

A comparative study of gender imbalance in India and China

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Abstract

Narratives changed from calls for birth control to concerns over fertility levels dropping below the zero-replacement level. The two neighbours, India and China both have a patrilineal society, which has created a growing preference for sons. Sex-selective abortion, female foeticide and infanticide have remained a concern, the paper looks at the response of the two countries to the perceived problem of population explosion while understanding how existing societal practices have created a gender imbalance. Global politics on a sensitive issue like this has accentuated pre-existing problems in both societies. A narrow approach to dealing with this intersectionality leaves out the larger problems. With the growing penetration of the Internet, one can expect more stories to come out in the public sphere which would add to the discourse of gender imbalance in the two developing economies.

Keywords: China, India, Gender Imbalance, Sex Ratio, Society, One Child Policy, Sex-Selective abortions...

Introduction

India and China have captured western imagination from the early days of History to their recent emergence as the world's largest consumer markets. As both countries zoom ahead towards increasing GDP and GNP numbers but have done precariously little to address the pre-existing patriarchal norms leading to growing cases of Gendercide. Extending the point of Gendercide, Elizabeth Gerhardt in her work; "The Cross and Gendercide: A Theological Response to Global Violence Against Women and Girls" (2014) points out that: "gendercide is an effort to harm and injure millions of women and girls based on their gender." The impact of having "Too many men" in society moves just beyond loneliness. One particular social consequence that we would be looking at in detail is the "marriage squeeze".

Both countries have a long history of son preference, the imbalance has been exacerbated by the short-sightedness in policymaking. The One-Child Policy in 1979 and the growing prevalence of family planning in India post the 1966 IMF Program, where India's population explosion was seen as an impediment to growth. The countries have been experiencing a significant drop in fertility levels over the last three decades, which further complicates the problem. As per estimates pointed out by (Guilmoto 2011, 2): "the number of men who are likely to remain bachelor's by 2055 will be about 15% in China and 10% in India if at all the sex ratio at birth returns to normalcy."

Policy decisions in both countries to deal with this gender imbalance or to deal with the population problem have been centred around governing female bodies and their right to reproduce. While, looking at gender imbalance and a plausible future, the fate of Biopolitics matters. This will increasingly occupy a transnational space with newer science and technology developments. The interventions by state authorities looking to restrict bodily freedom offer us a scholarly insight into the growing intersectionality between Biology and Global Politics. The changes in population policies and a departure from the predominant linear Malthusian model show a serious shift. The paper seeks to explore the changing narratives by drawing from Foucauldian Biopolitics and analysing how disciplinary environments are produced through the interaction of micro-structural power units. The effort here is to draw from these micro-interventions, which through consent and coercion manifest in larger macrostructures through the state apparatuses.

The Chinese population born during the great experiment in the form of the One-Child Policy has been a critical voice in the country. The growing penetration of mobile phones and the advent of the internet have allowed more voices to come out of the state, while also making

traceability easy for the Chinese authorities. To this section, the subject of population is not simply a state prerogative but is a sensitive subject where certain lines need to be respected.

Chinese Statistics need to be used with caution, and often the state institutions are guilty of publishing erroneous figures. It may be noted that Chinese media outlets cannot present information outside the purview of the authorities, these outlets function as active agents of the Communist Party (Goodstadt 1982, 6-7). Issues like sex-selective abortions, female infanticide and female foeticide are often devoid of statistics and shrugged off as private matters. Indian media has focussed on running awareness programs about the existing societal practices without addressing the context which creates the problems (MacPherson & Yvonne 2017, 414-15). The discourse in media about gender imbalance has been created based on a symptomatic reading of the larger problems while not engaging with sensitive bodily issues.

Mapping the Gendercide

“In Gendercide: The Implications of Sex Selection” (1985); Mary Anne Warren brought in the term “Gendercide”. The term refers to selective mass-killing of a particular gender and draws an analogy from Genocide. The systematic elimination, especially of females has been particularly prevalent in India and China, two countries that show some of the largest disparities in male to female numbers for sex ratio at birth. The work by Amartya Sen (1986) brought into the context that over 37 million women were reportedly missing as per the data analysed from the 1981 Census. The data garnered through Census 2011, shows that 914 girls are being born for 1000 males, a disturbing trend that shows the deepening gender imbalance. In the Northern states of India like Haryana, the number has fallen to 830. Chinese statistics, released by its state apparatuses points out that for every 120 males being born, there are 100

females. Estimates of the number of “missing women” are a point of debate, though some even quote the figure to be somewhere as close to 200 million.

The gender-based killing takes several forms and is further complicated by the cultural dynamics in play. Selective abortion, forced abortion, infanticide, foeticide and dowry-related deaths are often not reported as it largely takes place within private households making access to information rare. The top culprit is a reported one million sex-selective abortions which take place annually, despite legal intervention and numbers showing an improved sex ratio according to the Central Bureau of Health Intelligence’s, National Health Profile (2019).

The numbers are still far from satisfactory, and the issue of “missing women” remains a global concern.

It was China’s One-Child Policy, a policy modelled on Malthusian economics which equated the availability of food linearly to the population of the region, an idea that over the years has been thrust by the developed world on the developing world. Slowly, the issue of Gendercide started to gain prominence through western media, but the perspective has often been criticised to be a skewed one. Both countries have a strong patrilineal lineage, which explains the preference for a son for various socio-economic reasons. The demographic imbalance has created concerns about “surplus men” and “scarce women”, which is reconfiguring traditional societies. There are already widespread concerns about the consequences of having populations that are pre-dominantly masculine (Ravinder 2016, 2-4).

Population growth in the third-world countries was seen as a global problem and an impediment to world economic growth by the developed countries and soon millions were being pumped in the form of aid to deal with the problem coercing the respective governments to make policy changes. The post-revolutionary regime under Deng Xiaoping

made economic development its immediate mandate and was busy re-establishing its political legitimacy. With a new mandate, population control became fundamental to maintaining its legitimacy (Feng Wang & Gu 2013, 116-17).

China's One-Child Policy remains a contentious point in scholarly debate. With the introduction of OCP in 1979, Chinese media outlets controlled by the state like The People's Daily and Xinhua started to carry editorials pushing for "one child per couple, with at most two". The People's Daily news report from June of 1979, carried a speech which was given by Chen Muhua, who was the then head of the National Family Planning group. One of the lines which justified the need for a policy like the OCP read: "To move the focus of birth control work to have one child is the best approach." The social experiment in the form of the OCP was celebrated and birth control became a critical part of the "basic state policy".

The Marriage Squeeze

The alarming inconsistencies in the sex-ratio numbers at birth have constructed conditions that have led to a "marriage squeeze". Both India and China have been trying to control the probability of the birth of a girl child for at least the last three decades, one of the major social consequences of such a condition is the ever-growing "male marriage squeeze". This phenomenon is not new and the demographic imbalance has been seen as a key reason behind the current crisis. Both countries follow an almost universal law of compulsory marriage and this is worsening the likelihood of a male marriage squeeze.

A study published in the book "Too Many Men, Too Few Women" (2016) points out that: "by 2030, more than 20 per cent of men in China aged between 30-39 years will never get married." Ethnographic evidence provided by scholars looking at the phenomenon has

consistently warned of bride shortages and chances of increasing violence against women. Various means which can be used towards addressing the issue have been consistently appearing across Chinese, Indian and foreign media outlets adding to the discourse surrounding the issue.

While demographic statistics in India and China point to the “marriage squeeze”, the social consequence is also shaped through systematic problems in play which include cultural norms and socio-economic factors. Caste endogamy, clan exogamy, prohibiting marriages of widows, etc are some of the factors which are responsible for creating male-dominated societies. In the Northern states of India which are worst affected by the gender imbalance, bachelors are responding to the shortage of brides in different ways - one way, in particular, is seeking brides from other regions. The scarcity of women in the North of India in the marriageable age is not a new phenomenon, this dates back somewhere close to the start of the 1900s; were almost seven per cent of the men in the age group of 45-54 years in the North were never married in comparison to just three per cent of the men in the South of India (Bhat & Halli 1999, 676-77).

Son preference and the relative lower social strata of the females have created conditions for ongoing discrimination against females. The Chinese marriage squeeze has been a well-documented topic across scholarly literature and popular media. With fewer women available in the marriage pool, the women now have the choice to marry men belonging to a higher socioeconomic stratum. This growing preference and the relative scarcity of women have created a situation where men belonging to the lower socio-economic strata are not able to find a wife (Hesketh & Zhu 2006, 2-5). These bare branches or surplus men are specifically concentrated in poverty-stricken villages, and the name “bare branch villages”, has been

popularised through discourse in Chinese Media. Scholarly attention has now shifted to the impact of the bare branches, Valerie Hudson and Andrea den Boer in their book “Bare Branches: The Security Implications of Asia’s Surplus Male Population” (2004); argue that: “such an imbalance has the potential to trigger widespread domestic and international violence.” Across different historical epochs, the prevalence of a large number of unmarried men has led to higher rates of war and crime against females. The difference between the male and female sex ratio at birth in India and China is pointing to an impending danger, where there would be a disproportionate number of young males in comparison to females, dimming the prospects of global peace and security.

The Politics of Population

India and China, are the largest countries in terms of population size, outpacing others by a mile. One of the biggest demographic milestones that our world faces is less than a decade away. The exponential increase wasn’t seen until the 1950s, while China crossed the one billion mark in 1980, India crossed it in 1997. As per demographic estimates published in a World Economic Forum (WEF) report (2020), India is set to outpace China’s population growth by 2026.

There are serious social and biological implications of being a woman in Indian and Chinese societies. Girls in China were the main victims of infanticide and tended to have a higher Infant Mortality Rate, which was more so during poverty-stricken times in Mao’s China. A well-known survey in 19th Century India recorded that girls were regularly suffocated after their birth (Krishna 1998, 5-6). The 20th Century saw family planning programmes being introduced in both countries which brought changes in kinship patterns and affected millions of couples.

The One-Child Policy adopted by China was a measure unparalleled in Human History, and the decision was taken at a time when fertility levels in China were showing a decline. The population in Asian countries are slowly stabilising and is expected to reach consistency by the end of the 21st Century. Countries like Japan and South Korea are seeing a rapid decline in fertility, with levels falling below replacement levels. The designers of OCP had anticipated a much faster growth of population and failed to realise the impact that such a policy will have on kinship patterns in families. The policy was seen as a key plank for the regime to portray itself as a global power. Core constructs of the policy were defined starkly through biological terms (Dikotter 1995, 847-48).

With the implementation of OCP in 1979, unanticipated consequences started to emerge, including physical abuse, stagnation and a depressed fertility level leading to irreversible ageing. The goal of the policy was to decrease the population level to 1.2 Billion, it has been criticized internationally for violating freedom of choice by controlling family sizes and forcing women to undergo sterilisations and abortions. The race to control the population has often coalesced with the Chinese discourse on Minzu (Nation) which was being constructed as eugenically enhanced towards promoting the Chinese individual in a “Social Darwinist World”. The post-Mao regime soon started wresting control in a bid to create an “ideal” population size symbolising a modern China. The population became a state-led subject of national importance, which created conditions for blunt intrusion into individuals’ life and reproductive freedom that ring an alarm, more so due to the changing birth rates across different regions. The narrative of over-population would change in less than half a century, with the focus shifting towards dealing with population decline and ageing. With the focus

now seeing a shift, specific problems and issues faced by the people have been kept under the broad rubric of the population, which remains largely state-controlled.

China and India are two countries that can be seen comparatively on the same plane in terms of discrimination against females while suggesting that there are complex economic and cultural problems fuelling the situation (Eklund & Purewal 2017, 63-64). The skewed numbers have been recognised by India and China and have been seen as a threat to development, which might ultimately impact the peace and stability of the countries. India, following the Malthusian approach while trying to control the population, has added “kurimaru” or “daughter-killing” to the discourse surrounding sex-selective abortions and has taken an approach towards criminalising the same.

Abortions in China were banned during the revolutionary era, as Mao Zedong believed in a pro-natalist ambition for the communist state. While the post-revolutionary era brought in an anti-natalist ambition to give impetus to the economy. The much-criticised OCP came to an end in 2015, and the policy was replaced with a two-child policy. Though, even before the official end of the policy in 2015, there were certain provinces in rural China wherein the local administration would allow the families to have a second child on the condition that the first child was a girl.

India, while recognised the exponential population growth, did not wield the same ability as China to implement something as pervasive as the OCP. The Bio-Politics of SSA in India comes from the way the colonial administration has shaped pre-existing societies and the criminalisation of SSA in Independent India on the other hand. The criminalisation of SSA was celebrated as a milestone toward ending discrimination against females, but the

disciplinary environment has also created conditions for contradictory demographic and ideological outcomes. The immorality and illegality of abortions in the Indian state centred on the British framework of eugenics and pro-natalism have sparked movements post-independence against unsafe abortions. The movements were able to galvanise various stakeholders and abortion was made legal through the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act (1971) (Visaria, Ramchandran, Ganatra & Kalyanwala 2007, 39-40). Policies that came in post-1971 have focused on controlling population growth by improving reproductive health and easy access to various birth-control methods.

India's population problem was consequently being highlighted by the International community, a noteworthy platform being the World Population Conferences where developing countries were being asked to take drastic measures for keeping the population in check. Major aid agencies like USAID, World Bank and ADB insisted on keeping population as a pre-requisite indicator for receiving aid. The pressure from Western aid agencies forced the Indian Planning Commission to adopt a vertical approach discursively at first and also use coercive methods in isolated cases for keeping the population growth in check.

The "Population problem" was taken too far under Indira Gandhi with forced sterilisation campaigns during 1975-77. As per estimates, six million men mainly belonging to the lower economic strata were sterilised through coercion. Soon, male reproductive rights were seen as a perilous target politically for the masculinity of men. Population campaigns soon turned in robust ways towards women. This signified an administratively traditional approach toward governing the reproductive rights of women. The slogan "*hum do, hamare do*" became ubiquitous during this period and was popularised through different media forms. The Indian Postal Service during this time also started issuing envelopes with messages which read like:

“for a happy married life, please be in touch with the Family Welfare Centre.” Evidence through the years of sterilisations shows that efforts toward reducing population growth have hardly solved any of the pre-existing societal problems. The Total Fertility Rate (TFR) dropped to 2.2 per cent in 2017, as per the data released through the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) which points out that fertility levels in most the states have fallen below replacement levels. The only exceptions are the states of Bihar, Manipur and Meghalaya.

State-controlled approaches in India and China exhibit coercion and bring in criminalisation to create disciplinary environments which though addressing the symptomatic problem, ignore the larger schema in play. Both countries have long-standing programs which supposedly sought to address the gender imbalance, but neither has worked to create a support system for the women in the household. Broader concerns surrounding son preference, patriarchal lineage and reproductive pressures have been left out of the public response.

In both countries and other developing economies of Asia, the politics of population remains intrinsically linked with the policy decisions. The twenty-first century is seeing a more pervasive form of Biopolitics seeping into policy decisions. In China, with the development of frontier Biosciences and Biotechnology, governance cannot be seen in isolation from these developments which are slowly coming to shape the lives of the population. Political scientists Edwin A. Winkler and Susan Greenhalgh in their work; “Governing China’s Population: From Leninist to Neoliberal Biopolitics” (2005) points out that: “with its 1.3 billion people, and its radical experiments in demographic engineering, China is home to the world’s largest population and one of history’s most significant cases of population politics”.

Biopolitics in the Chinese sphere tends to operate in a psychological “problem space” legitimizing the pervasive role played by the statist tradition towards reshaping the Chinese society. With changing narratives, there has been a growing concern surrounding the quality of the next generation. The March of Dimes (MOD) and World Health Organisation (WHO) joint report points out that; “In India, birth defect prevalence varies from 61.1 to 69.9/1000 live births”. (Sharma 2013, 126-27). Data released by the Birth Deformity Monitoring Centre in China points out that; “of the 20 million babies being born each year, birth defects are now impacting 800,000 to 1.2 million children, which is a 40% increase since 2001.”

One case in particular that made headlines were from Jadugoda, a town in Jharkhand that is home to India’s largest Uranium deposits. Radioactive waste generated by the three mines which employ over 5,000 people has put the communities at risk. A study of 9,000 villagers in the area has shown that over 50,000 people are at risk from radiation. There has been a constant rise in the number of birth deformities and miscarriages in the area. (DW: June 25, 2014)

While India looks to hinge on the development path towards exploiting more resources to meet its ever-increasing needs, small towns like Jadugoda are being pushed to obscurity. Such cases might be dismissed as isolated, but demand scholarly attention towards understanding how modernization approaches, biopolitics and the global outlook of a nation affect different areas in more ways than one. In China too, the government’s effort to dominate globally has ramped up the extraction of resources, and the number of deaths and birth defects are seeing a steady rise due to rising poverty and widespread use of coal for powering its industries.

The Media perspective

While narratives of population explosion were soon replaced by concerns over declining fertility levels. The “population problem” started to take precedence in the 1990s with the economic liberalisation and rapid influx of western ideas. The popular media seemed to be prophesying doom if the so-called population problem was not dealt with. Some of the predictions read like this:

“The runaway birth rate has sent the nation staggering...We add 45,000 children a day to our population, which is well above the danger mark...In the next 35 years, the population will double...This will double the demand for the basic necessities of life. Food will become scarce; so too drinking water and jobs.” (Ravindran 1993, 26-27).

There have been proliferating symptomatic references to gender bias, gender sensitization and gender planning which have all been rather sporadic. Continued economic development and modernisation approaches are expected to open up wider opportunities for women. Exposure to media with the advent of satellite television and the penetration of the internet, it is expected that new influences would challenge the old power play in place. In both India and China, there is an increasing need to look at the root cause of son preference while changing deeply ingrained cultural preferences.

The Chinese government had embarked on a massive media and educational campaign during the launch of the OCP. This sustained campaign aimed to establish that the policy was meant for the good of the Chinese people, rather than being the prerogative of the Communist state. What was rather interesting about the statistics used for the campaign was that they focussed on family sizes, rather than population aggregates. Indeed, this was done to establish the

responsibility that each Chinese has towards the Communist state. The authorities through its massive state-controlled media launched efforts to ingrain new norms and keep the positive aspects of such a policy in the public consciousness. To highlight the impact of the OCP, the Chinese term “Shengnu” or “left-over woman” referring to unmarried women above the age of twenty became an important part of the Chinese media discourse. Similarly, stigmatising words which entered the discourse through Chinese media include “guanggun” which refers to the “left-over men” or the “bare branches”. Besides new words becoming an important part of the discourse, there have been persistent efforts to hide statistics.

The dark side of OCP though will remain in the media and scholarly discourse for times to come as it has led to some unintended social consequences. “Gendercide continues to be a common practice, even by family planning officials.” (Associated Press August 31, 2011) With increasing incidents being reported about sex-selective abortion, infanticide, femicide and the decreasing fertility levels, the belief that almost half of the “missing girls” reported in China can be linked to the One-Child Policy has been solidified in scholarly debates.

The propagation of the small family norm in India has been there for the last fifty to sixty years, and the message has been propagated through the usage of extensive multimedia forms which operate towards encouraging abortions and using other birth-control methods. The messaging around keeping a small family worked on a distinctive nationalistic fervour, reminiscent of the Chinese messaging which sought to focus on the economic advantages. In the public sphere, women’s movements have forced the judicial apparatus to revise the PNDT (Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques) Act. The Supreme court ruling has directed the Central and State Governments to use media as a tool for awareness to eradicate sex-selective abortions.

Numerous media reports while creating a discourse surrounding awareness have also been reporting about bride shortages and bride imports from different states to the daughter deficit states of the country, like Haryana and Punjab. While access to media might be associated with less prevalence of son preference, the impact it might have on keeping sex-selective abortions in check is largely understudied. It has become increasingly integral for the Government, NGO and faith-based stakeholders to counter-cultural norms which are shaping such acts. It is only with the help of public advocacy and societal transformation through engagement it would allow the messaging is effective.

The abolition of the OCP in 2015, saw euphoric reactions from the Chinese media. The new policy now allowed couples to have two children. Some of the outlets reported the issue in the following manner:

South China Morning Post – The report pointed out that the government will not apply the relaxations to all couples soon as it might lead to a population explosion. It also carried a quote from Wang Peian, who is the Deputy Director of the National Health and Family Commission; “adjusting and perfecting birth control policies is not tantamount to relaxing the work of birth planning.”

The Global Times - The report carried out by The Global Times points out the impact on urban spheres and how the policy changes will not lead to a population explosion. The report points out the labour shortage and decreasing fertility levels. It also tells the reader about how the new policy changes will keep the population younger and fix demographic dividends.

By midnight of 29th October 2015, less than six hours after the announcement of the ending of the OCP. There was a total of 4,961 postings across ten online Chinese news sites (Liu & Bao 2016, 229-31). The three dominant concepts covered in the discussions and the articles which were published online surrounded: a) cost, b) generation and c) timing. Each of these concepts represents the view of the Chinese public about pre-conception care.

In a case from India, Elizabeth Vargas of ABC News (2011), went on a trip to India for documenting the elimination of the girl-child in the North of India. In her much-cited report, she points out the problems in play that leads to the disappearance of millions of girls in India. Foreign media outlets like BBC, The Independent, The Washington Post, The New York Times and others have been pointing out the missing women problem for years while using scholarly studies to justify their claims. Commentaries by Nobel laureates like Amartya Sen are widely cited, but most of these reports carry a “western gaze” and fail to point out the systematic problems.

Conclusion

The paper has looked into the approaches used by the Governments of India and China towards controlling the perceived population problem. It also looked at the way societal and cultural norms intersect in large hetero-normative societies creating a gender imbalance, evident by the male-biased sex ratios in both countries. The two of the fastest-growing economies are on the cusp of becoming major powers across fields, but have done little to identify and solve the problem of the “missing women”.

Legal dimensions and creating disciplinary environments have been seen as a prerogative for exercising authority, this symptomatic reading of the problem has left broader discourse surrounding gender imbalance outside the policy purview. Both countries are already facing the impact of the policies and changing societal structures in the form of the marriage squeeze and the growing cases of violence against women which poses a serious threat.

The perspective of media has rather been skewed; as most of these issues hardly find the necessary coverage with news outlets seeking to avoid interfering in private matters unless it creates a public uproar. Chinese media, which is largely controlled by the state functions as the mouthpiece of the Communist government and is guilty of providing unreliable statistics. There needs to a broader discourse and interest amongst Media professionals to look beyond the isolated incidents. As for the problem of gender imbalance, the scenario is not expected to change unless there are radical changes in societal structures and the introduction of targeted policies which would allow the mitigation of the problems.

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