Sri Lanka’s marriage pattern has in recent decades taken a different turn from the societies of most developing Asian countries. In this paper Sir Gamage, lecturer in Sociology, University of Peradeniya, comments on some of the reasons for these trends and studies on this subject. This paper was originally prepared for the recent New York University — SIECUS — Colloquium on Human Sexuality: Department of Psychiatry, Peradeniya, (hence the limited treatment of this wide subject.) but the author was indisposed and unable to present it on that occasion.

Sri Lanka's marriage pattern has been studied primarily by social anthropologists (Yalman, 1971; Pieris 1956; Obeysekera, 1967; Tambiah, 1958; Leach 1961; Robinson, 1975) as a part of their general interest in the study of social institutions in Asian societies. Such social anthropological work describes the nature of 'Sinhalese Marriage', more specifically the Kandyan marriage, both in its traditional and contemporary forms. Sinhalese are the majority ethnic group in Sri Lanka and the study of social institutions in Sri Lanka is based on both traditional and contemporary Sinhalese, it can be stated that the patrilocal marriage is predominant in the Sinhalese family. While the majority of men remain in their villages after marriage, while inter-village marriages are rare; caste endogamy is generally practised. Intra-village marriages occur mainly among the poor while inter-village marriages dominate among the wealthy, the majority of men remain in their native villages after marriage; while half or more of the women leave the village of their birth upon marriage" (Robinson, M. 1988).

Once we move away from the indepth analysis provided in the above sources of information and subsequent social anthropological and demographic writings on the subject, marriage pattern covers many aspects of the phenomenon of marriage. It includes the timing of marriage, or proportions of proportions marrying, or proportions married, or proportions getting married, duration of marriage, stability and dissolution of marital unions. It can also be viewed as a social institution and analyzed within the context of specific traditions, customs, norms and a society. While demographicists pay more attention to the former, social anthropologists are mainly concerned about the latter aspects.

In Sri Lanka traditionally diga (Patrilocal) and binna (Matrilocal) marriages have been prevalent. Pieris writes 'In Sinhalese law and social practice, matrilocal and patrilocal marriages were distinguished. In the binna marriage, the husband lived in his wife's parental home and she had an equal interest in her own home. A binna husband had no privilege in his wife's house' (Pieris, 1956). In the case of diga marriage, the daughter lost the right to inheritance, but was entitled to maintenance in case her marriage was dissolved. However, this traditional pattern has now undergone changes and even women marrying patrilocally can inherit parental land if it is granted to them by parents.

With regard to the incidence and locality of marriage among the contemporary Sinhalese, it can be stated that the patrilocal marriage is predominant. The Sinhalese family is patrilocal and patrilocal (Dixon, 1970; p. 256, p. 250). Yalman’s findings also indicate that the occurrence of patrilocal unions is higher than the occurrence of matrilocal unions. He states that wealthy men who are natives of the village he studied do not marry matrilocally. On the other hand, poor men do settle matrilocal though the proportion is not very high. Out of 114 unions of 85 men in the poor category (on the basis of land ownership) 6.3 percent were matrilocal unions. The rest married patrilocal. Of the 182 girls, information of Yalman’s generalisation is that the marriage pattern for wealthy families is mainly patrilocal and for the poorest sections of the village it is frequently matrilocal (Yalman, 1971: pp. 128-29). The patrilocality of Sinhalese marriage has also been documented by other writers on Sinhalese marriage (Ryan, B: 1953 and Robinson, 1975).

In trying to obtain a clear understanding of the institution of marriage and associated aspects among the rural Sinhalese, it is desirable to depend on the anthropological studies cited above rather than on personal, sporadic observations. The major characteristics of marriage and associated factors as described above are:

1. For a detailed description of traditional Sinhalese marriage during the Kandyan period see — Pieris, Ralph; 'Sinhalese Social Organisation' part 6 1956.

With people marrying late and a relatively high proportion remaining single at higher ages, Sri Lanka's marriage pattern resembles the 'modern' type. Writing about Adan marriage patterns Smith states that the female marriage pattern in South Asia is relatively homogeneous across the countries with both early onset and a rapid tempo of entrance to marriage but in the context of this regional pattern Sri Lanka is an interesting exception with its very slow tempo.

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Sri Lanka females stand near the East level on the Singulate Mean Age at Marriage (SMAM)—several years above the South Asian level (Smith, Peter; 1978).

In comparison to Thailand, which is also a Theravada Buddhist country like Sri Lanka, it is evident that Sri Lankans marry and women marry later than Thais. The percentage single at the end of marriageable ages (e.g. 45-49) in Sri Lanka is higher than the percentage single at the corresponding ages of males and females in Thailand.

Several attempts have been made to understand the possible causes of the changes occurring in Sri Lanka's marriage pattern. Among them Dixon's study may be regarded as the major demographic study dealing with the nuptiality pattern in Sri Lanka utilizing national level data. Dixon uses data from the 1940s to 1963. Describing the nature of marriage timing, Dixon indicates that in 1963, 41 percent of the females aged 20-25 and 85 percent were still single. Also 10 percent of the men aged 40-44, were bachelors. Dixon concludes that it is not only due to the low marriage rate (sex ratio), or non-desirability, but the non-feasibility of marrying at proper ages which explains the delay in the timing of marriage. The difficulties in accumulating a dowry and finding a suitable bridegroom have become increasingly severe due to the following two reasons, according to her:

(a) Land fragmentation and landlessness caused by the nature of Inheritance laws and the acquisition of land for plantations (pp. 287-88, 293, 310).

(b) High natural increase in the Labour force.

Economic conditions in rural Ceylon (Sri Lanka) excluding the estates, are not favourable for nuptiality, males of marriageable age are increasingly less likely to have inherited any land, or to be able to purchase any; if they do have an inheritance, their portion is likely to be too small to support a family. Females, are increasingly less likely to bring land with them as a dowry. At the same time the rural economy is not expanding enough to provide wage paying jobs to supplement the meagre incomes from village gardens. Thus marriage for both men and women must be continuously postponed if not foregone altogether (p. 310). Dixon's marital components, and in some cases permanent celibacy, have been increasing increasingly necessary throughout the country, being too small to support a family, and employment is without doubt. Both men and women must wait longer to accumulate the necessary resources to set up a new household. This `nuptiality is less feasible for both than it once was' (Dixon, R 1970 pp. 287-88).

Though Gunasinghe's work was not a nuptiality study, Dixon's important point is that utilised the same kind of approach in a micro-level study of a village in the Kandy district of Sri Lanka. Dixon's interest was rather to look at the relationship between underdevelopment and marital fertility. However, it throws light on nuptiality in so far as it relates to fertility. Gunasinghe cites several reasons as to why the peasants in Delumgoda, the village he studied, became poor over time. The colonial acquisition of villagers' land for plantations has restricted the land available to villagers. The commercialisation of agriculture, specially paddy cultivation, motivated the villagers to sell the surplus paddy in the market. Otherwise they have gone to the village poor. The traditional social order which helped the poor was disrupted, and wage labour came into being in place of old forms of employment like share cropping and labour exchange. According to his data, 55.7 per cent of the heads of households do not own any paddy land, 9 per cent do not own any high land (defined as land except house and garden) and 19 per cent do not have legal title to their houses. Only 21 per cent of householders are employed on a regular basis in the modern sector and earn monthly salaries.

One of the drawbacks in Gunasinghe's study is that he does not define the `real poor segment' in Delumgoda, e.g. he talks about the percentage of households that does not own high land, paddy land, houses or hold employment in the modern sector earning a monthly salary. No idea is given as to how many of these families belong to all the four categories. Since these categories are not mutually exclusive the point here is that those who do not have land at all may have employment. If Gunasinghe defined the real poor peasant category which is denied any of these forms of wealth or employment, and their marital status and timing, then he would have been in a better position to conclude whether the delayed marriages were a result of lack of resources or not. Since he did not mention the number of people who get a reasonable income through land, farming or any other occupation like carpentry, or masonry, the number of unemployed also seems to be little exaggerated. However, it should be observed that the information the value of the elements of rural society of Sri Lanka in the 70s. Though there may be doubt in Gunasinghe's statistical reasoning as to whether it reflects an acceptable segment, and the statistics themselves are insufficient to identify the category of "real poor" peasants in Delumgoda, his arguments and conclusions are important and fruitful. In his conclusion he states "I demonstrated the casual relationship between the high proportions of unmarried women and the underdeveloped economy, which is incapable of generating sufficient employment opportunities" (Gunasinghe; 1977, p.151).

The higher age at marriage, coupled with a relatively higher percentage of the married or married at an early age, conforms with the two major characteristics of what demographers call a "non-traditional nuptiality pattern". In Dixon's words Ceylon (Sri Lanka) is the purest example of "a non-traditional nuptiality pattern in Asia that cannot be attributed to a larger immigrant population or highly urban environment" (Dixon, 1970, p. 286).

The increase at issue here then is why should a nuptiality pattern, usually found in societies with a higher level of development, be found by and large, like Sri Lanka which is at a different level of development. This issue needs more investigation by researchers before any firm answers are found. However, Dixon's and Gunasinghe's studies confirm that the conditions of under-development in Sri Lanka have in the timing contributed to the upward change in the timing of marriage.

This kind of conclusion is in complete contradiction to the assumptions of the 'demographic transition theory' (DTT) which summarises the European and lately some of the non-European experience in relation to non-traditional fertility trends. The DTT postulates that the increase in the age at marriage and reductions in fertility are consequences of an economically developed state of society with a higher level of urbanisation and employment opportunities. The differentials in age at marriage and the proportion single reveal some interesting facts as to how the delay in timing of marriage has been operating among different social groups. From the 1975 World Fertility Survey, Sri Lanka (WFSS) data, it can be seen that the overall mean age at marriage was 18.3 years for women interviewed during the survey. The mean for women living in estates is 17.3; which is about a year and a half earlier than for women living in urban areas for whom the mean is 18.8. For women from rural areas the mean age at marriage was lower than for estate women. This is consistent with the findings of Dixon and Gunasinghe's study. The mean age at marriage for Sri Lankan Moors had a mean of 16.5 which is two years younger than the mean for Sinhalese (18.8).
The Indian Tamils had a mean of 17.2 and Sri Lanka Tamils 17.5. Religious differentials more or less follow the same pattern as the ethnic differentials, according to the survey results. The rise in the mean age of marriage, along with the increase in the mean age at first marriage, is characterised by a relatively late timing of marriage both for males and females and a relatively high percentage of spinsterhood or celibacy. Though spinsterhood or celibacy (Permanent non-marriage) stood at relatively higher levels, recent findings show that the level has declined (Census; 1981).

The proportions getting married has also declined among the younger age groups, conforming to this same trend. The proportions getting married at the minimum age of 17.2 years during the period 1960-1975 (Fernando, 1980). Within various ethnic groups inter-caste marriages do occur in contemporary Sri Lanka and their occurrence now seems to be on the increase. The considerations of education, employment, income and life style cut across caste boundaries very often. However, the extent of inter-religious marriages cannot be accurately estimated since the Registrar General does not maintain such statistics. But such marriages are believed to be more numerous than marriages between ethnic groups (Fernando, 1980: p.434).

Apart from the tradition-oriented factors, there are also factors such as education which seem to influence the age at marriage. In more general terms, the educational development contributes towards the creation of certain attitudinal and behavioural consequences as may be seen in the case of marriage in Sri Lanka. However, once a marriage is arranged or contracted, it seems to be stable; since the level of marriage dissolution prevalent here is low.

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