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Understanding Gender and Agrarian Change under Liberalisation: The Case of India

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INTRODUCTION[1]

The neo-liberal turn in recent decades has ushered in policies of liberalisation[2], deregulation and commercialisation across the world, and the consequences have been complex and contradictory for development goals of poverty and inequality reduction. Understanding these effects is methodologically difficult, but in spite of the complexity and the challenges, it is very important that we try to grasp these connections in the interests of more effective and equitable policy. This paper will focus on India, rather than the whole of south Asia, because the diversity of experience across the region may obscure the relations we seek to uncover, and because India is both a very large and a paradigmatic developing country. It will first consider what liberalisation has meant in practice in India, with a focus on agricultural reforms, and will then discuss some of the methodological complexities of seeking connections between liberalisation and particular gendered outcomes. The main part of the paper then considers how gendered rural livelihoods are changing and what is happening to forms of social reproduction[3].

Gender marks a primary form of social differentiation and inequality, and Karin Kapadia has linked liberalisation to 'an erosion of women's rights and social status …and a deterioration in women's position in contemporary India' (Kapadia 2002b: 33-34), a claim which we hope this paper will explore in some detail, although the material one would have wanted for such an exercise remains very limited, and it generally offers a sex disaggregated account, rather than gender analysis.

The degree of variation between states and cross cutting agroecological domains in rural India, with their particular histories, makes any analysis of gender relations a complex task. In addition, within these spatial and temporal locations class, caste and ethnicity create distinctive kinship and marriage patterns constitutive of very different gender relations. These are often reduced to comparisons between the more subordinated women of north Indian cultures and less subordinated women of south India, although Unnithan-Kumar points out that contrasts between north and south India can be overdrawn. Her Rajasthan material on the Girasia 'indicates that the differences between north and south India are not necessarily that absolute. …[t]he distinction is perhaps a primarily text-based one, but when we look at popular practices it is not so clear' (2001:266). Despite variations between regions there are however trajectories of change which appear to have considerable reach; sanskritisation amongst lower castes and 'tribes', the spread of dowry into new social spaces, the deepening of son preference and consequent masculinisation of landed rural households, as well as positive changes such as rising age at marriage, closing gender gaps in education, and rising life expectancy.

[1] We would like to thank the following for useful comments on this paper: Kunal Sen, Madhura Swaminathan, Richard Palmer-Jones and the UNRISD reviewer. Errors and interpretations, however, remain our responsibility.

[2] In this paper we use the term liberalisation fairly broadly to refer to the wide range of policies covering the delicensing of industrial investment and production, removal of export subisidies, reduction of fertiliser and other input subsidies, shift from import quotas to tariffs and reduction in tariffs, financial liberalisation measures and easing the rules for foreign capital inflows. These have led to cutbacks in state social sector expenditure (health and education provision), in food subsides, institutional credit, agricultural extension and rural development programmes.

[3] What we do not pursue here, for want of space, is the shifting terrain of state discourse on gender.

Table 1 shows some indicators of changing gender and wellbeing at an all-India level, and what they portray is rising wellbeing overall, with however areas of concern, such as the maternal mortality rate. Locating the problem areas requires a disaggregated analysis and Rustagi (2000) shows in her presentation of gender development indicators just how variable the picture of gendered wellbeing is. With a district level, and rural, focus she seeks to identify at this finer focus, the areas showing particular gender problems. Using the indicators of sex ratios, education, female literacy, female infant and child mortality, age at marriage, fertility, and work participation, she finds that in the states of Rajasthan, Haryana and Punjab all districts reveal poor status of women, in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar most districts do, and in Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal and Orissa lower numbers of districts present poor results, whilst Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat record relatively favourable situations (2000: 35). One remarkable feature of such comparisons is the troubling and complex relationship between economic growth and gender inequality, since equality indicators for north Indian states which have seen dramatic agricultural growth are worsening, gender disparities are highest in the wealthiest northern states, and a number of studies find sex ratios worse in more agriculturally advanced villages (eg Roy 1995:198, Nillesen and Harriss-White 2004). This pattern emphasises the importance of separating poverty/wellbeing analysis from gender analysis.

It also raises the question of various pathways to gender effects of liberalisation, ie if it succeeds (women are more prosperous as persons but more disadvantaged as women), if it fails (women are less prosperous as persons but also inhabit less gender biased worlds), and, a grim lose-lose scenario in which they are both worse off as persons and as women. We return to these issues in the conclusion.

Table 1: Selected indicators of gender and wellbeing

Year	HDR year	Female adult literacy	Female GER (combined)	Female life expect-ancy	IMR	MMR per 100,000 live births	Total Ferti l-ity rate	Share of earned income	GDI	GEM
1992	1995	35.2	45.8	60.4	82	460	--	19.2	0.401	0.226
1994	1997	36.1	47	61.4	74	570	3.0	25.7	0.419	0.228
1995	1998	37.7	46.5	61.8	73	570	3.2	25.4	0.424	0.228
1998	2000	43.5	46	63.3	69	410	3.3	37.0	0.545	n.a
1999	2001	44.5	49	63.3	70	410	3.3	37.0	0.553	n.a
2001	2003	46.4	49	64	67	540	3.0	37.6	0.574	Na.

Source: UNDP's Human Development Reports for different years.

Note: The indicators presented in this table follow the UNDP definitions (combined GER stands for the Gross Enrolment Ratio at Primary, Secondary and Tertiary levels; IMR is the Infant Mortality Rate per 1000 live births, MMR the Maternal Mortality Rate, GDI the Gender-adjusted Human Development Index, and GEM the Gender Empowerment Measure. No information on GEM is available for India after HDR 1998).

1. METHODOLOGICAL QUESTIONS AND CAVEATS

Trying to understand the effects of liberalisation on rural women in India is an important endeavour, but it is not an easy one, being beset by methodological problems, of evidence and information, of procedures, of assumptions and conceptual uncertainties, and the generally difficult business of extracting meaning from empirical data.

Definitional issues:

Data relating to women's employment is quite problematic to interpret as a number of authors have pointed out. Bhalla and Singh (1997: A-12) point out in their analysis of changes in the agricultural labour force between 1962 and 1995 that the frequent changes in definition mean that the numbers of female workers in agriculture are not really comparable over various censuses, especially for 1971. Kapadia (2002a) also argues that as men are moving into non-agricultural occupations their wives are more frequently defined as cultivators in census exercises, thereby creating an impression, which is more apparent than real, of rising numbers of women cultivators. Furthermore, Ramachandran et al (2001:2) note that one of the problems with tracking changes in women's employment is not only the changing work definitions in the census, but also the consistently lower rate of women's work in the census compared to the National Sample Survey (NSS) results, and even the latter is an underestimate (by some 5 per cent) by comparison to time use studies piloted by NSS in 6 states. And confusingly for the 1980s the NSS shows a rising pattern and the census a falling one. Such data therefore needs to carry a health warming, and is best understood through triangulation with other data sources.

Attribution issues:

Although the language of cause and effect is no longer used with the innocence of earlier times, we are nevertheless working with an implied relationship between liberalisation as 'cause' and gender relations as 'effect', and therefore of the need to attribute. But attribution of effects to liberalisation is very difficult because the 'before and after' comparison implied is impossible to identify with much clarity.

Ideally, one would wish to identify the mechanisms through which specific policies introduced in India as part of a package of liberalisation measures produce identifiable outcomes. The first attribution hurdle is distinguishing the effects of liberalisation from macroeconomic stabilisation which is important (Bardhan 1998: 122) but complex. Setting this aside, simplistically, one would expect that liberalising the economy will stimulate markets and lead to increased employment and consumption and thereby grow the economy in a virtuous circle, with states increasing investment in human capital and the wellbeing of the poor improving through better education and health, and inequalities diminished through these mechanisms, and more political participation. But, in general, policies rarely set off a domino effect of this kind since there are so very many points at which they simply fail to knock over the neighbouring domino, for a multitude of reasons, or unexpectedly topple over into an unexpected direction. For example, policies may be adopted at the centre but not by states, they may be delayed in execution, subverted in meaning or implementation, neutralised or even reversed by contradictory policy initiatives and so on. Where we can, we point out how the politics of liberalisation policy have affected the theoretical

mechanisms whereby liberalisation increases wellbeing, but this a major field of study and not the focus of the present work.

In theory the impact of liberalisation on the rural sector was expected to operate through removing discrimination in 'terms of trade' against agriculture. Liberalisation would then lead to a rise in agricultural production (and related non-farm rural employment) which would benefit rural people including women. Furthermore, with more rapid economic growth women would benefit through greater public spending - in the medium term. Both these ideas follow what appear to be robust empirical relations between agricultural growth and poverty reduction and between public spending and well-being. This set of expectations did not address intra-household issues of course.

Many of the social processes observed in agrarian India are long established and have not been initiated in the early nineties. The question of the extent to which they have intensified under liberalisation requires a clear idea of the counterfactual, ie what would have happened without liberalisation, and this too is highly problematic. The time scales involved for effects to emerge and the spatial variations across Indian states create further challenges. In the light of these issues it would be misleading to over-readily attribute change to liberalisation policies. We prefer to offer an analysis of directions of change within a longer time period, and to point out, where it is possible, that these are linked to such policies. A longer term perspective is necessary in order to see what are long standing trajectories and what are new developments, to get a sense of the overall direction of change in poverty and inequalities, and to contextualise liberalisation policy and avoid assuming it to be more influential than it actually is.

A more prosaic but equally important issue which affects the attribution of effects, and also relates to time, is the question of what base year is used for comparative (ie implying before and after liberalisation) purposes (eg see Palmer-Jones, 1999). Deshpande and Deshpande (1998) show that the choice of base year and end years in comparisons can make big differences to quantitative analysis, because of effects like rainfall. In relation to climate, many Indian states have seen three years of drought recently which makes recent performance hard to judge, since drought years affect outputs and employment dramatically. Unusual weather in the last three years must be taken account of; 2001 saw a record level of food grain production of 212 million tonnes but 2002-3 was a drought year and this dropped to 183 million tonnes (Sunderam 2003, 67), whilst the latest figures for 2003-4 suggest a bumper year with an output once again of 212 million tonnes (The Hindu, February 20, 2004).

Finally, the question of the appropriate time period for evaluating a policy shift such as liberalisation is also important. Short run impacts are dominated by stabilisation rather than by adjustment proper, and effects are rolled out over a period of time. What this period is will vary, but work in Bangladesh (Hossain cited in Rogaly et al 1999: 26) suggests a 14 year spread. So while comparisons with the preceding decade produce particular verdicts, longer term comparisons may give a different picture of the performance of the 1990s.

Policy interactions:

Time periods are not the only problem in relation to attribution of effects to liberalisation; policy impacts are complex and interactive and the necessary data is seldom available. An instructive example is the collection of papers on agricultural growth in Bangladesh and West Bengal (Rogaly et al 1999). Poverty declined in Bangladesh in the early 1990s with rapid agricultural growth, and the trend from casual to piece rate work has increased earnings of the poor. But both West Bengal and Bangladesh saw considerable agricultural growth in the 80s and early nineties – despite very different policy environments – the redistributionist and interventionist policies of the left state government in West Bengal (particularly land reform) and the liberalisation of the Bangladesh government under World Bank pressure since the1980s. It appears to be hard to see how the West Bengal land reforms, or indeed the liberalisation in Bangladesh can account for much of the increased agricultural performance (1999:14), a conclusion that could easily have been reached without a comparative policy examination. The growth of the early nineties in Bangladesh was followed by a disputed (Adnan 1999 and Palmer-Jones 1999) slowdown which in turn may be related to a rapid drop in the water table from excessive use of groundwater for irrigation (1999: 29), a longer term effect of the liberal policy regime.

Intra-household analysis

Another set of methodological challenges relate to the specific requirements for an intra-household perspective on livelihoods in gender relations analysis, which remains rare. Gender disaggregation into data on men and women is a useful first step but without data on members of the same households it is not possible to understand how transfers between household members redistribute the costs and gains from any particular material or cultural change – such as those to wage rates or marriage payments or education, for example. It remains true that whilst we have an increasing availability of data on women, we still lack what is needed to understand gender relations. Mainstreaming women as a variable in development research in general is no substitute for the kind of data collection needed for analysis of gender relations. There is also a continuing invisibility, in official statistics, of women within farming households, and a super visibility of women as agricultural labourers but these are increasingly the same people and not separate class fractions, and their separation leaves the problem of understanding how livelihood portfolios are integrated in actually existing households.

Gender analysis is an interdisciplinary field and draws on data and evidence from a number of different disciplines, which poses a particular challenge for analysts, who therefore need an unusual range and reach in their expertise. We have therefore to be vigilant in the use of evidence from other disciplines than our own in the meaning we attribute such evidence. An example of the complexity of commonly used indicators of gender equity is the question of widow remarriage, its presence often being taken to indicate cultures (often tribal and or low caste in comparison to mainstream upper caste Hindu practice) which are less controlling of women. However, a careful historical study in Haryana (Chowdhry 1994: 74) shows that widow remarriage as an historical form has continued to be practiced just where it is least expected, and generally takes the levirate form in which the wife is married by a brother or agnatic cousin of the husband, and has little choice in this matter. It is still practiced and growing in popularity based on the need to control land and keep it within the family

since in the absence of male heirs the wife inherits the estate for the duration of her life. Thus it is important to use indicators of women's well-being, such as the presence of widow remarriage, with care, and avoid simplifying assumptions which can be very misleading.

The habitus of researchers and respondents:

Finally, and in accordance with the tradition of reflexivity and reflection on personal values and politics in feminist research, it is worth noting our awareness of what might be called the habitus, ie the often unquestioned disposition, of gender researchers in development. This habitus includes a tendency to read social change negatively (bad and getting worse) so that nothing ever seems to improve. Since the 1974 Government of India, Status of Women Report the impression from gender research is that the position of women has been declining and thus one would expect that by 2004 the situation would be exceptionally bad. However, this would be a difficult position to sustain in the light of both evidence of important areas of improvement (see table 1) and indeed women's voices. This habitus is partly grounded in a need to focus on the legion of remaining problems, despite improvements, since the pressing question for gender justice is how to understand and initiate progressive change in relation to the shortfalls in wellbeing and justice which women experience. But evaluating change, and the impacts of policy shifts, deserves a critical perspective on our default settings in order to avoid losing sight of the bigger (historical) picture and retain the relevance of gender analysis for development policy.

Feminist researchers have no monopoly of habitus though – and certainly the respondents in research projects also carry their own dispositions in relation to accounts of social change. Sarah Lamb (2000) gives a good example of the tendency for Bengali narratives of the past to reflect the golden ageism so common in both ethnographic enquiries and surveys, which ask about the present in relation to the past. As she points out, people seem to be predisposed to see the past as a better place. Researching social change over time requires an awareness that in qualitative and quantitative enquiries there is a tendency amongst both researchers and respondents to glorify the past and darken the present, and that this must be triangulated in critical fashion with evidence which allows us to take account of this effect.

Given these methodological challenges we consider it wise to offer this analysis as an appropriately tentative exploration of the gendered effects of liberalisation in agrarian India, as a policy turn within a context of shifting degrees of state involvement in development, and changing character of interventions. In the next section we briefly consider just what liberalisation has involved for rural India. With a population of a billion and considerable state level policy independence, the picture is diverse, and the time lags and differential implementation of the liberalisation agenda creates a very uneven landscape of change, but we attempt to give an overview of what the process has involved.

2. LIBERALISATION AND RURAL INDIA

The Indian elections of 2004 saw the ejection of the BJP, in favour of the Congress Party, in what was widely seen as a protest by the rural masses who have not benefited from the liberalisation policies introduced in 1991, despite the growth of the Indian economy, and in an ironic twist the architect of the 91 reforms Dr Manmohan Singh became Prime Minister. When he unveiled his economic agenda it emphasised agricultural revival, rural investment, a softer line on privatisation and labour reform, and a declared commitment to boost farm incomes and generate employment. The strong growth of the Indian economy recently (8.1% in 2004), based on IT manufacturing and service, compared to the slow growth of agriculture (2% pa over the last decade)[4] can be explained however in several ways: a failure of liberalisation policies, insufficient liberalisation of agriculture, inadequate public investment in agriculture or the particular difficulties of benefiting from agricultural liberalisation in the face of subsidised developed country agriculture. After 1991 India only partially liberalized agriculture, the international agricultural trade regime has remained biased against developing countries due to US and EU agricultural subsidies, and notwithstanding a string of "good monsoons" agriculture appears not to have grown as fast as in the previous decade.

This section largely describes the experience of liberalisation in rural India, before following sections consider the impacts on poverty and gender relations. First a brief account of agrarian change up the 1990s and the politics and extent of rural reform.

In the period up to the 90s, micro studies focused on the Green Revolution and its impacts on both agricultural production in particular and the rural economy in general. These reveal both uniformities and differences across regions. The Green Revolution experience left behind, according to Gough's (1989) research in south India on changes between the 1950s and 1976, a category of rural capitalists using high energy agricultural inputs and machinery. Differentiation and depeasantisation produced many wage workers. Casual labouring increased, while attached debt labour declined. Shifts to cash payments increased local markets for agricultural commodities, but poverty was not reduced. Gough argues that the total number of workers in agriculture grew so much that the increased intensity of production and associated labour demand did not turn into increased real wages.

Scarlett Epstein's repeated research over a 40 year period in Karnataka which compared an irrigated and a non-irrigated village, reveals the importance of local agro-ecological circumstances to trajectories of growth. The non-irrigated village has become strongly interconnected to local urban centres, and lost cohesion whilst the wetland village has sustained internal cohesion and community (Epstein et al 1998: 202). Some 65 per cent of men in Dalena (with little irrigation) engage in non-agricultural work outside the village, mainly in industrial jobs, whilst in irrigated Wangala increased crop productivity has created enough village demand to sustain restaurants, stores, repair services and other locally based non-agricultural employment, and farmers 'single out the change in cultivation practice as *the* most important change that has taken place over the past forty years' [1998:163 original emphasis], referring to HYVs, fertilisers, mechanisation, irrigation. The commercialisation of jaggery and particularly the adoption of auctions for marketing has put cane farmers into a strong bargaining position, relative to the sugar refinery.

[4] http://www.foodfirst.org/media [24/11/2004]

Clearly, Green Revolution technologies, especially when assisted by public investment in infrastructure and services, in particular irrigation and credit, do stimulate rural growth, though clearly with different implications for different groups. While HYV technologies themselves may have boosted production, the benefits of policies, including support prices, subsidies for fertilisers and other inputs and incentives (agricultural credit or power supply), did little to counter class and regional inequities (Rao and Storm, 1998:218). Agarwal (1985) notes the different implications in terms of employment, income control and prestige for women in agricultural labour, small cultivator and large cultivator households. While employment is generated for some categories of women, others are withdrawn from the labour force, though their unpaid work in terms of post-harvest processing and storage or cooking for the hired labour, intensifies (Sen, 1982).

The India wide situation in the 1980s was one of falling poverty, and on the eve of liberalisation Bhalla and Singh (1997) use state level analysis for the years 1962-5 to 1992-5 to show the acceleration of agricultural growth during 1980-3 to 1992-95[5], compared to earlier periods, and the shift from coarse grains into oilseeds in particular. This was largely aided by public spending on the rural sector in the 1970s and 80s. Male agricultural productivity also rose strongly in the 1980s in many states. The 80s saw what Bhalla calls 'an indigenously sponsored liberalisation' (1999: 33), which led to declines in employment growth rates as the employment response to growth continued to weaken – each percentage of growth in GDP led to 0.61 per cent growth in employment in the 1980s but only 0.32 per cent ten years later (ibid: 36).

What was the political economy context for the 91 reforms? Byres (1998), in reviewing debates on the Indian economy since independence, notes that while there had been a consensus that state planning was an anti-imperialist measure, even though it largely eschewed the left demand for a radical land reform agenda, the case for 'getting prices right' was made early on (during the second plan period) in relation to the apparently poor economic performance resulting from Indian planning.

In 1984, Pranab Bardhan offered a bleak assessment of the failures of development in India, pointing to the inadequacy of government welfare programmes, and in particular their tendency to be axed in the face of financial squeezes, corruption and leakages, and the failure to promote greater economic growth because of the heterogeneity of the dominant proprietary classes. The public economy was afflicted by political racketeering, and excessive political, administrative and financial centralisation, and

> 'Within the dominant coalition, big business and urban professionals and the bureaucracy (both civilian and military) will be …committed to a strong centre, but …agricultural interests …regionally diffused and fragmented but increasingly vocal will be interested in expanding the power of the State Governments which it is easier for them to corner.' (1998 :81-2)

In the epilogue commenting on the reforms he argues that some reforms came about not by design but due to bankruptcy at state levels, and that all were subject to political processes whereby many state level political leaders, of all parties, supported liberalisation as it offered a route out of this bankruptcy. Power has now shifted to the regions, regional parties become more significant, and regional branches of national

[5] The 1980s also saw an acceleration of growth in the manufacturing sector.

parties increasingly autonomous (1998: 125). Corbrigge and Harriss also note that reforms at state level were often inspired by competition between states for foreign investment and often led by experienced politicians who found here 'new sources of patronage to substitute for some of those forfeited by the shrinkage of the state's regulatory role' (Jenkins, 1997:6, quoted in Corbridge and Harriss, 2000: 159). There is still a staggering burden of subsidies (14.4% GDP in 1994-5) and rising deficits following on the strong upward revisions in public sector pay. State level revenue deficits have trebled over the 1990s (Bardhan, 1998: 129) yet local farming interests have been able to secure free or nearly free water and electricity, while also ensuring increases in procurement prices. Hidden subsidies to favoured groups have thus increased, while infrastructure investments in agriculture have declined (Ghosh, 1998:330).

Whether reforms have come in by stealth or design, they seem to prioritise the country's business and trading regime over its 'social investment' regime (Corbridge and Harriss, 2000:146). The interests of the rural social elites, as indeed urban private capital, continue to be met, while declines in provision of education, health or extension services have adversely affected the poor and assetless. Faced with rising prices and excluded from the 'new' regime of accumulation on the one hand, institutions of redress for the poor have also withered away on the other, replaced by local control by the mafia or other dominant groups,

Eventually the declining transfers from centre to states must change this scenario and it is the states already better off in terms of infrastructure in particular who will be better placed to compete for private investment, and poorer states seek bail-outs from the centre. Although the dominant coalition described in the 80s has fragmented to some extent Bardhan argues that 'one should not underestimate the enormity and tenacity of vested interests in the preservation of the old political equilibrium of subsidies and patronage distribution' (1998: 132). Furthermore, the shift of power from centre to states has meant a shift towards lower castes, and the old elites giving way to new actors and the erosion of old political forms such as the insulation of public administration from politics, a rampant and unapologetic corruption amongst politicians of emergent groups.

> The paradox then is that despite the trumpeting of the era of market reform, the period has been marked by essentially anti-market forces; 'the propagation of group equity and caste rights, the carving of markets for new jobs in the public sector in protected niches, special dispensations and patronage for newly emergent groups, rampant caste-based violations of the institutional insulation of economic governance – all amounting to a drowning of considerations of efficiency in the name of inter-group equity.' (1998: 134)[6]

[6]. He speculates that the old elites have lost interest in control of the state and opted for greener pastures in the private sector, which may be why 'very few substantive reforsm have yet been attempted in the agricultural sector…where [they] would have benefited the backward and lowly castes in massive numbers ' (1998:135) Bardhan argues that
'Indian political culture may have a dominant anti-market streak that will not easily disappear..'[due to] our collective passion for group equity, for group rather than individual rights, and to deep suspicion of competition in which the larger economic interests are given an opportunity to gobble up the small, work against the forces of market and allocational efficiency.' (1998:136). He predicts that change will be largely lip service as both old rural elites and emergent politically empowered lower castes struggle for access to dwindling state-level resources, increasingly confined only to privileged public sector employment, and thus caste identities increasingly emphasised to secure reservations.

This analysis suggests that reforms in rural areas have been at best partial. They might have been more successful if apart from trying to eliminate the weaknesses of the state system, they had also tried to build on its strengths, especially government spending strategies (including rural development expenditures) that had led to agricultural growth and poverty reduction in the 1980s. The implications of this for gender will be discussed below.

How much rural reform has actually taken place is thus debated but as Corbridge and Harriss (2000) point out, whether or not there were drastic shifts in the role of the state in practice, liberalisation brought with it a definite shift in rhetoric, with Nehruvian ideals of socialism and structural transformation disappearing from the official language in the 90s. It is important to remember that, in considering the significance of the withdrawal - or at least the less interventionist role - of the state under liberalisation, for women and gender relations, that a large body of work has critiqued state development programmes over several decades and argued that they have not empowered the poor, rather 'those who could negotiate access to the License-Permit Raj (ibid:144). However, the failings of any actually existing state do not entail the rejection in principle of the role of the state in relation to enabling and protecting gender equity.

What has liberalisation during the 1990s actually involved in India? The reforms lay stress on competition and free trade (dismantling the system of licensing and encouraging foreign equity investment in the Indian economy), minimising cost, modern technology, subsidy reduction, a reduced role for the state and economic stabilisation (Sundaram 2003). In practical terms, some of the key indirect fall-outs have been falling extension services, less institutional credit and inadequate price support systems. Each of these elements, direct and indirect, is discussed briefly below.

While structural reforms have been slower in agriculture than other sectors, since the mid-1990s, India has gradually opened up its agricultural sector to international trade, signing the Uruguay Round Agreement (URA) of the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT), now located in the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 1994. The URA commitments require a reduction in level of tariffs in a time-bound manner to allow market access, reduction in domestic support including subsidies to different crops and reduction in export subsidies.

In early 1998, there were some 800 agricultural items out of a total of 2700 that were placed under quantitative restrictions, that is, imports of these products were not allowed. By March 2001, India had removed such restrictions on 1429 items, 208 of which belong to the agriculture sector http://www.nabard.org/rural/overview_re.htm). With opening up to global trade it was anticipated that domestic prices would move closer to world market prices. As a result the prediction was that the production and trade of rice, wheat and cotton would expand marginally for the domestic market due to the lower domestic prices at present, oilseeds, sugar and pulses were likely to be adversely affected, as domestic prices were much higher than international prices. With the increased exports of rice and wheat, prices of these food crops would go up in the local market as well. At the same time, imports of pulses and oilseeds would

lead to a decline in their domestic prices, leading to a negligible overall impact on consumers (Gulati and Kelley, 1999)[7].

However, experience in the last few years has been the opposite. Between 1995-2000, global prices for all major crops – food grains, oilseeds and cotton - have declined (the largest being for edible oils) and are now much lower than domestic prices. The removal of quantitative restrictions on some major agricultural products such as rice, cotton and skimmed milk and exposing them to global recessionary trends has according to Patnaik (2002:120) contributed to a deepening agrarian crisis.[8] The average annual growth rate of the agriculture sector has declined from 4 per cent in the 8th Plan period (1992-96) to about 1.4 per cent during the first four years of the Ninth Plan (1997-2002) (GOI, 2002: 22)[9] and consequent erosion in real incomes. At the same time, consumer prices have not declined and with the tightening of the Public Distribution System, the poorest consumers, who spend a bulk of their household resources on food grains, are facing a decline in annual cereal availability to the extent of 10 kg per head between 1995-96 and 2000-01 (156.6 kg to 147.3 kg per capita) (Patnaik 2002: 138). We discuss the understanding of reduced cereal availability in the next section.

The growing crisis in the rice economy in West Bengal is a case in point. West Bengal saw a period of rapid agricultural growth during the 1990s, supported by land reforms, expansion of irrigation and input subsidies. With economic reforms, and reduction of subsidies on fertilisers, pesticides and electricity, there has been an increase in the cost of production. Market prices, however, slumped from Rs 640-790 a quintal in 1999 to Rs 320-515 a quintal in 2002. There have been two major reasons for this. First, since the reforms in 1998-99, inter-State restrictions in supply of grains have been removed, yet state-level differences in subsidies given to agriculture persist. As a result, cheap paddy from the neighbouring states of Bihar, Orissa and Jharkhand flowed into West Bengal. Further, while earlier West Bengal was able to export rice to neighbouring countries, especially Bangladesh, cheaper supplies from Myanmar, Thailand and even Taiwan replaced this. Uneven domestic liberalisation, the decline in global paddy prices, along with state inaction have led to negative consequences for the paddy farmers in West Bengal (Ghosh and Harris-White, 2002), and this in turn has had fall-outs on wage rates and levels of labour employed in paddy cultivation. Sen (2003:34) has noted a slowing down in the rate of growth of agricultural wages in West Bengal from 9.5 per cent in the 1980s to 1.03 in the 1990s. The price rises in wheat and rice seem to have mainly benefited Punjab, Haryana and western UP leading to a rise in inter-regional disparities.

Another example, widely discussed in the media, is the story of cotton. In the early 1990s, there was a boom in cotton production in peninsular India, particularly Andhra Pradesh, as world prices rose. Exports jumped by over 10 times between 1987 and 1990. Though production increased, it could not keep pace with demand, hence domestic prices for raw cotton also went up. The impact on the domestic handloom and power-loom sector has been disastrous, with hundreds of thousands of weavers

[7] The assumption behind trade liberalisation of course is that there is adequate transport and storage infrastructure available, that there will not be dumping of certain commodities in the world market.
[8] While the overall GDP of the Indian economy is estimated to have grown at 3.7 per cent in 2002-03, the GDP from agriculture sector declined at the rate of 4.4 per cent during the same year. (http://www.nabard.org/rural/overview_re.htm).
[9] Growth rate for agriculture declined in 12 out of 15 states in the 1990s as compared to the 1980s and three states, namely, Bihar, Orissa and Gujarat showed negative growth rates.

being pauperised. In Andhra Pradesh, the situation was worsened due to state adjustment policies implemented at the same time such as the hikes in power-tariff that led to a further increase in production costs. Different estimates are provided for suicides by weavers in Andhra Pradesh, the number however is considerable. All this happened in the context of a reduction in state development expenditures in rural areas, including employment-generation programmes and a general fall in rural non-farm employment as discussed in the next section, leaving few alternative employment opportunities for these weavers (Patnaik, 2002:125).

With the boom in cotton prices, farmers started growing cotton on more land. A decline in global cotton prices after a peak in the mid-1990s has led to mounting debt on account of the dependence by these farmers on a seed, pesticide-fertiliser regime prescribed by the global purchasers. Mostly small farmers, they persist in producing cotton as the only way to repay their debts, but one pest attack and destruction of the crop leaves them ruined, and now even without food to eat, as cotton is usually grown on land previously used for coarse cereals. The answer to their predicament is provided by the spate of suicides in the last five years. While there is no agreement on the actual figure of suicides, qualitative research points to considerable numbers of suicides by pesticide ingestion, as well as many more selling bodily vital organs to repay debts. A majority of these are men, as found also through the suicide figures referred to in the later section on subject positions. The impacts on women of widowhood through spouses' suicides, or the effects of health impacts of husbands' organ sales, are considerable, but it also reinforces the point that men too have gender identities which expose them to ill-being risks. The current plight of rubber and coconut growers in Kerala facing crashing global prices points to a similar trend (Patnaik, 2002:127-8).

From the 1960s to the 1980s the major factor in terms of policy formulation in the agricultural sector was attaining self-sufficiency in food production. This meant the provision of some domestic support, constituted of both extension services, a minimum support price offered to different crops as well as input subsidies on fertiliser, irrigation, electricity, credit and seeds. It would however be mistaken to idealise the pre-reform scenario. While the Aggregate Measure of Support (AMS) to agriculture has been negative since the 1980s, this has now declined further from -26.38 in 1988 to -62.45 in 1997 (Gulati and Narayanan 2000:790). As the prices fixed were generally below international levels, there was also a need to strictly control global trade. The recent withdrawal and toning down of these supports, without adequate back-up in terms of institutional linkages, or a stable long-term policy on agricultural commodities trade, seems to have led to negative consequences particularly for small and marginal farmers, who constitute a majority of Indian farmers. Detailed studies of the withdrawal or reduction of these subsidies on farm households are however not available. Since we know that vocal farmers lobbies have been effective at advocating retention of water and electricity subsidies, what is needed is a disaggregated study of how particular subsidy changes affect different elements of rural society – from the landless to large scale farmers.

Several studies also point towards the steady decline in public investment in agriculture in successive Plans since 1951 to the Ninth Plan (1997-2002),[10] and this is also noted with concern by the Report of the Steering Committee on Agriculture and

[10] This includes investment in irrigation, rural infrastructure including storage, roads and electrification, markets and research.

Allied Sectors for the Tenth Five Year Plan, especially in a context where about 70 per cent of the population has remained dependent on agriculture (GOI, 2002). It is however difficult to argue that the reforms are to blame for this. Figure 1 shows that public investment in agriculture (and total investment) has been falling sharply since 1979 and there is no obvious increase in the rate of decline in the 1990s (in fact, a slowing down of the rate of decline). Figure 2 also shows that after some progress in cutting public consumption, there has been a remarkable increase in public consumption in recent years to peaks that were reached in the mid-1980s. Finally the combined fiscal deficit of the central and state governments was 10 per cent in 2001-02, compared to 9.4 per cent in 1990-1991 just before the economic crisis. Much of this increase is because of public sector wage growth and employment and supports. Bardhan's thesis appears to hold true, that the dominant coalition - rich farmers, industrial capitalists, and professionals in the public sector - still seem to maintain their stranglehold on the resources of the state. By this account the decline in public investment in agriculture is less connected to the 1991 reforms and more to deepening of the politics of coalition involving increased spending on subsidies, wages and salaries, and leaving less and less funds for public investment.[11]

Whatever the cause, public investment in agriculture is low and declining. While in the Sixth Five Year Plan (1980-85), 10 per cent of outlay was on irrigation and flood control and 6.1 on agriculture and allied activities, by the Ninth Plan (1997-2002) these declined to 7.5 and 4.5 per cent respectively. This seems to have been accompanied by a slowing down in the production of food grains that had been driven by technology and government incentives in the 1970s and 1980s. While Gulati and Bathla (2001) found that production in the 1990s was market-driven and based on improvement in terms of trade and private sector investment, nevertheless the slowing down during the 1990s appears to follow the slowdown in public investment, particularly in irrigation[12]. Narayanamoorthy and Desphpande (2003) point to the higher wage rates in irrigated areas due to the need for timely labour as well as higher demand for labour on account of intensive cropping and the production of high value crops. The stagnation in irrigation could therefore be a contributory factor to the slowing down of real agricultural wages in the 1990s as well. The government launched the Accelerated Irrigation Benefits Programme in 1996-97 to halt this trend, and while some reversals are visible, the progress on this front has been slow.

Using econometric methods, Fan et al (1999) examine the impact of government expenditures relating to rural infrastructure and agricultural research on poverty. They find that investment in rural infrastructure, especially rural roads, and agricultural research and extension, education and irrigation have a far larger impact than the anti-poverty and watershed development programmes. They can in fact encourage private investment by rural households. On similar lines, Corbridge and Harriss (2000:148) note that the 1980s indeed saw a percent decline in rural poverty due to the spread of irrigation and double-cropping that made available more work including non-farm opportunities, along with government directed credit and employment schemes. In the absence of public social investment and effective market regulation in the 90s, the poor and women, they find, are locked in vulnerable and low-paid jobs leading to a "concentration of income and assets in a country that is riven by social and economic

[11] See also the review of liberalisation debates by Jayati Ghosh (1998).

[12] Growth rate of major and medium irrigation fell from 28.37 during 1985-86-1989-90 to 10.6 during 1990-91-1995-96 and further to 4.64 during 1996-97-2001-02. For minor irrigation, the decline was from 2.31 to 0.91 during the 1990s.

inequalities" (ibid: 166). The connection between public expenditure and poverty levels may then not be straightforward, hence the type and scale of public investment made is important. Irrigation development may have much greater poverty effects than watershed development or other rural development programmes, for instance, as also emerges from Epstein's study.

Decennial data on household capital expenditure drawn from the All India Debt and Investment Surveys (AIDIS) reveal a decline in the gross capital formation of rural households from 9.6 per cent in 1962 to 6.5 per cent in 1982, and further 3.7 per cent in 1992 (Thulasamma, 2003). Sawant et al (2002) show a decline in the number of cultivator households reporting investment in farm business from 19.3 per cent in 1972 to 11.89 per cent in 1991-92[13], suggesting a vicious circle of low income, low investment and low output. Low public investment seems to negatively impact on private investment (which is 2/3 of total investment), distorted further by the unequal distribution of land and wealth in society (Byres, 1998:16), and given their lag effect, as Randhawa points, out the low gross capital formation in agriculture in the 80s 'will dampen potential growth in the nineties, considering the gestation periods of various investments' (1994 :354). Thus the immediate response to reforms will be limited by under-investment in the past, a factor to be taken into consideration in evaluating the effects of liberalisation.

The other interesting observation that emerges from the AIDIS reports is the changing nature of asset formation amongst rural households. While in 1962, there was an emphasis on land reclamation and improvement, by 1992 the major focus was on farm machinery (Thulasamma, 2003).[14] Data from the quinquennial census on livestock and agricultural machinery corroborates this insight revealing significant growth in electric pumps, diesel pumps and tractors and a virtual stagnation in ploughs and animal carts. Clearly, these investments are seen as strategies to enhance outputs and reduce costs. As Rawal (2003) notes in his study of two Haryana villages, the cost of using combined harvesters for harvesting wheat is much lower than manual harvesting (Rs 450-500 per acre as against Rs 1250 for manual harvesting), leading to a considerable displacement of labour. This has had particularly negative implications for female labour, as cultural constraints inhibit them from seeking other work outside the village. Ramakumar (2003) notes similar contraction in female employment in paddy cultivation due to power tillers in the case of a Kerala village. The theoretical stimulus to agricultural growth and employment as a result of liberalisation may then well fail to materialise, and gains remain patchy.

The effects of liberalisation on social policy and provision in rural health and education have involved reduced health care provision and reported falls in education investment. These are discussed in further detail in the following sections, however suffice to say at this point that the decline in public provision has contributed to an enhancement in inequalities – between rural and urban areas, *dalits* and other groups and men and women.

While noting that state interventions are often flawed and gender-blind, if not gender-biased, Chowdhry maintains that they still remain essentially beneficial to women 'because [the state] has had to work under 'modern' democratising pressures of

[13] AIDIS data after 1992 is not available.
[14] Percentage expenditure on land reclamation fell from 32.2 to 14.3 per cent and on farm machinery increased from 28.5 to 45.5 per cent between 1962 and 1992.

introducing fundamental egalitarian rights and effecting the concept of one people, one nation and one law' (1994:20) For example, the reservation of seats in panchayats was handed down by the state without agitation from women's groups, and the consequences must be judged to be positive on balance. And Harriss-White (2003: 131) argues that employment only delivers real gains to women when it is not home based, and 'it is 'the State' rather than 'the market' that has supplied such work'. Liberalisation threatens this, although she adds figures to show that between 1994-1997 public sector employment contracted by 2% but was more than compensated for by a 15% increase in state government employment, and employment for women actually increased from 15-16.5% (Reserve Bank of India 1999: 20 cited in Harriss-White 2003: 131). This underscores the point made elsewhere that we need, in policy evaluation, to take care not to assume that policy intentions automatically become actual outcomes, since the officials of the state and other actors exercise resistance and agency in relation to policy which can easily be diluted, diverted and delayed to produce very different outcomes, or indeed very little change from the status quo.

Since 1991 the state has been re-oriented away from its responsibilities towards social sectors such as education and health and has prioritised the economic productivity of the nation. Activities have thus focused on entrepreneurial programmes and support like credit. This re-orientation has affected women, and Vasavi and Kingfisher (2003: 3) suggest that the deployment of economic arguments in neo-liberal policies in relation to poor women in itself affects the subjectivities and identities of such women since they reconstitute women as productive workers. Poor women are to be transformed from ''dependent' and 'subordinated', into significant economic actors'. From a previous position of invisibility women have become super-visible 'since the economic liberalisation or the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) was adopted by the government in 1991' (ibid: 5). And from being envisaged as passive welfare recipients they have become active economic agents. They say this is less to do with changes in the position of women, and more to do with the state's conception of them. It can be argued that the subjectivities of women themselves are not so easily reconstituted –just because officials of the state come to see them differently this does not mean they necessarily see themselves differently. Whilst we may be sceptical of the determining effects of assumptions inhering in state policies, nevertheless analysis of the effects of liberalistion must include the changing subjectivities of state officials themselves – so rarely examined – which must surely be altered by cultures of liberalisation. Narayan Banerjee (2003 personal communication) comments about the impact of liberalisation on the state itself, that when the state loses its welfare functions, as has been happening with liberalisation, then the character of state personnel change too. Their work cultures are no longer ones in which social justice is seen as part of what they deliver and officials develop a new indifference to poverty and inequality, and may even persecute colleagues who pursue these values. Many Indian Administrative Service personnel with such values leave and enter NGOs, leaving the state morally impoverished.

To summarise. Before 1991 the terms of trade have been biased against agriculture, subsidies and incentives have been low compared to other sectors, and public investment was already in decline. The 1991 reforms have been much slower in agriculture than other sectors and uneven in their application but have involved further subsidy reductions, deregulation of trade and price reforms. Agricultural growth has not however been stimulated, though often made worse due to the global recession of recent years that rather than boosting production and trade of rice, cotton

and to a lesser degree wheat, as was anticipated, led to their collapse. The persistent state-level variations in subsidies that make prices vary considerably internally, alongside free movement of grains led to the ruin of rice farmers in states such as West Bengal in 2001. There is evidence that sudden increases in prices for particular internationally marketed cash crops has drawn producers into growing such crops without fully appreciating the volatility of international prices and therefore the increased riskiness of production, with tragic results as in cotton. The reduction in state support to agriculture, particularly in terms of irrigation investments and institutional reforms, and its inability to monitor and control prices effectively has contributed to the slowing down of agricultural growth across the country during the decade, including a negative growth in few states such as Bihar.

This has meant a greater need for diversification for livelihood security for both men and women. As men are more mobile than women, they have often ended up migrating to other locations in search of work. Liberalisation then has also led to discursive shifts whereby poor rural women are seen less as vulnerable and deserving recipients of state welfare and more as active economic agents to be enabled as entrepreneurs by credit programmes.

In the following section we review the broader changes to poverty and inequality since 1991, before focusing on gendered rural livelihoods.

3. LIBERALISATION, POVERTY AND INEQUALITY

Women have gender identities alongside other identities, and it is therefore important to know how they have fared simply as poor rural citizens. Analytically separating gender and poverty means avoiding the assumption that how women fare *as women* will be the same as how they fare as poor people, and indeed it is the potential for contradictory effects along these identities which can militate against collective action by women. For example, if male wages, and therefore household incomes, are rising, even if women's wages are not, then their experience of poverty is likely to be ameliorated, unless (as must be vanishingly rare) there is absolutely no joint consumption and shared well-being. Or if caste relations are shifting then women may experience greater or lesser wellbeing primarily through these identities, albeit in variably gender distinctive ways.

Poverty and inequality are deeply intertwined but we partly disengage them in the two sections which follow to allow a focus first on the broad poverty trends, and then on the more complex picture of rural inequality. In both sections we nest the post 91 picture in an account of change of the preceding decades.

The pattern for poverty across India was that from the mid 70s it declined continuously until the end of the 80s, crept up a little in 1992, and dropped again in 1993-4 to about the level of 1987-8. There are competing accounts of the poverty story. Patnaik claims that 'the 'liberalisation' years have been bad for poverty, and especially so for rural poverty' (2003:24). The latest 55th round of the NSS shows a sharp decline in poverty rates, but the data was contaminated by the changed reference period, and she reports that uncontaminated data on expenditure however show rural poverty at 36 per cent in 1999-2000 (2003:24), only a marginal improvement from 1993-94. Dev M (2000: 824) concludes from three assessments of

poverty[15] that rural and urban poverty increased in the first two years after reforms, and declined thereafter, but that the rate of decline in poverty in the 90s has been slower than in the 80s, though urban poverty has declined much faster in the post-reform period[16]. He (2000: 834) points to the paradox of slower agricultural growth in the 90s despite improved terms of trade and private investment.

However, in a detailed examination of data for 1987-8, 1993-4 and 1999-2000 which adjusts for the problems with the 55th round of the NSS, uses the 43rd round as a base, and triangulates with other data on expenditure and wages, Deaton and Dreze (2002: 3735) conclude that poverty declined in the 1990s more or less in line with earlier trends, and the all India headcount ratio dropped from 29% in 1993-4 to 23% in 1999-2000. One might then conclude that headcount poverty has continued to decline at a similar rate to the pre-reform period, but that liberalisation has not accelerated the reduction in headcount poverty.

Further understanding of the changing distribution of headcount poverty requires a disaggregated analysis. While the NSS 55th Round data for Uttar Pradesh for instance finds an overall poverty incidence of 33.1 per cent, this is 44 per cent for SC/STs and 50.6 per cent for agricultural labour (Kozel & Parker 2003: 396, 391). In the case of India, Dev (2003) finds that poverty incidence for SCs was 36.25 per cent, for STs 45.86 per cent and for agricultural labourers 46.8 per cent against an average incidence of 27.09 per cent in rural areas.

The experience of Haryana is also instructive. One of the early Green Revolution states, Haryana saw a marked rise in poverty in the early 90s and in 93-4 this was close to 29 per cent, ie the extent of poverty in 1973-4 (Bhalla, 1999 : 30). Poverty levels have become delinked from agricultural performance in India and Haryana in particular. The new story is one of growth in per capita income without any reduction in poverty, as a consequence of rising inequality. In Haryana real agricultural wage rates rose to record levels in 1991-4 but this did not reduce poverty. The collapse of rural non-farm work in India generally is directly related to the rise in poverty – since agricultural wage rates are importantly affected by non-farm wage rates – but in Haryana the explanation for rising poverty is the stagnation of steady work in any sector.

While poverty figures may be contested, where there is consensus is over rising inequalities of various kinds. Deaton and Dreze emphasise the important rise in inequalities and show that inequality affected the decline in headcount ratios of poverty by 1.3%, ie it would have been 21.4% instead of 22.7% in the absence of the increase in inequality (2002:3739). Three important aspects of inequality are identified; already better off western and southern states have grown more strongly than poorer northern and eastern ones, rural:urban expenditure disparities have risen, there has been a widening of the gap between wages to occupational groups, with agricultural wages increasing more slowly than public sector pay, indicating occupational inequalities. Amongst the pervasive evidence for continuity in pre-reform trends, it is the rise in inequalities which seems to be a new development. Dev

[15] The literature on poverty still predominantly uses headcount approaches rather than well-being indicators, reflecting data availability

[16] Sunderam (2003: 67) shows that the decline in the overall growth rate of employment in 1994-2000 was largely attributable to the near stagnation of agriculture.

finds Gini coefficients showing increased inequalities in consumption post-reform (from 27.98 per cent in 1989-90 to 29.50 per cent in 1995-7) (2000:825).

The implications for rural women are that their experience of household poverty reduction will have been dependent on regional locations, rural-urban migration may be accelerated by widening well-being gaps, transfers from men in poor households may have become more uncertain, employment may have become more imperative than ever, and social mobility via marriage transactions increasingly urgent as differentiation proceeds. These themes are pursued further below.

What do the poverty figures mean for consumption? Over the long term there has been considerable improvement in nutrition; Harris-White and Janakarajan note that in their Tamil Nadu study between 1973-94, the proportion of households in nutritional stress has halved (1997:1473). Few commentators on long term change in rural India fail to point out the obvious changes in consumption behaviour signalled by the proliferation of teashops, bakeries, and grocery stores in even small villages (eg Gough 1989). These pose questions about who forms the market for this kind of commoditisation, how large it is and what it signifies about incomes, poverty and inequality.

During the 90s foodgrain output per capita fell (Patnaik 2003: 32), and Meenakshi and Vishmwanathan note that "there has been a secular decline in calorie intake in rural areas, amounting to approximately 70 calories per capita over the period 1983 to 1999-2000" (2003:369). A comparison of food consumption data from the NSSO 50th Round in 1993-94 and 55th Round in 1999-2000, seems to confirm fears of worsening nutrition. The proportion of rural people consuming less than 2400 Kcal per day increased from 42 to 45.2 per cent, while those consuming less than 1890 Kcal increased from 13.40 to 15.10 per cent over this period. In a comparison of NSS 38th and 55th Round data (1983 to 1999-2000) for 16 Indian states, Meenakshi and Vishwanathan show that while calories deprivation seems to have increased in most states (the exceptions are Kerala, West Bengal and Jammu & Kashmir), this varies with the norm chosen. Improvements are visible in eight out of the 16 states if a lower norm of 1800 kcal is chosen rather than the higher norm of 2400 kcal. For the same 16 states, per capita consumption of cereals declined from 434.79 grams per day to 410 grams per day, and this is significant for the poorest decile, whose food basket is still dominated by cereals.

However Deaton and Dreze point out (2002) that the reduction in average cereal consumption is not new, and a similar decline took place in the 70s and 80s when poverty was declining, driven by falling cereal consumption of the higher expenditure groups increasingly substituting other foods for cereals. A number of studies confirm this (Hanchate and Dyson 2000, cited in Deaton and Dreze p3747, Rao 2000) and National Nutrition Monitoring Bureau surveys show how fats, sugars and milk products are substituted for cereals as incomes rise (NNMB 1999), so it is not clear that declining cereal consumption equates to increasing hunger.

Food intakes are notoriously imprecise and difficult to interpret (Harriss 1990) whilst nutritional outcomes, such as Body Mass Indices (BMI) are much less ambiguous, and we know that BMIs indicate vulnerability for landless working men as well as some women. Gender norms in many rural Indian contexts suggest that women forego food consumption in the interests of other family members, and fast regularly, yet

they also have practical control of food preparation and for Haryana, Chowdhry (1994:224) observes that 'over the years, women have clearly outsmarted the men's cornering of the largest shares of food', and '….in matters of food a woman is generally considered to be a thief' (1994: 225). The very need for women to 'steal' food within their own homes shows the existence of such norms, but what matters in terms of nutritional wellbeing is the degree of conformity to the norms.

Swaminathan's analysis of 1993 NNMB data shows a fairly similar BMI for adult men and women of 46.02 and 45.84 respectively for nine Indian states, though there were some variations across states. Malnutrition amongst boys 1-5 years at 57.2 per cent was in fact marginally more than for girls of the same age-group at 55.1 per cent (2000: 27-28). The NNMB rural survey data from 2001 reveals a worrying trend on both counts from a gendered viewpoint. While BMI's for adult men and women have improved to 56.9 and 52.5 per cent respectively within the normal range, and chronic energy deficiency declined from the previous 46 per cent to 37 per cent for men and 39 per cent for women, the male-female gaps have widened. In the case of 1-5 year old children, while the gender gap in malnutrition levels is small, the proportion of underweight children has increased to 59.7 and 60.5 per cent respectively for boys and girls (NNMB, 2002: 88-93).[17] Outcomes in both periods indicate that the overall calorie adequacy as indicated by BMIs of adult women is less of a problem than the quality of those calories, since anaemia and micronutrient deficiencies continue to be pervasive and intakes of iron and vitamin A are grossly deficient amongst poor rural women in south Asia (NNMB, 2002: 48).

What is worrying from this data is that while both boys and girls suffer from nutritional inadequacy in their early years, girls seem to lose out as they grow up, as evident from the widening gender gap amongst adults in the 1990s.

It is probably the nutrition of girl children which is of most concern. Sen shows (1993:460), in a comparison of child nutrition in two villages, that the one where land reform produced less landlessness exhibited greater favouritism for boys in nutrition, and that in the village with a government run direct feeding programme for children, girls do much better. Recognising this, the Supreme Court of India passed an order on 28th November 2001 directing all states to provide mid-day meals in school. The coverage has been expanding over the last two years, though some state governments, notably Bihar, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh are yet to comply, claiming a lack of resources for this purpose (Dreze & Goyal 2003:4673).[18] They further note that by facilitating school participation among under-privileged children and girls, this measure can help challenge class, caste and gender inequalities. This reveals how the absence of state intervention, such as the withdrawal of state feeding programmes, may have particularly negative effects on girl children in contexts of strong son preference, and furthermore that state policies such as land reform may have progressive effects vis-à-vis class and retrogressive ones in relation to gender.

[17] A note of caution in terms of child BMIs – there is substantial age misreporting especially for girls which makes the age/ht/wt figures unreliable (pers. comm..from Richard Palmer-Jones).
dubious especially as western norms tend to be used.

[18] In Bangladesh too, research conducted by the ESTEEM project revealed that the strategy of school tiffins is clearly preferable to supplying dry rations for the children to take home from the point of child nutrition.

One of the most debated moves since the reforms has been the changes to the Public Distribution System (PDS). Sales from ration shops had declined by the early 90s associated with increasing issue prices. Government in 1997 therefore introduced a more rigidly targeted food subsidy programme to replace the previous universal access to PDS, and ignored calls for large scale food for work programmes in rural areas. The universal PDS had also been severely criticised for being inefficient and corrupt with 'leakage' of a third of wheat, rice and sugar and half of oils onto the open market, poor quality of food, uneven spread among states and a distribution not consistent with locations of high poverty, particularly bad rural distribution with an estimated 10 per cent of PDS food going to 50 per cent of the poor (Randhawa, 1994:369). On the PDS, Rajuladevi (2000: 480) says that open market prices would have been lower for rice if the PDS were not there and Radhakrishna et al (1994) find the PDS to be against the interests of the poor, who get a relatively small share of poor quality and end up renting ration cards to the rich, and simply giving access for rich to PDS supplies without card.

Swaminathan (2000) however, has argued that using income criteria for targeting households has led to the exclusion of a large number of people suffering from calorie and micro-nutrient deficits, who are no longer technically classified as poor.[19] The monthly entitlement of the poor, irrespective of size of the household, is fixed at 10 kg per household per month, indicating a meagre 2-3 kg per capita, given equal distribution within the household (Meenakshi and Vishmwanathan 2003). The costs therefore of such targeting are likely to be particularly high for women within poor households, who are likely to remain chronically under-nourished. Swaminathan also notes that off-take from the PDS is not related to poverty *per se*, but state level political commitment to food security. So while in Kerala, 87 per cent of the population purchased from the PDS in 1994-95, this was only 2 per cent in Bihar. At the same time, the extent of severe malnutrition was lowest in Kerala and highest in Bihar (2000: 29), Kerala also being one in three states that has shown improvements in calories intakes across both the 1800 and 2400 kcal norms. This has raised fears that the confident predictions that sustained increase in food prices are not a threat to India's poor in the longer run (Gulati and Kelly, 1999), and adverse affects merely short term, (Ravallion M 1998) may be incorrect.

Since infant mortality rates are a commonly used wellbeing indicator it is important to note too the slackening of the rate of decline in the IMR over the last decade: it fell by 17.7% between 1971-81, by 27.3% between 1981-91, but stagnated at 10% between 1991-99, and the decline in under 5 mortality rate shows similar slowing down (Rao 2004:8). Of critical importance are the gender differentials in infant and child mortality, discussed in more detail below. The child sex ratio in India has declined from 945 in 1991 to 927 in 2001, most notably in Himachal Pradesh (897), Punjab (793), Chandigarh (845), Haryana (820) and Delhi (865). Furthermore the sex ratio at birth deviates increasingly from the normal 105 males for 100 females to an All India figure of 111 males per 100 females, indicating massive sex selective

[19] The identification of poor based on income criteria has many problems: accuracy of data, seasonal variations in earnings of a majority of the rural poor, apart from a low official poverty line (Swaminathan, 2000:96). Village studies in Maharashtra conducted by Swaminathan highlight further problems in identification given the gap between central and state estimates of the Below Poverty Line households. She also found that it is generally the low-income households who use the PDS and not the rich, nor the very poor. While 70-80 per cent of households suffer calorie/food deficit, only 37 per cent are classified as income-poor (Swaminathan, 2000:32).

abortion of female foetuses with a similar line-up of states with the worst figures; Haryana, Punjab, UP, Rajasthan and Gujarat (Rao 2004: 9).

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At 0.9% of GDP India has the world's 5th lowest expenditure on health care, and whilst health sector expenditure declines, allocations for family planning has increased. But whilst the Centre was committed to the Cairo declaration and non-target oriented programmes, some states announced their own population policies, including a two-child norm for eligibility to stand for panchayati raj elections. Womens groups protested to the National Human Rights Commission, which read such policies against the National Population Policy, yet the Supreme Court upheld the Haryana government law mandating the two-child norm for eligibility to stand for PR elections (Rao 2004: 6), As Rao notes

> 'The irony is that PRIs are seen as a vehicle of democratisation and a space for the dalits, the adivasis and women to find a political voice. Indeed a third of seats are to be reserved for women to empower tem politically. But one hand of population policy takes away what is given by the other hand of women's empowerment. (2002: 6).

It may be relevant that it is the hand of the federal state which gives and the hand of the local state which takes away.

While the implication of the cutbacks in social spending for women's education is discussed in detail in a later section, it would be useful to make some comments on the implications on women's health here. As Table 1 reveals, while education indicators reveal a slow, but steady improvement over the decade, the picture with respect to women's health is not quite clear.

While life expectancy for women has been improving and fertility rates appear stable, there are wide fluctuations in maternal mortality and a slowing down of the decline in infant mortality rate (Deaton and Dreze 2002). Jejeebhoy (1999) notes that these widely fluctuating estimations could be a result of definitional problems in data collection, such as the underestimation of abortions in the National Family Health Surveys (NFHS). Further, while the NFHS provides information on access to ante-natal care and delivery services, it fails to look at other aspects of women's obstetric health status such as diet and feeding patterns, workloads, rest and conditions at delivery for which one needs to rely on the few available qualitative studies.[20]

Alongside this is the substantial increase in private health care provision in the 1990s at the cost of public health care. Rama Baru (2003:4436) notes a jump in the share of private hospital beds in India from 28.8 per cent in 1973 to 40.7 per cent in 1983 and to 61 per cent in 1996. This could conceivably lead to a regression in women's mortality if private health services are not affordable. The rate of untreated ailments rose by 40% in the poorest decile, those not accessing health care for financial reasons rose from 10-20% (Rao 2004: 9) and health expenditure is emerging as one of the main reasons for indebtedness (Krishnan 1999). In addition to cost, private health facilities are concentrated in urban areas, and Krishnaji and James, based on an analysis of Sample Registration System (SRS) data from 1971 to 1997, note that while there has been a general improvement in mortality rates and a reduction in the

[20] She notes fluctuations from 437 per 100,000 live births according to NFHS 1992 data to 555 per 100,000 live births according to a qualitative study in Karnataka by Bhat et al (1982).

female-male mortality gap in urban areas, rural females in the age-group of 15-29 years continue to be the most disadvantaged (2002:4634). Mortality rates for them are 27 per cent higher than for rural males and 67 per cent more than for urban men. This seems to be on account of lack of health care provision in rural areas combined with gendered ideologies of discrimination against women and their lack of control over cash incomes. As we discuss in this paper, women are increasingly confined to family farming and low-paid non-farm work, as not many well-paid options in terms of off-farm employment are available to them. With enhanced competition, commodity markets too are getting more masculinised and inaccessible for women (see Harriss-White), thus implying reduced access to cash.

A major shift however appears to be that gender disadvantage lasts for a shorter period of time. Women having completed the main reproductive period tend to be stronger in terms of survival, while many male jobs may involve greater risk during their peak productive years, and in the 30-44 age-group, it is rural men who are most disadvantaged in mortality statistics. Krishnaji and James also show that male deaths – unlike women's - are not well correlated to health care supply, and there seems to be a stagnation in male mortality (2002:14). This may be because women's mortality is connected to areas of health care which have been prioritised (reproductive health for fertility control) and are more tractable for basic services, whilst the primary causes of male mortality have not been population policy priorities.

Based on the National Family Health Surveys of 1992 and 1998, Krishnaji and James (2002:4636) have constructed two indices – one reflecting Safe Motherhood based on a combination of ante-natal care and deliveries under medical attention (both in public and private institutions, but excluding deliveries at home). The second reflects health care supply based on data on per capita public expenditure on health and the supply of doctors, hospitals and beds, each as a ratio of the population, across Indian states. While the first shows a general improvement in most states with the exception of Bihar, UP, Haryana, Assam and Punjab, the latter shows a worsening in most states during the 1990s (See Table 2). The exceptions here are Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, though other than Kerala, the rest still have a long way to go in achieving universal coverage. The consistently high health indices for Kerala point to the important role of public health institutions especially for the poor and women, yet these have been allowed to decay in most states over the 1990s.

Table 2: Changes in Safe Motherhood and Health Care Supply Indices in Selected States

State	SMI92	SMI98	HCSI92	HCSI98
Madhya Pradesh	30	33	30	32
Bihar	21	20	30	22
Haryana	42	38	34	33
Uttar Pradesh	25	20	35	23
Orissa	32	46	37	35
Andhra Pradesh	58	69	43	52
Rajasthan	19	30	43	40
Assam	26	26	48	44
Karnataka	59	66	53	57
West Bengal	50	62	57	47
Maharashtra	60	67	66	57
Tamil Nadu	78	88	66	63
Gujarat	53	63	73	76
Punjab	55	55	78	72
Kerala	92	96	100	100

Source: Krishnaji and James (2002:4636) based on NFHS data. SMI 92 and 98 stands for the safe motherhood index for 1992 and 1998 respectively and HCSI 92 and 98 stands for the Health Care supply Index. Both indices reflect population coverage.

In Gujarat for instance there was a decline in allocation to health from 8 per cent of the total budget in 1986 to 6 per cent in 1996 (Mahadevia, 2000:3200). The main reason for improvement in mortality rates here appears to be the success of the immunisation programme and the reduction in fertility rates during the 1980s, thereby reducing the number of pregnancies and the risk of mortality during child-birth. While public health facilities are used for maternal and child health programmes, treatment of diseases in entirely left to the private sector. Studies on the utilisation of health services in India and Sri Lanka show that the middle classes have largely moved away from public provisioning and it is the poor who use these services (Baru, 2003). What might these changes mean for rural women?

Krishnan (1999:228) in his analysis of the cost and burden of treatment finds that in all states except Kerala, rural patients pay more for health care and hospitalisation in private hospitals. This can increase the intensity of poverty for the already poor. As indicated by the data from Krishnaji and James (2002) as well, growing privatisation seems to be marginalising access for rural people, particularly women in the 15-29 age-group. In Gujarat, one already finds enhanced inequalities between the industrialised and non-industrialised as well as the non-tribal and tribal parts of the state, with the latter showing very high rates of malnutrition, goitre, anaemia and consequently mortality (Mahadevia 2000: 3203).[21] The Report of the Independent Commission on Health in India states,

> "there are significant differences in patterns of mortality and morbidity within regions and states, that are hidden in the aggregate statistics. The more remote, sparsely populated and resource-poor an area is, the greater chances of its neglect, in terms of the availability and effectiveness of health services. For

[21] The tribal district of Dangs has severe iodine deficiency to the extent of 44 per cent among school-going children (Government of Gujarat, 1994, quoted in Mahadevia 2000:3199 Table 9).

example, the stretch of tribal areas, extending from West Bengal to Gujarat… remain underserved, ignored and forced to accept a lower quality of life" (1997:7).[22]

A comparison of NFHS-1 and 2 data for Andhra Pradesh reveals an increase in crude death rate from 8.7 to 10.7 per 1000 over the period 1991-1998 with excess female mortality in the 0-4 age-group and the 15-49 age-group. While more than a third of women (37 per cent) have a BMI of less than 18.5 kg/m2, indicating a high prevalence of nutritional deficiency, this was higher for rural women (43 per cent), SC/ST women (44 per cent) and those employed by someone else (49 per cent). Though half of currently married women reported some reproductive health problem, only 37 per cent of them sought any medical help, primarily due to obstacles of time and cost (IIPS, 2000:152). Patricia Jeffrey (2003 pers.comm) reports a huge increase in private medical services used by almost all, including the poor, in the UP village where she is restudying reproductive health and gender relations. Villagers all like the speed, quality of care, cleanliness and politeness of private sector care. Public hospital provision is now much worse and reduced compared to 20 years ago. So while there is a large increase in women having hospital deliveries, this is at a significant cost.

What seems to emerge from this analysis is a widening of inequalities between rural and urban areas, between different states and between different caste groups, rather than gender differences per se. Improvements in reproductive health facilities and public investment in this field have served to improve women's reproductive health considerably. The improvement in the safe motherhood index across most states points towards a general improvement in maternal health, while stable and in some instances declining fertility rates point to fewer pregnancies and hence a lower exposure to risk of maternal mortality. But it is then other aspects of health that are neglected and contribute to mortality for both men and women who are unable to access health care on time and at affordable prices. And it is here that gender ideologies of worth tend to work against women's health-seeking behaviour as reported in the case of Andhra Pradesh. For better health outcomes for women, particularly rural women, it seems important to improve rural health infrastructure as well as improve its efficiency (Sankar and Kathuria, 2004).

Of course, information which is presented at household level, or simply divided into per capita estimates, cannot reveal much about intrahousehold poverty and inequality. For this we need work which collects data separately from women and men. Some insight into changing consumption patterns of women within households comes from Prem Chowdhry's study on consumption-expenditure patterns in rural Haryana (1999), where she found that while women's engagement in both agriculture and animal husbandry had increased with the introduction of new technologies, they did not have much voice in influencing the household's expenditure-consumption patterns. The new expenditure-consumption patterns were based on male priorities, emphasising status symbols and giving low priority to women's needs. For instance, she found improvements in household incomes leading to improvements in housing, with the construction of urban-style living rooms, fitted with tables, chairs, a fan, radio and TV. This was however an exclusive male space. Similarly there were investments made in restaurants and cinemas. There was however not much

[22] In Dumka district of Jharkhand, Rao (2002) found that 82 out of 188 sanctioned posts for doctors were vacant, 44 per cent of the total, in the district health machinery, the primary health centres were ill-equipped, resulting in low usage.

expenditure on household devices that could reduce the drudgery of women's work such as mixers, pressure cookers and cooking gas.

The situation has probably worsened for women since Chowdhry's study in the mid-1980s. With rapid mechanisation and the operation of combined harvesters by family labour, there is now a very low labour absorption in agriculture. This has meant a greater dependence on non-agricultural employment for agricultural labourer households. Here, the opportunities for women are very limited. Rawal (2003) in a recent study of two Haryana villages found that annually in labouring households, men earned almost three times what women earned primarily as a result of their non-agricultural work.[23] This was partly because there was no work in the non-agricultural sector available locally and women faced cultural and social barriers in terms of their mobility for finding work. This resulted not only in low wages, but payment to women was often made in fodder commodities rather than cash, and also contracts increasingly were informalised and insecure. Differences in earning capacity do influence the bargaining ability of women in the household as well as their access to food and other goods. In terms of consumer durables and other assets, while a large part of those are now acquired as part of a dowry, there are few that would make domestic life easier, except by chance. For instance, fodder choppers with electric motors can also be used for grinding wheat into flour, something earlier done by hand (personal communication from Vikas Rawal, February 2004).

What is the gender significance of the new consumerism so widely commented on? Non food expenditure in rural India, largely stagnant from 1960-73/4, saw a major rise in the last years of the 80s. The growth areas are however generally in male forms of consumption such as restaurants, hotels and cinemas which being public, and many associated with alcohol consumption, exclude rural women as direct consumers. It does however affect women by draining away household resources into personal consumption. Karin Kapadia (2002b: 58) while arguing for the greater opportunities for upward class mobility, as well as aspirations raised by increasing exposure to media, has however also pointed to the way the new consumption simultaneously unsettles the social order, and this is discussed below.

This section has showed that headcount poverty has continued to decline at previous rates, but has not accelerated and so expectations that liberalisation would prove to be more pro-poor than the alternatives have been disappointed. Furthermore, the decline in poverty would have been greater were it not for the increased inequality characterising the period. There is clear evidence of widening regional disparities, with already more prosperous states benefiting more than poorer ones, rural-urban disparities increasing and income inequalities between occupational groups widening. Broader indicators of wellbeing show deterioration – slowing down of infant mortality decline, and deepening wellbeing crises for particular groups – amongst which female foetuses, infants and girls are most salient.

Changing levels of household inequality

The previous section has sketched a broad picture of declining poverty with considerable continuity with previous decades, but increasing inequality since the 91

[23] The over-utilisation of groundwater in Punjab and Haryana and the rapidly declining availability could have serious implication on the sustainability of agriculture (MSSRF & WFP, 2004) and in turn on livelihood opportunities in the coming years.

reforms. Is the latter a new development or is it too simply more of the same? To answer this we will first briefly consider whether pre-liberalisation policy produced increasing rural inequality, then review what is known about the post-reform period.

The Green Revolution was for some time thought to have lead to increased inequality, for example, between the 50s and mid 70s the pattern of social mobility in Kathleen Gough's Tamil Nadu work was seen to reflect growing inequalities. She judges some 21 per cent of caste Hindus to have improved, and 35 per cent to have deteriorated, whilst only 4 per cent of Harijans improved and 51 per cent deteriorated in one village (Kirippur) and in the other, only 9 per cent caste Hindus improved and 58 per cent deteriorated, and again only 7 per cent harijans improved and 53 per cent deteriorated. Kirippur was more egalitarian but inequality had increased (1989: 391). More recently however, studies of change set in a longer time frame have been more positive. Reproductions of agrarian class structures depend to a great degree on patterns of landholding, and Dreze finds in his long term study of Palanpur in Western Uttar Pradesh that land based inequalities have remained very stable, and that by examining land holding dynasties, the distribution of land is seen to have remained remarkably constant over time, although there are now smaller holdings and more landless households, the latter since 1974 in particular (Dreze 2002: 211-13). Interestingly, the increased landlessness is not driven by land sales but by in-migration of landless households and thus cannot be seen as impoverishment of marginal farmers or signifying economic distress. Here too lies a methodological point about assuming that higher numbers of landless necessarily indicate land alienation from small farmers.

Dreze concludes that the Green Revolution has not increased inequality in areas with irrigation potential and relatively low landlessness. Although income inequality data for any particular year is hard to interpret (because of climatic factors and so on) the Gini coefficients of per capita incomes show 'no significant increase – and possibly some decrease - in economic inequality over the survey period.' (2002:214). An equalising factor has been expansion of irrigation from 50 per cent of land to 96 per cent. 'Technological change in agriculture has been more or less scale-neutral, and per-acre input and output levels are quite similar in different land ownership classes in each survey year. Similarly, it is unlikely that the expansion of non-agricultural employment has been a major force of growing inequality [check end of quote here? He speculates that this may be due to relatively low original levels of landlessness in Palanpur, and that in areas where land and water are more unequally distributed, because of low water tables and high investment costs, the impact of the Green Revolution may have been more inegalitarian.

To focus now specifically on the post-1991 situation. Sen (2003:10) demonstrates that the two most significant changes in technology over the last two decades have been an increase in fertiliser use and an overall decline in labour use across 14 States (the exceptions to this are West Bengal and Orissa). This can partly be explained by the dramatic rises in productivity of male agricultural workers, especially in the 80s (Bhalla and Singh 1997:A-14-15). But not only are these very unevenly distributed regionally, but such interstate variations in male agricultural worker productivity have tended to increase over time (the coefficient of variation rising from 43.35 per cent in 1962-5, to 46.94 per cent in 1970-3 and 51.94 per cent in 1992-5 (Bhalla and Singh

1997:A-14-15)[24]. In terms of gender distribution of employment, while the UP study by Kozel and Parker (2003) shows 75 per cent of female employment lies in farming, this is the case for only 38 per cent of men. While 16.6 per cent of men had salaried employment and 21.6 per cent non-farm employment, this was the case for only 2.8 and 4.1 per cent of women respectively.

Further, the output to cost ratios have increased substantially in the case of wheat in Punjab, UP and Haryana, but these are also the states with maximum decline in labour use over the 1990s. Output-cost ratios for paddy have been stable but declined for coarse cereals and oilseeds (except groundnut), adversely affecting Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra (Sen 2003: 13-15). In the 90s, with yield growth slowing down and prices of crops other than cereals and sugarcane rising slower than the cost of living, profitability of agriculture was clearly on the decline except for the few crops and regions that had effective and remunerative price support. This seems to have contributed also to a deceleration in the rate of growth of private investment in agriculture and pushed people to look for other options (ibid: 38). Inequalities between rural areas across states thus appear to be accelerating, although how much these are caused by the reforms is uncertain.

In a Tamil Nadu study two decades of agricultural growth has been judged modest, unstable and based on extraction of water resources for groundwater irrigation, but at the same time Harris-White and Janakarajan (1997) note that real incomes have increased substantially between 1973-94, 6 fold for the rich producers, 4.5 times for poor producers and 2.8 times for landless labourers (1997:1473). Since 1990 electricity for agriculture has been virtually free, despite donor pressure to introduce volumetric pricing, and yields for HYV paddy over the period have been static, although per cent foodgrains marketed has doubled to two-thirds of paddy production (Harris-White and Janakarajan 1997: 1472). Crop diversification over the last decade, and halving of average land holdings – in 1993-4, 64 per cent cultivated less than 1 hectare - has led to an increase in total rural assets inequality.

One element of inequality which may be said to have improved however is in the nature of labour contracts, which have shifted from attached and bonded labour contracts to more casual ones. Brass (1999) is critical of the permanent or attached labour contracts, as though meant to be materially reciprocal exchange relationships, these tend to provide poorly paid employment. The casualisation of labour is a longstanding pattern in rural India, and Pal (1997) uses ICRISAT data 1980-84 and resurvey 1992 to show that economic development in India goes hand in hand with expansion of alternative employment opportunities for agricultural labour and also an expanded access to credit, both of which lead to a decline in regular (ie attached) labour contracts and a gradual casualisation of agricultural labour. This trend has continued, though several qualitative studies suggest that casual labour hiring is also embedded within debt relations as well as networks of political and caste patronage based often on the mediation and distribution of resources flowing into the locality (Coppard, 2004). There thus seems to be some ambiguity amongst labourers in terms of relative benefits, as while earnings from regular contracts are usually lower than from daily casual labour, they are seen to provide comparative security. The

[24] Bhalla and Singh (1997) point out in their analysis of changes in the agricultural labour force between 1962 and 1995 that the frequent changes in definition mean that the numbers of female workers in agriculture are not really comparable over various censuses, especially 1971 (pA-12) and they confine their analysis to male agricultural workers.

diversification of opportunities, however, has also contributed to a desire for greater economic independence amongst labourers, hence a preference often for casual contracts. Further, with more cultivators taking on labouring, they tend to prioritise their own cultivation before engaging in wage labour. This shift away from attached labour has then gone along with rises in real wages.

The experience of growing class based inequality will have affected women's identities but also their perceptions of the importance of social mobility and thereby, we speculate, attitudes to marriage as the most significant opportunity for upward mobility in most women's lives. We discuss this further below.

Gender based inequality has proven more intractable in many ways than class. The implications of the Palanpur study are that poverty has been reduced, and over 35 years inequality is on balance improved – with the important exception of gender inequality. Most strikingly, it is the association of rural prosperity with deepening gender discrimination which is important to recognise. What Rustagi (2000:45), in her district level analysis of gendered well-being, identifies as Gender Backward Districts (GBD) are also prosperous districts – none of her GBDs are listed in the Relative Index of Development calculated by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy to identify districts with low levels of development. This pattern by which 'those who are deprived exhibit a somewhat lesser incidence of gender discrimination as compared to those who have better access to development' (2000:46) presents itself at many scales of analysis.

This suggests that poverty reduction can occur without improving gender-based well-being, ie women can benefit from socio-economic change as agricultural workers and farmers whilst at the same time experiencing deeper degrees of inequality and disadvantage as *women*. This re-emphasises the importance of points often made in gender analysis that poverty and gender must be conceptually separated (Jackson, 1996) and that women's gender interests are distinct from their other identity related interests (Molyneux, 1985). This latter point indicates that we must weigh up gains and losses in a more holistic way, taking account of multiple interests and identities borne simultaneously, rather than simply with reference to the sole identity of 'woman'.

To summarise, levels of headcount poverty have continued to decline in line with pre-reform trends, paddy yields remain static, average land holding size has declined, agricultural labour has become more casualised and somewhat better paid but agricultural employment has stagnated along with the agricultural sector in general. Consumption patterns reflect declining cereal and total calorie intake and increasing expenditure on household goods largely oriented to status and male leisure. Women as members of poor rural households are therefore not obviously enjoying shared improvements in household wellbeing. Dreze's study of 35 years of change does not show growing class based inequality, but does signal continuing gender discrimination even where poverty has fallen, and thus emphasises the importance of a gender analysis of liberalisation.

4. GENDERED LIVELIHOODS UNDER LIBERALISATION

As pointed out above, analysis of gender relations requires an intrahousehold perspective on livelihoods – which remains rare. However, here we review what has been proposed in relation to rural women, as a category, under liberalisation, and move from an integrated consideration of livelihood portfolios, and diversification in particular, to then focus on particular livelihood elements, resources, own-account farming and wage labouring and migration. The latter two sections have only a partial fit with class divisions, but reflect occupational distinctions common in most of the literature and in official data sources, which continue to make a primary distinction between cultivators and labourers.

Livelihood portfolios and diversification

Livelihood diversification in rural areas is not a new phenomenon, and the reasons for it include agricultural growth and increase in public expenditure in rural areas on the more positive side, to unemployment, urbanisation and the stagnation in real wages in agriculture on the more negative side, linking diversification to distress rather than to choice[25]. Particularly in relation to migration in search of employment to diversify household portfolios and add extra income streams, there has been considerable debate on how far such decisions are "voluntary" and lead to an improvement in the quality of life of the migrant workers and their families (Breman, 1996) or seen as reflecting poverty and food insecurity, the absence of choice and as a problem which should be discouraged by policy. In recent years, a body of work on gender relations in the context of migration has emerged, yet there is still little analysis available in terms of the impact of the broader phenomena of diversification on women's lives. Official statistics and much other research continues to work with notions of occupations rather than livelihoods, which separate own-account farming households with land, from landless labourers, and those in manufacturing, services and so on. Yet these divisions are less and less satisfactory as land holdings decline and marginal farmers become effectively landless, and as the landless increasingly do not simply carry out wage work in agriculture, but engage in local, and seasonal migration to non-farm work of a wide variety. Most poor rural households therefore have less and less specialised livelihoods, but ones which are complex and diverse. In this paper, some attempt is made to piece together the likely implication for gender relations based on a combination of longitudinal statistical data (mainly from the NSSO) and qualitative village studies.

NSSO data on the sectoral distribution of rural workers between 1977-78 and 1999-2000 reveals that while there has been considerable diversification, this has not only slowed down considerably in the 1990s, but has mostly been confined to male workers. While male participation in the rural non-agricultural sector has increased by 9.4 per cent, female employment has more or less remained stable and confined to agriculture. The main sectors of growth in the non-farm sector appear to be construction, trade, hotels and restaurants, transport and storage,[26] all of which have shown a preference for men. Construction, manufacturing and services have been the sectors where women's employment too has increased marginally (Bhaumik, 2002). Livelihood diversification in rural areas seems therefore to be offering opportunities to men – as small businessmen and as employees in better paid jobs, whilst for

[25] See, for instance, Lanjouw and Shariff (2000), Unni (1996), Sen (1998) on this point.
[26] There has been little growth in mining, electricity and services during the 1990s.

women it involves extremely lowly paid work which is a last resort when agricultural wage work is absent.

Table 3: Broad Sectoral Distribution of Workers in rural India: 1977-78-1999-00

Year	Primary	Secondary (1)	Tertiary (2)	Rural Non-Agricultural (1+2)
Rural Males				
1977-78	80.7	8.8	10.5	19.3
1983	77.5	10.2	12.2	22.4
1987-88	74.5	12.3	13.4	25.7
1993-94	74.1	11.3	14.7	26.0
1999-00	71.4	12.7	16.0	28.7
Rural Females				
1977-78	88.2	6.7	5.1	11.8
1983	87.5	7.4	4.8	12.2
1987-88	84.7	10.0	5.3	15.3
1993-94	86.2	8.3	5.6	13.9
1999-00	85.4	8.9	5.7	14.6

Source: Various rounds of NSS Employment and Unemployment Surveys.

While the All-India evidence points to a decline in the share of agriculture in GNP, co-existing with a more or less unchanged share of the workforce, the case of Kerala appears to be an exception. Along with a decline in contribution to the state domestic product, the population dependent on agriculture has also been steadily declining. Interestingly, the decline of women in the agricultural workforce in Kerala has been much greater than that of men. Between 1961-91, the ratio of male to female agricultural workers in Kerala increased from 16 to 21, while at the national level it fell from 20 to 16. There are several reasons for this. First, there appears a strong link to the changes in cropping pattern. Taluk-wise data for the period 1976-77 to 1989-92 reveal a significant decline in the area under paddy cultivation, directly leading to a decline in female agricultural workers. This is corroborated by a detailed village study in the northern Malabar region showing a decline in paddy land from 2039 acres in 1936 to 1075 acres in 1996 (Ramakumar, 2003: 17). The main reason for the shift in land use in this village appears to be the demand for land for construction purposes.

Should we regard involvement in non farm employment as reflecting distress or expanded opportunity, and therefore how might we read the low and declining involvement of women? Bhaumik's analysis (2002 :736-7) suggests that growth of non-farm employment occurs when farm sectors are sluggish and vice versa, and that workers seem to opt for farm employment when they can and for non-farm employment as a last resort. This is especially so for men, and the negative relationship between growth in farm employment and in non-farm employment is not so strong for women. However he also finds (2002: 738) that a high incidence of rural non-farm employment workers is associated with lower head counts of rural poverty 'especially in recent years'. It may be that the category is too broad to be very meaningful, and includes both poorly paid employment which is indeed a poor second to agricultural wage work, as well as forms of employment which are considerably better paid, and therefore make an impact on poverty levels.

Off-farm employment plays a very important role in rural economies, and how it fares under liberalisation is therefore important. Bhalla notes a recent restructuring of rural non-farm employment, a shift from rural to urban in key sectors, a decline in family operated units, a rise in those employing hired labour and a widening of labour productivity differentials. During the 1980s and 90s policy shifts were inimical to expansion of rural unorganised employment, in particular (Bhalla 1989/9? :711-2) notes changes in the regulatory environment affecting small scale and very small scale manufacturing, reduced rural infrastructure investment, credit policies which directed credit away from rural and small scale activities, and import policies affecting some small industries. Thus

> 'economic liberalisation measures have damaged prospects for productive employment in the rural, unorganised, non-farm sector. But too much blame should not be laid at the door of liberalisation measures. The situation is much more complex than that. Much of the restructuring of the unorganised sector which has taken place very likely would have taken place anyway'. (1989/99? :712-3)

This is because improved transport cuts two ways (market integration both increasing competition locally and offering wider opportunities), the decline of tiny family units and rise in share of hired worker units is a long term pattern, low productivity in the unorganised sector units persists in regions with poor infrastructure and power (their decline is related to changes in these areas), and therefore the route out of agriculture will happen with or without liberalisation.

While both the Census statistics for Kerala and the village data thus show a marked shift in occupation in favour of construction and other services such as transportation and communication, the opportunities for women in non-agricultural manual work was much more limited than for men. While the proportion of women in the agricultural sector declined by 9.5 per cent between 1961 and 1991, the share of female workers in other sectors (construction, trade and commerce, transport, storage and communication) rose by only 5 per cent. That more women may now be unemployed is corroborated both by the Census and NSSO data, which show a reduction in female work participation rates from 18 to 16 per cent (Census 1991 and 2001) and 29 to 24 per cent respectively (NSSO 1987-88 and 1999-2000) for Kerala.

A major contributory factor towards the move away from agricultural work in the case of Kerala is the high level of education amongst all groups. The village study revealed that 62 per cent of manual worker households had members educated to high school or above, unlike for the rest of the country (Ramakumar, 2003). Once educated, they do not like to work in agriculture, and aspire for formal service-sector jobs. Very few young people below the age of 30 years were found engaged in agricultural work. Gulati (1993) in the case of Gulf migration from Kerala and Thangarajah (2003) in the case of Muslims from eastern Sri Lanka, note that both the migrants and their families at home sought to consolidate their middle class status by consumerism, and emulation of orthodox Islamic codes including the withdrawal of women from agriculture.[27] At a more general level, Khare (2003) refers to Ghose

[27] Ballard (2003) finds in the case of migrants from Mirpur in Pakistan to the Gulf and Britain that while construction has boomed in the home area and the consumption of foreign goods, little development has been made in agriculture or industry, similar to the situation in Kerala.

(1999) to point out that 'the unfavourable effect of education on the participation rate of working age females [is] sharper than that in the case of working age males'.

A second example of diversification comes from longitudinal survey data of two villages, Aurepalle and Dokur, in Mahbubnagar district of Andhra Pradesh from the ICRISAT database. This reveals that while agriculture contributed around 87-97 per cent of household income in 1975-76, this had fallen to 27-32 per cent in 2000-01. Interestingly, the share of non-agricultural income which was 3-12 per cent in the earlier period was now 67-72 per cent (Rao & Bantilan, 2003). In Dokur, there appears to have been a drastic decline in agriculture, both direct crop income and casual labour. This has been compensated for by an increase in income from migration and other non-farm sources. While these figures are not gender-disaggregated, much of this additional contribution is constituted of male income from other sources.

In their analysis of rural industrialisation Harris-White and Janakarajan (1997) comment that this process in Tamil Nadu excludes women and low castes. Capital immigration to rural areas is related to factors such as cheaper labour and the possibilities for tax evasion in rural locations. For them the improvements in agricultural wages have been less affected by state interventions and more related to the tightening effect on agricultural wages of increased spatial mobility of labour (which increasingly avoids agricultural work) and increasing (but largely male) investment and employment in rural non-farm economy. Sharad Chari (2004) also discusses the evolution of the idea of the self-made man under liberalised industrialising rural economies, a new style of masculinity with implications for marriage exchanges and dowry in particular.

Non agricultural employment and incomes have been rising for some years in rural India, and household livelihoods diversifying, but women have not managed to retain their share of non-farm employment and appear to be congregating in the poorer paid segments of this sector.

Livelihood resources: land and credit

As land is increasingly scarce and commoditised it becomes subject to deepening male competition in which women's usufruct, trusteeship and ownership rights are challenged, denied and overridden through a number of strategies; intimidation, collective action by male kin, court cases and the reinvention of cultural forms.

Legally in India, most women have inheritance rights – the Hindu Succession Act 1956 entitles Hindu women to an equal share of family property and the Shariat Act 1937 entitles Muslim women to inherit half the share as their brothers (see Agarwal 1994 for a detailed discussion on this). Yet, in practice, few women claim their rights, as the relationship with their natal kin, especially brothers is seen as more important to their well-being than the potential material benefits from land[28]. Pushed by feminist advocacy since the mid-1970s, both in India and internationally in the context of the UN Women's Decade (1975-85), the Indian state has increasingly sought to recognise and support women's land claims. The legislation mentioned above sought to make

[28] Sharma (1980), Kabeer (1999) makes a similar point in the case of Bangladesh regarding the importance of maintaining good social relations with the brother, this being seen as a moral entitlement to material benefits, when required, by the sister.

land inheritance more gender equitable, and affirmative action was put in place in state-led land reform and land redistribution programmes, even though these cover only three million hectares or 1.6 per cent of arable land (Agarwal, 1998).

The Sixth Plan document (1980), the first government document to recognise women's land claims, recommended that all land distributed under the land reform programme should be registered jointly in the name of both spouses. The Seventh Plan (1985-90), while not restating the directive on joint titling, focussed special attention on improving the skills of women in agriculture and allied sectors through training and increasing the number of women beneficiaries of rural development programmes. During this period, the National Perspective Plan for Women (1988-2000) was drafted which however stated, "Women's undiluted access to land…would undoubtedly bestow on her necessary economic independence and power and would improve her social position in the family" (GOI, 1988).

Given that women play a major role in agricultural production, the Eighth Plan (1990-95) makes two recommendations to increase women's control over economic resources and services. First, it notes that for married women, joint titles would be desirable for productive assets, houses and house-sites. Second and more concretely, it called upon State governments to allot 40 per cent of surplus land collected under the Land Ceiling Act to women, particularly women headed households, the rest being in joint titles (GOI, 1992).

The Ninth Plan (1997-2002) document has placed women and tribals at the centre of the New Agricultural Policy, announced in July 2000. This is clearly linked to the sectoral distribution of the workforce with a majority of women workers and tribal people engaged in agriculture and allied sectors. It goes on to say, "Strengthening the conditions of female farmers and female labourers would also help improve the food security at the household level. This is because generally women spend most of their income on household expenditure unlike men and this would help improve the nutrition of the children[29]. Efforts will be made to grant property rights in land to women wherever possible and self-help groups of women may be encouraged to take up activities like the regeneration of wastelands. Women will be given preference in the allotment of ceiling surplus lands" (section 4.1.60).

While this explicit recognition of women and tribals appears to be a positive step overall in terms of recognising their primary engagement with agriculture, what is somewhat worrying in the shift in discourse in favour of women is the move away from social equity or justice to purely instrumental reasons for granting women rights to land. This step is expected to improve household food security and the nutrition of children. Further, the above statement seems to accept as fact that women are solely responsible for household maintenance and not men. It not only ignores the mutuality and cooperation between men and women in household agricultural production, but gives cause for men not to contribute.

While signs of change are not yet visible in land relations, whether in terms of issue of *pattas* (land titles) in women's names or in terms of enhanced training and extension services to women, the slow growth in the agricultural sector, the decline in

[29] A recent World Bank Review identifies several examples where women's asset control contributes to children's welfare. In Honduras and Nicaragua, the amount of land owned by women has a positive impact on food expenditure and children's educational attainment (Deininger, 2003:38).

public investment and other signs of stagnation make one wonder whether women's land rights represent the cultural valuation of women as 'conservers' of the rural sector. Evidence from Malaysia (Stivens et al, 1994) and Peru (De la Cadena 1995 quoted in Deere and Leon, 2001:268) suggests that a growing feminisation of landed property relations occurs in the context of a general decline in the rural economy. Women's base in the community was undermined by State focus on industrial investment, massive out-migration from the rural sector, women's disadvantage in the labour market and religious revivalism in the case of Malaysia. Younger women in fact preferred to look for socially valued work in the industrial sector, rather than staying on in the villages and tending the land. Will the declining importance of agriculture to household incomes lead to greater equity in inheritance patterns, is a question that needs further research.

Similarly, while emphasising tribal rights to land, there have been recent moves in the tribal-dominated regions of Jharkhand, Chhatisgarh and Orissa to not just liberalise protective land legislation and develop land markets, but also for the state to acquire land for "development" understood primarily as industrial and mineral development. Given the poor record of rehabilitation following displacement[30], it is no surprise that there is a resurgence of people's movements in these areas opposing such "development".

Further, despite the existence of such policy statements as described above, the reality appears far removed. In the case of women, Thakur (2001) points out that as implementation of central policy statements are based on State enactments, women's rights continue to be largely ignored both in land reform and rehabilitation policies, with the exception of Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal. Even in West Bengal, which has had a major land reform programme under the Left Front government, women were almost totally excluded from gaining a land title, on the plea that since they did not plough the land; they were not "tillers" (Gupta, 1997). This viewpoint was modified only in 1991, after intense lobbying by the women's movement in West Bengal. In the case of adivasis, in Kerala, each landless tribal household was promised between 0.40 and two hectares of land, depending on availability, by the state government in October 2001. In February 2002, a total of 575 families were given land, yet another 22,780 remained landless (Kaul, 2003). When it was clear that the government was backing down on its commitment, the adivasis protested. This led to police firing in Muthanga in Wynaad district in February 2003 and arrest of the leaders (Damodaran, 2003). Similar examples of the use of state force against adivasis are available from other parts of the country.

What this double-speak has led to is in fact a rigidification of marriage and kinship norms, as households and kin-groups come closer together to face the growing competition for land - from the state for industrial and mineral development and from Hindu and Muslim traders and moneylenders seeking to extend their base in villages and gain status as cultivators. The competition intensifies due to the protective tenancy legislation in most Scheduled Areas of the country that prohibits the sale or

[30] Fernandes (1994, quoted in the website of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs http://tribal.cin.in/index1.htm) notes that government development projects post-independence, mainly dams, mines and industries, have displaced 8.54 million adivasis till 1990. Even though the adivasis constitute only 8 per cent of the population of the country, they represent 55.16 per cent of the displaced. Over 64 per cent of those displaced have yet to be rehabilitated, thus living precarious lives in urban slums or shunting between different rural locations.

transfer of tribal lands to non-tribals[31]. While the State has thus used the Land Acquisition Act of 1894 to acquire tribal land, other private parties look for more informal ways of acquiring land including marriage to tribal women. In a context of economic and social marginalisation of the entire group vis-à-vis other ethnic and caste groups,[32] not only is there now a heightened emphasis on customary principles and norms, in line also with this debate in the international arena in recent years[33], but this emphasis has also meant shrinkage of women's rights. The reason given is that if women are allowed to inherit, "non-tribal" men would marry them and thus acquire the land. Once in non-tribal hands, it is much easier to dispose or exchange of this land. While not yet a major threat, there have been such instances, especially close to urban areas. Tribal leaders are therefore willing to allow women to inherit land only on condition that they marry within the tribe. While customary principles are flexible and do have social sanction, they too are socially embedded. Hence in a context of growing competition over land, gender identities and a concern for gender justice tend to get submerged under issues of ethnic identity and the right to survival, inheritance rights being circumscribed by the control over marital choice (Rao, 2002).

The Ninth Plan, along with ensuring land rights to women, also lays emphasis on credit access. Given that a majority of the Indian population live in rural areas and depend on agriculture for their livelihood, provision of adequate and timely credit, at reasonable rates of interest, has been a stated objective of public policy in post-Independence India. This objective was translated in terms of the expansion of the institutional structure of formal-sector lending institutions, directed lending (mainly through the Integrated Rural Development Programme or IRDP)[34] and concessional or subsidised credit to the poor and socially disadvantaged groups.

The bureaucratic problems as well as the lack of sensitivity of banks to the social and economic context in which they functioned led to a period of banking sector reforms in 1991. This had several implications for access to credit in rural areas. Firstly, while the share of rural bank offices had jumped from 17.6 per cent in 1969 to 58.2 per cent in 1990, there was a gradual slowdown in this process thereafter, with the share falling to 47.8 per cent in 2002. Secondly, while the bank credit given to rural areas increased from 10 per cent to 15 per cent during the 1980s (1980-91), it once again declined to 10 per cent in 2001-02 (Ramachandran and Swaminathan, 2004, forthcoming).

One of the objectives of banking policy had been to expand 'priority sector' lending[35]. In fact from 25 per cent in 1975, this did increase to over 43 per cent in 1988. The 1990s saw a decline to 34.4 per cent in 2001. Yet, this figure is misleading, due to a redefinition of 'priority sector' to include advances to newly created infrastructure

[31] Most of these Acts were passed during the colonial period in response to tribal rebellions protesting land alienation and usurious practices of moneylenders.
[32] We have noted in the last section the higher incidence of poverty and the lower health outcomes of tribal people.
[33] See, for instance, Toulmin and Quan (2000), Deininger (1999) and Gopal (1999) on the potential of customary institutions to ensure security of land tenure.
[34] IRDP loans were mainly targeted at men, and it was only with the introduction of a special scheme, namely, Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas or DWCRA within the IRDP ambit, that some of the resources were directed to women.
[35] Priority sector was defined as including agriculture, small scale industries, small transport operators, retail trade, housing and education loans. In 1979, a target of 40 per cent of all bank credit was set for priority sectors and within this a sub-target of 15 per cent for agriculture, to be achieved by 1985.

funds, non-banking finance companies and to the food processing industry[36] (Ramachandran and Swaminathan, 2002). The figures for only agriculture reveal a decline from 17.1 per cent in 1985 to 10.7 per cent in 2001. A further disaggregation of agricultural advances to cultivators by size classes of holdings reveals that the share of agricultural credit to marginal farmers that accounted for 30 per cent of total agricultural credit from commercial banks in 1990 declined to 23.8 per cent in 1999-2000. During the same period, the number of beneficiaries receiving credit through the IRDP also declined from 2.9 million to 1.3 million persons (Chavan, 2004 forthcoming, Tables 9 and 10). While gender disaggregated data is not available, it is likely that only a small proportion of this went to women due to the need for land as collateral for agricultural credit and the lack of land titles with most women.[37]

The government has sought to fill this gap through a rapid expansion in micro-credit through the formation of Self Help Groups (SHG), especially of women. These are meant to overcome the problems of inaccessibility, high transaction costs and poor repayments that were encountered by the formal credit institutions. The SHG-linkage programme has grown from support to 500 SHGs in 1992 to 500,000 in 2002, covering over 40 million poor people, 90 per cent of them being women (http://www.nabard.org/roles/mcid/highlights.htm).[38]

There is however evidence to show that this cannot adequately address the problems of the poorest. First of all, while only 9 per cent of the micro-finance programme is implemented through NGOs, in over 70 per cent of the cases the SHG-linkage is facilitated by NGOs. This implies that distribution and reach is governed by the existence of micro-finance NGOs. This is clearly revealed from the regional distribution of SHGs that reveals a concentration in Andhra Pradesh.[39] Secondly, while the NABARD Task Force estimated the credit requirement per family as Rs 6000 in rural areas and Rs 9000 in urban areas, the average loan recommended for and given to members of SHGs is around Rs 1000 (NABARD, 2000). This is clearly insufficient and once again leads to the trap of small income generation projects for women that are bound to fail (Buvinic, 1986)[40].

One further point about use of credit is relevant here. Women across the country are more engaged with livestock keeping (milch animals, goats, pigs and poultry) than crop production. They often also have more control over livestock than crops due to

[36] Loans to multinationals such as Pepsi, Kelloggs, Hindustan Lever etc, engaged in food processing, are now counted as priority sector advances (Report of the Finance Minister's Budget Speech, 1999, cited in Ramachandran and Swaminathan, 2004, forthcoming).

[37] Gender-disaggregated data on crop loans for Dumka district revealed that 3.9 per cent of all crop loans were disbursed to women in 2000-01, doubling from 2 per cent the previous year (Rao, 2002:282).

[38] This is perhaps the largest microfinance programme in the world operating through 444 banks (44 commercial banks, 191 RRBs and 209 cooperative banks) in all districts of the country. The cumulative bank loan in March 2003 was Rs 10263 million and refinance was Rs 7965 million. 91 per cent of this was given directly to SHGs and only 9 per cent to NGOs or other facilitating agencies.

[39] Out of a total of 717,360 SHGs with credit-linkage, 281,338 or 39 per cent are in Andhra Pradesh alone. The other southern states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala account for another 25 per cent (http://www.nabard.org/oper/oper.htm).

[40] Working with women's groups in Andhra Pradesh between 1996-98, Rao observed farming women in a village in Nellore district carefully analysing their needs, identifying irrigation as the investment required to improve their lives and estimating the cost of such a project to be Rs 50-60,000. This was however way beyond what was acceptable to the mediating agency, the district government in this case and what was finally sanctioned was Rs 10,000 at the rate of Rs 1000 per member of the group.

the lack of direct rights over land. Yet the share of animal husbandry and dairying was only 5.7 per cent of the total ground level credit offered by NABARD for agriculture and allied activities during 1999-2000 (GOI, 2002: 65-6).[41] A lot of SHG activity is focused on petty trade rather than production. Without sufficient finances and infrastructure support, while SHGs can contribute towards survival, it is unlikely that they could facilitate a shift to a higher quality of life.

Thirdly, transaction costs for such interventions are not necessarily lower. High rates of repayment require careful monitoring, supervision and support to the groups. What however happens is that transaction costs are borne by the NGOs, they in turn passing them on either to the donors or to the borrowers, as interest rates on such credit are generally higher than bank interest rates (Hulme and Mosley, 1998). The pressure to start repaying soon after the loans have been taken further leads to a bias in favour of those with some starting resources.

It would be worthwhile to briefly comment on the impact of such micro-credit interventions on gender relations, as clearly the data presented above reveals that 90 per cent of micro-finance in 2002 was going to women's Self Help Groups. Evidence from Bangladesh is contradictory. While Hashemi et al (1996) note that the control over income and assets by women do strengthen women's bargaining position within households, Goetz and Sengupta (1995) suggest that access to credit has not always served to strengthen women's bargaining position in the household, but has often led to increased stress due to the pressure to repay as well as enhanced violence. Yet interestingly in analysing different dimensions of empowerment of Grameen and BRAC members and non-members, Hashemi *et al* found that while control over decisions on purchases, and political and legal awareness was much higher amongst members, on the variable they called 'freedom from domination' which included taking of money and jewellery against her will, being prevented from visiting the natal home or from working outside the home, responses from both members and non-members were at par with each other (1996: 40). Kabeer (1998), reviewing both the negative and positive evaluations of credit programmes in Bangladesh notes that while they may indeed increase work burdens in some instances and violence in others, the perception of women as contributing to the household and sharing in the burden of provision does mitigate their sense of dependency and enhances their sense of self-worth, interdependence in familial relationships and voice in household decision-making. While no intervention may have a uniform set of outcomes and these are likely to vary with household structure, resources and status, yet the very fact of having access to a resource does expand women's choices.

In the Indian context, a study of women's Self Help Groups in Andhra Pradesh points out that while the organisation of women into groups is indeed a strategy in the right direction, advocated for long by women's organisations[42], and does have significant gains for women at the individual level, it does not automatically contribute to changing social norms and achieving gender equity. There is in fact evidence to the

[41] The Andhra Pradesh government has recently announced that it will stop financing goats, as they contribute to environmental degradation. People's groups are opposing this announcement, seeing it as an anti-poor policy with the main intention of satisfying World Bank conditionalities imposed as part of the Community Forestry Project.

[42] Collective action was a key strategy for the empowerment of third world women emphasised by the DAWN collective (Sen and Grown, 1987), reiterated in later documents such as Shramshakti, 1988. But even earlier in India, soon after independence, the strategy of mahila mandals was adopted, though the language used was one of welfare rather than empowerment.

contrary. When women's incomes increases, as does their influence in the public sphere, women's work burdens at home are likely to increase, there are more frequent instances of domestic violence and tensions in general tend to get accentuated within households (Deshmukh-Ranadive, 2003). Kabeer (1998) too agrees that credit per se may not have empowering effects for women and there is need for specific organisations to advance women's rights in the wider social arena. Credit access may then well have both positive and negative effects simultaneously and generalisations simply in favour or against credit for women would be mistaken; what matters is not to have unrealistic expectations of changed gender relations, to accept that evaluation requires a longer time perspective than is commonly the case, and to ensure careful critical scrutiny in programme monitoring.

To summarise this section. The government of India has moved towards more positive views on women's land rights, although state enactments of national policy are patchy. Perversely, it is the relative stagnation of agriculture which may reduce competition for agricultural land and allow improved access for women, as has happened elsewhere, but it appears that conversely increased male competition for land in recent years is related to not only shrinking land holdings but also to the growing importance of ethnic identities in resource claims, and the making of tribal identities. In such contexts women's land claims are increasingly contested. Changes during the 1990s to livelihood resource access by rural women have involved deepening struggles over land in which the agencies of the state have a crucial role to play in upholding women's inheritance claims against depredations of male kin, and an enormous expansion of credit oriented to women in groups rather than household production groups. This is potentially beneficial but as such programmes disburse small loans, this could possibly become a two tier system in which women have excellent credit access but only for small amounts, whilst men access bank loans which are large enough for significant investments. Women-focussed credit also risks increased gender conflict in the short term.

Labour in Livelihoods

Here we consider how the demands for, and on, women's labour have been shifting in recent years. We have not separated farming women from landless labouring women since these two categories increasingly overlap, and we begin with an account of changing domestic labour scenarios, before looking at changing cropping patterns and technical change, and the growing phenomena of corporate agriculture and contract farming.

A number of long term studies and restudies published in recent years, such as that of Palanpur by Dreze (2002), have taken a reasonably positive view of social change in the last half of the twentieth century. Scarlett Epstein, for Karnataka, reflecting on her original 1950s analysis and the futures she envisaged, finds that there was less population growth than she predicted, that she underestimated importance of education to social change, the value of agricultural technical change to sustainable livelihoods, and the importance of party politics in increasing the clout of rural areas (Epstein et al 1998: 200-201).

However much of the positive change noted by Dreze and by Epstein seems to have appeared in the 1980s in particular, as Kathleen Gough's earlier restudy in 1976 of her 1952 research produces a considerably more negative account of social change

(1989). By 1976 the new capital intensive industries had not compensated in terms of employment for the decline in artisanal industries, agricultural workers were worse off, the green revolution had made limited inroads and livestock products were consumed less. Thus it is important to periodise any generalisations, and to note that the methodological importance of the base year for comparisons holds for qualitative as well as quantitative research.

All rural livelihoods involve domestic labour to maintain and reproduce the household over time, and women of course play an absolutely central role in providing these services; child care, food preparation, fuelwood and water collection, care of the ill and elderly, and a range of activities that grade seamlessly into food production and income generating work, such as livestock care, homestead gardening, crop production and so on. Livelihood research pays lip service to these activities but there are still too few studies which routinely collect data on domestic work alongside descriptions and analysis of occupations, employment and farm production, and as a result information remains scarce and it is difficult to answer the question of what happens to women's domestic burdens under liberalisation-induced changes in livelihoods.

Although specific studies of liberalisation are scarce, some indications may be gleaned from recent research on changing activity patterns in response to commercialisation of agriculture. For example, in Nepal a project designed to commercialise fruit and vegetable production created time trade-offs for households with a pre-school child who received less care, despite the increase in men's leisure time (Paolissa et al 2001). And if resource extraction accelerates under liberalisation, and the opening up of common property to market forces, then we would expect to see an impact on the time of women and men for domestic fuelwood and leaf fodder collection. A study in Nepal (Cooke 2000) found the increased collection time comes almost equally from women and men. Sarin *et al* (1997) however note for India that the closure of forests for protection by community based Joint Forest Management groups (a widespread programme within rural India) has led to firewood collection now involving greater time and longer journeys to more distant forests by women, a finding also in Agarwal's (1997) study of JFM in 8 Indian states.[43] Further, women users of JFM forests are converted into thieves and villains, when their usage becomes defined as theft.

Water scarcity similarly has an adverse impact on women's work. In a study of women's use of bicycles in the drought-prone Pudukkottai district of Tamil Nadu in 1997, Rao (1999) found that one of the major uses of cycles was in the collection of drinking water from distant sources. A later study in the same region notes that 'fetching water' was no longer perceived as a major task (Saraswathi, 2004: 147). After the panchayat elections in 1996 which ensured women a third of the seats in local government, the provision of borewells and handpumps in every hamlet was pushed as a priority agenda, somewhat easing women's domestic work burdens, even though there were no shifts in divisions of labour. In the Santal Parganas on the other hand, Rao (2002) found that though the collection of drinking water is generally women's work, during the monsoons, when paddy transplantation work is at its peak, and women lack time, men do help with this task. While facilities for irrigation are

[43] Agarwal (1997) notes that women who prior to protection spent 1-2 hours for firewood collection, now spend 4-5 hours. Some need additional help from daughters, with negative effects of the latter's schooling.

being developed with state support, lack of attention to the provision of drinking water close to homes implies considerable time spent daily on water collection. Similar to the contradiction between gender disparity and economic prosperity, one finds here a contradiction between service provision and gender equality. In a context of liberalisation, growing commoditisation and rising foodgrain prices, it is imperative for both men and women to engage in paid work to make a living, so public investment in such essential services can serve to improve livelihoods by contributing to a reduction in domestic work burdens.

Some of the indirect effects of liberalisation on women's domestic work operate through the ways that agricultural growth produces a high demand for water, and these politically effective competing demands often makes domestic water supplies scarce. Bela Bhatia (1992), writing in the period following the Gujarat drought of 1985-88, noted the co-existence of 'lush fields' growing water-intensive crops such as sugarcane by farmers who could afford to drill deep borewells, alongside a serious drinking water crisis faced by the majority of marginal farmers and agricultural labourers. She finds that this is not so much due to the lack of rainfall as due to the rapid expansion of water extraction to support shifts in cropping patterns in favour of cash crops. The situation has not improved in recent years, and in November 2003 water tankers were delivering water to a number of villages across Maharashtra where drinking water has disappeared as a result of sugar cane farming. Drought is of course a factor, but water use for sugar farming precipitates water crises more frequently than before. State policies on water and electricity pricing, post-liberalisation, have not operated as they might have to deliver benefits to women, eg by allowing the costs of sugar cane farming to rise and thereby reducing competition for water and improving domestic water availability.

The utilisation of women's labour in domestic production as a part of livelihood strategies is affected by a range of factors; shifts in cropping patterns, technical change, availability of alternative opportunities, and broader shifts in the social organisation of agricultural production such as contract farming.

At the all India level, there have been some long-term changes in cropping patterns since the 1960s. The area under food grains as a percentage of gross cropped area has declined from approximately 75 to 65 per cent by the year 2000, mainly on account of the fall in the area under coarse grains and pulses. With the introduction of new technologies in the mid-1960s, the area under wheat in fact expanded in both absolute and relative terms (Gulati and Kelly, 1999:16) during 1970-94, largely due to expansion of irrigation in dryland areas. The area under oilseeds almost doubled during this period both due to price support incentives and the Technology Mission. However, there was a deceleration of growth for cereals, pulses and oilseeds in the 1990s as compared to the 1980s and a higher growth in fruits and vegetables the total value of which increased from 17.7 per cent in 1990-91 to 22.7 per cent in 1999-2000 (Dev, 2003). In Maharashtra, the land under horticulture, much of it corporate, has increased from 218,000 hectares in 1989-90 to 1014,000 hectares in 2002-3, an almost fivefold increase (Commissioner Agriculture Pune, 2003). Due to its perishable nature, however, unless infrastructure and marketing support are provided, diversification into horticulture can enhance risks for small and marginal farmers[44].

[44] This seems common knowledge when one looks at forest-based economies, where a lot of income comes from forest products including fruits. The sellers are mostly tribal and low caste women. In the absence of any storage or transport in the local markets, these women, having walked several hours

These changes might imply increased demand for women's agricultural labour, since irrigation involves double cropping and intensification, and horticulture is also labour intensive, but much depends on the manner of crop production. Studies from Tamil Nadu by Ramachandran *et al* (2002) and Nakkeeran (2003) find that shifts in cropping patterns from paddy, coarse grains and vegetables to plantation grown crops, apart from not being labour-absorbent in general, particularly displace female labour. The effects of displacement of women's labour take a number of years to evaluate, as was seen in the case of rice milling technologies in Bangladesh, where short term negative impacts were ultimately compensated for (White 1992), but a beneficial outcome depends on the overall employment demand, the quality of the new jobs relative to those displaced from, and any changes to forms of wage control.

In West Bengal, despite being the only state in India persisting with the land reform agenda, problems related to the growing intensity of cultivation and the increasing cost of non-land inputs, has led to a shift in cropping pattern away from foodgrains to other crops. Conversion of foodgrain-producing land in north Bengal to tea plantations, in the southern districts into fisheries, and in laterite tracts into pulpwood plantations are some examples (Mishra and Rawal, 2002:350). These can affect food security of poor households (in terms of inadequate local availability and being subject to variations in market prices) as well as gender relations. Brackish water prawn cultivation is primarily dependent on the labour of women and children, in part because of the very nature of the job, involving standing in water for several hours, the attendant health risks and the desire to protect the male breadwinner, and in part because of the volatility in employment availability and terms in response to international market prices. There has been considerable opposition to prawn cultivation in recent years by environmental groups who see it resulting in the rise of salinity, destroying land and vegetation in nearby areas as well.

Evidence from the US reveals that during the decade of the 1990s, growing control of US agriculture by a few corporate giants, from production right through to processing, distribution and sales, led to the decline in farm values of most products. At the same time the elaborate packaging and marketing of food products led to an increased expenditure on food (Ghosh and Thorat, 2003). While in India, macro-level data is not yet available, a few case studies are illustrative of possible fall-outs.

In Punjab, contract farming started in 1989 with Pepsi Foods Ltd (Pepsico) setting up a tomato processing plant in Hoshiarpur district. To make this viable, they soon wanted greater control over the yields and quality of tomato production leading to typical contract farming agreements. Within a decade, more than 90,000 acres were under contract farming in the Punjab. Farmers however are now increasingly becoming resentful of this total control by corporations, as there are growing incidents of pre-determined prices being reduced on the pretext of inferior quality.[45] In terms of

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carrying the load on their head are forced to sell at whatever prices are offered to them. They are also in a hurry to return home so cannot wait in the market for long (Venkateshwaran, 1996). Despite request for support in terms of infrastructure and marketing to these rural women under the government's rural development initiative, this has yet to happen. The problem has been acknowledged for over a decade, yet solutions are slow to implement.

[45] When the issue became critical in the case of basmati rice, the Punjab Ago Foodgrains Corporation was forced to step in and buy the rejected basmati rice.

employment, however, vegetable production particularly has led to a boom, especially for women workers[46]. Gill (2001) found that female labour accounted for 60 per cent of total labour used in tomato production. However, women's wages were only between 60-75 per cent of male wages. Yet, interestingly, compared to other Indian states, while there was no substantial increase in real wages in Punjab during the 1990s (primarily due to in-migration of male labour), the male-female gap in earnings was in fact the lowest in Punjab in 1999 (Chavan and Bedamatta, 2003).

In other states such as Andhra Pradesh, contract farming has led to a virtual alienation of the land of small and marginal farmers as they no longer have any say or control on how the lands are to be used. Access to by-products from supplementary crops and livestock too is thus restricted. In Andhra Pradesh, the spread of contract farming has led to a growing casualisation of labour as well as the greater use of female and child labour.[47] A study by Venkateshwarlu and Da Corta (2001) of hybrid cottonseed production in three districts of Andhra Pradesh found the large-scale use of the labour of young girls, extending over long periods of time. Men were withdrawing from work and there was growing responsibility on women and girls to earn incomes. Hard work coupled with lower wages was leading to health problems and girls were being withdrawn from schools. Ota (2002) also found in her study on child labour in Andhra Pradesh that growing inequalities were leading to the need for more diversified livelihood strategies based on the flexible use of available labour, including that of children. She found in her interviews with several poor households that men were increasingly unable to contribute much to household income due to ill-health or unwillingness to work, and it was the women, with help from the children, who were earning for survival (2002: 229). Her analysis of secondary data also reveals that child participation rates were positively linked to female labour participation.

Corporatisation of agriculture and contract farming thus appear to have quite different labour implications compared to the mechanisation of family farming. While the latter has tended to displace female labour, corporate farming seeks it out. While these case studies perhaps are not conclusive, they do point towards potential problems with contract farming that, despite providing employment to women, might lead towards a decline in women's status in the coming years. While the complete dependence on markets for food in a context where discrepancies in food distribution and consumption within the household are known to exist is perhaps not an issue only for women engaged in contract farming work, but for women in an increasing number of landless and marginal farming households, a more critical issue appears to be the insecurity of employment and income. Workers will be hired only when required, so a crash in world prices can lead to the slowdown in employment as well. Lessons from other parts of the world confirm that employment in the agribusiness sector is often associated with piece rate payment, insecure seasonal employment, bias in favour of women and children and disregard for labour rights (Barrientos et al, 1999).

Finally, the dependence on women workers, while giving women a source of income on the one hand, appears to have also led to growing work burdens, as there is little

[46] Gill (2001) notes a labour intensity of 3600-4000 hours per hectare for tomatoes compared with only 740 hours per hectare for paddy.

[47] Sukhpal Singh (2003) notes that in 1999-2000, Andhra Pradesh had the highest incidence of child labour in the country (25 per cent as compared to 9 per cent for India), higher rates of casualisation (47 per cent of rural employment as against 36 per cent for rural India) and higher rates of casual employment for female labour at 53 per cent compared with 43 per cent for male labour.

evidence of men taking on a larger share of reproductive work[48]. Being both export-led and female-led, such labour markets while providing women employment may reinforce gender inequalities (Elson, 1999, Pearson 1998) in some instances, but also provide an avenue for improved bargaining in the household in others (Kabeer, 2000). In a context where mechanisation of agriculture is displacing women workers and there are few alternative employment opportunities available, the implications of contract farming for gender relations need to be further researched.

The expectation has been that export-led growth will create more employment than the import substitution of earlier periods and studies show an overall expansion of employment with globalisation (Wood 1994). But what have been the specifics for rural Indian women? While corporate agriculture and sub-contracted work in some employment sectors has expanded for women, there is no general expansion in non-farm employment opportunities for women. We turn now to focus specifically on rural employment for women.

Most states have seen marginal intercensal rises in overall Female Work Participation Rate (FWPR) between 1981, 1991 and 2001 (Khare M 2003: 5), although the degree of variation between states is high, being higher in poorer states and lower in richer Punjab and Haryana. Landless women have of course been heavily involved in agricultural labour for many years, eg Gough (1989: 413) says that in 1976 among Harijans in Kumbapatti 64 per cent of women and 53 per cent of men were landless casual coolies, and in Kirippur, 74 per cent of women and 59 per cent of men were casual coolies. Furthermore, there has been considerable stability in the composition of women's employment in rural areas: and from 1961 to mid 1990s there were no major changes, in 1961 nearly 90 per cent of women workers were in agriculture, in 1994 this was 86 per cent (Bannerjee 1999 303). However many studies point to a decline in the number of days worked in agriculture.[49] Gough (1989) reports a decline from women working 90-240 days in 1951-3, to a 1976 situation in which average days worked by casual labour declined to 90-180 days for both sexes (Bouton 1985 cited in Gough) and Rajuladevi (2000:477) updates this to the 1995 levels where this has fallen to 62 days in rice agriculture.

We have already pointed out the definitional problems in work participation rate comparisons, but censuses also seem to under-record women's employment, and Ramachandran et al (2001) found in their Tamil Nadu study that the 1991 census showed 53 per cent participation for women and 57 per cent for men, whilst their own data found participation rates of 86 per cent for both genders. Furthermore, between 1977 and 1999, work participation rates rose for both men and women by about 5 percentage points.

So what happened in the 90s across India? According to official statistics the growth rate of rural employment slowed down considerably in the decade of the 1990s to 0.5

[48] Time use data from two villages in rural Jharkhand across seasons revealed first that women spend much more time than men on household maintenance tasks. During certain seasons, such as the monsoons, when paddy transplantation is at its peak, however, men do increase their contribution to domestic work. This is however restricted to certain activities such as water collection, food processing and child-care and rarely extends to cooking, cleaning, washing utensils or clothes. These remain exclusively female activities (Rao, 2002).

[49] Comparisons for micro studies always face problems of locational variations and non-standardised definitions.

per cent per annum from 1.7 per cent per annum in the 1980s[50]. The daily status unemployment rate in rural areas increased from 5.63 per cent in 1993-94 to 7.21 per cent in 1999-2000 (Dev, 2003). This is a matter of concern especially in the context of a high GDP growth rate overall (7 per cent) and a claim by the government that all sectors of the economy were doing equally well. In terms of crude work participation rates, one finds from NSS data that while male participation rates have remained more or less stable between 1987-88 (53.9 per cent) and 1999-2000 (53.1 per cent), female participation rates have declined from 32.3 per cent to 29.9 per cent during this decade.[51] This decline can primarily be explained by a lack of growth in the agricultural sector that is still the largest employer of women and at the same time a diversion of land for other uses such as mining and industrial development. Between the NSS round of 93/4 and 99/00 Labour Force Participation Rates (LFPR) fell for nearly all age cohorts of women (GoI 2000: 12), although casual labour has been steadily increasing for women.

Despite an overall decline in women's participation, women are however an increasingly important part of the casual labour force in rural areas, and some authors have claimed that rural India has been witnessing a 'feminisation of agriculture' as men withdraw from agriculture into other occupations and it becomes increasingly dominated by women (da Corta & Venkateshwarlu, 1997). Coppard (2004) reaches a similar conclusion in his West Bengal study where labour debts taken by male household members were often transferred to female members while men sought better waged employment. This conclusion is in fact somewhat different from Bhaumik's study cited earlier, that men's move out of agriculture is a response to a sluggish farm sector, implying a push rather than pull into better waged work. What seems to be the case is that with slowing down of agricultural growth rates in general and a decline in investment in agriculture, non-farm employment does in fact provide better returns to labour than agriculture, hence whether to repay debts or to accumulate capital, some member of the household, usually the man, does seem to diversify into non-farm work. If this is the case we may indeed see agricultural labour becoming a low wage 'sink' for women, and a relative feminisation take place, despite declining days work in farm labour.

Table 4: Crude Work Participation Rates: 1983 to 1999-2000[52]

[50] The overall growth rate of employment also declined from 2.04 to 0.98 per cent per annum during this period.

[51] For men, the change was from 155 t0 152 per 1000 persons, while for women it fell from 60 to 45 per 1000 persons (Sen, 2002).

[52] The term crude work participation rate reflects both wage and unpaid family labour, but does not include unemployment workers. The definition of worker is based on usual status (principal status + subsidiary status) and the employment schedule for the NSS 55th round provides the following categories for usual status: worked in h.h. enterprise (self-employed) : own account worker -11, employer-12, worked as helper in h.h. enterprise (unpaid family worker)-21, worked as regular salaried/wage employee-31, worked as casual wage labour: in public works-41, in other types of work-51; did not work but was seeking and/or available for work-81, attended educational institution-91, attended domestic duties only-92, attended domestic duties and was also engaged in free collection of goods (vegetables, roots, fire-wood, cattle feed, etc.), sewing, tailoring, weaving, etc. for household use-93, rentiers, pensioners , remittance recipients, etc.-94, not able to work due to disability-95,

Year	Rural Males	Rural Females
1983	54.3	33.0
1987-88	53.9	32.3
1993-94	55.3	32.8
1999-00	53.1	29.9

Source: Sundaram (2001) based on NSS data.

In contrast to the decline in crude work participation rates suggested by the NSS data above, other studies show that demand for women's labour did increase after liberalisation but was more casual, intermittent and part-time (Deshpande S and Deshpande L, 1998: L-31). Pre-reforms in rural India 17 per cent of workers over 15 years were women, after liberalisation it rose to 21 per cent (1998: L-36)[53]. Research in Andhra Pradesh (Roy 1995) finds that technology (irrigation, fertilisers, mechanisation) has both increased women's work burdens and employment opportunities in agriculture, and produced a huge rise in demand for their labour (1995:194-5).[54] The impact of technical change depends crucially on which parts of production processes are mechanised and how these relate to gender divisions of labour. Kapadia (2002a: 195) links the feminisation of agriculture thesis to the absence of mechanisation of women's tasks in agriculture. In 1979 there was no mechanised ploughing in her Tamil study, but now it all is mechanised, and men have been stripped of this task, their most profitable job. She says that no women's work has been similarly mechanised and that women now have more work available to them than men, in cane, banana and paddy production, which produces a feminisation of agricultural labour.

There is clearly a need to periodise changing labour market conditions carefully, since the 1980s studies show increased demand for women's labour as a consequence of irrigation and technical change, and overburdening has become a concern, whilst the post reform period has seen general stagnation, but a continuing relative rise in women's casual labour. It is also the specific forms of production organisation that importantly mediate effects of particular cropping pattern changes, thus horticulture can either intensify demand or displace in relation to women's employment. Overburdening also is not only related to combining wage work with domestic labour, since in the absence of wage based income women may have to buy cheaper unprocessed staples, and engage in foraging and other labour intensive means of survival.

The feminisation of agriculture is a term that needs unpacking, since it does not obviously fit with either the all-India data referred to above or the statewise data for areas such as Kerala, or West Bengal, where Banerjee (2003 pers. comm.) reports no feminisation of agricultural labour in his rural surveys. In their study Ramachandran et al (2001:10) remind us that feminisation of agricultural work is indicated by a rise in the proportion of female agricultural workers in the female work force, a rise in the

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beggars, prostitutes-96, others-97. A worker would correspond to categories 11 to 51. The crude worker participation rates is not the same as the more conventionally used labour force participation rates (which includes unemployment workers).

[53] Fortunately this was not also reflected in under 15 years, therefore education should be largely unaffected. But the experience of corporatisation as suggested by the Andhra Pradesh story, may change this scenario in the future, with negative implications also on schooling of girls (Da Corta and Venkateshwarlu, 2001).

[54] But despite this, rises in prices have reduced real incomes (Roy 1995: 196-7), and more male migration to work with improved rural transport has left women unassisted.

ratio of female to male agricultural workers, and a rise in the proportion of female work force in the female population (Duvurry 1989). Such feminisation has been taking place in Tamil Nadu over the 60s, 70s and 80s and is therefore not readily linked to liberalisation.

Furthermore, Ramachandran et al (2001: 13) find that the days of overall work of women in hired labour households amounted to 147 on average, a figure that has remained remarkably stable since 1976, but the agricultural component of the total has dropped from 65 per cent in 76-77 to 37 per cent in 98-9. Most of the non-agricultural work is low paid tamarind processing. This mirrors the position for India as a whole, where the total days of employment available to a woman in a rural labour household has risen from 233 days in 1983 to 265 days in 1993-4, but days in agriculture have fallen steadily. The nature of alternative employment available to women has meant harder work for more days, but earning less. This decline however is less marked for women from landless labour households than among all rural households. The study location had seen overall intensification of agriculture due to the development of groundwater, but the specific cropping changes from cotton and vegetables to banana, coconut and grape were from crops using considerable female labour to those using little, and they conclude that the period of 1977 to 1999 was 'one of significant deceleration in female labour absorption in agriculture' (2001:22) which somewhat challenges the feminisation of agriculture suggestion.

We may be able to anticipate effects of liberalisation on women by considering what factors explain the variations in women's involvement in agricultural labour - growth in the agricultural economy, changing cropping patterns since gender divisions of labour are fairly clearly marked and different crops have different requirements for women's labour, the expansion or contraction of other labour markets and wage differentials in those competing markets, as well as factors which are deeply embedded in gender relations within households such as the incomes earned by spouses which affect the need for women to work, the variable desire by women for employment, the attitudes of spouses and in-laws to women working, and the practical constraints of child care. Rising education levels can also affect engagement in agricultural work as has been known for some time (e.g Kamla Nath 1968). Amongst this list are factors associated with the demand for women's labour, which we briefly discuss here, but also many associated with the variable level of interest (and freedom to pursue that interest) women might have in agricultural employment. Simply knowing about the changing amount of waged agricultural labour women do tells us nothing about how much they seek to engage with it. Does a decline in days employed reflect a shrinking availability of work, or a diversion into other waged work, or a choice to do less waged work and more of other activities? This is critical to the reading, but not easy to detect from macro statistics, and we try to approach it in the section of gender divisions of labour below.

But first, it would be useful to consider the question of the changing quality of employment, particularly pay, in agriculture and elsewhere in the rural economy for women. An analysis of Agricultural Wages in India (AWI) data from 1964-70 to 1990-97 for male and female agricultural labourers reveals an absolute rise in real wages across all districts under consideration (46 districts across 17 states) during this period (Chavan & Bedamatta, 2003:17). Despite this absolute rise, there is a slowing down in the rate of growth in the 1990s in 22 districts (73 per cent of total on which data is available) for women labourers. For the majority of districts, the "decade of the

1980s was the period of highest growth in real wages for both male and female labourers" (ibid:20).

Ramachandran et al (2001) find that the work women have moved into from agriculture is of two types – the first is that which pays more than daily rated cash paid agricultural work (such as plantation work, construction, brick-kilns, road construction and other public works projects), and the second is worse paid and mainly tamarind processing, mentioned above. Quite a lot of the better paid work is however for activities which make great physical demands on women's bodies, and the character of these jobs therefore may make women who are nutritionally challenged unwilling to engage in them (Jackson and Palmer-Jones 1999), for good reason, and thus without the degree of choice which such a list implies.

A second issue, oft repeated, is the growing casualisation of wage work for women in agriculture. The distribution of workers by category of employment reveals that the proportion of casual labour has increased amongst both men and women. While women's regular employment has declined marginally from 4.9 per cent in 1987-88 to 3.9 per cent in 1999-2000, there has been a more substantial decline in women with self-employed status (54.9 to 50 per cent). Simultaneously those employed as casual labour have increased (40.2 to 46.1 per cent). While male employment follows a similar pattern, due to a somewhat higher level of regular employment among men (9.0 per cent), the proportion of those in casual employment is less than that of women (36.6 per cent). While most of the casualisation of female labour has occurred in the agricultural sector, for men this process has been more in the non-agricultural sector during the last decade.[55]

Table 5: Distribution of Workers by Category of Employment

NSS Rounds	Principal Status			All (Principal & subsidiary status)		
	Self-employed	Regular	Casual	Self-employed	Regular	Casual
Rural Males						
1983	59.5	10.6	29.9	60.5	10.3	29.2
1987-88	57.5	10.4	32.1	58.6	10.0	31.4
1993-94	56.9	8.5	34.6	57.9	8.3	33.8
1999-00	54.4	9.0	36.6	55.0	8.8	36.2
Rural Females						
1983	54.1	3.7	42.2	61.9	2.8	35.3
1987-88	54.9	4.9	40.2	60.8	3.7	35.5
1993-94	51.3	3.4	45.3	58.5	2.8	38.7
1999-00	50.0	3.9	46.1	57.3	3.1	39.6

Source: NSSO Rounds from Dev (2003)

Casualisation *per se* is not a problem. However, poverty data reveal that those having the principal employment status of casual labour have the highest ratio of poverty in

[55] The only year where more women were involved in the non-agricultural sector was during the drought year of 1997-8, when the government had put in place considerable construction work for the purposes of relief.

1999-2000 (around 42 per cent). For those who were self-employed and occasionally engaged in casual labour or for those with regular employment and occasional labour, poverty was considerably lower at 37.22 and 30.66 per cent respectively (Dev, 2003). Others point out that in agriculture casual is considerably better paid than 'regular' labour. Real wages for casual labourers, especially women, increased faster than for regular workers, but made slow growth in the 90s (Deshpande and Deshpande, 1998: L-37). The past three years of drought however will have affected availability of agricultural labour and wage levels.

Most (see Harris-White and Janakarajan 1997: 1473, Chavan & Bedamatta, 2003) research, reports rising real wages, but the picture for changing rural gender wage differentials over time has been mixed, and marked by positive change in recent pre-reform decades. Krishnaiah (2004: 18) reviewing work on wage rates finds that gender differentials in agricultural wages have been declining over 1956-85. His study in two of the ICRISAT villages of Andhra Pradesh in1991-2 shows that casual labourers are better placed than regular farm labourers as they have freedom to change employers, better pay and conditions, but less job security. Contract migrants are also better off than regular farm labourers as they get interest free credit, and they get food for the family rather than just for the worker. Females work predominantly as casual labour, and to some extent migrants, whilst all regulars are male. The majority of the casual labourers are women and most likely to be older women and from landed households, most non-farm work being done by males. This involvement of women from landed households is noteworthy. He also finds that there has been an intensification of work effort (2004: 183), with an increase in average work hours between 1984/5 and 1991/2, during which piece rate payment emerged. Overall real wages have been increasing for male and females, especially in one village which he puts down primarily to increased cotton and paddy growing.

Research based on surveys amongst rural women labourers in Gujarat (Joshi 1999:77) reports very little gender wage gap, with 279 of 300 women claiming equal wages to men and 21 saying they were paid more for the same task as men. This stands in stark contrast to Ramachandran et al (2001: 17) where wage rates over 1977-99 rose in real terms by 66 per cent for women and 70 per cent for men, but the gender wage gap increased. While women's wage was approximately 49 per cent of male agricultural wage in 1977, the ratio was 41.6 per cent in 1999. The picture for Tamil Nadu as a whole is for a more modest gap but a greater widening from 70 per cent in 1983, to 67 per cent in 87-8 and 58 per cent in 93-4 (Unni, 1999).[56]

A state-wise analysis of male-female daily earnings ratio based on the Rural Labour Enquiry (of the NSSO) points towards a halt to increasing male-female wage differentials in the late 1990s in a large number of states. The exceptions however were the more progressive states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra where the male-female earning gap not only continued to increase, but the ratio was more than 1.5 (Chavan and Bedammata, 2003)[57]. The restricted access for women in non-agricultural employment as well as the higher degrees of

[56] Gough (1989: 435) gives a gender wage gap for regular labourers wages of 74 per cent of their husbands, and for casual coolies of 67 per cent of their husbands.

[57] They also note that the rate of growth in real daily earnings of male and female agricultural labourers that showed a significant rise in the period 1983-84 to 1987-88, slowed down considerably thereafter across a majority of Indian states.

mechanisation leading to an overall decline in labour requirements in agriculture in these states, could be contributory factors.

A further point that emerges from the analysis of Chavan and Bedamatta (2003) is that the earnings of female labourers were below minimum wages for all states in 2001, with the exception of Kerala and Rajasthan, while this was not the case for men. This fact, combined with the increase in earnings gap between men and women in rural areas, the decline in availability of agricultural employment and the limited availability of employment in the non-agricultural sector for women indicates growing gender disparities in the rural context. Women are forced to work harder for longer hours and for lower remuneration.

Public employment programmes in rural areas are one means by which the state has approached poverty reduction, and therefore it is relevant to ask how effective they have been for women workers and whether they will be missed if a neo-liberal state withdraws from such programmes?

The main employment generation programmes at the national level are the Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY)[58] and the Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS). JRY is a very large rural public works programme implemented through the panchayats. Evaluations of the Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS) in Maharashtra reveal that such programmes are able to reduce unemployment, increase incomes of participating households, act as an insurance mechanism, and make the poor a political force. In 1998-99, these programmes generated 4.4 million person years of work. Compared to the size of the rural poor amongst the rural labour force (around 100 million form the target group), the contribution of these schemes is quite small, yet can be significant. Interestingly, the share of women in employment generated through JRY was only 17 per cent (Dev, 2003). Field-work in Jharkhand revealed that as only one member per household below the poverty line was eligible for employment under JRY, due to differences in both the nature of work as well as the wage-rates payable to men and women, with men earning a higher amount, a majority of those receiving work were men. The only women who received some work were widowed or separated women. Though the concurrent evaluation of JRY found that on average employment generated was 11 days a month, in the Santal Parganas, most of the eligible households had not received employment for more than 20-25 days in the whole year (Rao, 2002).

The performance of the EAS appears much worse than JRY, with poor coverage of villages and the target group, and the use of funds for activities that are less labour intensive and more capital intensive. Srivastava et al (2002) found in their study of five districts in Bihar and West Bengal, that while considerable durable assets had been created, these projects were material rather than labour intensive, with not more than 30-35 per cent of spending on wages, though the ostensible objective is the assurance of employment. Similar is the case of Andhra Pradesh, where though a lot of roads have been constructed using EAS funds, they have not led to employment generation.

There has been pressure in recent years to improve the social security provision for unorganised workers and vulnerable groups. These would include strengthening both the promotional (basic needs like education, health and housing, food security and

[58] This has been restructured in 1999 as the Jawahar Gram Samriddhi Yojana (JGSY).

nutrition, and wage employment programmes) and protective (pensions and insurance schemes) social security schemes. While several interventions do exist, the problem really has been in the utilisation of funds and implementation. One needs to learn lessons from states where some or all of these schemes have functioned well. These include: education, health, social security, decentralisation and land reforms in Kerala, mid-day meals in Tamil Nadu, PDS and Self Help Groups in Andhra Pradesh, the Employment Guarantee Scheme in Maharashtra, primary education in Himachal Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh and land reforms in West Bengal.

The growth in rural employment slowed considerably in the 1990s and overall women's work force participation rate declined somewhat. However, demand for women's labour increased after liberalisation, particularly for casual labour and real wages rose, although gender wage gaps remain. Insofar as casualisation of labour is developing, this has not been instigated by liberalisation, it is by no means clear that it is a negative development for women and the claims for a feminisation of agriculture seem somewhat premature in the light of declining numbers of days of employment for women in that sector.

Migration

Migration within rural areas and between rural and urban locations is an important element of changing gender relations because it entails new conjugal arrangements, new working lives, and new social contexts, whether these are in urban areas, unfamiliar rural ones, or indeed 'simply' in marital homes.

The expansion of seasonal rural-rural labour migration, and non-farm employment, such as the brick industry in rural areas of UP is very much associated with the Green Revolution (Karlekar 1995:53). As regional disparities seem to be widening under the post-91 reforms, the level of rural-rural labour movement is likely to increase, and as employment stagnates in rural areas, rural-urban migration is also likely to increase. What evidence is there of change and what might it mean for gender relations?

Recent migration research reflects ongoing debates in relation to push and pull factors and the degree to which migration is a negative or positive experience. Much depends on the type of migration, nature of origins and destinations as well as the social standing of the individual or household in the village and their networks in the destination. Mosse et al (2002) based on their study of migration amongst the Bhils in Western India note that wealth and social standing both influence outcomes, with the better-off appearing to gain more from migration than the poorest. While class ideologies have been more fully considered by recent research in shaping migration decisions and outcomes, gender ideologies and cultural categorisations of appropriate work roles, divisions of labour and responsibilities within households, are still largely unexplored.

Women however dominate migrant streams. Some 77 per cent (GoI 2001: i) of all migrants in India are women, but much of this is marriage migration (89 per cent) and largely overlooked in migration research, which focuses on employment. Only one per cent of rural women migrants are recorded as migrating for employment, itself an underestimate which partly derives from the view that women who are migrating with husbands are 'associational' migrants, simply there to accompany their husbands.

However this is mistaken, for wives who fail to find work in areas of destination return home, and the many who stay are migrants in their own right.

The involvement of women in rural-rural seasonal migration is not recent. Breman's (1985) classic studies of migration in Gujarat concluded that intra-rural migrants accounted for at least a fifth of the labour force and in areas of intense capitalist agriculture this may rise to 30-40 per cent. Further he found that 58 per cent of migrants in his study were women (see also Teerink 1995). In 1999-00 nearly 3 million women were recorded as short duration migrants, amounting to nearly a third of the total (Kak 2003), and as noted above this is likely to be an underestimate. Most are landless, young and illiterate, work in unskilled work like brick kilns and construction, fish processing, and in some instances agriculture. While the big cities see a large influx of rural women for construction work, Bardhaman district of West Bengal, with well-developed irrigation facilities witnesses a seasonal influx of agricultural labour from other districts of Bengal as well as the neighbouring state of Jharkhand. Irrigated areas in other parts of the country also see an influx of migrant labour during peak cultivation seasons. Women migrant workers are generally paid less than local women and work on piece rate contracts and some suffer harassment.

Karlekar (1995:23-78) points to the surprising degree (given the sensitivity of the topic) to which sexual harassment and exploitation is mentioned in relation to women's migration. In a study of brick kiln workers it was found (Chopra 1985) that many brick kiln owners are also landlords who place kiln workers in tenant-like relationships, with their wives and daughters living in the owners' house and subject to sexual abuse. Tobacco graders in Andhra Pradesh are perceived to be selected (in line-ups) on the basis of their beauty (Kumari 1984 cited p 56), and Breman reports expectations that groups of migrant women travelling without men in search of work will provide sexual services to farmers.

Mitra (1989-90) in a case study of Santal women's lives notes that there seems to be a "tacit acceptance by men of the fact that women would be exploited by outsiders", hence joint migration with men is now the rule, despite the futility of male presence in many cases. Whatever be the justification for joint migration, as Teerink (1995) points out, this serves to reproduce accepted gender relations in the destination areas as well, so for instance, after a whole day's labour, women would still be cooking for the family group, fetching water and completing domestic chores, while men relaxed. Also, the control over the income in such cases is likely to be with the men as heads of the household unit. Kak (2003) reports a 1999-00 survey which found that more women were casual labouring than men, who over the previous decade had improved their situations and moved into permanent labouring jobs. The work environment is harsh, living conditions poor, and the need to perform domestic chores in the camp after working in the fields or the construction site, doubles their workload. She concludes like Karlekar (1995) that seasonal migration by women does not necessarily enhance status, emancipate or lead to long term poverty reduction.

Seasonal labour migration has declined over the last ten years according to NSS data (Kak 2003) which is surprising given the growing regional inequalities. The three years of drought may perhaps have led to stagnation in rural employment (Bhattacharya 2003). The decline in seasonal migration would be seen as positive by the many who remark on the negative aspects of such migration for women. However the drop in the numbers may also reflect a phenomena commented on by Narayan

Bannerjee (pers. comm.) who says that in Bankura district (West Bengal) there is now a reduction in migration duration – people used to go for four-six week spells but now go for half that time - and work 16-20 hour days on piece rates, to earn the same amount of money in much shorter periods. They return exhausted and fearful of illness after migration. In-depth studies in Jharkhand found that a large proportion of earnings from migration was spent on health-care, and given the lack of public health-care services, this also resulted in high levels of indebtedness (Rao & Rana, 1997). Wages are therefore maintained but at the cost of enormous pressure on bodies and minds. If this is the case then the decline in the extent of seasonal migration may be more apparent than real, and the changing intensities of work a matter of concern for the nutritionally vulnerable labouring poor of both genders.

Rural-urban migration finds more positive gender analysis, both in relation to the emancipating effects of exposure to less restrictive urban cultures, and the greater opportunities for economic mobility in urban settings. Some areas of employment for women are expanding in urban areas, for example, domestic work is increasingly feminised, and 89 per cent are now women (Kaur 2003). Not only do men have better paid work available, but employers consider women more trustworthy and are increasingly reluctant to leave female children with male servants. Migrant women with access to salaried employment in cities, whether in manufacturing (Kabeer 2000) or in services (Gulati 1993) appear better able to renegotiate existing gender relations. Unnithan-Kumar (2003) shows how in many ways they are not just escaping the burden of indebtedness but also the restrictive demands of extended families. In addition to work opportunities, city life has distinctive gender cultures which seem to be more progressive. In a comparative study of attitudes, Jain et al (1997: 110) found that whilst 34 per cent rural women said they were often beaten by husbands, only 14.5 per cent urban women did. However not everything about urban gender cultures is progressive for they also found (1997: 83) that whilst 35 per cent of rural Scheduled Caste women did not want daughters to seek paid employment, 56 per cent took this view in urban areas.

The sex-working underbelly of rural-urban migration by women is also an area of concern, given the rising risks of HIVAIDS. In a study of sex workers in Orissa, Gangoli (2003) found that most had transgressed in some way before migrating to sex work, and that there was a phenomenon of 'flying sex workers' i.e married women with children who come into towns in the evenings to earn extra money especially before festivals. Svati Shah (2003) in an ethnographic study in Mumbai found that at hiring points women will seek construction work in the mornings and if they fail, after 11am, will ply for sex work. When asked which work they prefer they say construction work because 'yes, that is physical work. This? [i.e sex work] What is this?' In particular they disliked the police harassment and the men refusing to wear condoms. These are examples of sex work as a livelihood element in a portfolio of activities rather than, as often assumed, a specialised occupation, and clearly the implications for HIV/AIDS prevention are important.

A less negative view of migration as not only related to the push of poverty, but to the attractions of adventure and excitement is evolving. But Rao (2003) and Sjoblom (1999) note that amongst the Santals and Bhils. if at all there is a choice, men prefer to stay back in the village and tend whatever little land they have to preserve their

identity as 'cultivators'. They see migrant work as a loss of status,[59] hence if they do have to migrate, they project such decisions as an adventure to see new places or a strategy to build capital for investing in their own land. They therefore also prefer longer term migration to more distant locations. Similar to the experience from Latin America (Gisbert et al, 1992) and many African locations (eg Francis, 2002 for Tanzania) where women become dependent on migrant men's earnings, justifying in turn male control, the experience from different parts of India further suggests that uncertain and irregular remittances from migrant men tend to enhance the physical, financial and emotional burdens on women, rather than empowering them (Karlekar, 1995). The argument of adventure is still very rarely applicable to rural women, particularly those living in poverty[60].

In the longer term, however, the consequences of migration and the exposure to new ideas, new technologies and new information, for cultural and ideological change in rural areas can be profound, especially if combined with political mobilisation to claim their rights. A study (Anurekha Chari 2003) of the history of the Maharashtra EGS argues that in the 1970s the drought in Osmanabad district of Maharashtra led to massive male migration to towns, by landed Maratha men, a new phenomenon, with women left behind working in the MEGS. Upper caste ideals were violated, and these women were mobilised by a left of centre organisation (the Lal Nishan party) pressing for equal wages, maternity benefits, and questioning the sexual division of labour at worksites. Women became involved with new political strategies like traffic blocking, and came to play a vital role in the women's movement in the state.

What seems clear then is that migration decisions, experiences and outcomes, just as other livelihood strategies, are mediated by ideologies of caste, ethnicity and gender, of power, status and the relative valuations of different types of work in society. The access to resources, particularly land and credit, do also influence the types of choices available to individuals and groups. Migrant labour markets are highly segmented, but also gendered with implications for access to particular jobs, the capacity to earn and the conditions of work. Engagements in these then have different implications for men and women of different groups.

Changing divisions of labour

We have above reviewed the evidence for patterns of change in livelihood diversification, and gendered resource access, and then focused on livelihood elements; own-account farming and domestic labour, wage labouring and migration. But beyond the issues of how employment patterns are changing lies the question of what is driving those changes? Whilst clearly some causes are related to economic policy effects, reform for instance, to factors such as climate, and to interactions between the rural and urban economies, it would be a mistake to take an economically deterministic position to social change, and fail to recognise the workings of gender ideologies, and of women and men's agency as gendered subjects, in the processes observed and the outcomes that confront us at any one time.

[59] Unlike the Hindu castes that tend to withdraw female labour as a sign of status, amongst tribes such as the Santals and Bhils men prefer to stay away from wage-work and let women engage in it.
[60] See, for instance, Alpa Shah, 'The Love of Labour: Seasonal Migration from a Jharkhandi Village to Brick Kilns in West Benga'l,Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the British Association of South Asian Studies 2003, 8 April, Oxford.

One point which is clear from the discussions above is that the degree of gender flexibility in labour is important to changing scenarios, since gender wage gaps depend on certain tasks being reserved for one or other gender. This can have perverse effects for women, as for example when their tasks are labelled 'light' by comparison to male 'heavy' work to justify high male wages. But it can also have potentially beneficial effects where it limits competition from male labourers for some work. In Haryana gender wage gaps have been narrowing and although real male wages stagnated in the 80s, women's rose by 30 per cent, because male immigration depressed male wages and a strict gender division of labour protected demand for their labour (Chowdhry 1994:184-5). And where this is combined with increasingly narrow time windows for the completion of operations such as weeding or transplanting (where double or triple cropping schedules have to be accommodated) it can offer bargaining opportunities to women workers. Finally, where some tasks are indeed particularly heavy, risky or dangerous, then a division of labour which types these as suited to males, might be actually rather beneficial to poor women.

Karin Kapadia (2002a:197-8) comments that the gender division of labour is much more strictly enforced in wage labour than own-account farming. With the exception of ploughing, women farming at home can do any male job. [61] In drought years Pallar men did allow wives to do male tasks (digging) for wages but 'despite the dire straits their families were in, unemployed Pallar men never took up 'female' jobs: they preferred to depend on their wives' wages'. In new forms of contract labour mixed sex work is increasingly common and much better paid in general than casual work. The male kin who negotiate wages with employers do however pay much less to the women gang members, and to get around this, all-women gangs are becoming common. Pallar women thus will not tolerate exploitation by their husbands and kin when employed – despite tolerating it in domestic unpaid work. This may be the case, but it raises the question of how exploitation is understood by such women, and the need to take great care over our own assumptions.

The question of women's agency and their work preferences and how this affects changing divisions of labour is important to consider. After all rural women are not persons existing outside of broader cultural changes, but will change their desires, aspirations and consequent actions in relation to these shifts. For example, the rising levels of rural women's literacy and education in recent decades will change ideas of personhood and aspirations for the future, and the negative impact of education on women's interest in agricultural labour is evident, a good example being Kerala where women would rather migrate for service-sector jobs than engage in agricultural wage-work at home. Of course, without opportunities to exercise these preferences, ie without alternative employment, such desires will only be frustrated ones, but where alternatives do arise they may be pursued with some determination. Furthermore, a generalised denigration of manual labour may lead women with education (and their spouses) to prefer poorer paid but 'cleaner' work.

The issue of how far choices are being exercised, and how far gender divisions of labour reflect both choices and exclusions, is not easy to judge. In their study Ramachandran et al (2001: 12) found that landless Dalit women were employed for three weeks a year more than landless non-Dalit women. This might signal a greater

[61] On being asked about the taboo on ploughing for women, Santal women in Rao's study (2002: 180) were quite relieved that at least there was one task which men had to perform and this was seen as a blessing rather than a form of subordination.

commitment by Dalit women to agricultural wage work, or less aversion by Dalit husbands to wives doing such work, and a greater preference for non-agricultural work amongst non-Dalit women, unless of course there are significant class differences between landless Dalit and landless non-Dalit women which explain these differences. They also note that the decline in annual days of agricultural labour over the 1977-99 period is less marked for women from landless labour households than among all rural households. This could suggest that some of the decline in agricultural wage labour by landed women is related not to limited opportunities but to 'choice' (related to the education effect mentioned above, or the availability of better jobs, or indeed the wishes of husbands to limit wives' agricultural wage work).

Changes to domestic work burdens in gender divisions of labour may follow not only from changing resource availability, but also as an effect of broader social changes, elsewhere in labour relations. For example, in the Palanpur study it was found that the occupational structure changed, with a decline in village based industries due to competition from urban areas and changing consumer preferences. The rise in real wages for hired labour led some formerly non-labouring groups like Thakurs to both engage in such work attracted by better wages, and to avoid using service providers like washers and water carriers and do it themselves. The latter might imply an increase in women's unpaid domestic work in farming households (Dreze 2002).

We have discussed the possible feminisation of agricultural labour above, but withdrawal from agricultural work has been common for women in landed households, as well as for educated youth. Dreze comments on how educated youth with expectations of higher living standards shun manual work, a pattern which is likely to be predominantly found among male youth (Dreze 2002:209).[62] Masculinities may be shifting, amongst groups that have in the past valorised strength and hard physical labour as ideal forms of manliness, in directions which increasingly emphasise the value of non-manual work. The impact of this on younger women may be that their own options in relation to labour are constrained by male unwillingness to engage in agricultural labour.

One of the puzzles indicated in earlier sections is how we should, as gender analysts, understand what exactly labour force participation signals about gender relations and wellbeing, eg the low participation rate in West Bengal goes along with considerably less patriarchal cultures than those of other regions with higher participation rates. Similar to Agarwal's (1984) analysis of the impact of Green Revolution on women, a study by Nakkeeran (2003) in a Tamil Nadu village indicates that the move away from paddy cultivation has different outcomes on different categories of women. The higher caste women are being withdrawn from agricultural labour, on account of higher incomes from the plantation crops. While perhaps lacking autonomy, they are better off in terms of health, nutrition, food security, literacy and leisure. Landless women however are increasingly taking on more hazardous as well as lower paid employment to make ends meet. He therefore emphasises the need to take care in interpreting higher work participation rates as contributing to enhanced autonomy and well-being.

[62] A similar finding emerges from the long-term study of Karimpur (Wiser and Wiser, 2000), although other work referred to earlier indicates the negative effect of education on employment seems to be greater for women than men.

The historical and ethnographic Haryana[63] study (Chowdhry 1994) unsettles any notion that participation in agricultural work is necessarily negatively affected by purdah and patriarchy. Women there have been both veiled and highly active in agricultural work since colonial times at least. Haryana exhibited precolonial and colonial female infanticide among Jats, especially Sikh Jats and Rajputs, and enduring adverse sex ratios in the colonial period (1994: 54), and yet curiously, women's active farm work and labour value was fully culturally recognised (1994: 63-4). During this period a single man (lacking a wife) was not expected to perform well agriculturally, a widower was considered to be 'half paralysed' and prospective brides were scrutinised to ensure they were 'physically strong so that agricultural work can be performed well'. The bride was often older and taller than the groom, and many folk sayings refer to grown girls married to infant or pre-pubertal boys, such that the wife not only did the domestic work but brought up her husband. She also comments on the differential access by women to agricultural wage work, finding that landowners prefer to employ upper caste women. '[O]n account of their poor physique scheduled caste women are less strong than the upper caste women, and lose out in the competition for wage work where hard physical work is required. The landowners believe that upper caste women perform a great deal more work in a given time than scheduled caste women' (1994: 179-80). All this rather undermines explanations for infanticide which depend on the idea of women as 'liabilities' as well as raising questions about what to make of Female Labour Force Participation Rates.

Sheila Bhalla (1989) finds that the highest contribution to unpaid labour by women is in farms of 2.5-5 acres, then their contribution drops before rising again somewhat on very large farms, suggesting a U-shaped relationship between farm size and women's labour contribution.
The simple picture of withdrawal from agricultural labour by women in landed households, following on from the Green Revolution, is also called into question by Chowdhry's study. She admits that in richer regions the participation of women in agriculture is lower (1994: 48), and that the number of days (for women) of agricultural employment has been steadily falling since 1960s. But the comparison of Haryana and Punjab is instructive. Punjab has a low rural female labour participation rate, generally attributed to the Green Revolution and prosperity, yet in Haryana this has not happened to anything like the same extent, despite the fact that in both states the dominant rural norms are set by the Jat peasantry (1994:156-7).

Other factors that are associated with higher female participation rates are irrigation, and female labour is the lowest proportion of total agricultural labour in drier areas and higher in irrigated areas (Chowdhry 1994: 172)[64]. There is also an intrusion into female agricultural workforce of women from small cultivator households, competing with women from landless households. This intrusion is particularly clear in regions with most Green Revolution technology, where households needing cash to invest in agriculture are sending women out to work to get it (1994: 173-4).

[63] Haryana, the second richest state in India, was catapulted by state sponsored capitalism via the Green Revolution technology into very high levels of agricultural growth.
[64] But in comparing wet and dryland agriculture (Rajuladevi 2000) argues that women in the former can be unexpectedly more disadvantaged – there was more work in weeding and winnowing for women in the dryland systems, and less non-farm work in the wet villages

Palriwala (2001) in an insightful study of locality and marriage mobility not only reveals the 'woman-held' perspective on patriarchal north Indian kinship, which is the muted counterpoint so little emphasised in ethnographic work, but also shows how closely locality, marriage and livelihoods connect. Women's residential practices are considerably more complex, varied and flexible than recognised, and she links the invisibility of women's work with this invisibility of their mobility. Certainly it is a point which is of some significance for the project of properly gendering livelihoods analysis which generally assumes a static subject, or at best a conventional economic migrant rather than a marriage migrant.

In this location the transfer of a woman from her natal to her marital home was a gradual process over several years until visits to the conjugal home became extended into permanent residence. Visits to natal homes have been represented as largely for 'rest and rituals' (2001:245) in accordance with male models, but the labour aspects are important. The shuttling between homes was closely linked to farm labour requirements, with young married women managing to participate in weeding and harvesting in both locations, but especially in natal homes where both opportunities for work and tolerance for stretching the bounds of purdah tend to be greater, and the ability to control all income thus gained was more secure. The distance of marriage migration was decreasing over time and improved transport also aided the shuttling for work between homes. The conflicting interests of both households in her labour meant that reasons given for visits and returns would never mention labour, and thus it was socially invisibilised and devalued. It goes without saying that such labour is also not captured in work participation rates. Furthermore, since the circulation between homes is most intense in the early years of marriage, and stabilisation in the conjugal home occurs gradually with increased reproductive work and children, it is possible for wage work to be invisibilised (as in the frequent statement that 'women do not work') and domestic work to be represented as the main activity of married women.

The studies of Chowdhry and Palriwala make some important points about labour and identities that emphasise the connectedness between subject positions and labour. The roles as daughters and daughters-in-law are very different. Gender identities and work cultures are complex and undoubtedly related to the preferential treatment of sons. Where women's labour can only come from daughters-in-law not daughters – who are not even allowed to grind grain in natal homes – and girls are seen as only temporary residents in their natal homes and married young at some distance, and the daughter-in-law is the way to the much coveted male heirs, then daughters occupy a very weak position but daughters-in-law one with greater potential for power.

We have here raised questions about how divisions of labour relate to women's wellbeing and gender equity, ie to considering labour as more than a means of survival, as a cultural phenomenon which is implicated in identities and everyday power relations. We have therefore considered degrees of flexibility in gender divisions of labour, agency and preferences in relation to work, the potentially perverse effects of education and rising household incomes on labour force participation, and the complex relationship between this and other indicators of women's status. The ways these elements are changing in an era of liberalisation is by no means clear, beyond the broad prediction that rising incomes, falling headcount poverty, and growing class disparities are likely to produce perverse effects on gender relations in some states, but we signal them as part of our argument for a properly

gendered consideration of social change which requires more than sex disaggregated data to answer the important questions.

5. REPRODUCING INEQUALITIES: CASTE AND GENDER

The experience of inequality is mediated through a range of simultaneous identities which poor women carry, as members of households occupying different material positions and with varying levels of poverty (largely discussed above), and as members of caste/ethnic communities, as well as experiencing gender inequalities related to being women. Here we focus on the latter, and to consider changing cultural orders in more detail than in earlier sections.

But first a brief note[65] on rural class politics under liberalisation. Have the reforms of the 1990s produced organised resistance? During the 1980s and 90s mass farmers movements emerged in India, pursuing anti-urban politics. The Rudolphs (1987) identify the middle peasantry 'bullock capitalists' as critical to these movements and what matters to them most is the price of diesel and electricity, the cost of fertilisers and state guaranteed grain prices. The reforms to these areas as part of liberalisation may have added to the appeal of such movements. Bentall and Corbridge (1996) however argue that they are driven as much by caste and community as class interests defined in relation to economic factors. After all, they were in existence for some time before the reforms took hold, and indeed, in 1990 the biggest single subsidy made by the Indian Exchequer was the subsidy to the domestic fertiliser industry (1996: 37). The farmers movements of the 1980s were thus out of sync with both the Green Revolution (20 years too late) and with the liberalisation reforms (10 years too early), and they conclude that an economic explanation of their expansion is thus faulty. Their study shows that membership and motivation of the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) in western UP is connected to the extent of contact with urban cultures and debates, to Jat male identities valorising practical hands-on farming in counterpoint to Brahmin avoidance of manual work, and the broad appeal of leadership styles evoking a Gandhian simplicity and emphasis on values rather than politics. The connections to liberalisation therefore may be rather tenuous, or at most complexly related to increasing intensity of rural-urban contacts, the growing meaningfulness of caste in political identities and of the 'anti-politics' strategies of populist leaders in rural worlds ever more connected to urban and global cultures and seeking to define themselves in opposition to these others. We note also that varying tropes of masculinity – and the significance of embodied manual labour – are emerging in self definitions here, and how these relate to the simultaneous rejection of manual labour by educated young men in farming households as an interesting intergenerational question.

A useful case study of how rural labour has reacted to liberalisation is available in Bhalla's (1999) study of Haryana in the 1990s, where real wages rose, as did the share of rural workers in non-agricultural work, per capita incomes and output per worker. But so too did poverty. The only explanation is a substantial increase in inequalities. Members of landed households began entering the hired labour market and displacing workers from landless households, not a new phenomena since earlier studies have shown this in the 70s, but it may be that increased competition for hired labour jobs is a source of growing inequality in farm labour earnings. At the same time, jobs in manufacturing declined, food prices soared, rural infrastructure was neglected and

[65] Space precludes greater attention to this subject, discussed at length elsewhere, eg Brass (1999).

previously competing groups came together in dismay and engaged in violent confrontations with police and government. The AIAWU got involved in mass actions, the BKU debuted in Haryana in 1993, and under this pressure pricing of electricity was conceded by government, but revoked in 1994. Actions continued and peaked in 1997, with deaths of peasants, *bandhs*, blockades and marches.

In this alliance between agricultural unions and farmers movements the former understood it to be based on shared opposition to economic liberalisation and reduced government investment in infrastructure – especially rural power – which was bad for all, including agricultural workers (1999:57). The AIAWU pursued a number of successful actions, all of which involved concessions won via mediation of government (not direct confrontation of workers and cultivators) and through urban non-farm union support. 'In short, the fiscal stabilisation and structural adjustment programmes put in place in the early 1990s created conditions in which trade unionism flourished in Haryana and workers with sometimes common, sometimes conflicting, class interests tended to come together on the same platforms' (1999:59-60). However she concludes that whilst 'during the 1990s there has been a significant awakening of Haryana wage workers as a class… it is not clear how much this has to do with the new economic policies of the 1990s' (1999: 62). For example, many agricultural workers have diversified into a range of non-farm jobs and in these activities – brick kilns, municipal jobs, construction etc – they are exposed to better organised trade unions. Their politicisation by these contacts is similar to the processes described by Bentall and Corbridge. In other words rural reactions to agricultural reforms are as much affected by what happens to employment in urban areas.

Caste inequality

Socio-political change in relation to caste, and the reproduction failure of Brahman political power is the most prominent feature of many studies of longer term change. Political life in general has been transformed into less hereditary and more democratic local politics, and Epstein observes for her research sites that there is now complete acceptance of reservations, compared to the labour lockout which was the response when reservations were first introduced in 1955 (Epstein et al 1998: 179). The picture in relation to caste inequalities has improved and higher castes can no longer beat lower castes arbitrarily, make them do work for no pay and so on (Dreze 2002:215). This shift in caste based inequality is noted in all long term studies, eg the difference between standards of living of caste and Scheduled Castes has greatly decreased in both south Indian villages of Scarlett Epstein's research (1998: 174) and in Kathleen Gough's (1994). Gough (1989:245) comments on less caste segregation in 1976 compared to 1951, and the disruptions to Brahman authority and power – in 1952 they arbitrated disputes, judged and punished offences (backed by the divine authority of local deities) with floggings and collective fines, and humiliations like being forced to drink cowdung and water (1989: 310) but this was largely gone by 1976. Small Brahman landlords had lost their lands in a period of technological change because their caste rules forbade them to touch the plough and enjoined on them a life of religious observances (1989: 393). Brahmans no longer met as assemblies or had jurisdiction over lower caste streets, although hiring thugs to settle disputes in their favour became common. Elected Panchayat authority increased – although Brahmans dominated top posts – and non-Brahman elders were increasingly arbitrating disputes. The loss of land by landlords, and emancipation of former labourers compelled

candidates for office to try to win the goodwill of villagers. She notes however that politics remained as male dominated in 1976 as it was in 1952, with no women members of the panchayat, and women invariably voting for the same candidates as their husbands, fathers or brothers.

In her consideration of the changes in Karimpur village since the 1920s Susan Wadley (2002: 373) similarly finds, according to both rich and poor, social change entailing increasingly overt challenges to the landlord dominance, with the state taking over the authority of landlords. In her work the role of the state in improvements of wellbeing seems rather minimal - development programmes and the actual workings of elected panchayats introduced by the state are seen to have offered very little to the poor, health clinics open only irregularly, staff are committed more to family planning than anything else (Wadley 2002: 384), and girls access to education remains very low amongst the poorest, although it is increasing. However, child mortality dropped and life spans rose, which raises the issue of how to attribute well-being improvements in relation to the actions of the state, since they seem to occur to a large extent through indirect pathways rather than direct state sponsored rural development interventions. If this is the case then the argument about whether the pre-liberalisation state is better or worse than the post 1991 state may turn more on the conduct of particular functions rather than gross comparisons of public expenditure. *How* the state is involved may matter more than how much, which might also explain why there is not as direct a link between state expenditures and poverty patterns as might be expected.

The positive changes noted by Epstein which are related to state services are predominantly connected to education, explaining the differential fortunes of individuals over the time period largely with regard to education (1998: 195). She, like Wadley, takes a dim view of government development schemes, commenting on the reduction/disappearance of the patron-client relations between peasants and Scheduled Caste (SC) labourers and the many government schemes which leads them to now see the state as their patron. She questions whether these schemes are worthwhile, or if SCs should be encouraged to be more independent. Further she argues that class divisions have emerged within castes, not across them, due to the government reservations and workings of special schemes by caste identity, such that 'caste has remained the overriding principle of social organisation' (1998: 204-5). Along parallel lines, tribal/ethnic identity has resurged as an organising principle in areas dominated by tribes, especially in the political sphere, rather than class. The dramatically effective movements for separate states in Jharkhand and Chhatisgarh have been driven by tribal identity, even though they by no means constitute a majority in these states (Menon, 1998).

What this has meant for gender is that caste/ethnic identity has appeared to offer a more fruitful 'need claim' in relation to the state, than gender. It also raises the question of whether caste labelling and reservation has contributed to the endurance and deepening of caste identity and conflict in ways that have been detrimental to gender identities and mobilisation. For example, Chowdhry (1994) finds, for Hayana, that intensification of casteism in the post-colonial era has simultaneously strengthened patriarchy by sharpening elements of conflict between women themselves. In Jharkhand, a strengthening of tribal identity and norms has worked against women's land claims (Abhiyaan, 1999).

Kathleen Gough makes some interesting observations particularly about the role of women's sexuality in intercaste relations, pointing to the changes in gender cultures. In 1952 the most common area for pollution rules to be broken were around sexual relations between Brahman landlords and non-Brahman tenant women, as in the enduring custom of *ius prima nocte*, but in 1976 they were most readily infringed with respect to social distance, less infringed for food and drink rules, and very rarely infringed in relation to sex. As Brahmans became less powerful they became more tolerant about controlling their women's sexuality, and conversely as some non-Brahmans became more prosperous they became more controlling.

Furthermore, in 1952 adulterous relations between men and women of different tenant castes were very common, but in 1976 they 'caused a stir'. She relates the story of an affair in 1976 between an unmarried barber and the wife of a slightly higher caste man which ended in an attack on the barber by the woman's relatives, and public notices were posted accusing and threatening the woman. If this had happened in 1952 the Brahmans would have stepped in to control the barber (as their client) and the men of each group settled the affair, but what was novel in 1976 was that the woman was seen as an actor in her own right and responsible for her own actions (1989:360-1). Thus caste identity (both high and low) and sexuality is policed increasingly by male members of that group, suggesting that women's resistance therefore is now pitted as much against men of their own caste communities, rather than the sexual exploitation by landlords, which must be a potentially more complex and contradictory struggle.

What is striking is that whilst the poverty situation has generally improved, and caste relations have shifted quite profoundly and progressively,[66] improvements in gender equality have been much more uneven. Thus for example, Dreze comments in relation to his long term study that UP has a worse sex ratio than any country in the world – and one that is not changing favourably – and that rises in dowry levels and 'sanskritisation' have been negative. Women's lives there have improved in that they have shared in the general amelioration in poverty, the near complete ending of hand grinding, rising age at marriage, increased tendency to form nuclear families, and declining incidence of wife beating… And 'on the whole, women seem to feel that their general status in society has improved' and 'many also reported (on a positive note) that the bonds between husband and wife are closer than they used to be (2002:218). Epstein (1998: 203) too finds for south India that gender discrimination, while lessened, is still important. Dreze observes that in the political arena there is no comparable gender change to the decline of high caste domination, in his view because there has been no significant material change, especially in asset ownership, behind gender divisions of labour, to produce such change. As he says, whilst the institutions that weaken women (patrilineal inheritance, patrilocal exogamy and gender divisions of labour) remain 'linked to the organisation of agricultural production in this region' change is unlikely. However, a different take on causes is possible, for example, that it is the increasing inequalities in rural society in general that is driving the dowry and hypergamy syndrome producing adverse sex ratios.

Women's education:

One of the continuing favourable gender changes is the rising level of education of girls and the narrowing gender gap in this important indicator of well-being, and it

[66] Beteille (1991) finds state affirmative action and the discourse of equality contributing to this trend.

might be held to reflect improvements in the expectations of working futures for girls and increasing intergenerational investment in daughters. This is possibly the case but it is also the case that long term studies of change suggest that education, and the level aspired to, for girls is not for employment but in order to allow them to write home if mistreated in marital homes and to arrange marriage to a boy with a BA who would not want an illiterate wife. Both Harriss-White (2003) and Heyer (1992) in south Indian studies, find that marriage alliance is the main reason for education for girls. And education for a girl does drive dowry costs up. Thus educating girls is a kind of intergenerational investment, but not the kind envisaged in development policy, and possibly with unintended perverse effects on the dowry-hypergamy problem. We have mentioned above the gendered effects of educated boys who Wadley also finds often refuse to work on family lands and sit idle if they cannot get work suited to aspirations (Wadley 2002:387).

Nevertheless, whatever the motives of parents in educating girls the progressive impacts in the long run, the expansion of women's aspirations and agency, are good reasons for states to continue to invest intensively in education of girls and women. The failure to accelerate investment in rural education when so much remains to be achieved for women, is worrying, since education is implicated in both employment prospects and those ideational changes which are difficult to pin down but clearly contribute to more equitable gender relations. One of the key requirements for moving into regular employment or even self-employment of a better quality is educational status. Literacy has often been used as an indicator of educational levels, however, in order to get a higher quality of employment, minimum literacy is often not enough. A study in Bangladesh revealed that entry into any of the technical education programmes that could offer a better employment status in the future required a minimum of eight or ten years of schooling (Mitra and Reza, 2002).[67] Very few women thus become eligible for such technical training. In India too, while literacy rates have been consistently improving, one finds that even in 1999-2000, 68 per cent of rural males and 91 per cent of rural females are either illiterate or have been educated only up to the primary level. Less than ten per cent of female workers have education of middle school level or above, and this appears to be a real constraint in terms of their economic mobility.

Table 6: Distribution of workers by education category (in per cent)

Category	Rural Male		Rural Female	
	1977-78	1999-2000	1977-78	1999-2000
Not literate	55.0	40.3	88.1	74.9
Literate upto primary	30.8	27.7	9.1	15.7
Middle school	8.5	15.9	1.6	5.6
Secondary & higher sec	4.7	13.0	1.0	3.0
Graduate and above	1.0	3.1	0.2	0.7

Source: NSS Rounds on Employment and Unemployment from Dev (2003)

Present government policies have focused almost entirely on universalising primary education. Beyond this, there is a vast gap in terms of the number of secondary schools and high schools. Due to constraints in relation to distance from the home, issues of security and violence, especially in the absence of female teachers at higher levels, girls tend to drop out of school after primary education. So while India will

[67] See also Reiss (2003) on the links between different levels of education and livelihood opportunities in Rwanda.

probably meet the Millenium Goal in terms of gender parity in primary education, the gaps persist at secondary and higher levels.

Further, it may be worth mentioning a few key developments in the education sector in the last few years that suggest a much worse scenario for girls and women in the future. With the push to meet international commitments and universalise education, the government has adopted various short-term measures such as the recruitment of local para-teachers to support teaching in remote areas and thus ensure universal coverage. This in itself is not a bad move. However, it gets problematic when there is no simultaneous move to recruit and appoint trained teachers in these schools. There are a large number of vacancies in teaching positions, especially in remote areas, and not sufficient response to fill these vacancies.[68] While the para-teachers are often highly committed, lacking both qualifications as well as training, there is a limit to their capacity to deliver high quality education.

Realising this and fully aware of the importance of education for economic mobility, as in the case of health noted by Baru (2003), the middle classes have completely moved away from public education. There is a trend even amongst the poor to where possible send their children to private schools. The government, especially in states such as Andhra Pradesh has actively encouraged these schools. Private schools however cost money and hence parents often have to choose which child should go, and here, girls tend to lose out to their brothers. As the Probe Report notes, "parents are not generally opposed to female education, but they are reluctant to pay for it" (1999:97). Ramachandran and Sahjee (2002) argue that soon one will find a new segregation in basic education – with Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and girls going to poorly-run and ill-equipped government schools and all the others attending private schools[69]. With an increasing privatisation of education, there is evidence of growing gaps – those with resources are likely to benefit, and those without will get even further marginalised in relative terms. This evidence from the education sector in many ways mirrors changes resulting from the privatisation of investments in the agriculture sector.

Having considered changing class and caste relations, and the continuing challenges of gendering rural education systems, we turn now to the subject positions and finally the subjectivities of rural women, and to open discussion of what the perceptions of poor rural women might be about recent changes and about desirable futures. We use the term subject positions to refer to the particular social locations that women will, or almost inevitably, occupy during the life course, and this enables us to disaggregate the term 'women' to some extent and to consider how women in particular roles experience their gender identities, ie to attend to the common experience of structural constraints and opportunities that the institutions of marriage, kinship, descent and so on give rise to. The term 'subjectivities' is used to refer to the more personal,

[68] In Dumka district of Jharkhand, for instance, 1200 posts of schoolteachers at the primary and middle level have been vacant for over five years. The government has recently appointed 276 teachers, but this still leaves a considerable backlog, with clear implications both for the functioning of schools and for the quality of education. 550 para-teachers, on an honorarium of Rs 1000 per month and with 10 days of training are now being appointed, but clearly this is not a solution for encouraging good equality universal education.

[69] In terms of incidence of poverty, while the national figures for rural areas has declined from 37.37 to 27.09 per cent from 1993-94 to 1999-2000, it is much higher for SCs (48.11 to 36.25 per cent over this period) and STs (51.94 to 45.86 per cent). In the case of STs, the gap in relation to the national average has increased (Dev, 2003).

individual, biographical and perceptual character of gendered identities, and seeks to understand the feelings and attitudes that drive agency and aspirations.

Changing subject positions:

We can only touch here on elements of the many subject positions occupied by women and men. One issue raised earlier was in relation to excess female mortality in the 15-29 age group and male mortality in the 30-44 age-cohort in rural areas. To what extent is male mortality related to gender identities and subject positions as husbands and providers, which expose them to particular wellbeing threats and how might these be changing? Excess adult male mortality is little considered in gender analysis, yet important. In his study of the Badaga, Hocking's (1999:207) analysis of age specific death rates show between 1963-90 total female deaths was only 76 per cent of that of males, due to improvements in women's health and growing life expectancy. There were unusually high death rates among middle aged men (40-59), and in the 30-54 year group 44 men died and only 17 women. These excess deaths in men of prime working age raise questions about male gender identities as providers and the potential hazards these entail in relation to nutritional threats (Gillespie and McNeill 1992, Jackson and Palmer-Jones 1999), occupational health, accidental deaths from risk bearing gender identities and suicides, as a result of production failures.[70]

Statistics on suicides and accidental deaths show dramatic gender differentials.

Table 7: Suicides and Accidental Deaths in India

Age	Men	Women
All Age groups	21925	8240
Up to 14yrs	1394	735
15-29yrs	5973	3258
30-44yrs	7466	2392
45-59yrs	4801	1118
Over 60yrs	2291	737

Source: GoI 2000: 34

The suicide only component of these figures show that overall 61 per cent of suicides are by men and 39 per cent by women (GoI 2000:118), and whilst up to age 30 suicide rates are almost equal, beyond this male suicides are much greater and for reasons which are mostly social and economic, whilst the apparent motives for women's suicides focus on marriage and children – illicit relations and love affairs, dowry disputes, divorce, cancellation of marriage, illegitimate births and also lack of children – forms of perceived reproductive failures.

To turn now to women's subject positions. Firstly, women as mothers have experienced a transformation in fertility. Over 26 years of studying the demography of the Badaga tribe in Nilgiri hills of Tamil Nadu, Hocking (1999) shows how dramatically women's average reproductive span (and thus fertility) was halved over two decades, until by the nineties the birth rate was under 14, the death rate 6, and infant mortality under 22 per 1000, levels which have only recently been passed in

[70] Patnaik's (2002) discussion of the suicides amongst cotton farmers and weavers was discussed in an earlier section.

industrial countries (1999:12). The decline in fertility means less risk of maternal mortality, and less reproductive labour over many years for women. Swaminathan (2002: 69-139) discusses the dramatic decline in fertility in Tamil Nadu in the mid 1990s where the rising age at first marriage is clearly a factor. The decline amongst the Badaga may be connected to the context of the adoption of cash crop potato growing and later, tea, but since the phenomena occurs not only in commercialised agrarian regions there must be other reasons.

It is important to note however that the same declining fertility which has reduced excess mortality of adult women in their reproductive years, as reflected in overall improvements in women's mortality relative to men, has also increased the excess mortality of the female infant, as will be discussed further below. As infant daughters, and indeed as female foetuses, young women experience deep discrimination, as revealed in the sex ratio problem. One of the startling and disturbing aspects of gendered wellbeing in India is the adverse to women sex ratio as a result of excess mortality of girls in particular, and which does not show clear signs of improvement (Mazumdar & Krishnaji, 2001). If economic development by whatever means, including liberalised economic policy, is not associated with an improvement in sex ratios then there is a serious disjunction between it and gender justice. If adult mortality of women shows an improving scenario, this cannot be said of the girl child mortality, since census data show little improvement and indeed worrying new signs of excess girl mortality amongst groups such as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes which have not in the past been characterised by the complex of son preference and dowry which seems to drive female infanticide, foeticide and neglect of girls (Agnihotri, 2000). A striking feature of the detailed sex ratio picture is the association of the most adverse statistics with some of the most prosperous agricultural castes and regions, which again points to a clash between rising prosperity and rising gender discrimination (Rustagi, 2000, see also Filmer et al 1998). We will discuss the sex ratio issue here in relation to the subject positions of female foetuses, infants and young children, before going on to consider the position of wife.

Hopes that the sex ratio imbalance would improve have been dashed by the 2001 census results which show that between 1991 and 2001 the sex ratio has improved across the population as a whole, but the important indicator of juvenile sex ratio dropped from 947 to 927, and to very low levels in the richer states – 820 in Haryana and 792 in Punjab, reflecting processes which Harriss-White (2003: 122) is moved to call gender-cleansing, which does not seem far fetched when one considers that between 1981 and 1991 there were 4.2 million excess deaths of girls aged 0-4 and 1.2 million female foeticides in India (Das Gupta and Bhat 1998).

Since the adverse sex ratio so frequently implicates dowry and hypergamy it is important to understand the origins and impetus behind these practices. Sheel (1999: 96) argues that it was during the colonial nineteenth century when new socioeconomic opportunities were opening up, and social classes emerging, that the more fluid marriage practices became a rigidified endogamous caste system, concubinage forbidden and complex marriage rules adopted. Castes and subcastes increasingly policed their boundaries, made legal claims for upgraded caste identities, and sanskritised by adopting practices of higher castes, particularly hypergamy and its consequence, dowry. Such historical precedence might then lead to some concern that the intensified processes of opportunity, competition, commercialisation and global integration of economies under liberalisation may produce similar effects.

The association of low sex ratios with prosperity has been clear for some time, and Bannerjee and Jain (2001: 94) quote the 1931 census which points out the inverse relationship between sex ratios and 'social standing' such that the sex ratios for advanced castes was 878, intermediate castes 935, aboriginals 956 and depressed castes 982. This relationship has been observed not only regionally, but also in terms of land holding, education and urbanisation, all of which have been linked to adverse sex ratios. Harriss-White extends this analysis into rural elite businesses where she finds the under 15 sex ratio among the 66 elite firms of the study was 784 girls to 1000 boys (2003: 122).

The idea of the intrahousehold Kuznets curve was put forward to describe the relationship of household income to gender equity, hypothesised to take a U shape, with an initial fall in the latter as household incomes rise, followed by a rise. Agnithotri (1997) investigated this in relation to Indian juvenile sex ratios, ie that the increasingly adverse to women sex ratios with household income improvements result from the withdrawal of women from wage work (when their contributions are no longer so critical and in emulation of upper caste practice) and the consequent increase in costs of females relative to benefits, rise in dowry and a vicious cycle of girl aversion, which is broken at upper professional levels by the education and employment of girls. However he points out that the point for the upturn in sex ratios is at 24 acres of landownership (which excludes almost all landed families from reaching this point), and that the pattern in south India shows no U shape at all, with labour force participation not explaining the sex ratio. Recent census data show no U-shaped relationship either, but the perverse effects of land ownership are nevertheless clear. Girls have a much greater survival disadvantage in landed households, and as assets increase the disadvantage increases too. Harriss-White's research comparing sex ratios amongst different rural classes shows that 'Prosperity reduces the survival chances of girls, not when it is the form of income but when it takes the form of property' (2003: 126, see also Nillesen and Harriss-White 2004: 345). This is an important point and also emphasises the need to disaggregate forms of poverty – income and asset poverty producing very different well-being effects for women – and to see how gender analysis is a distinctive perspective which produces better understandings of poverty and well-being in general.

But since there is a growing trend of landlessness in rural India one might expect this to exert an ameliorating influence on sex ratios, since there are fewer and fewer landed rural households. That this has not happened is because of the spread of adverse-to-women sex ratios into labouring households, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, as the careful disaggregated analysis of Agnihotri (1997, 2001) has shown[71]. That the deterioration in sex ratios is most marked in richer regions, where absolute numbers of girls are very low, and at the other end of the social scale, amongst groups who have not practiced dowry until relatively recently, but amongst which the rate of decline in sex ratios is high even if the absolute numbers are not yet so acutely low, is very worrying.

The causes of the sex ratio problem are complex and the linkages to prosperity are evident in macro data, but rather convoluted the closer one looks at the relationship.

[71] Agnithotri shows that it is important to focus on the 5-9yr group as an indicator of discrimination against girls as excess mortality in this range is not affected by the greater number of male infant deaths that occur as a biological phenomena across all human societies (Agnihotri 2001).

Banerjee and Jain (2001) examine statewise changes over time and find that sex ratios cannot be accounted for by the pace of economic development in each state. They also consider the common assumption, following from Miller's seminal 1981 study, that sex ratios are linked to women's work force participation rate. But the census data over time shows this is not a robust relationship[72]. Miller and others have thought that paddy cultivation in the south, which makes greater demands for women's labour than wheat cultivation in the north, means that in the south women work more and are valued more and thus suffer less discrimination as infants. But as Banerjee and Jain show, paddy was not a major crop over most of the last century in south India where women nevertheless were active workers, and it was a major crop in Bengal where their labour force participation has been historically low and declining. We also see in Chowdhry's work in Haryana a situation of women's active agricultural labour (in a wheat growing area) yet acutely poor sex ratios.

In searching for other explanations Bannerjee and Jain review the literature on caste, and regional and class based marriage practices of court based nobility in the princely states (which had very poor sex ratios), and they ask why the caste based hypergamy underneath the low sex ratios of particular regions in the twentieth century became the method of status seeking and social mobility in these regions and not in others (2001: 99). They suggest that an important role was played by Brahmins who traditionally have held the authority of monitoring household behaviour at local level. The 1931 map showing high incidence of Brahmins in the population corresponds closely with those with hypergamy, exogamy and low sex ratios. Brahmins did not work as cultivators or artisans and were more commonly found in prosperous areas which could support such a specialised group, and in the princely states where they legitimated royal authority.

A second possible explanation is the linkage between what might be seen as a crisis in rural masculinities, ie the situation where men are increasingly reluctant to marry, in circumstances where employment is uncertain, landlessness high and they are still obliged to take responsibility as 'providers' for the family, and aspire to having a non-employed wife. As Bannerjee and Jain suggest from their qualitative material (2001: 107), in these conditions they look to dowry as a means to set themselves up – thus the dowry will be used to pay a bribe to get a regular job, to buy some land, or start a small shop. They hypothesise that data analysis might show a correlation between the percentage of never married men, slow growth in employment, incidence and intensity of dowry and discrimination against girl children. We return to the question of male subjectivities below and also to the general point of intergenerational investments by parents.

Understanding the impacts of liberalisation requires a diasaggregated analysis, of class and ethnicity as much as gender, but there are still few ethnographic studies of rural elites to illuminate their responses to liberalised economic policy, rarer still are such studies which incorporate gender analysis. Harriss-White in research on elite rural businesses shows the pivotal importance of sons for business succession and

[72] Banerjee and Jain (2001: 88-90) also point to the methodological problem of analysing relationships between sex ratios and labour force participation by women since they depend on census data which reflect the continuing invisibility of women's work. Census data which depends on the household respondent recognising and acknowledging the unpaid household and farm work of women members of the household. These conventions mean that only that part of women's paid activities which occur outside the household are reported and that too is an underestimate in the many places where non-working wives are the cultural ideal.

accumulation, yet the increase in the age at marriage, and the halving of completed family size within a generation, has led to a shortage of sons/brothers (2003: 113). Since such relatively scarce men marry hypergamously into the more numerous social classes beneath them, they are well placed to demand high dowries, and the inflationary effect will cascade through emulation. Furthermore, there is impetus for this from the bride's side too. In 1994 women held only 15 per cent of total jobs in the organised public and private sectors. Thus among the middle and upper classes '[w]omen's chances of enjoying a high standard of living or even a steady income depend mainly on their marrying men with those prospects.' (Bannerjee and Jain 2001:109), and 'most communities have a rate chart for dowries expected by grooms of different profession depending on the society's assessment of the latter's lifetime income prospects.' (2001: 110).

Judith Heyer (1992) also found dowry to be a means of networking and business alliances of rural elites, driven by brides families; Chari (2004) argues that dowry plays the role that capital from fathers once did in helping young men get started in business; and Kapadia (2002c) says that dowry is the public evaluation of a man's worth and represents 'modernity'. All of which suggests a powerful logic for why, rather than rejecting dowry as traditional, the modern business elite have rather reshaped it to their accumulation strategies. However, Harriss-White points out that the value of dowry in relation to total assets may be quite high in households which are salary-income rich, but very low in households which are assets rich, and therefore 'implausible as an explanation for gender-cleansing.' (2003: 128). She concludes that 'in the absence of ideology, neither the gendered transfer of assets between generations nor the gendering of the division of labour explains such acute female disadvantage in life chances.' (2003: 130 original emphasis).

Finally, the effect of declining family size has had an important effect on sex ratios. In the context of strong son preference, the desire for those fewer children to be boys, to guarantee at least 'an heir and a spare', intensifies. Thus the birth order is strongly correlated with survival chances for girls, and foeticide increasingly likely in the wake of a succession of girl children. This effect has been demonstrated for China, as a result of the one child policy, and in India where fertility is falling 'naturally', the same consequences have been shown (Dasgupta and Bhat 1998).

Thus two aspects of social change which would generally be seen as beneficial to women, increasing household prosperity for the middle level rural households, and falling fertility, can both be implicated in strengthening son preference and deepening discrimination against girl children to the extent of producing massive excess mortality of girls. This discrimination produces its effects not primarily through food allocation practices, since previous studies, and recent data (for a number of central and southern states 1990-1 to 2000-1) do not show evidence for either food intake deficits or BMI gender gaps between boys and girls, and no sex differences in the degree of stunting or wasting of pre-school children (NNMB, 2002: 89-90) which would be expected if this were the case, although data for northern states would be better to establish this conclusively. But it is through withholding health treatment that girls mortality becomes so high. In a liberalised and privatised situation where health services have to be paid for, we consider it likely that son preference in families will prove to have lethal consequences for girls, in ways which were not so marked when health care was less costly.

Thus it seems to be the case that adverse sex ratios are driven not by a single factor working across all social groups, but by a range of class, and region-based processes that produce a similar outcome. All of them however are connected in direct and indirect ways to marital competition, and hypergamy as a form of social mobility which appears increasingly imperative as differentiation and inequality intensify, and insofar as these processes are linked to liberalisation it is perhaps best seen as at least a contributory factor in the sex ratio problem.

Excess mortality of females declines with age, as the position of wife is added to that of daughter. The nature of marriage and how it is changing both reflects women's agency and that of men as fathers, husbands and brothers. Conjugal gender relations attain as much significance in patterning women's wellbeing as intergenerational gender relations do during infancy and childhood in natal homes.

The material interests of adult women are, and have long been, highly dependent on marriage outcomes. Kathleen Gough observes for the 1950s that 'traditionally husbands and wives worked as pairs and were paid together..those without a spouse were especially wretched' (1989: 435) and in commenting on social mobility and gender over the period to 1976 she remarks on the absence of change in the position of women where she notes only a bit more education but that 'the fortunes of women rose or fell with those of their conjugal families' (1989: 438). The wellbeing of women has been very dependent on successful marriage. Is this changing?

Kapadia thinks that a new pressure towards compulsory marriage derives from the nucleation of families which makes unmarried sisters regarded as a burden, and married sisters are regarded as less of a threat in brother's claims to parental property. It is the compulsion to marriage that makes women weak bargainers in markets, since married women are so constrained by physical and social immobility. This hypothesis would suggest that unmarried women (who do exist) are more able to progress their interests in markets, increasingly important under liberalisation, but we doubt that empirical study would support this notion. The balance of costs and benefits of marriage anyway has many strands and is never going to be evaluated on the basis of bargaining strength in wage markets alone, and the evidence points to a continuing high level of support for marriage by rural women (see following section).

A set of important changes to marriage practices have been observed in research across India, in particular the trend to nucleation of households, the rising age at marriage, and the intensification and spread of dowry. The nucleation of households, or the trend for extended families in which son's wives marry into and remain for many years in their husband's father's homes before establishing their own household, is another source of change much remarked on in rural India. Wadley and Derr show an increase in joint families over time to 1968, after which increasing jointness in landed families continues but it declines for landless families as they diversify out of agriculture and when nuclear families become 'more rational' (1993: 414). Hocking (1999: 167) also shows how households split into nuclear ones when they move from agriculture to other occupations and when spouses seek to control earnings rather than share with the wider group. Finally, Sarah Lamb remarks that a spate of gerontological literature and commentary blames westernisation and urbanisation for the breakup of the extended family, and the 'modern' seen as the root of many social ills. 'The three main villains of modern affliction…were westernisation, urbanisation and women' (2000: 90). Thus educated daughters-in-law

wanting jobs and independence are not interested in serving their mothers-in-law, and desire separation, and both Susan Wadley (1994) and Jeffery and Jeffrey (1996) hear the same for north India.

The trend to nuclear households is thus connected to declining land ownership (since it is the need for a large and coordinated labour supply for own-account farming which provides the logic for rural extended households), diversification from agriculture into non-farm occupations, and the desire of daughters-in-law to escape the iron rod of mothers-in-law and their domestic labour demands as well as their competition for the allegiance of sons, and to have more control over household finance. Since women's agency is very much involved in this trend it must be judged to be in their interests on balance, although the increased proportionate burden of domestic work in nuclear households and the constraints on mobility when children are young, and older female kin absent, must be disadvantageous to some. Insofar as liberalisation accelerates livelihood diversification out of agriculture, and landlessness, we might expect nucleation to continue apace.

Rising age at marriage must be viewed as a positive change for several reasons; the greater maturity of older women comes with a greater confidence and awareness of their own interests in relation to demands made by husbands and in-laws, greater physical maturity makes childbearing less threatening to health, there is opportunity for longer education prior to marriage and so on. The rising age at marriage is clear, eg in one study it has risen from about 16 in 1961 to 20 in 1992 (Bannerjee 2002 :49), and in another from 13-16 to 21 (Jain *et al* 1997: 226), but what is driving it is less so. Qualitative studies find that the higher age at marriage is not due to employment or to desires for more education for girls – typical education aspirations of parents for girls falling well below mean age at marriage. In another study parents were keen to marry daughters upon puberty, which is considerably younger than actual age at marriage, leading to the explanation that there is a problem of inability of parents to finance marriages earlier.

Bannerjee argues that men are increasingly less able to take on the responsibilities of marriage[73] since their livelihoods are increasingly insecure. Between 1982 and 1992 the percentage of households with no land or less than a ha rose from 50 to 72 per cent (2002 :56), and the significant rise in long distance circular migration in search of work means that '[m]en with uncertain, transient and low income occupations are likely to postpone marriage till they can find more regular work' (2002: 57). However, if this was the reason then would not SC men (generally landless and insecure) be less able to marry than general castes, which should be reflected in data on age at marriage, but there is no evidence of such a relationship. It may be though, that when livelihoods become newly perceived as insecure, rather than being part of a taken-for-granted reality as for SC communities, such behaviour follows. In other words an increased riskiness of livelihoods amongst previously more securely employed and/or landed men might be part of the trend to rising age at marriage and indeed to dowry, as a mechanism for the parents of girls to secure commitment from anxious and ambivalent men.

Certainly Hocking (1999) finds large numbers of never married women living at home with parents and an excess of young women compared to men, and thus the use of dowries as a means to attract spouses for daughters. He observes – in agreement

[73] see O'Laughlin (1994) for a related analysis for Botswana.

with Caldwell and Reddy from their nearby Karnataka study – that the two main changes over the past 25 years to rural marriage have been the move from bridewealth to dowry which has been 'rapid and traumatic' (1999:168) and the shift to marriage with non-relatives which has been slower and less concerning. The local marriage market has changed from a surplus of potential husbands to a surplus of potential wives. In the 15-19 age group, there are many more girls, since boys are commonly sent away for schooling and into urban situations. When his research began in 1963, bridewealth was Rs 100, but by 1990 dowry was adopted and Rs 50,000 was a common sum expended, with total marriage costs of Rs 125,000. If the inflating costs of marriage are indeed driving the age at first marriage up, then this may be an unintended but nevertheless beneficial effect of the dowry phenomena.

Hypergamous marriage, ie the marrying of girls into wealthier fractions of the caste community, is the foundation of dowry. In their attitude survey of SC women Jain *et al* found that (1997: 100) the top criteria in mate selection for both genders mentioned by all women was caste, followed by wealth for matches for a daughter (91 per cent) and education (75 per cent) for a match for a son. Hypergamy is a very dominant strategy for mothers, and fathers too no doubt, in their efforts to secure a good match and future for their daughters and educating daughters is clearly a very important strategy for meeting the requirements of desirable grooms. Both education and dowry are means to the end of hypergamy.

There can be no doubt that hypergamy is a key gendered strategy of social mobility. If liberalisation promotes the idea of the self-made man as an appropriate form of contemporary masculinity, then the counterpart for women, reflecting the economic competition fundamental to contemporary capitalism is hypergamous marriage. Kapadia's proposal that the use of dowry as an adaptive socioeconomic strategy in new market economies (2002c: 170) requires 'the creation of dependence and inferiority in women [which] must necessarily precede a switch to dowry' (2002c: 171) however seems a non sequitur. A switch from brideprice to dowry may be perceived as quite the opposite, as a move asserting the value of a daughter deserving a prize match, and as a move which will secure material independence through the effective need claims of wives. Furthermore, the evidence that feelings of self-worth are more than tenuously connected to actual levels of material independence are ambiguous.

In Haryana, during the colonial period, brideprice was prevalent among lower strata of the same castes which practiced dowry among its upper strata (Chowdhry 1994: 65-71) and given Rajput hypergamy in which girls marry up the scale, the middle level farmer would have to pay brideprice for his son (marrying from a lower family demanding brideprice) and dowry for his daughter (to marry her up). Jats by contrast lack status ranked clans (*gots*) within the caste and therefore for them, she says, hypergamy in its strict sense was not an issue. But nevertheless 'in arid Haryana of colonial days, the coveted wish had always been to get daughters or sisters married where canal irrigation existed, for which dowry had to be paid' (1994:71). In a general sense then the disposition has been to improve the position of daughters through marriage into economically favoured families and locations.

Brideprice was itself a problem since it was associated with low status, such that a lower ranked family with daughters may gain financially via brideprice but accepting it was tantamount to affirming your low status. So the socially mobile had reasons to

reject it in favour of dowry. Dowry was expensive but conferred status to males. In this way the growth and intensification of dowry seems to go hand in glove with growing class inequality, and male social climbing which is part and parcel of economic growth and poverty reduction. Generalised improvements in social mobility are then likely to create a generalised movement towards dowry.

The increase in dowry has been linked to the masculinisation of the population and the sex ratio problem, 'The immediate reason for the growing reluctance among families from diverse social groups to have and bring up daughters is, of course, the fact that in all sections of Indian society there is now an increasing menace of dowry' (Banerjee 2002:48). She notes increased dowry over the past two generations, the consequent land alienation from small farmers, and that 'there have been few organised social protests or resistance to the giving or taking of dowry' (2002: 49). This for her signifies that women have become devalued. And she asks 'why have the families of girls been unable to resist these demands?' (2002: 48) But does it mean this? It is clear that women themselves, both as mothers and as potential brides, desire dowry, the latter explicitly link it to their perception of better treatment in marital homes when substantial dowry has been paid, a more comfortable marital home, and the joint enjoyment of the consumer durables which form a substantial part of the dowry property.

The context of hypergamy (read social mobility) is what drives parents to participate in increasingly expensive marriage payments, and it may be that it is increasing social inequality, that propels the deepening of dowry, a desperation to move daughters up. Another factor may be that the parental 'contract' is changing in the context of falling fertility, and indeed as a consequence of the falling numbers of girl children, in which obligations to daughters are intensifying rather than attenuating. Having fewer children concentrates and intensifies the intergenerational investments. It is perfectly conceivable that the same household that may abort the foetuses of higher birth order girls will also attempt to attain the best possible husband for surviving girls through high dowry payments as part of an accepted obligation and commitment as a father and mother.

Therefore it may be that there are links between sex ratio problems and liberalisation (Kapadia 2002c, Harriss-White 2003), but we think these may well implicate falling fertility, and growing consumerism as well as social inequality and competition.

Subjectivities and attitudes:

One of the most complex and yet most important areas to assess in relation to social change is how women themselves see their situation, what their desires and aspirations are and how these conform and conflict with the prevalent social norms of patriarchal rural cultures. Dreze (2002) refers to the positive comments made by women about directions of change, and interestingly to the perception that conjugal relations are closer now than before. Somewhat against this grain lies Chowdhry's study of change over a century in which she portrays a trajectory from less controlling gender cultures, to the situation today when they are discriminated against in food intake, health care, resource access, expenditure, and political voice. Haryana women today exhibit a 'self-imposed subalternism' (1994:17) from the 'gender conditioning which has led to the internalisation of the idea of their own inferiority and subordination'. Women's voices are not only in this vein though, but, as she points

out, engage an independent and mocking voice which ridicules the gender order in social occasions. The interplay between social structures which appear ever more constraining, the subversions, refusals and challenges of women's everyday lives and the combination of both unquestionable insight and mystification in self-understanding makes this question difficult to reduce to a simple conclusion.

Hocking (1999: 242) found men in his 1963 surveys to speak more languages than women and visit towns much more often, whilst women had much less knowledge of current news items, mainly listened to music on the radio rather than the news and music favoured by men, and saw films much less frequently than men. Yet interestingly (1999: 253) he finds that one of the most marked differences in attitudes is that women were more strongly in favour of modernisation, being much more in favour of modern medical care and feeling that India should industrialise, whilst men firmly backed a solely agricultural future for India.

The degree and experience of son preference – or daughter aversion – in Scheduled Caste communities, where it is not expected, or at least moderate by comparison to caste communities, is revealed in a study of 400 SC women in Muzaffarnagar District of western UP, of whom 50 per cent were rural and 50 per cent urban (Jain et al 1997). Respondents proved to be fully aware of son preference, 75 per cent[74] said their parents gave more love and affection to their brothers (1997: 72-3). Interestingly the perception of unequal treatment in relation to allocations of resources – clothing, food, pocket money, celebrations – was less stark, with 50 per cent reporting favouritism to boys in food allocation but much less perceived bias in other areas. Son preference was not confined to fathers, for around 60 per cent of respondents said their mothers favoured their brothers in the event of disputes, and the great majority also felt that their parents had not treated them equally in regard to education (1997:77-79).

On attitudes to marriage the study found that only a very small percentage of Scheduled Caste women (Jain et al 1997: 94) felt it was a burden and inhibited women's freedom, 30 per cent said that their husbands were dominating, and only 3 per cent that subordination was a problem in marriage. Most felt that a woman needs a man because he is 'physically superior' and more socially powerful and able to provide security, and the majority were in favour of dowry (1997:103). Women expressed a negative attitude to divorce (only 18 per cent in favour) and 90 per cent thought that it lowered the position of women in society. There was considerably more domestic violence in the rural sample and 34 per cent rural and 14.5 per cent urban women said they were often beaten by husbands (ibid: 110). All this suggests quite a high degree of conformity to patriarchal norms, which may be a product of the survey based research methods (although the findings on domestic violence indicate considerable openness in responses), or reflect 'false consciousness' or indeed, express a reality which we as researchers may not particularly wish to hear. The analytical task is to engage reflexively with the latter by trying to take what is said seriously, whilst triangulating these views with other information to consider just how much these views are reiterations of hegemonic male norms.

In this project the research of Raheja and Gold (1996) is invaluable, being an ethnography written against the depictions of south Asian women as 'kept in their place by a patriarchal economy and a religious tradition that devalues them' and

[74] This would have been higher had those 17 per cent with no brothers or only children been excluded.

towards understanding 'North Indian women's identities as exuberant, resilient, and often refusing degradations imposed by male ideologies or structures of authority…[and possessing] their sense of their own power, dignity and worth' (1996: xiv-xv). It seems possible and likely that women both express, and feel, support for some of the social institutions which maintain the existing gender order – such as marriage – and simultaneously rail at its restrictions and assert countercultural perspectives which value women differently.

In considering questions of change they note that songs always make historical references and modern songs similarly refer to consumer goods, new forms of employment, education and in one wedding song women of the bride's side sing 'There are ever so many BA pass grooms, our girl wants a groom who is MA pass' (Raheja and Gold 1996:188). They observe some contemporary developments which may threaten the expression of women's distinctive perspectives in song, such as taped music, western bands and videos at weddings, male disapproval of educated girls singing 'obscene' songs, as well as commercialisation of women's erotic folk songs in the taping and sale of such material by men. Consumer goods may threaten the traditions of women's transgressive performances, but consumerism can also be the grounds for resistance. Kapadia (2002c) remarks, in relation to caste, that TV adverts both propagate consumerism but also the idea of a right to consume the same products as higher classes and castes with access to money. Reading Gough reminds us that until relatively recently low castes were not allowed to ride bicycles, wear sandals or watches (1989). Dowry goods increasingly involve modern consumer durables, at least some of which offer joint consumption to brides, which therefore both enlists support of young women for the practice but also potentially diverts access to marital assets from in-laws to the conjugal couple themselves.

When discussing subjectivities and attitudes, it is particularly important to be careful in making broad generalisations, as these do vary with women's positionality within the household, their class and caste identity. It is important however not to deny women's agency and recognise their everyday forms of resistance as well as negotiation strategies, which is not always overt.

How has the political consciousness of women been changing? The 73rd Amendment to the constitution provides for quotas for women in rural elected village panchayats (local government). Theoretically the logic for this is that it gives women the opportunity of political influence and it is expected that women elected to panchayats would represent the interests of women in their constituency. Therefore one would expect to see more local level development prioritising women's needs and reflecting their interests, a cadre of women politicians developing and progressing into higher level politics, and, with greater political voice, one might expect a flowering of women's movements in rural areas. While Tthese expectations may have been largely frustrated in the short term, changing political cultures and participation is a long term process and signs of positive change are becoming evident. Early female panchayat members have been criticised as stooges, and faced considerable resentment and exclusions by male members, but as time passes they have found voice and effectiveness to varying degrees, and the participation in 2000 is held to be of better quality than 1993 (Manasa, 2000, Chathukulam & John, 2000). In the long run it is difficult not to view the reservation system as beneficial to women, and to the degree that the 73rd Amendment was a gift from government, rather than a concession to agitation from below, acting in line with liberal perceptions of democratic

representation it might be judged a boon of liberalisation in the broader sense, beyond the reform of the economy.

What is interesting however is that whilst many agree that the consciousness of the rural labouring classes has changed, put down to migration and to media exposure in particular, causing emancipatory imaginings and expanded senses of possibilities, this has not happened in relation to gender. Lerche (1999) finds that when rural workers make contact with wider urban-based networks they become more confident, daring and resistant. Similar observations are made by Bhalla on the movement into non-farm work, and Kapadia (2002c) notes that it is where public transportation is good, that this has been most noticeable.

Kapadia asserts that – by contrast to male Dalit consciousness – women in the mass lack a reflexive dissatisfaction with their worlds and therefore 'among the subaltern classes female imaginaries have not yet constituted themselves on the scale of male imaginaries in India'. These female imaginaries are deliberately stifled, because women's active, critical presence in political domains is resolutely resisted, marginalised, culturally condemned' (2002c: 174). Thus the male imaginaries depend very materially on female servility for its success'. What Kapadia seems to miss is that the situation of women may not be authored by men in some direct fashion. Female imaginaries have been given more political space than ever before in the panchayats, and in the state orientations to women's roles in development, if they have not responded with a demanding agenda it may be more to do with the fruitfulness of other identity claims (such as Dalit identity), cooption of politicised women into NGO roles, and the complex business of intrahousehold gender struggles which generate far more profound obstacles to action than other identities do.

In this section we have given some space to considering women's attitudes, feelings and political consciousness about their situation as women, and discussed the complexity of representing the subjectivities of others, and the tensions generated by changes which appear to offer both benefits to individual women and disadvantages to the collectivity of women, and the simultaneously emancipating and enslaving character of other kinds of change such as rising consumerism.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper aims to examine the gendered experience of liberalisation in rural India, officially launched with the fiscal, monetary and trade reforms in 1991. We are tentative in claiming causality in relation to liberalisation, given the methodological challenges this entails in terms of periodisation of interventions and the attribution of results. Further, the complexity of central/state level policy implementation in a country of a billion people, and the growing competition between states for attracting investments, particularly of foreign capital, work against any generalisation for India as a whole. Inter-state competition has often led to perverse effects on labour in terms of withdrawal of protection, leading to a deepening of inequalities between states, between rural and urban areas within a state and between those with access to economic and political resources and those without (Corbridge and Harriss 2000). We therefore rather look at the gendered effects of liberalisation in agrarian India, as a policy turn within a context of shifting degrees of state involvement in development, and which has considerable continuities with existing patterns of social change.

In theory the impact of liberalisation on the rural sector was expected to operate through removing discrimination in 'terms of trade' against agriculture. Liberalisation would then lead to a rise in agricultural production (and related non-farm rural employment) which would benefit rural people including women. Furthermore, with more rapid economic growth women would benefit through greater public spending - in the medium term. Both these ideas follow what appear to be robust empirical relations between agricultural growth and poverty reduction and between public spending and well-being. This set of expectations did not address intra-household issues of course, and a counter set of expectations, derived from the gender critique of market-oriented approaches to development, might predict dire consequences for women of reduced expenditure on social services in the short run, increased labour burdens from intensified agriculture without commensurate increases in consumption due to intrahousehold inequalities, and greater poverty of women due to their constrained access to cash and ability to compete in labour and commodity markets.

Given the adverse terms of trade for agriculture prior to the reforms it would be reasonable to expect that rural communities mainly dependent on agriculture would benefit from liberalisation, but this has not really materialised as a result of what Barbara Harriss-White has called the 'policy incoherence', referring to West Bengal but probably generalisable to other states, with which the reforms have been implemented at state level, and the recession in the world economy in the 90s. Levels of headcount poverty have remained fairly stable, but average land holding size has declined, agricultural labour has become more casualised and somewhat better paid but agricultural employment has stagnated along with the agricultural sector in general. The uneven deregulation in different states and the variable engagements with export agriculture, and development of off-farm opportunities, have widened regional disparities and income inequality.

The changing consumption picture is complex, and the value of the PDS to the poor contested and clearly very different in different states. While it seems that nutritional outcomes have improved over 1991-2001 for all age cohorts, and gender gaps in child nutrition are not evidently adverse to girls, the gap between adult men and women's nutritional outcomes, as measured by BMI, has widened, which raises cause for concern, as do continuing micronutrient deficiencies amongst women. While in the

middle and high income groups, the consumption of cereals has been replaced by sugar and oils, amongst the low-income groups, there has been a decline without any substitution, primarily due to non-affordability and the erosion of real income. Finally, increasing expenditure on household goods is largely consumerist, oriented to status and male leisure, rather than reducing domestic work burdens, particularly in the more prosperous states such as Haryana and Punjab.Women's interests as members of poor households, as distinct from their gender interests, therefore (in aggregate) seem not to have sustained the momentum of positive change in the 1980s.

The overall pattern of change in the wellbeing of women since 1992, as reflected in the annual indicators reported in the UNDP Human Development Report, seems to have been generally positive with the exception of the maternal mortality rate, which raises the question of how far changes to public health provision with liberalisation has damaged women's reproductive health. Although the changes in MMR appear remarkably erratic and data quality may be problematic, the sex ratio data tells a very different story, to the other indicators, as a reflection of well-being. The 2001 census data shows particular locations where there is extreme excess mortality of girl children. It is of course perfectly possible for there to be both a generally improving situation for those women who survive to adulthood, and a deepening discrimination against female infants. What this implies for policy is a renewed emphasis on the girl child, and on social practices which allow both women and men as adults to discriminate against them.

Moving to the finer grain of women's livelihood activities under liberalisation we find that whilst non-agricultural employment and incomes have been rising for some years in rural India, and household livelihoods diversifying, women have not managed to retain their share of non-farm employment and appear to be congregating in the poorer paid segments of this sector. Their access to resources, both land and credit, has achieved considerable policy prominence, even though state enactments of national policy are patchy. The stagnation in the rates of growth of agriculture in the 1990s caused partly due to the decline in public investment especially in irrigation as well as the competition for land by corporate houses and industries in recent years, alongside shrinking land holdings and lack of credit access to men for investment in non-farm work has led to the growing importance of ethnic and caste identities in resource claims, leaving women's land claims increasingly contested.

The growth in rural employment slowed considerably in the 1990s and overall women's work force participation rate declined somewhat. However, demand for women's labour increased after liberalisation, particularly for casual labour and real wages rose, although gender wage gaps remain. While casualisation *per se* may not be a negative development for women, being at the lowest end of employment, both on-farm and off-farm, women's relative access to cash incomes may be declining, but it is the days of labour and gender pay gaps which are most significant here. The claims for a feminisation of agriculture however seem somewhat premature in the light of declining numbers of days of employment for women in that sector. While detailed studies on intra-household control over income and expenditure are not available for the 90s, since it is likely that women's contribution to total household income is declining, this may well, following Sen's intra-household bargaining model, lead to declining control over household expenditures by women. And if this be the case, their needs are not likely to be prioritised as indicated in patterns of consumption (as

in Haryana), widening nutritional gaps as well as producing a new segregation in fee-paying services, especially education and health.

Employment for women is increasingly spatially dispersed as migration to seasonal work opportunities in other rural areas or to towns increases and as differential rates of agrarian growth are accentuated under liberalisation such movements of labour are likely to accelerate. Migration produces diverse material and cultural effects on gender relations but much depends on the duration of the migration, the presence of spouses, the nature of the work in destination areas, and the degree to which control over incomes is reconfigured in new settings. What is clear is that migration involves cultural exposures which can unsettle the taken-for-granted nature of the agrarian gender order and insinuate new ideas.

The troubled relationship between poverty reduction and gender equity, which is apparent in a number of areas of our analysis, for example, in relation to excess girl child mortality, also becomes evident through the consideration of gender divisions of labour. Exactly how divisions of labour relate to women's wellbeing and gender equity is a difficult question, and requires a consideration of labour as more than a means of survival, but also a cultural phenomena which is implicated in identities and everyday power relations. We have therefore examined degrees of flexibility in gender divisions of labour, agency and preferences in relation to work, the potentially perverse effects of education and rising household incomes on labour force participation, and the complex relationship between this and other indicators of women's status. The ways these elements are changing in an era of liberalisation is by no means clear, beyond the broad prediction that rising incomes, falling headcount poverty, and growing class disparities could possibly produce perverse effects on gender relations in some states, but we signal them as part of our argument for a properly gendered consideration of social change which requires more than sex disaggregated data to answer the important questions about gender justice.

It is not possible to make a summary judgement of whether rising household incomes benefits women more than it disadvantages them, because everything depends on how broadly- based the experience of rising incomes is, the gender culture within which that household is placed, the particular power relations within individual households, and because the costs may be borne particularly by young girls who do not survive into adulthood. What we can say is that women's gender identities can 'discount' their benefits from rising household prosperity, relative to men and that their wellbeing is less certain than men's to rise with household prosperity.

In considering patterns of recent change in the key processes which reproduce gender relations over time we note that education of girls has been improving and gender gaps with boys narrowing, but the gaps at levels above primary remain large and exclude women from better paid employment. The trend to private education in rural areas, and the neglect of state schools, is set to produce a two tier system of poor quality provision for poorer children and better quality provision for those who can pay for it. Son preference is likely to exclude girls from private schooling, but the drive to educate girls for the marriage market will possibly sustain enrolments of girls in poor schools and up to the level considered suitable for a good match but too low to make any impact on their employability, thus reproducing the reliance of women on husbands' incomes.

Other key processes in the reproduction of gender inequality are the discrimination against women in their natal homes, as infants and children, and in their marital homes, as wives. But men too can experience gendered vulnerabilities and we draw attention to the socially expected role of husbands as 'providers' as an element in masculinities which can expose men to excess accidental and self-inflicted mortality. Our main discussion however is of the adverse-to-women sex ratios, and massive excess deaths, which must constitute the greatest social justice problem of India today. We trace some of the underlying processes of the problem, and find a series of distinct pathways for different classes and regions, which nevertheless produce the same outcome, and in which hypergamy, and the competition for marital alliances with wealthier families is a common thread. It may be that there are links between sex ratio problems and liberalisation but we think these may well implicate falling fertility, and growing consumerism as well as social inequality and competition.

Finally, we give attention to considering women's attitudes, feelings and political consciousness about their situation as women, the complexity of representing the subjectivities of others, the tensions generated by changes which appear to offer both benefits to individual women and disadvantages to the collectivity of women, and the simultaneously emancipating and enslaving character of other kinds of change such as rising consumerism.

Our analysis highlights once again what has long been argued in social research on poverty and inequality, namely, that the relationship is neither clear nor direct. This is more so in the case of gender equality and economic status, where not only do the two not seem to change at the same pace, but often also move in opposite directions. As Beteille (2003) points out, despite the recognition that poverty is multi-faceted, there is a tendency to reduce it into indicators of economic well-being and assume that this will lead to improved social outcomes as well. However, there is also evidence that relations of power and status may not always correspond to distinctions of class. In order to make any meaningful statement about the relationship between a particular conception of poverty, or for that matter growth, and gender inequality what is needed is both a historical and a comparative analysis.

While income inequality appears to have increased in India, this has been accompanied by an advance in legal equality for women, whether in terms of rights to land, protection from violence or indeed representation in local government. These rights can in some ways seek to keep in check the inequalities resulting from gendered land and labour markets, as visible in the case of the high male-female earning gaps especially in the more progressive states of the country. The continued need for state intervention in certain key sectors such as education, health and public distribution of food as well as in functional institutions for redress seems imperative to sustain progressive gender change. The capture of informal power at the local level by elites would otherwise further accentuate the inequalities between urban and rural, rich and poor and men and women.

In developing this account we have attempted to disentangle the experiences of rural women as members of particular castes and classes, to avoid assuming that gender identities are always the most significant to women's experience and agency, and to understand how these identities may sometimes eclipse gender. In terms of women's experience, we have therefore, looked at how women's wellbeing as poor individuals and members of poor households has been changing, as well as how their wellbeing

as women is shifting, and note some important contrasts between these dimensions. In terms of their agency we observe that caste serves as a proxy for class in governing access to resources in many areas of development activity by the Indian state (through reservations and special programmes) and thus caste:class identity is arguably a more powerful, and certainly more historically legitimated need claim, than gender, although there is gathering momentum around the need claims of women. It is possible that the space between the improving position of the poor on some axes, and the deteriorating position of women on others, is connected to both perverse processes within development (increasing prosperity producing increasing inequalities) and to the phenomena of gender identities proving to be weaker than other identities. Agency in relation to gender interests is then relatively stifled, and thus disabled from challenging deepening discrimination against women.

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Figure 1:
Sen K (2005)

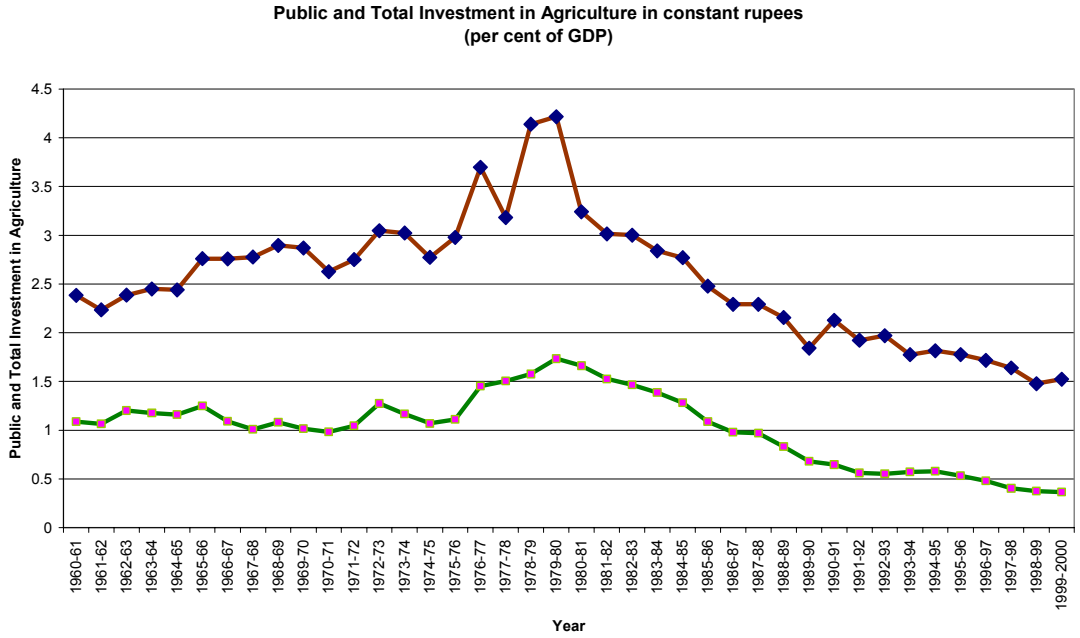
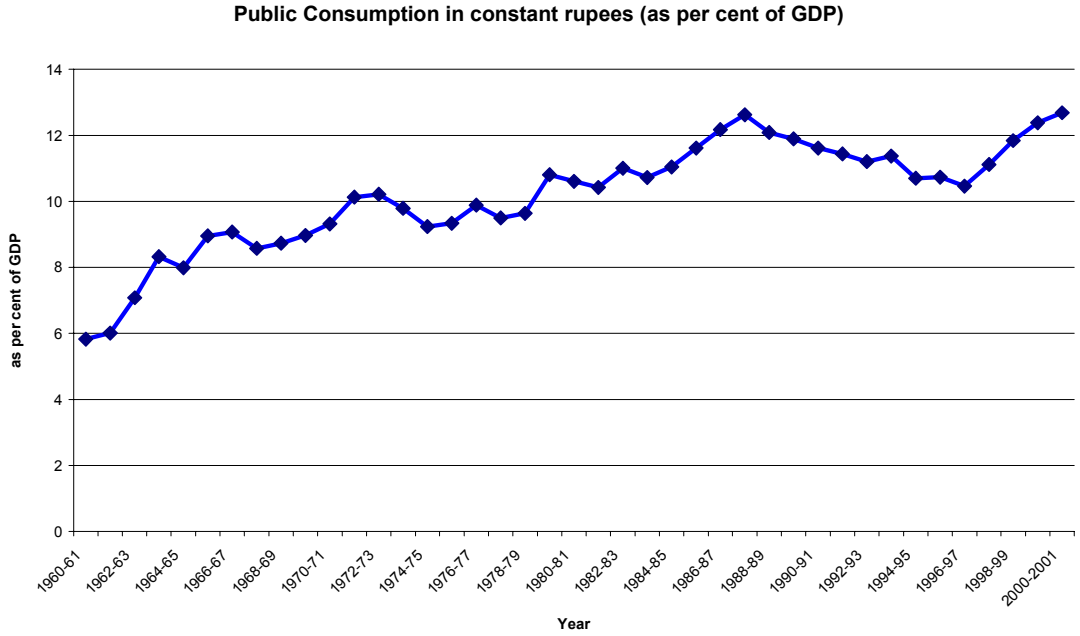


Figure 2



Growth rates of Agricultural and Manufacturing output (per cent)

Period	Agricultural Growth	Manuf Growth
1951-60	3.1	6.1
1961-70	2.5	5.3
1971-80	1.8	4.1
1981-90	3.6	7.6
1991-2000	2.7	6.1

Sen K (2005)

Annexure 1: Chronic Energy Difficiency and BMIs (NNMB, 2002)

Table 56 : Distribution (%) of 1-5 years Children according Weight for Age - Standard Deviation (SD) Classification

State	Sex	n	Weight t for Age*				
			< Median - 3SD	-3SD to - 2SD	-2SD to - 1SD	-1SD to Median	>= Median
Kerala	Boys	191	6.8	33.5	38.7	17.3	3.7
	Girls	184	8.7	31.5	33.2	18.5	8.2
	Pooled	**375**	**7.7**	**32.5**	**36.0**	**17.9**	**5.9**
Tamilnadu	Boys	540	14.8	36.5	36.3	10.6	1.9
	Girls	501	15.4	38.5	34.7	10.0	1.4
	Pooled	**1041**	**15.1**	**37.5**	**35.5**	**10.3**	**1.6**
Karnataka	Boys	411	16.8	41.4	32.1	8.8	1.0
	Girls	339	18.9	42.5	28.9	8.3	1.5
	Pooled	**750**	**17.7**	**41.9**	**30.7**	**8.5**	**1.2**
Andhra Pradesh	Boys	439	14.6	39.2	31.9	12.3	2.1
	Girls	398	16.6	35.9	34.9	9.8	2.8
	Pooled	**837**	**15.5**	**37.6**	**33.3**	**11.1**	**2.4**
Maharashtra	Boys	406	21.4	44.8	26.1	6.2	1.5
	Girls	341	25.2	38.4	24.6	8.5	3.2
	Pooled	**747**	**23.2**	**41.9**	**25.4**	**7.2**	**2.3**
Gujarat	Boys	390	23.3	41.8	27.4	6.2	1.3
	Girls	328	22.6	37.5	31.1	7.6	1.2
	Pooled	**718**	**23.0**	**39.8**	**29.1**	**6.8**	**1.3**
Madhya Pradesh	Boys	381	35.4	38.1	19.7	6.3	0.5
	Girls	363	36.1	38.8	18.2	5.0	1.9
	Pooled	**744**	**35.8**	**38.4**	**19.0**	**5.6**	**1.2**
Orissa	Boys	382	22.3	40.6	25.4	10.5	1.3
	Girls	392	27.8	41.1	25.3	5.1	0.8
	Pooled	**774**	**25.1**	**40.8**	**25.3**	**7.8**	**1.0**
West Bengal	Boys	319	19.7	40.8	30.7	7.2	1.6
	Girls	341	25.2	37.0	29.9	6.7	1.2
	Pooled	**660**	**22.6**	**38.8**	**30.3**	**7.0**	**1.4**

Sex	n	Weight t for Age*				
		< -3SD	-3SD to -2SD	-2SD to -1SD	-1SD to Median	>= Median
Boys	3459	19.9	39.8	29.6	9.1	1.5
Girls	3187	22.2	38.3	29.0	8.3	2.1
Pooled	**6646**	**21.0**	**39.1**	**29.3**	**8.8**	**1.8**

* : NCHS Standards

Table 60 : Distribution (%) of Adult (>= 18 years) Males according to BMI

State	n	BMI Grades*						
		< 16 CED III	16-17 CED II	17-18.5 CED I	18.5-20 Low Wt. Normal	20-25 Normal	25-30 Obese I	>= 30 Obese II
Kerala	902	3.4	4.3	14.7	16.5	47.0	12.7	1.2
Tamilnadu	1178	6.5	9.7	19.3	21.9	35.7	6.5	0.5
Karnataka	1506	5.3	8.3	22.6	22.1	34.5	6.8	0.3
Andhra Pradesh	1186	5.2	8.9	23.3	21.3	34.1	6.5	0.7
Maharashtra	1097	6.7	10.5	24.0	22.5	31.2	5.2	0.0
Gujarat	983	6.4	10.3	20.4	23.4	32.7	6.6	0.2
Madhya Pradesh	1378	6.7	10.5	25.6	29.0	25.8	1.9	0.4
Orissa	1546	5.1	7.7	25.8	30.5	28.6	2.0	0.3
West Bengal	1298	6.7	10.2	23.6	27.9	28.6	2.9	0.1
Pooled	**11074**	**5.8**	**9.0**	**22.6**	**24.4**	**32.5**	**5.3**	**0.4**

*BMI : Body Mass Index

Fig.25 Distribution (%) of Adults by BMI Grades

