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How Unjust How Merciless!**

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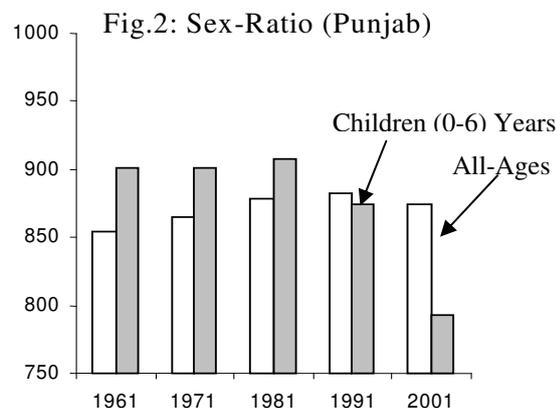
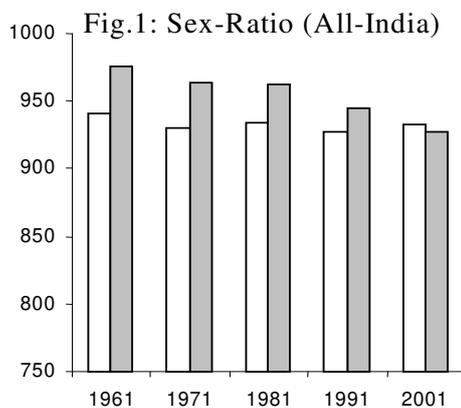
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The Quest for Sons among *Punjabis*

How Unjust & How Merciless!

Varinder Jain¹

Do the daughters really eat more and burden parents relatively more than the sons? Do their degree of love and affection for their parents is lower than their male counterparts? Do they provide relatively inferior security in old age to their parents? and so on. These are the few questions that comes to one's mind immediately while looking at the sharp differences in sex-ratios between the all-India levels and *Punjab* - one among the prosperous states of the Indian union. Figures 1 and 2 reveal: (1) the mismatch between the male-female ratios did not emerge recently rather it has prevailed over the period of time and such trend may continue even in future given the lower levels of sex-ratios for children in 0-6 age group. (2) The sex-ratio in *Punjab*, for all age groups as well as for the children between 0-6 years, has remained much lower than those at the all-India level over the period of time. (3) the sex-ratio for all the age groups has increased slightly throughout all the decades except 2001. (4) the sex-ratios for children between 0-6 years has remained stabilised during 1961-1971 but these started declining since 1981 and this decline has been much steep during the period 1991 to 2001.



In 2001, the sex-ratios in *Punjab* has reached at the lowest levels of 793 female children per 1000 male children with *Fatehgrah Sahib* district being at the lowest levels of 754 female children as per 1000 male children. This district recorded the highest decline of 120 points in 2001 from its earlier levels in 1991.

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The child sex-ratios in *Punjab* have worsened to such lower levels mainly due to the introduction (during 1980s) and then popularity (during 1990s) of the 'Pre-Natal Diagnostics Technique'. The *Punjabi* society has emerged historically as the patriarchal society and there has always prevailed a wish to have a male heir among *Punjabis*. Moreover, the cost of living in today's world has become so high that no rational parent wish to enlarge the size of his family and given the desire to have the male heir, these sex determination techniques proved to be the easy way, in the presence of greedy mid-wives, quacks, medical practitioners and the doctors, to get the fruit of their choice. There are very few who use these tests to detect some biological problem associated with the growth of the fetus. Of course, these medical practitioners also made their fortunes by charging large fees for each abortion. These fees varied from Rs. 7000 - Rs. 10,000 per abortion. Such easy option available to families have had an adverse impact on the sex-ratio in the state and *Punjab*, in 2001 Census, has emerged as the state with 7 districts out of top 10 with extremely low child sex-ratios among the 593 districts in India (GoI, 2004: 364)! In the event of such popular adoption of these sex determination techniques in *Punjab*, it is not surprising to find that the district with the lowest child sex-ratio has been from the Punjab only. It is worth mentioning here that owing to the alarming consequences of the popular adoption of these sex determination techniques, the state of *Punjab* along with other neighbouring states like *Haryana* etc. has enacted the 'Pre-Natal Diagnostics Technique (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse)' Act. By this Act, checking the sex of an unborn child has become a cognisable offence. Moreover, there exists the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971 as well.

But, even after the formal introduction, these acts were not implemented in spirit and consequently, the medical practitioners continued to determine the sex of unborn babies in a clandestine manner. The practice of killing unborn daughters has become rampant during these days. Such phenomenon became empirically proved as well with the recovery of several wells containing piles of female fetus at various places in Punjab till date. The unearthing of the mass grave of aborted female fetus behind a private hospital in *Patran* – sub-tehsil of the *Patiala* district, has again brought on the forefronts this issue of relative vulnerability of females in *Punjabi* society in general and the child sex ratio in particular. The killings at such massive scale are a blot on the face of culturally rich state of *Punjab*. Now, the time has come when the state,

economists, demographers and other thinkers working on *Punjab* economy and society should start a systematic thinking and introspection to explore various causes of such malaise of fetus killings.

Being from the much-affected district of *Mansa* that has child sex-ratio of 779 in 2001, we have had the chance to observe and discuss this issue at length. Therefore, we would like to express our opinion regarding the persistence of the problem of female feticide in *Punjab*. Though we did not conduct a systematic survey with a structured questionnaire, our observations may be taken as the qualitative evidence related to this problem. We found that the most dominant ideology among *Punjabis* is to consider the male child as their only heir and the girls are often considered liabilities. The feeling of having male heirs has reached to such extent that it has penetrated into *Punjabi* customs. Most of the customs and ceremonies are lead by those women, who have given birth to only male children. For example, there are the customs related with greeting bride at bridegrooms house by the mothers of only male children. It is believed that by doing so, the new bride will also give male heirs to the family. It can be often observed that the elders always bless their daughters-in-law for having a number of male children. Also, it can be seen everywhere that there are the practices of distributing sweets and exchanging gifts on the birth of a male child whereas the family is often consoled on the birth of a female child and no sweets are distributed on the birth of a daughter. The parents feel more energetic at the birth of male child whereas the same parents look much depressed, burdened and disappointed at the birth of female child. The existence of the patriarchal system might have conditioned all these customs, ceremonies and practices. Moreover, the factors like old age insurance, family bread winner, carrier of the family name, physical supporter and protector for the family and so on are the much echoed justifications among the *Punjabis* for having the male children whereas the 'Dowry System', which has turned up to its terrible heights, puts the female child at relative disadvantage. The minds of the parents are often conditioned by the notion that the birth of the female child will pressurise them to save for giving gifts to their daughter. The parents are also unwilling to have female children, as they are much worried regarding problems related with sexual abuse of their would-be daughters. Such feelings have arisen due to the penetration of media and the unsocial serials telecasted by most of the TV channels.

Anyone interested in studying the parents' approach towards female feticide may classify the *Punjabi* society into three categories. In first category, one can club together all the rich and the landlord families who do not have much problem in giving birth to the female child as they can afford to give dowry for the wedding of their daughters. But, these parents always quest for having male child as they consider him as their heir who'll take care of their business, wealth and property after their death. In urban areas, most often the parents acknowledge that the boys are not much caring and respectful than their daughters but still they accept their wish to have the male child! There is also the expectation among these parents that the marriage of their sons will bring a large amount of gold and wealth as dowry to their homes. In other words, they consider their sons as their assets. The middleclass constitutes the second category of parents who is having the same kind of mind-set for their choice of the male child but their limited wherewithal, in the presence of high dowry norms established by the upper class, restricts their choice for the female child. This class can be seen as the large victim of the demonstration effect as it often tries to imitate the rich class in setting their standards of living and social behaviour and in the process, given the restrictions imposed by limited capacity to meet obligations related with daughter's marriage, incline much towards female feticide. It is in this category of parents, one may find a very high incidence of female feticide. The landless and marginal poor families constitute the third category of parents. This category of parents, one may say, is entirely different from the other two. These kinds of parents either do not have the knowledge of the existence of these sex selective technologies or they cannot afford to take help of expert medical practitioners for abortions. Consequently they either take the help of traditional mid-wives or enlarge the size of their families by reproducing daughters in their quest for male child. The lower income levels and weak resource base of such parents imposes a certain kind of neglect and discrimination in the care of their daughters. The female children can be often seen working as domestic servants or the caretakers of babies in the houses of middle class and the rich families. These children, most often, end up with lower levels of achievements on educational and health fronts. These are often illiterate and malnourished. In few families, we also observed that these daughters, like their mothers, end up by becoming professional prostitutes who operate their business more secretly through some permanent channels. Moreover, these daughters have to bear

the burden of their families in much young age due to the practice of early marriage among poor families.

This whole story about the vulnerability, marginalisation and discrimination of the female child reflects nothing but the unfavourable status of women in *Punjabi* society. It is clear now that even after the introduction of legal measures by the *Punjab* Government, there is very inefficient enforcement and implementation of these rules and regulations. It is not so that there does not exist any administrative machinery for this in the state as the state is already having the Department of Women and Child Welfare. There exists the National Commission of Women as well. But, the existing trends reflect that even these agencies are not able to do much to end the plight of women in *Punjabi* society. We feel that the sole reason for the marginalisation and vulnerability of the female child is the widespread notion of patriarchy in *Punjabi* society. There is a need to generate such literature, which may change the mind-sets and ideologies long held, believed and practised by *Punjabis*. We have to have some kind of social mobilisation and community support unless the results may turn out to be much drastic in coming future!

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