

Youth Marriage Expectations and Changing Marriage Trends in India

Dr. Patibandla Hemalatha

Associate Professor, JMJ College for Women (Autonomous), Tenali, Andhra Pradesh

Abstract—Marriage remains one of the most significant social institutions in India, connecting individuals with families, kinship networks, communities and wider systems of social organisation. However, the meaning, timing and decision-making processes associated with marriage have undergone substantial transformation among younger generations. Expansion of education, urbanisation, occupational mobility, economic change, digital communication, changing gender expectations and increasing emphasis on individual aspirations have influenced the way young people understand marriage and partner selection. At the same time, parental authority, caste, religion, family reputation and socioeconomic considerations continue to influence marital decisions. This paper examines youth marriage expectations and changing marriage trends in India from a sociological perspective using secondary evidence from the National Family Health Survey, India Human Development Survey-based research, the Understanding the Lives of Adolescents and Young Adults survey and open-access empirical studies. The evidence demonstrates a substantial decline in early marriage and a corresponding increase in the age at marriage. According to NFHS-5, 23.3 percent of women aged 20–24 had married before the age of 18 in 2019–21, compared with substantially higher levels in earlier NFHS rounds. (UNFPA India) Research based on the India Human Development Survey also indicates that joint spouse selection between women and parents increased from 47.4 percent among marriages in the 1970s cohort to 62.6 percent among marriages in the 2000s cohort, while parent-only selection declined from 49.6 percent to 31.0 percent. (PMC) The evidence therefore suggests that contemporary Indian marriage is not simply moving from arranged marriage to love marriage. Instead, marriage is increasingly becoming a negotiated institution in which individual preferences and family expectations interact. The paper argues that changing marriage trends should be understood through the concepts of delayed marriage, individualisation, negotiated authority, educational expansion, economic independence and continuing family embeddedness.

Index Terms—youth, marriage expectations, marriage trends, India, marriage timing, spouse selection, arranged marriage, family, education, individualisation, gender, social change

I. INTRODUCTION

Marriage occupies a central position in Indian social organisation. It is not merely a personal relationship between two individuals but an institution through which families establish relationships, kinship networks are extended, social identities are reproduced and economic and emotional responsibilities are organised. Historically, marriage in India has frequently involved parents and relatives in the selection of partners, negotiation of marriage arrangements and establishment of post-marital relationships. Caste, religion, family background, economic status and social reputation have also influenced the choice of marriage partners.

The social context in which young Indians approach marriage has changed considerably. Young people today spend longer periods in education, increasingly migrate for higher education and employment, participate in wider social networks and encounter diverse lifestyles through television, cinema, social media and digital communication. The transition from adolescence to adulthood has consequently become more prolonged. Education, employment and economic independence may precede marriage, while intimate relationships may increasingly develop before formal marriage.

These changes are particularly significant for the study of youth. Young people are no longer simply passive recipients of decisions made by parents. They increasingly express preferences concerning education, employment, partner characteristics, residence, lifestyle and timing of marriage. Nevertheless, family relationships remain important.

Parents continue to provide economic and emotional support and may remain involved in partner selection even when their children have achieved educational and occupational independence.

The central sociological issue is therefore not whether Indian marriage is becoming traditional or modern. A more useful question concerns how authority is being redistributed within the family and how individual preferences are being negotiated with established social expectations. The transformation appears to involve delayed marriage, increasing participation of young people, greater emphasis on education and employment, and a movement from unilateral parental selection towards joint decision-making.

II. MARRIAGE AS A SOCIOLOGICAL INSTITUTION

Marriage has traditionally performed several functions in Indian society. It establishes socially recognised intimate relationships, regulates reproduction, creates kinship ties, facilitates intergenerational continuity and establishes systems of mutual economic and social support. Marriage also connects households and can reproduce caste, religious and class boundaries. From a sociological perspective, marriage is therefore both a personal relationship and a social institution. The individual may experience marriage as an

expression of companionship, affection and personal choice, while families may understand it in terms of social compatibility, family reputation, economic security and cultural continuity.

This dual character becomes particularly important when analysing contemporary youth. Young people may increasingly value emotional compatibility and individual preference, while parents may continue to evaluate prospective partners according to education, occupation, caste, religion, family background and economic stability. The result is not necessarily conflict between generations but often a process of negotiation.

The concept of negotiated marriage is therefore useful for understanding contemporary India. It recognises that young people's autonomy can increase without completely eliminating family participation. It also explains why the growth of individual choice does not necessarily produce a rapid disappearance of arranged marriage.

III. CHANGING MARRIAGE TIMING IN INDIA

One of the clearest indicators of changing marriage patterns is the decline in marriage before the age of 18. NFHS data demonstrate a substantial long-term decline in early marriage among Indian women.

Table 1. Major Demographic and Socioeconomic Indicators of Changing Marriage Trends in India

Indicator	Earlier period/level	Later period/level	Sociological significance
Women aged 20–24 married before age 18	65.9% in 1992–93	23.3% in 2019–21	Major long-term decline in early marriage
Women aged 20–24 married before age 18	47.4% in 2005–06	26.8% in 2015–16	Continued decline
Women aged 20–24 married before age 18	26.8% in 2015–16	23.3% in 2019–21	Further decline, although slower
Median age at first marriage among women aged 20–49	17.2 years in 2005–06	19.2 years in 2019–21	Marriage increasingly delayed
Median age at first marriage among men aged 25–29	22.6 years in 2005–06	24.9 years in 2019–21	Longer transition to marriage among men
Women aged 20–24 married before 18 with no education	—	Approximately 48%	Early marriage remains strongly associated with educational disadvantage
Women aged 20–24 married before 18 with higher education	—	Approximately 4%	Higher education strongly associated with delayed marriage
Women aged 20–24 married before 18 in poorest wealth category	—	Approximately 40%	Strong socioeconomic inequality

Women aged 20–24 married before 18 in richest wealth category	—	Approximately 8%	Wealth associated with delayed marriage
Women aged 20–24 married before 18 in India	—	23.3%	National NFHS-5 estimate
Women aged 15–19 births per 1,000	51 in NFHS-4	43 in NFHS-5	Decline in adolescent fertility

Source: International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF, National Family Health Survey; UNFPA India analysis of NFHS-5, 2019–21. (UNFPA India)

The decline from approximately 65.9 percent of women aged 20–24 marrying before age 18 in 1992–93 to 23.3 percent in 2019–21 represents a substantial demographic transformation. The NFHS-5 estimate nevertheless indicates that early marriage remains a significant social phenomenon. UNFPA identifies poverty, structural inequality and social norms among the factors associated with the continuing prevalence of child marriage in India. (UNFPA India)

The increase in age at marriage is equally significant. The median age at first marriage among women aged 20–49 increased from 17.2 years in 2005–06 to 19.2 years in 2019–21, while the median age among men aged 25–29 increased from 22.6 years to 24.9 years over the same period. (UNFPA India) The postponement of marriage indicates that the transition to adulthood is becoming longer and increasingly incorporates education, employment and economic preparation before marriage.

IV. EDUCATION AND CHANGING MARRIAGE EXPECTATIONS

Education is one of the most important factors associated with changing marriage patterns. Young people who remain in education for longer periods have fewer opportunities for early marriage and may develop aspirations that are incompatible with immediate marriage. Education can also expand employment opportunities, increase exposure to alternative lifestyles and contribute to greater participation in household decision-making. The relationship between education and marriage timing is particularly evident in NFHS-5 data. Approximately 48 percent of women aged 20–24 with no education had married before age 18, compared with approximately 4 percent among women with higher education. (UNFPA India) This substantial difference

demonstrates the close relationship between educational opportunity and marriage timing. Education does not operate independently of other factors. Educational attainment is associated with household wealth, place of residence, employment opportunities and social expectations. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that education is an important component of the social conditions that facilitate delayed marriage.

The changing educational experience of younger generations also affects expectations about marriage. Young people increasingly may expect to complete higher education before marriage and may consider employment or professional establishment important prerequisites. Marriage consequently becomes one stage in a broader life-course sequence rather than the immediate transition from adolescence to adulthood.

V. ECONOMIC CONDITIONS AND MARRIAGE TIMING

Economic circumstances are another important dimension of changing marriage patterns. The NFHS-5 evidence indicates a strong wealth gradient in early marriage. Approximately 40 percent of women aged 20–24 in the poorest household wealth category had married before age 18 compared with approximately 8 percent in the richest wealth category. (UNFPA India) This relationship demonstrates that marriage timing is embedded within broader systems of economic inequality. Families with greater economic resources may be better able to support prolonged education and delay marriage, while economically vulnerable families may face greater pressure to conform to established marriage expectations.

Economic independence has also become important in youth expectations. An open-access study of 1,082 young people found that 76.1 percent identified economic independence as an important factor in deciding when to marry, while 72.7 percent identified completion of education and 61.8 percent identified having a recognised profession. (PMC) These findings

suggest that young people increasingly connect marriage with economic readiness. Marriage is not necessarily rejected; rather, young adults may expect to enter marriage after reaching a particular level of educational and economic stability.

VI. RURAL, URBAN AND REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

The national decline in early marriage conceals substantial regional and socioeconomic variation. Rural areas continue to experience higher levels of early marriage than urban areas, while economically disadvantaged households experience higher prevalence than economically secure households. Regional differences are also considerable.

These variations demonstrate that the transformation of marriage in India is not uniform. Young people living in metropolitan areas and those from economically secure households may have greater opportunities to postpone marriage, while young people in disadvantaged communities may experience

stronger structural constraints. Consequently, the concept of “Indian youth” should not be treated as a homogeneous category. Marriage expectations vary according to gender, education, caste, religion, socioeconomic status, rural or urban residence and regional context.

VII. CHANGING SPOUSE SELECTION

The transformation of marriage is not limited to marriage timing. The process through which marriage partners are selected is also changing.

Research based on the India Human Development Survey provides particularly valuable evidence. Among marriages in the 1970s cohort, 47.4 percent involved joint selection by the woman and her parents, while parents alone selected the spouse in 49.6 percent of cases. Among marriages in the 2000s cohort, joint selection had increased to 62.6 percent, while parent-only selection had declined to 31.0 percent. Self-selection by the woman increased from 3.0 percent to 6.4 percent. (PMC)

Table 2. Changing Spouse Selection and Youth Marriage Expectations in India

Indicator	Earlier generation/period	Later generation/period	Sociological interpretation
Woman selected husband herself	3.0% in 1970s cohort	6.4% in 2000s cohort	Modest increase in independent selection
Woman and parents selected jointly	47.4% in 1970s cohort	62.6% in 2000s cohort	Strong growth in negotiated selection
Parents selected spouse	49.6% in 1970s cohort	31.0% in 2000s cohort	Decline in unilateral parental selection
Intercaste marriage	3.9% in 1970s cohort	5.7% in 2000s cohort	Limited increase
Couples should decide marriage together	—	68.7% among surveyed young people	Strong support for couple participation
Parents and couples should decide together	—	30.9% among surveyed young people	Continuing importance of family
Parents/relatives should decide together	—	0.5%	Very limited support for exclusive family authority
Economic independence considered important before marriage	—	76.1%	Economic readiness is a major youth expectation
Completion of education considered important	—	72.7%	Education increasingly linked to marriage timing
Attaining marriageable age considered important	—	72.6%	Legal/social maturity remains relevant
Recognised profession considered important	—	61.8%	Employment increasingly linked with marriage readiness

Girls married between survey waves in UDAYA	—	31.2%	Marriage remained significant during late adolescence
UDAYA girls married before 18	—	12.5%	Early marriage persists in high-risk contexts
UDAYA minor marriages decided by parents alone	—	54.7%	Strong parental role in early marriage
UDAYA minor marriages involving parents and girls jointly	—	38.4%	Negotiation exists even in early marriage contexts
UDAYA minor marriages selected by girls alone	—	6.9%	Independent selection remains limited

Sources: India Human Development Survey-based research; open-access study of young people's attitudes toward marriage and gender roles; UDAYA longitudinal survey of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. (PMC) The data demonstrate that the strongest transformation has not been the replacement of arranged marriage by self-selected marriage. Instead, the most substantial change has been the growth of joint selection. Joint selection increased by 15.2 percentage points between the 1970s and 2000s marriage cohorts, while parent-only selection declined by 18.6 percentage points. (PMC) This finding is sociologically important because it indicates a redistribution of authority within the family. Parents have not disappeared from the marriage process; rather, young people have become more involved in decisions that were previously more strongly controlled by parents.

VIII. YOUTH ATTITUDES TOWARDS MARRIAGE

Contemporary youth attitudes provide further evidence of this transformation. In an open-access study of 1,082 young people, 68.7 percent stated that marriage decisions should be made jointly by the couple, while 30.9 percent preferred decisions involving both parents and the couple. Only 0.5 percent preferred parents and relatives as the decision-makers. (PMC)

The findings suggest that young people increasingly value participation and autonomy. However, the 30.9 percent who preferred a joint decision involving parents and couples also demonstrates the continuing legitimacy of family participation. The evidence therefore does not support a simple opposition between individual choice and family authority. Instead, many young people appear to favour a model

in which the couple has substantial authority while parents remain involved.

IX. PARENTAL INFLUENCE AND NEGOTIATED MARRIAGE

The continued importance of parents becomes particularly clear when examining early marriage. The UDAYA longitudinal survey followed 6,168 unmarried adolescent girls aged 15–19 in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar between 2015–16 and 2018–19. During the follow-up period, 1,551 girls, representing 31.2 percent, married. Among the total baseline sample, 567 girls, or 12.5 percent, married before age 18. (PMC) The UDAYA study also found that parental discussion about school performance, friendships and personal matters was associated with delayed marriage in several statistical models. For example, after adjustment for residence, caste, religion, schooling, household wealth, state and social/digital connectivity, discussion of school performance was associated with remaining unmarried rather than early marriage, with a relative risk ratio of 1.33; discussion of friendships had a relative risk ratio of 1.37; and discussion of personal matters had a relative risk ratio of 1.29. (PMC) These findings are important because they suggest that parental engagement and parental authority are not necessarily identical. A family in which parents communicate openly with children may provide greater opportunities for young people to participate in marriage decisions.

X. INDIVIDUALISATION AND THE INDIAN FAMILY

The concept of individualisation is useful for understanding changing youth expectations.

Individualisation refers broadly to the increasing importance of personal choice, self-development and individual decision-making in social life. Education, occupational mobility and urbanisation can expand the range of choices available to young people. The spouse-selection data strongly support this interpretation. The increase in joint selection from 47.4 percent to 62.6 percent is considerably larger than the increase in self-selection from 3.0 percent to 6.4 percent. (PMC) The transformation is therefore not simply from collective decision-making to individual decision-making. It is more accurately described as a movement from unilateral authority towards negotiated authority.

Caste, Religion and Marriage Choice

Despite increasing individual participation, caste and religion remain important dimensions of marriage. The family may consider caste and religious compatibility when evaluating a potential partner. This demonstrates that individual choice operates within social structures rather than outside them. IHDS-based evidence shows that intercaste marriage increased from 3.9 percent among the 1970s marriage cohort to 5.7 percent among the 2000s cohort. (PMC) The increase is relatively modest when compared with the transformation in spouse-selection processes. This suggests that greater individual participation does not automatically lead to the disappearance of social boundaries. Young people may exercise greater autonomy while continuing to select partners within caste or religious boundaries. Marriage therefore remains an important mechanism through which social identities are reproduced. The contemporary situation involves a tension between expanding individual choice and continuing structural constraints.

Gender and Marriage Expectations

Gender remains a significant factor in the transformation of marriage. Women's educational participation has expanded and the age at marriage has increased, but marriage expectations continue to be influenced by gender norms. Young men may be expected to establish economic stability before marriage, while young women may experience expectations concerning domestic responsibilities, caregiving and family adjustment. Consequently, economic independence has different meanings for men and women. The increasing importance of

education and employment can nevertheless alter gender relations by providing women with greater economic resources and decision-making capacity. When marriage occurs after educational and occupational preparation, women may enter marriage with greater personal resources than previous generations.

At the same time, employment alone does not eliminate traditional expectations. Women may continue to experience expectations concerning household labour and caregiving even when they participate in paid employment.

Economic Independence and Marriage Expectations

The emphasis on economic independence is particularly important in contemporary youth culture. In the open-access study of young people, 76.1 percent identified economic independence as a factor affecting marriage decisions, while 72.7 percent identified completion of education and 61.8 percent identified having a recognised profession. (PMC) These findings indicate that young people increasingly perceive marriage as connected to personal preparedness. The ideal sequence may involve education, employment, economic stability and then marriage. This represents a significant departure from social contexts in which marriage was expected to occur soon after adolescence. The transition to marriage is increasingly linked with the achievement of adult status through education and employment.

Romantic Relationships and Partner Choice

Changing marriage expectations are also associated with greater visibility of romantic relationships before marriage. Young people increasingly encounter potential partners through educational institutions, workplaces, social networks and digital communication. The emergence of romantic relationships does not necessarily mean that arranged marriage has disappeared. A relationship may begin independently but subsequently be introduced into the family system for approval and negotiation. Similarly, parents may introduce potential partners but allow young adults to communicate and evaluate compatibility before making a decision. The distinction between arranged and love marriage is consequently becoming less clear. There can be multiple forms between completely parent-selected and completely self-selected marriage.

XI. DIGITALISATION AND MARRIAGE

Digital technology has introduced new possibilities for meeting and communicating with potential partners. Social networking platforms, matrimonial websites, messaging applications and other digital platforms have expanded the ways through which young adults can communicate. Digitalisation can potentially increase individual agency by allowing prospective partners to interact directly. At the same time, digital matrimonial platforms may reproduce traditional preferences by allowing searches based on caste, religion, education, occupation and family background. Technology therefore does not automatically eliminate traditional social structures. Instead, existing social norms can be transferred into new technological environments.

The Changing Meaning of Marriage

The transformation of marriage among Indian youth is also reflected in changing expectations about what marriage should provide. Marriage is increasingly associated not only with family formation and social responsibility but also with companionship, emotional compatibility, mutual respect, economic cooperation and personal development. The finding that 68.7 percent of respondents in one study believed that couples should decide about marriage together illustrates the increasing importance of mutuality and participation. (PMC)

At the same time, the continuing preference of 30.9 percent for decisions involving parents and couples demonstrates that family remains part of the contemporary understanding of marriage. (PMC) The changing meaning of marriage can therefore be understood as an expansion of expectations rather than the complete rejection of traditional expectations.

XII. DISCUSSION

The evidence presented in this study demonstrates that marriage in India is undergoing a substantial but uneven transformation. The most visible demographic change is the postponement of marriage and decline in early marriage. The proportion of women aged 20–24 married before age 18 has declined substantially over the long term, reaching 23.3 percent in NFHS-5. (UNFPA India) The median age at first marriage has also increased, indicating that young people are

spending a longer period in education, employment and pre-marital adulthood. Education and economic conditions are strongly connected with this transformation. Women with higher educational attainment have substantially lower levels of early marriage than women with no education, while wealthier households show lower levels of early marriage than poorer households. (UNFPA India) Marriage timing therefore reflects not only cultural preferences but also structural inequalities.

The most significant evidence concerning changing family relations comes from spouse selection. The increase in joint selection between women and parents from 47.4 percent to 62.6 percent, combined with the decline in parent-only selection from 49.6 percent to 31.0 percent, indicates a significant redistribution of decision-making authority. (PMC) Importantly, self-selected marriage remains comparatively limited. This means that the contemporary transformation should not be described simply as a movement from arranged marriage to love marriage. The stronger pattern is the emergence of negotiated marriage. This negotiated form of marriage allows individual preferences and family expectations to coexist. Young people may expect to have a voice in choosing a partner, while parents may continue to contribute knowledge, resources, social connections and cultural considerations.

Theoretical Interpretation

The findings can be interpreted through the sociological concepts of modernisation, individualisation and negotiated family relations. Modernisation theory would suggest that education, urbanisation, occupational mobility and economic development weaken traditional authority and increase individual choice.

The evidence provides partial support for this proposition because marriage is occurring later and young people are participating more actively in spouse selection.

The transformation can be understood as a movement from authority towards negotiation, from unilateral selection towards joint selection, from early marriage towards delayed marriage, from family-only decision-making towards family–individual participation, and from fixed marital expectations towards increasingly diverse expectations.

XIII. CONCLUSION

Youth marriage expectations in India are changing significantly, but the transformation is neither complete nor uniform. The evidence indicates a long-term decline in early marriage, increasing age at marriage, stronger emphasis on education and economic independence, and greater participation of young people in spouse selection. The most important finding is that changing Indian marriage cannot be adequately explained through a simple transition from arranged marriage to love marriage. The evidence indicates that joint decision-making has expanded much more strongly than completely independent spouse selection. (PMC)

The contemporary Indian marriage system is therefore increasingly characterised by negotiation. Young people expect greater participation in decisions concerning marriage, while parents continue to play important emotional, economic and social roles. The family remains important, but its authority is increasingly negotiated rather than automatically accepted. The demographic evidence reinforces this transformation. The decline in early marriage and increase in age at marriage indicate that young people are spending a longer period in education and economic preparation before marriage. (UNFPA India) Economic independence and educational completion are also important factors in contemporary youth expectations. (PMC)

The central sociological transformation can consequently be described as a movement from parental authority to negotiated authority, from exclusive family selection to joint selection, from early marriage to delayed marriage, and from fixed expectations to increasingly diverse expectations. This transformation reflects the changing relationship between individual aspirations and collective family life in contemporary India.

REFERENCES

- [1] K. Allendorf and R. K. Pandian, "The decline of arranged marriage? Marital change and continuity in India," *Population and Development Review*, vol. 42, no. 3, pp. 435–464, 2016. [Online]. Available: PubMed Central
- [2] International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF, *National Family Health Survey*

(NFHS-5), 2019–21: *India Report*. Mumbai, India: IIPS, 2021.

- [3] International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS), *Youth in India: An NFHS-Based Study*. Mumbai, India: IIPS, 2021.
- [4] P. Paul and K. Closson, "Is parental engagement associated with subsequent delayed marriage and marital choices of adolescent girls? Evidence from the Understanding the Lives of Adolescents and Young Adults (UDAYA) survey in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, India," *SSM – Population Health*, vol. 24, Art. no. 101523, 2023. [Online]. Available: PubMed Central
- [5] UNFPA India, *Child Marriage in India: Key Insights from the NFHS-5 (2019–21)*. United Nations Population Fund, 2022. [Online]. Available: UNFPA India Publication
- [6] UNFPA India, *State of the World Population Report 2022: Seeing the Unseen—The Case for Action in the Neglected Crisis of Unintended Pregnancy*. United Nations Population Fund, 2022. [Online]. Available: UNFPA India Report
- [7] "Young people's attitudes toward marriage, gender roles, and related factors," *PubMed Central*, 2024. [Online]. Available: PubMed Central