

For the Millions: Ending the Practice of Dowry in India

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In 2011, India conducted its fifteenth national census, and the results were very disconcerting. For every thousand males, there were 943 females; however, for children up to six years old, that number drastically dropped to 919, one of many indicators that sex-based abortions are common in Asian countries (India Census). In India, this practice is known as female feticide, and is just one of the symptoms of dowry. This custom of a bride and her family giving wealth and other resources to the groom and/or his family has long been engrained in India's culture and history, but today it leads to considerable unjust treatment against women, ranging from discrimination to abuse all the way to homicide. Dubbed "dowry death," these killings are punishments on brides for failing to provide enough dowry at the time of marriage, not continuing to provide payments afterwards—or, in some cases, the result of a groom and/or his family ridding themselves of a bride in order to marry another to bring in more wealth in the form of dowry. Brides committing suicide to escape dowry-related abuse and the murder of unborn girls so that parents won't have to face the burden of providing their dowry also fall under dowry death. Though the Indian government officially outlawed dowry in the 1960s, the practice still continues. According to Dr. Priya R. Banerjee of the State University of New York Brockport, over eight thousand female homicides relating to dowry violence were reported to the National Crime Records Bureau of India in 2011 (Banerjee 34). In any Indian newspaper there will be stories of dowry violence. Take the *Dainik Jagran*, for example, which reported a story of a young woman burnt to death over dowry just a week ago. But for every reported case, hundreds, if not thousands, go unpublicized. To save the lives of millions of women and unborn

children in India, the system of dowry today must cease and be replaced with a new form, one that involves both the bride and groom's side contributing to the new household—something that can only happen when individual mindsets and cultural attitudes change.

Indian culture is one based on tradition, and dowry has long been entrenched in the country's history. Priya Banerjee claims that its origins can be traced as far back to 1500 B.C., to an ancient code of law called the *Manusmriti*. This text describes the principles that all Hindus should obey, including the most honored custom of adorning a bride in rich clothing and, in return, her father receiving a cow and a bull from the groom (Banerjee). Since then, the practice has developed into the dowry of today, which involves the bride and her family offering to the groom and his family large amounts of cash, gold, and other valuable items such as TVs, washers and dryers, motorcycles, scooters, beds, and other household items.

Dowry is one of two systems of marriage payments. Its counterpart can be thought of as brideprice: the practice of a groom and his family giving wealth and other resources to the bride's family. Dr. Siwan Anderson, an Associate Professor of Economics, makes a clear distinction between the characteristics of dowry as opposed to brideprice: "Dowry... is found in socially stratified, monogamous societies that are economically complex and where women have a relatively small productive role" (Anderson 163). When we look at societies in the world where dowry was and is prevalent, this distinction quickly becomes apparent. The ancient Greek and Roman cultures used dowry and heavily limited women's roles in society, restricting them from having any education, political power, or work outside the home. The same can be said for medieval Europe, where dowry also became prevalent. In contrast, the early cultures of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Mexico, the Germanic tribes of western Europe and countries formerly under the Ottoman empire, all practiced brideprice. According to Anderson, brideprices are most prevalent

today in Africa, where women have a much larger role in society than their ancient Greek and Roman counterparts (Anderson 153).

The most egalitarian societies on earth are hunter-gatherer groups, where every member must contribute equally in order for everyone to survive. As a society transforms from a pastoral or horticultural society to that of an agrarian civilization, it becomes less and less egalitarian as certain key roles—those that can contribute and produce more—become valued over all others. This is especially true of industrial and post-industrial societies where women are not given the same opportunities as men, like in India. In this case, dowry is thought to serve as an economic equalizer. Because India is currently experiencing a rapid process of industrialization, its already heavily stratified society is becoming increasingly complex. Brides are now paying more for characteristics perceived as valuable—such as the groom’s status and the length of his formal education, a determinant of his future prospects of a large and stable income—since women themselves cannot fully economically participate in society, the result of a still-very patriarchal culture (Anderson 159).

On my past trips to India with my parents, I have heard many people in India claim that dowry serves as a pre-mortem inheritance for daughters. This makes sense because India is a patriarchal, virilocal society (the bride leaves her natal family to live with her husband’s family). Dowry is thought to be the bride’s share of her parents’ inheritance. She receives movable wealth such as gold and other appliances at the time of her marriage, when she joins a new family, and her brothers will get the house and any farmland when their parents die in order to keep the estate within their lineage; however, in most cases, the bride retains no access to her dowry. Instead, her husband and his family have power over the funds, obliterating the original purpose for a dowry. In addition, Sonia Dalmia and Pareena Lawrence, graduates from the Delhi School

of Economics, have deconstructed this theory. Their research suggests that the size of the bride's father's estate and how many daughters he has in his household—two factors that should have a major impact on a dowry's size, if it does serve as an inheritance—have no effect on the size of dowries (Dalmia and Lawrence 89). Thus, dowry has no practical purpose in Indian society.

Even with laws banning its practice and new programs in effect to discourage it, dowry is still commonplace in Indian marriages. Part of it is that the word “dowry” has different meanings, depending on geographic location and caste, as anthropology graduate student Nicole Wilson explains after spending fifteen months studying the burgeoning middle class of Tamilnadu, the southernmost state of India. Most people will stray from formally demanding dowry, placing the transfer of cash and other valuables under other names. Wilson speculates this to be partly due to the laws outright forbidding dowry (Wilson 40). Priya Banerjee claims that this loophole in the legislation is just one of the many reasons that dowry is seldom caught in the act and charged as the crime it is (Banerjee 37).

All of this is exacerbated by India's broken justice and administrative system, a fact that I can personally attest to from observations on my trips to India. The police rarely, if ever, correctly do their jobs—more often than not, they use unwarranted and excessive force. They are easily bribed. Judges, too, can be bought over if a suspect ever makes it to a trial. The delay between legislature and justice administration is huge. No matter how many laws can be created by an already ineffective parliament, very little can be done at ground level to get justice for those women suffering under the dowry system.

With this mind, is there anything that can be done? The form that dowry takes today needs to be abolished and replaced with a new system, one that dictates that both the groom and the bride's family contribute to the couple—but I believe this solution will only come when

broader cultural attitudes towards women change. Dowry is an incredibly complex social, cultural, political, and economic phenomenon. It is a custom long rooted in a society that is built on tradition but is undergoing a radical process of industrialization. Dowry is a symptom of a much larger problem of women being viewed as second-class citizens. They are denied the same rights as men—and this is only a reflection of the same issue found everywhere in the world. If we as humans are entitled to the same rights, why do we continue to deny others theirs?

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