



TOPIC OF THE WEEK

MAR'18 (08 to 14)

Topic: India's Gender Imbalance

The position and status of women has not been good since the Mughal period (age). Their status had deteriorated in the society and they suffered from many social evils.

Women in Mughal Period were not allowed to remarry. Polygamy was common among rich society. Women either became sati at the pyre of their husbands or passed their lives as women-hermits. The Muslims were always prepared either to molest or to capture Hindu-women which resulted in child-marriages and Purdah system.

Talking to Amir Khan on the latter's popular show Satyameva Jayate (aired on 6 May 2012). Dr. Bedi says that the concrete origins of female foeticide in India traced back to the 1970s. Abortion was not unknown then, and laws against abortion had already been written by the British – but the idea caught on then. According to Dr. Bedi, family planning was making its way inroads, and it was widely accepted that the root too many major

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social and economic issues India was facing at the time, was due to its growing population.

The preference for a male child was predominant in families, but the common practice then was for the woman to conceive till she got a male child. This practice was seen as a threat and the cause for the growing population. As a solution to this, government hospitals started aborting female foetuses. This would result in the couple getting the male child they wanted, and not needing to have any female children in the process.

The idea caught on, and soon spread to hospitals all over India. However soon, some activists opposed this practice, and in 1994 the Indian government passed the Preconception and Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act, making sex-selective abortion illegal. However, it was too late, and as has been throughout history, merely making it illegal did not stop it.

Now, with the advancement in technologies, and development of easier, and cheaper techniques, female

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foeticide has spread throughout India, and sex determination tests are a very common practice during pregnancy – abusing the technology which is supposed to be used, only if there are chances of the infant contracting any hereditary genetic disease or disability. And today, it is no secret, and one can clearly see where this immoral solution to a wrongly-identified problem, has led us to.

The one main reason why India's maternal and infant mortality rates are so high is that starting from birth, girls do not receive as much care and commitment from their parents and society as a boy does. For example, a new baby girl would only be breast fed for a short period of time, barely supplying her with the nutrients she needs. This is so that the mother can get pregnant as soon as possible, in hopes of a son the next time.

Because of the inhuman practices which were normalized by our society, the birth of the girl child was considered inauspicious. In villages as well as cities, the girl child was killed either before birth or after it. Even till date, the practice continues. The United Nations

Children's Fund, estimated that up to 50 million girls and women are 'missing' from India's population because of termination of the female foetus or high mortality of the girl child due to lack of proper care.

Women had only the role of a 'good wife' to play, and if a woman ventured out to work, she was seen as a bad woman, going against societal norms. Women were expected to cook food and eat only after the men, with whatever meager amount of food is left. This led to rampant malnutrition among women, and an extremely poor health status.

Around 500 women were reported to die every day due to pregnancy related problems due to malnutrition, and getting married before 18. It was only by the 1960s, that a few educated women began to see themselves increasingly change from a mere guardian of home to a legitimate participant in the discourse of life. The country saw the first undercurrent of female discontent with the system.

Human capital theory suggests that just as physical capital (machines) augments people's economic productivity, so human capital acquired through education improves the productivity of individuals. The new growth theories in economics place education and human resource development at the centre of their explanation for long-term economic growth. Confidence has grown in the belief that education affects economic growth because many studies have shown the positive correlation between a country's educational effort and its economic status, and causality has been attributed to education.

If female schooling raises human capital, productivity, and economic growth as much as male schooling does, then women's disadvantage in education is economically inefficient. Research world-wide shows that, in general, the economic benefits from women's education - calculated as the economic rate of return to education - are comparable to those from men's education. Thus, from the point of view of economic efficiency, the gender gap in education is undesirable.

While the economic benefits of educating girls are similar in size to the economic benefits of educating boys, recent findings suggest that the social benefits from investing in female education are far greater than those from investing in male education. Specifically, female education has powerful effects on the total fertility rate (and hence on population growth), the infant mortality rate, the female disadvantage in child survival, and on child health and nutrition. By contrast, statistical analyses show that male schooling has relatively much smaller effects on these important social outcomes.

Sex Ratio at Birth (SRB) is the number of girls born for every 1,000 boys. A recent report from the NITI Aayog said sex ratio at birth (SRB) nationwide had dropped from 906 in 2012-2014 to 900 in 2013-2015. In all, 17 of 21 large Indian States saw a drop in the SRB, with Gujarat performing the worst, declining 53 points. Also, newer data from India's Sample Registration System show the SRB fell even further in 2014-2016, from 900 to 898.

The number of girls born is naturally lower than the number of boys, and demographers speculate that this may be nature's way of offsetting the higher risk that men have of dying – male babies are biologically weaker than females, and men have historically seen higher mortality rates owing to risk-taking behavior and participation in wars. This evens out the sex ratio of a population as it grows older. But India is a special case. Its SRB is far lower than 952 because of the preference for the male child. This means we are killing girl children in the womb. As on today, around 63 million girls are estimated to be 'missing' in India because of such actions.

Low SRBs starting from the Seventies have led to large numbers of "surplus men" today in countries like India and China. There are concerns that skewed sex ratios lead to more violence against men and women, as well as human-trafficking. In India, some villages in Haryana and Punjab have such poor sex ratios that men "import" brides from other States. This is often accompanied by the exploitation of these brides.

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From female infanticide till 1970s to the emergence of sex selection technologies in 1980s, people have always found ways to have male child. A thriving market for sex selection sprung up with doctors openly advertising their services. In 1994, the government took notice and introduced the Prenatal Diagnostics Techniques Act which punishes healthcare professionals for telling expectant parents the sex of a child with imprisonment and hefty fines. In 2003, when technologies that allowed gender-selection even before conception became available, the act was amended to become the Prenatal Conception and Prenatal Determination Act (PC-PNDT).

By any token, this Act has been a failure. In November 2016, a report from the Asian Centre for Human Rights noted that between 1994 and 2014, 2,266 cases of infanticide were registered in India, against 2,021 cases of abortion under the PC-PNDT, even though abortions outnumber infanticides today. In all, 17 out of 29 States had either not registered any case, or had zero convictions. The PHFI report in 2010 found major gaps in the training of personnel implementing PC-PNDT. Poor

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training meant that they were unable to prepare strong cases against violators to secure convictions.

Now, India must implement the PC-PNDT more stringently, but must also dedicate more resources to fighting the preference for boys.

Suggested Reading:

- ✓ <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1990/12/20/more-than-100-million-women-are-missing/>
- ✓ <https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2012/03/heres-how-the-status-of-women-has-changed-in-india-since-1950-till-date/>
- ✓ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-s-skewed-sex-ratio-to-worsen-further-says-a-government-report/story-2jbZ805ttwoYM9GcOBBZCL.html>