

A NOTE ON FEMALE INFANTICIDE : AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL INQUIRY

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This is an exploratory study of female infanticide in a village in Tamil Nadu. This age old custom of sex selection of children, found among Kallars of Madurai district, was analysed to find out the possible reasons for its continued existence till today.

The method used was anthropological in nature. A detailed account, of the community studied, threw much light on the topic of the inquiry. The probable reasons that are found to be important are : cultural socio-economic (determined in turn by ecological and agrarian structure), marriage patterns and religious reasons.

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Introduction

Since I do not want the first child to be a female baby I wanted *it** to be killed. My husband feels that we should wait for the second child. If *that* also happens to be a female baby we will definitely kill the second one.

—A *twenty year old mother*

The prevalence of infanticide, especially female infanticide, is as old as human history itself. It is, therefore, hardly surprising to note the existence of this age old custom even today among some tribal communities. Existing evidence indicates that the practice dates back to the Upper Palaeolithic period. The reasons attributed for the practice of female infanticide are to control population for ecological and/or social reasons. This custom was considered as the most widely used method of population control during much of human history. It has also been pointed out that the "psychological costs of killing or starving one's infant daughters can be dulled by culturally defining them as non-persons" (Scrimshaw, 1978).

Other functions of female infanticide most often attributed are: controlling the number of children; selecting the sex of the child; rejecting deformities or abnormal births; and in the case of twins. It is not clear from the literature as to what happens when male children have deformities. The last mentioned case of twins occurs in those societies where twins are born to women who cannot successfully rear two children at once without neglecting other responsibilities.

* Normally used to denote an inanimate object in Tamil language.

Another example of infanticide, as part of an adaptive strategy, is provided by the Tapirape of the Amazon jungle, who had a social structure that prevented the groups from splitting into smaller groups, when the community became too large for the subsistence base (slash and burn agriculture and some hunting). Infanticide was mandatory to limit each family to three children, who could not all be of the same sex. The explicit reason given for this was that, otherwise, there would not be enough game (protein) to go around, and some would sicken and die (Scrimshaw, 1978).

The fact that becomes immediately apparent from the evidence furnished above is that the practice of female infanticide has been functional in many respects that varied from society to society which are primitive in nature. In a society where preference for sons is so strong, for various reasons, it seems to be a good functional equivalent of abortion in controlling family size, more so than contraception. Kingsley Davis and Judith Blake (1956) enumerated the ways in which it differs from abortion. *First*, infanticide allows the progeny to be selected by sex, as shown by the custom of female infanticide. *Second*, infanticide allows the offspring to be selected according to physical status, weeding out those with deformities, bad health, or unacceptable physical and racial characteristics. *Third*, it can be practiced when the circumstances of birth are considered to be abnormal and ritualistically taboo. *Fourth*, whereas abortion may injure the health of the mother, infanticide obviously does not. This analytical frame-work explains only one side of the two-sided coin. It becomes necessary to enquire into the origin of the practice of female infanticide, on the one hand, and the existence of female infanticide on the other. This is precisely what is intended in this paper. We present a case wherein the same custom is still being practised among the 'socially developed' and those who live in a 'technologically advanced era.' Thus, the aim of this paper is twofold. Firstly, to present the nature of this practice among the community studied, and secondly, the possible reasons for this custom being practised till today.

The Method

This paper is basically exploratory in nature. The existence of this 'supposed-to-have-vanished custom' came as a rude shock to the author who was working on a related task at the time. Another reason was that the prevalence of this custom among some rural communities of Tamil Nadu was not encountered anywhere in the literature, and therefore, the author was not in a position to undertake a systematic study on this anthropologically and demographically important phenomenon of female infanticide. Nevertheless, the informal interviews that were held with the informants, themselves, who were otherwise reluctant to reveal the facts for fear of these instances being mentioned in the report, threw much light on this phenomenon. In one instance, a female respondent insisted that her statements should not be mentioned in the report. The information collected, particularly from the female respondents, was cross-checked with the trained Dai at the local maternity centre who happened to live adjacent to the

community studied. She had performed some of the deliveries of children who never saw the light of day.

The Community

It is pertinent to trace the Kallar community's caste history in order to shed more light on the practice of female infanticide. An account given by Turnbull* as far back as 1817, which was quoted by Thurston (1975), is available for this purpose. Though there was no direct mention of female infanticide anywhere in his book, as is the case with much later accounts also, one can get some clues as to why the community has been practising this custom. The name Kalian (or Kaflar), Thurston observes, is commonly derived from the Tamil word Kallam, which means theft (Thurston, 1975). At present, this community forms a sub-division of a major caste title called "Mukkulathors" (Krishnaswamy, 1984). The kallar community was notorious for its killing, ferocity, bravery and the like, which points clearly to their unpleasant profession, that of robbing and slaying their neighbours. In former days, they were a fierce and turbulent race, famous for their military prowess. But lately, they have taken to diverse professions such as agriculture, watchmen of coconut groves (age old profession of kallars), business, illicit liquor distillation and so on. One has to keep in mind these cultural traits while explaining female infanticide.

Nature of the Custom

The statement mentioned at the beginning of this paper was one story among many, which the author himself heard from a young mother of twenty years of age. There could have been many more untold instances where the nature of these occurrences would have been more horrid. The trained Dai at the local maternity centre, who performs deliveries, was a witness to many instances of female infanticide. She narrated a few ways in which the members of the community accomplish this task of killing their infant daughters. In one instance, the father just stepped on the throat of his infant daughter, a few hours after the child was born, while the mother was still unconscious. A second way was to feed the infants a white poisonous milk of a wild plant with a little sugar — the result being instant death.

But who carries out these "executions" ? It is normally done either by the father or the mother of the infant. Since the preference for sons is so strong in this community, a woman who gives birth to only female children is looked down upon by the members of the community. In order to avoid the wrath of the in-laws, she may even do away with the baby during the initial days, and report

* T. Turnbull wrote, "The Cullaries are said to be in general brave people, experts in the use of lance and in throwing the curved stick called vullaree taddee. This weapon is invariably in use among the generality of this tribe. The word Cullar is used to express a thief of any caste, sect or community, but it will be necessary to trace their progress to that characteristic distinction by which this race is designated both a thief, and an inhabitant of a certain Naud, which was not altogether exempted from paying tribute to the sovereign of Madura" (Thurston, 1975, Vol. III, p. 53)

it as a natural death. In cases of inability by a woman to bear a son, even divorce is reported to be not uncommon. Which mother would dare to put herself into this position to invite this extreme social sanction ? It is interesting to note that in the Census Report of 1891, it is mentioned that as a token of divorce "a Kalian gives his wife a piece of straw in the presence of his caste people." In Tamil, the expression 'to give a straw' means to divorce, and 'to take a straw' means to accept divorce" (Thurston, 1975). Even today, the question of divorce among kallars is reported to be a least complicated social issue.

One could not say with certainty as to how much this element of female infanticide contributes to the over-all infant mortality prevailing in the society. The village where this custom still prevails is marked as a high infant mortality area which probably could mean that the death of female infants, who have undergone this social sanction, might have been reported as normal deaths. Since no statistics were available, one would never know the magnitude of these deaths unless there is a special study focused on the problem of female infanticide.

Discussion

Having seen the different facets of female infanticide, as prevalent in other communities as well as in the community in question, one has to look for the possible explanations of its continued existence. As is known, the factors that determine female infanticide are quite complex and varied among the Kallars of Madurai district. The possible reasons that could be attributed are socio-economic, religious, and, of course, the cultural habits of the Kallars in general.

The most important reason is cultural. As was noted, the hereditary occupation of the kallars had been dacoity and even now their economic conditions have not changed in a major way. Thus, they are a merciless community as regards the value of human life. Having a son means perpetuation of the race, with all its valour and adventure. They take pride in calling themselves as members of the 'Kalian race'. In an age of constant competition with other groups, the community needs enough hands, to get away from the law with the unlawful activities of its members. One would, therefore, like to have only sons and do away with the daughters, since the destruction of a female infant is viewed psychologically in the same light as abortion. In this context, it is not surprising to note that a mother is looked down upon for not being able to give birth to a son.

An important point that arises at this juncture is the availability of women for the very existence of the community itself. A convincing answer would not be possible for the simple reason that we do not have evidence to show how far the practice of female infanticide affects the sex ratio of the population. But one can look into the kinship structure, particularly the marriage pattern of the kalians. Kalians have exogamous septs called *Kilai* or branches (roughly equivalent to a clan in the standard English term of kinship) which run in the

female line, i.e., a child belongs to the mother's, not the father's sept. Thus, the children of a brother and sister may marry, because they belong to different *kilais* i.e., those of the respective mother (Thurston, 1975). The problem does not become acute as long as there are enough boys and girls available with the *kilais* of close kinsmen, which is not always the case with all the *kilais*.

The marriage pattern of Kallars leads us to the second reason, which is socio-economic. Possession of a son means more strength during inter-communal conflicts and his contribution towards family income. Daughters, on the other hand, are an economic liability. The existing marriage patterns of the kallar community demand that the parents provide a considerable amount of economic goods (if not money) in order to get their daughters married. The expenditure from the girl's side appears to be a continuous life long process, even well after marriage. The girl's parents are expected to offer gifts or invite the in-laws for each and every festive occasion. The agony does not end there. The girl's relatives, including the father and, at times, her brother, are expected to attend all the ceremonies connected with the son-in-law's family with appropriate gifts. An interesting note given by Thurston illustrates this point:

when a member of a certain *kilai* dies, a piece of new cloth should be given to the other male members of the same *kilai* by the heir of the deceased. The cloth thus obtained should be given to the sister of the person obtaining it. If her brother fails to do so, her husband will consider himself degraded, and consequently will divorce her (Thurston, 1975).

Due to these economic liabilities, a male child is always considered an asset in all circumstances.

The important elements which are intricately associated with the socio-economic status of the members of this community are the agrarian structure and the ecological factors. A close look at the agrarian structure reveals that the fertile land is owned by very few members of the Kallar caste as such land is mainly the property of the members of the other castes. Though the fertile land, fed by the Vaigai river, provides labour to the landless members of this caste almost throughout the year, the income earned from it is meagre. The male members of the caste get jobs during the heavy work seasons such as sowing and harvest, and females get jobs during the intermediate periods and also during the sowing and harvest seasons, involving light work. The wage structure is such that the female labourer is always paid less than the male labourer. One must also pay due attention to the seasonal variation of demand for labour and crop patterns.

The village, where the practice of female infanticide is prevalent, is found to have a peculiar ecological structure. The eastern side of the village is a plain which is traversed by the Vaigai river and has fertile paddy fields, coconut groves and *kodikkals* (betel nut leaf groves). The soil found here is black and alluvial. The market value of this land is considerably high. On the other hand, the western and south-western sides of the village have arid land with red soil which is less

fertile. It is also hilly in nature, so agriculture is dependent heavily on the monsoon. The land on this side of the village is less costly and mostly owned by the members of the kallar caste. Thus, the ecological imbalance, coupled with the unequal agrarian structure and wage structure of the village, renders the members of this community always poor. In effect, it would be worthwhile to compare the Kallars of different socio-economic status using the areal and personal variables. Before coming to conclusions of any kind, extra caution is needed when one studies the phenomenon of female infanticide among Kallars.

Finally, this phenomenon has religious overtones. This is not peculiar to this caste group alone. But one notes that the emphasis on the religious importance of sons is slightly more than in any other non-Brahmin caste groups. During most of the ceremonies in the household, it is the son who stands next to his father or by himself if the father is absent. This is more so in the event of the death of the father. A son is essential in ceremonies connected with cremation, the role of the daughter being insignificant.

Our brief discussion enables us to understand why this particular caste group still practises female infanticide. One can readily recognise the fact that Kallars are highly traditional, whatever may be the cultural content of their tradition. They seem to live up to the practical realities of day to day life. Because of this felt need, they do not hesitate to take the extreme step of killing their own daughters if that is necessary. In fact, a separate study is needed which would answer such questions as the imbalance created in sex ratio among the population, existence of other forms and nature of sex discrimination of children, effect of birth order on female infanticide and the status of women in general.

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