
SEX-RATIO IN INDIA: PAST SCENARIO AND PRESENT TRENDS

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Abstract: This paper seeks to trace the genesis of the contemporary problem of skewed sex ratio by examining the practice of female infanticide which existed in earlier times and which has now continued in the form of female foeticide with the advance of scientific engineering and technology. This form of violence against women has been assisted with the help of various Pre-Natal Diagnostic Tests where both mother and daughter are at risk just for the preference of a male child. This biased attitude has existed from time immemorial and it is hard to uproot prejudices and socio-cultural misconceptions which are deeply entrenched in our society. Various laws are enacted to combat this evil but it continues unabated. Skewed sex-ratio has set alarm bells ringing. The current challenge to combat this problem begins at the family level where this mistreatment begins the moment a girl child is born and it is only then can we expect changes at the larger societal level. This paper is based on secondary sources of data by analyzing statistical data of the government, population policies as well as various researches carried out by government bodies, welfare agencies and hospitals which have thrown light on the problem of declining sex-ratio in India and concludes with some recommendations to combat the problem.

Keywords: Sex-ratio, female infanticide and foeticide, cultural bias.

Introduction: There are several ways one can look at the status of women in any society. One such is to examine the common demographic indicators that give an overall picture of women's relative standing vis-à-vis men. In our country the skewed sex ratio suggests that female infanticide and foeticide might be the chief cause for the occurrence of decline in female population. A statistical audit throws light on the violence experienced by the helpless girl infant; whether in the mother's womb, at birth and also neglect as well as abuse thereafter.

Methodology: This paper is based on secondary sources of data. It relies on statistical material depicting the declining sex ratio from 1901 to 2011. This paper has attempted to analyze statistical data of the government, population policies as well as various researches carried out by government bodies, welfare agencies; and surveys conducted by hospitals provided valuable insights from a very relevant perspective which have thrown light on the problem of declining sex - ratio in India and concludes with some recommendations to combat the problem.

Origins of the Practice of Female Infanticide: Female infanticide, as part of an adaptive strategy was found among the Tapirape tribe of the Amazon region. Their social structure prevented them from splitting into smaller groups, even when the community became too large for subsistence base. "The rationale for the existence of this practice was inadequate food supply" (Scrimshaw, 1978 quoted in Krishnaswamy, 1988: 186).

When one examines the female infanticide records in India, there is overwhelming evidence of dominant caste like the Patidars, Rajputs, Jats and Ahirs - trying to maintain their socio-economic status through dowry avoidance and female infanticide. "Scholars like Malthus, McLennan and others had propounded

theories in order to understand the relationship between population increase, fulfilling essential necessities, and the need for an artifice for restricting rapid multiplication of human beings" (Parkasi, 1970 quoted in Krishnaswamy, 1988: 186).

The ways in which the baby girl is eliminated differs from one community to other. In Tamil Nadu, it was observed that the most commonly used methods for killing infants include "poisoning by the latex of the Calotropis plant, organo phosphate poisoning (pesticide), sedative overdoses, strangulation, neglect (starving the baby to death, which does not leave any forensic evidence), feeding the child paddy grain soaked in milk, or juice extracted from tobacco leaves, asphyxiation by swaddling the baby in a wet cloth is also practiced" (Samuel & Hebbare, 1988: 10 quoted in Mishra & Uday *et al.*). In some cases the father stepped on the throat of his daughter a few hours after the baby was born while the mother was still unconscious (Krishnaswamy, 1988: 189). Among the Kallar community of Tamil Nadu there is a widespread belief that if one kills their daughter the next child will be a boy.

Role of the British Government and Social Reformers: Such a barbaric practice shocked the British officials who took a written undertaking from Indian rulers to end this evil practice. Later the British government passed an official proclamation prohibiting infanticide through an Act in 1870, according to which, it was compulsory for parents to register the birth of their children, both boys and Girls (Devendra, 1994: 4). It must be stressed that the Infanticide Act of 1870 still exists and is strong enough to suppress female infanticide. The British created awareness on the evils of infanticide, kept a record of dowry deaths and fixed a norm for the amount of dowry to be paid. These measures helped

in the noticeable decline of this practice in most of the areas in India (Krishnaswamy, 1988: 187). In the social sphere many Hindu reformers who had studied western languages and culture simultaneously started a rigorous campaign against female infanticide and other social and legal inequalities in Hindu society (Devendra, 1994: 4).

Evil Practice Continues Stealthily: By the 1900's female infanticide was treated as an aberration of the past because the department to deal with infanticide in 1870 set up by the British government was closed in 1906, claiming total success in their campaign to suppress the practice. However, they were wrong as sex ratio had steadily worsened in the 20th C (Roy, 2000: 318). The evil practice continued stealthily with the complicity of family, kin members and neighbours. After 1931 and in the post-independence period, a large number of cases from different regions of the country revealed that female infanticide had continued unabated. Thus, the spread of this phenomenon resembles the growth of a malignancy.

Female Infanticide in the 1970's: In an article in *Imprint* (March 1979 quoted in Ghosh, 1984: 133), Arun Gandhi reported that "in Bombay city alone, 1300 new born babies were discarded every month and were found on garbage heaps, mauled by hungry dogs, left in public toilets, fished out of the city's sewers or thrown into the sea". Further, "one unwanted child had its head smashed by a stone, another was caught by its feet and hurled against a wall and a third was strangulated to death and a fourth was found lying in the gutter, its life snuffed out by a pillow".

Modern Guise of Female Elimination in the Form of Female Feticide: In the late 1970's there had been significant scientific discoveries in the field of biotechnology. Advances in fetal testing and genetical engineering had resulted in the first test tube baby, born in the year 1978. Advances in reproductive and screening technology have brought us closer to effective techniques for sex-selection such as sonography, fetoscopy, needling, chorion biopsy and the most popular one amniocentesis (Patel, 1988: 178). The prenatal test of amniocentesis had been used to ascertain the presence of certain defects that required medical procedures prior to birth (Schaeffer & Lamm, 1999: 606). Hence, the technique of amniocentesis was used in the big cities as well as small towns. Justification for this was aptly put by a team of doctors of Harkisandas Nurrotumdas Hospital in these words "in developing countries like India, as the parents are encouraged to limit their family to two offspring's, they will have a right to quality in these two as far as can be assured and amniocentesis provides help in this direction" (Panthaki *et al.* quoted in Patel, 1988: 179).

However, such tests inevitably identify the sex of the fetus, and have become very popular in India, an outcome that has had profound social implications. In many societies young couples planning to have only one child will want to ensure that the child is a boy because these cultures place a premium on a male heir. In such instances the female fetus is aborted (Schaeffer & Lamm, 1999: 606).

According to a statement in the Lok Sabha in 1978 by the State Minister of Health and Family Welfare, "In 1977, 2, 24,669 legal abortions were performed in India". To prevent illegal abortions the government had enacted the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act in 1972. This helped to prevent many unwanted children, social stigma and mental tension. However, in majority of the cases, abortions are not due to medical necessity but many take recourse to MTP (Ghosh, 1984: 133) and this was corroborated by the findings of the All India Institute of medical Sciences when they had conducted a sample survey of amniocentesis to find out fetal abnormalities. When the parents were told that the fetus was a girl; they were inundated with applications for an abortion to get rid of the pregnancy.

In the early 1980's a controversy around amniocentesis started as a result of several investigative reports published in popular magazines like *India Today*, *Eves Weekly*, *Sunday* and other regional language journals. What shocked everyone was that between 1978 and 1983, around 78,000 female fetuses were aborted after sex determination tests in our country.

Socio-Cultural Traditions and Misconceptions in Indian Society: "Oh no it's a girl," these words spoken at birth of a baby girl aptly characterize the disappointments and hurdles life has in store for most women in India. We do hear of instances where in when a girl enters the world, she is greeted not with a smile but with a scowl. However this does not happen when a boy is born. In fact women outdo men in giving vent to their depression when a girl is born. At home her mother treats her differently from her brother and she is considered a burden on her parents. A family, which has all daughters and no sons, receive much sympathy from the society. Sometimes a man will marry for the second, third and fourth time in hope of fathering a son.

A common justification for gender discrimination boils down to the fact that girls constitute a source of impoverishment for their family. It is therefore appealing to attempt the cost-benefit analysis; in order to examine specific costs related to girls as well benefits accruing from boys (Gangte, 2011: 55). Thus, the attack on the fetus does not begin in the womb, but it begins in minds of the human beings. To a large extent the prejudice against girl child forms the fear over their security right from the time they are

born and all through their childhood, girlhood, adolescence and womanhood. Always a son is preferred because of some traditional beliefs and misconception prevailing in our society. Thus, there is a selective dislike for daughters.

According to Roy (2000: 7) “the accepted reason for such a disparity, prompted by the existence of a dowry system, for a poor family, the birth of a girl child can signal the beginning of financial ruin and extreme hardship. Therefore, the birth of a son is considered bliss incarnate, while that of a daughter is the root cause of family misery”. However, this anti-female bias is by no means limited to poor families and much of the discrimination is due to cultural beliefs and social norms. These norms themselves must be challenged if this practice is to stop. For example, the son had to perform his parent’s funeral rites and continue the family lineage.

Ambiguous Government Policies: Commenting on the serious decline in sex-ratio in India, leading demographer Ashish Bose (2006) stated that “the government policies of the two child policy has got mixed up with female feticide”. He adds further “the famous family planning slogan, “*Hum Do Hamare Do*”, mathematically adds up to only three possibilities – that people have two sons, two daughters, or one son and one daughter”. Two daughters are not acceptable, culturally or economically, because they have to be married off. While one son and one daughter are tolerable, the ideal situation people strive for are two sons. Another slogan, “*Beti Ya Beta, Dono Ek Hain*”, makes little sense. How can they be equal for people when girls get married and go to another home and sons can be used as crutches? Thus, Bose concludes “the State policy of two children norm with a combination of one son and one daughter created ambiguity amongst the people”.

Declining Sex-Ratio in India: When we talk of the Indian Census it is important to understand that sex-ratio is defined as the number of females per thousand males. Also, in our country the scourge of female feticide is not only a family or gender issue, but has become a social problem. Despite a legal ban on Fetal Sex Determination and Sex Selective Abortion since 1994, further there was an amendment to the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Technique Act in 2003; still the practice is widely prevalent. Female infanticide of the past is refined and honed to a fine skill in this modern guise. It is as if an underlying feature of ancient times is recapulated in a modern avataar.

A team of scientists who analyzed female fertility figures from a national survey of six million people in India found that there were about half a million fewer girls born in the country in 1997 than expected. Using the figure, which has drastically reduced the estimates

of ‘missing girl children’ previously supplied by the Indian Medical Association, extrapolated over twenty years, the figure would be ten million, the researchers said in a report published by the Lancet Medical Journal (Lall, 2006). “We conservatively estimate that prenatal sex determination followed by selective abortion account for 0.5 million missing girls yearly and since access to ultrasound has become widespread, then a figure of 10 million missing female births would not be unreasonable,” says Dr. Prabhat Jha, University of Toronto Canada, who headed the research team (Suroor, 2006).

Growth of Female Population 1901-2011: In 1901, the female population of India was 117 millions. Over seven decades (1901-71), it increased by 147 millions or by 126 per cent. Compared to this, the male population increased by 163 millions or by 130 per cent. This differential growth has brought about a decline in the sex-ratio. In 1901 there were 972 females for every 1000 males in India. In 1971 the ratio declined to 930 females, in 1981/934, 1991/927 and in 2001/933 per 1000 males. These shortages aggravated over time; except in 1981 there is a reversal in the trend and in 2001 as well as in 2011 we see a marginal increase in the ratio.

I. Decline in Sex Ratio of Indian Population from 1901-2011

Year	Number of Females Per 1000 Males
1901	972*
1911	964*
1921	955*
1931	950*
1941	945*
1951	946*
1961	941*
1971	930*
1981	934**
1991	927**
2001	933**
2011	940**

Source: Report of the committee on the status of women in India, 1974, Government of India ministry of Education & Social Welfare Department of Social welfare, New Delhi. Source: Manorama yearbook, 2012, Malayala Manorama Press, Kottayam.

Sex-Ratio for Second Birth When First is a Girl: A remarkable thing to note is that couples do not go for sex determination tests for their first child as they have accepted the first child, even if it happens to be a girl. The research of the Indo-Canadian team said the ‘missing girl’ mostly appeared to be in the case of second and third children. Prof. Shirish Sheth of Breach Candy Hospital, Mumbai observed that “a daughter is socially and emotionally accepted if there

is a son, but a second daughter's arrival is often unwelcome if the couple already has a daughter. Further, this trend is more pronounced in educated rather than illiterate women and more widespread in urban areas than in rural areas". So the problem arises with the second and third conceptions. Most of such couples go for diagnostic test for the second child and if it turns out to be a female, they get it aborted. If there are two girls in succession, the third one has a greater danger of being terminated. Further, findings of the researchers that carried out female feticide study in collaboration with the Registrar-General of India point out that literate mother i.e., Class X level or higher report more number of missing girls as compared to illiterate mothers. Also, the women most at risk were those who already have one or two female children. In cases where the first child was a girl the ratio of girls to boys in the next birth were 759 to 1,000. This ratio fell further when the two-preceding children were girls, leaving the girl - boy ratio at just 719 to 1,000. However, the study said that for a child following the birth of a male child, the gender ratio was roughly equal. Interestingly, the data collected from 1.1 million households showed that religion is immaterial when it comes to feticide. All households, irrespective of their religious affiliation were less likely to have a second female child. The demographic impact of a skewed sex-ratio in the years to come will be a situation like China where there are 40 million bachelors or like Haryana where brides are outsourced from Kerala. Increase in cases of HIV, polyandry, and abortion-related deaths could be the other effects if corrective action is not taken (Raaj, 2006).

Recommendations: A Nationwide public education campaign must be launched to recognize

and spell out all forms of gender violence and the disastrous consequences of demographic imbalance. Also, the role of the father in determining the sex of the child must be highlighted. Funds must be made available to the organizations, especially in the health sector to initiate gender sensitive awareness through the electronic and print media. Laws should be stringent and must be strictly implemented. The State Public Health Ministry must reward voluntary organizations exposing those who facilitate or conduct sex determination tests. Also, action must be taken to punish erring doctors. Further, there is an urgent need for routine, reliable and long term registration of births and deaths. Lastly, since religion is also partly responsible for propagating wrong value agenda and the poor value accorded to the girl child; spiritual leaders with mass appeal have to be involved to change the mindsets of the people, as only a spiritual revolution can bring about this change.

Conclusion: Female infanticide and female feticide is found among all castes and classes of people and the rationale for it is to have a planned family with the right number of children of the two sexes, in a convenient birth order. The crime has acquired dangerous proportions and it must be curbed. There is a need to bring about a paradigm shift in the thinking of all individuals. To accept and internalize the fact that men and women are meant to complement each other physically, mentally and spiritually. As Swami Agnivesh has aptly put it, "God created the same sun and moon for both the sexes, so who are we to discriminate against the girl child?" We may or may not be able to eradicate this evil completely. As they say instead of cursing the darkness, let's light a candle!

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