

Community's Perception of Childlessness in Three Different Ecological Settings of Jammu, Jammu and Kashmir

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INTRODUCTION

Individual is an important component of the matrix of society. Society can be seen as an active system of relationships with family members, relatives, friends and neighbours. Society and individual have a reciprocal type of relationship, since both influence and are influenced by each other. For the smooth functioning of the society, it is essential for all its components to follow the norms. Giving birth to a child after marriage is considered as an important norm in most of the societies. Child bearing is a universal phenomenon, as it is the primary factor for one generation to succeed another, and keep the human race alive and moving (Delomont, 1980). It is automatically assumed that couples will marry and have children. The childless couples in almost all societies have a negative Social Value and parenthood is considered as a norm. Besides personal reasons, childlessness, is, at times, regarded as a calamity for social reasons (Kaul, 1996). In Indian society, the birth of the first child seems to be really the very culmination of marriage. Indeed, it may be true that the arrival of the first child in our society actually symbolizes final and complete maturity at the parents as adults. (Locke, 1951).

Many studies have documented the wide ranging consequences varying across societies, if the norm of child birth is not followed. However no such study has been conducted in the setting selected for the present work. Jammu is a heterogeneous land and there are many ecological settings available for study. Since, ecology is an important factor affecting any social issues, it is also bound to affect community's perception towards childlessness. It is important to understand the Psycho-social complexises relevant to the issue, so as to know the implications of the same for the childless couples.

OBJECTIVES

The objective of study are. To study the perception of the community towards childless couples and To compare perception of the commu-

nity in three ecological settings (Urban, Rural, Tribal)

METHODOLOGY

The total sample for the present study consisted of 300 community members (100 from each of the three ecological settings i.e urban, rural and tribal). All the respondents were females. Snowball sampling technique was used for sample selection and women who were the neighbours of childless couples were selected. A questionnaire was used to elicit the information from the respondents. The main area in which information was gathered were importance of having children, causative factors for childlessness, recognition of psycho-social problems faced by childless couples and solutions suggested to overcome the problem.

RESULTS

Demographic Profile of Community Members

The focus on the demographic profile of the respondents in this group is primarily based on their age, education, occupation, etc. All the respondents in this group were females because during pilot study it was found that females were more familiar and vocal about issues related to childlessness.

Age: Most of the respondents in all the three settings were in the age group 41-60 years. Very few were in the age group 61-70 years (Table 1). **Education:** The educational level of the respondents were classified under the following categories: functional literacy, primary school, secondary school, graduation (Table 1). Distribution of respondents according to their education reveals that a large proportion of respondents were only functionally literate.

Occupation: All the respondents in urban, 70% in rural and 48% in tribal setting were house wives having no regular wage earning activities. Rest of the respondents were engaged in wage-earning activities at or near home like cattle rearing, farming etc. (Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents

Type of setting	Urban		Rural		Tribal		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
<i>Age in years</i>								
30-40	10	20	14	28	7	14	31	21
41-50	18	36	26	52	33	66	77	51
51-60	13	26	10	20	10	20	33	22
61-70	9	18	-	-	-	-	9	6
Total	50	100	50	100	50	100	150	100
<i>Education</i>								
Could read / write	25	50	36	72	45	90	106	71
Primary Pass	12	24	4	8	5	10	21	14
Secondary Pass	10	20	10	20	-	-	20	13
Graduate	3	5	-	-	-	-	3	2
Total	50	100	50	100	50	100	150	100
<i>Occupation</i>								
Self Employed	-	-	9	18	20	40	29	19
Cattle rearing	-	-	6	12	6	12	12	8
Farming	-	-	6	12	6	12	12	8
Not Employed	50	100	35	70	24	48	109	73
Total	50	100	50	100	50	100	150	100

Importance of Having Children

Important Moments of Life: In this category the respondents were asked to recollect some of the important moments of life. This was done so as to ascertain the number of events related to children that were considered important. On the basis of responses obtained the important moments of life were divided into two categories i.e. Specific events and Generalized events.

i) *Specific Events:* Specific events are those special events which respondents considered as important milestones of development. It was found that out of the total responses obtained on this category i. e. 87(69%) in urban, 88(76%) in rural, and 94(80%) in tribal settings considered events related to children as important moments of their life.

a. *Child Birth:* 34(39%) responses in urban, 54(61%) in rural and 48(51%) in tribal setting were obtained that considered child birth as important moment in life.

One respondent stated that: “Childbirth is an important moment in one’s life especially for a woman, because she gives birth to a child after tolerating so much of pain, it is almost rebirth of the woman”.

Another respondent quoted: “child birth is a great experience in one’s life as it gives the feeling of being complete to both man and woman”.

b. *Education of Children:* 35(40%) responses in

urban, 22(25%) in rural, 28(10%) in tribal setting were related to children’s education, as the respondents felt that completion of education of children is an important milestone of life.

18 (20%) responses in urban, 12(13%) in rural and 18(10%) in tribal setting stated settlement and marriage of their children as important moments of their lives as respondents were of the view,

“When children get settled parents feel happy about it as every parent aspires to see secure and bright future of their children”.

Responses obtained from respondents clearly depicts the importance of child bearing, as moments related to children were considered as of most memorable and of utmost importance.

In case of generalized events 38(30%) of responses in urban, 28(24%) in rural and 23(19%) in tribal setting were related to generalized events, which were considered as important moments of their life. Some respondents believed that life is too long and it is very difficult to categorize it into few moments. Some considered taking care of household assets and fulfilling their duties as important while others considered moments of happiness, sadness and adventure as important moments of their life.

Reasons for Having Children

Child birth is considered important in almost all societies. However, reasons for this importance

may vary across communities. It is important to understand these reasons so as to delineate the problems couples face when they are not able to have children. In this study, a variety of reasons for bearing and rearing children were given by respondents which could be classified as:

(i) *Socio-Emotional Reasons*: Majority of respondents in all the three settings gave predominantly socio-emotional reasons for childbirth. According to them, children are important because they carry on generations. Survival of the lineage is the basic aim of having children. Children were also considered important because they bring happiness in the family, they are the source of joy and fill the family with laughter. Every body gets busy and involved with the arrival of child and they act as a source of recreation and pleasure. Children were also considered important for emotional reasons as arrival of the child gives emotional satisfaction to both the parents, because childlessness makes them feel isolated from family and society particularly from the friends and relatives who have children. The childless couples remain under constant pressure from family and society which makes them frustrated, anxious and helpless, so children were considered important because they satisfy the parental needs and give them emotional stability.

(ii) *Marital Stability*: From the given data (Table 2) it is clear that in comparison with urban group, more respondents in rural and tribal settings stated that children were important for marital stability. According to them, childlessness could act as source of friction between the couples and sometimes if the couple tried to cope up with the situation, the in-laws especially mothers-in law encouraged separation or remarriage of their sons. Arrival of the child was considered as a bond for marital stability. The child was seen as a binding force between the parents. They visualized a threat of separation, divorce or remarriage in case of infertility because the ultimate aim of marriage

was considered to be procreation.

(iii) *Future Security*: It was also considered important to beget children for reasons of future security as children were considered as caretakers for parents in old age and provided financial security. More respondents from the tribal as compared to rural and urban setting considered children important from this perspective (Table 2).

Normal Time For Conception

From the data obtained, it is clear that the next expectation of respondents in rural and tribal settings after marriage is childbirth that is why 52% respondents in rural, 55% in tribal and 17% in urban setting (Table 3) believed that child should be born as early as possible after marriage as any delay in first conception could lead to problems in future.

From the representation of data, it is clear that respondents from all the three settings advised the birth of the child within two years after marriage, thereby implying that society restricts the time period for conception and if pregnancy does not take place within this time, it is considered as a thing to be worried about. It was also found that only in case of urban setting, few respondents (20%) felt that it was the choice of the couple to become parents whenever they desired because today's generation is more educated and career oriented and it is their own choice to delay the first pregnancy to achieve their desired goal.

Community's Perception About Causative Factors of Childlessness

In this category the community's perception was studied in two ways: firstly who out of the couple is responsible for childlessness and secondly what are the causative factors of childlessness.

a. *Who is Responsible*: It was found that only

Table 2: Importance of having children as perceived by members of community

Type of setting	Urban		Rural		Tribal		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Reason								
Socio-Emotional	88	55	60	52	72	43	220	50
Marital stability	42	26	27	24	50	30	119	27
Future Security	30	19	28	24	45	27	103	23
Total *	160	100	115	100	167	100	442	100

* Multiple responses given

Table 3: Normal time period for conception

Type of setting	Urban		Rural		Tribal		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
<i>Time of Period</i>								
Earliest Possible	18	17	54	52	60	55	130	42
Within one year	16	15	30	29	30	27	76	24
Within two year	38	37	20	19	20	18	78	25
Within three year	11	11	-	-	-	-	11	3
Self choice	20	20	-	-	-	-	20	6
Total*	103	100	104	100	110	100	317	100

* Multiple responses given

10% of respondents in urban setting and none in rural and tribal setting stated that men could be responsible for childlessness. Women were held responsible by 56% of respondents in tribal, 52% in rural, and 15% in urban setting. Rest of the respondents stated that either husband or wife could be responsible for childlessness. Gender bias was seen in community's perception about the causative factors for childlessness as none of the respondents in rural and tribal setting stated that only males could be responsible for childlessness.

Those who held women responsible for childlessness cited the following reasons:

"Since we bring the girl from the other family so she is responsible for childlessness, there is no problem in our family".

"The female reproductive and sexual mechanism is more intricate and delicate and hence is more liable to disorder".

b. Reasons for Childlessness: Reasons cited by respondents for childlessness were categorized as follows :

(i) Medical Problems: From the data (Table 4) it is clear that majority of respondents in all three settings attributed medical problems as reason for childlessness. Reasons given were like abortions,

irregular menstrual cycle, blocked fallopian tube, weakness in husband or wife etc.

(ii) Supernatural Causes: It was found that in rural and tribal setting the most frequently perceived cause of childlessness was supernatural (Table 4). On the basis of responses obtained supernatural causes are categorized as Deity's wrath, Evil spirits and Karma [One's own deeds]. Deity's wrath was stated mostly stated in rural and urban areas as the people in tribal setting did not believe in Deities (Devatas). According to rural respondents, every individual has different Deity according to their caste and clan. People have to worship their Deity in a proper way as desired. It is considered important to please them, because pleased Deity will spread joy and happiness in the family. On the other hand, if they get annoyed, they punish the family members in one way or another. Respondents felt that childlessness may be the result of Deity's wrath because of couples or family member's inability to please them.

b. Evil Spirits: Majority of responses obtained in rural (43%) and tribal (60%) setting revealed that evil spirits could lead to couples inability to procreate. According to them some people know the use of evil spirits to harm others. Whenever any body comes under the influence of such

Table 4: Reasons for childlessness

Type of setting	Urban		Rural		Tribal		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Reason								
Medical Problem	100	50	45	30	48	40	193	41
<i>Supernatural Causes</i>								
- Diety's Wrath	20	10	18	12	-	-	38	8
- Evil spirits	28	14	64	43	72	60	164	35
- One's own deeds	12	6	23	15	-	-	35	7
- Voluntary childlessness	40	20	-	-	-	-	40	9
*Total	200	100	150	100	120	100	470	100

* Multiple responses given

people, it could lead to problem of childlessness. c. *Karma (One's Own Deeds)*: People in tribal setting didn't believe in Karmas but in urban and rural setting respondents believed that 'Karma' (Deeds) of the past birth influence the life of present birth. If some one had performed good deeds in their past lives, then they receive the benefits in future life, but on the other hand if some one has done bad deeds in their past birth, he would be punished and childlessness could be one form of punishment for bad deeds of the past birth.

Voluntary Childlessness: 20% of respondents in urban setting and none of respondents in rural and tribal setting stated that if a woman does not conceive few years after marriage they must be intentionally delaying conception by adopting family planning measures. As today's generation is educated and career oriented and sometimes young couples plan to enjoy their life for few years after marriage or they want to settle properly so they delay their first pregnancy. Voluntary childlessness was found to be an urban phenomenon.

Recognition of Problems Faced by Childless Couples

Psychological Problems: All the respondents agreed that childless couples has to face psychological problems. However, it was stated that the magnitude of the problem varied according to the personality of an individual. According to them, since parenthood is related to giving aspect of love, an individual wants to give love. Since childless couples are not able to do the same, it leads to "emotional lacking" which in turn leads to a number of psychological problems. Besides this, social criticism and social isolation also leads to psychological problems. The perceived psychological problems were depression, anxiety, irritability, aggression, isolation, lack of confidence and, mental- instability etc.

Marital Instability: In this study, majority (73%) of respondents in urban and all the respondents in rural and tribal settings stated that marital relations could become strained if there is failure in reproduction. According to them, if one of the partners has a strong urge to have children, they may blame each other which will give rise to conflicts. They may have insecurity of separation, divorce or remarriage. Rest (23%) of the respondents did not favour this idea that childlessness could lead to marital instability. They held this view that it was not always necessary that there

was a threat of strained relations. It depended on the inter-personal relations and understanding between the couple. It also depended upon the personality of the individuals and their cognitive adaptation to the coping mechanism adopted.

Problems Faced with Family Members: Respondents from all the three settings shared the belief that childless couples especially the women had to face a lot of problems in the family. 66% of respondents in urban and all the respondents in rural and tribal setting agreed that these couples had to face the taunts and sarcastic remarks of in-laws especially of mother-in-law. These people (family members) often would make them realize that something was lacking in them. Low status is accorded to them in the family and they had very little say in the family. This was especially true for female members.

Problems Faced in Society: 79% of respondents in tribal, 72% in rural and 58% in urban setting were of the view that childless couples also had to face the problems with the wider society i.e. neighbors, relatives, friends etc. as people started expecting the child as soon as possible after marriage. The childless females were considered inauspicious and were not invited in religious and social ceremonies especially ceremonies related to children. From the view point of community members it is clear that childlessness is perceived negatively and positive value is accorded to fertility. In order to live a smooth life at personal, interpersonal, psychological and social levels couples has to fulfill the norm of childbearing, otherwise they have to face psycho-social repercussions of childlessness.

Solutions Suggested by the Community Members

There are various alternatives for childlessness and it was felt important to study the accepted response of the community members. On the basis of information collected the alternatives suggested to cope with the problem of childlessness are categorized as follows:

i) *Medical Treatment*: From Table 5 it is clear that all the respondents in urban and majority of respondents in rural, and tribal setting suggested medical treatment for cure of infertility. According to them today's science has progressed a lot which can help such couples. Medical treatment suggested were medical examination of the couple, artificial insemination, in vitro fertilization (IVF) etc.

iii) *Religious Measures*: Religious measures were also suggested in rural and urban settings but no such suggestions came from respondents in tribal setting. Praying to God, keeping fasts especially one particular 'Ekadshi', 'Chaurth Ekadshi' by grace of which childless couples are blessed with children were recommended. Visiting holy shrines, organizing and participating in "Satsangs" and "Satvas" (a seven days prayer organized by saints) were some of the suggested religious measures.

iii) *Magico-spiritual Healing*: In comparison with urban setting, respondents from rural and tribal setting had a deep rooted belief in magico spiritual healing. When no problem is evident affected couples must consult a good (Well-Known) magico-spiritual healer as childlessness may be due to the evil effect of supernatural power. Respondents from tribal setting had a strong belief in magico-spiritual healing. According to them, it was most often seen in their group and they believed that people came under the influence of evil spirits and when they got proper treatment from a renowned "Sayana" [Magico-spiritual healer] they got benefited.

Adoption as an Alternative

Another alternative suggested was adoption. Respondents favoured adoption if medical treatment did not work and if the couple was not benefited from magico-spiritual healing then the couple should go for adoption as it was very difficult to live without children.

About 90% of respondents in urban, 70% in rural and 40% in tribal setting favoured adoption of child. Adoption was seen to be advantageous for two reasons. Firstly after adoption the child fills the vacuum of life and secondly it was a widely held belief that many times after adoption childless couples would themselves conceive. It was suggested that the child could be adopted

from hospital, orphanage, financially backward relatives either of husband or wife. Only few respondents favoured adoption from hospital or orphanage, others were of the view that no body knew about the caste, family, religion of such children so majority of respondents suggested adoption from relatives of couples especially from husband's family because child from that family will have same blood. Rest of the respondents from all the three settings did not favour adoption, as they believed that 'some ones child could never become one's own'.

CONCLUSION

Gender bias was seen in the perception of community for causes of childlessness, since only 10% of urban respondents and none of the respondents in rural and tribal setting held males responsible for childlessness. A maximum time frame of two years after marriage was provided by them for child birth to the couples and if conception did not take place within this period, it was considered something to be worried about. Causes of childlessness as perceived by them were mainly medical problems and super natural causes (Deity's wrath, evil sprits, deeds of the past birth). Voluntary childlessness was stated only by respondents of urban setting and it was attributed to education and employment of women. It was not seen positively by respondents. In case of perception of community members about pschyo-social problems faced by childless couples, it was found that all the respondents agreed that childless couples has to face numerous pschyo-social problems due to childlessness. Solutions suggested by the community members to cope with the problem of childlessness were medical treatment, religious measures, magico-spiritual healing and adoption. Religious measures and magico-spiritual healing were more frequently suggested by respondents of rural and

Table 5: Solutions suggested

Type of setting	Urban		Rural		Tribal		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
<i>Soluton</i>								
Medical treatment	100	72	73	40	62	47	235	51
Religious measures	20	14	44	24	-	-	64	15
Magico spiritual healing	19	14	65	36	71	53	155	34
*Total	139	100	182	100	133	100	454	100

* Multiple responses given

tribal setting. Views regarding the acceptance of adoption were also solicited and it was found that a large number of community members favored adoption as an alternative.

KEYWORDS Childlessness. Community. Perception. Urban. Rural. Tribal

ABSTRACT The present research is an attempt to study the perception of community members in three different ecological settings of Jammu, Jammu and Kashmir about childlessness. The sample of the study consisted of 100 community members each from three ecological settings, total 300 community members formed the core group for the study. snow ball sampling technique was used for sample selection. The tool used for the study was Questionnaire. View point of the members of the community about childlessness was studied and it was found that child birth along with education, settlement and marriage of children were considered as important moments of life, in all the three

settings, thus emphasizing the importance of begetting children. Causes of childlessness as perceived by them were mainly medical problems and super natural causes it was found that all the respondents agreed that childless couples have to face numerous pschyo- social problems due to childlessness.

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