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The Desperate Bachelors

India's Growing Population Imbalance Means Brides Are Becoming Scarce

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BHALI ANANDPUR, India -- Four years ago, as is the custom here, Jai Palarwal and his wife set out to find a bride for their eldest son. They buttonholed friends and relatives, and after two years finally secured a meeting with the parents of a teenage girl from another village. But the marriage was not to be. The parents thought their daughter could do better.

Since then, there hasn't even been a nibble.

"The ones who are looking want a groom with a government job and large tracts of land, and we have neither," said Palarwal, a retired electrician, as he lounged on a rope cot outside his modest four-room home. "The girls' parents have become very choosy."

They can afford to be. The parents in question live in the state of Haryana, and Haryana is running out of girls.

A fertile farming state just west of New Delhi, Haryana produces a smaller share of girls, relative to overall births, than almost anywhere else in India. The 2001 census found just 820 girls for every 1,000 boys among children under age 6, down from 879 in 1991. The lopsided sex ratio reflects the spread of modern medical technology, particularly ultrasound exams, which allow Indian couples to indulge a cultural preference for sons by using abortion to avoid having girls.

The situation in Haryana has become so desperate that some parents are not only dropping their demands for wedding dowries, a tradition that still has a wide following in India, but are offering a "bride price" to families of prospective mates for their sons.

"That's what I'll try," said Palarwal, adding that he is prepared to offer up to 25,000 rupees -- about \$520 -- to the family of the right girl. "Even if the girl is squint-eyed, I'll get my son married," he said.

While Haryana is an extreme case, the trend is also visible at the national level, where the number of girls under 6 declined from 945 for every 1,000 boys in 1991 to 927 in 2001. Some of the sharpest declines have occurred in the most prosperous areas of the country -- including wealthy neighborhoods in New Delhi -- where couples have the wherewithal to practice sex-selective abortion and the pressure from their parents to produce sons is often acute.

But only now are some people realizing what the shortage might mean for the sons.

"Earlier, we used to say, 'She has to be from the right caste, the right family, the right state -- everything,' "

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recalled Mahendra Singh, 54, a farmer and member of the village council here who is scouring the area in search of a bride for his 22-year-old son. "Now we don't care, as long as there's a girl who comes into the house."

The use of medical tests to determine the sex of a fetus is illegal in India, and -- at least in Haryana -- the bride shortage has spurred a crackdown on doctors and technicians who flout the law, with several well-publicized arrests. But the law is easily circumvented, experts say, and there is no indication that ordinary Indian couples are abandoning their quest for male heirs.

"The authorities are shocked at the bride shortage in Haryana, and they are suddenly clamping down in a big way," said Richa Tanwar, director of women's studies at Kurukshetra University in Haryana. "But even the bride shortage is not going to change things in the society. . . . The attitude is, okay, let the neighbors have daughters, I still want my sons."

Such attitudes are hardly new in South Asia, where sons are frequently seen as economic assets and daughters as liabilities, given the need to marry them off with large dowries. Some parents have resorted to murder, smothering or starving their newborn daughters or even poisoning them with opium balls.

The advent of medical tests such as amniocentesis and ultrasound over the last two decades has skewed the sex ratio further. As noted in a recent UNICEF study, South Asia "is the only region that defies the global biological norm, with only 94 women for every 100 men, so that 74 million women are 'simply missing.' " As many as 50 million of the missing women are from India.

The imbalance is especially glaring in Haryana, experts say, because the state combines traditional values with relatively high levels of education and income. That means parents are aware of sex-determining medical tests and able to afford them. "In Haryana, if you just take the literate population, you will see that the sex ratio is even worse," said Tanwar, the women's studies professor. "When you are literate, you will find ways and means to use and misuse technology to get rid of the girl fetus."

Bhali Anandpur, about 60 miles west of New Delhi and home to 800 families, is typical of Haryana's rural villages. Surrounded by sugar-cane fields, it is pleasant and well-maintained, with a bustling coed high school and a large Hindu temple towering above a main avenue paved with bricks. Women fill buckets from hand pumps in front of simple but spacious homes, some of which have cable television. Cows wade in a watering hole.

But in one respect, there's something unnatural about the village. In 2000, census workers counted a total population of 2,370 males and 1,957 females, according to Om Prakash, a science teacher at the high school who supervised the effort. The disparity was especially pronounced among children under 6, with 351 boys and 302 girls.

There was no separate category for girls and women of marriageable age, but young men in the village say they don't need a census to tell them they are lonely. (The legal age for marrying in India is 18, but in practice many girls get married in their early or mid-teens.)

"All the boys you see here, they'll all become overage," said Palarwal, the electrician, waving his arm at a dozen young men who joined him at the entrance to his home on a recent sunny morning. "They finish their day's work, and when evening comes, they sit down and think, 'Even today I haven't got a girl.' "

Among the group was Ajit Singh, 29, who would seem to be a reasonable marriage prospect given his university degree and income as a salesman of medical devices. Singh said his search is leading nowhere. "I have been looking around for some years, but in the last two years, the need has become desperate," he said.

Singh's bachelor status may reflect his high standards -- in particular, his insistence that any potential bride come from Haryana and his own Jat caste, which predominates here.

But others aren't so picky. Sajno Palarwal, 60, said she searched for years for a bride for her son, Rotas, to no avail. "We were too poor," said Palarwal, a wiry, expressive woman whose husband died nine years ago.

Finally, two years ago, she decided to look outside Haryana, enlisting the help of relatives with contacts in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. "By then we were too desperate," she said. "We just wanted a girl."

She eventually found one, a 16-year-old from another caste, and Rotas Palarwal boarded a train with two uncles to make the 500-mile journey to her village. While he sat in another room, his uncles met the girl and her family and closed the deal. Some weeks later he saw his wife, Archana, for the first time, on his wedding day. His mother gave the family about \$100 as "a gift."

Things seemed to have worked out. "She is now a Haryanwi," Rotas Palarwal said proudly as his wife, now 18, hovered in the background. "I am very happy."

Men in the village are under no illusions about the reason for the bride shortage. They speak of the latest census data and its relationship to illegal sex-determination tests. "Everyone's very stubborn about only wanting sons," said Mahendra Singh, 54, the village council member, who has three daughters and two sons. "They don't realize that this is going to affect society. People just assume that if a daughter is born, it's a thing to mourn."

Almost in the next breath, though, he revealed his own conflicting feelings on the subject. "I regret that I didn't sterilize earlier," he said. "Then I wouldn't have had as many daughters."

Special correspondent Rama Lakshmi contributed to this report.

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