

INTRODUCTION

India's deficit of females was first cited in 1901, with the advent of the Indian national census, and in the ensuing years, India's secondary sex ratio has continued to drop (Agnihotri 2000, 18). Concern over India's imbalanced sex ratio is not new; it has caused a heightened awareness of the ways in which low female status and discrimination are directly linked to this disproportion of females to males. There is strong pressure among Hindus to prefer sons, and this is most apparent through the example of India's exceptionally high prevalence of sex-selective abortions (purposely aborting a fetus because it is perceived to be that of an undesired sex) resulting in a preponderance of aborted females--and by other practices such as female infanticide and neglect that contribute to excess female mortality.

How, why, and to what degree does son preference have a detrimental impact on the survival and the status of Hindu females in India, and what can be done about it? In part one, I explore the effect of son preference on the Indian sex ratio and Hindu practices in contemporary India, placing particular emphasis on the extent to which these practices affect females. I do this by engaging a wide range of studies chosen for their ability to demonstrate the breadth and complexity of the issue through ongoing development in the modern context. In part two, I examine beliefs and practices located in Hindu religious sources beginning with the Vedic age that might provide clues to the origin and subsequent persistence of the Hindu preference for sons. I also place further emphasis on various ways in which female identity and status are influenced by the permutation of underlying beliefs and pragmatic realities. In the conclusion, I posit that there are distinguishing factors present in Indian Hindu experiences, beliefs and practices that help facilitate the perpetuation of son preference to a degree of extremity that is largely absent in Western cultures. I offer some preliminary observations on how this situation may be

improved or amended; however, I conclude that adherence to the dowry system, despite being illegal, is a root cause of the problem. Summarily, one way to address the larger problem of sex selection and female neglect is to eliminate the practice of the dowry that reinforces the notion that daughters are life-long economic liabilities.

I do *not* believe that Hindu women are less *valued* per se than women in other cultures, despite the fact that there is a negative economic correlation attached to them. From a more holistic examination of the problem, I will argue that Hindu women do indeed occupy a lower overall status in contrast to Hindu men, but this is only one aspect of a very complex gender issue that is distorted either more or less depending on the type and degree of socio-economic and religious pressures that are present. In fact, it is often argued that because women play such a central role in Hindu culture, there is a need for special measures to control and dominate them.

Discrimination against women in India has been amply documented; however, the magnitude of India's problem with sex-selection disfavoring females invites a deeper understanding of Indian cultural dynamics to explain the surprising degree of compliance and even facilitation that many women exhibit by aborting their daughters in preference for sons. Therefore, discrimination against women cannot be the sole reason India's sex ratio is imbalanced, even when strong socialization to adhere to prescribed gender roles is present. Likewise, unequal treatment and perceived differences in the genders do not necessarily mean that one can do without the other, or that one is more valuable than the other. The very foundation of Hindu religion and culture is emphatic on the cosmologically-deemed, inherent, and complementary natures of male and female without which nothing could exist. India has a rich source of potential to indeed solve its sex-ratio problem, but it will not be without a concerted effort on many fronts and must be tackled within the *context of Indian culture* without the presumption that Western developmental or feminist models are appropriate panaceas for India.

When I refer to son preference in this paper, it must be acknowledged that this necessarily excludes the random wish for sons (i.e., having a girl and now wanting a boy) that might naturally occur in any society. By contrast, I will refer to son preference that arises as a predominant response to daily cultural, political, and economic pressures. In

India, these pressures bear down to such a degree that son preference becomes influential in skewing the sex ratio, particularly in the absence of war, disease, or other factors that might otherwise account for it.

India has a plurality of religions, but I have chosen to concentrate on Hindus who comprise over three-quarters of the Indian population and for whom there is abundant evidence of son preferring practices.¹ Therefore, while there will be at times a tendency to speak of Indian females and males in a general sense, it should be acknowledged that for the sake of avoiding redundancy, and unless otherwise specified, I will be referring to Hindus in the context of this paper.

Statement of the Problem: Son Preference and Sex-Selection

The prevailing Hindu practices in India of female feticide, infanticide, and neglect, sex selection for the purpose of securing boy children, and reports of other violence toward females, could be inferred as ultimate expressions of misogyny--a notion commonly associated with strongly patriarchal societies. In the Indian context, however, this conclusion seems superficial and misleading, ignoring the many ways in which females have been, historically, held in *special* esteem as wives and mothers in Indian culture. Further, it does not take into account the pragmatic effects of poverty and overpopulation that influence priorities in daily decision-making. A more holistic account of gender relations in the context of Indian culture is needed before assumptions like this can be granted any validity. What is it that specifically drives son preference in India to such a large extent? Are Hindu women indeed unilaterally oppressed, weak, and/or simply ignorant of their options, or are gendered constructions of power *different* among Hindus (as opposed to Western women for example) which, when understood, might transform our thinking about the nature and value of Hindu women and their ability to respond to adversity?

¹ See "Census Data Online, Table 24: Three Main Religions in Every State, 1991." India's three main religious groups are Hindus at 82% of the population; Muslims at 12.12%; and Christians at 2.34%. Chhabra and Nuna (1993), p. 31, cite Sarkar's (1997) finding that among the major religious groups in India, Muslim "opposition" to abortion was the highest versus Hindus who showed the least.

There has been evidence to show that son preference in India does have a detrimental impact on Hindu females in certain ways. It is generally agreed that this is largely due to the fact that daughters are considered a financial liability. There is no facile resolution to what has been commonly termed the “plight of the girl child” in India in respect to sex-selective abortions and maltreatment according to gender. India’s progress toward balancing its sex ratio continues to be a constant challenge, despite the many programs and legal maneuvers enacted in an attempt to “uplift” females to a better and more equal position of opportunity. Pressing economic needs, the debilitating prevalence of the dowry system, and strong cultural values centered in, and maintained by, a clearly-delineated familial hierarchy press against the ability to effect revolutionary change at the pace and breadth this controversy has demanded. It is my hope that this paper will contribute to a more balanced awareness of the complexity of India’s problem of son preference and bring better understanding to the ways in which inspiring resources within the Hindu cultural and religious tradition can be cultivated as tools for shifting the paradigm of “plight” of the girl child to a process of empowerment and uplift for *both* genders.

As noted above, India’s most disturbing, well-documented, and generally agreed upon reason for fewer females is the Hindu preference for sons. Some scholars, like Valerie Grant in her book, *Maternal Personality, Evolution and the Sex Ratio*, point out that son preference appears to be “an almost universal phenomenon,” and Grant concludes that even in Western cultures, there is an “overall pattern, which remains persistently son-preferring”(Grant 1998, 182, 184).² However, these cultures do not have low sex ratios like India (or China), where son preference is especially compelling as adduced by the prevalence of female feticide, infanticide, and neglect, and female death by fire—which can be due to a suspicious “kitchen fire,” (Agnhotri 2000, 353) or the

² See Grant’s maternal dominance theory, p. 8, for an alternative view which, while certainly interesting, will not be expounded on here. Grant proposes that women bear children of the sex they are psychologically most suited to raise; hence, a preponderance of males in a society could be explained by a society having more women that are naturally suited to raising sons. Even if this were to be true in the case of Indian society, I would assume that the effect would most likely be negligible, given that there are already sufficient examples of female feticide, female infanticide, daughter neglect, *sati*, and “bride burning” to have a marked affect on the sex ratio, and which proves that many Indian women *are* conceiving girls in great numbers. Lastly research in this area of Grant’s expertise is apparently ongoing, still in the theoretical stage, and not entirely conclusive to my knowledge.

now illegal and more clandestine ritual of *sati* where a woman enters her husband's funeral pyre to die along with him. *There are clearly enough incidences of these practices to cause a significant aberration in India's sex ratio as compared to most other countries where the ratio of the two sexes is more evenly balanced.*³ While, potentially, these practices may occur in other cultures to some degree, in India, where the illegal system of dowry continues unabated, the girl child represents a high economic liability, which is crucial in the context of a developing country where the majority of its inhabitants are desperately poor. Nonetheless, son preference is likewise prevalent among the upper class, proving that economic and social pressures to favor sons are not isolated to those lacking financial prosperity.

Approach and Methodology

I do not intend to focus on the well-traversed path of female disadvantage or discrimination in India, *except* when germane to the problem of son preference and female survival. There has also been a great deal of work done on structural and programmatic strategies for raising the status of Indian females, so I will make only relevant mention of them; my prime concerns are sex-selective practices, son preference and their effect on the sex ratio.

Ethnographic and anthropological studies, due to India's large and diverse population (albeit mainly Hindu), continue to demand more significant attention, because it is now recognized that sex ratios within certain areas of India fluctuate not only by state, district and age group—but also according to caste and socio-economic status, and religion, local customs, and beliefs. Rural villages, which comprise the majority of India's total population, have received less attention than large urban centers, and more studies are

³ Attempting to cite Indian abortion prevalence statistics or to even estimate them is problematic: estimates vary widely, and sources concur that statistics are far from accurate to the true magnitude of the situation because all abortions are simply not documented or acknowledged. Nevertheless, Singh, et al., state that the WHO estimates that six million "clandestine abortions" take place annually in South Central Asia from a total of 7.4 million. Further, their report states, "It is believed that roughly 6.7 million induced abortions are performed annually in India, even though only about 632,000 are reported in government statistics" (60). For Asia, they estimate that 18% of all pregnancies end in abortion (67).

needed to balance the now heavily-weighted information on the side of the urban minority.

There has also been an overwhelming tendency for men in the middle or upper urban classes to speak for and about women, and Indian issues in general; thus, taking control over how India's social, political, and economic climates and structures are portrayed, and which do not always mesh with, or fully engage, the actual feelings and realities of the women or men in the lower classes and rural areas. In response to this, I have consulted a sampling of as many diverse voices and perspectives as possible. The problem will still remain, however, and indeed is acknowledged here, that many voices unfortunately remain underrepresented.

My approach was multi-disciplinary, and I have considered information from a wide range of sources that have overlapped to cultivate my perspective. While most do not secure a direct place in this paper, their influence is nevertheless not far from the surface. The disciplines I have consulted in my research are as follows: anthropology, behavioral science, demography, ethics, film, law, medicine, religion, philosophy, political science, psychology, sociology, and women's studies. The sources I consulted were obtained from scholarly, religious, and popular texts and articles, the Internet, Indian cinema, and the mainly Indian, but also American and British, news media. Since one of my goals was to focus on gender-related tensions and various ideologies involved in son preference, all of these sources contributed to my understanding in some way.

India appears to have made substantial strides in its attempts to improve women's lives if one looks at the growing mass of literature and studies on the status of Indian women, as well as the programs, committees, and groups that have been developed to survey and remedy the problem; however, Amartya Sen, Nobel prize-winning Indian economist, has repeatedly emphasized that females continue to be "missing" in large numbers (Sen 2001). Indian sex ratios are persistently imbalanced, and these efforts to balance them have not brought the degree of swift success that was originally expected. The way these strategies have been implemented, maintained, supported, and the degree to which they have been tailored to meet women's actual needs, however, begs ongoing closer examination. Women have made many legislative gains in the areas of dowry,

employment, law, and education, for example, but legal changes on paper do not always guarantee that they will be fully implemented and enforced in actual practice.

PART ONE

**THE HARDCORE REALITY OF SON PREFERENCE: SELECTIVELY
ELIMINATING DAUGHTERS**

The Impact of Son Preference on Secondary Sex Ratios

In the past several decades, there has been an upsurge in scholarship examining how patriarchal societies lend themselves to discrimination against women, especially with the advent of women's studies as a separate discipline in academia beginning in the 1960s. There has been ample evidence to show that gender discrimination and male domination in India, a strongly patriarchal society, have influenced the degree of access that females have to power, authority, and resources vis-à-vis males. Physical neglect of females, female infanticide, and sex-selective abortions disfavoring females are also evident and the degree to which these practices occur can vary according to region and other factors which I will elaborate on further. These latter practices obviously comprise the rawest level of unequal opportunity by their very nature of threatening existence; however, they are categorically different than discrimination and domination, I would argue, because they tend to be motivated by social, economic, and religious pressures rather than gender ideologies. Consequently, remedies to improve equality in opportunity and heightened gender sensitivity are needed to "uplift" Indian females on the one hand, but cultural pressures that are more of a practical and less ideological nature need to be addressed on the other.

Amartya Sen, winner of the 1998 Nobel Prize Laureate in Economics for his research on hunger, poverty, and gender inequalities, is an expert in the field of high-populace gender discrimination. In his April 21, 2001 inauguration address for the Radcliffe Institute of Harvard University, Sen informed his audience that he estimates the number

of women “missing” from “women-short countries” where gender bias is most prevalent to exceed 100 million.⁴ This estimate is all the more shocking given that Sen, a native Bengali, hails from India where their latest 2001 census reveals that there are currently only 927 girls to 1,000 boys in the 1-6 age group (which would normally have a high rate of females) and 933 females to 1,000 males in the general Indian population. This is up slightly from 1991 at 927:1,000, but down significantly from the 1901 Indian census which registered 972 females per 1,000 males in the population (Agnihotri 2000, 32). India’s cultural preference for sons and bias against females are the most widely-recognized causes for this skewed sex ratio.

The secondary sex ratio, or annual percentage of males to females among all live births, is “nearly constant” under normal conditions, and falls within the range of 104-107 males to 100 girls (Agnihotri 2000, 62). According to official United Nations estimates from the *United Nations Population Information Network* (2000 Revision), the sex ratio of *all* males to females living in the world is currently a much narrower margin of 102 males to 100 females or a 990:1,000 female to male ratio. Furthermore, this figure is actually “weighed down” by the exceptionally low sex ratios of India and China where there are more people than in any other countries in the world (Agnihotri 2000, 32). The primary reason for this decline in the gap is that while more males are born (and purportedly conceived)⁵ than females, males have higher mortality rates both in the fetal stage as well as later in contrast to females who have a natural biological advantage (Sen 2001). One might tend to conclude *prima facie*, therefore, that nature tends to move

⁴ Sen used the sex ratio of sub-Saharan Africa, an area relatively low in gender bias, as a standard against which to compare India’s ratio. This standard measure was 1.022 females to males versus India’s ratio of 0.93 females to males, to arrive at a 9% deficit of Indian females, or 37 million women as of 1986. Using the same method, China was figured to be “missing” 44 million women, and for the entire world, a total of over 100 million women. Sen also cites Stephan Klasen’s alternative method of calculation, which nevertheless yielded a somewhat close figure of 80 million women who were “missing” worldwide.

⁵ M. Tevfik Dorak refers to the *primary sex ratio at fertilization* as being “about 160:100.” Agnihotri, p. 62, refers to the “higher biological vulnerability of male fetuses” as shown by the 3-37 percent increase in male versus female fetal deaths. Grant states that “Male vulnerability has been well documented at every stage of the lifespan . . .” (93) and she refers to Hassold *et al.* 1983, wherein they estimated the primary sex ratio to be 115:100 (95). Grant also discusses some of the problems associated with trying to determine the primary sex ratio (93-95) and accedes that the primary sex ratio is not known (146). While the bulk of sources I consulted would not commit to any actual figure for the primary sex ratio--due to the inability to establish one with any high degree of certainty--most do however concur that there is a higher incidence of males to females at the time of conception.

toward a relatively fixed and even distribution of the sexes. Indeed, in the animal kingdom, “the overall birth sex ratio is almost universally 100 females to 100 males for all animals that breed bisexually.” (Grant 1998, 126). *In an ideal world* such might indeed be the case for humans as well, and the earliest researchers to discover these tendencies thought it was, attributing this near equalizing of the sexes to divine intention.

Sex ratios within India fluctuate according to district, region, age groups and castes—which points to differences in beliefs, practices, differing levels of discrimination against females, and the effect of migration when large numbers of men leave rural areas to work in the cities. Nevertheless, the most revealing indication of discrimination against females in “contemporary South Asia” emerges from the “*incidence of excess female mortality under the age of 5 years*” which is almost always caused by behavioral practices negatively impacting females (including sex-selective abortion and female infanticide) (Agnihotri 2000, 67-68, 324). Furthermore, even when districts ratios are combined, India’s overall sex ratio remains very low.

Researchers have noticed that there appears to be a north-western/south-eastern, or Indo-Aryan/Dravidian, divide in India whereby the latter tend to have higher sex ratios than the former. Upon closer examination, this is generally true, but fluctuations are indeed present within the different regions comprising each division. The south tends to be more “female-friendly” and women in this area tend to be less subordinate to men. One hypothesis for this difference in north and south is that the kinship system predominate in the south allows cross-cousin marriage; there is less social and geographical distance between the “bride giver” and the “bride taker;” and lineages are “perpetuated” rather than reconfigured as in the north where a new bride is viewed with suspicion and restraint, coming as she does from strangers in another village that is most likely quite distant. In the south, “reciprocal exchange” in marital transactions is the norm, while in the north the maternal family, including the bride who must marry up the social ladder, is deemed inferior, and her family is strapped with heavy financial obligations to the family of the prospective groom (Agnihotri 2000, 72-76). Prahbjot Malhi and Jagat Jerath (1997) further add that in the south: “Women may inherit property and bride wealth practice is common. Daughters, like sons, can and do render

old age support to their parents. Although sons are still favoured in the south a women's position in the family is not determined by her ability to bear sons.”

A few experts have implied that this pattern in the south may be changing, however, as the traditional subsistence mode of agriculture in the south (which women participated in and fared much better) is being replaced with cash crops resulting in a higher stratification of wealth. This has upped the dowry standard of respectability, and through increasing assimilation of northern mainstream culture into the south, along with its customs that are less “female-friendly,” an “emerging anti-female bias” is increasing among the more prosperous landholders in the south (Agnihotri 2000, 269-273). According to Agnihotri, female status is not necessarily correlated to higher family income. Thus, he states: “The ‘dowry market’ catches up with the wealth levels” (357)—meaning that the wealthy not only raise the standard for the poorer classes to emulate, but also suffer the same pressure to have sons who will bring in wealth, maintain their honor, and facilitate their ability to meet increased financial expectations. Further, son preference and female discrimination do not automatically decrease with a rise in material resources; instead, “allocation behaviour in the household is crucially determined by female contribution to prosperity and not by prosperity per se” (272, 291).

Sex ratios are important benchmarks for alerting and motivating the need for change and further evaluation of how a society functions, and have important applications to the formation and delivery of public policy. In this respect, variations of region and class must be taken into account. Agnihotri suggests that instituting social programs to increase female labor participation (one factor found to increase women’s status and empowerment) is virtually meaningless when applied to the wealthier classes who may not want or need their women to be assimilated into the job market (304).

Indian sex ratios have been profoundly influential in bringing about worldwide attention to the low status of women and children in India. They have helped reveal what might have otherwise remained hidden: the degree of decline of females in India, both in physical numbers as well as status; however, *the effects of pressure to maintain honor and respectability, and the need to be prosperous must not be overlooked.*

Sex ratios, and particularly their fluctuations, cannot always be fully explained by biology or physical changes in an environment. It is necessary to look beyond the forces of nature, and examine the influence exerted on a population by the human cultural, economic, and religious imagination. In this case, female feticide, infanticide, and female neglect can more than account for India's disparity without the need to chase down any further mysterious biological or environmental factors. Nevertheless, a few words are in order regarding a few of these alternative views.

Satish Balram Agnihotri, cited above, is a male scholar of Indian descent holding degrees in physics, environmental science, engineering and rural development, and is the author of the book, *Sex Ratio Patterns in the Indian Population: A Fresh Exploration*. Agnihotri believes that prenatal selection and sex-selective abortions are wrong and should be banned, and that they do not justify preventing the girl child from "being killed at birth or being allowed to die due to neglect." He further believes that low female to male ratios are indeed cause for concern, especially when they may eventually "spiral out of hand" upon the convergence of son preference and sex selections (357). Agnihotri refers to three "escape hatches" that he claims are "surprisingly strong within demographic circles" and that "recur in the literature and in policy debates" to "explain away or deny the problem" of low sex ratios and high female mortality rates: the sex ratio at birth; under-reporting of female children; and a supposed natural tendency for Indian women to deliver more males than females (20, 32, 62-66, 329, 356). Agnihotri provides strong evidence that *were* these to be factors which would in themselves explain India's low female-to-male sex ratio, their influence would nevertheless be slight or, in the case of the second factor, remedied by subsequent improvement in accuracy in later census figures. Sex discrimination and sex selection, by contrast, can affect sex ratios to a significant degree.⁶

Regarding the third escape hatch mentioned above, Valerie Grant, a female scholar in the field of behavioral science in New Zealand, defends a maternal dominance hypothesis in her book, *Maternal Personality, Evolution and the Sex Ratio: Do Mothers Control the*

⁶ In regard to the effect of improved health conditions on sex ratios, p. 62, Agnihotri points out how this has relatively low significance, citing Sweden's increase in the secondary sex ratio of less than three percentage points in over 200 years, and less than four from 1861 to 1980 in the United Kingdom.

Sex of the Infant? (1998), wherein she suggests that the degree of dominance in a woman's personality and levels of testosterone determine the sex of the child she will conceive. According to this theory, via the workings of nature, the sex of a mother's child is naturally the one she is most *suited* to raise. Thus, in theory it would be possible for a large group of women, all sharing similar dominance characteristics, to *naturally* produce a preponderance of children of the same sex (Grant 1998).

Grant also cites a 1980 study of three hospitals' records in a large city in India by A. Ramanamma and U. Bumbawale wherein 430 of 450 women carrying female fetuses chose to abort them. None of the mothers carrying male fetuses chose to abort. Therefore, Grant similarly presents strong evidence for the prevalence of sex selection in India, at least for this one locality--which is of course only a sampling yet quite decisive in its own right (184). Furthermore, Grant states that abortion involves such severe trauma to a mother that "localized social pressure to have a boy" must be very strong for a woman to opt for abortion just to avoid having a girl (190). Indeed, in India, such is the case.

The World Health Organization's (WHO) website (*Women's Health in South-East Asia*) publication, "Female Mortality and Morbidity" (2002), states that the usual genetic pattern for girl babies consists of "x-linked immuno-regulatory genes" that "contribute greater resistance to infectious diseases in the first *years* [emphasis added] of life" resulting in lower female mortality.⁷ However, statistics also show that in India, once these same infants enter the one- to four-year-old range, it is boys who begin to exhibit the lower mortality rates. The WHO states that this is "an unusual phenomenon," and one that "implies that environmental factors such as inadequate feeding and care, have nullified the biological advantage [of greater female resistance to infection]"-- something that can easily be overlooked if neonatal and post-neonatal mortality rates are not examined *separately*. The WHO states, "Higher female mortality is rare in infancy and *even more so* [emphasis added] in the early neonatal period." Measles is an illness which

⁷ See WHO Table 16 showing 1990-1995 statistics for India indicating a marginal difference in favor of females--60.5 versus 60.3 for males--when mortality is *not* figured separately from birth to one year, and then year one to four--obscuring the fact that females are actually at a greater risk beginning with their first birthday. This is not evident due to the averaging in of their genetic advantage which makes them initially more resistant than males to infections.

disproportionately affects females; however, India lacks sufficient or accurate data on sex-specific causes of death by age to confirm that measles might be the cause of higher female mortality in the one- to four-year-old age group. Furthermore, increased household prosperity may have little to no effect on improving the treatment of a girl baby according to the WHO's statement that, "In settings with a marked preference for the male child, increased availability of household resources may not translate into better feeding and care of the female child."

Amartya Sen, by contrast, is much more explicit about forms of gender discrimination in India. In his aforementioned essay, "Many Faces of Gender Inequality" (2001), Sen recommends a pluralistic approach to understanding gender inequality, stating: "Indeed, gender inequality is not one homogenous phenomenon, but a collection of disparate and interlinked problems." Sen cites seven basic types of gender inequality that comprise the "many faces" of this problem: mortality inequality; natality inequality; basic facility inequality; special opportunity inequality; professional inequality; ownership inequality; and household inequality.

Sen conducted a joint study of two large Bombay hospitals wherein he found "clear evidence" that overall when girls were admitted to the hospital, they tended to be brought in for more serious conditions than boys, inferring that a girl's health was often more compromised than the average boy patient's before medical care was sought for her. Sen also conducted a study in 1983 wherein he weighed all children under age five from two large villages. In his findings, he stated that "an initial condition of broad nutritional symmetry" among young children became, over time, a "situation of significant female disadvantage." While Indian girls were more likely to be undernourished than boys, Sen cautioned that this might not be due to girls being fed less than boys, but might rather be a reflection of girls' relative lack of access to healthcare vis-à-vis boys. As in the case of post-neonatal mortality decline in females, this suggests that there may be multiple reasons for health disparities between boys and girls, which nevertheless do not diminish the importance of examining a number of areas which in toto may adversely affect females.

Sen was also careful to point out, from his pluralistic perspective, that one instance of inequality could easily lead to another, creating a chain of dire circumstances for everyone. He used the higher incidence of female undernourishment as an example. If a pregnant woman were undernourished, she would have a greater risk of delivering a low-birth-weight baby that would, regardless of sex, consequently suffer a decreased chance of survival and an increased risk for physical and developmental problems. These health deficits would not only have a negative impact on the immediate family involved, but they could also be compounded on the societal level if they led to the child becoming a social or economic liability, and incapable of making any positive contribution to a community where resources were most likely already scarce.

Sen states that most Indian women also lack equal economic empowerment because they do not share the same opportunities as most men for becoming literate, obtaining “gainful employment,” or for pursuing more “rewarding occupations.” Economic power has routinely been correlated to status, within both society and the family, and accordingly Sen predicted that better economic empowerment for women would lead to an increase in “status, standing and voice in family decisions.” The unequal status of the childbearing woman within the family, implied as Sen stated in the need for greater female empowerment, is further implicated in sex-selective abortion and female infanticide.⁸

Sen uses the Indian state of Kerala as a model to accentuate the positive ways in which “women’s agency” has helped to eliminate gender inequalities by developing a fuller scope of “capabilities.”⁹ Sen again points out the benefits enjoyed by society as a whole when women increase their “freedom and well-being.” Kerala’s concentrated

⁸ I will expound more on this later using the example of women who opt to abort their female fetuses because they perceive themselves as having a diminished status and lack of freedom within the family. These perceptions then undermine their feelings of autonomy and ability to unilaterally make their own decisions under the coercive pressure of more assertive family members. However, as I will point out, this is not always so clear cut. Some women have indicated that pressure from other *women* in their community was influential in their decision not to allow their girl child to survive.

⁹ See “Census Data Online, Table 24: Three Main Religions in Every State, 1991.” There are only six states with large Christian populations in India, and Kerala is one of them with a Christian population of 19.3 percent. It would be fruitful to examine data that has accurately disaggregated Indian state and district sex ratios one step further by religious affiliation; however, I am not personally aware of any in existence. Without knowledge of this data, I cannot make any assumptions about the degree to which Kerala’s high sex ratio is linked to the state’s relatively greater number of Christians.

program toward the uplift of women has documented success in reducing their degree of child neglect, and has succeeded in lowering their mortality and fertility rates, resulting in an increase in what Sen calls their “social concern and care.”

Historical Perspective on Abortion in India

British rulers in India first established abortion as a criminal offense in 1860 via the framing of Indian Penal Code (IPC), Section 312, wherein it stated that “any one voluntarily ‘causing miscarriage’ in a woman with child – other than in ‘good faith for the purpose of saving her life’ was punishable by imprisonment that could be simple or rigorous and/or a fine” (Chhabra and Nuna 1993, 3). This code, not unlike Vedic injunctions against abortion discussed later in this paper, applied to both men and women. Despite the introduction of the 19th-century penal code, or even that of the early lawgivers’ condemnations, abortion has remained common in India, albeit more or less surreptitiously according to laws (or knowledge of them) and social conventions, and it is still the female fetus that is the primary target for abortion, and the female who faces decreased survival immediately following birth.

By the mid-1960s, mounting evidence against the negative consequences of illegal abortions prompted India’s Central Family Planning Board (CFPB) to hold a meeting in August, 1964, wherein they expressed concern for the widespread mental and physical suffering of women who used their health services following complications from unsanitary abortion attempts. This was not solely in response to a concern for women’s health; it involved an equal concern for the appending socio-economic toll caused by the diversion of scarce resources and skills to treatment of septic abortions that could have been prevented given proper medical care (5).¹⁰

Acting as a driving force behind the instigation of a successful review of the antiquated IPC, the CFPB became the Member-Secretary of a newly-established eleven-

¹⁰ See Everett M. Rogers and Douglas S. Solomon., p. 127, where the authors state that beginning in the early 1960s and at least up through 1971, India’s Ministry of Health and Family Planning, in conjunction with UNICEF support, began integrating traditional midwives (dais) into family planning programs through “referral activities” and medical training. I have no information on how long or if this measure lasted subsequent to 1971.

member “Shah Committee” set up by the Government of India to study the feasibility of legalizing abortion. The Committee’s goals were thorough: to examine abortion “in all its aspects, legal, medical, social and ethical,” and to make recommendations thereupon (5). The Shah Committee, in addition to the Member-Secretary and Minister of Public Health, was comprised of “five eminent women social workers and 4 medical doctors” (5). After two years of surveying responses from the medical community, and welfare and women’s organizations, the committee recommended that “liberalization” versus “legalization” of abortion be framed using the existing IPC as a foundation (6). Whereas abortion had been legal when a mother’s life was endangered, the newly-proposed bill contained a groundbreaking, worldwide legal precedent by including situations of contraceptive failure and a woman’s right to abortion without the consent of her husband (6).¹¹ The new bill stipulated that abortions could only be performed by a “qualified medical practitioner acting in good faith” under the following additional conditions:

“ . . . wherever the pregnancy posed: a serious risk to her [the woman’s] life, or grave injury to her health, physical or mental, before or after the birth of the child; substantial risk of the possibility of a seriously physically or mentally handicapped child being born; and where the pregnancy resulted from rape or intercourse with a minor or a mentally retarded girl” (6).

The Committee employed a comprehensive approach to the abortion issue in its recommendations for a “rigorous promotion of the small family norm and contraception; as [and] also, family life education on sex, marriage and parenthood, together with an expansion of easily accessible family planning services” in order to limit the number of abortions (7). This recognition of a need for a broad-based plan of action was a cogent move on behalf of the Committee, considering that their report contained an assessment that “at least 4 million illegal abortions” had taken place (7).

¹¹ Gangoli points out, however, how this formal right can be “negated or further restricted by legal interpretations.” See Gangoli for reference to the 1984 Delhi High Court case wherein a husband was granted a divorce on the grounds that his wife’s abortion without his consent amount to “cruelty” within the meaning of the law; and the 1993 Madras High Court ruling disallowing a 16-year-old girl from getting an abortion on the grounds that childbirth was unsafe at her age, instead using the logic of the common adage, “the younger the mother, the better the birth.”

After many years of deliberation, the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act was finally passed by the Indian Parliament in August, 1971, to become effective on April 1, 1972, and “no opposition was voiced as it became law,” unlike in the West (10). In the interim, Hungary, the USSR, Alaska, Hawaii, and New York also passed liberal abortion laws, some even surpassing those of the MTP; however, India retained its distinction as one of the few nations that progressively allowed legal abortions on various grounds (10).

Chhabra and Nuna, however, also state that the MTP Bill (Rajya Sabha) 1969 did cause a “limited furore among conservative citizens,” in the early stages, who objected to the bill on the grounds that it was a ‘chapter for license.’” The English media supported the doctors and demographers who concentrated on the problems caused by illegal abortions, while the Indian media focused on “the deleterious health effects of illegal abortions” and the “positive demographic fall out (sic).” Included in the Indian group were “some women’s voices” working in conjunction with the media and medical profession to help promote passage of the bill (9).

Hindu religious leaders have made ardent use of the Internet news media in more recent years to espouse their condemnation of abortion, and they support their views for protecting the fetus using references to the Vedas and Manu’s laws which I will later discuss in further detail.¹² While the issue of the right to life was not the popular platform for abortion discussion in India as it was the West, the more recent debates about amniocentesis and ultrasound enabling people to abort their girl fetuses have caused some people to challenge the ethics of sex discrimination involved in sex-selective abortion.

Chhabra and Nuna emphasized several important aspects of the early liberalizing process, influencing both the discussion and outcome of the initiatives. The medical community, which comprised a majority of the Committee and respondents to their

¹² For a scathing, reactionary Internet Book online blaming Brahmins for the continued “genocide of women in Hinduism,” see <http://www.dalitstan.org/books/gowh/gowh_1.html>, *Vedic Obliteration of Girls* by Sita Agarwal. Hindu websites advancing the Hindu notion of abortion as sin can be found at the Vaishnava Internet News Agency: <http://www.vina.org/articles/bedroom_abortion.html>; the Hare Krishna websites: <<http://www.iskcon.org>, www.krishna.org>, and <<http://veda.harekrsna.cz/html/yoga/issues.htm>>; and his Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada’s website, <<http://www.abspn.com/abortion.htm>>.

survey, were, according to Chhabra and Nuna, the “most organised and vocal” in this process of debate and decision-making (8). Their self-interest was at stake: they served to gain a potentially new and more “streamlined” health care system (6), and an authoritative monopoly on abortion services which, if subverted, would potentially criminalize offenders via injunctions under the old IPC rules.

Chhabra and Nuna’s criticism of the medical community’s new “medicalisation” of their services entailing “a still stronger specialised straitjacket” reflects a contextual concern for the large number of poor rural women who, unable to access or afford public health care services, would regularly use the services of local dais and lay practitioners to perform these services (9). Thus, while the initiatives of the Committee were a progressive step forward in securing rights for women (the right to have a legal abortion under more liberal circumstances without the consent of her husband, and a recognition that failed contraceptive use could be a cause of mental distress), these rights were nevertheless adjoined with motivations from the agendas of others—namely, a predominantly male health care delivery system, in contrast to the local, mainly female counterpart from the community they could access more easily with feelings of comfort and trust.¹³ The comprehensive measures added to the liberalizing changes to the abortion law—in particular, the push for a small family norm and more widespread use of contraceptives--further underscored the protest from some camps that women’s reproduction was now officially entrenched as a state-regulated object of male direction and control.

Geetanjali Gangoli’s article, “Reproduction, Abortion and Women’s Health” (1998), reflects this standpoint on abortion from the perspective of an *Indian* feminist.¹⁴ In this

¹³ See Singh, Wulf, and Jones (1997), p. 66, who state: “In India, small-scale studies show that government providers may be uncaring toward women, fail to ensure confidentiality, require women to obtain the consent of their husbands (even though this is not legally necessary) and often require that women obtaining an abortion accept sterilization or an IUD. Conditions such as these help explain why so few Indian women obtain abortions through the official health system.” Janet Chowla’s master’s thesis from a feminist perspective, entitled “A Woman-Centered Revisioning of the Traditional Indian Midwife: The Dai as Ritual Practitioner,” submitted July, 1993, to the Vidyajyoti Institute of Religious Studies, Delhi, focuses on the importance of the dai or midwife in India whose “ritual practice is empowering to women in facilitating labour, reaffirming bonds among women and validating the power and sacredness of woman’s body” (77).

¹⁴ I found that the appellation of “feminist” is frequently viewed as negative by many Indian women (and men) who resent their activism being associated with this term they consider Western. See Muhibul Haq

article, Gangoli repeatedly argues that India's *primary* motivations for addressing abortion concerns have not been women's health, but rather population control and control over women's sexuality and reproduction, whereby the state consequently used "force and coercion to reduce birth rates." In turn, the early feminist response, from a "small though extremely articulate feminist health movement" grew out of this framework, in contrast to any origins independent of its own as in the West. Gangoli states:

The question of women's health seems to be cast in adjunct to reproduction, at least as far as the Indian state is concerned. For the feminist movements in the city of Bombay, women's health [issues] are inextricably connected with issues around sexuality, reproduction and the social and legal control of these. In fact, it has been stated in an internal critique that the need of feminists to discuss sexuality seems to have emerged from debates around fertility and fertility control."

Furthermore, while male sterilization *and* female contraceptives were indeed the primary focus of the early program, the emphasis had shifted by the late 1970s to center on female contraception after the fall of Indira Gandhi's Congress Party in 1977 (which was purportedly in protest to her support for forced male sterilizations). In 1982, the Forum Against Sex Determination and Sex Pre-Selection sought to ban amniocentesis and ultrasound testing for sex determination purposes. The successful campaign to this end instituted by health and feminist movements, Gangoli argues, was deemed to be the *real* important "victory," because it resulted in the first law against sex determination in Maharashtra in 1988, and followed by a similar national-level law six years later: the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act of 1994.

Legal victory did not translate to actual enforcement of the prohibitory laws. It has not been until now, in the new millennium, that a concrete *process* for action is finally being taken to ensure that these laws are carried out and offenders punished. By contrast, the male sterilization program underwent a swift and effective political demise after only

Human Development Centre, *Human Development in South Asia 2000: The Gender Question*. (Pakistan: Oxford UP) 2000. The center's report states that the rejection of the label "feminist" derives from a narrow understanding of the term: ". . . in which feminism is considered a Western import and equated with views of Western middle class, secular, educated women, or with extreme female chauvinism." Despite the many varieties of "feminism," women attending a South Asian workshop concurred on this definition of feminism: "Feminism is an awareness of women's oppression and exploitation in society, at work, and in the family, and conscious action by women and men to change this situation." pp. 29-30.

two years. Gangoli uses the example of the “poor, illiterate, low caste or Muslim men” who bore “the brunt of the coercive sterilizations” during these years of National Emergency (1975-1977) to conclude that: “What this seems to convey is that even the most powerless among men possibly enjoy a greater degree of control over state policy than women do.” She further states: “The population policies in the country have shown a marked insensitivity to the lives and experiences of women, concentrating mainly on filling quotas.”

Controlling Female Reproduction

A woman whose primary role and means of satisfaction derives from being a mother may feel that her worth and honor are substantially threatened if she is coerced into using contraceptives or accepting sterilization. Mrinal Pande points out that “the desire to procreate is deeply embedded in human nature and that matrimony and childbirth will therefore continue to be treated as a holy and ennobling experience by all communities in India, even if the State refuses to endorse this view” (Pande 2002). Therefore, she adds that “the poor ignore even sensible appeals for planning their families.” She explains this further by stating that “Indian life here has entirely come to be sustained by symbolic values and meanings that the poor will impart to the most mundane things.” A girl entering puberty transforms into a “symbol of nascent and holy fertility that creates life,” and after giving birth to a child, she ritually becomes Laxmi, [Lakshmi] “the fertile creator of wealth and life.” Thus, Pande, explains, “The young woman by giving birth has attained a great honour . . .” Pande therefore appeals to the more innovative strategies being used by *non-governmental* organizations that take local customs and traditions into consideration, and involve direct feedback from the women for whom their policies will most affect. She contrasts this to the Indian government’s attitude that is “arrogant” and “full of disdain” when dealing with issues involving women’s reproduction.

India was the first country in the world to implement a national program for family planning. During this process--which included expanding the parameters of its abortion law and access to family planning services, promotion of the small family norm, and

“family life education on sex, marriage, and parenthood”--various methods of birth control were studied (Chhabra and Nuna, 1993, 7). In the West, feminists wrestled to have access to as many birth control methods as possible, often preferring methods most directly within their own realm of control. Many Indian feminists, like Gangoli, share an entirely different perspective that is critical of contraceptives and resentful of the shift in family planning that focuses on the female as being solely responsible for preventing pregnancy. Therefore, Gangoli states that “most of the methods propagated by the state are coercive, many are long acting and can have negative effects on the health of the users.” She further clarifies this from an Indian standpoint and states: “Feminists have not always looked at the multi-national control and promotion of contraception, or the global dimensions of family planning, including the export of harmful technology to nonwestern women.”

Gangoli’s statement about third-world women’s suspicious attitude toward contraceptives echoes the feelings of many non-Western women who feel manipulated by pressures to use new technology coming from “the outside” which will artificially control their reproductive processes in ways they are uncertain of. In cultures where natural, folk, or homeopathic medicine are common, it should not be surprising to find that the imposition of foreign, artificial methods from outsiders, who may be using third-world women as possible guinea pigs or ignorant victims of useless scam products, would be greeted with suspicion. This viewpoint has been most passionately articulated by Nawal El Saadawi in *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1995) which refers not only to women in the Arab world but also similar oppression that she views as being forced on all third-world women by Western imperialists. Furthermore, feminists have also argued that difficult access to health services and the time this often requires away from the home make follow-up visits problematic, as does the cost of the prescriptions for women with little resources.

Malhi and Jerath’s research (1997) further suggests that there is an association between Indian women’s willingness to use contraceptives and son preference, and state in their conclusions:

In sum, it seems that women's future decisions to accept contraception are clearly linked to the number of living sons among her surviving children. In a

society experiencing fertility transition the preference for at least two surviving sons is going to emerge as a major constraint for the family planning program, especially in the north. In the light of these findings it appears that further increase in the contraceptive prevalence rates in the country may become increasingly more difficult unless there is a decline in the desire for male children. Thus, it is important that the Indian Government instead of propagating the two-child family norm across the board, emphasize those policies that actively enhance women's status and change attitudes towards female children.

Gangoli and others have emphasized that while women gained the right to have a legal abortion under more liberal conditions, this was only a “paper right,” because it was not “buttressed by safe and humane abortion services” (Gangoli 1998), which was the original impetus and platform for framing the new law (Chhabra and Nuna, 1993, 6). A 1996 study by Khan, Barge, and Philip, “Abortion in India: An Overview,” not only supports Gangoli’s claim, but enlarges on the severity of the situation. According to Khan, et al., approximately 6.5 million illegal abortions are estimated to take place in India per year; whereas at the time of this report—24 years after abortion became legalized when performed in a government-authorized facility—less than 10 percent, or .063 million abortions, per year were actually legal. The majority of the abortions were therefore illegal, and done by “untrained village practitioners” who did not constrain women in the process of delivering their services in the following ways that governmentally-approved clinics did: showing insensitivity and lacking interest in doing something most of the doctors felt was morally or religiously wrong; not respecting women’s privacy or need for confidentiality; keeping women away from their families longer while they recovered; refusing to do abortions unless the woman agreed to be sterilized or be implanted with an IUD; charging extra fees or requiring prescriptions that were not affordable; or requiring governmental approval of their application before the procedure was done, which often took 5 to 6 months *or even longer*. One study these researchers cited set the number of septic deaths resulting from unhygienic abortions at 12 percent of all yearly maternal deaths, and another at 20 percent. Further, many of the governmentally-approved facilities were congregated in areas where there were relatively small populations, while larger states had very few. Rural women suffered the most from this disparity. There was a shortage of doctors sent to training centers, and most only did

a handful of abortions before gaining their licenses. Additionally, there was a severe shortage of actual funds allocated to the medical termination of pregnancy program, and on the “societal level,” the authors found that there was a high degree of ignorance among women that abortion was even *legal* in India.

Sex Selection, Abortion, and Female Infanticide

An alternative solution to helping alleviate the problem of India’s high rate of aborted female fetuses, and decrease the *need* for access to abortion services, might be to simply avoid conception of unwanted females from the very outset. In fact, this is a relatively recent strategy being pursued by a company out of South Carolina wanting to expand its operations to India where sons are at a premium (“Doing Away With Daughters”). The company’s product is called *Gen-Select*, and can be purchased via e-mail or a toll-free call for the fairly high price of \$119.95. *Gen-Select* purports to be a “safe” and “easy” pre-conception method of sex selection that boasts a success rate of 96 percent. *Gen-Select* consists of “gender specific nutraceutical supplements,” advice on monitoring ovulation and the most advantageous times for intercourse, and “external sprays or douches” to promote conception of a child of the desired sex (Menon and Roy Choudhury 2001). *Gen-Select* has been criticized as an opportunistic marketing scheme for an American manufacturer to cash in on and exploit India’s preference for sons, and the timing was certainly perfect since India’s 2001 census report had just been released confirming a continued low number of females to males resulting from son preference.

Bangalore women’s and child’s rights groups clamored to protest advertisements for *Gen-Select* in *The Times of India*, a newspaper which has offices in their city. *OutLookIndia.com*, *The Hindu* (India’s national newspaper), and *Frontline* (India’s national magazine online) both reported coverage of the November 26, 2001, protest demonstrations “spearheaded by Vimochana, a women’s organization” in Bangalore (“Doing Away With Daughters”). Vimochana also sponsored a campaign to send letters of protest to the editor of the paper. The Network to Empower Women Journalists (NEWJ), the chairwoman for the National Commission for Women, and CEHAT (Center for Enquiry in Health and Allied Themes) also joined in the protest in various ways.

Detractors for the advertisement claimed that the newspaper was at fault for “allowing commercial objectives to overshadow its social responsibilities”—all the more serious for a country that is currently concentrating its efforts toward uplifting the status of women, ending the practice of female feticide and infanticide, and “fighting the retrograde social attitudes and practices that discriminate against the girl-child” (Menon and Roy Choudhury 2001).

The Times of India did subsequently pull the ad, and “acknowledged the widespread use of sex-determination techniques and the failure of legislation to bring new and questionable technologies for sex-selection within its ambit”; however, it was interesting that they justified their right to run the advertisement by resorting a familiar Western, but non-Indian, abortion rhetoric of “freedom of choice” in their defense of a woman’s right to choose the sex of her child if she so desires (Menon and Roy Choudhury 2001).

The manufacturer’s spokeswoman, Jill Sweazy, defended her company’s marketing of the kit using a strategy that was attempting to respond to the Indian context, using the rhetoric of helping India achieve her goal of son preference, perhaps overdoing it when she also stated her aim to avoid those thorny “moral, ethical and legal issues of feticide” (Menon and Roy Choudhury 2001). The problem with Sweazy’s naïve statement is that India has gone far beyond the early stages of protest at banning amniocentesis and ultrasound for non-medical reasons. The issue of sex-determination, and its ensuing high negative profile which reflects poorly on the status of India’s women, has generated a new consciousness of gender discrimination in India—as shown by the immediately defensive reaction given by *The Times of India* when they emphasized their awareness of the issues.¹⁵

The *pragmatic* implication in Sweazy’s statement is the reality of the present law’s failure to address new advances in technology and how products such as *Gen-Select*, a

¹⁵ Dr. Anita Arya’s multi-volume texts on Indian Women (in particular *Indian Women: Society and Law*, 2000) attest to the many avenues in which this problem has been explored, and the revolutionary, holistic methods with which many people are currently beginning to approach it. The aim is to leave no portion of the Indian socio-cultural landscape unexamined. A full-frontal revamping of Indian socio-cultural assumptions and practices has been welcomed in these efforts, and even thoughts and practices formerly taken for granted are now being carefully scrutinized and reassessed to find ways to end discrimination against women in Indian society.

pre-conception sex-determination method, will fall under the purview of the ban on sex determination. The only law on the books addressing fetal discrimination at that time was the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act of 1994, (effective in 1996) which did not address pre-conception techniques--a problem which also arose in connection with the introduction of PGD, or pre-implantation genetic diagnosis, wherein the sex of the embryo is identified in vitro (Kakodkar 2001).

In fact, the PNDT Act itself is under scrutiny for not having effectively enforced *either* its ban on sex determination tests *or* its mandatory registration of all ultrasound clinics. A December 11, 2001, Internet news report stated that the Indian Supreme Court was forced to call in eleven state health secretaries to explain why such enforcement had not been taking place—most likely as a result of a petition filed by Savu M. George, the Centre for Enquiry into Health and Allied Themes (CEHAT), and Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Mandal (MASUM) “alleging that large-scale illegal sex-determination tests were taking place in India leading to female foeticide resulting in an abnormal male-female sex ratio” (“Sex Determination Tests”). This petition also demanded that the Act be revised to include all pre-conception tests (Kakodkar 2001). In addition, five multi-national ultrasound manufacturers were required to supply the Supreme Court with the names and addresses of all their ultrasound customers in the past five years in order to track their registration compliance (“Sex Determination Tests”). By January 29, 2002, *The Hindu* reported that the Supreme Court had sent orders that day to confiscate all ultrasound equipment in unlicensed clinics (“SC Order on Sex Tests”).

The effect of the 2001 Census also set other legal wheels in motion. On December 21, 2001, *The Hindu* reported that Delhi (with a very low 827:1000 sex ratio) had set up a committee to study the “declining population of women” as well as how to better enforce the ban on sex determination testing. It was interesting to note the responses of the people involved in this debate. Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit made the point that laws are basically useless without a corresponding outlook by the community itself. She stated:

“Till [to] date, the girl child has been looked upon by parents as a liability, an attitude which has to be changed. There is urgent need to reform the entire

system and bring about social change. The continued male dominance attitude and system has to be rooted out and this can be done by spreading awareness. The entire process has to be changed for the better (sic) of the girl child” (“Concern Over Female Foeticide”).

Dikshit also proposed a radical change in the laws concerning dowry. Similarly, Ms. Anjali Rai, of the Congress Party, and the then newly-appointed leader of the Delhi committee, stated that “female foeticide was a dangerous thing which needs to be checked at all cost.” She suggested that “the entire thinking of society” would need to be transformed in order to end the practice (“Concern Over Female Foeticide”).

Mr. Harsh Vardhan of the BJP’s suggestion was that the “law needs to be made more stringent and effective” (“Concern Over Female Foeticide”). It is interesting to notice that unlike the two women cited above, Mr. Vardhan makes no mention of a more holistic approach to reform, but rather that law and enforcement would be sufficient to remedy the situation—which is rather curious since this law has been totally ignored by the Indian political machine for the many years since its inception. The BJP has a website on which it reports its many views on Hindutva, or Hindu Nationalism.¹⁶ Lip service is given to the honored place of the Hindu woman; however, there is no mention of its support against sex discrimination of the female. In fact, the Human Rights Watch website is full of instances where the BJP’s nationalist activities have resulted in death or injury to women and children in its rampage against the dalits (the lowest social class of Untouchables).¹⁷ It is therefore not hard to conclude that the BJP’s nationalist agenda may be a priority to which all others are merely secondary. I found no mention of the BJP being in favor of sex-selective abortion; however, there was a glaring lack of any mention of support for female issues evident in detailed diatribes on Hindutva. Further, in his essay, “The Many Faces of Gender Inequality,” Amartya Sen touches on an interesting point concerning the BJP and another well-known nationalist group, the Shiv Sena. Sen suggests a possible connection between the northern and western regions of

¹⁶ See <<http://www.bjp.org/history/htvintro-mm-1.htm>>, “Hindutva: The Great Nationalist Ideology,” link on the BJP website.

¹⁷ See *Human Rights Watch: India*, “The Concept of Swadeshi” by Ashok Chowgule, <<http://www.hrw.org/wr21Asia-04.htm>>, for specific human rights violations and violence toward women and children inflicted in the course of the BJP’s nationalist activities.

India, where the female-to-male sex ratio is the lowest, to the fact that these areas “by and large, [have] given much more room to religion-based sectarian politics” (the BJP and Shiv Sena) in contrast to areas in the south and east where “religion-centred parties have had very little success.”

Aniruddha Malpani, an infertility specialist who promotes sex selection in vitro (PGD), defends this procedure as the “ultimate form of family planning.” (Kakodkar 2001). Malpani has done sixty PGDs in the past two years, all for patients desirous of conceiving a son. Not unlike the argument of some Indian women, Malpani feels that it is better to ensure that son will be born, than to risk conceiving a daughter who will have to be aborted, or who, if born, will face a “lifetime of discrimination.” Kakodkar, however, claims that “Women’s groups dismiss this ‘self-defeating and circular’ rhetoric.” He quotes Ammu Abraham of the Mumbai-based Women’s Centre: “Not even allowing the girl child the right to be born is the ultimate expression of hatred towards the female gender.”

Perhaps there *is* something worse. The *War Room* article, “Female Infanticide in India” (2002), by Manushir Bahukhandi, is an exposé on the mainly rural practice of female infanticide. Bahukhandi reports that local rural dais (predominately women) charge a mere 60 to 150 rupees to kill a girl child shortly after it is born. Asha Krishnakumar’s *Frontline* article, “Life and Death in Salem” (2002), is likewise shocking in her report on the rampant killing of girl babies in her district where the 2001 census showed a ratio of 826 girls to 1,000 boys. Krishnakumar states that dowries in Salem are required at the time of marriage and are a minimum of 10,000 rupees in cash and 10 sovereigns of gold each—an impossibility for women who could not even afford a “change of dress” for a girl child (boys, it should be noted, can also suffice with just a simple cloth for covering). A woman with four living girls and a boy revealed to Krishnakumar that she had also killed two other girl babies. This woman said, “A sonless woman is considered unlucky and would be ‘kept aside,’ and the husband would remarry.” This fear of being cast from the family into even deeper poverty or shame is not isolated: I have heard it echoed in other sources.

Conly, quoted by V.G. Julie Rajan in her article, “Will India’s Ban on Prenatal Sex Determination Slow Abortion of Girls?” (1996) states, “The decision that is facing the family is . . . if they have a daughter, they must marry her because not to marry a daughter is equivalent to death in traditional society. But to have that daughter, you have to mobilize a certain level of wealth.” A daughter, *nonetheless*, still has value, as Conly admits:

“Most families do want a daughter; a daughter to help the mother with child care and other household chores. Also, women often want an emotional bond with their daughter. The families are willing to scramble and survive for one daughter, but if you are talking about more than one daughter, then it becomes a huge problem” (Rajan 1996).

Krishnakumar’s report shows that arrests had recently begun to take place in Salem for sex determination offenses, and this led to greater secrecy. It also perhaps motivated some parents to opt for the government cradle program where mothers could leave their girl babies instead of killing them. In a separate article, “A Merely Legal Approach Cannot Root Out Female Infanticide: Interview with Salem Collector J. Radhakrishnan,” in *Frontline* (2002), Radhakrishnan, a Collector who took in babies in the cradle program of Krishnakumar’s in Salem, stated that “more than a dozen” arrests had been made for suspected infanticide in his district, and that several babies’ bodies had even been exhumed. However, there was some resistance to the cradle program in that some argued that it made it too easy for girls to be done away with, and that the program detracted from an overall incentive for family planning and population control. Paradoxically, however, this article also reports that female infanticide is “deeply entrenched” in Salem district where there has always been a great deal of pressure from family and neighbors to kill girl babies—even to the point that “people seem to have internalized it.” One Salem man quoted in this article stated: “I have grown up seeing girl babies being killed all around me—by my grandmother, mother, sister, aunt and neighbors. So, it does not strike me as something wrong.” The government has spent the last ten years trying to end female infanticide in Salem through programming for women and children, only to have this practice soar even higher.

The “‘cradle baby’ scheme” at Usilampatti, however, was not as successful as it was in Salem (“‘Cradle Baby’” 2001). In a few months, only six girls and one boy had been left in the cradle. The article states that some people thought the cradle program in Usilampatti failed because there was a social stigma and element of humiliation in using the cradle for babies who were not illegitimate (while Aravamudan’s “Chilling Deaths” article (1999) in *The Week* states it is due to parents being “suspicious of orphanages” versus being more acceptable to direct adoption). In Usilampatti, one parent must agree to sterilization, and parents are counseled to keep their child, but sources often cite these as actual deterrents for parents from seeking professional help. What did seem to work in Usilampatti, however, where a dramatic decline in female feticide and infanticide was subsequently recorded, was the introduction of a literacy program, as well as women’s awareness camps and self-help groups. Unfortunately, despite this decline, the Usilampatti “‘Cradle Baby’” article also reported that a number of illegal ultrasound tests were secretly being carried out under a shared cloak of silence between the community and the doctors involved, indicating that still more needed to be done--and perhaps also, I would argue, that secrecy and caution involved in the recording process had been heightened due to an increased awareness of how serious and visible this issue had become for the area.

Aravamudan’s 1999 report states that 3,000 female infants were killed in the Dharmapuri district of Tamil Nadu in the three preceding years. Even worse, Aravamudan states, is that female infanticide used to be done in a “quick and painless” way (mainly via poisoned drinks), whereas now that arrests and exhumations were taking place, more “prolonged and torturous” methods were being used. She states that babies were being “deliberately weakened and dehydrated,” and “sometimes cremated,”--but due to the usual practice of burial, this tended to also arouse suspicion--or the more recent practice of “inducing pneumonia” so the death certificate would indicate a disease. These practices were purportedly so widespread and acceptable that one doctor even told Aravamudan that his patients would just laugh and say it was “our child” when he advised them they were committing murder. The deputy director of health services at Dharmapuri stated that he thought male dominance and female suppression were the

main reasons for the problem. Village health nurses therefore motivated and monitored their patients to make sure they did not kill their girl babies under pressure from others, and Sheela Rani Chunkath organized street plays made up of villagers wherein the foci were “gender empowerment and the elimination of harmful social practices.” She claimed to get a good response when they would “call the young people in the audience onto the ‘stage’ and make them take an oath against dowry, no giving or taking, and female infanticide.”

In Kalaipayanam, health workers emphasized “women’s health and empowerment” when organizing the villagers to compose their own songs, stories and skits which they themselves produced, and also got the village children to rush on stage and make similar vows not to “give or take dowry and to protect female infants.” While Aravamudan conceded that “right now, for them, it might just be a game,” she hoped that when they grew up, it would be much more.

Dr. Sabu George, a health activist and policy expert pivotal in framing and promoting the passage of the 1994 PNDT law that banned ultrasound testing to determine the sex of a child, investigated female infanticide in 12 villages in Tamil Nadu from 1986 to 1990 while working on a health education program for preschoolers (George 1997). He was frustrated by the degree of apathy and denial he experienced when attempting to address the problem of female infanticide and have it taken seriously. It was not that the community or non-governmental organizations and other people in a position of influence to act on the problem were unaware of it, but there was strong complicity within the community, and workers who needed their support feared reprisal. George revealed that in 6 of the 12 villages he studied, 10 percent of female babies were killed within the first week of life. Female infanticide varied by region. In the other six villages, George found no evidence of the practice.¹⁸ George also found a correlation between female infanticide and birth order: the chances were higher that a girl baby would be killed if the parents had no other children, and up to 80-90% of the victims had several siblings. Most often the eldest female in the family killed the child, and to a

¹⁸ This is not surprising. Tamil Nadu is the perfect example of the fluctuation in sex ratios. Salem, Usilimpatti, and Dharmapuri are all in the state of Tamil Nadu which has a high overall sex ratio compared to other states in India at 986:1,000 per the 2001 Indian Census <www.censusindia.net/maps;/sexratio.html> 18 April 2002.

lesser extent it was done by someone else present at the birth. Feelings of guilt for female infanticide seemed to be lacking: parents were often quite open about not wanting girls and even went so far as to name them “*Venda* (don’t want) or *Podum Pennu* (enough of daughters).”

George cited several possible reasons for the persistence of female infanticide in Tamil Nadu (further complicated by a significant lack of research in the field): women’s low status; higher pressure for sons as fertility decreased; the rise in dowry practices; and changes in the mode of agriculture (referred to earlier in this paper). George cautioned against focusing solely on eradicating female infanticide without equal emphasis on the “longer-term neglect of saved girl children,” which could be helped in part by “consciousness-raising and gender sensitization of women and families” in order to better ensure more equal treatment of girls. George further urged that policies and programs be instituted to promote more gender equality in the areas of politics, law, education, and economics.

Gail Weiss (1995) has written a paper proposing a *relational approach* to sex-selective abortion. She brings out the interesting point that there is a tendency to presuppose that a woman makes a decision to abort her child as an “autonomous moral agent,” something Weiss hotly challenges. Weiss argues, “. . . SSA is never an individual decision but that it must be understood and evaluated through the family and community practices that make it appear to be a desirable (and, for many, the only viable) option.” She further states:

“. . . SSA both reinforces and opposes the stated (and unstated) values of a given community. I conclude that SSA is a ‘moral mistake’ for which individual blame cannot be assessed due to the fact that the decision to undergo the procedure is directly tied to community beliefs and practices that performatively construct differential values for males and females.”

Weiss’s concern for the need to alter the standards for social acceptability in a community to effect changes in sex-selective abortion, and her thesis that there is a symbiotic relationship between individual and community standards can be illuminating in helping to understanding female infanticide. In Usilampatti, the cradle program was

not successful because there was a social *stigma and degree of humiliation* toward leaving a child who was not born out of wedlock. In Salem, there was intense pressure by *neighbors and family* to kill girl babies, and in Tamil Nadu, a woman who was reformed by a play she saw and therefore decided to keep her girl baby still could not “take a very strong stand,” because “she has to be still acceptable in the area.” Therefore, these acts of surrendering, aborting, or killing females are not done unilaterally, without due consideration of the interlocking relationships in which they are a part—which is exactly the point Weiss is making. While in Salem, female infanticide may have been internalized to the point of trivializing it, the familial and communal pressures to act a certain way (i.e., kill the girl child) were also deciding factors. Each common practice, such as dowry, infanticide, or feticide, results from a communal/familial standard of acceptability and must be taken into consideration when attempting to rectify these problems. Certainly, recognition of this relational aspect was behind the motivation in Salem to institute door-to-door campaigns to increase awareness; campaigns to end dowry; the development of literacy programs; setting up monitoring committees on-site; and the addition of a hotline number to report suspected infanticide (“A Merely Legal Approach” 2002; Krishnakumar 2002). Through these efforts, individual families and the community were encouraged to undergo a reversal in their standards of gender discrimination acceptability.

Weiss cites two examples of how the relational approach can bring about a clearer understanding of why a woman may opt to abort or kill her female fetus/child, and sheds light on the complex nature of the issue. Weiss conjectures that a woman may actually feel empowered aborting her girl child if she views this act as an attempt to save another girl from the oppression she has had to endure--as in the case of the woman interviewed by Aravamudan in her article, “Born to Die” (2001), who said, “It is better they die than live like me.” Another source of empowerment may come from following the family or community’s wishes to do away with her female child for the sake of strengthening her own position within the family or community, since she will opt against accepting a long-term liability that would negatively affect her family’s socioeconomic status, and have a corresponding impact on the relative status of the community as a whole. Therefore, the

holistic or relational approach to SSA and infanticide must entail a very thorough examination of contextual mores within each community so as not to backfire or address only one aspect, such as the individual, while the communal or familial aspects continue to negatively influence and counteract them. Some improvements have already been instituted in this regard: India's programming has increasingly acknowledged this contextual requirement, with the inclusion of feminists on committees and the relatively-recent introduction of women *panchayats* who participate in decision-making at the village level.¹⁹ Further, empowering women in other ways, such as increasing literacy and developing other intellectual and skill-enhancing programs, would help *entire families* contribute to the "upward social mobility" that Patel mentions as a common justification for wanting sons who bring in large dowries (Rajan 1996).

Indian feminist Radhika Balakrishnan's article, "The Social Context of Sex Selection and the Politics of Abortion in India" (1994), is another example of the holistic approach. Balakrishnan examines gender equality as a result of many interlinking social factors. Like Amartya Sen, she uses Kerala as a model for comparison to show how all the other states in India could be, were they less discriminatory toward females.

Kerala is a success story, but it should not be treated with complacency. In addition to having a positive sex ratio for females, Balakrishnan states that Kerala has "the lowest fertility rates, highest level of female literacy, a high age at marriage and a fairly good receptivity to contraception." Women in Kerala are also active participants in the formerly-male domain of public life. Over three-quarters of the women in Kerala work in the non-agrarian labor force, and because literacy is high among women, they have used their empowerment to mobilize at the grassroots level to demonstrate for "equal pay for equal work and educational facilities for girls from destitute families."

Kerala is also a state where there is a "preponderance of matrilineal inheritance," something that, where lacking, seems to be a key factor in discrimination against women in other states. Balakrishnan points out that there is a "dialectic between cultural practice and material condition." When women do not have the right to own property, and their

¹⁹ See *The Hunger Project* website at <<http://www.thp.org>, South Asia> for detailed information on how women and communities are helping to fight hunger, poverty, and the discrimination of females by empowering women within their own communities.

families are forced to give large dowries (which often entails loans and the sale of their land), then women become a substantial economic liability in favor of sons who could acquire rather than give these major sources of wealth. Balakrishnan points to Das Gupta's suggestion that equity between the sexes would require propaganda campaigns or changes in state policies on property rights to stop the one-way flow of resources from the female's family to that of the male.

Balakrishnan refers to Karkal's study which concluded that the role and status of females in a society are directly linked to their level of health, which is in turn a consequence of the degree of social, economic and cultural discrimination they face. In India, women have higher mortality rates than men, unlike more gender-equitable countries like the United States and the United Kingdom.²⁰

Balakrishnan also cites Chen, Huq and D'Souza's 1982 study of Bangladesh showing that preference for sons may result in different degrees of "parental care, feeding pattern, intra-family food distribution, and treatment of illness favoring males." Referring to "minor policy revisions "(i.e. increased education of females), Chen, Huq and D'Souza conclude: "Rather, it seems likely that fundamental structural changes in the role, status and economic value of women in society will be required; in addition to the alleviation of economic poverty."

Balakrishnan cautions other feminists concerning the impact of new technology on women's lives. She states: "For feminists to be able to respond to the issue of sex-selective abortion in a context where poor women do not have access to basic health care, we need to take account of the multiple dimensions by which technology is affecting women's lives." One way in which Balakrishnan suggests that technology is "changing the character of gender and health relations" is her observation of a village that had a "shop" providing sex determination tests, which in turn increased the number of abortions at a government hospital to the point where they refused to do them any longer. Therefore, women were forced to go underground and use unsafe abortion methods outside the medical delivery system. From this, Balakrishnan concludes that legislative

²⁰ *The World Factbook, 2001* indicates that the sex ratios in India are: 1.05 males/females at birth, 1.06 m/f under 15 yrs., 1.07 m/f from 15-64 yrs., 1.03 m/f 65 years and over, and 1.07 m/f total population. United States: .096 males/females, total population; and the United Kingdom: .097 males/females total population.

restrictions against sex-selective abortions have not been successful, and that these have actually served to further undermine the quality of health care afforded women. Instead, she argues, “We need, rather, to attempt more broad-reaching strategies that will address the economic and cultural roots of the problem.”

Amartya Sen shares Balakrishnan’s recommendation that there needs to be a battle waged against the “ideology of sexism,” when he states in his conclusion:

Indeed, in dealing with the new—‘high tech’—face of gender disparity, in the form of natality inequality, there is a need to go beyond just the agency of women, but to look also for more critical assessment of received values. When anti-female bias in action (such as sex-specific abortion) reflects the hold of traditional masculinist values from which mothers themselves may not be immune, what is needed is not just freedom of action but also freedom of thought—in women’s ability and willingness to question received values. Informed and critical agency is important in combating inequality of every kind”(Sen 2001).

To this, I would add that it is imperative that both men and women need to challenge received values, because it is the *shared* persistence of thought patterns that reinforces the inability of a community to move forward toward gender equality. This does not necessarily mean that the “entire thinking of society” must be changed in the sense that shared cultural values and traditions should be haphazardly cast off. Instead, I would argue, increased sensitivity to gender inequalities which prohibit the full growth and potential of the family unit and community need reexamination. A shift in emphasis from the negative aspects of discrimination as a *norm* to the positive aspects of female potential as a *given* could channel the impetus for a new vision of how families and communities might further incorporate the strengths and qualities of women.

Women’s Agency and Empowerment

India awakened to the concept of women being a subject for public discussion and debate—for men *and women* alike--beginning in the mid-1960s with the process of formulating of a more liberalized abortion law. Feminist and women’s discussion were spawned from state population, health, and economic concerns involving women’s reproduction, which in turn engendered a larger arena of issues for women to consider, such as their own health and sexuality, as well as who really controlled it and how. As

awareness of the unequal status of males and females in Indian society became increasingly more clearly articulated, India responded fairly consistently by enacting laws (albeit an often time-consuming and not always *effective* process) and initiating fact-finding studies and programs to articulate and address the issues they elicited.²¹

In the course of these ventures, women also became more empowered and were conceded space alongside men to help carry them out. As a direct result, one-third of the Indian Parliament is now filled by women and there are numerous groups actively seeking the uplift of India's women--some being supported directly by the government, while others are grassroots groups, both governmentally- and non-governmentally-funded, who work in rural areas where government access is often limited or non-existent.²² The Hunger Project in India, funded by the Global Investment Group, is also making a major impact on social transformation, empowering women leaders in the panchayati raj.²³ The result has been a wide scope of areas for improvement in opportunities for women: improved quality and access to health care; education, self-awareness, and literacy programs; increased participation of women in decision-making; better services for both women and children; and awareness outreach to disseminate information to women concerning the resources now available to them. However, much is still needed to be done, and the road to success had not been easy. The Hunger Project emphasizes that even its own panchayati raj is not a "quick fix." They state:

²¹ See <<http://sdnp.delhi.nic.in/resources/population/news/ho-1-7-women.html>>, "White paper on decline in population of women sought" *The Hindu*, July 1, 1999, concerning the conference on the prevention of female feticide, organized jointly by the Campaign Against Sex Selective Abortion and Society for Integrated Rural Development, for its broad scope of attack in the battle against sex discrimination: its own feminist representation; a proposal for a 50% representation of women in political bodies; focus on gender education and women's perspectives; equal access and authority to empowering resources; and the gradual stopping of girl-child employment.

²² Indira Gandhi was Prime Minister of India for sixteen years, and according to Jacobson, *albeit in 1977*, "Women have been chosen to serve as cabinet ministers, governors of states, ambassadors, United Nations officials, and members of state legislatures and the national parliament." However, she emphasizes, as have others, that these women were culled from the elite class and are hardly representative of women in the general populace. See Jacobson 1977, pp. 62-63.

²³ See *The Hunger Project* website, <<http://www.thp.org/sac/unit6>>, South Asia Briefing Unit 6, for more information on women panchayat leaders, the courage they have exhibited, and the hurdles they have faced due to local opposition.

At the local level, the entrenched subjugation of women makes it challenging for women to participate. Women representatives must take action despite significant constraints on their time, opposition from husbands and family, and social customs that confine them to the home. Women representatives risk harassment, violence, and even death, all for their willingness to serve their community. At the state and national level, there is resistance to the idea of decentralized democracy, since it requires that power and resources shift hands from national leaders and bureaucrats, to local people” (THP in India 2000).

The liberalization process of the abortion code therefore did help activate women’s agency: it afforded women the option of securing an abortion under an expanded set of circumstances and by their own authority without the former requirement of their husband’s consent; and it helped create a new forum for women’s discourse and activity evolving from the public discussion of women’s reproduction. Women gradually assumed, and were granted, increased responsibility for helping to improve their status, with *somewhat* less reliance on an often-biased political machine to look after their own best interests. The introduction of modern technology in India in the 1970s enabling detection of the sex of a child before it was born soon became problematic and complex, both empowering and oppressing females by giving them more control over their reproductive options, but likewise rendering many to be victimized as well. The widespread popularity of sex determination tests among Indians proved that there is no real lack of hesitation in welcoming new advances if the need and motivation for them already exists.

Increased gender awareness education and literacy have helped address how new information is received and assimilated. Television and computers now enable women to explore alternative ways of thinking and behaving, but they also exacerbate tension in the continuing struggle between modernity and tradition, and the need to preserve culture on the one hand while assessing new information and selectively assimilating it on the other.²⁴ Education of both genders in alternative ways to bring about more cooperative means of change and growth has improved; however, many experts have underscored the

²⁴ Gangoli (1998) found negative aspects with the introduction of television, citing a mud hut with a television satellite which served to indoctrinate groups of women daily on modern views of gender norms that ran counter to their religious and cultural mores—and in this case changing how the village came to view children born outside of marriage. On the other hand, television must also have had an impact on how women viewed their own potential for empowerment, seeing alternatives from which they could explore new options.

need for the proper provision of the tools and skills to accompany these changes. Women's agency and more concerted efforts on their part to organize and plan at the grassroots level have been stressed repeatedly by both men and women; however, as stated above, the actual facilitation of these efforts in practice is often seriously problematic if women are expected to be confined to the home, and are not accorded the necessary time and space to carry out these activities.²⁵

Elimination of sex-selective practices and promotion of contraceptives will be hard to maintain if people rely on a son for economic relief through excessive dowries, inheritance, or a son to work the land, run the family business, or provide for the family in old age (given that India has no program for Social Security). The current system of dowry requires that a girl's family must agree to give a substantial amount of material and monetary wealth to the family of a prospective groom in return for accepting into their home the burden of a new daughter-in-law. This one-way giving does not stop once the marriage has occurred; rather, it is expected that the girl's natal family will continue to regularly provide expensive gifts to their daughter's in-laws to maintain her degree of respectability in the new family and ensure that she is treated well, in addition to showing gratitude for their daughter's daily upkeep and acceptance into the new family and home.

What I initially found to be most dangerously lacking in the solution to the problem of the disappearing girl child was, in fact, a more widespread and forceful attempt to rectify the substantial problem of dowry. Not only is a girl's family often financially crippled in the process of attempting to fulfill marriage transactions under the dowry system, but there are also widespread reports of brides dying under suspicious circumstances in the first few years *after* the marriage when the new in-law's monetary expectations from the girl's natal family are not met, or the girl is no longer wanted. Fortunately, this relative silence on dowry has changed substantially in the past year or two from when I first undertook this research. The march and rally staged by the Karnataka State Women's Commission (KSWC), attended by thousands of men and women in protest of the dowry system, in Bangalore, India, on November 28, 2003, illustrates changes that are beginning to take place. The BBC news reported that marchers attending this rally held

²⁵ See *Women's Emancipation Rights vs. Population Control*, Delhi: Author's Press, 2001, by Usha Sharma for an excellent discussion on women's empowerment and fertility control.

banners stating, "Brides are not for Burning," "Real Men Don't Demand Dowry," and "Dowry Causes Women's Deaths," and there was a staged reenactment of a bride being beaten. The KSWC spokeswoman intentionally avoided downplaying the seriousness of unabated dowry violence and deaths. Committee Chair Philomena Peres stated that even though Bangalore was reputed to be "India's information technology capital," women continued to suffer mistreatment. In that city alone, she cited six to eight *daily* dowry deaths. Since dowry transactions are illegal, silence was driven by fear. Therefore, Peres felt the law "should be adjusted." Nevertheless, Peres was of the opinion that younger people, like the students in the rally, were helping to effect change ("Thousands March Against Dowry," 2003).

The popular Indian website at <[http://: www.indiatogether.org](http://www.indiatogether.org)> now advertises a wedding card with a "dowry-free wedding" logo and the message, "I promise never to give or get dowry." Kalpana Sharma's article on the website, "Hitting Dowry for a Six," recalls Nisha Sharma's recent (2003) refusal to go through with her dowried wedding in Noida (a suburb of New Delhi) that potentially set off a "new anti-dowry movement" from the worldwide uproar of publicity it caused. Sharma challenges the acceptance of the Indian belief that girls are somehow a "burden" to their marital family, when in fact that family is inheriting domestic help who will serve not only her husband but his entire extended family living in the home. She points out that families will have to take a stand and support a united front against dowry demands from the very beginning, and urges girls to take advantage of having the numbers on their side, holding out for marriages that do not require dowry. She states that surveys have shown that even in Kerala, dowry continues to be negotiated. Change does not occur easily.

Conclusion

In Part One I have attempted to demonstrate how, why, and to what degree son preference has had a detrimental impact on the survival and status of Hindu women in India. In so doing, I have discussed the impact of son preference on sex ratios; the backdrop and history of the legalizing process of abortion in India and its subsequent triumphs and downfalls; the many ways in which females and their reproduction has been

influenced, controlled, and subject to the coercion of others and what impact this has had on improving, complicating, or victimizing their lives; and ways in which female empowerment and agency have been transformed in the wake of increased awareness of gender discrimination in Indian society. The issues I have touched on are complex and require a great deal of continued effort in the form of contextual appropriateness—to better respond to women’s actual needs and concerns; to bring about a better balance of rights and opportunities for both genders; and to reach right to the heart of the problem by prioritizing the need for a renewed assessment of the diversity embedded in local norms and traditions, the reality of daily economic and practical concerns motivating son preference, and how policy and law are actually implemented *in consultation with* the people who serve to benefit from them.

In Part Two, which follows, I will examine what religious sources are influential to Hindu culture, and where in them we might locate the ideological beginnings of son preference. I will also highlight ways in which Hindu women have drawn power and meaning from their tradition, and explore the cultural context in which Hinduism is embedded.

PART TWO

HINDU RELIGIOUS SOURCES AND SON PREFERENCE

Hindu Religious Sources and their Dissemination

Hinduism has no single founder or set dogma, and has grown in diverse ways in its several-thousand-year past; however, it does have certain oral and textual traditions which its followers deem sacred and authoritative (Subramuniyaswami 1999). Nevertheless, despite interpretation or the choice of sources used, there are common threads among these religious sources which place a high premium on the desire and need for the propagation of sons, who are accorded a greater share of rights and privileges. Duty is an expressed value for all segments of society, and women are revered for fulfilling their roles as mothers and wives. Women are not powerless, however, and situations of ambivalence and tension arise in gender roles when women's potentially dangerous sexuality is not controlled, or women step outside the boundaries of the prescribed cultural framework. Indeed it is vital that society adheres to the expected hierarchal order deemed by nature to ensure harmony in the earthly sphere until salvation is eventually obtained.

Women's roles are often contingent relative to their sons' who are commonly appealed to as guarantors of greater spiritual, social, physical, and economic rewards, but it is also true that they have important enabling and supportive roles for this to happen, and even sisters partake in rituals to ensure the well-being of their brothers.²⁶ Hinduism

²⁶ Susan J. Wadley's (Jacobson and Wadley 1977) later work on Karimpur details the importance of sisters, who practice rituals that are vital for their brother's protection and welfare. "Tying on Protection" and "Gauri" are such rituals performed in the summer and "Brother's Second" is performed by sisters each fall. Wadley emphasizes the benefit of activity involved for women in these rituals, whereas at other times they are expected to be passive and submissive. Through these rituals, they gain control and are not dependent on males, who in this case depend on them for their ritual power.

places an emphasis on order and cohesion, and this depends greatly on the stability of the family to which women are pivotal.

The brahminical elite (or male priestly class) is the historical purveyor of Hindu religious information and they have the authority to create, study, interpret, and transmit official religious teachings to the lower classes. Thus women's perspectives, by contrast, have been largely subdued, absent, or interpreted *for them* in traditional religious sources. Studies of Hinduism are further complicated by the fact that there are countless variations in beliefs over India's vast geographical expanse depending on caste, locality and custom, gender, and social and economic status which affect how information is interpreted or accessed, to what degree, and by what authority claims are made. More studies are needed in the field to overcome this inescapable tendency to generalize about Hindu culture and beliefs, and in so doing our knowledge of Hinduism as it is practiced will be greatly enlarged.

Subramuniaswami, who is not a native Indian yet has acquired a certain degree of respect and status through endorsement of his Hindu catechism, states that "All Hindus wholeheartedly accept the *Vedas*, yet each draws selectively, interprets freely and amplifies abundantly" (Subramuniaswami 1999, 377). He states that Hinduism "defies definition," (xvii) and therefore limits his interpretations to how Hinduism is "lived today" (xxix) and he explains that, "Even knowledgeable Hindus, after a lifetime of study, will hesitate to say that Hinduism is one thing and not another" (xvii).

Brian K. Smith, an American scholar in religions of India, aptly responds to this difficulty of "explicitly" defining Hinduism, but does indeed formulate a knowledge-based working definition for Hinduism based on his expertise. He also addresses the issue of locating unequivocal authority in Hinduism in his book, *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual, and Religion* (1998). Smith asserts that the "historically constitutive principles of Hinduism" can be traced back to and located in the Veda, despite its many subsequent manifestations (4-5). He defines Hinduism as "the religion of those humans who create, perpetuate, and transform traditions with legitimizing reference to the authority of the Veda" (13-14). Smith asserts that the Veda, however, is chiefly a source of instruction for and about rituals of little relevance to contemporary

Hindus, which may be true to some extent, but may also reflect his perspective as a Westerner. Nevertheless, his statement that “it appears to be the case that Hindus do acknowledge the absolute authority of the Veda for legitimizing post-Vedic Hindu beliefs and practices,” appears to be quite valid (20). Smith explains that “the Veda is not always treated as a closed canon” but instead is an “open book” as shown by the example of the later *Upanishads* which are *sruti*, or revealed, transcendent knowledge (21, 138). In addition to the Veda, *sruti*, are the *smriti*—the remembered, traditional knowledge which Smith states comprise “virtually all the literature in which the actual doctrines and practices of Hindu sects are codified” (21).

While there is a “unique set of *smriti*” to which different factions of Hindus may turn, Subramuniaswami explains that within this “secondary literature,” predominant texts do exist. He states: “Especially central are the ancient Sanskrit texts, such as the Itihasas, Puranas and the Dharma Sastras, which are widely termed the classical *smriti*.” It is within the *smriti*, Subramuniaswami states, that we find the “touchstone of theater and dance, music, song and pageantry, *yoga* and *sadhana*, metaphysics and ethics, exquisite art and hallowed sciences” (387). Subramuniaswami further states that “Hinduism’s poetic stories of *rishis*, Gods, heroes and demons are sung by gifted *panditas* and traveling bards, narrated to children and portrayed in dramas and festivals” (391). The Puranas, “popular folk narratives, teaching faith, belief and ethics in mythology, allegory, legend and symbolism” like the Itihasas, to which the two popular Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, belong, are arguably more significant sources of direct and readily communicable religious and cultural elements to which the average Hindu may be exposed (391). These epics have been committed to videotape, televised as series, are rich sources of material in the folk tradition (puppet plays, street plays, etc.), and are regularly re-enacted at festivals.

Agehananda Bharati, in his book, *Hindu Views and Ways and the Hindu-Muslim Interface* (1981), likewise emphasizes the Veda as a primary reference point for the shared worldview among people who call themselves “Hindu,” when he states that “. . . not all Hindus would agree to the one minimal common denominator there is—the acceptance of the Veda as having the same epistemological power of proof (*pramana*) as

direct perception and deductive inference,” yet he still concedes that “. . . this [the Veda] is precisely the only common minimal denominator of all forms of the total Hindu belief system”(2). Bharati then clarifies that while the Veda is “the formal view common to all Hindus,” nevertheless “. . . less than five per cent of all Hindus ever knew these texts even by name, and much less than one per cent knew even parts of their content” because the Vedic texts were the privilege of male scholars who were “usually Brahmins” (3). Accordingly, he states that:

“Until quite recently [1981], and in the more orthodox deep South of India, women were not allowed to study or chant the Veda, nor was the majority population of the subcontinent, i.e., all people designated as not belonging to the ‘twice-born’ castes [the three highest of the four castes: the brahmins, ksatriyas, and vaisyas]” (4).

Would it then follow that Vedic sources are prohibitively limiting to this discussion as they have only a relatively narrow application to Hindus at large? After all, as Bharati explains, the level of Hindu “rural grassroots” in India is the “level of the absolute majority by a long shot,” and this level is not characterized by a majority learned in the Vedas (5). Nevertheless, while the majority of Hindus may not be well-versed in the Vedas or study and recite them directly, the fact remains that Hindu culture *is* permeated by the legacy left by the Vedic people in the corpus of the Vedas, and Hindus do acknowledge the Vedas as authoritative.

While the actual particularities of the Vedas may be relatively remote for most Hindus, Bharati nevertheless points out that a survey of the “grassroots” segment of India’s population indicates that there is a “staggered, overlapping set of cognitions” among the people. Vedic influence and assimilation of its ideas can be passed to villagers by “village specialists (brahmin *pujaris* or Sanskrit ritual practitioners . . . the occasional *vaid* of traditional diagnostician-physician, and a large typology of *ojhas*, shamans, non-brahmin practitioners etc.),” as well as “brahmin specialists” in the Veda, “itinerant *sadhus* (holy men, monks),” and, again, printed material, radio, and movies which Bharati states have a “very high percentage of *dharmik*, i.e., religious lore themes” (5-6).

Bharati cites the following many “salient shared perceptions” found in Hindu themes and held by villagers all over India and in diasporas which indicate how Hinduism has been shaped and transformed by its adherents:

The universe is permeated by an enormous power; everything in the universe is suffered by, or part of that power. It takes on millions of forms, some benevolent, some malevolent, some neutral. The potentially malevolent forms are the demons, the mischievous souls of some departed—local spirits, witches, etc.,--must be watched with great caution or precaution, they are easily annoyed and cause harm. *Great saints and scholars are thought to have access to the universal being. The villagers can only listen to what holy men tell them about it, but the locality has to take care of the more immediately present forces* [emphasis added]. What happens to people is the cumulative result of many spiritual forces. . . . karma, so well known and so much marveled about by literate people . . . is neither the only nor even the most important causal agent for sorrowful events. It is either one or more of these factors (9).

J. C. Heesterman emphasizes the importance of a given *community's* tradition which operates in conjunction with orthodox religious concepts including law (Heesterman 1985). Heesterman proposes that tradition may be defined as “the way society formulates and deals with the basic problems of human existence.” He further states that to this extent, “Tradition therefore is and has to be bound up with the ever-shifting present.” (10). Heesterman uses the examples of Indian “village or panchayat justice” to show how local customary laws and procedures may be used to circumvent conventional legal processes. He suggests that “acceptable” decision-making is in this way possible since there is an “intuitive” knowledge and understanding “of the web of social relations and each other’s place in it” that the members share (10). Therefore, the introduction of females into the panchayat system in certain rural areas, as mentioned earlier, may have a significant impact on gender dynamics over time, helping to alter local standards of gender discrimination acceptability (to use Gail Weiss’s phrase) through women’s greater roles in decision-making. This may even, given time, extend the perception of women’s capabilities beyond the panchayat system and into the spheres of family life and the legal system. From the standpoint of religion, as Heesterman and Bharati imply, the culture is guided by laws and prescriptions; however, in the final analysis, communities are often inventive and remarkably autonomous in how they deal with problems of existence. This is especially important to keep in mind relative to sex-selective testing for the purpose of

abortion, female infanticide, and dowry which are common, but illegal and contrary to basic Hindu tenets.

Hindus have many sources of religious information to draw on, and they rely on religion to play a crucial role within the framework of mediation for new information and circumstances. It is not surprising, therefore, that Hindus are especially intent on being the sole mediators and preservers of their culture when modern technology and the influence of the West are perceived to threaten it. The Western concept of feminism is often viewed as subversive to Indians when it does not take Indian tradition and custom fully into account. It is, after all, Indian religious and cultural sources from which law is derived, and by adopting a conflicting ideology full-throttle from the outside, immanent and even transcendent law may be severely compromised. Change must incorporate as much of the old with the new as possible.

The Early Vedas: Rituals for Sons and Protection of Fetuses

An early legacy of son preference is established in the Vedas. A dominant theme in the Vedas is the importance of fertility—fertility that ensures the propagation of sons, and many of them.²⁷ A wedding hymn from the *Rig Veda* is cited by one of the early German scholars of Sanskrit texts, Hermann Oldenberg in the late 1800s. In this hymn, Agni²⁸ is called upon to protect the bride so that she will “be of blessed womb,” a mother of many children who live to old age, and who will “experience happiness from her sons!”—punctuating the expectation that the bride will be fertile, and have many sons to make her happy (Oldenberg 1993, 72). Immediately following the wedding, there is a Vedic ritual wherein the bride sits on a fertility-bestowing bull’s skin while “the son of a woman who has borne only male living children” is placed on her lap in the hope that she will subsequently obtain “healthy male progeny”(267). We are not privy to how the

²⁷ See Hermann Oldenberg, *The Religion of the Veda*. 1988. Delhi: Motilal Banarisdass, 1993. According to Oldenberg, p. 246, a Vedic marriage was not consummated until four days after the wedding ceremony and only before atonement rituals were completed to “dispel all the destructive powers inherent in the woman: the woman who kills her husband, who is childless [childless], [and] who causes harm to the cattle.”

²⁸ Agni is the prominent Vedic god who personifies fire and occupies a central role in Vedic rituals.

woman herself feels about the gender of her yet-conceived progeny; however, we can plainly detect the cultural value placed on male issue.

Oldenberg further states that in the *Rig Veda* sacrifice for the dead, a request is made the ancestors, the “fathers” to secure “unharmful male progeny,” and a special dumpling can be chosen at this time for the wife to eat in order to secure a son (317-318, 324). This *śraddha* ceremony for the ancestors persists as a religious imperative for Hindus, and is still performed by a male family member who is preferably the eldest son. “The production of sons is the way of paying off one’s debt to one’s ancestors,” explains Charles Malamoud, a French scholar in Vedic studies. This, he states, is because “liberation is immediate: a man only has to have glimpsed the face of his newborn son for him to be freed of his debts to the Fathers and guaranteed immortality” (Malamoud 2000, 102). Males are likewise still mandatory for the necessary and auspicious performance of funeral rituals,²⁹ and in particular, the son must light the funeral pyre of the deceased father to effect his journey to heaven. If there is no living son to do so, it is traditional for another male relative to be called upon to substitute.

Oldenberg cites several examples in the Vedic texts where special efforts were made to secure a son (yet conspicuously absent is a similar emphasis on obtaining daughters): a special powder would be inserted into the nose of a pregnant woman to ensure a male child (246-247, 261); sons could be conceived by having sex at a certain time and place (264); or by citing a special verse; a man could have his wife drink a special potion, announcing that she then sees the birth of a son (267); and, Oldenberg states, “At the ceremony to get male progeny, the woman has to eat a barley corn and two mustard seeds or beans placed on both sides of the barley corn and an image of the male genital organ so that she may give birth to a male child” (262).

A woman’s reproduction thus at times necessitated male ritual help to ensure that she delivered the anticipated progeny; but, she was also dangerous and powerful in her own right, and it was up to the man to keep her powers in check. Thus, according to

²⁹ See Kirit K. Shah (2001), pp. 1-2. One notable exception to this is Gulab Rani who learned the Vedic mantras and funeral rituals as a young child. She has been performing funeral rites at a cremation ground in Allahabad, “the very heart of Hindu orthodoxy,” since the 1950s. Her father and grandfather had this job prior to her, and she asserted her right to continue the family business for which she had been trained. She “single-handedly” started a “silent revolution,” and was accepted by the community and local priests.

Oldenberg, “the bridegroom protects the bride at the marriage from an evil eye . . . praying: ‘Be not be with evil eye, no killer of the husband’” (262), because it was believed that “in a woman of evil disposition dwells the ‘husband-killing body’, the body of son-lessness’, the body of herd-lessness’” (253).

Demons or spirits were causes of miscarriage, devourers of embryos, or believed to “change the male offspring into a female or cause other maladies” (133-134). While parents who were anxious to know if their unborn child was male and could seek out a descendant of the highest caste to touch a limb on the pregnant woman and relay if the child would be a boy or girl, the fetus was still quite vulnerable to danger for the length of the pregnancy—including transition to a girl (264-265, 267).

Despite a consistent theme of the desire for sons, killing an embryo, regardless of its sex, is mentioned several times in the Vedas as being one of the most serious of sins. As mentioned earlier, worth and honor were bestowed on the fertile woman who, having just given birth, was in one verse described as being “*ornamented* [my emphasis] with the blessing of a child” (171). Oldenberg also talks about “evil demons” in the Vedas, who among other things are “diseases, childlessness, sin, etc.” (134). Therefore, the killing of any child or fetus, who represents a *blessing* capable of ornamenting his or her mother, is a grievous sin--just as not having children at all is so terrible that the cause is attributed to “evil demons.”

While abortion is not yet condemned in the early Vedas in the context of *ahimsa* (non-violence, non-injury) or the theory of karma that were later developments in Hinduism, the acclaim for life (ideally a hundred autumns) is evident and often expressed.³⁰ The tenth volume of the *Rig Veda*, 162nd aphorism, illustrates the horror of abortion and the abortionist:

O! pregnant women, whichever monster approaches you with the evil intention to destroy your pregnancy, whoever approaches your womb, let fire destroy

³⁰ I found that contemporary Hindu scholars tend to refer to later portions of the Vedas, the *smṛti*, and ethics of abortion found in epics and law books to ground their arguments against abortion. These sources contain the more developed and articulated concepts of *ahimsa* and karma, which are subsequently employed to argue that an aborted fetus, subjected to harm and violence, is denied the opportunity to work out its karma and escape the cycle of rebirth (the ultimate goal of all Hindus). Abortion in this way engenders further suffering by denying the opportunity to achieve salvation. Further, in the time of the early *Rig Veda*, unborn children (dead) were viewed as demons and “bloodsuckers” who could do harm to the living. See Oldenberg, p. 325.

him with this hymn . . . O! pregnant woman, whoever attempts at abortion, whatever comes between man and wife [obstructing conception], whoever tries to displace that seed from your womb [make ineffective], I destroy him in the presence of the Holy fire” (Menon).³¹

Julius Lipner cites a hymn in the *Artharva Veda* (VI.113.2) where the abortionist is again admonished under the threat of fire and “wiping off” (a punishment that was recommended for the worst offenders). The hymn states: “Enter thou into the rays, into smoke, O sin. Begone into the vapours and into the mists! Be lost in the foam of the rivers. While thou, O Pusan, wipe off [our] misdeeds on the slayer of the embryo [bhrunaghi]” (Lipner 1989, 43). Other Vedic passages Lipner cites associate the abortionist, slayer of the embryo, with a thief, and he or she is guilty of an act similar to killing one’s own mother or father. In the later Vedas, women are said to lose caste for having committed abortion, and such violators were again listed in the company of murderers and thieves, affecting “one’s way of life, one’s social viability, and even one’s prospects for salvation.” Societal and salvic injunctions were so serious that even the embryo of a female slave fell under protection of these laws (44, 46).

This can be taken even further as can be seen in the following example where even a woman of childbearing age whose ability to carry a fetus is disrupted can amount to abortion. In this regard, Stephanie W. Jamison cites a Vedic scripture exhorting that the killer of an *atreya* (a woman who has just finished her monthly menstruation, making her more prone to conceiving) should suffer a penalty far greater than someone killing a woman at another point in her cycle (twelve years’ penance versus one) because “killing her is tantamount to killing an embryo as well . . . [and thus] equivalent to (and may possibly be) abortion” (Jamison 1991, 215-216). Therefore, the ability to procreate commands high value in the community, as seen by this legal injunction.

³¹ Also see Marvin Olasky, “Birth Defects: Abortion is Causing Social Problems in India and Throughout the World” (2004), who gives this translation of the same verse: “O! Pregnant women: Whichever monster approaches you with the evil intention to destroy your pregnancy/Whoever approaches your womb/Let fire destroy him. O! Pregnant women: Whichever devil kills the pregnancy that lives in your womb/ Whichever monster kills the fetus that is taking human shape by three months/Whoever intends to kill the baby that is evolved in ten months/I destroy him in the presence of this sacred fire.... Whoever carries you to a dreamy state of a fool and tries to abort your pregnancy, tries to kill your baby/I destroy him in the presence of this holy fire.”

There is consequently no doubt that abortion was clearly a serious crime in the Vedic age, being mentioned several times in connection with harsh penalties. Furthermore, special measures were taken to secure sons, along with appeals made to the ancestors or “fathers,” establishing the early preference for sons who maintained the lineage and links with the males before them, and who were able to bring about the immortality of their fathers. Women’s fertility and reproduction were a focus of numerous male rituals to help ensure the birth of sons and also many progeny, including daughters. Males were careful to keep a woman’s dangerous aspects under control, not simply as protection for her, but also for their own ultimate protection and that of their unborn children.

Women and the Laws of Manu

Most Hindus have had at least some degree of exposure to material in the Indian epic, *Mahabharata*, through various means of assimilation mentioned above. The *Bhagavad Gita* and a third and a half of the *Laws of Manu* are also contained in the *Mahabharata*, and many Hindus would most likely have heard of them (Doninger and Smith 1991, xviii). The *Laws of Manu* (aka *Manu*, *Manavadharmasastra*, *Manusmrti*) is a collection of verses by several authors, all representative of “Manu,” meaning “the first man.” These laws are believed to have been composed around the beginning of the Common Era (xvi-xvii, xxii) and comprise a legal code and “moral exhortation” for Hindu society (ivii, lviii). The *Laws of Manu* are filled with contradiction and inconsistencies; however, as Doninger states, this does not mean that we should equate the concept of “insoluble” with “irreconcilable” (xliv-xlv). Doninger argues that most historical religious texts with various contributors over long periods of time invariably exhibit ambiguity and paradox since they reflect different points of view, and at times appear to lack continuity and cohesion. Therefore, the seeming lack of agreement in *Manu* does not subtract from its legitimacy. Manu’s laws are a historical compilation intended to address not only the ideal but *exceptional* occurrences in daily life. While the ideal is best, Manu has also seen to provide alternative laws for people who fall short of the ideal. This in no way detracts from the central aim of Manu: to invoke a civil code and social laws for structuring Hindu society in a harmonious manner according to the

natural order of things as created. Further, Manu understands that oftentimes there are instances of extremity which are exempt from all the usual rules. Manu's dictates are the oldest, most respected, authoritative, and probably best-known Hindu religious laws. As such they act as the "source of much of modern Hindu law and culture" (Subramuniaswami 1999, 712, 758).

Manu's laws are often criticized for their demeaning references to women. Indeed, even as Manu commanded protection for pregnant women, men's interests were far from secondary in this respect and these dictates reveal the essential nature of controlling women's sexuality and fertility. As Crawford explains, this was because it was believed that the "husband takes birth within her [the pregnant woman's] womb" and for reasons of safeguarding the "purity of his progeny" (Crawford 1995, 27). Fathers who do not "give away" their daughters within three years of the onset of their menses, or husband not having sex with his wife on the day after her menstrual period ends were both considered guilty of the sin of embryo killing because the opportunity to conceive had been intentionally neglected (Crawford 1995, 26; Jamison 1996, 237).

More literal and fundamentalist views of Manu's laws are sometimes used to justify the subjugation of women and defend male dominance.³² Former Indian "bureaucrat" K.A. Kunjakkan's scathing criticism of Western feminism in his book, *Feminism and Indian Realities* (2002), is one of the more reactionary examples of how Manu's laws can be used in this way, especially vis-à-vis the West, when it is perceived to threaten the traditional structure and beliefs of Indian Hindu culture.

The *Laws of Manu* state that the Veda, containing all knowledge, is the foundation of religion, and that whatever duty Manu declares can be traced back to the Veda, aside from its composition at a much later date. Some of Manu's controversial assertions about women state that a group of women cannot be witnesses (except *for* other women) because "their understanding is unreliable;" a wife may be beaten by her husband with a rope or bamboo cane for "committing an offense;" a woman must be guarded by her father when a daughter, her husband when a wife, and by her son as a widow because she

³² This is not to imply that extreme religious fundamentalism is specific to Hindu culture, nor to claim that this perspective is representative of the majority of Hindus. Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored that this posture does exist and, to some degree, it exerts an influence on the cultural mix.

is “not fit for independence;” and because of her given nature, Manu assigned her at birth, “The bed and the seat, jewellery, lust, anger, crookedness, a malignant nature, and bad conduct.” Further, the woman is said to be the field, while the man is the seed to whom the son belongs. A woman should obey her husband and treat him like a god, and to this one husband she must remain completely faithful in her lifetime (or go to hell) even if he is lustful, misbehaves, or does not have any good qualities. Women, however, are by nature the corrupters of men, while sons “win the worlds” for their father and save him from hell. On the other hand, by sacrifice and self-effacement in fulfilling her duties to her husband, family, and society, a woman in turn receives protection and makes herself deserving of reverence (Doniger 1991: 13-14; 17; 38; 115-116; 159; 184; 197-198; 200-201; 205; 214-215).

Kunjakkam states that a female’s “inner conviction” of her role and identity in the Hindu system is cultivated by rituals and ceremonies which may certainly be true; however, he also asserts that in this way females are indoctrinated into being “thoroughly convinced of their physical and spiritual inferiority, and the power of *pativratas* [a wife who keeps “the chastity, purity, fidelity, and the faithfulness to the husband and the prestige of the family”]. Within this family-centered system, a woman’s aims in life become the service of her husband and the bearing of his sons—the latter being crucial in order to perpetuate the family tree and ensure her husband’s salvation by enabling him to fulfill his debts to god, the ancestors, his gurus, and himself (21-23). What Kunjakkam’s above statement overlooks, perhaps by coming from the standpoint of a male gaze, is that women’s participation in ritual and ceremonies is often-cited by *women* as being meaningful, creative sources of power not only of benefit to themselves, but also to other women, the family, and the community--in stark contrast to the assumption that these rituals and ceremonies merely subdue women and inculcate them with feelings of inferiority. Jacobson (1977) reports that Hindu childbirth rituals in Central India are not only rites of passage for both the mother and child:

The rituals serve a number of purposes: . . . provide the new mother with approval and support, contribute to women’s sense of solidarity with other women, and publicly recognize women’s vital roles in perpetuating and enhancing the prosperity of the family and the larger community. In a culture in which women typically enjoy fewer privileges than men, the rituals serve to remind women—and men—of the fact that

women, after all, produce children, the one thing without which no kin group or society could long exist (137).

Special Powers of Females in Contemporary Hindu Culture

Indian women have often risen to the call for justice, and were the backbone of Mohatmas Gandhi's movement for reform. Kunjakkam correctly states that under Gandhi's command, women were admired for their show of strength, confidence, and organization and were "willing to join processions, face police firing and go to prison." Similarly, women "joined terrorist groups and helped in editing and distributing banned newspapers and in manufacturing bombs" (209). Therefore, it is not always that Indian women cannot or will not act when necessary, as attested to in my earlier mention of the recent woman-organized rally and march in Bangalore in protest of the dowry system (which again is but one of several major protests planned and led by Indian women). Indian women are proud of their heritage, yet to outsiders their seemingly subordinate status relative to males who obviously continue to exert so much control over them, even with religious sanction at times, may seem questionable and even naïve. How can we understand the dynamics of compliant women in the home versus courageous women "in the field" so to speak? Why do women not revolt more within their own homes as they have for social justice when it appears oppression is literally at their own doorstep? Why do they agree to abort their daughters in favor of boy children when they are females as well?³³

³³ S.C. Gulati and Rama Pasnaik (1996) did a study in four urban slums of Delhi (*north* India) which has an exceptionally low sex ratio compared to other areas in India. Women investigators interviewed 400 women in these areas and found a high degree of disempowerment among these women within the home, in addition to a pattern of female discrimination and son preference that was predominately based on the income-earning potential of the male who dominated in family decision-making. Gross inequality was reported in feeding patterns of females and access to education and health care, among other things, which persisted due to the justification that males were the breadwinners of the family who depended on them for "future economic sustenance," p. 98. Therefore, males needed more and better food, education and attention to their health since they performed more physical work that directly contributed to earning a "livelihood" for the family, p. 94. This emphasis on economic dominance translated into decisions regarding contraception which was done by husbands, *unless the wife had already delivered two or three surviving sons*. Women reported a high degree of violence against themselves and their children by their husbands; however, the researchers observed that "women don't complain about such practices or violent behaviour or even ill treatment meted to them or their children. . . . no women ever complained to or taken

The Power of Tamil Women (1980), a collection of essays edited by Susan S. Wadley, is an insightful example of the need for more field studies on rural Hindus which might likewise enlarge and challenge our understanding of the meaning and construction of gendered power--even *within* a framework where female subordination and special restrictions, son preference, and male dominance are not only uncontested, but seemingly acceptable to both genders. Furthermore, Wadley, and a growing number of scholars since the 1970s in the fields of sociology, religion, and gender studies, have discovered that there is strong evidence of women's power in Hindu culture, and her following conception of *sakti* in the South Indian context does not rely on justification within the boundaries of traditionally male or aggressive activities as in Kunjakkam's examples cited above, but it does retain a high degree of the *relational aspect* of women's roles that is a persistent theme across India.

The central theme of Wadley's book is the Hindu belief in *sakti*, the feminine principle of energy and action, which is seemingly contradictory to the women in Tamil who generally live under conditions of outward control by men (albeit to a lesser degree than in north India as a rule). Indeed, a woman's *self*-control is a vital complement to the outward control exerted on her by others. It is interesting that in this instance--taken from Wadley's later fieldwork in south India, 16 years subsequent to her fieldwork in north India--Wadley describes *sakti* as the "power and energy of the universe" that is innate in all females, and a fundamental generative force. A woman's *sakti*, however, can be lost through dishonorable behavior contrary to religious and societal codes of conduct and this could negatively impact not only the woman, but her family, community, and even the nation. It is believed that a woman's quest in life is to maintain and control her *sakti*, whereby she increases her powers. She does this through

[sic] police help in a situation where her own or her children's rights were abrogated" (93). The researchers concluded that the strong history of socio-economic and cultural discrimination against women resulted in unchallenged views about women's basic human rights and dignity. Therefore, women were not sufficiently apprised of their worth as individuals beginning with their upbringing, when they also saw that the birth of a boy was often celebrated, while not that of a girl. Only 15 respondents of the 400 in the study had sought help from "grassroots structures" that offered group or organized help for women. The researchers found this to be another indication of women's overall lack of awareness of their rights and low priority in addressing their own needs. This may help us understand why women were able to be mobilized under a program directed by men and aimed at the betterment of the nation rather than the individual per se.

subordination, suffering, and self-sacrifice in the interest of others, and is in turn revered. Regarding this “paradox of male or female in control,” Wadley explains:

The *sakti* of a wife causes the husband to be a successful breadwinner. Further, Tamils believe that the wife would win any marital battle: only women’s self-control allows them to submit to men. But by submitting, they further increase their powers. Hence the noble, bound woman will in fact control her husband, who even though he is controlled by nature, cannot match the cultural control of a bound, ordered woman. Men should control women if and when they (women) do not control themselves. But the self-controlled woman—the chaste, noble woman—will ultimately control all (160).

High value is placed (at least among women) on female unity and solidarity which serve to strengthen women’s power in relation: through bonding and mutual support; self-identification with the goddess; and community roles as healers and unifiers of people. Further, as Margaret Egnor, another contributor in this collection of essays, states, “solidarity [is] based in large part upon a sense of their common suffering.” In fact, according to Egnor, “It is their daughters whom they [Tamil women] beat, and from they [that they] withhold privileges,” which here implies an alternative view emphasizing the value of female self-control, rather than discrimination toward daughters and a bias for sons (Egnor 1980, 27).

Wadley echoes the previous assertion that more “value” is placed on a daughter in south India than in the north. In her study of a north Indian village published 16 years earlier, *Shakti: Power in the Conceptual Structure of Karimpur Religion* (1975), Wadley makes little mention of women or their special powers connected with *sakti*.³⁴ Here we can see the marked shift from Wadley’s early research in north India to her later emphasis on female *sakti* in the south Indian context. In this book, Wadley makes short mention of the meaning of *sakti*:

Since the one common characteristic of all Karimpur deities, both good and bad, is *shakti*, power, the concepts implied by *shakti* are important. Probably the most widely known connotation is that of the goddesses, of the Goddess Shakti. In this sense, *shakti* implies the female energy of the universe without which there would be no motion. But *shakti* does not mean just female power or the representative of female power, but power in general. . . . Each item of the universe has its share of *shakti*, of power (55).

³⁴ “Karimpur” is actually a pseudonym Wadley retains for the area, having first been adopted by William H. Wiser several decades earlier. p.10.

Furthermore, Wadley contrasts the formal celebration of a girl's puberty rites in south India which are nonexistent in the north:

Puberty rites in Tamilnadu are concerned with controlling female energies. The primary form of prosperity that a woman can bring to her affinal kin is progeny. A bride is honored for her potential fertility, for sons that will hopefully emerge out of the union being created. A woman is not truly auspicious, married woman (cumankali) until her fertility has been proven, in particular by her ability to bear living sons. It is this power/energy of females that is most sought (164).

As stated earlier, in south India, a daughter can remain within the protective circle of her male relatives because a daughter is permitted to marry her cousin and does not move as far away from her natal home as do brides in the north (162-164). By this close proximity and kinship pattern, daughters are relieved to a greater extent from the conceptualization of being a financial liability. Further, as Wadley explains, in south India, midwives are not paid substantially less for delivering girls; there are birth ceremonies for both genders; females receive better medical care; sex ratios are more balanced; and women "play a greater role in agricultural production" than in the north (161). In other words, daughters are better integrated into the family unit and community both prior to and during marriage. She is not a contingent figure for whom large expenses will be required with little return in investment: she remains connected and engaged with both her natal and affinal families as the kinship structure enlarges. In short, she maintains a dynamic role of subject in contrast to object, and through the cultivation of her *sakti*, she brings spiritual power into the family and community, increasing its prosperity.

Despite less emphasis on *sakti* in Karimpur, Wadley does relate another yearly ritual in the north, Lampblack Mother, where women implore the goddess "for sons and also seek their sons continued welfare" (Jacobson and Wadley 1977, 167); *however*, in the course of worshipping the goddess in this way, Wadley states, "it is their belief that the *goddess* [emphasis added] will give them sons and will help them keep their sons healthy," (168) revealing that the ultimate results rest on the grace of the goddess, the feminine divinity. Female power may not necessarily be attributed in this case to something cultivated

within a woman as in the south, but even in the north the concept of feminine power is present nevertheless.

Dr. Murli Manohar Joshi states in his article, “Women’s Liberation: The Indian Way” (1995), that, “In the Hindu pantheon only the goddess Durga rides on a lion. This symbolizes that it is woman alone who can control the beast in man.” This responds well to Wadley’s discussion of *sakti* in the south Indian context where it is indeed believed that women’s virtue reigns supreme, but it also brings us to the most visible and emphatic representation of women’s spiritual power in Hinduism: the goddess, which I have touched on in Wadley’s description of the Lampblack Mother ritual in north India. While Oldenberg and Macdonnell both concur that the goddesses play a minor role in the Vedas, in contrast to the gods, as far as “guiding the universe” (Oldenberg 1988, 120), “as rulers of the world” (Macdonnell 1897, 124), or by the number of times they are mentioned in the verses, this may not be the best criteria for judging their importance or value to the *entire* culture in Vedic times, given that these perspectives from the texts and experts are exclusively male and lacking female input. Goddess worship and belief, nevertheless, became increasing more central to Hinduism as it evolved over time, particularly when we step outside orthodox religious texts dominated by males and observe the actual Indian religious and cultural milieu in practice, and view the prevalence of goddess depictions all over India.

In the West, there is currently nothing comparable to the magnitude of women saints and goddesses in India. A pandit’s wife whom Linda Johnsen interviewed said this about women saints in India: “There are thousands of lady saints in India. You think because there are no books about them, they do not exist” (Johnsen 1994, 1). She further explained:

If you go into the Himalayas you will find many *bhairvis*, female yogis who live in the caves and forests doing penance. But most of the women saints remain with their families, purifying themselves by serving others. Every morning before the family awakens they sit before their altars in their homes, worshipping and praying. They don’t care for name and fame. Even the people in the next village do not know who they are. In your country you believe that no one can be a saint unless they give seminars (1-2).

Kathleen M. Erndl (1993) has done extensive work on goddess worship in northwest India (and elsewhere) and she states: “The worship of Devi (the Goddess) is *one of the most vigorous and visible religious phenomena* [emphasis added] in northwest India today” (3). Erndl points out that Hindu goddesses not only avoided the common pattern of being later usurped by male gods, but instead grew in popularity, both “coexisting with the male gods and at many times making them superfluous” (7). Thousands of pilgrims trek to Hindu goddess temples each year, making vows, offerings, and worshipping goddesses whose representations are attended to by priests. Similarly, there are “prominent Devi shrines” that “specialize in helping people with their personal problems” (69). Goddesses can become manifest in humans, and Erndl states that goddesses usually embody women, but can become manifest in men as well (109). Cults often form around women who experience frequent goddess possession (111). Purity can be a prerequisite for the goddess embodiment (112), and as Jacobsen shows in the case of Munni, in some villages, young girls known as *kanyas* are viewed as goddesses because of their purity, and they often enjoy special treatment and certain freedoms in this respect before they reach puberty (Jacobsen 1977, 30).

Conclusion

In this section I have discussed how religious information has been assimilated in many ways resulting in a diversity of beliefs and practices, especially when communities adopt their own philosophies in response to the changing flux of their daily material circumstances. Aside from this, and the lack of any rigid dogma in Hinduism, there are common themes which emerge most likely from some degree of exposure to the legacy of the Vedas, and the Indian epics with the *Laws of Manu* in particular. In the early Vedas, the reverence for life, importance of fertility, emphasis on obtaining sons, and condemnation of abortion are readily apparent. In the *Laws of Manu*, the differences between males and females are elaborated on, attributing these differences to divine, cosmological intention. Women are given a subordinate position due to these innate differences, but this was intended so that there would be harmony and order when each person aimed to fulfill his or her duty in the grander scheme of things. The growing

popularity of goddess worship helped influence an expanded vision of the breadth and scope of earthly and otherworldly female potential. In the course of Hinduism's evolution, certain aspects of culture were largely persistent despite the passage of time and local deviations: the belief in gods and goddesses; the importance of family; the desire for sons; a reverence for virtuous females; assumptions of male independence and control and female dependence and need for control; and female reproduction and fertility as a shared concern which necessitated intervention by others for the welfare of the family, community, and nation. Whether a Hindu perceives his or her identity as deriving from birthplace or belief, the foundation of Vedic thought has nevertheless had a significant impact on his or her worldview, and it within the context of this worldview that solutions to the decline of females in India must be addressed.

CONCLUSIONS

In the course of my research, discrimination against females--meaning a negative, differential treatment accorded to females on the basis of their gender and associated with inequality--was the locus of the majority of literature about the status of women in India, particularly since I was *specifically* investigating son preference and sex-selective practices. In this process, many ways in which Hindu women are likewise *empowered, special, and valued* also surfaced but were not given nearly the attention they deserve due to constraints of time and space. Nonetheless, emphasis on the positive aspects of females in Hindu culture does indeed occupy a place of centrality in transforming the perception that females are unilaterally disvalued in India.

While I am cautious about using comparisons of India to the West, I think this juxtaposition of cultures is helpful in bringing the context of the situation in India to the fore, and will help better determine why sex-selection driven by son preference is a problem specific to India, whereas discrimination against females is common to both.

Sons have a traditional religious significance in India that is incomparable in the West: males are necessary to perform funeral rites; sons must light the funeral pyre and perform ancestor worship; and sons maintain the spiritual and physical lineage that preserves the important connection with previous generations. It is generally within the purview of males to effect immortality, but there are variations on this theme according to regional beliefs. Therefore, it is vital to have at least one son in the family to perform these services, but another male relative could also substitute in these roles, despite this not being the preference. Status is attached to having a son to perform these rituals.

Males dominate the religious hierarchy in both the West and India, but it is actually in India where females occupy a prominent place in harnessing and maintaining spiritual power, even if they are not the main purveyors of religious information, are excluded from certain religious activities, or have less access to direct salvation or religious

training. Powerful female saints and goddesses exist on both the earthly and spiritual planes and are worshipped by both men and women. Therefore, females are special and highly valued. As sisters, wives, mothers, and consorts to the gods, their sexuality and fertility can be controlled for the benefit of the family, community, nation, and ultimately even the cosmos. It is because of women's virtues and their ability to reproduce that men are assigned the duty of keeping dangerous female potential in check. Men do not need these special measures and precautions taken for them because they lack these powers specific to the female. In this way, differences between the genders are *intended* by creation to maintain a harmonious, ordered balance of complementary male and female natures which are accrued naturally, along with corresponding duties and obligations that are necessary to each. Similarly, there are inherent differences in social classes, and value is realized on all levels through the proper adherence to the duties required of each class, not only to avoid rebellion and provide structure to society, but also so that in the next birth, compliant lower classes will be enabled to secure a better position in society and increase their chances for salvation. *All* forms of life are permeated with the divine; hence, the taking of life is always serious and must be mediated by circumstances that dictate priorities. Manu's laws, which are heavily assimilated in Hindu culture, recognize that circumstances sometimes entail exceptions, but structure, order, and the fulfillment of duties are the foundation upon which the overall harmony of the family, culture, and universe depends. Therefore, hierarchies are natural and have value, and are not necessarily associated with oppression or a negative view of dominance as is common in the West.

The importance of physical and spiritual proximity of the joint family is not as pronounced in the West as it is in India, nor is a joint family even very common in the West. The values of family and lineage are exceedingly strong in India, and self-sacrifice endured to support and maintain them is a prime virtue and duty traditionally accorded to the female. Women gain power in the family by subordinating their own desires and cultivating their inherent virtues which enable the preservation of the family and culture. In this way they are revered for their contribution to the greater good of all, and for their ability to enhance spiritual power for the husband and sons, and that of the community as

a whole. Therefore, Western feminism and the influence of modernity and technology which threaten to break down the traditional structure of the family, cultural beliefs, and values are viewed with suspicion by many Indians. The past history of Western imperialism in India no doubt contributes to the resistance to embrace outside intervention and innovations which is clearly a consideration in family planning programs, the delivery of contraceptives, and requirements for sterilization and limitations on family size. Similarly, Western values of independence and self-sufficiency do not mesh with the reality of interdependence characterized the Indian joint family.

Large-scale poverty exacerbated by the dowry system is another difference between the West and India, and I suggest that the practice of dowry is *the* major, but not sole, reason why son preference motivating sex-selective practices is so predominant in India. Playing the dowry game is akin to the gambling problems prevalent among the higher and lowest classes in the West, except in India dowry is expected and almost automatic, which I have shown is beginning to change. The strong reliance of females on males for economic protection has only changed relatively recently in the West; however, this still did not result in a mass destruction of daughters in the West as it has in India. Agnihotri's claim that "allocation behaviour in the household is crucially determined by female contribution to prosperity and not by prosperity per se," mentioned earlier in this paper, can be extended to the idea that males bring in substantial monetary and material contributions to the household via marriage negotiations-- and marriage, unlike in the West, is an expectation for every child that involves implicit attention and planning by the entire family unit with arrangements often beginning at puberty or even long beforehand. Furthermore, the stranglehold of dowry obligations on the female's natal family is life-long and makes the new bride vulnerable to mistreatment, violence, and shame. The giving of dowry to the groom's family was not a legacy imparted by the Vedic tradition but rather was a later development in Hindu culture. Consequently, the elimination of the dowry system causes no break from India's cultural heritage handed down from the Vedic age, nor does it upset traditional ritual roles and duties prescribed

for males and females, or eliminate the foundation of hierarchy upon which Hindu culture is based.

Significant attention should naturally continue to be given to address the many forms of discrimination that are operative against the female, and these should be approached with care and sensitivity to effect a consistent erosion of inequality and mistreatment over time. Female opportunity and status should likewise improve with the immediate institution of large-scale gender sensitivity awareness campaigns and adequate funding for new and existing programs to uplift and empower females.

I would again argue, however, that dowry expectations that go beyond the scope of reasonable, voluntary, and symbolic gift-giving of a celebratory nature upon marriage must be forcefully halted in their tracks. Enforcement of the law against dowry should be monitored at weddings if necessary where dowry is on display and families would suffer the shame of their actions upon arrest. This would be highly punitive in India where the honor and shame of families are arguably far more *critical* than in the West. Indeed, concepts of honor and gratitude embedded in the ideology supporting the practice of dowry could certainly revert back to a more normative view in Hinduism that extols the virtues of marriage, transcending material and physical reality. This was evident in previous examples from Manu who exclaims that the radiance of the household depends on the happiness of the wife, and how enduring the loyalty and support of the wife is to her husband, even to the point in times past where a wife might epitomize honor in the marital alliance by choosing to enter the funeral pyre of her husband. Likewise, it is not impossible to imagine that one day--should these ideas be sufficiently advanced and reinforced--it may become shameful for families to demand money for the free labor they enjoy from their daughters-in-law; or that daughters are in high demand when sons have difficulty finding wives and there is not enough help in the household; or that the influence of Western women's independent lifestyles so deeply permeates the Indian media that Indian women begin to exert their right to remain childless or establish single-parent homes, giving rise to a premium on prospective brides who are willing to jeopardize her health through repeated births to issue children of either sex, be they sons or daughters.

The north could benefit from greater awareness and promotion of the ideology behind the kinship system in the south where females are not temporary liabilities to their families, but extenders of community and integration among people where reciprocal exchange is the norm. It is perhaps too much to assume that such a non-traditional system would be adopted in the north; however, the promotion of a more integrated model might give rise to alternative solutions. India's problem with son preference motivating sex-selection is not due to a daughter's lack of real value; rather, it is a problem of using sons to barter for prosperity and status.

Just as the goddess increased in popularity, the female in society could do so as well. This may come about simply due to the shortage of females turning the tide of dowry from maternal obligations to paternal ones, but this in effect creates a circular trap alternating one preference for the other at the expense of many precious lives. The root of the problem is barter whereas the ideology should be framed in terms of alliance, bonds, and strength. One of the most self-defeating areas ironically promoting sonship that I encountered in my research was entitlement. In the Delhi study done by Gulati and Patnaik (1996), females, compared to males in the same family, had inferior nutrition, medical care, education, little decision-making, and were weakened by repeated childbirth without complaint because it was believed that the male, as the wage earner in the family was *entitled* to these advantages. These researchers urged that both genders become more aware of basic human rights and women's "individuality" and "dignity" (166), and that women need to be strong in order to deliver healthy babies (especially the desired sons!) and to maintain the household. Further, I would argue that uneducated women can hardly be expected to contribute to paid employment if they lack skills and visibility, and are malnourished, sick, pregnant, or busy tending to more children than the family can afford. As stated in an earlier footnote, Gulati and Patnaik (1996) also found that the majority of husbands were also the ones who made decisions about contraception unless there were already two or three surviving sons. One reason women offered for demurring from talking to their husbands about contraception was shyness (164). Therefore, I found that the strength of these families was severely underutilized due to lack of communication about their needs, which was surprisingly absent as such, though

heavily implied, in most of the literature. Given that women were responded to most positively in their relational roles, better outreach to families concerning the benefits of female fitness for the future of the family, community, and nation should continue, in conjunction with ways to facilitate more dialogue between family members. The model of the goddess Durga riding on the lion is already accepted in Hindu society; however, the goddess of the hearth and home must also be nourished, just as the goddess in the temple is attended to by the priests, if she is to be fully utilized in all her potential.

In summation, on the national level, I think a massive campaign to end dowry as it is practiced is the first step in helping to eliminate son preference, and this should be reinforced by increasing the shame attached to offending parties. On the state level, planning and policymaking should involve feedback and participation from the communities it is meant to serve. On the local level, outreach through the media, street plays, and grassroots committees could help reinforce the notion of basic human rights and the benefits of equal access to health care. On the family level, there needs to be more communication, and this could begin through promotion of this theme by the media. None of these suggestions are too radical to be implemented but they do require funds, commitment, and a shift in the paradigm of discrimination to potential and empowerment to which India has been making some strides.

AFTERWORD

I first became interested in India's problems with sex-selective abortion, female infanticide, and imbalanced sex ratio in the mid-1990s. At that time, there was not much specifically written about these issues, but there was literature available about discrimination against women in India. In the past eight years or so, from my Western armchair, I have perceived a great deal of change: the shock and denial about speaking out about the intentional killing of daughters has lessened; programs have been implemented by and for women to help equalize their opportunities; conferences, workshops, studies, and a mounting body of literature have heightened awareness of the need for action, reassessments, and creative strategies; resistance by the government and local officials to fully engage their legal progress by backing up their paper rights with actual practice of new laws has been challenged and demanded; women's groups regularly make headlines for standing up to injustice and defending social causes; fear, anger, and even silence are more understandable as reprisals, backlash, and corruption are exposed; the Internet is now full of websites and chat rooms giving voice to opinions from people in countries all over the world; Western women have adopted the goddess figure for empowerment and Indian women have looked to Western feminism to assess what might be useful for them and what they are intent on avoiding; and dowry and son preference have increasingly been questioned and blamed for a host of problems, yet they persist nevertheless.

I began my research thoroughly baffled as to how so many people could prefer sons to the point of selectively aborting and outright killing newborn daughters when I knew how deeply Indian culture is steeped in reverence for the goddess, wives, and mothers. No matter where I turned, there was no one factor that could adequately explain why son preference in India is so persistent that, in isolation, it would motivate the large-scale destruction of daughters in the fetal stage and shortly after birth (with the additional

problem of subsequent neglect or mistreatment). The problem would need to be addressed within the Indian context in order to be understood and resolved therein, but I found that by comparing the West to India, and not trying to layer it onto the East, some of my confusion slowly transformed into a better understanding.

I consciously avoided focusing on the moral dilemma I originally felt worth pursuing on this subject. In the course of my research, it became very clear that the fundamental, *pragmatic* reality of economic gain propelled by enabling daughters to be financial liabilities, productive losses to their natal families, and burdens in marriage negotiations overrode moral considerations that were secondary to assessing priorities for family survival and gain as a whole.

India is a very expansive and diverse country; consequently, often when I read something, I came to expect and even anticipate another source which would counter previous claims, so the task was to access as much information as much as possible to locate common themes and sort out what was propaganda, stereotypical, misinformed, naïve, or simply innocent and isolated instances or points of view. I am well aware that are still large gaps in what I can and do know about sex selection, female infanticide, and son preference in India. I only hope that what I have shared can be of some use in helping to understand the depth and scope of son preference in India and perhaps inspire a new perspective on avenues for change.