

INDIAN GENDERCIDE: A GREAT THREAT TO SECURITY

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THE result of 2011 census of India is almost all heartening. Literacy is up; life expectancy is up; family size is stabilizing. But there is one grim exception- India's already skewed infant sex ratio is getting worse. India counted only 914 girls aged six and under for every 1,000 boys or 75.8m girls and 82.9m boys. This sex ratio is the worst in the recorded history of the modern Indian. According to 1991 census, the 0-6 sex ratio was 934 girls to 1,000 boys, which decline to 927 as per 2001 census. Nature provides that slightly more boys are born than girls: the normal sex ratio for children aged 0-6 is about 952 girls per 1,000 boys. Fast growth, urbanization and surging literacy seem not to have affected the trend. A cultural preference for sons and the increasing availability of prenatal screening to determine a baby's sex have helped contribute to a worsening in the ratio, which has been deteriorating rapidly even as the ratio for the population as a whole has improved. A decline was recorded in 28 of the country's 35 states and Union Territories, among which there is wide variation; from 830 in the northern state of Haryana to 973 Meghalaya in the east. And such imbalances are not confined to India. Last year the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences warned that by 2020 one in five young Chinese men would be unable to find a bride because of the dearth of young women.

The sex-ratio is most distorted in the states of the northern Gangetic Plain, such as Punjab. Haryana, West Bengal, remains the direst of all, with only 830 girls per 1,000 boys. More worrying, places that used not to discriminate in favour of sons, such as the poorer central and north-eastern states, have begun to do so. Economic success seems to spread son preference to places that were once more neutral about the sex composition of their children. The new census showed a worsening sex ratio in all but eight of India's 35 states and territories (though those eight include some of the most extreme examples, for instance, Punjab). Female literacy, improving general health care, improving female employment rates are slowly redefining motherhood from childbearing to child rearing-an indication that the country has reached a point of inflection. New Delhi launched a round of policy initiatives designed to turn the situation around.

Cradle baby schemes, where girl babies can be left anonymously at government buildings, were instituted in some states. In the north and northwest, where the worst sex ratios were found, state governments paid cash to families that chose to keep their girls and offered additional money if the girls were immunized, sent to school and not married off before 18 yrs of age. Government officials have condemned the culling of daughters from the population, as have religious leaders.

Some Sikh and Hindu priests have even administered oaths to their followers not to engage in this practice.

Whatever success these efforts may have had, they are apparently not enough. Indeed, as the average family size drops in India, the preference for sons only intensifies. It is sons who inherit land, pass on the family name, financially provide for parents in old age and perform rituals for deceased parents. Daughters, on the other hand, will cost the family dearly at the time of their marriage, with a dowry at times costing as much as a family makes in a year. For all of these reasons, as families choose to have fewer children, they try to ensure the presence of a sufficient number of sons -- and as few daughters as possible.

As a result, it becomes tantamount to having a serious birth defect in the minds of Indian parents, with genuine sentiment for their daughters giving way to a stifling economic calculus. But as daughters become rarer, they will become more valued. But dowry costs in India are rising, not falling, and the ratio of girls to boys continues to fall dramatically. In the area dubbed the "Bermuda Triangle for girls" in India, some districts register only 774 little girls for every 1,000 boys, a ratio of almost 130 boys to every 100 girls. Though the sex ratio has been worsening for decades, it is doing so more slowly. The figure in 2001 was 1.9 per cent worse than it had been in 1991. The figure in 2011 was 1.5 per cent worse than in 2001—an improvement of sorts.

The impact on Indian society is grim. One might have thought that scarcity would lead to girls being valued more highly, but this is not happening. One measure is the practice of giving dowries. Almost no one, rich or poor, urban or rural, dreams of dispensing with these. Rather, as Indians grow wealthier, dowries are getting more lavish and are spreading to places where they were once rare, such as in Tamil Nadu and Kerala, in the south. Majority of women shake their heads when asked to imagine life without dowries. The simple answer was: ***No body would find a husband.***

If we compare the number of girls actually born to the number that would have been born had a normal sex ratio prevailed, then 600,000 Indian girls go missing every year. This is less distorted than the sex ratio in China. However, China's ratio has stabilized; India's is widening, and has been for decades. Sex selection is now invading parts of the country that used not to practice it. India's sex ratio shows that gendercide is a feature not just of dictatorship and poverty. Unlike China, India is a democracy: there is no one-child policy to blame. Although parts of the country are poor, poverty alone does not explain India's preference for sons. The states with the worst sex ratios—Punjab, Haryana, Gujarat—are among the richest, which suggests distorted sex selection will not be corrected just by wealth or government policy. But it can be corrected.

Parents choose to abort female fetuses not because they do not want or love their daughters, but because they feel they must have sons (usually for social reasons); they also want smaller families—and something has to give. Ultrasound technology ensures that this something is a generation of unborn daughters, because it lets them know the sex of a fetus. Sex selection

therefore tends to increase with education and income: wealthier, better educated people are more likely to want fewer children and can more easily afford the scans- disastrous for the nation.

The “missing girls” are usually aborted, shortly after the parents learn of their sex. No doubt, the requests for a scan to check the sex of a fetus are turned down at majority of Ultrasound centers and hospital, but there are numerous medics who recommend a place that would do it. They are ready to reveal a fetus’s sex for as little as 500 rupees. Doing so is illegal, and discouraged by various campaigns, but the law alone is almost impossible to enforce. *Slapping the father on the back and saying “you’re a lucky man”* is hint enough.

A skewed sex ratio may instead be making the lot of women worse. Robbery, rape and bride-trafficking tend to increase in any society with large groups of young single men. And men in higher-up social ladder find wives more easily than those of lower-down, the social problems of bachelorhood tend to accumulate like silt among the poorest people and the lowest castes. This is unjust as well as damaging. Moreover, there are reports of unknown numbers of girls who are drugged, beaten and sometimes killed by traffickers. Others, willingly or not, are brought across India’s borders, notably from Bangladesh and Myanmar. “Put bluntly, it’s a competition over scarce women. Women in India are sometimes permitted, even encouraged, to “marry up” into a higher income bracket or caste, so richer men find it easier to get a bride. The poor are forced into a long or permanent bachelorhood; a status widely frowned upon in India, where marriage is deemed essential to becoming a full member of society. Poor bachelors are often victims of violent crime.

Moreover, the ten-year census may not capture what has been happening recently. For that, go to the sample surveys that India carries out more often. These show a different pattern. The figures are not strictly comparable, because sample surveys show the sex ratio at birth, whereas the census gives it among infants up to the age of six. Still, it is significant the sex ratio at birth is improving, not worsening. In 2003-05 the figure was 880 girls born per 1,000 boys. In 2004-06, that had risen to 892 and in 2006-08, to 904. It is not clear why this should be. The samples could be misleading. But perhaps they reveal a recent change in Indian attitudes towards the value of daughters.

The fears about India’s sex ratio are not merely of the harm that today’s level will cause when children become adults. People also worry that the ratio will get ever worse, deteriorating towards Chinese levels (which are even more extreme: on a comparable basis, China’s sex ratio at birth is about 833). This fear may be exaggerated. Not only are there signs of an incipient national turnaround, but regional figures give further reasons for hope. The states with the worst ratios, Haryana and Punjab, seem to have had skewed ratios for decades, going back to the 1880s. They now show some of the biggest improvements.

The national average is worsening thanks to states which once were more neutral with regard to sex, such as Tamil Nadu and Orissa; but because they have not had the historical experience of a strong preference for sons. They also seem less likely to push the sex ratio to the extremes that it reached in Punjab or China. If so, the next census in 2021 could show the beginnings of a shift towards normality. The deterioration in north-east and central India may not mark the start of a fresh erosion in the value of Indian girls.

India bans ultrasound scans from being used merely to identify a fetus's sex; it also makes sex-selective abortions illegal. But gendercide cannot be reduced just by coercive laws. In middle-income places, ultrasound scans are becoming basic prenatal procedures; it is all but impossible to stop parents from getting to know their child's sex. If a government cracks down on legal abortions, families will get illegal ones—risking the life of the mother, as well as that of her unborn daughter. Far more effective would be to persuade parents that their daughters are worth as much as their sons. Changing social attitudes is a difficult thing for governments to do; but ensuring that girls get their fair share of education, and women their fair share of health care, would be a start.

Many Western countries portrayed India as Asia's great hope, and India's growth as a global power will counter balance China's rise and ensure that rise remains peaceful. Indeed, the U.S. has identified India as a crucial partner for the coming century, and as part of its effort to cultivate a strategic partnership with New Delhi, Washington has even pledged to help India develop its nuclear energy capabilities. But the continued disappearance of India's women and girls is putting the future of India's security partnership with the West at risk. Even in March 2010; U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that "the subjugation of women is a direct threat to the security of the United States." In fact, the security of states is closely linked to the security of women. If Clinton is right, then shouldn't India's dismal female-to-male ratio raise a red flag for American foreign policy?

The most important interventions India could make are improving the economic situation of women and providing a real old-age pension for families that choose to raise daughters. Regarding the first objective, enforcement of land and property rights for women would go a long way toward erasing the idea that daughters are economically unproductive. Old age pensions for families with daughters would then complete that circle, tangibly demonstrating that an investment in girls pays off not just for the larger society, but first and foremost for her natal family. Why so few physicians have been tried under India's laws making sex-selective abortion illegal? The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) gives the international community the right to hold India accountable for the enforcement, or lack of enforcement, of its laws in this regard. India's future will not be brighter for having sunk to 914 girls per 1,000 boys. The daughter deficit will create a society that is much less stable and much more volatile than it would be with a more balanced ratio. The

sustainability of peace and stability - for India and the region - will be progressively undermined in lockstep with the devaluation of India's daughters.

