Chapter VI

Gender Dimensions of the Indian Marriage Market
Chapter 6

Gender Dimensions of the Indian Marriage Market

6.1 Introduction

Gender roles play an important part in marriage in defining gender equality. Earlier, within marital union there was a clear division of labour with men being the “bread winner” had to work outside while household duties and child bearing and rearing were the sole responsibilities of women. But with the passage of time, this notion has changed. The process of social development has brought about changes in attitudes regarding the gender roles and responsibilities within and beyond families. As has been found in many Western countries, with Second Demographic Transition (SDT), gender relations have changed so dramatically that the entire process of marriage and family formation has been altered. A whole new array of living arrangement emerged replacing the classic family system. The root cause of these social changes is the change in attitude towards gender roles. Increasing opportunities, available for women besides their reproductive roles and role as a care giver; a role that paves the way to bloom as an individual, are likely to make several changes in society. Moreover, following the changes in marriage pattern, further modification of attitudes regarding gender roles can also be envisaged. Hence, formation of unions and attitudes regarding gender roles are intricately related to each other. Even though Indian states are far from experiencing the changes in the gender relations in line with the Western countries, there are certain issues, peculiar to the broader Asian context in general and for India in particular, which may explain the future trends in gender relations and resulting impact on union formation and vice versa.
In India, family is still one of the prime institutions of support for all the members. It performs certain functions such as childbearing, socialization, education, economic production, emotional support so on and so forth. The process of family formation begins when a man and a woman reach marriageable age and consider marriage. But formation of union is not an individual decision alone. There are many facets of formation of unions starting from finding a suitable partner maintaining the prescribed age gap and all other social norms including caste, creed and religion. Moreover, formation of each union requires approval at the family level and has to abide by the social norms. All these restrictions make the pool of potential spouses smaller.

On the top of this, the ongoing process of rapid fertility transition has also put new restrictions on the pool of potential spouses mainly through two important channels. First, with fertility transition each forthcoming birth cohort is becoming smaller compared to the previous one. If we assume the current pattern of preference for marrying girls younger to men remains the same, there will be absolute shortage of marriageable girls in the Indian society. Secondly, fertility transition has been accompanied by son preference resulting in heavily distorted sex ratio in favour of males. This has made the pool of potential brides further smaller. It has been estimated that if sex ratio remains at 2001 levels, then by 2050, in India, there will be 47 million more men than women in the marriageable age group (Guilmoto, 2007). In such a scenario, formation of union will pose a serious challenge in India which will certainly have bearings on the entire family and social system. Moreover, it will also have implications in determining the status of women as they are scarce in supply.

With this backdrop, the purpose of the present chapter is to explore the plausible implications of changing demographic patterns on the future marriage market, especially from the gender perspective. Attempt is also made to explore the possible
changes in social and familial frontiers and thus try to bring out some potential future scenarios, given the cultural context of India. This chapter is more narrative and speculative in nature as the data to support these arguments are rare.

6.2 Cultural Environment and System of Union Formation in India

Historically, India has caught the attention of scholars from different parts of the globe owing to its wide cultural diversity. These cultural variations have been reflected in demographic outcomes such as age at marriage, fertility, infant mortality and women’s status related parameters. The cultural environment around marriage, as discussed in earlier chapters, can be characterised by universality of marriage, especially among similar in terms of caste, class and religion. Marriages in India have been essentially caste endogamous, gotra (clan) exogamous. Such marriages try to ensure that the immediate cultural environment, in which a girl functions after marriage is more or less similar (Kaur, 2012).

However, there are certain differences between north Indian and south Indian marriages regarding the rule of village exogamy and the choice of residence after marriage (Dyson et al., 1983). As observed by Dyson and others in northern India, marriages were essentially village exogamous and patrilocal which emphasised that women marry into the household of their husbands and reside with in-laws and other paternal relatives. But in southern India, marriages were village endogamous and in some cases matrilocal as well (Dyson et al., 1983). Even though these rules of marriage are undergoing changes over time, in most of the Asian societies including India and China, still patrilocal marriage is the norm and many young couples live with the husband’s parents.

As observed by Eklund (2013) patrilocal societies are essentially patrilineal in nature. It involves the inheritance of property, names, or symbolic rights strictly through
the male line, making girls only a transient member in the family. Patrilineality emphasises not only on patrilocal residences but also on the need for a male heir and use of patrilineal surnames (Ebray, 2002). It is also characterised by the religious conviction of worshipping patrilineal ancestors (Miller, 1981).

Traditionally, patrilineal norms are deciding the formation of union in the Indian society. In India, marriage of daughter is perceived as one of the major duties of parents, essentially father and it is directed by the idea of gifting a virgin bride to the husband and his family. Women are expected to join their husband’s family after marriage, retaining hardly any rights in their natal home. Marriage and the transfer of a girl to her marital role is combined with the rule of hypergamy or “marrying up”.

Since sons and their wives live with the son’s parents, they are responsible to provide care and support to parents in their old age and reproduce patrilineage through giving birth to male children (Croll, 2000). Besides marriage, the absence of non-family based social and economic support mechanism has given rise to a strong sense of ‘familism’ in the Asian countries including India which also, in turn, facilitates the continuation of Patrilineality (Eklund, 2013).

Given this broader umbrella of patrilineality, the present study considers two major cultural parameters which have direct links with the marriage market. First one is son preference which has direct implications on the supply side of the marriage market by prenatal discrimination of girls mainly through sex selective abortion. Second is the hypergamic marriage system of the Indian society which implies that a woman must marry into her own section or into one that is higher but must not be married into a lower section. This has bearings on the demand side of the marriage market. In the following sections these two factors has been dealt in detail in order to discuss the
nature and dynamics of these two parameters. Moreover, an attempt has also been made to bring out how these two parameters are related to the other issues operating in the marriage market.

6.3 Son Preference and discrimination against girls

India is a country characterized by high son preference and consequently heavily distorted sex ratios and a “culture against females” (Miller, 1981). This has far reaching demographic repercussions on India’s population. As discussed by Guilmoto (2007), “Masculinisation” of Indian population is not a new phenomenon and has been identified in the very first censuses conducted by British government in colonial India. Even though Indian data is plagued by gross under enumeration of females, it is the extraordinarily high mortality among females of all ages which has been identified to contribute towards historically skewed sex ratios in favour of males in Indian states (Visaria, 1969; 1971). Mortality scenario started to improve from 1920 onwards. But the systematic differential treatment in food allocation and health care at the household level, usually labelled as “female neglect”, continued leading to higher mortality of female children (Dasgupta, 1987).

Improvements in mortality conditions gained momentum after the independence and major breakthroughs were achieved in child and adult mortalities. In both frontiers females were the major beneficiaries. With improved mortality, fertility started to decline and a new era of sex discrimination began in India since late seventies. The reason behind this dramatic shift is mainly attributed to the introduction of methods of prenatal sex determination like amniocentesis and ultrasound technology. With these it has become much easier to achieve the ideal sex composition (or elimination of unwanted girls) along with the small family norm. Hence discrimination against female
children has become more intense which is reflected in the constantly increasing sex ratios in favour of males in some states of India (Table 6.1).

Table 6.1: Sex ratio* in major Indian states for the age group 0-2 years for the period 1981-2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Sex Ratio at Birth (0-2)</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>102.7</td>
<td>105.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>North West</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jammu and Kashmir</td>
<td>104.2</td>
<td>na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Himachal Pradesh</td>
<td>103.2</td>
<td>107.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punjab</td>
<td>107.3</td>
<td>116.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haryana</td>
<td>107.8</td>
<td>114.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delhi</td>
<td>106.1</td>
<td>109.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>North-Central</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajasthan</td>
<td>103.0</td>
<td>108.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uttar Pradesh</td>
<td>103.1</td>
<td>105.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bihar</td>
<td>100.5</td>
<td>103.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madhya Pradesh</td>
<td>101.5</td>
<td>103.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>East</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>103.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North-East</td>
<td>101.6</td>
<td>101.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Bengal</td>
<td>101.9</td>
<td>103.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Odisha</td>
<td>101.0</td>
<td>103.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>West</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gujarat</td>
<td>104.6</td>
<td>107.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maharashtra</td>
<td>105.1</td>
<td>107.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goa</td>
<td>104.5</td>
<td>103.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>South</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andhra Pradesh</td>
<td>100.5</td>
<td>102.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karnataka</td>
<td>102.3</td>
<td>104.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerala</td>
<td>102.7</td>
<td>104.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamil Nadu</td>
<td>102.9</td>
<td>105.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * male per 100 females; \( ^{\dagger} \) North-East consists of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. na: Not available


One more important dimension about the discriminatory practice against girls in India is that sex selective abortion is found to be more pronounced among urban middle and upper classes that are better off in terms of educational attainment and socio-economic status (Table 6.2 and Table 6.3).
Table 6.2 Sex Ratio* of children aged 0-6 and sex ratio at birth by selected background characteristics, 2001 Census

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background Characteristics</th>
<th>Sex ratio of children</th>
<th>Births during previous year</th>
<th>Births to women aged 20-34</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>107.8</td>
<td>110.4</td>
<td>106.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of Residence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>107.1</td>
<td>110.4</td>
<td>106.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>110.3</td>
<td>110.6</td>
<td>108.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>108.2</td>
<td>110.9</td>
<td>106.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>105.3</td>
<td>107.4</td>
<td>105.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>103.7</td>
<td>103.8</td>
<td>103.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikh</td>
<td>127.3</td>
<td>129.8</td>
<td>119.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>106.2</td>
<td>108.4</td>
<td>105.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jain</td>
<td>115.0</td>
<td>118.0</td>
<td>110.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Religious Communities</td>
<td>102.5</td>
<td>106.5</td>
<td>102.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caste/Tribe</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduled Tribe</td>
<td>102.8</td>
<td>106.4</td>
<td>103.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduled Caste</td>
<td>106.6</td>
<td>108.6</td>
<td>105.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>108.8</td>
<td>111.5</td>
<td>107.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother’s age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;15</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>105.9</td>
<td>na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>108.2</td>
<td>na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>111.4</td>
<td>na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>113.2</td>
<td>na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>112.1</td>
<td>na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>109.1</td>
<td>na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>103.7</td>
<td>na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>99.7</td>
<td>na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50+</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>75.7</td>
<td>na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother’s Educational Level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illiterate</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>108.7</td>
<td>106.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literate but below primary</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>110.0</td>
<td>106.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary but below middle</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>111.8</td>
<td>107.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle but below secondary</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>113.0</td>
<td>107.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary but below graduate</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>115.3</td>
<td>109.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate and above</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>114.1</td>
<td>109.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numbers (in thousands)</td>
<td>163,820</td>
<td>19,887</td>
<td>237,622</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *male per 100 females; North-East consists of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura.

Source: Source: Census of India, 2001, cited in Bhat et. al., 2007
As presented in Table 6.2, the sex ratios (male per 100 females) at births occurring in the previous year of census 2001 is 109 for illiterate mothers whereas the corresponding figure for mothers having education up to graduation or above is 114. This trend is quite prominent in the major states of India which are characterised by highly skewed sex ratios at birth in favour of males (Table 6.3).

To cite an example, in Haryana, Sex ratio at birth among the births occurring in the previous years of census 2001 is 120 boys per 100 girls for mothers who are illiterate and 141 for mothers who have education up to matriculation or more (Table 6.3). Similar trend has been observed in many other states.
## Table 6.3 Sex Ratio* at birth in major states by residence and mother’s education level, 2001 Census

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Births during the previous year</th>
<th>Births to women aged 20-34 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Place of Residence</td>
<td>Mother’s education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North West</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J &amp; K</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Himachal Pradesh</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punjab</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haryana</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delhi</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Central</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajasthan</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uttarakhand</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uttar Pradesh</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bihar</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jharkhand</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chhattisgarh</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madhya Pradesh</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North-East</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Bengal</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Odisha</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gujarat</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maharashtra</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goa</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andhra Pradesh</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karnataka</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerala</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamil Nadu</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: *male per 100 females; North-East consists of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura.

Source: Census of India, 2001, cited in Bhat et. al., 2007
The analysis presented here gives the indication of that even with the improvement in women’s position in terms of socio-economic changes, the extent of discrimination in some form or other continues which has serious future implications. It has been rightly pointed out by Guilmoto (2007) that as long as the battle was against high infant and child mortality it was easy to tackle by educating the ignorant masses who generally belong to the lower classes of the society. But when it is happening in the upper layer of the society, the issue becomes more sensitive and difficult to deal with given their better access to information and available facilities.

There may be two possible pathways through which this apparently ambiguous relation can be explained. As has been pointed out from time to time by many researchers that in most of the south Asian countries women’s education is not to improve their status per se, rather to make them more effective wives and mothers (Culpan et al., 1982). Girls are educated not with the vision to make them independent but to attract potential bridegrooms in the marriage market. In today’s marriage market the category of education (For example, convent education, technical education, professional training) has enough potential to generate stiff competition in the same way the amounts of dowry usually generate. By and large, educated brides are a sort of “status symbol” both for the natal and in-laws and nothing more than that. If the status of education remains likewise, much change in the gender relations in the familial front and hence less discrimination against female children cannot be expected. Secondly, women herself may feel that, in spite of improvements in their educational and work status, their position in the society in general and within family in particular has not changed significantly as there is very little change in the age-old patriarchal environment. Their bitter life-course experience may motivate them not to allow their own daughters to
suffer the never changing gender rules of the society and thus leading to sex-selective abortion.

6.4 Hypergamy

India has a strong hierarchical structure within the society; hierarchy in the name of caste, religious purity, wealth, power, status and so on which exist and strictly maintained in the hypergamic Indian marriages. It is ideal for the parents of a girl to marry off their daughter into a family of greater prestige, wealth and reputation (Caldwell, 1983; Billig, 1991). Though there are some differences in north and south Indian marriages regarding the rules of village exogamy and patrilocality, the rule of hypergamy, is favoured everywhere. The practice of hypergamic marriages is further reinforced by patrilineality which ensures that women do not own resources, neither do they inherit the property of natal families. Hence “marrying up” is seen as the only way to achieve social mobility, particularly for the natal families. Reasons behind the preference for hypergamic marriages are twofold: first, it is expected to improve the social prestige of the natal family in their network of relatives and secondly, it is envisaged as the higher security assurance for the daughters.

Apparently, hypergamic marriage system sounds as an innocent behavioural mechanism, but in reality it is one of the root causes of several social evils starting from sex selective abortion to dowry and lower status of females in the Indian society. According to Billig (1991), hypergamy is meant for protecting the male advantage in the competition for spouses. In a hypergamic marriage market, men belonging to higher status will be always lesser compared to women “competing” for them in the marriage market. Then parents of the girls have to ‘invest’ a lot for such “ideal” alliances. Dowry demands go up and the amount of groom price will be decided by the status of the
groom and his family. Higher the family in status hierarchy, higher will be the groom price. Hence it becomes increasingly difficult especially for poor families, to marry off daughters into families of greater prestige.

Nevertheless, in the recent past, owing to the developments in socio-cultural arena and the market economy, lot more new restrictions have been added in hypergamy without replacing the old ones. For example, in recent days parents of daughters are increasingly reluctant to marry off their daughters with boys hailing from families with higher ritual rank but having less education and employment prospect (Billig, 1991). This does not imply that ritual rank is no longer a necessary condition for marriage alliances, however, not sufficient enough as only this cannot ensure “good life” in this monetized economy. Hence, with ritual rank, the level of education and employment prospects of the grooms have also been added, leading to intensification of the marriage squeeze. This in turn, creates immense pressure on the families of girls in finding suitable partner maintaining the social prescriptions for an “ideal match”. These are the reasons leading to unwantedness of girls in most of the Indian families ultimately paving the way towards sex selective abortion.

6.5 Conceptual Framework

The pathways how son preference and hypergamy influence the marriage market as well as the overall status of females have been summarised in the conceptual framework as illustrated in Figure 6.1. As evident from the framework, the direct consequence of son preference is less number of females in the marriage market. This will result in marriage squeeze which may become favourable to women and may bring about positive changes in the status of women. On the other hand, hypergamy in the name of age, caste and moreover based on the achieved status of females (education,
employment) also creates squeeze in the marriage market mainly through assortative matching. Existence of strict hypergamy in the marriage system always creates a shortage of potential bride grooms in the marriage market even when there are less females in the market. This brings in the rising demands for dowry which in turn intensify the preference for sons leading to sex selective abortion and fewer females. Thus the cycle continues.
Figure 6.1

Pathways of Marriage Market in India: A Conceptual Framework
6.6 Plausible implications on the Marriage Market

From the above discussion it has become evident that, in India there will be too many men compared to women in the marriageable age group because of highly imbalanced sex ratios. An attempt by Guilmoto (2007) to project the population considering different scenarios of sex ratios at birth (SRBs) reveals that in India even if SRB remains at 106 over the whole projection period of 2001-2050, the female deficit in the marriageable age group of 20 to 49 will hover around 25 million by 2030 as a consequence of previous skewed sex ratios and dynamics affecting the age structure of a population. Census 2011 has also pointed out that there are nearly 37.3 million more men than women. Furthermore, Guilmoto (2012) also predicts that the cumulative number of additional men remaining single during 2020-80 in India will be closer to 40 million, which is even higher than the corresponding figure of 32 million for China. Such highly masculine population is likely to have serious demographic and socio-economic implications.

So far the Indian literature on sex ratio imbalance mainly focused on the trends, patterns and causes of sex ratio imbalance, devoting limited efforts towards a systematic analysis of the consequences of such an imbalance. Recent work by Kaur (2013) can be considered as one of the pioneering efforts in this direction, though there have been a few studies discussing one or two dimensions of the same (Guilmoto, 2007; 2012; Dreze et al., 2000; Chowdhury, 2012). It has already been rightly pointed out that the academic explorations on this aspect have mainly come from the Chinese experience where there is a higher male surplus and the phenomenon is yet to be seriously examined in the Indian context (Kaur, 2013). However, keeping in mind the socio-economic and cultural homogeneity in terms of high preference for sons, early and
universal marriages and a family oriented value system of the Asian countries, a part of it can be applicable to India as well.

Kaur (2013) has identified six major but interconnected themes discussing the consequences of sex ratio imbalance which are: marriage squeeze, an obvious impact of sex ratio imbalance, surplus males and violence against women, impact on marriage patterns and practices which is a corollary of marriage squeeze, effect on marriage payments, impact on men’s sexual behaviour and health and effect on gender equity prospects. Along with these, this chapter also highlights the possible changes in the family structure, spousal age gap and also makes an attempt to synthesise the existing literature in order to throw light on the expected future implications on the families and society at large, given the cultural environment of India.

6.7 Effect of Distorted Sex Ratios

Effect of distorted sex ratios has already brought about certain distinct changes in the marriage markets, especially in north western parts of India where the sex ratio was historically skewed in favour of males. Many more are yet to set in as the consequences of imbalanced sex ratios in the adult population can be realised at least after 20 years after experiencing the phenomenon (Kaur, 2013). In India, the consequences of rapidly declining sex ratios in the post 2000 will become visible among adult population by 2020 (Guilmoto, 2007). In the same line, fewer females, may be after 20 years, in the reproductive age, will be translated in to very fewer births in the forthcoming years, bringing dire consequences to the demographic imbalance. In this section some of the potential impacts of skewed sex ratios on individuals, families and society at large, which are likely to have links with the marriage market in India, have been discussed.
6.7.1 Marriage Squeeze and Delayed Marriage among Males

An obvious impact of sex ratio imbalance is marriage squeeze. As discussed earlier, from the demographic point of view union formation in the local marriage market depends on the supply of potential mates, which has a close relationship with the sex ratio in the marriageable age group. From the demographic trend in sex ratio imbalance in India, it can be easily asserted that there will be severe shortage of brides in the Indian marriage market. This deficit is already being felt in different states of north and north western parts of the country with long-standing skewed sex ratios (Ahlawat, 2009; Chaudhury, 2011; Kaur, 2004, 2012).

The unavoidable consequence of highly imbalanced sex ratio is delayed marriage or non-marriage among males. This has already been experienced in China where 1990 census revealed that out of 19 million unmarried people aged between 25 and 44 years, 86 percent were male and the scenario will be far worse in the coming days (Coale et al., 1994; Das Gupta et al., 1999). The effect of delaying marriage for one generation will then be felt on the younger generation. When men from younger generation reach the marriageable age they will not only be in surplus as a result of their own initial sex ratio at birth but also they have to compete for brides with the backlog of unmarried men from the previous generation (Guilmoto, 2007). Thus, unmarried men keep on accumulating owing to the cumulative impact of skewed sex ratio at birth on several generations and will create a bottleneck in the marriage market which cannot be solved only by delaying marriages. Moreover, a substantial proportion of males, probably from the poorest section of the population, have to forego marriages altogether following lack of adequate resources to attract brides. Because of acute shortage of brides, females belonging to the poorest section of the society also may aspire to get married in slightly better off families.
Hence, from the demographic point of view, the marriage squeeze will be favourable for females. However, this postulation regarding the future marriage market is entirely based on the demographic perspective, that is, on the age structure of the population. But marriage squeeze is something beyond the mere numerical imbalance. It depends on how marriage is socially, economically and politically constructed (Eklund, 2013). Who will marry whom is a very complex phenomenon especially in a hierarchical society like India where both traditional and modern values are moving hand in hand. Given the cultural environment in the country coupled with the typical pattern of gender roles, how far this squeeze will favour women not only in mate selection but also in determining the overall status of women is really a matter of genuine concern.

6.7.2 Impact on Family Structure, Living Arrangements and Spousal Age-gap

Marriage remains nearly universal and socially compulsory in India and till date remaining unmarried throughout is considered as a deviant behaviour. Indian society is characterised by “familism” — a family-centred welfare system, a family-biased production system and a family-oriented value system and in families men are looked after by their mothers and immediately thereafter by their wives (Bettio et al., 1998; Caldwell et al., 2003). In such context, inability to marry for both males and females after a certain age creates anxieties. Even in the literature, use of terms like “leftover women” or “bare branches” reinforce the notion that getting married and having a family is a must for everybody in societies like India or China (Eklund, 2013).

If the skewed sex ratio continues, the entire Indian family structure may undergo changes. As a consequence of prolonged or permanent bachelorhood, each family may have to accommodate many unmarried men or otherwise they (unmarried men) may have to survive on their own which is an unusual living arrangement in most of the
Asian countries (Guilmoto, 2007). Care giving to these male single elderly will also pose a serious challenge in societies with skewed sex ratios. As a corollary of lesser number of women, women’s role as care giver- that is, as wives, mothers and daughters in law will be on demand. Then at the familial level, there will be conflict of interest as it creates hindrance for women to blossom as an individual.

Furthermore, a shortage of brides implies a shortage of daughter-in-laws. In absence of them and in families with no son, growing evidence of uxorilocal residence in which the son-in-law stays with his wife’s family providing old age support to her parents is observed (Larsen et al., 2013).

Even though marriages are getting slightly delayed for women also, sometimes it is difficult to predict whether the age gap between couples will be reduced or increased. When there is sizable proportion of older men in the queue who may marry eventually, naturally the average age gap may increase (Edlund, 1999). Older men are expected to be in better economic condition and hence with higher stability compared to their younger counterparts. If girls’ parents prefer security more, then increasing spousal age gap is obvious. On the other hand, girls can also take this opportunity to delay the marriage (as there are too many men) in order move forward in their career. Even the very concept age hypergamy may also undergo changes. Unions can be formed with elder wives and younger husbands. Moreover, as corrective measures some changes like, choosing same sex partners, divorced and widowed women marrying never married males may set in which also can have impact on the family structure (Kochin et al, 2012).

Besides, in a deeply patriarchal society, being married implies breadwinning, raising and protecting a family (Kaur, 2013). But in the era of declining fertility combined with
son preference, there are many families having single son. If majority of them fail to find a partner in the marriage market, then it is difficult to predict whether the patrilineal system may be able to survive in its current form.

Moreover, as observed in many parts of China, single child norm sooner or later may result in a family structure of “4-2-1” family composed of four grandparents, but only two children, and just one grand-child (Eberstadt, 2007). The children in these new families will have no brothers or sisters, no uncles or aunts and no cousins. Their only blood relatives will be their ancestors. It has already been pointed out that children of these one child families, who are again most likely to be a boy, have certain problems in socialization and generally found to be very selfish (Park et al., 1995). This will have very serious family level implications for the future generation.

**6.7.3 Surplus Males and Violence against Women**

Security concerns of having a highly masculine population were discussed at a great length by Hudson et al. (2002). There are studies both in the Indian and the Chinese context asserting the link between increasing masculinity and rise in criminality (Oldenburg, 1992; Dreze et al., 2000; Edlund, 2007), more specifically gender based violence of rape, sexual harassment, sex work and the development of trafficking networks (Zhang, 2010). However, there is also scientific literature available confirming that there is no link between masculinity of population and violence (Hesketh, 2011).

There is evidence showing a relationship between the community sex ratio at district and state levels and violence against women at the family level. In their pioneering study Guttentag et al. (1983) identified that a relative scarcity of females would prompt the husbands to exert more control over their wives’ behaviour. Research reveals an
increasing female homicide victimisation and forced sex within marriage when there is an excess supply of males (Avakame, 1999; D’Alessio et al., 2010; Trent et al., 2012). In India, there are a few studies documenting a weak to moderate relation between state level sex ratio and violence against women such as female homicide and dowry violence (Mukherjee et al., 2001; Sev’er, 2008). In a recent work, Bose (2013) argued that Indian women in districts with high sex ratios experience more physical abuse and greater control than their counterparts in areas with better sex ratios.

Kaur (2008) has pointed out another link between skewed sex ratio and emerging violence of so called “honour killing” of youths who have discarded the marriage rules of caste endogamy and clan and village exogamy, in Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh. She opined that the aggressive activism of the community bodies like Khap Panchayats in these areas are highly influenced by the acute shortage of local women and heightened competition for them.

6.7.4 Impact on Marriage Practices

It has been highlighted by Koch et al., (2012) that predictions about the future marriage are based on a static model of marriage while there will always be some adaptive processes at work in order to meet the emerging crisis. These adaptive mechanisms are already setting in for the marriage markets characterised by high sex ratios in favour of males. Two major mechanisms to combat the bride shortage practiced historically are sending surplus young men to army or allowing them to migrate (Hudson et al., 2004). The other upcoming channels are taking brides from the poorer regions and poorer socio-economic backgrounds through kidnap marriage (Eklund, 2013), voluntary chain marriage migration of women from poorer regions

Another strategy observed in many Asian countries like South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong is to arrange long distance marriages through commercial agencies and brokers who arrange brides from relatively poorer countries such as the Philippines, Cambodia and Vietnam. These foreign brides are even preferred over their local counterparts, as they are believed to be more family-oriented (Kim, 2010).

In India, practices such as polyandry (wife sharing by brothers), leviratic marriages (marriage of widow to her husband’s brother) may re-emerge (Kaur, 2004, 2013). Also, there can be increasing demand for uxorilocal marriages (couple residing with women’s family) (Chowdhry, 2012; Larsen et al., 2013), preference for relaxation of caste endogamy, gotra (clan), village and territorial exogamy (Kaur, 2004, 2012), allowing exchange marriages, in which brothers and sisters are exchanged as grooms and brides among the same families (Larsen et al., 2013). Even though some of these changes, for example, polyandry and leviratic marriages question women’s agency, the other changes, though accepted out of necessity, are beneficial for the society to bring about positive social changes.

6.7.5 Effect on Marriage Transactions

One major improvement what we can expect in the Indian marriage system following lesser number of females, is in the practice of dowry. Dowry demand may become less prevalent as apparently there will be more men for a woman. Sometimes a reverse mechanism in the direction of marriage payments, from dowry to some form of bride price may set in. This practice is already prominent in China where male need to save
to pay a bride price as well as to build a house, the latter having a positive impact in finding brides (Wei et al., 2009, 2011).

In India, as discussed in Chapter Two, dowry became prominent in Indian marriages following the process of demographic transition. Steady decline in mortality resulting in increase in net annual flow of births made it compulsory to pay dowry in order to attract eligible bachelors from the smaller birth cohorts (Rao, 1993; Bhat et al., 1999). But this situation is reversed around the eighties when with the adverse sex ratios, there were more men than women in the marriage market (Das Gupta, 2009). Studies have already found that men from northwest India are not able to find brides and hence have resorted to import of brides from distant regions, poorer socio-economic backgrounds and lower caste groups. Such marriages do not involve dowry, rather men take care of all marriage expenses (Kaur, 2004; Larsen et al., 2013), though it cannot be termed as bride price. Hence these girls from the poorer section of the society could manage to marry: otherwise their families have to incur high dowry debt and sometimes may not even be able to arrange for the stipulated amount.

However, it has been pointed out by Kaur (2013) that decline in dowry demanded to address the shortage of brides, as revealed in the sociological studies with field experience, is so far observed among the poorer section of the males. The poorest section of the males with limited social and financial capital is unable to attract the local brides. Hence they resort to bring brides from the poorer regions by giving up the demand for dowry. In hypergamous Indian marriages it has not shown any sign of decline.

There is another interesting finding in the Indian context documenting male investment in toilets increased by 15 percent in Haryana following a sanitation campaign, popularly
known as “no toilets, no brides”. It has also been found that the effect of the programme is significantly high in areas where the shortage is acute (Stopnitzky, 2011).

6.7.6 Impact on Sexuality and Health of Bachelors

A surplus of bachelors in the population may raise serious health issues including sexual health. An increasing demand for commercial sex (South, 2012), rise in sexually transmitted diseases (Poston, 2011), impact on psychological wellbeing (Zhou, 2011), etc have already been pointed out. Hesketh et al. (2011) also noted that these single bachelors have relatively lower self-esteem and are more prone to depression. Another major issue identified by Sharygin (2013) is the crisis of elderly Chinese bachelors who will be concentrated in the poorer provinces with limited social protection. Since this aspect is not so prominent in India, so far there is no in-depth study in this direction.

6.7.8 Impact on Gender Equity

One obvious question which the sex-selecting societies are facing is, whether scarcity of women can any way increase their value in such societies. In common belief, it seems that adverse sex ratio may eventually favour women, men being the ultimate losers. Being less in numbers and on high demand women’s status is expected to improve along with their bargaining power within the family. Hence flexibility in gender norms and symmetrical family solidarity can be expected. Already positive signs of change in the perception of sons as “necessary” and weakening of cultural constructs of son preference, that is, patrilineal inheritance, patrilocal residence, son as the care giver in the old age, have been noticed (Larsen et al., 2013). These are some changes in the material conditions which can eventually question the age old institution of patriarchy, as argued by Kandiyoti (1988) in her classic article on bargaining with patriarchy.
Contrary to this, however, there is another school of thought which predicts that the relation is far from precise. Starting with Guttentag et al. (1983) who argued that members of the sex short in supply have greater ‘dyadic power’ as they are less dependent on their partners and if they are less satisfied in a relationship they can move forward to make another with other members of the opposite sex. But this dyadic power is shaped by the “structural power” which is associated with the political, economic and legal structures of the society (Guttentag et al., 1983). In a deeply patriarchal society like India, structural powers are usually associated with males. It enables them to influence and shape the social customs to limit the use of dyadic power women, even when they are short in supply. Hence, in male surplus societies a sense of “protective morality” (Guttentag et al., 1983) develops which implies monogamy, traditional feminine domestic roles for women limiting the scope for wider interaction outside family (Bose et al., 2013). This proposition when tested empirically has been found to be right (South et al., 1988).

As studies have already pointed out that scarce women are at high risk of experiencing violence, there will be increasing pressure on their mobility from the family as well on security concerns which may in turn affect their life options such as pursuing higher education and a career. Moreover, reduced demographic share of women will be translated into weak political voice in the democratic regime. There will be less involvement of women in public decision making. This trend may be reinforced by less involvement of women in non-domestic activities. Thus, marginalization of women in the political sphere also would affect the status of women in a negative manner. It will severely affect the gender equity aspect of the society. However, as already pointed out, amidst all barriers, some positive changes are occurring in the society which may correct sex ratio imbalance in the Indian society and start placing, if not more, at least
equal valuation to the girl child by allowing them to be born and grow to their full potential (Kaur, 2013).

6.7.9 Social inequality

It has already been mentioned that the phenomenon of distorted sex ratio and the consequent marriage squeeze is going to affect the male population asymmetrically creating another dimension of inequality. It is the poorest section of the men with low or no education and employment or mentally or physically disadvantaged that will be affected disproportionately. Many among them may end up remaining unmarried owing to insufficient resources at their disposal (Hudson, 2002; Kaur, 2004, 2012, 2013). Men in rural areas or in low income provinces with very limited social protection programmes are likely to suffer more as women move to urban or more prosperous areas in pursuit of “marrying up” (Sharygin et al., 2013). This phenomenon is most likely to act as a strong destabilizing factor in an ethnically heterogeneous society like India resulting in regional, class, caste based tensions (Hudson et al., 2004).

6.8 Effect of Hypergamy

Any time a norm of hypergamy applies to a hierarchically distributed trait, a marriage squeeze is obvious (Billig, 1991). If there is more men and lesser number of women in the marriage market, it may become easier to maintain hypergamic marriages in the Indian society as there are more options available for each girl. But research in different settings plagued with son preference revealed that boys are found in small families whereas girls will be available in the large families. Hence, there will be difference in “child-quality” depending on the family size (Blake, 1981). Moreover, given the nature of sex-discrimination in India, girls will be found in the lower stratum of the society and majority of boys will hail from the upper layer. Hence, one obvious outcome of pre
natal sex selection is the propagation of social stratification by sex or “female underclass” (Edlund, 1999). Moreover, an imbalance in status of families of boys and girls in terms of educational attainment, background of the family, etc. can be envisaged in the Indian society. In such a situation, the formation of union depends upon how far this imbalance can be compromised. For example, if a high profile man is not able to find a suitable partner with similar profile, he may compromise on certain things but still may have some preferences. For example, he may not be ready to marry a girl having education up to matriculation. In that case, formation of union will be difficult. Moreover, a girl with matriculation may also get a high profile husband if parents are ready to pay the price for it in the name of dowry. Hence, even if there are less females in the marriage market, it is not necessary that their bargaining power will improve substantially and dowry demands may go down. As long as the hypergamic marriage system prevails, dowry will be present in the marriages in one form or the other.

Secondly, if unions are formed with wide class differences, how far girls with lower profile will be able to cope up with high profile lifestyle will be a matter of concern. It is difficult to expect an improved status of women in such unions. Hence, the kind of marriage squeeze Indian marriage market is going to experience may not always favour females as long as the marriage system is hypergamic.

Thirdly, as already seen in the Indian context, an emergence of cross region marriages as one by product of sex ratio imbalance which compromises many rigid rules of marriage, are not necessarily hypergamous in nature (Constable, 2003). Mishra (2013) elaborated cases of cross-region brides who had experienced downward mobility in terms of caste or occupation. Even Kaur (2012) opined the same in her study of cross-region marriages in Uttar Pradesh. Hence, in societies where there is shortage of girls, marrying up is not always guaranteed. In such marriages, economic aspect of sending
away the extra members, more specifically daughters without paying dowry is governing the formation of marriage (Kaur, 2010).

In India, females are portrayed and socialised to enjoy subservient status. If that feeling along with hypergamic marriage system, that too most probably with wide class differentials continues, then much changes with regard to the unwantedness of a girl child cannot be expected even in the changed demographic regime.

A new tendency may develop among parents to prepare their daughters in order to cope up successfully with the high profile lifestyle and there will be competition for investing in this line. This tendency will be more pronounced among middle class families whose daughters have fair chances in the marriage market.

### 6.9 Future of marriage as an institution

So far, it has been seen that marriage is universal in the Indian society and it has revealed no sign of becoming less important for the Indians in near future. But, following the changes in the sex ratio and hypergamy, the implications on the status of women may question the need of marriage in future. Marriage as an institution, has already been discarded in many industrialized countries under Second Demographic Transition. In India, educational attainment of females and their work participation rates are increasing. Even though it is far below than that of the developed countries, at this juncture if they are asked to perform only the household duties as wives, mothers and daughters in law then the attractiveness of marriage may decrease and sustainability of marriage will also be under threat.

However, the changes are not going to happen overnight. Any process of social change happens in slow motion as it challenges the deep rooted systems of the society. For the
Indian society also, till date the traditional values regarding the very process of socialization of the boy and girl children in their childhood, gender roles, and hierarchy are still practiced widely.

6.10 Summary

This chapter synthesises the available evidences on future consequences heavily distorted sex ratios in combination with hypergamic marriage system which are likely to bring in several changes in the future marriage market. In this process the broader question of gender equity forms the backdrop. The changes in family demography what is happening or what is forthcoming in the Indian society is not altogether a new issue. Many other Asian societies have undergone and are still experiencing such changes. Differences lie in dynamics of the changes; in some frontiers it is drastic, whereas in some aspects the changes are so slow that it often remains unnoticed. Marriage is also one institution where the changes are apparently very slow and that is mainly because of the multidimensional nature of the marriage system.

For the Indian society the major issue that can be foreseen so far is the feasibility of formation of marital union as the imbalance of sexes is obvious. Hence, it is likely to bring about major changes in the structure of family, living arrangements and dynamics of care givers for old parents. Even within the marital union, changes are envisaged in terms of increasing average spousal age gap; on marriage practices and marriage transactions probably with reduction in dowry demands.

It will have certain impacts on gender equity within as well as outside the family. So far research has pointed out that limited supply of women creates a sense of protective morality limiting the options of social interactions for females. It has also been pointed out that violence against women increases when they are less in numbers. The recent
increase in crimes against females proves that Indian society is also not an exception to it. Gender equity is also severely affected in India through the aggressive interventions of community bodies like Khap Panchayats which is actually aggravated by imbalanced sex ratio.

Given the nature of sex discrimination in India, the imbalance of sexes is expected to increase with the spread of education and modernisation. It will lead to perpetuation of female underclass in the Indian society. While forming unions, which will be essentially hypergamic in nature, the status differentials of the families will adversely affect the status of women within family.

Following the pattern of sex ratios one more regional divide of the Indian states into bride takers (north-western states) and bride givers (Kerala to West Bengal and North eastern states) may come into existence. Girls will be brought for marriage and also in the name of marriage. Hence, prominence of inter-caste and inter-state marriages can be expected and those may work as a solution to correct the scenario. Growing evidence on inter-state marriages relaxing the norms of caste endogamy and clan exogamy are already available in the Indian context. On the other end, however, youths are still killed for marrying inter-caste or inter-religion, by their own family members in order to maintain family prestige (honour-killing). Under such circumstances, it is very difficult to find any feasible solution to correct the forthcoming imbalance.