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2006

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Larsen, M., Hatti, N., & Gooch, P. (2006). *Intergenerational Interests, Uncertainty and Discrimination*. Lund Papers in Economic History.

*Total number of authors:*

3

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# Lund Papers in Economic History



No. 105, 2006

*Population Economics*

## Intergenerational Interests, Uncertainty and Discrimination

*Conceptualising the Process  
of Declining Child Sex Ratios in India*

Mattias Larsen, Neelambar Hatti  
& Pernille Gooch

# Intergenerational Interests, Uncertainty and Discrimination

Conceptualising the Process of Declining Child Sex Ratios  
in India

*Mattias Larsen, Neelambar Hatti and Pernille Gooch<sup>α</sup>*

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

During the past 50 years India has achieved considerable social and economic progress. It is also generally assumed that the future progress will be even more rapid and that India will be an important player in the global market. Despite this unbridled optimism, the future for India's unborn female children looks increasingly bleak. In fact, the country is undergoing a social and demographic development of stunning proportion, which can only be expected to have far-reaching social and economic consequences.

The numerical relationship between males and females in the population, the sex ratio, is the most basic indicator of equality between men and women in a country at a specific point of time. Changes in this relationship reflect the underlying changes, for better or worse for women, in the country's socio-economic and cultural patterns. To date,

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is part of a series within the ongoing project, "Lives at Risk: Discrimination of female children in modern India", financed by the Swedish Research Council. We are grateful to Ramachandra Bhat, Karnataka, Laxmi Nodiyal, Uttaranchal, and Dr. Suresh Sharma, Institute of Economic Growth, New Delhi, for their invaluable assistance in the field. We thank Dr T.V. Sekher, International Institute for Populations Sciences, Mumbai, for his valuable contribution. We also thank Prof. Tulsi Patel, Dr. Jacques Véron, Dr. Anders Nilsson and Dhammika Herath for their constructive comments on earlier versions of the paper. Needless to say, the authors bear sole responsibility.

much research has been done on the nature of India's declining sex ratios<sup>2</sup>, in particular the rapidly declining sex ratio in the age group 0 to 6<sup>3</sup>. Though intuitively significant; the relationship between the processes of rapid social and economic changes and the worsening plight of girl children has so far received little attention<sup>4</sup>. This paper is an attempt to develop a conceptualisation of the *process* of declining child sex ratios (CSR) with particular attention to the *dynamic* aspect of the problem.

In India the natural biological sex ratio of slightly more females than males in the population is reversed, particularly in the youngest age group<sup>5</sup>. Although there has been a heightened consciousness of the problem, census figures show that the sex ratio of the age group 0-6 has declined at a disturbing pace since 1981<sup>6</sup>. The child sex ratios have continued to decline despite improvements in general welfare and female status and point to deeply rooted structures of gender inequality. Alongside the ongoing process of transformation and smaller families, *it appears that a substantial number of younger couples are apprehensive about bringing up daughters and deliberately choose not to.*

The 2001 Census results also show marked declines in areas and social groups that earlier showed more balanced sex ratios. This indicates that discrimination against daughters has spread to new regions and from higher social strata to lower, suggesting a necessity to analyse the structure and dynamics of the problem. In order to understand the economic, social and cultural realities behind the disturbing census figures comparative case studies from different regions of India are needed. Areas where declining child sex ratios are a relatively recent phenomenon are of particular interest. In this paper we try to approach the problem from a more holistic perspective in order to capture the transient quality of the structure in which girls are disfavoured and their lives put at risk.

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Visaria (1971), Bardhan (1974, 1982), Mitra (1978), Miller, (1981, 1989) Das Gupta (1987), Agnihotri (1995, 2000), Sudha & Rajan (1999), Croll (2000), Mari Bhat (2002a, 2002b).

<sup>3</sup> See for example Das Gupta & Mari Bhat (1997), Sudha & Rajan (1999), Agnihotri, (2000), Hatti et al (2004).

<sup>4</sup> See Larsen et al (2005) and Patel (2005b) for analyses where societal change is specifically taken into consideration

<sup>5</sup> However, the biological aspects of sex ratios at birth are still relatively unexplored and what is considered 'natural' is very much a euro-centric view based on sex ratios in western societies.

<sup>6</sup> The child sex ratio (CSR) decreased from 945 to 927. 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.

This article builds upon the recognition that the declining child sex ratios are a *result of an ongoing process of societal change*. Looking at areas which have shown significant declines in child sex ratios between 1991 and 2001, the article draws on results from recently conducted field studies in rural areas of Karnataka in the South and of Uttaranchal in the North. Uttaranchal has shown an alarming decline in the child sex ratio from 948 in 1991 to 906 in 2001. Of special interest are results of case studies from Siddapur Taluk<sup>7</sup>, Uttara Kannada District, in the Western Ghats of Karnataka and from Pithoragarh Tehsil, Pithoragarh District, in the eastern part of Uttaranchal<sup>8</sup>. For both cases the outstanding feature is *a very low child sex ratio*. Two additional cases with high child sex ratios are used for comparative purposes.

To begin with, we need to consider the overall process of societal change making up the context in which the decision-making behind the discrimination of daughters takes place. At the centre of the factors concerning the problem of daughter discrimination stands the family. The problem of “missing girls” can be ascribed to social, economic and cultural factors, which together create incentives for son preference and disincentives for raising daughters. Nonetheless, it is within the family that the decision-making takes place. Hence, it is of importance to analyse the *relationships between these factors with a focus on the family*. Intra-household relations are related to development and changes in society, which shape and change the social structures and norms conditioning relationships within the household. Changes such as rising levels of education, development of a wage economy, and in living arrangements are examples of such structural aspects that directly affect the institution of the family (Thornton & Fricke, 1987). We will argue that parents, as a reaction to the uncertainty that those very changes produce in terms of decision-making, ‘fall back’ on traditional norms regarding gender and domestic roles. This makes the criteria for the allocation of resources highly adversarial for girls, creating a structure in which there is little space for daughters.

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<sup>7</sup> Taluk and Tehsil, are different terms used in different regions for the same thing, namely, the major revenue, administrative and planning unit below the district.

<sup>8</sup> We assume that some basic cultural differences between northern and southern India are reflected in demographic behaviour (Dyson and Moore, 1983), which is why a north-south comparison is of interest.

## Transformation, uncertainty, cooperation and conflicts within the household

India is in a transitional phase where traditional and modern coexist, where old norms and expectations clash with modern ideas; in other words, India is experiencing a process of transformation with considerable changes in its social and economic fabric. During the 1990s India underwent fundamental economic reforms and changed from being an economy characterised by an emphasis on centralised planning, to a liberalised and globalised economy with great faith in the efficacy of the market mechanism (Nair, 2004). With its relatively sustained, high rate of growth during recent years, rapidly expanding private and service sectors, rising demand for well-educated professionals and a growing middle class, India is undergoing far-reaching changes. The Green Revolution has contributed to large productivity gains in agriculture. There has been a spread of cash economy, improvements in communications and transport. The media has grown in importance and there has been an increase of contract-based relationships replacing previous personalised patron-client ones. Fertility decline and the government's efforts in propagation of family planning have added a justification and rationalisation of deliberate family planning strategies which have contributed to the spread of sex-selection techniques (Chatterjee & Riley, 2001, Patel, 2005b) These changes have either directly or indirectly increased the value attached to the acquisition of basic levels of information and knowledge (Kabeer, 2000). It is against this background of a traditional society in transformation, a situation of fluidity, that the problem of daughter discrimination needs to be conceptualised.

As a point of departure, we suggest that parents' basic obligation is to make decisions concerning the future of their children as the children are not able to do so themselves. However, we also have to recognise that in the Indian context, 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 old age and the best ways to assure it (McNicoll & Cain, 1989, Kabeer, 2000)<sup>9</sup>. Three aspects of family in India stand out in stark contrast to western patterns of family organisation. These are, the vital need to nurture personal bonds within the community in order to secure ones existence and to gain social status, to secure old age support through

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<sup>9</sup> In fact, the right of parents without any means of their own to be supported by their children is recognised in section 125 (1) (d) of the Code of Criminal Procedure 1973, and in section 20 (3) of the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956 (Bhat & Dhruvarajan, 2001).

children, and lastly to arrange suitable marriage alliances. These are also the three most important factors, which *tie the interests and the decision-making of one generation to the next*. Family has always been a foundation of Indian society and pride is still taken in the centrality of marriage and family life<sup>10</sup>. Children have a special place in the family and the nurturing of interdependency and support across generations is uniquely valued in the Indian family system (Carson & Chowdhury, 2000). Naturally, these connecting interests are stronger the greater the 'generational depth' and the more extended or joint the structure of the family is<sup>11</sup>.

The existence of such an understanding and commitment between parents and children, commonly called an *inter-generational contract*<sup>12</sup> (Greenhalgh, 1985, Kabeer, 2000, 1996, Croll, 2000, Collard, 2000), is one of the factors which appear to have become threatened through the overall social and economic changes (Sen, 1990). As society transforms and parents' investments in educational expenditures increase, the direction of intergenerational income transfers eventually becomes altered. Correspondingly, *a rising market valuation of human capital gradually erodes the intergenerational contract and parental authority* (Parsons, 1984, Fapohunda & Todaro, 1988). While economic changes may have left child to parent flows intact, they have altered the flow of resources from parent to child (Caldwell, 1982). This suggests how *socioeconomic changes may have put a strain on the conditions for an inter-generational contract*, thus making the disincentives against

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<sup>10</sup> Patel writes that: "The family is an institution that simultaneously envelops and unfolds the ideal and normative on one hand and actual behaviour on the other. It works as a conduit, and sanctions and provides the potential for continuity as well as change in structures of kinship, marriage and reorganization of living arrangements in accordance with the times" (2005a:31).

<sup>11</sup> The joint family is a characteristic of traditional India (Patel, 2005), and in a joint family, the freedom of the individual member is subject to the interest of the group and the concept of duty is central. (Cormack, 1953). A joint family consists of brothers and their respective wives and children as well as old parents living together. Family members share property, residence and kitchen. (Ramu, 1988, Jeffrey & Jeffrey, 1997, Bhat & Dhruvarajan, 2001) Family matters are handled jointly and the household head, the oldest male member, 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. A nuclear family, on the other hand, is composed of the husband, wife and their unmarried children.

<sup>12</sup> In a rural, agricultural context there are distinct economic reasons for the existence of an intergenerational contract and a continuation of the farming enterprise within the family. A succeeding family receives an operating business plus land and dwelling together with the obligation to provide the parents with secured income for the rest of their lives. There is an economic advantage to the succeeding family in relation to alternative earnings from labour. This stems from the lower transaction costs of a family undertaking from intra-family cooperation and family labour ('self-exploitation') (Chayanov, 1986 [1925], Netting, 1993).

raising daughters even stronger. In this context it is possible to talk of a '*parental dilemma*', in which parents are compelled to make a decision regarding the gender composition of the family.

Closely related to this is another important aspect to keep in mind, the "life course perspective" (Das Gupta, 1995, Caldwell, 1978, Kandiyoti, 1988), which has particular importance in a joint or extended family setting with *closely connected interests of different generations of family members*. If one manages to tolerate a presently oppressive situation it can yield rewards later as sons become fathers and daughters-in-law become mothers-in-law. Naturally, this element is intimately linked with the interests of younger family members or future generations. Family members who have subscribed to these social norms of the family, have opposing interests with young family members and even with their own children. With smaller preferred family sizes a particularly unfortunate gendered consequence of this is how it expresses itself in a woman's position within the household increasing with the birth of a son (Kandiyoti, 1985, 1988, Dyson & Moore, 1983, Agarwal, 1994, 1997, Kabeer, 1996). Even though women can gain considerable power in the household in their old age, this depends on having sons who support their mother's voice at the expense of their own wives (Das Gupta et al, 2003). Within the family there thus appear to be two main factors causing daughters to be the first to be sacrificed; a gender dimension and a generational dimension (Croll, 2000, Greenhalgh, 1985). The inter-generational contract works to counter shifting dependency situations between generations as a way of insuring against vulnerability. In so doing, it also creates a hierarchical structure of the family based on resource flows. In other words, there is a *gender hierarchy* as well as a *generational hierarchy* and in both of them daughters come last. This means that, *the intergenerational interests are gendered by nature*. This would explain the apparent dichotomy between the value of a girl to her parents versus that of a woman to her in-laws.

Parents are compelled to include other interests than their children's, not least the parents' own, in their decisions. Once we have recognised that parents' obligations are to optimise these *intergenerational interests*, the obvious question that arises is *why daughters come to be excluded from the results of these deliberations*. The analytical concepts we will necessarily work with need to be clarified.

Societal transformation can be understood as a process of change with an increasing dependence on market mechanisms where a "growing differentiation of needs" is satisfied through impersonal



exchange (Weber, 1978:638). From a rural perspective, this implies understanding transformation as a process of greater inclusion and integration of the village economy in the larger transformational direction of society. Important sources of structural change in India are increased penetration and, therefore, dependence on the market mechanism along with government intervention particularly through land reform and technology in agriculture. Such a “Great Transformation” (Polanyi, 2001[1944]) is a process of ‘*disembedding*’ (Polanyi, 2001[1944], Beck, 1992, Giddens, 1990) of the economy from traditional social relations resulting in greater *complexity* in the period of transition, where; “[i]nstead of economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system” (Polanyi, 2001[1944]:60).

The resulting uncertainty for actors generates a desire for a re-introduction of social devices to reduce the uncertainty faced (Polanyi, 2001[1944], Beckert, 1996)<sup>13</sup>. It is a transformation away from pre-modern society in which economic relations are distinguished by a minimal need for trust (Giddens, 1990, Bourdieu, 1977<sup>14</sup>), a change from ‘custom to contract’. We can distinguish four ways in which the integration of action in pre-modern society is organised. Kinship, geographical context, religion and tradition all structure interaction through their historicity, lending them stability (Weber, 1978, Giddens, 1990). As they are based on particularistic bonds they are ‘taken for granted’ and are not questioned. These are disembedded from the local community in the process of modernisation<sup>15</sup> (Giddens, 1990). In such a ‘prestige economy’ it is necessary to build and nurture personal bonds to not only secure ones existence but also to gain social status. This is dependent upon the community’s acceptance and acknowledgment not only of one’s personal actions but, more importantly, those of other

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<sup>13</sup> Polanyi’s (2001[1944]) assertion of an inherent “countermovement” necessary to create stability after movement toward a laissez-faire economy has found resonance also in analysis of family development in Degler (1980), who argued that the twentieth century American family was created an exact opposite of the market economy’s concept of human relations. For Polanyi, the important point is that both processes are *politically* engineered and that the ‘disembedding’ is a necessarily abortive process. This is also something which Beckert reasserts, namely that; “on theoretical grounds, the claim of modernization theory that economic processes are increasingly removed from their social embeddedness with the development of market economies can be rejected” (Beckert, 2002:293).

<sup>14</sup> In Bourdieu’s terms this would entail a shift in importance from symbolic capital to economic capital.

<sup>15</sup> We deliberately use the term ‘transformation’ as opposed to ‘modernisation’. Our intention is to thereby avoid an understanding of change as a linear process as is often the case when the concepts ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ are used in a polarising fashion (Gusfield, 1967).

family members as well. It is of course also in the interest of the community as a whole that individuals and families conform to the proscriptions of the community. Needless to say, this is a main reason why the arranged marriage has such a central importance in India. Such a “capital of rights and duties built up in the course of successive generations” provides “an additional source of strength which can be called upon when extra-ordinary situations break in upon the daily routine” (Bourdieu, 1977:178). This “capital of honour and prestige” is “readily convertible” (Bourdieu, 1977:179) into economic capital with the family name as the means. However, even though “social honour, or prestige, may be the basis of economic power, and very frequently has been”, it becomes ‘disembedded’ during the process of transformation since the market is impersonal (Weber, 1978:926). This ‘disembedding’ affects the family by transferring many of the family’s functions to other institutions, something which is visible in the emergence of such laws as those regulating minimum age for marriage, or instituting legal rights for children in relation to their parents and for women’s individual property rights in relation to their spouses. Through this process, the family “ceases to be a coercive institution and becomes a persuasive institution” (Commons, 1991[1900]: 528). Thus, the *disembedding process* intrinsic to societal transformation entails a shift from structured forms of life as the provider of meaning to that of the individual as an agent who *chooses* to give loyalty to structures and institutions (Beck, 1992).

Increased division of labour itself leads to higher complexity<sup>16</sup>. The process of transformation ‘disembeds’ social and economic exchange from traditional forms of trust as they prevent the spread of division of labour from which novel cooperation and exchange relations emerge (Weber, 1978). Cooperation and exchange become possible without having to rely on traditional mechanisms because disembedding mechanisms “remove social relations from the immediacies of context” (Giddens, 1990:28). However, when the structuring influences of kinship, tradition, and religious cosmologies on actions are disembedded, the basis for cooperative relations is replaced by a situation in which their necessary stabilisation can only be achieved through the active inter-subjective communication of actors. Trust is built up gradually through the process of exchange itself (Curtis, 1986).

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<sup>16</sup> Ester Boserup (1970 [1989]:5) writes in her seminal work that: “[e]conomic and social development unavoidably entails the disintegration of the division of labour among the two sexes traditionally established in the village. With modernisation of agriculture and migration to towns, a new sex pattern of productive work must emerge, for better or for worse”.

The trust achieved through such communicative processes of reproduction is thus distinguished from the traditional forms of trust by its *contingency*. The increasing contingency in expectations of what others will do gives rise to *uncertainty* and a growing need to shape stable contexts of trust (Beckert, 2002). The uncertainty we refer to concerns *uncertainty in terms of decision-making*, and should thus not be confused with a more general insecurity. The increased potential for socio-economic mobility and the uncertainty, which it entails also increases the need to plan family size and gender composition more deliberately (Das Gupta, 1997). Thus, the direction of our analysis should be toward the reflexive interplay of parents' *intentional rationality* (Beckert, 1996, 2002) and the 'social devices'<sup>17</sup> they use to confront the uncertainty of the situation in which decisions have to be made regarding the future of their children<sup>18</sup>. The discussion thus leads to a focus on the relationship between change and the structures used to confront it.

The most basic tension in society is between the changing nature of the social world and the "frozen structures" or *institutions* needed to function socially, to interact, in the highly complex, continually changing, and thus uncertain world we live in<sup>19</sup>. The complexity of causal relations arises from the unintended consequences of our actions (Giddens, 1984). The relationship between structure and action is therefore reflected in how actors, through their actions, produce and reproduce the structures they experience as conditions of action without having the ability to control intentionally their concrete content (Giddens, 1984). Our perceptions of ourselves and of our interests as well as of our relations to others are conditioned by the institutional

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<sup>17</sup> Beckert exhaustively describes 'social devices' as "encompass[ing] all forms of rules, social norms, conventions, institutions, social structures, and power relations" (1996:820).

<sup>18</sup> Indeed, what Monica Das Gupta (1987) pointed out in her seminal article by emphasising that the discrimination was "selective" and not general was that it implies an *intentionality*, or what she called "conscious and voluntary behaviour" (Das Gupta, 1987:95) and her main intention was to provide more "understanding of the dynamics of sex discrimination at the household level and its relationship to family-building strategies (Das Gupta, 1987:77).

<sup>19</sup> This argument presupposes a tension in society but it should be pointed out that this tension is not to be understood as a "state of nature" or as tension between people. Rather, it is a tension between change and the devices with which people confront it. It is therefore not to be understood in a deterministic sense as something, which is inherent to and unalterable in human relations. What is implied is a meta-theoretical, ontological, understanding in which "agents cannot learn all the relevant future inter-temporal contingencies through time because the past does not provide a reliable guide to the future" and where "[h]uman institutions such as money and firms have evolved to cope with uncertainty but have unintendedly been a further source of uncertainty" (Dunn, 2000:431, see also North 2005). Thus, the underlying structures of society are also seen to change with the effect that cumulative learning does not necessarily diminish uncertainty.

context; they are vital elements of our socialisation. The complexity of the social world due to unintended consequences prevents the anticipation of outcomes; the resulting uncertainty complicates decision-making when actors have insufficient structure to base their decisions on. Correspondingly, institutions are the outcomes of individuals' need, or demand, for order and coherence in the face of change and uncertainty. They create reciprocal expectations which limit the choice set of actors, and thereby reduce uncertainty as they "secure expectations" (Commons, 1934:705, Knight, 1992). Institutions and conventions emerge both as responses and as definitions of uncertainty (Heiner, 1983, Storper & Salais, 1997, Knight, 1992, Cornwall & King, 2003).

Institutions are representations of the basic understanding of the changing world around us. That understanding is fundamentally embedded in the "shared habits of thought and behaviour" i.e. cultural and religious beliefs of society (Hodgson, 2003, Harriss, 2003, North, 2005). However, institutions are *dynamic manifestations* of peoples' ongoing legitimisations of their own actions and the reproduction of the institutions themselves. Institutions are thus changing even though their function is to provide constancy. An institution is, after all, by definition *constant during a period of time*. Structures provide 'fixity', in the form of 'social devices', but there is a continuum of 'fixity' resulting from these devices just as there are absolute and relative values. However, 'suboptimal' outcomes where one group is systematically disadvantaged are common and institutions that provide appropriate behavioural rules will not necessarily arise (Knight, 1992). It is thus not enough with a 'functionalist' understanding of institutions since they legitimise inequalities and discrimination. Institutions are also the media through which power relations are reproduced (Goehler, 2000) and this quality is central in understanding institutional change or rigidity (Knight, 1992, Harriss, 2003).

Situations where actors cannot anticipate outcomes of decisions and therefore also not assign probabilities to the outcome are situations characterised by *uncertainty* (Knight, 1921, Alchian, 1950, Heiner, 1983, Knight, 1992, Beckert, 1996, 2003, Dequech, 2001, 2003, Harriss, 2003). There is thus an apparent link between uncertainty and the degree of complexity and change of the surrounding social context and the way decisions are made. Uncertainty in this sense concerns the problems actors have in assigning means to ends. But the goal ambiguity and the uncertainty stemming from not knowing the ends does not mean that

parents do not make efforts to optimise outcomes with their choice of means.

The central obligation of parenthood is, after all, for parents to make decisions for their children as they may not be able to do so for themselves. The Indian situation with arranged marriages places particularly great responsibilities on parents. It is a question of optimising in terms of the situational structure and therefore also a question of rationality. The fact that the child sex ratios are low exemplifies how parents optimise the utilisation of means at hand<sup>20</sup>. When parents undertake a collective enterprise such as having and rearing children they make plans for something far in the future and for that they need to establish a basis for trust not only in one another, but also in the wider family circle (Curtis, 1986). Therefore, the intergenerational interests include reproducing the social structure or institution of the family.

Nevertheless, it is not appropriate to think of rationality in terms of conventional use in economic theory where “rational does not refer either to means or to ends, but rather to the relating of means to ends” (Polanyi et al, 1957:33). In the same sense it is important to point out the necessity of distinguishing between uncertainty and risk. While risk is quantifiable and perhaps even predictable, uncertainty, according to our definition, implies a fundamental inability to quantify and predict<sup>21</sup>. Instead, the uncertainty of the situation in this case relates to both ends and means as parents have increasing difficulties in formulating the ends since their children may have, in many ways, completely different ideas about how they want to live their lives. It is therefore a question of *intentional rationality* in which structural rigidities take on an important role (Beckert, 1996, 2002). It is in this context that institutions and social structures are central as they play the double role of both constituting the context and of enabling actors to make decisions based on that situational context, i.e. being both constraining and enabling (Commons, 1931, Giddens, 1984, Sewell, 1992, Hays, 1994, Ensminger & Knight, 1997).

A very useful way of conceptualising the linkages between structure and agency in the micro foundations of the institution of the family is in

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<sup>20</sup> One very clear example of how the choice of means is done in a disturbing, yet optimising way is of course the extent and speed at which sex determination tests and subsequent abortions have gained popularity.

<sup>21</sup> The classic definition of uncertainty comes from Frank H. Knight (1921) who made this same distinction between risk and uncertainty, where risk is a condition in which it is possible to assign probabilities to outcomes and where uncertainty is a condition under which no such probability distribution exists.

terms of cooperative and conflicting aspects of intra-household relationships. Such a conceptualisation focuses on the nexus of sociological and economic theories as it incorporates congruent (sociological) and conflicting (economic) interests (Swedberg, 2003). These are shaped and influenced quite differently depending upon the endogenous characteristics of the family and the exogenous material conditions.

Serious conflicts might be involved in decisions regarding household arrangements, concerning who does what and who gets which benefits, but the nature and form of the family organisation require that these conflicts be shaped within the general frame of cooperation, in which conflicts are treated as deviant behaviour (Sen, 1987, 1989). A family should thus be seen not only as a space of harmony, but also of conflicting power relations where some member's interests are set aside for other's in order for the household to persist over time. 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.

This conceptual framework is thus intended to place parents' expected and deliberate optimising in its structural context while at the same time allowing for a dynamic analysis of how that structure changes as society transforms.

## Case Studies

The outcome of daughter discrimination is, in fact, not difficult to see quantitatively. It is, for example, possible to get a clear cut picture of the ratio between sexes from attendance registers of how many girls and how many boys attend, or not attend, the local kindergartens. Likewise it is possible to trace the inequalities in sex ratios to geographical area, to social groups and to economic groups. However, if ones intention is to analyse the underlying reasons for this anomaly, it is necessary to shift focus from the outcome, the ratio, to the social process, which results in skewed sex ratios.

Empirical evidence used in this paper consists of data collected in interviews, in focus group discussions (FGDs) and in participant

observations. This information has been complemented by village level and taluk level data also collected during fieldwork<sup>22</sup>.

### ***1. Karnataka***

Situated on a tableland where the Western and Eastern Ghat ranges converge into the Nilgiri range, the South Indian state of Karnataka has a population of about 53 million. Karnataka is commonly divided into four regions according to their physical characteristics, namely Coastal, Malnad, Maidan plains and Southern Maidan. Each region also has its own distinct social, economic and cultural characteristics. According to the 2001 Census, the total literacy rate for the state is 66.6%. Rural literacy is 70.4% for males and 48% for females. The overall sex ratio is 965 while the rural sex ratio is slightly higher at 977. The CSR has declined from 960 in 1991 to 949 in 2001.

Uttara Kannada District and Siddapur taluk are situated in the North-western Malnad part of the state. It is characterised by ecological features typical of the Western Ghats range. The deciduous 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 rural literacy rate is 81.6 for males and 63.5 for females. The district CSR was 946 in 2001. The distinct physical features of the area have 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. Traditionally, a majority of the people derive their livelihood from the cultivation of paddy and areca<sup>23</sup>. The areca palm trees are grown in gardens or plantations and are normally situated down in the valleys. These are mostly inter-cropped with spices such as cardamom, pepper and to an increasing extent also with vanilla, together with coffee and various fruit trees. The case study was conducted on the plantation economy side in the border area between plantation and paddy economy.

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<sup>22</sup> The factors behind the dynamic are highly relative in nature and to a large degree the outcome of the subjective interpretations made by the actors involved. Thus, the decision-making process, which leads to discrimination of girls, has to be understood in terms of the social context. That social context is conditioned by relationships of power between its actors, the norms under which they act and the social structure to which they contribute and act within, all of which is of a qualitative nature.

<sup>23</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.

The district, as well as the area of study, is characterised by two types of cultivation and its distinct economies<sup>24</sup>. (Joshi, 1997) Changes in structure have 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 (Government of Karnataka, 2004).

Instead of structural change, the plantation area has experienced a transformation 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 as a whole, where the study areas are located, has one of the lowest child sex ratios in the state. As per the 2001 census the overall sex ratio in the district is 970 and for the taluk it is 973. The child sex ratio of the taluk declined from 927 in 1991 to 896 in 2001. This is a significant decline with many implications. While Kalahalli<sup>25</sup> has a very high child sex ratio (1217/1000), Minnahalli is characterised by having a *low child sex ratio* (868/1000) in 2001.

The availability of diagnostic technologies were made clear in statements like these; "Nowadays doctors don't tell the sex of the child straight away. It wasn't banned earlier and then it was no problem finding out. Even now, if people ask, and many people ask, they will be told. Everybody is aware, people from all classes and castes. If you want to find out it is no problem to do it. It may cost Rs 500-1000". Apparently, decisions concerning childbearing have become

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<sup>24</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. (Joshi, 1997)

<sup>25</sup> For reasons of discretion, we have chosen to use the fictitious names Kalahalli and Minnahalli.



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. But 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<sup>26</sup>. This in turn is reflected in comments like; “The ideal family is of one son and one daughter. For us it will be difficult in the future since we already have two daughters”. Differences in agrarian system appear to influence the child sex ratio. Problems of poor rains hit the paddy cultivators harder as they have no reserves, which the comment above clearly illustrates.

Practically in all respects Kalahalli is less developed. It was quite isolated until very recently and even today it only has limited communications to other areas. Although there have been considerable changes in agriculture after the tenancy reform, making it possible for people to cultivate their own land and subsequently earn more, there is still a big difference in income level when compared with Minnahalli. The low level of education is reflected in how the young people of Kalahalli do not look for possibilities outside their village. One respondent put it like this: “In our village most people have their fathers land and they find it sufficient. They feel that if they work there it is enough. This is the kind of attitude we have here”. Their situation gives very little confidence to try to live a different life and their *mobility* is considerably lower than the one of young people of Minnahalli. The dilemma they face is that they feel: “Even if we go to school we will just fall back into agriculture, so because of that many people don’t see the point of going to school”. This situation should be seen in contrast to the one in Minnahalli where the young use the opportunities and mobility given to them through education and look for different ways to live their lives than their parents do.

The mean age at marriage for women in Kalahalli is 17.5 and it is still so, as one woman explained, that; “To some extent and in some cases, education is discontinued once the marriage has been fixed”. Nevertheless, this type of attitude seems to be changing; “Girls have more courage now to question the age at which their parents want them to marry”, as explained by the women in one focus group discussion (FGD). Changes are taking place and women are gradually getting more say about their own life and their mobility is increasing. However, there

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<sup>26</sup> This corresponds to what Das Gupta and Mari Bhat (1997) terms ‘intensification effect’.

is a long way to go and the villagers constantly return to how they feel backward, subordinate and cut off.

On the other hand, Minnahalli, with very low CSR, has had *greater access to 'modern' aspects of life*. Not only has fertility gone down with smaller family sizes, there has also been a rise in education level where at least a college degree is the minimum the better off families expect and provide for their children. The rise in education has led to an *increased mobility* among the young. The young generation also marries considerably later. An effect of this development was explained in a male FGD in Minnahalli: "Now there are equal opportunities for boys and girls particularly when it comes to education. With regards to education for girls, it is now becoming so that the girls themselves are not ready to marry a boy who lives in a village. They want to have a good groom who lives in town and has a good steady income".

Both study areas share a son preference expressed in such remarks as: "According to tradition one son and one daughter is the ideal. With one daughter we need a son. A son is needed for heading the household or for agriculture work. With only daughters the land will go to the daughter's husband's side", or "The ideal family is one son and one daughter. The son continues the bloodline and is old-age support. The daughter is important to expand the social network". However, while *not one* respondent in Minnahalli talked about attaining the preferred gender composition of their families through the traditional way of repeated births until a son is born, this is still the method parents generally use in Kalahalli. This was expressed in statements like: "A son is necessary to take care of us in old age and also to perform ceremonies when we have passed away. First we had three daughters and then we finally had a son. Now everybody shows more affection to him".

In Minnahalli this practice has given way to modern methods of determining the gender composition of the family. This was illustrated in comments like the one given by one woman: "I needed at least one son. He will stay close to me and take care of me. I first had one daughter, and then I wanted to have at least one son. If the second had been a daughter I would not have gone through with the birth. The daughters move out when they marry". Most likely she had undergone a sex-determination test and as indicated by the statement was ready to abort the foetus had it been a girl. That foeticide is a widespread practice was expressed in remarks such as: "A doctor from [*a nearby town*] does the SDTs. For a higher price he brings patients to the town. He also performs abortions". Or in statements such as: "If somebody has a boy they don't try to have more children, people will only try to have one

more child if the first child is a daughter and only to get a son. People want to have male children. Therefore, regardless of if it is against the law the female foetus will be aborted". Thus, *there has been a shift from son preference to active daughter discrimination* made possible by modern technology in Minnahalli but not in Kalahalli. When people reason as they do in Kalahalli; "With two children I will stop, even if it is two daughters", it indicates how a similar shift has not taken place there.

While both areas have a strong son preference in common, that preference has been increased by the changes brought along by modern 'values', particularly in an increased mobility for the young, in Minnahalli but not in Kalahalli. At the same time there has been a change toward actively discriminating against girls, whether unborn or born, facilitated by modern techniques. This change appears to be what has contributed to the decline in child sex ratio.

These two patterns of change could be explained in terms of 'push' and 'pull' factors. In Kalahalli, agriculture has undergone such changes through tenancy reforms, what we consider a 'push' factor, that the economic reality for the rice cultivating families has been altered. At the same time, the families continue to use the traditional method of repeated births in order to achieve the desired gender composition. On the other hand, in Minnahalli, the increased availability of opportunities outside agriculture, what we would call 'pull', has created strong incentives for investment in education and *in individuals*. This in turn, has meant a diffusion of new values and greater socio-economic mobility, which has led to a shift from the traditional method of achieving desired gender composition towards a method facilitated by modern techniques.

## ***2. Uttaranchal***

In 2000, after many years of agitation the central part of the Indian Himalayas, formerly known as the U.P Hills, severed its bands with Uttar Pradesh and was constituted as Uttaranchal, the 27<sup>th</sup> state of the Republic of India. Women and environmental movements were an important part of the history leading up to the creation of the new state. This illustrates how sustainable use of the environment and better conditions for women are central issues for a majority of the people of the state.

Uttaranchal is situated northwest of Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state. It borders Tibet, Nepal, Himachal Pradesh, and the UP

plains districts. The State can be divided into three distinct geographical regions, the High-mountain region, the Mid-mountain region and the Terai-region. The economy of the state is predominantly agrarian and the rural scenario is still dominated by small-scale utilization of available environmental resources where women (and girls) do most of the work. This is complemented by a 'money order economy' due to large-scale migration of younger men to the plains for jobs in the armed forces, the government, or in the private sector.

Farooquee and Rawat (1997) lay down some of the main constraints to rural development in the hills such as physical isolation, poor infrastructure, and high cost of transportation, absence of market, limited production possibilities, and absence of irrigation facilities. They further state that the environmental fragility of the hills set limits for intensive production systems. On the positive side are factors such as diversified activities, specialised and skilled handicraft, and maximum utilization of available resources (Farooquee & Rawat, 1997). The backbone of economical activity in the hills has traditionally been small-scale agricultural ventures depending mainly on local input and production for subsistence rather than for the market. This scenario is now changing with, on one hand, commercialisation of agriculture and, on the other, diversification of occupations where agriculture loses its importance to salaried employment outside the village. The development in the state appears to affect women – and especially the girl child – negatively. While the overall sex ratio in Uttaranchal rose from 936 to 964 between 1991 and 2001 the CSR fell from 948 to 906.

For Uttaranchal comparisons have been made between two areas positioned at opposite ends of the spectrum of high respectively low child sex ratios. At one end we find Pithoragarh Tehsil, which has the lowest sex ratio in Uttaranchal in the 0-6 years age groups with an average of 855 girls to 1000 boys.<sup>27</sup> Pithoragarh District, which was carved out of Almora District in 1960, stretches from the Middle to the High Mountains and it borders Nepal to the East and China (Tibet) to the North.

Pithoragarh Tehsil is situated in the Mid-hills in the southern part of the district. With a rural CSR of 867 and an urban CSR of only 819, it demonstrates the general trend; found in the last census, that one consequence of economic growth, education, and access to modern medical facilities could be fewer girls in the population. Pithoragarh Tehsil resembles Siddapur Taluk in Karnataka in so far as it has *a very*

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<sup>27</sup> Laxar Tehsil in Haridwar District also has a CSR of 855 but as Laxar is situated in the plains we have chosen Pithoragarh in order to compare two tehsils both situated in the hills.

*low child sex ratio*. With greater exposure to ‘modern’ lifestyles new values have been accepted leading to *lower fertility and smaller family size*. One reason for this is new opportunities for employment in salaried occupations especially for males. Many men from the hills join the army. This is particularly so for Pithoragarh where it is estimated that about half of the households have a male member in the army or an elder man receiving an army pension. This influx of cash from outside is contributing to a marginalisation of agriculture. Just as in the cases from Karnataka also in Pithoragarh a preference for sons was expressed during interviews. This was articulated in statements from women such as: “We must have at least one boy” or “We cannot afford more than one daughter due to high marriage expenses”, but they also said: “Our in-laws are the biggest problem, they are the ones who want the boys most”. While all those interviewed denied that they themselves used ultrasound in order to abort female foetuses, which is illegal, they all knew that the method existed and said that they were sure that many families in the area made use of it. This was not difficult either as the town of Pithoragarh, with all its medical facilities, was within easy reach from the villages of our study.

Puraula Tehsil in Uttarkashi District, used for comparison, stands at the opposite end of the child sex ratio with an equal number of girls and boys (1000/1000), the highest ratio at tehsil level in the state. The two tehsils also stand in contrast when it comes to female literacy, in this case with Pithoragarh at top with a female literacy rate of 72.5 (male literacy 94.5) and Puraula at the bottom with 38.5, only about half of that of male literacy which is 73.7. This further demonstrates that development in the form of education and shortening of the gender gap in literacy does not automatically lead to more equal conditions for women and girls in terms of sex ratios<sup>28</sup>. Uttarkashi is situated in the Western part of Uttaranchal, bordering Himachal Pradesh to the West and China (Tibet) to the North. Puraula Tehsil, which is exclusively rural, constitutes the North-Western part of the district. This goes with a more ‘traditional’ lifestyle together with continued dependence on agricultural production based on female labour both for subsistence and for the market as well as a *higher fertility and bigger families*. Mori Block, from which the case study used here is fetched, is the most remote part of the tehsil and considered one of the most marginalized parts of Uttaranchal. Here people report that dowry is a new phenomenon evolved only during the last decade. Earlier the groom’s family had to give money to the bride’s family. In discussions women

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<sup>28</sup> See Jha et al (2006) for a very recent account of this.

said that a girl who was badly treated in her in-laws house could return to her native home and her parents would remarry her somewhere else. But they also said that this practice was declining, as somebody “who was educated would surely not marry such a girl”.

In this remote part of the state new opportunities for salaried employment are few. Young men do migrate to jobs in the plains but these are mainly low paid menial jobs. Their sisters also might take jobs as maids in the towns in the lowlands of the state. Transformation is here expressed as an increasing dependence on market powers *within agriculture*; in other words, a ‘push’ transformation. Crops produced for the markets in the plains below are replacing traditional crops produced to sustain the household but it is still women doing most of the farm work.

Just as in Karnataka, our study from Uttaranchal also indicates that differences in agrarian production appear to influence the child sex ratio. In both cases from Uttaranchal we have agricultural systems dominated by household female labour<sup>29</sup>, the difference being that in Puraula farming is still essential for the economic survival of the household while in Pithoragarh its importance is declining, being substituted by incomes from salaried employment for men. Thus, Puraula is characterised by a ‘push’ transformation while Pithoragrah exhibits a ‘pull’ transformation. The fact that women’s contribution to the household is no longer considered important was bluntly expressed by a male respondent from a rural household with two sons and no daughters: “We cannot afford girls because their contribution is not important”. Growth in new job opportunities for men and consequent increasing remittances of money from outside also seem to have inflated demands for dowry, resulting in very high costs for marrying off daughters. New values as regards family size and the rise in marriage expenses result in smaller families and a decline in the number of female children. Thus, the economies of Pithoragarh and Puraula are undergoing structural changes with different gendered outcomes.

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<sup>29</sup> The general situation where north India is characterised by low female agricultural labour participation being supply constrained, and the South Indian situation characterised by female farming and participation (Harris-White, 2001) is in our cases reversed. In the study areas in Karnataka, participation of women in agricultural work is less intensive than in the study areas from Uttaranchal where they are the backbone of agriculture.

**Table 1. Comparison of Case study areas**

	Karnataka-Case study area		Uttaranchal- Case study area	
Cultivation	Paddy+Areca		Paddy+Orchard	
	<b>Kalahalli</b>	<b>Minnahalli</b>	<b>Pithoragarh</b>	<b>Puraula</b>
Child Sex Ratio	<b>1217</b>	<b>868</b>	<b>867</b>	<b>1000</b>
Mobility	Low	High	High	Low
Education	Low	High	High	Low
Transformation	'Push'	'Pull'	'Pull'	'Push'
Source: Census of India 2001	Structural change – tenancy reform	Transformed through increased access	Diversification of occupations	Commercialisation of agriculture

## Differences in child sex ratios and transformation

Our case studies show links between areas with low CSR but also between areas with high CSR, which are *not* dependent upon region. Instead, similar features are common to high CSR areas in both our North and South Indian cases. These features illustrate the linkages between 'pull' transformation, the disembedding of the young whom it entails and low child sex ratios.

The areas with high CSR in Karnataka and in Uttaranchal are relatively isolated areas where the level of education is lower. In these areas there has been a transformation of agricultural economic conditions, a structural change, from *within*. In Karnataka, it has mainly been a combination of population pressure and land reform, which has changed the agrarian structure and the conditions for agricultural production while in Uttaranchal it has been a change from subsistence cultivation to cultivation for the market.

In the areas where the child sex ratios are low and the education level relatively high, this has not been the case. Instead, the low CSR areas have experienced changes in economy from a diversification of occupations with increased possibilities for employment *outside* agriculture. Here, people are convinced that there are gains to be made, at least economic, by educating the younger generation and investing in individuals. This change has led to a process where the young are becoming increasingly disembedded from customary social relations and a gradual transformation of the intergenerational relationships is taking place.

Our cases illustrate how 'push' transformation first changes the economic and then the social conditions, as in the form of commercialisation of agriculture with changing crop patterns or from land reforms. When structural change occurs through 'push' factors, where the economic changes are mainly related to livelihood insecurity

and rather associated with *downward economic mobility* as in our high CSR cases, it appears to lead to a more penetrating and broad institutional change. As 'push' factors emerge from necessary changes in livelihoods, be they government induced in the form of land reforms or as necessary reactions to climatic and economic changes in the form of different agricultural strategies with different crops, they affect the economic basis of the *whole family* regardless of generation.

On the other hand, in the study areas with low CSR in both Uttaranchal and Karnataka, change has instead been induced through what can be described as '*pull*' factors. The increased *access* to certain aspects of modern life such as possibilities for higher education, as opposed to structural change, has meant employment opportunities outside agriculture; for example, in the expanding private and service sector. '*Pull*' transformation is thus foremost characterised by an *existence of a market situation where a valuation of human capital is developing*. This is paralleled by how education has become important for economic reasons as people are convinced that it gives economic benefits, something there are many examples of. However, no one is certain of these gains especially not in the case of each individual. Where negative economic development and rather downward economic mobility characterises 'push' transformation, possibilities of a positive and upward economic mobility is distinctive of 'pull' transformation.

When 'pull' factors such as wider economic opportunities and modern communication cause young people to migrate, it affects individual family members first and changes the family through those individuals. Individual incomes give rise to income differentials within the family. Perhaps the most well substantiated consequence of this change is a decline in the extent to which family elders can influence and control younger family members, a central aspect of an extended family system (Goode, 1963, Thornton & Fricke, 1987, Mason, 1992). This is also an important contributing factor in the subsequent division of joint families into nuclear families. An essential part of the disembedding process of India is the 'nuclearization' of the Indian family, signifying a movement away from the traditional joint household toward a nuclear household situated in an extended family system.

Individual incomes pose a challenge to the existing criteria on which the allocation of resources is based. A direct result of 'pull' transformation thus appears to be that norms guiding allocation of resources within the household change from being tacit to becoming directly confrontational. When younger generation family members start earning individual incomes, these tacit criteria of intra-household



resource allocation are confronted and the existing consensus comes to be questioned, whether intentionally or not. This also offers an explanation as to how ‘pull’ transformation and individual incomes produce uncertainty. The change it provokes, from tacit to explicit norms, introduces new contingencies in the relationships between family members. In other words, the changes are induced through the younger generation, causing tension between generations as *the young are disembedded* from traditional forms of social relationships and the older generation is only indirectly, albeit profoundly, affected by these changes. Work and family become separated and a growing number of relationships become contract based. It is in such a context that uncertainty comes to characterise the decision-making regarding intergenerational interests. The central point is thus that ‘pull’ transformation leads to a disembedding of the young.

### Disembedding, uncertainty, and falling-back on established social devices

The disembedding process the young in the low CSR areas are experiencing, and the effects it has on the intergenerational interests, is strongly illustrated by the countless statements parents in those case study areas give. However, a central thing standing out in the pull-transformation areas is how parents give *two distinctly different kinds of statements* regarding reasons for son preference. The most common statements reflect some of the most well-documented reasons such as; “A son will give us old-age support and carry the family line further, a daughter will move out after marriage and before that it requires more responsibility to raise daughters”, or “Without a son it is like a family being without electricity. There is no light in the family”. Or perhaps more differentiated as one woman explained it: “For a family, one boy and one girl is the ideal. It is a blessing. A daughter is important for social networking and a son for carrying the family lineage further. The son performs all after death ceremonies. Without a son there is no salvation”. Entwined with this cultural reasoning are economic reasons; “According to tradition one son and one daughter is the ideal. If we have a daughter we need a son. A son is needed for heading the household and for doing agriculture work. With only daughters the land will go to the daughter’s husband’s side”.

On the other hand, there are the many statements generally given later on in the same conversations as exceptions to the already mentioned *conventional reasoning*. They are therefore often along lines

like these, this time more specifically concerning old-age support; “Sons are not as emotionally close to their parents as their daughters. Daughters will stay close. I am more confident about daughters, their behaviour and conduct”, or “Generally, sons will take care of us, otherwise daughters do it”. Another respondent said that: “My father now realizes that even though he gave preference to his son to study, who has not done it properly, it is his youngest daughter who has studied till 10<sup>th</sup> standard and who with her own effort has become a policewoman. She now takes care of the whole family”.

Parents talk specifically about concerns over sons’ future interests and behaviour, but they also recognise the influence on this process that the changing attitude in girls and young women has and how this is related to the higher level of awareness through education that they now have. This is illustrated in statements like; “Well-educated sons want to move out of agriculture. Educated girls don’t have the same opportunities. Even if they want to it depends upon how far away the job is. Nowadays it even happens that girls will ask if boys live with their parents or not, since they prefer to live alone with their husbands. It is the time for women now. At least nowadays girls are asked if they want to marry the boy chosen for them or not”.

Equally common are indications of uncertainties regarding the future and the way in which the young are likely to behave differently, as illustrated in statements such as; “To control a daughter’s conduct is difficult. Before marriage she should not have contact with men. Sexual contact is completely forbidden. If she fails to control her conduct there will be big difficulties for her as well as for the whole family. But for sons there are no such restrictions. It is like having an iron ball in one hand and a banana in the other. If I drop the iron ball there is no harm to it, but if I drop the banana it is spoiled and cannot be used”. In fact, such statements can be interpreted as direct descriptions of a *disembedding process* in which daughters’ increased autonomy and expected behaviour is construed by the parents and the community to be negatively related to the family’s social status as a means through which to function in society.

There are obvious *contradictions* between these statements. Indeed, these contradictions show, first of all that the first group of standard statements is examples of conventions and of depictions of the social norms influencing the existence of son preference. Even more interesting are the accounts, which exemplify breaks with convention and, instead, directly describe the disembedding process experienced by the young. This means that parents on the one hand give *conventional*

*statements* reflecting all the well-documented reasons for son-preference, but on the other hand, also give *unconventional statements* reflecting the actual present situation.

The *contradiction* between the conventional and the unconventional statements illustrates not only the uncertainty characterising the conditions under which parents are obligated to make decisions, but also the relationship between that uncertainty and the social devices on which parents' fall-back; i.e. the conventional attitudes which legitimise and enable parents to rationalise their son preference. It is the break with those conventions itself that from an intergenerational perspective generates uncertainty. The conventional statements thus exemplify a *legitimation and rationalisation* of parents' active son preference and as such what parents fall-back on. The unconventional statements illustrate what generates uncertainty, and the contradiction itself illustrates the actual falling-back. A near perfect example of the contradictory situation parents experience is reflected in this statement: "According to tradition and customs sons will stay close, but in the future we don't know. Through the influence of society sons want to live alone".

The disembedding thus has two sides; it entails changes for the individual in the form of greater possibilities and capabilities. However, those possibilities also challenge the cooperative frame of the family through the challenges to the existing criteria of resource allocation within the household. For young women these new possibilities are still restricted but they are now able to make demands on what kind of husband they want<sup>30</sup>. This highlights how the intergenerational interests are still intact in their structuring function but strained, partly by the increased autonomy of unmarried daughters but also by the greater social and economic mobility foremost for sons<sup>31</sup>. It implies how the increased autonomy of the young generation, and the disembedding attached with it, involves uncertainty in the context of intergenerational interests. Indeed, *it is these intertwined interests that make structuring norms and avoiding uncertainties important*.

We have seen how the disembedding of the young changes the institution of the family in gendered terms. *It has changed from being a coercive institution to being a persuasive institution* when it comes to sons but *not* with regard to daughters. This is experienced by the family as directly related to its status within the community. The disembedding,

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<sup>30</sup> The preferences expressed during fieldwork were most often for a husband with an employment living in an urban setting.

<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the parents themselves promote this.

which generates uncertainty is thus only *indirectly gendered* as it, in most cases, appears to be sons who are the agents of the process. This is more evident in Uttaranchal than in Karnataka. At first, this may appear contradictory in relation to daughter discrimination. However, although the disembedding process is not directly gendered, *the reactionary response indeed is*. The social devices resorted to by the parents give guidance to decision-making in the form of conventions that constitute a legitimisation of son preference and, in the end, imply a rationalisation of active daughter discrimination. The disembedding of the young, particularly the emancipation of sons from their fathers and their earlier separation from the paternal household, but also the emancipation of young women through greater access to education and awareness, robs the older women of their power and respectability as mothers-in-law (Kandiyoti, 1988). This lends explanation to the falling-back as a reaction to the uncertainty this creates through consideration of this “life cycle element” (Caldwell, 1978:563). It is not surprising that it often is the mother-in-law who applies the greatest pressure on the young daughter-in-law and her son to actively discriminate against daughters and produce a son. Thus, *the outcome is highly gendered* and the result is an intensified gender inequality illustrated by extremely low CSR.

The difference between high and low CSR areas is thus not only in the level and form of transformation but rather, and more importantly, in the uncertainty caused by it. It is against the background of this uncertainty that parents are compelled to fulfil their obligations as regards the future of their children. The parents find their way of facing this uncertainty by falling back on established conventions regarding domestic roles, which contradict the younger generation’s understanding of those same roles. The anticipated increase in the autonomy of the younger generation of women comes to be perceived as a threat to the future of the older generation.

The young generation’s needs are in many regards contrary to the traditional values that their parents still try to uphold. 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. These factors have been the main components in the process of ongoing social change in India and have contributed to the declining trend in CSR (Rele & Alam, 1993, Caldwell et al, 1982, Hatti & Ohlsson, 1984, 1985). They have played an important role in the low CSR study areas but are yet to make their way into the social fabric of the study areas with high CSR. Indeed, this finding substantiates what earlier studies have concluded; that increase

in socio-economic development and welfare contributes to continuing, and often more pronounced, son preference (Das Gupta, 1987, Clark, 2000). Not only has it become more costly to raise children as education has become more important (Caldwell, 1982, Croll, 2000), but parents now feel vulnerable to the increased mobility and autonomy of their children (Croll, 2000). This development introduces uncertainty into the decision-making concerning intergenerational interests, in reaction to which parents fall back on conventional legitimisations of son preference thereby rationalising the active discrimination of daughters.

## Conclusion

We have seen how ‘pull’ transformation leads to a disembedding of the young from conventional or traditional forms of social relations. This appears to first of all lead to an introduction of new contingencies in the relationships between generations, as expressed by respondents concerns about the future. Our case studies show how ‘pull’ transformation has led to a greater gap between generations, thus increasing uncertainty for parents. Unfortunately, the uncertainty introduced through ‘pull’ transformation appears to result in even less flexibility in the translation of norms into allocation. The allocation of resources within the household constitutes one of the main factors upon which son preference and daughter discrimination is legitimised.

The context of intergenerational interests is central to understand uncertainty. The uncertainty experienced by the parents concerns partly apprehensions about future social obligations such as arranging marriages and partly the young gradually becoming disembedded from those intergenerational interests. These concerns are demonstrated in the contradictory statements respondents have given. It is also the contradiction in statements that gives an understanding of how parents react to the uncertainty which the disembedding of the young produces by falling-back to conventional arguments for son preference. Falling back also offers an alternative to uncertainty and a basis for making decisions concerning the interests of the family that are intergenerationally tied through the socio-cultural obligations of parenthood.

While ‘push’ transformation changes the material conditions of the household in a way that influences all family members, pull-modernisation leaves existing power structures intact only to be challenged by the young generation. When uncertainty through ‘pull’

transformation leads to a falling-back on social devices, and thus to a limiting of the cooperative space, girls' life chances are affected negatively. Uncertainty becomes particularly detrimental for the situation of women and girls in the family as its intertwined interests of different family members impinge on the cooperative space. It is in this situation, this '*parental dilemma*', of decision-making concerning intergenerational interests that the interests of women and girls are excluded and daughters lose out.

Falling back offers a situational structure for decision-making, which concurs with the obligations towards intergenerational interests. It is in terms of this situational structure that optimising intergenerational interests leads to active daughter discrimination; something for which the necessary technological infrastructure is available. The obligated intentionality, which directs parents to fall back on conventions and social devices is understandable from a perspective where considerations of intergenerational interest condition preferences and decision-making. It adds a context to the already prescribed intentionality in which it finds its rationality. It is in the face of uncertainty caused by the disembedding of the young that the situational context of social devices brought down through centuries of gendered cultural prescriptions is fallen back upon and receives its renewed importance. Unfortunately, this context is constituted by norms, which are highly gendered. Nevertheless, it is in this context of intergenerational interests, changing economic conditions and social prerequisites, that the nature of the institutional change can be analysed and the process of declining child sex ratios in India conceptualised. From a conceptualisation which contextualises the problem of declining child sex ratios in the overall process of societal change India is experiencing, we can both understand and explain the dynamic context in which daughter discrimination is legitimised and rationalised.

We began this paper with the stated intention of conceptualising India's growing daughter discrimination and of analysing declining child sex ratios in dynamic terms as inherently related to the transformation India is experiencing. We believe that we have succeeded in our intention. We have conceptualised daughter discrimination and shown how such a conceptualisation can offer new possibilities for empirical work to understand and explain the process of declining child sex ratios in India.

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**Lund Papers in Economic History**

ISSN 1101-346X

ISRN LUSADG-SAEH-P--06/105--SE+17

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Printed by Media-Tryck, Lund, Sweden, 2006

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