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SEX COMPOSITION IN PUNJAB: THE ROLE OF SON PREFERENCE

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Abstract

Son preference refers to the attitude of people giving more importance to sons than daughters in their families. Such thinking has resulted into the loss of many daughters. Census of India has shown an improvement in child sex ratio in Punjab from 798 in 2001 to 846 in 2011, but the ground realities exhibit sharp contrasting results. The field survey conducted by the authors on 450 couples of two selected settlement units of Punjab presents a very dismal picture of sex ratio. The sex ratio among children of surveyed couples shows very low sex ratio of 691 only against the state average of 846. The present study provides an insight into the seriousness of the issues and fore-sees a serious demographic crisis if such a practice of son preference goes on unabated.

Introduction

The term son preference describes the attitude of society considering sons more important and valuable than daughters. Son preference refers to a range of values and attitudes, which are manifested in many different practices, their central focus being the neglect of daughter and over emphasis on the virtues of the son (Kumari, 2006). The practice of son preference is not alienated to India only rather it is prevalent in many Asian countries where parents prize their sons for economic, religious or social reasons (Clark, 2000). Sons are preferred because; (i) they have a higher wage-earning capacity, especially in agrarian economies; (ii) they continue the family line and (iii) they are generally recipients of inheritance (Hesketh and Xing, 2006). In contrast, daughters are considered an economic burden because of the dowry system. After marriage they become members of the husband's family and their contribution to their

parents' family is negligible, therefore investing in daughters will continue to be perceived as investing in another family's daughter-in-law (Dasgupta, 2003). In our socio-cultural milieu also, only the sons are supposed to perform the last rites of parents to help them achieve salvation. The various social, economic and demographic indicators provide evidence of a gender bias as well as deep-rooted prejudice and discrimination against women and girl children (Bora, 2007). The first census conducted by the British administration in colonial India also stressed on the male-heavy character of Indian population. Boys predominated among the Indian children, and high sex ratios were even recorded among older age-groups. Unfavourable death rates were indeed common among Indian women in all the ages. The practice of female infanticide had been detected in some provinces of west India (Guilmoto, 2005).

The psychic construct of the society has

always remained in favour of sons than daughters in our country. Earlier, female infanticide was widespread but usually, went unnoticed due to the lack of proper registration of infant deaths. But with the introduction of sex determination technology it has now taken the shape of female foeticide.

This practice has altered the demographic picture of the country. No doubt, girls were discriminated against boys earlier also, and a boy's birth was often celebrated more joyously but the girls had been accepted just as the will of God. However, with the availability of medical technology that can actually predict the sex of an unborn child, there is no longer dependence on God. People could intervene and terminate a pregnancy, when a woman was found to be pregnant with a girl (Kaur, 2011). Unfortunately, during the 70s, India has established a new rather liberal law on abortion, which in many cases rendered the termination of a pregnancy considerably easier. The law was primarily meant to address the issue of unwanted pregnancies, as part of a comprehensive family-planning strategy (Arnold et al., 2002). The combination of the pre-natal sex-determination and liberal law on abortion was used to reinforce the cultural prejudice against girls. A ratio favourable to boys and adverse to girls coincides with the introduction of modern pre-natal sex-determination methods (Bhat, 2002). The gender biasness resulting into the low status of women and neglect of girl child are leading to higher risk of mortality (Arnold et al., 1998; Sen, 1992), the cultural preference for the son, sex sequence and number of sons (Dasgupta, 2005 and George & Dahiya, 1998), societal changes rendering less space to daughters (Larsen & Hatti, 2008), abuse of sex determination techniques (Garg & Nath, 2008) and a small-family culture has created an imbalance in the sex composition. Several

kinds of vices that affect women like dowry, sexual abuse, prostitution, immoral trafficking etc. have further added fuel to the fire as the couples consider daughters as liability to be taken good care of, while the sons are considered as assets because they bring economic gains and provide cultural and social security.

The Census of India 2011 reported increase in the literacy rate, reduction in the overall growth rate and improvement in the sex ratio. The most disquieting feature is the contradictory trends in sex ratio of the general population and among the children under the age of six (EPW, 2011). The child sex ratio in India which was 927 in 2001, fell down to 914 in 2011 recording a decline of 13 points. It clearly reflects the neglect of the daughters and more preference for sons. While the country as a whole has seen a decline in the child sex ratio in 2011, the conventionally patriarchal state of Punjab, known for low child sex ratio, experienced the highest increase (48 points) in the child sex ratio in the country during the same period (2001-2011) and all of its districts also witnessed an increase in the child sex ratio. Ashish Bose (2011) a well known demographer also states that his field work doesn't conform to the census findings so the evaluation of census data is required to find truth. Moreover, Punjab almost at the bottom of the list of states on child sex ratio, recorded no case of conviction under the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PC & PNDT) Act in 2011 (The Tribune, 2012a). This shows that either the state has suddenly turned a new leaf or it completely failed to implement the law even while parents went on killing their unborn daughters to satiate their need for sons. This requires intensive field investigations and the present study is a humble step in this direction.

Objectives

The major objectives of the study are:

1. to study the sex ratio of children of the sampled couples from two selected settlements;
2. to study the role of age, religion, caste structure, family structure, education, occupation and income as determinants of son preference and
3. to analyse the effect of the number of children in a family on the son preference.

Methodology

The study is based on a sample of 450 respondent couples taken from two settlements of Amargarh and Sheikhpura selected as study area from Sangrur and Patiala districts of Punjab respectively. The survey was conducted in January, 2012. As in case of Census, the number of females per thousand males is taken as sex ratio. Data have been tabulated by applying simple statistical technique of percentages to interpret the results.

Discussion

Punjab, one of the most prosperous states of India has been famous for its growth and development, but it is notorious for its imbalanced sex ratio. However, the state fared well in 2011 as compared to 2001. The general sex ratio of Punjab improved from 876 in 2001 to 893 in 2011 in correspondence with the increase in general sex ratio of India i.e. from 933 (2001) to 940 (2011). The increase in the general sex ratio shows that female mortality has decreased because of improvement in pre-natal and post-natal facilities provided by the government under National Rural Health Mission launched in April, 2005. Although, female mortality has substantially declined, yet, it is counter balanced by another type of

pre-natal mortality that is sex specific and against a female foetus. As a result, in the case of child sex ratio of India, the figure came down from 927 in 2001 to 914 in 2011. The latest child survival data collected by UNICEF also state that in India under 5 female mortality rate is found to be higher at 64 in comparison to 58 for males (The Tribune, 2012b).

Trends in Sex Ratio

Table 1 shows the trends of general sex ratio and child sex ratio in the state of Punjab from 2001 to 2011.

It is surprising to note that the child sex ratio decreased by 13 points for India while in case of Punjab it increased by 48 points since the last decade. Twelve districts of the state had registered child sex ratio below 800 in 2001 but surprisingly in 2011 all the districts reported an improvement in child sex ratio. All the districts have recorded more than 800 child sex ratio and it ranges between 819 in Taran Taran district and 879 in S.B.S. Nagar district. The highest improvement of 87 points in child sex ratio is recorded in Kapurthala district while the lowest 19 points in Muktsar district during the period of 2001-2011.

This study however, reveals stark differences with the census figures. Table 2 shows that the number of girl children is much lesser than the boys. There are 375 girls against 543 boys indicating very low sex ratio of 691, may be due to high son preference by the sampled couples. These figures validate the presence of gender discrimination prevalent in Punjab.

As many as 23.77 per cent of the interviewed couples have a single child and those having a single male child constitutes 16.82 per cent. Only 6.95 per cent couples are having single girl child. The majority of the sampled couples are having two children (52.47 per cent). The couples bearing three or

Table 1
Punjab: Sex-Ratio – 2001 and 2011

Country/ State/ Districts	General Sex-Ratio			Child Sex-Ratio		
	2001	2011	Change	2001	2011	Change
Gurdaspur	890	895	5	789	824	35
Kapurthala	888	912	24	785	872	87
Jalandhar	887	913	26	806	874	68
Hoshiarpur	935	962	27	812	859	47
S.B.S. Nagar	914	954	40	808	879	71
Fatehgarh Sahib	854	871	17	766	843	77
Ludhiana	824	869	45	817	865	48
Moga	887	893	6	818	863	45
Firozpur	885	893	8	822	846	24
Muktsar	891	895	4	811	830	19
Faridkot	883	889	6	812	851	39
Bathinda	870	865	-5	785	854	69
Mansa	880	880	0	782	831	49
Patiala	875	888	13	776	835	59
Amritsar	871	884	13	792	824	32
Taran Taran	887	898	11	784	819	35
Rupnagar	889	913	24	799	866	67
S.A.S. Nagar	842	878	36	785	842	57
Sangrur	870	883	13	784	835	51
Barnala	872	876	4	792	847	55
Punjab	876	893	17	798	846	48
India	933	940	7	927	914	-13

Source: Census of India 2011, Provisional Population Tables, Punjab Series 4, p.17

more children are 23.76 per cent only (Table 2). It shows that most of the families in both the settlement units are limiting the size of their family depending upon the birth of a son. In other words, people stop adding children in their family just after the birth of a son.

Table 3 shows that sex ratio (691) in the families of the sampled couples is much lower than the state average (846). This figure indicates that the practice of female infanticide, foeticide, pre- natal abortions on finding the girl foetus in the womb is quite rampant in this so called prosperous region of India. Female foeticide has become so common these days as a total of 132 cases of foeticide were reported in 2011 of which the highest number registered was from Madhya Pradesh, followed by

Chhattisgarh and Punjab and these states together reported 56 per cent of the total foeticide registered in 2011 in the country (The Hindu, 2012). Especially, the northern states with their higher preference for sons are the biggest drivers of the anti-girl child trend (The Tribune, 2012c). The present survey brings out the fact that micro level studies are showing a totally different picture of the child sex ratio in the state as compared to the census data. This table further shows the sex ratio of the children in relation to various population characteristics of the couples under study.

Age Structure: The total respondents of both settlement units have been divided into four different age groups, i.e., below 30 years, 30-39 years, 40-49 years, and 50 years and

Table 2
Amargarh and Sheikhpura: Proportion of Sampled Couples
Bearing Different Number of Children

Number of couples	450
Number of children	918
Number of boys	543
Number of girls	375
Sex ratio of living children	691
Percentage of couples with one living child	23.77
Percentage of couples having one boy only	16.82
Percentage of couples having one girl only	6.95
Percentage of couples with two living children	52.47
Percentage of couples with three living children	19.28
Percentage of couples with four and more living children	4.48
Percentage of couples with no living children	0.88

Source: Field Survey, January, 2012.

above. The highest prevalence of son preference is observed in couples belonging to the age group of 50 & above. The low sex ratio among the children of this age group of couples is tending to be affected by the introduction of sex determination techniques during 1980's. The abortion laws were also very liberal during this period when these couples were in their reproductive age. The second lowest figure of sex ratio of children is found in the families of couples below 30 years of age. In fact, psyche of must having a boy child in the family has affected the child sex ratio in all the age groups.

Religion: Two major religions namely Sikhism and Hinduism are reported in the study area. The sex ratio of children is lowest in the Sikhs (630). The findings of religion data, 2001 have also shown the lowest child sex ratio in the Sikhs among all the religions of India. Their love for the agricultural land which further required males for inheriting and cultivating it placed a premium on sons (Kaur, 2003). The Hindus have higher sex ratio (836) as compared to the Sikhs (630). It is due to the general desire to have one daughter in the family because it is considered sacramental among the Hindus to

give away one daughter in marriage but more than one daughter is seen as adding to the family's costs rather than to its benefits (Bhat and Zavier, 2003).

Caste Structure: The castes of both the settlement units are divided into three categories namely general, scheduled and backward. The general caste recorded lower sex ratio than backward classes and scheduled castes. It shows that general castes enjoying better social status are more biased towards the girl child as compared to the other castes.

Family Structure: The high prevalence of son preference is found in the couples of joint families (662). The intense family pressure of must having a son especially in the joint families is affecting the sex ratio in these families adversely.

Education: To be educated is considered as the best virtue of life because it brings knowledge and awareness. In this study declining son preference is found among couples having education up to the secondary level. But on the other hand, highly educated people are restricting the size of their family at the cost of girl child. Moreover, the highly

Table 3
Amargarh and Sheikhpura: Population Characteristics and
Child Sex-Ratio of Sampled Couples

Population Characteristics	Child Sex Ratio
Total	691
Age (years)	
Below 30	633
30-39	698
40-49	799
50 and above	477
Religion	
Sikh	630
Hindu	836
Caste	
General	662
Backward Classes	675
Scheduled Castes	765
Family Structure	
Joint	662
Nuclear	702
Education	
Illiterate & up to Middle	614
Matric & Senior Secondary	786
Graduation & above	627
Occupation	
Agriculture	544
Labour	622
Business	727
Service	776
Income (Rs.)	
Below 60,000	637
60,000-1,80,000	692
1,80,001-3,60,000	790
Above 3,60,000	714

Source: Field Survey, January, 2012.

educated group has more exposure and knowledge of sex determining techniques and other means of terminating a female foetus resulting in the low sex ratio.

Occupation: Occupational structure of the families also influences sex ratio. In this study it is observed that the children belonging to agricultural class have the lowest sex ratio. Agricultural land is considered to be a family asset and sons are preferred more than daughter in order to retain the land in the family's name.

High son preference is also observed in the couples engaged in labour activities. Because, it is considered that son will add income to the family. On the other hand, couples of business and service class have better child sex ratio showing their awareness regarding importance of daughters in the family.

Income: The sampled couples on the basis of income are divided into four categories i.e., below Rs. 60,000; Rs. 60,000 to Rs. 1,80,000; 1,80,001 to 3,60,000 and above Rs.

Table 4
Amargarh and Sheikhpura: Number of Living Children
in the Family and their Sex Ratio

Number of Living Children	Sex Ratio
One	413
Two	619
Three	856
Four or more	1075

Source: Field Survey, January 2012.

3,60,000. High income level is believed to have a negative impact on the preference of sons as better off families can easily take care and educate both their sons and daughters equally. The study supports this argument, as sex ratio of children increases with increasing income level of the people showing low son preference among rich couples. But the couples belonging to highest income strata i.e. above 3, 60,000 have again shown biases towards the girl child.

Number of Children and Sex Ration

Table 4 shows the sex ratio in relation to the number of living children in the family. The respondent couples are further divided into four categories on the basis of the number of living children in their families (1, 2, 3, 4 or above). The Table 4 clearly demonstrates that as the number of children in the family increases the sex ratio also improves. A new unsavoury trend is emerging among couples i.e. not to go in for another child once they have a son (The Tribune, 2012a). The policy of the government towards promotion of 'small family' has also encouraged the people to go for sterilization even after one child if the first born child is a son (Donthi, 2011). It must be mentioned that as child bearing moves to third, fourth or more children in a family, the sex ratio also improves (Table 4).

It is again due to the tendency to have a son, because whenever the number of children in the family increases, there are more girls than

boys as the people attempt again and again to have at least one son in their family. Thus, to have at least one son, the couples are accepting girls in the family, resulting into high sex ratio. About 75 per cent of couples in the study area have 1 or 2 children in the family therefore, sex ratio is very low. The study highlights that the growing tendency of limiting the size of family among Punjabis is bound to adversely affect the sex ratio in years to come unless some drastic measures are taken in favour of girl child.

Conclusion

The present study concludes that the sex ratio of both the settlements under study is in the favour of sons than daughters. It is much less (691) than the state average (846) recorded by Census of India, 2011. It cannot be denied that the psyche of the people that propagates the idea of son preference is still deep rooted in our society. The majority of the couples (75 per cent) want to have only one or two children. The policy of family planning implemented by the government has further aggravated the problem as people started limiting their family but in the favour of sons. It is disheartening to observe that sex discrimination is prevalent throughout the society irrespective of age, income, caste, religion, occupation as well as the family structure with only few exceptions favouring the birth of a girl child. The advent of new technology and its vast exposure has made it easy for the couples to know the sex of the

child before birth. Although the use of such technologies to determine the sex of unborn child is banned yet sex determination and abortions of female foetuses are going on relentlessly. If this phenomenon continues for some more years along with the attitude of son preference among people it will surely raise most threatening demographic crisis of declining sex ratio which will have its own consequences.

Suggestions

- The religious leaders should make their followers aware of the adverse effects of declining sex ratio.
- The media should efficiently sensitise people regarding the issue.
- The doctors, nurses and other medical practitioners found guilty of practicing sex determination tests should be punished hard such as cancellation of their licenses. The license for medical practice once cancelled should not be restored under any circumstances.
- The most important way forward is to improve the psyche of the people by convincing them that the girls are not less important than sons in the family. Only then the daughters will get their long due share in the present world.
- The labour classes should also be provided with some social security measures which may incline them in favour of girl child.

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