



FEMALE INFANTICIDE IN TAMIL NADU: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction:

The history of human culture is replete with examples of systematic oppression of women. One form of oppression of women is the practice of female infanticide. Female infanticide means nothing but killing of a female child; soon after its birth, especially with mother's consent. This custom of killing new born babies is prevalent all over India. It is an extreme form of harassment inflicted on female child. This horrible practice is not only an insult to the new born child and its mother but also to women community. It is not a problem of any one community but a problem of the entire society, demanding quick solution. Female infanticide in Tamil Nadu has recently received widespread attention with in India and abroad. This paper contains reflections on the custom of female infanticide in India, in general, and among some communities in Tamil Nadu in particular.

Historical Background: In India:

Female infanticide started in India as human sacrifice in the Aryan society. The right to live had been denied to the girl child since early times. Reflection of the practice can be seen in scriptures as old as the vedas of the Aryans.

"Let a female child be born some where else; here, let a male child be born."

Human sacrifice to God was once prevalent in some part of Bengal. In Orissa when the couple had no children for a longtime, they took an oath to Goddess Ganga, that, if she bestowed them with children, they would offer the first born to her.

During, the medieval period, the condition of women was deteriorated. In this period, female infanticide, child marriage, purdah, Jauhar, sati and slavery were the main social evils affecting the position of women. The birth of a daughter was considered as bad luck. Freedom of women was considered as predecessor of doom. Women were largely uneducated and remained confined to their homes. There is hardly any recorded evidence of female infanticide in India prior to the advent of the Europeans.

The large scale practice of female infanticide drew the attention of the British rulers and forced them to act. In 1799, infanticide was declared to be a murder by the Bengal Regulation XXI. In 1804, this was extended to other parts of India. A notable feature of all measures was the introduction of an Act for Suppression of Female Infanticide. However, there is no mention anywhere in the literature of female infanticide as to whether anybody had been convicted for the crime as per the Act. The British tried to curtail the practice by monitoring pregnancies and registering births. There was apparently not one girl baby born in the Royal House of Raja of Porbandar for a hundred years in the 19th century.

Manu Says "Man should never give any license to their wives in day and night... they should keep them under their own control. The father protects her in infancy, the husband in youth, and sons in old age, a woman does not deserve independence" (Manu: 9: 2-3)

Social Stigmas on Infanticide:

Extreme poverty with an inability to afford raising a child is one of the reasons given for female infanticide in India. Such poverty has been a major reason for high infanticide rates in various cultures, throughout history, including England, France and India. The dowry system in India is another reason that is given for female infanticide. Although India has taken steps to abolish the dowry system, the practice persists, and for poorer families in rural regions female infanticide and gender selective abortion is attributed to the fear of being unable to raise a suitable dowry and then being socially ostracised.

Elaine Rose in 1999 reported that disproportionately high female mortality is correlated to poverty, infrastructure and means to feed one's family, and that there has been an increase in the ratio of the probability that a girl survives to the probability that a boy survives with favourable rainfall each year and the consequent ability to irrigate farms in rural India. Ian Darnton-Hill et al. state that the effect of malnutrition, particularly micronutrient and vitamin deficiency, depends on sex and it adversely impacts female infant mortality.

Reason for Female Infanticide:

The practice of female infanticide in Tamil Nadu came to public attention in the mid-1980. Investigation claimed that about 6000 female babies could have been poisoned to death in sub districts of Usilampatti in preceding decade. In 1997 it was estimated that there were about 3,000 female infant deaths per year due to "social causes". Temporal analyses of various rounds of survey are unique to the state and provide information on male and female live births and infant deaths. Other sources such as the Sample Registration Surveys and the National Family Health survey also suggested a decline in female infanticide and a report submitted to the State Planning Commission based on Primary Health Centre (PHC) records also noted that the

number of female infant deaths due to "social causes" declined from an average of about 3,000 a year between 1995 and 1999 to 372 in 2002, that is, a decline of about 88%. A number of NGO's like the Indian council for Child Welfare (ICCW), Village Reconstruction and Development Programme (VRDP) and Poonthalir health and nutrition workers in the districts of Salem, Dharmapuri and Madurai also note a decline in the incidence of female infanticide.

Even 15 years after the shocking expose of female infanticide in Tamil Nadu, the practice of killing female babies within hours of their birth is on a silent rise, particularly in Salem district. Baby girls are being killed in "newer and more cruel methods" to evade police action. While there is limited information, the mortality of babies surrendered to the CBS in the first phase was about four times higher than the State's Female Infant Mortality Rate (IMR). Furthermore, it is feared that the scheme feeds into a child trafficking network. For instance when the CBS was revived in 2001, the number of adoption centers rose from 11 to 23 and the CBS is supposed to have created a "girl baby glut" for these centers. More fundamentally NGOs and activists have criticized the scheme on the grounds that it absolves parents of their responsibility towards their daughters. For instance, Ruby Thiagarajan, president of Saiem's Young Women's Christian Association argued that the scheme encourages son preference as women can continue to "dump the girl child in the cradles" till they have the desired number of sons.

While in Salem, Dharmapuri, Namakkal and Theni districts, there are less than 900 girl babies for every 1000 male infants, in six other districts - Karur, Madurai, Dindigul, Erode, Cuddalore and Vellore - the juvenile sex ratio is between 920 and 940 female infants per 1000 male babies. In Salem and Dharmapuri districts, the infant mortality rate (IMR) has alarmingly hovered around 70 to 85 deaths per 1000 births in the past five years as against Tamil Nadu's IMR of 40 per 1000 births. However, as the NGOs and the police get tough with the infanticide perpetrators in the hinterlands in Salem and Dharmapuri, the villagers come up with "newer killing techniques" to keep the authorities off their trail.

Brutal Killing Techniques:

Most of the killings of infant girls are committed by a senior woman in the family, usually the paternal grand mother, and in a few areas by traditional birth attendants. In the past, the common method of doing away with baby girls was feeding poisonous milk of "fukkam" and "kalli" plants or dropping crude husks into just-born's throats. But as post-mortem exposes female infanticide, they now resort to "more gruesome" but "less revealing" techniques of asphyxiation. Another ruthless elimination method catching up in villages is to over-feed babies and tightly wrap them in a wet cloth. After an hour of breathless agony, they die. In yet another chilling infanticide, the "umbilical chord" is let loose, leading to excessive bleeding and eventual death. But the latest technique of asphyxiating the baby by placing it beneath a pedestal fan at full blast.

Periyar was of the opinion that women were utilised as machines to beget children. Even though, female literacy levels in Tamil Nadu have considerably increased, the gender gap between male and female literacy rates continues. Hence religion, custom, age old prejudices, etc. have put the girl child in to plight.

The Role of the Government in Eradicating the of Female Infanticide:

The issue of missing girl children has prompted the state to launch an expensive welfare programme exclusively for the girl children at birth in many states.

The state is implementing comprehensive programmes to protect the girl children and encourage the people to educate girls. One of the important schemes implemented by it is the Sivagami Ammaiyar Ninaivu Girl Child protection scheme. The objective of this scheme is to prevent female infanticide, discourage preference for the male child and to promote family planning. This scheme also ensures equal opportunity in education for girl children on par with male children.

Under this scheme, an amount of Rs. 22,200 is deposited in Tamil Nadu Power Finance and Infrastructure Development Corporation Limited by Government in the name of the girl child. A monthly payment of Rs. 150/- is released to the child from the interest accrued from the deposit, from the 5th year of the deposit and upto 20th year of deposit to take care of its education. On the 20th year of the deposit, the deposit amount with interest will be released to the girl to enable her to pursue higher education or to the marriage expenses.

In the case of families with two girl children and no male child, an initial "deposit of Rs. 15,200/- is provided by the Government with Tamil Nadu Power Finance and Infrastructure Development Corporation Ltd, for each of the girls children. A sum of Rs. 75/- crores have been allotted in the budget estimate for the year 2008-2009. It was planned to cover about 49,300 girl children under this scheme.

Thus the role of States here can not be ignored. Many schemes such as cradle baby, girl child protection etc., have played a vital role in improving the negative trend. The world observed the international Decade of women (1975-1985), The SAARC observe the year 1990 as the year of the Girl child and also celebrate International Women's Day on March 8th at every year.

On 14th November 2007, Smt. Renuka Chawdhury released the special Meghdoot Post Card of the Central Social Welfare Board prepared through the efforts of the women's Bureau of the MWCD and CSWB. This post card being sponsored by the Central Social Welfare Board to spread awareness on issues related to

female foeticide and other social issues and will carry messages on the schemes and policies pertaining to women and the girl child. As a beginning the Department of posts and telegraph will print and sell 10 lakh cards at the price of 25 paise per card.

Terredes Hommes (TDH) Core Trust' is a Non Government Organisation working for children in Salem district, without any political, religious or ethnic bias. "Poon thalir is one of the project of TDH Core Trust started to reduce IMR in all Blocks of Salem District. Further more, A registered adoption centre called "Life Line Trust" is started in Salem which is the 18th centre in Tamilnadu, The Trust is a sister organization of 'Poonthali', based at Edapadi. The trust has received "Surrendered babies" and not abandoned children.

Cradle Baby Scheme:

In 1992, following the continued efforts of NGOs and the media the Tamil Nadu Government acknowledged the prevalence of female infanticide and announced several schemes to "eradicate" it. These included

- ✓ The CBS which allows families to hand over unwanted female babies to the government.
- ✓ Legal action against perpetrators in infanticide, and
- ✓ The Girls Child Protection Scheme (GCPS) which provide financial incentives to families with only daughters.

The focus here is on the CBS which was first introduced in Salem district in 1992. Instead of resorting to female infanticide, parents who were unwilling to bring up their female babies could place them anonymously in cradles located in noon meal centers PHCs, selected orphanages and NGOs. Subsequent to their placement in cradles, babies were to be placed for adoption. Between 1992 and 1996, 140 babies were placed in government cradles.

This scheme had a short life because in the following elections there was a change of Government in May 1996 and thus it was shelved. Despite the low priority to scheme after 1996, babies continued to be abandoned by the parents and between 1993 and 2001 a total of 150 babies had been received by centers in and around Salem district

In May 2001, the CBS was reintroduced. The new version of the scheme was initially launched in five districts (Salem, Madurai, Teni, Dindigul and Dharmapuri) and was soon extended to the entire State of Tamil Nadu. The involvement of NGOs in scheme implementation and involvement of babies for adoption were also enhanced. Numerous cradle points were opened and frequent public announcements and advertisements in the press popularized in the districts notorious for practice of female infanticide. This scheme recorded a sharp increase in the number of babies that were surrendered in Salem and Dharmapuri.

In general the Government's intervention is essential to eradicate the evil practice of infanticide. The law can be enforced to prohibit the killing of female children. The birth control practices would help women in preventing unwanted birth. The media should play an important role in enhancing the status of women. Registration of marriages and births must be mandatory, Panchayats could be given responsibility for this which will help combat female foeticide, infanticide, child marriage and trafficking of minor girls. Thus the girl child is perhaps one of the most important section of the society.

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