

**HINDU-MUSLIM DIFFERENTIALS IN IDEAL FAMILY SIZE AND SON
PREFERENCE:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SELECTED STATES OF INDIA**

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Objectives:

Many a times, desire for son (which is almost unanimous irrespective of castes, creeds and states in India) contradicts with small family norms. Traditionally, in India, a woman enhances her status if she gives birth to a son, as sons are still considered more profitable (in economic as well as social terms) than daughters, though the scenario is changing gradually. As a safeguard against infant mortality, couples reproduce more and until the ideal sex composition of children is achieved (which is generally skewed for sons), couples willingly do not stop reproduction in majority of cases. It is often documented that religious minorities set higher goals to their ideal number of sons as well as total children either to protect their self-interest (as explicated in minority hypothesis) or for their socio-economic characteristics and developmental deprivations (as elucidated in characteristic hypothesis) or for the very religious theology (as explained in particularized theology) and which factor/s are interplaying more important role in this respect is still in the dark in Indian context for limited research. It is thus important to study the Hindu-Muslim differentials in ideal family size and ideal sex composition (i.e. the demand side of fertility) in respect of assessing whether the demand for son itself is high for the minority Muslims even after freezing its socio-economic and developmental differentials. Study on religious differentials on ideal family in insufficient in India mainly because of the political sensitivity of the topic, though the issue is important in view of the possible influences with such preferences that might exert on the very process of family formation and enlargement of family.

Data Source:

National Family and Health Survey (NFHS II) of 1998-99, which is the Indian version of Demographic Health Survey (DHS) is used for the analysis.

Methodology:

We have selected six states which possess 15% or more Muslim population. The states are Assam

and West Bengal from eastern India, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh of north India, Kerala of south India and Jammu, which is situated at the north west of the country. Except Jammu, in other five states, Muslims are the religious minority compared to Hindu while in Jammu, proportion of Muslim sampled population (female of 15-49 ages) is 14% more than Hindus. In demographic terms, Kerala is the best state followed by West Bengal while Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are the least developed states in India.

Bivariate and multivariate analyses are carried out to understand the levels and determinants of ideal family and its composition. We have not incorporated programme variables in the analysis like presence of health centers in the community, as it does not have effect on the demand for children. As demand for children is an outcome of three prime set of factors, namely demographic aspects, socio-economic factors and status of women, we have tried to incorporate those variables that fall under the purview of these sets of basic and intermediate dynamics.

Results and Policy Relevance:

1. Mean ideal number of children, either for boys or girls is higher for Muslims in all states irrespective of its developmental level.
2. Son preference (demanding more sons than daughters) is little higher among Hindus than Muslims, when all other factors are uncontrolled. Only 2-3% of Hindus and Muslims respectively want more daughters than sons contrary to about 35% who demand more sons than daughters.
3. If the woman is not having any son, then the demand for additional children is remarkably high in both the groups (70% and above) except among Hindus of Kerala and West Bengal. If she is having a least one son, still then, in the two less developed states namely, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, the demand for additional child in both the religious groups are high (45% and above). However, in Kerala, the demand for children is significantly more among Muslims even if they have one son and the trend persists even though they have two sons. Jammu, inhabited mainly by Muslims is the only state where the demand for children among Muslims is lesser over Hindus when they do not have children.
4. Multivariate analysis after controlling the possible socio-economic variables shows significant differentials in the demand for children of two religious groups both in terms of level and relative differences. We therefore do not find support to the

characteristic hypothesis in our study. The minority hypothesis premised on insecurity is also could not be substantiated fully due to our limited analysis. However, it is clear that religion, as popularly understood remains an important factor influencing ideal fertility level, but much more depends upon its interactions with other socio-political and cultural aspects that determine differences in ideal fertility levels. The way people practice religion and implement their religious beliefs are more important than the religious theology *per se*. Theology alone does not constitute religion. Any limiting effects of Islam on fertility are short term, if socioeconomic conditions change. And this is true for other religions and practices as well, as most of the religious theologies are pro natalist in nature. High demand for Muslim fertility as the resultant of Islamic theology is too naive, as sometimes believed by Indian scholars in the light of growing evidence of fertility decline among the Muslims across the world.