

## Perception of Rural Rajput Community of Jammu Regarding Prenatal Sex Determination Tests

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**ABSTRACT** The present research is an attempt to study the perception of rural Rajput community of Jammu regarding prenatal sex determination tests. A sample of 400 parents (200 mothers, 200 fathers) was selected from 10 blocks of Jammu district. The tool consisted of a self- devised structured questionnaire for determining the perception and beliefs of parents regarding prenatal sex determination tests. Results of the study revealed that majority of the parents were aware of the sex determination tests and considered it right and safe method for having a son. They wanted the practice to be continued in spite of the legal restrictions and legislation against it. The reasons behind this belief were stated to be economic liability and family pressure. This paper also suggests few recommendations based on data to eliminate this evil practice.

### INTRODUCTION

Indian society which was once the highest cradle of civilization and humanity was also renowned for equality of sexes and preservation of human dignity. No other country in the world has a tradition where so many female goddesses are worshipped, for example, *Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati* and *Kali* are considered the epitome of power, wealth, wisdom and might. Millions of people in India pray to these goddesses and young girls during *Navratri* festival in the hope of getting their blessings.

Yet in the same land, we have men and women who deliberately choose to abort the birth of their child when they discover it is going to be a girl. Such silent murders are carried out blatantly by parents who feel giving birth to a girl would mean a huge financial burden. Various tests, ultrasonography, amniocentesis etc. are used to determine the sex of the foetus which if found female, is aborted. One of the tests- amniocentesis has been misused for female foeticide. Commonly the abuse of sex determination tests is prevalent among all communities and is practiced by all, irrespective of their class, caste, religion, educational or cultural background (Jaffery and Jaffery 1983; Gupta A 1987; Gangrade 1988; Hindustan Times 1998). This evil practice

has emerged from a long prevalent social practice-the dowry system, which entails paying huge amounts of money by the girl's family to the groom's family to get her married. Female foeticide is an extreme manifestation of violence against women. Every year, an increasing number of girls are being killed before they are born. Despite being illegal, the sex determination industry has become more brazen in its operation, more sophisticated in its techniques and more commonly available. In one of the most gruesome incidents related to female foeticide, the police recently unearthed a well near an illegal abortion clinic in Punjab in which they found the remains of around 200 aborted babies, that they suspected were all females. The preference for a son is not limited to poor families alone; it is rooted in the social norms and cultural beliefs of the middle class and even upper class families show son preference. India has lost over 10 million girls due to female foeticide in past 20 years. According to a study conducted by the Centre for social research (CSR) with support from the ministries of health and women and child development, the areas with lowest sex ratio in New Delhi are Punjabi Bagh (842), Narela (828), and Najafgarh (841) (Banerjee 2008; c.f. The Times of India). The reasons are manifold, from old customs and traditions to economic constraints like dowry and lack of support in old age; everything seems to be against the female child.

In a survey conducted in village Dhanduha in Punjab in January 2006 (Dogra c.f. Outlook) regarding female foeticide, it was found that out of seven babies born in the last six months there

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were six boys and just one girl, a sex ratio of just 529:1000. One of the housewives of this village during survey stated that "I have two daughters and my mother-in-law is threatening to get another wife for her son if I do not have a boy. I got an abortion done last year when the scan showed it was a female foetus. This time I have been lucky." In Haryana, mobile clinics brought sex determination to the patient's doorstep, with doctors carrying a generator and ultrasound scanner to carry out the devious ritual.

Although the situation is comparatively better in Jammu and Kashmir state, as compared to other Indian states, observations reveal that this practice is catching up fast here also. About 7800 girls are being killed before birth every year in Jammu province (680 every month). In Jammu district alone, 2800 girls are being eliminated in the womb every year and such incidents are more in Sunderbani and Hiranagar Tehsils where girl child ratio has declined to 765 and 743 girls per 1000 boys. This illegal practice has become Rs 5 crore per annum business in this part of the state (George 2009).

Moreover, according to the Jammu and Kashmir sex ratio survey report 2006, the number stood at around 932 girls per 1000 boys. Region wise, the scenario is alarming with Jammu having 820 girls followed by Kathua with 840 girls per 1000 boys while Udhampur stands at 873 girls. These deplorable child sex ratios depict the mindset of the society towards girls.

The present study has been conducted on Rajput community, traditionally known to be very conservative and resistant to change. Rajputs constitute a sizeable chunk of the population in Jammu district. The major reason for choosing this group to study this specific topic concerning females' foeticide was to examine the perception of community members towards this issue specifically in the group where infanticide was prevalent till recent past. The objective of the research was to study the perception of rural Rajput parents related to prenatal sex determination tests and to find out the reasons behind using sex determination tests.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted in 10 blocks of Jammu district. The data was collected in the month of January-February 2010. From the 10 blocks namely, Akhnor, Khor, Bishnah, Satwari

Madh, Purmandal, Samba, Kot Balwal, Dhansal and R.S.Pura, 40 villages predominantly inhabited by Rajput community (5 families per village selected randomly) were covered. Sample for the study comprised of 400 respondents, 200 mothers and 200 fathers having at least two children, one male and one female. A self-devised questionnaire was developed keeping in view the objectives of the present study. Questions which were asked were like about awareness about sex determination technique (SDT) and their information, their perception about ethical issues involved in SDT. Pretesting was conducted in ten families in two blocks and the final form of questionnaire was then prepared and used for the study. After the collection of data, the information gathered was tabulated. A combination of qualitative and quantitative approach was adopted for data analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 1. Background Information of Respondents

Most of the fathers (93 percent) were in age group of 25-44 year and mothers (77 percent) in the age group of 15-34 year. While all fathers were educated from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> standard, 52 percent of mothers had studied up to 5<sup>th</sup> class and 27.5 percent were functionally literate. Army service and agriculture were found to be the main occupation of fathers while most of the mothers (90.5 percent) were housewives. The families belonged to middle socio-economic status. Most of them belonged to joint/extended families.

### 2. Awareness About Sex Determination Tests

Majority of the mothers (86.5 percent) and fathers (92 percent) were aware of sex determination tests. The data reveals an interesting fact that more men than women knew about the prevalence of such tests. Majority of them were found to have acquired the knowledge by word of mouth from others, who had undergone similar tests. When asked about the moral issues attached to sex determination tests, a total of 72.3 percent respondents had no qualms about undergoing a sex determination test if the effort guaranteed the birth of a boy. Only 18 percent respondents were against the use of any such tests as they felt that they would only tempt parents to

abort the child if it was a girl. Sex determination tests were considered to be a safe method to have a son ( Table 1) revealed by majority of the respondents (69.5 percent) as these did not endanger the life of the mother in anyway besides ensuring the birth of a male child. The women (44.5 percent) who felt that sex determination tests were unsafe said that they had no choice but to undergo such tests because of the pressure on them by their families and husbands. One of the mother said, "I do not know how safe such tests are, but if my willingness to undergo such a test would give my family an heir and make them happy, I would not object. It was seen that almost half the number of sample mothers appeared to be ready to undergo sex determination test to ensure the birth of a boy under pressure from the husband or his family.

**Table 1: Is it safe to go for prenatal sex**

S. No.	Opinion	Mother		Father		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
1	Yes	111	55.5	167	83.5	278	69.5
2	No	89	44.5	33	16.5	122	30.5
Total		200	100.0	200	100.0	200	100.0

**3. The Ethical Perspective of the Issue**

Table 2 indicates that only 24.3 percent respondents felt that it was morally correct to abort a girl child while the majorities (75.8 percent) were against any such step. The respondents who were in favour of foeticide felt that since girl children were economic liabilities as far as their upbringing, education, marriage and dowry was concerned and because they had to suffer in the hands of their in-laws later, it was better to eliminate them in the womb itself to save them from discrimination and torture later. One respondent mother remarked "it is better for a girl child to die before being born than to die a hundred deaths, every step of the way for the rest of her life." Even those who considered foeticide as morally wrong were not averse to the practice on the pretext that this was the only way to ensure small and happy families and assured birth of a son.

**4. Views Towards Continuation of the Practice of Sex Determination Test**

With respect to the views of respondents towards the continuation or termination of the prac-

**Table 2: Is it morally correct to abort a female**

S. No.	Opinion	Mother		Father		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
1	Yes	34	17	63	31.5	97	24.3
2	No	166	83	137	68.5	303	75.8
Total		200	100	200	100.0	400	100.1

tice of sex determination, 55.3 percent respondents wanted the practice to continue in spite of the legal restrictions and legislation against it, citing various reasons. A respondent father said that, "I do not care about the imposition of bans and restrictions on the practice as long as I can get a son to carry on the family line". A respondent mother remarked "the people who frame such laws do not know what it is like to have four or five girls in a poor family." At the same time quite a large number of respondents, 44.75 percent said that the practice should be stopped because it encourages foeticide. Some of them also reasoned that it would be wise to discourage it because of the legal implications and fear of imprisonment. More mothers than fathers were in favour of ban on the tests since they felt that due to the ban they would not be forced to undergo these tests and would be relieved. It was found that because of family pressure and expected enhancement of status in family, mothers were compelled to go for such tests whereas fathers favored these tests because of financial constraints and the thinking of continuation of family lineage.

Sex selective foeticide is banned under law under the pre conception and pre natal diagnostic techniques (prohibition of sex selection) Act, 1994 in Jammu and Kashmir. But non-seriousness in implementing this act shows that the crime is not getting the attention it deserves.

**CONCLUSION**

The picture that arises from the results is that the issue of female foeticide is a complex one because it is connected with social mores, traditions, economic constraints etc. Illegal abortion of female fetuses has been on the rise because of increasing dowry demands, easy access to sex determination of foetus and abortion techniques. People find it easier and probably less sinful to do away with an unborn foetus than to kill a born girl child, which amounts to infanticide. Majority of the parents in the present research were

aware of the sex determination tests and considered it right and safe method for having a son. Double standards regarding the moral implications of foeticide were observed. Most of the parents said that it was morally wrong to kill a girl child in the womb but simultaneously it was considered better to kill the girl child through foeticide rather than to bring her into the world and to let her die a hundred deaths at every juncture in life. Some even went to the extent of saying that it was better to spend Rs 3000/- (for abortion) now to save Rs.3 lac (for marriage expenses) in future. Majority of the parents wanted the practice to continue.

Little has been done over the years to end the rampant violation of laws that prohibit sex determination tests and provide tough punishment for violators. Since India enacted the Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques Act, not a single person has been convicted. More than laws and legislations, what we need today is a change in attitude towards the girl child. This change will, however come only when something is done to curb the evil of the dowry system. Temporal laws can only limit the crime to some extent but people have to be made aware of a higher law-the law of karma that decides the destiny of their lives. Depriving another human being of the right to live is considered the most heinous crime. In the present globalized technology driven world, it is a matter of pain and disgust to report that the discrimination against the girl child still continues. The present research conducted on a traditionally conservative community reveals that the desire for son is deep set in the minds of even young people and unless something drastic is done for bringing about attitudinal changes, very soon we will be reaching a stage that will mark the climax of a highly skewed sex ratio.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The government and private organizations must initiate campaigns to remove the biased attitude towards girls and ensure strict implementation of existing legislation against the dowry system and prenatal sex determination. They can also offer educational and vocational training to poor girls to make them self supported. The media can play a big role by highlighting real examples of successful women so that people's attitude towards girls can change. Religious and spiritual leaders can help to create awareness in their communities and issue directives to stop this inhuman practice. Our spirituality and devotion to female goddesses is hypocrisy if we do not take steps for emancipating girls and women from centuries old sufferings and bondage. The first step towards emancipation must begin with by giving the girl child the right to be born and to live with dignity.

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