

# India - The Effect of Capitalist Development on Gender Violence: Dowry and Female Feticide

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**With its tumultuous diversity and multifaceted culture, India has had its own history of the oppression of women. Feudal, patriarchal values have conjoined with capitalism (first brought in through colonization, now being imposed by both Indian ruling elites and Western capital represented by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank) to reinforce and continue women's oppression in various ways. The result is that violence against women has increased.**

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Pre-capitalist forms of violence are sometimes presented as remnants of the past, which will be abolished with the development of capital ism, modernization or simply education. Visitors from Europe or North America put the blame on the backwardness of India's culture. The national government says the same. But although much of the violence against women in Indian society takes its forms from the past, its content has changed. It results from the type of capitalist development that exists in this particular country. Two major, interconnected forms of violence against women in India are dowry death (or bride-burning) and female feticide. We will try to explain the strength and function of these two forms in present-day India. The purpose of this article is not to analyse every aspect of dowry. Rather, it is to explain the changes that have affected this social custom with the onset of capitalist development. [\[1\]](#)

## Origins of Dowry

Violence against women in India is part of the violence against oppressed people, i.e. *dalits* ("lower" castes), workers and indigenous peoples (*adivasis*). Gender violence also occurs within the communities of the oppressed: women therefore have an additional burden to bear. A complex interaction of class, caste, gender and culture impinges upon the forms of violence perpetrated on women in India.

Amongst other forms of violence against women, the practice of dowry — an important social custom — has led to the murder of large numbers of women. It is one of the more significant kinds of violence being inflicted on women today and has taken on grisly features lately. A complex set of factors has made “dowry deaths” an almost commonplace occurrence. We have to examine several processes to begin to understand how and why women have been confronted with dowry-related violence, and how dowry itself has changed over a period of time.

Dowry is the cash or goods or both given to the groom’s family by the bride’s family to effect marriage and subsequently on other occasions after marriage has taken place. The higher the status of the groom, the higher is the dowry demanded.

It would be difficult to ascertain when and exactly how the practice originated and what were the precise historical factors that went into making dowry mandatory in Hindu caste society, as there is very little data available and very few records to draw upon. But broadly speaking several processes took place in conjunction, giving dowry its present form.

In pre-capitalist India, dowry was connected with the hierarchical character of the caste system. It was practiced mainly by upper castes and the land-owning castes. Both land and caste were the parameters of power in feudal India. “Hypergamy”, i.e. marrying of the daughter to a family of higher caste, was a means of securing alliances with powerful families. Dowry was given to compensate for the difference between the status of the two families. It served to compensate for the increase in status of the bride’s family, and was a recognition of the higher status of the groom’s family.

Another factor that went into the practice of dowry was the concept of women’s chastity and purity. Hinduism has fixed prescriptions for proper female behavior, all of which are aimed at controlling women’s fertility and sexuality. Women in pre-colonial India were considered to be the property of their fathers, husbands and sons, to be protected in childhood, wifehood and old age. Like most organized religion, Hinduism does not grant women equality, though it has changed over the years and accommodates various liberal strands within it. A woman is to be the bearer of a male child, a dutiful wife and a submissive daughter. In pre-capitalist society, it was considered obligatory for the father to give his daughter in marriage at the right age to the right family.

Even when the marriage was between families of similar status, in some of the upper and middle castes, some dowry was given. It was connected with the fact that women from the upper castes were not allowed to do productive work. Women were considered to be unwanted burdens after a certain age. Dowry was therefore the price paid to the groom’s family for accepting a daughter, so that they would protect her and provide for her.

### **From Bride-Price to Dowry**

Dowry was practiced by the upper castes and some middle castes. The lower castes seldom gave dowries; instead they had a custom of bride-price or mutual gift-giving. In these castes, women’s labor was used extensively on the land. Women were therefore seen to be active in “productive” activities. They were not perceived to be economic burdens. Bride-price was a recognition of the value of women’s labour and a compensation to the bride’s family for loss of her labour. Lower-caste Hindu society thus perceived women as significant contributors to the economy. This does not mean that it was not oppressive of women; just that dowry was not manifest in quite the same forms. The socio-economic context in which bride-price made the transition to dowry would give an indication of how the status of women changed over a period of time.

Dowry, though restricted to the upper and middle castes in pre-capitalist India, is now rapidly spreading to other castes and communities which have seldom practiced dowry in the past. Contemporary dowry practices are quantitatively as well as qualitatively different from earlier patterns. While dowry was always a means to subjugate women, it is now assuming violent and cruel forms. Women are being tortured by their in-laws in order to extract more dowry, to an extent that they often force women into suicide. In many cases in-laws themselves burn women alive to get a new bride and more dowry.

Some of the significant features of dowry as it is practiced today are:

- a) It is spreading to all castes, classes and religious communities. Although it was originally a Hindu custom, now some Muslim and Christian groups also practice dowry.
- b) The amount of dowry being exchanged is increasing. Many marriages are founded on the sole consideration of dowry.
- c) Along with caste and property, higher education, jobs in the public sector or administrative services, professional status (e.g. as doctors, lawyers or engineers), and citizen ship of a Western country are some of the factors that contribute to the dowry being demanded.
- d) The violence related to dowry is assuming brutal forms. It exists now in almost all states of India. In pre-colonial India dowry, while a form of women's subordination, was not accompanied by such brutal violence on such a large scale.

The issue here is that modernization and capitalist development do not seem to have diluted the practice of dowry. One of the reasons for this is that dowry as it is practiced in contemporary India is a product of an interaction between past forms of subjugation of women and the socio-economic changes that have resulted from the processes of colonization and colonial capitalist development.

### **Colonization and Women's Economic Marginalization**

In pre-colonial India, the caste system was essentially an economic and social division of the various components of Hindu society. Each caste and subcaste had a specific position in the caste hierarchy, and was accompanied by a corresponding occupation. The social rank accruing to each caste division was also dependent on economic power, which was decided by the success each group had historically in manipulating and coercing the different elements of the social matrix. The caste system had strict regulations laid down for its adherents, which had to be followed in their entirety if caste purity and status were to be retained. Marriage, pollution rules, social codes and norms varied within and among caste groups.

Colonization introduced the capitalist mode of production in India, in accordance with the needs of British imperialism. This brought about several contradictory and complex changes in the economy and society. The caste system is no longer the predominant form of social division of labour, reducing the correspondence between caste and occupation. Capitalism has blurred caste distinctions, as it brought in a different kind of education system and industries, providing new avenues for social and economic mobility for different caste groups.

Colonization affected feudal relations and Hindu caste society in a way that aggravated the situation of women. For example, the colonial system of allotting land entitlements in the name of the head of the household, i.e. the man, paved the way for the disinheritance of women, where customary laws often allowed women to hold property. The pre-capitalist economy in India was largely land-

household- and community-based. Women played significant roles in all three of these spheres. Home-based production made women's work an important component of the pre-capitalist economy.

With the introduction of capitalism, economic control shifted away from the house hold and "production" centres were relocated outside the household. Mechanization was selectively introduced, displacing women from traditional areas of work and making their labour redundant. Privatization of family land-holdings and of communally-owried land such as pastures and forests had an overall negative effect on women's productive capacities. Women's control over natural resources declined.

Cottage industry and household industry were ruined by British policy. For example, spinning and weaving were among the major occupations for women in pre-colonial India. There were regional specializations of women's crafts, e.g. silk manufacturing in Assam, blanket-making in the North, chikan in Uttar Pradesh, quilting in Bengal, tie-dye in Rajasthan, and rug-making in Sindh and Baluchistan. With colonization, most women were eliminated from their traditional areas of production, while new economic opportunities were almost completely closed to them.

Rice dehusking is another such example. Rice pounding was one of the major women's occupations in some of India's rice-producing regions. In 1901, the number of women engaged in rice pounding was 2.5 million. By 1931, with the introduction of rice meal, the number of women engaged in this occupation fell to 131,000.

## **Independence and Capitalist Development**

Post-independence saw a continuation of these processes of capitalist development, with a devastating effect on women. "Socialism" was the byword of a post-colonial era whose major political figures were influenced by the vision of a Fabian utopia, but guided by the interests of more well-to-do peasants and major industrial companies. The ruling elite continued to consist of landlords, capitalists, upper-caste Hindus and bureaucrats. While an attempt was made to imitate Soviet-style planning, the state subsidized the private sector with infrastructure and financial support so that private industry could defend itself against Western capital and get a firm foothold in heavy industry.

While there was a current of liberal reform that wanted the state to play the role of benefactor and "uplift" the masses, there was little success in the alleviation of poverty or provision of health care or jobs. Indian society continued to be guided by pre-independence class relations, determined also in large part by caste.

The needs of capital led to contradictions between protectionism and liberalization, with a long-term shift from the first to the second. The process of economic liberalization began as early as 1960, though the pace was slow and occurred in fits and starts according to the exigencies of capital. On the other hand, the Indian state was obliged to keep up its rhetorical, socialist facade, partly because of popular movements, partly because of the political dynamics of India's position in South Asia and the patronage of the former Soviet Union. In 1969 banks were nationalized, while in the 1980's economic liberalization received a big boost. Since 1990, the country has witnessed a near-complete dismantling of government controls. National and Western capital is poised for a takeover, with the strength of the Indian state behind it.

Throughout the years of post-independence "development", large numbers of women have found themselves in low-paying, piece-rate, informal work that does not come under the purview of labour laws and is not granted any kind of state protection. Even while women joined the labour force in

increasing numbers, they were pushed out onto the periphery of the labour market. Women's work-load has increased; wages have not.

In recent years, the introduction of new technology in agriculture has rendered many women unemployed. Rationalization and modernization of textile mills has eliminated women from jobs that they had traditionally held in large numbers. In the face of growing unemployment and a worsening economic situation, the percentage of women engaged in economically gainful activities has declined. The only positive experience has been for middle-class women, who have gotten more education and entered the service sector in large numbers.

### **Sanskritization**

Capitalism has also brought other changes to Hindu society in particular, by reducing somewhat the correspondence between caste and occupation. While caste still determines social life, kinship relations and marriage alliances, there has been a certain amount of secularization at least in urban areas, although the process is by no means complete or invariant. On the other hand, a process of "Sanskritization" has set in.

Sanskritization implies social and cultural hegemony of the upper castes. It is an attempt to erode the lines between upper and lower castes at the cost of lower-caste identity; it seeks to absorb all lower-caste customs, life-styles and cultural legacies into the "mainstream" of upper-caste Hinduism. It is also an imitation of upper-caste norms of behaviour and customs by lower-caste people seeking to achieve upward mobility on the ladder of caste structure. (It is much the same as the process whereby the hegemony of white "civilization" is imposed on or accepted by black and indigenous peoples.)

The interaction of pre-existing customs of dowry amongst upper-caste Hindus, the process of Sanskritization, and the economic processes set into motion by capitalism brought about an entirely changed situation for women. This changed situation has led to the perception that women are economically unproductive, which is the basic premise behind the contemporary practice of dowry. Consumerism and commercialization of each and every aspect of life are two additional factors. It is the coincidence of all these factors that explains the new phenomenon of dowry death or bride-burning.

Thus dowry death is not a continuing form of violence from the past, though its form is feudal. Its content is very much rooted in the new economic reality.

### **Women Organize against Dowry**

The women's movement in India was galvanized around the issue of dowry in the late 1970s. A sudden increase in "accidental" deaths of women came to the notice of some women's groups in urban areas. Many of these deaths were suicides; others were instances when women had been burnt to death. Investigations by women's groups revealed the chilling and sordid reality behind these deaths.

A glance at some statistics reveals the extent of women's vulnerability to "dowry death" in India. In Delhi, two women die of burns every day. In a Bombay municipal hospital there were 157 burn cases in six months (1987-88). In Bangalore, suicide and dowry deaths doubled in 1984. Karnataka report nine cases of dowry deaths in 1982, 31 in 1983 and 48 in 1984. Andhra Pradesh reported 14 deaths in 1983, 27 in 1984 and 38 in 1985. Uttar Pradesh reported 14 deaths in 1984 and 323 in 1985.

Madhya Pradesh reported 42 cases in just five months from June to October 1985. In Maharashtra there were 129 cases of dowry death in 1984, which doubled in 1985. According to the official crime statistics registered with police stations, six women are burned alive every day in the state of Gujarat alone, which has the highest rate of dowry death. There are probably just as many unreported deaths. [2]

Even for those unwilling to go by statistic there can be no denying that dowry can be seen as a harmless social ritual that meant to regulate and distribute economic resources. Dowry deaths are a chilling indication of the expandability of women's lives in a patriarchal set-up that is guided by the interests of capitalist modernization. This is the reality of women's lives, which are continuously exposed to the dangers that these two forces unleash as they spin in each other.

Women's groups rose up against this social menace in the 1970s. The anti-dowry campaign entailed fighting cases in court; organizing protest demonstrations and social boycotts against dowry-giving and -receiving families; fighting against the police and forcing the media to recognize dowry deaths for the murders they were. Bombay, Calcutta, Delhi, Pune and Nagpur saw women of all ages come into the streets, picket outside residences distributing pamphlets, send memoranda to state agencies, argue at police stations, and engage in a debate over the effectiveness of the law.

A wave of awareness was generated by the anti-dowry campaign, which forced the state to respond and has at least discredited this custom at a social level. There is much more that needs to be done, for women are still being murdered in the name of dowry, but a beginning has been made.

### **Debates in the Movement**

In the course of the anti-dowry campaign, different strands of opinion surfaced inside and outside the women's movement about what dowry actually is and what purpose it serves. An overview of these opinions follows:

- a. Dowry basically represents social values intrinsic to Hindu families and the Hindu social set-up that have become distorted due to modernization. Consumerism and material greed have led to commodification of women, and linked social relations to the acquisition of wealth. The need of the moment is to raise people's consciousness about this commercialization. Once this is done, dowry will be eliminated.
- b. The transition from bride-price to dowry is due to the deteriorating role of female labour in the economic sphere and the reduction of women's contribution to the family. Women's cost of maintenance is therefore much higher than their economic input. Dowry came into being to balance this unequal situation.
- c. Dowry is a rotating sum of money that comes in at the son's wedding and is used for the daughter's marriage. Daughters are now economic liabilities; once they are gainfully employed, dowry will disappear.
- d. Dowry is a manifestation of a backward, semi-feudal custom, which takes on a consumerist, capitalist framework. With changes in economic and production relations, it will be eliminated.
- e. Dowry is a tribute from bride-giving families to bride-receiving families. It is a "clear manifestation of a structurally hypergamous, non-reciprocal, asymmetrical and extractive relationship between i) bride-giving and -receiving families and ii) men and women". [3]



f. Dowry is a transfer of wealth between families, with women as the medium through which it is effected. It is an acknowledgment of the groom's status, which is deemed to be superior as he takes upon himself the burden of an unwanted daughter. Laws will not help eliminate dowry; it will continue to be exchanged under cover. The answer is to demand inheritance rights for women.

## **Female Feticide**

The perception that women are burdens, and the overall patriarchal bias in Hindu caste society, has led to an increasing preference for male children. A woman's place is considered to be with her husband, and marriage is supposed to mean that all connections with the daughter have been severed. This leaves the male children to look after parents in their old age and carry forward the family line. Hindu scriptures also forbid daughters from burning the dead; the cremation pyre is supposed to be lit by the eldest son.

For these reasons, the custom of female infanticide was prevalent in some castes of pre-colonial India: the restricted number of caste groups that practiced dowry. In present society, the spread of the dowry system has combined with advances in medical technology and capitalist modernization to give rise to yet another heinous crime — female feticide.

Amniocentesis and chorion biopsy, both medical tests that were devised basically to detect genetic abnormalities in the fetus, are now being used in India primarily to detect the sex of the fetus. The detection of a female fetus usually leads to abortion. Modern technology is therefore being used to further intensify discrimination against women.

Female feticide has today reached alarming proportions and threatens to continue unabated. In Gujarat alone, according to conservative estimates, 100,000 female fetuses are aborted every year. Amniocentesis is offered by most abortion clinics and gynecologists, not only in big cities but also in small towns.

When contacted by activists, doctors openly acknowledge that amniocentesis has had side effects on women's health. Nonetheless, in complete disregard of medical ethics, doctors have been openly conducting sex-selection tests and performing abortions of female fetuses. When questioned by activists, they have bluntly argued, "We are providing a service that is demanded by the society." Doctors, considered as the most educated and the "cream" of Indian society, consider this a way to get easy money.

Common people, both men and women, feel that instead of raising a girl and paying dowry for her marriage later, it is better to spend money on a sex-determination test today. But the test is also widely used by educated, middle-class people in order to have a "balanced" family. The educated middle class is committed to the norm of small families, but do not want small families with only daughters. Sex-determination tests are thus becoming popular among all caste, class and religious groups in India.

Economists argue, "Why fight against it? As the supply of women decreases, their status will automatically rise." But the laws of supply and demand do not work here. The sex ratio in India is negative and declining. It was 972 women for every 1000 men at the beginning of this century, and it has continuously declined. It has now reached 927 women for every 1000 men. In places where the sex ratio is extremely negative, for example in areas of Rajasthan and Bihar, forced polyandry is a growing form of women's oppression. Women are forced to have sexual relations with all male members of the family. With further declines in the sex ratio, violence against women — harassment, rape, etc. — will increase.

To add insult to injury, female feticide is often cited as a measure of population control. The Indian government is today facing tremendous pressure to implement population control measures from the IMF and Western countries on which India is dependent for aid. Arguments in favour of tolerating female feticide gain a wider currency since abortion of female fetuses decreases population growth in two ways: the number of children less, and the number of future mothers less.

The Indian government thus side-steps the main issue of redistribution of resources, and becomes more concerned about restricting population growth than about addressing basic issues such as unemployment, health care and land reform. Western governments have their own reasons for turning a blind eye to the whole issue of consumption patterns that deepen the divide between rich and poor nations.

To rectify these imbalances, to change the reality of women's lives for the better, to ensure that women are able to live with dignity and with the basic essentials of life, our struggles cannot remain localized. The forces with which we are confronted are global. The "new world order" demands new response and more creative political action that can enfold women in all corners of the globe.

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## **Footnotes**

[1] Sources for this article, besides those cited in footnotes below, have included V.I. Pavlov, *Historical Premises for India's Transition to capitalism* (1973); André Béteille, *Caste, class and Power* (1971); C.J. Fuller, *The Camphor Flames* (1992); Amiya Kumar Bagchi, *The Political Economy of Underdevelopment* (1982); Romilla Thapar, *India*, vol. 1 (1966); Veena Pooncha (ed.), *Understanding Violence* (Bombay: Research Centre for Women's Studies, 1992); Govind Kelkar, "Violence against Women" in Niroj Sinha (ed.), *Women and Violence* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1989); Vibhuti Patel, "Towards a Feminist Critique of Theories of Violence" (Jan. 1985); Neera Desai and Maitheyi Krisnaraj, *Women and Society* (New Delhi: Ajanta, 1987); and Madhu Kishwar, "Dowry calculations", *Manushi* no. 78 (New Delhi, 1993). We wish to acknowledge the help of Ms. Moly Jacob, without whose help this article would not have been typed and finished!

[2] Nandhi Ghandi and Nandita Shah, *The issues at Stake* (1992)

[3] Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (London: Zed Books, 1981), cited in Gandhi and Shah, *op.cit.*