The status of Indian women, after a long history of discrimination and subjugation, is undergoing a change in India. Women are now passing through a phase between subjugation and emancipation and are now entering the outside world leaving behind the age-old tradition of domestic confinement. However, gender-based discrimination still represents the ugly face of the society of our times. It is a travesty of all canons of social justice and equity that women who constitute half of the world’s population and working hours earn just one-tenth of the world’s income. This statistics itself portrays the subordinate position of women.1

The family and the state, both operate on patriarchal gender-modes. This has widened the gap between women and men and put women in a disadvantageous position. Though her legal status is beginning to change, her situation has not changed. Even when her rights are legally recognised in the abstract, longstanding custom prevents their full expression. The principle of equality as one of the milestones has been embodied in the Preamble of the Constitution of India. With special regard to women, the Constitution assures that there shall be equality. No one shall be discriminated on the basis of sex but still society is oppressed with gender-bias.

The effect of discriminating socialisation of girl children may be seen from this deteriorating sex-ratio, higher mortality, low literacy and ill-treatment in families. The existing profile not only shows adverse female-male ratio except in Kerala, but also low nutritional status, low enrolment of girls and dropouts. The girl child has her rights and potentials, but she has no right to birth. Girl children in India comprise nearly 20 million. The Census speaks volume about the missing girls, especially from certain states and pockets of

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1 "Right to Equality and Gender-justice’ By Dr. Jitendra Mishra, Sr. Lecturer, Faculty of Law, DDU Gorakhpur University, Gorakhpur, U.P, Criminal Law Journal, AIR 2004, pp 48-49
our country. Most progressive and affluent states like Delhi, Punjab, Haryana and Gujarat have the lowest sex-ratio in the 0-6 age group. The findings of the CSR were so alarming that the United Nations urged India to take immediate steps to address the problem.

In India, the inhuman and deliberate neglect of girls has religious sanction backed by social practices and family support. But it should be just the opposite. Society must ensure that mothers receive proper pre-natal and post-natal care and protection of personality. Every girl child needs to brought up in a family with adequate standard of living and security besides the possibility of acquiring sufficient education.

As early as 1989, United Nations member states were asked to vote for a historic convention on the rights of the girl child. This convention had four goals (i) survival (ii) development (iii) protection (iv) and participation of girls. However, these did not hold good for the girl child. We have sufficient legal provisions and a number of welfare schemes launched by different states to raise the status of the female child, but still female foeticide continues. Over the years, laws have been made stricter and the punishment, too, is more stringent. But since people mange to evade punishment, others too feel inclined to take the risk. Just look at the way sex-determination tests go on despite a stiff ban on them. Not all parents kill their daughters because they hate them. Many are forced to take the extreme step only because they know it from experience that if she survives, her life will be worse than death. To that extent, all family members and relatives who give second-grade treatment to a girl and everyone who demands dowry, are encouraging foeticide. Once parents realise that their girl child would not have to undergo untold miseries all her life, most of them, if not all, would refrain from killing the flesh and blood of their own. After all, this must be an impossible thing for a majority of them.

Keeping an objective viewpoint, most scholars agree that there is a serious gap in health and survival in India and in other regions, including neighbouring Pakistan, China, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Korea, Nigeria and
parts of the Middle East. Many acknowledge that the problem is not solved by increased economic growth. A growing number would argue that improving the lives of girls and women is India's single-most important development task. The 1980s was a period of putting the issue of discrimination against daughters in front of researchers and policy makers, working to overcome widespread denial of rights and seeking solutions. At the same time, frequent reports of dowry deaths, especially in major cities of north India, prompted increased concern about the changing status of women in India.

By the 1990s, awareness of India's gender gap in survival and health had increased. The year 1991 was designated as the 'Year of the Girl Child' throughout South Asia. Again in 2001, the UN declared 2001 as the 'Year of the Girl Child' and now in 2006, the Haryana Government announced on International Women's Day that the year 2006 would be observed as 'Girl Child Year.' Conferences, workshops outreach programmes and special publications tend to highlight the status of the girl child throughout the country.

Conversation that the researcher had with people of various backgrounds revealed that the perception about the girl child among many of them was highly generalised. The researcher heard comments such as “Oh! Yes, everyone here prefers sons” or "Nobody in India wants daughters". Along with great awareness has come simplification so extreme that the problem of unwanted daughters has somehow been displaced or distanced through the construction of a now supposedly 'universal' Indian phenomenon. Thus the earlier challenge of raising awareness of the existence of son preference and unwanted daughters has declined in importance. Now the need is for two important changes, i.e.:

(i) To examine the need for a determined and time-bound effort to recognize girl children as a force to reckon with.

(ii) Effective implementation of preventive laws by banning sex-determination tests and punishing doctors who are actually committing this offence.
Recently, seven prominent doctors were found violating the PNDT Act in Patna after a raid following a sting operation.\(^2\)

If more such attempts are made, the future of the girl child will be secure. The campaign conducted by Shabana Azmi in the ‘Beti’ and ‘Ladki’ scheme is also appreciable. After the UN’s warning to Punjab, hundreds of pamphlets were distributed to make people aware of the situation. The attempts made by the media through movies like ‘Atmaja’, ‘Let Her Die’, ‘A Nation Without Females’ is also a major contribution towards curbing the menace.

The situation is alarming and there is a need to change the mindset of the people to make them aware that today women are exposed to new ideas about their personalities, roles and rights. Women now perform multiple roles as per the level of their education and professional competence. They are trying their best to cope with these roles and expectations. Similarly, the government should take up the issue of female foeticide on priority basis and work towards achieving gender parity.

Moreover, we now have time at our disposal. Instead of blaming each other, we should take the initiative. The change should start within each one of us. Let bygones be bygones. Mistakes committed by our forefathers should not be repeated by the present generation. We are the future parents, and with us lies the responsibility of maintaining the balance in society.

\(^2\) The Tribune, 11-03-06