CHAPTER – 8

FEMALE FOETICIDE:
IN THE STATE OF PUNJAB

“What gender is, what men and women are, do not simply reflect or elaborate upon biological ‘givens’ but are largely products of the social and cultural process.”

— Ortner and Whitehead

In some parts of India, there are so few women that men are having to look away from home to secure a bride. In the worst affected state of Punjab, there are fewer than eight girls to 10 boys.

Experts blame the outlawed practice of female foeticide for the skewed male-female ratio and say that almost a million female foetuses have been aborted because culture and tradition favour male babies. The reason is the same -- our social patriarchal mindset and available sex-determination techniques in the state. These techniques have been in use in the state since 1970s when doctors began practising amniocentesis. In Amritsar in 1979, an advertisement by a doctor about pre-natal sex determination clinics caught the attention of the media. Now Amritsar district has earned the dubious distinction of standing ninth among the 20 districts with the lowest child (0-6 years) sex ratio in India. The city has been notorious since 1970s for using ultrasound technology to identify the sex of the unborn baby. The problem is not that of Amritsar district alone. The whole of Punjab has been plagued with female foeticides. No district records more than 850 girls. Amritsar has a ratio of 783 girls per 1000 boys according to the 2001 Census and Fatehgarh Sahib has a ratio of 754 girls, the lowest in India. Ten districts of the country showing a decline in the number of girls are all in Punjab and Haryana, and eight are in Punjab alone. The ratio stands at a mere 770 for every 1000 boys.
in Patiala and 829/1000 in Ludhiana. The overall sex ratio in Punjab is 793/1000, as per the 2001 Census and as per the 1991 Census, it was 875/1000.

Table 8.1: Comparative statistics to show the decline in the child sex ratio over the last decade in Punjab:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sr. No.</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>1991</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>% decline in sex ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mansa</td>
<td>873</td>
<td>779</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sangrur</td>
<td>873</td>
<td>784</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Fatehgarh Sahib</td>
<td>874</td>
<td>754</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Jalandhar</td>
<td>886</td>
<td>797</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Bathinda</td>
<td>860</td>
<td>779</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Kapurthala</td>
<td>879</td>
<td>775</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Patiala</td>
<td>871</td>
<td>770</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Amritsar</td>
<td>861</td>
<td>783</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Rupnagar</td>
<td>884</td>
<td>791</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census 2001

Census figures for nearly a century showed Punjab’s overall sex ratio as always less than 900 females per 1,000 males due to female infanticide and female mortality. Advancement in technology and progress in medical science have led to a decline in the number of women. The 1991 Census shows 888 women per 1000 men. According to the 1991 Census, three of the four Indian districts with the lowest female child ratio were in Punjab and now this number has increased. The female sex ratio is 863 in Faridkot and 860 in Bathinda. The sex ratio of Punjab not only confirms the prejudice against the female child but also shows that latest technology is catering to it.

The mindset is only a part of the problem. The more glaring fact is that women are partners with men in perpetuating gender disparities. The preference for a son is not necessarily male driven. Surveys substantiate that the desire for a male child is not confined to men. Women are known to consume ayurvedic medicines and perform rituals to make sure that the first
born is a son. In Punjab 81 per cent of the respondents preferred a male child. Of this, the percentage of women was higher than that of the men. Nearly 84 per cent women have also become indirect partners to female foeticide. In Punjab 48.27 per cent women feel that there is no harm in female foeticide. The Malwa region represents the most ‘masculine sex-ratio’.1

According to the state’s former Health Secretary, Ms Rupan Deol Bajaj, the sex-ratio in Punjab has fallen to 754 females per 1000 males as compared to the national figure of 933:1000. She said all 17 districts of the state were included in the 34 districts with the lowest sex ratio in the country. She disclosed that in Punjab during the last decade, 6,21,790 female foetuses were aborted after sex determination by their parents.2

In Punjab, though the overall sex ratio was 874:1,000, the 2001 Census had revealed that it was just and 747: 1,000 in the age group of 0-1 year.

Baby girls in Punjab are certainly not considered to be made of sugar and spice and all that is nice as female foeticide is assuming alarming proportions in the state. From a tradition of infanticide to foeticide and now choosing the sex of the child through X-Y sperm separation marks the sad chapter of the story of women in this state with a pronounced feudal culture.

The state has a dubious distinction. Some of its districts have recorded the lowest sex ratio in the country. A 2002 study by the Chandigarh-based Institute of Development and Communication reveals that 92 per cent of the educated high-income group women who went in for sex-determination tests were aware that it was illegal, while 77 per cent of those who opted for female foeticide knew that it was a crime. Nearly 73.1 per cent families perceived the male child as a prospective earner and 85 per cent as protector while 55 per cent of the urban middle class Punjab families considered girls as a burden. In Ludhiana 16,000 cases of female foeticide were recorded last year.

1 Hindustan Times – 16 May, 2003
2 ‘Software- linked system to check foeticide”-www.aidindia.com
In April 2001, Akal Takat, the supreme temporal seat of the Sikh faith, banned female foeticide, reaffirming the Sikh principle of branding ‘kudimaars’ (killers of daughters), as cardinal sinners. But till now, the clergy has not received a single complaint. Paradoxically, the number of godmen offering concoctions and blessings to facilitate the birth of a son continue to proliferate in Punjab. And female foeticide continues to thrive. The concept of honour killings of the girls is prevalent among Jat Sikhs. In Bathinda district, a man with the consent of his first wife who had as many as 14 abortions, married another woman, all for a male child³. There remains an imbalanced birth rate of 6107 males and 4547 females in a year. Dr. Jassi, Director of Health Services, Punjab, refers to Punjab’s sex ratio as suicidal and a recipe for social chaos⁴.

Technology alone cannot be blamed. Its misuse by parents certainly is responsible for the heinous and inhuman practice. Even legal measures have proved ineffective since the problem is social and deep rooted⁵. Panjab University sociologist Rajesh Gill says, “Punjab has became more patriarchal than it was in the beginning of the last century and the girl child is now seen as a bigger liability⁶.”

This (above) is the latest position in respect of the female sex ratio in the state of Punjab. Before indulging in a detailed study eg. case studies of female foeticide/infanticide in Punjab, we discuss the history, socio-cultural environment and position of women in the state in the past as well as in the present to know the basic reason of the declining sex ratio in the state. As we know, Punjab is the richest state since centuries. Economically, socially, and culturally it is very rich, but still this evil is at its peak in Punjab. To study the details, we have to look into the history of the state.

³ The Tribune: 2 may 2003.
⁴ The Tribune 17 May 2000.
⁵ “Unfair to Daughters-Amritsar district gets a bad name.” The Tribune 6 April 2005.
8.1 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE STATE – WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO WOMEN

Historically, Punjab has always been a very progressive state and it was called ‘sapat sindu’ before the arrival of Aryans in India. Apart from the Sutlej, Beas, Ravi, Chenab and Jehlam, even Saraswati and Sindu were included in Punjab. The state is very ancient and Punjab means Punj+Aab. Punj means five and Aab means water. It is the land of five rivers. Aab is a Persian word. So it is necessary that Aab is popular among Muslim rulers. Perhaps it became popular during the reign of Mehmood Gaznavi. It means it was popular before the arrival of Gaznavi. It was called Punj+Jal. The word ‘Punchal’, as it was popularly known, was taken from Punch+Jal. Amir Khusro used the word Punjab in his writings. In Allaudin Khilji’s writings, word Punjab appeared. It was written in Persian.

The intruders, who attacked India from the north-western side used to come via Punjab. The war of Mahabharata was fought in Kurukshetra, which was a part of Punjab. Rigveda was written in Punjab.

Due to the Muslim invasions and subsequent establishment of the Mughal rule in India, there was a general decline in the position of women to which Punjab could not remain an exception. Both Hindus and Sikhs were anxious to protect the honour of their women. The Hindus found religious interpretations which gave an inferior status to Hindu women. The Sikh religion has hardly anything that suggests a low position to Sikh women. Consequently Sikh women were better placed than their Hindu counterparts.

In the sixteenth century, Guru Nanak observed a decline in women’s position. He, therefore, felt the need to give them a place of honour. He wanted them to actively participate in social, cultural, religious and economic pursuits with men and wanted them to share the grace of God equally with men. He repudiated the belief that women were evil and unclean. He wanted to build a nation where dignity was accorded equally to men and women to strengthen the social structure.
In *Asa Di Var*, Guru Nanak asked: "Why denigrate women who give birth to kings and all. The Guru has given a unique position to women. Sikh baptism is meant for both men and women. The Sikh Guru condemned the practice of Sati. "Blessed are those Satis, who lead a life of contentment and chastity," said Guru Amar Das.

Women in the Guru's household played an important role in the development of the new social order (eg. Bibi Nanaki, sister of Guru Nanak, and Mata Khivi, wife of Guru Angad Dev). Ravi Sahib Kaur (sister of minor ruler Sahib Singh of Patiala) successfully defended her brother's kingdom against the attacks of Marathas, Afghans and Europeans. Mai Bhago prevented the defeated soldiers from returning home and forced them to return to the battlefield to join Guru Gobind Singh. The soldiers were led by her. Even in Sikh Misls, women were present as politicians, diplomats, administrators and regents, and many led the forces against the enemy.

Indian women enjoyed respect and a good position in society in the Vedic period. The Muslim rule did affect their position negatively because with it came restrictions, customs and rituals that came in way of women's education and progress. The decline in their position is most striking in the 18th century; when women were considered inferior to men. This is noticed by marked contrast to society's attitude towards the birth of a girl. Sometimes, rather most of the time, a father answered in the negative to any enquiry about a newborn if it was a girl, indicating as if the girl was not a child. (Even in 1978 in Sarada Khurd and Sheikpura, women only counted their sons to tell how many children they had. Their causal attitude could be due to the difficulty in arranging marriages, finding suitable husbands, having to spend a lot on their marriages and also because women were economically dependent on men). Some of the parents practised hypergamy, making every possible effort to marry their daughters in better families with higher status.

As girls began to be considered a social and economic liability by their parents and society, the practice of female infanticide crept in which was mainly prevalent in the north. The Rajputs recorded the largest number but
this practice was not confined to Rajasthan alone. It flourished in Punjab as well and the Bedis were known for killing their infant daughters without any hesitation. They were killed either by poisoning, drowning or through an overdose of opium. Historical evidence indicates an increase in the number of female infanticide cases in Punjab. With the coming of the 1870 Act against female infanticide, the official reports showed a decline in the number of female infanticide cases. The Bedis gradually gave it up as it became compulsory to register every birth and death.

It has to be stressed again that Punjab was affected by the country's general conditions. Here also women began to be considered inferior to men. Strict caste rules made it all the more difficult for parents to find a suitable match for their daughters as there was limited choice within the caste. Parents displayed haste in marrying off their daughters, even during infancy (under 5 and 10 years). Child marriages gradually became popular in society. A number of girls died, where marriages were consummated before the age of 10 years. Girls were also married off in return of money. A woman could only be respected after marriage if she became the mother of a son. Both Hindus and Sikhs were generally monogamous unlike the Kulins of Bengal. The second wife was brought if the first one was childless. No widow marriage was allowed, except among castes like Jats, agricultural classes and artisans. On the contrary, divorce was a social stigma. Female education received little attention in the state. However, it was good for Punjabi women that various socio-religious movements, sabhas and societies came up in the state to create public opinion in favour of women's education and for removing social evils that lowered their position. The organisations that came into existence included the Arya Samaj, Dev Samaj, Singh Sabha, Chief Khalsa Diwan, Khatri Sabha and the Ahmadiya Movement. It was observed that Punjabi women were progressive and had lesser restrictions as compared to women in south India. In Punjab, women were involved in some kind of income-generating activity. Cooking, spinning, grinding corn, grain parchers, sellings milk, dung for fuel, midwifery, embroidery, ‘jutti’ and ‘paranda’-making and basket-making were the professions for Punjabi women besides working in
agricultural fields. Jat Rohr and Kamboj women worked with their men in the fields. Punjabi women have had an equal share in the building of India through the Kuka Movement, Singh Sabha, Chief Khalsa Diwan, Nirankari Movement, Akali Movement and the Indian National Congress. Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur, Raksha Saran, Subhadra Joshi, Jathedarni Mohan Kaur, Harcharan Kaur Gill, Shanti Devi Punia and many other women have left an indelible mark. It is, therefore, not surprising to find Punjabi women in almost all important spheres, including bureaucracy, politics and media. In order to continue to be enterprising and intelligent, with women contributing towards the country’s development, Punjabi society will have to guard itself against the increasing dowry trend and amniocentesis. Both these evils have been gaining since 1970s and early 1980s. It will be worthwhile to make a genuine effort to curb these social evils which are not only bringing women to a low social level, but also leading to a decline in the female population of the state.

8.2 SOCIO-CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT OF THE STATE

No study of a society can be complete without the study of position of women. The position of women in a society reflects the standard of its civilization, culture and refinement. A woman remained the centre of all activities in the family and enjoyed a reasonable position in the family. In fact, a wife was considered to be an ornament of the house. However, women were considered inferior to men and were enjoined to observe ‘purdah’. According to Muslim tradition, women were not allowed to sit with men in mosques and offer prayers.

The position which women enjoyed before the advent of the Muslim rule in India underwent a complete change during the Turkish supremacy in India. With the advent of Muslim rule, a sense of insecurity increased and consequently, Hindu women in northern India lost their high social status.

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Their spiritual, intellectual and physical development was obstructed and social status was curtailed.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the position of women was distinctly subordinate and they were regarded inferior to men. A woman was treated as a drag in society. The social laws and customs which evolved in the changed set-up, stamped women with the stigma of mental deficiency and created in them a sense of inferiority. It became a common saying in medieval India that any man, heeding the advice of women at home, was a fool. Women were not enjoying freedom in any walk of life. As a daughter, she lived under strict supervision of her parents; after marriage under supervision of her husband and as a widow under the care of her eldest son. A woman must never be independent, it was argued.

A woman was mainly confined to her home and domestic work. She was first required to serve meals to her husband and other elderly members of the family and then eat herself. It is corroborated by contemporary literature that women waited on men while they ate and had their food themselves after the men had finished. She had to follow her husband at a respectable distance while walking. A good wife was expected to dedicate herself spiritually and physically to her husband.

His gratification was her ultimate goal. The husband was sacred for the wife and no knowledge, pilgrimage, yagna, happiness, or devotion to gods could equal the pativarta or the sanctity of wedlock. Her own likes and dislikes did not count. She dressed in the manner that would please her lord. Her dress indicated whether her husband was absent or present, or even whether she was in favour or out of favour. Adultery was the greatest social offence that a woman could commit.

The position of a wife in Islam was legally much stronger than that of her Hindu counterpart, who had all the duties without any corresponding

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8 "Life and Culture in Medieval India," B.N. Luniya 1978, p-159 [Punjab Socio- Economic Condition, Dr. Daljit Singh]
rights. A Muslim woman had rights of her own. She could hold her property and if she could not enjoy it as she pleased, she could prevent her husband from taking possession of it. If the wife was rich, she could obtain a position of complete independence as against a needy husband. The main function of a woman was considered to bring forth a son and after that she was honoured and looked after by the people. The birth of a daughter was considered inauspicious, while that of a son was an occasion for rejoicing.

Though theoretically she was considered Lakshmi (Goddess of Prosperity) her birth was not welcomed. She had no share in her father’s and brother’s property. If there were many daughters, they became a major responsibility. A woman who gave birth to girls consecutively was condemned by her husband. It was considered necessary that an acceptable bride must have sons as her off-spring. The male child was expected to become a helpmate to his parents, hence the birth of a son was always welcomed and that of a daughter looked down upon as a misfortune. Though the birth of a female child was considered inauspicious in Hindu society, yet it is worth mentioning here that the birth of a female child in the Chenab Valley of Punjab was an occasion of immense joy. Damodar, a contemporary writer of the sixteenth century, writes that the birth of Heer, in Chuckak’s home was celebrated.

The festive activities on the birth of Sahiban in the house of Khiva Khan have been depicted beautifully by Peelu. Even in the royal families, the difference was clear and well marked. It should be noted here that the male child was desired during the sixteenth century. Only women rejoiced and feasted on the birth of a daughter, while the whole court took part in the celebrations, if a male child was born. For instance, Babur (the Mughal Emperor) was anxious to have a male child. Guru Nanak Dev also sang hymns indicating how people gave importance to the male child in society. “Mai Baap Ko Beta Neeka Sasure Chatur Jawai; Bal Kanya Ko Baap, Pyare Bhai Ko Ati Bhai, Poot Pekh Jyo Jiwat Mata, Utt Pout Jan Har Syo Rata.” This means how happy the mother is to see her son.
The heinous crime of infanticide was popular in north-west India. The birth of a female child was looked down upon as an unfortunate event in the family. No doubt, an average Hindu woman was respected as a daughter, wife, and mother among the Brahmins, Rajputs and Khatirs. But she was regarded as inferior to man. Her position, at best, was of a subordinate. Women were treated as objects of pleasure, child producing machines and cooks. Education for women was considered unnecessary and dangerous.

It is interesting to state that in Punjab women enjoyed authority in the household, both among the rich and the poor. She performed multifarious duties, including grinding of corn, milking cows and buffaloes, churning butter, cooking food, fetching water and spinning cotton.

An analysis of folk tradition presents an ambivalent image of women. If on the one hand she was suppressed in the patriarchal social system, on the other hand she exercised great authority at home.

The medieval Indian woman was a prey to many social rituals and customs like female infanticide, child marriage, pardha, sati, polygamy, prostitution and sutak etc. The practice of female infanticide was practised almost as a social custom. Infanticide had created hell on earth for the females. The girls were, therefore, neglected, ignored and allowed to rot and many of them died prematurely. The practice prevailed among the Rajputs of the hills, the Khatris of Gujranwala, Multan, Jhang, Shahpur, Jhelum and Lahore. The Hindus adopted the practice of female infanticide with a view to escape the risk of the girls losing chastity at the hands of enemies and foreign invaders. The Bedis in Punjab and Chauhans in Rajasthan were generally known as “Kurimars.” In Punjab, the Bedis of Jalandhar were so accustomed to it that anybody among them who kept a daughter was excommunicated. Some of the Jats also practised it. For the Bedis, it was a matter of social pride not to give a daughter to an inferior caste. It was primarily due to economic causes coupled with ignorance and pride that the fathers of boys required heavy dowry for their consent. Hence it became customary to kill daughters and avoid difficulties in their marriage. During the Sultanate period, female infanticide was very common among the Hindus. The Gakhars were
very particular in killing their daughters at the time of their birth. The Muslims also committed infanticide. Some Muslims of the Jat tribe and Muslim sayyids also committed the heinous crime of female infanticide. As soon as a female child was born, the father would take her to the door of the house and holding the child in one hand and a knife in other shouted that if anyone wanted, one was at liberty to take her away. If nobody came forward, the poor infant was immediately put to death.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when women suffered the most, young girls were carried off by members of the ruling class. Hence, to save their honour, parents indulged more in the killing their infant daughters or married them off at early age. The Sikh Gurus raised their voice against the practice of infanticide. The Tenth Guru laid down five injunctions to be obeyed by his followers. One was not to have any dealing with those who killed their daughters.

So through the ages, women in Punjab suffered a lot. The reasons might be different but the victim was only the woman as always.

8.3 PRESENT POSITION OF THE CHILD SEX RATIO AND REASONS FOR DECLINE IN THE FEMALE CHILD SEX RATIO IN THE STATE

Added to the long list of evils, the practice of female foeticide shows India in poor light before the international community. Pre-natal sex-determination tests followed by quick abortions destroy thousands of foetuses much before they can become daughters! The effects of this are visible in the vast human resources that are lost and the alarmingly declining female-male ratio. This widening gap between the female and male population is because many females are allowed to die. Throughout the world nature balances the sex ratio by its own biological mechanism, but in India nature is over-ruled. India has one of the lowest sex ratios in the world. Punjab, the richest state, has reflected this trend in the latest Census, a matter of great concern.

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10 Punjab: Socio-Economic Condition [1501-1700 A.D.] [CH-3]- By Dr. Daljit Singh (Punjab Historical Studies Development, Punjabi University, Patiala.)
The problems of 99.9 per cent girls in Punjab really begin at birth, when widely prevalent primitive patriarchal attitudes are instrumental in conferring on them low status. This is evident in the blatant preferential treatment to male siblings, lack of choice for their future, little or no encouragement to turn professionals and the importance attached to their early marriage. When society is at this stage of evolution in Punjab and Haryana, it is not surprising that by using sex-determination technologies, families prefer to abort the female foetus rather than let a girl be born.

How critical the situation has become today is aptly brought out by the Census conducted in 2001 which showed that India’s sex ratio had declined drastically since the last Census and the states that have contributed to this decline are Punjab and Haryana. The decline in Punjab is possibly the highest by 82 points and Haryana follows next with 59 points. Earlier in 1991, all districts of Punjab barring Nawanshahr recorded a child sex ratio of under 900 girls per 1000 boys11.

Socio-historic circumstances peculiar to the north-west are responsible for the subordination of the Punjabi female. Practices like “purdah”, child marriage, dowry and illiteracy were rampant in the past and have contributed to the secondary status of women in society. Sons were needed by society and welcomed. This psyche rules Punjabi culture today. The birth of a male child is greeted with jubilation and that of a daughter treated as a misfortune. Family pressure and unsupportive spouses are a major factor behind the spread of female foeticide. Side by side, major contributors to the crime are gynaecologists and radiologists as well as an amorphous but large tribe of doctors in society. A nexus of sorts exists between gynaecologists and radiologists on this front, as they together rake in considerable profit from the MTP business. A large number of clinics have mushroomed all over Punjab run by homoeopaths, ayurvedic practitioners, lab assistants, nurses, dais or PHC compounders. Numerous such clinics can be seen in Ludhiana, Khanna, Malerkotla, Malaud, Amritsar, Jalandhar and Bathinda. These are unhygienic, dingy, one-room clinics where dais perform abortions at great risk to women.

11 “Female Foeticide goes on unchecked in Punjab” (The Tribune 23-09-05) by Charu Singh.
Alongside, there are a large number of scan centres without any trained radiologist on the job. Prospective patients are shared between them. Nothing is mentioned on paper; the tests are shown as performed on medical grounds and the abortion as MTP.

The government and social organisations have been mobilising opinion to take steps to counter female foeticide. Consequently, the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Control and Regulation Act was passed in Parliament during the monsoon session of 1994. The state assemblies have passed the law in Maharashtra, Gujarat, Punjab and Haryana. This Act was introduced to stop the misuse of technology to further exploit women. However, passing the law by itself does not seem to be sufficient. Strict implementation is needed and awareness has to be generated. This Act leaves much to be desired and there are many loopholes in it. Preferably, the test should be restricted to government-run institutions and should be performed on the recommendations of two or more doctors. So far much noise has been made about the Act, but there has been minimal action. In the few cases that were taken up, the victim has been harassed and fined. It is perhaps an irony that on this issue, the law attacks the victims of the crime.

8.4 POSITION OF WOMEN

i) Ancient times of Gurus

ii) Modern times

The low sex ratio and child sex ratio amongst the Sikh community has been the focus of attention ever since the data on religion was released by the Census Commissioner in September 2004. It has come as a surprise for many thinkers since the religion prides itself in proclaiming that both the sexes enjoy equal status. The question now is: what is the status of women in Sikh religion. What is the affect of the teachings of Guru Nanak Dev, who broke the age-old tradition of ignoring women folk, belittling them and labelling them as evil? The Guru spoke out his heart and expressed his true feelings. Guru Nanak said:

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“Of women we are born, of woman conceived
To woman engaged, to woman married women
are befriended, by woman is the civilization
continued.
When woman dies, woman is sought, for it is by
woman that order is maintained. Then why call her
evil from whom are great men born.
And without women none shall exist, The eternal
Lord is the only one, O’ Nanak.
Who depends not on woman.”

This means that if there is someone to give, there has to be someone
to receive. Had woman not been the receiver, the onus of conceiving for nine
months would have been on the male, but it was not to be so in the game plan
of the Supreme Power.

Almost half the population around the globe comprises women. It is a
matter of concern that the sex ratio is on the decline most alarmingly in the
northern states of India, especially in Punjab. In examining the partially
disaggregated data, researchers stumbled upon a more surprising fact that
the sex ratio was adverse for the whole of Punjab irrespective of religion,
region, literacy level or participation at the work place.

All religions have a social and cultural context and cannot exist in
isolation. It is interesting to find that the prophets and founders of major
religions, generally favoured equality between men and women but it emerges
that the status of women deteriorated in later periods to a subservient level.
This is easy to explain. Since all major religions of the world emerged and
evolved in patriarchal cultures, the teachings have been interpreted and
understood by patriarchal way of thinking. In most of the religions, women are
treated as inferior to men physically, intellectually and spiritually. The general
portrayal of woman as a seductress being associated with body and flesh was
the reason why she was considered unsuitable for attaining the goal of
religion.
In a conservative society like India, the value system and ideal image of the woman is expected to derive inspiration from religious philosophy. Indian society, by the fifteenth century, had reduced the status of woman to that of a temptress or a distraction to all those individuals who devoted their life to the pursuit of religious belief. A woman was considered a component of wealth, a material possession, or an appendix to man. She was devoid of any independent existence and always expected to be guarded by a man as a wife, mother or daughter. She was not expected to live an independent life and widowhood was considered evil. In recent years, the situation is slowly changing with the spread of education and efforts by social reformers and the government.

8.4.1 ANCIENT TIMES OF GURUS

The Sikh religion was founded by Guru Nanak Dev (born in 1469 AD) and was followed by nine other Gurus. In 1708 AD, the 'guruship' was ceremoniously bestowed upon Sri Guru Granth Sahib by the Tenth Guru. Since then, Guru Granth Sahib is revered as a living Guru in the form of scripture. Therefore, the basic Sikh philosophy comes from the traditions set by the ten Gurus during their lifetime and from the compositions included in Guru Granth Sahib, which contains the writings of the Sikh Gurus and saints. According to the Sikh religion, every human being has a body, mind and soul and is equal to others in all respects.

Sikhism encourages every individual to be literate, without discrimination of sex, caste, creed or religion. The availability of religious teachings in the spoken language was an incentive for all to learn the language. In Sikhism, it is advisable that each individual personally recites verses from Guru Granth Sahib. Therefore, many gurdwaras offer formal educational facilities through schools and colleges to large sections of the community, mostly at subsidised rates and without discrimination of sex, caste, creed and religion.

In Sikhism, a woman has been given equal status to that of man in all spheres of life. According to the Sikh thought, as all things are created and
inhabited by God, there is no scope for discrimination on the basis of sex in
the practice of religion. The Sikh Gurus condemned the notion of inferiority of
women and respected women for they gave life to all humans. The Sikh
Gurus did not approve of any inferior treatment to one-half of the humanity but
rather encouraged women, who had turned meek and submissive by the
sixteenth century, to become courageous and independent. It may be
pertinent to mention that in Sikh religion a woman is not considered a
temptress, seductress, or any form of evil. Rather the definition of ‘maya’,
applicable to both man and woman, has been changed to imply any force that
leads one away from God. Thus, womanhood has been absolved from the
longstanding stigma of a temptress in our society. The practices of sati, female infanticide, dowry, child marriage and purdah were prevalent in India in
the sixteenth century. Therefore, the Sikh Gurus who strived to uplift the
status of women socially, prohibited dowry, female infanticide, sati, and
permitted widow remarriage. Similarly, the Gurus insisted that women folk be
considered equally competent in all respects to men and no more considered
to be a property of men.

The institution of marriage is upheld in Sikh religion and it is believed
that by living within the family life, one can attain enlightenment. Therefore,
Sikhism encourages family life and living on earned income. All the Sikh
Gurus, who were in the marriageable age, as also most others whose
compositions are included in Guru Granth Sahib, were married and had
children. In marriage, both man and woman are instructed to be respectful to
each other and to lead marital life on the principle of ‘one in mind and spirit’
though having separate existence.

Similarly, in professional, social and cultural matters, women are
expected to contribute. Most of the Gurus worked in different professions and
their spouses contributed significantly in different institutions. For an
honorable and respectful family life, some living standards are to be
maintained and Sikh philosophy encourages a spacious house, adequate
healthy food and a comfortable means of transport for every household. A
Sikh family is expected not only to maintain comfortable standards but also willingly be able to provide food and shelter to guests and the needy.

In the times of Guru Nanak, female infanticide was not uncommon in India and birth of a male child was a religious necessity. The Sikh Gurus prohibited female infanticide and encouraged a healthy family; a male child was not considered a must. In accordance with the Sikh philosophy, the female child is not discriminated against and a son is not necessary for any ceremony, including the death ceremony.

Sikhism does not believe in renunciation of householder's life and, therefore, each individual has to work hard for a dignified living. All labour is dignified, and no work is inferior or superior. To earn a living through hard work and to prosper and share with others are the guiding principles. Sikh women participate as equal members in all religious functions. In mid-sixteenth century, the Third Guru appointed 52 women as missionaries and four women to Manjis or diocese, in respective geographical areas in India to preach the tenets of Sikhism. In the early eighteenth century, during the time of the Tenth Guru, women were known to have led a batch of Sikh warriors in the battleground. Thus, all vocations are open to women and men alike. A woman in Sikhism is considered to be equal, if not more important to society. She does not change her name after marriage, and can practice and participate in any religious ceremony as a grown-up, elderly or widow. Women are encouraged to be equal participants in the workforce, with healthy self-esteem, strong mind and body. Therefore, they are entitled to the same wages and benefits.

**8.4.2 MODERN TIMES**

The Gurus prescribed equal religious status for both men and women but in the later period due to social restrictions, a woman’s position deteriorated, especially in terms of female infanticide. Baptized Sikhs are specifically instructed not to have social relations with families practising female infanticide. Sikhism upholds gender equality. The status of women in Indian society, particularly amongst Sikhs, has to be analysed in the context of Punjab’s history. As a border state, Punjab became a passage for invading
armies coming to India. The invaders abducted women thereby justifying the need to protect them. But women were important for the community. In a patriarchal society, a woman could be gifted to build kinship and ensure security. The role of women in motherhood, child-rearing and development further tied her to domestic activities. These complex set of factors resulted in lowered status of women. Among Rajputs and Jats in north India, the two groups mainly involved in resisting the invading armies, female infanticide was popular. Infanticide, child marriage, sati, purdah (veil) system, and prejudices were some of the measures adopted by society to protect the honour of women. This practice seems to have become widespread resulting in adverse sex ratio. The practice of protecting the girl child from outside influence, including education, and ensuring early marriage was also the result of the complex set of factors mentioned above. In addition, recent studies in other countries have shown that with improvement in the economic status, the sex ratio initially declines. The practice of sati is generally unknown amongst Sikhs but the dowry system is still prevalent, despite being forbidden by the First Sikh Guru.

8.5 EVIDENCE ON STATUS OF WOMEN IN SIKH RELIGION: CENSUS 2001

In India, 19.2 million Sikhs reside of which 11.4 million live in rural areas. Further, 14.6 million Sikhs live in Punjab, mainly in rural areas (11.6 million). In addition, a large number of Sikhs also live in Haryana (1.2 million), Rajasthan (0.8 million), Uttar Pradesh (0.7 million), Delhi (0.6 million), Chandigrah (0.2 million), Jammu and Kashmir (0.2 million) and Himachal Pradesh (0.1 million). It will be interesting to analyse various demographic trends in rural and urban regions of these states/Union Territories and compare them with the performance of other religions. The Census data on religion released in September 2004 shows interesting trends. We use the data only for four major religions in Punjab -- Sikhs (47.5 per cent in rural and 12.4 per cent in urban), Hindus (16.7 and 20.3), Muslims (0.9 and 0.7) and Christians (0.9 and 0.3). A phenomenon to be noted is that Sikhs are in majority in rural areas (except in the districts of Hoshiarpur and Nawanshahr)
and not in urban areas (except in the districts of Amritsar and Moga). First, the sex ratio in rural India reveals an adverse trend for Delhi, Haryana and Punjab and lower than the national average for J & K, UP and Rajasthan (Table-2). The low sex ratio in rural Punjab is applicable to all the religions, unfortunately. A similar trend is noted for the child sex ratio but Sikhs in Punjab exhibit the lowest rate in 9 out of 17 districts -- a dismal record. Secondly, in urban areas, the situation is more grim. None of the states and the Union Territory of Chandigarh record a figure above the national average in both the indicators. Rather the dispersion is wider than that recorded in the rural areas (Table-3). In Punjab, once again the trend is similar -- low sex ratio shared by all religions and persistently low child sex ratio for Sikhs. In examining the causes of this adverse trend across the northern states, including Punjab, we present data on literacy and workforce participation separately for rural and urban areas for the Sikhs and compare it with the total in that region (Table 4). Sikh women are doing well in literacy and show a mixed trend in workforce participation. No clear correlation emerges between adverse sex ratio and literacy or work force participation.

8.5.1 SURVEY-BASED DATA SOURCE-1998-99

The data has been collected from the Second National Family Health Survey undertaken in 1998-99 in India, which concentrates on the status of women. The survey was funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) with additional funding from UNICEF.

Table 8.2: Rural India-Sex Ratio

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>States/Districts</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Hindu</th>
<th>Muslim</th>
<th>Christian</th>
<th>Sikh</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Hindu</th>
<th>Muslim</th>
<th>Christian</th>
<th>Sikh</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Delhi</td>
<td>810</td>
<td>807</td>
<td>788</td>
<td>1023</td>
<td>890</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>842</td>
<td>915</td>
<td>902</td>
<td>867</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haryana</td>
<td>866</td>
<td>863</td>
<td>886</td>
<td>870</td>
<td>893</td>
<td>823</td>
<td>819</td>
<td>894</td>
<td>886</td>
<td>742</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chandigarh</td>
<td>621</td>
<td>579</td>
<td>513</td>
<td>683</td>
<td>841</td>
<td>847</td>
<td>847</td>
<td>1030</td>
<td>946</td>
<td>801</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punjab</td>
<td>890</td>
<td>870</td>
<td>862</td>
<td>884</td>
<td>898</td>
<td>799</td>
<td>831</td>
<td>865</td>
<td>872</td>
<td>784</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 8.3: Literacy and total workforce. (Number of females per 1000 males)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>States/Districts</th>
<th>Rural Literacy</th>
<th>Rural Total workforce</th>
<th>Urban Literacy</th>
<th>Urban Total workforce</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total Sikh</td>
<td>Total Sikh</td>
<td>Total Sikh</td>
<td>Total Sikh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delhi</td>
<td>624</td>
<td>763</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haryana</td>
<td>572</td>
<td>734</td>
<td>709</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chandigarh</td>
<td>480</td>
<td>723</td>
<td>704</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punjab</td>
<td>735</td>
<td>753</td>
<td>768</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Technical assistance was provided by ORC Macro, USA, and East-West Centre, USA. The survey conducted across the country covered a representative sample of 91,196 households and interviewed 89,199 women between the ages of 15-49 years. It needs to be mentioned that the aggregate data presented here has to be cautiously interpreted. The data for Sikhs basically comes from rural areas of north India, especially Punjab; for Buddhists from rural parts of Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh and Maharashtra; and for Jains from urban areas of Delhi, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. The data for other religions is more nationally collected and well distributed between rural and urban areas.

The National Population Policy, 2000 of the Government of India recognises the low status of women in India and is pursuing a policy of education and exposure to mass media expecting to lead to economic development and consequent socio-economic change. Jain, Christian and Sikh women are amongst the highest educated in India (Table -3).

The development process through education, work participation and exposure to mass media is expected to lead to empowerment of women and improvement in their socio-economic status. The autonomy that women enjoy is likely to have an impact on demographic and health-seeking behavior of couples by altering women's relative control over fertility and contraceptive
use, and by influencing their attitudes and abilities. To access the level of autonomy, the survey sought information on women’s participation in household decision-making, freedom of movement and access to money.

Table 8.4: Level of Education-highest level attained

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Illiterate</th>
<th>Literate to primary complete</th>
<th>primary School Complete</th>
<th>Middle school Complete</th>
<th>High School complete</th>
<th>Higher Secondary &amp; above</th>
<th>No. of women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>59.3</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>72903</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>60.5</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>11190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>32.9</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>2263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikh</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>1427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist/Neo-Buddhist</td>
<td>44.7</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>676</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jain</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>58.2</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>89199</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An important factor that has an impact on the fertility of women is the age at which a woman is married. In many parts of India, formal marriage is not immediately followed by cohabitation, as the marriages are performed at a relatively young age. Therefore, the time of cohabitation is the appropriate proxy for age at which the marriage is consummated. According to the survey, overall the median age is more for highly educated (high school and above) and urban women. The age is highest for Christian women followed by Sikhs in the range of 20 years followed by others in the range of 16-19 years. The total fertility rate (TFR), according to the survey, is lower at all ages in urban areas and for a higher level of education. The ideal number of children is 2.3 in urban areas and 2.8 in rural areas. The level of education also has an impact. The ideal number is 2.1 for women with at least high school education to 2.9 for illiterate women. A birth interval which indicates the place of childbearing has an impact on the health of the mother and child. Jain, Christian and Sikh women are performing well on all these fertility indicators.

The national family welfare programme in India has sought to promote responsible and planned parenthood through voluntary and free choice of
family planning methods. The programme aims to cover all aspects of women’s reproductive health throughout their lives and to encourage adequate spacing of births with at least three years between births. The use of family planning methods is highest amongst Sikhs and Jains.

Thus it is observed that religion is playing a positive role in the improvement of status of women amongst Sikhs. The dismal record on sex ratio, especially the child sex ratio, has to be examined further, as it transcends religion, literacy, economic status and place of residence in north India, especially Punjab. The reasons for the low sex ratio is a subject of serious research, mainly at the disaggregated level. The plausible causes, in addition to the reasons mentioned earlier, could be poverty in some regions (nearly 30 per cent of the population of Punjab is classified as Scheduled Castes – the highest among all states) and affluence in others (aided by modern medical techniques ensuring painless and perhaps guilt-less terminations); need for security, both in terms of defending the land and during old age; need to have an additional hand to help in agricultural activity (north India has basically agricultural-based economy); and a long history of invasions, wars, political and social turmoils witnessed in the region.12

As time passes and society progresses, one expects certain social evils to die a natural death. At least it is thought that they will be on the decline. But defying hopes, the recent Census has brought to light the fact that this evil is on the rise instead. Nearly one million abortions are still done and most of these are cases of female foeticide. The consequences of this mass murder are appalling. Female population of the country is fast disappearing. Child sex ratio has marked a sharp decline to below 900 girls per 1,000 boys in Punjab. The Union Territory of Chandigarh, which is considered a prosperous region, has recorded the worst 50-point decline in the child sex-ratio in the last decade.13

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13 “Murder Most Foul – Killing daughters is on the rise” – The Tribune, 16.9.05
Experts say sex-determination scans are easily within reach even in the remotest villages and unless the trend is reversed, another 70 million female foetuses could be aborted over the next two decades.

CASE STUDIES

The maximum number of female foeticide and female infanticide cases occur in the state (as already discussed in the previous chapter). More than 10 years have passed since the enactment of the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act, but the purpose has still not been served because people who want to get sex determination of the foetus done are getting it done. More and more infants, mostly girls, are being abandoned in the Doaba region. During the month of September 2005, in Jalandhar five infants were found abandoned, four of them were girls. In Chandigarh, a 27-year-old female, Sunita, was abandoned by her husband with her four daughters, after knowing that the child she was going to give birth again was a girl when a test was conducted to know the sex.

Now this is the height. Newspapers reported that a woman, Sukhwinder Kaur, agreed to bear Surinder Singh, a friend of her husband, a male child on the promise that he would marry her if the latter got to know. Eleven years later her husband divorced her and the lover dumped her for not producing a male child. She now lives with her parents in Tarn Taran (Amritsar).

According to a study conducted in 2001, 6,21,790 cases of female foeticide or sex-selective abortions were reported in the last decade. Recent raids on clinics allegedly carrying out sex-determination through ultrasound have not helped in curbing the evil. These tests have reached faster in Punjab villages. There are cases reported from every village of Punjab frequently regarding foeticide and infanticide. In March 2002 in Fatehgarh Sahib

14 “More parents abandoning infant girl” – Indian Express, 29.9.05
15 The Tribune, 12.11.05
16 The Tribune, 16.7.05
district, Ms Surinder Kaur with her husband, Mr Gurmeet Singh, were accused of foeticide at their residence.

In one more case, a farmer aged 60 and his wife of the same age, who wanted a male child to be the heir to their 150-acre property in Bathinda, took the help of a reputed hospital in Ludhiana (Dr Sumeet Sofat) to produce a test-tube male child. The results are good. Now the delivery is awaited.\textsuperscript{18}

The incident at the PGI, Chandigarh, on January 1, 2004, was really tragic. A woman, Geeta, smashed her new-born baby against a wall and killed her. It was the first murder of the year.\textsuperscript{19}

One person\textsuperscript{20} named Chandra Bhan of Okhla Industrial Area, in Fatehgarh Sahib, was sentenced to life imprisonment in January 2002 for killing his wife. The reason for committing the murder was that they were married for 10 years and she had borne him four daughters and not a single son.

In Bathinda district of Punjab, a sweeper working in a doctor’s house was caught red-handed as she was dumping two foetuses in a dustbin.\textsuperscript{21} A new-born baby girl wrapped in a black polythene bag was thrown by a woman into Sidhwan canal in Ludhiana.\textsuperscript{22}

A 10-day-old baby girl was found abandoned in the fields of Atta village, near Goraya.\textsuperscript{23}

This is a very shocking study that in a Mohalla, in Dera Mir Miran Village in Fatehgarh Sahib, where 12 families reside. There are only two or three girls.\textsuperscript{24} Ninety percent of the people in this village are educated and also

\textsuperscript{15} Supra Note 20 Chapter VI
\textsuperscript{19} The Tribune, 3.1.04
\textsuperscript{20} The Tribune, June 2004
\textsuperscript{21} The Indian Express, July 2004
\textsuperscript{22} The Tribune, Nov 27, 2003
\textsuperscript{23} Hindustan Times, 2.4.05
\textsuperscript{24} Killing the unborn daughter – I – Scooters are plenty girls are few. By Gayatri Rajwade; The Tribune, Sept. 13, 2006.
very rich, aware of law and understand everything, but the irony is that education and wealth have a reverse effect on the fate of the unborn girl.

Deviki Rana, a housewife in Patiala the mother of seven years old, is a post graduate in psychology and reasonably rich, but does not have the freedom to have another daughter. She has already undergone four abortions because the fetuses were female. She has developed hypertension and is finding it difficult to conceive again.25

There are not many girls in Mirzapur Village, Rajpura. Ms. Davinder Kaur, a resident of this village can finally lift her head high, because after four girls she has had a son the age difference between her eldest girl and the boy is 18 years.26 A study published recently says that a society dominated by the male is something to be worried about. According to the researcher, there are an estimated 80 million missing females in India and China alone.27

There are so many similar cases and newspapers are full of such incidents. There are social, cultural and religious reasons inextricably linked to the unwanted girl. The socially designated status of women falls further when she gives birth to a female. This can be redeemed temporarily on the birth of a son! The father, genetically responsible for the sex of the child, suffers no such change in status. Who is responsible for this heinous act? Will banning sex-determination tests help? If laws could generate their own enforcement there would never have been injustice.

It is already too late, but as the saying goes, it is better late than never. The girl child must get her share of human dignity.28

26 Ibid - 16
28 "Daughters have right to live, Save them from the unwanted syndrome," by Shakuntala Lavasa, The Tribune, 15.11.05