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# **Missing women and brides from faraway: Social consequences of the skewed sex ratio in India**

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## ***Missing women in India and China***

The economist Amartya Sen brought international attention to the problem of 'missing women' by calculating that there were 100 million women less in the world (Sen:1990). These missing women turned out to be primarily from large Asian countries such as India and China and some smaller countries such as South Korea and Taiwan. The world was shocked by this unnatural deficit and scholars began to initiate research into how we could have arrived at this state of affairs. At around the same time, media began to focus on the spread of sex determination technologies which allowed people to retain male and abort female foetuses. Reports also began to trickle in of the excess of bachelors in several of these countries. In China, the bride shortage was reported to have led to cross-border marriages, abduction of women and even a return to a traditional system in which families would adopt infant girls to raise them as future brides for their sons (DasGupta and Li Shuzhuo: 1999). In India, there were evidence of a return to fraternal polyandry and import of wives from other cultural regions within the country (Kaur: 2004).

In the first part of the paper, I discuss reasons for adverse sex ratios in these countries and in the second part its implications for marriage. While the paper deals primarily with India, a few comments are made regarding China in the first section. Social scientists, demographers and gender specialists began to worry about this deficit in the female population for several reasons. First, adverse sex ratios are a manifest indicator of an increase rather than a decline in gender inequality. Second, even more worrisome, why and how was it that women and girls were disappearing

in the population as these countries progressed economically? India, China, South Korea and Taiwan, have all shown spectacular economic gains in recent decades. As more women got educated, joined the workforce, the expectation was that traditional gender inequalities would lessen. With the rising age at marriage and lowered fertility women would be able to participate in the public domain on an equal footing. There would be improvements in their hitherto lower status. The declining female sex ratios point to the contrary – to specific forms of discrimination which have emerged or got strengthened even as women make some progress in a number of domains.

According to demographers, China developed highly masculine sex ratios as a result of its aggressive one-child policy (the present sex ratio in China being 856 girls to a 1000 boys). India, the other large contributor showed a secular decline in its sex ratio over the past century with a slight improvement appearing in the latest census conducted in 2001 (from 927 in 1991 to 933 in 2001). Traditionally and even up to the present, despite differing religions, India and China have been large patriarchal peasant societies with a culture and tradition of ‘son-preference’. The patrilineal social structure in both societies supported inheritance primarily for men; in return men were responsible for supporting parents in old age. Women moved away at marriage from their natal to their conjugal homes (patrivirilocality), generally residing with in-laws. Parents were thus deprived of any further advantage from them. Men also had religious duties towards parents during death rites, considered especially important in India. The social structure and culture thus inter-twined to make sons highly valued while daughters were correspondingly devalued. Although China practises bride-price as marriage payment and India dowry (an additional reason for viewing daughters as burdensome), sex ratios in both countries show a devaluation of women’s contributions.

### ***Modern sex-determination technologies and female deficits***

A recent paper in the Lancet (Jha et al: 2006) concluded that the decline in girl children in India could largely be attributed to sex selective abortions and that in the last two decades ten million female foetuses had been aborted in India. In both China and India, the introduction of NRTs (new reproductive technologies) has aided the sharp decline in juvenile sex ratios. China introduced ultrasound testing of pregnancies as part of enforcing its one-child policy. In India, from the late 1970s onwards, various methods of sex determination gained ground. Beginning with amniocentesis and chorion villous sampling (CVS), what slowly gained in popularity

was ultrasonography which allowed the detection of the sex of the child without an invasive procedure (Croll: 2000, Patel: 2007). Ultrasounds, although reliable only after the first trimester of the pregnancy, were cheap and easily available. In India especially, unscrupulous medical practitioners, radiologists and gynaecologists cashed into Indian couples' desire to have sons by providing ultrasound testing even in remote villages by making testing facilities available in small towns and through mobile ultrasound units.

Modern sex-determination technology has largely supplanted traditional means of daughter elimination such as female infanticide. India has been known to have several regions where female infanticide was practiced (Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and certain pockets of Tamil Nadu such as Salem and Dharmapuri) historically. While the practice is minimal now, deliberate neglect of girl children continues to add to their attrition. Deprivation of nutrition and health care leads to higher rates of girl child mortality while maternal mortality as a cause of death still remains high in several adverse sex ratio areas.

#### ***'Family planning' and 'Planning the family'***

The new technology of ultrasound has made it easier for couples to plan families with the sex composition of their choice. In India, the two child norm encouraged by the Government of India as its official policy for 'population stabilization' has led to a substantial decline in fertility across the country. However in the North West of India, this policy has worked against the girl child. As family size declined, North Indian couples chose to retain their preference for boys, eliminating girl children before birth through the use of ultrasound technology. In fact, during the early period of introduction of sex determination technologies doctors recommended this as a means of reducing India's burgeoning population. So little were they aware of the ethical dimensions and of a future in which ruthless elimination of female foetuses would become the common scenario. Recent feminist critiques of national family planning policies have argued that these were designed and implemented without any thought towards gender equality or taking into consideration existing societal structures which privileged men over women, boys over girls.

The use of technological methods of sex determination and daughter elimination has allowed society to deploy the rhetoric of 'choice' in planning family size and composition. Accordingly, it is 'modern' to have small families and even better to be able to choose the sex of the offspring. In this way, families would not have to subject

themselves to excessive unwanted fertility in the search for sons or subject themselves to the guilt of infanticide. Statistical data shows that the higher the educational level of the mother, more prone she is to using sex determination and eliminating unwanted girl children in order to have the size and sex composition that the family wishes to achieve (DasGupta: 1987, Guilmoto: 2007).

### ***Development, prosperity and adverse sex ratios***

Demographers and sociologists (Agnihotri: 2000, Bose: 2001, Kaur: 2007) have pointed to the negative correlation between higher levels of development, prosperity and balanced sex ratios. Thus in India, the prosperous states of Punjab, Haryana, Maharashtra and Gujarat and rich cities like Chandigarh and Delhi show the worst sex ratios. These areas have high per capita incomes, fairly high levels of literacy and greater access to health facilities. It is thus a conundrum as to why conventional economic development is not translating into human or social development and why in such areas there is harsher discrimination against girl children. This is revealed in the shocking decline in child sex ratios – the ratio dropped by 82 points in Punjab and by 59 points in Haryana (Bose: 2001). Prosperity should ideally translate into non-discrimination especially when there are fewer children. However, this has palpably not turned out to be case in North India.

Scholars have attempted to explain the further decline of child sex ratios in prosperous areas in terms of access to education, information and technology in the context of the transition to a small family size. These factors may provide the mechanism of the decline but do not explain why girls are considered burdensome when people are rich and girls themselves are more literate and capable of financial independence. How and why then is son-preference getting reinforced? The explanation may lie in the intersection of political economy with the institutions of family and marriage. The narrowing of the gender gap between men and women is being achieved within social structural conditions which leave gender relations unequal and unchanged and existing political economic conditions often strengthen these. Property and inheritance relations while legally more gender-equal now continue to be practised within a patrilineal ideology. The growing flexibility in gender roles is yet to be reflected in change in societal perceptions which continue to construct men as the ideal bread-winner and women as eventual contributors only to their in-laws' families. Increasing land fragmentation and slow growth of employment opportunities for educated males makes families perceive economic conditions as being especially insecure for males who continue to be perceived as the main bread-

winners and status-carriers for the family. Hence, families feel a pressing need to invest in the success of sons, especially in the absence of social security systems for parents.

In keeping with the above, inter-generational entitlements of boys are considered to be an 'investment' while those of girls are considered to be 'expenditure' and a drain on family resources. The Indian daughter typically is considered to be a 'guest' in her own home until she is married and sent to her husband's home. Thus investment in her accrues to her husband's family as does the dowry essential for a culturally 'honourable' marriage. Also contributing to the perception of how entitlements in children of different sexes are viewed is evaluation of female and male worth in other spheres. Women's work, which is often unpaid, under-paid or home-based or paid in kind, is not given the same value as that of males. Hence the perception of the male as the true bread-winner continues. This justifies higher household allocations of food, nutrition and health entitlements in the boy than in the girl. The net result of higher valuation of the boy is that mothers who bear sons are glorified and attain a high status in society while those who bear only girls or are infertile are devalued. Women and girl children internalise this differential value and in turn devalue their own sex.

#### ***Social Consequences- Bride shortage and marriage migration***

As the number of girls in the society declines, several serious consequences are plainly in view. A foremost worry is that development gains and progress made by women such that they are no longer burdened with early marriage and high fertility and a narrowing of the gender gap in education etc. may be reversed in such a climate. The age at marriage for women may come down once again (we see evidence of a marginal decline in the state of Haryana, between 1991 and 2001). This will negatively impact their education and work force participation. Girls and women may be forced back into exclusively domestic roles and there might be greater sexual demands on them. Shortage of girls, instead of making them more valued can intensify violence against them as they become a 'scarce' commodity.

A very visible effect facing several states is the excess of bachelors and problems in finding brides. In Indian society where social adulthood arrives only with marriage, the prospect of non-marriage becomes a serious matter. In rural areas marriage is also necessary for making farming viable. Hence, the marriage squeeze against men (shortage of brides) is impacting society in various ways. In a society with both

positive and negative rules of marriage (caste endogamy, clan and village exogamy, hypergamy, marriage accompanied by dowry, an appropriate age gap between spouses, arranged marriage etc) are rigidly enforced, the marriage market becomes ‘tight’ making it even more difficult for men to find spouses.

As a consequence of the adverse female sex ratio, men in the states of Haryana and Punjab are experiencing a nearly twenty percent deficit of marriageable women. Thus, given current sex ratios, one in every five men would remain unmarried. This situation will worsen considerably in the future with the recent declines in child sex ratios. In Haryana, men who reach the age of thirty five and are still single are unable to find a local bride. Men who become widowers cannot marry again. Under these circumstances the society has developed a number of ‘coping’ mechanisms. These, as will be clearly realized in the discussion below are neither female nor family friendly.

In the North-West of India, parts of which have had more than a century of skewed sex ratios, men have long had to cope with female spousal shortages. Two solutions were common – involuntary bachelorhood or celibacy, and fraternal polyandry. Given small landholdings and shortage of brides, families practised what Bourdieu (1977) calls the “collective strategies of the group involved” as a result of which many men were forced to remain single. They survived as adjuncts to their married brother/s families. Often, they were accommodated not in the main dwelling but in the dwelling meant for the cattle (*haveli* in Punjab and *gher* in Haryana). The married brother who accommodated the bachelor usually hoped to inherit his share of the land.

### ***Surreptitious polyandry***

Polyandry, or rather ‘surreptitious’ or informal polyandry was the other modality of accommodating bachelors in the family. Generally, the eldest brother would marry with the understanding that the wife would be shared by the other brothers. This system is not akin to what Berreman (1975) describes for the lower Himalayas where a number of factors perpetuated what he calls ‘polygynyandry’. Pettigrew (1975) and Hershman (1981) have both discussed the prevalence of polyandry in Punjabi villages, especially among the Jat landowning agriculturists and the agricultural labourers, the Chamars. Both scholars point to the fact that while it existed due to a combination of shortage of girls and concerns over land fragmentation, it was not

readily admitted to. Jeffery and Jeffery (1997) draw a similar scenario for the Jats of Western Uttar Pradesh who suffer from similar spousal shortages.

Census estimates for the past century rarely showed any unmarried women in the North of India while a certain percentage of men always remained unmarried (DasGupta: 1995, Bhatt and Halli:1999). Given the scarcity of women, widows in landowning communities, were strictly ‘husbanded’ by being married in leviratic relationships to a younger brother of the dead husband or even to a married older brother. This was in stark contrast to ideal Hindu custom which prohibited widow remarriage. Prem Chowdhry (1994), while documenting the diversity of marriage arrangements in Haryanvi society, has argued that during the colonial period marriages that violated superior (or upper caste) social norms were increasingly discredited and both caste and marriage norms came to be rigidly enforced. While the tradition of widow remarriage remained intact, polyandrous relationships declined. Inter-caste marriage also declined during the colonial period and in present day Haryana couples in inter-caste marriages are severely punished, often to the point of death (Chowdhry: 2007). More recently, there is information that given severely constrained circumstances of bride-shortage families are again allowing the practice of polyandry.

### ***'Import' of cross-region brides***

With few local brides at hand, men who are at risk of remaining unmarried are practising a third solution – marrying out of region or ‘importing’ brides from other regions. This is what I turn to now. Increasingly, men in Haryana are seeking brides from the Eastern and Southern region of India. Brides have thus been acquired from the Eastern states of Assam, West Bengal, Tripura, from the Southern states of Kerala and Andhra Pradesh and even from the Western state of Maharashtra. In Haryana, there have been some long standing patterns of brides coming from Assam and West Bengal. However, more recently in a desperate attempt men are seeking brides wherever they can find them.

The marriage distance in such unions far exceeds that of the normal radius for alliances, in some cases requiring several days journey by train. In marrying so far from home, couples are crossing cultural regions with the result that they share nothing in common – they speak different languages, eat different food, wear different clothes and their behavioural-cultural norms are distinctive. Living together involves considerable adjustment for the couple and raises concerns over the

acceptance of such marriages and especially over the status of children of such unions. Women especially face difficulties and the early years of marriage are very hard. Yet, the terms on which women are incorporated and accepted into local society and the negotiation of cultural difference within unequal structural positions happens in diverse ways often varying in accordance with women's prior standing and cultural background. Thus, many Kerala women, who generally tend to be more educated and capable of financial independence, can negotiate much better terms for themselves in the marriage than poor, uneducated women from Bihar or Bengal.

In-marrying women have to adjust to a radically different and far more patriarchal culture. Beginning with differences in food, clothing and language, women have to adapt to more symbolic cultural differences. The language of the Haryanvis is a dialect of Hindi while the women speak diverse languages such as Bengali, Malayalam, Assamese, and Marathi etc. Verbal communication is difficult, leaving the new bride socially and psychologically isolated. Haryanvis are mostly vegetarian while the women they are marrying are used to eating meat and fish. The women's cuisine is rice-based unlike in the North where it is wheat-based. The women have to adjust to a system where the separation of genders is radical, an expression of which is the local form of purdah called 'ghunghat', a veil for the face. Hindu women outside of the North do not observe purdah and have easier interaction with members of the opposite sex and with members of older generations. Freedom of mobility in their natal homes is far greater. Carrying out all tasks while keeping the face veiled is felt unnaturally constraining. In women's narratives, learning to make 'chapattis' (griddle cooked unleavened bread) is a symbol of the tough adjustment they have to make. They are scolded or beaten until they learn to make good chapattis even as they are deprived of their own food. But more than the physical adjustment and learning new work tasks, it is the distancing from one's own culture and the literal disowning of it that strikes at the soul. The body of the woman itself becomes written upon, in its transformation into a Haryanvi body. Over time, the women become perfect speakers of the local language and dialect and their dress and demeanour changes. Rites and rituals of their own land are replaced by that of the husband's; a cultural forgetting takes place, being re-awakened only when they encounter others from their own culture. The birth of children ties them down to their new home as it is through children that they acquire a stake in the husband's home and property and a right to continue to live where they have invested their labour, productive and reproductive.

Given the enormous distance from their natal homes and the expense of travelling, women who married in the 1980s did not keep much contact with their families. In more recent marriages, with the improvement in communications, women are able to keep in touch and visit occasionally. Yet, this does not substitute for kind of support networks that a local bride may have with her natal home and relatives. Women attempt to build their own 'community' by bringing sisters, relatives and neighbours from their villages to enter marriages with local men. In the process, some of them become 'agents' or matchmakers, making small profits for themselves.

As the marriage squeeze becoming tighter, the trickle of women which can be documented from the eastern states of Assam and Bengal from the 1980s onwards has literally turned into a flood. At present the numbers of women migrating for marriage into Haryana and the number of men seeking brides from various parts of the country has escalated enormously. Earlier marriages of cross- region women were mostly with widowers and older men – those who couldn't find local brides. The age gap between the spouses was large and most couples were illiterate or semi-literate. (Kaur: 2004). In more recent cases the couples are closer in age, the men are younger, couples are more educated and for many males this is their first marriage. It is obvious that men are anticipating that a local bride will be hard to come by and are taking steps earlier than in the past to acquire a cross-region bride.

In some ways, both the men and women who are forced to seek marriage outside their cultural universe are marginalized within their own societies. While poverty is a central factor among the women, sometimes abusive first marriages drive them out. At other times, as in the case of the Kerala women who are more literate and independent, it is factors such as lack of success in matching horoscopes for marriage or demand for gold by the prospective in-laws which leads them to becoming 'over-age' while they wait for proposals. Most women who marry out are from poor families from poor states. They often come from families of several sisters and may not have a living father or brother who would have been responsible for arranging their marriage. Some parents find it difficult to arrange their daughters' marriages if they have to fulfil unrealistic dowry demands. As non-marriage of daughters compromises family honour, parents are happy to marry their daughters to men who do not ask for any dowry and who pay for all marriage expenses. Match-makers convince parents that the grooms come from more prosperous areas of India and that their daughters will be happy. Often the women think the same.

Men who marry out are generally those who have little or no land, no employment or lack education, are physically handicapped or tinged by social scandal. Widowers seeking second wives have to look beyond Haryana. Few men over the age of thirty-five can find a local bride. Thus men who are lower down in the social hierarchy in some way or the other suffer. Yet, the increasing complexity of the situation as it unfolds is pointed to by two facts – that much younger men are now marrying out and that women from non-poor states are also entering such marriages. Political economy, gender dynamics and local rules of marriage in both bride-sending areas and bride-receiving areas need to be important elements in the explanation.

Although demography and local culture may be responsible for initiating an initial marriage or two, these often turn into dense networks between states and even between specific villages. As the ‘bride-trade’ becomes more lucrative, besides women who become match-makers, men have begun to enter the arena. Although there may be an element of trafficking (introduced with the entry of men) in some transactions most marriages are monogamous and remain stable. While men may view the transaction as ‘buying a bride’ because of the sum expended on travel, rituals and payment to the match-maker, women’s parents do not receive any money and do not see it as having ‘sold’ their daughter. In some cases, unscrupulous relatives sell girls in marriage, but this is most often not the case.

### ***Conclusion***

Many scholars have speculated whether such marriages which cut across boundaries of caste, region and sometimes even religion and in addition are dowry-less will have some positive consequences. Will they be able to challenge and break down the rigidities of caste, region and dowry? The jury is out on many of these questions as the situation is still an evolving one. A lot will depend on the influence women in cross-region marriages are able to have in their marital homes. The manner of their and their children’s integration into local society would be crucial. Will the scarcity of local women and of brides raise the value of girl children and of women in these areas? Will it turn the sex ratio around? There are fears, and some evidence that since women will be in short supply, they will be subjected to higher levels of violence. The value of local women may go up in the local marriage market but they will be at risk in various other ways. And women who have entered marriages far away from home and are cultural strangers may end up being treated as second class citizens for long.

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