

# An Analysis of Cultural Roots of Preference for Son in India



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## Abstract

Preference for son has deep cultural roots in demographic billionaire India. This realism is cradled in beliefs and rituals. Belief is an individual's mental attitude of one's acceptance of a proposition without any certainty of truth whereas ritual is practical aspect of belief. Beliefs and rituals about necessity of son(s) are in vogue in India and are conditioned by various socio-economic and cultural factors. An exploratory-cum-descriptive study was conducted in rural and urban areas of Hamirpur district of state of Himachal Pradesh with the objectives to know about prevalent beliefs about children, necessity of son in family and performance of rituals for begetting son. A sample of 470 respondents was drawn from all the three towns and ten most populous villages, taking two villages from each of the five tehsils, of the district. Information was collected from the men whose wives were in their reproductive period, with the help of an interview schedule specially designed for this purpose. Focus Group Discussions were held in each village and town to extract more information to have deeper insight of the problem being investigated. It was unearthed that four fifth of the respondents firmly believed that children are gift of God. Almost equal proportion of informants argued that son is necessary in a family because he provides old age insurance, performs last rites and is helpful in earning. Birth of son brings enhancement to status of family and continuation of line. Significant proportion of couples performs various rituals to ensure that they are blessed with son(s). However, every fifth subject did not subscribe to the view that son is necessary in family arguing that property can be transferred to son as well as daughter and both of them are equal. However cultural attribute has deep influence for preference of Son across all regions, religious communities, and caste groups in India.

**Keywords:** Attitude, Couples, Cultural, Rituals.

## Introduction

Culture impacts attitude of a person at micro level and the society at macro level. No two societies are alike due to difference in their cultural traits. Even same cultural units in different societies may not function exactly the same way because of difference in sub units of those units. Preference for son in India is culturally rooted. It is one of the main reasons of unfavorable sex ratio and has contributed to burgeoning population making India home to every sixth person on the globe. Economic Survey of India 2018 has unearthed that preference for sons has lead to 21 million 'unwanted' daughters in India. Empirical study eliciting relevant information from the respondents would unearth realism.

## Objectives of the Study

This study was conducted with the following objectives:

1. To know about prevalent beliefs about children;
2. To understand necessity of son in family;
3. To examine performance of rituals for begetting son.

## Methodology

### Research design

Main purpose of this study was to understand cultural roots of preference for son in India. It necessitated eliciting information pertaining to beliefs and rituals about sons and also about the fact whether sex determination tests are undertaken and action-reaction after such tests. Exploratory-cum-descriptive research design was used in this study.

### Universe

It is a herculean task to conduct a study over a large area or to interview large number of subjects due to limitation of time, money and resources. Such difficulties are compounded when study is to be

conducted by single person and that to in the regions which have numerous tough hill terrains and inaccessible areas. This study was conducted in Hamirpur district which is located in the Western Himalayas in the state of Himachal Pradesh in India.

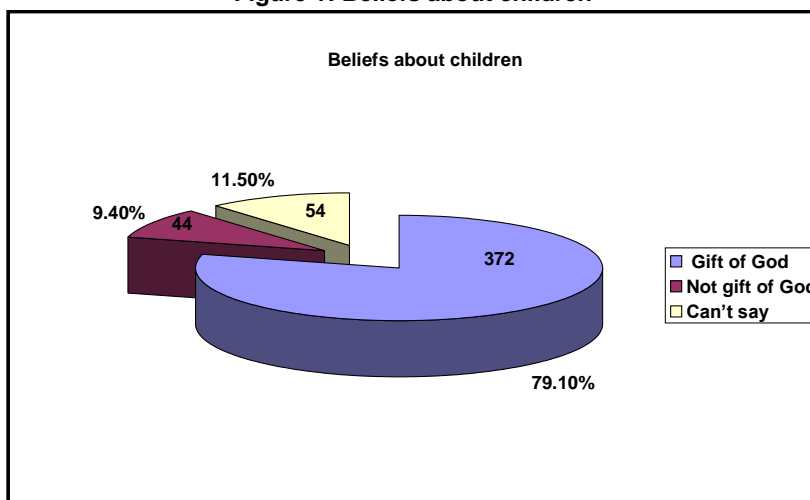
**Sample**

Out of twelve districts of Himachal Pradesh, Hamirpur was chosen because it has registered highest literacy rate during last four decades. All the three towns of the district and two most populous villages each were taken from all the five tehsils of the district. A sample of 470 was taken.

**Beliefs about children**

Beliefs which society holds are important attribute in knowing notion of the people about son and daughter in a family. There has been a wide spread belief in the area under study that children are gift of God to the mankind. In order to maintain sanctity to this belief certain people do not intend to interfere in His affairs through artificial measures of family planning. What beliefs respondents of this study have about children have been investigated. Information on this account is compressed in figure 1.

**Figure 1: Beliefs about children**



It is discernible that nearly four fifth (79.1%) of respondents believe that children are gift of God. Remaining 9.4 per cent respondents do not subscribe to this view. Percentage of those who were not in a position to firmly answer is 11.5%. Hence it can be pointed out that in the study area people still nurture the traditional belief that children are gift of God. Kapoor (1983) in his study named Correlates of Resistance to Family planning tried to examine relationship between workers attitude towards family planning and their adoption behavior and also to find

out reasons for their stiff resistance to acceptance. He like Naro et al. (2006) observed that belief that children are gift of God is negatively associated with adoption of family planning measures. Rasheed (2011), however observed that educated, elite carry the practice of preference for son. He suggested specific measures to arrest this practice banning dowry, enforcing a strict limit on the number of pregnancies a woman can have and making contraceptives available and also by increasing of age of women at marriage.

**Table 1 Belief about necessity of son in family**

Response	Frequency*	Percentage
<b>Yes</b>	374	79.6
Old age insurance	214	57.2
Enhancement of status	130	34.8
Continuation of line	179	47.9
Performance of last rituals	96	25.7
Transference of property	128	34.2
Helpful in earning	37	9.9
<b>No</b>	96	20.4
Girl and boy are equal	91	23.8
Property can be passed on to girls	10	2.6

\* Multiple responses

**Belief about necessity of son in family**

Belief system in Indian society about necessity of a son in a family is conditioned by various socio-economic and cultural factors. It is considered to be a religious act to give birth to a son due to more

than one reason. Data tabulated in table 1 shows that four fifth (79.6%) of respondents firmly believe that there must be a son in every family. The Economic Survey of India 2017-18 drafted by Chief Economic Adviser Arvind Subramanian and his team also re-

established this reality. It has been observed, "Families that have sons are more likely to stop having children than families where girl is born. This is suggestive of parents having children until they have as many sons as they want." Rest of the 20.4 per cent opines that one may not have any son. Majority (57.2%) of those who believed that a couple must have a son argue that son provides old age insurance to the parents. In fact believers in the necessity of son(s) have different convictions. Enhancement of status (34.8%), continuation of line (47.9%), performance of last rituals (25.7%), transference of property (34.2%) and helpful in earning(9.9%) are some of the other reasons respondents have put forth. Among various reasons to have at least one son in the family, old age insurance followed by continuation of lineage are most common reasons referred by the respondents.

It is very interesting and encouraging to observe that one fifth (20.4%) of 96 respondents who do not subscribe to the view that son is a must in a family. Overwhelming majority (94.8%) consider boys and girls to be equal. This supports philosophy

underlying family welfare in India. There are a small number (10.4%) of such respondents who opine that there is no necessity of a son in a family because like sons familial property can be passed on to the daughters. Kanitkar and Rele (1980) in their study on fertility and family planning in Greater Bombay in 1972 currently married women observed that children are believed to be gift of God and therefore, child birth should not be prevented. Naro et al (2006) found that the couples will not adopt contraception till they have desired number of children. Pande and Malhotra (2006) have observed that in India, Son preference is strong but not universal. Das (1999) observed that majority of the old live with married children, and these are overwhelmingly sons. This would seem to be an important economic reason for wanting to have sons

**Performance of rituals for begetting son**

Normally birth of a son to a family is welcomed, appreciated and celebrated. So much so that many couples after conception even resort to special rituals to ensure that they are blessed with son(s).

**Table 2 Rituals performed to have son (N=169)**

Rituals	Frequency*	Percentage
<b>Performed</b>	<b>169</b>	<b>36.0</b>
Yajna	26	15.4
Fasting	79	46.7
Worshipping	108	63.9
Bore Tabiz	50	29.6
Offered water to the Sun/Moon	36	21.3
Offered food to saints/Brahmins	24	14.2
<b>Not performed</b>	<b>301</b>	<b>64.0</b>

\*Multiple responses

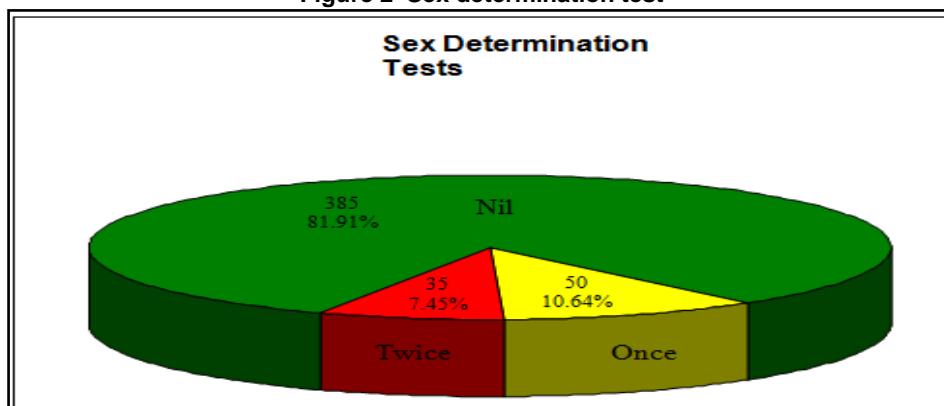
Data presented in table 2 shows that about two third (64%) of the respondents did not undertake any specific step to have a son. Rest of the 36 percent respondents performed one ritual or the other so that they are blessed with a male child. Among ritual performers, Yajna was solemnized by 15.4 per cent, 46.7 per cent had fasting and nearly two third (63.9%) worshiped Gods, Goddesses and local deities. Percentage of talisman bearers was 29.6. Water was offered to the Sun and the Moon by 21.3 per cent. However, 14.2 per cent offered feasts to

saints and Brahmins seeking their blessings for a son. Hence, worshipping gods/goddesses and followed by fasting are most common rituals [performed by the majority to have birth of a son.

**Sex determination test**

Desire to have a child of a particular sex is so strong among certain couples that they even resort to sex determination test ostensibly to know sex of the unborn child. Information gathered from the sampled respondents about sex determination by them is outlined below:

**Figure 2 Sex determination test**



Information given in figure 2 shows that out of 85 respondents who affirmed of having undergone sex determination, more than half (58.8%) did it once and remaining 41.2 per cent of the total respondents carried sex determination tests to know sex of the

unborn child twice. Rest of the 81.9 per cent, however, did not have any such test. This means respondents of this area welcome child irrespective of sex. This fact is heartening for all those who have concern for fast declining sex ratio in India.

**Table 3 Steps taken on knowing sex of child (N= 120)\***

Sex of Child	Steps	Frequency	Percentage
Male	Allowed to have normal birth	26	70.3
	Took special precautionary measures to ensure the birth of a healthy baby	7	18.9
	Opted abortion	4	10.8
<b>Total</b>		<b>37</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Female	Opted abortion	54	65.1
	Took medicines and other eatables to ensure miscarriage	15	18.0
	Allowed to have normal birth	14	16.9
<b>Total</b>		<b>83.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Grand Total</b>		<b>120.00</b>	<b>100.0</b>

\*Total tests by 85 respondents (once=50, twice=35 Total=50+35x2=120)

**Steps taken on knowing sex of child**

After knowing sex of the child to be born the parents react differently depending on sex of child in the womb. Table 3 depicts information about steps taken by those who undertook sex determination test after knowing sex of unborn child. On knowing that a male child is going to be born, 70.3 per cent allowed to have normal birth but 18.9 per cent took special precautionary measures to ensure birth of a healthy baby. Other 10.8 per cent of the respondents opted for abortion after knowing that sex of unborn child is male. It may be due to unwanted pregnancy or health of the mother and fetus. It was quite interesting to experience that one of the respondent conveyed that he got aborted a male fetus having a daughter after the birth of two sons. On the other hand percentage of respondents, who went for abortion after knowing that fetus was female, is 65.1. Besides, 18.0 per cent respondents took medicines and other eatables to ensure miscarriage to get rid of unborn female child. Merely 16.9 per cent of girl children were allowed to have normal birth by their parents who knew in advance that sex of fetus is female. It discerns that there is a strong preference for male child among those who have had sex determination tests. This indicates prevalence of age-old preference for son over the girl. It also reflects discriminatory attitude of parents against girl child even much before she sees light of the day.

**Elders' blessings to couples**

Favorable attitude for son has roots in blessings elders shower on newly married couples. When a couple, newly wedded or the one having no issue has interface with elderly kins and kiths, each of the spouses bows before such elderly persons and touch their feet with reverence. In return elders give their blessings in audible words or through thought waves. To understand this aspect of culture, each respondent was asked to tell what blessing newly wedded couple receives from their elders in the family and community? The responses expressed by them are constructed in table 4.

**Table 4 Elders' blessings to prospective couples**

Blessings	Frequency*	Percentage
Doodho Nahao Pooto Phalo	251	53.4
May you have son	240	51.1
May you have daughter	4	0.9
Others	21	4.5

\*Multiple responses

Some of the respondents had put forward more than one response. Analysis of these responses as given in table 4 indicates that majority of the respondents (53.4%) reported that 'Doodho Nahao Pooto Phalo' is the usual blessing given by the elders. Other 51.1 per cent respondents informed that the young couple is blessed with utterance 'may you have a son! Only 0.9 per cent respondents stated that elders wished them to be blessed with a daughter. However, 4.5 per cent of the respondents reported that elderly wished the couple having no issue to be blessed with smart and beautiful child. The information about blessings tabulated above unearths that in overwhelming majority of cases elderly persons pray to God to bless the couple with son. It reflects very strong desire and preference for son(s) is still prevalent in the community under study.

**Practices on the birth of a son:**

The preference for son is also very strongly reflected in the enthusiasm with which birth of son is welcomed. Birth of a son comes with excitement, thrill and joyful atmosphere in a family. It is expressed through practices being observed on this occasion.

**Practices to protect children from evil spirits**

A very important aspect of culture of this area is safety and security of young baby for the parents and other elder members of family. Several protective measures are taken to provide a security umbrella from evil spirits. In study area, it has been observed, that the people have deep rooted apprehension that evil spirits can cause some harm to their children. Owing to such apprehension they take certain protective measures. What measures are

adopted to protect children from evil spirits as conveyed by respondents of this study, are reflected

in table 6.

**Table 5 Practices to protect children from evil spirits**

Practice	Frequency*	Percentage
Mark black tilak on forehead of child	364	77.4
Use talisman (Tabiz)	77	16.4
Apply sacred ash	163	34.7
Chant incantations	117	24.9
Give sacred things to eat	17	3.6

\*Multiple responses

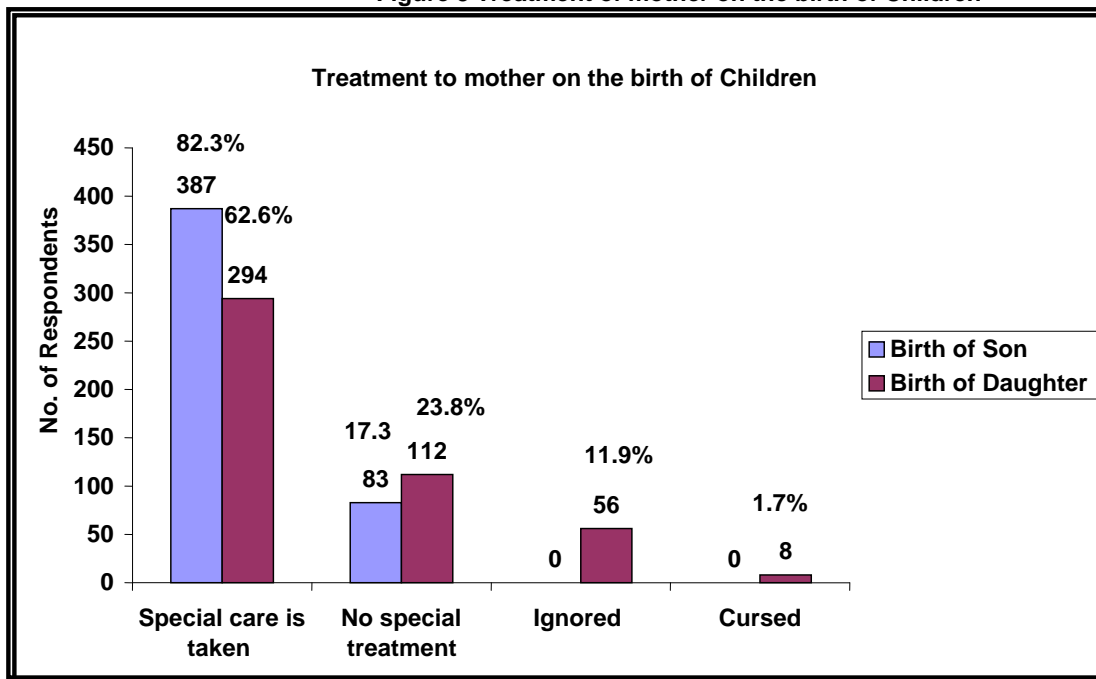
It can be seen from the data compressed in table 6 that more than three fourth (77.4%) of the respondents informed that 'black tilak' is marked on the foreheads of their children. The 'Talisman' or 'Tabiz' is used, stated 16.4 per cent respondents. Almost one thirds (34.7%) shared that 'sacred ash' is applied on the forehead or ear, or chest or some other part of body of child. One fourth (24.9%) intimated that they prefer chanting of incantations to protect their children. Eating of sacred things (Prasad)

neutralizes negative impact of evil spirits, believed 3.6 per cent of the respondents.

**Treatment to mother on the birth of child**

Traditionally Indian society accords higher status to a mother who gives birth to a male child. Her status in the family and community improves significantly. This fact has also been looked into in the context of preference given to sons as indicated in foregoing analysis.

**Figure 3 Treatment of mother on the birth of Children**



Though being blessed with son or daughter is beyond the control of the mother, yet respondents expressed that she is not treated exactly the same way on giving birth to a male and female child. The information given in figure 3 shows that overwhelming majority of the respondents (82.3%) unhesitatingly shared the fact that special treatment is given to the mother on mothering a son. Remaining 17.7 per cent of the respondents, however, informed that no special treatment is given to the mother when a son is born. On the other hand special care of is taken even if she is blessed with a daughter, informed 62.6 per cent respondents. A few others also expressed that no special treatment is given to them (23.8%), ignored (11.9%) and even cursed (1.7%) on giving birth to a daughter. It unearths that in substantial number of cases women are subjected to discriminatory

behavior by members of family on mothering a daughter.

**Main Findings**

Belief that children are gift of God continues to be deep rooted among overwhelming majority of the people. Necessity of son in family rests in the belief that he is old age insurance. Son is necessary for continuation of line. Status is enhanced by having son and he helps in familial earnings. He also performs last rites. In India, son preference is strong but not universal. However significant proportion of people opines that girls and boys and equal and property can be transferred to sons as well as daughters. In India, son preference is strong but not universal. Many couples want a balance of sons and daughters, and so, at least some girls are wanted.

Rituals are manifestation of belief of the people about son in family. More than one third of the people perform rituals like *Yajna*, fasting, worshipping, offering of water to the Sun/Moon and offering of sacred meals to the saints/Brahmans. Safety of children is attached very high importance. Marking of *tilak* on forehead of child, applying sacred ash on body of child, use of talisman, chanting of incantations and offering sacred eatables to child are some of the more visible and important practices in vogue.

In almost every sixth case sex determination test is conducted. Upon knowing that sex of unborn child is male, normal birth is allowed to occur in more than two third of the cases. However if sex of fetus is female abortion is opted in almost two third cases.

When a newly wedded couple approaches elder members of family, neighborhood, kinship or other circles of known persons, they are given blessings to be blessed with son in majority of cases. Special prayers are made for son. Birth of son follows celebrations in family being accompanied by neighbors and relatives. These manifest in songs, distributions of sweets and visit to local deities and other religious places. It is customary to take care of mother-child duo in Indian society. However the ladies giving birth to son are given special care in overwhelming cases.

#### **Conclusion**

Beliefs condition thinking and shape attitude of the people about gender of child and number of children in family. These are reflected in utterances, behavior patterns and practices of the masses. However son is considered to be the most precious asset who is entrusted to responsibility to take care of parents during their old age. Performance of last rites by him and deep rooted belief of continuation of lineage through him make him indispensable member of family. Birth of 21 million unwanted daughters in the country as reported in Economic Survey 2018 attests findings of this empirical study.

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