



Gender Imbalance, Marriage Squeeze and Multiple Biological Clocks: Exploring Challenges to the Intergenerational Contract in North India

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Abstract

This paper maps the impact of gender imbalance on intergenerational relations in north India. It uses the idea of multiple biological clocks to understand the impact that gender imbalance and male marriage squeeze have on two categories of persons: “overage” unmarried sons and their aging parents, and the inter-generational contract between them within the family-household. De-linking the idea of the biological clock from the female body, this paper demonstrates that social understandings of bodily progression are equally significant for men, who, in the Indian context, need to marry by a certain age, and their elderly parents who need to be cared for. In north India, where family-household unit is the most important welfare and security institution for the elderly, disruptions to household formation due to bride shortage caused by sex ratio imbalance, is subjecting families to severe stress. Families with unmarried sons struggle with anxieties centred on the inability to arrange marriages for aging sons, questions of allocation of household labor, the continuation of family line, and lack of care for the elderly. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in north India, this paper explores the tensions and negotiations between elderly parents and unmarried sons concerning the fulfillment (or lack of it) of the intergenerational contract against the backdrop of gender imbalance. It concludes by discussing the various strategies available to families in crisis that involve shame-faced adoption of domestic and care tasks by unmarried sons or bringing cross-region brides who then provide productive, reproductive, and care labour.

Keywords: Intergenerational Contract; Marriage Squeeze; Aging; Biological Clock

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Introduction

This paper illustrates the impact of a demographic gender imbalance on the social life cycle of individuals, families, and generations in north India, a region known for historically long-standing skewed sex-ratios (Arokiaswamy 2004; Kaur 2008; Visaria 2004). In particular, it focuses on the renegotiation of the intergenerational contract and gender roles in the context of skewed sex ratios and consequent male marriage squeeze¹ in the north Indian state of Haryana. In doing so, this paper posits the idea of multiple biological clocks, affecting different members of a co-resident family unit, who belong to different genders and age groups, yet are interdependent. The notion of multiple biological clocks takes into account a broader view of age in the life cycle, to focus on social understandings of bodily progression that define not only the timely occurrence of rites of passage, such as marriage and childbirth, but also age specific expectations of care and support.

This approach is unique in two ways. First, the idea of multiple biological clocks marks a departure from a gendered conception of the biological clock as centring on the reproductive body of the female (Friese *et al.* 2006). Equated with an “alarm clock,” the discourse on the biological clock has long been warning women that their bodies are on a course of reproductive decline and that their “time (to have babies) is running out.” Critiquing this linkage of the notion of biological clocks solely to reproduction in females, this paper extends the concept to include not only unmarried “overage” men—who fail to marry and reproduce by socially appropriate ages—but also their elderly parents, both fathers and mothers, who need more care and support as they age, but are often unable to get it. Second, this approach also shifts the focus from an individual to the household of co-resident members who are related through kinship and marriage links. In the Indian context, multigenerational households remain common (Shah 1999) and are the most important institution for the circulation of care and support for the young and old (Gangopadhyay and Samanta 2017). The focus on family-household units helps us illustrate how biological clocks of different categories of persons—unmarried sons and aging parents—do not simply operate in isolation but often interact with each other. For both groups, the anxieties around their ticking biological clocks and futures are getting exacerbated in the context of severe gender imbalance and bride shortage.

The cultural practice of son-preference, rapid fertility decline, and rampant use of sex-selective technologies have led to a demographic imbalance of genders in the northern and north-western part of India (Guilmoto 2012; Kaur 2016; Miller 2001). This is adversely impacting the marriage market where there are many more males than females in the marriageable age groups, a phenomenon referred to as male marriage squeeze. Several scholars have calculated the extent of marriage squeeze for India. Guilmoto (2012) predicts that in India, the total number of men remaining single between 2020 and 2080 will be closer to 40 million. Kaur *et al.* (2015) show that the proportion of permanent bachelors in female

deficit states will go up from 3.7 to 8.1 percent between 2015 and 2050. A similar rising trend of 'involuntary/forced bachelorhood' in north India has also been documented in several ethnographic studies (Chaudhry and Mohan 2011, 2018; Kaur 2004; Mishra 2013). These 'surplus men,' on an average, are usually above 30 years of age, from rural poor families, with limited educational and income prospects, and have less favourable physical and personal attributes in the marriage market (Mishra 2018). Existing research shows that in hypergamous systems, men at the lower rungs of the socio-economic hierarchy are worst affected by marriage squeeze as women marry upwards (Bossen 2007; Eklund 2013).

Given the practice of arranged marriage and lack of other forms of cohabitation, marriage for most Indians marks the transition to social adulthood and provides them with the legitimacy to start their own families. But involuntary bachelors (henceforth, unmarried men) are denied these social milestones even as their biological clock keeps ticking. Non-marriage of adult males also has varied consequences for their aging parents and the inter-generational relations between the two groups. This brings us to another crucial aspect of aging which is the demand and provision of care, for both elderly men and women, in the families affected by marriage-squeeze.

Family, in India, continues to be the most important social institution for elderly and childcare in the absence of institutional care structures. Under patrilineal family systems, daughters-in-law are expected to provide old age care for the elderly parents of their husbands (Allendorf 2017; Bhat and Dhruvarajan 2001; Dharmalingam 1994; Dey 2016; Kaur 2008; Shah 1999). Daughters move away to join their husband's family and, unless their brothers marry and bring home wives, the household becomes male biased with a single lone aging female left to take care of it. Thus, the marriage squeeze, or the inability of many men to marry, places the care circulation within the family-household under severe strain. The situation is further aggravated with increased longevity of life.

In Haryana, the life expectancy at birth for males and females stands at 67.6 and 72.3 respectively for the reference period 2013-2017, rising from 59.0 and 55.6 in 1970-75 (Sample Registration Survey 2019). With the older adults living longer, care-giving demands are increasing, but there are far fewer women on whom generally the social expectation of care provision rests. Thus, in a society marked by gender imbalance, concerns around both aspects of the biological clock—the need to marry at an appropriate age and longer life spans requiring an extended period of old age care—need to be managed afresh.

Situated against this backdrop, this paper explains how the demographic imbalance in north India is affecting individuals, families, and intergenerational dynamics within the family. In particular, it uses the concept of intergenerational contracts (Croll 2006; Kabeer 2000) to explore the changes in the relationship between matured unmarried sons and their aging parents. It explains how the disruptions in family structure brought about by imbalanced sex-ratios, result in the re-writing of many extant social roles and expectations and involve multiple negotiations between different family members and generations to meet the care deficit.

Fieldwork and methodology

This paper is informed by more than a decade of qualitative research done by both of the authors in north India. It is an outcome of a larger research project concerned with the broad question of the consequences of gender imbalance for family, marriage, and kinship practices in north India. The first author, Paro Mishra, conducted ethnographic fieldwork between August 2012 and December 2013 in five villages of Sonipat and Hisar districts of Haryana, mainly focussing on the issue of changing marriage patterns as a response to marriage squeeze (Mishra 2017) with follow up in October 2019. The second author, Ravinder Kaur, has been a long-term scholar of gender imbalance in Haryana from 2001

onward and has conducted extensive fieldwork in the rural and urban areas of Sonapat, Rohtak, Jind, Hisar, and Kurukshetra districts. The state of Haryana (Image 1) has been known for its long-standing gender imbalance (see Table 1).

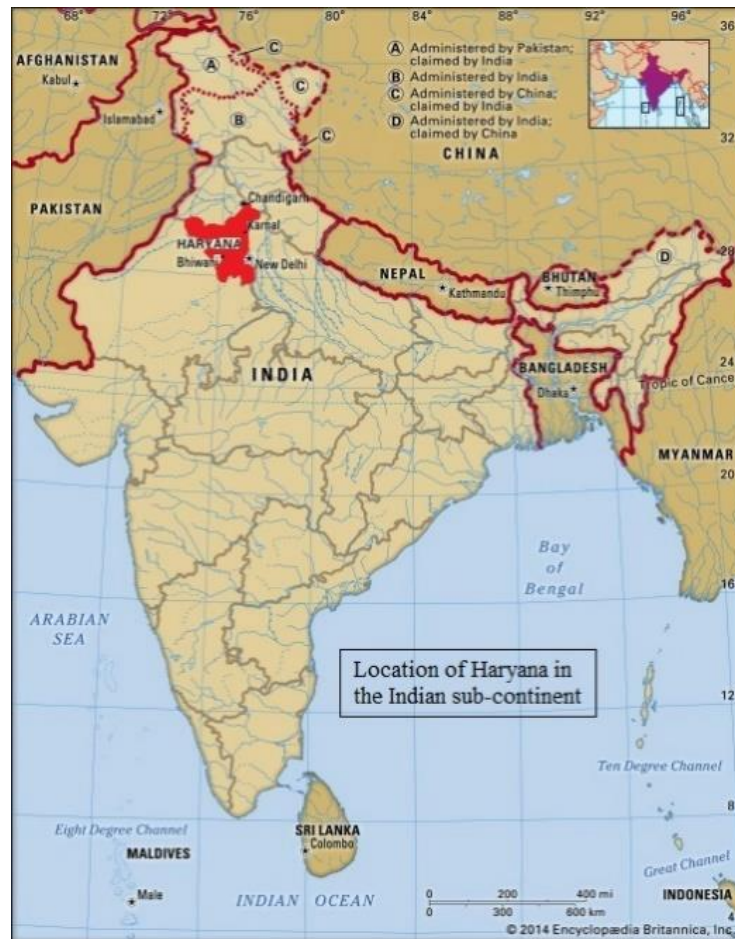


Image 1: Map showing location of study site Haryana (marked in red) in India (Source: www.haryana.gov.in)

As a part of their long-term research, both authors have collected data using qualitative approaches such as semi-structured interviews with unmarried men and their married siblings, aging parents, men who married cross-regionally, female marriage migrants, and village elders. Most of the interviews were conducted in the natural setting of the home of the respondents, barring a few that were conducted in public spaces like local teashops, village panchayat (council) premises, streets, and by-lanes. The interviews were conducted in Hindi and Haryanavi languages and ranged from 45 minutes to an hour and a half with multiple follow ups. They were accompanied by detailed note taking which was later translated and transcribed by the authors. The longitudinal engagement in the field site has proven extremely beneficial in noticing the changes that have occurred over time in regions affected by gender imbalance. This paper uses the narrative analysis method, which does not assume objectivity but privileges positionality and subjectivity of the respondents (Butalia 1998; Donner 2008; Riessman 2000). This approach was useful in understanding the life experiences of the respondents and examining both the particular and the more generalized dimensions of the way people live their lives in the face of constraints and the choices they make. The names of all the respondents have been changed to protect their identity.

Skewed sex ratios and the marriage crisis in Haryana

The state of Haryana is a small but prosperous north Indian state adjoining the states of Punjab, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh, and the Union Territory of Delhi (see Image 1). Despite its high per capita income and proximity to the national capital, Delhi, is characterized by one of the most abysmal sex ratios in the country, with its child sex ratio (0-6 years) standing at 830 girls to 1000 boys from the 2011 census (See Table 1).

Year	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011
Haryana	898	902	879	819	830

Table 1: Child Sex-ratio (0-6 years) for Haryana since 1971. Source: Census of India

In recent decades, new sex selection technologies, especially the widely available ultrasound, have enabled new forms of discrimination against female children, with pre-natal sex selection of boys over girls becoming pervasive (John *et al.* 2008; Miller 2001).

As a result of rampant sex selective abortion, hence smaller cohorts of female births (George and Dahiya 1998; Unisa *et al.* 2007), the shortage of brides in Haryana has worsened, with nearly one in five men facing a marriage crisis (Kaur 2004). Research shows that in 2012 there were seven excess males in Haryana per female and that this number would continue to rise to reach an excess of fifteen males by 2050, pointing to a long-term shortage of brides in the state (Kaur *et al.* 2016). As lifelong bachelorhood has become untenable and older practices of dealing with bride shortages such as fraternal polyandry or inter-caste marriage have become socially unacceptable, men in Haryana have taken to large scale “bride import” from other regions of the country (Ahlawat 2009; Kaur 2004, 2008; Mishra 2013, 2017). Yet, obtaining brides from other regions is not the first choice for men and their families. The search for a local bride delays men’s age at marriage and they generally succumb to a cross-region marriage as a “last resort,” around, or after reaching the socially “unmarriageable” age of thirty-five. As they wait to marry, the difficulties of coping with domestic and agricultural chores without a wife/daughter-in-law create anxieties for both the men and their aging parents.

The law banning sex determination and sex selective abortion (PCPNDT Act 1994), improvements in male and female literacy, and the declining importance of the land-based patriarchal economy have had little effect on the rigid gender norms centred on son-preference and daughter devaluation that continue to characterize the state. Most Haryanvis tend to believe that it is not the demographic shortage of women that hinders them in finding brides but the lack of jobs. Chowdhry (2005) notes the rise in youth unemployment, remarking that rural youth are no longer interested in farming work and prefer to wait for off-farm jobs, especially government jobs that ensure high social status and life-long job security. Difficulties men face in finding heterosexual mates are exacerbated by a changing political economy resulting in shifting norms of marriage hypergamy that entail men to have greater wealth, education, and superior jobs. Mishra (2017) noted how men who find it difficult to get married by the socially appropriate age often blamed the women and their changing aspirations and expectations vis-à-vis marriage. Men’s unemployment was seen as a result of women’s entry into male dominated employment spheres (Chowdhry 2007, 86). These factors, put together with traditional cultural norms of caste endogamy and clan exogamy (Kaur 2010), result in tighter and multiple marriage markets in which many rural men find themselves at a disadvantage (Jeffery 2014). As per 2011 census data, the

mean age of marriage for males and females in Haryana stands at 24.6 and 20.9 respectively (Bhagat 2016). However, many males in Haryana fail to get married by this age and thus experience a period of what scholars such as Singerman (2011) and Hashemi (2015) call “waithood.” Waithood is a liminal state during which men wait to find appropriate jobs and suitable brides.

Intergenerational contract and filial obligations in north India

Malhotra & Kabeer define intergenerational contracts as the “mutual claims and obligations which govern relationships between different generations within the family, conventionally conceptualised in terms of three generations young children, adult parents and aging grandparents” (2002, 7). They are based on implicit shared understandings of the role and responsibilities, claims, and obligations, which different categories of family members have towards each other. The essence of intergenerational contract is that parents are obligated to invest in the upbringing, education, and well-being of their children and make decisions concerning their future. In turn, children are expected to return the favour by taking care of their parents as they grow older and become dependent (Cohen 1998; Croll 2000, 2006; Gangopadhyay & Samanta 2017; Kabeer 2000; Tiwari & Pandey 2013; Vera-Sanso 2004).

A peculiar feature of the South Asian intergenerational contract is parents’ obligation to arrange appropriate marriages for their adult children, keeping in mind the various marriage rules and advantages that a ‘good’ marital prospect may entail in terms of status mobility for both the parties (Karve 1993). Adults rely on their parents to arrange and pay for their advantageous marriages and in return are expected to reciprocate care, support, and affection when the parents grow old. In doing so, they are guided by the notion of filial piety or what is locally known as *seva*. Filial piety refers to “relationships in long-term bonds of intergenerational reciprocity and affection, in which juniors provide care for their senior parents, both in old age, and after death as ancestors, in return for all of the effort, expense and love their parents expended to raise them in infancy and childhood” (Lamb 2002, 304).

Buch rightly argues that intimate care practices are often “a scarce resource that circulates through a complex web of kinship and intergenerational relations” (2015, 283). In India, where there is a near absence of alternative, institutional care-giving arrangements, family becomes the dominant welfare institution. Sons are looked upon as a form of old-age security and parents expect more from sons than daughters (Sharma and Kemp 2012). Patrilineality makes daughters temporary members of their natal family and thus married daughters are not expected to support their parents (Donner 2005; Kaur 2019, 2018; Lamb 2009). However, even though intergenerational contract has been highly son-centred (Croll 2000), patrilocality has meant that daughters-in-law, along with their husbands, provide care and *seva* for the husband’s co-resident aging parents (Brijnath 2014; Rangaswamy 2000). Thus, the burden of maintaining social ties and nurturing inter-generational relationships falls mostly on women (Allendorf 2017; Gangopadhyay & Samanta 2017; Gram *et al.* 2018; Katbamna *et al.* 2004; Samanta 2019). This is the reason why in the process of matchmaking, girls are chosen carefully by the groom’s parents. An important consideration in the process is whether the girl will get along well with the boy’s family and whether she will look after her elderly in-laws (Mathur 2007). Many young men are particular about ascertaining that their future bride is willing to co-reside with their parents and look after them. It can be inferred from this discussion that daughters-in-law then become crucial players in the maintenance of intergenerational contracts, and sons’ marital status may have a significant effect on the intergenerational provision of physical care, emotional support, and co-residence.

“If my sons get married, I can die in peace”: Failure of family social capital in the context of bride shortage

In north India, monogamous heteronormativity is the privileged model and thus girls are easily absorbed into the marriage market as they constitute a scarce pool. However, parents face considerable difficulty in finding brides for their sons, and as such many men remain never married. Evidence from the 2001 Indian census data finds that of the 30-34 age group, only 0.59 percent of females are never-married. The corresponding figure for males is 4.94. That singlehood is not a matter of choice, surfaced in numerous discussions with the rural populace. Hegemonic masculinity in north India is associated with the ability to marry, bear children, and continue the male lineage (Mishra 2018). The desire, ideal, and expectation to marry and bear children, especially male offspring, and to continue the family line was voiced strongly by both aging parents and their grown-up sons. As Master Haridas, a 71-year-old father of three unmarried older sons (all above 37 years of age) remarks:

My worst fear is dying without seeing them (his sons) decked up as grooms. I will fail as a parent if I am unable to find matches for them. After all, it is the duty of parents to marry their children so that there is someone to look after them when we are no longer there. [...] Without marriage, there will be no children. (Then) Who will look after him in his old age?

Similarly, patrilineality and filial ideals were endorsed by Satbir, a 32-year-old recently married man who worked at a grocery shop:

It is important for me to have a son otherwise my family name will be lost. My brother has two daughters who will go away (after marriage). The responsibility of taking forward my father's name in the village is now on my shoulders. I am his only hope.

In such a context where marriage and procreation are accorded a high social value, the inability to find matches for aging sons is often perceived as a personal failure by parents. Dharambir, aged 63, father of two unmarried sons in their 30s, has made it his life's mission to secure spouses for them. Both of his sons are employed in a shoe factory as contractual labourers and hence have no source of steady income. Dharambir spends his day mostly enquiring about possibilities of finding a match for his sons. His desperation was clearly evident when he asked one of the authors if she would know of someone who is willing to get married to his sons as she is meeting so many people in the context of her work:

I don't want anything else. My only desire now is to see them settled I really would like them to have their own families. I feel sad thinking about their growing age. In Haryana, there are very few girls so families like ours suffer as we don't have wealth or land. It is a long struggle for us [...] If they get married, I will die in peace having fulfilled my responsibility.

These narratives reveal how the tensions around finding suitable matches for sons are exacerbated in the context of a skewed sex ratio. Parents fear having unmarried adult sons who will risk becoming “bare-branches” (*chade*) (see Mishra, 2018 for a detailed discussion) due to bride-shortage. Failure to marry their children at socially acceptable ages is seen as shameful for the parents as it is viewed as an act of faltering in their moral duty.

Ticking clocks, anxious futures and gendered labour

Parental anxieties about their sons' non-marriage are also powerfully motivated by concerns about their own well-being and care in old age, and the best possible ways to assure it (Kabeer 2000; Larsen *et al.* 2010). As the biological clock keeps ticking for the elderly, they become more anxious about their futures in absence of someone to care for them. An old man in his late 70s living with his wife and unmarried 42-year-old son vocalized this concern:

Age is debilitating us. Till few years back we could take care of him but now we also want someone who can look after us. On whom else can we depend? In our village those who live with married sons and grandchildren are much happier and worry less about their futures. Haryana's sex ratio imbalance had made life difficult for families like ours.

Thus, rural parents fear having destitute futures in absence of daughters-in-laws under bride shortage. They compare their situation to other families with married sons and find themselves lacking the care and support that is usually provided in multigenerational household. This, however, is a one-sided accentuation of reality. Conflicts between generations especially with regard to the provision of care are not unknown and daughters-in-law often complain about the lack of recognition for their care work in the family² (Gupta 2005; Nandan 2007). Married sons sometimes separate from the joint household, leaving parents and unmarried siblings together. Daughters-in-law are considered to be the proverbial disruptors of the joint household. However, for the rural respondents of this study, the benefits of co-residence with married sons clearly outweigh the drawbacks.

The concerns about their future in the absence of daughters-in-law are more strongly vocalised by aging mothers as compared to fathers. The division of labour in Haryana is tilted towards harder work and longer working hours for females than males. Apart from domestic chores, care of children and elderly, women in Haryana also do a considerable amount of farm work. Animal husbandry is an important part of Haryana's economy and women do most of the work of taking care of the cattle (Chowdhry 2007). Having performed domestic and farm work from the time of marriage, a mother looks forward to being relieved of her domestic tasks by a daughter-in-law. Kanta, a woman around 65 years of age, living with her unmarried son and husband shared:

Now I am burdened with a lot of work as there is no one else to help me. We are not getting any proposals. Had my son been married I would have had some relief [...] My body is weakening, and I am unable to do handle it all.

The manner in which biological processes of aging interact with the social context in which elderly people are located is of paramount significance in understanding the experience of aging and their access (or lack of) to care and support. As a cultural practice, in India, marriage of a son marks the onset of aging, particularly for women as it entails significant shifts in her status and role within the family (Sati 1996). The entry of a daughter-in-law invariably implies a reduced burden of household work on the mother-in-law. Older women look forward to moving into a supervisory role while the bulk of the household and farm work is shouldered by incoming daughter/s-in-law. As Kandiyoti (1988) points out, women make the patriarchal bargain of not questioning their lack of power as young wives and mothers, with the expectation that they would enjoy the fruits later on in the life cycle by moving into a position of power and authority vis-à-vis their daughters-in-law. In absence of daughters-in-law, the elderly woman, despite aging, has to continue to look after her husband and son/s and thus she feels that she has not been able to cash in on the benefits of the bargain she made earlier. Kandiyoti

characterizes this as a “genuine personal tragedy” (1988, 282). Over a period of time, a woman’s physical abilities begin to wane, and she also grows resentful of the continuing burden placed on her. Yet, the gendered division of labour makes it difficult for men to share household and feminine farm tasks. Notions of masculinity and family honour are tied up with males being breadwinners through their work outside the home; doing household chores such as cooking one’s food and washing clothes makes a man an object of ridicule and pity. The cultural significance of *ghar basana*, or setting up one’s house through bringing a wife, is an important rite of passage for upholding the patriarchal social order.

Thus, gendered norms and expectations fundamentally alter the experience of aging for elderly men and women even though the biological clock keeps ticking for both these categories. Kittay (1996) rightly argues that popular and scholarly emphasis on intergenerational care obscures or renders invisible intra-generational forms of care. Care that aging wives provide to their husbands is often ignored in discussions focussed on aging and intergenerational care transfer. An important question that emerges in this context regards the role of adult sons. When parents are unable to fulfil their side of the social contract, in terms of finding matches for their adult sons, do the latter violate their obligations towards elderly care and support?

Mediating the intergenerational contract: duty and reciprocity

Our research found that some unmarried sons do take care of their older parents, even though their parents have not been able to find them spouses. In earlier days in rural Haryana, it was not uncommon to find unmarried men being accommodated in the joint household with a married brother’s family (Kaur 2008). However, under modern conditions and rising costs of living domestic units are becoming increasingly nuclearized (2008). Unmarried males living in joint families with married brothers often face marginalization and ridicule within their families (Mishra 2018). Although they can separate from the joint household and legally claim a share in family property, they normally refrain from doing so. This is because separation also entails managing the household independently and involvement in so called feminine domestic chores in absence of a wife. However, as married brothers separate from the joint household, unmarried men continue to live with their parents having no other choice left. Those men whose parent(s) were too old to work or look after themselves often described how it is their obligation to take care of older parents. A 44-year-old bachelor Kuldeep, who lives with his 65-year-old widowed mother, explains:

I am her only support, so I have to take care of her. Parents do so much for their children. When they grow old, it is our duty to look after them. If I had children, I would have expected the same from them.

Older bachelors, above 40 years of age, have resigned to their fates of remaining unmarried and have become primary caregivers for their aging parents. Raju, a single, 47-year-old car mechanic and only male child of his parents said:

I have accepted my fate. My parents did all that was in their hand to find a girl for me. My bad luck they couldn’t. They even saved some money to construct a new room for me after I get married. They have done all they could, now it’s my turn. [...] Now when they are old and sick, I am responsible for looking after them and I will continue to do so.

Once unmarried men cross the locally acceptable marriage age, which is around thirty-five years in Haryana, their options narrow. In such a situation, both parents (and their unmarried sons) begin

envisioning a future without a daughter-in-law (wife) and renegotiate their strategies for social reproduction of family. Our fieldwork revealed that in several cases where the mothers were too old to contribute towards household chores, the son assumed a more proactive role in the domestic sphere. They ended up taking charge of everyday household tasks like chopping vegetables, cooking, washing clothes and cleaning, in addition to their work outside home. However, a large part of this work is done in a covert manner, hidden from the public gaze of the wider community as there is an element of embarrassment associated with men's household work and as labour within the private sphere continues to be regarded as women's work (Chowdhry 1994; Kaur 2008). Thus, in the absence of daughters-in-law, unmarried sons unwittingly disrupted gender norms and contributed towards the intergenerational provision of care when their parents couldn't fulfil their expected role. However, as the next section highlights, some unmarried males did breach their side of the contract and felt justified in doing so.

The frailties of the intergenerational contract in north India can be deciphered from the fact that if adult sons felt that their parents have not put in sufficient effort in finding them brides, they too have a right to breach the terms of this implicit arrangement. In some cases, sons felt cheated and expressed resentment over the fact that the obligation was unfulfilled, and as a result their desire to provide returns of care or economic contribution to the family lessened (Kaur 2019). In a few cases, unmarried sons felt that their parents had given primacy to their own desires and compromised their duties with respect to them. Below, Ramesh, a 45-year-old bachelor, working as a truck driver for a transport service, describing himself as "blunt", talks about his relationship with his father, who married for a second time after Ramesh's mother passed away due to illness:

My father is selfish. He only thinks of his own desires. He was beyond sixty when my mother passed away, but he still desired a second wife for himself. Both me and my brother were of marriageable age then. Had there been any other father, he would have thought of his children's marriage not his own. Now, his second wife is also no more, and he is alone, but it doesn't affect me. Why should I care when he didn't? A relationship should be maintained from both sides, not one.

Ramesh is the only care-provider for his aging father since his brother moved to Delhi to work in a garment factory. But Ramesh has withdrawn all association with his father. He is mostly on the move because of the nature of his work and comes back home for few days every month. His father's survival is contingent on the food and care provided by his uncle's (father's brother) family. As per Ramesh, they are motivated by the greed of inheriting his father's house which he will not let happen.

In another case, an unmarried man blamed his drunkard father's recklessness which made his family lose their land and along with it his chances to find a spouse. He continues to look after his mother with whom he shares a closer bond. On her insistence, he fulfils basic requirements of his father. Although, he does not share any emotional intimacy with him as he remarks, "I am only doing this for her otherwise I don't feel obligated to it." Though cases like this were very rare, these ethnographic vignettes show that elderly unmarried sons may not contribute to parental care if they feel that parents had breached their side of the contract guided by personal desires, motives, or reckless behaviour.

Crisis of social reproduction and cross-region marriage as a family strategy

By and large, the absence of daughter/s-in-law in the family places a disproportionate share of household work on older women who continue to shoulder responsibilities for much longer periods—some of which may later be shared by a son. Although elderly parents appreciate the care their

unmarried sons extend towards them, they are also constantly worried about their unmarried son's futures. The anxiety about Ramesh's future is evident in his mother Kunta's statement:

I often worry that what will happen to him after we are gone. We at least had him. Who will he have? He will be all alone [...] Had he been married, he would have had his own family, his own sons to take care of him.

In such a scenario where there is a shortage of local brides, and reproduction (both social and biological) and care are marked by a crisis, many rural families in Haryana are bringing in cultural strangers from other distant regions of India as wives for their sons, breaching caste and other norms of propriety. Though statistics on the number of these marriages are not available, they are fairly common in Haryana with every village having at least 8-10 women hailing from distant eastern, southern, and north-eastern parts of India. In some larger villages the numbers are much higher. These unions are referred to as cross-region marriage (Kaur 2004; Mishra 2013) or long-distance marriage (Chaudhary & Mohan 2011).

An interesting point to note here is that more than often it is the mothers of unmarried sons who often take the first step to seek cross-region brides for their sons. In many cases, the mothers also provide the money that a man needs to travel to a distant location to find a bride. Damini, a 70-year-old mother who married her son cross-regionally to a woman from West Bengal, narrated how her husband was not really convinced about marrying their son cross-regionally even as he was nearing thirty-five. The father kept on saying eventually they will find a match for their aging son. She gave her husband six months' time to find a local match, knowing very well that he would not succeed. In the meantime, she herself approached another Bengali bride in the village to suggest a potential bride from her community. Within the next two months her son was married to a Bengali girl.

In families where the mother has passed on, men face increasing difficulties. Sunil is the youngest of four brothers and one married sister. All his brothers separated from the joint household after getting married and he and his widowed father were left to live alone. He shared that as "there was no one to cook food" for them, he was forced to bring a cross-region bride from Maharashtra, a state in the western region of India. In some cases, the fathers sourced cross-region brides for their sons through their links in other villages which had cross-region brides. In one case, a father took up match-making out of sympathy for families suffering the fate as his own family had prior to bringing home a cross-region bride.

Interviews with cross-region brides and their marital families suggest that a cross-region brides' value as a 'good daughter-in-law' is tied to her caring attitude towards the husband's elderly parents and her performance of household responsibilities (see Mishra 2017 for details). Sima, a 29-year-old, cross-region bride from Maharashtra said that she was specifically instructed by her husband to "always obey his parents and take care of them." The expectation that incoming daughters-in-law will take charge of household responsibilities and elderly care was so strong that in a few cases migrant brides were prevented from taking employment outside the home. Sheetal, a 26-year-old bride from Nepal, wanted to work in the same shoe factory where her husband worked, but her husband Nakul preferred her to remain at home to provide company and care for her 65-year-old mother-in-law. She said:

I thought if we worked at the same place, we could go and come back from the city (where the factory was located) together. It will be a convenient arrangement, but he didn't agree. [...] He said mother will be left alone in our absence and what if she needs some help.

Cross-region brides occupy a lower bargaining position in their marital homes, especially in the early days, which makes them highly dependent on their husband and his family. Thus, most brides accept what they are asked to do without challenging it. They also take on the care of in-laws to gain acceptance in the household and establish the legitimacy of their marriage. Thus Rani, a Bangladeshi Muslim married to a Dalit Hindu in the Sonipat district was proud of the fact that her in-laws had chosen to make their home with her rather than with the families of her husband's brothers whose wives were local women. Fulfilling the cultural expectation of a son's responsibility towards elderly parents helped her overcome her stranger status. Her story also shows that family feeling is brought about through "obliged affections and affective obligations" (Bourdieu 1998, 68) in the context of the moral scaffolding provided by the implicit intergenerational contract.

The concerns raised by ticking biological clocks of both unmarried sons and aging parents in the context of gender imbalance and local bride shortage are addressed through the newer familial strategy of expanding the marriage radius through cross-region marriages. The entry of cross-region brides not only resolves the anxieties of involuntary bachelorhood and fatherhood for north Indian men, but also helps fulfil the deficit of domestic and care labour within the family. For the men, cross-region marriages not only ensure marital intimacy and lineage reproduction, but also fulfilment of intergenerational contract towards their aging parents.

The cases discussed above express that contrary to popular expectations, imbalanced sex ratios and 'surplus' men may not simply imply greater familial or social instability. Rather, familial ties, intergenerational relationships, gendered and kinship norms are renegotiated in the face of challenges thrown up by gender imbalance. Even though unmarried men covertly shoulder some responsibilities in the domestic sphere, in this process of renegotiation, a disproportionate burden of adjustment continues to be placed on aging women in comparison to aging men. Thus, gendered norms and expectations fundamentally alter the experience of biological clocks for elderly men and women, as the latter continue to look after the former and also after adult sons. However, as the situation becomes impossible to address, the need for another woman in the house to replace elderly women's labour becomes dire. Thus, some families devise new strategies in the face of external constraints to offset the catastrophic consequences of local bride shortages. Bringing in a bride through cross-region marriage is one such strategy even if it involves subverting the traditional norms of marriage. While such multigenerational, culturally complex families may have their own challenges, they help both adult sons and aging parents fulfil their obligations towards each other and also address the challenges that their biological clocks pose for them.

Conclusion

It becomes evident from this discussion that the macro structural context of gender imbalance and marriage squeeze has implicated the family system into a complex web of social-moral crisis. With multiple ticking biological clocks, the anxieties around marriage, procreation, care circulation, allocation of household labour, and continuation of family name and lineage are becoming aggravated. This paper emphasizes the importance of looking at biological clocks in the context of household and familial relationships and not purely in terms of the individual body. In doing so, it goes beyond the conventional analysis of biological clocks as related to women's reproduction and their resort to measures like adoption and Assisted Reproductive Technologies.

The paper argues how the concept of multiple biological clocks draws attention to life trajectories of two other categories of kinship related members of the household: unmarried men, who are passing the socially appropriate age of marriage and their parents, who are declining in health and age. The fate of the bodily clocks of these two categories is bound up and faces challenges as both parties are unable to

fulfil their sides of the intergenerational contract; parents, in not being successful in finding brides for their sons and the sons in not being able to extend the provision of care for their aging parents through their wives. The essential missing link in the failure to fulfilling the intergenerational contract is a woman—the wife and daughter-in-law—whose absence then forces adjustments in how the generational protagonists deal with the care deficit created by the demographic female deficit.

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Notes

1. Male marriage squeeze refers to the shortage of marriageable women in a particular age cohort.
2. In joint families where there are several sons and only one might be married, the daughter-in-law has to bear the burden of looking after the entire family with little help from others which makes her resentful.

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