INDIAN WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE OF DEVELOPMENT

AN ANALYSIS

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C O N T E N T S

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In 1984, the ICSSR supported a proposal from Devaki Jain, Director, Institute of Social Studies Trust, to review and analyse the Indian Women's experience of development. Initially it was decided to request 3 scholars to review and assess the changing position of women in India and its regional variations - and then to synthesise this into a paper incorporating/highlighting different aspects. Accordingly, Dr. Mukul Mukherjee of Maitreyi College, New Delhi, Shri. Sudir Bhattacharya lately of National Sample Survey organisation, Calcutta, Dr. Rajani Alexander of ISST each submitted a paper on one of the several aspects of the issue. These papers were earlier submitted to the Indian Council of Social Science Research and form the initial core of findings which triggered off this present attempt for which I am very grateful to the authors.

Smt. Devaki Jain and myself were to prepare a synthesising paper on the basis of these papers. However, we were both intrigued and frustrated by the numerous contradictory trends, over time and across regions that were apparent from the data. Therefore, it was decided that, rather than merely preparing an amalgam of these diverse findings, we would go on to devise an appropriate overall measure of women's position and explore alternative hypotheses to account for the inter-regional and intertemporal variations. Accordingly, we have held many discussions over the last few years to analyse the intricacies of the problem. Unfortunately, because of her numerous other commitments, Devaki could not participate in preparing the manuscript and the final views and assertions, with all the mistakes they incorporate, are entirely mine. Nevertheless, I could not have gone through this exercise without her constant support. At each point of time, her comments helped to clarify my ideas and to formulate fresh hypotheses to meet her queries. I am very grateful to her and to ISST for giving me the confidence to work on this off-beat project.

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Nirmala Banerjee

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

This study began as an attempt to answer some simple questions that many of us are often faced with : has the position of Indian women improved over time? Is it true that, even within a similar class, women of some parts of India are better off than those of others? Has development been good for women or bad? Although these and similar issues have been discussed ad infinitum by all concerned across coffee tables, in political fora and in official committees, they rarely get unambiguous answers. Rather, the more knowledgeable the person dealing with them, the more the hedging and qualifying that goes into the answer. This is surely not for want of investigation or information. Indeed, in India, on women's studies of the last two decades, women and development has been a favourite topic : moreover, in most such studies, there has been a welcome tendency not to regard women's issues as static but to take account of changes that ~~had~~ have taken place in them over time, through social and economic upheavals.

Nevertheless, we appear to be no nearer to reaching an agreement even about what we mean by women's position and what constitutes an improvement in it. Now that we are already past the first United Nations decade for women and concern for women's issues is increasingly being vocalised in all public arenas, it is imperative that we find some better ways of dealing with these type of queries.

For doing so, it is perhaps better to start by trying to understand why the issue has proved so knotty. Obviously, Women's status or position is made of many diverse dimensions - their health, their educational achievements, the role they play in social, political and economic activities, their legal rights etc. So far, it has been customary to examine each such dimension separately as for example was done in the report of the Committee on the Status of women in India in 1974. This exercise was once more repeated in 1985 both by respective government departments

and also by several groups of individual researchers. But a comparison between the results of these two sets of exerrises only helped to highlight the inherent difficulties in judging this issue. On some aspects, there was a distinct improvement in women's achievements over the decade. In others, the change was not always positive or not as marked. Again, even when women had made some gains in a particular dimension, these gains were not always comparable with the gains made by men. Therefore, inspite of all this research, no conclusive answer could be given to the simple question as to whether or not at the end of the women's decade, Indian women were better off than they were at its beginning.

Also, although the publicity given to the women's decade in India was quite remarkable, few would claim that it was matched by purposive actions on the part of either the government or the society. Therefore, we are infact concerned not just with what happened in this brief period of one decade but with what has been happening to Indian women over the entire period of development for which we have some systematic data. And, even a cursory examination of this data indicates that even over this entire period of the 20th century these kind of interdimensional contradictions and problems of aggregation were very marked. A few examples would perhaps make this point clear.

Firstly, on several aspects, women's position has moved in a direction tangential to the general trends that came about through development. For example, after 1921, general standards of health began to improve in the country and expectation of life at age zero (e :) started going up : it went up from 19.4 between 1911 to 1921 to 26.9 between 1921-1931 and then to 41.9 between 1951-1961 (figures are for male population). Women's e: was also rising over this period but in every decade it fell increasingly below that of men (GOI 1985 Table 2.1 p.87). Similarly, between 1921 to 1961 the all India employment of men increased both in absolute terms and also as percentage of total male employment. But for women, this figure

fell continuously in absolute numbers between 1911 to 1961 (J.N. Sinha 1972, ch. I).

Secondly for women as a group, different indicators of relative well being have been moving in different directions. For instance, between 1931 and 1971, disparity between men's and women's literacy and educational performance had been slowly going down (Sopher 1980, ch. no))but over the same period, the relative position of the girl child within the family does not seem to have improved very much (this is discussed later in some details). In another respect, while women's civil and political rights have improved considerably, incidence of malpractices such as dowry and violence in marriage have certainly continued unabated.

The third set of inconsistencies becomes evident when one looks at regional differences in women's position. One finds that areas of similar rates of economic growth do not show similar rates of improvement in women's conditions. For example, in the last two decades, while economic growth rates of Haryana were comparable with those of Punjab and Maharashtra, life expectancy of women in the former region was significantly below those of the other two regions (GOI 1985 Table 2.3, p.89). Another example would be from a recent study of Rajasthan and Bihar which showed that inspite of a higher level of achievement on most aspects including female literacy, Rajasthan continued to have significantly higher rates of total fertility than Bihar (Srinivasan & Kanitkar 1984).

What happened to women of different parts of India could not thus be explained only in terms of the level of economic development. In the pattern of distribution of the costs and benefits of development, gender had played an important but varying role in each region. Could a method be devised to unfold how this process had worked in the past and now it was likely to

work in the future?

Multiplicity of variables affecting women's position is not the only reason why analysis of the issue of women and development has not been very fruitful. The approach from which this analysis is initiated is also vitiated by questionable assumption regarding the relation between the two processes viz women's subordination and economic development. One group of analysts consider women's subordination as a cultural phenomenon[1] determined wholly by past traditions. Economic development is then regarded as an extraneous variable which changes some parameters of the economy and society and hence also women's conditions. But because no allowance is made for a possible interaction between the two processes themselves, there is no explanation about why women of some societies respond more positively to economic stimulu[2] or why some kinds of development policies are more effective in reducing women's subordination [3]

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1. For example Lina Furzzetti in her book regarding marriage customs among Bengalis (Furzzetti 1982) goes into all kinds of details but does not at all consider the question of the class, region or time point to which the bride and groom belong, the extent of their belief and understanding of the rituals etc.

2. There is a lot of literature about comparisons between capabilities of women of different societies to respond to opportunities offered by development. See for example J. Caldwell (Caldwell 1986) on how China, Sri Lanka andKKerala in India have been able to increase women's expectations of life to levels beyond those indicated by their levels of economic development or prosperity.

3. Esther Boserup has suggested that opportunities for women to bring home food from outside can help women to get a better status (Boserup 1970, ch.1).

On the other hand another group of analysts assumes that women's subordination is entirely a function of economic development and each particular stage of the latter can be linked with particular forms of women's subordination. In this kind of analysis by Marxist feminists, attempts are made to link today's subordination of third world women with the experience of women of developed world in earlier periods and stages of development (Mies 1986 Mies et.al 1988). Others take note of the distortions introduced in the classical pattern of impact on women of capitalist development by colonisation and later, by economic domination of developing countries by the first world through multinationals[4] (Deere 1976). This analysis errs on the side of overgeneralisation and makes no allowance for cultural specificities and burdens of traditions that affect the way in which women can be utilized by capitalist forces. After all if there is any truth in the much touted image of "nimble fingers" of the South East Asian women, then one must acknowledge the fact that the fast economic growth of countries like South Korea and Thailand on the basis of export industries sponsored by multinationals at least partly depended on the availability there of a large pool of women who were docile but hard working and who enjoyed full societal sanctions for participating in production work outside their houses. On the other hand though labour was probably even cheaper in South Asia, absence of similar traditions of women working for wages outside agriculture must have inhibited setting up of similar foot-loose export industries there.

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4. Fiona Wilson has critically analysed this line of analysis. (Wilson 1985.).

Actually for understanding what happens to women's position in development it is essential to realise that the process of women's subordination is also a political one like that of economic development. In each society, the two processes take place within the same social arena and interact with the same traditional socio-cultural and economic institutions. As such neither can remain independent of the other. The extent to which development can affect women either positively or negatively itself depends on the initial position of women-their capabilities to respond to and to avail of new challanges and opportunities; The ease with which older traditions controlling women's social and economic responses can be altered also has a bearing on the pace and character of development. On the other hand, nature of development and the speed with which it takes place can also make significant inroads on traditional controls over women.[5] Therefore neither socio-cultural traditions nor forces of economic change can claim primacy over the other as explanant of women's position in a given society. Nor can one subscribe to the viewpoint which regards women as "Sarvamsaha Dharitri" (the all suffering earth) passively absorbing the impact of development.

A historical example from Indian experience brings out this interaction beautifully. The Oswals community (as described by Rama Mehta 1976, 1986) were the traditional courtiers of the Maharaja of Mewar who used to give

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5. Much has been written about women's changing roles in wartime Britain.

them complete economic security in return for their observing the royal family's extremely rigid code of social rules of dress and behaviour. These rules were particularly binding on women who had to observe purdah and forego education or outside contacts. Therefore on the eve of Indian independence, Oswal women were perhaps some of the most backward and constrained even in India. After independence however, the princely courts were dissolved and as a result the Oswal were totally exposed to outside economy. In the adjustments that followed, Oswal girls were sent to school and within one generation, several of their women reached careers of high social status. This in turn not only altered the community's perspective regarding women's education: but it also altered the economic prospects of many Oswal families. This is reflected in the tremendous prosperity of migrant Oswal who have now settled in large number in the U.K. and Canada where almost every family includes women professionals. Within a span of 30 years, the Oswal women have thus moved from middle ages to latter half of 20th century. This saga was possible partly because that community was indeed highly responsive to economic incentives. On the other hand the transition was made possible because independent India had created facilities for women to get education and enter professions. One can speculate how another community more steeped in feudal values would have responded to such a trauma. Would it have tried even harder to control women in a last ditch attempt to salvage its heritage? What if the country had not granted women legal rights for equality?

In this paper I have started an exercise to deal with such questions to a more satisfying extent. In the process,

I have found it necessary to move away from a discipline-specific approach and try to assimilate models and findings from several disciplines for making the analysis more comprehensive. I have first examined whether or not it is possible to find a measure of women's position that is responsive to changes in the economy, as well as in socio-cultural institutions over time and cross regions, and at the same time is also objective and non-trivial. Secondly, I have used the data base provided by several disciplines to substantiate or disapprove the hypotheses that are indicated by the analysis. I have also addressed some of the common debates. that are going on in this field regarding women's position in the light of my findings.

Measuring Women's Position

Women's position is the concerted result of all priviledges and privations - both public and private that are imposed on them and of the degree of autonomy they enjoy. Since I am referring to the position of women as a group it is the average level to which I am referring. However, it is not a statistical average but rather the accepted norm. In that sense, extremes of either kind would get a somewhat great weightage because they are more noticable for one's assessment of a society. This concept is to be distinguished from other familiar terms viz. status, power or autonomy of women. By status, I would mean the formal rights and priviledges bestowed on women as members of a particular group at specific points of their life cycle. Similarly, power can be publicly derived from one's status or privately acquired by one's own initiative. By acquiring power, a person can control the actions

and positions of others. By autonomy on the other hand, I would mean the capacity of person to take decisions about the person's own actions and ideas. Status and power both appear to me as hierarchical concepts so that increase in the status or power of some women may not necessarily add to the general status or well-being of the entire groups of women. As against that, increase in women's autonomy, even if it is selective, will improve the well-being of the groups as a whole,

These definitions of various terms may not correspond strictly with those in use elsewhere but since there is a lot of vagueness regarding their common usage, I have defined the terms for my purpose in this particular way.

Chapter - II

Choosing a Measure

A basic premise of this study is that women's relative position is a function of multiple dimensions. For assessing changes in their position over time and across regions one could attempt to compose some kind of a physical quality of life index (PQLI) incorporating values relating to several such variables. However, for this one would need more knowledge than we possess today about the different social and economic variables that affect Indian women's lives, and also about the nature of interaction between these variables. This is precisely what is hoped to be acquired through studies such as the present one. Also, it is possible that not all the dimensions that are relevant for this kind of an index are equally easily quantifiable in terms of some reliable

indicator. And lastly, there is a value judgement involved in selecting those particular dimensions which are to be included and the relative weights that are to be given to each.

Alternately, one can choose a particular characteristic of women's lives vis a vis men's, which is not only an important indicator of their well-being but also sensitive to changes that take place in other aspects of their lives. This too involve some knowledge about the extent of interdependance between dimensions and also a value judgement about the relative importance of that particular characteristic. And since both the methods mentioned here of measuring women's position viz. - preparing a PQLI or selecting one important characteristic as a surrogate variable involve making a value judgement, I have opted for the second method. The characteristic I have selected for this purpose is sex ratios of populations of different regions at different points of time. My arguments for selecting this characteristic rather than any other are as follows:

(a) The most important argument in its favour is that it is possible to get fairly reliable and continuous time series over a long period for India and its parts. Even the change of political and administrative boundaries have been allowed for.

(b) These figures show that in the time period under review i.e. first 80 years of the 20th century, there was in fact a continuously increasing deficit in the relative number

of women in the India population. Experts (Visaria 1961: Mitra 1980) agree that this deficit is not related to biological differences in male and female birth rates or any systemic under-ennumeration of women, but that it reflects serious differences in male and female mortality patterns. Since being alive is a precondition of well-being, this higher proclivity towards death of women has to be considered a primary indication of their relative well-being.

c) A significant part of this deficit is not merely an incidental result of the many relative disadvantages that are generally the lot of poor women during early periods of development. Admittedly Indian women are subject to relatively higher morbidity and mortality rates due to high fertility, early marriages, short intervals between child-births, low maternal nutrition, lack of trained attention during child-birth etc. However, it can be shown that over and above these problems shared by women of most underdeveloped countries, at least a part of the higher death rates of females are due to a deliberate and vicious discrimination against the very vulnerable group of female infants and young girs. Also, average age at marriage of women, their fertility rates, maternal nutrition levels, or access to contraception are all themselves fairly closely related to the social position of women in a given society, and therefore these factors too cannot be dismissed merely as indicators of economic backwardness.

d) For India, as is argued in the next few paragraphs, regional differences in the sex ratio exhibit a very marked

pattern which has remained steady over a long period. This in itself strongly suggests the possibility that the less than even sex ratios of India and its subregions are an important indicator of institutional factors.

e) An examination of the details of relative levels of age-group wise sex ratios and changes in them between regions and over time appears to suggest that economic development is in certain circumstances capable of removing some of the handicaps and problems faced by women. These circumstances however are not neutral to the prevailing socio-economic traditions. Therefore, sex ratio as an indicator of women's position appears to be sensitive to both cultural and economic forces and to the on-going interaction between these two in each society.

This sensitivity of demographic indicators to changes in women's position through different kinds of forces may not hold good in all societies at all times. Indeed one can visualise the possibility that in the coming years, general improvement in health standards would lead to a reducing of the deficit in women's population, without necessarily implying a significant change in the socio-economic position of women.[6] Nevertheless one can say that at least for the first eight decades of the 20th century, they did play this role in the

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6. Tim Dyson in a recent paper has argued that as general life expectancy of Indian population goes up, sex ratio of Indian population will increase for two reasons. Once women's life expectancy reaches 50‡, women have a better chance for out living men for biological reasons. Two, as India becomes more modernised and uses more machines, and energy, men, who are more involved with the modern life style are relatively more prone to industry induced diseases and accidents (Dyson 1986).

Indian society and its various subsections and therefore in an analysis relating to that time span, its relevance is fairly defensible.

Demographic Evidence

The facts in the matter are quite straight-forward and have been extensively analysed. The number of women as compared to the number of men in the Indian population or its sex ratio is remarkably low and contrasts sharply with that of many developed and developing countries. In 1981 it stood at 935 women per 1000 men. Comparable figures for other countries are : 1058 for the USA (1981), 1034 for Japan (1980), 1053 for U.K. (1980). Or to cite examples from developing countries closely comparable with India in many other respects : sex ratio stood at 1008 in Thailand (1980), 991 in Malayasia (1979), 1011 in Indonesia (1981), 1016 in Burma (1983), 1066 in Ethiopia (1984). (U.N. 1985).

This ratio, moreover, had been falling throughout the 20th century. Officially it has been claimed that the figure for 1981 was an improvement over the earlier trend, which fell steadily from 971 in 1901 to reach an all time low of 931 in 1971. However, some experts have argued that the very sharp fall between 941 in 1961 to 931 in 1971 was due to a seribus undercount of females in the latter year (Visaria 1981, Dyson 1984). In that case, if we ignore the 1971 figure, the 1981 results still fit in with the secular trend of decline. Table 1 gives the all India and statewise sex ratios for each decade since 1921.

The figure in Table 1 are calculated on the basis of today's boundaries of India and each of the states within it. They also relate to what is called general sex ratio GSR (as different from SR or sex ratio) because they have allowed for interstate migration. This is important in the case of India because a large section of males migrate singly in search of backward areas to other selected areas which offer greater job opportunities. Therefore, within India there are areas where the number of males residing there is unnaturally low due to male outmigration and others where it is equally unnaturally high because of their inmigration. Sex ratios of remaining population therefore get distorted.

The GSR is calculated after allowing for this.[7]

Figures in Table 1 show that the deficit in the number of women is not evenly spread over the whole of India. There are some states like Punjab and Uttar

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7. These adjustments were made by allotting to each state the number of males and females who were born there but counted elsewhere and deducting from its population the number of men and women who were born elsewhere but counted there. Decadal census data gives this break-up of migrants by place of origin in each state.

Pradesh (U.P.) where this ratio has been markedly below the national average throughout this period. There are others like Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu where it has consistently been above the national average. There are a few like Assam and Bihar where its relative levels has changed significantly during this period. And there are a few like Maharashtra where it has always hovered round the level of national average.

Table 1 with maps A and B which present the 1981 and 1911 physical outlines of areas with different ranges of GSR, brings out the following points. One, the levels of GSR have changed over time and the movement for most regions has mostly been downwards. However, the rates of change have not been the same for all regions; in some cases and at some points of time, it was faster and in others not so. Secondly, areas of similar tendencies of GSR form distinct clusters; they are not scattered wildly all over the map. They lie more or less close its each other. Thirdly, between 1911 and 1981, the composition of each such cluster has remained more or less the same. Even if the position of each may have improved, their relative positions are static. Therefore, the few changes, like the recent fall in GSR of Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh etc. stand out sharply in contrast and demand an explanation.

Table - 1

Variations in GSR 1921-1981 (adjusted for Internal Migration)

States	1921	1931	1941	1951	1961	1971	1981
Jammu &Kashmir	870	865	869	873	878	882	n.a.
Punjab*	821	830	850	858	864	863	879
Rajasthan	896	907	906	921	900	899	911
Uttar Pradesh	909	904	907	910	909	862	872
Andhra Pradesh	993	987	980	986	981	975	974
Kerala	1011	1022	1027	1028	1022	1019	1035
Karnataka	969	965	960	966	959	961	963
Tamil Nadu	1029	1037	1012	1007	992	975	975
Gujarat	944	945	947	952	940	936	945
Madhya Pradesh	974	973	970	967	953	943	941
Maharashtra	950	947	949	941	936	955	959
Assam	908	886	886	877	876	901	n.a.
Bihar	1016	994	996	990	994	928	925
Orissa	1086	1067	1053	1022	1001	983	978
West Bengal	905	890	852	865	878	931	946
India	955	950	945	946	941	931	935

Census of India 1971 Contenary Monograph No.6

Reg. Gen. of India, New Delhi.

These figures are adjusted for the several changes of borders of different states and of India that took place during this period.

* Included Haryana and Himachal Pradesh upto 1971. For 1981 inclusive of Haryana only.

The Deficit and its Sources

This deficit of females in the population arises in two ways. In some regions, there is a shortfall in the number of girls as compared to the number of boys in the very young age group. The sex ratio for the age group 0-4 years is called CSR.[8] Again this deficit in the number of girl children is also not spread evenly over the entire country. As Table 2 and Graph I shows, there have been marked differences in the CSRs of different states in all the three decades 1961 and 1971 and 1981. They also show that while the CSRs of most states are far from constant, relative positions of different states have not altered to any significant degree in this period.

Lastly, Maps C and D read together show that once again, states of similar levels of CSR form different zones within the country, and the boundaries of these zones have remained fairly steady between 1911 and 1981, even when absolute levels of CSR of each region have changed somewhat.[9] In a way, for CSR levels, there have been no dramatic changes like those in the GSRs of a few states.

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8. Since children of this age group do not migrate except in families, there was no allowance made for migration. The CSR for each state is calculated on the basis of all children below 4 who were enumerated there for census purposes.

9. It was not possible to give a continuous decadal time series of CSR levels of different states because the necessary exercise of adjusting boundaries of each states was too laborious. For GSR this had been done by Census authorities. We have done the same only for 1911.

Table - 2

No. of Females per 100 Males in Population 0-4 Years

Zone/State		Population of Age 0-4 C.S.R.		
		1961	1971	1981
1		2	3	4
NORTH ZONE	Punjab	929	917	915
	Haryana	-	921	924
	Rajasthan	972	956	983
	Uttar Pradesh	971	950	953
	Himachal Pradesh	987	984	N. A.
	Jammu & Kashmir	974	967	N. A.
SOUTH ZONE	Andhra Pradesh	1009	1002	992
	Karnataka	973	984	973
	Kerala	975	981	969
	Tamil Nadu	995	983	972
WEST ZONE	Gujarat	971	960	966
	Madhya Pradesh	941	992	985
	Maharashtra	983	975	953
EAST ZONE	Assam	1035	1009	N. A.
	Bihar	1016	985	1010
	Orissa	1048	1031	1018
	West Bengal	1024	1019	1002
	I N D I A	990	980	972

Taking into account the relative levels of GSR and CSR and changes in them over the period 1911 to 1981, the country can be divided into 4 distinct zones.[10]

1. The Northern zone - consisting of Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and U.P. where GSR and CSR have always been well below the national average. Even though these levels are improving in some parts of this zone, the position of each part of the region vis-a-vis other regions still remains unchanged.

2. The Western zone - consisting of Maharashtra, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh where GSR has always been around the national average though CSR has remained at slightly lower levels.

3. The Eastern zone - consisting of Assam, West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa where CSR has always been well above the national average while GSR has quite often undergone sharp changes. In West Bengal and Assam GSR fell for several decades earlier in the century but has by now recovered somewhat. In recent decades it is Orissa and specially Bihar which are on a downward trend of GSR.

4. The Southern zone where both GSR and CSR have always been well above the national average. This zone includes Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

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10. These zones are none of them uniform within. In each the different states exhibit varying levels of GSR and CSR at different points of time but generally the classification is not affected by these fluctuations. It may be noted that the four zones together do not cover the entire country but for the purpose of this paper, I intend to consider only this, what can be considered the trunk of the country.

Sex Ratios by Age Groups

The low CSR explains one part of the deficit in the relative number of women but it does not account for the whole of it. This point is easily appreciated when we take account of states like those in the Eastern zone where a surplus of girls in early ages gets converted into a deficit of women in the population as a whole. Graphs II and III show the movement of age groupwise sex ratios for each state in 1961 and 1981. This data is not adjusted for interestate migration so it is not comparable with the GSR figures. However these graphs show that in both 1961 and 1981, there are two troughs or lows in the line joining the points representing levels of sex ratios in each age group for India as a whole. One trough is in early childhood-in age groups below puberty. After that age, the levels of sex ratio rise for a few age groups only to fall again after a peak in the age group 25-29. It then goes on falling with some small variations till the age group 50-54 when it starts to rise again. Comparable lines for individual states do not all follow the shape of the all India line. In a few states the early childhood low does not occur. But surprisingly almost all of the state-wise lines exhibit the later dip in age groups between 30 to 55. As mentioned before, since this data is not adjusted for inter-state migration, the deficits in some states like West Bengal or Maharashtra which import more male labour are more artificial than real, as are the surpluses in other states like Bihar and U.P. which export adult male labour to other states. Nevertheless, the fact that in as many as 12 of the 14 states, levels of sex ratio in the age group 50-55 is near or below the national average, does indicate that there is a real shortfall in the number of Indian women which occurs in the age group between 30 to 55. This aspect of the deficit has often been neglected

in the discussion regarding Indian women's demographic position. Or it is attributed to the high fertility and maternity-induced mortality of Indian women. However, the point to note is that, the deficit occurs not in the peak fertility age groups (20-30 years of age) of women but after that. In the period between 1961 and 1981 this later trough in this line of age-group wise sex ratios has become shallower. According to Dyson, at least a part of these changes in the shape of this line is due to some changes in Indian male mortality patterns in post-40 age groups (see footnote 5). This part will be analysed in a later paper. In this paper, I intend to discuss only the deficit of females in childhood.

Chapter - III

Bias Against Girl Children

In his pioneering work, Visaria (Visaria 1961) had investigated causes of the deficit of women in India's population and had concluded that the deficit arose not from any statistical error or natural peculiarities of the pattern of conception and births in the Indian population but because of a relatively higher rate of mortality of women and specially of girl children. Further investigations have established beyond doubt this pattern of higher mortality of girls in early ages and have also shown that this pattern too is not explicable by biological or natural factors. A brief summary of these findings of demographers is given below.

It is generally agreed that biologically, female infants are hardier than male ones and in primitive regimes where mortality and specially infant mortality is

high, death rates are significantly higher for male infants and children. In nature this higher vulnerability of males is compensated by a preponderance of males in human conceptions and births. Apparantly there are as many as 105 boys conceived per 100 girls. With higher rates of male mortality this imbalance gets corrected over early childhood years so that numbers of males and females in pubescent population are about even.

Davis and Ouever (Davis and Ouever 1982) have shown that this natural pattern is disturbed by economic development which leads to a drastic reduction in infant and child mortality. For example, infant mortality rates (deaths in first 365 days per 1000 children born) have fallen as low as 6 in Japan, 11 in the USA, or 6 in Norway. Death rates in populations of 1 to 4 years are almost negligible (World Development Report 1987, Table 29, p.259). As a result, What is called child mortality rates (Deaths per 1000 children of age group 0-4 years alive at the start of the year plus those born within the last 365 days) fall to very low levels.

Since at birth, there is a natural excess of males in the population, populations of younger age groups continue to be male dominated when infant and child death rates are brought to such low levels through development. In fact Davis and Ouever have shown that in countries like Norway (which is not greatly affected by international migration flows) there has been a tendency for an excess of males till the age of 50 years. The overall excess of females in the population is due to their much longer life expectancy, because male death rates for all age groups above 50 years significantly exceed those of females.

India's child population has also become increasingly male dominated. Till 1931 or so, there were about 1030 to 1035 girl children to 1000 boys of age group 0-4 years in the Indian population. Since then however this ratio has fallen and as Table 2 had shown, in 1981 there were only 958 girls to 1000 boys.

Moreover, while the fall in GSR may perhaps have been arrested between 1971 to 1981, the sex ratio of child population continued to fall even in that decade. The explanation by Davis and Ouever which was discussed above however does not apply to India, because even in 1981, India's infant and child mortality rates were far above those of the developed countries. According to Chandrasekhara(1959), India's infant mortality rates were about 134 per 1000 infants (Of ages below 1 year) till 1950. From then onwards till 1978 this rate had fallen by only a small margin to 126. Thereafter the rate fell at a much faster rate, but even then in 1981 it stood at 110. Death rate of children between age groups 1 to 4 years were also quite significant. In 1981 it accounted for almost half as many deaths as deaths of infants. Altogether, for age groups 0-4 years, the death rate for India as a whole stood at 43 per 1000 in 1981. Therefore the increasing tendency of male dominance in India's child population cannot be equated with a similar tendency observed in developed countries in recent years.

This point becomes all the more clear if one examines the recent data on child mortality rates provided by the Sample Registration System (Table 3)

Table - 3

All India Male and Female Death Rate in Child Population

	1970		1978	
	0-4 Years	5-9 Years	0-4 Years	5-9 Years
Male	51.7	4.6	44.7	3.7
Female	55.1	5.0	52.1	4.7
Female death rate as 1% of male death rates	106.6	108.7	116.56	127.03

Source : Child in India GOI 1985 Table 2.42, pp.170-171.

For both these age groups not only is the female death rate higher but the bias has increased with the fall in the death rates.

This bias and its social roots have been further highlighted in Alice Clark's analysis (Clark 1987). She has shown that India's ratio of female over male mortality in the age group 1 month to 4 years of age is significantly higher than not only the norms accepted for western or southern Europe but also higher than those found in 95

per cent of the less developed countries covered by the recent World Fertility Survey. She therefore argues that the excess female mortality in India points in the direction of social rather than indigeneously determined biological causes (Ibid, P. WS 19).

She had shown that Padmanabha's data (Padmanabha 1982) gives the following ratios of age specific female to male mortality in different age groups.

Table - 4

Female to Male Ratios of Age-Specific Mortality Rates-All-India

	Age-Group	Ratio of Female over Male Mortality rates
1.	0 to 29 days	0.86
2.	29 days to 1 year	1.202
3.	0 days to 1 year	0.977
4.	1 year to 4 years	1.303
5.	29 days to 4 years	1.262

That is to say, even in India, neo-natal mortality (mortality in first 29 days of life) affects males more. But the later bias against girl children is even more marked than what is shown by the overall excess female mortality in infancy or childhood.

These facts are further highlighted by the details given in Table-5. Neo-natal deaths i.e. deaths in the first 29 days after birth accounted for as much as 63 percent of the infant deaths in 1981. As Clark has shown, for this brief period, male infants were more vulnerable than female ones. But in the period from 29 days to 365 days, female susceptibility to death was so much higher than the male one (as indicated by the ratio figure of 1.202 in row 2 of table 4) that though less than 40 percent of all infant deaths occurred in that period, the preponderance of male deaths in neo-natal age group was almost wiped out. (The overall IMR ratio was almost even, in row 3 Table 4). In later age groups from 29 days to 4 years, female death rates were higher than male ones and the bias got increasingly sharper as children grew older. It grew steadily from age group below 29 days to the age group 29 days to 1 year and then onwards for the age group 1 to 4 years.

Table 5

Relative Death Rates of Male and Female Infants and Children - Statewise

Region	Infant Mortality Rates 1981		0-4 Year Death Rates Male/ Female		0-4 Death Rates 1981			0-4 Death as percentage of total death		Neo-Natal deaths at % of Infant deaths 1981
	Rate per 1000	Male/ Female	1971/75	1976/ 80	Male/ Female	Female Rate	Rat-io	0-1 Yf.	1 to 4 yrs.	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
India	110	0.98	0.88	0.90	39.2	43.3	0.94	18.7	9.2	63.3
South Zone										
Andhra Pradesh	86	1.15	1.01	1.07	30.8	30.0	1.05	12.6	7.5	69.7
Karnataka	67	1.01	0.98	0.93	23.6	24.9	1.02	20.9	11.7	70.2
Kerala	37	1.12	0.97	1.04	13.3	11.0	1.15	8.4	4.6	68.7
Tamil Nadu	91	1.01	1.04	1.03	35.1	35.2	1.03	11.3	5.5	68.7
West Zone										
Gujarat	116	0.97	0.90	0.94	39.4	41.8	0.95	21.8	7.8	64.7
Madhya Pradesh	142	1.07	0.91	0.93	58.2	63.1	0.95	18.9	6.7	56.7
Maharashtra	79	1.09	0.97	0.93	25.9	26.6	0.97	22.9	9.2	68.4
East Zone										
Assam	106	0.99	1.08	0.98	36.7	42.3	0.98	18.0	11.8	63.3
Bihar	118	0.90	n.a	n.a	40.2	44.9	0.93	15.9	11.6	63.0
Orissa	135	1.07	0.98	0.94	42.2	42.1	1.06	21.9	6.7	59.1
West Bengal	91	1.01	n.a.	n.a.	35.3	31.7	1.02	8.1	4.4	70.2
North Zone										
Haryana	101	0.81	0.78	0.75	32.7	42.5	0.82	21.7	9.2	56.9
Punjab	81	0.99	0.77	0.79	23.8	27.7	0.83	15.9	5.9	60.2
Rajasthan	108	1.12	0.84	0.90	46.8	54.1	0.89	22.4	8.4	55.1
Uttar Pradesh	150	0.95	0.78	0.74	53.1	68.5	0.82	24.4	16.0	64.0

Columns 1,2,5,6 and 10 from Sample Registration System GOI Ministry of Home Affairs, New Delhi 1983.

Columns 8 and 9 from child in India GOI Ministry of Welfare New Delhi 1985 Table 2.45 pp 182-183.

Columns 3 and 4 Tim Dyson - Excess Female Mortality in India etc. Dhaka January 1987 Table 5.

Dyson's analysis in a recent paper (Dyson 1986) from which columns 3 and 4 of table 5 have been taken, indicated that though infant and child death rates were falling since the seventies, this had not led to a marked decline in the bias against girls. Between 1971/75 and 1976/80 the ratio of male to female death rates in age groups 0-4 rose only slightly for India, it fell further in Maharashtra, Haryana and U.P.

The state wise figures from table 5 indicate several interesting trends. Levels of infant mortality as well as child mortality rates for different periods differed widely between states and even within the four zones delineated above; these variations moreover were not fully accounted for by levels of development of each state. For example, Gujarat and Bihar had almost similar rates of infant mortality inspite of the considerably higher level of development of the former.[10]

Furthermore, table 5 shows that, the ratio of male to female deaths for India as a whole fell between infancy and childhood. That is to say, while IMRs were almost the same for male and female infants, deaths in childhood as a whole (i.e. between 0-4 years) were definitely more frequent in case of girl children. One can put it in another way.

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10 Similarly, although Haryana's IMR was much lower than that of Uttar Pradesh, the bias against girl infants was clearly very high since the ratio of male to female death rates was the lowest in the country for both.

In infancy, when causes of death were more likely to be due to physical conditions - birth weight, birth related disorders, exposure to infections and susceptibility to them etc. and when most children were breast-fed by the mother (so nutrition was less likely to be affected by gender issues; but after infancy, when a child's survival chances come to be increasingly influenced by the extent of social regard for its well being whether or not it got proper nutrition and adequate medical-attention, etc., the bias against girls becomes more marked as measured by relative death rates.

Much more interesting are the variations between regions around this basic all-India pattern. In the Southern and Eastern zones, in almost all states the ratio of male to female death rates was higher than one or near even and it remained the same or increased slightly between infancy to age group 0-4 years (Columns 2 and 6 of table 5). In the Western zone, this ratio was below even both in infancy and childhood, but it generally tended to improve after infancy. But in the northern zone, it fell sharply after infancy and remained well below even. Interestingly, Punjab's child mortality rates were some of the lowest in the country. Except for Kerala, no other state had as low a male death rate in age group 0-4 as Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, on th other hand, easily topped all states in child death rates. Madhya Pradesh was a close second if one took boys and girls together. Yet the ratio of death rates between boys and girls for Punjab and Uttar Pradesh were almost the same. Haryana, another rich state of the region had about average death rates for girls but for boys, its record was also better. Its ratio of male to female child death rates was also the same as Punjab

and U.P. Similarly, in the Western zone, this ratio (column 7) was at about similar level for all three states - Maharashtra, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh - through each of the three states had very different levels of child death rates. Another interesting fact was that for Maharashtra, inspite of its low and falling infant and child death rates, the sex ratio of 0-4 death rates had worsened between 1971/75 to 1976/80. All in all, one could say that progress or development did not alter the basic character in this respect of the states vis-a-vis each other.

Causes of Higher Mortality Rates of Girls

The processes through which death rates of female children tend to be relatively higher in some regions of India have been the subject of several studies. Without going into details of the extremely complex and controversial results of various studies, a few of the common conclusions of research so far are mentioned here. Leela Visaria (Visaria 1988) after looking at various studies[11] for different regions of India and Bangaladesh had concluded that "What has been shown is that boys receive preferential treatment in certain foods which are more valued or considered nutritious. Such foods are not consumed daily in majority of the households and therefore they can not have a significant impact on the nutritional status of children" (p.6). In support of this conclusion, Gopalan's (Gopalan 1987) analysis of the data collected by National

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11. For example she refers to Khan et al's two studies of Haryana village (Khan et al 1983) and Chen et al's study of Matlab thana in Bangladesh (Chen et al 1981).

Monitoring Bureaus for rural population in seven states indicated that actually, male children suffered more from malnutrition than females. Visaria noted that in line with her earlier conclusion, the discrimination against girls in nutrition was marked only in more developed areas/better off families[12] presumably because it was only there that some extra alternatives were available. This could also work in times of famines and scarcity when girls may be given less food (Bairagi 1986, Sen 1986).

Visaria however found considerable evidence both from her reading of studies by others and also her own project on differential health care prior to death in Kachchh area of Gujarat to indicate that "female children were clearly at a disadvantage with respect to health care in the event of an illness[13]. Visaria concluded that in her sample the process was not general but confined to particular communities and social, cultural as well as economic factors all interact to generate the bias.

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12. Sen & Sengupta's study of two villages in West Bengal also came to a similar conclusion (Sen & Sengupta 1983).

13. The Khanna study in Punjab, (Singh, Gordon & Wyon 1962) the Matlab study in Bangladesh (Chen et al 1981) and Khan et al (Khan et al 1983) all confirmed this finding.

Recently, Dasgupta (Dasgupta 1987) had resurveyed several villages originally included in the Khanna study (Wyon and Gordon 1971) which had consisted of intensive field survey of fertility behaviour. Her findings brought out some further interesting aspects of the bias against young girls. She found that the burden of excess mortality (that she had observed in her field work) fell selectively on a subset of female children. This subset consisted of girls born into families which already had at least one surviving daughter. The conscious and voluntary behaviour required to do this is far greater than would necessarily be involved in a generalised discrimination against females (Ibid p. 95). She indicated that the bias was closely related to individual parents' family building strategies. And it was falling size of desired families combined with a persistent desire to have at least one or two male children that was leading to an even greater pressure on younger mothers to literally neglect their "surplus" daughters to death.

Chapter - IV

Roots of Bias : Women's Economic Role

Starting with a provocative little article by Bardhan on the 1971 Census results (Bardhan 1974) several scholars have worked during the last decade on this broad regional pattern of the bias against girl children in India. Miller (Miller 1981) in her work based on historical and ethnographic material along with Census data for the early decades of 20th century has shown that the zoning of India by levels of JSR (sex ratios in population of age group o-9 years) has held good for a long time. According to her, areas of low JSR today are the same areas where at one time female infanticide

was commonly practised. Based on available ethnographic material, she argues that the same attitudes which once promoted female infanticide are still responsible for the current social attitudes and practices leading to a short-fall in the number of girl children.

For explaining these inter-regional differences, Miller (Ibid) and Bardhan (Bardhan 1974, 1982 and 1984) have linked the bias against girls in the north and north-west with the relatively low rates of participation of women in economic activities or women's work force participation rates (women's WFPR) prevailing there. They have argued that, in the south, in contrast to the north, these WFPRs for women are and have been in the past distinctly higher. According to them, this is because southern agricultural economy being rice based, agrarian activities there are more labour intensive and hence more in need of women's labour. As against that, northern wheat-dominated agriculture uses less labour and therefore can manage without using women in field activities. Agarwal (Agarwal 1986) also argues that greater participation in economic activities gives southern women a better position in the family than their northern counterparts. But she does not agree with the hypothesis that it is the dominance of rice that alone causes higher WFPR of women. She points to the fact that agriculture in West Bengal and Assam is heavily dominated by rice cultivation but women's WFPR there are some of the lowest in India. She also argues that the census data on WFPRs has come under considerable criticism for its lack of adequate coverage of women's work and therefore cannot be taken to be a sound indicator either of the cultural perception of women's work or their value to the society. Inspite of such

criticisms, the Bardhan/Miller hypothesis is widely accepted as an explanation of inter-regional differences in women's position and therefore deserves a more detailed examination.

Women's Economic Role :

Their argument is on the following lines : in areas where women's WFPRs are high a girl is regarded as less of an unproductive burden. Therefore birth of a girl child is not considered as much of a calamity as it is in areas where women's WFPRs are low. To quote Miller "My hypothesis is that "worth" is to a large extent related to work" (Miller 1981 p. 25). Miller also considers the impact of relatively high marriage costs of a daughter's wedding to the family as an additional explanation of the neglect of female babies. She notes that the incidence of low WFPRs of women and of high marriage costs have a high negative correlation amongst communities but does not explore the reasons for this.

After examining available ethnographic studies, Miller concludes that low WFPR and/or high marriage costs to the bride's family explain a part of the variations in levels of JSRs[14] (sex ratios in age groups 0-9 years) (Miller ibid pp. 158-159) but not all.

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14. Incidentally Miller has calculated JSR as a ratio of no. of male children (age group 0-9 years) per 1000 female children while I have calculated the reverse. Therefore what she calls a high JSR is a low JSR for this paper. The confusion is regretted.

Furthermore, as mentioned before, Miller explains the differences in women's WFPRs in terms of the variations in labour requirements of rice and wheat cultivation. She does take note of the problems of accounting for women's low WFPRs in rice dominated Bengal and Assam. But her explanation for that phenomenon was that Bengal and Assam had traditionally used in rice cultivation the technique of broad-casting and not of transplantation. Broadcasting technology was relatively less labour intensive and therefore Bengal could afford to keep its women out of the work of cultivation. Bardhan's argument is on similar lines. In a recent paper Kalpana Bardhan has also reiterated it (Bardhan 1986).

A Shaky Data Base

There are several very serious objections to this line of argument. First of all Miller has derived a causal connection between the relative levels of JSRs of different regions and relative levels of WFPRs of women from the fairly close correlation that existed between the values of these two variables in the 1961 census reports. For periods thereafter she has used findings of various ethnographic studies conducted over several years by various scholars at different sites. Surprisingly she has not considered the findings regarding women's WFPR from census reports of earlier decades even though it is generally accepted that figures of WFPRs as given by definitions used in censuses for 1911, 1921 and 1931 can be made comparable with these of 1961. Had she done so, she would have found that, while relative figures of region-wise JSRs have been fairly steady from 1901 to 1961, figures of women's relative WFPRs have undergone very marked changes even in relative levels from one decade to another

of the 20th century. Table 6[15] shows these WFPRs of women in different parts of India in different decades.

Our earlier figures had shown that throughout 20th century the north zone was consistently an area of low CSRs and the east and south zones areas of high CSRs. However, in 1911, women's WFPRs in Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan compared very well with these of regions in the south and west zone. So did those of Bihar and to a lesser degree of Orissa. Inspite of that CSRs of Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh were well below those of regions of the eastern zone. But as Miller has pointed out, Rajputana which is included in to-day's Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh was the traditional epicentre of female infanticide practices. Moreover, in the decade after 1911, women's WFPRs fell sharply in Kerala and West Bengal; in recent years in Bihar and Orissa too, same trends are noticeable. Yet the CSRs of none of these areas have fallen to levels comparable with these of north of west zone states. In other words, there is no evidence that a robust causal link between region-wise women's WFPR levels and CSR levels can stand the test of time. The 1961 findings cannot be extended backwards to explain the discrimination against girl children that has apparentl

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15. For this table, the 1981 figures are not strictly comparable with those of earlier years, since there was a difference in emphasis put on the cognition of persons regarding their status as workers (Anker 1983) to allow for) this to some extent the figures given include main plus marginal workers.

existed for a long time.[16]

The use of ethnographic material for assessing women's WFPRs or incidence of dowry & brideprice practices is also highly questionable in this context. In her table no.8 (pp 127-129) Miller has summed up the findings of several such studies extending over a period from mid-1950s to late 1970s. Some of these studies had related to propertied groups, others to non-propertied ones and still others to both. As Miller herself points out, relative numbers of working and non-working women in each site were not available so that the rankings of general WFPRs of women in each site as high, medium or low is mainly impressionistic.

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16. The figures of WFPR shown in table 6 are not comparable with Miller's figures of what she has called FLP (female labour participation rates) because she had used the WFPRs only of women of age groups 15 to 34 whereas I have taken them for the entire female population. Miller's argument for using FLP instead of WFPR is that the age group 15-34 years includes the largest number of adult females in 1961. However if we consider age-group wise WFPRs of women, in fact the female WFPR for age groups 15-29 is much lower than those for age groups 30-34 and 45 to 59. Indeed it is an important characteristic of the life cycle pattern of Indian women that the physical strain on them is greatest after the age of 30 years. By then, they usually go back to work but are still continuing to have children. This problem will be discussed in the second part of this monograph.

Table - 6

Work Force Participation Rates (WFPR) of Women Selected Years

States	1911	1931	1961	1981 Rural Only Main + Marginal
North Zone				
Punjab (includes Haryana)	11.9	12.7	14.2	10.2
Rajasthan	45.5	38.3	35.9	21.1
Uttar Pradesh	33.3	29.8	18.1	9.6
South Zone				
Andhra Pradesh	41.58	30.30	41.33	38.8
Kerala	28.01	22.81	19.75	17.0
Madras (T.N.)	36.48	30.12	31.29	27.4
Mysore	26.14	25.32	32.02	25.4
West Zone				
Bombay (includes Gujarat)	36.74	29.72	34.61	27.2
Madhya Pradesh	47.85	37.46	44.0	30.4
East Zone				
Bihar	34.71	26.09	27.13	13.4
Orissa	30.43	30.04	26.58	14.7
West Bengal	18.79	13.19	9.44	8.9

Source : J.N. Sinha 1972 statement 8 pp. 24-25,
Nirmala Banerjee 1988 statement 1 p. 2.

Secondly, these assessments of the extent of women's work as given by various investigations are themselves subject to the viccissitudes created by the definition of work. This has indeed been a long-standing problem for all estimates of women workers in India. For example, as I have discussed later the Jat women of Punjab and Rajasthan were traditionally known for the tremendous amount of work they did but, as several studies included in Miller's table mention, they were consistently categorised as non-workers partly because their activities were home-based (animal care, dairy, food processing, knitting industry etc), and partly also because social mores of the region were such that families did not recognise women's economic contribution.

Similarly, Miller has categorised Nimkhera where Jacobsen had done her field work in 1970 as a low WFPR area of women who maintained Purdah. But again, as I have mentioned later on, Jacobsen (Jacobsen 1982) specifically makes the point that inspite of Purdah restrictions, the Nimkhera women worked in field at peak labour demand season by going back to their natal villages. Basing any conclusions regarding relative levels of women's WFPRs on such studies is thus very unreliable.

What Determines Women's WFPR ?

Moreover, even if one were to accept the hypothesis that work gives worth to women, it only pushes the problems back by one step : why is it that there are such sharp differences in regionwise women's WFPRs according to the various definitions used by census authorities ? And how, if at all, do they affect women's position or in this case, the CSR ?

Again, Miller's explanation of differences in women's WFPRs between north and south is rather simplistic not only because of the anomaly presented by rice growing Bengal and Assam, but also because it is a moot point how far south (in the sense of area of better JSR/CSR) was itself a rice-growing area and in contrast the north (i.e. area of poor JSR/CSR) a non-rice area.

The 1911 Census reports (Vol. I, Pt.- I) provides us with detailed information on cropping patterns of various political and natural regions of India (Map E is reproduced from there). From this it appears that, at that time, on the Deccan plateau which accounts for most of the Indian land south of the Vindhya mountains, rice accounted for no more than 5 percent of the cropped area. Rice was an important crop only in the very narrow strips along the west and east coasts of the peninsula and in the flatter valleys and deltas of the rivers Kaveri, Godavari and to a smaller extent, Tapti. Even in the region equivalent to to-days' Tamil Nadu, only 26 percent of the cultivated land was then under rice. In contrast in the north, 30 percent of land in eastern Uttat Pradesh was under rice. The major rice producing areas were in the East-Assam, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa where rice claimed 50 to 70 percent of all cultivated land.

Even in 1971-72 after the completion of major irrigation schemes in the South, Andhra Pradesh (roughly comparable with the earlier state of Hyderabad) had 37.1% of gross cropped area under rice. In Maharashtra (part of earlier area under Bombay province, Bombay States C.P. and Berar as well as C.P. States) 15% of the gross cropped area was under rice. In Mysore State even then only 20 percent or less of the gross cropped area was under rice. In Tamil Nadu (comparable to parts of Madras province and Madras States including Tanjavoor) the comparable figure had risen fast to 58 per cent (GOI 1972 Table 17 p. 48). By 1981-82 for Andhra Pradesh, this figure had risen to 44 percent, and for Maharashtra as well as Karnataka it had risen to 25 to 33 percent (GOI 1984). So really speaking, the equivalence between rice cultivation and South (i.e. areas of traditionally high WFPR of women) was not a historical fact but a relatively recent phenomenon. In fact Kerala was the only area of Southern India (earlier Travancore and Cochin states) which had traditionally grown rice as the principle crop and, as table 6 shows, its WFPR of women was always well below the southern norm. Rice cultivation, whether by broadcasting or by transplantation technique, cannot then be said to have accounted for the high WFPR of women in some parts of India.

1911 As a Benchmark

Before going further into this issue concerning determinants of women's WFPR in each region it is perhaps necessary to explain why I have used 1911 as a kind of benchmark in this analysis. In many ways the years immediately preceeding the first world war marked a kind of a watershed for Indian women's participation in economic activities. The 1911 level of women's WFPR for Indian as a whole and for most regions therein was the highest in entire Census records from 1872 to 1981. Also after that date, women's industrial employment fell sharply and the absolute number of women in industrial workforce was lower in 1961 than the equivalent figure

for 1911 (J.N. Sinha 1972). There were several reasons for this which need not be discussed in details here. By then, the Indian economy had had nearly a hundred years to adjust to the enormous shock of the destruction of its traditional industries through competition from British industrial products in the wake of the industrial revolution in Britain. Indian population had also been almost stagnent for a considerable period around 1911. Moreover, till then, though railways and roads had begun to open up the countryside, the bulk of the rural population still depended on the products of local subsistence industries of grain and dairy processing, pottery, fuel and fodder - etc. for its basic necessities of manufactured goods. Women had formed an important part of the industrial workforce in these subsistence industries. in the period after this, these village industries came increasingly under competition with products of large scale modern industries as transport network expanded. All in all, because of factors such as these,[17] there was then perhaps more of a balance between the supply of and demand for women's labour in the Indian economy. Inter-regional variations in women's WFPR according to the 1911 Census records therefore were probably more representative of the variations in cultural traditions and economic imperatives of each society than figures for later years when constraints on demand for women's labour became more operative.

For these reasons, I have tended to use the Census records for this year as a basis for analysis of factors determining the relative levels of women's WFPR in each region.

Nature of Women's Work

In the entire elaboration of the hypothesis of work giving women worth, one finds little or no curiosity about what actually

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17. I have elsewhere discussed in some details the reasons why the process of modernisation tended to marginalise women in the 20th century economy of Bengal (Banerjee 1989).

constitutes women's work and whether or not it could at all give a woman any worth. However, it has been shown by several studies that in India, though the line dividing men's jobs from women's has shifted very dramatically between regions over time, nevertheless it has always been discriminating. In each situation examined, women were allotted poorer tools, and their work was therefore less productive of value. When tasks were allotted to women, they soon became socially less valuable and came to be paid at relatively poorer rates. Also their tasks were generally repetitive, laborious and physically exhausting (ICSSR 1983, Banerjee 1985a, 1985b, 1989). In addition, it is generally acknowledged that, being a part of the work force did not and still does not absolve Indian women from the burden of housework which in many cases not only includes standard tasks of cooking, cleaning and childcare but also a lot of preparatory work and assistance in the family's economic enterprise. This extended concept of housework claims a significant part of most women's working hours. Therefore it would not be surprising if Indian women abstained from the generally poorly rewarded economic work assigned to them unless it becomes absolutely imperative. They would prefer to withdraw from the labour market whenever possible.

Moreover, apart from the consideration that in India as elsewhere, women's domestic work is crucial for the reproduction of the family labour, it is also a very common tendency in India to equate a family's sense of well-being with the amount of time devoted by its women to domestic chores. Therefore, it seems logical to assume that families would withdraw women from the labour market and replace them by other labour whenever the latter is available cheaply and readily.

Surplus Generation and Women's WFPR

Both these possibilities, one of women wanting to withdraw from onerous jobs and families preferring them to confine themselves to housework would become real to a greater extent in areas where the economy generated sufficient surplus for sustaining a larger size of "idle" or dependent (non-worker) population. To examine whether this was actually the case, table 7 presents two kinds of indicators relating to two different hypotheses.

The first hypothesis was that, in the relatively densely populated areas, land would be scarce and there would be a larger class of landless labour available to be hired as cheap wage labour to replace women in family enterprises. Therefore women's WFPRs would be negatively related to population density.

From the figures in table 7 however it cannot be said that the relation held good in 1911. Among areas with population densities below 150 persons per square mile the WFPR of women was above 30 percent in 10 out of 12 cases. In areas with population densities above 225 persons per square mile also, five out of seven had women's WFPRs above 25%. For three of these latter regions the rates were above 30%. So the negative relation between these two variables was not very robust.

On consideration, this result is not very surprising. Areas of high population density would presumably have a large number of landless and poor people whose women would have to work to supplement the family income. Even if some women were withdrawn from household enterprises to be replaced by wage labour, other women belonging to assetless households which contribute the bulk of the two categories agricultural labour and general labour as per the 1911 Census categories, would themselves be required to join the workforce.

Table - 7

Regionwise Indicators of the Nature of Economy : 1911

	Area under rice as % of gross cropped area	Population density (no. per sq. mile)	Female work force as % of female population	Male work force as % of male population	% of Population supported by agriculture pasture
	1	2	3	4	5
North					
Kashmir	17	37	31.13	61.23	79.66
NWFP	nil	64	4.43	57.28	67.48
Punjab	4	200	10.53	66.23	59.90
Punjab State		115	12.33	64.30	
U. P. State	14	164	8.98	61.25	73.36
U.P.		440	34.62	67.11	
Rajasthan	nil	83	46.58	68.69	64.75
Ajmir	nil	184	46.81	69.17	54.00
South					
Hyderabad State	4	162	41.38	65.47	61.92
Mysore State	12	197	12.15	49.33	73.08
Cong.	58	111	53.41	74.22	82.54
Cochin State	42	675	29.75	56.47	51.26
Travancore State	29	452			53.64
Maddas	28	291	39.24	62.72	70.00
West					
Bombay	9	160	30.74	62.65	67.35
Bombay State		116	29.51	62.68	
Baroda State		248	29.17	62.59	65.42
C.P. & Beron	0.6	139	53.82	66.48	78.70
C.P. Agri	20	30	44.60	68.48	63.45
C.P. State	5	68			
East					
Assam	74	127	28.62	61.94	86.0
Manipur		41	32.39	46.20	
Bengal	69	578	9.57	60.36	76.26
Bengal States		153	13.02	34.37	
Bihar	30	561	30.37	55.41	80.16
Chotonagpur		207	43.92	57.18	
Orissa		373	20.22	54.68	
Bihar & Orissa States	54	138	30.75	53.55	
All India	31	175	20.41	71.68	-

Source : Census of India 1911.
: Column 1 : Vol.I Ch.I Subsidiary Table I
Column 2 : Vol I pt. II pp. 1 to 3
Columns 3 & 4 : Vol. I pt. II Table xv p.270
Column 5 : Vol. I Subsidiary Table No. 2
pp. 432 - 433.

The other indicator of relatively greater surplus generation was the extent of dependent population sustained by the economy or in other words, the WFPRs of the female as well as of the male population. The argument behind this hypothesis would be that, women's WFPR may be relatively low in areas where in general the economy could maintain a relatively larger percentage of idle population and therefore male WFPRs would also be relatively low. Male and female WFPR would then be positively correlated.[18] If on the other hand, the constraints operating towards low WFPRs of women were on cultural and not economic grounds, then low WFPRs of women would have had to be compensated by higher than average WFPRs of men.

In table 8, the data from columns 3 and 4 of Table 7 regarding the WFPRs of women and men for each region has been cross tabulated by levels of these WFPRs. It can be seen from it that, 13 out of the 26 regions lay on the diagonal going from left to right, That is to say, in 13 of these regions, if women's WFPR were low, men's were also low in their respectively relevant ranges and vice versa. On the other hand in only four areas, men's WFPRs were high although women's employment was relatively low i.e. men were overfulfilling their labour participation estimates as per women's WFPRs. These four regions were Punjab, Punjab States, U.P. States and marginally Bengal. Their case will considered later. As against that, there were nine areas where the reverse was true i.e. where men's WFPRs were low relative to the level of women's WFPRs. In other words, it was very common for women to compensate for a shortfall in men's WFPRs, rather than men doing so as would have been expected if women were being kept out of work force for cultural reasons.

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18. When work opportunities are scarce, it is possible that women would lose out in competition with men and therefore, the WFPRs of the former would fall faster than men's but I have assumed that in 1911, unemployment was not a serious problem. It is to be noted that Census records for 1911 did not distinguish between low paid or seasonal and other work.

In most regions where women overfulfilled the work requirement (i.e. regions lying to the left of the diagonal) men's WFPRs were relatively low probably because a significant section of working age males had migrated out of those areas to work in urban occupations in other states or even to other countries in Africa or far east. Bihar and Orissa along with Chota Nagpur and Bihar and Orissa States would be some of these regions. To a lesser extent Bombay, Bombay States and Baroda State would also fall in this category. Manipur however may represent a break from the All-India pattern since women's position there may be more akin to the Burma and S.E. Asia pattern. The deficit in supply of labour generated by these migratory trends if the male workforce was being made up by women and children specially for subsistence activities. Put in another way, in regions from where adult males tended to migrate for work, the remaining male population would have a higher percentage of children and old men. Therefore, in order to continue to run the traditional subsistence activities of the household, women had to be over-represented in the labour force.

Table - 8

Distribution of 1911 regions by WFPRs of Men and Women

Men's WFPR / Women's WFPR	60.0	60.1 to 65.0	65.1 +
15.0	3	3	1
15.1 to 30.0	2	3	
30.1 ±	3	4	7

Source: Based on Table 7.

These details indicate that whenever women's labour was necessary for the sustenance of the family economy, cultural considerations apparently did not prevent their participation. In such regions, either women were free of purdah restrictions or even if restrictions were there, some additional conventions were built up to circumvent them.

This was brought out well in a study of a village called Nimkhera near Bhopal by Doranne Jacobsen (Jacobsen 1982, 1986). In this region there were strict limits on women's mobility through purdah in their marital homes. However, since there was an acute shortage of labour in the peak agricultural season, some additional conventions had been built to allow married women also to join the labour force. Purdah apparently did not prevent a woman from moving freely in her natal village; therefore it was customary for all young married women to visit their parents' homes during the busy season of agriculture and help with the work in the fields of their fathers and brothers. In that way, overall women's work participation could be high even when there was purdah operating in the society.

Unfeminine Occupations and Women's WFPR

Another possible reason for the relatively low WFPRs of women in some regions in 1911 could have been the fact that, in some regions a significant proportion of population made its living in occupations which did not give women any scope for work.

In Table 7, column 5 indicates that in most subregions of India, over three fourth of the population was working in agriculture in 1911. Generally, more the dependence on agriculture of the population, the higher was the WFPR of

women of that area: but there were several marked exceptions where agricultural activities were prosperous and the surplus produced in those activities made it possible to sustain a larger proportion of non-worker or dependent population. In a few areas which are mentioned in table 9 however, a somewhat higher than average percentage of population depended for their livelihood on occupations other than agriculture. In these sub-regions, usually industry was by far the next most important sector of employment. However, at that point of time, most of the industrial production took place in villages and consisted of fairly crude manufactures meant for immediate local markets. Women were responsible for a large part of the production and output of subsistence industries. Typically, women were most active in industries of food processing, of processing forest products and also in dairy and animal husbandry-based industries. In Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa, Assam and Travancore Cochin's women accounted for about half the total industrial work force in 1911. In Bengal, Ajmer Mewara and Rajputana too, over 1/3rd of the entire industrial labour force consisted of women.

The non-agricultural occupations where women were most conspicious by their absence consisted of long distance trade and transport, armed forces and public administration. In many of these, traditional biases as well as women's lack of mobility and access to modern education prevented their entry. Inspite of these problems, figures in table 9 do not really explain to any great extent the differences in women's WFPRs between different regions. As a matter of fact, these occupations outside agriculture and manufacturing industry were so small

in size compared to the sizes of the total population and labour force that at aggregative levels, their impact could not but be negligible.

However, in one sense, the somewhat greater importance in these occupations other than agriculture and industry did make a significant difference for women's position. Workers in many of these occupations not only earned better incomes in terms of cash, but often also belonged to upper castes. Therefore, the fact that in their own perceptions based on the experien of their own immediate communities, these people saw women as economically dependent and non-employable meant that the whole society tended to build up an ideological image of women in that light. This ideology was perhaps of much greater relevance in determining the overall position of women in that society than the actual number of men and women employed there in those occupations. Relevance of these ideological considerations is discussed in a later section of this paper.

Chapter - V

Work and Worth

So far, I have argued that the marked interregional differences within India in the position of women represent a phenomenon too complex to be quickly explained in terms of some rough indicators of a broad north/south difference in the extent of women's work. Even the variations between different states in the levels of CSR are not satisfactorily accounted for in terms of census based estimates of women's

Table - 9

Regions with less than All India Average of no. of persons dependent on Agriculture per 10000 population. 1911: Women's WFPR

	No. of persons per 10000 population dependent on different occupations 1911.					Female WFPR
	Agriculture	Industry	Trade	Transport	Public Administration and lib arts including armed forces	
	1	2	3	4	5	6
All India	7168	1127	560	169	348	29.41
Ajmer	5496	1689	847	691	699	46.89
Rajputana	6475	1469	787	105	701	46.58
N.W.Frontier Province	6748	1147	645	216	623	4.43
Punjab	5995	2032	652	293	446	12.33
Cochin	5126	2002	1149	205	1149	29.75
Travancore	5364	1716	832	160	424	27.75
Bombay	6797	1256	651	267	523	30.74
Hyderabad	6192	1400	548	100	559	41
Baroda	6557	1230	639	82	729	29
Central India Agencies	6345	1294	549	56	525	44

Source: Census of India 1911 columns 1 to 5 Vol. I pt. I Subsidiary Table No. 2 pp 432 - 433 and column 6 Vol I Pt. II Table XV pp.278-280.

WFPRs. Within the 'north'[19] there are areas viz. Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan (Rajputana) where though the CSR has been observed to be low since the beginning of this century, levels of WFPR of women were well above average in the first half of the century. And there are other areas like Bengal and Orissa where women's WFPRs have been falling over this entire century but CSRs have maintained a high level. Also, barring a few sub-areas, everywhere else when women's WFPRs were relatively low, so were those of men. In other words, if in some areas, relatively more women were economically dependent, this was true also of the men there. So if not working had reduced women's worth, why had it not had the same effect on men's position? Why should that be an explanation of a low sex ratio i.e. a low regard for only women's lives?

Actually, the main thrust of the Bardhan/Miller argument was on the basis of the experience of the Punjab region - what are called Punjab and Punjab States in table 7 (roughly an area comprising of to-day's Punjab, Haryana, and parts of western Uttar Pradesh).

Even in table 8, these are the areas which lie to the right of the diagonal, in the extreme top right hand corner. It appears from the table that here, women were being kept out of the workforce even when men had to work extra hard to make up for that. If these were true then perhaps one might have to admit that this deliberate idleness of women deserved to be

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19. In most of the literature on these interregional differences in sex ratios of population, it is now common to regard the Vindhya mountains as the line roughly demarcating between the 'north' an area where CSRs are low and the 'south' where CSRs are better.

punished by a neglect of the girl child. But is that really a true picture of the situation on ground?

What is Work?

It is in this context that the question regarding what is in fact measured by census estimates of workforce becomes relevant. As was noted earlier, the inordinate reliance placed by this whole argument of work giving women worth on census estimates of women's WFPRs has come in for some criticism (Agarwal 1986). Bardhan's initial interest in this topic had been triggered off by the result of the 1971 census. (Bardhan 1974). And it can be shown as has been done by several scholars (for example Anker 1983) that the 1971 census definition and procedure for identifying workers and non-workers had an inherent bias against correctly estimating the number of women workers.

In that census enquiry for the first time each person had to be first identified as a worker or a non-worker (Q. 14(a) of the schedule). If for any person the answer to that query was in the negative, there no further probe was made into whether he or she took part in any productive tasks (Even to be counted as a marginal workers, the procedure was the same)[20]

Under this new procedure, it was now necessary for a person not only to work but also to be perceived as having been a worker by whoever was answering the census interviewer. This leads to

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20. In earlier census enquiries, the procedures used to be to get information about a person's participation in some productive task or the other and then the interviewer would classify his or her worker/non-worker status.

several kinds of biases against women. The person answering the queries has to see women's work as "work", and if social conventions regard what women do as unimportant or as mere housework (our women only do housework' is a standard response), then he (the person answering census queries is usually a senior male) would reply in the negative in the case of women. Or, as is the common case, if women's production work is constantly interspersed with housework, then other members of the household as well as the women themselves do not perceive it as work (Bhattacharya 1985).

Equally important perhaps is the fact that this 1971 procedure gave full scope for play to the traditional prejudices and reluctance existing in many cultures for admitting that women of the family work in the public sphere or contribute to the family income in any way. The 1971 and the 1981 census method to determine the size of the workforce was thus fully loaded against women.

More important for the issue here, there is no reason to believe that these kind of biases operate at an even pace in all parts of India. If they arise out of the nature of women's work, then the impact of the bias would obviously be lower in regions where more women go out to do regular wage work and higher in regions where they stay around the house and work at several productive tasks in between household chores. And if the bias is cultural (i.e. if it is a cultural value not to admit that family women have to earn any part of the living) then obviously its impact is going to vary according to the logic of each community and region with little reference to what women actually do there.

Miller, of course had used the 1961 census estimates which were less affected by these abovementioned considerations than the 1971 and 1981 estimates. But even there, there is a further

factor loaded against a correct estimation of women's worth to the household being determined in terms of WFPR. Census estimates in India including those for 1961 have followed the international convention of including in the workforce only those who participate in activities whose products or value added is included in the national product. This in turn implies that work on any activity of which no part of the product is marketed (for money) does not give a person the status of a worker. This means that with the exception of agricultural activities, [21] a lot of work which adds to the real income of a household but whose products are not in any part meant for exchange in the market, does not make a person a worker in the census sense. This provision also affects mainly women because it is they who carry on such activities as collection of free goods (fodder, fuel, vegetables, fruits, fish) for the household, or animal husbandry, sewing, food processing etc. all for the exclusive use of the family. Even today there are many areas of India where women are mainly engaged in only this kind of work.

Women's WFPRs in Punjab Area

If one goes into some details regarding the effects of definitional changes on women's WFPR, then the Punjab case comes out as a very interesting one. Firstly, the ratio between main workers (i.e. workers who were employed at least 183 days during the previous year) and marginal workers (i.e. those employed for less than 183 days in that year) was around one to three in case of Punjab and Haryana women both in 1971 and in 1981. For

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21. These conventions are followed for maintaining international comparability of data on GNP and employment and are designed as per the UN system of National Accounts. The exception made for agriculture means that a family's agricultural production on its own land for its own consumption does form a part of social production and workers working in that activity are also considered as part of the workforce (see for clear explanations NSSO 1988).

almost all other states, comparable ratio was about one to one or one to 1.5. In other words for women of this area, visible participation in social production sphere was apparently at most temporary, part time or seasonal.

Secondly, apart from census estimates of workers, the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) also takes up occasional surveys of the employment and unemployment situation. Because of the frequently made criticism that census estimates are biased against women, they have tried alternative definitions and survey methods with probing questions in their last three rounds (1972/73, 1977/78 and 1983). In their estimates for 72/73, women's WFPRs in Punjab and Haryana came out to be around 30 percent for female population in 5+ age group; comparable census estimates for 1971 and 1981, however, were below 10 percent. For no other state was the difference between NSSO estimates and census estimates as wide as this. Again, the 1972/73 NSSO estimates for most states closely approximated the 1961 census estimates of women's WFPR. But for undivided Punjab, the 1961 estimates were less than 20 percent i.e. well below the 30 per cent + estimate of NSSO.

Moreover, in order to capture the extent of women's work in non-market operations for enhancing the household's real income of the type discussed earlier, the NSSO had made a separate category of workers - category 93. Once again, this category incl ed a much larger percentage of women of this region than anywhere else in India. All these facts indicate that, for the Punjab/ Haryana region, the particular definitions of work and worker used in any enquiry were much more important than anywhere else in the country. They could make an enormous difference to estimat of women's WFPR. This is obviously because on the one hand, the nature of women's work there is different from elsewhere and on the other, there is a greater bias here against acknowledging women as workers. The two possibilities need not be independent of each other.

Visibility of Women's Work

Table 9 indicates that in 1911, for Punjab, the percentage population dependent on agriculture was well below the national average (60 percent as compared to 72 percent), On the other hand, it had the highest concentration of population dependent on industry. Punjab's industry consisted mostly of household based industries serving local market. Even when some of its industries began to serve more distant markets, production continued to be based in the household or in small workshops. There were very few large scale factory units. For example, the hosiery industry of Ludhiana began as women's household occupation in the 1820s: and even when it was modernised in early 20th century to serve the all India market, emergence of a group of middlemen ensured that it remained mostly home-based under a putting out systems.[22]

The low levels of women's WFPR of Punjab therefore are likely to be more apparent than real, in this context. In many senses, women of the region were much more active than the average for the rest of the country in contributing to the family economy. Moreover, this fact was not totally unnoticed by the society. As Dasgupta (Dasgupta 1987) has pointed out the enormous load work carried by women of peasant households of Punjab is well known and publicly admired by all who know

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22. Most of my knowledge of the Punjab industrial scene is from the work of Manjit Singh Political Economy of Unorganised Industry (to be published). Also Latifi 1911, Sah 1941 and GOI 1904.

the area.[23] The striking differences in levels of women's WFPRs between regions is thus more of a well promoted myth than reality. In Punjab and Bengal, this myth had probably been sustained by the nature of the economy and pattern of economic activities. At the beginning of this century the main crops in Punjab were wheat and millets which were relatively less labour intensive. Also, a much larger than average section of population was sustained by non-agricultural occupations where women could participate only at the household level and their contribution could be kept invisible. Later when Punjab became agriculturally prosperous through green revolution, it could afford to mechanise and also to draw on the surplus labour of poorer regions elsewhere.

In Bengal on the other hand, though the overwhelming majority of population was engaged in rice cultivation, the region was prosperous and could draw on the impoverished tribal labour of neighbouring Bihar and Orissa for its field work. The prosperity of agriculture meant that the household's domestic work could be made more elaborate, binding women more firmly to the household. In later period, as I have shown elsewhere Bengal had an increasing surplus of labour which led to women being further pushed out of social production (Banerjee 1989).

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23. This was particularly true of the "Jatni" (women of Jat community residing mainly in Punjab, Haryana, and Rajasthan) about whome Dasgupta has quoted a remark from Malcolm Darling - a colonial administrator - "the Jatni is an economic treasure. She does not plough, dig or draw a cart: but there is no other form of agricultural labour which she does not practise and ordinarily adorn" (Darling 1974:35) quoted by Dasgupta (Dasgupta 1987:91) Carstairs also has made a similar remark about these women in Rajputana (Carstairs 1983). As I will show later on, the Jats nevertheless had one of the lowest CSR in the country for all dates for which such castewise information is available.

The close connection between the low levels of CSR and low levels of women's WFPR cannot then be taken to indicate that the latter was a cause of the former. Low regard for the girl child was not really because she was not expected to contribute significantly to the family welfare. Rather it was because in those regions, women are held in low regard that both the survival chances of the girl child as well as the work alone by women throughout their lives are considered relatively unimportant. Also since women are considered the property of the family, their bodies and their labour are regarded as entirely at the disposal of the powers within the family : so if the family strategy indicates it, girl children are neglected and women's labour is deliberately hidden or under-valued. The differences in levels of women's WFPRs between regions then merely provides us with an additional indicator of the extent of social and familial control on women in each region. But this indicator too, like the relative levels of CSRs does not explain why this constraint is more binding in some parts of India than in others.

Women's Work - A Ground for Power Play

Rejecting the Bardhan/Miller hypothesis that work gives women worth does not by any means imply that work does not or cannot improve a woman's position. Gaining economic independence, in particular getting some money income of her own much more than just participating in social production-definitely gives a woman some autonomy as well as some mobility and this improves her overall wellbeing. This is all the more so if a woman can break some of the stereotypes regarding women's work in her society.

The Bardhan/Miller hypothesis however is quite different from this statement on several counts which are discussed below. One, using levels of work participation of women to explain levels of differential female mortality in childhood

means that we are concerned not with the actual changes in a particular woman's position through work but with the differences in the attitudes of parents of individual girls durin the latter's childhood based on their ideas about her future productivity.

Secondly, this entire analysis is on an aggregative or societal level i.e. it is in any case not concerned with the calculations of individual families but with the overall ideologies prevailing in each society and the differences between them. Individual women's revolutionary behaviour in the economic sphere cannot always change the general idea of what tasks are considered as appropriate for women. In most cases, societies can have radically different schemes of sexual division of labour with one society,permitting women to work in fields and another prohibiting it: but individual women cannot always change it. And the average parent takes the socially approved pattern, however, degrading it might be, as given.[24]

Traditions of sexual division of labour in all India socities have been shown to be the biased and discriminatory against women. I had earlier mentioned that most studies in the field have shown that tasks allotted to women are relatively

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24. Incidentally, in Indian society, all girls are expected to get married when entire control on their labour is passed on to their marital families. So any straightforward model such as the one by Rosenzweig and Schultz (Rosenzweig & Schultz 1982) which hypothesises that parents allocate child rearing resources between boys and girls according to the expected returns to the labour of either in adulthood is totally beside the point. Girl's parents do not in any case expect to share in her future earnings. Their concern with a girl's future income can arise only through the possibility that for a socially productive woman they may be required to pay less dowry at marriage. That is in fact what Bardhan has argued in his recent writing (Bardhan 1988); but that too is open to several serious objections which will be discussed later on.

more laborious, repetitive and physically exhausting as well as less productive because their tools and techniques remain primitive. Also, as I have shown elsewhere, when a particular tasks gets allotted to women it becomes socially less valuable (Banerjee forthcoming). Its returns relative to those of men in comparable work go down.[25] Furthermore, in the case of women, work is not considered as status promoting since it is traditionally identified with women of lower social orders. Factually, too, it is the women of relatively lower social status who account for the overwhelming bulk of Indian women workers. The scheduled caste and scheduled tribe women have significantly higher WFPRs in all regions of India than women of other social groups. The traditions of women's work and sexual division of labour in India are therefore not of the sort that can enhance the ideological status of women through work even though it may do so in real life.

This tendency to consider women's work as detrimental to family status exists to a greater or smaller degree in all parts of India and particularly in Punjab and Bengal societies.

In my field work relating to women workers in the unorganized

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25. My argument there was, several tasks in agriculture viz. transplanting, weeding and harvesting are identified as women's tasks to a greater degree in some regions of India than in other. The NSSO provides us with average earnings of casual male and female labour in each task for each state (NSSO 1980). If one cross-tabulates state-wise rates of these task-specific female to male earnings against the share of women in the taskwise workforce in each state, the results show that, there is a strong negative relation between representation of women in a taskforce and ratios of sex-wise/earnings. In other words, in regions where a task gets more identified with women, their earnings relative to those of men in that task are lower than in areas where they form a smaller share of the workforce in that task.

sector in Calcutta (Banerjee 1985 a). I had found that even when women had worked all their lives and so also had their mothers, they did not favour teaching their daughters any skills for the job market. Their ideal or dream was to get the girls married so that they did not have to do any productive work. Similarly, in their study of the garment industry of Delhi, Rao and Hussain (Rao and Hussain, ICSSR 1983) found several unmarried girls working who were desperately anxious that their society should not find this out since that would reduce their chances of making a 'good' marriage. Some of them were working to meet future dowry demands in their own marriages; but they felt that if the fact that they were working got known this dowry demand would go up further. The Bardhan/Miller hypothesis is misleading not only for its neglect of contrary factual evidence as pointed out earlier; it is also misleading because it takes no note of the social traditions of degrading women's work and the resulting ideological contradiction that exists between women's work and their worth to the family.

Chapter VI

Dowry, Low CSR and Women's Work

When amniocentesis[26] tests first caught the attention of Bombay people, one advertisement is supposed to have claimed "why not spend Rs.500/- now and save Rs. 50,000/- in future ?" Indeed a frequent reason given for bias against a daughter is said to be that she is likely to create financial problems for the family at the time of her marriage on account of the dowry demands and high costs of marriage imposed on the former by the groom's family. Again, the incidence of dowry and other expenses to the brides' family varies widely between different communities within any region and also between regions. Obviously, the prevalence of such a practice indicates a major handicap for women and therefore falls within the purview of this paper even though it would be difficult to establish whether or not the practice is a sufficient condition for neglect of girl children on a wide enough scale for it to lead to a fall in a region's CSR.

Several authors have put forward explanations for the incidence of dowry and these variations among different communities and regions. Among them Miller has once again drawn on ethnographic material which apparently suggests that the two variables levels of juvenile sex ratio and FLP or female labour participation rates in age group 15 to 34 years,-are strongly related to the burdens of marriage costs to brides' families (Miller op. cit. table 9, pp. 140-144 and p. 150). Bardhan, taking his cue from

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26 Amniocentesis is a pathological test whereby the intra-uterine fluid of a pregnant women is tested for finding out, among other things, the sex of the unborn foetus. In India, the test has been used mainly to enable families, at an early stage of the pregnancy to arrange for aborting the foetus in case it is a female one.

Miller's analysis, puts forward the hypothesis that "lower female participation in agriculture and other economic activities - in the 'north' than in the 'south' lowers the economic value of the women (and hence raises the compensating need for dowry) in the former regions than in the latter. (Bardhan 1988, p. 479).

In the previous section, I had argued against assuming that women's participation in work as such, specially work that does not transgress the socially approved pattern of undervaluation and underestimation of their economic contribution, cannot be considered as an explanation of why some societies continue to be biased on their attitudes to girl children. In the case of dowry, this kind of explanation is of even less relevance. Dowry in fact is usually much more prevalent in upper caste/upper class sections of a society. And, since throughout India, there is a strong observed negative relation between the family income/status and women's participation in economic activities, one can assume that for explaining the greater incidence of dowry in some societies rather than others the issue whether or not there is a tradition[27] of women's work in that society is of not much relevance. Also, one can argue rather simplistically to counter Bardhan's hypothesis by saying that for rich households, the burden of feeding one extra dependent woman cannot be so irksome as to require compensation. Yet available evidence suggests that the rich have no aversion to dowry; in fact the practice is often more applicable in richer households than elsewhere.

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27. Once again it is only the traditional roles of women in the society and economy which can determine the parental attitude towards a little girl. This does not rule out the possibility that in a particular case, girls of upper class/caste households may be trained for modern careers and then be expected to get married without dowry inspite of the practice being rampant in their society.

Increasing Incidence of Dowry.

The Bardhan/Miller view of the issue is made all the more trivial because, as with the tradition of women's WFPR, they also assume that for each society, giving of dowry or receiving of brideprice is fixed for all times to come - as if neither of these characteristics are likely to change by any force including that of development. However the practice of dowry has, in fact, been subject to rapid alterations. Indeed, in the current debate regarding the issue, the most important question is why the prevalence of dowry has gone up rapidly in recent years. Not only have the demands become more strident in societies where the tradition had existed, but the practice has newly spread to many communities where previously it was not known. What is more, many of these societies have a long standing tradition of high WFPRs for women. It is in this changing pattern of the incidence of dowry that really demands an explanation.

Development and Dowry Demands :

The spread of dowry to additional communities has been noted by many people though as yet there is little systematic information about it. The point was brought home dramatically by a report in a popular magazine-INDIA TO-DAY- on a section of Kallar community of south Tamil Nadu. In this community women have always worked as agricultural labourers along with men. But suddenly in the last few years, the customary brideprice has come to be replaced by steep demands for dowry by the grooms. This traumatic change has resulted in many families killing their newborn daughters. One mother confessed to have killed four daughters in the last ten years. The report is being investigated by some college teachers of the neighbouring town; their preliminary findings have confirmed these reports though no details of their

findings have as yet been published.

In W. Bengal too, several social scientists have found evidence of a similar switchover from dowry to brideprice. Thus a preliminary report[28] on the Barujivi Women are still active in the traditional occupation of the community of cultivating betel leaves, there has been a rapid shift to dowry giving in place of the longstanding tradition of brideprice. App. I gives a brief note prepared by Mr. Das of Haraprasad Shastri Institute describing this changeover.

Dowry as it Existed in the Past.

The practice of giving and receiving dowry has full sanction of the religious texts in Hindu society where "Salankrita Kanyadan", the gift of a well adorned virgin daughter to a suitable groom (a groom of at least equal but preferably higher social standing) is supposed to bring enormous religious and social credit to her family and especially to her father. The custom of course assumes that the daughter is entirel in the father's control till her marriage for him to dispose of her as it best serves his spiritual and social purpose. The accompanying gifts are usually supposed to be one-way; the bride's family is supposed to get only social kudos in return for their material gifts.

However, as with most Hindu,customs, there is no rigorous compulsion in the society for all to practise only the "Kanyadan" type of marriage. In the past, usually it was only the upper caste/class families who observed the ritual; the rest had their own procedures and customs in which dowry did not figure at all. Rather, in poorer households, a girl's parents could often expect a brideprice to compensate them for parting with a pair of willing hands. Even when "Kanyadan" was practised, the gifts in most cases were conventional and nominal.

From time to time, dowry had indeed played an important role in several communities for determining social hierarchies. Bu

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28. An English translation of the brief note by Das of the Haraprasad Shstri Gaveshna Kendra to this effect is attached as appendix.

even on those occasions the practice was confined to those families who had some reason to seek and preserve a high social standing for themselves. Thus Pocock (Pocock 1976) has explained at length the role played by dowry among the Patidars of the Charota region of Gujarat from the middle of nineteenth century, around that time the community had newly come to acquire considerable wealth from agricultural prosperity as well as trade with Africa. The more wealthy among them had deliberately set out to develop within themselves a greater social hierarchy which would give them a dif erentially higher social status in line with their rising prosperity. This hierarachy was structured around an elaborate system of hypergamous marriages propped up by huge dowry payments; women were withdrawn fromtheir traditional roles in the economy and expected to observe a kind of "purdah". However, Pocock points out that, even among the Patidars, there were a lot of people who did not expect to get dowry because they did not have the necessary social standing. Quite often men of those families had to bring brides from other distant areas even by paying a brideprice.

Inden (Inden 1976) describes another instance of the same game taking place in Bengal of the middle period when in an otherwise politically and economically stagnant society, upper caste families had tried to acquire and maintain their high social position through an elaborate and rigid code of hypergamous marriages. Dowry was one way of buying your way into the select group. The custom eventually grew into an extremely oppressive pattern of polygamy, high dowries and little girls being married off to old men on their death beds - all of which have often been portrayed in Bengali popular literature of 19th and 20 century. Less well known is the fact that throughout the 19th century, a large section of even Brahmin families in Bengal did not belong to the ritually superior group of the "Kulins", either because they had been banished from it on account of some lapses or because they had felt no urge to buy and keep their place in it. These Brahmin families regularly paid a brideprice to acquire brides : even Ramakrisha Paramahansa, the great religious

and social leader of late 19th century Bengal had been married in that way. Some recent explorations in popular Bengali literature of the 19the century by myself with the help of several friends has shown that throughout that period there was a lot written about such evils of the brideprice practice as sale of daughters to old men, the problems faced by middle-class youth in getting married for want of necessary funds etc.[29] Even in the 1920s, in Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel Biraj Bahu, there is a discussion in the family about whether the daughter of the family should be married off to a groom willing to pay the customary brideprice or whether they should try and get her a more eligible "college-educated" groom by paying a dowry and doing "Kanyadan". Though in the novel they ultimately decided on paying the dowry and thus ruining themselves, there is no indication given by Sharat Chandra that the former kind of marriage would have brought any social disgrace on Biraj and her husband.

Dowry was thus mainly a mechanism for entering and winning the status game in societies where there was already a basis for a fairly elaborate social stratification. The possibility of such stratification existing in a given society depended partly on the capacity of the regional economy for generating a surplus for maintaining it; partly it also depended on some historical factors generating such tendencies inthat region which are discussed in later sections. At this juncture it is sufficient to point out that though dowry always had a material content, its significance in the past was probably more oriented towards acquiring social gains.

At the same time it is also worth noting that dowry was not the obverse of brideprive. The lat er was always a fiarly straightforward if crude way of compensatingthe girl's parents

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29. See for example the following satirical plays written about the custom : 1. "Kaner Ma Kande ar Takar Putuli Bandhe" (The Bride's Mother Weeps and Ties the Bundle of Money) by Bholanath Mukhopadhyay. 2. "Nayasho Rupayaa"(Nine Hundred Rupees) by Sisir Kumar Ghosh. 3. "Balidan" (A Sacrifice) by Girish Chandra Ghosh. There are also innumerable reports regarding the perversities brought about by the custom in "Samvadpatre She Kaler Katha". Collected by Vinay Kumar Ghosh.

for parting with a productive asset: the girl's productivity could be in terms of her participation in the family's economic activity; or it could be in terms of producing children or adorning the household. Thus pretty girls from poorer families were often in demand in rich households who were known to pay a kind of brideprice for that. Dowry on the other hand was never a compensation to the groom's family for having to feed an "unproductive" person. The people who demanded and got dowry were usually too rich to worry about feeding an additional mouth. The dowry payment was more in lieu for the kind of credit or social dowry payment was more in lieu for the kind of credit or social kudos the gesture brought to the bride's family. The girl's role or her capabilities were of little relevance to the whole transaction. Moreover neither brideprice nor dowry were particularly designed to raise the social status of women. In either case the daughter was disposed off by the father and family according to their own calculations of relative gains. In many communities practising paying brideprice, the girl had a right to get a divorce and remarry. But this involved repaying the brideprice to the earlier groom which the girl would have to manage herself. The earlier amount would have gone to her father who could be under no obligation to part with. Nevertheless, brideprice at least recognised the fact that a woman was a productive being and valued her for it even though the value was not her own to dispose off as she liked. Dowry made her into an entirely passive pawn in the status game of the two families.

Dowry in Development .

The spread of dowry in recent years is distinctly different not only because it affects a much wider section of population but also because its orientation has shifted significantly from social ambitions to calculations of material gains. I would like to argue that this shift is connected with the particular nature of economic development that has taken place in India in recent period.

A noticeable feature of the recent development process is that not only has it been faster but it has also brought in its fold

a much larger section of the Indian population. More and more subsistence activities are being obsorbed into mainstream market economy and along with it, social and economic structure in different section of the country are becoming much more elaborate and heirarchically complex. At the same time the process has brought in its purview people of a much wider spectrum of socio-economic backgrounds and offered them prospects of greater upward mobility through education, jobs and enterprise than had ever been known in recent history of India. At the same time the process has introduced in the country a much wider variety and range of consumer goods and material comforts than ever before. Indian media too is now able to spread this information to a very large section of the population, so that the felt needs and desired life styles of most people have undergone a material change.

However, while developmental forces have destroyed the viability of most traditional activities, they have been unable to find a viable living for the totality of India's fast growing labour force as a result even a minimum of economic security or a share in the new props of good living remains the priviledge of a select minority to which the majority is constantly struggling to join. This then is the scenario in which men of all classes and social backgrounds have come to harbour aspirations for a better standard of living. There is a larger than ever range of goods available in the market that they know of and would liketo enjoy. But, at the same time, for most of them the prospects are slow to materialise because they cannot find a foothold in the modern economy. For many young men living is so precarious and uncertain that marriage and building of a family are not viable options.

For the majority of women too, economic development as it has taken place in India has done little to change some of the basic parameters of their lives. On the one hand, there is no relief from the social pressure on each family to get their daughters married soon after puberty. On the other, there is little or no change in the traditional pattern of sexual division of labour in

each society. Women's jobs still remain of a sort which have poor returns, and offer few prospects of promotion or betterment. So whether or not women participate in economic activities, their chances of gaining upward social mobility through their own work or jobs remain relatively poor as compared to those of men. In many societies they may get education but still be barred from taking up public positions. Therefore the only way women can join in the race for social and economic prosperity is by marrying a man with such prospects. In other words, for women, marriage is not only a social imperative; it is now also their only chance of being upwardly mobile and enjoying the increasing opportunities of a better living.

Thus while all girls of marriageable ages i.e. of ages between 15 to 30 years are under both social and economic pressure to get married, their numbers are not matched by those of men who are in a position to get married. The relative minority of grooms who have won the lottery of a secure job and also prospects of advancement in their careers are therefore doubly prized by fathers of marriageable daughters. The latter have but two options; either to bid for one of the prized grooms through offers of a fat dowry. Or to coax one of the less fortunate men to get married by offering them some incentive-eiter a job or a valued consumer good and /or some captial to start some enterprise. This imbalance between the number of prospective brides and grooms in the marriage market among most communities has made dowry a common tool for bargaining everywhere. The incidence of dowry then is indeed connected with women's work experience but not through any simplistic connection between their WFPR levels and the extent of dowry. Rather, women's economic roles do have an impact on their position vis-a-vis dowry because women have failed to achieve in the course of development any breakthrough in the traditional confines of a discriminatory division of labour. They have not been able to transgress the limits imposed by tradition on their skills, mobility and access to resources. As a result, in the modern economy their position has become even more degraded as compared with that of men.

This kind of experience of women's marginalisation in the economy during the course of modernisation is not unique to India : but the reasons why that situation has led to the menace of dowry in its particularly vicious forms that are to be found in most parts of India are perhaps peculiar to the Indian cultural traditions which link status seeking in society with more controls on women. This is perhaps a special if dubious gift on the Brahminical heritage that Indian women are handed down from generation to generation. In the next few sections the factors contributing to these trends are briefly examined.

Dowry as Women's Share in Property

Another explanation of the prevalance of dowry, specially in north Indian societies had been offered by Sharma (Sharma 1984) and later presented with greater force by Kishwar (Kishwar 1988). Their argument is that dowry is actually the share of a daughter in the assets of her family. Because after marriage a daughter is supposed to be totally estranged from her natal family and equally completely absorbed in the affinal one, the father and brothers are unwilling to give her a claim in their inherited productive assests, specially land, Instead she is given some liquid and unproductive assets like cash, gold, furniture etc. at marriage and expected to remain content with those.[30]

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30. It is true that even after the passing of the Hindu Succession Act most families get the daughters to sign away their rights on even the residential house of their parents. Also in 1989, the Haryana government in fact made a brief and abortive attempt to pass a law whereby women were to be denied any claim on their natal family's cultivable land.

Sharma argues that this practice ensures that productive assets are not fragmented because the brothers who do inherit them jointly are expected to live together in a joint family while daughters are expected to move away. Kishwar goes so far as to argue that, dowry giving is to an extent justified and brides' families are protesting mainly because they are reluctant to give even that much to the daughter.[31]

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31. In some interviews with girls of peasant families in Jalgaon district of Maharashtra, I had got a similar response from several girls. They claimed that through out their childhood, they had worked on their father's lands while their brothers had been sent to school. Later there brothers had refused to work in fields and opted for negotiating in the marketing of crops etc. While the girls had continued to work in the fields. They felt that a substantial dowry was at least some compensation for the hard labour they had put in till marriage because otherwise they would get no share in the family property. Even if the amount of dowry did not come to them, at least it would give them some status in their husband's families.

Though the argument is logical, it just does not fit in with the facts of the matter. Dowry as it stands today may be the only share a daughter gets in her father's wealth. But the actual amount that is demanded is not calculated as a share of that property but as a demand set by the groom's family irrespective of the financial conditions of the bride's family. The amount often varies with the economic prospects of the groom, his qualifications, and career. In many communities there are fixed schedules of rates of dowry depending on whether the groom is a doctor or an engineer, whether he belongs to the Indian Administrative or Police Services. The schedule can be adjusted to an index of inflation but not to the financial resources of the bride's family. As Lakshmi (Lakshmi 1989) has forcefully argued this demand might have to be met by the bride's family by selling assets or incurring debts.

Also as Lakshmi (ibid)[32] goes on to argue, equating dowry with women's inheritance implies that a women can only get her rightful share in parental property by marrying. An unmarried woman is assumed to have no such right to that property. There is also the question that since dowry is not "stridhan" (women's own property), equating it with inheritance means that a woman is apparently regarded as incapable of reaching adulthood when she can manage her own assets.

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32. Lakshmi brings out forcefully the various confusions that are implicit in Kishwar's arguments and the anti woman stance that it represents.

Chapter VII

CULTURAL FORCES

So far I had analysed the hypothesis that low CSRs in particular regions were the result of low WFPR of women there. Since that hypothesis could not be sustained, we are back with the original questions that this paper is meant to deal with. Why is then a greater incidence of bias against girl children in some parts of India? The prevalence of the institution of dowry no doubt makes the birth of a girl unwelcome to her parents, but dowry is again not just a result of the fact that women are underrepresented in social production. It is mainly due to attitudes which lead to a systematic undervaluation of women's bodies and labour by their families and by society and keep them confined to 'women' type jobs which offer few prospects of upward social mobility to a women. The question before us is how did this tradition become such an integrated part of Indian culture and family ideology? And why is it so much stronger in some areas as to encourage deliberate discrimination against young girls even upto the extent of resulting in their higher death rates?

Cultural zoning

Dyson and Moore (Dyson and Moore 1983) who have also explored the data regarding differential sex ratios and relative mortality patterns of girls and boys in various parts of India have tried to answer these questions in terms of differences in cultural patterns prevailing in different parts of India. They noted the broad north west/south east divide within India between regions of similar demographic trends and linked this finding with the apparent duality of Indian cultural traditions. Roughly speaking, it can be said that the pattern of culture in North India is derived from the Aryan tradition while the pattern in south follows more closely the Dravidian tradition. The north/

south divide in regions according to their relative levels of CSRs also follows this rough line dividing India almost along the Vindhya Mountains.

Dyson and Moore had taken their cue mainly from the work of Karve (Karve 1968) on the different patterns of kinship prevailing in India. Her main argument was that the various Indian cultural patterns stemmed from the two basic modes, Aryan and Dravidian. The main difference in these two modes consisted of their distinctive patterns of kinship which largely determined the position of women in each culture. The Aryan kinship system is supposed to be strictly patrilineal and particularly glorifies relations by blood through the male line. Women are viewed as outsiders brought in to propagate the blood line: but this outside influence is always to be viewed with suspicion, as a potential threat to the bonds of loyalty and solidarity between father and sons, as well as between brothers and cousins on paternal side. In order to minimise this outside influence, customs surrounding marriages ensures that the new bride is kept vulnerable and defenceless. For this the north Indian system strictly tabooes marriage within kin. Also exogamy in marriage generally means that brides come from not just outside the groom's village but often are supposed to come from villages at least beyond the immediate neighboring ones. Her low status in the husband's house is further driven home by the practice that in a marriage relation, the bride's family are supposed to be under a permanent obligation to the groom's and the former has to continuously propitiate the latter with gifts without ever expecting or accepting a return of any sort. Most important, the bride has to maintain strict purdah within her marital home. This is presumably to ensure that there is no disruption of the harmony in the joint

family through the impact of her dangerous sexuality on any of the other males in the husband's family.[33]

The southern kinship pattern is in contrast much more liberal and built up to make the bride's transition from one home to the other much smoother. Marriages within kin between maternal uncles and nieces or cross cousions are as a rule encouraged. Village exogamy is not important. Purdah regulations are not a common feature. In some communities women had traditional property rights and there were several which had practised matriliny even in early 20th century.[34]

After examining other explanation for the north/south differences in Indian women's position which were based on

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33. Papanek and Minnault (Papanek and Minnault 1986) have shown how in north India the Hindu Purdah system is quite distinct from the muslim purdah system. The former is meant mainly to make the bride invisible to the senior males within her affinal family. In Muslim households on the other hand, the emphasis was on separating women from the world outside her natal as well as her marital families. Within either of the families, the rules were not so strict, especially since Muslims encouraged marriages even between children of brothers.

34. In coastal districts of Andhra, girls got a piece of land as marriage gift from their natal families. This was regarded as part of 'Stridhan' (bride's property) and she alone had full rights of ownership on it. This is most unlike the Aryan tradition which disallows any gifts of land especially to women themselves.

differences in eco-system (Such as the Bardhan/Miller hypothesis discussed earlier), Dyson and Moore felt that there is simply no clear correspondence between cultural variations on the one hand and differences in agrarian ecology on the other. "So whatever the ultimate economic and historical factors shaping culture, it seemed appropriate and more realistic to take culture as the primary determining factor (of women's status) for the purposes of present analysis" (Dyson and Moore op. cit pp. 47-48).

Culture: A Static Force?

Given the complexities involved in any analysis of women's relative position in different regions, it is easy to see why Dyson and Moore accept this cultural regionalisation as an adequate explanation. However, the problem is, this means that one accepts that these two prehistoric traditions are themselves unchangeable and remain for all times to come as the most important force determining women's position in different parts of India. This brings the authors very near the position that many scholars in analysing cultural practices in India, seem to put forward quite frequently. As Lakshmi has put it, "it is deep within a very dangerous argument that nothing in a given culture needs change: all it needs is understanding" (Lakshmi op. cit. p.190). This position in the name of academic objectivity is not only defeatist but hard to accept for any person who is morally repelled by the kind of bias which can neglect little girls to death.

It also does not tally with facts regarding those trends as we know them. Karve herself had not argued in terms of only this north/south dichotomy. She had shown that, over time, cultural patterns had evolved further to divide the country into four instead of only the two Aryan and Dravidian zones of kinship patterns. According to her findings, kinship

norms prevailing in India formed four broad blocks. Apart from the Aryan pattern in the north and the Dravidian one in the south, a third one had evolved in the middle of India through the continued interaction between those two major patterns.

Yet another had emerged in the far east by interaction of the northern pattern with the tribal influences of the northeastern hills as well as influence of the very different kinship pattern existing in neighbouring countries of Burma or Thailand. So Karve had shown no reluctance in accepting that there was a dynamism in those patterns which needed constant reexamination.

What is more, while Dyson and Moore were content to observe the rough correspondence between the north/south cultural and demographic patterns, the four zones outlined according to demographic criteria at the beginning of this paper did not co-incide with either the original two-way kinship pattern or its later four-way version as outlined by Karve's kinship patterns in the following points:

1. According to Karve's classification by kinship patterns, Bengal, Bihar and Assam plains were a part of the northern zone. By the 20th century, however, their demographic trends were distinctly different from those of the rest of the northern zone and had to be put on a different category.

2. Similarly, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, parts of Madhya Pradesh and Orissa were put in a separate block by Karve as a region where both the northern and southern cultural tradition

had interacted. This probably holds true even now : but the interaction in different parts of this broad region has not been uniform. By this century, judged by demographic trends, Rajasthan was much nearer the northern zone: Orissa had joined the eastern block. And Maharashtra, Gujarat and parts of Madhya Pradesh were more homogenous among themselves in demographic characteristics and could be grouped in a separate fourth zone.

In fact, considering the fact that Dyson and Moore are familiar with India's demographic patterns and changes over time in them, it is rather surprising that they are the ones to put forward such an entirely static, almost ossified version of Indian Cultural patterns.[35] Even if one were to accept their hypothesis about culture being the primary

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35. For explaining the continued bias against girl children in Punjabi Community inspite of higher standards of education and higher age at marriage of their women, Dasgupta (Dasgupta op. cit.) has also argued that it is the unchanging kinship patterns that are responsible for this state of affairs. She however maintains that this is because institutional changes so far have not been successful or adequate to alter women's structural marginalisation in the economy. Her argument is thus quite different from what Dyson and Moore appear to imply viz that kinship patterns affecting women exist in a vaccum and are/permanently given.

determinant of women's position, their knowledge of the demographic profile of India should have made them realise that cultural regionalisation of India would be more complex than just a clean permanent divide in two parts along the Vindhya/Narmada line.

One can, in fact argue with Sopher (Sopher 1980) that India's cultural regionalisation has been in a constant flux in response to the time-to-time onslaught on it of various freshly arriving cultures. After the Indo-Aryan advent, the Muslims come to India in several waves. They were themselves not a homogenous group. The Persians who came earlier had little in common with the tribal Mughals who followed. The general pattern of Muslim penetration in India was different for different regions within the country. In north India, Muslims influence resulted in the establishment of a court-based nobility as well as a widespread urban artisan culture. In eastern India, while the descendents of the conquerers became overlords there grew up a vast population consisting mainly of converts from local population who constituted the peasantry. In the south Muslims were mainly alien elite warriors. There the converts to that religion from within the local population were overwhelmingly urban artisans. Still later in the history of India at least in the coastal regions and and metropolises, the British radically altered the hitherto land-bound and inward looking Indian culture by making it conscious of other cultures across the seas.

It is clearly beyond the scope of this paper to trace these numerous cultural forces and their continued and separate impact in shaping through time women's position in each region. But it is perhaps possible to locate some of the cultural factors which were apparently connected with relative levels of CSR of different regions at the beginning of this

century. One can then analyse the process through which these interconnections had worked till that juncture and then examine whether changes in women's positions in the period thereafter can be explained in terms of similar processes taking place later on. The earlier cultural pattern had no doubt evolved in response to the chaning socio-economic scenario of each region over the preceding centuries. And whatever changes took place in this century must similarly have also had their impact on the cultural mores of each region regarding, among others, the treatment of young girls.

Impact of Caste on CSR

Right from the beginning, census authorities of India had been deeply concerned about the shortfall in the number of females in the Indian population. In every decadal reports, there was a detailed discussion regarding possible explanations for this phenomenon. Census authorities had marked that after making allowances for inter-regional migration, this deficit was persistently larger not just in a few selected regions but within these regions, in some specific castes. As the 1931 census noted "sex ratio increases inversely with social standing in Hindus ..... for example in Bombay (Presidency), sex ratio for advanced castes was 878, for intermediate castes 935, aboriginals 956 and depressed castes, 982 (GOI 1931, p.198)".

An examination of the age-groupwise and castewise data that is available in Census reports for the decades before independence brings out the following points.[36]

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36. These conclusions are based on the chapters on Sex in Volume I of the 1911 and 1931 Census reports. Specially relevant are subsidiary Table 1, and Subsidiary Table III of Vol.I, Pt.I, p.223 and 228-231 respectively of Census of 1911. For 1931, Vol.I pt.I, Ch.VI text table on p.204, Subsidiary Table IV, p.213 and Vol.I, pt.II, Table VII, on Age sex and Civil conditions, p.126-128.

1. In 1911 and 1931, most parts of India had a surplus of girls in their child population as would be expected in the high infant and child mortality regime prevailing then. The few regions with CSRs below the national average were mostly in what are called the north and the west zones in this paper. Within these regions, there were several districts where the absolute number of girls was well below that of boys. Most districts of Punjab, Punjab States, Western United Provinces, Kashmir as well as a few districts of both Rajputana agencies and the Bombay Presidency fell in this group.

2. Remarkably, many of the princely states like Baroda, Gwalior, and even Travancore Cochin had CSRs significantly below the national average.

3. In both 1911 and 1931, the shortfall in number of girls was more likely to occur in a few selected castes, particularly the castes of Jats, Gujars, Brahmins and Rajputs.

4. In other regions also there were some instances of a less than even CSR in a few selected castes. In regions where such deficit was to be found, it often spread to many of the castes at the upper end of the caste hierarchy. Nevertheless it was more likely to be so in the castes mentioned in point 3. For example in Bombay and Madras, as well as in Central Provinces and Berar, the deficit

occurred amongst the brahmins. In Central India Agencies, the CSR was less than even for Gujars and Rajputs. In Hyderabad State, the deficit was to be found in several of the upper castes including the upper groups of peasant castes.

5. It should be noted that this characteristic of those specific castes was not repeated everywhere in the country where there were people belonging to those castes i.e. it was not that these specific castes had a deficit of girls in all regions. For example, in Bengal and Orissa, Brahmins did not share this tendency. For peasant castes like Marathas, Kunbi or Kapus, the CSR was greater than even for Bombay but there was a shortage of girls in these castes in Baroda (Kunbis) and in Hyderabad (for the others).

6. In regions where there was evidence of such an anti-girl bias, it was likely to occur in all religions. Sikhs and Jains were particularly susceptible to this tendency.[37] In Punjab, N.W.F.P. and Baluchistan, the Muslims also shared this tendency.

7. For censuses after 1941, no caste-wise data is provided by Census reports : but mentioned before in later decades, the deficit of girls in child population had increased in size and the tendency for CSR to be less than even or less than the national average had spread to a larger area. Nevertheless the original core area still remains the most markedly deficient area.

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37. In Punjab, several castes like Rajputs, Jats, Nats, Kumhars etc. occur in Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs.

Chapter - VIII

CASTES AND REGION

There is then substantial evidence to support the proposition that historically, discrimination against women and specially against little girls was confined to a limited number of specific castes. However, though many of these castes like Brahmins were present in most parts of India, their anti-female bias was mot apparent in all the regions they lived in. It was only in a few selected areas that this bias became marked in people of those castes. And when it did, the attitude was also shared by several other castes and communities whose general social status was similar to that of the former. In other words, the factors that triggered off the biased attitudes in the bias-prone castes were to a large extent regional and affected people of many other castes and even other communities of similar or near-similar status. It was this concentration within a given region of several biased communities that made its effects on GSR or CSR noticeable at the district or state levels. In other areas where the region-oriented factors triggering off the biased practices were absent or less forceful, discrimination against girls children might have been noticeable in specific castes but it nevertheless got diluted at the regional aggregative level and had no impact on the overall region-wise indicators of women's position. This interweaving of caste-based attitudes with region specific forces for triggering them off is specially intriguing and further analysis of it is likely to provide us with some clues about how the process actually works or had worked in the past.

Caste or Community

Although the census authorities considered Brahmins, Rajputs, Gujars or Jats as upper castes, the data does not

really permit any quick equation between caste and class nor allow any easy conclusions to be drawn about class being at the root of women's problems. Also, even though earlier census authorities often tried to relate castes to specific traditional occupations, by 1911, the majority of people of castes even like the Rajputs or the Marathas had been or had become landowning cultivators. Similarly Gujars and Ahirs, whose traditional occupation had been dairy and sheep berding, were rapidly changing over to agriculture as noted by census authorities of Central Provinces and Berar (GOI 1911, Vol. Pt.1, p. 247). It was perhaps more likely for members of these particular castes to be in occupations other than cultivation (for example in army or in trade) than for members of other castes/communities : but the bulk was definitely dependent on agriculture for its living, And, it was to be expected that among this largely agrarian population of each caste, there was a whole range of rich and poor cultivators.

A Group Identity

What was special about these communities was the fact that, due to some historical factors they, more than the other castes or communities had developed a pan-Indian identity and were fiercely conscious of it. The Sikhs, Rajputs, Marathas and Gujars were very conscious of their own heritage as warriors and Kshatriya over-lords of the past. They were among the first to join the British army and thus again became a distinct part of the new culture evolving under British rule. Similarly, Brahmins had always, all over India, considered themselves as custodians of Hindu shastras, religious authority as well as knowledge in the Hindu society.

In addition, they along with the Kayasthas, were among the first to partake of English education and join the new urban professions opened up by the imperial rule. These two castes were also over-represented in other benefits under the new regime : For example, in Bengal they had appropriated most of the jamidari rights created by the British.

Moreover, the existence of numerous princely states with royal lineages again belonging to some of these communities furthered not only the sense of a group identity but also encouraged within them an ethos of social hierarchy and a strong respect for social taboos and sanctions. I had earlier described how the Mewar court - 'Durbar' - had used its powers and economic sanctions to impose a rigid set of conventions amongst the Oswals right till India became independent and the princely rule was dissolved. Similarly, the 1931 census report (Vol.I, Pt.1, p.196) mentions that in Jaipur the ruler who belonged to the Kacchawa community imposed extremely strict control over that community. As a result these people were known even amongst Rajputs for their very rigid social customs.

Group Identity and Women

The interesting part was, this pride and urge for a group identity as well as customary controls by princely rulers both were of a sort whose main burden fell on women and made those societies specially biased against little girls. Not only were CSRs of particular castes/ communities exceptionally low, the same was the case at the regional level within several of the princely States of northern and western India. In 1931, Jaipur's CSR was only 659; Mewar's was 856. In Western India the overall CSR in 1931 was about 1008 which itself was below the all

India average then. But for Baroda it was even lower and stood at 983; for Gwalior it stood at 988. Caste based biases appeared to get stronger when several such castes lived in close proximity with others of similar practices in a particular region (usually a princely state) and became noticeable at macro levels in regional indicators like levels of CSRs.

This strong urge of several castes or community-based groups to preserve and promote their group identity got linked with the position of their women through some special characteristics of the Hindu culture in practice. These special characteristics are reflected in two major cultural ritualistic practices which were very important in India at least till the first half of 20th century. One was that, for each caste, to preserve its identity it was necessary to practice endogamy i.e. marrying within that own group. According to the other, one accepted method of acquiring social status was to follow the practice of hypergamy. Under that custo each daughter had to be married only in an 'anuloma' type of marriage : that is to say, to a groom of at least equal but preferably higher ritualistic status.[38] If at any point any daughter of the family was married against this rule, then the entire family, including the other siblings of the girl lost their status for good. In north India, this anuloma practice was combined further with the compulsive provision

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38. This status was usually not dependent on wealth. Nevertheless all families within a group/caste know the hierarchy between families and accepted it. There was also caste based guardians of these hierarchies who could decree that a particular family had lost their previous status.

that each girl became "Arakshaniya" (incapable of being protected) at or around puberty. She therefore had to be married off. Otherwise the father would continue to bear 'Kanyadaya : responsibility for the daughter and once again the family status would remain threatened. In South India, perhaps this compulsion on getting daughters married was less binding. In Kerala for example Nambudiris - the highest ranked caste group there, - did not expect all the Nambudiri girls to get married. Custom decreed that only the eldest son of Nambudiri family was to get married. The rest of the brothers would have relation with Nair women but did not marry them. This meant that a lot of the Nambudiri girls who were barred from marrying any lower caste men,[39] had to remain celebate.

The Kerala case brings out the other important characteristic of the practice of 'anuloma' : men of superior social status were fully permitted to marry women of somewhat lower social status without affecting their family's status. They were often persuaded to do so by payment of a large dowry. Though this wife might not become ritualistically the most important of a man's brides, the marriage nevertheless reflected well on her family.

The dice were thus fully loaded against the parents of daughter because of the combined bind of the compulsion to get all daughters married and the rule that in each case it had to be an 'anuloma'. The process could at best be financially crippling to the girl's family, because to achieve this,

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39 That is barred from practising 'Pratiloma' a daughter marrying a man of lower social status.

they might have to pay huge dawries. Or it could lead to social disgrace in case the requirements could not be met. And to recover from this disgrace was very time consuming difficult and also expensive. There was therefore considerable incentive for families not to want daughters and to resent the ones that were already born.

The Special Problem of Princely States.

In case of the princely states, these severe rules of hypergamy became even more restrictive because societies there were particularly highly politicised and hierarchy conscious. Historically this was not without reason. As Das (Das 1976) has pointed out, in princely communities of north India, families were formally supposed to be closely knit around paternal relations of father and son, brothers and kin through the male blood line. But in reality, because inheritance and property also passed down the male line and was shared commonly with male relations on paternal side, there was strong mistrust and continuous internecine struggles between cousins, step-brothers and even brothers. In this situation men relied heavily on the support they could get from the families of their mothers and wives. Contracting a good marriage was therefore vitally important for a man's political career and his actual fortunes. Das (Ibid) explains how this process too led to intensification of the requirements of hypergamy . Since all families were looking for connections with powerful allies through marriage, none could afford to lose its ritualistic status. If one of them did not observe the rules about daughters' marriages, sons too could not hope to make good marriage connections because the entire family had lost its ranking. All in all, the double bind of hypergamy and need to make good political connections through marriage meant that a family preferred to have as few daughters as possible. It then had less occassions to worry about its social status.

During the 19th century, when princely courts lost their political clout, these marriage practices continued strong because, status through marriage was all the more important when no gains could be made through actual conquests and wars. Also in many cases, the power sought out of such marriages was not political but commercial. Families of certain communities like the Jains of Rajputana and western Uttar Pradesh, who were very active in trade within India as well as with other countries of Africa, South East Asia and the far East, still conducted a major part of their business through family connections and relations of mutual trust. They too used marriage as the chief tool for negotiating business relations and ensuring trust in business deals. So the importance of keeping the ritualistic marriage position intact remained important for families even in the process of development.[40]

The Need for Hypergamy

In this entire process, however, several points are of crucial importance. These ideas about marriage were not confined to Aryan or Dravidian culture alone. By the last century, there was no reason to believe that the Vindhyas acted as a cultural barrier. The South equally with North accepted the same pantheon of Gods and same ideals derived from Ramayana, Mahabharata and the Puranas. And in none of the regions, ordinary people were engaged in these kind of power games. They

40. This development might partially account for the vague link we had noticed vide table 9 in the greater prevalence of non-agricultural occupations among population of some regions where CSRs were traditionally low. The connection could be not through the failure of women to participate in some of these non-agricultural occupations but because communities practising those occupations might be more inclined to using marriage alliances for business purposes and therefore practising hypergamy. This could affect thei attitude towards the birth and survival of daughters as discussed earlier.

largely accepted that daughters had to be married,[41] but marriages were generally for procreation as well as getting two more willing hands for doing family chores. They were seldom meant for raising the family's status. Even within the status conscious castes, the process was limited to people who were particularly in search of social status and the rest could and did opt out of the process.[42] On the other hand, if there was a custom of accepting bride price by the girl's parents them parents looked out for the best offer by a groom. Bride price was itself not very liberating for brides becuase she could not prevent her father from marrying her off to the best bidder who could be an old man, a widower or anybody. And in some communities if she wanted to divorce that man, it was she who had to earn the money to repay for the bride price. Her father would usually refuse to give the amount back. But at least in these kind of marriages a daughters' birth was not unwelcome.

Hypergamy was thus not a rule or a given for all times in any community or caste. Every one of the particular castes or groups who practised it had, at some point of time,

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41. Quite often the urgency among lower class/caste groups to get daughters married early came from the fact that, quite often, the land lords and other social superiors sexually abused the women of former groups as part of this exhibition of the latter's power over the former. In that case, if the daughter was unmarried, the social disgrace would ruin her chances of marriage. But if the same thing happened to a married woman of lower groups, the husband and the society generally convinced at it.

42. Please refer to App. J

deliberately opted for it. For example, in Bengal, the common story is, the Sen kings of middle period were disturbed by the lax practice of ritualistic purity by traditional Bengali brahmins and Kayasthas and are said to have imported from Kanauj (Kanyakubja)[43] five families each of Brahmins and Kayasthas. These five families called "Kulin" Brahmins and "Kulin" Kayasthas, were ritualistically accepted as of the highest status among the entire Brahmin and Kayastha communities and also by the court. Similarly, with the establishment of Shivaji's empire, five of the Maratha families were declared as "Panchakuli" the five superior families who began to trace their lineage from the Rajputs. Henceforth these families refused to do agricultural work though their roots lay among the ordinary peasant cultivators of that region. More recently, the story of the efforts put in by the Kunbis of the Charota region in Baroda to lift themselves to the status of Patidars mainly through newly developing a very elaborate hypergamy system has been well documented (Pocock op. cit). Each of these communities had brought in this pattern precisely because they felt a need at that time to assert their status or to arrange for getting a better social status. Therefore in each case, the process was very much a dynamic one triggered off at same point of time by a newly felt urge. This urge drove communities to introduce a more hierarchical and hierarchy-conscious status in the society in which they lived so that they could be distinguished and remain distinguished from the hoi polloi. This need would be felt if a community had newly made money

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43 Please note that these Brahmins came from the South. In Bengal at least, the ritualistic purity of Karnataka and Tamil Brahmins over the Bengali ones has been reasserted several times in the last five hundred years. And even to-day in Bhatpara, the area where the socially accepted superior and learned Brahmins of Bengal live, the majority of families originate from Karnataka roots.

and/or gained political power and wanted a social status to match it. Or it was newly entering into fields of business and trade and needed a larger and more loyal groups of supporters. Or the urge could be felt also by castes/groups who had earlier been powerful but had lost that distinction. In order to save some of its distinction of upper status in the society, the groups might resort to more stringent practices of endogamy and hypergamy.

Chapter IX

BRAHMINICAL FORCES

Summing up the discussion so far, one can say that the idea of daughters as mute agents of earning or losing status for their families were probably inherent in the entire Indian perception of women, but the practice of hypergamy and its excessive elaboration and imposition in each society was triggered off by some developmental changes such as the rise and fall in economic and political fortunes of specific communities. It was only in such situations that the rigours of the system were once again evoked for controlling/limiting the number of girls in each family.

However, there is a further problem. The kind of pressures that were discussed in the previous section which led to some groups newly promoting the practice - were presumably spread all over India throughout recorded history : However evidence that is available suggests that, the regions where these elaborate rituals of hypergamous marriages became important on occassions were not really randomly spread all over India but had generally always remained in a few areas. Karve's (Karve 1968 op. cit) evidence showed that elaborate marriage rituals were specific to some regions mainly in West and North India. On the other hand, Kolenda and Elder (both writing in 1966) made the point that the incidence of marriage expenses to bride's families was more region specific than class specific.

Libbee had similarly (Libbee 1980 pp. 93-98 maps no.10-12) calculated the average distance travelled by brides to marital residence on the basis of 1961 Census data on migration. He had found that village exogamy was not found in all parts of even North India. It was particularly noticeable in terms of percentage

of rural women who had left their natal village and the average distance[44] they had travelled in Punjab, Western Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, the border between Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat, Central Gujarat and Eastern Maharashtra. Again the regional aspect becomes more important and the mere north/south, Aryan/Dravidian explanation is not engugh because one region where Libbee's index of exogamy shows quite significant concentration is in eastern/Central Maharashtra and Central Gujarat, which are even according to Karve not the areas of pure Aryan tradition.

A possible explanation for this could be that, the latent cultural value of earning higher social status through the degradation of daughters (through hypergamy, dowry etc.) is not triggered off automatically just by the need for status seeking. The latter needs to be directed towards the use of this particular method - i.e. hypergamy - as a proper tool by some mediators. And these initiators are most likely to be the Brahmins - who as custodians of Hindu culture have always brought pressure wherever possible on the common people to follow the ideals of Manu and his views about women.

This hypothesis was suggested to me by Sopher's analysis of the interregional differences within India in the disparity in levels of men's literacy and women's literacy. He has provided an elaborate table based on 1931 Census data to indicate that (Sopher 1980 Ch. IV pp. 170-171) at least at that point of time while Brahmins had a consistantly higher literacy rates for males than the average for the total

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44. It is generally assumed that village exogamy on marriage and a greater distance between the natal and marital homes are signs of women's vulunerability.

Hindu population in all parts of India, the disparity[45] in literacy of males and females was always higher among brahmins than in all Hindus (Bengal was the only marginal exception to that). (Sopher 1980 Ch. IV p. 170 table no.6) Sopher argued that literacy specially of women requires among other things cultural sanctions and though brahmins had, at least in 1931, a much better record of male literacy, their relatively poorer records of female literacy was due to cultural reservations. This suggests that if there is a greater influence of Brahmins in a given region, the position of women is likely to be relatively worse.

Area of Brahmin Dominance.

Interestingly, if one looks at Sopher's map no. 19 (p.167) where he has reproduced a density map about the percentage of Brahmin population in the population of each district, it comes remarkably close to the areas in Libbee's map where exogamy was high. In general, there was a very low concentration of Brahmins in our South zone except for a few pockets in Coorg, Tanjavour and the Godavari/Krishna, deltas. Populations of the remaining area included less than 4 percent of Brahmins and a large tract had less than 2 percent of brahmins. Again there was a concentration of Brahmins in Konkan and parts of Eastern Maharashtra.

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45. Disparity was calculated by the formula

$$\text{Log } 10 \frac{P(1-P)}{P(1-q)}$$

where p is the probability of a male above 7 being literate and q is the probability of a female above 7 being literate.

Areas of highest concentration were in Saurashtra and Surat areas of Gujarat as well as the north zone consisting of U.P., Rajasthan, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh. So in a way, the predominance of Brahmins is spatially linked in a rough way with the areas of low CSR, and pockets where hypergamy and exogamy coincided.

The concentration of Brahmins in these pocket itself needs an explanation. In a way, since Brahmins do not work as cultivators or artisans, they have to be supported by the other population. So they would naturally concentrate in areas where there is a surplus producing economy and this tallies with their living in river deltas and the Indo Gangetic plains. But Brahmins were found in very large numbers in Rajputana, Punjab, and Saurashtra, none of which had prosperous agriculture at that time. Their presence would be linked with the princely courts which required Brahmins to legitimise their roles and their political superiority in terms of the Hindu religious system. The concentration of Brahmins specially in princely states probably accounted for the tremendous handicap suffered by women in those core pockets that had been mentioned earlier.

The Modern World

The question remains how far these past events and beliefs explain the situation of girls to-day. I have argued that dowry to-day is an important cause of bias against girl children. I had also argued that dowry to-day is not a continuation of the earlier hypergamous practices for status seeking that were confined to a few communities. It is now a more or less universal phenomenon, pervading all regions and communities of India. I want to argue now that though the present dowry practice is generically different from the earlier one, its roots lay in this tradition. I would suggest that it is not so much that new groups and communities are simpley making those

calculations about the women's expected life time income vis-a-vis men's and them demanding a price for that difference. Rather they are translating their urges and greeds into a Brahminisation process. Since they are now capable of upward social mobility, they accept the ideas and practices of the upper castes that are convenient and convince themselves that they too are entitled to these benefits, and their women also are to be subordinated at least culturally. This is how the ideals of an open society are now being visciously used to claim Brahminical prerogatives by all specially vis-a-vis women.

Chapter - X

Conclusion

In case the views expressed above are taken to be more definite than they are, I should insist that they are all tentative groping at discerning the shape of the problem of explaining women's position in Indian society. No single discipline illumines the path; obviously therefore there are no readymade models for easy adoption and confrontation with data. Indeed it is not clear what the relevant data might be. Nevertheless, with that proviso, I can still claim that several points suggested by the line of analysis followed in this study were sustained by standard macro level data made available by official sources. What is more, the relations appeared to hold good for fairly long periods of time in the past and facts available so far regarding current position do not contradict them. These can therefore be accepted as fairly well established hypotheses for further research.

Data used in the study regarding sizes of male and female populations, their age specific distribution, as well as occupation-wise breakup of the workforce for different regions of India has been drawn from census reports for various decades. These have been supplemented by other official estimates of demographic as well as employment trends. Anthropological studies of several scholars as well as some literary sources have provided many useful insights on which this paper has been built; but I have shied from using any such findings as proofs of the argument mainly because the study is concerned with large scale changes or their absence in major societal variables in the course of development.

The study on the whole fully supports the assertion that gender is an important variable in determining the distribution of well-being in Indian society and this is reflected to a significant degree in the demographic profile. For the girl child, its implications vary with class, caste, region and religion but are not subsumed by any of these variables. Rather, her experience of development has been monitored by the combined

effect of all of them including gender. Moreover, although India's overall sex ratio may have increased in recent years and the shortfall in women's life expectancy as compared to men's may soon disappear, there is little reason to believe that the ideological position regarding women's worth that prevails in different sections of the society has altered by any material degree. The persistently higher mortality rates of girl children in specific areas testify to that. Forces of development have succeeded in reducing overall rates of infant and child mortality rates in several of those areas. But this has not led to a corresponding concellation of that bias to any noticeable degree.

The paper has argued that attempts to explain regional variations in the degree of this bias in terms of variations in officially estimated levels of women's WFPRs for different regions have not been found satisfactory. Though the two variables did appear to be connected at a certain point of time, changes in the latter in the past have often not been reflected in corresponding changes in the former. Rather, there is considerable evidence to support the contention that, like the relative chances of survival of little girls, giving due recognition to women's work is also a fairly accurate indicator of women's relative social position in different parts of Indian society. Neither can explain or account for the other or determine women's position. The actual level of women's WFPR in a given region, in fact, appears to be closely and positively related to the level of men's WFPR in the same region. In general, these rates for both men and women would be relatively low or high depending on how far the region produces a surplus.

In arguing that the particularly low ideological position of women in parts of India cannot be explained by their relative inability to participate in the workforce, I am by no means suggesting that economic idependence is not important for improving women's position. Certainly, partaking in productive work probably gives women some additional autonomy and therefore

significantly improves their actual well-being. But in this paper our concern is with the families' attitudes and behaviour, towards their baby daughters in the first few years of the latter's lives. These attitudes in their turn are likely to be largely determined by standard social perceptions regarding women's worth in that particular society. And, given the general pattern of sexual division of labour prevailing in most parts of India, participating in the labour force is unlikely to confer a high status or regard for working women inthe Indian society. Even in areas where women have always been active in social production, the standard pattern of job allocation between men and women generally discriminates against women and can seldom challenge the superior value attached to males by the society. Also, in most regions, worker women predominantly belong to lower classes and castes and there is a tendency for women to withdraw from the workforce when the family economy improves. Women's work therefore does not improve the statistically perceived ideological status of either the working women or of the families who permit them to do so. In subsistence economies, in a labour scarce situation, a worker woman could and does command a bride price and this has a positive effect onthe general attitude towards the birth of a daughter in those societies. But the paper has discussed how in those societies, practices of dowry and even female infanticide become common once developmental forces bring about a greater hierarchy in the social sturucture and newly introduce prospects of upward social mobility for its members. In other words, work gives some status to women only as long as men too are working on similar, low level jobs. But because women have not been able to claim their due share in the improving job prospects that development has brought forth for men, their continuing with traditional, women-type work has little positive impact on their social or familial position.

The paper then goes on to consider whether the widely perceived differences between the north and south, Aryan and Dravidian cultural attitudes to ards women are by themselves sufficient to explain these long-standing variations between regions in women's position, It notes that these factors have undeniably given shape to the cultural practices that are

considered acceptable in each region; but this kind of classical zoning of all regions was not capable of explaining all the differences in standard societal attitudes towards women prevailing in each location for all times to come. Several historical factors had, in fact, played an equally important role in shaping the prevailing conventions in this matter. Over time, these tendencies have led to there developing more variations between regions in women's position than warranted by just the two-way dichotomy. An examination of available historical data appeared to indicate that, in the past, adverse sex ratios in child population occured only in a few selected castes and most of these castes belonged to the upper social strata. The chances of this caste based bias reaching a significant proportion in the population were, on the other hand, related to some region specific factors. The role of two such factors was particularly noticeable : One was the relative proportion of Brahmins in the total population of each region; the other was the situation of those bias-prone castes in the so-called princely states. Interestingly, these two factors were of relevance even in the southern Dravidian regions. Upper caste girls in princely states of south India also appeared to suffer a handicap.

These findings suggest some possibilities that may be of help in explaining some of the newly growing tendencies in Indian society. A higher than average proportion in the population of Brahmins, a group unlikely to be found engaged in subsistence activities, suggests that such a region would be a surplus producing one where, consequently, there would be a more complex social structure. Similarly, areas under princely states would also have a more hierarchical society to accomodate the pretensions of the rulers. Moreover, it appeared that such states had generally housed Brahmins in larger numbers than warranted by their own resources base. The combined effect of these factors was that sex ratios in the child populations there were some of the worst in the country. It appears then that, the ideological position of women in India becomes worse as society becomes more hierarchical, more complex. And since this process is a neccessary

consequence of the development pattern that is being currently followed, the prognosis for Indian women is likely to be far from positive. That the southern Dravidian regions were not immune to these tendencies also suggests that inspite of their distinct cultural heritages, most parts of India accept the cultural hegemony of the Brahminical pattern and the latter comes to dominate whenever circumstances provide room for it.

Discussion in the paper regarding the recent unprecedentedly rapid spread of dowry in most parts of India brings out the nature of the interplay of several apparently unrelated factors that are generally shaping women's position at this juncture. On the one hand, dowry is directly the outcome of the failure of our development strategy to alter any of the basic parameters that govern women's lives. It has neither reduced the societal pressure on them to get married at an early age. Nor has it offered them chances of sharing in the generally improving economic prospects through their own work. For that too, marriage is the only option before most women. At the same time, development has also resulted in an upsurge of production and availability of a very wide range of goods and services in the Indian economy and has therefore completely reshaped the horizon of choices facing the Indian people. As discussed before, these trends have altered the basic character of dowry from being mainly a device for seeking status as in earlier periods. Dowry now is much more of a commercial proposition connected to the groom's life-long income prospects. At the same time, it is also very much a display of the bride's family's wealth, social connections and their wishes to forge an allieance with other important families.

However, it is also well-known that dowry based marriages, even among the very rich, can fare disastrously and are very often totally degrading to the woman being married. And at least for the rich, the choice of educating and endowing daughters for prosperous careers, much as is done for sons, rather than arranging their marriages by paying a dowry is a fully viable option. Indeed this choice is open at some level for all parents and specially for those who are sufficiently concerned about the

matter at the time of the birth a daughter to make the negative choice of neglecting or killing her. Just as they start saving for a dowry, they can start planning a livelihood for her.

The interesting point is that most people, regardless of whether they live in the north or in the south, do not consider these as valid alternatives. This may partly be because they know about the job prospects that exist for average women and do not feel optimistic about a girl being able to make a decent living. But much more often it just does not occur to them. Or the whole weight of the Hindu tradition of acquiring "punya"- heavenly credit-pins them down. That this is degrading or even dangerous to the girl is obviously of little consequence to them. In other words, one has to take explicit account of the basic premise that, in the Indian society, women as such are considered less valuable and this is independent of their social productivity. To the economist this may be a difficult premise to accept; but to students of Indian society, other similar instances of the society derating the productivity of any socially degraded group on a priori grounds should be very easy to find.

I am arguing that there are some special, culture-specific reasons why Indian societies appear to react fairly regularly in this particular way, viz. by degradation of their women, to the growth of social hierarchies. The reasons probably lie in the particular historical combination of social and of course economic forces which made the society in Indo-Gangetic plains one where patri-local, patriarchal, extended kin joint families became the rule : where pressures of demand for labour gave inordinate importance to women's reproductive activities and where private property developed early to put a premium on marriages and legitimacy. Such speculations are beyond the scope of this paper. But I think it is important to take note of the fact that while degradation of women in the course of development may not be peculiar to India alone, the Indian society follows its own distinct path for doing so. Therefore, for dealing with it, solutions will also have to be tailored specifically for India or even for its sub-regions if the need arises for that.

Before ending, I need to clarify my position on one point : the paper has emphasised the need for a better understanding of the specificities of the crisis of development as it affects Indian women. But in this case, understanding does not by any means imply forgiveness or even passive acceptance of the cultural modes that underlie these specificities. Rather, such an understanding is expected to evoke a reaction suitably sharp to match the enormity of the injustice involved in treating generations after generations of women merely as symbols of social status. This is therefore very much a plea for action, but action which is more sensitive to the complexities of the issue. It calls for active efforts not just to create more jobs for women but to remove the barriers that obstruct women's full and equal participation in the economy. It also calls for a continuous and powerful propaganda to build up awareness about the fact that social customs and traditions are not invariant nor sacrosanct. This kind of analysis is mainly for empowering the political struggle that is necessary for achieving these larger ends.

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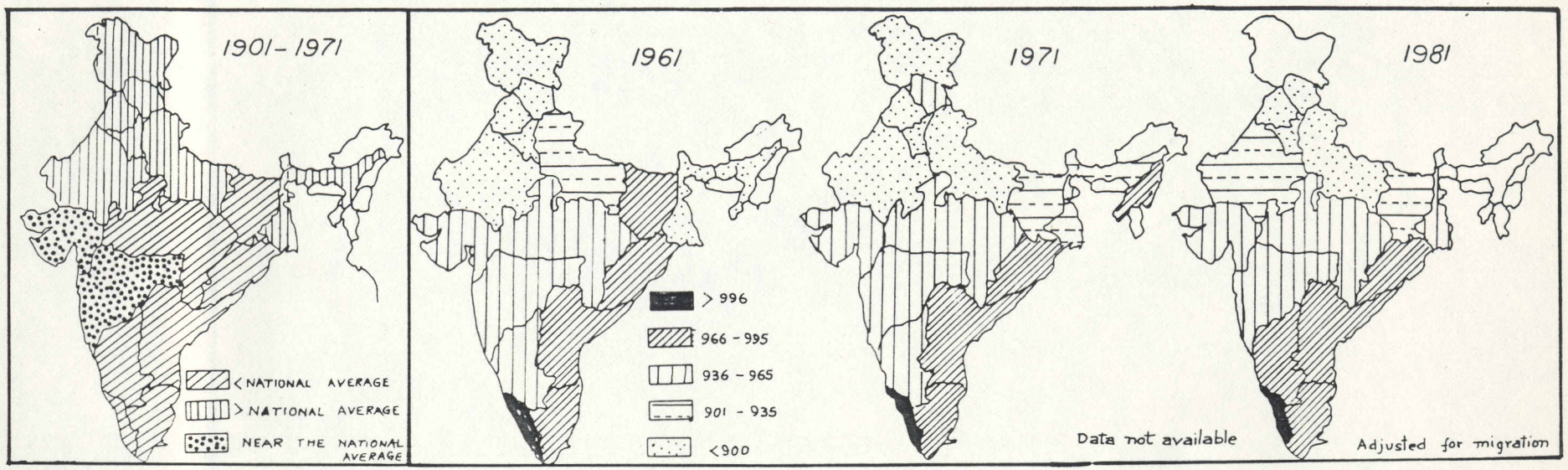
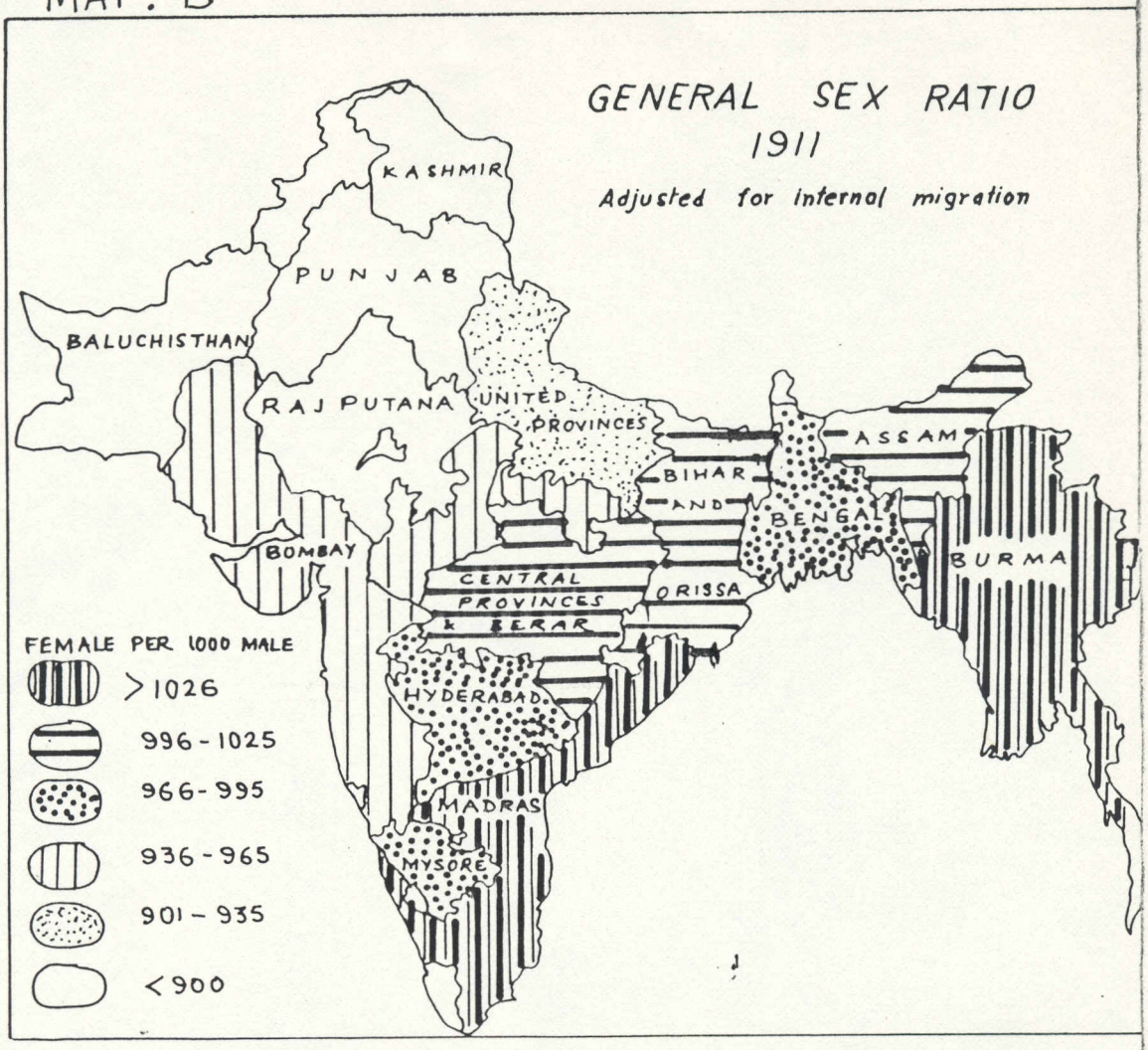
MAP. A

REGIONAL VARIATIONS IN SEX RATIO AN INDICATOR OF BIAS

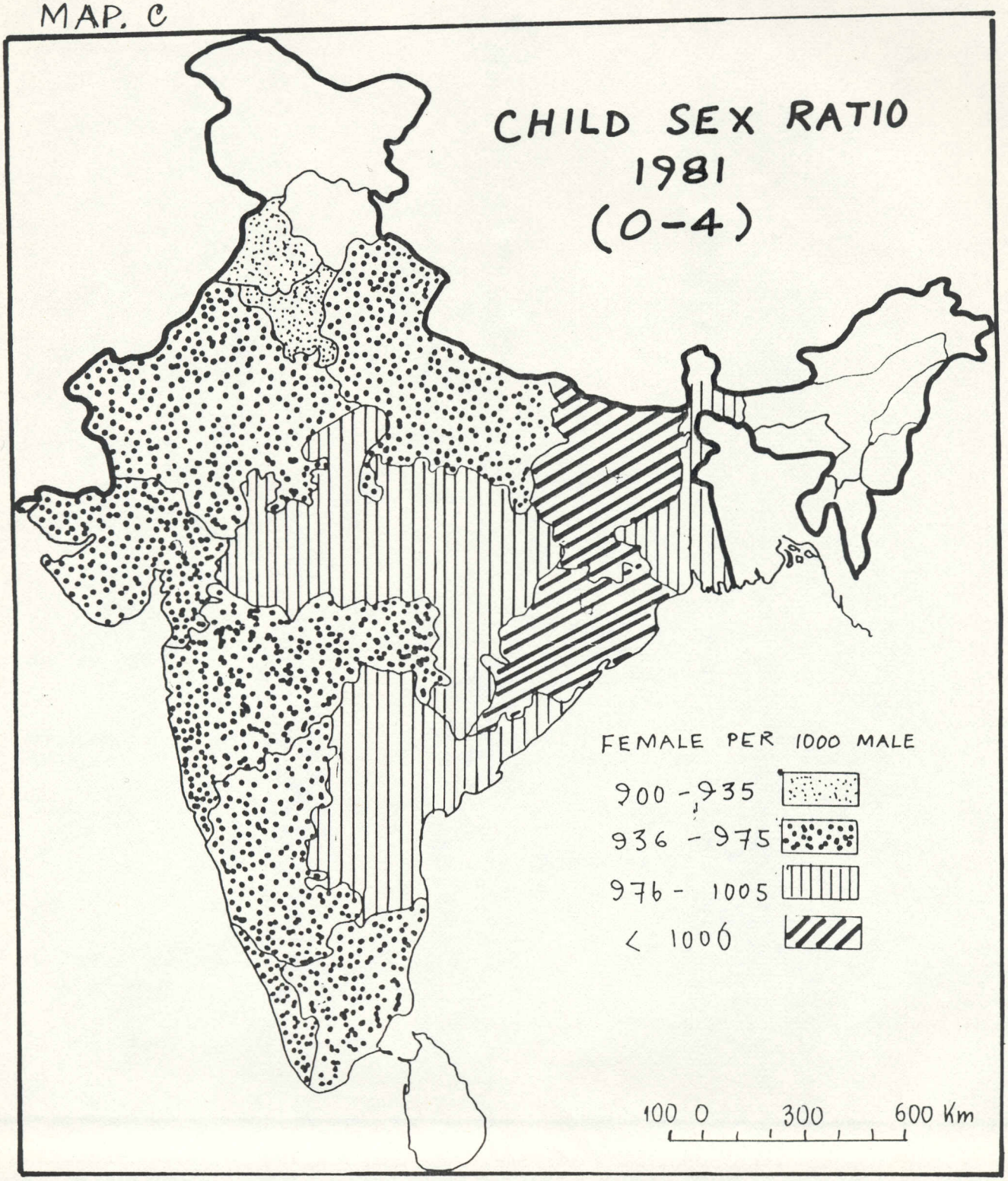


MAP. A

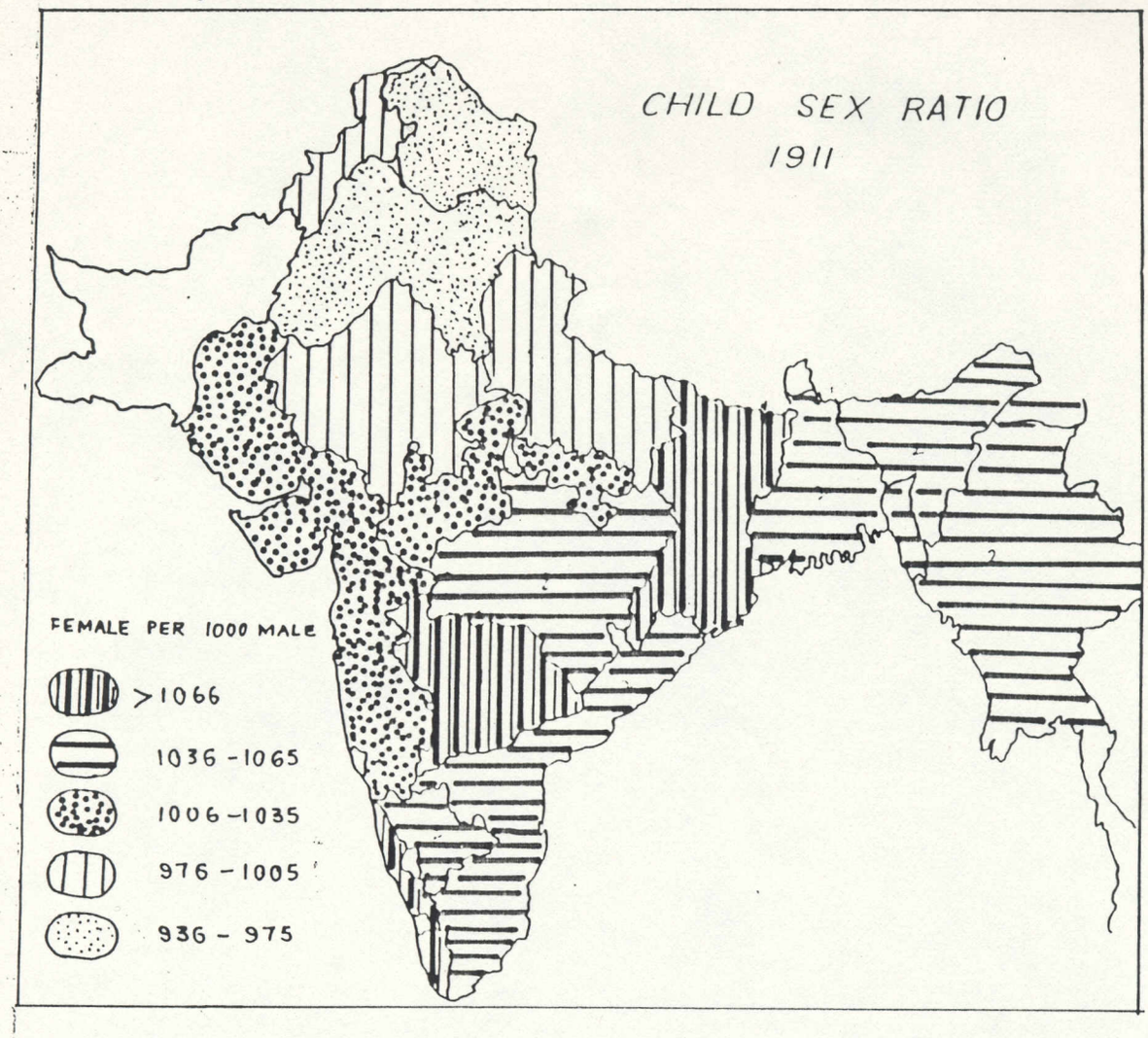
MAP. B


GENERAL SEX RATIO
1911
Adjusted for internal migration
KASHMIR
PUNJAB
BALUCHISTHAN
RAJ PUTANA
UNITED PROVINCES
ASSAM
BIHAR AND
BENGAL
BOMBAY
CENTRAL PROVINCES & BERAR
ORISSA
BURMA
HYDERABAD
MADRAS
MYSORE
FEMALE PER 1000 MALE
>1026
996 - 1025
966 - 995
936 - 965
901 - 935
<900

MAP. C


CHILD SEX RATIO
1981
(0-4)
FEMALE PER 1000 MALE
900 - 935
936 - 975
976 - 1005
< 1006
100 0 300 600 Km

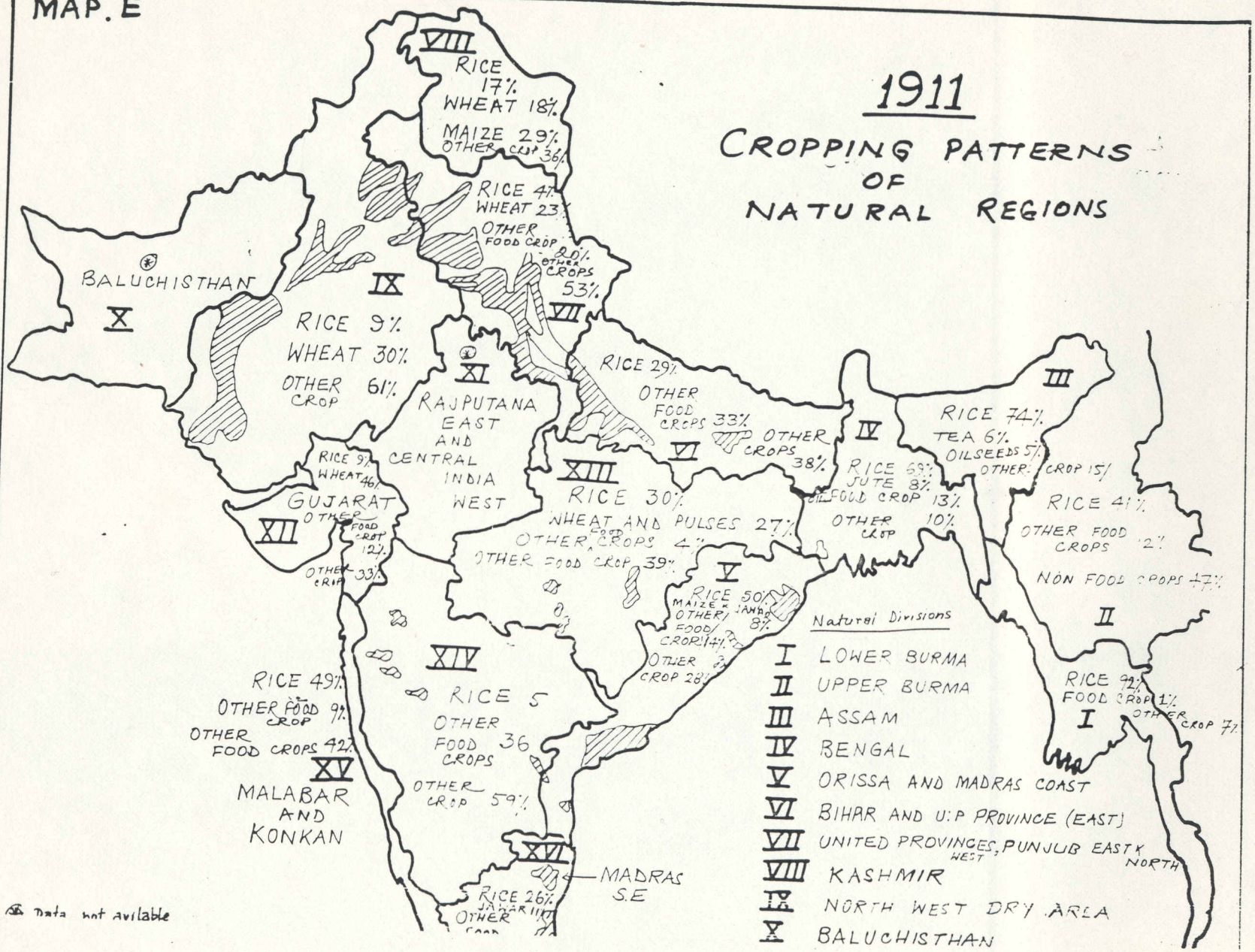
MAP. D


CHILD SEX RATIO
1911
FEMALE PER 1000 MALE
>1066
1036 - 1065
1006 - 1035
976 - 1005
936 - 975

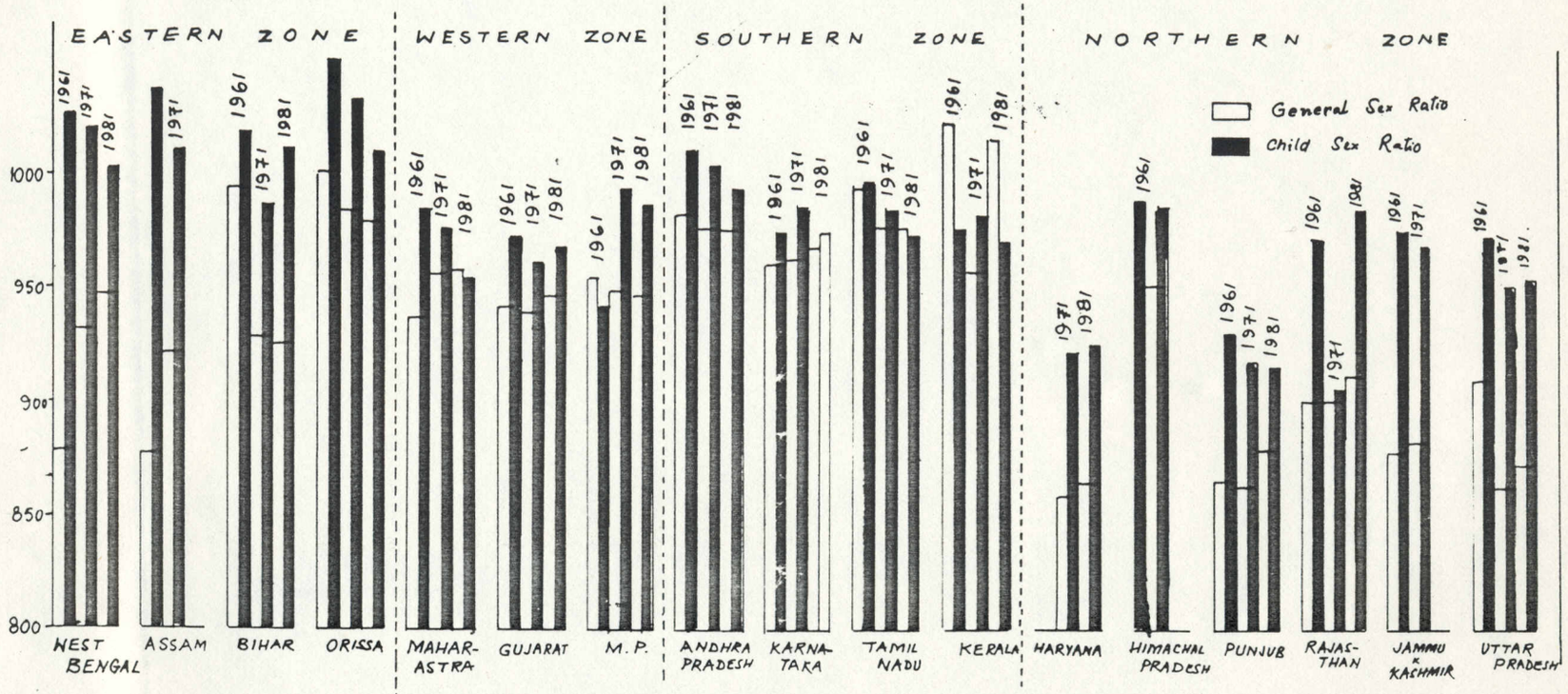
MAP. E

1911

CROPPING PATTERNS OF NATURAL REGIONS

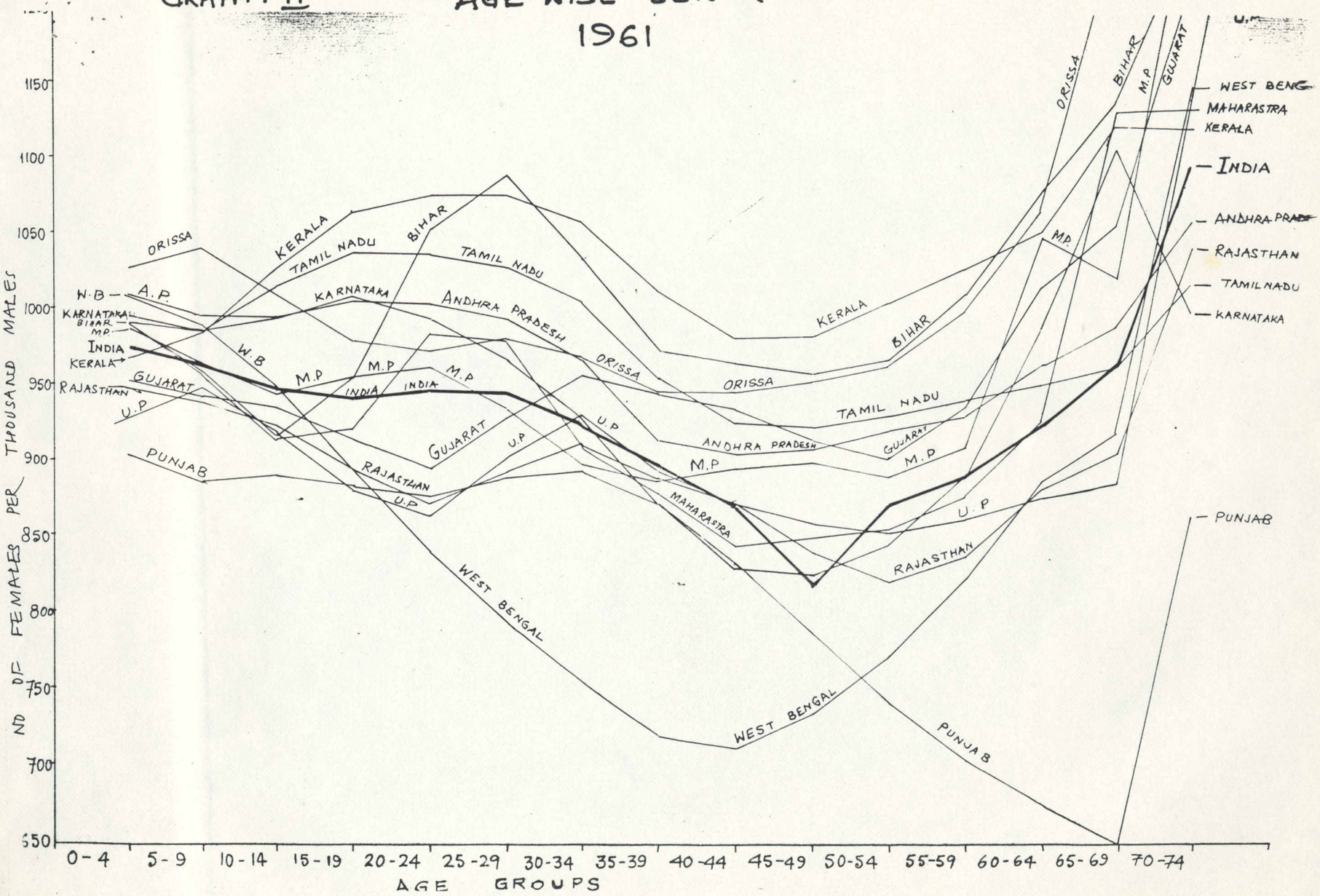


GRAPH. 1 GENERAL AND CHILD SEX RATIO 1961, 1971 & 1981 STATEWISE & ZONEWISE



GRAPH. II

AGE-WISE SEX RATIO
1961



APPENDIX - I

BARUJIVI COMMUNITY

In the Barujivi community, improvements in literacy and education levels have meant that younger people are reluctant to take up the traditional occupation of cultivating betel leaves. They now prefer to go in for white collar jobs. With this, there is a marked decline in the traditional practice of paying a brideprice at the time of marriage. Instead, the practice of dowry is gaining ground. Some specific cases are given below.

The late Sharatchandra Pal, a betel leaf cultivator of old Baruipada, Halisahar, had paid a brideprice of sixty rupees at the time of the marriage of his son Shambhunath. When Shambhunath's grandson Indra Kumar got married to Jogmaya, the daughter of Nivaranchandra Dey, no brideprice was paid, but no dowry either. He did however, get a few gifts such as the bridal bed. When Indra Kumar's son Pradipchandra Pal, currently an employee of the Halisahar Municipality, gets his daughter married, he will have a hard time finding the money for the dowry.

The late Totaram Dey of old Baruipada had three sons, Rajkumar, Kalikumar and Krishnakumar. Though Totaram was a rich and respected betel grower of Halisahar, he had to pay a brideprice of about Rs. 200 for getting each son married. Kalikumar's son, Nivaranchandra did not get any brideprice for his daughter Jogmaya; as noted above, he had to give some gifts to his son-in-law.

The late Bipin Das was a well-to-do betel grower of Bhairavkul; his daughter was married to Gurupada of Dhupagram who himself was a prosperous betel grower. A brideprice was paid to Bipin Das on this occasion. When his son, Surendra Nath got married to Nirupama from the Senhati Pal family, neither brideprice for dowry was paid Surendra Nath's sons were all in white collar jobs; each of them had received a dowry, in cash or kind, worth several thousand rupee One son Ashok is now working as an engineer in the State Electricit

Board; he said that his entire life's savings would be wiped out in meeting the expenses including dowry for his daughter's marriage.

Similarly, Krishnadhan Datta's son Raicharan was a prosperous betel grower in the Maheshwarpasha Village of Khulna district. In his own marriage, he had paid a brideprice of Rs. 80. In his daughter's marriage to Bankabehari Pal, a betel grower of the same village, he had received a brideprice of Rs. 100. At the time of the wedding of his grandson Manindra, a shopkeeper, no cash, whether as dowry or as brideprice, was paid; but Manindra got a gold ring and his wife some jewellery from her father. One daughter of Manindrababu got married in 1988 when he had to spend more than Rs. 25,000. For the next daughter, he expected to spend over Rs. 30,0000 Bankabehari Pal's son-in-law, Raicharan Datta's grand daughter got married to Thakurdas who works as A.S.M. Ranaghat. At that time the bride's father's gave some gifts in kind and Rs. 2001 in cash.

Bhupati Ranjan Das.
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