Chapter-7

Son Preference and Fertility
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SON PREFERENCE AND FERTILITY

7.1 Introduction

In the developing countries one of the reasons mentioned frequently for the high level of desired fertility, is the importance of having sons for economic, social and religious reasons. Traditionally in agrarian societies, particularly in patriarchal societies, sons are considered functional for maximizing economic or non-economic utilities. Sons provide the family labour and eventually assume responsibility for the household and for running the farm. They are also expected to assume the responsibility for parents in old age, as daughters usually marry out and are less likely to provide financial support. The family name is also preserved through a son. In addition to performing economic activities, male children are also supposed to carry out funeral and post funeral rites for their deceased parents. Among Hindus, a son kindles the funeral pyre and this ensures the salvation of his father’s soul. According to Hindu religious belief only a son can perform some of the religious rites on the death of his father. The latter is doomed to a particular kind of hell unless these rites are performed.

7.2 Social, Economic and Religious Characteristics of Son Preference and Fertility Behaviour

The economic value of a son is usually more emphasised by females than males. Women in most agrarian societies are dependent more on their male kin for financial support and typically they are junior to their husbands by a couple of years. This factor may constitute a reason for them to want to produce many children in order to avoid destitution when widowed. On the other hand husbands lay more emphasis on having a son for continuing the family name.

All these socio-economic cum religious attributes are responsible on the part of parents of Indian societies expressing explicit preference for sons over daughters. This preference is noticed right from the moment of birth in these societies. The birth of male child is immediately followed by a call to pray in the name of God among
Muslims, and celebration among Hindus but no such ceremonies are noticed when a female child is born.

Preference for one sex over the other for whatever reasons may lead to higher fertility both at individual and societal levels. Couples with a strong preference for one sex or for at least one child of each sex, may go beyond their desired family size in the event that they do not achieve the sex composition they want by the time their preferred number of children is reached.

In the Indian society we still find a strong influence of tradition. These cultural traditions have a deep impact on the fertility behaviour of the people and thus promote the desire for more children both male and female with a greater desire for a male child. The world fertility survey on sex preference shows that all over the world particularly in China and India the two most populous countries gender preference is rampant and has given rise to sex determination test and the mushrooming of clinics for such purposes.

In rural India preference for a male child is deeply rooted in the religious social and economic environment. The birth of a son, according to the Hindu scriptures is regarded important because a son has to perform the last rites upon the death of his father for his Moksha, and thereafter the Shradha rites yearly, which is supposed to save the fathers soul from going to hell. Indian society is more or less a patrilineal society and therefore sons are highly desired for carrying on the family’s name and transfer of property rights, particularly landed property, as providers of emotional comfort and financial security in the parent’s old age, and as the main source of reliable labour in farming and other family type economic ventures. But among the Muslims the birth of a son does not have any religious significance as is found in the case of Hindus. Rather in Islam daughters are without doubt a great blessing from almighty Allah. They are a means of salvation and a path Jannah (Heaven) for their parent’s. The holy Prophet (PBH) has stated that when a boy is born then he brings one Noor (light) and when a girl is born, then she brings two Noor’s. It has been narrated in a Hadith that the Holy Prophet (PBH) has stated that if parents are kind and generous towards their daughters, then they will be so close to the Holy Prophet (S.W.A) in Jannah like one finger is to the next. The Holy Prophet has also stated that the person who is faced with hardships due to his daughter and
makes *Sabr* (patient) then his daughter will be a *Purdah* (curtain) between him and hell. The crux of the above narration states that one who loves his daughter and withstands the hardship of grooming and getting them married then Almighty Allah makes *Jannah Waajib* (compulsory) on him and keeps him protected from the fire of hell.

7.3 Studies Pertaining to Son Preference and Fertility

Repetto (1972,p. 70-76) tested an hypothesis that, in developing countries with strong son preference, limitation of family size and associated fertility behaviour is constrained by the strong desire to ensure the survival of one or more sons. Further it is noted that families with a high proportion of daughters tend, other things being equal, to have smaller families, and families with a high proportion of sons, again other things being equal, tend to have a higher fertility. In an earlier study based on the 1951-61 intercensal data, centered on 1956, and the survey findings of *The Khanna Study* in the Punjab state, May and Heer (1968, p. 199-210) designed a computer stimulation model to study the impact on desired family size of survivorship of sons. The authors concluded that, “If every pair of parents were to practice perfectly effective family planning when son survivorship has been assured, the maximum reduction in the model intrinsic rate of increase of India is 24 percent” (p. 208). It is estimated that the average number of children born is reduced from 7.0 to 5.1, a reduction of 27%, under four specific conditions. Jain characterized these assumptions as “stringent and unrealistic” (1975, p. 157). (Chaudhury. (1982), pp 46-47)

Thus, India may be placed in the category of higher son preference for there is a history of female infanticide (Wyon and Gordon, 1971) and a higher mortality rate for female children (Cassen, 1976) attributed usually to neglect. However, using other criteria, India may not rank as high in terms of son preference. For example the Operation Research Group (ORG) in Baroda, India, questioned an all India sample of about 25,000 couples in 1970 on various aspects of fertility behaviour and contraception and found that the majority of Indian couples want children of both sexes, while envincing a modest preference for sons. Most of those who wanted an even number of children wanted an equal number of sons and daughters, while those
who stated a desire for an odd number generally wanted sons, one more than the number of daughters (ORG 1970). (Chaudhury. (1982), pp 42-43)

According to the NFHS 3 women in Odisha are much more likely to use contraception if they already have a son in consistent with the son preference attitude. For example, among women with two children, 68 percent of women with two sons use a method of family planning, compared with 35 percent of women with two daughters and 60 percent of women with one son and one daughter. (NFHS, III, 2005-06. (2008), http://www.nfhsindia.org , 16 / 08 / 10)

7.4 Major Findings

Table No.30: Distribution of the Respondents According to their Educational Qualification and their Level of Son Preference in Cuttack District

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Categories</th>
<th>Level of son preference</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illiterate</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>75.4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>52.5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>30.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher Secondary</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.A</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above B.A</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total no. of respondents - 250

From the above data it is quite evident that women who are highly educated do not have a strong son preference attitude as compared to the women with lesser educational qualification or those who are illiterate. Educated women are enlightened enough not to discriminate between a male child and female child. For them both are equal in all respects. They feel that whether they give birth to a boy or a girl it hardly has any impact on their status in their family or the society at large nor do they consider a male child as a security in their old age. Their prime concern is to give birth to a child who is healthy both physically as well as mentally.
The above data also shows that there are some educated women who have a strong or a moderate preference for a male child. As reported there are about 19.6% women who project a strong son preference attitude and about 15.2% women showing a moderate preference for a male child. This proves that the Muslim women of Odisha even though after attaining higher education are still rooted to their tradition. The reason for these women for favouring a male child over a female child was that there are too many responsibilities and obligations to be fulfilled in the case of a girl child. A girl requires more care and attention as compared to a boy. Moreover, she has to be given away in marriage which is a much greater burden for the parents. According to these respondents they have seen their parents undergo the pain at getting their daughters married and therefore do not want to experience the same.

Thus, education does not necessarily have any effect on the son preference attitude. Muslims of Cuttack district are still very conservative and traditional in their attitude. They are still not very modern in their outlook. They still believe that a son raises their status in the society. If they don’t give birth to a son then it will put a question on their womanhood. For them a son is necessary from the societal point of view. Graph no. 19 shows the same details as represented in table no. 30.

**Graph No.19: Distribution of the Respondents According to their Educational Qualification and their Level of Son Preference in Cuttack District**

![Graph showing distribution of respondents based on educational qualification and son preference level](image-url)
Table No.31: Distribution of the Respondents According To the Husbands Occupation and the Level of Son Preference in Cuttack District

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupational Categories</th>
<th>Level of son preference</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculturists</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>64.3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Govt. employee</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non govt. employee</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>24.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled labourers</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unskilled labourers</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>70.6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total no of respondents - 250

The above table clearly points towards the fact that a high level of son preference attitude is found among the skilled, unskilled labourers as well as the agriculturists. Among the agriculturists the desire for male children may be attributed to the fact of keeping the landed property intact in their family. A son will also be a source of help in the agricultural fields. As far as the labourers are concerned, sons will be a source of security to them as compared to girls. They are believed to lessen the financial problems of the family by being an additional source of income.

It is also found that among the govt. as well as non- govt. employees the craze for a male child is comparatively less. This is due to the fact that this particular category of people are well educated and therefore do not dwell in the traditional and orthodox belief that a son is superior or preferable than a daughter. They do not discriminate between a boy and girl and treat them as equal. But still there are some who despite being educated have such a strong influence of their traditional culture that no matter what they have, a slight inclination towards a male child is visible.

Among the business class people also a tilt towards a male child has been observed although not very strong. Their preference for a male child is basically for the reason that a son will be a helping hand in their business and can further carry on their work to new heights but with a daughter there will be less possibility in terms of
achieving such a goal. Graph no. 20 shows the same details as represented in table no. 31.

**Graph No.20: Distribution of the Respondents According To the Husbands Occupation and the Level of Son Preference in Cuttack District**

![Graph showing distribution of respondents based on husbands' occupation and son preference levels.](image)

**Table No.32: Distribution of the Respondents According to the Occupation of Wives and Level of Son Preference in Cuttack District**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupational Categories</th>
<th>Level of son preference</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House Wife</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled labourers</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unskilled labourers</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>52.4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total no. of respondents - 250

Among other factors, preference for one sex over another is determined by differential participation in productive activities by males and females. In India where agriculture is advanced and linked with plough and irrigation, it is men who do most of the farming. Women less often than men participate in agricultural activities. Although the women spend roughly the same time and sometimes more, her participation in directly productive activities in general and crop production in particular, the total time in work compared to male is quite limited with a few
exceptions. Females never produce enough to offset their consumption. Therefore in
an economy where female participation in productive activities is marginal and where
daughters are rather a drag on family resources one is likely to observe a greater
preference for sons. Such is also the scenario in the rural areas of Cuttack where
agriculture is dominant. The data of the agriculturist category clearly proves the above
mentioned facts.

In advanced non agricultural societies, one finds no preference for one
particular sex over the other because of the fundamental shift in patterns of
occupation and ownership and change in mortality rates. In advanced industrial
societies children are mostly consumers rather than producers because in these
societies there is hardly any scope for child labour and most children remain in school
until their late teens. Moreover, parents do not depend on their children for old age
security. Therefore, one would expect to find no preference for a particular sex over
the other in such societies. The above data clearly projects that the educated working
class, both male and female, in Cuttack district of Odisha do not have a very strong
son preference attitude. Only 48.8% of the respondents showed son preference that to
a moderate one. The prime reason is the direct and indirect costs involved in raising
the children. Direct costs involve the expenses required to provide education, food,
clothing, recreation and health care facilities. Indirect costs are mostly attributed to
income foregone as a result of the withdrawal of educated mothers from paid
employment outside the home, because of the presence of young children. In this
category is also included the leisure time that the parents have to sacrifice due to the
presence of young children of varying ages at home. Thus parents of a higher socio
economic status are least concerned about the sex composition of children since an
additional child in order to meet sex preference would involve extra cost.

Among the wage earners both skilled (50%) and unskilled (52.4%) a strong
preference for a male child is observed. This is due to the fact that this particular
category of people is dependent on their children for old age security. Therefore it is
quite obvious for them to be biased towards a male child. Graph no. 21 shows the
same details as represented in table no. 32.
Graph No.21: Distribution of the Respondents According to the Occupation of Wives and Level of Son Preference

7.5 Case Studies

In order to substantiate the statements given above some case studies have been done on the Muslims of Cuttack district in Odisha as under:

Case V

This is the case of a woman “nop” a resident of Gohalipur, Raisuguda a village under Cuttack district. Her current age is 34 and she got married at the age of 22. Her husband is a farmer. Both husband and wife are not well educated. She did not even complete her primary education and her husband is an 8th class drop out. She bore her first child, a girl child three years after her marriage. But prior to giving birth to her first child she had suffered two miscarriages. Even though they have limited means for rearing their children they still want a son who can continue their family name. But due to some health problem “nop” was not able to conceive for the last nine years. Despite their financial problem they are still trying to alleviate this problem by taking medical help from the local doctors and hospitals. She is badly in need of some thorough medical treatment so as to be able to give birth to another child. They favour a male child to carry out their family name but are not against female education. They are sending their daughter to school and want her to get the best education.
Case VI

Another interesting case that caught my attention was of “qrs” aged 34 and a resident of Maulvi Muhalla, Nandol a village in the Cuttack district of Odisha. She got married at the age of 24 and within a year of her marriage she gave birth to a girl child. Her husband is an Arts Graduate and works as a salesman in a shop. After completing her high school education she stopped studying any further due to the conservative and orthodox nature of her father. Therefore, she is just a housewife. Economically they are not so well off and that is the reason they wanted to avoid having any more children. But due to family pressure and a strong son preference attitude of her in-laws “qrs” after an interval of 3 years gave birth to her second child and fortunately to a male child. According to both of them now their family is complete and they do not want any more children as more children means more responsibility and they want to give both their children a good upbringing. They are using contraceptives to avoid unwanted pregnancy. She regrets the fact that she was not able to continue her studies. Therefore, both she and her husband are in favour of education and want to impart the best education to their children and give them a secure future. They do not want their children to face the same difficulties that they are facing.

From the above two cases it is quite clear that a strong son preference attitude is inherent among the Muslims of Cuttack residing in the villages. In both the cases the respondents are not so educationally affluent. So it can be said that education to some extent has some bearing in the thought process of the people. Education motivates the people to think rationally and not to indulge in any sort of gender discrimination. We also find that in both the cases although the respondents are not financially well off still they are ready to take the pressure of having a large family only to fulfil their desire to have a male child.

Case VII

“tuv” aged 29 married to has a different story to tell. She is a resident of Kesharpur in Cuttack. She got married to her first cousin when she was 21 years old. She is a graduate and her husband is an engineer. Belonging to a joint family and being the eldest daughter in law she had a great burden of responsibilities on her
shoulder. Her first delivery at the age of 23 was quite painful as she gave birth to a
dead girl child. Then two years later she again gave birth to a girl child. She was a bit
depressed due to the fact that she had given birth to a girl child. Despite being
educated she still has that stereotyped belief that a son is necessary to continue the
name of the family, although there is no such pressure either from the side of her
husband or her in-laws to give birth to a male child. Therefore they as a couple have
decided to keep their ideal family size to three children so that if luck permits she can
satisfy her desire to bear a male child. Both husband and wife are very much against
abortion but are using contraceptives.

Contrary to the first two cases in the above case we find that even though both
the husband and wife are educationally privileged still a son preference attitude is
lingering among them. The social stigma attached to the importance of having a male
child is so strong that even by attaining some degree of rationality the couples cannot
deviate their thinking in a logical direction.

Case VIII

Next is the case of “xyz”, aged 40 years. She is a resident of Jobra, an area
which falls under Cuttack town. She was married at the age of 21 into a conservative
and orthodox joint family. She quit her studies soon after completing her high school
education and her husband is also not much educated, being a ninth class drop out.
Her husband runs a grocery store and they have an average income. Soon after the
completion of one year of her marriage, at the age of 22, she gave birth to her first
child a baby girl. Again after 2 years, at the age of 24, she gave birth to another child
and this time again a girl child. Her husband and her in-laws were quite depressed for
the reason that she failed to bear a son even the second time. She had to hear a lot of
taunts for this. But finally after 2 years she bore a male child. This brought quite a
relief to her and her family. Now that their intention of having a male child was
achieved they decided to stop any further conception by means of contraceptive
measures. Since they have two daughters they do not want to take the risk of having
another child because if she turns out to be a girl, she will again be an added burden to
their family, even though at times they desire to have another son. They due to their
strong son preference attitude send their son to an English medium convent school
whereas their daughters have been admitted into vernacular government schools.
Thus, the above case is a bright example of the fact that how strongly is the son preference attitude rooted among the Muslims of Cuttack district.

Case IX

Another interesting case that I came across was of “ghi”, aged 45, who is a resident of Dargah bazaar, an area which comes under Cuttack town, married to a well known businessman of Cuttack. She herself is well educated having completed her Graduation from a reputed college in Cuttack. She got married at the age of 21, soon after the completion of her graduation. According to her getting married at a young age brings with it a lot of challenges and responsibilities which may not be easy for everyone to cope with. She bore her first child a baby boy at the age of 22. Because of her very conservative family background and a joint family system, the will of the family and her husband mattered more than her own wish. Therefore she was forced to bear more children with a minimum difference between their ages. The time gap between her first and second child was one and a half year, which was a boy. Then after a gap of two years again she gave birth to a son, then after 2 and a half years yet again a son was born and then finally after 2 more years she gave birth to her last child, a girl. Thankfully giving birth to so many children did not affect her health condition much. All her deliveries were normal without any complications. At present she is aged 45 and has 4 sons and daughter. Surprisingly instead of having a weakness for a male child her husband was keener to have a daughter as a result of which she gave birth to 5 children, her youngest child being her daughter. Today she has no regret having five children because her husband is economically stable and is capable of raising five children and providing them with the best facilities available. According to her husband having more children gives security in old age and helps in continuing the family name. He always had desired having many children, particularly at least one daughter and therefore he does not regret the fact that they have five children because he has the means to fulfil each of his child’s needs. Both are in favour of female education and do not consider girls to be a liability.

Thus, the above case can be seen as a path breaker in terms of son preference but such cases are very exceptional and nothing can be generalized on the basis of it. More or less son preference attitude is rampant within our culture and tradition and no amount of education or modernity can bring any sort of lasting change in the attitudes
of the people of our country. Therefore the Muslim inhabitants of Cuttack district are also no exception in this regard. A deeply rooted preference for a male child was also found among them. So religion has no role to play in this regard because the basic culture our nation has a very powerful and deep seated impact on the minds of the people which are evident in their way of living.

References


