

## DOWRY AND MARRIAGE IDEOLOGY IN MODERN-DAY INDIA: TRADITION BORNE *FROM* MODERNIZATION

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### Introduction

At a New Delhi, India wedding in May 2003, a young computer engineer named Nisha Sharma used her cell phone to report her would-be husband to the police just moments before her wedding was to begin. His crime—as delineated by India's anti-dowry legislation—was demanding an even higher dowry than had been negotiated before. Observing her stressed father, who would have had to face the shame of not being able to marry off his daughter because of a dowry disagreement, Nisha decided to suppress the unjust dowry demand. She did not know it at the time, but this simple act not only would save her from a marriage that she was afraid could threaten her own well-being, but it would also transform her into an instant feminist celebrity, glorified by mainstream news reports both in India and around the world (“Till Death Do Us Part” 2003 and Brooke 2003). It is important to note, however, that despite the glorification of this action, dowry practices did not stop. The Indian public's outpour of praise and relief for Nisha's action, then, is indicative that Nisha's justifiable boldness is an extreme aberration from the norm; the fact that Nisha's action was newsworthy tapped into a collective cultural anxiety of dowry as a cultural flaw. Dowry as this “cultural flaw” has been the hinge of feminist critiques of Indian society as it has been linked to trends in female infanticide, bride-burning, unequal sex ratios in census statistics, and female subversion overall.

Despite the visibility of these correlations between dowry and female subversion, dowry remains so well-entrenched into marriage ideology, a recent survey revealed that 75 percent of Indian women do not believe that marriage is possible without the payment of a dowry (“Till Death Do Us Part” 2003). Such a statistic taken in combination with Nisha's case reveals some complex conundrums. First, dowry is often associated with terms such as “conservative” and “repressed”, yet Sharma—with her cell phone and highly-demanding career path—resembled the western image of the modernized woman and her family was *still* posed to pay a hefty dowry. Additionally, the

media reports, the popular response to the media, and anti-dowry legislation all indicate an outward condemnation of dowry, but at the same time, the practice of dowry exchange continues to flourish. It seems ironic and confounding, then, that at the same time India is becoming increasingly modernized, the seemingly “outdated,” prosaic tradition of dowry has gripped marriage ideology so that such a large percentage of modern-day women believe it is necessary. An examination of dowry’s history, however, reveals that this paradox is neither unusual nor only a recent social phenomenon. Modernizing forces—namely colonialism, commercialism, and women’s movement—have been at work in India for years, and they would seem to suppress such primitive-appearing dowry practices. Contrary to popular wisdom, however, close examination of these modernizing forces does not support modern dowry practice as an outgrowth of tradition that modernization simply failed to remedy. Rather, dowry has evolved *into* a tradition—a tradition that has been all cultivated, entrenched into marriage ideology, and exacerbated *by* modernization.

### **A Note on Modernity and Cultural-religious Infusion**

Throughout this discussion of modernizing forces as the propagating forces of dowry, it is important to keep in mind the meaning of the term “modern.” On one level, it is used in a contemporary sense, describing the practice of dowry “today” and the state of Indian culture “today.” Yet there is also an underlying context of cultural relativity as the term “modern” also originates from a western context and carries the implication of advancement and progressiveness. Indeed, the making of so-called “modern India” could not have been complete without the infusion of western forces.

It should also be noted that even though dowry has its origins in Hindu ideologies, and the evolution of dowry practice—as will be argued—has been partially dependent upon the Hindu notion of caste, the interlocking nature of culture within India has allowed dowry ideology to permeate even other the other prominent religious groups—Muslims and Christians—in India (Samuel 2002:202-203). This cultural permeability lends even greater magnitude to the dowry phenomenon as it makes dowry an Indian phenomenon and not just an isolated Hindu phenomenon.

### **Almost Dowry, But Not Quite: Marriage Ideologies and the Roots of Dowry**

The term “dowry” is recognized as and applied to what a woman brings into a marriage, whether it is money, the prospect of financial gain through her pro-

fession, material objects, or even the amount spent by the bride's family on the wedding celebrations (Menski 1998:16). This assortment of possessions and wealth transferred to the groom's family has attracted much attention in the past few decades because of the dramatic increase in newly married women being killed by their in-laws, husbands, or a co-conspiring combination of the two, over botched dowry transfers or negotiations. Characteristics of the ill-arrived reasoning on behalf of the groom's side include perceptions that the bride and her family still owed more to the husband's family, or that the pre-wedding dowry negotiations had not been met. Even if those negotiations have been met, the groom's family can still make further demands even after the wedding—or right before the wedding, as was done in Nisha Sharma's case—placing a lot of strain on the bride's family to meet the demand both in order to protect both the family honor and the bride's marriage.

Such explicit demands and negotiations are the central concern of what is called the "new" dowry problem (Sheel 1999:2). The practice of making outright material demands during a wedding is a recent social phenomenon, increasing in magnitude only in the past two centuries as compared to thousands of years of Hindu marriages. In Hindu tradition—Hinduism being the predominant religion in India—marriage is specified as one of twelve life sacraments (Paul 1985:1). Instead of being up to individual choice, marriage is an essential religious rite for an individual to be considered a proper Hindu. Dowry and bride-price practices, in contrast, are not prescribed or even mentioned by Hindu scriptures, which condemn the notion of a father becoming a "seller of his offspring" by engaging in monetary exchanges for his daughter's wedding (Paul 1985:3).

Rather, dowry in its earliest roots rested within a more informal context of gift exchange during a wedding. "Dowry" in this context had not yet been coined as a term or identified as a problem. It instead existed as a *voluntary* custom (Sheel 1999:18), one with spiritual and symbolic weight. This symbolism derived from the defining foundation of a marriage: the *kanyadan*, or the giving-away of a heavily-ornamented and elaborately-dressed bride by her natal family to that of the groom (Diwan 1995:20). In this manner, the bride herself represented a gift. In addition, the father of the bride would also give *varadakshina*, additional cash or gifts, to the groom as a sign of affection and honor. Friends and relatives of the bride also often sent her into her new life as a married woman with a *stridhan*, a gift given to the bride that, like *varadakshina*, was intended to serve as a gift rendered out of love and affection. It also served in the capacity of an economic security

blanket for the bride in case she and her husband went through financial difficulties, or, in the worst case, their marriage dissolved (Paul 1986:6).

Such gift-giving at the time of a wedding does not seem unusual; rather, these traditions seem to be well-meaning rituals that, if anything, would lend the bride some economic power within the marriage. After all, her parents and relatives bestowed these gifts on a voluntary basis, so it would appear that the groom, if anyone, would be under pressure as his in-laws were gauging how *much* they liked him and how much they wanted to give him. It would also appear that the bride, entering marriage with her *stridhan*, would wield a definite amount of power, especially because in Hindu mythology and the Laws of Manu, a Sanskrit code of law formulated c. 200 C.E. (“Laws of Manu” 2004), mandated that a woman’s property belonged solely to her and that not even in death could a man take over her property. The Laws of Manu in this context granted women complete economic independence.

Yet paradoxically, the same provision for a woman’s sexual independence was hardly made. The Laws of Manu also stated that women are “never fit for independence,” and to delineate the extent of this helplessness, the code specifies that over the course of a woman’s life, “her father protects [her] in childhood, her husband protects [her] in youth, and her [sons] protect her in old age” (Oldenburg 2002:20). It is not difficult to imagine how the force of this particular code would have superseded any economic independence the Laws of Manu may have granted women. Given that under this codified law, a woman could be seen strictly as an object passed from father to husband, the other objects—her *stridhan*—that accompanied her could be assumed to pass from father to husband as well. This code also established a notion of women as mobile units, who were passed along a series of men, who were immobile and thus in the better position to obtain and maintain property (Oldenburg 2002:20). If the husband was to be the protector, then a woman’s *stridhan* could only have so much power in doing any protecting, and any property she brought into the marriage would automatically be absorbed by her husband’s power.

But why would brides’ families continue subscribing to these customs if they inevitably favor only the groom? To further explain both how the *varnadakshina* and *stridhan* became entangled into a practice of dowry, and why a girls’ parents would succumb to any obligation to present these gifts—especially in the modern context of dowry—the concept of marriage as a “market” exchange must also be considered. For example, in rural areas, which covered much of India prior to the advent of modernizing forces, a great deal of value was placed on women’s work because in agriculturally-

based societies, women were recognized for being able to contribute to the maintenance of that agriculture; women's domestic capabilities were as—if not more—essential to the survival of agriculture as were men's capabilities. In these regions, dowries were superseded by bride-price—in which the groom's family compensated the bride's family for taking away an important economic unit (Banerjee 1999:659-660).

The converse would be true in more urbanized, less agrarian regions. In more conventional patriarchal marriage—the type exemplified by the limitations on women put forth by the Laws of Manu and the type more popularly imagined as characteristic of Indian tradition—the husband is the protector and the one with market-specific human capital, which requires special skill and carries earning potential. By contrast, a bride only has what is called household-specific market capital, which requires only minimal skill and carries no earning potential for the household (Sen 1998:82). In this model, women's work is devalued and women become economically dependent upon their husbands; the value of a woman's contributions to a household is comparatively less than the cost “imposed” upon the husband to sustain her in that household.

This economic model of marriage in place, *stridhan* and *varnadakshina* became entwined into serving as dowry, functioning as a form of compensation paid by the bride's family for the groom's assumption of economic responsibility for the daughter (Banerjee 1999:662). It is important to recognize that as such, the transfer of dowry also reflects a perception on the bride's family's behalf of the groom as a valuable and scarce material “good” or commodity.

This discussion of dowry roots and marriage ideology should make several points clear. First, and most importantly, dowry was not an ancient or religiously-sanctioned tradition; for much of Indian history, it only weakly existed where the parameters of *stridhan* and *varnadikshan* became blurred. Additionally, these customs of *stridhan* and *varnadikshan* were not practiced by all strata of society; only in non-agrarian dwellings in which a high value would have been placed upon a groom were these customs practiced. And to further define who practiced these “groom-price” customs, because the gifts of *stridhan* and *varnadakshina* carried such high costs, they were practiced primarily by upper-class and royal families for a number of years (Sheel 1999:20).

Given these ideologies, and knowing that dowry was limited in scope and practice, one must wonder how dowry practices came to manifest themselves in such a frenzied proportion in modern times. In thinking of dowry practices as backwards and prosaic, it may also seem odd that dowry in its incipient

form was at first an upper-class phenomenon; conventional thinking makes it easier to assign such a supposedly outdated, seemingly anachronistic practice to lower classes. The question then becomes one of how dowry practices diffused across regions and classes to all parts of Indian society, and also how dowry became so well-entrenched into modern marriage ideology and tradition.

### **The Transformation Begins: Colonialism**

Among its myriad effects on Indian society, British rule would be the original impetus for this transformation of dowry ideology. 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 the decades, however, trading officers' interests in India changed from being concentrated on trade to focusing upon conquest (Oldenburg 2002:11); 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. By the 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, was—and still is—the subject of criticism for its inherent ethnocentrism towards and exploitation of the “host” countries. Even though Britain in the nineteenth century was very clearly becoming an imperial power as its list of colonies grew, a still-significant population existed in the British Parliament and the public that was skeptic and critical of imperialism (Oldenburg 2002:11). 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.

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 western lens and incorporate facets of the culture into its 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). To rationalize the civilizing mission, the British found evidence of

“backwardness” in Indian culture in places such as British-occupied Punjab, a region that had a uniquely well-established practice of dowry, which already had visibly spawned the practice of female infanticide (Oldenburg 2002:47). 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). Like this dowry practice and female infanticide, the Hindu tradition of *sati* or *suttee*, in which a widow could be made to burn 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 implement it into their criticisms of Indian culture and to pass a prohibition law against it in 1829 (Tschurennev 2004:80). The most significant impact British occupation had with respect to *spreading* dowry practices, however, actually had more to do with the caste system. British ideals of class and societal hierarchy transformed Indian structures of hierarchy, making class not only a more visible institution but also conceptualizing it as a goal. In doing so, the British would create the proper marriage market conditions described before—ones in which the groom is seen as a commodity so that dowry would pervade marriage ideology.

The caste system is an ancient part of Hindu culture and a highly intricate form of social organization. The simplest form of explaining this system—which could otherwise require books to fully outline—is that caste is based upon the principle of “social honor, attained through personal lifestyle, in which the domestic arena is crucial” (Joshi and Liddle 1986:70). Caste was intended in Hinduism as a form of reminding one to live a virtuous life so that upon death he or she could, in the Hindu perception of reincarnation, be reborn into a higher caste and live an even more virtuous life (Srinivas 2002c:169). The hierarchy of the system actually is 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 was likely the caste system’s combination of both incomplete codification and cultural complexity that allowed the British to critique and manipulate it. As with *sati* and infanticide, the British sent ethnographers to examine caste closely for evidence of how it could be incorporated into the civilizing mission (Waligora 2004:145). 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 2002d:174). At the same time the British out-

wardly condemned the caste system and spread the notion of a “caste-ridden society” (Waligora 2004:141), however, the “divide and conquer” ideology made the divisions created by the caste system beneficial to British occupation, as it helped stave off collective uprising (Waligora 2004:143).

As British officials’ critiques of the caste system helped justify their presence, their manipulation of the system helped strengthen their rule. This manipulation occurred on several levels. On the most primary level, the British, as the wielders of power in colonial India, represented themselves and were perceived by colonized Indians as being a sort of new upper “caste” (Mann 2004:2-3). But how could non-Hindus engage in this caste system? 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—though they may be indicative of class—but, according to the British definition, is defined primarily by property and land ownership (Joshi and Liddle 1986:70). 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 1986:70-71). The key to the British maintenance of this structure was the “divide and conquer” strategy; to gain the support of Indians and give the illusion of goodwill, British officials incorporated upper-caste, English-educated Indians into government and public positions (Joshi and Liddle 1986:71). By doing this, the British effectively birthed a whole class of Indians administering the will of the British empire, feeding an illusion that British imperialism was not as pervasive as critics could argue it to be.

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 highly visible in society. This visibility evoked the trends of what noted Indian social anthropologist M. N. Srinivas called “Sanskritization” and “westernization.” Sanskritization refers to the emulation and adoption of upper-caste lifestyles by lower castes (Srinivas 2002e: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 would be very powerful, as westernization fed a need to be like the “modern,” powerful British, and Sanskritization fed the desire to be like the upper castes, now the upper classes.

How do these forces relate to marriage ideology? The western notion of class is crucial to the evolution overall marriage ideologies because class stresses

the individual and family unit, whereas caste stresses an entire group. Individuals can change class status through acquisition of property, whereas the status mobility of a caste occurs only slowly over time (Joshi and Liddle 1986:70). The shift towards class over caste, and the great emphasis of class in the public sphere, manifested itself in marriage ideology because marriage revolves around the transfer of an *individual*—the bride—from one family unit to another. And because men were perceived to be the “immobile” holders of property and status, the shift towards class emphasis would heighten their value as commodities in a marriage market, as they could confer their status to their bride (Samuel 2002:199). Marriage, then, would represent a means of upward mobility, and hypergamy—the practice of marrying into a higher social strata (Sheel 1999:23)—in this context would become a strived-for ideal since it would allow for that upward mobility. This mobility, however, carries a price; when the groom’s status is so highly valued, dowry pressure escalates (Sheel 1999:24). It now becomes clear how British attempts at modernization of Indian social organization—or the façade of this attempt—bolstered dowry into marriage ideology; by making class and caste almost synonymous and placing a higher social value on the two, the groom’s status in a marriage also appreciated in value, creating more pressure for the payment of dowry.

### **Post-Colonial Commercialization and Modernization: Post-Independence to Present**

After its 1947 release from colonial rule, India was not unique in needing to reconstruct its infrastructure and government; many countries faced this challenge in a post-colonial and post-World-War-II world. Major movements in India during this era—from its independence to the present—have included industrialization, commercialization, and also a women’s movement emphasizing women’s education and decrying injustices such as dowry demands and female infanticide. Whereas British colonialism became exposed as being exploitative and culminated in its 1947 ejection, these post-colonial modernizing forces—particularly women’s education—would appear to be beneficial to India in bringing it out of its “third-world” status. Indeed, many statistics show that these forces *have* helped the country’s economic prosperity and colonial recovery. Yet at the same time, the notions of social stratification cemented by British colonialism have silently impeded any diminishing effect these new forms of modernization would presumably have on the “backwards” tradition of dowry.

The foundations of Indian industry and commerce, were, perhaps as expected, laid by the British. During World War II, the British utilized India as an arse-

nal and 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 grown clear. Gross domestic product (GDP) gains—which are often implemented as an indicator of a nation's economy—before 1990 were less than 1 percent per year; since then, with the advent of multiple global corporations and also a number of Indian entrepreneurial efforts, that figure has risen and stabilized at 5 percent annually (Mukherji 2002:33). Trade reforms since the 1980's have allowed for a foreign investment of over 2.5 billion dollars (U.S.) into India's economy, twenty times more than before those reforms (Mukherji 2002:50). As evidence of the growing market sector and availability of jobs, poverty in India—while still existent—has dropped to 26 percent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, down from 36 percent in 1993 (Mukherji 2002:34)

This vast economic boom and investment of capital into India's economy has certainly been beneficial to the nation, which only half a century ago was constructing itself from the remnants of an imperial world. Yet the same progressive effect of a booming economy, however paradoxical it is to say, does not apply to dowry practice. If anything, economic progression has even *more* deeply saturated into dowry practices the notions of greed and materialism, which are so readily identified by critics as the hinges of backwardness in modern-day dowry.

Evidence of the new obsession with material goods and projection of status through those materials is perhaps best illustrated by the Nisha Sharma case, a story which likely became popular for its ability both to connect with dowry-practicing society and also to illustrate effectively so many facets of dowry practice. Nisha's groom approached her father before the wedding ceremony with a demand for \$25,000 (U.S.), a large sum of money regardless of whether it is viewed in terms of American dollars or Indian rupees. This demand came *after* Nisha's father had already bought for the groom's family a luxury sports car, two flat-screened televisions, two refrigerators, two air conditioners, two ovens, and two home-theatre sets, among more ("Till Death Do Us Part" 2003; Brooke 2003). Clearly an emphasis was placed on very technological, modern material goods; the \$25,000 that the groom would have received had Sharma's father succumbed to the demand presumably would have gone towards the purchase of other commercial goods. To further illustrate the significance of money and materialism to the modern dowry demand, a 1979 news report estimated that in the Indian

state of Bihar, the total sum of dowry exchanges exceeded 40 billion Rupees (Rs.) per year, a volume of money surpassing even the Bihar state government's total budget (Ghosh 1989:77).

The focus on, if not obsession with, obtaining these 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). Possession of these goods, by virtue of their very "technologically advanced" nature, also lends the owner an image of modernity. Yet, when India's biggest and fastest-growing socioeconomic class is 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, but actually *having* the means to buy all of those goods may not be a reality. This conundrum reflects the very basis of economic theory: unlimited desires in the face of limited resources.

Dowry seals this breach between desire and resources, at least for the family of a male, offering perhaps the best explanation for why dowry anxieties have consumed the middle classes especially. If a man and his natal family know that commercial goods and money can be demanded as dowry, then, if their desire for these objects is deep enough, they presumably will make that demand. And lest he be betrothed to another Nisha Sharma, the bride's family will likely meet his demands. Thus, as India becomes increasingly commercially and industrially modernized, more visibility is conferred to material goods. Those material goods then are associated with notions of modernity and upper-class status, and the culturally ingrained need to look—and feel—both modern and high-class cultivates a desire for these objects. This desire in turn feeds the necessity of dowry as a means of obtaining those objects, and obtaining those objects only reaffirms the notions of material wealth as a signifier of status. 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.

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 women's movement, spearheaded by several independent 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 (Joshi and Liddle 1986:17-18). A primary mechanism for

these goals since the 1960's has been increasing the availability and quality of women's employment opportunities. Employment translates to earning potential, and earning potential would then transfer market-based human capital value to women. Employment thus has been favorably viewed as a means of enhancing women's status (Desai 1996:98). To bolster the movement for women's employment, making quality education on all levels—from primary school to graduate school—more accessible to females has also been a top priority.

These initiatives for education and employment have been successful insofar more women have attended school and gained employment. In 1946, only 37 females attended primary school for every 100 males, and only 10 females attended university for every 31 males. As of 1974, those figures had risen to 62 females for every 100 males in primary school and 31 females for every 100 males at the university level (Ghosh 1989:191). As far as employment, Indian government has instituted laws to help ensure equal treatment of women in the workplace, such as the Equal Remuneration Act of 1975 (Ghosh 1989:215). 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 is this really indicative of a reversal of dowry demands? This trend on its face seems to suggest that the modern values of women's education and employment will erode at the dowry problem; the assumption lying underneath is that women would be more independent, have more input on whom they marry, and be able to provide their own financial protection in married life as they work. Yet 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). Also consider that Nisha Sharma is a computer engineer, yet her family had been ready to dole out thousands of American dollars' worth of goods (Brooke 2003). Finally, a study conducted in the 1990's found that 89 percent of non-working 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).

Given that educated, employed women are still subject to dowry, the question that is raised is why it *appears* otherwise. 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 overall *social* hierarchies, especially not those inherent in marriage and dowry customs. The ideal of hypergamy is still very much in place, and a woman's level of education or her earning potential are like checkpoints on a resume. This 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—marriages in which the bride and groom both meet and consent to marry without any outside assistance—are increasing in India, many marriages are still to some degree arranged, going through some level of engineering by eager matchmaking parents and relatives. In this process, the potential bride's and groom's sides each sift through each other's "biodata," or a collection of biological data including factors such as, but not limited to, age, height, appearance, values, religion, caste, educational level and profession. 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 ads placed in newspapers or magazines, word of mouth through relatives and friends, or nowadays—in the most modern fashion—by computer through online matrimonial services, an option which has become most popular with young adults seeking to engineer their own marriages (Thottham 2001).

Having examined a popular *mechanism* through which modern marriages are arranged, an explanation can be offered for why the perception that dowry demands decrease with women's initiatives is a false correlation. If potential brides and grooms are screened against each other, presumably each side is screening against the types of bride or groom that would not be desirable. For the bride-to-be, the most desirable groom will preferably be the one of higher social status and potential as a good provider. For the groom-to-be, the most preferable bride will be of the same social status or at least a slightly lower social status, since a heavy stigma is attached to grooms marrying "up" social strata. The consideration of a potential bride's education and career, however, is most interesting in this whole process. If a potential bride is well-educated, not only does she gain earning potential and the image of modernity, but the *groom* and his family could also make

the claim to being modern by incorporating such a “Renaissance woman” into their family.

The face of this perception by the groom’s family, it is no wonder that dowry demands of educated and employed women would appear to be decreasing. Because a woman’s higher educational and professional level is an advantage to the prospective groom both in terms of contribution to household earnings and also the image of modernity, the bride compensates for some of the incidental costs of her being incorporated into her husband’s life. 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, or “price-tag” for the groom (Paul 1986:25). The pressure that women receive to achieve high professional levels so that they might be able to get a higher-status groom for a lower tangible dowry payment, then, is a latent part of the dowry problem.

Additionally, for the cases in which dowry is still paid, the perception that the payment is somehow lesser than what it would normally be is fed by the matchmaking process itself. Because the groom’s and the bride’s families are “screening” prospective brides and grooms, respectively, and because each side carries a notion of the ideal bride or groom in this screening process, the eventual match should not pose any major surprises to either side. In other words, if a prospective bride’s family “aims” to marry her to a certain type of man and screens specifically for this man, then the dowry he and his family demand in most cases should not be a major shock; it is logical that when the bride’s family sets a standard for what type of husband they are seeking, they make a provision for what kind of dowry payment could be commanded as a result. This diminished shock factor is also fed by the fact that even though there could be some differential in class status between the bride and the groom, that differential is likely to be small by virtue of the increasing inability to pay dowry if there were a large difference in class status. The small differential in class status, interestingly, is also accompanied by a small differential in educational and professional status as well. As Indian social anthropologist M.N. Srinivas noted, “there is an implicit rule which 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 2002a:295-6).

Thus, as necessary and noble as education and employment are for women, they are employed in the marriage market in a manner which propagates dowry pressures. Ironically, it is by virtue of their “modernizing” effect that they are so integrated into matchmaking and dowry considerations. Because of the mechanism through which marriage matchmaking proceeds—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.

### **Conclusion**

Dowry is an institution laden with mismatch between ideology and practice, between expectations and realities. It is decried publicly in response to news media, yet its practice continues. State law—the Anti-Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961—forbids it, but it is a *de facto* cultural law. This was certainly evidenced when Nisha Sharma utilized that law in the arrest of her would-be groom; she gained the public spotlight *because* it was so unusual for anyone to actually implement that “modern” state intervention. Finally, dowry appears to be a relic of backwards tradition, unmollified by modernization; instead, modernization has only transformed it *from* a less virulent form and exacerbated it into a cultural epidemic. If nothing else, the evolution of dowry practice over time serves as a reminder that observing the world through western eyes can prove to be extremely hazardous to our understanding of history and culture. A tradition may appear to be an inherent and inextricable quality of an entire culture, but as witnessed with dowry—culture, tradition, and ideology are very malleable institutions. When global forces are in motion, an assessment of culture and tradition must not be made from a modern, popularized glance.

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