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Gender Scripts and Age at Marriage in India

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These results are based on India Human Development Survey, 2004-05. This survey was jointly organized by researchers at University of Maryland and the National Council of Applied Economic Research. The data collection was funded by grants R01HD041455 and R01HD046166 from the National Institutes of Health to University of Maryland. Part of the sample represents a resurvey of households initially conducted in the course of India Human Development Survey 1993-94 conducted by NCAER.

The tables presented in this abstract are based on preliminary unweighted analaysis.

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Abstract:

While it has been long recognized in the feminist discourse that marriage is one of the key institutional sites for production and reproduction of hierarchical gender relations, demographic literature on marriage patterns in developing countries has rarely explored this insight. This deficiency can be attributed to conceptual shortcomings as well as difficulties in obtaining appropriate data. This paper uses data from the newly collected India Human Development Survey, 2005 for over 40,000 households around the country to explore ways in which gender scripts regarding valuation of women's modesty and separation of male and female sphere shapes the decisions regarding age at marriage across different regions and different social classes.

Introduction:

While it has been long recognized in the feminist discourse that marriage is one of the key institutional sites for production and reproduction of hierarchical gender relations, demographic literature on marriage patterns in developing countries has rarely explored this insight. This deficiency can be attributed to conceptual shortcomings as well as difficulties in obtaining appropriate data.

Conceptually demographic research has done well with micro level analysis but macro analysis has been much harder. For example, within a given society, demographers do a good job of predicting which group of people will have more children and which group will have fewer children. The underlying models of fertility behavior, while not perfect, seem to perform reasonably well. But when it comes to predicting the route a whole society would take, or why United States has higher fertility than Western Europe, the field still seems to be evolving. Applying the same logic to research on nuptiality i.e. age at marriage, type of union and union stability, in societies where decisions are made by individuals, micro level analysis can be very fruitful. Hence, research in the United States and Europe on ways in which individual men and women negotiate deeply

personal decisions about marital formation and dissolution have yield some interesting results as well as debates (Oppenheimer 1997; Ruggles 1997).

However, in societies where marital decisions are not made by individuals but by corporate families, demographic research has been faced with greater difficulties with most research focusing on kinship structure and economic strategies of the family with marriage alliance, choice of eligible partners and marriage timing being subsumed under research on political economy of the family (Fricke, Syed, and Smith 1986; Thornton and Fricke 1987; Peletz 1995). Adding gender to this mix has not been easy because within this context, it would be difficult to see gendered behavior as an attribute of a family, it would have to be seen as a something that pervades a host of social institutions and cultural climate, making it difficult to fit into the comparative static framework popular among demographers. Even the path breaking study on gender and kinship in India by Dyson and Moore (1983), ultimately focused far more on kinship and treated gender as an element in kinship structure rather than something worthy of investigation in its own right (Dyson and Moore 1983).

Issues of micro-macro linkages are at the forefront of demographic and sociological thinking and there is no inherent reason why social institutions shaping gendered behavior and their links with nuptiality patterns should not form a subject of demographic research. In fact, a variety of micro-demographic and ethnographic studies have attempted to study the link between social institutions and demographic outcomes including marriage patterns (Fricke 1986; Caldwell, Reddy, and Caldwell 1983; Fricke, Axinn, and Thornton 1993). While these studies have provided many interesting insights and generated interesting hypotheses, lack of empirical data on a range of societies makes it difficult to examine these hypotheses within a quantitative framework controlling for other confounding influences.

Our research on India provides an interesting opportunity to augment this research. India is a highly heterogeneous country with tremendous differences in age at marriage, marriage and kinship patterns, gender roles and ideologies and economic structures across states. Even within a single state, there can be enormous differences across different regions, for example South Kanara in southern Karnataka is matrilineal society with gender norms closer to Kerala while northern Karnataka follows far more restrictive gender norms. We are fortunate to have access to newly collected India Human Development Survey 2005, spanning 40,000 households over all 25 states and union territories of India (with the exception of Andaman and Nicobar). This survey was conducted by researchers from University of Maryland and the National Council of Applied Economic research and was funded by the National Institute of Health. It was specifically designed to study various dimensions of gender-in-action and since the data were to be collected from ever married women aged 15-49 in structured interviews, considerable attention was directed to framing questions which would provide information that would meaningfully tap into various dimensions of gender roles and gendered opportunity structures within the Indian context.

Gender Scripts and Marriage Timing:

While India has been undergoing a variety of demographic and economic changes in recent years, marriage remains a subject of great importance to the corporate family. As Table 1 suggests, less than 5 percent of our respondents had the primary role in choosing their husbands. Although 48% of the women were consulted in this choice, it is difficult to see how meaningful this consultation was since only 11 percent met their husbands at least a month before the wedding and 70 percent only met their husbands on the day of their wedding.

One of the greatest concerns for most parents is to arrange a marriage for their daughter in a “good” family where she would thrive. While the definition of “good

marriage" may vary across families, there is a universal concern that nothing should damage the value of a daughter in the marriage market. Popular literature, films and social science literature all emphasize a fear of women's sexuality, particularly among upper class, upper caste families, and argue that even a possibility that the bride may not be a virgin reduces her desirability to her prospective parents-in-law. In practice, a girl does not even have to be sexual active to be labeled promiscuous. Simple contact and platonic friendship with the opposite sex can be enough to damage her reputation(Lindenbaum 1981; Caldwell, Reddy, and Caldwell 1983; Caldwell et al. 1998). Thus a long gap between puberty and marriage is seen as a risky period by parents who seek to minimize this risk by arranging an early marriage. This desire to avoid risks conflicts heads on with parental desire to let their daughters mature before facing the pressures of the married life and increasing public consensus about the undesirability of child marriages. Consequently, while the age at marriage in India has been rising, much of the change has come from a decline in child marriage with a majority of the women continuing to marry before the legal minimum age of 18. Table 2 shows that while the mean age at marriage rose in India between 1961 and 1999 it is still only 19.7 years for India as a whole.

However, this concern with women's sexual purity is neither universal nor predominant across class and geographic boundaries. Reification of women's modesty is the privilege of upper social classes, and higher caste status is often demonstrated through such reification. Lower class and lower caste women rarely have the privilege of secluding themselves. Similarly, casual contact with men is viewed with much greater fear in certain areas of the country than others. We seek to better understand the role this fear of women's sexuality and immodesty plays in shaping marriage patterns via an examination of these differences across different cultural contexts. Fortunately for our purposes, India provides a fascinating laboratory of different gender and sexual scripts,

allowing us to test our hypothesis that early marriage is a part and parcel of gender scripts in which women's sexuality is feared and their modesty becomes a conduit through which family honor is viewed.

Our focus on sexual scripts emphasizes a concern with women's sexuality and chastity but is quite distinct from other measures of women's empowerment such as their control over resources or general power in household decision making (Mukhopadhyay and Higgins 1988; Mason 1986). Thus, we argue that age at marriage will be lower in areas and in communities where there is a greater concern with women's sexuality and where there is greater segregation of men and women in separate spheres but other dimensions of gender relations will not have an impact on age at marriage.

Sexual scripts is a theoretically meaningful concept but one that is difficult to operationalize. In the Indian context, a variety of anthropological studies have pointed to separation of male and female spheres as a key ingredient in this(Papanek 1973; Mendelbaum 1988). Our survey includes several measures of separation between the sexes: (1) Practice of purdah/ghunghat; (2) Ease with which women can visit shops, temples and health centers; and (3) Ease of communication between men and women in a household as measured by eating primary meals together. We also measure women's economic empowerment by asking questions about: (1) Access to cash for household expenses; (2) Women being title holders in home ownership or rental agreements; and (3) Women's role in household decision making. We argue that if sexual scripts have a distinct role in shaping parental preferences for appropriate age at marriage for their daughters, district level indices measuring sexual scripts should have a far greater impact on age at marriage than other aspects of women's lives such as economic empowerment.

Table 3 provides an interesting corroboration for this argument by documenting tremendous differences in age at marriage across different Indian states. Interestingly, these differences are not always commensurate with the economic status of these states

nor does it fit neatly into the north-south divide observed in other demographic phenomena in India. The northern state of Punjab has higher age at marriage than the southern state of Andhra Pradesh and one communist state Kerala has median age at marriage of 20 while the other communist state West Bengal has a median age of 17. This suggests that exploring the link between sexual scripts and age at marriage may provide an interesting analytical handle in explaining some of these inter-state differences.

Preliminary Results:

Our ultimate goal is to analyze these data using hierarchical linear models. However, preliminary analysis with ordinary least squares regression supports our arguments. Table 4 shows results from three models. This analysis is based on ever married women age 25-49. By age 25, more than 95 percent of Indian women are married, reducing selection bias in our results. This yields a final sample of about 27,000 women spread all across India. While we control for basic individual level factors as predictors in marriage timing, most of our theoretical interest is centered around social institutions indexed by proportion of women experiencing gender segregation and economic empowerment in a district.

Model 1 in Table 4 indicates that while age (indicating birth cohort), caste, household economic status and education affect women's age at marriage, it is the state level variables that dominate this equation. The addition of our markers of sexual scripts – measured at the district level – substantially reduce these state level differences and are statistically significant in their own right. Areas where women have greater physical mobility, where they are less likely to be segregated and veiled and where they are more likely to eat with the men in their households have higher age at marriage and some of these coefficients are large in size. The addition of other empowerment measures such as women's access to cash, women's name on home title or rental papers or higher role in

household decision making does not has a significant impact on age at marriage and the coefficients are small in size.

While the preliminary results presented here are highly suggestive, the final paper will examine intra-district and intra-social class differences in age at marriage using hierarchical linear models estimated using HLM.

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Table 1: Singulate Mean Age at Marriage of Females in India, 1961-1999

Census year	**Singulate Mean Age at Marriage for Females**		
	Rural	Urban	Total
1961	15.7	17.9	16.1
1971	16.7	19.2	17.2
1981	17.8	20.1	18.4
1991	18.7	20.7	19.3
1998-99 NFHS-2	19.0	21.5	19.7

Table 2. Prevalence of Arranged Marriage in India			
	% of women who chose their husband	% of women who had a say in choosing their husband	% of women who met their husband at least 1 month before marriage
Education			
0	3.44	48.15	10.35
1-5	4.35	62.07	14.80
6-10	5.39	74.73	19.36
11-12	5.97	81.02	21.79
13-15	8.40	88.03	25.93
Urban	3.89	58.78	15.25
Age Cohort			
25-30	5.00	61.83	14.87
31-35	4.12	61.91	15.05
36-40	4.27	59.96	14.09
41-45	4.37	60.13	13.95
46-49	3.71	56.10	14.86
Total	3.48	47.77	11.47

Table 3: Gender Segregation and Women's Economic Independence by State

	Gender Segregation			Women's Economic Independence Factors		
	Median	Mean			Mean	
	Age at Marriage	Purdah	Eating separately	No. of places can not go alone	Decision Making Index	Cash on Hand	Name on Housing Title
Jammu & Kashmir	19	0.8	0.37	0.56	0.98	0.78	0.14
Himachal Pradesh	18	0.42	0.28	0.52	1.03	0.91	0.21
Punjab	19	0.37	0.39	0.55	0.82	0.87	0.06
Uttaranchal	18	0.41	0.49	0.62	0.85	0.91	0.27
Haryana	18	0.78	0.62	0.53	0.52	0.96	0.1
Delhi	19	0.43	0.39	0.39	0.76	0.97	0.26
Rajasthan	16	0.93	0.75	1.16	0.48	0.82	0.1
Uttar Pradesh	16	0.84	0.82	1.05	0.56	0.91	0.16
Bihar	15	0.83	0.95	1.51	0.7	0.92	0.21
Meghalaya	19	0.29	0.26	0.23	2.07	0.78	0.2
Assam	19	0.72	0.57	0.81	0.83	0.72	0.09
West Bengal	17	0.68	0.35	0.6	0.83	0.65	0.09
Jharkhand	17	0.55	0.72	1.08	0.81	0.9	0.11
Orissa	17	0.63	0.9	0.71	0.63	0.8	0.04
Chhatishgarh	17	0.55	0.49	0.82	0.31	0.83	0.04
Madhya Pradesh	16	0.92	0.53	1.19	0.4	0.76	0.18
Gujarat	18	0.73	0.13	0.48	0.6	0.95	0.55
Maharashtra	18	0.39	0.22	0.33	0.71	0.9	0.13
Andhra Pradesh	16	0.12	0.55	0.54	0.6	0.97	0.14
Karnataka	18	0.12	0.34	0.62	0.6	0.81	0.34
Goa	24	0.05	0.32	0.31	0.36	0.94	0.13
Kerala	20	0.16	0.17	0.34	0.73	0.43	0.22
Tamil Nadu	19	0.08	0.27	0.45	1.65	0.92	0.14

Table 4: Regression Coefficients for Factors affecting age at marriage in India

	Model 1 Background Variables		Model 2 Add Gender Segr. Vars		Model 3 Add Economic Vars	
	Coeff.	**S.E.**	**Coeff.**	**S.E.**	**Coeff.**	**S.E.**
Urban Residence	0.427	(3.59)**	0.216	-1.93	0.241	(2.43)*
Women's Age	0.006	-0.65	0.005	-0.63	0.005	-0.62
Education grade1-6 (illiterate omitted)	0.509	(5.17)**	0.507	(5.45)**	0.51	(5.40)**
Education grade7-9	1.261	(16.27)**	1.25	(17.32)**	1.251	(17.43)**
Education grade10-11	2.303	(17.01)**	2.274	(17.21)**	2.267	(18.16)**
Education grade12-15	3.265	(20.51)**	3.224	(20.12)**	3.217	(21.06)**
Educ. grade 15 and above	4.994	(22.82)**	4.948	(22.76)**	4.945	(22.90)**
Household Assets	0.715	(2.10)*	0.695	(2.05)*	0.712	(2.16)*
Other Backward						
Classes (upper caste omitted)	-0.388	(2.71)*	-0.374	(2.60)*	-0.383	(2.80)**
Scheduled Caste	-0.604	(5.38)**	-0.595	(5.30)**	-0.594	(5.29)**
Scheduled Tribe	-0.019	-0.08	-0.09	-0.41	-0.09	-0.42
Muslim	-0.199	-0.52	-0.166	-0.49	-0.173	-0.5
Sikh,Christian,Jain	0.634	(2.25)*	0.573	(2.32)*	0.558	(2.28)*
J & K (Uttar Pradesh omitted)	2.874	(16.94)**	2.341	(9.02)**	2.359	(6.41)**
Himachal Pradesh	1.799	(19.01)**	0.723	(2.09)*	0.801	(2.16)*
Punjab	2.643	(20.39)**	1.676	(5.04)**	1.705	(5.30)**
Uttaranchal	0.977	(21.48)**	0.188	-0.77	0.244	-0.83
Haryana	1.009	(13.09)**	0.827	(5.06)**	0.787	(3.68)**
Delhi	1.626	(16.46)**	0.876	(3.36)**	0.9	(3.54)**
Rajasthan	-0.463	(10.18)**	-0.414	(8.74)**	-0.471	(5.86)**
Bihar	-0.666	(10.37)**	-0.55	(4.48)**	-0.489	(2.78)**
Meghalaya	3.267	(4.51)**	2.096	(3.02)**	2.383	(2.94)**
Assam	2.879	(44.83)**	2.5	(19.02)**	2.494	(9.12)**
West Bengal	1.125	(40.50)**	0.454	-1.97	0.412	-1.05
Jharkhand	1.079	(14.10)**	0.668	(3.72)**	0.72	(3.45)**
Orissa	1.972	(17.92)**	1.815	(8.32)**	1.794	(6.60)**
Chhatishgarh	0.214	-1.8	-0.435	-1.81	-0.541	-1.94
Madhya Pradesh	-0.101	-1.39	-0.269	-1.96	-0.369	-1.55
Gujarat	1.668	(22.55)**	0.871	(2.68)*	0.86	-1.77
Maharashtra	1.175	(15.99)**	0.098	-0.28	0.089	-0.26
Andhra Pradesh	-0.125	(2.08)*	-1.211	(3.27)**	-1.183	(3.10)**
Karnataka	1.095	(15.86)**	-0.169	-0.43	-0.193	-0.42
Goa	6.212	(51.12)**	4.94	(11.28)**	4.885	(10.80)**
Kerala	2.859	(36.71)**	1.443	(3.43)**	1.317	-1.71
Tamil Nadu	2.72	(27.12)**	1.334	(3.04)**	1.577	(2.95)**
Dist. Level Gender Seg. Factors						
Proportion practicing purdah			-1.125	(2.31)*	-1.084	(2.16)*
Proportion of Households where men			-1.044	(2.21)*	-1.075	(2.07)*
& women do not eat together						
Score on number of places women			-0.063	-0.22	-0.099	-0.29
can not go alone						
Dist. Level Econ. & Social Ind. Factors						
Proportion having cash on hand					-0.307	-0.26
Proportion of women with their name						
on housing title					-0.043	-0.05
Mean on Decision Making Index					-0.24	-0.67
Constant	15.3	(53.08)**	17.197	(28.75)**	17.645	(15.02)**
Observations	27320		27320		27320	
R-squared	0.31		0.31		0.32	
Robust t statistics in parentheses						
* significant at 5%; ** significant at 1%						