

Infanticide: An Offshoot of Patriarchal Custom

Dr. K.S. Sarwani

Professor, Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, SOEL, The TamilNadu Dr. Ambedkar Law University, Chennai, TamilNadu.

ABSTRACT

The social system in India was and continues to remain predominantly a patriarchal, patrilocal and patrilineal society, wherein the role of father, brother, husband and son is way higher and important than that of a mother, sister, wife and daughter correspondingly. Conditioned upbringing from a young age ensures that gender stereotypes like man's superior social status vis-à-vis woman's inferior status and the roles they have to play in different stages of their lives are dinned till it is internalised. This unequal upbringing brings forth many customs and practices harmful to women and girl children. Religious scriptures give preference to sons. Son preference and daughter abhorrence leads to exclusionary practices like foeticide, infanticide, screwed sex ratio, child marriage, denial of nutritious food and good education to girls, honour killing etc.

Keywords: Gender Discrimination, Social Exclusion, Policy Inclusion, Patriarchy.

Introduction

Gender apartheid is rooted in every culture, which becomes legitimised over centuries of usage. There are norms regulating the day-to-day life and behaviour of individuals, which varies from culture to culture. Gender specific violence against women and girl children is a global phenomenon that can be either overt or covert. It includes physical and mental abuse. Gender roles and culture are intertwined.¹ The secondary role of women in Indian society cuts across caste, region, religion and class lines. This reflects in many aspects of people's lives. The grip of patriarchal customs forces people to think and react in bizarre ways. Women who beget sons get more respect in society and those who beget daughters have to face many humiliations. So parents prefer to have only male children which make foeticide and infanticide as acceptable practices in society despite being criminal offences. This article attempts to understand the practice of infanticide in Tamil Nadu and the efforts of the Government to stop it in a unique way instead of first penalising the parents or relatives who do that job.

Review of Literature

"Law and son preference in India: A Reality check",² a report authored by Kirti Singh analyses the socio-cultural preference for sons and the resulting discrimination of daughters and women in all stages of their lives. *"Gender and Language: A Study of Social Movements in India"*, an article by Kshipa Sharma, highlights the role of language in forging man-woman hierarchies from childhood and its effect on women's rights, as gendered language sustains male superiority.³

Rekha Roy's, *Women's Rights in India*,⁴ elaborates on women's declining status to men from Vedic age to the present and how it is part of patriarchal male agenda to suppress women through culture and religion.

“*Widowhood in Rural India – Perpetual Mourning*”, a book by Martha Alterchen, analyses customary practices and norms regulating the lives of the widows including their property rights.⁵ “*Women and Culture*”, a journal edited by Caroline Sweetman, focusses on gender and development.⁶

The Practice of Infanticide

In the 1980's and 1990's it was the media and some NGO's that brought to light the heinous practice of infanticide in certain areas of Tamil Nadu. Infanticide is the brutal practice of killing girl children within a week or 10 days after their birth by parents, grandparents or close relatives. Various ways are adopted to kill the infant girl like drowning the child, force feeding paddy husks and suffocating the child, feeding milk of a poisonous plant called kallipaal, starving the child etc.⁷ It is usually the second and later born girl children who meet this fate making their stay on earth brutally short. This practice is common in Salem, Dindigul, Usilampatti, Erode and the surrounding belt in Tamil Nadu.⁸

Foeticide is widely practical in many North Indian states is killing of a female foetus in the mother's womb. It is a pan Indian phenomenon with some pockets more prone to it. This paper limits its analysis/discussion to the practice of infanticide, reasons for this custom, its impact on society and policy initiatives by Government of Tamil Nadu to tackle it.

The practice of infanticide remains region and community specific. Foeticide and infanticide are practiced simultaneously in some communities and regions. In Tamil Nadu, a study carried out by Chunkath and Athreya (1997) reported the existence of a 'female infanticide belt' that started from Madurai and covered the districts of Dindigul, Karur, Salem, Usilampatti, Erode, Dharmapuri, North Arcot District and surrounding belts. Since 1989, 1,747 female infants were killed in 19 blocks of Salem district alone. As per Government records 450 girl children out of 600 girls born were victims of infanticide.⁹ The 2001 census report of India reported that between 1991 to 2001, the overall sex ratio fell down sharply from 948 in 1991 to 939 in 2001. (SnehLalaTandon&Renu Sharma, 2006)¹⁰.

In yet another field study undertaken by T.V. Sekher and NeelambarHatti,¹¹ in Mettur taluk in Salem, 'Penn Shishu Kolai' or female infanticide was justified by many villagers including women. Here pesticides and at times sleeping pills were also used along with paddy husk, kalli paal, starving the baby and loosening the knot of the umbilical cord. This customary practice of infanticide was not confined to poor people or backward communities, but was practiced by almost all communities in that region. The villagers held the view that having a daughter is a punishment for the sins committed in previous births and that bringing up daughter is like watering the neighbours garden. It was also found that the rich and influential people in that region resort to foeticide under medical guidance, but infanticide was practiced by all sections.

Causes for This Custom:

The President of India, K.R. Narayanan, in his Republic Day Address in 2002 spoke about the deplorable status of women and girls. While referring to the crime statistics, he also spoke about their traumatised existence and how their mother's womb is also unsafe for them as it is converted into their tomb.¹² The President was talking about the practice of foeticide. But in Tamil Nadu, female infanticide is a real threat to the life and safety of girl children.¹³ Infanticide has been reported in Bihar, Orissa, Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra and is not confined to Tamil Nadu. But in these states foeticide is also resorted to intensely, whereas in Tamil Nadu the practice of infanticide is more blatant to the

discerning eye. Infanticide is defined as “Killing of an entirely dependent child under one year of age, by mother, parents or other relatives in whose care the child is entrusted”.¹⁴

The reasons for son preference and daughter abhorrence is due to a complex set of socio-cultural and economic factors like dowry system, poverty and above all the many seen and unseen layers of socio-cultural norms and attitudes that confers secondary status to women and primary importance to men. This is clearly evident in marriage ceremonies and rituals where the girl and her parents are treated as lesser mortals and the boy, his parents and relatives are accorded more importance. On every auspicious occasion, the woman's parents or brothers have to shower gifts and pamper their son-in-law's family. It is lifelong servitude of the girl's side to the boy's side. So to avert such socially inferior status, many parents decide to snuff out their girl child's life soon after birth, as they are a liability.

Poverty also plays an important part. In the name of dowry, during and after marriage, the girl's family has to shell out hard cash, vehicles, jewels and bear marriage expenses. If the girl goes in for higher education, parents have to give higher dowry and get suitable boy with higher qualifications. In the marriage market the term “suitable” means that the girl's educational qualification has to be lesser to the boy's including job. But economically the girl's family can be richer than the boy's family as only then they can aspire for a better life. There is no question of equal status. If recurring dowry demands are not satisfied, the woman is physically and mentally harassed, is at times sent back to her father's place as punishment, which is viewed as a stigma by her parents as culturally it is frowned upon.

Apart from these causes, protecting the girl's chastity till her marriage is a big problem for parents. If their chastity is violated it casts a slur on the entire family. If a girl loses her chastity, nobody will come forward to marry her burdening her family for a lifetime. Cultured stratification ensures that the men who commit such crimes go scot free, but the unfortunate victim is further victimised. That is the reason that prevents parents from revealing the brutality suffered by their daughters. The fact that their daughter has to endure a life of discriminations and sufferings at various stages of her life embolden parents and relatives to commit the heinous crime of infanticide.

Yet another compelling factor for son preference is that in a patriarchal, patrilocal and patrilineal social setup, it is the sons who can continue the family legacy and lineage and do the last rights of the family members, whereas daughters go to another house and can help their husbands carry out that family's duties. The scriptures lay down that the institution of marriage is to beget sons.

Global Initiatives

The widening Child Sex Ratio (CSR) between girls and boys made the policy makers at the international, national and state level to make policies to stress the need and protect the girl children from violent and murderous attacks before birth manifested through gender biased sex selection and post birth discriminations. “United Nation Plan of Action for the Elimination of Harmful Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children”, was initiated by the United Nations in 1984 itself to help States develop a national plan. It gave instructions to the state parties and all Governments to openly condemn female foeticide and infanticide as a flagrant violation of the basic right to life of the girl-child. The Fourth United Nations Conference for Women, held in 1995 in Beijing, issued a list of nine strategic objectives for the state parties to follow. It includes identifying harmful cultural practices and to take concrete steps to stop the silent violence against daughters before birth and in their infancy.¹⁵ The years from (1991-2000) was declared by SAARC as the ‘Decade of the Girl Child’ and listed specific goals for dignified survival and development sans discrimination of girl child.¹⁶

Response of India

In 1992, a National Plan of Action exclusively for the girl child (1991-2000) was formulated for “*Survival Protection and Development of the Girl Children*”. The first point stressed was to stop female foeticide and infanticide. In 2015, Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao Scheme, which means ‘Save the Girl’ and ‘Educate the Girls’ was introduced by the Ministry of Human Resource Development and Ministry of Health and Family Welfare to eliminate foeticide and infanticide and provide holistic education for girl children.¹⁷

Even before that since 1986-87, the Planning, Research, Evaluation and Monitoring (PREM) division of the Ministry of Women and Child Development was providing General Grant-in-Aid (GIA) scheme for carrying out research. In the 12th plan period, some areas were identified and listed as priorities for research and evaluation.¹⁸ Female foeticide, infanticide, dynamics behind sex ratio and traditional gender role identification including gender neutral language among others were listed as priority areas for research.

Tamil Nadu’s Inclusive Policies

The Government of Tamil Nadu introduced two path breaking and innovative schemes to end infanticide and foeticide in the year 1992. One was the *Cradle Baby Scheme* introduced first in Salem to stop infanticide and save the girl child. The other scheme was the *Girl Child Protection Scheme* envisaged to provide short term and long term support for the girl child.

Cradle Baby Scheme, 1992

The Government of Tamil Nadu boldly accepted the existence of infanticide and also revealed its resolve to curb their menace., Reception Centres were opened at vantage points where cradles were placed. Those parents unable or unwilling to bring up their girl children can leave their children in the cradles. Each Reception Centre is provided adequate equipment and groceries. Later the children have to be handed over to specialized and licensed Adoption Agencies by the Reception Centres.¹⁹

The Cradle Baby Scheme was a success and in 2001, the Government extended the scheme and opened full-fledged Reception Centres at Madurai, Theni, Dindugul and Dharmapuri. Later more centres were opened at Cuddalore, Ariyalur, Villupuram and Tiruvannamalai districts in 2011.²⁰ The sustained efforts by the Government and NGO’s ensured increase in CSR from 942 girls for every 1000 boys in 2001 to 943/1000 boys in 2011.²¹ Thus this cradle baby scheme a unique protective measure introduced with a humane intention was a huge success.

Thiru Kamarajar Scheme

This scheme introduced by the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu in 1992 and was named as “*Thiru Kamarajar Scheme*” is wider in scope than the Cradle Baby Scheme. It was also known as Chief Minister’s Girl Child Protection Scheme.

Its twin objective was to stop infanticide and to promote formal education for girls, so that their future is secured. By providing financial incentives to meet both short term and long term needs, directly in the girl child’s name, confidence was instilled in the minds of their parents. In 2006, this scheme was renamed as “*Sivagami Ammaiyar Ninaivu Girl Child Protection Scheme*”.²²

This scheme has 2 sub schemes. Scheme-I is for poor families with one girl child and Scheme -II is for poor families with 2 girl children, born after 2011 August and deposits are made in the girl children’s

name with the Tamil Nadu Power Finance and Infrastructure Development Corporation Limited as Fixed Deposit. Under Scheme-I Rs.50,000 is deposited in the name of the girl children who satisfies the eligibility for this scheme. Under Scheme-II Rs.25,000, is deposited in the name of each girl.²³ After every 5 years the Fixed Deposit is renewed. Once the girl child completes 18 years, the matured amount along with the interest is deposited in the girl child's account.²⁴

For availing this, the girls should have appeared and cleared 10th standard examinations, so that the amount given will help them to pursue higher education. From the 6th year of deposit, an annual incentive of Rs. 1800 is given to the girl children. The Government of Tamil Nadu deposited Rs. 992.43 crores with the Tamil Nadu Power Finance and Infrastructure Development Corporation. This scheme benefitted around 5,90,019 girls from December 2001 to March 2015.²⁵ In 2014-2015, 97, 173 girl children were benefitted in Tamil Nadu under this scheme.

Conclusion

The year 1992 was a momentous and memorable year for girl children. Under a women Chief Minister, the late J. Jayalalitha, protective policies like Cradle Baby Scheme and Chief Minister's Girl Child Protection Schemes were rolled out. These inclusive policies while revealing the state's resolve to end discriminatory customs, also gave courage to parents of girl children that the state has willingly become partners with parents to help them in bringing up their girl children. Along with Mid-day meal scheme, this scheme led to reduction in school dropout rate of children and female literacy rate increased from 63.43% in 2001 to 73.86% in 2011. Other inclusive and gender neutral policies that benefitted girl students include free bicycle scheme for girls, free bus pass, free uniforms, five text books, free footwear etc, also made parents feel that girls were no longer a burden. Government Marriage Assistance Scheme was also extended to beneficiaries under the Girl Child Protection Scheme. So, here too the state willingly partnered with parents of girls in order to fulfil their social obligation. These welfare schemes are still continuing to this day, lessening the burden of parents and saving the lives of many girl children and ensuring a better future for girls. Thus, the Government of Tamil Nadu's genuine policy measure to end the evil practice of infanticide bore fruit with vigorous efforts and has reduced gender gap to a large extent. Though son preference remains every parent's desire, daughter abhorrence has reduced considerably and these inclusive policies deserve to be given some credit for that.

REFERENCES

1. SebleDawit and AbenaBusia, 'Thinking About Culture : Some Programme Pointers, Gender and Development', Vol. 3 No. 1 (Culture) (Feb, 1995)pp.7-12.
2. Kriti Singh, "Law and son preference in India, A Reality Check", United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)-India, New Delhi, August, 2013.
3. Kshipa Sharma, 'Gender and Language: A Study of Social Movements in India', *Journal of Politics and Governance*, Vol.3, No.4, October-December, 2014, pp. 25-29.
4. Rekha Roy, Women's Rights in India – A Feminist Perspective, Akanksha Publishing House, New Delhi, 2006
5. Martha Alterchen, Widowhood in Rural India – Perpetual Mourning, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2000
6. Caroline Sweetman, 'Women and Culture', Oxfam Publishing, *Gender & Development*, Vol.3, No.1, February. 1995.

7. The Lawyers Collective, November, 2001, p.4
8. Chunkath, S.R. and Athreya, V.B, 1997, 'Female Infanticide in Tamil Nadu: Some evidence', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 32(17):ws 21-28
9. Krishna Kumar, A. (1992). 'Female Infanticide Beyond Symptoms: Will the government measures help?' *Frontline*, December 4, 1992
10. Tandon Sneh Lata and Sharma Renu, 'Female Foeticide and Infanticide in India: An Analysis of Crimes against Girl Children,' *International Journal of Criminal Justice Sciences*, Vol.1 Issue 1, January 2006
11. Sekher T.V and Hatti Neelambar (2010), 'Disappearing Daughters and Intensification of Gender Bias: Evidence from Two Village Studies in South India', *Sociological Bulletin*, 59 (1), January-April 2010, pp. 111-133
12. Bose, Ashish, 'Female Foeticide: Doctors, Governments and Civil Society Ensure Failure', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 37, No. 8 (Feb 23 – March 1, 2002), pp. 696-697
13. Srinivasan Sharada, 'Gender Bias in Child Mortality', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.36, No. 51 (Dec.22-28, 2001), pp.4767-4768
14. Kolloor, T.M. (1990), 'Female Infanticide: A Psychological Analysis', *Grass Roots Action*, special issue on Girl Child, 3 April, 1990
15. Elizabeth J. Croll, 'From the Girl Child to Girls' Rights', *Third World Quarterly*, Vol.27, No.7, 2006, pp 1285-1297
16. Tandon Sneh Lata and Sharma Renu, 'Female Foeticide and Infanticide in India: An Analysis of Crimes against Girl Children,' *International Journal of Criminal Justice Sciences*, Vol.1 Issue 1, January 2006
17. <http://wcd.nic.in/BBBPScheme/main.htm>
18. <http://wcd.nic.in/sites/default/files/cswb/pdf>
19. Demand No.45, Policy Note 2011-2012, Social Welfare and Nutritious Meal Programme Department, Government of Tamil Nadu, p.35
20. The Hindu, Chennai, July 24, 2011
21. <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/UNFPA-Publication-39835.pdf>
22. <http://womenchildwelfareschemes.blogspot.in/2014/01/sivagami-ammaiyaar-ninaivu-girl-child-html>
23. The Times of India, Chennai, April 17, 2013
24. <http://kavimalar.dinamalar.com/news-details.asp?cat=14&id=7>
25. Demand No.45, Policy Note 2015-2016, Social Welfare and Nutritious Meal Programme Department, Government of Tamil Nadu, p.37