DOWRY, BRIDE-BURNING AND FEMALE POWER IN INDIA*

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Synopsis – An increasing number of bride-burnings or dowry murders have been reported from India. These are the cases of married women being murdered, usually burned to death, by husbands or in-laws whose demands for more dowry from the bride's family remain unmet. Using published accounts of these incidents along with interview material from one woman who escaped burning, this article examines the problem in terms of recent changes in women’s roles and sources of female power. It is tentatively suggested that bride-burnings not only reflect women's relative lack of economic power in modern India, but might also reflect a diminishing of the power Indian women traditionally exercised through their fertility.

Over the last two decades, the reports from India have shocked the world: married women murdered (usually burned to death) by their husbands and/or in-laws over the issue of inadequate dowry. These recent incidents of bride-burning are a shocking example of the new forms of violence against women which are arising in modern, or modernizing, settings in many areas of the world. In India, these events are occurring alongside the growth of feminist organizations, the expansion of educational and economic opportunities for women, and some societal questioning of traditional gender roles.

This article examines the bride-burning problem in India by looking at recent changes which have occurred not only with respect to dowry transactions, but also with respect to more traditional sources of female domestic power. It is not possible here to consider all of the complex factors which are contributing to dowry murders in India, but we suggest, though necessarily tentatively, that along with the traditional lack of female control over family property and marriage arrangements, the problem may be further compounded by a new loss of female power in another important sphere, namely the power women could traditionally exercise through their fertility.

The article draws upon published accounts of bride-burning combined with material from interviews with a bride-burning survivor carried out by one of the authors (James). This case emerged not from research focused on bride-burning, but rather as part of a larger study of literacy programs in adult education centers in Madhya Pradesh. In this study James (1988) found that many of the women who came to the adult education centers were fleeing dowry harassment or attempted burnings. The case we present here was selected for the depth and detail of information provided by the woman involved. Before examining dowry murders, we offer some comments on dowry in India to place the issue in a broader cross-cultural perspective.

DOWRY IN INDIA

One feature of dowry systems in general which applies strongly to India is their association with socioeconomic stratification and the concerns of kin groups with maintaining or enhancing social status through marriage. In an historical treatment of dowry, Goody (1971, 1973, 1976) argued that in Eurasia, in contrast to Africa, intensive plow agriculture created differential wealth, promoting divisions between status groups. It then became important to perpetuate these divisions over the generations to insure that control over property remained within the status group. This was achieved in part by instituting “status group endogamy” through the mechanism of dowry marriage. Thus, “status group endogamy”

...is not simply a question of the absence of marriage between groups...but of matching like for like, or getting an even better bargain. And the usual mechanism by which this is achieved is the matching of property, often by means of dowry...(Goody, 1973:593)

Dowry, then, goes hand in hand with a class system and with maintenance of the superiority of higher groups over lower. Here marriages, at least among the upper classes, must be well controlled and, by extension, so must courtship. The roles of matchmaker and chaperone become important in this Eurasian context, along with a high value placed on female virginity at marriage (Goody 1976:17). Women must be endowed with property in order to attract husbands of equal or higher rank, and their sexuality must be controlled in order to limit “...the possibility of conflicting claims on the estate in which a woman has rights” (Goody 1976:14). Schlegel (1991) has more recently confirmed the strong association between dowry transactions and cultural concerns with female premarital virginity, which, she argues, helps to prevent lower class males from claiming wealth through impregnating higher class females. Ultimately the whole complex of cultural values centering on female "purity" and the notion that the honor of male kin groups rests on the exclusion and sexual purity of its women (see Mandelbaum, 1988) is related to the institution of dowry as an instrument in preserving and perpetuating socioeconomic classes. As we shall see, both the themes of social status and female chastity recur through accounts of dowry murders.
There is, however, another common idea about dowry systems which does not apply well in India. This is the idea that dowry is a form of female property or wealth. Thus, Goody (1973) and others (e.g., Tambiah, 1973) have seen Eurasian dowry universally as “female inheritance”---women receive a portion of the family estate at marriage, rather than upon the death of the father or mother. This portion they receive as movable property rather than land which is left to sons. But many working in India, such as Miller (1981) and Sharma (1984), have convincingly shown that whereas this may be true in many areas of the world, in India dowry is property which passes from the bride's family to that of the groom, and that even if perceived to be “women's property” (stridhan) by some Indians themselves, in fact a bride does not have (and historically never had) genuine control over the use and distribution of this property. Women in the Indian dowry system should be seen as vehicles or property transmission rather than as true inheritors.

Madhu Kishwar (1986), who has written several articles on dowry for the Indian feminist magazine Manushi, has argued that Indian dowry effectively functions to disinherit women and promote their economic dependency on men, which in her view is the real crux of the modern problem of dowry murders. Although current law permits daughters to inherit from the father's estate, more often women are upon marriage made to sign over these rights to their brothers. As for the dowry itself, Kishwar (1986) writes:

In actuality, a woman is seldom allowed to have control even over things that are supposedly for her personal use. Gold and other jewelry are traditionally supposed to be a woman's personal security, but, in practice, the gold usually stays in the custody of her mother-in-law or husband. It is up to them to give her what they wish for her personal use and daily wear...It is fairly common for certain items of her jewelry to be incorporated into her husband's sister's dowry (pp. 6-7).

Moreover, Kishwar points out that were the point of Indian dowry to provide a daughter with some financial security, parents would give her productive assets such as land or a shop, rather than clothing and household goods, which depreciate in value. Defining dowry as female inheritance, Goody (1976) saw it as a kind of economic "gain" for women. But the irony, to him, was that the system also entails a "loss" of women's control over their marriages or their sexual behavior:

The positive control of marriage arrangements...is stricter where property is transmitted to women. It is a commentary on their lot that where they are more propertied they are initially less free as far as marital arrangements go. (Goody 1976:21)

But in the Indian context, it would appear that women lose on all counts. This context (and the whole question of sources, or lack of sources, of female power) is important to bear in mind in any discussion of dowry murders. In India dowry not only serves to promote status group endogamy (hypergamy) to maintain a class system, but it is now actively manipulated to serve new ends of status-seeking among individual families. In this modern context, women as vehicles of property transmission not only lack control over both property and marriage arrangements, as was largely the case previously, but may in fact suffer considerable harassment, physical abuse, and even murder in connection with their roles as bringer of dowry.

**DOWRY MURDERS**

From what is known about dowry deaths, it is possible to see some patterns, although exceptions exist in every case. They appear to be largely, though not exclusively, occurring in Northwest India, and they are largely, though no longer exclusively, among Hindu groups. They occur most often in cases of arranged marriages (the most common form of marriage in India) but have occurred in cases of a “love match,” and they occur predominantly among the urban middle-class (Kumari, 1989; van Willigen & Channa, 1991). It is difficult to know how widespread the problem is, but most conservative estimates are that at least 2000 women are victims of dowry deaths per year in India (Chhabra, 1986:12-13). The area showing the greatest problem is New Delhi, with an estimated two dowry deaths per day (Bordewich 1986:21). The number of reported cases increases yearly. It is not known to what extent the increase reflects an increase in reporting rather than an increase in the crime. However, it may be that the crime is still underreported since the number of hospital cases of severe burns in young married women exceeds reports of violence against women by burning (Kumari 1989:24).

The preponderance of cases of bride-burning in North India is significant. This is also the area in which Miller (1981) finds significantly more males than females in juvenile age groups. This she attributes to neglect of female children, who are an economic liability relative to males. In the Northern region, too, dowry marriages are more common. The expense of providing dowry for daughters is one reason which Miller finds for the relatively intense preference for sons and relative neglect of female children in the North.
Sharma suggests that North Indian dowry has dramatically inflated as India has shifted to a market, cash economy over the last 50 years: “...dowry used to be more or less conventionally determined and many items could be made in whole or part by members of the bride’s family themselves (e.g. rugs, clothing, bedding)” (Sharma 1984:70). But now, especially among the urban middle classes, expectations of televisions, motor scooters, refrigerators, large sums of cash and so on are usual. Many observers related modern dowry and dowry deaths to the frustration of urban middle class, caught in a new consumerism, status-seeking, and rising expectations of a life style they cannot on their own earning power quite afford (Bordewich 1986:24–25).

Sharma’s (1984) work on dowry has also cleared up one confusion, namely how it is that marriageable women appear to be in great supply (everyone is anxious to marry off a daughter and even accused dowry murderers manage to secure new brides!) even though there are far more males than females in the marriageable age groups in the North. Hypergamy (marriage of women upward into higher status groups) was traditionally common in the North and with modern dowry is becoming more so. In addition, lessening of caste restrictions in modern marriages promotes more hypergamous competition. Dowry givers are thus competing upwards for scarce grooms at the top (Sharma 1984:72).

Dowry and dowry murders continue despite the fact that dowry transactions have been illegal in India since the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961. As a result of pressure by women’s organizations, subsequent amendments to the Act have even strengthened the laws against dowry and dowry harassment (Ghadially & Kumar 1988:175-76). However, what is actually dowry can be legally claimed as “voluntary gifts” at marriage. Dowry persists not only because the law is ineffective or difficult to enforce, nor because of the pressures and demands of the groom’s family, but also because the families of brides, in spite of growing public awareness of the tragic consequences, continue to give dowry. This may be due to concerns that otherwise a daughter could not be married at all (universally considered an undesirable event in India), or that the family could not secure an appropriate match. Also, parents of the bride may continue to believe that a lavish dowry will help to secure their daughter’s favorable treatment in her in-laws’ home, after which they may “yield to extortion out of fear for their daughter’s safety…”(Bordewich 1986:24). Stein (1988) reports that many Indian women “still believe...that not only can dowry be used to overcome disadvantages in the marriage market, such as dark skin color, but it gives them dignity and status” (p. 485).

From the reported cases of dowry murders, it appears that the difficulties usually start early in the marriage. A new bride is harassed and criticized for the pitiful dowry she has brought. She is encouraged to wrangle more and more from her family, yet her in-laws remain unsatisfied until, at some point, the situation explodes into an attempt on her life. One woman (“Sita”) whose husband attempted to burn her, reported the following:

I got married when I was 23 years old to a person whose family was not as wealthy as our family. My father [a businessman] gave $8,000 cash as dowry. (He) gave me expensive clothes like 500 saris, 10 golden jewelry sets and one diamond set, all the pots and pans necessary for the house, a television set, wardrobe, freezer, cooler fan, double bed, furniture and other things he thought would be useful in the house. More than that, he used to send things from time to time, like on festivals. One year of my marriage has not passed when my in-laws and husband started giving me trouble every day for more dowry. My mother-in-law started telling my husband, “Leave this woman and we will get you another one, at least the other party will give us more and better dowry than what these people have given us. What her parents have given us is nothing. Moreover, this girl is ugly and she is dark.”

Sita’s reference to the relative wealth of her family and her detailed description of her lavish dowry appear to reinforce the same materialistic values which evidently lie behind dowry harassment and murders. Later she spoke with bitter resentment about her husband’s new wife who “...is using all my things, like all my expensive saris, jewelry, and other things.” Her account also suggests a blatan economic motive for dowry murder---that it frees the woman’s in-laws to get a new bride and additional dowry. A similar idea reported in an article by Bordewich (1986) is expressed by the father of an allegedly murdered bride:

...as soon as we agreed on the marriage they started troubling us. First they told us to buy diamond rings instead of mere gold ones...Then they insisted on a sofa bed for fifteen thousand rupees, but I could only afford one that cost seven thousand. Whatever was in my means I did, but they were always displeased...they demanded a stereo and tape-cassette system, and then they asked for saris for the boy’s sisters...and then for a gas stove. I gave them...I had read that there were so many tortures and murders of young women over dowry and I was afraid of what might happen to [my daughter]. I told them I would pay whatever I could...but they didn’t even wait for the money to come. They probably realized they had gotten all they could from us. A few days later [my daughter] was dead...There has never been an investigation...Now they can marry their son to another girl and get another dowry (p. 25).
The most common means of murder is soaking the bride in kerosene and setting her aflame, with a report to the police of a suicide or an accident in the kitchen. Sita describes how this was attempted on her:

[The winter my son was born] my mother-in-law started telling me not to wear so much gold jewelry at home, to remove it at night and keep it in the wardrobe. I did not understand why she was telling me this when she had not done so before. But I did what she asked. [Then] one evening my husband went into the kitchen and asked for a match box. My mother-in-law’s sister-in-law gave him a match box which my husband then kept in the wardrobe very close to our bed. Then he left the house, saying he would be coming late that night. That same evening, the electricity went off and my mother-in-law’s sister-in-law came to get the match box to light a lamp. She found the match box in the wardrobe and took it. My husband came in very late that night when my son and I were sound asleep. Due to the cold, I had pulled the covers up over our heads. Suddenly I felt that the quilt was wet and cold, but I thought it was just due to being cold at night. But when I removed the quilt from my face, there was a strong smell of kerosene. I got up quickly and saw my husband getting into bed and covering himself, pretending he was sound asleep...he had been looking for the match box which he could not find. You can imagine that if he could have found the match box, my son and I would not have survived. We would have been burned to ashes.

One theme recurrent in many dowry murder cases is the issue of the bride’s "reputation” and sexual “purity,” which, as we saw in Goody’s (1976) discussions of dowry, serves as a link between the institution of dowry, family concerns with status, and the perpetuation of socio-economic classes. With respect to this issue, a woman facing dowry harassment is truly vulnerable as any suggestion of her “loose” character is an easy defense for her husband or in-laws. In the case above Sita reports that after fleeing from the bed,

I started crying loudly, then my husband and mother-in-law came and started telling me to leave the house. I told them I would not step out of the house until my parents came, because if I would have left the house, they would have told the police and everybody that I was the one who wanted to leave the husband and the house, that it was my fault and not anyone else’s in the family. They would have cooked up another story that I am a bad character and that is why I left the house at that hour of the night (3:00 a.m.).

In a dowry murder case discussed by Kumari (1989), the husband accused of burning his young wife claimed that she had committed suicide because she could not forget her own “murky past” involving previous sexual activity (p. 64). Similarly, in newspaper accounts of dowry deaths it is common to find some innuendo of lapsed sexual behavior on the part of the victim. Also illustrative is the following account, taken down by Bordewich (1986), from a woman who virtually sees a dowry murder:

...In the house across the street we could see a man beating his wife. I went out onto the balcony and saw that the neighbors had gathered in the street to watch...A moment later I heard a scream...and there in front of me was the woman, burning in the window. She tried to wrap herself in the curtains, but they went up in flames. I ran into the street, but none of the neighbors seemed disturbed. People were saying it was “just a domestic issue” or that the woman must have had a "loose moral character." The woman died soon afterward in the hospital. The husband was never charged (p. 26).

DOWRY, FERTILITY, AND FEMALE POWER

Dowry murders must be viewed within the context of Indian culture, which is characterized by patrilineal descent, patrilocality, the joint family, and strongly prescribed subservience of wives to husbands and in-laws. In both the popular press and scholarly literature, discussions of dowry murders incorporate these and other elements of Indian cultural traditions and women’s roles within them. Certainly the association of death, fire, and female chastity or purity has caught the attention of writers who have drawn parallels between modern bride-burning and the ancient upper caste custom of sati, or the burning of a widow alive on her husband’s funeral pyre. This was considered a (theoretically self-willed) act of great religious merit, only to be performed by a chaste wife in a state of ritual purity (Stein 1988:464). Again, in Hindu mythology, Sita must prove her chastity to her husband, Rama, through passing unburned through fire, and in another myth Sati Devi proves her loyalty to her husband, Shiva, by leaping to her death into the ceremonial fire of her father who insulted him.

Whatever deeper meaning all this may have within the Indian consciousness, Stein (1988) rightly points out that both the ancient sati and modern bride-burning reflect one clear fact of Indian life: the unacceptability of the unmarried adult woman. Thus sati was a way to dispose of the widow, who in earlier times among high castes, could not remarry, but who could, if alive, remain in society as a threatening, uncontrolled sexual woman. In the modern context, the existence of an unmarried adult daughter, with all the same connotations of uncontrolled, dangerous sexuality, brings shame and dishonor to her parents whose duty it is to marry her off, and who receive religious merit for doing so. So great is the pressure to marry the daughter (and keep her married, a divorced woman being equally unacceptable and threatening in
Indian society) that a woman’s parents remain in a weak and vulnerable position with respect to dowry harassment. Stein (1988) concludes:

...marriage is still seen as the only way in which Indian women can be part of their own society, can function as social beings, even at the expense of their own personalities, and occasionally their lives (p. 485).

The situation is compounded by another deep-rooted Indian tradition: the religious and social inferiority of the bride’s family to that of the groom. In Hindu tradition a bride is a religious gift (*kanyadan*, gift of the virgin) and, as such, can only be given upward to those of higher rank, those to whom one must show perpetual deference and respect. The inferior and subservient position of a wife to her husband is on another level shared by the family who gives her. Thus “the subordination and frequently oppressed position of the daughter-in-law is exacerbated by the exclusion and deference of her own kin” (Stein 1988:476).

Kishwar (1986) also refers to these relationships in her discussions of dowry deaths, highlighting the powerless position of a bride and her parents. For her, dowry harassment is but one of many techniques by which a groom and his family can humiliate a bride to “accept a subordinate position with the family and feel grateful for being allowed to survive at all in the marital home” (p. 4). She also affirms that marriage of the daughter and dowry are matters of status and family honor, so that “...most parents would rather see their daughters dead than have them get a divorce and return permanently to the parental home” (p. 5).

Chhabra (1986), noting the many cases of dowry deaths which involve the mother-in-law, discusses the role of the traditionally problematic relationship between a woman and her daughter-in-law in India in terms of modern dowry harassment. Participating in or encouraging dowry harassment is the mother-in-law’s way of rejecting the new bride, whom she perceived as a threat to her son’s support and loyalty to herself (pp. 6-10).

All of these socio-cultural factors and may more are fundamental to accounting for dowry deaths and, along with the inability of police and the courts to alleviate the problem, go a long way toward explaining why these deaths persist. However, most of these cultural traditions, which have in various ways, degrees, and combinations deeply shaped Indian women’s lives, have been around for centuries, whereas dowry murders are apparently quite new, becoming a recognized social issue in India in the 1970s (Kumari 1989).

The concept of “dowry death” was only legally established in India in the 1980s (van Willigen & Channa, 1991:371).

What has changed in Indian society to bring about this form of violence against women? Along with the new socioeconomic issues already referred to, it is important to ask also whether women in this modern context have lost sources of power which previously gave them some leverage. Despite all the constraints on women and the general sense of powerlessness which any account of the traditional Hindu woman’s life will give, it was still the case that a new bride did not endlessly suffer ill-treatment from and subservience to in-laws, but gradually transformed herself from lowly bride to respected mother, perhaps eventually to become a powerful mother-in-law herself.3 Regardless of however lowly the position of the affinal women in this strongly patrilineal society, she was, at worst, a necessary evil since she alone held the power to reproduce the husband’s lineage. In a more traditional scenario, the adept Hindu woman tried to please her husband not only to express a culturally required subservience but also in order to become pregnant, as this would ultimately be her way out of misery and toward a rising status within the husband’s household. With each sign of successful fertility, and particularly with the birth of sons, her position improved. As with many areas of Asia, sons were desired to continue the partilineage, serve as heirs, perform important funeral rituals for parents, and to provide security in old age. Economically they contributed to home based production or could bring in cash income.

A woman’s fertility was the key to what can be considered a “great transition” in her status and identity. Summarizing this or the whole of India, Mandelbaum (1970) wrote of the bride that

...the real relief comes when she becomes pregnant. Her mother-in-law can afford to relax a bit in her role as taskmistress; her husband is pleased; the men of the household are glad; there is an awakened interest in seeing that she eats well and rests easily. This first burgeoning also marks her first upward move in the family status hierarchy...[then with childbirth] She is no longer the lowly probationer she was at first. If the child is a son, she has proved herself in the most important way of all and her confidence is the more secure. The son is her social redeemer and thenceforth her importance in the family tends gradually to increase (pp. 88-89).

Raising this issue shifts the focus somewhat away from dowry, over which women evidently never had much control, and toward other sources of female power which may be changing, at least among the urban middle classes of the
North. In a sense, female fertility, or the high value placed on women’s successful reproduction, may have served as a “safety valve” for women in the past. But once this fertility value diminishes, women’s position is indeed insecure. One startling feature of the dowry murder cases is the high number of women murdered who had already produced children, even sons. In one study 36% of the dowry murder cases involved women who had already produced children; another 11% of the women were pregnant at the time of death (Ghadially & Kumar 1988:168). Although she does not give numbers, Stein (1988) notes of dowry murder victims that “...a surprising number of them are pregnant when they die” (pp. 474-475).

Even victims of dowry harassment seem surprised to realize that childbirth and particularly the birth of a son does not alleviate their situation. Sita, in the case discussed earlier, remarked that after being harassed over dowry, “I gave birth to a male child. [But even with this] they did not want to keep me or the child either. They cared only for the dowry.” Similarly in the case of Suman, described in the Indian feminist magazine *Manushi*, it was reported that

...[The husband’s] maltreatment of Suman continued to escalate. He pawned all her jewelry. Even the birth of her son did not improve the situation. When the son was a year old, Suman was once more beaten and thrown out of the house in the hope of pressuring her parents to give more dowry (Kishwar 1986:8).

Demographic data from India supports the suggestion that the country’s traditional strong value on high fertility may be changing. Fertility rates are declining and have been since the mid-1960s. An analysis of the 1981 census produced the following report:

India, the second most populous country in the world, is experiencing the early stages of fertility transition. The unprecedented acceleration in the rate of growth of India’s population, sparked off by declining mortality as early as 1921, has finally been arrested...It is beyond doubt that a significant contribution to this phenomenon lately has been from declining fertility, of which there is ample cumulative evidence. (Rele 1987:513)

One reason for the decline is undoubtedly urbanization, which tends to dampen fertility since the “cost” of children increases while their economic benefits decline. The above report also shows that the pace of decline is accelerating and that although the decline is occurring in both rural and urban areas, urban fertility remains much lower than rural fertility. Other studies show that fertility rates are lower and declining faster among wealthier and more educated groups (Goyal 1989). Along with fertility declines, some studies show declines in desired number of children, again most notable among urban, educated and wealthier groups (Jejeebhoy & Kulkarni, 1989). Could it be that changes in fertility values are taking place and that, however advantageous this may be for India’s population problems, it may be a contributing factor to dowry murders? Demonstrating a significant change in fertility values (beyond merely showing a decline in fertility levels) and a definite connection with dowry murders would, of course, require much further research. Nevertheless, our inquiry into dowry murders, and discussion of the problem within the context of more traditional ways in which women acquired some domestic leverage, is suggestive. Previously through much of India a large joint family and the production of many sons was itself a source of prestige. Through successful reproduction, women could gain respect and greater security in the husband’s household. In today’s context, children and grandchildren, though undoubtedly still desired for all the same cultural reasons as before, become economically less important. At the same time a new urban consumerism and concern with material displays of wealth is widely reported in India and is directly referred to in all studies of dowry deaths. We suggest that insofar as these shifts in values be occurring, they may diminish the domestic leverage women once exercised through reproduction.

**WOMEN IN PRODUCTION AND REPRODUCTION**

In his study of dowry systems, Goody (1976) incorporated the work of Boserup (1970), who distinguished systems of “female farming” (shifting cultivation), where women perform the major part of agricultural work, from “male farming” (plow agriculture) where male labor predominates. The latter is associated with private land ownership, a landless class of laborers, and dowry, as opposed to bride-wealth marriages. Boserup saw the development of male farming in Asia, and the later shift to male farming in Africa, as detrimental to women since the diminution of their roles in production increased their economic and social marginalization.4

Boserup (1970) made the important point that in regions of female farming, women are valued both as workers and as child bearers, whereas in systems of male farming, they are valued as mothers only (p. 51). Applying these ideas to modern, urban India (where the valued economic activity is income-earning), it appears that a new problem facing women, at least among the middle classes, may be that women lack value, and therefore power, either as workers or as mothers. Of course middle class Indian women can and do
make important contributions to household income, increasingly so in the modern context. But, as Sharma (1984) points out, we need to look at women’s work in relation to the proportion of their economic potential relative to that of men:

It might be possible to show that the expansion of dowry has been accompanied by a decline in women’s capacity to contribute household income compared with that of men, even though there has been no absolute diminution of women’s economic activity. New opportunities to earn cash wages in factories, in government employment, and white collar occupations have expanded far more rapidly for men than for women...(pp. 67-68)

Boserup’s critics (Beneria & Sen 1981) claim that one problem with her analysis is that she ignored women’s roles in reproduction. Their point is that women’s reproductive roles in many cases hinder their full equal participation in wage labor or other socially valued economic activities, whereas Boserup laid the blame on sexually biased cultural values and changes in technology. In fact, however, Boserup did address women’s roles in reproduction, though not quite in the way her critics would have liked to have seen. Writing before 1970, she seems to have foreseen that changes in fertility values could occur and could negatively impact women. Speaking in general of societies with male farming systems, where women have been devalued as workers but are still valued as mothers, she wrote: “There is a danger in such a community that the propaganda for birth control, if successful, may further lower the status of women both in the eyes of men and in their own eyes” (Boserup 1970:51). Whereas it is unlikely that “propaganda for birth control” alone would have this effect, it may be that in India, urbanization and the growth of the consumer economy are bringing about the same result.

CONCLUSION

Many observers of the problem of dowry murders in India have contributed to showing a powerful link between this form of violence against women and women’s relative lack of economic power. With the urbanization and consumerism characterizing India today, women have not shared in access to new economic opportunities with men. We suggest that at the same time, their one traditional source of leverage, their fertility, has possibly diminished in value. Regrettably, women are valued for the dowry they will bring; but so long as their valuation rests primarily in their being vehicles of property transmission, they will remain vulnerable to dowry harassment and murder.

NOTES

1 In India there has been a long history of anti-dowry movements, and only recently have they concerned dowry harassment and murder issues. For discussion see Kumari (1989).
2 This observation was made by Frank Myka (personal communication) in his review of cases of dowry murders in the Hindustan Times during 1989.
3 For discussion of these aspects of women’s lives in Hindu Nepal see Bennett (1983).
4 Boserup’s work was an early contribution to what has become a vast literature that links male subordination to women’s roles in production and women’s access to property. Many of the arguments put forth in this line of research follow, with modification, Engels’ treatise on the origin of the family. Important current studies can be found in Leacock and Safa (1986). Modern studies have in general emphasized that both the development of the world capitalist system and international development projects in the Third World have had adverse consequences for women. Today, different positions are taken within this framework. For a review of the literature see Tiano (1987).

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