

Born To Marry: The Political Economy of Dowry in India

Abhilasha Srivastava

Abstract:

The last hundred years of women's history in India has been painted black with dowry related incidence of murder, female feticide/infanticide and domestic violence. An examination of dowry's history reveals that it is neither an exceptional nor a recent social phenomenon in India. Many societies in the earlier days of civilization had such practices. While such practices in most western societies vanished with modernization, they became more widespread and inflationary in India. Modernizing forces, namely colonialism and commercialization, have been at work in India for years, and they would prima facie be expected to suppress such 'primitive' practices. However, even after more than forty years of its prohibition, the practice has spread and has increasingly ingrained itself in the institution of marriage. This paper attempts to historicize the factors that led to the origin and institutionalization of dowry. It concludes that dowry practices were not an outgrowth of tradition, that modernization simply failed to remedy, rather dowry has been institutionalized by processes like globalization and colonization themselves and has resulted in a gender stratified marriage system with negative consequences for women in India.

Introduction:

*Ab jo kiye ho data aisa na keejo, Agle janam mohe bitiya na keejo,
Bitiya jo keejo tou phir aisa keejo, Bitiya ke jaisa bhagya na deejo*
(O Lord don't do again what you did this time; don't make me a girl
when I am reborn next, And even if you have to, don't give me the fate
of a daughter)

A folksong cited in a north Indian story by Ms. Qurratulain Haider

This old folksong from rural North India still holds relevance for women in most of India where a recent news report stated 'Delhi Police official's daughter found burnt for dowry.' The last hundred years of women's history in India has been painted black with such dowry related incidence of murder, female feticide/infanticides and domestic violence. In recent decades, anti-dowry movementsⁱ, by limiting themselves to the constant repetition of "abolish dowry" as the only solution, have only helped give further legitimacy to the conventional belief that daughters are an economic liability in India. Thus, while dowry needs to be strongly condemned for reinforcing the inferior status of women, it paradoxically receives support not only from society but also from women themselves (Kishwar 1999: 11-19). A countrywide survey conducted in 2001 by the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) and the Indian School of Women's Studies and Development, establishes the rise and spread of dowry even in communities where it was unheard of. According to its findings, the dowry system has become a homogenous, pan Indian phenomenon, permeating "every section, class, caste, and religion and even the more egalitarian tribal communities, particularly during the past one and a half decade" (Taking on dowry, Frontline 19(23) November 2002)ⁱⁱ. It is quiet disturbing that more than forty

years after its prohibition, the practice far from being eliminated has spread and is increasingly ingrained in the idea, and institution of marriage.

More often than not, the practice of dowry is blamed on traditions seeped in the religious, caste ridden past of Indian society but there is little mention of exorbitant dowries causing ruin of families in the literature of pre-British India. Unnaturally high dowry payments and other atrocities related to such payments became a major theme only in nineteenth century literature from India. This period seems to have witnessed large-scale erosion of women's economic importance and inheritance rights due to the ways in which the colonial rulers imposed their capitalist ideas and understanding of socio-economic institutions, on the traditional structures of Indian society.

Similar dowry systems and discrimination against women were common in other societies as well. As Goody writes of Medieval Europe, "in a sense women were more valuable as wives than they were as daughters, since in the latter capacity they had to share in the estate. Indeed female infanticide was not altogether unknown in dowry systems" (Goody 1976:11). However, while dowry practices in most western societies vanished it became more widespread and inflationary in India. An examination of dowry's history reveals that this paradox is neither unusual nor a recent social phenomenon. Modernizing forces namely colonialism and commercialization have been at work in India for years and they would prima-facie be expected to suppress such 'primitive-appearing' practices. This paper is an attempt to look at the reasons for the existence of dowry in its current form using historical and socio economic lenses and examines the hypothesizes that, dowry practices were not an outgrowth of tradition, that modernization forces simply failed to remedy, rather dowry has been institutionalized by processes like globalization and colonization themselves and has resulted in a gender stratified marriage system with negative consequences for status of women in India.

There is no general consensus or certainty about the definition or origin of 'dowry'. But for the purpose of this paper we would be using the definition given by the government of India in the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1966. 'In strict terms, dowry is what a bride's parents give to the groom or to his family on demand either in cash or in kind. It can be looked as a settlement that is normally constituted of: (1) what is given to the bride, and often settled beforehand and

announced openly or discreetly; (2) what is given to the bridegroom before and at marriage; and (3) what is presented to the in-laws of the girl. The settlement often includes the enormous expenditure incurred on travel and entertainment of the bridegroom's party' (The Dowry Prohibition Act 1961. Act No. 28 of 1961 [20th May, 1961]). This definition can be extended to include the giving of gifts or cash from the bride's parents to her husband, his family or to herself after marriage, either towards fulfillment of the pre-nuptial settlement or on the basis of further expectations and/or demands of the groom and his family.

This paper attempts to look at the factors that led to the origin and institutionalization of dowry and accompanying fall in the status of women. Moreover, it also tries to capture the contemporary picture of dowry and women's status in India.

Contemporary Literature on Dowry

Most literature on economic interpretations of dowry is derived from Gary Becker's celebrated work, 'A Treatise on the Family' where he puts dowry as a price that clears marriage markets. Becker bases his theory on the assumption that in natural populations the numbers of men and women are roughly equal, so men in a physical sense are not scarce and need not be "bought". Dowries are created as an exception rather than rule in cases where, changes in either male mortality or female mortality could lead to imbalance in marriage market. In more recent literature on dowry Botticini and Siow (2003) note that dowries serve as a way to split wealth among all children, and dowries disappear as societies become wealthier – which correlate with the decline of family businesses (including farms) as central to making a living. They also note that the timing of dowries and the lack of sharing rules likewise fits with a bequest motive where incentives matter. However in case of India these explanations do not seem to hold. Anderson Siwan (2003) shows the role that caste plays in determining the existence of dowry in a caste based society by contrasting the case of Europe with India. Modernization is assumed to involve two components: increasing average wealth and increasing wealth dispersion within caste groups, however her paper shows that, in caste-based societies, modernization leads to increases in dowry payments, whereas in non-caste-based societies, the payments decline (Siwan 2003:1)

Dowry inflation in India has also been a topic of research and controversy among scholars (Bloch and Rao 2002, Agnihotri 2003). Siwan (2003) points out that in South Asia, and especially India, dowry inflation is an issue, because it leads to gender-selective abortions and in extreme cases to violence, such as murders of daughters-in-law whose families don't deliver sufficient dowry. Rao (1993) has argued that dowries in most regions of South Asia have steadily become larger over the last forty years, causing widespread destitution among families with daughters to be married. He shows dowry "inflation" with data on marriage transactions and other individual and household information from six villages in south-central India, and from the Indian census. Rao attributes dowry inflation to the "marriage squeeze" caused by population growth, which resulted in a surplus of younger women in the marriage market. The scarce sex will be a net recipient of resources on a partner market. If men are scarce, women will transfer resources to them against mating and partnering opportunities, and vice versa. However, Edlund (2000) failed to replicate Rao's (1993) findings due to lack of data and Anderson (2000) showed that under realistic assumptions on age gaps at marriage, there were fewer women than men on the marriage market. Hence, there is little to suggest that dowry-inflation is driven by an increasing scarcity of men.

Given the importance of dowry as a social problem in India, economic literature on it is rather inadequate and there are many important questions that remain unanswered such as the nature of relationship between dowry payments and capitalist patterns of ownership. One reason for the inadequacy of economics literature on this subject is the relative unavailability of empirical data on the subject, as data on dowry (prohibited by law) is not available in conventional surveys. While this is changing, if economists are to study important but understudied topics such as this, a more qualitatively informed approach to data collection would be required. However, approaches used in existing economic literature are largely demographical which sideline the importance of socio-economic processes and institutions that led to the development of dowry. The case of dowry in India remains a unique and complex phenomenon that cannot be explained only in terms of rational utility driven frameworks of neo-classical economics. It necessitates an interdisciplinary approach, giving importance to social and institutional forces alongside market forces so that one can successfully investigate interactions

between social, cultural, and economic realms of peoples' lives. This paper will give a glimpse of this complexity by historicizing dowry in Indian context.

Origin of dowry and Status of Women: Historical Background

Providing a comprehensive picture of dowry and status of women in the contemporary era requires a complete analysis of social institutions and class/caste dynamics of the periods in which this practice arose, evolved and was nurtured. The current section touches at some of the historical roots of the practice.

Rise of Patriarchy, Caste and a new status for women

The transformation of Indian society into a patriarchal one was a slow and gradual process. Historians agree that the Rig-Vedaⁱⁱⁱ period was characterized by a pastoral society with the predominance of 'tribal' ethos that valued women's reproductive as well as household roles. As eminent historian R S Sharma puts it, 'in the Rig-Veda, people were organized not along 'Varna' lines or class but along tribal lines and women, the producer of fighters and cattle herders, were in great demand' (Sharma 1983:27). The post Rig-Vedic period however saw the slow withdrawal of women as a group from the production process with the increased dependency on plough based agriculture and formation of a caste based society and state. Even though women continued to participate in the agriculture process but their role became limited and caste formation ensured that a certain section of women did not participate in the production process at all. By the middle of the first millennium, Romila Thapar explains that the pure-polluted^{iv} dichotomy, which strictly demarcated the Brahmans from the untouchables, was firmly established (Thapar 1978: 47). The maintenance of caste purity required not only the ban on general mixing between member of different castes but also the enforcement of the rules of caste endogamy and exogamy^v (Sheel 1999:39).

Uma Chakravarti, who traces the origin of Brahmanical patriarchy in India, attributes it not only to the emergence of a fairly stratified society and the collapse of tribal economy and polity in the post-Vedic period, but also to the total control established over women's sexuality by the dominant male class during the period (Chakravarti 1993:579). Chakravarti confirms that the process of establishing control over women's sexuality in a highly stratified and closed

structure could have led to emergence of a unique nexus of caste, class, patriarchy, and the state. The structure thus formed has shaped the ideology of the upper castes for centuries and continues to provide the underpinning for beliefs and practices, undermining the role of women in society even today (Chakravarti 1993: 580).

The establishment of a patrilineal succession in kinship led to a stricter preservation of caste purity, which in turn meant that the sexual behavior of certain categories of women needed to be closely guarded (Chakravarti 1987: 23). This was the general context in which women's 'essential nature' came to be identified with their sexuality. The notion that the essential nature of women is vested in their sexuality is dealt with most explicitly by Manu^{vi}, the most prominent ideologue of the Brahmanical^{vii} system. Building up from the need to guard against even the most trifling 'evil' actions of women Manu argues that by carefully guarding one's wife a man preserves the purity of his offspring, his family, himself, and his means of acquiring merit (Laws of Manu^{viii}). Thus the safeguarding of the caste structure was achieved through the highly restricted movement of women or even through female seclusion.

The system of patriarchy as established by the Aryan-Brahmin nexus is one of the most unique and successful ideologies constructed by any patriarchal system. It is one in which women themselves controlled their sexuality through the concept of *stridharma*^{ix}, or the *pativrata*^x. The actual mechanisms and institutions of control over women's sexuality, and the subordination of women, were thus completely made invisible and with it, patriarchy was firmly established as an ideology since it was 'naturalized' (Chakravarti 1993:585). Patriarchy could thus be established firmly as an actuality and not merely as an ideology. The archaic state was clearly both a class state and a patriarchal state; in the case of India there has been a close connection between caste, class, and the state, which functioned together as the structural framework of institutions within which gender relations were organized (Chakravarti 1993:587).

This emerging complex pattern of caste, patriarchy and gender relations in society also became apparent in the marriage forms and rituals that subsequently changed. The oldest known surviving record of marriage is provided in the tenth book of Rig-Veda, which claims that the marriage ceremony was apparently devoid of any complexities of rituals. Evidence suggests that, considerable freedom was enjoyed by both men and women in choosing their partners (Bhargava

1988, Apte 1978, Indira 1955). In total, eight forms of marriage^{xi} have been recognized as per the Laws of Manu which have been summed up by Maynes into four patterns- gift of the bride, sale of the bride, and the self choice by the man and women (Maynes 1883:123). The ‘gift of the bride’ became the most favored form while the free choice was severely condemned as Talbot confirms ‘that the ‘Mahabharata’ progresses from extolling ‘gandharvaa’ (concept of love marriage) form of marriage for rulers and ‘kanyadaan’ (Brahma form of marriage which is considered the highest form) form of marriage for Brahmans to kanyadaan form of marriage for all (Sheel 1999:209). In successive historical periods, the pressure to standardize approved forms of marriage increased. The Brahmanical control and hegemony was sought to be established through a rigid caste structure, a formalized marriage system with prescription for age and choice of partner, as well as by tighter controls over women through pre-puberty marriages, economic dependence and emphasis on chastity and celibacy.

It was in the ‘*kanyadaan*’ form of marriage that the cultural and religious genesis of dowry could be traced while its institutionalization can be attributed to the social structures of caste and patriarchy. The theories focusing on the concept of ‘*kanyadaan*^{xii}’ (giving away of the daughter), and the attendant ‘*dakshina*’ (gift giving to a person of higher status) as well as ‘*stridhan*^{xiii}’ (part of the inheritance given to the daughter during marriage) as a moral basis for practicing dowry, is based on the high merit accorded to gift givers and gift giving in the ‘*shashtras*’ (the set of religious codes of Hinduism) (Fruzzetti 1990:200). Thus, by giving dowry, not only sanctity is accorded to the marriage but also the status and prestige of the bride’s family is enhanced.

Another aspect of dowry is associated with the dual nature of gift giving during a daughter’s marriage as pointed by Fruzzetti in her recent study. She points out that as both dowry and the daughter herself are being given as gift in the marriage ritual, thus it is important to differentiate between the economic aspect and sacred aspects related to the event. She traces her answers in the attitude towards women in society, which make it imperative for a daughter to be married before puberty to maintain the concept of purity associated with the gift (kanyadaan meant gift of a virgin). Further, she says, “purity of one’s women is to be maintained and the best way to maintain it is to give them away at the right age” and as a result “elaborate rituals surround the gift of the virgin and the seemingly unbalanced economics of dowry giving”

(Fruzzetti 1990:31) Dowry thus reflects the economic status of the giver while form of marriage reflects 'sacred' parts dedicated to caste and kinship principles (Fruzzetti 1990:31).

The culturally and ideologically 'preferred' *kanyadaan* form of marriage required the father to bestow the daughter in marriage with gifts and gold and also enabled earning the maximum spiritual merit for its performers. By the end of the medieval period, the process of marriage had become more rigid and pre-puberty marriages became the norm accompanied with gift giving, property transfer and hyper-gamy^{xiv} and caste restrictions. This resulted in rising compulsions for parents to arrange for an early marriage at the cost of increasing dowry thus distorting the early character of dowry as gift giving (Sheel 1999:45). Yet the practice of dowry did not presume its monstrous form until the premodern period, as the practice was restricted mostly to the upper caste population, which could afford gift giving because of their status. This was due to the fact that there were still many other forms of marriage prevalent among lower caste who did not feel forced to adopt the ways of the upper caste and women in the lower stratum of society continued to enjoy greater freedom.

M.N. Srinivas proposed that it was during the later periods that the practice became widespread due to the combined effects of the prevailing kinship structures, caste system and hypergamous marriages. These factors shaped the economic behavior of people having daughters, brought about by the 'status asymmetry' between affinal groups and hence promoted the practice of dowry in India. However, it was the increasing emulation of higher castes by the lower castes in the later decades that contributed to the legitimacy and spread of dowry (Srinivas 1984: 25).

Stridhan, Inheritance Rights and Dowry

The relationship between women's property rights and form of marriage is closely associated with the shift from tribal to agricultural society and the emergence of patriarchy. Patriarchy has been defined to indicate that "men hold power in all the important institutions of society and that woman are deprived of access of such power, it does not imply that women are either totally powerless or totally deprived of rights, influence and resources" (Lerner 1986: 239). However within a patriarchal set up sexual subordination of women was affected through

the ideology, force and economic dependence on the male head (Lerner 1986: 9). Thus property came to play an important role in characterizing the pattern of kinship and inheritance within a patriarchal set up. Property in all its form came to be regarded 'as a crucial indicator of balance of power between women and men' (Hirschon 1984:1). At this point it becomes imperative that evolution of dowry be seen in terms of not only cultural symbols and social practices of marriage as an institution but also through structural dimensions of property and gender hierarchies inherent in it (Sheel 1999:34).

Women's rights to property are closely associated with the concept of 'stridhan' as mentioned in religious texts, which, at least normatively, was inviolable to a large extent. But in most cases an unmarried girl was not entitled for any property as the women as such were considered incapable of inheriting property, as they were to be gifted away by their father (Indira 1955:159). Many historians maintain that women in ancient India enjoyed only limited legal control on the property they inherited and this control depended on religious, political, social status as well as the form of the marriage they were wedded in (Indira 1955:182). A woman's acquisition of property remained synonymous with her marriage and her control over it also depended upon the form of marriage she was wedded in indicating her caste and class status (Sheel 1999:52).

Thus two main points are discernible about the provision of stridhan. First, stridhan included the daughter's portion of inheritance in the form of landed property and other items such as jewelry and household goods transmitted to her at the time of her marriage. Even though the women's control on her inheritance remained far from complete yet women's limited control over their inherited property accorded her a say in economic decision making especially as such practices were sanctioned and legitimized by the patriarchal social order of the time. Second, stridhan formed only a part of the dowry as the dowry explicitly included gifts from the bride's father to the groom or his parents and not to the daughter alone. The gifts were mostly voluntary and were treated as tokens of respect accorded to the groom and his family members as well as a way to ensure their daughters well being in her in-law's family.

Moreover, marriage and its linkages with society and polity of the time, though sometimes conflicting in form and nature, reflected a variety of options as well as differences in

opinion. Even though the right to property for women, and marriage remained inextricably enmeshed but no single tradition existed despite the efforts of the state to homogenize the forms of marriage. Thus dowry, as an institution, remained fluid and confined to the upper castes and did not become such a pervasive and integral part of the marriage as in modern time. The question naturally arises as to what transformed dowry into its current monstrous form leading to a complete devaluation of the status of women in India?

Colonialism and Institutionalization of Dowry

Among its myriad effects on Indian society, British rule also provided the impetus for the transformation of traditional forms of gift exchange to dowry as a widely influential ideology. Sheel agrees that the customary fluidity and diversity in the institution of marriage of the ancient and medieval Indian society was most affected by the socio-political and economic changes, which accompanied the colonization of India (Sheel 1999:64). In an ethnocentric attempt to civilize the barbarian ways of the Indian population, the British drew upon their experiences from European capitalism and began defining various social, religious and cultural phenomenon in India which translated into deep repercussions for the gender relations, in addition to other aspects of Indian society (Sheel 1999:65).

British colonization of India began as early as 1600 with the establishment of the British East India Company, which existed then solely for trading purposes (Oldenburg 2002:11). Over time, however, trading officers' interests in India changed from being concentrated on trade to focusing upon conquest; in this manner, they could collect revenue not only from the trade of Indian products but also from taxing and exploiting the labor and existence of the Indian people themselves (Oldenburg 2002:11). By the early 1800's, British officials had succeeded in placing several regions of India—such as Bengal and Punjab—under imperial control. This imperialism, also known as colonialism, has remained a subject of great controversy as to its effect on the host population of colonized countries. In order to maintain both colonial presence in and control over India, British imperialists had to justify their stake there. “Simple economic and power interests, however, would not be enough as they would only resonate the arguments of those who decried imperialist ethnocentrism and exploitation; a solid ideological reason for British forces to remain in India was necessary” (Oldenburg 2002:14). For the imperial state, legitimizing colonialism on

this ideological level was most convincing only if there was a proclaimed aim to “improve the country and to bring the fruits of progress and modernity to the subject peoples” (Mann 2004:5).

As British occupation in India persisted, officials had ample opportunity to observe the predominantly Hindu culture through a European lens and incorporate facets of this culture into their reasoning for why this progress was necessary. The notion of introducing this progress became known as the ‘civilizing mission,’ one that Britain could characterize as a duty of discipline and education and not simply an economic exploit (Mann 2004:6). Dowry practices had started earlier in northern Indian provinces like Punjab because north Indian agricultural practices did not value women’s contributions as much; thus they were devalued in the marriage market (Banerjee 1999:660). In addition, the Hindu tradition of sati^{xv} or suttee, in which a widow could be burned on her husband’s funeral pyre as part of an ancient rite to protect the husband’s honor (Tschurennev 2004:71), also attracted attention from British officials who were quick both to employ it into their criticisms of Indian culture and to pass a prohibition law against it in 1829 (Tschurennev 2004:80). The most significant impact that the British occupation had with respect to spreading dowry practices, however, actually had more to do with the caste system. British ideals of societal hierarchy, steeped in a capitalist worldview, transformed the fluid Indian institutions of societal hierarchy as more visible and rigid in terms of class, caste and gender. In doing so, the British ended up creating a market for marriage - one in which the groom was valued as a ‘distinct’ marketable commodity while women’s worth was devalued making dowry an all pervasive equalizing marriage requirement.

Codification of Caste and Status of Women

The caste system is an old component of Hindu culture and a highly intricate form of social organization. The simplest way of explaining this system is that caste is based upon the principle of “social honor, attained through personal lifestyle, in which the domestic arena is crucial” (Liddle and Joshi 1985:76). However, the hierarchy of the system actually was not very well defined, especially in the upper castes, allowing local cultural interpretations, ideologies and practices to influence the local caste hierarchy (Srinivas 2002:169). It is this combination of both incomplete codification and cultural complexity inherent in the ancient caste system that allowed the British to critique and manipulate it.

To the British, the fact that a social codification set in ancient times was still being followed was in itself a sign of backwardness. The tiered nature of the caste system, although not intended by scripture to be all encompassing and fixed, went against the ‘enlightened’ western notion of egalitarianism (Srinivas 2002:174). The development of a colonial legal system by the late eighteenth century also provided for an occasion for codification of the ‘Hindu Family law.’ The purpose was the regulation of the jurisdiction of earlier forms of local laws prevalent in each province in respect to succession, inheritance, marriage, caste and religious practice (Sheel 1999: 66). The transformation of complex customs and practices into a unified Hindu Family Law entailed comprehending ancient religious literature and applying it to the modern legal framework. For this purpose Sanskrit Pundits, who were Brahmins (highest caste) by caste, were attached to the courts (Sheel 1999:67). This led to the transformation of Brahmanical or high-class Hindu family norms into universal statutory Hindu Law. Customs and norms approved by the Brahmanical code of conduct became the yardstick to validate or invalidate socio-cultural practices prevalent among other sections of the differentiated Hindu society.

‘*Brahminization*^{xvi}’ thus emerged as one of the key factors in the colonial appropriation of the whole of Hindu society. This in turn led to the codification of rules related to marriage with the institutionalization of the kanyadaan form of marriage. As evidenced in several law suits during the British period, studied by Banerjee and Sheel, it can be deduced that the court considered all Hindu marriages to be of the kanyadaan form only, on the ground that no gift or payment was received by the bride’s side in consideration of marriage. There was however, a tacit approval of one-way transaction of gifts or dowry from the bride’s side along with the gift of the daughter (Sheel 1999:73). Along with this, the notion of caste purity and pollution was also honored and inter caste marriages were severely discouraged thus exacerbating caste endogamy^{xvii} and hyper-gamy.

On the most primary level, the British, as the wielders of power in colonial India, represented themselves and were perceived by colonized Indians as a new upper “caste” (Mann 2004:2-3). The British accomplished this by merging the Hindu notion of caste with the western notion of class. Class, as opposed to caste, is not determined by lifestyle conditions but, according to the British definition, is defined primarily by property and land ownership (Joshi and Liddle 1985:77). The British, by virtue of their imperial power, were able to manipulate the

parameters of Indian land and property ownership such that the nature of land ownership changed from collective to individual, and also so that they were the ones receiving revenue from taxes (Joshi and Liddle 1985:77). The key to the British maintenance of this structure was the strategy to incorporate upper-caste, English-educated Indians into government and public positions, which not only helped them gain the support of Indians by giving them an illusion of goodwill (Liddle and Liddle 1985:78) but by doing this, the British effectively birthed a whole class of Indians administering the will of the British Empire.

The creation of this ‘administrative’ class of Indians, derived primarily from the upper castes, not only sparked a pivotal collision of caste and class ideology, but also made the institutions of caste and class—now married to each other in practice—more visible in society. This visibility evoked the trends of what; the noted Indian social scientist M. N. Srinivas called “Sanskritization” and “Westernization.” Sanskritization refers to the emulation and adoption of upper-caste lifestyles by lower castes (Srinivas 2002:200), and Westernization refers to the emulation of western—and in the colonial period, British—ideologies by non-westerners. The combination of these two social forces in response to British occupation were very powerful, as westernization fed the need to be like the modern, powerful British, and Sanskritization fed the desire to be like the upper castes, now the upper classes (Srinivas 2002:201).

The western notion of class is crucial to the overall evolution of marriage ideologies and accompanying status of women because class stresses the individual and family unit, whereas caste stresses an entire group. While individuals could change class status through acquisition of property, the status mobility of a caste occurred only slowly over time (Liddle and Joshi 1985:79). The shift from caste to class, and the great emphasis on class in the public sphere, manifested itself in the concept of marriage because marriages revolved around the transfer of an individual the bride from one family unit to another (Sheel 1999:67). And because men were perceived to be the ‘immobile’ holders of property and status, the shift towards class emphasis also heightened their value as commodities in a marriage market, as they could confer their status to their bride and at the same time devaluing the status of women (Samuel 2002:199). Marriage, then, started representing a means of upward mobility, and hyper gamy, became a strived-for ideal as it allowed for that upward mobility. This mobility, however, carried a price, as the groom’s status was so highly valued that the payment in the form of dowry escalated (Sheel

1999:24). It now becomes clear how the British attempts at modernizing Indian social organization bolstered the entrenchment of dowry into marriage; by making class and caste almost synonymous and by placing a higher social value on the two whereby the groom's status in a marriage appreciated in value, creating more pressure for the payment of dowry. This not only led to an expansion of dowry among other castes but also gave a robust institutional basis to the practice.

Restructured Property Rights and Status of Women

The colonial rule thus, without actually destroying the socio-religious institutions and caste hierarchy, changed the context in which it traditionally functioned. The empire reinforced the strong Brahmanical cultural order alongside the restructuring of economic order. As David Washbrook and others see it, the political economy of colonialism was 'Janus faced' and rested on two contradictory principles with different social implications. On the one hand it codified religious law to preserve ascribed status and on the other it promoted the emergence of free market relations in land and its produce (Washbrook 1981:655). Based on their own experience of capitalism and free markets, land was declared a marketable commodity capable of private and determinate ownership, so that fixed and settled land revenue in cash could be recovered on every plot of land on fixed dates (Oldenburg 2002: 100). This redefinition of property as a privately owned source of wealth started an unwritten future of gender and property rights in India.

While allocating land to residents it was customary for the British administration to consult the tribal or village elders, which mostly consisted of elderly male members of the village, to avoid potential conflicts (Oldenburg 2002:106). Thus the British engagement with property transactions meant that women's property rights as constituted in the concept of 'stridhan' were treated as perfunctory or relegated to the margins in the newly created system of property where only men had ownership rights. This view was also concurrent with the capitalist form of landownership in Britain where women did not own any property. For women, the gulf between the pre-colonial and postcolonial meanings of rights and entitlements was widened. This was not slow erosion but an abrupt erasure with the registration of ownership in the name of a single proprietor, making the agrarian economy more masculine. By the 1850's, the idea of

property had acquired all the refinement of a capitalist form, it was classified as inherited or self-acquired, and as movable or immovable and different conditions were attached to their disposal depending on its classification (Oldenburg 2002:147). The destruction of traditional crafts pushed large sections of impoverished artisan groups back to a total reliance on their small landholdings, and the consequent increasing pressure on land bestowed a special power and status on those who owned land (Kishwar 1999:2). This made transfer of property not only complicated but also made it less profitable to do so increasing a marked preference for sons who had a direct inheritance right. Thus on one hand this alienated women from their traditional property rights but also made the economy more masculine by allowing men to dictate, interpret, amend and change laws.

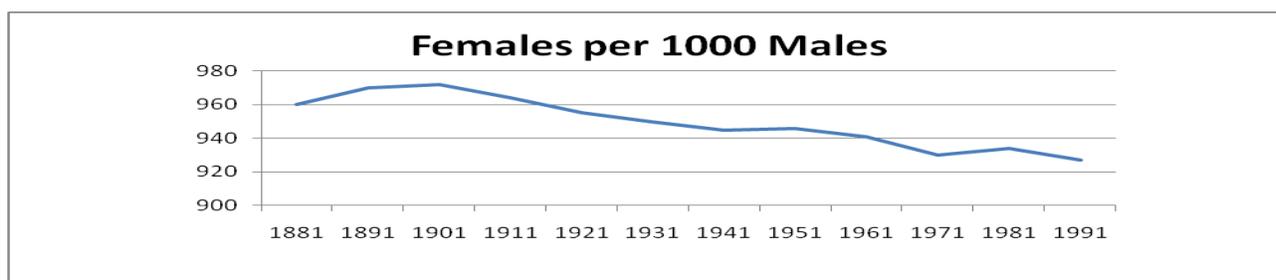
Capitalism and Patriarchy

The British Raj thus helped in welding the past patriarchal strictures and modern capitalist understanding of individual rights to create a hybrid meaning that transmuted into law. With the market becoming the determinant of individual self worth the traditional roles allotted to women were devalued. Following the establishment of new administrative machinery in the nineteenth century, women's economic worth was downgraded with the creation of new power centers outside of the traditional peasant economy. The new jobs and opportunities created by the colonial machinery provided avenues for rapid economic advancement and political power for men, in a way that working or owning small or average holdings of land never did (Kishwar 1999:5).

The job of a *patwari* (village land record keeper), a police constable or even a clerk in a government department provided men with enormous clout by virtue of the regular bribe income, in addition to his income from the land (Kishwar 1999:5). His family became more prosperous than a landholding peasant family, which did not have this other source of income, power and influence, and acquired a dominance that they could never have attained solely as peasants. This influence and income was exclusively individual, and unlike the income from land, in which the wife's labor played a visible role. Since most women continued to work in the peasant economy, while an increasing number of men were gaining access to new jobs and business opportunities, there was a dramatic increase in the economic and political clout of men. Thus the economy

grew ‘moustaches’ not only by segregating domains of ‘public sphere’ and ‘private sphere’ on gender lines but also by devaluing female roles of reproduction, nurturing and homemaking as non-pecuniary ones. This argument has been made by many economists including Folbre and Hartmann, who say that the relation between patriarchy and capitalism is one of “partnership.” They are not the same system, but they work together; they have been adapting to one another. Capitalism values individualism and “rational choice” among exchange-values while it devalues nurturance and use-values.

This highly patriarchal economic and social trend, unleashed under British rule, saw wedding expenses escalate and dowry evolving into blackmail as the preference for sons became ever more marked. Jobs in various new sectors like army and infrastructure with salaries and pensions proved to be detrimental to the worth given to the reproductive assets of women, which more than ever needed to be controlled for production of wealth generating sons. Ironically, the British started on a note to end female infanticide by decreasing preferences for sons but ended up escalating the same as evident in the sex ratio graph below. Thus British attempts at transforming patriarchy instead resulted in solidifying the traditional foundations of patriarchy with the cement of capitalism.



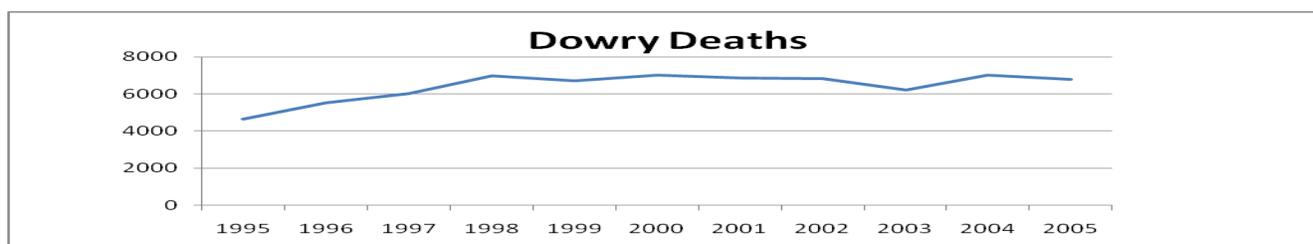
(Source: Census of India, Government of India)

After its 1947 release from colonial rule, India was not unique in its need to reconstruct its infrastructure and government as many countries faced this challenge in a post-colonial and post-World-War-II world. Whereas British colonialism was exposed as being exploitative and culminated in its end in 1947, these post-colonial modernizing forces would appear to be beneficial to India in bringing it out of its ‘third-world’ status (Oldenburg 2002:106). Major movements in India during this era from its independence to the present have included

industrialization, commercialization, and also women's movements emphasizing women's education and decrying injustices such as dowry and female feticide/infanticide. Yet at the same time, the notions of social stratification and gender relations cemented by British colonialism have silently impeded any diminishing effect these new forms of modernization could have had on the 'backward' tradition of dowry.

Dowry and Status of Women in Contemporary India

The foundation of Indian industry and commerce was laid by the British as they utilized India as a production center for war goods and materials, which began centralizing parts of the country around production hubs (Srinivas 2002b: 399). Since independence, India has both worked on developing its infrastructure and also developing its economy; in recent years India's growing prominence in the capitalist world has become clear. Yet the same progressive effect of a booming economy, however paradoxical it is to say, does not apply in the same way to dowry practices and accompanying status of women. If anything, economic progress has saturated the practice of dowry more densely with the notions of greed and materialism (Sheel 1999:101). This is evident from dowry related death data for the last decade, which shows an increasing trend.



(Sources: National Crimes Bureau, Home Ministry, Government of India)

Economic Growth, Conspicuous Consumption and Dowry: A Symbiosis

To further illustrate the significance of money and materialism in the modern demand for dowry, a 1979 news report estimated that in the Indian state of Bihar, the total sum of dowry exchanges exceeded Rs. 40 billion per year, a volume surpassing even the economy of the state government's total budget (Ghosh 1989:77). Drawing on Veblen's idea of conspicuous

consumption^{xviii}, the focus on obtaining modern material goods has everything to do with projecting both a high status and modern image. Items such as televisions, cars, and appliances are expensive, and thus having these items can confer to their owner the image of having a high socioeconomic status (Paul 1986:24). Thus, as India increasingly becomes commercially and industrially modernized, more visibility is conferred to material goods and the culturally ingrained need to look both modern and high-class, cultivates a desire for these objects. This desire in turn feeds the necessity of dowry as an easy means of obtaining those objects. Thus, economic modernization and dowry are caught in a repeating cycle with each other, with modernization feeding dowry practices and dowry reaffirming the need to be modern.

With India's biggest and fastest-growing socioeconomic class, the middle class, a class with some but not extensive economic power, obtaining high-priced commercial goods may be a high economic priority in terms of projecting an even higher status, there is not always an ability to buy all of those goods through one's own sources (Kishwar 1999:10). Dowry seals this breach between desire and resources, at least for the family of a male offering. This trend is fueled by the fact that the marriage of a daughter is still a traditional process linked to the salvation of the bride's father and stigma of not getting a daughter married at the right age is still real.

In addition to propagating a cycle of material desire, the perceived need to be 'modern' has fed a strong women's movement in India. This movement, spearheaded independently by several women's groups, has dedicated itself to pushing for gender equality and remedying the issues of dowry, female infanticide, bride burning, domestic violence, and other forms of female subversion (Liddle and Joshi 1985:85-86). A primary mechanism for these goals, since the 1960's, has been to increase the availability and quality of women's employment opportunities. Employment translates into earning potential, and since earning potential can then transfer market-based human capital value to women so it has been favorably viewed as a means of enhancing women's status (Sheel 1999:98).

To bolster the movement for women's employment, making quality education at all levels from primary to graduate school—more accessible to females has been a top priority. These initiatives for education and employment have been successful insofar as more women have attended school and gained employment. In correlation with these trends of increasing

education and employment, dowry scholars cite evidence of dowry demands decreasing when women have earning potential through their employment (Sen 1998:81-2). But the conclusion that this is really indicative of a reversal of dowry demands is still not robust. This trend, at face value, seems to suggest that the modern values of women's education and employment will erode the dowry problem; the underlying assumption being that women would be more independent, would have more say in whom they marry, and would be able to provide for their own financial protection in married life as they work. But in the absence of empirical evidence and the presence of inflationary trends in dowry, one can safely presume that this is not the case.

Even now, education and employment are not truly mutually exclusive with susceptibility to dowry demands or dowry endangerment. If this were so, then statistics released by India's Ministry of Human Resources Development would not have found that of dowry victims, 91 percent had received some form of education, and 20 percent were working women who contributed to family income (Ghosh 1989:76). Finally, a study conducted in the 1990's found that 89 percent of nonworking women surveyed viewed dowry as necessary for marriage and 87 percent of working women surveyed agreed with that viewpoint. The mere 2 percent difference hardly suggests that economic or educational empowerment of women has had any radical remedial effect on the dowry problem (Banerjee 1999:671).

Patriarchy Redefined

The persistence of dowry can also be explained by the fact that the overall process of marriage remains highly patriarchal and ingrained in traditional roots but with a modern cover. The pre-marital resume determines how high up on the social ladder a bride can marry, just as a business resume determines how high on the corporate ladder a businessperson can climb. It is important to remember in this context that even though so called 'love-marriages' are increasing in India, many marriages are still to some degree arranged, going through some level of engineering by eager matchmaking parents and relatives (Sheel 1999:100). In this process, the potential bride's and groom's sides each sift through each other's 'biodata' or collection of biological data including factors such as, but not limited to, age, height, appearance, values, religion, caste, educational level and profession (Thottam 2001:37). The best "matches" are prioritized for the bride or groom-to-be to meet; if a couple meets and consents to be married,

then a wedding will eventually take place. This matchmaking screening can take place through matrimonial advertisements placed in newspapers or magazines, word of mouth through relatives and friends, or nowadays in the most modern fashion through online matrimonial services, an option that has become most popular with young adults seeking to engineer their own marriages (Thottam 2001:38).

Given that educated, employed women are still subject to dowry, the question that is raised is: why the increased bargaining power of women in public sphere does not help in eradicating the institution of dowry. The best explanation for this phenomenon is that incorporating women into educational and professional spheres may have given women more visibility and power in those spheres, but it has not actually shaken the overarching social hierarchies, especially those inherent in marriage and dowry customs. The ideal of hyper-gamy is still very much in place, and a woman's level of education or her earning potential are like checkpoints on a resume (Sheel 1999:157). In the face of this perception, woman's higher educational and professional level is an advantage to the prospective groom both in terms of future contribution to household earnings and also to the image of modernity, the bride compensates for some of the incidental costs of her being incorporated into her husband's life (Kishwar 1999:15). A woman's educational and professional level, then, serve as a 'dowry discount'; the amount of money or material goods her family invests into a dowry may be lessened or entirely diminished, but at the same time, a woman's more qualitative attributes compensate for any perceived loss from the dowry (Paul 1986:25). Thus the pressure that women face to achieve high professional levels so that they might be able to get a higher-status groom for a lower tangible dowry payment, then, becomes a latent part of the dowry problem. M.N. Srinivas notes, "there is an implicit rule which is only very rarely broken that the boy ought to be at least as highly educated as [the bride] is. . . . A male doctor prefers to marry a female doctor, a male academic his female counterpart." (Srinivas 2002:295-6). Thus, as necessary and noble as education and employment are for women, they are employed in the marriages in a manner which propagates dowry pressures. Because of the mechanism through which marriage matchmaking precedes marital screening and the surface perception of high educational status as a desirable trait, the unseemly correlation between heightened dowry expectations and women's personal achievement is not so readily detected.

Property Rights

Another aspect of patriarchy in the current marriage system is associated with the nature of property rights for women. Even though equal property rights have been granted to Hindu women legally, the social situation is entirely different. Women inherit more often as widows than as daughters or wives. This is the main reason why the dowry given at the time of a daughter's wedding comes to be seen as an offering to her in-laws, rather than as her exclusive personal property (Kishwar 1999: 10). Through this dowry, her parents are buying a share for their daughter in her husband's family property. As put by the anthropologist TN Madan, 'dowry may have been a pure gift at ancient time but in more modern times it is a presentation to the groom's family to ensure the daughter's well being in her in-law's family. As on one hand dowry provides acceptance and goodwill to a girl in her marital families while on the other hand it also compensates for the lack of inheritance' (Madan 1975: 237).

At the time of her marriage, a woman ceases to be a full member of her natal family without simultaneously gaining full membership in her husband's family with immediate effect. The new membership often accrues to her with time as she proves her loyalty to the interests of her new family. The roots of her insecurity lie in her fragile rights in her natal family. In most traditional societies, including India, the concept of inheritance differed enormously from the modern, western concept of inheritance, which allows a person to will away property to whomever he or she chooses. Traditional societies recognize the rights of each and every member, including the handicapped or crippled, to be at least maintained from, if not exercise control over, the property. Property is primarily seen as a form of kinship wealth, not individual wealth. Dowry in this context is increasingly viewed as 1) gratitude payment to get rid of the unwanted burden of a daughter, 2) an offering made to the groom's family commensurate with their honor, that is, their social and economic standing, and 3) a lingering notion from the tradition of stridhan whereby a family feels their daughter should be given her due share in parental property; however, the payments are given not to her but to the groom's family and considered as an investment to secure a share for her in her husband's household property (Kishwar 1999:20).

Caste vs. Class

Traditionally, the culture of dowry went hand in hand with hyper gamy, thus, marrying off daughters provided an opportunity to forge alliances with influential families. However, transformation of the idea of caste and the emergence of enormous class differentiations within the same caste has changed the priorities that go into determining a suitable match. The real or potential earning capacity of the groom has come to occupy a far more important place in deciding marriage alliances than the traditional notions of social status or higher sub-caste status. Thus, sub-caste and caste boundaries are being increasingly replaced, especially among the urban communities, by the modern and far broader category of class. Higher dowries now go to grooms with a higher earning capacity even if they are of lower social or sub-caste status. This, when added to the spread of geographic mobility in urban areas, makes marriage increasingly a market based phenomena where dowry act as the price. Marriages are increasingly being arranged through matrimonial ads and other modern institutions of match making where families largely unknown to each other enter into marriage alliances. This anonymity has contributed a great deal to downgrading the importance of non-economic factors such as goodwill, the personal qualities of the groom as a gentleman, and the social respect commanded by the family.

Economic reforms of the 1990s have not blunted son preference or done away with discrimination against girls and women. These have on the contrary intensified as seen mainly in the continued devaluation of women in spite of their increasing contribution; the perception that they are an economic burden, and in an intensification of daughter non preference. Daughter non-preference is strengthened, most, by dowry expenses, and in the light of huge dowries, costs of bringing up girls suddenly appear wasteful, making daughters an economic liability.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

This paper has attempted to draw upon a long and wide canvas, traversing from ancient to contemporary time and has tried to capture the various dimensions of dowry and accompanying status of women in India. In examining dowry through historical and socio economic lenses, we comprehend the dynamic nature of this phenomenon as well as the larger question of subordinated status of women in Indian society in general and in the marriages in particular. It

also posits that the origin and growth of dowry cannot be comprehended in isolation without looking at it in an integrated framework constituted of tradition, capitalism and colonialism.

The foray into historical backgrounds of dowry revealed some distinctive patterns of its origin and growth. First, dowry was not part of marriage prior to the gradual establishment of settled plough based agricultural economy, establishment of caste system and hierarchical political structures. These changes coupled with Brahmanical patriarchy led to drastic changes in gender stratification among the upper castes where women were systematically co-opted for the perpetuation of the caste system. Despite the origins of dowry in the pre colonial period, it was the colonization of India and socio-political and economic changes which accompanied it that affected the customary fluidity and diversity in the institution of marriage of the ancient and medieval Indian society and institutionalized it with the cement of capitalism. Moreover, the postcolonial period of socio-political and economic reforms have not only failed to address the problem of dowry but have fueled it into the monstrous form that it has taken today. Anti dowry bills and property right reforms have remained largely ineffective in solving the problem till date. In fact, encouraged by market liberalization, opulence has become a celebrated state to be pursued, which has further aided the commercialization of dowry. Thus, economic modernization and dowry are caught in a repeating cycle with each other, with modernization feeding dowry practices and dowry reaffirming the need to be modern.

Even today marriage remains largely traditional garbed in the modernity of Internet matrimonial sites. An important aspect that comes to the fore in this discussion is the status of women in general and their bargaining power within the family. Marriage as a process remains largely gender stratified with women having little bargaining capacity. In reinforcing the image that they are an economic burden, there is an indispensability of marriage, their dependent status, the practice of dowry maintains and reproduces the devaluation of women. In spite of recent stricter regulations, the problem has continued pointing out to inadequacies in the law itself and to the need for more broad-based efforts. The law is rooted in a patriarchal framework which views women as economically dependent, vulnerable and in need of protection, which is provided by a familial setup. Another reason why any attempt that addresses only dowry will remain ineffective is that most women do not own or control their dowries. This in itself is symptomatic of the ubiquitous bias against women that excludes them from ownership, control

and decision-making about productive resources. Thus dowry in India remains a complex socio economic phenomenon having a substantive impact on the lives of women not only in terms of their status in society but their well being in general.

In conclusion, dowry in all its multi-dimensionality needs to be tackled at various levels. There is a need for both long-term measures for socio economic reforms as well as short-term life saving tactics. To provide immediate life saving mechanism there is need for a professional support system, which can provides sanctuary for dowry victims, and also prepare them for an independent life. The long term plans need to aim at changing societal attitudes towards women and empowering them. A good starting point could be educational programmes targeted at increasing gender awareness amongst the coming generation to be run at school and college level, with the aim of mobilizing the younger cohort to question the patriarchal structure ingrained in the idea of marriage. Moreover there is a need for stricter property right regime to improve the economic status of daughters as well as fortified enforcement of dowry laws as an effective deterrent to the practice of dowry and bride burning. Such practical steps along with the mass communication and educational programmes to publicize anti-dowry ideology may trigger a much-needed initiative in addressing the eminent problem of dowry in India and lead us to a more equitable society.

End Notes

ⁱ Beginning of the anti-dowry movement was in the 1970s and 1980s. The movement appeared to lose steam in the 1990s as women's organizations dealt with a spate of other issues, but problems related to dowry continued to multiply. The women's movement in India is a rich and vibrant movement which has taken different forms in different parts of the country. Some of organizations currently involved in anti dowry movement are All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), All India Women's Congress (AIWC), Anti-arrack movement etc. along with these several NGO's are also involved

ⁱⁱ The survey covered 10,000 respondents from 16 states and Delhi.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Rig-Veda (compound of rig "praise, verse" and Veda "knowledge") is an ancient Indian collection of sacred Sanskrit hymns. It is counted among the four canonical sacred texts Hinduism known as the Vedas. Some of its verses are still recited as Hindu prayers, at religious functions and other occasions, putting these among the world's oldest religious texts in continued use

^{iv} In India, caste forms the main element of Social structure. This system consists of hierarchically arranged, in-marrying groups that were traditionally associated with a specific occupational specialization. Interrelations between castes arose out of the need of one caste for the goods or Services of another. These relations are governed by codes of purity and pollution. The structural distance between castes is measured in terms of purity and pollution; higher castes are pure in their occupation, diet, and life-style while lower caste pollute making them untouchables. Caste rules govern inter-caste relations, determining the social and physical distance that people of different castes have to maintain from each other and their rights and obligations toward others.

^v Endogamy refers to the practice of marrying within the same caste while exogamy refers to the practice of marrying outside one's caste

^{vi} Manu in the Indian Mythology is the first man and the legendary author of an important Sanskrit code of law, this book. It is also called Manu Samhita and Manu-smriti. The name Manu is associated with "man, male", and sometimes to "think". In Hinduism Manu is known as the first king. Rulers of medieval India traced their genealogy back to him.

^{vii} a term commonly used to denote a system of religious institutions originated and elaborated by the Brahmans (the highest caste in Hinduism)

^{viii} The Laws of Manu (Manu Smriti) from somewhere between 200 BCE and 200 CE is considered the oldest and one of the most important texts of this genre. Scholars are now quite well agreed that the work is an amplified recast in verse of a "Dharma-sutra", no longer extant, that may have been in existence as early as 500 BCE. Manusmriti (Laws of Manu) is considered by some Hindus to be the law laid down for Hindus.

^{ix} It's a women's duty described as traditional conduct, observances, vocational and spiritual patterns which bring spiritual fulfillment and societal stability. Characterized by modesty, quiet strength, religiousness, dignity and nurturing of family. Notably, she is most needed and irreplaceable as the maker of the home and nurturer of children.

^x Pati means husband and Vrat denotes vow. A woman who staunchly remains loyal to her husband is a Pativrata. The Ramayana (Hindu religious book) mentions that an ideal Pativrata will not see another man other than her husband even in her dreams. In addition a Pativrata should serve her husband as she would serve and worship God, even if the husband is blind, diseased, poor or impotent.

^{xi} The eight types are: Brahma, daiva, arsa, prajapatya, asura, gandharva, raksasa and pisaca. Where Brahma is the highest form where parents of the girl make a gift of their daughter (kanyadaan) to the groom. Marrying a girl to an rtvik (priest) during a sacrifice is called "daiva". In arsa form the girl is married off to an old sage because the parents could not celebrate her marriage according to the Brahma rite at the right time. In prajapatya also there is no trading and kanyadaan is a part of it as in the Brahma ceremony but it is inferior to Brahma form as the father of the daughter goes in search of the groom. In the asura type the groom is in no way a match for the girl, but her father or her relatives receive a good deal of money from the man who forces them to marry her to him. The gandharva type is the "love marriage". In the raksasa form the groom battles with the girl's family, overcomes them and carries her away. In raksasa, though violence is done to the girl's family, the marriage itself is not against her wish.

^{xii} Kanyadaan which means gifting away a virgin has been derived from the Sanskrit words Kanya which mean a virgin and Daan which mean donation. Kanya Daan is a very significant ritual performed by the father of the bride in presence of a large gathering that is invited to witness the wedding. The father pours out libation of sacred water symbolizing the giving away of his virgin daughter to the bride groom, who is a form of god.

^{xiii} Stridhan was part of the inheritance right of the women transferred to her during the time of her marriage.

^{xiv} Hyper-gamy refers to the practice of seeking a spouse of equal or higher socioeconomic or caste status than oneself

^{xv} Sati was a funeral practice among some Hindu communities in which a recently-widowed woman would either voluntarily or by use of force and coercion immolate herself on her husband's funeral pyre.

^{xvi} Brahmanization is the process of applying rules and norms practiced by Brahmins(upper caste) as universal laws to all Hindus

^{xvii} Endogamy is the practice of marrying within the same caste.

^{xviii} Conspicuous consumption is spending excessively on goods and services acquired mainly for the purpose of displaying income or wealth, as such display serves as a means of attaining or maintaining social status

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