

Vol. 3, No. 3, September 2015

p-ISSN: 2338-8617

e-ISSN: 2443-2067

Jurnal Ilmiah

PEURADEUN

Media Kajian Ilmiah Sosial, Politik, Hukum, Agama dan Budaya



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JIP

International Multidisciplinary Journal
OAJI: 745/1396982282-2014/R-6.465
ORCHID iDs: 0000-0001-8492-315X
Thomson Reuters: RID-F-6135-2014

ISI Impact Factor Value 2014 ICR: 0.479
Copernicus ICV 2013: 4.05
Google Scholar Index-h3, i10: 3
IBI Factor 2014-15: 3.26

 Copernicus Publications
The Innovative Open Access Publisher



SCAD Independent
IAO Accreditation
4-8362/387/IAO/2014



THE PRACTICE OF DOWRY IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF HINDUISM IN INDIA

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Received: August 12, 2015

Accepted: August 30, 2015

Published: Sept 20, 2015

Article Url: <http://www.scadindependent.org>

Abstract

Hindu religious notions have ingrained a sense of powerlessness in the psyche of many Indian women. Women are discouraged from making complaints of dowry harassment and abuse in the name of defending "family honor". Awareness of women's status in India is a key element for change and abolition of dowry abuse. But, families should be encouraged to defend the rights of its women. This needs to extend outward so greater solidarity among women can be built since women are often the ones inflicting and perpetuating the abuse of young brides. All such behavior would help to alter the core attitudes that victimized women develop of themselves. In these ways, women can empower their existence within the context not only of policymaking, but also within a world that will promote equality, respect, and dignity for all living beings.

Keywords: *Hinduism, India, Dowry, Practice, Religion*

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A. Introduction

Hinduism is a complex religion that plays a crucial role in many Indian women's lives. The practice of dowry giving derives from intricate religious traditions as well as from the broader historical, social, and cultural contexts of India. The origins and evolution of dowry reach back to Hindu marriage traditions. Many of those customs focused on the characteristics of inheritance and property where there was a prominent relationship between property, women's inheritance rights, and marriage. Women's economic inferiority was correlated with their sexual subordination to men. Within this patriarchal system, property was a symbol that divided power between men and women. The elements of husband and ancestor worship, and respect for legitimate motherhood, were also factors in the patriarchal arrangement of marriage.

According to the ideology of *stridharama* advocated by the literature of Brahma, money or material goods given to the girl by her parents were a *stridhan*, meaning "woman's treasure." This gift was a sole and secure property for the bride in time of need. Also, *dharmya* represents the need for the bride's father to arrange the marriage and offer the gift of daughter according to the scriptures of *Manu*. This form of 'religious non-reciprocal gift-giving' is one of the foundations of the patriarchal dowry system in India.

Hindu doctrine is explicit about the social position of women. Portrayals of women in the Vedic age likened women to Devis (goddesses), with "priests creating an idealized portrait of submissive, housebound women" (though at the same time "evoking the image of mothers as powerful, protective and supportive") (Sakuntala, 1952: 104). Important deities include Lord Rama and His wife Sita Devi, and Lord Shiva and His wife Parvati Devi. Lord Rama is known for His convictions of truth, justice, and most of all, dharma (duty). He conveys these vital ideologies in the important Hindu religious epic The *Ramayana*. Lord Rama's wife, Goddess Sita, sees Him as a God; she is a devotee of His every Being. Goddess Sita represents the ideal Indian wife, the one with impeccable purity. This purity is Her obedience of Her Husband's belief.

This obedience, in turn, reflects Her faithful devotion toward Him. This doctrine is the reason many Hindu men expect some form of obedience or respect from their “devoted” wives.

Lord *Shiva* plays the ‘lead’ role of the Destroyer of Evil. Goddess Parvati was separated from His body, incarnating other Goddesses such as Kali Ma (Goddess of Destruction) and Durga Ma (Goddess of Strength). Although many Hindus devote their prayers to Durga Ma as the Giver of Strength and Power, *Lord Shiva* over shadows her potential. People of the Hindu faith regard Him as the Ultimate Destroyer of Evil. In essence, regardless of the power a woman may possess, her man outshines her. The man leads and the woman follows.

An examination of the relationship between religious texts and the origins of women’s social and economic inequality could suggest ways to reinterpret religious doctrine in order to help advance women’s status in India today.

B. Religious Tradition, Laws

During the period of British colonial rule in India, many British writers condemned Indian religion, culture, and societal pressures regarding women. For example, James Mill, the author of *History of British India*, “learned about Hindu society through readings of the Code of Manu, some religious works, and accounts written by travelers and missionaries. He concluded that ‘nothing can exceed the habitual contempt which the Hindus entertain for their women...They are held, accordingly, in extreme degradation” (Forbes, 1996: 13).

Ironically, the British did not view their oppression of India as analogous to the Indian suppression of women. Instead, they interpreted India’s ancient texts within the context of the societal changes that were taking place in the country as a result of the British colonial presence. The colonial period marked an era of transformation in Indian socio-religious institutions through the observation and criticism of the traditional functioning of Indian society. Hence, before British rule, *kanyadan*, known as proper ‘bride-price,’ was an enforced traditional ritual, whereas during

and after British rule, dowry had become a separate entity from the marriage custom of *kanyadan*.

There is, however, no denying that Indian women benefited from the gradual improvement of enforced laws through the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 and the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961. These “acts” were the first steps toward the emancipation of women. The Hindu Marriage Act removed all “legal disabilities” of women in marital relations. A woman was entitled to fair treatment, without the abuse of her husband through cruelty, rape, emotional and sexual assault, or desertion. Moreover, she had additional legal rights to divorce. The legislation recognized the existing Hindu marriage ceremonies, but “in order to facilitate decision in case of litigation, registration was recommended” (Srinivas, 1984: 368).

There has always been difficulty in implementing these laws, however, because of the social and traditional obligations of giving expensive ornaments, jewelry, and clothes to a bride. This points to a major problem in Indian society, the obsession with reputation and family honor. The commodities earned through “marriage bargains” enhance the status of the groom’s family. Ironically, the transaction also displays a reputable “giving” nature from the bride’s side. Many families would do almost anything, even murder young women, to uphold their prestigious status. It seems that no law can stop this. The fact that laws and proposals alone cannot change the mentality of a particular society is critical to understand.

C. Education and Awareness

Social traditions such as dowry giving place Indian women in a fragile and often dangerous environment. In the Hindu religious epics, women manage to hold their own place in a male-dominated society. In traditional and modern India, however, women have to overcome stereotypes, legal barriers, and social acceptance to assume an active and vital role in Indian culture. Religious notions have ingrained a sense of powerlessness in the psyche of women. Awareness-raising is a key initial step in breaking down traditional barriers and changing attitudes.

It has been held that dowry is a means to compensate for the “weakness” symbolized by a girl. This justification counters the notion of a dishonorable gain on the part of a son through the demanding of dowry. The blame goes to the girl’s “inferiority,” enhancing male chauvinism and leaving women in a subservient position. Arranged marriages thus place the boy’s family in an advantageous position to make demands.

The solution to such an unfair distribution of power is in the hands of the youth themselves. They have an obligation to lead a crusade against the dowry system and to bring about a healthy change within Indian society. Ingrained religious orthodoxy does not make the situation simple. Furthermore, “The anti dowry act is rarely enforced. It also needs to be strengthened. A penalty of Rs2, 000 and six months imprisonment is hardly adequate punishment for those who inflict physical and mental torture on helpless young women” (Grover, 1990: 60). The punishment does not fit the crime and reflects the anti-dowry battle from a decade ago. Even at present, the laws do not prevent abuse and violence against innocent young women.

Many women do not have the courage to come forward with complaints of dowry harassment and abuse due to fear of putting their “family honor” to shame. Radha Kumar (1993: 67) believes that “no one (including the police) had ever bothered to investigate (these complaints) or even categorize them. And mostly they had been passed off as private affairs that took place within the family and were of no concern to the state”. Indeed, the accusers of dowry abuse can easily bribe corrupted police officers to get away with the violence they inflict on brides.

The solutions to the problems of dowry abuse lie not only in laws, but also in the core attitudes of the victimized women themselves. Women do not value their own lives, and thus endure massive physical, mental and emotional abuse from their husbands and in-laws. An unfortunate irony is that many of the cruelties are inflicted on these innocent women by women themselves. One would expect that mothers-in-law would compassionately understand new brides’ fears and anxieties. Paradoxically, their blind obsession with money takes away this sense of support. Mallika Sarabhai

(in Kumar, 1993: 68), a well-known dancer and women's rights activist, points to the significance of women supporting each other:

Women are suppressed, tortured and killed for many different reasons in India. If every Indian woman promises to herself that she will not torture another woman, that she will protect each woman, that she will respect womanhood, India will change tomorrow.

Education plays a crucial role in building this supportive attitude between women. Despite the increase in literacy rates for women, most women are not educated in the real sense of the term. According to Vinay Bharadwaj, a professor at the University of Delhi, "the Indian education system, which should help change the thinking of the society, is not doing that" (see in Ranjana, 1999: 86). The Indian education system produces engineers, doctors, and professionals, but it is not liberating the mind. There is no social or moral orientation within education.

On the other hand, Kailash Rekhi (in Sastri, 2010: 68) states that a social worker who helps dowry victims receive legal and financial assistance through non-government and government agencies, optimistically believes the situation is getting better, due to the fact that many Indian girls are becoming aware of their rights and their rightful place in society. They are rejecting marriage proposals where dowry is demanded. They believe they are not worth less than any boy because their parents have given them a good education and they are financially independent. If a young man wants to marry one of them, he has to accept her on her own merit and not for money.

In addition, young people are taking responsibility for their own lives which provides optimism for the movement against the consumerist treatment of women. They are "raising their voices and asking their parents why they are being used as commodities with a price tag?" (Srinivas, 1984: 32). Indeed, many Indian girls are rejecting men who see them as property, rather than as living, breathing, and feeling human beings. Traditional values are difficult to mold in one day. Nevertheless, there has been a gradual yet prominent improvement in the handling of pertinent issues of dowry.

Awareness-building and education will increase confidence and self-reliance in the psyches of women, who will then incorporate the basic transformations necessary to fight effectively against the injustices of female infanticide and dowry abuse. Ultimately, the movement to combat dowry revolves around the core notion that men and women are equals and should have equal access to education, employment, and property. One should, indeed, “seek the possibility to bring about equality between the sexes and wipe out the vile institution of dowry (Srinivas, 1984: 35).

D. Conclusion

Hinduism is a complex religion that plays a crucial role in many Indian women’s lives. The practice of dowry giving derives from intricate religious traditions as well as from the broader historical, social, and cultural contexts of India. The origins and evolution of dowry reach back to Hindu marriage traditions. Many of those customs focused on the characteristics of inheritance and property where there was a prominent relationship between property, women’s inheritance rights, and marriage.

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