Cousins under the skin: how the obsession for a male child can be changed

The obsession for a male child in many parts of Asia can be changed. South Korea shows the way

On the Vietnam Airlines flight to Hanoi, I did the opposite of what I usually do at take off — loosened my seat belt fully before I could buckle it. On most other flights I have to tighten the belt to make up for the passenger who occupied the seat before me. But the Vietnamese are so slender that one can only buy their elegant Ao dai at stores that say ‘foreigner sizes available’!

Equally non-threatening are the streets full of two-wheelers in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Used to feeling extremely nervous at seeing groups of young men on two-wheelers in India, especially those that wave brightly coloured flags and matching scarves, it felt strange to have these Vietnamese young men negotiate my jaywalking without honking, without shouting slogans, and without baring their teeth. I am not sure if it was the men or their two-wheelers — mopeds and scooters rather than the more popular motorcycles in India — that had this effect. It was probably both. It felt as though the ravages of years of war had led the population to abandon rage for smiles.

Shopkeepers joined me in the game of endless bargaining, but they didn’t nag me or block my way if I moved on without buying something. Perhaps this had something to do with the fact that a majority of petty shopkeepers were women. At about 77%, Vietnam has one of the highest female labour force participation rates in Asia.

Some comparisons

It felt good to be in a place where worth is not measured by girth, in humans or in vehicles. But first impressions can be misleading, so I turned to data. When I travel, I have the habit of comparing the place I am in with my home country — and ranking. But I do not look for data on the ease of doing business. I have no urge to do business and in any case, business ease is a poor way of measuring the well-being of a people. Instead, I look at quality of life indicators and a country’s attitudes towards its women.

In spite of a per capita GDP that is similar to India’s, the difference in quality of life between the two countries is stark on a number of indicators over the past few years, although it may be narrowing, both because India’s quality of life is improving and because Vietnam has been fast shedding many of its Communist-era commitments. Thus, according to the latest available figures of the World Bank and of various demographic and health surveys, the Vietnam government spent 3.8% of its GDP on health compared to India’s 1.4%, and 5.7% on education compared to India’s 3.8%. In Vietnam, 78% of the population has access to basic sanitation compared to 44% in India, 46% are covered by safety net programmes compared to 11% in India, and 12% of the population is below the poverty line of $3.20
purchasing power parity per day compared to 60% in India. The infant mortality rate in Vietnam is 17 per 1,000 live births (India’s is 35). On other measures too, Vietnamese women have a clear edge over Indian women: a female life expectancy of 85 years (India’s is 70 years); a maternal mortality ratio of 54 (India’s is 174); of women of reproductive age being anaemic (24% compared to India’s 51%); of seats in Parliament occupied by women (27% compared to India’s 12%); of females above 15 being literate (91% compared to India’s 59%); of women having experienced domestic violence in the last year (9% compared to India’s 24%); of women believing that men have a right to beat their wives for one of five (usually petty) reasons (28% compared to India’s 47%).

As I scrolled down these indicators, I felt increasingly embarrassed about India’s state. Obviously economic growth is not doing enough to improve some important things in India. The Vietnamese know something that India does not.

Preference for sons

Then, suddenly, I stopped short. India and Vietnam are, after all, cousins under the skin in at least one important way. Women might get a better deal in Vietnam than they do in India, but not in one crucial aspect: at 111, the sex ratio at birth, or SRB (the number of males born for every 100 females), is eerily similar in both countries. For perspective, in countries that do not actively prevent the birth of female babies, the SRB hovers between 106 to 108. If it crosses this range, it strongly suggests that there is sex determination followed by sex-selective abortion taking place. The SRB has crossed this range in many parts of Asia and the Caucasus ever since sex determination technology became easily available, so Vietnam and India are not alone.

I suppose this is cultural, something to do with our common Asian heritage. There is a lot of writing about how the patriarchy, patriline and male dominance in Asia outdo the patriarchy, patriline and male dominance in the rest of the world and make families think that it is imperative that they have sons; that daughters are dispensable if a choice has to be made. In the past, female neglect and to some extent female infanticide were expressions of this mindset — now we have less guilt-inducing and less visibly callous ways of satisfying it.

Pallid national slogans like ‘Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao’ or international calls for women’s economic empowerment are unlikely to change things much. As the high levels of female education and labour force participation in Vietnam show, both education and jobs can coexist with a continued obsession for sons.

But culture is not immutable. This obsession for male children can be diluted with more practical policies to increase the substitutability of sons and daughters as well as the ability to manage with neither. This is best evidenced in the recent and rapid return in South Korea of the SRB from a peak of 116.5 in 1990 to a more ‘normal’ 107 today. Broader access to old age security, better prosecution of violators of laws against sex determination and sex-selective abortions, better enforced equal inheritance laws, and ‘cultural’ inducements such as allowing parents to choose either maternal or paternal surnames for their children seem to have all contributed not only to improving the status of daughters but also to lowering the value of sons. In turn, these measures have made women and families more indifferent to the sex of their children.

There are important lessons here for both the otherwise progressive Vietnamese as well as the still regressive Indians.

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