

Will India eventually prefer daughters to sons?

The gender statistics are depressing, but two recent studies offer some reasons for hope

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With women being scarce and more coveted in the marriage market, it may lead to a decrease in post-natal discrimination against women. Photo: Pradeep Gaur/Mint

The dystopian vision of testosterone-fuelled societies dominated by unmarried men is scary. A recent study suggests that such concerns could be misplaced.

It is well known that there are only 940 females for every 1,000 males in India. This ratio is far worse in certain states such as Haryana, where there are 877 women for every 1,000 males. Data from the 2011 Indian census indicates that the trend is getting worse. For instance, the census showed there are about 7.1 million fewer girls than boys below six years of age, a notable increase compared with the gap of 6 million fewer girls recorded in the 2001 census and 4.2 million fewer girls in the 1991 census. Will fewer girls inevitably make it difficult for men to find brides?

A recent study by French researchers **Hippolyte d'Albis** and **David de la Croix** undermines this popular assumption. Their research points out that a strongly biased sex ratio, such as in India, does not necessarily imply a shortage of women in the marriage market, as long as the mean age gap between the spouses is large enough and the population is growing fast enough. Some counterfactual exercises can

be conducted by those interested using the online simulation tool here: <http://www.de-la-croix.be/missing-brides-index.html>

The two researchers use data on age at marriage, fertility rate and sex ratio at birth to construct what is called a Brides Index, to estimate the possible imbalance in the marriage market. According to the index, India has 1.043 grooms per bride, which is not that bad compared with countries such as South Korea (1.194), China (1.139), Singapore (1.134) and Japan (1.092).

The strong preference for sons is a national shame and needs to be condemned for its own sake, but it may not necessarily lead to a bride shortage.

There is also research which shows that social preferences can change, and daughters become more important.

A research paper by **Lena Edlund**, an economics professor at the Columbia University, suggests that increasing availability of prenatal sex determination in societies favouring sons may lead to social segregation by sex, with more men in the richer classes and more women among the poor.

Edlund shows that when parents prefer married children to unmarried children, and sons to daughters, sex choice can consistently result in the birth of daughters into low-status families and sons into high-status families. This is supported in India by a study by the Centre for Global Health Research, a non-profit research institute which looks into the reasons behind premature mortality among the global poor, and which suggests that selective abortion of girls is more common in wealthy households in India.

With women being scarce and more coveted in the marriage market, it may lead to a decrease in post-natal discrimination against women. According to Edlund: "The top parents would try for sons, but further down the social spectrum, daughters become increasingly attractive because a daughter would marry increasingly better than a son. So at some point parents will switch to aiming for daughters."

It is rare to find reasons for optimism about gender relations in India, so such research surely qualifies as a silver lining.