

Are Women in India Hampered by 'Hindu Rate' of Gender Discrimination?

Thursday 22 February 2018, by [SADANANDAN Anoop](#) (Date first published: 19 February 2018).

The plight of women in the country has its roots in Hindu traditions, and a Reformation may be needed to fix it.

Nature ensures that roughly an equal number of boys and girls are born. This parity holds true for almost all countries. India, however, stands at odds with this natural order.

Selective abortion of female fetuses leads to fewer girls being born in the country (about nine girls per ten boys). Feticide and premature death of girls due to neglect add up to an estimated 63 million women "missing" from the population.

The oft-cited reason for this gender inequality is that Indian parents have a strong preference for sons. This explanation though holds true only in some states. A third of the Indian states show no such preference for male heirs and have fairly balanced child sex ratios.

The government's Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (Save the daughter, educate the daughter) policy, which seeks to eliminate the imbalance, is based on the premise that the uneven sex ratio is due to low literacy among women. But wealthier urban states, such as Delhi and Punjab, where most women are not merely literate but are also school matriculates, are among the abject cases of this gender bias, and poorer rural states with low female literacy, such as Bihar, Chhattisgarh or Jharkhand, have more favourable sex ratios. This also suggests that economic development or urbanisation may not wipe out gender bias in India.

The underlying reasons for the skewed sex ratio and gender discrimination lie elsewhere, in some long-standing Hindu traditions.

Devi or the doormat

Hinduism has an impressive capacity to sustain contradictions. Within its fold, Hinduism simultaneously holds dualism and non-dualism; devotion, doubt and denial; self-denying spiritualism and self-gratifying materialism. One such contradiction is the status of women. Hindu mores deify women as the venerable mother, and as formidable goddesses, even as they relegate them to submissive inferiority.

Three traditional Hindu practices underline the inferior status of women and are consequential to gender discrimination in India. These traditions make some forms of gender bias that are prevalent in all religious groups particularly acute among the Hindus.

First, customary Hindu inheritance practices under the Mitākṣarā and Dāyabhāga systems privilege sons and alienate daughters and widows from ancestral lands. The Hindu Succession Act of 1956 codified these practices as law in independent India and applied them expansively to cover Buddhists, Hindus, Jains and Sikhs. Under this broad application, sons inherited ancestral property

if the deceased did not will it otherwise, while daughters and widows were left high and dry.

In contrast, in Muslim, Christian and tribal communities, specific procedures endowed women with the right to inherit some lands. Tribal inheritance rights varied by community and region, but Muslim personal law generally allowed both daughters and widows inheritance. Christian laws too gave widows a share of the inheritance and, following the 1986 Mary Roy case, extended to daughters the right to ancestral property.

The Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act in 2005 sought to give Hindu women legal rights to ancestral lands, but its progressive intent was undermined by a host of perverse tactics to deny Hindu women property. Subterfuge included “gifting” the daughter’s due share to her brothers, and increased female feticide and childhood mortality.

These responses not only deprived Hindu women of their legal rights but also seem to have erased decades of progress made in leveling sex ratios. National Family Health Surveys reveal that the overall number of females to males declined sharply after the 2005 law, more so in states with more Hindus. In states where the population is mostly Hindu, overall sex ratios now are comparable to the distorted levels that existed in the 1990s.

In part, this skew could be attributed to increased inter-state migration, usually of men in search of work, and to greater availability of medical technology by the turn of the century to terminate female fetuses. But distorted childhood sex ratios (0-4 years), which cannot be due to migration, suggest otherwise: the ratios declined in states where most people are Hindus. If technology has facilitated discriminatory feticide, then it has happened more so in predominantly Hindu states.

Further evidence comes from census data, which records sex ratios by religion. It is not just states that are mostly Hindu that have suffered from worsening childhood sex ratios; it is the Hindu community at large. Far fewer girls than boys are now being born into Hindu households than at the turn of the century, and the skew has deepened more among the Hindus; other religious groups too witnessed decline in the number of girls, but their childhood sex ratios are within the normal bounds of what we see in countries around the world.

Second, the custom of dowry for brides makes Hindu families treat daughters as a financial burden and sons as prized. The practice has seeped into other religions in India, but its wide prevalence among Hindus makes parents averse to having daughters, favoring sons instead.

Third, besides material factors, such as dowry and property rights, there are transcendental reasons for gender discrimination in Hinduism. In Hindu tradition, sons are seen as the sole legatees of family line (See, for instance, Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad). Hindu parents hold that, after their death, sons – and not daughters – will deliver them from evil and carry on their duties; they expect to live on in this world through their sons. Daughters are not deemed to carry forward the family lineage.

In a culture infused with beliefs and practices that esteem sons, daughters can be dispensed with. That is what state-level childhood sex ratios suggest. Far fewer girls than boys exist in states where Hindu culture and traditions are more prevalent – i.e., in states where the population is predominantly Hindu.

A preference for sons thus seems to hold sway in states that are mostly Hindu, whereas in states where most people do not belong to the Hindu fold childhood sex ratios approximate parity. Skewed sex ratios are not a pan-Indian phenomenon; they are largely a Hindu problem.

The problem of sex ratios is just one indicator of the general plight of women in predominantly Hindu states; other indicators paint a grimmer picture. Women in these states are more likely to be

unschooled and thus poorer, unhealthier (BMI < 18.5 kg/m²), and be victims of crime than their counterparts elsewhere in the country. The lives of women in predominantly Hindu states, if they were not cut short in the mother's womb or in infancy, seem poor, nasty and wretched.

Need for a Hindu Reformation

Any attempt to deal with gender discrimination in India must start with a firm recognition of what lies at the root of this social ill.

In the past, such social ills had galvanised a galaxy of reformers such as Ram Mohan Roy, Debendranath Tagore, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Dayananda Saraswati, R.G. Bhandarkar, Chattampi Swami, Narayana Guru and Vivekananda. In their quest to distill and celebrate the essence of Hinduism, these reformers sought to cleanse its traditions from the degeneracy of caste prejudices, child marriage and widow burning; they campaigned to educate girls, extend inheritance to women and allow widows to remarry.

These days, Hindu reformers are a rare species. Those who profess to champion the cause of Hindus are fixated on the bugbears of 'love jihad' and the erosion of Hindu population advantage, artfully disregarding the fact that the real demographic threat to Hindus comes from the community's regressive traditions that lead to abnormal sex ratios and subject women to wretched lives.

The absence of enlightened leaders, and the ineffectiveness of progressive legislation or modernisation to redress social ills point to the need for a popular collective Reformation of Hindu traditions to annihilate gender discrimination.

What better to have as the first canon of this Hindu Reformation than the treatment of all women as equals, not merely the veneration of a few.

Anoop Sadanandan

P.S.

The Wire

<https://thewire.in/225464/an-unpleasant-truth-underlies-gender-discrimination-in-india/>