

English 180, First Place; Professor, Dr. Timothy Helwig

Jasbir Bhangal

In 2011, India conducted its fifteenth national census, and the results were very disconcerting. For every thousand males, there were 943 females; however, for children up to six years old, that number drastically dropped to 919, one of many indicators that sex-based abortions are common in Asian countries (India Census). In India,

children in India, the system of dowry today must cease and be replaced with a new form, one that involves both the bride and groom's side contributing to the new household—something that can only happen when individual mindsets and cultural attitudes change.

Indian culture is one based on tradition, and dowry has long been entrenched in the country's history. Priya Banerjee claims that its origins can be traced as far back to 1500 B.C., to an ancient code of law called the *Manusmriti*. This text describes the principles that all Hindus should obey, including the most honored custom of adorning a bride in rich clothing and, in return, her father receiving a cow and a bull from the groom (Banerjee). Since then, the practice has developed into the dowry of today, which involves the bride and her family offering to the groom and his family large amounts of cash, gold, and other valuable items such as TVs, washers and dryers, motorcycles, scooters, beds, and other household items.

Dowry is one of two systems of marriage payments. Its counterpart can be thought of as brideprice: the practice of a groom and his family giving wealth and other resources to the bride's family. Dr. Siwan Anderson, an Associate Professor of Economics, makes a clear distinction between the characteristics of dowry as opposed to brideprice: "Dowry... is found in socially stratified, monogamous societies that are economically complex and where women have a relatively small productive role" (Anderson 163). When we look at societies in the world where dowry was and is prevalent, this distinction quickly becomes apparent. The ancient Greek and Roman cultures used dowry and heavily limited women's roles in society, restricting them from having any education, political power, or work outside the home. The same can be said for medieval Europe, where dowry also became prevalent. In contrast, the early cultures of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Mexico, the Germanic tribes of western Europe and countries formerly under the Ottoman empire, all practiced brideprice. According to Anderson, brideprices are most prevalent



of Economics, have deconstructed this theory. Their research suggests that the size of the bride's father's estate and how many daughters he has in his household—two factors that should have a major impact on a dowry's size, if it does serve as an inheritance—have no effect on the size of dowries (Dalmia and Lawrence 89). Thus, dowry has no practical purpose in Indian society.

Even with laws banning its practice and new programs in effect to discourage it, dowry is still commonplace in Indian marriages. Part of it is that the word “dowry” has different

