

THE MARRIAGE PATTERN OF SRI LANKA

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Sri Lanka's marriage pattern has in recent decades taken a different turn from the societies of most developing Asian countries. In this paper Siri Gamage, lecturer in the Department of Sociology, University of Peradeniya, comments on some of the reasons for these trends and also on previous social anthropological studies on this subject. This paper was originally prepared for the recent New York University — Siecus — Colloquium of Human Sexuality; Department of Psychiatry, Peradeniya, (hence the limited treatment of this wide subject) but the author was indisposed and unable to present it on that occasion.

Sri Lanka's marriage pattern has been studied primarily by social anthropologists (Yalman, 1971; Pieris 1956; Obeysekera, 1967; Tambiah, 1965; Leach 1961; Robinson, 1975) as a part of their general interest in the study of social institutions in Asian societies. Such social anthropological work describes the nature of 'Sinhalese Marriage', more specifically the Kandyan marriage, both in its traditional and contemporary forms. Sinhalese are the majority ethnic group in Sri Lanka, comprising 74 percent of the total population. The demographic treatment of the marriage pattern in Sri Lanka has been limited to very few studies e.g. Dixon, Ruth 1976; and Fernando, D 1975; Paranagamage, D.G. 1978. Several nationally representative sample surveys carried out by the Department of Census and Statistics plus the major census information collected by the Department also provide a reasonable data base for analysing the trends and components of Sri Lanka's marriage pattern. While such survey and census data have been utilised in assessing the levels and rates of marriage occurrence the anthropological literature on the institution of marriage provides in-depth information about various aspects of marriage such as customs, residence, dowry, endogamy and exogamy. My effort at understanding the marriage pattern in Sri Lanka is based on the findings of above sources of information and subsequent social anthropological and demographic writings on the subject.

Marriage pattern covers many aspects of the phenomenon of marriage. It includes the timing of marriage (age at marriage), quantity or proportions getting married, duration of marriage, stability and dissolution of marital unions. It can also be viewed as a social institution evolved over time within the context of specific traditions, customs, norms and a society. While demographers pay more attention to the former aspects of marital unions, the social anthropologists are mainly concerned about the latter aspects.

In Sri Lanka traditionally diga (Patrilocal) and binna (Matrilocal) marriages have been prevalent.* Pieris writes 'In Sinhalese law and

social practice, matrilocal and patrilocal marriages were distinguished. In the binna marriage, the husband lived in his wife's parental home and she had an equal interest in her parent's estate with her brothers. A binna husband had no privilege in his wife's house" (Pieris, 1956). In the case of diga marriage, the daughter lost the right to inheritance, but was entitled to maintenance in case her marriage was dissolved. However, this traditional pattern has now undergone changes and even women marrying patrilocally can inherit parental land if it is granted to them by parents.

With regard to the incidence and locality of marriage among contemporary Sinhalese, it can be stated that the patrilocal marriage is predominant. The Sinhalese family is patrilineal and patrilocal (Dixon, 1970; p. 256, p.250). Yalman's findings also indicate that the occurrence of patrilocal unions is higher than the occurrence of maerilocal unions. He states that wealthy men who are natives of the village he studied do not marry matrilocally. On the other hand poor men do settle matrilocally though the proportion is not very high. Out of 114 unions of 95 men in the poor category (on the basis of land ownership) 6.3 percent were matrilocal unions. The rest married patrilocally. On the basis of this information Yalman's generalisation is that the marriage pattern for wealthy families is mainly patrilocal and for the poorest sections of the village it is frequently matrilocal (Yalman, 1971; pp. 128-29). The patrilocality of Sinhalese marriage has also been documented by other writers on Sinhalese marriage (Ryan, B: 1953 and Robinson: 1975).

In trying to obtain a clear understanding of the institution of marriage and associated aspects among the rural Sinhalese, it is desirable to depend on the anthropological studies cited above rather than on personal, sporadic observations. The major characteristics of marriage and associated factors as

* For a detailed description of traditional Sinhalese marriage during the Kandyan period see — Pieris, Ralph; 'Sinhalese Social Organisation' part 6 1956.

found in the four villages studied by Yalman, Leach, Tambiah and Robinson have been spelled out by Robinson herself and I think it is useful to quote. "Similarity in patterns of marriage and inheritance in the four villages studied is basic: the fundamental rule of categorical cross-cousins marriage is operative; marriages between first cross-cousins are rare; caste endogamy is generally practised; intra village marriages occur mainly among the poor while inter-village marriages predominate among the wealthy, the majority of men remain in their native villages after marriage; while half or more of the women leave the village of their birth upon marriage" (Robinson, M. 1968).

Once we move away from the indepth, case study type social anthropological studies towards the demographic literature which consumes representative survey and Census data and assumes more generality, we are able to observe several salient features of Sri Lanka's marriage pattern at national level as well as at sub-group levels. One notable finding of such demographic research is the remarkable delay in the timing of marriage experienced by males and females, coupled with the significant reduction in the proportion getting married. "The average age at marriage for females rose from 18.1 years in 1901; to 20.7 in 1946; to 20.9 in 1953; to 22.1 in 1963; and 23.5 in 1971. In 1901, the male average age at marriage was 24.6 years; while in 1946 it was 27.0; and it rose to 27.2; 27.9; and 28.0 years in 1953, 1963 and 1971". (Fernando, 1975). These averages clearly show that the average age at marriage for both males and females is on the increase. Fernando's analysis further shows that the proportions of females married have declined sharply between 1901 and 1971 and among men, proportions currently married at ages 15-19, 20-24 and 25-29 have declined steadily over the years. According to the 1975 World Fertility Survey, Sri Lanka findings "the trend towards delayed marriage has continued in recent years; the Singulate Mean Age at Marriage (SMAM) for women rose from 23.5 in 1971 to 25.1 in 1975" (WFS; 1978).

With people marrying late and a relatively high proportion remaining single at higher ages, Sri Lanka's marriage pattern resembles the 'modern' type. Writing about Asian marriage patterns Smith states that the female marriage pattern in South Asia is relatively homogeneous across the countries he studied, with both early onset and a rapid tempo of entrance to marriage but in the context of this regional pattern Sri Lanka is an interesting exception with its very slow tempo.

Sri Lanka females stand near the East level on the Singulate Mean Age at Marriage (SMAM) — several years above the South Asian level (Smith, Peter; 1978).

In comparison to Thailand, which is also a Theravada Buddhist country like Sri Lanka, it is evident that Sri Lankan men and women marry later than Thais. The percentage single at the end of marriageable ages (e.g. 45-49) in Sri Lanka is higher than the percentage single at the corresponding ages of males and females in Thailand.

Several attempts have been made to understand the possible causes of the changes occurring in Sri Lanka's marriage pattern. Among them Dixon's study may be regarded as the major demographic study dealing with the nuptiality pattern in Sri Lanka utilizing national level data. She uses the Census data from the 1940s to 1963. Describing the nature of marriage timing, Dixon indicates that in 1963, 41 percent of the females aged 20-25 and 85 percent of the males were still single. Also 10 percent of the men, aged 40-44, were bachelors. Looking at the reasons for the delay in timing of marriage, Dixon concludes that it is not the non-availability of mates (sex ratio), or non-desirability, but the non-feasibility of marrying at proper ages which explains the delay in the timing of marriage. The difficulties in accumulating a dowry and finding a suitable bridegroom have become increasingly severe due to the following two reasons, according to her:

- (a) Land fragmentation and landlessness caused by the nature of inheritance laws and the acquisition of land for plantations (pp. 287-88, 263, 310).
- (b) High natural increase in the population.

"Economic conditions in rural Ceylon (Sri Lanka) excluding the estates, are not favourable for nuptiality, males of marriageable age are increasingly less likely to have inherited any land, or to be able to purchase any; if they do have an inheritance, their portion is likely to be too small to support a family. Females are increasingly less likely to bring land with them as a dowry. At the same time the rural economy is not expanding enough to provide wage paying jobs to supplement the meagre incomes from village gardens. Thus marriage for both men and women must be continuously postponed if not foregone altogether (p.256)..... That marital postponements, and in some cases permanent celibacy, have been increasingly necessary throughout the country, because of pressures on scarce land and employment is without doubt. Both men and women must wait

longer to accumulate the necessary resources to set up an independent household. Thus nuptiality is less feasible for both than it once was" (Dixon, R 1970 pp. 287-88).

Though Gunasinghe's work was not a national level study like Dixon's it utilised the same kind of approach in a micro-level study of a village in the Kandy district of Sri Lanka. His interest was rather to look at the relationship between underdevelopment and marital fertility. However, it throws light on nuptiality in so far as it relates to fertility. Gunasinghe cites several reasons as to how the peasants in Delumgoda, the village he studied, became poor over time. The colonial acquisition of villagers' land for plantations has restricted the land available to villagers. The commercialisation of agriculture, specially paddy cultivation, motivated the villagers to sell the surplus paddy in the market which would otherwise have gone to the village poor. The traditional social order which helped the poor was disrupted, and wage labour came into being in place of old forms of employment like share cropping and labour exchange. According to his data, 55.7 per cent of the heads of households do not own any paddy land 69 per cent do not own any high land (defined as land except house and garden) and 19 per cent do not have legal title to their houses. Only 21 per cent of householders are employed on a regular basis in the modern sector and earn monthly salaries.

One of the drawbacks in Gunasinghe's study is that he does not define the "real poor segment" in Delumgoda, e.g. he talks about the percentage of households that does not own high land, paddy land, houses or hold employment in the modern sector earning a monthly salary. No idea is given as to how many of these families belong to all the four categories. Since these categories are not mutually exclusive the point here is that those who do not have land at all may have employment. If Gunasinghe defined the real poor peasant category which is denied any of these forms of wealth or employment, and their marital status and timing, then he would have been in a better position to conclude whether the delayed marriages were a result of lack of resources or not. Since he did not mention the number of people who get a reasonable income through land, farming or any other occupation like carpentry, or masonry, the number of unemployed also seems to be little exaggerated. However, it should be observed that the information he provides is valuable to identify the elements of rural society of Sri Lanka in the 70s. Though there may be doubt in

Gunasinghe's statistical reasoning as to whether it supports his argument, and the statistics themselves are insufficient to identify the category of "real poor" peasants in Delumgoda, his arguments and conclusions are important for our task. In his conclusion he states "I demonstrated the casual relationship between the high proportions of unmarried women and the underdeveloped economy, which is incapable of generating sufficient employment opportunities" (Gunasinghe; 1977, p.151).

The higher age at marriage, coupled with a relatively higher percentage of those who never marry, conforms with the two major characteristics of what demographers call a 'non-traditional nuptiality pattern'. In Dixon's words Ceylon (Sri Lanka) is the purest example of "a non-traditional nuptiality pattern in Asia that cannot be attributed to a larger immigrant population or a highly urban environment" (Dixon, 1970, p.258). The question at issue here then is why should a nuptiality pattern, usually found in societies with a higher level of development, be found in a country like Sri Lanka which is at a different level of development. This issue needs more investigation by researchers before any firm answer could be found. However, Dixon's and Gunasinghe's studies confirm that the conditions of underdevelopment in Sri Lanka have in the timing contributed to the upward changes in the timing of marriage.

This kind of conclusion is in complete contradiction to the assumptions of the 'demographic transition theory' (DTT) which summarises the European and lately some of the non-European experience in relation to nuptiality and fertility trends. The DTT postulates that the increase in the age at marriage and reductions in fertility are consequences of an economically developed state of a society with a higher level of urbanisation etc.

The differentials in age at marriage and the proportion single reveal some interesting facts as to how the delay in timing of marriage has been operating among different social groups. If we look at the 1975 World Fertility Survey, Sri Lanka (WFSS) data it can be seen that the overall mean age at marriage was 18.2 years for the women interviewed during the survey. The mean for women living in estates is 17.3; which is about a year and a half earlier than for women living in urban areas for whom the mean is 18.8. For women from rural areas the mean age at marriage was intermediate. As for ethnic differentials, the Sri Lankan Moors had a mean of 16.5 which is two years younger than the mean for Sinhalese (18.6).

The Indian Tamils had a mean of 17.2 and Sri Lanka Tamils 17.5. Religious differentials more or less follow the same pattern as the ethnic differentials, according to the survey results. The rise in the mean age at marriage is greatest among Sinhalese Buddhists and for women with lower levels of education. Age at marriage by zone, according to Paranagama, shows that the females in the dry zone married nearly 3 years earlier than the females in the wet zone, and the urban rural difference in age at marriage within the zones seems less significant than zonal differences (Paranagama, 1978). However, the general finding in the demographic research is that the women living in urban areas enter marriage later than their counterparts living in rural areas. The early age at marriage reported for the dry zone may be a reflection of this pattern.

Regarding the stability of the institution of marriage in Sri Lanka we could state that marriage in Sri Lanka is a relatively stable institution, with very low levels of widowhood, divorce or separation as means of marital dissolution. The WFSS results show that widowhood and divorce or separation stood at 6 percent each for all women who entered marriage. Out of all married women interviewed during this survey, 96 percent had been married only once and 88 percent were still in their first marriage (WFS, Summary 1978). Here we should not forget however, that many marriage dissolutions occur in Sri Lanka, especially in the rural sector without necessarily reporting them to the authorities and the rates usually worked out on the basis of data reported to the Registrar General of Births, Marriages and Deaths have to be used with enough attention to this fact. In fact, traditionally the Customary marriage was never registered and even today some of the old couples live together without registering their marriages. Legally, both males and females can contract a marriage on their own at the minimum age of 21 years. Below this age parental consent has to be obtained for marriage. At present spouse selection is made on the basis of two major lines. (a) Arrangement by parents, relatives or friends. (b) Contracting by the partners. Whichever manner one follows, the spouse selection is made on the basis of certain criteria. Ryan (1953) identified that the spouse selection is made on the basis of five fundamental rigid criteria and three balancing factors. The five criteria are ethnicity, caste, age differentials, bride's virginity and horoscope matching. The balancing factors include girl's family dowry power, the security and occupation of the groom, and the status of family lines. These factors are more look-

ed into when marriages are arranged rather than when contracted.

There is very little interethnic group marriage taking place in Sri Lanka. For example inter-ethnic marriages constituted only about 3 percent of those registered each year during the period 1960-1975 (Fernando, 1980). Within various ethnic groups inter-caste marriages do occur in contemporary Sri Lanka and their occurrence now seems to be on the increase. The considerations of education, employment, income and life style cut across caste boundaries very often. However, caste endogamy is still practiced within each Caste group by those who can afford to. This is more true in arranging marriages for their children by parents rather than in the case of contracting. "Although selecting a partner from the same religious group is usual, departures from this practice are not uncommon where one partner embraces the faith of the other or where differences in religious faiths are compatible with marriage. However, the extent of inter-religious marriages cannot be ascertained since the Registrar General does not maintain such statistics. But such marriages are believed to be more numerous than marriages between ethnic groups" (Fernando, 1980: p.434).

Apart from the tradition-oriented factors, there are also factors such as education which seem to influence the age of marriage in Sri Lanka. School attendance keeps both men and women out of the marriage market during their schooling period and the attitudinal changes brought about during this period could further postpone the entrance to marriage.

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Formal education in Sri Lanka is relatively free and open, compared to other societies in the South Asian region. As a source of to seek employment in the present context; and to be more competitive in the job market, women seek more education which eventually delays their marriage.

Finally it could be stated that the marriage pattern in Sri Lanka is characterised by a relatively late timing of marriage both for males and females and a relatively high percentage of spinsterhood or celibacy. (Though spinsterhood or Celibacy (Permanent non-marriage) stood at relatively higher levels, most recent findings show that the level has declined (Census; 1981). The proportions getting married has also declined among the younger age groups, conforming to this same trend. Standard indices of marriage timing such as SMAM, Mean Age at Marriage, and even the components of the marriage pattern such as a K.C. prove the same. The educational, employment and income factors coupled with tradition-oriented considerations of caste, ethnicity, religion dowry etc. seem to be major influences in the observed delay in the timing of marriage. In more general terms, the socio-economic and cultural conditions prevailing, in the context of Sri Lanka's relative economic underdevelopment contributes towards the creation of certain attitudinal and behavioural consequences as may be seen in the case of marriage in Sri Lanka. However, once a marriage is arranged or contracted, it seems to be stable; since the level of marriage dissolution prevalent here is low.