



SISTERS OF THE TREES



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Sisters of the Trees

Among the arid lands of Rajasthan, India surrounded by marble mines, there is an oasis: a small town called Piplantri, where women are no longer afraid of giving birth to a girl. Since 2005, families that previously got rid of their daughters for not being able to pay the dowry, today celebrate by planting 111 trees every time a girl is born. This program has turned Piplantri into an oasis. There is improved literacy, work opportunities and now the women organize. "Sisters of the Trees" reveals the lives of the women and the positive changes that the community is making.

Piplantri

Rajasthan is the largest state in India. It is located in the northwestern part of the country, and its capital city is Jaipur. In the west and northwest, Rajasthan shares a border with Pakistan. Most of the northwestern part of the state is dry, and it includes desert area. The Aravalli Range divides that from the southeastern part of Rajasthan, which is at a higher elevation, and is more fertile. The state of Rajasthan is one of the least densely populated in India, with many people living in rural areas. Piplantri is a village in southern Rajasthan, in the Aravalli Range. It has a population of just over 5,000 people.

Marble Mines

The state of Rajasthan is known for its marble and has hundreds of marble mines. Marble quarried in Rajasthan was used in the construction of the Taj Mahal, which is a famous white marble mausoleum in the Indian city of Agra. However, there has often been a lack of government oversight of mining practices in Rajasthan, and areas such as Piplantri have experienced significant environmental harms from mining activity. Marble mining can harm the environment in numerous ways. Firstly, the landscape is visibly destroyed as vegetation is cleared and large blocks of marble are cut out of the ground, leaving behind a huge hole. Plant and animal habitats are frequently destroyed too. In addition, mining often causes significant pollution. Marble dust can cause air pollution, and contaminate both soil and water. Mining operations involve using large quantities of water as well, as part of the process of cutting marble out of the ground.

Mining near Piplantri led to deforestation and loss of land, and caused wells in the area to dry up. Journalist Chelsea Steinauer-Scudder explains some of the problems that Piplantri experienced. She says, "The industrial saws used to cut marble can require as much as forty-five thousand liters of water per hour. As the marble is processed and polished, the waste is transported away from the site in the form of a slurry: water mixed with fine particles of stone, which contaminates soils. Thus, the mine drew much of the local water from the ground, lowering the water table. And with no roots left to hold water in the soil, rainwater would run down the hills out of reach." Steinauer-Scudder says that the village literally dried up, with trees and wildlife disappearing. "Eventually, people began to leave the village," she says, "No longer able to farm, or sought better working conditions than could be offered in the mine. Those who remained often had little water that was safe to drink." As a result of the tree planting and other actions taken by the people of Piplantri, many of these problems were significantly reduced.

A Preference for Boys

In India, boys have traditionally been seen as more valuable than girls for several reasons. One is that only sons can pass down the family name. Another is that sons are the ones that perform funeral rites when their parents pass away. Finally, inheritance is generally passed down through sons.

In contrast, daughters are often seen as a liability. One of the biggest reasons for this is that when women marry, their parents lose wealth in the form of a dowry. A dowry is a gift of cash or goods that parents give to the groom's family. While India banned the dowry system in 1961, it is still widely practiced there. In addition to losing money through a dowry, parents also lose a valuable source of support when a daughter gets married. While sons traditionally stay in their parents' home after they marry, continuing to look after their parents, daughters are expected to move into their husband's homes, and start looking after their in-laws instead.

Sex Selection in India

As a result of the higher value that has traditionally been placed on boys, some Indian families choose to abort female fetuses, a practice known as female feticide. Selective abortions have changed the ratio of males to females in India's population. In most parts of the world, including India, the natural sex ratio is about 105 boys to every 100 girls. However, as a result of sex selection, India no longer has this natural ratio. In the 1970s, prenatal testing became available in India, so parents could determine the sex of a baby before birth, and in the 1980s that testing became cheaper and more widespread. In addition, abortion was legalized in 1971. As a result, parents began to abort girls, and the sex gap started to increase. The Pew Research Center explains, "Once prenatal testing allowed Indian families to learn the sex of a fetus during pregnancy, sex selection took off. The sex ratio at birth widened rapidly from about 105 boys per 100 girls before 1970, to 108 boys per 100 girls in the early 1980s; it reached 110 in the 1990s and remained at that level for roughly 20 years." According to India's 2011 census, the sex ratio had reached 111 boys to every 100 girls. In 1994, India made prenatal sex determination illegal. Sex-selective abortions are also illegal there. However, these restrictions are widely ignored. Pew estimates that as a result of female-selective abortions, between 2000 and 2019, at least 9 million female births went "missing," meaning that 9 million girls were never born because parents aborted them.

In addition to selective abortion, there is evidence that some female babies are killed soon after birth, which is known as female infanticide. For instance, UNICEF reports that India's under-five mortality rate is significantly higher for girls than for boys.

In recent years there have been attempts to change the perception that women are less valuable than men, and according to Pew, the sex ratio in India has started to move back towards a normal level. The organization reports that according to the most recent estimates, there are now about 108 boys to every 100 girls. However, compared to other nations, India still has a ratio that is significantly skewed. In a 2021 research article in the *Asian Bioethics Review*, the authors write: "After China, India has the most skewed sex ratio at birth. These two Asian countries account for about 90 to 95% of the estimated 1.2 to 1.5 million missing female births annually, worldwide, due to gender-biased (prenatal) sex selection."

Education for Girls

In addition to often being seen as less valuable than men, Indian women have traditionally been discouraged from getting an education or working outside the home, and have instead been expected to obey their husbands and take responsibility for all domestic chores. In 2019 and 2020, the Pew Research Center surveyed close to 30,000 adults in India. It found that the majority of both men and women believe that husbands should be the ones in control. Pew reports, “About nine-in-ten Indians agree with the notion that a wife must always obey her husband, including nearly two-thirds who completely agree with this sentiment. Indian women are only slightly less likely than Indian men to say they completely agree that wives should always obey their husbands (61% vs. 67%), according to the survey.”

Since 2019, education has been free and compulsory for children between the ages 6 and 14, however many girls do not actually receive that education. Research reveals that a large number of girls are forced to drop out of school to help look after siblings, do housework, or otherwise help their families. Time magazine calls the situation a “spiraling crisis,” because the lack of an education reduces future opportunities for these girls. Overall, it says, “Indian women contribute only 18 percent to the country’s GDP — one of the lowest in the world — and only 25 percent of India’s labor force is women.” According to CARE India, a nonprofit organization that works to empower marginalized women and girls, while India’s female literacy rate has improved in recent years, it is still far too low. For instance, it reports that the literacy rate for women in Rajasthan is only about 57 percent, which is the lowest in India. In comparison, the men’s literacy rate in Rajasthan is more than 80 percent. Overall, the organization says, “There are still over 186 million females in India who cannot read or write in any language.”

Positive Change

While problems such as illiteracy and feticide remain, Piplantri is an example of how there is also positive change happening in India.

When a girl is born in Piplantri, 111 trees are planted in her name. This number was chosen because 1 is an auspicious number to Hindus. In addition to planting trees, the girl’s parents sign an agreement that their daughter will be allowed to finish school, and that they won’t marry her off before she is 18 years old. Both the parents and the village also contribute money to a fund, which is held until the girl turns 18, when it can be used to help pay for her wedding or her education. In 2018, a training center was created in Piplantri by the state government, for the purpose of educating others who might be interested in following Piplantri’s example. According to a BBC article, “The building hosts engineers, officials and residents from other districts who hope to replicate Piplantri’s model of water harvesting and tree planting elsewhere in Rajasthan and the country. As many as 50 to 60 visitors come to Piplantri some days – most of whom come to attend workshops in the training centre – and the village even has a set of cottages to house them.”

Additional Resources

Books

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