Chapter 2

Status of Girl Child in India: A Situational Analysis
2.1. Introduction

While the introductory chapter gave an overview of the problems of street children in India, the current chapter takes the theme further by exploring the conceptual understandings of 'gender' and the problems of street girls in Indian society. The social construction of gender will focus on gender as a category as well as gender as an ideology. Then the chapter reviews available literature on the girl child, especially street girls and delineates the objectives, hypothesis as well as methodology of the present work. In the second section, the study will address the historical situation of women in India. The focus is on women instead of girl children specifically because a woman in her life span assumes different roles of a daughter, wife and mother. The third section deals with the depiction of women in sociological literature and the problem of her discrimination. Here, an attempt has been made to identify various indicators, where the discrimination on the basis of gender differences is there in the Indian society. The analysis will be on the reconstruction of childhood and the present situation of the girl children in the Indian context.

2.2 Social Construction of Gender

In commonsense knowledge, gender is a grammatical expression. It exists in most languages and divides objects into masculine, feminine and neuter. Usually, there is no particular reason as to why certain objects are considered masculine, feminine or neuter. In each language, the usage of gender is different. Thus, gender is a matter of habit and convention—this is how things have been referred to and this is how they ought to be. The general conception of gender has come to be associated with biological sex. Sex is considered a fact: One is born with either male or female genitalia. The connotation of feminine and the masculine in the terminology of 'gender' refers to the distinction between female and male.

Before moving to the social construction of gender an attempt has been made to analyse the debate of sex and gender and the distinction between the two. The sex-gender distinction is modelled upon the more general distinction between nature and culture, or between biological and social (Shiva, 1988). In this context, sex is what makes a male or female, and 'gender' is what makes an individual as masculine or feminine in a given society. But this dissimilarity is not self sufficient to demarcate the distinction between these two.
The above distinction of sex and gender is self-refuting because it does not bring forth a clear-cut distinction between the two. In academic parlance, the sociological discussion brought forth the division. Sex is seen as reflecting physical differences of the body whereas, gender reflects a social division. Thus, gender concerns the psychological, social and cultural differences between male and female. Rightly so, Donna Haraway’s (1991: 130) contribution on the word ‘gender’ in German Marxist dictionary echoes both the perspectives:

The word gender closely adheres to the concept of sex, sexuality, sexual difference, generation, engendering. Further, ‘gender’ is at the heart of constructions and classifications of systems of difference.

For Haraway, gender is a social construct related to the systems of difference. Sex is the province of biology, i.e. fixed and unchangeable, whereas gender is shaped through the history of social relations and interactions (Ostergaard, 1992: 6-7). Relations between men and women are socially constituted and the term gender relations distinguish such social relations between men and women.

Consideration of gender as a construction of social reality refers to the socio-cultural definition of man and woman and the way societies distinguish men and women and assign them social roles (Bhasin, 2003: 1). This has been extended to refer to not only an individual identity and personality, but also to the symbolic level to cultural ideals and stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. Each society slowly transforms a male or female into a man or a woman, into masculine and feminine, with different qualities, behaviour patterns, roles, responsibilities, rights and expectation (Bhasin, 2003: 2). As Oakley defines, gender roles are a product of culture rather than biology. Individuals learn their respective male and female roles. (Oakley in Haralambos, 1994: 373). That people are feminine or masculine can be judged by the criteria of culture and not by biological evidence. Feminity is associated with a wide range of economic, social and political roles including those reflecting domestic functions. These differential images of women, perceived on the basis of their relationships with men and desirability and the degree of concern with social norms regarding the division of labour, determine the nature and scope of the roles that a woman assumes.

Thus, a gender approach means analysing the forms and the links that gender relations take and the links between them and other wider relations in society. Gender
relations are not static. Due to the links between gender and economic relations, economic changes affect gender relations. Similarly, the productive relations and the conditions of reproduction also affect gender relations. An individual as a social actor has a defined position in the social structure that rests on socially adopted rules, goals, expectations, rights and responsibilities. Gender differences are workable and may be changed by political and opinion-shaping influences. The concept of women in development is concrete and may lead to marginalizing women as a particular species with inherited handicaps. The concept of gender in development is abstract and opens up for the realisation of women’s productive potentials in development.

2.2.1 Gender as a Social Category
The meaning of gender as a category of analysis is basically a methodological tool that enables to identify and isolate certain elements in reality. Like caste, class and religion, gender is a category of description and analysis. Other aspects of social reality like caste and class are determined and influenced by gender divisions (Geetha, 2002: 10).

The discussion of gender analysis includes a complex of psychological associations and socio-cultural relations. The psychological associations of gender are primarily considered to be a set of dispositional traits that an individual can modify by choice. The conception of gender from a socio-cultural perspective views it not simply as a collection of psychological traits, but as a basic element of social structure.

The society is structured in such a way that norms and behaviour are decisive in shaping the behaviour of “gendered beings” in society. Here, the inclusive aspects of cultural norms as well as other essential components such as social and economic systems have important roles to play. Justifying the above, Geetha mentions that gender difference involves unpacking systems and the ideas that govern them and scrutinizing systems for the ideas they create (Geetha, 2002: 9).

Gendered relations are neither harmonious nor non-conflicting. On the contrary, the socially constructed gender relations may be ones of opposition and conflict. But as such conflicts are not facts from biology or nature, but socially determined, they may take very different forms under different circumstances. They often take the form of male dominance and female subordination. The various forms where subordination takes place inter alia include women’s unpaid domestic work, labour in the low-wage sectors of the market and in
rural areas of Third World countries. This is due to sexual division of labour that is tied to gender division and male dominance.

The division between female and male is socially created and is deeply woven into the organisations of institutions and everyday life. It is not just a division but also an asymmetry, with men having more power and status. Being male and female carries connotations of different power and status (Nagla, 2001: 132). Gender does not have a uniform impact across situations. It is because gender alone as a stratification variable provides as incomplete an understanding as using only class, race, ethnicity or caste (Kalpagam, 1986).

Though power and status among gender relations are not similar, the differential relationship of man and woman is structured in different societies. It is geared towards the reproduction of a dominant group (men) and subordinate group (women). In this context, Indian society has always been highly hierarchical. There are several hierarchies, beginning from the family and community level. Within the family, the hierarchy follows with an individual’s age, sex, ordinal position, affinal and consanguinal kinship relationships etc. Within the community, the hierarchy of caste, lineage, wealth, occupation and relationship with the ruling power have been maintained and integrated by means of a complex combination of customs and religious beliefs (Chitnis, 2003: 11). The duality of domination and subordination follows at each hierarchy. Due to the harshness and oppressiveness of these hierarchies a series of behavioural codes emerge which also bend superiors to fulfill their obligations. A philosophy of self-denial, and the cultural emphasis on sublimating the ego also gets associated with such a hierarchical relationship. (Chitnis, 2003: 11). Gender is a manifestation of the contingent stereotyping or of structural power relations and the issue of race was central in propelling these debates on gender as multiple structures of power. (Rege, 2003: 7).

2.2.2 Gender as an ideology

Gender refers to a qualitative and independent character of women and men’s position in society. Gender relations are constituted in terms of relations of power and dominance that structures the life chances of women and men. Thus, division of labour is not fixed by biology, but constitutes an aspect of the wider social division of labour and this in turn is
rooted in the conditions of production and reproduction and is reinforced by the cultural, religious and ideological systems prevailing in society (Ostergaard, 1992: 6).

The ideology was critically reflected in the writings of early sociologists. Durkheim argued that among the cultivated people, the woman leads a completely different existence from that of the man...the two great functions of the psychic life are...dissociated, (in) that one of the sexes takes care of affective functions and the other of intellectual functions" (1964: 60). Under the influence of role theory and functionalism, the study of gender in sociology was conceived as an achieved status accompanied by a set of patterned gender roles. Similarly, the Marxist analysis is on division of labour between production of use values for home consumption, and exchange values for markets. This distinction, however, disappears for rural women who produce both (Nickols and Srinivasan, 1994). So it is clear that the gender identity as well as gender relations are not current phenomena. The differences of gender identity and relations are the most ancient, most universal and most powerful origin of many valued conceptualisations of everything else in the world.... As far back in the history, the social and natural worlds were organised in terms of gender meanings (Harding, 1986: 7).

The category of masculinity as a socially constructed product of gender ideology is associated with the creation of the concept of woman as the 'other'. In this asymmetrical relationship, feminity is ideologically constructed as everything that is not masculine and must be subjected to domination (Shiva, 1988: 48). There are two gender-based responses to the process of domination and asymmetry. The first, represented by Simone de Beauvoir, is based on the acceptance of feminine and masculine as biologically established, and the status of women as the second sex is similarly determined. Women's liberation is prescribed as the masculinisation of the female. The emancipation of the 'second sex' lies in its modelling itself on the first; women's freedom consists in freedom, both from biology and from bondage (Beauvoir, 1972: 87). It consists of women battling against the elements and becoming masculine. The liberation that de Beauvoir conceives of is a world in which the masculine is accepted as superior and women are free to assume masculine values. The process of liberation is thus a masculinisation of the world defined within the categories created by gender-based ideology (Shiva, 1988:49).
De Beauvoir accepts the patriarchal categorisation of women as weak and unproductive sublimated passively to her biologic fate. The worst that was laid upon woman was that she should be excluded from the warlike forays. For it is not in giving life, but in risking life, that man is raised above the minimal. That is why superiority has been accorded in humanity not to the sex that brings forth life but so that which kills (Beauvoir, 95-96). De Beauvoir subscribes to the myth of man-the–hunter as a superior being.

There are three broad responses to the feminist critiques of the discipline: inclusion, separatism and reconceptualisation. The first kind of response integrates women into the cognitive structures of the disciplines; it leaves the assumptions of the mainstream discipline unchallenged. The second response argues for sociology of women from a woman’s perspective. All women are seen as sharing a common position derived from their marginalisation and exploitation in a patriarchal society. The effort is to conceptualise the social world based on the experience of women. Such a position not only leaves the mainstream unchallenged but also in a reverse way reiterates the division of women to experience and men to theory. The third position of reconceptualisation seeks to move beyond a filling in of gaps and separatist knowledge. It seeks to integrate feminist challenges to the discipline in ways that lead to a reconceptualisation of the sociological categories (Rege, 2003: 5-6).

There is no agreed usage for the term ‘gender’ to conceptualise the social construction of gender. The social construction of gender in last quarter of twentieth century draws attention to the controversial gender issue within feminism. This is important in a number of significant ways. Davies (1996: 663-66) views the significance in three ways. First, there is a move to regarding gender not as an attribute but as a relation (Scott, 1986; Connell, 1987). Insisting on the relational equality of gender provided a dual challenge. On one hand, it affirms gender as a social construction, thus drawing attention away from the behaviour of particular men and women towards historically and culturally constructed masculinities and feminities from which subjectivities, identities and behavioural regularities emerge. On the other hand, it challenges both those who have studied only women and those who have worked on masculinity to ensure that a relational focus is sustained.
Secondly, there is a focus on gender relations as power relations that take a binary form, a form in which women (or rather the qualities that woman represent) are constructed as 'devalued others'- as carriers of qualities that thereby remain unacknowledged and denied (Hartsock, 1990; Jay, 1991; Bologh, 1990).

Thirdly, there is an acknowledgement that gender understood in these ways can be seen to operate at multiple levels; it gives meaning to, and affects, the formation and reproduction of organisations and institutions. It also influences the level of interactions and identities (Acker, 1990, 1992; Alverson and Billing, 1992; Savage and Witz, 1992; Mills and Tancres, 1992). A particularly important derivative of this is that gender relations are not fixed; such relations can thus be challenged, dislodged and transformed into the process of daily reproduction. It is within this conceptual framework that the experiences and struggles of female gender have been located. This perspective can recover humanity not in its distorted form of the victim and oppressor, but by creating a new wholeness that transcends gender identity.

2.3. Status of Women in India: A Historiography

For a social system to function, its necessary contradiction thrives on the basis of the gap between the ideal and praxis. It is true that various macro parameters like economy, polity, social situation, cultural conditions determine the state of gender relations in a society. When these forces express commitment to the betterment of gender relations by reinforcing their voice both explicitly and implicitly, it is difficult to understand why there is a persistence of unequal gender relations in India? To answer this, a historical sketch of the evolution of social conditions of female gender in the areas of their social life has been discussed. The discussion is from the early stages to modern times. It will give emphasis on the degree of suppression experienced by a female at each stage of their life cycle which varies qualitatively and quantitatively. To substantiate this statement, a historical sketch on the status of female gender has been outlined in Indian context.

2.3.1. Ancient Period

During Vedic times, i.e. from 2500 to 1500 B.C. the Aryans who came to the Indus Valley were a herding and warring nomadic people. During this period women had an exalted position and they enjoyed a fair amount of personal freedom and equality (Sharma, 1994:
13). Though the birth of a girl was not welcome, she did not suffer inequality in the society. In spite of the attitude of indifference, the female child had a respectable position in the family and society. The higher sections of society the sacred initiation (*upanayana*) of girls was common, and they used to go through a regular course of education. Some attained distinction in the realm of theology and philosophy and a considerable number of women used to follow the teaching career.

In the family, the woman's role of daughter, wife and mother were respected too. She enjoyed freedom of movement and also had a say in the choice of her marriage partner. There are references in Vedic literature that *Kshatriya* girls had exclusive rights of selecting their own consort. Divorce was permitted and widow remarriage was allowed within the family. She was regarded an indispensable member of the family without whom consummation of human life was not possible (Indra, 1955: 23). Husband and wife were treated on a par, and the happiness of each depended upon the other (Altekar, 1956: 11-13). The presence of wife was necessary for sacrificial performance, for "the gods do not accept the oblations of a bachelor (Altekar, 1956: 11-13 and Indra, 1955: 161-166).

During the later Vedic period i.e. from 1500 to 500 B.C., the Aryans began to settle in the Gangetic Plains. Early agricultural society and with it private property started to develop. The honoured position which the wife enjoyed in the family and society during the Vedic era gradually started declining during post-Vedic period. Many of the elements of Hinduism, which oppress women, were the result of conflict between the Dravidians and the Aryans, and the influence of the Scythian and Muslim invaders (Marshall, 1931: 57-87).

The key to deterioration of her status, according to Altekar, was the introduction of non-Aryan wife into the Aryan household. Since the non-Aryan wife had no knowledge of Sanskrit language and Vedic rituals, she was declared to be unfit for association with her husband in religious ceremonies (Sharma, 1994: 20). As a result of this, women were neglected and not allowed to be part of the centres for learning. It was preferred that women received training at home from fathers, and near relatives. Hence, religious training was not available to every woman; consequently, a tendency developed to curtail the religious rights
and privileges of the average woman. Many religious functions and sacrifices were
performed by male substitutes. However, when the husband was away or out on war service
some rites and religious functions continued to be performed by women alone. Altekar goes
on to say that the general freedom and better status enjoyed by women in Vedic period was
largely due to men being engaged in conquest and consolidation. Women used to take an
active part in agriculture, and in the manufacturing of cloth, bows and arrows and other war
materials. They were useful members of society and could not be treated with patronage and
contempt.

The position of women considerably deteriorated during the period from 500 B.C. to
700 A.D. The Aryans had by then settled down. The Mauryan and Gupta empires rose and
fell. Stratification increased in society. Marriages between Aryans and indigenous
inhabitants took place. Though these non-Aryan women were accepted in every way as
wives, owing to their ignorance of Sanskrit language and Vedic religion, they could not take
part in religious ceremonies. Thus, women from the higher sections were withdrawn from
outdoor work. Freedom to move was curbed simultaneously. Birth of a son became a
religious necessity as he alone could perform certain ritual functions. Gradually, women
came to be considered unfit for freedom and deserving no independence - to be kept under
the authority of the male at all stages of their life.

2.3.2. Medieval Period

A further deterioration in the status of women occurred between 700 A.D and 1800 A.D.
The invasion of the country by Muslims complicated the Hindu religion. The Muslim period
in India left scars in the status of women in India, who then lost access to education and had
few rights and privileges. Women were dictated by the dictums and rules laid down by the
exponents of Puranic literature. The custom which was cruelest to women was the system
of seclusion and veiling known in India as “purdah”. Till the 12th century purdah was
absent. Interestingly, the strictest seclusion was practiced by the military Rajputs whose
adult wives come from other villages, and “by excluding the wives, the chance that they may
adversely affect the family interests was minimized” (Cousins, 1922: 88).
By this time, the custom of sati, the burning of a widow on the funeral pyre of her husband, had become common among the upper castes. In theory, sati was “voluntary”—i.e. it was often considered preferable to the hardship of a widowed life (Ward, 1822: 322-329), but there were cases on record of child “widows”, whose marriage had not even been consummated, being forced to the husband’s funeral pyre, and of women drugged or hand and foot tied and flung into the fire in order to support the family honour (Altekar, 1923: 146-149 and Basham, 1967:189).

However, in the face of constant invasion when men folk were often away fighting battles, it was considered safer to keep women in seclusion. Female infanticide, child marriage and sati were the outcome of the problems faced by the society to protect the honour of their women folk. Sati became a custom when there was a religious ban on widow remarriage. Firstly, it ensured the chastity of a widow, and secondly, there was an economic benefit as the assets of the deceased could be claimed by persons other than the widow. Child marriage was the popular feature of social life in Mughal period, the Hindu daughters were married before the age of nine or ten and in some cases girls were married even before they had learnt to talk (Mishra, 132). The practice of early marriage simply meant that girls were deprived of access to education. During this period, the husband came to exercise greater control over wife and she, on account of her illiteracy and ignorance, fell an easy prey to ill treatment and tyranny.

2.3.3. Colonial Period (1800 A.D to 1947 A.D)

In the 18th century at the dawn of the British rule, the position of women in the family and society had suffered the maximum degree of deterioration (Sharma, 1994: 32). The position of women in this period was in a sorry state. Literacy levels ebbed and after 1857 there was hardly one woman in a hundred who could read and write. This was so because of the evil religious practices, sinister outcomes, irrational religious rites and inhuman superstitions and ceremonies, unknown in the ancient period, which had crept into Hindu society. Early marriage, enforced widowhood, sati, Devadasi, purdah, dowry, female infanticide and evil
practices of polygamy, made the Hindu society a huge static and immobile social structure in which woman practically had no say and was neglected.

The British period brought a degree of political orderliness. The existing social structure was modified through legislative measures. Legislation was enacted to permit inter-caste marriages and widow remarriage. Divorce was permitted under certain conditions. Facilities were provided for education of women. The thinkers and leaders of society advocated education of women and restoration of their legal and social rights. Socio-economic movements like the Brahma Samaj and Arya Samaj lent further support to these concepts. The influence of liberal English education also helped to spread and strengthen these ideals. Unlike in the West, the movement for social reform and women's advancement in India was initiated and led by enlightened male leaders.

At the end of the 19th century, the reform movement, to a certain extent, merged with national resurgence and political emancipation goals inspired by ideals of M.K. Gandhi. These leading lights provided the springboard for Indian women to involve themselves in socio-political and national activities (Jones, 1989).

2.3.4 The Post Colonial Period (1947 A.D onwards)

After the Independence of India, the architects of Indian Constitution recognized the unequal social position of women and equal rights for women got enshrined in the Constitution. By enshrining the equality principle in the Constitution, the greatest honour was paid to the neglected and subjugated sections of the society. Equality of sexes (Basu, 2004 and Bakshi, 2005) is enshrined in the Chapter III, which is Fundamental Rights. Article 15 states that any type of discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth is contrary to the goals laid down in the constitution. Part-III of the Constitution on Directive Principles of State Policy also lays down ideals for the emancipation of women.

After conferring equality in the Constitution, the next step was to reform the laws by which people were governed. Legislative reforms were brought about in the country. The
Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, the Hindu Succession Act, 1956, Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956, and the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, 1956 were passed. Besides these four major legislative measures, a number of other laws have been passed to restrain undesirable social practices and to protect the interests of women workers. Prominent among these are the Prohibition of Dowry Act, the Suppression of Prostitution and Immoral Traffic Act, and the Factories Act, all passed in 1958. Again in the year 1992 and 1993, the Constitution of India was amended (73rd and 74th) to confer women’s empowerment at Panchayati Raj (local government) level.

2.4. Depiction of Gender in Sociological Literature

The term gender scarcely appeared in the academic writings of the first half of the last century. The notion seems to have gathered widespread currency only with the coming into being of sex-gender distinction. By the seventies, this conceptual distinction had found general acceptance within sociology in particular and social sciences in general. Gender remains much contested but an indispensable concept: Contested because some scholars challenge this shift from women to gender and indispensable to others because they see it as allowing for a more inclusive analysis of the human experience based on interesting structures of domination, difference and diversity (Rege, 2003:9).

The status or position of human beings in society is a major index of modernization. The inter-relationship of human beings can be devised by various aspects such as caste, class, religion, education, production and reproduction where the society is stratified into higher and lower groups. Gender is another aspect, where the status of human beings is stratified on the basis of male and female. In this context, the position of female is a subjugated one. A significant difference exists in women's position i.e. the expectations regarding women's appropriate patterns of behaviour, privileges and responsibilities; and the values attached to women's roles. The diversity and multiplicity of roles and status of women explain the influence of culture and social structure in moulding the social order.

Due to the differences in economic development, the status of female gender in developed countries is a major concern and there have been great improvements in the status of women there. The situation in a developing country like India may not be as satisfying when compared to certain European countries. The status of women has undergone drastic
changes with modernization. When a traditional society like India is becoming modern, gender related issues and male-female differences get more focus and attention.

Status is a complex concept and can be understood only if the concepts are not separated from the experience to which they give expression. The word status is defined as the social honour or prestige, which a particular group is accorded by other members of a society. Status groups normally involve distinct styles of life and patterns of behaviour, which the members of a group follow (Giddens, 1991: 212, 732).

The words status and role have been used interchangeably. While status defines who a person is, role defines what such a person is expected to do. The status of a female in society can either be ascribed or achieved. The status of a woman becomes an independent level of analysis because it is defined by her role in the society. The role of a woman varies from other woman and everyone has more than one status. Thus the word status is an abstract concept and cannot explain our entire range of behaviour. It is only indicative and thereby is reduced to a static rather than a dynamic concept.

If everyone has more than one status then these status profiles may not be compatible with others. This confusion and ambiguity is a source of strain and discomfort and generally one tries to get rid of it or change it. A sociological understanding explains that the society expects a functionally assigned role from a female gender. But whenever there is discrepancy in role expectation and role performance, this becomes a major source of discomfort in the society. This gap may be due to individual or social reasons. Thus, the role gap of a female in relation to a male exists due to various social reasons. Some scholars present a picture of male domination of female stemming from the evolutionary adaptations of early human beings to a way of life based on hunting and war-fare, with the genetically imprinted male dominance continuing to shape the relations between the sexes today. Likewise, in present scenario, some have argued that the forces of industrialism and other forms of modernization have produced improvements in the lot of the women relative to men, while a counter argument by others is that these forces further degraded the status of women in the society. Thus, gender relations, refers to the relations of power between women and men which are revealed in a range of practices, ideas, representations, including
the division of labour, roles and resources between men and the ascribing to them of
different abilities, attitudes, desires and personality traits, behavioural patterns and so on
(Agarwal, 1996; 51).

Complexity breathes through the heterogeneous nature of Indian society with its
pattern of socio-economic inequality, the existing social structure based on caste,
community and class; the social, economic, political and cultural changes occurring at
present, educational development and structural changes in the living styles. It is important
to note here that any micro or macro change that has occurred in the past or is taking place
has always had both negative and positive impact. Such diverse forces acting in our society
are inevitably giving rise to ambiguities and contradictions. The processes of development,
urbanization and modernization have also played a role in creating and resolving
imbalances.

India is known as a land of paradoxes. The female element is predominant in India, a
land where goddesses are worshipped and women revered as goddesses. The country is
“referred to as “the motherland” and the whole cultural life permeates with the idea of the
female ideal, the Mother Goddesses, and the awe of her representatives, the Indian
Mothers…. Like, cow an animal honoured above all the animals, the women are honoured
above all other human beings”. (Ehrenfels, 1941:133) They are regarded as the stronger of
sexes, and most capable of bearing responsibility.

Issue of her identity, sexuality and domesticity occupy importance on sociological
literature on Indian women. The identity of a woman in India is formed in relation to the
values, meanings and symbols of Indian society. Her self is affected by the cultural world
outside. The meanings and values of the cultural identity are internalized. The ideology of
motherhood differs according to the socio-cultural context, ethnicity, and class. In India,
which is mostly a patriarchal society, motherhood has connotations of respect and power.
Here, the “mother goddess” is highly revered, but real-life mothers are respected to a very
limited extent, and that respect is usually for mothers of sons. This can vary depending on
factors such as gender relations, class and caste. How then do we explain the paradox, so
often pointed out, that India has traditionally been a land of the seclusion of women, Sati
(the burning of the widow) and of child marriage? For this it is necessary to distinguish between “folk” and “formal” culture, between the ambiguous position of women in the official culture, as expressed in Vedic literature, and the unequivocal honour and esteem in which women are held popular in religion, myth, folklore and daily life (Fane, 1975: 52).

In sociological literature, few studies have been conducted to depict the situation of women. Gail Omvedt’s monograph on violence and Vasanth and Kalpana Kannabiran’s essay on gender, sexuality and caste violence stand out as pioneering works. In different ways, these writers examine the forms and modalities of sexual assault in a society in terms of how these differences shape masculine and feminine self-perceptions and how and where caste identity intersects and informs a person’s sense of being male and female (Geetha, 2002: 97).

The patriarchal system in India, evolved over centuries has created durable patterns of attitudes and behaviour which make for the wide spread practice of treating women as property. Women were made to appear inferior to men. A woman earns respect if she performs her assigned role of wife, mother or daughter. Hinduism is probably the only religion where women are both feared and worshipped as goddesses. But ironically, in reality women often get ill-treated. Various examples from the ancient Indian literature are quoted which bring out these aspects. Women are subject to legal and social disabilities as per their various strata and different stage of life cycle. As a result those few oft-cited traditional examples describing human relationship between men and women can only be viewed as exceptions proving the rule. Therefore, besides feminism one must also pay heed to how an evolving ideology of the Hindu family resulted in such a stringent patriarchy in India (Seth, 1992).

Women are represented in Indian literature as a form of divine energy. She is accoladed for her spirituality. There are numerous women spiritual leaders since the time of Bhakti movement in South India. Women spirituality raises two not easily answered ambivalent questions – the first, can a spiritual experience be different for or be distinguished between women and men, for surely such an experience should transcend all the trappings of identity of a material world. The other is, to what extent can or should women be treated as women and not as de-sexed or asexual persons in the spiritual sphere? Gender becomes the issue not so much in the spiritual orientations or experiences of the
women themselves, but in the way this is viewed in patriarchal society. Women, as such, are not thought fit for attaining salvation through spiritual experience or asceticism. For a woman, salvation comes through surrendering herself to her husband and family, not by surrendering herself to devotion and god. Because this is the ‘ideal’ woman, any woman who seeks to express her own spirituality becomes ‘dangerous’ and ‘deviant’ (Ramaswamy, 1997).

Similarly, Raj Mohini Sethi’s study on women agricultural producers in Himachal Pradesh depicts the subordination of women, which is traced to the excessive concern for maintaining the ‘purity’ of the female body in child-rearing practices and the socialization of women. This concern leads to segregation and seclusion of women to follow the system of purdah, sati, child marriage and forced widowhood. Women are engaged in work intensive private agriculture, which is regarded as low prestige work not significantly contributing to productivity. Segregation and seclusion make women and their work invisible. This also closes educational and employment opportunities for women and prevents them from acquiring vocational skills. Since women are unable to transcend these socio-cultural barriers; they are segregated within the existing structures of the divisions of labour in society (Sethi, 2003: 226-243).

C.V. Kala’s micro-study on female participation in farm work in central Kerala shows that the participation of women in agricultural work is controlled by a complex of norms in the local social structural context. The last 25 years of last century has not brought about rationality but a tradition bound variation in female roles in local agricultural employment (Kala, 2003: 245-269).

Prem Chowdhury’s study of peasant society in Haryana across a century, carefully and with a wealth of detail, unravels relations of production and reproduction, as they exist within an agricultural economy. His work presents an account of gender where control over a woman’s labour as well as control over her sexuality-are essential to the existence of a hierarchical peasant society (Chowdhury, 2002: 93).

Thus from the above case studies, it can be seen that discussion of female status in sociological literature depicts the suffering women. In spite of the constitutional provisions for women in India, they face tremendous amount of insecurity and helplessness as is
obvious from the declining sex ratio, life expectancy, literacy rate, internal migration rates and economic participation. Though women have access to all avenues of learning and public appointments, in actual practice, a small percentage of women in India are either highly educated or are holding positions in Government and private organisations. Thus, in a complex, hierarchical and heterogeneous country as India, the status of women is affected by innumerable factors including caste, class, religion, family, region, education, age, production and reproduction. Generally speaking, women in India are seen as a deprived section of society. India still remains a male-dominated society where a woman remains subjugated or oppressed.

2.5. Diversity of Gender across Caste and Class

Caste and class are the two important factors which influence the outcome of gender relations in India. Specific rules are laid down for women as to how they should act according to situations. Most of the castes in the country are in favour of the patriarchal power and secondary status for women. However high a position a man or woman occupies in the society, he or she has to follow the norms of the caste system. Very few people dare to defy the customary rules and regulations of their caste system. That explains the deep entrenchment of dowry culture, and ill treatment of women among many educated men in the country. Women in higher caste have more restrictions on their freedom due to barriers laid down by their caste. In fact, a tribal woman is considered to enjoy more freedom than the non-tribal counterpart. For instance, in many tribes a tribal woman can repudiate her marriage and can easily remarry. In tribal societies even widowhood does not disqualify a woman from marrying again (Pujari and Kaushik, 1994: 278).

2.6. Constructing Childhood of a Girl

The 20th century was considered the “century of the child” and perhaps at no other time have children been so highly profiled. The ideology of child-centred society gives the child and his interests a prominent place in the policy and practices of legal, welfare, medical and educational institutions. A whole discourse is devoted to understanding the particular
qualities of children. But despite this rhetoric the very concept of childhood has become problematic during the last decade.

The discussion reflects on contemporary concerns by exploring the ways in which childhood is socially constructed. This means, the exploration of ways in which the immaturity of children is conceived and articulated in particular societies into cultural specific sets of ideas and philosophies, attitudes and practices which combine to define the 'nature of childhood' (James and Prout, 2003: 1).

The debate around who is a child? This is not just a matter of semantics but a question increasingly central to academic and professional practice. The gradual emergence of the concept of child shifted from health and starvation issues to the consequences of socio-cultural practices, famine, war and poverty. There is growing consciousness of issues related to child abuse, particularly child sexual abuse, which again challenged traditional beliefs about childhood. The growing unease is reflected in changes in academic interests also. Concerns have been developing about the way in which social sciences have traditionally conceptualized and dealt with children and childhood. These concerns become quite clear with an introduction of paradigms for the study of childhood. The discussions of the tenets of the emergent paradigm (James and Prout, 2003: 8) are as follows:

1) Childhood is considered a social construction. As such it provides an interpretive frame for contextualising the early years of human life. Childhood, as distinct from biological immaturity is neither a natural nor a universal given, but appears as a structural and cultural component of many societies.

2) Childhood is a variable of social analysis. It can never be entirely divorced from other variables such as class, gender or ethnicity. Comparative and cross-cultural analysis reveals a variety of childhoods rather than a single and universal phenomenon.

3) Children’s social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the perspective and concern of adults.

4) Children must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. They are not just passive subjects of structural determinations.
5) Ethnography is a particularly useful methodology for the study of childhood. It allows children a more direct voice and participation in the production of sociological data than is usually possible through experimental or survey styles of research.

6) Childhood is a phenomenon in relation to which the double hermeneutic of the social sciences applies. (Giddens, 1976) That is to say, to proclaim a new paradigm of childhood sociology is also to engage in and respond to the process of reconstructing childhood in society.

The intersection between culture and individual can be described through interactions between the process of human development and culture. The primary function of culture is shaping human experience into meaningful segments, or “stages”. The definition of developmental stages is a part of culturally shared response to the observable aspects of human development, and thus, it seems reasonable to expect certain universal elements in stages as defined by all cultures. The cultural construction of child development (Harkness and Super, 1983: 223) has three main dimensions: first, culturally derived criteria for the duration of each developmental stage; second, a set of characteristic physical and social settings; and third, culturally shared expectations for behaviour by and toward individuals in each stage.

As in all societies, the treatment of children in India is likely a function of deep-seated cultural norms. Few would deny that there is societal tolerance for the use of corporal punishment, a cultural factor theorized as a risk factor for physical abuse. (Zigler and Hall, 1989: 38-75). In addition, India is a partilineal society in which extreme preference for male offspring leads to a corresponding denigration of female children. There is not only societal pressure to bear a child but to bear a male child who will carry forward the name and legacy of the family and provide physical and financial security to parents in their old age. In India, property is inherited by male heirs even though legally women have and can claim their due share. As a result, female children have been at higher risk for selective foeticides, infanticide, poorer nutrition, healthcare and educational opportunities, kidnapping and forced prostitution (Proffenberger, 1981: 71-95; Wadley, 1993).

One of the most sophisticated theories of gender to emerge in the Indian context was that advanced by E. V. Ramaswamy Periyar, an anti-caste radical and original thinker who
lived and carried out his agitational propaganda in Tamil Nadu. He argues that masculine and feminine norms are not given. He argues that except for nursing the child, the infant could be looked after as well by its father as by its mother. He submits accepted notions of feminity to a scathing critique—beauty, chastity and motherhood, he notes, were convenient and elaborate fictions which not only convinced women that they were destined to be subordinate, but also enabled them to welcome that subordination.

Likewise, he suggests that masculinity is merely an expression of brute male power. In this sense, it is the greatest obstacle to female freedom. He is particularly critical of sexual standards which excuse, legitimise and even celebrate male promiscuity, while condemning women to either a life of limited monogamy or wretched widowhood. He undertakes an exhaustive critique of chastity and its converse, female promiscuity. Arguing that a chaste wife and a prostitute mirror each other, he suggests that the one connotes lifelong sexual slavery to men, while the other sells herself to several men. In either case, feminity is condemned to servitude (Geetha, 2002: 89).

What was the basis of masculinity and feminity, both of which were obviously social constructs? Periyar locates the existence of these norms and attributes within a social and economic system, which historically had come to favour the male. This system also processed the sanctity of religion. Thus, economics, masculinity and a spiritual priesthood together held the social system in its place. His criticism of this interlocking social system appeared inspired by Engels’s work, though he embeds his ideas within the recognisable context of Hindu caste society (Geetha, 2002: 90).

2.7 Contemporary Status of Girl Child

The low status of a girl child in society is reflected in the denial of fundamental needs and rights. A son is generally raised with self-oriented expectations while a daughter is raised with other oriented expectations in the sense that sons are made to concentrate on their education and careers whereas, daughters are supposed to accommodate the relational needs of others. Girls are often treated as inferior to boys, both within home and by society-at-large. They are socialized to see themselves at the bottom of the hierarchy, which in turn undermines their self-esteem and their ability to reach their full potential as human beings. For instance, when a girl is prevented from going to school or is too exhausted to pay attention in class because of her workload at home, she is being denied her right to
education. Further, when a girl carries the bulk of responsibility for the housework while her brother studies, plays or attends to his interests and hobbies, she is being discriminated against.

Every year about 15 million girls are born in India. Almost one quarter of the number do not see their 15th birthday due to adverse socio-cultural factors which are embedded in our existing culture. A girl child is considered a liability in the family. The socialisation process of a girl child is different from a male child. Gendering or gender indoctrination teaches different social mechanisms and makes a child internalise such behaviour, attitude and roles. Though the boys and girls are brought up in same family, the socialisation process differs on the basis of gender. This attitude reflects the pattern of interaction, role responsibility and distribution of resources, which are embedded in cultural values. Thus, it may be inferred that gender is a crucial determinant of the course of life of an individual in both biological and social developments. In this context, the gender gaps can be identified through a disparity between males and females on various socio-demographic indicators, such as sex ratio, child sex ratio, maternal mortality rate, infant mortality, foeticide, health and nutrition, literacy rate, work participation rate and property rights across rural and urban settings.

2.7.1. Sex Ratio in India

Sex composition is one of the basic demographic characteristics of any society. The term sex ratio is used to denote the number of women per 1000 men. This is an important social indicator to measure the extent of prevailing equity between males and females in a society at a given point of time. Generally, the changes in sex composition largely reflect the underlying socio-economic and cultural patterns of a society. The sex ratio in India, given in Figure 2.1, reflects the gender bias in society.
The above figure depicts the sex ratio from 1901 to 2001. According to the data, sex ratio in the beginning of the 20th century was 972 (1 on X-axis refers to year 1901) and thereafter declined continuously until 2001 with the exception of census years 1951, 1981 and 2001.

It is natural for an ordinary person to believe that male and female ratio in the total population is exactly a balanced one. Over a century, the sex ratio in India shows that there is a negative growth rate. There is a welcome improvement since the census year of 1991, which recorded 927 females for every 1000 males. In the last four census years i.e. since 1971 sex ratio has fluctuated between 927 and 934. Moreover, in most of the countries the sex ratio tends to be in favour of women. In capitalist countries, for example there is an average of 106 females from every 100 men, in sub-Saharan Africa, there are 102 women per 100 men; and in South East Asia, 101 women for every 100 men. In India, on the contrary, there are less than 93 women for every 100 men.\(^1\) (Here it is FN) From the above discussions we can conclude that socio-economic conditions of a nation do not have much relevance. Rather, the sex ratio of the country is by and large rooted in socio-cultural factors which are against the female gender in the Indian case.

\(^{1}\) [www.infochangeindia.org/booksandreportsst56](http://www.infochangeindia.org/booksandreportsst56)
2.7.2. Missing Girls

Like the sex ratio, the table below shows that the picture of child sex ratio is gloomy in India.

**Table: 2.1. Child Sex Ratio (1991-2001) (Girls per 1000 boys aged 0-6)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>945</td>
<td>927</td>
<td>-18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andhra Pradesh</td>
<td>975</td>
<td>964</td>
<td>-11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>975</td>
<td>964</td>
<td>-11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bihar</td>
<td>953</td>
<td>938</td>
<td>-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chattisgarh</td>
<td>984</td>
<td>975</td>
<td>-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gujarat</td>
<td>928</td>
<td>878</td>
<td>-50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haryana</td>
<td>879</td>
<td>820</td>
<td>-59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jharkand</td>
<td>979</td>
<td>966</td>
<td>-13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karnataka</td>
<td>960</td>
<td>949</td>
<td>-11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerala</td>
<td>958</td>
<td>963</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madhya Pradesh</td>
<td>941</td>
<td>929</td>
<td>-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orissa</td>
<td>967</td>
<td>950</td>
<td>-17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punjab</td>
<td>875</td>
<td>793</td>
<td>-82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajasthan</td>
<td>916</td>
<td>909</td>
<td>-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamil Nadu</td>
<td>948</td>
<td>939</td>
<td>-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uttar Pradesh</td>
<td>927</td>
<td>916</td>
<td>-11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Bengal</td>
<td>967</td>
<td>963</td>
<td>-4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Census of India, 2001, Series -1, Registrar General of Census, Delhi.*

The above table suggests the 0-6 sex ratio has dropped from 945 to 927. If one takes a closer look at the child sex ratio in different states it becomes apparent that a steep decline occurred mainly in Punjab in the period of 1991-2001. In addition, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Chandigarh, and Delhi, all of which are relatively well developed have seen a decline in sex ratio in last ten years. In only one state i.e. Kerala, the child sex ratio has increased. Thus, it is considered that socio-economic developments apart, cultural values affect demographic profiles. Thus, child sex ratio in India speaks strongly about the strong preference for sons in the family and increasing hatred towards the girl child.
It is noteworthy from the National Sample Survey (1999-2000, 55\textsuperscript{th} round of NSS) that the child sex ratio among the poorest five per cent households in rural areas is 946 where as the richest five per cent is as low as 804. The corresponding figures of poor and rich in urban areas are 903 and 819 respectively. This shows that the rich people are more biased against a girl child.\footnote{www.infochangeindia.org.} In a culture that idolizes sons and dreads the birth of a daughter, to be born a female comes perilously close to being born less than human.

\textbf{2.7.3. Maternal Mortality}

In India, health and well being of a girl child is at risk from the time of conception. Although, overall mortality rates have declined, high female mortality persists up to the age of 35 years. Differential health care, nutritional status, and existing cultural beliefs and practices are some of the factors responsible for higher female mortality.

Maternal mortality rate in India is unacceptably high. Less calorie and inferior diet intake are the reasons for high mortality rate. In addition, lack of care and ignoring special needs of a girl child at her adolescence may render her vulnerable to complications and mortality during pregnancy and childbirth. Girls, thus fail to reach their free growth potential, get married early, and run considerable risk of obstetric complications. They give birth to low weight babies continuing the vicious circle. Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) in India is as high as 437/10,000 births and over 100,000 women die every year from causes related to pregnancy and childbirth. It is estimated that 13\% of these deaths occur before the age of 24 yrs.

Female foeticide amounts to the elimination of the girl child at the foetal stage after determining the sex through varied diagnostic methods, like ultrasound and amniocentesis, a test originally intended as a prenatal test to defect certain congenial abnormalities. These techniques are allowed by Government of India for the purpose of determining genetic disabilities. The aim of these modern techniques is to make pregnancy safer but ironically, these are widely used to determine the sex of the foetus and abort it. The abuse of these techniques to determine the sex of the foetus and the rejection of the unwanted girl by quick abortion is a sorry state. The pre-natal diagnostic test techniques have thus come to cause
more harm than good. This exposes women to serious health risks and complications. Even at the advanced stage of the foetus, deliberate killing of girl child practice is not an exception. There is an increased risk of abortion or congenital malformation in the foetus. There are serious adverse effects on the reproductive organs due to intrusive procedures and late abortions.

2.7.4. Infant Mortality

To stretch the argument a bit further, discrimination against daughters is a never-ending process. Those girls who manage to survive till birth and beyond find that “the dice is heavily loaded against them in a world that denies them equal access to food, health, care, education, employment and simple human dignity” (Prabha, 1999). An immediate effect of this can be seen in higher female child mortality.

Though, female infant mortality rate has declined, yet one in every 13 children dies before completing the first year of life. A third of 3 million girl children who die in a calendar year do not see their first birthday. It is assumed that female infanticide along with other threats to a daughter’s survival, growth and development would disappear with economic development, lower and controlled fertility, improvements in income levels, nutritional levels and health care and with female education. Although the overall physical well-being and education of both the male and female children has improved with economic development and declining fertility, recent studies of female infanticide reveal extreme forms of discrimination resulting in death. Thus, due to the preference for a son, gender discrimination has persisted and even increased despite the socio-economic and demographic trends that might have been expected to eradicate this anomaly.

An unfair, illogical and unreasonable demand for male offspring has led to a reduction in the number of females born per year. Social pressures, fear of continued harassment by the husband and in-laws, lack of self worth, frustration at the future that awaits the girl in general, which is marked by domestic and sexual violence have all contributed to the quick elimination of the girl child at the foetal stage or even at an early age.

The census data shows mortality patterns among children are highly skewed towards younger ages. More than 90 per cent of the deaths in juvenile age groups take place by the fifth birthday. Of these again, deaths during the first year of life, or infancy, account for
above 60 per cent of the deaths. Within infancy, deaths in the first one month, or the neonatal deaths account for a substantial portion of about 60 to 70 per cent. The table below represents neonatal, infant and child mortality in India.

**Table 2.2 Neonatal, post neonatal, infant and under five mortality rates for five years period preceding the survey by residence, India (1998-99)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years preceding the survey</th>
<th>Neonatal Mortality</th>
<th>Post neonatal mortality</th>
<th>Infant Mortality</th>
<th>Child Mortality</th>
<th>Under five mortality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Urban</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-4</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>47.0</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>63.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-9</td>
<td>35.1</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>67.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-14</td>
<td>42.1</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>65.1</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>86.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rural</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-4</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>73.3</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>103.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-9</td>
<td>56.3</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>85.5</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>118.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-14</td>
<td>58.4</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>92.6</td>
<td>45.0</td>
<td>133.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-4</td>
<td>43.4</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>67.6</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>94.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-9</td>
<td>51.7</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>78.0</td>
<td>31.9</td>
<td>107.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-14</td>
<td>54.5</td>
<td>31.4</td>
<td>85.9</td>
<td>39.3</td>
<td>121.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The first five-year period preceding the survey does not include the month in which the interview took place. Rates are specified on a per-thousand basis. See text for definition of rates.
1. Computed as the difference between the infant and neonatal mortality rates

The infant mortality rate, given as the number of deaths per 1000 in an infant (0-1 age) was 79.5 per cent for males and 80.4 per cent for females in India in 1990, and 63.89 for males and 62.44 for females in 2000 (Hudson and Boer, 2004: 115). Although the IMR for 1990 and 2000 shows a marked improvement since 1980 (113.9 for males, 119.0 for females), these mortality rates are still extremely high. With a few exceptions, female infant and early childhood mortality rates have persisted at levels higher than those for males since early 1980s. It is not just during the first year of life that female death rates are unusually high; these rates persist throughout childhood. The imbalance between death of boys and girls is one of the major causes of India’s skewed sex ratios. In fact, female deaths outnumber male deaths until 30-34 years of life. Thus, for the first 30 years of life, Indian females are at a disadvantage compared to males; this situation however is most marked in the first five years of life.

Of the causes of death for infants in India, infectious and parasitic diseases account for greatest proportion (42 per cent of deaths before the age of five). Differential death rates from diseases are often attributed to differential health care for male and female children.
Indian parents are more willing to invest in costly health care for male infants but not for female infants. The lack of medical attention for girls was also observed by researchers involved in the National Family Health Survey in India in 1998-99. Not only were parents less likely to attend to daughter’s illness, but they also vaccinate their daughters less often. The incidence of acute and chronic malnutrition is much higher for girls, evidenced by the higher female death rates from malnutrition.

2.7.5. Health and Nutrition

A human being needs certain primary health facilities to keep its momentum of continuity and growth in society. A normal and prosperous society requires sound health of its citizens. The health system becomes operational and effective by making its facilities available to every individual free of cost or at lesser cost. In addition, the health status of men and women reflects important dimensions related to gender discrimination. In this context, the health facilities available for women are not sufficient and satisfactory.

The relationship between health and poverty or health and development is complex and multifaceted. Poverty in its various dimensions could be a manifestation, as well as determinant of an individual’s health. It has, in its basic form of food deprivation, a direct bearing on the morbidity and longevity of people. Growing food insecurity is manifested in high malnutrition rates affecting the physical and mental development of children and leads to starvation deaths. High child mortality on account of diseases like diarrhoea and respiratory infections are fairly widespread among children deprived of these basic amenities of life.

Many of the Indian States have high child malnutrition due the birth of low weight babies. Birth weights of less than 2,500 grams are very closely associated with poor growth not just in infancy but through childhood. According to estimates, 20-30 per cent of all babies are born below normal weight representing an intergenerational transfer of malnutrition.

The impact of gender inequality and poverty acts in a synergistic manner to depress the nutritional status of the girl child. At present, there are nearly 75 million malnourished children below the age of five in the country (www.indianngos.com). The nutritional status and growth of girls are influenced by factors like purchasing power of the family, food intake, illness episodes and care during illness, etc. Inadequate purchasing power of the
family exacerbates discrimination against female children for food intake. The root cause however is not too much the lack of food, but the lack of value attached to the girl child.

For girls, adolescence is the period of growth that calls for higher nutrient intake. However, the nutritional needs of girls during this period are, more often than not, ignored which leads to stunting, posing complications during pregnancy and child birth. In India, more than half of adolescents are under nourished, about 32% are stunted, and the problem is more among girls (45%) than boys (20%) due to deep-rooted gender discrimination. Owing to dietary insufficiencies, adolescent girls do not achieve full height and weight potential. About 35% of rural girls have weight below 38 kilograms and 32% of girls have height below 145 cm (ICRW/USAID study, 1994). In the long run, this leads to anaemia and eventually to an increase in maternal mortality rate. In India, health and well being of a girl child is at risk from the time of conception. Although overall mortality rates have declined, high female mortality persists up to 35 years of age, at every age level.

**Some important facts on the status of malnutrition in India**

- 70 out of every 1,000 children born do not live to see their first birthday. A decrease of only 1 percent since 1990.
- Almost 95 out of every 1000 children die before the age of 5. This is 15 children less vis-à-vis the 1990 figures.
- 46.7% of the children in India are underweight, around 4.8% less than the figures for 1990
- About 22.7% children weigh below 2.5 kg down from 30% ten years ago.
- 265 cases of polio in the year 2000, substantially lower than 10,408 cases of 1990 (NIN, 2002).

Numerous earlier studies have shown that where men and women have equal access to nutrition and healthcare women live longer than men. Systematic and specific discrimination against women for decades is seen from the vital demographic indicators. The sharp decline in the number of girl children from 945 in 1991 to 927 in 2001 proves beyond doubt that they are systematically discriminated against in the society. However, it is interesting to note that despite these problems and the fact that children constitute 40 per cent of India’s total population there is no separate governmental unit to specifically address child’s health.
Children's health is usually subsumed in the government's population control and family planning efforts. Family planning and immunization programme were among the earliest of health care programmes initiated in the 1960s. The National Health Policy of 1983 laid stress on Maternal and Child Health (MCH) renamed since 1992 as the Child Survival and Safe Motherhood Programme (CSSM). Since 1983 there have been marked changes in the determinant factors relating to the health sector. Some of the policy initiatives outlined in the NHP (1983) have yielded results while in other areas the outcome has not been as good as expected. To overcome the shortfalls of 1983 policy, the National Health Policy 2002 was formulated.

The uniqueness of the programme lies in its aim to reduce infant mortality and child morbidity through greater focus on child health and nutrition. As reproductive health care became the focus, post ICPD (International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo, 1994), CSSM was brought under the umbrella of the present Reproductive and Child Health (RCH) programme of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. Certain new components such as Reproductive Tract Infections (RTI), Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI), HIV/AIDS, adolescent health and contraception were added to the existing focus areas.

2.7.6. Education

The widespread and deep-rooted discrimination against women education in Indian culture led to basic disadvantages and hurt the process of their progress of women and their development. But this traditional pattern of sex discrimination underwent some changes in the colonial period, and a significant change happened after the introduction of provisions for female education in post-colonial period. This transformation has enabled women to shed the traditional life and play a different role and maintain a different status in the family and the broader society. In this background, a close and positive relationship has emerged between modern education and adoption of work by women. It follows that if women attain modern education; they develop new role(s) and adopt new jobs, especially outside their homes. On the other hand, if they remain uneducated, they continue to play their traditional role within and outside their homes.
Table 2.3. Literacy Rates in India (1951-2001)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census Year</th>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Male-Female gap in literacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>18.33</td>
<td>27.16</td>
<td>8.86</td>
<td>18.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>28.30</td>
<td>40.40</td>
<td>15.35</td>
<td>25.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>34.45</td>
<td>45.96</td>
<td>21.97</td>
<td>23.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>43.57</td>
<td>56.38</td>
<td>29.76</td>
<td>26.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>52.21</td>
<td>64.13</td>
<td>39.29</td>
<td>24.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>64.8</td>
<td>75.85</td>
<td>54.16</td>
<td>21.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The above table suggests the changing situation of women’s education. But if we compare the educational growth of women in relation to men, then probably the growth rate is not very good. The benefits of education are unarguable for a girl child, yet education seems to be beyond the reach of too many girls in the developing world. According to UNICEF, of the estimated 130 million school age children who are not receiving education, approximately 73 million are girls. In India, very conspicuous gender disparities persist in the educational sector, especially with regard to enrolment and retention at the primary, upper primary and higher levels of school education. Lack of equal access to educational opportunities and early assumption of domestic responsibilities lead to a girl’s non-enrolment in school or premature discontinuation of education. Early marriage also puts an end to education. Most Indian parents are not willing to send daughters to co-educational schools where there are no female teachers or to schools, which are at a distance requiring girls to be escorted to their destination. More importantly, Indian parents are of the opinion that, educating a girl child is wastage, since her only requirement is to take care of her family. Girls form more than half of illiterate children in the age group of 5-9 yrs. Although girl’s enrolment at various levels of school education has improved appreciably, they account for only 43.2% of enrolment at the primary stage and 39% at the upper primary stage. The incidence of dropout and stagnation for girls is much higher than that of boys at primary and upper primary stage. It is estimated that for every 10 girls who enter Class I, 1/3rd of girls manage to enter Class II. Only six girls reach class V.

As a matter of fact educated members are considered to be productive members of the society. UNICEF points out a number of unmistakable connections that link education for
The more educated the mother is, the more infant and child mortality is reduced.

Children of more educated mothers tend to be better nourished and suffer from lesser illnesses.

Children (and particularly daughters) of more educated mothers are more likely to be educated themselves and become literate.

The more years of education women have, the later they tend to marry and tend to have fewer children.

Educated women are less likely to die in childbirth.

The more educated a woman is, the more likely is she to have opportunities and life choices and avoid being oppressed and exploited by her family or social set-up.

Educated women are more likely to be receptive to, participate in, and influence development initiatives and send their own daughters to school.

Educated women are more likely to play role in political and economic decision-making at community, regional and national levels.

2.7.7. Property Rights

Although legally women have the same rights as man to hold, acquire, inherit and dispose of property, these rights are not enjoyed by Indian women on the same basis as men. The rights of property are governed by the personal laws of the communities. The diversity of laws as it exists today is in itself an anomaly since the state has to differentiate between one person and another on the basis of personal laws. A common uniform civil code, therefore, should be evolved and include:

(a) inheritance law to be based on the Indian Succession Act

(b) marriage law and

(c) divorce law

Female should be entitled to the same rights to succession or inheritance and acquiring property as a son. All properties belonging to husband and wife respectively at the date of the marriage shall thereafter remain their separate property and the income or acquisition from any source whatever made or acquired during covertures should be owned by the
husband and wife jointly. It is not easy to eradicate deep-seated cultural values or traditions that perpetuate discrimination. However, Indian Constitution provides a significant and positive role in dealing with all kinds of social issues and gender discrimination is no exception to it. An obvious example in this context is Hindu Succession Act 1956. The Hindu Succession Act, 1956, gave women the same rights in the matter of succession as men, thereby making a material change in her ability to inherit property. It has categorised ‘daughter’ wife and mother as Class I heirs. A traditional barrier of limited ownership and full ownership has been scaled down by the Act and woman has been made an absolute owner of the property whether it was acquired before or after the commencement of the Act. Despite this, the enactment of the Hindu Succession Amendment Act of 1985 was introduced which gives equal right to daughter in the parental property as that of the son. But the law has not found wide scale social acceptance.

The persistence of preference for a son in Asia irrespective of high levels of economic development in certain regions and societies has once again drawn attention to culture as a very significant causal factor contributing to the increasing decline in the number of girl children. All the ethnographic evidence suggests that girls and boys are expected to and indeed exhibit different behaviours, undertake different physical and emotional tasks, and participate in and perform different practical and ritual activities both within the family and kinship groups as well as in the public sphere. It is such gender reasoning that has to be challenged if campaigns to reduce discrimination against girls are to be successful. In this attempt the state has to play a significant role.

2.8. Conclusion

The discussion on a conceptual understanding of gender in this chapter shows that gender difference is not a biological phenomenon but rather it is a social construct by which the male gender moulds the society to its advantage. Traditionally, Indian history speaks of gender discrimination. This makes the female gender subjugated and oppressed for a long time. Even at the dawn of modernisation, the gender bias against female has not been changed. The discussion on sex ratio, child sex ratio, mortality rate (foeticide, maternal mortality rate and infant mortality rate), health and nutrition, education, property rights and the differences in rural and urban sex ratios indicate that females are discriminated against in every sphere of life. The process of discrimination or prejudices against the girl child starts
from the period of conception and it goes on till her death. Again, the preference of a son is so strong that the process of nurturing and socialisation is tilted against the girl child. From the above, it is clear that the phenomenon of gender discrimination is a complex one and various socio-economic indicators interplay to confine women to a subjugated position. This discrimination is further confounded in case of the street girls who are doubly discriminated – discriminated for their gender and discriminated for their vulnerabilities and deprivation. This double discrimination has deep psychological effect on the adolescent psychology of girls. The theme is explored in the next chapter.