

ENDANGERED DAUGHTERS OF INDIA: A REFLECTION ON INDIA'S CIVILIZATIONAL COLLAPSE

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Abstract: With the advent of UN Declaration of Human rights and CEDAW, the government of the countries took some stringent measures to curb the problem of female marginalization and suppression. Many new schemes and programs have been launched for the upliftment of women. Despite tremendous efforts made by the countries of the world to bring women at par with men, females are still relegated to a secondary status in the society. India is one such country which is struggling with a similar challenge. The constitution and judiciary of India have granted equal rights to women but equality at social level is yet to be achieved. Birth of a female is still unwelcomed in conservative Indian families. Inclination towards male progeny has put a question on the existence of female children in the society. Sex-selective abortions and female infanticide have become rampant. The present paper tries to examine the existence and effects of female foeticide and infanticide in contemporary Indian society. It also tries to identify the reasons for its unhindered existence.

Key words: Female infanticide, male progeny, dowry, sex ratio, sex-selective abortion

The contemporary world resonates with the idea of human rights. The efforts are being made to erase every trace of discrimination from the society in terms of caste, creed, religion or gender. Though laws have been formulated to protect the rights of the individuals yet materializing them at social level is still a remote dream. Execution of women's rights is facing a similar hurdle. The laws formulated to safeguard the rights of women are unable to change the fossilized ideologies of the orthodox, conservative societies which view women as secondary to men. The birth of a girl-child is unwelcomed and insignificant to most of the conservative families of India. This attitude towards a girl-child has been in existence since time immemorial in India. The advent of modern India saw a transition in the despicable position of women. Dowry Prohibition Act, Right to Property, Divorce, Reservations in government jobs and institutions have assisted a section of women to rise from the passive and parasitic life. However Indian society is still rife with the conservative families which view women as subservient to men. The existence of Indian women as secondary to men is due to the following factors:

1. Society's Inclination towards Male Progeny
2. Patrilocal Society (girl moves to matrimonial family after marriage)
3. Dowry system

Indian society is patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal in structure. "Discrimination between the sexes in India begins at birth, or even before it. It starts before the child is born, in the mother's womb. None of the conventional blessings showered upon the pregnant woman mentions daughter" (Nabar 1995:51). A male progeny is regarded as the propagator of family lineage. Hence a male child is a welcome reprieve as he not only becomes the harbinger of family lineage but also supports the parents in old-age. This social norm has fossilised and cemented in the social structure and transmitted from one generation to another. Whereas a girl is viewed as a liability till she is bequeathed to the groom. "Women are expected to leave their natal homes at marriage to live with the family of the groom, to whose customs they are expected to adapt" (Shenk 244). The patrilocal Indian society detaches a girl from her natal family after marriage and conjuncts her with the matrimonial family. She nurtures, serves and addresses to the needs of her newly formed relations and is expected to forego her natal relations. The ideology of patrilineal and patrilocal society explicitly advocates gender discrimination. *Statistics on Women in India 2010* given by National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development¹ has revealed the inclination of the society towards a male progeny. According to the survey conducted by the organization, 22.4 % of Indian women wanted to have more sons whereas 2.6 % of women preferred to have more daughters than sons in the year 2006. 20% men want to have more sons whereas 2% men want to have daughters (Table 312010). The data clearly shows the inclination of both men and women towards sons. The following table indicates the son preference index of different states in India:

Table 1: Index of Son Preference for Major States in India²

States	Index of Son Preference*	Rank
Andhra Pradesh	13.8	11
Bihar	24.5	4
Gujarat	23	6
Haryana	20	8
Karnataka	20	8
Kerala	11.7	12

Madhya Pradesh	27.1	2
Maharashtra	18	9
Orissa	23.4	5
Punjab	20.3	5
Rajasthan	25	3
Tamil Nadu	9.2	13
Uttar Pradesh	21.6	1
West Bengal	14.3	10
All India	20	

Index of Son preference =100 (E/C)

Where, E =the excess number of sons over daughters considered ideal C= the ideal family size.

Life of a female is baffling. As a daughter, she is an unwelcomed child but she is required as a wife to provide a son for the continual of family lineage. The arrival of a daughter is witnessed with dismay and burden. Girls born in a poor family face the worst kind of discrimination. Anne Firth Murray writes in her book *From Outrage to Courage*:

“Being born female is dangerous to your health. This reality may not be true for many readers, but for most women living in poorer countries around the globe, it is devastating (xv).”

Parents of a girl are also submerged in an ocean of responsibilities. They have to educate their daughters in order to get a better groom and simultaneously dowry has to be arranged for the consummation of their marriage. Dowry has become a nuisance in contemporary Indian society. Many women are subjected to domestic violence and dowry deaths every year in India. Parents spend the entire savings of their life in the consummation of their daughter’s marriage but they are not sure of their security and well-being. Even the educated and economically independent women are facing atrocities inflicted on them by the unsatisfied in-laws.

Some instances of dowry harassment are registered as cases of “cruelty by husband and relatives”.³

	1997	2003	2006	2007
Incidence of Dowry Deaths	6006	6208	7618	8093
Cruelty by husbands and Relatives	36592	50703	63128	75930

The whole process of upbringing a girl child and passing her to the matrimonial family is burdensome and unprofitable. These factors have cumulatively led the society to despise the birth of a girl. The society’s shanking for a son brought with it female infanticide and foeticide. Though the government of India took some stringent measures to curb the problem yet female foeticide and infanticide are illegally practised in the country. This practice is not only limited to India but also in other countries of the world which reflects the craving of different societies of the world for a male progeny. Anne Firth Murray points out:

The dangers start before birth. Sex-selective abortion is widespread, as parents decide for various reasons that they cannot bring another girl into the world. Hundreds of thousands of girls have “disappeared,” unbalancing sex ratios in countries like China, India, and Korea” (Murray xv).

With the availability of ante-natal sex determination tests the gender of the foetus can be easily known. The conventional families are inclined towards male progeny hence female foetus is aborted by many families without giving a second thought. Female infanticide and foeticide have many long-lasting implications on the society.

1. It has skewed sex ratio in India
2. It treats women as a nonentity
3. In some sections of the society women have only become a mechanism to produce male progeny
4. It can lead to an increment in female trafficking. With decline in number of girls in society, females will become more vulnerable to illegal trafficking.
5. It can also aggravate child marriages especially in rural areas. With limited number of females available in the society there would be a rush to procure a female at the earliest in order to safeguard family lineage.
6. Early marriage would lead to early pregnancies. This would affect the health of women immensely and also aggravate mortality during child birth

The imbalance in sex ratio is the epicentre from which the remaining issues pertaining to women evolve. Hence to culminate the aftermath of imbalance in sex ratio, it is essential to nip female foeticide and infanticide in the bud. The skewed sex ratio has laid its imprints in the society. If left unchecked it would have catastrophic effects not only on women but also on the society. The following table discusses the sex ratio in the year 2000-2002⁴. It is shocking to see that in almost all the states of India females are lesser in number as that of men. This decline is due to specific socio-cultural factors which include female foeticide and infanticide besides dowry deaths, poor health of women, domestic violence and sexual abuse. The data given in table 1 admonishes the Indians about the pathetic situation which would exist after a few decades due to the skewed sex ratio.

India/States	Rural	Urban	Total
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
INDIA	898	868	892
Punjab	781	757	775
Haryana	817	745	804
Himachal Pradesh	826	826	826
Uttar Pradesh	862	875	864
Gujarat	866	788	844
Rajasthan	886	917	890
Bihar	870	863	870
Maharashtra	904	891	899
Kerala	913	904	911
Madhya Pradesh	933	849	920
Andhra Pradesh	939	967	945
Tamil Nadu	946	883	926
Assam	947	913	945
Orissa	950	889	944
Karnataka	950	957	952
West Bengal	957	915	949
Note: The states are arranged in order of the rural Sex ratio at Birth (Column 2)			

The above table glaringly exhibits the unequal sex ratio in different states of India. It cannot be possible in any way that this difference might be due to more natural births of boys as that of girls. Even if considered true, it might be acceptable for a few states and not all. It means that the overall outlook of the society towards girls is discriminatory hence people are saying 'no' to the birth of girls. Not only female foeticide but also female infanticide is being used in different parts of India. Female infanticide is deliberate killing of a female child. Various methods like feeding the child with organic or inorganic chemicals or deliberately neglecting to feed the infant are used to kill the girl infant. Washington Post published a tragic story of an incident of female infanticide in the article '*Born Oppressed Women in the Developing World Face Cradle-to-Grave Discrimination and Poverty*':

Rani returned home from the hospital cradling her new-born daughter, the men in the family slipped out of her mud hut while she and her mother-in-law mashed poisonous oleander seeds into a dollop of oil and forced it down the infant's throat. As soon as darkness fell, Rani crept into a nearby field and buried her baby girl in a shallow, unmarked grave next to a small stream.

"I never felt any sorrow," Rani, a farm labourer with a weather-beaten face, said through an interpreter. "There was a lot of bitterness in my heart toward the baby because the gods should have given me a son" (Anderson 1993).

Female infanticide is a common practice in some states of India. It is more rampant in the rural regions of the nation. In some cases the only consideration the baby gets in her short and unfortunate life is that she's drowned in milk and not water. (Verma 2005). Due to illiteracy and poverty, rural areas are more dominated by the conventional ideology of male supremacy in a society. Female existence is side-lined or is considered insignificant. Those who are allowed to survive, live in abject conditions. With a limited exposure to primary education and unequal access to food and healthcare, female child accepts her outrageous position in the community. Conventional ideology of male supremacy has cemented in the social structure of Indian society. Even modern education has not been able to eradicate conventional concept of gender discrimination. Female foeticide and infanticide rip a girl of the right to live. The following table discusses the crime of foeticide and infanticide committed against children during 2000.

Table 1: Incidence (I) Percentage Contribution to All India (P) of Crimes Committed Against Children during 2000 (State and UT-Wise)⁵

Sl. No.	State/UT	Foeticide		Infanticide	
		I	P	I	P
	States				
1	Andhra Pradesh	8	8.8	8	7.7
2	Assam	0	0.0	4	3.8
3	Bihar	1	1.1	4	3.8
4	Gujarat	0	0.0	4	3.8
5	Haryana	13	14.3	1	1.0
6	J& K	0	0.0	1	1.0
7	Karnataka	1	1.1	2	1.9
8	Kerala	0	0.0	2	1.9
9	Madhya Pradesh	14	15.4	31	29.8
10	Maharashtra	41	45.1	20	19.2
11	Orissa	1	1.1	0	0.0
12	Punjab	0	0.0	6	5.8
13	Rajasthan	9	9.9	5	4.8
14	Sikkim	0	0.0	3	2.9
15	Tamil Nadu	0	0.0	8	7.7
16	West Bengal	0	0.0	2	1.9
	Union Territories				
17	Chandigarh	1	1.1	0	0.0
18	Delhi	2	2.2	2	1.9

Source: Crime in India 2000, p. 216.

The above table reflects very poorly on some states of India where female foeticide and infanticide is the highest. It projects Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana and Rajasthan worst hit by this inhuman practice. With the growth in the population of India, people usually plan to have two children in their family. This has burdened them with the thought that out of the two children one should be a boy. In order to materialize their desire of possessing at least one son, they are becoming more and more inclined towards ante-natal sex determination test.

Indian society is highly conservative as far as the importance of a son in a family is concerned. Son preference has devastated the life of women. They have become a medium through which masculine desires are fulfilled. Patriarchy is trying to erase all traces of female identity. No matter how hard the Indian government tries to protect the human rights of women, it has been consistently violated by the male hegemony. Men play the role of safeguarding the social and ethical values of a society or community. In this process they treat themselves as supreme and relegate women to the subservient position. Women neither have control over their bodily integrity nor identity. Marriage uproots them from their natal family and implants them into the matrimonial one. The problem of female foeticide and infanticide is further worsening their plight by putting a question on their existence. Society needs to be sensitized about the importance of a girl-child for a civilisation in order to progress. Denial of human rights to half of the population of a civilisation would lead to its collapse.

Though government of India has taken certain stringent measures to curb the problem yet conventional people are not ready to dilute the rigid norms of the society. The constitution of India grants equal rights to all irrespective of their caste, religion, creed or gender. Still women are discriminated and even denied the right to live. This is a blot on the reputation of India as it exhibits it as a country which does not treat its citizens with the same eye. The unborn and unheard daughters of India exhibit India as a conservative state. He endangered daughters of India reflect the country's civilizational collapse.

Notes:

1. Statistics on Women in India 2010..Natioanl Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development: New Delhi. 2010,p.117.
2. Rajan S.I., U.S. Mishra and T.K. Vimla (1996) "Choosing a Permanent Contraceptives: Does Son Preference Matter?" Economic and Political Weekly, July p.20, p.1980.The Third All India Survey of Family Planning Practices in India, ORG, Vadodara,1990. Calculated by Eapen and Kodoth (2001).
3. The table is a part of *Gender Violence in India*. A Prajanya Report 2009. Prajanya Trust. p. 4.
4. Registrar General, India, Sample Registration System, Statistical Report, 2002, New Delhi, 2004, p.31.
5. Crime in India 2000, p. 216

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