

Unwanted Indian Girls

Rekha. P. Menon



What's in a name? While it may be true that a person is the same, no matter what his/her name is. Names do make a difference because they represent each person to the outside world. It is not surprising then that someone with an odd name would feel embarrassed about it.

Till recently, it was a common practice in Maharashtra to bestow children with unattractive names like Dagdu, Kachru, Dhondu which mean stone, garbage and rock respectively. The parents believed that infant deaths could thus be avoided – if the evil eye came that way, the child would manage to give it the slip and survive.

Another variant of this custom was to name the third or fourth daughter, born after two or three previous daughters, as 'Nakusha' or 'Nakushi' which means unwanted. The belief was that giving this name to a girl child would ensure that the next born would be a boy. Till recently, this practice was widespread in the area around Wai and other rural parts of Satara district.

In the documentary 'Nakusha' directed by Shijith.V.P, a PhD student from IIT, Hyderabad exposes the fact that the so called custom is prevalent not only in Satara but also in other North Indian States. In Gujarat, the unwanted girls are called 'Moli' means dead one. Most of the places in North India, girls are compared to darkness. In panjab and Hariyana such girls are called sunset. In this context Shijith V.P and T.V.Sekher of the International Institute for Population sciences, Mumbai set out to research the psychological impact of living with a name that means unwanted. They surveyed 77 families with girls named 'Nakusha' in several tehsils of Satara. Of these they interviewed 44 girls with that name who were above the age of 10. Families with a little property or land want it to remain in their name and hence prefer sons. It was particularly common amongst the Maratha community. The researchers found Nakushas from the age of 4 to 48, an indication of the fact that the practice has been around for decades.

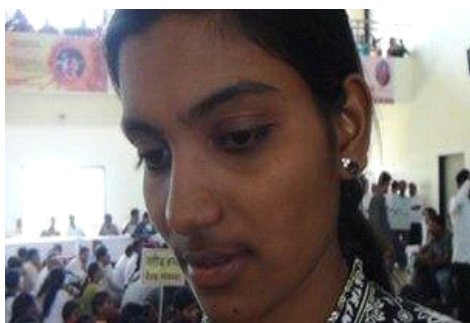
Parents had no qualms talking about why they named their daughters Nakusha. Some spoke of it in front of the girl named Nakusha ignoring the visible signs of grief on the child's face. One mother said in front of her daughter that she did not want the girl to which the girl began weeping. The mother of a 12 year old Nakusha was expecting a boy and was unhappy when she had a daughter. She said she did not love Nakusha as much as her other children while growing up. The girl did not receive the gold earrings that are traditionally given by a mother to her daughter. Many girls did not know what their name meant when they were young, but discovered it through the taunts they faced at school. Many were devastated when they found out what their name actually meant. Not surprisingly, nearly 70% of Nakushas surveyed faced some form of humiliation on account of their name.

Satara's villagers tend not to hold naming ceremonies for baby girls nor do they spend on their nutrition, welfare and education. Many mothers are not allowed to breastfeed their little daughters. Girls who are privileged enough to have been breastfed are not entitled to milk once they are weaned off their mother's milk. Typically, even otherwise male kids get to eat first and their sisters make do with leftovers. Likewise, new clothes or toys are a boy's privilege. Incidentally, Satara, home to a majority of Maharashtra's politicians has a sex ratio of 881 girls for every 1000 boys. In 2011, the Satara district Administration led a campaign to legally change the names of all such girls. The names of some 265 girls were changed in this manner and with this possibly the attitude of the people of Satara also.

A few months ago, the life of a little girl in Ratnagiri underwent a similar transformation. The unwanted stamp was erased and she was given the name 'Sonal' to show that she was a precious child. Sonal is a student of Ratnagiri Zilla Parishad School Std. 1 at Nachane. She was born to a poor family of daily wage workers –their fourth girl after two had died in infancy. Only the sister who came just before Sonal had survived. On the birth of their fourth girl child, the parents, bowing to social pressure named her Nakusha, hoping for a boy the next time around.

It was Dr.I.C.Sheikh, the principal of the DIET Ratnagiri District noticed a small girl with a smiling face in the school. He asked her name and was shaken when she told him it was Nakusha. He decided to talk with her parents and persuade them to change her name officially. He requested the girl's parents to come to the school and explained to them how painful their daughter would find her name as she grew older. But if she were given a nice name it would boost her self-confidence. She would feel that her parents cared about her.

Her parents offered no argument. In fact, her father said, “I am an illiterate laborer. We were not particularly unhappy because our fourth child was also a daughter. But I could not go to see her after she was born and my sister gave her this name under pressure from people around her. We did not give the matter much thought.” Today Sonal is a bright and cheerful student.



Sakshi

More than 200 Indian girls whose name meant “unwanted” in Marathi were given a fresh start at a mass renaming ceremony in Maharashtra state. Mr. Zubair Ahmed from BBC met one of the girls with a brand new name Sakshi. She says:

- My name is Sakshi which means a “witness”. I am 16 years old and I have just been named.
- All my life I was known as Nakusha – the Marathi word unwanted.
- I understand why my parents did not want me. They had three girls before me. I was the fourth girl to be born to my parents. Everyone here wants sons.
- They named me Nakusha believing this will end their bad luck and stop the birth of more girls. But two more girls were born after me.
- The renaming ceremony held in Satara district has been the most important event in my life and as I am a witness to it, I have picked up this name to mark this occasion.
- I always wondered why I was nameless. At times I felt terrible.
- But this spurred me on to prove myself and I worked hard to make a mark in studies and sports. And it worked.
- Although my parents continued to call me Nakusha, they began to treat me like my other five sisters. So, not having a proper name didn't really matter anymore.
- Yet I wondered why my family did not give me a proper name. I brought this up several times with my parents but they ignored my queries.
- But I was never angry or upset with my parents. I understood why I was unwanted at the time of my birth.
- Having lots of girls in a family in India is a big problem for parents.
- My parents have six of us and arranging our weddings will make them bankrupt. They will have to pay fat dowries for us.
- I was very happy when I heard that the local administration had launched this scheme of naming nameless girls.
- My school friends helped me choose my new name and I love it.
- Now, I will tell my family my new name and urge them to call me Sakshi.
- I told them that I was attending the ceremony and obtained their permission to change my name. They readily agreed. May be they have realised that they were wrong in calling me Nakusha.
- I know I have to be patient, because people are used to calling me Nakusha. It will take a while for them to get used to calling me by my new name.
- But now I have a name and I feel good. I feel like a new person. I feel confident. It will change my life forever.
- Earlier I struggled to give myself an identity. My identity was attached to my family's. Now I feel that I have my own identity.
- A proper name means a lot to me. I am in school now. Soon I will go to college. And that will be the start of a new life.

➤ Everyone in college will know me by my new name. No one will know I was once Nakusha. I am excited about my future.

Yes, a proper name can give a human being confidence and identity.

Around 629000 girls (aged 0-6 years) are estimated to be missing in India every year. The majority of them are aborted, others are killed, abandoned or neglected to death just because they are girls. The roots of this problem lie in a strong patriarchal society that has translated in to an obsessive preference for sons and discrimination against girls. Every 50 seconds a parent in India kills their daughter.



Poverty and social pressure are said to be responsible for the problem

Daughters are...

- ✓ Aborted
- ✓ Abandoned
- ✓ Buried alive
- ✓ Poisoned
- ✓ Crushed with stones
- ✓ Starved
- ✓ Let die of infections
- ✓ Stifled with a pillow

Daughters are killed because...

- ❖ They won't help with work.
- ❖ They won't continue the family name.
- ❖ They will need an expensive dowry for the groom's family.
- ❖ They will move to their in-laws and will not take care of their parents in old age.

The number of missing girls has increased between 2001 and 2011, according to the Census, and it is becoming a substantial problem in North Western India. Economic Survey conducted on 2017 highlights how preference for sons is hurting daughters. The Economic Survey has mentioned that the desire for a male child has created 21 million 'unwanted' girls in India between 0 and 25 years. Chapter 7 of the survey, tabled in parliament deals with gender equality. While India has shown improvement in several parameters related to women's empowerment, the preference for a son has not diminished. "In some sense once born, the lives of women are improving but society still appears to want fewer of them to be born", the survey stated.



Survey pointed out several reasons behind preferring a male child such as compulsion of a woman to move to her husband's house post marriage, inheritance of property, rituals performed by sons and dowry among others. The male child preference is highest in Punjab and Haryana and lowest in Meghalaya. More than 2 million women go missing across age groups every year either due to sex-selective abortion, disease, neglect or inadequate nutrition according to the National Family and health survey (NFHS).

While more women are educated, employed and financially independent today compared to how it was 10 years ago, they still do not have control over their earnings and child birth. Quoting the NFHS, the survey pointed out that more women tend to quit their employment after marriage or child birth. The survey recommended that the nation must confront the societal preference for male offspring. Noting that schemes such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Sukanya samrudhi yojana, enhanced maternity leave and mandatory crèches in work places are steps in the right direction, the survey called for a stronger commitment on the gender front similar to the Government's push for ease of doing business.



The problem spreads across the country. Health officials in the southern Indian State of Tamil Nadu have identified three districts – Dharmapuri, Salem and Madurai – as problem areas. In Dharmapuri alone, close to 1300 children are killed every year, while Salem comes second with over 1000 such killings. Availability of sex determination tests like amniocentesis and ultra sound seem to have increased the problem further. Reports say that the practice is widely prevalent in the interiors of Tamil Nadu and is adversely affecting the sex ratio.



Activists working in the area say that the practice of female infanticide is particularly rampant among the Kallar community. They add that the community valued its female population until the early years of the 20th century. However, after the green revolution that brought agricultural prosperity, men assumed greater role in the economic process and women were made subservient. Since 1970's the female population began to decline in terms of their autonomy.

Activists and non-governmental organizations have to conduct strong campaign against this discrimination which only could provide an immediate answer to this burning issue.

Works Cited

Mukherji, Anahita. "Nakusa: Burden of unwanted girls". Times of India, 4 Jan, 2016, web.

Deshpande, Haima. "The wanted and unwanted". Open Magazine, 29 April, 2015, web.

Shijit, V.P, dir. "Nakusha". 4 Jan, 2016. Documentary.