Chapter I

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1.1 Introduction

Marriage, in most societies is considered to be one pivotal life event for both men and women, setting in motion a variety of other life changes, including formation of new family or new part of an extended family. Because of the huge impact of marriage on the lives of women in particular, researchers and policymakers have increasingly sought to consider marriage through a human right framework, especially with regard to issues related to age at marriage. For example, Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), a declaration adopted by United Nations General Assembly in 1948 at Paris, states that “marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses”, and that “men and women of full age are entitled to equal rights as to marriage”. Correspondingly, as cited in Jensen and Thornton (2003), the United Nations’ 1962 convention on the “Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration and an Associated Recommendation” calls on member states to establish a minimum age of marriage of no less than 15 years. Later, following the 1979 and 1990 conventions, the same has been raised up to 18 years.

Marriage has a strong bearing on different aspects of human life. Despite being an individual level phenomenon, its effect can be realised both at the familial and societal levels. At the societal level, the parameters such as marriage timing, proportion of ever married as well as the proportion of arranged marriages may hint towards the pace of social transition that a particular society is passing through. It has been stressed by the modernisation argument that with urbanisation, westernisation and accompanying
changes in the society, the basic intention to get married will experience a change. It will become a more individualistic process, to be entered into, for love and self-fulfilment rather than for traditional family concerns. The spread of education and employment serve as a strong impetus to this independence, especially in terms of better and more equal options for women. The substantial gains made by young women in the fronts of education and employment are thought to be reflected in more egalitarian and conjugal oriented marriages (Malhotra, 1996). Hence, the attitude towards marriage acts as an indicator of social development.

Moreover, changes in nuptiality pattern can trigger important changes in family structures and in the style of family life. In most of the developed countries, the trend of “less marriages and late marriages” as well as the increasing divorce rates have made the life cycle transitions less strictly patterned and more intricate. In the developed setting, there is an observable decline in categories of more traditional households consisting of married couple and their unmarried children. It has been replaced by plethora of different living arrangements. One parent families, mostly headed by women, are increasing and one person households and reconstructed families become more visible. Hence the notion of nuclear family has changed and following the changes in nuptiality pattern one family has been giving birth to several families. It is because of this reason some authors are speaking about the “death of the family and birth of the families” (Pairo, 1997).

The relationship of marriage to sexual exposure and the differences in the reproductive behaviour of those who marry at different ages are the two major issues that prompted researchers, especially demographers to study the patterns and trends in age at marriage and fertility under varied settings. Women who marry young are exposed to the risk of conceptions throughout the most fecund years of their lives and thus influence the
fertility to be higher (Karkal and Rajan, 1989). Malthus in the presentation of his thesis on population has stated delay in marriage as a major preventive check on the growth of population. Freedman (1963) also viewed delayed marriage as one of the fertility control measures. Matras (1965) also highlighted age at marriage and control of marital fertility as two engaging facets of family formation that influence the number of children ever born. Even in populations in which marital fertility is modestly controlled, marriage patterns still play a dominant role in governing fertility levels (Trussel, 1980).

In most of the countries fertility is predominantly confined to marriage and marriage itself signals the beginning of exposure to the risk of pregnancy. Hence the timing of marriage has some bearing on women’s health as well as on survival of the child. Early exposure to marriage and pregnancy may become fatal for both the mother and child. Nevertheless, it has been widely felt that if women marry two or three years after menarche, she might be probably more fecund as her reproductive power would not be impaired by early damage (Caldwell et al., 1983). These issues demand undivided attention of not only researchers but also of the policy makers to decide appropriate policy prescriptions.

It has been long recognized that marriage is one of the key institutional sites for production and reproduction of gender relations (Desai, 2010). But demographic literature on marriage patterns in developing countries has rarely explored this insight. However, demographic research has made successful efforts in research on nuptiality in societies where decisions on the parameters of marriage such as age at marriage, type of union and stability of union are made by individuals. For example, research in the United States and Europe on ways in which men and women negotiate deeply on personal decisions about marital formation and dissolution have yielded some interesting results as well as debates (Oppenheimer, 1997; Ruggles, 1997). However,
in societies where marital decisions are not made by individuals but by corporate families, demographic research has faced greater difficulties. In such societies, choice of eligible partner and marriage timing have been subsumed under research on the political economy of the family (Fricke et al., 1986; Thornton and Fricke, 1987).

Hence there are many facets of marriage. Basically it serves as the point of initiation for many other researchable issues. Here lies the importance of studying marriage as an independent topic of interest in its own right. To explore more into it, the phenomenon of marriage has attracted a wide range of scholars, notably Sociologists, Anthropologists, Demographers, Economists and Psychologists. Like any other social phenomenon, marriage can also be studied from a variety of research perspectives. Once the phenomenon is acceptably defined, it can be examined descriptively and analytically, at the individual level or at the aggregate level. Such diverse research approaches are both legitimate and necessary to obtain sheer insight into a complicated social phenomenon, called marriage.

The present work has adopted a demographic outlook to describe the phenomenon of marriage change in India. The entire thesis can broadly be classified into two parts. The first part aims to describe the process of marriage change in India and in its major states. The second part examines the consequences of changing demographic circumstances in combination with marriage on declining fertility and future marriage market. While discussing the consequences, the broader perspective of gender relations has been kept as backdrop.

1.2 Interrelationship between Marriage and Fertility

There is a close relationship between timing of marriage and fertility. Marriage pattern gained importance in demographic research, especially in the developed countries, in
the post transitional phase when fertility started to decline within marital union and a clear postponement of parenthood was observed. In countries where the historical Demographic Transition has come to an end with the achievement of replacement level fertility, a drastic pattern of household formation and reproduction has been experienced. Starting in the 1960s, in most of the countries of north-west Europe, the age at first marriage rose, pre and post marital cohabitation increased, and procreation in such informal unions soon followed (Surkyn and Leastheghe, 2004). Also, there was a clear postponement of marriage and childbearing which progressed up to the point where fertility has fallen below the replacement level to explain which a new term, “lowest-low fertility” has been coined. In order to differentiate this phase of transition from the earlier one, a new terminology “Second Demographic Transition” (SDT) came into existence (van de Kaa, 1987).

SDT became prominent when the most predicted outcomes of the first or the “historical” demographic transition in the West did not materialize as envisaged to a new stable demographic regime characterized by fertility around replacement level, early and universal marriage, a dominance of the nuclear family consisting of a married couple with children born in wedlock and based on asymmetric gender roles but on strong emotional conjugality (Leastheghe and Surkyn, 1988). Instead, a plethora of different living arrangements other than classic marriage emerged as legitimate alternatives, ranging from single living, prolonged pre-marital cohabitation, parenthood within cohabitation, single sex household formation, post-marital cohabitation or Living Apart Together (LAT)-relations replacing post-divorce and post-widowhood remarriage. In this new demographic regime not only marriage pattern but also the notions of marriage, child-bearing and child-rearing have undergone several changes. The question which most of the high income developed nations are facing now is not
when to marry, rather, whether to marry at all. The steady decline in marriage rates in the industrialized countries has sparked vigorous debates among social scientists over whether people are retreating from marriage altogether or simply postponing their marriages to older ages (Goldstein, 2001). An evaluation of the cumulative marriage levels of various birth cohorts of Asian Chinese women shows that hardly anyone marry before their twentieth birthday and ever diminishing proportion to do so before their twenty fifth and thirtieth birthdays (Leete, 1994).

Following the fertility transition process, below replacement fertility over the past few decades is gradually becoming a global phenomenon in population dynamics as well as a matter of genuine concern for the international community (Bongaarts, 2001, 2002; Caldwell et al., 2003; Hirschman, et al., 1990; Jones, 2007). Although the majority of these low-fertility countries are in the developed regions, the share of developing regions has also increased substantially during the past three decades. During 1970-75, the number of countries with below replacement fertility was only 19. But by 2000-05, the number has increased to 65 of which 19 were developing countries (Matusukara et al., 2007).

While population scientists all over the world took effort to find an explanation to this phenomenon, they came to a consensus that marriage and family are increasingly at risk in many cultures and one major factor contributing to that is the emancipation of women which has improved their power of negotiation in all spheres of life. However, while discussing the current transitional pattern, most of the times the role of marriage in declining fertility has been understated. Emphasis is laid always more on the marital fertility; perhaps streaming from the family planning movement. However, after a certain stage, use of family planning may reach to a saturation point and will not be in a position to explain the further decline in fertility. For example, in India, the state of
Kerala has completed its fertility transition by early nineties. Typically, up to this point, the use of family planning methods largely explain the extent of decline. But when fertility declines further, there is scope of some attitudinal changes of the persons concerned. At this stage, attitude towards marriage, divorce and remarriage as well as proportion married will decide the future trend of fertility transition. This is the case with almost all the developed countries as well as some developing countries in east and south-east Asia.

It has been increasingly realized by the mid-1980s that several countries in East and South-east Asia had not only completed their First Demographic Transition at an unprecedented speed, but also had entered into a post transitional phase with rising age at marriage (almost over 25 for women at their first marriage) as one of the distinctive features (Leete, 1994). The influence of changing social norms, new patterns of lifestyle, economic constraints and alternative concepts of personal freedom in the choice of partners are some of the factors that are tending to erode the erstwhile integrity and stability of marriage and family. In India, these two institutions have always been upheld as firm foundations of fulfilment and happiness not only for the individual concerned but also for the other members of the family, the neighbourhood and the local community. Even though the frequency and the number of divorces and cases of break up are comparatively low in India, the subtle changes in all the parameters related to marriage cannot be ignored.

1.3 Theoretical context

The broader theoretical regime on marriage hovers around the puzzle whether marriages are getting delayed or forgone altogether. Most of the theories of marriage are meant for answering either or both the questions regarding when to marry and whom
to marry. There are different schools of thought which have tried to explain the phenomenon in the best possible logical frameworks. To provide a snapshot of the broader theoretical regime on marriage (detailed discussion on theories of marriage given in Chapter Two) it would be good to start with the economic argument of Gary Becker. Becker (1973) who argued on the basis of “female independence hypothesis” which emphasizes that the major benefit of marriage lies in the mutual dependency of both partners which arises from the gendered division of labour between spouses. According to Becker, the tendency for men to specialize in market work and for women to concentrate on household activities makes marriage desirable because the trading of different skills is beneficial to both partners. But with the process of development, however, rising levels of female education and improved labour force participation reduce sex specialization and make women less dependent on men. As a result, women’s economic gains from marriage decrease, rendering it less desirable. On the contrary, Oppenheimer argued that economically independent women would not buy out marriage rather they would delay the marriage in pursuit of marrying assortatively (Oppenheimer, 1988). Raymo (2005) has brought another aspect of mismatches in the marriage market as an important factor behind non-marriage and delayed marriage among highly educated females. Women generally prefer men of higher socio-economic status than themselves for marriage which is known as female status hypergamy. With convergence in the educational attainment of men and women, the relative pool of attractive partners for highly educated women decreases leading to non-marriage and delayed marriage among them. The major similarity of all the theories of marriage is that all of these are trying to address the broader theme from the gender viewpoint and further rendering an indication to move towards more egalitarian marriages with the process of development.
1.4 The Indian Context

Traditionally, in India, the value system around marriage has been more religious and spiritual providing limited scope for the gratification of personal aspirations of the individual. Marriage was believed to be a sacred duty towards the family and the community and there was no recognition of personal factors, aspirations and interests of the individuals concerned. Among the Hindus, marriage is traditionally a religious ceremony. It is more of a sacred duty rather than a matter of personal convenience. (Goyal, 1988).

Age at marriage has been increasing slowly in India either due to legal interventions or personal factors or both. A consistent increasing trend is observed in both mean and median age at marriage over cohorts born since 1916 for males and cohorts born since 1921 for females (Goyal, 1988). According to the recent National Family Health Survey (2005-06), the median age at first marriage is 17.2 years among women aged 20-49 and 23 years for men in the same age range. Even though increases in the median age at first marriage are proceeding at a very slow pace, wide regional variation and rural-urban differentials in the pattern of age at marriage clearly suggests that there is ample scope for in-depth study of the marriage pattern in the Indian subcontinent. Moreover, the rapid fertility transition in the Indian states, during the last three decades also calls for an in-depth understanding of the marriage patterns in India.

Timing of marriage has remained an important research issue for the demographers in India as well. Since considerable proportion of marriages in India take place at ages close to start of reproductive age of women, raising age at marriage has been viewed as one of the relatively few important policy interventions “beyond family planning” that might affect fertility. To date, there have been several quantitative studies of age at
marriage in India. Most notable are those of Agarwala (1962, 1972), Basavarajappa et al., (1967) and Malaker (1972, 1973, 1975). Unfortunately, all of these research efforts have been hampered by the variety of Indian marriage customs, paucity of data, age misreporting and recent changes in marriage patterns.

Indian marriage customs vary widely by religion, caste and geographic locations. Also, marriage is traditionally a two stage process in which marriage ceremony and cohabitation are separated by a considerable time interval. Length varies according to the age of the bride. Hence to study the impact of timing of marriage on fertility, researchers actually requires the information on “effective marriage”, that is, the age at first cohabitation. It involves a sort of conceptual dilemma. On the other hand age misreporting is another factor that complicates research on age at marriage. The extent of misreporting is probably magnified by the existing legislation that places a lower limit of 18 for women and 21 for men. Demographers usually rely on decennial census data for information on age at marriage. But such data are plagued with the problem of incompatibility. Finally there is growing evidence that the mean age at marriage is rising and there is increasing dispersion in the age at marriage. Unfortunately the usual measures such as the period marriage rate and the period mean age at marriage are not adequate enough to reflect the magnitude and nature of recent changes in the cohort marriage patterns. Sample surveys are believed to be relatively better as far as the age data is concerned.

Another facet of research on marriage in India is to examine how far the theoretical models of marriage can explain the marriage pattern in India. In India, over the past few decades, women’s access to education and gainful employment has increased. However, following the female independence argument, the incidence of marriage has not gone down substantially. Also, the incidents of marital dissolution have not
increased considerably. Hence it can be safely asserted that in the Indian context we may not get much evidence in support of this hypothesis. Moreover, there are certain paradoxes which can catch the attention of the researchers. For example, Kerala, which is has one of the highest literacy rate in India, is one among the states with lowest workforce participation rates for female. However, marriage is universal in Kerala, albeit at a relatively higher age compared to the other Indian states. Barring the reason that there are not enough opportunities keeping pace with the number of seeking work, what is interesting is that the socio-cultural factors and beliefs shape women’s job preferences. The higher number of years women spend largely in the general education, is still today rationalized as being in the interest of the family as it could foster more effective child care, health and education even though it may not result in gainful employment. Unlike men, full time domesticity is not regarded as ‘unnatural’ in a state having the highest proportion of highly educated women (Eapen, 2004). Under such circumstances, if there is any change in the timing of marriage, it really needs a closer and fresh look, going beyond the existing theoretical models.

Last but not the least, marriage and fertility are intricately related and it is difficult to separate child bearing from marriage in the Indian context. Fertility is clearly on the way down for all major Indian states. There are some states in India which have already completed the transition process by the achievement of fertility at the replacement level or at the tail end of the process. Hence, given the rapid fertility decline in majority of the Indian states, it is quite obvious that marriage patterns will surely have a role to play. Even though control of marital fertility, mainly through permanent method of female sterilization has always been highlighted as the major contributory factor behind Indian fertility transition, it reaches a point of saturation sooner or later. In the Indian context, now it is high time to look beyond the use of family planning methods in order
to unfold the other dimensions of fertility decline. In this direction, marriage will be the next important factor having enough potential to reduce fertility.

With this backdrop, the present study is an attempt to examine the various nooks of marriage in the Indian subcontinent with the specific objectives outlined in the next subsection

1.5 Objectives:

In the light of the foregone discussion, the broad objectives of the study are summarised as follows:

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

1.6 Data and Method

Data for accomplishing the above mentioned objectives has been taken mainly from two sources viz. decennial census data from 1971 onwards and three rounds of National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data (1992-93, 1998-99 and 2005-06). In Census data district is the lowest level at which spatially disaggregated information on different parameters are available whereas NFHS provides the estimate only at the state level.

In order to describe the changing pattern of marriage across the globe an extensive review of relevant theories of marriage has been done. This has provided the required
platform to build the analytical framework of the thesis. As mentioned earlier, that the thesis has two distinct parts describing the process and consequences of the marriage patterns in the Indian context. While describing the process of marriage change in India, a broad overview has been presented from the census data mainly on the basis of indicators like mean and median age at marriage for the female population. Besides these aggregate indicators, trends in percentage of never married females in three prime age groups of 15-19, 20-24 and 25-29 across various social groups has also been examined in order to describe the pattern of marriage change in India.

Given the limitations of the aggregate measures of marriage timing percentage of never married females in different age is considered as the superior indicator to describe the current changes in the marriage pattern. But unlike 2001 census, in the previous censuses never married female population has not been cross classified across different social groups. Hence using census data an extensive analysis of never married females in India could not be done. Use of survey data, however, could address this limitation. Trends in never married female population have been analysed at great length using survey data for the period 1992-93 to 2005-06. Thus the emerging trends in the Indian marriages, mainly with regard to the timing of marriage has been provided across different social groups and across major Indian states over a time period of almost three decades. Nevertheless, using Coale’s nuptiality parameters, a discussion is made on different stages of nuptiality transition for the period 1992-93 to 2005-06 in the major states of India.

With this backdrop, the next step to describe the changing process of marriage in India involves identification of the determinants of marriage change in India. Marriage is not only a personal but also a family as well as a social matter in India. Hence identifying the determinants at the individual level may not provide a holistic picture. Hence using
Random Effect Model, the determinants of mean age at marriage has been identified at the district level combining the data of Census 1991 and 2001 at the district level. Along with different socio-economic predictors at the district level, the model includes regional dummies as well. Moreover, using data from the last round (2005-06) of the NFHS, an attempt has also been made to identify the predictors of delayed marriage at the individual level separately for females in 20-24 and 25-29 age group. Along with the individual and household level characteristics, the control variables include state dummies as well.

In order to describe the consequences of changing marriage pattern, the study focused on two major aspects; the first one being estimation of the contribution of nuptiality changes on fertility decline and the second one is the consequences on the gender relations in the future marriage market. To estimate the contribution of nuptiality on declining fertility, the change in total fertility rate between 1992-93 and 2005-06 has been decomposed. Proportional decomposition method developed by Kitagawa (1955) and then modified by Retherford and Cho (1981) has been used for this purpose. In this model the compositional changes in place of residence as well as the compositional changes in the educational attainments of females have also been controlled in order to have a better understanding of the entire process of fertility decline in the major states of India.

In the last section, an exploration is made to gauge the gender relations in future, given the forthcoming demographic imbalance in the Indian marriage market. Based on an extensive desk review, the available evidences have been synthesized in order to build the future scenarios. However, the chapter is narrative and speculative in nature as the data to support these arguments are rare.
This section provides a snapshot of different methodologies adopted in the study to accomplish the objectives outlined in section 1.5 of this chapter. However a detailed discussion on each methodology has been provided in the respective chapters.

1.7 Organization of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter is introductory in nature and gives the broader context of changing patterns of marriage and family across the globe, both in the context of developed and developing countries. The specific objectives of the work as well as the data and method used in order to accomplish the objectives have also been outlined in this chapter. The second chapter presents the theoretical aspects of marriage developed from time to time under varied social circumstances and highlights the theoretical debates as well. The third chapter discusses the trends in marriage patterns in India. This chapter also provides an idea on the stages of nuptiality transition in the major states of India. In the fourth chapter, the determinants of marriage change in India are explored at the individual and at the district level. Given the ongoing process of fertility decline in the Indian states, the fifth chapter is dedicated to estimate the contribution of changing marriage patterns on fertility decline. The attempt of the sixth chapter is to link the present demographic scenarios with future marriage market keeping in mind the existing gender relations in the Indian society. Chapter seven summarises the thesis and discusses major conclusions as well as areas for further research in this direction.