Chapter VII

Summary and Conclusions
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7.1 Introduction

Studies on marriage have gained enough attention in demographic research in line with the process of demographic transition. The demographic transition is envisaged to come to an end with the achievement of replacement level of fertility. But by sixties, it was realised that many countries of north-west Europe entered into a post-transitional phase with fertility well below the replacement level. Slowly it is becoming a global phenomenon with many other developed as well as developing countries joining the trend. While searching for an explanation, demographers arrive at a consensus that beyond control of marital fertility, the basic intention to get married has undergone changes. The studies indicated that emancipation of women in terms of access to higher education and better job opportunities are the prime factors governing this trend.

There are different explanations on the relationship between improvements in the achieved status of women and the changes occurring at the familial front in general and union formation in particular. The broader theoretical regime on marriage hovers around the puzzle that whether marriages are getting delayed or forgone altogether. Becker (1973) argued on the basis of “female independence hypothesis” that economically independent women would be reluctant to marry whereas according to Oppenheimer (1988) economically independent women would not buy out marriage, rather they would delay the marriage in pursuit of marrying assortatively. Raymo (2005) has brought mismatches in the marriage market as an important reason behind non-marriage and delayed marriage among highly educated females, given the cultural
context of hypergamic marriages for females. Pathways to describe changes in the marriage patterns are different depending on the cultural environment in general and gender relations, an integral facet of union formation, in particular. Hence, it is not possible make a generalised theory of marriage, given the intricate nature of the event.

Given its potential link with fertility in most cultural settings, marriage timing and issues related to union formation are important areas in demographic research. This is especially true for the broader Asian context where it is difficult to separate child bearing from marriage. Hence, in the era of global fertility decline, it is quite possible that the role of marriage also has undergone changes. The control of marital fertility has always been highlighted as the major contributory factor behind fertility transition in countries like India. However, its contribution in the context of rapid demographic and social changes needs more careful scrutiny. In many countries, marriage pattern or formation of unions decided the pace and direction of fertility transition beyond replacement level. Besides, marriage timing has bearings on women’s health and their status in the family. Hence, marriage serves as the point of initiation for numerous other issues; whether social, economic, cultural or health. These fundamental links make marriage an important area of research in many disciplines. This study has adopted a demographic perspective to look into the phenomenon of marriage in India.

Although in the broader Asian context marriages are undergoing sea changes, studies observed no significant change in the Indian marriage pattern as far as the aggregate measures mean and median ages at marriage are concerned. However, the wide regional variations and huge rural-urban differentials in most of the demographic parameters call for in-depth understanding of the Indian marriage pattern. Given the above context, the present study is an attempt to explore the various dimension of marriage in the Indian subcontinent with the following specific objectives.
7.2 Objectives

1. To examine the temporal change in the pattern of marriage in India

2. To identify the factors responsible for changes in marriage patterns in India

3. To explore the implications of marriage pattern on different aspects of gender relations

4. To examine the impact of change in marriage on fertility decline in India

7.3 Data and Methodology

Required data for this work is taken mainly from two sources. Census data from 1971 to 2001 have been compiled for relevant analyses. Keeping in mind the limitations of the census data, data from all three rounds of National Family Health Survey – NFHS (1992-93, 1998-99, 2005-06) have been used. Besides the aggregate indicators such as mean and median age at marriage for the female population, percentages of never married females in three prime age groups (15-19, 20-24, 25-29) have also been considered while analysing the data.

To provide a broad overview, census data have been analysed across the available classification of data. Moreover, National Family Health Survey data have also been used to describe the emerging trends in the Indian marriages, mainly with regard to the timing of marriage across different social groups and across major Indian states over one and a half decade between 1992-93 and 2005-06. Measures like Coale’s nuptiality parameters are used to understand nuptiality transition in the major states of India across different stages. Determinants of changing pattern of marriage have been identified both at the individual and at the district level. The individual level analysis has given an understanding on the pattern of delayed marriage in India. At the district level,
linking the census data from 1991 and 2001 as a panel, predictors of district level mean age at marriage have been identified employing the random effect model.

In the face of global fertility decline, the study also estimated the contribution of nuptiality changes on the fertility decline for the major states in India. The change in total fertility rate between 1992-93 and 2005-06 has been decomposed using proportional decomposition method developed by Kitagawa (1955) and then modified by Retherford and Cho (1981). For the purpose of this analysis, the compositional changes in place of residence and education of females have also been included. Last of all, given the forthcoming gender imbalance in the Indian marriage market, a synthesis of available evidence has been done in order to bring out issues that may arise related to union formation in the near future, mainly from a gender perspective.

7.4 Key Findings

7.4.1 Trends in Marriage Pattern

Analysis of census data reveals that mean and median ages at marriage have increased only marginally by one year between 1971 and 2001. Females belonging to Hindu and Muslim religion are more likely to marry at younger ages whereas Christian females have a tendency to delay marriage. Analysis of mean age at marriage for different social classes also gives the idea that the mean age at marriage has increased almost by the same magnitude for all women, irrespective of their affiliation to any religious group. Similar trend has been observed with regard to their place of residence as well. Hence, the differences in the levels of mean age at marriage, as observed in 2001, are by and large, because of the differences in the initial levels in 1971.
Cross-classification of females in different cohorts on the basis of duration of marriage reveals concentration of marriages at higher ages. It spells out that the phenomenon of marrying at relatively higher ages is already taking place among younger females. This is becoming prominent in the younger cohorts for example, females who married between 1992 and 2001. The same cohort based analysis across different educational groups of females reveals that, educational attainment of females up to a certain level, at least up to primary education is necessary to experience some changes in marriage timing.

Using data from various rounds of NFHS, the stages of nuptiality transitions in terms of Coale’s nuptiality parameters \((a_0, K)\) has been summarised for the major Indian states. It has been observed from the findings that in majority of the Indian states, the age at which marriage starts \((a_0)\) has increased at a slow pace between 1992-93 and 2005-06. But the spread of marriage towards later ages \((K)\) has been achieved at a steady pace, even when there is not much increment in the age at which marriage starts in a particular state. States like Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Odisha and Tamil Nadu have achieved a better spread of marriages at later ages in the recent period along with some improvement in the \(a_0\) value. On the other hand, states like Assam, West Bengal and Karnataka have achieved a better spread of marriage without much improvement in the \(a_0\) value. Even though Kerala’s progress has been quite satisfactory as early as in 1992-93, subsequently there is stagnation in the entire transitional process. Conversely, Assam also exhibited a unique pattern reflecting changes in the marital structure in the latter end of the nuptiality schedule. As a whole, it appears that nuptiality transition may not proceed at a rapid pace in India owing to the sticky nature of the parameters of marriage in the Indian society.
7.4.2 Determinants of marriage change in India

Findings of logistic regression analyses at the individual level and random effect model at the district level indicate that besides female literacy rate, regional factors also have impact in determining the timing of marriage. District level analysis reveals that compared to the districts in the northern region, those in the central region exhibit significantly lower levels of mean age at marriage. The districts in the southern region reveal higher mean age at marriage compared to their counterparts in the northern region whereas districts in eastern and western region are not significantly different from those in the northern region as far as the district level mean age at marriage is concerned.

On the other hand, examining the state coefficients in the logistic regression analyses, it is found that after controlling for educational attainment of females, there is no statistically significant difference between women of Bihar and their counterparts in Kerala for the 20-24 age group. But the chances of remaining unmarried for females in 25-29 age group is significantly lower for women in Bihar compared to women in Kerala. This indicates that the reasons for delaying marriage may differ for women belonging to the age groups 20-24 and 25-29 in different context.

Moreover, findings also indicate that, everything else held constant, the apparent disadvantages of the demographically backward states with regard to marriage timing may disappear, at least for 20-24 age group. Hence timing of marriage in India is no longer governed entirely by cultural practices at least for the 20-24 age group. The importance of cultural parameters may become more visible in deciding the timing of marriage for females in the older cohort.
7.4.3 Role of marriage in fertility decline in India

Compositional changes on marital status has contributed fairly towards declining fertility in many Indian states even after controlling for compositional changes on place of residence and educational attainment of females. However, the changing composition of marital status is mainly due to delayed marriages. Both compositional changes on place of residence and educational attainment have influenced in determining the pace of transition, the latter having a major effect. Even though for some states the age-residence-education-marital status specific birth rates tended to increase the TFR, it is quite logical in the face of distributional changes in favour of women with higher education. Age at marriage is relatively higher for females with more years of education. However, they usually bear children soon after marriage. In this way, educated females contribute towards increasing marital fertility when the overall fertility is falling. Last but not the least, like Western countries which have completed fertility transition and also the countries in the broader Asian context, attitudinal changes regarding marriage and fertility, may be through a different route, can also be envisaged in the Indian society.

7.4.4 Gender relations and future of union formation in India

An attempt has been made to explore the gender dimensions of the process of union formation in India linking the current demographic outcomes with possible future scenarios. In order to substantiate the arguments two cultural parameters, namely, son preference and hypergamy which have direct links, from the supply and demand sides respectively, with the marriage market have been considered. The major issue what could be foreseen for the Indian marriage market is the feasibility of formation of unions. The ongoing process of rapid fertility decline and extreme son preference in
India are making each forthcoming cohort smaller than the previous one in terms of availability of brides. The long term impacts of these combined forces are the severely distorted sex ratios and eventually acute shortage of brides in the Indian marriage market. Too many males in the marriage market will result in delayed marriage especially among males, increase in average spousal age gap, changes in family structure, increasing demand for women’s role as care givers and probably reduction in dowry demands.

Shortage of brides will be affecting the lower stratum of the male population as they lack enough social and financial capital to attract brides. Hence they are more prone to remain unmarried in the changed demographic regime. This may act as a strong destabilising factor resulting in social conflicts.

In India, the tendency of sex discrimination is more prominent in the upper layer of the society, that is, among those with comparatively better educated and better standard of living. Even in the states which are relatively richer extreme discrimination against girls is more evident. Given this nature of sex-discrimination, majority of the future pool of brides will come from the lower stratum of the society whereas boys will hail from the upper layer. Hence, maintaining hypergamic marriage system seems to have become easier as there will be more options for each girl. But the feasibility of unions will depend upon how far these class differentials can be compromised. Moreover, if unions are formed with wide class differentials, in such unions much improvement of the status of women cannot be expected even if they are scarce in supply. Nevertheless, inter-state, inter-caste marriage may become more prominent in the Indian society. Lastly, following the pattern of sex-ratio in major Indian states, one more regional divide in terms of bride-givers (Kerala to West Bengal and North-eastern states) and bride-takers (north-western states) can be expected.
7.5 Conclusions

The process of historical demographic transition and then the idea of second demographic transition have brought marriage to the centre stage of demographic research mainly because of its direct link with family formation and fertility. Throughout the world, following replacement level of fertility, marriage patterns are experiencing changes resulting in wide alterations in the family structure. However, unlike the developed countries or some developing Asian settings, in India so far marriage as an institution does not seem to be under threat. Majority of the females marry eventually and living single is apparently uncommon. Yet, the undercurrent changes in the parameters of marriage cannot be ignored.

Moreover, in India, fertility decline has reached a stage where it is necessary to look beyond the adoption of contraceptive methods as explanatory factors. Since both marriages without children as well as children outside wedlock are uncommon in the Indian society, change in patterns of marriage is the next potential factor to influence the future of demographic trends. In this backdrop the present work has been attempted.

The major conclusions emerging from the study are:

- Indian states have been experiencing rapid fertility transition for last three decades. Rapid fertility transition started in the southern states in the eighties and now these states have a fertility rate between 1.8 and 2.0. Despite these, changes in marriage pattern are not very drastic in India. Temporal changes in Indian marriage pattern for the period 1971-2001 reveals that the age at marriage increased only marginally. This pattern of rapid fertility transition coupled with slower changes in marriage patterns does not match with the experience of the many developed countries as well as many Asian countries.
that entered a post transitional phase with the achievement of below replacement level of fertility followed by increasing age at marriage. It gives an impression that Indian society is unlikely to follow the transitional pattern of drastic changes in the institutions of marriage and family following replacement level of fertility as observed in the case of developed countries. Rather, the strong sense of “familism” may govern Indian society to take a different route suiting its cultural context.

- The slow increase in mean age at marriage has also been observed for females across different socio-religious groups in the Indian society. Even though, as per 2001 census, the levels of mean age at marriage are different for females in major religious groups, the change in mean age at marriage between 1971 and 2001 are almost same for females in all major religious groups. This trend implies that in order to achieve a universal higher age at marriage, differential attention is required towards backward groups so that they can move at a faster pace.

- Theories of marriage, evolved in different settings, have identified spread of education as one of the major catalysts influencing changes in marriage patterns. This study also reinforces the role of education in determining the timing of marriage for Indian females. It has also been found that compositional changes in favour of educated women have contributed significantly towards the decline of fertility between 1992-93 and 2005-06. However, in order to experience any change in marriage timing, educational attainment of females needs to cross the threshold level of primary education. Hence, it can be asserted that spread of female education beyond primary level may accelerate nuptiality transition in India.
• Even though overall changes in marriage patterns are not dramatic in nature in India, proportion of never married females are increasing almost steadily at the aggregate level. This is likely to influence the pace of fertility transition. It has also been found that compositional changes in marital status have contributed fairly in the change in total fertility rate between 1992-93 and 2005-06 for the major Indian states. This leads towards the conclusion that the contribution of changing patterns of marriages is becoming more and more visible in the entire process of fertility decline. However, the changing composition of marital status is mainly governed by a movement towards marrying at later ages as marriage is still continued to be a major institution in India.

• Regional factors are believed to shape the demographic outcomes in the Indian context. These factors are likely to influence the demographic outcomes including the timing of marriage through the cultural forces which are different across regions. This study also underlines that regional factors have contributed significantly in determining the age at marriage at the district level in India. However, while determining the timing of marriage at the individual level, regional factors are not so prominent for females in the 20-24 age group. But for females in the 25-29 age group, regional factors revealed a clear contribution in determining the timing of marriage. It paves the way to conclude that marriage timing of females in India are not governed entirely by cultural practices in the younger cohorts. It is found that once factor like educational attainment is controlled, the apparent disadvantages for the females in the backward states may disappear at least for the younger age group. However,
cultural factors have not become redundant altogether; perhaps its role is more prominent among females in older cohorts.

- Fertility transition along with son preference and prenatal sex discrimination have resulted in diminishing cohorts of girls in the Indian society. Hence, in the long term perspective, formation of unions is going to be a serious challenge as there will be absolute shortage of brides. This demographic phenomenon is likely to make several changes in the institutions of marriage and family. However its impact on the overall gender relations in the Indian society is not very clear so far. Shortage of females may bring about some positive changes in the institutions of marriage and family by relaxing the norms of inter-caste and inter-state marriages or by reduction in the amount of dowry demanded. But shortage of brides, combined with hypergamic marriage systems in the Indian society may not allow such changes to occur at the upper layer of the society. Men belonging to the lower stratum of the society, who will be the worst hit of this demographic outcome, are likely to adopt these strategies to attract brides from other regions.

- Given the nature of sex discrimination in India, a scenario may emerge, particularly in the states with high gender discrimination, where boys will be available more in the upper segment of the society, that is, in families with better financial and social capital at their disposal. Also, with the intensification of sex bias coupled with declining fertility in the Indian society, boys will be available more in smaller families. Hence there may arise an absolute disparity in the “quality” aspects of boys and girls as well as in the status of their families. This
phenomenon could lead to a perpetuation of “female underclass” in the Indian society. In such circumstances, union formation would be possible only with wide class differentials. In such unions, chances for improved status of women are likely to be very limited even if they have the demographic advantage of being fewer in numbers.

7.6 Directions for further research

This study aimed to present a broad understanding of the marriage scenario in India. For this purpose data mainly from two different sources have been used: decennial census by Registrar General of India and various rounds of Demographic Health Survey (NFHS). Given the structure of the above mentioned data, there are certain research issues which could not be addressed in the present study. Those, however, may be considered for future research projects.

- Union formation of females depend not only on the characteristics of never married females, but also on the characteristics (such as income, job security, level of education, etc) of never married males, who form the pool of potential husbands. But such data for never married males is not available in NFHS as it covers only female of 15-49 age group.
- In deciding the formation of unions local marriage market has certain roles to play. But the present study does not consider this aspect owing to lack of operational definition of local marriage market. Even though there are some studies available in the developed context, demographic research is rare in the Indian context
- Impact of exogenous factors such as sudden economic changes, sudden increase in preference for a particular group of bridegrooms, etc (for example, IT
professionals or NRIs) could not be captured. Exploring the impact of such factors through primary evidence can bring about interesting insights.

- Attitude towards formation of union is governing the marriage trends in many societies. Data from current sources can at the most identify the segment of the population who are postponing their marriage. But to understand the reasons behind postponing marriage such as whether the postponement is voluntary or forced; or whether the aversion is somehow conditioned by the existing gender roles and responsibilities, it is necessary to have enough primary information on these aspects.