

Age at First Marriage for Husband and Wife between Muslim and Santal Communities in Rural Bangladesh: A Cross-Cultural Perspective

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Abstract—Age at first marriage is a basic temporal term that is culturally constructed for marriage relationship between an adult male and an adult female intended to have sex, to reproduce and to adapt to environment from one generation to another around the world. Cross-cultural evidences suggest that age at first marriage for both male and female not only varies across the cultures, but also varies among the subcultures of the same society. The purpose of the study was to compare age at first marriage for husband and wife including age differences between them between Muslim and Santal communities in rural Bangladesh. For this we hypothesized that (1) there were significant differences in age at first marriage and age interval between husband and wife between Muslim and Santal communities in rural Bangladesh. In so doing, 288 couples (145 pairs of couples for Muslim and 143 pairs of couples for Santal) were selected by cluster random sampling from the *Kalna* village situated in the *Tanore Upazila* of *Rajshahi* district, Bangladesh, whose current mean age range was 36.59 years for husband and 28.85 years for wife for the Muslim and 31.74 years for husband and 25.21 years for wife for the Santal respectively. The results of *Independent Sample t test* showed that mean age at first marriage for the Muslim samples was 23.05 years for husbands and 15.11 years for wives, while mean age at first marriage for the Santal samples was 20.71 years for husbands and 14.34 years for wives respectively that were significantly different at $p < 0.05$ level. Although husbands compared to wives in both the communities were relatively older, there were significant similarities in mean age differences (7.71 for Muslim couples and 7.51 for Santal, $p > 0.05$) among the selected husbands and wives between the two communities. This study recommends that further cross-cultural researches should be done on the cause-effect relationships between socio-cultural factors and age at marriage between the two communities in Bangladesh.

Keywords—Age at First Marriage, Age Difference at Marriage, Bangladesh, Cross-Cultural Comparison, Muslim, Santal.

I. INTRODUCTION

AGE at first marriage is a fundamental aspect to develop marriage relationship. Actually, marriage is a universal social institution [1, 2] through which an adult male and an adult female generally involves in marriage relationship and

acquires new social status as a husband and wife. The social status the husband and wife acquires goes through from institution to companionship [3] to meet reciprocal material, sexual, emotional, psychological and spiritual needs for their survival [4]. Social scientists argue that male-female relation through marriage norm is the first and foremost bond in human civilization; it is the foundation of all human bonds, because most of the cultures around the world prefer sexuality and reproduction in marital tie; it also makes legitimate children born. In addition, the social, emotional, material and protectional supports the marriage relationship provides for its members, especially husband and wife and their dependent children, other relationships cannot. Without these supports associated with marriage relationship human generation cannot survive and replace on the earth, and social, economic and cultural progression and transmission can not occur into the next generation [1-11]. This cross-cultural study focuses on age at first marriage and age interval in marriage relationship between Muslim and Santal communities in rural Bangladesh.

Age is a natural/ biological and temporal term that is culturally constructed for both the male and female for basic social purposes, such as marital sexuality, reproduction, and social obligations in every society in which they can adapt from one generation to another to their respective environment. Although researches on human growth and development suggest that age of puberty and sexual maturity for both the male and female all over the world are more or less the same in biological sense, for example, puberty in general begins at the average age 12 for female and 1/2 years latter for male from when primary and secondary sex organs for both the male and female gradually develop and with the progression of age, they both are matured enough to involve in sexual behavior, depending on emotional, cognitive and social maturity [12-16], a great deal of systematic *culture-specific* and/or *cross-cultural* data in social science literatures indicates that both age at first marriage and age interval between male and female in marriage relationship not only widely vary in world cultures, but also vary among the subcultures within the same society because of wide variations in socio-demographic statuses, technologies, including diversity in beliefs, norms, values, and attitudes towards marriage, marital sexuality, reproduction and adaptation

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strategies [1, 2, 11, 19, 21-43]. These relevant studies clearly indicate that the more developed and highly urbanized societies prefer delayed age at first marriage involving in long term education to build up career and to get a qualified job, to prevent high fertility and mortality, to improve health and environmental conditions and to balance between population and resources for proper adaptation, while in the developing and under developing or backward societies more early age at first marriage prevails. Most of the studies also indicate that although the men are likely to be older than the women in world cultures, there are marked differences in age interval between them in the world cultures: Age differences between men and women in the underdeveloped societies are higher than that in the developing than that in the developed ones.

Based on the assumptions several studies conducted by United Nations [1, 2] and others explored that in the developed regions mean age at first marriage was from 22 to 28 years for men and from 18 to 25 years for women, in the African and Asian regions as developing and underdeveloped nations it was around 25 years for men and 20 years for women, although early age at first marriage (under 17 years) for both men and women in some nations, such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Bhutan was prevalent, wherein mean age differences between men and women were up to 10 to 15 years compared to that 1-5 years in the developed regions. In another recent comparative study data derived from censuses, civil registers and survey reports United Nations [35] indicated that singulate mean age at first marriage was 22.8- 29.4 years for men and 19.5-25.5 years for women in Africa, 24.4- 28.4 years for men and 20.7-26 years for women in Asia, 25.2-29.3 years for men and 22.1-26.9 years for women in Europe, 30.8 years for men and 27.9 years for women in Caribbean, 25.2-30.5 years for men and 22.3-28.1 years for women in America, and 27.6 for men and 24.3 for women in Oceania respectively. Mean age difference between men and women in the America region was very low, 2.6 years compared to the Caribbean and Europe (both were 2.9 years) compared to the Asia, 3.0 years compared to the Africa region, 4.9 years. In line with United Nations' findings, Wikipedia [34] explored and presented more or less the same results about age at first marriage across the countries. According to Wikipedia [34] mean age at first marriage was from 22.6 years (in Mozambique) to 32 years (in Libya) for men and from 18 years (in both Chad and Mozambique) for women in Africa, from 21 years (in Bangladesh) to 31.8 years (in Taiwan) for men and from 16 years (in Bangladesh) to 28.8 years (in Hong Kong) in Asia, from 23.5 years (in Mexico) to 34.3 years (in Canada) for men and 22.7 years (in Brazil) to 31.7 years (in Canada) for women in Americas, 29.2 years (in New Zealand) to 30.6 years (in Australia) for men in Oceania, and 25 years (in both Moldova and Ukraine) to 35.3 years (in Greece) for men and 22 years (in Moldova) to 30.4 years (in Sweden) in Europe. Several researches' findings [35-43] in developing and under-developed countries on age at first marriage were earlier for both men and women and age differences between husband and wife in their marital union

were higher than that in the developed cultures, mentioned above. In one cross-cultural study Quisumbing and Hallman [33] found that mean age at first marriage for husbands in Guatemala (22.6 years) was earlier than in Mexico (23.3 years) than in Bangladesh (23.8 years) than in Philippines (25.1 years) than in Ethiopia (26.3 years) than in South Africa (28.5 years), while the mean age at first marriage for wives in Bangladesh (15 years) was earlier than other selected developing countries, such as 17.9 years in Ethiopia, 18.4 years in Mexico, 19.9 years in Guatemala, 22.2 years in Philippines and 23.2 in South Africa.

Marriage in Bangladesh is a universal social institution that plays many important roles to organize a marital union to meet sexual and human needs for proper human development and adjustment across the generations, as are many developing and under-developed patriarchal societies around the world. The main stream of Bangladeshi culture always prefers marital sexuality and never permit premarital, extramarital and homosexuality, although rare cases secretly exist in those sexual behaviors in both rural and urban communities as well as in different sub-cultural groups [44-47, 49]. The relevant studies [49, 66-68] reveal that marriage as a social institution is shaped by patriarchal system through which marital tie between a male and a female is developed based on perception of male and female's biological maturity and psycho-sexual behavior. Without marital tie a man and woman cannot, generally, consume sex and cannot maintain their intimate relation. In addition, the children are born outside the marital tie are called illegitimate.

State's legal provision on minimum age at first marriage in Bangladesh generally is minimum 18 years for female and 22 years for male to access in marriage relationship. Although periodical research reports indicate that singulate mean age at first marriage is gradually increasing ranged from 24.9 years men and 19.1 years for women in 1991 [35] to 25.4 years for men and 19.4 years for women in 2007 [59] due to changes in socio-economic status, especially among the middle and upper class families in both rural and urban areas [44-59], several *culture-specific* [45-47, 50-59,61-65] reveal that most of the lower class families irrespective subcultures in both rural and urban areas generally expect early age at marriage and high age difference between husband and wife in marriage relation due to prevail low socio-economic status, traditional and customary way of life, dowry and virginity for women, and maintenance of family responsibility, integration and continuation. In a cross-cultural study Sarker [49] found that Muslims compared to Hindu married earlier in rural villages. In another cross-cultural study Uddin [60] found that Muslim couples' age at marriage compared to Santal couples were higher in rural Bangladesh. This study also indicated that age difference between husband and wife was lower than that between the Santal husband and wife in this study area. However, cross-cultural studies conducted in abroad suggest that there are wide cultural variations in age at first marriage, including age difference between husband and wife. But in Bangladesh there is a paucity of specific cross-cultural data on

age at first marriage and age difference between husband and wife among various religious and ethnic communities, especially between Muslim and Santal communities, although marriage rates, mean age at marriage for both male and female associated with fertility trends across the ethnic community are more or less available. So, the present study examines and compares age at first marriage and age difference between husband and wife to enter into marital life between Muslim and Santal communities in rural Bangladesh. The findings of the cross-cultural study on age at marriage and age difference between husband and wife not only will contribute to social and demographic sciences in world cultures, but also will add synthetic knowledge to Bangladesh's sub-cultural variations.

II. BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

Background

Bangladesh is an agrarian economy based rural country where various religious and ethnic communities, especially Muslim and Santal, live in the same geographical location, and involve in the historical and social processes for livelihood. The **Muslim** community in Bangladesh is the major dominant religious community; ethnically, they are *Sunni*; physically they are mixture of different stocks, having common ordinary folks with the long traditions of beliefs and ideas. They speak in *Bengali* language with the mixture of *Arabic-Urdu* preference; religiously, they believe in Islam which includes the oneness of God or Monotheism (*Tawhid*), Holy Qur'an as His Devine laws and principles, Muhammad (sm) as His nominated last Prophet and his *Hadith (Sunnah)* as practices of sayings. A man who believes in Monotheism, Qur'an and Hadith is called Muslim [44-49, 60, 66-68]. On the other hand, the **Santal** community in this country is the largest tribal group of Aborigines. Racially, they belong to *Proto-Australoid* stocks and speak in *Austriac-Mundary*, and sometimes they speak in *Bengali* version with the other *Bengali*-speaking people. They believe in several *Bongas*. A man who believes in several *Bongas* is called a Santal. The Santal in Bangladesh believe in animism, which includes worships of nature [63-65].

Traditionally, conjugal life in Bangladesh begins at time when respective parents or elder members arrange their marriage according to communities' norms. This relationship between a man and a woman is relatively enduring relationship involving in economic cooperation, and allowing exclusive sexual relationship leading to sexual satisfaction and to child bearing and rearing. Both the Muslim and Santal communities are patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal in nature. Although both cultures permit *polygyny*, permit sororate and levirate, widow or widower' remarriage, they widely practice monogamy or serial monogamy, the Muslims practice more polygyny than the Santal, because Islamic rules or Sunna, guide Muslim males to take up to four wives at a time, depending on the situations [54-56, 68, 69]. Both communities follow *endogamy*, and *exogamy*; the Muslims are religiously endogamous and class, lineage exogamous, but the

Santal are tribal endogamous and clan exogamous [65-67]. Although both the communities prefer *contracted marriage*, the Santal widely practice romantic marriage than the Muslim. According to Islamic rules before marriage an adult male and an adult female cannot meet together, because it is sinful [49].

In rural Bangladesh, about 76% of the peoples irrespective of all communities live in subsistent economy in which most of them are poor. Minority groups such as Santal are the poorest of the poor. One report indicates that 53% of the rural people are poor and there are 55 millions food insecure households and 62% of the adults are illiterate [69, p. 3]. Although main occupation of the rural villagers is agriculture, man-land ratio is very low and many of them are landless or near the landless due to law of inheritance, land fragmentation and over-population. Some reports indicate that about 62% of the rural households are functionally landless [69, 70]. In this subsistent economy, division of labor between men and women, especially adult men and women varies enormously between the Muslim and Santal communities. Both Santal adult men and women take part in agriculture and any other fields and work outside the family from dawn to dusk as manual laborers [63-65]. On the other hand, division of labor between adult men and women in Muslim community is strictly maintained according to sex norms. The Muslims think adult men are only breadwinner of the family. So the Muslim men have to work in agricultural field and other economic sectors. Generally, Muslim women do not work on the agricultural field and do not go outside the family alone. Their main functions are to bear and rear children, maintain family chores, serve family members, although women in the lower class families work outside the family under economic pressure for family maintenance [46-49, 60, 71] and other reports indicate that the vast majority of Muslim women in Bangladesh are not only poor and are confined in four walls in the household, but also depend on three pillars of their supports: on father, husband and son in their life cycle. These fundamental belief and male-female relations in the socio-economic status systems of the communities may influence age at first marriage for husband and wife and age differences between them in marriage relationship in rural Bangladesh context [49].

a. Age at First Marriage for Husband

Age at first marriage for males depends on their socio-cultural status and environment in which they live. Relevant culture-specific [44-48, 51-59] and even cross-cultural research reports [49, 60] indicate that mean age at first marriage for males differs from rural to urban residence. It also differs from one class to another and even from one ethnic community to another within this country. For example, in one village study, 140 samples Sarker [49] found that mean age at first marriage for husband was 22.2 years. In another study, including 3152 samples ICDDR, B [57] found that mean at first marriage was 26.7 years for all husbands. Sultana [65] in her culture-specific study found that mean age at first marriage for husband was 19.9 years. In a recent cross-

cultural study Uddin [60] found that mean age at first marriage of Muslim husbands (22.9 years) was higher than the Santal husbands (20.7 years) in rural Bangladesh.

b. Age at First Marriage for Wife

Age at first marriage for females in a society is also influenced by their socio-cultural status and environmental situation in which they live. Several cross-cultural studies [72, 73] conducted in America evidenced that people from economically disadvantaged families tended to marry earlier compared with those from advantaged families, women living in non-metropolitan regions married at younger ages compared with women in metropolitan region, and non-White women compared with White women entered into marriage at younger ages. In a cross-cultural study in India Sheela & Audinarayana [38] found that mean age at first marriage of Muslim women aged 13-49 was earlier, 17.7 years compared to Hindu women, 17.6 years compared to Christian women, 20.5 years. Based on in-depth interview with 65 women, age ranges from 20 to 49 in three villages of northern Bangladesh Schuler *et al.* [54] found that mean age at first marriage was 14.2 years for the samples. Including 140 samples, Sarker [49] found that mean age at first marriage for wives was 14.8 years. With reference to BDHS's studies Kamal indicated that mean age at first marriage for women among the lower class families was 15 years in Barisal, 15.6 years in Chittagong, 14.9 years in Dhaka, 14.5 years in Khulna, 14.2 years in Rajshahi and 15.9 years in Sylhet division. In another study, including 3152 samples ICDDR, B [57] found that mean at first marriage was 19.5 years for all wives. Sultana [65] in a culture-specific study found that mean age at marriage wife was 16.1 years. In a recent cross-cultural study Uddin [60] found that mean age at first marriage of Muslim wives (15.1 years) was higher than the Santal wives (14.1 years) in rural Bangladesh.

c. Age Difference between Husband and Wife at Marriage

Although with the progression of socio-economic status overall mean age difference between husband and wife in Bangladesh is decreasing ranged from 7.2 years in 1981 [1] to 6.8 in 1991 [35], several studies indicate that age difference between husband and wife is still high in the rural poor and tribal families in Bangladesh. Sarker [49] in his village study found that age difference between husband and wife at marriage was about 8 years. Sultana [65] found that mean age difference between husband and wife in the Santal community was around 10 years. Uddin [60] found that mean age difference at marriage among the Muslim couples was 8.0 years compared to 9.89 years among the Santal Couples in a village of Bangladesh. Based on relevant literatures review, mentioned- above, the present study hypothesized that there were significant differences in age at marriage including age differences between husband and wife between the Muslim and Santal communities in rural Bangladesh. The specific hypotheses drawn in this study are as follows:

Hypothesis 1: There are significant differences in age at first marriage for husbands between the Muslim and Santal communities in rural Bangladesh;

Hypothesis 2: There are significant differences in age at first marriage for wives between the Muslim and Santal communities in rural Bangladesh;

Hypothesis 3: Husbands compared to wives are relatively older in both the communities;

Hypothesis 4: Age differences among the Muslim couples are higher than that among the Santal couples in rural villages of Bangladesh.

B. Methodology

a. Sample

Field work for this study was conducted from January to June, 2006. In so doing the village *Kalna*, situated in the *Talonda* union of *Tanore Upazila, Rajshahi* district, Bangladesh, was purposefully selected where two distinct cultural communities: Muslim and Santal were living as neighbors in the same geographical setting. In this study village there were about 380 eligible couples: 200 couples were Muslim's and the rest of them were Santal's. In order to compare age at first marriage and age difference between husband and wife in marriage relationship between Muslim and Santal communities, two separate sampling units of the communities' husbands and wives were developed: one for Muslim and another for Santal. Each community was considered as a cluster and every husband or every wife of both the cluster community was accounted for as a study unit. Based on preliminary investigation 576 samples (145 husbands and 145 wives, 72.5% for the Muslim cluster and 143 husbands and 143 wives, 79.44% for the Santal cluster) were randomly selected through cluster random sampling. The selected husbands and wives for each cluster sample who were the first time marriage and actively participated in the study, age ranged from 16 to 60 years for husband and from 11 to 50 years for wife.

b. Variable and Measure

In measurement of *age at first marriage* for both husband and wife and *age interval* in marriage relationship, most of the researchers defined the terms as timing norms based on either state's legal or religious or social customary laws and measured in years applying self-report, interview and survey method to collect reliable and valid data [1, 2, 11, 21, 33, 40, 42, 44, 48, 54, 60]. The present study defined and measured the relevant terms: Age at first marriage and age difference used in this cross-cultural study were defined as timing norms and measured in years based on the Muslim and Santal community's customary social norms and practices in rural villages, although minimum legal age at first marriage for both male and female in Bangladesh was present. Especially, *Age at First Marriage* was defined as the timing or age at which both male and female enter into marriage and their marital union was formed and assessed in years [1, 2, 35]. *Age Difference* in marriage relationship was defined as the timing

of biological age interval between husband and wife and accounted based on birth day that was assessed in years [1, 2, 35]. In addition, the Muslim and Santal community's couples and their socio-economic status background factors were measured because the selected couples' age at first marriage and age difference between them were embedded. In measurement of background factors, such as *Community* was nominally measured and coded as 1= Muslim, and 2= Santal. *Family type* was nominally measured and coded as 1= Nuclear Family and 2= Joint (Extended) Family. *Education* was numerically measured in years. *Occupation* was nominally measured and coded as 1= Farming, 2= Small business, 3= Day laboring and 4= Van pulling. *Yearly total income* was numerically measured in Taka (1 US\$ = 68 Bangladesh Taka in currency exchange).

c. Instrument and Procedure

Study design used in this study was cross-cultural one which explored and compared quantitative (objective) aspects of age at first marriage for both husband and wife and age difference in their marital tie for valid comparison. For this 576 respondents (husbands and wives) selected from both the communities were singly and personally interviewed with questionnaire schedule that was designed with open-ended and close-ended questions, following Mitra & Kamal's [45], Mitra's et al. [48] instruments, and *Family Measurement in India* edited by S. Bharat [74] and other researchers' questionnaires [52-58] to collect raw data on the indicators of age at first marriage and age difference, including their socio-cultural status. These aspects of age at first marriage and age difference were measured at the ordinal and ratio scales.

In order to collect real and valid data through interview method with questionnaire schedule on the age at first marriage and age difference in culturally restricted community, as was in the Muslim and Santal community in Bangladesh, several strategies were followed: (1) the author built up rapport with the respondents of the communities' samples to create consciousness about the research purposes and objectives and it continued until the completion of data collection in order to establish research reliability and validity; (2) As age was sensitive issue, because two or three decades ago birth and marital registrations were not well established and many of them irrespective men and women reported false age on their birth and marriage [75], so age at first marriage and age difference in marital bond were carefully examined and explored; (3) As Muslim women could not interact with the male interviewer, so one female interviewer, who was trained up on the research issue, worked with female respondents and male interviewer (author himself) collected data from the male respondents. First month of the research period was used to build up rapport with the respondents and second month was worked for preliminary investigation intended to select samples and the next 4 months were used for real data collection with the questionnaire method.

d. Data Analysis

According to our central research objective, including 4 research hypotheses, the collected data were analyzed by descriptive statistics, focusing frequency distribution on the age at first marriage for both husband and wife, including age difference between them between the Muslim and Santal communities and then significance test, especially *Independent Sample T Test* was applied to explore differences on the examined variables between the communities. Results on the variables were presented by cross-tabulation, although the results of socio-cultural background factors of the samples were not analyzed and tabulated.

III. RESULTS

Most of the couples in the study village lived in nuclear family (95% for Muslim and 80% for Santal respectively) and the rest of them were in extended family. Although main occupation of the respondents was cultivation, most of them had no land property (30% for Muslim and 86% for Santal respectively) and many of them were marginal farmers. Although master occupation was agriculture, 66% of the Muslim husbands and only 14% of the Santal husbands engaged in farming. Others adopted petty trade, day laboring (7% for Muslim and 85% for Santal). On the other hand, cent percent of the Muslim women were housewives and the Santal women were both housewives and day laborers. In education most of the respondents were totally illiterate, although some respondents completed their primary and secondary education. In yearly family income, most of the families earned from 10 to TK. 20 thousands. (31% for Muslim and 80% for Santal); 27% of the Muslim and 16% of the Santal earned TK.21-30 thousands, and about 40% of the Muslim and 3% of the Santal families were 31-50 and above thousands. However, family income of the Muslim families, however, was higher than that of the Santal families. In such socio-economic background age at first marriage for husband and wife, and age difference between them at marital tie for both the communities are given below:

A. Age at First Marriage for Husband

Table 1 represents data on age at first marriage for husband for both the communities. Data clearly suggest that age at first marriage for the Santal husbands was earlier than that the Muslim husbands, at 15 and below age about 17% of the Santal husbands were married, while no Muslim's husband did marry at that age. In 16-20, 21-25 and 26-30 age group frequency of the Muslim husbands' marriage was higher than that the Santal husbands', although at 30 and above age frequency of the Santal husbands' marriage (9.79%) was slightly higher than that the Muslim husbands' (8.28%). Figure 1 suggests the same linear direction result presented with cumulative percent about husbands' age at first marriage in both communities. Actually, the results of Independent Samples t test presented in table 4, column 1 reveal that mean age at first marriage of the Muslim husbands (Mean=23.05, SD=6.96) was higher than that the Santal

husbands (Mean=20.71, SD=5.81), that was significantly different in access to marital life between the communities (F=0.39, P-value=0.53, t=3.08, df=286, P-value=0.00) at p<0.05 level.

TABLE I
FREQUENCY OF AGE AT FIRST MARRIAGE FOR HUSBAND BY MUSLIM (N=145) AND SANTAL (N=143), KALNA VILLAGE, BANGLADESH, 2006

| Timing of First Marriage for Husband in Year | Muslim | | Santal | |
|--|-----------|-------|-----------|-------|
| | Frequency | % | Frequency | % |
| >15 | - | - | 24 | 16.78 |
| 16-20 | 61 | 42.7 | 52 | 36.36 |
| 21-25 | 52 | 35.86 | 43 | 30.07 |
| 26-30 | 20 | 13.79 | 10 | 6.10 |
| 30 < | 12 | 8.28 | 14 | 9.79 |
| Total | 145 | 100 | 143 | 100 |

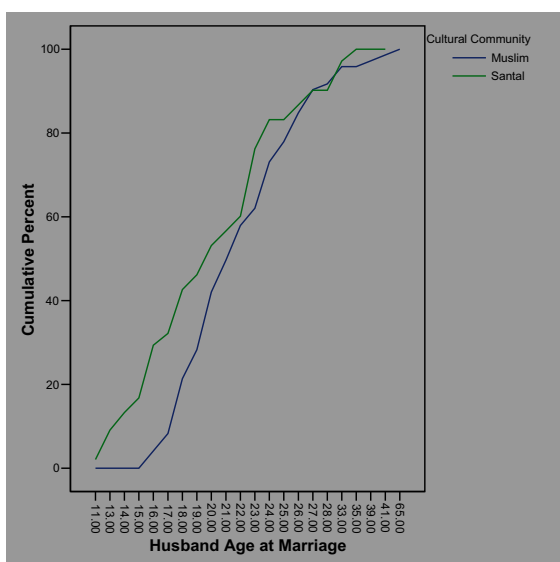


Fig. 1 Cumulative frequency for Husband's Age at First Marriage by Muslim (n=145) and Santal (n=143), Kalna Village, Bangladesh, 2006

B. Age at First Marriage for Wife

In 15 and below age group about 63% of the Santal wives were married, while 59.31% of the Muslim wives did marry in that age group. In 16-20 age group frequency of marriage of the Muslim wives (34.48%) were slightly higher than that the Santal wives (30.77%), although in 21 and above age group frequency of marriage of the Santal wives (6.29%) was slightly higher than that the Muslim wives (6.21%). Figure 2 suggests the linear direction result presented with cumulative percent about wives' age at first marriage in both communities. The results of Independent Samples t test presented in table 4, column 2 reveal that although mean age at first marriage for the Muslim wives (Mean=15.11, SD=3.55) was higher than that the Santal wives (Mean=14.34, SD=4.10), there was significant similarity to enter into marital life (F=6.87, P-value=0.01, t=1.69, df=286, P-value=0.09) between the communities at p<0.05 level in the study village.

TABLE II
FREQUENCY OF AGE AT FIRST MARRIAGE FOR WIFE BY MUSLIM (N=145) AND SANTAL (N=143), KALNA VILLAGE, BANGLADESH, 2006

| Timing of First Marriage for Wife in Year | Muslim | | Santal | |
|---|-----------|-------|-----------|-------|
| | Frequency | % | Frequency | % |
| <15 | 86 | 59.31 | 90 | 62.94 |
| 16-20 | 50 | 34.48 | 44 | 30.77 |
| 21-25 | 6 | 4.14 | 9 | 6.29 |
| 26> | 3 | 2.07 | - | - |
| Total | 145 | 100 | 143 | 100 |

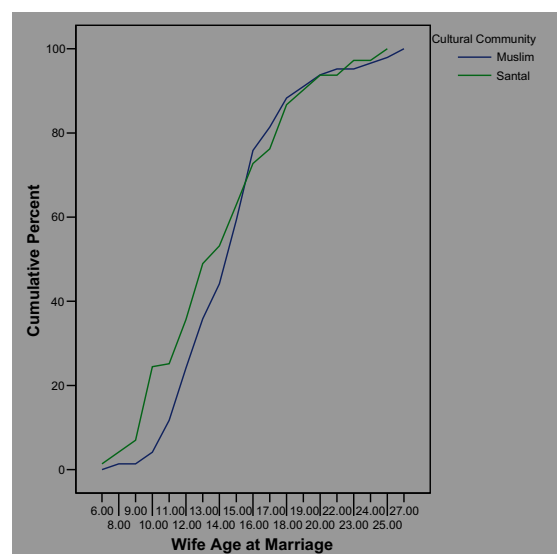


Fig. 2 Cumulative frequency for Wife's Age at First Marriage by Muslim (n=145) and Santal (n=143), Kalna Village, Bangladesh, 2006

C. Age Difference between Husband and Wife at Marriage

Table 3 shows data on age interval of husbands and wives between the two communities. Data in the table reveal that age difference between husbands and wives are slightly different. That is in the range of 1-5 years age difference frequency of minimum age interval between the Santal husband and wife (43.36%) was higher than that the Muslim ones (33.79%), while the frequency of maximum age difference ranged from 6 years and above the Muslim between husband and wife (66.21%) was higher than the maximum age difference between husband and wife of the Santal (56.64%). Figure 3 shows the same linear direction result presented with cumulative percent about age difference between husband and wife in both communities. In addition, results of Independent Samples t-test show that there were significant similarities in age difference between husband and wife of the communities [Mean=7.71 and SD=4.36 for Muslim, Mean=7.51 and SD=4.15 for Santal (F=.12, P-value=0.73, t=.39, df=286, P-value=0.69] at p>0.05 level.

TABLE III
FREQUENCY OF AGE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN HUSBAND AND WIFE BY MUSLIM (N=145) AND SANTAL (N=143), KALNA VILLAGE, BANGLADESH, 2006

| Age Difference in Year | Muslim | | Santal | |
|------------------------|-----------|-------|-----------|-------|
| | Frequency | % | Frequency | % |
| 1-5 | 49 | 33.79 | 62 | 43.36 |
| 6-10 | 82 | 56.55 | 71 | 49.65 |
| 11-15 | 8 | 5.52 | - | - |
| 16-20 | 2 | 1.38 | 10 | 6.99 |
| 20 + | 4 | 2.76 | - | - |
| Total | 145 | 100 | 143 | 100 |

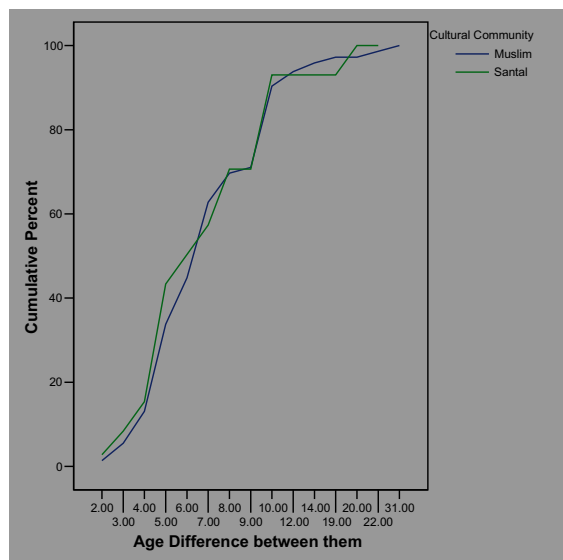


Fig. 3 Cumulative frequency of Age Differences between Husband and Wife by Muslim (n=145) and Santal (n=143), Kalna Village, Bangladesh, 2006

TABLE IV
RESULTS OF INDEPENDENT SAMPLE T-TEST ON HUSBAND'S AND WIFE'S AGE AT FIRST MARRIAGE AND AGE DIFFERENCE AT MARITAL TIE BY MUSLIM AND SANTAL, KALNA VILLAGE, BANGLADESH, 2006

| Test of Variables | Levene's Test for Homogeneity of Variances | | | | T-test for Equality of Means | |
|-------------------|--|--------------|------|---------|------------------------------|---------|
| | Mean | SD | F | p-value | t | P-value |
| For Husband | M:23.05 S:20.71 | 6.96 5.81 | 0.39 | 0.53 | 3.08 | 0.00* |
| For Wife | M:15.11 S:14.34 | 3.55 4.10 | 6.87 | 0.01* | 1.69 | 0.09** |
| Age Difference | M:7.71 S:7.51 | 4.36 4.15 | 0.12 | 0.73 | 0.39 | 0.69** |

Note: M (Muslim, N=145 for Husband and 145 for Wife), S (Santal, N=143 for Husband and 143 for Wife), df= 286, * p<0 .05, ** p>0 .05 level.

IV. DISCUSSION

Purpose of the study was to explore and compare age at first marriage and age difference in marriage relationship among the Muslim and Santal couples in rural Bangladesh. For the research purpose, we hypothesized that (1) there were significant difference in age at first marriage for husbands between the Muslim and Santal communities in rural Bangladesh; (2) There were significant difference in age at

first marriage for wives between the Muslim and Santal communities in rural Bangladesh; (3) Husbands compared to wives were relatively older in both the communities; (4) Age difference among the Muslim couples higher than that among the Santal couples in rural villages of Bangladesh. In order to examine hypotheses 288 couples (145 couples or 72.5% from the Muslim and 143 couples or 79.44% from the Santal) from the village *Kalna* of *Talonda* union of *Tanore Upazila, Rajshahi* district, Bangladesh, were randomly selected through cluster random sampling, whose age ranged from 16 to 60 years for husband and from 11 to 50 years for wife in which most of them were in middle ages. The selected couples were interviewed with questionnaire method by the author, including one female data collector. The findings of *Independent Samples t-test* independently suggested that there were significant differences in age at first marriage for husbands and age at first marriage for wives and age difference between husband and wife between the Muslim and Santal communities were significantly similar, although the husbands compared to their wives were relatively older in both the communities. However, the findings of the present study confirm the first and third hypothesis determined between Muslim and Santal couples in rural Bangladesh.

Age at first marriage for husbands and wives, including age difference in this study was the comparison area between the Muslim and Santal communities in rural Bangladesh. The results of the study revealed that mean age at first marriage for husbands (Mean=20.71 years) and wives (Mean= 14.34 years) in the Santal culture was earlier than that the husbands (Mean= 23.05 years) and wives (Mean= 15.11 years) in the Muslim culture in the study village. In addition, mean age difference between husband and wife in the communities was slightly different, 7.71 years for Muslim and 7.51 years for Santal respectively. The results of Independent Samples t-test suggested that although mean age at first marriage for husbands was significantly different, the wives' mean age at first marriage and mean age difference between husband and wife was significantly similar between the two communities. The findings of the study are supported by United Nations' [1, 2, 35], Harpending's [21], Wikipedia's [34], and many other studies conducted in developing and under-developed cultures [33-42], including Bangladesh [45, 48, 53-60]. Based on socio-cultural perspective United Nations' [1, 2] studies revealed that the societies were socio-culturally more developed, where both male and female married later due to involve in higher education and career development to get valuable jobs, while both the male and female in the developing and especially under-developing societies married more earlier due to prevail low socio-economic status, traditional technologies for production, parental positive attitude towards early marriage, especially illiteracy, , low life expectancy at birth and child labor or early involvement in livelihood for family maintenance [72, 73].

Based on evolutionary perspective, specially, Buss [10, 11] argues that natural selection has produced males and females who attract each other for reproductive success and

resource distribution to protect them and their offspring. According to Buss, the females who are young are attracted by males, whereas the males who possess sufficient resource to protect them are attracted by the females. These different strategies used by our distant ancestors may explain today's sex differences in mate selection. In cross-cultural perspective Buss [11] and others [17, 18, 20- 24] explore that females place the highest value on cues that indicate a males' resource acquisition (earning, capacity, industriousness, maturity etc.), while males most value on females' reproductive capacity (youth, health and attractiveness). Social psychologists [12, 13, 17, 32] also explain it based on equity theory and feminist perspective. According to them, potential partners seek an equitable "bargain" when they form a relationship. As most societies today are patriarchal, males (especially older males) most likely hold authority to control monetary resources that are traded in the market place to utilizing females' youth and beauty. From this perspective the findings of across cultures and times simply reflect the ability of relatively wealthy males to attract young, attractive and relatively less wealthy female partners. If these same sex differences in age preferences are also found in the matriarchal cultures where women hold economic and political power, evolutionary theory would be strongly supported; reverse findings would be consistent with equity theory and feminist perspective.

V. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Marriage is a universal institution to enter into marriage relationship intended to meet sexual and reproductive needs, to control sexual drive and to adapt to environment in Bangladesh, as are in many other cultures around the world. For these social purposes, some subcultures of Bangladesh, such as rural community, in general, and tribal ethnic groups, in particular, prefer more early age at first marriage for both male and female and more age differences in marital relationship compared to urban community and affluent class who support delayed age at first marriage for both male and female. The present study explored age at first marriage for both husband and wife including their age difference in marital relation between Muslim and Santal communities in rural Bangladesh. The findings of the study suggested the Santal culture compared to Muslim culture practiced more early age at first marriage for both male and female in rural subsistent economy. Although men in both cultures were older than women, age differences among the Muslim couples were higher than that in the Santal couples. However, the findings of the study may add and contribute new knowledge to the social and demographic literatures in world cultures, including Bangladesh. Based on the findings social policy and program may be undertaken to delay age at first marriage for the prospective husbands and wives, especially for women in both the communities in rural Bangladesh [39], because many of the relevant studies reveal that both early age at first marriage for both male and female and higher age difference in conjugal life influenced by socio-cultural factors: Ethnicity,

religion, socio-economic status, family structure have social, biological, cognitive and emotional consequences on proper and successful human adaptation to respective environment [33, 34, 36-43, 52-58]. So, future cross-cultural studies should be done on cause-effect relations of age at marriage and age difference in marital bond in Bangladesh.

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