

# THE DISAPPEARING GIRL CHILD IN INDIA

Sharat Chandra Bose Memorial Lecture  
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I thank the Netaji Institute for Asian Studies for the honour of being invited to deliver the Sarat Chandra Bose Memorial Lecture. Though my working life over a long span of over 50 years has been spent outside this state, I grew up in Kolkata, and still have vivid memories of the high regard and respect for the Bose brothers shared by all members of our large extended family, especially my father and uncles, who knew Saratbabu closely.

The theme represents for me the most critical challenge facing our society, our civilisation and our future. My personal failure – to arouse adequate social outrage on the issue has shaken my supposedly ‘incorrigible optimism’ and confidence in the basic humanity of the ordinary average Indian. I keep hoping that the apathy is rooted in lack of information or the inability to grasp its long-term implications.

In July 1982, national women’s organisations protested against the emerging practice of Amniocentesis followed by abortion of female fetuses being advertised by one Bhandari’s Clinic in Amritsar. The advertisement described the birth of a girl child “as a threat to the family economy and **the nation**”. A young journalist, Ritambara Shastri’s brilliant investigative story covering a full page of a national English daily exposed vividly the inhuman social culture being fostered through Bhandari’s and a few other clinics in Amritsar – just a day before the meeting. Mr. Ved Marwah, then Joint Secretary in charge of the Women’s Welfare and Development Division within the Government of India, was shocked enough to carry the matter to the Minister for Health and Family Welfare. The Minister asked State Ministers to take action against such clinics. Nothing came out of that intervention, because the Clinics were not doing anything illegal. A campaign organised by young activist doctors and women’s groups and studies revealing that over 90% of abortions following amniocentesis were of female fetuses in Mumbai resulted however in some preventive legislation in Maharashtra and Gujarat – whose impact is comparable to the Anti-Dowry Act of 1961, or its amended version two decades later. Pressure from these health activists and women’s organisations, ultimately led to the Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques Act (1994), the amendment of which is currently ready for Parliament. The need for amendment for effective enforcement was directed by the Supreme Court in response to a PIL filed by CEHAT and Dr. Sabu George (Supreme Court Order of 4<sup>th</sup> May 2001 on Writ Petition No. 301 of 2000).

Another story surfaced, also in the 1980s, from a totally different region, and community in the country. India Today reported a rampant practice of female infanticide in Usilampatti Taluk (District Madurai, Tamil Nadu) inhabited predominantly by the Perumallai Kallars. A series of studies, by women’s studies scholars/journalists/

activists followed, each of them throwing a different set of lights on the practice. While *fear of dowry* was a common explanation – offered by leaders of the community – academics, lawyers, politicians etc. – two women scholars (interestingly both bear the same name – but they do not know each other) found some other factors.

The historian Vasanthi (currently Chair – Tamil Nadu State Commission for Women) identified increased inequality between different parts of the Taluk, thanks to increased agricultural productivity in the canal irrigated area – as a distinct cause, since dowry had been adopted by the well to do, educated sections. She found more girl children in the unirrigated, drought affected region, than in the prosperous part.

The writer Vasanthi identified (from conversations with women who admitted killing their daughters) the impact of the population control policy pursued by the State Government – since it provided social as well as legal legitimacy to abortion. The well-to-do could afford abortion, but poor women who depended on their physical labour and could not afford the pre-natal tests were also *afraid* that abortion could damage their health – so they preferred to give birth, and kill the child only if it proved to be a girl. The study also hinted strongly of collusion on the part of hospital staff and the police, in addition to the complacency of leaders of the community.

Both studies had highlighted caste endogamy – within the context of increasing inequality as the reason behind the prevalence of dowry. The historian had mentioned that Perumallai Kallars had been a martial community with men mostly employed in the armies of local princelings/landowners **leaving subsistence agriculture to the women**, until the area was subjugated by the British early in the nineteenth century. Two earlier studies by foreign scholars – Louis Dumont (1950s) and Pauline Kollenda (1960s) had found strong evidence of **female dominance in this community**, not only in the prevalence of bride-price, but in other social practices. Kollenda however reported signs of a gradual decline in women's status, with bride price beginning to give way to dowry. By the 1980s when female infanticide was reported – dowry had become the caste-norm.

Still later studies noted the spread of female infanticide to other districts and caste groups in Tamil Nadu, which had no history of this practice and a high sex-ratio until the 1950s. Pressure from women's groups and the Department of Women and Child Development, Government of India resulted in a programme to promote adoption of unwanted daughters. However, further development of reproductive technology, paired with a harsh population control policy manifested consequences in a steep decline in the juvenile sex-ratio during the nineties - as demonstrated by the Census of 2001. I shall leave it to Dr. Satish Agnihotri to present this evidence to you.

Beginning with this twenty years old history is deliberate – to counter the propaganda about **the end of History and of Ideology**. Blotting out history as one of the tools of power is not new. **The largest single group of victims of such power play have been women – of all colour, races and regions**. Non-acknowledgement of their contributions to human civilization, community living, and social progress became the most important tool for subordinating and subjugating women, projecting them only as **reproducers** - bearers of children. As long as humanity's survival required more numbers, women were treated with some care. Even wars were fought to acquire them. Once the sheer weight of numbers is projected as something to be frightened of and 'people' are displaced by 'population' – a soulless, non-human term - women become a

liability – even a threat. I have to emphasise this basic logic of power – because without **it we cannot even begin to examine the issue that the disappearing girl child poses.**

At stake is the survival of **Homo Sapiens, or human civilization as we know it, unless we rescue the threats facing the girl child in the world today and tomorrow** from the miasma carefully fostered by historical myths and false propaganda about Indian, South Asian Culture, Traditions, or religious values as the source of the entire problem.

Human societies, cultures, languages, knowledge, ideas, life styles or aspirations are not static. If they were, they would be fossilized, and disappear as happened to many living species in the past. Like most other moving, life forces – they produce their own patterns of dynamics, growth and decay. Thirty years of active involvement in the women’s movement and women’s studies has transformed my own understanding and appreciation of the **richness and strength of our cultural diversity.** The diversity is most explicit yet, extraordinarily, the least known – in the distribution of responsibilities between women and men – and consequent acquisition of potential **capabilities** ( I’m using the term in the Amartya Sen-Martha Nussbaum definition) – and strengths – physical , mental and moral – demonstrated by the majority of our women – normally viewed by the intelligentsia as illiterate, ignorant, oppressed, subordinated and voiceless millions – who have to be civilized, uplifted and empowered by us. **In reality, the process works the other way.**

Shouldering the major burden of the family’s survival from childhood – these women master the art of survival in most adverse situations. Add to that their inherited stock of experiential knowledge, occupational skills and sense of responsibility as human capital/assets. Coming together of such women in an organization – **sets off an energy explosion – not easily attained by any middle class women’s organization. Rights have never been a part of this majority’s education – so one dose of legal literacy, especially on the Constitution – works like the ignition of a motor engine – expanding their self-esteem, collective confidence and responsibility – from the familial to the social, and political.**

Many of us in the women’s movement have been fortunate to watch this transformation taking place, drawing from it fresh energy, strength **and** capability to empower ourselves. As social scientists we recognized the political dynamics that we first saw in Self Employed Women’s Association, Working Women’s Forum, and Annapurna Mahila Mandal – all in metropolitan cities. There are many rural counter-parts today, unleashing dynamics which have socio-cultural, environmental as well as political dimensions. The Xth Five Year Plan Working Group on Empowerment of Women acknowledges the existence of **this force** –citing three significant indicators – (a) the extraordinary response from rural and urban women to the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional amendments; (b) the jump in the female literacy rate to a **critical mass** of 54% (2001 Census); and (c) Domestic violence, which forms the largest share of crimes against women, **“as a negative reflection on the state of our society”.** **Its higher visibility is, however , indicative of a building anger and positive assertion by women of their rights”.**

I have dared to describe this process as **counter-Sanskritisation** to defeat, or at least check the extraordinary power of the **far older, dominant form of cultural**

**dynamics** designated as the Sanskritisation process by Srinivas in the '60s. In his own words " Its first manifestation is the **immurement** (read subordination, and increasing controls on labour and traditional freedoms by the family) of women". Srinivas found this operative among the traditionally working or peasant castes among Hindus experiencing upward mobility. We have found it equally operative among non-Hindu communities - as they move upwards in the socio-economic ladder. The 1961 Census study recorded **Bride-price, not dowry** as being practised by more than 60% of the Indian population. No later Census has dared to assess the present situation – but we know **dowry** as the main rationale being offered by everyone for the killing of women – before or after birth and marriage

Thanks to the path-breaking investigation of Satish Agnihotri – **we now know that the increasing disappearance of Indian girls in the youngest age-group is concentrated not in the poorest but in the most prosperous 'developed' regions of India. And the only identifiable section of the Peoples of India who cannot be accused of polishing off their daughters are the Adivasis.**

I am not a demographer – but my historical evidence is mostly demographic. it is a fact that the practice of female infanticide existed among some communities in North India. After it was banned by law, the British Raj conducted Annual Surveys under police supervision in those regions/communities **and no evidence of the practice being continued was found.** On the other hand, the age-specific infant mortality rates from 1881-1901 **recorded the sway of the biological norm of male babies being more vulnerable.** Recording a major conclusion from his review of the 1881 Census, my guru Asok Mitra wrote in 1978:

“...Female life in 1881 was on the whole better off than male life... **mortality in the first few years was considerably less, during middle life it was somewhat more, then after about age 40 it fell below the male mortality. The Average duration of life was considerably greater than that of males at birth, but fell below from age 4 to 21, after which female life was better off than male to the close of the upper limit of 60**”.<sup>1</sup>

Mitra also provided evidence that the Raj was able to control the practice of infanticide after banning it, an admission not pleasant for a nationalist to make. Even the gross sex ratio improved between 1881 to 1900. **The phenomenon of the declining sex-ratio thus started only from 1901, and after a freak improvement in 1981, continued unabated.** Offering various explanations for the 'neglect of females' Mitra had raised some blatant questions:

“What does a declining sex ratio portend for the future of the population of India? Is it not a good portent for a decline in the rate of growth of population, **for after all, women are the only source of population and the less of them we have the better?**” (Ibid. Vol. 1, Part III, p. 396).

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<sup>1</sup> Asok Mitra, *India's Population : Aspects of Quality and Control*, Vol. 1, Abhinav Publications, New Delhi, 1978, p. 10

Mitra's question remains as valid today as an expression of the culture and values that we have produced among the educated middle class through five decades of the Population Discourse, and globalisation of the culture of an acquisitive society. The adoption of international covenants for gender equality and child rights come during the same period that wants less and less of children to be born, while the proportion of the elderly in the populations of the most developed countries went on increasing to nearly a quarter of the whole – destroying the original pyramidal shape that appears to me as the natural and the ideal.

**Advances in bio-sciences and technology** are harnessed to control and modify the human reproduction process. As a member of the International Independent Commission on Population and Quality of Life (1993-96) I found it extremely difficult to get any expert advice or information on these scientific and technological **advances** – until the draft report of a Canadian Royal Commission indicated an acute sense of fear, discomfort and powerlessness - calling for social intervention – since it was becoming **too dangerous to leave such possibly irreversible long-term hazards threatening the future of human society or the species as a whole – to the self regulatory ethical codes of different scientific and medical associations.**

Feminists all over the world have identified themselves with absolute reproductive freedom, and free choice for abortion, or sex selection. A philosopher from Oxford headed a Commission appointed by the European Union to examine the ethical and legal implications of the new developments in reproductive technology, especially of sex-selection of the unborn child, and recommended **the right to choose** of the **couple**. In the context of our own society there is no way of ensuring that the **couple's** choice is the reality. Even if it were – does that make it ethical, moral, right or just? Do any of us have the right to condemn future generations of humanity to the far worse danger of depopulation or too many men chasing too few women – pregnant or otherwise, willing or unwilling?

**I am sure that gender imbalance in the child population is no longer confined to India, South Asia or China/Korea – but would be found operative in other corners of the world – in the North and South.** I have been searching for child sex-ratio data in the UN's statistical (recent) outputs – and their absence only increases my apprehensions about the politics of quantitative data. I am not a quantitative analyst – but only an indifferent student of history, considerably reeducated by **my teachers 'from below'** - in my sense of social and generational responsibility. Those women would put their collective responsibility – to the future – before pushing any **individual or even a couple's right to choose** away the lives of their children.

After half-a-century of the discourse or advance of human rights, I am compelled to say that **freedom of choice without moral, social and generational responsibility** is a herald – for what Ashish Bose calls a civilisational collapse.

**SEX RATIO OF TOTAL POPULATION AND  
CHILD POPULATION IN THE  
AGE GROUP 0-6: 1961-2002**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Sex ratio in Age Group 0-6</b>	<b>Overall Sex Ratio</b>
1961	976	941
1971	964	930
1981	962	934
1991	945	927
2001	927	933

*Source: Census of India 2001, Series 1, Provisional Population Totals, Statement 22, p. 96*