



Depiction Of Son Preference And Female Feticide In Post Nineties Indian Cinema

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Abstract: Within Indian patriarchal families, a well-established preference for male progeny resulted in the loss of girls either before or after their birth. The son preference in India is comprehended within several different strands of thought, which are still considered part of cultural beliefs and practices. The preference for a male child has been seen as an expression of traditional social behavior. And the gender disparity of socio-economic rights is also enforced to choose the male progeny in a patriarchal society.

As I consider film and sociology to be linked, in this article I would like to analyze 'son preference' in the aspect of post-nineties alternative cinema. Influenced by feminist theories and the new world view, it proposes that as committed artists, alternative filmmakers have tried to depict the struggle for reproductive and sexual rights, which has led to a progressive feminization of the theory and practice of governance, development, human rights, and justice. Simultaneously, I would like to locate how patriarchal these cinemas are subtly, even when they articulate the rights of the womb. Is it possible to contextualize these films in multiple locations and categorize them accordingly to have a much more disaggregated view and bring out the fractures within the new vision of gender?

Key Words: *Patriarchy, Son preference, Female Foeticide, Alternative Indian Cinema*

The cited song is based on the traditional hierarchies of patriarchy, which are anonymously threatened with the birth of a girl child. In Indian society, when a girl is born, the entire earth sinks afoot, but when a son is born, it rises one foot to greet him. Post-nineties film directors have seen our society through the prism of films that have developed a new consciousness and an endless work of criticism in action. So here it is very indispensable to point out through the lens of post-nineties alternative Indian cinema why, within patriarchy, the birth of a son is still considered auspicious but the birth of a girl child is still considered a burden. Films like *'Father Son and Holy War'* (1994), *'Mrityudand'* (1996), *'Haribhari'* (2000), *'Matrubhumi: A Nation Without Women'* (2005), *'Tommidinelaly'* (2011), *'Me and My Sister'* (2013), *'Nahannyote'* (2013), *'Jalpari'*

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(2013), 'Mardistan' (2014), 'Chunnav' (2014), 'It's A Girl' (2014), 'Quissa' (2015), etc. critically visualized the discrimination against a girl in Indian patriarchal society. Directors have tried to explore the truth through their cinematic gaze that, even after birth, girls are at a much higher risk of childhood death than boys. Female babies are less likely to survive the first year than their male counterparts. After birth, son preference persists, leading to the neglect of girls and their lack of access to nutrition, health, and maternal care in these critical early years.

At the beginning of the film '*Matrubhumi: A Nation without Women*' (2003), it is visualized that female feticide and infanticide are promoted by son preference, which could have contributed significantly to the fall in the sex ratio, and asserts that sex selection at birth through the emerging technology of sex determination is a common phenomenon.² Director Manish Jha focused on the fact that, due to the bias in son preferences in India, almost seven lakh girls are killed by their parents before they are born. Even after birth, girls are at a much higher risk of childhood death than boys. Female babies are less likely to survive the first year than their male counterparts. After birth, son preference persists, leading to the neglect of girls and their lack of access to nutrition, health, and maternal care in these critical early years. Patriarchy always determines the resilience of son preference. The tendency of couples to strive for a son is seen as an essential ingredient in a complete family. The film '*Na Hanyate*' (2012) has visualized that the strong feelings of son preference provoke a mother to choose the life of her son among two. Though the protagonist, Jui, is emotionally attached to her daughter, she nevertheless saves the life of her son as her old age asset and security.

Due to the strong feelings of son preference, the gradual decline of the female sex ratio indicates gender discrimination in Indian society. India's sex ratio among children aged 0–6 years is still alarming. The film '*Father Son and Holy War*' (1994) has explained that in a society with a strong preference for boys, couples with more girls would continue childbearing till they had achieved their desired number of male children. Director Anand Patwardhan has shown that the term son preference specifies gender discrimination and nurtures the attitude that sons are more important and valuable than daughters. Son preference has a historical root that is connected to the Vedic period.³

In the personal interaction director, Anand explained that the question of son preference alongside gender asymmetries requires different types of inquiries and explorations. That accounts for dynamism, contradiction, challenge, and change. The concept of reproduction is not only a biological process, but it is also closely tangled with socio-material, cultural, and political norms. The film has explored that in Asian countries,

² They find the bigger female deficits in the 10+ group. However in the absence of age data they use estimates which now after the release of official age data can be seen to have gone haywire.

³ In Rigveda, the son is referred to as 'Putra', 'Su nu', and the 'Vir', the Rishi Kakshivat said that the husband and the wife should pray together for a brave son. The tradition has mentioned that marriage began to be projected as valid only if it lets to progeny, particularly to the birth of sons. A dominant theme in the Vedas was the importance of fertility which ensured the propagation of sons. In the 1900 German scholar, Hermann Oldenberg had referred a wedding hymn from Rig Veda where Agni was called upon to protect the bride so that she would be of blessed womb'

See Oldenberg Herman, 1988, 'The Religion of the Veda', New Delhi Motilal Banarashidas, p-72

poverty, inequality, and population, both internationally and nationally, have been brought together for a long time. (Patel and Purewal, 2005: 25); nevertheless, the complexity of the issue remains challenging. It is very alarming that gender relations are always crucial in reproduction.

The film has revealed the politics of reproduction in the patriarchal domain. It has always been dominated by the preference of male progeny. Professor Tulsi Patel has explained that, in the Indian context, the question of gender politics in reproduction came earlier through the demographic and policy formulation interest in fertility, population growth, and non-acceptance of contraception and subsequently on regional kinship and female autonomy differences between South and North India.⁴

In a personal interaction, director Anand Patwardhan mentioned that, while son preference is not necessarily only a belief, even son preference and sex ratio are most often used to identify gender discrimination. He argues that Son's preference is understood within several different strands of thought. He explains that, while son preference is associated with it in terms of cultural beliefs and practices, such as inheritance, The sex ratio has been used as an indicator of gender equality and inequality, which has had an impact on the demographic and statistical spheres of South Asia. (Patwardhan : 2020)⁵

The documentary film '*Pankh*', produced by Chetna, visualized that in Indian patriarchal society, several superstitions influence the practice of son preference. The film has mentioned that in South India, especially Tamil Brahmin families, they have traditionally practiced the particular ceremony. It is associated with giving birth to male progeny. I.e., women have to eat barleycorn, and two mustard seeds or beans are placed on both sides of the barleycorn, along with the image of the male genital organ, so that she can give birth to a male child. The film has raised a pertinent question in the post-globalization period when science and technologies have trounced all irrational practices, so why is a section of people still obsessed with getting male progeny?⁶

The film *Quissa* (2015) explored the idea that the initial preference for a male child seems to be an expression of confirming the expected traditional social behavior. It might not be a strong-held view of the individuals themselves. Besides the loosening of social cohesion, individual needs and desires become central, and they prioritize their requirements. They try not to ignore their instincts to become parents. This is a crucial step as parents consciously decide to adopt, irrespective of age, sex, and percentage of the child. The conscious act of subconscious parental instinct, the love for the abandoned, and giving joy to the destitute—the interplay of all these emotions culminates in bringing home a child to a complete family.⁷

⁴ Patel Tulsi, 2007 Sex- Selective Abortion in India: Gender, Society and New Reproductive Technologies., New Delhi, Sage Publication. P-31

⁵ The interview was given on 21.8.2020

⁶ Pankh (2015) produced by Chetna.

⁷ Patel Tulsi, 2007 Sex -Selective Abortion in India: Gender, Society and New Reproductive Technologies. New Delhi, Sage Publication. P-255

The film *Quissa*, directed by Anup Singh Batla, was set in 1947, when a Sikh named Umber Singh was disgruntled at the fact that he did not have a son to carry on his family lineage. That is assumed to be carried forward by the male of the next generation. He stated to his wife about his expectations towards male progeny, but Mehar, his wife, is unsure and fearful that if she has another girl, Umber will leave her. During the birth of their fourth child, Umber takes the child from the lap of Mehar and declares with happiness that it is a boy. Mehar checks the gender of the child and realizes the child is a girl. Umber is declaring the child to be a male because of his strong desire to have a son. It was clear from the film that preference for a son and discrimination against a daughter were related to a few socio-political and economic factors. The principal purposes served by the birth of the sons were that they enabled the father to pay off the debt he owed to his ancestors and secure immortality and the heavenly world. The most important secular advantages of sons were their economic utility and the perpetuation of the race through them. These reasons were sufficient for people to procure a son by whatever method. The film director, Anup Singh, criticized the patriarchal ideology that has promoted son preference.

Director Shyam Benegal has explained in the film *'Haribhari'* (2000) that the most spectacular ploys of capitalist patriarchy are to privatize and institutionalize motherhood. He has explained how Gazala was taunted and sexually abused by her husband since she was not the mother of a son. According to the recently published NFHS-4 state reports, it has been found that in Haryana there is a strong preference for sons. Fifteen percent of women and 20 percent of men want more sons than daughters, but only 1-2 percent of women and men want more daughters than sons. However, most men and women would like to have at least one son and at least one daughter. Children are strongly affected by their current number of sons. For example, among women with two children, 95 percent with two sons and 92 percent with one son want no more children, compared with only 38 percent with two daughters who want no more children. Notably, however, the proportion of currently married women with two children who want no more children, irrespective of their number of sons, has remained unchanged in the 10 years since NFHS-4. In Haryana, unplanned pregnancies are relatively common. If all women were to have only the number of children they wanted, the total fertility rate would have been considerably below the replacement level, at 1.6 children per woman, instead of the current level of 2.1 children per woman. Whereas in Bihar, there is a strong preference for sons. Thirty-seven percent of women and 30 percent of men want more sons than daughters, but only 2-4 percent of women and men want more daughters than sons. However, most men and women would like to have at least one son and at least one daughter. Women's desire for more children is strongly affected by their current number of sons. For example, among women with two children, 74 percent with two sons and 62 percent with one son want no more children, compared with only 25 percent with two daughters. Notably, however, the proportion of currently married women with two children who want no more children, irrespective of their number of sons, has remained unchanged in the 10 years since NFHS-4. No matter how many children they already have, men are more likely than women to want no more children. In Bihar, unplanned pregnancies are relatively common. If all women were to have only the number of children they wanted, the total fertility rate would

have 2.5 children instead of the current level of 3.4 children per woman.⁸ In Uttar Pradesh, the percentage of women and men who want more sons than daughters are 31 and 28 percent, respectively, but only 1-2 percent of women and men want more daughters than sons. However, a large majority of men and women would like to have at least one son and at least one daughter. Women's desire for more children is strongly affected by their current number of sons. For example, among women with two children, 84 percent with two sons and 77 percent with one son want no more children, compared with 37 percent with two daughters wanting no more children. Notably, however, the proportion of currently married women with two children who want no more children irrespective of their number of sons has increased to 73 percent in NFHS-4 from 64 percent in NFHS-3, and for men, it has gone up from 62 percent to 73 percent during the inter-survey period. In Uttar Pradesh, unplanned pregnancies are relatively common. If all women were to have only the number of children they wanted, the total fertility rate would have reached the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman, instead of the current level of 2.7 children per woman.⁹

Director Shyam Benegal has discussed in personal interaction that patriarchy dictates that the test of 'maleness' and 'femaleness' lies in the ability to produce a son. A son is a one-way ticket to 'moksha', old-age support, and a repeatedly renewable check for dowry. So people do anything to get a son. Secondly, in all such cases, the birth of a son is attributed to the efficacy of the method. However, any failure is dumped on the errors, ill luck, or karma of the user. Thirdly, there is the almost total absence of a culture of questioning. There is almost a conspiracy of silence. (Benegal :2019)¹⁰

The National Award-winning Assamese film *Me and My Sister* (2013) has depicted the political economy of son preferences. The film has shown that a lack of access to assets and capital determines women's deprived position in Indian society. Without rights to land or real instead of nominal inheritance, the preference of sons will continue to overshadow any positive perceptions of girls as they will remain as economic appendages rather than economic agents, given dowries and out-marriage of women from their natal homes. The film focused on the material basis of gender relations around ownership, which forms the basis for son preferences alongside other gender biases. In the film '*Quissa*' (2014), director Anup Singh criticized how various codes of exchange and communication (despite some of the existence of overreaching barriers for women) offer women both negotiation power and routes to fulfillment within the patriarchal households set up. They narrated women's autonomy and agency even within patriarchal structures and ultimately presented an alternative epistemological position to the more reductionist views of other studies.¹¹ However, in South Asia, the deep focus on birth points to the moment at which males and females are born and become masculine and feminine. Social constructivism sadly seems to flutter in the wind during times when the aspirations of

⁸ NFHS-4, /Bihar Report p-7

⁹ Ibid-/ UP Report, p--7

¹⁰ The interview was taken in 2019 at the residence of the director Shyam Benegal.

¹¹ Dr. Sharma combined the anthropological approach of long-term intensive fieldwork with question of political economy / Marxist feminism by viewing culture as something forming and constantly changing around the organization of production and reproduction. Sharma U,1980; 'Women Work and Property in North West India, London, Tavistock, p-16

households and communities can seemingly only be achieved by the production of a family line of male heirs.¹²

In the film *Aadapillalamy* (2011), director Mahesh Babu visualized the discrimination against the girl child. The film demonstrates various forms of discrimination that girls experience. There are two stories in *Aadapillalamy*. The first follows an eight-year-old girl from a working-class family. Her parents expect her to help around the house and take care of her baby sister. While her brother is allowed to eat more food, study, play, and have ice cream as he pleases, The story shows her struggles to strike a balance between household chores and her desire. She ends up failing her exams because her parents did not allow her enough time to study. And she fantasizes about how different her situation would be if her brother only shared the chores and care of their baby sister. The second story is about an older girl in a slightly better-off family. She wears makeup and enjoys dancing with her friends, but her parents scold her for these indulgences. They no longer allow her to attend school because there was a fear of boys harassing her. She is quite bored, and her parents eventually permit her to become a domestic worker, but this makes her vulnerable to assault by the employer.¹³

The film *Aadapillalamy* (2011) has raised the pertinent question of whether the foundation of son preference is based on commonly cited practices like dowry, patriarchal kinship relations, and male inheritance. The son preference is historically deep-rooted and is maintained and managed by social relations, capital assets, and customs. In states like Punjab, Rajasthan, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, etc. where gender discrimination is the basic feature, their political economy is charted out by looking at how power, hierarchy, wealth, control, and stability have been at the center of the maintenance of gender relations in those regions. The structures that generate anti-girl child sentiments also generate several contradictions. These contradictions contribute to every structure and are equally significant to understanding the foundations of son preference through, for instance, social relations and economic rationales for preferring or even choosing to have male progeny.

A general explanation for son preference is that sons can provide old-age support.¹⁴ It has also been said that in India, a majority of old parents live with married sons. In the absence of any social welfare benefits or security in old age, they are sometimes treated as burdensome. In Hinduism, family sons are mandatory because of their spontaneous participation in the funeral rituals of the parents. Added to this, most women have very limited opportunities to contribute to their parents' welfare. Post-nineties Indian filmmakers have explained that within a patriarchal private domain, sons are needed for the transmission of family property. I had an opportunity to communicate with the great film maestro Shyam Benegal, and he explained that it is a very alarming condition that even in the present context, besides, in certain communities, parents are being

¹² In fact, Simon herself was one among two sisters. Her father had desperately wanted to have a son and was disappointed with his life in only having two daughters. Perhaps due to this De Beauvoir's parents lived a subsequent life of estrangement with her father resigning himself to Simon's academic success, despite being a daughter to pull the family out of abject poverty. See the book *Second Sex* by Simon De Beauvoir.

¹³2011 *Aadapillalamy* Mahesh Babu

¹⁴ Shekher T. V. & Hatti Neelambar, January-April, 2010, *Sciological Bulletin*, 59(1), 'Disappearing Daughters and Intensification of Gender Bias: Evidence from Two Village Studies in South India', *Indian Sociological Society*

subjugated to humiliation if they have more girl children. He explained that a strong preference for a son automatically assigns a lower status to girls, which very often results in discrimination against them. Discrimination at times led to mistreatment, aggression, and neglect. The discrimination against a girl child takes an extreme, violent, and cannibalistic form when a child is killed either before or after birth, merely because she is a female. He said that women also practiced son preference due to a lack of legal and general awareness, illiteracy, and displacement from social production. The woman thinks that if she has a girl child, then she can lose her position in society because our patriarchal structure thus values the son's mother. Apparently, the hierarchy also criticizes the woman as being the mother of a girl child.¹⁵

From the above discussion, it has been observed that the social system of patriarchy, with males as the primary authority figures, is central to the organization of much of Indian society. The system upholds the institution of male rule and privilege and mandates female subordination. Patriarchy manifests itself in the social, religious, political, legal, and economic organization of society. Patriarchal societies in most parts of India have translated their prejudice and bigotry into a compulsive preference for boys and discrimination against the girl child. They have also allowed practices such as female infanticide, dowry, bride burning, and sati. Despite its social construction, patriarchal culture, reinforced by the major religion in the country, maintains its stranglehold on gender inequality. The prevalent patriarchal framework places an ideological ban on the discussion of alternative approaches to achieving gender justice.

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