

THE KILLING OF EVE



Taranjeet Kaur was helped into her wedding finery (at left) as her mother, Rupinder Kaur, watched. Below, the parents of the bride, Amarjit Singh and Rupinder Kaur, collected envelopes of monetary gifts that would go to the groom's family as their daughter, Taranjeet Kaur, entered the reception hall on her wedding day.

Photographs by Mary F. Calvert/The Washington Times

INDIA

From page A1

"I decided this was the only rational response, given what was in store for many of them," she said.

More boys than girls

India is facing a shortage of women like Miss Kaur.

In most places in the world, a mother can find out the sex of her unborn child, but in India, it's illegal to do so. That is because if she's a female, there is a good chance she will never be born.

Roughly 6.7 million abortions occur yearly in India, but aborted girls outnumber boys by 500,000 — or 10 million over the past two decades — creating a huge imbalance between males and females in the world's largest democracy.

Ratios of men to women are being altered at an unprecedented rate in India and neighboring China, two countries which account for 40 percent of the world's population.

According to UNICEF, India produces 25 million babies a year. China produces 17 million. Together, these are one-third of the world's babies, so how their women choose to regulate births affects the globe.

Female infanticide — whereby tiny girls were either poisoned, buried alive or strangled — has existed for thousands of years in India. But its boy-to-girl ratio didn't begin to widen precipitously until the advent of the ultrasound, or sonogram, machine in the 1970s, enabling a woman to tell the sex of her child by the fourth month of her pregnancy.

That coupled with the legalization of abortion in 1971 made it possible to dispose of an unwanted girl without the neighbors even knowing the mother was pregnant. In 2001, 927 girls were born for every 1,000 boys, significantly below the natural birth rate of about 952 girls for every 1,000 boys.

In many regions, however, this imbalance has reached alarming levels and it continues to grow. In 2004, the New Delhi-based magazine Outlook reported, sex ratios in the capital had plummeted to 818 girls for every 1,000 boys, and in 2005 they had slipped to 814.

The issue is highly sensitive for the Indian government, which had given the nation's sex imbalance scant attention until this month.

"It is a matter of international and national shame for us that India, with [economic] growth of 9 percent still kills its daughters," Renuka Chowdhury, the

Cabinet-level minister of state for women and child development told the Press Trust of India news agency in an interview that was widely published in the national press.

Mrs. Chowdhury announced plans to set up a nationwide network of orphanages where women can drop off unwanted daughters with no questions asked.

"We will bring up the children. But don't kill them because there really is a crisis situation," she says.

Yet the practice of "female feticide" is so widespread and deeply ingrained in the nation's psyche, scholars and activists fear that even the most vigorous attempts to combat it would require a lifetime or longer to restore nature's balance.

"There has always been a deficit of women: Infanticide, neglect or they're left to die if they are sick, but technology has accentuated it," says Prem Chowdhry, a New Delhi-based scholar and specialist on male-female relations in India. "The volume has grown. Culturally, these things are not new, but now they're taking a new shape."

Early this year, the British medical journal Lancet estimated the male-female gap at 43 million. Worldwide, Lancet said, there are 100 million "missing girls" who should have been born but were not. Fifty million of them would have been Chinese and 43 million would have been Indian. The rest would have been born in Afghanistan, South Korea, Pakistan and Nepal.

China gave an even bleaker assessment last month, with the government saying that its men will outnumber women in the year 2020 by 300 million.

One Geneva-based research center, in a 2005 update on the phenomenon, termed it "the slaughter of Eve."

"What we're seeing now is genocide," says Sabu George, a New Delhi-based activist. "We will soon exceed China in losing 1 million girls a year."

The date may already be here. In a report released Dec. 12, UNICEF said India is "missing" 7,000 girls a day or 2.5 million a year.

Although India has passed laws forbidding sex-specific abortions, legions of compliant doctors and lax government officials involved in India's \$100 million sex-selection industry have made sure they are rarely enforced.

Several companies, notably General Electric Corp., have profited hugely from India's love affair with the ultrasound machine.

As a result, a new class of wifeless men are scouring eastern India, Bangladesh and Nepal for



"They are innocuous, but everyone knows what's inside."

Sikh radiologist

The city of Yamunanagar, population 300,000 located 130 miles north of New Delhi, is encircled by wheat and sugar cane fields, bisected by the Yamuna River and dotted with herds of black water buffalo.

The area north of New Delhi has the country's most severe shortages of girls. In Yamunanagar alone, there are 30 doctors who will illegally abort a female child at the request of the parents, says Dr. Tajinder P. Singh, 45, a local radiologist.

He refuses to tell pregnant women the sex of their offspring after their ultrasound tests in his office in a Yamunanagar strip mall. And he reports the names of those doctors who do to the government.

In response, doctors refuse to refer their patients to him, his family has been physically threatened, and he was thrown out of the local branch of the Indian Medical Association.

Asked how he copes, he says: "My family is small, my house is small, my daughters don't ask for much money."

In New Delhi, one of the city's top obstetricians, Dr. Puneet Bedi, has likewise been blackballed by his associates for his stance against "female feticide."

"I can work only as a visiting consultant and only work at small hospitals," he says sadly. "But that is the price you pay. Feticide is the tip of the iceberg on medical malpractice here."

"Feticide was invented, touted and sold by the medical profession, and it operates with the complete consent of all factors of society," he says.

What keeps him going? "Oh, nothing," he responds. "A lot of us are quite frustrated. I didn't choose to be an activist. But the amount of malpractice is so bad here — either you get involved in it or you get desensitized to it. I know a lot of good doctors who do not practice it, but they also do not speak against it."

"Of my 10 first cousins in Punjab, no one has had a daughter in 10 years," he says. "You hope someone else would be stupid enough to produce a girl but not you."



The Washington Times

available women. India, already a world leader in sex trafficking, is absorbing a new trade in girls kidnapped or sold from their homes and shipped across the country.

As sex-specific abortions increase, the destabilizing effects on Indian society are bound to greatly impact a country with expanding economic and strategic ties to the United States.

India's estimated \$23 billion defense budget relies on military hardware from U.S. corporations, and the U.S. Congress voted in November to permit the sale of nuclear technology to the country.

In September, The Washington Times sent a reporter and photographer to spend three weeks in different parts of India chronicling this problem. They asked: What are the cultural reasons for this genocide? Why is the government allowing it? Who is fighting against it and what steps can be taken to stop it?

Dowry deaths

Sister Mary Scaria was one of two girls in a family of nine children.

Dressed in an aqua-colored sari of the Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary, the nun is also a lawyer and coordinator of the Delhi Catholic Archdiocese's Justice & Peace Commission. In early 2006, she published "Woman: An Endangered Species?" which charged that "female feticide" is decimating half of the population.

She chiefly blames the dowry system, a Hindu marriage practice by which the groom's family demands enormous sums of money and goods from the bride's family as a condition for letting their son marry her.

"At a wedding, everyone looks to see how many bracelets the bride has and how much gold she has," the nun says. Dowries typ-

ically consist of gold and appliances, as well as substantial amounts of cash. Defenders of the system say that girls are often denied an inheritance in India; thus, what she gets at her wedding is in effect a savings account she can retain for the rest of her life.

What actually happens is the groom's family pockets the dowry, the nun explains, and the payments don't stop there.

"When a wife has a baby in India, the wife's family has to pay for the hospital stay," Sister Mary says. "After the birth, they also have to bring gold and food for the new family, even new saris for all the relatives."

Some Indian castes even require that the bride's family pay her funeral expenses when she dies. Worse yet, the groom's family will often kill the bride in what's known as a "dowry death" if they think the dowry is too small.

Many families therefore elect to not have a girl at all. Medical clinics — which Sister Mary calls "womb raiders" — have advertised "better 500 rupees now [for an abortion] rather than 50,000 rupees later" [for a dowry]. The first amount is about \$11; the second is \$1,100.

Dowries are theoretically banned under the 1961 Dowry Prohibition Act, but enforcement is poor and other religious groups such as Muslims and Christians have been caught up in the custom.

Sister Mary says that if she were to get married, her Catholic family would have to pay up.

A Sept. 29 article in the Times of India front-paged its account of a Muslim family in New Delhi that dumped a new daughter-in-law within 24 hours after the wedding because the dowry was not big enough.

The groom said he wanted about \$4,400 more "as well as a Pulsar [motor] bike," the bride told the newspaper.

Caste causes

It's a sultry evening and Ms. Chowdhry, dressed in an olive green salwar kameez, orange pants and gold bracelets, is reflecting on why the life of an Indian woman can be so miserable. "First," says the New Delhi-based scholar, "girls can get killed for a number of reasons, including anything that brings dishonor. A girl can be killed before she is born. If she survives, she is forcibly married. If there's not enough dowry, she is killed."

She cites the Indian state of Haryana, just north of New Delhi, which has the country's second highest per capita income. It also has India's second worst sex ratio, after Punjab state to the west. For every 1,000 boys born in Haryana, just 820 girls were born, according to the 2001 census. In 1991, it was 879 girls.

Punjab is similarly wealthy; thus, instead of the poor killing their children, it's the rich, says Ms. Chowdhry, a former senior fellow at the Nehru Memorial Institute and Library.

"Punjab and Haryana are the two highest per capita income states, but they have such regressive trends," she says. "How can they call themselves modern?"

India's caste system "is very basic to violence against women," she says. It is based on Hinduism, which teaches one's behavior in this life determines which caste one will be born into for the next life. Individuals are expected to marry within their caste.

Thus, the shortage of girls is a "huge problem" to men in Haryana and Punjab who wish to observe caste practices.

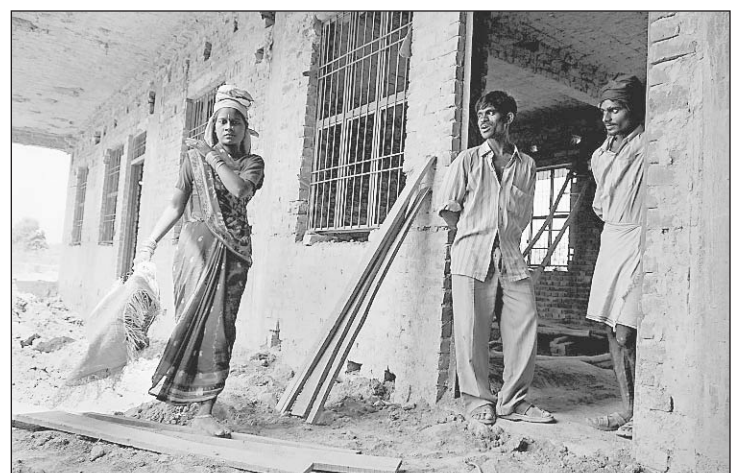
"In Haryana, 36 percent of the men between 15-45 are unmarried," she says. "In one district, it's 40 percent. Men who do not get married get more vicious."

Richer men will be able to get themselves wives; what's troubling to Ms. Chowdhry are the poorer men who are importing brides from India's poor eastern regions.

"These women are extensively sexually exploited," she says. "They do all the housework, manual and field work. Some of these women, once they are used by a man, they are passed on to another."

Pregnant women wishing to avoid having daughters who might suffer such a fate are desperate to find doctors who will tell them the sex of their children.

"Mobile vans have advertisements on them that a doctor is available," Ms. Chowdhry says.



Men at a construction site taunted a Dalit (untouchable) woman as she passed outside Lucknow, India. India's caste system is "very basic to violence against women," said Prem Chowdhry, a scholar and specialist on male-female relations in India.

THE KILLING OF EVE
India's abortion crisis

Part 1: Missing girls: An estimated 10 million female fetuses have been aborted in the past two decades in a nation where sons are prized and daughters scorned.

Part 2: Hostage to dowries: Determining sex before birth—and aborting the fetus if it a girl—is a cheap alternative to raising a daughter.

Part 3: Compliant doctors: It is illegal for physicians to tell parents the sex of a child before birth. But laws to protect female fetuses are rarely enforced.

Part 4: Corporate culpability: General Electric Corp. profits handsomely by selling ultrasound machines in India.