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May 22, 2011

First Published: 23:06 IST(22/5/2011)

Last Updated: 11:25 IST(20/11/2011)

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## It's bloomtime now

In the 1920s, a young Tamil girl sang and starred in her school musical. It was, ostensibly, a private event with few outsiders. Yet so exceptional was her singing that Swadesamitran ran her photograph and wrote about the event. Seeing that photo in the newspaper, her household “was appalled” for, as the music historian V Sriram writes, “good, chaste women never had their photographs published in papers”.

Today, this seems like an archaic, if minor, prejudice based on gender: one fostered by a conservative, ill-educated, economically stagnant and culturally insular society of the 1920s. There are more vicious examples of gender discrimination now, from dowry deaths to multiple rapes in Delhi. Yet the census of 2011 reveals the worst discrimination of all: there are even more “missing women” in India than Amartya Sen first realised, 22 years ago.

The 2011 Census revealed that for the under-six age group, there were only 914 girls for every 1,000 boys. This child-sex ratio, or CSR, was 927 girls per 1000 boys in the 2001 Census; in fact the CSR has declined in 28 of the 35 states. The CSR in India suggests things are getting worse for girls and women in India, even while the economy is getting better.

More alarming is the inverse correlation between declining child-sex ratio and increased economic growth. In Gujarat, where economic growth is much heralded, this shortfall of girls is seen starkly between backward and non-backward districts, with the former at 923 and the latter at 873. Ironically, regions with large tribal communities, in general, have better CSRs than the high-growth areas of the country. Alarming, states like Tamil Nadu, which were historically gender agnostic, have begun to show a marked decline in CSRs as well.

We need not belabour the question of why this is so: socio-economic pressures, dowry and the greater economic value of being male, explain our disgraceful prejudices against girls. But what can we learn from these depressing census figures? First, rising education in itself is not enough. We're becoming more literate and less gender-friendly.

Second and sadly, increased female education is neither a sufficient nor necessary condition to ensure stable gender ratios. Numerous studies had led us to believe that educating girls could transform society. Not true in this respect, alas.

Third, income growth can simply increase access to technological tools that perform selective abortions. Richer people aren't necessarily wiser or more decent.

Fourth, legal restrictions haven't been effective. We already have the Preconception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act, 1994, but it hasn't improved the CSR. Worse, as home secretary GK Pillai acknowledged: “Whatever measures that have been put in over the last 40 years have not had any impact on the child sex ratio.” Fifth, India's modernisation has worsened the practice of dowry rather than reduced it.

Professor Siwan Anderson at the

University of British Columbia has argued that caste continues to perpetuate dowry because India's endogamous marriage practices restrict the supply of marriage partners — and as a result efficient matching of individuals doesn't occur. Caste, in a sense, acts as a barrier in the free market of marriage. Then dowry becomes a method to bid for mates, signal social status and perpetuate an arms race to reach the top of the pecking order. Free enterprise has unshackled the economy, but the beneficiaries are operating in a restricted marriage market, limited by caste. They just demand higher dowries now.

What does the shortage of girls mean for us as a society? In economics, when the supply of a good is limited, the 'price' of that good rises if and only if there exists an orderly and legal market to transact. In its absence, you get blackmarketing, violence, theft and trafficking to possess that good. It doesn't take much imagination to connect the dots and recognise what this means when one gender is in short supply. Cases of polyandry are being reported from Haryana. In China, where the one-child policy has created a similar imbalance, there are horrifying stories of predatory bands of young males on the prowl for scarce women.

Can policy-makers do something about it? Governments can't usually alter cultures, but laws can be creatively used to help. How about tax breaks for mixed-caste marriages? Grants for having female children? If girls are undervalued because they don't earn as much as men, countervailing policies can be made. Since our growing economy unduly favours men, there is a role for government to help create employment opportunities for women. Mandating benefits for gender-neutral employers, or ensuring legal protection for female staff, can increase women's employment opportunities and in turn contribute to increasing the economic 'value' of a girl child.

Changing CSR numbers might seem like a 21st century fad, but in fact it's consonant with our ancient wisdom. The Manu Smriti, no less, proclaims: "Where women are not revered, all rites are useless".

As for that young girl who was once chided for getting her photograph published in the newspaper — in 1998 she went on to be awarded the Padma Vibhushan, India's second highest civilian award. She was DK Pattammal, the grand matriarch of Carnatic music. As her life exemplifies, in every seed, there is nestled a mighty banyan — awaiting its opportunity to bloom.

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