

Factors Affecting the Age at Marriage in Nepal

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Introduction

The theory regarding the social determinants of the timings of the first marriage is not well known. While anthropologists have given attention to kinship and marriage, demographers are engaged in understanding the relation between marriage and fertility (Hawthorn, 1970:86; McDonald, 1983:1). The age at which marriage occurs in a nuclear family system tends to be late because the economic situation has to be strengthened to be able to set up a separate household. In an extended family system where the formation of a new separate household is not a condition, marriage occurs early (Hawthorn, 1970:87). In a Hindu society where the kinship system is very strong, marriage is considered as one of the sixteen classical stages (Samskāra) in a person's life. One of the ways in which a person is considered a mature man is through his marriage (Meyer, 1960:215). Young members of the household should obey all rules of etiquette and have respect for their elders.

Judith Blake (1967:136) looks at marriage somewhat differently from this emphasis on kinship systems. She hypothesizes that age at marriage is higher where selection of partner for marriage is made by free choice rather than by an arranged match. The former type of marriage usually occurs only when both mates are old enough to make their own decision and are sufficiently independent financially to be able to set up a separate household. Early marriage occurs in entirely different conditions, where parents will often make the decision for their sons and daughters. Children will be supported financially and reside with parents even after their marriage.

Peter McDonald (1981:416), in an attempt to develop a framework for analysis of nuptiality, looks at marriage in relation to its functions in each culture. Functions, as he observes, in the major cultures, are classified into three categories: economic, social and personal. Economic functions of marriage may have to do with establishing a separate new household. Marriage may provide a means of economic security, and it may also serve as an instrument to make a division of labour. Marriage also provides means for the exchange of wealth. Depending upon the culture, the social functions of marriage serve as an important element in the maintenance or transformation of the social structure in many ways. Marriage may strengthen or weaken social differentials. It can form or strengthen social or political alliances,

continue family lineage, and provide a means of social control of sexual activity. It helps to maintain the socio-political role relationships in the society and serves to reinforce or establish the social prestige of those involved. Apart from those functions which may have important effects on individuals, there are certain functions that are specifically personal. In many cultures, marriage may only be sanctioned to enter into the sexual act and as a source of affection, love and emotional support. It may also be a means to achieve spiritual reward in a religious sense.

McDonald has pointed out that some or all of these functions may be operating in any given society. Furthermore, changes in function may occur due to changes in the prevailing social structure and its value systems which in turn affect the marriage customs including marriageable age.

In trying to identify factors affecting the age at marriage among the Gurung community in Nepal, Macfarlane (1976:221) identified several possible causes that would have varied the age at marriage. Marriage could occur earlier or later depending on the timing of inheritance and rules of inheritance. Age at marriage can also be affected by the amount of capital required at marriage. It can also be determined by the size of the kin group to which the couple belongs. The amount of money that is required for marriage can easily be borrowed from other kin groups, to be paid back over the years as they support other kin members' weddings. Other determining factors can be how marriage is arranged, the standard of living and availability of partners.

The following analysis will basically aim to identify the sub-groups which practise early and the sub-groups which practise late marriage. An attempt is made to relate their marriage patterns with the cultural practices that prevail in their societies based on anthropological research.

Data

This research study was conducted based on the data from the Nepal Fertility Survey, 1976. This survey was conducted in 1976 by the Nepal Family Planning/ MCH Project in collaboration of the World Fertility Survey, London. A total of 5940 ever-married women of 15-49 years were interviewed using three-stage cluster sample design.

The quality of data was assessed after completion of survey at the Princeton University with the help of the World Fertility Survey (Goldman, et al., 1979).

Results

Mean ages at marriage according to different background characteristics are presented in Table 1 controlling for the current age of woman. Data indicate that women from the Mountain region tend to marry

later than women from the Hills and Plains. According to anthropological research (Furer-Haimendorf, 1964; Bista, 1972; Ross, 1981), people from the Mountains have entirely different marriage functions than for the people from other geographical regions.

Two of the major groups inhabiting the Mountain region are Bhotes and Sherpas. There are several peculiar practises that may have led to relatively late marriage among them. According to their social traditions, every married couple must establish an independent household even if the bridegroom's father has to divide his own house (Furer-Haimendorf, 1964:39). Though young Sherpas have freedom to select their partners, it usually takes several years to become a legal couple. There are three major wedding rites, Sodene, Dem-chang and Zendi or Gyen-kutop which must be completed before a bride can be brought to her new home (Furer-Haimendorf, 1964:41-68). The gap between each of these rites could be several years.

By the time the final wedding, Zendi or Gyen-Kutop is performed they may have one or two children[†]. They will become legally husband and wife after the completion of this ceremony. Furer-Haimendorf (1964: 56) suggests a delay of this ceremony may have occurred because of the need of the daughter's labour, and the bridegroom not having the capacity to set up a household of his own.

Other minority groups (Dhinga, Lhomi etc.) in the mountainous region also have the freedom of selecting their partners (Bista, 1972: 170 and Ross, 1981:74). The Dhinga who are from the western Mountains also do not practise childhood bethrothal (Ross, 1981:74).

Unlike the people of the Mountain region who have many common social traditions and practices which might have caused them to delay their marriages, there are wide divisions among different groups in their culture and social tradition in the Hills and Plains. Therefore, in order to discuss factors affecting age at marriage in these regions it will become essential to look at each ethnic group separately.

Mean ages at marriage presented in Table 1 clearly show two distinct age patterns of marriage among ethnic groups. Some ethnic groups belonging to the Tibeto-Burman language family, e.g. Gurungs, Tamangs, Rais, Magars and Newars tend to marry later than those belonging to the Indo-Aryan language family. Of all the ethnic groups in Nepal, mean ages at marriage are highest for Gurungs, Tamangs and Rais. The Brahmins tend to have the lowest mean age at marriage.

†. Due to the relatively infertile period following the menarche, very few women have one or two children before the final wedding rite (Furer-Haimendorf, 1964:41).

TABLE 1

MEAN AGE AT MARRIAGE (IN YEARS) BY BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS
CONTROLLING CURRENT AGE OF WOMAN: NEPAL, 1976

Background characteristics	Age of woman					Total
	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	
Geographical region						
Mountains	16.0	16.6	16.0	15.8	15.0	16.0
Hills	15.4	15.2	15.9	15.8	16.0	15.6
Plains	15.0	15.0	15.3	14.9	15.3	15.1
Ethnicity**						
Gurungs	16.5	(18.5)	(17.5)	(16.8)	*	17.6
Tamangs	17.1	16.4	(18.7)	(18.0)	(17.7)	17.5
Rais	16.5	17.1	(17.4)	(17.2)	(18.4)	17.2
Magars	16.3	16.6	16.5	16.4	16.9	16.5
Newars	16.0	16.2	16.4	17.5	16.9	16.5
Chhetris	15.4	14.9	15.1	15.3	15.5	15.2
S-D-M-D @	15.9	(14.6)	14.8	(15.4)	(15.8)	15.2
Tharus	14.8	14.8	15.9	15.5	(15.8)	15.2
Muslims	14.1	(13.8)	(15.2)	14.6	(15.3)	14.5
Brahmins	13.9	13.0	14.0	13.1	13.2	13.5
Others	14.8	15.1	15.6	15.4	15.1	15.2
Religion						
Buddhism	17.1	16.8	18.7	17.1	(18.0)	17.4
Hinduism	15.2	15.2	15.6	15.4	15.6	15.4
Islam	14.2	(13.8)	(14.9)	14.6	15.7	14.6
Work status of woman before marriage						
No work	14.7	14.6	15.2	14.7	15.1	14.8
Non-farming	(15.3)	*	*	*	*	16.3
Farming	16.1	16.2	16.4	16.5	16.6	16.3
Education of woman						
No schooling	15.4	15.3	15.7	15.6	15.7	15.5
Primary	15.1	15.4	15.0	(15.2)	(15.7)	15.2
Middle +	14.9	15.1	15.7	13.7	(15.1)	15.0
Work status of husband						
Non-farming	15.1	14.7	15.6	15.3	15.6	15.2
Farming	15.3	15.3	15.7	15.6	15.7	15.5
Total	15.3	15.2	15.7	15.5	15.7	15.4

Notes: * indicates denominator is less than 10 women.
() indicates that mean is calculated based on less than 25 women but more than 10 women in denominator.
@ S-D-M-D stands for Satars, Dhanuwars, Majars and Darais.
** a small number of Sherpas excluded from ethnicity variable.

Sources: Tabulated from the Nepal Fertility Survey data, 1976, standard recode, version 1, London: ISI/WFS.

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Higher mean ages at marriage among Gurungs in comparison to many other groups have been documented by Macfarlane (1976:220). From his village-level data, he found that two-thirds of marriages occurred at between 17 and 21 years among Gurung women. The mean age at marriage was just over 19 in his village. He suggested several factors that might have accounted for higher age at marriage among Gurungs. Unlike other groups, Gurungs do not live in a joint family. Their family usually consists of husband and wife with their unmarried children. It is expected that a few years after marriage, a couple must set up an individual household. The same type of social tradition exists among the Limbus (Caplan, 1974:185). Therefore, marriage occurs fairly late so that a family will have sufficient time to accumulate capital to provide a separate household for the new couple. Another important factor is the way in which a marriage is arranged. Among Gurungs, Tamangs, and Rais, selection of partner is usually made by free choice. To some extent, young couples among the Newars and Magars also enjoy freedom of selecting their partners. Such a freedom among Newars is attributed mainly to western education, political liberalism and economic considerations (Bajracharya, 1959:418).

Like Gurungs, Tamangs, Rais and Magars, the remaining ethnic groups also have their own traditions regarding marriage. Two of the common features of these groups are the joint family system and parentally arranged marriage.

The mean age for Newar girls at marriage is 16.5 years (Table 1) which is three years higher than the mean for the Brahmin girls. Among Brahmins the traditional pattern of early marriage is due to the fact that the girl is to be married off before menarche (Allen, 1982:180).

Michael Allen (1982:180) confirms, based on his anthropological study conducted during 1973-74 and 1978-79, that the Newars also followed this orthodox pattern which required pre-pubertal marriage. While comparing pre-puberty marriages performed by Newars with those Brahmins, he found that unlike Brahmin girls, Newar girls go through a ritually elaborate mock-marriage during childhood, i.e. Ihi, in which the Kanyadan ('the giving of the virgin') event is an important function. In the process of Kanyadan, a Newar girl is married to a supposedly celibate god. In the orthodox Hindu marriage, Kanyadan is actually done giving a virgin girl to a boy prior to menarche. Thus, these differences in observed spiritual and religious values might be the reason why Newar girls have higher age at marriage than Brahmins.

By and large, Brahmins and Chhetris look on marriage as a religious rite. Both of these groups follow almost similar marriage rituals. Marriage between a Chhetri girl and Brahmin boy is an acceptable union (Furer-Haimendorf, 1959:232). Because they have the same social practi-

ces and beliefs regarding marriage, the question arises why the age at marriage differs between these two groups. Mean at Marriage is 15.2 years for Chhetri girls and 13.5 years for Brahmin girls (Table 1). Based on the anthropological evidence also, an early pattern of marriage

is less frequent among Chhetris than among Brahmins (Bista, 1972:7). According to Bista, Chhetri girls are married off when they are fully grown whereas among Brahmins, in order to gain Punya, 'merit', their girls of eight to ten years must be given to a Brahmin boy.

Basically, we could identify two reasons for higher age at marriage for Chhetri girls than for Brahmins. Firstly, unlike Brahmin young couples, Chhetri young couples can say whether they like each other or not before parents decide on their marriage. In marriage rituals, there is one extra ceremony before the Kanyadan rite which is exclusive to Chhetris (Bennett, 1977:129). This is called Swayambar which literally means girl's self choice of a husband.

Secondly, the Thakuri group which is considered the highest class within the Chhetri caste has relatively late marriage because of their concern with status. The amount of dowry to be given is considerably large if one wants to maintain family status. In order to keep the local community unaware of this difficult situation, Thakuri girls are married off to a distant location (Winkler, 1979:307). This type of marriage arrangement will definitely restrict the daughter's ability to revisit her parents frequently. Winkler argued that their marriage was delayed until a bride was ready to separate from the natal home.

The remaining groups (Tharus, Satars, Dhamuvars, Majhis, Darais, Muslims) have slightly higher mean age at marriage than Brahmins and lower than the Mongoloid groups. Except for Muslims, marriage systems that have been adopted by other groups have been influenced by Hindus. The Tharus who were practicing various forms of marriage such as capture and purchase, have the Hindu system (Shrivastava, 1959:139). They also consider marriage obligatory; and unmarried women do not have social status. The girl's parents usually find a partner for their daughter. Unlike in most other societies in Nepal, the girl is older than boy. It is not unlikely that a boy of seven or eight years is married to a girl of 15 or 16 years (Bista, 1972:121). This may be one reason why Tharu girls have higher mean age at marriage than Brahmins.

Information regarding the social traditions of the Satars, Danuwars, Majhis and Darais is very scanty. Bista (1972:131) reported that Danuwars practise marriage by mutual agreement which involves a decision of couples to live together. The age at which the couple decides to live together according to Bista could be between 29 and 30 years which does not support our finding.

Ages at marriage differ according to religion (Table 1) Buddhist girls marry much later than Hindu and Muslim girls: mean at marriage is lowest among Muslim girls in all age groups. Hindu girls occupy an intermediate position between Buddhists and Muslims. Factors relating to mean ages at marriage are nothing more than the reflection of social tradition and belief practised by each ethnic group. Mongoloid and Tibeto-Burman language groups are either Buddhist or follow Tibetan Buddhist culture. Except Muslims, all other Indo-Aryan groups belong

to the Hindu religion. Differences in mean ages at marriage by religious group are not peculiar to Nepal. In Malaysia (Chander, *et. al.*, 1977:60) and Sri Lanka (1978:63), mean ages at marriage are found to be highest among Buddhists followed by Hindus and Muslims.

In a society where labour is in demand, we would expect woman's age at marriage to be higher. If a woman is working or helping her parents on the farm, her marriage is likely to be postponed a few years. Mean ages at marriage according to the work status of women before marriage indicate that those who work before marriage tend to marry almost two years later than those who do not work (Table 1). This pattern is consistent in all age-groups. On the other hand, it is found from data that husband's work status is not so important in relation to age at marriage (Table 1). Women whose husband are working in farming have almost the same mean age at marriage as those whose husbands are working in non-farming occupations. Again, mean ages at marriage do not differ according to husband's educational level. When controlled for age, there is an inverse relationship between age at marriage and education of husband for women aged 25-29 and 40-49.

Summary.

The above findings have indicated that the social customs, traditions, and religious values attached to marriage affect ages at which marriage occurs. It clearly shows that age at marriage is higher among women who live in joint family system or whose marriages are arranged by parents. Marriage tends to get delayed also, due to economic reasons as well as the needs of the daughter's labour. Marriage often gets delayed among the groups which encourage new couple to set up an individual household.

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