

PRENATAL SEX DETERMINATION: Issues and Concern

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Abstract:

A vast amount of knowledge and voluminous literature is available on sex discrimination in India over the last twenty years. Moreover, detailed statistics about sex ratio from various sources exist. Understanding the rationale behind prenatal sex determination is no doubt key to deciphering the dynamics of sex ratio in India. Present article is an attempt to review the main dimensions of the recent sex-ratio degradation in India: its origin, its mechanisms and social characteristics, its implications in the long run and its major causes. Analysis also points to the positive linkage between abnormal sex ratio and better socio-economic status and literacy. Child Sex ratio is not lowest in poor tribal districts or other backward areas, but in prosperous Western Maharashtra and other economically empowered districts. It is essential to raise awareness and seek attitudinal and behavior changes to tackle the problem.

Introduction:

India has an alarming gender imbalance and population experts have revealed that female foeticide is being practiced at alarmingly big numbers although selective abortions has been banned in the country. The deficit of females was found in prosperous urban and prospering rural areas applying that this phenomenon is being practiced by educated and prosperous families. Analysis also points to the positive linkage between abnormal sex ratio and better socio-economic status and literacy. In some ways this is a very old tale. Long before medical abortion became available, unwanted girls were killed after birth or not given enough food and medicine to survive. But modern technology has changed that. As a consequence, infanticide has given way to foeticide. Sex determination tests became big business shortly after their introduction in India in the 1970's. Billboards stating, "Invest rupees 500 now, save Rs. 50,000 later" were designed to encourage prospective parents to abort female fetuses and save on a future dowry.^[1] In 2005, 90 million women were estimated to be missing in seven Asian countries alone apparently due to prenatal sex selective abortion.^[2] Sex-selective abortion was rare before the late 20th century because of the difficulty of determining the sex of the fetus before birth, but ultrasound has made such selection easier.

Scenario: These practices are especially common in some places where cultural norms value male children over female children. Practices of Sex selection are quiet common in China, India, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, New Guinea, Pakistan, and many other developing countries in East Asia and North Africa.^[3] Because of the lack of proper statistics, it is not easy to assess the proportion of abortions conducted for purposes of sex selection. Studies have estimated that sex-selective abortions have increased the ratio of males to females from the natural average of 105-106 males per 100 females to 113 males per 100 females in both South Korea and China, 110 males per 100 females in Taiwan and 107 males per 100 females among Chinese populations living in Singapore and parts of Malaysia.^[4] According to the 2001 census, the sex-ratio in India is 107.8 males per 100 females, up from 105.8 males per 100 females in 1991. The ratio is significantly higher in certain states such as Punjab (126.1) and Haryana (122.0).^[5] There is reduction of female-to-male sex ratio from 945 per 1000 in 1991 to 927 per 1000 in 2001. A 2001 government census revealed that there were 795 women for every 1000 men in Punjab, India's rural heartland. Generally the sex ratios in the northwestern states are highly masculine, whereas ratios in the southeastern states are more favorable to females.^[6] Maharashtra is one of the most progressive states in the country in health, literacy, urbanization and socio-economic indicators but there also the declining trend of Child sex ratio can be seen.

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Sr.No.	District	1991	2001	Change
1	Sangli	924	850	-74
2	Satara	941	884	-57
3	Ahmadnagar	969	890	-79
4	Kolhapur	931	859	-72
5	Aurangabad	933	884	-49
6	Jalgaon	925	867	-58

TABLE 1

Child Sex ratio (Females/1000 males) in Western Maharashtra and other economically empowered districts. (Comparison of 1991 & 2001 census⁷)

Sr. No.	District	1991	2001	Change
1	Gondia	978	964	-14
2	Nandurbar	977	996	+19
3	Gadchiroli	980	974	-6
4	Osmanabad	946	927	-19
5	Ratnagiri	961	954	-07
6	Chandrapur	965	944	-21

TABLE 2

Child Sex ratio (Females/1000 males) in poor tribal districts or other backward areas (Comparison of 1991 & 2001 census⁷)

It is evident from Table 1 there is considerable decline in sex ratio in Western Maharashtra and other economically empowered districts. While increment in child sex ratio is evident in Nandurbar, a tribal district (Table 2).

Child Sex ratio is not lowest in poor tribal districts or other backward areas, but in prosperous Western Maharashtra and other economically empowered districts. Mumbai – The commercial capital has Child sex ratio of 898 (Colaba: 860 – most prosperous area.). In S.I.D.A. project survey in Ahmadnagar district, sex ratio in tribal area of Akole was 980 while that of Rahta, developed area is 760. In a study carried out in two villages of Rahta sex ratio is 779 in Hasnapur, where majority of population is Muslim and sex ratio is 725 in Chandrapur, where majority of population is Hindu.^[8] Maharashtra was the First State to enact PNNDT Act in 1987. Hon. Supreme Court passed an Interim judgment in 2001 for stricter implementation of Act. In 2004 there was an amendment – Pre conception Pre-natal Diagnostic Technique Act (PC-PNNDT). But it is necessary to change the mindset that Law is not for me to follow, it is for others.

Social Context: A traditional nickname for a woman within her family is paraya dhan, which means “somebody else’s property”. Understanding the rationale behind sex selection is no doubt key to deciphering the dynamics of sex ratio in India. Desire of sons is in order to make familial propagation, security for the elderly, labor provision, and performance of ancestral rites. Parents may wish for a male child because in many cultures only a male will carry on the family name. The practice of female deselection in India could be attributed to socioeconomic reasons. There is a belief by certain people in India that female children are inherently less worthy because they leave home and family when they marry. Upon marriage, a son makes a daughter-in-law an addition and asset to the family providing additional assistance in household work and brings an economic reward through dowry payments, while daughters get married off and merit an economic penalty through dowry charges. Girls are perceived to be particularly vulnerable, as family honor

seems, at times, to rest exclusively on women's behaviour, rather than on men's. The final factor of female deselection is the religious functions that only sons are allowed to provide, based on tradition in Hindu, which mandate that sons are mandatory for the funeral of their late parents and to assist in the salvation of soul.^[9] Some turn to people called *dais*, traditional midwives, historically female, who offer female deselection, letting the baby boys live but killing the newborn girls by giving them a sharp jerk, that is, turning them upside-down and snapping their spinal cords, and then declaring them stillborn.^[10] In one study of middle class Indians in Punjab, 63% of women and 54% of men felt that amniocentesis should be undertaken if the couple has no son and more than two daughters. If that test shows that the fetus is female, 73% of women and 60% of men felt that it should be aborted. The top three reasons cited for aborting a female fetus include "a male dominated society" (23%), "social stigma attached to having a daughter" (19%), and "difficult to afford a dowry" (17%).^[11]

Unfortunately sex ratio as an important indicator of gender equality and women empowerment has been totally forgotten in the United Nation's Millenium Development Goals.^[12] The question is not whether the preference for boys is wrong, but if it is okay to go to such extent to abort a fetus after finding out that it is a girl. First of all, these abortions take place later in the pregnancy, so there is always a risk to the woman. Secondly, the only reason these fetuses get aborted is because they would have been girls. Is it wrong?

Implications of Sex Selective Abortion:

Potential consequences are

- Increase in violence against women and denial of basic right to them.
- Increase in sex related crime.
- Adverse impact on reproductive health of women because of repeated pregnancy and abortions.
- Adverse impact on mental health of women as they are normally blamed for their inability to produce son.

Literacy and job training programs as well as increased

access to higher education for women are vital in empowering women and increasing their status. Public education campaigns are also an important part of the equation. Although eradicating sex selective abortion may seem like a daunting task in a country with such limited resources, it is a vitally important one, morally, socially and economically. To tackle the problem it is essential to raise awareness and seek attitudinal and behaviour change.

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