

Age at Marriage in India : A Quantitative Study of Sirsi Taluk, Karnataka, 1960-1979

Introduction

THE demographic problem implicit in population trends and the need for controlling the growth rate are now fully recognized, and so are the consequences to the development efforts, if the population trends cannot be arrested and reversed. Several methods of family planning for reducing fertility, both voluntary ones and involuntary such as compulsory sterilization, have been discussed. In recent years, the importance of rising age at marriage for fertility decline in developing countries has attracted considerable attention. In the Indian context as well, there have been considerable discussions on increasing the age at marriage as a means to reduce fertility.

However, in our view only marginal links exist between age at marriage and fertility. There are several other factors, which probably have a more direct bearing on *both* age at marriage and fertility.

In short, the following factors have been pointed out in the literature as the determinants of the shifts in age at marriage; infant mortality, the demand for female labour, age structure and sex ratios, educational reforms, inheritance customs and laws, dowry systems, costs and revenues of bringing up children, attitudes towards sexual activity, towards use of contraceptives etc, and the status of the woman.

Nevertheless, our understanding of these determinants is highly inadequate,

since age at marriage has received surprisingly little attention among social scientists empirically analyzing population development in the developing countries. Furthermore, most of the studies undertaken in this field have been based on aggregated census data. As we know that age at marriage varies considerably between regions, between social and economic groups and so forth, it is essential that research in this field should be undertaken on a *micro* level.

This paper¹ attempts to establish changes in age at marriage during the period 1961-1979 in two different caste groups: Brahmins and Namdhari Naiks.* Our

1. The present paper is part of a larger ongoing study, where we have attempted a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the relationships between age at marriage and different social, economic and demographic factors such as education, dowry, marriage squeeze and changes in economic conditions.

2. The following two tables clearly show the differences in landholding and income between the two groups under study. Furthermore, it should be pointed out that the rate of literacy is 92% among Brahmins and 49% among Naiks (1980/81).

TABLE A—LANDHOLDING (acres)

<i>Type of Land</i>	<i>Brahmins</i>	<i>Naiks</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Total</i>
1. Dry	2040 (36%)	2670 (48%)	920 (16%)	5630 (100%)
2. Wet	150 (14%)	750 (71%)	160 (15%)	1060 (100%)
3. Garden	1540 (87%)	195 (11%)	30 (2%)	1765 (100%)
Total number of households	821	1264	639	2724

TABLE B—ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME (%)

	<i>Brahmins</i>	<i>Naiks</i>
0- 2000	13.9	42.9
2000- 3000	5.0	17.9
3000- 5000	6.6	20.1
5000-10000	22.1	14.1
10000-15000	9.3	2.2
Above Rs. 15000	43.1	2.8
	100.0	100.0

analysis is based on micro level data relating to Sirsi taluk in Karnataka in Southwestern India.

The Data

Our analysis is based on interview data, gathered for 2,725 households during the period January 1980-June 1981. As a first step in our analysis we have chosen to use a period measure, i.e. median age at marriage for those marrying in different years during the period 1960-1979. Since our data pertain to a particular moment of time, there are a number of problems concerning the analysis of changes over time. One of the problems concerns the representativeness. For example, are those individuals, still living in the taluk at the time of interview, and who got married in 1969, representative of *all* individuals who got married in that particular year? Furthermore, we have not controlled for the size of the different age cohorts and the cohorts' past history. This is linked to the bunching problem, and relates to the propensity of respondents to state ages ending in preferred digits, which leads to heaping ages ending in zeros and fives. More specifically the following three bunching errors can be identified.

1. Bunching when asked about the age at the time of the interview (20, 25, 30, 35 etc).
2. Bunching when asked about the age at marriage (15, 20, 25, 30 etc).
3. Bunching when asked how long time ago did the respondent get married (5 years ago, 10 years ago etc).

While these effects cannot be totally eliminated, we can minimize their influence by excluding every fifth year in the data, as the different effects are accentuated every fifth year. This is illustrated in Table 1, where the first effect is shown by a diagonal line, the second by a vertical and the third by a horizontal line. The table clearly shows that the bunching errors are especially dominant, where the three lines meet, *i.e.* every fifth year.

Results

According to the Indian census, mean age at marriage for women has increased from 16.1 years in 1961 to 17.3 years in 1971. This trend is generally believed to have persisted, or even accelerated during the 1970's. However, as the 1981 census results have not yet been published and as very few studies have been undertaken concerning the continuing rise, we have attempted to shed light on whether this has really been the case, *at least* in the state of Karnataka. Furthermore, the marriage delay that has been observed during the 1960's is based

on aggregate data, which do not permit an analysis of the delay occurring among different economic and social groups,

TABLE 1—AGE AT MARRIAGE FOR WOMEN 1960-1979. NAMDHARIS

Year of Marriage	Age of Marriage											N	med			
	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22			23	24	25-
1979		1			5	13	5	16			4	3	2	2	58	19.3
78		1	2	5	5	3	1	5			2	2	1		42	18.8
77		1	1	3	5	13	5	8			4	8			55	19.0
76			2	2	11	2	12	4			2	4		3	52	18.8
75		1	5		1	9	10	4	1		2	2	2		61	20.0
74						11	5	7	18		3	2	1	1	61	18.7
73						1	9	7	4		4	1	2		39	18.3
72			3			11	18	8	1			2		1	52	17.5
71		1	1	1	2	12	4	1	5			1			32	17.0
70			2	1		13	3	16	5	1		1	1	1	69	17.2
69		1	1	8	5	2	9	3	8					1	36	17.5
68		1	1	4		13	1	8	1	2	1	1	1	1	42	16.7
67			2	1	16	3	18	1	2			4			47	17.1
66		4	1	8		12	1	2	1	1		2		1	32	16.3
65		2	3	3	3	2	7	3	16			1			64	16.3
64		4	1	5		6			8	2				2	26	16.6
63			1	1	6	3	3	8							23	17.0
62		8	1	1	2	2	6	1	1	1		1			22	18.8
61						7	2	3							14	16.9
60		1	1	5	2	8	2	4	1	1				1	65	16.0

Figure 1 shows the increase in age at marriage for both men and women in Sirsi taluk during the period of study. It can be seen that the increase has been particularly marked during the 1970's.

The age at marriage for women were more or less identical for both Brahmins and Naiks at the beginning of the period and furthermore, corresponds well with the national figure according to the 1961 census.

The increase in the two groups is slight during the period 1961-68; about one year, which also corresponds with the increase in the national figures from 1961 to 1971. Subsequent to 1969 both groups exhibit marked increases in age at marriage, where the increase in the case of Brahmins takes place at a much higher level. The increase for this group is five years from 1968 to 1979, while for Namdhari Naiks it is slightly less than three years. In 1979 the observed median age at marriage is 22.2 years for the Brahmins and 19.3 years for the Naiks.

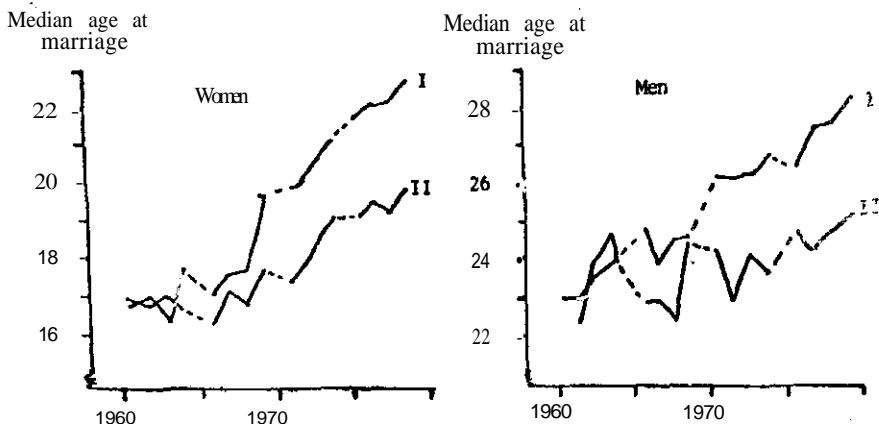


Fig. 1. Median age at marriage for those marrying during the period 1961-1979.

Note : I = Brahmins

II = Namdhari Naiks.

We can observe a similar trend for men. Among Brahmins, however, the most marked changes occur for males a couple of years later than for women. Otherwise, the patterns are rather similar, with a slight increase during the 1960's and a more pronounced one during the 1970's. For Naiks the changes during the 1960's exhibit considerable variations, but during the period 1972-1979 we observe steady changes. However, the rate of increase is less than for Brahmins.

Finally, it may be noted that the age gap between the spouses has remained almost the same over the period; obviously the almost identical pattern of changes have occurred in both female and male age at marriage.

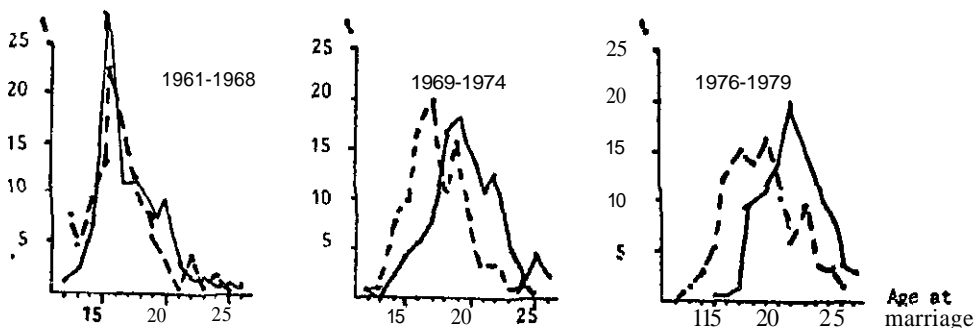


Fig. 2. Female marriage pattern—percentage in different age groups 1961-1968, 1969-1974 (except 1970) and 1974-1979.

Note : — = Brahmins

- - - = Namdhari Naiks

A more detailed picture of the female marriage pattern, which relates to the distribution of age groups is shown in Figure 2. A notable feature is that during the 1960's we observe a pronounced peak at the age of 16, while in the subsequent periods the distribution is more even. With regard to the male marriage pattern we can observe similar changes.

Thus, we can conclude that there has been considerable shift in the age at marriage. Our analysis also indicates that this shift has been more pronounced during the 1970's not only with regard to the female age at marriage, but also in the case of men. Furthermore, the shift during the 1970's has been more marked among the higher caste.