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## **Knowledge, attitude and practice of family planning among fishermen in Tamil Nadu**

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Indian society consists of immensely varied political, social, ethnic, linguistic, religious and community groups, which, by and large, reside in villages, where poverty, misconceived religious notions, social customs, illiteracy, ignorance and superstitions prevail. The Government of India launched a family welfare programme in the early 1950's to accelerate the country's economic and social development, and has formulated an official policy with the aim of reducing the rate of population growth. The programme was accorded special priority during the 1960s and 1970s, but has so far only met with marginal success, that is, till 1989-90, only 41.9 percent of the total eligible couples had been effectively protected [1] and the target of reducing the birth rate from 40 to 25 per thousand population by 1991 remained only a pious wish. A possible reason for this is that a uniform policy is being followed for the entire country with an emphasis on permanent methods without considering the needs and preferences of the local people. For example, in Goa and other places a considerable percentage of women successfully use natural family planning methods, which are not included in the list of official family planning methods [2].

As mentioned above, the people of India being multilingual, multireligious and multiethnic, it is necessary to develop special programmes to tackle the needs of different groups. Hence before launching a special programme, a thorough understanding of the differentials and determinants of fertility and mortality is essential. In cent years, the need for such studies has been felt so that more specific knowledge can be gained about factors determining fertility and family planning acceptance by particular communities, which can be used for developing suitable programmes for them. Since very little is known about the demographic condition, fertility and family planning behaviour of the fisherman community in India in general and Tamil Nadu in particular [3-6], an attempt has been made to study family planning behaviour among this community.

### **Lifestyle of fishermen in Tamil Nadu**

The fishermen of Tamil Nadu are locally known as 'pattanavars' (literally, a dweller a town or pattanam, which word occurs in the names of various towns

on the seacoast such as Nagappattanam or Chennapattanam), and are popularly called 'Karaiyans' or seashore people. This community continues to possess the basic characteristics of a folk society despite the urban environment around it, and remains homogeneous in social, economic and cultural matters, and the caste panchayat exercises judicial and social control over its member [4]. The major portion of the life of these fishermen is spent at sea; they have little time for taking an active part in familial issues, much less to speak about their interaction, either culturally or socially, with other communities. Consequently, women assume a vital place with regard to the upbringing of the children and in the household. Only the male members go fishing while the women folk are involved in domestic work and also participate in offshore activities, and in selling fish.

### **Research design**

Thanjavur district is conspicuous among all the eight coastal districts of Tamil Nadu in its produce of marine fish which accounts for about 30 percent of the total marine catch of the state. Trenquebar, a taluk in Thanjavur district, was selected as the study area based on information from the Thrangampady Pattanavar Panchayat Office that this taluk has played a significant role in marine fishing in the district.

According to the records of the Panchayat Office, there were 803 fishermen's households in the study area, with 560 eligible couples. As a first step, eligible couples (wife aged 15-49 years) were enumerated (558) and one-third (185) of them were selected by systematic sampling. With the help of a well-structured questionnaire, information relating to knowledge, attitude and practice of contraceptive methods was collected from the wives.

### **Results and Discussion**

The paragraphs, which follow, describe the knowledge, attitude and practice of family planning among the fishermen as also the number of children ever born.

#### ***Knowledge about family planning methods***

Table 1 presents a distribution of the respondents by their knowledge of contraception. It indicates that family planning knowledge was widespread, and that all the respondents were aware of at least one method of contraception. Among the various methods, female sterilisation was most well known by 93.5 percent of respondents, and by another 2.7 percent following probing. The next best known method was male sterilisation, reported by 78.4 percent of the respondents though many more reported knowledge (20 percent) on probing.

Among the temporary methods, the oral pill ranked first (56.5 percent), IUD (39 percent) next, followed by the condom (30.5 percent). The knowledge of these methods increased to 87.0, 69.8 and 67.9 percent respectively after probing.

**Table 1** : Percentage distribution of respondents by knowledge of family planning methods

Method	Without probing	With probing	Total knowledge	No knowledge	Total percentage	(N)	Ever users
Loop	39.0	30.8	69.8	31.2	100.0	178	5=2.8%
Pill	56.5	30.5	87.0	13.0	100.0	177	
Condom	30.5	37.4	67.9	32.1	100.0	174	
Vasectomy	78.4	20.0	98.4	1.6	100.0	185	
Tubectomy	94.0	2.7	96.7	3.3	100.0	184	37=20%
Abstinence	87.8	10.5	98.3	1.7	100.0	181	28=15.5%
Rhythm	16.3	48.2	64.5	35.5	100.0	141	

Note: The total sample size varies among the methods due to non-response for particular methods.

(N) = Total respondents

Abstinence was the most commonly known natural method in the study area, and was in fact, the best-known method among both natural/conventional and modern methods. Among the respondents, 88 percent knew about this method, and the level of knowledge increased to 98 percent after probing. Reported knowledge of the rhythm method, on the other hand, was only 49 percent, even after probing.

The findings presented in Table 1 also suggest that probing played a significant role in determining the actual level of knowledge, in general for all methods, and particularly for the three temporary methods (condom, IUD and pill) and especially for the rhythm method. The low level of knowledge reported by the respondents prior to probing and the subsequent increase following probing may be due to shyness of the fisherwomen to respond to questions about contraceptives, the fact they had only heard about the method but did not know much about it, and problems of understanding the concept of family planning methods.

*Attitude to family planning and reasons for favour/disfavour*

The attitude of the respondents to family planning indicated that the majority (80 percent) were in favourable of family planning. Among the remaining respondents, 16.8 percent expressed disapproval and 3.2 percent claimed to have no idea about family planning (Table 2).

**Table 2** :Percentage distribution of respondents by reasons for favourable /unfavourable attitude to family planning

Reason	Percent
Favour FP:	31.7 (47)
It helps to maintain the standard of living	27.7 (41)
It makes the family small and happy	23.0 (34)
It limits the family and reduces expenditure the	17.6 (26)
It protects mother's and child's health	
Do not favour FP:	45.2 (14)
Operation harmful to health	29.0 (9)
It is against religion/God	16.1 (5)
Children are God's gift	9.7 (3)
Fear of death of living children	

he figure in brackets represent the number of respondents.

The prominent reasons stated by respondents who held favourable attitudes to family planning were by and large economic (Table 3), the most important being "to maintain the standard of living" (31.7 percent). Apart from this, health reasons such as "mother and child health are protected" were given by about 18 percent of the respondents.

**Table 3** : Percentage distribution of respondents by family planning practice

User and method	Percent
Ever user	37.8 (70)
Method ever used	40.0 (28)
Abstinence	7.0 (5)
IUD/Pill	53.0 (37)
Tubectomy	

The figures in brackets represent the number of respondents.

The chief reasons given by respondents who disapproved of family planning were that "the operation makes people weak and it is harmful to their health" (45.2 percent). That family planning is against religion/God and "children are God's gift" was expressed by an equal number (45.1 percent), and fear of child

loss was the least mentioned reason (by about 10 percent). The findings clearly indicate that adoption of family planning has been hampered on account of the fear of side effects, and hence appropriate measures are called for to remove the existing fears and doubts about the use of the people various methods among the people.

### *Family planning practice*

The findings reveal that almost two-fifths (378 percent) of the respondents had ever used some type of contraception during their married life. Among the methods, sterilisation was the most accepted method. Nearly a fifth (19 percent) of all the respondents and 52 percent of all ever users reported to have adopted sterilisation (Table 3). It may be noted that though vasectomy well known, not a single vasectomy had been performed in the study area. This clearly indicates that only women were active in the adoption of permanent methods. Next to tubectomy, abstinence was the most popular method and around 42 percent of the ever users reported to have practised it. Such a high percentage of couple practising natural methods is not found among other societies. At the same time, one need not doubt the finding as a high percentage of the respondents not only reported knowledge of abstinence but also approved of it. Only 6.2 percent of the ever users had accepted temporary methods like the IUD and or I pills.

The above findings reveal that among the respondents who had accepted family planning, tubectomy ranked first; there was no even a single case of male sterilisation. The reason for this is probably the type of occupation that the men folk are engaged in-since fishing is hard work the fishermen do not want to take any risk which would affect their livelihood by accepting vasectomy, which they fear will affect their health and strength.

### *Family planning and children ever born*

The average number of children ever born to the respondents in the study area was 3.99. It was observed that over half (55 percent) of the respondents had accepted some form of family planning method (abstinence, sterilisation) only after the age of 35. This clearly indicates that the idea of planning the family came at a very late stage of their life, or after having completed the desired family size. The average number of children ever born for those currently practising abstinence was 5.4, which clearly supports the above view that the effect of this method on unwanted pregnancy is minimal.

## **Conclusion**

The study reveals good knowledge and favourable attitudes (80 percent) towards family planning among the fishermen community of coastal Tamil Nadu. However, only 37.8 percent were found to have accepted some form of family planning, among which sterilisation and abstinence were most widely practised. Among the sterilisation acceptors, all were female. In fact, not a single vasectomy case had been performed in the study area, the major reason being the fear that it would affect their health and consequently their day-to-day activity of fishing which is their only source of income.

The study reveals that the knowledge of permanent methods and abstinence among the respondents was more than that of temporary methods. Therefore, intensive efforts should be made to popularise temporary methods and birth spacing. For this, suitable special orientation training camps should be organised to remove the misconceptions about the use of various family planning methods. Additionally, the IEC programme should be further strengthened so as to motivate the people to adopt family planning methods at an early stage of their married life.

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