

Has The Sex Ratio Really Improved?

Alarming Ramifications of Population Trends

○ Malini Karkal

Preliminary figures from the 2001 census were recently released by the Census Commissioner of India, who is also the Registrar General (RG) of India. Newspapers reports on the findings of the census count have reacted favourably to the information about the rise in literacy level of the population and the sex ratio. *The Indian Express* said: “First news is good news: literacy and sex ratio are up.” The sex ratio, which was 927 females per thousand males in the 1991 census, went up to a corresponding 933 in 2001. However, a small increase in the deficit of females is not very significant in the context of the continuing enormous deficit of females, and the information about the sex ratio among children gives an ominous indication of vast increases in the deficit in future.

35 Million Females Missing

The press release reports that the number of males in the 2001 census count was 531,277,078 and that of females, 495,738,169. This actually indicates that there are over 35 million fewer females than males. During the last decade, the absolute deficit of females increased by about three million. In most other nations there are more females than males.

More significant is the report on the sex ratio for children below six years of age. The Registrar General (RG) reports that the sex

ratio for this age group has gone down from 945 in 1991 to 927 in 2001—a large decadal difference. The sharpest declines in sex ratio for these children are reported from Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Gujarat, Uttaranchal, Maharashtra and Chandigarh—areas where abortions of female foetuses after sex determination test are known to be widely practiced. In addition to the foeticides, the practice of female infanticide is apparently increasing, as reported from districts like Salem in Tamil Nadu, a state where the status of

women was believed to be better than in the northern states.

Greater neglect of female babies in terms of provision of food and medical attention also decreases their chances of survival. UNICEF reported that, of the 402 districts, the number of deaths of females upto age five is higher than males in over half (224) the districts. This, in spite of the fact that biologically speaking, female babies have better chances of survival than male babies. Amartya Sen reports that the sex ratio is about 105 women per 100 men in the populations of



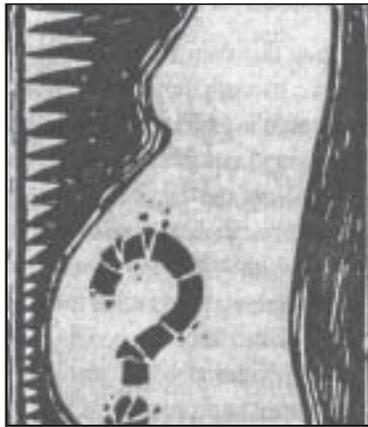
nations where women are not discriminated against.

Total fertility rate (TFR) went down to 3.3 by 1997, while the birth rate was 26.4 in 1998. However, in India, the maternal mortality rate (MMR)—or the chances of dying from pregnancy related causes—continues to be among the highest in the world. MMR in India was 408 per 100,000 mothers, while it was 115 in China and 30 in Sri Lanka. Similarly, the chances of dying of children born to mothers whose health is not satisfactory—the infant mortality rate (IMR)—in India were 72 per 1,000 births—high compared to 31 in China, 46 in Indonesia and 22 in Thailand.

One can therefore conclude that the rise in the sex ratio of the Indian population is due to the improvement in survival chances of older women, those who have survived the hazards of younger ages and are able to express their biological advantage, and not because of the improvement in the status of women or in their living conditions.

Devaluation of Women

The practice of female foeticide and infanticide bears out the continuing influence of patriarchy and the lower status of women. The health of the population continues to be poor and, from the data on registration of deaths, it is seen that 22.8 per cent of the total deaths are of children below the age of one year, 9.9 per cent of children between ages one to four years. Thus, of the total deaths, 32.7 per cent (or one in three) were of children under the age of five years. The percentage of deaths for children under age 15 years was 37.3. The mortality percentages were higher for the BIMARU states: 47.7 per cent in Uttar Pradesh, 41.5 per cent in Bihar, 45.3 per cent in Madhya



Pradesh, 46.4 per cent in Rajasthan and 42.2 per cent in Assam. The data available indicates that a large majority of children born in these states are of low birth weight, with the mothers not in good health.

Marrying girls off young is also an indication that women have low status. They are recognised only in their role as mothers and are denied opportunities for education or economic independence. The National Fertility and Health Study (NFHS) reports that about half the women between ages 25-49 are married before they are 15 in Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan, and about four-fifths of women in these states are married before reaching the mandated minimum age of 18 years. Even in states like Kerala, Nagaland, Punjab and Manipur, where the age at the time of marriage is higher, at least one out five women is already married by the age of 18.

Early Age of Sterilisation

Regarding the decline in the rate of growth of population, data available from NFHS shows that this is primarily being achieved through sterilisation of women. Among the currently married women in reproductive ages (ages 13 to 49 years), 41 per cent were using contraception; sterilisation

accounted for 76 per cent of the contraceptive used (81 per cent in rural areas and 66 per cent in urban areas). The source for contraception was mostly (for 79 per cent of the users—87 per cent in rural areas and 62 per cent in urban areas) either a government hospital or primary health centre. It is also reported that 82 per cent of those resorting to sterilisation had never used any other method of contraception before. The percentage of such non-users of other methods was: Andhra Pradesh (93 per cent), Bihar (91.6 per cent), Rajasthan (91.3 per cent), Uttar Pradesh (88.9 per cent), Orissa (88.2 per cent), Maharashtra (86.9 per cent), Madhya Pradesh (86.7 per cent), Nagaland and Mizoram (86.4 per cent each), and Karnataka (83.1 per cent).

That women are being sterilised at young ages is indicated by the fact that the average age of the wife at the time of sterilisation was 25.7 years, with 44 per cent of the couples undergoing sterilisation before the wife was 25. Seventy-nine per cent sterilisations took place before the wife was 30, and less than one per cent when the wife was in her 40s. Over the years, the proportion of all sterilisations that were done on women has increased as a proportion of all sterilisations; the proportion of sterilisations of men has declined relative to women. NFHS reports that 23.3 per cent sterilised women, 15.1 per cent sterilised men, 20 per cent pill users and 18.9 per cent IUD users experienced health problems because of the use of this method of contraception. It was also reported that only 15 per cent of the pill and IUD users and 30 per cent of the sterilised women and men received follow-up visits from health staff. The users did need follow-up care and sought it from private sources.

Reduction in the growth rate of the population must be seen in the context of the fact that women are

being sterilised through government facilities at young ages. Most of them have had no previous experience with any other method of contraception before being exposed to a permanent method. A substantial number of them experience health problems after sterilisation and there is no assurance that a significant proportion of the children they have already borne, will survive through childhood.

To Sum Up

Though there has been a small change in the sex ratio in favour of women from the 1991 census to the 2001 census, the improvement is not significant, especially considering that the absolute deficit of females has increased by about three million



Also, despite this small improvement, the rapidly declining sex ratio among young children indicates that the overall sex ratio is headed for further decline and the deficit of females is almost certain to increase substantially in the near future. The maternal mortality rate remains among the highest in the world; foeticide of females is becoming far more common in more and more states; age of marriage and age at first pregnancy remains low; and women's status as reflected in access to health care and basic education remains low in absolute terms, and as compared to that of males. □

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Giving voice to the unheard



FOR CONCERNED YOUNG JOURNALISTS AND PHOTOJOURNALISTS

The National Foundation for India has a programme for young (upto 40 years), mid-career (5-7 years experience) and sensitive journalists to enable them to take time off from their routine occupations, to research and publish articles/photo essays on issues of importance to ordinary Indians, their battle for a better life and covering diverse aspects of development-related issues. That includes the working conditions of people, environment-related matters and other social problems. National Foundation for India encourages proposals with focus on **Gender Equity & Justice** (the declining sex ratio among girls below the age of seven is a serious matter of concern in some states).

The Foundation offers six fellowships of Rs. 1,00,000/- each. Journalists, especially women journalists, from small newspapers with demonstrated capacity to publish well-researched articles/photo essays are encouraged to apply. One of the Fellowships will be awarded to a photojournalist. It would be desirable for the successful applicants to take leave for about six months, from their employers, to work on the chosen theme.

The last date of receipt of applications is **27th August 2001**. The results will be announced in **November 2001**.

For details, contact:



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