THE EMERGING RURAL YOUTH: A STUDY OF THEIR CHANGING VALUES TOWARDS MARRIAGE*

AMBARAO T. UPLAONKAR

This study reveals that there are definite but favourable changes in the attitudes of the rural youth towards the ideal age at marriage, especially for men, and that a greater proportion of the rural youth tended to make relatively, independent choices in selecting their life-partners.

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Introduction

Youth *per se* represents the dynamic character of human society. Youth has the capacity to absorb new challenges and evolve new values in a fast changing society. Thus, through its youth, a society copes with new challenges and demands, and passes from a traditional mould to modernity. Societies committed to progress and change will rely on the initiative, enterprise and cooperation of its youth. The degree of social recognition accorded by a society to its youths as prime agents of change is an indication of its desire for change.

*Youth in Traditional India*

In traditional India youth never emerged as a distinct group with its own culture and philosophy. The individual was socialised to become a subordinate rather than an independent being.

"A child cannot detach himself from the family and act independently. This prevents him from forming a sharply differentiated impression of himself and from separating himself from his family. Because of large number of people in a joint family, a child is just one of the group (Gore, 1978)."

Youth in traditional India were given a low and secondary role and status. An ideal youth meekly obeyed parents, elders and teachers, performed duties, shouldered responsibilities and fulfilled obligations according to the norms laid down by tradition. Any action or idea, which countered the feelings of elders was unwelcome.

*Youth in Modern India*

However, the youth in modern India is undergoing significant changes in respect of their values, attitudes and outlook, due to changes unleashed by modernisation, urbanisation, industrialisation and acceptance of a welfare state concept based on democracy, socialism and secularism.

* The data analysed in this paper are part of a research project: "Rural Youth in Modern India", sanctioned to the author by the Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi.
Aim
The aim of this paper is to analyse whether or not rural youth has emerged as a distinct group anchored by the modern values of freedom and autonomy so as to be able to decide the issues of life, competently, on their own.

Objectives
The specific objectives of the study are to know the values of rural youth towards:
- The ideal age at marriage of males and females
- The choice of the life-partner.

Method
The study is based on a sample of 1,500 rural youth drawn from seven villages of a Mandal Panchayat Block in Gulbarga taluka of Gulbarga district in Karnataka. Of the total 3,000 rural youth, in the age group 16-30 years, 50 per cent were selected by taking every second person from the list prepared for males and females separately. The sampling frame consisted of a household survey conducted by the Family Planning Association of India, Gulbarga and the 1991 Census. There were 770 males and 730 females in the sample. The respondents were interviewed at their respective villages by a batch of two male and two female investigators for a period of three months.

Marriage and Youth
Marriage and family constitute crucial stages in young lives. Marriage has far-reaching implications for youth, the society and the nation. The youth are supposed to make crucial but independent decisions about basic issues such as age at marriage and choice of a life-partner.

Marriage in India
Marriage among Hindus is a sacrament, a holy union of two souls. It is one of the basic samskaras or rites that men and women have to go through. As a sacrament, Hindu marriage demands early or child marriage in order to protect the chastity of the girls. Thus Hindu ideals encourage pre-puberty marriage for girls. The Dharma-shastras enjoined parents and guardians to marry off their daughters before they attained puberty. Parents who could not marry off their daughters were ostracised and looked down upon (Kapadia, 1966; Qureshi, 1978).

Although the practice of child marriage has its own disadvantages, it played an important role in traditional India. According to Ross (1961: 282):

> Formerly the early marriage of women and their incorporation into their husband’s household at a very impressionable age meant that even the minutest detail of family behaviour could be transmitted through them to the next generation.

According to Venkatrayappa, early marriage enabled a girl to get an idea of the modes of expected behaviour, standard of living, attitudes of the different members
of the family which thus, made her more accommodative (1973:184). The practice of child marriage made the process of transition of the girl from her parents' home to the husband's home smooth and took care of her proper integration into the culture of her in-law's family.

**Legislation on Child Marriage**

The institution of Hindu marriage was subjected to reforms during the British rule. In 1929, the Child Marriage Restraint Act was passed. Under Section 3 of this Act, marriage between a male and female below 18 and 15 years, respectively (now the corresponding ages are 21 and 18 years), was considered an offence and the parties were liable to be punished. Several socio-economic and educational changes which were introduced by the British questioned the conventional values associated with marriage and family. Besides, social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar launched a vigorous campaign against the evil effects of child marriage.

After Independence, the Government of India raised the age of marriage of girls to 18 years and that of boys to 21 years with a view to fostering a better understanding of the institution of marriage and responsible parenthood in the minds of those embarking on marital life. Consequently, the mean age at marriage for boys and girls for India began to rise considerably. For example, the mean age at marriage for boys and girls rose from 20.44 and 13.04 years in 1901-11 to 23.43 and 18.39 years in 1971-81, respectively.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideal Age in years</th>
<th>16-20</th>
<th>21-15</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Mean Age*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Men</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>(77)</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Women</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>(730)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>(1500)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Separate Variance Estimate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>X² = 69, df = 1;</th>
<th>Significant (P &gt; .000)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Ideal Age at Marriage**

*Male Youth*

Data presented in Table 1 were the responses of rural youth to the question: *In your opinion at what age should male and female youth marry?* It can be seen from the data that an overwhelming majority of the rural youth (85 per cent) wanted male youths to marry between 21 and 25 years of age. It is clear that rural youth
wanted a male youth to marry at an age when he would have attained physical, psychological and social maturity. However, the men and women respondents differed in their attitudes towards the ideal age of marriage for male youth. For example, 92 per cent of the men, as against 77 per cent of the women, expected the male youth to marry in the age group of 21-25 years. Although there were differences in the expectations of men and women, a majority of each wanted the male to marry between 21-25 years of age.

An examination of the mean age computed for the purpose showed that while the men proposed the ideal age of marriage for male youth at 22 years, the women wanted it at 21 years. Although there was little difference between the ideal mean ages proposed by men and women, their expectation was higher than the stipulated age at marriage by law. It means there were definite changes in the ideal age at marriage for male youth.

**Female Youth**

Data given in Table 2 show that, in general, 66 per cent of rural youth wanted the female youth to be married between 17 and 18 years of age. Only 8 per cent of the respondents expected them to be married between 19 and 21 years of age. The attitudes of the respondents towards the ideal age of marriage for female youth was conservative.

A further examination of the data showed that 75 per cent of the women, as against 59 percent of the men, wanted the female youth to be married between 17 and 18 years of age. Compared to the men, the women respondents were more liberal and progressive. This finding went against the assumption, that men would be more liberal and progressive. However, the mean age computed for the purpose showed that both the men and women respondents wanted the female youth to be married at 17 years of age. It can be gauged that the values of rural youth with regard to the ideal age of marriage for female youth were conservative, even below the age (18 years) stipulated by law for girls. Although the mean test has not yielded any measure of significance, it may be stated that the attitude of rural youth towards the status of women vis-a-vis age at marriage was not changing as fast as its attitude towards men. Studies conducted
by Ishwaran (1968) in the rural areas of Dharwad and by Venkatrayappa (1973: 234) in rural Mysore, have shown ample evidence of a rise in the age at marriage of both boys and girls.

The main reason for the conservative attitude of rural youth towards the ideal age at marriage for female youth is due to the fact that Gulbarga district in Karnataka has remained a backward region in terms of literacy, education and industrial development.

In conclusion, it may be said that the attitude of the rural youth, under enquiry, towards the ideal age at marriage for males was changing considerably. But the same change had not occurred in respect of female youth.

**Choice of Life-Partner**

The degree of freedom given to youth to choose the life-partner is an indication of the social recognition accorded to it. In the traditional joint family, marriages were arranged by the parents, guardians or relatives. Marriage was, and is even today, considered a union of two families, kin groups and castes.

Parents and kinsmen were mainly instrumental in selecting, negotiating and arranging the marriage, other than the bride and groom themselves. Since marriage was arranged by the parents and was considered a family affair, considerable emphasis was placed on the attributes of the mate’s families. Aswalya Grhyasutra says that, first of all, the family should be examined from both sides — the mother’s and the father’s. Besides, caste endogamy permitted little heterogeneity in mate selection, and the principle of monogamy was mostly prevalent.

However, with the advent of modernisation, the sacramental values associated with marriage began to erode. Pre-puberty marriages, especially among the higher castes living in urban areas, came to be looked down upon as the younger generation, including women, started attending schools and colleges. Shah observes (1975: 285-86):

Educated Hindus no longer felt obliged to marry off their daughters before puberty. Sending daughters to college appeared to be gaining in favour over early marriage among the middle class.

In course of time education came to be recognised as a pre-condition of marriage. The spread of modern education, mass media and technology have made the younger generation conscious of their individual rights in decision-making even in rural areas. This is not to suggest that modern youth are against the power and authority of the parents and the ideals of the joint family. What they want is a certain amount of autonomy for self-choice in conformity with the ideals of the joint family. Venkatarayappa found that the groom was given a chance to select and choose his bride, though subject to the approval of the parents (1973:185). A similar trend was noticed by Ishwaran (1968: 72):

Young men now want to see their brides before marriage, and the bride is sometimes even so bold as to glance up at the young man she is engaged to.
Freedom of Choice

This section aims at analysing the responses of the respondents in general, and of male and female youth in particular, towards freedom to choose one's life partner. The variable 'freedom to choose' was considered important in relation to parents and family. The variable was divided into four response categories as a continuum — conservative-modern. At one end a youth's acceptance of the parents' decision in deciding upon his life-partner without question was placed. At the other end was placed the youth's choice in deciding upon a life-mate regardless of the parents' wishes. But the last response was not viewed as 'modernisation' but 'alienation', since it meant opposing the power and authority of parents and family. Modernisation is understood as youth's relative independence plus elders' approval. A similar theoretical base has been provided by George Kurian (1961), in his study of married Syrian Christians from Kerala. He describes a range of four patterns. Marriage which is:

- Arranged according to the ideas of the parents
- Arranged by parents with the consent of respondent
- Respondent's own choice with the consent of the parents
- Respondent's own choice without the consent of the parents.

The actual response categories in the present enquiry were as follows:

- Parent's choice without the consent of the self
- Parent's choice with the consent of the self
- Self-choice with the consent of the parents
- Self-choice without the consent of the parents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3</th>
<th>ATTITUDE TOWARDS FREEDOM OF CHOICE OF LIFE-PARTNER BY SEX</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attitude towards freedom of choice</td>
<td>Respondents (IN PERCENTAGE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Parent's choice without the consent of the self</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Parent's choice with the consent of the self</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Self-choice with the consent of the parents</td>
<td>41</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Self-choice without the consent of the parents</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total</th>
<th>100</th>
<th>100</th>
<th>100</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(770)</td>
<td>(730)</td>
<td>(1500)</td>
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\[ \chi^2 = 9.969, df = 3, \text{ Significant} \quad (P > .000). \]

It can be seen from Table 3 that, in general, 57 per cent of the respondents opined that rural youth should marry according to the wishes of their parents without question. Only 21 per cent of the respondents stated that while choosing the life-partner, the parent's decision was primary but their (youths') desire or approval should be taken into account. From the data it may be stated that while the first category of youth might be considered conservative, the second category might be described as conservative-cum-modern. It is clear that a section of the youth was making a departure from tradition to modernity.
A further examination of the data showed that 21 per cent of the respondents said that rural youth should choose their life-partners on their own but seek the approval of their parents. This section of the youth, though small in proportion, may be described as modern, as they were displaying positive trends of adaptation.

A comparison of the responses of men and women respondents showed that almost cent per cent (98 per cent) of the women were conservative in their outlook towards the choice of the life-partner. This is due to the fact that women in the sample were relatively illiterate and untouched by the force of modernity.

The data with regard to the men respondents, however, showed an entirely opposite trend. Only 19 per cent who were in favour of obeying their parents blindly without a personal choice. A significant proportion of the men (39 per cent) were making a departure from conservative to modern values, as they wanted to obey their parents but did not want to be neglected.

A positive trend was that 41 per cent of the male youth favoured the view that youth should exercise their independent thinking but at the same time seek the approval of their parents. This means a relatively good proportion of the male youth in rural areas, under enquiry, have been influenced by modernity.

In conclusion, it may be stated that a considerable percentage of rural youth wanted to exercise an independent choice, in consultation with their parents in selecting their mates. However, a comparison of the men and women respondents showed that women were found still tradition-bound. This is not a healthy trend in so far as the effective participation of rural women in democracy and rural development is concerned.

Influence of Social Values

The institution of marriage was, and is even today, closely related to the joint family, kinship and caste. The choice of brides and grooms, especially of brides, was influenced by caste, kinship and family goals.

Kapadia (1958: 169) maintains:

Marriage was a social duty towards the family and the community, and there was little idea of individual interest. The social background provided by the authoritarian joint family, and caste with its dominion in all spheres of life, afforded no scope for the recognition of any personal factor, individual interests and aspirations in the relations between husband and wife.

However, the traditional values of family, caste and kinship lost much of their original hold under the impact of modern education, urbanisation and industrialisation. The institution of marriage among Hindus began to lose much of its sacramental character. Individual qualities such as beauty, height and health, and social factors such as the educational status of brides and grooms and their families began to gain importance in the eyes of youth. Thus, modern youth are likely to give a certain degree of priority to personal desires as against family and caste values alone.

For purposes of analysis, social values which are supposed to influence the choice of mate were grouped into three independent categories:
• Group values — caste, kinship, religion
• Family values — parents' property, wealth and social position
• Individual values — brides/groom's beauty, education.

The respondents were asked to give responses according to preference: first preference to the one which they considered very important, second to the next important, and third to the least important. Each preferential response was separately coded for comparative analysis.

Table 4 shows that the respondents (99 per cent) gave first preference to group values such as religion/caste/kinship. It is quite understandable on the part of the rural youth to have given first preference to group values, as primordial groups have a strong hold in Indian society. However, it cannot be concluded that the rural youth is highly traditional and conservative. An examination of the second and third preferences revealed that an equal number of youth, that is, 67 per cent of the rural youth had given them to individual and family values, respectively. It also shows that rural youth give equal importance to individual and family values. Although there was indecision about second and third preferences, nevertheless, the fact that individual values such as education, looks and so on scored equal percentage shows, that they were moving towards modern values.

### Table 4
SOCIAL VALUES INFLUENCING CHOICE OF LIFE-PARTNER BY SEX (IN PERCENTAGE)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Social Values by Preference</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>T</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group Values</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Religion/Caste/Kinship)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family Values</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Parents' Power and Position)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individual Values</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Boy's/Girl's Looks, Education)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>(770)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ X^2 = 1850; \quad df = 2 \quad X^2 = 408; \quad df = 2 \quad X^2 = 408, \quad df = 2 \]

Significant (P > .000)  Significant (P > .000)  Significant (P > .000).

However, there were differences in the responses of the men and women with regard to the choice of life-partners. For instance, 58 and 42 per cent of the women gave second and third preferences to family and individual values, respectively. This shows that for the women respondents, individual values such as education and looks were less important than group and family values. On the other hand, an overwhelming majority (91 per cent) of the men respondents gave second preference to individual values. This reveals that the men respondents were more particular in selecting their brides by giving importance to individual values, while the women showed little interest in them. It shows that the female respondents have not developed any degree of autonomy to decide the primary issues of their lives.
These data also suggest that modernising forces such as education, employment, mass media and technology have not made an adequate impact on the attitudes and outlook of the rural women-folk.

**Conclusion**

The focus of the paper has been to analyse whether or not rural youth in modern India were emerging as a distinct group with the modern values of freedom and autonomy in deciding the basic issues of life. The study has revealed that, in general, rural men were undergoing a change in respect to their attitudes towards the ideal age at marriage and choice of life-partner while rural women have not changed much. The study points towards the need for concerted effort to involve the youth in democratic and developmental processes with a view to harnessing their energy for social transformation and national reconstruction. The study points towards the need for concrete efforts to develop rural youth if the government genuinely wants to harness youth energy and build a youthful India.

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