



Death Wish for Daughters Son Preference and Daughter Aversion in Bihari Folk Songs

○ Sangeeta Krishna

Jo hum janati dhia kokhai
janamiha
Peeyati mirchi jahar ho
Mirchi ke jhaare jhooredhia
mari jayiti

Chhoot jayite garhua santaap ho
(Had I known that the foetus was that
of a girl, I would have had a drink of
hot chillis and killed not only the
foetus but also this life long curse).

Curse of the Girl Child

The above fertility song sung in one
of the dialects of Bihar reflects sorrow,
pain and pathos on the birth of a girl
who is unwanted and unwelcome by
her own mother. The woman, who had
desired the coveted male child, feels
depressed at the birth of a daughter
and wishes death for the female baby.
She feels that her entire life is going to
be a penance for her. She frantically
desires for solace.

Another song makes pointed
reference to the birth of girl child as a
life long misfortune, a permanent
eclipse for the family. The parents
wonder when they would get relief
from this curse.

Chandra grahanwa beti sanjahi
laagela

Suraj grahanwa bhinusaar ho,
Dhia grahanwa beti janam se
laagela

Jaane kab ugrin hoyee ho

(The lunar eclipse occurs at night,
the solar in the day. Eclipse brought

about by the birth of a daughter lasts
forever).

There is a belief in Bihari society
that, with the birth of a girl, the earth
goes down by few yards whereas the
birth of son raises its position.
Simultaneously, the father is asked
to take off his *pagadi* (turban)
because with the birth of a girl,
humiliation and misfortune have
entered the house. And since the
father is not only a male, but also on
the top of gender hierarchy, he
should prepare himself to fight this
bad omen. In contrast, the moment
the pregnancy is disclosed, the
entire family and the community,
expecting the birth of a boy sit
together and sing:

Gund la re malaniya
Haar jachcha meri kamaniya
Raja rani do janeji
Aapas mei badh rahe hod
Jo gori tum dhia janogi
Mahalon sa karain khader
Jo gori tum poot janogi
Sab kuch karain waar

The gardener's wife (*malin*) is
asked to prepare a beautiful garland
for the would be mother. She is told
that the same garland would be given
to her as a "reward" if a son is born,
but at the same time she is also
reminded that if by accident a girl is
born, she would, be driven away
from the house as a "punishment".

She is told to pray to god for that
boon. *Sohar*, *Badhai*, drumming of
thalis are the ways to rejoice the
occasion.

Jug jug jiya ho lalanwa
Bhavanwa ke bhaag jagal ho
Lalana laal huye ho
Ankhiyon ke deepak
Manawa mein aaas jagal ho.

(May you have a long life, your birth
has brought prosperity and wealth.
You are the light of this house. Our
dream is going to be fulfilled).

Son preference is deeply
embedded in Bihari culture. The entire
atmosphere is charged with
excitement and happiness when a
male child comes into the family,
whereas the birth of a girl brings stoic
silence.

The midwives or the village
chamain's remuneration varies
according to the gender of the
newborn. The norm is 40 kg of grain
and clothing if a son is born, but half
the grain amount and an old saree at
the birth of a daughter. This
highlights the differential response to
the birth of the girl child (Krishna:
1999).

With each successive birth of a
daughter, the mother's status in the
family falls further and it can be
redeemed only when she gives birth
to a son. The mother is accorded
differential treatment and may even

be abandoned as a punishment for producing a daughter. She is made to eat a less nutritive diet, sleep on dry grass (*puaal*) and the room (*sauri*) in which she sleeps is covered with smoke emitted by cornwood whereas the room where a son is born is purified and perfumed by sandalwood smoke. The discrimination could be well seen in this song when the in-laws' family is trying to define her place and accord value in the family, depending on the gender of the child:

*Laal odhan laal aasan
Kera phal bhojan re
Aye lalna chanan ke jarela
pasangiya
Niari bhal aawela re
Kus odhan kus aasan
Van phal bhogan re
Aye lalna khukhudi ke jarela
pasangiya
Ninariyon na aawela.*

Religious and Cultural Sanction

The father who is genetically responsible for the gender of the child suffers little or no change in his status if a daughter is born. In fact, he only becomes an object of pity and sympathy. It is taken for granted that only a son can carry forward the lineage and scriptures are freely quoted to sanctify this belief.

There is a traditional blessing, "May you be the mother of hundred sons." This gender bias which has religious and cultural sanction is best reflected in the recent 2001 census provisional figures. With a national average of 933 females per 1000 males, India stands at the lowest rung along with Pakistan in having a huge deficit of females in its population. From the turn of the century, the census has been recording a downward trend. In 1901, it was 974 females per 1000 males, in 1911 it was 964, in 1921 the figure came down to 953, in 1931 it went down to 950 and 1941 recorded 945 females. The sex ratio was 946 in 1951, 941 in 1961, 930 in 1971, 934 in 1981, and 927

in 1991. But the most alarming situation is in the age group, 0-6, indicating a decline of 18, that is, from 945 to 927 on a national basis.

Bihar also has a similar story. The state registered a decline of 21, that is, from 959 in 1991 to 938 in 2001. Even the overall sex ratio of the state speaks of a gradual decline which is as follows: 994 females per 1000 males in 1961, 954 in 1971, 946 in 1981, 911 in 1991 and 921 in 2001, recording a marginal increase of 10, which is not satisfactory.

In a survey conducted by one NGO in the early 90's, the sex ratio was found to be dangerously low in four different blocks in the state. In Gopalpur block of Bhagalpur district, it was found that there were only 949 females for every 1000 males. In Bhawanipur block (Purnea), the ratio was 757 against 1000 males, in Dumra block (Sitamarhi) the ratio was 819 while in Palpur (Gumla) it was equally alarming at 781.

Thus the sex ratio in the state is dangerously skewed. If this trend continues, then we are headed towards a society with a gross gender deficit - the "missing women" phenomenon. The data on sex ratio

thus reinforces the reports of female foeticide that have appeared in the press from time to time. The unfortunate fact is that this deep-rooted gender bias cuts across cultural, caste, class and religious divides.

Born in a society that is obsessed with the male child, a girl child is looked upon as a source of colossal financial loss and economic drain and a great burden for all times. The social conditioning of women, who themselves are often convinced of the superiority of males and the importance of sons, makes them act as perpetrators of such views and practices. The following song gives vent to the depression of a mother who is unable to find a groom for her daughter:

*Bhaado maas amawas
rainandhiyari
Kahe tu janamalu hamaar dhia?
Hasuan khojalo churia khojalo
Situha katawalo tohaar naar
dhia
Kaise karab kanyadaan dhia
Kahe tu janamalu hamaar dhia.*

(Why, my daughter, did you have to take birth? Even the time that you chose was symbolic. It was a dark



night and it rained heavily. We could neither find the sickle nor the knife to cut the umbilical cord. Finally, the midwife settled for a snail's shell. We have searched and searched to find a groom for you. How do we get relief from you? Why my daughter did you have to take birth?)

Declining Sex Ratio

Another oft repeated sentiment in Bihar families is that it is better to be killed in the mother's womb than to be burnt at the mother-in-law's home for dowry. It is made out as if daughters are killed or unwanted because of the financial drain they bring for the family. But then prosperous cities like Delhi, and Chandigarh and better off states like Maharashtra and Gujarat, Haryana, Punjab have also registered a decline in their overall sex ratio which stands below 900. According to the 2001 census, Haryana has a shocking 869 females and Punjab 886 for every 1000 males. Equally shocking is the figure from Delhi which stands at 833, whereas Chandigarh records the lowest that is, 763 females per 1000 males.

Some parents perceive the birth of a daughter as a potential danger to their prestige and honour. The resultant impact is that the child may be left unprotected from cold or heat, unfed by breast or bottle, uncared for, untreated in the event of illness. She may be left bleeding to death after cutting the umbilical cord, or harmful substances applied to the wound to let her die due to tetanus later on. In certain areas, the newborn girl infants are buried deep in earth after putting them in an earthen pitcher (Krishna : 1999).

Kallurs of Madurai believe that by the killing of a baby girl, a boy child will be born next. In Punjab, in some castes, dead girl babies are laid under a tree. The next morning the place is examined to see if a jackal or dog has dragged the baby towards

its mother's house. If it is there, it is a bad omen, meaning the mother would give birth to another girl. If it is dragged away it means a boy will be born. Among the *Khands* of Madhya Pradesh, it is believed that if a child dies within seven days of birth it is excluded from the cycle of future female births in the family, so there is "less chance of a female being born".



Obsession for sons is often quoted as being the root cause, for the high fertility rates in India. Before the advent of new technology for sex determination, families practiced female infanticide, which is still prevalent in some Indian states. Diagnostic technologies and testing facilities like ultrasound and amniocentesis have made huge inroads in rural India also. Even places like Jamui, a small town in Bihar can boast of such facilities.

Sustained gender selection will have serious ramifications in countries like India where the sex ratio has already tilted in favour of the male. In fact, sex determination followed by selective abortion can hardly be looked upon as a free choice that women assert. Loss of status within the family, being subjected to taunts and abuses and even being physically thrown out of the house as a consequence of not producing a son, are some of the reasons why women are averse to daughters, as indicated through this song:

*Bahurani ke ho gayee bitiya
Khatiya bahire karo
Sasur sunale ki bitiya bhaili
Sir se utaar de lein pagadiya
Khatiya bahiro karo*

(The daughter-in-law has produced a daughter. Throw her cot out of the house. The father-in-law should be informed that a girl has been born in the family so that he can remove his turban.)

It is imperative to understand the inner dynamics of patriarchy and its institutionalised forms. To say that women undergoing sex determination tests (SDTs) should also be liable for punishment is to overlook the fact that a woman is hardly provided space to "exercise her choice" for a male or female child. The social pressures and compulsions are so strong that she often can't think independently. The current law against sex determination tests which stipulates punishment for a mother undergoing SDT will only increase the misery of women in a context where women have little room for autonomous decision-making. □

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The author is a Research Associate at the Centre for Women's Studies and Development, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi