

Political Economy of Marriage: Construction of Commodity and Gift within Marriage Practices and Transactions in India

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Introduction

Are all aspects of human life commodifiable? Are exchange and its corresponding behaviors limited to the economic realm, or are all objects and relationships subject to the cost-benefit analytic exchange? If so, what are the consequences? Does the impingement of market metaphors imply the destruction of non-market relations, or the shrinking of the realm of customs and moral obligations? Is the world of the gift and its accompanying social relations irrelevant to the capitalist calculation of returns? Or conversely, is the consideration of the commodity form irrelevant for a non-market transaction? This paper explores these questions by analyzing preferences and behaviors around marriage formation in India.

The difference between commodity and gift has been established as analogous to the distinction between market and non-market relations in the social sciences (Mauss 1954; Polanyi, et. al., 1957, Gregory 2015). This distinction is linked to the degree of sociability involved in the exchange where commodity-exchange and gift-exchange take the opposite poles of the spectrum (Rus 2008). Commodity has come to stand for rationality, individualism, a strict calculus of material gain and loss, and impersonal relations that disappears after the transaction is over. In contrast, gift stands for power, moral obligations, collective concerns, non-material rewards, and the glue for holding together society through social relations that survive and continue even after the exchange (Lapavistsas 2004, Rus 2008). The metaphor has remained important for economics as a discipline because it challenges and brings attention to the appropriate method of differentiating between market and non-market relations (Lapavistsas 2004). Scholars claim that in advanced capitalism the demarcation between market and non-market relations has blurred, especially in the realm of the family but that demarcation is not clear in developing economies (Lapavistsas 2004).

India, a postcolonial neoliberal state, presents a unique case, the institution of marriage, which is delicately poised between the realms of market and non-market exchange. It is a traditional institution that is governed by religious scriptures and caste rules, yet the effervescence of matrimonial sites and advertisements gives it a semblance of a 'marketplace' where men and women could be treated as commodities to be bought and sold. For example, a provincial court mulling ways of stopping matrimonial websites from publishing monetary demands (market price) that accompany advertisements for prospective grooms invoked the moral, and religious nature of marriage and its erosion in contemporary India.¹ Studying the institution of marriage in India affords us an opportunity to critically examine the relationship between market and non-market exchange as well as the implications of such a relationship.

¹ Special Correspondent. "State should control matrimonial websites that promote dowry: HC." The Hindu, March 25, 2016.

Marriage: market or gift exchange?

The most influential analysis of marriage in economics comes from Gary Becker's work in new home economics (NHE). Becker used a neoclassical framework to present a market theory of marriage, which assumes voluntary exchange and existence of a marriage market. Feminist economists have critiqued and extended the NHE but concentrated mostly on the labor supply and consumption decisions within the marital union rather than focusing on the purpose of marriage formation. Thus in the NHE and its extensions, marriage is treated like a market. In contrast, literatures in sociology and anthropology treat marriage as a social institution, which constrains rationalistic, individualistic behavior. Bridges between the disciplines of economics, which primarily focuses on the monetary dimensions, and other social sciences, which focus exclusively on the non-monetary aspects, have either not been built, or are precarious at best.

The work of Chris Gregory (1982) has been the most influential in economic anthropology that tries to combine theories of classical political economy and classical anthropology, to understand exchange relations in non-European societies. Being an economist himself, he took an anthropological turn in trying to understand the relationship between production and consumption relations. In studying the economy of Papua New Guinea (PNG), Gregory, built on Marx's idea of productive consumption and consumptive production, and Levis Strauss' theory of marriage as a system of gift exchange of women, to propose a conceptual framework for studying non-western societies. This conceptual framework treats the production, consumption, distribution, and circulation of both things and people in 'totality.' He distinguishes commodity and gift exchange as a distinction between market and non-market relations. Gregory's formulation of this distinction is captured in the following paragraph:

“Marx was able to develop a very important proposition: that commodity exchange is an exchange of alienable things between transactors who are in a state of reciprocal independence ... The corollary of this is that non-commodity (gift) exchange is an exchange of inalienable things between transactors who are in a state of reciprocal dependence. This proposition is only implicit in Marx's analysis but it is ... a precise definition of gift exchange.” (Gregory 2015, 12)

Gregory used this distinction as the foundation for a theory of 'gift-based' societies, characterized by kinship-based groups (clans), as opposed to 'commodity-based' societies, characterized by social classes. An understanding of this framework requires further elaboration of Marx's idea of reproduction and commodity and Levis Strauss' idea of marriage, kinship and gift exchange.

Marx developed the concept of 'reproduction' in Grundrisse, 1857 as the conditions that are necessary for the society to sustain itself through self-replacement of both things and people. Marx argues that production, consumption, distribution, and circulation are elements of a unitary whole, with production as the predominant phase. In this conceptualization, production is also immediately consumption because it involves using

material and labor energies, which he called 'productive consumption.' At the same time consumption is also production because it provides the necessary condition for the production of human beings themselves, which he called 'consumptive production.'

"In productive consumption... the producer objectified himself, in the latter, the object he created personifies itself. Hence this consumptive production- even though it is an immediate unity of production and consumption- is essentially different from production proper. The immediate unity in which production coincides with consumption and consumption with production leaves their duality intact."

In this analysis of reproduction, Marx focuses primarily on the circulation of things and treats the circulation of people as exogenous. Gregory attributes this omission to Marx's analytical focus on capitalist societies, where treating sexual relationships and biological reproduction as exogenous may be considered appropriate. Gregory tries to overcome this analytical difficulty by borrowing on the concept of consumption as the sexual reproduction of people from Levi-Strauss, as outlined in *Elementary Structures of Kinship 1949*.

Levi-Strauss's work builds on the theory of reciprocity and gift exchange, that dominated anthropological literature at the time and was primarily concerned with contrasting social, political, and economic institutions of western and non-western societies. The work of Marcel Mauss (1925) and Lewis Morgan (1877) was influential in setting the stage for Levi-Strauss' conceptualization of marriage as a system of exchange of women, in clan-based societies (India being one of them). He argued that women are the 'supreme gift' in clan-based societies as women's fertility is vital for the reproduction of the next generation within a group and marriage, in this schema, is a mechanism of exchanging productive labor as well as establishing a bond of reciprocity between the bride-giver and bride-taker. Thus for Levi-Strauss, in clan-based societies gift exchange was not essentially of an economic nature but a "total social fact", that is, an event which has a significance that is at once social and religious, magic and economic, utilitarian and sentimental. jural and moral." (Levi-Strauss 1969,52). His theory of the evolution of a gift economy of women revolved around the interpretation of the incest taboo and exogamy practices.

"The prohibition of incest is less a rule prohibiting marriage with the mother, sister or daughter, than a rule obliging the mother, sister or daughter to be given to others. It is the supreme rule of the gift, and it is clearly this aspect, too often unrecognized, which allows its nature to be understood." (Levi-Strauss 1969, 481).

Gregory combines the Marxist political economic approach with Levi-Strauss' theories to develop a conceptual framework that focuses on studying the production, consumption, distribution, and circulation of both things and people as a conceptual whole, without treating the production of things or circulation of people as the 'predominant phase.' Drawing on Marx's terminology, he distinguished between production as the

objectification process that converts people's energy into things and consumption as the personification process that allows the survival of people. In doing so, he also distinguished between a class-based society, as dominated by the objectification processes and clan-based society, as dominated by personification processes. Thus he proposed that things and people assume a commodity form in a class-based society and gift form in a clan-based society.

In this framework, marriage is squarely placed in the gift exchange column, especially in non-European societies. It is treated as a personification process that helps in maintaining a realm of reciprocal social relations through exogamy while ensuring the circulation of people that completes the 'reproduction' process. Marilyn Strathern (1988), in an innovative spin of Gregory's political economy of PNG, developed an endogenous analysis of gender relations, claiming that gift economy and the social relations emerging from such exchange could be best understood using an anthropological lens rather than a feminist one. Based on this understanding both Gregory and Strathern emphasize that gift exchange and the social relations underpinning the process, for example of gender and ethnicity, should be treated as exogenous. This might have had little implication for analyzing PNG but has important implications for studying India where capitalist relations were superimposed on existing social relations through colonialism. Thus understanding the effect of relations of production on gender and caste and the evolution of marriage as an institution requires a better understanding of the relationship between capitalism, patriarchy, and caste. The next two sections will look at the literature that deals with this.

A Marriage of Capitalism and Patriarchy

Engel's *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* 1884, has been the most influential in studying family, marriage, and gender relations in a political economic framework. He also drew upon Morgan's anthropological insights and Marx's idea of reproduction to deal with the links between gender relations and the production processes. He claimed:

“According to the material conception, the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of immediate life. This again is of a two-fold character: on the one side, the production of the means of existence, of food, clothing, shelter and the tools necessary for that production; on the other hand, production of human beings themselves, the propagation of species. The social organization under which the people of a particular historical epoch and a particular country live is determined by both kinds of production: by the stage of development of labor on the one hand and of the family on the other.” (Engels 1972, p. 71)

In this analysis, Engels was primarily concerned with understanding how women's role in reproduction was shaped by the production and reproduction of commodities in a capitalist society. He argued that women's oppression was a direct result of the rise of the private ownership of the means of production. Thus monogamous marriage evolved as an

institution in class-based societies to preserve private property through inheritance. Engels thus provided a historical materialist study of the emergence and nature of family and marital relation in a capitalist society and was the first one to bring together the two systems oppression- patriarchy and capitalism, under one coherent analysis. However, feminists have critiqued Engel's analysis on several grounds, primary being the reduction of the system of women's oppression- patriarchy- to capitalist class relations (Hartmann 1979). Hartmann famously contested this by developing a dual systems approach where patriarchy and capitalism remain in an uneasy struggle with each other-sometimes working in tandem and sometimes in opposition (Hartmann 1979). In a similar vein, Barrett (1988) argued that ideological expression of oppression could not be subsumed under the material base. She claimed that the sexual division of labor and its accompanying ideology, that allocate different meaning to men and women's labor, have been embedded in the capitalist division of labor from its beginning.

In an extension of the theories of feminist materialism recently Social Reproduction Theorists (SRTs) have tried to understand the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy by extending Marx's concept of reproduction. In a recent collection of articles (Bhattacharya and Vogel 2017) SRTs acknowledge that human labor is at the heart of creating or reproducing society as a whole. However, they differ with Marxist analysis that treats productive labor for the market as the sole form of legitimate work, and broadens the definition to include familial as well as community work that goes on to reproduce and sustain the worker, or more specifically the 'labor power'. In doing so, SRTs perceive the relation between labor dispensed to produce commodities and labor dispensed to produce people as part of the systemic totality of capitalism. Thus according to SRT, while the formal economy is the production site for goods and services, "the people who produce such things are themselves produced outside the ambit of the formal economy, in a 'kin-based' site called the family." (Bhattacharya and Vogel 2017, p. 14)

This analysis broadens both Marxist and Feminist understanding in two ways. First, it proposes a more specific reading of the economy. As Susan Ferguson (2016), elaborates that understanding of capitalism simply as an economic system involving workers and owners is incomplete, as it fails to examine the ways in which wider social reproduction of the system - i.e. the daily and generational reproductive labor that occurs in households, schools, hospitals, prisons, and so on—sustains the drive for accumulation. Second, it treats oppression as central to the understanding of the economy rather than a peripheral one, as it treats gender, race, and sexuality based inequality as shaped by, capitalist production rather than as an exogenous constraint.

Marriage In India: Caste and Patriarchy

Marriage is inextricably linked to caste in India. According to census data of 2011 95% marriages fall under what is known as 'arranged marriage'; a marriage arranged by parents within one's caste. Caste exists at a fundamental level as a system of hierarchy along with other hierarchical systems such as patriarchy, and often, one is indistinguishable from the other. Thus understanding the link between caste and marriage is important for understanding the institution and its purpose in the Indian context.

The Caste system in India is a complex system of social stratification that is built on graded inequality, which operates at each possible boundary between groups. The traditional system is built like a pyramid structure where the lower you are placed, the lower your ritual status is. This pyramid has 4 sections or *Varna*. Each Varna, however, includes a large number of castes, and each caste includes innumerable clans. The clans are organized around a *gotra* which signifies a paternal lineage that is traced to a common male ancestor. The four Varnas are *Brahmin* (priests, purest), *Kshatriya* (warriors, landowners), *Vaishya* (traders), and *Shudra* (peasants, artisans). Below these four Varna, are the 'untouchable' communities that are considered ritually polluting because of the polluting occupations they have been forced to do such as scavenging, cleaning, and dealing with dead animals.

The traditional Caste system is now further complicated by the imposition of constitutionally sponsored affirmative action programs in India which are aimed at compensating for the unequal life outcomes shaped by the caste system. The Indian constitution clubs the top three Varnas as 'General Castes,' that have access to 50% quota in all government controlled educational institutions and employment. The Shudras are considered 'Other Backward Castes,' and get a 27% quota. The untouchables are called 'Scheduled Castes,' and get 15% quota and indigenous communities, outside the purview of Hindu religion, are given 7.5% quota. The quotas themselves are not representative of the population demographics and unavailability of recent caste-based census data makes the correct estimation difficult.

All the theoretical understanding of caste in contemporary literature draws from the influential work of B. R. Ambedkar who emphasized that the structure of marriage and reproduction is the fundamental basis of the caste system. Ambedkar defined caste system as a system of 'graded inequality,' which is created due to *the superposition of sub-caste (Jati) endogamy on clan (Gotra) exogamy*.

“The various Gotras of India are and have been exogamous..., so much so that, in spite of the endogamy of the Castes within them, exogamy is strictly observed and that there are more rigorous penalties for violating exogamy than there are for violating endogamy. You will, therefore, readily see that with exogamy as the rule there could be no Caste, for exogamy means fusion. But we have castes; consequently in the final analysis creation of Castes, so far as India is concerned, means the superposition of endogamy on exogamy.” (Ambedkar 2014, 23)

However Ambedkar also noted that, “in an originally exogamous population an easy working out of endogamy (which is equivalent to the creation of Caste) is a grave problem,” (24) and it is in consideration of the means utilized for the preservation of endogamy against exogamy that solution of this problem could be found. He discussed three such mechanisms that were primarily intended to solve the problem of the *surplus man* and *surplus woman* in a caste and to maintain its endogamy. These mechanisms are 1. *Sati (self-emulation of wife on funeral fire of the husband)*, 2. *Enforced widowhood (no widow remarriage for women)* and 3. *Child marriage*. All the three mechanisms were the

violent means through which women's sexuality and reproductive rights are controlled within the institution of marriage. Thus Ambedkar's conceptualization of caste also lays the basis for understanding how patriarchy and caste work in tandem to maintain caste and gender hierarchies in India. So Ambedkar's prescription for breaking caste-based inequality lies in the institution of marriage itself "the real remedy for breaking caste is inter-marriage. Nothing else will serve as the solvent for caste" (Ambedkar 2014, 45). This remains a distant dream as only 5.8% marriages in India could be termed as inter-caste marriages, a number which has not changed in the last 40 years (Ray, Choudhary and Sahai 2017)

Moreover, Ambedkar also demonstrated that caste, which was a fluid identity for a long time (with only Brahmins, the upper caste following its principles strictly) was solidified throughout India as an ideology through imitation and excommunication. Ambedkar for example convincingly showed that the observance of customs of Sati, enforced widowhood and child marriage varies directly with the distance that separates the caste. Those castes that are nearest to the Brahmins imitate all the three customs and insist on the strict observance thereof. Those that are less near imitate enforced widowhood and child marriage; others, a little further off, have only child marriage; and those furthest off have imitated just the belief in the caste principle.

In contemporary India the three mechanisms that Ambedkar discussed for maintaining caste endogamy: Sati, Enforced widowhood and Child marriage, have been made illegal; however they continue to exist in some form or other, especially the last two. Widowhood is still viewed as a stigma socially, and remarriage among women is more an exception than a norm, a recent report based on census 2011 paces the remarriage among women at 10%. The legal age of marriage in India for women is 18 years, however, as per a recent UNICEF report, 27% of the girls were married before that nationally, with the percentage varying as big as 60% in North India. The practice of Sati is now extinct but phenomenon like honor killing and female feticide/infanticide can be considered its replacements. In an honor killing, a girl is brutally killed by her close kin or at their instance, for transgressing both caste endogamy rules (inter-caste marriages) as well as clan exogamy rules (sagotra marriage), both of which are enforced with equal ferociousness. Earlier this phenomenon was believed to be prevalent only in north India, but now several southern states have also started regularly reporting such occurrences (Agnes 2016). Another practice that solves the problem of surplus women to maintain endogamous caste structure is female feticide/infanticide. Fuelled by medical advancements such as ultrasound imaging, sex-selective abortions have made the highly skewed female vs. male child sex ratio even worse in the last 30 years.

Ambedkarite thought has been influential in a strand of feminist literature that studies the link between patriarchy and caste. In this tradition, Uma Chakravarty 1993, coined the term 'Brahminical patriarchy' to refer to the control of women through the widespread practices and beliefs among the upper castes of India. Chakravarti points out that women are the repository of caste 'honor' as such she is subjected to patriarchal protection and violence at the same time. She argues that the manifestations of upholding/enforcing

cultural codes are visible in arenas of marriage and reproduction. Thus, the problem of the bounded nature of the circulation of women is explicitly tied to the formation of caste. Further, Chakravarti argues that Brahminical patriarchal structures thus formed have been made invisible through marriage rituals such as *Kanyadaan*², *stridharma*³, and *pativrata*⁴ that provide an ideological underpinning for beliefs and practices extant even today (Chakravarti 1993, 580). Sheel (1999), in her analysis shows that the colonial restructuring of the socio-economic order reinvented Brahminical tradition along with the promotion of the *Kanyadaan*⁵ form of marriage and this played an important role in the institutionalization and expansion of Brahminical patriarchy extensively in post-colonial India. This is also the case in contemporary law; the Hindu Marriage Act, which brought in monogamy, prevented child marriage by stipulating a minimum age of marriage and brought in the concept of contract by introducing an element of consent, even though the sacramental aspect of Hindu marriage was retained by prescribing *kanyadaan* as the essential ceremony for legal validation of the marriage. Thus marriage in India is largely structured around the relations of caste and gender, where it is difficult to distinguish one from the other.

This paper draws on the Marxist, Feminist, and Ambedkarite thought discussed above to present a conceptual framework that can be summarized as follows

1. The reproduction process, as Marx defines it, is an integrated process with production, consumption, distribution, and circulation of goods and services as well as people.
2. The social relations of reproduction are determined by the relations between labor dispensed to produce goods and services and labor dispensed to produce people.
3. The social relations of reproduction shape and are in turn shaped by the hierarchies of gender and caste.

Based on the above framework this paper analyzes primary qualitative data on behavior and preferences on marriage formation in India to claim that in India marriage is a site where gender and caste relations are shaped within the capitalistic processes of reproduction (in the sense Marx defines it). In doing so, this paper shows that market and non-market exchange relation co-exists as a hybrid in the marriage exchange where

² Kanyadaan, which means gifting away a virgin has been derived from the Sanskrit words Kanya which mean a virgin and Daan which mean donation. Kanyadaan is a very significant ritual performed by the father of the bride in the presence of a large gathering that is invited to witness the wedding. The father pours out a libation of sacred water symbolizing the giving away of his virgin daughter to the bridegroom, who is a form of god.

³ It's a women's duty described as traditional conduct, observances, vocational and spiritual patterns which bring spiritual fulfillment and societal stability. Characterized by modesty, quiet strength, religiousness, dignity and nurturing of family. Notably, she is most needed and irreplaceable as the maker of the home and nurturer of children.

⁴ *Pati* means husband and *Vrat* denotes vow. A woman who staunchly remains loyal to her husband is a Pativrata. The Ramayana (Hindu religious book) mentions that an ideal Pativrata will not see another man other than her husband even in her dreams. In addition, a Pativrata should serve her husband as she would serve and worship God, even if the husband is blind, diseased, poor or impotent.

⁵ According to Manu Smriti, the religious book of Hindus, there are six forms of Marriage that are prescribed in the religious book i.e. Kanyadaan, Daiva, Arsha, Prajapataya, Gandharva and Rakshasa, Asura and Paisacha. The most approved form is Kanyadaan form in which the father or guardian offers the girl as a gift to the bridegroom.

language of the market is used to define the groom as a 'commodity' driven by a strict calculus of material gain and loss, impersonal relations and in contrast, the bride is defined as gift, which is essentially non-commodifiable and stands for, moral obligation, collective concerns, personal relations that survive and continue after exchange. This paper also claims that a Capitalist-Brahminical-Patriarchy provides an overarching ideological framework/worldview/ mental schema, which shapes peoples behavior and provides a shortcut for making decisions.

Data

The analysis in this paper is based on in-depth, open-ended interviews about how decisions were made around marriages. This project started as an empirical exercise in trying to understand the motives behind dowry in India, which is an illegal and sensitive issue, hence the recruitment of respondents could not be done randomly. Instead, a snowballing method was used to locate households where the son/daughter was married in the last five years, and who were willing to be interviewed⁶. The resulting sample is not statistically representative, and the conclusions cannot be generalized to the broader population. Instead, I use the in-depth interviews to bring to light aspects of behavior which were not captured in the large sample surveys including the beliefs of individuals and their reasons for making certain decisions. My original sample consisted of 110 households, but for this paper, I have restricted the sample to Hindu households only, which reduced the sample to 80 households from two urban and two rural areas in North and South India each. The urban centers are Lucknow in North India and Hyderabad in South India, and a nearby village for each city. The strata that I have used are caste, socio-economic class, and location (North/South and urban/ rural). In the sampled households, I administered a survey questionnaire for collecting demographic information. In addition to the survey, I collected qualitative data on norms, individual motives, expectations and preferences that are relevant to household level decision making on marriage. This is done by administering in-depth interviews with the bride/groom and parents (father and mother) in these households separately. The interviews were conducted in Hindi and Urdu and later translated and transcribed into English for analysis. The next section presents the analysis of the interview data.

Analysis

Interview data reveals that the primary purpose of marriage is to maintain the purity and continuity of a male lineage through ensuring caste and patriarchal setup. However, in a capitalistic set-up, this also implies the control over the division of labor so that both production and social reproduction happen in tandem. This is what we see in the beliefs, behaviors, and rituals in the marriages in India. Marriage remains an institution where women are circulated among men as 'gifts,' in this sense it remains a non-market, social, moral and religious mechanism. However, this also implies that women as 'gifts' are now thought of as a negatively valued exchange in a capitalistic set-up, where the feminine qualities required for social reproductive labor, embodied in the bride, has a no economic

⁶ All the interviews were conducted by me during the FY 2013-14. The field research was partly funded by William Waters Grant, ASE and Provosts Dissertation Funds, American University.

value but only a moral one. At the same time, marriage also needs to be seen as a 'marketplace' where the bride-side has to find an educated, employed and well-earning groom for their daughters and pay the price for doing so. A marketplace culture and language of the market reflect the fact that productive labor and masculine qualities associated with that labor can now be thought of as a 'commodity' capable of economic exchange.

Non-market- Kinship relations: Bride as gift

Role of Caste/Sub-caste/Clan: Caste endogamy and Clan exogamy

The preference for caste endogamy as well as clan exogamy was very strict among the respondents. The search for a prospective groom always happened within the universe of the same sub-caste, and then the horoscopes were exchanged to ensure that gotras (clans) of the two parties were different. The rest of the negotiations took place only after horoscopes have been matched. In urban settings, there is increasing use of matrimonial websites and print media advertisements to find perspective spouses, but these site and advertisement are always compiled along the lines of caste sub-caste. Also, even when they are increasingly used for finding perspective spouses, families make an extensive inquiry about the sub-caste and gotra before proceeding further. A father of the bride shared this process.

"When I started looking for my daughter I asked people in my community (sub-caste) to pass on any leads for a suitable groom. I also looked at some newspaper ads, but mostly the primary way of searching is spreading the word in the community. By searching through friends and relatives, we can be sure of their caste and sub-caste and will not have to make separate inquiries. Once we identify such a family, who are looking to marry their son we send a horoscope of our daughter to them and ask for their son's horoscope. Horoscope you see is very important to ensure that our families do not have the same gotra and that the two people are compatible for marriage. Only when the horoscope has been matched, and I was sure that sub-caste and gotras were ok, I went ahead for my first visit to see them.

The marriage for individual love is not considered moral. Such marriages are looked down upon and highly discouraged. A bride from urban Hyderabad said

"Lover marriage was never an option for me. Growing up one learns the ways of the world, and I knew that my parents would not be able to take a shock of inter-caste marriage. I do not want to bear this burden of alienating my family and living as an outcast."

The term 'love-marriage' specifically applies to inter-caste or inter-religious marriages. In my sample, all the marriages, except five, fell under what is called 'arranged marriage.' These were marriages that were 'arranged' by the parents within the same sub-caste and different gotra, on the principals of caste endogamy and clan exogamy, and all the

decisions about choosing the bride/groom, finances, arrangements etc. were taken by parents. Out of the five marriages that did not fall under this arrangement, three were 'love-cum arranged,' a form of inter-caste marriage where the bride/groom choose their partners by defying the caste endogamy rule, but parents accept that and decide about the finances and arrangements. The two were 'love-marriage,' inter-caste and not accepted by the parents, both these marriage were between upper caste (*savarn*) and lowest caste (*avarn*) individuals, and both these cases couple faced a threat on their lives from the parents and had left their town/village to start a new life in urban area.

Kanyadaan (Gift of a Virgin): Negatively valued exchange

Kanyadan is a marriage ritual by which a father gifts his 'virgin' daughter to a groom, this offering is mediated by a Brahman priest (highest in caste hierarchy). Virginitiy is specifically emphasized in the ritual as marriage is considered a medium through which purity and immortality of one's line are insured, and caste hierarchies are maintained. In this scheme of things, women are circulated in marriage to ensure that the clan-based and caste-based relationships are maintained and perpetuated, and they are the only medium through which this can be attained. A father of the bride from urban Lucknow summarized this as follows.

A woman is like a field (nature), and a man is like a farmer who provides the seeds (human). The woman nurtures that seed and preserves the house and the clan relationships. Thus a woman is the biggest and purest gift that is revered in our society. Without earth, there cannot be any crop, without nature man is nothing.

As discussed above the father cannot give this gift to the people related by blood and to the person of same clan (gotra). However, the gift of a virgin can only be bestowed to the people of the same sub-caste. It is the greatest gift that a man can bestow, the one from which he acquires most religious merit (punya). Women are considered the purest gift, which cannot be tainted through economic considerations. Thus the marriage practices that do not follow this ritual or where women are exchanged for a bride-price are seen with contempt. In rural Lucknow, I encountered two other forms of marriages that were prevalent, a generation ago that did not follow Kanyadaan rituals. Both these forms of marriages were practiced among the lowest born castes and involved some form of bride-price (transfer of money or goods from groom-side to bride-side at the time of marriage). These marriages were seen as 'immoral' and socially unacceptable in the local setting. A father of the bride said

"During my marriage, my family had to give bride-price for my wife. My wife's family came to our house with very few people and married us off in a very simple ceremony without elaborate rituals. My family had to pay for all the arrangements also. Now if I want to marry my daughter in the same way, it will be looked down upon. People will say that I have sold my daughter for money. I will lose my respect in the society."

This practice also establishes the hierarchy between the bride-side and groom-side, where groom-side is always considered superior to the bride-side, in all aspects. This is apparent in a variety of practices and performances connected with the wedding including the ritualized touching of feet of the groom and his parents by family members of the bride. This is done during the marriage ceremonies as well as in later life during important festivals and when the two families visit each other socially. Also, the bride's parents do not eat or drink when they visit their daughter in her marital home, thus signaling that they have an inferior status.

Social Reproduction: Femininity and Reproductive Labor

To gift the daughter in marriage is considered to be the greatest responsibility of a father. To bestow this gift one needs to ensure that purity of women is guaranteed, and they are married on time. In the marriage market, however, the qualities that parents, as well as the groom, preferred in a bride, were her 'feminine' nature qualities such as docility, homeliness, adjusting nature, and not being assertive or aggressive. These qualities were directly linked to the understanding that social reproduction was a wife's primary responsibility after marriage. Since these qualities were not always apparent, so the groom's family tends to make extensive inquiries about the bride from the family and friends of the bride. Even though there was a strong preference for an educated bride, in most of the cases, education of the bride was considered a 'future value,' which could be used later if the groom's family underwent economic shocks or financial instability. The decision-making about whether a bride can take up a paid job lies primarily with the family of the groom. Age of the bride was also an important criterion, and most respondents expressed a preference for a young bride, who was five to seven years younger than the groom. The age of the bride was directly associated with her reproductive roles as well as the assumption that younger girls would be less assertive and easier to be molded according to the behavioral codes of conduct of the groom's family. The mother of a General caste Hindu groom from urban Delhi shared the qualities of an ideal bride as well as the nuances about how much of a say a bride could have in household decisions:

"The most important thing in a bride is her nature, which includes adjustment and docility as well as homeliness. I want to choose a daughter-in-law who conforms to the norms of the house and takes her household responsibilities seriously.⁷"

Moreover, the preference for feminine qualities is superimposed with the understanding that the wage work done by men as more important and valuable than the unpaid work done by women inside homes. Similarly, women's capabilities and their rights were also devalued on a regular basis. Young brides were usually considered incapable of looking after themselves financially as well as physically and socially. In this scheme, marriage is regarded as an institution that supplies the protection of a capable man to an incapable woman. Thus the hierarchy between the groom-side and bride-side, which originates in the ritual of *Kanyadaan* is further solidified in a capitalist mode of production which

⁷ MOG/DEL/H/G/U/VN810096

values productive work while devaluing reproductive work. The father of a bride from Lucknow explained this succinctly:

"Our ancient religious texts say that a man can not get salvation unless he marries off his virgin daughter. You already know how difficult it is nowadays to marry one's daughter at the right age. There are so many hurdles- dowry, shortage of good grooms, caste and status mismatch etc. A girl's father has to knock at dozens of doors before the right groom can be found. So when a groom and his parents agree to marry my daughter, they are doing a great service to us. They have given us the invaluable gift of salvation. It is priceless, and now we will always be indebted to them. This debt can never be paid back, and so we will always remain inferior to them. This will also help you explain why a daughter's parents do not get anything from the groom's side, as they are lower in status to the groom's family. A girl's parents are not supposed to even have a sip of water in the groom's home. We also have to show respect to the groom's family because they are also going to provide for my daughter; protect her, and give her their family name.⁸"

Marriage market: Groom as the commodity

Demands: Dowry as Price

The centrality of money in contemporary marriages, as symbolized by the predominance of dowry is taken as given by people. Any discussion about the groom and his family revolved around the ongoing 'market rate' of the groom and people did not feel any discomfort in talking about their preference for grooms in the language of the market. The amount of dowry is mainly determined by the qualities of a groom such as his future earning potential (based on his job), current salary, and parental property. However, families, where the bride was professionally qualified, looked for a groom who had further better financial capabilities than their daughter. This was driven by the fact that a groom was considered the primary breadwinner of the family as was considered more capable of everything just by virtue of being male. In this sense, the dowry amount reflects more than just the price to be paid by the bride's side for attracting a better groom but also a price for 'masculinity' that is embodied in a male. The father of a bride from urban Lucknow shared his experience in finding the right groom within his means:

"The budget depends on the ongoing market rate for the kind of groom one is looking for. My daughter was highly educated so I knew I had to look for a more educated groom to match her, and I was mentally prepared for it. In my community a propertied, and well-qualified groom with a salary of Rs. 70,000 (USD 1000) per month costs at least Rs.2 million (USD 30000). You see, it is a father's responsibility to marry his daughter because he is the primary decision-maker in her life. This has to do with her shy and docile nature. They do not have

⁸ 712_0090

the full capacity to see good from bad, and right from wrong. Women always need a capable man to advise her, provide for her, and to protect her.⁹”

Data also shows some variations in the amount of dowry by caste. Respondents from economically lower castes did not search for highly qualified grooms, as the ‘market-rate’ for such grooms was very high. A mother of the bride said the following:

“The dowry depends on the profession of the groom, for example, if the groom is a doctor do you expect that his parents will marry your daughter to him for Rs. 1 million (\$ 15000) they will not even talk to you for offering that. Finding a groom who has a government job in administration means at least Rs 5 million (USD 75000) in dowry. Only high caste can approach such grooms now, we lower middle-class people cannot even dream of that.”

Negotiation

The negotiation between the bride-side and groom-side about payment of dowry and various other arrangements between the two parties best reflect marriage as a market exchange and the nature of the groom as a commodity. The father of a bride from rural Lucknow threw light on this aspect:

“You see for parents a son is a commodity, which should help them make a profit through payments made by the bride's side. Most people spend a substantial amount of money on their son's education so that he becomes a pricey commodity, and then they recover their costs and a profit during the wedding, as simple as that! ¹⁰”

Negotiations begin when the bride's family approaches the groom's side, and the groom or his family have the right to refuse the proposal. This right is reflective of the power asymmetry between the two sides. During financial negotiations, which usually take place between elderly male members from both sides (the bride and groom are not part of these negotiations), the groom's side negotiates for the price of the groom commensurate with his education, job profile and their caste status. For example, the groom's side asks for a specific amount of cash to be paid as dowry; they decide the number of persons they would be bringing in the marriage party; they dictate the quality of food and stay arrangements that should be made for the actual wedding ceremony; and they provide a list of gifts that are to be given to specific people in their entourage on the day of wedding, and so on. A list of the things that are to be offered during various rituals through-out the wedding ceremony is made by the bride-side based on the demands/negotiations and given to the groom-side. The groom's side has the discretion to make changes to this list as it suits them. Overall, the bride's family is under constant pressure to deliver on promised things as well as be prepared for making last minute changes if so directed by the groom's parents. The father of a groom from urban Lucknow explained the negotiation process:

⁹ FOB/LKO/H/G/U/712_0090

¹⁰ FOB/LKO/H/OBC/R/131015_001

"There are detailed discussions between the two sides about everything that has to do with wedding arrangements. However, there is not much room for negotiation as the groom's side usually decides things and tells the bride's family about it. The groom's side figures out how many people they would bring in their marriage procession and communicate it to the bride side. Also, we discuss food that is to be served during the marriage, and I made it clear that I did not want fancy food but the food should be cooked with proper care and good ingredients. I also told the bride's family that they should personally monitor every arrangement that was being made because a lot of my relatives would attend the marriage and I did not want them to be disappointed¹¹."

Discussion

The above analysis complicates the neat distinction between commodity and gift as a metaphor for market and non-market exchange and in extension between economic and social relations. In understanding the behavior around marriage formation in India, this paper contends that people's beliefs are structured around social relations of reproduction, such that labor dispensed to produce goods and services and labor dispensed to produce people are pitted against each other. These labors shape, and are in turn shaped by, the hierarchies of gender and caste. In such a set-up marriage becomes both a 'market-place' where productive labor and masculine qualities associated with that labor are viewed as a commodity capable of economic exchange and at the same time marriage also remains a site for kinship based relations where feminine qualities required for social reproductive labor, embodied in the bride, has no economic value but only social, moral and religious ones. This analysis also points to a paradox in the process: commodity form and its related attributes are reified such that groom becomes not only an object of attention and desire but also more autonomous, while at the same time the gift form embodied in the bride becomes only a negatively valued exchange having a marginal social significance with no autonomy.

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¹¹ FOG/LKO/H/OBC/U/712_0061

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