

Indian soap to combat 'boys only' culture

A new primetime television show will shock a nation still obsessed with gender selection

by Jane Hughes
Delhi

A WOMAN in a Delhi hospital bed weeps with relief on hearing that her premature baby girl has survived a Caesarean delivery despite her husband's hopes that the operation would kill the child.

The scene – a pivotal moment in a new Indian television soap – is liberally dosed with Bollywood melodrama, but the issue is horrifyingly real as the scale of the problem of cultural preference for boys in India is becoming apparent. And the issue has created a booming industry in sex-selection abortion.

This soap, funded by international development charity Plan and backed by the Indian government, is meant to raise awareness about the widespread abortion of unwanted female babies.

Use of pre-natal gender screening was banned in 1994, but the law has been widely flouted and it is now big business. According to the Campaign Against Female Foeticide (Caff), 90 per cent of the estimated 3.5 million abortions in India each year are to eliminate girls. The social consequences are already being felt. Between 1991 and 2001, census figures show that the number of girls for every 1,000 boys up to the age of six dropped from 945 to 927.

In Punjab, the worst affected state, there are fewer than eight girls to 10 boys. Sex ratios are now so skewed that young men in some Haryana villages are resorting to buying brides from poorer areas. Despite this, swaths of Indian society are still in denial. 'Most people don't think it affects them or their class,' said Bijayalaxmi Nanda of Caff. 'The problem is almost invisible because women won't admit what has happened, particularly when they have been coerced.'

It is such attitudes that the soap, *Atmajaa* (Born of the Soul), due to be broadcast on prime-time television this winter, is intended to challenge. 'We wanted the story to have such a strong emotional impact that people wouldn't be able to stop talking about it,' said director Madhab Panda.

The soap's central character, Mamta, is forced into a premature Caesarean when her outwardly progressive middle-class husband and mother-in-law discover she is carrying a girl. They hope the baby will die, but Mamta bribes the doctor to take her to an orphanage if she lives.

In India, the view of daughters as a burden stems from the dowry system (despite its illegality), a desire to continue the family line through a male heir, and an interpretation of Hinduism which says a father's last rites must be carried out by his son.

In Mamta's case, the irony is her mother-in-law successfully ran the family business and brought up her family alone after her husband's death. Yet when a priest reads in her stars that her son will die if Mamta's firstborn is a girl, superstition takes over. The story follows Mamta's transformation as she meets a campaigner helping other women. When her husband pushes her to have an early and dangerous sex detection test during her second pregnancy, she stands up to him and eventually leaves.

In her new apartment block, virtually every neighbour has a connection to the issue of female foeticide, from the male reporter who exposes illegal clinics to the poor couple who will only get family help if they have a son.

The cast of glamorous actors are being groomed as campaigning ambassadors and their presence has secured newspaper coverage

across the country. For Mansi Salvi, who plays Mamta, the soap has been an eye-opener. 'I was shocked to find out this sort of thing was happening in the upper classes,' she said.

Changing attitudes is crucial. Female foeticide began with the misuse of ultrasound, but female infanticide has been reported in India for many years. Researchers from St Stephen's Hospital in Delhi recently found that baby girls in socially deprived areas were three times as likely to suffer sudden unexplained deaths as boys.

As Panda points out, laws

alone will not relieve the pressure on women to produce sons. Indeed, lack of political will meant the ban on sex detection tests was hardly enforced until 2001 when a veteran girls' rights campaigner, Dr Sabu George, petitioned the Supreme Court for tougher legislation. Since then 16,000 illegal ultrasound machines have been regis-

tered and several clinics raided. Yet there are enough unscrupulous doctors for the abortion of girls to continue. And science now holds out the promise of sex selection before conception.

'We want people to question their motives and to show why daughters should be valued,' said Panda. 'Hopefully, husbands will think about

what their wives are going through and women will realise they have the final say in their reproductive rights.'

He has some grounds for optimism. *Atmajaa* was developed after the success of a short film telling the fictional story of a woman's battle against female foeticide which elicited a powerful response from women who

felt able to talk about their experiences for the first time.

Jayant Kumar Banthia, the Registrar General of India, says the loss of girls 'will haunt the population for a long time'. Men are already marrying younger brides and there has been a rise in sexual violence towards women in the worst affected areas.

Bijayalaxmi Nanda re-

members that, after the birth of her daughter Akshara, one woman doctor asked why she was celebrating. Akshara, now six, is playing Mamta's daughter. 'When Akshara first heard me talking about female foeticide, she wanted to know why people kill girls,' said Nanda. 'She said "but if this had happened to me, I would not be here".'



An Indian woman and her baby outside a hospital near New Delhi. The sign warns that 'Pre-natal sex determination... is a punishable act.' Photograph by Gurinder Osan/AP