

SOCIAL ECONOMICS, POLICY AND DEVELOPMENT

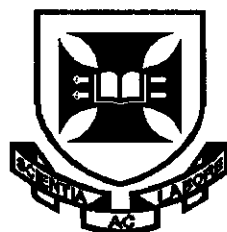
Working Paper No. 2

**Sen's Theory of Entitlement and
Deprivation of Females: An Assessment with
Indian Illustrations**

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Sen's Theory of Entitlement and the Deprivation of Females: An Assessment
with Indian Illustrations

Abstract

Outlines Sen's entitlement theory (initially proposed to help explain the occurrence of famines) and discusses it critically particularly in relation to its ability to explain the deprivation of females. Sen's approach provides more a framework than a theory, while it is likely to foster institutionalism, it lacks a dynamic focus. Agnihotri, Palmer-Jones and Parik try to use the theory to explain the much lower female-male ratios in northern India (particularly the northwest) than in the south. They use female labour force participation as an indicator of female entitlements but their results are not entirely satisfying. Explanation of other socio-economic status of women calls for deeper institutional analysis. The economic position of females depends on their stage in life and their family circumstances. The neoclassical theory of the family (e.g. Becker's theory) may give a useful explanation of the treatment of females when they are children. The bargaining theory of the family is useful when females become wives. The relevance of these theories is illustrated by differences in institutional family arrangements affecting females in the north and in the south of India and with reference to the Santal tribal group. While Sen's theory can only provide a partial explanation of the socio-economic status of females, it is not irrelevant to the situation of females in India. Although family incomes have grown in India on average, the deprivation of females appears to have increased on average, as indicated by falling female-male ratios in India. This result is

similar to that obtained by Sen for the Great Bengal Famine, namely economic improvement in aggregate accompanied by economic deprivation of a group of individuals.

1. Introduction

Amartya Sen developed his theory of entitlement mostly to help explain the occurrence of famine in situations where the aggregate supply of food is adequate to feed the whole population. But it was soon realized that this theory also had application to the analysis of poverty and to aspects of economic deprivation generally. The main purpose of this essay is to discuss the extent to which Sen's theory is useful for analysing the deprivation of females. In order to do this, we first outline and critically discuss Sen's theory in relation to his original context. Then its possible role in explaining the economic status of women is examined. Particular attention is given to its relationship to other theories which endeavour to explain the economic status of women. In conclusion, some observations are made about the status of women in India (particularly tribal Santals in eastern India) and where possible, connections with Sen's entitlement theory are highlighted.

2. Sen's Entitlement Theory Outlined and Critically Discussed

Sen's theory of entitlements (related to resource endowments) proved to be persuasive in supporting his thesis that famines can often occur when there is no lack of food or any

decline in its availability in aggregate. In such circumstances, some individuals may experience hunger because exchange rate entitlements change in a way which is unfavourable to them. For example, the wage rates of some individuals may fall in relation to the price of food and result in their starvation. The Great Bengal Famine of the early 1940s can largely be explained by such factors (Sen, 1977, 1981a) and variations in exchange entitlements explain some other famines as well (Sen, 1981a). Sen is able to convincingly reject the naïve hypothesis that famines are invariably a result of a decline in food availability; the so called FAD (food availability decline) hypothesis.

While Sen's approach is useful in analysing the occurrence of famine and starvation, its value for explaining other forms of economic deprivation is not yet clear. The aim here is to consider its potential for explaining the economic deprivation experienced by some women and the extent of their poverty. But before doing so, consider the degree of novelty of Sen's theory.

In fact, Sen's theory may not to be so novel as an explanation of the economic position of individuals. Standard welfare economics, for example, in a pure exchange economy (as illustrated by an Edgeworth-Bowley box) indicates that the economic welfare of an individual depends on his/her initial resource endowment 'in this box' and on his/her exchange possibilities, or 'exchange entitlements'. The initial resource endowments of an individual can also be called his/her entitlements if one has some degree of legal right to these.

Slightly more sophisticated economic welfare theory adds the possibility of production to that of pure exchange. This extends the range of economic opportunities available to at least some individuals. The analysis which Sen gives in Appendix A of *Poverty and Famines* accords with standard economic theory. Thus, his main contribution resides more in his analysis of the determinants of the famines than in providing a new theory of what determines the degree of wealth or poverty of individuals. Nevertheless, as we shall see, Sen's approach eventually highlights the importance of institutional studies, and so contrasts with traditional neoclassical economic analysis

In a nutshell, Sen summarises his entitlement theory as follows: 'A person's ability to command food – indeed to command any commodity he wishes to acquire or retain – depends on the entitlement-relations that govern possession and use in that society. It depends on what he owns, what exchange possibilities are offered to him and what is taken away from him' (Sen, 1981a, pp. 154-155).

A couple of observations can be made about Sen's exposition. It is first of all clear that entitlements vary with the nature or structure of society. Therefore institutional arrangements within individual societies must be studied when exploring the implications of Sen's entitlement theory. Secondly, although Sen uses the masculine form in the above statement (thereby exhibiting gender-bias), his theory applies equally well to females. The economic position of females (applying his theory) will depend on what they are able to own and use, their exchange possibilities, transfers of resources to them and what is taken away from them.

The importance of institutionalism as expressed, for example, through legal structures is emphasised by the following statement of Sen:

‘...the focus on entitlement, has the effect of emphasizing legal rights. Other relevant factors, for example, market forces, can be seen as operating *through* a system of legal relations (ownership rights, contractual obligations, legal exchanges, etc). The law stands between food availability and food entitlement’ (Sen, 1981, pp. 165-166). Presumably Sen includes as well as statutory law, customary or common law. Furthermore, customary practices will have an impact even if they are not legally binding. Indeed, some such practices, for example, of a discriminatory nature, could strictly be illegal. Nevertheless, they operate to change entitlements.

The problem of inadequate attention to the legal basis of ‘entitlements’ has been previously noted by Gasper (1993). He comments: ‘Experience with the ‘entitlements’ approach, as defined by Sen, raises a number of distinctions and problem-areas....narrow definitions (legal rights only) versus extended definitions (including other social rights and obligations)....’ (Gasper, 1993, p. 709). Furthermore, it might be observed that entitlements provided by legal and social rights are sometimes uncertain or fuzzy. This adds an additional complication.

Sen’s theory is incomplete as means of explaining socio-economic status. Basically, it provides only a general framework for analysis (Sen, 1981, p. 163). Unless it is embedded in a particular institutional context, it has little predictive or analytical power.

Furthermore, Sen does not develop a theory of the factors which alter entitlements or rights and change endowments available to individuals. Processes of changes in entitlements are not discussed as they are for example by North (1981, 1990). Moreover in the earlier works of Sen, there is no discussion of how variations in entitlements with economic growth or development will alter inequality of entitlements and income. Thus, the dynamic element explored by Kuznets involving the changing distribution of income is absent. In fact in his book, *On Economic Inequality* (Sen, 1983), does not even mention Kuznets.

What is clear from Sen's theory is that an individual's economic position requires a wide view to be taken of income (Cf. Sen, 1981b). Nevertheless, it is possible to apply Kuznets theory in this wider context of entitlements which includes a consideration of social security benefits provided by the state (Tisdell, 1993, Ch. 6). Nevertheless, Sen appropriately points out that a mechanical view of income distribution is inadequate. He claims that 'Classifying the population into rich and poor may serve some purposes in some contexts, but it is far too indiscriminating to be helpful in analysing starvation, famine and even poverty' (Sen, 1981, p. 156).

If Sen's entitlement theory is to be applied in the wider context of development economics, much more attention should be given to factors which systematically alter entitlements as economic development occurs. As things now stand, it seems reasonable to conclude that Sen's entitlement approach does not constitute a general theory, even if changes in exchange entitlements were useful in explaining the Great Bengal Famine. To

some extent this is recognised by Sen who suggests that 'the entitlement approach provides a general framework for analysing famines rather than one particular hypothesis about their causation' (Sen, 1981, p. 163).

In his critique of Sen's entitlement theory, Gasper emphasizes this point. He states: 'His type of entitlements analysis can be seen rather as a *problematique* and approach, a procedure of questioning and investigation, that encouraged wide attention or as some authors say, a 'frame', not a 'theory' in the sense of a comprehensive causal model or a precise conceptual apparatus. This *approach* involves, we suggested earlier: analysis of effective/sanctioned command, and its various channels and determinants, including attention to the rules and institutions that control access, and the distinctive positions and vulnerabilities of different groups' (Gasper, 1993, p. 709). However, Sen himself gives surprisingly little in depth attention to such sociological factors, even if their importance is recognised by him. As suggested by Gasper (1993) the significance of Sen's entitlement approach is that it has encouraged others to look more closely at the connections between actual sociological relationships and the economic position of individuals. Thus the previously relatively narrow framework of economics as expressed in neoclassical economics is moved towards an institutional approach. It is in this respect that Sen's entitlement approach is relevant to considering of the economic status of females.

3. Sen's Entitlements Approach, and Other Theories to Explain the Socio-Economic Status of Women

The social relationships of individuals usually alter throughout their lifetime. In childhood one is completely dependent on senior family members, in maturity dependence is reduced but in old age economic dependence on family may reassert itself. The position of a female child is different to that of a woman. The latter's position will vary depending upon whether she is single, married or divorced and with her age. In India, it may also vary with kinship relationships (Dyson and Moore, 1983) and depends on whether or not females belong to an extended or nuclear family. Clearly, a discussion of the economic (and social status) of females must be related to their situation in relation to a family. Therefore, attention must be given to theories of decision-making within family contexts.

Traditional neoclassical economics is both gender- and family-free. Its application to family decisions was pioneered by Becker (1981). He envisages a single utility function to be maximised in family decisions. Whether this utility function is a mutually agreed one by the marriage partners or dictationally imposed either by the husband or wife is unclear. The important thing is that it is assumed to exist in Becker's theory. Because children are in a dependent situation, it is the parent's wishes and their utility function which counts.

According to Becker, family decisions, such as those about the size of the family, are influenced by the net economic benefits which the parents expect to receive. As, for example, rearing children becomes more costly and as they add less to the family income

or to economic security of their parents, the number of children demanded by parents declines. It follows also from this theory that if females provide parents with:

- (a) lower net income than males, and
- (b) less possibilities for economic and other support in times of need such as old age or sickness,

females will be less preferred than males. In addition, females will yield a lower return on investment in improving their human capital, e.g. via education and improved health. Thus in societies where females have few entitlements and especially in cases whether exogenous rather than endogenous marriage take place (that is outside and inside the village respectively) and the female loses in the latter case contact for all intents and purposes with their parents after marriage, one can expect female children to be deprived in comparison to males.

In marriage, a woman's economic and social status relative to her husband (or other family members) depends significantly on her bargaining position. It may therefore be that a bargaining theoretic approach is most relevant to family analysis at this stage. Analyses of this type has been proposed by Schultz (1990), Alderman *et al.* (1990) and Haddad *et al.* (1997). This approach can be combined with Sen's entitlement approach. The economic status of a married woman depends on her relative threat capacity (in relation to bargaining). Threat depends to a considerable extent on the economic and other entitlements of the woman. It is the ability of the female to withdraw endowments and entitlements from her husband or family which, other things equal, increases her threat power assuming that Nash's threat theory can be applied (Nash, 1950; Tisdell,

1996a, Ch. 12). For example if the woman is able to institute divorce and has entitlements to some assets of the family, this increases her threat power. So would her ability to earn income and exercise rights in relation to its expenditure. Because of such rights a female may be in a position to determine the extent of her economic support for other household members. This ability provides a wife with economic threat power. So would her ability to withdraw from earning outside income thereby reducing family income.

The close proximity of a wife to her kin can also increase her bargaining power within her family. In southern India for instance females after marriage or generally located not far away from their relatives – they mostly remain in the same village or nearby. By contrast, this is not usually so in northern India. In northern India the relatives of a wife have no influence of any significance in a wives' new household and she is relatively powerless in the extended family of her husband. This contributes to the relatively high socio-economic status of women in southern India and to the comparatively low status of females in northern India.

A woman who inherits her husband's property should he predecease her will also have greater power over her children (than a female without such rights) especially if she can exercise discretion in relation to inheritance. Her threat power in this case is likely to depend on the amount of property involved. In collective decision-making in the family the relative threat power of family partners matter when it comes to the sharing of available resources.

Agnihotri *et al.* (1998) suggest that Sen's theory of endowments and entitlements can be applied to the study of gender gaps and combined with unitary and collective decision-making models of the family. Drèze and Sen (1989, Ch. 4) see considerable scope for its application in that way. However, the generality of Sen's framework results in his theory having little specific predictive and explanatory power. Initially Agnihotri *et al.* had high hopes for using Sen's approach to explain the occurrence of missing women in India. But subsequently they express disappointment with it, suggesting that it may be naive approach to the study of 'missing' women in India. In their conclusion they suggest that they may have been following a naive approach and that 'one can dispute the dichotomy between 'economic' and 'cultural' worth and question the mechanisms by which economic and cultural worth are converted into each other and into well-being' (Agnihotri *et al.*, 1998, p. 25). The causal factors involved in social relationships are often unclear, are to a considerable extent historically determined and alter with the dynamics of society. Endowments and entitlements are reflections of deeper forces at work in society.

4. Observations on the Status of Indian Women especially Tribals in Eastern India

In India as a whole the status of females relative to males is low but this situation varies geographically, and to some extent with ethnic groups within India. It is for example generally agreed and supported by cross-sectional data that the economic status of women in northwest India is inferior to that in south India. However, the states of Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal involve an intermediate position and in some respects the status

of women in these states is more akin to that of the south. The north-south gender divide in India corresponds basically to India's cultural divide. The Indo-Aryan culture is dominant in the northwest and the Dravidian culture in the south. Dyson and Moore (1983) suggest that the socio-economic status of women in India is little influenced by religious differences, e.g., whether the family is Muslim or Hindu – Muslims in the south tend to conform to the general norms of southern India. But even within the northern area pockets of somewhat different ethnic and cultural groups exist, for example tribal groups. In particular, such groupings occur within Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal. The Santals constitute one such tribal group. Possibly females in this tribal group enjoy a relatively higher status compared to Biharis, Bengalis and Oryans who are more steeped in Indo-Aryan culture.

Consider Indian's basic north-south gender divide. This divide is reflected in higher male-female ratios in the north compared to the south. In normal human populations, one would expect (for biological reasons) a slight excess of females in comparison to males with this female-male ratio rising as the expected length of life of a population increases. However, in India, the ratio of females to males is substantially less than unity which suggests that for one reason or another significant numbers of females are missing from the Indian population. The reasons appear mainly to be the practice of female infanticide and economic deprivation of females resulting in their earlier death than otherwise.

Agnihotri *et al.* (1998, p. 5) present some data on female to male ratios for India which are revealing. They are reproduced in Table 1. They indicate that at the last census (1991) there were only 927 females per 1000 males in India and that this gender imbalance has increased since 1961, that is during a period in which India has experienced substantial rises in per capita income due to economic growth. Thus although the endowments and entitlements available to families in India increased in this period, the deprivation of females worsened. This observation is similar to that made by Sen in relation to the Great Bengal Famine – the famine was not a consequence of insufficient food, but a ‘maldistribution’ of entitlements to food.

Table 1: Female to Male Ratios (FMR) in India, 1961-1991; Number of Females per Thousand Males

	Total Population	General Castes	Scheduled Castes	Scheduled Tribes
1961	941	934	957	987
1971	930	924	935	982
1981	934	930	932	983
1991	927	923	922	972

Source: Agnihotri *et al.* (1998) p. 5

We can note that female-male ratios (FMRs) are more favourable for scheduled tribes than for Hindus irrespective of whether Hindus belong to general castes or scheduled castes. The scheduled castes consists of former harijans or Hindu untouchables. Since 1961, their FMRs have converged towards those of the general castes. The reasons for this are unclear. One possibility is that with increasing status and income, they may be increasingly following the custom of the general castes. Agnihotri *et al.* do not provide separate FMRs for Muslims and their method of estimating FMRs for scheduled tribes may slightly understate these ratios. Partly because of inadequacy of data, Agnihotri *et*

al. (1998) exclude the tribal population from most of their analysis. To some extent, this reduces the comparative value of their analysis.

Dyson and Moore (1983) provide a clear exposition of India's north-south gender divide which is reflected to a considerable extent in differences in FMRs and in similar demographic gender-related data. The divide is a line that approximates the contours of the Satupura hill range, extending eastward to the Chota Nagpur hills of southern Bihar with some indeterminacy in the east for Bihar, West Bengal and Orissa which appear to be in a transitional zone. The broken line in Figure 1 represents this divide. The states to the north of this line (Gujarat, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab and Haryana) generally have relatively unfavourable female demographic characteristics whereas those to its south (Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra) have more favourable female demographic characteristics, e.g. in terms of FMRs. The states of Bihar, West Bengal and Orissa have a somewhat intermediate position, and variation possibly occurs within these states with locality. Later studies, e.g., Agnihotri *et al.* (1998), suggest that India's geographical gender division has not weakened with its economic development.

Dyson and Moore (1983) find that the divide is greatly influenced by kinship structures. A different kinship structure exists in Dravidian culture to that supported by Indo-Aryan culture. They point out the following:

'There are three key principles of north Indian kinship. First, spouses must be unrelated in kinship reckoning, and often too by place of birth and/or residence. In other words the

marriage rules are exogamic. Second, males tend to co-operate with and receive help from other males to whom they are related by blood, frequently their adult brothers. Third women generally do not inherit property for their own use, nor do they act as links through which major property rights are transferred to offspring' (Dyson and Moore, 1983, p. 43).

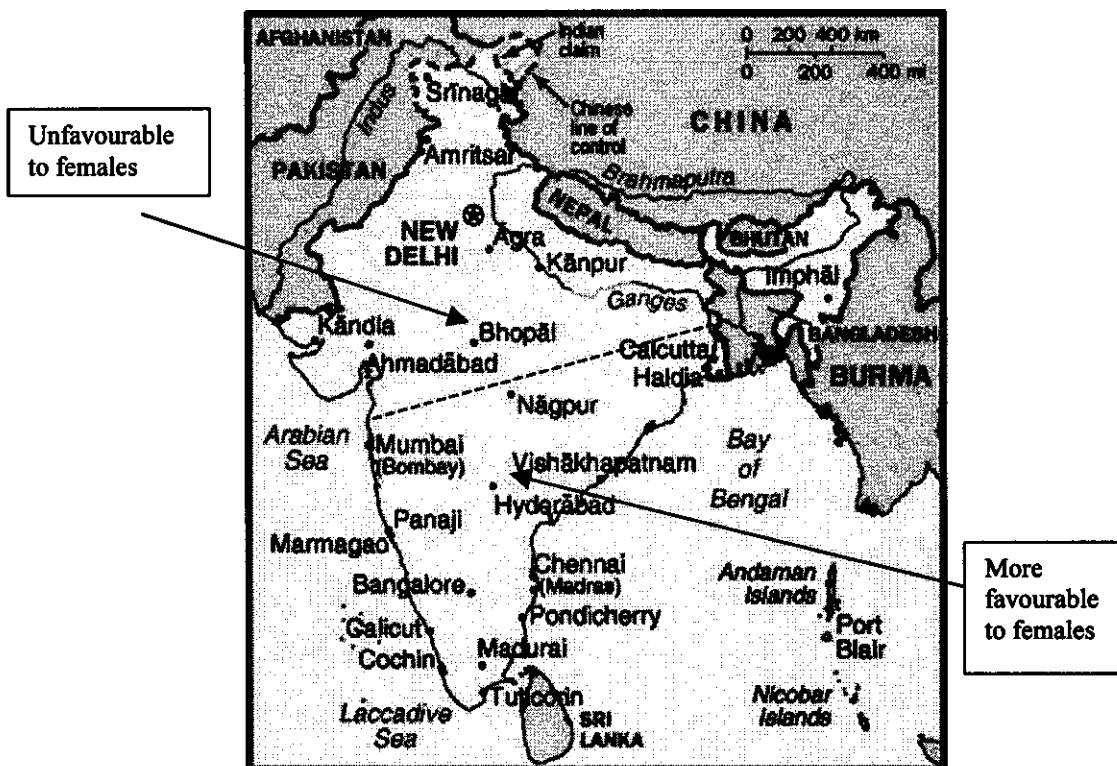


Figure 1: Division of India (excluding northeast states) into north and south demographic gender divide. The broken line is the dividing line.

In addition, after marriage, a woman in the north normally joins the extended family of her husband and has little further contact with her own blood family. In these circumstances her bargaining power is weak because her threat power is low. Furthermore, her natural parents are likely to obtain little return from investing in her natural capital – at most, it might reduce their dowry payment. In these circumstances,

the consequences for married women in north-west India are as predicted by bargaining theory and those for dependent females, e.g. children, are as expected on the basis of the neoclassical unitary type theory, namely situations of female socio-economic deprivation in north-west India.

In southern India the situation is quite different. Marriage is mostly endogamous, often the ideal marriage is between cross cousins. Married persons tend to come from the same locality and both *remain* in it with husband just as likely to co-operate with males to whom they are related to by marriage as by blood. Furthermore, 'women may sometimes inherit and/or transfer property rights'.

Females have more autonomy in the south, therefore greater bargaining power in a family situation and natural parents do not lose all advantages from investing in the human capital of their daughters as in the north. Therefore on the basis of both unitary and bargaining economic theories of the family, one would expect the socio-economic status of women to be higher in south India than in the north and for females to experience less deprivation in the south. This is supported by the available evidence as presented for example by Dyson and Moore (1983) and as updated by Agnihotri *et al.* (1998).

Agnihotri *et al.* place considerable emphasis on female labour participation rates as indicators of entitlements of females. They find some evidence that demographic disadvantage of females in India falls as this participation rate rises both within Indo-Aryan and non Indo-Aryan cultures. Indeed from their Figure 3 one could be led to the

conclusion that female-male differences between Indo-Aryan and south Indian culture disappear once female labour participation rates (FPRs) become high enough. Their analysis puts considerable burden on FPRs as indicators of female entitlement. However, FPRs themselves may be mostly a consequence of other culturally determined rights and entitlements of females. One, therefore, wonders whether a study of differences in FPRs provides an in depth analysis of differences in female entitlements. Indeed, the authors themselves express some reservations about this (Agnihotri *et al.*, 1998, p. 25).

Now as mentioned earlier, tribals have been given little attention in studies of the socio-economic status of females in India. For example, Agnihotri *et al.* (1998) specifically excludes them from their study. Yet they are not unimportant in India. In 1981, the Santals, one of the largest tribal groups had a population of over ½ million in Orissa alone. Within India, they are located in eastern India mainly in the states of West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Assam and Tripura. In addition, they are present in Bangladesh. Their total population is approximately 5 million. They speak Santali and belong to the Munda group of tribal people. They have a relatively high female-male population ratios. Based on the 1981 census figures quoted by Debi (1990) the number of females per thousand rates in Orissa was 994, slightly above that for all scheduled tribes and significantly above that for all Hindus and for the total Indian population.

The following are some features of Santal society which may increase the bargaining power of married women compared to their northern Indian Hindu or Muslim counterparts:

- Families are frequently nuclear. Joint extended families are few.
- A form of marriage known as Ge-de-Jamei is possible. In this case, the boy 'comes and lives with the family of the girl. This happens when the girl has no brother' (Debi, 1990, pp. 239-240).
- Widow marriage is permitted in the Santal society (Debi, 1990, pp. 239-240).
- Furthermore divorce is permitted in Santal society and can be initiated either by the husband or the wife. 'If a woman leaves her husband and elopes with another man, the second husband would return the marriage expenses and the bride price' (Debi, 1990, p. 240).
- A husband who wants to divorce his wife must usually pay compensation.
- Work and economic activities are shared by both sexes almost equally.

Amongst the Mundas, the group to which the Santals belong, Singh *et al.* (1998) point out that the husband is head of the household, but he consults his wife behaves 'like the head of equals'. Furthermore, they go on to point out:

'The wife does not enjoy low status in the family. Both husband and wife do the collection of minor forest produce in forest. Except ploughing, a wife performs all kind of agricultural activities. Both earn wages in forest and mines. Both do the rearing of cattle and both visit the market for sale and purchase of goods. The husband is the master of the house, the wife is the mistress of the house.

The husband cooperates with his wife in cooking by doing work like fetching water and cleaning utensils, kitchen and even cooking. He cooperates with the wife in rearing the children. It is generally the wife who knows well about maintaining household expenditure. In this way, both husband and wife struggle hard to maintain their family. This does not mean that conflict never arises between husband and wife' (Singh *et al.*, 1998, p. 81).

Very often both males and females work outside the home and seasonally migrate for work.

Comparing the entitlements of Santal women to those in Indo-Aryan culture, Santal wives appear to have greater entitlements and threat power. This may partly explain their superior social status in the family. Furthermore, often bride price rather than dowry is paid so parents do not have such a disproportionate financial burden if they have female children rather than males. Again, even if living in separate households, daughters may still continue to provide some support for their parents. In addition, if a couple only has daughters, they may acquire a son-in-law for their household or to live nearby through a Gar-de-Jamei marriage.

Wives have considerable autonomy in relation to work and scope for the dissolution of marriage. If widowed, they need not become a burden on their family because they can remarry.

While female deprivation is not practiced by Santals to any great extent (and this can be explained in terms of bargaining theories of the family and in the dependence childhood stage, by the optimising economic strategies of parents), Santals as a group suffer economic discrimination in India society as a whole. This may for example limit their job opportunities and willingness to invest in their education.

While Santal society is patriarchal, males are less dominant than in Indian Hindu society. Sahu (1996, p. 1) observes that 'Tribal societies [in India] by and large are more liberal to their women in comparison to non-tribal societies'. Sahu also points out that almost every married Santal woman possesses her own small animals – goats, pigs and poultry. She often finds food for these in the forest, can sell these animals and use this income at her own discretion. However, she mostly uses it to help care for her children or to buy small items for herself. It is an independent source of income for her which indirectly benefits her children and her family as a whole.

However, Santal society is not static. Its social structure is being increasingly influenced by the dominant religion/culture of Hinduism, and by environmental change. Sahu (1996, pp. 61-62) suggests: 'due to the impact of the Hindu society, a tendency is growing among the Santhal males to establish them as superior forcibly by using several [Hindus] proverbs. Womens' position is also going to decrease due to deforestation. They are not finding forest products for family consumption and for sale too. Now she can only keep few animals. Keeping of animal[s] is also affected due to lack of forests'.

Hence, we should note that in this case deforestation and environmental degradation especially undermines the socio-economic position of married women in Santal society (Cf. Alauddin and Tisdell, 1998, Ch. 7). In addition, encouragement of cash-cropping further undermines the economic power of Santal wives because males control cash earned from cash crops (Sahu, 1996, p. 71). A similar phenomenon has been observed in Africa where a shift from subsistence to cash cropping has reduced the relative economic power of wives in families and their ability to use their produce to care for themselves and for their children (Gross and Underwood, 1971; von Braun and Kennedy, 1986; Kennedy and Oniang'o, 1990). Thus environmental deterioration and a switch to cash cropping, encouraged by the push towards economic globalisation, can impoverish tribal women and their children in particular circumstances; circumstances which are by no means rare.

It is also worth mentioning that the fabric and communal life of Santal society has been undermined by the Union government of India in various ways. For example, the 'well knitted administrative system [of the Santals] has gone through a drastic change under the pressure of police administration within the jurisdiction of [the] Indian Constitution. As ..[citizens] of India, Santals also come under the governments rules. There is [an] elected panchayat [in accordance with the law of India] which is local government having revenue and judicial powers. So [the] traditional panchayat is becoming automatically ineffective' (Sahu, 1996, p. 74). Local government is being increasingly controlled by non-tribals (Dikus) in Santal areas (Sahu, 1996, p. 136) and Indian law makes virtually no allowance for the customs, beliefs, values and social codes of tribal people. According

to Sahu (1996, p. 134), 'tribals are controlled by the same law and legislation [as that for other Indians] and no effective law has been made for the tribals and their women even after 48 years of independence'. However, separate personal laws have been enacted for Hindus and for Muslims in India, the dominant religious group in India.

Nevertheless, a cautionary comment is in order concerning Sahu's observations. Many of the observations of Sahu (1996) are based on fieldwork in Madhupur Municipality of Bihar Province. Since Santals are spread over a wide area in eastern India, socio-economic differences are likely to have emerged between Santal tribal groups, e.g. some differences may be present between those in Orissa in the south-west of West Bengal compared to Bihar. Despite this, some of Sahu's generalisations about the changing socio-economic status of Santal women seem warranted and worthy of further study. In particular, Sahu's study highlights significant changes in social values and institutional structures in Santal communities driven by external social and state influences. Social and institutional dynamics therefore need to be taken into account in studying the situations of females in Santal and other tribal communities. Social and economic change in these communities is increasingly dominated by non-communal forces.

5. Concluding Comments

Sen's theory of endowments and entitlements is not in itself a very powerful theory for explaining the socio-economic status of women, partly because it is no more than a framework. It is only by developing this framework in particular social setting that it

becomes relevant. Then one is virtually developing a new theory because Sen's framework is so general that it has few powers of discrimination.

The socio-economic status of females must be related to their stage in life. The situation of a dependant female child is as a rule different to that of a woman. The former lacks bargaining power but the latter may have such power depending upon her entitlements. Entitlements are such that the bargaining power of wives is greater in southern than in northwest of India. In some tribal groups, such as the Santal, the relative bargaining power of wives is even greater again. Female-male ratios appear to be higher when wives have greater bargaining power. Coincidentally parents can expect greater returns from female children in such cases. So one would expect less discrimination against female children in the south of India and in Santal communities than in northwest India. Such factors result in a higher female-male ratio outside of northwest India. So it seems that *both* the comparative economic interests of parents in male compared to female children and the relative bargaining position of wives can be used to explain differences in economic status of females. Both the neoclassical and bargaining approaches are relevant depending upon the life-stage of a female. Sen's framework appears to be of secondary importance in unravelling these issues.

Nevertheless, it is telling that with economic growth in India resulting in rising family incomes, discrimination against women appears to have increased as indicated by the declining FMRs in Table 1. This result mirrors that of Sen in relation to the Great Bengal Famine. Hopefully this trend will not continue. As pointed out by Kuznets (1963, 1973)

it is possible to have situations of growing economic inequality in the early stages of economic development (Cf. Tisdell, 1996b) but with inequality then falling with sustained economic growth.

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