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**Vulnerable Daughters in a Modernizing Society:  
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# **Vulnerable Daughters in a Modernizing Society: From ‘son preference’ to ‘daughter discrimination’ 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. I. Introduction**

The high masculine sex ratios of the Indian population have been a matter of concern for some time. Considerable attention has been paid to different dimensions of female deficits in India and persisting regional variations (Sen 1990; Agnihotri 2000; Miller 1981 and 1989; Bhat 2002; Croll 2000), since the numerical imbalances between the male and female sexes were pointed out in the seventies (Visaria 1971; Natarajan 1972). The 2001 Census has set off further debates on the issue and has narrowed the focus to the changes in the juvenile or child sex ratio<sup>1</sup>. 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 are female children still at risk? 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’? There is need to focus attention on daughter-discrimination and other aspects related to children differentiated by their gendered value.

Human population exhibits definitive characteristics in terms of its sex composition. In most parts of the globe, fewer females are born, yet

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<sup>1</sup>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 (from 1991 onwards) the entire population into two groups, those aged 0-6 years and those 7 years and above.

females, as compared to their male counterparts, typically survive longer to exceed the males numerically at any given point of time. However, this demographic attribute eludes India where males decisively outnumber the females and women constitute less than half of the total population. Sex ratio is a direct indicator of women's status and welfare. The sex ratio changes are usually analyzed in a framework that underlies (relatively) greater deprivation and discrimination of females as opposed to males. The major determinants of numerical imbalances revolve around factors such as under enumeration of women, fertility, mortality and migration. Under-enumeration of females, relative to their male counterparts, typically encountered in the Indian context due to lower status of women, also makes census sex composition more masculine. However, 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).

While the 2001 Indian census shows that the overall male-female 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 945/1000 to 927/1000. The regional disparities also appear to have increased; the northern states generally exhibit a worsening trend in male-female 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. 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. Amartya Sen has called it a 'technological revolution of a reactionary kind'.

## **II. Fertility Trends and Son Preference in Contemporary Asia**

One of the most remarkable changes in the last century has been the shift from high to low fertility. Indeed, this has been described as 'the greatest single demographic change in the second half of the century' (Caldwell 1993; 300). The timing, onset, pace and magnitude of this

decline varies between countries. In the 1990s, India had experienced a new fertility decline at the national level. The 2001 census indicated that, after a large spell of unprecedented population growth, the country experienced a gradual decline in the fertility levels. However, there is also evidence that there is growing disparity between the north and the south, with the southern states having been more successful in controlling population growth<sup>2</sup>. In a vast country like India with considerable demographic diversity and heterogeneity and varying levels of socio-economic development among states, the levels and phases of fertility decline vary significantly from one state to another (Bhat 1994; Guilmoto and Rajan 2002; Sekher *et al* 2001).

Several studies suggest that cultural factors have played an important role in determining fertility trends (Basu 1992; Jeffery and Jeffery 1997; Das Gupta, 1987). 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.

### **III. Fertility Decline and Adverse Sex Ratio**

During the last two decades, considerable debate has taken place, particularly in India, on the imbalance in sex ratio and the question of 'missing women'. In a significant article titled as "More than 100 million women are missing", Amartya Sen (1990) brought to focus the increasing gender discrimination by analyzing the male-female ratio. He has argued rather convincingly that the problem of missing women is "clearly one of the more momentous, neglected, problem facing world today". Miller (1981), in her anthropological study of 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

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<sup>2</sup> 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 which have been made available under the South India Fertility Project ([www.demographie.net/sifp](http://www.demographie.net/sifp)).

India, which brings into play neglect and mistreatment of unknown numbers of children. According to her, the solution to this problematic future lies “in giving high priority to achieving gender equality in economic entitlement and increased awareness of the social importance of equal health and survival of males and females” (214).

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 (Clark 2000; Das Gupta and Bhat 1997; Bhat and Xavier 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. However, the social and economic development and governmental interventions 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 an 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 weight of expenses of her marriage, particularly dowry, which is a heavy burden for the bride's family.<sup>2</sup> Sons, on the other hand, are considered as assets, deserving short and long-term investment. In 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 1991). 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

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<sup>2</sup> 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).

son preference and daughter discrimination is that sons can provide old age support. In India, a majority of the old parents live with married children, who are usually 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.

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; Kabeer 1996; Agarwal 1994). 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. Parents use these methods to achieve the desired sex composition of the children within the desired family size. 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. As per this legislation, only government- registered clinics and laboratories may employ prenatal diagnostic procedures that can be used to assess the sex of the fetus. The Act also 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 from February 2003. Now, the Act is renamed as the Pre-conception and Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex-selection) Act, 1994<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> (NFHS) indicates more than 100,000 sex-selective abortions in India every year (Arnold, Kishor and Roy 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).

Using the NFHS data again, it was observed that at the national level, the sex ratio at birth for mothers who had either ultrasound or amniocentesis was 934 female births per 1000 male births. The lower sex ratios for births to mothers who had either of these tests could be attributed to sex-selective abortions. NFHS survey has demonstrated that ultrasound and amniocentesis are often used for sex determination and sex selective abortions of female fetuses have been rampant in many states of India. Though ultrasound and amniocentesis tests on pregnant women are legal in India, the divulgence of the sex of the child to the parents is illegal since 1996. The legislation has been a miserable failure in preventing the couples seeking sex determination tests and abortions and the medical practitioners performing them. Enforcement of legal procedures alone will not reduce these incidences unless there are significant changes in the attitudes and socio-economic environment.

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<sup>3</sup> 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).

<sup>4</sup> NFHS, similar to Demographic Health Survey (DHS) in other countries, comprises of a nationally representative sample of about 100000 households, covering ever married women in the age group of 15-44 years. This survey has been conducted since 1992-93 and takes place ca. every fifth year.

## **IV. Two Village Studies in South India**

At the national and state levels, we have reasonably good idea about the levels of fertility decline, the extent of son preference and the relationship between the two, based on the analysis of large scale data from various demographic and health surveys. But, how this really manifests 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 these village studies 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 concentrated to a small group were done to elicit information about the value of boys and girls, reproductive preferences and strategies. The qualitative research methods employed in the two 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<sup>5</sup> and in some cases, at the residences of some members. Retaining all the

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<sup>5</sup> 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.

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 State**

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. Predominant smallholding is the characteristic feature of this district. 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.

Canal irrigation is a characteristic feature of Mandya district. The major irrigation work, the Krishnarajasagar dam across river cauvery was partly completed by 1921 and water was made available to the farmers of the district. 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.

With assured irrigation and the Visvesvaraya Canal passing through this village, many important changes have taken place in the agriculture of this village. 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 easy 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.

*“It was better before. Rainfall was sufficient and the crop yield was good. We used to get sufficient water from Krishnarajsagar (KRS) dam across river Cauvery and there was not much problem for our agriculture. We were getting good crops and, we were happy.”*

*“Due to insufficient rainfall, canal water from KRS for our agriculture is becoming difficult. All the villages in the surrounding area have the same kind of problem.”*

*“Because of the financial constraints everybody has been limiting the family size. Fragmentation of land has taken place due to partition of the families, and everybody having only smallholdings. So, parents don’t want to have more children and again don’t want to divide 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. They are the *Gangadikar* Vokkaligas enjoying higher rank within the Vokkaligas. 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 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 that 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".*

*"Even poor people have to give dowry. Even if the boy is an agricultural worker, he gets lot of gold and cash".*

*“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.”*

*“People who are wealthy started giving huge money as dowry to maintain prestige. Slowly others also started following these people. A proverb says; ondu meke hallake bitthu antha yella meke hallake biluvdhe”. (In a herd of sheep, if one fell into the well, should others also start jumping into it, without assessing the situation?).*

Prosperous Gowda families are ready to pay even half-million to 1 million rupees as dowry, besides giving gifts in the form of gold jewellery, 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.*

*“Educated girls should insist that they are against dowry. I read in newspapers that, in cities, some girls refuse to marry when the boy’s family demands dowry. Our village girls have neither the opportunity nor the courage to do like that”.*

*“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 progress”.*

The discrimination in providing primary education to boys and girls was evident during the discussions with schoolteachers. Just to give a couple of examples;

*Some people send their sons to convent school (better quality education) and daughters to government school (poor quality education). Why does this difference exist?*

*“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”.*

*“What is the use of educating girls at all? If they get too much education they may start getting new ideas through magazines and films and oppose the parental wishes”.*

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 birth control measures paved the way for other communities towards the acceptance in this village. A majority felt that it was a responsibility and sometimes a burden to have more children, particularly girls. 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). Dependence on agriculture in Mandya district is far greater than anywhere else in the state. 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 create 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 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 clearly illustrate the strong 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.”*

*“My husband wanted more children, he was very much against sterilization. But I went and had it. Now, he tells me that what I did was a correct thing.”*

*“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”.*

*“When I became pregnant, my in-laws used to neglect me because my mother gave birth to only girl children and they believed that I will also give birth to a girl. Everyday I used to pray to god for a baby boy. When I delivered a boy I became a respectable person in the house. My in-laws became happy and my husband was also very happy. That day they distributed sweets to all our relatives and neighbours”.*

During our fieldwork we observed that a majority of the young couple underwent sex determination test, either in private clinic or nursing home. 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 fetus. We also came across cases where some public health workers, particularly Auxiliary Nurse 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 more money for, what they called as 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 belonging to the Vokkaliga community 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.

*“In the neighbour’s house they have done abortion secretly. Now, in our community one new thing has started. If one becomes pregnant, the family won’t tell she is pregnant. She is taken to Mandya 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.”*

*“When I went to the hospital last time, I saw Mahadeva and his wife, He has 3 girls and his wife is again pregnant. If it is a girl, he wants to abort. Then, the doctor shouted at him and said I am not ready to go jail for your sake. However, there are many other doctors who would do the abortion”.*

*For my daughter-in-law, we did scanning to find out the sex of the baby. The doctor took Rs. 1000 but did not reveal the sex of the fetus. So went to another doctor who determined that the fetus was a female and terminated the pregnancy at our request.”*

*“Ram Gowda’s wife died during abortion. Poor woman, she has left behind two daughters.”*

*“When I took my sister to the hospital for delivery, next to her bed, there were two abortion cases which had been admitted. I came to know that they came for aborting female fetus”.*

*“For my daughter-in-law, we did scanning to find out the sex of the baby. After taking 1000 Rupees, the doctor did not reveal the sex of the baby. After that we went to another doctor who determined the sex of the foetus and terminated the pregnancy.”*

*“Why have daughters? Daughters one day or another leave our house and become part of their in-laws’ family. So it is better not to have them at all. Sons can get education, get good jobs, earn money and look after parents”.*

Another old 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 in village M said ‘yes’. Some of them strongly felt the necessity to have at least two sons. Krishne Gowda quoting a local saying which 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 incidence of dowry has gone up considerably in all the 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 it has become an essential feature of the marriage. The dowry payment includes cash, gold, silver and expensive consumer items like TV and refrigerator, and in many cases a vehicle, preferably a car or motor bike. A portion of the land and property is also transferred from the girl's family to the boy's family. Apart from all this, 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. A village 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 carried out in village M clearly indicate the changing attitude towards the perceived value of sons and that of daughters. The tables presented below are based on a survey of 96 young male or female parents (those having at least one child in the age group 0-6). Out of 96, sixty-Six belongs 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. 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 1 daughter	18.2	30.4
2 daughters	-	-
Total	100	100

### B. Value attached to the children by parents

	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 of 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

		Vokkaliga (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**

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). There were certain taluks in the district, which reported shocking anomalies in juvenile sex ratio in 2001. 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 2001 census has amply substantiated the still existing and rampant practice of female infanticide in parts of Tamil Nadu, despite overall socio-economic changes.

**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 locally 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 in Mettur Taluk**

This village 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 (females per 1000 males) 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 field work, we came across incidences of female infanticide from this 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 practice infanticide (see Appendix 2). 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 practised the *penn shisu kolai*. There were few police cases registered recently against parents for committing the infanticide. But, the arrival of sex determination tests, even in villages, 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" (see Appendix 2). Our study in this village 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 monitored closely by local NGOs. The girl child protection scheme of the state government is being used to motivate parents to care for female infants. Surprisingly, similar effort from the government and the public is absent in combating female foeticide.

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

*“Parents of the bride borrow money from others, sometimes they sell their land to cover 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.”*

*“I have one daughter and one son. My in-laws wanted one more son but my husband was very particular about sterilization. One day he took me in his scooter to Mettur for the operation without informing at home. First, my in-laws were very angry with us. But now, they appreciate my husband’s decision”.*

There was a phenomenal increase in the amount of dowry transacted from girl’s family to boy’s family. The land owning gounder had to pay atleast 80 sovereigns 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 landowning 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 25000 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 a 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) at 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 many daughters were unwelcome resulting in a deliberate intensification of non-preference of daughters and consequent 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”. 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 this as follows:

*“In our community, the boy’s parents demand dowry because they think it is their right. Even after paying much dowry, the in-laws may demand more dowry, humiliate our daughter and physically ill-treat her. Finally she may be forced to return to our home distressed and in shame. 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.

## **V. Some Concluding Observations**

In both the study villages clearly indicate that in the eyes of parents, even after improvement in girl’s education and employment, 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 strategies to attain desired number of sons are employed by parents across 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 PNMT Act of 1994. 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 the NGO activist in our Tamil Nadu study village, “the real culprits here 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 own wishes.

The FGDs in both the study areas clearly illustrate the people’s tendency to identify having a daughter with dowry payments. The continuing trend of increasing dowry demands, in cash and in kind, across communities, both as a crucial factor in marriage negotiations as well as a ‘status enhancer’ within the community, has had significant impact on how the parents value the worth of boys and girls.

Interestingly, the two peasant communities (Vokkaligas and Kongu Vellala Gounders) in the study villages have become increasingly affluent as major beneficiaries of the access to irrigation and other inputs of modern agriculture. This affluence has meant a continuing rise in living standards, aspirations and consumption. Besides acquisition of various trappings of modern life, another way of demonstrating their economic affluence, according to the FGDs, was to catch a 'well-qualified son-in-law' since this would enhance their status and standing within the community and the village. 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, over time 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 at the expense of daughters. Since both study areas have completed the fertility transition and small family is the accepted norm, the parents seem to make the deliberate choice between a son and a daughter since a son would mean inflow of wealth while a daughter implies a 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 a daughter.

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 now 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 marriages. Consequently, these communities also exhibit similar preferences albeit to a lesser extent.

The field level observations from the two low-fertility regions of South India and the data analyses clearly indicate a strong preference for sons, particularly among the peasant communities. However, with the substantial decline in fertility, 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. Along with this, the increasing pressure on limited availability of land on the one hand and the spiralling costs of bringing up children, particularly girls, due to increasing demands for dowry to be paid, parents prefer to avoid having daughters. The medical technology has come in handy for many couples for achieving the desired sex composition and the desired small 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 before they are born.

## 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 the son-in-law	Dowry (cost) in 2004	
		Cash (Rs)	Items
<b>Rich</b> (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
<b>Middle class</b> (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 other expenses towards marriage

<b>Poor labourers</b> (SC's and other castes)	Landless agricultural labour (groom)	10-20 thousands	10-20 grams gold, and clothes and all other expenses towards marriage
<b>Vodda* households</b>	Landless labour (groom)	5-10 thousands	10-20 grams gold, and all other expenses towards marriage. 101 articles like vessels etc.

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

Source: Focus Group Discussions carried out by the study team during 2004-05.

## Appendix 2

### Characteristics of three Communities in Tamil Nadu Village

Characteristics	Vanniyars	KV Gounders	Dalits
1. Joint / Nuclear family	Both joint and nuclear families exist among them.	Prefers mostly the nuclear family.	Since housing facility is not enough they (parents and married couples) live under the same roof, but cook separately.
2. Dowry	Depending on the economic status, dowry differs.	Dowry is common	Demanding dowry is becoming common.
3. Preference of the size of the family	Prefers to have more than one child. Irrespective of economic status, they want at least one male child.	Prefers to have only one child that too a male child.	Maximum preferences of children are three and at least one to be a male child.
4. Practice of family planning	Women go for family planning without the consent of men.	Women consult men to undergo family planning with one child.	Both men and women discuss and undergo family planning.
5. Preference for choosing bridegroom	Employment is the main consideration, but in the past they gave importance to property.	Land holding and property were given more importance at the time of marriage	Employment is the only consideration.

6. Practice of foeticide	Quite often	Very rampant	Not very common.
7. Practice of infanticide	Very rampant	Rarely	Quite often
8. Landholding	They have land holdings but less than gounders	They have more land than other communities	No landholdings
9. Finding match / availability of girls	Due to female infanticide there may be shortage of girls after ten years	Finding a bride is very difficult. (Impact of infanticide in the past)	The present trend in infanticide may lead to lack of girls in future.
10. Property sharing	After marriage no share is given to the daughters.	Some share of property to the girl is common. It is usually done after the death of parents	No share is given to daughters
11. Abortion	Abortion is common	Fortune-tellers also play a major role in facilitating the abortion of female foetus.	Traditional practice of abortion still exists

Source: Focus Group Discussions carried out by the study team during 2004-05.

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