

## BREASTFEEDING AND CHILD-SPACING IN INDIAN WOMEN

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### SUMMARY

Breastfeeding is a way of life with Indian women. Modern contraceptive practice for child-spacing are accepted only by the educated few. The full potential of breastfeeding acting as a natural child-spacer is not appreciated. Educating the Indian women to follow certain guidelines so that the full benefits of breastfeeding as a child-spacer would go a long way in improving India's Maternal & Child Health and population problems.

### INTRODUCTION

Breastfeeding is a way of life amongst Indian women but child-spacing is not! This is reflected in the level of acceptance of modern contraceptive methods offered through India's Family Planning Programme. In fact, most Indian women, barring the highly educated are reluctant to use any spacing methods and more so, during the postpartum period. Traditionally, most Indian women, breastfeed for long periods of time and believe the breastfeeding protects them

from another pregnancy sometimes with disastrous results! It would therefore, be worthwhile to provide these women with guidelines based on scientific facts regarding the usefulness and limitations of using breastfeeding as a child-spacing method.

This article is based on the data collected in a survey on breastfeeding, associated lactation amenorrhoea and postpartum contraceptive practices of 2000 parous women residing in the metropolis of Bombay.

### SUBJECT & METHODS

Two thousand parous women average

age 32.1 + 5 yrs were interviewed for this study. As our aim was to collect information on breastfeeding, associated lactation amenorrhea and postpartum contraceptive practice of a cross-section of Bombay women, care was taken to interview women from different ethnic, social and educational backgrounds. Thus, we had 77.0% Hindus, 16.0% Muslims, 7.0% Christians. 55.6% of our subjects were slum and chawls dwellers while 44.4% lived in self-contained flats. Literacy-wise 28.3% of our subjects were illiterates, 19.8% had primary education, 34.3% had high school education, while 17.6% were college educated. Half the women in the first three groups and over 90% in the fourth were employed. The average age at marriage were 16.2% + 2.8 yrs, 17.6 + 2.5 yrs; 19.7+3.4 years and 23.3+3.1 yrs respectively for the four groups. Similarly, the average number of pregnancies for the women in the four groups were 3.9 + 1.4, 3.3 + 1.1, 2.9 + 1.1 and 2.1 + 1.0.

## RESULTS

The results shown in this study are based on the analysis of the survey data using the SPSS Package.

Table I, **Breastfeeding practices** indicates that more than 95% of our 2000 study women breastfeed all their infants. Interestingly, among the few who did not, 'infant illness' was cited as the main reason by the un-educated and 'in-sufficient' milk by the educated. Regardless of their level of education almost all women gave demand feeds both during the day and night.

Table II, **Duration of exclusive**

**breastfeeding** indicates that the period of exclusive breastfeeding varied with the educational status of the mothers. More than 85% of the un-educated breastfeed for periods greater than 6 months with 35% continuing for more than a year. Majority of the college and high school educated breastfed for periods between 3-6 months, though 33% of the high school educated did breastfeed for 9 months and 12% for over a year.

Table III **Exclusive Breastfeeding & Lactation Amenorrhea** indicates the correlation between exclusive breastfeeding and the lactation amenorrhea associated with it. Column 1 indicates the number of live births the 2000 study women had, Column 2 indicates the time-interval after parturation, Column 3 indicates the number and period for which the 2000 study women with 5603 live births breastfeed their infants. Column 4 indicates this figure as a percentage of the total. Column 5 indicates that from the total number of exclusively breastfeeding women for a particular period, how many had lactation amenorrhea. For e.g. out of 5431 who were breastfeeding for 6 weeks, 4678 had lactation amenorrhea. Column 6 indicates that figure as a percentage.

Table IV, **Resumption of sexual activity** in the four literacy groups was almost the same.

**Table I**  
**BREASTFEEDING PRACTICES CORRELATED WITH**  
**THE EDUCATIONAL STATUS OF WOMEN**

| Variables                                       | Educational Status of 2000 Study Women |                |             |           |
|---|--|----------------|-------------|-----------|
|   | Illiterates                            | Primary School | High School | Graduates |
| No. of women                                    | n = 565                                | n = 396        | n = 687     | n = 352   |
| Total no. of live births                        | n = 2095                               | n = 1216       | n = 1707    | n = 585   |
| <b>Did you Breastfeed All Your Children ?</b>   |  |                |             |           |
| Yes   | 97.5%                                  | 98.0%          | 96.9%       | 92.7%     |
| <b>If Not, Why Didn't You ?</b>                 |  |                |             |           |
| (No. of live births)                            | n = 52                                 | n = 25         | n = 53      | n = 43    |
| Infant sick                                     | 41.3%                                  | 57.2%          | 39.0%       | 17.8%     |
| Mother sick                                     | 26.1%                                  | 21.4%          | 18.6%       | 22.3%     |
| Insufficient milk                               | 26.1%                                  | 21.4%          | 40.7%       | 53.3%     |
| Personal  | 6.5%                                   | 0.0%           | 1.7%        | 6.6%      |
| <b>What Were Your Breastfeeding Intervals ?</b> |  |                |             |           |
| <b>Day</b>                                      |  |                |             |           |
| Approx. 4 feeds                                 | 11.6%                                  | 16.5%          | 20.3%       | 16.6%     |
| 5 - 6 feeds                                     | 52.1%                                  | 64.2%          | 59.3%       | 59.9%     |
| > 6 feeds                                       | 36.3%                                  | 19.3%          | 20.4%       | 23.5%     |
| <b>Night</b>                                    |  |                |             |           |
| 1 - 2   | 63.8%                                  | 69.8%          | 71.9%       | 84.5%     |
| 3 - 4 feeds                                     | 36.2%                                  | 30.2%          | 28.1%       | 15.5%     |

Approximately 25% resumed sexual activity before 6 weeks and by 3 months postpartum almost 80% of all couples were sexually active and the remaining 20% did so by 6 months postpartum. Table V, Postpartum contraception correlated with parity indicates

**Table II**  
**DURATION OF EXCLUSIVE BREAST FEEDING (ALL PREGNANCIES)**  
**CORRELATED WITH THE EDUCATIONAL STATUS OF WOMEN**

| Period<br>Post partum | Educational status of women |                            |                         |                      |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|
|                       | Illiterate<br>n = 2095      | Primary School<br>n = 1216 | High School<br>n = 1707 | Graduates<br>n = 585 |
| Live births           |                             |                            |                         |                      |
| at 6 wks              | 97.5%                       | 98.0%                      | 96.9%                   | 92.7%                |
| at 3 mths             | 96.2                        | 96.2                       | 94.2                    | 87.6                 |
| at 6 mths             | 85.6                        | 84.3                       | 66.9                    | 59.7                 |
| at 1 yr               | 35.4                        | 35.2                       | 12.6                    | -                    |

**Table III**  
**CORRELATION BETWEEN EXCLUSIVE BREASTFEEDING (B.F)**  
**AND THE ASSOCIATED LACTATION AMENORRHEA (L.A.)**

| Live Births<br>n | Period<br>Post-partum | Exclusively<br>n | B.F. women<br>% | Ex. BF    | Women     |
|------------------|-----------------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------|-----------|
|                  |                       |                  |                 | with<br>n | L.A.<br>% |
| 5603             | 6 weeks               | 5431             | 96.9            | 4678      | 86.1      |
|                  | 1½ - 3 mts            | 5166             | 92.2            | 3442      | 66.6      |
|                  | 3 - 6 mts             | 4286             | 76.5            | 2650      | 61.8      |
|                  | 6 - 9 mts             | 2689             | 48.0            | 1348      | 50.1      |
|                  | > 1 yr                | 1490             | 26.6            | 865       | 58.0      |

**Table IV**  
**RESUMPTION OF SEXUAL ACTIVITY AFTER PARTURATION**  
**CORRELATED WITH THE EDUCATIONAL STATUS**  
**OF WOMEN (ALL PREGNANCIES)**

| Period postpartum | Educational status of women |                    |                        |                      |
|-------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|------------------------|----------------------|
|                   | Illiterate<br>n = 565       | Primary<br>n = 396 | High school<br>n = 687 | Graduates<br>n = 352 |
| < 6 wks           | 27.9                        | 25.6               | 36.5                   | 21.4                 |
| < 3 mths          | 45.3                        | 53.2               | 50.1                   | 43.9                 |
| < 6 mths          | 23.0                        | 17.0               | 9.9                    | 29.2                 |
| > 6 mths          | 3.8                         | 4.2                | 3.5                    | 5.5                  |

Table V

POSTPARTUM CONTRACEPTIVE PRACTICE CORRELATED WITH  
PARITY AND THE EDUCATIONAL STATUS OF WOMEN

| Interval between parturation<br>and Contraceptive use | Educational status of women |                |             |           |
|---|-----------------------------|----------------|-------------|-----------|
|   | Illiterates                 | Primary School | High School | Graduates |
| After 1st Child (live births)                         | n = 545                     | n = 371        | n = 635     | n = 323   |
| 1½ - 3 mts  | 1.1%                        | 6.6%           | 17.9%       | 30.2%     |
| 3 - 6 mts   | 0.4                         | 4.7            | 10.8        | 31.0      |
| 6 mts - 1 yr  | 0.4                         | 1.3            | 3.5         | 12.0      |
| After 2nd Child (live births)                         | n = 536                     | n = 366        | n = 550     | n = 169   |
| 1½ - 3 mts  | 6.5%                        | 14.6%          | 38.6%       | 50.2%     |
| 3 - 6 mts   | 1.1                         | 6.7            | 10.4        | 19.9      |
| 6 mts - 1 yr  | 0.7                         | 3.7            | 3.5         | 7.9       |
| After 3rd Child (live births)                         | n = 431                     | n = 274        | n = 324     | n = 72    |
| 1½ - 3 mts  | 19.8%                       | 38.1%          | 54.2%       | 65.2%     |
| 3 - 6 mts   | 1.9                         | 2.7            | 6.0         | 13.5      |
| 6 mts - 1 yr  | 1.6                         | 2.0            | 2.2         | 9.7       |
| After 4th Child (live births)                         | n = 322                     | n = 150        | n = 135     | n = 16    |
| 1½ - 3 mts  | 36.6                        | 59.5           | 66.6        | 69.2      |
| 3 - 6 mts   | 1.5                         | 5.0            | 2.3         | 7.7       |
| 6 mts - 1 yr  | 0.6                         | 2.5            | 0.6         | 0.0       |
| After 5th Child (live births)                         | n = 174                     | n = 43         | n = 47      | n = 4     |
| 1½ - 3 mts  | 36.8%                       | 46.2%          | 52.7%       | 75.0%     |
| 3 - 6 mts   | 1.6                         | 4.2            | 3.4         | 0.0       |
| 6 mts - 1 yr  | 1.0                         | 2.1            | 2.7         | 12.5      |
| After 6th Child (live births)                         | n = 87                      | n = 13         | n = 16      | n = 1     |
| < 3 mts   | 44.5%                       | 100.0%         | 32.4%       | 100.0%    |
| 3 - 6 mts   | 2.0                         | 0.0            | 6.9         |           |
| 6 mts - 1 yr  | 2.0                         | 0.0            | 4.9         |           |

a positive correlation between a) their level of education, b) number of the percentage of women using living children.  
postpartum contraceptives with

### DISCUSSION

The study documents the similarities and differences in the breastfeeding practices, resumption of sexual activity after parturition and the use of postpartum contraceptives by the 4 literacy groups of women residing in Bombay.

Regardless of their level of education, all of them lived upto the motto of Indian women that 'Breastfeeding is a way of Life of India' and hence gave demand feeds both during the day and night to their infants. The period of breastfeeding however, varied according to the level of education but even the college educated women did breastfeed for 3-6 months. Though 25% of all couples were sexually active by 6 weeks and 20% by three months, a vast majority of them, lived upto their other motto of 'No Child-Spacing' and hence, except the educated refrained from using any modern child-spacing methods, believing in a 'chance' instead of 'planned' pregnancy. Pregnancies that are too closely spaced endanger the health of both the nursing mother as well as the un-born infant. The first child is stopped from suckling when the mother becomes 'pregnant-again' thus depriving it of a major source of nourishment. The second frequently is a low-birth baby because it is born from a mother whose physical resources have not had a chance to recoup. Table III, on the correlation between exclusive breastfeeding and lactaion amenorrhea indicates that even at 6 weeks

postpartum approximately 15% of the exclusively breastfeeding mothers were already menstruating and by six months postpartum 40% were menstruating. This is in contrast to what has been reported that the maximum birth-spacing effect of breastfeeding is achieved when a mother exclusively breastfeeds and thus remains amenorrhoeic. This way breastfeeding provides more than 98% protection from pregnancy in the first six months (Kennedy K.I., 1989).

Each month of exclusive breastfeeding increase the average birth intervals as much as fifteen days (Smith D.P., 1985) and in countries where contraceptive use is not a regular practice breastfeeding is credited as a major mechanism in achieving birth intervals of upto 30 months (Bongaarts J., 1983). This could only mean that Indian women are unable to reap the full benefits of breastfeeding as a child-spacer. Hence, educating the mother to (WHO, 1988) (a) breastfeed as frequently as possible during the day & night, (b) avoid giving any supplementary foods and liquids at least in the first six months, (c) feed supplementary liquids and foods only after breastfeeding, (d) avoid using baby bottles and pacifiers.

All this could go a long way in taking advantage of the dual role of breastfeeding as a birth-spacing method, thus providing the Indian woman with a postpartum contraceptive which is readily

acceptable to her.

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