STUDY OF INSTITUTION OF FEMALE INFANTICIDE IN COLONIAL INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The practice of female infanticide in Indian society is an age-old institution wherein a female child was deliberately killed. There is also another tradition of sex-selective abortion so called female feticide. Such practices of many communities in colonial India adversely affected the position of Indian women. The prevalence of this practice though reflected in antique Indian religious scriptures as a social menace, did not come under the onslaught of Indian intelligentsia for a long period of times, thus, abating the vitality of Indian society for ages. However, in respect of the elimination of this practice from Indian socio-cultural milieu, British colonists undertook firstly an initiative to strictly enforce regulations for its suppression in India. Their efforts became so effective in some regions, but in fact sadly, the tradition of female infanticide was not wiped out completely from Indian society.

KEYWORDS: Infanticide, Female, British, Indians.

INTRODUCTION

The people of India have experienced a long history of social evils and traditions since antiquity. The social evils which were rampant in their society during the British rule in India were mainly sati system, female infanticide, purdah system, caste system, child marriage, devadasi, alcoholic drinking and untouchability, etc. Of these evils, very little is known to the people about female infanticide but its practice was credulously prevalent in Indian families.

Female infanticide is usually defined as an act of murdering a female infant deliberately. Many communities of colonial India, irrespective of class and caste performed it for ages, thus dwindling in the number of girl child in India. There is also a practice of sex-selective abortion in India. It is called as female feticide. In this process, the life of a female foetus is removed within the womb for being a female sex. This practice, however, does not seem to be a recent fact, as its prevalence can be traced to old custom of Hindu civilization, the evidence of which are reflected in ancient Hindu scriptures as old as the Veda (Saikia, 2008). It is stated that this practice seemed to be emanated customarily from the performance of female infanticide, but its growth and spread has been reported from post colonial period.
And, the urban people, mostly from the middle class were fond of it more than the poor illiterate people. The reducing in the number of child at birth was thus, the outcome of it.

The prime victims of female infanticide from ancient times were the communities, especially belonged to the states of Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Punjab and Bengal. They are the Rajput and Bengali community who have been reported that their practice was very extensive. Even, among the Rajputs, it was performed customary. In addition to the Hindu community, this social menace came into existence among the Muslims in the colonial period, especially among the Shias. But, it is the most fortunate for the people living in northeastern states where this tradition was totally unknown to them. In south India, there was only a fewer caste committed to the female infanticide in comparison to the north. However, the frequent occurrence of female infanticide in some regions of India during the colonial period threatened to the very existence of the female child in Indian society. In addition to Indian states, this practice was largely prevalent in several provinces of China during the 19th century CE.

It is assumed that female infanticide commenced as a religious allegiance and ritual in Indian society. For this reason, no one enlightened people of earlier days raised voice against this superstitious rite. Of course, this practice was socially approved (Tulsi, 2007). From the early 18th century CE, there had been several instances of female infanticide which shows the frequent occurrence of dwindling drastically in the child sex ratio between male and female at births. But, the changes occurred in early 19th century CE, while some Indian intelligenstsia and British administrators were drawn towards the social evils, and thereby this callous institution came under their onslaught. As a result, the laws were enacted by British colonists to thwart it from the Indian subcontinent. Despite of this fact, the practice still persisted to some extent. It put women in a lower position in the contemporary Indian society. This article thus tends to focus on antique institution of female infanticide, which was rampant in Indian society during the British rule in India. The methodology used for preparing this paper is historical. It is a descriptive and analytical study. This paper is mainly based on secondary data collected from referred books, journals, research papers, web and magazines, etc.

Motive behind female Infanticide

The custom of female infanticide came into existence in India for ages. In the terms of emergence of this tradition, the view of some scholars reveals that there were some motives accountable behind its practice in the contemporary Indian society. One such motive was to escape from a great economic burden. The liability relied on parents of the female baby
because of the existence of a dowry system whereby the parents of the girls were required to pay a gift to the son’s family at the time of marriage. The demand of dowry at that time was probably very high. And, it usually consisted of either in the form of lots of money or valuable commodities. This however, made the parents to consider their daughter to be a great economic yoke of which later on, male preference might be favoured in society. In the name of a decent dowry, the requisite of a lot of money for the purpose of marriage ceremony probably became outrageous for socially downtrodden parents of the girls of that period. The exorbitant demand was beyond their means of capacity as most of them lived below poverty. It may also be referred that Rajput ruler, Raja Swai Jai Singh of Amber (1681-1743) tried to reduce the expenditures incurred in connection with the marriages of daughters (Mahajan, 1986). This infers that the arrangement of marriage ceremony at that time was very expensive. And, dowry became an essential ingredient during marriage ceremony, and came to be regarded as a means of attaining the high caste stratum in society. On the other hand, there was another situation that according to Hindu Shastra, the arrangement of marriage for their daughters was the prime duty of parents, but failure to execute it during their alive is considered as the desecration of their religious sanctions and social dishonor (Grover, 1984). Of course, it was not confined to Hindus only. Among the Shia Muslims of colonial India, it prevailed to some extent. The reason behind this practice remained the same as with Hindus. In their community too, the birth of a female infant was viewed as ill-fated for being a patriarchy form of society and the prevalence of the dowry system. So, in respect of dodging from the liability of dowry, the family members of the infant resorted to murdering the female infant so extensively that it later evolved into as a usual manner in Indian society. Yet again, the social set up of India was primarily patriarchy wherein the woman has no right or say in the running of their lives. Only the family runs through a male. This common belief was deep-rooted among the Rajputs and other castes of western as well as central India during the 19th century CE. However, it was such a patriarchy social structure whereby a woman was usually afforded to a subordinate status in society, to such as extent that even, the birth of a female infant in a family was considered to be a curse. Besides this, a belief relied in people that only the sons could take care of their parents in old age and perform the last rites in accordance with Hindu religious Shastra. Of course, it is truism to say that the legacy obtains through the male line (Koradia, 2013). It is also widely believed that the sons are the breadwinners, inheriting the affluence of their parents. For that reason, the
male child is invariably most welcome and desired rather than a female child in Indian social and cultural milieu.

Another reason behind its practice was the prudence of honour and pride of caste. For instance, the bedis khutris, a dominant caste among the Sikh khutris of Punjab region in north India committed to it extensively. The reason of their practice was rather the sense of pride of the caste as the marriage of their daughters occurred only into the boy of the same caste, but not to the boy of the lower status family. However, their sons could marry girls of the lower stratum family (Vishwanath, 1998). Similarly, in Tamil Nadu of south India, such dominant caste, especially the Kallars and Todas in the 19th century CE acted on it. This reveals that their motive behind the performance of female infanticide was to avoid the intermixture of blood so as to continue the limpidness of their descent aptly.

In accordance with the customarily faith of the people, the female infanticide was certainly, a kind of religious sanction. But there is no reference to the performance of female infanticide that had been sanctioned by several Hindu religious scriptures, but its presence in pre-colonial India is apparent from the facts of documentary of colonial India. Nevertheless, this custom was so widespread that later made inroads into regions of many communities, irrespective of caste and class wherein earlier there was no instance of such practice customary (Koradia, 2013). Thus, it may be said that the motives or reasons for carrying out such a rite of female infanticide deliberately among the Indian community during the colonial period was mainly the social, cultural, economic rather than religious candidly but it seemed to be varied from region to region.

Method of homicide the female infant

In colonial India, the members of high caste and the ethnic groups so called socially backwards practiced the female infanticide. In killing the baby at their birth, they followed some traditional ways. It is the most unfortunate for the female child in the family that sometimes, the mother itself played a major role on it. Negligence of mother to feed her a female child was a common method in Indian society. She also administered opium or poisonous drugs to the child through the nipples of her breast (Mahajan, 1986). Of course, all the mothers of that period were not fond of committing such an act. There is also an instance of mothers of the baby who did not prefer this inhuman practice. It seems that in actual fact, the fate of female infant depended entirely on the verdict of father. Occasionally, the midwives involved in killing the female infant, while a stern resistance came from the baby’s mother. This is evident that the practice of female infanticide was a way of discrimination.
against women, indicating a sign of insubstantial against the mother to her child right whereas the latter gives birth to a child.

Another way of killing the female child was throwing into the river. The people, who lived mostly on nearby the river Ganga, generally threw their female infants into Ganga river. It was due to the fact that the community, especially the Hindus considers Ganga river as a holy river or river God. Their belief in the purity of water of the Ganga is so ingrained that a dip in the Ganga river is sure to purify them of all their sins. Besides this, there is also a saying that under peculiar circumstances, some of the Hindu parents offered their first born child to Gangas, considering themselves free of their sins. However, the female baby hurling into the river was common during this period. This may also be observable from the fact that “Maharaja Dalip Singh, son of Ranjit Singh, mentions that he had actually seen when he was a child at Lahore, his sisters put into a sack and thrown into the river”(Grover, 1984:Stanely & Kumari,2010). To say, such practice thus, was a very common incident that was amazingly rampant in Indian social setup during the colonial period. So, it can reasonably be conjectured that the preference of a boy in the Indian family system is so embedded that even, some of the infant’s parents or the family members were not reluctant to commit such a barbarous and horrific act.

In addition, other ways of murder included the submerging of the baby in a big container of milk or hot water and feeding her salt as well as burying her alive in an earthen pot. Being a domestic crime, its practice was confined secretly within the family. Of course, very interestingly, this practice in many regions consisted of some superstitious rites and rituals. But, in no evidence to testify that any sacred Hindu religious scriptures sanctioned it. However, each region had their own means of homicide the baby. Such a barbaric act of killing the female child and the escalating incidence of female foeticide was a strong chronic social menace which greatly contributed to lowering the position of women in Indian society.

Prohibition on female Infanticide

Deliberately, killing the female infant in a systematic manner within one year of its birth is a very inhuman and heinous practice. This barbaric and horrendous act has greatly affected the Indian society since ancient times. Although this was a kind of social menace yet it could not draw the attention of the Indian intellectuals or Rajas for its suppression for a long period of times. However, during the time of Mughal rule in India, Akbar tried to eradicate it. Despite of this, it persisted.
In colonial India, the custom of female infanticide of Indian community came to the notice of the Britishers in 1789 when it was being performed openly among the Rajputs in the eastern part of the state of Uttar Pradesh. The prevalence of this practice was also found alongside the western seashores among the Jharija Rajputs of Surat and Kutch of Gujarat. Most fortunately, only five families in Kutch did not commit this practice. But many Hindu families, the Rathors of Jaipur and Jodhpur practiced it largely. Besides this, there are also other castes like Jats and Mewatis who did not have a dowry system but acted on it. This custom however, continued among them for more than one hundred and fifty years. It may be mentioned that in 1857 in the region of colonial Punjab, John Cave-Brown documented firstly the practice of killing female infant among the Jats. This infers that the much occurrence of female infanticide during the 18th and 19th centuries CE existed in the north west of India, but later, it widely scattered into regions of India. It is also stated that it was because of this custom that during the dominance of Raja of Porbandar, there was not a single girl born in the royal house for a hundred years in 19th century CE (Saikia, 2008).

In Calcutta, William Carey, a Christian missionary saw the practice of female infanticide while he was doing a survey of different areas. A detailed report was then submitted to Lord Wellesley, then Governor General of British India for taking initiative against this social evil. Meanwhile, the attitude of British officials and enlightened Indians appears to be same in accusing the female infanticide all over colonial India. Therefore, the colonial administrators firstly adopted a persuasive and coercive method to curb this chronic menace. But it became ineffective. Hence, a regulation popularly known as Bengal Regulation XXI of 1795 was legislated firstly, declaring infanticide as illegal which is equivalent to committing a murder. Besides this, after a few years in 1804, one more regulation known as Regulation III of 1804 was enacted in India. By this regulation, the systematic killing of female infant was declared as a crime and those people who indulged in it were treated as criminals and punished severely. In this way, with the help of Political residents and agents in Indian states, the ethnic groups who were especially practicing on the inhuman practice were compelled to discard (Grover, 1984). But, it was not far away from Indian culture probably due to lack of cooperation of Indian native rulers as well as conservative people. Consequently, the continuance of this practice has been reported even after the regulations in some parts of India, particularly in the North West Provinces and Rajputana. However, it is stated that there is no instance of the efforts from Britishers to suppress female infanticide in south India during the British rule in India. Of course,
compared to the north, it was very fewer castes in south that performed it. It may be the fact that during the 19th century CE, dowry system did not come into existence largely in south India.

It was because of its failure that the Government of India passed an Act for containment on the female infanticide. The act was primarily a precautionary measure. According to the act, a number of officers were appointed to maintain the registers of birth and death of the baby in every village. It was made compulsory for every parent to register their all babies as well as to provide for authentication of female child for some years after birth (Grover, 1984). This however, became very effective to some extent as the colonial administrators in their effort were fortunate to have full support from the native rajas and intellectuals. And, the attitude of native social reformers usually remained supportive to the Britishers, of which Lord William Bentinck on being persuaded by the court of Directors could strictly enforce regulations to suppress this immoral practice. Of course, meanwhile, women’s issues had already been raised for the first time in India in the 19th century CE and subsequently, many social reformers of India were also magnetized towards this evil practice. Some of them were inspired by the laissez-faire ideas of the west, but some preferred to bring back the glorious tradition of ancient India. It may be referred that the father of Indian renaissance, Raja Rammohan Roy openly condemned this act, while revivalists, such as Dayananda Swarswati and Vivekananda made an untiring effort to improve the status of women by bringing back the ancient Indian norms. But very interestingly, most of them sought credibility for their ideas and actions in the ancient Sanskrit texts (Desai & Thakkar, 2001). However, it is said that since most of the Indian women during this period were illiterate, the British colonial officials adopted an educational programme and this later, came into effect in declining of expenses incurred in marriage ceremony. For this act, most of the women in Hindu family made admiration to colonial administrators. As a result, in some regions of colonial India, the performance of the female infanticide rather became redundant. But, it is the most unfortunate that Indian society could not entirely become free from this evil tradition, and the prevalence of this practice has been reported in post-colonial period too.
Conclusion

Thus, the institution of female infanticide consisted of one of the most important features of Indian society during the colonial period. Many communities of India, irrespective of caste, creed and class committed to female infanticide extensively, of which the vitality of Indian society had adversely been affected for ages. Their performance on this tradition however, involved some superstitious rites. The efforts of British administrators and Indian intelligentsias to strictly suppress female infanticide have been seen during the British rule in India. Despite of this, it still persisted clandestinely at a snail’s pace. In fact, the act of murdering the female infant and obliteration of female fetus was a sign of gender discrimination and gender injustice as well as sadism against women, thereby made lowering the position of Indian women. Their efficient support and activities in the family as well as in society was not treated as national value in molding a better Indian society. So, the empowerment of women in the present milieu of Indian society ought to be addressed significantly so as to provide equality with men.

References