

Marriage Among Parsis

PARSIS migrated from their homeland to India, for political asylum, around third quarter of the eighth century. They lived in clusters in larger towns and admitted no convert to their religion. As a result, the members of the community retain many of its original characteristics, subject to demographic forces. According to the recent census count, nearly eighty percent of the Parsis in the world live in India and over sixty percent of them live in Greater Bombay. For this population of the community, in Greater Bombay, characteristics are well documented by the Parsi Panchayat.

The details on vital events for the Parsi population of Greater Bombay for the past hundred years are available from the above records of the Panchayat. The census data for the same period show that the size of the Parsi population in India is declining and that it is rapidly ageing (median age of population was 24 in 1901 and 40 in 1971). Compared to the general population of India, the Parsis have always had low fertility and mortality rates. These fertility rates are comparable to those of the developed countries. However, the mortality rates, though much lower to those of the general population of India, are higher than of the corresponding rates of these developed countries. As a result, the growth in the size of the population due to natural increase has either been negligible, or even negative. The increase in the Parsi population in India was, under these circumstances, mainly due to in-migration. Decline in in-migration since 1931 and perhaps increased out-migration of the population after the departure of the British from India, resulted in decrease in the total count of the Parsis at the 1961 and 1971 censuses.

The trends in patterns of fertility, mortality and migration of the Parsis., described above, have obviously affected the vital events in the community and the vital events in their turn affected the natural growth and the characteristics of the population. In this connection a study of marriage, which has undergone several changes during the decades, is of considerable interest.

The data for the marriages among the Parsis in Greater Bombay, are available in the records of the Parsi Panchayat mentioned above. The marriages among the members of the community are solemnised at the *Agiaries*, the fire temples. The temple priests furnish the information to the Panchayat. The Panchayat also obtains information on marriages that take place outside *Agiaries*, including those involving non-Parsi partners. For our present study of marriage among the Parsis of Bombay, we will use the data from both, the records of Parsi Panchayat and the census.

Incidence of Marriage

Table 1 gives crude marriage rates (CMRs) for the Parsis of Bombay. It is evident that there has been a significant and consistent tendency of decrease in the incidence of marriage during the period. The crude marriage

TABLE 1—CRUDE MARRIAGE RATES (CMR) AMONG PARSIS 1901-1971

Year	CMR		
	Population	Male	Female
1901	8.4	16.0	17.7
1911	8.7	16.5	18.3
1921	8.6	16.1	18.6
1931	6.3	11.9	13.4
1941	7.7	15.2	15.9
1951	7.2	14.2	14.7
1961	7.3	14.9	14.4
1971	6.8	13.6	13.4

$$\text{CMR} = \frac{\text{Number of Marriages in the year}}{\text{Mid-year Population}}$$

NOTE : A three year average was taken for the numerator in the calculations of CMR.

SOURCE : Information on number of marriages obtained from the registration records maintained by the Parsi Panchayat, Bombay and population figures from the census reports.

rates were a little higher for females than those for the males till 1951. The 1961 and 1971 CMRs for females were a little lower for females than those for the males. This may be a result of decrease in in-migration and ageing of population, both of which result in increasing the number of females in the population.

The data available from censuses show that the age composition of the male and the female population had considerably changed. When the CMRs for males and females for 1971 were standardised for age distribution by taking the 1961 age distribution as standard, it was observed that the 1971 CMR for male was 14.5 and for females it was 14.6. Thus it can be said that the drop in CMR from 1961 to 1971 as shown in Table 1 was largely a result of the changes in the age distribution of the population. The standardised rates also show that female CMR was higher than that for males as was observed till 1951. (Since the age-distribution of the 1951 Parsi population is not available the standardisation for 1961 CMRs was not possible).

From observations of CMRs for other countries one notices that the CMRs that had showed a decline have been rising in recent years. The CMR of United States of America dropped from 9.8 (1953) to 8.5 (1962), but since then it has risen to 10.3 (1968). Japan had a CMR of 7.9 (1953) and it rose to 9.9 (1964). Ireland, which is known for late marriages accompanied by relatively larger proportion of the population remaining 'single' had a CMR of 5.4 (1953) and of 6.4 in 1968. In contrast with these trends the crude marriage rates among the Parsis have shown a continuous decline.

Nubile Marriage Rate (NMR)

Nubile Marriage Rate is a measure that is more sensitive than the crude marriage rate since it calculates the marriages among those persons who are eligible to marry instead of the total population as is the case with the crude marriage rate. Table 2 presents the NMRs for the male, female and total population.

The values for NMRs show that rate of marriage among the population above 15 are higher for the males as compared to those for the females in contrast to the conclusions based on total population as shown by the CMRs. From the table it is also seen that NMR has declined over time for both the sexes.

However, the drop is relatively sharper for males as compared to that for the females. The standardisation of the 1971 NMR for age, based on the 1961 age distribution gives 41.4 as NMR for males and 39.0 for females i.e., higher rates for 1971 than those for 1961.

TABLE 2—NUBILE MARRIAGE RATES (NMR)* AMONG PARSIS 1901-1971

<i>Year</i>	<i>Population</i>	
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
1901	24.0	44.9
1911	23.1	43.5
1921	24.0	44.1
1931	18.0	34.2
1961	17.9	37.6
1971	17.3	36.4

$$*NMR = \frac{\text{Number of Marriages in the Year}}{\text{Mid-year Marriageable Population aged 15 and above}}$$

NOTE : Since the age distributions for 1941 and 1951 are not available, the rates for those years could not be calculated. SOURCE : Age distribution of the Parsi population obtained from the census records.

General Marriage Rate (GMR)

Considering the fact that the number of marriages taking place among those aged 50 and above are much smaller, a refinement of NMR is achieved by considering the marriageable population between the ages 15 to 49 in the denominator. The GMRs for the Parsi population are presented in Table 3. The GMRs for the females are higher than those for the males. The reversal from the conclusions based on NMRs has taken place because the marriageable population among the females was higher at ages 50 and above as compared to that for males, due to the presence of a large group of females whose marriages had dissolved either due to widowhood, divorce or separation (see Table 7A which shows the proportion of such females in the total).

With the exception of the year 1931 the GMR for the males has always been around 49. However, in the case of females relatively larger fluctuations were

observed. The age standardised GMRs for 1971 were 55.2 for males and 72.7 for females.

TABLE 3—GENERAL MARRIAGE RATES (GMR)* AMONG PARSIS 1901-1971

<i>Year</i>	<i>GMR</i>		
	<i>Population</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
1901	28.7	49.0	69.4
1911	27.4	47.3	65.2
1921	29.0	49.1	70.8
1931	21.8	38.2	50.9
1961	27.0	50.0	58.7
1971	27.2	48.6	61.5

$$\text{*GMR} = \frac{\text{Number of Marriages in the Year}}{\text{Mid-year Marriageable Population Aged 15 to 49}}$$

NOTE : Since the age distributions for 1941 and 1951 are not available, the rates for those years could not be calculated. SOURCE : Age distribution of the Parsi population obtained from the census records.

In the absence of data on age specific marital rates no standardisation could be made for CMRs, NMRs and GMRs for all the years. However, based on the results for 1971 one may say that the changes in the age composition among the Parsis, have greatly influenced the incidence of marriages in the community. The ratios of GMRs and NMRs further confirm the influence of changes in the age composition of the population. These ratios are given in Table 4.

TABLE 4-RATIOS OF GMRs TO NMRs AMONG PARSIS 1901-1971

<i>Year</i>	<i>GMR/NMR</i>		
	<i>Population</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
1901	1.2	1.1	1.3
1911	1.2	1.1	1.3
1921	1.2	1.1	1.3
1931	1.2	1.1	1.3
1961	1.5	1.3	1.7
1971	1.6	1.3	1.9

Since both the GMR and NMR refer to the marriageable population, the value of the ratio of the two rates is mainly influenced by the size of the population aged 50 and above. Presence of larger number of 'marriageables' (widows etc.) in the older groups among the females compared to those among the males have resulted in the higher ratios for females for all the years. Increase in the ratios for 1961 and 1971 has taken place as a result of the ageing of the population. Since the ageing has been greater among the females (median age for males 24.5 in 1901 and 39.3 in 1971 whereas it was 24.3 in 1901 for females and it rose to 40.7 in 1971) the ratios are higher for them.

Age at Marriage

It is generally observed that in the communities with low incidence of marriage the age at marriage is higher. Hajnal¹ has suggested a method of calculating mean age at marriage from the data available from the censuses on the proportion unmarried. Mean ages at marriage for the Parsi males and females calculated from the census data available for the community are presented in Table 5. The age at marriage has been high for the Parsi males and the females, even as early as 1901 and it has increased over the years during 1901 to 1971, for both the sexes.

TABLE 5-MEAN AGES AT MARRIAGE FOR PARSI MALES AND FEMALES 1901-1971

<i>Year</i>	<i>Mean Age at Marriage</i>	
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
1901	29.4	24.3
1911	29.8	25.3
1921	29.5	24.4
1931	29.3	24.7
1961	31.1	26.6
1971	31.2	26.6

SOURCE : Proportion of Parsi population unmarried by age-groups obtained from the census records.

1. Hajnal John, "Age at Marriage and Proportion Marrying", *Population Studies*, Vol. 7, Nov. 1953, pp. 111-136.

Median Age at Marriage

The median ages at marriage for males and females were calculated for hundred years from the records of registration of marriages maintained by the Panchayat (Table 6). From these figures too it is seen that the median age at

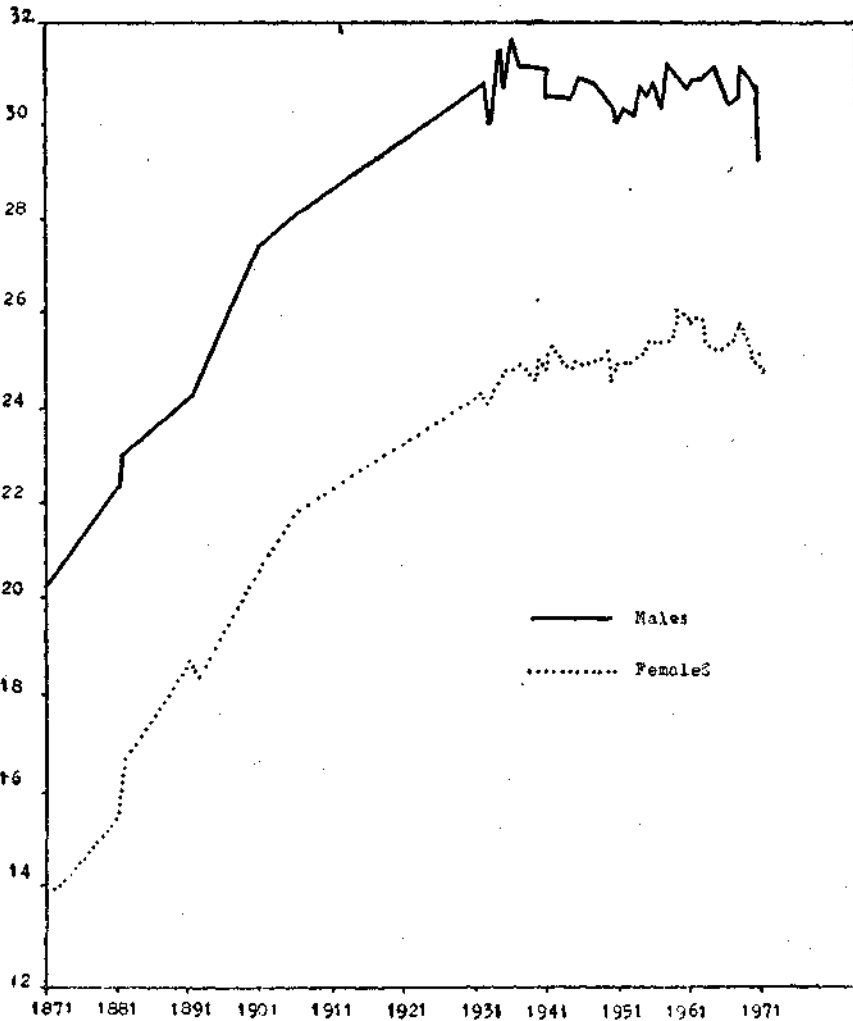


Fig. 1. Median Age at Marriage for Parsi Males and Females 1871-1971

marriage has risen over years for both males and females and has stabilised at around 30 for males and 25 for females. This pattern of continuous

TABLE 6—MEDIAN AGE AT MARRIAGE AMONG PARSI MALES AND FEMALES 1871-1971

Year	Median Age		Year	Median Age	
	Males	females		Males	Females
1871	20.3	14.1	1948	30.7	25.0
1872	20.5	14.0	1949	30.6	25.2
1881	22.3	15.5	1950	30.3	24.6
1882	23.0	16.7	1951	30.0	24.9
1891	24.3	18.7	1952	30.2	24.9
1892	24.4	18.3	1953	30.1	25.0
1901	27.4	20.7	1954	30.7	25.1
1902	27.5	20.9	1955	30.6	25.4
1906	28.1	21.7	1956	30.7	25.4
1932	30.8	24.3	1957	30.3	25.4
1933	30.8	24.1	1958	31.2	25.8
1934	30.0	24.4	1959	31.0	26.1
1935	31.4	24.7	1960	30.8	25.9
1936	30.8	25.1	1961	30.7	25.7
1937	31.7	24.8	1962	30.8	25.8
1938	31.2	24.9	1963	30.9	25.7
1939	31.1	24.6	1964	31.1	25.4
1940	31.1	25.0	1965	30.7	25.2
1941	31.1	24.9	1966	30.4	25.3
1942	30.5	25.3	1967	30.5	25.4
1943	30.5	25.1	1968	31.1	25.7
1944	30.5	24.9	1969	30.9	25.4
1945	30.6	24.8	1970	30.7	25.0
1946	30.8	25.0	1971	29.2	24.8
1947	30.8	24.8			

SOURCE : Ages at marriage of Parsi males and females obtained from the records of the Parsi Panchayat, Bombay.

rise in the age at marriage is rather unusual compared with the patterns observed in other communities. Bogue² classifies the countries in the world into four categories from the information on the ages at marriage of their females:

<i>Category</i>	<i>Median Age at Marriage for Females</i>
Child Marriage	Less than 18 years
Early Marriage	18 or 19 years
Marriage at Maturity	20 or 21 years
Late Marriage	22 years and over

Bogue observes that the countries that had higher ages at marriage, are now marrying earlier than before and those that had early ages at marriage are gradually postponing their marriages. Bogue further adds that the ages at marriage for females are generally converging to twenty. The Parsis seem to be deviating from this universally observed pattern. They had "late marriages" and yet the age at marriage of the Parsi females (and that for the males too) has been rising. There has been a minor decline in the age at marriage towards the end of the period, but there is no definite reason to believe that this decline marks the beginning of the declining trend in age at marriage.

Proportion 'Unmarried'

With the rise in the age at marriage the proportion remaining unmarried

TABLE 7A-DISTRIBUTION OF PARSI POPULATION BY MARITAL STATUS 1901-1971

<i>Year</i>	<i>Marital Status</i>					
	<i>Male</i>			<i>Female</i>		
	<i>Unmarried</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>Widowed</i>	<i>Unmarried</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>Widowed</i>
<i>(1)</i>	<i>(2)</i>	<i>(3)</i>	<i>(4)</i>	<i>(5)</i>	<i>(6)</i>	<i>(7)</i>
1901	59.0	36.3	4.7	49.6	35.7	14.7
1911	58.9	37.3	3.8	48.9	36.9	14.2
1921	55.8	40.5	3.7	45.7	40.9	13.4
1931	55.7	41.1	3.2	47.8	40.0	12.2
1961	53.6	42.0	4.4	45.3	40.1	14.6
1971	50.0	46.5	3.5	41.0	44.8	14.2

2. Bogue Donald, *Principles of Demography*, John Wiley and Sons Inc., New York, 1969, p. 316.

in the population increases. For the Parsis the proportion of population remaining 'unmarried' has shown a decline over years (Table 7A, Cols. 2 and 5).

The distribution of the population by marital status when standardised for age distribution (Table 7B) shows that the proportion 'unmarried' has increased over years as is expected from the universal pattern.

TABLE 7B—EXPECTED* DISTRIBUTION OF PARSI POPULATION BY MARITAL STATUS 1901-1971

<i>Marital Status</i>						
<i>Year</i>	<i>Male</i>			<i>Female</i>		
	<i>Unmarried</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>Widowed</i>	<i>Unmarried</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>Widowed</i>
<i>(1)</i>	<i>(2)</i>	<i>(3)</i>	<i>(4)</i>	<i>(5)</i>	<i>(6)</i>	<i>(7)</i>
1901	59.0	36.3	4.7	49.6	35.7	14.7
1911	63.1	33.1	3.8	53.5	33.0	13.5
1921	63.6	33.3	3.2	53.3	34.8	11.8
1931	63.2	34.1	2.7	55.2	34.3	10.5
1961	70.7	27.4	1.8	63.2	30.3	6.5
1971	69.5	29.3	1.2	62.1	32.7	5.2

*The distribution standardised for the age distribution of 1901 population among the Parsis.

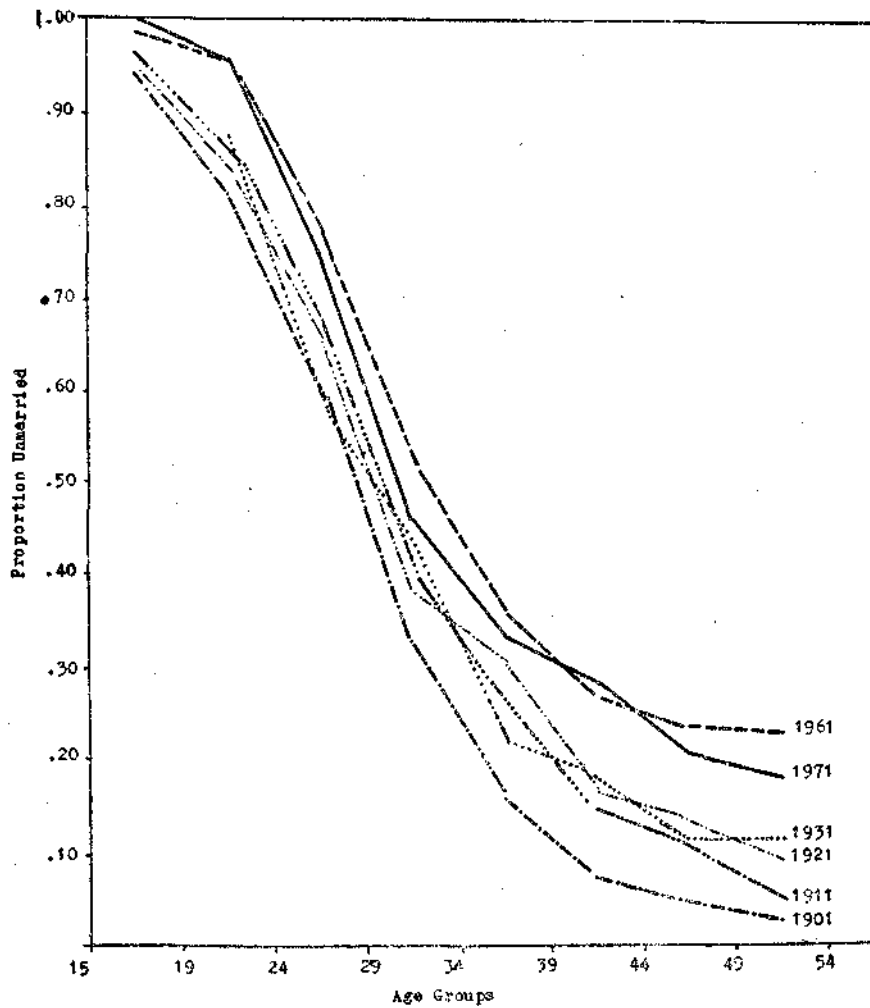
SOURCE: Distribution of the Parsi population by marital status obtained from the census records.

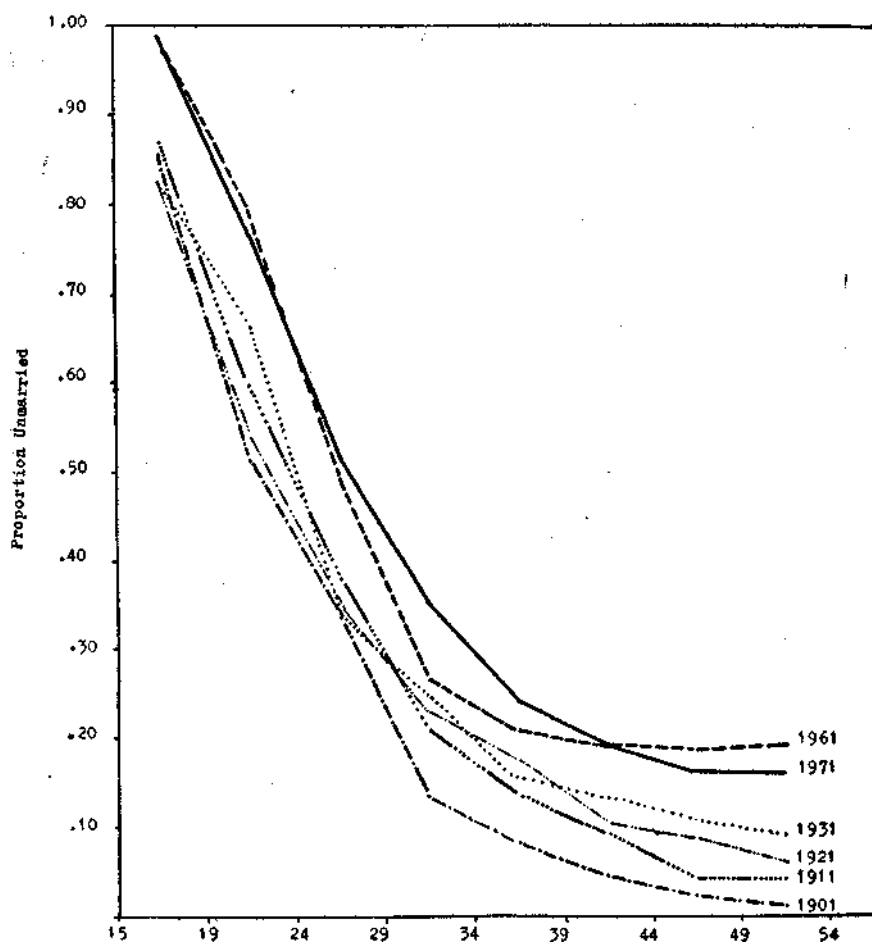
Proportion 'Unmarried' by Age 50

The population remaining 'unmarried' at the age 50 and over has increased over the decades (Table 8). The proportion increased from 2.8 percent (in

1901) to 18.6 percent (in 1971) for the males and from 1.6 percent (in 1901) to 15.4 percent (in 1971) for the females.

FIGURE 2A - Proportion Unmarried Males in Parsi Population
1901 - 1971





Age Groups Fig.

2B. Proportion 'Unmarried' Females in Parsi Population 1901-1971

TABLE 8—PROPORTION 'UNMARRIED' BY AGE 50 AND ABOVE 1901-1971

Year	Percent 'Unmarried'		
	Population	Males	Females
1901	2.1	2.8	1.6
1911	3.4	4.2	2.7
1921	6.1	7.6	4.5
1931	7.8	9.1	6.5
1961	18.1	19.8	16.4
1971	16.9	18.6	15.4

SOURCE : Calculated from the distribution of the Parsi population by marital status available from the census records.

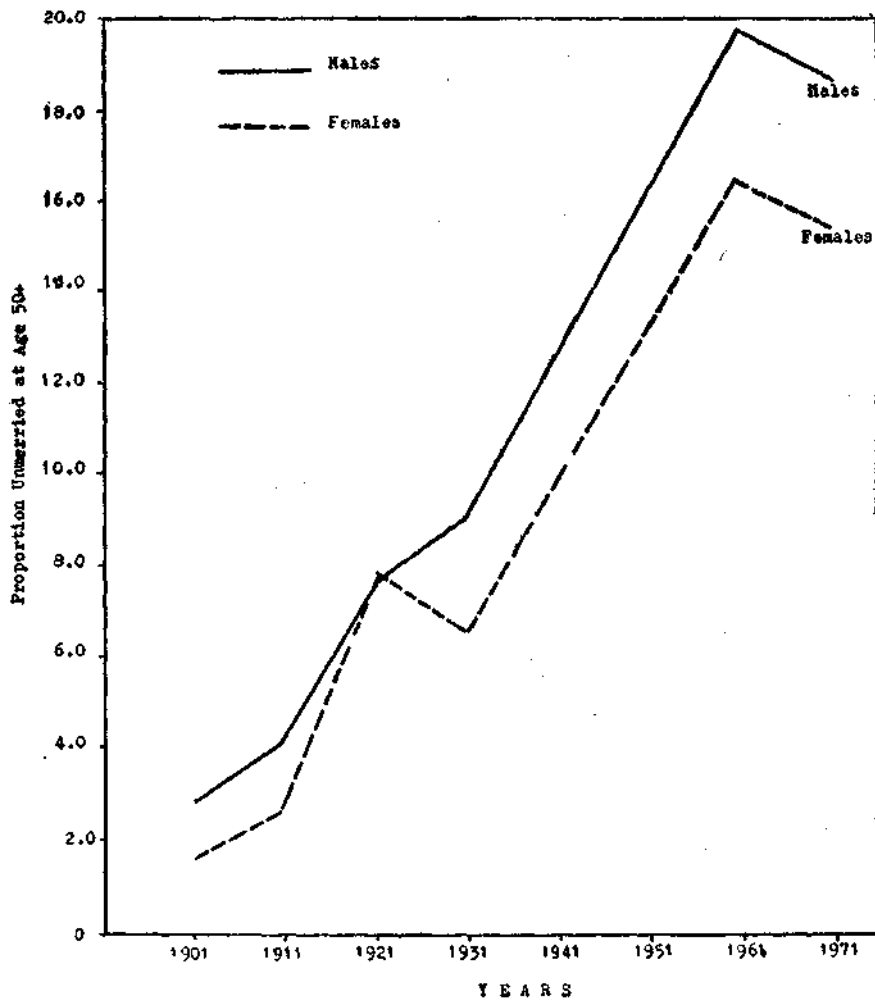


Fig. 3. Proportion Unmarried at Ages 50 and Over 1901-1971.

Child Marriages

Though no marriages in the age group 0-14 were reported during 1961 and 1971, there were reports of males and females in age groups 0-14 as 'married' and 'widowed' in censuses of 1901 to 1931 (Table 9).

Second Marriages

A total of 32 marriages were reported during the one-year period of 1960-

1961 (6 months before and 6 months after the census) wherein either or both of the spouses had married for the second time. Six of the marriages were between partners both of whom were marrying for the second time. In eighteen marriages the grooms were marrying for the second time and the brides for the first time. Eight more marriages were reported wherein in brides were marrying for the second time and the grooms for the first time.

During the 12 months of 1970-71 there were 31 marriages wherein either the bride or the groom was marrying for the second time. No marriages were reported wherein both the partners were marrying for the second time. In

TABLE 9—MARRIED AND WIDOWED MALES AND FEMALES IN AGE GROUP 0-14 AMONG PARSIS OF BOMBAY CITY 1901-1931

Year	Percent in the age group							
	Married		Widowed		Married		Widowed	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
1901	34	79	—	3	0.50	1.18	—	0.05
1911	77	87	4	8	1.15	1.36	0.06	0.13
1921	49	63	1	4	0.76	1.08	0.01	0.07
1931	61	48	—	1	0.82	0.71	-	0.02

case of 24 marriages the grooms were marrying for the second time and in case of 7 the brides were marrying for the second time. The mean ages at second marriage for males and females for 1960-1961 were 40.5 and 37.1 respectively and for 1970-1971 they were 40.1 and 33.7 respectively. The youngest male marrying for the second time in 1960-1961 was 25 years old whereas the female was 26 years old. Corresponding ages for 1970-1971 were 24 for male and 26 for female. The oldest male marrying for the second time in 1960-1961 was 60 years old and the female was 48 years old. In 1970-1971 the oldest male was 62 and female was 47.

Mixed Marriages

During the ten year period of 1950-1959, 65 Parsi males and 79 Parsi females took partners from outside their community. Corresponding numbers for the decade 1960-1969 were 168 and 211. During the decade 1950-1959 a total of 4639 marriages had taken place among the Parsis wherein both the brides and their grooms belonged to the community. Thus a total of 9422 Parsis got married during the decade and of these 1.5 percent had taken their partners

from outside the community. The decadal percentage for males marrying outside the community was 1.4 for males and for females it was 1.7. During the decade 1960-1969 there was an increase in the mixed marriages and 3.7 per cent of the total persons who got married during the decade took their part-nears who were non-Parsis. The decadal percentage among the males marrying non-Parsis was 3.3 and for females it was 4.1.

Consanguineous Marriages

A population that is not very large and does not have many members taking marriage partners from outside the community, the incidence of consanguineous marriages is likely to be high. In a survey of the Parsis of Greater Bombay conducted by the Census of Maharashtra, 14.3 percent of the ever-married women in the age-group 15-69 reported to have married their blood-relatives.³ Ghosh¹ reports an incidence of 12.7% among the Kota tribe in Madras. Ghosh quotes other studies on inbreeding in various communities. Based on the comparison with the data from other studies Ghosh concludes that the inbreeding in the Kota tribe was high. Parsis thus have quite a high incidence of consanguineous marriages.

The types of consanguineous marriages of the Bombay women, as reported in the survey by the census, are given in Table 10. In the table husband's brother is erroneously classified as blood relation.

TABLE 10—PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF EVER-MARRIED GREATER BOMBAY PARSI FEMALES OF CONSANGUINEOUS MARRIAGE BY THE TYPE OF CONSANGUINEOUS MARRIAGE

<i>Type of Consanguineous Marriage</i>	<i>Percentage of ever-married women 15-69 years</i>
Married to Mother's brother	0.9
Married to Mother's Father's Sister's son	19.6
Married to Mother's brother's son	14.2
Married to Mother's Sister's son	23.3
Married to Father's Brother's son	17.4
*Married to Husband's Younger brother	0.9
Married to other blood relations	23.7
All Consanguineous marriages	100.0

SOURCE: Census of India 1961, Vol. X, Maharashtra, Part X(L-D), *Parsis of Greater Bombay*, p. 24, Table H.

*Erroneously classified as 'blood relation'.

3. Census of India 1961, Vol. 10, Maharashtra, Part x (L-D), *Parsis of Greater Bombay*. p. 24.

4. Ghosh Alope Kumar, Inbreeding in the Kota Tribe of Nilgiri Hills, Madras, *Social Biology*, Vol. 19, No. 3, Sept. 1972, pp. 289-291.

Incidence of Widowhood

The censuses till 1931 gave the distribution of the population by three categories of marital status viz., 'unmarried', 'married' and 'widowed'. The 1961 and 1971 censuses provided information on the separated and the divorced. The data show that among males 0.5 per cent in 1961 and 0.3 per cent in 1971 belonged to the group of divorced and the separated. Among the females the percentages were 0.7 and 0.5 for 1961 and 1971 censuses respectively. Since these percentages are small and the earlier censuses provided no information for such cases the group is included in the group of widowed for the discussion below.

With the general rise in the expectation of life the incidence of widowhood declined among the Parsis from 4.7 percent to 3.2 percent among males and 14.7 percent to 12.2 percent among females during the period of thirty years of 1901 to 1931. Since then the proportion of widows among the females rose to 14.6 percent in 1961 to decrease somewhat to 14.2 percent in 1971. The corresponding proportion for males too showed an increase to 4.4 per cent in 1961 followed by a reduction to 3.5 per cent in 1971 (Table 7A).

Difference Between the Ages of Brides and their Grooms

Generally the brides are younger to their grooms and the difference in their ages is on an average of 5 years. Comparison of the ages of Parsi brides and their grooms at first marriages obtained from the data for the eleven years period of 1960 to 1970 for the Greater Bombay population are given below.

TABLE 11—AGE-GROUPS OF BRIDES AND THEIR GROOMS AT FIRST MARRIAGE 1960-1970

<i>Age group of Bride (Years)</i>	<i>Age group of</i>		<i>Percent Grooms</i>				
	<i>Younger</i>	<i>Same Age</i>	<i>Older by years</i>			<i>Total %</i>	<i>Brides</i>
			<i>1-5</i>	<i>6-10</i>	<i>10+</i>		
16-20	0.5	0.3	32.6	45.6	21.0	1000	386
21-25	1.8	6.1	44.5	36.6	11.0	100.0	1938
26-30	11.0	12.7	43.4	25.3	7.6	100.0	1085
31-35	16.6	13.3	37.8	22.2	10.1	100.0	397
36+	18.7	4.7	36.8	29.8	10.0	100.0	171
All ages	6.4	8.0	42.0	32.7	10.9	1000	3977

Most of the brides (85.6 per cent) married grooms older to them. Nearly one in twelve brides had their grooms of ages same as theirs whereas one in sixteen married grooms younger to them.

Conclusion

The ages at marriage for the Parsi males and females have been higher in comparison with the patterns of other communities. The questions asked to the 'never married', aged 25 and above in the survey conducted in 1962 for the Greater Bombay Parsi population throw some light on the subject.

As many as 40 per cent of the 'never married' males said 'low income' as the reason for their being 'single'. An additional 6.4 per cent males in the group found 'lack of accommodation' as the reason, whereas 5 per cent expressed that 'low income' and 'lack of accommodation' to be deterrents to their marriage. Five per cent males said that they did not find a partner who was 'suitable' to their tastes.

The above statements by the 'never married' males may be indicative of the situation that prevails in the community. The parsis as a community, have achieved a high standard of life. Since the community lives in clusters and is a closed one, deviation from the norm, is difficult. Under these circumstances both the males and females keep on postponing the marriages till a certain level of education and income is achieved. This results in higher ages at marriage.

Living closer to the British during the pre-independence period, the Parsis acquired several 'Western' norms and yet having lived as a closely-knit community they maintain the traditions. The ages of brides and grooms have a pattern that is not seen in the general population. 'Child-marriages' have disappeared during the progress. But dissolution of marriage by divorce and re-marriage of widows have not shown any significant increase among the Parsis. The relatively larger proportion of widows has been maintained during the seventy year period of 1901 to 1971. The minor incidence of mixed marriages, which shows that howsoever social and progressive a Parsi is, when it comes to taking a life partner he goes back to his community.

High age at marriage of Parsi females coupled with increasing proportion

remaining 'single' has resulted in declining fertility in the community. The inadequate data on completed fertility which shows decline in total fertility rate also supports the feeling that there is a high incidence of voluntary control of fertility among the married. The limitation of fertility among the married may be a result of efforts of the married to maintain the desired socio-economic standards. The decline in fertility over past several years has brought about a decline in the number of young persons. This in its turn has influenced the incidence and the trend of marriages in the community.