

Marriage traditions in South India from 1930 to the present

This is a comparative study of historical changes in marriage and inheritance traditions among Hindus, Muslims, and Christians in South India during the twentieth century, and particularly the effects of economic and cultural globalization on family structures and gender relations. The research project is sponsored by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA/Sarec).

The study explores marriage customs and their material, ideological, and discursive consequences among selected communities in Kerala. It focuses mainly on the past forty years, but sets the historical background by tracing changes back to the beginning of the twentieth century. The past four decades are of particular interest as a period of modernization and globalization, as well as a time when political identities have been increasingly based on religion or caste. In the context of Kerala, global processes since the 1960s are characterized by a large number of individuals who have migrated to the West (mostly Christians and Hindus) or to Arabian Gulf countries (mainly Muslims) for varying periods of time. The general flow of communication, tourism, and media are other aspects of cultural globalization in Kerala.

Kerala is of specific interest for several reasons. The state is known for its positive social indicators and for the relatively high status of women there. The three main religious groups include communities with matrilineal as well as patrilineal traditions. This is particularly important because property in matrilineal communities was owned by women and then transferred to the next generation through the female line. From an initial study focusing on marriage payments, it widens to include other cultural and religious factors that contribute to identity-creating processes. Class, caste, gender, and religious identities are seen as in flux. Because of the pivotal importance place of marriage as part of religious identity, marriage payments will be a main focus of the study.

One of the most serious problems in conjunction with the subordinate position of women in Indian society is the question of dowry. During the past few decades, there have been frequent reports of women being abused, victimized, and even murdered because of disputes related to dowry. Sex-selective abortions, female infanticide, reluctance to educate girls, and violence are other phenomena generally considered to be outcomes of the dowry system. Lesser forms of oppression include denial of property rights, barring women from higher education, and depriving them of resources they have inherited or earned. All are examples of the structural violation of human rights. From a Western point of view, the phenomenon of dowry appears as the outmoded practice of a traditional society—something that will disappear with “modernization”. In India, however, dowry has recently been put in practice by groups who did not have this “tradition” during the early twentieth century. Laws concerning marriage, divorce, custody, family systems, and succession are not uniform in India, but differ among the various religions and from community to community. Family laws have been continuous topics of discussion since Independence, making the study of marriage, along with its economic, symbolic, and discursive consequences, a complex and challenging task.

