

Understanding Culture Promoting Preference of Sons Among Women of Kakrala Village, Punjab

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Abstract

Despite major strides made in several parameters related to women and their empowerment, the culture promoting preference of sons remains undiminished. For decades, female subordination and gender discrimination have regrettably remained as impediments to women's social, cultural, and economic growth. Punjab, popularly known as 'Nation's Basket' is characterized by strong patriarchal norms and inherent gender inequalities. While the state has the most equitable model of development, it also has the lowest sex ratio. Contrary to the biological pattern, there have been a lesser number of women than men in Punjab. Punjab has been consistent in maintaining a skewed sex ratio since the first census in 1881, with a sex ratio of 844. As per census 2011, it remains at 895 with the Indian average at 943. Girl child discrimination is reflected with a Child Sex Ratio (CSR) of 846, which is taken as a consolidated reflection of mortality in the most vulnerable age group. The continuing practice of male child preference manifests as cultural neglect of the girl child and also provides social acceptability and justification to female infanticide and prenatal sex selection, both of which are crimes in India. Based on secondary sources and primary data, this paper will focus on the deeply rooted gender bias against girl children in village Kakrala. By elucidating the culture and practice of male child preference through using narratives from the field, this paper will argue for a more comprehensive and holistic approach towards ensuring gender equality that goes beyond developmental indicators and questions the challenge that still exists towards the right to life for girl children.

Keywords: Gender, Culture, Women, Patriarchy, Punjab

Introduction

India has made rapid progress in the overall socio-economic development and that has significantly improved maternal and child health, better education, improved economic opportunities, especially for women, and reduced literacy gaps between men and women. But this trend of development has not yet resulted in equalizing sex ratios in general and gender relations in particular (Ahlawat, 2016). According to the World Economic Forum (WEF) Gender Gap report, India has slipped down to 112th position from the 108th position in 2018 (World Economic Forum, 2020). As per census 2011, there are 940 females per 1000 males in India which reflects the griming situation of girls as well as the occurrence of sex-selective abortion practices. At the same time, Child Sex Ratio (CSR) has declined from 927

in 2001 to 914 in 2011 which is further a cause of serious concern. These numbers highlight that there is persistent discrimination against girl child and that achieving gender equality might still be a far fledged dream for our nation. These numbers also indicate that despite higher levels of education, awareness, and economic prosperity that our nation has achieved over a few decades, the consciousness and attitudes of people towards women and girls have not changed.

For decades, female subordination and gender discrimination have regrettably remained as impediments to women's social, cultural, and economic growth. Research studies have shown that lack of gender equality translates to outcomes such as poor health, poor education, and limited access to resources for women. The neglect and discriminatory behavior

towards girls leading to excess female mortality have been widely documented (Visaria, 1971; Dasgupta, 1987; Miller, 1989; Kishor, 1995, as cited in Ahlawat, 2016, p.2). India has a history of more women and girls dying than men through their childhood and reproductive age. Gendered practices and norms are deeply embedded within the social fabric of our society and they not only subjugate women in every sphere of their lives, but also condition them to internalize these practices and norms. It is considered to be the prime responsibility of the women to impart these roles and practices to their daughters and daughters in law. In a patriarchal family set up, young girls while growing up are often encountered with phrases such as 'You are a woman, you are supposed to do this' or 'You are a woman, you are not supposed to behave like this'. Women are taught to be submissive and tender right from their childhood so that they are properly 'adjusted' in their families once they are married. Women are socially conditioned and their gendered identities are constructed around them so much so that more often than not, women themselves become torchbearers of patriarchy. As rightly argued by Bhargavi V, 'The discriminatory socialization of children based on gender plays a special role in preparing the female psyche for subservience.' (2008, p.398).

Review of Literature

Though the situation of women in our society in recent years has improved due to numerous awareness drives and social campaigns such as 'Beti Baccho, Beti Padho', but there is a long way to go as far as gender equality is concerned. At the center of gender discrimination discourse, is the phenomena of son preference. Despite major strides made in several parameters related to women and their empowerment, India's obsession with a male child and their significance has not diminished. Son preference in India is ancient and universal. It is an indicator of social development (Radkar, 2016). There are a plethora of social, cultural and economic factors that contribute to this skewed preference. There has been enough and more research on understanding the cause of this preference and the main reason emphasized by social scientists has been the patriarchal social set up and its implications on the position of women in our society. Many studies carried out since the 1970s have shown how cultural practices have always undervalued daughters or women in Indian society (Ahlawat, 2016). Cultural norms and rituals celebrating the birth of son are practiced and observed across all sections of our society. There is a social and economic value being assigned to a male child. Birth of a son is supposed to give a higher social status to the family, especially the mother, as well as it is considered as a step forward towards economic prosperity. A boy in the family is

viewed as an investment and future breadwinner while the daughters, on the other hand, are seen as liabilities and are eventually married off to their 'real' families on paying heavy amounts of dowry. There is always a feeling of remorse associated with the birth of a girl child, especially for second or third daughters. They are even less breastfed than their brothers and have limited or little access to good food, medical care, and education as compared to their male counterparts. Moreover, a family is never 'complete' unless they are blessed with a son. It is often considered as a burden to raise young girls as the concept of shame and honor are associated with them. There is a strong emphasis on their purity and virginity and girls are told to behave in preconceived and socially constructed norms. A lot of importance is attached to the onset of menstruation in young girls because it is an indication that the girl is not barren and will reproduce once married hopefully, sons.

"India's story of economic development has not translated into corresponding gains in the social sphere and this paradox is indicative of how development can be a misnomer if it does not change unjust cultural thought and practice" (Ahlawat, 2016, p. 1). Gender discrimination in recent years has taken newer forms and manifestations. The lives of daughters who are born are improving, but they are still not wanted. The level of education among girls and women is increasing, their ultimate goal still revolves around marriage and children. There is not necessarily a direct correlation between economic advancement and reduced gender inequality. It is reported that neglect and discrimination against girl child and son preference are more pronounced in areas that are economically advanced due to massive privatization and availability of sex-selective technologies. Many studies have reported that there is a direct relationship between skewed sex ratio and economic prosperity and availability of technologies for sex selective abortion as well as infanticide. These practices are more dominant among people with higher education and higher incomes. For example, Punjab, one of the richest states of our country, has the worst child sex ratio amongst the other states. The state has recorded a long history of female infanticide and male child preference. With the new trend of having small families, people are strategically choosing to have sons over daughters. Economic survey (2018) reported that 'India could have as many as 21 million unwanted girls, that is, girls whose parents wanted to have sons instead' (Thomas, 2018). The same report also estimated that many Indian parents are opting to have children till they have the desired number of sons. Families keep on trying until they have a son and that manifests in deeply rooted discriminatory practices against the girl child, especially the second or child one.

Objectives and Research Methodology

This paper aims at understanding the culture promoting preference of sons and the deep-rooted gender bias against the girl children in village Kakrala, Punjab. By elucidating the culture and practice of male child preference, this paper will argue for a more comprehensive and holistic approach towards ensuring gender equality that goes beyond developmental indicators and questions the challenge that still exists towards the right to life for girl children. Through reviewing specific indicators related to women and their empowerment, it attempts to locate gender discrimination within everyday occurrences of their lives, social beliefs, and patriarchal norms. Besides the secondary sources of information, the argument made in the paper is also authenticated by primary data which was collected by the author during her doctorate field research in Village Kakrala of Patiala District, Punjab. In-depth interviews were conducted with 125 women of the village and those relevant are stated in the paper.

Punjab and Gender-Specific Challenges

Punjab the 'land of five rivers' has always held an iconic status in the history of the country. Punjab, the home of the Green Revolution, is known for its rich and composite culture. It is one of the top income states of our country and has served as a role model of development for other Indian states. Green Revolution during the 1960s has been instrumental in accelerating the economy of the state and establishing it as one of the richest states of our country. The state is known as 'Nation's Basket' the largest producer of food grains contributing one third to the central pool of food grains, thereby, rendering its importance for maintaining the food security of the nation. Agriculture has played a significant role in making the state one of the prosperous states and the economy since the 1960s has been growing at an annual rate of 5 percent.¹ No other Indian state has the distinction of growing at a rate of 5 percent spread over the last 50 years and has simultaneously very impressive track record on account of equity.² Though, after 2005, the growth rate in the state has been lower than the national average (World Bank, 2017, p.1). Although due to this kind of growth model, there were faster reductions in the number of people living below the poverty line and only 8 percent of people in the state are living below

poverty line and are amongst the lowest in the country³. But there are paradoxes in the development in the state.

The state of Punjab is characterized by strong patriarchal norms and thus struggles with gender discrimination which is often reflected in the skewed sex ratio of the state. Sex ratio for the state stands at 895 (census, 2011) which is among the worst in the country and is much below the national average of 940. It is disturbing that the state of Punjab has been struggling with a skewed sex ratio since many decades now and it has remained consistent in this imbalance since the first census in 1881 with a sex ratio of 844 (Department of Planning, Punjab, 2017)⁴. This number has drastically improved from 793 in 2001 to 875 in 1991. Even after this progress, the number does not reflect a grim picture of the state of women and girl child and their low status in the state.

Table No 1: A Comparison of Sex Ratio in Punjab and India

Year	Sex Ratio (Punjab)	Sex Ratio(India)	Percentage Difference ¹ (%)
1951	844	946	11
1961	854	941	9.2
1971	865	930	7
1981	879	934	6
1991	882	927	5
2001	876	933	6
2011	895	943	5

Source: *Women and Men in India, 2018*

The above table reflects the pattern of sex ratio in Punjab and India. From the table, it can be comprehended that there have been improvements in the state in terms of increasing the sex ratio every decade. The percentage difference in the sex ratio of Punjab and India has shown a decreasing pattern from 11 percent in 1951 to 5 percent in 2011. But still, the state lags in terms of the national average. There have been over 2 percent improvement over the last ten years in the state, which is a cause of serious concern. The girl child sex ratio (CSR), which is considered to be a cumulative indicator for gender inequalities and discrimination since birth, mortality at

1 Government of Punjab Department of Planning Punjab.(2017).Punjab Vision Document 2030. Institute of Development and Communication.Chandigarh

2 Ibid

3 World Bank. 2017. *Punjab - Poverty, growth, and inequality (English)*. India state briefs. Washington, D.C. : World Bank Group.

4 Government of Punjab . Department of Planning Punjab.(2017).Punjab Vision Document 2030. Institute of Development and Communication.Chandigarh

5 Percentage Difference manually calculated

birth, and accessibility of the health services by the most vulnerable age group, stands at 846 while the national average being at 919. Moreover, this number decreased from 901 in 1961 to 846 in 2011. Adverse sex ratio reflects the confluence of many socio-cultural factors: inherent gender discrimination, continuing strong son preference, and the combination of declining family size preferences and unchanging demand for sons, the easy availability, in practice, of technology that enables fetal sex determination and the apparent difficulty in enforcing laws prohibiting the revelation of fetal sex (Shireen J. Jejeebhoy, 2014). The girl child missing rate in Punjab is 11084 which is much higher than the national average of 3328 (Department of Planning, 2017, p. 353). Furthermore, the trend of a poor female work participation rate (FWPR) also highlights the inherent gender inequality in the state remaining at 13.9 percent, which is much below the Indian average of 25.51 and is amongst the lowest in the country. On the contrary, the male participation rate stands at fifty-five percent which is higher than the national average of fifty-three percent (Department of Planning, 2017). Furthermore, the status of anemia among adolescent girls and women is alarming in the state. According to NFHS-4, more than half the women in the state (53.5 percent) are anemic and the comparison between NFHS-3 (2005-06) and NFHS-4 (2015-16) shows that the percentage of anemic women has increased by more than 15 percent over ten years. One might raise a question that despite being one of the most developed states of the country and having better health facilities as compared to other states, why is it that more than half of its women are still strangling in the chains of anemia. This health issue is not just nutritional and poverty-related. Socio-cultural beliefs such as putting family first, offering their husbands the best of everything including food, and the practice of eating last often result in deterioration in women's health. Most women are discouraged to make decisions for them, including the kind of food they want to consume.

Table No 2: A Comparison of Child Sex Ratio (CSR) of India and Punjab

Year	Punjab	India
1961	901	976
1971	901	964
1981	908	962
1991	875	945
2001	798	927
2011	846	914

Source: *Women and Men in India, 2018*

Punjab has been performing quite well as compared to other states as far as women's health and its specific indicators are concerned. Maternal Mortality and Infant Mortality rate for the state is 122 and 21 (SRS, 2014-16) respectively, both of these indicators fall much below the national average. Antenatal checkups (ANC) indicators for the state such as 3 ANC checkups, PNC visits, institutional deliveries, etc are better than the national average (HMIS-NHSRC, 2015-16). But there is a need to look beyond these indicators to have a nuanced understanding of the existing scenario of women's health and women's position in the state.

The occurrence of anemia among women and young girls in Punjab is very disturbing. According to NFHS-4, close to fifty-four percent of the women in the state are anemic and the comparison between NFHS-3 (2005-06) and NFHS-4 (2015-16) shows that the percentage of anemic women has increased by more than fifteen percent over ten years, as it is clear from table number 1 mentioning the incidence of anemia among women and girls in Punjab that is given below (International Institute for Population Sciences, 2015-16). The National Family Health Survey-3 data reported that close to fifty-five percent of Indian women were anemic and twenty-four percent were Indian men and the state that performed the worst throughout the country was Punjab. Data from the District Level Household and Facility Survey conducted between 2012-2013 suggested that anemia in the state was widely prevalent among all age groups and was particularly high among pregnant women marking the rate up to fifty-eight percent. NFHS-4 data also estimated that around fifty-four percent of adolescent girls in the state had anemia, which is a much serious concern for the state as young girls even before entering the motherhood phase are already anemic. More so, these numbers must be underreported.

Table No 3: Incidence of Anemia in Punjab among women and girls

Indicators	NFHS-3 (2005-06)	NFHS-4 (2015-16)
Women who are not pregnant aged 15-49 years	37.9	54.0
Women who are pregnant aged 15-49 years	41.6	42.0
All women aged 15-49 years	38.0	53.5
Adolescents girls who are anaemic(15-19 yrs)	43 (DLHS 4)	58 (NFHS 4)

Source: *Reports of National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 4- Punjab and National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 3-Punjab*

Son Preference in Village Kakarla, Punjab: Narratives from Women

To understand the preference of sons and inherent gender inequalities, in-depth interviews were conducted with women of Kakrala village on the significance of sons in their lives. There is a lot of scholarly work on the linkage of women with nature and men with culture which reflects the reality of our society. But even the women think that their roles, their tasks, their products are not at par with those of their men. 'Men have to earn money. That is tougher. What we do back at home is easy, cook food, take care of babies, clean house. That's all. We stay back at home. Our work does not bring money. Maybe what you do get you money. But not ours. It is not work'. Thus, there is a universality of female subordination, not just by men, but by women themselves.

'When and how do you come to realize that this is what is expected of you?', was the question. They replied, 'what is there to learn, I have been taught since birth that I have to take care of younger siblings, and later on when I grow up, my husband and his family. It is out there. Nobody teaches these things to you. Even you must be taking care of the male members of your family. You are a woman. You are made to do this. Take care of everyone. What is so new about it! I have seen my mother thinking about herself after everyone else and even here, I do the same. I should think about myself only if everybody in the family has been taken care of. My wishes and desires are always last.' 'A female body knows its role. You don't teach anything. It is made to do all this. I got married last year. My parents thought it is the right thing for me. Before that, I was constantly told by my mother to keep my body safe for my husband. I was taught to impress everyone at my natal home by my work and to always keep them happy. I was also advised not to sit at the same level as my husband; you should always sit at a place lower than him.'

The women regard their work to be inferior and less valued than that of men. Also, there is an inherent common thought existing among the women that they attain social status only when they are married and have children, preferably sons. The attainment of respect and social status is only through being somebody's wife and a mother of a male child. The preference of sons over daughters is one phenomenon that is very deep-rooted among the women of Kakrala village. It is necessary to have a son. From their conversations, it was clear that having a son not only gives them respect in society, but also within their families. As one of the women who had just given birth to a son explained the importance of having a son, 'I have 3 daughters also. But having a son is a necessity. Husband will keep on blaming me for not giving him an heir, even the in-laws. I also wanted

respect within the village. I will get it through my son only and women get status only when they become wife's and mothers of a son'.

On discussing the importance of having a son with an old and experienced woman in the village, the author got very interesting reasons. She explained, 'See, whatever wealth and property I have made will go waste if I don't have a son. Daughters are supposed to get married and make their own family. Sons will be our support when we get old. On not having a son, a woman will never be happy herself because she will be made to feel unwanted from her family and even society'. Another woman expressed, 'a lot of money is spent if you have a daughter. We have to save money throughout our lives for a daughter's dowry ritual. They say *Ladki hoti hai to ek muthi choti ho jati hai* (With a girl's birth, one fist gets smaller). That means wealth from your house goes away, whereas, with son, wealth comes in the house.' 'It is necessary to have a son, very important. Who will do the last rites and rituals when we die? We don't even get heaven if the last rites are not paid by our sons. Son is needed. We don't get *moksha* (Salvation)'

Thus, having a son not only brings respect in society but also wealth and prosperity. Birth of a son is seen as a sign of prosperity and happiness. There is a hope that sons will take care of their parents and support them financially when they are old. Also, all the rituals in Indian society are male-oriented, so if one is not having a son, he/she will be excluded from any of the rituals. One cannot achieve salvation if the last rites are not paid by a son. Daughters are married and sent off to their own houses. The want of a male child is so dominant that even women having 4 daughters or more, do not want to go for Tubectomy, with a hope that God will give them their heir. 'I have 4 daughters. But I m not going for an operation. My husband and in-laws want a son. We are not in a situation to provide proper food and education to our children, but are willing to keep trying for a son'. 'But do you want a son' was the question to her. She replied, 'Yes, why would any woman not want a son. I want to make my husband happy.' This depicts the de facto superior position of men over a woman, which is so deep-rooted and embedded.

One of the women respondents from the village explained, 'During my pregnancy, ANM suggested me to eat good meals and have tablets as my hemoglobin was very low. But I was always so stressed that whether I will have a baby boy or not. If not, I know, my life is going to be of no use'. Another woman highlighted the scenario, 'We only want a son. Wishing from god and doing whatever we can do. But many people kill their daughters once they are born. At least we are not doing this.'

It is so obvious to notice that these women know what their appropriate roles are and after a series of social structural arrangements and childhood experiences, they have sort of internalized these roles to such an extent that they don't find anything exceptional or wrong in killing their wishes and desires. The quotes such as 'you are a woman,' 'you have to keep your family happy' depict the gender differences that are culturally produced and are interpreted as being rooted in 'biology', as something that is so natural or to be more precise 'biologically determined'. According to Leela Dube, 'These social arrangements in which men and women have unequal rights, positions, and roles- both as brother and sister and as husband and wife are perceived as corresponding to the arrangement of nature which assigns unequal roles in procreation to the two sexes'. (Dube, 1988)

Such grimming situation of women and girls in village Kakrala also indicates the prevalence and practice of sex-selective abortion practices. During the fieldwork, one of the male respondents, who reside in village Kakrala, said 'These tests are not being done in Public hospitals/clinics, as they are illegal. But many private clinics offer sex prediction tests. It costs 30,000 to get that test done. And then if it is a girl child, it is another 11,000-12,000 for the abortion. And everyone, poor or rich, if possible, desires to go for these tests'. On asking one of the women respondents about the prenatal tests, she informed, 'These tests are not conducted everywhere these days. Especially, not in public hospitals. But in Nabha, many private hospitals do this but charge very heavily. Those who can afford them, they do it.' Thus, the prevalence of sex-selective abortion and infanticide still exists, despite all the progress achieved by the state in all these years.

Despite being one of the most progressive and prosperous states with high per capita income and 70 percent female literacy rate, Punjab suffers from the skewed sex ratio, declining female work participation rate, and a culture promoting strong preference of sons. These figures highlight the prevailing scenario of gender discrimination and the lower status of women which is often over showed by the 'economic indicators', 'rich cultural heritage', and 'social values' of the state.

Conclusion

In recent years, there have been massive efforts from the government in protecting girl child through social campaigns, social security schemes, improved health facilities, and improved education. And these efforts have translated into reduced maternal mortality, reduced infant mortality, increased girl child enrolment, and improved well being. But the deeply rooted culture promoting preference of sons has not improved. There has been enough and more research on the effect

of indicators such as maternal mortality rates, safer pregnancies, institution deliveries, access to health and presence of adequate health institutions on the overall health of women and how significant these indicators in determining the health status of women of a particular region. But in the case of Punjab, albeit the importance of these indicators, it is also crucial to look beyond these indicators for a clearer picture of the status of women.

On one side, the state 'Punjab' is synonymous with rich culture, tradition, folk music, fertile lands, and great food, on the other side; it is also synonymous with skewed sex ratio, gender imbalances, an alarming rate of anemia among women. In today's day and age, there is enough and more discussion around women's empowerment and achieving gender equality. India is hoping to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 and SDG -5 that aims to achieve gender equality in all aspects has much more far-reaching implications on all other 17 goals and is undoubtedly the most significant indicator to be achieved. The question here arises that is it possible to achieve gender equality and achieve the numbers where the most basic right of life and birth is still a challenge? Can we talk about achieving national and international goals of eliminating gender discrimination when one of the most developed states of our country is struggling with a skewed sex ratio and prenatal sex selection practices and deeply rooted patriarchal norms?

Punjab has been performing better as compared to the national average in most of the indicators such as growth rate, literacy rate, MMR, IMR, birth rate, etc which are often the parameters defining the prosperity, well being, and development of a particular region. However, there is a need to look beyond these indicators and understand the scenario in the state socially and culturally. People in Punjab are known to cherish efficient roads, good schools, one hundred percent rural electrification, schools, and health centers provide basic amenities to the people of the state which are still not available to large areas of the rest of the country (Government of Punjab, 2015, p.1). However, it would be problematic to analyze the state of development in Punjab solely based on specific indicators and parameters. There is a need to look beyond these numbers and understand the scenario that has been brewing in the state from the past two decades through a gender lens.

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