

Practice of aborting female fetuses causes more controversy in India

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BOMBAY, India — A growing number of pregnant women in India are using the medical procedure known as amniocentesis to determine the sex of their unborn child and have an abortion if it is a female.

A preference for sons goes back centuries in Indian tradition, especially in remote areas where they help in the fields, add to family income and offer parents' security in old age.

Amniocentesis is chiefly used elsewhere to determine the health of the fetus but its use in India solely to determine sex of the fetus has set off a raging controversy between women's groups and doctors who give the test.

Women's groups contend that when it leads to the abortion of the female fetus it is an outrage against morality and against women.

The doctors maintain, however, that it is an alternative in overcrowded India to the practice of women having six or seven unwanted daughters to gain the goal of a son or two.

"Forcing a mother of three daughters to have a fourth may be in

a way matricide," Dr. Datta Pai, whose Pearl Centre clinic has performed thousands of the tests, said.

He added in an interview that even though the father is the determining factor in the sex of a child, women are blamed for not having sons.

"In Indian society, which is sick to the core in these matters," Pai said, "a woman bearing too many female children invites the wrath of her husband and in-laws and may undergo the most cruel mental trauma."

Among those objecting to the procedure is Vibhuti Patel of the Forum Against Sex Determination and Sex Pre-Selection Technique.

"Amniocentesis, which is primarily meant for detecting genetic defects in a fetus, has been reduced to a lethal weapon to be used against women," she said.

The procedure, which involves drawing amniotic fluid from the sac surrounding the fetus, was introduced as a technique for sex determination in India in 1982, in the northern state of Punjab.

Bombay since has become the center for the practice, and as many as 20 clinics are believed to offer the test here, along with many more

individual physicians.

Most of the clinics are capable of more than 1,000 of the procedures a year and some, including Pai's Pearl Centre, also offer abortions.

Pai began amniocentesis tests in 1982 and did 200 that year. In 1985, he did 1,350. He said 55 percent of the fetuses he's tested were female.

"It is entirely possible that a large number of the female fetuses were aborted," he added.

No official figures are available on the sex of aborted fetuses, but researcher R.P. Ravindra published a study in January on 8,000 abortions in Bombay hospitals and reported that all but one involved female fetuses.

The cost of the test runs from \$5.75 to \$16. The procedure is widely advertised on trains and buses, often with unabashed praise for male children.

Mrs. Patel complains about the low cost in India, noting the test is much more expensive in other countries.

"One of the reasons for the cheap availability of the tests is the misconceived notion that it helps family planning," she said.

She calls the test a "perverse misuse of modern technology," while Pai says it should be con-

sidered against the social backdrop of India.

Despite government policies that foster family planning, India's population of about 780 million is expected to grow to 1 billion shortly after the year 2000. Abortion is not officially part of the family planning policy, but it is legal and easily obtainable.

While a son is a prize for an Indian family, a daughter is looked upon as a deficit and female infanticide is still a problem in some tribal areas.

Daughters usually don't earn money and must be provided with hefty dowries for their marriages.

"We are talking about centuries of conditioning that women are worthless," Mrs. Patel said, adding that she believes in trying to change that attitude and education is bringing about some change.

But Pai sees the arguments against amniocentesis as a refusal to recognize reality.

"We have this bad habit of mixing morality with every issue," he said. "One must not forget the brutal reality that no matter what the government says, women are treated as secondary citizens. I practice amniocentesis as a lesser evil. It is better to have feticide than matricide."