5	14.6
4. "	urban	12.8	13.9	14.2	14.3	15.4	15.3
adjusted*							
5. husband	rural	19.4	20.4	19.8	20.5	20.3	20.2
6. "	urban	21.6	22.0	22.0	22.0	22.5	23.0
7. wife	rural	12.9	13.5	13.6	14.1	14.6	14.6
8. "	urban	14.0	14.5	14.7	14.7	15.6	15.4
9. no. of couples	rural	1,829	1,887	2,013	3,219	2,326	2,423
10. "	urban	670	775	1,165	1,451	1,067	1,027

Source: Ajit Das Gupta et al. (1955) : *Couple Fertility*, National Sample Survey, 7, Government of India, pp. 23-24.

* The ages are adjusted for differential survival of couples married at different age groups.

The data show that in the period covered by the survey, there has been only a slight advance in the average age at marriage, a little more in the urban sector, particularly for women, the age of the husband going up from 21.6 to 23.0 and of the wife from 14.0 to 16.4. The age difference between the partners had also narrowed a little and was 6.6 in the urban sector for the most recent marriage period. More recent data, relating however to effective marriage, available from the NSS seventeenth round (1961-62) suggest a further rise in the age at marriage in the urban though not in the rural areas.

While the average age at marriage for the whole country remains low, there is considerable variation not only between the rural and the urban areas but also between different regions and between size classes of towns. The south zone and of the states therein, Kerala has the highest ages at marriage and there is a systematic rise in the age with progressively larger size class towns. The average ages at marriage were also found to be highest among the Christians and also a little higher among the non-agricultural class, particularly for the husband, than among the agricultural. The differentials by size class of towns and religion are presented in Table 4.

TABLE 4. AVERAGE AGES AT MARRIAGE OF HUSBAND AND WIFE MARRIED 1930 AND AFTER BY SIZE CLASS OF TOWNS, ALL-INDIA URBAN HINDU COUPLES AND BY RELIGION, ALL-INDIA RURAL COUPLES; NSS FOURTH ROUND, URBAN, 1952 AND SECOND ROUND, RURAL, 1951

class	husband	wife	no. of couples
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<i>size class of towns</i>			
1. cities	23.3	15.9	516
2. 50,000 and above	22.4	15.5	1,005
3. 15,000—50,000	22.3	14.5	685
4. below 15,000	21.0	13.6	563
<i>religion</i>			
5. Christian	24.2	18.6	171
6. Sikh	21.0	16.9	300
7. Muslim	21.2	15.1	755
8. Hindu	19.6	14.2	10,339

Source: Ajit Das Gupta, et al. (1955): *Couple Fertility*, National Sample Survey, 7, Government of India, pp. 28-29.

The data on wife's age at effective marriage by educational level relating to the years 1941 and after, available from NSS seventeenth round are shown in Table 5. In both the rural and the urban areas there is an appreciable rise in the age with higher educational standard, though the rise is more marked from the middle stage onwards, it being also progressively greater at succeeding higher educational levels. The

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data from the seventeenth round also show that the effective marriage ages though having no definite trend at lower levels of per capita expenditure rise appreciably higher at upper levels of expenditure.

TABLE 5. AVERAGE AGES AT EFFECTIVE MARRIAGE OF WIFE MARRIED 1941 AND AFTER BY EDUCATIONAL STANDARD, ALL-INDIA RURAL AND URBAN; NSS SEVENTEENTH ROUND 1961-62

sector	educational standard						
	illiterate	literate but below primary	primary	middle	school final	graduate and above	all standards
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
1. rural (no. of wives)	15.9 (19,220)	16.9 (1,722)	16.8 (840)	17.4 (182)	18.6 (48)	*	16.0
2. urban (no. of wives)	15.8 (13,336)	16.1 (3,454)	16.6 (2,634)	17.5 (1,486)	19.4 (879)	21.5 (508)	16.2

Source: Tables with Notes on Couple Fertility, National Sample Survey, 175, (Draft), p. 10.

* The number in the sample is too small.

In India, the female participation rate in the labour force happens to be much smaller in the urban than in the rural areas and it is, moreover, only the former which shows consistently appreciable variation in the rate for females by marital status. The data from NSS sixteenth round presented in Table 6 show that the participation rate of the unmarried, as contrasted with that of the married, rises steeply at ages 20-29. The higher participation rate of unmarried women may be due to a greater urge being felt to engage in gainful activities as might be true also of the widowed, divorced and separated but it may also indicate a higher age at marriage of women in the labour force.

TABLE 6. LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES FOR FEMALES BY MARITAL STATUS AND SELECTED AGE GROUPS, ALL-INDIA URBAN; NSS SIXTEENTH ROUND, 1960-61

marital status	age (years)				
	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-39	40-49
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
1. never married	11.3	28.9	41.7	*	*
2. married	17.0	16.7	19.2	22.8	21.9
3. widowed, divorced and separated	*	58.3	47.7	54.1	43.2
4. all classes (no. of persons)	14.6 (4,404)	19.6 (4,616)	21.1 (3,544)	26.0 (4,940)	27.5 (3,676)

Source: Tables with Notes on Labour Force, National Sample Survey, 103, Government of India (1966), p. 18.

*The number in the sample is too small.

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The importance of marriage in the migration of women particularly in the rural areas is brought out by the following data from NSS fourteenth round (1958-59)⁹ which show the percentages of migrants who had moved in consequent on marriage, the areal unit of reference being a village or a town.

	male	female	total	no. of persons
rural	5.2	66.3	66.8	15,244
urban	0.8	55.1	20.7	14,176

The proportion of in-migrants to all residents came to be 12 per cent and 48 per cent respectively for males and females in the rural areas and 37 per cent and 47 per cent respectively in the urban areas.

As the age at marriage is related to residence as also to certain socio-economic characteristics which in their turn affect fertility performance, a proper assessment of the impact of the age at marriage on fertility would require a study of the relationship with the other factors kept under control. The data on the number of children according to age at marriage from the NSS sixteenth round (1960-61) presented here relate, however, to the urban areas as a whole. These show that the number of children born alive decline systematically with progressively higher age at marriage of the wife. The average number of children born to women aged 42 and over for different age groups at effective marriage are shown below, the figures in parenthesis indicating the number of women in the sample.¹⁰

under 17	17-21	22-26	27 and above	all ages
6.6 (1,755)	6.1 (976)	5.1 (191)	4.0 (85)	6.3 (3,007)

While the difference in respect of women married under 17 and those married at 17-21 years is quite small,—the distribution within the age group 17-21 being, of course, uneven, the average age at marriage being nearer the initial age,—there are progressively larger reductions in total fertility as the age at marriage rises still higher.

Recently there have been claims that the birth rate can be substantially lowered by raising the age at marriage of the wife.¹⁰ The claims and their rebuttals rely mainly

⁹ *Tables with Notes on Internal Migration, National Sample Survey, 163 (Draft), p. 20 and Idem, 134 (Draft) p. 16.*

¹⁰ Murari Majumdar : *Family Planning in Urban India* (under publication).

¹⁰ S. N. Agarwala in *Yojana* of April 12, 1964 claimed that "if female age at marriage rises to 19 years....., the birth rate might decline from present 40 to 20 in about 20 years" ; R. P. Goyal maintained in *Yojana* of August 30, 1964 that the birth rate can be reduced a third by late marriage. Q. U. Khan rebutted Agarwala's claims in *Yojana* of June 21, 1964 and held that the birth rate could be reduced by only one-sixth by raising the marriage age from 15-16 years to 19. C. Bose and A. C. Das in *On Fertility Differentials in West Bengal* in the Seminar on Problems Relating to Demography in West Bengal (Calcutta, 1967), using data from 1961 West Bengal Fertility Survey, claimed that ultimate reduction of about 30 per cent in the birth rate will be effected if minimum age at marriage of rural women be raised to over 18 years.

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on data from a section of the population or a small area (a few selected villages). The National Sample Survey have relevant all-India data though these still lie untabulated. Even with representative national data it will not be easy to estimate the quantum of reduction in fertility performance that will take place subsequent to a rise in the age at marriage. The groups that currently marry at higher ages have naturally different socio-cultural patterns from those that marry earlier and merely a rise in the age at marriage by a certain number of years without changes in the pertinent cultural patterns will presumably prevent the births that were previously occurring at the intervening ages but may also lead to a higher fertility performance at later ages. The effect of delayed marriages on population growth may also be further offset by improved survival of births deferred in this way. It is to be noted in this connection that the number of children surviving to women aged 42 and above for different age groups at marriage as estimated from the NSS sixteenth round came to be considerably closer to each other than the numbers born considered in a previous section. In particular, the difference in respect of women married under 17 and those married at 17-21 years practically disappeared, as the following figures show.

under 17	17-21	22-26	27 and above	all ages
4.2	4.1	3.6	2.7	4.1

A move to raise the age at marriage in India is, however, socially desirable and may itself usher changes in cultural pattern. But this can hardly be effected through legislation. The Sarda Act fixed the minimum age for marriage of girls at 14 in 1929 and the Hindu Code Bill raised it to 16 in 1956. As is well-known these pieces of legislation made very little impact on the prevailing marriage ages. Wider cultural changes have to be brought about to effect the desired rise in marriage ages and concomitant reduction in fertility performance.

Apart from shortening of the more fertile period of the reproductive age span which reduces total fertility of women married at comparatively advanced ages, differential practice of family limitation may influence the fertility pattern of women married at different ages. The data available, from the NSS sixteenth round,¹¹ relate, however, only to husband's age at marriage and though the proportion of couples who had ever taken steps to limit the size of their families increases progressively with a rise in the husband's age at effective marriage, the differential is not substantially large as the following figures show.

under 17	17-21	22-26	27 and above	all ages
3.6	4.2	5.8	7.4	5.3

Moreover, as the proportion of husbands who had ever resorted to family limitation methods rises also with present age until the early forties, the differential may be even smaller as a particular age at marriage group automatically excludes people currently

¹¹ Tables with Notes on Family Planning, National Sample Survey, 118, Government of India (1967), p. 90.

of younger ages. It is to be noted in this connection that the range of variation in the wife's average age at marriage corresponding to changes in the husband's age is comparatively limited. For 1946-51 marriages in the urban areas, as estimated from the NSS fourth round, the average age at marriage of the wife for the specified age at marriage groups of the husband came to as follows.¹³

17-21	22-26	27 and above
16.0	16.8	20.2

While the factors determining the family planning status of a couple are complex, the one of basic importance is the desire concerning the number of children and their sex composition. One half of the total number of respondents in the NSS sixteenth round enquiry,¹³ who had knowledge of but had never resorted to family limitation methods, were not inclined to adopt them because they wanted more children. Similarly, nearly 40 per cent of respondents who were ignorant of family limitation methods were not inclined to learn them because of the same reason. The importance of the male child in this context is apparent from the response to the query in regard to reasons for desiring additional children. Of the respondents who desired additional children, 65 per cent did so in order to ensure family survival, while another 23 per cent mentioned preference for male children compared to only 6 per cent who cited preference for female children. The ideal total number of children also came to 3.2 on the average while the corresponding figure for male children was 2.2.¹⁴

¹³ Ajit Das Gupta, *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

¹³ Tables with Notes on Family Planning, *loc. cit.*, pp. 108, 74 and 33.

¹⁴ A. K. Halder and N. Bhattacharya: *Fertility and Sex-sequences of Children of Indian Couples* (under publication), found that of the couples with two children those, with both female, had a higher fertility performance in the subsequent three year interval even in India.

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