

IIPS Research Brief

Every year, IIPS undertakes many research studies on a number of themes related to population and health at the state and national levels using its own resources. The 'Research Brief' is a new initiative by the Institute to provide an opportunity to the Institute's faculty, Ph.D. students and visiting fellows to quickly disseminate the important findings of their research studies before they are published as a research report or in a scientific journal. The authors of the Research Brief look forward to receive feedback from readers that could be helpful in revisiting the larger study report.

Editors
Research Brief Series

EDITORIAL TEAM

Prof. K.S. James
Prof. T. V. Sekher
Dr. Dipti Govil
Dr. M. V. Vaithilingam
Ms. Irin Anna Solomon

E-mail: publication@iipsindia.ac.in

[Research Brief | International Institute for Population Sciences \(IIPS\) \(iipsindia.ac.in\)](#)

Results

Polygynous marriage by cohort

Analyzing the marriage cohorts of the latest three rounds of NFHS, it was found that polygynous marriages declined with passage of time (**Figure 1**). According to NFHS-III, the prevalence of polygynous marriage was higher among women who had married before 1980 (2.5%) than among those who had married in the subsequent years. At the same time, as per NFHS-IV, 2.1% of the women who had married before 1985 were more likely to report polygynous marriage compared to those married in 2010-14 (1%).

¹ Associate Professor, Department of Family and Generations, IIPS

² Professor, Department of Population and Development, IIPS

³ Research Officer, International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai

Acknowledgement: The authors thank the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India and IIPS for providing a research grant for undertaking this study.

Polygyny in India: Levels and Differentials

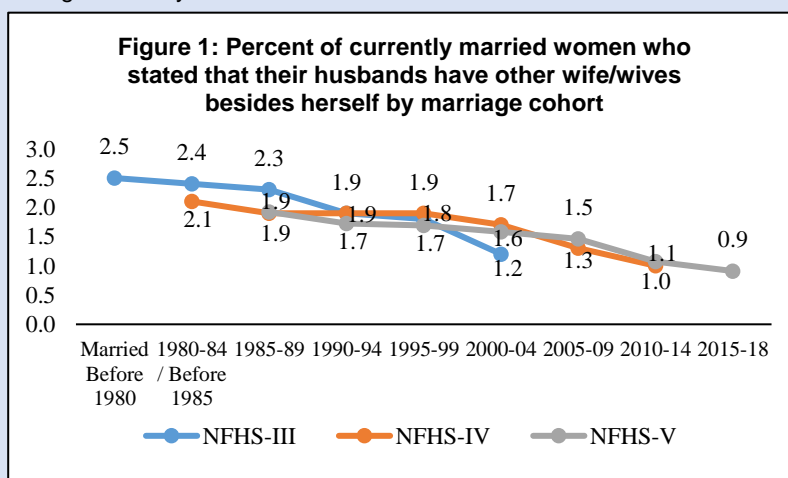
Harihar Sahoo¹, R. Nagarajan² and Chaitali Mandal³

Background

Polygyny is the most conventional form of polygamy, involving the marriage of a man to more than one woman at a time. Historically, more than 80% of human society allowed polygyny. However, due to the rising cost of living, it is rare to find a man married to more than one wife simultaneously. Many countries, including India, banned the practice of polygyny. In 1955, the Hindu Marriage Act of India prohibited the practice of polygyny. Although India has banned polygyny among Hindus, this practice still exists among some sections of the Hindus and the personal law of Muslims allows such practice. There are several causes and consequences of polygynous marriage. Polygyny may occur due to various reasons such as excess mortality of men than women, thereby, leading to a deficit of men and surplus of women, desire to have children to continue the family line, failure to produce children/son by first wife, the cultural practices of lengthy periods of sexual abstinence after child birth driving the men to seek another partner, etc. Most of the literature on polygyny so far available is based on African countries where its prevalence is high. However, the extent of polygynous marriages in India is still unknown. It is essential to understand the extent of polygyny in India as this form of marital union has several consequences such as gender inequality, subordination of women, unequal treatment of spouses, neglect of children, rivaling step-children, inheritance issues among children/spouses, etc. Polygyny also affects spousal age differences, coital frequency, child survival, marital relationships, widowhood and mental health. Considering the lack of research in India with respect to the prevalence of polygyny and its demographic, health and gender impacts, this study aims to explore the levels and differentials in polygynous marriages in India.

Data and methods

The study uses data from third (2005-06), fourth (2015-16) and fifth (2019-21) rounds of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS). These rounds provide information about polygynous marriage. The women were asked, "Besides yourself, does your husband have other wives?" Women who indicated that their partner had more than one wife were considered to be in polygynous unions/marriages. This Research Brief provides the analysis of answers given by currently married women aged 15-49 years.



Similarly, in NFHS-V, 1.9% of the women who married before 1990 were more likely to report polygynous marriage than those married in 2015-18 (0.9%).

Prevalence of polygynous marriages as reported by women

In India, polygynous marriage decreased from 1.9% to 1.4% from 2005-06 to 2019-21 (**Table 1**). In 2005-06, the prevalence of polygynous marriages was high in Arunachal Pradesh (6.9%) and Sikkim (5.6%). In 2019-21, the highest prevalence of polygynous marriages was found in Meghalaya (6.1%) and Mizoram (4.1%). With the exception of nine states (Chandigarh, Delhi, Punjab, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Meghalaya, Tripura, Maharashtra, and Puducherry) the rate of polygyny decreased in almost every state from 2015-16 to 2019-21. Furthermore, districts with higher prevalence of polygyny were found in states of Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh and Odisha (**Table 2**). Among the districts, the prevalence was high in East Jantia Hills (20%), Kra Daadi (16.4%), West Jaintia Hills (14.5%), and West Khasi Hills (10.9%). **Figure 2** depicts that in five districts, more than 10% marriages were polygynous marriages and in another 16 districts, 5%-7% of marriages were polygynous.

Table 1: Percent of currently married women who stated that their husbands had other wife/wives besides themselves, NFHS-III to NFHS-V

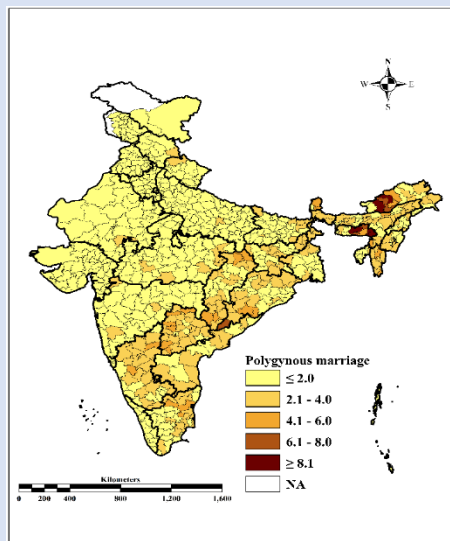
States	NFHS-III	NFHS-IV	NFHS-V	States	NFHS-III	NFHS-IV	NFHS-V
North				Manipur	2.4	3.2	2.3
Chandigarh	-	0.2	0.6	Meghalaya	4.6	3.8	6.1
Haryana	0.2	0.4	0.3	Mizoram	2.4	8.3	4.1
Himachal Pradesh	1.8	1.1	0.6	Nagaland	4.0	1.9	1.5
Jammu and Kashmir	1.3	1.2	0.4	Sikkim	5.6	4.5	3.9
Delhi	0.9	0.4	0.6	Tripura	2.0	1.4	1.6
Punjab	0.5	0.3	0.5	West			
Rajasthan	0.9	0.5	0.6	D&NH and D&D	-	1.5	0.7
Uttarakhand	2.1	1.3	0.8	Goa	1.0	0.3	0.2
Central				Gujarat	1.3	0.8	0.5
Chhattisgarh	2.1	2.4	2.0	Maharashtra	2.0	1.2	1.3
Madhya Pradesh	1.5	1.6	1.2	South			
Uttar Pradesh	1.0	0.9	0.9	Andaman and Nicobar Islands	-	2.0	0.5
East				Andhra Pradesh	3.0	2.4	2.0
Bihar	1.4	1.7	1.4	Karnataka	3.3	2.5	2.4
Jharkhand	2.4	1.7	2.2	Kerala	1.5	0.9	0.8
Odisha	2.8	2.4	2.2	Lakshadweep	-	1.4	0.5
West Bengal	2.5	2.0	1.8	Puducherry	-	1.6	2.4
North-East				Tamil Nadu	3.6	2.4	2.0
Arunachal Pradesh	6.9	4.7	3.7	Telangana	-	3.0	2.9
Assam	3.3	2.4	2.4	India	1.9	1.6	1.4

Table 2: Percent of currently married women who stated that their husbands had other wife/wives besides themselves by Top 40 Districts of India, NFHS-V, 2019-21.

State	District	Polygynous	State	District	Polygynous
Meghalaya	East Jantia Hills	20.0	Arunachal Pradesh	Lower Subansiri	5.0
Arunachal Pradesh	Kra Daadi	16.4	Odisha	Gajapati	4.9
Meghalaya	West Jaintia Hills	14.5	Arunachal Pradesh	Upper Subansiri	4.9
Meghalaya	West Khasi Hills	10.9	Tamil Nadu	Viluppuram	4.6
Arunachal Pradesh	East Kameng	10.2	Karnataka	Yadgir	4.6
Arunachal Pradesh	Papum Pare	6.9	Telangana	Mahabubnagar	4.6
Odisha	Malkangiri	6.6	Chhattisgarh	Dantewada	4.6
Arunachal Pradesh	Kurung Kumey	6.6	Sikkim	East District	4.6
Meghalaya	South West Khasi Hills	6.4	Telangana	Wanaparthy	4.5
Meghalaya	Ribhoi	6.2	Odisha	Rayagada	4.4
Chhattisgarh	Bijapur	5.9	Tamil Nadu	Perambalur	4.3
Mizoram	Aizawl	5.9	Assam	Biswanath	4.2
Meghalaya	East Khasi Hills	5.8	Assam	Karimganj	4.2
Telangana	Kamareddy	5.8	Sikkim	South District	4.1
Sikkim	North District	5.7	Tamil Nadu	Dharmapuri	4.1
Mizoram	Saiha	5.5	Chhattisgarh	Balrampur	4.0
Chhattisgarh	Surajpur	5.5	Telangana	Komaram Bheem Asifaba	4.0

Karnataka	Haveri	5.3	Chhattisgarh	Bastar	4.0
Telangana	Nirmal	5.1	Rajasthan	Chittaurgarh	4.0
Telangana	Medak	5.0	Madhya Pradesh	Anuppur	3.9

Figure 2: Percent of currently married women who stated that their husbands had other wife/wives besides themselves by Districts of India, NFHS-V



Polygynous marriages by religion

Religion was one of the most important factors in polygyny. The latest data (NFHS-V) shows that polygynous marriage was the higher among Muslims (1.9%), followed by others (1.6%) and the least among Hindus (1.3%). Polygyny among Hindus was more prevalent in Telangana, Odisha, and Tamil Nadu, and less prevalent in Jammu and Kashmir, Haryana, and Punjab according to NFHS-V (**Table 3**). Similarly, polygynous marriage among Muslims was high in Odisha, Assam, and West Bengal and low in Jammu and Kashmir, Maharashtra and Haryana. In communities other than Hindu and Muslim, polygynous marriages were more prevalent in Odisha and Telangana as per NFHS-V.

Table 3: Religious differentials in Polygyny by major states, NFHS-III to NFHS-V

Major states	NFHS-III			NFHS-IV			NFHS-V		
	Hindu	Muslim	Others	Hindu	Muslim	Others	Hindu	Muslim	Others
Haryana	0.2	0.8	0.0	0.4	1.3	0.2	0.3	0.8	0.6
Jammu and Kashmir	0.8	1.6	0.0	0.8	1.4	0.4	0.3	0.5	0.1
Delhi	0.8	2.0	0.0	0.3	1.2	0.0	0.5	1.7	0.0
Punjab	0.8	1.4	0.3	0.4	0.4	0.3	0.4	1.2	0.5
Rajasthan	0.9	1.6	0.0	0.5	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.8	0.9
Uttarakhand	2.2	1.4	0.8	1.2	1.6	0.0	0.7	1.5	0.0
Chhattisgarh	2.0	4.2	2.4	2.3	3.7	1.7	2.0	1.6	1.2
Madhya Pradesh	1.5	1.5	0.0	1.6	1.6	1.2	1.1	1.6	1.4
Uttar Pradesh	0.9	1.4	0.0	0.8	1.2	0.4	0.8	1.1	0.0
Bihar	1.3	1.9	0.0	1.5	2.8	0.0	1.3	2.2	1.8
Jharkhand	2.6	2.6	1.4	1.6	1.7	2.4	2.0	2.4	3.2
Odisha	2.8	9.1	0.0	2.3	4.4	4.0	2.1	3.9	4.2
West Bengal	2.1	3.8	2.0	1.6	2.8	3.6	1.4	2.8	2.3
Assam	2.1	6.9	1.3	1.8	3.6	0.9	1.8	3.6	1.8
Gujarat	1.2	1.9	3.7	0.7	1.1	1.6	0.5	0.7	0.0
Maharashtra	1.7	2.3	3.6	1.1	1.2	1.7	1.3	1.4	1.2
Andhra Pradesh	3.0	2.1	4.2	2.5	1.7	1.6	1.9	1.8	3.1
Karnataka	3.3	4.5	1.9	2.5	2.8	1.9	2.4	2.6	0.4
Kerala	1.0	2.7	0.8	0.6	1.7	0.5	0.5	1.5	0.3
Tamil Nadu	3.9	0.0	1.5	2.4	2.5	1.2	2.0	1.7	0.7
Telangana	-	-	-	3.1	2.2	4.8	3.0	2.1	4.1
India	1.9	2.9	2.9	1.4	2.1	3.2	1.3	1.9	1.6

Polygynous marriages by background characteristics

Among the caste groups, polygynous marriage was found to be most prevalent among the Scheduled Tribes compared to other groups and it declined over time in all the caste groups. Polygynous marriage was found to be highest among Scheduled tribe women and declined over time (3.1% as per NFHS-III compared to 2.4% in NFHS-V) followed by Scheduled caste women, 2.2% in NFHS-III compared to 1.5% in NFHS-V (**Table 4**). The practice of polygyny was more common among Buddhists (3.8%) and Muslims (2.6%) as per NFHS-III; while in NFHS-V, it was higher among other religions (2.5%), followed by Christians (2.1%) and Muslims (1.9%). Further, polygyny was more prevalent in rural areas than in urban areas.

Women from North-Eastern and Southern States were more likely to report polygyny. In NFHS-III, 3.3% and 3% of the currently married women in North-East and South India, respectively, reported being in polygynous marriages. As per NFHS-V, 2.6% of the women in the North-east and 2% in South India reported the same. Further, polygynous marriage was more prevalent among women who had no formal education than among those who had higher educational qualifications. Polygyny was most prevalent among the poorest women and women who had no formal education. Furthermore, polygynous marriages were higher among older women aged 35 years and above in all rounds of NFHS.

Table 4: Percent of currently married women who stated that their husbands had other wife/wives besides themselves by background characteristics, India, NFHS-III to NFHS-V

Background Characteristics	NFHS-III	NFHS-IV	NFHS-V	Background Characteristics	NFHS-III	NFHS-IV	NFHS-V
Caste				Educational level			
SC	2.2	1.7	1.5	No Education	2.7	2.5	2.4
ST	3.1	2.8	2.4	Primary	2.2	2.0	2.1
OBC	1.8	1.4	1.3	Secondary	1.0	0.9	0.9
Others	1.7	1.2	1.2	Higher	0.5	0.4	0.3
Religion				Wealth index			
Hindu	1.8	1.5	1.3	Poorest	2.4	2.3	2.4
Muslim	2.6	2.0	1.9	Poorer	2.5	2.1	1.8
Christian	2.4	2.0	2.1	Middle	2.4	1.6	1.5
Sikh	0.3	0.3	0.5	Richer	1.7	1.2	0.9
Buddhist	3.8	1.8	1.3	Richest	0.9	0.7	0.5
Others	1.7	2.7	2.5	Age at first Marriage			
Place of Residence				<18	2.1	1.6	1.4
Urban	1.6	1.2	0.9	18-20	1.6	1.3	1.2
Rural	2.1	1.7	1.6	>=21	1.8	1.8	1.7
Region				Age of women			
North	0.9	0.6	0.5	15-24	1.3	0.8	0.8
Central	1.2	1.2	1.1	25-34	1.9	1.4	1.2
East	2.2	1.9	1.7	35+	2.4	2.1	1.8
North-East	3.3	2.6	2.6				
West	1.7	1.0	1.0	Total	1.9	1.6	1.4
South	3.0	2.3	2.0				

Conclusions

Although polygynous marriage is not legal in India for any community other than Muslims, its practice still continues in some sections of the society in India. The study revealed that the prevalence of polygynous marriages in India was quite low, at 1.4% in 2019-21, and further declined over time. Overall, the prevalence of polygynous marriage was found to be higher in the North-Eastern region, followed by the Southern region of India. Higher prevalence of polygyny was reported from two North-Eastern states – Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh. The difference in polygynous marriages between Hindus and Muslims was 0.6% at the all India level. Overall, polygynous marriage was found to be higher among poor, uneducated, rural and older women. It indicated that socio-economic factors also played a role in this form of marriage in addition to region and religion. Before arriving at any conclusion based on the social, economic and demographic characteristics, one has to bear in mind that the prevalence of polygyny in India is low and it is fading away. Demographic, health and gender consequences of polygyny needs further probing.

International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS), Deonar, Mumbai-400088, Tel: 022-42372502

Vision “To position IIPS as a premier teaching and research institution in population sciences responsive to emerging national and global needs based on values of inclusion, sensitivity and rights protection.”

Mission “The Institute will strive to be a centre of excellence on all population and relevant issues through high quality education, teaching and research. This will be achieved by (a) creating competent professionals, (b) generating and disseminating scientific knowledge and evidence, (c) collaboration and exchange of knowledge, and (d) advocacy and awareness”