

**CORRELATES OF COITAL PATTERNS IN A TRADITIONAL INDIAN  
SOCIETY**

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## **Abstract**

Frequency and timing of intercourse is one the strongest and most persistent factors affecting fertility in non-contracepting populations. Relatively few rigorous studies on coital pattern and correlates in contemporary India have been published. This study used a small window data from traditional Indian society to investigate current coital pattern and to identify the key factors that influence coital life in scheduled castes of Hindu population living in rural areas in the Northeastern Indian state of Assam. It is observed that frequency of intercourse is relatively low in this traditional society where coital life is largely dictated by religious strictures and social taboos. Logistic regression technique has been applied for weekly and monthly reported coital frequency data. Covariates such as susceptibility condition of wife, age of wife, age of husband, couple's marital duration, sub-caste, per capita monthly income of the household, number of male surviving children and total number of surviving children have strong effects on the risk of sexual intercourse.

## **CORRELATES OF COITAL PATTERNS IN A TRADITIONAL INDIAN SOCIETY**

The frequency of intercourse affects natural fertility. Fecundability is determined by several behavioral and physiological factors, including the frequency of unprotected intercourse. Coitus is the proximate cause of conception, the difference between some coitus and no coitus is related to the difference between some probability of conception and none. The timing of sexual intercourse in relation to ovulation strongly influences the chances of conception. However, the number of fertile days before or after ovulation is uncertain. Estimates range from 2 days per menstrual cycle (Potter, 1961; Bongarts, 1983) to 10 days or more (WHO, 1983; France et al, 1992, Wilcox et al., 1995). Even with daily intercourse, most ovulatory menstrual cycles may be incapable of producing a conception (Wilcox et al, 1995). The probability of conception could be higher or lower for specific couples. Closely spaced ejaculations reduce the sperm count, the concentration of sperm, and the percentage of sperm that are motile (MacLeod and Gold, 1952; Freund, 1962). Thus, frequency of ejaculation could theoretically reduce the potency of sequential batches of sperm, and thereby reduce chances of conception.

In India, frequency of intercourse is one of the least studied proximate determinants of fertility. Most of the reports on frequency of intercourse are based on urban Indian couples (Kapoor and Aravindakshan, 1980; Yadava and Rai, 1989; Joshi et al.1991;). Sex is still considered taboo and sexual matters are generally not discussed in the family. The practice of coital life outside marriage is socially not acceptable in traditional Indian society. Women's virginity till marriage is greatly valued. In India under the influence of socio-cultural factors, a large number of parents marry their

daughters during adolescence (Nath et al.1993a , Kapadia, 1955). Many research studies have documented that a large number of myths and misconceptions associated with normal sexuality are prevalent among various socio-cultural groups in India (Kakar, 1989). Abstinence from sex is considered a virtue in Hindu religious scriptures. Hindu law books and *Puranas* (these are series of ancient books possibly compiled in the ninth AD in which the principles of Hindu jurisprudence were described) prohibit sexual relations on a few specific days related to the phases of moon and sun every month (Meyer, 1953). Fertility regulation methods in traditional societies include delayed marriage, residential separation of spouses, breast feeding, and regulated coital behavior.

Coital frequency has been reported to be a function of marital status, relationship, duration, number and sex of children, religious affiliation, income, education, fertility intentions, age, race, and self-assessed health, time spent in work (Doddridge et. al, 1987; Islam and Khan, 1993; James, 1974, 1982; Kahn and Udry, 1986; Udry et al, 1982;).

One factor contributing to the large family size in India is the desire of couples, regardless of socioeconomic status, to have sons. Sons are believed to be a source of security and protection in one's old age, and to provide perpetuation of the family name (Mukerjee, 1976). In a society which has no organized and universal social security program, care of the aged is assigned to the family and kinship system. In the Hindu religion, the begetting of sons has always held significance. For a Hindu, the *shardha*- a religious rite performed after death- is important since it is believed that without it one's soul will not complete its transmigration and reincarnation. Only a son (Kapadia, 1966; Patwardhan, 1968) can carry out this rite fully and properly. In traditional Indian society, bearing a son brought a woman more respect and social status (Dube, 1954).

The purpose of this present paper is to study the coital pattern and to examine the effects of selected socio-economic and demographic factors on sexual activity in a traditional Indian society living in rural areas of Assam, India. Logistic regression model is used to estimate the net of each explanatory variable.

### **Materials and Methods**

**Sample Selection.** Data for the research presented here come from the retrospective survey, 'A Study on Effects Socio-Economic Factors on Fertility among Scheduled Caste Population in the Rural Areas of Karimganj District, Assam' conducted during 1988-89(the reference date for survey questions was June 15, 1988) under the auspices of University Grants Commission (UGC), New Delhi.

The survey was confined to the scheduled caste population -- the backward and economically deprived class of the Indian population, the lowest class of Hindu society -- within a caste system of social organization found in old India and continuing to the present day. Membership in a caste is hereditary and is fixed for life. A couple was defined as *eligible* for the present study if both the partners were alive on the reference day of the survey and the age of the female spouse was less than 50 years.

The Karimganj district of Southern Assam is predominantly Bengali speaking area, where a large number of villages are identified as scheduled caste villages. If at least 10% of the village population belongs to the scheduled castes, the village is considered to be a scheduled caste village by the Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Assam. From a list of scheduled castes of the district, a sample of 37 villages was selected by simple random sampling. Then, all scheduled caste households were enumerated. The survey comprised 1,805 scheduled caste households from the selected

villages. There were 2052 eligible couples in the sample. The objectives of this survey were to obtain reliable data relating to fertility, to study the socioeconomic and behavioral factors affecting fertility, and to estimate biocultural parameters of human reproduction in traditional societies.

Only those couples who did not practice any method of family planning to space and limit births are considered. Educational attainment among these groups of people is very low, and most of them are still engaged in traditional occupations like agriculture, fishing, cloth washing, hair cutting, cane works, pot-making. Only a small number of persons were employed in government or nontraditional private sector jobs.

There are many possible ways to ask about frequency of sexual intercourse. In this survey two questions were asked (i) How many times have you had intercourse in the last week? (ii) How many times -- in a specified range e.g., (1-3), (4-6), (7-12), (13-18), and (19-24) times-- have you had intercourse in the last month? But these questions were asked in local vocabulary. While criticizing reliability of data collection on sexual activity, Becker and Begum (1994) suggested limiting recall time to within the last week for those with frequent sexual intercourse; for those with low levels of sexual activity, a month might be more suitable.

Since the topic of sexuality is very sensitive in this culture, the interviewer asked it at the end of the interview and in private. The information was collected from females by village midwives. Because of practical problems involved in collection of these data from the complete sample, it was decided to collect this information from a smaller sample of approximately of one-third the size of the main survey sample. Thus, the information on coital frequency was collected from only 750 married women, two

months following completion of the main survey. When carrying out statistical analysis, age and other information were adjusted appropriately.

In the present analysis, the effects of nine independent variables on the frequency of intercourse of couples are examined. These covariates are (i) wife's susceptibility to pregnancy, (ii) age of wife (iii) age of husband, (iv) couple's marital duration, (v) wife's education, (vi) subcaste (vii) per capita monthly income of the household, (viii) number of male surviving children and (ix) total number of surviving children. At the time of intercourse the wife may be pregnant or in PPA (experiencing Post Partum Amenorrhea) or susceptible to conception (i.e., neither pregnant nor in PPA). Females were categorized according to level of education as (1) those who had no schooling or 1-3 years of schooling, and (2) 4 or more years of schooling.

On the basis of monthly per capita income (PCI), three economic groups were formulated for households: (1)  $PCI < 75$  rupees (Rs), (2)  $Rs\ 75 \leq PCI \leq Rs\ 100$ , and (3)  $PCI \geq Rs\ 101$ . These three income groups represent lower, middle and upper income households within this community. As the survey was restricted to the scheduled caste population, a grouping by sub-caste was done for the present analysis, each group having its own distinct social organization and culture as follows: (a) Namasudra: primarily engaged in cultivation and bamboo basket making, (b) Kaibarta: traditionally fishermen, but who also cultivated land and (3) Craftsman: professional group of barbers, washer-men, cobblers, earthen pot-makers who also rarely cultivated small plot of land.

**Analytical Method.** The dependent variable in this study was whether or not a couple engaged in coitus during (a) the week and (b) the month (30 days) preceding the interview. In the multivariate model, several covariates that were either found in the

preliminary analysis as important predictors for coital frequency or that were theoretically reasonable as potential predictors from previous studies have been included. Dichotomous logistic regression was used to identify correlates of sexual frequency during a week and during a month. This log-linear technique facilitates testing models hypothesizing association between dichotomized dependent variables and the multiple categories of independent variables. This approach allowed for simultaneous estimation of the odds ratio of each variable while controlling for the effects of the other variables in the model. The odds ratios comparing sexually active respondent with sexually inactive ones were used to estimate association with potential correlates.

### **Results and Discussions**

Coital frequency distributions during the previous week and the previous month were presented in Tables 1 and 2 respectively. The average weekly coital frequency among this traditional society was 0.85 and monthly it was 3.97. Among all couples 33 per cent did not report sexual intercourse during the previous week and 27 per cent refrained during the previous month. The highest proportion (35.1 per cent) of couples reported a coital frequency of 4-6 times per month.

--- Tables 1 & 2 about here ---

Table 3 presents the percentage distribution of married couples, by selected characteristics, according to sexual activity. Overall 64 per cent of the respondents reported being in a susceptible state (i.e., neither in pregnant or in PPA), while 11 per cent were pregnant and 25 per cent were yet to resume their menses following a live birth. Most (89 per cent weekly, 96 per cent monthly) of the susceptible women were sexually active and pregnant women were the least active sexually (18 and 28 per cent).



Only 33 per cent of the couples had two or more surviving sons. Over 60 per cent of the couples had at least three surviving children. With the decreasing number of surviving sons the proportion of sexually active couples increased. But with the

--- Tables 3 about here ---

increasing number of surviving children the proportion of sexually active couples decreased. Both older husbands (45 years or less) and wives (20 years or less) were less active sexually. Level of education amongst females was very low in this community. Most of the mothers who were categorized as 4<sup>th</sup> grader or higher educated in this study could not complete their tenth grade education. There was no variation in the proportion sexually active according to level of wife's education. Couples belonging to the lowest income group were less sexually active than couples belonging to middle and higher income groups.

Except for wife's education, all remaining eight covariates were statistically significantly associated with the odds of sexual intercourse. A susceptible wife was more likely to engage in sexual intercourse during a week/month as compared to a pregnant

--- Tables 4 & 5 about here ---

wife. A wife in PPA state was 49(68) per cent less likely to practice coital life during a week (month). While a pregnant mother was 0.83(0.81) times less likely to have her coitus during a week (month) compared to a mother in susceptible to conception. The youngest women aged below 20 years were less likely to have coitus compared to woman aged 30 years or above, while wives belonging to (25-29) years age group were 70(46) per cent more likely to have her coitus during a week (month). The oldest husbands were 52(69) per cent less likely to have sexual intercourse during week (month) in compared to

the youngest men (< 30 years of age). Middle-aged husbands (30-44) years of age had high odds of sexual activity. Couples with low marital durations (less than or equal to 60 months) and those with long marital durations (more than or equal to 121 months) were respectively more and less likely to practice sexual intercourse compared to couples with 61-120 months marital durations. The risk of having weekly (monthly) sex was 32(18) per cent more for a couple having no or one surviving son as compared to couples having two or more surviving sons. But if the total number of surviving children was at least three then this risk was decreased by 25/31 per cent. Though the illiterate or 1-3 graded educated wife was slightly more at risk of coitus than the more educated wife, this was not a statistically significant effect. Sub-caste membership and level of income in this traditional society reflected the ecological set-up. Accordingly, a couple belonging to the Namasudra sub-caste was more likely and Kaibarta couple was less likely to have intercourse as compared to a Craftsman couple. Couples belonging to the lower and middle-income groups had lower risks of coitus compared to that of an upper income couple.

The mean number of children ever born for women aged 40-49 years for complete survey sample of this population was 6.1. In a recently conducted all India survey, this average was reported 5.74 which was second highest for any Indian state just next to Uttar Pradesh (IIPS, 1995). There are certain factors in Indian culture, which have restricted high fertility. Although Nath et al (1993b) found that the average age at marriage in this society was 16 years, the practice of low frequency of sexual intercourse may contribute to fertility restriction. The sexual behavior of Hindus is influenced by religious rules, which specify as to when a husband should meet his wife physically. The

phases of the moon and sun play important roles in regulating avoidance of coitus. New moon days, full moon days, Ekadashashi, i.e., the eleventh day after the new or full moon, and the day when the sun comes in to a new house of the zodiac, are some times of avoidance. In almost in every home, the housewife worships *Lakshmi* ‘the Goddess of wealth’ on every Thursday. The man who on these days cohabits with his wife goes to hell. The number of days of avoidance for religious reasons ranged from 2 to 120 days per year in Mysore and from 1 to 79 days in New Delhi (Blacker, 1955). A Bengali community in West Bengal reported to have on the average 7 days of sexual avoidance in a month (Nag, 1962). Abstinence has been reported as invariably practiced during the period of lactation for at least three months. Nath et al (1993b) reported that the average age of weaning was 16 months for this population. Further, in this population, it was taboo to practice coitus during the menstrual flow. During the menstruating period, a wife usually did not sleep with her husband nor was she allowed to enter the kitchen and cook food for others.

In this study, the frequency of intercourse was lower than that described in similar studies in urban and rural India. The present report contradicts the comments made nearly 40 years ago by Robbin (1959) about India’s population ‘...when the sun goes down on an Indian village, the people are left to darkness. They have no books, no movies, and no television. There is only one thing to do, go to bed. There they find their sole recreation and amusement, their brief escape from the hours of hard work of the day. At the roots of Asia’s problem of population is copulation’.

In this traditional society most people were engaged in agricultural activity, fishing, and other petty menial tasks like hair-cutting, cloth-cleaning, bamboo-basket

making, and pot-making. They were busy at work from early morning to sunset to earn their livelihood and were physically exhausted at the end of the day. Most of these households were not connected with electricity and even in those few houses, which were connected, the supply of electricity in this rural part of India was erratic. So, people usually went to bed as early as 8-9 PM. In most cases couples slept together with their younger children of ages 12 or less. Sometimes the wife and husband slept in two separate beds with their children but in the same room. Households having numerous members may have separate bedrooms, but usually the rooms were separated by very thin bamboo walls. So, even then privacy was not guaranteed. A couple waited for cohabitation until other household members including children fell into a deep sleep. In the mean time they also were likely to fall asleep. In this rural community, it is traditional for the housewife to get up early and to sweep the courtyard and home and to cook food for the husband, children and other members of the household.

The results suggest that a relatively conservative attitude towards sexual activity persist within this population. Compared to Western society (Udry et al, 1982; Rao and Demaris, 1995), the average weekly/monthly coital frequency was much lower. Thus, high frequency of sexual intercourse is less of concern than is unprotected intercourse with respect to risk of conception. The logistic regression analysis demonstrated that the wife who had the following characteristics had a higher risk of coital intercourse: susceptible to pregnancies, (20-29) years of present age, husband aged (30-44) years, marital duration of less than 5 years, belonging to Namasudra sub-caste, having an upper level income, no or only one surviving son, less than three surviving children. In a recently reported medical study, Wilcox et al. (1995) found that risk of conception was

maximized with two or three days of intercourse occurring during the six-day interval ending with the ovulation day. Hindu epics enjoin husbands and wives to have sexual intercourse to beget children at specific periods of women's menstrual cycles when they are believed to be particularly fecund but abstain from sex at other times. *Ritu*, the period immediately following menstruation, is considered most propitious for conception. Indian fertility rates are high because of unprotected coitus or lack of strong motivation for induced abortion following an unwanted pregnancy. Of course, induced abortion in this traditional society was considered a sin. So, in this traditional society, where the frequency of coitus is very low but unprotected, fertility can be controlled through the use of a male method of contraceptive. However, proper motivation is required. More qualitative research is essential to understand the low coital frequency in this traditional society and hence its correlates. Further, regional studies are needed to ascertain the chance variations of coital patterns in different Indian ecological settings for effective implementation of birth control program.

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Table 1. Coital frequency during last week of the couples studied.

Coital Frequency	Number	Percent
0	246	32.8
1	386	51.5
2	104	13.9
3	14	1.9
Total	750	100.0

Mean= 0.85 SD =0.72 CV = 85

Table 2. Coital frequency during last month of the couples studied.

Coital frequency	Number	Percent
0	202	26.9
1-3	155	20.7
4-6	263	35.1
7-12	111	14.8
13-18	18	2.4
19-24	1	0.1
Total	750	100.0

Mean = 3.97      SD = 3.74

CV = 94

Table 3. Percentage distribution of married couples, by selected characteristics, according to time-duration and sexual activity.

Characteristics	Total N=750	Sexual experience (Percentage)	
		During last week	During last month
		-----	-----
		Yes (N=504)	Yes (N=548)
<hr/>			
Susceptible Status			
Pregnant	85	17.7	28.2
PPA	187	33.7	35.3
Neither pregnant nor in PPA	478	89.1	95.8
Age of wife			
<20 years	89	46.1	49.4
20-24 years	275	67.6	69.8
25-29 years	165	73.3	78.2
≥30 years	221	70.6	82.8
Age of husband			
<30 years	218	66.5	69.7
30-34 years	259	72.6	81.1
35-44 years	85	64.7	76.5
≥45 years	188	61.7	64.4
Marital duration			
≤60 months	264	59.1	61.4
61-120 months	276	70.6	81.5
≥121 months	210	72.9	76.7
Wife's education			
Illiterate or 1-3 grades	556	67.3	73.7
≥4 <sup>th</sup> grade	196	67.0	71.1
Caste			
Namasudra	488	71.9	77.9
Kaibarta	191	57.6	65.5
Craftsman	71	60.6	60.6
Per capita monthly Income in Rupees			
< 75	337	63.5	72.4
75-100	230	67.8	71.3
≥ 101	183	73.2	76.5
Male surviving children			
Less than two	503	69.2	79.8
Two or more	247	66.2	69.7
Total surviving children			
Less than three	297	72.1	82.1
Three or more	453	69.2	67.1

Table 4. Summary results from Logistic Regression Model for weekly coital frequency

Covariates	Co-efficient( <i>b</i> )	Odds ratio	SE
Constant	-0.3825 ***	0.682	0.191
Status <sup>a</sup>			
Pregnant	-1.7585 ***	0.1723	0.175
PPA	-0.6750 ***	0.509	0.165
Age of wife <sup>b</sup>			
<20 years	-0.7927 ***	0.453	0.357
20-24 years	0.1862	1.205	0.234
25-29 years	0.5288 ***	1.697	0.238
Age of husband <sup>c</sup>			
30-34 years	0.1534	1.166	0.242
35-44 years	0.2972 *	1.346	0.223
≥45 years	-0.7410 ***	0.477	0.326
Marital duration <sup>d</sup>			
≤ 60 months	0.2249	1.252	0.274
≥ 121 months	-0.4608 **	0.631	0.325
Wife's education <sup>e</sup>			
Illiterate or 1-3 grades	0.0922	1.097	0.130
Caste <sup>f</sup>			
Namasudra	0.2414 **	1.273	0.158
Kaibarta	-0.4304 ***	0.650	0.183
Per capita monthly Income in Rupees <sup>g</sup>			
< 75	-0.289 ***	0.750	0.148
75-100	-0.2092 *	0.811	0.163
Male surviving children <sup>h</sup>			
Less than two	0.2774 ***	1.320	0.139
Total surviving children <sup>i</sup>			
Less than three	0.2837 **	1.327	0.173

p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001

a: pregnant, b: ≥ 30 years, c: <30 years, d: 61-120 months, e: ≥ 4<sup>th</sup> grade f: craftsman, g: ≥ 101, h: two or more, i: Three or more.

Table 5. Summary results from Logistic Regression Model for monthly coital frequency

Covariates	Co-efficient( <i>b</i> )	Odds ratio	SE
Constant	0.0899	1.094	0.206
Status <sup>a</sup>			
Pregnant	-1.6548***	0.1911	0.206
PPA	-1.1419***	0.319	0.170
Age of wife <sup>b</sup>			
<20 years	-0.9293***	0.395	0.387
20-24 years	-0.1272	0.881	0.255
25-29 years	0.3798**	1.462	0.259
Age of husband <sup>c</sup>			
30-34 years	0.3478*	1.416	0.273
35-44 years	0.4086**	1.505	0.261
≥45 years	-1.1731***	0.309	0.417
Marital duration <sup>d</sup>			
≤ 60 months	0.2898	1.336	0.304
≥ 120 months	-0.5737**	0.563	0.369
Wife's education <sup>e</sup>			
Illiterate or 1-3 grades	0.0894	1.093	0.143
Caste <sup>f</sup>			
Namasudra	0.3528***	1.423	0.176
Kaibarta	-0.2408*	0.786	0.204
Per capita monthly Income in Rupees <sup>g</sup>			
< 75	-0.0248	0.976	0.167
75-100	-0.3591***	0.698	0.185
Male surviving children <sup>h</sup>			
Less than two	0.1660*	1.181	0.198
Total surviving children <sup>i</sup>			
Less than three	0.3790***	1.460	0.197

\*p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001

a: pregnant, b: ≥ 30 years, c: <30 years, d: 61-120 months, e: ≥ 4<sup>th</sup> grade f: craftsman, g: ≥ 101, h: two or more, i: less than three.