"Fertility as Mobility": What Does It Tell Us about Mobility in India?

This paper examines the association between fertility outcomes and social mobility in India. It then goes to examine what this association tells us about the nature and extent of social mobility in the country.

In its earliest formulation, which can be traced back to at least Malthus, "fertility as mobility" thesis stated that small family size is conducive to upward social mobility (Dumont, 1890 as cited in Greenhalgh, 1988). The rationale for this argument draws upon the property of capillarity or capillary action of liquids in the physical world. So, just as gravity necessitates that liquids have to be thin in order to rise up in narrow tubes, in the same manner families have to be small in order to rise up the mobility ladder.

Recent formulations have, of course, moved away from this simplistic and rather eugenicist orientation. Instead the emphasis is to understand the institutional structures that are beyond an individual's control and provide the frame of reference for a couple's fertility decisions to achieve desired mobility goals (Greenhalgh, 1988). So, for example, the desire for upward mobility did not provide any rationale for limiting family size in late traditional Chinese society. The costs of bringing up children, both boys and girls, was minimal- as aptly described by the phrase "two chopsticks and a bowl". The only exception was the investment required for decades of study in preparing for imperial examinations, given that joining the ruling elite through a position in the imperial bureaucracy was one of the mobility goals in these societies. However, upwardly mobile families minimized the costs associated with the examinations, by devoting their resources to one son, who was most likely to pass these examinations and join the bureaucracy, while subsidizing child-rearing costs by sending other sons to work at an early age.

Following the latter approach, I examine how mobility- fertility linkages are shaped in the Indian society. Given that the institutional structure defines both a couple's objective and subjective experience of mobility, I examine how each of them is associated with fertility outcomes.

I hypothesize that both a couple's experience and expectations about mobility is associated with lower fertility levels. While the neo-liberal economic policies pursued in India over the last 20 years have generated rising opportunities and aspirations, it is also associated with an extremely competitive environment and prohibitive education costs. In this scenario, limiting family size is the rational decision for parents to maximize opportunities of upward mobility for themselves and their children (Basu and Desai, 2010).

Data and Methods

In order to carry out my analysis I use household survey data, India Human Development Survey (IHDS, 2005). IHDS is a multi- topic nationally representative survey of 41,554 households across 33 states and Union Territories in India, only the small island states of Andaman and Nicobar & Lakshadweep are excluded.

The analytical sample is restricted to *married* men who are *above 18 years* but *less than 59 years* whose wives were interviewed in the survey (N= 29, 114). The reason for restricting the sample to married men is that my primary interest is fertility outcomes (decisions). This is also the reason behind an upper age limit of 59 years for men in the sample. The maximum age of women in the sample is 49 years, assuming a maximum age gap of 10 years between husband and wife, it seems reasonable to restrict the maximum age for men to 59 years. I restrict my sample to married men who are above 18 years of age and whose wives were interviewed; those below 18 years are too young for a study on fertility outcomes.

I examine each of my research questions- whether there is an association between fertility outcomes and a couple's objective experience of mobility and whether there is an association between fertility outcomes and perceived chances of mobility- using a set of two fertility measures: ideal number of children (or fertility preferences) and current number of living children (or fertility behavior). IHDS asks a sub- sample of 33,482 ever- married women in ages of 15- 49 years questions pertaining to their fertility behavior and history that allows me to measure both desired and achieved fertility.

I use two measures of objective mobility- inter- generational occupation mobility and economic mobility. IHDS (2005) collects detailed information on occupation of the head of the household and his father; I used this information to create a variable that measures

intergenerational occupation mobility. For example, men who are professionals but their fathers are farmers are coded as having experienced intergenerational occupation mobility. I hypothesize that fertility is significantly lower among couples who have experienced upward mobility versus those who have not or have experienced downward mobility.

Mobility in terms of economic status is measured by the household's response to the following question:

"Compared to 10 years ago, would you say your household is economically doing the same, better or worse today?"

Responses are coded into one of the three responses- no change, improvement and deterioration- in terms of economic status. I hypothesize that couples who have experienced an improvement in their economic condition have lower fertility than those who have experienced no change or worsening of economic conditions.

I use expenditure on private tuition as an indicator of perceived chances of mobility to analyze the association between men's perceived chances of mobility and fertility outcomes. I categorize states into three categories- high, medium and low- according to the average expenditure on private education. The underlying hypothesis is that expenditure on private education is indicative of the chances of returns from education investment. Higher the expenditure on private education, greater is the expected returns from education investment and greater the perceived chances of mobility and lower would be the fertility levels.

Preliminary Results

Preliminary cross- tabulations suggest that while there is no clear pattern in fertility differentials by a couple's experience of inter- generational occupation mobility, and there are small differences in fertility by a couple's experience of economic mobility, fertility differentials by perceived chances of mobility are large and in the hypothesized direction.

[Table 1 about here]

Further analysis is required to see to what extent these associations hold true when standard SES variables are controlled for in a regression framework. Moreover, to the extent we

find little association between mobility and fertility, it becomes necessary to investigate if the results indicate not so much a lack of association between mobility and fertility but a lack of mobility in the Indian society.

Table 1: Association between fertility outcomes and inter- generational occupation mobility, economic mobility, and perceived chances of mobility.

	Average number of ideal children	Average number of living children
Inter- generational occupation mobility		
Upward mobility	2.39	2.70
No mobility	2.45	2.60
Downward mobility	2.28	2.47
Economic mobility over the last 10 years		
Same economic status as in last 10 years	2.53	2.76
Improvement in economic status over the last 10 years	2.43	2.61
Deterioration in economic status over the last 10 years	2.54	3.00
Perceived chances of mobility		
High expenditure states	2.11	2.45
Medium expenditure states	2.37	2.57
Low expenditure states	2.93	3.24

References

Basu, A. M. and S. Desai (2010). Middle Class Dreams: India's One-Child Families. <u>Annual Meeting of Population Association of America</u>. Dallas.

Greenhalgh, S. (1988). "Fertility as Mobility: Sinic Transitions." <u>Population and Development Review</u> 14(4): 629-674.