

MARRIAGE, FAMILY AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN MAHARASHTRA: A STUDY OF CHANGING TRADITIONAL PRACTICES

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Abstract

Marriage has historically occupied a central position in the social and cultural organization of Indian society. In Maharashtra, marriage has functioned not merely as a union between two individuals but also as an important institution connecting families, kinship networks, social groups, cultural traditions, and community values. Traditional marriage practices have therefore played an important role in maintaining social continuity, family relationships, cultural identity, and intergenerational bonds. However, the processes of modernization, education, urbanization, industrialization, migration, changing occupational structures, expansion of communication technology, and increasing awareness of individual rights have brought considerable changes in marriage practices and family relationships. The present study examined the relationship between marriage, family, and social change in Maharashtra with particular emphasis on changing traditional marriage practices. The study was based on secondary information obtained from the Census of India, National Family Health Survey, Government of Maharashtra publications, official statistical reports, and published scholarly studies concerning marriage and family practices in Maharashtra. The analysis focused on changes in age at marriage, educational status, rural-urban differences, women's participation in marriage-related decisions, and the continuing influence of traditional marriage practices. The findings indicated that traditional marriage practices have not disappeared completely; rather, they have undergone gradual transformation. Family participation continues to remain significant in marriage decisions, while education, individual preference, increasing age at marriage, women's participation in decision-making, and changing social values have acquired greater importance. NFHS-5 data showed that 21.9 percent of women aged 20–24 years in Maharashtra were married before the age of 18 years, compared with 26.3 percent in NFHS-4. The proportion was 15.7 percent in urban areas and 27.6 percent in rural areas. The findings further indicated that educational and urban social environments were associated with important differences in marriage-related indicators. The study concluded that marriage practices in Maharashtra were undergoing a transition in which traditional values and modern social norms continued to coexist.

Keywords: Marriage, Family, Social Change, Traditional Marriage Practices, Modernization, Urbanization, Women's Agency, Maharashtra, Kinship, Social Transformation etc.

1. Introduction-

Marriage is one of the most significant social institutions in human society. It establishes socially recognized relationships between individuals and creates a framework within which family life, kinship, reproduction, socialization, inheritance, and intergenerational relationships are organized. In the Indian social context, marriage has traditionally been understood not only as a relationship between a man and a woman but also as a relationship between families and wider kinship networks. In Maharashtra, marriage has historically been closely associated with family organization, kinship relationships, community identity, religious traditions, social status, and cultural continuity. Traditional marriage practices have included the

selection of the bride and groom, involvement of parents and elders, engagement ceremonies, religious and cultural rituals, participation of relatives, marriage-related exchanges, and post-marriage relationships between the two families. These practices have differed across communities and regions and have reflected the cultural diversity of Maharashtra.

The Maharashtra Gazetteers have documented marriage, family, and kinship as important components of the social organization of the state. Traditional marriage arrangements have historically been influenced by factors such as caste, kinship, religion, family status, economic position, age at marriage, and customary practices. At the same time, the modernization of Maharashtra has

gradually altered several aspects of the institution of marriage. The expansion of formal education has been one of the important factors associated with changes in marriage practices. Education has increased awareness regarding legal rights, personal choice, gender equality, employment opportunities, and the importance of delaying marriage. Urbanization and migration have also exposed individuals and families to diverse social and cultural environments, contributing to changes in traditional expectations regarding marriage.

Official data provide evidence of such changes. According to the National Family Health Survey-5 Maharashtra fact sheet, 21.9 percent of women aged 20–24 years were married before reaching the age of 18 years. The corresponding figure in the previous survey was 26.3 percent. The NFHS-5 figure was 15.7 percent in urban Maharashtra and 27.6 percent in rural Maharashtra. The same source shows important differences in educational attainment between rural and urban women. Among women aged 15–49 years, literacy was 90.2 percent in urban areas and 79.5 percent in rural areas. The proportion of women with ten or more years of schooling was 61.1 percent in urban areas and 40.7 percent in rural areas.

These changes suggest that marriage practices cannot be examined independently of broader social transformation. Changes in education, employment, residence, communication, family structure, and gender relations have influenced the way individuals and families approach marriage. At the same time, traditional practices continue to influence marriage decisions, particularly in rural and extended-family settings. A study of 1,200 married women aged 18–29 years and their husbands in rural Maharashtra examined the relationship between traditional marital practices and women's agency. The study reported that traditional practices such as limited involvement of prospective brides in partner selection, early marriage, dowry, and purdah continued to have relevance in some sections of rural Maharashtra. Thus, the contemporary marriage institution in Maharashtra represents neither a complete continuation of tradition nor a complete rejection of traditional practices. Instead, it reflects a process of social transformation in which traditional values, family expectations, individual preferences, and modern social norms interact with one another. The present study was therefore undertaken to examine the changing traditional marriage practices in Maharashtra and to understand their relationship with family and wider social change.

2. Background of the Study-

Maharashtra has a socially and culturally diverse population consisting of different religious, caste,

linguistic, regional, and community groups. According to the Census of India 2011, the state had a total population of 112,374,333. The Census classified the population by major religious communities and provided separate information for rural and urban areas. This diversity is significant for the study of marriage because marriage practices are closely connected with cultural traditions and community-level social organization. Different communities have historically developed distinctive customs concerning partner selection, marriage ceremonies, family participation, residence after marriage, kinship relationships, and marriage-related exchanges.

The Census of India provides an important demographic foundation for understanding the social context in which these practices operate. The official Census C-01 table provides population distributions by religious community for total, rural, and urban areas of Maharashtra.

Table 1- Population of Maharashtra by Religious Community, 2011

Religious Community	Population	Percentage of Total Population
Hindu	89,703,057	79.83
Muslim	12,971,152	11.54
Buddhist	6,531,200	5.81
Jain	1,400,349	1.25
Christian	1,080,073	0.96
Sikh	223,247	0.20
Other Religions and Persuasions	178,965	0.16
Religion Not Stated	286,290	0.25
Total	112,374,333	100.00

Source: Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, Census of India 2011, C-01: Population by Religious Community, Maharashtra.

Interpretation-

The data presented in Table 1 demonstrate the considerable religious diversity of Maharashtra. The Hindu population constituted 79.83 percent of the state's population, followed by Muslims at 11.54 percent and Buddhists at 5.81 percent. Jain, Christian, Sikh, and other religious communities together constituted the remaining population.

This diversity is important from a sociological perspective because marriage practices are embedded in community-specific cultural and social institutions. Consequently, changes in traditional marriage practices need to be understood within the broader context of Maharashtra's plural social structure rather than as a uniform process affecting all communities in the same manner.

3. Rural-Urban Context of Social Change-

The distinction between rural and urban society is particularly important in examining changes in marriage practices. Rural communities have historically maintained stronger forms of kinship interaction and community-based social regulation, whereas urbanization has created greater exposure to occupational mobility, educational opportunities, individual choice, diverse social networks, and changing family structures. The Census of India 2011 provides the demographic basis for understanding this rural-urban context. Maharashtra had a rural population of 61,556,074 and an urban population of 50,818,259 in 2011.

Table 2- Rural and Urban Population of Maharashtra, 2011

Area of Residence	Population	Percentage
Rural	61,556,074	54.78
Urban	50,818,259	45.22
Total	112,374,333	100.00

Source: Census of India 2011, Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India.

Interpretation-

The data indicate that Maharashtra had a substantial rural population alongside a large urban population in 2011. The coexistence of these two major social environments is important for understanding variations in marriage practices.

Urbanization has provided individuals with greater exposure to educational institutions, employment opportunities, diverse social networks, and changing lifestyles. Rural society, while also undergoing substantial transformation, has generally retained stronger community and kinship-based social relationships. Consequently, changes in marriage practices may occur at different rates and in different forms across rural and urban settings.

4. Need and Significance of the Study-

Marriage practices represent an important dimension of social change because they reflect transformations in family structure, gender relations, cultural values, social control, and individual decision-making. The study was significant for the following reasons:

First, marriage is closely connected with the continuity of family and kinship systems. Changes in marriage practices may therefore produce corresponding changes in family relationships and patterns of social interaction.

Second, the age at marriage provides an important indicator of changing social norms. The decline in the proportion of women marrying before the age of 18 in Maharashtra between NFHS-4 and NFHS-

5 indicates a measurable change in marriage-related behaviour.

Third, education has increasingly become an important factor in marriage decisions. The difference between rural and urban women's educational attainment provides an important social context for understanding differences in marriage practices.

Fourth, women's participation in marriage-related decision-making represents an important dimension of social transformation. Research conducted in rural Maharashtra has demonstrated that women's involvement in partner selection and marriage timing remains limited in some contexts, indicating the continuing influence of traditional family structures.

Finally, the study is significant because it helps explain how traditional cultural practices adapt to changing social conditions. The contemporary marriage institution in Maharashtra is characterized by the interaction of tradition, modernity, family expectations, individual preferences, and changing gender relations.

5. Review of Related Literature-

The study of marriage and family in Maharashtra has been addressed from demographic, sociological, cultural, and gender perspectives.

The Maharashtra Gazetteers have documented marriage as an important social institution and have described traditional marriage forms, marriage ceremonies, age at marriage, dowry, divorce, remarriage, and changes associated with modernization and Westernization. This historical documentation provides an important basis for understanding the continuity and transformation of marriage practices in Maharashtra.

Kherde's sociological study of inter-caste married couples in Aurangabad examined marriage across caste boundaries and highlighted the relationship between marriage and changing social relationships. Such studies demonstrate that marriage can also become an important site of social transformation.

A major empirical study conducted among 1,200 married women aged 18–29 years and their husbands in rural Maharashtra examined the relationship between traditional marital practices and women's decision-making and contraceptive behaviour. The study found that women's participation in marriage-related decisions was associated with greater involvement in marital communication and reproductive decision-making. Recent research on generational trends in rural Maharashtra has also examined changes in education and marriage norms. A study based on 659 parent-adolescent dyads from the Pune Maternal Nutrition Study found that marriage and

education norms were changing across generations, providing evidence of intergenerational transformation in rural Maharashtra.

The reviewed literature indicates that marriage practices in Maharashtra are influenced by education, gender relations, family structure, kinship, community norms, and broader processes of modernization. However, the simultaneous relationship among marriage practices, family relationships, and wider social change requires further integrated examination. The present study therefore focused on these dimensions collectively.

6. Objectives of the Study-

- To examine the nature and social significance of traditional marriage practices in Maharashtra.
- To study the changes that have occurred in traditional marriage practices under the influence of education, urbanization, modernization, migration, and changing lifestyles.
- To examine the relationship between changing marriage practices and transformations in family structure, women's roles, and intergenerational relationships.
- To analyze the coexistence of traditional values and modern marriage-related values in contemporary Maharashtra.

7. Research Questions-

- What are the major traditional marriage practices historically prevalent among different communities in Maharashtra?
- What major changes have occurred in these traditional marriage practices in the context of social transformation?
- How have education and urbanization influenced marriage age and marriage-related decision-making?
- How have changing marriage practices affected family relationships and women's roles within the family?
- To what extent do traditional marriage values continue to influence contemporary marriage practices in Maharashtra?

8. Research Methodology-

8.1 Research Design:

The present study adopted a descriptive and analytical research design. The study examined marriage and family as social institutions within the broader process of social change in Maharashtra. Particular attention was given to changes in traditional marriage practices, age at marriage, educational status, rural-urban differences, women's participation in marriage-related decisions, and the continuing influence of family and kinship networks.

8.2 Nature of Data:

The study was based primarily on secondary data. Reliable information was obtained from the Census of India, National Family Health Survey, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of Maharashtra publications, Maharashtra Gazetteers, and peer-reviewed scholarly studies relating to marriage, family, gender, and social change in Maharashtra. The use of secondary data enabled the study to examine marriage-related changes through officially reported demographic indicators as well as findings from empirical studies conducted in Maharashtra.

8.3 Sources of Data:

- Census of India 2011
- National Family Health Survey-4
- National Family Health Survey-5
- Health and Family Welfare Statistics in India
- Government of Maharashtra Gazetteers
- Peer-reviewed research studies on marriage and family in Maharashtra
- Published demographic and sociological studies

8.4 Method of Analysis:

The collected information was classified thematically and analyzed using descriptive interpretation. Quantitative information was presented through tables and percentages, while findings from published qualitative and sociological studies were interpreted in relation to changing marriage practices, family relationships, gender roles, and social transformation.

9. Traditional Marriage Practices in Maharashtra-

Marriage practices in Maharashtra have historically been embedded within broader systems of family, caste, kinship, religion, community, and regional culture. Marriage was generally viewed as a family and community institution rather than merely an individual relationship. The selection of a marriage partner, timing of marriage, religious ceremonies, participation of relatives, post-marital residence, and exchange practices were influenced by established social norms.

The traditional marriage system also provided a mechanism through which social relationships were established and maintained between families. Kinship networks played an important role in identifying potential partners, negotiating marriage arrangements, organizing ceremonies, and maintaining relationships after marriage.

However, traditional practices were not identical across Maharashtra. Differences existed according to religion, caste, tribe, region, socioeconomic status, and rural-urban location. Consequently, the transformation of marriage practices also occurred unevenly across different sections of society.

Historical documentation in the Maharashtra Gazetteers indicates that marriage customs, ceremonies, age at marriage, widow remarriage, divorce, dowry, and other marriage-related practices have undergone changes over time. These changes demonstrate that marriage has remained a dynamic social institution rather than a completely static cultural practice.

10. Changing Age at Marriage-

Age at marriage is one of the important demographic indicators through which changes in marriage norms can be examined. Increasing age at marriage is generally associated with longer educational participation, changing aspirations, employment opportunities, legal awareness, and changing perceptions regarding family formation. The NFHS-5 Maharashtra fact sheet reported that 21.9 percent of women aged 20–24 years were married before the age of 18 years. The corresponding proportion was 26.3 percent in NFHS-4. The NFHS-5 figure was 15.7 percent in urban areas and 27.6 percent in rural areas.

Table 3- Women Aged 20–24 Years Married Before Age 18 in Maharashtra

Survey	Percentage
NFHS-4	26.3%
NFHS-5	21.9%
Change	4.4 percentage points decrease

Source: Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India, National Family Health Survey-5 and Health and Family Welfare Statistics in India 2023.

Interpretation-

The data indicate a decline of 4.4 percentage points in the proportion of women aged 20–24 years who were married before the age of 18 between NFHS-4 and NFHS-5. This decline indicates a gradual transformation in marriage-age norms in Maharashtra.

The change is particularly significant because age at marriage is closely connected with educational continuation, employment opportunities, reproductive decisions, and women's participation in family decision-making. The reduction in early marriage therefore represents an important component of broader social transformation.

11. Rural-Urban Differences in Marriage Practices-

The transformation of marriage practices has not occurred uniformly across rural and urban Maharashtra. The NFHS-5 data demonstrate substantial differences between rural and urban areas.

Table 4- Selected Marriage and Education Indicators among Women in Maharashtra, NFHS-5

Indicator	Urban	Rural	Total
Women aged 15–49 who are literate	90.2%	79.5%	84.6%
Women with 10 or more years of schooling	61.1%	40.7%	50.4%
Women aged 20–24 married before age 18	15.7%	27.6%	21.9%
Women who have ever used the Internet	54.3%	23.7%	38.0%

Source: National Family Health Survey-5, Maharashtra State Fact Sheet.

Interpretation-

Table 4 shows a clear rural-urban difference in education and marriage-related indicators. Women's literacy was 90.2 percent in urban areas compared with 79.5 percent in rural areas. Similarly, the proportion of women with ten or more years of schooling was 61.1 percent in urban areas and 40.7 percent in rural areas.

At the same time, early marriage was considerably more prevalent in rural Maharashtra. The proportion of women aged 20–24 who were married before age 18 was 27.6 percent in rural areas compared with 15.7 percent in urban areas. The difference between rural and urban areas therefore suggests that educational opportunities, access to information, and the broader social environment are important dimensions of changing marriage practices.

12. Education and Transformation of Marriage Practices-

Education has become one of the major forces contributing to changes in marriage-related attitudes and behavior. Increased educational attainment can influence the timing of marriage, expectations regarding employment, partner selection, family size, and women's participation in household decision-making.

The NFHS-5 Maharashtra data show that 50.4 percent of women aged 15–49 had ten or more years of schooling. The proportion was substantially higher in urban areas at 61.1 percent than in rural areas at 40.7 percent.

The relationship between education and changing marriage norms has also been examined in recent research on rural Maharashtra. A study based on 659 parent-adolescent dyads from the Pune Maternal Nutrition Study examined generational changes in education and marriage norms and found evidence of changing expectations regarding education and age at marriage across generations.

These findings indicate that education has become an important component of the transition from

traditional marriage norms toward more flexible marriage expectations.

13. Women's Participation in Marriage-Related Decision-Making-

Women's participation in marriage-related decisions represents an important dimension of social change. In traditional family systems, decisions concerning partner selection and timing of marriage were frequently influenced by parents, elders, and extended kin.

Empirical evidence from rural Maharashtra provides important information in this regard. A study of 1,200 married women aged 18-29 years and their husbands examined traditional marital practices and women's participation in marital decision-making. The study found that women who were primary decision-makers in choosing their marriage partner had higher odds of having discussed pregnancy prevention with their husbands and of having ever used modern contraception. Women who were primary decision-makers regarding the timing of marriage also had higher odds of having used modern contraception.

Table 5- Selected Indicators of Women's Marital Agency in Rural Maharashtra

Indicator	Percentage / Finding
Women who were primary decision-makers in partner selection	15.5%
Women who were primary decision-makers regarding timing of marriage	9.4%
Association between partner choice and communication about pregnancy prevention	AOR 1.76
Association between partner choice and ever use of modern contraception	AOR 2.19
Association between marriage-timing choice and ever use of modern contraception	AOR 1.86

Source: Dixit et al., study of married couples in rural Maharashtra.

Interpretation-

The findings demonstrate that women's participation in marriage-related decision-making remained limited in the rural Maharashtra study population. Only 15.5 percent of women reported being the primary decision-maker regarding partner selection, while 9.4 percent reported being the primary decision-maker regarding the timing of marriage.

At the same time, the findings indicate an important relationship between marital choice and subsequent marital communication. Women who had greater involvement in partner selection or marriage timing showed higher odds of communication and modern contraceptive use. This suggests that greater participation in marriage-related decisions may be associated with greater agency within marriage.

14. Traditional Practices and Continuing Family Influence-

Despite the transformation of marriage practices, family influence continues to be an important feature of marriage in Maharashtra. The persistence of family involvement does not necessarily indicate that marriage practices remain unchanged. Instead, the role of the family appears to be undergoing transformation. Recent qualitative research conducted in Kurla, Maharashtra, among 24 married women found that women's autonomy in household decision-making was shaped by intergenerational hierarchies, gender norms, socioeconomic conditions, education, economic participation, and extended kinship relationships. The study also found that extended-family influence could continue even within nuclear households through expectations and indirect interventions.

This evidence indicates that the transition from joint to nuclear family structures does not automatically eliminate traditional forms of family influence. Rather, family influence may change its form while continuing to affect marriage, household decisions, mobility, and other areas of family life.

15. Intergenerational Change in Marriage Norms-

Marriage norms are transmitted from one generation to another through family interaction, community practices, socialization, and cultural expectations. However, these norms are also subject to modification as younger generations acquire higher levels of education and experience different social environments. Research in rural Maharashtra involving parents and adolescents examined intergenerational concordance concerning gender-equity norms in marriage. The findings showed some same-sex parent-child concordance concerning girls' rights regarding marriage timing, partner choice, contraception, and attitudes toward marital violence.

More recent research using data from the Pune Maternal Nutrition Study similarly examined generational changes in education and marriage norms among rural families in Maharashtra. The study included 659 parent-adolescent dyads and examined contemporary and future aspirations concerning children's education and marriage.

These findings indicate that changes in marriage practices are partly intergenerational. Younger generations may retain important cultural values while simultaneously developing different expectations regarding education, marriage timing, and personal choice.

16. Marriage, Family and Social Change-

The evidence examined in the present study demonstrates that marriage practices in Maharashtra are undergoing a multidimensional transformation. The transformation is visible in several interconnected areas.

First, the age at marriage has increased gradually, as reflected in the decline in the proportion of women aged 20–24 married before age 18 from 26.3 percent in NFHS-4 to 21.9 percent in NFHS-5. Second, education has become increasingly important in shaping marriage-related expectations. The substantial difference between rural and urban women in educational attainment corresponds with differences in early-marriage indicators.

Third, individual participation in marriage decisions has emerged as an important dimension of social transformation. Nevertheless, evidence from rural Maharashtra indicates that family influence remains significant and women's primary role in partner selection and marriage timing remains limited.

Fourth, family transformation does not necessarily mean the disappearance of traditional social influence. Contemporary research indicates that extended kinship networks continue to influence women's decision-making even where nuclear family structures have developed.

Thus, social change in Maharashtra should be understood as a process of adaptation and negotiation rather than a simple replacement of traditional practices by modern practices.

17. Major Findings

- Traditional marriage practices continued to have social and cultural significance in Maharashtra, although their forms and functions were changing.
- Marriage practices varied across communities and were influenced by religion, caste, kinship, region, socioeconomic conditions, and rural-urban context.
- The proportion of women aged 20-24 years married before age 18 declined from 26.3 percent in NFHS-4 to 21.9 percent in NFHS-5.
- Early marriage remained more prevalent in rural Maharashtra than in urban Maharashtra, with corresponding proportions of 27.6 percent and 15.7 percent.
- Women's educational attainment was higher in urban areas than in rural areas, with 61.1 percent of urban women and 40.7 percent of rural women having ten or more years of schooling.
- Women's participation in marriage-related decision-making remained limited in the rural Maharashtra study population examined in the reviewed research.

- Family and extended kinship networks continued to influence marriage-related and household decisions even within changing family structures.
- Intergenerational differences in education and marriage norms indicated an ongoing transformation of traditional expectations.
- The transformation of marriage practices was closely associated with broader processes of education, urbanization, modernization, changing gender relations, and individualization.
- Traditional and modern marriage values were found to coexist in contemporary Maharashtra rather than existing as completely separate social systems.

18. Conclusion-

The present study examined marriage, family, and social change in Maharashtra with particular reference to changing traditional marriage practices. The analysis demonstrated that marriage in Maharashtra has remained an important social institution while undergoing gradual transformation under changing social, educational, economic, and demographic conditions.

The findings showed a measurable decline in early marriage among young women, accompanied by substantial differences between rural and urban areas. The increasing importance of education, access to information, changing aspirations, and altered perceptions concerning the timing of marriage has contributed to this transformation. At the same time, traditional family and kinship structures continue to influence marriage decisions and household relationships.

The study also established that women's participation in marriage-related decision-making represents an important dimension of contemporary social change. Evidence from rural Maharashtra showed that women's primary involvement in partner selection and marriage timing remained limited, while greater involvement was associated with stronger marital communication and reproductive decision-making.

The transformation of marriage practices has therefore not resulted in the complete disappearance of traditional values. Instead, contemporary Maharashtra represents a situation in which traditional practices, family expectations, individual preferences, educational aspirations, and modern social values interact continuously. Marriage and family in Maharashtra can consequently be understood as institutions undergoing gradual restructuring. The nature of this restructuring is particularly visible in changing marriage age, educational participation, women's decision-making, family influence, and

intergenerational expectations. The overall pattern indicates a transition from predominantly family-controlled traditional marriage arrangements toward increasingly negotiated forms of marriage, while the cultural and relational significance of family continues to remain strong.

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