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Past, Present, and Future: Analyzing the Relationship Between Indian Women and Cultural Traditions

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Past, Present, and Future: Analyzing the Relationship Between Indian Women and Cultural Traditions

It is no surprise that with a population of 1.2 billion, India is a nation comprised of diversity. However, as seems to be the case with most of the world's nations, this diversity is not always inclusive in nature. Rather, many Indian women – arguably one of the country's largest minority groups – are facing a multitude of plights as a result of cultural traditions. Cultural aspects such as religion influence societal norms, thus impacting how many women live and are treated. This treatment can translate into gender-based violence, affecting many women's power and positions within society. I want to be clear and highlight the fact that I am not an expert in Indian women's studies, although I think my research and lived experiences (albeit not extremely long in length) can serve to add much to the overall academic conversation. I understand that discussing different cultures can be difficult to navigate. Furthermore, I realize the importance of balancing ethnocentrism and cultural relativism; we must not judge other societies based on our own perspectives, but also must be careful of chalking up all situations as an excuse of cultural practices. This essay is my attempt at walking this fine (yet sometimes blurry) line. I aim to define gender based violence and its specific forms, discuss the contextual foundation upon which these issues have grown, and evaluate current attempts to resolve such affairs.

Defining the Issue: Sex-Selective Abortion

The term “gender based violence” encompasses many facets, such as domestic violence, verbal harassment, assault, and murder. Because the topic is so wide, I will be focusing on the

issue of gender based violence as it relates to sex-selective abortions. Sex selection – the attempt of dictating an offspring’s sex – has much darker implications than its alias “family planning” would have one believe.

In patriarchal cultures where the male sex is preferred over the female, sex selection technologies have opened the doors to utilizing abortion as a weapon against women. One nation-wide study conducted on married Indian women concluded that “83 per cent [sic] of every married woman in the age group 15-49 with two sons and 76 per cent [sic] with one son said they did not want any more children. On the other hand significantly fewer women, 47 per cent [sic], with two daughters said they did not want more children” (Mallik, 6). Based on these results, it can be surmised that women with sons were more content with their children, and thus did not want additional offspring, whereas women with only daughters were not content and were more likely to want more children (i.e. sons). In order to lessen the burden of bearing more children – be it financial, time, energy, etc. – many Indian women are now turning to sex selection technologies.

Although gender based violence does intersect with class and caste, it is important to note that normative pressures can force sex selection abortion upon anyone, regardless of their social standing. According to a study conducted by the Forum Against Sex Determination and Sex Pre-Selection (FASDSP), “about 74 per cent [sic] of the doctors said that over half of the women who came for tests were middle class, and more than 85 per cent [sic] of the doctors said that they had tested no lower class women, although the areas selected for the study had a substantial lower class representation” (FASDSP, 5). These statistics do not convey that women in lower classes do not take part in sex selection abortions. Rather, these statistics highlight the taboo associated with abortions; it is possible that lower class women are not receiving as much

certified medical care because they seek out alternative, less stigmatized forms of treatment.

Sex selection abortions and the controversy they carry are compounded by the fact that abortion as a medical procedure continues to be classified as taboo in many parts of India. As a result, many women seek help from unqualified “medical professionals” in an attempt keep out of the view of prying eyes. Such treatments often wreak havoc on women’s bodies; according to an NPR report, “an estimated two-thirds of abortions performed are unsafe, done illegally at home or by quacks and midwives, and the annual death toll is about 4,600. Many women end up with life-long health problems. And women in rural India are disproportionately affected” (Chatterjee, “Abortion in India...”). Because of the stigma that surrounds abortion, as well as a lack of necessity, facts about abortions are not properly conveyed to the public. As a result, women are dying. Even when women do trek to hospitals and clinics to receive an abortion, factors such as whether or not a doctor is properly trained, the cleanliness of facilities, and the availability of services (particularly in rural areas) are usually dismal at best. For example, in Uttar Pradesh, only 43 of the 171 public health clinics (PHCs) registered to provide abortion are actually providing abortion services – either because of a lack of required equipment, or a lack of trained doctors (Barge, 8). This disconnect between policy, practice, and people is deadly.

To better understand how abortion conditions compound the issue of sex selective abortions, Dr. Sandhya Barge, in conjunction with colleagues M.E. Khan and Nayan Kumar, conducted a study titled “Availability and Access to Abortion Services in India: Myth and Realities.” This study looked at the issues surrounding abortion holistically, taking into consideration factors such as history, legalities, supply/demand, quality (of providers and facilities), counseling services, and government initiatives. What I found to be most shocking was the lack of knowledge surrounding abortions; knowledge concerning abortion in

communities is a factor widely neglected in studies, yet is one that reveals startling information:

In Indian cultural context sexuality, reproduction, abortion, sexual health, etc. are sensitive issues and are not discussed openly. Abortion is all the more sensitive subject, as still it is widely believed that abortion is a sin and even today only a small proportion of the community members are aware that the government legally approves abortion ... 31 per cent [sic] women in Tamil Nadu and 75 per cent [sic] in Uttar Pradesh and Haryana believed that abortion is illegal ... in Bihar ... only 28 per cent [sic] of people were aware that abortion is legal. (Barge et al, 14)

These statistics are deeply startling, as they reveal the enormous disconnect between written law and reality for so many of India's inhabitants. Abortion has been legal in India since 1971, but because many people remain unaware of this fact, they avoid hospitals and clinics for the procedure in fear of repercussion. Dr. Barge believes that this disconnect between people and policy, as well as India's substandard abortion conditions, are all issues that stem from government apathy: "increasing accessibility of abortion services was not an important issue and hence at the time of allocation of resources it [abortion services] always received the least priority" (Barge, 10). Recall the NPR statistic concerning botched in-home abortions and the vast number of deaths they result in each year. Government apathy solves nothing; facts about the legalities of abortions are not properly conveyed to the public, and as a result, women are dying.

In order to understand sex selection to its fullest extent, it is imperative that one realizes the cultural and traditional factors that shape society and its norms. Thus, the next two sections of this essay will explore the historic roots of sex selective abortion and gender based violence within India; using these factors, I will then evaluate current practices, policies, and solutions.

Cultural Contexts for Sex Selective Abortions in India

In order to fully grasp a concept or issue, one must research the contexts surrounding the

matter before ever attempting to make any form of judgment or analysis. Taking an intersectional approach – thus taking cultural contexts into consideration – will add an entirely new dimension to the topic, as connections are drawn between seemingly unrelated subjects (e.g. economic status, religion, societal traditions, etc.). According to the 2011 census, there is currently a 940 female to every 1,000 male sex ratio in India. This preference for sons did not occur overnight; in India, as with many other parts of the world, there lives a historical preference for having sons over daughters (“Sex Ratio.”).

Nation-wide research has been conducted by numerous scientists, and from their results, a trend of three cultural reasons for preferring sons over daughters has emerged. In her essay, “Negative Choice: Sex Determination and Sex Selective Abortion in India,” feminist author Rupsa Mallik discusses the cultural beliefs that surround sex selection. Mallik has found that the primary reason lives within the socioeconomic realm; “sons it is believed are more likely than daughters to provide family labor on the farm or in a family business, earn wages and support their parents during old age. In addition, they can attract a substantial dowry” (Mallik, 3). Sons are believed to be more monetarily beneficial to a family than daughters, and thus women are pressured (both verbally and physically) into bearing sons. Najibul Hasan Khan affirms this conclusion through an article titled “Female Feticide and Infanticide in India: A Challenge to Human Rights” in the Indian Journal of Politics. Khan states that “a man is expected to work and earn for his family in the process repaying all that was cost to bring him up. A woman is considered a financial obligation, as money spent on bringing her up, educating her, marrying her will not be repaid as she will go to her husband’s house after marriage, and the benefits of all that ‘investment’ shall go to his family” (Khan, 196). Mallik describes the second and third guiding factors to be “their [the sons’] socio-cultural utility as patrilineal descent and inheritance

continues to be the predominant form of kinship bonding” in combination with religion, “where sons have been accorded the unique privilege of performing various rituals and functions including the funeral rites for deceased parents” (Mallik, 3). Sons are favored because of the gender roles they have been assigned to for centuries. In the case of sex selection, economics, religion, and tradition are all intertwined.

Perhaps the greatest cultural context that stigmatizes birthing female children is the dowry system. Many families often anguish over birthing daughters, for the prospect of having to give away such a huge sum of resources in the form of a dowry can seem impossible. According to Khan, “Dowry is the money, goods or property a woman brings into marriage typically given to the groom’s family by the bride’s family (Khan, 197). Dowry was fundamentally used as a financial basis for starting a family, but is often wielded as a tool by the bride’s family to solicit financial gain. The fact that dowry is still a factor in sex selective abortions may be puzzling to some, as dowry has been illegal in India since 1961 (Ramakrishnan, “The Dowry System...”). Varsha Ramakrishnan, a student fellow at the Pulitzer Center, believes that the outlawing of dowry is extremely difficult to enforce, in part because of its deep entrenchment within India’s colonial history:

In India, it [dowry] has its roots in ... times when a gift in cash or kind was given to a bride by her family to maintain her independence after marriage. During the colonial period, it became the only legal way to get married, with the British making the practice of dowry mandatory. The trend in present India, with its booming economy, is now encouraging ever-higher bride prices among all socioeconomic strata. (Ramakrishnan, “The Dowry System...”).

For many brides’ families, this “gift” of a dowry is beyond imaginable, as some grooms’ parents insist upon receiving enormous sums of money, as well as items such as cars and property (Khan, 197). Khan goes on to state that dowries are such a prevalent worry that many clinics perform under-the-radar sex selective ultrasounds, with one clinic advertising “using the slogan,

‘500 now, or 5,00,000 [sic] later’ – the former indicating the price of an abortion, and the latter that of the dowry” (Khan, 197). For some parents, societal norms, in combination with economic pressures, can paint sex selective abortion as if it were their only option.

Ending the Stigma

Throughout the past century, Indian women have found their agency by utilizing various platforms. Radhika Govinda, author of the research project “‘*Didi*, are you Hindu?’ Politics of Secularism in Women’s Activism in India: Case-study of a Grassroots Women’s Organization in Rural Uttar Pradesh,” stresses the importance of a woman’s voice being heard through whichever means necessary. These platforms include published literature, independent activists, party-affiliated organizations, autonomous groups, non-governmental organizations, research, and government initiatives. Govinda professes, “it [the women’s movement] is perhaps the only movement in the country that engages with issues as varied as violence against women, social discrimination, economic self-dependence, environment protection, political representation, and globalization” (Govinda, 614). To advocate for some women is to advocate for all women, thus highlighting the importance of intersectionalism within feminism and women’s movements.

The 1920s and 1930s in India were times of change, as British colonial rule was slowly being transferred over to Indian rule. Feminists from both nations were unhappy with the treatment of Indian women, and felt they needed to give voice to the oppressed. As a result, the publication *Stri Dharma* – meaning “The Sphere of Woman” – was born. This magazine was in circulation from 1918-1936, co-authored by both British and Indian writers. The writers strove to bring people together under “universal principles of gender solidarity and international cooperation ... unifying all women, regardless of class, race, or creed,” stating that they were

“sisters in a great family, bound together by mutual desire to help each other, and to do something for the welfare of humanity” (Tusan, 625). The writers made sure to encompass all possible readers, even going so far as to translate their publications into indigenous languages. By doing so, it was ensured that all readers had a space in the feminist conversation.

Literature is still used as one form of empowerment today. Feminist author K. Saraswati Amma is known for writing powerful short stories, designed to remind readers of “the double standards ... [of] women who carry the burden of morality in an immoral world” (Devika, Thampi, 7). Amma’s works bring to mind the Gandhian ideology of equality and the value of femininity, thus paving a way for women’s entry into male-dominated spaces (e.g. labor and political spheres). Researcher Ketu Katrak concurs with this statement, believing that the struggle between creating a lasting culture shift in India vs. helping women solely through forms of social work is a difficult task (Katrak, 200). Katrak draws upon the words of poet and activist Purvi Shah to drive home her point:

The idea that the home is private, its affairs governed by culture, makes it possible to justify male superiority and domestic violence— [as though] they are simply the result of ‘tradition’, ‘heritage’, and culture. The separation of politics from culture is similarly used to silence activist messages, by barring progressive groups from participating in community events and constructing a sanitized version of culture that suits elite interests and power. (Katrak, 200)

In response to claims such as this, many programs have sprung up as a way to empower women – thus sanctioning their choice of whether or not to participate in sex selective abortions. One such program is the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA). The SEWA is a trade union NGO (affiliated with almost two dozen “sister organizations and cooperatives”) that offers many training sessions, each designed to facilitate women’s joining of the workforce, as well as gain access to income, food, and social security (Bali, 164). Each of these factors lends itself towards

the goal of women's autonomy. Ultimately, this autonomy gives women the choice of whether or not to have an abortion based on their own volition, rather than succumb to societal pressures.

Specifically, though, sex selection and abortion are both complex issues, and cannot be solved with any one simple answer. The key to limiting, and ultimately ending, violence against women through sex selection is that action must be taken. I agree with Mallik when she affirms, "sex selective abortion is not the result of an unintended or unwanted pregnancy. It is a gendered preference for a certain type of pregnancy that guides the decision to undergo sex selective abortion" (Mallik, 19). For this reason, I am in favor of the various sex selection bans that have been implemented throughout India's recent history. Such laws include the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act (1971, amended in 2002), and the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act (1994); "the former Act prohibits abortion except only in certain qualified situations, while the latter prohibits the sex selection of a fetus with a view towards aborting it" (Nehra). It goes without saying that there are some cases where sex-revealing technologies must be used, such as in cases of possible harm to the fetus or mother. However, I believe that in these cases, doctors should be instructed to not reveal the fetus's sex.

Along with a revamp of all services currently provided, I believe that both citizens and doctors need to be better educated about sex selection and abortion. I believe that all people have the right to knowledge and information that will keep them safe and healthy, such as the legalities of abortion, the true dangers of sex selection (as a tool for violence against women), and post-abortion services (healthcare routines, counseling, etc.) that will ensure their health remains the best it can be. I believe that the cultural foundations upon which sex selection abortions have risen should be closely examined, and that education needs to be conducted with this information in mind. I do not argue for the dismantling of India's culture; I think that would

be ethnocentric and inhumane. However, I do think that at some point, people across the globe all deserve basic human rights – including the right to choose whether or not a woman would like to have an abortion, without pressures from society influencing her decision.

While education will ultimately be the driving force against abortions rooted in sex selection, I believe that additional tools must be implemented in order to make immediate progress within society. One such tool could be the widespread implementation of “baby hatches.” A United Nations Population Fund report has found that:

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 centres, PHCs, selected orphanages and NGOs. Subsequent to their placement in cradles, babies were to be placed for adoption. Since the program's inception in 1992 in selected districts, some 390 boys and 2400 girls have been safely left, according to the Tamil Nadu government's directorate of social welfare. (Mohanty, “Trash Bin Babies...”)

While solutions such as baby hatches would not completely solve the issue of female infanticide and sex selection abortions, I believe that tools such as these are steps in the right direction.

With the widespread introduction of baby hatches, perhaps parents would not feel the need to abort their female child, and would instead put her up for adoption. In order for this campaign to be successful, however, baby hatches must be readily available in both urban and rural areas, must be cloaked in anonymity, and must be a safe and healthy environment for a baby. Parents must be made well aware of baby hatches, their uses, and their locations. Otherwise, baby hatches risk failing their audiences in similar ways that the government has failed to inform its citizens on abortions.

Ultimately, sex selection and abortion are two issues that, despite the light recently shed on them in the media, remain all too prevalent. I believe that proper education on the cultural causes can contribute greatly to the eventual ending of this practice. In order to be more

successful, I think it is vital that the Indian government funds such educational programs and training programs (such as SEWA) to facilitate women's self-sufficiency. Furthermore, with the implementation of tangible tools such as baby hatches, sex selection abortions can be greatly diminished in an immediate timeframe. Abortion can be made safer through the proper relaying of information, training of doctors, and support of government offices. Once everyone is all on the same page, I believe that we truly can make a positive impact on sex selection abortions, as well as abortion conditions in India.

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