

The one-child policy of China is the most ambitious piece of social engineering in history. Never has any nation attempted something as drastic and of such magnitude as this scheme. However, its ramifications for the Chinese society have yet to be figured out.

Compulsions of the one-child policy (rural couples are allowed two) are obvious. China, with 7 per cent of the earth's arable land and overexploited water resources, already has 1.23 billion people, 21 per cent of the world's population. Even with such a draconian population policy, China is adding another 14 million every year.

With a strong preference for a male child (akin to our.s) in the Han Chinese, the one-child regime operates harshly on the girlchild. Many are aborted or killed at birth, others are given away or abandoned. Besides there is the practice of underreporting of female births. Many a wife giving birth to a daughter is wilfully maltreated by her husband forcing her to go away so that the man could remarry for a son. As a result, China today has nearly 40 million more males than females. There is a flourishing black-market in brides. Unlike in India, Chinese daughters fetch brideprice.

Yet quite unintentionally, the onechild policy has done wonders for the status and image of the girlchild. Millions of middle-class urban families now have one girlchild. Parents dote on them and value them highly. These girls are receiving almost as much parental attention and investment in their education as single sons. They are doing well in studies, sometimes better than boys. The one-child policy seems to have triggered a silent revolution, leading to a greater acceptance of the girlchild and a boost to women's self-esteem in a traditionally male-dominated society.

The Onlies of China

○ Mohinder Singh

Some day the one-child limit may well be given up but by that time Chinese women would have notched remarkable gains in gender equality, and such gains are irreversible. Two decades of the one-child regime, which started by being hurtful to the girlchild, have actually struck at the very heart of 'age-old gender inequality-something that half a century of communism with its known emphasis on women's liberation could not accomplish.

Another imponderable of the onechild norm concerns the physicalcum-psychological development of all those onlies, both boys and girls. Observers often note that the onlies are being over-coddled by their doting parents. One consequence is that these children are usually overfed, many to the point of obesity.

Whatever the onlies demand-and they mostly demand foods rich in fats and proteins, such as meat, sweets and fast-foods-they are given. Grandparents are even more indulging; they tend to cater to every whim of the grandchild. No wonder, single children are known in Chinese as "four-two-ones"-four grandparents, two parents, and one spoiled brat.

Besides spending relatively large sums on over-feeding their onlies, parents are seen to spare no expense on their toys and clothes. In many families nearly half the family budget is snapped up by the onlies. Parents often 'go to extraordinary lengths to give the only child the best possible education. That'S the top priority, no matter what it costs.

Special tutors are hired outside schools. Parents skimp on their own consumption, take loans to buy their only child expensive educational inputs, such as a computer, even a piano. All this is coupled with intense pressure on the child to excel in studies. The ultimate aim is to get him or her into a university; unlike in India, only 2 per cent of them can get a coveted university seat.

Clearly parents are nursing unduly high expectations of success and status for their children. Most Chinese parents missed opportunities and affluence during the Mao years, and their dreams now rest on one little child. Most households now revolve around a single child; once it was around the dominant patriarch. Elsewhere in the world the only-child



situation doesn't go beyond the concerns of individual family happiness and the child's psychological adjustment. But in China the problematic character of such children in mammoth numbers has become an important social issue. It even worries state authorities.

An impression has gone around that the onlies, particularly sons, are being spoiled by the over-indulgence of their parents. These children could grow stubborn, moody, irritable, and more selfish than children who have siblings. Being less exposed to setbacks and disappointments, they may not be able to withstand emotional blows when they grow up.

Extensive research has predictably been conducted by teachers, sociologists and psychologists into the behaviour of single children in China. These studies indicate that the onlies are more egocentric, with lower ratings in cooperation than non-only

children. The latter are mainly children with one sibling-families with more than two children are getting far fewer in China. Some studies even show that the onlies have a higher incidence of teenage delinquency.

The only child, however, fares much better in western research. These studies concentrate on IQ and school results-items lending to more accurate quantification than other criteria such as "personality". When it comes to educational achievements, the results are clearcut: only children have been found to have higher achievements in both length of education and quality of academic work.

As to personality traits such as emotional adjustment and sociability, western research generally finds no significant difference between the only and non-only children-the onlies being "more maligned than maladjusted". It is not the nature of only children that creates problems,

but what is expected of them by their families and society within which they happen to live. If they are any different, it is because of the expectations and anxieties that others have about them.

Of course, the folklore against the only child persists everywhere. Parents experience pressure from relatives and friends to have a second child. Many parents' feel stigmatised as being selfish.

The history-making Chinese experiment of one-child family would be interesting to watch. More so as the first children born under the onechild norm are getting old enough to marry other single children, and have a single offspring of their own. How will these new children fare? Will they be even more pampered? If the western experience is any guide, the Chinese onlies should not pose any serious personality problems eventually. □

Women Bhakt Poets



*"No one can stop you - Mira set out in ecstasy.
Modesty, shame, family honour - all these I threw off my head.
Flinging away praise and blame, I took the narrow path of knowledge.
Tall the towers, red the windows - a formless bed is spread,
Auspicious the five coloured necklace, made of flowers and buds,
Beautiful armlets and bracelets, vermilion in my hair parting,
The tray of remembrance in my hand - a beauty more true.
Mira sleeps on the bed of happiness - auspicious the hour today.
Rana, you go to your house - you and I cannot pull together.
No one can stop you - Mira set out in ecstasy."*

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