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Age at Marriage in India— Emerging Trend

AGE at marriage is an important intermediate variable having bearing on the level and pattern of fertility. In most underdeveloped countries of the world, an important factor responsible for prevailing high population growth rates is the low level of age at marriage. In India, it is now well recognised that age at marriage needs a significant increase so that fertility is reduced and high rate of population growth comes down. Despite apparently vigorous efforts, including legislation prohibiting child marriages, the bulk of marriages in India continue to be performed at ages much below the desired. The amendment to the Child Marriage Restraint Act in 1978 has laid down the minimum age of marriage for boys and girls at 21 and 18 years respectively. However, till recently even the mean age at marriage continued to remain much below the prescribed minimum age in several states of India.

It is well-known that historically child marriage has been an accepted norm in Indian society. Even though statistical data are not sufficient, literature contains ample evidence to reveal that taboos, social customs and pressures have perpetuated the prevalence of early marriage in India. Prepuberty marriage in case of females had been a very common feature of the Indian marriage system even upto the end of nineteenth century. In fact, it was considered a matter of pride for parents to have arranged the marriage of their daughters before they had attained puberty. From the beginning of the twentieth century, however, under varied pressures of modernisation, some changes in this traditional early marriage pattern have been under way. Age at marriage of males as well as females has recorded an upward shift in the course of the present century.

Estimates of the mean age at marriage of both males and females have been made using census data on age, sex and marital status distribution of popula-

tion for different census decades from 1891-1901 onwards.¹ These estimates show that during the period 1891-1901 to 1951-61, the mean age at marriage of males recorded on an average an increase of around 0.4 years per decade. While the estimated mean age at marriage of males was 20.9 years in 1891-1901, the corresponding estimate was 22.3 years in 1951-1961. For females, the average decadal increase during this period was 0.5 years, the estimated means being 12.8 and 16.1 years in 1891-1901 and 1951-1961 respectively.

In this paper, we propose to analyse the most recent changes in this pertinent demographic variable making use of the estimates of singulate mean age at marriage for three points time 1961, 1971 and 1981. These estimates have been derived on the basis of methodology first used by John Hajnal.² The data on age, sex and marital status distribution of population are taken from the three censuses. The estimates are derived for the country as a whole and for each of the major states separately for rural and urban areas. Such estimates for 1961 and 1971 have been directly taken from an earlier study on the subject by the author.³ For 1981, the estimates have been made on the basis of the published 5 percent sample data.

It may be noted here that our estimates of mean age at marriage relate to census synthetic cohort. For males, the estimates are for all those who are married before attaining the age of 50 years and for females, married before the age of 35 years. The existing states of Punjab and Haryana were carved out in 1966 from the former Punjab State. Therefore, for 1971 and 1981 while we have obtained separate estimates for these two states, the estimates for the united Punjab have also been made for comparative purposes. This has been done by combining the data for the two states.

The Country Level Trends

The steady upward trend in the level of age at marriage observed during early and mid-twentieth century upto 1961 has continued unabated during 1961-81. The results both for males and females reveal that each of the two successive decades recorded a larger increase as compared to the successive increases for the earlier decades. In Table 1 are given the relevant estimates of mean age at marriage for males as well as females for the three points in time. The results show that the mean age at marriage for males for the whole country improved from 21.39 years in 1961 to 22.24 years in 1971 and to 23.10 years in 1981. The corresponding increases for females were from 16.10 years in 1961 to 17.23 in 1971 and to 18.41 years in 1981. It is to be seen that bet-

1. Agarwala, S. N., *Age at Marriage in India*, Kitab Mahal Pvt. Ltd., Allahabad, 1962.

2. John Hajnal, "Age at Marriage and Proportion Marrying," *Population Studies*, Vol. VII, 1953.

3. Goyal, R. P. "Shifts in Age at Marriage in India between 1961 and 1971," *Demography India*, Vol. IV, No. 2, 1975.

TABLE 1—TRENDS IN THE LEVEL OF AGE AT MARRIAGE IN INDIA
1961-81

	<i>Mean Age at Marriage (in years)</i>					
	<i>Males</i>			<i>Females</i>		
	1961	1971	1981	1961	1971	1981
Rural Areas	20.80	21.56	22.42	15.69	16.67	17.81
Urban Areas	23.53	24.32	24.82	17.92	19.22	20.14
India	21.39	22.24	23.10	16.10	17.23	18.41

ween the two decades 1961-71 and 1971-81 the difference in the amount of increase has been marginal both for males and females. Over each of the two decades, the mean for males recorded an increase of around 0.85 years and the female of around 1.15 years. The smaller increase for males as compared to that of females in the two decades implies a reduction in the male-female differential age at marriage.

As for comparable rural-urban trends in 1961-71, increases of mean age at marriage were larger for both males and females in urban than in rural areas; the corresponding increases in 1971-81 were comparatively higher in rural than in urban areas. This appears to mark a reversal of the widening rural-urban gap in age at marriage. During the decade 1971-81, the mean age at marriage of males showed an improvement of 0.86 years in rural areas as compared 0.50 years in urban areas. For females the corresponding increases are 1.14 years and 0.92 years. In contrast, during the decade 1961-71 the respective increases recorded in rural and urban areas were 0.76 and 0.79 years for males and 0.98 and 1.30 years for females. Further, both for males and females while the increases recorded were higher during 1971-81 as compared to those during 1961-71 in the rural areas, in urban areas they were smaller in 1971-81 than in 1961-71. This is indicative of the continued upward trend of increase in rural areas and the emergence of a reverse process in urban areas.

Trends in Different States

The estimates obtained for different states are given in Table 2 for males and Table 3 for females. In Tables 4 and 5 are presented the comparative increases in the mean age at marriage of males and females respectively over the two decades of 1961-71 and 1971-81. Barring the two states of Jammu & Kashmir and Assam for which 1981 census data are not available, figures are given for all the major states of India. The results clearly show that in line with the country as a whole, both the decades witnessed notable increases in the mean age at marriage of males as well as of females in all the states. The comparative study of the amount of increase for the two decades in different

TABLE 2—TRENDS IN THE LEVEL OF MEAN AGE AT MARRIAGE OF MALES IN DIFFERENT STATES OF INDIA 1961-81

	<i>Mean age at Marriage</i>								
	<i>Rural Areas</i>			<i>Urban Areas</i>			<i>Both Rural and Urban Areas</i>		
	1961	1971	1981	1961	1971	1981	1961	1971	1981
Haryana	—	19.97	21.02	—	23.08	23.58	—	22.65	21.67
Punjab	—	23.23	24.25	—	24.29	24.34	—	23.53	24.40
United Punjab	21.11	21.82	22.77	23.20	23.87	24.05	21.64	22.37	23.14
Rajasthan	18.97	19.05	19.76	20.25	21.04	22.15	19.20	19.48	20.39
Uttar Pradesh	18.26	18.76	20.02	21.42	22.49	23.28	18.66	19.41	20.73
Madhya Pradesh	17.82	18.40	19.61	21.39	22.49	23.32	18.43	19.24	20.54
Bihar	18.35	19.48	20.92	20.89	22.41	23.60	18.63	19.85	21.35
Orissa	21.52	22.46	23.81	23.10	24.03	25.43	21.66	22.64	24.05
West Bengal	22.84	23.64	24.70	25.01	25.77	26.66	23.53	24.32	25.27
Gujarat	20.64	21.27	22.23	22.85	23.73	24.06	21.27	22.08	22.88
Maharashtra	21.17	22.37	23.22	24.06	24.61	25.28	22.22	23.34	24.12
Andhra Pradesh	21.67	22.11	22.36	23.27	24.02	24.36	21.99	22.56	22.92
Karnataka	23.75	24.25	25.12	25.39	26.10	26.64	24.17	24.78	25.63
Kerala	25.59	26.11	26.72	27.12	27.20	27.75	25.54	26.31	26.53
Tamil Nadu	24.46	25.17	25.27	25.34	26.19	26.49	24.77	25.52	25.73

states reveals that for both males and females the increase was larger during the later decade in the six states of Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, and Kerala. In the three states of Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu, however, both for males and females the level of increase was smaller during the later period. Of the remaining four states, for Gujarat the results reveal no significant change in the amount of increase between the two decades for males and a small rise in the second decade for females. For the other three states, West Bengal, Karnataka and Punjab the second decade showed a smaller increase for females but a somewhat larger one for males.

With regard to males, the increase was more substantial than for the country as a whole in the three states of Bihar, Maharashtra and Orissa in 1961-71 and the four states of U.P., Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa in 1971-81. Among those lagging far behind the country in the pace of this increase in respect of males in 1961-71 were the four states of Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh,

TABLE 3—TRENDS IN THE LEVEL OF MEAN AGE AT MARRIAGE OF FEMALES 1961-81 IN DIFFERENT STATES OF INDIA

State	Mean age at Marriage								
	Rural Areas			Urban Areas			Both Rural & Urban Areas		
	1961	1971	1981	1961	1971	1981	1961	1971	1981
Haryana	—	16.19	17-0	—	19.26	20.08	—	16.77	17.87
Punjab	—	19.90	21.02	—	23.73	21.13	—	20-12	21.04
United Punjab	17.21	18.33	19.38	19.00	20.23	20.74	17.59	18-79	19.75
Rajasthan	14.41	15.02	15.82	15-74	16.83	17.98	14.63	15.37	16.31
Uttar Pradesh	14.46	15.09	16.22	16.96	18.25	19.37	14-30	15.59	16.85
Madhya Pradesh	14.01	14.66	16.04	16.14	17-60	18.96	14.32	15.20	16.70
Bihar	14.64	15.34	16.35	16.08	17.10	18.68	14.66	15.51	16.66
Orissa	16.45	17.15	18.95	17.03	17.62	19.93	16.48	17.20	19.07
West Bengal	15.20	16.78	18.46	19.17	20.52	21.45	16.13	17.76	19.30
Gujarat	16.77	17.86	19.03	18.44	19-48	20.48	17.21	18.34	19.54
Maharashtra	15.10	16.56	17.65	18.16	19.44	20.31	15.96	17.53	18.81
Andhra Pradesh	15.12	15.94	16.76	16.64	17.95	18.93	15.40	16.39	17.34
Karnataka	16.01	17.33	18.73	17.97	19.48	20.48	16.48	17.91	19-29
Kerala	19.91	20.74	21-71	20.89	21.58	22.36	20.06	20.88	21.83
Tamil Nadu	18.23	19.32	19.90	18.73	20.17	20.86	18.37	19.61	20.25

Karnataka and Kerala and in 1971-81, the three states of Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. In all other states, the amount of increase had been marginally lower or higher than the increase in the country as a whole. It is to be noted that while the two states of Bihar and Orissa continuously recorded higher amounts of increase in the two decades, the two states of Andhra Pradesh and Kerala has remained far below the average amount of increase in the whole country during this period.

The differential changes recorded during the two decades only marginally affected the rank position of different states with respect to mean age at marriage of males. Broadly, the states could be classified into three groups in this regard. The first group comprised states with a substantially higher level of age at marriage than the national average. The second group comprised states whose age at marriage differed only marginally from the national average. The states with notably lower level of age at marriage than the national average form the Third group. The results of our exercise showed that none of the states moved

TABLE 4—DECADAL INCREASE IN THE MEAN LEVEL OF AGE AT MARRIAGE OF MALES DURING 1961-81

State	Rural Areas		Urban Areas		Overall	
	1961-71	1971-81	1961-71	1971-81	1961-71	1971-81
Haryana	—	1.05	—	0.50	—	1.02
Punjab	—	1.02	—	0.05	—	0.87
United Punjab	0.71	0.95	0.67	0.18	0.73	0.77
Rajasthan	0.68	0.73	0.69	1.11	0.28	0.91
Uttar Pradesh	0.50	1.26	1.07	0.79	0.75	1.32
Madhya Pradesh	0.58	1.21	1.10	0.83	0.81	1.30
Bihar	1.13	1.44	1.52	1.19	1.22	1.50
Orissa	0.94	1.35	0.93	1.40	0.98	1.41
West Bengal	0.80	1.06	0.76	0.89	0.79	0.95
Gujarat	0.63	0.96	0.88	0.33	0.81	0.80
Maharashtra	1.20	0.85	0.55	0.62	1.12	0.78
Andhra Pradesh	0.34	0.25	0.75	0.34	0.57	0.36
Karnataka	0.50	0.87	0.51	0.54	0.61	0.85
Kerala	0.52	0.61	0.08	0.55	0.47	0.62
Tamil Nadu	0.71	0.10	0.85	0.30	0.75	0.21
India	0.76	0.86	0.79	0.50	0.85	0.86

its position from one group to another over this period of twenty years. In the first group, the states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and West Bengal retained in first four positions. Five states of Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Punjab and Gujarat retained their next five positions in the second group and the third group comprising states of Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh retained their 10th to 13th position at the bottom of the order. Within each group, however, there were some changes in the ranking of states. For instance in the first group West Bengal and Karnataka interchanged their positions in the third and fourth places in the order. In the second group, Orissa displaced Andhra Pradesh from sixth to seventh rank during the first decade 1961-71 and subsequently Punjab moved up to the 7th place relegating Andhra Pradesh to the eighth rank position in 1981. Similarly in the third group, Bihar improved its rank from 12th to 10th and Rajasthan lost its 10th rank to displace Madhya Pradesh from 13th to 12th position.

TABLE 5—DECADAL INCREASE IN THE LEVEL OF MEAN AGE
AT MARRIAGE OF FEMALES DURING 1961-81

State	Rural Areas		Urban Areas		Overall	
	1961-71	1971-81	1961-71	1971-81	1961-71	1971-81
Haryana	—	1.11	—	0.82	—	1.10
Punjab	—	1.12	—	0.40	—	0.92
United Punjab	1.12	1.05	1.23	0.51	1.20	0.98
Rajasthan	0.61	0.80	1.09	1.15	0.74	0.94
Uttar Pradesh	0.63	1.11	1.29	1.12	0.70	1.26
Madhya Pradesh	0.65	1.38	1.46	1.36	0.88	1.50
Bihar	0.80	1.01	0.82	1.58	0.85	1.15
Orissa	0.70	1.80	0.59	2.31	0.72	1.87
West Bengal	0.58	1.68	1.35	0.93	1.63	1.54
Gujarat	1.09	1.22	1.02	1.02	1.13	1.20
Maharashtra	1.46	1.00	1.28	0.97	1.57	1.28
Andhra Pradesh	0.82	0.82	1.31	0.98	0.99	0.95
Karnataka	1.32	1.40	1.51	1.00	1.43	1.38
Kerala	0.83	0.97	0.69	0.78	0.82	0.95
Tamil Nadu	1.09	0.58	1.44	1.44	1.24	0.64
India	1.98	1.14	1.30	0.92	1.13	1.18

With respect to changes in different states in the mean age at marriage of females over the two decades, amount of increase varied between 1.63 years for West Bengal to 0.72 years for Orissa in 1951-71 and between 1.87 year for Orissa and 0.64 years for Tamil Nadu in 1971-81. In 1961-71 the three states of West Bengal, Maharashtra and Karnataka recorded markedly higher and the six states of Orissa, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Kerala notably tower amount of increase than the country as a whole. However, in 1971-81 there has been a more balanced increase in different states. During this decade the three states of Orissa, West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh recorded significantly higher and only one suite of Tamil Nadu a substantially lower level of increase than the whole country. The increase in all the other

nine states differed only marginally from the national increase of 1.18 years over the decade.

The interstate variation in the amount of increase of the mean for females in the two decades, too did not significantly change the rank position of different states. The states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu continued to hold their 1st and 2nd ranks in the descending order. Likewise the states of Rajasthan, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh retained in their 11th, 12th and 13th positions at the lower end, although within them Madhya Pradesh improved its position from 13th to 11th, displacing Bihar and Rajasthan to 12th and 13th ranks from their initial 11th and 12th ranks respectively.

The reshuffling of ranks from 6th to 8th between the states of West Bengal, Orissa and Maharashtra are the other changes in rank positions over this period. West Bengal improved its rank over Orissa by interchanging their ranks between 6th and 7th positions.

Trends in Rural/Urban Areas

Separate estimates of mean age at marriage for rural and urban areas of each state are presented in Tables 2 and 3. The respective comparative amount of increase for each state between the decade 1961-71 and 1971-81 for males and females respectively are given in Tables 4 and 5. It is evident from the results that in the two decades, the rural and urban areas of each state shared the increase in mean age at marriage of males and females. There was quite a generally shared tendency of upward shift in age at marriage of both sexes. In all likelihood, all cross-sections of the country's population have shared this trend.

A comparative study of the amount of increase between rural and urban areas of each state for the two decades reveals that while during 1961-71 there were larger increases in urban areas than in the rural in respect of both males and females in most of states, the reverse is true for the period 1971-81. In 1971-81, the bulk of states recorded higher increases in rural areas as compared to urban areas with respect to both males and females. Maharashtra, Orissa and Kerala for both males and females, West Bengal and Punjab for males only and Gujarat for females only are the cases which do not fall in line with the general trend of higher increase in marriage age in the urban than rural areas in 1961-71. Likewise, during 1971-81 the exceptions to the general pattern of larger increase in rural were the four states of Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Tamil Nadu to both males and females and additionally the state of Bihar in respect of females only. This rural urban pattern of increase over the two decades in most of the states is similar to the national pattern and show the reversal of the process of widening rural urban gap in the mean age at marriage of both males and females.

TABLE 6-RANK POSITION OF DIFFERENT STATES IN RESPECT OF
MEAN AGE AT MARRIAGE OF MALES AND FEMALES 1961-81

Rank Position with Respect to

	<i>Mean age at marriage of</i>					
	<i>Males</i>			<i>Females</i>		
	1961	1971	1981	1961	1971	1981
Kerala	1	1	1	1	1	1
Tamil Nadu	2	2	2	2	2	2
Karnataka	3	3	4	5	5	5
West Bengal	4	4	3	7	6	6
Maharashtra	5	5	5	8	7	8
Andhra Pradesh	6	7	8	9	9	9
Orissa	7	6	6	6	8	7
Punjab	8	8	7	3	3	3
Gujarat	9	9	9	4	4	4
Rajasthan	10	11	13	12	12	13
Uttar Pradesh	11	12	11	10	10	10
Bihar	12	10	10	11	11	12
Madhya Pradesh	13	13	12	13	13	11

Concluding Remarks

It is very clearly indicated by the results here that there has been a marked and consistent increase in the level of mean age at marriage of both the sexes during the last two decades. This has been the case in respect of the country as a whole, in each state and in rural and urban areas of all states. In 1961-81, the mean age at marriage at the national level recorded an increase of 1.7 years (from 21.4 years in 1961 to 23.1 years in 1981) for males and an increase of 2.3 years (from 16.1 years in 1961 to 18.4 years in 1981) for females. Another encouraging trend is a comparatively larger increase in age at marriage of both sexes in rural areas in 1971-81. This is in contrast to comparatively larger increases in urban areas in 1961-71 and the earlier decades. This indicates the

emergence of reverse process of the narrowing down of widening rural/urban gap in age at marriage. The decrease in the gap in the mean age at marriage of males and females in both the decades is also indicated by the results of this study.

The interstate variations in the amount of increase in mean age at marriage of both males and female; over the two decades have not significantly the rank ordering of different states in this regard. The four central states Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand continued to occupy the bottom position from 10th to 13th and the southern states, of Kerala and Tamil Nadu maintained their 1st and 2nd positions in the order of the mean age at marriage of males and females all through this period,