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Social and Cultural Influences on Fertility Behaviour

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Governmental efforts towards fertility reduction often face a dilemma: babies who are planners' worry are also a parent's hope and joy (Mandelbaum 1974:110). The beliefs of the people on this subject and what planners believe ought to be done may on occasion diverge substantially. Planners generally assume that people suffer from ignorance and need only to be educated about population and family planning activities in order to change their behaviour. The underlying assumption is that the people gratefully accept the proffered package of advice and services. (UNESCAP 1992:27) As, studies have shown, people are not motivated to reduce the size of their families by the lessons provided by statistics of rampant population increase with its negative impacts on the process of development overall. Nor are they motivated by the ease and availability of virtually foolproof methods of fertility control. People have their own ideas about the family size, the importance of the male child, and so forth. As these beliefs are rooted in religion, culture and tradition, there is also a deep attachment to them. (Mathur 1975) Acknowledging their critical role in the choices that the people make in this regard, a perceptive study noted: "Social and cultural factors dominate all others in affecting fertility". (WCED 1987:106)

Generally, traditional societies are characterised by a pronatalist disposition. Based on her study of fertility behaviour in a Rajasthan village, Patel (1994: 74-75) concludes:

Parenthood confers honour on a couple in Mogra. A person graduates to the status of a full-fledged adult only upon acquiring parenthood. It is supposed to make individuals more responsible and trustworthy in their households and the community. It is believed to be an insignia of an individual's maturity and greater knowledge of the world. A person's image and respectability get enhanced with every additional child's birth and survival. A couple with four to five surviving children is held in higher esteem than younger couples without children.

In India, especially in its villages, the people want not fewer more children. They have good reasons to have more children. Indeed, children are a great asset to rural households. They start contributing the household work very early, and later also work outside the house, in the fields, etc. Girls usually help their

mothers with the household work like brooming, cleaning the utensils, washing clothes, cooking, fetching water, collecting cowdung, looking after younger children, taking food to the family members working in the fields, etc. Older girls also help in feeding the cattle and milking the cattle and other agricultural work. The boys work mainly outside the house, such as grazing cattle, fetching firewood or working in the fields. For people in villages, in slums, among craftsmen, workers and such groups, children can serve as a kind of 'insurance', and can actually be a source of 'wealth'. For a majority of people in India, children are an 'investment' rather than a 'consumption unit'. In a country where most of the people neither get any old-age pension nor have their lives insured, children are particularly an investment for old age. (Chattopadhyay-Dutt 1995: 86-87)

The Importance of Sons

In India, male children are particularly in demand. Sons are important from a religious point of view. According to Hindu religion, a man attains salvation only when a son performs certain rights at his funeral. Basu (1992:103 and 1990:93-94) gives the following as a potent example of preference for sons:

Every observer or resident of the Indian scene has personal knowledge of at least a handful of homes where child-bearing has continued mercilessly until a son has been born, even when this means a string of five, six or even seven and more daughters first. On the other hand, we would be hard put to identify even one home which has as many sons and a youngest daughter whose late arrival has been the main reason for repeated pregnancies and with whose birth child-bearing comes to an end.

In Senapur, a village in Uttar Pradesh, Luschinsky (1963:69) found people worrying over questions such as the following:

What will happen to my lineage if I have no sons? If I have no sons who will care for me in later years? Daughters go off to other villages to live. I may be ill and feeble in old age. I want the security of sons.

The preference for male children does not stop with just one son. They want more. Sons are valued in this andro-centric culture not only as providers of security in old age and during protracted illness, but for many other reasons as well. Once married the girls are considered to belong to their husband's family, and therefore, they cannot be relied on for support in old age in the way the sons can. In fact, there are strong taboos on taking any kind of help from a married daughter. Educated people with a liberal outlook, living in metropolitan cities, are known to be averse to even drinking a glass of water in the homes of their married daughters. Yet, another reason for the strong son preference, as

Chattopadhyay-Dutt (1995:88) noted, could lie in the dowry system, which is widely prevalent in India and seems to be flourishing even though legally it is prohibited.

Blaikie (1975:17) sums up reasons for the importance of sons in the Indian culture as follows:

1. Sons are required to perform the last funeral rites ('sraddha') for their parents. It is interesting to note that in Sanskrit, 'put' means hell and 'putra' means literally 'one that saves from hell' or simply 'a son'.
2. Sons upon marriage attract dowries for the parents. The boy-or-girl lottery can often makes or break a family financially, and keeps many 'modernizing' families from finally breaking free from this form of contract. If they eschew a dowry for their own son, they might still have to find one for their daughter.
3. Sons provide economic and emotional security in old age. (Even if the parents do not actually live into old age, it is natural for them to assume they will do so). It is the son not the daughter who remains at his parents' home after marriage.
4. Sons provide income and help in the house and in the fields from an early age.
5. Sons bring prestige and local political power (and even protection against the threat of physical force in confrontation situations) to the household, the kinship group and caste.

The question of son survivorship is therefore so vital that do not feel satisfied with just one son. They seek safety in numbers. Studies by May and Heer (1968:199-210) and several other investigators have found that with the mortality levels of 1960, the Indian couples to be reasonably certain of having one male child would need to have an average of 6.3. They conclude that unless mortality rates decline sharply, extensive fertility reduction is unlikely to occur.

Motherhood for Status

Women, too, have compelling reasons for desiring children, preferably sons. They have been conditioned to see their success and destiny in terms of procreation. As Opler (1964:206-207) saw situation in a village in Uttar Pradesh which he calls Madhopur:

The most fervent hope of the young woman is that she prove her worth to her husband's family by producing a healthy male child. She knows very well that she will have little standing in her husband's home until she bears him a son.

Continuing, Opler (1964: 206-207) noted:

'...the birth of a son entitles a woman to respect and status, and exempts her from much hard work. She and her baby are likely to be pampered for some time after parturition. Henceforth, she is referred to through the name of her child; she becomes 'the mother of so-and-so'.

Motherhood enables a woman to gain a status not otherwise attainable. Mandelbaum (1974: 16-17) reported:

Once a woman becomes pregnant she is likely to receive more fond attention than she enjoys at any other time. At her first pregnancy, she is given a kind of respect in the household that she did not get before. During her subsequent pregnancies also, she usually gets favoured treatment. Certainly for a young wife, pregnancy is fine, the baby is fun, motherhood is grand and God-given.

On the other hand, the woman who bears no children is treated quite differently. Status graduation through motherhood is so marked that barrenness is a dreaded condition. Patel (1974:78) reports from her village study:

Motherhood is extolled, while barrenness is held as a curse. If a woman does not produce children, her husband has the prerogative to divorce her or marry another. Sterility spells social and emotional doom for the woman. She is considered an ill omen both for the household and the larger society. It is inauspicious to run into her early in the morning or on auspicious occasions, such as rituals of childbirth, wedding and marriage, or while setting out of the house to the fields for sowing, or to another village or city. These considerations are indicative of her lower status. In quarrels and squabbles she is insulted for her failure in fertility performances. The dart of barrenness is thrown at her to whittle down her strength and to latently glorify fertility. She is under constant pressure from household members, relatives and neighbours to produce children.

In a society where fertility is all that counts for social status, it is unlikely that fertility reduction programmes will make much headway "until Indian women have some avenue of achieving status and security equivalent to the consideration they now receive for demonstrating their fecundity and ability to bear sons". (Opler 1964:214)

Advantages of Larger Households

The people in villages tend to favour large families. Status, religion, and such factors supporting the demand for more children, briefly discussed above, are certainly very important. But far more important are some practical reasons that strongly motivate the people in favour of having a large family. Indeed, many people see some clear advantages in their families becoming larger and larger. As Patel (1994:99) noted:

The larger the household, family and lineage, the greater the prestige of its senior members. Their sphere of authority widens as the lineage enlarges itself. More people approach them for help in matters such as labour exchange, borrowing money, and influencing government and other officials for expediting some pending matters in favour of those with fewer, and by implication less influential, members in the household.

The pattern of life in agrarian societies is such that problems of underemployment and over population do not come to the surface as forcefully as they manifest themselves on the urban, metropolitan scene. To quote Opler (1994:214-215) again:

On an unmechanized farm there are always chores to occupy everyone. At the time of preparation of fields, irrigation and harvest all hands are desperately needed. In fact, at these times women and children are pressed into service, and men return from urban employment to participate. It is the image of these peak work periods that lingers in the mind of the villager when he discusses population size.

In rural areas where mechanization is moving forward, the people have practical reasons to think in terms of large families. (Nag 1980) In an Indian village, a rather prosperous farmer who had purchased three tractors, installed pumping sets on wells, and had adopted a host of other technological innovations was heard bemoaning the fact that he had no brothers and cousins:

In the olden days it was quite all right to leave your agricultural work in the hands of your farm labourers. But things now have changed. Now only has labour become more demanding, the hired hands just cannot be trusted with your expensive farm machinery, which sure requires very careful handling. (Mathur 1975)

The point that he was making was that in the absence of support from the closer, family people it was not possible for him to modernize and expand his agricultural operations much further.

It is usual for large village families to send some of their members away to work in cities. The people working in cities do not take their wives with them; they

remain tied to the village where they periodically return for longer or shorter duration. These families also get regular remittances from the city. This flow of cash income to the village enables families to buy new agricultural equipment, send their children to schools, spend more money on marriages-things that give prestige. Opportunities that the city offers obviously cannot be seized on by small families and the villagers understand this very clearly.

It is also easier for a large family to obtain loans locally. If certain amounts remain outstanding against a man, his brothers, sons, and other relations can be asked to clear the account. In village society, the debt is regarded a family obligation.

As participants in the jajmani system-the network of hereditary work and exchange-larger families are again in a happier position. If one member of the barber family is prevented by illness to visit certain jajmans on a particular day, his father, brother or son can do the job on his behalf. This is essentially an inter-family relationship. A smaller family with just one person would obviously be severely constrained in fulfilling its traditional obligations.

Another factor which contributes importantly to the desire for large families is the fact that village life is riven with strife-the familism, the factionalism, the political rivalries. A large united family can better safeguard its status and interest. (Mandelbaum 1970) The numerical strength comes from fertility. As Luschinsky (1963:69) also observed:

Political emergencies also disrupt village life from time to time. Individuals or factions sometimes express their ill will toward one another by crop cutting, crop burning, or threats of one kind or another. Disputes over land rights, loans, insubordination, etc., are not uncommon. No man trusts his good nature alone to keep him out of trouble. He wants the security of friends who will stand by him in times of need, and if he heads a large family with a number of sons, his wishes are more likely to be considered on the village political scene.

On people's perception about the strength which comes from numbers, the two well known studies of Khanna village in Punjab observed that bitter faction fights in villages are won by men, not contraceptives. (Wyon and Gordon 1971 and Mamdani 1972) The role that numbers play in the village community was also highlighted by Srinivas (1959) in his study of the dominant caste.

The land reform laws which set a limit to the size of the agricultural land that a family can own have also helped the larger families. By 'legally' partitioning the land among family members, they have in actual fact been able to retain all their

land. On the other hand, it is the smaller families, which found to their dismay that after partitioning they were left with lands in excess of their entitlement.

In the extended family system there are no compulsions to reduce fertility. In a nuclear family consisting of parents and their children the responsibility to support the family rests entirely on the principal provider who usually is the father. This system encourages late marriages for the reasons that a man must settle in a job and have some assured source of income before taking on familial responsibilities. Even after marriage the desire for children is not so great because they are often seen as an economic liability. Such constraints in the case of the extended family system do not operate. As Davis (1955) explains:

By contrast, in the extended family the burden of marriage and of children does not fall upon the parents, but upon the entire family group and is so diffused that the cost to any one person may be seen as relatively light. Further, the presence of numerous relatives means that the wife is not particularly burdened with the care of the young children. It is possible for both man and the woman to marry at a very youthful age since there is no requirement that they be economically self-sufficient before launching a family.

There is, in fact, a further practical reason for not caring to limit the number of children in the extended family system. Since everybody is jointly responsible for bringing up children, it is sometimes disadvantageous to a couple to have fewer children. This may not necessarily relieve them of responsibilities of caring for other children in the larger family. Those with fewer children of their own may be required to contribute to the maintenance of the children of other parents.

Factors Favourable to Fertility Reduction

Sociocultural factors do not always obstruct change. Even in traditional societies there are sociocultural elements supportive of change in fertility behaviour. Perhaps not enough is known about these circumstances. As Mandelbaum (1974:13) observed: "There are also certain forces favourable to birth limitation, although information about them has not been abundantly available or systematically presented and has been overshadowed by a good deal of misinformation." However, the planners have tended to overlook socio-cultural factors, viewing them more as inhibiting change rather than initiating it. As commented by Colletta (1980:12):

All too often culture is seen as a bulwark of conservatism rather than recognised as a tool for positive change. While anthropologists have documented the conflict between development and culture, they have been less helpful in applying anthropological principles to discover the positive relationship between them. Anthropologists should be at the forefront of development by leading the discovery of how long-established cultural

pathways of interaction, established roles, institutions, and value-incentive systems might be employed as levers for positive change. The study of culture as an object for intellectual curiosity versus its value as a viable process for enhancing human survival must be balanced.

The practice of fertility control, in fact, has a long tradition. Arguing that the people in India followed indigenous methods to limit their family size even before the launch of the official family planning programme, Chattopadhyay-Dutt (1995) stresses the need to devote increased research and development resources to promote their use as these methods will be culturally familiar and more acceptable. Mandelbaum (1974:1) wrote in a similar vein:

A good many people in India practised fertility control long before they had knowledge of modern contraceptive techniques. They did so for traditional social reasons and by methods traditional in the culture. These means and motivations are still current and, if properly understood, could be more effectively utilised in family planning efforts than they have been.

It is obvious that without the involvement of the people and without taking their sociocultural concerns into account, efforts at fertility reduction are unlikely to yield the desired results. For example, a knowledge of why the people behave the way they do when confronted with a visiting family planning worker is important to the success of the programme. To be able to persuade the people to adopt new ideas and to abandon the older ones, the planners and administrators must know the people and understand their beliefs and traditions which still play an important role in their lives (Mathur 1995). As Opler (1964) cautioned, any fertility reduction effort "that does not take these cultural realities into account initially and does not respond to whatever changes occur in them as time goes on is adding psychological and cultural difficulties to the ordinary mechanical problems that confront any large scale effort".

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