

THE QUACK OF PATRAN AND OTHER STORIES

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While the National Commission for Women ran a campaign in the print media this *bhai duj* featuring a forlorn looking brother gazing into a sisterless future (*is bhaiya duj par kahan hai meri bahan?* the copy read), and the The Delhi Commission for Women deplored ‘turning wombs to tombs’ through its catchy turn of phrase, the relentless elimination of female foetuses (SSA or sex-selective abortion in sanitised technical language), one assumes, carries on regardless of governmental platitudes. One of the more shocking evidence of this murderous practice was the recent (August 2006) discovery of a couple, with their twin wells filled with the gory remains of about 35 aborted female foetuses in Patran, Patiala. This led to the arrest of the quack of Patran, ‘doctor’ Pritam Singh and his wife and assistant Amarjit Kaur. The doctor’s qualifications, which probably had no correlation to the success of the Sahib Nursing Home he ran, were a mere ‘middle pass’ and a career of being a hawaldar in the Army, with no one having any clue to those of his wife, except perhaps ‘*samaj seva*’ and desire for a quick buck. The couple were obviously in a symbiotic relationship with the community they ‘served’, the latter finding a convenient method for exterminating the despised female foetuses.

I am going to juxtapose this account of female foeticide from Patran, Patiala, circa 2006, with another one justifying female infanticide from Dhulah Kangar, Patiala, recorded more than 150 years ago, to show the historical and cultural context of the practice of infanticide, while simultaneously underlining the novel features of the problem today. I believe this is important not only because it shows how deeply son-preference is embedded in our culture, but also illustrates how devaluation attaches itself to female life, a factor in itself, even when the circumstances in which it is practiced change. The following story was extracted by J.M. Douie in 1896, the Deputy Commissioner of Jullunder, from the settlement reports of Hoshiarpur and Ferozepur districts, put there in the first place through the services of a ‘native’ assistant. It is pertinent to highlight the circuitous route that such reportage took, giving a peep into the fabrication of the colonial records. It is this that has led some historians to point to the less than disinterested nature of colonial files, more often than not the amateur officer-ethnographers out to show the barbarity of the natives in order to legitimise colonial rule, or alternatively, being led on by canny natives into collating stories that they knew would please their colonial masters, affirming as they would their moral superiority. The many files on the apparently insuperable problem of infanticide in Punjab, for example, graphically described the methods employed by the Punjabis to do away with female infants, ranging from starving, over-feeding after a bout of starvation encouraging fatal diarrhoea, over-drugging with opium, to exposure to the cold or plain neglect, underscoring native cruelty and savagery. Yet the particular construction of stories and anecdotes, I will argue here, also convey messages of and to the community, and the

process of colonial ossification of native manners and customs does not make them meaningless, though they do make the historian cautious.

Douie's account narrated the story of how Emperor Akbar married the daughter of Mahr Mitha, a Dhariwal zamindar of Dhulah Kangar in Patiala. It related the saga of a rather ruddy Jat daughter able to control a runaway buffalo by keeping her foot on the rope tied around the animal's neck while simultaneously balancing a couple of water pots on her head. Emperor Akbar, it was said, a witness to these events, was so impressed by her prowess, that he immediately decided to marry her in the hopes of having children as strong and fearless as her. A 'Darbari Panchayat' was called to give consent, the Darbaris tracing descent from a select Jat and Rajput ancestry. Akbar, it may be noted, was famous for making matrimonial alliances with Rajputs, and the Darbari Jats, quite clearly were seeking social elevation by associating with both the Rajputs and Akbar's Darbar. Their social climbing, however, meant that subsequently the Darbaris could not marry their daughters outside the confines of the Darbari families, and resorted to female infanticide in order to maintain their prestige. This story of Mahr Mitha's daughter is poignant and ironical. The very positive qualities of the Jat's daughter, her prowess in agricultural tasks (later made much by the colonial state) that presumably won her a high alliance, also became the cause of the downfall of other Darbari daughters, as the destruction of their lives became a means to achieve a celebrated status.

T.J. Kennedy, the Deputy Commissioner of Ludhiana, similarly reported the case of the 'Sahu log' (big/rich people), among them the Garehwal and Shiru Gil Jats, who too practiced female infanticide, so that their few surviving daughters could marry within the highest Jat ranks, and they could maintain the distance from the ordinary Jats. The last point is worth noting as among the Jats, then as now, there existed a wide spectrum of social practices that included accepting money for the hand of a daughter, routinely practicing exchange marriages referred to as *vatta-satta* in Punjab, to following brahmanical customs including *kanya-dan* and dowry marriages among the highest castes, which among the Jats included a ruling elite as in the native princely states, Patiala among them. That the Darbari Jats or the Sahu log used female infanticide as a sanskritizing practice is evident, especially if we keep in mind the establishment of social status that marriage alliances brought in the society in the nineteenth century.

At the same time it needs to be stressed that the practice of infanticide received a fillip during the British Raj itself despite the fact that the British came to Punjab proclaiming their intolerance of it, prepared as they were to bring it to an end, having discovered infanticide earlier in the North West Provinces. The recording and fossilizing of native customs that followed in the trail of the British, indeed their insistence on recognizing people through the prism of their social conduct, ensured massive upsurge in social one-upmanship, as a more clear path to social recognition got fixed. When we see this in conjunction with the changing economy of the colonial period, and the demands that the state made for timely revenue payments, and the fixing of land in patriarchal hands, we see why son-preference got more strongly established. To supplement incomes for time-bound revenue payments parents wished to have more sons working the land, or joining the army, transforming daughters into unwanted burdens.

The triumphalist proclamations attempting moral makeovers of the natives with which the British entered Punjab gave way to more routine matters as the British found evidence for not only persistence, but perhaps increase in the occurrence of infanticide as

the nineteenth century wore on. A greater concern for them was the gathering evidence of the prevalence of infanticide among the Jats, for them the very backbone of the Raj, as they constituted the revenue-paying peasantry and lent soldiers to the Army. While the desire not to disturb the Jat apple-cart induced inertia among the British officers, the collection and analysis of census records, and specific enquiries related to infanticide required at least making suitable noises towards sorting out the problem. The figures and statistics, caste and religion based, were a bit of a nightmare for the British, probably giving them headaches, and a desperate need to find a way out, as I will show later. Between 1891 and 1901 the Child Sex Ratio or CSR (0-5 age group) figure for the Hindus was a dismal 841 girls per 1000 boys; it declined for the Sikhs from 778 to 766 (another shocking revelation for the British as they held Khalsa Sikhs in esteem and vouched for their relatively better treatment of women); while the Muslims showed a marginal improvement from 871-879. In 1911 the CSR (0-5 age group) was reported as 914 girls per 1000 boys among the Hindu Khatri, 931 among the Sikh Khatri, 839 among the Hindu Jats, and an abysmal 694 among the Sikh Jats! In some instances these figures are comparable to the 2001 data which shows the CSR (0-6) of Punjab a low 874/1000. In Fatehgarh Sahib, infamous for the lowest juvenile sex ratio in the country, the figure plummets to 754/1000, with Khamano block teetering at 628/1000. But unofficially the figures that we receive today are much worse. A recent article in Outlook (Feb. 27, 2006) quoted CSR figure in some districts of Punjab a precarious 529/1000 (Nawanshahr's Dhanduha village) and even an astounding 429/1000 (Jalandhar's Gobindpura). Punjab has rightly been stigmatized with the title *demaru* (daughter destroying) along with some other states in India., though wary scholars are also pointing to the egregious 'north Indianization' of the southern states as nationalization of the country is achieved through its worst customs, thus also serving the ultimate insult to the high per capita income states of the north west.

The British found reasons for the practice of female infanticide in what they called the 'pride' and 'poverty' of the Indians. Pride referred to hypergamous marriage practices that made parents look for grooms for their daughters in a family of higher status for their daughters. This apparently created an anomalous situation of unmarried girls at the very top of the social hierarchy who, it was claimed, were done away with through infanticide. At the bottom of the pile too, where men did not find brides, a trade in women from other parts flourished. Poverty referred to high caste customs that required the bestowal of a handsome dowry to the daughter at the time of her marriage, leaving parents unwilling to bring up too many daughters.

Aspects of hypergamy, associated with sanskritization, noted in the case of the Darbari Jats and the Sahu log is also visible in one of the first case histories of infanticide collected by the British in Punjab. As early as 1851, the British recorded the account of why the Bedis, the Khatri descendants of the founder of the Sikh faith Guru Nanak (the rest of the nine gurus were also Khatri), practiced infanticide. The oft related tale (a number of files and books on infanticide repeated the story ad nauseam), spoke of why Dharam Chand, a grandson of Nanak, initiated the sordid saga of female infanticide. Dharam Chand was said to have had two sons and a daughter. The girl, at the right age, was to be married to a Khatri boy. On the occasion of the marriage, the groom's party in many ways humiliated the bride's family. These included the insult to her brothers who went to drop her off to some distance at the time of her *rukhsat* (departure), and were

taken much farther than etiquette required, returning weary and footsore. The indignant Dharam Chand, taking this as the last straw in a string of unwarranted humiliations, is said to have bade all the Bedis to kill their daughters as soon as they were born, rather than bear such insults. His sons prayed to him to withdraw such a cruel injunction. Dharam Chand is said to have replied that if the Bedis were true to their faith, and abstained from lies and strong drink, God would only gift them with male children, a story among many things, indicative of the popular perception that the birth of a daughter was a punishment. Dharam Chand, the story goes, took the burden of the crime of female infanticide upon himself, and it was said that from that day on his head literally fell on his chest and he walked about as one bearing a heavy weight upon his shoulders.

This polyvalent story, brimful with semiotic possibilities, may have been received by the British as creating for them an opportunity to reform a high caste well respected people, and thereby proclaim their intentions of intolerance towards dubious native customs. The Bedis, on their part, may have used it as a justifying myth for what was an opprobrious practice condemned by the gurus. It may be recalled here that the third Sikh guru Amar Das, and the tenth, Gobind Singh, gave exhortations against female infanticide, which also points to the longer history of the practice, as also of its condemnation outside the framework of colonial cultural shenanigans. The outstanding motif in this story rich in symbolic value seems to be that of honour, compromised for Dharam Chand Bedi when the groom's litter forcibly broke through his entrance or when his sons faced humiliation by the groom's party. If we see the marriage ceremony as showcasing the honour of the families involved, then the forcible entry of the litter (much as the subsequent violation of the daughter's virginity) can be viewed as an assault on the Bedis' honour. Honour in Punjabi society, as in many others, can be said to have the peculiar quality of being embedded in women's bodies while augmenting male pride.

It is no doubt a matter of debate whether marriages in Punjab were hypergamous or not. Denzil Ibbetson in his study of Punjab castes in fact noted marriage relations being established between families of equal status. However, hierarchy was built into the marriage ceremony itself, between the wife-givers, the family and clan of the bride, and the superior wife-takers, the relations of the groom, as anthropologists and sociologists have shown for many parts of India, and Paul Hershman has delineated in his analysis of the *milni* ceremony in Punjab. Thus the very birth of the daughter can signify a future humiliation, and she can be viewed as a devalued, lesser person. The falling of Dharam Chand's head upon his chest, perhaps presented by the Bedis to the British as a penitent posture for advocating a heinous crime, can also be interpreted as a token of permanent humiliation that the marriage of the daughter had brought to the Bedi. This may have especially galling to the Bedis, who, though placed relatively low in the internal caste rankings of the Khattris, hoped for social mobility because of their august ancestry.

A third concern that the story displays is an overtly reformist one – an exhortation to the Bedis to stay away from lies and liquor, and to remain steadfast in their faith. Is it possible that between the many rival and guruship claiming branches of the families of the Sikh gurus, many of whom accepted revenue-free grants from the Mughal Empire, and later Ranjit Singh's state, a falling of moral and spiritual standards had occurred? It is important to note that the reward for moral uprightness in the Bedis' tale was the birth of male children, the birth of girls being viewed as a punishment for a sinful life. So while the gurus exhorted against the practice of infanticide, among many of their followers and

descendants, female infanticide was viewed as one possible way to achieve a high ritual status. The practice of female infanticide in our tale was made ethically acceptable, with no repugnance attached to its continuance, by being made a reward for a life of rectitude.

Whether the story of the unsung and unnamed Bedi daughter, or that of the nameless but appreciated Dhariwal daughter, these tell us of why daughters' persons didn't count for much, even when they were not destroyed or done away with in Punjab. It is this devaluation, I suggest, that continues to be their fate today too. Additionally, in the colonial period, the phenomenon of the modern dowry, inflated in size, competitive in spirit, and increasingly outside the control of the woman herself, also came into being. A quick example to show this will suffice here. In 1853, soon after acquiring full control over the whole of Punjab, the British organized a grandiose meeting of the various defeated and subdued chiefs in Amritsar on the occasion of Diwali. Besides announcing the bringing to an end practices like that of infanticide in Punjab, the new rulers also chose this moment to discountenance spending excessively on marriages, including dowry. Agreements spelling out marriage expenses in great detail were signed by various 'notables' of the Punjabi society, ranging from defeated sardars, representatives of various castes, to village headmen, introducing the novelty of sumptuary laws in Punjab. As this early intervention in the social sphere in Punjab showed, and the later praxis of census operations enhanced, the British persistence with sumptuary legislation was followed in Punjab only in its breach. Sir Dennis Fitzpatrick, the Lieutenant Governor of Punjab commented on this incongruous situation in 1895, noting the social competition that was unleashed among upwardly mobile castes in Punjab.

As the nineteenth century wore into the early twentieth, and the British discovered the shift in the focus of the 'crime' of infanticide from the higher castes in Punjab to their favoured Jats, their bureaucratic initiatives to bring infanticide to an end froze into inertia and confusion. More so because, as mentioned earlier, the large population of the Jats displayed a welter of social practices that ranged from giving dowry to accepting money for the hands of their daughters, polygamy, polyandry, to of course infanticide. In this social and political quicksand inaction on the question of infanticide became the favoured policy of the British by the fin de siècle, with officers drawing solace from the otherwise distressing rise in trade of women, surely partly a fall out of the rise in infanticide. As women commanded high prices in the fluid marriage market, the British hoped that infanticide would come to an end. Lt. Col Popham Young, the commissioner in the Jullunder division, notorious for high evidence of infanticide among the Jats, noted in 1914, "In the present we may derive some satisfaction from the fact that regarded as livestock the value of females is appreciating, with the result that their lives in infancy are less likely to be sacrificed than heretofore." The irony and dark humour in the situation of the colonial state that started off with an evangelizing fervour on the question of female infanticide and ended up seeing the sunny side of women being bartered as livestock completely missed the earnest Popham Young as he groped for a way out of the quagmire, partially at least, of their own making.

The trade in women that Popham Young noted in 1914 is again haunting us today. The murder of Tripala Kumari of Darhi village, Ranchi district, Jharkhand, in March 2006 by the hands of her 'husband' Ajmer Singh of Dohola village, Jind district, Haryana, for what the papers reported as a refusal on her part to be a 'Draupadi,' i.e. decline sex slavery in a polyandrous relationship with Ajmer Singh and his brothers,

again throws up the conundrum of persistence of female foeticide while importing brides from faraway Assam, Bengal and Jharkhand. And unlike Popham Young we can no longer take comfort in a possible reversal of foeticide because brides from faraway are fetching fancy prices. Also the circumstances of the present are not the same as when infanticide was practiced in Punjab. The ready availability of medical technology (a new test reportedly will be able to reveal the foetus's sex in seven weeks), more so in prosperous Punjab, new family planning norms that sometimes make the survival of even one daughter difficult (though many in Punjab are reported to go for a '*test da kaka*' after two daughters), are surely constitutive of different circumstances. Hypergamous marriages and upward mobility through elimination of girls may not be practiced today. But girls continue to be counted for little, and dowry has peaked into a stupendous problem. Punjab, at least for the moment, has not changed its stories. The following account of circa 2001 illustrates the point. On 7 November 2001, the then Punjab Chief Minister, Parkash Singh Badal's son Sukhbir Singh Badal was 'blessed' with the 'gift of a son' after two daughters. The Akalis celebrated the birth of the Akali 'heir'. One of the advertisements released by the then reigning party of Punjab read 'Sons are like sweet fruits, may God bless everyone with sons.' Sons are deemed in this ethos as the only true inheritors of a father's (parents'?) patrimony. The similarities with Dharam Chand Bedi who wished to bless the Bedis with only sons are not far to seek.