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## **Raising Female Age at Marriage: Priority in India's Population Policy and Programme**

**T**HIS paper argues that it is primarily the rather sticky and sluggish low age at marriage of population that comes in the way of fertility decline and slowing down of population growth rate in India. Although the rising trend in marriage age has been discernible for some time, the rate of increase is only marginal. Any major policy or programme to push up the existing low levels of this pertinent demographic variable is also lacking. Measures like enactment of simple legislation fixing minimum ages at marriage and advertising in the media or posters campaign to highlight the comparative advantages of late marriage are perhaps not enough to change this tradition-bound practice of early marriage.

In almost all countries which witnessed demographic transition, positive changes in marital behaviour played a pertinent role in bringing about a decline in the levels of fertility. On the basis of this experience, it is now generally recommended that policies and programmes be pursued to initiate changes that may help push up the prevalent low age at marriage in most underdeveloped and developing countries of the world to help curb their high population growth rates. In India, in spite of a big planned family planning effort, a major cause for failure in curtailing the high birth rate is the persisting levels of low age at marriage. For making a notable dent in birth rate and thus successfully slowing the high population growth rate, in addition to the current contraception-oriented programme it would be desirable to plan and implement schemes and measures which may help boost the rising trend in marriage age in India.

Table 1 presents data on mean age at marriage of females in India and its different states over the last few decades. The level of increase or decrease during the past two decades is shown in Table 2. Table 3 gives the data on the number and percentage of districts in India and different states that are not likely to attain the desirable levels of marriage age by 1991 if the present rates of change continue. These data clearly reveal that the female age at marriage is yet to reach the desirable levels in most parts of the country. In 1981, for which the estimate for each state is available, the entire Hindi belt comprising the states of Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar accounting for nearly 40 per cent of the country's population had not even attained the mean marriage age for females of 17 years. Although in the country as a whole the mean marriage age of females has risen to the level slightly above the minimum prescribed by law of 18 years, Haryana and Andhra

Pradesh besides the four named above have remained below the country's level and have not attained even the legal minimum prescribed in 1981.

TABLE 1 : MEAN AGE AT MARRIAGE OF FEMALES IN INDIA AND DIFFERENT STATES, 1951-81

| State          | Mean Age at Marriage of Females ' 1 |              |       |       |
|----------------|-------------------------------------|--------------|-------|-------|
|                | 1951                                | 1961         | 1971  | 1981  |
| Haryana        |                                     |              | 16.77 | 17.87 |
| Punjab         | 16.06 }<br>}                        | 17.59 }<br>} | 20.12 | 21.04 |
| J&K            | -                                   | 16.10        | 17.80 | 19.65 |
| Rajasthan      | 14.23                               | 14.63        | 15.37 | 16.31 |
| U.P.           | 13.84                               | 14.80        | 15.59 | 16.85 |
| M.P.           | 14.53                               | 14.32        | 15.20 | 16.70 |
| Bihar          |                                     | 14.66        | 15.51 | 16.66 |
| Orissa         | 14.23 }<br>}                        | 16.48        | 17.76 | 19.07 |
| West Bengal    | 14.53                               | 16.13        | 17.76 | 19.30 |
| Gujarat        |                                     | 17.21        | 18.34 | 19.54 |
| Miharashtra    | 15.48 }<br>}                        | 15.96        | 17.53 | 18.81 |
| Andhra Pradesh | 12.57                               | 15.40        | 16.39 | 17.34 |
| Karnauka       | 16.09                               | 10.48        | 17.91 | 19.29 |
| Kerala         | 19.88                               | 20.06        | 20.88 | 21.83 |
| Tamil Nadu     | 17.05                               | 18.37        | 19.61 | 20.25 |
| India          | 15.59                               | 16.10        | 17.23 | 18.41 |

Source : Goyal.R.P. 1988. *Marriage Age in India*.R.R. Publishing Corporation, Delhi. 70-71; Agarwal, S.N., 1962. *Age at Marriage in India*, KitabMahal, Allahabad: 238-51.

None the less, all the major states over both the decades 1961-71 and 1971-81 recorded an increase in the mean marriage age of females. Over the entire period, increase varied only between 1.70 years in Rajasthan to 3.5 years in Jammu and Kashmir. In the country as a whole the increase over this period amounted to 2.4 years. It may be noted that between different states the quantum of increase recorded is somewhat smaller in states with comparative lower levels.

TABLE 2 : INCREASE IN MEAN AGE AT MARRIAGE OF FEMALES DURING 1961- 81 IN INDIA AND DIFFERENT STATE

| <i>State</i>   | <i>Increase in Mean Age at Marriage (Years)</i> |                |                |
|----------------|-------------------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|
|                | <i>1961-71</i>                                  | <i>1971-81</i> | <i>1961-81</i> |
| Haryana        |                                                 | .1.10          | 2.30           |
| Punjab         | 1.20                                            | 0.92           | 2.12           |
| J&K            | 1.70                                            | 1.85           | 3.55           |
| Rajasthan      | .74                                             | .94            | 1.68           |
| Uttar Pradesh  | .79                                             | 1.26           | 2.05           |
| Madhya Pradesh | .88                                             | 1.50           | 2.38           |
| Bihar          | .85                                             | 1.15           | 2.00           |
| Orissa         | .72                                             | 1.87           | 2.59           |
| Gujarat        | 1.13                                            | 1.20           | 2.33           |
| West Bengal    | 1.63                                            | 1.54           | 3.17           |
| Maharashtra    | 1.57                                            | 1.28           | 2.85           |
| Andhra Pradesh | .99                                             | .95            | 1.94           |
| Karnataka      | 1.43                                            | 1.38           | 2.81           |
| Kerala         | .82                                             | .95            | 1.77           |
| Tamil Nadu     | 1.24                                            | .64            | 1.88           |
| India          | 1.13                                            | 1.28           | 2.41           |

SOURCE: Goyal, op. cit: 75.

To make a significant dent in the level of fertility, the marriage age of females in India should increase to 21 years. The pace of increase recorded in most states during the two recent decades falls far short of this. Only Kerala and Punjab had attained this level in 1981. At the current pace of increase Tamil Nadu may alone cross this level by 1991 but that will be all.

TABLE 3 : NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF DISTRICTS IN INDIA AND DIFFERENT STATES THAT WILL NOT BE ABLE TO ACHIEVE DESIRABLE LEVELS OF FEMALE AGE AT MARRIAGE IN 1991

| State                               | Total No. of Districts | Category A |             | Category B |             |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------|------------|-------------|------------|-------------|
|                                     |                        | No.        | Percent     | No.        | Percent     |
| Andhra Pradesh                      | 21                     | 20         | 95.2        | 7          | 33.3        |
| Assam and Meghalaya                 | 12                     | 8          | 66.7        | 0          | 0.0         |
| Bihar                               | 17                     | 16         | 94.1        | 13         | 76.5        |
| Gujarat                             | 19                     | 8          | 42.1        | 0          | 0.0         |
| J&K                                 | 10                     | 6          | 60.0        | 0          | 0.0         |
| M.P.                                | 43                     | 41         | 95.4        | 30         | 69.8        |
| Tamil Nadu                          | 14                     | 1          | 7.2         | 0          | 0.0         |
| Maharashtra                         | 26                     | 18         | 69.3        | 0          | 0.0         |
| Karnataka                           | 19                     | 9          | 47.4        | 3          | 15.8        |
| Orissa                              | 13                     | 12         | 92.3        | 2          | 15.4        |
| Rajasthan                           | 26                     | 26         | 100.0       | 16         | 61.6        |
| Uttar Pradesh                       | 54                     | 52         | 96.3        | 27         | 50.0        |
| West Bengal                         | 16                     | 8          | 50.0        | 0          | 0.0         |
| Punjab + Haryana + Himachal Pradesh | 28                     | 11         | 39.3        | 3          | 10.7        |
| Kerala                              | 10                     | 0          | 0.0         | 0          | 0.0         |
| Others                              | 7                      | 2          | 28.6        | 0          | 0.0         |
| <b>India</b>                        | <b>335</b>             | <b>228</b> | <b>71.0</b> | <b>101</b> | <b>30.1</b> |

Category A: Districts which will not be able to achieve the 1971 level of female marriage age in Kerala of 21 years in 1991.

Category B: Districts which are not likely to achieve minimum age at marriage of females prescribed under law of 18 years by 1991.

SOURCE : Goyal, Op. tit.: 130-1.

The results of an exercise to find out the number and percentage of districts in each major state which at the current pace are not likely to attain the desirable levels are given in Table 3. This again is a dismal picture. More than half the districts in the most populous central states of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar are not likely to attain even the legal prescribed minimum of 18 years by 1991. The desirable level of 21 years attained by Kerala in 1971 would not perhaps be achieved by the majority of the districts in 10 out of the 15 major states in the country and by more than two-thirds of the total number of districts in the country as a whole. It would thus emerge that female marriage age in India is low and the pace of increase is slow and inadequate in most parts of the country.

The major emphasis in India's population policy has all along been on contraception. Although the importance of raising age at marriage has been duly recognised, no definite policy or action programme has so far emerged to this end. Amendment to the Child Marriage Restraint Act raising the minimum ages at marriage for both sexes was a welcome initiative but its enforcement has lacked force. Additionally, except for some media campaign, there has not been any other planned effort to change the tradition-bound norms favouring early marriage in Indian society.

There is a need to plan and implement programmes to inculcate norms of behaviour making late marriage of females acceptable and adoptable in the Indian social system. Inadequate information on the subject seems to be one factor behind this lack of will. There is no adequate data or information base to explore this complex social phenomenon on which to base the strategy by for change.

There is, therefore, a need for conduct of comprehensive research and studies to analyse this complex social behaviour and sort out its correlates and determinants. We suggest below some tentative schemes and measures:

1. Steps be initiated to enforce the provisions of law on minimum age at marriage.
2. A system of compulsory registration of marriages be introduced. This, in addition to providing a data base, will greatly help in implementing the legislative provisions regarding minimum age at marriage.
3. A programme directed towards young rural girls to provide gainful employment and useful technical skills attractive enough to postpone marriage, be developed and implemented on a large scale. Such programmes may prove specially useful in the central Hindi belt of the country where the female marriage age is still very low.
4. Special schemes and programmes be implemented for improvement of literacy and education among females in areas and pockets where female literacy still persists at very low levels.
5. Specific efforts be directed towards improvement of the status of women. Voluntary organisations working in this direction be given due recognition, support and encouragement to evolve the right environment making late marriage and even non-marriage acceptable in the Indian society.
6. Planned schemes be pursued to generate more and better employment opportunities for urban women. It would also be desirable to encourage growth of suitable shelter homes and hostels for unmarried women in big cities and towns in addition to

creation of job opportunities to help young rural women to take up jobs in preference to early marriage.

Special attention and priority be paid to research and studies directed towards analysis of socio-economic factors affecting marital behaviour. Marriage has been a neglected area in demographic research. Special studies in this area may greatly help in formulating and initiating sound and effective policies and programmes in this direction.

The minimum ages at marriage prescribed by law be raised to 20 years for females and 24 years for males. Amendment to include provision of compulsory permission before marriage in the present law perhaps also needs consideration. These, including some provisions of penal action for cases not observing the provisions of this law, may notably help in the objective of raising the age at marriage of females.