

Battered Lives: Examining Gender-Based Violence in Documentary Films

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ABSTRACT

The ubiquity of gender violence and the lack of progressive laws is an endemic problem in Indian society. Sex selective abortions and increase in the number of female infanticide cases have become a significant social phenomenon in India. This paper explores two heartrending documentaries: Evan Grae Davis' *It's a Girl: The Three Deadliest Words in the World* and Madhusree Dutta's *Memories of Fear* and interrogates the nexus between dowry, infanticide and feticide that completely dehumanizes women. Davis' documentary explores the gruesome facts of gendercide and reflects how poverty and cultural norms lead to a male being more highly valued than a female. The film begins with a grotesque reality of an Indian woman standing in a homemade graveyard, narrating how she longed for a son and the manner in which she strangled all her daughters and buried them. Dutta's non fictional film is an evocative portrayal of the interplay between sexuality, construction of fear and women's own contribution to the system that continues to denigrate them. Both the documentaries problematize Indian woman's position and highlight the many complexities and cultural challenges so extreme and entrenched that simply educating girls seem to be a limited endeavour. The analytical approach of this paper stems from the feminist studies of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Kumkum Sangari.

The decades bracketing the turn of the century have witnessed intense and unprecedented growth in the Indian economy. Modernisation has changed the fabric of Indian society in many ways. Over the last fifty years since Independence, India has witnessed remarkable progress, economically as well as socially, in reduced poverty and dramatically increased literacy rates. Despite economic success and material welfare, the position of Indian women continues to remain paradoxical. On one hand, the country has seen an increased percentage of literacy among women, and women are allowed to enter into professional fields, while on the other hand are seen practices of female infanticide and foeticide.

Son preference is widespread across Indian society with little variance across income classes, education levels, and rural/urban areas. According to census data, the child sex Ratio (0-6 years) in India was 927 girls per 1,000 boys in 2001, which dropped drastically to 918 girls for every 1,000 boys in 2011.¹ Gender biased sex selection is a discriminatory practice against girls which is embedded in a complex net of socio-economic and cultural factors. In most Indian families, a girl is considered '*parayadhan*' (someone else's property, not worth investing in), a burden whose safety needs to be ensured, who need to be paid for during marriage. Many women who give birth to girl children are forced to undergo sex selection, termed unfit for motherhood and treated like outcasts by their own families and communities. This prejudice against girl children has penetrated the urban-rural boundaries, not only causing a skewed sex ratio, but a rapidly declining sex ratio which raises some serious concerns about the discriminatory practices prevailing in 21st century India.

Sociological research studies argue that son preference itself emanates from patriarchal, patrilocal and patrilineal practices

all of which undermine the value of girls. More specifically, hypergamy prompts payment of high dowry to secure a worthy groom; exogamy and patrilocality translate into daughters having to marry outside the clan and relocating into marital families situated (most often) quite far from the natal home. Parents also cease to have rights over their daughters after marriage and cannot claim any physical or financial support. Patrilineality means that lineage is traced from the male descendants and also becomes a way of organising inheritance of property. These practices give rise to a host of other customs and traditions which subordinate women and their families and contribute to son preference. The patrilineal and patrilocal character of Indian kinship system dictates that sons are responsible for maintaining their aged parents. Couples with only daughters face a potential future of deprivation and loneliness. Preferences for sons, therefore, are closely tied to security for one's old age.

In India, China and many other parts of the world today, girls are ruthlessly killed, aborted and abandoned simply because they are girls. The United Nations estimates as many as 200 million girls are missing in the world today because of "gendercide". Gendercide is described as the systematic killing of members of a specific sex. In India gendercide is seen in the systematic killing of women for various reasons, usually cultural. The most widespread form of gendercide is seen in the practice of gender selective infanticide and foeticide. Shot on locations in India and China, Evan Grae Davis' *It's a Girl* reveals the gruesome reality of gendercide. The sixty-four minute documentary is expertly crafted and thought provoking, allowing the viewers to meet not only the experts who sift through the repulsive data of gendercide but also the women and children who have been affected by son-preference cultures: victims, perpetrators, survivors, freedom-fighters. The riveting moments

in the film raise pertinent questions about the perfidious nature of patriarchal culture.

Gendercide in South Asia takes many forms. Sometimes girls are killed or abandoned if not aborted as foetuses. Girls that are not killed often suffer malnutrition and medical neglect. Girls who survive infancy are often subject to neglect, and many grow up to face extreme violence and even death at the hands of their own husbands or other family members. The war against girls is rooted in centuries-old tradition and sustained by deeply ingrained cultural dynamics. The film tells the stories of abandoned and trafficked girls, of women who suffer extreme dowry-related violence, of brave mothers fighting to save their daughters' lives, and of other mothers who would kill for a son. Global experts and grassroots activists put the stories in context and advocate different paths towards change, while collectively lamenting the lack of any truly effective action against this injustice.

The documentary begins with an Indian woman standing in a homemade graveyard, narrating her story, "Eight times, I got pregnant, hoping for a son. Eight times, a daughter was born. Eight times, she strangled her daughter and buried her".² She laughs nervously as she speaks. She doesn't seem to feel a terrible sadness. "Women have the power to give life," she explains, "and the power to take it away."³ The documentary thrusts the viewer into the real war on women with a glimpse inside two patriarchal societies. Despite the words of the woman who killed her eight newborn daughters, the cause of widespread gendercide in China and India is not the power of women. The devaluing of women at every age has led to abortion of female children at a rate of up to 30% throughout China and India, along with the rampant abuse, neglect, and murder of girls and young women. Policy efforts to halt infanticide have been directed at mothers, who are often victims themselves. The documentary

shows tragic scenes of women having to decide between killing their daughters and their own well-being.

However, the gruesome practice of gendercide is not unique to the poor. The film deftly juxtaposes compelling images and alarming testimonies of women from financially affluent families. When Mitu Khurana, learned she was pregnant, her husband and mother-in-law forced her to undergo an ultrasound test to determine the sex of the baby. Like the dowry system, gender tests are illegal in India—this is because of high rates of sex-selection abortions. Once Khurana's husband learned she was carrying twin girls he and his mother told her to have an abortion. When Khurana refused, her husband threw her down a flight of stairs and locked her in a room, leaving her bruised and bleeding. Kumkum Sangari in her essay *Gendered Violence, National Boundaries and Culture* writes:

The fact that there is no full male monopoly of institutional and interpersonal violence; that women can be active agents in inciting and inflicting violence, suggests the obvious that patriarchies are not the rule of men over women but systemic structures . . . Indeed patriarchies work to undermine solidarities by dividing women within the same family, neighbourhood, caste or class, as well as across classes, castes and religion.⁴

The film deftly portrays that women sometimes take an active part in confining the realms of female experiences and aid in the perpetuation of patriarchy. In Mitu Khurana's case the most insidious force is the mother in law, the domestic matriarch, under whose authority the daughter-in-law is brutally treated. Mitu Khurana ultimately escaped and gave birth to the girls two months prematurely. Despite tireless efforts by Khurana to bring her husband and the doctor who performed the illegal ultra-

sound to justice, no charges were ever laid. “What should I do to save my daughters, where do I go from here?”⁵ she asks. The final scene is a lengthy heart-wrenching depiction of a Mitu Khurana playing with her two daughters who she refused to abort despite her in-laws’ insistence.

While Davis’ *It’s a Girl* portrays the grotesque reality of the indiscriminate elimination of the girl child in India, Madhusree Dutta’s *Memories of Fear* is an attempt to capture the process of socialization of girl children which makes them vulnerable to violence in later life. The documentary shows how girls are socially conditioned into a fear psychosis about just anything so that it is easier to control and suppress them. The film won the National Award for the Best Film on social issues in 1996. The documentary explores male despotism, the sexualisation and objectification of women as mere objects of male sexual, sadistic pleasure, humiliation and harassment of women both at home and at work place, sexual violence, crime and ill treatment done to women.

In the film there are four parallel narratives that trace the path of growing up of girls of various age groups. The film deals with the shattering of their dreams, the construction of their desires, the growing alienation from their body and the formation of fear. Although the experiences are apparently insignificant, they influence the gender construction of woman’s psyche. The experiential narratives are juxtaposed with testimonies of older women who have gone through violent marriages and are able to trace the connection between the construction of femininity and marital violence. These women have internalised oppression. Pain, violence and deprivation form the essential content of these women’s lives. They are suspended in time and place. Their life choices are so severely limited that the women themselves feel destroyed. Kumkum Sangari in the essay *Gendered Violence, National Boundaries and Culture* writes:

Violence is a foundational and systemic feature of all contemporary patriarchies. Women's consent to patriarchies is often an effect of the anticipation of violence, or the guarantee of violence in the last instance—to ensure obedience, inculcate submission, punish transgression. Patriarchies rest equally on consent by women, violence against women, and on legitimating ideologies.⁶

The film evocatively portrays how women are reduced to erotic objects of the male gaze. Consequently, women are made to feel inadequate and insecure and they eventually capitulate to the patriarchal demand upon their bodies. The film unveils the ideologically conditioned cultural parameters that value the activities of men and degrade women. The film unravels the silent ways in which patriarchy controls the structured female psyche and women sometimes are mounded to be passive, diffident feminine. Madhushree Dutta says the film germinated in her mind when she met an elderly woman who had come to the NGO Majlis looking for a way to help her daughter out of her abusive marriage. The elderly woman herself had been in an abusive marriage and said sadly, "I gave her fear as inheritance and that is why she could not cope with her own life."⁷ And that was the beginnings of a film that explored invisibility, violence and living in the city. In this film, parallel narratives trace the way in which four girls of different ages grow up and the connections between violence and desire. Dutta also wanted a form that would dilute the idea of testimony as raw data. So the film also included stylised performances, embellished re-enactments along with the more conventional testimonies.

In India where caste based discrimination, religious

antagonism, class consciousness and economic disparity prevail; the subaltern state of being can be discerned at different levels of existence. Added to this there is a strong gender-based discrimination in India over the ages. In the words of Spivak, women constitute what she calls the “gendered subaltern”. Both the documentaries explore the marginalised, helpless predicament of Indian women. In a male chauvinistic social setup, women are often rendered vulnerable. The dominant male ideology subjugates them, and puts some normative and discriminatory ‘laws’ before them to follow without questioning; it institutionalises these ‘laws’, and enforces them through family, society, politics or administration. Spivak’s comment in this regard needs special mention: “It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps male dominant”. (*Can the Subaltern Speak?*)⁸

Spivak also mentions that:

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the third world woman caught between tradition and modernization.

(*Can the Subaltern Speak?*)⁹

These documentary representations demonstrate that the condition of gendered subalternity is not limited to one social class or group of women. The films depict that middle-class women can potentially be subjected to subalternity. Though the women seen in these documentaries come from different backgrounds, social forces restrict them to conditions of subservience.

Both the documentaries interrogate the ambivalent position of Indian women. Son fixation has led to a culture of violence against girls, from being killed in wombs, to being killed as infants, to starved and trafficked as young girls, to being beaten as wives. The anti-female bias is by no means limited to poor families. Much of the discrimination is to do with cultural beliefs and social norms. These norms continue to de-stabilize the position of Indian women. Indian women in the twenty first century would argue that they still have a long way to go to attain gender justice. Women have acquired a level of financial and political autonomy and consciousness about their rights, yet they experience helplessness in bringing about basic changes for eliminating gender inequalities from the society. Although education is a powerful predictor of women's role and status and agency within the household, it is by no means their only relevant attribute that can potentially influence fertility decision-making within the household.

NOTES

- 1 Census of India 2001, Government of India, www.censusindia.net
Census of India 2011, www.censusindia.gov.in/2011-common/
- 2 *It's a Girl: The Three Deadliest Words in the World*. 2012. DVD directed by Evan Gray Davis, 2012
- 3 *It's a Girl: The Three Deadliest Words in the World*. 2012. DVD directed by Evan Gray Davis, 2012
- 4 Kumkum Sangari. "Gendered Violence, National Boundaries and Culture". Ed. Women Contesting Culture. Changing Frames of Gender Politics in India. Ed. Kavita Panjabi and Paromita Chakravarti. Kolkata: Stree, 2012, p.327
- 5 *It's a Girl: The Three Deadliest Words in the World*. 2012. DVD directed by Evan Gray Davis, 2012

- 6 Kumkum Sangari. "*Gendered Violence, National Boundaries and Culture*". Ed. Women Contesting Culture. Changing Frames of Gender Politics in India. Ed. Kavita Panjabi and Paromita Chakravarti. Kolkata: Stree, 2012, p.326
- 7 *Memories of Fear*. DVD, directed by Madhusree Dutta, 1995
- 8 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" (1988) Rev. ed. reprinted in *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*. Ed. Rosalind C. Morris. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010, p.28
- 9 *Ibid.*, p.40