Middle class dreams:
India's one child families

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The worldwide movement towards smaller families is not necessarily an indication of convergence in the motives for fertility declines. The several theories of contemporary fertility declines, especially in the context of very low fertility, attest to both the existence of several theorists, as well as the real possibility that different motives can lead to similar behaviors. It is particularly intriguing to speculate about the factors motivating some population sub-groups to have very low fertility, when one is looking at societies that are yet to enter the second demographic transition. Understanding the fertility behavior of these sub-groups, which inhabit an otherwise relatively high fertility region, raises several interesting theoretical as well as policy relevant questions.

Our paper strives for such understanding by looking at a special expression of low fertility – the one child family – in India. Rapid fertility decline in India in the last two decades has received considerable attention but much of the discourse has focused on a decline in high parity births. However, we find that almost hidden from the public gaze, a small segment of the Indian population has begun the transition to extremely low fertility. Among the urban middle classes, it is no longer unusual to find families stopping at one child, even when this child is a girl; see Table 1 below. From the distributions in Table 1 it appears that about 14% of families have stopped at one child or at two daughters.

We try to examine this low fertility in the light of theories of very low fertility in the industrialized world. But we also ask if there is something qualitatively different about very low fertility in the context of a country still to complete its first demographic transition. In particular, we wonder if a different process is at work in newly industrialized countries where rising aspirations outstrip economic growth and call for innovative ways to meet these new aspirations.

We seek to understand the contours of this phenomenon by focusing on families who appear to have completed family building and in which the youngest child is at least five years old.   This analysis will use data from India Human Development Survey 2004-2005 which is a nationally representative survey of 41,554 households containing interviews with 33,583 ever-married women aged 15-49. Of these, 19,188 women have children who are aged 5 or above. These women form the analytical sample for this analysis.

Studies of the second demographic transition in the industrialized countries have highlighted increasing individualism and reluctance to enter into parenthood (Leseaghe and Sukryn 1988; Van de Kaa 2001, Hakim, 2003), resulting in heterogeneity with some individuals eschewing parenthood while others having two children. Other studies have focused on rising female labor force participation in conjunction with relatively immutable gender inequalities and the high burden on women for childcare (McDonald,2004).

We look at the Indian data from the perspective of the above theories. And then we ask some further questions. These include questions about the uniqueness of the one child family in India, in the sense of asking whether this family type represents a growing heterogeneity of the population of whether these family are merely the forerunners of a movement that will gradually involve the population at large. One way to look at this issue is to see how recent this phenomenon is. Were there always a significant proportion of one child families, which got ignored in earlier analyses because studies of Third World fertility have tended to focus almost exclusively on the large family and on the gradual process of fertility decline?

We are also interested in a somewhat different aspect of the gender and opportunity costs question. Is very low fertility an expression of the opportunity costs of children because childbearing involves foregone opportunities to **earn** money (through female participation in the labor force for example) or foregone opportunities to **spend** money? Our preliminary data offer interesting insights into a new phenomenon in India where middle class aspirations lead people to stop at very small families for two reasons connected with **spending** money and time– to meet their increasing large material wants, as well as the rising desire to invest highly in these few children. While these families are interesting demographically, they are even more interesting from a social stratification perspective. Using unique survey data we show that these children are beneficiaries of what Lareau has termed "concerted cultivation" (Lareau 2003) in which parents invest heavily in these children, sending them to private schools and private tutoring, resulting in increased social stratification over time, created at least in part by these diverging demographic destinies.

Characteristics of Small Families:

When we examine the characteristics of these small families, it is clear that urban and educated women are at the vanguard of this movement. More importantly, incorporation into global culture through English skills and less traditional gender roles also seem to be associated with a movement towards one child family (see Table 2).

Characteristics of Children in Small Families:

Children in these atypical families also appear to be highly advantaged. This is not surprising since one of the reasons families choose to stop at one child or two even if the two children are girls is because they have great aspirations for their children and choose to invest heavily in them, sending them to private schools and for private tutoring. These children are more likely to attend English medium schools and have greater levels of skills than their peers (see Table 3).

All these tables make a prima facie case that one child families represent a small but important segment of Indian society in which dreams of middle class success inspire parents to stop at one child and invest heavily in these children. However, the tables presented here show only bivariate relationships. Multivariate relationships controlling for education, income, age and region are important to examine and will be examined in the completed paper.

The IHDS survey represents a unique opportunity for linking parental characteristics with child outcomes and expect that this paper will both give us some interesting persuasive answers as well as throw up some pointers to influence further research, relevant to declining fertility in the developing countries as well as some hints for reexamining the nature of very low fertility in the industrialized world..

References:

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**Table 1: Family Size Distribution
for women whose youngest living
child
is at least 5**

	%
2 children with at least 1 boy or 2 boys, or 3+ children	86.03
Two daughters, no son	3.5
One Son, no daughter	5.95
One daughter, no son	4.52

**Table 2: Characteristics of Women with Small
Families**

	Large Family	Two girls	One boy	One girl	
Urban/Rural Residence					
Metropolitan City	75.52	4.58	11.89	8.01	100
Smaller City	83.17	5.02	6.33	5.48	100
Developed Village	87.78	3.25	4.97	4	100
Less Developed Village	88.8	2.47	5.19	3.54	100
Mother's Education					
None	90.27	2.18	4.25	3.3	100
1-4 Std	86.81	3.1	6.33	3.76	100
5-9 std	85.07	4.27	5.95	4.72	100
10-11 std	80.78	5.46	7.88	5.88	100
12-14 Std	66.51	8.48	12.41	12.61	100
15 Std	63.57	7.76	18.02	10.65	100
Missing	88.32	2.81	4.24	4.63	100
Mother's English Fluency					
Not at all	87.47	3.08	5.39	4.06	100
A little	77.21	5.97	9.67	7.15	100
Fluent	63.5	9.23	15.56	11.72	100
Mother practices pudah/ghunghat					
No	82.11	4.66	7.23	6.01	100
Yes	90.04	2.3	4.64	3.02	100
Household Wealth Index Quintile					
Poorest	88.26	2.32	4.72	4.7	100
2nd	89.52	2.28	4.8	3.4	100
Middle	88.18	2.98	5.22	3.61	100
4th	84.33	4.35	6.47	4.86	100
Affluent	81.07	4.98	7.97	5.98	100

Table 3: Children's Educational Outcomes by Family Size

	Large Family	Two girls	One boy	One girl	All
Attends Private School					
No	73.44	63.43	61.44	62.5	72.6
Yes	26.56	36.57	38.56	37.5	27.4
Goes for Private Tutoring					
No	78.28	70.75	67.23	70.13	77.6
Yes	21.72	29.25	32.77	29.87	22.4
Medium of Instruction in School					
Vernacular Language	85.92	69.95	73.34	71.06	84.83
English	10.94	26.46	23.63	26.35	12.02
Other, Mixed etc.	3.14	3.6	3.03	2.59	3.14
Can read simple paragraph					
No	40.13	25.64	34.36	33.56	39.5
Yes	59.87	74.36	65.64	66.44	60.5
Can do two digit subtractions					
No	46.83	31.15	25.57	35.21	45.74
Yes	53.17	68.85	74.43	64.79	54.26