

Socio-Economic factors influence the age at first marriage of Muslim women of a remote population from North-East India.

Anjali Haloi¹ and Dhruba Kumar Limbu²

Abstract. *The present cross sectional study was undertaken among the Assamese Muslim women of Kamrup district, Assam, one of the North-Eastern states of India with a view to understand the differences in the age at first marriage of women and socio-economic factors influencing it. The findings of the present study reveals that the age at marriage is negatively associated with the type of family i.e., the larger family type, lower is the mean age at marriage. The mean age at marriage is likely to increase with increase in maternal education and household income. However, the mean age at first marriage of Assamese Muslim women was found to be 19.40 ± 0.04 years in this population.*

Key Words: Assamese Muslim women, Age at marriage, Maternal education, Household income, Type of family.

Introduction

Religion, one of the oldest socio-cultural characteristics associated with the mankind and civilizations created by them over thousands of years of known history, is practiced by almost all societies and it really acts as a powerful system of social control. India is a country of many religions. Hindus and Muslims are the two major religious communities in India. Many studies have shown that religion has a profound impact on age at marriage. This is true for Assam too - one of her states located in the North-Eastern part of the country. Continuous and rapid population growth in Assam, to a great extent, has impeded her socio-economic progress over the years. This rapid population growth in Assam is attributed to the age at marriage, meaning the lower mean age at marriage, larger is the family type. Women in underdeveloped and developing countries marry early. The mean age at marriage in these countries is less than 20 years. While in developed countries the average is 23 years (UNICEF 1991).

A women's age at marriage is an important factor for her fertility rate too. Many studies conducted in India, revealed that fertility rate declines with the increasing mean age at marriage (Bharati and Dastidar, 1990; Das and Dey, 1998; Varma *et.al*, 1999; Khongsdier, 2005, Sahu, 2006; IIPS, 2007). Yadav and Badari (1997) analyzed the

1 Dr. Anjali Haloi, Sophisticated Analytical Instrument facility, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong (Meghalaya), India, Pin. 793022. Corresponding Author: e-mail: anjalihaloi@gmail.com

2 Department of Anthropology, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong (Meghalaya), India.

age at effective marriage can still play an important role in the reduction of fertility of some states in India such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Rajasthan. Women in low developed countries marry when they are very young. The average age in these countries is below 20 years. While in more developed countries the average is 23 years (United Nations, 1995).

In North-East India also, Khongsdier, (2005) has shown that the mean number of live births per mother decreases with the rise in age at marriage of the mother. Some studies also shows that age at marriage is associated with socio-economic conditions thereby it is difficult to assess its direct impact on fertility (Gulati, 1988).

In this context a study was undertaken among the Assamese Muslim women of Dadara and Agyathuri villages of Kamrup district, Assam, India with the following objectives:

1. To understand the differences in the age at first marriage of the Assamese Muslim women and compare the mean age at first marriage of the study population with some other neighboring populations of Assam, India.
2. To know whether socio-economic factors has any influence on the age at first marriage of the women of the study population.

Materials and Methods

The fieldwork for the present study was conducted among the Assamese Muslims of Dadara and Agyathuri villages of Kamrup district, Assam, India. It is located between 28°11' and 26° 09' North latitude and 91° 47' to 91°50' East longitudes. The total Muslim populations of Kamrup district is 6, 25,002 of the district (2001 Census). A complete enumeration has been done for the present study and all households of the two villages were visited and surveyed.

In the present study some important socio-economic variables were taken into consideration. These include monthly income of the households and educational level of the mother and family type etc. Data on age at first marriage of the women and information on their socio-Economic background were collected through structured schedules similar to those for the National Family Health Survey-2(NFHS-2, IIPS.2000).

The study included 1034 married Assamese Muslim women who were willing to cooperate with the present study. The data on age at marriage were collected by recall method. No sampling techniques were applied for the selection of the informants. All data were managed and analyzed using SPSS (PC Software), version 11.5. The data were presented in terms of percentage, mean and standard error. Student's t-test was done to see significant difference with some neighbouring populations and the regression analysis was done to see whether age at marriage is dependent on socio-economic factors or not.

Results and Discussion

Table 1. Frequency distribution of married women according to their age at first marriage

Age class	Age at marriage(in years)	Frequency	Percentage
1	≤18	16	1.55
2	19	820	79.30
3	20	113	10.93
4	21	42	4.06
5	22	6	0.58
6	23	3	0.29
7	24	1	0.10
8	25	29	2.80
9	≥26	4	0.39

Table 1 shows the frequency distribution of Muslim women of Dadara and Agyathuri villages according to their age at first marriage. There are only 1.55% of women who were married on or before 18 years of age. In the next age group i.e., 19 years, the percentage of married women abruptly increases to 79.30% and, thereafter, it declines as the women's age at marriage increases up to 24 years. The percentage of women is slightly high (2.80%) who got married at 25 years of age. However, it again declines abruptly (0.39%) in the next higher age group i.e 26 years and above.

Table 2. Mean age at first marriage

Total number of women	Mean ± SE (years)
1034	19.40 ± 0.04

The mean age at first marriage among the Muslim women of Dadara and Agyathuri villages is 19.40 ± 0.04 years.

Table 3. Mean age at marriage among the Assamese Muslim women & some other populations of North-East India

Population	Number of women	Mean ± SE	Reference
Assamese Muslims	1034	19.40 ± 0.04	Present study
Chutiya	62	18.06 ± 0.16	Das <i>et.al.</i> , 1980b
Ahom	77	18.47 ± 0.27	Das <i>et.al.</i> , 1980b
Lalung	51	14.59 ± 0.18	Das <i>et.al.</i> , 1980a
Garo	95	19.63 ± 0.30	Das and Saikia, 1999

Table 4. Mean value of t-test significance; age at marriage

Populations	t-values	Significance level	Inference
Assamese Muslims × Chutiya	0.12	P > 0.05	Insignificant
Assamese Muslims × Ahom	3.44	P < 0.001	Significant
Assamese Muslims × Lalung	26.72	P < 0.001	Significant
Assamese Muslims × Garo	-0.77	P > 0.05	Insignificant

The data on age at marriage of the present Assamese Muslim women and some other populations of North-East India are presented in Table 3 and values of t-test significance are summarized in the Table 4 which reveals that the Garo population have highest age at marriage (19.63 ± 0.30), followed by the present study (19.40 ± 0.04). On the other hand, Lalung shows the lowest age at marriage (14.59 ± 0.18). The present population is significantly different from Ahom and Lalung whereas, it does not show significant relationship with Chutiya and Garos of North-East India.

Table 5. Regression analysis of age at marriage on independent factor

Parameters	Coefficient of regression (B) and its Standard Error (SE)	t-value	p-level
	B ± SE		
Age at marriage			
Maternal education	0.4365 ± 0.06	7.306	Significant at 5%
Household income	0.0002 ± 0.00	13.070	Significant at 5%
Type of Family	-0.2555 ± 0.07	3.481	Significant at 5%
Constant	17.4235 ± 0.17	100.303	Significant at 5%

Table 5 shows the regression analysis of the effects of socio-economic factors on age at marriage of the mothers in the study population. In this model, we have taken into consideration the maternal education, household income and type of family as independent factors where as age at marriage is as dependent factor. The above table shows that age at marriage is significantly dependent on maternal education, household income and type of family. The results of regression analysis indicate that age at marriage is negatively associated with types of family (-0.2555 ± 0.0734) i.e., the larger family type, lower is the mean age at marriage. The mean age at marriage is likely to increase with increase in maternal education and household income.

The present observation on age at first marriage among the Assamese Muslim women is in conformity with NFHS-3, where the age at first marriage of the women of Assam falls on the age of 19 years. The mean age at first marriage of some other neighboring populations also shows the similar results viz. in Chutiya is 18.06 ± 0.16 years (Das *et al.*, 1980b) and Ahom is 18.47 ± 0.27 years (Das *et al.*, 1980b). Only Lalung, who shows lowest mean age at marriage 14.59 ± 0.18 years (Das *et al.*, 1980a), than to the rest of the populations compared. The Garo shows close affinity with the Assamese Muslims in respect of the age at first marriage.

Summary

Age at marriage as theoretically expected is an intermediate variable that influences fertility in human population where practices of modern contraceptives are absent. Many studies shows that the effect of maternal education on live births is strongly compounded by maternal age at marriage. Age at marriage is significantly dependent on maternal education, household income and type of family. From the present study it is seen that age at marriage is negatively associated with types of family i.e., the larger family type, lower is the mean age at marriage. The mean age at marriage is likely to increase with increase in maternal education and household income. It is likely that they have higher aspiration for better education and higher economic status, thereby also may be reducing the birth rate in order to provide their children with such facilities (Varte, 2006).

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