

# The Silenced Minority



Sharon Fernandez, Untitled, 1991 Ink on Paper

*Do not abandon the vows of womanhood taken by you.*

*You have to follow your mother, grandmother, and great grandmother. You have to mind the hearth and the children.*

*Do not ask odd questions.*

*Do not exceed the boundaries.*

*Do not abandon your vows of womanhood.*

*Do not speak with your face up.*

*Be inside the house.*

*Wash clothes, clean the utensils. Clean the leftovers and remove the soiled plates.*

*Sew and embroider.*

*Sweep and draw designs on the floor.*

*Water the Tulsi plant.*

*Circumambulate the sacred tree. observe fasts and perform vratas!*

*Bend your neck downwards.*

*Walk without looking up.*

*Do not let your eyes wander.*

*Do not abandon the vows of womanhood.*

from the play *Mulagi Jhali Ho (A Girl is Born)* (Dube)

# *Sex Ratio and the Status of Women in India*

*By Sujata Ramachandran*

*Depuis le début du siècle, le ratio femme-homme en Inde change en faveur des hommes. Les femmes sont en train de devenir une minorité dans le pays. L'article traite des causes du déclin du ratio femme-homme en regard du statut des femmes dans la société indienne. L'article aborde, entre autres, la question de la discrimination que subissent les femmes au sein de la famille, la popularité croissante du système de la dot et le problème de l'avortement de foetus femelles ou de l'infanticide dont sont victimes les nouveau-nées.*

The famous story *Kafan* (The Shroud) by Munshi Premchand is symbolic of the predicament faced by a large number of Indian women. The story opens with Madho and Ghisu, father and son, sitting outside their hut one winter evening eating roasted potatoes while Madho's wife lies inside the hut dying in childbirth. The woman is the sole breadwinner of the family, so they are irked by her illness. They wonder who will feed them, provide them with money to buy liquor, and silently endure their beatings when they are drunk. By morning, the woman is dead but there is no money to provide a shroud for her so they beg from their neighbours and manage to collect five rupees. Once in the market, however, they automatically gravitate towards a liquor shop where they spend the money on good food and drink. Drunk, they become maudlin and mourn the dead woman, showering blessings on her for having brought them luck even in her death, saying she would surely prefer them to be well-fed than to have her corpse well wrapped, since even in her lifetime, all her energy went into looking after them.

In the village hierarchy, a woman's life is in many ways valued less than an animal's. The logic is simple: it takes money to replace an animal, whereas to replace a woman is not only easy but in certain circumstances even remunerative. When a social work organization tried to establish a hospital for women in Rajasthan, there was a great deal of resistance and hostility. The village men could not see why so much fuss should be made over women; they insisted that what they really needed was a hospital for their farm animals! (Kishwar and Vanita 6)

## **Sex ratio: the deteriorating trend**

The term "sex ratio" refers to the number of women per thousand men in the population. In most developed countries, namely, the United States, Canada and countries in Western Europe, women outnumber men in the total population. On the other hand, in many countries in the developing and the underdeveloped world, there is a large deficit of women in the total population. India, where a downward tendency in sex ratio has been witnessed in the present century, is no exception.

According to the 1901 census, there were 972 females per thousand males in India. By 1991, the sex ratio had declined to 929 females per thousand males. The total deficit has increased from three million in 1901 to 22 million fewer females in 1991 despite rapid increases in the total population. This steadily declining ratio of females to males in India has been attributed to a higher death rate of females throughout life. (Ghosh 21) These figures emerge despite the fact that in our species, males are more vulnerable to all sorts of

mortality factors than females are. Males are more likely to die than females as fetuses, in childbirth, in childhood and in adulthood. (Daly and Wilson 52-53) What, then, is the mystery behind the absence of millions of women in the Indian population? The answer lies in women's low status and the preference for the male gender in Indian societal structure.

## **Women in Indian society**

To be women is to accept suffering. Suffering ennobles. Endurance is a part of femininity. Woman is patient like the earth—she can accept all the trampling. (Lakshmi 273)

In India, as in other countries of the world, there is a great discrepancy between the idealized concept of woman and the real situation in which women find themselves. In both the industrially advanced and less developed countries, women are burdened with cumulative inequalities as a result of socio-cultural and economic discriminatory practices which, until recently, have been thought of as part of the immutable scheme of things established by nature. (De Souza ix)

The Hindu code of Manu aptly demonstrates the patriarchal way of thinking. "In childhood, a woman must be subject to her father; in youth, to her husband; when her husband is dead, to her sons. A woman must never be free of subjugation." (Salamon 39) While countless women and many enlightened men have struggled against this kind of limiting and discouraging prescription of women's lives, it has proven difficult to overcome.

The "typical" Indian woman, representing about 75 per cent of the four hundred



million women and female children in India, lives in a village. She comes from a small peasant family that owns less than an acre of land, or from a landless family that depends on the whims of big farmers for sporadic work and wages. She can neither read nor write, although she would like to, and has rarely travelled more than twenty miles from her place of birth. In many cases, she does not know who the prime minister of India is and cannot identify her country on a map. Sometimes she does not know about the existence of her own village *Panchayat*, or governing council, but even if she does, she is rarely aware that there is a place reserved for a woman member, because only men attend the meetings. She does not own land in her own name, or even jointly with her husband. She believes that she catches cold and fevers from evil spirits that lurk in trees. Her occupation is field work, chiefly harvesting, planting and weeding, for which she often receives less than fifty cents a day—in many cases, half the wage that a man receives for the same amount of work.

She has to juggle this labour with her other full-time job: the care of the house and the children. Her husband does not help her; indeed, he does not even consider what she does at home to be work. A village woman starts her life from scratch every day. No labour saving devices like the washing machine or cooking range are made available to her. Even a single *chapati*, the Indian flat bread, has behind it a chain of drudgery that has not changed in thousands of years. To make a *chapati*, a woman needs water, which is often several miles away by foot. She also needs wheat, which she must harvest by scythe, under a blazing sun in a back-breaking bent forward motion, and then grind by hand. To cook the bread she needs fuel, either firewood, which she collects herself, or cow-dung

cakes, which she makes herself. To get the dung, she must feed the cow, and to feed the cow, she must walk several miles to collect suitable grasses. (This is assuming the family is lucky enough to even have a cow; many do not). The bread is at last prepared over a small mud stove built into the dirt floor of her hut. While she cooks, she breast-feeds one child and watches three others.

Such a woman rarely has control over her own fertility and may start producing babies as early as the age of fourteen. She delivers them on the floor of her hut, usually with the help of her mother-in-law or a *dai*, an untrained village midwife. There is a good chance that the child will grow up malnourished, with iron and vitamin A deficiencies, and without basic inoculations to protect against diseases. One in ten children in India will not live to be a year old. If the child is a girl, there is an even smaller chance that she will survive. This is because the girl will often be given less food and care than her brother. Assuming she lives, she may go, erratically, to a one-room village school but she will be pulled out whenever her mother needs help with the other children and the chores in the house. Her education is over when she is married off as a teenager to a young man she has never met; from then on, she will begin a new life with her husband's family as a virtual beast of burden. (Bumiller 11-13)

The condition of some Indian women is so wretched that if their plight received the attention given to that of ethnic and

racial minorities in other parts of the world, their cause would be taken up by human rights groups.

### Women's deprivation within the family

Most women, especially among the poor, are made to take on a heavier work burden than men. A three year field-study conducted in some villages of Karnataka and aimed at discovering rural energy consumption patterns showed that the labour of women and children together contributes almost 70 per cent of the total human energy spent in doing all the work in the villages. Most of this energy was not spent on income generating activities but on survival tasks—gathering firewood, fetching water and cooking. This particular survey did not take into account other domestic work such as sweeping, washing clothes, cleaning utensils, and childcare, even though these tasks consume a great deal of human energy. Most of women's energy is therefore expended on daily life-supporting tasks, which have to be performed irrespective of the season. (Kishwar and Vanita 4)

They also eat much less than the men in their families. A study conducted in Punjab by Horowitz and Kishwar revealed that during the periods of heaviest field labour, women's average consumption was 2,169 calories, approximately two thirds of the 3,112 calories consumed by men.

A study on energy expenditure and calorie intake in India shows that women expend 53 per cent of human energy on survival tasks, while men use 31 per cent. The corresponding figure for calorie intake reveals that women consume 100 calories less than what is expended, while men consume 800 calories surplus. Furthermore, a woman's calorie intake is usually at "maintenance" level and



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does not make any allowances for the additional calories required during pregnancy and lactation. (Batliwala 25) Nutrition during pregnancy is often deficient in many communities due to misconceptions and social taboos which deprive women of basic vitamins, calcium, protein, iron and calories. (Mukherjee 49) Between 60 to 68 per cent of women suffer from "nutritional anemia" and it is quite common to find many of them suffering from night blindness during and immediately after pregnancy. (Gandhi and Shah 103)

Malnutrition, combined with excessive work, hampers the weight gain of both the mother and the fetus. Food intake immediately after childbirth is, in fact, dependent on the sex of the child, and a number of customs and beliefs. For instance, if the child born is male, then the mother gets better food and better attention.

The process of gender discrimination thus begins immediately after the birth of the female child. Recent studies in two villages of Uttar Pradesh revealed that while there is no discrimination in the amount of cereals consumed, there are marked differences with regard to expensive food items such as milk and milk products. Males were also given more fruits and vegetables as compared to females. (Ghosh 23) Prosperity does not seem to contribute to the lives of female children either. In two villages in West Bengal, where land reforms had brought in a higher standard of living, the under-nourishment index of girls remained unchanged, whereas in one of them there was a significant improvement in the nutritional status of boys. (Sen and Sengupta 89)

Levinson, reporting from the Punjab, states that "the most significant determinant of nutritional status is sex. In other words, a child's sex *per se* would more consistently account for variation in the nutri-

tional status, than any of the other variables...." (Ghosh 23)

### Marriage and the growing popularity of the dowry system

The preference for a male child stems from the widespread practice of the dowry system. Dowry, or the exchange of wealth at the time of marriage, is an age-old, accepted practice which was once prevalent in selected communities in the Hindu society. It has now spread to most religious sects and other communities in India. The practice of dowry has been slowly replacing the earlier custom of bride price, or the payment by the groom to the bride's family.

Among the Jat community in Haryana, for example, dowry was looked down upon as greed some fifty years ago, while today it has become an expression of social status in terms of the amount of dowry given and received. Dowry was earlier referred to as *Stree Dhan* (woman's wealth or property) to be used for the woman's welfare and benefit. It was a form of inheritance in an agricultural economy. Today, dowry has assumed material forms from gold, jewellery, or clothes given to the girl at the time of the marriage, to utensils and furniture needed to set up a new home, to cash and vehicles needed for the bride groom's business or education.

The marriage depends on the amount of dowry the girl's parents are willing to pay. In a hilarious scene from their play, *Mulagi*

*Jhali Ho*, (A Girl is Born), the *Stree Mukti Sanghathana* (Women's Liberation Organization) caricature the "shopping" for grooms. Fancy prices are quoted for professionals and officers in the administrative services whereas other government servants command much less dowry. In reality, this takes place in its crudest form in the Saurath Sabha of the Maithili Brahmins in Bihar, in which grooms are displayed and brokers negotiate for the best dowry from the would-be bride's families. But the negotiation and transaction of dowry does not end with marriage. It often follows the woman all her life, through festivals, visits or whenever the family-in-law needs money or other items. (Gandhi and Shah 52)

This practice has led to unfortunate consequences. "Housewife dies accidentally of burns when stove burst while she was cooking" and "A young married woman committed suicide by setting herself on fire. The police have registered a case of suicide." Small news items like these appear daily in newspapers based on police bulletins. Many accept these reports as factual representations of reality never suspecting the horrors behind them. Deaths such as these have recently been termed "dowry deaths" or "bride burnings", the result of brutal forms of maltreatment of women at the hands of their in-laws who often want to extract more money from the girl's parents and sometimes want to arrange a second marriage for their son to secure a second dowry. (Kishwar 182)

Most of the women who become victims of "dowry murders" belong to middle and lower middle class families; a large number are educated, working and earning money. What makes such a woman so vulnerable? One after another, details of each dowry death have painted a nightmarish picture of the lives that many women



Photo: Brenda Cranney



lead within middle class, respectable homes. The final act of lighting the match is usually preceded by months or years of torture, beatings and other forms of ill treatment. Many of the parents are aware of the abuse and some even know their daughters' lives are being threatened. Many of the women return several times, in desperation, to their parents homes before they are murdered or driven to suicide. Each time the woman is advised to be patient and sent back after some kind of patch-up reconciliation. (Kishwar 33)

The available statistics on dowry deaths are chilling. In Delhi, on an average, two women die of burns every day. The monitoring of burn cases in a municipal hospital in Bombay revealed that within six months there were as many as 157 cases. ("Project Help" from September 1987 to February 1988) The type and the degree of burns ruled out the possibility of "real" accidents, which means that the women either tried to kill themselves or were killed by others. In Bangalore, suicide and dowry deaths doubled in 1984 as compared to previous years. Karnataka reported nine cases of dowry deaths in 1982, 31 in 1983 and 48 in 1984. Andhra Pradesh reported 14 cases in 1983, 27 in 1984 and 38 in 1985. In Uttar Pradesh, the figure of 182 in 1984 doubled to 323 in 1985. (These figures include deaths by burning and suicides). Madhya Pradesh reported 42 cases of dowry deaths in just five months in 1985. In Maharashtra, there were 120 cases of dowry deaths in 1984 which doubled in the next year. There were 411 cases of suicide by young married women in 1983, 652 in 1985 and 662 in the first ten months of 1986. (Gandhi and Shah 53)

Since all girls are destined for marriage and motherhood in Indian society, the obligation of dowry tends to make parents consider a female child a liability from birth. *A daughter is commonly thought of as alien wealth who is only a temporary guest in her parents' home and who really belongs to her husband's home.* The sooner she reaches there, the better. Women are discouraged from seeking the intervention of their parental families when they are maltreated by their in-laws. The parting message given to a daughter at the time of her marriage is meant literally: *"Daughter, today we are sending you to your in-laws' house, may only your dead body or corpse come out of that house."*

Among peasant castes, there is a well observed tradition of marrying daughters into families who live sufficiently far away so they will be discouraged from maintaining day to day contact with their natal families. (Kishwar and Vanita 54)

### Female feticide and infanticide

Allowing for variations of behaviour across regions and between higher and lower castes, it is generally true that in India a woman's sense of personal worth is related to her fertility and the social standing she achieves as the mother of sons. (De Souza ix-x) The birth of a son is an occasion for rejoicing, while that of a daughter, particularly if she is the second or the third, is an occasion for mourning.

The desire for a male child can be so strong that parents use prenatal testing — amniocentesis and ultrasound—to deter-

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mine gender, and they subsequently abort female fetuses. Ramanamma and Bambawali's study of records in three hospitals in the city of Pune indicate that between June 1976 and June 1977, 700 women sought sex detection in hospital "B". 450 women were informed they would have a daughter. 430 of these decided to have an abortion. On the other hand, all 250 women who were informed that they bore a male fetus carried on with the pregnancy, even though they were warned of genetic disorder in some cases.

Similarly, Kulkarni's study of gynecologists in the city of Bombay reveals that 64.3 per cent use amniocentesis solely for sex determination. It was estimated that by 1986, approximately 16,000 tests were being performed each year in the Bombay metropolitan region alone. It has also been estimated that selective abor-

tions have claimed 78,000 female fetuses between 1983 and 1986. (Lingam 14-18)

The poor women's version of prenatal sex testing and selective abortion is female infanticide. It was the British who first documented the practice of female infanticide in India in the late eighteenth century, chiefly among upper castes in northern parts of India. More than a century later, Indians believed that the practice, like *sati*, had all but died out. This myth was shattered in June 1986 when *India Today* published an explosive story. Carrying the title, "Born to Die," this article estimated that 6,000 female infants had been poisoned during the preceding decade in the district surrounding the town of Madurai in Tamilnadu. Although difficult to ascertain its accuracy, the article also reported that the practice of female infanticide was popular among the 200,000 members of a poor and low caste called Kellars, who poisoned their female babies with the lethal oleander berry extract growing in their fields.

### Access to medical facilities

Very little information has been collected on the health status of women in India and their access to medical facilities. What little material is available reveals a bias. For instance, a study conducted at the Safdarjang Hospital revealed that more male children attended the Out-patient Department as compared to females and the nutrition clinic recorded an overall higher incidence of malnutrition among females. This discrimination stems from the "traditional beliefs that boys need to be cared for and nurtured more than girls because they carry the family name; that one can stay with the son in old age but not with daughters; and that boys are after all 'yours', while the girls are somebody else's property." (Bhogle 68)

A more recent report from Punjab in 1989 states that 55.5 per cent of children who died between seven and 36 months were females of the underprivileged community and 69 per cent of these had severe malnutrition. The only female who is of high priority is the first born, as long as she is the only living child. However, a subsequent pregnancy or a delivery of male child reduces her priority status. First and second males are always of high priority. This is by and large true of the third also. Of doubtful and low priority



are all females, except the first. This is particularly true of the underprivileged whose response to nutrition and health education for the third or fourth female often is: let her die. (Singh 125)

### **Female work participation in the labour force**

A U.N. report in the 1980s revealed the following:

Women do two-thirds of the world's work. They produce 60 to 80 per cent of Africa's and Asia's food, 40 per cent of Latin America's. Yet they earn only one-tenth of the world's income and own less than one per cent of the world property. They are among the poorest of the world's poor. (Staudt 9)

There are multiple images of a woman's work: cooking on a mud oven, planting in the field, carrying a child on her back, teaching in a school, overburdened at home. In many parts of the world, women haul water and firewood to homes. Women labour both in the formal and informal sector as traders, vendors and factory labourers. And yet, the question is often asked: what is women's work?

Patriarchal institutions and structures have rendered women powerless by refusing to value women's productive work, especially in the home. Marilyn Waring states that "women are a Third World wherever they are: low on technology, labour intensive, and source of raw materials, maintenance and unpaid or underpaid production for the more powerful." (xix)

The participation of women in the labour force in India is significantly lower than that of men, ranging between half to one fourth of men's participation rate. It is important to note that domestic work has been excluded from economic activity in all census enumeration and overlooks the fact that the working day of a poor woman in India may be anywhere between 12 to 16 hours.

There is, however, a significant increase in female participation in agriculture as farmers or casual labourers. The rise in female cultivators is accompanied by a decline in male cultivators: from 56 per cent in 1971 to 54.8 per cent in 1981,

which is actually an indicator of poverty among women. Briefly, what these statistics indicate is that there is a trend towards an increasing pauperization, under-employment and a process of "feminization" of agriculture.

### **Male-female differential in literacy and education**

Despite special efforts to improve educational performance among women, large differentials exist between the educational performance of males and females. If literacy rates among males and females are taken as a measure of educational development, a current discrepancy between male and female literacy rates is observed. Male literacy rates continue to outstrip female literacy rates at the national, state and district level.

In India, despite four decades of social

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and economic planning, including compulsory education, free education and adult education programmes, the literate segment of the population does not exceed 43 per cent of total. Among the different segments of the population, it is seen that 47.32 per cent of the total male population are illiterate. On the other hand, the corresponding figure for females is 68 per cent, which means that nearly two thirds of the female population in India do not know how to read and write. In India, female literacy is the result of a pervasive socially enforced deprivation and sexism.

### **Conclusion**

It is evident that there are many inequitable gaps between men and women in India: in wages and job opportunities; in

literacy and education; in adequate health care; in extensive and arduous unpaid work in water and firewood collection and agricultural production; in control over land; and in political voice. The male bias and neglect of the female child not only in childhood, but at all ages in India has resulted in differential mortality patterns. The death rates among females tend to be much higher, despite the fact that females have better survival potential.

In India, patriarchy reproduces itself in numerous ways through different relationships and institutions to maintain a systemic inequality between the sexes.

This is achieved through rules of legitimacy of offspring, through controlling sexual access to women and through the establishment of possessional rights over women which men have as husbands, fathers or older male relations... This is further strengthened and maintained over time by the socialization process that embeds women strongly within the familial structures and hierarchic gender relations so that they have little or no independent status and transgressions outside the family and male authority expose them to swift retribution and confirm their vulnerability. (Gandhi & Shah, 89)

Indeed, society is structured in such a way that is discriminatory to females. Attention must be paid to the stark and bleak realities confronting tens of millions of Indian women today. Attention must be paid to the injustice, to the frustrations, to the limitations imposed upon women generally—which thereby affect the very quality of life in this society. Women constitute one of the most exploited groups in Indian society; tribals, poor and low castes being the others. However, women also fall into each of these other groups. Thus a poor man living in an urban area is deprived, but a poor, illiterate woman residing in one of the poor rural areas in India is the most deprived.

Through the process of socialization women are effectively moulded to conform to the mandate of their culture and their role in the social structures. We must find ways of changing the overall patterns of discrimination and differentiation that



exist on the basis of gender. Such structures will otherwise continue to perpetuate a male meritocracy and skew the population's gender distribution for years to come.

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