



## Declining child sex ratio and gender specific violation of human rights in India

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### ABSTRACT

Females have an innate biological advantage over males. Female babies out survive male babies and women live longer than men. This is a female advantage which increases linearly with development in the absence of very marked preference for males. However, India is one of the few exceptional countries where sex ratio has been unfavourable to females. The recently released 2011 Census data paints a grim picture of sex ratio among children (0-6 years) which has touched an all time low. Every census shows a reduction in the proportion of girl child compared with the previous one. In the case of female children in womb of expectant mothers, they are not only denied the right to live, but are robbed of their right even to born, as revealed by their declining numbers. It is in this context, the present study attempts to highlight the phenomenon of failing child sex ratio in India as a sheer manifestation of violence against women, a violation of their human rights

The 4<sup>th</sup> U.N.Conference on Women states that equality between men and women is a matter of human rights and a condition of social justice and also a necessary and fundamental prerequisite for equality, development and peace. The Indian constitution is firmly grounded on the principles of equality and justice. Its preamble promises to all its people socio-economic and political justice and affirms equality before the law. More particularly, Article 21 of the constitution on 'protection of life and personal liberty' states "no person shall be deprived of life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law." However, the reality speaks of different situation in India. In the case of female children in the womb of expectant mother, they are not only denied the right to live but are robbed of their right even to be born.

The Universal declaration of Human Rights proclaims equality for all irrespective of sex, but in our country, half of its human resource pool is still considered unworthy of being born and they are denied the right to life. As independent India is moving ahead, the attitude towards the girl child has, as the latest census reveals, regressed to the dark ages. It is in this context the present study attempts to highlight the phenomenon of declining Child Sex Ratio (CSR) in India as a sheer manifestation of violence against women, a violation of

their human rights.

Females have an innate biological advantage over males. Unless they are radically discriminated against, female babies out survive male babies and women live longer than men. This is a female advantage which increases linearly with development in the absence of very marked preference for males. However, India is one of the few exceptional countries where sex ratio is unfavourable to females. The ratio which as high as 972 in 1901 Census fell to all time low of 927 in 1991 census. However, the overall sex ratio presents slightly encouraging trend across the country in the last two censuses. Though the change is marginal but appreciable, but 2011 census paints a grim picture of CSR which has touched an all time low. It has declined to 914 female children for every 1000 male compared to 933 in 2001 census. Every census shows a reduction in the girl child compared with the previous one.

Table 1 presents the sex ratio of the total population and child population and child population (0-6 years) from 1961 to 2011. Table 1 reveals that after 1991, there has been consistent rise in overall sex ratio. On the other hand, fall in CSR has been unabated since 1961. This is not 'census specific', but more a recurring and continuing trend. Boys continue to be preferred and daughters remain unwanted. The technological

improvement and boom that the country has seen over the last few years seem to have aided in eliminating unwanted foetus (Sitaram, 2011). What is more disturbing is the 62 points decline in CSR as compared to 1 point decline in overall sex ratio between 1961-2011. If the trend continues further, then in the coming decades, the census would show an abysmal sex ratio disfavoured women. The dislike for female children has found expression through female infanticide which was common in the 19<sup>th</sup> as well as early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even in modern times, this ugly practice does exist in certain communities, particularly in the Kallar community of landless labourers in Tamilnadu's Madurai district. As many as 3000 cases of female infanticide occur in Tamilnadu every year (Sadhu, 1999). The recent application of amniocentesis at the time of pregnancy has increased the practice of female foeticide in Indian society. When this procedure determines at an early stage of pregnancy that the foetus is female, it is more likely to be aborted. Thus, the unborn female baby shares with the born female infants high risk of elimination as technology reinforces traditional bias (Kishnaji, 2000).

The child sex ratio has declined in 27 states and union territories and sharp fall in the range of 22 to 88 points have been reported from the states of J&K, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and others during 2001-2011. Table 2 shows the distribution of states and union territories by ranges of sex

ratio of child population in the age group 0-6 years for 2001 and 2011.

Table 2 reveals that the number of states and Union Territories with sex ratio in the age group 0-6 years of 951 and above has reduced to half from 18 to 9 in 2011. This reduction in girl population is not due to natural population divide but a state that is arrived through conscious choices and anti-girl gender bias. The traditional approach to sex selection-the neglect of girl children in terms of nutrition, health care, education, opportunities, love and care has now been replaced by simpler, more accessible and more affordable technology that eliminates female before they are born. According to one estimate, more than 100,000 abortions of female foetuses occur each year (Fred *et al.*, 2002).

Male predominance at birth is commonly observed in almost every part of the world and India was no exception. Sex ratio at birth (males per 100 females) was found to vary between 102 to 108 for different population and for India, it is estimated at 105 male live births to 100 female births (Visaria, 1967). The excess of male to female births is assumed to be insurance by nature for biological disadvantage experienced by male in comparison to his female counterpart. However, a number of researchers have expressed the possibility of rising sex ratio at birth in recent times (Sudha and Rajan, 1988, Kundu and Sahu, 1991, Raju and Premi, 1992). They are of the view that the

**Table 1 : Sex ratio of the total population and child population(0-6 years) from 1961 to 2011**

| Year | Sex ratio in the age group 0-6 years | Overall sex ratio |
|------|--------------------------------------|-------------------|
| 1961 | 976                                  | 941               |
| 1971 | 964                                  | 930               |
| 1981 | 962                                  | 930               |
| 1991 | 945                                  | 927               |
| 2001 | 927                                  | 933               |
| 2011 | 914                                  | 940               |

Source: Census of India, 2011

**Table 2 : Distribution of states and union territories by ranges of sex ratio of child population in the age group 0-6 years for 2001 and 2011**

| Sex ratio     | No. of states/union territories, 2001 | No. of states/Union Territories, 2011 |
|---------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 880 and below | 4                                     | 5                                     |
| 881-915       | 5                                     | 9                                     |
| 916-950       | 8                                     | 12                                    |
| 951-985       | 18                                    | 9                                     |
| 986 and above | 0                                     | 0                                     |

Source: Census of India, 2011

**Table 3 : Birth order by sex vis-a-vis sex ratio**

| Birth order           | Sex of previous child               | Sex ratio at birth (girls to 1000 boys) |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> Order | One male child                      | 959                                     |
|                       | One female child                    | 542                                     |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> Order | One male child and one female child | 558                                     |
|                       | Two female children                 | 219                                     |

Source: CMAI study, 2001

wide spread practice of prenatal sex selection or sex selective abortion have been skewing sex ratio at birth in favour of preferred male progeny which is depressing child sex ratio further.

The practice of prenatal sex selection is most prevalent in regions that boast high levels of educational attainment and relative prosperity. Bose(2001) earlier classified the demographically backward states of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh as BIMARU states. Now to take note of the alarming decline in CSR, he coined another acronym DEMARU meaning killing daughters and classified Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Gujarat as DEMARU states. Here D stands for daughter, E stands for elimination, M for male, A for aspiring for rage and U for ultrasound, that is to say, daughter eliminating male aspiring rage for ultrasound. The illegal availability and affordability of parental screening technology and a large number of private medical facilities willing to illegally cater to this demand has abetted this practice. Foeticide is nothing but infanticide happening in a much earlier state. A hardened conscience and disregard for the sanctity of life is the reason for widespread abortion and female foeticide in particular (Carey, 2011).

A study by the Christian Medical Association of India (CMAI) taking into account, 11267 births for the year 2000-2001 collected from one of the public hospitals in Delhi showed the following trend (Table 3).

Table 3 shows that second daughter is less tolerated than the first and chances of having a third daughter are further reduced to 219 girls over every 1000 boys. The Indian government's massive campaign in 1970s and 1980s – "*Hum do Hamare do*"(We are two and we have two) — aimed at reducing family size and controlling population growth. Given the resulting shift in family size, families have a tremendous desire that at least one of their two children be male. The CMAI study reiterates the fact that the sex of the previous child exerts a greater influence on whether the family will tolerate a daughter or not as compared to other factors.

Considering that India has undergone significant economic and social changes in the last few decades, female children are still at risk, despite marked progress in female literacy and increased economic participation of women in economic and political life. Obsession for a male child is deeply entrenched in our patriarchal society where a women's status is determined by her reproductive performance, more particularly, the birth of a son. Moreover, it is women who exhibit a stronger desire for sons and are strongly motivated to bear male children. In fact, the cost benefit considerations pertaining to male and female child treat male children an asset while the female children are considered to be liabilities. In the Indian context, the most contributory factor towards male preference is the prevalence of dowry, besides other benefits of having male child like economic support, social security in

old age, having a legal heir, performing last rites of parents and carry on the lineage of patriarchal society. Therefore, taking someone's life, even one's own child before she is born for the above cited reasons reflect gross violation of human rights in all aspects due to their gender, which is bolstered further by Hindu religious laws.

Clearly, the sex selective abortion and female foeticide can be considered as gender specific violation of basic human rights. Gender based violation emerges as primary human security concern for women which not only shrinks the range of choices open to them, but also limits their control over their own lives. In the light of the violation against women in India, the decision to abort a female child seems to be a socially reinforced necessity driven by gender.

To conclude, economic development in India has not only been unable to provide any respite to one of the basic human rights- the right to life to half of its population, but on the contrary, it has made the situation even worse. Ironically, and this is the paradox that, it is the modern and globalized society that is promoting heinous practices like female foeticide, sex detection tests and induced abortions of female fetuses. In fact, the technologically assisted male producing industry has been flourishing in India which is depressing the sex ratio of the child age population. Unless the issue is addressed in time, the CSR is continued to be skewed further. Demographers warn that future deficits of adult women will affect the stability of the entire marriage system. Not only will it impact quality of life and the rights of women but also it will create potential social unrest and increase sexual violence against women.

In Indian context, legislative effort alone cannot solve the problem of sex selective abortion. In fact the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PNDT) Act of 1994 proved to be the most unused legislation in India. Actually the issue of sex selections not only a struggle against and struggle for, it is a struggle within (Nanda, 2009). In most countries, cultural and social factors do not operate vigorously in favour of any sex. In India however, it has been found to be so with respect to male sex. Cultural factors seem to have considerable grip over women in our society and resultant gender discrimination. Miller (1981) says it as a "culture against female" and consequently there arises a powerful relationship between culture and morality since culture has its strong effect not only on female role and status but also on female survival. Reversal of such a situation calls for shifting of focus towards the value of the society and culture instead of depending entirely on the growth model and high growth rates of income.

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