

TRENDS IN MARRIAGE AGE OF GIRLS IN INDIA

S. S. YADAV*

INDIA is characterised by the institution of early universal marriage. This fact has a great demographic, social and economic significance. Changes in marriage pattern have greatly influenced trends in fertility in advanced countries, and there is a keen interest in seeing similar developments in India. Registration of marriage is not compulsory. However, not much is known about the present situation and there is little information about the prevalent age at marriage of boys and girls, and its variation in the different parts of the country or the time trends. Vital Statistics of India for 1961¹ gives the median marriage age of girls in the rural and the urban areas to be 16.1 and 17.1 years respectively. They are based on sample surveys organised by the Registrar General in the various States around 1961-62. Census distribution of population by marital status in quinquennial age groups has been used by Mertens² P. K. Jain³ and Agarwala⁴ to estimate age at first marriage on certain assumptions. Mertens calculated the mean marriage age of girls from 1961 census data to be 17.2 years. Jain's estimate of median values for girls is 18 years and for boys 24 years. Agarwala calculated the mean age by Hajnal's⁵ synthetic cohort method to be 15.8 for girls and 21.4 for boys. The differences in the estimates are primarily due to the methods adopted and the assumptions made. All of them, however, conform to the conclusion that marriage age for girls is within the range of adolescent unstable fertility. It is well below 20 years and clearly above 15 years. In this matter, cultural factors are dominant. In western countries, industrialisation substantially modified the pattern by leading to postponement of marriage. However, child marriage was never their cultural trait, even when they were not industrialised, and this constitutes a basic difference between them and the developing countries. All the same, there is a general frame, within which marriage pattern may vary between nations and between subgroups within a nation. After the

* I am indebted to Shri S. P. Jain for guiding me in preparing this paper.