

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION TO THE THESIS

The study of the regional demography of India is incomplete without reference to the socio-culturally (and ethnically) distinct North-eastern region of India. Almost in contrast to the academic interest received by demographic (and especially, fertility) issues worldwide, resulting in the accumulation of a massive volume of literature on the subject; we find that research on fertility issues of NER has remained largely neglected until now. Indeed, a rather singular focus on the ongoing ethno-cultural struggles and socio-political unrest in the region and its states has perhaps led to a relegation of its prime demographic questions to the background. There is little gainsaying that a deeper understanding of the demography of the region is not only justified in its own right, but can illumine hitherto unexplored aspects of the society of NER. In this context, the primary aim of this thesis is to construct, and examine the process of fertility transition in India's North-east in a historical and comparative perspective vis-à-vis India, using available secondary sources of information on the region and its states.

NER currently has one of the highest fertility rates in the country, and fertility transition in the region and its states is far from over. In fact, as far as demographic indicators such as fertility, infant mortality, and maternal mortality is concerned, NER can be clubbed with the proverbially backward Hindi-speaking belt of North India. The stalling of fertility decline in the region, and especially among its tribal-majority states, during the 1990s, has been a rather remarkable feature of its fertility transition,

especially in view of the fact that other regions of India have been undergoing a rather smooth decline in fertility at least since the beginning of the 1970s. Indeed, this latter event led to various surmises- from the possibility of significant errors in the data, to the possibility of an early transition rise in fertility in NER. However, our findings suggest that fertility trends from official estimates may not have led us astray after all, nor is the recent stalling of fertility pre-transitional in nature.

In fact, the construction of long term trends in fertility for NER beginning 1900s, reveals that even though fertility rates were considerably higher in the region, as compared to the all-India average for most of the colonial period, the states of the region (especially Assam) experienced relatively faster fertility declines vis-à-vis the all-India average starting 1970s till the beginning of the 1990s. Although the tribal majority states of NER, primarily Meghalaya and Nagaland, were late in commencing fertility decline, even these states revealed significant reduction in fertility from at least the beginning to middle of the 1980s.

In this context, one of the significant findings from the analysis of fertility for the colonial period has been the existence of a reproductive differential between NER and all-India; with the former exhibiting somewhat higher fertility as compared to the latter. In fact, using information contained in the census for the indirect estimation of the fertility rate for Assam and all-India for 1911 and 1931, we find that TFR of the former region was higher by nearly a child than the latter. However, in line with previous research in the field, we find that in-migration, which had little role to play in shaping population growth trends at the all-India level, had a huge impact and lead to substantially higher population growth in NER and its states during the entire pre-Independence period.

It is also interesting to note that during the colonial rule, immigration had been largely a feature of the plains, with importation and employment of ‘coolies’ in the tea estates of Assam province and voluntary movement of agriculturists from neighboring over-populated areas of the Bengal Province. However, during the post-Independence period, we find a wide extension of the areas witnessing immigration, and this includes much of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Sikkim. Additionally, significant intra-regional migration has now become a trait of the states in the region. The latter development is, to no small extent, an outcome of the anti-immigrant protests in Assam during the 1970s. This, as has been argued in the thesis, has been fuelled in large part by the Centre’s policy of ethno-cultural determinism of political autonomy in NER. Not surprisingly, the movement of the migrants into the tribal-majority states has led to similar fears of demographic ‘imbalance’ and that of ‘identity loss’ in these new receiving areas, with severe ramifications impinging on both personal and social choices of these communities including reproductive decisions (but more on this presently).

While the aforesaid aspects of the demography of NER are in sharp contrast to the experience in other regions of India, an examination of the proximate determinants of fertility in particular, demonstrates a fair degree of resemblance to the experience of the other regions/states of the country. For instance, contraception remains the foremost proximate determinant of fertility in nearly each state and region of India, NER being no exception to it. For instance, in Arunachal Pradesh contraception played a major role in fertility decline and in Nagaland, it was primarily responsible for the stall in fertility decline. Interestingly, nuptiality was also found to be a proximate

determinant of much importance and its effect had been mostly towards reducing fertility as was seen in the case of Tripura and Nagaland.

However, a most remarkable finding is the change in fertility preference towards a *larger* number of children in most of the states of NER during and following the 1990s. In fact, no other state in India evinced such an increase, and the wanted fertility rate of the states of North-east during the mid 2000s were not only higher than the all-India average, but also higher than that in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. Thus, the rise (or lack of decline) in fertility among the states of NER (and especially its tribal dominant states) during most of the period following the 1990s, cannot be attributed solely to the poor performance of the family planning programme in this region, as there are indications of a change in underlying preferences among these states.

Our analysis of the determinants of fertility in NER using district level data from the 1991 and 2001 census, throws useful light on the socio-economic, cultural and political dimensions of fertility in the region. Not surprisingly perhaps, female literacy has a significant negative effect on fertility, and in fact, turns up to be significant in the cross-sectional as well as fixed effects panel analysis. Indeed, among all the socio-economic determinants, female literacy has been found to have the most robust association in a fall in fertility rates. While researchers have passionately debated about the *absolute* as well as *relative* importance of female education, vis-à-vis other factors in achieving social goals like reduction in fertility, it is hard (if not impossible) to deny that female education irrespective of the region or the time period considered has been found to have a significant fertility-reducing effect.

It is notable that a few studies in the recent past (e.g. Mari Bhat, 2002) have noted that fertility decline and the use of contraception has been relatively faster among the uneducated women vis-à-vis their educated counterparts. However, to conclude from this that female education is no longer important for fertility is not correct. Even if one were to agree that the strict correspondence between education and fertility is waning overtime, female education at the societal level actually could be influencing the fertility decision of the uneducated women. Cleland and Jejeebhoy (1996) by examining interstate differences in the relationship between female (maternal) schooling and fertility find that “overall levels of schooling in a *society* may constitute as powerful an influence on reproductive patterns of individuals as their own length of schooling. A logical extension of this conclusion is that, low educational attainment, at the individual level, does not necessarily imply a high level of fertility” (Cleland and Jejeebhoy, 1996: 83). Similarly, McNay *et. al.* (2003) using multilevel statistical analysis of the determinants of fertility decline in India note that “even when fertility decline is driven by the behaviour of uneducated women , female education remains an important explanatory factor....It involves externality or spillover effects to the uneducated” (McNay *et. al.*, 2003: 4505) and conclude that “the key role of education in India’s fertility decline may now be masked by the nature of the contemporary transition, it has by no means disappeared” (McNay *et. al.* 2003: 4506).

Nevertheless, as our research shows, in the relatively socio-economically backward areas, female education holds the potential to reduce fertility rates significantly. Indeed, our study finds that indicators of women’s status/autonomy in general, have a strong fertility reducing impact. More importantly, sustained thrust on female education is the key to continuing fertility transition in the future. As pointed

out in Jain and Nag (1986), "... although advancement in female education cannot be used as a primary means to reduce fertility during the next decade, changes in current education policies can substantially contribute to reduction in fertility in the long run" (Jain and Nag 1986: 1607).

The impact of tribal culture and status on reproductive decisions, and particularly that on fertility, has been a vital concern in the context of India. Apart from the fact that these communities have remained relatively backward, both economically and socially, there is a growing concern over the fact that the assimilation of the tribes into the mainstream, have led to the emergence of formerly unknown socio-cultural features, that are detrimental to women's status in general and for the process of fertility transition in particular. In fact, as noted in this thesis, and as least as far as NER is concerned, there seems to have been a transformation in the socio-cultural moorings of the tribes, leading to increased son preference and possibly changes in the marriage system, with negative consequences for the decline of fertility among them.

Interestingly enough, the increasing prominence of 'love marriage' in the social milieu of NER has led to increasing distance between the bride and her natal family and introduction of patriarchal values in these societies. For instance, Deshorjit and Nabakumar (2010), based on a field study on the Phayengs of Manipur, found decline in the incidence of consanguinity coupled with increase in marriage distance during the last decade and a half. This clearly indicates that the custom of territorial endogamy is being gradually replaced in NER, implying the possibility of strengthening of son preference among the communities.

Marriage endogamy and exogamy are fundamentally related to the relative value of daughters among the various socio-cultural groups as well as the relative value of

sons over daughters. Territorial endogamy is intrinsically opposed to certain features of social organization that lead to preference of sons over daughters (son preference). Specifically, since the distance (both physical and emotional) of married daughters from their natal families is typically much smaller as compared to exogamous marriages, the value of daughters to their natal families can be expected to be relatively higher. Indeed, it has been noted by researchers (see for instance, Das Gupta et. al., 2003) that parents continue to rely on their daughters for support in times of need under such a system, whereas in the case of exogamous marriages, it is neither morally endorsed nor practically feasible to do so. Therefore, as noted earlier, the changing marriage pattern among the tribes of NER could be depleting the relative value of daughters.

Among the various indicators of female status related to marriage in tribal societies, the custom of bride price and post-marriage residence deserves special mention. As against the custom of dowry payment in non-tribal societies, the payment of the bride price among tribals is recognition of the economic value of women to their natal families. The primary reason for the existence of such a custom can be argued to be the practice of shifting cultivation among tribals that demands considerable input of female labour. However, as noted in the study published by the National Commission for Women (Fernandes, Pereira and Khatso, 2007) on the customary laws of NER, this feature is fast disappearing from the marriage scene. In fact, Fernandes (1990), found evidence that tribals and Dalits have been switching over to dowry payment as a method of gaining upward social mobility. Even among the tribes of NER, for instance the Adivasi, this practice is gradually waning away. A primary reason for the disappearance of bride price or its replacement with dowry could be the changing

socio-cultural mores of tribal societies, land management and ownership being most important of them. Overall, changes in marriage patterns and the associated increase in son preference among the tribes could be a durable hurdle in the path of fertility decline.

Particularly interesting in the context of North-east India has been the concern over the fertility-enhancing impact of religious conversion to Christianity. It is oft-claimed that the Church, with its distinctive anti-contraception stance, has been responsible for the relatively higher fertility in NER (for instance, Saikia, 2005). However, we find that adherence to Christianity has a fertility inhibiting effect, possibly due to the fact that these populations have been exposed to influences from a larger (or even global) community, vis-à-vis their non-Christian counterparts, and hence have an earlier exposure to the idea of a small family as a better choice. A second and more important reason could be the higher age at marriage among Christians as compared to populations of other religious groups in NER (Kar, 2002).

In this context, it could also be mentioned that an examination of the interplay between adherence to Christianity and belonging to the category of Scheduled Tribes, has been particularly rewarding. In fact, this particular constellation has been hypothesized to elicit higher fertility, primarily because religious doctrines (including those regarding the morality of using family planning methods) would have a greater hold over decisions regarding fertility among the tribes due to the particular set of circumstances that surround these communities today, including socio-economic underdevelopment and the fear of identity loss. There is no gainsaying that the fear of identity loss and the felt need for cultural revival among these communities, could lead its members to an austere adherence to their established customs and traditions- of

which the Church and its preaching, would no doubt, be an integral part. Indeed, we find that this has been exactly the case in NER, and fertility is higher where the proportion of tribes as well as Christians is higher in the population.

One of the most fruitful directions of investigation in the context of NER has been that of the relationship between socio-political factors (especially as related to ethno-cultural movements) and its impact on fertility. Indeed, this particular aspect has been relatively unexplored in the Indian context, but if the experience of NER is anything to by, political transitions may have an important role to play in the fertility transition in the various states and regions of India. However, this does not mean that socio-political factors have been altogether neglected in the Indian context. Indeed, as we noted during the course of the thesis, the impact of socio-political movements as they effect changes in existing social structures thereby facilitating fertility decline, has been noted by scholars in the context of the South India as well as West Bengal.

Nevertheless, the role of ethnic diversity per se, which has hitherto received considerably lesser attention, assumes an important role in the fertility transition in NER. As we argue in the thesis, the presence of a few dominant (population-wise large) ethnic groups in the region could lead to a strong tendency towards using demographic power as an instrument for obtaining socio-economic and political power. In other words, we expect that larger the number of numerically *smaller* groups in a state or the greater its ethnic diversity, *lower* would be the fertility rate. This is especially the case in NER, because the numerically smaller ethnic groups have been almost completely assimilated into the larger tribal groups, with the result that the possibility of divergence of interests between the former and the latter are rather weak.

While we have strong theoretical and empirical reasons to include the selected variables in the regression analyses, it is pertinent to mention here that incorporation of other factors such as poverty, or per capita income, or for that matter more refined measures of women's status and autonomy such as dowry and bride price, and inheritance patterns, or for that matter political participation of women, especially over a considerably long period of time, would have greatly enriched the results of this study. However, lack of data, especially at the desired level of aggregation at the macro level precluded us from such an undertaking. Nevertheless, we hope that these limitations do not take away from the important findings from this research, and the determinants of fertility in NER have been unearthed to a significant extent.

In this connection, it is interesting to note that even though there are signs of accentuation of gender bias in these societies in many forms, very little research exists on these issues, and especially in the manner in which they may be affecting reproductive decisions within these communities. In fact, very little research exists on the issue of gender discrimination in NER, perhaps as a consequence of the general notion of a high status enjoyed by women in tribal societies as such. Of course, the idea of higher female status in tribal societies is not baseless, and indeed founded on earlier painstaking research of several scholars. However, as the present study brings out, even if these 'impressions' are true to a certain extent, considerable changes in gender relations may be underway in this region too. A careful analysis of the various factors affecting gender discrimination in child survival reveals that the situation in NER may not be after all, very different from the rest of India today, even though physical (and perhaps psychological) isolation had kept NER away from 'mainstream' culture till the recent past. Even though cultural features of tribals do offer added

protection to the social position of women in this region, it too has its limitations. In fact, tribal status is associated with higher fertility in NER, as indicated by the results of our analyses. What is more, data from the latest round of the NFHS (2005-06) found a stronger son preference among the *tribes* of NER compared to their nontribal counterparts, in terms of the proportion of men who want more sons as compared to daughters in their family.

Even though hard data are difficult to come by, there is some evidence to suggest that land management and ownership patterns in the region could also be changing, leading to increasing corrosion of the socio-economic foundation of the relatively higher status of women in NER. For instance, in an in-depth analysis of the civil society and gender relations in the state of Meghalaya in NER, McDuire-Ra (2007) noted that among the matrilineal Khasi tribes there has been a shift from common land to private land with a simultaneous change in ownership in favour of males in a large number of cases. ‘As women undertake the majority of the labour in the cultivation of common land, especially through *jhumming* (shifting cultivation), the privatization of common land and relegation of *jhumming* to poor quality land has been a major cause of insecurity’ (McDuire-Ra 2007: 184). It is perhaps important to understand the traditional pattern of land ownership in the region and any changes therein have to be sensitive to the special requirements of females for maintaining their sustenance and not the least, their social position. Indeed, future research on fertility transition in the region needs to look closely into the nature and effect of changing land ownership and management on the status of women and hence their decision making power, including fertility choices.

The present analysis falls just short of incorporating the influence of a distinct aspect of the contemporary society of North-east India viz. the effect of prolonged social unrest and ethnic conflicts on gender relationships and the status of women. Due to difficulty in procuring the relevant data, we had to leave out this issue from the present investigation, and to that extent at least, the present analysis remains incomplete. It is perfectly possible that the situation of ongoing social unrest in NER is influencing gender relations considerably and we would have reached at a finer understanding of the various issues involved, could we have considered it. Indeed, there is considerable scope for further research on various aspects of gender relations and fertility in NER, and investigations along new directions, such as the one suggested above can prove to be rewarding areas for future research.

Nevertheless, this thesis makes several interesting points. From a policy perspective, improvement in the family welfare programme with a thrust on its IEC (information, education and communication) component has the potential of reducing fertility primarily by reducing unwanted fertility. The study also brings out that greater effort has to be made towards bringing down the infant and child mortality rates and increasing the female literacy rate in the North-eastern states of India if there has to be sustained fertility decline in the region in the coming years. Importantly perhaps, this thesis makes a case for a deeper understanding of the basic issues of socio-political organization, not only in their own right, but as they affect myriad dimensions of people's lives- both personal and social. However, without a comprehensive, and most importantly, sustained policy focus on the overall development of the region, with a special focus on resolution of the ethno-cultural unrest in the region, fertility decline in NER and its states, perhaps cannot be expected to gain the required momentum.

Specifically, we find that there may be direct, and not so direct, channels through which ongoing conflict and duress along with the forces of modernization in NER (that may entail emulating many mainstream socio-cultural practices) may be affecting fundamental aspects like gender relations in the region. The silent but significant changes, confronting the peoples of the region, as for instance, in socio-cultural practices governing fertility behavior, calls for greater attention and a holistic approach to the various demographic, economic and social issues facing NER to-day.