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Political Science
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Women's Rights and Development in India
MAP
Professor Moyer

My MAP with Professor Moyer in the Spring of 2012 was an invaluable part of my time at Grinnell, as it allowed me to gain experience doing an intense amount of research on a specific subject. My MAP focused on a phenomenon happening in India, which is that there are sex-selective abortions occurring around the country. I particularly focused on three states, with varying levels of development – Bihar, Punjab, and Kerala. Furthermore, the summer after my MAP, I spent time in northern India and had the opportunity to understand some of the gender, education and health issues in a deep and meaningful way. Having the chance to analyze what is happening on the ground in India immensely enhanced my research. I would like to participate in this symposium as a way to share what I've learned from my research, as well as learn from other people's academic work and experiences.

EXCERPTS FROM MAP

In the spring of 2012, I did a MAP with Professor Wayne Moyer on Women's rights and development in India. I spent the following summer working for an NGO in Rajasthan, a province in the northwest region of India. This essay will explore an unfortunate phenomenon in India—the fact that the ratio between men and women and substantial evidence suggests that a high number of sex-selective abortions are taking place in certain regions of India. Sex-selective abortion is defined as the act of terminating a pregnancy based upon the predicted sex of the baby.

I want to explore why this phenomenon is taking place in some regions of India, but not in other regions. To explore this topic, I selected three regions that had varying male to female ratios: Bihar, Punjab, and Kerala. I chose these three provinces because they each have varying levels of development. Bihar is the least economically developed of the provinces that I chose, and Kerala seemed to be the most developed in terms of literacy rates and economic growth. The third province I chose was Punjab, and it's an interesting case because it seems to be at a middle stage of development.

I began my research looking for issues pertaining to women's rights in India. The data from the 2011 Census directed my research toward an issue I did not anticipate. Initially, I thought that my research would entail typical Third World women's issues, such as education or political involvement. After studying the 2011 Census, I realized that women's rights in India would be far more complex than my previous assumption. Once I understood that the female to male ratios in certain areas of India are very skewed, I examined the 2011 Census closer. Upon further research, I came across information that discussed a sex-selective abortion phenomenon in certain parts of India. I investigated

variables that I thought could account for the sex-selective abortion issue, and I found that all of the variables seem to be intertwined. The sex-selective abortion issue led me to believe that the fundamental issue with women's rights in India is that women do not hold as much value as men, and this is clearly shown in the low female to male ratios.

There is no data that gives a specific number of sex-selective abortions because it has been outlawed in India, but we can deduce where they are taking place because of the skewed female to male ratios. In the 1970s, sex determination of the fetus became possible in India. This technology was initially used to detect abnormalities, but it quickly became used to determine the sex of a fetus.

The independent variables of this study provide possible explanations for a skewed female to male ratio in some areas of the country. I hypothesized that the various plausible explanations include the following: access to education, varying literacy rates, the prevalence of the dowry, the maternal health facilities in the province, the total fertility rate, different per-capita incomes, and whether the region is urban or rural. Possibly the most significant independent variable is the idea of social agency, which I will explain in detail later in the paper. The dependent variable for this study, the female to male ratio, provides factual evidence that sex-selective abortions are occurring in India.

I hypothesized that poor areas, where there was likely very little education, would not have sex-selective abortions. As income increases in an area, people also gain more access to technology, and as a result, more sex-selective abortions can take place. Then, as an area continues to develop, people may become more highly educated. As this happens, women's groups might begin to organize, and the number of sex-selective

abortions may begin to drop. As I began to compare the three provinces, I found that the main variable for the differing sex ratios might not only be due to education.

With further examination of the subject, however, my conclusions differed from my original hypothesis. Based on my research, I will argue that a certain level of poverty and desperation induces the use of sex-determining technologies. Furthermore, the prevalence of the dowry in the North has led me to believe that the dowry is a fundamental factor behind the occurrence of sex-selective abortions in Punjab and Bihar.

When I tested all of the variables, I came to the conclusion that sex-selective abortions are rampant in rural, agriculturally based, poor provinces in the North. Moreover, the evidence that there are more sex-selective abortions in the North where dowries are more common confirms the importance of the dowry variable. Overall, I found that social development does not come about until the economy is in decent shape and economic development has taken place. It seems that the overarching variable that makes the critical difference between a state that has a sex-selective abortion problem and a state that does not have this issue is social agency.

Social Agency

Possibly the most important and inclusive variable is social agency, which is an idea that originated in Amartya Sen's work. Social agency includes capabilities, social mobility, status, and activism. Fundamentally, social agency drives Kerala and is lacking in Punjab and Bihar. Social agency connects all of the variables because if it is missing, all of the other variables become less important. Women's rights can begin once a place

has experienced economic development, and a place could not form strong social agency until its economy is functioning.

Punjab does not have social agency quite yet, but in some ways, it is more developed than Bihar. In looking at Punjab's per-capita income, we are able to see that their economy functions more productively than Bihar. Furthermore, Bihar does not show any signs of social agency. Maternal health, an important variable for social agency, seems to be a focus in Kerala, but not in Punjab or Bihar. Furthermore, the maternal mortality rate in Bihar and Punjab is much higher than it is in Kerala. From this, I have deduced that there is a lack of overall social agency in northern India.

Domestic violence is an important indicator of the social agency of women. If women are not respected in the household, it is plausible to assert that their status in society is low. It is also reasonable to assume that the prevalence of domestic violence in a place speaks negatively to the family dynamic, particularly the relationship between the husband and wife. Furthermore, as it pertains to India, if domestic violence exists, the husband might be able to more easily convince the wife of an abortion. This was an argument that I made in my MAP, and was reinforced by my time in India. At a conference based on the issues surrounding sex-selective abortions, one woman stated that she had had five abortions because she was told she was going to have a girl. She went on to mention that her husband strongly encouraged her to get the abortions. I am not asserting that abortions are being forced upon women in areas where domestic violence occurs. My argument is grounded in that if men are the dominant figure in the households, and domestic violence is taking place, the status of women is probably low and women are therefore considered less desirable.

In Rajasthan, I worked with a women's self-help group on trying to develop a marketable good. This project ended up turning into a women's health project as well. The women's group decided to make fashionable, reusable pads for women. Women in rural areas of India were using inadequate substitutes for pads. There were three fundamental reasons that these pads were a good item for the market. First, using a reusable pads would save money because one would not have to buy pads every month. The second reason these pads are a good idea is that the disposable pads are harming the environment, as they are not degradable. The last reason this is a good product is that women were given a chance to create and market their own products. From working with this women's group, I found out that many of them were insecure about their ability to sell products because they were unfamiliar with economics and business.

Rajasthan has a very skewed sex ratio. As I have stated, my MAP discussed what variables were responsible for this declining sex ratio. At the conference that I attended on sex-selective abortions, and it was interesting to see the variables being discussed in comparison to the variables discussed in my paper. It was interesting to see that social agency, the variable that I argued was most responsible for the declining sex ratio, seemed to be a significant point of discussion at the conference. I also feel like hearing primary source accounts of experiences enhanced my research. The fundamental reason for this declining sex ratio seems to be the women's role in society. From the rhetoric during the conference, it seems that girls are less valuable than boys in a cultural sense. The issue that arises is how does one go about helping bring development when culture becomes an obstacle. There was a lot of discussion at the conference about solutions, but

I felt that the most significant aspect of this conference is that this phenomenon was being recognized and discussed as an issue.

Furthermore, one way in which I was able to understand the conversation happening in India surrounding the rights of women was to look through newspapers. Sex-selective abortions and the status of girls were the topics of many articles. One such article was entitled “Parents flush baby girl out of train toilet.” These types of articles not only highlight what is happening in India, but also reflect a conversation that is beginning as to why these types of events are taking place.

I worked in a school in Rajasthan that opened me up to some of the criticisms of teaching English as a second language in the developing world. Learning about this was specifically interesting because of the stage of India’s development. Certain parts of India are extremely developed, while other parts and areas seem under-resourced and undeveloped. India is facing an interesting predicament because the sentiment seems to be that people want to preserve their culture, but people also seem interested in modernizing. This is creating a debate in the discussion of education because some people are arguing that education is ruining the culture, especially in the rural areas. As children are being educated, it seems that they are moving to the bigger cities and leaving the families and villages. I came to the conclusion that I do not believe that education can be blamed for this movement, because education simply opens the doors for the children to leave their villages, but ultimately the children are deciding to leave. This debate furthered my understanding of the challenges of development and helped me concoct my views on developmental strategies and theories.

My conclusions from my MAP and my research in India led me to believe that while education is essential for development, there are cultural norms that exist between men and women that are fueling these inequalities. In conclusion, Indira Gandhi, the first woman to become prime minister of India, said, “ The power to question is the basis of all human progress.” She had a vision of a progressive and prosperous India. In many ways, India has experienced modernization, but if India is ever going to become a strong First World country, it has to develop women’s rights. If impoverished Indian states, such as Bihar, would choose to follow Kerala’s lead, they would be able to reach the same level of social agency and development. Progress in India will begin with giving women the power to question and fight for their rights.