

## Social Status of Childless Couples in Three Different Ecological Settings

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### INTRODUCTION

Almost in all societies, fertility or the ability to produce children has a positive social value whereas infertility has a negative social value. Parenthood is considered as a norm. A woman's capacity to create, bear and nurture a child is the very essence of her womanhood, her unique and special capacity –prized, feared, envied, protected and celebrated. Birth is the only defence against the inevitability of death, an intimation of our immortality of our new hopes for the future. When the woman has a child she confirms herself and for others that she is a complete woman, fertile and capable of biological tasks of creating and perpetuating life (Peffer and Anne, 1983). Procreation is socially desired for family and religious reasons to ensure the continuation of the family lineage. A newly married woman is kept under close watch by the members of the family, and even neighbours. The slightest sign of her untoward behaviour or ill-health confirms the conviction of the elderly ladies that the bride is in the family way. In case conception does not take place, those around her may be patient for a year or two, but there after they start making queries, and then doctors, astrologers, saints are consulted, the couples go for pilgrimage and *mahatmas* to be blessed with the child. (Anand, 1984)

Family and society look down upon the couple who is not able to bear children within reasonable period of time following marriage. From simple enquires from family, friends and community to taunts, divorce and even being pressurized for a remarriage are some of the after effects of infertility particularly in rural areas and among low socio-economic status. In India, a barren woman occupies a low place in the society and she is known as "*Barj*". The term "*Barj*" refers to an unproductive and sterile field as well as a woman who fails to conceive (Kaul, 1996). Barrenness by many people is associated with sin particularly sexual sin. If children are considered as gift of god, not bearing children is surely a curse or a punishment. Many people come to

believe it as a 'curse' or punishment by God for their previous premarital sexual activities (Burgwyn, 1981).

In rural areas of India, the condition of barren woman is worst, here the status gradation through motherhood is so marked that barrenness is a dreaded condition, the inferior status awarded to barren woman is the other side of the high status awarded to the fertile woman. Motherhood is extolled, while barrenness is held as a curse. If a woman does not have a child, she is considered as 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 child birth, wedding, and marriage or while setting out of the house to fields, for sowing or to another village or city. In quarrels and squabbles, she is insulted of her failure in infertility performance. The dart of barrenness is thrown on her to whittle down her strength and to latently glorify fertility. She is under constant pressure from household members, relatives and neighbors to produce children (Patel, 1994).

Because of this social attitude, the childless couples almost in all the societies, feel socially isolated. With each unsuccessful attempt they feel isolated from family and friends with children. Women especially express the feelings of being excluded from the social nexus of the mothers and couples with children (Imeson, 1996).

The social isolation experienced by these couples has a major impact on their lives, many feel marginalized at family gatherings and social events (Harris, 1994). Without children they do not share the commonalities that children bring to life events, celebrations, social network, social events and parenting experience (Hireesh and Hireesh, 1989). Despite the fact that women have been reported to experience greater feeling of isolation than men (Daniluh, 1988). Phipps (1993) found that men also described feelings of isolation from others and physically isolated from their spouse.

The present study was designed to understand the dynamics of social relations of childless

couples in three different ecological settings of Jammu (Jammu and Kashmir). It was felt important to take different ecological settings because individual is influenced by his ecological setting which include physical set up (Demographic aspects like age, and education, occupation, availability of resources) and social set up (Caste system, religious groups, neighbourhood etc.).

The main aim of the study was to find out the social status of childless couples in family, society and at work place in rural, urban and tribal settings of Janmu.

### METHODOLOGY

Sample of the study was drawn from three different ecological settings of Jammu. Total 150 childless couples (50 from each ecological setting) were taken into consideration. Snow ball sampling technique was used for data collection. Interview guide and informal observation were used to elicit information from childless couples.

### RESULTS

Majority of respondents in all the three settings were in the age group 40-60 years. Respondents dwelling in urban setting were more educated than in rural and tribal setting. The main reason for childlessness was primary sterility (70%) in all the three settings. Repeated miscarriages, premature deaths, neonatal deaths, damaged fallopian tube, death of the child were some of the reasons found in case of pregnancy wastage(24%) and secondary infertility(6%).

### DYNAMICS OF SOCIAL RELATIONSHIP

#### Relationship of Childless Couples with Immediate Family

It was found that some of the respondents in ur-

ban, and most of the respondents in rural and tribal setting had extreme social pressure and criticism from their family members to have children (Table 1). In those cases where family members were hopeful for conception, respondents were kept under close watch by the members of the family. They had to face questions ranging from simple queries to sarcastic remarks when conception did not occur. In urban setting, some of the family members were suspecting that respondents must be using family planning measures. Female respondents especially from rural and tribal setting reported getting poor treatment and being given a low status in the family as compared to their counterparts having children. They did not get required cooperation and understanding to deal with the problem from family members and were often made to realize that they were infertile and inferior. During quarrels they were insulted because of childlessness and were also called by different names like "Banj", "Kulta". 24% of respondents in rural and 32% of these respondents in tribal setting were physically abused by their mothers-in-law, husbands, elder-sister-in-law, husband's elder brother and elder brother's wife for not being able to produce a child. One of the respondents stated that:

*"One day I was beaten up by my in-laws so badly, I cried loudly and neighbors came for my rescue".*

Twenty six percents of female respondents in rural and tribal setting had the threat of second marriage from their family members, especially mothers in-laws who were pressurizing for second marriage of their sons. In some cases the in-laws had restricted the visit of respondents to their parent's home. It was also reported that the other females in the family who had children were making use of their childlessness and provoke

**Table 1: Relationship of childless couples with family member**

| Type of setting  | Urban |     |        |     | Rural |     |        |     | Tribal |     |        |     | Total |     |        |     |
|------------------|-------|-----|--------|-----|-------|-----|--------|-----|--------|-----|--------|-----|-------|-----|--------|-----|
| Gender           | Male  |     | Female |     | Male  |     | Female |     | Male   |     | Female |     | Male  |     | Female |     |
|                  | n     | %   | n      | %   | n     | %   | n      | %   | n      | %   | n      | %   | n     | %   | n      | %   |
|                  |       |     |        |     |       |     |        |     |        |     |        |     |       |     |        |     |
| Social Criticism | 10    | 20  | 16     | 32  | 12    | 24  | 34     | 68  | 15     | 30  | 24     | 48  | 37    | 25  | 74     | 49  |
| Harmonious       | 20    | 40  | 22     | 44  | 30    | 60  | 10     | 20  | 10     | 20  | 10     | 20  | 60    | 40  | 42     | 28  |
| Relationship     |       |     |        |     |       |     |        |     |        |     |        |     |       |     |        |     |
| Normal           | 20    | 40  | 12     | 24  | 8     | 16  | 6      | 12  | 25     | 50  | 16     | 32  | 53    | 35  | 34     | 23  |
| Total            | 50    | 100 | 50     | 100 | 50    | 100 | 50     | 100 | 50     | 100 | 50     | 100 | 150   | 100 | 150    | 100 |

other family members against them. This type of behavior was more frequently directed towards female respondents of rural and tribal settings especially when they were held responsible for childlessness by the family members. This was frequently seen in those cases where the respondents were not engaged in wage earning activities and where they were not materially sound from their parent's side. In comparison with females, male respondents had to face fewer problems in the family. Although they also faced social pressure for not having children and social criticism but the intensity of the behavior targeted to their childlessness within their family was less. In majority of cases, family members were sympathetic towards them. The reason for this could be that the family under investigation was husband's family which would naturally accept them more. Females were considered inauspicious for religious functions or other rituals at home. They were given less preference at the time of "Diwali Pooja", "Lohri Dahan" and rituals related to child birth etc.

Forty percent of male and 44% of females in urban, 60% of males and 20% of females in rural and 20% of male and equivalent number of females (Table 1) in tribal setting reported having harmonious relationship and adequate understanding with their family members. They found their family members to be sympathetic, co-operative, and affectionate and found that the family members never made them realize that there is something lacking in their life. They never criticized their behavior and understood their feelings and sentiments. They never discussed any topic related to childlessness, as they didn't want to hurt their feelings. Respondents reported that they were involved in decision making and were considered equally important like other family members. They also had emotional support from

their family members especially from elderly member. Some of the respondents reported that if any one in the family, intentionally or unintentionally gave remarks or comments, which could hurt their feelings, they were immediately stopped by elders. Whenever respondents got depressed or felt isolated, they were consoled and encouraged by their family members. It was reported by some of respondents that they could live and adjust easily only because of the love and support of their in-laws.

### Relationship with Neighbours

Sixteen percent male and 28% female respondents in urban, 20% male and 56% female respondents in rural and 26% of male and 60% (Table 2) female respondents in tribal setting reported that insensitive behavior to their childlessness was directed towards them from neighbours. The neighbours kept a close watch over them and enquired frequently about their reproductive status. The childless women also had to occasionally face the remarks and comments of their neighbors. It was also observed by some respondents that neighbouring women kept their children away from them and if their children came to them, they would make some excuse or other and take away their children and if the child insisted to stay, they never left the child alone. These type of feelings were reported by female respondents and were mostly found in case of rural and tribal setting.

### Social Interaction-Participation In Social And Religious Gatherings

Respondents (couples) were asked to delineate whether they were invited to social and religious functions, the extent of their participation in such functions and the reason for not attending such functions. Analysis of their responses reveals the following results.

**Table 2: Relationship of childless couples with neighbours**

| Type of setting         | Urban |     |        |     | Rural |     |        |     | Tribal |     |        |     | Total |     |        |     |
|-------------------------|-------|-----|--------|-----|-------|-----|--------|-----|--------|-----|--------|-----|-------|-----|--------|-----|
| Gender                  | Male  |     | Female |     | Male  |     | Female |     | Male   |     | Female |     | Male  |     | Female |     |
|                         | n     | %   | n      | %   | n     | %   | n      | %   | n      | %   | n      | %   | n     | %   | n      | %   |
|                         |       |     |        |     |       |     |        |     |        |     |        |     |       |     |        |     |
| Social Criticism        | 10    | 16  | 14     | 28  | 20    | 40  | 28     | 56  | 13     | 26  | 30     | 60  | 41    | 27  | 72     | 48  |
| Harmonious Relationship | 12    | 24  | 22     | 44  | 10    | 20  | 12     | 24  | 15     | 30  | 9      | 18  | 37    | 25  | 43     | 29  |
| Normal                  | 30    | 60  | 14     | 28  | 20    | 40  | 1      | 20  | 22     | 44  | 11     | 22  | 72    | 48  | 35     | 23  |
| Total                   | 50    | 100 | 150    | 100 | 50    | 100 | 50     | 100 | 50     | 100 | 50     | 100 | 150   | 100 | 150    | 100 |

Restrictions in participation in social gathering by neighbours and relatives was reported by 52% of female respondents. These restrictions were more prevalent in rural setting, less restrictions were found in urban and no restrictions were found in tribal settings. Participation of childless females in social gatherings especially rituals related to pregnancy or childbirth was restricted in case of rural and tribal setting because these women were considered inauspicious or incomplete. They were called at the time of having food but not invited at the time of performance of rituals. Some of the respondents themselves avoided attending such ceremonies because they felt embarrassed and humiliated on such occasions as people around them passed some remarks or other and they became the topic for gossip and conversation. In case of urban setting, some of respondents stated that they were not invited on birthday parties of children, as they didn't have children.

Childless males as such did not report any major restrictions on them for such ceremonies and rituals. It is because perhaps these ceremonies are more female centered and males did not have much role to perform in these.

#### At Work Place

Majority of male and female respondents who were engaged in economic activities outside the home reported that they had to face the comments, remarks and suggestions of their colleagues at the work place as well. If any misunderstanding or arguments took place, they were stated as being aggressive, short tempered, jealous and their childlessness was held responsible for such nature. Few respondents in urban setting reported that

*"If any member in the working place is in the family way, their pregnancy is kept secret because people think that they would feel jealous or sad about it".*

Some of them felt isolated when others shared the experiences of their pregnancy and child care in this group. This incident was narrated to the researcher by one of the respondent in urban setting who had some physical problems and therefore she could not conceive. One day she heard two of her colleagues talking about her infertility and making fun of it. They were passing remarks and saying that many illegal children were born in the hospital, she should adopt one

baby. She should not waste her time. These remarks made her so depressed that she took leave for one week and cried the whole week and felt that she should leave the job. This example typically illustrates the lack of sympathy and understanding of society towards childless individuals and the effect sarcastic remarks from others have on these individuals. These kinds of responses regarding the insensitive behaviour of others were reported by a large number of respondents.

#### CONCLUSION

It was evident from the responses that fertility or ability to produce children has a positive social value. Family and society looks down upon the couples who are not able to bear children. Insensitive behavior to their childlessness was targeted by their family members, neighbors, relatives and friends. They were under constant social pressure from family and society and some females even had to face the threat of remarriage and divorce particularly in rural and tribal areas. Because of such attitude the childless couples especially women felt isolated from family and society, they expressed the feeling of being excluded from couples having children at family gatherings and other social events. Men also reported the feeling of isolation but women reported greater social isolation especially in those cases where family members were not supporting them.

**KEY WORDS** Childlessness. Social Status. Family, Neighbours. Work Place

**ABSTRACT** The present research is an attempt to study the social status of childless couples in three different ecological settings (Urban, Rural and Tribal). The sample of the study consisted of 50 childless couples each from three ecological settings, total 150 couples formed the core group for the study. Snow ball sampling technique was used for sample selection. The tools used for the study were. Interview guide and Informal observation. Results revealed that childless couples especially women from rural and tribal setting had to face the repercussions of childlessness in family and society. Insensitive behavior to their childlessness was targeted by family members, neighbors and relatives, they were considered inferior and incomplete. They were taunted about their childlessness and even physically abused by their family members in case of rural and tribal setting. Their participation was restricted in the rituals related to children or other religious or social activities because they were considered inauspicious. This was most frequently reported in case of rural setting. Some of the respondents, however, also had harmonious relationship with their family members as they were loving, caring and supporting.

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