

THE FRACTURING INSTITUTION: ANALYSING THE DECLINE OF TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

by

Ojasvi Vijay

Symbiosis Law School, Nagpur

ABSTRACT

Today traditional arranged marriages in India, which was historically a sacred and indissoluble union between families rather than just individuals, is now undergoing a significant transformation. This Research paper addresses the question to what extent have demographic imbalances, economic transformations, educational expansion, and technological disruptions contributed to the major decline of traditional arranged marriage in India as a universal institution, and how do these factors vary across class, region, and gender. Synthesizing data from the National Family Health Survey-5, National Sample Survey, Census records (1971–2011), and ethnographic studies, the paper identifies four primary drivers: Structural demographic imbalance creating 39 million surplus grooms, Economic liberalisation producing urban-rural divergence in marriage timing, Female educational expansion altering assortative mating and delaying marriage among educated women, and Dating applications enabling partner selection beyond caste boundaries. This paper argues that rather than uniform decline, India is experiencing polarised restructuring among disadvantaged populations that is rural, less-educated, lower-caste, marriage remains nearly universal but increasingly distressed (bride shortage, dowry inflation, cross-region migration) among privileged populations (urban, highly educated, wealthy), marriage is becoming selective, delayed, and increasingly questioned. This divergence has significant implications for gender relations, family policy, and social welfare in the world's most populous nation.

Keywords: *Marriage decline, Demographic transition, Delayed marriage, Bride shortage*

1. Introduction

For millennia, marriage in Indian society has constituted far more than a private romantic arrangement. It has served as the primary mechanism for property transfer, caste reproduction, social network formation, and legitimate procreation. Unlike Western individualistic marriage models, the traditional Hindu conception of *vivaha* is a sacrament (*samskara*) obligatory for spiritual fulfilment, with ceremonies designed to unite not just a bride and groom but their entire kinship networks¹. Arranged marriages, wherein families mediate partner selection based on caste, religion, economic status, and astrological compatibility, have historically accounted for the vast majority of unions².

This resilience is well documented empirically. Successive rounds of the India Human Development Survey found that only around five to six per cent of Indian marriages crossed caste lines, a proportion that showed no meaningful increase between the 1970s and 2011-12. It is against this backdrop of institutional stability that the more recent shifts examined in this paper appear especially significant.³

Yet contemporary India presents a paradox. Even as the country experiences rapid economic growth, urbanisation, and educational expansion factors typically associated with the 'second demographic transition' observed in Western societies marriage remains nearly universal. Over 97% of Indian women marry by age 30⁴. However, beneath this surface of universality lie seismic shifts: the average age at marriage has risen significantly, divorce rates in urban areas have increased by approximately 200% over two decades, live-in relationships are gaining legal and social acceptance, and an estimated 39 million men may never marry due to structural bride shortages⁵.

This research paper focuses on a central research question: **To what extent have demographic imbalances, economic transformations, educational expansion, and technological disruptions contributed to the major decline of traditional arranged marriage in India as**

¹ W J Goode, *World Revolution and Family Patterns* (Free Press 1963) 45.

² Research Scholar and Research Guide, 'The Role of Education and Career in Shaping Preferences for Love and Arranged Marriages in Gujarat's Urban Society' (2024) Zenodo 3.

³ Rukmini S, 'Just 5% of Marriages in India Are Inter-Caste, Says Report' (Scroll.in, 13 May 2016) <<https://scroll.in/article/807948/just-5-of-marriages-in-india-are-inter-caste-says-report>> accessed 20 April 2026.

⁴ National Family Health Survey-5 (2019–21) (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2022) 234.

⁵ N Praveen and S Siddhanta, "'Unmatched': From Skewed Births to a Structural Surplus of Grooms' (2026) arXiv preprint 11.

a universal institution, and how do these factors vary across class, region, and gender?

The answer, this paper argues, lies in distinguishing between *incidence* and *institutional form*. While most of the Indians now still marry but, the *nature* of their marriage—how partners are selected, when unions occur, and how they sustain them, and whether they are seen as permanent—has now undergone such a fundamental transformation. The institution is not collapsing but fracturing along lines of class, education, geography, and gender.

The following paper proceeds as mentioned. Section 2 (Reviews theoretical frameworks for understanding marriage decline). Section 3 (Analyses demographic and economic drivers.) Section 4 (Examines socio-cultural transformations including changing gender roles and technological disruption.) Section 5 (Presents regional and class-based variations.) Section 6 (Discusses implications and concludes with answers to the research question.)

2. Theoretical Framework: Beyond the 'Decline' Narrative

2.1 Conceptualising Institutional Change

Scholarship on marriage in India has moved beyond simplistic narratives of Westernisation or cultural collapse. Following Goode's classic theory of family change, industrialisation and urbanisation were predicted to weaken extended kinship systems and shift authority from elders to nuclear couples⁶. However, India's trajectory has proven more complex. Caldwell, Reddy and Caldwell demonstrated that Indian family patterns exhibit 'semi-autonomous' change, wherein economic transformations alter marriage practices without fully dissolving traditional structures⁷.

More recent frameworks emphasise *stratified reproduction*—the idea that different social classes experience family change differently⁸. As this paper will demonstrate, educated urban elites are pioneering delayed marriage, companionate partner selection, and greater acceptance

⁶ W J Goode, *World Revolution and Family Patterns* (Free Press 1963) 78.

⁷ J C Caldwell, P H Reddy and P Caldwell, *The Causes of Demographic Change: Experimental Research in South India* (University of Wisconsin Press 1988) 112

⁸ S Barik, 'Delayed Family Formation and Rising Childlessness in India' (2026) International Institute for Population Sciences 8.

of divorce, while rural and lower-caste populations face distinct pressures including bride shortages and marriage migration.

2.2 The Demographic Transition and Marriage Markets

Demographic approaches to marriage emphasise supply-side dynamics. The child sex ratio in India, measured as girls per 1,000 boys aged 0 to 6, has remained persistently skewed, falling from 945 in 1991 to 927 in 2001, and further to 919 in 2011, due to sex-selective abortion and, historically, differential neglect of female children⁹. As these cohorts reach marriageable age, a structural surplus of men emerges. Under conditions of universal marriage and monogamy, such imbalances inevitably leave substantial numbers of men unable to find wives¹⁰.

However, demographic factors alone cannot explain institutional change. As Das Gupta and Li argue, skewed sex ratios interact with economic stratification, dowry practices, and migration patterns to produce complex marriage market outcomes¹¹. Data from the National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-21) suggest some easing of this imbalance at the aggregate population level, recording an adult sex ratio of 1,020 females per 1,000 males, driven mainly by lower female mortality at older ages.¹² The surplus groom phenomenon, detailed in Section 3.2, has generated cascading effects including cross-region marriage migration, rising dowry demands in some contexts, and, paradoxically, delayed marriage among educated men who can afford to be selective.

Journal of Multi-Disciplinary
Legal Research

3. Demographic and Consistent Economic Drivers

3.1 Economic Liberalisation and Importance Marriage Timing

The 1991 economic reforms, which dismantled protectionist trade barriers and integrated India into global markets, produced heterogeneous effects on marriage patterns across regions and sectors. Using district-level panel data from five waves of Indian censuses (1971–2011),

⁹ Office of the Registrar General, 'Child Sex Ratio' (Census of India 2011).

¹⁰ M Das Gupta and S Li, 'Gender Bias in China, South Korea and India 1920–1990: The Effects of War, Famine and Fertility Decline' (1999) 30(3) *Development and Change* 619, 625.

¹¹ M Das Gupta and S Li, 'Gender Bias in China, South Korea and India 1920–1990: The Effects of War, Famine and Fertility Decline' (1999) 30(3) *Development and Change* 619, 630.

¹² National Family Health Survey-5 (2019–21) (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2022) 189.

Sengupta and Azam exploit variation in tariff reductions across industries to identify causal impacts on marriage rates¹³. Their findings reveal striking urban-rural divergence.

In urban areas, districts experiencing larger tariff cuts saw *increases* in marriage rates among young adults aged 15–34. This counterintuitive finding—economic liberalisation associated with *more* marriage, not less—reflects the positive effect of trade-induced employment growth for both young men and women. When young people secure stable urban employment, they become marriageable earlier, and families become willing to invest in wedding expenses¹⁴. However, the same study finds no effect of tariff cuts on rural marriage rates, suggesting that rural marriage markets remain governed by distinct dynamics, including agricultural cycles and kinship obligations¹⁵.

Fertility responses to trade liberalisation also diverged: tariff cuts *reduced* fertility rates primarily in rural areas, where economic uncertainty and changing opportunity costs of childbearing appear most pronounced¹⁶. This finding suggests that even as rural marriage rates remained stable, the *character* of marital unions—including fertility decisions within marriage—shifted significantly.

3.2 The Structural Surplus of Grooms

Perhaps the most dramatic demographic transformation affecting Indian marriage markets is the emergence of a massive surplus of marriage-age men. Praveen and Siddhanta develop a novel Surplus Groom Index that improves upon crude fertility-based estimates by incorporating early-life mortality and cohort progression. Using 2011 Census data, they estimate that approximately 11% of men aged 15–54—roughly 39 million individuals—cannot marry due to bride shortage.

Critically, this imbalance is not confined North Indian states. While Punjab records the highest deficit at 33% of men who are unable to marry, states often considered demographically progressive show substantial imbalances: Kerala at 18%, West Bengal at 14%, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu at 11% each. This widespread pattern reflects a demographic mechanism: declining

¹³ S Sengupta and M Azam, 'The Effect of Trade Liberalization on Marriage and Fertility: Evidence from Indian Census' (2025) 77(3) Oxford Economic Papers 653, 658.

¹⁴ S Sengupta and M Azam, 'The Effect of Trade Liberalization on Marriage and Fertility: Evidence from Indian Census' (2025) 77(3) Oxford Economic Papers 653, 665.

¹⁵ S Sengupta and M Azam, 'The Effect of Trade Liberalization on Marriage and Fertility: Evidence from Indian Census' (2025) 77(3) Oxford Economic Papers 653, 670.

¹⁶ S Sengupta and M Azam, 'The Effect of Trade Liberalization on Marriage and Fertility: Evidence from Indian Census' (2025) 77(3) Oxford Economic Papers 653, 672.

fertility produces smaller female cohorts that cannot absorb male-heavy cohorts from earlier birth years. Even balanced sex ratios at birth do not ensure equilibrium once fertility declines and marriage are delayed.

The consequences of this groom surplus extend far beyond individual celibacy. Bride shortage has generated cross-region marriage migration, wherein men from bride-deficit North Indian states travel to East Indian states such as West Bengal and Odisha to find wives¹⁷. These marriages often involve lower-caste brides, breach traditional endogamy rules, and exist in a legal grey zone between 'arranged marriage' and 'bride trafficking'. Kukreja's ethnographic research across 246 villages documents how poverty, heightened dowry demands in local markets, and demographic pressure compromise women into such matrimonies—even as many brides exercise agency in arranging chain migrations for relatives¹⁸.

The scale of this migration is considerable. A field study conducted by the NGO Drishti Stree Adhyayan Prabodhan Kendra found that over 9,000 of 10,000 surveyed married women in parts of rural Haryana had been brought in from other states, most commonly Assam, Bihar, West Bengal, Odisha and Jharkhand. Such figures indicate that cross-region marriage migration is not a marginal phenomenon but a structural feature of marriage markets in India's most bride-deficit states.¹⁹

3.3 Education, Assortative Mating, and Age Gaps

Educational expansion—particularly among women—has fundamentally altered the matching process in Indian marriage markets. Using National Sample Survey data from 2004–05 and 2011–12, Praveen, Singh and Sharma identify an inverted U-shaped relationship between women's education and spousal age gaps. Keeping husband's education constant at graduation level, the age gap between spouses first widens as wife's education increases from primary to secondary levels, then narrows as wife's education reaches postgraduate levels.

This pattern reflects competing dynamics. In rural India, the rising prosperity and educational hypergamy (women 'marrying up' to more educated men) initially widen age gaps here, as educated men delay marriage to establish careers while seeking younger, less educated brides.

¹⁷ Guérin, A Natal, C J Nordman and G Venkatasubramanian, 'For Money Can't Buy Me Love? The Political Economy of Marriages over Two Decades in Tamil Nadu, South India' (2024) HAL Sorbonne Université 22.

¹⁸ R Kukreja, 'Trafficked or Married? Unpacking Dispossession of Matrimonial Choice in Cross-Region Marriage Migration in India' (2024) 59(7) *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 2170, 2175.

¹⁹ 'In India, a Shortage of Women Generates Demand for Trafficked Brides' *Foreign Affairs* (New York, 26 June 2023) <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/when-bride-be-bride-buy>> accessed 20 April 2026.

However, among highly educated urban couples—particularly where wives hold postgraduate degrees—age gaps narrow, reflecting more egalitarian matching which are based on shared educational status rather than traditional age hierarchies.

This relationship is corroborated by national data: regression analysis of National Family Health Survey-5 figures finds that each additional year of a woman's education raises her age at marriage by approximately 0.36 years, after controlling for household wealth and place of residence. Women with twelve or more years of schooling married, on average, several years later than women with no schooling at all.²⁰

The same study identifies a troubling trend: among India's urban upper class, income's relationship with spousal age gap becomes nonlinear, declining beyond the 7th income quantile. This pattern, combined with limited marriage mobility opportunities for highly educated women, 'hints at a possible threat to the institution of marriage among the urban upper class'. When highly educated, high-income women cannot find suitable partners willing to accept egalitarian unions, delayed marriage and non-marriage become plausible outcomes.

4. Socio-Cultural Transformations

4.1 Delayed Family Formation and Rising Childlessness

India's fertility decline to sub-replacement levels (Total Fertility Rate ≈ 2.0) has occurred despite relatively early marriage by global standards. Using National Family Health Survey-5 (2019–21) data on 9,243 women aged 36–49, Barik identifies five distinct partnership trajectory clusters: formal marriage before cohabitation (7%), classical marriage (45%), premarital sex followed by union (9%), sex outside union without marriage (3%), and no relational transition (36%)²¹.

Most striking is the finding that 'atypical trajectories' particularly which directly have no relational transition and sex outside marriage—are concentrated among highly educated, urban, and wealthier women (Odds Ratio = 2.81 compared to disadvantaged groups). This thing shows a divided reality: involuntary childlessness and how early marriage among socio-economically constrained women vs. voluntary or opportunities-driven delayed family formation which

²⁰ United Nations Population Fund India, 'Child Marriage in India: Key Insights from the NFHS-5' (UNFPA India, 2022) 6.

²¹ S Barik, 'Delayed Family Formation and Rising Childlessness in India' (2026) International Institute for Population Sciences 14.

among the privileged. The institution of marriage is not disappearing but becoming a marker of class distinction, with educated urban women increasingly questioning whether marriage is necessary for fulfilled adulthood.

4.2 The Rise of Love Marriages and Companionate Ideals

In the past people used to think that traditional arranged marriage was the way to go. This is because it was all about what was good for the family. Things like caste status and property. People also thought about who they knew and how they could meet people. Things are different now. A lot of Indians live in cities and they have access to things like the internet and television. Because of this they think about what they want in a marriage. They want to be with someone they really like. Who likes them back. They want to have things in common with this person. In some cities in Gujarat like Ahmedabad and Surat and Vadodara people are doing things differently. Now thirty to forty percent of marriages are based on the people in the marriage choosing each other rather than their families choosing for them. This is a change, from traditional arranged marriage than conventional family matchmaking²². The scale of this shift becomes clearer when set against the national picture. Nationally, only around five to six per cent of marriages cross caste lines, a figure that had barely moved in the four decades preceding 2011-12. A city-level trend of thirty to forty per cent self-selected partners therefore represents a marked departure from the arranged, family-mediated norm that continues to prevail across most of the country.²³

This change is not about how people act but it is also about what people believe in. Young Indians are starting to see marriage as a relationship between two people who can make their decisions rather than something they have to do for their family and community. When people get an education and have a successful career it gives them the power to question the usual way of doing things to choose who they want to be with and to say no to marriages that do not meet what they want. Young Indians, women are using this power to make their own choices about marriage. Marriage is becoming more about what the individuals in the marriage want than what the family and community want. Young Indians are looking for a marriage that is based on what they think is important. They are not afraid to say no to things that do not fit with that.

²² Research Scholar and Research Guide, 'The Role of Education and Career in Shaping Preferences for Love and Arranged Marriages in Gujarat's Urban Society' (2024) Zenodo 6.

²³ Rukmini S (n 29).

The idea of marriage is changing for Indians and it is becoming more about the marriage itself rather than, about the family and community for emotional fulfilment²⁴.

4.3 Technology and Dating Applications

Digital technology in today's world emerged as a transformative force in Indian marriage markets. Dating applications such as Tinder, Bumble, and Ok Cupid have now gained significant penetration of customers among urban youth, offering alternatives to family-mediated matchmaking. H Sharma, N Patel and R Prajapati document that approximately 40% of young Indians engage with dating apps, with long-term relationships formed through these platforms sometimes leading to marriage²⁵.

The disruptive potential of these dating apps stays in their capacity to beat and bypass traditional social boundaries. Users can now connect across caste, religious, and regional lines that would be strictly policed in arranged marriage contexts. This Research indicates that how couples meeting through these dating apps are approximately 20% more likely to be in inter-caste marriages compared to those formed through conventional methods²⁶. This represents a significant challenge to caste endogamy, a foundational principle of traditional marriage regulation. This user base skews heavily towards young, urban, and higher-income Indians, with usage concentrated among those aged eighteen to thirty in metropolitan centres rather than smaller towns or rural areas. The geographic concentration of dating app adoption helps explain why its disruptive effect on caste endogamy, while real, remains confined to a relatively narrow, privileged segment of the population rather than reshaping marriage markets nationally.²⁷

However, dating apps also bring risks and mixed feelings. The swipe culture that focuses on looks may make it harder to form connections. Having many potential partners can actually cause problems with commitment as people keep looking for someone. There are also safety worries, like harassment, stalking and financial scams remain significant, particularly for

²⁴ Research Scholar and Research Guide, 'The Role of Education and Career in Shaping Preferences for Love and Arranged Marriages in Gujarat's Urban Society' (2024) Zenodo 10.

²⁵ H Sharma, N Patel and R Prajapati, 'The Transformation of the Institution of Marriage in India and the Role of Dating Apps' (2025) Sage Journals 5.

²⁶ H Sharma, N Patel and R Prajapati, 'The Transformation of the Institution of Marriage in India and the Role of Dating Apps' (2025) Sage Journals 12.

²⁷ H Sharma, N Patel and R Prajapati, 'The Transformation of the Institution of Marriage in India and the Role of Dating Apps' (2025) Sage Journals 8.

women²⁸. Rather than simply replacing arranged marriage, technology is creating new hybrid forms wherein individuals exercise greater autonomy within still-significant family oversight.

4.4 Divorce and Alternative Relationships

Perhaps the biggest sign of change in institutions is that more people are accepting divorce and relationships outside of marriage. In India not many marriages end in divorce. About 1% compared to 40-50% in the United States. This trend is corroborated by successive rounds of the National Family Health Survey, which recorded the share of ever-married Indian women reporting themselves as separated or divorced rising from around 0.6 per cent in 2005-06 to close to 1 per cent by the most recent round. Although still low by international standards, the consistency of this upward movement across survey rounds suggests a genuine, if gradual, social shift rather than a statistical anomaly.²⁹ What's notable is that the divorce rate has been increasing rapidly by around 200% in urban areas over the past twenty years. There are reasons for this. One is that women are more financially independent now so they find it easier to leave marriages that are not making them happy. The laws have also changed to make it easier for people to get divorced. Additionally, it is becoming more acceptable to get divorced, among people who are well-educated and live in cities. Relationships where couples live together without getting married were hardly seen in India before. Now they are recognised by law. Are becoming more accepted by society. The stigma, around divorce and live-in relationships is decreasing. The Supreme Court's holding that cohabitation between consenting adults is not a criminal offence, made in the case of *S Khushboo v Kanniammal* (2010), together with its later decisions defining the legal incidents of such relationships, has further legitimised alternatives to formal marriage³⁰. These developments suggest a fundamental reorientation: marriage is increasingly viewed as contingent on ongoing satisfaction rather than indissoluble obligation.

²⁸ H Sharma, N Patel and R Prajapati, 'The Transformation of the Institution of Marriage in India and the Role of Dating Apps' (2025) Sage Journals 15.

²⁹ National Family Health Survey-4 (2015–16) (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2017); National Family Health Survey-5 (2019–21) (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2022).

³⁰ *S Khushboo v Kanniammal* (2010) 5 SCC 600, para 28. See also *D Velusamy v D Patchaiammal* (2010) 10 SCC 469; *Indra Sarma v V K V Sarma* (2013) 15 SCC 755.

5. Regional and Class-Based Divergence

5.1 North-South Contrasts

India's regional heterogeneity produces sharply contrasting marriage regimes. Comparative analysis of Kerala and Bihar—states representing South Indian social development and North Indian demographic stagnation, respectively—reveals persistent differences. In Bihar, women with minimal education from poor families face high rates of early marriage; in Kerala, even uneducated women marry later due to progressive social norms and greater gender equity³¹. The scale of this gap is stark in the most recent data: the National Family Health Survey-5 recorded that around forty per cent of women aged 20-24 in Bihar had married before the legal age of eighteen, compared with only eight per cent in Kerala. Such divergence illustrates how the same national legal minimum age at marriage can coexist with radically different lived realities depending on regional levels of female education and economic development.³²

These regional differences are not static or stable but proactively interactive with economic change. Kerala's early demographic change, with high female literacy, and matrilineal traditions in some of the communities have long supported later marriage and greater female autonomy. Bihar's consistent poverty rate, lower female education, and stronger patriarchy maintain early marriage. However, as Section 3.2 noted, even Kerala now experiences substantial bride shortage (18% of men unable to marry), suggesting that demographic pressures affect even 'progressive' states³³.

5.2 Class Polarisation in Marriage Trajectories

The most significant finding emerging from recent research is class-based polarisation rather than uniform decline. As Barik's trajectory analysis demonstrates, India's marriage system is bifurcating: disadvantaged populations (rural, less-educated, lower-caste) continue to experience early, universal marriage—though increasingly compromised by bride shortage and marriage migration—while privileged populations (urban, highly educated, wealthy) pioneer delayed marriage, companionate selection, and acceptance of divorce and non-marriage³⁴.

³¹ R R Shetty, 'Age at Marriage and Its Determinants: A Region-Wise Comparative Study between Kerala and Bihar' (2026) International Institute for Population Sciences 9.

³² UNFPA India (n 32) 4.

³³ N Praveen and S Siddhanta, "'Unmatched': From Skewed Births to a Structural Surplus of Grooms' (2026) arXiv preprint 14.

³⁴ S Barik, 'Delayed Family Formation and Rising Childlessness in India' (2026) International Institute for Population Sciences 25

This polarisation has important policy implications. For disadvantaged populations, the 'problem' is not marriage decline but marriage *distress*—dowry inflation, bride trafficking, and surplus grooms who cannot form families. For privileged populations, the 'problem' is declining marriage propensity, rising childlessness, and potential fertility below replacement. These are distinct phenomena requiring distinct policy responses.

6. Analysis: Answering the Research Question

This paper set out to answer the research question: **To what extent have demographic imbalances, economic transformations, educational expansion, and technological disruptions contributed to the perceived decline of traditional arranged marriage as a stable, universal institution in India, and how do these factors vary across class, region, and gender?**

The evidence presented yields five principal findings.

First, structural demographic imbalance—specifically, the surplus of approximately 39 million marriage-age men due to skewed sex ratios and fertility decline—is the most quantitatively significant driver of marriage market dysfunction. This factor alone explains cross-region marriage migration, the erosion of traditional endogamy norms, and the phenomenon of 'unmatched' grooms. However, its effects vary dramatically by region and class, with northern states and disadvantaged communities experiencing the most severe consequences.

Second, economic transformations including trade liberalisation have produced heterogeneous effects—increasing marriage rates in urban areas benefiting from employment growth while leaving rural patterns largely unchanged, and reducing fertility primarily in rural contexts. This suggests that economic change affects the *quality* and *timing* of marriage more than its incidence³⁵.

Third the fact that more women are getting an education has really changed the way people choose their partners. When women get education, they often marry men who are closer to their age and they also get married later in life especially in cities. This shows that what women learn in school is a reason why people are not getting married as young as they used to. This finding is consistent with national regression estimates showing that each additional year of a

³⁵ S Sengupta and M Azam, 'The Effect of Trade Liberalization on Marriage and Fertility: Evidence from Indian Census' (2025) 77(3) Oxford Economic Papers 653, 670–672.

woman's education raises her age at marriage by roughly 0.36 years, even after accounting for household wealth and rural or urban residence. The effect of education therefore operates independently of, and in addition to, the economic factors discussed elsewhere in this paper.³⁶

Fourth technology is also playing an important role in changing the way people meet and choose their partners. Dating apps are now making it for people to meet others from backgrounds, which is leading to more marriages between people from different castes. This is especially true for people in cities and it is a demerit to the traditional way of arranged marriages.

Fifth and most importantly these changes are not happening everywhere in India at the rate. Marriage is not becoming less popular everywhere. It is changing in different ways for different groups of people. For people who're not as well off who live in rural areas and who do not have as much education marriage is still very common but it is also becoming more difficult. There are not brides and the price of dowries is going up which is leading to people moving to different regions to find wives. For people who're better off who live in cities and who have more education marriage is becoming less common and people are getting married later in life. More people are also getting divorced, living together without getting married and even choosing not to get married all.³⁷

So, the answer to the question of what's happening to marriage in India is complicated. For people who're better off traditional arranged marriages are not as common as they used to be. But for people in India marriage is still very common it is just changing in different ways because of economic and demographic pressures. In the future researchers should study how people's marriages change over time and how technology is affecting marriage in groups of people. They should also look at ways to reduce the problems that people are facing in areas where there are not brides. Marriage in India is not dying it is just changing in ways and these changes will have a big impact, on Indian society for a long time.

³⁶ UNFPA India (n 32) 9.

³⁷ S Barik, 'Delayed Family Formation and Rising Childlessness in India' (2026) International Institute for Population Sciences 25–26.

7. Extended What We Found Out What It Means and What Comes Next

7.1 Summing Up the Main Points

This paper tried to answer a question: how have changes in the population, economy, education and technology affected the traditional way of arranging marriages in India? We looked at a lot of data from sources and found some important things that we want to talk about again.

First the biggest problem with marriages in India now is that there are not enough women for all the men who want to get married. This is because there are boys being born than girls and it has caused a lot of problems. Men are having to look for wives in parts of the country and some women are being forced into marriages they do not want. It is also getting harder for people to follow the rules of marriage like only marrying within their own social group.

Second changes in the economy have had effects on marriages in different parts of the country. In cities, where there are jobs, people are getting married more often. In rural areas, where there are not as many jobs people are still getting married, but they are having fewer children. This shows that economic changes can affect when and how people get married but not always whether they get married all.

Third more women are getting. This is changing the way people choose their husbands. Women who are highly educated are having a time finding husbands who are willing to treat them as equals. This is causing some women to choose not to get married or to get married later in life.

Fourth technology is also changing the way people meet and get married. Dating apps are making it possible for people to meet and marry someone from a social group but they are also creating new problems, like the objectification of women and the risk of violence.

Fifth and most importantly these changes are not affecting everyone in the way. In some parts of the country marriage is still very traditional while in others it is becoming more modern and flexible. People who are wealthy and educated are having choices about whether and when to get married while people who are poor and less educated are still facing a lot of pressure to get married.

7.2 What It All Means

Our findings are important for understanding how families and societies are changing.

First, they show that the idea of a " demographic transition". Where people in developed countries are having fewer children and getting married later. Is not happening in the same way in India. In India people are still getting married, but they are having children and the institution of marriage is changing.

Second our findings support the idea of " reproduction". Where different social classes have different experiences of family and marriage. In India wealthy and educated people are having choices about marriage and family while poor and less educated people are still facing a lot of pressure to get married.

Third our findings show that demographic changes. Like the imbalance between men and women. Are driving changes in the institution of marriage. This is not a matter of cultural or social change but also of demographic reality.

7.3 What We Can Do About It

Our findings have implications for policy.

For people who are struggling to find a marriage partner we need to address the root causes of the problem. This includes enforcing laws that prevent sex- abortion and providing support for women who are being forced into marriages they do not want.

7.4 What We Did Not Do

There are some limitations to our study that we want to acknowledge.

Firstly, we relied on existing data and research than collecting our own data. This clearly meant that we could not get as detailed creation or nuanced a picture of people's experiences

Second our focus, on the "decline of marriage" might have inadvertently reinforced the idea that marriage's the only or best way to form a family. In reality there are different ways to form a family and we should be supporting and recognizing all of them.

Third the papers reliance on data up to 2026 means that we do not know the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on marriage patterns yet. We have some evidence that suggests the pandemic has disrupted wedding ceremonies affected people's decision on when to get married because of economic problems and maybe even increased domestic violence during lockdowns. We will only know the long-term effects on divorce rates the number of children people have and people's intentions to get married when we have years of data on marriage.

7.6 Final Reflections

The institution of marriage in India is not dying. This might seem surprising given the title of the paper. It is the most important thing we learned from our analysis. What is happening is not that marriage is disappearing, that it is changing from a uniform, lifelong family-controlled institution into a diverse set of practices that vary significantly by class, region and gender.

For a woman in rural Bihar who has minimal education marriage is still almost universal happens early is arranged by families and is effectively permanent. Her experience of marriage in 2026 is different from her grandmother's experience in the demographic pressures. There are fewer available brides and higher demands for dowry. That shape the terms of the match.

For an educated woman in urban Bengaluru on the other hand marriage is increasingly a choice rather than something she has to do. She may delay marriage until her thirties. Decide not to get married at all. If she does get married, she is likely to have a companionate love-based union with a partner who has an educational status and she will have a significant say in choosing her partner. If the marriage does not work out divorce is an option. Live-in relationships offer a way to be intimate without getting legally married.

These two women live in the country speak the same language when it comes to marriage but they participate in fundamentally different institutions of marriage. The difference between their experiences is the fact of contemporary Indian family life.

This difference has implications for Indian society. It threatens to create a world in which marriage. Once a universal experience that brought people together. Becomes another marker of class privilege accessible to some people and distorted for others. The 39 million surplus grooms who are not rich and are from castes and will never get married are not just numbers. They are people who will go through life without the respect, emotional closeness and family that marriage has traditionally given.

Many educated and earning women decides not to marry or have kids are not just making a choice but they are reacting to the problems they face. These problems include:

- * No childcare options
- * Workplaces that do not support them
- * Ongoing unfair treatment of women in marriage

This tension is visible in recent workforce data. Even as India's female labour force participation rate has risen substantially in recent years, the increase has been driven overwhelmingly by low-paid, informal, and rural work, while only around forty per cent of women with postgraduate qualifications are formally employed, a figure that has grown only slowly despite rising educational attainment. For highly educated urban women, marriage and motherhood therefore continue to carry a real opportunity cost that less-educated women in the workforce do not face in the same way.³⁸

These issues make marriage not a great choice, for them. To address these challenges, we need a strategy: reducing marriage distress for disadvantaged populations while expanding relationship options for all people.

The institution of marriage in India is being remade. Unevenly, painfully, but also in some respects more equitably. The task, for researchers' policymakers and citizens is to understand this transformation and to shape it toward outcomes that expand human flourishing rather than constraining it. This paper has tried to contribute to that understanding. There is still a lot of work to be done on marriage.

Bibliography

- Barik S, 'Delayed Family Formation and Rising Childlessness in India' (2026) International Institute for Population Sciences <https://www.iipsindia.ac.in> accessed 20 April 2026.
- Caldwell J C, Reddy P H and Caldwell P, *The Causes of Demographic Change: Experimental Research in South India* (University of Wisconsin Press 1988).
- Das Gupta M and Li S, 'Gender Bias in China, South Korea and India 1920–1990: The Effects of War, Famine and Fertility Decline' (1999) 30(3) *Development and Change* 619.
- Goode W J, *World Revolution and Family Patterns* (Free Press 1963).

³⁸ Press Information Bureau, 'Enhanced Female Workforce Participation in Economic Activity: Data Shows Improved Employment Indicators over Last Six Years' (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India, 2024) <<https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=2074399>> accessed 20 April 2026.

- Guérin I, Natal A, Nordman C J and Venkatasubramanian G, 'For Money Can't Buy Me Love? The Political Economy of Marriages over Two Decades in Tamil Nadu, South India' (2024) HAL Sorbonne Université <https://hal.science> accessed 20 April 2026.
- Kukreja R, 'Trafficked or Married? Unpacking Dispossession of Matrimonial Choice in Cross-Region Marriage Migration in India' (2024) 59(7) Journal of Asian and African Studies 2170.
- National Family Health Survey-5 (2019–21) (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2022).
- Office of the Registrar General, 'Sex Ratio at Birth' (Census of India 2011).
- Praveen N and Siddhanta S, "'Unmatched': From Skewed Births to a Structural Surplus of Grooms' (2026) arXiv preprint <https://arxiv.org> accessed 20 April 2026.
- Praveen N, Singh A and Sharma S, 'Marrying Up or Matching Even? Socioeconomic Drivers of Spousal Age Gaps in India' (2025) arXiv preprint <https://arxiv.org> accessed 20 April 2026.
- Research Scholar and Research Guide, 'The Role of Education and Career in Shaping Preferences for Love and Arranged Marriages in Gujarat's Urban Society' (2024) Zenodo <https://zenodo.org> accessed 20 April 2026.
- Sengupta S and Azam M, 'The Effect of Trade Liberalization on Marriage and Fertility: Evidence from Indian Census' (2025) 77(3) Oxford Economic Papers 653.
- Sharma H, Patel N and Prajapati R, 'The Transformation of the Institution of Marriage in India and the Role of Dating Apps' (2025) Sage Journals <https://journals.sagepub.com> accessed 20 April 2026.
- Shetty R R, 'Age at Marriage and Its Determinants: A Region-Wise Comparative Study between Kerala and Bihar' (2026) International Institute for Population Sciences <https://www.iipsindia.ac.in> accessed 20 April 2026.
- S Khushboo v Kanniammal (2010) 5 SCC 600.