

Daughter Elimination: Cradle Baby Scheme in Tamil Nadu

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Tamil Nadu's two decade old Cradle Baby Scheme tries to ensure that female babies who would otherwise have been killed are given up for adoption. Civil society activists are not happy with the scheme because they feel that it only encourages parents to abandon female babies and is not a substitute for tackling the crime of sex selection and female foeticide. However, until the girl child is welcome in families, such a scheme will be needed.

The Cradle Baby Scheme (CBS) was launched in 1992 by the government of Tamil Nadu in response to the practice of female infanticide. Nearly two decades on, even as little is known about the functioning of the scheme, it continues to attract criticism from civil society.¹ To place the debate on a somewhat more informed footing, this paper examines the potential role played by the CBS in the reduction of daughter elimination in Tamil Nadu. It begins by providing the background against which the CBS, along with other interventions, was introduced. This is followed by a description of the scheme, an analysis of its implementation the responses of different actors and implications for the future of such schemes.

Daughter Elimination

The practice of female infanticide in Tamil Nadu came to public attention in the mid-1980s. Two media articles in the 1980s argued that female infanticide had come to be increasingly practised over a decade and a half among the Kallars in the Madurai district. The investigation claimed that about 6,000 female babies could have been poisoned to death in the sub-district of Usilampatti in the preceding decade (Soundarapandian 1985; Venkatramani 1986; Jeeva et al 1998). In the 1990s, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) report brought to public attention the widespread prevalence of female infanticide in another community, the Gounders in Salem district (Venkatachalam and Srinivasan 1993).

Soon after, Chunkath and Athreya (1997) estimated that there were about 3,000 female infant deaths per year due to "social causes", a euphemism for infanticide. Our temporal analysis of various rounds of Vital Events Surveys – these surveys are unique to the state and provide information on male and female live births and infant deaths based on a sample of about 9 million individuals – confirmed these

figures and we found that between 1996 and 2003, the incidence of post-birth daughter deficit, our measure of infanticide, declined sharply from a deficit of about 4,485 girls every year between 1996 and 1999 to about 1,800 in 2003. The declines were dominated by Dharmapuri and Salem, the two districts which account for the highest proportions of daughter elimination (Bedi and Srinivasan 2008). Other sources such as the Sample Registration Surveys and the National Family Health Survey also suggest a decline in daughter deficit and a recent report (2005) submitted to the State Planning Commission based on primary health centre (PHC) records also noted that the number of female infant deaths due to "social causes" declined from an average of about 3,000 a year between 1995 and 1999 to 372 in 2002, that is, a decline of about 88%. A number of NGOs like the Indian Council for Child Welfare (ICCW), Village Reconstruction and Development Programme (VRDP) and Poonthalir health and nutrition workers in the districts of Salem, Dharmapuri and Madurai also note a decline in the incidence of daughter elimination, especially female infanticide (discussions during fieldwork, July 2006, April 2007 and July 2008).

Cradle Baby Scheme

In 1992, following the continued efforts of NGOs and the media the Tamil Nadu government acknowledged the prevalence of daughter elimination and announced several schemes to "eradicate" it. These included (i) the CBS which allows families to hand over unwanted female babies to the government, (ii) legal action against perpetrators of infanticide, and (iii) the Girl Child Protection Scheme (GCPs) which provide financial incentives to families with only daughters (Srinivasan and Bedi 2009). The focus here is on the CBS which was first introduced in Salem district in 1992.

Instead of resorting to female infanticide, parents who were unwilling to bring up their female babies could place them anonymously in cradles located in noon meal centres, PHCs, selected orphanages and NGOs. Subsequent to their placement in cradles, babies were to be placed for adoption. Between 1992 and 1996, 140

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babies were placed in government cradles (*The Hindu*, 24 June 2001). The scheme had a short life and following elections and a change of government in May 1996, it was shelved. Despite the low priority to the scheme after 1996, babies continued to be surrendered, and between 1993 and 2001 a total of 150 babies had been received in Salem district (Table 1).

Table 1: Babies Received in the Cradle Baby Scheme

	Male	Female
Phase 1: 1992-13.05.2001		
Salem	0	150
Phase 2: 14.05.2001-30.11.2007		
Salem	57	665
Madurai	30	109
Theni	20	146
Dharmapuri	40	965
Dindigul	12	38
Other districts	231	487
Total Phase 2	390	2,410

Source: Directorate of Social Welfare, Government of Tamil Nadu. ROC No 58544/CW6/2007, dated 3 January 2008.

In May 2001, the CBS was reintroduced. The new version of the scheme was initially launched in five districts (Salem, Madurai, Theni, Dindigul and Dharmapuri) and was soon extended to the entire state. The involvement of NGOs in scheme implementation and placement of the babies for adoption was enhanced. Numerous cradle points were opened and frequent public announcements and advertisements in the press popularised the scheme particularly in districts notorious for the practice of female infanticide. The scheme recorded a sharp increase in the number of babies; between May 2001 and November 2007, 2,410 baby girls had been received (Table 1). The bulk of these babies were surrendered in Salem and Dharmapuri. As of March 2009, the figure stood at 3,418 babies (486 male and 2,932 female) (http://www.tn.gov.in/policynotes/pdf/social_welfare.pdf, accessed on 7 February 2010).

Decline in Daughter Elimination

Combining information from the overall decline in post-birth deficit and the number of babies handed over to the CBS allows us to provide an idea of the contribution of the scheme in preventing and reducing the incidence of infanticide. Consider that according to our analysis post-birth daughter deficit fell from an annual shortfall of about 4,500 during the

period 1996-99 to about 1,800 in 2003 – a decline of about 2,700. Over the 6.5 years between May 2001 and November 2007, on an average the scheme received about 370 female babies per year. These figures suggest that the CBS may have directly accounted for about 14% (370/2700) of the reduction in post-birth daughter deficit observed between 1996-99 and 2003 (for more details on methodology and data see Bedi and Srinivasan 2008).² Thus, while the bulk of the reduction in female infanticide may be attributed to other measures undertaken at the same time, the figures clearly support the idea that the CBS also plays an important role in preventing infanticide.

Notwithstanding what appears to be the role of the scheme in reducing infanticide, an immediate concern is the state's capacity to settle the cradle babies in adopted homes and the survival rate of babies handed over to the CBS. While there is limited information on the fate of the babies after they are handed over to the scheme, according to information gathered during fieldwork, the mortality of babies surrendered to the CBS in the first phase was about four times higher than the state's female infant mortality rate (IMR) (CASSA, Cradle Baby Scheme, position note, May 2007). Furthermore, it is feared that the scheme feeds into a child trafficking network (Bos 2007; *Frontline*, Vol 22, issue 11, 21 May-3 June 2005). For instance, when the CBS was revived in 2001, the number of adoption centres rose from 11 to 23 and the CBS is supposed to have created a "girl baby glut" for these centres (CASSA, Cradle Baby Scheme, position note, May 2007; Krishnakumar 2005).

More fundamentally, NGOs and activists have criticised the scheme on the grounds that it absolves parents of their responsibility towards their daughters and does not address son preference. For instance, Ruby Thiagarajan, president of Salem's Young Women's Christian Association (*Sunday Magazine*, 6 January 2002) argued that the scheme encourages son preference as women can continue to "dump the girl child in the cradles" till they have the desired number of sons. The Campaign against Sex Selective Abortion (CASSA) rejects the CBS on the grounds that it violates the Convention on the Rights of

the Child (CASSA, Cradle Baby Scheme, position note, May 2007).³ According to CASSA, the CBS violates articles 7 and 9 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which deal with the child's right to be cared for by her biological parents and requires the State to ensure that children shall not be separated from their parents and in case of separation from one or both the parents, the State should respect the rights of the child to maintain personal relationship with both parents. These sentiments were echoed in a Public Interest Litigation filed recently against the CBS (*The Hindu*, 8 July 2009).

Countering these criticisms, government officials and NGOs involved in implementing the scheme argue that handing over babies to the scheme is a more humane option than murder and that the scheme offers the potential of a better life for unwanted babies. For example, having come under severe criticism for encouraging parents to surrender their daughters, the collector of Salem in 2001 noted, "I asked the officials to stop receiving babies. Soon after, there were babies abandoned in gutters and garbage bins. We cannot let this happen. So we had to reopen the scheme" (Srinivasan 2006). According to him, the scheme was not a permanent solution but acted as only a temporary safety valve and would be discontinued the day female infanticide stops. As one of the NGOs involved in adoption put it, "Instead of certain death, they (female babies) now have secure lives" (Trustee, Karnaprayag in *Sunday Magazine*, 6 January 2002).

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Among the local people, the unpopularity of the scheme is due to a different factor expressed in a popular Tamil saying, “we may give (children) to *Yama* (the Hindu God of death) but none to others (in adoption)”. Surrendering threatens a man’s image as the provider and protector, echoed in responses like “He (household head) cannot bring up a daughter, is he a man?” (Srinivasan 2006). Concerns about the quality of female life also surface in the decision to surrender or eliminate. These concerns are couched in the image of the ideal “good” mother to justify daughter elimination over giving away unwanted daughters, as illustrated by this response from one of the study villages,

Only mothers who have got a child in wrong ways will surrender. A true mother will never have the heart to do so. She will say, “if the baby is killed, I will be upset for two days”. But this is better than thinking, “Am I a mother? I gave away my offspring” (Fieldwork, Salem district, 2002).

Considering the sociocultural baggage that parents have to deal with in surrendering their unwanted daughters, a former government official noted that whatever may be the criticisms directed at the scheme, the fact that many women chose to surrender rather than resort to female infanticide showed the courage of these women in challenging social ridicule (interview with a former collector, Madurai district, April 2000; also Rajivan 1998).

Looking Ahead

The well-being and placement of cradle babies are clearly issues that merit immediate and concerted attention. Apart from isolated instances there is no systematic information on the fate of the cradle babies and the absence of such information reduces the attractiveness of the scheme. While records are still not well kept, in recent years some changes have been made to tighten implementation. These measures require the parent(s) to bring along a photo identity while surrendering, and babies can be surrendered only in designated hospitals in district headquarters; cradles are no longer available everywhere (discussion with director, Poonthalir, August 2008). In addition, according to the adoption laws, adoption can be mediated only by designated

organisations and cannot be undertaken by private individuals.

While it is clear that the management of the scheme needs to be improved, it is not clear whether the scheme promotes son preference or vice versa. The scheme was introduced because in an environment of high son preference many parents do not want daughters. A child should indeed have the right to be cared for by biological parents, but if some parents are unwilling to fulfil their responsibility and are likely to eliminate, neglect or abandon an infant, should there be continued insistence that parents are responsible or is it more suitable to offer the possibility of adoption? A pragmatic view, given the deep-rooted nature of son preference and daughter aversion, is that the scheme offers a humane option to infanticide, neglect, and abandonment, to be exercised *in the last instance* to protect the newborn female. There is evidence that this is already happening. NGOs like the ICCW, VRDP and Poonthalir that are working to tackle daughter elimination, counsel families to keep the female baby and use the CBS as a last resort (discussions during fieldwork, July 2006, April 2007 and July 2008).

While the CBS has played a role in bringing down the incidence of female infanticide in Tamil Nadu, it is not a substitute for addressing sex selection and to create an environment favourable to daughters. However, where girls are born and their survival is at stake because they are unwanted, schemes like the CBS can potentially work towards protecting the best interest of the newborn. Till such time as parents eagerly embrace the birth of daughters it will have to remain one of the strategies to tackle daughter elimination. As the following case illustrates, at present, such a situation is still to be reached.

A newborn baby girl was rescued by a female medical technician of the Emergency Medical Research Institute ambulance in Krishnagiri on Thursday. Eyewitnesses told *The Hindu* that the baby with blood stain(sic) was abandoned at the vicinity of an orphanage in a vegetable bag. On hearing the baby cry, orphanage administrator K P Chinnaiyan informed the service. The baby was cleaned by the technician on the spot with the help of the local people. Later, they admitted the baby at the District Headquarters Hospital in Krishnagiri (*The Hindu*, 22 January 2010).

NOTES

- 1 For instance, declaring the continued decline in the 0-6 sex ratio in various parts of the country as a “national emergency”, the central government as part of its national child protection programme proposed a crèche in every district so that parents can leave their unwanted female babies in them (*The Hindu*, 22 February 2007). This proposal was severely criticised by civil society actors (*The Hindu*, 3 March 2007; Action Aid Workshop in Delhi, December 2007).
- 2 Our analysis shows that between the period 1996-99 and 2003 there was no increase in pre-birth deficit and there is little evidence to support the idea that the reduction in post-birth deficit (infanticide) has been accompanied by an increase in sex selective abortion. For details see Bedi and Srinivasan (2008).
- 3 CASSA is a state-wide network of more than 60 NGOs whose main aim is to ensure effective implementation of the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act (2003).

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