

South India Fertility Project Phase II

Presentation (draft 1)

Bangalore, ISEC

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Research framework

General objective

Our research aim at capturing the self-sustaining nature of fertility decline by showing that fertility decline in one social group is fuelled by low fertility behaviour in other groups.

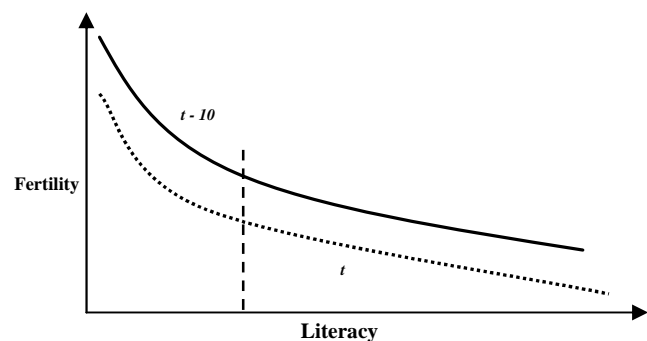
We will therefore try to document how groups are influenced by other groups that have already reduced their fertility. As means to reduce fertility are already well known in South India, we will concentrate on two other dimensions that accelerate fertility decline: the changing perceptions of costs and benefits of the small family norm, and its increasing legitimacy among the people at large.

Context

The first phase of the SIFP has shown that fertility variations are considerable across South Indian regions. Some of these variations are readily explainable by observed differences among regions, in terms of literacy or women's status. However, most of the variations observed seem to be linked to features specific to regions. As a result, it is at times difficult to say more than "fertility in Kerala (or elsewhere) tends to be lower because... we are in Kerala". There seem to be very few other reasons given to geographic differences in fertility levels apart from this kind of circular explanation.

At the same time, fertility is declining very fast in all part of South India, with some regions reaching below-replacement levels. It seems obvious that the source of the change cannot be only attributed to changes in other domains such as literacy, family planning infrastructure or economic conditions as these changes do not proceed as fast fertility decline.

When we look at the literacy-fertility nexus, we discover that fertility declines irrespective of literacy. For a specific literacy level at some date t , the average fertility is now lower than it would have been ten years before as shown on the figure. Though changes in literacy levels do decrease fertility, fertility seems also to decrease by itself, irrespective of other changes. This situation is not only visible in time, but also across regions: illiterate women in low-fertility regions tend for example to have fewer children than their sisters in a high-fertility environment.



This suggests that the dynamics of fertility decline is partially self-sustaining, through diffusion mechanisms. Diffusion mechanisms imply that fertility decline is affected by a self-feeding process: in an environment where fertility is coming down, people may be encouraged to reduce their fertility, even when external conditions have hardly improved. The most obvious phenomenon in this regard is the imitation factor: people perceive their fertility as "too high" compared to other groups they tend to emulate. Once they have reduced some of their fertility, the other groups in the community have also

reduced theirs and they still have to reduce it further to catch up with lower-fertility groups. In such a scenario, fertility will decline simply because it has already reduced somewhere else.

Research hypotheses

This view rests on a few hypotheses that can be listed and are still to be corroborated:

- People do perceive differences in fertility behaviour across social groups
- People tend to emulate "progressive" groups.
- Groups that have been associated with faster fertility decline are respected and occupy a high position in the social scale
- Reversibly, laggards (high-fertility groups) are socially looked down upon as backward. They can't offer any role model to other groups.
- The value system of older generations (with higher fertility) is no more relevant in the eyes of the present generation. These generations are less able to influence young couples than in the past.
- Demographic influence in fertility decline is a function of the intensity of interaction between groups.
- This intensity is itself a function of geographic and social proximity to low-fertility areas or to urban areas and other sources promoting low fertility behaviour: this proximity depends on geographic distance as well as on existing network (historical relationship between areas, migrant communities, etc.)

Fieldwork Operations

Specific subregions are selected in South India. In each region, a group of possible villages are identified for fieldwork. Fieldwork conducted by individual investigators will be concluded by focus group discussions.

Documentation

Prior to fieldwork, general documentation is gathered on the selected regions from published sources. This covers basic question about physical features, social composition, local economy (agricultural and other components), urban influence (urban economy) and historical and cultural characteristics.

SIFP maps will also help to identify the main dimensions of the demographic and economic profile of the regions that are already given in the Census.

Fieldwork

Fieldwork is to be conducted in one or several villages that are somewhat homogeneous and representative of the micro-region studied. The number of villages to be studied by one FI depends on their size and accessibility. Whenever possible, it is better to study a bigger village than many hamlets.

During fieldwork the field investigator (FI) will be based in the villages. He will meet local leaders and a large range of people, including old age people, dalits and other low-status groups, women, the youth.

Though based in villages, he may also visit the local town for comparison. Visits to other villages is also useful for comparative purposes.

The PI is also expected to meet the principal investigator (PI) regularly: during visits of the PI to the field and during visits of the FI to the research institute. A larger meeting may also be arranged at mid-term for FIs from different areas to meet and share information and experiences with PIs.

Fieldwork methodology

The FI will gather information mainly through interviews and observations. Information will be cross-checked by asking different people about their perceptions. At times, it may be difficult to distinguish between perceptions, representations and actual facts.

Surveys through questionnaires are to be restricted for various reasons: we often don't need exact figures and surveys are highly time-consuming, especially when covering large villages. Moreover, demographic data on fertility are not easy to capture. They should be resorted to only for basic counts. Some administrative data may also be collected from local officials.

Some questions (such as number of students in local schools, migrants in distant places, cost of housing, etc.) may however require a quantitative estimation.

Information to collect

Information gathered by FIs will cover the general items mentioned above: physical features, social composition, local economy (agricultural and other components), urban influence (urban economy) and historical and cultural characteristics. Moreover, the information should also cover differences between local groups, especially between richer and more educated classes and the rest of the population.

The FI has to follow the guidelines developed by the SIFP team: these instructions will detail all the fields to be covered. Some information falls neatly in predefined categories: main crop, irrigation type, number of school and date of construction, etc. Other information may be based on rough estimates by the FI.

Otherwise, the information will be mainly qualitative, related to factors of change and influence in the villages. It may concern mostly newly introduced techniques and behaviour, as well as the new mentality. It will be very important to gather comparative information, i.e. information about the differences between the situation earlier, the present conditions, and the conditions as obtained in more "advanced" areas (cities or other regions) and among the more "progressive" (richer?) classes.

As far as possible, the guidelines will give the issues to cover, but the information collected will often be open-ended. FIs will therefore have to transcribe the result of their observations and interviews regularly in notebooks. Though preferably in English, all local important concepts should be retained in the local language. These field notes will be edited into a field report.

The study of social change

Changes under study might be not yet initiated, under way, already completed.

Changes will concern all aspects of local life, but the most interesting changes to be examined correspond to changes increasing the autonomy of individuals and families: Wages, new employment, education, local access to information (newspaper, TV, etc.), exposure to other settings (visits, short or long-term migrations, etc.), family values, solidarity within the family and with other villagers, support received from the government.

The focus is on changes that are the source of debate and discussion. The fact that these changes generate some controversy means that they interfere significantly with the traditional functioning of the local society.

These transformations are usually initiated through forerunner groups ("pioneers"), a small category of individuals or families that are ready to experiment a new behaviour. Because the behaviour is new, it is also risky to the eyes of the rest of the community and may be disapproved of at the beginning. However, when these change catch on (some never do), they may spread fast within the community. Usually, people who adopt them first tend to be younger and more educated, but this is not always the case. After a period, the change has become a norm and every body is supposed to have adopted it. However, some groups or individuals have not and may be regarded as backward for that

reason. These groups (laggards) tend to be either socially more conservative, or economically backward.

The readiness to adopt a new behaviour depends on three main factors: knowledge (how much do people about these new behaviours), benefits (what are the benefits and costs of changing one's behaviour) and legitimization (how the new behaviour is socially received).

Reproductive change

It is not feasible for FIs to assess fertility change with real accuracy. They may try to examine information collected by local health personnel (births, family planning), but it will be still difficult to have a precise idea of the real extent of fertility decline and of fertility variations across social groups.

However, it is possible to have some better idea of the three factors determining adoption of low-fertility behaviour: knowledge, benefits, legitimacy.

- Knowledge: family planning methods are by now almost widely known in South India. However, health personnel may help identify groups or localities where knowledge is still incomplete.
- Costs and benefits

Reliance on child labour (in the household or for outside employment) is a crucial component of the cost factor of fertility reduction. The availability and the type of employment for children in the local economy constitute such a dimension.

Perception of cost and benefits related to schooling and health is another dimension.

The functioning of the family planning infrastructure (accessibility, cost, etc.) is another dimension of the cost and benefits of fertility reduction.

- Legitimacy

A lot of information can be collected about ideas and values in terms of fertility choices: what is good, what is bad, and why?

In this connection, it may be useful to distinguish between the traditional fertility regime (older generation, marginal groups), the current situation characterised by rapid fertility decline, and the probable plateau of the two-child norm (sometimes already reached in the study area). These three situations can be described in terms of three categories of people.

The FI will have to understand what are the characteristics of these three groups: age, social position, status, mentality, public image, etc. The FI will have also to understand how public figures (from outside the village) fit in this division: historical figures, political leaders (local, regional, national), religious figures, cinema stars, TV personalities. And how people explain the possible gap between their own fertility behaviour and that of their role models.

An other, though more distant model is related to foreign countries, especially industrialized countries in the West (Europe, USA) and in Asia (Japan, China, Singapore). How far do villagers know about their low fertility levels? How far do they relate their behaviour to modernity as exemplified in this various settings. How do they reconcile low fertility in these areas with their deficiencies in the Indian eye (lack of democracy in China, lack of family or religious values in the West, etc.).

The neighbourhood and the extended family still have an attitude more supportive of high fertility. Having no child is always seen as a much more serious situation than having too many. For that reason, people expect newly married couples to have children (or boys) as fast as possible, irrespective of their social or material circumstances. This, in turn, has an effect of the overall fertility.

They are not directly affected by the cost exerted by excess fertility: an additional, unplanned child is a burden only to the mother or to the parents. Only when the number of children is significantly beyond the accepted norm does the extended family or neighbourhood condemn the attitude of the parents.

Schedule

<i>Base Institution</i>	<i>Fieldwork (in each site)</i>	<i>Duration</i>	<i>Tentative Calendar</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contract preparation etc. 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Final selection of field sites Recruitment and training of Field Investigator 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preliminary documentation on sites (1 month FI) 		1 m	April-May
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Report/visit of FI to the PI Meeting of FIs from different regions FG preparation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Field work by FI (4 months FI) Field visit of PI Focus Group (end of FI stay) 	4 m	June-Oct
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FG transcription/translation 		1 m	Nov
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Report (first draft) 		2 m	Dec-Jan
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Final report (IFP) 		2 m	

PI: principal investigator

FG: focus group

FI: field investigator