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Hanging in An Unequal Balance

Vipin Pubby

After the ban on sex-determination tests in four States, the Lok Sabha recently followed suit. But is just banning the test enough to ensure a better deal for women? Vipin Pubby checks out the scene in Haryana.

In less than 30 years of its existence, Haryana has emerged as the second most economically advanced state in the country after Punjab. Economic indicators have shown a sharp uptrend ever since the "neglected" parts of the composite Punjab were carved out to form Haryana in 1966.

Ironically, however, while the general belief is that prosperity brings in awareness and reduces discrimination against the fair sex, the cold facts reflect a trend away from it in Haryana.

The male-female ratio in the state has actually been declining and is among the lowest in the country at 865 females per 1,000 males. The average for rural areas is 864 but certain districts have as low a ratio as 814 females for every 1,000 males.

What could be more worrying is the fact that the impact of the recent trend of sex tests through ultrasound imaging may not be adequately reflected in the 1991 census figures (Figure 1).

Though Amniocentesis came to India in 1975, the technique began to be applied for determination of sex openly and in a big way only in the late 1980s after the enactment of the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act. A rash of advertisements and wall writings appeared all over, more so in Haryana, to determine larka ya larki. The legalisation of abortion, though enacted with an entirely different aim, gave a free rein for ultrasound tests and female foeticide.

There was an acute scarcity of girls for marriages even much before the sex tests came into being, says Khazan Singh, Head of the Sociology Department, Maharishi Dayanand University (MDU), Rohtak.

He pointed out that monogamy was common and there were instances when parents of prospective brides had to be paid 'dowry' (or rather bride price) even though it was not an acceptable custom.

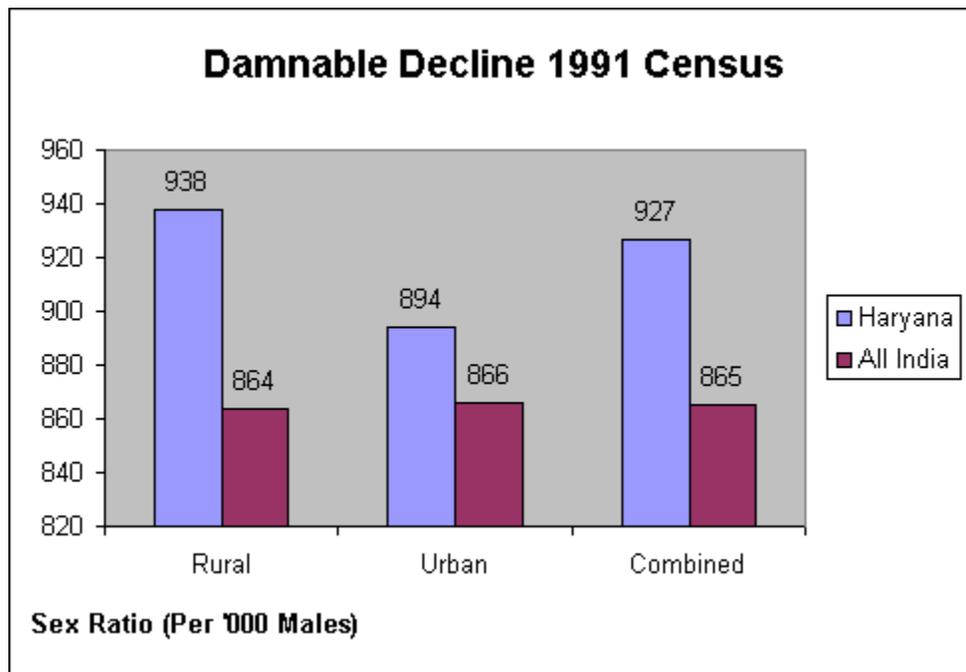


Figure 1

Neglect and discrimination against women has been the bane of the society in the area, stresses R. K. Punia, who heads the Sociology Department of the Haryana Agricultural University in Hisar. The discrimination starts from the time of suckling. While sons are breast-fed even after they can run around, girls are weaned much earlier. Then follows discrimination in food, health care, hygiene, education and jobs. Ironically, it is women who discriminate most against their sex. A significant fact about Haryana is that the sex ratio is low despite the dowry system having a weaker hold in the state as compared to others like Uttar Pradesh or Bihar. Perhaps the slogan Larki hi dahej hai (the bride herself is the dowry) is taken much more in a literal sense in Haryana than elsewhere!

Over 80 percent of the agricultural operations in the state are done by women. These include sowing, transplanting, weeding, harvesting and storage. Men work in the fields only as plough men, says social worker Chandrawati, who adds that a harsh life under unhygienic conditions could be a reason for the high mortality rate among women.

Indeed, a common sight in rural Haryana is that of men squatting on charpaiis and smoking the hukka while the women are busy in the fields or tending to household responsibilities.

Interestingly, during a recent tour of rural areas, when photographer Swadesh Talwar tried to snap a group of men smoking the hukka and playing cards, one of the men remarked: "Go ahead, take our photographs to tell the world that the men here are useless and good for nothing".

The sex ratio is the lowest the discrimination against women quite high in the districts of Haryana which border Rajasthan. The trend is in the reverse as one moves northwest towards Punjab where womenfolk do not work in the fields. "The areas contiguous to Rajasthan are still ingrained in the cultural moorings of the desert state", points out Punia. He refers to historical reasons, which could be partly responsible for the distinct preference for males in the area.

So deep is the desire for male babies that the birth of a female is considered a catastrophe. Larka idhar, larki kisi aur ke (A son for us and daughters for others) is a common prayer. No wonder, girls are at times named Bhatari (too much) and Dhagha (enough).

While the ratio of males to females at the time of birth is about 52:48 in Haryana, there is a sharp decline over the years. A micro-study conducted by Sunder Lal, head of the Social and Preventive Medicine department of MDU, has revealed startling facts.

The study was conducted in rural areas around Rohtak on 9,000 children. The sex ratio for infants in the identified group was 861 females per 1,000 males. However, the sex ratio plummeted to 849 by the age of 14 years - clearly showing a high mortality rate among girls below the age of 14 years.

The study also noted a decline in the ratio during the reproductive age. The birth rate in the area was computed to be 32.8 per 1,000 population as against the national average of 29.9, which indicated high fertility and high mortality in reproductive age group (15-45 years). The maternal mortality rate was found to be 475 per 1,00,000 live births.

The causes for non-maternal mortality in the state are alarming. Bums, rail and road accidents and suicides account for 29.7 per cent.

No less than 12.8 per cent deaths among females are due to poisoning (mostly among those married). Lal points out that the figure reflects high rate of deaths due to conflict at household level. The study also states that only 1.2 per cent of the family members of deceased women could produce death certificates.

The Haryana government is deeply concerned over the trend, says Health Secretary Raghbir Singh. He says besides the other steps being taken to improve

the lot of women, it was noted that the ultrasound tests were being grossly misused for sex tests. In view of the urgency of the problem, the government has decided to issue an ordinance for a ban on such tests through prenatal diagnostic techniques.

Though the law is yet to be enforced, the mere declaration by the government of its intention has had a salutary effect. Health Department staffs have asked the ultrasound clinics and others to clear up the hoardings and billboards and have cautioned them about strict action. The result is that almost all such practitioners have painted over the hoardings.