

Census 2011: Governing Populations and the Girl Child

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The much-awaited provisional results of Census 2011 bring the news that the child sex ratio (0-6 years) has declined further from 927 to 914 girls for every 1,000 boys, due to a widening of the circle of daughter aversion, especially across western and central India. But in all the monitoring to correct this “imbalance” what place is there for a genuine engagement with the life chances of girls in diverse contexts?

The announcement of the provisional population figures from Census 2011 has come at a very important moment in India’s relationship with the census and its operations. Newspaper headlines made it clear where India’s own priorities lay – first and foremost were the “positives”: improvements in the rate of decline in the growth of the population (though less than anticipated), a rise in literacy rates and also of the overall sex ratio of the number of women per 1,000 men. The only fly in the ointment is therefore the child sex ratio (CSR measuring those in the 0-6 year range) which has dropped from 927 girls per 1,000 boys in 2001 to an all-time low of 914 in 2011. The secretary to the Ministry of Home Affairs appeared on the evening news saying that on the matter of the girl child, the government must re-examine its policies.

How should we approach the whole question of sex ratios and the counting of girls? Recall that when the very different question of counting caste became the subject of contentious debate in the lead up to Census 2011, the main objection in the official note was that a caste enumeration would interfere with the “integrity” of the population count. Various scholars had also argued against including caste in the census on the grounds that it was both too political and too complex. But what exactly is this “integrity” of our numbers that would be violated by including a question on caste? This was never clarified. And is the unwritten assumption then that counting girls and boys is neither political nor complex?

Gender has become both naturalised and a critical instrument in the undisputed aim to control

the population, while not allowing the number of females to drop unduly. Even references to gender discrimination are subsumed within this larger concern over the role that women play through their fertility patterns in the governance of the population. The inclusion of information on literacy and the “positive” figure of increased literacy among girls and women are part and parcel of this drive towards ensuring a fewer number of births. In the following note, I hope to denaturalise some of our taken-for-granted approaches towards sex ratios. But first, what has been the story so far and what can we learn from Census 2011?

Child Sex Ratios since 1991

In order to begin a discussion of India’s child sex ratio patterns, Table 1 has been compiled by drawing on both the earlier census figures and the provisional figures just made available. The difference in successive decades has also been included for easy reference. The break-up of the country into the regions of the north-west, north-central, west, east and south offers a quick overview of the broad patterns in the last two decades. (One might keep at

Table 1: Child Sex Ratios (0-6 Years) Census 1991, 2001, 2011, Select States

State	(Females per 1,000 males)				
	1991	2001	Difference 2001-1991	2011	Difference 2011-2001
India	945	927	-18	914	-13
North-west					
Himachal Pradesh	951	896	-53	906	+10
Punjab	875	798	-77	846	+48
Haryana	879	819	-40	830	+11
Chandigarh	899	845	-46	867	+22
Delhi	915	868	-47	866	+2
North-central					
Uttar Pradesh	928	916	-12	899	-17
Madhya Pradesh	952	932	-20	912	-20
West					
Gujarat	928	883	-45	886	+3
Rajasthan	916	909	-7	883	-16
Maharashtra	946	913	-33	883	-30
Goa	964	938	-26	920	-18
East					
Bihar	959	942	-17	933	-9
Jharkhand	NA	965		943	-22
West Bengal	967	960	-7	950	-10
Nagaland	993	964	-29	944	-20
Orissa	967	953	-14	934	-19
South					
Andhra Pradesh	975	961	-14	943	-18
Karnataka	960	946	-14	943	-3
Tamil Nadu	948	942	-6	946	+4
Kerala	958	960	+2	959	-1

Source: Compiled from Census of 2001 and Census of 2011.

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the back of our minds not just that this period happens to correspond to the so-called era of neo-liberalism, but also that it spans roughly a generation.) At the national level, the decline of 18 points in 2001 has now been followed by a further decline of 13 points. As more families are having fewer children (registered by the reduced fertility rates) there is therefore an ongoing gendering in their sex composition. To put it briefly, practices leading to fewer girls in the 0-6 age group have been spreading more thinly over the last decade over a much larger proportion of the country. The circle is widening.

The figures from 1991 have been included in order to recall why Census 2001 made such headlines a decade ago. This was when the child sex ratio (CSR) first dropped below that of the overall sex ratio: While the child sex ratio fell from 943 in 1991 to 927 in 2001, that of the overall sex ratio rose from 927 to 933 in the same period (a clear sign that life expectancy among women was increasing significantly). It was in 2001 that several states in north-west India witnessed plunges in their child sex ratios – with Punjab leading the way by dropping below the 800 mark, while other states such as Himachal Pradesh experienced huge declines for the first time. Secondly, 2001 made history (especially at the district level) because of evidence of child sex ratios falling below the 950 mark (taken as the general norm the world over) in other parts of the country outside the north-west, such as Goa, urban Orissa, and even pockets in the north-east. In the north-west, these patterns were put down to the intensification of practices of sex selection at birth in regions with known prior histories of female infanticide and higher female mortality; elsewhere, a smaller proportion of families was now resorting to similar practices probably for the first time.

North-West vs Rest of India

Moving on to Census 2011, the state figures point to a clear difference between the north-west and the rest of India. It would appear that there has been a peaking (or plateauing) of the practice of sex selection in states like Gujarat, Haryana, Delhi and Himachal Pradesh, with small improvements from very low levels in Chandigarh and Punjab. (Notice that none of the

north-western states have fallen further, though they have by no means come back to 1991 levels, which were themselves well below the 950 mark.) Punjab's rise from 798 to 846 (48 points) according to 2011 figures makes it now look more like its neighbours, but only a district-wise analysis would reveal where the real changes are. In states like Delhi and Gujarat roughly the same proportion of families is resorting to sex selection as was true a decade ago (since this is a comparison of the number of girl children born and alive between 1996-2001 and 2006-2011). In Punjab the severity of the practice has thus only eased slightly. According to a news report mentioning district level data for the state of Haryana, the district of Kurukshetra (which had the worst CSR of 771 in 2001) now has a CSR of 817, similar to the trend for Punjab. However, many more districts (Jhajjar, Mahendragarh, Rewari, Bhiwani, Faridabad, among others) have worse CSRs than in 2001.

Whatever the "improvements" (if that is the right word) in north-west India, CSRs are falling in large parts of western, central and eastern India – Maharashtra, Goa, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh – and even Andhra Pradesh has joined the ranks from among the southern states. (Of course, Tamil Nadu is well known for its history of female infanticide and sex selection in districts like Salem and Dharmapuri – so it remains to be seen what a more disaggregated picture of that state would reveal.) *In other words, the state wise figures demonstrate a widening of the circle – even if the numbers are not dramatic – well beyond the so-called prosperity belt of north-west India, to the poorer states.* A recent news report on UP, for instance, highlights the spread of sex selection to eastern towns and districts where it was hardly known before. (The only state whose figures are so strange that there is every reason to doubt them is Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), where the census was undertaken after a gap in 1991, in 2001 and 2011. According to the provisional figures, the CSR has plummeted from 941 to 859 – 82 points – along with this. J&K is the only state in the whole country to have registered a positive increase in its fertility during this period. Whatever the form that the ongoing conflict is taking, such figures are hard to make sense of and require further investigation.)

It is likely that the "improvements" in the north-west are related to efforts at monitoring the use of sex determination testing, in contrast with its spread elsewhere. But it would be wrong to equate the two, since the picture is more complex than that. The very fact that the CSRs are falling in such a wide variety of states (from Goa in the west, which is not associated with high levels of poverty, to poor states like Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh) and then again in a heterogenous state like Maharashtra, which has witnessed one of the steepest declines in 2011 of 30 points, makes it absolutely necessary to wait for the time when a more contextual micro level understanding can be undertaken.

To give an example of such contextual analysis during the previous decade, in a study conducted by a group of researchers (John et al 2008) during 2003-05 in five of the lowest CSR districts of north-west India, it became evident that within this broad belt where child sex ratios had dropped severely, local contexts were nonetheless extremely significant. Thus for instance, while Fatehgarh Sahib in Punjab demonstrated the presence of families with just one son (especially among Jat Sikhs and urban upper castes), and families in Kangra and Rohtak strived for two children (but very few with only girls), in the districts of Dholpur and Morena significant forms of child neglect leading to high rates of mortality among girls in larger families went hand in hand with the growing practice of sex selection.

The Debate So Far

In order to get a better perspective on adverse sex ratios, let us recall the decade of the 1980s when practices of amniocentesis for sex selection became the subject of the first campaigns by women's groups and health activists in Maharashtra, Delhi and Punjab. At that time, this issue garnered little public support. Indeed, it was not even clear to most people what the problem was. Today we might be in the opposite situation, where the sex ratio has become the symbol of gender discrimination as such, and few are interested in anything beyond it. One must underscore, therefore, the extent of activism and analysis both in India and abroad, and the variety of organisations (local groups, the state, religious organisations,

international bodies and so on) which are closely monitoring these figures. In a more self-critical vein, the child sex ratio has become a veritable academic and advocacy industry in its own right.

The results of Census 2011 have therefore been highly awaited, if from varying perspectives. Some scholars have offered predictions of likely patterns, drawing from the National Family Health Surveys (the most recent being NFHS III, 2005-06), as well as the Sample Registration at Births (SRBs) made available every year. Significant differences have also been crystallising. Has there been too great or too little a focus on the Preconception and Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act of 1994? Counter-intuitively, could there be reduced son preference even though the numbers are skewed? Is the problem one of “mindsets” out of synch with modern values of equality, or, does modernity itself have a lot to do with what is happening? On the one hand, some advocates believed that the main focus ought to be on the criminalisation of unscrupulous medical practitioners, while others warned of how the very advocacy against sex selection was turning into a problematic campaign against abortions per se. While some predicted heightened practices of “female genocide”, others saw signs of a turnaround.

Confluence of Processes

There is something curious about much of this debate and the positions that have been taken. On what basis would we, after all, expect change to happen? Planning the size and sex composition of one’s children is surely at the confluence of a range of processes, from stretching limited resources, wanting the “best” for one’s children with the effect of heightening the burden of having them, extreme socio-economic volatility, varying individual morality, the kinds of technologies available, and the nature of gender disparities across classes in contemporary society. Much has been said about signs of reduced son preference as more and more families say that they want a girl and a boy. But what if this preference actually translates into the statement “at least one boy, and at most one girl”? Moreover, what kind of structural changes are we witnessing such that expectations of a turnaround could have a genuine basis?

As already mentioned, the secretary to the home ministry went on record to say that, in the face of this further decline in the child sex ratio, the state should re-examine its policies.¹ There has been far too much focus on the need to restore “balance” to the skewed numbers. What is forgotten is that in a growing population like ours with its hypergamous marriage market, male privilege has benefited over generations from an excess of marriageable women in any given cohort. In other words, there has been an invisible structural imbalance at work in most parts of the country outside the north west, but which was never considered to be a problem to be “corrected”. Indeed, the peculiar case of Kerala with its positive sex ratio but highly discriminatory practices against women is a case in point. In all the focus on sex ratios, fertility and literacy, little attention is given to what is arguably the most critical indicator of the status of gender in our country. The most recent round of the National Sample Survey (66th Round, 2009-10) has the stunning revelation that, after 20 years of unprecedented economic growth, the total proportion of women in any kind of paid work is no more than 15%. Another way of putting this would be to say that 85% of all women are destined to find their future through structural forms of dependency. This does not even begin to discuss the nature of the work that

constitutes the 15%. Therefore, rather than keep playing the manipulation game of balancing numbers, what is required are state policies that actually seek to create the conditions for meaningful life-chances, beginning with those of girls and women.

NOTE

1 By way of comparison, consider the latest concerns surrounding the demographics of our great neighbour China. China is still the most populous country in the world, and, moreover, has had the worst skewed sex ratios the world has ever seen. This has been laid at the door of its heavily administered one child policy, which resulted in practices such as sex selection to ensure that the only child was a boy. Interestingly, current demographic concerns being voiced are primarily focusing on the very consequences of a one child policy per se. China is now beginning to be an aging population, with too few people in the working age to support too large a proportion of older people. News reports have referred to a 20 year old special experiment in rural Shanxi province where families were actively encouraged to have more than one child. But, according to this report, especially given the level of earnings of a working class family, very few of them were interested in a second child, and fertility patterns in that region have shown little difference from the rest of the country! While the consequences of the skewed sex ratio are also briefly discussed, it is this willed desire for just one child that is now seen to threaten China’s future development (Deccan Herald 2011).

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