

*Brief Lives*

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## **Among Poor Villagers, Female Infanticide Still Flourishes in India**

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One Couple's Third Daughter  
Sparks an Unusual Battle  
With the Lowly Midwife

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*Meeting by a Washing Well*

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DEWA, India—Inside a bamboo shed in this poor village, a midwife named Sanjha presided over the brief labor of Ramkali Sah, an illiterate woman with wide eyes and a coy manner. Sanjha ushered a newborn out of Ramkali's womb, and announced a girl.

The midwife knew then what the family would want. She would be told to murder the girl.

Despite India's big steps toward economic growth and integration into the global economy, the age-old practice of female infanticide still flourishes here. There's a growing effort to eliminate the practice by educating the midwives who often perform the killings. But in India's poorest villages, that work faces deep-rooted cultural and financial obstacles.

The village of Dewa lies in Bihar state, where fully 10% of India's one billion inhabitants live. It is the country's poorest state, with a dearth of doctors in remote areas and thousands of midwives. The midwives earn about 50 cents and a sack of grain for each live delivery of a girl, twice as much plus a sari if it's a boy. Getting rid of a newborn female fetches as much as \$5.

The female-male ratio in India, always lower than the global average, consistently declined in the past century, though it's impossible to link that trend conclusively to female infanticide. The 2001 census is expected to report a ratio of 900 women to every 1,000 men. That would be down from 927 in 1991, the latest complete census, 941 in 1961, and 972 in 1901.

Part of the imbalance, nationally, comes from abortions. In towns, it's common to see signboards advertising ultrasound services that often lead to terminated pregnancies—although the use of ultrasound to determine gender was banned in 1996. The Indian Medical Association estimates that three million female fetuses are aborted each year, generally after sex-selection sonograms and mostly in urban areas. Other estimates put the number at five million.

In poor and backward places such as Bihar, however, where sonograms are still a rarity, it's cheaper to kill a newborn girl than to travel to a city and pay for a gender test and abortion. And Bihar's gender ratio is among the most-lopsided in the country. The 1991 census in Bihar showed 912 women for every 1,000 men, down from 1,054 women in 1901. In the district where Dewa is located, the ratio in 1991 was 819 women to 1,000 men.

In some pockets of Bihar and Rajasthan, another poor state, the female-male ratio is a meager 600-to-1,000. Last August, one village in Rajasthan witnessed its first Hindu wedding procession to a bride's home in 110 years, because no other girl had been allowed to survive.

South Asia has a long history of violence against females; besides infanticide, there also are acid attacks and killings sparked by dowry disputes. According to the National Crime Records Bureau, dowry deaths jumped nearly 26% between 1996 and 1998, to 6,917 from 5,513. The bureau recorded 114 cases of infanticide in all India in 1998, compared

with 107 in 1997 and 113 in 1996. But such deaths usually go unreported, and the bureau's executive director, Sharda Prasad, says that any crime is likely to be grossly underestimated. "It's anybody's guess" what the actual figures are, he says.

Mr. Prasad believes that "modernization has contributed to an increase in dowry deaths, ... because there are more demands for goods. People want a TV, a fridge. If they can't purchase these things with their own money, they should come with the girl." And one corollary to this may be contributing to the persistence of female infanticide: As aspirations outpace rises in income, a daughter represents an even bigger potential drain on her family's finances.

Well before Ramkali Sah came to term in the fall of 1998, the extended Sah family already knew the math. They had married off a daughter the previous year, and it had cost them a dairy cow, farm tools, a bicycle and \$575 in cash—all told, about a year's income. Another girl would be crippling.

Some Indians regard a daughter not merely as a liability but as a traitor: She switches loyalties when she is married off, usually in her teens, and moves in with her in-laws. "Raising a daughter is like watering your neighbor's plant," says a south Indian proverb. Women are subordinate to men in Hindu scriptures; a Hindu goes to heaven only if a son lights the funeral pyre.

"If a boy is born, he will be a breadwinner," says Asherfi Sah, the patriarch of the Sah family and the father of five sons and one daughter. One of his sons, Prakash, is the husband of Ramkali.

Prakash Sah is among the village's fortunate men who have managed to leave behind farm work and get one of the more lucrative factory jobs that have become available with economic reforms. A visit to one of the extended family's huts reveals a new radio inside and a new bicycle parked outside.

But the Sah clan wasn't feeling flush in the fall of 1998, when the family was still recovering from the previous year's marriage of Prakash's sister. Moreover, Prakash and Ramkali already had two girls. The last thing the Sahs needed was a new baby girl.

So, they turned to the able hands of the midwife Sanjha, who reckons she is about 45. Her wiry arms are covered with tattoos, which is common among tribal and low-caste women in north India, as is the single name. She knows many ways to kill: snap the baby's spine; shove rock salt down her throat; force her into a clay pot and seal it.

Sanjha won't discuss how many infants she had killed before she abandoned the practice three years ago. But she is more forthcoming about why she stopped killing and what happened when she was hired to deliver Ramkali's daughter.

The change of heart came when Sanjha began to receive rudimentary training from an organization called Adithi. Founded in 1988 by Viji Srinivasan, a development worker who had been with the Ford Foundation for six years, it aims to improve the lot of poor Biharis, providing informal education for girls and women, and small loans to support cottage industry. It gets funds from international organizations, such as Britain-based Plan International and Action Aid, as well as aid organizations of foreign governments.

Adithi started holding village meetings in the early 1990s to teach midwives about prenatal care and hygiene. Traditional birth attendants deliver nine out of 10 babies in Bihar, and Adithi had identified a need to teach some basics: cut the umbilical cord with sterilized scissors, for instance, rather than with a scythe that was used on grass and weeds.

"I used to deliver a baby on a heap of straw—not even a mat," Sanjha says.

Over time, Adithi staff won the confidence of the

midwives in Dewa and other villages, and the instructors began to grasp the extent of infanticide committed by their students. The revelations led Adithi to try conducting a structured survey on infanticide, but there was almost no cooperation in the communities. So the organization turned back to the midwives, who quietly came out with their own appalling estimates.

There are about 535,000 traditional birth attendants in Bihar for a population of 100 million. In several districts of the state, Adithi found that each midwife killed as many as five newborn girls a month. The study, released in 1995, was an informal exercise, but Ms. Srinivasan believes that “if anything, the survey underestimated infanticide.”

She sent the findings to Bihar’s welfare commissioner, the most senior civil servant in the state welfare ministry, but got no response. In fact, the national government and most state governments officially deny that infanticide takes place. Infanticide “was true in the past, but no longer,” says A.K. Choudhary, formerly Bihar’s health commissioner and now secretary of rural development.

Adithi began a grass-roots campaign against infanticide at the source: the midwives. It wasn’t easy. At early sessions, the midwives—some of them holding their own baby girls—questioned the notion that girls have an equal right to live. They said they needed the money; they noted that the families didn’t want the babies anyway. Over and over, Adithi counselors urged the women to think of newborn girls as if they were their own daughters.

More challenging still was getting the midwives to resist their employers. Most midwives are dalits, those on the lowest rung of Indian society, and have almost no stature in their communities because the job involves blood and so is considered impure. Midwives are only one step above people who collect human

waste.

It took Sanjha two years to absorb Adithi's message. Before the encounter with the Sahs, however, she kept silent about her change of heart, for fear of losing potential clients. During that time, to save the girls she delivered, she would try to persuade families to keep them. On several occasions, families she served agreed to spare the child, but later Sanjha would hear the infant had died of "natural causes," which usually meant the family had let the infant starve.

Ramkali Sah gave birth in a bamboo shed where firewood was stored. Sanjha recalls that it was a crisp night bright with stars that dimly lit the rice paddies and wheat fields around Dewa. When the Sahs learned that their third child was a girl, judgment was swift, Sanjha says. "The mother-in-law said, 'Kill her or abandon her somewhere so that she'll freeze to death.'"

Sanjha resisted, and the Sahs raised the stakes: an extra eight kilograms, or about 18 pounds, of rice to dispose of the child. Extra rice is like extra cash. Sanjha delivers five to six babies a month and has a sharecropping arrangement with a landowner in the village. Her husband, a mason, brings home about \$2 per job. All told, they live on less than \$40 a month. Rice would free up cash to repair the straw roof on their half-brick hovel.

Still she stood firm, asking the Sahs to give her the child with the idea of handing it over to Adithi for adoption. The Sahs wouldn't budge.

Hours later, Sanjha finally returned home, leaving the child behind in the arms of the furious mother-in-law. For three days, the midwife kept an eye on the baby from a distance. Publicly, the child remained nameless, although rumors in the village said she had been called Mantorni, which is Hindi for someone who breaks your heart. On the fourth day, Sanjha

heard that the Sahs were not feeding the infant.

Unable to do more herself, she contacted a nearby Adithi office. A counselor named Asha came and called an impromptu village meeting. Asha and the Sahs recall the scene.

More than two dozen women villagers gathered near a well where clothes are washed, sitting on straw mats beneath an oak tree to escape the noonday sun. Asha began by congratulating the Sahs on the birth of their baby girl. Then, she got right to the point: “I hear there might be a problem with the child’s health. Can we help?”

Sampatia Sah, Ramkali’s mother-in-law, reacted angrily: “I know why you’ve come,” she snapped. Beside her, Ramkali cradled the five-day-old Mantorni.

Asha began a Socratic dialogue with the group on the value of daughters. Who returns to visit you more—your married sons or daughters? How many of you believe that girls deserve to be educated? So, how many of you think a daughter is as valuable as a son? Thus prodded, several women agreed that girls can be an asset and more loving than boys.

Asha turned to the Sahs, who had sat silently through this exchange. “If you don’t want your baby,” she said, “let Adithi put her up for adoption.”

The mother-in-law remained defiant. Asha warned her that she would face prosecution if anything happened to the child. As the meeting broke up, many of the women agreed that they would watch over the Sahs’ daughter.

The next day, Asha returned with a photographer. The message was clear: A snapshot would be proof that Mantorni had once been healthy.

It’s hard to gauge Adithi’s overall effectiveness. In this pocket of Bihar it has trained only 400 or so midwives, who serve about 190,000 people. These 400 have all told Adithi they have stopped killing.

In fact, emboldened by their training, some midwives have taken great risks to save babies. At least 15 newborns have been spirited away to Adithi headquarters without their parents' consent. All those girls have been adopted.

A year after her birth, the Sahs have come to terms with their new daughter. "We're keeping the child," Sampatia declares. She has 19 grandchildren, and boy or girl, she says, "I love them all equally." But, she adds, "the world knows that when a son is born, the status of a family increases."

As the grown-ups talk outside their shack under a blue sky, the girl first known as Mantorni—now a bubbling one-year-old—sits on Sampatia's lap and giggles as her cheek is stroked. The Sah family has given Mantorni a permanent name now: Rani, which means "Queen."