

Where unwanted girls are called Kafi, Unchahi

Chandigarh - Three-year-old Kaafi doesn't yet know that her name means 'enough'. But she can sense that her year-old younger brother is the apple of her mother's eye.

Kaafi, the fourth child of a farm labourer in Bahuakbarpur village near Rohtak, has learnt to make do with whatever care her older sisters aged 10 and seven give her.

Her parents inflicted her with the name of Kaafi because they felt they had had enough daughters, writes Grassroots Features.

In Ghadikheri village, the third daughter of a mechanic is called Bharpai (which means paying the penalty) Devi. 'We have only daughters and no son,' laments her mother Dayawati. 'Her aunt gave her this name. But I don't like it.'

The appalling status of girls in Punjab and Haryana is well known. Rampant female foeticide has brought down the sex ratio in these two states to abysmal levels. The girls who survive foeticide are often cursed by humiliating names. And each call is a cruel reminder of their tragic fate.

However, R.S. Doon, deputy commissioner at Rohtak, feels that such names are a thing of the past and modern-day Haryana is free from such prejudice. 'No, I doubt if you'll find even one such name in these times in our state,' he declares.

The officials are predictably ignorant of the ground realities. Not only are such names for girls very much in use - new ones are constantly being coined.

Earlier, one could find a few Bhateri (meaning 'enough') Devis in every village. Now, Kaafi Devi is more common. One Rohtak village - Ghadikheri - has four Kaafi Devis. All are the third or fourth daughters in a family, with no son.

The trend began when one mother delivered a son after naming her fourth daughter Kaafi. 'Now it's almost a trend at Ghadikheri,' observes Sabita Devi, an anganwadi or mother and child care supervisor. 'Families wanting a son name their last daughter Kaafi.'

A sample of some of the names given to infant girls are: Dhappan (a full stomach), Maafi (forgive) Devi, Mariya (deathly), Badho (excessive) Devi, and Bas Kar (stop it). Activists have even found a girl named 'Enough Kumari' in a Sonapat village!

Janwadi Mahila Samiti (JMS) state president Jagmati Sangwan says: 'We have launched a drive in Haryana to change these derogatory names. We started off with two of our own activists, and are trying to persuade parents to change their daughter's names.'

Unchahi (unwanted) Devi is a 34-year-old JMS activist in Hissar. Named so after she was born after two successive girls, Unchahi has learnt to live with her accursed name.

In feudal Haryana, the birth of a girl is a mournful occasion. Unchahi's parents made her 'unwanted' status crystal clear.

This year JMS activists got together and publicly changed her name to Chahi (wanted) Devi.

At the Rohtak Medical College hospital, 42-year-old Bhatari Devi has come for an operation. Asked if she was ever angry with her parents for giving her this name, she said: 'It's all right. I can understand their sentiment. They did not have a son. Besides, I realise my name has been lucky for me. I have three sons!'

The desire for not just one but many sons is deep-rooted among w

omen in rural Haryana. They are willing to carry a derogatory name for life if they feel it will help attain the hallowed status of becoming a son-bearing woman. It also gives sex-determination tests and female foeticide a huge fillip.

There is ample evidence of sex determination testing and female foeticide cases in Punjab and Haryana. The scourge is more common among the well off as the poor don't have the resources.

'Nowadays anyone with a little money goes in for sex determination tests,' says gynaecologist G.S. Saini of Punjab's Nawan Shahr district. 'It is only the very poor families where you can still find three or four girls in a row. Derogatory names are generally given in such families.'

The overall sex ratio for Punjab and Haryana today is much worse than during the 2001 census. In Punjab, the overall sex ratio at birth (considered a more accurate indicator of female foeticide) is now 776:1,000, as against 793:1,000 in 2001. In urban areas it goes further down to 761:1,000. In Haryana, it has gone down from 820:1,000 to 807:1,000, according to the latest Sample Registration System data from the Registrar General's office.

A recent analysis for Punjab by an Indo-Canadian team, which appeared in the British medical journal Lancet, found the sex ratio a dismal 614:1,000 if the first child is female. In urban areas, it goes down to 560:1,000!

In Haryana, when the first child is a female, the sex ratio is 667:1,000. And in urban areas, this goes down to 614:1,000. The country average in this category is 759:1,000.

The study, the first systematic and scientific one on female foeticide, was conducted by Prabhat Jha with St Michael's Hospital, University of Toronto, and Dr Rajesh Kumar of the Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research in Chandigarh.

However, the good news is that when the first child is male, Punjab's sex ratio goes up to a healthy 1,003:1,000. In other words, with one son in the bag, families are less inclined to go in for sex determination tests and female foeticide.

The analysis uncovered another chilling statistic. Children born to mothers with Class 10 or higher education had a significantly lower sex ratio at 683:1,000 than illiterate mothers at 869:1,000. More education appears to make it easier for mothers to access sex determination tests and female foeticide networks in the countryside.

Lamenting the birth of a girl is a tradition in Punjab and Haryana.

Says social activist, H.S. Dalal: 'The birth of a girl in rural Haryana is signalled by smashing a terracotta pot. A boy's birth is announced by beating a brass 'thali' (plate) with a spoon.'

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