

Kinship System, Fertility and Son Preference among the Muslims: A Review

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ABSTRACT This review illustrates that differences in kinship system between north (by an large patrilineal) and south (by an large matrilineal) of India is an important factor to bring about regional disparities in sex preference of children by the Hindu parents but not by the Muslim parents in whom Kinship system is traditionally unique as it shares similarity with Dravidian system in marriage pattern and inheritance from paternal side and similarity in kinship terminology with Indo Aryan system of the north while among the Hindus it is traditionally based on patrilineal inheritance, not withstanding the Hindu succession Act of 1956'. Though dowry and sex selective abortion are the determinants of status of women among the Hindus, they are generally not practiced among the Muslims. However, the lower education status, economic status and social status (due to patriarchy and religious ideologies) respectively and together produce circumstances leading to son being seen as the best socio-economic insurance by the Muslim women. This review of studies conducted on the above topic shows that high fertility among the Muslim women is also a consequence of son preference arising out of socio-economic compulsion in the traditional absence (due to strict religious prohibition) of sex selective abortions.

INTRODUCTION

India attracts attention of the world because of gender bias- the small number of females as compared to males as a demographic feature. This feature is mainly attributed to Hindus who comprise over three –quarters of the Indian population. Although the concern over India's imbalanced sex-ratio is not new, India's deficit of females was first cited in 1901, the sex ratio for all of India (female/1000 male) was 972, in 1971 the ratio further declined to 930 and after a small climb in 1981 to 936 the ratio in 1991 was 929, now it has raised again to 933 in 2001. According to the 'First Report on Religion Data, 2001' released by the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India. The child sex -ratio of Muslim (950/1000) is better than that of Hindus (925/1000), despite the fact that the over all literacy rates among Hindus (65.1%) is higher than that of Muslims (59.1%) populations. The data presented in Table 1 shows a large difference in child sex ratios between Hindu and Muslim populations both in rural and urban areas. Further it was listed in the Census of India 2001, that sex selective abortion is one of the reasons for the declining sex –ratio of the child population (age group, 0-6yrs) and it can be concluded from the data that the problem of sex selective abortion is predominant in the Hindus community. In order to understand the abuse of

technology to abort female fetuses, one needs to understand the wider social historical context of gender bias on the population. It is needed to take into account socio-economic, cultural and ideological factors that contribute to the neglect and murder of females beyond the fetal stage.

Table1: Sex ratio rural and urban children (F/M Age Group 0-6) among Hindus and Muslims, India, 2001

<i>Areas</i>	<i>Hindus</i>	<i>Muslims</i>
Rural	931	955
Urban	898	937
Total	925	950

Source: 'The First Report on Religion Data', Census of India 2001, Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India

Another important factor, which needs to be highlighted, is the continuing bias shown by prosperous communities towards the girl child. Census 2001 listed that the Sikh community with 786 girls for every 1,000 boys has the lowest child sex ratio followed by the Jains (870/1000). This fact is found to be corroborated by Agnihotri (2000) findings that female status is not necessarily correlated with the higher family income meaning that the wealthy not only raise the standard for the poor classes to emulate, but also suffer from the same pressure to have sons who will bring in

wealth, maintain their honor, and facilitate their ability to meet increased financial expectations. In addition to this, Agnihotri (2000) suggests that instituting social programs to increase female labor participation (a factor found to increase women's status and empowerment) is virtually meaningless when applied to the wealthier classes who may not want or need their women to be assimilated into the job market. Hence from the above, it can be concluded that indicators like educational status and economic status are not considerable enough to influence sex ratio and women's status.

So, which are the features we have to look into to understand the skewed sex ratio of India? Is it cultural variations or regional variations or religious variations, which affect the sex ratio? Why a son is so much more preferred in Indian cultures? Is it true for all regions and all religions in India? In this respect, we would like to mention that having a girl and then wanting a boy is a universal phenomenon occurring in any society (Grant, 1998). But it must not necessarily be at the cost of females' death. Grant (1998) mentions that in western cultures, there is an overall pattern which remains persistently son – preferring. However, these cultures do not have low sex ratio (male/ female) like India (1.07) or China (1.06) (CIA-The World Fact Book, 2001).

INFLUENCE OF VARIATION IN KINSHIP SYSTEM AND CULTURE ON SEX-RATIO

Son is preferred in Indian context because sons are considered to contribute to the family's resources and family name is preserved through a son; sons are expected to carry out certain ceremonial death rites, and sons and not daughters are expected to contribute towards parents in their old age. As far as regional variation is concerned, the distinct sex ratio divide between the north-western and south-eastern region of the Indian subcontinent (Miller, 1984), is part of a wider cultural division recognized as the Indo-Aryan (north)-Dravidian (south) divide. Relevant features of the Indo-Aryan kinship systems, identified by Dyson and Moore (1983: 43-45) are: spatially exogamous marriage rules; social cooperation between males based on descent; exclusion of women from property inheritance chain. These contrast with the features of the southern kinship system, namely, spatially endogamous marriages, equal importance of

affinity and descent in social cooperation among males and inclusion of women in the property inheritance processes. In Indo-Aryan system, the bride-givers are accorded an inferior status as compared to those who receive the bride; this can be envisaged in marriage rituals like washing of the feet of the groom's parents by certain person (s) from the bride's side. Thus, it is one of the many reasons why reciprocal marriage is forbidden in the Indo-Aryan system where women have been assigned a lower status compared to the Dravidian system. These cultural disparities show that the south tends to be more female-friendly and women in this area tend to be less subordinate to men. Another important aspect of the southern kinship system is matrilineal kinship system and daughters, like sons, can and do render old-age support to their parents.

Rules of marriage may also be responsible for the distorted sex-ratios, in the south cross-cousin marriages are predominant; there is less social and geographical distance between the bride giver and the bride taker; lineages are perpetuated rather than reconfigured as in the north where a new bride is viewed with suspicion and restraint, coming from distant villages, resulting in elated social status and social value of females in south which in turn may influence sex-ratio.

This seems to be corroborated by Das Gupta's (1987) study which draws a connection between inheritance pattern and sex-ratios. Gopalakrishna Kumar (1989) also emphasizes the importance of exploring the influence of women's political and economic power to regional variations in sex ratios. These findings are evident in case of Kerala, which has historically shown positive sex ratio. However it also has characteristics that suggest better gender equity: it has generally had the lowest fertility rates, the highest level of female literacy, a high age at marriage and fairly good receptivity to contraception. Kumar (1989) also points to the preponderance of matrilineal inheritance as a possible explanatory reason for both the positive sex ratio and the greater gender equity that has set Kerala apart. While in the north Chandigarh, capital of Punjab, has the lowest sex ratio i.e., 773 (Provisional Population Totals: India. Census of India 2001, Paper 1 of 2001). Das Gupta (1987) emphasized that patrilineal descent is a key organizing principle of the Jat Kinship system (the dominant group in Punjab are the Jats, a land owning caste, in whom son is given more

preference over daughter). Further added that cultural practices may contribute to low sex ratio in Punjab. He stated:

“There is no question of women owning land. If she insists on her right to inherit land equally under the civil law, she would stand a good chance of being murdered.”

Like Das Gupta (1987), Nag (1991) also given a descriptive account of son preference and its regional differences in India- a strong son preference in northern states compared to the southern, reflecting difference in Kinship structure, female autonomy, and other social characteristics.

The resource flow is always from the woman's father to the man's family in the form of dowry at the time of marriage and even after the initial payment of dowry which has been given as a reason for exclusion of women from inheritance in Hindus. However, the Hindu succession Act, 1956' has been introduced giving equal right of inheritance to the daughter along with the son. But it hoists a question as to how far that condemnation of dowry system coupled with advocacy of reforms of the daughter's rights as an heir to the property of her natal family solves the problem of aversion against female child. How far the law is being enforced or is it able to cause any change in attitude towards female in Hindu patrilineal society, where daughters are considered transitory member in their natal family and their position depends on the number of sons they produce?

From a close examination of Kerala and Punjab, it appears that in both the states, in spite of the higher literacy rate and low fertility rate wide gap keeps going in sex-ratios due to variation in law of inheritance, dowry system, rules of marriage and females' place of residence after marriage which affect female status and in turn results in disturbed sex-ratios.

INFLUENCE OF RELIGION ON FERTILITY BEHAVIOURS AND SEX RATIO

After the above views on variations as a result of regions, next crucial aspect, which needs to be investigated, is, do religious beliefs have something to do with sex ratios? Does son preference exist in all religions or differ from one religion to another? Is declining sex ratio an indicator of low status of women, if it is, then, how far is it true for different religions? Keeping

these questions in mind, in this section difference in the sex ratios in people of two different religions, namely, Hindus and Muslims has been discussed. In this section, women's status among Muslims concerning law of inheritance, rules of marriage and kinship system will be scrutinized, keeping in retrospect the Hindus.

Cain's (1979, 1982) work based largely in rural Bangladesh suggests that in the patriarchal environment which restricts the movements and the range of activities of women, effectively eliminating opportunities for employment and then by fostering both economic and social dependence of women upon men “...the best risk insurance for women is to produce sons, as many and as soon as possible” (Cain, 1979)

Sex preference can be a constraint on fertility decline, if couples who have already reached their desired family size continue childbearing until they achieve the desired sex composition of children (Nag, 1991). Sheps (1963) has shown mathematically that if the probability of having a boy is the same for all individuals, the expected family size increases with increasing preference for one sex over the other. For example in a hypothetical situation of perfect fertility control, if all fertile couples desire of minimum of two sons and would stop childbearing after having two, they would average 3.88 children, whereas if all couples desire at least one son and one daughter, they would average 3.00 children.

Census 2001 listed that Muslim child sex ratio is higher than that of Hindus in spite of its low female literacy and low economic status. A demographic feature like infant mortality among Muslims, at 59 per 1000, is much lower than that among Hindus, at 77 per 1000 (Bhat, 2003) and child mortality, which is 83 per 1000 for Muslims, substantially lower than child mortality among Hindus at 107 per 1000 (IIPS and ORC Macro International, 2000). Bhat (2003) study on child mortality and Census 2001 on child sex ratio are evident to show Muslims are less averse to daughters than Hindus. But this does not deny the existence of son preference attitude.

This greater sex ratio somewhere intends to probe the long existing speculation on the inferior status of women among Muslims as compared to Hindus. Also, the question whether this improved sex ratio is a consequence of no son preference or of higher status of women among Muslims needs proper inspection. Further, it is needed to look into, cultural practices within Islam in this

respect; how are they different from the Hindu system and to what extent non-Muslim communities (especially Hindus) affect the social life of the Muslims. It needs to be emphasized here that the prohibition of abortion in the holy book, Q'uran, is one of the many reasons for the sex ratio going in favor of Muslim girls.

Apart from this, household dynamics about the values of females and sex ratios provides the important insight for differential mortality rates by sex. Chen (1982), D'Souza and Chen (1980) and Chen et al. (1981) study on rural Bangladesh investigate the reason for decline in differential mortality by sex. D'Souza and Chen (1980) point out that son preference in parental care, feeding patterns, intra family food distribution, and treatment of illness favoring males, are possible causes of the differences in child mortality rates. Chen et al. (1981) provide important evidence of the social mechanisms manifest differential access to health and nutrition by sex preference. They found that differential allocation of food result in disparities in nutritional status with respect to sex and male children brought to the hospital more frequently than female children.

Further, it is reasonable to add here, that unlike Hindus, the cultural practice of payment of high dowry is not explicit among Muslims. It is taken as gifts to the bride by her family member but is not obligatory and not demanded. In this respect, Chaudhry (1982) mentioned that

"In India, Bangladesh and Morocco, the net negative reward from having a daughter (because of dowry system) is in fact so great that parents are not motivated to have additional children after a string of prior daughters since their chance of having a son with next birth is only slightly greater than 50 per cent. In Taiwan, on the other hand, where couples with prior daughters are more likely to have another birth than couples with prior sons, it does not appear that the net negative reward for another daughter is as large as the net positive reward for another son (dowry is not a major issue in Taiwan)".

Thus, two inferences can be made from his study, first that son preference is a universal phenomenon in every society and second, dowry is the major cause for females facing neglect earlier, when sex selective technology was not available and later, of female feticide in the techno savvy era in India.

Religious teachings play a major role, as

Muslims translated prescribed Islamic tenets into practice, in which dowry system is not engendered and abortion is strictly forbidden. This acts as the safeguard against sex selective abortion. But one important point needs to be examined is the impact of socio-cultural milieu, as Muslims form the integral part of a wider complex.

It would be worth mentioning at this juncture that the Muslim kinship system is unique. It shares similarities with Dravidian system of south in terms of law of inheritance considering women, recognizing the distinction between cross and parallel consanguineal relatives and giving preference to consanguineous marriage apart from uncle-niece marriage, and on the other hand, Muslims society is patriarchal and patrilineal in nature and follow kin terminological framework similar to Indo-Aryan Kinship system. By and large, it is found that Muslim women gain respect and status when they marry and have children, thereby improving their bargaining position in the social structure (Youseef, 1978). Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanavi, in early 20th century wrote in a compendium that bless a Muslim women by wishing her husband, brother, or children long life, or wishing for her many sons and grandsons (Minault, 1998: 62). So, son preference is an inevitable phenomenon even in the Muslim community.

According to Islamic law of inheritance, a son receives twice as much as a daughter, a brother twice as much as a sister and a husband twice as much as a wife. Besides this, Islam considers dower (*mehr*) and maintenance being compulsory on the part of husband. It reduces women's financial commitments and increases man's burden proportionately; bearing this extra burden on man in mind, his share in inheritance has been fixed at twice that of women. From this, it can be assumed that the high frequency of consanguineous marriages is a consequence to retain the family property which is entitled to the girls. Thus, consanguineous marriage, law of inheritance, compulsion on dower and less importance to dowry among Muslims, promote the social environment to foster female birth and less aversion towards them. Nonetheless, a more deep-seated subject of inquiry is how many girls do get their share of property even when they seek for it? Is the amount of dower adequate enough to support her or just a ritual or custom to perform? How far is it true that acceptance of the dowry system which is the major force behind

son preference among Hindus is completely absent in Muslims, as all religions equally tend to be affected by the process of 'Sanskritization' (Srinivas, 1962) – the adoption of the ritual of higher castes.

All these questions to some extent are answered by Mistry's (2001) study on Muslims of Malegaon. Her study reported that the customs of dowry is not prevalent among Malegaon Muslims. Dowry (*Mehr*) though theoretically an institution to empower Muslim women but in practice, it has failed to do so. It is observed that dowry amount is too meager which makes it merely an economic right on paper. Her study indicated high frequency of non-consanguineous marriages and absence of preference for son among them. Regarding property rights 61 per cent of the women's parents, husband or relatives had no property to inherit and only 4 per cent of the women get a share in property. It is concluded from her study that absence of dowry system and property to inherit clubbed with high frequency of non-consanguineous marriages are the major factors influencing the attitude of Muslim women of Malegaon for son preference.

It is, therefore, reasonable to suppose that

Muslims' higher sex ratio is not an outcome of elevated female status. Though in part Muslims kinship pattern is similar to Dravidian kinship system, it is not reinforced by high female literacy rate unlike in southern states. However, there is no denying the fact that Muslims show a much lower degree of "daughter aversion" than the Hindus, and this provides a plausible explanation for their larger families (Iyer, 2004).

The second feature is that fertility rate of Muslims women is remarkably higher than that of their Hindu counterparts. National family Health Survey (NFHS), conducted in 1998-99, shows that the total fertility rate for Hindus is 2.8 and for Muslims 3.6, (International Institute for Population Sciences and ORC Marco International, 2000). "*Particularized theology*" argument has been that it is the very essence of religion that influences fertility irrespective of any socio-economic or demographic factors. Higher fertility of Indian Muslims is blamed as a result of their adherence to the tenets of Islam in a more orthodox manner and their opposition to family planning programs. Although Islam gives permission for using birth control measures on several grounds, one of them being husband's incapability to bring up more children.

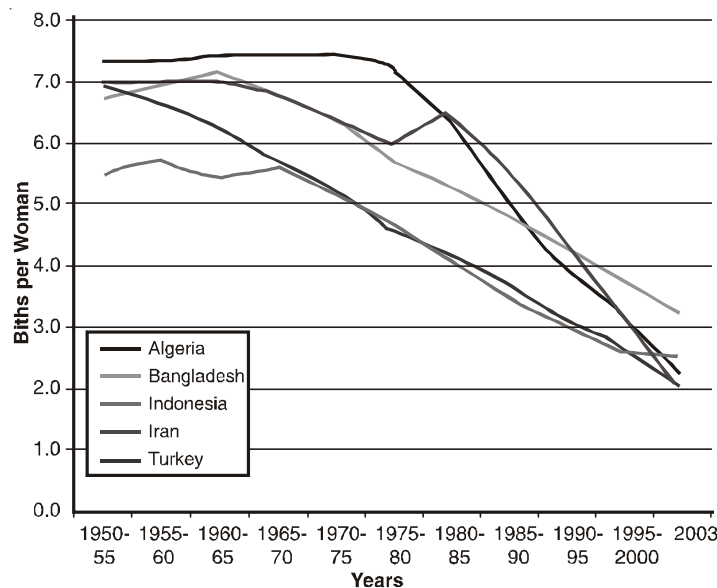


Fig. 1. Fertility Rates 1950-55 to 1995-2000, Estimates for 2003

Source: Executive Summary: Fertility Decline in Muslim countries prepared by Dr. Elise Jones and reviewed by Dr. Charles F. Westoff in July 2003

Table 2: Total fertility rates and sex ratios of five Muslim countries that are well along in the fertility transition process

<i>Muslim countries</i>	<i>Total Fertility Rate (TFR)</i>	<i>Sex Ratio Under 15 years (Male/female)</i>
Algeria	1.89 (2006.est)*	1.04 (2006.est)*
Iran	1.82 (2005.est)**	1.06 (2005.est)**
Indonesia	2.44 (2005.est)***	1.04 (2005.est)***
Bangladesh	3.11 (2006.est)****	1.05 (2006.est)****
Turkey	1.94 (2005.est)*****	1.05 (2005.est)*****

Sources: *****< <http://fixedreference.org/2006-Wikipedia-CD-Selection/wp/t/Turkey.htm>>

****<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Bangladesh>

***<http://fixedreference.org/2006-Wikipedia-CD-Selection/wp/d/Demographics_of_Indonesia.htm>

**<<http://www.answers.com/topic/demographics-of-iran>>

*<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Algeria>

However, Saw's (1989) study emphasized that Malay population of Singapore stands out as the first Muslim population in the world to have achieved replacement level fertility. Similarly Iran, an Islamic nation has shown phenomenal decline in fertility, dropping from 5.5 in 1988 to below 2.8 in 1996, more than a 50 percent decline in 6 years. The figure for the year 2000 is 2.17 according to Iran Demographic and Health Survey, 2000. Abbasi-Shavazi suggested the social and cultural context of the society along with certain government policies such as rural development, health improvement, and the rise of literacy paved the way for a successful family planning program introduced by the Islamic government. It is striking that, fertility has fallen farthest and fastest in Iran which is ruled by clerics, and in Algeria where Islamic fundamentalism is also very strong (see graph 1). Indonesia and Bangladesh are large Muslim dominated Asian countries with appreciable non-Muslim minorities, have shown decline in total fertility rates (see graph 1). Total fertility rates of Indonesia and Bangladesh are 2.44 (2005 est.) and 3.11 (2006 est.) respectively. In Turkey, Bangladesh and Indonesia, family planning is identified largely with secular authority and may be vulnerable should forces opposed to the latter prevail. Under 15yrs sex ratios (Male/Female) (Table 2) of these five Muslim countries range from 1.04 to 1.06 indicating the fact that males' proportion is considerably higher despite declining fertility rates.

Thus there is no simple relationship between Islam and fertility behavior. But increased under 15 yrs male proportion put forth that whether this increased sex ratio in demographically advanced Muslim is a natural phenomenon or an outcome of some of sex preference keeping in mind that abortion is forbidden by Q'uran.

Iyer (2004) shows that Muslims of India though having evidence of higher fertility, also display lower degrees of girl child aversion. It has been noticed that the increase in the likelihood of Muslim women terminating their fertility after the birth of a son or daughter is substantially lower than the corresponding values for Hindus. So, it has been identified that Muslims treat their daughters better on account of significantly lower level of daughter aversion. He further emphasized that the reason for the higher fertility of Muslim women in relation to Hindu women may lie in daughters being more welcome in Muslims than in Hindu families. But here, it is more likely to address whether the increased sex ratio in Muslims indicating a rise in fertility rate be an outcome of son preference or is it a sign of welcome for a daughter in a family, despite the fact that female literacy is low in Muslims. Daughter aversion does not imply to only sex selective abortion, but also neglect, low education, low exposure to outer world and less freedom which needs to be considered as attitudinal aversion which suppress women's development and lead to lower status of women in society. Thus it is required to carry out holistic study keeping in perspective variables like social status, nutritional status, economic status, and educational status, access to health facilities, decision making ability and religious ideologies, facilitate to throw light on reasons for differences in differential frequency of sex preference concerning religion.

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