

Role of Age at Marriage in Determining Family Size: An Anthropological Study in Assam

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Abstract

The present paper examines the role of age at marriage in determining family size among the Boro Kachari population of Assam. An attempt has also been made to assess the role of some of the socio-cultural background variables in determining age at marriage of the population. The study was conducted in 2017 in six villages of Goalpara district predominantly inhabited by the Boro Kachari population. The data were collected from 300 ever married Boro Kachari women aged 15-49 years. The data reveals that the 13 per cent of girls get married even before attaining the legal age of 18 years. The result has found that the age at marriage of the women plays an important role in determining the size of the family. The study also cross-examines the different factors that determines the age at marriage of the Boro Kachari women. It has been found that the age at marriage increases with the increase of educational level of the women. The study also established that the number of the surviving children increase among those women whose age at marriage is lower. The respondents are of opinion that late marriage has already reduces the child bearing span of the women, and therefore, it directly influences the size of the family.

Keywords: *Family planning, Contraceptives, Age at Marriage, Surviving number of children.*

1. Introduction

In Assam, there are 50 ethnic groups along with 23 notified scheduled tribes inhabiting in the 31 districts of the state. Most of these communities have their own deep-rooted socio-cultural values and ethos that directly or indirectly influence the family planning characteristics of the population. Of the total 35 million population of Assam, tribal population constitutes more than 14 per cent. Family planning related studies and surveys carried out by different scholars and agencies have revealed that tribal people are comparatively least adopters of family planning and their growth of population is uneven (Sharma & Rani, 2009). According to the Census 2001, the growth rate of tribal population (2.45%) of Assam was higher than the general population during 1981-91. Surprisingly, in 1991-01 their growth rate climbed down to 1.45 per cent as against 1.85 per cent of the general population. In addition to these, the Census 2011 also reveals that the population growth rate in some districts of Assam that are predominantly occupied by tribal population like Kokrajhar (5.19%), Chirang (11.26%), Baska (11.17%), Udalguri (9.76%), etc. are decreasing and is far below than state and the national average (Census,2011). This uneven growth of population between different ethnic communities has caused wide demographic disparities.

Age at marriage, especially of girls plays a pivotal role in determining the family planning behavior of the couple. Early marriage extends the effective reproductive span of the women and thus increases the possibility of having more pregnancy. Early age at marriage leads to early child bearing which has serious implication on the well being of mother, children, family and the nation as a whole. It is reported that mothers of age group 15-19 years face a 20 percent of high risk of dying in pregnancy than aged 20-24 year. According to a report published by WHO, girls getting married before 15 year has five times more likely to die as compared to women of age 20 year (WHO, 2000). In addition to pregnancy and childbirth complication, several studies have revealed that the young married girls are more vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases and infections. Early marriages not only affect the health of mother, it also causes health problems to

the new born. It is evident that infant mortality of young mothers is always higher than the mothers of older age. Another important disadvantage of early marriage is that the women getting early married suffer from social and personnel disadvantage. Early marriage causes both loss of adolescence and forced sexual relationship. Besides these, the women lost her freedom of movement and end up her life within the confinement of the four walls of the house. Such social isolation from her own family, friends and social network exerts serious psychological and emotional consequences.

In India, the average age at marriage of girls is gradually increasing. In 1951, the average age at marriage was 15.2 year, which increased to 19 year by 1991 and 19.7 by 1999 (IIPS and Macro, 2000). However, The NFHS-3 revealed that 44.5 per cent of Indian girls get married even before they attain the legal age of marriage 18 year. As per 1991 census, 5 per cent of girls get married in between age group 10-14 year, 35 percent in between 15-19 year and 82 per cent in between 20-24 year. In this study an attempt has been made to study the role of age at marriage in determining the family size of the Boro Kachari tribe of Goalpara district of Assam. The study will also examine some of the determinants that affects the age at marriage of the Boro Kachari women.

The present study was conducted in 2016 in Goalpara district of Assam, India. Demographically, the district is predominantly inhabited by the Muslim (57.52%), followed by the Hindu (38.51%), and the Christian (7.72%). The presence of other religious groups like Buddhist, Jains and Sikhs are less than one per cent of the total population. The tribal population, which constitutes more than 16 per cent of the total population comprises of Rabha, Boro Kachari, Garo and Hajong. The population growth rate of the district (22.74%) during 2001-11 was far higher than the national average of 16.23 percent. The family planning services and the performance of the indicators are comparatively poor. The NFHS-3 has found that 27.4 per cent of girls get married before the completion of 18 years as against state average of 24 per cent. The percentage of having birth order 3 and above is more than 33 per cent.

The Boro Kachari, which is selected for the present study is the largest tribe of whole Northeast India. The tribe share more than 40 per cent of the total tribal population of the state. They are mainly concentrated in the districts of Kokrajhar, Chirang, Udalguri and Baska of Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD) along with Bongaigaon, Darrang, Goalpara, Kamrup and Sonitpur. They are also scattered over in some pockets of districts, like Dhemaji, Golaghat, Marigaon and Karbi-Anglong. In Goalpara district, they are mostly found in the villages of Dudhnoi, Lakhipur, Matia and Rangjuli revenue circles. Their settlements are permanent in nature and primarily dependent on agriculture and its related activities for livelihood.

2. Materials and Methods

In this study, a total of six villages of Goalpara district, viz., Siamari, Kharalalpara and Jonaimari of Kushdhowa Block, Dohela of Matia Block, and Darrangiri and Patiapara of Rangjuli Block, predominantly inhabited by the Boro Kacharis were included. A total of 300 Boro Kachari women in their reproductive age were selected as respondent by systematic random sampling. For recording of information, two schedules were framed encompassing most of the topics related to the study. The first schedule contains queries related to basic socio-economic background of the family members, while the second schedule comprises of questions pertaining to age at marriage and their family size. The data were analysed by applying univariate statistical methods to inspect the frequency and percentage distribution of various factors.

3. Findings

Age at marriage of the Boro Kachari women is one of the important socio-cultural determinants of family planning. Table 1 shows that out of 300 ever married women in their reproductive age group, 13 per cent of them were married before 18

year of legal age of marriage. The highest proportions of respondents were married in between 19-23 year (76%). Only 8 per cent of the respondents have age at marriage in between 24-28 year. The percentage of women getting married after 28 years is very low. It was only 2 and 1 percent in the age group 29-33 years and 34 years and above category, respectively.

Table 1: Age at marriage of the respondents

	Age at marriage (in years)										Total	
	14-18		19-23		24-28		29-33		34 &above			
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Respondents	39	13	228	76	24	8	6	2	3	1	300	100
Husband	-	-	99	33	124	41.33	69	23	8	2.67	300	100
Mean Age at Marriage												
	Respondents						21.1 year					
	Husband						25.80 year					

The table also presents an analysis of age at marriage of husband. It was found that the age at marriage of the husband is comparatively higher than the respondents. The result shows that age at marriage of the husband of the respondents were found to be highest in the age group 24-28 years (41.33%), followed by 19-33 years (33%), 29-33 years (23%) and 34 years and above (2.67%). The studies also revealed that mean age at marriage of respondents and their husband which were 21.1 year and 25.80 year, respectively.

Table 2: Socio-economic background characteristics

Occupational categories	Respondents		Husband	
	No	%	No	%
Cultivators	-	-	234	78
Businessmen	-	-	21	7
Domestic maid	4	1.33	-	-
Govt. servicemen	6	2	15	5
Housewives	264	88	-	-
Private servicemen	20	6.67	12	4
Daily labours	-	-	9	3
Self-employed	6	2	9	3
Total	300	100	300	100

Table 2 presents the statistics of the socio-economic status of the respondents. This variable plays a paramount role in determining family planning characteristic of population groups. It is observed that 88 percent of the respondents are housewives whereas only a small chunk of the respondents engaged in private jobs (6.67%). The percentage of respondents working as domestic maid, self-employed or in government jobs is negligible and is below 2 percent. The occupational status of the husband was also examined in this study. The study revealed that more than 78 per cent of the husband worked

as cultivators. The other avenues in which they are working are business (7%), government services (5%), private jobs (4%), daily wage labour and self-employment (3% each).

Table 3: Educational status of the respondents and husbands

Numbers and percentage distribution by educational level											
Illiterate		Up to primary school		Up to middle school		Up to high school		Up to higher secondary		Graduate/ Post-graduate	
Respondent											
No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
24	8	51	17	135	45	69	23	9	3	12	4
Husbands											
54	18	48	16	48	16	108	36	30	10	12	4

Table 3 presents the educational status of the respondents and their husband. It has been observed that the educational level of the Boro Kachari respondents is more or less better compare to their husbands. The study found that only 8 per cent of them are found to be illiterate compared to 18 per cent of their husbands. The proportion of women and their husbands who have been to school, but not completed primary school, was 17 and 16 per cent, respectively. The highest numbers of respondents have studied up to middle school level (45%) as against 16 per cent of the husband. The percentage of the respondents and the husbands with high school education was 23 and 36 per cent, respectively. Only 4 per cent of respondents and husbands have studied above higher secondary level.

Table 4 analyses the relationship between the age at marriage with the educational status of the respondents. The study shows that the highest percentage (58.33%) among the illiterates respondents have married in the age group 14-18 years, followed by 19-23 years (25 %), and 24-28 years (4%). The age at marriage of illiterate respondents was found to be least in the age group 29-33 years (1%). No illiterate respondent was found to have age at marriage in the age group 34-38 years. The table presents that age at marriage of more than 86 percent of the respondents who have studied up to high school level were in the age group 19-23 years compared to other age group 14-18 years (9.02%), 24-28 years (3.53%), 29-33 years (0.78%) and 34-38 years (0.39 %). The percentage of age at marriage among the respondents who have studied up to 12th standard was found to be highest (33.33%) in the age group 24-28 years, followed by 14-18 years and 19-23 years (each have 22 %).

Table 4: Age at marriage and educational status

Age at marriage	Educational Status			
	Illiterate	Up to School level	Up to XII th Standard	Up to College level
14-18	14 (58.33)	23 (9.02)	02 (22.22)	-
19-23	06 (25.00)	220 (86.27)	02 (22.22)	09 (75.00)
24-28	03 (12.50)	09 (3.53)	03 (33.33)	02 (16.67))
29-33	01 (4.17)	02 (0.78)	01 (11.11)	01(8.33)
34-38	-	01(0.39)	01(11.11)	-
Total	24 (100)	255 (100)	9	12

The percentage of age at marriage in the age groups 29-33 years and 23-38 years was 11.11 percent. The tables shows that the age at marriage of two third of the respondents who have been to college or university was in the age group 19.23 years, followed by 24-28 years (16.67) and 24-28 years (8.33). The respondents of this category were not found in the age group 14-18 years and 34-38 years.

Table 5: Age at marriage of respondents by number of surviving children

Age at marriage	Respondents by number of surviving children					Total
	0	1	2	3	4+	
14-18	-	36 (37.5)	22(23.91)	28 (57.14)	28(58.33)	114 (38%)
19-23	12(80)	22 (22.92)	20 (21.74)	12 (24.49)	15 (31.25)	81 (27%)
24-28	03 (20)	12 (12.5)	18 (19.57)	05 (10.20)	04 (8.33)	42 (14%)
29-33	-	10 (10.42)	22 (23.91)	02 (4.08)	01 (2.09)	35 (11.67)
34-38	-	16 (16.67)	10 (10.87)	02 (4.08)	--	28 (9.33)
Total	15 (5.00)	96 (32)	92 (30.67)	49(16.33)	48(16)	300 (100)

Table 5 examines the distribution of the respondents by age at marriage according to the number of surviving children. The table clearly shows that the number of surviving children decreases with increase in the age at marriage. The respondents having highest number of surviving children (38%) was found among those whose age at marriage was in the age group 14-18 years, followed by 19-23 years (27%), 24-28 years (14%), 29-33 years (11.67%) and 34-38 years (9.33%).

On the hand, the table also revealed that out of 300 respondents, 5 percent of respondents were without surviving children at the time of survey, 32 percent of the respondents have 1 surviving children, 30.67 percent have 2 surviving children, 16.33 percent have 3 surviving and 16 percent have four or more than four surviving children.

The table also noticed that that the highest number of respondents with 1 surviving children is found among the respondents whose age at marriage is in between 14-18 years (37.5%), followed by 19-23 years (22.92%), 34-38 years

(16.67%), 24-28 years (12.5%) and 29-33 years (10.42%). In case of respondents having 2 surviving children, it was found that it is highest among the respondents whose age at marriage was in between 14-18 years and 29-33 years (each has 23.91%), followed by 19-23 years (21.74%), 24-28 years (19.57%) and 34-38 years (10.87%). In case of respondents with 3 and 4 or more than 4 surviving children, the table clearly shows that the number of surviving children decreases as the age at marriage increases. It is observed that respondents whose age at marriage is in between 14-18 years, the respondents with 3 and 4 or more than 4 surviving children is 57.14 percent and 58.33 percent, respectively. Gradually, the percentage of surviving children decreases as the age at marriage increases. The percentage of respondents with 3 children is less than 5 percent in those respondents whose age at marriage is above 29 years. It further decreases in case of those respondents with 4 or more than 4 children.

Table No 6: Time from marriage to first birth

Age at marriage	Gap between marriage and first birth				Total
	1 year	2year	3 year	4 year+	
14-18	27 (36)	81(56.64)	21(42.86)	09 (50)	138
19-23	34(45.33)	29 (20.28)	24(48.98)	09 (50)	96
24-28	09 (12)	29 (20.28)	04 (2.80)	-	42
29-33	03 (4)	03 (2.10)	-	-	06
34-38	02 (2.67)	01(0.70)	-	-	03
Total	75 (26.32)	143 (50.18)	49 (17.19)	18 (6.31)	285

Table 6 examines the timing between age at marriage and the first birth. It is observed that out of 285 respondents, the 2 years gap between marriage and first birth was highest (50.18%), followed by 1 year gap (26.32%), 3 year gap (17.19%) and 4 year gap (6.31%). The table also found that the highest percentage of respondent having 1 year gap between marriage and first birth was among the respondents whose age at marriage was in between 19-23 years(45.33), followed by 14-18 years (36%), 24-28 years (12%), 29-33 years (4%) and 34-38 (2.67%). The 2 year gap between marriage and first birth is found highest among the women whose age at marriage was in between 14-18 years (56.64%), followed by 19-23 and 24-28 years (each has 20.28%). It is almost negligible in the 29-33 and 34-38 years category. The percentage of children with 3 years gap between marriage and first birth is highest in 19-23 years (48.98%), followed by 14-18 years (42.86). The 4 year gap is equal in both 14-18 and 19-23 categories (50% each).

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper focuses on the role of age at marriage on the fertility behaviour of the Boro Kachari tribal population of Assam. The Boro Kachari, which is selected for the present study shares more than 40 per cent of the total tribal population of the state. The different demographic data carried out by governmental and non-governmental sources have proved that the growth rate of tribal population of Assam was declining than the general population during last two decades. The figures of Census of 1991-01 and 2001-11 have reflected the same fact. In 1991-2001, the growth rate of the ST population have decline down to 1.45 per cent as against 1.85 per cent of the general population. In addition to these, the Census 2011 also reveals that the population growth rate in some districts of Assam that are predominantly occupied by tribal population like Kokrajhar (5.19%), Chirang (11.26%), Baska (11.17%), Udalguri (9.76%), etc. is far below than state and the national average. The most significant point to be noted that most of the family planning related studies and surveys carried out by

different scholars and agencies have revealed that tribal people are comparatively least adopters of family planning and their growth of population is uneven. The other most important fact is that the population growth rate of the Goalpara district on which this study was carried out is exceptionally higher than the national and state average. The population growth rate of the district was 22.74 percent during 2001-11 as compared to the national and state average of 16.23 and 17.26 percent, respectively. Demographic studies have found that among various factors responsible for determining family size, age at marriage of the girl's plays a pivotal role. Gogoi and Medhi (2014) in a study carried out in Goalpara district has found that the lower age at marriage of the Muslim girls is one of the major factor responsible for exceptional growth rate of the district. In their study, they have found that 46 percent of the Muslim girls get married even before attaining the legal age of marriage. On the other hand, the finding of this study clearly shows that only 13 percent of Boro Kachari women get married before attaining legal age of the marriage is. It is interesting to note that the mean age at marriage of Boro Kachari girls is also higher (21.1 year). The NFHS-3 has also reported that 41 per cent of women in Assam marry before reaching the legal age of 18 years. The present study clearly established that the proportion of the Boro Kachari women who marry young is comparatively low and is declining compared to state average and is creating a great disparity in the age at marriage between different population groups living in the same locality.

The study has found that educational and occupational status of the women plays an important role in determining the age at marriage of the Boro Kachari girls. This has been proved various studies that education in school is one of the most influencing factors in determining the age at marriage of the girls. The findings of the study have observed that the educational level of both women and husbands is comparatively better. The percentage of illiterate respondent is only 8 percent and this is very significant indicator for their higher age at marriage. The study revealed that the age at marriage of the girl is directly proportionate to the educational status. The illiterate women have lower age at marriage than those who have more years of education in school and colleges. More years of schooling not only leads to the postponement of the marriage but also helps young women to develop a positive outlook towards family planning. Education helps to develop the status of the women which in turn enables the women to decide about the family size. Study carried out in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh of India has found that inadequate socialization, discontinuation of education etc. due to repeated pregnancies caused severe devastating effect on the girls (Saxena,1999).The most serious implication of early marriage is the abandonment of school life halfway adversely affecting the personality development of the girls. Mahanta (2016) has also found that education number of live births is significantly less when wives are more educated than husbands. Jeejabhoy (1995) has found that education is the single most factors that stongly related to the postponement of the marriage. Increased age at marriage increase the possibility of female education develops modern outlook and enhance the capacity to earn an independent income.

Occupation of girls is an important determinant of age at marriage. Singh and Samara (1996) has found that women's labour force participation plays an important role in determining the age at marriage. In this study, majority of the women are housewives and very small occupational variation is found (table 2) among the respondents of the study population. In addition to their household works, they participate actively in agricultural activities including sowing, transplanting, weeding, harvesting, winnowing, etc. They also rear and domesticated livestock's like poultry, pigs, goats, cows, etc. which they use both for household and commercial purposes. Many women make substantial economic contribution to the family by selling these livestock and their products. Though the Boro Kachari society is patrilineal, the status of Boro Kachari women is better in many respects. They play important role in decision-making process, both in the family and the society. It is observed that there are several women organizations within their society with strong social network, which works equally both for the women, and the society. They are also free and open to discuss sensitive issues

like family planning with health and family workers, which might have bring them close to the family planning services. All these factors have helped them to develop positive outlook towards family planning. A number of studies have also suggested that the ability to take decisions in family matter is an important women empowerment and it influences the marriage decision (Bloom, Wypij, and Das Gupta 2001; Jejeebhoy and Sathar 2001; Kishor 2000).

The present study also analyses the relationship of age at marriage with the number of surviving children. It has been observed that most of the respondents have 1(32%) and 2 (30.67%) surviving children. The percentage of women having 3 and 4 or more than 4 is little above 16 percent. If we correlate this data with age at marriage, we will find that highest number of surviving children, irrespective of the number is found among those women whose age at marriage is low and it continues to decrease as the age at marriage increases. The study clearly established that the number of children is inversely proportionate to the age at marriage of the women. This findings correlate with the findings of The Mysore Study, where it was found that females marrying between 14 and 17 years gave birth to 5.9 children compared to 4.7 children by the females marrying between 18-21 years (United Nation,1961). The present study also examines the timing between age at marriage and the first birth. It is observed that 1 and 2 year gap between marriage and first birth was highest among the respondents whose age at marriage was comparatively lower than those whose age at marriage was higher.

4. Conclusion

From the foregoing results and discussion, it can be concluded that the age at marriage of Boro Kachari women plays an important role in determining family size. The present study leads to the conclusion that age at marriage of the Boro Kachari tribe to a large extent depend on some of the socio-cultural and economic characteristic of the tribe. Thus, it can be conclude that among Boro Kachari tribe, the age at marriage is comparatively better and therefore the number of surviving children is also less and hence in turn it plays an important role in the population growth rate of the tribe.

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