

Saving the unborn girl child: Are we doing enough?

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In early part of this year film actor Amir Khan televised a hard-hitting and soul stirring series on Indian TV Channels titled "Satyameva Jayate". It successfully showed a mirror to the society which many times didn't like what it was seeing. As a result attempts were made to shatter the mirror rather than washing the dirty face. But the great thing about mirrors is that they always tell the truth even when shattered to pieces. One such episode covered the ills of prenatal sex determination and sex-selective abortions. It highlighted all relevant issues so well. One fact that clearly emerged was that prenatal sex determination is rampant inspite of the law and efforts to curb this evil are proving unproductive.

While running through different estimates of skewed sex ratios in India one gets variable estimates. In 1992 Amartya Sen calculated that 37 million women were 'missing' in India. The UN in 2001 estimated that there were 44 million missing women in India.¹ Data from the census of 2001 suggests that there are only 933 women for every 1000 men in India. This figure has just changed marginally to 941 females for every 1000 males by 2011.² Whatever be the figure, one strong fact remains: inspite of the PNDT Act, inspite of so much drum-beating and even after all the resolute efforts ongoing all over the country India is losing almost 7,000 girls daily because of the traditional preference for sons which cause many people to abort female fetuses. This brings us to ponder - are we doing enough? The answer is obviously NO! Some of the main reasons for this are summarized below.

FAILURE TO CHANGE THE HEARTS

The biggest challenge that the female fetus faces to its gender based survival is failure of the society to change the hearts of all those who matter. It is now a well-known fact that this malady strikes maximum in the educated middle-class and well to do strata of the society. It is saddening to get requests for knowing the sex of the unborn child. Families seeking this are well aware of the

problem, the law and the consequences. They sign forms that they do not want to know the sex of the child. However when we start doing the sonography first question is "Is it a boy or a girl?"

The laws have changed but the hearts have remained the same. It is a well known fact that revolutions are not brought about by laws. Responsible behaviours come from the change of heart. Not much is done in this matter. Dowries, inferior female status in the society, crime against women and such social maladies continue unchecked. Therefore the want for the male child could not be eliminated. Result - an unchecked demand for knowing the sex of the child and a resultant elimination of the female fetus.

HYPOCRITICAL COMMITMENT OF KOLS

Key Opinion Leaders or KOLs as they are known can include religious leaders, political leaders and social reformists and organizations. They have been doing by and large a half-hearted and hypocritical service to this matter. It seems they too don't have a change of heart. Therefore they make noises which are not carried far. Their messages do not sink in the hearts and mind of the society. As a result the desired social change does not occur. Social changes like widow-remarriage and abolition of sati system in India have been brought about not merely by law but by very determined and honest attempts of these people - the KOLs. Earnest, continuous and committed messages from such individuals and organizations are lacking as regards matters related to prenatal sex determination and improving the status of women in the society is concerned. As a result the efforts in curbing the menace remain sub-optimal in giving desired results.

INCOMPETENT AND CORRUPT IMPLEMENTATION OF PNDT ACT

While the government and the society with best intentions to curb this menace legally enacted the PC-PNDT act, its implementation has been absolutely incompetent. Most of the time the medical officers of the government, who have been given wide powers to check and seal the sonography machines of doctors who do not comply and adhere to the provisions of the act, implement this law arbitrarily, inconsistently and incompetently. While they draw great happiness on sealing the machines of doctors for erroneously filling the documents required for the same, they do little for actually catching those who are doing the crime of prenatal sex determination. On the other hand greasing the palms of these authorized personnel easily lets the errant doctor or sonographer off. What is more, sting operations to catch the perpetrators of crime in action by surprise do not remain a surprise. Moles planted by the errant doctors leak the information of an impending sting operation and so the entire operation proves an exercise in futility. All this is done by paying a bribe.

Political clouts and connections of these doctors deter the law implementing authorities from doing much. On occasions with best intentions and determinations even if they do so, their political bosses pressurize them to leave the doctors and others involved in the act. As a result the law fails to get desired results.

This is not to say that all is bad in the law. The law is by and large good. Most doctors and others covered under

the law comply and cooperate and many implementing authorities are doing so with the best of their abilities. However even one black sheep in the community or the society is enough to annul the results.

CONCLUSION

The menace of elimination of female fetus in Indian society remains deeply rooted. Attempts to curb this menace by legal and social means have until now remained sub-optimal in giving results. Lack of change of heart of individual parents concerned, lack of committed commitment of KOLs and incompetent and corrupt implementation of PC-PNDT Act has led to a scenario where the answer to the question we started with viz; Saving the unborn girl child: are we doing enough is a big and emphatic NO.

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