

Missing: 50 million Indian girls

ROHTAK, India

In recent years, the world has been shocked by the Taliban's ruthless suppression of women in Afghanistan, the practice of female genital mutilation in parts of Africa and the abuse of female domestic labor in places like Saudi Arabia. Yet it is the world's largest democracy that is the undeclared winner in the contest of violence against women.

In India, female foeticide — the sex-selective abortion of girls — has led to an alarming "gender gap" in the country's population. In 1990, when the census showed that there were 25 million more males than females in India, the government reacted by introducing a law making it illegal to detect the sex of a foetus through ultrasound examination. Yet by 2001, the gender gap had risen to 35 million, and now experts estimate it as high as 50 million.

The practice of female infanticide has a long history in India: Because of the widespread cultural preference for sons, many baby girls used to be killed after birth. But modern technology, particularly the ultrasound machine, has made it easier for parents, and highly profitable for doctors, to practice female foeticide without great risk of detection and punitive legal action.

Assumed to be prevalent among Hindus, because of their custom requiring male progeny to perform cremation rites, female foeticide is in fact found today to be equally rampant among Sikhs, Muslims and Christians.

Likewise, the practice has usually been presumed to be most prevalent among the poor and illiterate, because of spiraling dowry demands made on brides by the groom's family, as well as other traditional prejudices. However, recent UN and Indian studies reveal that female foeticide is today most frequent among the rich and highly educated. One study maps the increased frequency of female foeticide with rising levels of education — lowest among women with a fifth-grade education and highest among women with university degrees.

The consequences of female foeticide and the resulting gender gap are already unfolding: Girls are being trafficked from impoverished neighboring countries like Bangladesh and Nepal or from disadvantaged or tribal areas in India and sold into marriage for the equivalent of about \$200 (in Haryana State, a bull costs \$1,000). With 50 million girls already missing today, the result of this dangerous practice is ineluctable: A society without women, even if today it is the world's second-most populous, is doomed to eventual extinction.

Early this year, after Health Minister Anbumani Ramadoss expressed despair at the government's inability to reverse this calamitous situation despite legislation and other policies, religious leaders of all faiths convened an "Interfaith People's Yatra (or Journey) of Compassion," a kind of traveling protest march, on female foeticide. It was organized by the Arya Samaj, a reformist social-religious movement founded in 1875, with the support of the central and state governments, Unicef and Unifem.

Earlier this month, participants in the Yatra traversed India's worst-affected northern states in their motor convoy, generating a mounting wave of awareness and action among religious and political leaders, civic activists, women's groups, students and teachers. As we marched, we shouted in our thousands, "Sons and daughters are the same! Save

our daughters to save our country!"

Our position is categorical: Ending female foeticide is not in itself enough. All forms of gender injustice must be stopped.

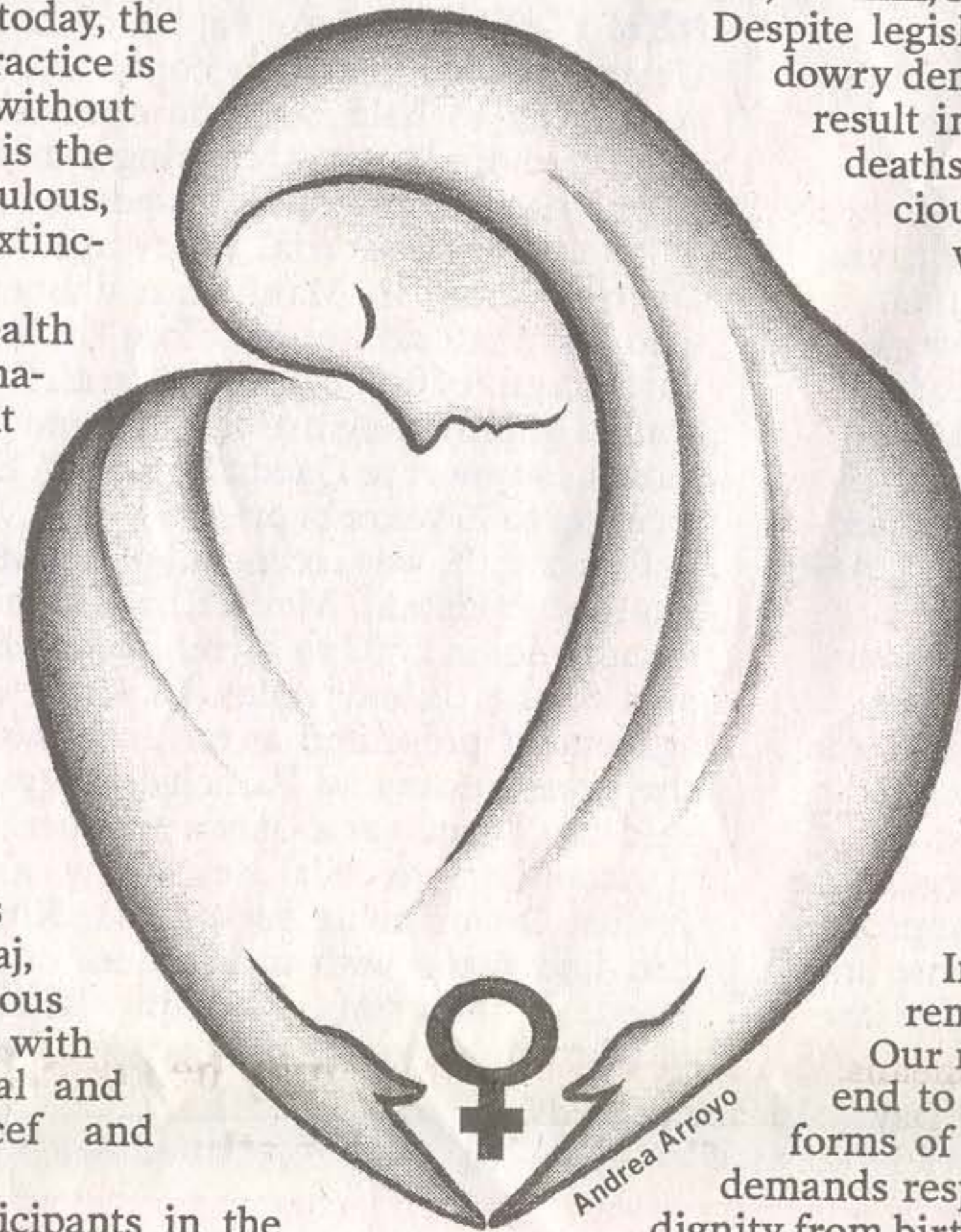
The treatment of women as second-class citizens is deeply embedded in the Indian mindset, whether Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, Jain or Parsee.

Despite legislation making dowry illegal, dowry demands are exorbitant and still result in an estimated 25,000 dowry deaths a year, at the hands of avaricious grooms and in-laws. Child widows are meted execrable treatment and are denied the right of remarriage.

Even when daughters are allowed to go to school, they are burdened with household chores, leading to high drop-out rates. Across all the religions, the birth of a son is celebrated while the birth of a daughter is mourned.

Until sons and daughters are treated equally, until life is made safe for the Indian woman, the country remains morally under siege.

Our march demands not only an end to female foeticide, but to all forms of violence against women. It demands respect for women's rights and dignity from birth to death.



Swami Agnivesh, a former education minister of Haryana State, is president of the Arya Samaj. Rama Mani is course director at the Geneva Center for Security Policy. Angelika Köster-Lossack is a former member of the German Parliament for the Green Party.