



Readers' Forum



A Gender Specific Fetish

“Fair, convent-educated, beautiful bride wanted”—screams the matrimonial section of many a reputed newspaper and magazine. Most people in India hardly notice anything grievously abnormal with statements like these. Not to mention the scores of inputs coming from a cosmetic company which wants to help the “fair sex” get fairer through home remedies and special face packs which give the politely termed “dusky” girls a chance to miraculously illuminate their skins in a few days. After all, let’s face it—this kind of racism, a fetish for the fair skin, has existed in India for a long time, but what is significant is the fact that it is very gender specific.

In the 1990s, a certain popular fairness skin cream came out with an all enticing advertisement depicting a dark woman being neglected by a potential suitor on the college campus. The solution was clear and fortunately readily available to the rejected girl! She used “Fair and Lovely” and *voilà* — her complexion turned fair in no time and, more importantly, it caught the attention of the special guy who fell in love with her instantly.

The reputed “Fair and Lovely” fairness cream went a step further, for which it got some flak from the All India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA). In 2001 they ran an offensive ad insinuating that darker skinned women are incapable of getting jobs in the corporate world.

I was shocked during one of the trips to my home town, to see the advertisement flashing several times on one of the mainstream television channels throughout the day without respite. A dark skinned girl goes to an interview for selection of air-hostesses for a reputed airline. She is obviously rejected because of her complexion. She returns home forlorn and sad and faces her father who wishes he had a son, who would have taken care of parents in their old age; instead all they have is a dark-skinned daughter who is only capable of causing misery to the family. She redeems her fate by getting a fairness cream to brighten her job prospects.

Although protests were made some time later against this commercial and it was ultimately withdrawn, I still can’t reconcile myself to the fact that it was incessantly shown, validating not only the idea of colour fixation but also the fact that a girl child is worthless and unwelcome in the 21st century. And the aforementioned fairness cream is

certainly not the only product of its kind being marketed in India. There are various others which conjure up similar dreams and claim their ability to change skin tones, some even with the richness of ancient ‘ayurvedic’ formulae!

Underneath the entire propaganda lurks the phallogocentric idea that appearance is the only tool that a woman has to navigate the job market. Thus the race/colour question intricately merges with sexism and compels women to be beautiful, fair and lovely—the only means of survival left for her in society.

Amrita Ghosh, Madison, USA

Oppression in Families

The venerable institution of the joint family evokes very conflicting and contradictory feelings among people in India. People who profit by being part of it defend it. To define it for the uninitiated Indian, a joint family is basically a multi generation family starting from grandparents and ending with grandchildren, or maybe even great-grandchildren, who live together under one roof and cook in one kitchen. At first look it sounds great for a woman. Just imagine — there are two or three *bahus*, each taking her turn in the kitchen, so you are not saddled with the cooking and the dishes every day of your waking life. But a closer look reveals the power play that works with the mother-in-law as the wielder of authority with her bunch of keys rationing everything to an army of subjects, daughter-in-law or servant,



and keeping a tight fist over the money.

I am a part of such a set up in its higher middle class Punjabi edition. There are 11 of us altogether: the in-laws, myself and my husband, our two daughters and a son, my *devar* and his wife, and their two sons. The low point in the family was migration to India, but with hard work and a bit of luck we still reside in a *kothi* in Civil Lines, which was purchased by my husband's grandfather. When my husband and I were married 21 years ago things were not so good but we managed to establish a garment export business, which brought unheard of prosperity to the *khandan*, that subsisted on stories of past glories. We did well and lived well and so did the joint family.

But we made a mistake. Instead of having the business in our own name and only our name, we wanted to live up to the ideal standards of the joint family and made my sister-in-law a partner. Our logic was that it will let her family live gracefully and on equal terms. Then, when our fortunes became even brighter, my mother-in-law managed to have my father-in-law also made a partner — and that too with a share now bigger than my husband's. Mind you, she herself kept to the wings. After all, he was the head of the family, so it was due to him.

There was another catch to it all. To my misfortune I am a foreigner, though I have lived in India most of my life. I even did my schooling here. I studied Oriental languages, have a double MA, am doing my PhD, and know Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu, besides a smattering of Sanskrit and other useless tongues such as Latin, German and Russian, apart from my mother tongue, Polish. Now this, my being a foreigner, was always my handicap and was used to batter me with for years. Of what use to me was the fact that I was working in a company which was largely my

creation and contributing the greater part of our common income, or the fact that I wore nothing but *salwar kamees* or occasionally a sari, could do *path* from *Guru Granth Sahib*, accompanied my mother-in-law to *Sis Ganj* Gurudwara at daybreak in the early days of my marriage, knew *Japji* by heart, read *nitnam* every day and ate nothing but *desi* food? There was no way I could have overcome the fact that I was not born in the right *biradari*.

Of course I got a lot of praise in front of strangers and by strangers on how well I have adjusted, how well I spoke Hindi and so on. But under no circumstances would I be given any right to be a full fledged member of the *biradari*. I was not allowed to run the kitchen, order the food, or open the store. That I was running a business with a turnover of Rs. 1 *crore* did not change anything. I wasn't considered bright enough to be able to add up daily household expenses and balance the monthly ration of few a thousands in our joint home.

It took me almost twenty years to decide to have a separate kitchen. By then my eldest daughter was studying in college and learning all about gender issues and feminism. My son is now in 12th class and my daughter in the 7th class. I have finally

got support and understanding from my husband, but not before his family milked our business of all the money and left us with tens of *lakhs* of debts to the bank, not before his younger brother turned against him and his mother threatened to have him evicted from the house by the court. His love and loyalty for his family died and a part of him died too. We became closer than ever in our life and we have our children to think of.

One could say - what has the joint family system to do with it all, this might be just a maladjustment, a clash of characters, just an ordinary twist of circumstances. Yet, I am inclined to think that the truth lies somewhere else. I myself didn't cook, but worked outside the house and got nothing for it, just a small amount of pocket money, which was never enough for the immediate needs of my children, nor me. My mother in law was drawing a salary bigger than mine just for the privilege of being my husband's mother.

I know of friends, foreign women, whose life was no easier than mine. One of them was not allowed into the kitchen, and though her husband and her children had food cooked there, she kept a little kerosene stove in her bedroom and cooked her own meals. Another was terrorised by her in-laws



to the extent that she could not conceive for eight years after marriage.

A woman who has her blood kin behind her can always seek their help. And also, no one would ill treat a girl whose parents are equally well matched in status. However, it does not work in cases where a woman has nobody to fall back on. A foreign woman is even more suspect. Not only is she a relationless orphan but her very intentions, way of thinking and morals can be suspect. Combined with mental and physical abuse it can be unbearable. I lost self confidence. I lost my belief in myself. I could not go on working, successfully, and keep having all the money taken away. I started to think that there must be something wrong with me, that my judgment can't be sound.

Finally alongside my daily routine in the factory, I took some part time courses at Delhi University, then got my second MA, where I topped. I joined a PhD programme and started research in something as strange and whimsical as medieval Islamic philosophy. I don't feel I am nothing any more, yet I feel saddened. For my joint family I do not exist. I do not talk to them. I want to run away and be free from the illusory, deceptive, false safety of the joint family. I want to be on my own.

There is a *ghazal* of Abida Parvin from her cassette "*Hamsafar*" to which I listen very often. The lines are somewhat like this:

*Duniya kitni bawli, patthar puji jae
Ghar ki chakki koi na puje,
jiski pisi khae.*

Maria Skakuj Puri, Delhi

When Parents Turn Killers

Global knowledge and technological revolution might have brought affluence but they have not taught us the value of equality. Easier access to expensive technology making sex determination tests readily available



Dip in Child Sex Ratio for Urban Indian Centres

Cities	1991	2001
Delhi	904	850
Mumbai	942	898
Pune	943	906
Amritsar	861	783
Ahmedabad	896	814
Baroda	934	873
Rajkot	914	844
Jaipur	925	897

has led to an alarming increase in female foeticide in the country. What is more distressing is that the rate is higher in urban, affluent and educated India.

Sixteen States and Union Territories with 70 districts have recorded an abnormal decline in girl child population between the last two censuses. While the curse is manifest in the entire country, it is high income rich States like Maharashtra, Gujarat, Punjab and Haryana that have recorded more than 50 point decline in the Child Sex Ratio (CSR) since 1991. Delhi has the dubious distinction of having most districts with an unfavourable ratio of less than 900 girls to 1000 boys. Gujarat that had at least 20 districts with a CSR more than 900 in 1991 is left with only eight such districts. A look at the table reveals the harrowing picture in

the most industrialized and developed centres of the country.

Education, exposure and affluence have not brought equality but only consumerism and commodification of relationships alongside the traditional bias of sons being still considered bread earners and *budhape ki lathi* (support of old age). Today, how many boys are fulfilling this duty and to what extent needs serious re-evaluation and yet parents prefer the male child.

In fact, how much choice the educated urban woman has in this matter, is debatable. One can see hundreds of cases of forced sex-determination tests, abortions, family wars and property disputes, all for want of a son. It is then not surprising that a 2002 study in Punjab conducted by the Institute of Development and Communications, Chandigarh reveals that 92 per cent of educated high-income group women who went for sex determination tests were aware it was illegal; 77 per cent of those who opted for female foeticide knew it was a crime; 43 per cent perceived the male child as a prospective earner and 58 per cent as a protector while 55 per cent of urban middle class families considered girls burden.

If a educated, urban and affluent person thinks in this manner, why blame the poor and illiterate for being partial to sons? While the former with advantages of education and money use modern costly technology to decide the gender of the child to give birth to—distorting the demographic structure, the latter continue producing child after child for want of sons. Such a trend is bound to have very serious social consequences.

Female foeticide is not only a heinous crime; it also has serious socio-psychological implications by disempowering women. Fewer girls mean that not only their childhood but also their marriage and future may be threatened; their security and success endangered.

Mona Khare, Bhopal, MP. □