

FEMALE INFANTICIDE AND FEMALE FOETICIDE IN INDIA: ATTEMPTING COMPREHENSIVE EXPLANATIONS

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Abstract

The issues of female infanticide and female foeticide have acquired considerable public prominence, in the context of the discussions on adverse sex-ratio in India. In the literature on adverse sex-ratio, using anthropological and demographic perspectives, there are several attempts to understand these practices, whose impact might lead to gender imbalances. Yet, this paper contests that such explanations remain comparatively inadequate in explaining the phenomenon of female infanticide and female foeticide. It is intriguing to note that female infanticide which was claimed to be effectively controlled in pre-independent India has resurfaced in post-independent India not just among the communities which were historically alleged to have been associated with practices of female infanticide and female foeticide, but even among communities and regions where it was previously unknown. Added to the practice of female infanticide, is female foeticide, thanks to the arrival of medical technologies. It is argued and even proved empirically in the context of north India that development in communication, transport and health sectors has resulted in comparative decline of female infanticide and foeticide. However in this paper, on the basis of empirical studies, I argue that in South India there are increasing signs of female infanticide and foeticide in some regions and some groups amidst development and relative prosperity. I attempt to explain this through kinship and marriage rules changing forms of economic relationship, health infrastructure, education, son preference/daughter neglect, overall prosperity and patriarchy.

Introduction

Since the early 1980s, there have been reports of the widespread prevalence of female infanticide in Tamil Nadu, both in popular press (India Today 1986, June 15th: 10-17) and in academic settings. A Tamil historian (Devi 1991) and a Tamil author (Sundaram 1991) subsequently undertook studies on female infanticide in these regions and have confirmed its occurrence. A year later, George et.al (1992) incidentally encountered and confirmed cases of female infanticide from 6 villages of K.V.Kuppam block of North Arcot District in Tamil Nadu. In the same year, 1992, female infanticide was also reported from Salem district, more than a hundred miles away from the Usilampatti region of Madurai district which had figured in 1986 India Today report (Viji Srinivasan, Frontline, 1992: Asha Krishnakumar, Frontline, 1992 as quoted in Chuknath and Athreya, 1997). The reports suggested that female infanticide had spread from a core region of four districts to three additional districts in a belt running north-south along the western half of Tamil Nadu, and to a further nine districts on the periphery (Chuknath & Athreya, 1997).

These reports are, apparently, surprising and contradict earlier studies. Anthropological accounts of South Indian societies suggest considerable relevant differences from the north Indian models, in terms of the prevalence of bride price, female-friendly marriage

practices, equal freedom and opportunities, higher female literacy rates, less rigid patriarchal structure and a near total absence of son preference. Why, then, have child sex ratios declined so much, and why has female infanticide appeared in parts of south India? What aspects of social norms and social structures have witnessed transition and change in terms of the indicators mentioned above, and what has caused these changes?

To throw light on these questions I present accounts of female infanticide in two different geographical locations in Tamil Nadu, Salem district and Theni District. The material I am using here comes partly from a small piece of research I carried out in 2004-2006 in the Mettur Area of Salem District. The comparative material from south India comes largely from the Kallars of Madurai District and the Gounders of Salem District. These are not the only castes and districts where infanticide has been reported, but the Kallars and Gounders in their respective areas of numerical and social dominance may have initiated and practice (Chuknath and Athreya 1997; WS2B)².

² It is also likely that the practice of female infanticide by the dominant peasant/landlord caste of the local community served to legitimate and provide social sanction to the practice and contribute substantially to its spread among all castes (ibid). The materials on Bihar, North India, suggest that there the practice of

Both these districts have very low or declining child sex ratios. The decline in Salem has been from 830 girls per 1000 boys in 1991 to an all time low of 826 girls per 1000 boys in 2001 while the same has marginally declined from 928 girls per 1000 boys to 927 girls per 1000 boys for Madurai (UNFPA, 2003).

Female Infanticide among Kallars and Gounders in Tamil Nadu

Among Kallars:

In June 1986, India Today reported cases of female infanticide in Tamil Nadu, which sent a shock wave to the whole nation (Venkatramani 1986). The report argued that over the last 10 to 15 years, female infanticide had become increasingly accepted among Kallars in Usilampatti taluk in Madurai district of Tamil Nadu. Venkatramani claimed that 600 female Kallar births took place in the Usilampatti Government Hospital every year, out of which 570 babies vanished with their mothers; hospital sources estimated that more than 450 (80%) of these vanished babies became victims of female infanticide (Venkatramani 1986: 28). Furthermore, it was claimed, the practice was rampant in three villages of Usilampatti Taluk; that nearly 6000 female babies had been killed in the Taluk in the previous decade; and that the practice was essentially related to dowry demands among Kallars (Venkatramani 1986: 26-33). There was hardly a poor Kallar family in which a female baby has not been murdered some time or the other during last 10 years, according to author, who also argued that it was the Kallar women who unwillingly poisoned their own babies. The dowry system took root among the Kallars after the construction of a dam on the Vaigai River, which brought irrigation water into Usilampatti 25 years ago. With prosperity came increasing dowry demands, which today are a part of Kallar culture. Kallars were warriors for the Chola emperor (who ruled parts of Tamil Nadu 10 centuries ago) 'who wouldn't hesitate to behead somebody with a scythe'. Nonetheless, despite Venkatramani's claims, there is no logical link to their descendant's behaviour when confronted with newborn girls in a situation of increasing dowry concerns (Venkatramani 1986). Venkatramani's report led to an unprecedented proliferation of writing on the subject in Tamil Nadu. Subsequently, other communities were identified as practicing female infanticide. However, the Kallars of Usilampatti and the Gounders of Salem have

figured constantly in the reports on the subject. In direct response to the early reports, Vasanthi Devi undertook the first academic study of female infanticide among the Kallars of Usilampatti taluk in 1987. She sheds some interesting light on the position of women in this community and how it had changed over the preceding decades in response to the modernizing economy of independent India (Devi 1991).

Dumont reported that in 1954 the community practiced 'bride price', but in 1967, Kolenda noted a change from bride price to 'bride price-cum-dowry system' (Kolenda 1967). In 1987, Devi argued that rapid agrarian changes took place after the Kallar integration into the modernizing economy' of Tamil Nadu and, in particular, after the completion of Vaigai Canal System in the late 1950s. According to her, the Canal system created 'a degree of differentiation of the agricultural community' with the rise of 'a middle peasantry', accompanied by the 'impoverishment of the lower levels of the peasantry'.

Devi (1991) traces two processes that, she says, have rapidly destroyed the traditional high and near equal status of Kallar women; changes due to economic devaluation and changes due to the new values adopted by the upwardly mobile section. With the nearly total absence of any industrialization in the area, the proportion of agricultural labourers in the rural population as a whole almost trebled between 1961 and 1981. Differentiation took the form of newly wealthy Kallar resorting to businesses like liquor, transport, cinema houses and other contracts, while other migrating to urban centres (especially Madurai), taking to education and acquiring considerable political influence. Devi (1991) further reports the implications of reduction from cultivator to wage labour status for women in this community. Devi argued that when women are reduced to wage earning, their considerably lower wages lead to their devaluation and underline their inferiority, especially *when a preponderant proportion of the peasantry were cultivators*. Furthermore, the opening of new avenues brought about by the process of tertiarization has largely bypassed women; women have been withdrawn from the labour force and confined to the home following the adoption of new values by the rural neo-rich classes which have been totally inimical to women's dignity and respect. All this has led to the adoption of dowry practice in the community, which was claimed to be non-existent till the mid 1960s. According to her, dowry demand today may range from Rs.5000 and 5 sovereigns of gold for a poor, landless agriculture Kallar to Rs.200,000 and 50 sovereigns of gold for a doctor (Devi 1991).

female infanticide originally began among Rajputs but has now spread to many other castes (Srinivasan, et.al.1994).

According to Devi, it is not difficult to see why the killing of baby girls began in villages well served by transport and communication networks, with canal irrigation and with a growing neo-rich class (Devi 1991

Thurston's report suggests a dramatic and public event; accounts of the methods used in contemporary cases of infanticide describe different methods. According to Devi, female infanticide is generally carried out within 24 hours of the birth of the baby by adopting indigenous devices such as feeding the baby with milk made from poisonous oleander berries, with a few grains of paddy and chicken broth, or stuffing the baby's nostrils. More recently, Aravamudan (1999) reports a new *modus operandi*: a newly born baby may be wrapped in a wet towel and left on the floor for some time, dying within a few hours from 'pneumonia'. This reduced the chances of detection, which is now apparently as important as the killing itself. Infants were sometimes cremated to avoid post-mortem inquiry, but that arouses suspicion because the usual practice is burial. Aravamudan concluded that female infanticide in Tamil Nadu has found a legal loophole; inducing pneumonia to kill unwanted daughters (Aravamudan, 1999).

In 1991, a writer of Tamil literature, Vasanthi Sundaram undertook a socio-psychological study of the people of Usilampatti in order to ascertain what made a mother kill her own daughter, and she related the recent rise in female infanticide to 'the period of intensification of the Family Planning Programme in that area'. Family planning was propagated at a time when the social structure of Kallar was undergoing changes; there was poverty and both contraception and abortion appeared to have been out of the reach of poor people. Sundaram blamed doctors for emphasizing only sterilization as a method of contraception. Many women fear the operation, which also involves hospitalization and post-operative care which the poor cannot afford, even with the financial incentives they receive for being sterilized (Sundaram 1991 cited in Mazumdar 1994).

Among the other forms of interventions that the emergence of female infanticide have witnessed since early 1990s, the role of M.S.Swarminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF), Chennai has been quite remarkable in that its views have more credibility by its unique location within Tamil society. It has produced several monographs and research pieces, one of which i.e., monograph-5 by Elisabeth Negi is particularly significant. Negi repeats many of Devi's arguments about how modernization, and the construction of the Vaigai Dam, which have led to a shift

from growing traditional crops to cash crops in the regions of Madurai, is a possible explanation of female infanticide (Negi 1997). Women became mere liabilities with their knowledge having become redundant; men aspired to marry only those women whose family could afford to offer dowry. Sergent et.al (1996) has been quoted by Negi (1997: 12) in favour of her argument that in the landless classes, the presence of sons ensures a higher labour participation and correspondingly a high financial support to the family. As a consequence, the family is likely to favour a male child, increasing the probability of female infanticide. Modernization has brought about changes in the traditional systems, she says, thereby lowering the status of women in the society.

Negi (1997: 15) cites Krishnaswamy's (1988) finding that dowry, given at the time of the daughter's marriage, has influenced the status of women in these regions. The daughter is considered to be a liability as her contribution to the family is temporary up to the time she is married and sent to another family. Dowry is not the only expense born by the bride's family in their daughter's marriage. Gifts in cash and kind are also given to the husband's family during ceremonies connected with pregnancy and childbirth and ceremonies for piercing the ear of the girl child and so on. According to Negi, the inability to meet the dowry-related demands from the in-laws family is a major cause of female infanticide (Negi, 1997: 16).

In an earlier monograph of MSSRF, Arulraj et.al (1993) conducted a study for the State Social Welfare Board covering about 300 women in three districts. These were all mothers whose girl children had died. In Konganapuram block, Salem district, the number of girl infant deaths in 1990-91 was much higher than that of boys, though male births were higher. Nearly 60% of female infant deaths took place within 7 days of birth, suggesting infanticide. The practice seemed to be spreading outwards from the Gounder community in which it is alleged to have originated. There also seemed to be a change in the methods used, with a shift to female foeticide, particularly in the prosperous belts of Salem and Periyar districts. According to Arulraj et.al, female infanticide is grounded in a complex mix of economic, cultural and social factors. Dowry, poverty and expenditure on girls were claimed to be the primary reasons. The strong desire for a male child to perform the last rites for the parents, or to keep inheritance intact, the belief that only sons can take care of parents when they are old, as well as social pressure to conform, which is very intense in

a rural community, were the other factors mentioned (Arulraj et.al 1993).

Among Gounders

The research carried out by George et.al (1992) in 12 villages of the then Salem district during late 1987-89 to study the "child growth and survival" incidentally revealed the cases of female infanticide among Gounders. Though the study has shown that almost all (94%) of female infanticide occurred among Gounders, it has argued that the pattern of the practice roughly corresponds with that of Kallar of Madurai district.

On the caste composition and matrimonial alliances, the study sheds some interesting lights. One, the villages with female infanticide has a predominantly Gounders population; of the 18 cases of female infanticide to married women (excluding one infanticide by an unmarried woman) reported in the study, 17 were among the Gounders. The remaining one case occurred among the Arunthatis (cobblers), a scheduled caste. Secondly, marriages in these villages are predominantly 'consanguineous' mostly between uncle and niece, and first and second cousins. It is to be noted that these scheduled castes are, like Gounders, a highly consanguineous group. This correlation between marriage patterns and female infanticide is surprising, given that in North India, female infanticide is usually associated with hypergamy and exogamy. Field conversations with the villagers suggested that these Gounders, unlike their counterpart Kallar in Madurai region, were from the upper social stratum of the village, owning a significant proportion of the land, and that they had practiced female infanticide for several generations (George et.al 1992: 1155).

A significant feature of the study is that the villages in which female infanticide occurred were far less developed in terms of urban linkages, services, and education than the non-infanticidal villages. Another significant observation derived from this study is that except one case, involving a first born daughter, all the other victims were second or higher birth order, and each of these families had at least one surviving daughter at the time. This pattern corresponds to the well known parity-specific practice of female child neglect in North-West India, which seems to protect and preserve first born daughters but discriminate against higher parity daughters (Dasgupta 1987). However, this pattern contrasts with that of North India where among those who have been involved with female infanticide for long, the victims were, and still are, most often first order birth, as per available accounts.

In a recent journalistic investigation Venkatesan (2001) reports that female infanticide which was practiced by only a few communities, especially the Gounders till a decade ago, has cut through caste lines, and now baby girls are being killed in 'newer and more cruel methods' to evade police action.

This review of the published sources on female infanticide in Tamil Nadu suggests that there are deeper questions that need to be asked about 'traditional' and 'modern' forms of female infanticide. Classifying female infanticides as a 'tradition' suggests either that it was practiced unthinkingly as a custom, or that it was justified to others in terms of customary practice. 'Contemporary' forms of female infanticide, by contrast, are usually presented as a result of rational decision-making, for example as an 'affordable' alternative to contraception or sex selective abortions. "Well-to-do people go for family planning methods. We limit our families in our own indigenous way. What is the difference? If it is legal to kill a baby in the womb, why should it be wrong killing a new born baby? – Response of many Kallar women to the question to why they commit female infanticide (Mazumdar 1994: 14). The problem with the 'traditional' discourse on female infanticide is that it presents the families as 'cultural dopes', playing out cultural rules without any agency of their own. The problem with the discourse on contemporary female infanticide is that it over-predicts the emergence of female infanticide: why should not all households facing likely dowry problems weigh up the costs and benefits and choose to abort female fetuses or kill (or neglect) female children? Thus, for example, the only reason cited by Devi is the growing dowry demand and the despair it causes among families. However, if dowry is the sole culprit then we are faced with explaining why only selective communities like the Kallars and the Gounders, and only some within these communities, resort to female infanticide. Many other communities have dowry practices but have no caste panchayats.

Discussion and Conclusions

This paper has attempted to compare female infanticide in two very different parts of India, in order to help understand its emergence in South India where it was previously unknown. This comparison poses some obvious difficulties not only for those who are actively involved in curbing the practice but for development experts as well. The South and North Indian infanticide stories provide conflicting and contradicting views. Most of the accounts and reports examined in South India linked the emergence of female infanticide with the introduction of development

and modernization factors; the somewhat similar process in a north Indian village seems to have led to a reduction of the practice (and, perhaps for the same reasons, a slight improvement of child sex ratio of Jaisalmer district, from 851 girls per 1000 boys in 1991 to 867 girls per 1000 boys in 2001 (UNFPA 2003). In Tamil Nadu, by contrast, the child (0-6) sex ratio has not only declined in erstwhile low child sex ratio districts like Salem, but also in other districts (Trichirapalli, Perambalur, Cuddalore, and Vellore) that previously had better records. How can we account for these social phenomena in a holistic way?

One suggestion is that we should contextualize it within several value debates, which aspire to become systems, of gender equality, reproductive freedom, the role of the state and its control over private lives (ostensibly for the public good) and social justice (Mazumdar 1994). However, this does not seem to reduce the complexity of the problem, but increases it by the inclusion of other dynamic social institutions, e.g. the changing family, law, culture, and the social construction of gender and public policies. We have seen that the role of state in bringing development and prosperity in South has resulted in the marginalization of women from their active productive economic roles increasing the perception of daughters as liabilities. The state's direct attempts to curb female infanticide in Tamil Nadu have been met with skepticism on both theoretical and conceptual grounds (Sunder Rajan 2003: 197). The Tamil Nadu government's immediate initial response to the publicity generated by media accounts of female infanticide in parts of the state was to announce a series of highly publicized measures. The two most publicized interventions were a Girl Child Protection Scheme (primarily in the form of financial incentives to help families maintain their girl children) and a Cradle Baby Scheme (whereby cradles were to be placed outside hospitals and orphanages to receive the newborn infants that parents may have otherwise intended to kill). An evaluation of these schemes suggests that both were flawed; the government's perception of female infanticide was grounded in a diagnosis of extreme poverty in these areas, i.e. primarily as a socioeconomic problem (Sunder Rajan 2003: 196). In the North, the Rajasthan government's drive in the last one decade to remove poverty and underdevelopment seems indirectly to have resulted in a decreasing incidence of female infanticide and a marginal improvement in the sex ratio in some pockets, as is evident in Deora. It seems to be the case that the state's *direct* involvement in female infanticide in Tamil Nadu has not only led to the aversion of those involved but

also to the creation of distrust and non-confidence among them. Because of the flaws in conceptualization as well as implementation, it seems that people prefer the death of their daughters instead of giving them away and consigning them to an unknown fate (Sunder Rajan 2003: 198). The case of Deora suggests that an *indirect* approach may be more likely to lead to positive results, but further ethnographic studies are needed before any meaningful and reliable conclusions could be reached on the subject.

So far, however, I have considered only the explanations based on socio-economic factors, such as increasing poverty and the emergence of dowry as results of specific forms of economic development. The indicators of these factors have been demographic and cultural; worsening child sex ratios and emergent preferences for sons and against daughters. I want to offer concluding remarks in this regard by looking again at the nature of two accounts.

Who Practices Female Infanticide and Why?

The first issue is the role of caste. In the North, it seems that only high caste Rajputs have been involved with female infanticide. In the South, female infanticide seems to cut across caste lines; the Kallar are low caste, and Gounders belong to the upper social stratum of village. In the South, some scheduled castes are also reported to be involved with female infanticide. Given the debates about how caste has become transformed as a social institution, both under colonialism and under the pressure of a liberalizing capitalism, how caste group membership and identities are implicated in female infanticide needs further investigation.

The second issue is the nature of the relationship between general social processes, rhetorics of motive and individual behavior. Most authors identify as causes such factors as the economic burden of the girl child, dowry, inheritance systems, poverty, caste, social pressure, expenditure incurred on ceremonies, cultural values and beliefs – all of which lead to son preference. The reasons for female infanticide in both North and South India appear to be somewhat similar. Yet there are differences. In South India a majority of the reported victims of female infanticide were second or higher birth order girls, and each of the families at least one surviving daughter at the time (George et.al 1992). In the North, colonial account as well as field conversations in Deora revealed that those who are involved with female infanticide did not spare a single daughter. These differences suggest that the meanings of 'son preference' are very different in the two examples: in the South, declining total family size preferences have put

pressure on households to have at least one son at low parities (a feature also noticeable in north India, especially Punjab). In Deora, by contrast, there is little sign of a desire to limit the number of sons born to households that practice infanticide. A further difference is that in the South Indian example, marriages are predominantly 'consanguineous' i.e., between uncle and niece, or between first and second cousins (George et.al 1992). This correlation between marriage patterns and female infanticide is surprising, given that in Deora and elsewhere in North India, female infanticide is usually associated with hypergamy and exogamy. This raises questions about any relationship between female infanticide and marriage practices and kinship organisation.

Perhaps as a result of these differences, there are also differences in the rhetorics of motive. My field conversation with some elderly revealed that a decade ago or so, people of Deora expressed little or no guilt in talking about female infanticide as *ku-riti* (bad tradition); rather they would take pride in explaining to their folks that their family had performed a *ku-riti* recently. However, now there are people in the village, including the village head, who would feel shame and express his disapproval for such acts, indicating that the practice of female infanticide has somewhat gone underground – from an overt to covert act. On the other hand, things have reversed in Tamil Nadu. Investigating the practice in the late 1980s, Elisabeth Bumiller described the difficulties of her journalistic attempts in studying infanticide in Tamil Nadu because of sensitivity of the subject (Bumiller 1990). In 1997, Negi reports that while there is a 'predictable grief' among the mothers of victims of infanticide in Tamil Nadu, there is also 'a marked absence of guilt' (Negi 1997: 19-20), Venkatesan reported that a woman in Salem shouted at a journalist when asked why she had carried out a case of infanticide: 'What do we do when we don't have money to bring up and marry off girls. Will you bear the expenses?' (Venkatesan 2001). The issue that I want to raise here is that the accounts people give of their actions, the terms in which they justify or regret their actions, must be seen as rhetorics, and we cannot assume that they represent underlying motives or psychological states.

What do we know about these underlying motives? Many authors, including Miller (1997:21) have pointed out that dowry, and dowry inflation, is common in many regions and communities in India where female infanticide is unknown. Madhu Kishwar (Kishwar 1989) has pointed out that dowry givers and dowry takers are not neatly divided into two separate and opposed groups (unless the dowry

givers have no daughters at all to give). If (as seems to be the case) son preference is widespread across India, as it disfavours of daughters, what leads some people in some communities to resolve this issue through female infanticide where their near neighbours in similar circumstances find other resolutions to these pressures?

Some argue that the modern Indian state derives its stand on tackling female infanticide in Tamil Nadu from the colonial government's 'civilizing mission' discourse (Kasturi 2002). But the post colonial state claims for itself a more absolute mandate for intervening in social or women's issues than colonial ones by claiming a consensus that need not be reiterated (Sunder Rajan 2003: 199). This leads me to suggest that perhaps we need to look beyond the state's intention by focusing on broader questions of technological advance, the development of a market-driven society and the disastrous impact of consumerist culture in pushing dowry (without questioning its association with female infanticide) brought about by new forces of economy. Yet these forces themselves seem to have contradictory effects. The villages in which female infanticide occur in South India were far less developed in terms of urban linkages, services, and education than the non-infanticidal villages (George et.al 1992). Such portrayals of infanticidal villages match well with the profile of Deora a decade ago or so, when female infanticide was quite common. However, after the relative opening of Deora with roads there was a reduction in the incidence of the practice. Should we expect and wait for a similar improvement for such villages in Tamil Nadu in order to witness a change in the practice, or is State intervention desirable, necessary, and practiceable?

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