



## NOTES FROM PUNJAB: MAKING SENSE OF THE MISSING DAUGHTERS

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## KEYWORDS :

As I Negotiate my way through the narrow lanes of Jhansla village of Patiala District with Surinder Kaur, the ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) of the area, I am anxious about my ability to elicit responses from my research group participants. We stop at the high and formidable gates of a double storied house. A slim, well dressed woman about 45 years of age opens the gate. She is Usharani. She warmly welcomes us inside the compound of her house. Five to six women sit on charpoy in the enclosure. A new-born infant lies swaddled in blankets on one charpoy, watched over by an emaciated young girl barely in her twenties. The ostensible purpose of my visit there is to look at the beautiful phulkari chunris embroidered by the young girls in the village as part of a skill development programme of a local NGO. Usharani is one of the coordinators of the programme. The chunris are exhibited and I take the opportunity to do an ice-breaking exercise by appreciating the intricacy of the embroidery and making small-talk with the participants. In way of conversation I find out that the little infant is Usharani's first grand-daughter born to her first-born son. I gently prod whether she was happy at having a granddaughter and she replies in the affirmative. 'What if the next is a girl,' I ask. She looks worried at my question, but remains calm 'We will welcome her', she says. 'And the next?', I ask again. This time her daughter-in-law the emaciated young girl in her 20s looks at me with fear in her deep-set eyes. I was specking the unspeakable, questioning the unquestionable. What if she gave birth to no son? She looks as if her life is hung in the balance on my question. Usharani's polite demeanour slips at this point. Her voice became menacing 'even if she has to give birth to 10 daughters, she will, so that she finally begets a son. 'Do not', she warns me. 'frighten my daughter-in-law with such ideas.' The young daughter-in-law becomes panic-stricken and the other women around us shift uncomfortably in their seats. An uneventful lazy afternoon is suddenly transformed into one of frightening and uncomfortable truths....

Between the 2001 census and the 2011 census, the Punjab's child sex ratio has shown an improvement of 48 points signifying an improvement in terms of the survival of its daughters. This ratio is still one of the lowest in the country, which has witnessed an unparalleled fall in child sex ratio captured in this decadal census. This decline in sex ratio has been attributed to a spread in the practice of sex selective abortion. While fall in child sex ratio in Punjab is no longer a conundrum, after established studies and writings have provided reliable data to reveal how daughters are being disposed and dispensed there, any improvement in the ratio complicates matters. A plethora of initiatives and programmes by state and civil society claim to have succeeded in turning around the clock in Punjab. The initiatives which include the PCPNDT Act's implementation, conditional cash transfers to enhance worth of daughters and awareness building and advocacy around the issue are now being seen as an effective multi-pronged approach to counter the systematic form of gender discrimination ensconced in the practice of sex-selective abortion. The initiation of the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) programme of the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, in recent years might have also contributed towards this

improvement. Recently, the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India released the data for sex ratio at birth under the Sample Registration System (SRS). It shows that while the sex ratio at birth (SRB) for India declined by 13 points between 2011-13 (909) and 2015-17 (896), Punjab's SRB improved by 19 points during the same period (from 867 to 886).

In this essay, I strive to make sense of this so-called turnaround by sifting through the layers of the state - civil society initiatives. While I remain sceptical about being able to capture any real transformation, I am concerned with delving deeper into what is being perceived as having been transformed. The sex ratio has been seen as a significant indicator of the status of women. Any improvement in child sex ratio is thus indicative of a largescale confrontation of the structures, institutions and attitudes perpetuating gender hierarchies. As the state-civil society initiatives claim to having done so, it is important to consider their activities in depth, and critically examine how their promise of vision and transformation has led (or not) to the countering of sex-selective abortion and the concomitant gender discriminatory practices by which the daily lives of women in Punjab are moulded and shaped by. How do these initiatives explore the notion of sex-selective abortion as gender discrimination? Can a prescribed course of action be extracted from the specific contexts and forces from which its dominant forms emerged, and whether it can continue to be sustained, and usefully converted and applied to other contexts.

I use my field notes from Punjab to convey the complexity of the issue, the multi-layered nature of field encounters and the highly intricate relationship between the state, family, community and the market forces. The field here consists of three districts - Patiala, Mohali and Fatehgarh Sahib, all of which had a very low child sex ratio in the 2001 census and have shown improvement in the 2011 census. Interactions with implementing authorities, local NGOs and focus group discussions with women and girls in the village of Tangaria village in Fatehgarh Sahib, Kalomajra and Jhansla villages in Patiala District and interviews with senior government functionaries in Chandigarh also inform the study.

**SOCIAL PROBLEM – SO THE DOCTOR SAYS**

The initiatives by the state to counter sex selective abortion fall within the purview of the Health Ministry. The Chief Medical Officer (CMO) is entrusted with the main responsibility of taking care of the issue. The CMO of Mohali painstakingly explains her unenviable job to me. Apart from a close monitoring of the PCPNDT Act, the state had to also ensure that its population remains under control. The Balri Rakshak Yojana of the State Government was also linked to population dynamics.

Another important initiative, which both the middle level and lower level functionaries credit Punjab's turn-around in child sex ratio, is the tracking of pregnancy. The ANM (Auxiliary Nurse Midwife) of the region shared with me the details of the tracking system. Pregnant women whose first-born are daughters are kept under active surveillance. Community as well as state driven monitoring through ANMs and ASHAs were committed to two main but disparate things - the

tracking of pregnancy and population control. It is important here to uncover the systemic connections between the population control dynamics and the concomitant burden on women's bodies and the multiple forms of control over it by the state, community, family and market forces. The compelling argument of the authorities was that the state could only intervene to a small extent since it was a social problem and the preference of sons was a cultural issue which the state could do little about. The absolving of guilt on the part of the medical practitioners who cold-bloodedly and illegally engaged in sex determination and sex selective abortion was hard not to miss. So was the absolute disconnect with issues around gender discrimination, status of women and the like.

The Balri Rakshak Yojana, which was ostensibly meant to enhance the status of the girl child, was linked to an extremely coercive population control policy. It was applicable for two daughters and the mother had to produce a sterilization certificate. In Mohali there were only three applicants who were being considered for the yojana. Lack of certification made it difficult for the yojana money to be disbursed. A focus group discussion with 60 ASHAs of the district brought in a more complex and complicated understanding of the issue. About five of the ASHAs had single daughters and some were menopausal but they themselves had not availed the scheme. An unimaginative and inflexible reading of the scheme criteria made it difficult to do so. An example of this can be gathered from the response of the coordinator of the yojana who said that the women who were menopausal could not apply for the scheme because they did not have the sterilization certificate.

The statist discourse thus made families, especially women, the main target of their punitive measures. What was missing from the ambit of state surveillance was the deeper, more nuanced understanding of how the unwantedness and disposability of daughters is linked with the abject status of women with very little control over their bodies and with no real dispersal of resources to bring about their autonomous decision-making. No such idea informed state policy or state functionary. A mechanical and deeply patriarchal approach of the authorities made even the more gender sensitive ideas in policies bite the dust. The diverse and contradictory interpretations of policies complicate the situation at the ground. The principal objective of countering sex selective abortion by enhancing the status of women and girl-child was lost in the process. The cause of daughter aversion remained unidentified except in generalized and disembodied terms as social problem or cultural backwardness. The intermeshing of cultural and material factors along with the institutional and structural premises which implement policies is never a part of the larger understanding on the issue.

#### **STORY OF EIGHT VILLAGES AND SINGLE SON FAMILIES:**

One of the most active civil society initiatives in Punjab has been the Punjab Voluntary Health Association. They have been engaged in various forms of activities for the last two decades on the issue. The methodology of the civil society initiative can be termed as multipronged. The functionaries of the initiative were not convinced about the turn-around noted in the census. They agreed that from 2003 to 2005 the state government was actively involved in countering the issue since the child sex ratio in Punjab had become a matter of national concern. However, it no longer figured high on the state's agenda. Also, according to them civil society activities were few and far between. There was no funding of such activities either from international and/or national donor agencies. The lack of civil society activity was visible in the ground. Many activities had been abandoned because of lack of funds. Outreach centres at the local levels had been abandoned. The informal networks created with the community were now irrevocably severed.

The Association had employed a large number of local women within their community outreach programmes across villages in Fatehgarh Sahib district. The learning from working on an issue like this had led to an awareness and a certain passion and commitment to women's rights. Questioning of gender hierarchies and power structures was central to their work. Economic self-reliance also had led to the strengthening of their position vis-à-vis their family members. The discontinuance and non-sustainability of projects had left a vacuum in the lives of those women. There was also a loss of their credibility in front of the community. Their integration into the local patriarchal order was now difficult since they had stepped outside it. Not only had they stepped outside it, they had dared to question, probe and reform it. The hostile environment in which these women functioned was visible in their everyday existence. Meeting 25 ex-women-workers of such organisations in Tanageria village of Fatehgarh Sahib complicated further the accommodation of the empowerment project of women in the larger discourse of countering sex selective abortion. Models for understanding transformation and social change processes need to be applied not just to women out there, but also to the women who work within these institutions, particularly in the uncelebrated gender machineries that have sprung up elsewhere. Apart from Goetz's study of women development workers, which focuses attention on grassroots intermediaries, there has been little effort to focus attention on intermediaries of change, who often suffer from an enormous burden of expectations, and are expected to succeed in environments often resistant or immune to ideas of social change.

By expecting them to effect transformation and then ejecting them unceremoniously due to projectised approach, there is the danger in overlooking and negating the small victories that their presence and activism, however limited may achieve. Also the ability of the initiative to transform the abilities of women working with them to counter gender discrimination and to be able to logically and coherently question the stereotypes and myths perpetuated by patriarchy reveals the potential of the civil society initiative to bring about a certain change in the lives of women so that they can bargain and negotiate for a better position in society. But the dangers of such transformation becomes clear when programmes are not sustained and the security and emancipation of such women remain an incomplete task and fraught with problems, obstacles and grave dangers.

The VHAP shared its study of 8 villages in Fatehgarh Sahib in order to understand the extent of the practice of sex selective abortion. Their research revealed that 75 percent of the families in these 8 villages had single sons. The disturbing trend further highlighted the connection between small family norm and male child planning. The women workers who had been part of the research as field workers and in assisting with data collection enthusiastically shared with me the findings from the field. What became clear from their sharing was that there was easy accessibility of the technology of sex determination and sex selective abortion; the monitoring of such illegal medical practices was very weak; and socio-cultural norms had now willingly adopted the small family norm as a product of modernisation. However, the notion of the liability of having daughters continued to inform both market as well as family choices. Thus, the women workers as well as the male functionaries of the VHAP were not convinced about the turnaround in the census at all. For them even the data of the census was suspect considering the field was in front of them to interact, know and learn.

However, it is also important to say here that I am not valorising the NGO's work against other forms of intervention. The broader understanding on social interventions today views NGOs as a vital vehicle for countering gender

discrimination. I believe that it is also useful to reveal the limitations of NGOs in introducing genuine, comprehensive social change. There is definitely a need to subject NGOs to empirical and historical analysis. It is significant to also recognise that the NGO as a form of organisation is different in critical ways from social movements. Local women's social movements mobilization in pursuit of gender justice roots the impetus for change in forms of engagement that go beyond projectized interventions and offer the prospect for more meaningful and lasting change.

The invisibility of such women's movements in Punjab posed a real problem for me since the distinctions between NGO mobilisation of women and women's movement could not be categorically laid down. Even ubiquitous local women's groups facilitated by government programmes like Mahila Mandals were conspicuous by their absence. The Punjab branch of the AIDWA was named as the only form of women's movements that existed. The historical trajectory of the Punjab's women's movement needs to be studied here. Was there a women's movement in Punjab? What were the issues that it was active on? And if it did exist, how did it disappear?

While these questions did engage my attention, I was more concerned to address the epistemological and practical challenges that is faced by the society when there are no women's social movements to challenge the patriarchal power of the family, community and the state. Women's movements do provide the critical tools to counter the issue, to restore the political, to question the reductionism and technicism around daughter aversion. The ability of women's social movements to draw on the locally diverse lived realities and experiences has the potential to generate new possibilities and insights regarding the connections between the local and the national dynamics of the women movements in India. So along with daughters who go missing in Punjab, the missing women's movements make it difficult to bring back issues of gender justice, gender discrimination, equality and rights into the policy agenda. (Agency and agenda (the instrumentalist way that women are used both the NGO and the state. This instrumentalisation leads to their further marginalisation.

#### **IMPLEMENTING THE ACT: 112 CASES AND MORE**

After the 2001 census showed a significant drop in the Punjab's child sex ratio, a series of newspaper articles and writings in reputed journals puzzled over the conundrum between Punjab's economic prosperity and its dismal performance when it came to its daughters. The aversion to daughters in Punjab had historically been captured in its practice of female infanticide. When sex determination technologies were banned in government hospitals in 1975, they proliferated in Punjab.

The declining child sex ratio in Punjab had been noted in the 1991 census but in 2001 the drop being the highest (-77) in the country captured national imagination. A PIL in Supreme Court in 2002 led to a positive judgement asking all state governments to proactively follow the law (PNDT Act). This led to pressures from the national government on state governments to act immediately as per the order of the Supreme Court. The Department of Health and Family Welfare (DOHFW) in Punjab began to act on the orders of the centre. The then Secretary took an active interest on the issue and the law became the main focus of all policy initiatives at that stage. While the law had been passed in 1994 and had come into effect by 1996, none of the agencies in the field till this time had sensed any effort on the part of the state government for its implementation.

With the directives of the Supreme Court, a slew of activities started. Awareness generation and orientation programmes were organised for NGOs. A state nodal officer's post in the DOHFW was created and Dr Goyal became the first

incumbent. The Nodal Officer was given full authority to implement the law. The emphasis was to make officials implementing the law to be accountable and responsible for the any decline in the child sex ratio their region. The punitive actions against erring officials included charge-sheeting, delay of pensions, etc. Rupan Deol Bajaj succeeded Rajan Kashyap as the Secretary of DOHFW. She continued to engage intensively on the issue. The interest, initiative and the will of the government to book the guilty under the Act percolated down to send a terse message to illegal medical practitioners. And this also continued under D.S. Guru the next Secretary. The practice of surprise checks on private nursing homes and hospitals by state level teams with an action-oriented approach with immediate charge-sheeting and moving to court became standard practice. Dr. Goyal shared that they used the Section-20 of the Act, thereby making it difficult for the erring doctors to get out of the clutches of the law. The minister of state for health Laxmi Kanta also took a personal interest in the issue mainly focussing on awareness generation, workshops, seminars and the like. As a result, there are a total number of 143 ongoing cases under the Act and 93 of cases decided or closed. The state has managed to get convictions in 31 cases.

However, as gathered from the field, by 2007 the activities on implementation of the Act started slowing down. With the improvement in the CSR in census 2011, the law was put to cold storage and the issue was now relegated to the background. While the child sex ratio in Punjab continues to be one of the lowest irrespective of the improvement, the state has come to an understanding that it has been able to turn around the clock.

Along with the booking of errant doctors under the Act, pregnancies of women came to be monitored by 2005. Incidentally, this was the year that NRHM was launched. The basic thrust of the Health Ministry was to successfully carry out the programmes under the NRHM, like recruitment and training of ASHAs, Janani Suraksha Yojana and child health programmes. Financial resources of the ministry came to be used for this purpose, especially in terms of infrastructural development. In the present times while implementation of the Act has been forgotten, it is tracking of pregnancies which has become the mainstay of activities around the issue. This tracking has a triple objective or the killing of three birds with one stone. The objectives include encouraging institutional delivery under JSY, linking up with the renewed target oriented female sterilization programmes to control numbers, and incidental watch and monitoring of sex selective abortion.

The gender discriminatory ramifications of this monitoring mechanism are brushed aside. It is also believed that a powerful medical doctors' lobby has been able to maintain the status quo in putting the focus on the pregnant women and not the doctors.

Bureaucracies are complex chains of commands in which rank is a key determinant of what gets prioritized and becomes actionable. The level of threat emerging from the current CSR is not seen as challenging an issue which would undermine the public image of the bureaucracy. Unlike other issues, the issue of gender discrimination usually has very little threat potential for the image of the bureaucracy. The CSR of 2001 along with the PIL had changed that. The finding of the census 2011 limited this pressure. While there are some numbers we must be optimistic about, the uncomfortable question to ask here is whether government agenda has any scope to make states answerable to women, and answerable for countering gender discriminatory practices like sex selective selection.

#### **GIRL'S EDUCATION, MOBILITY AND SEXUALITY: HER CUP OF TEA**

*Hoi jo badhkar hai kariye jhat biah, ujjal meri pag nun na kar*

deve *siah*.

*(Now that she is turning depraved, let us quickly marry her off, or she may stain my white turban).*

When girls schools were first established in Punjab by the colonial government, they were unable to attract high caste girls. Towards the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, the Punjab elite wrested the initiative from the government, and took upon itself to encourage the education of upper caste girls. Malhotra's insightful work on Punjab reveals how the main purpose of education was to establish control over women and to instruct them in lessons which fitted them for the exacting task of being a pativrata wife. Education was meant to inculcate in women the discipline for undertaking future familial roles, including the making of a disciplined wife and a subservient daughter-in-law. The use of education as a double edged sword for girls became the norm in Punjab. Datta's rich and nuanced study of Subhasini, an Arya Samajist, who belonged to south-east Punjab (now Haryana), points to the controlled, disciplined and desexualized existence of women under the auspices of Arya Samaji Kanya Gurukuls.

The complex relationship between girl's education, their mobility and sexuality continue to govern community's attitudes even today. This nexus of gender with caste is now porous with the lower caste and class aspiring to be like the upper class and upper caste. Literacy rates in Punjab are not dismal and the positive factor is that there is parity of female literacy rate with male literacy rate, with just about 10 to 12 percent difference. Literacy rates however are not truly indicative of education since they focus only on a basic minimum. While a basic minimum in education remains a criterion for marriageability of daughters, the path to college education for girls in Punjab remains fraught with complexities and difficulties. While the horrific practice of sex selective abortion has not been able to establish any positive correlation with women's education, it is important to delve into the kind of education that women access and have access to across caste and class lines.

In a series of focussed group discussion with young girls in Jhansla and Kalomajra village of Patiala district it became clear that while girls accessed school education easily and without much struggle on their part, the college education was not so easily accessed. The fears and insecurities associated with keeping vigilance over daughter's sexuality, which used to be an aspect of high caste society, had now influenced other castes and communities in Punjab. Kalomajra and Jhansla were adjoining villages and girls from both the villages had been forced to discontinue their college education due to a local incident. The incident involved a young girl student, a resident of the Kalomajra village, having a cup of tea at a local restaurant with a male friend from her college after class hours. She was sighted by village elders leading to high tension in both the villages.

The inter-mixing of the sexes and such other undesirable behaviour were attributed to the unrestricted mobility of the young girls which could not be put to constant surveillance. The depravity brought by college education, i.e. exposure to male attention and possibility of male suitors and the danger that could emanate from the uncontrolled sexuality of girls, was part of the community discourse.

As a punitive measure almost all girls from the two villages were stopped from going to college. The state driven conditional cash transfers like Balri Rakshak Yojana and Dhanlakshmi Yojana, which are meant to increase the status of the girl-child by prioritising access to health and education, seem to miss this very significant nexus between patriarchal forces and education. They also seemed ignorant of the fact

that college education in Punjab was mostly privatised and the amount of such cash transfers was a pittance compared to the fee structure of the colleges. While all young girls expressed their desire to go back to college, the parents and grandparents and other members of the community considered the punitive decision as a just one.

The villages were at a distance of 40 kms from Chandigarh and approachable through pucca roads. A kilometre away from the village on the main roads were private professional colleges and multi-national outlets like subways and McDonald's. However, this kind of medieval decision-making processes continues unabated in the villages revealing the complexity of the reach of liberalization and globalization and its distinct marketized forces. Both the state as well as NGOs have no time or inclination to look into these matters as these are matters which are not part of any projectized interventions or part of any plan and programmes. Lack of resistance from anywhere else shows that the undesirability of daughters in Punjab was so obvious that its questioning seems almost impossible.

This painful process of gender socialization instils in every girl's mind a sense of her own inferiority and compels her to accept her subordinate status in society vis-à-vis her male counterparts. This docility and submissiveness of women prepares them for their future roles in which sex determination and sex selective abortion become normalized practices. Punishment for noncompliance or its threat – both real as well as imagined – leaves women with very little choice to exercise their autonomy or individual decision-making capacities. Market forces built around profit motives, state and civil society interstices revolving around narrow plans and projectized programmes and a missing women's movements aid in the strengthening of such gender discriminatory practices.

## CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to probe the turn-around in the 2011 census in CSR of the Punjab state as well as the improvements shown in the sex ratio at birth shown in SRS 2017. It has endeavoured to show how the state through its agencies and the civil society initiatives has worked on the issue of countering sex-selective abortion in Punjab. The state government's claim that the strict tracking of pregnancies of women has led to this turn-around sits uncomfortably with ideas of women's reproductive rights, the notion of gender discrimination and the issue of privacy. What is paradoxical about such action is that the state views it as transformative of women's status and as a commitment to the idea of gender equality and rights. The emphasis on the small family norm and its contradictions with the issue at hand, especially in the context of targeted sterilization by the state agencies, is also delved into here. The civil society initiatives opposition to this action is in the form of their research and documentation of intense daughter aversion leading to single son families brings into light the burden that small family norm places on the issue leading to an increase in sex selective abortion. The patriarchal predilections of the state and its collusion with Punjabi patriarchies comes to the forefront here.

The main concern of this study is to show how the state and civil society interstices have engaged either conflictually or inadequately with the issue of sex selective abortion as gender discrimination. The need to adhere to a projectized intervention encouraged a hierarchical and non-sustainable view of confronting gender discrimination. The dichotomous relationship of the objective of the conditional cash transfers to enhance the worth of daughters and its extremely coercive and gender insensitive criteria also gives a glimpse into the ways the state asserts its agenda of population control without engaging with the pressures that women face due to it and the concomitant gender discrimination it brings. The nexus of

tradition and modernity when it came to resources like health and education for women becomes clear with the control of women's bodies and agency for modern norms like small family or educated daughters for marriage or use of sex determination and sex selective abortion (reproductive technologies) for disposing with daughters.

The possibilities of the initiatives exist in the networks that had been formed between different kinds of cooperational, confrontational and collaborationist alliances and arrangements between various categories of women intermediaries, government bodies, community members, etc. The untapped potential of these networks to confront Punjabi patriarchies which includes the state, family, community, NGOs and the market due to lack of interest to incorporate nuances and to sustain them beyond projects and plans, is a denial of the many lessons learnt over the years. Overcoming this challenge calls for a discursive shift in the manner in which the issue has been framed and the way in which state and civil society agenda has been fixed. Coercive tracking of pregnancy by the state to control numbers has to make way for a sensitive, rights-based approach. The efficient implementation of the Act to catch the errant doctors as well as family-members, and regulation of the market of reproductive technologies could be part of the punitive measures. The tracking of pregnancies of women needs to be replaced by a tracking of resources for girls and women related to their education, health and their right to self-development. The girls who had been prevented from going to college over a cup of tea were not submissive victims of their circumstance, devoid of human agency, unable to steer their own destiny. They were autonomous beings who desired to claim their rights by voicing them. The potential of their collective action and the intriguing and tempting speculation about the emergence of a feminist agenda through such collective action which would be able to counter gender discriminatory practices like sex selective abortion will always remain.

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