

# Family Structures and Declining Child Sex Ratios in India<sup>1</sup>

*Mattias Larsen & Neelambar Hatti*

## Introduction

The paper attempts to analyse the role of family structure in the trend of declining child sex ratios. The paper builds on recognition of the declining child sex ratios as a result of a process of change in which a multitude of different social, economic and cultural factors have importance. It draws on the preliminary results of a case study recently conducted in rural Uttara Kannada District in the Western Ghats of Karnataka. The two outstanding demographic features of the study area are *a very low child sex ratio and a high proportion of joint families*.<sup>2</sup> While these two features constitute the focus of our analyses, the theoretical perspective is derived from the cooperative-conflict approach to intra-household allocation of resources. This encompasses a bargaining approach, which takes into account both the conflicting and congruent aspects of intra-household relationships, thus providing a framework that includes both structure and agency.

## Conceptual framework

Serious conflicts might be involved in decisions regarding household arrangements, of who does what and who gets which benefits, but the nature of the family organisation form requires that these conflicts be shaped within the general frame of cooperation, in which conflicts are treated as deviant behaviour (Sen, 1987). Incorporating the immediate institutional context, the institutional arrangement, deepens the analysis more directly.

The bargaining approach can be briefly outlined as follows. Household members will cooperate insofar as cooperative arrangements make them better off than non-cooperation. The bargaining problem first arises when more than one possible cooperative solution exists and when each of these solutions are better for both parties than non-cooperation. There are many solutions of cooperation that are better than non-cooperation, but they are not, of course, equally good for both the

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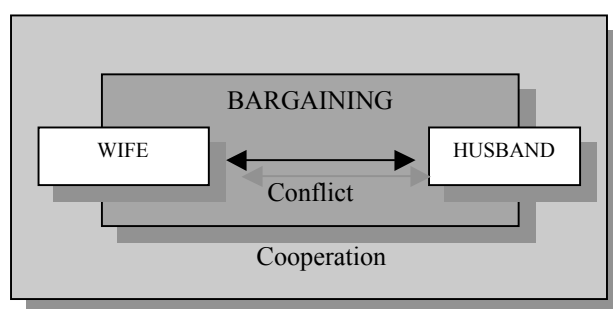
<sup>2</sup> One important reason for high incidence of joint families in the area is the low density of population.

parties. The resulting outcome will depend upon the relative bargaining powers of the household members. The combination of cooperative and conflicting aspects in bargaining problem makes the analysis of it valuable in understanding household arrangements. (Sen, 1987) The bargaining approach to intra-household dynamics provides an excellent framework for an analysis of the *bargaining space*.

The institutional set up of social norms and rules built on active participation in cooperation and based on the obvious benefits from cooperation, is also the context within which everyday conflicts of interests are played out. It is through this structuring, normative, aspect that interaction becomes biased. It is, in other words, in the coexistence of congruent and conflicting interests that inequality exists.

In fact, *there is a coexistence of congruent and conflicting elements even in the choice between different cooperative solutions*. Recognising this fact is central in understanding the reproduction of inequality. This is so because, “the value system that leads to implicitly cooperative behaviour within a group may well be directed toward a particularly unequal solution in the choice between different cooperative outcomes”. (Sen, 1989:66) An unequal solution may very well be a superior option to fully atomistic and individualistic behaviours for all parties. But still, one group may systematically benefit less from cooperation than another. This is obviously valid for intra-family inequality and gender bias.

Figure 1. **Bargaining Situation.**



Source: Goehler (2000), (modified).

Acknowledgement of *differences in perceptions of individual interests and of legitimacy* of existing household arrangements is necessary to understand the existence of inequalities. Sen argues that there is an advantage in distinguishing between *objective aspects* of a person's interests and that person's *perceptions of self-interest*. By analysing a person's well-being in terms of his or her capability of

achieving valuable “functionings” it is possible to better understand existing inequalities. (Sen, 1985) “A functioning is an achievement of a person: what he or she manages to do or be”. (Sen, 1985:7) The objective aspects of “functionings”, i.e. a person’s “doings” or “being”, include such basic things as being well-nourished, while the subjective, psychological and cultural, aspects include such things as being able to appear in public without shame. The *valuation* of these “functionings” corresponds directly to a person’s perception of self-interest. “The choice among cooperative solutions may be distinctly unfavourable to a group – women, for example – in terms of objective criteria of functional achievements, without there being any *perceived* sense of ‘exploitation’, given the nature of perceptions of self-interest and conceptions of what is legitimate and what is not”. (Sen, 1989:68) In particular, three necessary departures from the standard model of bargaining problems result from this. (Sen, 1987): (1) Well-being levels at the breakdown position. (2) Perceived interests. (3) Perceived contributions.

Firstly, how do differences in breakdown position influence the respective party’s bargaining powers? If a woman’s fate is to be disowned from her community in case of a divorce, where such a thing as a divorce is at all thinkable, then the severity of the situation she would find herself in, social exclusion, strongly weakens her ability to secure a favourable ‘collusive’ outcome. The “breakdown position” is of direct relevance to the choice of collusive outcome. It affects the respective bargaining powers of the two people since they relate the option of a “breakdown” to an option of cooperation. Secondly, perceptions of interests may cause a person to get a less favourable collusive solution if he or she attaches less value to personal well being than to the well being of others in the household. Thirdly, perceptions regarding who contributes what and how much, and the corresponding legitimacy to a bigger share of the fruits of cooperation influences the collusive solution to be more favourable to the person perceived to contribute more. This reflects a bias against reproductive work, favouring productive work. Women’s possible participation in outside income generation influence their relative shares and improve their breakdown position.

Sen suggests an analysis of questions of legitimacy through an extension of his own “entitlement approach”. (Sen, 1981) However, the “entitlement approach” is essentially a legal concept and as such it needs to be extended to be able to deal with the allocation of resources *within the household*. (Sen, 1987) The extensions

of the bargaining framework deal primarily with issues of *legitimacy* regarding entitlement in a situation (intra-household relations) where such entitlement is not validated on the basis of private ownership. Intra-household distribution is basically socially determined and mediated by non-market factors. This is why it is essential to direct attention to issues of legitimacy. The concept of “extended entitlements” makes it possible to link the intra-household allocation of resources and the process of decision-making within the household with questions of legitimacy. Since legitimacy is linked to the prevailing institutional setting, such a framework can help understand how household arrangements may be structured unequally, and how that structuring actually takes place.

## **Background**

Uttara Kannada District is situated in the north-western part of Karnataka state. It is characterised by ecological features typical of the Western Ghat mountain range. The monsoon forests and the elevation give it a relatively mild climate and access to natural irrigation from the many rivers that flow in the valleys.

The landscape has shaped the villages, which tend to be small and scattered. It also makes communications difficult and in the more remote villages communications are still sparse. The livelihood for the majority of the people is from the cultivation of paddy and areca<sup>3</sup>. The areca palm trees are grown in gardens or plantations, normally situated down in the valleys and are mostly intercropped with spices such as cardamom, pepper and to an increasing extent also with vanilla, together with coffee and various fruit trees. Along the fringes of the plantations, farmers grow cocoa palms, which, besides contributing to household income, protect the areca palms from wind and strong sun. The case study was conducted on the plantation economy side in the border area between plantation and paddy economy.

The district, as well as the area of study, is characterised by two types of cultivation and its distinct economies<sup>4</sup>. (Joshi, 1997) Changes in structure have

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<sup>3</sup> The Areca nut, or betel nut, is the main ingredient in the stimulant *paan*, widely popular in South Asia and parts of Southeast Asia.

<sup>4</sup> Collins (1925) divided the area of study into two distinct tracts. A rice tract covering an area of 83.7 sq. m., with 45 villages and a population density of 155 per sq. m., and a garden/plantation tract of 248.2 sq. m. with as many as 157 villages and a density of population of only 77 per square mile. (as cited in Joshi, 1997)

been fundamental in the paddy economy, whereas the plantation economy has remained largely unchanged (Pani, 1997, Joshi, 1997). The most notable changes came with the Karnataka Land Reforms (Amendment) Act of 1974, an important feature of which was the abolition of tenancy by conferring ownership on the erstwhile tenant. (Joshi, 1997) This affected the paddy economy with its very high incidence of tenancy and high farm rents. In the plantation economy, where a labour shortage posed a major problem, where tenancy was rare and where the land rent was low, the agrarian structure has remained relatively intact. Today, farm wages for women in this area are the highest in the state while wages for men are the third highest (Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Karnataka, 2004). The subsequent differences in institutional structure are evident in the fact that the family structure of the paddy economy area is generally nuclear, whereas the joint family form is dominant in the plantation economy area.

Instead of structural change, the plantation area has experienced modernisation from increased availability of education facilities and from the diffusion of modern values through TV. Perhaps equally important has been the improvements in transport and communications. In other words, the area has become modernised in the sense of *access* to certain aspects of modern life. It is a relatively well-off area as it enjoys fertile soils, natural irrigation and relatively lucrative cash-crop agriculture.

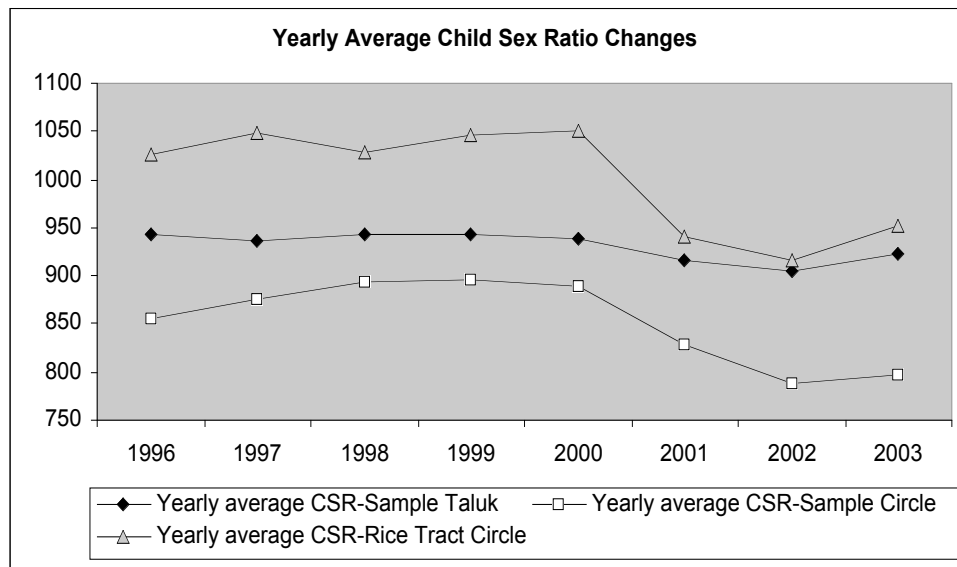
Siddapur taluk<sup>5</sup>, where the study area is located, as a whole has the lowest sex ratio in the state. The study area itself is characterised by three striking demographic features. One is a ***very low child sex ratio*** (CSR), as low as 788/1000 in 2002<sup>6</sup> (see Graph 1). Secondly, it is an area with a ***high proportion of joint households***, about 71% as compared to the all Karnataka figure of 44%. (NFHS-2, Karnataka, 2001) Lastly, Uttara Kannada District also has ***the lowest density of population in the state***, 132 per sq. Km, as compared to 275 for all Karnataka, and 324 for all India. (Census of India, Karnataka, 2001, NFHS-2, Karnataka, 2001)

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<sup>5</sup> Taluk is a major revenue, administrative and planning unit after the district.

<sup>6</sup> The Census of India measures the sex ratio as number of females per 1000 males as opposed to the standard international norm of number of males per 1000 females.

**Graph 1**



Source: Child Development Project Office (CDPO), Anganwadi Attendance Records.  
**Note:** The CDPO divides the Taluk into 5 circles with a total amount of 91 Anganwadies (Kindergartens), the Sample Circle in which the area of study is situated consists of 5 Anganwadies.

The overall, rather dramatic decline in CSR between 2000 and 2003 correlates well with the very poor rains in the same period<sup>7</sup>. One respondent explained the situation like this: “The rain and the crop was average the last three years. In 2001 there was very little rain, last summer there was a lack of water and drinking water problems. There is no river and no brook. Under normal conditions one acre will give maximum 15 and minimum 10 bags of paddy. In 2001 we got only 5 bags per acre”. Rearing children is a heavy financial burden and the potential role of children as an insurance against risk does not hold (Cain, 1981, Jeffrey & Jeffrey, 1997). Apparently decisions concerning childbearing have become increasingly conditioned by economic factors. Indeed, the preliminary findings of our study substantiate that childbearing is closely linked to economic reasoning where many children are considered a financial burden. This was expressed in comments such as; “Because of the difficulties in life, it is enough with one child. Life is difficult at the moment”. It is important to remember that such a change in reasoning may not affect the way parents legitimise their son preference, but when such a preference is strong it would indeed have an effect in terms of lower CSR. This in turn was articulated in comments like; “The ideal family is of either two sons or

<sup>7</sup> Rainfall was classified as deficient during the period 2001-2003, actual rainfall being 38%, 34% and 51% less than normal respectively. (Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Karnataka, 2004)

one daughter. For us it will be difficult in the future since we already have two daughters”. To the question whether she wanted more daughters one respondent replied; “No. We don’t have much land and we have a low income”.

Differences in agrarian system appear to influence the child sex ratio. Apart from the clear differences in level of CSR, the period of sharp decline was more dramatic in the rice tract sample<sup>8</sup>. Problems of poor rains hit the paddy cultivators harder as they have no reserves, which the first comment above clearly illustrates.

## **Analysis**

The very fact that society is a society, “hinges on the phenomenon that people reflexively construct structures and institutions within and through which to interact. Human society is a human *artefact*”. (Goverde et al, 2000:10) Throughout history humans have structured their social lives to create order and reduce uncertainty. (North, 1991) The family is the most basic and fundamental form of organisation and structuring of social life, it constitutes the most immediate institutional arrangement.

The traditional form of family structure of the area of study is the joint family with brothers and their respective wives and children living together. Family members share property, residence and kitchen. (Ramu, 1988, Jeffrey & Jeffrey, 1997) Family matters are handled jointly and the household head, the oldest brother, has the final authority and responsibility. A joint family draws on the *economic advantages* of a collective undertaking. The benefits are in the form of cost efficiency from a collective ownership and use of necessities. As pointed out in one of the Focus Group Discussions (FGD) we conducted: “Financially, a joint family tends to save much more. Not just in money, but also in time and chores”. Beside the economic benefits a perhaps equally important characteristic of the joint family is the *support system* it offers. “In a joint family there is more support. There is a cost efficiency and a unity which can not manifest in a nuclear family”.

The nuclear family structure has different benefits. It may lack a support system but instead it offers *greater personal freedoms* for the individual family member. As evident from the discussions; “there is more freedom financially for a woman in a nuclear family as she has greater choice. She does not have to defer to an elder”. Living in a nuclear family also entails a *greater exposure* to things in

everyday life, which can lead to more knowledge and, thus, awareness. “Mobility brings us more knowledge and it makes it possible for us to bring about changes. If we live in the home we won’t be able to understand much and we won’t be able to change things”. With a lower degree of division of labour and with fewer hands available, each member needs to be aware of, and know, more aspects of household life. The clear difference between joint and nuclear families in this regard was also expressed; “In some households, husbands are handing over some responsibilities to their wives such as keeping account of labour, so women have a general awareness of the family’s financial matters. However, this is only the case in nuclear families, not in joint families”. Among the households in the sample it was, for example, the responsibility of the men to go to the market and buy food. In some of the nuclear families the woman had taken over that responsibility as their men were occupied with other work. This was precisely the reason why they regularly left the village, something women in joint households did not.

As regards social relations, the joint family is a more complex organisation form, and as such requires a higher degree of structuring. The success of the joint family depends upon the participation and interdependence of all members. (Ramu, 1988) More rules need to be in place for relationships and exchanges between people to function well. Norms guiding social action are to a higher degree translated into defining norms and are more *institutionalised*. The nuclear family may leave social norms less defining. *The family structure conditions the degree of structuring necessary*. However, this is not to say that the joint family form is simply more constraining. To use the terminology of Giddens (1984), structures are both enabling and constraining. Although the respondents talked about how the joint household is constraining regarding individual freedom, the greater structuring of the joint household is indeed enabling in the sense of the “unity” and “support” it gives.

The strengths of the joint household family, its support system and collective undertakings, rest on a stronger structuring. This, in turn acts as a constraint in the sense that it, to a large degree, puts limits on what can be bargained about. It is, to take a very concrete example, impossible in a joint household to bargain over an individual’s personal right to a piece of the household

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<sup>8</sup> In the rice tract sample it fell 134 points, from 1051 to 917, while it fell 100 points in the area of study, from 888 to 788.



property. To claim a piece of the land owned by the household would mean jeopardising the joint family as an institution. Indeed, the nuclear family also puts up limitations, but relatively less so than the joint family. *The family structure conditions the bargaining situation*, not just by limiting what can be bargained about, but also through the intertwined interests of the family members. The outcomes of the bargaining between one conjugal pair may very well have an influence on the situation of other members of the joint household; other members indeed express those concerns and interfere. In terms of breakdown positions, a woman's breakdown position is, theoretically, better in a nuclear family than in a joint family. Because of the size of the joint family, its cost of an individual member not cooperating would be small, whereas the cost would be much greater for a nuclear family. On the other hand, as indicated by figure 1, *in a nuclear family there is a greater space for bargaining*, whereas the cooperative frame of a joint household can impinge on this space precisely through the intertwined interests of the household members.

*Women's participation in decision-making affects their relative bargaining powers.* While discussing expenses for marriage, one woman explained that: "I don't know about expenses. Issues related to marriage expenses are men's responsibility. Women normally don't question the decisions". In a joint family where one elder might be the sole person who controls resources it is less likely for women to be actively involved in decisions. In one of the male group discussions the men stated that: "very few women ask for financial explanations. For them even to reason about such things, they don't have adequate knowledge to understand, we just tell them what is happening". If one never participates in decisions, how can one then have knowledge about the underlying economic requirements to be filled? In nuclear families women tend to be more part of decision making and as discussed earlier, this was one of the benefits of the nuclear family, which was articulated. One example of the differences between joint and nuclear families was expressed like this; "men do not ask women's opinions about matters of the family. Decision making power is in the hands of the husband or the head of the family. In a few families, in divided (nuclear) families, men are taking advice from or involve women in decision making related to any major family issue". Not participating in or being kept from decision making takes away the ability to influence that decision and also limits bargaining power in other

decisions. Greater participation also means that more is bargained about. Bargaining at one point in time affects bargaining later on by strengthening or weakening a person's breakdown position. Participation in one area of decision-making strengthens the bargaining position in other areas. When more space is open to bargaining and when women participate more in the decision making process, chances that such an iterative effect will be positive are greater.

The access to a large social support system, which is one of the main benefits of the joint family, also affects bargaining power. This is so particularly in extraordinary situations concerning behaviour, which is not accepted by the community, such as drinking or gambling. In such extraordinary situations, women in nuclear families might face more difficulties and may perhaps be forced to support the family themselves. The inherent control mechanisms of the joint family may also prevent such behaviour in a way that a nuclear family cannot. Another such situation is one of economic crisis, where the social support system may be a last lifeline. (Agarwal, 1997) In general, *the support system of the joint family will strengthen the bargaining power of the person who follows the prevailing norms*. As one woman responded in discussing the situation of daughters'; "It is easy when they follow the norms of society". In this sense the joint family's cooperative, normative frame-work, gets reproduced and reinforced. However, it will thus also make it more difficult for women as patriarchal structures make the situation consistently unfavourable for women. It thus becomes clear how that same normative framework impinges on the space for conflicts in a joint family.

A well-documented example of the connection between son preference and bargaining position is the fact that a woman's bargaining position within the household increases with the birth of a son. (Kandiyoti, 1985, Dyson & Moore, 1983, Agarwal, 1994, 1997, Kabeer, 1996) This would be more so in a nuclear family where one birth influences the family's situation more than in a joint family, and this, in turn, induces a stronger inclination toward son preference. In a joint family, on the other hand, the social (and cultural) pressure to have a son would be greater as a birth affects more people. Since this provides reasons for son preference in both cases. It also illustrates the underlying differences in reasoning, as well as legitimisation of son preference.

The relationship between actual contributions to the household and perceptions of contribution is more complex in a joint family than in a nuclear

family. Fewer people and resulting lower division of labour means that the contributions of each member are more evident in a nuclear household. The contributions are more valued along the actual ‘objective’ contributions. In a joint family where individual contributions are less clear; they are more likely to be valued and perceived ‘subjectively’ and on the prevailing gendered norms regarding who contributes what. How needs and contributions are perceived become more institutionalised and the allocation of resources is more defined by institutionalised norms. *There is thus a link between the greater structuring needed in a joint family, as discussed above, and how the resources are allocated within the household.* Comments such as; “women only work in the kitchen anyway, why do they need education?” are directly connected to unclear perceptions of the true contributions women make to the household. Social norms influence the individual’s perceptions of needs as well as of contributions. In a joint household, collective values are important and collective action is also respected and revered to a greater extent than in a nuclear family. Correspondingly, the perceptions of individual interest are also lower in a joint household. As social norms influence individual’s perceptions in this way, “perceptions impinge on social norms but are not the same as social norms. For instance, norms might define on what principles family food is shared – say, contributions and/or needs, but the translation of these norms into allocations would depend not just on actual, but *perceived* contributions and needs”. (Agarwal, 1997:17. Italics added) Family structure conditions the way in which the individual’s perceptions are influenced by social norms, and vice versa and, thus the *translation of norms into allocation*. A shared sense of legitimacy and perceptions related to it can influence the allocation process in terms of who is entitled to what<sup>9</sup>. The greater bargaining space found in the nuclear family provides a larger flexibility in the translation of norms into allocation. *The family structure affects the bargaining power* as well as the position of women in the household and how a strong son preference is *legitimised*, thus resulting in daughter discrimination,

The relationships between generations are different in a joint and a nuclear household. In a joint household the older generations have greater influence on the younger generations. While discussing the trend of fragmentation of joint

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<sup>9</sup> This is also how Sen (1987) conceptualises *extended entitlements*, i.e. normatively determined entitlements.

households, a member of one FGD commented that; “if one person is in control of the money the youngsters will face more problems”. When he was asked about financial matters such as whether they had taken any loans, one of the respondents replied; “I don’t know. The head of this household does not live here”. Even though he lived with his two brothers - aged 45, 35 and 30 respectively - he did not have any knowledge of basic financial matters because his father, the household head, still handled such matters. In nuclear families children become financially independent sooner and the older generation has less influence in important decisions such as education. One reason why the older generation might try to keep control is to avoid a splitting up of the family. Another respondent explained that; “sons will quarrel after becoming a majority and they will go for dividing the family or the land”. The grandfather may often be the one who has the final word in the decision whether or not a daughter shall be given more education. And for women, the greater financial freedom found in a nuclear family is also related to less influence from older generations, as exemplified in the above already cited quote; “there is more freedom financially for a woman in a nuclear family as she has greater choice”; more importantly, it is so because “*she does not have to defer to an elder*”. As Jeffrey and Jeffrey point out, a conjugal pair “...rarely make fertility decisions in isolation from social groups which specify what ‘respectable’ families are like, and create a kind of social or collective rationality. In other words what is economically rational can be culturally very specific” (1997:79). However, the degree to which this is true differs between joint and nuclear families. This is clearly indicated by the responses we got when discussing the ideal family. In only 9 % of the nuclear households was the preferred ideal family said to be important for other family members than the parents. On the other hand, in 44% of the joint families the ideal family was important also to other members than the parents, such as paternal or maternal grandparents.<sup>10</sup> As one woman explained; “while giving birth to my child I had to listen to my mother-in-law. We had to obey her or father-in-law regarding child rearing, family size and daughter –son composition of the family. In those days at least two sons and one daughter was required. My wish was one son and one daughter”. This close connection between generations

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<sup>10</sup> There was also a marked difference between joint families in different villages. We might expect that this reflects differences in economic standing, but perhaps more importantly, in cultural patterns.

contributes to a slower change factor and gives more leeway for *institutional resistance*.

Our results so far indicate that the limited structural change in the study area has allowed a continued predominance of the traditional family structure, the joint family. The joint family structure appears to condition the bargaining situation adversely for women. Its higher degree of structuring impinges on the bargaining space and imposes patriarchal norms on the bargaining situation through the intertwined interests of the family members. Due to the greater complexity of the joint family and the higher structuring needed, perceptions regarding needs or contributions as well as the allocation of resources, are to a higher degree defined by norms that are more institutionalised. In comparison with a nuclear family, where the greater bargaining space provides a larger flexibility in the translation of norms into allocation, the restricted bargaining space of the joint family reduces the criteria for allocation of resources to be more 'subjective', or rather, to a higher degree determined by institutionalised norms. The allocation of resources within the household constitutes one of the main factors upon which son preference and daughter discrimination is legitimised and the structure of the family conditions that legitimisation through its influence on perceptions. A direct example of the intertwined interests of members of a joint family is the closer relationships between generations. This imposes considerations of older generation family member's preferences, the most obvious of which is that of linking secure old age support with future generations of the family and, hence, a preference for sons.

Increasing access to various aspects of 'modern' life has imputed new values in the form of lower fertility and smaller family sizes, higher education and mobility and higher mean ages at marriage (Rele & Alam, 1993; Caldwell et al, 1982; Hatti & Ohlsson, 1984, 1985<sup>11</sup>). However, it appears that the joint family structure and its lesser space for bargaining have restricted the bargaining power of women. The incorporation of these new values in a traditional family structure seems to take place under the cooperative, normative, framework of that family structure. As a consequence, the already low bargaining power and low position of women declines further and the consequent undesirability of girls increases as opposed to being challenged by the new values. Low bargaining power for women

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<sup>11</sup> Sirsi Taluk borders Siddapur Taluk and the two are very similar in social composition as well as in agrarian system.

in combination with the new values and an overall improvement in welfare seem to further restrict the space for daughters in a family. At the same time as women's bargaining power has remained low, the decision making process appears to have become more intricate with more complex preferences. Our preliminary results suggest that this development creates a negative process in which women's low bargaining power and the increased complexity of parents' preferences feed off each other, resulting in a continuous decline in the child sex ratio.

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