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REGIONAL VARIATIONS AND CHANGES IN FEMALE AGE AT MARRIAGE IN INDIA 1961-81.

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ABSTRACT: Female age at marriage is an important social and demographic variable having strong implications for human fertility, child mortality and status of women etc. Hence, the demographers and population scientists have paid increasing attention to this area. It is also a rich area for social and population geography. However, little effort has been made in this direction. Perhaps due to the fact that information on age at marriage is largely not available in the absence of complete marriage registration in the country. The indriect demographic techniques, to a large extent, have filled up this gap in the availability of data on the subject. Therefore, it is now possible to undertake a study on a larger geographical scale in order to study the regional variations and changes in marriage age. This work makes an attempt in this direction.

INTRODUCTION

Marriage is an important event in life. It is associated with transition in roles and responsibilities of individuals; it requires physical maturity for sexual activityand ability to maintain family and children. It is gnerally expected that marriage should take place at adulthood because by this time one achieves proper physical growth and also acquires potentialities to fulfil the demands of marriage. But we find that some people marry before reaching adulthood, or say in early childhood, while among others it gets delayed much beyond it. This aspect of marriage has allured the researchers to probe into the phenomena because of its several socio-sconomic and demographic consequences. Among social scientists, the anthropologists, who are well known to study the marriage and kindship, have paid little attention to the study of age at marriage until recently. The standard texts in social anthropology virtually make no mention about it (McDonald 1981; 413). Demographers have shown increasing interest in female age at marriage precisely because marriage is a precondition for child-bearing in most of the societies. The age at marriage of female determines the age of child-bearing, and also the duration of child-bearing in a woman's life. It has also been considered as an intermediate or proximate determinant of fertility (Davis and Blake 1956; Bongaarts 1978). In India, the study of the age at marriage has been made possible by the researchers inspite of several handicaps due to the non-availability of data in the field. As the marriage registration system is ineffective in India, the census information on age and marital status has been used to calcuate the age at marriage indrectly. Apart from this, the National Sample Survey has also collected some data on age at marriage in some of its rounds and the various sample

surverys carried out by the individual researchers, the population research Centres and the International Institute for Population Sciences, Bombay are the important sources of the study on age at marriage in India. The available literature on the subject shows that while attempts have been made to study the inter-state and inter-district variations in female age at marriage, hardly any effort has been made to unfold the variations in female age at marriage at the regional level (Bhagat 1987). Thus, an attempt has been made in this paper to understand the regional variation in female age at marriage in India and changes in it during the recent past.

DATE BASE AND METHODOLOGY

The data on the age and marital status available in the social and cultural Tables, published by the census of India constitutes the important source in the present study. The census data has been used to derive age at marriage for females by employing a method developed by Hajnal (1953) which requires the proportions of singles by age-groups and provides an estimate, called Singulate Mean Age at Marriage (SMAM). The Singulate Mean Age at Marriage is considered as an alternative to Mean Age at Marriage (MAM) in the absence of marriage registration. The computation of SMAM is simple and the method is as follows:

$$\frac{\sum_{x=10}^{k} n \cdot {}_nS_x - S_k}{1 - S_k}$$

Singulate Mean Age at Marriage (SMAM) =

where ,

${}_nS_x$ = proportion single in the age-group x to x+n

n = Interval of age-group

k = Upper limit of the age under which marriage occurs (generally 50 is considered in most studies)

S_k = Proportion single at age k.

** Mean Age at Marriage is derived by averaging the ages at which marriages are contracted in a given year.*

SMAM refers to average number of years lived in the single state by those who marry by certain age, say by age 50 (Hajnal 1953). The method involves the following assumptions.

i) Population must be closed to migtion or its net effect should be negligible;

ii) There should not be any differential in mortality by marital status;

iii) The age pattern of marriage has not experienced any abrupt changes overtime.

The studies have shown that the differential mortality and migration do not introduce any significant errors in the calculations of age at marriage (Agarwala 1962), and it has been agreed that the mehtod is useful for making comparisons across groups and regions (Goyal 1982). However, the inadequacies of the mehtod have been pointed out by the researchers (Bhagat 1987), and therefore,the proportions single in marriagable age-groups is also to be retained, as the indicator is more sensitive to the changes in marriage pattern than SMAM (Hajnal 1953). The regional variations and changes in female age at marriage have been analysed below on the basis of the mehtod suggested by Hajnal.

REGIONAL VARIATIONS IN FEMALE AGE AT MARRIAGE

The study of regional variations in female age at marriage is important because it is a crucial variable in the organisation of family and kinship.As study shows that family and kin-

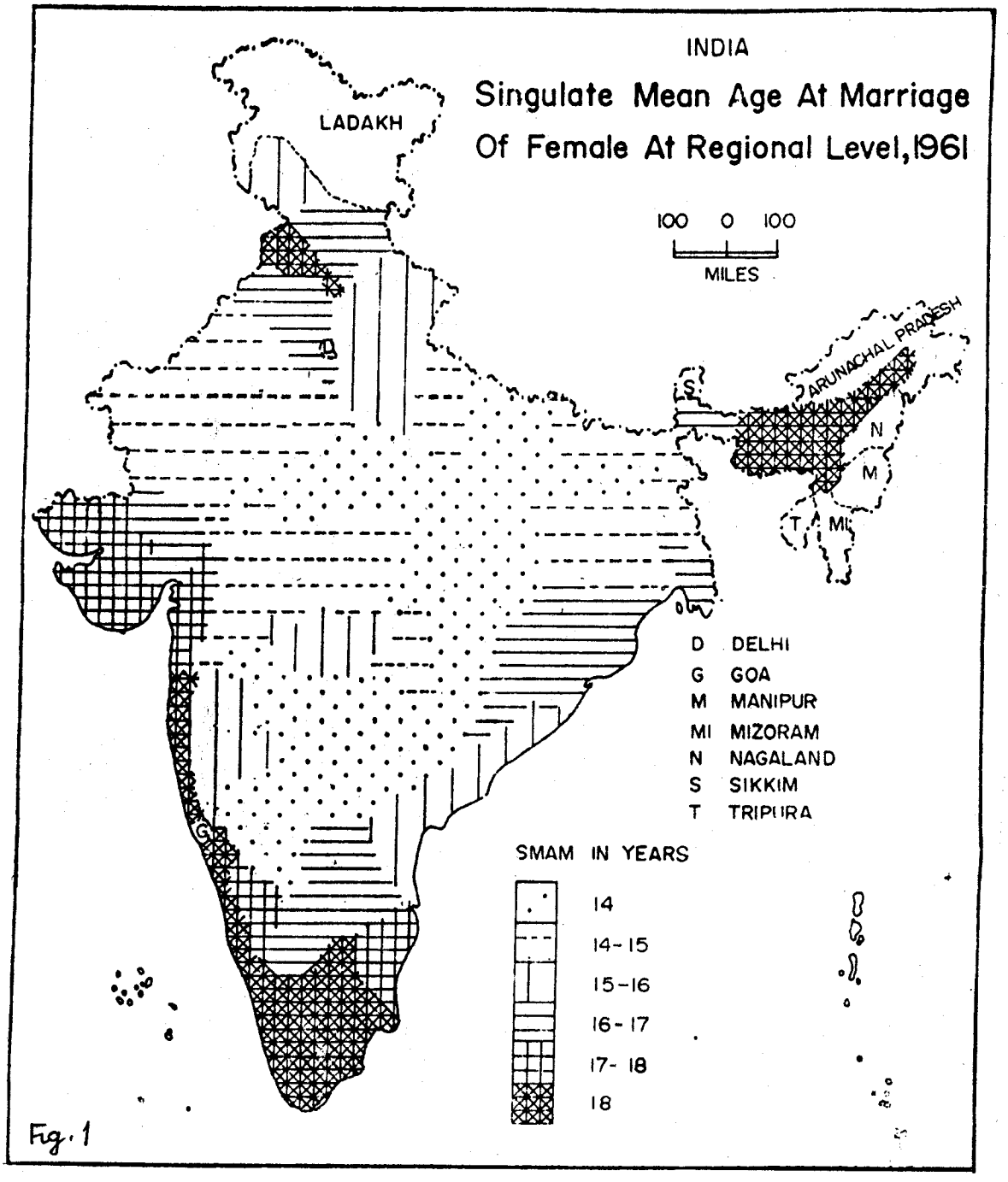
ship are not alike over space, but differ greatly from one area to another (Karve 1965). In such situation, the study of regional variations in female age at marriage will help in analysing family and kinship pattern across various regions and also in unfolding the dynamics of reproductive behaviour at the regional level. Further after independence, efforts are being made to establish unity and cohesion among regions and people in order to consolidate national unity and to maintain national integrity.

This demands deeper understanding of social-cultural and economic organisation of each region which has harboured the huge diversities of the country.

Studies have been carried out to highlight the intrastate and inter-district variations in female age at marriage (Agarwala 1962, Goyal 1968). These studies are important and meaningful in several respects, yet not appropriate for unfolding the variations in a phenomena over space. The states are generally the hetrogeneous units which conceal wider variations within them and the districts fragment the significant spatial processes which transcend their boundaries (Raza 1981;113). In the light of the inadequacies of states and districts as proper units to portray spatial variations, the regions commonly defined as relatively homogeneous area in terms of several characteristics, may serve our purpose more appropriately. Several regional schemes have been developed by scholars and Government organisations (itra 1964; Singh 1971; N.S.S. 1966). The regional scheme developed by N. S. S. has been adopted in the persent study as they are formed on the basis of amalgamation of contiguous districts in each state for which the age and marital status data is available in the censuses.The regions are formed on the basis three main criteria-(i) topography, (ii) cropping pattern and (iii) population density (N. S. S. 1966)- and are fairly homogeneous and not marked by intra-regional disparities of a high order (Monnis Raza 1981:113).

The proportions single for each region are dervied by adding total and single population age-groupwise of the districts falling within each region, and then SMAM for each region has been calculated. Table I persents proportion single in the age-group 15-19 and SMAM at the regional level for the period 1961-81. The table reveals interesting results, which are ordinarily not visable from state or district level estimates.Kerala is known for its demographic uniqueness in the country having achieved the lowest brith rate and the highest age at marriage of females. But, it is important to mention that within Kerala, it is the Southern part which is more unique than rest of the state, In all the three censuses southern region of Kewrala has female age at marriage higher by more than 2 years than the Northern region. However, the difference in proportion single (15-19) has been declining between the consecutive censuses. For the composite Punjab also, there is a marked degree of variations in the proportion single and SMAM between Northern and Southern regions and the difference between the two regions is increasing over time from 1961 to 1981.

Note : The classification of regions in each state is based on N. S. S. 25th round (1970-71) (See Report No. 237, 1976). except for Gujarat, Punjab and Haryana. For these states,the classification adopted in 19th round (See Report 143, N. S. S. 1966) has been retained for convenience, because in 25th round regions of Gujarat are classified, unlike other states, on the basis of Tehsil as a unit for which data of age and marital status by age-group is not available. Therefore, the classification of regions as given in 25th round for Gujarat cannot be adopted. The state of Punjab was reorganised in 1966 and Haryana came into existence. In order to make comparison between 1961 and 1971, the regions of undivided Punjab, as given in 19th round, has


INDIA
Singulate Mean Age At Marriage
Of Female At Regional Level, 1961
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MILES
LADAKH
ARUNACHAL PRADESH
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T TRIPURA
SMAM IN YEARS
14
14-15
15-16
16-17
17-18
18

Fig. 1

Table 1.

PROPORTIONS SINGLE AND FEMALE AGE AT MARRIAGE BY REGIONS, 1961-1981.

State/Regions	Proportion Single (15-19)			SMAM		
	1961	1971	1981	1961	1971	1981
ANDHRA PRADESH						
1. Coastal	.233	.361	.467	15.67	16.77	17.42
2. Inland Northern	.118	.233	.339	13.87	15.22	16.50
3. Inland Southern	.279	.380	.500	16.17	16.95	17.63
ASSAM						
4. Plains	.429	.548	N. A	18.36	18.59	N. A.
5. Hills	.591	.669	N. A	19.38	19.64	N. A.
BIHAR						
6. Southern	.240	.339	.457	15.06	16.16	17.52
7. Northern	.142	.213	.358	14.17	15.19	16.53
8. Central	.107	.166	.282	13.65	14.78	15.92
GUJRAT						
9. Coastal	.487	.643	.767	17.65	18.79	19.82
10. Northern	.346	.518	.626	16.38	17.74	18.69
11. Western	.458	.661	.811	17.48	18.90	20.20
HIMACHAL PRADESH						
12. H. P.	.294	.490	.681	16.24	17.54	19.06
JAMMU & KASHMIR						
13. Mountains	.301	.520	.785	15.97	17.80	20.20
14. Other Hills	.222	.406	.643	15.76	17.11	18.92
15. Jhelum Valley	.279	.517	.705	15.97	17.75	19.62
KERALA						
16. Northern	.518	.658	.735	18.52	19.60	20.52
17. Southern	.799	.892	.927	20.83	21.87	22.54
KARNATAKA						
18. Coastal Ghats	.591	.762	.877	18.76	20.24	22.84
19. Inland Eastern	.413	.672	.757	17.27	19.16	20.20
20. Inland Southern	.348	.518	.641	16.76	18.17	19.39
21. Inland Northern	.214	.358	.526	15.27	16.57	18.11
MADHYA PRADESH						
22. Eastern	.135	.223	.444	13.93	15.20	17.14
23. Inland Eastern	.125	.172	.306	13.56	14.20	15.81

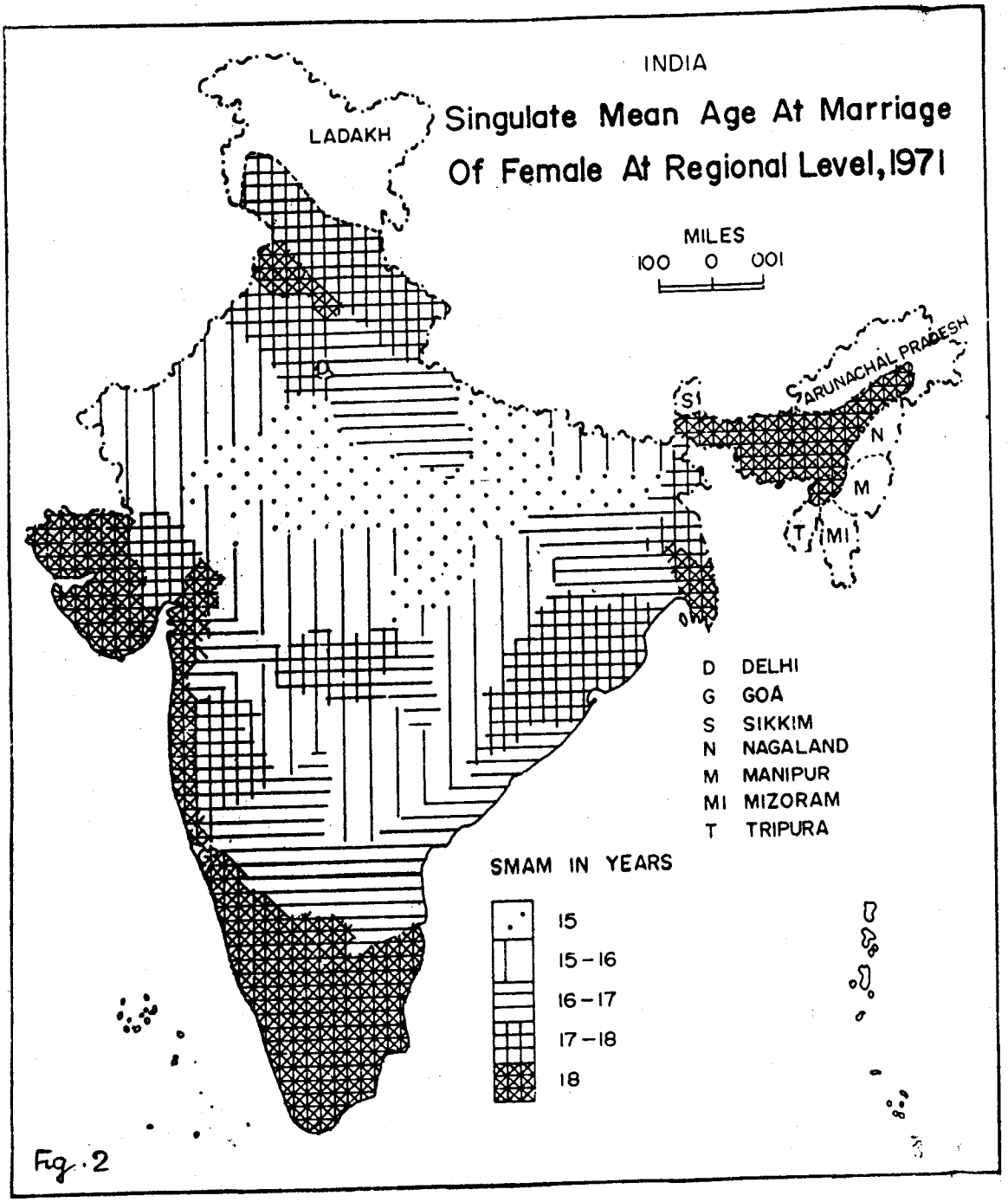
24. Inland Western	.143	.218	.358	14.42	15.34	16.65
25. Western	.143	.284	.404	14.20	15.57	17.09
26. Northern	.055	.120	.223	13.03	14.33	15.55
MAHARSHTRA						
27. Coastal	.532	.815	.792	16.33	20.41	20.74
28. Inland Western	.214	.39	.547	15.5	17.02	18.18
29. Inland Northern	.179	.371	.507	14.84	16.81	17.96
30. Inland Central	.100	.228	.358	13.77	15.56	16.85
31. Inland Esatern	.232	.467	.673	15.67	17.47	19.01
32. Eastern	.170	.397	.620	14.80	16.85	18.46
ORISSA						
33. Coastal	.278	.398	.698	16.00	17.04	19.10
34. Southern	.282	.397	.620	16.02	17.17	18.68
35. Northern	.333	.470	.712	16.64	17.68	19.32
PUNJAB & HARYANA						
36. Northern	.605	.792	.874	18.46	20.12	21.20
37. Southern	.408	.503	.604	16.81	17.75	18.60
RAJASTHAN						
38. Western	.151	.243	.346	14.50	15.35	16.21
39. North Eastern	.162	.238	.353	14.28	14.14	16.05
40. Southern	.178	.317	.467	14.64	15.92	17.04
41. South Eastern	.076	.159	.235	12.99	13.59	14.95
TAMIL NADU						
42. Coastal Northern	.417	.641	.707	17.40	18.89	19.71
43. Coastal Southern	.668	.808	.847	19.10	20.34	20.98
44. Inland	.574	.732	.756	18.41	19.56	20.11
UTTAR PRADESH						
45. Himalayan	.244	.418	.580	15.82	17.19	18.41
46. Western	.241	.354	.522	15.65	16.68	17.90
47. Central	.187	.323	.483	14.87	16.12	17.50
48. Eastern	.103	.153	.232	13.18	13.94	15.19
49. Southern	.066	.142	.257	13.12	14.31	15.85
WEST BENGAL						
50. Himalayan	.317	.516	.611	16.31	18.48	19.31
51. Eastern plains	.170	.375	.548	14.87	17.08	18.45
52. Central plains	.338	.564	.796	16.92	18.87	20.63
53. West plains	.143	.325	.536	14.59	16.76	18.47

been retained. Regions of undivided Punjab exclude three districts, namely, Shimla, Lahul & Spiti and Kangara which were part of undivided Punjab in 1961, but were transferred to Himachal Pradesh as a result of reorganisation. These districts are added with Himachal Pradesh in 1961 in order to make it comparable with the figures of 1971 census.

The Western Uttar Pradesh has SMAM 17.9 years, it decreases to 17.5 years in Central region and to 15.2 years in the Eastern region of the State in 1981. The Eastern and Southern regions of Utter Pradesh show very low age at marriage of female compared to other regions of the state. It is wrong to believe that the entire state has female age at marriage woefully low. Similarly, in Bihar, the Chhotanagpur plateau (Southern region), has comparatively higher age at marriage (17.5 years) than the state average (16.5 years) in 1981. It may be noted from Table 1 that in Bihar, the plains (Central and Northern regions) have the higher incidence of early marriages. In the Northern and Central region, the proportion single in the age-proup 15-19 was 36 and 28 percent compared to 46 percent in the Southern region in 1981. In the states of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh also, there are significant differentials between the regions. In Madhya Pradesh, the Northern region which borders with Southern region of Uttar Pradesh and is known as me Bundelkhand historically, had the owest age at marriage of females and very high prevalence of early marriages in the state. In Rajasthan, the age at marriage of female is generally very low and also there is a higher prevalence of early marriages in all the regions, but the Southern Eastern region shows the lowest age at marriage and the highest prevalence of early marriages in all last three censuses. The Western region, which constitutes thr areas of Thar desert, has a slight higher age at marriage of females than the state level in all the last three censuses.

In eastern India, particularly in the states of Assam, West Bengal and Orissa, a substantial difference in age at marriage of females exists between the regions of the state. Assam has been divided into plains and hills. In the Hill region, females marry one year later than the plains as seen in 1971.The proportion single in the age-group 15-19 was 21 pecent higher in the Hill region than the plains in 1971.The 1981 census count was not held in Assam in view of the disturbed condition of the state. In West Bengal, the Himalayan and Central regions have higher age at marriage and the other two regions (Eastern and Western plains) have lower age at marriage and proportions single than the state average in all censuses from 1961 to 1981. The state of Orissa has been divided three regions, namely, Coastal, Southern and Northern regions. Southern and Northern regions are constituted mainly by hills and pateaux, while coastal areas are mostly low lying plains.The SMAM in the Northern and Southern regions are lelatively higher than the coastal region, but the difference is not wide as it has been observed in the case of other states.

Andhra Pradesh consists of three distinct regions, namely, Telangana, Rayalseema and coastal areas. N. S. S. has also divided the state into these regions but named them differently. Telangana is named as Northern Inland and Rayalseema as Southern Inland because of thier geographic locations.The Northern land shows the lowest age at marriage of females and also the lowest proportion single in the age-group 15-19 in the state. The mean age at marriage of females in Northern Inland was 15.2 and 16.5 years respectively for 1971 and 1981 compared to 16.2 and 17.3 years at the state level. This shows that female age at marriage in Telangana was much lower and was similar to the level of some regions of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh.The Inland Southern which consti-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Singulate Mean Age At Marriage
Of Female At Regional Level, 1971
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SMAM IN YEARS
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15 – 16
16 – 17
17 – 18
18

Fig. 2

tutes Rayal seema has the highest age at marriage of females followed by coastal region.

The state of Karnataka consists of four regions. These are (i) Coastal Ghats (ii) Inland Eastern (iii) Inland Southern and (iv) Inland Northern.The Coastal Ghats show very high age at marriage of females i.e 20.24 and 22.84 years in 1971and 1981 respectively compared to 17.8 and 19.2 years at the state level for the same years. The lowest age at marriage was found in Inland Northern i.e., 16.6 and 18.1 years in 1971 and 1981 respectively.

There are two major states in Western India, namely Maharashtra and Gujarat. Maharashtra has been divided into six regions, and variations in female age at marriage between the regions are found to be of very high order. For example, the difference in SMAM between the coastal and Inland Central was 4.85 and 3.89 years respectively in 1971 and 1981. The Inland Central region of Maharashtra is historically known as Marathwada whcih remained much backward even after higher level of socio-economic development of Maharashtra compared to the national level. The Eastern region constituting the districts Bhandara and Chandrapura shows the next lowest age at marriage of femles in all the last censuses. In Gujarat, the difference between regions is not large except the Northern region which borders with Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh.

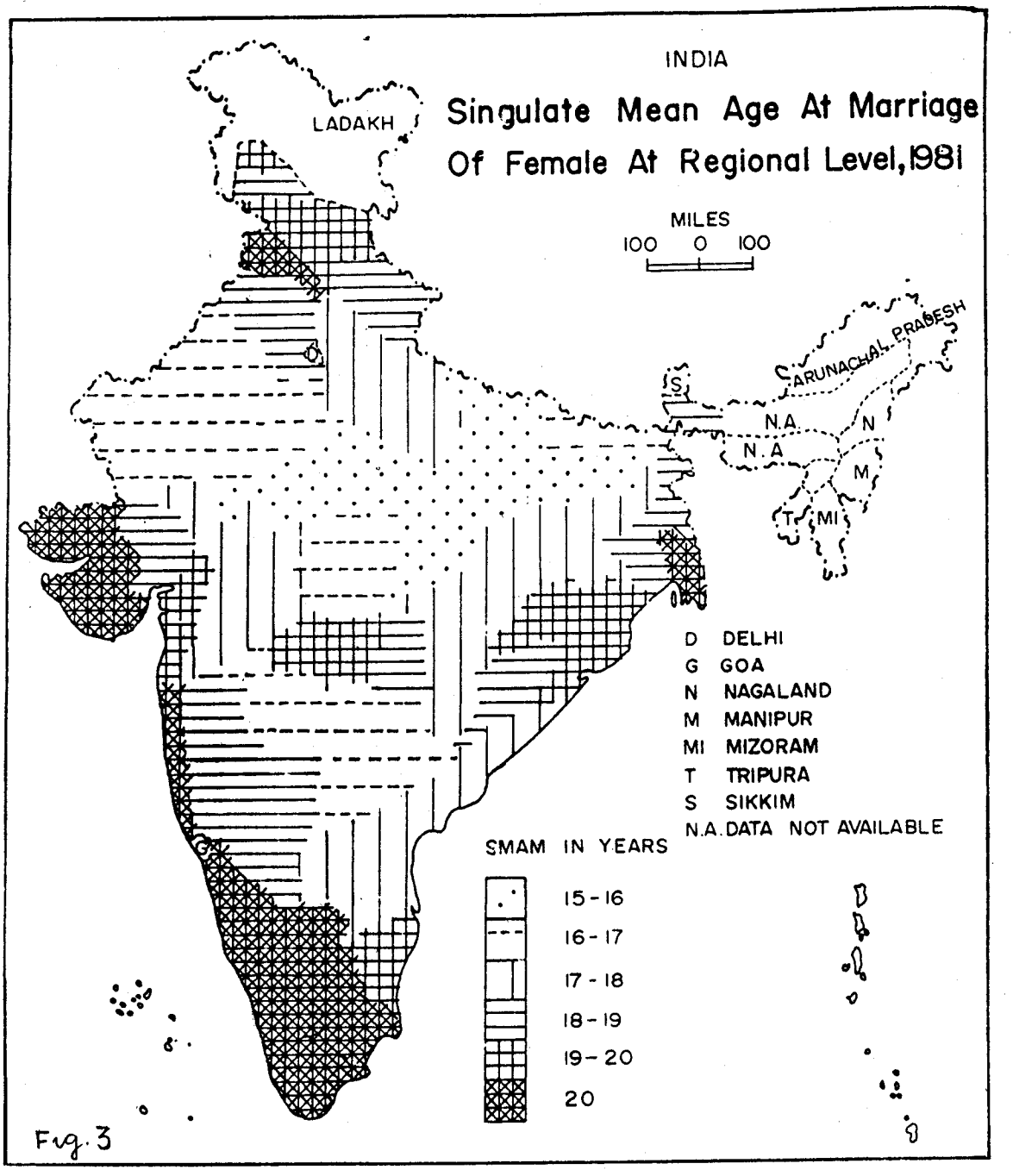
Tamil Nadu has two distinct regions- the coastal and the Interior Highland. The coastal areas are again divided into Northern and Southern coastal regions.The Southern coastal region has higher age at marriage of females and the rest of the two regions have lower age at marriage than the state average in both the 1971 and 1981 census.

It has been observed that Himalayan areas of Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal have higher age at marriage in the states. Similarly the other parts of Himalayas, for example Jammu & Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh also show almost the similar level of proportion single and SMAM. Himachal pradesh has been treated as single region by N.S.S. and Jammu & Kashimr has been divided into three regions - Mountainous, outer hills and Jhelum Valley. The state has been traversed by river Jhelum from east to west and the mountainous ranges have been dissected by it, which ultimatley falls into Indus after crossing the state in Pakistan.The female age at marriage in Jhelum Valley is higher than the outer hills, however, it is lower than the Mountains, in 1981.

CHANGES IN FEMALE AGE AT MARRIAGE

It is evident from Table 1 that there is an increase in female age at marriage in all the selected regions of the coutry. the increase has been found in both the regions, characterized by low as well as high age at marriage. It ranged from less than two year in few regions to more than 4 years in some of them during 1961-81. It must be admitted that the change is rather slow in majority of the regions of the country which manifest an increase of approximately 1 year per decade. Such slow change is a matter of concern for a country like India where the age at marriage has been perhaps the lowest in the world. The slow increase has also been testified by the data of National sample survey in its several rounds in the recent past (Mitra 1978).

The various demographic sample surveys carried out in different parts of the country during the last few decades are also important tobe taken into account for measuring the change in the marriage age of females in different parts of the country. The trend in female age at marriage from survey data may be analysed in two alternative ways; these are by birth cohort and marriage cohort methods. In the birth cohort method, data on ageat mar-


INDIA
Singulate Mean Age At Marriage
Of Female At Regional Level, 1981
LADAKH
MILES
100 0 100
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N NAGALAND
M MANIPUR
MI MIZORAM
T TRIPURA
S SIKKIM
N.A. DATA NOT AVAILABLE
SMAM IN YEARS
15 - 16
16 - 17
17 - 18
18 - 19
19 - 20
20

Fig. 3

riage cross-classified by the present age of the women.The mean or median claculated for each present age-group are the representative of the cohort or generation born during the equal nimber of years prior to the survey. The marriage cohort method requires age at marriage of women to be cross-classified by the duration fo their marriages. This gives the age at marriage of women married during a prticular period. Both the mehtods are affected by mortality and migration similar to other measures of nuptiality (U. N. 1961 : 89). The studies based on sample data have employed both the mehtods mentioned above in measuring change in female age at marraige and noted an increase, rather slow in the differnet parts of the country (U. N. 1961, Driver 1963; IIPS 1984; Caldwell 1983, Rao et al 1987). However, it is important to remember that the survey data sometimes may not be able to trace the trend in age at marriage because of their nature of being affected by truncation effect and recall lapses. The trucation effect means taht the marriage experience of the younger cohort or younger generation (in this case 15-29) is not complete and average age at marriage computed on the basis of those who are married in the cohort may not be the representative of the marital behaviour of the entire cohort. Similarly, data on age at marriage generated by direct question to the older women may suffer from recall lapses because memory gets hazy over time. On the other hand, these types of problems do not arise in case of census data since direct question is not put on age at marriage but only the information on age and marital status are acquired. The marital status is expected to be known to every women, and the data on present age may suffer from age-misreporting. But under the assumption that error in age misreporting will be of the same magnitude in all the censuses, the slow increase observed through census data remains true beyond doubt.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS:

The study at the regional level shows that in most of the regions in the Gangetic plain have low female age at marriage low, and the regions forming parts of Himalayas have relatively higher age at marriage compared to the former. Further, it will also be wrong to believe that entire south has higher age at marriage; on the contrary, the regional study indicates taht there are some regions such as Telangana in Andra Pradesh, Inland Northern region in Karnataka and Marathwada in Maharashtra where age at marriage of female is found to be low, and there is a higher prevalence of early marriages. Thus, while regionalism in marriage age for female is a reality, the North-South contrast appears to have been misconceived by scholars due to their narrow view of South being defined to the Malabar coast and its adjoining areas. A closer look at regional variations within the south shatters its so called homogeneous identity; and this is equally applicable the North where there are regions which show age at marriage as high as in some regions of the south (Region of Northern Punjab and some regions of Himalayas).

There has been slow increase in female age at marriage in the country during the recent past and it is supported by the evidence from different sources.

The regionalism in the pattern of female age at marriage as revealed by the present study is a pointer to the working of the spatial processes in the persistence of early marriage practices in the country. This is perhaps the little explored aspect *vis-a-vis* the other demographic phenomena which merit our attention.

In the recent years there has been a growing realisation of the incompatability of the national policy with that of the regional conditions, priorities and goals. Consequently

there is an advocacy for regional policy in the country. This realisation is important from the point of view of population policy also because demographic variables mainfest clear regioalism in their performance as it is evident from the present study on female age at marriage. Thus, it is strongly felt that a regional population policy ought to be worked out in consonance with regional specificity and goals. Such policy will be perhaps more sound and have greater chance of being successful in the short-run.

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