

Female infanticide in India and its relevance to Nepal

Michelle Vickery¹, Edwin van Teijlingen²

¹Sociology and Anthropology Graduate

michellevickery@hotmail.co.uk

Faculty of Health & Social Sciences

Bournemouth University

Bournemouth, UK

²Professor of Reproductive Health Research

evteijlingen@bournemouth.ac.uk

Faculty of Health & Social Sciences

Bournemouth University

Bournemouth, UK

Abstract

This paper offers a sociological analysis of female infanticide in India with the aim of provoking readers to consider similar issues in Nepal. India and Nepal have a close relationship; their citizens are able to travel freely between the two countries and they share many similarities in their cultural, religious and social traditions. This has meant that people and ideas are easily exchanged between the two, making it necessary to consider the Indian phenomenon of female infanticide in Nepalese context.

Introduction

Gender selection and its subsequent female infanticide (FI) remains a problem for many countries today, most notably India (Mittal et al. 2013; Srivastava 2014). It is calculated that India has the largest number of missing women (Grech and Mamo 2014) due to the patriarchal customs which perpetuate male preference (Sen 2003; Srinivasan and Bedi 2006; Diamond-Smith et al. 2008; Chidamabaranathan et al. 2011; Perwez 2013) and promote the selective elimination of females through practices such as infanticide and sex-selective abortion (Patel 2013). Although sex-selective abortion may be considered a related phenomenon to FI (Scrimshaw 1983), this paper will focus on exploring reasons for the latter and linking it to the Nepalese context. Towards the end of the 20th century, Sen and Dreze (1989) estimated that 37 million women were missing in India because of such pervasive

anti-female practices. Sen (2003) acknowledged that various estimates had been calculated, but all were characteristically large. Despite this estimate being outdated, statistics from the Census of India (2011) continue to demonstrate a decline in the female population, specifically in the 0-6 year age range.

India and Nepal have strong relationship and the open border between the countries (Asian Centre for Human Rights (ACHR) 2016) symbolises this closeness, along with the similarities between socio-cultural and religious traditions. This explains the many thousands of Indian pilgrims who visit Nepal's Hindu temples and festivals or Buddha's birthplace in Lumbini. In 2015, nearly 200,000 tourists came to Nepal from India (Ministry of Culture, Tourism & Civil Aviation 2016). At the same time, more than two million Nepalese work in India, often in seasonal positions (Nepal Institute of Development Studies (NIDS) 2011). Furthermore, there are strong political and historical links between the political elites in both countries, not only between the Congress Parties but also between Maoist rebels in India and (former) rebels in Nepal (Sahay et al. 2016). This leads us to raise the question: "To what extent is India's problem of female infanticide also a problem in Nepal?"

This paper is organised as follows: the first section will provide a brief discussion of the sociological reasons for FI in relation to the patriarchal structure of Indian society, to explain why the practice continues to occur. Following this, there will be a discussion of why it is relevant for Nepalese scholarship to explore the reasons for the continuation of gender selection in its neighbouring country. Finally, there will be some concluding remarks to link the phenomenon which pervades India to Nepal.

Female infanticide in India

India has a deeply patriarchal history which continues to pervade modern society (Sumner 2009) and the discrimination females face as a result of this contributes to the existence of FI (Patel 2013). Some, such as Hegde (1999), are critical of this and argue that because females are agents of the practice, FI reverses the assumption that patriarchy dictates the conditions of survival, as females are actively contributing to their own oppression. In contrast, Patel (2013) disagrees, by suggesting that male preference, which is reinforced through all realms of patriarchal societies, directly contributes to the eradication of females and the ethical implications surrounding FI disappear as it benefits females to maintain patriarchy.

There are various patriarchal socio-cultural norms which have led to women being construed

as a burdensome appendage in different realms of Indian social life (Muthulakshmi 1997; Schwartz and Isser 2007; Sumner 2009; Singh 2012; Nayak 2014). Males are considered economically beneficial as they are the breadwinners (Basumatary 2015) and are obliged to care for their natal family indefinitely (Tandon and Sharma 2006), which is desirable as India lacks social security schemes for the elderly (Sumner 2009). The desire for sons is further perpetuated by the custom of patrilocal residence once a daughter is married (Kelkar 1992), which has resulted in females becoming labelled as a temporary family member with any investment in them being considered wasted (Singh 2012). Furthermore, the extensive dowry demanded by the groom's family upon marriage has further deterred families from having female children (Nayak 2014). Patrilineal inheritance ensures the continuation of the family name and ensures property is kept within the family lineage (Sumner 2009). Traditional beliefs surrounding spirituality preclude females from lighting the funeral pyre of her parents, which is a necessary task to ensure their safe passage to the afterlife, making sons desirable (Tandon and Sharma 2006).

Female infanticide in Nepal?

Son preference is prominent in many South-Asian countries due to their patriarchal structure (Filmer et al. 2009) including Nepal, where similarly to India, statistics show there are a declining number of females to males (Bhandari and Mishra 2012). Like India, which has a majority Hindu population of 79.8% (Census of India 2011), Nepal is a largely Hindu country with 81.3% of the population identifying with the religion (Government of Nepal 2012). Hinduism confers a high status on males and further shared similar cultural preferences between the countries (Bhandari and Mishra 2012) result in women being considered as inferior to men, and subsequently discriminated against from birth (Mahat 2003).

An analysis of data collected two decades ago for the 1996 Nepal Demographic and Health Survey suggested there was a substantial level of sex preference evident in Nepal (Leone et al. 2003). This was at a time when "Commonly used indicators of gender bias ... (did) not suggest a high level of gender discrimination in Nepal" (Leone et al. 2003: 69). This study was conducted before abortion was legalized in Nepal in 2002, and the new law prohibited sex-selective abortion (Henderson et al. 2013). There is a multitude of literature to suggest that gender selection in the form of female foeticide exists in Nepal (Shrestha 2010; Bhandari and Mishra 2012; ACHR 2016). The lack of writing concerning FI, however, may infer, or perhaps better, does suggest it is less prevalent. However, the limited literature tends to suggest that for similar reasons to India, such as dowry, economic well-being,

patrilineal structure, Hindu religion conferring high status to sons to perform funeral rites, the continuation of family name and males as the breadwinners, Nepal is experiencing a decline in the number of females due to fatal acts such as FI (Bhandari and Mishra 2012). A survey conducted among women by the Centre for Research on Environment, Health and Population Activities (2007) found that 98.8% of female participants stated it was necessary to have a son for various social, economic and religious reasons: old age security 79.5%, financial support 67%, continuation of family lineage 60%, performing funeral rituals 59%, inheritance of property 23.6%, prestige and power 21.5%, and other religious advantages 11.2%. The limited research that exists focusses on abortion used as a mechanism to select gender. For example, Lamichhane et al. (2011) conducted a qualitative study amongst abortion service providers in Nepal and found sex selection to be an increasing problem. The health care providers blamed this on the availability of abortion and ultrasonography, combined with a strong preference for sons. Health care providers found it difficult to identify sex-selection cases if a woman and her family presented for an abortion. Evidently, these are serious issues that need addressing, but overall, despite a strong societal preference for a son and issues around sex selection we found little research-based evidence of FI in Nepal.

Conclusion

The patriarchal social, cultural and religious traditions that pervade contemporary India place immense pressure on women to conform to the social expectation of producing sons, and this directly contributes to the continuation of FI. The similar patriarchal social, cultural and religious traditions of Nepal also promote son preference, but the extent to which this results in FI is seemingly less than neighbouring India, although still evident. The decision to commit FI is based upon what will yield the greatest outcome for the parents in different realms of social life within both of the countries discussed. Many factors intersect to exacerbate the favouring of sons and the elimination of females, including dowry, patrilocality and parental care, patrilineal inheritance, traditional beliefs in spiritual advancement, the continuation of the family name, and economic wellbeing. FI is a human rights issue and preventing this can only occur by changing the deeply embedded cultural and socio-economic factors which promote the demand for sex-selective abortion and FI. Perhaps there should be more research to uncover the true extent to which FI occurs in Nepal, given its close proximity and similar traditions to neighbouring India; a country which has one of the worst reputations for the killing of baby girls.

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