Chapter 9

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The foregoing study contradicts the paradigm that religion is the determining factor behind the high fertility rate amongst Muslims. The findings clearly reveal that fertility behavior of the Muslim population in Cuttack district of Odisha is not only affected by religion but by a host of social, cultural and economic factors such as early age at marriage, level of education, occupation, infant mortality, son preference attitude and low status of Muslim women.

It is a general perception that Muslim population is higher than the other religious communities in India because of the fact that the primary aim of Muslim marriage is the reproduction of legitimate children and Islam as a religion does not permit abortion and sterilization. This particular belief to some extent has been ruled out through this study. Through extensive interview with the respondents I arrived at the conclusion that although the Muslims of Cuttack district are religious and are very strongly attached to their religious values most of them especially those belonging to the lower strata and those who are educationally backward, lack proper knowledge of the teachings of their religion, Islam. They do not have any idea about what their religion has to say in terms of having many children, abortion or sterilization. Most of the respondents whose family size was larger were mainly because of their illiteracy, ignorance and poor socio-economic status. For example 27.6% of the respondents who were illiterate had an average number of living children of 4.4 per woman and from the economic point of view the average number of living children was as high as 4.6 per woman for 11.2% of the respondents who belonged to the agriculturalist category. Very few of the respondents who were illiterate as well as poor and had a smaller family size primarily because one of the spouses got sterilized. This clearly shows that their family size has nothing to do with their religion rather their illiteracy, ignorance and low economic status are the main reasons behind it. Only a handful of the respondents with larger family size were found who belonged to higher socio-economic strata of the society. These respondents had appropriate knowledge about the teachings of the Quran and the Hadith and therefore had not placed any restriction on the number of children they reproduced. A good number of educated couple,
however, used contraceptives as a family planning measure and kept their ideal family size i.e. 2 children (*Hum do Humare do*). Through the data on Cuttack district it was revealed that only 15.9% of the respondents who were illiterate had adopted the family planning measures while the percentage was as high as 89% for those who had completed their post graduation. Although birth control through abortion is prohibited in Islam I also came across a few respondents who had resorted to abortion so as to avoid unwanted pregnancies in spite of being very well aware of this fact. Therefore if we go by the majority it can be concluded that religion has very little effect on the fertility of the Muslims of Cuttack district.

Age at marriage has an important bearing on the fertility behavior. Since most of the Muslims are married at an early age their reproductive span is longer. They are exposed to more pregnancies and more child births. This accelerates higher fertility because until and unless the people are literate they lack knowledge, attitude and practices (KAP) of the various family planning methods which would help in controlling population growth. In the rural as well as the urban areas of Cuttack district about 30.2% and 24.8% of the respondents respectively were married at an early age i.e. between the age group of 15-19 years. The family size for the rural respondents was 4.5 children per woman and for the urban respondents the family size was found to be 3.6 children per woman. Therefore their family size was found to be larger as compared to those respondents married at a later age. In Cuttack district although some of the respondents were found to be economically developed but the mindset has not changed and they are still very conservative and narrow minded. Most of them consider marrying out their daughters at an early age a better option rather than allowing them to pursue higher studies and become mature. Such thinking dominates the minds of those who belong to a poor socio-economic class. It was found that those girls who were given a chance to continue their studies even after marriage have developed a notion to have their family size small. It was reported that those who were married in the age group of 20-24 and 25 and above, mostly had smaller family size since their reproductive span was smaller as compared to those married at an early age. Moreover, they also had the maturity and enlightenment to understand the benefits of small family norm. In the rural areas there were about 28% respondents in the age group 25 and above and their family size was found to be 2.3 children per woman and in the urban areas 24% of respondents was in the age group
25 and above and their family size was 1.8 children per woman. This fact very clearly rules out the prevailing belief that religion alone is not the determining factor responsible for higher fertility among Muslims. Thus through proper motivation and awareness of the people it is possible to change the mind sets of the people so that they may understand the disadvantages associated with early marriages. Repeated conceptions have a negative effect on the health of women as well as the newly conceived child. Such conditions adversely affect the society as a whole. This was reported during the course of the field work.

The data also demonstrate that occupation is also a major determinant contributing to the fertility behavior of Muslims. From the data collected in Cuttack district, it was found that the average number of living children per woman was higher among the agriculturist’s (6.7 in rural areas and 5 in urban areas) and the skilled (2.6 in rural areas and 2.8 in urban areas) and the un-skilled laborers (3.4 in rural areas and 3.2 in urban areas). Among the laborers the family size was larger for the sole reason that they believed that the larger the number of children greater will be the helping hands in the family both financially as well as in terms of contribution to the household work. The sons will help by working in the fields and grazing the cattle’s while the daughters will help by engaging themselves in the activities like cooking, keeping the house clean, looking after her younger brothers and sisters, collecting woods, fetching water from the nearby well etc. This particular class of Muslims also had a strong son preference attitude because of which they kept on reproducing children until and unless they have a son. Among the agriculturists the family size was higher because of the obvious reason more the number of children less will be the burden of work in the agricultural fields as well as at the home. The above facts could also be proven through the case studies of the two ladies “abc” and “def”. Both of them had a large family size and they also cited the above discussed reasons for the same. As compared to the above three categories discussed above the family size of the Government employees (2.3 in rural areas and 2.7 in urban areas), Non-government employees (1.7 in rural areas and 1.6 in urban areas) and the business class (3.1 in rural areas and 2.8 in urban areas) was much less. In terms of adoption of family planning methods the percentage was found to be minimum among the agriculturist’s and the skilled and un-skilled laborers being 17.9%, 32%, 35.3% respectively as compared to the business class, government employees and private
employees, their percentage was 51.7%, 59.3% and 80.5 % respectively. Moreover, it was also informed that women engaged in high profile jobs either have small families or preferred to follow the one child norm. Only those women engaged in petty jobs such as housemaids or laborers have larger families because of the reason that they were married at an early age and were either illiterate or very less educated. But there were also a few women belonging to this category who had completed their high school education and were in favor of small family norm but could not follow it because of their poor status in the family and no involvement in the decision making process because of the dominance of their husbands This clearly brings to light the fact that the poor economic condition as well as low standards of education has a strong bearing upon the fertility behavior of Muslims of Cuttack district.

Education is one of the most significant factors affecting fertility pattern. Higher the education, smaller is the size of the family and vice versa. Education shapes and moulds the minds of the youth to understand the negative consequences that more number of reproductions has on the health of the mother as well as the social well being. In the study of Cuttack district it was found that the average number of living children was 4.6 in the rural areas and 4.2 in the urban areas among the respondents who were illiterate. It was the minimum among those who had completed their post graduation. It was found to be only 1 child per woman in the rural areas and 1.5 children per woman in the urban areas. Despite of the fact that the literacy rate is higher among girls in Cuttack district, but this urge had only gained momentum during the past 15 to 20 years. Perhaps we can hope for better future in terms of ideas related to the small family norm but the present situation is such that very few Muslim girls go for higher education. Education in one way delays the age at marriage and indirectly reduces the period of reproductive capacity which in turn contributes to lower fertility rate. Field data also proves this fact since 52.2% of the respondents who were illiterate were married in the age group of 15-19 years and none of the respondents who had completed their graduation or post graduation were married at an early age. Among the respondents it was found that even those who had completed their higher secondary education were keen at keeping their family size to just 2 so that the financial as well physical burden on them would become less and eventually they would be able to bring up their children in the best possible manner and give their children the best facilities within their reach. Moreover, it was also found that in
the matters of adoption of the family planning methods 89% of the respondents who had completed a high level of education i.e. post graduation were reported to be the most enthusiastic to have a small family size. Those who were illiterate showed no interest in keeping their family size small. Therefore for them the percentage was very less i.e. 15.9%. Hence, the parents should enable their daughters to pursue higher studies as well as motivate them to adopt family planning methods to keep their family size smaller.

Due to higher infant mortality rate prevalent among the Muslims of Cuttack District, the couples continued to be active in their reproductive behavior. This factor played an important role in resulting for higher fertility rate among the Muslims of Cuttack district. Out of 250 mothers interviewed, 71 of them had experienced child deaths. 229 of them were those who had lost at least one child and 42 of them were those who had lost more than one child of all their children born. Thus the death of one or two children is quite a common phenomenon for the Muslims of Cuttack district. For almost 20.9% of the child deaths no reason could be cited by the parents. Such cases were mainly found among the poor categories of people of the rural areas where medical facilities were not available. Moreover, such sections of the people are mostly illiterate and ignorant and therefore were not able to make out the exact cause of death of their children. The other two vital reasons, causing the death of children were prolonged fever and birth related incidents, their percentage being 16.2% and 12.2% respectively. Henceforth in an intention to make up for the losses suffered and so as to achieve their ideal family size they remained active in their reproductive activity which eventually led to higher fertility. This again throws light on the fact that poor educational and economic standards of the Muslims of Cuttack district have an important bearing upon their total fertility rate. Moreover, it was also found that those respondents who were married at an early age, in the age group 15-19 had experienced the highest percentage of child deaths being 56.5%. The reason attributed to this is that those girls who were married at an early age encountered maternal issues and they also lack the knowledge as well as the maturity regarding conception issues as well as the bearing and rearing of children. Therefore this throws light on the fact that religion has no connection with the higher fertility rate among the Muslims of Cuttack district.
A strong son preference attitude among the Muslims of Cuttack district is yet another factor determining their fertility behavior. Although giving birth to a male child does not hold any religious significance among the Muslims but still the craze to bear a son is quite rampant among the Muslims of Cuttack district. Even among those who are educated such an attitude is found. About 41.4% of the respondents who had completed their higher secondary education projected a strong son preference attitude. This is mainly because of the orthodox and narrow thought process prevailing in their society. The social stigma attached to the birth of girls discourages couples to desire for a girl child. Many educated and economically well off respondents said that they preferred a son over a daughter. One such respondent was “tuv” on whom a case study has been done. It is not that they hate a girl child but are scared of taking the responsibility of bearing and rearing a girl. Moreover, the mother’s social status increases in the family as soon as she gives birth to a male child. This attitude is responsible to have as many births till a son is born. Some of the respondents revealed that there was constant pressure from the side of their in-laws to bear a son who would continue their family name. Such a pressure to bear a son was not only found among the illiterate and ignorant people living in the in the rural areas but it was also found among some of the educated families settled in the urban areas. Out of the case studies that were conducted, the cases of “nop” and “qrs”, who are the residents of rural areas of Cuttack district, throw light on the above mentioned facts. Those respondents who were economically and educationally weak gave the obvious reason for preferring a boy over a girl child, to be that a son will act as a breadwinner to the family while a girl has to be given away in marriage and because of their poor financial condition the burden of marrying their daughters would be too much for them. Among the illiterate the son preference was found to be very strong the percentage being 75.4%. And highest son preference attitude was found among the agriculturists, skilled and unskilled laborers, with the percentages 64.3%, 68% and 70.6% respectively. Another important factor that came to light from this study was that the percentage was almost nil for the working women in the matters of preference for a son. For such women the gender of the child did not matter to them. Moreover, most of them were very ambitious and had kept their family size to just 1 and wanted to stick to it no matter whether they gave birth to a boy or a girl. However, I also came across respondents who were keen on having daughters rather than sons, and had gone beyond their ideal family size number just to have a daughter. Such was the
case of “ghi” who happened to be a resident of an urban area of Cuttack district. But
the number of such respondents is too small and negligible. Therefore the desire to
have a son is so strong among the Muslims of Cuttack District that they keep on
reproducing children even when their ideal family size has been achieved. This
accelerates fertility rate indirectly.

The social status of Muslim Women in Cuttack District is not very favorable.
Since Cuttack itself is very conservative and tradition bound, the low status of women
is bound to follow. It is not that the condition of Muslim women is very pathetic but
in terms of higher education and their economic independence much progress has not
been found. Some of the respondents revealed that although they were allowed to
avail higher studies they were kept under strict supervision of their parents and
guardians. Inspite of higher studies only a few of them could independently take up a
job. Most of them were either married off against their will or asked to pursue such a
career which would give them the convenience of staying with their parents. This
shows the level of narrow thinking prevailing in their society. Although the concept of
dowry is not very evident among the Muslims of Cuttack but still because of the fact
of living in a Hindu dominated area the Muslims have also been influenced to some
extent. Therefore, they also consider girls as a liability. The above discussed thinking
was clearly found in the case studies of “stu” and “pqr”. Most of the Girls were
married at an early age because of the societal pressure on the parents to marry off
their daughters at the right age. This could clearly be seen in the case of “vwx”, who
is a resident of a rural area in Cuttack district. Moreover since most of the girls are
either illiterate or less educated and are not financially independent they do not stand
a place in the decision making process of the family. Not even in the matters of
deciding the ideal family size nor in the matters of adopting family planning methods
to have a desired family size. In many cases in the rural areas the women were forced
to continue having children in spite of their bad health. Among the respondents I also
came across some who were financially independent, ambitious, holding a very
progressive thinking and thereafter had an equal share in the decision making process.
Their number, however, was very insignificant to be able to bring about any marked
change in the society. But still we can hope that in the coming years we can hope for a
better future in terms of the status of Muslim women in Cuttack district. This clearly
brings to light the fact that the low status of the Muslim women may be regarded as one of the reason influencing high fertility rate.

From the above discussion it is clear that the stereotype belief that religion is the sole reason behind higher fertility rate among Muslims is not correct, rather there are numerous socio-economic factors which affect their fertility behavior. The role of religion in determining fertility behavior among the Muslims of Cuttack district of Odisha does not stand the empirical scrutiny of data collected from field work. Since the present study is confined to a very smaller area, it cannot be generalized. Therefore, it is required to carry out studies relating to adoption of family planning methods by the Muslim community in general. This will help in the formulation of population policy in India, keeping in mind the result of such studies conducted on Muslims. This is an area where further research needs to be conducted to fill in the existing loop holes.