



Critical Observations On The Working Of ‘Beti Bachao Beti Padhao’: Focus On Nayagarh District Of Odisha

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Abstract

In a patriarchal societal order like that of India, gender sensitization has been a neglected domain leading to retarded impetus for women’s empowerment. Following Prime Minister’s ambitious declaration for launching an initiative named ‘Beti Bachao Beti Padhao’ steps have been augmented to boost girl child’s survival and promote educational avenues to carve out a befitting status for her holistic development. Gearing up several initiatives like shift from paternalistic generosity to reinforced community action, making concerted efforts to curb child marriage and promoting convergent efforts for putting a full stop to women’s trafficking have been reckoned as some of the core components of the campaign. Nayagarh district in Odisha one of the selected districts in the whole country, witnessed multi-pronged community led activities with facilitation extended by government agencies. This article attempts to dissect the undercurrent driving this movement including the basic facets, issues, constraints and challenges.

Key Words: Girl Child, Empowerment, Education, Gender, Sex Ratio, Odisha, Nayagarh

Introduction

India is on the path to becoming the fastest-growing economy globally and is set to overtake China as the most populous nation this year, according to recent reports. Experts indicate that India must pursue its economic growth through an inclusive development approach. This challenge and opportunity should be leveraged to unlock its demographic potential across various sectors. A significant part of this effort involves increasing the participation of women in the workforce and ensuring fair access to essential needs such as education, employment, and healthcare. This is crucial to uphold its commitment to the principle of 'leaving no one behind' as part of the 2030 Agenda for the Sustainable Development Goals. Yet, we find ourselves still grappling with the imbalance in our country’s sex ratio at birth and striving to safeguard the fundamental right of every girl child to live with dignity and equal opportunities in this nation. A distorted child sex ratio (CSR) in India has been documented and analyzed by numerous researchers since the early 20th Century, beginning with the first Census in 1871. A pronounced preference for sons has emerged as the main reason for the neglect of girl children in patrilineal and patrilocal Indian societies, resulting in a high mortality rate among girls aged 0-4 years. In the 1990s, this issue was exacerbated by the widespread availability of medical technologies that enabled the illegal determination of fetal sex. The 'Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques (PNDT) Act' of 1994 was the first

legislation in India aimed at curbing sex-selective abortions, which was later revised in 2003 to become the Pre-Conception and Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques (PC & PNDT) Act. This legislation mandated the maintenance of records for diagnostic tests and limited the use of these technologies to registered centers and qualified professionals only. However, despite these legal frameworks, numerous reports have continued to reveal a troubling decline in CSR in India, reaching its lowest point in the Census Data of 2011. Some reports attribute this decline to inadequate implementation of the PC-PNDT Act or delays in judicial proceedings.

Statement of Research Problem

Indian Society is characterized by a patriarchal and male-dominated structure. Sons are seen as the ones who carry on the family lineage, while daughters typically marry and leave their maternal homes. Sons are responsible for performing vital religious rituals that assist grandparents and parents in achieving salvation. The social framework and relationships are deeply rooted in beliefs and traditions that predominantly favor the birth of male children. Male offspring are viewed as providers of financial and emotional support in old age; they contribute to the family's wealth and property, whereas daughters are perceived as a financial burden due to dowry and other associated costs. Furthermore, our religious texts reinforce gender discrimination. A norm advocating for smaller families was promoted through the Family Planning program initiated in India post-independence. This initiative further entrenched the preference for sons within the socio-cultural and religious value systems of the country. The ability to detect physical and cultural abnormalities in the fetus has facilitated sex determination. The introduction of such technologies in a patriarchal society like India, where the fertility rate remains high, has resulted in an unfavorable sex ratio. This situation has become a boon for those who strongly favor male children, which has significantly contributed to the declining sex ratio in India. Pre-Natal sex selection stands as one of the primary factors leading to a drastic reduction in the number of girls under the age of six. According to the Census of 2011, there has been a notable decline in the Child Sex Ratio, with only 918 girls for every 1000 boys in the 0-6 age group. The continuous drop in this Ratio since 1961 (from 976 in 1961 to 927 in 2001 and 918 in 2011) raises serious concerns as it highlights the low status of women in our society and underscores the issue of gender discrimination.

Dissection of Underlying Causes for the Campaign

Given the necessity for an intervention that tackles the widespread and intricate nature of the issue through collaborative efforts among multiple stakeholders and a multi-sectoral strategy, the Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (BBBP) scheme was developed. Initiated in January 2015 by the Government of India, the BBBP was introduced as a joint effort involving three ministries (W&CD, Human Resource Development, and Health & Family Welfare) to:

- Ensure the survival, protection, and education of the girl child;
- Establish equal value for the girl child through social mobilization and involvement
- Raising awareness among stakeholders for protection of girl child and her education

The scheme was first launched in 100 critical districts in 2015, followed by a nationwide rollout in 2018. Since its inception, numerous news articles and evaluations of the BBBP scheme have sought to assess its progress and impact at various stages. While many of these reports arrive at conflicting conclusions regarding the scheme's effectiveness or impact, there is a general agreement on its significant relevance and limited efficiency. This independent research, conducted by policy scholars from the Indian School of Public Policy, confirms and offers an updated view on its progress to date and identifies key areas for future improvement.

Functional Efficacy of Policy Perspectives

In accordance with international commitments and the rights of the girl child to life, survival, protection, education, and participation emphasized in SDGs¹, CRC², and CEDAW³, the BBBP scheme represents a distinctive initiative aimed at proactively addressing discrimination against the girl child. Beyond the constitutional provisions that advocate for equal rights for women and children, the National Development Agenda⁴ further underscores the importance of an intervention like BBBP. The scheme aligns well with other initiatives such as Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, National Health Mission, Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (for Pregnant and Lactating Mothers), One Stop Centre (for all women and girls), and Sukanya Samridhhi Yojana. Overall, this intervention has proven to be beneficial as a central theme that enhances other initiatives and encourages various stakeholders to prioritize gender issues in development. It shows significant alignment in resource utilization, administrative structure, and coordinated actions among different ministries. The scheme has successfully highlighted the problem of gender discrimination. It has led to improvements in all major indicators,⁵ such as CSR, the enrollment of girls in schools, and the percentage of institutional deliveries over the years. However, the pace of progress has been sluggish. The absence of disaggregated data, inadequate monitoring, poor expenditure planning, and a sidelined focus on sectoral interventions have obstructed the desired changes and consistent outcomes across states. When we examine the measurable impact of the scheme during the first five years of its implementation, several reports, including data from civil registration systems in various districts, indicate a stabilization of the sex ratio at birth. Notable advancements have been observed in critical districts such as Mau (Uttar Pradesh), Karnal (Haryana), and Patiala (Punjab), among others. Since the launch of this scheme, there has been a reported improvement in the early registration of pregnancies and the number of women choosing institutional births, as well as an increase in the enrollment ratio of girls in secondary education. The researcher found that we currently lack sufficient data to evaluate the scheme's impact on girls from marginalized communities and how effectively it enables educated girls and expectant mothers to engage in the decision-making processes of their own lives and families. It is also important to highlight that the intervention primarily targets rural areas, despite strong evidence and experiences indicating the prevalence of female feticide in urban settings. In these urban areas, affluent and educated families tend to excel in all three factors that contribute to the sex-selective elimination of the girl child: willingness, ability, and readiness.

Evaluative Achievements in Pan Indian Context

The scheme has received a high rating for its convergence, as it effectively utilizes existing outreach and implementation systems, such as Panchayats and ASHAs/Anganwadi workers, and is carried out in partnership with various other departments. However, it has struggled to utilize the allocated resources efficiently. The audit report from 2017-18⁶ pointed out the under-

utilization of funds and excessive spending on media and advocacy alone. Field surveys and discussions with stakeholders indicated that ground-level functionaries lack clarity regarding their specific roles or tasks within this scheme. This ambiguity leads to ineffective monitoring, hindering efficient resource management. In response to stakeholder feedback and audit findings, significant revisions were made to the scheme's implementation strategy starting in 2022. The government announced a renewed emphasis on sectoral interventions and zero-budget advertising for this scheme during a parliamentary session. BBBP was recognized as a component of the Sambal sub-scheme under Mission Shakti in the 15th Finance Commission. Additionally, the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship and the Ministry of Minority Affairs have been included as partners to enhance skill development and employability for girls. Although the scheme's original goal was to tackle issues that jeopardize the rights of the girl child throughout her life cycle, its design fails to adequately address the concerns of key stakeholders at various stages of a girl's life—from the womb to young adulthood. Several underlying factors continue to fuel gender bias against the girl child, including a lack of financial independence, early marriage, and limited participation in decision-making, among others.

Analysis of Campaign's Efficacy in Nayagarh District

The 'Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao' initiative, along with the anti-girl child marriage campaign by the Union Government, was inaugurated in the district. Nayagarh has been selected as one of the 100 districts nationwide to participate in the 'Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao' campaign due to its low female sex ratio. It was highlighted that Nayagarh district has 855 women for every 1000 men, and 55 villages have been earmarked for the campaign's first phase. The district gained attention following the female foeticide scandal in 2007. The Doctors were asked to cease conducting sex determination tests. Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the 'Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao' campaign, aiming to enhance the child sex ratio. Nayagarh has been chosen as one of the districts under the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Scheme due to the concerning decline in the Child Sex Ratio (CSR) as indicated by the Census data. In 2011, Nayagarh's Child Sex Ratio stood at 855, while the national average was 919 and the state average was 941. This represented a decline of 49 points from the 2001 Census.⁷ The Sex Ratio at Birth (SRB) was particularly disheartening, presenting a challenge to elevate the SRB from 845 (in 2014-15) to 865. The District Administration of Nayagarh, with the backing of the Women and Child Development (W & CD) department of the Government of Odisha, has launched extensive campaigns involving various groups and institutions to ensure the effective implementation of the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) initiative. Consequently, by the end of September 2016, the Sex Ratio at Birth (SRB) in the district had risen to 883.

Reinforcing Community Action

Community involvement is a crucial element of this initiative. Not only have government officials been engaged, but also non-governmental organizations, the public, students, media representatives, and political figures have been made aware of the issues at hand. The District Administration has conducted over 34 orientation programs for departmental officials, active NGO members, grassroots functionaries, Anganwadi Workers (AWWs), Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs), elected representatives, school teachers, and students, among others. Advocacy campaigns have been executed from the village level to the district level, employing various methods such as traditional folk performances, street theater, posters, banners, and hoardings. Technology has been harnessed to its fullest potential. Campaigns have been conducted through SMS, email, community radio, cable television, and social media platforms (including Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp). Special Gram Sabhas have been convened to address the protection of the girl child. Guddi-Gudda Boards have been created and updated in all 1555 Anganwadi Centers (AWCs) across the district. Various days and occasions have been celebrated to honor the girl child, and the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) logo is prominently featured on all cover files, letters, and notifications issued by the district administration.⁸ Additionally, the Health Department has organized IEC and advocacy campaigns that actively engage the community. This initiative is one of the crucial efforts undertaken by the District Administration of Nayagarh district to honor girl children (Kanya) and raise awareness about the significance of the girl child. The District consists of 8 Blocks and 178 Panchayats. This initiative is observed in every single Grampanchayat throughout the district. Every parent with a girl child is encouraged to participate in the sensitization program alongside their daughter. CDPOs are designated to facilitate the program in each Grampanchayat of the respective blocks. Sarpanch, Block Chairman, Anganwadi Workers, Teachers, School Children, Community leaders, and the Child Protection Unit are all present at the event. School students perform various plays addressing the declining child sex ratio, gender discrimination, and the negative effects of child marriage and trafficking, while also highlighting the goals of the "Beti Bachao Beti Padhao" scheme. In accordance with local customs, the girls don new outfits and adorn their foreheads with bindi, while all guests tie threads around their wrists. The girls are honored by guests and elders following Odia traditions with diya, raw rice, berry leaves, and grass. At the conclusion, all attendees pledge to protect and cherish their daughters and ensure they receive an education. The District Administration has successfully honored over 10,560 girls in the district through this initiative.

Preventing Child Marriage: Revamping Girls' Education

Recognizing that child marriage significantly hinders the realization of child rights, the District Administration of Nayagarh is actively working to eliminate this practice within the district. This year, the District Administration has successfully intervened to prevent 34 instances of child marriage. The District Child Protection Unit (DCPU) is consistently following up on these cases to ensure that the children who have been rescued continue their education. The DCPU is also diligently organizing awareness programs at the village and Panchayat levels to educate the community about the detrimental effects of child marriage. The results of these sensitization efforts are evident, as the District Administration is receiving increased reports of such marriages and is responding promptly.⁹ Nayagarh District Administration collaborates with various organizations, including the Child Welfare Committee, Special Juvenile Police Unit, CDPOs, and other stakeholders, to prevent child marriage occurrences in the district. Panchayat Level Child Protection Committees (PLCPCs) have been established, chaired by Sarpanchs, in 177 gram panchayats as part of the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS). Members of the PLCPCs are educated about the prohibition of child marriage and their responsibilities in this regard. Continuous awareness programs are being held in rural areas and villages under the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao initiative and ICPS in the district. The District Administration has also provided training for all Child Marriage Prohibition Officers (with CDPOs designated as C.M.P.O.) regarding their duties and responsibilities. Furthermore, training sessions for block-level officials and AWWs have been conducted across all eight blocks.

A Case on Curbing Trafficking of Girls

The trafficking of girls and women poses a significant challenge in the district. To address this issue, a workshop was convened with all stakeholders to gain insight into the current situation and determine a path forward. The district administration partnered with an NGO to launch a mass awareness campaign against Human Trafficking. The "Swarakhya Caravan," a mobile unit equipped with IEC materials and staffed by social activists and trafficking survivors, traveled to the remote areas of Nayagarh district, disseminating crucial information on how to identify trafficking, empower oneself, and avoid falling victim. Mamina (pseudo name) a 13-year-old girl from Bada Sahara village in Bhapur Block. She is an exceptional student currently in class VIII. Her father, a daily wage laborer, is illiterate, and the family belongs to the scheduled caste category.¹⁰ Their monthly income is approximately Three thousand rupees with her father being the sole provider. In light of their impoverished circumstances, Mamina's father resolved to marry her off. However, Mamina, a determined young girl, strongly opposed her father's decision as she was eager to continue her education. Despite her relentless efforts to convince her parents, she ultimately felt compelled to accept the arranged marriage to a man who was 40 years old, 27 years senior to her. Upon receiving information from the block supervisor, the District Child Protection Unit, along with the Sub-Collector of Nayagarh and the SDPO of Khandapada, swiftly intervened to prevent the marriage. Mamina was rescued and brought before the Child Welfare Committee (CWC) in Nayagarh for further action. The CWC ordered her short-term placement in a Child Care Institution. On June 16, 2015, the CWC issued an order for the child's parental care under specific conditions. After extensive discussions, persuasion, and counseling by the DCPU team, Mamina's parents, relatives, and the entire village were ultimately persuaded about the serious implications of child marriage.

Enforcing PC&PNDT Act: A Step towards Empowerment

The notion that there is a desperate need for a male child within families has faced significant criticism from the District administration of Nayagarh, which has implemented a Zero tolerance policy towards offenders. The district's PC&PNDT Cell actively conducts raids on illegal or unregistered clinics to combat the unlawful practice of sex determination. On May 30, 2015 the PC&PNDT Cell received a tip-off regarding an illegal abortion taking place at Raghunath Clinic, located at Bahadjhola Chhak, Odogaon. The Cell's staff promptly traveled to Odogaon and executed a raid on the clinic in question.

This clinic was being operated from the residence of Dr. Bhagaban Mohanty. During the raid, a woman named Jyoshnarani Pradhan was found performing a termination of pregnancy, assisted by an individual named Janardan Sahoo. Upon inspection, the team discovered that the clinic owner had established a fully equipped operating theater with indoor facilities.¹¹ All necessary instruments for medical termination of pregnancy (MTP) were present within the clinic. Jyoshnarani Pradhan, who is unqualified, was illegally conducting medical terminations of pregnancy at this facility. During questioning, she revealed that she was impersonating a doctor and was running the clinic with the collusion of the house owner, Dr. Bhagaban Mohanty, along with several other doctors from Bhubaneswar. The role of the ASHA worker was established in this case. Sita Nayak, ASHA of Saradhapur village in Nayagarh, along with Janaki Behera, ASHA of Srirampur, Daspalla, were involved. Consequently, the clinic in question was sealed by the police, with the BDO of Odogaon present, and the accused were apprehended by the Odogaon Police Station. An FIR was filed under sections 312, 313, 315, 316, 420, and 10B of the IPC, as well as Section 5 of the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act and U/s-16 of the Odisha Clinical Establishment Act 1990. In Nayagarh district, there are 29 privately registered clinical establishments according to the inspection report from the CDMO Nayagarh. The District Health Administration has conducted raids on four unauthorized clinical establishments due to alleged activities, which have since been shut down, and is maintaining close surveillance on other private nursing homes.¹²

Outcome Level Indicators

Thanks to the efforts of the District Administration, there has been a notable improvement in the sex ratio at birth, especially in the 55 identified villages. Singarpalli village, located in the Odogaon block, previously recorded the lowest child sex ratio in the district. According to the Census of 2011, the sex ratio in this village was 468. However, by the years 2014-15 and 2015-16, this figure rose to 875 and 871, respectively. The current sex ratio for children aged 0-6 in this village is now 1015, as reported by a survey conducted by the PC&PNDT Cell in Nayagarh, with assistance from field functionaries.¹³

Scope for Further Research

Since independence, numerous legislations have been enacted to safeguard the rights of the girl child. Yet, laws alone cannot resolve these issues. Merely correcting the child sex ratio will not render girls as valued equals in society. A profound social awakening and a united determination to eradicate this plight are essential. In light of this, future assessments must also seek to address questions like its furtherance. What insights can be drawn from this experience that may be applied to other initiatives, particularly from the perspective of social behaviour change? Why the primary emphasis is placed solely on rural regions, when the Child Sex Ratio is even more alarming in urban settings? So far as convergence and accountability are concerned, what ways has this initiative transformed the government's approach to a multifaceted social challenge? Who bears responsibility for both positive and negative outcomes at each phase? Under sustainability aspect what consequences would have arisen had this intervention not been implemented? What if it were to cease? What do the collective indicators and experiences reveal about enduring behavioral shifts regarding women and their roles?¹⁴ Finally, under the question of empowering it may be raised that does the communication strategy portray women merely as recipients of protection or welfare services, or do we adequately highlight their rights, voices, and entitlements as equal citizens and human beings?

Concluding Observation

We must confront the myriad threads that have woven this shameful and detrimental social fabric, wherein societies condone the murder of daughters to uphold tradition or self-interest.

Having achieved some preliminary success, this initiative ought to be restructured to comprehensively tackle all manifestations of violence and discrimination against women. A life cycle continuum approach proves beneficial only if it aids in comprehending and crafting methodical interventions at every stage. from the unborn child to adulthood. It should be formulated to bridge the divides between any two life phases of the child, ensuring uninterrupted support and a fair environment for development. Revising

indicators, establishing a thorough gender database, and enhancing reporting mechanisms in the field represent commendable starting points from a policy standpoint. This moment also presents a prime opportunity to harness the momentum generated by this initiative and concentrate on amplifying the agency and autonomy of women within families and public domains. Crucially, it is the parents particularly the expectant mother who must be empowered as the decision-makers concerning the future of their unborn or infant child. The state and society can contribute by fostering an environment that enables them to make informed choices, free from fear, bias, or prejudice.

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