

The sex ratios of india



India's growth story has been incredible. The stock markets are doing well. Corporate India is optimistic about India being able to sustain the current growth rate for a considerable period of time. Indian companies are making their presence felt through cross-border mergers and acquisitions. Services and manufacturing sectors are booming. Growth in agriculture may be sluggish as compared to the other sectors, it growing nonetheless. Urban India believes that India is going to surpass the United States of America in a span of fifteen years. However, fundamental problems like malnutrition and corruption still plague our country. But the urban, educated, middle class are not affected by malnutrition and have learnt to live with corruption.

There is one problem besides corruption and malnutrition; which is prevalent across all sections of the society and all of them all guilty participants in making this problem a widespread one. The urban, educated, middle class; despite being 'educated', do not seem to realise the long term effects of their actions. This problem, if unchecked, has the potential to apply the brakes on India's growth. The birth of a boy child is celebrated, while the birth of a girl child is, well; tolerated. And sometimes, the girl child is killed even before she is born.

Sex ratio is the number females in a geographic region per 1000 males. Most developed economies of the world (except China) have healthy sex ratios, with more number of females than males ¹. A sex ratio 952 females per 1000 males is considered healthy. The national average as per the 2001 census is 933. Delhi has a modest 915 according estimates in the year 2009 ². As per the 2001 census, Rajasthan averages 922, while Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh average 964 and 978 respectively. Kerala being the most

literate state also has the healthiest sex ratio of 1058 per 1000 males ³. However states like Punjab has a dismal sex ratio of 795 per 1000 males, which is alarming ⁴. The state of Maharashtra too is a cause for concern. With more working women being visible in Maharashtra, there is a misconception that Maharashtra is better off, but facts state otherwise. The juvenile sex ratio is 869 girls to 1000 boys, as on March 2010 ¹¹. If India has to continue on the growth path, the burgeoning menace of female foeticide cannot be ignored. But is the common man on the road concerned? No. Why? For one, the common man believes that it is not his problem; but of the feminists, the NGOs, the government, and so on. For another, he believes that the problem is societal, not personal; and hence it cannot affect him. (The common man I am talking about is a reference to the numerous people I have met so far in my life. Gender imbalance is the least of their problems.)

Is the problem societal? Crime against women is on the rise and the increasing imbalance between males and females will aggravate it ⁵. A survey conducted by Jagori, based in Delhi concluded that women face harassment in public places on a continuous basis ⁶. Since most of the cases of harassment go unreported, the awareness of the magnitude of the menace is abysmally low. An article written by Kalpana Sharma, "No girls please, we're Indian," (The Hindu, 29 August 2004) calls this problem an epidemic with huge social costs associated with it. My understanding of the articles I have referred to is that gender imbalance would lead to an increase in restlessness among men. Women would become easy targets to vent their frustration.

Is the problem personal? We Indians have developed a very wrong mindset. Unless a problem affects us personally, we do not seem to bother. Should women care? Women craving for sons, who have never faced harassment should realise that even they can be vulnerable. Should men care? States like Punjab and Haryana are facing a very grave situation. Due to their heavily skewed sex ratios, there are not enough brides for the grooms within the community. A study notes that 20% men may remain unmarried ⁶. Another study notes that marriage has beneficial effects on health and survival, with men reaping maximum benefits. Therefore, men run the risk of shorter life expectancy ⁷.

Why is that we do not want daughters? Daughters have always been considered as paraya dhan. Parents consider having a daughter as an expense, a luxury they cannot afford. Taking care of her, educating her, and marrying her off to a suitor, all require huge sums of money. Any property she inherits or assets that she creates go the family she marries into. Families who own large pieces of land have owned such lands for generations. Such families would always want their first child to be male for the purpose of inheritance and keeping the land within the family. Even today marrying off a daughter is considered the biggest responsibility a parent can possibly have. Fears for her sexual safety and security make parents to marry off their daughter as early as possible.

Why is that we want sons? The answer is dowry. Though the practice of dowry is made illegal in 1961, it is an open secret that the practice is prevalent even in 2010. We have men in the south proudly telling each other that they have a 'market value' in the marriage market ⁹. There are men

among the rural folk who consider getting married simply to rake in dowry and use it to fund their businesses. Dowry in today's world has taken many convenient forms like a fully furnished apartment, high-end electronics, a four-wheeled vehicle, and huge sums of money. The trend of son preference cuts across socio-economic factors like caste and economic status⁶. As a result, dowry related harassment is rising. Other than financial concerns, there are other benefits in having sons. India is a patrilineal society. Sons continue the family lineage (gotra), while daughters lose their gotra of birth and join the lineage of their husbands. This essentially means that sons are the only legitimate descendants in the system. Therefore, sons are a source of prestige for a family.

As a consequence of these deep seated norms, girl children under the age of 5 face severe neglect in terms of nutrition, immunisation, and clothing. They also face discrimination with regard to schooling. Sometimes female infants are killed within a few days of their birth. With the advent of technology, the trend of sex selective abortion or female foeticide has risen to unprecedented levels. Thirty years ago, these methods were not known. The Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act (PNDT) Act prohibits doctors and clinics from using pre-natal diagnostic techniques, such as scans, to determine the sex of a foetus. First offenders would face a penalty of up to three years of imprisonment and a fine of 10,000 and repeat offenders would risk a five-year imprisonment and a 50,000 fine. The act also prohibits any advertising for diagnosis facilities. The act notwithstanding, the awareness of sex selective abortions were popularised with the mushrooming of unregistered, illegal, small clinics by advertising

the 'benefits' of sex selective abortions through messages like "It is better to pay a small amount today for a sex-selective abortion than a larger amount later for your daughter's dowry." The government, on its own, has not been effective in enforcing the act. The government has a myopic take on the issue. Since this issue cannot be treated as a plank to garner votes, the long term after effects of sustained gender imbalances on demography are not being considered seriously 10.

All hope is not lost. Many NGOs have launched sting operations, such as luring doctors into revealing the sex of a foetus. While often receiving wide publicity, these initiatives are proving somewhat less effective for legal reasons, as proof of criminal wrongdoing is often difficult to establish. But they nonetheless have had an unmistakeable impact on clinic operators in some areas, who have come to realise that the Act can be implemented by non-official entities. Other than stings, NGOs have been also been instrumental in spreading awareness through campaigns like Save our daughters, Laadli 1 million signature campaign, FADA movement by Deepalaya, Jatha campaign by Jagruti, and recently, the programme Santulan by the Divya Jyoti Jagrati Sansthan, to name a few. Actress Gul Panag has taken up the cause in Chandigarh and has partnered with a city based NGO called Samsher Singh Foundation to fight female foeticide 8.

Notwithstanding these initiatives, at a personal level, we must spread awareness of the issue. A growing India not only needs to debate on fiscal deficit and current account deficits but also on the daughter deficit. The issue needs to be talked about more often to make it relevant all the time. Changing the mindsets of a billion people will not happen overnight. The

youth and newly wed couples need to be sensitised about the issue. I advocate certain fundamental changes in the way we think to bring about the change. The urban, educated, middle class can be targeted first with these ideas. After there is a considerable change in the mindset of the middle class, these ideas can be trickled down to the grassroots.

The primary problems of lineage, inheritance, and girls being treated as paraya dhan need to be addressed. The Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005 gives women equal rights of inheritance of land and property. This empowers the women economically and treats daughters as equal financial providers. Second, sons are no more providing for the parents during their old age. Sons are moving out of their ancestral homes, are staying away from their parents and are starting families of their own. Parents of sons are also not assured of constant personal care from their sons in their old age. Now in such a context, it does not matter if the parents have sons or daughters: they are going to stay away anyway due to a variety of reasons and they will be playing roughly equal roles when their parents need them. Third, the concept of a patrilineal society needs to be done away with. The very notion that a daughter would be part of another family after marriage should be erased. Daughters, not just sons, can also be considered as legitimate descendants. The children of the daughter need not be thought of as children of another family. In the United States of America, a child can take the surname of either parent. Though it is not a norm here in India, the government is not stopping us from doing so. Now with respect to dowry, young men need to be sensitised about the issue. They need to be told that the fact that they are proud to have a 'market value' is detestable. They

need to be taught that it is unethical to think of dowry as an opportunity for instant money. Traditionally, parents of the girl perform her wedding and bear all the expenses. This has to change. Parents of the boy should also shoulder the burden of performing the wedding and share the expenses with the parents of the girl; it is after all the wedding of their son, what is the shame in bearing the expenses of their own son's wedding? Better still, the boy and the girl should be made accountable for the expenses incurred. It their own wedding, why make their parents shoulder the entire responsibility for the expenditure? The fundamental assumptions which would make these changes work are that the urban, educated middle class are liberal in their mindsets, love their sons and daughters roughly equally, and have inflated egos. By hitting on their egos, by enquiring about their capability to fund their own son's wedding, these changes can be driven home.

It would too naive to think that by making these changes, we would quickly achieve a healthier sex ratio. These changes are easier said than done, because they are too radical. Even the urban, educated, middle class would find it difficult to digest and assimilate these changes because the existing norms have been around for centuries. Small successes should be celebrated and propagated. It would take years for these changes to provide material results. Eventually, when these changes produce results, one cannot rest because these changes will still have to trickle down among the rural and poorer sections of the society. For India to be an economic superpower, all sections of the society should have a healthy sex ratio within their communities. It is a long and arduous journey ahead.

(I have quoted references for most of the facts, results of a survey or study, and certain opinions by authors like Banashri Savanoor and Kalpana Sharma stated in this article. Everything else is either a culmination of my readings on the subject or purely my personal opinion. I shared my ideas on this subject with my colleagues where I worked and they appreciated them. Their feedback was that these ideas are logical, but making it practical would be very difficult.)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_sex_ratio

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/Delhi-sex-ratio-takes-a-nosedive/articleshow/6555979.cms>

<http://www.iloveindia.com/population-of-india/sex-ratio.html>

<http://www.e-pao.net/GP.asp?src=20..280810.aug10>

<http://legalserviceindia.com/article/I292-Female-Foeticide.html>

http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-120929-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html

<http://www.economist.com/node/16789152>

<http://www.bollywoodworld.com/bollywood-news/gul-panag-to-fight-against-female-foeticide-110519.html>

I have drawn such a conclusion from my personal experience. I hail from Hyderabad, and it is common knowledge that certain communities like the Reddys, and the Gouds are known for their exorbitant dowries. The talk of a 'market value' for men started during my college days. It was one of the most

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discussed topics in most circles. When I graduated and started working in Mumbai, there was a small Telugu community within the workplace, and I was shocked to hear the term 'market value', again; among older men. The very notion of a human being, man or woman; being treated like a commodity enrages me. I have been reading up on this topic from quite a long time and has become close to my heart. That is why I have chosen this topic.

My views on the bias against the girl child and the PNDT are a culmination of my readings on the subject. Facts and advertisements for the clinics have been taken from PC-PNDT Handbook for the public, <http://pndt.gov.in/index2.asp?slid=6> HYPERLINK " <http://pndt.gov.in/index2.asp?slid=6&linkid=58> " HYPERLINK " <http://pndt.gov.in/index2.asp?slid=6&linkid=58> "sublinkid= 58 . The views on the government are entirely personal.

<http://www.indianexpress.com/news/as-law-crawls-maharashtra-sex-ratio-drops-more/649580/1>