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India & the sex selection conundrum

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THE HINDU Indians across the country are deliberately ensuring that girls are simply not born. This artificial alteration of our demographic landscape has implications for not only gender justice and equality but also human development and democracy. The picture shows two girl children in a Shishu Vihar orphanage in Medak, Andhra Pradesh. Photo: Mohd. Arif

Let us agree to go beyond billboard exhortations to 'love the girl child.'

What was our immediate response to further decline in the child sex ratio in India? Within days of the provisional 2011 Census results (March-April 2011), the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare reconstituted the Central Supervisory Board for the Pre-conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex selection) Act 1994, which had not met for 3 years, and on November 30, 2011 the Ministry of Women and Child Development formed a Sectoral Innovation Council for Child Sex Ratio. But we are busy dousing flames in haste without looking to dampen the source. This fire-fighting approach is unlikely to succeed, because putting out fires in one district virtually ensures its spread to another. That is what has happened.

The decline in child sex ratio (0-6 years) from 945 in 1991 to 927 in 2001 and further to 914 females per 1,000 males in 2011 — the lowest since independence — is cause for alarm, but also occasion for serious policy re-think. Over the last two decades, the *rate* of decline appears to have slowed but what began as an urban phenomenon has spread to rural areas. This is despite legal provisions, incentive-based schemes, and media messages. Indians across the country, bridging class and caste divides, are deliberately ensuring that girls are simply not born. This artificial alteration of our demographic landscape has implications for not only gender justice and equality but also social violence, human development and democracy.

What is wrong?

So what are we doing wrong — both in the discourse we have created and in the policy route we have chosen to walk? To start with, we have chosen to target one symptom (practice of sex selection), instead of evolving a comprehensive national policy response to a deeply resistant ailment (son preference/daughter aversion and low status of women in India). State policy has, in the main, consisted of seeking to stem the supply of technology that enables sex selection through application of the law — the PCPNDT Act bans the use of diagnostic techniques for determining the sex of a foetus. The rationale (framed within an inverted demand-supply paradigm) is that stopping supply of the technology will reduce the demand — for determining the sex of the foetus and aborting if it is female. So far (notwithstanding wide publicity about the PCPNDT Act, including signboards in every clinic, hospital and nursing home), this hasn't panned out as planned.

Meanwhile, this singular focus on PCPNDT has triggered an unhealthy discourse beyond what the law actually bans (using medical diagnostics to determine the sex of the foetus) to the next step, i.e. the act of abortion. Over the last few years, the hunt for aborted female foetuses appears to have become legitimate media pastime and reportage consists chiefly of stories about “foetuses' foeticide” and “foetal remains.” Clearly, the goriness of the phenomenon meets the media's need for just a tad bit of sensation (foetal remains found in gunny bags outside quack clinics, in the

fields, in the dark depths of deep wells, etc.).

While national attention on this issue is welcome, this is complex terrain. On the one hand is the right of females to be born, and of society to protect and preserve a gender balance. On the other hand lies a woman's right under the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act (enacted in 1971, revised in 1975) to have a safe and legal abortion as part of a whole gamut of reproductive rights. In our zeal to create an environment against one type of abortion (of a foetus *only* because it is female), we end up stigmatising all abortions. Access to safe and legal abortion for Indian women is already severely limited, and this environment will not improve things. Indeed the very word 'foeticide' i.e. 'killing' of the foetus (used often without the qualifying '*female* foeticide') dents abortion rights.

Tackling the demand side

As for tackling the demand side — i.e. addressing the complex reasons that son preference-daughter aversion is so prevalent — our policy response has included marking the National Girl Child Day (declared in 2009) on January 24, sporadically putting up billboards at major intersections telling us to 'love the girl child,' '*beti bachao*,' 'stop killing girls', and a slew of ill-conceived conditional cash transfer schemes to incentivise the birth of girls at both the Centre and the State level.

A 2010 desk review of 15 conditional cash transfer schemes (Dhan Lakshmi, Ladli, Beti Hai Anmol, Kanyadan, and others) conducted by TV Sekher of IIPS for UNFPA is revealing. Most of them promised relatively small amounts at maturity, had complex conditions (immunisation, school enrolment, institutional delivery, sterilisation, among others), gave cash amounts at the age of 18 (for dowry?), and were aimed at poor or BPL families. Quite apart from the objectionable attempt to arm twist every imaginable kind of 'desired' behaviour (immunise, educate, sterilise) in return for small sums of money, the big problem is that these schemes are targeted largely at poor families. This is not a poor or BPL-only phenomenon. Small cash amounts are unlikely to make an iota of difference to families who have resources to pay for sex selective technology. On this issue, Indian policymakers, accustomed to 'targeting' the poor (i.e. BPL) need to bravely enter the unfamiliar terrain of targeting the not-so-poor, the upwardly mobile, the wealthy.

The advocacy and communications around this issue, by both the government and NGOs, has taken the 'love the girl child' route. It is unexceptionable, politically correct, and ensconced comfortably in a language of patriarchal protectiveness (*ladki ko bachao*). Of course, everyone likes to 'love little girls in pigtails,' including MPs who will defeat the Women's Reservation Bill time and again in Parliament.

Cultural attitudes

The problem of 'demand' goes far deeper than our communication or policy solutions seem to suggest. Sex selection is located at the complex interface of cultural attitudes, patriarchal prejudice, socioeconomic pressures, the changes wrought by modernity, and the commercialisation and misuse of modern medical technology. The impact of modernity and materialism on the decreased valuation of females i.e. enhanced daughter aversion, the lack of old-age social security i.e. son preference, increasing violence against women, property rights, inheritance laws — each of these and more play a role. We must demand of ourselves an equally comprehensive national policy on the sex ratio, capable of addressing each contributory factor.

South Korea & China

South Korea has beaten the problem by adopting a comprehensive national response. China, whether or not we agree with its particular national framework, at least has one. The Chinese government adopted a series of concurrent policies, strategic actions and laws to promote gender equality, increase female workforce participation, ensure old age social security, *in addition to* banning the use of sex selective diagnostics. The country's sex ratio is showing small signs of improvement.

Finally, a national communication strategy is key to a national policy response, and this must rest on acknowledging two things — one, behaviour change communication is a specialised field whose expertise must be harnessed, and two, the nature of reproductive decision-making in India is changing along with immense changes in the Indian family structure. A communication strategy needs to identify primary targets (*decision-makers*) and secondary targets (*decision supporters*), and reach them through strategic media platforms — traditional, conventional and new media. As for the core content of messages, a lot can be said, but for now let us agree to go beyond billboard exhortations to 'love the girl child.' And recognise that the girl will grow up to be a woman one day.

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