



FEMALE FETICIDE IN INDIA: CHALLENGE FOR THE SOCIETY

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Abstract: *Women constitute half a human population have been discriminated, harassed and exploited irrespective of the country to which they belong. Everywhere women are confronted with many challenges. Female feticide is perhaps one of the worst forms of violence against women where a woman is denied her most basic and fundamental right i.e. “the right to life”. Killing of female child has been a phenomenal characteristic of Indian society under the rule of patriarchy since ancient days. The practice first dubbed as female infanticide came into vogue due to the lack of scientific discovery and unavailability of modern and progressive technology and sophisticated sex determining instruments. With sufficient availability and extensive supply of such sophisticated sex determination techniques in the health institutions and clinics, there have been hundreds of incidences of female feticide surfacing and hence assuming an alarming proportion across the country at present. It seems that the sex determination test leading to identification of the sex of unborn child has made the practice of killing the female child unnoticed and easier than before. The practice that commenced in India under the influence of the deeply rooted patriarchy, that is, to prove the strength of man over woman, has also been influenced by poverty and dowry.*

Key Words: *Female feticide; child sex ratio; gender inequality*

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INTRODUCTION

The custom of Gender Selective Abortion has been the key cause of low gender ratios in India. It is assumed that to be born a girl is the worst curse and crime. It is regarded as a punishment for the whole life for parents and the girl herself. The parental preference for son is nothing new. No doubt preference for a male child over a female child is universal but in Indian society, a girl has always been blamed for all the misery and misfortune. Religions, traditions and customs too play their respective part. Value attached to sons is well explained in the blessings and good wishes contained in a number of verses used in marriage rituals.

Everywhere women are confronted with many challenges. Female feticide is perhaps one of the worst forms of violence against women where a woman is denied her most basic and fundamental right i.e “the right to life”. The phenomenon of female feticide in India is not new, where female embryos or fetuses are selectively eliminated after pre-natal sex determination, thus eliminating girl child even before they are born. As a result of selective abortion, 35 and 40 million girls and women are missing from the Indian population.

The practice of female feticide is not new in India. It is a severe demonstration of violence against women. Female feticide means deliberate slaughter of a fetus after getting it diagnosed as a female fetus. The trend of female feticide is far stronger in the metropolitan or urban areas rather than rural areas and between the literate and cultured rather than the illiterate. Gender choice has become a flourishing business in many areas in India. Sadly, every time a woman gives birth to a girl, she is exposed to a successive pregnancies and subsequent terminations till she gives birth to a male child. No one can sense the amount of trauma, pain, stress, disturbance and suffering a woman undergoes both physiologically as well as psychologically each time she undergoes an abortion.

There has been a considerable progress in science and technology to check a fetus for genetic and birth disorders. But many communities in India practice sex selective abortion only because it is a female fetus. The main reason for the increase in cases of sex selective abortions is a nexus between doctors and families obsessed with male child. The practice of female feticide is getting a wider acceptance, as there is an increase in the number of medical practitioners who participate in the service of sex selective abortion.



The long standing tradition of son preference, coupled with medical technology now gives to the status conscious Indian families, the choice between payment of large dowry for their daughters or elimination of daughters. The traditional method of getting rid of the unwanted girl child was female infanticide, where the female baby was done away with after birth in various ways – either by poisoning the baby or letting her choke on husk or simply by crushing her skull under a charpoy. With the advancement of medical technology sophisticated techniques can now be used or rather misused, to get rid of her before birth. Through ultrasound scans and amniocentesis, the sex of the fetus can be determined during the pregnancy of the woman and then the fetus is aborted if found to be female.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The paper will briefly discuss the status of women in India. the rising use of sex-selection technologies in female feticide to further develop my argument. And discuss the social thought for women and gives same appropriate suggestions for empowering women.

UNDERSTANDING SEX RATIOS

- According to the conventional definition, sex ratio = (number of males/number of females) per 100 population. However, in India, we usually define sex ratio as (number of females/number of males) per 1,000 populations, at a specific point in time.
- Population sex ratio is the ratio of females per 1,000 males in the entire population.
- The child sex ratio is the ratio of females per 1,000 males in the 0-6 age-group.
- Sex ratio at birth is the ratio of female live births per 1,000 male live births. The fact that more boys are born than girls has been known at least since the 17th century (1). A sex ratio at birth that lies between 934 and 952 females per 1,000 male births is considered to be within the normal range, based on observation over several decades for many countries (2). The sex ratio at birth is the most relevant indicator for examining the magnitude of sex-selective abortions.

The census of 2011 has brought much disquiet because the child sex ratio (0-6 years) declined yet again, from 927 girls per 1,000 boys in 2001 to 914 girls per 1,000 boys in 2011. This decline has been interpreted as the direct result of more sex-selective abortions of female fetuses taking place. However, it is important to note that in India, unlike most



countries of the world, more girls than boys have been dying during childhood and this contributes to a decline in the child sex ratio.

CAUSES AND EFFECTS

The important causes of female feticide and infanticide as revealed by studies are as follows:

1. Son desire

Indian society is patrilineal, patriarchal and patrilocal. Among the Hindus, the reproduction and heredity beliefs are governed by the laws of Manu. Following this law, Hindus believe that a man cannot attain redemption unless he has a son to light his funeral pyre. Besides religious consideration, economic, social and emotional desires favour males, as parents expect sons but non daughters to provide financial support, especially in their old age.

2. Girl as a burden

The evil of dowry system has led to a belief that daughters have to be protected and sufficient financial resources have to be accumulated to support the marriage of the girl. Boys on the other hand are considered as assets, who fetch a fabulous dowry for the parents.

It is a deep rooted instinct of the culture of Haryana that girl is always considered as a Praya Dhan. Moreover, there is thinking among the respondents that a large amount is required for her marriage. Whether she is educated or not, to get a good bridegroom it requires a lot of money in the form of dowry. If girl is educated, the problem becomes even worse, because 'higher the education, higher the expenditure on marriage to maintain the status'. Even after marriage, girls in Haryana remain liability towards parents and brothers in the form of gifts (Siddha & Kothli) on various festivals every year and in the form of Sindhara (on the occasion of 1st Teej festival after marriage), Pillia (on the birth of a baby), Chhucchhak (when after delivery she visits her Mayka), Bhaat (at the time of her children's marriage). She remains burden on parental family till the end of her life. This has created a stereo-type notion of girl as a "burden" on the household.

3. Education and the gender skew

The more educated a women is, the more likely she is to actively choose a boy, assuming that she decides to have one child. The only educated women likely to keep daughters are



the very independent minded. Educated men, especially in the business class, also want to have sons to carry on their business.

4. Misuse of technology

The tests like Amniocentesis and ultrasoundgraphy, which were originally designed for detection of congenital abnormalities of the fetus, are being misused for knowing the sex of the fetus with the intention of aborting it if it happens to be that of a female. Thus, female feticide and infanticide is receiving fillip through misuse of technology, done surreptitiously with the active connivance of the service providers.

5. Weak implementation of laws

The Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act, 1994, prohibits determination of sex of the fetus. It also provides for mandatory registration of genetic counselling centres, clinics, hospitals, nursing homes, etc. However, the implementation of the law is weak and it has not been used to the fullest. The focus has been only on the registration of the number of ultrasound machines and not on the actual act of abortions of female fetuses. Furthermore, in several cases the accused have not been booked under relevant sections of the Act.

SOCIAL ACTION TO CONTROL FEMALE FETICIDE:

People both in rural as well as in urban areas have to be made aware about the need of a female child in the social milieu as that of a son. A progressive legislation alone cannot solve social problems. The people must be aware of the progressive legislation which has certain deterrent facts. Many women are compelled to undergo tests and seek abortion on acceptable as well as unacceptable grounds under compulsion. A new spirit has to be imbibed propagating that a female child is not a curse. It is not a liability. It is not a drain on economy. It is not an instrument through which dowry has to be given. A feeling has to be nurtured that she is the daughter, she is the mother and she is the life partner. Foeticide can not be controlled unless the equation changes and families begin to value their daughters more than they do at present. It does not take much to kill an infant daughter even without the aid of technology, if she is unwanted.

Among all the factors, which need attention, education is the most important. In parts of South Asia where education and employment opportunities for women are relatively high, the female to male ratio is comparable to that the developed countries. For instance in Sri



Lanka the sex ratio is 102 women per 100 men and in Indian state of Kerala 104 women per 100 men. This reflects towards the deep rooted manifold, short and long-term effects of education on the psyche and life pattern of people. If we want to stop the female foeticide or neglect of women, we have to stop looking for quick fixes and instead face the problem squarely. There is no way to ensure the healthy survival of baby girls unless families find them worth nurturing. That is indeed a complex task, which allows for no easy short-term solutions. Activists intervention has not led to curbing sex determination tests. The real challenge before us is to figure out ways in which a realization of the value of daughters can be enhanced in the eyes of their own families. All those who have a stake in it apart from the government authorities, like women's group, health groups, non-governmental organizations, the academia, the media and most importantly the medical professionals have to play their part to see that the provisions are implemented and the provisions are strengthened by amendments of the act. Unless social action is supplemented with prompt implementation of regulations under the law meant to stop female feticide, such practices will continue to flourish. To ensure smiles on the faces of our youth, both boys and girls, let us intensify joint efforts to root out unhealthy social elements, 'Now' since future depends upon what we do in the present.

CONCLUSION:-

Female feticide not only denies the girl child her most basic human right - the right to be born - but it also turns women into silent victims. When there may be emergence of the situation where brides will not be available for the marriage of the sons to maintain lineage and continue the human race of even those people who believe on long standing tradition of son preference, that "only sons can offer Pyre Pindadana, Mukhagni and not the daughters". Men in the states of Haryana and Punjab are already experiencing a nearly 20% deficit of marriageable women. As Swami Agnivesh, religious leader and social activist, said last year when talking about feticides: "There's no other form of violence that's more painful, more abhorrent, more shameful". It is felt that the mindsets of the people should be changed right from now towards the importance of the girl child in the family in both rural and urban area. There is an urgent need to alter the demographic composition of India's population and to tackle this brutal form of violence against women. The enactment of any law is not sufficient; laws must be adhered to and applied rigorously, before any



change in the status of women can take place. In spite of the Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act many incidences of female feticide are taking place in India. There is still supreme controversy as to who will serve as the watchdog to control the misuse of the practice of female feticide. Promoting gender balanced society involves targeting behavioural changes in society which in turn involves a long term community based intervention, awareness programmes, programmes to promote girl children's right, addressing myths related to sons/ daughters and concerted efforts to change the mindset of people.

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