Gender genocide in India!

I. India –at moral and ethical crossroad

Almost half of India’s population is women. They are half the sky!

They can be invaluable economic asset; a powerful force for bringing in socio-economic development and a qualitative change in quality of life of the family, society and nation at large.

Yet, despite such demographic reality, gender inequity and discrimination remain deeply entrenched, aided and abetted across all stratum of Indian population.

The status of women in India continues to remain pathetic, to say the least. Profoundly patriarchal and feudal Indian society holds great fascination for child where women are neither seen nor heard. Girls are perceived as a liability; any investment over them treated as wasteful.

Girls thus remain at the mercy of patriarchal society (men folks), at nadir of social and gender equality as distressingly reflected by

- lower sex ratio
- lower literacy
- poor access to and utilization of Health services
- higher infant mortality particularly among girl child
- higher mortality among women, particularly below 35 years of age
- no role in decision making including regarding their own body, health care and reproductive choice

The consequent behavioral pattern is neglect and exclusion, denial of democratic rights and human rights violations towards women.

Gender-based discriminations, harassments, violence has come to be associated with women even since before her birth- starting with female feticide- and graduating into various types, social, psychological, behavioral and physical. Female feticide, infanticide including newborn neglect and abandonment, rape, sexual harassments, dowry deaths etc. - women have it right from womb to tomb!

With sex ratio continuously declining from 947 to 914 during 1991-2011 and from 2 districts to 538 districts (84% of total districts) having more male babies- India is thus fast moving toward a gender-imbalanced society. The continuing decline in child sex-ratio (0-6) has emerged as an alarming social problem.

Understandably, Girls have not vanished overnight! Decades of sex determination tests and female feticide that has acquired genocide proportions that are finally catching up with states in India.

Killing of girls means fewer wives and mothers for future generations and, as a result, a significant increase in the imbalance of the number of men and women in the society.
Vanishing girls - due to female feticide and infanticide - the implications have been deeper, manifold - tearing apart socio-cultural fabric, breaking traditions and religious beliefs, up surging values, throwing ethics and morality to the wind - and leaving the society badly wounded.

With increased availability of modern medical techniques, sick society with perverse mindset finds it easier - committing murder in the womb! Unfortunately, despite the Government’s sincere efforts reflected by meaningful Policy measures backed with legal safeguards (enacting legislation- banning sex-selective abortions) - the practice continues unabated!

The menace has contributed to “sex selective abortion” growing into hundred million industries in India and trafficking having emerged as a big Enterprise.

Female feticide not only denies the girl child her most basic human right – the right to be born – but it also leaves a permanent mark on psyche of the women (mothers).

*Given a conscious thought, there cannot be any other form of violence that’s more painful, more abhorrent and more shameful!*  

India is home to over a billion people, accommodating incredible cultural diversity between languages, geographic regions, religious traditions and social stratifications. It is one of the most ethnically diverse populations in the world. Also, there is vast linguistic diversity accounting for 22 major languages and hundreds of regional dialects.

Despite large demographic, socio-cultural, linguistic, religious and ethnic diversities, there are common themes and principles that contribute to the values, attitudes, beliefs and norms of the dominant society and have a strong sense of pride in the distinctiveness and diversity of their culture.

Not surprisingly, Mark Twain, a well known major American Writer, had famously said that “India is the cradle of the human race, the birthplace of human speech, the mother of history, the grandmother of legend, and the great grandmother of tradition.”(https://www.dasym.com/india-civilization-culture/)

India's approach to Ethics focus on four key principles, viz; Autonomy (free-will), Beneficence (to do good), Non-mala-faience (not to harm) and Justice (social distribution of benefits and burdens). (https://www.slideserve.com/vahe/indian-approaches-to-ethics).

We take pride in being the oldest civilization, moral values and ethics! We belong to a tradition that adores and worships the Mother Goddess. We acknowledge the female principle in nature. In ancient India womanhood was glorified; the feminine principle occupied a preeminent position in the social arrangement. The female deity was a symbol of empowerment and reflected the glorious position women held in society. The Devi was the very embodiment of power; she was the vanquisher of evil and slayer of the demon. All gods and the masculine principle were considered subordinate to the feminine.
Louis Jacolliot, the celebrated French author of *Occult Science in India*, who explored *Indian roots of Western occultism*, said: "India of the Vedas entertained a respect for women amounting to worship; a fact which we seem little to suspect in Europe when we accuse the extreme East of having denied the dignity of woman, and of having only made her an instrument of pleasure and of passive obedience." He also writes: "What! Here is a civilization, which you cannot deny to be older than your own, which places the woman on a level with the man and gives her an equal place in the family and in society." The French barrister who lived in India in the mid 19th century, sought to trace roots of Christianity in the Hindu myths and religious traditions.

*Seen in these contexts, can there ever be an act more inhuman, more ghastly and gruesome than dissolving the girl child in the womb?*

### II. Need for introspection

One basic question must trouble us: "How can anyone deny the basic human rights to the newborn?" How a man placing the seed of a child into the woman’s womb decides if gender will determine the status of the newborn in the family. As the father responsible for the child’s birth he cannot have prejudice towards her. He is responsible for the unborn child’s gender. It is not the woman, but the man’s chromosome that decides whether the newborn is going to be a girl or boy. Yet, he with his family will torture the woman blaming her for giving birth to a girl. And the unreasoned bias is reflected in the way the family treats the newborn.

Men cannot do without women. They need a mother to feed them, a sister to play with, in their youth they seek a ladylove for romance, a wife to have a family with... but they don’t want a daughter born to them! These double standards and ingrained hypocrisy have made the girl child more vulnerable – demographically and culturally as well.

Can this human psyche be adequately explained or analyzed? Can such diabolical behavior be justified by any logic?

Is this sane, civil conduct to go all out to get a bride, pay for one in a hush-hush deal, then if she is pregnant with a girl child, abort the foetus and sell her to a brothel?

Let us think of it! With the process of giving birth to a child, a mother is born. *She is our first Guru – Teacher.* The word *Guru* means ‘dispeller of darkness’. She dispels our fear of darkness, uncertainties of the unknown, and lavishes us with love, compassion and understanding. She fills us with understanding of our first lessons of being human. She instills within us kindness and forgiveness. For, whenever we do anything wrong, make a mistake, it pains her to punish us, and within minutes she cradles us in the warmth of compassion streaming from her heart.

Every human life is a gift from the mother’s womb. We spend nine months in her womb, while she goes through all the discomfort in keeping us safe. Her hormones and body undergo changes, but she only wraps us in love, eagerly waiting to hold us in her arms. And then we are born, and she feeds us her natural milk. She fills our world with love, protecting us from the harshness that she is exposed to. Her every
moment is dedicated to us. She sleeps according to the cycles of our waking, sleeping, crying and feeding. Our life is hers till we are capable of being independent.

We are nourished and nurtured every moment of our life by mother. She is our Mother Nature, our Mother Earth. She bears our burdens and sustains us through inclement weather and mellow sun. And in return – we abuse every moment a future mother, inflict wounds on her and eliminate her even before she is born. Her crime? She has been born as a daughter! We will not let her see the light of day, lie on her mother’s lap and crawl on the ground... We treat her worse than our diseased cattle.

As stated in the Vishnu Purana, when the position of the woman declines, society loses its equilibrium and harmony. In the spiritual domain, men and women have an equal position. They are equal as sons and daughters of the same Father.

Being a mother is something that cannot be taught in school or mastered through a program. It is an innate gift, a skill learnt by virtue of being a woman. She is a natural healer, caretaker, and nurturer. She is a natural upholder of moral standards and spiritual principles. She is love and devotion personified. She learns the art of motherhood from nature, from the trees, the birds and recalling her childhood days in the arms of her own mother. This is motherhood, celebrated down the ages and across all cultures.

A close examination will unmistakably point to the decline of the woman’s position in society. The glowing image of the woman, her lofty position as mother, sustainer of life, has been mauled by prejudices borne out of economic considerations.

She is seen as an object of desire, manufacturer of male children and a source of cheap labour. Whenever found lacking in any of these duties, she is sold for money and bought for pleasure; she can be molested and raped mostly with impunity. And her fall in social esteem is causing a grave imbalance to the moral order.

With the new affluence has come the question of carrying forward the family’s financial activity, protecting its interests. The conventional wisdom suggests that only the male members of the family can take charge of its fortunes and keep its flag flying. Underneath this assumption is the male fear of being displaced from the leadership role, prospects of losing control over the family.

If only someone took a look at the list of successful women entrepreneurs and top business executives, the impression of male indispensability for the leadership role would be dispelled in a minute. Whichever way one looks – art, science, business, sports, politics, administration – women are on the rise. The myth of the male preeminence and privilege has been inlaid in the social structure by the orthodox quarters to protect its interests, preserve the status quo. The segment of society which has benefited from the existing arrangement, it is common knowledge, will not tinker with new ideas of change. Social stereotypes perpetuated by Indian Films and television have only gone on to justify this unjust arrangement.

All this appears topsy-turvy, in dire contrast with India's rich history, civilization, ethics and moral values and dynamic culture- spanning back to the beginning of human civilization- Indus Valley Civilization, more precisely known as Harappan Civilization about 5000 years back.
In Hinduism the Devi image has a stronger hold over the believer’s imagination. The grandeur of the female deity is indeed breathtaking. Reverence for the woman is a major strand in our religious and cultural traditions, the story of our forefathers for hundreds and thousands of years.

The question that automatically crops up is: Are we the true descendents of those Indians who revered those bright radiant daughters of the classics, the fiery women of the epics and the ravishing women of the Vedas and Puranas? How could our society approve of an inhuman and ungodly act like female feticide? Does it not betray hypocrisy of our culture in keeping mum about the killing of the girl child in the embryo while singing in praise of the exalted Devis?

The simple answer to this question is: neither our culture nor tradition have ever approved of the silent murder of the girl child whether as an embryo or after her birth. This evil has crept into our social climate much later. It is a new construct, an offshoot of the new economic reality.

What is rather unnerving is that the steps so far taken by the government have failed to buck the trend. Preventive measures like enactment of law declaring foeticide a punishable crime made no impact. So did a string of incentive schemes encouraging families to have a more positive attitude to the arrival of a girl. The age-old prejudice against the girl child seems to have been accentuated by the new affluence which has been visible in the years since the economic reforms.

III. What is the way out?

What is the way out? How to make Government’s honest initiatives, legal safeguards really effective and change the mindset of people? Do we need a different module/approach as the issue primarily relates to societal attitudes and prejudices?

To my mind, two aspects are **Critical** and must be taken up with all the seriousness. These ares- introducing a comprehensive course on India’s civilizations, culture, ethics and moral education at the primary level of schooling so that there is ever lasting impressions on impressionable mind of the children who grow up into adults with right values and balanced unprejudiced mindset; and a strong **programmatic approach** which lays adequate emphasis on “**converting perceived liabilities into lucrative economic assets!”**

Any meaningful programmatic intervention therefore should be one which

- places the girl child at the **forefront**
- **empower** them with education, knowledge, legalities and appropriate actions;
- enable them to gain **financial strength** through skills leading to gainful employment for dignified living
- help them (adolescent and young girls) emerge as **role models** in their respective community and proactively involve them in the strive to address the issue from **position of strength**
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