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ISSUES

When Dowry Went Wrong

How British policy ruined India's ancient system

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Hinduism Today has always been puzzled how the ancient system of stree dana, "women's wealth," morphed into the modern-day extortion called dowry. Stree dana took the form of jewelry and gold given to the wife by her family, which remained her legal possessions in the marriage, insurance against the untimely demise of her husband. When we inquired of Sri Chidananda Saraswati (Muniji) of Parmath Niketan and Dr. Karan Singh, both gave the same answer: "The system changed during British times." But until we read this book by Veena Oldenburg, we never understood why.

Death of women at the hands of a husband, or his family, for the "crime" of not providing additional dowry is one of most emotionally charged issues of modern India. The Prohibition of Dowry Act of 1961 and subsequent amendments have stopped neither the violence nor the request for dowry. Yet, recently several brides on their wedding days had the courage to call the police on grooms and their families for making last-minute dowry demands. It is timely that Veena Oldenburg, associate professor of Indian history at the City University of New York, has written her highly provocative book, *Dowry Murder, The Imperial Origins of a Cultural Crime* (261 pages, Oxford University Press, us\$18.95). This is an academic work, dense and sometimes ponderous, but a solid piece of research which challenges the common assumptions about modern-day dowry.

Oldenburg shows that in precolonial India dowry, called stree dana, was an institution managed by women for women. Dowry was a positive force in society that enabled wives to establish their social status after marriage and also provided insurance policies for emergencies. Oldenburg then directs us on a journey through Punjabi society, showing that "dowry and associated wedding expenses neither caused the impoverishment of the Punjab peasant, which is what early colonial administrators claimed, nor were they the cause of the increase in violence against women, whether in the form of female infanticide or today's bride burning." She points the finger at the increasingly masculine economy and social upheaval created by Imperial policies which took away women's traditional economic entitlements, made male farmers the sole proprietors of property rights and created inflexible tax collection regimens.

Prior to the British, the village money lender was not intent on taking land from the peasants. Rather, he and the farmer had a kind of symbiotic relationship. In contrast, the new breed of money lenders during the British Raj had "an appetite for appropriating their debtors' land. Land was now a commodity that could be alienated from the original proprietor and auctioned off by the government to recover their arrears of revenue." Because of fixed dates for tax collections, rather than the share of the crop required by the Hindu kings, "the peasant was forced to borrow in a bad year or a year when the harvest was late, chiefly to pay his taxes on time (rather than for riotous wedding parties or opulent dowries)." In Oldenburg's study of the British paper trail, this cycle of poverty the farmer was slowly sinking into was the direct result of England's "civilizing mission" to India. The British, Oldenburg asserts, blamed everything except themselves to cover up the disastrous results their agrarian policies had on India's previously stable rural society.

Other social and economic changes brought about intense competition for the best qualified and best employed grooms. An attractive dowry became the prize to catch one of these grooms. Oldenburg asserts, "The idea that a groom's family could make demands slowly infiltrated other traditional gift-giving occasions reserved by parents for their married daughters and their children. The trend, which started in the colonial period, has steadily worsened, even occasioning violence: the suicides of prospective brides to save their parents from the expense and humiliation of such alliances and the burning to death of wives whose dowries did not meet expectations. Such perverse transactions are unfairly perceived as 'dowry problems;' it would be far more accurate to think of these shameless and amoral demands as 'groom price.' But they came to be countenanced in a world where the relationship of power and gender had been radically reordered."

Oldenburg's exhaustive pursuit of the British Imperial paper trail challenges the reader to reevaluate the common view on dowry. It becomes clear how British Imperial policy in India turned dowry from a safety net into a noose with its subsequent stranglehold on modern Indian society.

Dowry Murder, the imperial origins of a cultural crime, by Veena Talwar Oldenburg, 261 pages, oxford university press, us\$18.95, oxford university press, 198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016 <http://www.usa.oup.com>