Recent Trends in Union formation and dissolution in India

Introduction

In many part of Asia, marriage is increasing being delayed and non-marriage has gained prominence. In South Asia, however, marriage continues to be nearly universal and early. Also in much of South Asia, in contrast to rest of Asia, marriages are typically arranged by the parents. This paper examines marriage and divorce patterns in India. Besides the sheer size of the country, India is an interesting case to study for several reasons. The opening of the economy in the early 1990s and dismantling of the socialist policies has transformed the economy. This transformation has brought about changes in lives of women: as never before greater proportion of women are participating in the labour force, including in the IT sector and call centres. With greater prosperity, the aspiration and desires of the populace has also changed. Exposure to new lifestyles and economic independence of the young has the potential to weaken the hold of parents in the lives of the young. This paper will look at how these changes have transformed the institution of marriage.

As in much of South Asia, marriage remains universal in India with less than five per cent of women remaining unmarried by the age of 30, and marriage occurs relatively early, with Singulate Mean Age at Marriage of 19 for women (based on 2001 census). Universal marriage has been the norm for over a century. At the beginning of the 20th century, Risley and Gait (1903:421), the then Census Commissioners of India, were struck by the "almost universal prevalence of the married state" and proffered this explanation: "in Europe sentiment and prudence exercise divided sway, and the tendency on the whole is rather towards a decline in the number of marriages. In India neither of these motives comes prominently into play." Whatever the motives of getting married, marriage still continues to be universal in India. This pattern of universal marriage is true in all parts of the diverse country.

A distinguishing feature of the Indian marriage system was the near universal prevalence of caste endogamy. Marriage partners must be from the same caste (varna) and inter-caste marriages were not accepted. In some cases, couples in inter-caste marriages were ostracized and subjected to violent attacks. Similarly parent-arranged marriages were the norm and "love-marriage" (the common term used for self-arranged marriage) was not tolerated. In India, "arranged marriages" are often contrasted with "love marriages". In general usage the term "arranged marriage" is applied to marriages in which family and kin play a key role in spouse selection. This type of marriage is contrasted with "love marriage" where individuals select their own partners. The meaning of these two types of marriage systems has changed over time. In arranged marriages in the past women used to have little say in marriage decisions, but now they are consulted and their opinion sought before marriage decision is made. On the other end, many of the love marriages now have the approval of the parents (i.e. love-cum-arranged marriages). Thus, far from being distinct terms, there seems to be a continuum and overlap between love and arranged marriages now. This paper will explore these complexities using recent survey data.

Divorce or separation rates have traditionally been low in India. But there are signs that this might be changing. Divorce cases filed in family courts have been increasing. While this should not be equated with divorce rates (as not all filings for divorce are successful) and should be interpreted with caution (as they may reflect the growth in number of marriages in tandem with population growth), they, nevertheless, suggest an increased willingness to file for divorce. An amendment to the marriage law introduced in 2010 makes 'irretrievable breakdown of marriage' a ground for divorce. This some commentators believe would make it easier to get a divorce. Family law for the Muslims in India is based on the Sharia, and marriages and divorces for Muslims are registered separately. For the Muslims it is relatively easy to get a divorce under the Sharia. Besides looking at the national trends in divorce, we will also examine religious differences in divorce rates.

Changes in marriage and divorce have been linked to ideational change, shifts in education and labor force participation of women, exposure to new attitudes, changing lifestyle preference, changes in social structure and changes in religious and civil laws regulating marriage and divorce. To a varying extent, many of these changes have been occurring in India and this paper will examine the influence of these changes on marriage and divorce rates in India.

Data and methods

Data from three surveys are used in the analysis. District-level Health Survey (DLHS-3) a nationally representative survey of about 600,000 women has information on marital status and timing of marriage and divorce. Indian Human Development Survey (IHDS) surveyed about 40,000 households on variety of topics including detail questions on marriage. Youth in India interviewed young people aged 10-24 in six states in India. The interviews covered topic such as romantic relationship, sexual experience and spouse selection. While raw data from DLHS-3 and IHDS are analysed, we will use information from numerous published tables from Youth in India survey (the raw data are not publicly available).

Key aims and preliminary results

The paper investigates the following issues. I present the outline and preliminary findings here. These would be expanded in the full paper.

1. Trends and patterns in marriage and divorce

Marriage is early for women in almost all parts of the country, though there are significant regional patterns. In much of the South marriage occurs at slightly older age than in the north. Northeast region has the highest marriage age. In all parts of the country, marriage continues to be universal.

Figure 1: Singulate Mean Age at Marriage (SMAM), Women, 2005-6.
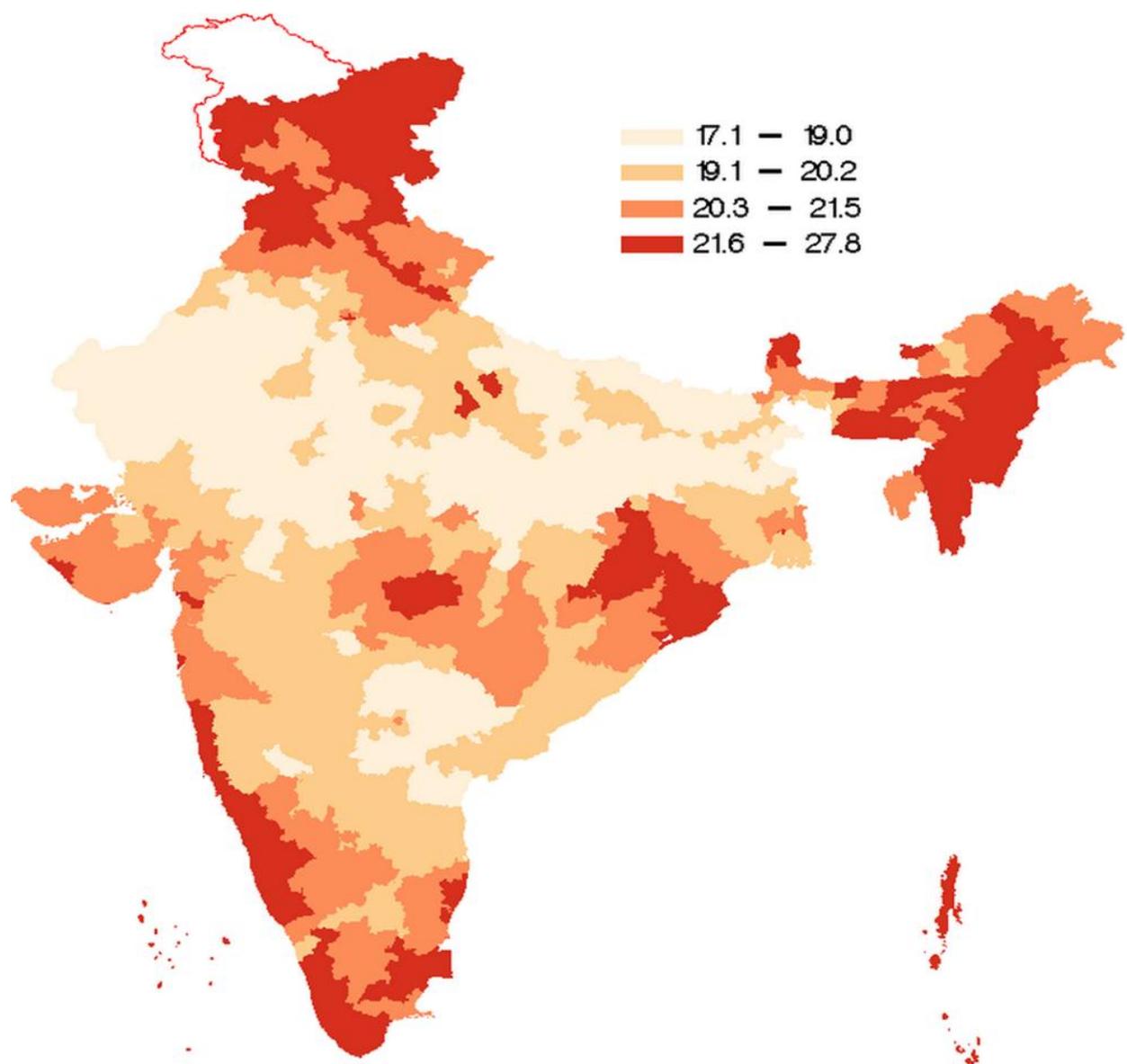
Source: Map created by the author based on DLHS data.

In terms of divorce, there has been an increase in marriages ending in divorce, separation or desertion (DSD). Though the probability of such DSD is still low compared to western standards. Just about 6 out of 1000 marriages that occurred between 1987 and 2005 ended in DSD (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Predicted probability of a marriage ending in divorce, separation or desertion 3-year moving averages.
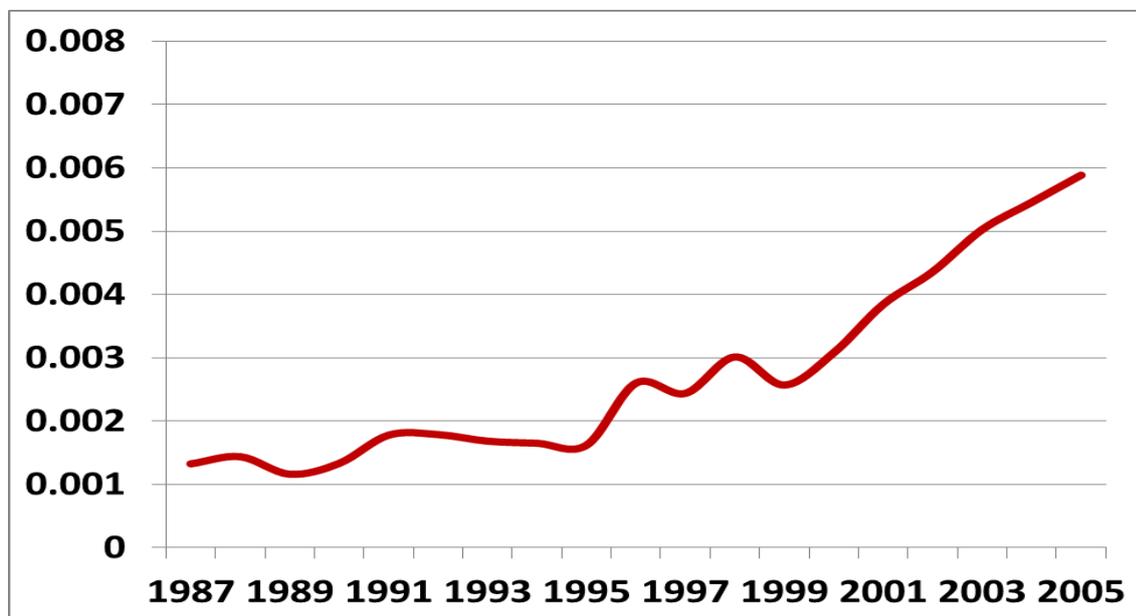
Source: Author's calculation based on DLHS data.

2. How do people choose their spouse in India?

Marriage in India is considered by parents as performing dharma (duty). It is the father's responsibility to choose a husband for his daughter before she reaches puberty. The bride's virginity is offered as a "gift", and she is subordinated in service to her husband's family (Netting 2010). In addition, the bride's family has to pay dowry to the groom's family (Bhopal 2011). Indian marriage system has been characterized as quintessential "arranged" marriage system, where the notion of marriage is not concerned about love (Baas 2009). However, increases in modernization coupled with globalization have sought to redefine the boundaries between "love" and arranged marriage systems in India. The boundaries between the two forms of marriage are being increasingly blurred.

"Love" marriages are often deemed as a violation to the Indian heritage and often treated with hostility and contempt. They denote promiscuity, disregard to familial honour and threat to the society (Netting 2010 ; Kodoth 2008). They are also regarded as unstable relationships as it lacks the "official" structures to bind and uphold discipline (Kodoth 2008).

Previous studies have indicated that the young generations of Indians have found new ways to negotiate the traditional customs and maneuver the violations of those traditions, while at the same time retaining the historical and sacred heritage. In Netting's (2010) research about

upper-middle class 21st century highly educated young Indians, the dichotomy between "love" and arranged marriages no longer is as clear-cut as before. Her research subjects transcended the conventional confines between the two marriage systems, and, instead, creatively and simultaneously adopted both systems in a complementing way to achieve their own personal goals. Baas' (2009) research also points to the creative new ways of combining both systems IT professionals. In Sharangpani's (2010) research on young women's narratives on marriage and related concepts also confirmed previous studies that modernity has allowed the younger generation to conceive of traditions such as the Indian arranged marriage system in new ways. These recent studies have affirmed the increasing vagueness of boundaries between the once thought-of dichotomized marriage systems, devising ways to preserve the old heritage and traditions yet embrace the new values that modernity brings.

Table 1: Spouse selection in India: married women age 25-49, per cent

Birth cohort	Self-arranged	Jointly- arranged	Parent- arranged with consent	Parent- arranged with no consent
1976-80	6	36	25	33
1971-75	5	36	25	34
1966-70	4	37	22	36
1961-65	5	37	22	37
1956-60	4	38	19	38

Source: Based on IHDS data

Table 1 presents percent of marriages by marriage type. Marriage type is classified into four groups: self arranged, jointly arranged, parent arranged with consent, parent arranged without consent from the women. These classifications are based on two questions in the survey that asked women "Who chose your husband?" and the question "Did you have any say in choosing him [husband]?" As can be seen from the table, self-arranged marriages without any involvement of parents remains low at about 6 percent for the most recent birth cohort. However the major change is in the category parent arranged with consent of women. Generally, the results show that parents are still playing a key role in arranging marriage.

3. Spousal characteristic with focus on endogamy

One of the defining features of the Indian marriage is caste endogamy. This continues to be true now. As Table 2 shows about 95% of women married men from the same caste. There is not much difference by educational level. Even for women with higher education, caste endogamy is still common. Spatial endogamy (whether the husband is from the same village/town/city) (results not shown in the Table): about 14 percent of women married men from the same village/town. There are regional differences from low of around 3-6 % in the northern states to a high of around 28 % in the south. Consanguineous marriages (women

married to a close relative or uncle): about 10% of marriages were consanguineous. Such marriages were common in the southern states constituting nearly a quarter of all marriages.

Table 2: Spousal characteristics for married women, 2005-6, per cent

Women's education	Same caste as husband	Husband related by blood (consanguineous)
Primary School or lower	94.68%	15.53%
Secondary School or lower	94.54%	13.80%
Above Secondary School	93.34%	9.07%

Source: Author's calculation based on IHDS data

The final paper will look at how changes in class structure and wealth distribution are competing with the influence of caste and will look at the influence of education of women on the type of spouse selected.

Conclusion

In the traditional Indian marriage system, marriage was universal, arranged marriages were the norm and caste endogamy widely practiced. All three elements continue to prevail today: marriage remains almost universal, arranged marriages are common, and caste endogamy still widespread. However, there have been changes in the Indian marriage system, notably in age at marriage and spouse selection process. Over the last five decades marriage age has increased gradually for both men and women. When it comes to spouse selection, women now have a greater say within the arranged marriage system. In contrast to the past, the search for potential bride or groom now encompasses a variety of methods: search by family members, traditional matchmakers, commercial match making agencies, computerized match making bureaus, matrimonial websites and newspapers. There are also signs of greater marital instability. Our preliminary results have pointed out several interesting findings that need further careful examination.