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## FROM FEMALE INFANTICIDE TO FEMALE FOETICIDE – A CASE STUDY IN A LOW SEX RATIO DISTRICTS OF TAMIL NADU

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**Abstract:** Infanticide is the custom of killing girls at birth. The female child unborn and born was unwelcome to such an extent that parents were even willing to kill. Various methods like poisoning the milk, strangling, burning alive or even drowning were used to do away with female babies. In Tamil Nadu, the Kallar community were practising this evil. Even though they liberalized their womenfolk within the caste rules, they committed female infanticide due to the problem of poverty. This practice is not confined to the Kallars alone. Tribal people like the Todas have practiced female infanticide. The steady growth of this evil forced the British Administrators to take some preventive measures. Two regulations were passed by the Government to suppress infanticide, namely, Regulation XXI of 1795 and Regulation III of 1804. During the first half of the Nineteenth Century, a few British Officials took an active role in abolition of female infanticide. In 1890, the Infanticide Act (Act III) was passed which required for its working special police surveillance of the suspected. Statistics shows that in Madras in 19920 out of every thousand babies born as 199 die within the year of birth. The cause for such death rate are early marriage, poverty, low standard of living, bad nourishment, low vitality of mothers and overwork in the case of expectant mothers. This evil has occurred not only in several cultures across history, but is known to occur in contemporary societies as well. Female infanticide in India has been documented for period of British colonial rule by several scholars. In the period since infanticide, the gruesome practice has been reported as occurring in many parts of the country including Tamil Nadu, where the phenomenon is of recent origin, and was not known to exist before independence, except among the Todas.

**Keyword:** Kallars, Todas, Gounders, Vanniyars, Infanticide, Foeticide, Usilampatti, Karimangalam, Infant Mortality Rate (IMR)

### INTERDOCTION

Though the Vedic literature gives a plenty of information to prove that the women enjoyed a lot of freedom during the ancient period, their position and status in the house and the society began to decline owing to their nefarious activities and physical weakness. In the early times of Tamil Country female infanticide as a problem was not practiced.<sup>1</sup> There are no early references about this evil practice in the Tamil Country. It was only because of that the Tamil Country was not very much affected during the Muslim invasions. But at the same time certain tribes of Tamil Country had practiced male and female infanticide to control the population in their tribal area, particularly the Todas of Nilgris.<sup>2</sup>

The birth of female children was not welcomed in the society except in the families of devadasis and professional prostitutes. Their birth was marked by indifference and no anxious enquiry was made. No greetings or welcome to the new comer was made and the new born female child was considered as an intruder on the scene. Sorrows and sufferings were the expression recorded on the scene. Normally the relatives hesitated to visit the family in the event of the birth of a female child.<sup>3</sup>

When a woman delivered female children successively, then the woman would be discarded from the house and the man who was responsible for the birth of female children would marry as much number of women as possible till he would get male issues. In many cases, wife or wives who delivered female children successively were deserted along with their children who became destitute. At

last the deserted women and their children became the victims of all sorts of social evils such as prostitution.

After the female child was born, preparations were made to kill the innocent soul. In many cases, the mother's breast was smeared with the preparation of the juice of datura or the mudar plant (*Asclepias Gigantea*) or the poppy, and the infant had to drink that deadly poison with its first draught of milk. In some cases, it was customary to dig a hole and fill it with milk, and place the new born infant in it in order to drown the same. But most of the new born babes were buried alive. In addition to that, many female children were killed by strangling with the umbilical cord.<sup>4</sup> The father of the female child had a major share of its murder.

Since the father has to give his daughter in marriage before she attained puberty, he had to 'hunt' for a suitable husband for his girl above his rank in caste and status. If a girl remained unmarried till puberty, it was a disgrace to her father. Therefore the father of the girl had to search for a suitable husband for her daughter at any condition put forth by the parents of the bridegroom. Many parents became paupers after conducting the marriages of their female children.<sup>5</sup>

Dr.P.Nagoorkani, a Researcher from Madurai viewed that the Popular Justice Ministry in Madras Presidency was responsible for shaping the public opinion against all the evils associated with women. The liberation of women from the thralldom of cruel practices and traditions formed one of the declared principles of the Justice Party and its Minister.<sup>6</sup> During the successive Dravidian Parties rule, many legislations were brought to end many

evils connected with women. However, Female infanticide was first noticed in Tamil Nadu only during 1980s. During that period it was found that the Madurai District was prone to this evil.<sup>7</sup> The first major reporting of Female Infanticide in Tamil Nadu appeared in the India Today on 15<sup>th</sup> June 1986. The report of S.H. Venkatramani dealt with incidence of female infanticide in Madurai district.<sup>8</sup> But afterwards it was found that the killing female infants were practiced through out Tamil Nadu. Madurai, Dharmapuri and Salem were referred as prone areas of the practice of female infanticide.<sup>9</sup> The practice of female infanticide can be clearly noticed from the deaths of female infants within 7 days of their birth.

Tamil Nadu was the first State to openly acknowledge the existence of female infanticide. Successive governments could do little to penetrate the social structure. The practice of female infanticide is not confirmed to some remote villages but is well established, spread over a geographical belt comprising at least eight districts: Dharmapuri, Salem, Namakkal, Dindigul, Madurai, North Arcot, Theni and Thiruvanamalai in Tamil Nadu.

The practice of female infanticide is in vogue among the Piramalai Kallars, Vanniars, Gounders and Kongu Vellalars, who now occupy a much larger geographical area than their eight districts mentioned above. The Vanniars in Dharmapuri District and Dalits in general, who are not known to have indulged in it even until two decades ago, are now practicing this notorious crime.

#### Female Infanticide in Usilampatti Taluk

The Taluk of Usilampatti in Madurai District in Tamil Nadu shot into national notoriety in the 1980s for the extreme form of violence against women, the female infanticide and it became a byword for it. The Infanticide is slowly being replaced today by female foeticide, ably assisted and abetted by a medical profession that has lost its scruples and professional pride.<sup>10</sup> The vast majority of the population of Usilampatti is Kallars, who had been categorized as Criminal Tribes by the Colonial British regime. Usilampatti was, like all stereotyped dominant gender systems in India. Certain forms of patriarchy associated with the culture of the Brahmanical castes were literally unknown in Usilampatti. Kallars were a hardy labouring community with the exception of a few families at the very top of the social ladder. The women also shared agricultural work almost equally with men. The Women were accorded high status in the Kallar society. The origin stories of clans and the important position occupied by female deities in the Kallar pantheon give us an insight into the traditionally high status accorded to women. Two of the clans or Nadus are claimed to be founded by women, who have been deified and occupy a dominant position among Kallar gods. These are the Nadu of Pappapatti founded by "Kothipanai Ochchayi" and that of Karumathur founded by Pechiamman. Such a community, where women had traditionally enjoyed relatively greater rights and freedoms suddenly came hurtling down and metamorphosed into a barbarously misogynistic society with rampant female infanticide and foeticide.<sup>11</sup>

#### Two Sets of Villages in Madurai District: Low and Higher Sex Ratios

In the Madurai District Nattamangalam Kovilankulam Panamooanpatti, Kethuvarpatti Sirupatti, Kalluthu, Pappapatti, Eramarpatti, Alligundam, Meikilarpatti, Eravarpatti, are the places notified, where the practice of female infanticide is rampant. These places have registered very steep decline in the sex ratio since 1950s. At the other end of the spectrum, there are other villages in the Madurai with very high sex ratio. The ones with the highest sex ratio as per 1981 census are Poosalapuram-1147, Vandapuli-1094, Muthunagaiapuram-1080, Boothipuram-1075, Sempatti-1075, Sindhupatti-1,059, Athamkaraipatti . 1049, Vandari 1046, Perikattalai 1040 and Kethuvarpatti-1036. The two sets of villages present contrast. They seem to drastically different from each other in their economic structure, patterns of economic change in the few decades, and in the prevailing value system. Most of the villages in the second list, ones with high sex ratio, are interior villages, poorly connected by road and transport systems, very arid and poverty stricken, with traditional, semi-tribal values still surviving. On contrary, the villages in the first list, ones with very low sex ratio, are closer to urban centres, fairly well connected by road and transport systems, with good proportion of land under irrigation and rapidly undergoing changes in economic structure and value system. Thus, it is found that only those villages, which are having the urban contacts, fell victim to this practice. Similarly, the sex ratio lower in the landholding household than in the landless ones.<sup>12</sup>

According to Statistics collected by the Madurai Kamaraj University Sociology Department, the practice of female infanticide in drought prone areas around Usilampatti in Madurai district is continuing unabated and in 1990 the evil had taken a toll of about 200 female infants. The efforts of various voluntary and Government agencies to stop this obnoxious practice had not yielded results and it had spread from Usilampatti to other parts as well.<sup>13</sup>

#### Efforts for Prevention

Efforts of various voluntary and Government agencies to stop this obnoxious practice in Madurai areas had not yielded results. It had spread from Usilampatti to Nilakottai. Right from the early stages of pregnancy people around the women talk to her at length of the suffering and an aversion for the female baby in her and giving her the courage to kill it. Sometime female babies are sold which orphanages take. Even female infants were handed over to the police stations in this region. The Andipatti All-Women Police Station received two female infants. Two poverty stricken couples left their just born in police custody at the police station instead of resorting to the widespread practice of female infanticide. In the same way in Periyakulam General Hospital Ramayee from Maravapatti in Andipatti taluk had handed over her third girl child to police station instead of killing the child.<sup>14</sup> This change is definitely a heartening change of rigid attitudes.

In Madurai District, the practice of female infanticide is not a traditional custom. The only reason cited for the chilling crime is the growing dowry demand and the

despair it causes among families. It is said that the first daughter generally escapes but the second and subsequent girls are seldom spared. There are women in this region who advise how to kill newborn babies without any sense of shame. The economic condition, unemployment, illiteracy among village women and increasing wedding expenses are reasons for such a drastic action. Without economic progress, the killing of female infants would continue in this area.

#### **Dindigul and Salem Districts- Practice among all Castes**

In 1986 when the practice of female infanticide in Madurai District of Tamil Nadu first received the major media attention, the focus was on the caste group of Piranmalai Kallars. Later in 1992, the female infanticide was found to be widespread in Salem District. There the Gounder community was considered to be the one practicing it, and it was believed by the many that the practice did not exist among the other castes. But the truth is that the other communities are also practicing the female infanticide. The practice seems to be widespread among the poorer and socially disadvantaged communities including the Thevars, Vanniyars and the Dalits. For instance of 124 cases of female infanticide in Dindigul Health Unit Centre, as many as 82 or slightly over two-thirds, were accounted for by the Piramalai Kallar, other Kallars, Thevar, Parayar and Pallar households. The Dalit households belonging to the Pallar arid Parayar groups accounted for 46 of these deaths or around three-eighths of all female infanticide deaths in Dindigul Health Unit Centre. Similarly the Vanniyar and Dalit households are also practicing female infanticide. The Data from Salem Health Unit Centre records for 1994-1995 show that Vanniar households account for nearly half of all the female infant deaths. The other castes accounting for a sizeable number and proportion of female infanticide deaths include various Dalit groups and Gounders.<sup>15</sup> The Dalit groups and the Gounders account for around 10 per cent each of all the female infanticide deaths. Hence, it is clear that though the practice was initiated by the Piramalai Kallars and Gounders in their respective areas of numerical and social dominance, now other communities also practice the evil.

A study was conducted for the State Social Welfare Board in 1993.<sup>16</sup> It covered about 300 women in the three districts. These were all mothers whose girl children were victims of this practice. Preliminary analysis of the rate of infant birth and deaths presented a graphic picture. Between 1988 and 1992, the IMR of female babies- in Usilampatti Block was consistently higher than that for male babies, the average being 72.8 for boys and 126 for girls.<sup>17</sup> Even more surprising, the number of female births in the block was lower than the number of male births, leading to a suspicion that the elimination process begins even before birth. In Konganapuram Block, Salem district, the number of girl infant deaths in 1990-1991 was much higher than that of boys, though male births were higher. Nearly 60% of female infant deaths took place within 7 days of birth, suggesting infanticide.<sup>18</sup> In the Public Health Centres records, it was registered a majority of female infants were stated to have died due to social causes.

The practice seemed to be spreading outwardly, from the Vellala Gounder community in which it is alleged to

have originated.<sup>19</sup> There also seemed to be a change in the methods used, with a shift to female foeticide, particularly in the prosperous belts of Salem and Periyar districts.

#### **Salem and Dharmapuri Districts**

In respect of several standard indicators of health and education, Tamil Nadu is a comparatively better performer among the various States next only to Kerala in terms of literacy rate according to the 1991 Census. Its infant mortality rate for 1995 as per SRS data stood at 56 per 1,000 live births, and only three states had a lower IMR. The state has a good network of primary schools and comparatively better rates of enrollment and retention. Its birth and death rates do not compare badly with those of many major states. Yet the practice of female infanticide has been reported to exist in the state and its occurrence officially admitted. Data from the Census of 1991 on sex ratio (defined as females per 1000 males) for both the general population and the juvenile population (0-6 age group) are highly unfavorable to women in several blocks and districts of Tamil Nadu. While the average sex ratio of the general population of Tamil Nadu as a whole is much higher at 974 as against the national average of 929, it was only 937 in Salem District and 942 in Dharmapuri District. Salem District has, in fact, the dubious distinction of having the lowest juvenile sex ratio of 849 among all the Districts in the country.<sup>20</sup>

In Salem and Dharmapuri Districts the infant mortality rate has alarmingly floated around 70 to 85 deaths per 1000 births during 1995-2000. The NGOs and Police got tough with perpetrators of female infanticide in the hinterlands in Salem and Dharmapuri, who adopted new techniques to kill the infants.<sup>21</sup> In a study conducted in 1995, documentation was done about the practice at female infanticide even among tribals, Dalits and Muslims in Salem and Namakkal though it originated in the Kallar community.

At present Multipronged approach has been adopted by the Salem district administration to combat female infanticide and carry the message to the target groups. The service of woman NSS Volunteers as well as the spouses of the top brass are requisitioned and used. After organizing a series of seminars and workshops on creating awareness among the people to prevent female infanticide, now the campaign has been taken virtually to the doorsteps of the people, particularly to those villages where the obnoxious custom of dispensing with female children in inhuman manner still exists.

To achieve the goal at eradicating this evil practice, 125 woman NSS volunteers from the Sarada College for Women and the Government College for Women launched the door-to-door campaign in the endemic villages of Mookkanur, Reddiyur, Thottianur and Kulandaiyankattur, located over 35 km from Salem. This movement was supported by the Government. The Volunteers approached the womenfolk in the homesteads which had already reported female infanticide, and where pregnant woman and eligible couples were there.

The volunteers drove home the point that the infanticide and foeticide were a crime and punishable under law. If they had already get two children either of the spouses should under go sterilization or non scalpel operation or

condom to avoid one more child.

The Volunteers highlighted the various welfare schemes launched by the Government, the pre-natal and post natal care, need for taking nutritious food, spacing child birth, and so on. They tried to establish a good rapport with the villagers by staging skits on these issues. The issue of eradicating female-infanticide was being given top priority in the district administration of these infanticide and foeticide prone districts. All the pregnant women were now being registered and monitored till the delivery. There was no room for any untoward incident, moreover who committed the offence was now acting a deterrent.<sup>22</sup>

The practice is grounded in a complex mix of economic, culture and social factors. Dowry, poverty and expenditure on girls were claimed to be the primary reasons. The strong desire for a male child to perform the last rites for the parents, or to keep inheritance intact, the belief that only sons can take care of parents when they are old, as well as social pressure which is very intense in a rural community, were the other factors.

To conclude, it was the British who first documented the practice of female infanticide in India. It was only in 1992 that the Government of Tamil Nadu formally acknowledged the existence of female infanticide. It was the first state in the Indian Union to do so, although the practice is prevalent in more than 10 states. Contemporary cases of female infanticide in Tamil Nadu is reported in the districts of Madurai, Salem, Dharmapuri. In 10 of the 21 blocks in Madurai District, of which Usilampatti block is one, the sex ration was below 900. Nearly 600 female births in the Kallar group are recorded in the Usilampatti Government hospital every year. Of these, an estimated 570 babies vanish with their mothers. Hospital sources estimate that nearly 80 percent of these vanishing babies –more than 450- become victims of infanticide. About 70 per cent (450 out of 570) of infant girls fall prey to infanticide. In Karimangalam Block of Dharmapuri District, female infanticide has been prevalent for the past twenty years. It is deplorable that Dharmapuri District has been rated as the highest in female infanticide.

Even today the so-called educated people kill their female child in the womb itself by abortion after confirming the sex through the technology of amniocentesis. Law does not punish them or society never considers it as a crime or sin because abortion is recognized by law and the society. Today female infanticide is an universal phenomenon and modern advanced technology has been utilized to reinforce discrimination against the female foetus, and preference for male children still exists. The presence and prevalence of the evil in Tamil Nadu was unearthed by social organization, press and the Government as late as 1988.<sup>23</sup> Thus it is horrible to record that the wastage of infant life in India and in Tamil Nadu is large.

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