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April 2015

Sponsor: Jason Fuller  
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## **The Impact of Arranged Marital Customs on Women's Autonomy in Rural India**

### ***Abstract***

*It will be argued that while modernization in India has allowed for small improvements to women's autonomy, in rural India today the little autonomy women do have is constricted through traditional norms and expectations related to the fundamental notion of love, rural economic constraints, and contemporary dowry culture. This thesis works to understand how women's autonomy may be restricted through the fundamental notion of love, which emphasizes group cohesion over individualism, the lack of structural economic resources in rural areas, and high financial expectations in relation to dowry culture. This research will conclude by arguing that the future of women's autonomy in India rests on the ability for women to escape acts of violence and become financially independent.*



## **Acknowledgements**

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I found the majority of my research through the DePauw University Libraries and multiple wonderful DePauw University professors who let me borrow their books for extended periods of time!



# Map of India<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Source: One World Nations Online, [http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/india\\_map.html](http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/india_map.html)

<sup>2</sup> From August-December, 2014 I spent time living and working in Pune, India. Everyday I



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## Introduction

*I once met a woman named Deepti who was from the outskirts of Rajasthan. Deepti finished primary school, was studying business administration at a local college, and in general, from an outsider's perspective, was headed toward a happy and successful future. But then something happened. Her father's business wasn't doing well, or her brother got into an accident; it could have been anything. Bottom line, her family was facing economic hardship and in order to relieve the family's financial burden, Deepti was rushed into a hastily arranged marriage. In a dramatic, but not wholly uncommon, turn of events, the trajectory of this Deepti's life was thrust into the hands of a proper stranger. While this may seem like the plot of a Harlequin romance novel, unfortunately, Deepti is not fictitious. Deepti embodies the experiences of so many women throughout rural India.<sup>2</sup>*

Researching arranged marriages from a Western perspective always seems to evoke the question of autonomy, i.e. "Why don't women have the freedom of choice in marriage; why aren't they able to independently select their own husbands?" The following argument will problematize this mindset by investigating the practice of arranged marriage throughout rural India; however, in order to do so it is necessary to properly frame the background for this research question. While there are many women throughout rural India who are exceedingly happy with their arranged marriage and may have felt a sense of agency during the selection process of their spouse, these are not the women who will be represented in the following analysis. This research seeks to understand how women's autonomy may be constrained throughout the planning, execution, and outcome of an arranged marriage. The following analysis will also question why women who are fully educated and have gained substantial amounts of human capital must forfeit their individual autonomy, due to economic constraints, for the sake of their own, or their in-laws,' families. It is in these scenarios where the question *autonomy* becomes blurred and nuanced; it is these women who will be represented throughout the subsequent analysis.

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<sup>2</sup> From August-December, 2014 I spent time living and working in Pune, India. Everyday I walked home from work with two young women who worked in the manufacturing plant attached to my office. This anecdote is a combination of their stories.

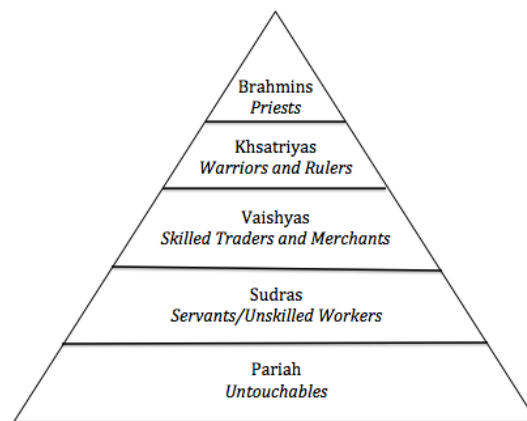
In order to understand this particular population of women, and in order to appreciate their positionality within their respective communities and dive more deeply into their relationship with traditional cultural norms, it is necessary to provide a historical framework. The background for this analysis will be outlined through the history of hierarchy and arranged marriages in India, the history of caste, and the gendered institution of marriage. This background will provide the framework for understanding how the strictures on women's autonomy can be divided into three categories: Love, economics, and familial constraints in relation to the dowry system. The following analysis will then apply these sources of structural inequality to better understand how the norms related to marriage in particular restrict women's autonomy throughout modern India. It will be argued that while modernization in India has allowed for small improvements to women's autonomy, in rural India today the little autonomy women do have is constricted through traditional norms and expectations related to the fundamental notion of love, rural economic constraints, and contemporary dowry culture.

### **The History of Hierarchy and Arranged Marriages in India**

#### *The History of Caste*

The history of arranged marriages in India goes back to the organization of the caste system. In relation to marital norms, it is commonly accepted that caste is characterized by the obligation to marry within the group, by endogamy (Dumont, 1980). Moreover, in Hinduism, the most widespread and practiced religion of India, marriage dominates social life and is often seen as the most prestigious family ceremony; weddings are lavish and expensive occasions whereby a large number of family and caste members gather for multiple days of celebration.

The social framework governing arranged marriages is dominated by hierarchical criteria and strict cultural norms. Historically, the Indian caste system has been the main form of hierarchical organization; however, for arranged marriages in India, this system is not watertight and there are few exceptions where inter-caste marriages are accepted. Caste based social status is also associated with societal advantage and disadvantage depending on one's placement with the hierarchical framework; societal disadvantage is a reality for those born into the lower castes (Joseph, 2010). This organizational structure is incredibly complicated in that, "compared with a tribe which breaks down into clans, caste society represents a higher order of complexity, since each caste generally has its exogamous clans or their equivalent" (Dumont, 1980). Within the caste system there is also a link between caste and kinship. The diagram below depicts a simplified breakdown of the caste system.



*Figure 1*

Before beginning to understand marital norms one must recognize that Indian hierarchy is incredibly complex and each caste and/or region may conform to a diverse set of marital norms. Not only is caste central to the custom of arranged marriages, but it is also an important feature of the social, political and economic life of India (Boivin, 2005).

One overarching theme to remember is that in order to retain the importance and dignity of arranged marriages in India, status is essential; hence not wanting to lose societal standing governs endogamy. Endogamy is often viewed as the outcome of a hierarchical society, not a primary principle (Ryali, 1998). Each *Varna* (i.e. Brahmins, Khsatriyas, Viashyas, Sudras, and Pariah) may have clans, or subsidiary groups, where marrying exogamously is permitted; however, in most cases all above *Varnas* or castes are closed off to those below.<sup>3</sup> Within the *Varnas* there are also multiple levels of subdivided castes that give shape to the organization of this singular cohesive system. The separation between different *Varnas* comes from the higher groups' fear of losing status by intermixing with lower groups, thus keeping each caste barred from the others. The marginalized and untouchable Pariah was placed outside of the *Varna* system. As a result of this system, each caste retains a sense of permanency and exclusivity. Furthermore, the caste system creates conditions of 'graded inequality' where the rights and privileges of a person are directly related to their status within the hierarchical system (Thorat and Newman, 2010). As a result of these structural societal barriers, in Indian culture arranged marriages become essential due to the importance of hierarchy and maintaining autonomy for each social class.

An example of an archaic Indian marital custom that clearly relates to the importance placed on hierarchy and social status is the practice of infant-marriages (Dumont, 1980). An infant-marriage is typically arranged while one's son or daughter is still a toddler. The purpose of this marital custom is to ensure high caste families retain

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<sup>3</sup> *Varna*: Sanskrit word for any one of the four traditional social classes of India (excluding the Pariah, or untouchables). For a complete definition see *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, online at <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/623520/varna>

their status in future generations through securing a suitable match for their children early on in life. For high castes (such as those within the Brahmin *Varna*) there is pressure on families to secure husbands of high rank for their daughters in order to reaffirm their status. Infant-marriages were practiced among the Brahmins and other upper castes; however, this custom was banned in 1929 by British reformers and is no longer practiced.<sup>4</sup> While today infant-marriages are outlawed, this custom clearly demonstrates the historical importance placed on finding a proper match for one's daughter.

British colonialism led to a new hierarchy within India as the Brahmins were demoted from the top of the caste system. The British colonialists became the new upper most class and were emulated by the original high castes. It was during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, as British power rapidly expanded throughout India, that Sanskritization evolved and spread through the subcontinent (Srinivas, 2002). Sanskritization is the process through which lower castes move up the traditional hierarchical organization by emulating the practices of the high castes (Srinivas, 1952). Through Sanskritization lower hierarchical positions seek to adapt the customs and beliefs of the upper castes, via social reform legislation and action, in order to attain ritual parity with castes located higher up the social structure. As the British replaced the Brahmins as the highest class within the Indian hierarchical framework, the Brahmins began to emulate British marital customs and became less concerned with marrying-off women before adulthood. Although the Brahmins began to follow more British customs, Brahmin practices were still respected by the lower castes. Thus, within this system, the upper castes increasingly adopted developmental idealism and modern family behaviors, while lower castes gradually abandoned their

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<sup>4</sup> For more information see *Homo Hierarchicus: Isogamy and Hypergamy*, Louis Dumont

indigenous practices. As a result of this process lower castes began to follow high caste conventional practices, which were more much more rigid than their traditional ways of life. It was during this time when lower castes became more concerned with wifely obedience and further assimilated to high caste practices where women's autonomy was far more limited. In further exploring how classism governs Indian arranged marital norms, we will work to understand how class hierarchy not only plays a part in determining who is fit for marriage, but also the level of importance placed on an individual's marriages, should there be more than one.

#### *Caste and the Gendered Institution of Marriage*

In the Indian culture there is a clear difference between primary and secondary marriages. The only time an individual's title changes from unmarried to married is after their first marriage; any subsequent marriages are seen as inferior to the first, particularly for women. This norm indicates how marriage, like societal organization as a whole, is strictly hierarchal. In discussing marital hierarchy, the gender disparities between men and women become readily apparent. For example, high-class Brahmin men have many options when it comes to marriage. If a Brahmin man's first wife is unable to have children, he is often free to take on other wives. On the contrary, for women second marriages may only be permissible after being widowed. If a Brahmin man chooses to take on a second wife, and the second wife has been married before, she will not be granted the same status as the Brahmin man's first wife. If, on the other hand, the second wife has not been previously married, for the Brahmin man this second marriage will retain the same level of prestige as his first marriage (Dumont, 1980). As an order of tradition, and due to the expenditure an

Indian wedding requires, a woman's second marriage may never be granted the same level of ritual or esteem as her first.

While in first marriages spouses must be of equal status, for second marriages only the woman may be subordinate. This cultural norm further reiterates women's subordination to men. Nevertheless, for Brahmins monogamy is stressed except in cases of female sterility or if the man is part of a royal family. If the Brahmin man is part of a royal family he may take on subsequent wives, typically called concubines; these concubines retain a lower status than the man's principal wife (Dumont, 1980). The practice of keeping concubines only occurs when families are extremely wealthy. That being said, any children the concubines may have are seen as illegitimate and are not guaranteed any inheritance from their father. In a central part of India, known as Malwa, anthropologists have found evidence of women fairs.<sup>5</sup> At these fairs many husbands would come to sell their first wives for money to royal families, again clearly expressing women's subordination to men (Dumont, 1980). Through the explanation of these norms, it is evident that in India there is a clear difference between first and second marriages, and while marital norms differ for men and women, women are traditionally regarded as subordinate to men.

### *The History of the Dowry*

To further understand how hierarchy regulates marital customs on both a structural and individual level, we must turn our discussion toward the dowry system. There are largely economic reasons as to why a woman's second marriage may never be as prestigious as her first. As previously indicated, marriages are grand events where the bride's family traditionally carries most of the financial burden. Because of the emphasis

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<sup>5</sup> For more information see *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*, Louis Dumont



placed on class, there is a strong incentive for families to attempt to marry their daughters “up” the social ladder. If a family is well connected and respected there is a chance their daughter could marry a man from a higher class. Marrying “up” can happen within a subcase or even between *Varnas*. In general because women are seen as subordinate to men, Brahmins believe the woman is a “gift” in marriage to her husband (Dumont, 1980). This custom does not define “gift” in the traditional sense, but rather means that the bride’s parents must actually pay the groom’s family to receive their daughter. This is an extremely important custom where the bride’s parents offer lavish presents and host receptions for the groom’s family, thus a groom of higher superiority requires more extravagant receptions and gifts. In essence, the dowry system requires a woman’s parents to provide gifts or host parties for a groom and his family in order to give thanks for accepting their daughter into the man’s family.

A good example of how the dowry system may be abused by grooms and their families comes from the colonial period of Bengali history. The Rarhi Brahmins of Bengal were traditionally divided into two sub-castes, the Kulin and Sortriya (Dumont, 1980). Because the Kulins were seen as the higher caste, Kulin men were traditionally pursued as husbands for Sortriya daughters. This dynamic historically led to many Sortriya women marrying “up” through wedding Kulin men; however, since the men were unable to care for all their wives, the Kulin men would resort to visiting their wives every so often, but not actually living with them. Each time a Kulin husband visited one of his wives, he expected gifts. Eventually the exploitation of this dynamic led the High Court (Criminal Procedure Code, 1973 - Section 125) to pass a law stating that husbands were required to care for their wives. While this ruling helped ease the financial burden placed on the families of

Sortriya women, it also reinforced the conviction that women were subordinate to men and economically required their husband's support.

Because marrying off one's daughter could be incredibly expensive due to the responsibility placed on the woman's parents to pay for both a wedding and dowry, Indian families generally preferred sons. In colonial times, some women would even kill their infant daughters in order to relieve their family of these financial burdens. Additionally, the practice of reducing a girl's first marriage to a ritual formality was also used to spare her family the financial burden of a dowry. A first marriage, done as a formality, meant a family would marry their daughter to a god, a temple, or even an object. This practice enabled the woman to pursue a second marriage free from the expensive pomp and circumstance that was expected from a first marriage. The *Devadasi*, or ritual prostitutes, often followed this custom (Dumont, 1980). In South India a *Devadasi* is a girl who is dedicated to the worship and service of a deity or temple for the rest of her life; this term does not carry any sexual connotations.<sup>6</sup> Thus, while marriages were predominately hierarchical in nature, a woman's first marriage could be made fictitious in order to ease her family's financial burden and enable her to pursue a less formal second marriage.

Traditionally the dowry was used as a form of inheritance for daughters at the time of marriage whereas sons would receive their inheritance upon the death on their father (Basu, 2001; Goody and Tambiah, 1973; Uberoi, 1994). Although modern India law stipulates equal inheritance by all children, in practice this legislation is rarely implemented (Basu, 2001; Diwan and Diwan, 1995). Furthermore, in recent decades very high dowries including demands for cash and consumer items have become increasingly

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<sup>6</sup> *Devadasi*: Sanskrit word meaning a female who serves a God or Goddess.

common in Northern India, while wedding expenditures continue to be largely the bride's parents' responsibility and are typically not shared with the groom's family (Malhotra et al. 1995; Miller, 1981, Uberoi, 1994). These modern norms indicate dowries are still present and strictly practiced throughout many parts of India. These norms have the potential to reduce women's autonomy through increasing women's financial dependence on their parents while at the same time impeding many women's upward societal mobility due to their family's inability to pay the exorbitant dowry prices expected from high caste families.

While the practice of arranged marriages began as a product of the caste system, castes and kinships were not completely rigid. These systems of organization were meant to rank and order human possibilities, not to punish the nonconformists. The consequence of this social structure, however, led to clear gender disparities. This system of hierarchical organization is rooted in Hinduism, the predominant religion of India. In terms of whether or not a man is superior or subordinate to a woman, their relationship is titled either *anuloma* or *pratiloma* in the Hindu religion. This means that if the man is from a higher caste than his wife, their relationship is titled *anuloma*; however, if the man is from a lower caste than his wife, their relationship is called *pratiloma*. In Hinduism *anuloma* can be defined as 'following the hair,' or conforming to the natural order, and *pratiloma* means 'brushed the wrong way,' or going against the grain. For Hindus only *anuloma* marriages are legitimized. Thus, even in one of the oldest and most widespread Indian religions, women are fundamentally defined as subordinate to men. The dowry system further contributes to the validation of women's subordinate status through forcing financial expectations on parents in order to secure a stable future for their daughters, while at the same time allowing men to be more selective in choosing a first, or even second wife.

In order to unravel how traditional arranged marital norms continue to shape modern practices, it is important to consider how and why many of these customs can be maintained through a more subjective cultural analysis. Though hierarchy remains a central theme governing arranged marriages, a true cultural analysis of marriage would be incomplete without exploring the notion of love.

### **Love and Arranged Marriages in India**

While the caste system, through the emphasis it places on hierarchy, continues to indirectly shape arranged marriage practices in modern India, many traditional marital norms have flourished due to a variety of diverse cultural constructs. Given the lesser importance of the caste system in contemporary India, and in order to understand how female autonomy may still be constricted throughout the subcontinent, one must also appreciate how the notion of love is fundamentally different in Indian culture than it is in the Western world. For Westerners who are most familiar with the intimate relationship between love and marriage, disassociating these two concepts may seem unfathomable; however, in India a more fluid notion of love enables one to understand how arranged marriages have remained an integral component of Indian societal norms. As we will see, this fluid notion of love may constrict women's autonomy through prioritizing the love one has for their elders, parents, and culture over individual preferences. This notion of love leads to women's self-sacrifice in order to preserve and maintain group harmony.

#### *The Humility of Love*

In Margaret Trawick's research novel, *Notes on Love in a Tamil Family*, love and familial relationships are explored through a yearlong case study analysis of a family living in Tamil Nadu. Tamil Nadu is a state located on the Southern most tip of India and is

populated by many remote rural villages. Trawick's research was largely observational and was based on a single family she lived with during her stay in Tamil Nadu. Throughout her research Trawick touches on two main themes: One, how India as a country and culture exceeds Western expectations, and two, how cultures may only be fairly represented through the interaction between ideal and experience. Her subsequent research takes her experiences and relates them to ideals common to South Indian culture. One significant area of concentration throughout her research relates to how Indians' complex culture of love may hold the key to maintaining harmony in arranged marriages.

Love in a Tamil family may be difficult for an outsider to understand due to the complexity of the word's inherent meaning in the native language. The Tamil word for love, most similar to the English definition of "love," is "anpu;" however, this word would probably be more accurately defined as "attachment" in English. In the Tamil family, "Love was often described as a force that was tender, gentle and slow;" this conception of love was tangible throughout Trawick's observations on familial dynamics (Trawick, 1990). Trawick describes how in Tamil Nadu love is more often shown through private and subtle actions rather than words. In public couples and spouses in Tamil Nadu may appear cold to one another from a Western perspective; however, Trawick describes this casual avoidance as a form of respect for one's partner. In public both wives and husbands in Tamil Nadu may not refer to their spouse by name, but rather by their affiliation. As odd as this custom may seem to outsiders, it clearly relates to the value Tamil families place on humility in their relationships. Trawick works out the relationship between humility, love, and ambiguity by observing couples and relevant social customs, "In Tamil you can't directly

say, with any hope of credibility, 'I am a loving person,' for the loving are also humble. All you can do is show it" (Trawick, 1990).

These customs, and their underlying rationale, help paint a picture as to how love grows and is maintained through arranged marriages in Tamil Nadu. Tamil people believe love takes time to create between couples, and thus when it finally blossoms their love is both genuine and based off true feelings of attachment and mutual respect. This allows us to understand how arranged marriages continue to flourish outside the confinements of the caste system. Love is not seen a prerequisite to marriage, but rather the eventual outcome. Furthermore, love in Tamil Nadu is humble and based on respect, and respect for one's family is of the highest importance.

The cultural norms surrounding love relate to how parents raise their children in Tamil Nadu as well. Humility is viewed as a critical value, and parents are responsible for instilling this value in their children. In fact, in Tamil Nadu, parents will often downgrade the success or beauty of their children in order to teach them humility. This form of love, in extreme cases, may result in cruelty to one's child, "For a child's own good, to 'grow' a child, in the name of love or just for fun, a caretaker might cruelly provoke love's opposite" (Trawick, 1990). Here Trawick points out a very important and distinct concept through her observation on familial dynamics with respect to children. In Tamil Nadu parents feel their main goal and responsibility is to mold their children into individuals who are both humble and respectful. The importance of these values allows one to understand how the ambiguity of love is transmitted from one generation to the next. These childrearing customs also demonstrate how respect for one's parents is ingrained in children from infancy; thus, it is easy to understand how, in relation to arranged marriages, children

would feel it natural and even reasonable for their parents to direct their marital choices. This intrinsic cultural value may lead women to prioritize their family's wishes over their own wants and desires out of respect for their elders, or to maintain group cohesion.

While it is important to remember that Trawick's research was largely based on one specific family from Tamil Nadu, and while we may not be completely convinced that the norms Trawick witnessed could be applied to other rural areas throughout India, her research allows one to understand how love in Tamil Nadu is both unique and fundamentally different from the Western understanding of love. In Tamil Nadu love is not meant to foster intimacy, but is rather shown as a form of respect. This is the key to maintaining the harmonious relationship between humility and ambiguity in relation to how love is expressed in South India. In Tamil Nadu love is not the route to personal happiness because it more about the giving than receiving. As we apply these cultural constructs to arranged marriage we will see how, for women in particular, these values may enable self-sacrifice in order to show respect and humility toward one's family.

In applying Trawick's research to the custom of arranged marriages we can begin to understand how, in some regions of India, intimate love is not viewed as necessary, or even essential, for a successful marriage. Love in India is about respect, and respect for one's kin is of the highest importance. Thus, love, as it relates to marriage, is fundamentally rooted in the love one has for their family and cultural values. Through appreciating this complex notion of love, it is easy to understand how Indian children would want their families to be closely involved in the selection of their future spouse. As we will see, this ideology of love has remained a constant cultural construct in India and still continues to influence modern arranged marital practices.

### *Love Versus Arranged Marriages in Modern India*

To better understand how the modern practice of arranged marriages has evolved or been challenged by the influx of commodities, media, and ideas, Netting (2010) conducted interviews with fifteen male and female unmarried professionals between ages twenty-two and twenty-nine. These interviews took place in Vadodara, Gujarat, a region located on the Western coast of northern India. Netting chose Vadodara as a research site because it is generally considered “modern” and has long been an educational center in India. From these interviews Netting found that while some young, modern Indian men and women have moved beyond the typical love-versus-arranged marriage dichotomy, the importance of familial acceptance continues to play a key role in the spousal selection process. In India self-chosen marriages (more typically known as “love marriages”) are viewed as, “based on sexual attraction, lustful, disrespectful, and dangerous to society” (Orsini, 2006).

Throughout the late nineteenth hundreds some Indian feminists further supported this idea through stressing the volatility of romantic love and urged women to value the protection provided by their parents after an arranged marriage (Kishwar, 1999; Thapan, 1997). Nevertheless, romantic love continues to be a compelling ideology for youth in developing countries (Robinson, 1998). Romantic love is linked to ideas of freedom, equal rights, self-exploration and development, and is often glorified in media and literature. Furthermore, in today’s world the expansion of the Internet and cell phone communication reinforces self-expression both personally and professionally. While these technoscapes permeate modern society in India, older generations still connect love marriages with premarital sex, pollution of the higher castes by lower castes, and the abandonment of



familial obligations. Thus, these very beliefs may be threatening to a family's identity should their child or grandchild pursue a love marriage.

The thirty-minute intensive interviews detailed in Netting's study were conducted in English and covered topics related to parental marriages, the educational and occupational background of the participants and their parents, the participants' romantic history, opinions about horoscopes, post-marital residence, women's employment, and the participants' and their families' ideas on how a marital partner should be chosen. All the participants from these studies emphasized that arranged marriages have changed greatly during the last generation. While modern families' still use personal networks and newspaper ads to find a suitable match for their children, now the Internet and social media has become an acceptable outlet for these types of searches. One of the participants, Layla, who became engaged shortly after her parents and the man's parents arranged an introduction, described her new relationship through stating, "When I got engaged I felt uncomfortable... It's still building, I can't really say that even now it's romantic love... its just that now I have accepted the fact that I have to live my whole life with this man... and I'll do it *happily*" (Netting, 2010). It's interesting to note here how Layla felt uncomfortable with the engagement at first, but has since made the choice to be happy with her new relationship and what it means for the rest of her life. Even though romantic love was not a pre-requisite for the engagement, or even a stated goal for the marriage, Layla seems to feel confident this type of love will build with time. While arranged marriages are clearly associated with a couple slowly growing into romantic love, even in cases of self-selection many of the participants indicated they wanted to prevent emotion from, "carrying them into the unknown, dangerous territory" (Netting, 2010).

While some participants like Layla perceived arranged marriages to have a positive impact on their life course, others felt arranged marriages systematically handicapped individuals who happen to find romantic love outside of a formal introduction or arrangement. One participant, Asha, was forbidden to see or communicate with her boyfriend because her parents did not approve of him being Christian; she describes her current situation stating, "I value my parents a *lot*... If I get married according to my parents I'll be getting married for *them* not for myself... I don't want to but I have to" (Netting, 2010). Like Asha, none of the participants believed they would marry someone if their parents continued to disapprove of the match, and some even spoke negatively about elopements stressing that parents and children need each other throughout the course of their lives. These findings suggest Indian women continue to bear the burden of respecting their parents' wishes. In both Asha and Layla's cases the women choose to take a less comfortable or self-serving route in order to appease their families' wants and desires.

Most participants believed formal introductions with a potential spouse were generally more stable because they guaranteed the couple would be from the same religion and social class; however, most participants also wanted the ability to make the final decision on their marriage for themselves, and wanted more power to end an unsatisfactory engagement (Netting, 2010). On the other hand, many women especially believed a love marriage could be an equalizer to male-female relationships through, "neutralizing the cultural trope toward male dominance" (Netting, 2010). Many female participants noted that gender inequality comes across early on in the selection process of a potential match. Parents want grooms to be well educated and settled with a secure job, but for brides, grooms' parents feel it is most important for women to have good morals

and the ability to adapt to their husband's family. Because Indian cultural norms generally require the bride to move in with the groom's family after the wedding, this final consideration is taken very seriously. Here again women are expected to conform to the wishes of an external party in order to preserve group cohesion and uphold significant cultural traditions.

In keeping with this cultural norm, all the participants expected the bride to live with the groom's family unless economic conditions necessitated otherwise. For male participants this was seen a non-issue; they respected their parents and wanted their new brides to mold into their families. Not surprisingly, for women adhering to this cultural norm brought out grave concerns. Although all the female participants agreed to this tradition in principle, they worried they would face the burden of adjustment alone and would have to neglect their careers if their in-laws insisted, thus restricting their autonomy. Women generally felt a love marriage would mitigate this danger because a caring, egalitarian husband would have to help preserve the woman's rights within his family. One participant explained this sentiment through stating, "Love marriages [brings] advantages for the girl because [her husband will] speak out and maintain all kinds of respect in the family. Now it becomes *his* responsibility to make her feel comfortable in his home" (Netting, 2010). Nevertheless, most participants still thought it necessary to guard against unchecked emotions, match horoscopes, and bring a bride into the husband's family in order to preserve family continuity.

While Netting's study confirms that some young, modern Indian men and women are more open to the prospect of a love marriage, many would prefer to preserve familial cohesion through accepting an arranged marriage and guarding against unchecked

emotions. Even though some women felt love marriages would provide a more egalitarian relationship, they still agreed to live with their husband's family after marriage and take the necessary, traditional precautions, in order to maintain harmony within between families.

### *Love Versus Physical Attraction in Arranged Marriages*

In furthering modern research on love in India, in 2007 Twamley studied love and desire among young middle-class Indians living in the Gujarati region. Twamley conducted an ethnographic study comparing love and intimacy among heterosexual single and married men and women. Eighteen in-depth interviews were conducted with people living in Borada, India. The participants were Hindu, between ages twenty and thirty, and were found through university societies, networking websites, and community organizations.

Through this study Twamley found that many participants clearly distinguished pure love from physical attraction. Pure love was said to be like the love one had for their family, which was untainted by physical attraction. That being said, participants acknowledged physical intimacy was an intrinsic part of a solid marriage and would prefer to marry someone they could grow to love; however, physical attraction was related to what many Indians refer to as "time-pass" relationships, or those that are not serious and have no prospects of marriage. Thus, sexual restraint signifies serious intentions in a relationship rather than a short-term diversion or fling.

In the Gujarati language there two words for what Westerns would define as "love;" *prem*, meaning physical attraction, and *bhakti* meaning devotional love. Pure love, or *bhakti*, is considered the best approach to a relationship because it avoids the "unreliable forces" of physical attraction. Physical love is associated with love marriages because these

marriages don't directly consider caste or family and often go against the parent's wishes. These types of marriages are viewed as being socially deviant. When asked about love at first sight, many participants noted that this kind of spontaneous and uncontrollable love, without recourse for social criteria of a good match, would be viewed as destabilizing notions of filial duty. Thus, arranged marriages are viewed by modern Indians as respectable and are the preferred choice for middle-class young men and women. Arranged marriages thus reinforce the notion that young women should not trust their emotions and should consequently rely on guidance from others in order to find a suitable spouse.

In conducting this study Twamley used the political economy of love approach to understand how love is embedded in historically situated worlds, cultural practices, and material conditions. While there has been a recent increase on the emphasis placed on love in modern India due to young men and women becoming more involved in choosing their own spouses, older generations still believe marriage in an institutional arrangement. Thus, even self-selected partners must adhere to social norms of propriety, and because love marriages are associated with instability and disregard for one's family, many self-selected couples attempt to distance themselves from these views through affirming their love is spiritual, pure, and not based on physical attraction. Hence, even in cases where young men and women self-advocate, they still feel societal pressures to prove their love is not based off ideals that are seen as destabilizing to familial bonds.

#### *Love and Arranged Marital Satisfaction*

To further understand what characteristics determine marital satisfaction, in 2008 Madathil and Benshoff conducted a comparative analysis of Asian Indians in both arranged marriages and love marriages, or "marriages of choice." Madathil and Benshoff interviewed

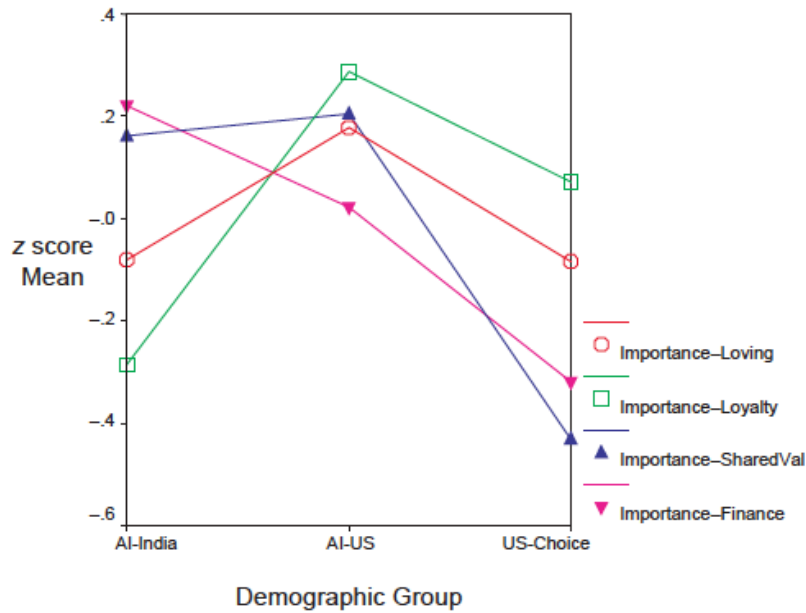
114 males and 115 females from Bangalore, India. Of this sample 19% reported their options had not been considered at all when arranging their marriage, 81% said their opinions had been somewhat considered, and 90% of the couples reported that their families supported their marriage (Madathil & Benshoff, 2008). Many of the couples interviewed expressed that they had been discouraged from pursuing a love marriage for fear that this might interfere with family closeness and prescribed familial obligations.<sup>7</sup> These beliefs are consistent with collectivist cultures, like India, which emphasize the value of the extended family or the immediate community (Hui & Triandis, 1986). Thus, in many communities throughout India group identity and cohesiveness are stressed and rewarded. Similar to Twamley's findings, romantic love is considered to be impractical, unnecessary, and dangerous (Desai, McCormick, & Garddert, 1989).

In relation to arranged marriages, companionship and practical love are seen as the most legitimate forms of affection and bonding between spouses. Similar to Trawick's findings, young adults are socialized by Indian society to embrace humility and have more practical and realistic expectations for marriage, thus enabling them to accept their parents' choice and still live happily with an arranged marriage (Medora et al, 2002). Accordingly, marital bonds between couples in India are based on a sense of filial commitment and adherence to cultural traditions rather than on intimacy (Yelsma & Athappilly, 1998). These customs place the needs of the family above those of the individual, which in some cases restricts women's autonomy and their ability to maintain a life outside the home.

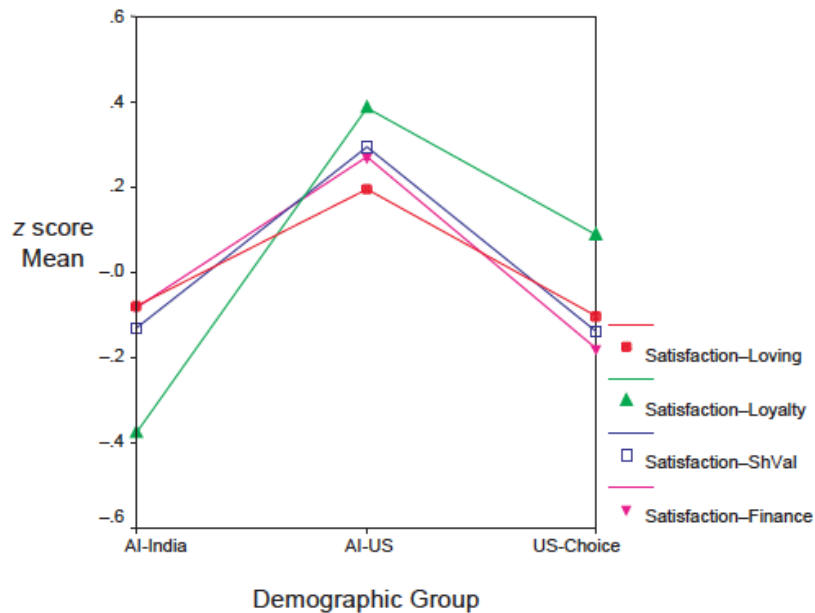
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<sup>7</sup> For more see Medora, Larson, Hortacsu & Dave, 2002.

Madathil and Benshoff choose Bangalore to recruit volunteers for their study because it is considered one of the most diverse metropolitan cities in South India. In conducting this comparative analysis Madathil and Benshoff used the three factors Rosen-Grandon (1998) determined underlie each of the two CHARISMA scales of Importance and Satisfaction. These three factors included 1. Loving (defined as open communication and agreement that the expression of affection is important, and mutual respect, foreignness, and sensitivity are valued), 2. Loyal (defined as a high level of consensus, a sufficiently high level of sexual activity, lifetime commitment to the marriage, interpersonal loyalty, and strong moral values), and 3. Shared values (expressed as the ability to manage conflicts, traditional gender roles, and a high priority being placed on religiosity and parenting). In addition to these three factors Madathil and Benshoff also chose to include finances to both the Importance and Satisfaction scales; “finances” was defined as financial comfort, lack of debt, and financial independence. The graphs depicting the standardized z score means for the importance and satisfaction subscales are shown below (Madathil and Benshoff, 2008).



**FIGURE 1: Standardized z Score Means for Importance Subscales**  
 NOTE: AI-India = Indians in arranged marriages living in India; AI-US = Indians in arranged marriages living in the United States; US-Choice = Americans in marriages of choice living in the United States.



**FIGURE 2: Standardized z Score Means for Satisfaction Subscales**  
 NOTE: AI-India = Indians in arranged marriages living in India; AI-US = Indians in arranged marriages living in the United States; US-Choice = Americans in marriages of choice living in the United States.

While in this analysis Madathil and Benschoff also compared Asian Indians living in the US who had both arranged and choice marriages, here we will only focus on AI-India, or participants living in India who had arranged marriages. For the AI-India group, there were



no significant differences between men and women in relation to their total importance scores. In comparing the AI-India group's importance scores to their satisfaction scores, it is noteworthy that finances were viewed as the most important factor for a successful marriage whereas loyalty and loving were the two least important factors. On the flip side, loving was viewed as the most satisfactory factor for the AI-India group. It is interesting to point out that if one compares the AI-India standardized z mean scores for satisfaction to the other two population groups, AI-US and AI-Choice, AI-India has some of the lowest levels of satisfaction across the board for all four factors. In comparing these findings to the work of Trawick and Twamley, it could be possible that these reported low levels of satisfaction may have more to do with to cultural emphasis placed on expressing humility and realistic expectations in relation to love rather than truly unsatisfactory marriages.

In modern India more than 90% of all marriages are still arranged (Gautam, 2002). While this may be surprising considering the advances in modern communication technologies and globalization, in relation to love, arranged marriages in India satisfy many of the criteria viewed as important and necessary to finding pure love and maintaining group identity. Because passionate love is not viewed as a necessary prerequisite to marriage, and as we have seen the purest form of love is often humble, it is not surprising that Madathil and Benshoff's findings confirm love is the least important factor for arranged marriages in India, but later becomes the most satisfactory.

It is important to note that even within this context of love, and the importance placed on hierarchical relationships, many women feel that they are able to exercise autonomy in modern India and may not feel suppressed by men or traditional cultural norms related to arranged marriages. That being said, it could also be argued that some of

these women may not fully recognize the works of domination they are subject to within the context of love and arranged marriages.

While Netting found that some women feel love marriages could provide more equality at home, many women would prefer an arranged marriage in order to maintain their family's support and preserve closeness. Of the researchers mentioned above who have studied love in India, none seem to have come across young men or women who have a strong underlying desire to completely break away from the practices related to arranged marriages. As we have seen, love in India is most commonly shown through realistic expectations, respect, and humility; both modern young people and older generations view marriages and relationships built on intimacy and/or physical attraction as unstable, dangerous, and potentially harmful. These complex and fluid notions of love allow one to understand how many young men and women continue to prefer arranged marriages in modern India.

It is only fair to expect that as arranged marriages have evolved over time, and will continue to do so, so will the notion of love. Some researchers have proposed theories as to how and why India will evolve to become more accepting of love marriages in the future. Modernization theory argues that industrialization, urbanization, and educational expansion created the initial push toward love marriages as these types of relationships were viewed as well-suited for urban living and industrial occupations (Adams, 2010; Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Thorton, 2005). In the future, developmental idealism may push people to change their family behaviors to match those of the Western family, where the idea of intimate love is viewed as modern (Hirsch & Wardlow, 2006). Nevertheless, while today's India may be more accepting of love marriages, as we have seen industrialization is

not enough to fully make this jump; in order for love marriages to be considered the new normal, ideological factors must also evolve. That being said, while there are many large cities and educational centers in India that are more accepting toward modern relationships and conceptualizations of love, a large portion of India's population is still confined to rural areas where structural access to modern thought, sources of independence, and technology remain limited.

As we will explore in the following analysis, many women in rural India experience restricted autonomy in relation to arranged marriages due to limited financial resources and oppressive societal expectations. Additionally, because the current notion of love in India is not individualized, this cultural construct arguably restricts women's autonomy through supporting a structure where individual wants are less important than group identity and familial cohesion. While financial concerns structurally limit rural women's access to higher education and many societal freedoms, this particular population is especially at risk due to traditional norms further restricting their ability to gain independence outside their family unit. As we have seen, many egalitarian concerns may also stem from the traditional norm requiring women to move in with their husband's family after marriage.

Women have traditionally faced complicated and limited forms of autonomy as a consequence of arranged marriages and the redefinition of love in India. While arranged marriages in some cases allow women to advance up the social hierarchy and gain independence from their nuclear families, in other cases a family's restricted access to financial resources prevents women from acting as true agents in the selection of their marital partners, and may lead some women to sacrifice their individual wants in order to

maintain group cohesion and identity. These factors complicate women's autonomy in India, particularly in rural areas where the lack of financial resources and low levels of development confine women within the traditional system of cultural subservience to men.

### **Modern Rural Patterns of Hindu Marriages**

#### *Rural Marital Customs in Rajasthan*

For Hindus in particular, marriage is seen as a religious duty. Parents assume the responsibility for arranging their children's marriages, and weddings are often considered the grandest event of a family's career. Hindu marital norms can be arranged into two categories, the norms for what are known as twice-born castes (Brahmins, Rajput, and Mahajan), and the norms for the stratified groups of artisans (weavers, butchers, leather workers, and the untouchable sweepers). For both groups a yearlong cycle of rituals may reinforce the bonds of marriage; however, for the non-twice born castes, while there are sacred rites, marriage is more of a civil contract. Additionally, caste and subcaste endogamy are generally followed and there are many screenings of a potential spouse before an arrangement is made. Traditionally, parents must also confer with the kin elders before making a decision on an arranged marriage. The ultimate decision, however, is reached only after taking into consideration the potential spouse's reputation, familial achievements, current assets and liabilities, wealth, power, education, and inherent qualities. While, as Trawick indicates, the relationship between spouses is modest in its ambiguity, the process of arranging a Hindu marriage is anything but. In order to reach a collective decision both sets of parents must thoroughly enquire about and evaluate the other family's most intimate details related to their financial background, reputation, and future prospects.

In 1972 Gupta studied caste specific marital norms in the predominately Hindu village of Awan. Awan is located in southeast Rajasthan and has a population of 2,575 people, including 41 Hindu castes. In this region the Brahmin represent the highest class and are typically priests or land owners; the Rajput are below the Brahmin and are predominately warriors, and the artisans make up the lowest castes. In this study various interviews were conducted between 1963-1965. The interviewees were either married or responsible for arranging marriages, and came from 19 different Hindu casts, representing 158 girls and 163 boys (Gupta, 1972).

The interviews showed that, in general, the higher castes retain their status due to being perceived as ritually pure and economically superior. In this regard, the artisan castes are not much better off than the untouchables. One main finding from these interviews showed that the wealthier families tended to spend more on weddings, while the less affluent spent less. While this finding is intuitively obvious, it further reinforces the immense importance of high castes' ability to create a wide social and economic network. A family's expenditure on a wedding affirms their position and helps retain their status in future generations. It is typical for families to spend between nine months to two years' income to finance a daughter's wedding, a custom that would be virtually impossible for low caste families. The same pattern holds true for dowry expectations. From an economic perspective, weddings between members of twice-born castes function as a transfer of wealth, via the dowry, from the bride to the groom's family. This process expands the families' social networks for future generations. In this sense, a family's upward social mobility is marked by their wedding expenditure and gifts to the groom's family.

Other interesting trends were documented which related to why many high caste Hindus in this region arrange marriages before their daughters reach puberty. Pre-puberty marriages allow parents to find the best possible match for their daughters. Thus, the daughter becomes an economic partner to her in-law's family early on, which reduces the financial shock to her own family. Additionally, because dowries are a central component to arranging a marriage, starting this process early is beneficial for a girl's parents; as the study indicates, "Early marriages of the children usually safeguard a family from impoverishing its fortunes" (Gupta, 1972). In pre-puberty marital arrangements the parents are typically young, there is a lesser probability that they could lose their wealth, and there is a higher probability they would have more wealth to spare. This mirrors finding which indicate that higher castes tend to arrange marriages later than lower castes due to the higher castes' stable sources of financing.

The distances parents are able to travel to arrange marriages for their children are also largely related to a family's economic status. Out of 312 marriages, 20% occurred between members of the same village, and very few marriages occurred between families living 100km or more apart.<sup>8</sup> Families with a higher economic status, who may also provide an expensive dowry, are able to expand their networks over large distances and attract potential spouses from further away. Thus, these findings indicate that economic resources and the age at which an arranged marriage occurs are positively correlated. Education is also correlated with both economic resources and the age of marriage. While education is highly valued and considered rewarding, many low caste families arrange marriage before their children complete high school, further preventing them from moving up the social

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<sup>8</sup> Gupta, 50. For more information see Cohn, B. S. & McKim, M. (1958). "Networks and centres in the integration of Indian civilization." *Journal of Social Research*, 1(1-9).

ladder. Furthermore, an early marriage prevents one from moving to an urban area and attending college. However, as previously discussed, arranging marriages early can serve as a stabilizing force for low caste families.

It has been shown that economic vitality, education, and the age at which an arranged marriage occurs are all positively correlated. Furthermore, the traditional practice of giving dowries reinforces the separation between castes and inhibits high caste families from considering low caste families suitable for an arranged marriage. At the individual level, low caste daughters have a lesser opportunity to attend college and assert their independence. These daughters often feel pressured to ease their family's financial burden by accepting an arranged marriage before they finish their education. Next to religion, the institution of marriage is the slowest to change, and because traditional norms are set by the older generation, change is often seen as highly offensive and disruptive.<sup>9</sup>

Rajasthan, the area where Gupta focused his research, is a fairly affluent state in northern India. Although his study focused on a rural village located in the southeast region of the state, even more rural areas located in less affluent states are accustomed to diverse yet rigid social norms. Additionally, families from villages in less affluent states have more pressing aspirations for their daughters related to escaping poverty and obtaining educational freedom. In "Marriage Norms, Choice and Aspirations of Rural Women," Kalpagm discusses how rural marriage norms carry varied levels of significance. In 2008 Kalpagm conducted a cross-section of interviews with women and girls from Lahoorpur village, Allahabad, in the state of Uttar Pradesh.

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<sup>9</sup> For more information see Kapadia, K. M. (1965). "Marriage and family in India." Bombay: Oxford University Press. Third Edition. Print.

In areas like Lahoorpur village, where modern law recognizes free choice marriages, cultural traditions related to the caste system work strongly against this practice. In an area where societal norms dictate rural life, marriage endogenous to the caste group is the rule. In these areas, kinship, marriage rules, caste and caste boundaries, and intersecting patriarchies regulate social discipline. While some young couples in these communities do select their own spouses, or pursue a love marriage, many of these cases go unnoticed and unreported. It is not unheard of for love marriage couples to be ostracized from their families and/or villages. In extreme cases, women who marry by choice may be murdered, and it is not wholly uncommon for community officials turn a blind eye to these crimes. Love marriages are also subtly admonished in Hinduism, the predominant religion. The Hindu word “izzat,” or honor, defines good conduct, particularly for women, and depends on women displaying modesty and obedience. Thus, defying one’s parents and exercising choice in marriage goes against this strict social code. Furthermore, in rural areas patriarchal values allow men to treat women and girls as property, thereby restricting free will.

#### *Rural Marital Customs in Uttar Pradesh*

To further research the marital norms of extremely rural villages in Uttar Pradesh, Kalpagm conducted interviews to gather personal narratives from women and girls from this region. These interviews were structured to better understand how these women and girls view marriage by choice versus the traditional practice of arranged marriage. Both group interviews and individual interviews were conducted in a family/household setting. Some group interviews were conducted with the Kurmi Singraur, and Dalits groups. The women from the Kurmi Singraur caste typically worked in the fields, tended to cattle, or did



housework. The Gupta caste either did carpentry work or regular housework, and the Dalita women worked as field hands for the Kurmi landowners. No women who left the village and went to work at the bazaar in Allahabad were interviewed. The Kurmi women interviewed ranged from those who were affluent to those who were economically marginalized, both older and middle aged women, and women who were either married or unmarried.

Women from the more affluent Kurmi community indicated that female literacy and education levels have progressed from generation to generation and now many girls are completing their high school education. Education has allowed some girls to become more socially and financially independent; however, the majority of women still marry according to their parents wishes. While some mothers said they would think about allowing their daughters to marry by choice, many of the older Kurmi women, especially grandmothers, felt girls should still marry according to caste. These women also said their husbands were responsible for making the final decision on an arranged marriage. In a slightly paradoxical finding, these mothers expressed the desire for their daughters to have freer, more comfortable, and financially independent lives than their own. This desire may be hard to meet in practice due to findings that, "They [girls] are not allowed to do a job as the villagers jeer that the parents are eating with their daughters' income" (Kalpagm, 2008). Thus, while mothers believe education is the path to freedom, there are still societal norms that prevent women from using their education to become financially independent.

The less affluent Kurmi women were slightly younger than the affluent Kurmi women Kalpagm who were interviewed. In general, the less affluent young Kurmi women said that while they would be happy to marry by their parents' choice, they would prefer to

find a job first. Many of these women expressed the desire to move to urban areas to attend university and find urban husbands; however, many of the young women believe that if they were to marry by choice they would be ostracized from their families and villages. It is still the norm in this community for a woman's parents to arrange a marriage after seeing the man's property and land. While many women are confident their parents would find them a good match, they do not believe they should be completely dependent on their husbands. It can be said that this is a caste in transition and that over time women could gain more freedom through moving to urban areas to pursue higher educations.<sup>10</sup>

Kalpagn was also able to interview a few groups of women from the Gupta class of Uttar Pradesh. These findings indicate that women in this caste do not feel the atmosphere of their village is conducive to allowing women to become independent. The older women said that because they cannot always afford to send their daughters to university, they encourage their girls to learn trade skills like painting and tailoring. Many mothers feel forced to marry their daughters off in hard times to ease the family's financial burden, which often leads to haphazardly arranging marriages for their daughters to men who are uneducated or unemployed. Additionally, families in this caste feel that if their daughter were to marry out of caste the village would view her as out of control and shameless, thus damaging the parent's and sibling's reputation for consideration in future arranged marriages. In general the Vishwakarma caste also expressed these same worries and Vishwakarma women were more concerned with their family's financial standing and reputation than their daughters' wishes.

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<sup>10</sup> For more information see Lambert, H. (1997). "Caste, gender and locality in rural Rajasthan." In C. J. Fuller (ed.), *Caste Today*, Oxford India Paperbacks, New Delhi, 93-123.

Many Kurmi mothers would like their daughters to be economically independent; however, these mothers feel the village atmosphere and social pressures are not conducive to achieving these goals. Additionally, many of the less affluent families were more concerned with their family's financial well being than their daughters' access to education, independence, or freedom. The increase in dowry expectations is also a burden for less affluent families and has caused problems in finding suitable grooms. While young women were generally more educated than the older generation, their education has not changed marital practices or made these women more economically independent. Although social change has begun through more daughters receiving higher education and/or moving to urban areas, many women do not yet feel empowered to ignore societal pressures and live freely.

On the other hand, Kalpam also presents the idea that marriage may be liberating for women; "They can move about freely and can talk to anybody because they have their husband's support where as daughters have restrictions on their movement and on conversing with strangers" (62). With their husband's support, some women may feel they can act more liberally than they would be able to if they were single. Single daughters, on the other hand, may be more restricted/restrained in their interactions with urbanites and strangers due to societal pressures of modesty and subversion to one's parents. On a macroeconomic level, unmarried women in rural areas may not feel they have a voice in the development of their villages without their husbands' support. Thus, these studies show us that while more women are gaining access to education, societal customs and expectations still prevent many women from asserting their social and economic independence.

## Arranging a Modern Hindu Marriage

Even among the educated middle class in modern India, marriage remains as much of a concern for families as it does for individuals.<sup>11</sup> In modern India newspapers have become the main medium for contacting a large number of potential matches, particularly in urban areas. Through access to print media, information about a large number of people is readily available to all social classes; thus, the possibility of finding a suitable match is enhanced. In modern India there is an insufficient number of matchmakers to meet the demand of a growing population, which has become the main reason modern Indian families are turning to newspapers in order to find their children suitable partners. Due to both industrialization and urbanization in modern India, there is a greater emphasis placed on individual values over group values; however, the prevalence of arranged marriages continues to represent the dependence on family.

In 1985 Ryali collected an equal number of randomly selected ads published in the Sunday edition of *Hindu*, an English newspaper printed and distributed throughout Chennai, India. This study consisted of a random sample of 1000 matrimonials (500 male and 500 female). Almost all the ads contained both preferred and desired qualities for potential matches and were categorized by social and personal features. One common trend for these advertisements was that social factors were emphasized to a greater extent than personal factors when searching for matches. For both males and females, the main personal qualities of importance included education and professional experience. In looking at social factors, "Between 50 to 70 percent of the Chennai advertisers consider caste as a key factor in their choice of a prospective mate. Similarly, between 70 to 80

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<sup>11</sup> For more information see Nanda, S. (1992). "The naked anthropologist." Belmont: Wadsworth.

percent of this sample specified religion as a primary attribute” (Ryali, 1998). This reveals that while the medium for finding potential spouses for arranged marriages has changed, individuals still prefer endogamous matches regarding caste and religion. To further support this finding, research indicates that extended families tend to place a greater emphasis on social characteristics than do nuclear families, demonstrating how traditional values are retained by older generations.<sup>12</sup>

Historically, as well as in modern practices, arranged marriages can be seen as supporting communal rather than individual needs. However, that being said, as opposed to a generation ago matrimonial ads now place a greater emphasis on personal rather than the social qualities of a potential spouse. Additionally, the bride and groom are now directly involved in expressing personal qualities they are looking for in their future spouse; it is no longer just the parents’ choice that matters. While individual choice has become more prevalent among young modern Indian men and women seeking arranged marriages, individuals still prefer endogamy when it comes to education, caste, and religion. Furthermore, there is still a dependence on the individuals’ parents for support through establishing respectability and providing a dowry. In modern India there is a continued societal norm and expectation of a dowry, and although dowry transactions are now illegal in India, traditional norms continue to dominate current practices.<sup>13</sup> It has also been found that if a man’s parents were to refuse to accept a dowry it would diminish their respectability. Similarly, if a bride’s family refuses to offer a dowry it would be demeaning to their daughter. Thus, because both men and women are dependent on their parents in

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<sup>12</sup> For more information see Kalpagam, U. (2008). “Marriage norms, choice and aspirations of rural women.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 43(21), 53-63.

<sup>13</sup> For more information see the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, Bhat & Halli, 1999; Stone & James, 1995

regards to dowry culture, they are not in the position to offer resistance to traditional societal norms.

In newspaper ads there is also a lesser emphasis on love in Indian matrimonials than what may be expected from a Western perspective, further substantiating Trawick's findings. When analyzing the newspaper ads, "Less than 10 percent of Chennai matrimonials think of caring and loving as positive nurturing qualities" (Ryali, 1998). When looking for suitable matches, men's parents tend to look for credentials with respect to education, profession, and social status. "Nearly three quarters of the advertisements, particularly the male segment, in Chennai mention education as a primary issue, while more than half regard one's profession, or the prospect of it, as a key element in the choice of a mate," these findings further represent how education for women has become an essential status symbol necessary to secure a suitable match (Ryali, 1998). Although today women in India have greater access to education and stable occupations, many women continue to be more traditional than men in regards to their personal goals and ambitions to marry.

The cultural tradition of "family ethic," meaning it is the duty of every family member to support every other family member in all matters affecting the family's honor and finances, helps explain why social factors are so important in retaining a solid grip on the value system. As long as Indian society continues to perpetuate the notion of respectability, and the younger generations continue to depend on their families for social presentations of caste, religion, education, and profession, the core traditional values of arranged marriages are unlikely to deviate from the norm. Despite social reforms that have

taken place throughout India, traditional values related to maintaining social hierarchies and the dowry system continue to prevail.

### **Dowry Norms in Rural India**

#### *The Marriage “Squeeze”*

Research has shown that dowries in South Asia have risen over the last 40 years and now in some areas often amount to nearly fifty percent of a household's assets (Rao, 1993). This trend indicates that many traditional marital norms associated with dowries still thrive in modern rural India. As previously indicated, dowries in rural India hinder women's autonomy because the necessity to provide a sizable dowry prevents low-income women from being considered as eligible wives for many suitable high caste men. Furthermore, families that are unable to provide a substantial dowry may resort to hastily marrying off their daughters in order to ease the family's financial burden. While dowries may limit many women's ability to find and secure eligible husbands, the increase in the average price of dowries in modern rural India may be due to structural demographic and economic factors rather than changing traditions or cultural norms.

Rao (1993) adapted Rosen's (1974) implicit market model to the marriage market in India using data from six villages in South Central India and data from the National Indian census. This model revealed that the increase in women entering the marriage market has played a key role in the rise of the price of dowries. The model assumes that a groom's household seeks to maximize their own utility through considering the desirable traits of a bride and her family, and the goods they are willing to offer. Similarly, a bride's family seeks to maximize their utility by considering the traits of the groom, his family, and the dowry they would have to provide in order to attract a particular groom. Thus, if there

are enough participants in the marriage market no bargaining would occur over the price of a dowry because the prices that differed from the equilibrium would be bid down to a more competitive level by another buyer.

Modern India's declining mortality rates have made for larger younger cohorts than older cohorts, and since traditionally women tend to marry older men, the number of women eligible for marriage belong to the younger and therefore larger cohort (Keyfitz, 1985). These statistics indicate that the rate of population growth and the average age difference between spouses will affect the severity of the marriage "squeeze" and determine the excess supply of women in the marriage market. The excess supply of women in this market may result in further competition for scarce grooms and consequently shift the dowry function upward, subsequently increasing the average price of dowries. Furthermore, households with older daughters would be expected to outbid those with younger daughters due to the fact that the younger women would still be able to search for a groom in a later marriage market (Srinivas, 1984). If older brides were able to outbid their younger counterparts the marriage squeeze could be relaxed through reducing the age difference between spouses; however, if older brides were not able to pay higher dowry prices the marriage squeeze would intensify.

To model these theories Rao used data, collected by the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-arid Tropics (ICRISAT), which consisted of households from six villages in three districts of rural South/Central India. The information related to age distributions, used to find demographic patterns, was obtained through the 1921-1981 Indian census. This information was combined in order to create the final sample of 141 households, which were spread relatively evenly across the three districts. Furthermore, to



get the real values of the dowry transactions, all transfers were valued at the 1984-rupee value of gold.

Rao's analysis found that the surplus of women over men in the marriage market indicates that the population has grown enough to outweigh the fact there are still more men than women in the total population. Figure one details the variation in sex ratios for each of the three districts. It is important to note that all three districts saw a turnaround in the sex ratio, in favor of men, by 1961. The most likely reasoning for this turnaround may be the decrease in mortality rates throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and 1950s respectively.

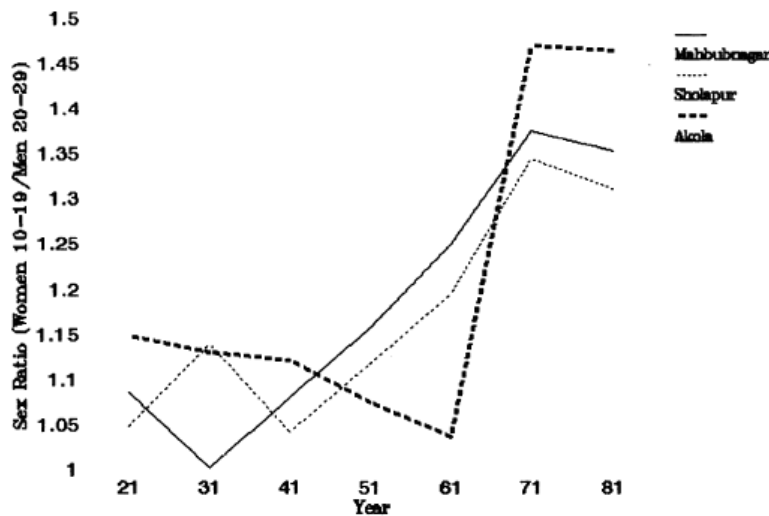


FIG. 1.—Sex ratio (women 10–19/men 20–29)

(Rao, 1993)

Rao found that the district sex ratio, which can be used to index the degree of the marriage squeeze, to be significantly correlated to the increase in net real dowries. This finding suggests that a surplus of women in the marriage market relative to the number of men causes dowries to go up. Additionally, the difference between the land owned by the bride and groom's parents before marriage significantly reduces dowries, meaning if the bride and groom's family own land of similar values there is a greater probability that the

dowry offered by the bride's family will be lower. This finding suggests that families of equal status generally agree on a dowry price that is close to the equilibrium point. It is interesting to note that none of the individual factors included in the study, such as education or schooling, seemed have an effect on the size of the dowry. This finding may indicate that household characteristics are more heavily weighted than individual characteristics when negotiating a dowry. Placing a greater level of importance on household characteristics rather than individual characteristics when negotiating a dowry may increase the burden placed on brides' families and further discourages women from pursuing a love marriage or a spouse outside their family's socio-economic class. This finding also raises the question of whether or not women would feel inspired to further their education or increase their human capital if they knew these efforts would not have an effect on their family's expected dowry contributions, and therefore would do nothing to ease their family's financial burden throughout the process of securing a positive arranged marriage.

Unlike in urban areas, the marriage squeeze manifests itself in many rural districts throughout India by forcing the price of dowries up and generally shifting the distribution of marital resources in favor of men. These findings support the theory that population growth, an increase in the size of younger cohorts, and a surplus of women in the marriage market has played a significant role in the increase of dowry prices throughout rural India. Because urban areas are more densely and diversely populated, demographic disparities may not have as large or palpable of an effect on dowries as they would in more rural districts. In rural areas the marriage squeeze may adversely impact women's autonomy through placing a greater weight on her family's socio-economic status. This pressure may

be particularly harsh on older women's families who, through negotiating the dowry, are forced to pay higher prices than those available to younger women and their families. Furthermore, women in rural areas have less structural access to men outside their communities, thus as the marriage squeeze tightens women who do not have the necessary financial resources may find themselves being pushed into a subpar or hastily arranged marriage.

### *The Dowry System and Attitudes Toward Social Change*

While it is clear that the dowry system still plays a role in shaping marriages across modern India, and that the value of dowries is increasing, it is worth understanding why this custom is so resistant to social change even though many brides disapprove of its necessity. Moreover, despite women having more active roles in the market economy, the practice and value of dowries continues to grow and may have increasingly adverse effects on women in India. In 2004 Srinivasan and Lee studied married women's attitudes toward the dowry system in the northern Indian state of Bihar. The researchers choose to study women in Bihar because it is a relatively poor state that is still strongly traditional, has not been significantly influenced by modernization, and has a long history with dowries. (Srinivasan, 1995).

Historically it was thought that the dowry served as a type of inheritance for women since traditionally only sons were permitted to inherit family property (Sharma, 1980). However, the dowry may have also been used to compensate the groom's family for all the future economic support they were expected to provide their new daughter in-law, since previously women were not involved in the market economy and would be dependent on their husband's family (Boserup, 1970). That being said, if women's economic dependence

were related to practice of dowries, one would expect this custom to decline in popularity as more women enter the global economy. Yet, this does not seem to be the case because as women's labor force participation has increased, dowries have also become more common. These trends are incredibly dangerous for women whose families are from lower income classes and may not be able to afford the increased dowry expectations.

Data from The National Crime Records Bureau of the Government of India keeps track of crimes related to dowries. Many of these crimes have to do with violence against women, which may be perpetuated by the husbands and/or their families if a woman offers a smaller than expected dowry. In 1998, 6,917 *dowry deaths* were recorded in India, an increase of 15.2% over the 6,006 deaths in 1997 (National Crime Records Bureau, 1998). As previously indicated, the pressure on brides' families to provide a large dowry may be linked to the marriage "squeeze," which intensifies the competition for suitable grooms (Bhat & Halli, 1999; Rao, 1993). This constraint particularly affects women from lower income classes, and combined with the lack of access associated with living in rural areas, further limits the number of suitable husbands available in the marriage market. However, not only are grooms seeking higher prices, but brides' families feel the need to match this demand due to the fact that the dowry is a vehicle for families to make status claims.

Many families not only feel pressured to provide a sizable dowry in order to preserve their status, but they may also feel that a large dowry ensures the family can attract a suitable husband for their daughter and thus relieve the possibility of her long-term dependence on her family after marriage (Krishnaswamy, 1995). Furthermore, brides' parents know that future in-laws may show preferential treatment to the daughter in-law who brings the biggest dowry into the family. This could result in better living

conditions for the new bride within her new family, thus bringing fewer household responsibilities, more courteous treatment, and greater autonomy (Minturn, 1993; Sharma, 1980). In some cases when dowry expectations are not fulfilled wives may suffer severe consequences including physical abuse and even death.

Srinivasan and Lee used data from the National Family Health Survey conducted in India from 1992 to 1993 to gauge dowry approval throughout modern India. A total of 5,949 married women under the age of fifty were interviewed for the study and asked whether they approved or disapproved of the dowry system. The results of these qualitative interviews showed that just over one third (35.5%) of the married women in approved of the dowry, signifying the custom is widely unpopular. This finding is interesting because Srinivasan and Lee's sample population largely consisted of rural women with traditional characteristics, meaning to find such widespread disapproval of the dowry system from this population suggests there is the potential, or at least the desire, for change throughout rural communities. Furthermore, women who had access to modernizing influences such as education, television, and urban residence all had the expected negative effects on dowry approval. However, those who participated in unpaid work, such as household labor, were significantly more favorable toward the dowry than non-employed women. This finding may not be all that surprising after considering how a large dowry affects the way in-laws treat new brides with respect to household responsibilities. That being said, because modernizing influences such as education and urban residence are likely to become more common in the future, these factors may result in diminished support of the dowry system among women in rural areas who are currently involved in unpaid labor.

While education and employment are often viewed as modernizing influences on the market economy, in rural areas across India these factors may not have as great of an effect on traditional practices. Because women in Bihar who participate in the labor market are typically employed in menial occupations with little exposure to career opportunities or co-workers with liberal ideas, it is possible that the effect of modernization in these communities is muted. Moreover, women who participate in unpaid work, which generally means contributing to the family enterprise, are in effect contributing to the economic security of their new families and may value the resources and favorable treatment their dowries provide. To the extent women move out of unpaid employment and into occupations in the market economy with more career opportunities, support for the dowry among rural women is likely to diminish.

There is little evidence to suggest women's power is increasing in India, and the little power women do have remains constrained by a patriarchal culture (Das Gupta & Bhat, 1998; Stone & James, 1995). Many factors related to the dowry system, and its influence on rural areas across India, contributes to women's lack of autonomy. As Srinivasan and Lee found, in general women disapprove of the dowry system except in cases where they feel it may encourage better treatment and access to freedom from their in-laws. In these cases it may be that some women don't necessarily feel the dowry system is enabling less restricted autonomy, but rather that it is preventing a harsh reality and a variety of worse case scenario living conditions they could face after moving in with their in-laws. The dowry system, as it stands today in rural areas, places a tremendous pressure on women's families to provide a sizable dowry in order to secure a suitable match, ensure fair treatment of their daughters, and relieve their own financial burden. Consequently,

when considering arranged marriages, because women rely on their families to support and fund their dowry, they are structurally bound to comply with their parents wishes during the selection of their future spouse, and therefore must sacrifice some autonomy in rejecting an unfavorable match or pursuing a love marriage. The added pressure of the marriage “squeeze” further drives economic competition, raises dowry prices, and thus guarantees dowries remain an unsatisfactory but necessary factor in arranging marriages.

#### *Truth in Numbers: Modern Dowry Deaths*

The prevalence of dowry related crimes continues to plague many parts of rural India. While the official numbers of dowry deaths throughout India range between 6,000-7,000 deaths per year of women aged 18-40, these figures may be disproportionately low due to many cases going unreported or written off as “accidental deaths” (Narasimhan, 2000). Furthermore, during the festival months from October to January every year dowry deaths across religious and class lines rise sharply due to in-laws demand for additional gifts from the bride’s family for Christmas, the Hindu festival of Divali, or the Muslim holiday of Ramadan. These trends indicate that dowry related deaths span both geographical location and religious orientation throughout modern India.

As previously indicated, an unmarried daughter is seen as an embarrassment to her family and an affirmation that her parents have not done their “duty.” This philosophy is where the distortion of dowry begins since the dowry becomes a way for a bride’s parents to help induce a groom to fulfill their own responsibility to their daughter. In addition to this sense of responsibility, the impact of consumerism and the commodification of women have made a status symbol out of offering a groom and his family consumer gifts such as an apartment, car, or even a refrigerator (Narasimhan, 2000). These lavish gifts further

reinforce the assumption that a women's contribution to her husband's life is valueless unpaid work, which must be compensated for by the bride's family at the time of marriage. For low-income families with sons, a dowry becomes a means of economic betterment and the potential to escape poverty, for the economically advantaged, dowries are a medium for families to flaunt their wealth; however, for the those in the middle class, the economic rat-race may be so strenuous that women's rights become low-priority until daughters fall victim.

"Bride-burnings," literally the torching of one's wife through the use of fire and kerosene, increased in popularity throughout the early 1980s; these crimes put pressure on Parliament to address dowry related deaths (Narasimhan, 2000). In 1983 Section 498A was added to the Indian Penal Code to make "any form of cruelty, mental or physical, inflicted by a husband or his relatives on a women, an offense punishable with imprisonment up to three years." Section 304B was added in 1986, which further stipulates that the death of a women within seven years of marriage, by burns or with evidence of injury, cruelty, or harassment, must be investigated and constitutes a "dowry death" punishable by imprisonment of seven years. While these legislative acts sought to decrease dowry deaths through increasing the reporting and investigation of dowry related domestic violence, time and time again dowry related crimes have been met with apathy from law enforcement officials. Further complicating the issue is the fact that dowry deaths are viewed as a private family matter involving unhappy women who commit suicide because of depression; this belief further inhibits dowry deaths from being considered public societal concerns.



Madhu Kishwar, editor of the feminist magazine *Manushi* from Bangalore, argues that the dowry is not the problem; it is the cultural prohibitions that limit women's access to financial resources, which may help them walk away from an abusive situation. This sentiment is met with opposition from some feminists who work with the families of dowry death victims. These support groups and feminist groups counter with the fact that even though many women today have jobs and professions, when subject to the dowry system they are expected to forfeit control of their resources to their husbands and in-laws upon marriage (Narasimhan, 2000). In following this argument it is clear that the incidence of dowry related deaths stems beyond the current legislative targets. It is not only reporting and prosecuting issues that help to support these acts of violence, but also the inherent societal beliefs related to the importance of women's subordination to men, the economic disadvantage of rural families, and the struggle for women to maintain autonomy and financial independence after marriage.

### *The Future of Dowry Legislation*

Modern political discourse surrounding the custom of dowry is often represented as a serious societal problem, which plays out through the neglect of daughters, domestic violence, and the murder of brides. Previous legislative attempts to deal with these problems have been met with apathy and virtually no diminution of either dowry or violence against women (Shenk, 2007). In the future, if dowry legislation is to achieve broad support and effective societal change, it must implement a targeted approach to dowry violence as well as recognize the positive motivations and effects of the dowry, which may not be uniformly distributed across regions, castes, or social classes.

Anti-dowry activists in India argue that modern dowries are bribes forced from brides' families for the benefit of grooms and their families. As previously indicated, along with the rise and spread of dowries there have been increased incidences of suicide, abuse, and the murder of brides (Oldenburg, 2002; Sheel, 1999). Additionally, although the practice of giving a dowry is nearly universal throughout modern India (Srinivas, 1984), discrimination and violence against daughters is not uniformly distributed by region or social class (Kumari, 1989; Oldenburg, 2002; Prasad, 1994; Sheel, 1999; Van Willigen and Channa, 1991). In regions where income inequality is low and the "marriage squeeze" is less prevalent, dowry demands are often more reasonable and negotiated down to equilibrium levels for the current marriage market. In these regions, primarily located across South and East India, women are not subject to violence and restricted autonomy as a result of exorbitant dowry demands (Narasimhan, 2000). Dowry violence is often found to be most common among the middle and lower classes where there is envy over consumer goods, but often the lack of resources to acquire them (Kumari, 1989; Prasad, 1994; Paul, 1985; Suran et al., 2004). Additionally, due to their dependence on their in-law's income and perceived lack of financial contribution to the household, dowry disputes are more prevalent when women work in the home (Paul, 1985). Consistent with Narasimhan's findings, future dowry legislation must target activities that spur domestic violence and restrict women's autonomy, while at the same time not completely ridding of practices that may protect brides' economic independence and favorability with their in-laws.

Current dowry legislation has proven ineffective in protecting brides and their families from extortion. To strengthen existing legislation, the Dowry Prohibition

Amendment Act of 1984 increased the punishment for the giving and receiving of a dowry, made demanding and advertising for dowry illegal, and legislated all such crimes cognizable, meaning the police or community groups could report illegal activity without any of the victims filing a formal complaint. Despite these amendments, and in addition to the “dowry death” legislation enacted in 1986, most scholars still agree that dowry prohibition has failed to curb the giving and receiving of dowries, reduce the financial burden placed on brides’ families, or decrease the prevalence of domestic violence (e.g. Basu, 2001; Dalmia and Lawrence, 2005; Diwan and Diwan, 1995; Prasad, 1994; Srinivas, 1984; Srinivasan and Lee, 2004; Van Willingen and Channa, 1991).

The 1961 Act, which initially outlawed the practice of dowries, created a loophole by allowing gifts to be presented to a groom and his family during the wedding ceremony. This legislative gap enables grooms and their families to require the bride’s family to provide them with gifts at the wedding ceremony without being considered a dowry. Additionally, since both the giving and receiving of a dowry are illegal, a bride’s family who is being abused or harassed for a dowry would implicate themselves by reporting the issue (Baus, 2001). These two political loopholes lead to the ineffective management of dowry crimes and further reduce women’s autonomy through continuing to support the dowry and providing limited options for women to persecute grooms and their families when faced with harassment over excessive dowry demands.

While these legislative loopholes should be concerning to policy makers, the bigger issue regarding dowries and women’s access to societal and economic autonomy stems from the lack of public support and legal enforcement of dowry prohibition. Public attention to dowry violence is limited and many Indian families simply ignore the laws and continue to

give and receive dowries openly or with limited secrecy. Complications also arise when a family with both daughters and sons feel the expectation to give a dowry in order to receive one from their future daughter in-law (e.g. Basu, 2001). Furthermore, the long standing belief that domestic violence is a “family matter,” not meant to be regulated by law enforcement, prevents women, family members, and police officers from calling on the legal system to handle cases of abuse through the courts.

Some Indians may resist changes to dowry legislation due to the fact that few women actually benefit from dowries through the positive effects dowries may have on the treatment they receive from their in-laws and the potential for some autonomy outside their in-laws’ household. That being said, unfortunately all women who enter into arranged marriages, especially those from the middle or lower classes, do not experience these positive aspects of dowry culture. Due to these conflicting outcomes of dowry practice, simplistic sweeping reforms that attempt to address only violence and discrimination are often ineffective; thus, future legislation should be targeted in two ways in order to increase efficacy. First, the prohibition against the giving and taking of dowries should be eliminated. Under its current conditions this legislation actually harms the interests of women due to the fact that the persecutor becomes the persecuted though the reporting of dowry misconduct. Second, Section six of the current dowry act, which specifies that dowry gifts must be documented at the time of marriage and legally acknowledged as a trust in favor of the bride, must be more strictly enforced. This provision has proven to be successful in ensuring the return of women’s property in the case of desertion or abuse (Oldenburg, 2002).

There is also room for activists to play a substantial role in improving dowry outcomes. These groups should encourage brides' families to give dowries in forms that can be easily traced to their daughter, such as property or land in the bride's name. Additionally, activists can continue to encourage families to educate their daughters in a manner that would ensure employment in meaningful occupations if such contingency actions become necessary. Both these measures may provide a means of escape, financial freedom, and enhanced autonomy for women when faced with marital troubles.

Aligning Indian dowry legislation more closely with the positive and negative consequences of dowry culture might more effectively combat the negative outcomes associated with the extortionate dowry demands seen in some parts of India. While amending current legislation will not completely rid of the negative consequences dowry culture imposes on women and their families, more could be done to help curb some of the worst offences, provide women with financial resources should a marriage turn south, and reduce dowry related violence. However, it is recognized that these revisions are not a route to substantially increasing women's autonomy. Dowries fundamentally limit women's autonomy in that resources, which could be retained by a bride, are given as a gift to the groom and his family. While current research indicates dowry transactions could benefit brides through more favorable treatment from their in-laws, in reality this marginal benefit only masks a larger systemic issue. Improvements to women's autonomy must start with financial independence. Whether financial independence comes from gaining employable skills and knowledge, or transferring inheritable wealth to daughters rather than their husbands, in order increase women's autonomy they must first be economically independent.

## **Conclusion**

While modernization in India has allowed for small improvements to women's autonomy, in many rural areas today women's independence is still restricted through the fundamental notion of love, rural economic constraints, and contemporary dowry culture.

In ancient India, the organization of the caste system allowed for structural societal barriers that continue to shape modern marital practices. As a result of systemic societal divisions, arranged marriages became essential in order to maintain autonomy for each social class. Furthermore, because the caste system emphasizes classism, there is a strong incentive for families to attempt to marry their daughters into a higher caste. However, in order for families to marry their daughters up the social ladder they must attract a high caste groom through offering him and his family lavish gifts. These gifts, which became known as a dowry, have the potential to reduce women's autonomy through increasing daughters' financial dependence on their parents and restricting upward mobility of women whose families are unable to pay the exorbitant dowries demanded from high castes families.

The fundamental notion of love in India also has the potential to restrict women's autonomy. Love in India is not seen as a prerequisite for marriage, but rather as the eventual outcome. Moreover, the most genuine form of love is expressed through humility and respect, and respect for one's family and culture is of the utmost importance. Understanding this notion of love makes it easy to appreciate why contemporary sons and daughters feel it necessary for their parents to be intimately involved in the selection of their future spouse. Self-chosen marriages, or "love marriages," which occur outside the traditional arranged marital norms, are viewed in India as lustful and disrespectful. This

sentiment is related to the belief that pure love is based on humility and respect, thus because love marriages don't directly consider one's family or caste, and often go against parents' wishes, they are seen as socially deviant and dangerous to society. These customs place the wishes of the family above those of the individual, which in many cases limits women's ability to maintain a life outside the home after marriage. Furthermore, many women still agree to live with their husband's family after marriage in order to maintain harmony and out of respect for traditional Indian customs. Because the fundamental notion of love is based on familial commitments and the adherence to cultural traditions rather than intimacy, Indian marital customs arguably constrict women's autonomy through supporting the belief that individual wants are less important than group identity and cohesion.

In rural parts of India where traditional societal norms dominate marital culture, marriage endogenous to the caste group is the rule. In these areas social discipline is strictly regulated by kinship, caste boundaries, and patriarchy. Additionally, many less affluent families are more concerned with their financial well being than their daughters' access to education and independence. While the younger generations of women from rural areas typically have more advanced education than their elders, in general education has not changed marital practices or made women more economically independent. These trends indicate that the lack of access to financial resources structurally limits women's independence, even with increased levels of education.

The prevalence of arranged marriages in modern India suggests there is still a greater emphasis placed on group values over individuality. Because dowries are still a necessary component of an arranged marriage, the increased price expectations for these

gifts prevent some women who lack financial resources from securing eligible husbands regardless of caste. Furthermore, larger younger cohorts, and the resulting surplus of women in the marriage market, have played a role in the increase of dowry prices throughout India. Consequently, because many women rely on their parents to support their dowry, they are structurally bound to comply with their parents' wishes in the selection of their future husband. This leads women to sacrifice some autonomy in leaving their homes in search of greater independence, rejecting an unfavorable match, or pursuing a love marriage. In extreme cases conflict over the appropriate dowry can lead to "dowry deaths" or domestic violence. Feminist activist groups across India argue that today the dowry system creates the expectation that women should forfeit control of their financial resources to their in-laws upon marriage. Not only do reporting and prosecuting issues help support these acts of violence, but also societal beliefs related to women's subordination to men and unequal access to financial resources further restricts women's autonomy after marriage. Future dowry legislation must strike a balance between maintaining the positive aspects of dowry culture while at the same time creating harsher punishments for negative, and at times fatal, outcomes.

The future of women's autonomy in India depends largely on women's ability to gain financial independence. In rural areas, while increased access to education has helped support women outside the household, in the future greater structural access to career oriented jobs will enable economic independence for many women. As women gain more financial equality through modernization and urbanization, individualism may become more prevalent throughout India, leading to less oppressive dowry expectations and a reduction in the emphasis placed on classism. While these factors can only help support



women's autonomy, and change is clearly possible, future social cultural evolution in India is bound to be a slow, bumpy journey.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

First and foremost, future research should focus on the types of legislative measures that would help prevent unfavorable societal outcomes as a result of the dowry system. While the first step to increasing women's autonomy in India is through financial independence, in order to gain this independence we must prevent violence against women. Future research should also be directed at understanding the types of programming or infrastructural changes necessary for educated women from rural areas to gain employment outside the household. Research on women's autonomy in India in the future should address questions related to two themes: One, how we can prevent violence against women through reduced dowry expectations, and two, what structural or developmental changes are necessary for rural women to achieve economic independence outside their homes.

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