EDITORIAL

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“Let a female child be born somewhere else; here, let a male child be born.”

--- [Atharva Veda. VI.2.3.] [cf. Peri]

It was the mind-set towards females that we inherited. It might be an adaptation of the nomadic Aryan war-tribes to maintain their war machinery efficient. But, it has no place in a modern civilized society if we claim to be so.

Family is the basic functional and structural unit of our society. Its formation, propagation and replication are ensured through the customs and traditions of universality of heterogamous marriages and religiously duty bound reproduction and rearing. Equality between male and female was probably ever preached but never practiced in its true sense. Patriarchal society having preference for male has been the tradition throughout Indian history, but for exceptions. Our society has been predominantly a God fearing society and children are being considered as God’s gift. So, prayer to God for having son or having no daughter was the main method available to a couple in the period prior to the advent of modern birth control medical technologies. Mere prayers perhaps did not disturb the female sex ratio beyond the tolerable limits of the society in the past. Extreme cruel acts of female infanticide etc. were never acceptable to the society at large, but for some tribes. However, with the help of advanced reproductive medical technologies, people themselves could accomplish their wish of having son only. The economic pressure of having small family also fuelled this process. Consequently, the female sex ratio declined beyond absorbable limits and is still worsening further. Its initial implications in terms of non availability of brides, increasing atrocities on females etc. are already before us. Child sex ratio in some districts of Northern India has gone around 800. How the society will cope with such an imbalanced sex ratio in the time to come? But, it is shocking that still sheer inaction prevails on our part to fight against this social anomaly. It seems, probably we are totally unaware of its impending disastrous impact. In fact, the very existence of our society is at stake!

Utter enactment and implementation of PNDT Act alone is not going to guard us from this calamity. This is simply one of the methods of having no daughters. People will evolve some other methods to achieve the same. We are not yet addressing the root causes of this crisis. Many deep rooted customs, traditions, rituals and rites of son preference and detest daughters can be seen in people worrying over questions such as: What will happen to my
lineage if I have no sons? Who will own my property? Who will do my funeral rites? Who will care for me in later years? Daughters will go off to other villages to live with their husbands. I may be ill and feeble in old age. I want the security of sons. Why should I bear the burden of dowry and why should take risk of safety of girl child especially when there are gangs of unmarried males all around? All such questions, whether genuine or ill founded, need to be addressed comprehensively on priority basis. We shall have to think holistically and act immediately. **What are the options and interventions available with us to implement? – The question needs wider and aggressive social debate with full political commitment.** It needs active social involvement and a movement. Making people aware of the magnitude of the impending social crisis is imperative to ensure their participation in this movement. We being doctors as well as social scientists and propagator and implementer of medical technologies, it becomes our prime duty to take lead role in the struggle for the common cause.

Consequently, it is contextual here to discuss in details the various aspects of adverse sex ratio to satisfy the cognitive learning lust of everyone having concern i.e. **what is sex ratio and how does it get distorted?**

Sex ratio is the number of females per thousand males. Nature tries to keep it fairly equal and stable in the absence of human interferences. Female feticide following prenatal sex determination is such an obvious intervention that even a lay man understands it as well as its impact thoroughly. Sex selective sterilization and spacing based on sex of living children i.e. adopting these methods after having one or two sons or two sons and one daughter etc. are also equally responsible for causing decline in female sex ratio. Statistically it can be explained in terms of turn bias or probability bias as in a population reproductive cohort, couples having more sons have higher probability of bearing daughters and vice versa in case of couples having more daughters. Couples’ sub-cohort with higher probability of bearing daughters adopt sterilization or spacing methods, where as other sub-cohort with higher probability for bearing son keep on producing. This results in more male births than female births. This method leads to a unique type of discrimination against females - **“DISCRIMINATION BEFORE CONCEPTION.”** Thus, females in our society suffer discrimination at all levels i.e. before conception, before birth (in womb) and before death (throughout life). On the contrary, they have to nurture males from ‘womb to tomb’ as in Northern India practically total work in fields and in houses is done by females. Most males remain busy in smoking, playing cards, taking alcohol and beating their wives. Ours is totally a cruel society for females – both in actions and conceptions. One can find in the mass media so many types of such insertions like – ‘Mother turns murderer.’ Or ‘female is the enemy of female’ and likewise. Those who say or write such words or do not react after hearing or reading such shameful insertions, probably don’t understand what motherhood is? Consent of mother for abortion etc. should not be construed as her willingness for having no daughter on the same lines as ours. She identifies herself totally with her daughter in the womb. She visualizes her daughter’s fate akin to her own life. Her soul shivers and she finds herself unable to tolerate the same fate of her daughter also. She anticipates the continuity of her sufferings through her daughter. She decides for her salvation instead of giving her a totally tortured life. The females are living here just because they can’t dare to die. Otherwise, there is nothing charming for them in life to live. Though, fortunately situation in cities is somewhat different.
Other serious dimension of the problem of distorted sex ratio is that even if we explore and uproot all discriminatory practices against females right now, the problem will start improving after 2-3 decades. Thus, the problem has long incubation as well as recovery period of 2-3 decades. Moreover, many of us are under illusion that scarcity of girls will increase their value. It must be remembered that the economic principle of commodity prices is not applicable here. Rather, it is otherwise. More the scarcity of girls/females; there will be more and more atrocities on females. This forces couples not to take risks of having a daughter. So, the problem has the potential of self perpetuation also once it sets in. Imbalance in sex ratio on either side is undesirable. Though, there are countries like Thailand with female dominated society, who have adjusted successfully to their adverse male sex ratios probably because of comparatively conducive female sexual bio-physiology and favorable socio-cultural values. Even this was not feasible in our male dominated society.

How does the imbalance in sex ratio manifest?

Sex ratio primarily manifests through debarring youths from entering the usual family cycle. To a certain level, this imbalance is absorbed in the society without much ill effects. Once this limit is crossed, the impact is inconceivably unfortunate. As we observe these days, the male youths in large number, especially in rural areas of Northern India, are being deprived of entry to family cycle because of their inability to get married. Fortunately for the time being, these youths are from economically marginalized social strata and are segregated in various castes as most marriages in India are within respective castes. The male youths of economically better off families manage to get married and the left out youths in every caste are from the economically weaker families only. Because of this initial social segregation, the situation is yet to reach the critical level to explode. But, it is doubly disastrous since the higher critical level will have many fold adverse impact on explosion. As we all are well aware, desire to have continuity of lineage and sex hunger by no means is less than an instinct. The weak barriers of social inhibitions and restrictions may be swayed away at any moment by these instincts and if a gang of such youths enters someone’s house and force the young females to succumb to their wish; what will happen? I think there is no need to write much in this context here. Everyone can anticipate everything. Psychologically also, these over aged unmarried male youths have suffered the most traumatic transition from ‘Most Wanted ones to Most Unwanted ones’ in the society for no fault on their part. Desperations are high on their heads. As sons, they were the most precious; but as unmarried youths, they are the most hatred lot. I again ask: What is their fault? If no fault, then why should they suffer? If such youths turn rebellious and indulge in antisocial acts forming gangs, is there any social barrier or force that can stop them? The answer is ‘BIG NO.’

But, it is no time to lose hearts; rather one should never. Every problem, how so ever serious it may be, has solution provided we are sincere in searching it out. Gender equality in real sense is probably the best solution to the problem. Hence, in addition to parity in economic and socio-cultural aspects, the more important is that females need parity as individuals. The society shall have to change its mind-set to recognize the rights of females as individuals at par with that of males. Otherwise, no other solution is in sight. However, the very existence of rights arises only when there are claimants ready to do or die for their rights. So, the females will have to come forward to attain equality to save the society and themselves. Since, equality can never be given, it has to be attained.
Social rehabilitation of over aged unmarried male youths is again a very high priority problem to be solved amicably without delay. The energy of such youths needs to be channelized in nation building processes. This will also help preventing their indulgence in anti-social activities.