

Socio- Ethical Dimensions of Prenatal Diagnosis

¹ Dr. Leena K.R.

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Philosophy,

HHMSPB NSS College for Women, Neeramankara, Thiruvananthapuram 40, Kerala.

Abstract

The technological side of medical profession is growing day by day. Every technology as such is good to the society. But unethical and careless application of these technologies create many social and ethical problems in the world especially to the future generations. If we analyse the case of prenatal diagnosis, we can see many technological misuse- I e., in some extent it leads to female foeticide. So technology as such is good, but we have to handle these technologies with a comprehensive axiological and ethical way, in order to have a maximum output.

I. INTRODUCTION

The medical field is in its peak of advancement today and technologies have played an important role for these developments. It has provided sufficient support and assistance in every sphere of medical profession. Today the medical field sharpened by technology is becoming more and more inhuman. It does not recognize the self limiting principle. Medical technology, though a product of man, tends to develop its own laws and principles, different from those of human nature. It leads to a way of life, based on materialism. Inappropriate use of technology in the medical field tends to remove the personal humane approach to people needing health care.

There has been a spurt of growth of newer technologies of reproduction. All of them raise ethical issues. The new assisted reproductive technologies that are used in the field of medical profession are prenatal diagnosis or sex selection, Artificial insemination, In vitro fertilization, surrogate motherhood etc.

II. PRE NATAL DIAGNOSIS

The prenatal diagnosis is the general process of identifying the sex of the embryo with the help of technologies like amniocentesis¹, scanning etc, even before its birth. It helps the doctors to identifying the defect of the embryo, before the birth of a child. Any other technologies like prenatal diagnosis has its

merits and demerits also. The Wide misuse of these technologies leads to female foeticide.

Some people would prefer their child to be of one particular sex. Sometimes their preference has specific medical reasons; for example, in instances of sex-linked genetic disordersⁱⁱ the couple may want a child of the other sex. In other instance they would prefer a child of a particular sex is for specific social or even religious reasons. For all these things to happen they seek the help of the prenatal diagnosis technology

Human female produces similar eggs (ova), each with X chromosomes. Human male produces two types of sperms; 50% sperms have X chromosomes and 50% sperms possessed Y chromosome. The sex of the newly born child is solely determined by the type of the sperm that fertilizes the egg (ovum). If the egg is fertilized by an X-bearing sperm a girl is produced. If the egg (ovum) is fertilized by a Y-bearing sperm, a boy is produced. Which type of sperm fuses with the egg is purely a chance. So it is the father who is biologically responsible for the sex of the child. But, it is the mother who is always blamed for giving birth to female child.ⁱⁱⁱ

Woman plays a very important role in the continuity of the family and human species. She nourishes the fetus in her womb for nine months and after birth she nourishes the infant until the child learns to feed herself/himself. Hence biologically woman is superior to man. However, women are a victim of social injustice like dowry at marriage, and are treated inferior to man. But an educated person, who has understood the scientific basis of sex determination, should be rational and objective and free from prejudice in matters pertaining to the equality of sex. In fact man should feel obliged to woman because she plays a significant role in the continuity of the family and human race. With the advancement of new technologies the sex selection has become increasingly feasible.

The impetus and justification for sex selection research and development are related to two basic aims of medical science:

- The control of diseases- in this case, sex linked and sex- influenced^{iv} ones such as haemophilia^v, spina bifida^{vi}, and Parkinsonism.^{vii}
- The promotion of human happiness :- to identifying the sex of the embryo.

If a couple having two or more children with same sex & they would prefer other opposite of this sex. It is contended that the availability of sex selection would reduce the total number of births because parents would not have to bear additional children in order to have one or more of the particular sex. This should be performed only for reasons relevant to the health of the fetus or the mother. Prenatal diagnosis should not be performed solely to select the sex of the child. Prenatal diagnosis, whether for male child or female, denigrates the fundamental personhood of those yet to be born, and has the power to harm societies by understanding sex ratios. The potential harm to large groups of people outweighs any immediate benefits to individuals or families. The Government of India has already passed legislation banning diagnosis of sex for non-medical reasons. That is , parliament passed the Pre-conception and Pre- natal Diagnostic Techniques Bill On December 2002. The highlight of the new bill is that the fine for those who indulge in sex selection procedure has been doubled from Rs.50, 000 to Rs.1 lakh.^{viii} There is also provision for the suspension and cancellation of the registration of those who violated the law. All the sex determination techniques have brought under the ambit of laws.

Pre natal diagnosis help the medical profession to identifying following

- A child with disability
- Risk occur in the life of the foetus & also in the mother
- prenatal diagnosis may be performed to protect the health of the mother
- clinically confirmed cases of morbid anxiety or situations where prenatal paternity testing would benefit the mother’s mental health

The Indian society, like many other societies, is pro-male. A son is expected to support his parents in old age. Thus a son is an old age security. In the patriarchal system, the son continues the family lineage. According to the Hindu religious custom, the son has to perform certain rites on the death of the parents. Female babies can mean dowry at marriage and therefore, a burden for the family. There is already an adverse ratio with respect to females.^{ix}

SEX RATIO (1901 – 2011)	
Census Year	Sex Ratio (females per 1,000 males)
1901	972
1911	964
1921	955
1931	950
1941	945
1951	946
1961	941
1971	930
1981	934
1991	926
2001	933
2011	940

The 1901 census shows the sex ratio as 972 female to 1000 males. This has further deteriorated to 933 females to 1000 males as per the 2001 census. In 2011 census, 940 females to 1000 males .It itself shows rejection of female fetus by our society.^x

III. ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF PRE NATAL DIAGNOSIS

Pre-natal sex determination is most often carried out with the intention of rejecting the female fetus. If the test shows that it is a female fetus, an abortion is carried out by the doctor at the request of the parents. There are many such abortion clinics. The public opinion is against it, when it comes to the individuals and the doctors, directly involved, the ethical issues are forgotten. Under Sec. 312, I.P.C. whoever voluntarily causes criminal abortion is liable for imprisonment up to three years, and/ or fine; and if the woman is quick with child the imprisonment may extend up to seven years. There has been a hue and cry. Many investigators have proved the selective female foeticide, which has been assuming large properties. Whatever may be the case the most important thing needed to prevent the destruction of female babies is the change in the attitude of our society based on moral ethical laws.

All technologies are developed for the welfare of humanity. But misuse of these technologies will affect the equilibrium of the Nature. Every technology as such is good, but usage of these technologies leads to some unethical problem created in society. As in the case of pre natal diagnosis, the unethical usage of these technologies leads to sex selection of the embryo. It results in female foeticide. Only because of these misuses, we cannot simply ban

any technology. Through campaigns and awareness program, we can change the character of each and every individual . Along with this we can also provide certain values through our education. That is, the value based education can shape our society and also the individual.

NOTES & REFERENCES

- [1] K.N.Bhatia,and M.P.Tyagi ed., Trueman's Elementary Biology (1990;rpt. Jalandhar: Trueman Book Company,2000), II,U5. 182.
- [2] R.P.Meyyan,ed., Genetics (Tamil Nadu: Saras Publication,2005),p129.
- [3] Warren T. Reich, Encyclopedia of Bio Ethics, vol. 4 (New York : The Free Press. A Division of Macmillan Publishing co. Inc., 1978), p. 1440.
- [4] K.N.Bhatia,and M.P.Tyagi ed., Trueman's Elementary Biology (1990;rpt. Jalandhar: Trueman Book Company,2000), II,U5. 139.
- [5] Haemophilia is a sex linked genetic defect, from which males suffer; females can carry the gene and pass it on to their male off spring without themselves being affected.
- [6] Faulty development of a spinal code is known as spina bifida.
- [7] A group of neurological disorders marked by hypokinesia, tremor, and muscular rigidity.
- [8] Indian Year book 2011.
- [9] C.M.Francis, Medical Ethics, 1st ed. (New Delhi: Jaypee Brothers Medical publishers (P) Ltd, 1993), p.80.
- [10] Research, Reference and Training division,ed., India 2005(Government of India: Publication Division Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 2005) p.11.