

## India's Women: The Mixed Truth Amartya Sen

Amartya Sen, Nobel prize winner in Economics in 1998, is the author of the essay "India's Women: The Mixed Truth". Sen discusses some of the possible reasons for violence against women in India. He believes that female schooling is an important factor in reducing gender discrimination in general. He suggests certain urgent measures that we should take.

- A distressing aspect of gender bias in India that shows no sign of going away is **the preference for boys over girls**
- A distinct "boy preference" can be found in **many African countries and Asian countries** including India and China
- Gender bias is reflected in the higher mortality rates of girls and women
- Earlier, there was a neglect in the health care given to girls and women and because of this the mortality rates of girls and women were high
- Now the neglect of healthcare of women has decreased but a new form of discrimination is practised. **The wide use of new techniques such as sonograms for determining the sex of foetuses has led to huge numbers of selective abortions of female foetuses.**
- **Selective abortion of female foetuses is called "natality discrimination" It is a kind of high tech manifestation of preference for boys.**

### **The effects of women's education.**

- Women's education cuts down child mortality.
- It works against the selective neglect of the health of girls.
- It helps in cutting down fertility rates.  
For example, the reduction of fertility that has taken place throughout India (and more sharply in Bangladesh) is clearly connected with the expansion of women's literacy.
- Education empowers women to have a stronger voice in family decisions.
- Education increases women's chance for employment and the possibility of financial independence.

# The effects of women's education- Examples & Statistics

## BANGLADESH

Bangladesh's steep fall in total fertility rate from nearly seven children not long ago to 2.2 now (quite close to the replacement rate of 2.1) is strongly connected with girls education and employment

## CHINA

China's shift from high fertility to below replacement fertility can in many cases be more easily explained by the voice earned by women through education and greater economic independence

This was more effective than the punishment given through the "one-child policy"

## INDIA

- In India, expansion of women's schooling has contributed to its significant reduction in fertility rates. The average of 2.4 children per family for the entire country is a big fall from earlier rates, but we need to work more to reach the replacement level of 2.1.
- Nine of the twenty largest states of India have fertility rates below 2.1
- This is the impact of the increased power of women in decisions about giving birth to children

## LIMITATION OF EDUCATION IN ENSURING GENDER EQUALITY

- Education does not adequately reduce discrimination against girls
- It is unable to eliminate selective abortion of female foetuses
- Even educated mothers show a preference to give birth to male children rather than girls.

## OTHER MEASURES TO END GENDER DISCRIMINATION

- Understanding and scrutiny of traditional values become important.
- We need to create an awareness that seeing girls as inferior to boys is odd and wrong.
- We should have knowledge about what happens in other places where such discrimination against girls is not present. This is an important step in overcoming parochial thinking
- **Amartya Sen mentions the organised public initiatives by Korea and China to spread awareness about the value of girl children**

## Adam Smith's discussion, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*

Adam Smith believes that parochial values can be broken primarily by knowledge of what happens elsewhere and how other people think about the same problems.

- Smith emphasized the importance of considering how a local custom would look to people at 'a certain distance from us'
- We can understand a situation or a cultural practice only by observing it as an 'impartial spectator'
- Both freedom of action and freedom of thought is important in overcoming parochial values

## **NORMAL RANGE OF VALUES FOR SEX RATIO AT BIRTH**

Everywhere in the world more boys are born than girls. The female-male ratio is around 940 to 950 females per 1,000 males in European countries. Between 2005 and 2010, the average of females to males at birth for Europe as a whole was 943

Among the larger European countries, the female-male ratio at birth is

- 941 in Italy,
- 940 in Spain,
- 939 in Greece, and
- 935 in Ireland.
- **Amartya Sen takes the ratio of 935 per 1,000 (the ratio for Ireland) as a standard ratio against which to measure selective abortion of female foetuses**

## **CALCULATION OF SEX RATIO AT BIRTH IN INDIA**

Since birth registration is incomplete in India, the ratios of girls to boys at birth are calculated using census data

**The actual numbers of girls and boys in the age group between zero and six as counted by the census is taken, and then the birth ratio is calculated by working backward.** It is done by adjusting the zero to six figures for differences in mortality rates at specific ages between birth and age six.

## **REGIONAL DIFFERENCE AMONG INDIAN STATES IN SEX RATIO**

With the data provided by the 2011 census, **all the states in the north and west of India had low values of sex ratios.** Most of these states have a sex ratio lower than 920 or even 900. **This is a clear evidence that sex-selective abortion is practised in these states in a great degree.**

These states include Maharashtra, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Uttarakhand and Jammu & Kashmir

**The female-male ratio at birth in the south and east of India remains within the European range for such ratios.**

These states with sex ratio above 935 include Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal, Assam etc

## **POSSIBLE REASONS FOR THE REGIONAL DIVIDE**

Amartya Sen does not give any convincing clear-cut answers to this question.

More research must be done in this matter.

The diversities between India's different traditional cultures, as well as differences in economic, political and social influences could be the possible reason

## NECESSARY ACTIONS

- There is a need for better policing.
- There should be greater media attention to neglected issues like sexual trafficking and marital rape
- More importance should be given to schooling for girls.
- More political and social discussions on the moral strangeness of "boy preference" should happen
- More commitment should be shown by India's mainstream political parties to address the issues of gender inequality.

### Textual one mark questions:

Answer in a word or a sentence.

#### 1. What shows little sign of going away in India?

An aspect of gender bias in India that shows no sign of going away is **the preference for boys over girls**

#### 2. Where in the world would you see a distinct bias of boy preference?

A distinct "boy preference" can be found in **many African countries and Asian countries** including India and China

#### 3 What has the wide use of new techniques such as sonogram led to?

The wide use of new techniques such as sonogram has led to **selective abortion of female foetuses which is also called "natality discrimination"**

#### 4. According to Sen, what can be called "natality discrimination"?

**Selective abortion of female foetuses is called "natality discrimination"** It is a kind of high tech manifestation of preference for boys

#### 5 What is meant by selective abortion of foetuses?

Selective abortion of foetuses means the sex of the foetus is determined and **female foetuses are aborted.**

#### 6. Which Indian states show clear evidence of widespread sex-selective abortion?

Indian states that show clear evidence of widespread sex-selective abortion include Maharashtra, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Uttarakhand and Jammu & Kashmir (**Western and Northern states**)