

Fertility and Familial Power Relations Procreation in South India

Review >
South Asia

In recent years there has been a considerable decline in the average number of children born to women in Andhra Pradesh. The bottom line seems to be that women increasingly perceive children as consumers and not as producers. Challenging the pervasive notion of women as mere providers of nourishment and incubation to the seed that contains the potential of life (Dube 1986, Eliade and Sullivan 1987), Minna Säävälä's *Fertility and Familial Power Relations: Procreation in South India* charts an increase in feminine assertion, as opposed to compliance, in the domain of procreation.

By Nita Mathur

In the present day, women need to negotiate their fertility choices rigorously within family structures. As a result of this changed situation, familial, generational, and gender relations are subjected to significant transformations. In addressing this and related issues, Minna Säävälä brings together anthropological and demographical insights to develop a meaningful interpretation of women's personal narratives.

This study, based on fieldwork in the East Godavari district in coastal Andhra Pradesh, explores the place of child-bearing in the lives of rural women, and how the women aspire to lead a life of dignity with few children rather than struggle to provide for many. It aims to: (1) bring an interpretation of the socio-cultural changes in which fertility decline is embedded to the fore; (2)

establish an understanding of the processes related to declining fertility; (3) analyse, in terms of social, physical, symbolic, and power-related realms, the familial repercussions of the fact that women now give birth to far fewer children than their own mothers did; and (4) examine how the quest for a small family and the adoption of female sterilization as the most accepted contraceptive method have a bearing on gender relations and intergenerational relations. At another level, the work may be located in the larger framework of gender and culture. It examines the implications of low fertility at grass-roots level in terms of women's choices and the interplay of power and social control in families. To pursue this discussion it is imperative to identify the processes and framework within which women make and pursue fertility choices.

Given the fact that, in the traditional Indian situation, a woman's body and

its processes are largely under the control of men, the author cites interesting cases of women who opted for sterilization of their bodies, overthrowing their husbands' authority. This comes out succinctly in the case of a young woman who pressed her right to decide on the number of children she would rear, in spite of the forceful demands of her husband and mother-in-law. A sterilization scar is an assertion of the symbolic status of a mother/woman, challenging the authority of the mother-in-law as a post-procreative woman who wields considerable influence in familial affairs. Such self-assertion appears to have sparked off a wave of conservatism and oppression.

Fertility may be treated as a part of the larger cultural complex, consisting of beliefs, values, myths, rituals, and cultural practices. Against this backdrop, cultural interpretation of conception and birth, as well as indigenous

methods of birth control, assume considerable significance, and had Säävälä examined these she would have added a welcome dimension to the argument developed in the book. Nonetheless this is a fine piece of work with clear objectives, pursued by the author throughout the text, and opening up several interesting possibilities for further research. <

- Säävälä, Minna, *Fertility and Familial Power Relations: Procreation in South India*, Copenhagen: NIAS (2001), pp. xvi + 239, ISBN 0-7007-1484-7

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