

## **Female Infanticide and Patriarchal Attitude: Declining Sex Ratio in India**

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### **Abstract**

*Indian society is based on extreme patriarchal beliefs. The identity of a woman in an Indian society is not independent, but dependent on men. They are either known as the daughters, wives, or mothers. Of these three identities, the role as a mother is the most important one. "It is not only that motherhood brings status to woman but also it is an attribute without which she is useless. Being a mother is an achievement for Indian woman. However, the gender of the child plays a big difference in the pride of being a mother. "The birth of a son is perceived as an opportunity for upward mobility while the birth of a daughter is believed to result in downward economic mobility of the household and the family". The birth of the girl comes as a burden to the parents especially during the marriage. It's a tradition in India to give dowry to the groom's family by bride's parents. Since dowry is an unaffordable factor, parents choose not to give birth to daughter. The advancement of medical technologies, in forms of Pre-Natal Diagnostic Tests and amniocentesis, has resulted in the practice of destroying female foetuses, a sex-selective abortion. Being a woman from same part of the world and belonging to the similar tradition and religion, this issue needs to be brought up and analyzed in detail. Moreover, this is a humanitarian issue that deserves attention. This paper will focus around the theories that support and oppose the idea of sex selective abortion. It will further discuss the sources reviewed and add a synthesis or response towards the practice of sex-selective abortion in India.*

### **Introduction**

India, with 1.21 billion people is the second most populous country in the world, while China is on the top with over 1.35 billion people. The figures show that India represents almost 17.31% of the world's population, which means one out of six people on this planet live in India. Every year, an estimated 26 millions of children are born in India which is nearly 4 million more than the population of Australia. It is significant that while an absolute increase of 181 million in the country's population has been recorded during the decade 2001-2011, there is a reduction of 5.05 millions in the population of children aged 0-6 years during this period. The decline in male children is 2.06 million and in female children is 2.99 millions. The share of Children (0-6 years) in the total population has showed a decline of 2.8 points in 2011, compared to Census 2001.

**Causes of Declining of Girl Child-**A major pattern among families in India is the pervasive son preference. An unfavourable female-male sex ratio, where males have outnumbered females has been an important indicator of gender bias in India. However, Monica Das Gupta and Mari Bhat show that with reduction in family size, the sex ratio becomes even more adverse, illuminating the existing gender bias.

### **Girl Child Traditional Attitudes, Beliefs and Practices Son reference**

- Sons are defiantly preferred over daughters.
- Sons are necessary for the material and spiritual advancement of their parents.
- Sons are considered ritually and economically desirable, essentially for lighting the funeral pyres of the parents and release of their souls.
- Sons continue the family tradition
- Son is 'Kul Ka Deepak'

### **Girl Child is a Liability**

- Bringing up a girl child is like watering a neighbour's plant.
- Girls are "Parayadhan"
- Girl Child is a drain on family resources because of the dowry that has to be given to her on her marriage
- Girl Child-an economic liability
- Girls are a liability as the rituals that are associated with a girl or woman demand expenditure from parents throughout life.
- Son is an economic investment; Girls do not represent a sound investment, whereas sons represent desirable returns. Girls are economically unproductive.

### **Girl child-A Burden**

- Foeticide is way to lessen the financial burdens
- Better kill a female fetus than give birth to an unwanted child.
- Better pay Rs. 500/- now than to pay Rs.5, 00,000/- and more later on as dowry
- If a daughter is killed, the next child will be a son.

The girl child realizes that the preferences shown to male children is because they are permanent members of the family, and are inheritors of the family name. Her stay in the paternal home is limited; she grows up knowing that she is regarded as a liability whereas the son is a valuable resource. She is taught to be humble and submissive and is treated as a second class citizen, this results in a deep rooted inferiority complex in her young mind. The discrimination begins prior to her birth and continues till her death. She is neglected from the womb to tomb, the girl children have been labeled as the "most wasted asset". This is largely due to our traditional and social conditioning that "women's place is within the four walls or her sweet home".

The root causes leading to female foeticide are complex and reflect diverse political, economical, social, cultural and religious practices, none of which justify such a violation of human rights.

### ***Recent Studies on Socio-Cultural Background of Son Preference and Neglect of Daughters***

Recent studies have revealed that, in South Asia, we have inherited the cultural legacy of strong son-preference among all communities, religious groups and citizens of varied socio-economic backgrounds. Patri-locality, patri-lineage and patriarchal attitudes manifest in, women and girls having subordinate position in the family, discrimination in property rights and low-paid or unpaid jobs. Women's work of cooking, cleaning and caring is treated as non-work. Hence, women are perceived as burden. At the time of marriage, dowry is given by the bride's side to the groom's side for shouldering 'the burden of bride'. In many communities female babies are killed immediately after birth either by her mother or by elderly women of the households to relieve themselves from the life of humiliation, rejection and suffering. In the most prosperous state of Punjab, the conventional patriarchal preference of male children leads to thousands of cases of sex selective abortions. Recently a man drowned and killed his 8-year old daughter and also tried to kill his wife for having borne him the girl child. According to the Chandigarh (Punjab) based Institute for Development and Communication, during 2002-2003 every ninth household in the state acknowledged sex selective abortion with the help of ante-natal sex determination tests.

Recently, Voluntary Health Association of India has published its research report based on fieldwork in Kurukshetra in Haryana, Fatehgarh Sahib in Punjab and Kangra in Himachal Pradesh that have worst child sex ratio as per 2001 Census. The study surveyed 1401 households in villages, interviewed 999 married women, 72 doctors and 64 Panchayat members. It revealed that "The immediate cause for the practice of female foeticide is that daughters are perceived as economic and social burden to the family due to several factors such as dowry, the danger to her chastity and worry about getting her married."

In this context, commercial minded techno-docs and laboratory owners have been using new reproductive technologies for femicide for over two and half decades. Among the educated families, adoption of small family norm means minimum one or two sons in the family. They can do without daughter. The propertied class do not desire daughter/daughters because after marriage of the daughter, the son-in-law may demand share in property. The property-less classes dispose off daughters to avoid dowry harassment. But they don't mind accepting dowry for their sons.

Birth of a son is perceived as an opportunity for upward mobility while birth of a daughter is believed to result in downward economic mobility. Though stronghold of this ideology was the North India, it is increasingly gaining ground all over India.

**Table 1: Index of Son Preference for Major States in India**

States	Index of Son Preference*	Rank
Andhra Pradesh	13.8	11
Bihar	24.5	4
Gujarat	23	6
Haryana	14.3	10
Karnataka	20	8
Kerela	11.7	12
Madhya Pradesh	27.1	2
Maharashtra	18	9
Orissa	23.4	5
Punjab	20.3	7
Rajasthan	25	3
Tamilnadu	9.2	13
Uttar Pradesh	21.6	1
West Bengal	14.3	10
<b>All India</b>	<b>20</b>	

**Index of Son preference =100 (E/C)**

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

**Sources:** 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).

**Consequences**

Over the next 20 years, in parts of China and India there will be a 12 to 15 percent excess of young men leading to an obvious bride shortage: between 2015 and 2030 there will be 25 million men in China who have no hope of finding a wife<sup>1</sup>.

This can give rise to:

- ✓ A substantial increase in aggressions and organized crime
- ✓ Rape and other forms of violence against women
- ✓ Drug and alcohol abuse
- ✓ Situation where all men of the family share the same wife.
- ✓ Women being viewed as commodities: for example kidnapping and trafficking of girls across borders.

In 2011, the total number of children in the age-group 0-6 years is reported as 158.79 million which is down by 3.1% compared to the child population in 2001 of the order of 163.84 million. The share of children (0-6 years) to the total population is 13.1% in 2011 whereas the corresponding figures for male children and female children are 13.3% and 12.9%.

<sup>1</sup> Isabelle Attané, op. cit.

**Table -2: Population (0-6 years) 2001-2011 –India**

	Children (0-6 yrs) (in millions)			Total population (in millions)			Share of children (0-6 yrs) to the Corresponding total population (%)		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Census 2001	163.84	85.01	78.83	1028.74	532.2	496.5	15.93	15.97	15.88
Census 2011	158.79	82.95	75.84	1210.19	623.72	586.47	13.1	13.3	12.9

Source: Census, Office of Registrar General of India

Twenty States and Union Territories now have over one million children in the age group 0-6 years. Uttar Pradesh (29.7 million), Bihar (18.6 million), Maharashtra (12.8 million), Madhya Pradesh (10.5 million) and Rajasthan (10.5 million) constitute 52% Children in the age group of 0-6 year.

The decadal decline in population was more for female children (3.8%) than male children (2.4%) in the age group 0-6 years.

**Table- 3: Child Population in the Age-Group 0-6 Years by Sex, India**

	Persons	Male	Female	Decadal decline in child population		
				PERSONS	MALE	FEMALE
Census 2001	163837395	85008267	78829128			
Census 2011	158789287	82952135	75837152	5048108 (3.1%)	2056132 (2.4%)	2991976 (3.8%)

Source: Census, India, Office of Registrar General of India

As per Census 2011, the State/ UTs with alarmingly low (<900) child sex ratio are, Haryana (830), Punjab (846), Jammu & Kashmir (859), Delhi (866), Chandigarh (867), Rajasthan (883), Maharashtra (883), Uttarakhand (886), Gujarat (886), Uttar Pradesh (899). Though, the overall sex ratio is favourable to females in the State of Kerala (1084) and UT of Pondicherry (1038); there are no such States when child sex ratio is considered. The State/ UTs which are having better (> =950) child sex ratio are Mizoram, (971), Meghalaya (970), A & N Islands (966), Puducherry (965), Chattisgarh (964), Arunachal Pradesh (960), Kerala (959), Assam (957), Tripura (953), West Bengal (950).

The divide between the north and south has got even starker with the child sex ratio in 2011. With the exception of Himachal Pradesh, no state in north India now has a child sex ratio above 900. Jammu and Kashmir has seen the most severe drop of 82 points in its child sex ratio, making it the third worst state after Haryana and Punjab. In 2001, Jammu and Kashmir had a better child sex ratio than the Indian average. Haryana (830) and Punjab (846) remain at the bottom of the table, but have improved over 2001. India's north-east seems to have a much healthier attitude to girl children than the rest of the country: Mizoram, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh have the highest child sex ratios among the states followed by Chhattisgarh, Puducherry, Andaman & Nicobar and Kerala.

The State/ UTS which showed significant decline in child sex ratio during 2001- 2011 are, J&K (decline of 82 points), Dadra Nagar Haveli (decline of 55 points), Lakshadweep (decline of 51 points), Maharashtra (decline of 30 points), Rajasthan (decline of 26 points), Manipur (decline of 23 points), Jharkhand (decline of 22 points), Uttarakhand (decline of 22 points), Madhya Pradesh (decline of 20 points). 8 State/UTs have shown improvement in child sex ratio during 2001 -2011 with Punjab showing biggest improvement among States /UTS (increase of 48 points), followed by Chandigarh (increase of 22 points) and Haryana (increase of 11 points) Himachal Pradesh 906 (increase of 10 points), A & N Islands (Increase 9 points), Mizoram (Increase of 7 points), Tamil Nadu (Increase of 4 points), Gujarat (Increase of 3 points).

### **Rural- Urban differentials in Child Sex Ratio**

During 1991-2011, child sex ratio declined in both rural and urban India. Though, the child sex ratio in rural India is 919 which are 17 points higher than that of urban India, the decline in Child Sex Ratio (0-6 years) during 2001-2011 in rural areas is more than three times as compared to the drop in urban India which is a matter of grave concern. However, the gap in rural urban child sex ratio has been reduced from 27points in 2001 to 17 points in 2011.

**Table -3: Child (0-6 years) Sex Ratio: 1991-2011 – India**

<b>Census year</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Rural</b>	<b>Urban</b>
1991	945	948	935
2001	927	933	906
2011	914	919	902

Source: Census, India, Office of Registrar General of India

In the rural areas of 25 States/UTs, the Child Sex Ratio (0-6yrs) has declined in 2011 Census over 2001Census, in 9 States/UTs Child Sex Ratio has improved in 2011 Census and no change has been observed in one State (Gujarat ). Trend is slightly better in Urban Areas as compared to Rural Areas as in 13 States/UTs Child sex ratio has improved, in 21 States/UTs, it has declined, and there is no change in one State (Kerala).

In the rural areas Child Sex Ratio is higher as compared to urban areas in 26 States/UTs in 2011 Census. In urban areas of 9 States/UTs (Highly urbanized NCT Delhi, Chandigarh, Puducherry, Punjab, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, Mizoram & Manipur) Child Sex Ratio is higher when compared to their rural areas.

### **Decline in Child Sex Ratio 2001-2011 (District Wise)**

Due to decline in CSR (0-6 years) in majority of states/UTs (27) in 2011, the gap between the results of Census 2011 and 11th Plan goals has further widened. Himachal Pradesh and Andaman & Nicobar Island have achieved 11th Plan goals set for sex ratio in the age group 0-6 years. Four states (Punjab, Mizoram, Tamil Nadu and Gujarat) are close to the targets with difference of 1-5 percentage points.

### **Sex Ratio at Birth**

Sex Ratio at birth denotes the number of female live births to 1000 male live births. Sex ratio at birth is an indicator of the discrimination against girl child, and heinous crimes such as female foeticide. Compared to 2000-2005 period, where sex ratio dipped continuously (from 892 to 880), the period 2005-10, has showed slight improvement (from 892 to 905)<sup>2</sup>.

Among the major States, as per SRS 2008-10, Sex Ratio at Birth is lowest in Punjab (832) followed by Haryana (848) and highest in Chattisgarh (985), followed by Kerala (966). Comparing the results of 2002-04 and 2008-10, Sex ratio at birth declined in Tamil Nadu (decline of 19 points) and Orissa (decline of 6 points) whereas all the other bigger States showed improvement during this period.

Among the Annual Health Survey (AHS) States, Sex Ratio At Birth was highest in Chattisgarh (951), and lowest in Uttrakhand (866). Across all AHS States, except Rajasthan, Odisha and Assam, Sex ratio at birth was significantly higher in Rural Areas than Urban Areas.

A view of the District wise data on Sex Ratio at Birth and Sex Ratio at 0-4 years from AHS for Chattisgarh and Uttrakhand is indicative of the within State variations. In Chattisgarh, which is having a Sex ratio at Birth at 951, there are three districts with Sex Ratio at Birth favourable to females namely Kawardha (1008), Rajnandgaon (1004), Dhamtari (1003) while the Sex ratio at birth is lowest in Koriya (876) along with 7 more Districts having sex ratio at birth less than 950, out of the 16 Districts. In Uttrakhand with Sex Ratio at Birth 866, the district with highest sex ratio is Neonatal (918), and the lowest sex ratio at birth was reported from Pithoragarh (764). For all the remaining 11 districts, Sex ratio at Birth was reported between 823 and 890.

<sup>2</sup> Sample Registration system, O/o Registrar General of India

## Conclusion

We need to counter those who believe that it is better to kill a female foetus than to give birth to an unwanted female child. Their logic eliminates the victim of male chauvinism, does not empower her. The technodocs don't challenge anti-women practices such as dowry, instead display an advertisement, "Better Rs.5000 now than Rs.5 lakhs later" i.e. Better spend Rs.5000 for female foeticide than Rs. 5 lakhs as dowry for a grown up daughter. By this logic, it is better to kill poor people or third world masses rather than let them suffer in poverty and deprivation. This logic also presumes that social evils like dowry are God-given and that we cannot do anything about them. Hence victimise the victim.

Female infanticide is not a new practice; it has been committed in many parts of the world during the time of famines and disasters. However, the practice of sex selection through abortion raises a moral question. Is the life of an unborn not valuable because it's a girl? Is a girl not to be born because one day she will become the burden to her family? How is the nature going to continue if there are no or less women to reproduce? These are some serious questions which need to be addressed immediately.

Sex selective abortion is the result of son-preference and the dowry system; however the major cause is the social status of women in India. Women are still the subject of domination and subordination. They are still subjected to their husbands' decision. The cultural and social context of India does not provide the base for women to stand up for themselves. They are taught to be subordinates to their husbands and in-laws. The gender issues in India, be it sex-selective abortion, or women violence, will not be successfully addressed until and unless women themselves value their being and their identity. Government regulations are important to control the number of sex-selective abortion. Nevertheless, government should make policies that empower women and support their identity as a human being rather than someone's wife or a mother.

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