

Project Plan – Daughter Discrimination in Modern India

In India, the natural biological sex ratio of slightly more females than males in the population is reversed. The trends in sex ratios have shown a continuous decline in the proportion of women in the total population since 1901. The 2001 figures for children, in particular the age-group 0-6, highlight a *disturbing development toward an increasing undesirability of girls and preference for sons*. The sex ratio of the age group 0-6 has declined in a highly alarming and much faster pace than the overall sex ratio of the country after 1981. (Hatti et al, 2004) Within India, there have been marked regional disparities for as long back as the records show, with the north generally exhibiting a worsening trend as compared to the south¹. There are also sharp variations within the different states.

Economic development and decreasing fertility has revealed an underlying *desire to plan the gender composition of the family*. (Croll, 2000) Indeed, socio-economic development has contributed to *continuing or more pronounced son preference*. With the smaller family sizes of today, preference for sons appears to have accentuated the discrimination against girls as *less space is given to them within the family*. The social structures conditioning parents decision-making are constituted mainly of *patrilineal* patterns of inheritance with an *exogamous marriage system*, no other institutional alternative to *old age support* than the family as a source for social insurance together with *distinct gender roles* with roots in cultural-religious practices². (Miller, 1981, Greenhalgh. 1985, Das Gupta, 1987, Kabeer, 1996, 2000, Collard, 2000, Das Gupta et al, forthcoming) The resulting unequal social structures form the basis on which parents legitimise their preference for sons. Instead of being valued, daughters are seen as liabilities. In combination with the practice of sex-detection tests and subsequent abortions of female fetuses through widespread availability of techniques originally intended for detection of genetic abnormalities, the exposed underlying reasons for undesirability of girls has now developed into active discrimination of daughters mainly through female foeticide.

All of these contributing factors point to the centrality of the *institution of the family* to the problem at hand. Indeed, recent studies emphasise the importance of the family structure, whether nuclear or joint. (Larsen, 2004, Larsen and Hatti, 2004) Understanding gender inequalities within the family and across generations is possible through a conceptual framework that takes into account both *conflictual* and *congruent* aspects to *intra-household allocation of resources*. Assuming either that all members of households have shared goals and identical interests or that the relationship between the man and the woman is a zero-sum game of pure conflict is therefore equally misleading. (Sen, 1989) Serious conflicts might be involved in decisions regarding household arrangements concerning who does what and who gets which benefits. But the nature of the family organisational form requires that these conflicts be shaped within the general frame of cooperation, in which conflicts are treated as deviant behaviour. (Sen, 1987) 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. Such a “cooperative conflict” (Sen, 1987) model thus “keeps sight of both structure and agency” (Seiz, 1995:616). The problem poses important theoretical considerations. An extension is needed toward a greater inclusion of qualitative, normative aspects to intra-

¹ Haryana in the North has a ratio of 820 women per 1000 men as compared to Karnataka’s of 964. (Census of India 2001).

² Sons alone are considered to be able to perform the funeral rituals of the parents. (Mutharayappa et al, 1997)

household resource allocation. An obvious starting point would be to more thoroughly problematise the concept of power commonly used in bargaining models, in particular in the direction of normative aspects of power. Equally important would be to include a connection between wider societal changes and changes within the family.

The main objective of the study is *to analyse the underlying dynamics of the current trend of declining sex ratios for the age group 0-6.*

Karnataka in the south and Uttar Pradesh (UP) in the north have both had increases in overall sex ratio³ from 1991 to 2001. When looking at the sex ratios for the age group 0-6, however, one is struck by the difference. While the overall figures show small but definite increases, the 0-6 ratios have registered considerable decreases between 1991 and 2001. Like India as a whole, both Karnataka and UP show a *slight improvement in overall sex ratio*⁴, but a *large decline in the sex ratio for age group 0-6.* However, the two states' respective ratios differ considerably, thus reflecting the well-documented differences with higher ratios in the South and lower in the North (Miller, 1981, Dyson & Moore, 1983, Croll, 2000). The study will focus on two areas in Karnataka and two areas in UP with differing trends in sex ratios⁵. The objective is therefore to attempt to answer the questions: What are the causes of the changes in sex ratios? Why do the sex ratios exhibit diametrically opposite features? What do the study areas have in common and what sets them apart?

This is a comparative study on a micro level of four villages in two different parts of India, two in Karnataka and two in Uttar Pradesh. The two villages in each state are situated in areas of their respective states with distinctly differing developments. Such a comparative study would help highlight what is fundamental for the dynamics of the development through isolating basic factors similar to both areas. Secondly, by analysing different developments emphasis will be put on the interaction between underlying factors as it illuminates more possible combinations of factors. It will thus also help to understand how those different combinations influence the development dynamics. Thirdly, analysing a positive development will help us understand the extent to which different factors influence the process.

The sample villages will be chosen on the basis of their trends in sex ratios and villages with ratios mirroring the ones of their respective Taluks will be sought out. The study will aim at analysing differences in attitudes and practices regarding gender dimensions toward issues of reproductive strategies and intra-household allocation of resources. With a micro-approach using semi-structured interviews, Focus Group Discussions and official records from local Kindergartens, the study will combine qualitative and quantitative data. Quantitative data make it possible to focus both on villages with positive and negative development of child sex ratio, thus facilitating a comparative approach. It would also make it possible to relate aspects such as income or education level with the presence of strong daughter discrimination. Household as well as individual interviews will give valuable insights into particular family situations and particular local social practices and their importance. Focus group discussions in turn help give an important image of prevailing social norms. The methodological approach thus facilitates a focus on the family within its social normative context while at the same time providing important comparative possibilities.

³ Karnataka had an increase from 960 to 964 and UP from 876 to 898. (Census of India, 1991, 2001)

⁴ India as a whole has had a bigger improvement than Karnataka has. From 927 to 933 (India) as compared to from 960 to 964 (Karnataka), Census of India 2001.

⁵ For example, Siddapur Taluk in Uttara Kannada district, Karnataka, with *considerably lower* ratios for the age group 0-6 than for its total population and Hirekerur Taluk in Haveri district, Karnataka with *considerably higher* and positive ratios for its age group 0-6 than for the total population. (Census of India, 1991, 2001)

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