

Different Stages of Elimination of the Indian Girl Child

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Abstract

The paper focuses on various issues related to the killing of a girl child in India. A declining sex ratio is an indication of this heinous act still being carried out in the modern world. The uniqueness of this situation is that the killing is done by the family members themselves. In some cases, it could be the mother too! What makes a mother want to take the life of her own child? Are the reasons linked to her own journey from herself being the 'unwanted' girl to a woman whose main purpose is to give the family a male? A male who will carry on with the patriarchal system with the woman as his chief ally? The paper looks at the various stages of elimination of the girl child starting from killing of the desire to bear a female child to the killing of the foetus - female foeticide, then the newborn baby- female infanticide and finally killing the girl child by neglect. The girl who manages to survive becomes a woman - now ready to give birth. The cycle starts again! Should she bring her own version into this world so that she too is subjugated to all that she herself had to endure? Or is there another way? The paper looks at some of the options that the parents resort to in India.

Keywords: *Indian girl child, patriarchal system, female foeticide, female infanticide, sex ratio.*

Introduction

The killing of the girl child is an age-old tradition carried out by many communities in different parts of the world. This unfortunate tradition is perhaps the reason for the low child sex ratio in India. According to United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), "India is the only large country where more girls die than boys, with the inverse sex ratio at birth being 900 girls born for every 1000 boys. Globally 7 percent more boys die under the age of 5 compared to girls, but in India, 11 percent more girls die under the age of 5" (UNICEF, 2020 para.4). The report on "Vital Statistics of India based on the Civil Registration System" for the year 2018, shows the sex wise distribution of registered births as 52% registered male births as against 47.9% of registered females births (Ministry of Home Affairs, India 2018: 40).

Of all the questions that any researcher can ask a respondent, perhaps the most difficult one could well be, "What made you kill your own child - your daughter?" It would be just as difficult for any respondent to give an honest answer. Most certainly, the decision is not an easy one. Yet it culminates in to something, which can be considered no less than a homicide and that too of one's own flesh and blood. What compels a family to take such an action?

The present paper is not looking at the reasons behind such a heinous act. This has been the focus of many papers. Each one of them gave its own theories and making its own assumptions. The present article tries to identify the different stages in the journey of an Indian woman from the mother's womb till the time she herself is ready to deliver a baby. Then she may deliver a girl child! For a society to make her kill her own child, it takes years to implant the idea, nourish it and then finally make her actually commit it. It could be the result of years of socialization and numerous other factors, which reduce the importance of a female child and make her, appear "worthless" in the eyes of her own mother.

The need to "do away with the girl child" is so strong that the society tries to eliminate her at the different stages of her growth.

Stages of Elimination of the Indian Girl Child

Various stages of elimination are given below.

- Killing the Desire for a Girl Child
- Killing the Thought of a girl child during the Preconception and conception stages
- Female Foeticide
- Female Infanticide
- Killing the Girl Child by neglect

The details of the above points are discussed below:

1. *Killing the Desire for a Girl Child*

The society not only kills the child but even kills the desire in a woman to have a girl child. There are various factors that contribute to this.

1. Personal Factors

These factors concern the woman herself. Her perception of her own self, her satisfaction with her role as a woman and the self-image which she develops over a period of time. As a little girl she observes her mother and other younger female members of her family bowing down to the wishes and commands of the men and a few senior women. She rarely hears any voice of dissent and learns very early in life as to how her own behavior has to be different from her brothers. She observes and gradually absorbs the image of a 'dependent' individual.

Kumar (2015) writes in the book on the nature and extent of development and gender disparity in Haryana, a state which has the lowest sex ratio in India –that is 876 females per 1000 males (Ministry of Women and Child Development 2021).

"Women are dependent on the men folk in all occupations. It is a common saying in the countryside, that female as daughters are dependent on their fathers and brothers, as a wife on their husbands and as mothers on their son. In addition, women are generally not given importance in family decision making ...The decisions of all male bodies are binding upon women" (Kumar 2015: 76).

This is true, unfortunately, even for women living in the cities. The urban women are no doubt more educated but the family set up remains largely patriarchal. She must do well in

her studies as well as learn to do domestic work. Thus, they are told that their education means that they should excel in studies and do well in the examinations, but it does not mean that they can take decision regarding their lives. The type of occupation that the girls can take up is also decided for them.

Bahadur (2009) on the basis of the results of the study, "Psychological Factors as Predictors of College Girls' Orientation towards Marriage and Career", reported,

"The results indicated that girls autonomy regarding matters related to self, choice of marriage partner, making friends, decision related to taking up jobs are important areas for them. But they do not feel that they can fully exercise control over these areas as they are still seeking parental approval"(Bahadur 2009:166).

Unfortunately, parental approval is influenced greatly by social rules and norms. Thus, a daughter is encouraged to do her graduation and post-graduation studies but is told to limit her choice of occupation to school teachers and college lecturers.

John (2018) who conducted a multi stage and multi sited study of sex ratio in Haryana and Maharastra during 2015-17, reported a difference in parental aspirations regarding education and future employment opportunities for their children. A university degree "with teaching as a possible job opportunity" was preferred for daughters as against "professional aspirations for sons" (John 2018: 88).

The hand that reaches out to them and gives them education pulls back at the mere mention of giving them their rights. Further, if she has been discriminated with her brother, the matter only becomes worse. She must come home early before dark, although her brother can stay out as long as he wants. In addition, if the choice of life partner is not given to her and she is forced to carry the traditional *tray of tea to the drawing room* for the future groom and his family, which result in a very poor self-image. Dowry adds to the misery and instills in the girl a feeling of worthlessness and of being an economic burden on her parents.

Kaur (2007) analyses the socio-economic reasons behind the decline in the juvenile sex ratio and writes,

"An important aspect of the perpetuation of son preference is the socialisation of girls in an atmosphere of familial discrimination. The differential care and affection within the family is registered by girls, percolating at the psychological level into a mindset that favours boys over girls. The low value placed on a girl by family, society and by cultural norms instills a sense of her own inferiority and her brother's superiority in the mind of the girl. She then grows up to be a wife and mother with the same values" (Kaur 2007: 236 - 237).

The most dreadful thing is if the girl has been sexually exploited at some point of her life and carries horrible memories of it. Needless to say, such experiences would probably suffocate any desire for a girl child.

The condition of a rural girl is also pathetic. As Jahan (2015) writes in her article "The Social Construction of 'Self' and Womanhood in a Hindu Village of Bangladesh", a country not very different from India;

“In a crude Hindu society like Khankhanapur ...the essence of ‘self’ develops in the women’s heart as they continuously encounter diverse factors that are external but related to them... From the childhood, a village Hindu girl is expected to perceive herself as a little woman incorporating into her character the womanly traits. She is socialised not to behave like a boy, go here and there and escape household duties. Alongside her school education, as a ‘little woman,’ she is expected to spend her time in learning the house work from her mother. This is thought to set a stage for her to act her role of a wife and mother in her life-long social drama... During her girlhood, a village Hindu woman incorporates within her the very notion of womanhood that resonates around marriage and childbirth.” (Jahan 2015: 42-43).

The only important event in the life of a woman is her marriage and later childbirth. All throughout her maiden years, she has to prepare herself for her life after marriage. Once married, she must use her years of training to placate the new family, irrespective of how they treat her. Even if things do not work out, there is hardly any option available to her. Divorce is seldom an option for an Indian woman.

As per India Today report (2018, November 20), although the global divorce has increased to 251.8% since 1960, it is less than one percent in India. But this does not really mean that all is well in the marriage. As Dommaraju concludes, “The comparatively low level of marital dissolution in India might seem to represent a desirable situation if marital stability was underpinned by marital satisfaction, symmetrical gender power relationship, an equitable socio-legal system and egalitarian values. For many women, however, staying in or leaving a marriage is not necessarily dependent on any of these values” (Dommaraju 2016: 215).

Even if she has a bad marriage she must continue to live with her husband. A large number of women experience domestic violence and marital rape but very few of them, even in educated urban India reach out for help.

The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4) of India for the period 2015 -16 reported that one-third of married women were subjected to some type of emotional, sexual or physical violence by their husbands. It was also found that only 14% of women who had faced physical or sexual violence had tried to get help, but a large percentage i.e. 77% had neither told anyone about the violence that they experienced nor asked for any kind of help. This does not mean that the family is not aware of the problem. A study on domestic violence in India by International Clinical Epidemiologists Network (INCLIN) reported that 58 % women subjected to domestic violence said that their immediate family was aware of the situation (INCLIN 2000: 27). The family simply looks the other way and chooses not to reach out to help the victim. In a highly patriarchal society even the violent behaviour of men is justified. Karp, A. *et al.* (2015) reported a survey conducted by Population Reference Bureau, revealed that 26 % of males in India and surprisingly a slightly higher percentage of females (30 %) agree that “wife beating is acceptable”. Even pregnant women are not spared. The above mentioned survey conducted by INCLIN also reported that of the 50 % women who underwent physical violence, also experienced it during their pregnancy (INCLIN 2000: 10). In the existing scenario

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of discrimination, no attempt is made to hide the notion of a girl child's "uselessness". No thought is given to the feelings of the child and its effect on her emotional development. A study conducted in rural Maharashtra, revealed that a number of people had named their daughter *Nakusa* / *Nakoshi*, which in Marathi means "unwanted". Most of these girls were the third or the fourth daughters of the parents and the parents hoped to get a son after having named the daughters so. According to the researchers, "a woman who herself had a bad childhood experience in terms of discrimination and mobility, naturally feels insecure in her married life, thus leading to a vicious cycle of gender deprivation and discrimination towards her daughter" (Shijith and Sekher 2015, p.75). The researchers reported that a woman was explaining the reason behind the name that they gave to their daughter in front of the latter and least affected by the fact that tears were rolling down *Nakusa's* eyes (Shijith and Sekher 2015: 77).

Giriraj (2004) conducted a study in Kadayampatti Panchayat of Salem district on 42 "rescued" families who were given facilities, assistance and awareness with the intention of changing their views regarding female foeticide by the organization named, "World Vision". The women respondents "regretted being women" and 83.33% believed that they would have killed their baby girls if the voluntary organisation had not come in at the right time. A female child was considered a liability by 90.48 % of the respondents (Giriraj 2004, as cited in Tandon and Sharma, 2006, Female foeticide and female infanticide section).

When such a girl, who is considered a "liability" by her family and has the idea firmly implanted in her mind grows up to be a woman, will she be able to look at her daughter differently? Will she be able to shake off the burden of "being unwanted" and reach out and "want" a girl child?

In the poem "When I (your daughter) was born Ma", a daughter asks her mother a very pertinent question - a question which many Indian mothers may not be able to answer honestly.

When I was born Ma

When I was born Ma,
Did you distribute *laddoos* (Indian sweet)?
Did *dadi* (paternal grandmother) sang songs
And *bua* (father's sister) danced along?
Was there partying and merrymaking
And bursting of crackers too?
Or was there silence?
Just as there was today...
When *chotti* (younger sister) was born?
Tell me, Ma...
Tell me, Ma...
Tell me, Ma...
Did you not want me???

ii. Economic Factors

India is basically a poor nation with a large number of Indians living way below the poverty line. Getting a girl married is an expensive proposition in most parts of the country. However, even if the parents are able to marry their girls off somehow, the fear that what has been given might not satisfy the in-laws keeps haunting them. Unfortunately, a number of brides are put to death simply because the insatiable greed of the in-laws. Deaths in India related to dowry demands have increased by almost 15 times since the mid-1980s. It rose from 400 women a year to around 5,800 a year by the middle of the 1990s. For the year 2019, the National Crime Bureau of India (NCBI) reported that majority of cases under crime against women (30.9%) were registered under the category "Cruelty by husband and or his relatives" (NCBI 2019: xii); and a total of 7115 dowry deaths were reported all over India (NCBI 2019, Table 1.2:2). The rising number may indicate that more cases are being reported as a result of efforts put in by the women's organizations.

Bose (2001) points out that even the much educated and financially well-off nurses from Kerala have to save money for dowry. It was found in a study conducted in Delhi by Damodaran (2013), that nurses found it difficult to save anything for their "different" needs which included "paying for the marriage and dowry expenses of younger women in the family" (Bose 2001:192).

iii. Social Factors

A young daughter is always told that she has to go to another house and only the son is capable of looking after the old parents. This way the idea of uselessness of a daughter is again infused in her. In fact, there are many very derogatory sayings in most cultures and subcultures. A common saying is, "*raising a daughter is like watering your neighbour's garden*".

The society places immense importance to the son. According to Desai (2015),

"Sons are more likely than daughters to provide family labour on the farm or in a family business, earn wages and support their parents during old age. Upon marriage a son brings a daughter-in-law who brings rewards in the form of dowry" (Desai 2015: 140-141).

Singh *et al.* (2014) gave three major reasons for preference of male child-economic, socio-cultural and religious. The economic utility of the son is being an earning member whose earnings remain within the family. The daughter on the other hand has to be married and given a "dowry" because of which she appears to be a financial liability. The socio-cultural utility is ingrained in the minds of the members of patriarchal families which strongly believes that only the son carries forward the family line. There is also a belief that certain religious duties, such as lighting the funeral pyre of the parents, so that they can hope to achieve salvation, can be performed only by the sons. One wonders as to whether salvation is indeed possible in such cases where the parents have themselves killed their own daughters so as to get this son for lighting their funeral pyre. For society, the women are "simply good for nothing".

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As Chibber, B. (2018) writes, "In a patriarchal society, women often suffer in silence, often deprived of personal liberty and bound by rules made by the allegedly superior males" (Chibber. 2018: 123).

All the above factors - personal, social and economic, simply add up to give the female a poor self-image and a sense of immense dependency on others. This perception perhaps, gets transferred to the way she interprets the importance of a girl child, even one of her own!

2. *Killing the Thought during the Pre Conception and Conception Stages*

Whatever little thought that might be left in the mind of a young bride is further brutally murdered during the pre-conception and conception stages. A married woman is blessed to be "*saubhagyawati*" (perpetually married) or "*dhudho nahao, puto phallo*" (May you bathe in milk and bear many sons). The phrase - bathing in milk, signifies not only the economic prosperity of the woman but that she should have enough milk to feed her many sons. There are no blessing for a girl child. The whole atmosphere in the house of a newly wed is filled with the talk of a male child. There are innumerable non-medical practitioners who give "medicines" for conceiving a male child. Some even recommend what should be done during conception to have a boy child.

There are verbal threats from the in-laws and the woman fears that she might be disowned if she gives birth to a girl. Any desire that might be there in the heart of the newlywed to bear a girl child is stifled. Pavithra, Dhanpal and Lokanath (2015) in a study on gender preference among 100 pregnant women attending antenatal clinics in Bangalore, reported preference for a son by 53% of women. In a similar study carried out in Bangalore on gender preference and anxiety among pregnant women, it was found that a high percentage i.e., 64% of respondents having two daughters seriously wanted a son. Only 6% of respondents with boys wanted a daughter. In terms of level of anxiety, 93% of pregnant women with two female children had high levels of anxiety as compared to 67% of those having one male and one female child and 27% having two male children (Yadav and Badri, 1997).

3. *Female Foeticide*

In the story of women's struggle, even science and technology seem to be playing a negative role. Today, it is possible to determine the sex of the child even before birth, thus making the task of killing the girl child even easier. 57% of the respondents gave modern sex determination methods and female foeticide as the reason for falling sex ratio in Mehsana district of Gujarat (Sharma, 2014).

There are a variety of methods available for determining the sex of the unborn child. The most common and popular one, well within the means of most families living in India, is the method of conducting ultrasound. The ultrasound technique has proven to be fatal for the female foetus in the country. The medical community was fast to recognise the money - making opportunity which the technique offered. The portable ultrasound machine allows doctors to

go from house to house in towns and villages, imploring people to make use of its services in doing away with the female foetus. Cousins (2017) reported on the comment of a doctor, who worked in a reputed medical institute in Haryana as, "The ultrasound was India's biggest curse. A doctor wants money and a woman wants to know the sex of her child - it's a mutual benefit and both keep their mouths shut" (Cousins, 2017:1). Presently, ultrasound has become an efficient sex-selection device. (Warade, 2013, Conclusion section, para.1). The next step after an ultrasound and detection of a female foetus, abortion is done in many cases.

Chandan (2008) conducted a micro demographic study among Punjabi communities of Gurdaspur district in Punjab and reported that 55.3% of respondents went for ultrasound to detect the sex of the unborn baby and 83.3% of female foetuses were aborted.

Sahni et al. (2008) collected records and analyzed data from 33,524 deliveries at one hospital from 1900 to 2006, over a time period of 10 decades and concluded that the sex ratio dipped significantly after 1980. This coincided with the ultrasound machines coming in use. It was found that up to the year 1979 the sex ratio was 935 and post 1980 it came down to 892. In those cases where the first born was a girl, the ratio further fell down to 716.

Even in a place like Delhi which has a high percent of educated population and supposed to be "broad minded Indians"; the picture is dismal. A study titled "Analysis of Trends of Sex Ratio at Birth of Hospitalized Deliveries in the state of Delhi", looked at the entire phenomenon of declining sex ratios in the capital between the years 1993 and 2002. The study revealed that if the first born was a boy, then the sex ratio at birth was 959 per 1000 males. When the first born was a girl it came down to almost 50% i.e. 542 girls per 1000 boys. For the third order of birth, when the first two were daughters, it came down drastically to 219 girls per 1000 boys (Verghese, Aruldas and Jeemon, 2005).

The Hindustan Times, a popular Indian newspaper, reported on October 16, 2016, that eighty-nine (89) hospitals and nursing homes in Delhi had reported sex ratio at birth of 800 girls or less for 1000 boys; and were issued a show cause notice to explain the abnormal ratio. The Delhi health minister, Mr. Satyender Jain said that in some nursing homes the sex ratio at birth was even as low as 300 girls per 1000 boys (Eighty-nine hospitals in Delhi get notices over poor sex ratio, 2016, October 16, The Hindustan Times). This short newspaper report speaks volumes about the status of the girl child in urban India.

Action AID (2008) reported an interview conducted with some medical practitioners who "justified sex selection abortions as being a 'social duty', which prevented the ill treatment of unwanted daughters and helped with population control" (Action AID, 2008:15).

Chakraborty and Sinha (2006) used "fixed effects model of pooled least squares for the last four decennial census data across fifteen major states of India" and examined the determinants of declining child sex ratio in India. They reported that factors such as female literacy, female work force participation and economic growth do not result positively in reducing problems related to female survival.

"It is alarming to note that sex ratio of age cohort 0-6 is inversely related to female education and female economic activity rate with relatively higher elasticity coefficients

for urban India; catalysed by the spread of sex determination tests and sex selective abortions, which played a key role in worsening the juvenile sex ratio" (Chakraborty and Sinha, 2006 :16).

Yadav (2018) in the study of socio-economic aspects of child sex ratio, since 1991 with special reference to Uttar Pradesh, found the impact of female literacy rate on the child sex ratio negative. As the female literacy rate increased the child sex ratio decreased.

The situation is showing no signs of improvement. Unfortunately, the policies of the government also do not provide much relief. As Follett (2020) points out in the article, "Neo-Malthusianism and Coercive Population Control in China and India" that, "State based two child policies have increased sex selective abortions and neglect of female children contributing to a skewed sex ratio"(Follett, 2020:23).

4. Female Infanticide

Female infanticide is the deliberate killing of baby girls because of the preference for male child. It is mainly because of the low worth associated with the birth of females. In a study carried out in ten villages of Tirupati, Rural Mandal in Chittoor district, it was found that as high as one-third of the respondents were unhappy at the birth of the girl child (Ramana and Rani, 2015). Another study which compared knowledge, attitude and behaviour of working and nonworking women towards foeticide, reported that 56 % of working women and 43.2 % of working women considered a "girl child still a curse" (Malviya, 2010). Rana (2013) reported that 40 % respondents expressed happiness at the birth of their first daughter. This percentage declined to 10.46 for the second daughter and nil at the birth of the third and fourth daughter (Rana, 2013:144). Some mentioned that the arrival of the third daughter gave them heartache" (Rana, 2013:146). Others said that it was like a "bolt from the blue" (p.146). One respondent reported that when her third daughter was born her mother-in-law said, "*ek aur jalaha aa gaya*" (one more burden has come) and nicknamed her *Pasourre*, meaning trouble (Rana, 2013:149).

There are various cruel methods by which a female child is put to death. Aravamudan (2007) describes many cruel methods in her book, "Disappearing Daughters". Many research studies have also given details of the horrific methods used either by the mothers themselves or by family members.

5. Killing the Girl Child – Death by Neglect

The problems faced by a girl child are many. The so called "lucky" girl, who is not killed in the womb or soon after she is born, is less likely to receive immunization, nutrition or medical treatment as compared to a male child.

In a study conducted in Himachal Pradesh (Rana, 2013), it was found that 52.66 % of the respondents breast-fed their female children for a period of six months or less and only three percent were fed for more than eighteen months. But when it came to the male child, 9.67 % were fed for less than six months or less and 37.67 % for more than 18 months. The study also

reported that 83.66 % respondents took their sons to hospitals for treatment. The percentage of parents taking their daughter to hospitals was only 41.33%. Similarly, 82.48 % sent their sons to private schools for education as compared to 58.76 % of respondents who sent their daughters to private schools. In the report “Health in India” based on National Sample Survey on Household Social Consumption related to health for the period July 2017 to June 2018, it was found that in the age group of 0 – 4yrs, 9.5 % male children were hospitalized as compared to only 4.9 % females in this same age group in the rural areas. In the urban area, 7.9 % of male children got hospitalized as compared to 4.7% females. Similarly, for the age group 5 – 14yrs, 11.8 % males in rural areas and 10.8% in urban areas were hospitalized as against 7.1 % females in rural and 6.9 % in urban areas (National Sample Survey Office, 2018 Statement 3.9: 33). Another study used the data from India’s National Family Health Survey of earlier years i.e. 1992-93, 1998-99 and 2005-06. This was to research on the discrimination among children aged 0 - 35 months and concluded that daughters do undergo discrimination in comparison to sons, irrespective of the sibling composition and at all levels of birth order (Rajan and Philip, 2018: 249).

It is almost as if the parents and society are punishing the girls for being born.

There are also issues related to the safety of a girl child. According to Karlekar (1995), “Control of her sexuality and its safe transference into the hands of the husband is of primary importance. Concern over the conduct of the sexually vulnerable girl is responsible for the continuance of the practice of early marriage. Well over 50% of girls continue to be married below the legally permissible age of eighteen years, as has been recorded in successive census reports and substantiated by field studies. Though the age of marriage is rising gradually, a large number of girls are barely out of their teens when they leave their natal homes for another unknown residence. Subsequent expectations and relationships are often stressful and confusing for those who are essentially still children. Most important, of course, is adjustment to the conjugal relationship. Marital rape, which is not recognized as a crime under Indian law, is nonetheless widespread. It is quite possible that many victims of marital rape are often unsuspecting children” (Karlekar 1995: 56-57).

The survey of 2019 of National Crime Bureau of India (NCBI) reported that 35.3% of all crimes against children were in the category of “protection of children from Sexual Offences including child rape”(NCBI, 2019: xii). Out of 73,138 children reported missing in 2019; 52,049 were females (NCBI, 2019: xv).

Conclusion

Therefore it appears that a girl child throughout her life is made to feel “unwanted” and “useless”. As she grows up in a deprived and uncaring environment, the notion that she is a “burden” is strongly ingrained in her mind. The only way by which the parents can lighten this “burden” is by getting her married. But marriage does not come cheap. There is dowry which has to be given to the boy’s family; perhaps as a token for relieving the parents of their

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"burden" and taking it on their own shoulders. Since the new family has "obliged" her by taking her into their fold, she must pay back by carrying forward the family lineage and name. That unfortunately, in an Indian society, only a son is eligible to do. This might appear to be the reason behind the killings. But it could well be a sum total of all the experiences that the "unwanted" girl child has had as she grew from a child to a woman, irrespective of the income group of the family she belonged to or the education that she might have had the fortune of receiving. At present the sex ratio in India stands at 934 females to 1000 males (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2021). A lot needs to be done to stop the inhuman practices and the efforts are to be made at all levels; individual, family, society, national and international.

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