

Nuptiality Pattern in Rural Bangladesh

Introduction

THE pattern of marriage is one of the most important variables associated with fertility and population growth in many societies. Policies to control population growth often include legislation to increase the minimum age at marriage as one way of controlling fertility. European historical experience shows that nuptiality patterns contributed significantly to the lowering of fertility levels in the early stages of fertility transition. Late marriage and widespread celibacy were responsible for lowering age-specific fertility rates in the populations of Western Europe. In Eastern and Central Europe, on the other hand, where marriage occurred earlier and was nearly universal, a somewhat slower fertility transition was achieved through a reduction in marital fertility without any drastic accompanying nuptiality change. Populations of many developing countries, however, exhibit nuptiality patterns characterized by a still higher incidence of marriage and considerably younger age of marriage than even the earliest observed schedules from Eastern Europe (Lesthaeghe, 1971). Bangladesh is no exception to the other developing countries in this respect.

Materials and Methods

Since 1963 the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR, B) has been conducting a health oriented research programme and providing limited health services in Matlab thana, Comilla district of Bangladesh. The Demographic Surveillance System (*DBS*) is one of the components of this field programme. It has maintained a continued registration of

births, deaths and migrations, in addition to periodical censuses, since 1966. In 1975, the system was augmented to include marital unions and dissolutions in the study population. In 1978 the area was reduced to 159 villages and the total population was estimated as 174,860. The article deals with marriage data registered during the period 1975 to 1979. A data tape containing marriages registered during the period is used for the analysis.

The DSS, as it operates now, is an independent four tier system. At the village level, 110 female Community Health Workers (CHWs) are responsible for detecting vital events. The CHWs visit each household once in a week in the comparison area, and once in a fortnight in the MCH-FP area. They enquire about births, deaths, migrations, marriages and divorces and record these events in register books. Their work is checked by 12 male Health Assistants (HAs) who visit each household monthly. They accompany the CHWs and record vital events on standard registration forms. Each field unit comprises a 16,000 population, about 3,000 households, and is covered by one Health Assistant. The HA's work is supervised by a Senior Health Assistant (SHA), who visits each household at least four times a year.

Results

Seasonality of Marriage

Marriage is virtually universal in Bangladesh. It generally occurs at an earlier age for females compared to males (Hong, 1980). The proportions of never married, married, widowed and divorced males and females recorded in 1978 in the study area are shown in Table 1. It is observed that before reaching the age of 25 years, practically all women were ever-married.

The distribution of marriages by month shows a marked seasonal variation (Table 2). Adopting the approximate expression for the standard deviation of the seasonal index

$$S.D. = \frac{100 \sqrt{\text{Observed number of marriages}}}{\text{Expected number of marriages}}$$

and allowing for a monthly average of between 230 and 390 marriages (recorded in 1975 and 1976 respectively), it appears reasonable to discard fluctuations within the range of ± 10.0 points as not significant. Hence, in the 1976-1979 period, the first seasonal peak appears to be in February-March, followed by a second peak in June (observed in 1975-1977 and in 1979). Apart from this, there were fluctuations in the individual years showing a slightly different seasonal pattern: for instance, in 1975 the highest monthly number of marriages was concentrated in December, and, in 1976, a secondary summer peak extended over three months (June to August) with the highest numbers, once again, in

TABLE 1—PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF THE POPULATION OF DSS BY AGE, SEX AND MARITAL STATUS: 1978

Age	Males				Females			
	Never married	Married	Widowed	Divorced	Never married	Married	Widowed	Divorced
<5								
5-9								
10-14					97.1	2.8		0.1
15-19	96.8	3.1		0.1	53.8	43.6	0.2	2.4
20-24	68.6	30.5		0.8	6.7	87.1	0.8	5.3
25-29	24.9	73.2	0.3	1.6	0.6	94.0	2.6	2.9
30-34	5.4	92.8	0.3	1.6	0.2	93.7	4.4	1.7
35-39	1.1	97.8	0.2	0.8	0.1	88.9	9.6	1.3
40-44	0.2	98.5	0.6	0.7	0.1	81.4	17.7	0.8
45-49	0.5	97.4	1.5	0.7	0.1	70.4	28.6	1.0
50-54	0.4	96.7	2.1	0.9	0.1	59.9	39.1	0.9
55-59	0.3	95.1	3.5	1.0	0.1	46.5	52.3	1.1
60-64	0.1	93.3	6.0	0.6	—	32.1	66.7	1.2
65-69	0.2	92.3	7.1	0.5	0.1	19.7	79.6	0.7
70+	0.2	81.8	17.1	0.9	0.1	8.4	90.8	0.5
Total	64.7	34.0	0.9	0.4	50.7	38.8	9.2	1.2

SOURCE: Becker *et al.* (1982 :15).

*less than 0.1 percent

December. In 1978, the summer peak moved from June to July and an additional peak emerged in November.

Average Age at First Marriage

The median age at first marriage is a useful summary measure for comparing the timing of first marriages. In most countries with inadequate registration of marriages, such information can be obtained only indirectly by Hajnal's (1953) method which has limitations, in particular in a situation when age at marriage is changing. The advantage of the DSS data is that it allows the computation of the average age at marriage directly from the marriage records. The median

TABLE 2- VARIATION IN SEASONAL INDEX* OF MARRIAGES: 1975-1979

Year	Months											
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
1975	70.0	96.0	71.2	50.5	87.1	141.1	116.3	120.8	84.0	107.5	67.5	188.4
1976	76.7	136.7	140.4	43.9	105.6	121.3	122.4	115.1	60.4	83.4	51.4	144.6
1977	89.8	177.4	164.8	50.0	99.1	136.8	100.8	82.7	69.7	67.1	74.4	95.9
*1978	95.9	114.0	150.0	56.6	71.3	104.4	111.0	75.2	109.6	81.7	117.9	81.7
"1979	87.6	172.0	182.1	52.2	101.7	142.7	103.8	64.9	66.7	49.8	92.4	93.0

*Reduced DSS area.

- Based on the expected number of marriages in a given month $E=M.N/365$ where M is the annual total marriages, N is the number of days in the given month; seasonal index $I = 100.0 / E$ where 0 is the recorded number of marriages in the given month.

Note. Twelve error (inconsistent) cases were excluded from the analysis for the year 1979.

age at marriage of males and females derived from the data collection in the DSS area is shown in Table 3. The median age at marriage of the grooms did not significantly vary from year to year; in contrast, the median age at first marriage of females increased by almost one year from 16.0 years in 1975 to 16.9 years in 1979. A continuous upward trend in the age at first marriage of the brides was noticeable throughout the whole period from 1975 to 1979.

TABLE 3—MEAN AND MEDIAN AGE AT FIRST MARRIAGE OF GROOMS AND BRIDES: 1975-1979

Year	Grooms				Brides			
	N	Mean	S. D.	Median	N	Mean	S. D.	Median
1975	(1871)	24.4	3.91	24.8	(2271)	16.0	1.97	15.9
1976	(3450)	24.2	3.84	24.2	(3917)	16.2	2.03	16.0
1977	(2745)	23.9	3.76	24.3	(3102)	16.4	1.96	16.3
1978	(2277)	24.1	3.73	24.3	(2550)	16.7	2.15	16.4
1979	(2435)	24.0	3.69	24.2	(2733)	16.9	2.13	16.7

Age Difference between Grooms and Brides at First Marriage

The age difference between groom and bride is a social rather than a demographic phenomenon (McDonald and Abdurahman, 1974). A wide range of age differences between grooms and brides exist in rural Bangladesh. However, Bangladeshi men usually like to marry girls who are at least and often ten years younger than themselves; this has been the practice in both rural and urban areas (Ahmed and Chowdhury, 1981).

In our study the age differences averaged between 7 and 8 years during the period 1975-1979 (Table 4). It is noticeable that it was lowest for grooms in the

TABLE 4—MEAN AGE DIFFERENCE (YEARS) BETWEEN THE GROOMS AND BRIDES AT FIRST MARRIAGE: 1975-1979

Groom's age at first marriage	Brides younger (on average) years									
	N	1975	N	1975	N	1977	N	1978	N	1979
< 20	(233)	2.7	(433)	2.3	(375)	2.2	(213)	2.3	(258)	2.1
20-24	(610)	6.3	(1400)	6.1	(1061)	5.9	(985)	5.4	(1017)	5.4
25-29	(851)	10.1	(1356)	9.8	(1129)	9.4	(898)	9.2	(981)	8.9
30-34	(157)	13.8	(233)	13.3	(159)	13.7	(160)	13.4	(162)	12.7
35-39	(16)	17.6	(25)	16.3	(17)	16.8	(21)	17.0	(15)	17.3
40-49	(4)	23.8	(3)	28.3	(4)	14.3	—	—	(2)	25.0
All Grooms	(1871)	8.4	(3450)	7.7	(2745)	7.4	(2277)	7.3	(2435)	7.1

'under 20' age group and increased gradually to over 20 years for grooms aged 40 and over. In the rural areas of Bangladesh, many well-to-do older men often tend to marry very young brides.

Socio-economic Differentials of Age at First Marriage

Persons who belong to different socio-economic groups have different ages at marriage in almost all societies (Bogue, 1969). As education increases, the age at marriage rises for both grooms and brides. In Bangladesh, education has been found to be correlated with age at marriage of women in the younger age group 10-24; the lower the level of education the higher the proportion married. Studies that provide information about socio-economic differentials in the age at marriage are few, largely because of the lack of adequate data. However, because the DSS collects limited information on groom's occupation, this provides an opportunity to study whether a relationship exists between the groom's socio-economic status and age at marriage.

The median ages at first marriage of men and women in the different educational categories are presented in Table 5. Relatively early age at marriage prevails among all women, except those who had more than primary education. Among the women with no formal education, maktab-koranic school only, or 1-5 years of primary school, there was no marked difference in average age at first marriage. However, even between these women and those with six or more years of formal schooling, the difference in the age at first marriage was only 0.5 years. An encouraging sign of change is noticeable in our data set, namely the gradual increase in the average age at first marriage between 1975 and 1979 from 15.9 to 16.8 years (maktab and 1-5 years of primary school) or to 17.1 years (no formal education). Similarly, for women with six or more years of formal schooling, the average age rose from 16.4 to 17.4 years in the five-year period.

As far as males are concerned, two aspects of the age at first marriage were significant. First, the age at first marriage increased with rising education from about 22.9 years (no schooling) to 24.9 years (six or more years of formal education). Second, there was no marked trend towards older marriage in any educational category.

Table 6 shows the age and educational pattern of both husband and wife. For females in each age group, a strong tendency to marry a partner of a similar educational level is evident only at the lower levels of education. For example, the proportion of grooms with no education marrying brides with no education ranges from 70 to 77 percent; for those with religious koranic education (Maktab) from 83 to 89 percent. At somewhat higher educational levels of husbands, the concentration was considerably weaker. Because of the association between age and educational level, grooms with six and more years of

TABLE 5—MEAN AND MEDIAN AGE AT FIRST MARRIAGE OF GROOMS AND BRIDES BY EDUCATION: 1975-1979

<i>Education of Grooms and Brides</i>	<i>Grooms</i>				<i>Brides</i>			
	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>S. D.</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>S. D.</i>	<i>Median</i>
1975								
None (No schooling)	(561)	23.6	4.16	23.9	(780)	15.9	1.88	15.8
Maktab (Koranic education)	(115)	23.6	3.70	24.0	(447)	15.9	1.91	15.8
Primary (1-5)	(389)	23.9	3.80	24.6	(678)	15.9	2.12	15.9
Secondary and above (6+)	(806)	25.3	3.64	25.3	(366)	16.4	1.88	16.2
1976								
None (No schooling)	(1286)	23.0	3.88	23.1	(1604)	16.0	2.02	15.9
Maktab (Koranic education)	(317)	23.7	3.74	23.8	(871)	16.3	2.00	16.1
Primary (1-5)	(647)	23.8	3.66	24.1	(965)	16.0	2.01	15.8
Secondary and above (6+)	(1200)	24.9	3.70	25.0	(477)	16.8	2.05	16.4
1977								
None (No schooling)	(893)	22.9	3.76	22.0	(1095)	16.3	1.90	16.2
Maktab (Koranic education)	(382)	23.5	3.98	23.7	(898)	16.4	2.00	16.3
Primary (1-5)	(520)	23.8	3.62	24.1	(744)	16.3	1.96	16.2
Secondary and above (6+)	(950)	25.0	3.46	25.0	(365)	17.0	2.03	16.6
1978								
None (No schooling)	(667)	23.1	3.60	23.3	(798)	16.7	2.34	16.4
Maktab (Koranic education)	(437)	23.3	3.75	22.9	(896)	16.6	2.02	16.4
Primary (1-5)	(392)	23.8	3.65	23.9	(547)	16.8	2.06	16.4
Secondary and above (6+)	(781)	25.5	3.45	25.3	(282)	17.2	2.07	16.9
1979								
None (No schooling)	(655)	23.3	3.45	23.3	(776)	17.1	2.28	16.9
Maktab (Koranic education)	(661)	23.7	3.75	23.5	(1135)	16.8	2.02	16.5
Primary (1-5)	(411)	23.8	3.52	24.1	(562)	16.8	2.05	16.6
Secondary and above (6+)	(708)	25.3	3.66	25.2	(260)	17.4	2.26	17.1

TABLE 6-PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF BOTH HUSBAND AND WIFE BY AGE AT FIRST MARRIAGE AND BY EDUCATION: 1975-1979

Husbands of All Ages and Level of Education	Wife's Age and Education																			
	<16					16-18					19-20				21+					
	N	None	Mak- tab	1-5	6+	N	None	Mak- tab	1-5	6+	N	None	Mak- tab	1-5	6+	N	None	Mak- tab	1-5	6+
None	(1286)	75.1	14.2	9.6	1.1	(1999)	69.9	18.7	9.7	1.9	(323)	74.6	16.7	8.0	0.6	(100)	77.0	12.0	11.0	—
Maktab	(546)	3.1	82.6	12.1	2.2	(967)	4.1	85.7	9.4	0.7	(193)	2.6	84.4	11.4	1.6	(47)	2.1	89.4	8.5	—
15	(754)	29.2	31.8	35.1	3.8	(1212)	30.2	30.2	35.1	4.4	(185)	35.7	29.4	32.4	2.7	(66)	34.8	25.8	37.9	1.5
6+	(1209)	12.4	13.8	47.4	26.4	(2376)	11.8	10.0	41.8	36.4	(452)	11.7	9.5	34.5	44.2	(185)	10.8	10.8	30.8	45.9

Note. None (No schooling); Maktab (Koranic education); Primary (1-5); Secondary and above (6+).

schooling would increasingly marry brides of a similar level if they married older girls (19 years of age and over). Where they choose to marry a younger girl, the chances were that the brides would be less educated.

The mean or median age at first marriage of grooms and brides by occupation of the groom is shown in Table 7. In the case of males, a higher age at first marriage is found for those with service and business occupations than for the

TABLE 7—MEAN AND MEDIAN AGE AT FIRST MARRIAGE OF GROOMS AND BRIDES BY OCCUPATION OF GROOMS (CURRENT): 1975-1979

Occupation of grooms	Grooms*				Brides*			
	N	Mean	S. D.	Median	N	Mean	S. D.	Median
Farming (own land)	(4807)	23.4	3.89	23.5	(5458)	16.0	2.00	15.9
		23.8	4.02	24.0		17.0	2.0	16.3
Farm Labourer	(674)	22.2	3.53	22.0	(814)	15.7	1.78	15.8
		22.9	3.96	22.4		16.8	2.13	16.7
Non-Agricultural Labourer"	(2758)	23.4	3.58	23.7	(3304)	16.1	1.77	16.0
		23.9	4.02	24.3		17.0	2.16	16.7
Service ⁴	(2208)	26.0	3.53	25.7	(2436)	16.0	1.98	15.9
		25.3	3.60	25.4		17.1	2.12	16.8
Business	(1635)	24.2	3.58	24.4	(1841)	16.0	2.31	15.8
		25.3	3.63	25.2		17.2	2.28	17.1
Others ⁶	(696)	23.0	3.40	22.5	(720)	15.9	1.92	15.9
		23.8	3.31	24.3		16.6	2.75	16.1

Note. *The range of annual values observed in 1975 to 1979.

¹Industrial worker, daily labourer, potter, carpenter, barber, washerman, goldsmith, fisherman, boatman.

⁴Includes service and professional.

⁶Not gainfully employed (student), unknown, others not classified among the occupational groups.

other occupational groups. Farmers owning land were generally somewhat older at first marriage than farm labourers, the latter showing the lowest average age at marriage of all occupational categories. Business or service men seem to have a tendency to marry somewhat older brides than the other occupational groups but the difference was only marginal. There was a gradual increase in age at first marriage of women in the five-year period since 1975, irrespective of the husband's occupation.

Discussion and Conclusions

Marriage is universal in Bangladesh. First marriage occurs at very young ages particularly for brides. Although, there is some indication that age at first marriage of brides increased in the five years between 1975 and 1979, from an average of 16.0 years to 16.9 years. Groom's average age at first marriage remained almost constant at 24 years throughout this period.

A pronounced seasonality of marriages exists in rural Bangladesh. It is probably related to both economic factors and climate. The rural economy of Bangladesh is mainly agriculture-based, with Jute, *Aman*, *Aus* and *IRRI* rice being the major cash crops. *Aman* rice is harvested in October and November (Autumn), and Jute, *Aus* and *IRRI* in the summer months of June, July and August. Hence, the first seasonal peak of marriage follows the autumn harvest season, the second coincides with the summer harvest. In January, April, September and October the number of marriages stood far below the annual average in most years. The seasonal pattern of 1975 was distorted to some extent by the 1974/1975 famine (Ruzicka and Chowdhury, 1978). The total number of marriages in 1975 was less than half that of the following year 1976. Delayed onset of the monsoon or its prolonged duration causing disruptions to the pattern of life in the villages may also be a cause of the irregularities in marriage seasonality.

As first marriages occur less often among persons of advanced ages than among the young, the distribution of age is skewed and hence the mean age at marriage is greater than the median age (Shryock and Siegel, 1975). In our data this applies to females but not to males. The difference between the two measures of central tendency was, however, only marginal. The standard deviation of the distribution of male ages at first marriage was almost twice that of females. It indicates that the age at first marriage of females varies within a considerably narrower range than that of males. In rural Bangladesh, there is a general belief that a girl aged 20 is already 'too old to marry*.

In Bangladeshi society, parents and guardians are almost always responsible for arranging the marriages of their daughters and sons. Even today, unmarried daughters of marriageable age are thought to be a great burden for the parents. If the parents cannot arrange a marriage for their daughter in good time, they become worried. With no other alternative (often because of lack of money to provide an adequate dowry), a father may have to arrange a marriage for his young daughter with a well-off man even if he is of a rather advanced age. This problem is especially prevalent in low income families. It appears from our findings that there is an increasing age difference between grooms and brides, especially if the groom is more than 35 years of age.

There is a social stigma against marrying older girls in Bangladesh as mentioned earlier. The other reason for early marriage is the importance given to

chastity of the bride. A girl generally reaches puberty at about the age of 12 years. It is believed that a girl remains chaste only if she is married soon after that age (Maloney, Aziz and Sarker, 1981).

The mean age difference between groom and bride is about eight years. Younger grooms marry brides not such younger than themselves but the age difference increases rapidly as the age of the grooms increases. For the grooms who married at ages 40 years or over, the age difference averaged 28 years.

Education has a substantial effect on age at first marriage of women as shown among the few women with secondary or higher education; these women married at a later age. However, most of the women who got married during the five year period reviewed here had no schooling or only the koranic education. There was a strong concentration of marriages among grooms and brides of similar education especially at lower educational levels.

Clearly marriages where a wife would be better educated than the husband were very rare indeed in the rural area of Bangladesh in the early 1970s and, most probably, before then as well.

Grooms' occupation was related to their age at marriage and that of their brides. A higher age at marriage was found for those with service and business occupations. They also have a tendency to marry somewhat older brides than grooms of other occupational categories.

Standard of living and attitudes are likely to differ according to the occupational status of males in rural Bangladesh. The social status of brides is closely related not only to that of their parents but also to the husband's occupation (Shahidullah, 1980). This may be a factor in the parent's decision when choosing a suitable groom for their daughter.

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