

Haryana gives its daughters a fighting chance

On January 22, 2015. Prime Minister Narendra Modi chose Panipat, Haryana, to launch the Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (Save the girl child, educate the girl child) national campaign. Mr Modi's choice wasn't unexpected: the state, notorious for foeticide and female infanticide, had the worst child sex ratio (the number of girls for every 1,000 sons) among Indian states in the 2011 census. Haryana's child sex ratio was 834, compared with the national average of 919. Things have changed since.

The state's success in preventing female foeticide is evident in the numbers released by the Haryana government this week. The sex ratio at birth in the state in 2017 has shown a clear improvement, the best in 16 years. Out of the 5,09,290 children born in the state during the year (January 2017 to December 2017), there were 2,66,064 boys and 2,43,226 girls, which is a marked improvement. The sex ratio at birth in the state is now 914.

The spike is not sudden. The last three years have seen a steady rise with the sex ratio at birth increasing from 876 in 2015 to 900 in 2016. Today at least 12 Haryana districts have a sex ratio of 900 or more. What is also remarkable is that some of the worst offenders, which were part of Haryana's gender critical district list — Mahendergarh, Rewari, Sonapat and Jhajjar — with a child sex ratio below 800 in the 2011 census, have shown marked improvement of 136, 91, 88 and 96 points respectively.

One of the biggest reasons for this turnaround is stricter implementation of the law and a crackdown on sex selection tests which has broken the nexus between unethical doctors, quacks, untrained health workers, ultrasound technicians and operation theatre assistants. As many as 550 FIRs have been registered under the under the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Technique (PC&PNDT) Act and Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act since 2015 and more than 1,000 people jailed. Along with the fear of law, the social stigma against people who are accused of foeticide is growing. In part, this can be attributed to the achievements of women athletes such as the Phogat sisters and Sakshi Malik that have helped fight the deep-set bias against girl children.

As always, though, there is room for improvement in the Beti Bachao campaign. An anonymous online complaint portal where people can blow the whistle on unregistered doctors operating ultrasound machines is yet to be launched and there is an absence of a structured monitoring mechanism to ensure greater accountability. Still, it can't be ignored that a state, once infamous for female foeticide is showing greater regard for the girl child. Although Haryana's success story, along with those of Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, two other states that have showed significant improvements in the sex ratio, is worth appreciating, the states, and indeed, all India would do well to now start focusing on the continuing violence against women in the form of heinous rapes and murders.

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