

## ***Book Reviews***

**Agnihotri Satish Balram.** *Sex Ratio Patterns in the Indian Population: A Fresh Exploration*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2000. 379 pages. Hardbound. Indian Rs 475.00.

The term sex ratio is used to mean male per 1,000 female population, while the female-male ratio (FMR) means the number of females per 1,000 male population. The proportion of women to men in the Indian population is 927 to 1,000, strikingly below the world average of 990 to 1,000. What is of major concern is the fact that this female-male ratio (FMR) not only has a declining trend but also varies by region, social status, age group, and levels of prosperity.

This book provides an entirely fresh perspective on the perplexing puzzle of the low proportion of women in the Indian population. The main focus of this study is on mapping the diverse and complex pattern of the FMRs along different relevant dimensions. The analysis also shows sensitivity to diversity that improves our understanding of the problem significantly even at rudimentary levels of analysis.

The book consists of ten chapters. After the introduction, Chapter Two provides a very brief outline of the literature relevant to the analysis. The review covers the debates on sex ratio at birth, sex-selection migration, and sex-selective enumeration errors. These three factors continue to explain the problem of low FMRs even though they have a marginal impact. The literature also focuses upon the main concerns of discrimination-driven excess female mortality and its demographic consequence on low FMR.

Chapter 3 analyses the use of FMR data in the juvenile age group, and within it the 0-4 and 5-9 age groups separately at the district level. The use of the juvenile sex ratio offers several advantages, which reflects the decennial changes in demographic variables like fertility, mortality and its sex differentials more readily as compared to the all-age group sex ratio data. More importantly, these reflect the pattern of excess girl-child mortality in the 0-5 age group, which is a distinct feature of the sex ratio imbalances in contemporary South Asia. This results in very low FMRs, since the death rate in the juvenile age group is very high as compared to the death rates in the subsequent years. Within the juvenile age group again, the deaths are highly skewed towards the younger ages, with 90 percent of these deaths taking place under the age of 5. As a result, it is the under-5 mortality patterns that really determine the juvenile sex ratio. Under-5 mortality again has an internal structure, which has a bearing on the sex ratio patterns in the 0-4 and 5-9 age groups. Briefly

stated, there is excess male mortality during infancy, which is mainly a biological phenomenon, and excess girl child mortality in the later years (1-4 age group), which is a socio-cultural phenomenon.

Chapter 4 anticipates differences between the two components of the juvenile age group FMRs by using data from the 1981 Census. The analysis is followed by disaggregating the FMRs on the basis of social groups: Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes, and the 'general' category. FMRs among the Scheduled Tribes are usually higher than the FMRs among the Non-scheduled Tribes. Among the latter, the Scheduled Castes have lower FMRs as compared to the general category in the Northern states. These differences are further confirmed at the district level analysis of the juvenile sex ratio. Adverse survival conditions for Scheduled Caste female children in certain regions of the North are revealed through an unusually masculine sex ratio. It also emerges that the 0-4 and 5-9 age group FMR data can be fruitfully used to infer sex differentials in infant and child mortality between different groups even if the mortality data are not available.

Chapter 5 highlights the role of cultural factors in explaining the regional variation in the FMRs. Where the culture is female-friendly, the survival chances of the girl-children are better. The study also elaborates on the diversity in sex ratio patterns by kinship.

Chapter 6 briefly reviews the literature on entitlements (a person's potential command over resources) and their application to gender relations. It also elaborates the debate on household models and describes the cooperative-conflict model.

Female labour participation (FLP) has been identified as the most significant economic correlate of sex ratios. Chapter 7 examines this relation by analysing the 1961 and 1981 Census data on juvenile FMRs and FLP, first without and then with disaggregation. The disaggregated analysis generates a number of new insights. Briefly, it is seen that a high FLP provides a sufficient condition for survival but not a necessary one. Wherever culture takes care of survival, FLP is less critical. In female-friendly kinship regions, it is nearly insignificant.

Prosperity by itself cannot ensure a reduction in the relative gender inequality in survival, but it is important to recognise the significantly distinct processes that operate as prosperity increases. An attempt is made to resolve this debate in Chapter 8 by examining the role of female contribution to prosperity, rather than prosperity *per se*. The female contribution to prosperity turns out to be more relevant to survival than prosperity. A disturbing trend is also noted that emerges during the analysis of recent survey data—an unusually masculine sex ratio among the more prosperous groups even in the more female-friendly regions of South India. The results are tentative but constitute an important and urgent research agenda.

The analysis of the 1991 Censuses data confirms the trend of a further decline in FMRs in Chapter 9. It also reveals a growing masculinisation of the sex ratio even in the 0-4 age group. These data show a declining female workforce participation as

compared to the 1981 figures. Their (females') withdrawal from the workforce and their increasingly adverse survival conditions are a matter of serious concern for policy-makers.

The concluding chapter recapitulates different aspects of the issue at three levels: connecting different insights; considering patterns of change over different time-scales; elaborating the scope for further research and discussing the policy implications. Two important findings need to be highlighted. First, infant mortality and child mortality emerge as appropriate indicators of development and discrimination, respectively. The objective of any social or policy intervention must be to ensure development without discrimination. Second, male children seem to face the survival hurdle only once, that is, during the neo-natal period; while female children appear to face it a number of times, i.e., on account of sex-selective abortion, infanticide, neo-natal mortality, and childhood mortality.

Although this study has considerably advanced the understanding of the sex ratio problem in India, it suffers from certain limitations. The first limitation relates to the disaggregation of the data by urban and rural location of the population. The second limitation in the study relates to the "general" category. As culture is an important variable, it is perhaps useful to break up the "general" category further. The third limitation concerns the parity effect: the higher the parity, the lower the sex ratio at birth. As the number of children per household declines, the sex ratio at birth and hence the overall sex ratios are likely to get more and more masculinised.

This rich and original analysis of the sex ratio in India highlights the need for plurality in the design of policy interventions. It will be essential reading for demographers, policy-makers bureaucrats, and activists/NGOs in the areas of health and population, while being of equal interest to those engaged in gender studies, economics, and population studies.

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