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De-coding Female Foeticide as a Long-Standing Curse in Agrarian Societies

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ABSTRACT

Female foeticide or the discriminatory abortion of female fetuses has been and sadly, remains one of the number one killers of Indian girls. This paper aims to use qualitative and quantitative data of recent socio-cultural research to take forward the plough hypothesis developed by Ester Boserup and the work of Alesina et al. The paper approaches the problem of female foeticide as a psychological one, rather than a sociological or a legal one. It traces the trajectory of this psychological malaise from its source in agrarian societies to its most common and deadly expression in modern Asian transitional societies in the form of 'son preference', which in turn has contributed to increasing numbers of female foeticide yearly.

Keywords: *Foeticide, patriarchal culture, son preference, India, South Asia, agrarian societies, abortion, Indian women, girl child*

I. INTRODUCTION

Last year, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) dedicated its World Population Report, 2020, to the larger cause of creating gender equality, choosing the theme '*Against My Will – Defying the practices that harm women and girls and undermine equality*'. Sadly, the COVID 19 pandemic overshadowed its message, much like everything else that year.

A closer reading of this 2020 UNFPA report reveals that while it may not be dealing with the ongoing viral pandemic, nevertheless it deals with an equally important psychological pandemic – that is the unwarranted and unapologetic killing of the girl child across the globe.

India, a country, largely applauded for containing the viral pandemic, is clearly failing in reversing or even containing this psychological pandemic, with close to 45.8 million Indian girls reported '*missing*' in 2020, essentially on account of the misuse and abuse of “*pre- and post-birth sex selection practices*”, resulting from archaic patriarchal attitudes of son preference. And if that was not staggering enough, our very own 2011 census estimates that

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some 5 million little girls have gone missing in India, in the last decade alone.

Naturally then, one infers that though after 70 plus years of freedom, Indian women are today relatively free, however, they are nowhere close to enjoying freedom of equality in today's modern transitional society. The Indian girl child continues to struggle for her right to breathe and live free.

Female foeticide, or as it is commonly understood, is considered the discriminatory abortion of female foetuses has been and sadly, remains one of the number one killers of Indian girls. However, to put things in a more comprehensive and correct perspective, it is important to understand that it is not India alone that is plagued by this need to get rid of its unwanted girl children.

II. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

Motivated by the seminal works Ester Boserup, Alesina, Giuliano, Nunn and others that have researched extensively on the linkages between the use of plough in agrarian societies to the perpetuation of sexist mindsets in modern transitional Asian societies, the present research paper aims to hypothesize that:

1. Female foeticide is not just an Indian problem, but in fact haunts numerous other Asian countries as well.
2. The paper approaches the problem of female foeticide as a psychological one, rather than a sociological or a legal one. It traces the trajectory of this psychological malaise from its source in agrarian societies to its most common and deadly expression in modern Asian transitional societies in the form of '*son preference*', which in turn has contributed to increasing numbers of female foeticide yearly.
3. The paper concludes that the war on female foeticide cannot be won if viewed from a purely legal or even a social context. It needs to be dealt with, as one would, with a psychological malaise, for it is, in its truest sense, a by-product of a bygone agrarian era that may have crumbled on paper but thrives in the deepest recesses of our common psyche. Until this archaic mindset of viewing women as a liability is not shattered, little will change or even improve for our girls.

III. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

Given the on and off lockdowns within the country and the severe constraints on travelling and meeting people, my research for this paper has primarily been contingent on available secondary data taken from the reputed published sources such as books and websites on

internet, journals, essays, multinational journals, and magazines.

However, all data such sourced has been cross checked and cross referenced by me both, quantitatively and qualitatively. Primary data in the form of telephone interviews and exchange of opinions has not been directly included in the research paper but has largely been used to sharpen my understanding of the subject.

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

A cursory search in the field of gender studies or even gender equality throws up literally millions of studies, papers and projects done on the precise subject of female foeticide. Much less work is visible or available when one looks to study female foeticide as a particular psychological malaise. Under the psychological spectrum much research has focussed on capturing and studying the attitude and awareness quotients of gender equality, with most of the work focusing on the urban-rural divide in developing societies. Considerable work has been done on the Gender scheme theory as well, a good example of the same being Rao, Vidya and Sriramya (2015) work on the Indian “girl” psychology².

Much less work seems to have been done in the field of establishing a concrete theory of female inequality in primarily agrarian societies. However, three field research stand out and need special mention. The first is Ester Boserup’s (1970) groundbreaking analysis on how different attitudes about gender roles evolved because of differences in the form of agriculture traditionally practiced. Her research shows that in cases of shifting agricultural economies, agriculture being a labor-intensive exercise requires using a stick or hoe and witnesses active participation of women. On the other hand, the use of plows for intensive farming work requires a lot of effort. As a result it is the men who usually specialize in agriculture, and women in such agrarian societies usually stick to doing household chores like cooking and cleaning.

Boserup went on to argue that the differences in the two types of agriculture resulted in different norms about the natural role of women in society. *“In societies featuring plough agriculture, gender attitudes typically exhibit less equality regarding the role of men and women in society, and the view that the appropriate role for women is in the domestic sphere is much more common”*³.

The second set of studies was undertaken by Alesina , Giuliano P, Nunn N (2018) and focused on the use of the plough in traditional agriculture. They established that in societies that used

² Rao. G.P, Vidya . K.L., Sriramya . V,(2015) The Indian “girl” psychology: A perspective, *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*, 57(Suppl 2): S212–S215. doi: 10.4103/0019-5545.161480, PMID: PMC4539864

³ Alesina, Alberto, Paola Giuliano, and Nathan Nunn(2011),"Fertility and the Plough." *American Economic Review*, 101 (3): 499-503.DOI: 10.1257/aer.101.3.499

the plough, men specialized in agricultural work, due to the physical strength needed to pull the plough or control the animal that pulls it. This made ancient plough-using societies to value boys more than girls. Using empirical data they showed how descendants of societies that traditionally practiced plough agriculture today have higher average male-to-female sex ratios⁴.

Last but not the least, studies by Krause and Patrick (2016) too have examined the impact of cultural gender norms created by differences in traditional agricultural practices on observed sex ratios at birth over the last four decades. They argued, “*Descendants of plough societies exhibit a highly male-skewed sex ratio of last birth, which is achieved through son-based fertility stopping preferences. From the 1980s onward the expected sex ratio at birth of plough descendants becomes highly male-skewed at lower levels of total fertility, providing evidence that these descendants realize their son's preference through sex-selective abortions*”⁵.

V. FEMALE FOETICIDE: NOT AN INDIAN PROBLEM ALONE

The fact that female foeticide is practiced on a large scale in India, alone, is perhaps the most common and well accepted myth. However, recent socio-cultural and demographic studies have shown that, this is far from true. While India does indeed account for a substantial share of deaths due to the evil practice of female foeticide, it is not alone. Gender inequality is an international psychological epidemic, spread to far and distant corners of the world, as shown in the box below.

Table 1: Estimates of excess female mortality below age 5, and its share of overall mortality rates among girls below age 5 in 2012

Country or Territory	Excess Female Mortality Rate	As a percentage of the overall Female under 5-mortality
Afghanistan	5.2	2.7%
Bahrain	1.1	5.9%
Bangladesh	2.1	2.6%
China	1.0	3.3%
Egypt	2.4	5.6%
India	13.5	11.7%
Iran	1.8	5.2%
Jordan	1.9	5.0%
Nepal	2.9	3.5%

⁴Alesina A, Giuliano P, Nunn N (2018) Traditional agricultural practices and the sex ratio today. PLoS ONE 13(1): e0190510. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0190510>

⁵ Krause, Patrick, (2016) "Traditional Agricultural Practices and Sex Ratios at Birth in Modern Times". Master's Theses. 176. <https://repository.usfca.edu/thes/176>

Pakistan	4.7	2.7%
<p>Mortality rates are per 1,000 births. Excess female mortality rates are calculated as the difference between observed and expected mortality rates for females below age 5. Proportion of overall mortality is calculated using observed mortality rates for females below age 5. Calculations are based on Bayesian estimates of the sex ratio of</p>		
<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; display: inline-block;">UNFPA, <i>State of the World Population 2020 Report</i>, Page 47</div>		
<p>mortality rates below age 5. (Alkema and others, 2014)</p>		

Independent research on the very subject has shown that female foeticide is largely practiced in Southeast Asian countries, leading to a skewed child sex ratio. Every year countries such as Pakistan, Nepal, and China report millions of cases of female foeticide. Research by Guilmo & Attane⁶ has noted the details of the declining fertility rate in most of these countries. Among other works, Banister's research on China has especially thrown light on deep-rooted gender inequality prevalent in Chinese culture and then excessive son preference common in the country⁷.

Closer home, in Bangladesh, research studies undertaken by Chowdhury and Bairagi (1990) have noted the glaring evidence of female disadvantage in almost all spheres of life, especially in surviving⁸. In India, the latest census data (2011) show that the child sex ratios (females per 1,000 males) have decreased compared to data from the last five decades. Increasing son preference and neglect of daughters is occurring in many states in India, despite the advances made in education, literacy, healthcare, and income attainment.

VI. EXPLORING THE COMMON AGRARIAN LINK

Traditionally this part of the world, and these countries particularly have been largely agrarian economies. An agrarian economy is one in which agriculture is the mainstay or the most important source of livelihood. In such kind of societies where agriculture is the main livelihood the role of man in the economy becomes very important. There are a couple of reasons for this.

Firstly, the man is the physically stronger out of the two sexes. This is a biological fact that cannot be disputed. Genetically speaking, men have more muscle mass in them which makes them more physically powerful than women. This fact, that man is rough and tough, makes him best suited to do agriculture which is ordinarily considered a highly taxing and tiring exercise. It is but natural then, that it was man, who took the first step out of the house to protect

⁶ Attané, I. (2006). The Demographic Impact of a Female Deficit in China, 2000-2050. *Population and Development Review*, 32(4), 755-770. Retrieved April 4, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20058926>

⁷ Banister, J. (2004). SHORTAGE OF GIRLS IN CHINA TODAY. *Journal of Population Research*, 21(1), 19-45. Retrieved April 4, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41110780>

⁸ Chowdhury, M., & Bairagi, R. (1990). Son Preference and Fertility in Bangladesh. *Population and Development Review*, 16(4), 749-757. doi:10.2307/1972966

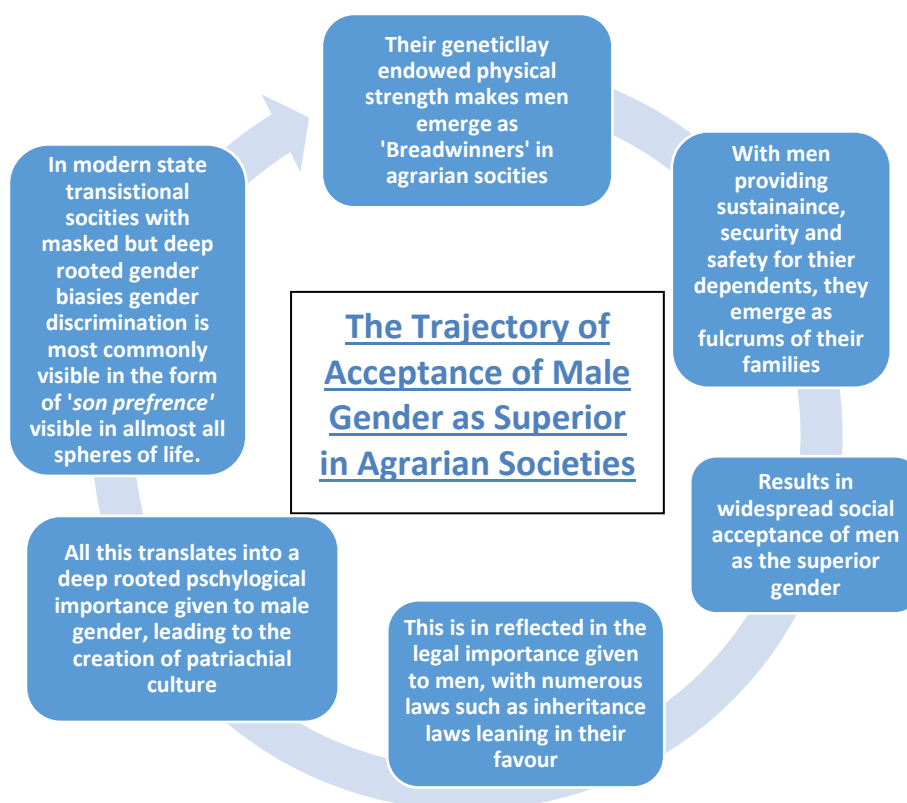
the house and to look for food, and later to grow food for his family.

Man, thus grew into his role as the sole 'breadwinner' of the family, by contributing the most in terms of income, providing security and sustenance for his dependent family. On the other hand, the role of women in these kinds of agrarian societies was very subdued. They essentially chose to be 'home makers' and 'care takers' of the family, for the simple reason that they were not physically strong to protect themselves or to do hard labour.

VII. TRACING THE DEADLY TRAJECTORY

Over a period, the importance of man in agrarian households made him gain social importance and relevance as well. From being a fulcrum of family, he transitioned to being a fulcrum of society as well. A very good example of this is in terms of the inherent inheritance laws. In ancient agrarian societies, the only property was agricultural land, so it was but natural that this land was going to be left to the son of the house as he was the one who would basically till the land and keeps it in the family. Leaving this agricultural land to the daughter was a moot point simply for the reason that the girl would get married to somebody else and it would be the son-in-law who would then inherit the land, thereby taking it out of the family.

Table 2: Detailed stages in the trajectory of developing & crystallizing patriarchal culture and son- preference mentality



This results in a psychological advantage been given to men in the form of a patriarchal culture being crystallized in these societies and communities. As a part of this culture, it is the man who makes the most important decisions, and his voice is heard the loudest. This germinates in the form of an obvious ‘Son Complex’ in these ancient agrarian societies wherein families prefer to give birth to sons, as opposed to daughters, for the simple reason that man has more economic, social, and psychological value attached to him.

VIII. CONCLUSION

To conclude, it would therefore be entirely wrong on our part to claim or to even believe that the evil of female foeticide exists only in India. All most all agrarian societies of the world encourage a patriarchal culture that cumulates in the creation of an excessively unequal society and mentality. While most of these countries, India included can no longer be defined purely as an agrarian society, the agrarian mentality survives and thrives.

Aided by the introduction of too much technology, too soon, with very little education and awareness on how to use these pre-and post-natal sex determination technologies we as a country are struggling to establish gender equality. And we shall continue to struggle if we think we need to defeat a people or a group. Far from that, we need to dilute and beat the inbred agrarian mentality that is holding us back and killing millions of little girls all over the world. For as long as girls are considered a social and economic liability, the country can never prosper in its truest sense.

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