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Factors Influencing the Time Taken to Initiate Women's Marriage after Menarche in Tamil Nadu**

Introduction

GENERALLY, the factors influencing timing of marriage of a woman used to be examined keeping her age at marriage as a dependent variable with a host of several independent variables. But it would be more appropriate to study the timing of marriage by dividing it into various segments (Fig. 1).

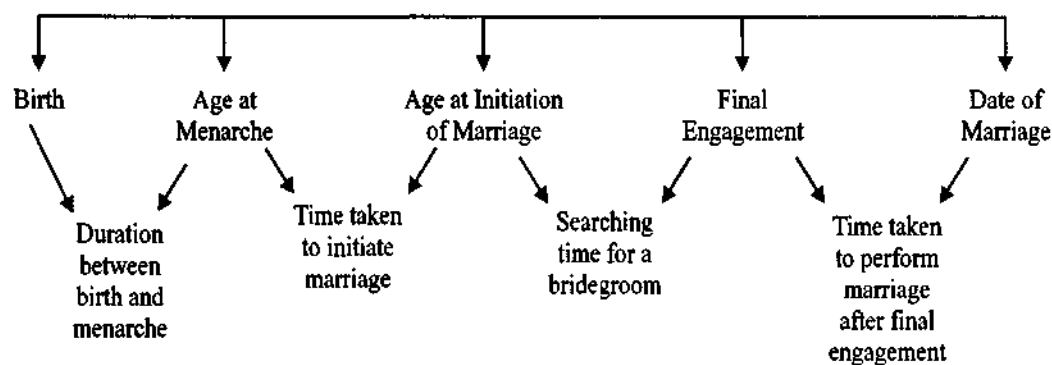


Fig. 1. The Segments of Timing of Marriage

Theoretically, timing of (first) marriage of a woman is the time lapsed between the year of birth and year of marriage. This period can be divided primarily into four

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segments. The first segment is the duration between year of birth and year of attainment of puberty, which can be studied, with the help of age at menarche. The second segment is the time taken to initiate marriage after menarche. This can be studied taking the time lapsed between age at menarche and age at first proposal for marriage. Once marriage is initiated, it will take some time to search for a suitable groom i.e., searching time for a bridegroom and if the groom is acceptable to bride and her parents, a final engagement will take place. At the time of final engagement the date of marriage will be fixed i.e., the age at entry into wedlock, which normally will be a few months after final engagement. Thus,

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Timing of Marriage of woman} &= \text{Age at Menarche} + \text{Time Taken to Initiate Marriage after Menarche} \\ &+ \text{Searching time for a suitable bridegroom} \\ &+ \text{Time lapsed between the final engagement and date of marriage.} \end{aligned}$$

Of these segments of timing of marriage, in the Indian context, the time taken to initiate marriage after menarche will be the crucial one in deciding the timing of marriage, because it is the usual custom to initiate a girl's marriage around the attainment of puberty. The Hindu religious doctrines support this cultural practice. According to these writings, the right time for a girl to marry was her eighth year and twelfth year was the latest limit laid down for a girl to remain as maiden. If she remained unmarried beyond that, her parents and elder brothers were assigned to hell (Kapadia, 1966; Sharma, 1966 and Sur, 1973). In view of this stipulation, parents (and/or elder brothers) would like to initiate the marriage process and then start the searching for a suitable mate immediately after menarche. However, it is difficult to study the socio-cultural factors influencing age at menarche, since it will be chiefly determined by the biological and nutritional factors. On the other hand, studying the determinants of the time taken to initiate marriage after menarche would be more useful so as to understand why such period is shorter/longer and among which sub-group of population. This paper aims in this direction.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretically, age at menarche of women is the prime factor that influences the time taken to initiate marriage after menarche, in addition to their and their parents' socio-economic characteristics. Initiation of marriage after menarche, by and large, indicates the societal norm of timing of marriage. Most of the marriages used to be initiated soon after puberty, since it is an important pre-requisite for biological and physiological readiness for sexual union and pregnancy. Further, to avoid neighbour's or community's criticism and to complete the responsibility of marrying off girl at the earliest, parents/elders

initiate the marriage of the girls as soon as menarche. In view of these factors, parents even force their daughters to discontinue from schools and at times they may not send for work also. Under these circumstances, time taken to initiate marriage after menarche for women will be positively associated with their age at attainment of puberty (Sheela and Audinarayana, 1997).

Women's individual socio-economic characteristics viz., educational status, occupational status and monthly income will also have a greater bearing on the initiation of their marriage after menarche. Completion of education, participation in better occupational position and economic independence to girls, by and large, increase the socio-economic status in the family and the society. These in turn develop modernisation in their thinking towards marriage and its related aspects and thereby increase their participation in decision-making about the marriage. Time taken to initiate marriage after menarche for women will also be influenced by parents'/elders' socio-economic characteristics such as level of education, occupation and monthly income, since they are the principal persons to initiate the marriage process. Parents with better socio-economic background will be able to provide their daughters with better alternatives to marriage viz., encouraging them to go for higher education, motivating them to participate in income generating activities etc., in addition to consulting them about timing of marriage. All these naturally would postpone the time of initiation of their marriage much later after menarche (Caldwell *et al*, 1983; Rao *et al*, 1986; Audinarayana and Senthilnayaki, 1989; Audinarayana, 1990, 1993; Sheela and Audinarayana, 1997).

In addition to these, time taken to initiate marriage after menarche is also decided by the certain cultural norms/practices viz., caste endogamy, consanguinity and number of siblings in marriageable ages. Theoretically, there is possibility that the time taken to initiate marriage after menarche will be shorter for those women who belong to lower caste, who have one or more blood relatives in marriageable ages and who have one or more female siblings in marriageable ages. In the case of first one, adherence to early marriage norm is the major reason for such pattern in addition to lower socio-economic status. With regard to the latter two, preferential norm of marrying among blood relatives and marriages of girls by their birth order (especially among the daughters) as a cultural practice act as the predictors of time taken to initiate marriage after menarche. Finally, there is possibility of changes in the initiation of marriage after menarche over a period of time due to social change and modernisation as well as across the rural and urban areas.

Data and Methods

Data for the present paper were collected from 600 ever-married women of Salem district, Tamil Nadu state during June-October, 1998. The sample consists of 200 women each from three communities viz., Adi Dravida (Scheduled Caste), Vanniar (Most

Backward Caste) and Kongu Vellala Gounder (Backward Caste) who were selected from 6 villages (300 rural sample) and 3 wards from Salem city (300 urban sample). However, the analysis is restricted to those women whose marriages were initiated on or after attainment of menarche. Thus, 26 women—7 from rural and 19 from urban areas—are not included in the analysis because their marriages were initiated before menarche.

Variables Used for Analysis and their Measurement

Based on the theoretical framework, the following variables are considered for analysis. Of these variables the dependent variable and covariates are treated here as continuous and the explanatory variables as 'categorised'. The details of measurement of all these variables are provided against the each of the variable.

Dependent Variable

| | |
|--|---|
| Time taken to initiate marriage after menarche for woman (TTIMM) | Time lapsed between woman's age at menarche and age at first proposal for marriage (in completed years) |
|--|---|

Explanatory Variables

| | |
|---|---|
| Woman's education (in completed years of schooling) | 0 = No schooling 1 = 1-8 years 2 = 9 and more years |
| Woman's monthly income (in Rupees) | 0 = No income 1 = Rs. 400 or less 2 = Rs. 40 land above |
| Father's education (in completed years of schooling) | 0 = No schooling 1 = 1-5 years 2 = 6 and more years |
| Father's monthly income (in Rupees) | 1 = Rs. 500 or less 2 = Rs. 501-1,500 3 = Rs. 1,501 and above |
| Caste background of woman | 1 = Adi Dravida 2 = Vanniar 3 = Kongu Vellala Gounder |
| Availability of blood relative mates in marriageable ages | 0 = No 1 = Yes |
| Number of female siblings in marriageable ages | 0 = Nobody (i.e., no one or some one in ≤ 14 years) |

| | |
|-------------------------------|------------------------|
| (i.e., in 15 years and above) | 1 = 1-2 2 = 3+ |
| Place of childhood residence | 1 = Rural 2 = Urban |

Covariates

| | |
|--------------------------|--------------------|
| Age at menarche of woman | In completed years |
| Year of marriage | In calendar years |

Here, woman's and her father's educational status and monthly income represents her own and her father's socio-economic status at the time of respondent's (woman's) marriage. Next three variables are taken as indicators of cultural factors. Since sample women are belonging to rural and urban areas, it is used as one of the explanatory variables when the analysis is carried out across the categories of marriage cohort.

Multiple classification analysis (MCA) is adopted to assess the gross and net effects of the explanatory variables on the time taken to initiate marriage. This analysis allows us a more accurate assessment of each factor under consideration, controlling the effect of other variables, with time taken to initiate marriage after menarche. In order to see whether the factors influencing the time taken to initiate marriage vary across the place of residence and over time period, the analysis is carried out separately for rural and urban areas as well as for past and recent marriage cohorts of women (i.e., women who got married during 1987 or before, and during 1988-98). Age at menarche and calendar year of marriage are treated as covariates when the MCA is carried out for rural and urban areas, whereas age at menarche alone was used as a covariate in the latter case.

Results

Rural Setting

Results from Table 1 (cols. 2-4) highlight that, in rural areas, all the seven factors under consideration had explained 31 per cent of variation in the time taken to initiate marriage after menarche (TTIMM). Caste background of the woman had exhibited a large net effect ($\beta = .33$; sig. at .001 level) on the time taken to initiate marriage after menarche (TTIMM), though its gross effect was moderate ($\eta = .17$). Father's educational status had also shown similar pattern ($\eta = .09$ and $\beta = .14$), but at a moderate level (sig. at .05 level). On the other hand, the gross effect of woman's schooling on TTIMM was high ($\eta = .27$) and remained the same even after making allowances to other explanatory variables and the covariates ($\beta = .21$; sig. at .001 level).

Woman's as well as her father's monthly income though exhibited the expected (positive) direction of influence on TTIMM; statistical significance was lacking in both the cases. Contrary to the expectation, woman who had relatives in the marriageable

TABLE 1 RESULTS OF MULTIPLE CLASSIFICATION ANALYSIS

| <i>Background Characteristics</i> | <i>Place of Residence</i> | | | | | | <i>Year of Marriage</i> | | | | | |
|--|---------------------------|-----------|------------|--------------|-----------|------------|-------------------------|-----------|------------|--------------|-----------|------------|
| | <i>Rural</i> | | | <i>Urban</i> | | | <i>≤1987</i> | | | <i>1988+</i> | | |
| | <i>No</i> | <i>Un</i> | <i>Adj</i> | <i>No</i> | <i>Un</i> | <i>Adj</i> | <i>No</i> | <i>Un</i> | <i>Adj</i> | <i>No</i> | <i>Un</i> | <i>Adj</i> |
| <i>1</i> | <i>2</i> | <i>3</i> | <i>4</i> | <i>5</i> | <i>6</i> | <i>7</i> | <i>8</i> | <i>9</i> | <i>10</i> | <i>11</i> | <i>12</i> | <i>13</i> |
| <i>Covariates</i> | <i>Age at Menarche</i> | | | | | | <i>Age at Menarche</i> | | | | | |
| | <i>Year of Marriage</i> | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <i>Woman's education</i> | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 0 No Schooling | 139 | 153 | 168 | 36 | 198 | 203 | 104 | 125 | 130 | 71 | 217 | 249 |
| 1 1-8 Years | 89 | 172 | 157 | 99 | 214 | 220 | 101 | 178 | 171 | 87 | 212 | 212 |
| 2 9+ Years | 27 | 307 | 278 | 119 | 328 | 321 | 56 | 235 | 239 | 90 | 379 | 353 |
| Eta & Beta Value | 27 | 21*** | | 28 | 25*** | | 27 | 26*** | | 36 | 28*** | |
| <i>Women's Monthly Income (in Rs.)</i> | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 0 No Income | 122 | 191 | 175 | 161 | 251 | 238 | 146 | 176 | 153 | 137 | 277 | 255 |
| 1 <400 | 67 | 137 | 168 | 40 | 215 | 296 | 68 | 141 | 177 | 39 | 210 | 293 |
| 2 401+ | 66 | 188 | 186 | 53 | 344 | 324 | 47 | 187 | 207 | 72 | 303 | 300 |
| Eta & Beta Value | 14 | 04 | | 20 | 17** | | 11 | 13** | | 13 | 10 | |
| <i>Father's Education</i> | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 0 No Schooling | 184 | 178 | 189 | 114 | 233 | 251 | 160 | 155 | 169 | 138 | 249 | 271 |
| 1 1-5 Years | 50 | 152 | 129 | 48 | 273 | 259 | 56 | 168 | 157 | 42 | 269 | 235 |
| 2 6+ Years | 21 | 214 | 171 | 92 | 300 | 286 | 45 | 220 | 186 | 68 | 327 | 305 |
| Eta & Beta Value | 09 | 14* | | 14 | 07 | | 15 | 06 | | 15 | 10 | |
| <i>Father's Income (in Rs.)</i> | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1 <500 | 116 | 157 | 166 | 82 | 237 | 269 | 137 | 157 | 166 | 61 | 264 | 270 |
| 2 501-1500 | 92 | 190 | 187 | 95 | 272 | 273 | 81 | 179 | 174 | 106 | 272 | 280 |
| 3 1501+ | 47 | 196 | 179 | 77 | 286 | 251 | 43 | 190 | 170 | 81 | 284 | 275 |
| Eta & Beta Value | 10 | 05 | | 09 | 04 | | 09 | 02 | | 03 | 02 | |
| <i>Caste</i> | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1 Adi Dravida | 91 | 159 | 115 | 79 | 211 | 192 | 91 | 162 | 121 | 79 | 207 | 195 |
| 2 Vanniar | 76 | 150 | 165 | 83 | 276 | 280 | 81 | 166 | 173 | 78 | 267 | 272 |
| 3 Gounder | 88 | 216 | 249 | 92 | 302 | 314 | 89 | 178 | 214 | 91 | 339 | 344 |
| Eta & Beta Value | 17 | 33*** | | 18 | 24*** | | 04 | 25*** | | 25 | 28*** | |
| <i>Availability of relatives</i> | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 0 No | 46 | 172 | 148 | 44 | 300 | 299 | 43 | 186 | 165 | 47 | 279 | 296 |
| 1 Yes | 209 | 177 | 182 | 210 | 258 | 258 | 218 | 166 | 170 | 201 | 273 | 169 |
| Eta & Beta Value | 01 | 08 | | 07 | 07 | | 05 | 01 | | 01 | 05 | |

| | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|-----|------|------|-----|------|-------|-----|------|------|-----|------|------|
| Number of Female Siblings in Marriageable age | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 0 < 14 Years | 175 | 1.78 | 1.76 | 154 | 2.60 | 254 | 165 | 1.61 | 1.63 | 164 | 2.71 | 2.77 |
| 1 1 & 2nd (in 15+) | 60 | 1.73 | 1.67 | 50 | 2.12 | 236 | 55 | 1.63 | 1.67 | 55 | 2.18 | 2.33 |
| 2 3+ | 20 | 1.65 | 2.03 | 50 | 3.34 | 3.26 | 41 | 2.07 | 1.97 | 29 | 3.97 | 3.39 |
| Eta & Beta Value | .02 | | .05 | .18 | | .14 * | .10 | | .08 | .22 | | .13* |
| Place of Childhood | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Residence | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1 Rural | — | — | — | — | — | — | 161 | 1.45 | 1.58 | 142 | 2.32 | 2.58 |
| 2 Urban | | | | | | | 100 | 2.08 | 1.86 | 106 | 3.30 | 2.95 |
| Eta & Beta Value | | | | | | | | .19 | .09 | | .22 | .08 |
| Multiple R^2 | | 31.0 | | | 38.0 | | | 23.3 | | | 36.0 | |
| Multiple R | | 55.3 | | | 61.3 | | | 48.3 | | | 60.0 | |
| Grand Mean | | 1.8 | | | 2.6 | | | 1.7 | | | 2.7 | |
| N | | 255 | | | 256 | | | 261 | | | 248 | |

Note: * = .05; ** = .01; *** = .001

ages and who had three and more female siblings in marriageable ages had experienced longer period of initiation of marriage after menarche, but the results were observed to be insignificant.

Urban Setting

The data given in Table 1 (cols. 5-7) reveal that, in urban areas, all the variables under consideration together had explained 38 per cent of the total variation in the TTIMM. As observed in the case of rural areas, woman's caste background and educational status had shown, large net effects (sig. at .001 level) on the TTIMM and more or less, in similar pattern. Next to these variables, woman's monthly income had exhibited both gross and net effects (eta = .20 and beta = .17) at a highly significant level (.01 level). Contrary to the expectation, the gross and the net effects (eta = .18 and beta .14) of number of female siblings in marriageable ages on TTIMM were found to be moderately significant (.05 level). That is, the TTIMM was higher for those women who had more number of female siblings in marriageable ages than those who had none or lesser number of siblings. None of the other variable such as father's education and monthly income, and availability of blood relatives in marriageable ages showed any significant effects on TTIMM though the direction of effects were on the expected line.

Past Marriage Cohort (1962-1987)

Among those women who married in the past, MCA results (cols. 8-10 of Table 1) show that all the eight variables under consideration together had explained 23 per cent

of variation in time taken to initiate marriage after menarche (TTIMM). Conspicuously, the gross effect of woman's caste background on TTIMM was noted to be very little ($\eta = .04$), after adjustment for other explanatory variables and covariate (calendar year of marriage) its net effect turned out to be very high ($\beta = .25$) and statistically significant (.001 level). On the other hand, woman's education had exhibited a high positive gross effect ($\eta = .27$) on TTIMM and remained high ($\beta = .26$; sig. at .01 level) even after controlling for other predictors and the covariate. Monthly income also had exhibited a highly positive gross as well as net effects on TTIMM ($\eta = .11$ and $\beta = .13$; sig. at .01 level).

Conspicuously though the gross effect of woman's childhood residence on TTIMM was observed to be high ($\eta = .19$), its net effect reduced to a lower and insignificant level ($\beta = .09$). On the other hand, though the gross and net effects of the remaining variables on TTIMM were neither consistent nor significant.

Recently Married Women (1988-1998)

MCA results for those women who married during the last 10 years preceding the survey (cols. 11-13 of Table 1) reveal that all the variables under consideration together had explained 36 per cent of the total variation in mean number of years taken to initiate marriage after menarche. Woman's caste background and educational attainment had shown the highest explanatory power (sig. at .001 level) on TTIMM either before or after controlling for other variables and the covariate ($\eta = .25$ and $.36$ and $\beta = .28$ and $.28$, respectively). As noted in the case of urban areas, the TTIMM was somewhat large (sig. at .05 level) for those women who had 3 or more female siblings at the time of initiating their marriage as compared to those who had 1-2 siblings or none.

As noted earlier, the difference in mean TTIMM for women by childhood residence was very large (about 1 year; $\eta = .22$), it had narrowed down to $.37$ and thus, its net effect ($\beta = .08$) turned out to be significant. More or less, similar pattern was also noted in the case of father's educational status. Even the remaining variables such as woman's monthly income, father's education and monthly income, and availability of blood relatives in the marriageable ages did not exhibit significant effects on TTIMM, though the results were mostly on the predicted lines.

Discussion

From the foregoing analysis, it is explicit that caste background of the woman turned out to be the strongest predictor of TTIMM, irrespective of the place of residence and marriage cohort. That is, women belonging to Kongu Vellala Gounder community (who have a higher social standing in this part of the society) had taken relatively longer time to initiate marriage after the attainment of puberty than those who belong to Vanniar

(middle position) and Adi Dravida (lowest in social strata) communities. Thus, there is a clear support to the proposition that "higher the caste background of the woman longer will be the time taken to initiate marriage after menarche". Another striking feature observed here is that the differentials in TTIMM of woman across the three caste groups are more conspicuous in urban areas, where social change would take place much faster as well as among the recently married women, who are more prone and comparatively modernised than their rural counterparts. This finding leads to the generalisation that the cultural norm of initiating the marriage of girls early or late after their menarche is upheld by the various caste groups over generations and across the rural and urban areas.

Next to caste background, educational level of women had played a remarkable role in lengthening the TTIMM uniformly among all the categories of place of residence and marriage cohort under consideration. As noted earlier, this outcome is natural and expected. In addition to woman's education, their monthly income had also shown a positive effect on TTIMM i.e., women who belong to higher income bracket, had experienced longer interval between age at menarche and age at first proposal. Further, this pattern appears to be more prominent in urban areas and in past marriage cohort.

Father's educational attainment showed a significant (at .05 level) positive effect on TTIMM only in rural areas, though the expected pattern was noted among the other sub-groups of women. These findings support the fact that fathers who are educated, by and large, encourage their daughters to continue higher education and even secure a job as alternative rather than initiate the marriage process at an early age. At later stage parents may even expect some or full income from daughter's earnings either to meet family's expenditure or to meet dowry and/or marriage expenditure in near future.

Contrary to the expectation, the TTIMM is longer for those women who have three or more female siblings in the marriageable ages. The pattern appears to be more prominent in urban areas and among those women who belong to recent marriage cohort (1988-98). Delay in searching for suitable mate and large expenditure for marriage and thereby weak economic position for those women who either do not have or have one or more siblings might have lengthened the TTIMM of those women who have three or more siblings. Besides these, higher education of women followed by waiting or searching for suitable job in the case of those women who have three or more siblings might have caused for longer TTIMM.

Conclusions and Implications

This study has highlighted that caste background and educational status of the woman had exerted significant net effects on the TTIMM irrespective of place of residence and marriage cohort. TTIMM was longer for those women who were getting higher monthly income and who had three or more female siblings in marriageable ages

as compared to their counterparts. However, the pattern was more prominent in urban areas as well as in the past marriage cohort in the case of former one, whereas in urban areas and in the recent marriage cohort in the case of latter one. Remaining variables did not show consistent (except father's income) and significant effects (except father's education in rural areas) on the TTIMM.

A number of implications can be drawn from this study. The findings of this study suggest that the overall educational status of women and their fathers have played a highly significant role in influencing the TTIMM. In view of these,

- it may be suggested that appropriate strategies and programmes may be evolved to motivate the parents in general and illiterates in particular to initiate the marriage alliances to their daughters much later after menarche.
- Efforts also should be taken to encourage the girls to attend schools/colleges after they attain menarche and also to participate in income generating activities, which in turn may postpone the time taken to initiate marriage after menarche.

In the informal discussions with the respondents it was learnt that, by and large, parents gave less importance to girls' education till the recent past. Besides this, middle/high/higher secondary schools in villages/towns are in far off places, about 3-15 kms away, from their native villages and thereby there was some apprehension to parents to send their daughters to such schools especially after their menarche. Such tendency has to be changed by

- building schools in villages itself and also to motivate girls as well as parents about the need for higher education, which in turn will lengthen the time taken to initiate the marriage after menarche.
- Strengthening the existing transport facilities to the villages (with bus passes up to higher secondary school level), which can facilitate the girls to attend the nearby schools so as to continue their higher studies after menarche rather than entering into married life.
- Though it is difficult to eliminate the caste endogamy *per se*, the policies and programmes may be aimed to improve the socio-economic status of the members belonging to lower and middle caste group, which may lengthen the time taken to initiate marriage after menarche.

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