



Economics and Sociology of Son Preference in India

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Abstract:

Son preference over daughters is very common in India, China, South Korea, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Middle East. Paper discusses in details about the forcing factors for son preference in India. The major objective of the paper is to discuss how social norms, cultural values, perceived economic utility of sons over daughters, religious rituals, dowry, kinship system, gender discriminated labour market and less employment opportunities for women force parents to prefer sons over daughters. Sons are considered as life-long economic assets to the family while daughters are supposed as life-long economic liabilities. Paper concludes that as long as parents follow their deep rooted socio-cultural and religious customs, there will be a strong preference for sons and neglect of daughters.

Key Words: Son preference, social norms, religion, dowry, economic utility

Introduction

The presence of a preference for sons over daughters in a number of countries of Asia including India is well-established in the literature (Arnold, Choe, & Roy 1998; Gupta et al. 2003; Clark 2000). There is an old Indian proverb according to which

“*eighteen goddess-like daughters are not equal to one son with a hump*” (Dahl 2010). Women’s lack of economic power, male dominance within the family, dependence on sons for old age support, high dowries, patrilineal clans, and marital exogamy have been the principal suggested forces compelling parents, both mothers and fathers, to favor sons over daughters. An old Tibetan proverb says “*Daughters are no better than crows. Their parents feed them and when they get their wings, they fly away*” (Dahl, 2010). In China also, the peasants have a saying: “the birth of a boy is welcomed with shouts of joy and firecrackers, but when a girl is born, the neighbours say nothing” (Attane 2005). Some years ago, the billboard messages in India promised: “*Invest INR 500 now, save 50000 latter,*” encouraging prospective parents to abort female fetuses in order to avoid future dowry expenses (Retherford and Roy 2004).

The latest Census of India (2011) revealed that the child sex ratio (number of girls per 1,000 boys among children in the age group 0-6 years old) is at its lowest since India’s independence in 1947. India’s skewed sex ratio and son preference (Kishor 1993) have persisted since 1901 and have not eroded despite the tremendous economic growth India has done through liberalization and globalization (Miller, 1981; Arnold, Choe, and Roy 1998). One of the most alarming trends in India is that son preference, which can be a normal attribute for parents who have only girls, is accompanied by the neglect and death of millions of girls through lack of medical care, improper nutrition, infanticide, and sex selective abortions (Arnold, Kishor, and Roy 2002). This is occurring even among the educated and high-income groups in India (*Times of India* 2010). Sen (1992, 2003) first addressed this disturbing trend by recognizing that millions of women in India and China are missing because of continuous neglect in nutrition, health care, and prenatal care.

In most Indian families, a daughter is viewed as a permanent economic liability, and she is conditioned to believe that she is inferior and subordinate to son. Sons are idolized and celebrated. “*May you be the mother of a hundred sons*” is a common Hindu wedding blessing in India.

Studies in India have identified three major factors that underline gender biasness and son preference. One is economic utility of son i.e. son provide family labour on the farms in rural

area, helping in family business, earning wages and supporting parents in old age (Dharmalingam 1996). Secondly, son brings daughter-in-law in his family and provides additional domestic help to his family and also brings dowry in family (Kishor 1995). Third, another important advantage of having son is the socio-cultural utility (Dyson and Moore, 1983). Finally, the utility of having son arises from the important religious functions that only son can provide. According to Hindu tradition, sons are needed to kindle the funeral pyre of their parents after death and to help in the salvation of their souls (Das Gupta 2003; Dahl 2010; Kishor 1995; Wesley and Choe 2007; Zimmermann 2012).

Economics of Son Preference in India

Economics plays a crucial role in son preference. Preference for sons over daughters is purely a rational economic decision of the parents. One of the major causes of son preference in India is the perceived economic utility of having sons. Expenses made on son's bringing up and education is quite receivable in the form of dowry at the time of son's marriage or in the form of earning when he gets a job. The son is expected to earn and 'pay back' by looking after the parents in old age. Dowry is a big economic bonanza for the parents, if they manage to sell their son to the highest bidder. On the other hand, all the money spent on a girl's education is considered a 'waste' and even if the girl earns it will go to the husband's family. Worse, giving birth to a girl means that the parents will have to 'buy' a groom for her when the time comes. Compared to daughters, sons provide help in family businesses and farms, have more earning opportunities in labour market and provide financial help during old age (Miller 1981; Bardhan 1988; Basu 1989).

Where women are employed or are independent producers, they can establish their potential economic independence from male domination. This economic autonomy reverberates through marital, kinship, sexual, and political aspects of gender relations as well. If only sons are seen as potential contributors to the economic prosperity of the family, then they will be preferred and daughters will be seen as an economic burden. Men are considered as main bread winners in

India. The labour market is also more favourable towards man than woman. More men are employed than women and in some cases men get more wages than women for the same work. In this way sons become beneficial to the family than daughters. Girls are considered a drain on family resources during their childhood without bringing economic benefits later on. Fathers and mothers need to have sons because of their higher earning potentials. While a son is considered an asset, a daughter is considered a liability. There is a proverb, *'Bringing up a girl is like watering a plant of other's garden'*.

Rosenzweig and Schultz (1982) in their study find that parents seek to maximize family utility when making resource allocation decisions and investments in children, and therefore sons who are perceived to have higher income-earning potential receive a proportionately greater share of family resources. Higher expected earnings are likely to motivate greater human capital investments in daughters relative to sons, and that intra-household equality brought on by working women's contribution to household income may equalize expenditures on sons and daughters (Behrman et al 1999; Kingdon 2005).

Daughters are considered to be liabilities because of the tradition of dowries. Families do not have the same incentives to invest in the education of their daughters as they do with sons because daughters leave their parental homes and live with their husbands and in-laws. In much of India, marrying off daughters can become a huge family expense. There are costs for sons' weddings as well, but the dowries and gifts that come with the new bride mostly end up with the sons' families. So, on balance, more sons can eventually mean more resources while more daughters can be a drain on household wealth (Das Gupta 2003; Kishor 1995). As dowries have grown larger with economic development and as they have spread beyond their traditional

North Indian region, they have been widely cited as a cause of discrimination against girls. In most Indian families which are patriarchal in nature, only sons can inherit the family property and women have very less such rights. North India is characterized by a rigid patriarchal society in which a man who does not have a son would rather adopt one than allow the daughter to inherit his property (Das Gupta 2003). Son preference is also connected with land holding of the

family. Big landlords in North India who belong to the higher castes among Hindus have deep son preference than lower castes who are poor and don't own land (Liddle and Joshi 1986).

Sociology of Son Preference in India

Socio-cultural norms, beliefs, traditions, rituals and customs are the major causes of son preference over daughters in India. Female infanticide has a long tradition in India. In the nineteenth century the *Jhareja Rajputs* killed virtually all their girls at birth. They were even known as the '*kuri mar*,' the 'daughter killers' (Dahl 2010). Socially men are valued higher than women. Women have very less freedom in social life and decision making process. Parents are always worried about the chastity of the girl and if the girl loses her chastity, family loses its honour. Girls are therefore much more of a risk to family honor and identity than sons to whom the strict moral code does not generally apply.

Kinship system in India also favors sons. A central tenet of the North Indian kinship system is that brides are brought into the extended family from outside the family and from outside the local area. This means that parents often have little motivation for long-term investment in their daughters. Once married, they become a part of someone else's extended household, often at some distance from their natal village so that continued social relations can become quite infrequent (Dyson and Moore 1983). The South can be quite different, it is not only acceptable for daughters to marry within the village and cross-cousin or uncle-niece marriages are often preferred. Consequently, parents can expect as strong lifelong relationships with their daughters as they do with their sons.

But in the North Indian pattern, exogamy means that parents can maintain that close relation only with sons. Kishor (1993) found empirical support for these arguments by showing that districts where village exogamy is the norm are the districts where girls suffer higher child mortality than boys.

The patrilineal and patrilocal character of the North Indian kinship system dictates that sons are responsible for maintaining their aged parents. Couples with only daughters face a potential future of deprivation and loneliness. Preferences for sons, therefore, are closely tied to security for

one's old age. Widows are especially vulnerable in old age so the need for sons is felt as much by mothers as fathers. Women culturally cannot inherit ancestral property in large part of India so that parents need a male heir to pass their land and family possessions (Dyson and Moore 1983; Almond et al. 2009; Dharmalingam 1996).

In patrilineal extended families, it is the tie between father and son, not husband and wife that is the key social relationship. Thus, the kind of companionate marriages that develop in a system of nuclear families is largely missing or weak in much of India. Instead, the conjugal tie can be seen as a potential cause of the division of family lands and joint households. In this system, women are a threat to family stability while sons are the guarantor of prosperity and local influence.

Why Women Prefer Sons?

It is quite understandable that men prefer son for their socio-cultural, religious and economic reasons. But why women prefer son over daughters? The non-monetary benefits may be the good explanation for son preference among women. When a woman enters in a family as a bride, she has a very little social position in that family. The birth of a son raises the social prestige of the family and leads to increased respect for the mother of the child. Men start withdrawing from being involved in family decisions as they get older, and women start taking over the management of the family with the support of their grown-up sons (Rahman et al. 1992; Das Gupta 2002; Kaur 2008; Kishor 1993). The presence of a loyal son increases the bargaining power of a woman in the family. Sons also provide support and protection for their mothers during domestic violence. A woman is like a free servant in the family. She does unpaid work like cooking, washing, mopping, cleaning etc. Only the son can provide her some relax in the later stage of life from this work by marrying and bringing a daughter-in-law in the family. In this way new bride become the free servant of the family and mother gets some controlling power. In patriarchal society women without sons are often the target of gossip and snide remarks in their village. Sons are also important for their mothers in the old age if father died early. Sons are the only

hope for widows in India. Due to socio-cultural restrictions women generally don't stay longer with their married daughters. Hence, in such socio-cultural norms which generally go against the girls, mothers willingly or unwillingly prefer sons.

Son Preference in Hindu Religious Texts

An early legacy of son preference is established in the *Vedas*. The main source in *Vedas* is the importance of fertility-fertility that ensures the propagation of sons, and many of them. In a wedding hymn in *Rig Veda* "Agni is called upon to protect the bride so that she will be of blessed womb, a mother of many children who live to old age, and who will experience happiness from her sons" (Oldenberg 1993). Immediately after the wedding, there is a *Vedic* ritual wherein the bride sits on a fertility-bestowing bull's skin while 'the son of a woman who has borne only male living children' is placed on the lap in the hope that she will subsequently obtain healthy male progeny (Oldenberg 1993). As per Hindu religious texts production of sons is the way of paying off one's debt to one's ancestors. Sons are still mandatory for the necessary and auspicious performance of the funeral rituals. As per Hindu religion the son must light the funeral pyre of the deceased father to affect his journey to heaven (Kishor 1995; Dahl 2010, Oldenberg 1993).

Oldenberg (1993) cites number of examples in the Vedic texts where special efforts were made to secure a son (But there was nothing written on obtaining daughters): a special powder would be inserted into the nose of a pregnant woman to ensure a male child; sons could be conceived by having sex at a certain time and place; or by citing a special verse; a man could have his wife drink a special potion, announcing that she then sees the birth of a son; and Oldenberg states, "at the ceremony to get male progeny, the woman has to eat a barley corn and two mustard seeds or beans placed on both sides of the barley corn and an image of the male genital organ so that she may give birth to a male child".

According to Hinduism, a man who has failed to sire a son cannot achieve salvation (Dahl 2010). The common blessing

elders grant to the newly married couple is: “*May she will be the mother of hundred sons*”.

The one of the most obeyed religious source in Hinduism is *Manusmiriti* or the *Manavdharamshastra*. In his essay “Women and Counter-Revolution”, Dr. Ambedkar (The greatest Indian after Gandhi) argues how Laws of Manu were responsible in degrading Indian women.

As Dr. Ambedkar cites, Manu proclaims:

It is the nature of women to seduce men in this (world): for that reason the wise are never unguarded in (the company of) females; One should not sit in a lonely place with one's mother, sister or daughter, for the senses are powerful, and master even a learned man; Women do not care for beauty, nor is their attention fixed on age; (thinking), '(It is enough that) he is a man', they give themselves to the handsome and to the ugly.

The laws of Manu against women are of a piece with this view. Women are not to be free under any circumstances. In the opinion of Manu:

Day and night women must be kept in dependence by the males (of their families), and, if they attach themselves to sexual enjoyments, they must be kept under one's control; Her father must control (her) in childhood, her husband in youth, and her sons in old age, a woman is never fit for independence; By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house; In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent; She must not seek to separate herself from her father, husband, or sons; by leaving them she would make both (her own and her husband's) families contemptible. Woman is not to have a right to divorce.

On the basis of the above discussion it can be said that Hindu religion is also one of the most important reasons for preferring sons over daughters and degrading women.

Conclusion

Son preference and neglect of girls are occurring even among the educated and affluent classes in India and are not

correlated with economic development, affluence, or literacy levels. The low status of women, economic considerations, social norms, cultural assumptions, religious rituals and patriarchal values are intensifying this trend in India. Son preference has serious negative effects on women's health, fertility choices, and future well being of girls. Violence against women are increasing. There are clear signs of more rape cases due to shortage of girls in rural North Indian states like Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan.

Policymakers need to take into consideration the complex interplay of economics, religion, traditions, customs, and the inferior status of women among the highly diverse states in India in order to address this grave issue.

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