Hindu/Muslim Fertility Differentials: A Comparative Study of Bangladesh and West Bengal

Nahid Kamal, *London School of Economics and Political Science*
Gabriela Mejia-Pailles, *London School of Economics and Political Science*

Religion affects fertility through a number of mechanisms. Some of these include religious doctrines, socio-economic variables like education and social class, and having minority status in a community. These mechanisms are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In fact, all of these explanations have been put forward in order to explain the higher observed fertility of Muslims in India where Hindus form the majority of the population. The pro-natalist teaching in Islam is believed to be responsible for the lower uptake of modern contraception among Indian Muslims while their backwardness in education and urbanization is thought to stem from their historically disadvantaged position in relation to Hindus in the country.

The relevance of these hypotheses is examined by looking at Hindu dominated West Bengal and Muslim dominated Bangladesh, which together comprised the former province of Bengal in British India and consequently have many similarities in terms of language, culture and political history. These similarities in culture and tradition among the general populations of the two wings of Bengal are to some extent attributable to the fact that the vast majority of Bangladeshi Muslims are Hindu converts. Nevertheless, significant Hindu/Muslim differentials in fertility have prevailed in both the Bengals throughout the course of the twentieth century, although the gaps have been narrowing in recent years.

The availability of comparable survey data since the 1990s enables study of the determinants of the differentials in Hindu/Muslim fertility in the two Bengals. According to preliminary results, Muslims in West Bengal (who form the minority in the state) have significantly higher levels of fertility than the Hindu majority although their fertility preferences are not that varied (Table 1). We argue that this is not primarily attributable to the minority status hypothesis (Table 2) but rather to the Indian Family Planning Programme's reliance on terminal methods. Muslims have historically been resistant to sterilization, male or female, plausibly owing to religious sanctions, even in the context of Bangladesh which recorded one of the most

dramatic increases in the contraceptive prevalence rate in history. Muslims have higher fertility than both the Hindus and Schedule castes/tribes in West Bengal because the Indian programme offers little choice and availability of reversible methods. Indeed, the level of unmet need is 18 percent among Muslims compared with 10 percent among Hindus of West Bengal. Again, it comes as little surprise that West Bengal, with the largest percentage of Muslim population after Jammu and Kashmir, recorded the highest use of traditional methods of contraception among all Indian states, according to the latest NFHS survey reports.

In Bangladesh, the Hindu/Muslim differential in fertility is not quite as pronounced as in West Bengal (Table 3). The main explanation we put forward is that the long term structural changes in the socio-economic sphere which prompted the largely traditional people of Bangladesh to revisit their fertility aspirations and adopt modern contraception, have affected Hindus and Muslims of the country alike. And thus unlike in West Bengal, socio-economic background and female education are stronger predictors of fertility in Bangladesh than religion.

Table 1. West Bengal, NFHS 1998-99, Future fertility preferences by religion

Fertility Preferences	Religion		Total
	Hindus	Non-Hindu	
Have another	22.0%	27.9%	23.2%
Undecided	1.1%	0.6%	1.0%
No more	41.4%	46.7%	42.5%
Sterilized	34.1%	22.8%	31.7%
Declared in fecund	1.1%	1.2%	1.1%
Up to God	.2%	.9%	.4%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Authors' calculations

Table 2. West Bengal, NFHS 1998-99: Logistic Regression Odd Ratios for future fertility preferences.

Variables	Odd ratio	Std Err	z	P>|z|	[95%	Conf. interval
Children ever born	0.39	0.02	-16.52	0.000	0.35	0.43
Age	0.86	0.01	-17.89	0.000	0.84	0.87
Education						
Low	0.96	0.14	-0.28	0.783	0.72	1.28
Medium	0.94	0.14	-0.38	0.702	0.71	1.26
High (ref)	1.00					
Socio-economic status						

Low	1.46	0.23	2.35	0.019	1.06	1.99
Medium	1.18	0.16	1.19	0.233	0.90	1.53
High (ref)	1.00					
Religion						
Hindu	0.66	0.09	-3.17	0.002	0.51	0.85
Non-Hindu	1.00					
Current use of contraception						
none	3.28	0.43	9.15	0.000	2.55	4.24
traditional	3.07	0.43	8.04	0.000	2.34	4.04
Modern	1.00					

Source: Authors' calculations

Table 3. Bangladesh, DHS 1999-2000. Children Ever Born by Religion.

Children Ever Born	Religion		Total
	Muslims	Non Muslims	
None	11.4%	9.4%	11.1%
1-3	53.1%	60.3%	54.0%
4+	35.6%	30.2%	34.8%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Authors' calculations