

## **Sex ratio imbalances in India: a disaggregated analysis- forwards**

### **FOREWORD**

I agreed to write this foreword with full knowledge of my lack of competence. My familiarity with Satish Agnihotri's work and personality extends over some years, even if I am not in a position to comment on the quality of the tools that he has used for his analysis. It has been my fortunate (or unfortunate) role during the last quarter of a century to challenge many eminent specialists in quantitative analysis to 'check their own data' and methods to identify where and how they made women invisible by discarding data on them for any critical analysis. This of course applies particularly to economists but also many eminent demographers (with some honourable exceptions).

Dr. Agnihotri's case is however very different. One cannot pin him down as a product of any single discipline - he seems to have acquired so many. A scientist, with a social conscience strong enough to familiarise himself with considerable knowledge of many social sciences, a researcher with the purpose and mentality of an activist, and a man who has not allowed his bureaucratic profession to blunt either his intellectual curiosity or his sense of fair play or justice - these are the qualities which make him exceptional. He appears to have avoided the spreading cynicism among successful members of his generation and profession.

In the course of his work on this volume, he went visiting many scholars in India and abroad - not only to discuss his project but also to show them his respect for the questions they had raised years, even decades earlier, on the meaning of India's declining sex ratio. At least three of them called me to say how impressed they had been by the quality of his mind and the earnestness of his purpose. And all this was before he arrived in Delhi with the specific purpose of meeting me. His bubbling enthusiasm and excitement were infectious. In spite of our generation and the disciplinary gaps we had no problem in communicating.

With the increasing disappearance of male members of what I used to call the freedom generation (whose members had become adults between 1927 and 1947) who became allies and ardent supporters of the women's studies movement that followed the Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India - some of us were beginning to worry with the indifference and even occasional hostility amongst the younger generation - men in particular. Here was a representative who did not fit that stereotype. As he talked it was easy to see that it was not only intellectual ambition that had driven him into this study. Something much more was involved. His actions since the study was completed confirmed all my expectations. Had my guru JP Naik been around he would have been equally happy to find a young person who believed that research can also be a tool for action.

Readers of this volume will find strong evidence for this assessment scattered through the book. His strategy of closing many 'favourite escape hatches' of other quantitative analysts was not only to score points but to challenge all those who are guilty of trying

to explain away uncomfortable secular trends in data instead of asking the basic questions - why and how.

The fact that the author has been driven to ask an activist with no background of quantitative analysis to write this Foreword is a proof of this rather harsh statement. Since raising questions is the *raison d'être* of women's studies, I have already extended a warm welcome to this new entrant into our ranks. The new skills and methodology that he is able to bring to this area, the combination of interdisciplinary approach with innovative rigour in use of theories, data, hypotheses and conclusions from many fields - economics, demography, development studies, and cultural studies - would have delighted many of the old friends and allies whom we have lost recently.

It is a pity that we could not get the book out before the departure of Asok Mitra, the first Indian to highlight and question the declining sex ratio, or MN Srinivas who always looked for the 'worm's eye view' being used in the process of developing a 'bird's eye view' - one of the reasons for his appreciation of the approach - developed by the Committee on the Status of Women in India and Women's Studies.

He would have also enjoyed the way the author has used maps and tables to project the dynamics of cultural change clearly apparent through use of data in different points of time. The expanding black regions in Agnihotri's maps ought to convince anyone with an open mind (and some conscience) that female foeticide and female infanticide are two faces of the same phenomenon where tradition and modernity are not in opposition but in strong alliance - destined to lead to what Ashish Bose calls 'social turbulence'. It should make such readers look for the common factor which explains both and join us to influence the discourse on Population Policy to different directions.

Even from its very beginning Women's Studies in India discovered that the source of women's oppression do not lie only in poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, etc. but also in prosperity. All of us would thank Agnihotri for the way in which he questions the 'prosperity effect'. I have always admired boldness in a scholar to challenge dominant theories and authorities. The CSWI's exercise was to a great extent a very risky gamble - inferring conclusions to give meaning to the oral evidence that it had gathered - challenging wide ranging dominant understandings of the structure and dynamics of Indian society and its development. It is very heartening to find some of our inferences and hypotheses developed over the last quarter of a century being substantiated so skillfully by a young scholar.

Lastly, I thank the author for providing us with a very powerful tool to question the advocates of measurable indices for human development, human rights, gender empowerment and social development. Over the last twenty years my sisters and teachers from the peasant communities of India have convinced me that if the Indian nation is ever to acquire a really just social order, the leaders of that revolution have to come from those whom we were taught to view as the least civilised and most backward: I asked the late Prof. Mahbubul Huq that in the light of Agnihotri's analysis would he accept the validity of my question - in the Indian sub-continent who is more socially developed? The Adivasis, who do not dispose off their daughters by one method or another, or the rest of us? He noted the question but did not live to provide

the answer. Fortunately at my age I can afford to indulge in emotive language - risking my identity as a social scientist. I was brought up to believe that I must always weigh the consequences of my action - right or wrong - in my own life time. But just in case I have to be reborn may I wish to be an Adivasi woman in India.

Thank you, Satish!

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Centre for Women's Development Studies  
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