



RELIGION & SON PREFERENCE

Dr Moly Kuruvilla

Director

Centre for Women's Studies

University of Calicut

Calicut

Introduction

In Indian society the status of women has changed from time to time; position of women in society is the index to the standard of social organization. Sex composition of human population is one of the basic demographic characteristics, which is extremely vital for any meaningful demographic analysis. Changes in sex composition largely reflect the underlying socio economic and cultural patterns of the society. Sex ratio is an indication of the extent of prevailing equality between males and females at a given time. It has been estimated that around the year 2000, the world had 986 females against 1000 males whereas in India it was only 933 females per 1000 males. India is one of the few countries where males significantly outnumber females, and this imbalance has increased over time. It is estimated that deaths of young girls in India exceed those of young boys over 300,000 each year, and every sixth infant death is specifically due to gender discrimination. Of the 15 million baby girls born in India each year, nearly 25 percent will not live to see their 15th birthday.

In most Indian families, a daughter is viewed as a liability, and she is conditioned to believe that she is inferior and subordinate to men. Sons are idolized and celebrated. *May you be the mother of a hundred sons* is a common Hindu wedding blessing. In India there has been a continuous decline in the sex ratio since 1901 to 1981 from 972 women per 1000 men to 934 women per 1000 men respectively. In 1991 it became the lowest in the history of the Census with a count of 927 women per 1000 men. In 2001, the sex ratio again became 933 per 1000. While a son is considered an asset, a daughter is considered a liability. There is a proverb, 'Bringing up a girl is like watering a plant in the neighbour's garden'. To some extent, the neglect and abuse of female foetuses, infants and children is a phenomenon common to several cultures.

The deficit of women as per sex ratio statistics reveals an alarming rise from 3 million in 1901 to 36 million in 2001. This trend has given rise to the concept of 'missing girls' as connoted by the Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen. "Given a preference for boys over girls that may manifest itself in the form of the parents wanting the newborn to be a boy rather than a girl. There was a time when this would be no more than a wish, but with the availability of modern techniques to determine the gender of the foetus, sex-selective abortion has become common in many countries. This is high-tech sexism"



(Sen, A, 2001).

There are reasons to believe that it is increasingly becoming a common practice across the country to determine the sex of the unborn child or foetus and eliminate it if the foetus is found to be a female. This practice is referred to as pre-birth elimination of females (PBEF). PBEF involves two stages: determination of sex of the foetus and induced termination if the foetus is not of the desired sex. This practice widely termed, as female foeticide is believed to be one of the significant contributors to the adverse child sex ratio in India.

Several studies have documented the discriminatory practice of son preference especially in the northern and central states of the country (Subrata, 1974; Muthurayappa et al., 1997; Arnold et al., 1998; Arokiasamy, 2002). The NFHS 11 (1998-99) results show a preference for sons over daughters in all the southern states at varying degrees as given in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Number of Sons or Daughters Wanted by Women

States	Mean Ideal Number of		Want More (%)		Want at least 1%	
	Sons	Daughters	Sons	Daughters	Sons	Daughters
Andhra Pradesh	1.0	0.8	19.8	2.7	76.0	71.3
Karnataka	0.9	0.5	13.0	1.9	70.0	67.5
Kerala	1.0	0.8	14.6	5.2	72.6	70.7
Tamil Nadu	0.8	0.7	9.6	1.9	66.3	63.9

Source: National Family Health Survey (NFHS – 11), 1998 -'99

Table 1 shows that among the southern states Kerala stands next to Andhra Pradesh in its son preference. The findings such as the mean ideal number of sons and daughters wanted in the families, the percentage of families preferring more sons than daughters or more daughters than sons, percentage of families desiring at least one son and one daughter showed that the families valued sons more than the daughters. Further analysis of the data regarding sex preference of ever married women by State, 1998-99 reveals that in India, the mean ideal number of sons and daughters are lowest among the southern states along with Goa.

The fairly good overall sex ratio of 1058 women to 1000 men in Kerala is masking the



hidden grave situation of an unfair child sex ratio of only 963 girls for 1000 boys (Census, 2001). The point that deserves utmost concern with regard to the present study is that Kerala has the lowest fertility rate and its society strictly adheres to small family norms. Here the preference and obsession for sons has every chance to urge people adopt sex selection techniques including prenatal diagnosis and subsequent female foeticide.

According to the First Report on Religion Data (2001), there is considerable difference in child sex ratios among various religious communities, as given in Table 2.

TABLE 2

Sex Ratio among various Religious Communities

Religious Communities	Child Sex Ratio	Overall Sex Ratio
Hindus	925	931
Muslims	950	936
Jains	870	940
Sikhs	786	836
Christians	964	1009
Buddhists	942	953
Others	976	992
All	927	933

Table 2 shows that the child sex ratio and overall sex ratio vary considerably with the religious communities. There are 931 Hindu women for every 1000 Hindu men, which is less than the National average of 933 women for every 1000 men. The figure among Muslim community is 936 per 1000. Christians have the highest sex ratio of 1009 females per 1000 males and Sikhs record the lowest overall sex ratio of 839 per 1000. With regard to child sex ratio, it was the worst among Sikhs, then Jains, followed by the Hindus and Buddhists while that of Muslims and Christians was better.

Female foeticide once assumed to be prevalent among Hindus because of their custom requiring male progeny to perform cremation rites, is found today to be equally rampant among Sikhs, Muslims and Christians. The social evil which has been presumed to be most prevalent among the poor and illiterate because of spiraling



dowry demands and other traditional prejudices are today most frequent among the rich and highly educated. They report a study that maps the increased frequency of female foeticide with rising levels of education, lowest among women with a fifth grade education and highest among women with university degrees. Also the Hindu (2005) reports the findings of the study conducted by the Centre for Social Research in Delhi that preference for a male child is higher among the educated and rich sections of the society. Accordingly the rich and educated class has greater access to ultrasound clinics where sex determination tests of the foetus are done.

Several surveys and research studies have proved that son preference and subsequent sex selective abortions are more prevalent among the rich and educated classes. It is also shown that son preference increases with decreasing family size. All these findings in the backdrop of a declining child sex ratio point to the existence of son preference and probability of female foeticide in the Kerala society where the people are highly educated and strictly adhering to small family norms.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study has been designed to attain the following objectives:

1. To find out whether son preference exists in Kerala society as per the total sample and the sub samples belonging to different religious groups.
2. To find out whether there will be a significant association between the response pattern to the existence of son preference in Kerala society and the religious affiliation of the samples.
3. To analyse the reasons attributed to son preference by the different religious groups.
4. To suggest measures to enhance the dignity of girl child in the society.

PROCEDURE

(a) Sample

The sample for the present study consisted of 450 individuals in the reproductively active age group of 20-40 years drawn from the two districts of Ernakulam and Malappuram. An equal number of men and women belonging to the three major religious groups viz. Christian, Hindu and Muslim were selected using stratified random sampling method.

(b) Tool

SPI (Son Preference Inventory) developed by the investigator was used to collect the data. The first part of the inventory assesses the demographic details of the respondents whereas the second part collects data on respondents' attitude towards son preference. The third part contains ten major reasons attributed for son preference and the respondents are required to rank the statements in the order of 1.....10 with



the most prominent reason they find to be ranked as '1' and the least plausible reason assigned a rank of '10'.

Statistical Techniques Used

The objectives of the study and the hypothesis to be tested warranted the use of percentage analysis and Chi-square test for independence of attributes.

Results

1a. Assessing the Existence of Son Preference in Kerala as per the Total Sample and the Sub-samples Based on Religion.

The major findings obtained for the percentage analysis of the responses agreeing to the existence of son preference in Kerala in the sub samples based on the three major religious communities are given below:

TABLE 3
Percentage of Responses Agreeing to the Existence of Son Preference
in the Total Sample and the Sub-samples Based on Religion

Variable	Sample Size	Those Agreeing to Son Preference	Percentage
Christian	150	115	76.7
Hindu	150	106	70.7
Muslim	150	95	63.3
Total	450	316	70.2

As per Table 3 more than 60 percent of all the religious communities agree that son preference exists in Kerala society. While 76.7 percent of Christians and 70.7 percent of Hindus agreed to the presence of son preference, respondents from the Muslim community showed the lowest percent of agreeableness with the existence of son preference in Kerala society.

2. Estimation of the Association Between the Classificatory Variable and Response Pattern to Existence of Son Preference

The major findings with regard to the estimation of association between the response pattern to existence of son preference and the classificatory variable of religion is summarized in Table 6.

TABLE 6

Data and Results of Chi-square Test for Independence of Religion and Pattern of Response to Existence of Son Preference



Classificatory Variable	Chi-square Value	df	Significance
Religion	6.398	2	0.05

The Chi-square values for independence between the classificatory variable of religion and the response pattern to the existence of son preference was found to be significant which in turn show a significant association of religion with the response pattern to the existence of son preference in Kerala.

3. Major Reasons for Son Preference Attributed by the Three Major Religious Groups

The major reasons and the number of respondents attributing the same among the three major religious communities viz. Christians, Hindus and Muslims are given in Table 7.

TABLE 5
 Major Reasons for Son Preference
 Attributed by the Three Major Religious Groups

Sl. No.	Major Reasons	Number of Religion-wise Respondents			Total
		Christian	Hindu	Muslim	
1	Economic burden necessitated by dowry to girl	83	83	91	257
2	A son would carry on the family lineage	24	22	13	59
3	Insecurity experienced by girl child	19	20	15	54
4	Other reasons	24	25	31	80
	Total	150	150	150	450

Table 7 shows that the number of responses to the three major reasons shows much similarity among the three religious communities. Majority of respondents among Christians, Hindus and Muslims attribute 'Economic liability necessitated by dowry' as the most prominent reason for son preference. In the case of other prominent reasons also, the proportion do not show much variation. With regard to the reasons leading to the discriminatory practice, members of all religious communities have a common ground.

The Chi-square value of test for independence of attributes was found to be negligent indicating a lack of association between religion and reason for son preference.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study reveal the existence of son preference in the Kerala society. More than 70 percent of the total sample and more than 60 percent of all the sub samples based on religion expressed their agreeableness to the existence of the phenomenon. The results of the study are in agreement with that of Patel



(2003) and the NFHS-II Survey (1998-99) according to which Kerala had second position next to Andhra Pradesh among the southern states with regard to son preference. Research findings of Sulaja (2005) also substantiate this fact but according to her even though son preference exists in Kerala it is not that much crucial as in Karnataka or Tamil Nadu. But the Census details of 2001 especially of the 0-6 age group and the findings of the present study point to a crucial situation taking shape in Kerala too.

Estimation of the association of the classificatory variable and the response pattern to existence of son preference revealed a strong association between the two. The 'First Report on Religion Data, 2001' reveals the highest overall sex ratio of 1009 and the comparatively better child sex ratio of 964 for Christians among the various religious communities. But as per the present study highest percentage of respondents who expressed agreeableness to the existence of son preference in Kerala belongs to Christian community. Nevertheless, the mere agreeableness to the existence of a phenomenon in the society does not imply that the Christian community does have strong son preference

It is a generally accepted fact that even the average Keralite has fallen prey to the luxuries of consumerism, which has led to a high cost of living. This has further necessitated the observance of not only 'small family' norms but also 'only child family' norms. At a time when the neighborhood families rejoice over the birth of their honorable male citizens it is quite natural that one may crave for begetting such a celebrity as their own. What is required is enhancing the value and status of the girl child, which is the only panacea for the son mania existing in the society. Age-old beliefs of parents that a son would carry on family lineage and that he would add on to social status to the family could be corrected only through proper awareness campaigns. When the young girls rise up to the standard of adding fame and prestige to the family, such narrow minded attitudes are likely to vanish from the society.

Increased violence and trafficking of girls and women have generated feelings of insecurity to the extent that it has become a reason for son preference of the public. Measures to ensure security to girl children must be taken up on a war footing.

Suggestions to Enhance the Dignity of Girl Child in the Society

The best measure to check the evil of son preference is by enhancing the value of the girl child. Even the average Keralite has fallen prey to the luxuries of consumerism which has led to a high cost of living. This has further necessitated the observance of not only 'small family' norms but also 'only child family' norms. Proactive role must be played by the National Women's Commission and the respective State Women's Commissions to look at policies that lead to societal female devaluation. Equal inheritance to ancestral property as well as equal remuneration for men and women need to be clearly examined.



Also we have to think in terms of providing more opportunities through more relaxations, incentives and reservations for the deprived sex both as child and adult. Such measures would augment the process of women empowerment through education, employment and political power whereby daughters could be thought of as assets and not as liabilities. Programmes such as the 'only girl child scholarship' implemented by the CBSE are right steps in this direction.

Schemes in various states such as Haryana that give incentives to families where there is a daughter need to be promoted on all India level.

As the findings of the study has revealed, religion has a significant role to play in changing the mindsets polluted with unhealthy son preference. Almost all religions consider men as superior and women as inferior, impure and sinful. Religious dogmas are misinterpreted by the religious leaders and practitioners who are all men so as to keep women secondary. Priesthood most often is accorded to men only. As per religious discourses, God, the creator is fully aware of the physiology like monthly periods of his own creation, the woman. Then how can one discriminate woman as impure based on her bodily functions? If the bodily functions and secretions related to men's body are acceptable to God and do not interfere with his performing religious rituals, they naturally shouldn't be considered as a barrier to women also. **When God does not discriminate between his creations (male and female), why should the creations themselves should venture into discriminating the fellow creations.** This is a kind of blindness that requires immediate treatment in the form of open intellectual discussions in groups and personal logical analysis by every human mind. Correct awareness and true interpretation of the holy books in every religion should be promoted. Such texts should be subjected to serious studies which in turn would remove the blindness of millions of religious fundamentalists and practitioners.

The personal and family laws, relating to marriage, divorce, inheritance, succession, adoption and guardianship have been guided by religious beliefs of respective communities. The sad part of these laws is the fact that most of these are anti women and women are being victimised by the recent trends of religious fundamentalism. Any law which comes in the way of women empowerment should be changed. Since religion has a deep and powerful influence on human minds, it should be utilised for curbing the sinful practices of gender discrimination, son preference and female foeticide. Religious leaders should rise upto the need of the time and promote women's active participation in public sphere so as to enhance the dignity of womanhood.

The Uniform Civil Code that claims for equal rights for men and women in all matters relating to marriage, divorce, guardianship and custody of children remains as a distant reality because of the strong opposition by certain religious communities. The enactment of UCC is feared to interfere with the fundamental right to freedom of religion. In all personal laws there are differential standards for men and women with



regard to marriage, divorce and property rights which is to be viewed as a shame to civilisation. So in order to ensure gender justice, the first and foremost thing to be implemented is the enactment of the UCC. Those religious leaders who are capable of logical reasoning and progressive thinking should take the lead in this effort. This would add momentum to the process of enhancing the dignity of women from the status of a second sex.

Conclusion

In the present study a significant association was found between religious affiliation and the response pattern towards the existence of son preference in the society. Campaigns at the grassroots level should be designed using religion as its aid. Religion should be used as a tool to spread the message, as today most communities are influenced by the dictates of religious organizations and spiritual leaders. The religious dimension of the issue needs special attention.

References

1. Arnold F. et al (1998). Son Preference, the Family Building Process and Child Mortality in India. *Population Studies*, 52.
2. Arokiasamy.P (2002). Gender Preference, Contraceptive Use and Fertility in India: Regional and Development Influences, *International Journal of Population Geography*, 8.
3. Census of India (2001). Directorate of Census Operations, Kerala.
4. First Report on Religion Data (2001). Registrar General and Census Commissioners, India.
5. NFHS-11(1998-99). International Institute for Population Sciences. National Family Health Survey India, Mumbai p -122, 2000.
6. Mutharayappa et al (1997). Son Preference and its Effects on Fertility in India, National
7. Family Health Survey, March.
8. Patel Vibhuti (2003). A Cultural Deficit, *India Together*, August .
9. Sen Amartya (2001). Many Faces of Gender Inequality, *Frontline*, 18(22), Oct -Nov.
10. Subrata Lahiri (1974). Preference for Sons and Ideal Family in Urban India. *Indian Journal of Social Work*, 34(4).
11. Sulaja, S (2005). Son Preference in the Southern States of India: An Analysis, *Health and Population – Perspectives and Issues*, 28 (3), 122-131.
12. The Hindu (2005). Decline in Child Sex Ratio Among Educated Sectors, Saturday, February 19.