From 'fertility control' to 'gender control': Evidences of increasing gender bias in rural South India

T.V.Sekher and Neelambar Hatti

"Having a daughter is like watering a flower in the neighbour's garden."
- Tamil proverb

I. Introduction

Considerable attention has been paid by researchers to different dimensions of female deficit in India (Visaria 1971; Miller 1981; Sen 1990; Agnihotri 2000; Croll 2000; Bhat 2002; Kaur 2004; Patel 2007). The 2001 Census has generated further debate on the issue and has narrowed the focus to the changes in the juvenile or child sex ratio[1]. Changes in the sex ratio of children aged 0-6, are better indicators of status of girl child in India, known to be more hostile to females in their early ages. It also reflects the sum-total of intra-household gender relations. Why millions of girls do not appear to be surviving in contemporary India, despite an overall improvement in welfare and state measures to enhance the status of women? Why is daughter discrimination on the rise despite progress in female literacy and growing participation of women in economic and political activities? Is there a significant shift from perceived 'son preference' to deliberate 'daughter discrimination'?

While the 2001 Indian census shows that the overall sex ratio has marginally improved from 927 women per 1000 men to 933 per 1,000 during the last decade, the number of girls to boys in the youngest age group fell from 945 to 927. The regional disparities also appear to have increased; the northern states generally exhibit a worsening trend in sex ratio as compared to the southern states. The census evidence suggests a clear cultural preference for male children, particularly among some north Indian states. The census lists ' sex-selective female abortions', 'female infanticide', and 'female neglect' – typically through giving girls less food and medical care than boys- as "important reasons commonly put forward" for this shocking anomaly. The new figures point to the use of new technologies to determine the gender composition. The accelerated fall in the child sex ratio after 1981 is largely due to the diffusion of prenatal sex selection techniques in regions with well-entrenched gender bias (Bhat 2002; Hatti *et al* 2004).Furthermore, as social norms are changing toward smaller families, the availability of and access to new reproductive technologies provide an easy way for parents to achieve such goals.

One of the most remarkable changes in the last century has been the shift from high to low fertility and this has been described as the greatest single demographic change in the second half of the century (Caldwell 1993). The timing, onset, pace and magnitude of this decline varies between countries. The 2001 census indicated that, after a large spell of unprecedented population growth, India experienced a gradual

decline in the fertility levels. However, there is also evidence that of a growing disparity between the north and the south, with the southern states having been more successful in controlling population growth[2]. In a vast country like India with considerable demographic diversity and heterogeneity and varying levels of socio-economic development, the levels and phases of fertility decline vary significantly from one state to another (Bhat 1994; Sekher *et al* 2001; Guilmoto and Rajan 2002).

Several studies suggest that cultural factors have played an important role in determining fertility trends (Das Gupta, 1987; Basu 1992; Jeffery and Jeffery 1997). While attention has been drawn to the importance of cultural factors in studying demographic behaviour, few studies have examined in detail the relations between cultural and economic aspects. One important cultural (and economic) feature is the value attached to sons. It is important to further analyse the nexus of economic, social and cultural factors that underlie daughter discrimination, thus shifting the focus from son preference to daughter discrimination.

II. Fertility Decline and Adverse Sex Ratio

In a significant article titled as "More than 100 million women are missing", Sen (1990) brought to focus the increasing gender discrimination by analyzing the male-female ratio. He has argued that the problem of missing women is "clearly one of the more momentous, and neglected, problems facing the world today" (p-9). Miller (1981), in her anthropological study on neglect of female children in north India, has illustrated the strong relationship between culture and mortality. It is the cultural bias against females in north India, which brings into play neglect and mistreatment of unknown numbers of children.

There have been a number of studies, which have attempted to illustrate how the decline in fertility will affect gender bias and greater imbalance in juvenile sex ratios (Das Gupta and Bhat 1997; Clark 2000; Bhat and Zavier 2003; Vella 2005; Nanda and Veron 2005). A substantial decline in fertility presupposes a desire for fewer children as well as access to the means to limit the family size. Both these conditions can be achieved with increase in social and economic development. It is generally accepted that the pace of demographic transition is closely associated with the levels of socio-economic development. However, there are evidences to show that, even in the poorer regions, substantial decline in fertility has occurred through political interventions, in the form of family planning programme. The social and economic development and governmental interventions alone do not ensure any substantial change in the cultural ethos of the society. In South Asian societies, it is believed that a major barrier for decline in fertility was the prevalence of strong son preference, irrespective of social and economic development. It is also argued that with the increase in welfare and economic development, the influence of son preference would decline gradually. These assumptions are being questioned by some studies indicating that there has been an increase in son preference during the years of fertility decline. This occurs not only in poorer communities but also in populations where women have taken to education, employment and have achieved considerable social status. Das Gupta (1987) has found that excess female mortality for second and subsequent parity daughters was 32 per cent higher than their siblings

for uneducated mothers and 136 per cent higher if the mothers were educated. Basu makes a similar observation; " although her capacity to increase the chances of survival of her children seems to increase with education, the typical Uttar Pradesh women's ability to treat her male and female offspring equally actually decreases" (1992: 196). The existence of strong son preference has resulted in the desire to prevent the birth of daughters by carefully balancing the desired family size and desired sex composition of the children. In other words, the decline in fertility partly explains the rising masculinity of many populations (Das Gupta and Bhat 1997; Croll 2002). It is hypothesized that as fertility declines, two opposing forces could affect the child sex ratio, what is called as 'parity effect', which leads to a reduction of sex bias and 'intensification effect', which increases it. Considering this dimension, there is a need to examine the influence of the mirror image of son preference, namely, the daughter discrimination. Does a strong son preference ultimately result in deliberate discrimination against daughters? Miller asserts that, "the problem is that son preference is so strong in some areas of India and amongst some classes that daughters must logically suffer in order that family's personal and culturally mandated needs are fulfilled" (1981:25). Logically, this would mean that stronger the son preference, more intense the daughter discrimination.

Rather than going through repeated pregnancies bearing daughters in an attempt to produce male progeny, the norm of small family size and reduced fertility seem to imply that unborn daughters are the first to be 'sacrificed'. Generally, both infanticide and fatal neglect of female children seem to be supplemented by sex identification and sex selective abortion, to achieve the desired family size and desired gender composition. Better opportunities for women's education, increasing labour force participation and greater exposure to urban life, do not guarantee equal status for daughters. In many Indian communities, daughters are associated with a double loss. Firstly, a daughter leaves the natal family after her marriage and the benefits from investments made on her upbringing accrue to the new family, constituting a loss to her natal family. This is further compounded by the expenses of her marriage, particularly dowry, which is a heavy burden for the bride's family[3]. Sons, on the other hand, are considered as assets, deserving short and long-term investment. In rural India, the birth of a boy is thus a time for celebration while a birth of a girl, especially second or subsequent one, is often viewed as a time of crisis (Bumiller 1990). Besides economic considerations, there are cultural factors that support son preference. All these factors put together contribute to the firm belief that daughters cannot substitute sons. A general explanation for son preference is that sons can provide old age support. In India, a majority of the old parents live with married sons. The Indian context, characterized by high levels of uncertainty, where no institutional alternative to the family as a source of social insurance has emerged, parental decisions are likely to be powerfully motivated by their concerns about their own security in the old age. The existence of such an understanding and commitment between parents and sons, known as inter-generational contract, is one factor that appears to have remained unchanged through overall socio-economic changes. Sons are also important because they alone can perform the funeral rituals of the parents. Added to this, most women have very limited opportunities to contribute towards their parents' welfare. This creates an apparent dichotomy between the value of a girl to her parents and that of a woman to her parents-in-law.

It has also become more expensive to raise children as education has become more important and a necessity in a transforming society. The increasing cost of education and marriage of girls is a major drain on the household resources, which acts as a strong disincentive to have daughters. Another study found that whether parents discriminate against a living daughter depends on the sex of her older siblings (Pande and Malhotra 2006).

The underlying workings of female discrimination are undoubtedly highly complex. However, a number of broad factors have been identified which together create a situation where sons are preferred and daughters are neglected. The patterns of inheritance are typically patrilineal in India with property passing from father to son (Miller 1981; Agarwal 1994; Kabeer 1996). Upon marriage the bride leaves her natal home to live with the family of her husband. In this exogamous lineage system women are left out. They become dispensable essentially because they count for very little as individuals.

In recent years, a major factor directly influencing the imbalance in child sex ratio is the widespread use of sex determination technologies and sex selective abortion. Misuse of sex determination tests has been a subject of media attention for many years. Health activists and women's organizations voiced their concern forcing the government to act. In 1994, the Government of India banned the tests at the national level, with the *Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques (PNDT) (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act*. The Act specifies that no prenatal diagnostic procedures may be used unless there is a heightened possibility that the fetus suffers from a harmful condition or genetic disease. It also states that no person conducting prenatal diagnostic procedures shall communicate to the pregnant women concerned or her relatives the sex of the fetus by words, signs, or in any other manner. This Act was again amended in the light of the newer techniques of pre-conception tests and the amended rule came into effect in 2003. Now, the Act is renamed as the Pre-conception and Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex-selection) Act, 1994[4]. This legislation has been a miserable failure in preventing the couples seeking sex determination tests and abortions and the medical practitioners performing them.

Female fetuses are liable to victimization on the basis of their sex alone even before they are born. Only far reaching social changes that aim at increasing female autonomy, female economic power and the value of the girl child are likely to make a significant impact on the demand for sex-selective abortion. Interestingly, there is no reliable statistics available on sex selective abortion at the state or national level in India. An indirect estimate using the data from two rounds of National Family Health Survey[5] (NFHS) indicates more than 100,000 sex-selective abortions in India every year (Arnold *et al* 2002). The evidence of substantial sex-selective abortion in states such as Punjab, Haryana, Delhi and Maharashtra is consistent with the high rates of use of ultrasound and amniocentesis (Retherford and Roy 2003).

III. Two Village Studies in South India

How fertility decline and son preference really manifest at the village level, particularly in the context of widespread availability of sex selection techniques at low cost? By studying two villages in the low-fertility regions of South India, we

attempt to understand how these factors interplay at the micro-level, with changing socio-economic conditions. The main objective of this field enquiry was to study the precarious situation of female children before birth (their chances of being born at all), at birth and during the first six years of childhood. In order to gain an understanding of the dynamics it is essential to look into household and individual behavior. Here, the main concern is how reproduction strategies and specific gender discrimination practices vary among households belonging to different socio-economic groups. It is important to understand how the desire for sons, whether strong or weak, is directly related to daughter discrimination and neglect. The focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews were done to elicit information about the value of boys and girls, reproductive preferences and strategies. The qualitative research methods employed in the study villages provided very useful insights. A focus group, generally consisting of 8-10 persons with similar socio-economic and demographic background, encouraged lively discussions on specific issues, moderated and facilitated by the researchers. The entire discussion was tape-recorded which helped in the preparation of detailed transcripts later. FGDs provided not only experiences and opinions of the participants but also their perceptions on various issues. The information gathered through FGDs was supplemented with individual interviews. All these qualitative information was pooled together and synthesized to arrive at conclusions. The average time taken for a FGD was 90 minutes. FGDs were conducted in Panchayat offices, temples, *anganwadi* centres[6] and in some cases, at the residences of some members. Retaining all the participants till the end of the FGD was a challenging task. In general, villagers were very forthcoming in expressing their views and revealing their perceptions.

a) Mandya District in a Low Fertility Region of Karnataka

Mandya district is located in the central belt of southern part of Karnataka, which has been geographically classified as southern *Maidan* (plains) region of the state. The district is compact with high population and village densities. More than 60 per cent of the total population of the district belongs to a single peasant community, the Vokkaligas (gowdas). With the paucity of land for further expansion of area under cultivation, the long history of irrigation and its impact, and the Vokkaliga's love for land and cultivation have been documented by social scientists (Epstein 1962 and 1973; Srinivas 1976). There were fewer land transactions and the land values have increased considerably in recent decades. Landholdings of less than 2 hectare form nearly 85 per cent of all holdings. The large holdings with more than 10 hectares accounted for only 0.33 per cent of the total holdings and about 4.54 per cent of the total land held. Thus, marginal and small farmers were predominant in the district. The fortunes of a man generally depended upon the size of landed property of his father and the number of siblings with whom he would have to share the property.

Agricultural land, with assured canal irrigation, is the backbone of the economy of the district. The major crops are paddy, sugarcane, ragi and coconut. Sericulture and handloom weaving are the two other important economic activities, which provide work for thousands of families. The district recorded a population

density of 355 per sq. km in 2001. The male literacy rate was 72 per cent and female literacy 52 per cent in 2001.

Observations from the Study Village M

Village M is located about 8 kms from Mandya town (district headquarter). Coconut gardens and fields of sugarcane and paddy along with canals and streams surround the village. As per 2001 Census, there were 637 households in this village with an average household size of 5. The literacy rate was about 60 per cent. The general sex ratio was 926 (females per thousand males) and the child sex ratio (0-6) was 732 in 2001, a considerable decline from 825 in 1991.

The advent of irrigation brought overall changes in the pattern of cultivation and consequently, improved the economic condition of land owning families. Ownership of land implies regular food availability and income for the families. Therefore, land is the most important economic resource for the villagers. Most farmers use high yielding varieties of seeds and apply fertilizers. The availability of irrigation pump sets, tractors and power tillers in a way replaced significant part of agriculture labour. The easy availability of credit and marketing facilities also helped farmers. The access to the commercially vibrant Mandya town with many trade and industrial establishments also encouraged many villagers to take up employment in the town. However, fragmentation of land and unpredictability of agricultural production and prices made many of them sceptical, as narrated during FGDs.

> *"Fragmentation of land has taken place due to partition of the families, and everybody now having only smallholdings. So, parents don't prefer more children in order to prevent further division of their land."*

The population of the village has increased from 761 in 1951 to 2921 in 2001. Nearly 70 per cent of the households were Vokkaligas, the dominant community in the village as well as in the district. Vokkaliga in local language means 'cultivator', and they are traditional agriculturists. Undoubtedly, Vokkaligas control the bulk of the cultivable land in the village. According to 2001 census, 36 per cent of the total workers were cultivators and 24 per cent were agricultural labourers in this village. Twenty-one per cent of the households belonged to scheduled castes (deprived communities).

We observed that dowry, wealth flow from bride's family to groom's family, has become a common practice in all castes and communities. The communities that did not practice dowry in the past have now started this in a big way. This has put a heavy burden on the girl's family in arranging for dowry demanded by the boy's family and also meeting the increasing marriage expenses. Having more children is a financial burden on the family in terms of sending them to school and in performing their marriages. Epstein, who studied two Mandya villages documents the emergence of dowry practice; "in Wangala, it was Beregowda, one of the most enterprising peasants, who initiated change to dowry payments. He explained that three considerations had motivated him to take this step: first, he was keen to get an educated husband to his daughter. Second, his daughter had not been trained to work

in the fields and far from being an economic asset she would be a liability as a wife; finally, he said, Brahmins had always given their daughters dowries" (1973:197). Another study of South Karnataka village describes the changes in dowry practices - "The major change was the coming of dowry. In the early 1950s, the first dowries in Bangalore were paid by some Brahmin families. Not until the beginning of the 1960s did the first Brahmin landlord family in the study area provide a dowry and not until 1965 was this done by the first Vokkaliga (the major peasant caste) family. It is still not paid by Harijans (Scheduled castes), although in the largest village they ceased paying the *Tera* (bride price) five years ago, and the payment is still small among some of the backward castes. Nevertheless, they all anticipate its arrival. In all castes, the bride's family now bears the major portion of the wedding costs, and it is they who seek loans and sell land" (Caldwell *et al*, 1982: 707). The observations from FGDs illustrate how dowry has emerged as an essential part of marriage negotiations.

> *"In our colony, Kamala has two, sons. Her elder daughter-in-law has not brought anything, but the second daughter-in-law has brought a huge dowry. Therefore, the younger one receives more respect than the elder one. Including the husband and in-laws, threaten the elder one for not bringing dowry. I have seen them beating her also. Any time, she will be sent back to her natal home".*
> "Boy's *parents consider it is their right to collect dowry. They never think about the economic position of the girl's parents".*
> *"They never realize it can happen to their daughter also".*
> *"Some parents are forced to give their land as dowry".*
> *"No marriage in this village has taken place without giving gold and cash to the boy's family"*
> *"I don't want daughters. Even if I spend Rs. 5,000 for abortion, it is better than spending Rs.500, 000 on dowry."*

Prosperous Gowda families are ready to pay even half-million to 1 million rupees as dowry, besides giving gifts in the form of gold jewelry, car, furniture, etc. Usually the girl's family has to bear the entire marriage expenses. The dowry paid and the gifts given depend upon the qualification and employment position of the boy and land owning status of the family (See Appendix 1). During our fieldwork we came across young Vokkaliga couples having only one child, *mostly male*, and deciding to accept family planning. According to them, if they had more than one child it would be extremely difficult to provide good education and meet the cost of upbringing. As narrated in our focus group discussions, since land was limited, it was difficult to maintain the standard of living.

> "*Earlier in this village, scheduled castes never used to give dowry. After seeing Gowdas, they also started. Some people believe that paying more dowry is a prestige issue for the family. They sell their land or borrow money to give dowry".*
> *"Even though girls with some education may try to oppose the payment of dowry in villages, they generally give in to the parental/family pressure as the marriage negotiations progresses".*

The discrimination in providing primary education to boys and girls was evident during the discussions with school teachers.

"Some people send their sons to convent school (better quality education) and daughters to government school (poor quality education)"
"Why to spend on daughter? Son gets good education and will earn money for the parents. Daughter, one or another day, has to leave the house".

Generally, most of the Vokkaliga families are nuclear. After marriage, women have no right over the parental property including land. The sons inherit all family assets. During our interviews and FGDs, we found that there was a strong preference for small families, and interestingly, most of the couples had already accepted family planning. It was the Vokkaligas who by accepting contraception paved the way for other communities towards birth control. The type of fertility transition experienced in this village and other parts of the district has been unique, and one can see a strong relationship between population pressure on land and rapid fertility decline (Sekher and Raju 2004). The paucity of cultivable land and availability of irrigation have resulted in increasing land values. The land owning Vokkaliga desires to have only one or two sons to avoid further fragmentation of land. As mentioned by Epstein (1998) "They now appreciate that large number of children creates economic problems of future generations. But most of them still have a strong son preference. They continue procreating until they have at least one son. For example, Shangowda had one son after his wife had given birth first to two daughters. He and his wife then decided that three children are enough for them. A large proportion of villagers pursue the same strategy. In this too, old beliefs and customs persist in a changed setting" (P-196). Vokkaligas consider land as the source of old age security, along with the son. Beals, while studying social change in a Mysore village 50 years ago, has stated that- " Namhalli's landowning group, while not threatened with starvation, has been faced, in recent years, with the problem of dividing a limited quantity of land among an ever increasing population. Within the village many solutions to this problem, ranging from abortion to the adoption of iron plows, have been tried. In almost every family in Namhalli, at least one child has been groomed for urban employment" (1955: 98).

The focus group discussions with women of the village clearly illustrate the strong son preference and intense desire to limit the number of children.

"After *having two daughters, my mother-in-law told me not to go for sterilization. Then I thought, if I continue like this, it will be very difficult for me, and I may die. Then I went to a doctor and decided to have operation."*
"I got operated immediately after the birth of my second child. My husband gave me full support in this decision."
"I have a daughter; my husband wanted at least one boy. My mother-in-law became sad and cried when I gave birth to a girl child".

During our fieldwork we observed that a majority of the young couple underwent sex determination test, either in private clinic or nursing homes. People from village M, go to nearby Mandya town where two nursing homes are known for

conducting abortions. During focus group discussions among Vokkaliga and Scheduled Caste women, we found that almost all were aware of the facilities available to find out the sex of the foetus. We also came across cases where some public health workers, particularly Auxiliary Nurse and Midwives (ANMs), were providing information and advising village women 'how to get rid of unwanted daughters". Many women openly admitted that several doctors in Mandya city conduct both the test and the abortion. In a few cases, people went to places like Bangalore and Mysore. This was expensive for the family, but rich Gowdas were ready to spend money for what they consider a 'good purpose'. For conducting sonography and disclosing the sex of the fetus, private nursing homes in Mandya charge between Rs. 1,000 to 2,000, and if a woman prefers to undergo an abortion she has to pay an additional Rs. 5,000. During our focus group discussions many women justified persuading their daughters or daughters-in-law to opt for abortion saying that it is better to spend a few thousand rupees now than spending a million rupees later, thus avoiding all the future problems like education, marriage, dowry, etc. One woman said that had this facility (ultrasound) been available 20 years ago, she would have gone for it to reduce the number of daughters. She said, "*Hecchu edi kere haal maadtu; Hecchu henninda mane haalaaitu*" (too many crabs destroy the lake and, similarly, too many daughters spoil the house). In her efforts to have a son 20 years ago, she gave birth to three daughters. Few observations from FGDs-

> *"If one becomes pregnant, the family won't tell she is pregnant. She is taken to find out the sex of the baby. If it is a girl, the foetus is aborted immediately. Everything is done in a secretive manner."*
>
> *"Rame Gowda's wife died during abortion. Poor woman, she has left behind two daughters."*

Another woman explained the necessity for having a son; *"maga manege; magalu pararige"* (son is for our family and daughter is for other family). When asked about whether they depend on their sons for protection during old age, most men and women said 'yes'. Some of them strongly felt the necessity to have at least two sons. Krishne Gowda quoting a local saying substantiated his argument; *" ondu kannu kannalla; obba maga maganalla''* (one eye is not enough to see, one son is not enough for the family).

It is very evident that the practice of dowry has spread to all communities. The girl's family is under pressure to meet a series of payments for the marriage, beginning with engagement and concluding with the bride actually going to reside in the groom's house. In many communities, the practice of dowry was unheard of about thirty years ago but now it has become an essential feature of the marriage. Apart from dowry, it is a well-established norm among all communities that all expenditures for conducting the marriage have to be borne by the girl's family. Considering all these expenses and practically no return, many feel that having a daughter is a 'real burden' for the family. An old woman appropriately summarized the situation: "*Yavaga Honnina bele Eruthade, avaga Hennina bele iliyuthade"* (Whenever the value of gold goes up, the value of the girl comes down).

The findings from the sample household survey (96 young male or female parents having at least one child in the age group 0-6) carried out in village M clearly indicate the changing attitude towards the perceived value of sons and that of daughters. Out of 96 respondents, 66 belong to vokkaligas and the remaining from Scheduled Castes. The son preference is strong among vokkaligas, nearly 77 per cent of them want either one son or two sons (and no daughters!). Only 18 per cent of them consider that their ideal family comprised of one son and one daughter. More than four-fifth of them felt that daughters were more expensive to bring up than sons and 71 per cent were apprehensive of the problems/difficulties associated with suitably marrying off their daughters (Table 1). Nearly half of the mothers perceive that the future life of their daughters will be worse than their own. However, only 12 percent of fathers felt that the life of their sons will be worse.

Table 1. Findings of Household Survey in Village M.

A. Ideal family size according to the respondents

Ideal family size	Communities (in percentages)	
	Vokkaligas	Scheduled Castes
1 son	30.3	17.4
2 sons	46.9	47.8
1 daughter	4.6	4.3
1 son and 1daughter	18.2	30.4
2 daughters	-	-
Total	100	100

B. Value attached to the children by parents

Value of boys and girls	Communities (in percentages)	
	Vokkaligas	Scheduled Castes
Sons are more expensive to bring up than daughters	21	24
Daughters are more expensive to bring up than sons	87	72
Will you face difficulty in arranging marriage for your son?	18	42
Will you face difficulty in marrying off your daughter?	71	89
Son will take care of you when you are old	63	74
Daughter will take care of you when you are old	9	12

C. Parental perception about the future of their children

Parental perception		Vokkaligas (in percentages)	
		Men	Women
How do you think life will be for your daughter (s)?	Better	NA	11
	Worse		49
	Like your own		40
How do you think life will be for your son (s)?	Better	39	NA
	Worse	12	
	Like your own	49	
Total		100	100

Note: NA- not applicable

b) Salem District of Tamil Nadu- Low Fertility Region known for Female Infanticide

Salem district recorded the lowest child sex ratio in South India in 2001. This district attracted considerable attention in the nineties for the prevalence of female infanticide (George *et al* 1992). A study carried out based on available PHC records confirms the incidence of female infanticide in the districts of Salem, Dharmapuri and Madurai (Chunkath and Athreya, 1997). The worsening child sex ratios of 2001 census has amply substantiated the still existing and rampant practice of female infanticide in parts of Tamil Nadu, despite overall socio-economic changes (Sekher and Hatti 2007).

In Salem district, the average household size was 4.0, with literacy rate 65 in 2001. Two major communities are Vanniyars and Kongu Vellala Gounders. Vanniyar originally formed fighting force of the Pallavas and hence, came to be called as 'padayachi'. Their community cohesiveness is remarkable. Some of them practice agriculture as their main occupation. The traditional occupation of Vanniyar is oil pressing and oil selling. The nuclear family is the most common form. Sons inherit property and the eldest son gets a greater share. Daughter does not have any right to the property unless they have no brothers. Vanniyars are categorized as most backward caste (MBC) and the state government has reservation policy for them. Kongu Vellala Gounder is an inhabitant of the Kongu region of the Tamil Nadu. Agriculture is the traditional occupation of this community. The other economic activities are animal husbandry, trade, industrial labour etc. They are hardworking agriculturists and specialized in garden cultivation.

Observations from the Study Village K

The village K in Mettur Taluk has 1341 households according to the 2001 census with a total population of 4983 (2676 males 2307 females). The average household size was 4.0. The overall literacy rate was 47 per cent. The general sex ratio is 862 and the child sex ratio was 616 in 2001, a decline from 673 as recorded

in 1991. Three major communities in this village are Vanniyar, Kongu Vellala Gounder and Scheduled Castes.

During our filed work we came across incidences of female infanticide in the village. Though some families, including women, were hesitant to talk about it, there were a few who openly justified the practice. Though the practice was more prominent among Vanniyars, other communities also occasionally indulge in infanticide. On many occasions, though the mother of the child was not directly involved, the elder members ensured the elimination of female infant within a week after birth. The methods used for this purpose included feeding the child with poison, loosening the knot of umbilical cord, suffocating baby to death, feeding with paddy husk, and starving the baby to death. A more 'modern' method recently observed was the use of pesticides or sleeping pills. Some elders use the prediction of local astrologers ('fortune tellers') as a strong justification to get rid of the daughter who would 'cause destruction to the family'. As one old woman, narrating the plight of her family said; "it is better they die than live like me". *Penn shisu kolai*, female infanticide in local language, is justified for various reasons. Though many families tolerate the first girl, the subsequent daughters are really at high risk. The general observation that the female infanticide was confined to certain backward communities like Kallars has been proved erroneous. It has spread to communities like Gounder, Vanniyar and Pallars. Our discussions in village K indicated that it was not only the poor who practiced infanticide, but the rich and powerful in the village also resorted to *penn shisu kolai.* There were few police cases registered recently against parents for committing the infanticide. But, the arrival of sex determination tests, has given a new method for those who can afford to pay. Many economically better off families admitted that they avoided the birth of another girl "with the help of doctor". However, poor women in the scheduled caste colony said, "We cannot afford to pay for test and abortion. So we still practice infanticide, which is much cheaper". Our study clearly shows the practice of female infanticide was being substituted by female foeticide, particularly among Gounder community. The combined efforts of the state, NGOs and some panchayat leaders have had some impact on reducing the incidence of female infanticide. Pregnant women already having a girl child used to be classified into high-risk category and were monitored closely by local NGOs.

Among the Kongu Vellala Gounders, dowry was reported as the major reason to avoid having daughters. A few observations from FGDs are cited below:

> *"Parents of the bride borrow money from all sources; sometimes they sell their land to meet the marriage expenses."*
> *"After paying so much dowry, they continue to demand more. If she fails to bring dowry, the husband and in-laws start harassing her. That is why many people don't want daughters."*

There was a phenomenal increase in the amount of dowry transacted in the village. The land owning Gounder had to pay atleast 80 soverigns of gold, Rs. 2 lakh cash and a car, as well as to meet all the lavish expenditure to conduct marriage. The manifold increase in dowry among all communities repeatedly came up for

discussions in the FGDs. The Vanniars are not far behind, the rates ranging between 40 to 60 sovereigns of gold, car or motorbike and marriage expenses. Even the landless Dalits (the poorest in the village and depending upon agricultural work for their livelihood) are forced to pay gold (5 to 10 sovereigns) and meet the marriage costs, which can easily exceed 25,000 rupees. Borrowing money to meet these 'unavoidable' expenses has pushed many families into the trap of indebtedness on the one hand and social obligations on the other. According to one Dalit women, "having a daughter is a punishment for the sins committed in previous life". In most of the marriage negotiations, the first criterion was how much dowry would be given. "Modernisation ushered in the importance of material status, driving the need to be extravagant and to show off as a way of asserting one's social standing. For well-off Gounders performing *seeru* (dowry) and the conduct of marriages of daughters became an important forum to display new found prosperity and to assert their status within their community (caste group)" (Srinivasn 2005: 602). This factor clearly shows why daughters were unwelcome resulting in a deliberate intensification of non-preference of daughters and consequent increase in son preference. Even the affluent families who can 'afford' daughters and can provide them with good education are sceptical because, as a local leader put it, "the higher the education of the girls, the higher the dowry". It is also true that "an increase in the prevalence of dowry, which has raised the costs of bringing up children, and created a situation of financial distress, have also contributed to the fertility decline in some segments of population"(Krishnamoorthy *et al* 2005: 245). Marrying off a daughter without giving a decent dowry can have serious consequences for the natal family as well as for the daughter. One respondent expressed her worry:

> *"The in-laws may humiliate our daughter, demand more dowry, ill treat her and finally she may be forced to return to our home. How can we allow this to happen to our daughter?"*

Apart from the demand at the time of marriage, the demand after marriage for more dowry, resulting in the fear of ill treatment of their daughter if the demands are not met, is a perennial worry for many parents. The inability to pay the amount of dowry demanded could also lead to a delay in the marriage itself and an unmarried daughter would pose many a problem for the parents.

IV. Concluding Observations

The two village studies clearly illustrate that in the eyes of parents, daughters are rarely able to substitute for sons. Though the will for limiting the family size is quite evident across communities, "smart couples" are able to achieve the desired family size and the desired sex composition of children together. The new reproductive technologies that are available are employed by parents from all communities. Notwithstanding the extent of use, it is also an indication of the easy availability and affordability of sonography and abortion facilities despite the legal hinders such as PNDT Act. As narrated by a literate woman in Village M: "Had these clinics were available 30 years ago, many of us would never have seen this world!" According to a NGO activist in Tamil Nadu study village, "the real culprits are the medical doctors who misuse the technology to increase their profits". Though

the "technological effect" may mainly be responsible for the elimination of female foetuses, the powerlessness of village women in our patriarchal societies is an equally important factor to be considered. Personal interviews with young women in the study areas reveal that many a time, they were forced to undergo sonography and abortion, much against their wishes.

The FGDs in both study areas clearly show the tendency to identify the daughter with dowry payments. The continuing trend of increasing dowry demands, in cash and in kind, is a crucial factor in marriage negotiations as well as a 'status enhancer' within the community. The dowry had significant impact on how the parents value the worth of boys and girls, even today.

Interestingly, the two peasant communities (Vokkaligas and Kongu Vellala Gounders) in the study villages have become increasingly affluent as major beneficiaries of access to irrigation and other inputs of modern agriculture. This affluence has meant a continuing rise in living standards, consumption and aspirations. Besides acquisition of various trappings of modern life, one way of demonstrating their economic affluence, according to the FGDs, was to get a 'well-qualified son-in-law' since this would enhance their status and standing within the community. This desire of course would gradually inflate the dowry demands of the boy's family and also increase the wedding expenditure of the girl's family. Hence, the increasing costs of education and marriage and a conviction that dowry rates can only move upwards compel the parents to seriously consider the investment in and return from a daughter as against the benefits that can accrue to the parents from investing in a son. Both the landed and the landless in our FGDs cite this as the most important reason for preferring sons over daughters. In both villages the small family is the accepted norm, parents seem to make the deliberate choice between a son and a daughter since son would mean inflow of wealth while daughter implies financial drain. The affluent communities, which not too long ago considered payment of large dowries as a symbol of their capability and status, now realise that such payments constitute a threat to their affluence, lifestyles and aspirations and, consequently prefer not to have daughter/s.

As a result of the growing affluence of the landowning communities, the cash flow among the landless agricultural labourers has also increased due to higher wages, most of which is being paid in cash than in kind. This fact coupled with the desire to imitate the customs of the higher castes in the village, a kind of sanskritisation process, has meant that the practice of dowry payment has permeated to the landless lower castes, thus increasing the expenses of marriage of daughters. Consequently these communities also exhibit similar preferences to avoid having daughters, albeit to a lesser extent.

The observations from the two low-fertility regions of South India and the survey data analysis clearly indicate a strong preference for sons, particularly among the peasant communities. However, with the substantial decline in fertility in these regions, the son preference appears to have resulted in an increased as well as intensified manifestation of deliberate discrimination towards daughters. The widespread use of sex selection techniques has provided an opportunity for couples

to choose a son rather than a daughter. The increasing pressure on limited land on the one hand and the spiralling cost of bringing up children on the other (particularly for girls due to dowry), parents prefer not to have daughters. The medical technology has come in handy for many for achieving the desired sex composition and the desired family size. The rapid fertility decline, not accompanied by changes in the cultural values and gender inequality, is in a way responsible for the intensification of gender bias and the deliberate attempt to deny the girls from being 'born at all'. In other words, female foetuses are increasingly being 'victimised' on the basis of their sex alone, even among the affluent communities.

Appendix 1

A. Range of Dowry in a Village in Mandya District (1970)

Community	Occupation/education of the son-in-law	Dowry paid	
		Cash (Rs)	Items
Rich Vokkaligas	Educated, with a job in the city	3,000-4,000	1-2 acres irrigated land. Jewelry (for Rs. 6,000) Cloth (for Rs. 3,000)
Middle Class Vokkaligas	Educated	1,000-2,000	Jewelry, cloth (for Rs. 3, 000)
Poor Vokkaligas		Up to 1,000	Cloth and jewelry (for Rs. 1500)

Source: Epstein 1973

B. Range of Dowry in Village M (2005)

Community/Caste	Occupation/education of son-in-law	Dowry (cost) in 2004	
		Cash (Rs)	Items
Rich (Vokkaligas)	Groom is employed in government/private job and settled in the city	3-5 lakhs	Land, car, 100-130 grams gold, clothes, all other expenses towards marriage
	Groom is employed in government /private job and settled in the village.	2-3 lakhs	Scooter, 80-100 grams gold, clothes and all other expenses towards marriage
Middle class (Vokkaligas & other castes)	Groom is in government /private job and settled in the City	1-2 lakhs	Land, scooter, 60-70 grams gold, clothes and all other expenses towards marriage
	Groom is in government/ private job and settled in the village.	Less than One lakh	Land, scooter, 60-70 grams gold, clothes and all other expenses towards marriage
	Groom is an agriculturist, settled in the village.	50,000	60-70 grams gold, clothes and all expenses towards marriage
Poor labourers (SCs and other castes)	Landless agricultural labour (groom)	10-20 thousands	10-20 grams gold, and clothes and all other expenses towards marriage
Vodda* households	Landless labour (groom)	5-10 thousands	10-20 grams gold, and all expenses towards marriage. 101 articles like vessels etc.

**Vodda is a SC community, which migrated from Tamil Nadu and settled in the village in 1960s.*

Source: Focus Group Discussions carried out by the authors in 2005.

Notes

[1] The Census of India measures the sex ratio as number of females per 1,000 males as opposed to the standard international norm of number of males per 100 females. Defining the sex ratio by covering children in age group 0-6 may seem arbitrary but the Census uses it for the purpose of literacy status, categorising the entire population into two groups, those aged 0-6 years and those 7 years and above.

[2] For a detailed review of fertility transition in South India, see Guilmoto and Rajan (2005). Quantitative and qualitative analysis of fertility changes in four southern states have been made available under the South India Fertility Project (www.demographie.net/sifp).

[3] In the era of globalisation and increase in consumerism, dowry payment is more a rule than an exception. Many communities in south India where the practice of dowry was totally absent have started making huge payments in recent decades at the time of marriage. In many families, even after the payment of dowry there is continuing uni-directional flow of resources from a woman's parental household to her in-laws. Dowry has emerged as a strategy to acquire higher standards of material life with adverse consequences to women's status, including their survival. For a detailed description of the changing nature of dowry practices in South India, see Srinivasan (2005).

[4] However, the first court case and conviction under this Act did not happen until very recently when a doctor and his assistant in the state of Haryana were sentenced to two years in jail (*The Hindu*, Wednesday, March 30, 2006).

[5] NFHS, similar to Demographic Health Survey (DHS) in other countries, comprises of a nationally representative sample of households covering ever married women in the age group of 15-49 years. This survey has been conducted first in 1992-93, then in 1998-99 and recently in 2005-06 (IIPS and Macro International 2007).

[6] The Anganwadi centers are nursery schools for children aged 3-6 years, which provide nutritious food under the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) of the Government. Almost every village has Anganwadi centre which also provides a meeting place for pregnant and lactating mothers.

References:

Agarwal, Bina, 1994. *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Agnihotri, S.B., 2000. *Sex Ratio Patterns in the Indian Population: A Fresh Exploration,* New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Arnold, Fred, Sunita Kishor, and T.K.Roy. 2002. "Sex-selective Abortions in India," *Population and Development Review,* 28(4), 759-785.

Basu, Alaka, 1992. *Culture, the Status of Women and Demographic Behaviour*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Beals, Alan R., 1955. "Interplay among Factors of Change in a Mysore Village." In McKim Marriott, (ed.), *Village India: Studies in the Little Community*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press**:** 78-101.

Bhat, Mari P.N., 1994. "Levels and Trends in Indian Fertility." *Economic and Political Weekly,* 29 (51 & 52), 273-80.

Bhat, Mari P.N., 2002. "On the Trail of 'Missing' Indian Females (I and II)," *Economic and Political Weekly,* 37 (51 & 52), 5105-118 and 5244-263.

Bhat, Mari P.N and Francis Zavier., 2003. "Fertility decline and gender bias in Northern India," *Demography*, 40(4), 637-57.

Bumiller, E., 1990. *May You be the Mother of a Thousand Sons: A Journey Among Women in India,* New York: Penguin Books.

Caldwell, John, P.H, Reddy, and Pat Caldwell, 1982. "The Causes of Demographic Change in Rural South India: A Micro Approach," *Population and Development Review*, 8 (4), 689-727.

Caldwell, J., 1993. "The Asian fertility revolution: its implications for transition theories", in R. Leete and I. Alam (ed.), *The Revolution in Asian Fertility*: *Dimensions, Causes and Implications*, Oxford: Clarendon Press: 299-316.

Chunkath, S.R. and V.B, Athreya., 1997. "Female Infanticide in Tamil Nadu; Some Evidence," *Economic and Political Weekly,* 32 (17), WS 21-28.

Clark, Shelley. 2000. "Son Preference and Sex Composition of Children: Evidence from India," *Demography,* 37(1), 95-108.

Croll, Elisabeth J, 2000. *Endangered Daughters: Discrimination and Development in Asia*, New York: Routledge.

Croll, Elisabeth J., 2002. "Fertility Decline, Family Size and Female Discrimination: A Study of Reproductive Management in East and South Asia" *Asia- Pacific Population Journal*, 17 (2), 11-38.

Das Gupta, M., 1987. "Selective Discrimination against Female Children in Rural Punjab, India," *Population and Development Review,* 13(1), 77-100.

Das Gupta, M, and P.N.Mari Bhat., 1997. "Fertility Decline and Increased Manifestation of Sex Bias in India", *Population Studies*, 51 (3), 307-15.

Epstein, Scarlet T, 1962. *Economic Development and Social Change in South India*, Bombay: Media Promoters and Publishers.

Epstein, Scarlet T, 1973. *South India: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow. Mysore Villages Revisited*, London: ELBS and Macmillan.

Epstein, Scarlet T, 1998. "Researcher's View" In Epstein S.T., A.P Suryanarayana and T. Thimmegowda, *Village Voices: Forty Years of Rural Transformation in South India,* New Delhi: Sage Publications: 89-205.

George, Sabu, Rajaratnam Abel and B.D. Miller. 1992. "Female Infanticide in Rural South India," *Economic and Political Weekly,* 27 (22), 1153-60.

Guilmoto, C.Z. and S. Irudaya Rajan., 2002. "Spatial Patterns of Fertility Transition in Indian Districts," *Population and Development Review*, 27 (4), 713-38

Guilmoto, C.Z. and S. Irudaya Rajan, (eds.), 2005. *Fertility Transition in South India*, New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Hatti, Neelambar, T.V.Sekher and Mattias Larsen, 2004. "Lives at Risk: Declining Child Sex Ratios in India"*, Lund Papers in Economic History*, No.93. Lund, Sweden: Lund University.

IIPS and Macro International, 2007. *National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3) - India 2005-06*, Mumbai: International Institute for Population Sciences.

Jeffery, Patricia and Roger Jeffery, 1997. *Population, Gender and Politics: Demographic change in rural north India,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kabeer, Naila., 1996. "Gender, Demographic Transition and the Economics of Family Size: Population Policy for a Human-Centred Development," *Occasional Paper 7*, Geneva: UNRISD.

Kaur, Ravinder, 2004 ." Across–region Marriages: Poverty, Female Migration and the Sex Ratio", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 39 (25), 2595-2616.

Krishnamoorthy,S, P.M.Kulkarni and N.Audinarayana, 2005 "Causes of Fertility Transition in Tamil Nadu" In C. Z. Guilmoto and S.I. Rajan, (eds.), *Fertility Transition in South India,* New Delhi: Sage Publications: 227-247.

Miller, B.D., 1981. *The Endangered Sex: The Neglect of Female Children in Rural North India,* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Nanda A.K and J. Veron., 2005. "Child Sex Ratio Imbalance, Fertility Behaviour and Development in India: Recent Evidence from Haryana and Punjab" In I. Attane and J. Veron, (eds.), *Gender Discrimination among Young Children in Asia,* Pondicherry: French Institute of Pondicherry and CEPED: 91-131.

Pande, Rohini and Anju Malhotra. 2006. *Son Preference and Daughter Neglect in India: What Happens to Living Girls*, Washington D.C: International Center for Research on Women (ICRW).

Patel, Tulsi, 2007. " Informal Social Networks, Sonography and Female Foeticide in India " , *Sociological Bulletin*, 56 (2), 243-262.

Retherford, R.D. and T.K. Roy, 2003. *Factors Affecting Sex-selective Abortion in India and 17 Major States,* National Family Health Survey Series, No.21, Mumbai: IIPS and Hawaii: East-West Centre.

Sekher, T.V, K.N.M. Raju and M.N. Sivakumar., 2001. "Fertility Transition in Karnataka: Levels, Trends and Implications," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 36 (51), 4742-52.

Sekher, T.V.and K.N.M.Raju, 2004. *Fertility Transition in Karnataka*, Monograph (5), Bangalore: Institute for Social and Economic Change.

Sekher,T.V. and Neelambar Hatti, 2007." Vulnerable Daughters in a Modernizing Society: from Son Preference to Daughter Discrimination in Rural South India" in I. Attane and C.Z.Guilmoto (eds.) *Watering the Neighbour's Garden: The Growing Demographic Female Deficit in Asia*, Paris, CICRED: 295-323.

Sen, Amartya, 1990. "More than 100 Million Women Are Missing," New *York Review of Books,* December 20, 61-66.

Srinivas, M.N, 1976. *The Remembered Village,* Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Srinivasan, Sharada., 2005. "Daughters or Dowries? The Changing Nature of Dowry Practices in South India", *World Development,* 33 (4), 593-615.

Vella, Stephanie, 2005. "Low Fertility and Female Discrimination in South India: The Puzzle of Salem District, Tamil Nadu". In C. Z. Guilmoto and S.I. Rajan, (eds.), *Fertility Transition in South India,* New Delhi: Sage Publications: 248-281.

Visaria, P. 1971. *The Sex Ratio of the Population of India,* Monograph (10), Census of India, New Delhi: Office of the Registrar General of India.