

**WOMEN'S STUDIES CELEBRATION**

Women's History Month 2005

**NOMINATION: Papers and projects done in completion of course work for Spring, Summer and Fall 2004 eligible for nomination. Students do not need to be enrolled Fall 2004 or Spring 2005 to be eligible.**  
(Students are encouraged to identify works they would like nominated and approach their professor to initiate the process.)

Instructor Helaine K. Minkus \_\_\_\_\_ Dept. Geography & Anthropology\_\_

Course Number and Name Anth 356 Women in Cross-Cultural Perspective\_\_ Semester completed Fall 2004\_\_

Title of Nominated Work Dowry Murder: Is Culture Alone the Culprit\_\_\_\_\_

**CATEGORY:** Sampson:  
Undergraduate Research Paper  X  See \_\_\_\_\_  
Undergraduate Project \_\_\_\_\_ Olson \_\_\_\_\_  
Graduate \_\_\_\_\_ Kessler  X  \_\_\_\_\_  
Turell \_\_\_\_\_  
Belter \_\_\_\_\_

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**\*\*WHY DO YOU, THE INSTRUCTOR, RECOMMEND THIS AS AN EXEMPLARY STUDENT PAPER/PROJECT? (Attach a separate sheet.)**

As the nominating instructor, please notify the student and ask them to turn in the paper, or attach to your nomination form.

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Awards are sponsored by the UW-Eau Claire Foundation, Helen X. Sampson Fund, and by private individuals. Research involving human subjects must conform to the guidelines given by the Institutional Research Board. Contact Research Services, 836-3405, with questions.

Submission deadline is February 11, 2005.

## Why I consider this an exemplary paper

When Erin proposed writing a research paper on dowry deaths in India, at first I was not very supportive. Students seem to gravitate to the most sensational topics such as honor killings, female genital surgery, etc. I advised her to try to go beyond the shocking statistics to seek a deeper explanation of the causes of what has been termed "dowry murder". She succeeded beyond my expectations.

I think her paper presents a sophisticated analysis of the historical background of dowry from the pre-colonial institution through the period of British colonialism and into the present. She draws upon a variety of literature and insightfully argues that the real problem is violence against women rather than dowry as such.

Erin acknowledges the serious problems that Indian women encounter. But she presents a more sophisticated account of the reasons than is found in the popular literature and even much of the academic literature. While dowry demands have increased in recent years and the ostensible reason why a bride is killed may be said to be her in-laws' insatiable greed for more payment, dowry alone is not the culprit. The Dowry Prohibition Act did not stop either dowry or violence against women and a more effective enforcement against dowry would also not solve all the problems.

The paper is twice as long and draws upon much more research than was required for the class assignment. I find it a remarkable achievement for a sophomore and very much hope that Erin pursues her dream of attaining a Ph.D. in anthropology.

Helaine K. Minkus

**House 1**

**Dowry Murder:  
Is Culture Alone the Culprit?**

**Erin House**

**January 22, 2005**

## Dowry Murder:

### Is Culture Alone the Culprit?

The increase in the number of grisly deaths of young brides through burning is a relatively recent and particularly disturbing phenomenon that afflicts the Indian subcontinent today. These alarming deaths occur when a young bride is murdered by her husband and/or in-laws, or is driven to commit suicide as a result of continued maltreatment and harassment by her husband and his family. These deaths are often first explained as kitchen accidents, a convenient alibi, considering how the chosen fuel for the deadly fire is oftentimes kerosene, a substance that women use to complete kitchen work. Add in the long, flowing *saris* and scarves the wife wears, and it is no wonder why this explanation is first argued on numerous occasions as the cause of dowry murder. This excuse has lost legitimacy in recent years, however, largely due to the staggering number and the swift increase in the rate of these deaths over recent years. Reported dowry deaths in India numbered 1,319 in 1986. This figure rose to a startling 6,917 by 1998 (Mandal 192). Obviously, this issue threatens to reach even higher catastrophic proportions, as evidenced by the rise of over 5,000 deaths in less than 15 years. Because of the grisly nature and increasing frequency of dowry deaths, the issue has become sensationalized in recent years and is now a hot-button issue for members of the media, activists and academics alike.

A useful start for a study of this controversial topic is a look at dowry in its original, pre-colonial form. Early texts proclaim that dowry, known as *Stridhanam*, was placed under the woman's control. All clothes, jewelry, household items and the like were given to the bride by her family and considered to be her property. What is more, a

component of this old form of dowry, known as *Sulkam*, was actually brideprice, received from the groom's family by the bride's and then in turn was transferred to the dowry for their daughter to inherit. This was said to be given in return for the value of the virgin and the gift of the daughter that the bride's family was making. This supports the idea that marriage payments involved elaborate exchanges of payments between both families over a long period of time. The notion of a bride's family paying for a higher-status husband was not the standard practice of the time. S.J. Tambiah clarifies the function of dowry in these early times: "Daughters have no share in their father's property, but they are entitled to maintenance and to the expenses necessary for their marriage and establishment" (92). While property was disposed to sons through inheritance, daughters received their share through marriage gifts in the form of dowry. The important point to emphasize here again is that in pre-19<sup>th</sup> Century India, dowry was under the control of the brides and seen as their own property (Tambiah 86). This is vastly different from the practice of modern-day dowry, in which the husband is in command of the goods contributed by his wife's family.

It would be a massive oversight to make the immediate leap from this ancient cultural practice of female ownership of dowry to its present form of exploitation by males. Obviously, culture alone could not be the sole cause involved in the corruption of dowry, for Indian culture first produced a system in which the bride had power and security. In fact, there was a foreign origin—and outside source—that caused this dramatic shift: the British colonialists. Victorian ideas of gender inequality were brought over by the British, as they dealt only with men and utterly ignored Indian women. Dowries subsequently became controlled by men, stripping women of their sole rights to

property. Not only did this place women completely at the mercy of their husbands, sons, and brothers, but once the dowries were put in the hands of men, this practice became corrupted and exploited and in turn led to the heinous marital murders so afflicting India today.

It is too simple to summarize dowry demands by saying that the British policy of dealing only with men was the only cause of them. Something had to have occurred that made Indian families require more money from their future in-laws, transforming dowry into a prospect of economic gain. The cause of this lies again in British colonial policy, for the British also brought with them to India the land revenue system, and Indian land was subsequently turned into a commodity. Men were the only citizens allowed to own land, of course, and were thus identified as individuals and given legal names by the British. This disregard for women's rights mirrored Victorian England. Later, however, even the Indian men began to suffer under British colonialists' policies, as they became indebted to money lenders for their land. What's more, the small landowners were eventually completely driven from their properties because the fields lost their productivity and became barren, due to pollution, overworked fields, and saline conditions of the soil. This made it impossible to produce enough to survive, let alone make payments to the British colonialists.

Unavoidably, these unfortunate changes had social implications. Indian citizens under the exploitative policies of the British became desperate to gain money and thus began in turn to exploit their own customs. One obvious method came from dowry payments. The demand from families grew, causing the function of dowry as moveable

property for the individual daughters to diminish. Instead, dowry became as valuable to men as were their own property rights.

The preference for sons also was exacerbated by the politics and wars during the British colonial period. Army jobs provided a salary for Indian males, a steady and reliable income. Such security was not guaranteed with the birth of a female child. Oldenburg suggests that this is also responsible for the practice of female infanticide within India. Women were charged with making important decisions for the family, since their husbands were off in the army, and they took it upon themselves to create gender-targeted families. The selective killing of female infants was seen as logical in order to increase the number of boys for the greater good of the family. Colonial policies worsened this, as they did not take into account the needs of Indian females and did nothing to give them rights within the society.

Despite these facts, the common perception is that these dowry deaths occur as the direct result of unfavorable aspects of Indian culture, and several theories present often interrelated societal factors that create a climate suitable for the creation and promulgation of murders against brides. One comprehensive and resounding refrain within these explanations is the devaluation of women in general by Indian society. Shipra Mandal perceives women in Indian society to constitute a “separate, devalued class,” which in turn leads to acts of violence committed against them (40). She considers the practice of female infanticide, neglect of the health, nutrition and education of women, the ritual of *Sati* (widow-burning), pressure on brides to commit suicide, and dowry deaths all as evidence of socially condoned violence against the socially inferior class of women.

It is generally accepted that the husband in an Indian marriage should be of a higher social status and be better educated than the wife, thus putting the woman in a further subservient position. Hypergamy, or marrying up in the social sphere, is an important component of Indian matrimony and one that serves to disadvantage the bride and her family, forcing them to compete for a suitable husband. In relation to this, Flavia Agnes purports that Indian culture and tradition play an essential role in the death of young brides, as parents are desperate to “get their daughter married and keep her married at all cost, rather than face the stigma of having an unmarried or a divorced daughter at home” (18). Additionally, since such a high premium is placed on a girl’s virginity at marriage in India, there is pressure for the family to marry their daughter at a specific time. The longer she waits to marry, the more chance there is for her to lose her chastity and thus her value as a bride. Parents of sons do not face such pressure, for no such societal demands for male chastity exist. When it is time for a daughter to marry, the pride of the family comes under contention, placing the woman and her family at a disadvantage. Due to the fact that unmarried women are cultural taboos, families often are forced to take what they can get in terms of suitors, for a bad husband is better than no husband at all. Subsequently, an unhappy bride may be asked by her parents to endure an unfavorable situation in order to maintain family pride.

Another cultural practice often blamed is that of patrilocality. When a bride marries, she leaves the support structure of her natal family and enters a new and often hostile living situation. Joint families – households consisting of several generations of family members – are common in India, and the new bride is seen as an interference, upsetting the balance of the husband’s house and family. Strained relations between the

bride and her mother-in-law and sister-in-laws put her in an uncomfortable and uncertain position, and sadly she has no kin to which to turn in this moment of extreme vulnerability. As the lowest ranking member of the household she holds little power and is at the mercy of her husband and his family.

These factors again are all argued to provide an antagonistic setting for women in Indian society, but it is the practice of dowry within this cultural milieu that is espoused to be the main culprit behind “dowry deaths,” as the name implies. Economic rationale often is said to exist behind dowry demands after the husband’s family is unsatisfied with the bride’s dowry and tries to demand more from her family. Ruth and Stanley Freed believe that “the economic advantage of dowry murder is that the young widower can then remarry and obtain another dowry” (157). Various theories attempt to explain why dowry is deemed insufficient by some families, thus necessitating the demand for more. Mandal suggests that the father of the husband attempts to earn back the money that he loses from the dowry that his family provides for their own daughters by demanding more from their daughter-in-law’s family. Mass-consumerism and an increase in the demand for material items – such as televisions, motor scooters, and refrigerators – also may be impetuses behind dowry demands. Linda Stone and Caroline James present another theory behind the economic motivation of dowries. They claim that women are no longer valued as reproducers within Indian society (as evidenced in declining fertility rates and the fact that many women who have been killed in dowry murders already had borne children), so the worth of an individual woman is best represented in the amount of her dowry. As children become less important and consumerism increases, Stone and James argue that this is enough motivation behind demanding more and more from a

woman's dowry, for women are not valued for their roles as mothers, but are seen more as potential for economic gain (313-314).

In addition to economic motivation, alcoholism is another underlying cause of dowry deaths. Upon arrival in India, the British colonialists banned nutritious indigenous alcoholic beverages, only to replace them with Western distilled liquor. This type of drink proved to be more intoxicating and addictive. Veena Talwar Oldenburg presents this as a major cause in violence against women. Drinking also reduced the amount of money spent on food, education, clothes and medicine for Indian families, which proved to be especially damaging for women (Oldenburg 158).

Cries against the perceived harmful practice of dowry have not fallen on deaf ears. Indeed, as early as 1961, the government of India hoped to curb marital murders by passing the Dowry Prohibition Act. Dowry was abolished under this law. Despite this very clear and stringent decree, however, dowry not only persists within India, but "dowry-related crime" is actually on the increase. So why, then, does this societal crisis continue to thrive? Didn't the opponents and critics of dowry get what they wanted: an abolition of the process they find so disastrous for women's freedom and security? These same critics again turn to Indian culture to explain why the Dowry Prohibition Act has been unsuccessful thus far in eradicating dowry deaths. Mandal points again to the inevitability of marriage, the high premium on virginity, and the possibility of raising one's status through marriage as viable reasons. Family honor is again put forth as an explanation for the persistence of dowry. Competition for a husband also forces dowry to be used as a negotiating strategy for marriages and the economic entrenchment of dowry within the marriage system is something which cannot be ignored, according to Freed and

Freed. These factors seem to indicate that Indian women are merely victims of their culture and that the current legislation is not strong enough to protect them against the violence they potentially face.

While the arguments pinning the blame for dowry deaths on Indian culture alone definitely set the stage for and contribute to the persistence of the unfortunate practice, they alone do not tell the whole history surrounding the once laudable system of dowry. This obsession of outsiders to focus solely on a foreign country's culture as the cause of all of its problems is an unfortunate trend that does nothing to ameliorate the trouble at hand. Oldenburg wishes that these events were looked at not merely as cultural maladies, but as the crimes they are: "The cultural flavor of crime and violence is preserved in the Indian setting by the media's insistence on calling extortion 'dowry demands' and murder 'dowry deaths' (219). The actual causes that she cites are the over-consumption of alcohol—as previously discussed—and also the backlash against women asserting themselves in modern India. As the marriage age of women grows older and Indian women become more educated, they are not as easily controlled by their in-laws. They are less submissive, which does not sit well with the in-laws who are used to complete subservience by the bride. Oldenberg also denounces the effectiveness of the Dowry Prohibition Laws in that they focus only on property, yet ignore sexual harassment, rape, and extramarital affairs within a marriage. As women are less and less willing to accept such treatment from their husbands, they will often voice their oppositions, leading to volatile reactions from oftentimes ego-inflated and inebriated men.

There is a critical misrepresentation of dowry murder and the constant exoticism of Indians compared to the "stable" Western World does nothing to curb this distortion.

Thinking in such a manner helps to justify imperial rule, for it suggests that Western practices are somehow more civilized compared to the barbaric practices of the Other. This leads inevitably to oftentimes unfounded generalizations and stereotypes, as marvelously depicted in the Epilogue to Oldenburg's book:

More women in New York City are killed by their husbands or boyfriends than in robberies, disputes, sexual assaults, random attacks or any other crime in cases where the relationship between the murderer and the victim is known... an average of 231.2 women were murdered annually in New York, a city of 8 million, in [a] five year span, which represents 28.9 murders of women a year per million inhabitants... the annual 'dowry death' figures for Delhi, also a city of approximately 8 million, for 1990-1994 averaged 17.2 women killed by familiars per million inhabitants. (229)

Simply because dowry murders are perpetrated in a far-off land and use kerosene and a match as weapons instead of a gun or knife, these deaths are seen as somehow more gruesome or unacceptable. This is a tragedy, because such generalizations write off the entire situation as a result of backwards cultural practices and ignore the real, very tangible influences, such as alcohol. To borrow an appropriate statement from Radhika Parameswaran, "It is not wrong to describe the violence inflicted on women in the name of 'tradition' but it is a colonialist move to cast 'culture and 'tradition' as primarily responsible for such violence and to ignore other factors (11). Sensationalism of dowry murder in India, designed to invoke horror within outsiders, does little to move any closer to viable solutions for the women of a nation who are desperate for effective change. To condemn their culture as the cause of their suffering is the ultimate insult to these individuals who have been so wronged by colonialist intervention into a system that served them well for generations.

## Annotated Bibliography

Agnes, Flavia. "Marital Murders: The Indian Reality." Health for the Millions 40 (Feb. 1993): 18-21.

Flavia Agnes works as a lawyer in Bombay, working with issues related to violence against women. This paper was first presented at a workshop in Geneva regarding gender fairness in the courts. She primarily argues against economic motives as the sole cause of dowry deaths, which is why the Prohibition Act proves to be unsuccessful in eliminating such crimes. Instead, she sees family pride and the social stigma of an unmarried daughter as the most virulent causes of dowry murder.

I respect Ms. Agnes' opinions and follow her line of reasoning. I agree with her thesis that economics are not the main reasons for these deaths and appreciate that she attacks the Dowry Prohibition Act as being ineffective. Her work no doubt will be and has been of immense benefit to downtrodden women in this part of the world. It would please me even more, however, if she would emphasize the role colonialism played in creating the current cultural climate in India that has had such a deleterious effect on women.

Freed, Ruth and Stanley Freed. "Beliefs and Practices Resulting in Female Deaths and Fewer Females than Males in India." Population and Environment 10 (1989): 144-161.

This source covered the topics of violence against Indian women as a result of a preference for sons and the low status of females. The researchers

spent several years in India gathering their information and presented it in this paper to explain the uneven sex ratios in this country. They claim that cultural practices are to blame for this imbalance, and cite female infanticide, female feticide, *Sati*, dowry murder, and suicide as such examples of these cultural practices.

Through my research on the matter, I acknowledge that the current cultural climate is one of hostility and lower regard for women, but I reject the notion that these are deeply rooted cultural practices. Outside factors had just as much, if not more, of an impact on the devaluation of women in Indian society than traditional practices.

Mandal, Shipra. Modernization and Women's Status in India. Austin: University of Texas, 2000.

The author conducted this study for a dissertation to earn a doctorate of philosophy degree. She was living in India and watched and took note of the phenomenon of bride burning as it became newsworthy. It is a very thorough work, examining Indian history, culture, media-influence, and other theories existing that surround the topic. Several impressive charts and figures also grace its pages.

I found this work useful as a baseline for the facts I needed to understand the basic issue. The author has no doubt conducted careful research, but, again, I would criticize her for not delving into the historical realm as to what caused the current cultural climate.

Oldenburg, Veena Talwar. Dowry Murder: Imperial Origins of a Cultural Crime. New York: Oxford, 2002.

This was the single most useful text in shaping my argument for this paper. Ms. Oldenburg's presented the view of the British colonialists' policies as the main factors involved in the corruption of dowry. She is an Indian women who has had personal, terrifying experience with dowry murder and narrowly escaped being a victim of such a crime. The book is thorough to a fault and presents dense, heavy, and convincing examples to defend her thesis.

This book made me a believer. Going into this paper, I was fully prepared to explain dowry deaths as an unfortunate result of Indian cultural practices, but Ms. Oldenburg is the one who inspired me to shift my focus halfway through the analysis. In fact, the entire second part of my paper is almost entirely inspired by this text. I found it to be one of two sources that even mentioned the colonialists' impact on modern India.

Parameswaren, Radhika. "Coverage of 'Bride Burning' in the Dallas Observer."

Frontiers 16 (1996): 69-71.

The author is a student in Dallas Texas discussing in a paper the reporting of a bride burning incident that was reported in the "Dallas Observer" and the Western misperceptions that exist within it. She emphasizes how "othering" reinforces that other countries are backwards and chaotic, while the West is stable and modern. Also, exoticism of crimes that occur in other countries are depicted as somehow more heinous than crimes of a similar nature that occur in the West.

This article was a bit redundant, but help to round out my paper.

Obviously, these misperceptions lead to my own misunderstanding of dowry deaths, and influence a vast array of issues within our global understanding. I used her ideas of generalizations and stereotyping in my conclusion to tie together the first part of the paper with the second, to explain why the cultural explanations are first given instead of the historical background.

Polisi, Catherine. "Universal Rights and Cultural Relativism: Hinduism and Islam Deconstructed." World Affairs 167 (1996): 41-46.

This is a paper that dealt with human rights abuses within various cultures and whether or not societies can use "culture" as an reason to justify their actions. The author has a master's degree in international law and economics.

Honestly, this source was the least useful for me, but I included it because it is the only other text that mentioned the impact of the British on current dowry practices. The author briefly explains how Western ideas of gender inequality influenced the Indians, and lead to the transfer of control of dowry from the women to the men.

Stone, Linda and Caroline James. "Dowry, Bride-Burning, and Female Power in India." Gender in Cross-Cultural Perspectives 3 (2001):307-316.

This article draws on information from published accounts and interviews from bride-burning survivors. It covers the old form of dowry, explains current practices surrounding dowry, examines female status in India, and offers an explanation as to why this is so. This article suggests that women's reproductive

roles have become devalued, thus making them more of economic importance than as mothers.

This was the first article I read about dowry-murder and actually what sparked my interest in the matter. I now find it a bit sensationalized and again am shocked that it mentions nothing about the impact of the British colonists. It appears to be a thorough examination, yet leaves out a critical piece of the issue.

Tambiah, S.J. and Jack Goody. Bridewealth and Dowry. London: Cambridge, 1973.

An older, yet still useful text, this book details the origins of dowry practice in locations in Africa and South Asia. The authors present a complete analysis of each location, with historical views and how they have changed over time.

This book helped me to discover what the earliest forms of dowry were like in India and gave me an insight into the practice in its pure sense, before the corruption due to colonialist policies. It earns my respect for neither glorifying or condemning dowry; it just presents the information in an honest, academic fashion.