

Analysing Entrenched Patriarchal Attitudes

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TOO MANY MEN TOO FEW WOMEN: SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF GENDER IMBALANCE IN INDIA AND CHINA

Edited by Ravinder Kaur

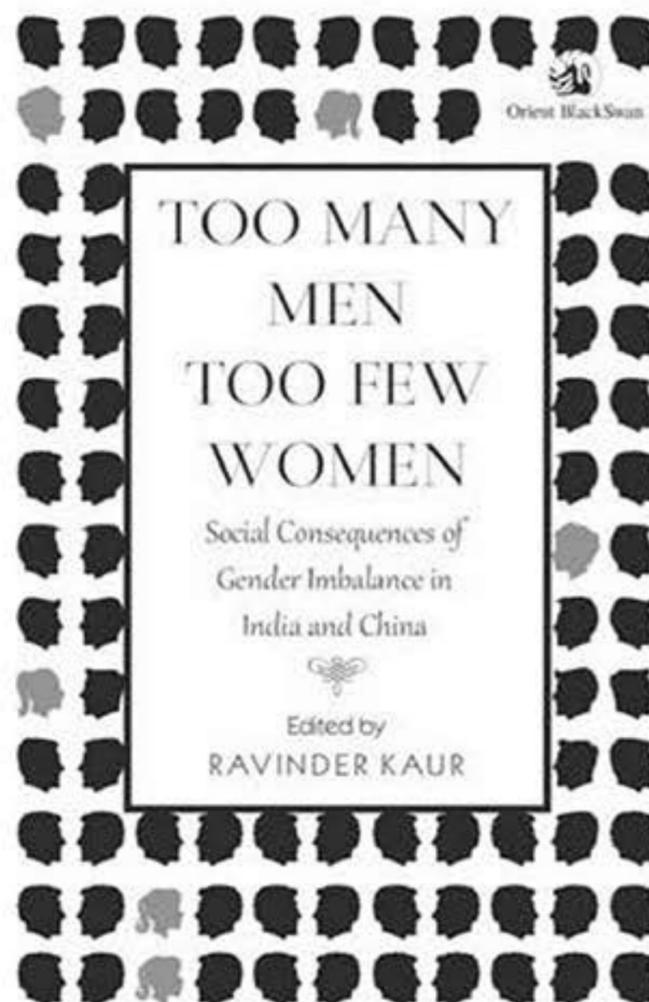
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Over the last three decades and more, China's growth miracle has economically transformed the nation, catapulting it to become the second largest economy in the world. Interestingly, over roughly the same period, China also saw a deterioration in its gender ratio, with a resultant sex ratio at birth (SRB) (2010–15) being 'dangerously high' at 116 boys for every 100 girls. A Chinese population of 700 million men and 667 million women (2014), meant China has 33 million more men than women.

The Indian economy too witnessed rapid growth rates post economic reforms in the 1990s, and is the fastest growing major economy in the world today, expected to be the third largest in the world in the next decade. However, in terms of gender balance, India has seen an equally dangerous transformation as China—SRB showed India had 111 boys for every 100 girls (2010–15), and a sex ratio of 943 women for every 1000 men (2011). Indian an population of 624 million men and 586 million women (2011), means 38 million more Indian men than women.

What do the adverse gender ratios and increasing masculinity of population in two of the most populous nations in the world, which are also growth engines for the global economy, mean for their own future as well as for the rest of the world? What would it mean for the social and economic status of the women themselves? What impact would it have on the health of the men folk, on regional development and also on government spending on social welfare programmes? These are relevant and interesting questions explored by the book *Too Many Men, Too Few Women* edited by Ravinder Kaur. The book is a collection of 11 research-based, analytical essays written by eminent scholars, working on the sex-ratio imbalance in China and India, and is an outcome of a two day seminar organized by The Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies (RGICS) in November 2012 at New Delhi.

The book under review fills an important gap in literature on the subject of gender imbalance, as it addresses the consequences of deeply-entrenched traditional attitudes that have resulted in seriously



imbalanced gender ratios in two most populous countries of the world, namely, India and China—two countries that have been 'preventing the birth of daughters for close to three decades.'

The book opens with a comprehensive introductory chapter by Kaur addressing the socially crucial question of the 'marriage squeeze', which refers to a mismatch in marriageable population as a consequence of bride shortage. Estimating the number of men likely to be left without brides in India and China, the introductory chapter outlines the consequences of a large number of men, predominantly from socially disadvantaged sections of the country, being left out of the marriage market and consequently foregoing the benefits of marriage. China is already witnessing marriage related migration of young women out of the poorer, rural areas to marry the richer, more educated men in urban areas. Similarly in India, brides are seen to move from the poorer eastern regions, and the higher dowry areas in the south, to the more prosperous regions in northern and western parts of the country—a 'demography subsidy' that is leading to the better-off regions being able to import brides from many of the poorer areas.

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Coming to statistics, of which this heavily research-based book has many, it is seen that China has 25.4 million excess males under 20 years of age, with the figure in India being close at 25.2 million (2015). The social consequences of such highly skewed populations, with ‘too many men, and too few women’ of marriageable age, have resulted in many social consequences, such as, an increased ‘bride price’ in China as more men compete for women. In India, a positive effect that could be quoted from the book is the study on sanitation from Haryana, where having a toilet increases chances of marriage for the man. However, the consequences also include risky sexual behaviour for men, and overall rising crime rates in both countries. The book analyses the relevant and highly interesting question of whether scarcity of women has led to them being more valued with greater bargaining power or not.

It also lays the foundation for policy prescriptions in the book, focussed on engineered social management, provision of robust legal support for women, safeguarding the interests of cross-border wives and most importantly, weeding out core reasons for a boy-child preference.

If we thought a shortage of a woman in India would result in a negative correlation with demand for dowry or with violence or crime against women, the book would show how wrong we are. As the number of girls of marriageable age decreases in the country, there are the unintended consequences of dowry continuing to be high for ‘suitable boys’, as the less wealthy and less eligible boys in regionally backward areas get left out of the marriage market.

As women in China show a tendency to marry more educated, wealthy men and migrate, likely to leave behind ‘bachelor villages’ of isolated, single men, it is projected

to impact issues of health care, social peace, self-esteem of these young men who get left out of the marriage market. It is further projected that ‘these men will cluster in the rural areas of a few provinces, creating the possibility of social instability’. Highlighting the magnitude of the problem, the book points out that ‘China is on the cusp of a dramatic deterioration in men’s marital prospects ... the sex imbalance between potential spouses of the same age group is forecast to be at its worst by 2020’.

In India, too, States like Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, which have a deficit of females, are experiencing a ‘marriage squeeze’. The percentage of permanent bachelors is likely to go up from 3.7 percent in 2015 to 8.1 per cent in 2050. The likely ‘severe marriage crisis,’ as already pointed above, will result in educationally and economically disadvantaged men getting ‘left-out’ of the marriage market, as women of marriageable age migrate to better located, richer areas, to marry more qualified men. The phenomenon of ‘long distance bride import has not been conducive for gender equality in India as such brides have felt isolated and often faced violence, handicapped by lack of family support. While studies show increased crime and violence are among the predicted consequences of the gender imbalance, issues of depression and low self-esteem are also not to be ignored.

With respect to consequences for law and order and crime rates, the book quotes a study that found murder rates higher in districts with low female-male ratios, concluding that ‘patriarchal, male-dominated societies are likely to be more violent. Interestingly, shortage of women also does not spell well for status of women in society, as it reinforces gender stereotypes with reference to roles performed by women. This happens because women in such societies tend to get married earlier, withdrawn as they are from education by parents anxious about security of their daughters in a male-dominated environment, with a surfeit of men vying for their attention.

Policy should focus on addressing the ‘negative social consequences of sex ratio imbalance’, take proactive steps to correct the gender imbalance. Encouraging registration of marriages and providing legal support to cross-border wives are among some policy inputs that emerge from the book. Also governments should make provision for the old who are unable to rely on the children they never had as a result of leading lives as forced bachelors.

The essays included in the book are divided into three parts, namely, (i) Exploring

Consequences, (ii) Social Challenges of the Marriage Squeeze, and (iii) Interrogating Policy Responses. In the essay, ‘Signs of Change? Sex Ratio Imbalance and Shifting Social Practices in Northern India,’ Mattias Larsen and Ravinder Kaur explore strategies that have evolved to address shortage of brides in India. These are however found not effective enough to take care of the ‘greater number of individuals than usual’ who get left out of the marriage market. It analyses the effect of shortage of women on dowry, on implications for women’s freedom and mobility as patriarchal controls increase, and also the related aspect of an impact on preference for sons.

Sunita Bose, Katherine Trent and Scott J. South, in their essay, ‘The Effect of a Male Surplus on Intimate Partner Violence in India,’ discuss how India’s son preference has led to a continuing masculinization of the sex ratio at younger ages, and how in a patriarchal society there is a disturbing rising trend in violence against women.

‘China’s Marriage Market and Upcoming Challenges for Elderly Men,’ by Monica Das Gupta, Avraham Ebenstein and Ethan Jennings Sharygin quantitatively analyses census results in China and extrapolates them to predict the potential issues in the Chinese marriage market over the next forty years. It also effectively provides short and long term policy remedies like improved social assistance, social insurance and progressively structured pension programmes for the rural elderly.

Patricia Jeffery in ‘Dowry, Daughter Aversion and Demographic Change: A Sociological Critique of the ‘Marriage Squeeze’,’ talks about the gender bias as fertility declines; analyses women oppression through continuing dowry and daughter aversion, as well as the deeply ingrained gender politics in India. The author prescribes reforms like addressing women’s property rights and access to education and employment.

‘Understanding Marriage Squeezes, Sex Ratio Imbalance, Gender and Social Policy in China,’ by Lisa Eklund discusses general social policies in China that have exacerbated the ‘marriage squeeze’ in the country. The author calls for a review of policies to strengthen social rights of individuals.

In ‘Bare Branches and the Marriage Market in Rural China: Preliminary Evidence from a Village-level Survey,’ Xiaoyi Jin, Lige Liu, Yan Li, Marcus W. Feldman, and Shuzhuo Li explore the characteristics of the Chinese men who cannot marry (the involuntary bachelors) because of the marriage squeeze and the rural marriage market.

Neerja Ahlawat in ‘The Dark Side of the Marriage Squeeze, Violence against Cross-

region Brides in Haryana,' specifically explores violence and injustices done against brides (especially cross-region brides) in Haryana as a result of skewed gender ratios. The author calls for greater involvement of local NGOs and communities in safeguarding the rights of cross-region brides.

'Imbalanced Sex-ratio and Cross-region Marriage: The Challenges of Transcending Caste Boundaries,' by Paro Mishra mainly discusses the increase in long distance, cross region marriages due to bride shortages. It also discusses imbalanced sex ratio as a reason for the rise in intercaste marriage in present day Haryana.

'Social Management of Gender Imbalance in China: A Holistic Governance Framework,' by Shuzhuo Li, Shang Zijuan and Marcus W. Feldman explores the prevailing policies around achieving gender equality in China, like the National 'Care for Girls' Campaign. It provides suggestions for a more holistic social management framework in China.

'Acts of Omission and Acts of Commission: The Adverse Juvenile Sex Ratio and the Indian State,' by Rajni Palriwala talks about some of the programmes or schemes in India which are ineffective and suggests measures to normalize the gender ratio.

The final essay titled 'Understanding

Policy and Programming on Sex Selection in Tamil Nadu: Ethnographic and Sociological Reflections,' by Shahid Perwez critically analyses 'the impact of state interventions on issues of sex selection and gender imbalance in the particular ethnographic context of Tamil Nadu.' It also highlights political intervention in issues related to sex selection and family planning.

Too Many Men, Too Few Women is unique in bringing together eminent scholars to focus on the theme of the social consequences of a skewed gender ratio in both the countries. Covering 'several strands of thought,' the book thereby reflects the societal complexities in both India and China. It makes a strong case of how laws alone cannot correct a deeply-entrenched prejudice against birth of females, and that social, economic and cultural changes alone can bring about the desired societal transformation in these two great nations.

The book is research based, which is an aspect that brings authenticity to the substance and the arguments it makes. At the same time, in order to reach a larger readership, the book could have adopted a more popular style of writing and designed as less academic. The book may read as ominous but it cannot be overlooked that it is timely

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and there is an urgent need today for undertaking the policy measures which the book highlights. The book is an important read for governments and civil society organizations in order to arrive at measures urgently required today for reform.

Sumita Dawra, an IAS officer from the Andhra Pradesh cadre, is presently Principal Secretary in Department of Higher Education in the State. She is the author of *Poor But Spirited In Karimnagar: Field Notes Of A Civil Servant* (Harper collins), & *China: Behind The Miracle* (Bloomsbury).