The Puzzle of Muslim Advantage in Child Survival In India

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The socio-economic status of Indian Muslims is, on average, considerably lower than that of upper caste Hindus. Muslims nevertheless exhibit substantially higher child survival rates, and have done for decades. By age five, the Muslim survival advantage over upper-caste Hindus is 1.30%-points, or about 10% of baseline mortality risk. The more widely discussed gender differential in under-5 mortality is 0.30%-points, less than a fourth of the religion differential. We show that the religion differential is not explained by neighbourhood effects. Decomposition of the differential in terms of socio-economic and demographic characteristics and state and cohort-specific unobservables shows that some compositional effects and in particular their greater urbanisation favour Muslims but that no more than 10% of the differential in child survival is explained. The finding that Muslims own a trait that enhances child health is reinforced by decomposing religion differentials in child anthropometrics and by introducing comparisons of Muslims with low caste Hindus. Incorporating a range of more unconventional variables in an alternative specification, we find some evidence that the vegetarian diet and the shorter stature of Hindu women contribute to their disadvantage. We speculate that weaker son preference and social networks amongst Hindus also contribute but are unable to establish this with our data. The results of this study contribute to a recent literature that debates the importance of socioeconomic status (SES) in determining health and survival. They augment a growing literature on the role of religion or culture as encapsulating important unobservable behaviours or endowments that influence health, indeed, enough to reverse the SES gradient that is commonly observed.

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