

A NOTE ON DIFFERENTIAL SEX-RATIOS & POLYANDROUS PEOPLE IN INDIA

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THE great disparity between the two sexes in the population of India has been a matter of considerable demographic interest in successive census-return since 1872. In 1901 there were only 963 females per 1000 males. This phenomenon of male-excess persists even in the latest 1961 census return for India (male: 22,62,93,620; female: 21,29,41,462). The fact that women were continuously outnumbered by men in India has duly been admitted in different periods by government officials, demographers, actuarial experts and others interested persons in the field. In the *Census Report of India* (1951) it has thus particularly been emphasized that : 'a deficiency of female arises in all parts of India as a biological phenomenon' (p. 60).

Uneven distribution of sex-ratio throughout India still upholds the existence of the above 'biological phenomeon' in distinct zones and as a consequence, 'There are recognizable geographical bands where there are more than 1000 females per 1000 males. If districts and states are arranged according to the sex-ratio, a curious pattern, except for eastern Madhya Pradesh and Bihar largely ou account of their tribal population, seems to emerge on either side of latitude 20°. It will seem that the sex-ratio is appreciably lower in the north of latitude 20° than south of it' (*Census 1961*, p.xvii).

As a matter of fact, in the north of this demarcating latitude low sex-ratios are discernible, particularly in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. 'In Punjab, Ambala (812), Simla (731), Ferozepur (848). Bhatinda (837), Sangrur (840), and Patiala (830) form a compact block of low ratio. The other

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compact area occurs in Uttar Pradesh with Saharanpur (825), Dehra Dun (766), Muzaffarnagar (841), Meerut (843), Naini Tal (719), Rampur (871), Pilibhit (842), Bareilly (834), Budaun (837), Mathura (838), Agra (840), Shahjahanpur (826), Farrukhabad (839), Etawah (847), Kanpur (811), Lucknow (839), and Sitapur (859) (*Census 1961* : p. xviii).

In close proximity of this geographical tract of female deficiency, we find the location of one of the famous polyandrous groups of India. The polyandrous Khasas of Jaunsar-Bawar, a pargana of the Dehra Dun district (Uttar Pradesh) conform immediately with the general demographic pattern of the said compact belt of low ratio in North India in having conspicuously high proportion of males among themselves. It has been shown that among the Khasas, great disparity between the two sexes has been in existence consistently from as early as 1901 when males per 100 females were 126.9. Maximum excess of males (131.2) among the Khasas was observed in 1921.

In this context it would be profitable to refer to what was commented on the disparity of sex-proportions among the Khasas by noted anthropologists like Dr. D. N. Majumdar and Dr. R. N. Saksena who had intimate experience about the polyandrous folk of Jaunsar-Bawar. Dr. Majumdar (1960) wrote, 'It is said that female infanticide was prevalent in the area some 25 years ago. Now-a-days, though infanticide is no longer practised in this area, yet no significant changes in the sex-ratio have taken place in recent decades' (p. 18). Under the circumstances, it becomes really difficult to lay stress on any causal relations that might exist between the customs of female infanticide resulting in high male excess and polyandry. It appears more plausible that the Khasas, irrespective of their marriage custom, exhibit the same 'biological phenomenon' of female deficiency as the inhabitants of Dehra Dun district as a whole, and other geographical tracts of low sex-ratio in Uttar Pradesh and Punjab.

It is to be noted that polyandry as a form of marriage has, on the other hand, never been reported to exist among those people like the Bedees, the hypergamous Rajput, the Khatris, the Chauhans, the Sikhs of Uttar Pradesh, Rajputana and

Punjab, among whom historical evidences of female infanticide are available. (*Census 1911* and Das : 1956 and 1957). Even if it is admitted that the cruel custom of female infanticide was notably instrumental in bringing about consistent high male excess and consequently polyandrous marriage among the Khasas of Jaunsar-Bawar, then, it is expected that among those people of Punjab, U. P., and Rajputana, who practised almost ritually the custom of female infanticide, polyandry should have eventually crept in as a social element in their respective cultures. But authentic evidences are absolutely lacking to justify such expectation.

Again, this question about the assumed relationship between dearth of females due to infanticide and polyandry among the Khasas has aptly been discussed by Dr. Sakseua (1955). He wrote with regard to the distribution of population in Jaunsar-Bawar; 'It will be observed that the population of this region is almost static and the net increase in the population is showing a downward trend, as would be evident from the following analysis :

Mean decennial growth rate (1881 - 1901)	+	13.3
" " " " (1901 - 1921)	+	8.8
" " " " (1921 - 1941)	+	3.6
" " " " (1941 - 1951)	+	1.4

'Another interesting feature of the population is the disparity in sex-ratio which is said to have exerted its influence on the form of marriage and helped polyandry. But this sex-disparity is not peculiar to Jaunsar-Bawar alone. In the whole of the district of Dehra Dun, excluding Jaunsar-Bawar where sex-disparity already exists, the same disturbed sex-ratio is noticeable. According to the Census Report of 1951, there were 1,77,423 males and 1,26,134 females. But certainly polyandry cannot be said to exist in other parts of Dehra Dun district' (p. 17).

In order to gain an insight into the problem of chronic low female proportion together with its peculiar spatial dispersion in India, attention is invited to what has been written in this regard in the 1951 *Census Report of India*. This information, it is hoped, would especially help in appraising the merit of

the issue under reference. In India (1951) the sex-ratio (number of females per 1000 males) was 947. The lowest value was 883 in north-western India and the highest 993 in southern India. The sex-ratio was found to be less than 1000 in every division of northern India and north-western India without any exception.

With regard to female deficiency in India it has been shown in the *Census Report* (1951) that in Madras during 1941-50 for every 1000 male children born there were only 948 female children, and the following results have further been supplied to us.

State	Average	Sex-ratio at birth during 1941-50	
		Highest during decade	Lowest during decade
Madras	948	959	937
Madhya Pradesh	939	946	921
Bombay	935	937	931
Uttar Pradesh	857	874	843

It is written, 'These figures are very instructive and three points should be noted about them: *First*—In every case, there is a definite excess of male births over female births; *Second*—The excess is very much more pronounced in Uttar Pradesh (North India) than in the other three States (which may be taken to be broadly representative of South India, Central India and West India); and *Third*—The lowest and highest values recorded over a period of ten years do not differ very much; and this fact shows that the occurrence of an excess at birth is not an accident... .

'We must accept the existence of a male excess at birth as a fact. A deficiency of female arises in all parts of India as a biological phenomenon. It is believed that this happens in almost all parts of the world' (pp. 59-60).

In the backdrop of such geo-demographic situation it is in South India that the second notable group of polyandry-practising people is met with. Of these people the Todas, the most discussed tribe of Nilgiri Hills, maintain a conspicuous position like the Khasas of North India in showing high male proportion in their population since 1872. But for

such masculine nature of the Toda population the eminent anthropologist Dr. Rivers (1906) had the occasion to comment on the tribe. On the strength of population data furnished by the genealogical records of 359 Toda families, Dr. Rivers built up a hypothesis for explaining the constant feature of female deficiency on account of infanticide and continuing practice of polyandry among this tribe. In this regard he tabled a concrete point in suggesting that 'it is possible that at their first arrival in the Nilgiri Hills, the Todas had few sources of food, and had a severe struggle for existence ; that they therefore adopted the practice of female infanticide, and that polyandry followed as a consequence' (p. 521). Further, he wrote, 'All accounts of the Toda agree in attributing to them the practice of female infanticide, though at the present time, the Todas are very chary of acknowledging the existence of the practice' (p. 478).

Taking a cue perhaps from the discussion made by Dr. Rivers, the *Census Report of India* (1911) reiterated, 'the crime [female infanticide] was also common amongst the Todas of the Nilgiris who, being polyandrous, had no great need of women and, being poor, did not wish to rear superfluous offspring' (p. 216). Again, Dr. Rivers asserted that 'there is no doubt whatever as to the close association of the polyandry of the Todas with female infanticide. It has certainly, however, diminished in frequency, and the consequent increase in the proportion of women is leading to some modification in the associated polyandry' (p. 518).

If it were true that the proportion of women among the Todas began to increase due to decreasing practice of infanticide by the beginning of the present century, then it is obvious that some time later, say 25/30 years, the female sex-ratio must show an appreciable improvement amongst them. But, the available facts point to an interesting state of development. In 1902 there were 132.2 males per 100 females among the Todas according to Dr. Rivers' own estimate. Peculiarly enough this demographic feature of male excess continued to exist even in 1931 when the sex-ratio happened to be the same as shown by Dr. Rivers.

Incidentally, it is important to note that since 1872 the male proportion among the Todas never dropped down to the lowest limit of 127.4 per 100 females which was, on the other hand, noticed long before in 1901. It is thus evident that irrespective of the prevalence of female infanticide or its declining influence, male excess continued to dominate as a biological phenomenon in the Toda population. Under the circumstances, the question remains: Would it be reasonable to assume any direct causal relation, as asserted by Dr. Rivers, between (i) practice of female infanticide, (ii) increasing proportion of males and (iii) marriage of one woman with more than one man at a time in the group concerned?

Further, that polyandry as a form of marriage should necessarily be governed always in a population by the detrimental impact of female infanticide seems to be unjustified. This would amply be evident from the fact that besides the Todas who are suspected of infanticide, there are in Travancore and Cochin (Kerala) of S. India *sixteen* other castes and tribal groups who have been reported to practise polyandry but never female infanticide (Iyer : 1939, 41 ; Mandelbaum : 1938). These people are (1) Izhuvans, (2) Kammalans, (3) Kaniyans, (4) Karvazhi Pulayas, (5) Kotas Nilgiri Hills tribe), (6) Malayarayans, (7) Mannans, (8) Muthuvans, (9) Nayars, (10) Paliyas, (11) Panans, (12) Parayas, (13) Pulayas, (14) Ullatans, (15) Uralis and (16) Velans.

On the other hand, it is moreover significant to note that some of these polyandrous people register a male sex-ratio below 100 while some more than the limit of equality. The groups which show for a considerable period consistently high female ratio (more than 100) are the Izhuvans, Kammalans, Karavazhi Pulayas, Ullatans, and Velans. Contrary to the above, the Kaniyans, Kotas (a tribe), Malayaryans, Mannans, Paliyans, Parayas and S. Pulayas have an excess of male in their respective populations. In this context the Mannans, Paliyans and Pulayas deserve special mention since they have been maintaining a constant high male proportion from the past (vide Table A).

In order to appreciate the significance of the varying

sex-proportions among the castes and tribal peoples mentioned above, it is imperative to make a close study of the wider demographic situation that has conditioned the population make-up of Travancore as a whole. It has been shown in *Census Report of Travancore* (1931): 'During the past decade the female births in Travancore averaged 944 per 1000 male births, and the sex-ratio in 1931 was 987. In India the proportion of female to male births during the decade 1911—1920 was 933 and the sex-ratio in 1921 was 945' (p. 134).

Further it is found in the report that the sex-proportions at birth varied considerably from year to year within 1920—21 and 1929—30 and the ratio of female to male births was higher in the earlier part than in the latter part of the decade in question (maximum 972 in 1923—24 and minimum 948 in 1929—30). 'The causes of these variations are not known and owing to the absence of separate vital statistics for different races, castes, and religions, it is not possible to ascertain whether the variations are shared by all the communities or are confined to any particular community or communities.

'The sex-ratio of children under one year may probably give a better indication of the degree of masculinity at birth than the imperfect vital statistics. In the population of Travancore in 1931 there were 991 female children to 1000 male children under one year. ... It is noteworthy, however, that this ratio is very nearly equal to the sex-ratio of the aggregate population, the former being 991 and the latter 987' (p. 135).

Incidentally, it is interesting to note that the males have been continuously in excess in Travancore-Cochin during the time-gap covering 1901 and 1931, but since 1941 the proportion of females has begun to increase very slightly over that of the males. In 1951 there were 1008 females per 1000 males in Travancore-Cochin (*Census Report of Travancore-Cochin*, 1951, p. 67).

Viewing the problem of differential sex-ratios from a

slightly different standpoint it can be stated that an excess of male proportion in a population does not necessarily lead to polyandry. It would be evident from the fact that there exist some caste people like the Kanikkars, Malapantarams, Mala Vetans (Vetans and Vettuvans) in Travancore-Cochin (Kerala) who show continuously high male ratio among themselves from long past, but they practise neither polyandry nor female infanticide. Table B will speak for itself in explaining the issue raised here.

In this regard it would, then, be sociologically interesting to examine how the polyandrous form of marriage has been operating as an established custom among the caste-group consisting of the Mannans, Malayarans, Paliyans, etc., but *not* among the caste-group including the Kanikkars, Malapantarams, Mala Vetans, etc., though it is a fact that under more or less similar ecological conditions each one of these castes has been strikingly maintaining continuous male excess in their population over different decennial counts since 1901.

Meanwhile let us have a look on the other side of the issue. Discussing various points related to the sex-ratio pattern of Travancore-Cochin, the *Census Report* (1931) for this State has stated that while Trichur and Quilon districts have an excess of females, Trivandrum has males and females almost in equal strength. But Kottayam district stands conspicuously apart from the rest in maintaining all along a male excess in the population since 1901. Sex-ratios in Kottayam district vary from 951 females per 1000 males in 1901 to 977 females in 1951, the minimum 939 being found in 1921.

It should be noticed at once that it is in this Kottayam district that irrespective of marriage-practices, caste people like the Malapulayas, Malayarayans, Mala Vetans, Muthuvans, Ullatans, Uralis, etc. show more males than females, as has already been pointed out above, in their respective population. They are living particularly in the following *taluks* of Kottayam district, which strangely enough started with a deficit of females even as late as 1901.

Sex-ratios for of the Taluks in Kottayam district

	Census Year					
	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941	1951
1. Changanachery	959	963	917	944	954	942
2. Kottayam	948	953	956	969	994	1012
3. Minachil	954	958	946	967	961	988
4. Devikulam	695	799	856	799	823	852
5. Thodupuzha	979	931	924	917	961	968

With respect to this sort of disturbed sex-ratio continuing for more than half a century, one may be tempted to conclude that it is the general demographic peculiarity of female deficiency of Kottayam district (and for that matter of Travancore-Cochin as a whole), that has perhaps been reflected in the sex-composition of the population of each one of the castes and tribal people concerned. Under the circumstances, is it not more reasonable to propose that the custom of marriage of one woman with more than one man at a time has functioned independently of the observed fluctuation in sex-ratios among the people concerned ?

With reference to what has been discussed so far it is amply clear that the biological phenomenon of male excess (or female deficiency) remains as a long-standing demographic characteristic of India's population as a whole. This feature is particularly conspicuous in northern and north-western India. But why should such an affair persist in India ? 'It is less easy to find a satisfactory explanation of the causes which, in the greater part of India, have produced a deficiency of females. It does not seem to be due to any appreciable extent, to their concealment at the Census, nor can any correlation be traced between the proportions of the sexes and climate, season of gestation, food, consanguineous marriages, and the like' (*Imperial Gazetteer of India*, 1909, vol. I, p. 480).

As against the above situation, it is a noteworthy social fact that the polyandrous people of India are concentrated in two distinct geographical tracts only—one in the north-

west sub-Himalayan region of Uttar Pradesh and the other in the south-western marginal areas of Travancore-Cochin (Kerala).

In spite of the fact that compact blocks of low ratio of females are immediately recognizable in regions like Punjab and Uttar Pradesh, polyandry as a custom has never taken its root in any group, except among the Khasas, residing in the said geographical belt. Is it not interesting to probe how in the land of male-dominated population *only* the Khasas have retained the practice of marriage of one woman with more than one man at a time? Pursuant to this, it can again be posed: Should the biological feature of continual male excess be an essential pre-requisite to keep polyandry going in the community concerned?

With special reference to the disturbed sex-ratios of the caste people of Travancore-Cochin, it is all the more imperative to realize that while the event of continuing high male proportion or otherwise in any group should be examined within the appropriate demographic context, customary practices like polyandry or other forms of marriage are to be appraised in their proper societal framework. To put the idea more concretely, it is suggested that instead of ascribing simply a generalized relation between polyandry and high male concentration (due to female infanticide or other biological factors) in a caste or tribal group concerned, it would be better to study thoroughly the nature and functions of the *social structure* that has sanctioned or otherwise marriage of several men with one woman at a time, and at the same time caused demographic imbalances affecting increased male or female proportion over a long stretch of time within the group concerned.

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TABLE A

Census Report-wise distribution of population and sex-ratios among different polyandrous communities of India

Castes and Tribes practising polyandry in India	Census Report for the year	Population		(Sex-ratio males per 100 females)	Reference
		Male	Female		
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
A. South India					
1. Izhevans (Illevans, Tiyvans, Chouans, Thandans)	1901	91524	92980	98.4	L. A. K. Iyer
	1931	132875	143774	92.4	
2. Kammalans (artisan classes)	1881	342438	349862	97.9	L. A. K. Iyer &
	1931	22085	23461	94.1	Census Report
3. Kaniyans (Panikans)	1931	1950	1891	103.1	L. A. K. Iyer
4. Karavazhi Pulayas (Maia Pulayans)	1901	14	12	116.7
	1911	17	28	60.7	
	1931	126	129	98.9	
5. Kotas (a tribe of Nilgiri Hills)	1911	547	616	88.8	Census Report
	1931	562	569	100.5	
6. Malayarayans	1911	1294	1318	98.2	
	1921	1486	1372	108.3	L. A. K. Iyer
	1931	1606	1576	101.9	
7. Mannans	1901	615	557	110.4
	1911	647	592	109.3	
	1921	587	511	114.9	
	1931	665	611	108.8	
8. Muthuvans	1901	409	399	102.5
	1911	195	184	106.0	
	1921	122	136	90.4	
	1931	649	652	99.5	
9. Nayars (of Travancore)	1931	431154	437257	98.6	Census Report
10. Paliyans	1921	165	134	123.1	L. A. K. Iyer
	1931	266	217	122.6	
11. Panans	1901	1403	1378	101.8
	1931	1771	1832	98.7	
12. Parayans	1931	72158	70206	102.8
13. Southern Pulayas	1931	86782	38610	100.5

Castes and Tribes practising polyandry in India	Census Report for the year	Population		Sex-ratio (males per 100 females)	Reference
		Male	Female		
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
13.1 Pulayas (including the Southerners)	1911	93235	91979	101.4	L. A. K. Iyer
	1921	99420	96784	102.7	
	1931	188815	181355	101.4	
14. Todas (A tribe of the Nilgiri Hills)	1901	451	354	127.4	W. H. R. Rivers and Census Report
	1911	426	322	132.3	
	1931	840	257	132.3	
15. Ullatans	1911	2197	1918	114.5	L. A. K. Iyer
	1921	1604	1803	89.0	
	1931	2242	2879	77.9	
16. Uralis	1901	106	114	93.0	" "
	1911	169	197	85.8	
	1921	129	101	127.7	
	1931	454	462	98.3	
17. Velans	1901	4009	4280	94.8	" "
	1931	5205	5690	91.5	

B. North India

18. Khasas (of Jaunsar-Bawar)	1901	28349	22752	124.6 (a)	D.N. Majumda R. N. Saksena
	1911	30518	24294	125.6 (b)	
	1921	31567	24056	131.2	
	1931	31922	24857	128.4	
	1941	82345	25305	127.8	
	1951	84704	25765	128.9	

TABLE B

Census-Report-wise distribution of sex-ratios among some selected polyandrous and non-polyandrous castes of Travancore-Cochin

Polyandrous castes	Ref. Census year	Sex-ratio (males per 100 females)	Non-Polyandrous castes	Ref. Census year	Sex ratio (males per 100 females)
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
1. Mannans	1901	110.4	1. Kanikkars	1901	105.4
	1911	109.3		1911	116.0
	1921	114.9		1921	109.5
	1931	108.8		1931	112.5
2. Malayareyans	1921	108.9	2. Malapentarams	1901	156.0
	1931	101.9		1911	131.1
				1921	147.8
			1931	142.9	
3. Pallyans	1921	123.1	3. Mala Vetans	1911	114.0
	1931	122.6		1921	99.7
				1931	101.7

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