

Marriage prevalence among young-adults in India: social, time and regional trends

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Abstract.-

We use labour force microdata to study the relationship between societal changes and marriage prevalence among young-adults in India over the last two decades. Societal predictors considered include phenomena such as educational expansion, women's economic activity and urbanization. Individual predictors include socio-economic characteristics and also religion. Analysis will be based on Labour force survey microdata for India (1983, 1987, 1993 and 1999) made available by the *Integrated Public Use of Microdata Series* international project (IPUMSI), with complementary use of the Demographic Health Surveys (1992-93, 1998-99 and 2005-06). We conduct a multilevel analysis to investigate demographic trends at two levels of disaggregation: regional and individual. Even though it is still the case that family and parental decisions strongly influence marriage decisions, our preliminary results show that marriage postponement for women is nearly universal. Educational attainment proves to be an important factor in these shifts.

Keywords: Union formation, marriage, family, India,

Background.-

The scientific literature usually links the demographic transition to economic development, but the exact mechanisms that motivate it are subject of much interdisciplinary debate (Caldwell et al., 2006). Low et al. (2002) argue that the demographic transition is linked to increased investment in socioeconomic status through mediums such as education and work; this leads to increased ages at first reproduction and thus to lower lifetime fertility. Nevertheless, some authors have focused on the importance of cultural transmission as a motivation that has an influence on the demographic transitions (Shenk, 2009).

In the past several decades, the marriage system in India has experienced a number of changes, including increases in women's age at marriage and the near universal adoption of dowry as a condition of marriage. Both these changes have been attributed to changes in the demographic conditions of the marriage market and, in particular, to the deficit of marriageable men (a phenomenon known as the "marriage squeeze") (Banerjee, 1999; Srinivasan and Lee; 2004). The marriage market in India is stratified by social position, region and characteristics of men and women. Therefore, any explanation of changes in female marriage patterns and in marriage payments must also account for the effects of gender and social stratification on the functioning of the marriage market (Banerjee, 1999). In addition, the importance of religion and tradition is manifested in India's deeply rooted caste system, which continues to play a key role in the organization and stratification of Indian society (Haub and Sharma; 2006).

Arranged and intra-community marriage remains the dominant nuptial form across the Indian subcontinent, from the most remote rural villages to the bustling urban municipalities. Not surprisingly, most representations and analyses of matrimony in South Asia focus on practices that reflect the normative marriage pattern. Nevertheless, there is an emerging picture of inter-community marriage in contemporary India that challenges traditional conceptions of geographic and cultural boundaries in at least two ways. Firstly, people who inter-marry tend to live in densely populated cosmopolitan cities or towns, where socio-economic and cultural divisions are more likely to be relatively fluid. Secondly, most scholars would agree that the majority of people in India view family connections and concomitant life events (especially birth and marriage) as supreme and sacred points of convergence between the earthly and spiritual realms. Thus, an unorthodox practice such as inter-community marriage is a special kind of hybridising process that arguably reflects ongoing social change in India. (Jauregui and McGuinness; 2003).

Socially, marriage tends to confer added status on both parents and children because it signals the completion of a religious duty and suggests preservation of the family line. Marriage is clearly the major element in the preservation and change of caste linkages in India. The degree of control exercised by the families, however, appears to be waning over time, and there has been a rise in the incidence of elopements and "love marriages", particularly in urban areas (Bloom and Reddy; 1986). In this sense, while many people believe in rigid caste boundaries, in practice the divisions are rather hazy. Caste is a highly localised concept. There may be thirty-six castes in a region of Bengal, twenty in a Rajasthani village, and eight in a Tamil town, all with varying sub-castes, rules for interaction, intensity of adherence to tradition and myths of origin and greatness. This is where the distinctive dynamics of the metropolis become important, since urban centres encompass people who have countless different understandings of, and practices related to, caste, religious, or ethnic affiliations. The tenacity of arranged marriage, dowry, and fierce communalism—the last of which often leads to violent conflict and even attacks on couples intending to marry—hinders those who might consider wedding out of caste or creed. However, although many people believe inter-community marriage is becoming increasingly common, it must be understood that the lack of strict enforcement of marriage registration, and the absence of comprehensive research make it difficult,

if not impossible, to determine with any certainty whether inter-community marriage is rising proportionally to population increases. (Jauregui and McGuinness; 2003).

Marriage also has significant economic implications in Indian society. Traditionally, it is associated with a transfer of wealth from the bride's family to the groom's (i.e., a dowry), although after marriage it is the duty of the groom and his family to provide permanent financial support for the bride (Bloom and Reddy; 1986). In India, at least until recently, there was a significant regional divide in the custom of marriage transactions. Almost all communities in the south, including the high-caste Brahmins, practised brideprice. Marriages were isogamous, that is, they were among status equals, as would be suggested by their marked preference for cross-cousin and uncle-niece alliances. On the other hand, in northern India (excluding the sub-Himalayan region), marriages were hypergamous among the upper castes, that is, a woman was given in marriage to a man of superior clan or division of the same caste, but seldom to a lower one. In these groups, giving away the daughter was accompanied by a gift of dowry, which included jewellery, clothing, grain, utensils, and, occasionally, property (land and livestock). In lower-caste groups, in contrast, marriages were largely isogamous as in south India, and brideprice was more common than dowry. Since the turn of the century, many communities in India have been switching over from a brideprice to a dowry system, and that among those who were already practising it, the amount of dowry demanded has been skyrocketing (Bhat et al; 1999). The custom has permeated all religions and social classes, has spread to neighbouring countries and is flourishing even among South Asian immigrants to Western societies (Srinivasan and Lee; 2004).

This situation has a variety of consequences: because daughters require extreme financial investments with no material return, rates of female feticide (abortion of female foetus) and infanticide are high in some parts of the country (Srinivasan and Lee; 2004). The strong preference for sons and low value of women in India has long fostered an unusually high ratio of men to women, but the imbalance has reached alarming levels. Since recordkeeping and health care have improved, these traditional explanations do not account for the recent increase in the sex ratio. Abortion of female foetuses appears to be the primary cause. In fact, the sex ratio is more skewed among children in wealthier than in poorer families, suggesting that the ability to pay for sex determination and abortion are important factors. In addition, the gender gap in literacy highlights another important aspect of Indian society and tradition: the generally low status of women (Haub, Sharma; 2006).

Taking into account that the marriage system in India is characterized by early and universal marriage of females, almost all marriages are arranged by the elders in the family because new couples are generally expected to live with the groom's parents. Somewhat surprisingly, the modern-day anthropologist tends to dismiss a demographic imbalance in the marriage market as the reason for the growing popularity of groomprice marriages, even though, when asked, the reason given by the people themselves has been the shortage of eligible men in the community. The tendency has been to assume that people were referring to a scarcity of eligible men of an ideal kind rather than a scarcity of men in general given by the actual trend in the sex ratio (Bhat et al; 1999). Accordingly, one of the most striking features of India's population profile is its abnormally high ratio of males to females, particularly at young ages. While about 105 boys are born for every 100 girls in most countries, the ratio is about 113 per 100 in India, and it ranges up to 129 per 100 in some states (Punjab for example). Nevertheless, census data also reveal that females, particularly in younger ages, are often missing from census figures. However, some of this female deficit reflects sex-selective abortions by parents who want to avoid having a girl and the omission of female household members from the census count (Haub, Sharma; 2006).

Across the developing world, women's traditional patterns of early marriage are giving way to later ages at first marriage; nonetheless, the age at which women marry continues to vary widely both across and within countries. In seeking possible explanations for variations in marriage timing, usually the links between socioeconomic development and early marriage are examined; yet, the literature singles out three factors that are especially relevant to women's age at first marriage: female labor force participation, women's acquisition of formal education, and urbanization (Singh and Samara; 1996). Because of the critical linkages between the timing of marriage and demographic, social and economic variables, age at marriage is an important indicator of population growth and development. Although much research efforts have been hampered by the variety of Indian marriage customs, a paucity of data, age misreporting and recent changes in marriage patterns. These problems are not insignificant: First, Indian marriage customs vary widely by religion, caste and geographic location, urban-rural residence, educational background and income level; thus, they also seem to be changing over time; Second, India is a nation in which large numbers of people do not know their exact age (Bloom and Reddy; 1986). Detailed data from the census highlight the fact that many Indians often report an approximate age rounded to a "0" or "5" (Haub and Sharma; 2006).

A particularly interesting feature of traditional marriage customs is the prevalence of childhood marriage, that is, the marriage of a girl before she reaches puberty (Bloom and Reddy; 1986). Child marriage—defined by UNICEF as marriage before 18 years of age—is a reality for more than 60 million women worldwide. The practice has become increasingly recognised as a human-rights violation, and has decreased worldwide during the past 20 years. Nonetheless, child marriage remains pervasive in south Asia, where more than half of all child marriages occur (Raj et al; 2009). In India, such marriage is always "arranged" by the girl's parents and does not signal the beginning of cohabitation or sexual relations. Instead, childhood marriage is better thought of as a contract that is closely akin to the Western concept of betrothal, although this practice is slowly dying and diminishing (Bloom and Reddy; 1986). Traditionally, the transition from childhood to adulthood among Indian females has tended to be sudden. On the one hand, as a result of the poor nutritional status of the average Indian adolescent, there is evidence that menarche occurs relatively late, delaying the biological onset of adolescence. On the other hand, marriage, and consequently the onset of sexual activity, pregnancy, and childbearing occur relatively early, thrusting adolescent females early into adulthood, frequently soon after regular menstruation is established and before physical maturity is attained. Despite laws stipulating the legal age at marriage as 18 for females, early marriage continues to be the norm even in the 1990s. In the four large northern states - Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and especially Rajasthan - the median age at marriage remains 15 or less even in the 1990s. Nationally, there is evidence that the prevalence of adolescent marriages has been declining modestly over the last decades. (Jejeebhoy, 1998).

However, in the past 15 years the country has had several economic reforms resulting in substantial increases in personal wealth for many citizens, and simultaneously, national policy efforts have been developed to increase educational and economic opportunities for women and girls. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, policies and programmes focused on prevention of child marriage and family planning support for poor and rural women and girls have been substantially expanded in the past decade. These efforts have brought national public attention to this issue and led to recent policy proposals by the Law Commission of India, to ensure legal protections are available to girls irrespective of which Indian state they live in (Raj et al; 2009).

While India is an emerging economic power, life remains largely rooted in its villages. Only a small fraction of Indians are benefiting from the country's expanding industrial and information sectors. Although the region has a rich and ancient history, present-day India is a relatively new nation. At independence, India consisted of provinces defined by the British, along with more than 500

princely states whose territory was ultimately taken over by the new Indian government. Boundaries for today's states were largely drawn along language lines after independence. In the 21st century, India is a federal republic comprised of 28 states and seven union territories. States and union territories are split into 593 districts and 5,564 subdistricts. New states are created periodically to ease the burden of governing as their populations grow or to provide separate states for ethnic and tribal groups (Haub, Sharma; 2006).

In Europe, for example, geographical processes (horizontal) or processes that were both social (vertical) and geographical (oblique), served as the transmission channels of transition at its onset. In India, apparently, we find a process of non-geographical diffusion, which was earlier called vertical. A vertical diffusion is defined as the transmission of information down the social scale, generally from the elites to the unqualified rural workers. The data provided by Indian censuses do not allow us to measure fertility on a social scale. However, the sudden and widespread change observed during 1971–1981 suggests another form of diffusion which could be both non-geographical and non-social. This diffusion occurs from a centre and is directed towards all information-receivers, irrespective of their geographical and social location. This process has already been identified and named “top-down” by Srinivasan in 1995. It is a vertical but non-social diffusion, set in motion by government organizations (Bocquet-Appel et al; 2002). In addition, a long zone on the longitudinal axis (east-west direction) of abrupt fertility change was detected from the west to the southern bank of Narmada along the Satpura Range up to Eastern Madhya Pradesh. This zone marks the boundary between two vast regions, the high fertility region in the North and the lower fertility region in the South (Balabdaoui et al., 2001).

The north/south division also marks enormous socioeconomic differences. In contrast to high illiteracy, rapid population growth, and poor health common in the north, the southern states of Kerala, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu are known for high literacy levels, long life expectancy, and low birth rates. Throughout history, the south had more contact with an outside world attracted by its profitable spice trade. While in the far north it is where some of India's most populous states are located, such as Haryana, Delhi, Uttaranchal, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, and West Bengal. Therefore, Indian population is heavily concentrated in the broad fertile northern plains (Haub, Sharma; 2006).

Many Indians who live in relatively populated areas are classified as rural because their communities are highly dependent on agriculture and lack the population density required for the official urban designation. In general, India classifies communities as urban if they have at least 5,000 people; a population density of at least 400 people per square kilometer (1,000 per square mile); and less than 25 percent of the male labor force engaged in agriculture. As in other countries of South Asia, India's urban population has grown relatively slowly for the last century (Haub, Sharma; 2006). Despite the former, India accounts for three of the 20 megacities that can be found worldwide—urban areas with 10 million or more people: Delhi, Kolkata (Calcutta), and Mumbai. It is relevant to point out that more than 40 million urban Indians live in areas classified as slums—a number roughly equal to the population of Spain.

When referring to fertility trends, since 1950, fertility in India has decreased by about half, from just under six children per woman to about three. The total fertility rate (TFR), or average total number of children a woman would have given current birth rates, was 2.3 or fewer in seven states in 2003. Two states, Kerala and Tamil Nadu (located in the south of India), had TFRs below 2.0, close to the level of the United States and other developed countries, and below the replacement level of 2 children per woman. The major factor in India's fertility decline in recent decades has been, especially, the increase in the use of family planning (Haub, Sharma; 2006). Right before the 2001 Census there was a debate there was a concern among scholars regarding fertility rates per religious

groups. As the Census showed, nearly 80 percent of Indians practiced Hinduism, one of the world's oldest religions, while Muslims were second, with 13 percent. The rest of religions consist of Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, and others, such as Parsis. The ongoing conflicts between the Hindu majority and Muslim minority—which occasionally erupt in violence—fuel fears about the long-term effects of demographic changes that could shift the balance of the two groups in some states. Muslims have higher fertility and are growing at a slightly faster rate than Hindus (Haub, Sharma; 2006). This has resulted in an intense debate, however, the decadal census provides only broad population figures of various religious groups while the components of this growth remain unknown. In this sense, the controversy on Muslim population growth primarily revolves around fertility, as the impact of mortality and international migration has been rather negligible in the country in recent years (James and Nair; 2005).

India's population growth slowed as the birth rate gradually declined beginning in the late 1960s. Since the early 1970s, the birth rate has fallen from just under 40 births per 1,000 population to 24 per 1,000 in 2004. This decline reflected the concerted effort by the government to slow population growth. Despite that fact, the history of high birth rates has kept India's population relatively young: In 2005, about 36 percent of the population was below age 15 and just 4 percent was age 65 or older. Therefore, the young population virtually guarantees further growth, as these young people produce their own families, who will also require additional schools, jobs, and housing. (Haub and Sharma; 2006).

Objectives.-

Consequently, the main key elements that are going to be taken into account on the present paper can be summarized as it follows: First, it is important to acknowledge the implications and influence that tradition has in the marriage prevalence in India. A good example is the continuity of the dowry system in a stratified society (social, caste, religious, economic and geographically). Therefore, our purpose is to examine which is the relationship between factors such as educational expansion, urbanization and changes on the productive structure in marriage prevalence at young ages. Second, in reference to fertility decline, we raise the question on the elements that have made possible such transition (increase in the age of first marriage, socioeconomic growth, educational attainment, rural-urban migrations, changes on family structure, etc.). In addition, it is relevant to study such changes at a geographical level, that is, at a regional scale throughout the past two decades, for which data is available. Like this, the paper will consist of a description of the results with territorial and time patterns regarding changes in marriage prevalence, as well as of the predictor factors: education, urbanization, agriculture and sex ratio. The second and final level of analysis will show the results of a multilevel model, which allows to isolate the effect of the variables as a way to separate the influence of the factors taken into account by two different levels: regional and individual.

Data and methodology.-

The data used in this paper comes from the IPUMS database (www.ipums.org). IPUMS provides free access to census microdata from 44 countries around the world. In the case of India, however, the data comes from employment surveys for the following years: 1983, 1987, 1993 and 1999.

Our dependent variable is 'ever married', that is, if the individual is married or has ever been married (1) or never has been married (0). The 'Ever married' are those individuals whose marital status was: married, separated, divorced or widowed at the time of the survey. We focus on young

individuals age 20-24 for three main reasons. First, by using a five year age group we avoid overlapping cohorts from survey to survey. Second, the risk of union dissolution and remarriage is lower at younger ages. Third, we are interested in examining the prevalence of marriage at younger ages. All in all, we think that this is an illustrative age-group that also allows to investigate the impact of education. Although some university students may have not finished their studies at these ages, some may have or were currently attending them. Table 1 shows the sample size for every year as well as the distribution of the main variables used.

We have compared the proportions of ever married from the Employment Surveys with the data, provided by the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), in order to calibrate the quality of the information for the two years for which we have data of both sources: 1993 and 1999. From the DHS there is also available another sample for 2005-06 that confirms the tendencies observed in the previous years. The results show (Table 2) that the proportion of 'ever married' observed in the IPUMS samples is very similar to the DHS samples.

As predictor variables we use, at individual level, sex, education, religion and urban-rural residence. In the case of education, Indian samples do not provide years of schooling within levels. Thus, the variable education adheres to the Indian system of years: primary equals completion of 5 years, lower secondary is 8 years, and secondary is 10 years.

At a regional level, we use region of residence, percentage of population working in agriculture and sex ratio. The region is categorized in 79 different values corresponding to the second administrative division available in the IPUMS samples. The first one is the state that has 32 different values, although it has been considered that a lower geographical level can show better the important differences between territories.

The percentage of population working in agriculture has been calculated dividing the number of persons who work in agriculture, fishing and forestry by the total population of the region. The sex ratio is introduced in the model calculating the logarithm of the quotient male/female.

We use multilevel analysis to work simultaneously at two levels of analysis: individual, and regional. Multilevel or random effects models are able to exploit hierarchically arranged data to differentiate the contextual effects from background effects for individuals. This will allow us to observe variability levels between regions and also to assess how much of the total variation in family formation can be attributed to differences between individuals and regions. We will use multilevel logit models for binary and multinomial responses.

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Table 1.- Sample size and distribution of the sample by main explanatory variables

		Sample							
		India 1983		India 1987		India 1993		India 1999	
Educational attainment									
Male	Less than primary completed	11377	(42.3)	11729	(40.0)	8468	(33.2)	7141	(27.2)
	Primary completed	9468	(35.2)	9785	(33.4)	8161	(32.0)	9142	(34.8)
	Secondary completed	4797	(17.8)	6185	(21.1)	7280	(28.6)	8021	(30.5)
	University completed	1253	(4.7)	1613	(5.5)	1582	(6.2)	1952	(7.4)
	Total	26895		29312		25491		26256	
Female	Less than primary completed	19349	(68.6)	21086	(66.8)	15574	(59.6)	13451	(50.3)
	Primary completed	5864	(20.8)	6444	(20.4)	5755	(22.0)	6739	(25.2)
	Secondary completed	2238	(7.9)	3045	(9.6)	3612	(13.8)	4834	(18.1)
	University completed	739	(2.6)	988	(3.1)	1204	(4.6)	1698	(6.4)
	Total	28190		31563		26145		26722	
Religion									
Male	Buddhist	127	(0.5)	144	(0.5)	172	(0.7)	159	(0.6)
	Hindu	22213	(82.5)	24346	(83.1)	21308	(83.6)	21626	(82.3)
	Muslim	2977	(11.1)	3258	(11.1)	2714	(10.6)	3143	(12.0)
	Christian	729	(2.7)	694	(2.4)	627	(2.5)	637	(2.4)
	Other	874	(3.2)	840	(2.9)	675	(2.6)	702	(2.7)
	Total	26920		29282		25496		26267	
Female	Buddhist	159	(0.6)	164	(0.5)	178	(0.7)	143	(0.5)
	Hindu	23516	(83.3)	26157	(82.9)	21922	(83.8)	22052	(82.5)
	Muslim	2921	(10.4)	3547	(11.2)	2765	(10.6)	3192	(11.9)
	Christian	819	(2.9)	782	(2.5)	612	(2.3)	674	(2.5)
	Other	800	(2.8)	889	(2.8)	676	(2.6)	663	(2.5)
	Total	28215		31539		26153		26724	
Urban-rural status									
Male	Rural	18972	(70.5)	21334	(72.8)	18184	(71.3)	18312	(69.7)
	Urban	7951	(29.5)	7980	(27.2)	7312	(28.7)	7955	(30.3)
	Total	26923		29314		25496		26267	
Female	Rural	21098	(74.8)	24063	(76.2)	19367	(74.1)	19632	(73.5)
	Urban	7122	(25.2)	7511	(23.8)	6786	(25.9)	7094	(26.5)
	Total	28220		31574		26153		26726	

Source: India National Survey. IPUMS-International

Table 2.- Proportion of ever married at age 20-24 by sample

		Samples						
		IPUMS83	IPUMS87	IPUMS93	DHS93	IPUMS99	DHS99	DHS06
Educational attainment								
Male	Less than primary completed	57.5	57.3	54.5	49.4	51.8	48.4	48.6
	Primary completed	44.0	41.0	38.3	36.0	36.7	36.7	32.1
	Secondary completed	27.9	26.4	25.3	27.8	21.7	30.8	20.0
	University completed	20.5	20.1	19.2	17.7	15.0	17.1	10.8
	Total	45.8	43.3	38.8	38.2	34.6	33.1	30.5
Female	Less than primary completed	93.3	93.3	92.4	92.4	92.1	91.6	91.7
	Primary completed	78.3	77.5	78.8	74.9	78.9	81.1	78.2
	Secondary completed	51.4	52.5	52.8	54.7	54.4	74.6	59.5
	University completed	32.2	35.5	31.5	34.7	32.9	44.5	30.7
	Total	85.2	84.3	81.1	82.8	78.2	79.2	76.0
Religion								
Male	Buddhist	40.9	41.7	23.3	n.a.	14.4	n.a.	n.a.
	Hindu	47.8	44.8	40.2	n.a.	36.4	n.a.	n.a.
	Muslim	41.4	41.2	35.9	n.a.	29.4	n.a.	n.a.
	Christian	19.2	19.2	15.9	n.a.	15.7	n.a.	n.a.
	Other	31.8	28.7	31.1	n.a.	25.8	n.a.	n.a.
	Total	45.8	43.3	38.8	n.a.	34.6	n.a.	n.a.
Female	Buddhist	91.2	85.4	80.3	n.a.	74.8	n.a.	n.a.
	Hindu	86.7	85.6	81.9	n.a.	79.6	n.a.	n.a.
	Muslim	86.6	86.0	84.0	n.a.	78.8	n.a.	n.a.
	Christian	55.7	53.1	51.3	n.a.	45.0	n.a.	n.a.
	Other	65.8	66.9	70.0	n.a.	61.5	n.a.	n.a.
	Total	85.2	84.3	81.1	n.a.	78.2	n.a.	n.a.
Urban-rural status								
Male	Rural	52.4	49.6	44.9	44.1	41.2	38.5	38.0
	Urban	30.0	26.5	23.6	25.0	19.5	21.0	18.5
	Total	45.8	43.3	38.8	38.4	34.6	33.1	30.5
Female	Rural	89.3	88.4	86.3	87.7	84.2	84.8	82.6
	Urban	73.1	71.1	66.3	69.8	61.6	64.9	62.3
	Total	85.2	84.3	81.1	82.8	78.2	79.2	76.0

Source: India National Survey. IPUMS-International