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# **Changing Marriage Patterns in Asia**

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

There have been major changes in aspects of marriage in Asian countries over recent decades. In one short paper, it is not possible to cover effectively a continent as large and diverse as Asia, but in this paper I will concentrate on two of the major regions of Asia – East and Southeast Asia, on the one hand, and South Asia, on the other. Together they contain over 90 per cent of Asia's population. Central Asia and West Asia are omitted from the analysis for reasons both of space and the author's lack of regional knowledge. The rising trend of international marriage is also omitted for lack of space.

The key issues differ between South Asia and the more easterly parts of Asia, largely because their traditional marriage and kinship systems differed, but also because the forces acting to modify these systems have had different intensity in different places. Half a century ago, universal and early marriage were characteristic of almost all of Asia,<sup>2</sup> but child marriage (a high proportion of girls marrying before their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday), while very common in South Asia, was not common in Southeast or East Asia, with the exception of some of the Malay populations of Malaysia and Indonesia. The system that produced child marriage was a strongly patriarchal one in which parent-arranged marriage was the unquestioned mechanism for finding a marriage partner.

In the case of East and Southeast Asia, fertility in major countries is now well below replacement level. Delayed and non-marriage have contributed to very low fertility, and are important for this reason, but they are important issues in their own right, along with rising divorce rates. Traditional arranged marriage systems have almost disappeared. In South Asia, the key issues relate to whether there are any fractures in the arranged marriage system, issues related to continued patterns of early marriage, and the role of consanguineous marriage.

The geographic division of issues, of course, is not completely neat. For example, early marriage remains an issue in some parts of Southeast Asia, though not to nearly the extent that it does in South Asia, and consanguineous marriage is prevalent in parts of Southeast Asia. Also, in just one South Asian country - Sri Lanka – delayed marriage is as much of an issue as it is in countries further eastwards.

## MARRIAGE PATTERNS AND THEIR RELATION TO KINSHIP SYSTEMS

Before discussing changes in marriage ages, the differences in kinship systems and their effects on both arrangement of marriage and age at marriage need to be considered. Both the Confucianist systems of East Asia and the Hindu system in India emphasized the absorption of the bride into the husband's family, whereas the bilateral kinship systems of most of Southeast Asia allow much closer association of the bride with her affines, and a pattern

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of a paper presented at Session 154, "Changing demographic landscape in Asia" in 26<sup>th</sup> IUSSP International Population Conference, Marrakech, Morocco, 28 September 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Universal marriage is sometimes defined as fewer than 5 per cent of women remaining single at age 45-49. According to this definition, only the Philippines and Myanmar (just) failed to qualify as universal marriage societies. By early marriage, we mean the vast majority of women marrying before their 25<sup>th</sup> birthday.

whereby the newly married couple more commonly lived first with the bride's parents rather than the husband's parents, before establishing an independent household.<sup>3</sup>

The system that is heavily dependant on arranged marriage is strongest in North India. North Indian kinship involves three key principles: marriage is exogamous with only non-relatives marrying; males generally cooperate with agnates, particularly brothers; and females do not inherit. The sexuality of women needs to be carefully controlled to uphold the honour of the family. Husbands and wives should not be too emotionally attached, as this could threaten the unity of the patriarchal family. Girls are married off very young, and are thenceforth cut off from their natal families. There is a saying that "a woman is concerned not with who her husband will be but with who her mother in law will be" (Caldwell, 1992: 44). Early marriage (with a considerably older man) helps protect young women's chastity, marks a clear break from their natal families, makes them more likely to accept the structure of authority in their new family, and weakens the husband-wife bond. Writing of fieldwork in rural Karnataka, in South India, Caldwell, Reddy and Caldwell (1982: 706) noted that although great changes had been transforming marriage over the past third of a century, there was no claim of any decline in the significance of arranged marriage, which remained universal.

Many of these principles also operated in Malay-Muslim societies of Southeast Asia, in particular the desire to protect family honour by marrying off girls at a young age. However, women could inherit, albeit following the Islamic allocation of half shares. And while patriarchy as a principle was supported by their Muslim religion, in practice spousal relations were much more egalitarian. As a result of the bilateral kinship system, the North Indian pattern of cutting off young wives from their natal family was absent. In the non-Muslim Southeast Asian societies such as Buddhist Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos, and Catholic Philippines, choice of spouse was more relaxed than in Muslim Southeast Asian societies.

In East and Southeast Asia, a broad generalization is that at mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, arranged marriage with varying degrees of consultation with the individuals marrying remained the norm, but by the end of the century, it had virtually disappeared.<sup>4</sup> The sharp decline in arranged marriage has been clearly documented for Japan, Taiwan and Malaysia (Retherford and Ogawa, 2006, Figure 1.9; Thornton and Lin, 1994; Jones, 1994: 131-144), and observed elsewhere, though it has probably not proceeded as far in parts of rural Indonesia as it has elsewhere.

The history of arranged marriage reflects trends in gender and inter-generational relations. Traditional arranged marriage placed considerable power in the hands of parents, and in particular the father. The weakening of the system of arranged marriage throughout East and Southeast Asia reflects at a deep level the abdication of this power by the older generation and in particular by males of the older generation. It can be seen as a largely voluntary

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<sup>3</sup> For Thai patterns, see Podhisita, 1994 and Limanonda, 1994. In Thailand, matrilocal residence after marriage is most common in the northeast and the north, whereas in the central region and the urban south, where there are larger proportions of people with Chinese ancestry, neolocal residence or virilocal residence is preferred (Limanonda, 1994: 390).

<sup>4</sup> This generalization of course needs to be more nuanced. For example, in Thailand, arranged marriage was not the norm in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, whereas in Cambodia, also a Buddhist country, arranged marriage remains very common, even today.

abdication, rather than one brought on by revolutionary means. It is clearly related to the remarkable developments in education, increasing urbanization and involvement of women in economic activities outside the household, among other things – which in the public perception are often referred to in the vernacular as “changing times” (e.g. in Indonesian, *perubahan zaman*), a term which some social scientists may consider excessively vague, but which on the contrary captures the breadth and pervasiveness of the changes referred to.

Why, then, has the arranged marriage system proven to be so much more resilient in South Asia? Its weakening in Southeast Asian countries is not so hard to explain. These are characterized by bilateral kinship systems and not (except for Vietnam) subject to Confucianist influences, so there was less underlying structural need for an arranged marriage system. The system therefore crumbled when faced by changing reality, in the form of extended education for girls, the effect of this on raising ages at marriage, and the lack of a compelling reason why parents should continue to be the ones making the choice of spouse for later-marrying daughters. But this does not explain why the same crumbling took place in East Asian Confucianist-influenced societies, but not in South Asia. Part of the explanation may be simply a “developmental” one: Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore were the East Asian “tiger economies” which experienced rapid and sustained economic growth over the four decades from the 1960s onwards. Female education became universal, and urbanization reached advanced levels. In South Asia, development, whether measured by economic or human development criteria, was much slower, at least until India’s recent upsurge in growth. Female education has lagged male, though before concluding from this that lack of female autonomy is a key factor in persistence of arranged marriage, it needs to be noted that arranged marriage is nearly universal in Kerala, where female autonomy is acknowledged to be particularly high (Caldwell, 1992: 52).

It is partly that young people in South Asia recognize that their parents may be the best ones to choose their marriage partners, and have shown little inclination to challenge the arranged marriage system. By contrast, in East Asia, the arranged marriage system has collapsed, but it has been argued that nothing has emerged to replace it, and the dearth of social contacts with the opposite sex is partly responsible for the sharp rise in singlehood (Retherford and Ogawa, 2006: 17-18). Reports in the popular press suggest that parents in China and Japan may be getting more involved again in finding partners for their children. There is certainly evidence that in East and Southeast Asia, many young people are finding it hard to deal with the lack of an arranged marriage system, though adaptations of various kinds are developing – for example, the involvement of Islamic marriage bureaus serving as matchmaking agencies in Malaysia (Jones, 1994: 153) and more broadly, the growth of internet dating, which in Singapore is sponsored by the government (Jones and Gubhaju, 2009: 259-60).

The one exception to the persistence of arranged marriage systems in South Asia is Sri Lanka, which in relation to marriage should perhaps be considered to lie in Southeast Asia, as it is culturally closer to the Theravada Buddhist countries such as Thailand and Burma than it is to the countries of the Indian subcontinent. Here, arranged marriage dropped sharply over the 20 years from the early 1960s to the early 1980s (from 70 per cent to 32 per cent), according to the Sri Lankan Demographic Change Project (Caldwell, 1992, Table 5.1).

## TRENDS TOWARD LATER AND LESS MARRIAGE

In 1960, Asia was characterized by universal marriage (a crude definition of which is fewer than 5% of women remaining single in their late 40s), with the Philippines and Myanmar the only exceptions, both by a small margin. The contrast with the present time is dramatic. Asia is now home to some of the latest-marrying populations in the world, and in three countries (Singapore, Hong Kong and Myanmar), the proportion of women reaching their late 40s never-married exceeds 10 per cent, and will soon reach this figure in Japan and probably, Thailand.

The trend toward later marriage has been universal throughout Asia over the past half century; in East and Southeast Asia it has been accompanied by a trend toward less marriage (Jones, 2005; Jones and Gubhaju, 2009). A summary of trends is given in Table 1. Another measure – the proportion still single at age 35-39 – is given in Table 2. Over the 35 years from 1970 to 2005, SMAM for women has increased by 4.7 years in Japan, 5.5 years on Korea, 5.0 years in Taiwan (to 2000) and 4.1 years in Indonesia. In the first three of these countries, SMAM was already relatively high in 1970, and by 2005 was amongst the highest anywhere in the world, particularly if cohabiting couples in Western countries are included in the married population for purposes of comparison (Jones, 2007). In other Southeast Asian countries – Philippines, Malaysia and Thailand – the rise has not been as spectacular, though their SMAMs for women were already around 22 in 1970, and have now reached levels of 24 or 25.

Women who are still single at age 35-39 are nearing the point at which their reproductive capacity is seriously diminished. As Table 2 shows, the proportion of women who are still single in this age group has reached 20 per cent in Hong Kong, 19 per cent in Myanmar, 18 per cent in Japan, 16 per cent in Taiwan, and 15 per cent in Singapore. These figures were only in the 2-6 per cent range (except for Myanmar and Singapore) as recently as 1980. This is a very sharp change in a relatively short period of time.

Singlehood is particularly high for well educated women. Figures for Thailand in 2000, for example, show that the proportion of women still single at ages 35-39 was 7 per cent for those with primary education or less, 14 per cent for those with lower secondary education, 17 per cent for those with upper secondary education, and 23 per cent for those with tertiary education. For men, the relationship between educational level and marriage is different – in a number of countries (e.g. Japan, China, Singapore and Chinese Malaysians), it is the less educated who are less likely to marry, seemingly because of the difficulties they face in the marriage market. Partly as a result of this, there have been rapid increases in the proportion of men from wealthier Asian countries (e.g., Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore) marrying women from poorer Asian countries (e.g. China, Vietnam) through marriage brokers (Jones and Shen, 2008; Kim (ed), 2008).

Given that singlehood is much more prevalent for well educated women, an important question is whether the recent rise in singlehood is purely a “compositional” effect of increasing proportions of women in these educational categories, or whether the increase in singlehood is something sweeping through the whole society. A recent study shows that in Japan, Korea and Taiwan, the dramatic trend away from marriage has been pervasive across all educational groups, whereas in Thailand, for the Chinese in Peninsular Malaysia, in Singapore and in China, compositional changes played the dominant role (Jones and Gubhaju, 2009).

Average age at marriage has been rising in South Asian countries as well (see Table 1) – by two and a half years between 1970 and 2000 in India, by two years in Bangladesh, by three and a half years between 1970 and 2007 in Pakistan and by three and a half years between 1990 and 2005 in Iran. While most of these increases have not been nearly as great as in many countries of East and Southeast Asia, they are certainly important, and in the case of Iran a particularly striking development, given the strong promotion of early marriage in the early post-revolutionary years. It is noteworthy that in Iran's pro-natalist phase (1976-86), during which early marriage was encouraged, the SMAM barely changed. The three and a half year rise in SMAM was entirely concentrated in the following 20-year period (1986-2006), in which pro-natalist policies had been abandoned.

In India, there are large regional differences in age at marriage. Women marry relatively late in the South, particularly in Kerala, and relatively early in the North, particularly in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh (Visaria, 2004: 62). These differences have been discussed as part of a broader difference in female autonomy and demographic behaviour between North and South India (or more strictly northwest and southeast India) by Dyson and Moore, 1983.

### **Age Differences between Spouses**

Mean age differences between husbands and wives are much wider in South Asia than in East and Southeast Asia; in East Asian countries in recent decades, the SMAM for males typically exceeds that for females by between 2 to 3.5 years, and for Southeast Asian countries by 1.8 to 3.6 years, whereas in South Asian countries, the differences tend to be more like five or six years. (For earlier evidence from World Fertility Survey data, see Casterline et al, 1986). Bangladesh is probably the most extreme case; men marry on average more than nine years later than women, indicating large age differences between husbands and wives (National Institute of Population Research and Training et al., 2009: 77). The wider age gap in South Asian countries reflects parent-arranged marriage and patriarchal family structures, which typically lead to young ages at marriage for females, whereas males are expected to be in a position both to support a family economically, and to show maturity in taking on the responsibilities of a new family, before entering into marriage, which usually means some delay in marriage.

Over time, the age differences have contracted somewhat in most Asian countries for which there is evidence. For example, in Pakistan, the difference between SMAM for males and females was around 6 years in the 1950-1970 period, but has been around 5 years since the 1980s (1991 DHS, Table 7.2); census data show the difference contracting to 3.9 years in 1998 (Nayab, 2009). In Iran, the difference in mean age at first marriage in rural areas fell from 5.3 years in 1980 to 4.3 years in 2000, and in urban areas from 5.4 years to 5.0 years. (Abbasi-Shavazi et al, forthcoming, Table 5.2). However, in Peninsular Malaysia, there has been little change. What is clear in Malaysia is that tertiary-educated women tend to have a smaller age gap with their husband, and are more likely than other women to be the same age as, or older than, their husband (Tey, 2007, Tables 1 and 8).

## ISSUES ARISING FROM RISING SINGLEHOOD

In the traditional, universal marriage systems of Asia, only women with serious physical or mental disabilities were likely to remain single. The situation has now drastically changed in many East and Southeast Asian countries. In Japan, around 40 per cent of women are entering their 30s still single, and around 15 per cent of that cohort is likely to remain single when they reach 49.<sup>5</sup> In Indonesia, around 12 per cent of women are entering their 30s still single, though the proportion reaching their 40s still single remains very low. Most East and Southeast Asian countries fall between these two extremes. What is the role of singles in these societies? In Japan, many adjustments have been made, but the use of terms such as “parasite singles” to describe those who remain living at home, and enjoy their good salaries to buy designer clothes and take vacations with friends, shows a degree of tension about the role of singles. In Indonesia, the situation of singles may be more difficult, because a place has not been provided for single adults in community and family activities and ceremonies (Situmorang, 2005). Similarly, in Vietnam, while non-marriage has become more acceptable, “single women are far from being fully accepted by, and integrated in, their families and communities” (Belanger and Hong, 2002: 90). It is perhaps easier for single women in Buddhist countries such as Thailand and Burma, where remaining single to look after aged parents is an accepted role for women.

In many countries of Asia, it is very difficult for singles to access contraceptive advice and services. In many countries of the region, access to contraception by unmarried teenagers is made very difficult. For example, in Mataram, Lombok, women are denied access to family planning in government clinics if they are unable to confirm that they are married; the alternative for single women is to access contraception privately, but “this requires the cooperation and discretion of a willing doctor, midwife, or chemist and the financial resources to pay the inflated cost of contraception sold in the private sector” (Bennett, 2005: 35). In Malaysia, even the private Federation of Family Planning Associations of Malaysia “has limited its services for young, adolescent and unmarried women to counseling, information, and education, and not any direct services that are not endorsed by government policy” (Chee, 2006: 5). There is a clear need to re-think these policies in view of the much longer period young people are exposed to the possibility of premarital sexual relations.

Delayed marriage of the magnitude being experienced in many East and Southeast Asian countries is sufficient to make a considerable difference in lowering fertility rates, from an accounting point of view, but perhaps more emphasis needs to be placed on the motivation for delaying marriage. Given the stress on quickly having a child after marriage in these countries, delay in marriage could in many cases be motivated by reluctance to start family formation by those who are worried about the many problems of bearing and raising children in these societies. These problems include the increasing costs of childrearing, both the direct financial costs and the opportunity costs of women’s interrupted career development; societal expectations about intensive parenting and driving children to succeed in a highly competitive world, and the pressures this places on women in particular; and the difficulty for women in finding a partner who shares their values and expectations, particularly about partnership in housework and childrearing in a two-income household.

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<sup>5</sup> An even higher proportion of Japanese men are likely to remain single on reaching 49 – perhaps 20 per cent.



## CONSANGUINEOUS MARRIAGE

Consanguineous marriage tends to be prevalent in societies where the interaction between young women and men from outside close kin is highly restricted. It is therefore prevalent in many Islamic societies, as well as non-Islamic communities in South Asia, especially in South India. The most common form of consanguineous unions is between first cousins (Bittles, 1994: 562). As noted by Korson (1979: 196), writing of Pakistan, “with the limitation of sexual segregation among adolescents and adults enforced by the practice of *purdah*, it is only natural that the young men and women are likely to develop close attachments to those relatives they are permitted to see over a period of time, namely, cousins”.

Pakistan does, indeed, have one of the highest rates of consanguineous marriage in the world. Among currently married women aged 15-49 surveyed in the 2006-7 Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey, only one third were married to non-relatives, and the proportion was even lower among those aged below 30, suggesting, if anything, a tendency for the practice to increase over time. This increase over time is confirmed by comparing the 2006-7 Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey with the DHS of 1990-91 (Nayab, 2009). More than half of women in 2008 were married to first cousins. Consanguineous marriage was more common among the rural and less educated population, but even among those with secondary education, 44 per cent were married to first cousins, and among the tertiary educated, 37 per cent (National Institute of Population Studies et al, 2008, Table 6.3).

In India, consanguineous marriage has long been more prevalent in the south, especially in Tamil Nadu. The favoured version is matrilineal cross-cousin, that is with mother’s brother’s daughter, or uncle-niece marriage, that is, with sister’s daughter (Caldwell, 1992: 49; Dyson and Moore, 1983). Tamil populations abroad (e.g. in Malaysia) have carried on this tradition; in a survey of Indian (mainly Tamil) women in Malaysian estates in the 1980s, close to 30 per cent had been offered to their maternal uncle, where one was available (though only half of them actually proceeded to the marriage), while one third were offered in marriage to a cousin, of whom two thirds married the cousin. In all, some 40 per cent were offered in marriage to a cousin, an uncle, or both (Tan et al., 1988: 44-48).

In Malaysia, not only the Tamils but also the Malays have traditions of marrying close relatives. Malaysia’s long-serving Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad famously argued in his book *The Malay Dilemma* (banned until he became Prime Minister) that the genetic weaknesses resulting from the practice of cross-cousin marriage were part of the reason why Malays were unable to compete successfully with the Chinese in Malaysia.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, the evidence from the Malay world shows that among Malays in Malaysia, marriage to relatives is not particularly common, and certainly less than in parts of Indonesia, where in places it reaches levels of 30-50 per cent (though the Javanese seem to have lower rates of consanguineous marriage than elsewhere in Indonesia - Jones, 1994: 11-13).

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<sup>6</sup> Because the highest rates of consanguineous marriage tend to be associated with low socioeconomic status, interactions between consanguinity and social variables can complicate assessment of the genetic effects of human inbreeding. In a survey of the available studies, Bittles (2001) summarizes that the greater likelihood of rare recessive genes inherited from a common ancestor results in morbidity levels some 1% to 4% higher in the progeny of first cousins than in the offspring of unrelated couples, and mean excess mortality 4% higher.

It has been frequently argued (e.g. by Goode, 1963) that consanguineous marriage will decline with development, urbanization and the decline of arranged marriage. And there is indeed evidence of decline in many parts of the developing world (Tfaily, 2005). However, the decline has tended to be slow, and not universal. As noted above, there is no sign of a decline in consanguinity in Pakistan. A recent study for Iran (Abbasi-Shavazi et al., 2008) shows very considerable regional variation in levels of consanguinity, and greater incidence in rural areas and among the lesser-educated, lending some support to the argument that it will soon decline, particularly bearing in mind the decline in arranged marriages in Iran. Nevertheless, consanguineous marriage has strong cultural support in Iran, and there is no evidence of a lowered incidence so far.

The stress placed by many observers on the undesirable clinical outcomes of close kin marriages, which adversely affect only a small minority of the families and individuals concerned, needs to be balanced by an understanding of the social and economic benefits of a consanguineous union in the cultural settings of the countries in which they are prevalent. Such benefits include maintenance of family structure and property, financial advantages of keeping dowry or bridewealth payments within the family, a closer relationship between the wife and her in-laws, and greater marital stability.

## **PROBLEMS OF CONTINUED EARLY MARRIAGE**

In South Asia, universal marriage remains the norm, and although there has been a decline over time in the proportion of females in the 15-19 age group who are married, the proportion still marrying as teenagers remains very high in Bangladesh, parts of India, Afghanistan and Nepal (Bhagat, 1993, 2002). Marriage, though, tends to be at a later age in Pakistan, and at a much later age in Sri Lanka, which in this respect does not fit the South Asian pattern at all.

Before World War II, teenage marriage was the norm throughout Southeast and East Asia.<sup>7</sup> The postwar years saw major changes, but in the early 1960s, teenage marriage remained the norm in Islamic Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malays in Malaysia, Singapore and Southern Thailand), as well as among the Indian populations of Malaysia and Singapore and, to a lesser extent, in rural Thailand and Myanmar.<sup>8</sup> The median age at marriage for females in the late 1950s was around 17 in Indonesia, for Malays in Malaysia and Singapore, and for Southern Thai Muslims (Jones, 1994, Table 3.1). Then it rose dramatically and by 1990 had reached 21 in Indonesia and 24 for Malays in both Malaysia and Singapore.

Table 3 shows the percentages of females ever-married in the 15-19 age group in various countries and populations. This statistic needs to be interpreted carefully. It is a cross-sectional figure, showing the current marital status of those in the age range 15-19 *at the time of the census*. If 50 per cent of this age group are ever-married, it does not mean that half of women marry only at ages 20 and above. Many women aged 15-19 at any particular time are aged 15, 16 or 17, and the fact that they are not yet married does not necessarily mean that they will not marry before reaching age 20. Thus, if 50 per cent of women aged 15-19 are

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<sup>7</sup> The youngest marriage in East Asia appears to have been in Korea, where in 1935, 63 per cent of females aged 15-19 were ever married (Kwon, 2007; Xenos and Kabamalan, 2005, Fig. 8). In China, a study carried out in eleven provinces between 1929 and 1931 found that 72 per cent of women had married before reaching the age of 20 (Croll, 1981: 66-67).

ever-married, this implies that a *large majority* of the women in this cohort marry in their teens.

In South Asia, although proportions ever married at ages 15-19 have fallen very substantially, they remain much higher than in even the earliest marrying countries of Southeast Asia, while in East Asia, teenage marriage has virtually disappeared. Teenage marriage, then, is very much a South Asian issue, and appears to be closely linked with the persistence of arranged marriage.

In India, the proportion of females aged 10-14 who are currently married declined from 6.5 per cent in 1981 to 2.4 per cent in 2001 (Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, no date: 18). The legal age at marriage for women in India is 18. In 2001, one state – Rajasthan – had by far the highest proportion of women who are married before reaching age 18 – 5.4 per cent. It was followed by Madhya Pradesh and Bihar, each 3.2 per cent, Andhra Pradesh, 2.9 per cent, and Uttar Pradesh, 2.8 per cent. The Census report commented that these are the known demographically backward states with high birth rates, high infant and maternal mortality rates and low literacy rates (Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, no date: 19). While 18 has been set as the minimum age at marriage for women since 1929 (Haub and Sharma, 2006), most Indian women married before age 17 until fairly recently.

In Bangladesh, too, the legal age at marriage for women is 18, but a remarkably large proportion of marriages takes place before that age. The 2007 Demographic and Health Survey found that 66 per cent of women aged 20-24 were married before age 18 (see Table 5). Although there had been a steady decline in the proportion married before age 18, from 90 per cent among women currently aged 45-49, the fact that two thirds of young women are still married before the legal age suggests that this particular legislation has little or no meaning. As for the proportion of marriages occurring before age 15, this has fallen rather more sharply, from 65 per cent among women aged 45-49 to 21 per cent among women ages 15-19.

In 1960, Southeast Asia could not match the South Asian figure of 70 per cent of females ever married in the 15-19 age group, but among Southeast Asian Muslim populations, figures of 50 per cent and more were common – in Malaysia and Singapore, many provinces of Indonesia, and in Southern Thailand. Then a decline set in, dramatic in the case of Malaysia and Singapore, much more gradual in the case of Indonesia, such that the percentage ever married in this age group is now above 8 per cent only in Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Myanmar – interestingly, most of them non-Muslim populations.

To take Indonesia as an example, although there has been a gradual decline over time in teenage marriage, it remains quite prevalent. Based on data collected in 2002-3 by the Indonesia Demographic and Health Survey, between the cohort of women aged 50-54 and those aged 20-24 (i.e. over a 30-year period), the proportion married before age 15 fell from 23 per cent to about 4 per cent; the proportion married before age 18 fell from 56 per cent to 24 per cent; and the proportion married before 20 fell from 71 per cent to 42 per cent (see Table 4). A few years later, according to the 2005 Inter-Censal Survey, the proportion married before aged 20 in the 20-24 age group had further declined to 35 per cent. This means that more than one third of all women were still marrying in their teens, and of all women currently in their childbearing ages in Indonesia, approximately half married as

teenagers; but an increasing proportion of those marrying as teenagers have been marrying at ages 18 and 19 (Jones, forthcoming).

In Indonesia, as in many Asian countries, there are legal issues in early marriage. The legal age at marriage for girls in Indonesia has been 16 since 1974. In the decade after that, more than 10% of girls were still being married before reaching that age, a figure which had fallen to about 3 per cent by the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There are a number of reasons why such marriages are still taking place. One is that in some cases, the girl is pregnant, and marriage is seen as the only way to preserve family honour. Another is that some parents, and officials responsible for registering such marriages, do not accept any lower age limit on the age at which girls can be married. Another is that sometimes there is no valid birth certificate for the girl, and therefore no way for the official to verify her age.

There are at least four key problems with early, parent-arranged marriage. First, there is a human rights dimension. Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses”. Second, early marriage is likely to result in early age at first childbirth, which can have adverse health consequences for both mother and child. Third, marriage is typically a barrier to education. Fourth, women who marry very young, typically to a much older husband, “are likely to have less power, status, agency and autonomy within the household. In fact, men may choose younger brides for this very reason” (Jensen and Thornton, 2003: 10).

## **DIVORCE TRENDS**

Divorce rates in Western countries rose very substantially – with more than a doubling of the general divorce rate – in the two decades between 1960 and 1980 (Jones, Asari and Djuartika, 1994, Table 1). Since then, these rates have shown little change, although with the rise in cohabitation, divorce trends in these countries are becoming less meaningful as an indicator of dissolution of long-term relationships. In East Asian countries, though, divorce rates have been rising steadily since 1980, particularly in the period since 1990 in the case of Japan, South Korea and Hong Kong (see Table 6). The rise in South Korea was particularly sharp between 1995 and 2000 – the period in which the Asian financial crisis occurred. The usual risk factors explain only a small part of the rise in Korean divorce over this period, implying “transformations in normative regimes regarding divorce, which may have accelerated after the economic recession in the late 1990s” (Lee, 2006: 127).<sup>9</sup> In China, freeing up of divorce regulations in 2001 and 2003 may have contributed to the sharp rise in divorce rates in the 2000-2005 period.

Trends in divorce in East Asia appear, then, to be going the way of the west, and partly for the same reasons. Substantial increases in divorce rates in East Asian countries signify a significant change in circumstances and attitudes to divorce, because in the past divorce carried a considerable stigma, and the pressure to remain in a disharmonious marriage for “the sake of the children” and also for the sake of appearances and family honour, was very strong. It would appear that factors such as increasing economic independence of women, and the pressures of the big city environments in which an increasing proportion of East

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<sup>9</sup> South Korean divorce rates appear to have leveled off since 2003 and to have fallen since the introduction in 2008 of a mandatory deliberation period before a couple could end their marriage (Junghyan, 2009). Interestingly, divorce rates in Taiwan also peaked in 2003.

Asians live, are influencing divorce trends. More controversial is the issue of whether East Asian societies are becoming more individualistic and less governed by Confucianist norms.

But in the less wealthy countries of Asia, divorce rates have varied tremendously in the past, from very low rates in South Asian countries to very high rates in the Malay-Muslim populations of Southeast Asia. One generalization about trends in divorce that has at least some theoretical basis is that in stable high-divorce systems, “industrialization” can be expected to lead to declines in divorce rates (Goode, 1963, Chapter 8). I have argued that, with regard to the Malay-Muslim populations, it is only when the traditional marriage and kinship systems in these countries are understood, along with the pressures under which they are placed by social and economic developments, that trends in divorce can be understood. (Jones, 1997; see also Hirschman and Teerawichitchainan, 2003). “Industrialization” led to massive declines in divorce rates in these populations, because divorce had been an escape route from unsatisfactory parent-arranged marriages at very young ages, and when this system of marriage arrangement broke down and love marriages took over, this escape route was no longer needed.

Actually, in very recent years, the falling trend in divorce rates in Malay-Muslim populations of Southeast Asia appears to have been reversed, very likely because the factors just mentioned have more than played themselves out, and divorce among these populations is now being driven by similar factors to those operating elsewhere in East Asia, and in the West, for that matter. The rise came first for the Muslim population of Singapore, followed by Malaysia.

In South Asian societies, too, the underlying marriage system must be understood if lack of increase in divorce rates with “industrialization” is to be understood. In South Asian marriage systems, divorce is not a feasible way out of a disharmonious marriage. Unless arranged marriage and patrilocal residence cease to be the norms governing marriage, it seems unrealistic to expect much increase in divorce rates in the region. In any case, comprehensive data are elusive; the data for Iran in Table 5 show a drop in divorce rates from 1985 to 1995, then a significant rise by 2005. Further west, into West Asia and North Africa, general divorce rates in these Muslim countries have remained roughly constant (Syria, Turkey, Jordan, Tunisia) or declined (Bahrain, Egypt, Libya).<sup>10</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Arranged marriage systems in South Asia have proved extremely durable, whereas they have broken down in East and Southeast Asia. Age at marriage has risen very substantially in the countries where arranged marriage systems have broken down, but it has also risen (though to a lesser extent) in the South Asian countries. Social norms and community and family structures have not yet adapted fully to the much higher proportions remaining single into their 30s and 40s. As for the problem of very young marriage, legislating minimum ages for marriage appears to have little impact on marriage ages, as minimum ages are flouted openly in countries such as Bangladesh and until fairly recently in India, and a little more circumspectly in countries such as Indonesia. Some form of community consensus about ages below which marriage should not be allowed needs to be developed rather than relying solely

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<sup>10</sup> There was an apparent sharp upsurge in Turkey in 2005, though this was apparently because of the shift to a different source of statistics on divorces (The MERNIS system).

on regulations imposed from above. The human rights elements of arranged marriage at very young ages need to be emphasized.

Divorce rates have been rising sharply in many Asian countries, particularly in East Asian countries, as a result of the strains on marriage and an erosion of the belief that marriages must be preserved at all costs. However, divorce rates remain very low in South Asian countries, where the marriage system does not allow for the “escape route” of divorce.

Policymakers and planners find it hard to come to terms with issues relating to the sexuality of the unmarried. In traditional systems, this was of great significance, but it was dealt with by ensuring that young women did not remain single for long after reaching puberty. It remains of great significance, but the interval between puberty and marriage has lengthened greatly, meaning that the chance of premarital conceptions is heightened. Family planning programs in the region have great difficulty in coming to terms with this, and with the need to provide contraceptive information and services to the unmarried.

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**Table 1**  
**Trends in Singulate Mean Age at Marriage, Various Asian Countries, 1970-2005**

<b>COUNTRY</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2005</b>
<b>WOMEN</b>					
<b>East and SE Asia</b>					
Japan	24.7	25.1	26.9	28.6	29.4
Korea	23.3	24.1	25.5	27.1	28.8
Taiwan	22.6	23.9	26.0	27.6	
China		22.4	22.1	23.3	23.6
Hong Kong	23.8	25.3	28.0	29.6	30.3
Thailand	22.0	22.8	23.5	24.1	
Singapore	24.2	26.2	27.0	26.5	26.9
Malaysia	22.1	23.5	24.6	24.9	
Indonesia	19.3	20.0	21.6	22.7	23.4
Philippines	22.8	22.4	23.8		
Myanmar	21.3	22.4	24.5	25.8	
<b>South Asia</b>					
India	17.7	18.7	19.3	20.2	
Pakistan	19.7	20.2	21.7		23.2
Bangladesh	16.8*	16.9**	18.1	18.7	18.7
Sri Lanka	23.5	24.4			
Iran		19.7	19.8	22.4	23.3
<b>MEN</b>					
<b>East and SE Asia</b>					
Japan	27.5	28.7	30.4	30.8	31.1
Korea	27.2	27.3	28.5	30.3	32.0
Taiwan	24.6	25.3	28.8	30.5	
China		25.1	23.8	25.1	25.7
Hong Kong	30.2	28.7	29.8	31.9	33.0
Thailand	24.7	24.9	26.0	27.4	
Singapore	27.8	28.4	29.9	30.0	30.1
Malaysia	25.6	26.6	27.9	28.5	
Indonesia	23.8	24.1	25.2	25.9	27.0
Philippines			26.3		
Myanmar	23.9	24.6	26.3	27.6	
<b>South Asia</b>					
India	22.7	23.4	23.9	24.8	
Pakistan	25.7	25.1	26.5		
Bangladesh		23.9	25.0	27.6*	
Sri Lanka	28.0	27.9			
Iran					

Notes: For India, years are 1971, 1981, 1991, 2001. For Iran, years are 1976, 1986, 1996, 2006, for Pakistan 1972, 1981, 1991, 2007. \*1975 \*\*1983

Source: Jones and Gubhaju, 2009, Tables 1 and 2; Jones and Gubhaju, forthcoming. Dommaraju, 2008, Table 3.1; Sathar and Kiani, 1998, Table 1; Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey 1990/1991, Table 7.2. Bangladesh figures for women calculated by author from various fertility surveys.

**Table 2**  
**Percent of Women Never Married at Ages 35-39, Various Asian Countries, 1970-2005**

<b>Country</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2005</b>
<b>East and SE Asia</b>					
Japan	5.8	5.5	7.5	13.8	18.4
S. Korea	0.4	1.0	2.4	4.3	7.6
Taiwan	1.2	2.1	6.0	11.1	15.9
Singapore	5.1	8.5	14.8	15.1	15.0
Hong Kong	3.0	4.5	10.2	17.5	20.3
China	n.a.	0.3	0.3	0.5	0.7
Thailand	5.2	7.3	9.6	11.6	n.a.
Philippines	8.0	8.0	8.7	9.5	n.a.
Indonesia	1.4	1.9	2.7	3.5	4.3
Myanmar	7.0	8.9	13.8	18.6	
<b>South Asia</b>					
India	0.5	0.6	0.9	1.3	
Bangladesh	0.4	0.0	0.1	0.2	0.4
Pakistan	2.1	1.7	2.4		3.0
Sri Lanka					
Iran					

Source: Jones and Gubhaju, 2009, Table 1; Jones and Gubhaju, forthcoming; Dommaraju, 2008, Table 3.1; Sathar and Kiani, 1998, Table 1; National Institute of Population Research and Training et al., 2009, Table 6.2.

**Table 3**  
**Teenage Marriage: Percent of Females Ever Married at Ages 15-19, Various Countries**

Country	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000
<b>East Asia</b>					
South Korea	7.0	2.9	1.8	0.5	0.7
China			4.4	4.7	1.2
Taiwan	10.4	7.2	5.3	2.7	
Hong Kong	7.0	3.3	3.7	1.6	0.7
<b>Southeast Asia</b>					
Philippines	12.7	10.8	14.1	10.5	10.2#
Indonesia	40.5	37.4	30.0	18.2	8.7
Thailand	18.5	18.9	16.7	14.9	12.0
Southern Thai Muslim**		56.9	48.6	20.8	11.5
Malaysia Malays	54.2*	22.8	10.5	5.1	3.0
Malaysia Chinese	10.3*	6.0	4.6	2.5	1.8
Malaysia Indians	53.2*	17.0	8.0	6.0	4.0
Myanmar		22.0	16.8	10.7	8.4
<b>South Asia***</b>					
India	70.5	57.2	45.9	36.8	
Bangladesh		70.2	65.8	53.3	48.1
Nepal				44.0^	40.3
Pakistan	53.4	34.4	29.4	24.9	20.6@
Iran			34.3^	33.5^	18.6^

Notes: Malaysia figures for 1960 (actually 1957) and 1970 are for Peninsular Malaysia.

\* 1957

\*\* The provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat, Yala and Satun (76.8% Muslim in 2000).

\*\*\* Includes Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. #6.8 if “common law/live in” are considered to be never married. @1998 ^1976, 1986, and 1996 respectively.

Myanmar data are for 1973, 1983, 1991 and 2001. Indian data are for 1961, 1971, 1981, 1991 and 2001. Bangladesh figures actually 1975, 1983, 1991 and 1999-2000.

Source: Jones, 1994, Table 3.1; Population Census reports for Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia; Byun, 2004, Table 6.3; Xenos and Kabamalan, 1998; Sathar and Kiani, 1998, Table 1; National Institute of Population Research and Training et al., 2009, Table 6.2; Nepal Demographic and Health Survey 2007, Table 6.2.

**Table 4**  
**Indonesia: Percent of Women Married by Exact Ages 15, 18 and 20,**  
**From 2002-3 Demographic and Health Survey**

<b>Current age</b>	<b>% before age 15</b>	<b>% before age 18</b>	<b>% before age 20</b>
15-19	2.8	n.a.	n.a.
20-24	4.7	24.2	42.1
25-29	7.2	29.0	48.2
30-34	10.1	32.1	50.5
35-39	12.7	41.7	57.2
40-44	17.0	46.8	66.5
45-49	20.4	51.2	68.9
20-49	11.2	36.0	54.1

Source: 2002-3 Demographic and Health Survey.

**Table 5**  
**Bangladesh: Percent of Women Married by Exact Ages 15, 18 and 20,**  
**From 2007 Demographic and Health Survey**

<b>Current age</b>	<b>% before age 15</b>	<b>% before age 18</b>	<b>% before age 20</b>
15-19	21.1	n.a.	n.a.
20-24	32.3	66.2	79.2
25-29	41.3	75.4	86.4
30-34	48.5	81.1	90.2
35-39	47.2	81.8	91.0
40-44	54.4	87.1	94.0
45-49	64.7	90.1	95.3
20-49	45.2	78.0	87.8

Source: National Institute of Population Research and Training et al, 2009: Table 6.3

**Table 6**  
**General Divorce Rates (Number of Divorces per 1,000 Population Aged 15+),**  
**Various Countries and Regions, 1980-2005.**

	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005
<b>OECD countries</b>						
Australia	3.6	3.3	3.2	3.5	3.3	3.2
France	2.0 <sup>11</sup>	2.5	2.3	2.5	2.4	3.1
Germany	1.9	2.5	2.0 <sup>12</sup>	2.5	2.8	2.8
United Kingdom	3.8	4.0	3.6	3.6	3.2	3.4 <sup>13</sup>
United States	6.7	6.3	5.9	5.6	n.a.	n.a.
Russian Federation	4.7	4.5	4.9	5.7	5.2	4.9
<b>Asian countries</b>						
Hong Kong	n.a.	1.0	1.2	1.9	2.4	2.5
Japan	1.6	1.8	1.6	1.9	2.4	2.4
South Korea	0.9	1.3	1.3	1.6	3.2	3.3
China	n.a.	n.a.	1.0 <sup>14</sup>	1.3 <sup>15</sup>	1.3	1.7
Thailand	0.8 <sup>16</sup>	0.9	1.2 <sup>17</sup>	1.3	n.a.	n.a.
Singapore	1.0	1.0	1.6(13)	1.5	1.6	1.9
Iran	1.1	1.5	1.2	1.0	1.3	1.7
Syria	1.1	1.2	1.3	1.4 <sup>18</sup>	1.2	1.4
Turkey	0.6	0.6	0.7	0.7	0.7	1.8
Jordan	2.4	2.6	2.9	2.5	2.9	2.9
Bahrain	3.0	1.6	1.8	1.7	1.6	2.0
<b>Other Muslim countries</b>						
Egypt	2.7	2.8	2.3(15)	1.8	1.6	1.3
Libya	2.2	n.a.	1.1	0.4	0.4	0.5 <sup>19</sup>
Tunisia	1.9	1.4	2.4	1.3	1.4 <sup>20</sup>	n.a.

Source: Calculated from data on numbers of divorces and on age structure from United Nations Demographic Yearbooks.

<sup>11</sup> 1979

<sup>12</sup> 1991

<sup>13</sup> 2003

<sup>14</sup> 1992

<sup>15</sup> 1997

<sup>16</sup> 1979

<sup>17</sup> 1992

<sup>18</sup> 1996

<sup>19</sup> 2002

<sup>20</sup> 1999