

Missing Girl Child-A Cause of Concern

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Abstract: In many states of India, there are several evidences that indicate a widespread practice of using female birth intervention. Although, reasons for decline in the child sex ratio are many, but the most important is the presence of a strong son preference. The results of 2001 Census have set off a further debate on the issue and have narrowed down the focus to the changes in the juvenile or child sex ratio. Changes in the sex ratio of children, aged 0-6 years, are better indicators of status of girl child. The present paper concentrates on the child sex ratio rather than socio-economic changes. This study has given some suggestions for the improvement of the socio-economic and cultural fundamentals, which has always been detrimental to the interest of our female population. From the policy point of view the state along with the community needs to facilitate any change visualized in these fundamentals, by directing programmes in the spirit that the women brings human life up so we all should bring her up. Programmes that aim to reduce the excessive son preference and increase the value of daughters to their parents must be given highest priority. It aims to expand the literature on sex ratio and offers empirical evidence of discrimination at the grassroots, as mirrored by the shifts in sex ratio. The paper further discusses the three factors responsible for the decline in the child sex ratio, namely sex-selective abortion, infanticide and neglect/discrimination of girl child in Indian context.

Keywords: Female Infanticide, Sex Ratio, Sex Selective Abortion.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is a caricature that a nation that aspires to be a world power has no social respect for its women. India's economic transformation and growth have received much media attention in recent times. However, another major transformation going on in Indian society that has received much less attention is the demographic transition that the country has been undergoing since the 1960s (Agnihotri 2009). The ratio of females to males aged 0-6 years has been declining quite sharply over the last three decades, from 964 females aged 0-6 per 1,000 males of the same age in 1971 to 927 in 2001. While many countries around the world have a small imbalance in their sex ratios for biological reasons – such as a biological tendency for more male than female babies to be born to compensate for the slightly higher risk of mortality among newborn boys – the imbalance in India is acute, and is most likely the reflection of three major behavioral factors: First, this imbalanced ratio is indicative of prenatal sex-selection by parents, whereby the parents choose to abort female fetuses based on prenatal ultrasounds. Second, this ratio also reflects higher rates of infant and child mortality among females. Some of this may be attributable to infanticide, but most of it is likely the result of parental neglect of female children in terms of food and health care allocation.

Finally, an imbalanced sex ratio can also arise when parents use contraceptives differ-

entially depending upon the sex composition of their existing children, such as using contraceptives only after having had a son.

All three behaviors reflect a strong cultural preference among Indian parents for sons over daughters (Bhat 2002). Gender bias can broadly impact a society, and it is estimated that by 2020 there could be more than 25 million “surplus males” in India. While the 2001 Indian census shows that the overall male-female sex ratio has marginally improved from 927 women per 1000 men to 933 per 1000 during the last decade the number of girls to boys in the youngest age group fell from 945/1000 to 927/1000. The regional disparities also appear to have increased; the northern states generally exhibit a worsening trend in male-female sex ratio as compared to the southern states. The Census evidence suggests a clear cultural preference for male children, particularly among north Indians. The sharpest decline for the age group 0-6 years is observed in the northern states, particularly in Haryana (877/1000) and in Punjab (893/1000). The census lists ‘sex-selective female abortions’, ‘female infanticide’, and “female neglect” – typically through giving girls less food and medical care than boys- as “important reason commonly put forward” for this shocking anomaly. The new figures point to the use of new technologies to determine the gender composition. Furthermore, social norms are changing toward smaller families, the availability of and access to new technologies provide an easy way for parents to achieve such goals. Amartya Sen has called it a ‘technological revolution of a reactionary kind’ Human population exhibits definitive characteristics in terms of its sex composition. In most parts of the globe fewer females are born, yet females, as compared to their male counterparts, typically survive longer to exceed the males numerically at any given point of time. However, this demographic attribute eludes India where males decisively out-number the females and women constitute less than half of the total population. Sex ratio is a direct indicator of women’s status and welfare (Bora, Tyagi 2007). The sex ratio changes are usually analyzed in a framework that underlies greater deprivation and discrimination of females, as opposed to males. The major determinants, of numerical imbalances, revolve around factors such as under enumeration of women, fertility, mortality and migration. Under-enumeration of females, relative to their male counterparts, typically encountered in south India due to lower status of women, also makes census sex composition more masculine. Though such enumeration bias is relatively greater at certain ages such as early childhood and widowhood, rather being artificial than real, it does not depict the grim reality and warrants interventions that can generate better awareness about the need for accurate age reporting as well as recording. While the 2011 Indian census shows that the overall male-female sex ratio has marginally improved from 933 women per 1000 men to 946 per 1000 as per 2001 census.

1.1. Reasons for Declining Females to Males Ratio

The decline in the sex ratio of the child population can be attributed to a number of factors such as neglect of the girl child, female infanticide, sex selective female abortion and changes in sex ratio at birth, apart from the quality of census enumeration, the differential undercount of males and females, the quality of age data and methodological aspects of various censuses.

While it is not possible to make any remarks on the last factor in the absence of the

results of post enumeration check for the 2011 census, a close look into the question of levels of enumeration by sex in 1991 census by many scholars revealed that there was no evidence of a general undercount of females in the 1991 census, except in the state of Bihar. Moreover, when the two rounds of NFHS data were independently examined, it revealed that the sex ratios of the population in the 0-4 and 5-9 age groups had declined considerably, particularly in the urban areas, between the two survey points during the last decade. This is consistent with the census data which suggest that the child sex ratio in India has become more masculine during the recent period.

The available literature in this context suggests that a combination of factors namely; the urge to have a son, acceptance of the small family norm as a result of the fertility transition, access to pre-natal sex determination tests and abortion has worsened the situation relating for the girl child. The prevailing socio-economic and cultural milieu including the impact of modernization has further aggravated the situation with regard to these factors. At the household level or micro level, the relationship of population to available resources, the nature of localized risk, and heirship strategies have been the main considerations. The concept of the new household economy is widely emerging, which characterizes fewer children; a small family of which one must be a boy. The usually known explanations like sex differentials in mortality, under-enumeration, sex selective migration, biologically determined sex ratio at birth that would have caused imbalances in the sex ratios, have not been supported by the expert findings (Bose, Ashis 2002). The deficit due to these has been negligible. An assessment of the available studies reveals that in India, biases against the girl child are based on socio-economic and cultural considerations. Further, in a situation where social insecurity is very high, where no income guarantee and no insurance exists; it is very tough to convince the parents that girls are assets and will look after them in their old age. Virtually all kinds of effective risk coping institutions are absent therefore; sons are a lifetime protection against insecurity. Now with the small family culture even the first-born girl is not welcome. Some of the possible reasons that responsible for a decline in the child sex ratio are discussed below.

1.2. Want of Sons

Both in rural and urban India, if the first birth is a girl child, the sex ratio of the second birth largely worsen against girls. There is a striking deficit of girls if the first birth is a girl; couples face imbalance in the sex ratio of their children. If the first birth is a male child, the sex ratio of the second birth is in favour of females.

1.3. Ancestral Worship

In Indian states, ancestor worship adds another dimension to the need to have male offspring. Son's presence is necessary to ensure one's prestige during one's lifetime and after death also for performing a series of funerary rituals. People feel that they will only be able to achieve moksha through their sons. These types of social order need a big reform. Religious Pundits should give the preaching that the girls are as valuable as boys and the mindset that militates against the girl child may not take place.

Society should introduce a system where both sons and daughters can perform

the religious rites for their parents

Financial burden Associated with Daughters

One of the reasons for the presence of fewer girls in Indian homes is the net wealth out flow on the occasion of a girl's marriage. Despite the Anti Dowry Act, the practice continues and is spreading all over the country. With such an environment, it is true that those households or parents with more sons are far better off than the parents with more daughters. This costs and benefits trade off leads to killing the girl in the womb than to be burdened with debts or to part with land and house (Dasgupta 2005). In the near past cases of farmer's suicide have been reported in the national dailies, the cause is not so much crop failure but the inability to repay debts incurred for a daughter's marriage. In this way a daughter becomes an avoidable social and economic burden.

1.4. Bilateral Kinship System

In all states, there is a strong commonality in their kinship system, which is rigidly patrilineal. This includes passing on the main productive assets through the male line, while women may be given some movable goods in the form of dowry. Strong son preference is an inherent characteristic of the rigidly patrilineal system. Here the choice of the families remained irrational and unfair to their daughters and they are hardly considered for inheritance. Son preference can be effectively reduced if daughters are considered for the inheritance. To reduce excessive son preference and to stop decreasing girls' population, India needs to accept bilateral kinship systems (Dasgupta 1997). In this system kinship relations are maintained through both male and female line. This system is popularly accepted in South East Asian countries. In all these places, there is little evidence of gender discrimination. Such patterns reduce the difference between the value of daughter and that of son, and villagers are supportive of daughters. As per the Hindu Property Act, 1956, a daughter would have been a double gainer in the matter of property, but she remained asset less. This Act has made matters worse, to avoid division of property; female foeticide was the best course available. Patriarchy is the root cause of this disease; eradication can only be effected by direct attack on patriarchy.

1.5. Give incentives for Giving Birth To Daughters

If a baby girl arrives, parents cannot help worrying about family finances, for the whole life parents budget get disturbed. For such families', governments in the lowest child sex ratio states should start generous family benefits which should be known as parents' money programme (Dasgupta, Bhat 1995). After a girl child is born, rural and urban parents should get money under this programme irrespective of their occupation, they must be given extra money every month at the rate of the prevailing daily wages.

1.6. Increase Daughters' Value to Her Parents

It seems that if the large majority of the women get paid employment, as paid employment is valued much more, even then son preference will hardly get reduced.

The reason is that women's contribution to their parent's family is negligible; therefore investing in daughters will continue to be perceived as investing in another family's daughter-in-law. In view of the increasing paid employment opportunities for women, the respective governments as well as community should make sincere efforts to make it acceptable that women too contribute to the well being of their parents. To reduce son preference, it is essential to have policies that raise the value of girls to their parents relative to boys.

As long as daughters continue to be totally absorbed in their husband's home and cannot contribute to their parent's economy and welfare, son preference will continue to persist even though adult women are integrated into education and formal occupations. At the policy level there should be emphasis laid on gender equality, but nothing has been done to alter the fundamentals of the family system in order to make daughters and sons equally valuable to their parents.

Various five-year plans have laid greater emphasis on women's economic role, and have also identified core development issues of women such as health, education, and employment. As the list of the legislations to safeguard the constitutional rights given to women is increasing, more and more female children are missing from the Indian states. Since the 2001 census, much is being said about the declining female child population; discussions are held in national, international seminars and symposiums (George et al. 1992). The participants are scholars, NGOs and policy makers, mainly focusing on the regions, states and country-level status of the child sex ratios. Print media is also in the forefront but its attention has been flimsy, reporting a few instances of female fetuses abandoned in well, near railways tracks and in open fields.

This media coverage has only been sensational with no concrete fallout. In this regards, so far all these efforts has been proved to be a just hue and cry. After the 2001 census it was expected that the child sex ratio must have started improving; rather evidences are demonstrating a widespread practice of birth interventions. It is reflected in the declining female to male sex ratio at birth in hospitals and within communities. It is noticeable that the shortage of girls has also started becoming apparent in nursery and primary classes where increasingly smaller numbers of girl children are coming for registration as compared to boys the actual issues are grossly missing with the missing female children. Many informants told the researchers that they did not stop at one abortion, but had three or four — sometimes more — because a girl had been conceived each time. "Abortion," says the report, "...is the method of family planning par excellence — to limit family size, to enable spacing between children, and also to regulate the sex composition of the family." Although sex-selective abortion is illegal in India, it is rarely prosecuted. Women who are most aware of the official position — the urban middle class — usually denied the practice of sex-selective abortions. At the same time, note the researchers, the urgency to have a son appears "...with a greater and more universal tone in the urban settings, as compared to the rural settings."

Changes in work, education, marriage age, and marriage costs also seem to add up to disaffection for daughters, to a greater extent than before. The factors causing this include: increased investment that has to be made in daughters in terms of education and

marriage; the loss of their material and labour support; fears for their sexual safety and security; and worries about their future happiness in an appropriate marriage.

1.7. Constitutional laws:

1. The Hindu Marriage Act 1955 has made divorce an easy affair.
2. The Equal Remuneration Act 1976 provides for equal pay to men and women for equal work.
3. The Immoral Traffic Prevention Act makes sexual exploitation of females a cognizable offence
4. The Dowry Prohibition Act 1961 aims at containing the evil of dowry;
5. The Child Marriage Act Restraint Act 1976 has raised the age at marriage of a girl to 18 years and that of a boy to 21 years;
6. The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act 1971 legalizes abortion on health grounds;
7. The Indecent Representation of Women Prohibition act 1986 and the Commission of Sati (prevention) act 1987 have been passed to protect the dignity of women and prevent their exploitation and violence against them.
8. To check the decline in sex ratios and to stop female foeticide, the Pre-conception and Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act, 1996 and the amendment PNDT Act 2003 has been introduced. The main purpose has been to ban the use of sex-selection techniques before or after conception as well as misuse of prenatal diagnostic techniques for sex selective abortions and to regulate such techniques.
9. The latest one on this list has been India's Domestic Violence Act 2006, its aim is to protect women against domestic violence. Some state government had also passed eve-teasing laws in the late 1990s.

In India, nearly 45 girls per thousand female live births were missing, but when we talk about total live births (male + female) then 22 girls per thousand live births were missing (Das Gupta et. al., 1997).

2. SPECIAL FOCUS ON HYDERABAD

The number of girls born in Hyderabad, for the first time after 100 per cent birth registration began here four years ago, has gone above the number of the boys born. The statistics for 2005 show a staggering 4,000 increase in single year. Against 61,770 baby boys, 62,654 girls were born in 2005. This has jacked up the city's child sex ratio for 2005 to 1,014 females per 1,000 males, which is in stark contrast to the figures of 942 females per 1,000 in 2001 and 963 per 1,000 in 1991. The number of girls born in 2002 was 53,433, against 61,148 boys. This slowly rose to 57,864 in 2003, against 61,024 boys. In 2005, girls finally overtook boys, outnumbering them for eight out of 12 months.

This was when girls were stronger, number-wise, in just three of the previous 36 months. The interesting phenomenon now has top gender specialists, population experts and anti-female foeticide campaigners of the country poring over Hyderabad's statistics. The city in 2001 had the least child sex ratio in the State at 942 females per 1,000 males, with Ranigunj recording the lowest among wards with 838 females. The low sex ratio had no other explanation, but female foeticide. "Ranigunj, in a 5 km radius, had nearly 100 scan centres!"

Vigorous implementation of the Act, which prohibits selection and passing on information of the sex of the foetus, began in the city in September 2004. So far, the district administration has served 374 notices on 389 scan centers and seized 104 scan machines, of which 87 were released after owners paid fines and gave undertakings that they would not be used for sex selection. More than 90 registrations were suspended and 18 centers/hospitals and three machine manufacturers were being prosecuted. One doctor was also arrested in mid-March for violation of the Act. Andhra Pradesh has shown dramatic improvement in sex ratio but is facing a capital shame with Hyderabad being lowest on the list of the number of women against every 1,000 men, according to the 2011 provisional census figures. The first set of results of the Census 2011 has some encouraging news relating to the slower decadal growth rate of population and the rising literacy levels. However, the same is accompanied by negatives like a chilling picture of a sharp drop in the child sex ratio. It is a matter of national shame that this ratio, which has been declining since 1961, has witnessed the sharpest fall from 927.31 girls for every 1,000 boys in 2001 to 914.23 in 2011, the worst since Independence. True, the overall sex ratio has shown an improvement in 2011 at 940 females for every 1,000 males, up from 933 in 2001. But this appears to be largely due to higher life expectancy among women. While the decadal growth in population has declined to 17.6 per cent in 2011 from 21.54 per cent in 2001, it is still higher than the earlier projection of 16 per cent by the office of the Census Commissioner.

Already the environmental crisis facing the country is alarming, largely because of the huge and growing population pressure. The 2011 census has brought forth India's abysmal sex ratio, something that even our vaunted economic growth has been unable to stem. The number of girls per 1,000 boys has fallen 13 points, to 914, in the 0-6 age group in the past decade. Authorities admit that the programmes they had initiated to stem female foeticide and infanticide is not working. It's not just among the poor. The latest census figures show cities don't fare too well either—in Delhi, for instance, the ratio is down 2 points, to 866.

Economists have long tried to explain the "missing women in Asia", first noted by the Nobel prize-winning Amartya Sen as early as 1990 in a seminal paper he wrote for *The New York Review of Books*. In it, he tried to wrap economics around biology and explain why 100 million women in India were "missing". At birth, he said, boys outnumber girls everywhere. But women are hardier than men.

They live longer and have a higher survival rate. Women outnumber men in much of the developed world. Even within the country, there is a difference in sex ratios. Punjab and Haryana have a lower sex ratio relative to Kerala. "These numbers tell us, quietly, a terrible story of inequality and neglect leading to the excess mortality of women," writes

Comparison between the overall female sex ratio of Census 2001 and Census 2011 prevalent in different states of India.

Serial No.	Name of State	Census 2001	Census 2011	Increase or decrease in percentage
1	Andhra Pradesh	978	992	1.43%
2	Arunachal Pradesh	893	920	3.02%
3	Assam	935	954	2.03%
4	Bihar	919	916	-0.33%
5	Chhattisgarh	989	991	0.20%
6	Goa	961	968	0.73%
7	Gujarat	920	918	-0.22%
8	Haryana	861	877	1.86%
9	Himachal Pradesh	968	974	0.62%
10	Jammu & Kashmir	892	883	-1.01%
11	Jharkhand	941	947	0.64%
12	Karnataka	965	968	0.31%
13	Kerala	1058	1084	2.46%
14	Madhya Pradesh	919	930	1.20%
15	Maharashtra	922	925	0.33%
16	Manipur	974	987	1.33%
17	Meghalaya	972	986	1.44%
18	Mizoram	935	975	4.28%
19	Nagaland	900	931	3.44%
20	Orissa	972	978	0.62%
21	Punjab	876	893	1.94%
22	Rajasthan	921	926	0.54%
23	Sikkim	875	889	1.60%
24	Tamil Nadu	987	995	0.81%
25	Tripura	948	961	1.37%
26	Uttar Pradesh	898	908	1.11%
27	Uttarakhand	962	963	0.10%
28	West Bengal	934	947	1.39%

Sen in an oft-quoted line. Two explanations, one cultural (the East is more sexist than the West) and the other economic (women fare better in developed economies) have been “implicitly assumed”, as Sen says, to account for the lower number of women. Sen dismisses both explanations—read his paper for reasons—and lays the blame squarely on gender discrimination, suggesting that employment, literacy and economic rights, including property rights, are factors that would help right the wrong.

Women feel like failures when they give birth to daughters; they feel victorious when they bear sons.

The son is the carrier of the family name and business; the daughter takes away the family wealth. Sons take care of you in your old age; and they can light your funeral pyre.

But all that is no longer true; not even in traditional or rural homes. As numerous micro-finance institutions that lend mostly to women have figured out, it is the women who earn and save money. If you've ever employed a maid with a drunkard husband, you know that he is the burden and she is the financial provider.

India needs to save our girls. The future of our boys, and indeed our civilization, depends on it.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this paper reveal that in spite of the various legal provisions and women's specific developmental programmes, the gender bias and deep-rooted prejudices still persist. The continuously declining child sex ratio over time is a glaring example of gender bias. About the causes of this decline various factors have been identified in the available literature as well as by this study. These are for instance: child's birth order, number of living sons, education levels of women and rural-urban residence. However, the most influential factor that has affected the sex ratio in the all states is a strong son preference. Underlying this preference are age old as well as modern factors, specifically related to the historical, sociological, economic, psychological, medical and modernization. With modernization, acceptance of the small family norm, access to pre-natal sex determination tests and abortion technologies has further aggravated the situation. The urge to have a son translates into reality with the spread of technology to the doorstep of couples; it has become very easy to produce only sons. In this regard, abortion laws and the PNDT Act do not have any control over couples, thriving practitioners like obstetricians, gynecologists and Y sperm injectors. Any laws are not acceptable to them. Although most laws are made in India with great fervour, their execution is the main issue.

The endeavour should be to make the existing law work. The functioning of the private ultrasound clinics should be banned and these facilities should be made available only in government-controlled centers, such as public hospitals, primary health centers and health and family welfare related centers. The general thrust of the policies is to increase the value of daughters to their parents. Under the prevalent traditional social system, women's contribution to their parent's family is non-existent; even most educated, well paid women are unable to contribute to their parent's well being. Further in reducing son preference, social reformer activism as well as state policies can play an important role. Increasingly, the family size is getting smaller, instead of two sons and one daughter norm; the state should initiate the one son and one daughter norm, so that imbalances in the child sex ratio could be removed. The availability of reliable and affordable old age pensions, social security and life insurance programmes in rural and urban areas will possibly reduce the excessive dependence on sons. Had there been effective risk coping institutions in rural and urban areas, the son would not have been prioritised over the daughter.

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