

J. P. Naik Memorial Lecture, 1983

SOME REFLECTIONS ON
DOWRY

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PREFACE

I thank the Centre for Women's Development Studies and its authorities for doing me the honour of inviting me to deliver the J. P. Naik Memorial Lecture for 1983.* Naik was an unusual human being, and during the twelve years or so when he was the Member-Secretary of the Indian Council of Social Science Research, he left a decisive impact not only on the organization of social science research in India but raised the prestige of the social sciences, and he even influenced, in a subtle way, the direction of research through his own sensitivity to the problems faced by the country and his awareness of the contribution which the social sciences could make to their analysis and solution. He did all this while retaining warm and friendly relations with many social scientists, officials, and even politicians.

Naik was keenly aware not only of the inferior position accorded to women everywhere but of the andro-centric bias built into the social sciences as they have developed everywhere. Indeed very little is known of the way in which women look at their culture and social structure, and until recently, information on even these matters was collected very largely by men social scientists. Naik grasped this and did his utmost to promote women's studies everywhere, both inside and outside the I.C.S.S.R. One cannot also forget Naik's prodigious capacity for work—he really seemed to enjoy tackling huge piles of files after a long day of committees and interviews. There was no doubt that he was a workaholic and an ascetic but at the same time he had a sense of humour and a ready laugh. All in all, he was a rare kind of person and we are the poorer for his loss.

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SOME REFLECTIONS ON DOWRY

I

The title of my lectures is 'Some Reflections on Dowry', and it would be insulting the sophistication of this audience to elaborate on its importance or topicality. Dowry has become, literally a burning problem, and the burning of housewives is not confined to any single part of India, though it seems to be concentrated in the region around Delhi. For instance, from 1 January to 1 November, 1983, 690 women had died of burns in Delhi alone.¹

Dowry is in many ways an archetypal institution, for it illustrates the kind of problems which the social anthropologist/sociologist studying his own society faces frequently. However, this is not to say that social anthropologists who study 'other cultures' do not face similar problems but only that while studying one's own society such problems are more frequent, and the dilemmas and conflicts they pose, far more poignant. The first and the most obvious problem is the ambivalence which dowry rouses in the sociologist studying it. On the one hand, there is the feeling that the institution is an unmitigated evil and that it needs to be destroyed root and branch, and at the earliest opportunity, and on the other hand, the institution demands to be understood, its many ramifications traced, and its regional, caste and other variations recorded. The sociologist studying dowry cannot help being fascinated by it, and being impressed with its strength and resilience. But this very fascination with the institution and his awareness of its strength might result in his being accused of being a reactionary who wants the institution to remain.

Dowry is also an institution which is perhaps best studied by women social scientists, or, better still, by husband-and-wife teams. The segregation of the sexes is so marked a feature of our society, especially of its more traditional sections, that at least in the initial stages the men will have to be interviewed by men, and women by women. Further, women social scientists might have better insight into the kind of mental world in

¹*Deccan Herald*, Bangalore, 5 November 1983.

which the daughter-in-law or mother-in-law lives than a male social scientist. When the researchers have gained the confidence of the interviewees, it may be an advantage to have the men interviewed by women and *vice versa*.

Finally it is necessary to stress the wide ramifications of dowry. It affects profoundly kin and affinal relations, it cannot be understood without reference to the caste system and the emulation of the higher castes which is integral to it, and it influences radically the economic behaviour of couples having daughters. This means that a narrowly economic interpretation of dowry will miss out crucial facts and misinterpret even the selected facts.

II

Very little is known about inter-caste differences in the matter of dowry. Also, dowry commonly tends to be viewed in isolation from the series of prestations that link the two kin-groups coming together in marriage. To some extent, indignation at the horrors of dowry, and at its spread to ever new castes and sections, have been responsible for the feeling that academic curiosity about the institution is a luxury if not evidence of the reactionary outlook of the social scientist concerned. But calm reflection should convince intelligent laymen that detailed knowledge of the working of dowry among diverse groups is an essential pre-condition to its removal. Further, such knowledge will also enhance our understanding of kinship system, of saving, expenditure and the economic behaviour of the people and of the role of the emulation of the higher castes by the lower in the spread of dowry.

It is essential to distinguish between dowry in India to the north of the Vindhyas—continental India—and dowry in peninsular or south India. The former area is broadly characterized by either hypergamy or a hypergamous ideology and dowry seems integral to hypergamy. This point needs to be highlighted since it has been frequently missed out and especially by those who have put forward an 'economic interpretation' of the institution.

Hypergamy refers to the custom of marrying a man from a superior grade or clan, within the same *jati*. Sometimes, the superior grade or clan may not be specified, but the general notion prevails that a girl should wed a superior male. The basic

idea here is that a girl should marry into a higher division and, under no circumstances, into a lower one.] Mckim Marriott, who studied in the fifties a village near Aligarh in U.P., states that the family to which a girl is given, becomes respected and that from which a girl is taken, becomes low. In other words, it is the fact of the girl being given that makes the recipient superior just as the act of giving the girl makes the donor family inferior. He stands, however, alone in this view of hypergamy.²

A major consequence of hypergamy is status asymmetry between affinal groups, the boy's kin being higher than the girl's kin. The latter improve their status through marriage while the former secure cash, jewellery, costly clothing, furniture and other goods. To quote Marriott,

Behind this organization of marriage is the feeling that one's daughter and sister at marriage become the helpless possession of an alien kinship group. To secure her good treatment, lavish hospitality must be offered and gifts made to her husband's family throughout life. The economic effects of this patterning of marriage are considerable. Not only marriage and other expenses are kept high, but quantities of goods follow the women in later years by the same non-rational path. One quarter of all milk animals are obtained as gifts from marital relatives, and about one quarter of all debt is incurred to fulfil marriage demands [i.e., in Kishan Garhi, his field village in U.P.]. The persistence and vigour of such a structuring of marriage puts limit on the degree to which a village can manage its economic affairs as a local unit' (Marriott, 'Social Structure and Change in a U. P. Village', in *India's Villages*, edited by M.N. Srinivas, Bombay, 1955. p. 112).

Status asymmetry between the bride's and groom's kin, is, however, absent in the South. (Kerala with matriliney is, however, unique, and I exclude it from my purview). Marriages are basically isogamous in the South and this is further reinforced by the preference for cross cousin, and cross uncle and niece, marriages. Finally, the custom of bride-price, which was universal among south Indian castes, resulted in, if anything, a tilt in favour of the bride's kin as far as relations between the affines were concerned. In fact, even as recently as 1948, I was present at the wedding negotiations of two Okkaliga kin-groups in Rampura in Karnataka, where I found the bride's kin listing their demands

² See his 'Social Structure and Change in a U.P. Village', in *India's Villages*, edited by M.N. Srinivas, Bombay, 1955, p. 112.

about the saris and jewellery which the groom's kin had to provide at marriage. Such demands were the rule though that did not mean that prestations moved only from the groom's kin to the bride's. Indeed since weddings were invariably performed in the bride's house, the burden of hospitality was generally heavier on the bride's kin than on the groom's. Thus, the bride's kin had to give at least two big dinners, one of which was non-vegetarian, in addition to providing hospitality and refreshments for the groom's kin and other guests, while the groom's kin had to give only one dinner, a non-vegetarian one, on their return to their home from the wedding.

Weddings, then, are occasions when the two affinal kin-groups exchange gifts. But such exchanges are rarely symmetrical, a tilt towards one group or the other being more common. Further, weddings also initiate such exchanges between affinal kin, and these continue for a long time. For instance, in great parts of India a woman had traditionally the right to have her first few confinements in her natal home, and her parents had to bear the expenses of the confinements and give gifts to the new-born infant and its mother. Among hypergamous groups, the woman had to carry along with the infant, gifts of food, grain and flour to her in-laws. The Patidars of Gujarat joke that a woman was likely to be sent back if the provisions she brought with her were deficient in quality or weight. Among Anavil Brahmins of south Gujarat, the woman had to carry, among other things, sweets to all the Anavil households in the affinal village.

While in the North, and in particular, among the hypergamous castes, modern dowry is in line with the unidirectional flow of cash, goods and service from the bride's kin to the groom's, in the isogamous South, modern dowry is really a totally new development. Traditionally, weddings were much less asymmetrical in the South, but nowadays there is complete asymmetry among the dowry-paying castes. That is, dowry has introduced a new status asymmetry in the South, and to that extent it has become more like the North.

Modern dowry presupposes a high degree of monetization in the community, increased agricultural and general prosperity, and access to the 'organized sector'. Until a few decades ago marriage was the only 'career' for a woman except among the landless labourers and other poor where women had to hire

themselves out for daily wages. Young men who had salaried jobs, or careers in the profession, were sought after as bride-grooms. They were 'scarce commodities', and their scarcity was exacerbated by the rule of *jati* endogamy and the need to marry a girl before she came of age. The parents of the lucky youths demanded cash and such goods as cycles, woollen suits, etc., as part of the wedding agreement. The monster of modern dowry has grown from such humble beginnings.

In the dowry of today large sums of cash—frequently amounting to a few lakhs of rupees—are transferred along with furniture, gadgetry, costly clothing and jewellery, from the bride's kin to the groom's kin. In addition, the bride's kin have to meet all the expenses of the wedding including the travel expenses of the groom's party. An element of unpredictability may be regarded as integral to modern dowry: the bridegroom's kin may demand that the male members of the *barat* (procession of groom and his kinsmen to the bride's house) be given real Scotch and not be fobbed off with Indian whiskey. In the days when pre-pubertal weddings were the rule additional demands were frequently made at the time of the consummation of the wedding, or when the ritual of *simanta* was performed for the pregnant woman, and the threat held out that otherwise the ceremony would not take place, amounted almost to a repudiation of the marriage itself.

In south Indian upper caste weddings, the groom's kin assume that it is the duty of the bride's kin to keep them pleased, and they appear keen to find fault with the arrangements made and the gifts given, and they are also known to make sudden demands. The bride's kin have to take all this in their stride for they are the inferior party. And they know it.

The 'dowry' that obtains in higher caste weddings in India today is a totally new phenomenon, and ought not to be mixed up with traditional ideas such as *kanyadan* and *stridhan*, though such confusion is widespread. A gift or *dan* has to be accompanied by a subsidiary cash gift (*dakshina*), and in *kanyadan* the bride is given as a gift to the groom. On this analogy, the dowry becomes the *dakshina*. *Stridhan* usually refers to the gifts given to a woman by her natal kin or by her husband at or after the wedding.

But modern dowry is not *dakshina* or *stridhan*. As already

stated the amount of money given as dowry is substantial if not huge among the higher castes and its payment is demanded, directly or indirectly by the groom's kin.

It is absurd to regard it as a sub-gift incidental to the main gift. (A cynic might say that the reverse is true). In addition to paying the dowry, the bride's kin give gifts of jewellery and costly saris to her, and it is difficult to state with confidence that the bride will have control over the jewellery. Traditionally, however, it was hers to dispose of, at least in south India, and she passed on as much of it as she could to her daughters. If the husband sold a piece of jewellery belonging to her to meet a crisis, he was expected to make good when his circumstances were better.

Among the Anavil Brahmins of Gujarat dowry marriages are regarded as the proper ones in sharp contrast to marriages by exchange and marriages by paying bride price. They are so prestigious that one way of identifying a Desai—i.e., the higher subdivision of the Anavil Brahmins—is to find out whether his relations had all married paying dowry. Further, dowry marriages are equated with *kanyadan* marriages, and Klaas van der Veen, in 'I Give Thee My Daughter—A Study of Marriage and Hierarchy among the Anavil Brahmins of south Gujarat', has rather uncritically accepted such an equation.³

The Pedivala Desais, the highest division among the Desais, got their girls married in the *kanyadan* form and paid dowry to the bridegroom's kin, even though the latter were, except very rarely, their inferiors. According to van der Veen there were ideological reasons for this: 'The Pedivala are the superior group still strongly cherishing the ideal of dowry marriage, in which any thought of financial profit should be avoided. In such unions the character of the hypergamy was quite different from that in the marriage of status unequals arranged from financial need by the two Desai families...'⁴ The Pedivala dowry was, according to Pedivala thinking, the *dakshina* accompanying the 'gift' of the girl to the groom. They gave this even though the groom was status-wise, inferior. They regarded dowry as part of the ritual of *kanyadan*. This is very different, however, from modern dowry.

³ Van Gorcum & Co., N. V. Assen, 1972, pp. 25, 32 and 47.

⁴ Ibid., p. 191.

As stated earlier, modern dowry is entirely the product of the forces let loose by British rule such as monetization, education and the introduction of the 'organized sector'. The attempt to equate the huge sums of cash, jewellery, clothing, furniture and gadgetry demanded of the bride's kin by the groom's, to *dakshina* is only an attempt to legitimize a modern monstrosity by linking it up with an ancient and respected custom, a common enough and hoary Indian device. What is surprising is that the imposture has had so much success.

III

Pre-British dowry needs to be distinguished from 'modern dowry', the former being integral to hypergamy, as I have stated already, while in the non-hypergamous areas, the payment of bride-price seems to have been the rule. Thus far I have only referred, and that too only very generally and superficially, to hypergamy in Gujarat. Bengal was the other classic area of hypergamy, the institution being extremely popular among the Kulin Brahmins many of whom also practised polygamy at least during the first half of the nineteenth century. At the prompting of the reformer, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, the Government of Bengal appointed, in 1866, a committee to inquire into and report on Kulin polygamy. A brief and readable report was produced by the Committee within six months. According to H. T. Prinsep, one of the members of the Committee, Kulin polygamy was widespread in Bengal, and... 'there were instances of Brahmins having nearly 100 wives, many of whom they had never seen since their marriage with them as girls' (H. H. Risley, *The People of India*, Calcutta, 198, p. cxl). Prinsep added further:

... The father of a girl is obliged by Hindu law and the custom of the country to marry her before she attains puberty; she must marry in her own caste; and he has to bring a suitable husband for her. Kulin polygamy... appeals to Brahmins of the mendicant and priestly classes of small means. Education may have done much to reduce its sphere; but education has not reached such classes, and obviously they will be the last to come within its influence (Risley, p. clx-xi).

Immediately after expressing his belief in the ability of education to liquidate dowry, Prinsep seems to have had second thoughts on the matter:

... I would point out [that] though education may have done something to mitigate its [dowry's] evils, it cannot claim to have done much to reduce the rates payable in the marriage market. The usual rate demanded by one who has taken the degree of Bachelor of Laws in the Calcutta University is, I have credibly informed not many years ago, Rs. 10,000 or nearly £ 700 . . . (Risley, pp. clx-clxi).

The passages quoted above have been taken from a letter which Prinsep wrote to the editor of *The Times*, London, on 27 September 1907. A few India hands including Sir Henry Cotton were discussing the subject of Kulin polygamy in the prestigious but, from the Indian point of view, rather remote columns of *The Times* of London. In his letter Prinsep first stated that the Kulins who were practising polygamy were uneducated Brahmins of the mendicant and priestly classes. And like a true product of the Victorian era, he declared his faith in education as a solvent of social evils. But immediately after his declaration of faith, he seems to have been overtaken by a sense of reality. Bengalis who had a BL from Calcutta University were even in those days collecting Rs. 10,000 as dowry. The point that I wish to emphasize in this connection is that Prinsep is here confusing two different types of dowry, one traditional, and the other, modern. The candidates for the former were poor, mendicant and priestly Brahmins while for the latter, they were the Western-educated sons of the elite.

While the richer and higher strata of hypergamous castes paid huge sums by way of dowry to obtain desirable grooms, the poorer members of the lower strata were often required to pay bride price, or have recourse to marriage by exchange, either direct or indirect. Direct exchange was when two men married each other's sisters, and indirect, when other parties were also involved to complete the exchange. Thus the rich, land-owning Patidars of central Gujarat paid dowry, while poor Patidars paid bride price. Again the rich land-owning Desais (upper layer of Anavil Brahmins) paid dowry while the Bhatela, the poorer division of the Anavils, practised marriage by exchange, both direct and indirect.⁵ In the extreme south of Gujarat lived the Pardi

⁵ Van der Veen makes the point that while poor Patidars had no objection to paying bride price, the Anavils were allergic to it as such as marriage had been classified by the law-givers as *asura*, and therefore forbidden for Brahmins.

Desais (also called Kay Desais) who were also Anavils but who were very poor until recently and had the custom of marrying by exchange. But during the last twenty years many of them became prosperous through the cultivation of new and profitable crops, and dowry has come to stay amongst them.⁶ There is a 'cargo cult' aspect to dowry marriages—the groom's kin regard his wedding as an occasion for securing, without paying a paisa, the many and much-desired products of modern technology. Among Tamil Brahmins, for instance, a video cassette record of the wedding is the latest demand made by the groom's kin.

It is necessary to ponder on the implications of the fact that parents of girls born in the lower grades pay dowry to get them married to men of the higher grades while men in the lower grades pay bride price, or resort to exchange, to be able to marry girls in their own grades. Bride price and marriage by exchange are then integral to the dowry system of the hypergamous castes. It is not only that there is a drift of all girls towards the men of the highest grades, but some men of the top grades indulge in polygamy (synchronous or serial) while some others marry after becoming widowers or divorcees. All this results in making brides scarce for the poor bachelors in the lower groups. Sometimes this is compounded by the incidence of female infanticide in the higher grades, and as mentioned earlier, both the Patidar and Rajput practised female infanticide till it was stopped by the British in the nineteenth century. Indeed, female infanticide seems to have been practised among several groups in the western and north-western regions, and also near about Banaras.

In studying dowry the continuous desire of the bride's kin to improve their family standing or status needs to be kept in mind, particularly in hypergamous areas. Secondly, dowry and bride-price have also to be studied in the context of changing male-female sex ratios wherever the data are available. In this connection, it may be mentioned that demographic history is woefully neglected in India and there is not even awareness of the fact that it is neglected.

IV

The theory that bride-price is compensation paid to the parents of a girl for the loss of her services on marriage, is a plausible

⁶ Van der Veen, pp. 262-3.

one, and has been widely touted, but extremely difficult to prove. The argument that the indigenes themselves offer that explanation does not carry us very far since that 'explanation' is itself part of the total phenomenon to be explained. The 'compensation theory' makes a distinction between the intra-mural and extra-mural work performed by a woman, and only the latter being regarded as deserving of compensation. (It ties in neatly with the distinction between productive and non-productive work, the work done on the farm being productive, while that done at home, cooking, cleaning and bringing up children being non-productive.) The bride-price paying groups are either poor and belong to the 'lower' castes, or they constitute the poorer sections of the higher and richer castes. Thus, within a single caste, in one section the bride's kin may have to be 'compensated' for the loss of her services on marriage while a higher section of the same caste is not only not compensated but the bridegroom and his kin are paid cash and gifts in kind at the wedding and subsequently. Since the higher castes and richer groups live in extended kin-groups, women have a wider variety of tasks to perform, supervise and co-ordinate within the household than among poorer groups who tend to live in small kin-groups.

Generally, the sums paid as bride-price tend to be very small, in contrast to dowry where substantial assets are transferred from the bride's kin to the groom's. For instance, in the former princely state of Mysore, the sums paid as bride-price during the first few decades of this century, were very small and it is not easy to call them 'compensation' to the bride's kin. Thus, for instance, Okkaligas near Srirangapatna paid twenty silver rupee coins, and a four anna piece as *tera* or bride price. (However, there were exceptions to this and I shall refer to them later).

The question naturally arises whether the economic and other services of a girl obtained through marriage are adequately compensated by paying as trifling a sum as Rs 20 and 4 annas. One answer may be that the sums were fixed a long time ago when the economy was minimally monetized, and that they have not been revised. Another argument, which, incidentally has some force, is that poor peasants find even these sums difficult to pay. But it is really more satisfactory to regard these pay-

ment as 'symbolic' of the transfer of rights over the girl from her natal to her affinal kin.

There are reasons to believe that in the nineteenth century all the castes in south India, excluding Kerala, paid bride-price. This means that even among Brahmins the bride's kin were compensated at her marriage. But it is known that Brahmin women generally did not (and do not) work outside the home, and certainly not for wages. Clearly, then, the compensation theory fails to explain satisfactorily the phenomenon of bride-price.

This provides a convenient spot for disposing of a theory put forward very recently by Dr Indira Rajaraman—and, I expect, subscribed to by many—that when women from the richer groups are withdrawn from agricultural work it is in order to enable them to have more leisure. She writes, '... The decline in female participation in gainful work i.e., increase in female leisure, may then simply be something that is purchased by the community with its increased prosperity.'

It is pleasant to think that when peasants get rich they prevent their women from working for wages outside the home so that they could have more leisure but unfortunately that is not true. When peasants acquire enough land they think that their new status as landowners is incompatible with their women working for wages. Their women should no longer be seen by the *hoi polloi*. In this connection it may be noted that Brahmin women, however poor, do not work on the land for wages like women from the other castes because their status is so high. (In the case of the Brahmin, social and ritual status is to some extent independent of wealth).

In the closing years of the nineteenth century the bride-price payable to an Iyengar (Tamil Brahmin) girl in princely Mysore seems to have been Rs. 300, a high sum indeed.⁸

Further, there is inscriptional evidence to show that the custom of paying bride-price among Brahmins in south India goes back at least to a few centuries:

This inscription is dated during the reign of Virapratapa Devaraya Maharaj (of Vijayanagara) and in the Visvvasu year,

⁷ 'Economics of Bride-Price and Dowry', *Economic and Political Weekly*, xviii, 8, 19 February 1983, p. 276.

⁸ M. N. Srinivas, *Marriage and Family in Mysore*, Bombay, 1942, p. 20.

which was current after the expiration of the Saka year 1347. It refers to a question of sacred law (dharma) of the Brahmins, which was settled by the Brahmins of the kingdom of Padaividu, among whom Karnataka, Tamil, Telugu and Lata Brahmins are mentioned. Their representatives signed an agreement to the effect that henceforth marriages among their families had only to be concluded in *kanyadana*, i.e., that the father had to give his daughter to the bridegroom gratuitously. Both the father who accepted money and the bridegroom who paid money for the bride should be subject to punishment by the king and excommunication from their caste. This practice was evidently adopted from the canonical works on sacred law, which condemn in strong terms the payment of money for the bride, and use the term *asura-vivaha* for a marriage thus concluded. The four forms of marriage permitted to Brahmins are mere varieties of the marriage by *kanyadana* (*South Indian Inscriptions*, edited and translated by E. Hultzsch, Vol. 1, 189, pp. 82-3, quoted in Srinivas, 1942, p. 21).

While the custom of bride-price was pretty nearly universal in south India, in the North, it was practised by the poorer sections of hypergamous castes and by many others. It seems to have been widespread among the people of the Himalayas.⁹ Poor Oriya Brahmins had to pay for their brides till World War II. Bride-price also seems to have prevailed among the non-hypergamous castes of the Gangetic plain.¹⁰

In other words, the incidence of bride-price seems to have been widespread in pre-British India in spite of the fact that it was expressly forbidden to Brahmins and other twice-born castes. One way of looking at the classification of marriages by the

⁹ G. D. Berreman, *Hindus of the Himalayas*, Berkley, 1963, pp. 128-9.

¹⁰ Professor A. M. Shah has written of Gujarat castes, 'There was also another important correlation. The institutions of both bride and bridegroom price (the latter also called dowry) were rampant in castes with continuous internal hierarchy—dowry mainly at the upper levels, bride price mainly at the lower levels, and both dowry and bride price among status-seeking middle-level families. The small endogamous units, on the other hand, did not practise either. While the Rajputs, Leva Patidars, Anavils and Khedawals have been notorious for high dowries, and the Kolis have been looked down upon for their practice of bride price, the Vanias have been paying neither. The two categories of castes have been deeply conscious of these differences between them, and have been talking freely about them ('Division and Hierarchy, an Overview of Caste in Gujarat', in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, N. S. 16, 1, January-June 1982, p. 24).

Brahmin law-givers is to regard it as an attempt to impose the Brahminical ideology of *kanyadan* on a country where most people, including many Brahmin castes, but excluding the richer sections of hypergamous castes, practised bride-price. That extremely popular form of marriage was dubbed *asura* and condemned as unsuitable for Brahmins. The law-givers interpreted *asura* marriages as marriages involving the sale of brides and their own nostrum was *kanyadan*, where the bride was given as a gift to the groom.¹¹ Gift, it may be noted, is the binary opposite of sale, and idea of gift had not only been developed by the Brahmins but had become identified with them and its extension to include the transfer of a girl to the groom's house at marriage, may be regarded as only logical.

The National Committee on the Status of Women in India have commented on the phenomenon of the increasing withdrawal of women from the labour force:

The ratio of female to male workers has declined in all categories in the rural, and, most categories in the urban, areas. The participation rates of men and women differ widely in all age groups except the youngest (0-14), the difference in urban areas being much higher than in rural areas. The decline from 1961 is clear in all the age groups. This overall decline in the percentage of women workers is visible in all States for both rural and urban areas but is sharper in the urban areas. The distribution of women workers in the nine industrial categories adopted by the census shows their increasing dependence on agriculture and a decline in both the industrial and service sectors (Summary Report, Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi, 1975, p. 62).

Census figures substantiate the above conclusion:

A macro-analysis reveals that women's economic participation has been declining since 1921, both in percentage of workers to the total female population and in their percentage to the total labour force. While the total number of women workers declined from 41.8 million in 1911 to 31.2 million in 1971, their percentage in the total labour force declined from 34.44 per cent in 1911 to 17.35 per cent in 1971. The percentage of women workers to the total female population declined from 33.73 per cent in 1911 to 11.86 per cent in 1971. This decline has been even more precipitous in recent years. During 1961-71, while the male and female populations increased by

¹¹ See N. Sengupta, *Evolution of Hindu Marriage*, Bombay, 1965. Chapter III, pp. 93, 99.

25 per cent and 24 per cent respectively (20 per cent and 21 per cent in the working age group) and the number of men workers increased by 15.2 per cent women workers declined by 41.4 per cent (Ibid., p. 61).

While the declining economic participation of women is a fact as also the spread of dowry to groups previously practising bride-price, it was left to the authors of the Report of the National Committee on the Status of Women in India to link the two as cause and effect:

Changing from bride price to dowry is an attempt to improve the social status of a family or group, because dowry is associated with the higher social groups. This change has been reported from different regions and indicates a loss of status for the girl in her father's family where she becomes a liability rather than an asset. *This is undoubtedly a consequence of the withdrawal of women from production activities and of the loss of their production skills* (p. 24, emphasis mine).

The reasons which prompted the Committee to link the two as cause and effect are nowhere stated.

The Committee has also drawn the attention of readers to the steady decline in the number of females per 1000 males ever since the 1911 census when it was 972, to 930 in 1971. In the age group 10 to 14 the proportion of females is 887 while in age group 15 to 19, it is 883.¹² In rural areas the proportion of females in these two age groups is 885 and 896 respectively while in the urban areas it is 895 and 835.¹³

Prima facie the above ratios would tend to favour bride-price rather than dowry, but the Committee do not seem to have gone into the implications of a sex ratio increasingly unfavourable to women.

The key to the problem of spreading dowry is perhaps to be sought in the fact that since independence there has been a sharp increase in the emulation of the higher castes by the lower. Such emulation was facilitated by the latter's increased access to education, and jobs in the organized sector, and in the growing erosion of the moral authority of the dominant castes to prevent the dependent castes from emulating their betters.

Professor Scarlett Epstein has described in detail how, increasingly, dowry has replaced bride-price among the Okkaligas

¹² Summary Report, p. 7.

¹³ Ibid., p. 142.

(Peasants) of the two villages, Wangala and Dalena, intensively studied by her over a period of fifteen years. She writes:

The changeover to a system of dowry I attribute to the interaction between four important variables. First and fundamental is the increased wealth Mandya Peasants now enjoy. It is this which enables them to spend more lavishly on weddings in their struggle for social recognition. Second, it has become a matter of prestige for wealthier Peasants that their women-folk do not work on the land, young girls no longer trained to do field work become capricious and demanded more of costlier items of jewellery. Where formerly a Peasant's wife was an economic asset, she has now become a liability. Accordingly the groom's family now want to be paid for taking over the responsibility of keeping her where previously they had been prepared to compensate her father for the loss of her production contribution. Third, there is now a small but growing number of young educated male Peasants whose parents feel justified in claiming compensation from their son's in-laws.... Lastly, Brahmins, who provide the reference group for village Peasants, practise a dowry system; imitating Brahmin customs means Sanskritising one's style of life in the hope of raising one's social status. As Beregowda put it: 'What is good enough for Bramins is good enough for me!' (*South India, Yesterday, Today and To-morrow*, Macmillan, London, 1973, p. 199).

Epstein is right in listing increased wealth of Peasants and their desire to emulate Brahmins as two of the four factors making for dowry. Her second 'variable' needs to be modified: granted that a woman who works both on the family farm and inside the house is a greater asset economically than one who works only inside, it is surely an exaggeration to say that the latter is a liability. Besides, even if a wife were willing to work outside it is the *man* who feels that *his* status in local society is jeopardized by his wife working extra-murally. Usually, with children going to school and having to be prepared for careers outside agriculture, the task of bringing them up becomes more complex and difficult in richer and more educated households, and also the chores in the house increase. It is therefore incorrect to describe the new wife as an 'economic liability'. Educated Peasant youths are able to command dowries because parents of girls want their daughters to marry salaried men. Men having government jobs, or being in the professions and living in cities, have prestige and are in short supply. These are also the reasons which prompt Brahmins (and others) to pay dowries.

This desire to emulate Brahmins and change from bride-price to dowry has not only affected the better off members of land-owning castes but also the Scheduled Castes, and even the tribes. Dr. L. S. Viswanath, who has carried out field-work among Tadavis, a section of the Bhils, living in nineteen villages to be submerged by the Narmada Dam under construction at Vadgam in Broach district, writes that they have

become settled agriculturists, bettered their economic position and tried to Sanskritise their customs. In 1910, a religious teacher preached among them, and asked them to give up bride price, liquor drinking, meat eating, widow remarriage, etc.

There are two endogamous groups among Tadavis, Dhanka and Tetariya. Both groups were earlier paying bride price in cash, but they have given it up as low and uncivilized. The Tadavis I interviewed in several villages say that it is the uncivilized 'jungle' Bhils who pay bride price, eat meat and so on. The Tadavis call a Brahmin priest to perform their weddings ('Economics of Bride-Price and Dowry', to be published).

To repeat, it is emulation of the higher castes by the lower ones that leads to the replacement of bride-price by dowry. Usually, such emulation is preceded by several predisposing factors including improved economic condition, education and access to the organized sector. But it does not always require as a precondition, withdrawal of women from wage-earning. Tadavi women continue to work for wages on the Narmada dam but they are no longer paid bride-price. Scheduled Castes in West Bengal pay dowry even while their women continue to work as labourers. Dowry obtains also among Kannada-speaking Scheduled Castes in the villages around Bangalore.

Finally, while some of the emulation of Brahmins and other very high castes may be called Sanskritization, everything that is emulated ought not to be labelled such. Dowry came to the Brahmins through 'Westernization', and it does not become Sanskritization when others take it over from Brahmins.

V

In Hindu ideology, marriage is considered as an essential *samskara* (or ritual) which all men and women, at least those who belong to the twice-born castes, must undergo. Marriage is the means through which the latter pass from the first *ashrama* of

brahmacharya (period of learning when celibacy is a must) to the second—and actually, in most cases, final—of *grihasta* (or householder). While marriage is essential to all, it is in a sense even more important for women than for men. Only renouncers are exempt from marriage but the opportunities for women to become renouncers are very few indeed, most orders having only a provision for male candidates.

On marriage, a girl becomes a member of her husband's kin group and works for promoting its interests. But it needs to be stressed that a woman is not only a producer but a reproducer. It is through her fertility that her husband's lineage is continued. Great social value is set on her fertility, and her conjugal—and even her natal—lineage have a vested interest in her fertility. She is liable to be set aside and another wife taken if she does not produce children, and in particular, sons. When a marriage is childless, it is usually assumed that it is the wife's fault. Traditionally, a barren woman was avoided by the orthodox, even beggars not accepting alms from her. Her younger sisters were likely to find it difficult to obtain husbands because of the fear that they might also prove to be infertile.¹⁴

Among the richer landowners, traders and politically powerful groups as also Brahmins, there is much emphasis on the continuity of the lineage (*vamsha*). The hold of this idea may be said to be almost mystical. This idea has a secular as well as a religious dimension: The lineage has to be continued either through the birth of male children, adoption, or through treating the resident daughters' children as members of their mother's natal lineage. This involves the reversal of the virilocal principle as in the institution of the *ghar jamai*. There is no greater tragedy than the extinction of the lineage and no greater curse than saying 'may your lineage come to an end'. On the religious side, the dead ancestors have to be periodically propitiated through offerings of water, sesame, rice and food, in return for which they look after the welfare of the living members. It is interesting to note that a favourite, articulated reason for adoption is the need to have someone to perform ancestor rites. It is wrong to think, however, that children are highly valued only among the rich and powerful. They are valued no less by the poor though for a diffe-

¹⁴ See M. N. Srinivas, *Marriage and Family in Mysore*, Bombay, 1942, pp. 171-6.

rent mix of reasons—children start earning even before they reach their teens, and older sisters help to look after younger ones leaving mothers free to attend to other jobs. The continuity of the family is also important to the poor though it is not as firmly institutionalized or as mixed up with religious reasons.

VI

Dowry, as it has developed during this century, and in particular since World War II, imposes an unconscionable burden on the bride's kin group, and this is further compounded by certain other conditions which have to be satisfied by the bride and her kin before marriage. In the first place, the groom has to be found within the endogamous *jati*. If the *jati* does not have enough eligible young men who have the educational and other qualifications which enable them to get jobs in the government or enter the learned professions then there is acute competition among parents of eligible daughters to secure desirable young men. This leads to high dowries, and to new dowry-induced status asymmetry in which the groom's kin call the tune to which the bride's kin have to dance.

There were also other limiting conditions. For instance, traditionally, among the twice-born castes a girl had to be married before she came of age and the puberty ceremony was performed for her. Keeping a grown girl in the house was religiously a sin, and, secularly, scandalous. Virginity in brides and chastity in wives were—and are—fundamental values of Sanskritic Hinduism. A girl having a pre-marital liaison not only ruined her chances of making a good marriage but also obstructed the chances of her younger sisters finding good husbands. She brought shame on her entire family. Family honour and reputation stood—and still stand—at the centre of marriage. But during the last fifty years or so, the age at marriage has been steadily going up for girls, especially high caste and urban girls, and the prepubertal requirement has become defunct.

As mentioned earlier, the married state is more obligatory for women than for men. Traditionally, a married woman, or more precisely, a woman whose husband was alive, enjoyed a high ritual and social status. As a *sumangali* (also called *sahasini*) she was entitled to wear the red *kumkum* mark on her forehead,

flowers in her hair, glass bangles, the sacred *tali* round her neck, and several other symbols which were denied to widows. Her person was auspicious, and she was welcome everywhere. In contrast, the widow was physically disfigured—her head shaved, ornaments removed and a drab sari symbolical of widowhood and eschewed by *sumangalis*, proclaimed her sad and despised condition. Among many groups, she was not allowed to wear a blouse. A divorcée also had low status though not as low as that of a widow. However, a widower or divorcé by contrast did not suffer from any loss of status. Further, while a widow had to observe mourning for a year after her husband's death, a widower was enjoined to remarry within a few weeks of his wife's death.

As stated earlier, the *kanyadan* form of marriage was the one most preferred by Hindu canonical lawyers. Even lay Hindus regard it as merit-producing while other forms were not, and one of the ways in which a public-spirited and orthodox Hindu tried to store up merit or *punya* was by organizing the weddings of poor girls usually from the twice-born castes.

An implicit but none-the-less potent ideology underlines *kanyadan* form of marriage. In the first place, it is only in patrilineal and virilocal unions that *kanyadan* occurs. In these unions the girl traditionally had no right to any immovable property in her natal lineage and all that she got from her close relatives were gifts of jewellery, clothing and cash and these, along with the gifts made to her by her husband, constitute her *stridhana*. These marriages were necessarily of very young persons for only when they were very young were they likely to obey totally their elders. It was the elders who decided who should marry whom on caste, astrological and other grounds. Marriage was too vital to be left to the chance liking of two individuals and both the concerned kin-groups tried to make certain that the marriage would be harmonious and fruitful. Since the girl was younger than the boy she learned not only to obey the husband's parents but him as well.

This provides the background for the doctrine of perpetual dependence of a woman: when unmarried she is dependent on her father, after marriage, on her husband, and when widowed, on her son, a theory that was propounded by that arch male chauvinist, the canonical lawyer, Manu. Such dependence is

more acute among the better-off and the higher castes where women stay inside their homes. Immurement resulted in lessened knowledge of the outside world, and contributed to women's increased dependence on men, further fuelling the theory of perpetual dependence. Women's activities became confined to the kitchen, and to the production and rearing of children. Women of the richer households wore a lot of jewellery and fine clothes, and became indicators of the secular status of their spouses.¹⁵ On the other hand, the men who inherited land and houses, and wielded political and economic power, dressed simply if not austere.

VII

The tendency of the lower castes to emulate the customs and ritual of the higher castes is part of the dynamics of the caste system. In the context of dowry and bride-price, it means that lower castes tend to give up bride-price and replace it with dowry even when their womenfolk are engaged in productive work outside the home.

But a caste, in particular, a non-dominant caste, was traditionally *not* allowed to emulate the customs of a high caste of its choice. The dominant caste of the region normally prevented it from doing so. For instance, the Anavil Brahmin Desais, who were the dominant caste in the Surat region, did not permit the inferior Bhatela to switch over to dowry from bride-price though impoverished Desais took dowry from rich parents of Bhatela girls. But the parents of Bhatela grooms were denied the privilege.

However, the dominant castes themselves had greater freedom to emulate the customs of ritually higher castes. As an example, I may mention the efforts of the dominant caste of Okkaligas in the Mysore-Mandya region, since the 1930s, to switch over from

¹⁵ 'Sociologists have viewed women as the carriers of status in social systems, an observation that is best dramatized in the world of the pre-industrial city elite. Here, women, utilizing elaborate dress, make-up, coiffures, and/or display of jewelry, reflect, indeed advertise to other women of the elite, the family's socio-economic position, their own exemption from physical labor, and their ability to spend long hours in self-adornment' (Gideon Sjoberg, *The Preindustrial City: Past and Present*, Free Press, New York, 1960, p. 166).

bride-price to dowry. At this time, education was spreading among Okkaligas, and better prices for agricultural produce during the War years, resulted in increased prosperity. Educated Okkaliga youth thought that bride-price amounted to sale of the bride, and *muyyi* (gifts of small cash made to bride or groom by kindred and friends), demeaning. In the late thirties wedding invitations of the richer and educated Okkaligas stated explicitly that bride-price and *muyyi* would not be taken. By the 1950s the more prosperous and educated Okkaligas in this region had given up these institutions. Today, dowry is the rule among the educated. As Epstein's Beregowda put it, 'What is good enough for Brahmins is good enough for me!'

VIII

Indian weddings are occasions for conspicuous spending and this is related to the maintenance of what is believed to be the status of the family. Maintaining, or giving expression to, family status, involves in turn the articulation of networks, networks of kin and caste, and nowadays, of professional colleagues, friends and acquaintances, members of one's club, etc. Care is taken to invite as many important acquaintances as one can, and these become indicators of one's status just like the number of cars parked outside the wedding hall. It must be made clear that both the kin groups coming together in the wedding are sensitive to considerations of family status or honour, though the bride's kin are usually a little more eager to impress everyone, especially the groom's kin.

Apart from the cost of clothing, jewellery, the cash given to the groom or his parents, the bride's kin have to meet the cost of two if not three lavish dinners given to groom's kin and other guests, of the beverages and snacks supplied to the guests during the wedding, the *shamiana*, lights, band, music, processions, and sometimes, fireworks.

The hospitality must be on the lavish side, and the guests, especially the groom's kin, are only too eager to find fault. Their praise is keenly sought. Nowadays, among several high and educated castes, the groom's kin may stipulate that all the expenses of the wedding be met by the bride's kin, including the cost of their travel to the bride's city or town. Sometimes the groom's

party may express its desire for having a 'grand' wedding, and the girl's kin have to agree.

It is essential to mention that resources are consumed on a large scale at a wedding. The dowry money is far from being 'a rotating capital fund' as some imagine it to be. There is nothing to prevent the parents of the groom from putting the dowry money to any use they like, and it is not always that they have an unmarried daughter to whose spouse the money is given as dowry. What it leads to is certainly the impoverishment of the girl's parents, and it does not always buy security for the girl. There is no guarantee that it will prevent the groom's parents from making new demands on the bride's.

While bride-price was always a fixed amount within an endogamous *jati*, and the various prestations that needed to be made were also specified, dowry is characterized by asymmetry, uncertainty and unpredictability. All the expenditure might be on the bride's side only, and there are no norms as to what the groom's kin may ask. That is not all. Months after the wedding, when the girl is pregnant or on some other occasion, the groom's kin may demand from her kin, that a particular item of costly jewellery be presented to her. If the parents of the girl do not produce the jewellery the girl might be harassed, and in extreme cases, even set aside.

I have said above that great expenditure is frequently incurred on weddings due to the bride's family's desire to vindicate their status, and less frequently, to the demand of the groom's kin that the wedding be performed 'grandly'. There is also a third and perhaps much deeper source of lavish expenditure at weddings (and funerals). Briefly stated, the argument may be summed up in the following manner: Rural society is divided into conflicting, multi-caste factions, each faction being led by a single patron or combination of a few friendly patrons. There is competition among the rival patrons for winning over the allegiance of clients, many of whom shift their loyalty from patron to patron. The huge dinners which are given at weddings, and the procession with fireworks, etc., are means to retain the allegiance of clients. Villagers talk of the great dinners given at the wedding of so-and-so. They mention the number of sheep slaughtered, the number of people fed, the wonderful dances of nautch girls, etc. Since the techniques of preserving grain were primitive until

recently, and it went bad if kept for long time, feeding clients was a good way of putting such grain to use.

These deep-rooted tendencies have been carried on to modern times and they have gained strength by getting linked to the status of the family celebrating the wedding, its desire to articulate its networks, consumerism, etc.

IX

I hope that my brief account of dowry has given some idea of the strength of the institution and its ramifications. The fight against the institution will have to be carried out simultaneously on several fronts. The struggle will most probably be a long one. It is necessary to remember that dowry is the suttee of the twentieth century.

Some may think that all that is needed to put an end to dowry is a really stern piece of legislation which prescribes deterrent punishment for those who demand dowry and those guilty of bride-burying. But deterrent legislation, however desirable, may not be enough. The police, the judiciary, especially judiciary at the lower levels, and the general public need to be educated about dowry, the hardship it causes to poor and middle class parents, and how it degrades those who receive it while impoverishing those who pay it. On the social side, it results in the destruction of hard-earned wealth at weddings in an effort to maintain or improve the status of the bride's kin. Dowry, in short, is an anti-social institution.

The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 has been unanimously declared to be an utterly ineffective law.¹⁶ In spite of the rapid spread of dowry since independence, the number of cases taken up under the Act have been pitifully few. Leaving aside legislation for the moment, a great deal needs to be done to change the attitudes of the police, of the judiciary, of neighbours, and finally, of the bride (or wife). These dimensions assume a particular significance in the context of 'dowry deaths' which have assumed menacing proportions in recent years particularly in the Delhi region. In a recent article,¹⁷ Sumanta Bannerjee has writ-

¹⁶ See *Report of the National Committee on Status of Women in India*, Summary Report, pp. 44-5.

¹⁷ *Deccan Herald*, Bangalore, 7 February 1984.

ten that 'The process of trial and punishment of the accused in dowry death cases, apart from being lengthy, is fraught with numerous hurdles. First, the local police refuse to co-operate with the relations of the victim and do a shoddy job by way of investigation. As a result, the prosecution case does not have a leg to stand on in the course of the trial, and the accused are acquitted in the absence of suitable evidence.'

In every aspect of the police investigation of bride-burning there is incompetence as well as indifference. For instance, in spite of the Central Home Ministry's instructions that all unnatural deaths should be investigated by a Deputy Superintendent of Police or higher official it is not unknown for dowry deaths to be investigated by sub-inspectors.

Sumanta Banerjee makes the point that the data released on bride-burning in Delhi by the women's organization, Saheli, reveal the sorry state of police investigation even in the capital.

Of 11 cases registered under Section 306 IPC (abetment to suicide) since 1979, not a single conviction had taken place till 31 May 1983, and of 94 cases registered as murders, only 12 were convicted during the period. Saheli had found that more than two-thirds of bride-burning cases were investigated as accidents with no case ever registered, and though the post-mortem is often conducted the police records never give the results of the post-mortem.

The attitude of the judiciary at the lower levels is such that they 'tend to dismiss most of the cases and acquit the accused on grounds of insufficient evidence, an excuse supplied indirectly by the prosecution itself because of police indifference in the course of investigation'.

Early in November 1983, the Delhi High Court overturned the judgement of Mr S. M. Aggarwal, Additional Sessions Judge, who had awarded in May 1983 a triple death sentence in a bride-burning case:

The husband had been sentenced to death along with his mother and brother for burning Sudha, a twenty-one year old bride who was expecting her first child. It was, according to Mr. Aggarwal, a particularly diabolical, well-planned and pre-meditated murder deserving the extreme penalty. The accused had stored twenty litres of kerosene though they had a cooking gas connection, and, on the fateful day, they had poured kerosene on Sudha in the backyard and had locked

the doors in order to prevent her from escaping.... The judge (of the High Court) have acquitted the accused because the prosecution had not produced conclusive evidence in support of its contention that the crime was calculated and pre-planned.¹⁸

Judges understandably look for clear and indisputable evidence especially in a case where a person is charged with having committed murder but can such evidence be available in cases where the husband, his mother and brothers all conspire to do away with the husband's wife who is staying with them? The neighbours are reluctant to be involved in a murder case affecting those who live physically very close. The police, as I mentioned earlier, are ill-paid, ill-qualified, incompetent, indifferent and corrupt, and it is not unfair to say that they frequently look to how they can benefit from the tragedy that has occurred.

Most important of all there is the attitude of the victim which is baffling, to say the least. As Sumanta Banerjee says,

... Certain questions should be gone into thoroughly. Why do these women (those who are not murdered but driven to suicide) feel so helpless as to kill themselves? Why even in their dying statements, they corroborate the husband's or in-laws' story about their being involved in accidents?... The Delhi-based Saheli found that in most of the cases, the women in their dying declarations confirmed whatever their in-laws said. Saheli asks, was the husband present during such declaration? Did his presence influence the dying woman's statement?

A number of victims are educated women, some are even working women. 'Yet they seldom show independence of mind to leave their husbands' homes, and choose instead to remain there and suffer persecution. Is it the fear of social stigma that prevents them from remaining alone? What kind of despair makes them choose the last resort of suicide? What makes them leave their in-laws always under the shadow of death?'

Answers to these searching questions must certainly be found but that is only part of the solution. Considering how deeply entrenched dowry is, and the price it extracts from the girl and her natal kin, nothing less than a powerful and wide-ranging

¹⁸ Editorial, *Deccan Herald*, Bangalore, 5 November 1983. See also editorial in *The Bulletin of the Centre for Women's Development Studies*, Vol. I, No. 2, November 1983.

social movement will be adequate to wipe it off the face of the country. The institution needs to be attacked on all fronts, and educating the public about its harmful effects in a variety of areas, is a most urgent task. The takers of dowry must be ostracized and ridiculed. During the marriage season, neighbourhood dramas in the local language must be staged bringing home to the people the evils of the institution. Any information received about dowry must be given the utmost publicity using, if necessary, wall-newspapers and town-criers in villages. The support of enlightened men and women, the press, politicians and officials must of course be enlisted in this fight. Pressure must be put on political parties to give tickets only to candidates who have worked against dowry and to deny them to those who are known to have taken dowry or participated in dowry transactions.

The movement to combat dowry should be built around the core idea that men and women are equals and should have equal access to education, employment, property, etc. It may be a very difficult idea to accept. I have met men who all their adult life have regarded themselves as spokesmen for the poor and oppressed but balked at the idea of gender equality. I should not be surprised if some regard the struggle for gender equality as a red herring drawn across the trail of the much more important struggle to do away with classes and castes. But all this should not deter those who seek to bring about equality between the sexes and wipe out the vile institution of dowry.

30/1/97