Nepal’s Family Planning Program has Come a Long Way: A Conversation with Dr. Badri Raj Pande

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It has been nearly six decades since Nepal introduced a family planning program. At present, the average number of children that a woman in Nepal has is just two, which is defined as a ‘replacement level’ of fertility (that is, two offspring to replace the couple themselves). In contrast, about fifty-years ago (in the mid-1970s), the average was more than six children for a married woman in Nepal. This change in reproductive behavior (certainly influenced by attitudes towards smaller family size) should be considered a ‘reproductive revolution’ in an essentially patriarchal and patrilocal society like Nepal – a transition several other countries have experienced in recent decades as well.

This reproductive revolution is driven principally by the adaption of modern methods of contraception. In 1966, Nepal became one of only a handful of countries where family planning was officially adopted as a ‘fundamental human right and a policy tool in long-range national planning’. Sterilization (mainly female sterilization) has been the principal method of fertility control. At present, more than 50% of married women in Nepal use some form of contraception. By all measures, the country’s family planning program must be considered a success. In more recent years however, other factors including abortion and rising age of marriage, as well as male-selected out-migration, have also contributed to the further decline in fertility.

The success over the years can best be explained by the reinforcing set of individual- and couple-level factors generating demand and programmatic support for the provision of family planning services. These two aspects have also been described as changes in the ‘social setting’ and ‘program efforts’ – indices that help to explain the country’s transition from a high, stable fertility level to a low fertility level. While in the mid-70s only a small percentage of women of reproductive age (15-49) had any education, by the mid-2000s, more than two-thirds of women in reproductive age had at least some education. Over the course of my involvement in a research project in the early 1970s in Batulechaur (which was a village then and is now a coveted suburb in Pokhara), I still recall the elders telling me that ‘sending girls to school is like pushing a water buffalo to climb a tree’. In recent decades, Nepal has witnessed proportionately more girls than boys in many grades. Surely, the times have changed!

On the program (service delivery) side, while there were only a handful of clinics offering contraceptive services in the early days, as of 2021, more than 700 health facilities were providing sterilization services in Nepal. At the macro-level, changes in the economy and ‘destabilization’ of the social system facilitated the ‘ideation’ of a smaller family size as the norm. Consequently, the longstanding blessing used by elders, ‘May your progeny cover the hills and mountains’ has gradually been replaced by the wish, ‘May you have a small, but happy family’.

The early phase of introducing and institutionalizing family planning in Nepal was certainly not smooth or easy. There was strong condemnation and opposition from many groups in Nepali society. Certainly, the high level of acceptance of contraception that we observe today in Nepal has had a turbulent trajectory.

The history of family planning in Nepal is also a story of pioneering leaders and service providers. One of these pioneers of the family planning program in Nepal is Dr. Badri Raj Pande. Soon after the completion of his MBBS at the age of 22, Dr. Pande was involved in initiating organized family planning advocacy in Nepal, as early as 1958. He was a founding member of the Family Planning Association and then also served for several years as Deputy and then Chief of the FP/MCH Project, the cradle of the nation’s family planning program in the public sector. He held various positions with the Ministry of Health, and also worked.

On 19 January 2020, I met with Dr. Pande at his home in Kathmandu. I was particularly interested in better understanding the social and cultural environment in which he struggled to gain a foothold and launch the family planning program in Nepal. In this note, I present some excerpts from the conversation I had with Dr. Pande.

Could you recall and share with me some of the vignettes that capture the social environment in the early years of the family planning program in Nepal?

“In the early years, family planning was a highly sensitive topic. In 1959, two of my colleagues and I had gone to give a promotional talk on family planning at the Prithivi Narayan College (now campus) in Pokhara. During the program, we were informed that there was a large group of people organized outside the hall to beat us up for promoting a ‘worthless matter’ called family planning. We managed to finish the talk somehow, but had to escape through the backdoor.”

“During the conference of the World Fertility Survey in the mid-1970s, I had arranged for the president of the Family Planning Association (of Nepal), who was royalty, to inaugurate the conference. Following this, I had an inquiry from the palace secretariat, enquiring why I had...
dared to bring a royal to such a conference.”

“Even when I arranged public meetings to promote family planning, very few women ever showed up. Even doctors were critical of our activities. I remember one of my senior doctors came to me and commented, “you represent a revered family of nation-builders, why are you promoting something that calls for controlling the growth of the Nepali population?” I also remember an editorial in Gorkhaputra, the leading national newspaper, in which a doctor had complained that a person by the name of Dr. Badri Raj Pande had set up a Bansa Binas Singh (an association to end the lineage) and that such an ill-minded activity ought to be stopped. When vasectomy was introduced, a senior doctor commented that I was on the wrong path to try to ‘castrate men’ in the motherland.”

In spite of having to face such a harsh social environment, what inspired and motivated you to keep going?

“My motivation for advocating for family planning was, I think, deeply rooted in the very high levels of maternal and child mortality that I was seeing around me. Deep inside me I felt that there had to be something beyond the hospitals to bring about changes in the situation at the time.”

Looking back, what factors do you feel contributed to propelling the program to achieve success?

“I feel both the supply and demand sides were important in promoting family planning in Nepal, although the supply side was the initial focus of the program.”

Looking back, what do you attribute as necessary ingredients for achieving success in your work?

“In my opinion, commitment, interest and, and above all, passion are the key ingredients for achieving success in one’s work. At the same time, the budgetary matter also has to be closely monitored, for this factor can break the system and inhibit success itself. Success has, however, some downsides too. It warrants some personal and family sacrifices. My children still sometimes talk about how they hardly saw me during those early years.”

Finally, how would you like to be remembered by the younger and future generations for your work, particularly in family planning?

“Specific to family planning in Nepal, I would like to be remembered as someone who cared and made a contribution to society and the country.”

These vignettes from the past, recounted by one of the pioneers of Nepal’s family planning program, make it abundantly clear that Nepali society has undergone a major transformation in the social and cultural milieu, in which reproductive decisions are made and acted upon. While the vignettes shared by Dr. Pande may sound ludicrous now, in the early years, one had to fight against a strong tide to make progress. More than pure conviction, one also had to have the courage and commitment to break through barriers — and sometimes, even endure feeling like an outcast in one’s own society. To recall the words of a great leader, “A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history.” Dr. Pandey can aptly be described as such a ‘determined spirit’ in the history of Nepal’s family planning program. The replacement level of fertility that Nepal has witnessed in the first quarter of the 21st century is a testament to the success of family planning pioneers like Dr. Pande.

REFERENCES
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