The process of change in the social structure is an inevitable universal social reality. The changes in the last few decades are so rapid and far reaching that many thinkers look upon this as a new era in human history. The processes of industrialisation, urbanisation and secularisation have brought about many socio-psychological changes in the attitudes and values of the people. The most striking one is the emancipation of women from their traditional bound ethos challenging the institution of marriage and family.

1.1 Changes in the Institution of Marriage

Family and marriage are considered to be the oldest and the most basic and fundamental institutions in the sub-systems of the society. Both are important for the existence and functioning not only of society, but also for the sustenance and continuation of human being. The concept of marriage varies in degree from community to community and nation to nation. Marriage is not merely a social channelisation of instinctive impulses and motivations but it is a live social bondage. According to Horton and Hunt (1964: 206), “Marriage is the approved social pattern, whereby two or more persons establish a family”. Marriage as a socially sanctioned union of male and female, is an institution devised by society to sanction the union and mating of male and female for purposes of (a) establishing a household (b) entering into sex relations, (c) procreating and (d) providing care for the offspring.

It is an old saying that marriage is a necessary evil because it completely changes the life style of human being, particularly of woman, as
she surrenders even her own identity. Still everybody wishes to marry because remaining single is not being encouraged by the society. By the time a girl attains the age of 25 or 26, society expects her to have settled in life. If a girl remains unmarried a lot of suspicion regarding her character and temperament begins to plague the mind of people.

Marriage is a deeply established, ingrained and persistent social expectation for any Indian woman. Marriage and motherhood are two important cultural indicators that metamorphose the girl into an acceptable suitable womanhood. It is believed that marriage is central to womanhood. In fact, women establish her female identity through marriage. She is expected not only to be a wife but also a mother, the ultimate, expression of her womanhood. As wife and mother, she is expected to keep the interests of her husband and children above her own. She commands respect and honor only to the extent she excels in her role as a mother and wife. Besides, she needs her husband and children for her own being and becoming. Finally, a woman believes that her children and husband needs her.

The winds of change have been blowing over many traditional institutions and concepts. One such institution, that still remains popular and which seems to be under a savage assault from shifting social trends, is the institution of marriage. Along with the change in family norms in the contemporary society, the pattern of marriage is also changing. Men and women of today are willingly stepping out of their traditionally demarcated roles and moving towards a more egalitarian concept of marriage. Some of the changing patterns in intimate relationship that are currently posing challenges to the traditional model of marriage, according to Weiten (1986)
are; (1) Increasing acceptability of singlehood, (2) Increasing popularity of cohabitation and (3) Increasing rate of divorce.

1.2 Ideology of Marriage in Different Religions

Traditionally, marriage has been guided by religion. Marriage is a sacred bond between male and female and is an indissoluble institution. The Hindu scriptures conceive marriage as sacramental in character. Sacramental in the sense that it was considered to be a sacred institution of society for the purpose of fulfilling the natural and social obligations on the one hand, while attaining salvation on the other (Hallen 1966). Moreover, marriage is said to be essential for a woman because it is the only sacrament that can be performed on her. Dr. Radakrishnan (1956) observes that marriage is a must to fulfill the four great objectives of life-Kama, Artha, Dharma, and Moksha. Marriage is necessary for a woman as she can’t attain Moksha unless her body is consecrated through the sacrament of marriage. Marriage is the most important of all samskaras and it was there in every society and it is regarded as necessary and desirable to all. Hindu marriage is a marriage between two families and the honor of the bride’s family depends upon bride’s behaviour in her new role as a wife. She is expected to follow all the vogues and behaviour pattern of her husband’s family.

Islam and Hinduism advocate that marriage is a religious duty for everybody and those who remain unmarried even after reaching the marriageable age are considered to be improper and disreputable. Christianity encourages celibacy and late marriage by attaching purity and sanctity to unmarried life, though it recognizes that marriage is essential for procreation, those who have refrained from marrying are hailed and revered. Roman Catholics regard that marriage once established is indissoluble only death can
free them from each other and from the bond of marriage. Marriage is sacrosanct among Hindus and Christians, where as it is a contract according to Islam.

1.3 Marriage in Different Countries

The pattern and style of marriage and family varies from country to country. But the essence of the idea of these institutions is more or less same. In traditional Chinese culture, marriage is not only seen as a personal choice but also as a family responsibility. In Chinese society, marriage is almost the only recognized channel to establish intimate relations with members of the opposite sex. In China, the purpose of marriage is to ‘form a family’ and family is the final destination of a person. According to Sherif (1999) in Egypt, marriage continuously occupies a significant place in the life course of both men and women. Societal norms as well as family structure and expectations influence the prevalence of marriage as a necessary rite of passage for achieving adulthood among this population sector.

In western society before industrial revolution, the traditional ideological position was quite different from the present. It can be summarized in the following words:

“God created men and women as essentially different types of being. Woman is weaker. Man is woman’s lord and master. This difference between the sexes must reflect itself in their relative status in society; they must enjoy different rights and be required to fulfill different duties. Only the man can be given full rights. Woman must be sheltered. By being a virtuous and gentle wife and a pious, fertile mother, a woman could gain respect” (Dahlstrom 1967:170).
With the advent of the Industrialization, several socio-economic changes began to take place. Many avenues for women were opened to acquire employment. During the 60’s and 70’s, more and more women entered into the labour market. They were ready to act dual roles such as official and household works. Due to these changes the pattern and structure of marriage and family also changed respectively. Marriage, today no longer has much connection with the desire to perpetuate property and status from generation to generation. As women became more economically independent, marriage is less of a necessary economic partnership than it used to be. In the same way the educated working women consider self-respect and the development of personality as necessary goals of life. As contrasted with marriage of the past, present American marriage presents both sexes with a changed and expanded concept of the role. The most prominent change that has occurred is increased freedom of choice. Women have more freedom of choice- in choosing husband, in getting married and in escaping an unhappy marriage.

1.4 Marriage in India

The meaning of marriage was rooted in the socio-religious domain of Indian society. Ancient narrations reveal that women of the proto and prehistoric India were much better with regard to their voice, freedom, their living status in general, education, carrier option, marriage option, family and religion. This gave them equal opportunity for survival with self-respect. The status of women was extremely rich in culture and stands supreme for its glory. At the dawn of Indian history, women possessed a high social status and some of them were widely reputed for their learning. In Vedic age, women occupied a high position in society. She had equal rights with men.
and enjoyed freedom in choosing her life partner; women went to Guru Kula to receive education and married only after acquiring education.

Gradually, the condition changed. The social background provided by the authoritarian joint family and caste with its domination in all spheres of life, afforded no scope for the recognition of any personal interests and aspirations of woman in the family life. As the merging river loses its identity in the ocean, so a wife was supposed to merge her individuality with that of her husband and family. Her only concern in life was to see that all needs of her husband are properly met.

The developments of science and technology during the last two centuries have somewhat altered the definition of life. The spread of modern education, especially among the women, and the political consciousness that follows have created new phenomena. Various reform movements, social legislations and opening of modern occupational roles for women have created new outlooks. The institution of marriage is getting shifted more to the needs of individuals than as the social and religious obligations. Legally speaking, the traditional ideals of marriage have been replaced with a new set in which marriage is no longer a social or a family concern. It is purely a personal affair leading a man and woman to seek social, psychological and economic happiness by pursuing their own free, will.

1.5 Marriage in Kerala

In Kerala, with regard to the institution of family, the dominant caste Hindus has two distinct forms of family, i.e. the patrilineal and patrilocal joint family of the Namboothiris and the matrilineal and matrilocal joint family of the Nair’s and other castes. The Namboothiris had both
Among the Namboothiris, only the eldest son could marry from his own caste, which alone was recognised as a genuine marriage contract and entitled the children born out of it to inherit the illam wealth. However, there was no legal provision prohibiting a junior member of a Namboothiri illam from marrying a woman of his own caste. But it was seldom done. The said custom might have originated out of their desire to conserve illam property and keep it undivided. They conceived marriage as a sacred religious rite and divorce was not permissible. The wife of Namboothiris called ‘antherjanam’ was expected to respect and obey her husband. These Namboothiri women could not be as free as their Nair counterparts. They had to remain within the four walls of illam. All the younger brothers in Namboothiri illam would enter into ‘Sambantham’ relationship with matrilineal castes.

The Nair caste belonged to the dominant group in society which provided a model for other subordinated groups. The Nairs of Kerala are different from other castes mainly because they trace their descent through the female line and they had a marriage system in which women were allowed to have several husbands simultaneously. Nair women married the higher caste Brahmins. Still in the end of the 19th century fifty six percent of all families in Travancore, a region in south Kerala, lived in a matrilineal joint family. The children born out of ‘sambantham’ belonged to their mothers and children have no tie with father. It is obvious that ‘sambantham’ had little formality, less stability and no legal or social obligation. Among the Nairs, the link between a woman and her husband was of the weakest kinds. The husband-wife relationship was not supported by familial obligation either. The institution of marriage was conceived in a loose sense in this
community. Another interesting feature of women’s life in Kerala is that they marry and enter the institution of marriage, by personal choice or by choice of the family, at later period or age compared to other parts of India (Alexander 1968).

Among the Muslims, the birth of a girl was looked upon as an unfortunate and unpleasant omen. Early marriage is the accepted custom. Marriage was entirely based on the theory of contract. They never considered marriage as a sacrament. There are prescribed norms for this contract of marriage. Polygyny was a permitted practice. Dowry system was in vogue. Divorce was common. With the spread of modern education, Polygyny vanished and ceased to be relevant and monogamy became the preferable type marriage.

All the above discussions show that marriage is a universal phenomenon. But even then there were many men and women who were not married. The attitude towards them is not similar. Society was looking towards the male unmarried person with a respectable eye. Gordon (1994) says, Single men benefit from the higher social status conferred to married men. At the same time, society’s outlook towards unmarried female is negative.

1.6 Singlehood

In ancient time, the unmarried women were severely condemned and had no place in society. Under Roman law, an unmarried woman was considered a burden. That is, ‘unmarried status’ was not positively accepted by society. An unmarried girl was under the tutelage of her father during his life, under her agnates by blood or adoption after her father’s death. Single women were never free from the dominance of male people.
In America spinsterhood came to be seen as a sexually as well as socially deviant state. The number of single women was never more than a few percent in colonial America. By 1780, the percentage began to rise and continued to rise throughout the 19th century. In the 19th century, among the American middle and upper class, single women became associated with a ‘cult of single blessedness’ and lost some of its association in colonial America with sin. Viewed more contemptuously by others than by themselves, the cult of ‘single blessedness’, was a movement among educated single women to bring dignity to their place in society. The legacy of single blessedness fostered emphasis on marriage or singlehood as a choice for women in the middle and upper classes (Adams 1976).

Recent years have brought about a great change in the life of women all over the world; influencing their attitudes, values, aspirations, ways of feeling and acting for effective participation in all walks of life. The majority of young women want to live on their own. In west, being single is far more common than is usually supposed by a society which assumes that people normally live in households of two adults and two kids.

In the 21st century, singlehood is increasingly seen as an acceptable alternative, for men and women. In one survey (Bureau of the census, US 1984), only one third of young adults agreed that ‘it is better to be married than to go through life single’, a quarter disagreed and the rest were uncertain. Reflecting these changes in attitudes, singlehood among men and women under the age of 35 has risen sharply, outpacing the growth of most other household arrangements. Now, the unmarried adults in the United States are about 50 million. Some of these singles are postponing marriage, but others will remain single through out their lives. This increase in single
Americans can be attributed to a number of social and economic trends: the postponement of marriage, the rise in the divorce rate, career break-through for women and the easing of credit discrimination against them and the growing independence of young people from their parents.

1.7 Singlehood in India

Unlike West, in India, an analysis of the position and status of single women during the Vedic times reveals that they enjoyed a high status. A girl in Vedic India waited until she could find the right partner for marriage, failing which she could even decide to remain unmarried. Further, she had a high sense of security due to her right to paternal property. Child marriage was unknown during that period. The Vedas refer to unmarried female recluses like Apala and Aitreya and some of them received co-education. Girls were regarded as good Omen. Girls were free to opt for their ways of life, to spend as unmarried girls or join the religious sages for meditation or to marry. The unmarried girls were paid high respects. The two daughters of pre-Vedic king Rishabhdev, Sundari and Brahma did not marry and took a path of high academicians ending as great philosophers of their time. The girls who opted to live unmarried took up some field of learning specially Arts and philosophy. They used to enjoy their solitude in temples or Ashrams. Thus we see that unmarried single women, enjoyed considerable status and authority during Vedic times. She was not discriminated against nor was her status lowered because she was single (Misra 1992).

During the post Vedic age the position of single women slowly began to decline. As marriage came to be considered as a goal for women, the chastity of single women was doubted and hence she came to be looked down upon. According to Manu, if the father does not give his daughter in marriage
at the proper time, he will go to hell, and it was believed that a woman who was not married would be denied heaven. The sacramental status of marriage is necessary for their salvation. Thus unmarried women were severely condemned and had no place in society. Manu supported the male’s domination and compelled women who stayed in the solitude of temple, to demonstrate their art in public, by dancing before the God and they were converted as ‘Devadasis’ and Nagarwadhus. This deteriorated further into prostitution degrading the status of women to shameful limits.

Outdoor activities were beyond the jurisdiction of Indian unmarried women. They were not allowed to participate in politics and economic affairs and social gatherings of the society. Economic dependence of single women on others has been a dominant feature of this period. This complete dependence of single women on others, in respect to economic life, was a source of exploitation of single women in the traditional Indian society. They were treated like a commodity or possession and lived under the authoritarian control of the patriarch. They did not play any role in family decision and were expected to obey their family masters. While women were constantly being victimized and exploited by society, single women were victims of a double exploitation by virtue of them being single. They lack the protection of a man and sometimes of a family and therefore, were vulnerable to exploitation economic, social, psychological and sexual levels.

With the advent of India’s independence there have been several changes in the very structure of society and consequently on patterns of marriage. The new perspectives on the marriage and family have questioned many of the assumptions of the traditional view. These approaches have not assumed the family as inevitable. The new opportunities for education and
employment, the emergence of new socio-economic patterns, and the privileges of new and equal legal and political rights to women, slowly changed the traditional concepts of the role and status of women in contemporary Indian society. In India, during the late 1960’s the women’s liberation movement began shaking the foundations of the family by attacking the role of women within it. The permissiveness of the 1960’s was seen as a threat to the institution of marriage. Statistically marriage appears to be in decline. The number of first marriages per year has gone down steadily since the 1960’s. The number of marriages is not a good guide to the popularity of marriage. The proportion of adult men who are married has dropped from 71 per cent in 1971 to 53 per cent in 2000, the proportion of adult women from 65 per cent to 52 per cent (Matheson and Babb 2002). One of the most striking changes is the increasing number of people who live on their own. The women of new generation are growing up with a belief that whatever their fate be i.e., be it remaining single, they must be partly or fully self-supporting. The emancipation changed their life style, their roles, their status and life patterns.

Jethani (1994) found out that in the last ten to twenty years, individual’s attitudes have changed from viewing marriage as a sacrament solemnized primarily for the fulfillment of one’s religious and social duties and for the welfare of the family, to believing it to be a social contract which is entered into primarily for the good of the individuals and for the personal happiness and satisfaction. Earlier there were very little percentage of women who really got any pleasure out of marriage. For them marriage was a sacrifice compromised for their life-long bread where they were victimized by one man and not by many. Today marriage has come to be perceived as an
instrument to fulfill personal needs of individuals like affection, security, social status and maintaining life itself. Not only this, the change in mate selection can also be perceived. Reaching a certain age, everybody, boy or girl wishes to get married. Failure to get the right person forces them to remain single. The number of this never-married women is increasing rapidly.

The single women who once had a sort of social security in joint families are now exposed to economic distress, social, and sexual exploitation. If spinsters, they usually find it difficult to find living accommodation. Socially, they face a lot of problems and are not accorded a place in society. Psychologically they feel insecure and experience various mental conflicts and the agony of living a life of utter loneliness. The position of single women who are economically dependent is worse. Without a job to maintain themselves financially these women are harassed by their own family members and relatives. This feeling of constant dependence often makes them miserable.

Sharma (1996) argued that in Indian context, voluntary unmarried life-style among woman is a rare phenomenon. But, compared to rural area, the rate of single women is increasing rapidly in urban centers. In the 21st century, a man or woman can opt to remain unmarried and be not only highly valuable member of society but perfectly normal as well. A woman living alone today is more acceptable than she would have been many years ago.

1.8 Singlehood in Kerala

In Kerala society, Singlehood is not a new phenomenon. From ancient times, many girls from Namboothiri families remained single. They were
restricted by endogamy. That is, they were allowed to marry only from their own caste. The eldest son in the family had the right to marry from the same caste. All other Namboothiri males were allowed to establish relation or “sambantham” from other caste people. This prevented many Namboothiri girls the chance of marriage. Keralites never overlooked them but had a sympathetic eye and respect. They were very beautiful, healthy and showed interest in various fields of art and knowledge.

The literature, novels and essays of this period indicated the typical condition of these women. They were denied access to go anywhere or to wear full dresses and were always guarded by servants. After puberty, they were not allowed to see or talk to any males, even their fathers or brothers. But Nair and other Hindu women got married and their situation was not this bad except for Horoscope and health problems. Their situation was better than the life of ‘Antherjanam’ (Gopalakrishnan 1973).

Among the Christians, especially in the catholic families existed a peculiar custom, one daughter remain single for taking the care of old parents and younger ones. These single women helped the head of the family to manage the family administration and financial matters. This culture is more or less same as the culture existed in Germany. In Germany, Watkins (1984) in his book stated that, at home unmarried single woman were engaged in household management, caring for aged parents and child minding. They also acted as surrogate wives of widowed fathers and brothers. There was a family strategy of keeping one daughter at home to ensure the well-being of the parents.

The advent of British culture brought forth changes to these situations. Christian, Nair and Namboothiri girls became very highly educated, and
entered into reputable jobs such as teaching. They dedicated themselves to their profession and remained single up to their last breadth. They enjoyed high status and position in the society. It inspired other caste girls to welcome singlehood in their life. Employment enabled women to use their potentialities to make a substantial contribution to the social and economic development of the country. The Census reports (2001) indicate that the number of never married women rate has been increasing since 1961 to 1981. Moreover, 30+ never married is also increasing. That is, between 1961 and 1981, it went from 1.70 per cent, 2.02 per cent, 2.39 per cent respectively. According to Thomas (2004) the reason behind this is the higher education of women and their freedom. But 1991 and 2001 census shows a decline in the rate of never married women.

1.9 Spinster to Singletons

The dramatic increase in the number of single women has also brought in a change, in the attitude of the society to them and as it is reflected in the terms used in connection with single women. In the middle ages the single women- spinster brought in the picture of old maid- unattractive and often unhealthy. By the 18th century, spinster became the legal term for unmarried woman and came increasingly to have negative connotation. “Spinsters” became linked to “old maid”, implying certain pejorative attributes such as narrowness of spirit (Hufton 1984). According to Hufton the term spinster began as a professional term, meaning ‘female spinner’. In western society, before industrialization took spinning and weaving out of the home, the term ‘spinsters was not a put-down; it might even have been a compliment to a women’s industriousness (Jethani 1994). With industrialization, however, “unmarried women were no longer positive economic assets to the household
Chapter 1

because there was less need for their labour in spinning, weaving and other economic tasks” (Watt 1963: 124). The old maid stereotype is related to a perception of single women as lacking something, being incomplete, deviating from the norm and the normal.

Assessment of the quality of life of spinsters in past has generally been harshly negative, despite some revision of this view in recent years. The stereotype of the spinster as an unattractive and often unhealthy female singleness among women is more typical in the west, but has increased elsewhere as well. The spinster was clearly a social anomaly. Lacking a husband- a man to support and protect her, she was usually dependent upon parents or siblings for her livelihood.

During that time, single women faced a lot of difficulties to obtain a suitable job in their life. Unmarried women mainly worked as servants in their employers’ home and in domestic production (Anderson 1984). Unmarried women were partly influential in bringing about changes. Spinsters in their philanthropic work in Britain, USA and Finland laid the foundations of the welfare state which eased the position of unmarried women. The spinster problem in Finland was solved by facilitating the employment of unmarried women, so that they would not be a liability.

Spinsters formed the backbone of feminism in the late of 19th and early 20th century. The feminist movement undoubtedly played a crucial part in bringing about changes that improved the position of women but these were not the result of feminist organization and activity alone. Broad changes in the economy and in education were crucial. Economic change drew women into work. Pilcher (1995) is of the view that educational success then
facilitates career success and successful women act as role models, which raise girls' expectations further.

Today singleness is not at all incompatible with the ideal of womanhood. The new singletons’ carefree city singles bring in a more positive picture than the old maid spinster. They believe that singlehood will provide more freedom, independence and more life satisfaction than married life. As more women remain single, the social stigma and isolation associated with spinsterhood declines, reforming singlehood, as an alternative to marriage (Chamber 1984). Stein (1976) has conceptualized the choice to be single or married as a balance between pushes and pulls towards being single. Even though, females are aware of the advantages of marriage, they somehow fail to get married either by choice or by chance. After all, they realized that marriage is not the end of life. Education and employment are interlinked with singleton and in this changing society their position is not as bad as it was before. Today a singleton of high status and position is not disrespected by society. The success of a woman is not based on her singlehood or marital status.

Many single women emphasized that their life styles had offered them pleasures and gains compared to married women with family responsibilities that required compromises. Single women have to make decisions alone and have to care for them by themselves. Single women continue to push back boundaries of individuality and to assert their own status as individuals. They try to construct a type of independence where in relative individuality becomes strength rather than a weakness. Single women in the course of their day to day lives try to balance out their need for intimacy and independence. Perhaps, modern single women in metropolitan areas are moving towards
being complete without a complement, not as isolated heroines of their own lives, but in interaction with others. They have had more space to develop their friendship networks and to explore possibilities for support and intimacy, particularly with other women. Being single has become an opportunity, not simply fate. Singleness offer possibilities, they contain tensions and contradictions.

Many modern singletons believe that the stereotype of an old maid – spinster is becoming a thing of the past. The single women have emerged as a distinct social category in rapidly changing urban India. We have a number of successful unmarried women who enjoy high status in the fields of various professions, services and social works.

Today a new and positive stereotype is applied for modern single women. A modern singleton is seen as urban, highly educated, relatively young, ambitious, single minded, determined, active and a career woman. By rejecting marriage and children she has made a conscious choice to be single. This study presents the emergence of singletons as a new global sociological phenomenon of the Twenty first century and traces the generation differentials of single women in two generations – the Spinsters and Singletons.