

# Consumerism and the Indian Dowry: Collision Course

The dowry system was created in Greek and Roman times and later spread from Europe to India and South Asia. ● Traditionally, it meant the money, goods, or estate that a woman and her family doled out to her husband in marriage. ● While the dowry practice has lost traction elsewhere, it's booming in modern India, bringing with it a collision between the old and the new.

by Nicoletta Ferro



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In the black-and-white photograph seen around the world, Nisha Sharma, then barely 21, was seen wearing a simple salwar kameez, India's traditional pajama-like trousers, and sitting forlorn in front of a group of brand-name boxes with refrigerators, air conditioners, speaker systems and other household appliances. It was spring 2003. It's unlikely that Sharma, a computer science student from Noida, on the outskirts of Delhi, saw herself as becoming a symbol in the struggle of Indian women against the dowry system.

She might in fact have wished that things had gone according to the best-laid plans, as they do for thousands of contemporaries. In accordance with tradition, families pre-arrange "appropriate" matches based on religious and caste affiliation. The protocol involves first identifying possible candidates through local newspaper ads or specially-tailored websites. The "candidates" are then briefly introduced, after which the two families meet formally, pacts are agreed on, and a marriage date is set. The script is fairly commonplace. But for Nisha Sharma the story took a slightly different twist – and she's not alone. The family of the groom made exaggerated dowry demands, including promises of cash and the furnishing of sellable consumer goods (computers, televisions, motorbikes, cars) to ensure the marriage go forward.

Nisha's father was generous, aware that his gifts would have a major impact on his daughter, her husband, and his family. But his paternal generosity went further still. He lavished the same goods he gave to Nisha for her wedding to her husband's older brother – head of the house-

1975: Young Indian women demonstrating against the dowry, which thrives despite bans.

hold since the death of their father. He did this to ensure the entry of her daughter into her new household would be welcomed and envy-free.

«I want my daughter to be happy as you are at this moment,» said Nisha's father as he handed over the keys to a new Maruti Esteem (among India's more popular compacts) to his future son-in-law. But

Information technology student Nisha Sharma sits near household appliances that were part of her family's dowry. She walked out on her New Delhi wedding to rebel against excessive demands made by her groom's family, citing the Dowry Prohibition Act. She became a symbol of the anti-dowry movement, though the practice is booming.

Nisha's happiness lasted only until the wedding day, set to take place before some 1,500 guests. When she arrived at the ceremony, she found the two families arguing. Hers was responding to sudden request by the groom's mother for a dowry equivalent to 12 lakhs (about \$ 25,000) in cash, Nisha, already dressed in her traditional red wedding sari, made a revolutionary decision. She walked out on the ceremony and went to the police, complaining that her future in-laws were acting in violation of the Dowry Prohibition Act (SEE BOX).

It doesn't matter that the story smacks of soap opera material ("I thought, 'has he come to marry me or for the money?'" Nisha later told "People" magazine, speaking



Corbis / A. Bhargava

of her husband-to-be). In truth Nisha's father was effectively extorted, and his gifts manipulated by a conniving mother-in-law-to-be and her calculating son. Tape recordings of conversations between the two sides confirmed the exaggerated dowry requests and showed that Nisha's father began resisting further payment demands after he discovered that the social and economic status of the groom's family didn't correspond to what had first been advertised.

A complexity of the scenario story reflects the tumultuous changes that Indian society has undergone in recent decades. Liberal economic reforms have all but ended the Nehru-era bourgeoisie, ushering in a more heterogeneous society, an eclectic middle class that while having different origins, wealth, and religion status is

linked by a desire for upward social mobility. This wish clashes with rigidity of an environment weighed down by the enduring constraints of a caste system that still persist, albeit lubricated by cash. The subject of dowries has become even more contentious since the 1970s, since it was directly linked to a more ominous subtext: Violence against young brides.

Delays by the bride's family in paying agreed-upon dowries or their doubling during negotiations is a frequent a source of pre-marriage tension. Sometimes the dowry payment issue persists long past the wedding itself (particularly if the bride's family faces financial dif-

A young Indian couple wearing traditional marriage garb.



Afp / Getty Image



A couple during a lavish wedding ceremony held in the opulent Samode Palace Hotel in Rajasthan.

Corbis / G. Rowell

faculties), leading to escalating threats of violence, if not violence itself, directed against newly-married young women.

**B**ride burning is the most dramatic, and common, consequence of such quarrels. Such attacks can be lethal. Since most Indian cooking is still kerosene-powered, malicious burning is hard to pin down. Police investigations find themselves mired in charges and countercharges, making it difficult to identify the culprit.

All this is profoundly ironic considering that the original Greek and Roman era concept of the dowry, which spread gradually from Europe to South Asia and India in more modern times, was that of an unfettered gift that took the form of money, jewelry, textiles, clothing, jewelry and furnishings for a new household. It represented a

kind of pre-mortem bequest, in the absence of the vested right to request an inheritance from a woman's family.

Today, things have changed, and in addition to the traditional dowry a second one has arisen. Each member of the groom's family usually contributes to the list. It usually states highly desired consumer products, mostly high-tech equipment, including PCs, refrigerators, DVD players, plasma TVs, motorcycles, and cars. Since the mid-1970s, such items, the fruits of a flourishing economy, have flooded the Indian market. As a result marriage transactions have been transformed into a detailed financial negotiation.

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Though Indian wedding rites remain largely traditional, dowry items have gone high-tech and include DVD players, computers, mobile phones, televisions, and household appliances.



AFP Photo / D. Chowdhury

**T**he higher the "assessed" market value of the bridegroom, the greater the total cost of the goods that the bride's family will need to come up with as a dowry. Analyzing the process, it becomes clear that each player in the game benefits from the marriage transaction.

For the parents of the groom, the dowry represents a unique opportunity to capitalize on the investment made in the training and education of a male child. Many families work toward this goal.

They see education as equaling employment and investing money in the high school and university training of their male heir. The principle aim is to facilitate access to well-paid jobs. At the same time, a son's training, employment status, potential revenue and are also, in addition to his family background, quantifiable assets that add to a man's value on the marriage market.

For the father of the bride, it's not simply a matter of finding the right partner for his daughter, but being able, through the whole of the marriage mechanism, to enter into a network of alliances consistent with his jati, or caste (the Indian subcontinent numbers some 3,000 castes usually based on occupation, tribal affiliation or geographical area of origin). "Belonging" through marriage can portend long-term economic or business benefits. But dowry demands can also profoundly complicate the demands of an extended family when, for example, the bride has many brothers. The gift-giving process can set into motion a vicious cycle, with brothers of a "successful" bride later feeling entitled to find a wife whose parents will also deliver a substantial dowry – in addition to taking advantage of any access or any links brought about by their sister's wedding.

In this sense, the dowry becomes a kind of reward to couples with larger families. Those that have to endure paying out a dowry for a daughter know they'll be rewarded in kind when their son, or sons, wed. For members of the wealthier class-

es, the dowry can even be a way to invest money on the sly, in ways they couldn't do legally. For the poor, it can represent a windfall in starting up a small business. Even in the context of the new economic order, the dowry still has an important social role. For India's tens of thousands of youthful "cyber coolies," men and women who work in the country's tech industry mostly in jobs of minor or marginal importance, finding a job with a mainstream employer or a foreign multinational company can be proportional to the sum of the investment made in taking time to find work abroad, even if the work is poorly paid, since foreign work is a respected resume tool.



Corbis / E. & N. Kowall

A dowry can be a way of generating the necessary funds to help boost prospects for an otherwise impossible-to-imagine future.

Listing these benefits help provide a general social and moral justification for the dowry system and to help ensure it's perpetuated over time. Despite its progressive decline in parts of the world where it was once commonplace, India's dowry system is flourishing more than ever before.

Its Indian resurgence taken different forms and moved in different directions. Geographically, for example, the practice has tended to move north-to-south. Before, the southern part of the country traditionally practiced bride-ricing, which provided for a specific transfer of assets to benefit the future bride's family without the need for any direct contributions to the newly married pair.

The dowry system has also extended itself well beyond national barriers. Non-Resident Indian (NRI) communities residing in the United States, Canada and Britain have all witnessed increases in dowry practices.

Dowries have also proved generally impervious to the degree of development or economic classification. Indi-

The much-read 'Matrimonials' section of Indian dailies is chock full of demands and details. Religious status, caste, profession, social status and domestic circumstances of prospective brides and grooms are considered essential to a match.

an regions with a high literacy rate, economically-affluent Kerala and Punjab, for example, have seen increases in dowry practices, as have Bihar and Orissa, two of the country's poorest and most backward states. While in the past the giving and receiving gifts was exclusively the preserve of upper castes who had the necessary means to make such gifts, it has since been disseminated among all castes, urban and rural, with Christians, Muslims and Sikhs all taking part.

### A vague law

The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 officially banned the practice of dowries in India, stating it was a crime either to offer or accept one and warning of severe penalties to offenders.

But the way the dowry was actually defined is weakest link in the law.

A dowry was described as "any property or valuable security given or agreed to be given either directly or indirectly – (a) by one party to a marriage to the other party to the marriage; or (b) by the parents of either party to a marriage or by a other person, to either party to the marriage or to any other person; at or before or after the marriage us consideration for the marriage of the said parties..."

Sister Lorenza, who has been involved in helping orphans of outcasts in Vijayawada, located in the southeastern province of Andhra Pradesh, for more than half-a-century struggles to conceal her disappointment at the renewed development and reach of the dowry. "Among the Dalits (the so-called untouchables, without a caste) and Adivasis (tribal communities in rural India), it's increasingly to find ways of marrying the girls because of the increasingly absurd demands of the

The ban applies to the dowry, but the law adds that: "Any presents made at the time of a marriage to either party to the marriage in the form of cash, ornaments, clothes or other articles, shall not be deemed to be dowry within the meaning of this section, unless they are made as consideration for the marriage of the said parties."

What's specifically meant by "presents" and how they're distinguished from a dowry is never made clear. The law states only that that character and nature of gifts should reflect local tradition and that their worth respect the economic status the donor. These definitions have proved far too vague to explain something as complex and nuanced as the Indian dowry system.

dowry marketplace. Despite the generalized social backwardness and the rampant illiteracy, new husbands and their families are no longer content with a simple marriage between two children and see marriage instead as a means to somehow achieve a new financial status, like living out a dream." Increasingly, however, there's resistance to a view of the dowry as being a practice that exists to victimize women. There are cases where the bride, and not her family, pushes for an agreement to the demands of a dowry in the hope of facilitating more approving and gracious entrance into her husband's family. In other cases, the bride's family consciously seeks to ensure their daughter "marries up," which would extend the family's upward social reach. At the same time there have also been reports of men who have returned home from the Indian Diaspora in search of wife but have been victimized by dowry deceptions. In most cases such deceptions involved efforts to extort cash from the hapless or to try to obtain visas for members of the bride's family. Such cases have increased so markedly that the U.S. State Department published a brochure warning about possible frauds in 2005. "A number of U.S. citizen men who have come to India to marry Indian nationals have been arrested and charged with crimes related to dowry extraction," it read in part. Canadian authorities have recommended the establishing of clear gift lists and recommended consideration of prenuptial agreements.



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