

SON PREFERENCE AND FERTILITY: A STUDY AMONG THE MUSLIMS OF CUTTACK DISTRICT, ODISHA

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ABSTRACT:

Preference for a male child particularly in rural India is deeply entrenched in the religious social and economic environment. . According to the Hindu traditions, for example, the son performs the *Shradha* rites upon the death of his father, and thereafter yearly, which is supposed to save the father's soul from going to hell 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 economic security in the parents' old age; and as the chief source of reliable labor 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 a means of salvation and a path to *Jannah* for their parent's. But still the craze to bear a son is quite rampant among the Muslims of Cuttack district. This paper seeks to explore the fertility behaviour among Muslims in Cuttack district of Odisha .The main objective of the present study is to prove that higher fertility rate among Muslims is not because of their religion rather it seems to be determined by other social, cultural and economic factors such as their son preference attitude The present study seeks to collect data from both primary data such as unstructured interview schedules as well as an analytical study based on secondary sources such as the NFHS I, II, III, Census, Human Development Report etc. The reasons that were traditionally responsible for preference of sons over daughters still continue to be the guiding force behind such a perception in present context. The preference for sons over daughters has resulted in an increased level of fertility.

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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.

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.

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)

Objectives:

- To examine the existence of son preference among Muslims of Cuttack district.

- To assess the effect of son preference on fertility among Muslims of Cuttack district.

Materials and Methods:

In the present study data has been collected from both primary and secondary sources such as books, journals, articles, magazines and statistical data were referred to and primary data was collected with the help of unstructured interview schedules. Cuttack which is one of the largest city in Odisha has been chosen as the study area. The total population of Cuttack is 26,18,708 out of which 5% are Muslims. Out of the 14 blocks in cuttack district only 2 have been taken into account, namely Cuttack Sadar and Salepur. Moreover 6 villages have been studied namely Souri, Raisuguda and Nandol belonging to the Salepur block and Praharajpur, Parmahansa and Kandarpur belonging to the Cuttack Sadar block. The respondents were selected on the basis of purposive sampling. Thus on the basis of this sampling procedure the eligible couples among the Muslim religious group in the age group of 15-64 were chosen. The respondents were the female partners of the eligible couple. The total sample of the present study consisted of 250 respondents only.

Major Findings

Table No. 1: Distribution of the Respondents According to their Educational Qualification and their Level of Son Preference in Cuttack District

Educational Categories	Level of son preference					
	Strong		Moderate		Low	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Illiterate	52	75.4	12	17.4	05	7.2
Primary	28	52.5	16	30.2	09	17
High School	20	38.5	12	23	20	38.5
Higher Secondary	5	41.7	4	33.3	3	25
B.A	9	19.6	7	15.2	30	65.2
Above B.A	2	11.1	3	16.7	13	72.2

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. 1 shows the same details as represented in table no. 1.

Graph No.1: Distribution of the Respondents According to their Educational Qualification and their Level of Son Preference in Cuttack District

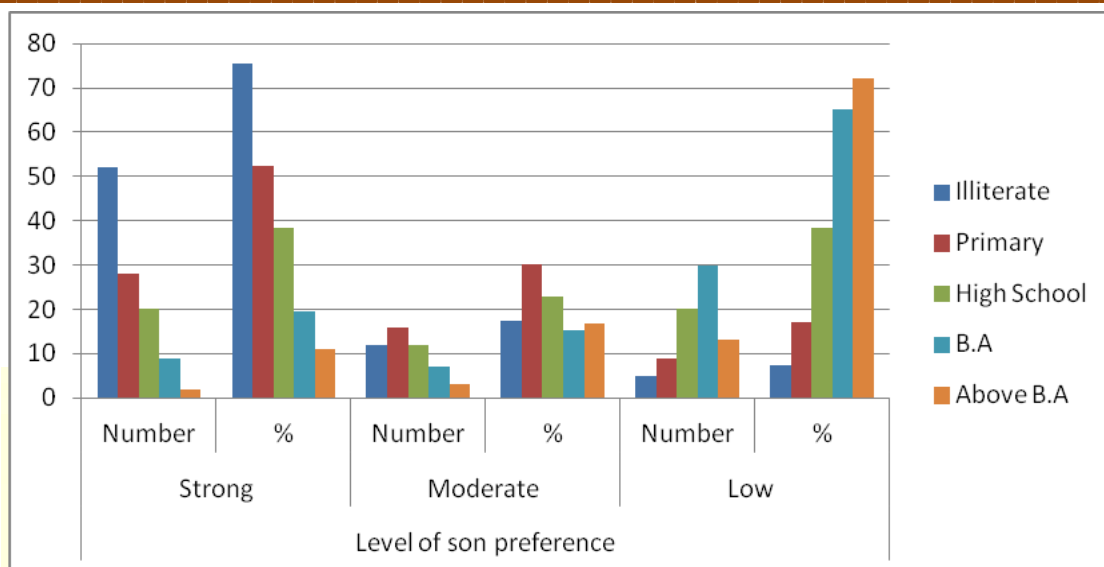


Table No.2: Distribution of the Respondents According To the Husbands Occupation and the Level of Son Preference in Cuttack District

Occupational Categories	Level of son preference					
	Strong		Moderate		Low	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Agriculturists	18	64.3	7	25	3	10.7
Govt. employee	22	27.1	21	25.9	38	46.9
Non govt. employee	11	26.8	5	12.2	25	61
Business	29	50	14	24.1	15	25.9
Skilled labourers	17	68	4	16	4	16
Unskilled labourers	12	70.6	3	17.6	2	11.8

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. 2 shows the same details as represented in table no. 2.

Graph No.2: Distribution of the Respondents According To the Husbands Occupation and the Level of Son Preference in Cuttack District

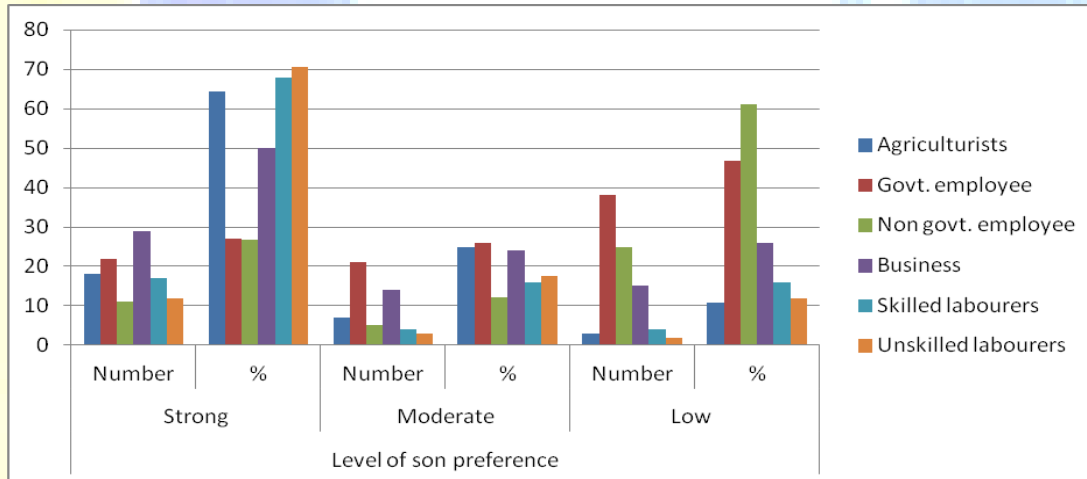


Table No.3: Distribution of the Respondents According to the Occupation of Wives and Level of Son Preference in Cuttack District

Occupational Categories	Level of son preference					
	Strong		Moderate		Low	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
House Wife	59	34	71	40.8	44	25.2
Service	0	0	21	48.8	22	51.2
Skilled labourers	6	50	4	33.3	2	16.7
Unskilled labourers	11	52.4	7	33.3	3	14.3

Total no. of respondents - 250

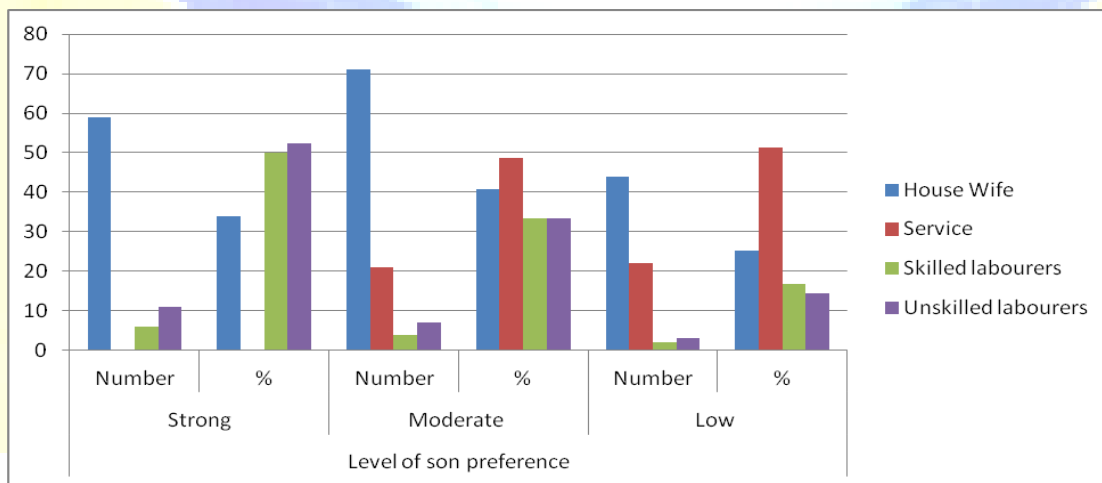
Among other factors, preference for one sex over another is determined by differential participation in productive activities by males and females. In India where agriculture is advanced and linked with plough and irrigation, it is men who do most of the farming. Women less often than men participate 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. 3 shows the same details as represented in table no. 3.

Graph No.3: Distribution of the Respondents According to the Occupation of Wives and Level of Son Preference



Discussion and Conclusion:

In the present study it has been found that an explicit preference for sons over daughters exists among the Muslims of Cuttack district. 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. 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 rural areas but it was also found among some of the educated families settled in the urban areas. 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. 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.

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