



# Female Infanticide in India

A FEMINIST CULTURAL HISTORY

RASHMI DUBE BHATNAGAR,  
RENU DUBE, AND REENA DUBE

FEMALE  
INFANTICIDE  
IN INDIA

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I N I N D I A

*A Feminist Cultural History*

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Rashmi Dube Bhatnagar,  
Renu Dube,  
and  
Reena Dube

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*To Saroj Rani Pathak,  
Rekha Dube, and Carol Kay*



*Inspired by the work  
inaugurated by Ranajit Guha*

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## Preface

This book emerges from our years of combined scholarship as well as from our own lived experience of growing up, living, and studying in postcolonial India as women of a recently decolonized nation-state. We had always been aware that the phenomenon of woman-devaluation was pervasive in our society and that most girls and women were socialized to accept the seeming naturalness of son-preference and its corollary, the devaluation of the life of the girl child. Yet as women scholars we could not help but recoil in horror when we recalled the multitude of allusions in novels, films, and everyday conversations that casually referred to girl child murder. We then began a journey to uncover the coded ways in which talk about female infanticide was socially sanctioned. The initial horror we felt was an important critical subject position with which to begin our journey because it forced us to acknowledge and deal with how we were implicated as women and as scholars in the sanctioned ignorance of the widespread postcolonial Indian practice of femicide.

Our critical and scholarly interest in the phenomenon of female infanticide and femicide leads us from the present into the past. Instead of offering a sensational account of violence on women in the third world, we have tried to understand this issue discursively. This means firstly, that we see this phenomenon as part of a larger continuum of violence on women and of a piece with the worldwide phenomenon of the devaluation of women. Secondly this means that our approach to the issue of female infanticide and femicide is discursive, historical, as well as theoretical: we trace the history of the practice of female infanticide in colonial India, critically evaluate the British efforts at reform, and theoretically examine the ferocious re-emergence of this formerly localized practice across contemporary India. Our approach is guided not only by the important question of how and why female infanticide and femicide take place, but by the more important question of how does this practice become productive for families and communities so that it continues to re-emerge despite legal governmental measures against it.

In the first chapter of the book we examine the national and global implications of femicide in postcolonial India by focusing on the nexus between First World reproductive technologies and the discourse of population control and development within the nation-state. We inaugurate our discussion of femicide by analyzing the present situation regarding femicide

because we think it is important for our readers to understand and appreciate the contemporary genocidal proportions of the situation, as well as the true dimensions of this issue.

In the second chapter we move from the present into the past. We do so in order to understand how the crime of female infanticide was “discovered” by the British in colonial India, and the politics involved in the way this crime was named and discussed. We argue that the colonial politics of naming had an enormous impact on the way the British colonial administrators treated this crime within the imperial center and the way they dealt with it in the colony. Child murder is a capital offense in nineteenth-century England but female child murder is penalized by fines in the British colony of India.

From the politics of discovery and naming and the unequal relations between center and periphery, we move in chapter 3 to the question of how the colonial administrators profile the paradigmatic infanticidal communities in British India in purely racial terms. We critique this racist profiling because we contend that it contributed to the fabrication of a motive for the crime. Therefore, instead of unquestioningly accepting the colonial hypothesis that this crime was committed and commissioned by a racially proud, feudal, barbaric community in order to ensure racial purity, we explore how and why this repressive practice was productive for the infanticidal community. We put forward the proposition that it was productive because it was part of a network of practices of social violence on Rajput women for the purposes of primitive accumulation of wealth and upward mobility.

In order to appreciate how the crime of female infanticide came to be aligned and associated with the dowry system and continues to be read off as an unfortunate consequence of the dowry system, we examine and analyze in detail the history of infanticide reform carried out by the British administrators in nineteenth-century colonial India. Therefore two chapters, chapters 4 and 5 of the book are devoted to a critical analyses of the British efforts at infanticide reform.

In chapter 4 we look at the administrative history of a “successful” case of British infanticide reform in the Kutch and Kathiawar regions of colonial Gujarat. We conclude that the discursive inscription of daughters as economic burdens emerges in the British colonial discourse of infanticide reform. We name this powerfully persuasive discursive inscription the colonialist-economic explanation for infanticide. We show how the British grafted infanticide reform onto revenue collection in order to create legitimacy for their revenue collection from the Jhareja Rajputs in Kathiawar. Thus in the absence of an established right to rule, infanticide reform gave the British trading company the appearance of legitimacy as the civilizing, morally superior power.

In chapter 5 we deal with the historical emergence of the first colonial census at the site of female infanticide reform. We argue that it is this funda-

mental linkage of female infanticide with the first census taking in colonial India that forges the discursive inscription of female infanticide within the overpopulation discourse in contemporary postcolonial India. In the second half of the chapter we reconstruct a fragment of women's history by focusing on the 1854 case against Baee Nathee, a tribal woman in Kathiawar who was accused of killing her newborn twin daughters. The Baee Nathee case was used by the British reformers to discipline the wealthy and powerful infanticidal clans by making an example of the tribal woman who unlike the Jhareja Rajputs, belonged to the most politically powerless community. The Baee Nathee case becomes emblematic for the ways in which it reveals the politics of race, class, and gender in the colonial administration of the British.

In this book we have tried to approach the issue of female infanticide and femicide by circling the issue from various discursive incision points that are available to us as scholars and as women and we have tried to move beyond what Edward Said has called "the politics of blame" in order to map out what makes this social practice productive and therefore persistent in postcolonial societies. However, we did not design this book only as a critical requiem to the missing millions of women in India. We were invested in addressing the issues surrounding femicide with a view to opposing it. One of the questions that has often come up in the course of reviewing and discussing this book with friends and colleagues has been the question of solutions. What is the solution to this problem? Our own meditated answer has been that instead of quickly formulated, programmatic solutions that may or may not work, we are interested in the question of resistance and opposition to this practice.

Consequently the last two chapters of our book are devoted to just such resistance carried out by ordinary women, men, and the subaltern classes under the name of Meera, a woman poet in fifteenth-sixteenth-century Rajasthan. We argue for a recognition of the precolonial modes of dissent that have been inherited from medieval times, and continue to fuel dissent at heterogeneous sites despite assaults by dominant cultures, and in spite of the domestication of these forms by colonial and nationalist writers. Chapters 6 and 7 examine traditions of female dissent, which are opposed to the idioms and material practices of woman devaluation. We argue that Meera's poetry engenders traditions of coauthoring that makes it possible for generations of the poor and dispossessed to articulate their resistance. We focus on the Meera tradition because her poetry inaugurated a woman-centered critique of Rajput patriarchy from within the community. Meera's poetic codes and encoded comments on Rajput daughter-killing contrast women's ecologically centered way of being (as sower, planter, and nurturer) to the elite male Rajput cult of violence and the commodification of women as exchange.

Our book is dedicated to celebrating the girl child as a full human being capable of contributing to the community, the nation, and the world. We

oppose a world view that contributes to woman devaluation and treats the girl child as an unproductive consumer of family wealth. Therefore, throughout this book we have been keenly attuned to the ways in which the practice of female infanticide and the phenomenon of woman devaluation has been resisted historically and continues to be opposed in the present times. The practice of femicide in our own times has to be addressed not only by laws and legislation but by the active opposition and resistance of all the women and men who are concerned with the issues of equality and equal opportunity.

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Spectral and living influences shape my contributions to the present book. My contribution to this co-authored book bears the impress of the graffiti on the college wall in the late 1970s by Naxal members of Indraprastha Hostel for women that read, “Women are not chapatti-making machines.” I am indebted to teachers and colleagues at two women’s colleges at Delhi University, Indraprastha College for Women, and Miranda House, particularly the latter’s year-long seminar on feminist theory in 1985–1986 that gave me the friendship of V. Krishna, Zakia Pathak, Uma Chakravorty, Angela Koreth, Swati Joshi, and Rajeswari Sunderajan. I was privileged to attend the first meeting of the Delhi-based women’s periodical *Manushi* in a room at the women’s hostel of Miranda House. The editor Madhu Kishwar was always willing at meetings, processions, or guest lectures to discuss women’s issues with me.

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—R. D. B.

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—R.D. & R.D.

## CHAPTER 1

# The Practice of Femicide in Postcolonial India and the Discourse of Population Control within the Nation State

The world is going to hell if those people don't stop breeding.

—*National Geographic*, October 1998

I will keep this one only if it is a son.

—An Usilampatti woman, *The Hindu*, November 1994

The selective killing of the female fetus in postcolonial India has received serious commitment from activists in the Indian women's movement(s) but scant rhetorical and theoretical analysis. This omission in postcolonial feminist theory is curious given the fact that the Indian women's movements were the first organized groups in the 1970s and 1980s to call attention to the use of new reproductive technologies for feticide and the selective breeding/nurturing of male fetuses in modern India.<sup>1</sup>

Our objective in this chapter is to attempt a rhetorical and discursive analysis of the violence visited on Indian women. Therefore, our discursive analysis begins by foregrounding the conjunctions between the discourses of femicide and the rhetoric of overpopulation, and examines the ways in which femicide is inscribed, rationalized, and co-opted into the rhetoric of population control in postcolonial India. We argue that the discourses of modernity, development, population control, and new reproductive technologies work together to claim the Indian woman's body as object and to name femicide as informed choice and family planning.

This women's collective eschews the ahistorical, simplified, and colonialist explanations that trace present day femicide in an unmediated manner to nineteenth-century practices of female infanticide in colonial India. The telos of such explanations is a continuist history of femicide in terms of the anti-woman bias of Indian traditions. In refusing to see tradition as the overarching explanatory framework for female infanticide in the past and its resurgence as femicide in the present, we are in conversation with Lata Mani's pioneering work on the practice of sati in colonial India. Lata Mani has



conclusively shown that explanations concerning the oppression of Indian women that center on Indian traditions are in fact a product of colonialist discourses (*EPW* 21.7, 26 April 1986). Thus, feminist analyses that focus exclusively on Indian traditions run the risk of omitting and eliding histories of resistances, heterogeneous locations, and discontinuity in history.

Our scholarly commitment is to the study of the condition of postcolonial modernity in its specificity. We understand femicide as a specifically postcolonial violence, which is facilitated by the patriarchal family, reproductive technologies, the nation-state, and the discourses of global agencies and international organizations. The first section addresses conceptual errors that are in wide circulation concerning female infanticide in India; we suggest that it is in and through the conjunctions between the discourse of modern femicide in India and the rhetoric of overpopulation that these conceptual errors come into play. The second section examines the political text of the Emergency in the 1970s in India in order to demonstrate that the effect of the conjuncture between the overt rhetoric of overpopulation and the covert discourse of femicide is that female populations are targeted for extermination. The third section analyzes alternative paradigms and possible solutions.

It is symptomatic of this crime of gendered violence that the available statistics for female infanticide are conflicting. In 1998 the Indian Association for Women's Studies reports that 10,000 female fetuses are killed every year in India. The editorial of a national daily puts the annual figure at 50,000 female fetuses (*Times of India*, August 6 1994). Yet another study determines that from 1978 to 1983, 78,000 female fetuses were reported killed, or 13,000 female fetuses annually were aborted, following the use of amniocentesis as a sex determination test. These conflicting statistics indicate that this violence has become the undetectable crime against women and at the same time, the estimated numbers indicate the proportion of a genocide.

Another indicator of this genocide is the declining sex ratio in India. In colonial India the gender imbalance indicated by the 1901 census is a sex ratio of 972 females per 1,000 males. After India's independence this gender imbalance is exacerbated rather than redressed: the 1981 census shows that the female to male ratio drops to 935 females per 1,000 males. The number of missing women increased to 22 million in independent India from 3 million under colonial rule. This trend continues unabated, currently the female to male ratio is 933 females per 1,000 males. While the world over women outnumber men, India is unique in that here men outnumber women. The normal sex ratio favors the birth of female babies; however, India has a steadily declining sex ratio skewed in favor of male births. This phenomena of missing women is proof that it is not only the female fetus that is endangered but the overall conditions for many Indian women are life-threatening.

In our view exclusive analytical attention to the female fetus does not illuminate the real nature of the problem. Instead we relate the violence of femicide to the birthing mother, the surviving sibling sisters, and to other forms of violence perpetuated on women in postcolonial India like rape (every 54 minutes in India), dowry deaths (every 102 minutes) and the estimated 500 “accidental” suicides of housewives that occur in major cities annually (*India Abroad*, July 1998). By situating the problem in this continuum, we argue that the modern holocaust of femicide signifies not only the serial killing of female fetuses but also girl-child murder by negligence through discriminatory practices such as uneven food allocation causing nutritional deficiencies, uneven access to medical care, family resources, and minimum survival needs. These traditional forms of gendered neglect have increasingly been recognized by feminist scholars as a weeding out process and as virtually undetectable infanticide. Many studies have demonstrated that the girl-child is at risk not only at birth but also in infancy. For example, one writer notes, “The significant decrease in the female population occurs after birth and before the age of four. From 1978 to 1983 . . . of the twelve million girls born each year, only nine million will live to be fifteen” (Balakrishnan 1994, 276). The victims of female infanticide are not only the aborted female fetus, the girl child, the birthing mother, and the infanticide survivors who grow up with the knowledge that they and their female siblings survived attempts to murder them. The list of casualties include the large population of women who are disciplined by the violence visited on other women.

### Some Pedagogic Issues Concerning Femicide in Postcolonial India

As teachers and scholars our concern is with the distortions that occur when students and colleagues discuss femicide in India within the rhetorical framework of overpopulation. The chief anthropological misconception is that femicide is a traditional method of population control in Asiatic societies. This misconception has to be dismantled discursively and empirically. The discursive logic of this belief is to portray femicide simply as the resurgence of age-old practices of female infanticide, thus reinforcing the popular belief that the social problem of femicide is facilitated by ancient customs of population control, not by the discourses and institutions of the postcolonial nation state.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, this perception is ahistorical and is not borne out by women’s history. Feminist scholars have shown that in the indigenous cultures of the South (Asia, Africa, Latin America) women knew and had access to a variety of sophisticated and noninvasive contraception to limit pregnancy and for the purposes of spacing children. These methods fell into disuse and were not communicated intergenerationally because women were forced to forget their

traditional body-knowledges with the advent of colonialism and neocolonialism. In these indigenous cultures of the South infanticide and feticide was one practice coexisting with a variety of methods, child murder was certainly not the dominant method of population control.<sup>3</sup>

Teaching about the violence against Indian women involves battling the persistent Orientalism wherein Indian women are viewed as passive victims of absolute and undifferentiated customs of patriarchal oppression. Our extensive historical and literary research enables our understanding that female infanticide was never uniformly or universally practiced in India. For example, in nineteenth-century colonial India female infanticide was confined to select landowning propertied families and communities in certain regions in north-west India and with the exception of one tribe, female infanticide was unknown in southern India. Even in these infanticide-endemic districts female infant killing was a discontinuous practice. The paradoxical fact about India's social and cultural traditions vis-à-vis women is the heterogeneity of practices. Historically women-related practices in India were plural and contentious; for example, traditions of cherishing daughters were always in conflict with traditions of daughter-devaluation and daughter-murder.<sup>4</sup>

The British perspective that the commission of female infanticide in India is causally related to the family's burden of providing excessive dowry for the daughter is a viewpoint shared by many in India. Nineteenth-century colonialist female infanticide reform efforts in Gujarat addressed the problem posed by the daughter's dowry by instituting a dowry fund. Colonial administrators promised landowners exemption from land tax for one year on condition that they preserve their daughters. Official documents reveal that the measure failed to have any effect on the incidence of the crime. Our own view is that in contemporary India the dowry system is not so much a hallowed tradition as a patriarchal capitalist means of devaluing daughters and daughters-in-law as worthless objects, a means by which the natal family rids itself of a female claimant on family wealth, and a quick and easy way of acquiring capital for the marital family. Thus in the natal and marital family the system of dowry works within the femicidal logic of woman devaluation. Femicide and dowry deaths are on a continuum because the former requires reproductive technology to destroy the daughter within and outside the womb, and the latter functions in the private sphere as a way of destroying the adult daughter and daughter-in-law. In effect dowry deaths are yet another contemporary aspect of femicidal logic of treating women as valueless consumers.

Family poverty is mistakenly perceived as the source of the problem of female infanticide, in accordance with the popular belief that daughters are neglected because their parents are too poor to take care of them. Our study of the infanticidal clans and communities in nineteenth-century India has shown that infanticidal families had no dearth of money and in many cases

owned property in land. Contrary to the economic reasoning, the serial killing of female fetuses and infants is not a function of the class and wealth-status of the family but rather an index of the totality of women's condition, status, and value in family and society.<sup>5</sup>

The solutions to female fetus killing, hypothesized by current research on modern femicide, also tend toward economism. The economic solution is family affluence on the principle that it is natural for a rich family to value all its children, including its female children. For instance, Vaasanthi's recent case study of femicide amongst the infanticidal tribe of Kallars in Usilampatti taluk in Madurai district concludes that to prevent female infanticide the Indian Government should deposit 1,000 Rupees at the birth of a girl child for her marriage dowry (*The Hindu*, November 20, 1994). Dr. K. J. Kurian's observations on the Kallars in Usilampatti concur with Vaasanthi's economic solution to modern female infanticide, "The main point is that a girl needs to be married, which needs a few thousand Rupees which poor villagers cannot afford" (*Eubios Ethics Institute Newsletter* 3, 1993, 3).

A similar economic solution to female infanticide was attempted in nineteenth-century India by British colonial administrators. The British solution was three-pronged: penalize infanticidal families with fines and land seizure, establish a British-administered Infanticide Fund from these fines, and offer to pay the dowries of surviving daughters from the fund in order to encourage infanticidal families to preserve their daughters. Our research shows that despite regular census by the colonial government to monitor female infant deaths, the economic solution was a complete failure.

The failure stemmed in part from British collusion with the infanticidal logic wherein daughters are viewed as financial burdens. We discern a fundamental contradiction between the British analysis of the problem of female infanticide in terms of tradition/custom and their solution in economic terms. If we are to take the economic solution seriously then we must suppose that customs and traditions can be changed by the simple logic of economics. Conversely, if we take the British analysis of the problem of female infanticide as Indian custom seriously, then we must suppose that a woman-related custom cannot be eradicated by economics because the custom of female infanticide survives despite family affluence. The fundamental contradiction we have noted in British analysis continues to be reproduced by post-colonial analysts like Vaasanthi and Kurian. We designate this particular kind of analysis the colonialist-economic approach to female infanticide. Colonialist-economic solutions do not address the fundamental problem of inequality between the sexes nor challenge the fundamental premises of woman devaluation, instead they offer a stop-gap solution.

We believe in a woman's choice and her ability to be self-determining; we recognize that the small family norm is generally less oppressive on the

wife/mother, and generally speaking fewer pregnancies are conducive to the health and longevity of the childbearing mother. We nevertheless take into account the fact that in postcolonial India the small family norm lacks class specificity. The sociopsychology of childbearing of the rural poor woman is markedly different from middle-class woman's discourse about children. While the latter is concerned about the effect of frequent pregnancies on maternal health, childbirth, and child rearing, the poor woman has many children in the hope that some of them will survive the high infant mortality rate. For the poor woman the period of pregnancy is often the only period when her diet, her health, and need for rest has priority. The poor woman cannot buy into the middle-class woman's dream of fewer children, more leisure, health and self-cultivation, and greater family resources for the children.

Western feminists fought long and hard for the choice to have fewer children so that daughters could have more opportunities for education and self-cultivation than their mothers and grandmothers.<sup>6</sup> This narrative of First World emancipation becomes an obstacle in understanding the imperatives for the rural poor women in India who wish to preserve the right to have children. The poor woman's reasoning is explored in Deepa Dhanraj's film *Something like a War* (1991) where the rural women of Rajasthan repeatedly point out that the wealth of the poor inheres in children (*garib ka dhan uske bacche*). Therefore, more children means more labor power for the poor woman and her family. We do not endorse child labor nor do we advocate large families. Nevertheless, we have to recognize that for the poor woman her children are her support structure and her only resource against total destitution, while middle-class children require long-term investments of education to make them productive members of the family.

The economic perspective on female infanticide tends to delink the economic factor from classed attitudes to women and children, thereby occluding the fact that the laboring classes value women and children as producers while the upper classes generally regard their women and children primarily as consumers. From an early age the rural poor woman's children work as laboring members of the family; the eldest daughter often assumes the maternal role of childrearing younger siblings; children relieve the mother of labor intensive household chores like collecting firewood, bringing water from far-off places, tending livestock, cooking and cleaning; the children also take care of the mother in times of illness and in old age, often substituting for the male or female parent on the days that either of them is too ill to work. The children of the poor are earning members in their own right, contributing to the mother's subsistence production in the household or in the field, in addition to taking up part-time jobs to augment the family resources.<sup>7</sup>

At the present time this distinction between the attitudes of the middle class and the poor working class toward their children is in danger of being

lost as the poor working class as well as the rural poor begin to adopt middle-class values and attitudes toward women and children. The adoption of these values and attitudes have been materially facilitated by displacements of people from their traditional occupations and lifestyles by development projects like the building of dams, mining, and the creation of factories. These displaced populations face alienation at all levels and at the same time are subjected to the pressures of patriarchal capitalism, which is disseminated as a homogenized national culture.

Therefore, the heterogeneity of class- and community-specific gender practices are in danger of being swallowed by the anti-woman capitalist logic. For example, in western and southern India female infanticide was virtually unknown; instead there existed strong traditions of matriarchal organization of the family; women's labor was valued both in the natal and marital family and women had property rights. At the present time in the rural areas of southern and parts of western India, like Usilampatti taluk of Madurai district, the practice of female infanticide has become widespread. In these remote areas where reproductive technology for sex determination is not yet widely available, capitalist patriarchal devaluation of women has become so pervasive that long-forgotten methods of child murder are being revived in order to commit female infanticide. We believe that a persistent colonialist patriarchal devaluation of women, accompanied by the capitalist logic of accumulation through violence, and an increasing emphasis on privatizing of property at the cost of the general community leads to socially sanctioned female infanticide and daughter killing. Under global capitalism it is commodity-relations between men and women that take precedence over earlier heterogeneous modes of upward mobility in India, facilitating the devaluation of women's labor and productivity and finally devaluing women as daughters.<sup>8</sup>

In the capitalist discourse of development the cliché that the poor are poor because there are too many of them implies that it is the poor of the world who rapidly consume the planet's resources while giving nothing back to society and the environment, while rich nations and peoples of the world work hard at producing wealth and conserving the environment. These slogans are resuscitated in a speech by Ted Turner, the American media magnate, at a real estate development conference. The context of Turner's remarks is his billion dollar gift to the United Nations, which the latter intends to channel into the U.N. population programs. Turner suggests that globally families should practice a one-child-only norm. Turner's public statement exemplifies First World thinking about world population, therefore it is instructive to examine it more closely:

If you have two billion people you could have automobiles, and everybody could have a good standard of living. I've got to worry about the totality of

the planet because there are some people who think we can build a wall around the United States and keep the misery out. (They think) we can just let Africa and Central and South America and parts of Asia stew in their own juices. I don't agree with that at all. A lot of people will stay in India and Bangladesh and Africa and El Salvador. A lot of them will stay there and starve. There's no question about that. But a lot of them won't. They're going to come to where the prosperity is—and they know where the prosperity is, baby. We need to have a one-child family (policy) globally. People who abhor the China one-child policy are dumb-dumb, because if China hadn't had that policy, there would be 300 million more people in China right now. (*India Abroad*, 38, September 25 1998)

Turner's philanthropic, democratic, and conservationist posture dismantles as he speaks. Turner first confesses that even though he is a spokesperson for the small family he himself has a large family. Turner asserts "a personal responsibility to worry about overpopulation" in order to underline his disinterested concern for the future of humankind. The claim that he is worried about "the totality of the planet" is contradicted by his exclusive focus on Third World populations in Africa, Central and South America, and parts of Asia. Turner's statement, "People who abhor the China one-child policy are dumb-dumbs" makes it clear that he is in favor of coercive measures for population control although his speech appears to support democratic persuasion. Turner's admiring reference to China's population policies implies an endorsement of China's human rights violations and coercive state apparatus. In effect Turner's implication is that democracy and democratic procedures are appropriate in United States but coercive population control policies used exclusively in the Third World, are necessary to control those populations.

Turner's appeal continually shifts grounds because he cannot find the one convincing appeal that will convert his audience to work toward and support the control of the poor in the Third World. He observes that a small family improves the "quality of life" so that everyone can have "automobiles" and "a good standard of living." This blatant consumerism changes into a concern for the totality of the planet. When that is not enough the rhetorical appeal changes from disinterested philanthropy toward the Third World to xenophobia: according to Turner it is not possible to build a wall round the United States to ward off the starving millions from invading America. Quite apart from the cultural imperialism of assuming that all of the people in the Third World desire the American Dream, Turner also commits the fallacy of surmising that it is possible and even ecologically desirable that the South aspire to the same level of affluence as the North. The shifting and changing rhetorical grounds of the speech reflects the sanctioned ignorance in the First World

of the unequal exchange between the North and the South and the damaging impact of unfettered development on the environment.

The causal link between affluence and the small family norm in the North and poverty and the large family in the South has to be radically rethought in the context of global capitalism and the international division of labor. From the 1970s critics like Samir Amin have made us aware that capitalist accumulation and continued development in the North is made possible by the growth of underdevelopment in the South (*Unequal Development: An Essay on the Social Formations of Peripheral Capitalism*, 1976). The North is enriched through collaboration with indigenous elites of the South, and the most damaging consequences of this collaboration are visited on women and environment in the South.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, a study of the relationship between poverty and family size in a country like India needs to be complicated by considering the unequal exchange between the North and the South and the role of international agencies like the United Nations, World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund in this unequal exchange.

The capitalist model of development adopted by India is inspired by the North and is anti-poor, anti-woman, and anti-environment, contributing to the prosperity of the North and the native elites of the South. This development model excludes the poorest classes in India from the material benefits of the nation state, displaces them from their homelands and destroys their life-sustaining natural environment.<sup>10</sup> Within this model of development the Indian nation-state promises affluence for all. However, the unequal exchange in global capitalism means that the prosperity of the First World is predicated on the poverty of the poor in the Third World. In fact, the wealth, accumulation, and affluence of the North is only possible, given the limited nature of the planet's natural resources, on the continuing impoverishment of the poor of the South.

Unable to deliver on its promise of prosperity for the poor the Indian nation-state offers, with the help of international agencies, the palliative of family planning. The poor are told that their eligibility for a share in the nation state's prosperity is dependent on their acceptance of population control. They are asked to voluntarily reduce their numbers even as they are being displaced and further impoverished by development projects. It is in the interstices of these persuasive/coercive strategies that femicide emerges in postcolonial India as the underbelly of the discourses of development and the official version of ecological conservation.<sup>11</sup> Modern femicide is inserted into the global frame of reference through the international discourses of development and the official version of ecological conservation operating as population control.

Our first epigraph from the *National Geographic* represents the popular cliché that the world is going to hell because "those people" are having children or "breeding." In the discourses of development and the official version



of ecological conservation the poor, the dispossessed and disenfranchised female population of the South is subject to and blamed for the destruction and depletion of the environment. "In global terms," notes a United Nations report, "the impact of a drastic decrease of population in the poorest areas of Asia, Africa, and Latin America would be immeasurably smaller than a decrease of only 5 percent of the richest countries at present consumption levels" (*UNICEF, Children and the Environment*, 1990). Even though this report acknowledges the error in the blame-the-poor population policies of the governments of the South, there is no attempt to reconceptualize United Nations programs and take effective action.

The large abstractions of development discourse and population theory become concrete everyday realities in Indian women's lives through the notion that to be progressive and desire prosperity for the family, it is necessary that they accept reproductive technology in their lives. It is widely and erroneously believed that the techniques of amniocentesis and ultrasound for sex-selection purposes is a regrettable side effect in the transformation of an underdeveloped nation. In short, there is nothing inherently wrong with the new reproductive technologies. If the Third World misuses these material-discursive practices to visit violence on their own women, that is simply their problem. Thus, the gender bias of invasive fertility control technologies and the violence visited on Indian women are often perceived as incidental and aberrant misuse of gender-neutral science. In contradistinction we argue that the role of new reproductive technologies evolved in the North and exported to the South functions to control Third World women's reproductive choices even at the cost of their health and life expectancy.

The postcolonial state's population program strips the rural poor woman of her only resource and without changing any of the material economic conditions that causes her poverty, persuades her that the simple fact of less children and less labor power will result in more prosperity and better conditions for her. Thus, the state ignores the root cause (her poverty) and attacks the symptom (her many children). She is correct in perceiving that the family planning program is of a piece with the inroads made into her resources of water, soil, seed, and forest by depriving her of firewood through deforestation, sale of pasture land, and the systematic destruction of her living environment. The state's family planning and family welfare programs do nothing about the health of women; when they ask for contraception they are given sterilization.

In unpacking the different strands of discourse that function to keep femicide a rational and national choice in postcolonial India we come to the counterintuitive insight that development and modernization have not always enabled the emancipation of all women in all parts of the world. Madhu Kishwar suggests that in postcolonial societies like India, "progress and eco-

conomic development can have very differential impacts on women's and men's lives, and sometimes can even have a harmful impact on women's lives" (*Man-Made Woman*, 1985, 33). This is certainly true in the area of femicide: three decades of political independence from colonial rule has meant that the heterogeneity of familial-social attitudes toward the girl-child are marginalized and modernity ushers in scientifically efficient methods of femicide.

It is social forces of our own modern times that introduce the practice of female infanticide in regions and communities that hitherto had no traditions of girl-child murder. It is in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s that the violence of femicide is generalized and universalized among all classes, regions, and communities of postcolonial India. History teaches us the profoundly anti-modern and anti-progressivist lesson that political independence and modernization means further attrition of the survival conditions for postcolonial Indian women.

### Femicide in the Public Domain: The Nationalist Populist Rhetoric of Family Planning

Exactly a century passes between the ineffective abolition of female infanticide in British India in the 1870s and the re-emergence of a new and far more generalized form of scientific genocide of female fetuses in the 1970s. Female infanticide (traditional methods of killing new-born female infants practiced in northwest India) reappears as modern femicide (scientific methods of aborting female fetus combined with traditional methods of killing through neglect and discrimination). Our focus is on the function of nationalist populist rhetoric of family planning in this re-emergent and modernized discourse of femicide.

We deploy the term "nationalist populist rhetoric of family planning" in this section to prevent readers from interpreting family planning in India in Western terms. Family planning connotes to First World women choice, planned parenthood, care of maternal health, choice of contraception, and control over their bodies. Family planning carries a very different set of connotations for most Indian women—state coercion instead of affirmation of a woman's individual choice, disregard of maternal health rather than care of maternal health, women selected for experimentation with unsafe contraception rather than an informed choice of contraception. The political issues around family planning for many women in United States may well be the right to life versus the right to choice, however the political issues concerning family planning for an Indian woman involve discourses of development, overpopulation, and the fact of state coercion. Therefore, we examine family planning not merely as an accepted value-free norm but in the discursive context of

state intervention and the dominant political rhetoric of the 1970s, namely nationalist populism in the Indira Gandhi era.

Nationalist populism has its discursive roots in the First World, in the notion shared by corporate America, the U.S. government, the United Nations, and Third World governments that all the problems of underdevelopment stem from overpopulation in the Third World. In the nationalist populist vocabulary national interest connotes the larger good of the greatest number of citizens as well as the imperative for swift development in order to compete with advanced countries of the world in the global market. The corollary to this populism is the notion that coercion is justified as means for the desirable goal of population decrease. This rhetoric is neo-imperialist because it covers over the nexus between the international community and indigenous governments both of which colonize the poor. The indigenous governments are “persuaded” by international interests to buy reproductive technologies and services, which keep the big multinational pharmaceutical companies in business. The forms of coercion adopted by this international conglomerate of interests consists in linking foreign aid and credit to Third World countries with the level of performance in the field of population control. Instead of resisting this carrot-and-stick approach of the North, nascent democracies of the South like India attempt to jump-start development by undemocratic programs of population control.

The nationalist populist analysis of underdevelopment is predicated on the center/periphery binary and carries profound implications for Indian women. First World women’s rights over their bodies—their right to maternal health, right to contraception and abortion, their informed choices about, as well as their free access to, a variety of scientific means for determining if and when they wish to be pregnant—coexists alongside Third World women’s lack of rights over their bodies. At the very time that American women organize themselves around issues like the environment, nuclear proliferation, women’s rights over their bodies and reproductive choice, elsewhere in the world First World scientists and private corporate interests in the U.S. cooperate with the postcolonial state to unleash new and untested reproductive technologies that deprive Third World women of their right over their own bodies and reproductive choice. This combine consisting of corporate and scientific First World interests and the Indian government discover their ideal subjects for trying out new untested contraception among the poor women population of the Third World. Third World rural and urban women are perceived as guinea pigs who can be easily coerced and need not be informed about the side effects of new contraceptive devices, partly because it is assumed that these women do not know that they have a right to refuse and consequently can be intimidated by the medical profession into accepting injections or pills or surgery, and partly because they are unorganized and politically powerless.<sup>12</sup>

The chief rhetorical feature of nationalist populism is a narrative of the “nation” within which alternative visions and political dissent is disallowed and delegitimated. Indeed, the nationalist populist rhetor speaks alone because there is no debate or dialogue in this rhetorical situation. This is true of the 1970s in India; after two decades of political independence the 1970s is marked by social upheaval and economic crisis; many intellectuals, activists, and cultural workers raise doubts about the social justice in India’s chosen development model and offer alternative visions. It is precisely at such a politically dynamic moment that the ruling Congress party declares the Emergency. The Emergency of 1974–1977, declared by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, mark the watershed years of unprecedented state terrorism through suspension of all democratic institutions, repression of dissent, and large-scale arrests of political dissidents as well as a media blackout on all forms of reportage on state excesses.

Nation and democracy are no longer coeval in the Indian nation-state’s political discourses in the 1970s, thus the imaginary construction of the nation does not include democracy/democratic procedures and institutions. As a direct result the powerful new discourse of family planning does not denote counseling and advising the family, instead family planning in India comes to mean social engineering of the postcolonial family.<sup>13</sup> The watershed years of state terrorism also mark, in our view, the period of social engineering of the postcolonial Indian family through the nation’s coercive and persuasive apparatus. For the first time a spectrum of coercive strategies are evolved to limit family size. The euphemism for state coercion is “motivating” and every branch of the government, national media, and youth organizations are involved in “family planning motivation.” In the mid-1970s an employee’s certificate of sterilization and the number of people “motivated” is a precondition for promotions, loans, housing, licenses, and permits. State employees are required to undergo vasectomy as well as meet sterilization targets by forcibly “motivating” the poor to undergo vasectomies in mass sterilization camps. These camps are set up in railway stations, slums, villages, and some areas with a high density of the minority Muslim population.

Populist slogans that overpopulation is the single source of India’s underdevelopment and poverty are internalized by the middle-class intelligentsia as part of their everyday speech and political discussion. Contemporary political discourse of the urban elite has a unidimensional view of national problems and solutions: the urban elite espouses the notion that overpopulation is the source of all national ills and population control is the efficient route to development and national prosperity. While the middle-class patriarchal family’s political engagement with nation building lies in consenting to the Prime Minister’s call for a small family, the middle classes also come to

believe that the recalcitrant poor need not have a voice in determining their family size and must be coerced for their own good.<sup>14</sup>

The political pieties about overpopulation are not subject to debate and question. Instead, the coining of a phrase suffices for genuine political debate in the nationalist populist simulacrum of the public sphere. The state embarks upon a sustained multimedia propaganda about the small family norm. Large billboards, radio jingles, television and cinema advertisements, puppet shows, politicians' speeches all counsel the Indian couple that happiness and prosperity is defined by numbers. The nationalist slogans of the times are, "A small family is a happy family" (*Chhota parivaar sukhi parivaar*) and catch phrases like, "We are two and we have two" (*Hum doe hamare doe*), "Stop at two or three" (*Do ya teen bus*) and "Wait after one and none after two" (*Ek ke baad abhi nahin, doe ke baad kabhi nahin*). Contemporary films include set situations and dialogues deriding the traditional large family and expounding the benefits of a small family. These slogans and set pieces scold, shame, exhort, and silence the citizenry and in so doing have long-term effects on the subjectivity of the postcolonial family.

Collective resistance first appears as people's fear; rumor and unofficial grapevines serve as the channel for people's information about, and anger against, governmental excesses.<sup>15</sup> Nationalist populist slogans are parodied on the streets, for instance Indira Gandhi's election slogan "Remove poverty" (*Garibi hatao*) is parodied as "In the process of removing poverty they removed/ exterminated the poor" (*Garibi hatate hatate garibon ko hi bata diya*). This slogan refers to the combination strategy by the government of setting up sterilization camps as well as removing the poor from the cities and resettling them outside the city in resettlement colonies. The subsequent political overthrow of the Indira Gandhi government in the elections is widely interpreted as people's rejection of coercive male sterilization. In the post-Emergency electoral campaign the anti-poor politics of Indira Gandhi's "family planning" and prodevelopment policies are exposed by populist slogans coined by the opposition, "Denounce mass male sterilizations" (*Nasbandi hai! hai!*). However, the rhetoric of this oppositional critique, being populist in nature, does not address the anti-woman bias of family planning policies, and it is this omission that predetermines the aftermath of the Emergency.

We do not simplify the discourse of modern femicide in India by suggesting that female fetus killing is merely the outcome of a top-down change imposed in the 1970s on a passive people who fall prey to the coercive and persuasive apparatus of the government. In our view the discursive connection between the Emergency and modern femicide is that under conditions of extraordinary state coercion, femicide is the patriarchal family's invested decoding of the official nationalist populist rhetoric. This decoding is a far

more complex process than the passive internalizing of state directives by the people. The patriarchal family is faced with a dilemma, they are anxious to stake their claim on the economic opportunities offered to a few by the state so they wish to comply with family-planning directives for a small family, and at the same time they are equally determined to preserve and continue their own patriarchal interests through having one or more sons. However, the traditional method of having a male child through large families is a source of social shame in the 1970s. Nationalist-populist messages—prosperity is accessible to all people if they achieve the perfect small family—is reinterpreted by upwardly mobile households to accommodate son-preference. Thus the post-colonial family deciphers the slogan “Stop at two or three” (*Do ya teen bus*) to mean “Stop at two or three sons.” It is in this crisis that many families negotiate between traditional son-preference and the modern small family norm by deploying new, available reproductive technologies like amniocentesis and using them for sex determination and sex selection.

Reproductive technologies imported from the West not only solve the problem of the unwanted female child for individual families, science also quick-fixes the nation's problem of overpopulation through mass female sterilizations. Referring to the immediate post-Emergency years Alaka M. Basu notes, “In 1977–1978 female sterilizations suddenly made up as much as 80 percent of all sterilizations” (*EPW*, vol. xx, no. 10, 1985, 422). The long-term effects of the Emergency on women in general, and the twentieth-century resurgence of female infanticide in particular, only gradually became evident. Family planning in the Emergency mainly targeted poor men. Post-1977 family-planning policies exclusively target poor women in urban and rural India. The targeting of men in the Emergency causes a government to fall, the targeting of women by the state in the post-1977 years causes no political repercussions. Unlike the Emergency period, the targeting of women in the 1980s and 1990s family planning remains unresisted by the postcolonial family because the patriarchal family is willing to submit their women for sterilization so long as their men are protected. The patriarchal family sanctions female sterilizations despite the fact that the female sterilization operation is more complicated, unsafe, and expensive than male sterilizations. The post-Emergency family-planning focus on female sterilizations is premised on the cynical assumption that women constitute the one group in society against whom violence carries no repercussions. Therefore, this collusion among the international agencies, the state, and the patriarchal family in mass tubectomies does not by any means offer reproductive “choice” to women, instead these mass sterilizations constitute yet another mechanism whereby state-sponsored violence is unleashed on women.

The postcolonial family did not suddenly become a conscienceless predator of women, especially since the majority of families practicing

modern femicide do not belong to the traditionally infanticidal families of northwest India. The predatory behavior of the post-1977 Indian family toward its own women is the cumulative effect of the criminal negligence of state planners. From the first Five-Year Plan these planners do not concern themselves with how population-control measures, in the context of the untransformed feudal-patriarchal necessity for a male child, put increased pressure on the birthing mother and the female child. Modern femicide could not have reached its present genocidal proportions if the nation state had not turned a blind eye toward new forms of violence on women.<sup>16</sup> It is precisely when the state wages war on the postcolonial family that the patriarchal family retaliates by turning predatory on its own women.

The infringement of civil liberties by the state in the Emergency period as well as the forms of state coercion on the postcolonial family triggers a major discursive shift in the Indian women's movements. Women's resistances are cohesively organized around the issue of family and the violence perpetrated on women by the state via the patriarchal family. In the words of a leading activist Brinda Karat, "The [women's] movement became more focused in the post-emergency period. . . . It was only after the emergency that the movement's focus was directed toward the family" (*India Abroad*, December 27, 1996). In 1974–1975 at the very outset of the phenomenon of modern femicide, women's groups call attention to the fact that scientific technology meant for the detection of genetic disorders in a premier research hospital in Delhi (All India Institute of Medical Sciences) is misused by seven out of eight couples to abort the female fetus.<sup>17</sup> In the 1980s and 1990s the ultrasound test is the most widely used method for facilitating female infanticide. Ultrasound technology is hawked by charlatans in private clinics that do not require patients to produce a doctor's permission for the test. These clinics mushroom in every Indian city and reach small towns and villages in mobile vans and many gynecologists habitually require pregnant women to undergo this test.

From the late 1970s, despite growing criticism and information-gathering by women's organizations about this scientific weeding out of female fetuses, no governmental legislation was enacted to monitor or prevent it. The law of 1994 that prohibits the administering of prenatal tests for the purpose of femicide and threatens those who take or administer the test with a three-year prison term and fine comes too late and offers too little to combat this epidemic.<sup>18</sup> Nationalist populist rhetoric of the 1970s has a lasting effect on the ways the postcolonial family justifies female infanticide. The fusing of the nationalist populist rhetoric of family planning with the patriarchal interests of the postcolonial family has the following effects: within the postcolonial family femicide is named as the practice of the small family norm and femicide exacerbates the violence on all women in general.

### Femicide and the Condition of Women in the Private-Familial Sphere: Lalli's Suicide/Murder

Manjira Dutta's 1995 documentary film *Relationships (Rishte)* deals with the contemporary problem of femicide. The film documents the 1993 case of Lalli Goel and the subsequent efforts of the woman activist Shyamkali to raise the community's awareness in order to organize collective resistance by women. Lalli Goel was a Delhi housewife who fatally poisoned two of her four daughters and committed suicide on June 8, 1993, because she was misled, after several sex-determination tests, into aborting her male fetus. Throughout the film most of the characters display enormous confusion about whether Lalli's death is a criminal offense for which they should seek legal redress or whether Lalli's death can be written off as a suicide. Amidst all this confusion there are no questions raised about Lalli's murder of her two daughters, which is accepted as a "natural" impulse of a desperate mother.

Dutta's film does not isolate the female fetus as the victim of gendered violence. Instead the film visually constructs a chain of female victims—Lalli, her two dead and two surviving daughters, Lalli's mother-in-law, the new wife, and the neighboring women of the community. In Lalli's case three females pay with their lives for the death of one male fetus, thus the numerical ratio between male and female casualties is three women to one male fetus. The violence does not stop there but continues to spiral forward. Five months after Lalli's death, her husband Gopal marries again. A new list of potential victims springs up in the wake of the earlier death toll. The list comprises Gopal's second wife who is submissive because she has come from a poor family and still has to face the family abuse if she does not give birth to the male heir. The list also includes Lalli's two remaining daughters who are constantly reminded that their siblings' cause of death is due to the fact that they are daughters and not sons.

As Indian women viewers we find it remarkable how the film captures an essential ingredient in the phenomenon of femicide: men constantly speak for women and about women. Many of the women in Manjira Dutta's film do not speak with the exception of Shyamkali the activist. Lalli's female relatives do not speak at all. Her mother is reported as saying that it is too late to seek legal justice. Lalli's mother-in-law moves silently before the camera performing her household chores. Lalli's female neighbors listen with somber expressions to Shyamkali who says, "Today it has happened to this one, tomorrow the same thing can happen to another." Thus visually and discursively the film allows us to come to our own conclusion that it is the male members of the family who make decisions about women's reproductivity.

Lalli is the victim of the most widespread and socially sanctioned abuse in postcolonial Indian families, a form of abuse that can be described without



exaggeration as the colonization of the Third World women's womb. As a child-bearing mother Lalli faces a variety of psychological, physical, social, and economic abuse because she does not give birth to a son. There are no laws, institutions, governmental or nongovernmental agencies, or women's shelters that can offer Lalli protection from the violence visited on her due to son-preference. Lalli is more educated than her husband but despite her higher level of education the passive collusion of her natal family and her economic powerlessness as a housewife combine to severely limit her options. Lalli and her daughters are at the mercy of her married family and unable to walk away. Infact Indian women's education and employment alone cannot ensure that their status will automatically improve to the degree that they will no longer be subject to the sorts of abuse visited on Lalli. In the postcolonial patriarchal family, the educated and employed married woman is subject to the same sorts of controls as the uneducated, unemployed, or underemployed married woman as is obvious from the dowry death killings in India.

A program of resistance to the systemic violence of femicide involves, in our view, a debate and discussion on the discourses and popular idioms in which that violence is enacted, interpreted, and sanctioned. Each character in the documentary offers their own version of the reasons for the suicide/murder. The filmic text constructs Lalli's victimage in such a way that as spectators we are impelled to focus on the ways in which tradition enmeshes with modernity in making Lalli a victim.

In India the abuser and the female victim's subjectivity is produced and shaped by the material and discursive apparatus of overpopulation theory. Each character in Manjira Duttas' film situates female infanticide in the discursive concepts and terminology of Malthusian population theory. The dead woman's husband Gopal Goel explains the reasoning for the mistaken abortion in terms of numbers, "My Mrs. felt mental *tension* because we already have four daughters and this fifth daughter will add to the numbers." In contemporary India the "numbers game" as we term it, constitutes the popular idiom for the Malthusian connection between a nation's population and the state of national prosperity.<sup>19</sup> In this popular idiom the numbers game refers to the *number of expendable females* because postcolonial modernity ushers in the view that women are not producers but consumers and destroyers of family prosperity.

Gopal attributes the numbers game to his dead wife. Nevertheless the vocabulary in which he describes his own thoughts after his wife's abortion reveals that he habitually thinks in the binary of women as expendable numbers versus men as cherished members of the family. For instance, Gopal refers to the male fetus as his *umeed* or hope, revealing his belief that male children are the family's hope and are never counted in the "numbers game" among the unmourned female casualties. In front of the camera Gopal refers

to his new wife as being on “trial,” he uses the English word in the idiom of spoken Hindi-English to openly admit before the filmmaker that the new wife’s ability to please him and produce sons will determine her fate as a replaceable number.

In a similar rhetorical maneuver Goel’s father uses population theory indirectly by attributing it to the victim. Lalli, he claims, killed her two eldest daughters because she wished to save the family ten lakhs in dowry. He says, “She wanted to save us ten lakhs for our profit (*faida*)” thus outlining the Malthusian idea that children are a drain on the nation’s resources and their accidental death or murder adds profit to the family and nation. Both men, Gopal and his father, speak before the camera in a relaxed body posture; the state’s discourse of population and the popular idiom of the numbers game has made it possible for them to talk about the woman who was an integral part of their family for ten years, as well as the murdered daughters who had claims on their affections, in a dehumanizing and instrumentalized terminology of four numbers who should not become five and are now reduced to two.<sup>20</sup> Thus, male perpetrators argue that female fetus killing is a form of population control when it is actually gender discrimination.

The film uses montage to intercut Gopal’s statements with the filmmaker’s interviews with the medical establishment. Dutta’s montage shocks the viewer into realizing that the educated medical establishment echoes, endorses, and completely concurs with Gopal in rationalizing femicide through population theory. The cinematic text presents us with three characters who analyze the Lalli case through their professional vocabulary. The psychologist Indrani Guha uses the family-planning terminology to describe a mother’s desire for a male child as a societal “goal.” Ms. Guha’s analysis erases the social-familial violence on Lalli by describing her suicide/murder as the psychological effect of failing in a societal goal. These educated urban professionals are not impelled by the Lalli case and the growing statistics of femicide to review, reevaluate, or reflect on the imperialism and gender-bias in the discourse of population control, which they have imbibed from state propaganda.

The educated elite are no different from the marketing professionals who seek to popularize ultrasound technology as a boon for both the Indian couple and the nation. An advertisement in a national newspaper in the early 1980s openly sold the facilities of a private clinic for detecting female fetuses, “Amniocentesis and ante-natal sex determination has come to our rescue and can help in keeping some check over the accelerating population as well as give relief to the couples requiring a male child” (*Indian Express*, June 27, 1982). This advertisement was commissioned by the New Bhandari Hospital in the city of Amritsar, Punjab, and was widely criticized by feminist groups and the national press. The Bhandari Hospital gained national recognition in 1982 when a male fetus was mistakenly aborted by this antenatal sex determination