

Female Foeticide: A Heinous Crime

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"Woman is the builder and tncoul(lcr offl Nation's destiny

Though (lclcntc nnd soft as a lily,

She has n heart, stronger and bolder than that of a man,

She is the Suprcntc inspirn(ion for man's onward march"

■ R.N.Tagorc

Woman has been the fiction of violence and cruelty through ages in all societies, cultures and religious communities in the world. She has been greatly discriminated and considered as an object of subjugation and subordination. She has been subjected to a subservient role in the family and asked to do household work apart from bearing and rearing children. She has been denied dignified life, self-respect and the opportunity to realize her potential, ability and capability. Religion has always exerted its influence in keeping woman under man's servility and suppressed any attempt to break this human bondage and live a life of virtue and chastity against her salvation. Man has assigned woman inferior status, though he out of dissimulation or hypocrisy, calls her by expressions like "fair sex", "better half" and "goddess". Moreover, in India, we have inherited the cultural legacy of having strong son-preference among all communities, religious groups and citizens of varied social-economic backgrounds due to the belief that sons carry on the family name. This Patrilocality, patrilineage and patriarchal attitudes manifest in women and girls and provide them subordinate position in the family, discrimination in property rights and low paid or unpaid jobs. At the time of marriage, the bride's family gives dowry to the groom's for shouldering 'the burden of the bride'. That is why, the birth of a male child is an occasion fit for celebration and the birth of a female a cause of tragic gloom in the family. As a result in many communities as a custom female babies are killed immediately after birth either by the mother or by elderly women of the family to relieve themselves frothl the life of humiliation, rejection and suffering.

It is a disgrace for the Indian society, which considers the birth of a girl child as a bad investment for future. A more degrading and disparaging feature of the society which has been existing for the last few decades is the immense love for male child and elimination of female foetus because woman has always been a victim of social discrimination. Social discrimination against women results in systematic neglect of women's health and position from womb to tomb. She is considered a consumer rather than a producer, and this narrow viewpoint of the Indian patriarchal society has led to horrid practices like female foeticide & female infanticide. The reason behind this social evil can be linked with the evil of dowry, hypergamy, prevailing in our society. Moreover, She has been repeatedly subjected to domestic violence, bride burning, prostitution, rape, sexual harassment. Although in India, mythological women are Shakti; but sociologically, they are not as crime against women is on increase. At each level in our society, for example family, household, kin group, community and nation women are discriminated. Not only discrimination women also face harassment at each step in all walks of life. These harassments consist of evils like selling of women in the brothels, gang rape, incest and burning of brides for not bringing sufficient dowry and callous behaviour etc. Although our graph of literacy is on the rise after independence and India has been developing in all spheres, it sad to see that attitude towards women have indeed gone from bad to worse. Women in our society generally remain confined within the four walls of their house. They are not allowed to participate in the decision-making in the family. In this male dominated society, she needs protection from her father as a daughter, depend on her husband as a married woman and seeks support from her son or husband as an old woman as if God has made her to live under dominance of men and work for them. Sometimes it seems that in the present Inale dominated, patriarchal society, people find it difficult to accept woman as an independent personality.

Science and technology have given the chauvinistic male another powerful weapon in the form of ultra sound machine to kill her in the womb itself. With the invention of this new technology to monitor the 'Foetal' health, it was expected that it will be used for taking care of the health of the unborn child, but this became the terminator of female foetus and as a result

Female infanticide and female foeticide are nowadays widely practiced in most of the States. It is shocking that non-violent people who live in close-knit families can ever think of committing murder of foetus remorselessly without any feeling of compassion and pity. Female foeticide is the offshoot of the inferior status given to women in society. The birth of a girl child is considered to be entailing suffering and misery for the family. She is a greater burden to her parents and a cause of responsibility for them because of the lascivious eyes of immoral characters. Further, parents of girls pass sleepless nights in search of a suitable match for her, troubled by the problem of raising dowry and after-marriage uncertainties. Therefore, people who are selfish, weak-hearted and cowards resort to the option of killing her in foetus to overcome the later problems. Some mid-wives' are bribed with hefty sums of money for killing the child.

Female foeticide is a big blot on the fair face of Indian Society. The ultra sound machines which were intended to monitor the health of foetus are proudly used for killing her unethically. Sex determination clinics, with the help of unscrupulous doctors and medical men, have become accomplices of man in the determination of sex of foetus that the current scenario of sex ratio has become dismal and gloomy. The overall sex ratio, at present, is favourable to women only in Kerala. However, in Kerala also, in the 0-6 age group, the sex ratio was 963 as per 2001 census. Out of total 3,6.5 lakh 0-6 Age group population 18.6 lakhs were male babies and 17.9 lakhs female babies: Thus, 99760 female babies and infants were missing in 2001 in Kerala. This masculinisation of sex ratio is a result of selective abortion of female foetuses after the use of ultrasound techniques of sex determination. Now the question arises: Are female foetuses being deliberately eliminated or aborted? To a great extent, yes! is the answer. Are the technologies (ultrasonography, amniocentesis, chorion Villi biopsy, foetoscopy, material serum analysis etc.) assisting in elimination? Again, the answer is; yes, largely.

The answer is well supported by the trends that surfaced in the 2001 Census. The following statistics reveal the truth:

Census	- Girl Child/Male Child ratio in 0-6 age group
1981	- 962 Girls/1000 Boys
1991	- 945 Girls/1000 Boys
2001	- 927 Girls/1000 Boys

Biologically girls are stronger and with all the thrust on the well-being of the girl child, the 1981 trends should have at least continued, but in the past 20 years, the ratio has dropped considerably. Since 1979, when the first private sex determination clinic was set up in Punjab, such clinics have proliferated rapidly. By the early eighties, such diagnostic centers had mushroomed even in rural areas, conducting sex determination for a few hundred rupees. While there can be no moral or ethical justification for foeticide still, it continues to be practiced. It is true that women should have the right to abort their unwanted foetus, but if the technology is being used only to eliminate the female foetus, then it should be questionable.

In fact, sex determination, which was mainly restricted to metros only, now, is prevalent in villages as well. If sex determination tests are allowed to proliferate, and the elimination of female foetuses allowed, the society should be ready to pay for this sin, after around two decades. The decline in sex ratio in urban areas is more than twice than that in the rural areas.

According to 'Saheli' a Delhi based women's group, between 1978 and 1982, 78000 female foetus were aborted. During 1987-88, an estimated 13000 sex determination tests were conducted in seven Delhi clinics only. Today the North Western States where such clinics had first appeared have the lowest sex ratio. Punjab has 793 girls for every 1000 boys, Haryana 820 girls/1000 boys and Delhi follows with 845 girls/ 1000 boys. If the situation remains the same then this elimination of daughters will cause paucity of potential brides. It will lead to girls being married at a younger age. It will further contribute to poor status of women, as they will be less likely to finish their school or develop job skills before marriage. It can also result in early motherhood ultimately resulting in high mortality rate

of mother and children. Another potential consequence of elimination of daughters is a surplus of unmarried men which will lead to increase in the acts of sexual violence against women. This decrease in the number of women can lead to reemergence of a tradition called polyandry i.e. the custom of having more than one husband at the same time. This can lead to a high degree of conflict between brothers who are the husbands of same women. This will further create a sociological disorder. Women constitute important share of workforce throughout the country especially in rural areas. Besides house keeping they work in the fields also. Decrease in their number can lead to poor productivity of our fields.

Some months back, Delhi University Students and Teachers came out of their classrooms to support the amendment of the Pre-Natal Diagnosis (PNDT) Bill, which was tabled in Parliament, recommending more stringent measures against doctors who selectively abort female foetuses. The amended PNDT Bill suggests certain important modifications in the existing 1994 PNDT Act, which make it mandatory not only to register all kinds of techniques but also to maintain records of every such scan. It also enhances the penalties for violation of the act. Of course, a powerful lobby of doctors resisted the amendments. But Female foeticide is still continuing in India. The legal and legislative measures, the PNDT Bill, the ban on the disclosure of the sex of foetus have failed. The unscrupulous doctors still provide the required information and cheat the law as a result Female foeticide, female infanticide and child marriage are still prevalent in many parts of the country despite protection from law. The practice of dowry is still plaguing every family having marriageable daughters. Statistics reveal 900 Dowry deaths every year. The birth of a girl is still not welcomed in the Indian society due to which there has been a fall in the rate of female birth. A situation has already reached now that a great number of boys, particularly in rural area, are not getting bride. In mass wedding fairs, we can see ten or twelve boys following a girl to lure her to marry. We have come in such a state when a number of boys have to practise forced celibacy. This sociological imbalance may have very serious consequences. It is the hollowness of our value system that we are killing daughters and still want brides for the sons.

The greatest supporters of a child (whether male or female) are the natural parents. If a girl has a father who loves her and grants her all fundamental rights, that girl is inviolable. Fathers often provide material comforts but deny daughters their right to choose their life partner. A few lines from a poem come to the mind when one can think of the way a girl fears her father:

Oh haste, thee haste, the lady cries

Though tempests round us gather

I will face the raging of the skies

But not an angry father. (From Lord Ullin's Daughter)

For a daughter there can be no greater misery, than to know that her father does not support her. If she was an unwanted child, the despair is compounded. What can be more disgracing than the feeling of nothing more than a contraceptive failure? To go through life and realize that she was thrust on her unwilling parents is a fate much worse than death.

The amendment of PNDT Bill is only one of the means towards an end. We must take a nation wide campaign against gender discrimination and inequities. The root cause for elimination of female foetus is to be traced unless the evil of forced marriages, dowry, and illiteracy among the females are done away with, the lives of women will not improve.

Banning prenatal sex determination might add a feather in the caps of rights activists; but it will not materially improve the lives of women. A social awakening for true respect to the girls is required; a lot of honest hard work with full political 'will' in this field can only solve the problem. In the words of Swami Vivekanand:

"There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing."

The government needs to take stringent action against such people and enforce laws by imposing exemplary punishment for the guilty. Governments should announce incentives

on the birth of a girl child. Free education, ban on dowry system and financial aid for marriage of a girl child should be given liberally. In a way the society, should be made socially aware with proper education, and rational outlook be formed on the importance of girl child. It is when this problem is identified properly that we can empower our women and wage a long and relentless battle for a dignified existence with her male counterparts as empowerment of women has already been recognized globally as a key element to

achieve progress in all areas. This requires changing the mentality of our society as a whole because not only men, women themselves sometimes become the enemy of women. That is why there is something more required than empowerment to uplift the status of women.

The powerful medium of social Network TV which is nowadays telecasting serials like 'Na ana Iss Desh Laado, Balika Vadhu and Maan ki Awaaz —Pratigya' is a step forward in this direction. Besides this there is a dire need to formulate a

Comprehensive Global Action Plan to improve the living conditions of the 'deprived and backward' girls and adolescent females. Mere inclusion of Political reforms, Social reforms, Constitutional Provisions, Rights are not enough. The issue is very critical; and it requires introspection by women at first hand and of course by men. It is only through a new way of thinking, a broad perspective of analysis, an objective approach, and a rational stream of thoughts irrespective of gender we can think of some degrees of change. This menace of Female foeticide could only be dealt by first creating a positive environment for the perception of the role of women & it could only be done by generating awareness on key issues like Sex Ratio and making people realize that woman laid the foundation for good movers and moral values. They are the Flag Holders and the Mothers of Civilization representing the overall picture of their families with regard to Social, Political, Economic and Educational aspects. They must not be deprived of the 'privileges of participation' into any area, which is open to men. They must be definitely equally compensated and made aware of macro economic policies, which provide opportunity of self-employment and other incentives. All forms of discrimination against the girl child and violation of her rights shall be eliminated by undertaking strong measures both preventive and punitive within and outside the family. Above all the need of the hour is to change the social attitude towards her. The elimination of daughters should not be the concern of only lawmakers and social

workers; it should be a common goal for everyone. Female foeticide could only be removed if we change our mindset, attain gender equality and realize the complimentary role of women. The following words of Dr. Rajendera Prasad rightly conclude the present issue of eliminating daughters which is a true paradox of development in India: "Our women have a very great part to play in the progress of our country as the mental and physical contact of women with life is much more lasting and comprehensive than that of a man."

Moreover, we all know that the Hand that rocks the cradle, rules the world.

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