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## Dear God, Give Us Only Male Children

*R.P. Ravindra*

*It is hard to believe that such a bizarre thing could be happening in Kerala which earned the praise of the world for achieving total literacy last year. But next month it will host the week-long Putrakameshthi yagnya – a sacrificial ritual for those seeking male progeny. R.P. Ravindra examines the controversial event.*

From May 2, 1992, for one full week the town of Cochin in Kerala will witness the re-enactment of a historical event. The previous performance is said to have been orchestrated by King Dashrath a few thousand years ago. 'Puthrakamesthi Yagnya', according to the Valmiki Ramayana, was performed by Dashrath, under the instructions of Rishyashringa Rishi, to help him beget sons. During the Yagnya, offerings were made to Agni, amidst chanting of Mantras from the Atharvaveda. At the end of the Yagnya, a luminous person from 'Prajapita Loka' appeared from within the 'Yogavedi' holding in his hand a golden plate containing 'Payas'. The 'Payas' prepared specially by the Gods was eaten by the three queens of Dashrath. This resulted in the birth of Rama and his brothers.

So goes the story. For generations, we heard it, treated it as a story and forgot it. Our ancient scriptures are full of stories of strange conceptions. Of 'Surya' blessing Kunti with a son, of people born in unlikely manners. Millions of people regard the scriptures as sacred, yet in their lives they understand and follow the basic laws of nature regarding conception and birth. Yet, even as we stand on the threshold of the 21st century, the Center for Astrological Research & Development (CARD), the organizer of this Yagnya, thinks otherwise. It believes that Puthrakamesthi is a 'sacred, elaborate, result-oriented' ritual which would immensely benefit childless (read sonless) couples. (Incidentally, according to Ayurveda, a mother of only daughters is regarded as 'sterile'.)

The Yagnya has already become a media sensation. The organizers are going to spend 75 lakh rupees for fulfilling the wishes of 1,000 sonless couples – just peanuts you might say, for such a 'noble' cause. The organizers have been so thorough, they will feed Agni only the best, the uncontaminated. After all the gods who receive their shares through Agni are not used to consuming contaminated substandard food. Hundreds of cows have been procured to yield over a quintal of pure ghee. The quality control tests are equally rigid for the

other paraphernalia e.g. 30,000 mud pots, tons of firewood, hundreds of kilograms of rice etc.

There are reports of strong protests and feeble murmurs of disapproval. The latter are from a section of vedic scholars who question the competency of present day scholars to produce results. They also believe that Dashrath could beget sons because he had performed Ashwamedh Yagnya in addition to Putrakamesthi. It can be expected that if the present Putrakamesthi fails, a twin production of Ashwamedha and Putrakamesthi would soon be in the offing.

The rationalists have objected to 'this crude practice and commercialization'. The women's groups are concerned over the perpetuation of male dominance under the guise of vedic rituals. Still, the success of the Yagnya is a foregone conclusion, the organizers claim that there were 5,000 applications from issueless young couples in India and abroad and they have been able to accommodate only 1,000. The number of childless couples all over India is 1.5 million as per their claims. Therefore, the demand is much greater than the supply.

It has always been so. The 'son mania' is so strong in India, that people will do anything to beget a son. The all pervading patriarchal influence has prompted people all over the world at almost all times to try out anything - weird, silly or ghastly, (see box). It is understandable if during Archimedes' time, men tied the left testicle for this purpose, or in India during Punsavana ritual, the woman was made to lie down on her right side and medicated drops were added to her right nostril. Because at that time, scientific knowledge about conception and childbirth was not available. Everything to the left - uterus, testicles, bed side was considered feminine, while the right side was masculine.

What can one do when the same theories are blindly followed in India, with or without a fancy modern packing, even today. Take the case of 'Select' capsules, manufactured by Vasa Pharmaceuticals, Vadodara. The manufacturers claimed that the product, if taken for 21 days, starting from 15th day of the last menstrual period, would result in the birth of a son. It was further claimed that the product would even change the sex of a female issue as 'the sex of the foetus is undecided for the first 3 months'. The product was a big hit in Gujarat, even gynecologists trained in modern medicine prescribed it.

A gynecologist attached to a reputed Ayurvedic hospital in Bombay performs 'Punsavana' for those longing for a son. A vedic 'scholar' from Thane claims that he can make a woman in USA conceive a son by performing a Ganesh Pooja here at Thane! Another self-made researcher in Bombay suggests a strictly for fee course in diet for the yet-to- be pregnant mother. The logic of the diet is that it would control the blood composition, which in turn influences the hormonal

levels, which ultimately at the time of coitus makes the vaginal mucus more permeable to bearing sons.

Weird! Twisted logic! You might say. But lakhs of people think otherwise. How can such things go unchecked and unchallenged? Several forces are at work. One is the desperation of couples. Patriarchy dictates that the test of 'maleness' and 'femaleness' lies in the ability to produce a son. A son is the one way ticket to 'moksha', an old age support, a repeatedly renewable cheque for dowry. So people do anything to get a son. Secondly, in all such cases, birth of a son is attributed to the efficacy of the method. However, any failure is dumped on the errors or ill luck or Karma of the user. Thirdly, there is almost total absence of the culture of questioning. There is almost a conspiracy of silence. The state, academicians, politicians, professionals, media, social organizations, judiciary, almost all of them prefer to keep mum. Seldom are the right questions raised and debated, and the right action taken.

It is time to break the silence and raise questions - simple, straight, and even awkward. If the organizers of the Yagnya are so confident, why do they refuse the scrutiny of their performance by an independent body? Even if the Yagnya is proved to be 100% effective, is it appropriate to spend such a huge amount for this cause? Why are people who are so concerned about the quality of food materials to be added to fire not concerned that millions of people in India do not get even dirty adulterated food? Why do products like 'Select' remain in the markets for years? Why don't gynecologists trained in modern medicine assert that sex of the offspring is determined at the time of conception and it remains unaltered later? Why don't doctors point out the potential hazards of administration of any medicated substance (probably containing hormones) to a pregnant women in the first trimester? Why do 'Punjavane' and related theories change the sex of the foetus from female to male and not the other way round? What if the transformation process remains incomplete? The list is endless.

The basic question however, still remains unanswered. What is the way out? Should we reject all the unscientific methods and go for modern scientific methods of preselection of sex? More than 200 groups of researchers are engaged in a world-wide question for a technique of sex pre-selection which would be efficient, cheap, safe, and simple. No technique has yet proved to be accurate. But then, it could just be 'the questions of time' before it became a reality.

Choosing the sex of one's offsprings is sexism at its worst. Sex selection would further reinforce the sex stereotypes prevalent in our society and increase women's oppression.

It's time we realize that the craving for male offspring is not a natural urge. It is the response of an insecure psyche conditional through ages. In a country like India with a highly skewed sex ratio, sex preselection would have dangerous ramifications. Sex pre-selection represents a process of pre-elimination of women. This may be much more acceptable to people because on an immediate level there seem to be no problems. Which is why it is even more dangerous.

Female infanticide, sex-selective abortion and sex pre-selection are manifestations of the same attitude\values. It is time we said no to all of them, even as we oppose obscurantist and deceptive rituals like Puthrakameshthi.

Some ancient- and spurious – prescriptions for son-seekers

- Tying the left testicle before coitus.
- Conception at the time of full moon, with a cold wind blowing.
- Conception before midnight.
- Drinking a lion's blood.
- Hanging of pants on the right side of the bed by the man.
- Man having intercourse with his boots on.
- Woman dressed in a man's clothing before coitus.
- Stepping out of bed by the woman (the morning after coitus) with the right foot first.
- Peeling a grain of barley after 'Ritusnana' and swallowing it with water for eight days on an empty stomach.
- Eating (by the woman) curds from a cow having a calf of the same color (as herself), two beans and a grain of barley.
- Writing the Gayatri mantra and the Mahamrityunjaya mantra, under the stars, under Pushya Nakshatra on a Bhojpatra bark with a pomegranate pen dipped in saffron and washing the bark daily with holy water and drinking it during the first morning of pregnancy.