

Child Sex Ratio and the Politics of 'Enemisation'

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India's child sex ratio has gone awry despite several monitoring and corrective mechanisms. The root of the problem, the very "undesirableness" of daughters, is not remotely dealt with by the state which has adopted a modus operandi of "enemisation" of the offenders. In this world view, the state is vested with power and authority, while blame and responsibility lie with the guilty individuals. A look at the concept of enemisation in the context of India's skewed CSR argues that often the state's acts of "doing good" for the people are informed by the politics of enemisation.

India's child sex ratio (CSR) has gone awry: between the Census of 2001 and that of 2011, even as the country witnessed "unprecedented" economic growth and began to be perceived as one of the superpowers of the millennium, the national CSR deteriorated alarmingly. The 2001 Census recorded a CSR of 927:1000, while the 2011 one showed 914 girls per 1,000 boys at birth. This being the national average, the ratio is obviously worse off in half the nation. Maharashtra has an unexpected ratio of 883:1000. The unexpectedness comes from the fact that it is one of the "economically developed"¹ states with Mumbai being the financial capital of the country. So, even as we have often understood economic deprivation as the cause for a skewed CSR, Maharashtra's reality comes to question this assumption and urge rethinking.

The Maharashtra government subsequently designed methods to plug the gap. Having realised the significance of the phrase "at birth", it focused on the issue of female foeticide – the logic being that the numbers get skewed right at birth since several girls are not allowed to be born in the first place. They go missing at the foetal stage because of sex-selective abortion. Foetal sex can be detected by ultrasonography (USG) after the 10th/12th week of pregnancy. Indian jurisprudence marked the use of USG to detect foetal sex as criminal activity under the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques, (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act in 1994, in a bid to curb abortion of female fetuses. The punitive actions recommended for anyone caught disobeying the law included shutting down of a provider's business and the permanent cancellation of his/her registration. The Maharashtra government piloted a monitoring project that would check the illegal use of USG. In March 2010 it installed the Silent Observer (SIOB) in Kolhapur district. This was a centrally located device equipped with a satellite

based tracking mechanism that could monitor all USG centres in a given radius. All relevant data of all pregnant women who came in for USGs – legal and illegal – were to be centrally stored on a government database.

However, two years down the line, the success narratives of the SIOB project vary,² and after the census details trickled in, the state government decided to add to existing measures. There was also a shift from the punitive to the rewarding. The proposal was to provide incentives to a woman who would give birth to a female third child.³ It also proposed that digital photos of all aborted fetuses be stored in a central database, and the medical cause for the termination of pregnancy be documented in detail by the provider. A suggestion was also floated that the legal 20-week period within which a woman can have a medical termination of pregnancy (MTP) be brought down to a 10-week one, since the sex of the foetus is not discernible at that stage.

Correctives and Their Criticisms

The corrective mechanisms raised eyebrows and caused anxieties. Several doctors and activists came together to question some or most of these. It was pointed out that confidentiality about the woman's identity (and more so if she were unmarried) would be severely compromised if all details were to be documented and accessed by state officials. Questions were also raised about the feasibility of reducing the legal period for MTP to 10-weeks, since several women who are undernourished and have irregular menses would not realise they are pregnant for weeks together, and would thus not be left with a legal option to terminate an unwanted pregnancy. She would then perhaps be forced to avail the services of unregistered practitioners and could end up with serious consequences for her health.

Intensifying a third delivery only if it were a girl child is downright self-contradictory. In a country where the state has hitherto propagated the two-child norm, how would a family know that the third pregnancy would lead to the birth of a girl, unless they opted for a

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sex-determination test, which is illegal? While the fate of this bill remains to be seen it is also uncertain whether at all free services – hospital delivery, education and others – are incentives enough to make the allegedly money-starved population accept its daughters and help the nation better its CSR. Especially, since it is not really a lack of financial resources and provisions alone that motivate families to kill their daughters.

The state, instead of taking cognisance of the root of the issue has resorted to a flurry of actions that are set to punish specific offenders, or at best tempt individuals into abstaining from committing the crime. The skewed CSR is a mere indicator in itself. It indicates gender oppression, poverty, androcentric beliefs, and notions of social status, a patriarchal and an intolerant society. The “correction” as it were, then requires to address each of these coordinates; punishing individuals is far too limited a move. Yet that is what the state has hitherto been doing; by confusing the causes and the effect, by treating the ratio as an end in itself, it has identified a single strategy solution to what it perceived as a single problem. The legal and economic solutions in practice are decontextualised and merely exist to seek out individual enemies and punish them, thereby also losing sight of the “sexual politics”⁴ at work in the context of CSR.

Politics of Enemisation

It would not be out of context to turn to Rabindranath Tagore to understand the politics at work in the context of CSR-related solutions in Maharashtra. In Tagore’s dance-drama *Shyama*, the action starts with the royal treasury looted and the royal guards on a frenzied search for the thief – more in order to save their own necks than to punish the crime. The guards say:

Chor chayi, je kore hok
Chor chayi hokna je kono lok
Chor chayi noilemoder jaabe praan
Churi hoye gachhe rajkoshe
 (We want the thief, no matter how
 We want the thief, no matter who
 We want the thief, else we’ll lose our necks
 The royal treasury has been looted).

The audience is jolted by the casualness of the second line – the drive to find a thief, any thief, anyone on whom the

onus of the empty treasury can be placed and the prestige of the guards salvaged. In the story the guards are indeed successful in “finding” a thief and executing him. Being able to explain (in this case, the “empty treasury”) assumes critical significance in politics and its inability comes as a threat to the sustainability and strength of the powers-that-be. The guards in *Shyama* come across as the symptoms and symbols of this tendency in politics, as part of the larger frame that has tended to find a cause always outside of the self. A politics, that thrives on a retroactive process of enemisation.

Politics or *rajneeti* – the *neeti* of the *raj* – is the law of the land/ruler. And a ruler always has his ruled. Thus there is an a priori structure of a self with law and power, and an other who needs to be put under the effect of that law and, who is adopted by the one with power. The *neeti* cannot work outside of this structure. It is the logical imperative of this structure that if there has been a disruption, a violation of the law, then it must be the other who is responsible for it. If needed, an “other” is created for this occasion. State-centred politics (i.e., where the state is the higher moral and spiritual force beyond (and above) the material interests of its subjects, (where the state is the main agent of historical change) thus has to find an “enemy” (as also a “victim”). Taking this frame to the problem of the CSR, we see how the state and its appendages have been addressing the issue in a confrontational way which urges the identification of an enemy who needs to be reformed or eliminated. And in the process we have ended up dealing with the woman as if she too were an enemy of the state, one who needs to be kept under surveillance. Consequently, we have missed out on asking ourselves, what in the larger structure of the social and the cultural has actually made the woman seek sex-selective abortion services in the first place – that is to say, we have not yet engaged with the root of the problem.

On Approaching the Root

But why at all do we need to understand the root? On two counts: one, the imagination of the present political is state-centric where the state is the higher

moral and spiritual force beyond and above the material interests of its subjects, and where all solutions are inevitably guided by what is legal. Two, this political is akin to a witch-hunt, where the division between the right and the wrong, good and evil, is, as if, certain and unquestionable, and the only task remaining is to find the wrongdoer.

But, how can we as a collective think of addressing the issue historically, socially and ethically (and not morally), as also beyond the immediate? The pervasiveness of the problem urges an engagement from multiple standpoints; alongside occasional immediate redressals, a deeper and critical analysis of the reason for the existence of the issue needs to happen. What are the larger social structures that have kept on sustaining this desire? Overt consequences like the absence of potential brides in states like Haryana exemplified by the movie, *Mathrubhumi*, have not been able to make families want daughters. So, will somehow ensuring that for each 1,000 boys there are 1,000 girls be the satisfactory end? Will that ensure the girl child is desired? Does the state itself not contradict its position by giving out conflicting messages in asking society to accept daughters while discriminating against women through payment of unequal wages or through its other gender-insensitive laws? It is only through a critical engagement with all these range of aspects that we would be able to address the problem at the roots; it is also important to treat the ratio as an indicator and to understand what it indicates. We then could proceed to address the problems indicated rather than deploying legal forces to get the ratio right. Understandably the eradication of all causes will take a long time, but until we identify the various strands that have gone into its making over years and centuries, a proper beginning will not be made. Perhaps, statist perspectives and legalistic solutions will not help us come out of a long-standing culture that earmarks the sanction of female foeticide.

NOTES

- 1 The much flaunted idea of “high growth” and “economic development” can also be problematised and put to question. Hyped overall growth

stories of some Indian states remain haunted to this day by low Human Development Indices, low percentage of people below poverty line, deprivation and hunger. This article, however, is focusing on only one axis of the problem – CSR – and is taking low CSR itself as interpellative wake-up call for stories of high growth and economic development, thus putting aside for the time being the critique of such stories of the economy.

2 *Daily News and Analysis* (2011), September 19, viewed on 10 March 2012, [http://www.dnaindia.com/mumbai/report_exclusive-](http://www.dnaindia.com/mumbai/report_exclusive-maharashtra-government-s-silent-observer-can-do-little-to-save-girl-child_1588899)

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3 *The Times of India* (2011), October 4, viewed on 10 March 2012, http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-10-04/mumbai/30242223_1_girl-child-third-child-population-first

4 By “sexual politics” the authors imply that there is a long-standing history to the undesirable-ness of daughters that also calls for engagement. Addressing the issue of undesirableness is also of as much importance as allowing the daughter to be born. The concept of sexual politics can

be drawn from Gayle Rubin’s work where she talks of the “sex/gender system” (“Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex”, 1975). Her aim was to develop conceptual tools that would explain how and why women’s oppression was maintained in widely different cultures as also maintained differently. Rubin takes sex to mean biological sexual differences and gender to mean the oppressive social constructs-norms brought to bear on these differences. A similar endeavour is urgently called for in the context this article espouses.