SHORT ARTICLE

Determinants of family planning acceptance and changing social norms among the tribes of Tamil Nadu – A qualitative exploration

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Abstract

Background: There are very few studies done among tribes that explore the contribution of changing social norms which influences the acceptance of family planning methods. **Objective:** To discover various changing traditional social norms that influence tribal people to accept contraceptive methods. **Methodology:** Ten in-depth interviews were conducted among Toda and Irula tribes of Nilagiri district, Tamil Nadu. Family planning acceptors were interviewed and sampling was purposive to get data richness. The interviewed were summarized and themes identified. The themes were used to construct a conceptual framework of social factors influencing family planning acceptance. **Results:** The important themes that emerged were: (1) Perceived need for development in terms of education and sufficient savings for future. (2) Improved perception on attaining gender equality by women. (3) Lack of bonding between parents and children due to poor attention and poor understanding in large families. (4) Learning from the bad experiences of others with large families was a major reason for adopting small families. **Conclusion:** The social norms which influenced acceptance of family planning methods seem to be related to perceived financial and economic development of families directly or indirectly. Therefore family planning education programs should emphasize on the financial and economic benefits of family planning.

Key Words

Social Norms; Family Planning; Nilagiri Tribes; Gender Equality and Effective Parenting

Introduction

India is the pioneer in adopting the National Family Planning program in 1952 from the time of introduction the programme has undergone important changes and acceptance of contraceptive methods has grown slowly [1]. Over the past 60 years the states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala have performed well in controlling the population growth. All the south Indian states are performing well but in comparison the north Indian states are poor performing which resulted in 'North-South demographic divide' due to poor program implementation which is driven by infrastructure oblivion [2]. There are certain social norms which act directly or indirectly on family welfare decisions such as family size, number of male and female children and overall fertility. Gender norms also strongly influence family welfare decisions [3]. According to NFHS the TFR of Tamil Nadu is very much low which is said to have attained the replacement level of fertility [4]. The public health system focuses on providing access to contraceptive methods, increasing awareness and providing incentives for those who accept family welfare. There are behaviour change communication campaigns largely oriented towards advantages and disadvantages of family size and various contraceptive methods. Despite this there are still poor family planning acceptance rates in several parts of the country and in remote tribal pockets. There are strong social determinants which influence the acceptance of family planning.

There are a several studies which have explored the social factors which influence family planning acceptance. A study done among tribal in north east India showed that increasing trend in literacy has made people to plan their family size [5].

Perceived benefits of small families and threats of large families which are dependent on cultural context of the population influence family welfare acceptance [6]. One question that looms large is whether changing social norms in the current times has led to a different set of determinants of acceptance of family planning.

Aims & Objectives

To understand the determinants of family planning in the setting of changing social norms in tribal communities in Tamil Nadu.

Material and Methods

Study setting: This qualitative exploration study was conducted in Nilagiri district of Tamil Nadu. Tamil Nadu is an industrial state located in south- India with well performing health indicators [7] Nilagiri district is a hill station located at north – western part of Tamil Nadu. Nilagiri district was selected to conduct the study because it is the shelter for several tribal populations [8]. *Ethics statement:* The study design and method of data collection was approved by Institutional Ethical Committee. The participants were included in the study after getting verbal consent from them.

To explore the social factors and perceived benefits, samples for the study were selected from Thoda and Irula tribes in Nilagiri district. A total of ten in-depth interviews were conducted, five in Thoda tribe population and other five in Irula tribe population. Sampling was done purposefully to get rich data and deep insight.

Thoda tribes are a developed population in terms of education and life style. Among all the tribes Thoda are considered to be well developed [9]. The Thoda women who were interviewed were working in their own farms which were provided by the Government. Irula tribes are primitive and undeveloped population within the society compared to Thodas because of their traditional practices and isolation [10, 11] Most of the interviewed Irula tribal women were working for daily wages.

Interview: The methodology adopted was in-depth interviews because it throws light on deep insights and individual benefits or experiences which cannot be revealed through a quantitative survey [7]. The participants were approached in their respective residence itself. Interviews were conducted in Tamil. Interviewer started the discussion by asking whether they had done family planning, their perceived threats of having more children, perceived benefits of having limited family size and practical difficulties of having unplanned families in day to day life. Other important social issues such as providing education to children, infrastructure development of the village, interpersonal conflicts and other factors make the people self-motivated towards family planning were also covered. Each interview lasted about 20 to 30 minutes. During the interview extensive notes were taken by the researcher. Audio recording was not done as the participants belonged to tribal communities and tend to be conscious when recorded, thus limiting the scope of the interviews. *Coding:* The interviews were read several times followed by manual open coding to identify the themes emerging from the in-depth interviews. Then the codes were accumulated into themes from which a conceptual framework was developed for further analysis. *Reflexivity:* A reflexivity note was maintained before and after the interview to record the mind set and mood of the interviewer so that the inevitable biases during the interview and analysis could be considered during interpretation of the data. Any personal opinion or defensive thoughts towards the answer of the respondent was recorded down in reflexivity note.

Results

The main themes that emerged from analysis are summarized in table 1. There are some social factors that emerged during the interview which motivates people to limit their family size.

Perceived Need for Development: In the olden days having more children was perceived as an economically favorable option [12] with decreasing reliance on agriculture as the occupation and rising urbanization of villages, requirement of large number of children to share the work load in the farm has reduced. This has changed the direction in which utility of having more children was perceived in the past.

'In our community many people got degree and settled in America, so my children also must study well, for that lot of money is needed so if I have less children I can put them in good college and make my children equal with others so that they don't feel inferior to others'

In marginalized tribal communities there seems to be a strong association between college education and freedom from the inherent inferiority feeling. This Thoda tribe mother tries to bring up her children without inferiority feelings of belonging to a marginalized community. She perceives a need for development and having small families would facilitate them to provide education to all the children and thus aid in development. A previous study has shown that family welfare services are not only for planning the family size it is positively correlated with number of school enrollments [13]. Thus interventions encouraging people to have small families in these tribal communities should focus on education of the children, which is sure to strike a cord with the community.

Saving money is an integral part of any family for future needs and financial security for the members of the family but having large family size prevents savings. This is an emerging social norm in urbanizing rural communities where communitarian feelings are reducing and being replaced by individualistic attitudes [14]. The attainment of economic growth is never met by a family with more children due to expenditures occurring visibly and non-visibly for the children to grow. The money saved and benefits of having small family are well realized by women in this modern era so women prefer to have small family size.

'With fewer children I can save some money which can help me during sick days or the days I take leave from work, but now I cannot save money at all' mentioned by a woman belonging to Irula tribe.

Perceived need for effective parenting: A family welfare acceptor from Irula tribe said that,

'If we have more children it is difficult to fulfil our responsibilities. After giving birth to them it is our responsibility to bring them up well'

While this does reflect the importance of what the couple perceived as ideal family size in family planning acceptance [10,11] it also shows us that the decision is directed more by personal responsibility and choice rather than the government norms. Parenting is increasingly being seen as an important activity [15]. This is in close association with the need for development that emerged as a strong theme previously. The needs for development made them want to educate their children and also to concentrate and perform their parental responsibilities effectively.

Perceived need for gender equality: Gender roles of women lead to excess household work due to more family members. So to safeguard from excess household work and to give attention on bringing up the children family planning is used as a strategy. A community survey done in Lucknow has found out that the unmet need was higher among the housewives which was 66.3% on the other hand the unmet need was relatively less around 51.9% among the employed women, this shows the felt need of non-working mothers to limit the family size [16] It is well perceived by the mother that chances of having leisure time and concentrating on self-developmental activities is less with more children which makes women more dependent on earning member of the family even though the women is well educated [17,18]. A irula women revealed,

'As a lady I have to wash more clothes and it consumes six buckets of water which I have to take from a distance of around quarter kilometer that too in a hilly region. If I have less children my work load is also less'

Women perceived that limiting the family size will make them appear slim and fit. They were as much concerned about the physical appearance as the fitness and ability to work for a salary and support the household income. An irula woman said,

'I should look and feel young. My body should not look like I have given birth to two children. Only then I will have the power to do hard work'

These points emphasize the perceived need of the women for gender equality. This has a strong connection with the main theme of perceived need for development. Changing social norms regarding gender has influenced the fact that women need respite from long hours of household work and also need to participate in gainful employment equally with men. In contrast to this a study published in 2014 has highlighted that the contraception prevalence rate (CPR) is higher among the non-working women when compared to working class in slum dwellers of shilling [19]. So this shows the motivational drive of the tribes to work equally with their male counterparts.

Perceived need for social connectedness: In olden days of joint families having many brothers and sisters was viewed as a social capital. But in this study one of the interviews revealed that large families lead to interpersonal conflicts between children. The perceived need for development of individuals and nuclear families and the perceived need for effective

parenting seem to have led to serious conflicts between siblings of large families. The parents also felt that this made the child emotionally distance themselves from the parents.

'…fight emerges between the brothers and sisters thinking of who is more important to parents or sometimes leads to thinking bad about the parents, but I expect them to understand me and how much I work and care for them' irula women.

This clearly points to rapidly changing social norms. Small nuclear families are becoming the norm even in rural and tribal areas. Therefore larger families are perceived as reasons for distortion of social connectedness. Smaller families are perceived as leading to lesser conflicts and greater social connectedness.

The four strong themes that have emerged from this study are perceived need for development, effective parenting, gender equality and social connectedness. All these themes are unique in that they are perspectives which have not been explored before. They all depict one unifying theme, changing social norms. Urbanization and exposure to the external world has reached the nook and corner of even remote tribal areas. Therefore many of the tribal communities are also rapidly undergoing cultural and social changes. Many tribal people are perceiving the need for social change and development. They do not want their children to suffer the pains of marginalization as they themselves did. The strategy to prevent marginalization is exposure to outside world which happens best through education. The study was dominated by the recurrent theme of need for development. The other themes such as need for effective parenting, need for social connected ness and gender equality all relate directly to the underlying need for development. This seems to drive family planning acceptance.

The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) was the first forum where family planning and reproductive health was viewed from the development lens. ICPD shifted the entire focus from demographic approach to a rights based approach. [17] The intelligence of such an approach can be well appreciated from this study. The fact that family welfare is inseparable from development has emerged strongly from this qualitative exploration. India is a signatory to the ICPD plan of action and it has strongly influenced the successive Reproductive and Child Health Programs. This study emphasizes the need to strengthen the development based approach to family welfare in remote tribal areas. Based on these findings a conceptual framework was built which is shown in figure 1.

Conclusion

This study clearly points out the determinants of family planning acceptance with changing social norms. The perceived need for development in remote tribal areas drives most decisions regarding family welfare. Therefore the policy makers of the family welfare department need to take this into consideration and reorient the behaviour change communication campaign to a more rights based approach. Effective family welfare programs of the future should be empowering the community.

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Tables

TABLE 1 THEMES OF SOCIAL FACTORS INFLUENCING ACCEPTANCE OF FAMILY PLANNING

Themes	Codes	Quotations
1. **Perceived need for development**	Education insecurity	'In our community many people got degree and settled in America, so my children also must study well, for that lot of money is needed so if I have less children I can put them in good college and make my children equal with others so that they don't feel inferior to others'(Thoda)
	Savings for future	'With fewer children I can save some money which can help me during sick days or the days I take leave from work, but now I cannot save money at all' (Irula)
2. **Perceived need for effective parenting**	Effective parenting	'If we have more children it is difficult to fulfill our responsibilities. After giving birth to them it is our responsibility to bring them up well'(Irula)
3. **Perceived need for gender equality**	Need to reduce women's work load	'As a lady I have to wash more clothes and it consumes 6 buckets of water which I have to take from a distance of around quarter kilometre that too in a hilly region. If I have less children my work load is also less'(Irula)
	Need to be gainfully employed	'I should look and feel young. My body should not look like I have given birth to two children. Only then I will have the power to do hard work' (Irula)
4. **Perceived need for social connectedness**	Need to reduce interpersonal conflicts	'…fight emerges between the brothers and sisters thinking of who is more important to parents or sometimes leads to thinking bad about the parents, but I expect them to understand me and how much I work and care for them. All this can be avoided in small families' (Irula)

Figures

FIGURE 1 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK SHOWING CHANGING SOCIAL NORMS LEADING TO FAMILY WELFARE ACCEPTANCE