

Culture, Gender Bias and Beliefs Surrounding the ‘Nakusa’ Girls of Maharashtra

V P SHIJITH, T V SEKHER

In rural Maharashtra, many parents have named their daughters “Nakusa/Nakoshi.” In Marathi that means “unwanted.” The parents hope the next child will be a boy. Most of these girls are the third or fourth daughters of their parents and their names have caused them socio-psychological problems. A study of such families in the villages of Satara District forms the basis of this article.

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V P Shijith (vpshijith@gmail.com) is with the Indian Institute of Technology, Hyderabad and T V Sekher (tvsekher@gmail.com) is with the International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai.

Discrimination against the girl child in India is an existing reality and it reflects serious sex-based differences, inequalities and neglect. The complex interplay of culture and socio-economic factors combines to deprive the girl child in many ways. Parental attitudes toward children are shaped by the culture of the community, which leads to different kinds of treatment based on their sex (Miller 1981). In India, the general perception about the low value of the girl child in comparison to her male counterpart is reflected clearly in a Tamil proverb, “Having a daughter is like watering a flower in the neighbour’s garden” (Sekher and Hatti 2010a).

Background of the Study

The different kinship systems of India create unfavourable or favourable situations for women. Marriage systems also vary considerably across regions with significant implications for female autonomy. The traditional, patrilineal, patrilocal and exogamous marriage and kinship systems generally prevalent in much of the subcontinent have placed women in a lower status than men (Dyson and Moore 1983). Culture is a significant determinant of the position of women in a society. Where the culture is female-friendly, survival chances of the girl children are better.

In terms of familial exclusion, daughters themselves experience lesser expectations and less worth, and parents have the feeling that they are bringing her up just for another family’s advantage (Croll 2000). The term “son preference” refers to the attitude that sons are more important and more valuable than daughters. Son preference has a clear cultural dimension. Generally there are three major

cultural and religious reasons that are broadly discussed by researchers for the preference for sons in India—aspects of inheritance, old age support, and rituals (Miller 1981; Croll 2000). In many Indian households, the birth of a boy is a time for celebration, whereas the birth of a girl is often viewed as a crisis (Bumiller 1991; Clark 2000). Daughters are associated with loss or double loss due to the expenditure incurred in their upbringing and later, marriage. A daughter leaves the natal family after her marriage and the benefits from investment made in her upbringing go to the new family of her husband (Croll 2000; Hatti et al 2004).

A woman, who has herself had a bad childhood experience in terms of discrimination and mobility, naturally feels insecure in her married life, thus leading to a vicious cycle of gender deprivation and discrimination towards her daughter. The most visible form of discrimination at birth is the practice of female infanticide which has customarily been deployed to limit the number of females. Infanticide, wherever it is practised, is directed primarily towards females, as evident from studies in India (George et al 1992). Some researchers have debated upon cultural aspects of discrimination against the girl child, and most of the studies have concluded that not only does the son preference have an economic basis, it also has strong cultural assumptions behind it (Das Gupta 1987; Basu 1992; Sekher and Hatti 2010b)

Deeply-rooted cultural assumptions about gender identity and its relation to the discrimination against the girl child are still an inadequately explored subject in India. This study was undertaken to examine how culture and gender discrimination are intertwined in the naming of the girl children who are “unwanted” by their parents, in order to analyse the factors responsible for it. According to Sue and Telles (2007),

Selecting a name for a child represents an important cultural decision. Names often signify ethnic identity, particularly the identity that parents expect for their children. Given names have obvious long-term consequences; as labels they influence the socialisation of children and contribute to the

development of personal identities. Although parents may choose from an apparently boundless number of names, their choices are shaped by social and cultural influences.

In the Indian context, names of children have origins in ancient scriptures and mythology, generally reflecting parental aspirations for a bright future for their children. Several parents in the Satara region of Maharashtra have named their daughters “Nakusa”/“Nakoshi” which means unwanted (in Marathi), in the belief and hope that the next child will be a boy. This practice, a combination of gender bias and superstition, prevails in the rural areas of some districts in the state.

Our study used both quantitative as well as qualitative methods for gathering information and was primarily based on a household survey conducted in Satara District. It was conducted on the basis of available information from a list of girls whose names have been changed recently through a renaming campaign of the Nakusa girls by the district administration. The list of 265 such girls from 11 tehsils of the district was obtained from the zilla parishad (ZP) office, and used as a sampling frame to identify the respondents. The list includes information about the present (new) names of the girls, their age, place of residence, and village as well as tehsil. This list from the seven tehsils, namely, Satara, Jaoli, Mahabaleshwar, Phaltan, Koregaon, Karad and Patan, was available and 100 “Nakusa” households were randomly selected from this list. The parents of these girls from these selected households, spread over 42 villages, were approached. A total of 77 families were interviewed using a structured schedule. From these families, 42 girls were also interviewed (those aged 10 years and above). The interview schedule had three parts, namely, household information, parental attitude towards the Nakusa girls, and a section particularly for interviewing. The interview schedule comprised questions on socio-demographic and economic characteristics of the households, factors behind the naming of the daughter, and manifestations of neglect and discrimination against them. Apart from the household survey, a few case

studies of these girls and their parents were also prepared. Key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), activists, social workers, and government and ZP officials, who are directly involved in the renaming campaign.

Unwanted and Unwelcome

The naming of a girl as Nakusa was reported among Hindus only. The list of girls named thus prepared by the ZP revealed that all the cases were only from the rural areas. More than half of the sample households surveyed in this study belong to general castes, particularly the Maratha community. One of the NGO activists told us,

Why is this practice more common among the Marathas? They are rich and have property. If they have a son, the property will remain in their family; otherwise it will go to another family. Particularly the very poor among them name their daughters ‘Nakusa’ (interview conducted in Satara, 2 February 2013, henceforth only the name of the place and date).

A majority of the households surveyed are poor (about 65% have a monthly income of less than Rs 2,000). Most of the parents of the Nakusa girls are either illiterate or less educated, and mainly work as agricultural labourers.

Interestingly, the Nakusas contacted are between the ages of four and 48 years, indicating that this naming practice is old and still prevalent in these villages. Most of them are either the third or fourth child of their parents. In our sample, 26 Nakusa girls had three elder sisters each. At the time of the survey more than half (56%) of the Nakusa girls were students and 10% were working, mostly as labourers.

In the interviews, the parents revealed that they felt that at least one son is necessary in the family for support and to maintain the family status. Many of the parents were concerned about the property ownership; they said “If I have no son, then all property will go to another family. I do not want this to happen and thus, at least one son is required” (Keral village, Patan tehsil, 21 February 2013). One of the mothers explained (Wadale village, Phaltan tehsil, 16 February 2013), “One of our relatives does not have even

one son, now they are old and are suffering a number of health problems but there is nobody to look after them.”

More than 90% of the parents openly admitted that they were expecting a boy rather than a girl when another daughter was born and this compelled them to name that child Nakusa. A mother of a 12-year-old girl said, “at the time of Nakusa’s birth, I was expecting a boy and was very upset when I got a girl, everyone in the family was disappointed” (Vanwasmachi village, Karad tehsil, 31 January 2013). She revealed that in comparison to other children, she did not pay much attention to this daughter during her childhood. She mentioned that she had given golden earrings to her other daughters but this one did not receive any such sign of affection. By rejecting the girls they name Nakusa, the parents attempt to provoke the gods into giving them a son.

Another mother said that during pregnancy she underwent a sonography test and found she was carrying a girl child. Her family members refused to allow abortion and that frustration resulted in naming her child Nakusa. She explained that it was like a request to god *nako deva nako* (god, I don’t want a daughter once again) (Vanwasmachi village, Karad tehsil, 31 January 2013). She believes that naming her daughter Nakusa led to her being blessed with a son.

Once they start going to school, the girls named Nakusa start getting taunted. The parents do not seem to have any problem in revealing why they named their daughters thus, even in front of the daughters. Interestingly, many parents did not have any regret for naming their daughters, Nakusa.

Some parents told us that suggestion of elders, grandparents, neighbours or relatives led them to name their daughters, Nakusa. When one of the mothers we spoke to told us that she did not want the daughter, the girl who was sitting next to her began crying. However, the mother continued unflustered. At first she refused to acknowledge that she knew the meaning of the name but on persistent questioning agreed that she did. She also said that the daughter so named kept asking why she had been given that

name but was not given any answer. Many of the parents said after they had named an unwanted third or fourth daughter Nakusa, the following offspring was a boy. When the parents started explaining the reasons behind the name Nakusa, the girls became very emotional and started crying. Some of the parents stated that they have named their girls born before or after the ones named Nakusa as Seema (in Marathi this means boundary or limit).

The common rituals observed in the community after the birth of a new baby are called *Panchvi*, *Shashthi* and *Barse*. According to the respondents, the most popular function was the Barse (naming ceremony) and is celebrated by all communities. It is usually conducted on the 10th or 12th day after the birth. Around half of the parents interviewed revealed that they did not conduct any naming ceremony for the girls named Nakusa.

When a male child was born, the naming ceremony was celebrated in a grand manner by inviting relatives and fellow villagers for a special meal. But for a girl's naming ceremony, the function was conducted on a smaller scale with few invitees.

Even after the district administration renamed these girls, a majority of the parents still continue to address them as Nakusa. One of the fathers said,

Why should I call her with the new name? Her old name is habitual to us. Government has changed her name, when the Government starts giving us financial support, then I will call her with the new name. When the day 'Nakusa' was born, I thought of committing suicide. I was really disappointed (Kole village, Satara tehsil, 5 February 2013).

Most of the neighbours and villagers too continue to call the girls by the same older name.

A 13-year-old recounted that when she reached her village after a renaming function, she told her neighbours, "My name is changed; now it is Aiswarya." The neighbours retorted, "So what? We will still call you Nakusa. Let the government people call you by the new name" (Parut village, Mahabaleshwar tehsil, 10 February 2013).

More than 61% of the parents stated that the girl child is a burden to the

family. Financial burden was the most important reason reported by the parents behind this attitude. "Bringing up girls is so expensive. It is very difficult to afford their education and arrange their marriage. We have to give so much dowry for a daughter's marriage, otherwise who knows that the husband's family may create some problems and torture our daughter", a parent said (Adarki Khurd village, Phaltan Tehsil, 17 February 2013). According to a father,

I have five girls and one son. Because of these girls, I have a lot of tension. I have no job or money. What should I do? I wish to do a job, and have to marry off two more girls. My situation is very pathetic. Marriages of three daughters were performed in a simple manner due to financial problems (Wadale village, Phaltan tehsil, 16 February 2013).

Fortunately, a gradual decline in the practice of naming of daughter as Nakusa was observed in these Satara villages.

Experiences of the 'Nakusa' Girls

A girl named Nakusa said,

Wherever I go, I was faced with the same question. Why is your name 'Nakusa'? Till the tenth standard, I was unaware about the meaning of the word. But when I finally understood it and the reason behind my name, I felt a lot of anguish and agony (Julewadi village, Karad tehsil, 28 February 2013).

When she really understood the meaning of her name she decided never to behave like an "unwanted" in front of people. But the feeling that she is unwanted still haunts her. She still cannot erase it even after changing her name.

Another Nakusa (19 years old) stated that she was afraid of revealing her name to others because people laugh at her. "People used to call me 'Nake'," a short form of Nakusa. Now her name has been changed following the renaming programme conducted by the z.p. But her certificates still bear the old name. "I always felt that my friends and siblings have nice names but only my name is very bad. Why did it happen to me?" (Malwadi village, Phaltan tehsil, 17 February 2013). She was confident that one day she would be a wanted daughter to her parents.

A woman in her early 30s, who was named Nakusa, shared her experiences,

"I really feel as if I am an unwanted person in the family," she said angrily. Looking at her mother, she continued:

My mother and father were concerned about my brothers and elder sister only, I was always given a different treatment. If this was the case, it would have been better for them to kill me in the beginning itself (Chorkewadi village, Satara Tehsil, 1 March 2013).

She burst into tears soon after. The differences in treatment and care experienced by the girls named Nakusa and their brothers were also probed and 69% of the girls interviewed had a brother. About 50% of the girls felt that their brothers were getting preferential treatment from their parents.

A 15-year-old said that when people called her Nakusa, she felt helpless at not being able to convince them not to call her that. After renaming, when people continued calling her Nakusa, she told them that her name had been changed to "Sunita." But they said that they could not get over the old habit. When she heard a classmate saying that if her own parents did not want her why should others care for her, she said that she was upset and unable to talk to her classmates.

A 25-year-old told us that when she was in the sixth standard, her teacher had given her homework to split the word "Nakusa," which in fact was her own name. She could not do that exercise. The very next day, when the teacher asked her, she told him that she did not know how to do that exercise. At this, the teacher got very angry and wrote her name on the blackboard and then split it into three words. Nakusa=*nako asleli mulgi* ("unwanted girl"). "I will never forgive my parents for this humiliation," the girl told us (Julewadi village, Karad tehsil, 28 February 2013). Another girl said "Whether in school or college, everyone is calling me the same old name. Nobody is addressing me by new name. Some of my classmates and teachers tease me by saying 'nake nako' which really hurts a lot" (Dharamwadi village, Patan tehsil, 21 February 2013).

Another "Nakusa," after much persuasion, shared her painful experience that occurred during a family function.

During the naming ceremony of a newborn, one relative asked her "Nakusa, shall we give your name to this newborn girl? Then all the women gathered there started laughing. I feel suffocated during social gatherings" (Kokisare village, Patan tehsil, 25 February 2013). Our study reveals that more than 68% of the Nakusa girls reported having faced humiliation from fellow villagers and relatives. Nearly one-third of them face some sort of humiliation at school and public gatherings.

The government officials and social activists behind the renaming campaign believe that the new names will help to end the humiliation of these girls and will help in boosting their self-esteem.

Concluding Observations

Our study illustrates how strongly the son preference coupled with traditional beliefs and sex-segregated norms results in discrimination against girls. Parents naming their daughters "unwanted" is one of the most visible forms of gender discrimination and neglect. When the intention behind the naming of a person is more than giving her identity, and is actually a negative label, it is a

manifestation of gender discrimination existing in our society. Even after changing their names formally, the discrimination and humiliation still continue, as is evident from this study.

This study highlights the need for socio-psychological as well as economic support for these "unwanted" girls. A special financial incentive programme needs to be implemented to ensure the education and well-being of these girls, similar to the conditional cash transfer schemes for girls (Sekher 2012). If they are unable to get the basic requirements of education, healthcare and more importantly parental affection, they may continue to feel unwanted and unwelcome. They must be provided ample opportunities to prove that they are valuable assets to their families and society. Apart from the Satara District administration's campaign to rename them the government should also set up an appropriate mechanism for changing their names on all records/certificates at the earliest. Since the renaming of the girls itself does not change the attitudes of their parents and community, much more needs to be done to address this crude form of gender discrimination.

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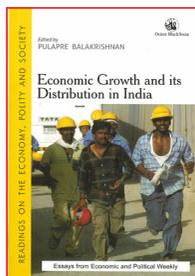
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