

## **Female Foeticide**

Recently, when Badminton Star Saina Nehwal admitted in an interview that her grandmother refused to see her till a month because she was a girl child, the gender debate is stirred once again. The popular teleserial “Balika Vadhu” comes to our mind that such extreme character like “Dadisa” exist in real life.

The killing of women exists in various forms in societies the world over. However, Indian society displays some unique and particularly brutal version, such as dowry death and sati. Female foeticide is an extreme manifestation of violence against women. The determination of the sex of the foetus by ultrasound scanning, amniocentesis and vitro fertilization has aggravated this situation. As a result of selective abortion, between 35 and 40 million girls and women are missing from the Indian population. In a seminal article in 1991, Indian economist and Noble laureate Amartya Sen has addressed them as missing women. Researchers for the LANCET Journal based in Canada and India stated that 500,000 girls were being lost annually through sex selective abortions. Unlike western countries, here son preference over daughters exists. After conception, sex of the foetus is determined and if the sex of the foetus is found female, they are aborted. Sex determination and selective abortions by medical professionals has grown into 1,000 crore industry (US\$244 million).

In some part of the country, the sex ratio of girls to boys has dropped too less than 800:1000. The United Nations has expressed serious concern about this situation.

All through the process of civilization, the status of women has undergone evolutionary changes according to the overall development and progress of society in various aspects at large. In all these more than seventy three years of development after independence of India, despite our scientific development and technological advancement for the betterment of the society at large, we could not blot out the fundamental notion of gender-wise discrimination. Though we find a mention of prayers being said for the birth of a son, we do not come across any reference to eliminating daughters at birth in the ancient Vedic period. Atherva Veda states that “the birth of a girl, grant elsewhere here grant boys”. Gender discrimination was strongly dictated in Manu Smriti, according to

which female is under the custody of males from womb to tomb. Cases of abortion of female fetuses have been reported from many major cities in India in late 1970s. The inhuman face of the new developments has revealed its ugly face in the killing of the newborn female babies.

Marriage in the Hindu fold of life is traditionally considered essential for procreation and continuation of the “vansh”. Blessings showered on the bride during a wedding, consist of the line “asht putra sowbhagyavati bhav” meaning “may you be blessed with eight sons”. Thereafter conception, mantra from Atharva Veda, one of the most sacred books of Hinduism, are prescribed from chanting so that if the foetus is female it will transform into a male child.

Female infanticide is not uncommon in Indian society and is still prevalent in certain parts of the country. “Raising a female child is like watering your neighbour’s plant” is a popular proverb still doing the rounds in India. Historically, traditional pattern of neglect and deprivation of female including infanticide, were an integral part of the society. Daughters were the expendable offsprings as the value system put the premium on sons. Social scientists agree that traditionally the status of women in a patriarchal society has always been low. A literacy rate in India for men in the year 1991 was 63.86% as compared to 39.42% for women. In India 300 million adults cannot read and write, of which 200 million are girls. Inferior education lowers a girl’s self esteem, employment opportunities and therefore her ability to participate in the decision making process. Discrimination of girl child has no class or caste families, whether rich or poor, literate or illiterate, show less care or attention to girl child in comparison to male child in the aspects of nourishment, allotting domestic chores, providing allowance for entertainment, education etc. Traditional customs of marriage and the evils of dowry are always disadvantageous to women. The sex ratio has been consistently declining in India from the beginning of 20th century.

“Chore pe baje thali, Chhori pe thekre phoran” is the old sentiment in the Indian state of Haryana which means “announce the birth of a son by breathing of brass plates but at the birth of a daughter break earthen pots”. Historically, female infanticide was

common among certain castes and tribes such as Rajputs, Jats, Ahirs and Sikhs. It was a custom widely accepted among tribes, where sons were needed to defend the honour and more important, the territories of the tribe. In Punjab, because of marital and agriculture traditions, there has always been a demand for sons to go for battle or who would plough fields during peacetime.

In most part of the country son is a major obsession. One son is a cause for joy while two are seen as a lifetime for celebration, the traditional thinking being that if one dies, at least the other will live to take care of the parents. In the bargain, pressure on the woman to produce a son are unending. The girl child is seen as an economic drain as her marriage and dowry crushes her family under huge of debt.

As early as 19th century, the British has reported infanticide among certain communities in Tamilnadu like the the Todas and Kallars. Feeding paddy soaked in milk or poisonous sap of the calotropis plant, are the traditional way for killing an unwanted infant. Most of the cases of female foeticide take place during the early neonatal period that is during the first seven days of the infant's life. The infant was done to death by a senior woman in the family, mostly the paternal grandmother, and in some cases by the "dai"( birth attendant). With the advancement of modern technology its practice has taken a different shape. In Haryana and Punjab, a custom is called "Dudhpethi" in which the head of the newborn female child is kept in the milk bucket till she dies is a brutal and inhuman action of our so called prestigious high society. But now it possible to detect the sex of a baby when it is in mother's womb. This has made it possible to abort the female foetus, if it is unwanted. The most commonly used sex determination test is amniocentesis. Primarily it was discovered for the detection of malformation of the foetus. But since 1978, this test is used as sex determination test all over the country. While infanticide has a cultural history in India, foeticide is a relatively new phenomenon, permitting societies, which had no previous record of infanticide. Aborting a female fetus has resulted in a skewed sex ratio. There has not been sufficient debate and dialogue on the pros and cons of the skewed sex ratio in India. It needs to be monitored and reported in the correct perspective.

## Reasons for the Female Foeticide

Patriarch in India is so strong ,that traditionally man-woman relations are deeply embeded in the psyche. In the Hindu religion , a woman has no place. Dr. Radha Krishnan, Late President of India, wrote that Hindustan was a way of life rather than a form of thought, for it is primarily concerned with codes of practice than with beliefs. Dharma or right action regulates the most intimate details of daily life and moksha is the ultimate satisfaction. The four-fold system of the purusharths, which outline an ideal life cycle, is directed towards the goal of attaining moksha. The form of salvation or perfection could be finally achieved through sons, who after lighting the funeral pyre can offer ancestor worship. Women are not suited to Performing religious

**Table : SexRatio and Life Expectancy in India from 1901 to 2011**

Year	Sex Ratio	Life Expectancy	
		for Male	Females
1901	927	23.6	24.0
1911	964	22.6	23.3
1921	955	19.4	20.9
1931	950	26.9	26.6
1941	945	32.1	31.4
1951	946	32.5	31.7
1961	941	41.9	40.6
1971	930	46.4	44.6
1981	933	54.1	54.7
1991	929	60.9	64.0
2001	926	64.1	64.7
2011	943	66.1	68.2

**Source : Registrar General of India, Ministry of Family Welfare, Govenment of India, New Delhi.**

training and knowledge. They are therefore expected to lead the life of dutiful subjugation as that they may be reborn a man in the nest life and thus b gifted with religious previleges.

Much has been written about why indians want fewer girls. The most obovious reason is that girls have to be married off and that entails huge expense on ceremonies and the

dowry. Dowry demands are growing with rise in consumerism. So, inevitable, girls are seen as an unwelcome grain on family finances. In rural Haryana, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh farmers and daily wageworkers take loans and make their wives undergo scanning and selective abortions to ensure they bear only sons. It is presumed that parents must pay to “unburden themselves of their daughters. Sonalda Desai reported that there are posters in Mumbai advertising sex-determination tests that read “ It is better to pay 500 Rs now than Rs.50,000 (in dowry later). With the prevalence of caste and community based systems in India, female purity often becomes synonymous with male honour and as a result , virginity can be lost only through marriage and to a man of equal if not higher status. Huge dowries are thus required, as incentive for a man from a higher birth order to marry a woman from a lower birth order and therefore, the daughter becomes an avoidable social and economic burden.

The government’s policy has also an impact on the incidence of foeticide. While earlier, female children with lower birth orders usually had a fair chance of surviving , the target based population policy has changed the position now. The worldwide acceptance of the small family norm has made even first-born female children unacceptable and as a consequence the increase in female foeticide. Young married couples out to start family , feel that the availability of sex determination techniques assists them in choosing the sex of the child according to their will. So, the boys make more economic sense. Whether their choice result in a skewed sex ratio leading to social problems for a girl child, is not given adequate thought to.

### **Future Consequence**

Given the lower value placed in Indian society, premarital sex determination with the intention of preventing female births must be viewed as a manifestation of violence against women, a violation of human rights. The pregnant woman, though often equally anxious to have a boy , is frequently pressurized to undergo such procedures. Many women suffer from psychological trauma as a result of forcibly undergoing repeated abortions. Demographers warn that in the next twenty years there will be shortage of brides in the marriage market mainly because of the adverse juvenile sex ratio,

### Number of Female Child / 1000 Male Babies (1991-2011)

Name of the State	Census1991	Census 2001	Census 2011
Haryana	879	819	834
Rajasthan	916	909	888
Uttar Pradesh	927	916	902
Maharashtra	946	913	894
Punjab	875	798	846
Jammu & Kashmir	Not available	941	862
Delhi	915	868	871
Gujarat	928	883	890
Madhya Pradesh	941	932	918
Uttarakhand	949	908	890
Arunachal Pradesh	982	964	972
Meghalaya	986	973	970
Mizoram	969	964	970
Chhattisgarh	984	975	969
Andaman & Nicobar Is.	973	957	968
Pondicherry	963	967	967
Kerala	958	960	964
Assam	975	965	962
Sikkim	965	963	957
Tripura	967	966	957
West Bengal	967	960	956
Jharkhand	979	965	948
Karnataka	960	946	948
Nagaland	993	964	943
Tamil Nadu	948	942	943
Goa	964	938	942
Odisha	987	953	941
Andhra Pradesh	975	961	939
Manipur	974	957	936
Bihar	953	942	935
Dadra & Nagar Haveli	1013	979	926
Lakshadweep	941	959	911
Himachal Pradesh	951	896	909
Daman & Diu	958	926	904
Chandigarh	899	845	880

**Source : Survey of India, 2011, Council for Social Development**

combined with an overall decline in fertility. While fertility is declining more rapidly in urban and educated families. In rural areas, as the number of marriageable women decline, men would tend to marry younger women, leading to a rise in fertility rates and thus a high of population growth. There is a belief in some part of the country that only a young bride will give birth to a son for the family. The abduction of girls is an associated phenomenon. The Hindustan Times recently reported that young girls from Assam, West Bengal, Bihar and adjoining areas of Nepal are kidnapped and sold into marriage in neighbouring Haryana.

An imbalance in the sex ratio would have an impact on marriageable ages for women in the future. Child marriages which are on the decline, would once again be resorted to, bringing with it illiteracy and further deterioration in the status of women. Another adverse impact of a skewed sex ratio would be wife sharing, as is prevalent even now in some rural areas. An obvious fallout in this would be higher maternal mortality rates and a drop in the overall health standard of women. Sex related violence against women would also see new proportions.

More males than females should logically spell an increase in the value and status of women. This is unlikely, as the social gap that exists in the Indian society between a man and a woman, would widen, worsening the situation further. The impact on society should not be underestimated. According to Chinese estimates, by 2020, there are likely to be 40 million young men, called *guang guan* or “bare branches”, in China, because of the adverse sex ratio. A society with a preponderance of unmarried young men is prone to particular danger. More women are likely to be exploited as sex workers. Increase in molestation and rape are an obvious result. The sharp increase in sex crimes in Delhi has been attributed to be the unequal sex ratio.

### **Intervention Measures and Suggestions**

The seriousness and social implications of female foeticide were realized firstly in 1986 after a social organizations started campaigning for a ban on the sex determination test. They pleaded that the test is not only discriminatory and inhuman but also has

dangerous social implications. The reduced sex ratio would lead to polyandry, prostitution and other crimes against women like trafficking, rape, kidnapping etc.

Keeping in view the Forum Against Sex Determination and Sex Pre-selection (FASDSP), a social action group in Mumbai initiated a campaign in 1986. Succumbing to public pressure the Maharashtra government enacted the Maharashtra Regulation of Pre-natal Diagnostic Technique Act 1988, the first anti sex determination drive in the country which was followed by Punjab in 1994. Both these repealed by the enactment of a central legislation i.e “Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques ( Regulation and Prevention of Misuse ) Act on 28th September ,1994, which banned sex determination tests all over the country. This Act carries a three-year imprisonment sentence and Rs. 10,000 fine for the offender. The implementation of this Act initially faced problems as monitoring agencies had to be identified at all levels. It was therefore only in 1997 when the responsibility was delegated that actual implementation of this Act.

But there are some weaknesses in the existing laws. This is difficult to regulate all clinics that use ultrasound for sex determinations as well as the host of other purposes. The mere fact that tests like amniocentesis , chorion biopsy, ultrasound etc have been allowed by the law for the purpose of detecting genetic abnormalities in the fetus, they cannot be banned. Ultrasound has replaces the earlier techniques of amniocentesis and chorion biopsy . After the determination of sex of the fetus, most selective abortions are happening in second trimester, violating the MTP Act,1971, which permits abortions only upto the twentieth week of the pregnancy after being certified by two doctors. Secondly the MTP Act allows abortion on the ground of mental trauma, which is on the discretion of the doctor to define, and it is difficult to prove that a woman is having abortion because she is carrying a female baby. The new technology like X-Y Chromosome separation and the Pre-implantation Genetic Diagnosis (PGD) should be done in the light of law. It is suggested by some researchers that amniocentesis , chorion biopsy and other tests, which are used to check the abnormalities of the fetus, should be banned because Article 2 of the Convention of Rights of Childs says that a disabled



child has also the right to be born as a normal child. So, this step can be taken to solve this problem. Following measures can be taken to eradicate this problem—

- Registrations of Nursing Homes should be made compulsory and if they are found guilty for doing such type of crime like sex determination and abortion of female foetus, license should be cancelled and all the staff including doctors should be punished in the court of law.
- Government schemes to save the girl child were taken in 1997 in the country but these schemes will be implemented in true sense when we will be able to have educated, economically independent and empowered women who would then be the part of decision-making bodies. Its impact would be an overall improvement in the status of women.
- The centuries old bias against girl child can perhaps at best be removed only by changing attitude of the community or the society as a whole, that a girl child is an expense, a waste, a burden. Myths about the son preference should be also removed.
- The press and media has a great role to remove this evil. If newspapers, radio and television were to allocate a certain percentage of their time on this issue, the massive need to change the attitude of the people of the community or a country would be met. Prominent personalities should spread awareness among the people as we have seen in the programme directed by Ameer Khan in “Satyamev Jayate” television serial through which Rajasthan Government made many Fast Track Courts to punish the offenders in the cases of Female Foeticide. A Tamil play “Pacha Manu” and Hindi serial “Es Ghar Na Aana Lado” have brought considerable changes in the mindset of people to unite against these evils.
- Education should be emphasized and financial support should be given to the families with girl child for their education and employment.
- To remove the bad practices of dowry, strict law should be made and implemented too. Financial support in this regard also be given by the government to the poor families for the marriage of their daughters.

Government has taken many steps in the light of the problem of skewed sex ratio. The Beti Bachao has been underway in many communities to spread awareness regarding gender disparities due to sex selective abortions. But women must have to value themselves for mindsets to change. A definite beginning needs to be made to ensure and assure the girl child today, a better tomorrow. Let us come forward for the noble cause in favour of the coming generations.