

Bhagat, Rasheeda.: Where the End Comes Before Birth. The Hindu Business Line. July 20, 1999. P. 15.

Where the End Comes Before Birth

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The anxiety for the male child has led to the mushrooming of scan centres in the Madurai/Usilampatti area. These centres, against the law, reveal the sex of the foetus which, if female, is generally aborted. Will the generations of prejudice against the girl child end?

Long after you have driven away from the cluster of villages around the Usilampatti belt of Madurai, the images of bright-coloured hair ribbons, fragrant jasmine flowers in neatly combed hair, deep vermilion bindis on the forehead and the silver anklets worn by little girls with sparkling, wide, intelligent eyes, remain. And return to haunt you again and again.

Even today, the 'she' of the human species is an unwanted entity in these villages. Unwanted enough to bring down the female ration in the population. A 50,000 population sample survey done in November 1998 by the Society of Integrated Rural Development (SIRD) in 88 villages in the Usilampatti region, infamous for both female infanticide and now, foeticide, clearly shows the declining sex ratio in the age group 0 to 5 years. The survey shows that the female-male ratio in these villages hovers around 879-880 females to every 1,000 males.

The 1991 census figures for Madurai district put the ratio for the same age group to 918 females per 1,000 males. So there is a sizeable fall, and thereby hangs a tale.

Every non-governmental organisation working in this belt of Tamil Nadu is aware of the long-prevalent tradition of killing girl babies. In a brutally patriarchal society, the causes for this heinous practice are manifold: not the least of it being dowry. The others vary from every family being desperate for a male heir, for as flimsy a reason as performing the last rites of the parents, to the oft-proven-wrong belief that it is the male child who takes care of the aged parents.

Add to this the prospects of a life filled with drudgery that faces the average village woman. The refrain you hear in the villages around Usilampatti has speciously impeccable logic. "As mothers, we might as well undergo the one-

time misery of killing the child – either after birth or before – after determining its gender on the TV machine (an ultrasound scan), rather than put her through a life-time misery and suffering".

According to the statistics provided by the government, the practice of female infanticide is coming down. This might be true., if one looks at the killing of girl babies after birth by barbaric methods such as suffocating the new-born with a pillow; choking her with rice grains or paddy husk; or covering her face with a wet towel. Even more inhuman methods, such as burying the child alive, or allowing it to die of sheer hunger as the mother stops feeding, are also prevalent.

But as these methods leave a trail, and which led to the government clamping down on such practices severely in 1992-93, when a woman called Karuppaiyee was arrested in Madurai, infanticide has given way to foeticide. In and around Usilampatti, as many as 13 scan centres have sprung up, and in Madurai there are more than 50.

To the question, whether a scan can reveal the gender of the foetus with some accuracy only after 16-20 weeks, the SIRD vice-president, Mr. C. Maunam says: "That is no deterrent. We know cases when the mother has aborted the foetus in the sixth, seventh or even eighth month." Which, of course, makes it an artificially induced delivery.

The scan clinics, which are doing brisk business in Usilampatti, have fixed the fee according to the villagers' capacity to pay, charging Rs. 50 to confirm the pregnancy and Rs. 150 to reveal the gender.

In Madurai, of course, the fee is upward of Rs. 300 and there is some awareness that revealing the sex of the foetus is a gross violation of the provisions of the Prenatal Diagnostics Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act of 1994. At the Doppler Scan Centre in Madurai, a prominent notice is put up: "Revealing foetal sex is prohibited by law. Don't insist on knowing the foetal sex."

Speaking to Business Line, its owner, Dr. S. Manohar, said that since he "put up the notice two months ago, business had come down as some people want a scan done only to know the sex of the child."

He does give a "commission" to the doctor who refers the patient for a scan, (or else I'll have to shut shop") and admits that though his centre does not reveal the sex of the foetus to the patient, sometimes on "humanitarian considerations, when patients with three daughters want to know the gender, we would reveal it after 30 weeks or so". Of course, when (referring) doctors call us and insist on

knowing the sex, we have to reveal it". Another loophole in the system is that the records of the clinic bear the sex of the foetus, and a little 'co-operation' from the staff can reveal it to the parents.

Gross misuse of technology

Though sonology is a boon in diagnosing congenital defects and other abnormalities, and has often helped doctors – such as Dr. S. Suresh of Chennai – save babies, in this belt of Tamil Nadu, it has been hijacked for the purpose of murdering the female foetus.

Obviously, the craze to beget a male child and abort a female foetus, has made the scan centre a vital link in the chain. While allowing the parents a chance to end the pregnancy if the child is female, thus saving them from the arm of the law – which in this area is hardly long – for the doctors, it is a money-spinner. Small wonder, then, that a couple of scan centres have announced a gold coin to the doctor who recommends the maximum number of patients in a month!

And, after the sex of the foetus has been revealed to a woman and if it happens to be female, not only the child but also the mother's life might be at risk. The more advanced the pregnancy, the more difficult and costlier the abortion. Often, families in a village put together Rs. 150 for the scan, but cannot afford the abortion performed by a private doctor who might charge between Rs. 1,000 and Rs. 3,000. It is here that quacks come in the picture. The attempt to kill the foetus varies from the insertion into the uterus of the stem of a poisonous plant to the consumption of all kinds of locally brewed concoctions – one example is the pregnant woman drinking two kilos of sugar boiled in two glasses of water, or mixed with a cola or any other aerated drink – to induce abortion.

Says P. Pavalam, a counsellor with SIRD, "Quite often, the abortion is incomplete and the woman has to be rushed to a hospital which is not always able to save her at that last stage."

Gauging the anxiety for male babies in this belt and sensing the money-spinning potential for a male-baby making venture, Siddha and other medical practitioners have jumped into the fray. They promise male children if the parents follow a certain diet, do some breathing exercises and adopt certain poses during coitus at certain periods of the moon!

The more advanced the technology and the grander the name that can be given to it, the better the prospects of making easy money. A Madurai based microbiologist, promising to use advanced technology to separate the Y sperms from the X and implant them in the woman's womb in a bid to produce a male

baby (see Business Line, July 10) has ended up in trouble with women's groups. His visiting card was a dead giveaway and following a police complaint, he had to get anticipatory bail from the Madras High Court.

Dr. Sabu George, who has a doctorate in child growth from an American University and who has been researching the phenomenon of female infanticide in India from 1985, came through this microbiologists's board blatantly offering a male child. "I knew that such a technology is being used in Punjab - Ludhiana, Amritsar and Jalandhar - where about Rs. 1 lakh is charged, but it was the first time I found such a case in the South."

That was in November, 1998 and he immediately brought it to the notice of the SIRD. Though under the 1994 Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques Prevention Act, the appropriate authority for registering a complaint against sex-discriminatory techniques is the Directorate of Public Health, "it took us a long time to even get an appointment with the Director as he has so many other responsibilities."

Only in March did the SIRD representatives get an appointment with the "appropriate authority" and were asked to first file a police complaint. Now the police have to file a chargesheet, only after which the case can begin.

Dr. George feels that it is the doctors' lobby which succeeded in getting a State authority and not an independent body to look into such complaints. "The doctors are only too well aware that such an authority will have his/her hands full with various responsibilities and hence it was the easiest way to scuttle or delay investigations into complaints made under the Act."

Decrying the blatant attempt by some doctors "to commercially exploit public demand for a male child", the SIRD president, Mr. Jeeva said: "Female genocide is now sought to be done by transforming a barbaric practice into modern medical technology".

In Chennai, the well-known infertility expert, Dr. Kamala Selvaraj of G.G. Hospital, even while decrying all sex-determination tests as "unethical", told Business Line: " But when women with one or two daughters come to me and say they want a male child, I do try to help them by a natural method." This "natural method" involves the monitoring of the ovulation period and advising the couple to have intercourse during a particular period.

No law bans such "natural methods" to get a male child. But the very fact that there is a demand for them is certainly disturbing. So what if a couple has one or two daughters? Why don't those who have one or two sons go chasing methods, technological or 'natural', to beget a girl child, one wonders. But then, as the

Hong Kong based chairperson of the Equal Opportunities Commission put it, "you cannot legislate against attitudes."

While prosecution of erring microbiologists or sonologists who reveal the sex of the foetus, has to go on, let us look at the large group of women from the SIRD Women Sanghams who had assembled at Suliochanpatti village, about 12 km from Usilampatti, to talk to this columnist.

When the girl child and the evil of dowry is the issue of discussion, the women get so charged up that it is quite a task to persuade them to talk one at a time. In the beginning, everybody says that infanticide was no longer being practised in their village. But after some time, they lower their guard, some of the women admit to killing their girl children.

Vasanthi (name changed) had done the act only a month ago, "because I already have two daughters and it is not going to be easy to find the dowry to get them married." She wants a male child, and has planned out the strategy for her next pregnancy. "This time I'm going to see on the TV (scan) whether it is a girl or a boy. Only if it is a boy, I'll go through with the pregnancy; if it's a girl, I'll do an abortion."

Instead of being appalled at this chilling admission, the other women only sympathise with her. Says Jyothi: "There is no way you can expect her, or any of us, to organise the marriage of three daughters."

Significantly enough, dowry is not the only deterrent. "The average we are asked to give is around 10 sovereigns (of gold jewellery), a steel bureau (cupboard), a scooter, a gold ring and a set of clothes for the bridegroom, and furniture for the house. If all this is a one-time affair, we would manage that. But it is the continuing demands from the mapillai's (bridegroom's) family that kill us," she adds.

The demands may sound ridiculous to an educated urban woman. But in the rural areas, they are no laughing matter. The first Diwali and Pongal after the marriage are nightmare occasions for the married woman's parents, when huge brass vessels, 100 kg of rice, 500-600 bananas, so many kgs of jaggery and, once again, clothes for the bridegrooms' family have to be presented.

"Then for other social occasions, like an ear-piercing ceremony, or a death in the bridegroom's family, we have to once again dole out all kinds of gifts. It is a lifetime burden we have taken on."

What if the Scan Centre Makes a Mistake?

The answer to this question is provided by Jaya of Periyasemettupatti, about 42 km from Madurai. "This is exactly what happened to a woman from Pudukkottai who came to a scan centre in Usilampatti to find out the sex of the child. She was told the child was female and the private doctor to whom she went demanded Rs. 3,500 to abort the baby. But as she didn't have the money, she went back, and three months ago, delivered a male child."

If the nexus between the scan centre and the doctor is complete, as is being charged, one does not know how many hapless parents in this region are murdering male children too.

Macabre though it may sound, perhaps this might be nature's way of evening out the sex ratio in a community.