

Dispensing with Daughters: Technology, Society, Economy in North India

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A study of the micro-level experiences of families in five districts, one each in five states, some of them with the lowest child sex ratios in the country, seeks to explain the complex causes behind the declining ratios by looking at gender and family strategies, shaped by social processes in the urban and rural areas.

The problems of a negative female-male sex ratio in northern India, and more recently of severe declines in child sex ratios (CSRs) are well-known. Less noticed, however, is that most studies have addressed the issue primarily through statistical, demographic facts and trends. Our study, whose findings are summarised here, opens up micro-level experiences and actions of individuals and families in five districts with some of the lowest CSRs in the country. Using an innovative combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods, the study seeks to explain the complex reasons for declining CSRs, by focusing on the contemporary meanings and practices of gender and family strategies, as these are being variously structured by wider social processes, in different urban and rural locations.¹

The districts chosen were Kangra (Himachal Pradesh), Fatehgarh Saheb (Punjab), Rohtak (Haryana), Dhaulpur (Rajasthan) and Morena (Madhya Pradesh). All have extremely low or the lowest CSRs. The study was done in two phases – Kangra, Morena and Dhaulpur during 2003-04 and Rohtak and Fatehgarh Saheb during 2005-06. In this summary, only some of the findings can be presented, which means that the site-wise variations, critical to our findings and analysis, have to be omitted.

Table 1 provides basic sex ratio data for the sites chosen in the study. Despite some variation within the sites, with occasional “good” sex ratio sites, the figures are generally low. The urban figures are particularly low, but in Rohtak and Fatehgarh Saheb rural-urban differences are narrow. Urban Dhaulpur is an exception but space does not permit us to discuss it further here. In Fatehgarh Saheb, Rohtak and Kangra, the 0-14 CSRs are worse than the overall and the 0-6 worse than the 0-14, indicating the presence of some trends at birth, before it, or soon after. In Morena and Dhaulpur, the worst sex ratios are in the 0-14 age group indicating that bias against girls/women is most visible in the 7-14 age group in these two districts.

Aversion to Daughters

The CSR patterns were examined in relation to a number of independent variables, but no simple correlations were found.

Development Levels: The order of the five study districts, Morena and Dhaulpur, Kangra, Rohtak and Fatehgarh Saheb, broadly reflects levels of development, in the reverse order of their CSRs. However, there is nothing hard and fast about this order. Morena and Dhaulpur have high levels of child mortality with skewing against girls, corresponding to comparatively severe levels of poverty, unlike the other sites. The neglect of girls is most severe in Morena.

Standard of Living: No clear correlations were found with standard of living measures, used as a proxy measure for class. Generally, low CSRs exist at all economic levels in rural areas with extremely low CSRs among different urban classes. The worst sex ratios are not found in the highest urban class fractions. The pattern

Table 1: Sex Ratios of Selected Sites

State District		Fieldwork Data (2003, 2005)				
		Madhya Pradesh Morena	Rajasthan Dhaulpur	Himachal Pradesh Kangra	Haryana Rohtak	Punjab F-Saheb
Rural	Overall sex ratio	859	860	1001	831	866
	0 - 6 sex ratio	895	823	835	798	762
	0 - 14 sex ratio	857	797	852	862	735
Urban	Overall sex ratio	824	885	921	878	864
	0 - 6 sex ratio	771	922	743	751	706
	0 - 14 sex ratio	763	850	764	806	696
Total	Overall sex ratio	842	874	961	855	865
	0 - 6 sex ratio	842	871	789	776	734
	0 - 14 sex ratio	815	824	807	834	716

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indicates that economic constraint combines with the striving for upward mobility and available technologies to produce outcomes that suggest a spreading aversion to daughters.

Caste Groups: At one end of the spectrum, the upper castes have the worst CSRs in most sites, especially in urban areas. At the other end, the scheduled castes are

Table 2: CSRs of Children Born after 1990 by Order of Birth

	Morena	Dhaulpur	Kangra	Rohtak	F.Saheb
1st born	957	966	898	895	830
2nd born	812	822	770	810	690
3rd born	743	919	737	880	590

demonstrating the combined effects of poverty and upward mobility in terms of greater masculinisation among their children. Interestingly, the extremely low CSRs of the rural and urban upper castes are more differentiated when disaggregated. By far the worst sex ratios in the rural sample are among the Jat Sikhs in rural Fatehgarh Saheb (CSR 590), where the agrarian crisis and a growing desire for just one son are taking the structural influences on family composition to a new level. The other backward classes display a much more mixed picture.

Education: Widespread levels of schooling are a relatively recent phenomenon in most of the rural sites. High levels of schooling for girls in the 10-14 age group have been achieved, but along with low CSRs. Matters become more complex in higher education – in the three economically better off sites, the proportion of girls accessing higher education outstrips that of boys. Two of these sites have the lowest sex ratios in the country.

Fertility and Demographic Transition: The number of children per family in the different sites has been declining, but at different rates. The lowest fertilities are found in Kangra, followed by Fatehgarh Saheb. Interestingly, fertility patterns in Fatehgarh Saheb show a greater spread than in Kangra, with a small but significant number of women having just one child, and across different age cohorts. By looking at birth order within particular families, it is possible to see whether there are

changing trends across births. Generally, CSRs worsen by birth order, with the biggest drops in the second birth.

Only Morena and Dhaulpur have acceptable sex ratios among first-borns. In Kangra, Rohtak, and particularly Fatehgarh Saheb, sex selection appears to have been resorted to from the very first birth and more so in urban than in rural areas, though in the case of Rohtak and Fatehgarh Saheb the differences are small. There is a major drop with the second birth in all sites barring urban Dhaulpur, indicating that it is among the second-borns that changes in family size as well as in sex selection are having the greatest impact.

Planning Families/Planning Gender

On being asked how many children a family ought to have, most responded “one boy one girl”, with a few wanting more sons. In Fatehgarh Saheb a very small number openly said that “one son is enough”. In practice the pattern was similar with important variations. The small family norm becomes visible to different degrees in all the sites after 1985, very strongly so in rural Kangra, Fatehgarh Saheb and Rohtak. In rural Morena it is a two-son pattern that takes the lead, while in urban sites the two boys/one girl combination follows one boy/one girl. In Dhaulpur, both these combinations emerge in the lead. Fatehgarh Saheb stands apart in that after the one boy/one girl pattern comes that of one child – a son. An insignificant number of families have only daughters. The growth of the small family norm has been indistinguishable from planning for sons. Planning the family means planning for families with sons and preferably without daughters, and certainly not more than one daughter.

Family planning strategies to prevent the birth of daughters are vouchsafed in the language of modern family planning, rationality and science. The message of the inverted triangle is well known – plan for small families. It is read as “plan not to have daughters”. This means that abortion turns into a mode of contraception – for monitored conception is necessary to ensure sons. Women carry the responsibility and burden for producing the “correct” family – if necessary through repeated conception and abortion, the latter often in

unsafe conditions and late in the pregnancy. This is then reported as miscarriage.

Despite past strategies that had similar outcomes, there is now a shift from conscious to more deliberate strategies, first at the level of a planned household strategy, and second in the kinds of technologies used for achieving family planning goals. In the past, the planning of the family unfolded as children were born, with active intervention such as infanticide and passive intervention through selective female neglect. Today, the goals are more directly expressed and achieved through planned technological interventions from early to fairly late in the pregnancy.

- **Female Infanticide:** This phenomenon has been historically documented in these sites. There is evidence that vestiges of female infanticide survive.

- **Technologies of Neglect:** Neglect is the act of not taking steps that could save the life of a child, systematised to the fine degree of a technology. These techniques of neglect lead to the attrition of girl children into teenage years, as seen from the data, particularly in Morena and Dhaulpur and among poorer families across the sites.

The absence of public healthcare and financial and other difficulties in gaining access to existing facilities emerge as crucial factors in the greater neglect of girl children. In the richer sites and among well-to-do families, female mortality due to neglect is negligible. However, discrimination in healthcare, nutrition and type of schooling was evident in many sites, reinforcing the low value given to daughters.

- **Herbal Potions and Ritual Prescriptions:** Other than folk techniques passed down by local “specialists”, socially legitimate religious organisations and individuals are reinforcing son-preference by supplying methods believed to ensure the birth of male children. Punjab boasts the newest technologies for sex determination and selection while old methods remain equally popular, pointing to the desperation for sons.

- **Sex Selective Abortions:** Despite the Pre Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act 1994 (amended in 2003) prohibiting sex determination and sex selection, the use of ultrasound and sex selective abortion was pervasive, with local doctors, gynaecologists, radiologists and obstetricians, nurses, auxiliary nurse midwives (ANMs), and other

medical personnel all benefiting monetarily. Many of these services have gone underground, but the clinics providing them are well known to local residents and the authorities. Those who resorted to traditional methods often wanted to confirm the sex of the foetus through an ultrasound test.

In the more “developed” states and among the better educated and better off, “pre-emptive” action before birth itself is resorted to, deliberately and consciously. Though technological interventions vary by belief and economic level, they veer towards “modern medical science”. Among some poorer families, especially in Morena and Dhaulpur, attempting to control family size and sex composition through ultrasound linked abortion comes much later, if at all. Rather than a simple class-stratification correlation, one sees the impact of class and caste relations and the influence of the practices of the powerful. Thus, there was a case in urban Kangra wherein an upper caste/class employer provided a “backward” lower-caste/class employee with a loan to undergo an ultrasound test.

It has been noted that India has more ultrasound machines per population than the west, with unnecessary ultrasound check-ups prescribed as routine diagnostics during pregnancy. The collusion of the medical community with manufacturers and technology providers is also well-documented. The moral stance adopted by the medical fraternity is itself a matter of major concern. We were told that “if girls were not wanted they should not be born”; “elimination of girl children helped the larger goal of population reduction”; “this is a social service to people, allowing them to exercise their choice”.

Economic and Social Contexts

Understanding the economic and social factors that lead to a skewed child sex ratio requires moving from the immediacy of reproductive decisions. It is necessary to grasp the nature of change and not assume a straightforward continuity with tradition. In fact, though son-preference remains, it has been somewhat shaken, reflected in murmurings on the undependability of sons. The more thorough elimination of daughters can only be explained if we accept that what was the obverse of son-preference – daughter undesirability

– has now become daughter-aversion. Daughter-aversion as an emotion and practice has become the common sense with a life of its own, quite apart from son-preference. Thus, along with son preference, we need to understand the growing unwantedness of daughters – the idea that they can be dispensed with. The fact that some people do also want and care for a daughter does not take away from the social force of daughter-aversion.

Rather than any one process or structural feature, one must understand particular conjunctures of processes and features in a particular locale that lead to low CSRS. These conjunctures can be viewed through the different dimensions of the inter-generational transfer of resources. The latter combines with the new opportunities for sex selection to become a conscious strategy for dispensing with daughters.

Inter-generational Transfer of Resources

In all the sites the inter-generational transfer of resources is critical in expressing and defining the relative value of sons and daughters. With persisting structures of patrilineal descent, patrilineal inheritance and post-marital residence patterns, young couples go to live with the husband’s family; sons continue the family line and inherit property. In every site and group without exception, marriage is socially compulsory, especially for girls. What does this imply? First, daughters are not expected to support their parents materially, and certainly not married daughters. Residential and descent practices combine in the well-known idea that a daughter is a temporary member and resident of her natal family. The returns for spending on her cannot be care or support in old age, whatever may be the

other (ritual, spiritual, status) benefits. Son preference remains a normative value.

Compulsory, normatively correct high status marriage is increasingly tied to an earlier upper caste practice of dowry marriage and to the spread of expensive marriages. The normative denial of support from daughters is held along with the assertion that daughters must only receive. Growing demands for lavish dowries and rising expectations of elaborate weddings for daughters means more “outgo” on them, stimulating daughter aversion. Additionally, there are fears that with extended dowry and perceived increases in marital breakdown, support to daughters will not end with their marriage.

A very important change in the inter-generational transfer of resources, generally not noted, is linked to the striking rise in the mean age at marriage for both men and women. This means that there is a sheer lengthening of the period for which the natal family must support a daughter, beginning with food and clothing. As a child grows, the requirements of these basic needs become more expensive. Educational costs must be added to this. Later marriage also translates into a larger dowry.

The social practices of marriage mean more spending on a daughter before, at, and after her marriage – for a daughter who should go away. We see in this situation the unintended consequences of piecemeal reform strategies. Stopping child marriage is unequivocally desirable, for marriage at a later age should enhance women’s autonomy. However, when other aspects of marriage practices – caste, kinship, descent and inheritance norms – remain unchanged, daughters become a burden while an enhancement in married women’s autonomy is uncertain.

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(Book 1)

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With no change in the norms of sexuality and caste-based marriage, the increasing age at marriage has meant more anxiety surrounding the unattached sexuality of unmarried nubile daughters. The “dangers” are apparently increased by the numbers of unmarried, young men (partly due to the low sex ratio), whose lack of employment and eligibility keep them unmarried.

Economic Trends and Crisis

The inter-generational transfer of resources is closely tied to economic processes and trends in work and employment. The palpable sense of a looming agrarian crisis has implications for family aspirations and family-building strategies. In the agriculturally richer sites of Fatehgarh Saheb and Rohtak, not only was diversion of property to daughters to be prevented, even male heirs must be limited. In Morena and Dhaulpur, landed and upper caste respondents were torn between the rationality of reducing the number of heirs and the power that accrues through more sons. In all these districts, land is increasingly scarce and insufficient or perceived as such. To this picture may be added the highly skewed distribution of land and the growing fragmentation of landholdings. For the (relatively) rich, it was the uncertainty of a future based on agriculture, while for the poor it was the immediate concerns of subsistence and returns to labour.

The agricultural crisis and the growing importance of non-agricultural employment also devalued the role of women in agriculture. Across the sites women’s work was below the threshold value for recognising the need of women’s and thence daughters’ labour. Except in Kangra, there were clear articulations that women’s paid work threatened gender and familial authority and should not be encouraged. Not only were women an economic burden, they were to be kept as such. The need for earning men rather than earning women was reified through the latter’s lower incomes and restricted mobility.

Aspirations increased the need for non-agricultural work and occupational multiplicity within a household, even as the gap between the aspirations and realities of male non-agricultural employment widened. Growing male unemployment

reinforces insecurity and the sense that investment should be directed at sons rather than daughters. The general sense of the difficulty faced by men in getting employment and securing livelihoods has been congruent with the aversion to spend on daughters, who are then considered a further drain on family resources. Increasing migration has also meant that married daughters may not be close by to provide emotional support and physical care.

Concluding Issues

Are there any signs of positive change? There were individuals, men and women, who refused to practise sex selection of any kind, who proudly pointed to their daughters, but they were by far in the minority. From the 2005 field data, there appears to be some indication that post-2001 families in Rohtak and Fatehgarh Saheb are showing a greater acceptance of the first girl child than was true in the 1990s, even though second and third births remain sharply skewed against girls. Also important is the fact that data on health and nutrition from Kangra, Fatehgarh Saheb, and Rohtak reveal lesser discrimination against surviving girls. Qualitative data also reveal a desire among some mothers to ensure better futures for their daughters.

As girls in Kangra and even in Rohtak proceeded to do better than boys in schooling and as their job prospects in urban areas improve, the conflict over parental investment in children appears to be heightening. The beginnings of the realisation that the support of adult sons may not always be forthcoming is opening the door towards a more friendly treatment of daughters. However, a positive valuation of daughters for their own worth is only rarely heard.

We conclude the study with the following recommendations:

- Making transparent the nexus between local medical and paramedical personnel, government healthcare officials, and private radiologists and gynaecologists which allows continuing access to sex determination and selection.
- Expansion of public health facilities in terms of locations and possible treatment which would allow more gender equitable health-seeking behaviour on the part of parents and reorientation of public health programmes so as to delink them from family planning programmes.
- Expansion and improvement of public education.
- Institutional and state support for people in old age, including financial and physical care.
- Measures to counter the low levels of women’s work and the lack of value attached to it.
- Measures to address the compulsory nature of marriage for both women and men and undermine patrilineal residence.
- Pave the way for social acceptance of women’s right to property which would then enable parents to accept support from children of either sex.

NOTE

- 1 The methodology involved a two stage questionnaire administered to a total of 6,500 households across urban and rural sites in each of the districts, followed by in-depth interaction with select families. The details of the methodology can be obtained from the report “Planning Families, Planning Gender: The Adverse Child Sex Ratio in Selected Districts of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana and Punjab” by Mary E John, Ravinder Kaur, Rajni Palriwala, Saraswati Raju and Alpana Sagar, Books for Change, 2008 (with support from ActionAid India and IDRC Canada). The report can be accessed on www.cwds.org

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