

The emergence of the one-child family in India

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The whole world knows and talks about the “one-child” phenomenon in China. Most of this discussion is tied to analyses of the one-child policy instituted by the Chinese government in 1979 and to the positive and (mostly) negative ramifications of that policy (Vallin 2016; Jiang, Li and Sánchez-Barricarte 2016).

At other times, the single-child family is a subject of interest for countries with very low fertility. But for countries like India, in which fertility has been high until recently, there is little interest in families that might imitate the very low fertility behavior of China and Eastern Europe (for an exception, see Pradhan and Sekher 2014).

One-child families in (selected groups of) India

In a recent paper, Basu and Desai (2016) demonstrate that there is in fact an interesting subsection of the Indian population that seems to have stopped childbearing after one child. Furthermore, they have done so without any encouragement or pressure from government policy and in spite of being surrounded by people who want and celebrate two or more births – and even sometimes four or more births. Among the urban, upper income, educated middle class, it is no longer unusual to find families stopping at one child, even when this child is a girl.

Data from the India Human Development Survey of 2004-2005 show that about 16% of women with a college degree seem to have stopped after one child, and that 13% of those living in the four metro cities have done the same. The numbers are even higher for more recent cohorts and recently available data from a later round of this survey only confirm this finding.

Basu and Desai therefore examine the factors that may lead some families to stop at a single child, and they conclude that the motivations for this very low fertility are more mundane than those currently used to explain the very low fertility in countries undergoing what has been called the Second Demographic Transition. In this transition, there is believed to be a strong

element of ideational change, which Van de Kaa (2001) has described as a move toward “post-modern” and “post-materialistic” values and preferences, a focus on individual expression and fulfillment, and openness to a diversity of experiences and lifestyles.

In stark contrast to mothers in India with higher fertility, mothers of single children appear to be: no more likely to join the labor force (if anything, they are *less* likely to be working); no more consumerist (that is, very low fertility is not a strategy for being able to afford a second car); and no more conjugally absorbed (if anything, women with a single child in fact have a *lower* level of couple communication, suggesting that children possibly form an important topic of parental conversation!). All these findings are also consistent with the larger literature on the slow pace of social change in India: in spite of rapid economic growth, there is much less modernization of attitudes such as those that are expressed in the retreat from marriage in East Asia or the acceptance of childlessness in Europe, to name just two examples. Finally, the relatively high socioeconomic status of these single-child families does not lead us to expect that negative, structural constraints limit fertility in the same way that has been proposed for European countries that have seen massive economic slowdowns.

Investing in the child’s education

Where single-child families in India score higher is in the investments they make in only children, especially in terms of education. Controlling for things like maternal education and family income, expenditure on children’s education is higher by 40 per cent in one-child families than in families with three or more children, with two-child families falling in between. Children from one-child families are 1.56 times as likely to be in a private school as children from 3+ child families, while children from two-child families are 1.4 times as likely to attend private school. Both these relationships are highly significant (that is, they cannot reasonably be considered a mere statistical accident). When we interact being a single child with the gender of this child, the relationship is even more intriguing: any negative impact from being a girl is limited to girls in 2+ child families; among one-child families, parents do not distinguish between boys and girls.

What all this suggests is that this very low fertility is largely an expression of the same (although stronger) motives for fertility decline in general. In turn, these motivations are related to rising parental aspirations for children and for their own consequent social mobility (analogous to explanations for fertility decline in the 1970s and 1980s in China - Greenhalgh 1988). Furthermore, this expansion of aspirations can be related to the nature of the rapid economic growth in the country. This growth has opened up the possibility of very high returns on education, but only for a few. That is, as employment opportunities have not kept pace with educational growth competition for scarce jobs increases.

Complementing this increased sense of competition is the growing public recognition of the poor quality of education provided by a wide range of educational institutions. When barely 50 per cent of enrolled children are able to read (Pratham 2005), it is not surprising that parents seek alternatives to government schools. And all these alternatives are expensive. One way to meet these expenses is to reduce the number of children who need such investments.

Forerunners?

What might all this tell us about the future? These one-child families in India may represent what Livi Bacci (1986) called the “forerunners” of fertility decline in the rest of the population, which implies that this an idea that will catch on. Conversely, these families may reflect a growing heterogeneity in the Indian population and the average fertility will

eventually become a balance of childbearing between highly motivated families and the remaining bulk of the population. In this case, will it be because the latter lacks the ambition for dreaming big dreams and is also hampered by cultural and institutional constraints on such dramatic fertility decline? Only time will tell.

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