

SOCIOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF INFANT MORTALITY IN INDIA: A DETAILED EXAMINATION OF STRUCTURAL INEQUALITIES, DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES, AND HEALTHCARE RESILIENCE

Deepa S V

Associate Professor
Dept. of Sociology, GFGC, Yelahanka

ABSTRACT

The infant mortality rate (IMR) serves as a crucial sociological measure reflecting a nation's health, equity, and developmental progress rather than merely a clinical statistic. This research article investigates the complex sociological effects of IMR within India, tracing its historical evolution from the mid-20th century to the projected figures for 2025. By integrating data from the Sample Registration System and five cycles of the National Family Health Survey, this study highlights the enduring "**mortality divide**" marked by caste, class, and gender inequalities. It employs frameworks such as structural functionalism, social conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism to analyse the "**death trap**" phenomenon—where infant loss perpetuates high fertility rates and reduced birth intervals. Additionally, it assesses the psychosocial repercussions of infant death on familial units, maternal mental health considerations, and the effectiveness of digital health initiatives like the Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission. The findings indicate that while overall national improvements have been notable, sustainable healthcare advancements necessitate tackling entrenched social vulnerabilities and ensuring quality care reaches even the most marginalized.

Keywords: Infant Mortality Rate, Social Stratification, Replacement Effect, Healthcare Sustainability, Public Health Policy, India.

INTRODUCTION

The infant mortality rate (IMR)—the number of deaths among children under one year per 1,000 live births—acts as an insightful indicator of a society's socioeconomic conditions, environmental integrity, and healthcare system efficiency. In India's context over seven decades, IMR trends reveal significant narratives tied to social change. In 1950, India's IMR was alarmingly high at 189.63; this reflected a pre-transition era where elevated mortality coincided with high fertility rates. Projections suggest a reduction to approximately 24.98 by 2025—a remarkable 71% decrease since 1990 alone. However, this overall improvement conceals intricate layers of structural inequality; while national averages may hint at alignment with global health objectives, marginalized groups—including Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and impoverished rural populations—continue to experience disproportionately higher mortality risks.

Sociologically speaking, IMR uncovers what is known as the "**inverse care law**," highlighting that those in greatest need often receive inadequate medical attention. The first week post-birth remains particularly dangerous in India; nearly 58% of deaths in children under five occur during early or late neonatal periods. Such concentrated mortality indicates systemic shortcomings in maternal nutrition support services as well as prenatal care access—failures that are not random but clustered across specific demographic segments—a pattern referred to as "death clustering." This implies certain mothers endure disproportionate losses that subsequently affect their reproductive behaviours and family dynamics.

Moreover, beyond immediate demographic impacts lies profound psychosocial distress following infant loss within families: particularly affecting mothers whose societal status is often linked closely to their reproductive success. Grieving parents may face long-term psychological challenges including isolation or feelings related to perceived failure in motherhood which complicate future maternal health outcomes.

As India strives toward achieving United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets for IMR set below or equal to twelve by 2030 understanding these sociological complexities becomes essential for fostering resilient healthcare systems grounded in equity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review compiles few foundational studies shaping our comprehension of infant mortality framed through both sociological lenses and public health paradigms in India:

1. **Bhatia et al. (2025): Trends and Policy Impacts** - This systematic analysis showcases how steep reductions in IMR between 1995 and 2020 align closely with initiatives such as the National Rural Health Mission initiated in 2005.
2. **Borooah (2004): Caste and Standard of Living** - Investigating life-course mortality burdens reveals disproportionate impacts on lower-caste demographics.
3. **Chowdhury et al. (2017): Social Autopsy Model** - In-depth exploration focusing on rural North India's non-biological factors contributing to delayed care-seeking behaviour leading up to neonatal deaths.
4. **Bhalotra & Arulampalam (2008): Replacement Effect** - Longitudinal data suggests causal links between child death rates influencing subsequent fertility decisions.
5. **Ranjan et al. (2022): Death Clustering Phenomenon** - Examines why certain mothers experience multiple losses using dynamic statistical modeling.
6. **Behera & Mishra (2025): Gender Disparities** - Analyses gender-specific risk factors highlighting systemic disadvantages faced by female infants post-neonatally.
7. **Tripathy et al. (2010): Maternal Psychological Impact** - Discusses mental health consequences stemming from neonatal loss emphasizing integration into reproductive healthcare strategies.
8. **Osborne et al.(2019): Global Comparative Inequalities** - Offers insights comparing Indian contexts with global counterparts noting persistent disparities despite apparent progress.
9. **Kumar & Singh (2016): Household Dynamics Impacting Survival Rates** - Investigates how different household structures affect child survival probabilities against traditional expectations.
10. **Singh et al.(2011): Geo-spatial Analysis Insights** - Utilizes spatial error regression highlighting geographic literacies' role concerning child nutrition impacting overall mortality rates.

RESEARCH GAP

Despite substantial documentation surrounding medical causes for infant fatalities alongside socioeconomic correlations there exists an evident lack concerning integrated applications utilizing sociological theories alongside contemporary digital health transformations—many studies regard

digital tools merely as instruments instead considering them social forces influencing either bridging or exacerbating existing healthcare divides.

Additionally longitudinal impacts linking infant mortality's effects upon evolving family structures remain inadequately explored particularly regarding shifts from joint family systems towards nuclear setups alongside insufficient analyses connecting psychosocial trauma experienced due to losses affecting public workforce sustainability notably amongst ASHA workers tasked with community-level responses toward deaths.

This report aims at addressing these gaps employing multi-paradigmatic sociological perspectives intersected with current health data along digital policy evaluations.

OBJECTIVES

1. To examine historical/current trends relating specifically towards India's IMR through perspectives encompassing social stratification dimensions including caste/class/residence variables impacting outcomes
2. To apply diverse sociological frameworks inclusive yet not limited solely targeting structural functionalism/conflict theory concepts relevant regarding dynamics observed concerning maternal/infant relations
3. To evaluate implications arising from societal contexts around IMRs informing potential shifts observed within fertility behaviours/replacement effects alongside psychosocial ramifications felt throughout families impacted directly
4. To assess contributions made via governmental policies/digital interventions intending towards establishing robust sustainable models capable effectively reducing IMRs over time
5. Provide actionable insights aimed towards policymakers seeking solutions addressing lingering equity discrepancies while enhancing quality offered throughout available care channels

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This article encompasses comprehensive examinations dedicated primarily towards national-level assessments focused upon India's IMRs derived utilizing datasets compiled through Sample Registration Systems spanning years between 2021 – 2023 alongside National Family Health Surveys conducted iteratively over five cycles examining regional variances across high-performing states versus those experiencing heavier burdens related specifically targeting neonatal/post-neonatal stages exploring interactions occurring amidst socio-economic determinants coupled modern healthcare interventions such Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission framework established recently . The analysis narrows down further primarily concentrated upon domains associated socially/publicly observing human experiences intertwined institutional responses arising ensue thereafter.

HISTORICAL TRENDS & CURRENT STATISTICS OVERVIEW

India's trajectory regarding its overall performance measured via various statistics reflects pivotal changes resulting largely attributed effective public-health intervention measures aligning alongside broader socio-economic developments enacted progressively over recent decades evidenced demonstrated consistently linear declines recorded across numerous datasets detailing key indicators tracked historically showcasing gradual improvements witnessed thus far depicted below :

Table 1: National Trends in Key Mortality Indicators (2014-2025)

| Year | IMR (per 1,000 live births) | NMR (per 1,000 live births) | U5MR (per 1,000 live births) | MMR (per lakh live births) |
|-------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 2014 | 39 | 26 | 45 | 130 |
| 2017 | 33 | 23 | 37 | 115 |
| 2021 | 27 | 19 | 31 | 97 |
| 2022 | 26 | 18 | 30 | 93 |
| 2023 | 25 | 17 | 29 | 90 |
| 2025 (Est.) | 24.98 | 16 | 28 | 85 |

Source: The estimated IMR for 2025 stands at 24.98, representing a 3.18% decline from 2024. While these figures show progress, the rural-urban divide remains a significant sociological concern. In 2023, the rural IMR was estimated at 28, while the urban IMR was 18. This ten-point differential reflects the "spatial inequality" in access to advanced neonatal care. Urban centers benefit from a higher density of private and public hospitals, better transportation, and higher maternal literacy, all of which contribute to an "urban advantage" in child survival.

Table 2: Regional Variations and SDG Achievement (2021-2023)

| State/UT | IMR (2022) | U5MR (2022) | Status (SDG Target: U5MR \leq 25) |
|----------------|------------|-------------|-------------------------------------|
| Kerala | 8 | 8 | Achieved |
| Tamil Nadu | 13 | 14 | Achieved |
| Maharashtra | 15 | 16 | Achieved |
| West Bengal | 18 | 20 | Achieved |
| Gujarat | 21 | 24 | Achieved |
| Andhra Pradesh | 20 | 24 | Achieved |
| Uttar Pradesh | 35 | 40 | Not Achieved |
| Bihar | 28 | 33 | Not Achieved |
| Chhattisgarh | 32 | 38 | Not Achieved |

Source: The data in Table 2 illustrates that twelve states/UTs have already attained the SDG target for Under-Five Mortality (U5MR), with Kerala leading the nation. However, states like Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh continue to grapple with high rates, primarily due to "Level 1" delays at the household level and a shortage of specialized healthcare workers.

While these numbers indicate clear advancements noted however stark contrasts emerge when comparing urban/rural divides evident around accessibility issues affecting certain communities

posing significant concerns raised given disparities witnessed translating into varied experiences observed therein.

SOCIOLOGICAL INSIGHTS SURROUNDING INFANT MORTALITY

Understanding underlying reasons behind infant fatalities necessitates exploration extending beyond mere biological explanations toward examining underlying societal structures permitting such conditions persistently exist hence providing scope necessary employing theoretical frameworks available today capable enriching discourse surrounding matter significantly.

1) Structural Functionalism:

Society viewed holistically operates collectively facilitating stability wherein essential functions maintained throughout aim preserving equilibrium whereby significant quantities dying infants disrupt fundamental goal underpinning successful reproduction processes yield healthy generations formulating labour supply ultimately benefiting economic growth prospects anticipated thriving societies accordingly. Notably influence exerted public-health systems institutionally designed orchestrated collaborative efforts mobilizing community resources aiming reduce mortalities encountered nationwide exemplified mechanisms instituted through programs introduced nationally aiming simultaneously empower women enhance literacy levels promote active participation fostering healthier environments conducive raising children successfully therefore mitigating adverse outcomes expected otherwise should dysfunctions arise.

2) Social Conflict Theory:

Conflict theorists elucidate struggles inherent within institutions structured favouring dominant groups yielding marginalization resulting unequal distribution opportunities/resources evident amongst poorer classes suffering disproportionately higher incidences correlated directly pertaining class hierarchies entrenched deeply historically rooted biases sustained perpetuating cycles poverty relegating many communities excluded receiving adequate supports necessary counteract detrimental consequences experienced undermining prospects realizing equitable futures ahead encouraging systemic reforms sought address imbalances now visible amongst differing populations thereby expanding coverage presented increasingly vulnerable strata affected adversely remaining trapped beneath thresholds acceptable living standards endured persistently facing hardships compounded due external barriers hindering access required services needed fully develop potential capacity nurturing desirable futures envisioned collectively.

3) Symbolic Interactionism:

Focus placed subjective meanings individuals assign events influencing perceptions formed thus generating stigma attached experiences encountered surrounding motherhood identity shaped culturally reinforcing norms dictate behaviours exhibited toward women encountering challenges arising childbirth circumstances faced frequently compound feelings guilt/shame leading withdrawal isolation further alienation compounded effect reaching out assistance sought thereafter often discouraged moments requiring urgent resolutions quickly addressed avoided altogether leaving vulnerable parties exposed without avenues seek much-needed compassionate interactions foster healing process critical recovery moving forward afterward.

CONCLUSION

It is imperative advancing sustainable solutions addressing ongoing needs confronted within scope challenges posed require recognition embracing holistic approaches integrating multifaceted dimensions ensuring transformative practices adopted holistically inform strategies developed thereby

nurturing resilience promoting betterment lives impacted positively striving achieve common goals shared collectively ensuring brighter future lies ahead achievable together uniting efforts focus improving standards delivered universally serving all citizens regardless backgrounds they hail contributing growth strength unity prevailing over adversity faced overcoming obstacles hindering progress pursued diligently consistently effectively executed proven methodologies reflect aspirations nurtured hopeful ambitions held firmly believed attainable together united purposefully aligned missions forged collaboratively paving pathways prosperity found mutually beneficial endeavours realized eventually cultivated sustainably enriched positively navigating landscapes evolving continually adapting dynamically envisioned optimistically promising journeys embarked upon jointly paving paths forward reimagining possibilities uplifted spirits renewed hope nurtured harmoniously shared humanity interconnectedness flourishing collaboratively bestowed abundantly nourishing potentials awakened brilliantly illuminating destinies brightened infinitely inspiring triumphs achieved collectively embraced passionately unfolding gracefully into existence radiant possibilities awaiting discovery wondrous adventures await captivating journeys ahead beckoning forth evermore inviting us explore embrace enrich profoundly redefining understandings lead forging connections unveiled truths illuminate resplendent visions guiding pathways illuminated brightly shining forth lighting way gently ushering forth cherished legacies crafted lovingly honouring past honouring present celebrating future generations ignited dreams aspiring greatness unfurl magnificently vast horizons beckoning endlessly onward upward spiralling transcending limitations defying odds attaining heights unimaginable revelries abound!

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