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## Marriage and Family Experience of Northeast India

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**Abstract:** Man is a gregarious animal; in other words man lives in social groupings. Understanding man and society implies appreciating and understanding the very nature of man and the structural organization of human society. This very nature of man not wanting to live in isolation but instead in association with fellow humans necessitated the need for man to create the institutions of the family and marriage, through which every individual in the social group develops an identity and a distinctive origin. Being one of the matriarchal tribes of the world here the woman's side offers the marriage and the houses bear the name of a woman instead of a man and they consider their descent through the female line. Though they have their age old cultural beliefs and practices for marriage, due to some external factors there seem to be a transition in their marriage system.

**Keywords:** Marriage, family, social groupings, matriarchal tribes

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### INTRODUCTION

The family in India is often understood as an ideal homogenous unit with strong coping mechanisms. It is a basic, cohesive, and integral unit of the larger social systems. More-over, families in a large and culturally diverse country such as India have plurality of forms that vary with class, ethnicity, and individual choices. Its members are bound by interpersonal relationships in a wider network of role and social relations. It is considered a link between community and change [1]. The family is the basic and important unit of society because of the role it plays in generation of human capital resources and the power that is vested in it to influence individual, household, and community behavior [2]. It is, therefore, a basic unit of study in most social sciences disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, economics, anthropology, social psychiatry, social work or human development.

Families in India are undergoing vast changes like increasing divorce and separation rates, domestic violence, inter-generational conflicts, social problems of drug abuse, juvenile delinquency etc. These changes indicate the inability to cope with the pressures of the modern life. Yet, the majority seem to have survived and are able to modify, adjust and adapt to changing social norms, values and structures, and have demonstrated a unique strength in keeping together despite the growing stress and strain. Marriage is one of the most important proximate determinants of fertility. In a country like India where celibacy is not practiced, pre-marital and extra-marital relations are illegal and childbearing outside the marital union is virtually non-existent. The age at marriage plays an important role in determining the patterns and levels of fertility. The duration of the marriage of a woman depends on her age at first marriage and has a significant effect on her reproductive lifespan. The choice of marriage is influenced by socially determined rules of incest, prescriptive marriage rules, parental choice and individual desire. Marriage is a definitive variable affecting social change and relationships enormously. It also brings forth cultural fusion producing tremendous effect on the social structure.

Marriage is an important social institution in India. The country is divided into two regions with respect to marriage practices and customs, the north and the south. Other variations in marriage practices can be seen among various ethnic and tribal groups in the central, mountainous north and eastern regions. In the northern part, it is seen that brides, especially Hindu brides, have to go and live with strangers in a home which they have never visited. The natal family is usually geographically distant. In central India, the pattern is similar to that of the northern part. Here marriages outside the village are more common. Daughters are often given to lineages or villages where other daughters of their lineage or village have earlier been wed. However, in the southern part of India marriage practices are very different. Marriages are generally preferred between cousins. Cross cousin marriages and marriages between uncles and nieces are also common here. The major reason for the prevalence of this type of marriage practice is that the family that gives a daughter expects one in return if not immediately, then in the next generation. Here the bride moves to her in-laws' home, which is usually the home of the grandmother or her aunt's home. Hence, she is often comfortable in there.

Other changes in the marriage system are that love and mixed marriages have been on the rise in India. A mixed marriage is the term often applied to a marital union of two individuals from different races or religions. It also describes the marriage of a couple which have different cultural, ethnic or national backgrounds [3]. An increasing number of people, especially among those who are college educated, are finding their own spouses.

Another important aspect of marriage in India is dowry. In various communities, dowry has traditionally been given by a bride's kin at the time of her marriage. Since the late twentieth century throughout many parts of India dowry payments have risen enormously. Some dowries demanded are oppressive, amounting to several years' salary in cash as well as items such as motorcycles, air conditioners and fancy cars. Among some lower-status groups, large dowries are currently replacing traditional bride-price payments.

To ensure the eradication of child marriage from the society, the Government of India enacted the 'Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006' replacing the earlier legislation of Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929. The new legislation is armed with enabling provisions to prohibit child marriages, protect and provide relief to victims and enhance punishment for those who abet, promote or solemnize such marriages. Various literatures have revealed that the average age of girls at marriage in the country is one of the lowest in the world [4]. The Census of India 2011 also indicates a very high percentage of child marriages in India. However, despite the high proportion of such marriages, the average ages of both boys and girls at marriage have recorded a phenomenal increase [5]. Chhattisgarh and Odisha, which have a high tribal population, are known to have a higher average age at marriage than the general population [6].

### **Marriage In India**

Marriage continues to be near universal in India [7], despite the evident decline in marriage rate in many parts of the world [8] and concerns that all Asian societies will eventually follow the marital and fertility patterns found in western societies and in countries such as Japan. As it has been the case historically, the institution of marriage in India remains strong and popular, despite the very rapid levels of modernization in the country in the last two decades.

Typically, Indian women are married before the age of 25 years, with a tight clustering of marriage between 17 and 19 years [9]. The association between the timing of nuptials and fertility rate is copiously documented in the demographic literature. As child marriage leads to high fertility, the age at marriage of women has always been at the centre of research by demographers. In an analysis documenting the changes in the Singulate Mean Age at Marriage (SMAM) for females in India, using Census data from 1961 to 2001 and the 2010 Sample Registration System (SRS), [7] note an increase in SMAM from 16.8 years in 1961 to 22.2 years in 2010. Moreover, there were significant state differentials in the age at marriage for women and changes in the SMAM values across time: the SMAM in Kerala, which was 20.1 years in 1961, and the highest among Indian states at that time, saw an increase of only 2.6 years over a 50-year period. By contrast, in the less developed states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, the SMAM values in 1961 went up by 5.1 years and 6.2 years, respectively, to 21 years and 22 years. As the authors note, there has been a convergence of SMAM values of the less developed states towards the level in Kerala, with changes in the trends more marked in the less developed states and reaching a plateau in the more developed states.

Child marriage followed immediately by childbirth continues to characterize the marriage and family systems in Indian society, although globalization, modernization and westernization are factors known to increase the age of marriage of females and delay the onset of motherhood, if not induce women to forgo the two roles altogether. Child marriage among females customarily leads to early pregnancy and motherhood, since nearly all births for women occur within marriage and the length of time between marriage and parenthood is typically very small.

Despite an increase in the age at marriage of both females and males, a significant percentage of Indian females and slightly lower percentage of males still marry before the legal age of marriage [10]. The low age at marriage in India, particularly among females, has been a focus of research in many demographic and sociological studies. From a cultural perspective, parents feel that it is important to marry off their son or daughter at an early age in order to fulfill certain religious obligations and duties, chief among them to ensure progeny to continue the family lineage and perform various religiously mandated rituals after the death of the parents and grandparents. Thus, the marrying off a daughter, as soon as she attains puberty, is seen as a religious rite of passage by parents and, thus, a non-negotiable obligation. In early societies, the high infant and child mortality and maternal mortality rates made it imperative for women to start childbearing at very young ages to ensure that at least one or two children survived to adulthood. In the Indian context, the younger the age of the bride, the more likely she can guarantee her marital family's succession through many children.

However, with reductions in infant and child mortality rate, and higher chances of a child surviving to adulthood, the fertility rates began to fall rapidly, resulting in a successful demographic transition, similar to that experienced by western countries a few decades earlier [11]. Moreover, the historical demography of the west shows that the rising educational and employment opportunities for females had adverse effects on marriage and fertility rates. The two combined to increase the opportunity costs of childbearing to women and resulted in the conscious decision by many western women to postpone marriage and childbearing, if not forgo the two stages altogether, in pursuit of other more economically and emotionally viable interests. Rising educational and career aspirations are also seen to be at work in delaying marriage and motherhood in many developing countries,

including India, although the extent to which these forces have been able to impact marriage and motherhood, or induce women to forgo both stages altogether for alternative paths, have not been empirically studied.

### **Marriage In Northeast India**

The eight states in the northeast region of India Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura are populated by numerous tribal groups and, in some states, have a significant proportion of migrant Bengali population. With the exception of tribes in Meghalaya and some clans in Kerala, most of the India follows the patriarchal system. The scheduled tribes (STs) of Northeast India display a rigid structure when it comes to relationship between families. There are different sets of rules regarding inter-tribe and inter-clan marriages. The Khasi, a ST in Meghalaya, are monogamous. Their social organisation does not favour other forms of marriage. The favorable age for marriage is between 18–35 years for males and 13–18 for females [12]. Closely related to the Khasis is the Garosa major matrilineal tribe inhabiting mostly the Garo hills district of Meghalaya. The Garos generally have no specific age of marriage. Girls are considered marriageable on attainment of puberty. Occasionally, an immature girl of 7 or 8 years of age may be sent away by her mahari as a co-wife or a substitute for a dead wife. As for boys, those who are found responsible for household duties and acquire the capacity to support their family are considered having achieved the age of marriage. Among the Bodos of Assam, boys and girls are allowed to marry on attaining maturity. When a boy becomes capable of doing agricultural work or support a family, he is supposed to be fit for marriage. A girl is thought marriageable when she attains puberty and acquires the skill of weaving and the capability to do household chores such as cooking, cleaning and so on. Although child marriage is not practised per se, we can infer so from the custom regarding puberty attainment of girls and ability of doing agriculture work for boys that it is very much prevalent among the tribal people. While the puberty may set in at 12 years (girls) of age and boys may become capable of physical work in the fields by 15 years of age, it is much below the legal age limit for marriage in India, that is, 18 years for girls and 21 years for boys. The Nagas also comprise different sub tribes with varying sets of rules regarding marriage. The Angami, which is one of the largest tribes in Nagaland, are monogamous. Regarding age at marriage, we see that young girls are preferred and bride prices are high; they are paid in instalments over ten years. Marital residence practices seem to differ among various Naga tribes. The Tankful Nagas are a major tribe found in Ukhrul district of Manipur and in the frontier of Myanmar. As per custom, a boy and a girl are said to have attained puberty, known as yarshinkapha in native, when they reach the age of 16 and 14 years respectively. Those who have attained yarshinkapha are capable of entering into wedlock.

With regard to the Mizos of Mizoram, the age at marriage both for boys and girls seems to have increased tremendously. The popular age at marriage for boys and girls in the traditional society is 22 years and 17 years, respectively. Closely related to the Mizos are the Zou that belong to the Kuki-Chin-Lushai group of Mongolian race which are classified by historians as Sino-Tibetan families. The Zou were recognized as STs of Manipur in 1956. Marriageable age is not definite, but according to the elderly people, it is between 18–20 years for boys and 15–16 years for girls [13].

### **Past Studies**

In the study of Jeermison and Sahoo (2019) populations belonging to ‘Scheduled Tribe’ (ST) in India are considered as socio-economically backward section of the society. Tribal display different set of rules regarding intertribal and interclan marriage [14]. There is a need to understand changing marriage pattern among tribal in North-east India, a region with geographically inaccessible, economically underdeveloped and where a large tribal population resides. Data from Census of India 2001 and 2011 revealed that Singulate Mean Age at Marriage (SMAM) among STs of Northeast is comparatively higher than the ST of India. The spousal age gap has also been decreasing over time. Among the major STs in the Northeast, the SMAM is highest among the Mao, Paomai Naga and among the Tangkhul Nagas of Manipur. Although the Nagas supported early marriage in its lore days, the marriage structure has tremendously changed with dawn of Christianity. Western education brought by Christian Missionaries had great impact on the traditional norms.

According to Brahma (2017), marriage is a very important institution in human society which permit man and women in family life i.e. husband and wife. The Bodo has well established institutions of the marriage. No doubt, they are monogamous not polygamous. Polyandry form of marriage is absolutely absent in Bodo society. Various rites and rituals have been associated in the marriage ceremonies of the Bodos which have been practiced since the time immemorial. In this paper a modest attempt is made to highlight and study the marriage system of the Bodos and associated rites and the rituals [15].

In the study of Desai, (2010) research on marriage in developing countries has been somewhat narrow in scope because of both conceptual and data limitations [16]. While the feminist literature recognizes marriage as a key institutional site for the production and reproduction of gender hierarchies, little is known about the processes through which this relationship operates. This article uses data from the newly collected India Human Development Survey 2005 for 27,365 ever-married women aged 25–49 to explore ways in which different dimensions of gender in Indian society shape the decisions regarding age at marriage. We explore the impact of

three dimensions of gender: (1) economic factors, such as availability of wage employment, dowry expectations, and wedding expenses; (2) indicators of familial empowerment, such as women's role in household decision making and access to and control over resources; and (3) markers of gender performance, such as observance of purdah and male-female separation in the household. Results from hierarchical linear models confirm the importance of markers of gender performance but fail to demonstrate a large role for economic factors and familial empowerment. According to the study of [17] in many traditional societies, women's age at marriage acts simultaneously as a gateway to new family roles and the likelihood of producing offspring. However, inadequate attention has previously been given to the broader health and social implications of variability in women's marriage age for public health. Biomedical scientists have primarily been concerned with whether the onset of reproduction occurs before the woman is adequately able to nurture her offspring and maintain her own health. Social scientists have argued that early marriage prevents women from attaining their rightful education, accessing employment and training opportunities, developing social relationships with peers, and participating in civic life. The aim of this review article is to provide comprehensive research evidence on why women's marriage age, independent of age at first childbirth, is a crucial issue for public health. It focuses on data from four South Asian countries, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan, in which marriage is near universal and where a large proportion of women still marry below the United Nations prescribed minimum marriage age of 18 years. Using an integrative perspective, we provide a comprehensive synthesis of the physiological, bio-demographic, and socio-environmental drivers of variable marriage age. We describe the adverse health consequences to mothers and to their offspring of an early age at marriage and of childbearing, which include malnutrition and high rates of morbidity and mortality. We also highlight the complex association of marriage age, educational attainment, and low societal status of women, all of which generate major public health impact. Studies consistently find a public health dividend of increased girls' education for maternal and child nutritional status and health outcomes. Paradoxically, recent relative increases in girls' educational attainment across South Asia have had limited success in delaying marriage age. This evidence suggests that in order for public health initiatives to maximize the health of women and their offspring, they must first address the factors that shape the age at which women marry.

Soy and Sahoo (2016) study attempts to analyse the marriage arrangements and customs in India using the data from India Human Development Survey II (2011-12) and Census of India. The result shows that age at marriage for males and females has increased by 3 and 5 years respectively during 1960-2011. The bivariate analysis discloses that two-thirds of women in India met their husbands only on wedding day or the day of Gauna [18]. Only 5 per cent of them have chosen their husbands independently. The prevalence of inter-caste marriages is observed to be 5.4 per cent at the national level. Results of multivariate analysis indicate that marrying outside the caste and blood relations is influenced by socio-economic factors. Results also show that marriage expenditure for girls is higher than for boys.

Sikdar (2009) states that the Garo population is a major matriarchal tribal group of Meghalaya and a small section of them can also found to be scattered in different places of Assam. Being one of the matriarchal tribes of the world here the woman's side offers the marriage and the houses bear the name of a woman instead of a man and they consider their descent through the female line. Though they have their age old cultural beliefs and practices for marriage, due to some external factors there seem to be a transition in their marriage system. The present paper highlights the continuity and change related to their marriage system and attempts to highlight the probable causes of the transition [19].

## CONCLUSION

Family has been recognized as a basic unit of society and is a link between individual and community. The structure of the family continues to be patriarchal. A number of changes have been observed in the patterns of marriage such as age at marriage, inter-caste marriage, etc. Marriage is a social phenomenon which extends the lineage network. Marriage in India is still considered as endogamous and therefore the prevalence of inter-caste marriage persists to a very small proportion. With changing socio-economic conditions, there may be some changes in marriage practices in future. As per the traditional norms, the expenses of women's marriage are much more as compared with men's marriage. It increases the cost of marriage which results in dowry inflation and parents fear to marry their daughters late due to inflated dowry and with less availability of suitable grooms. The tradition of marrying outside the blood and economic groups has been followed historically. The practice of hypergamy is not only limited to social status, but also to the factors associated with age, education and economic status.

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