

**ASIA, VANISHING POINT FOR  
AS MANY AS 100 MILLION WOMEN:  
A COMMENT**

By

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Nicholas Kristof's report on the declining sex-ratio in many Asian countries raises more questions; than providing answers. It also demonstrates a reappearance of the "mysterious orient" syndrome a mindset that may provide a cover for neo - colonial attitudes.

Let me first pick out the unanswered questions and contradictions. Throughout the report the finger is pointed at "traditional" "outdated attitudes" - of son preference that leads to discrimination against female infants, girls and women of all ages. But there is no explanation as to why such attitudes should be spreading or hardening - to lead to a declining sex-ratio.

Only some Asian countries' data is mentioned - so the reader is to conclude that gender iniquity is a feature of only Asian cultures. Had the author taken the trouble to consult a few demographers - especially those who have tried to reconstruct historical demography like the late Christofer Tietze - he might have found out that many currently "developed" countries possibly experienced this phenomenon, as their societies moved from predominantly agrarian to the industrialised stage - through various upheavals. Fortunately, for the self-righteous defenders of human rights, their governments had not designed the instrument of the Census in those days - so scholars like 'Tietze could not demonstrate their theories with the kind of data base that India can offer. In the case of the African countries too, most have started their census only recently, so trend analysis is impossible.

The situation is somewhat reminiscent of Mr. Chandrasekhar (when he was Prime Minister) observing that Sati, or widow burning-was a practice only prevalent in Bengal, and not in the rest of India. While other historians roundly criticised the PM's a-historical statement, Prof. Barun De la - mented "It seems Bengal's sin (in the eyes of the PM) was in having mounted a movement 'against Sati !".

In his anxiety to dramatise the "vanishing point" of Asia's "missing women" - Kristof insists that poverty cannot be the cause, otherwise why does sub-Saharan Africa have 2 women more for every 100 men ? We are of course not told what he ratio had been earlier, or how many, or which African countries he has included in this sweeping aggregation.

It is amazing that the editore of the International Herald Tribune should permit such unashamed praise (or propagandist abuse!) of "overall statistics" even school kids These days know that aggregated statistics hide more than they reveal - just as every undergraduate knows that you cannot draw sweeping conclusions from demographic

data at one point of time. While the report is particular to mention "huge differences" within India, it promptly jumps to the conclusion that Kerala could offer a "benchmark" for the "Third World" if it were "gender blind". Kristof appears to be unaware of the fact that though still favourable to women, the sex-ratio in Kerala was dipping through the 60s and 70s, as happened with Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh since the '30s. During some of the same decades erstwhile declining and low sex-ratio states (e.g. Punjab, West Bengal etc.) registered an upward swing in the sex - ratio, which has been reasonably steady since then. Why?

My major criticism, however, is 'not of Kristof's obvious lack of knowledge of demographic analysis. The report offers no explanation for the most major indicator of women marginalisation with the advancing "globalisation" of the economies of the Asian countries, though it admits that "the problem is getting worse in Asia". Obvious clues that are included :- a) why Papua New Guinea's relatively 'gender blind' society should have started following the 'classically blind' society should have started following the 'classically patriarchal' cultures like India and China:

b) why religion seems to have no impact on this societal behaviour (the countries referred, to, between them, include all the major religions of the world); or c) why the sex - ratio started declining afresh in India and China in the 80s - when the former began its "liberalising" policies and the latter its "modernising" ones.?

My last criticism is of the patronising suggestion that Asian scholars, culturally benighted as they are - do no research to "find tangible support for the statistics". Indian demographers like Asok Mitra and Ashis Bose were ridiculed by their western counterparts through decades - for the significance they attached to the declining sex-ratio. Being a non - demographer, and a mere woman at that - my observations to the population council and the overseas development council (both located in the USA) produced amused dismissals from almost all professional population - ists in these bodies. Morris de Morris did deign to examine the possibility of including sex-ratio as one of the indicators in his exercises to develop the PQLI (People's Quality of Life Index), but rejected it as of no significance after a month's tour of India. And I think Presidency College, Calcutta, Cambridge University, U.K., and Prof. Amartya Sen himself ought to object to his being appropriated as a "Harvard' economist". To the best of my knowledge - Harvard did not contribute anything to Amartya Sen's development. And his gender-sensitive research began when he was still at Oxford. Many professional demographers have been studying China's population trends. I am not aware of anyone other than the benighted Asian economist Amartya Sen for having focussed on the declining sex ratio and increasing infant mortality as critical reversals of 'of earlier demographic trends in that country.

Despite my incompetence in the field of population studies, I did make a prediction to some colleagues in the early '80s - that the combination of a one child population policy and the modernising "responsibility policy" adopted by China in 1979 to raise its agricultural productivity may, in the long run, wipe out the gains women had made in the 50's to the 070s period. Sen proved that my prediction was not altogether baseless.

Back In the 1970s Asok mitra had in India's population trend, because too many changes began to take place during this decade. The economic participation rate of women began

to decline sharply and the gender distribution in life expectancy and mortality changed in favour of men, gap which has been maintained ever since. He identified this decade as also the beginning of the steady increase in India's population growth. It much higher rate than in the previous few centuries. He suggested a link between these trends and the increased dependence of the Indian economy in the world market. We, in the Centre for Women's Development Studies, have since then identified another significant trend. The sex ratio among illiterates was virtually at par until 1931, from when female illiterates began to outnumber men increasingly indicating that amongst the poor and marginalization was still higher. Thus gender inequalities were penetrating even those section of the population where they had been relatively far less before.

Though the word 'culture' is not mentioned anywhere in Kristof's report, culture is obviously the culprit he has in mind, in accusing Asian countries of killing of the female of the species. It appears that he has no interest in understanding the pluralism of Asian cultures or the effects that increasing poverty and disappearing access to basic subsistence resources (like land, water and forests) produce on the poor of the third world countries, peasant women in India and other third world countries. Peasant women in India and other third world countries have been protesting against the denudation of these life support systems based on the natural environment in order to feed larger industries in their own countries and abroad, but obviously Kristof is not interested in hearing the voices of the group who are victims of 'global development' in a world order which is becoming increasingly iniquitous and unequal.

This does not mean that I belittle the gravity of the crisis that the declining sex ratio portends. After all, I am one of the culprits who, since our discovery of this most powerful indicator of women's marginalisation in 1974 (during the investigation of the Committee on the Status of Women in India) began to appeal to social scientists and the media to include gender as a variable in their examination or projection of issues of mal development, poverty and inequality. My sharp reactions to Kristof's article can thus claim some justification.