GIRLS AS DISPOSABLE COMMODITIES IN INDIA

BARBARA HARRISS-WHITE

A novel by the Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf, *The First Century after Beatrice*, tells of the rumour of an Egyptian scarab whose powder has the property, when taken by men, of screening out females at conception. A drug with the same property is developed by a multinational corporation and marketed under the name and aura of the scarab. It starts to get around. But its impact is irreversible. Throughout what Maalouf calls the ‘South’ a generation overwhelmingly consisting of boys is produced. The result is unexpected and horrific: the proliferation of men deprived of full social identity, mass violence, terrifying insecurity for a minority of girls, a new kind of traffic in women, widespread physical reprisals against the ‘North’, a global descent into economic autarky. Not the answer to the population problem, the scarab instead catalyzes a demographic and economic disaster strewn with violence, beside which our own era of degenerate capitalism appears as a golden age.

In India real life has begun to mimic science fantasy. Females are being screened out as foetuses before birth, and as children afterwards. It is done through a violent but insidious process of gender cleansing that takes place in the bosom of the family, often with the complicity of women. While girls are very far from being as scarce as in Maalouf’s narrative, their current scarcity has started to produce anecdotal and symptomatic evidence of the kind of reactions described in the novel. India’s gender imbalance both reflects and feeds on kinship patterns, and on caste and class inequalities that are woven into the fabric of everyday social life.

This is graphically seen in sex ratios that track the relative number of females to males. Whereas the world average sex ratio was 990 in 1991, the number of females per thousand males of all ages in India was only 929 – which reflected a sharp decline over the course of the 20th century (down from 972 in 1901). While it recovered slightly to 933 in 2001, we have to factor into the rise in relative female status an increase in adult male deaths from tobacco, alcohol and sex-biased diseases like TB. By reducing the male
denominator, the relative gains to women are exaggerated.\footnote{1}

According to the 2001 census, however, the sex ratio \emph{at birth} was 892; by
the time of the interim Sample Registration Surveys of 2002–4 it had de-
teriorated to 882 – seven per cent under the world-wide ratio of 950.\footnote{2} World-
wide more boys than girls die in infancy so that the initial surplus of boys
tends to decline towards parity with increasing age in childhood. But from
the final decades of the last century, the sex ratio tracking the mortality of
Indian children under the age of six (the Child Sex Ratio, CSR) has started
to behave in alarming ways. While the overall ratio of females to males in
India’s population was slowly improving, among children it declined, and at
a faster rate. From 945 in 1991 it dropped to 927 in 2001.

The all-India average also conceals an epidemic of deterioration in the
northwest of the subcontinent, which has been spreading to the south; and
it is worst in urban areas, among upper castes and the rich.\footnote{3} It appears to
bear no relationship to the differing levels of human development achieved
in India’s states.\footnote{4} While the maximum deterioration is found in the states of
the northern poverty belt, the lowest CSRs are actually found in the most
economically developed states of the North West. By 2001, the CSR was
below 850 in Haryana (770 by 2004), below 800 in Punjab and 760 in the
most affluent metropolitan suburbs of south Delhi – only three girls for
evvery four boys. Even in the most egalitarian state, Kerala in the south, the
CSR fell over the last quarter century as it did even more seriously in Left
Front-ruled West Bengal.\footnote{5}

Girls in certain relatively advantaged castes and communities such as Jats,
Sikhs and Jains are thought to be most at risk. One field study of 6,500
households is reported to have discovered a low of 300 among upper caste
Hindus in the Fatehgarh Saheb district of Punjab in 2007 – just one girl for
every three boys.\footnote{6} In nearby Haryana the CSR was recently found to be 541
among the richest segment of the population; it was over 1000 among the
poor.\footnote{7} It is highest in mountainous and/or tribal regions. There you may
be indigent and ‘backward’ but if you are a girl child you have the highest
chances of staying alive in contemporary India. Even so, the more female
siblings you have, the higher your chances of death.

How are these girls and female foetuses killed? There are three kinds of
proximate mechanisms – culling in childhood, infanticide and sex-selective
abortion. For Malini Bhattacharya, member of India’s National Commission
for Women, ‘This is a demographic disaster… Women are so devalued that
their birth must be prevented’.\footnote{8}

Neglect is likely to be by far the major culler of girl children. Already by
the 1980s there was substantial evidence of lethal combinations of under-
nutrition and health neglect, broadly in parallel to the regional and socio-economic patterns of excess female mortality. Gender-biased health spending persists, and is significantly associated with the deaths of girl children.9

Infanticide is thought to be common in certain regions of India but restricted to certain castes. In the state of Tamil Nadu, for example, a central ‘spine’ of infanticide has been identified in districts characterised by rapid agrarian change and upwardly-mobile low castes.10 Female foeticide has long been known but until the last decade it was thought to be a costly luxury unaffordable by the rural masses.11 Knowledge of it was largely confined to small case studies and anecdotes until 2007 when the Lancet published the first conclusive evidence of a connection between amniocentesis, sex-selective abortion and the sex ratio, in a paper claiming that half a million girl foetuses were being destroyed in India each year.12

While certain social commentators refer to these deaths in terms such as ‘extreme and reprehensible violence’, the idea that these deaths are a form of violence, or murder, or a crime is always widely denied – even in a society attuned to phrases like ‘silent violence’ and ‘structural violence’ to describe routine oppression and exploitation.13 Culling by default through under-feeding and/or neglectful health care when faced with accidents at birth, or with upper respiratory tract infections or diarrhoeal disease, is certainly not regarded as a form of violence. Infanticide does not require active smothering, starving, drowning or herbal poisoning: it may be done passively by exposure at birth. Abortion is also rationalised as an indicator and instrument of female autonomy, and of a woman’s right to choose.

The idea that these deaths are a distinctive aspect of capitalist modernity is also widely rejected. That there is a long social, economic and political history to the sex ratio is undeniable. Alice Clark’s research on upper-caste reproductive behaviour in early 20th century Gujarat showed how the practice of hypergamy (marrying upwards in status terms) carried the consequence of eradicating the women of the highest-ranking castes. Land could be retained within a tight circle of kin while lower-caste bride-givers paid dowry for the privilege of connecting themselves upwards. Here it was assets that were being protected, rather than the specific logic of capitalism at work.

Equally, the longstanding debate about the relative roles of economic and cultural drivers of female disadvantage has been resolved in favour of culture. Satish Agnihotri has shown conclusively that the practice of paying a dowry (which makes girls a burden) and the kinship practice of village exogamy (which isolates brides) spread southwards from northern India in the last part of the 20th century and are not directly related to macro-economic indicators. My own work on small-town business elites in south India confirms
the significance of culture. It shows that there is no sense in which dowry could be said to be either punitive or a form of pre-mortem inheritance on a par with male legacies, yet the under-15 sex ratio was 784 in the mid-1990s. It is clearly, as Agnihotri has concluded, a result of the vicious cultural expression of female subordination and male supremacy, so much so that a woman researcher commented that ‘the criminals are within us’. It is not only men who are pressured to kill girls, it is even more women who have internalised their own patriarchal oppression so deeply that they perpetrate and condone these crimes in hegemonic complicity. A preference for sons long predates capitalism, a son being an essential insurance in old age, a legitimator in Hindu death rituals and the link between past and future generations. Son-preference may even be intensified by fertility decline and by the state’s more or less voluntary two-child policy, since the accident of two daughters is starting to be displaced by ‘crafted’ combinations involving at least one son. Last but not least, the violence expressed by the CSR is part of a rise in the pervasive violence against women which exceeds the fabled rates of growth of services. ‘This violence has always been there, it is being re-invented’ says Malini Bhattacharya.

Nevertheless, I wish to argue that the killing of girls in the 21st century does have a great deal to do with capitalist modernity and that the practice has been ‘re-invented’, at least in part to regulate and respond to the market economy. There are three aspects to the argument.

First, in the informed political imagination, it is from the reforms initiated in 1991, the year of the nadir of the aggregate sex ratio, that the deterioration of the CSR may be dated – and, for many, a cause-effect relationship may be established. But the argument goes both ways and is hotly debated. On the one hand, the political economist Jayathi Ghosh exemplifies those for whom it is a demographic response to poverty and vulnerability, exacerbated by state neglect. Her argument is nuanced: with liberalisation new barriers prevent access to public services; utilities are privatised and commodified; infrastructural investment is neglected; health, education and social services are starved of resources. Work in the wage-labour force is being replaced by even more insecure and disguised wage-work in petty commodity production, trade and services. Women enter domestic service on a large scale. Eighty per cent of wage workers earn less than Rs 20 ($0.50) per day. It is this insecurity, these poverty wages, and significant male-female differentials in wage rates, that are thought to trigger violence against those who are already vulnerable. Why rear a child who will earn lower wages and returns and also bring shame on your family if you cannot afford the costs of a conventional marriage for her?
By contrast other scholars date the era of liberalisation to a much earlier time, with no ‘kink point’ either in economic growth or in the evolution of the institutions which form the social structure of accumulation.\textsuperscript{21} For them, the key trigger for the new wave of violence against girl children is not so much the increases in insecurity, and the persistent gendered differentials in wage-rates, as the acquisition of property. In south India, for example, whereas increases in the incomes of landless agricultural labourers are not found to be associated with a deterioration in the CSR, for rural households with landed property there appears to be a clear inverse relationship between income levels and the CSR.\textsuperscript{22} India’s landholding structure is being progressively miniaturised: 95 per cent of rural households currently own under two hectares of land – and have expenditures exceeding income.\textsuperscript{23} Capitalist development in India is creating a huge space for debt-ridden petty production in the agricultural and the non-farm ‘informal economy’, and the acquisition of the smallest amount of property leads to the mass imitation of the male-biased inheritance practices that protect its transfer across the generations.

Second, the cultural politics of the dowry have a lot to answer for. Since the turn of the century recorded dowry deaths (murders of brides for lack of a full dowry) are running at 7-8,000 per year, and dowry suicides at 3-5,000.\textsuperscript{24} The dowry has been reworked to serve the interests of accumulation. Historically vested in the bride and composed of movables (notably jewellery), it formed a private security fund. It is now commonly vested in the groom’s family. In the business class it has for long been a carefully-calibrated component in the cross-generational transfer of assets. In the new middle classes, based in finance, trade, services and the professions, and defined through consumption, lifestyles are shaped by advertising and the media. Grooms can be ‘auctioned’ and brides turned into commodities; auspicious marriages (and pre-marriage ceremonies) are festivals of ostentatious consumption, and dowries take the form of money, property and consumer durables. What Shahid Pervez has called the ‘consumption-oriented reproductive journey’ is expressed in other one-sided exchanges through a woman’s life-time of reproductive rituals and is now fast being generalised among the rural masses where expenditure exceeds income.\textsuperscript{25} If the dowry is understood as a response to insecurity then it has rebounded adversely on the gender it began by favouring, and has increased the security of families that produce sons. When reproductive practices make daughters into such economic burdens, the threat of having to amass dowry is motive enough to dispose of ‘female commodities’.\textsuperscript{26}

Third, the process of culling has been medicalised and commodified. The
aborting of female foetuses – ‘death before birth’ – has started to become a field of accumulation in its own right. Referring to ultrasound scans in the era of liberalisation Malini Bhattacharya, the member of the National Commission for Women quoted above, admitted that ‘one has to allow freedom of choice to the service seeker and the freedom to sell by the service provider’ – together with the freedom to advertise openly in the print media. For the service seeker, an ultrasound scan is available for $8, equivalent to a week’s male wages. Foeticide may cost a family one to two months’ earnings, while dowry requires the mobilisation of several years’ income; for the service provider, the Wall Street Journal reports that since 2000 ultrasound technology sales have increased at about 10 per cent per year – in 2006 the sector turned over $77m. UNICEF estimates that the turnover of the foeticide industry ‘downstream’ of the ultrasound machines has now reached $244m.

The technology itself caters for a differentiated market: a machine can cost anything from $7,500 to $100,000. There are now some 30,000 registered clinics. How does this relate to general health-sector coverage? There are about 84 million married women in the reproductive age group, so there is one diagnostic clinic per 2,800 married women, while there is one general physician per 1,666 people. If each ultrasound clinic has just one qualified practitioner then in a population well in excess of a billion already roughly one in twenty doctors are making specialist profits from demand for foetal sex information. But in India’s huge informal economy, there is also an unknown number of unregistered clinics – increasingly based in small towns or operating as mobile services – profiting from the market in second-hand, refurbished or onward-sold new machines. In a study in Maharashtra in 2004 75 per cent of ultrasound centres were found to be neither owned nor managed by trained medical personnel. Elsewhere there is a widely-reported systematic transfer of responsibility: scans are under-enumerated; results are indecipherable on paper; records are manipulated or not kept at all. (In Hyderabad, in a rare audit in 2006, only 16 per cent had adequate details of patients).

General Electric took the lead in the new wave of foreign corporate investment able to enter India in the 1990s. It dominates a market of 15 companies in a joint venture with Wipro, the outsourcing company, taking advantage of the latter’s distribution and service network and linking up (‘partnered’) with local banks to aid instalment purchases. The oligopoly includes Siemens AG, Philips Electronics NV, Mindray International Medical Ltd (from China) and Erbis Engineering, an agent for Japan’s Toshiba. The companies are unable to prevent the unlawful use of the ultrasound
machines they sell. As a result, amniocentesis has been described by the senior Indian Administrative Service official and scholar of the sex ratio, Satish Agnihotri, as a ‘weapon of mass destruction’ – misused even in some government health facilities as well as in private ones. The proliferation of private commercially-run medical colleges has also facilitated the production of doctors available for commercial female foeticide. In a unique sting operation in 2007, 70 per cent of medically qualified owners of scanning facilities were found to be prepared to carry out sex-selective abortions as late as the seventh month of pregnancy.

This violence against girl children is in theory prohibited by law. In this sector as elsewhere India is festooned in progressive, regulative and protective law. But while the Pre Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act of 1994, made more stringent in 2003, restricts prenatal scanning to the detection of foetal genetic abnormalities, in the real world just being female counts as a genetic abnormality. And the Prohibition of Dowry Act of 1962/5 is honoured in the breach. In 2005 the Hindu inheritance laws were reformed to enable women to inherit, on the argument that the right to property empowers women. But in practice this is thought to increase the fear in joint families that their land will pass on inheritance to their girl children at a stage when the latter are married ‘out’ of the family (and sometimes out of the locality) and into rival families who will then assume control. In April 2008, the Indian Prime Minister called for a ‘clamp down’. But lack of legal literacy, lack of access to justice (implicating the police and the judiciary), surprisingly low conviction rates, and lack of sufficiently deterrent penalties means that the law is hardly ever enforced. At its best the law serves as a goal for aspirations, at its worst a discursive mask for a nexus of criminal interests and ‘passivists’.

What is being done? Nation-wide state-led campaigns for the adoption of girls have clearly failed. Certain states, Tamil Nadu for instance, have offered incentives to mothers of girl children – though these incentives have been criticised as inadequate even for the routine expenses of pregnancy. Midwives are paid for childbirth but these payments are thought to be ten times less than the rate for midwives assisting infanticide. In the parts of society that demand infanticide there will be relatively large financial incentives for midwives’ complicity. Area-based projects in high-risk areas have had patchy success. One of them brought the local female infanticide rate down by 90 per cent during the 1990s through a set of stages: first crèches for working women, next a mother-and-child welfare project, and finally monitoring and counselling women at high risk. But responses that are focussed on targets perceived to be at ‘high risk’ – whether regions or couples
– miss the routine culling that takes place by neglect.

The National Commission on Women monitors legal and constitutional protection but it too neglects the culling of girl children, focusing instead on rape and sexual assault. The Commission’s draft bill on these kinds of violence lies un-presented to Parliament and un-incorporated into the 11th Plan. The Commission’s amendments to the Acts outlawing trafficking are also ‘lying with’ a Government that has shown much more energy in easing the regulations for export, finance and services than improving the conditions for labour, let alone enforcing existing law.

Concerned academics and investigative journalists have played an important progressive role in researching, explaining and publicising the dynamics of this violence. A huge number of NGOs have lately mobilised public awareness of the issue in ways that are often idiosyncratic and hinder the formation of a coherent movement. Oxfam has organised a coalition of 400 of them under the slogan ‘We Can’, and an India-wide network has brought together 3,000 more under the acronym FORCES.

They have work to do. First all culling – including neglectful, ‘benign’ practices as well as the deliberate acts – have to be recognised as violent. Second this violence must be ‘denaturalised’, which is a sensitive issue for women, linked as it must be to a larger fight against religious obscurantism. It faces opposition even from elements within the medical profession (where it is also depoliticised, as a ‘public health problem’), and despite publicity it has hardly registered in the media, where ridicule and shame are recognised tropes in other progressive causes. Third, this practice, and the larger issue of violence against women, has to enter national politics.

Currently the complex of problems of violence against women is neglected by all major political parties: the low status of women is an intrinsic part of India’s party politics. ‘When there are debates in Parliament on the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act or even the Domestic Violence Act, the presence of parliamentarians is minimal’ commented Malini Bhattacharya of the National Commission on Women. Invisibly low on all these agendas are debates over the status of women as sellers of their labour: on the issues of sex-neutral minimum wages, work rights and women’s control over their own incomes – not to mention the de-commodification of their work via income guarantees, pensions, social security, or the structures of violence in which all this takes place.

The killing of girls, violence against women and the growing markets for ultrasound and sex selective abortion are terrible indicators of capitalist development with Indian characteristics. While the domestic sphere and the process of biological reproduction have always been dangerous for women,
it is the desire for upward mobility in an era of renewed primary accumulation and rampant commodification, combined with the oppressive market for labour and the absence of decent state-mediated social security, that make the home and the womb such increasingly violent places.

NOTES


1 These gains are due to slow but steady improvements in the life expectation of girls who reach 5 years of age together with a deterioration in male mortality in adulthood.

2 Between Censuses, demographic information is collected from very large samples by the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO); for data for 2004 see Randeep Ramesh, ‘India to Crack Down on Doctors Aborting Girls’, The Guardian, 25 April 2008.

3 Urban areas have CSRs lower than the national average; rural areas of prosperous states have very low CSRs; but because of the generally better sex ratios in rural areas the overall sex ratio is higher is poorer states. See L. Visaria, ‘Improving the Child Sex Ratio: Role of Policy and Advocacy’, Economic and Political Weekly, 22 March 2008, pp. 34–37.

4 The Human Development Index, the standard indicator of well-being, normalises and summarises life expectancy, literacy, education, standard of living, and gross domestic (state) product per capita.


6 ‘Preference for Boys Further Skews India’s Sex Ratio’, Express India, 13 December 2007, reporting an ActionAid study. For other quantitative information in this paragraph, see Census of India, 2001; R. Bhagat, ‘Slaughter in the Womb’, The Hindu, 19 March 2007.

1995, pp. 2074-84.
11 For instance the density of sonography and of sex selective abortions in Maharashtra correlates closely with purchasing power and is concentrated in the rich sugar belt. R. Bhagat, ‘Slaughter in the Womb’.
14 Estimates of the business assets per son (net of the dowries paid out on daughters) have been compared with estimates of total dowries per daughter from key elite informants willing to divulge these sensitive details; B. Harriss-White, *India Working: Essays on Society and Economy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 128-30.

16 Bhagat, ‘Slaughter in the Womb’.


21 C. das Gupta, ‘State and Capital in Independent India: From Dirigisme to Neoliberalism’, PhD Thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, 2008, presents evidence of the period 1965–80 (that others have identified as one of industrial deceleration) as being rather one of institutional flux in which practices of early liberalisation and Indian FDI were being established at the same time as structures of dirigisme were being used and challenged.


The alliance between the upper caste, urban Hindu beneficiaries of capitalist modernity and right-wing cultural politics (not confined to the Hindu nationalist BJP but at work wherever Hindu political sentiment is courted) is associated historically with – and arguably also at work on – the Child Sex Ratio. The relationship involves the media – e.g. patriarchal soap operas – religious discourse, and cultural practices reinforcing the male-centric social order (see Vanaik, this volume).


P. Wonacott, ‘India’s Skewed Sex Ratio’.


UNICEF reports no convictions in 22 of the 33 states by 2006; and of the few doctors booked under the PNDT Act – 422 by 2007 – only 2 have been convicted and according to Ramesh (‘India to Crack Down’) by April 2008, one was back in business.

Cases have been registered against GE, Wipro and Erbis for knowingly selling to unregistered clinics, the penalty for which in 2008 was a fine of Rs 50,000 ($1,250 or £625) and 3 month’s jail. Ramesh, ‘India to Crack Down’.

Informal norms are at variance with, and much more powerful than, the law. Deviance from informal norms – a dowry-less marriage for instance – receives social punishment while the criminal breach of the law goes almost entirely unpunished by the state.

Ramesh, ‘India to Crack Down’.

While it may be invidious to identify individual examples, it is important to note the tireless efforts of the demographic sociologist Sabu George, in relating his field research to public interest litigation against
the misuse of reproductive technology; of demographer Leela Visaria, of economist Venkatesh Athreya and of civil servants and scholars Satish Agnihotri and Sheela Rani Chunkath (as above). See T.K. Rajalakshmi, ‘Sex Selection and Questions of Law’, *Frontline*, 17(21), 2000. *Frontline* and *Economic and Political Weekly* have played important roles in raising the awareness of elite intellectuals.

43 Visaria, ‘Improving the Child Sex Ratio’.

44 Quoted in Rajalakshmi, ‘Rethinking Violence’.