

NEGOTIATING MARRIAGE IN NEPAL

BRIDEPRICE AND UNTOUCHABLE

WOMEN'S WORK

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INTRODUCTION

For Hindus throughout South Asia the most prestigious form of marriage is *kanyadaan*, the "gift of a virgin" (Fruzetti 1982; Bennett 1983). *Kanyadaan* marriage is accompanied by dowry payments from the bride's family to the groom's, property generally understood to be the woman's, with limitations. As the form of marriage most widely written about in the anthropology of South Asia, dowry-dependent marriage has come to characterize a significant dimension of the region's culture (India in particular) (Goody and Tambiah 1973; Sharma 1980; Fruzetti 1982).

However, a second and less prestigious form of marriage is practiced by people of lower caste in Nepal, called *chori betchnay*, literally "selling daughters." Bilateral monetary and in-kind exchanges characterize this form of marriage, though there is greater emphasis on brideprice exchanges from the groom's to the bride's family. This chapter addresses the brideprice practice called "selling daughters," and its meanings in a remote, subsistence, agricultural community in far western Nepal called Bhalara. At an average altitude of 4,500 feet, Bhalara enjoys rich seasonal changes from cold winters to hot, dry springs that erupt into many rainy months of summer monsoon. The most spectacular season is autumn when the

brilliant green rice is ready for harvest. The days are crisp and sunny, the nights cool and comfortable, and the mountains are in spectacular view. Bhalara is an isolated region, accessible only by foot after an initial day-long flight from Kathmandu, or a full month's walk from India.

The discussion proceeds from the now well-accepted understanding within gender studies and feminist anthropology that gender and kinship are fundamentally cultural, political, and economic (rather than "natural" or biological) phenomena, linked in fundamental ways through the everyday practices of local people. This view builds from the work of Collier and Yanagisako (1987) in which they refigure the "public" domain and the "domestic/private" domain from their relation as functional opposites within the social sciences (from Durkheim to Levi-Strauss).

The approach here reconceptualizes the opposing relations between the public and private domains with an attention to the practice of kinship, particularly the economic and political nature of the material exchanges involved in lower-caste marriage. The data from Bhalara indicate that the practice and meaning of low-caste marital exchange and its consequences ramify both inside and outside the confines of the domestic household. To illustrate, when I first learned of *chori betchnay* I assumed that few people would discuss it, particularly since a man had recently clashed with local police around this issue. Surprisingly, lower-caste women openly discussed the practice while upper-caste women did not. They said the selling of daughters was more common in the past than now, that it is currently "illegal," that is widely practiced, and that understandably those who denied ever having accepted money for a daughter were probably hiding something. Elements of caste-based resistance and the autonomy of otherwise oppressed groups like the lower castes seemed to shape the politics of this marriage transaction.

CASTE IN NEPAL

The Hindus of Bhalara maintain social structural hierarchy through the caste system. Caste is a difficult term, the product of unsystematic application of a Portuguese word (*casta*) to different levels of complex social ranking (*varna*, the most inclusive four divisions, and *jaat*, the subcategories within *varna*). Caste ranking in Bhalara is similar to that found in India and the rest of Nepal and is based on relative ritual purity, the ideological link among the low-caste groups is their ritual impurity relative to those above them. Although there are many arguments within caste theory about what makes the low castes low (for a full discussion see Cameron 1998), locally they are labeled *nachunay manchay* or *jaat* (not touchable people or caste), *saano jaat* (small caste), and *talo jaat* (low caste). In addition to their untouchable status in relation to those of high caste, there is ranking among the low-caste groups themselves. The upper-ranked and intermarrying groups include the following artisans and specialized laborers: basket weavers, goldsmiths, ironsmiths, masons, and former guards for the local king. These artisans—some of

whom are also marginal farmers—do not touch those of caste rank lower than themselves. The groups below them include leather workers and tailors who do not intermarry but are nonetheless of equivalent status. At the bottom of the caste hierarchy are a single group of potters, musicians, and female prostitutes who are untouchable to all other groups above them. The highest ranked and most ritually pure groups in the Nepalese caste system are the Brahmins, followed by the Thakuri and Chhetri.¹

STRUCTURAL FEATURES OF MARRIAGE

As in so many cultures around the world, the parents of Bhalara are responsible for arranging their children's marriages. Many considerations of proper matchmaking are embedded within the social interactions by which men from the prospective groom's family search for, locate, and negotiate for a suitable bride. To begin, rules of marriage require a Hindu to marry within one's *varna* (Brahmin, Chhetri, Matwali, Shudra). In Bhalara this rule is strictly followed, and any deviation is considered "unnatural," a transgression of the moral and social order. Within caste subdivisions of *jaat*, some lower-caste groups are strictly *jaat* endogamous, some are preferably *jaat* endogamous, and others are preferably *jaat* exogamous. The lowest Shudra—the Baadi, Damai, and Sarki—and the upper-caste Giri are strictly *jaat* endogamous; they marry only other Baadi, Damai, and Sarki. The other low castes are preferable *jaat* exogamous; Parki, Okheda, Luhar, Sunar, Oudh prefer to marry outside of their *jaat* (but still within their upper tier of the *Sudra varna*) although they are not always able, and it does not seem to matter if they do not. Clan and lineage exogamy constitute the incest taboos of Hindu marriage. From some groups like Sarki or Baadi, only one or two lineages exist in the surrounding area, and brides must often be located elsewhere. Finally, once all of the above stipulations are met, the astrological charts of the prospective couple, constructed at birth by family Brahmins, are consulted for their conjunction. If the family's Brahmin determines the match suitable, marriage negotiations may proceed.

Early age at marriage and even prepubertal marriage for girls has long been practiced throughout Hindu South Asia. The data from Bhalara confirm these earlier findings. Of 88 women ranging in ages from 15 to 68 in 1989, the mean age at first marriage was 13.6 years for upper castes and 13.7 for lower castes. These data match figures from early twentieth-century India (Goody 1990, p. 208).² Girls' vulnerability to becoming victims of karma is greatest around the issue of marriage. Girls fear they will be fettered with *naraamro shriman* ("bad husbands") the least desirable types being an elderly man or a man already married. For both lower and upper castes such marriages usually involve large brideprice.

After a girl marries she moves to her husband's parent's house where another segment of the extended family begins. Here the wife lives the rest of her life (unless widowed, separated, or divorced), in service to the patriline as a worker,

mother, and wife. Household composition in Bhalara varies from the most common two or three generations, to less common one or four generations.

BONE, MILK, AND BLOOD: THE SUBSTANCES OF MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

The meaning of family (*pariwaar*) involves the emotional bonds and sameness of "substance" that come from daily living together (Schneider 1980). Specifically, those people who share bone (*haad*), organs (*ang*), blood (*ragat*), milk (*dudhe*), clan (*thar*), are by definition considered family. The people of Bhalara believe that the *haad* and *ang* come from the father's semen, and the *ragat* comes from the mother. Mother's milk is the medium through which other "substances" of the family are mixed within the child, gradually incorporating him or her into the *pariwaar*.

At the time of marriage a woman acquires her husband's clan and relinquishes her parents'. Transformation of the woman's clan begins during the marriage ceremony when the couple walks around the wedding fire and a white cloth extended between them is torn—symbolizing the severance of clan ties with her natal home. But for the new wife to be fully incorporated into her husband's family, the other substances of kinship must be transformed, too. A woman's substance gradually transforms to that of the husband's lineage through continued contact with his "substance" (the most significant being semen) and those of his family (food, water, soil, air, heat, cold, touch) (Marriott 1989). In-laws consider the new bride a lineage member, but their full acceptance of her is gradual (David 1973).

The catalyst for this marriage-based transubstantiation is certainly the marriage ceremony, but is not considered complete when the wedding ends. Like all relationships, the wife's and husband's develops over time; and because of the great cultural importance placed on clan exogamy and the substance difference (i.e., a balance between identity of status, and difference of clan and lineage) is what makes the couple's marriage possible in the first place. Thus, the sharing of substances between the wife and husband during sex, work, religious practice, and daily commensality allows the affinal woman to become a member of her husband's family and, ultimately, his clan. Finally, the birth of a child establishes her and the offspring's full rights to clan membership. In her role as mother the woman contributes to the child a second substance needed to be a family and clan member—her breast milk.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF MARRIAGE

For religious, economic, and emotional reasons the natal family (*maiti*) prefers the married daughter to live close to them.³ The daughter is a person to whom *dakshina* ("religious offerings") are regularly given for religious merit, and families want to sustain the sacredness of the daughter to her natal home. The daughter is

also a worker who is needed during peak agricultural and artisan production periods. Finally, mothers are particularly attached to their daughters and want them to live nearby after marriage.

From the groom's family's perspective, there are also practical advantages to bringing women from nearby villages. Many families in Bhalara attribute their economic stability and prosperity to the daughters-in-law who hail from close villages. These women are generally happier and more productive. Married women can share the products of their labor with their natal home, receive labor assistance from sisters, are close to natal friends, continue to be treated in a special way as a daughter, and have at least partial sanctuary from demanding in-laws and abusive husbands.

MAITI AND GHAR: THE MEANING OF PLACE

The places of most significance in a woman's life are her natal home (*maiti*) and her husband's home (*ghar*). The *maiti* represents an idealized place of childhood and adolescence and an idyllic time when the physical landscape of the hills and the movement of the agricultural season and the ritual cycle are first experienced by a girl. Thus, the *maiti* is a key symbol in women's psychological and emotional experiences.⁴ The emotional attachment to the *maiti* is felt as a conflicted desire to remain attached to her natal home, even after her first and second children are born. It is a place where a married woman returns for periodic visits on many occasions. Visits may be short, informal, and unplanned, made by women whose *maiti* are in the same or neighboring villages. Other planned visits to the natal home are of a religious or work nature. Finally, the natal home is a place of refuge where women seek temporary shelter and protection from abusive husbands and in-laws.

In contrast to the *maiti* is the *ghar*, the husband's home. Here, a low-caste woman spends the majority of her adult life working the husband's farm (if they own land), working for her husband's high-caste *riti* (patrons) and others who will hire her (if she is lower caste), and raising children and grandchildren. The people found at a woman's *ghar* are her husband, his parents, their parents, and the husband's unmarried sisters, brothers, and brother's wives and children.

PROPERTY AND MARRIAGE

Formal inheritance of name, lineage, immovable property, and rights to the dispersal of property is through males. The father's property, inherited from *his* father, is shared by all his sons and used by the son's wife and children. This property is owned by the lineage of males related by birth and descent. Informal bilateral inheritance by women of other movable property is in the form of dowry. Certain of these rules may be circumvented by informal and less codified practices. For example, women may inherit from their father extensive amounts of

property in an otherwise patrilineal system (though with land this rarely happens). In the case of lower-caste women, acquiring artisan tools and skills, and inheriting the husband's patron-client relations are important. These less formally structured practices of inheritance are important for women because they expand, intensify, and preserve the relationships in which they are involved daily.

Certain basic elements of inheritance are defined and limited less by the structure and ideology of caste than by the material realities of production and property ownership in the subsistence, agricultural community. This is particularly the case in lower-caste households. Land inheritance within lower caste households is negligible, constrained as it has been by a history of sociopolitical forces that have prevented lower-caste people from owning land in the first place (Cameron 1997). What is of heritable significance among lower-caste males are patron-client relations which are passed to sons by fathers. For women of low caste, the skills for sewing, basket making, leather working, pottery, farming, animal husbandry, midwifery, dancing, and singing are first taught by their own parents, and further developed by members of the husband's family to fulfill patron-client obligations. Parents strive to provide daughters with the material tools for the above skills.

The lack of land inheritance in lower-caste households has significant consequences for marriage and marital relations. Patriarchal authority in the lower-caste household is limited by the lack of land inheritance; their landlessness diminishes the control lower-caste males have over property and its inheritance process, thus preventing absolute male authority. As the economic context within which lower-caste households arrange their marriages, the relative economic equality between the sexes induces refigurations of marriage negotiations that favor the bride's family and acknowledge her power.

DEMYSTIFYING THE "GIFT": THE PRACTICE OF BRIDEPRICE MARRIAGE

Canceling the "Virgin Gift" in Low-caste Marriages

Among the people of untouchable caste in Bhalara the transfer of cash and in-kind payments in exchange for a bride is common. *Chori betchnay* ("selling daughters") is the local term for this practice, though it is minimally an economic transaction. The money that the bride's parents request and receive from the groom's family has an important ceremonial and social use—to pay for the feasting of the groom's party at the bride's house during the wedding. A small amount remains for the parents' personal use. The term "selling daughters" has dual meanings. The literal meaning of the economic metaphor signifies a market-type demand for lower-caste brides: payment for her skills and compensation to her parents for their loss. Metaphorically the term expresses a certain disdain for a practice both widespread and discrete. Paradoxical in a society characterized by

dowry (an opposite kind of material exchange), the practice of selling daughters can be located in a system of gender meanings that derive from the caste and poverty of Bhalara's untouchables.

Of the families interviewed in 1988-1989 in Bhalara, only one of the lower-caste groups, the Luhar ironsmiths, performed more *kanyadaan* than brideprice marriages. Correspondingly, the Luhar are the largest landowners of the untouchable groups. Wealth in land increases the ability and desire to choose the more prestigious type of marriage. Otherwise, all other lower castes practiced *chori betchnay* with equal or greater frequency than *kanyadaan*.⁵

A combination of factors determine if a lower-caste marriage will be *kanyadaan* or brideprice. As previously discussed, the economic status of the bride's family is relevant to the decision. Poor families with little to no land, with few upper-caste patrons, and no cash reserves will choose brideprice, if only to cover wedding expenses. Second, the birth order of the husband is important; marriage to an eldest son is more prestigious than to a youngest, and a bride's family will try to sponsor a *kanyadaan* marriage in such cases. A third factor is the birth order of the daughter, eldest daughters are less likely to be "sold" than younger daughters.

The frequency and status of brideprice marriage among Hindus in other parts of South Asia is ambiguous. Goody uses the term to describe certain marriage transactions in India (1990), but gives little description of its status. Nor is it possible to establish its connection with the rest of Nepal, the Kumaon region of India, or other parts of north India. Brideprice marriage has been described only briefly for India, and the majority of descriptions come from south India (Gough 1961) and Sri Lanka (Yalman 1963). "Selling daughters" is mentioned by the untouchable man who is the subject of Freeman's life history (1979, p. 83), but again, there is no discussion. Finally, Raheja (1988), a recent scholar of caste in India, rather artificially forces certain kinds of marriage transactions into her otherwise tenable model of the transferal of inauspiciousness: instances of old Brahmin men and other upper-caste men who, "for some reason" cannot get a proper bride and therefore give money for young brides. In such instances, which she claims are examples of exchange and not gifting, the transferal of inauspiciousness does not occur, as it normally would in a *kanyadaan* marriage when gifts are transferred from a source of higher status to one of lower status. In such instances, the *paap* ("sin") remains with the groom's family (p. 237). The opposite is true in Bhalara; the *paap* of *chori betchnay* remains with the girl's parents until it can be partially ameliorated through ritual (discussed below).

When lower-caste daughters are sold in marriage, the groom's family is "purchasing" her labor power, is in effect paying for the right to permanently separate her from her natal family and transform her labor into wealth for the husband's family. She is not, therefore, a "gift," as is the *kanyadaan* bride. The original mystification of the bride as a "gift object"—with its attendant ideological practices of honor and asymmetry of in-law relations—in the prestigious *kanyadaan* marriage is substituted in low-caste marriage with another representation of the bride as a

"commodity object" (Strathern 1988). In either case the daughter/bride is commonfield, yet it is the rights to her services that are at stake. In the gift form her services are free, but in the commodity form they come at a price.

In the low-caste household women's labors are not mystified, as they so often are in the high-caste household. While the artisan husband makes commodities, the wife works on the family farm and on the farms of others. Landownership by males in the upper-caste family gives them rights over the labor and labor products of their wives, rights which are otherwise absent in the lower-caste household. In the artisan household a high percentage of rented land is acquired through the joint efforts of wife and husband. The land owned by a high-caste household is not acquired through the efforts of its women. They enter the husband's household as brides with no property, and no rightful capacity to earn land like lower-caste women do. Thus, the economic power of low-caste women is based in the explicit valuing of the products of her labor by the household. Her labor is not mystified by devaluing its products and their functions in other domains, as occurs in the high-caste household.

Ritual Resolution of Selling Daughters

To understand more about the social and cultural practice of selling daughters, we can compare certain of its symbolic elements and gestures with that of its ideological and more prestigious counterpart, *kanyadaan*. The people of Bhalara idiomatically capture a central symbolic act of *kanyadaan*—washing the daughter's feet (*kuta dunay*)—in a sorrowful expression of fondness and respect for the daughter: "Only after washing your feet will I send you away." Religiously and socially prestigious, *kanyadaan* privileges the sacred capital of the daughter as a gift over her labor value as an agricultural worker. The sacred capital of the daughter reaches a climax in the *kanyadaan* wedding ceremony when her feet are washed by her relatives and she is given money. The amount of money she receives reflects the number of people who choose to take advantage of this form of virgin worship, itself a reflection of how many people acknowledge the sanctity of the bride "gift." To the people of Bhalara, the sanctity of the gift derives from its purity. The virgin gift is diminished when money is accepted by the parents for a daughter's wedding. Thus, there is little to no *kuta dunay* money when a daughter is sold.

The people of Bhalara agree that it is a "sin" (*paap laagnu*) to sell daughters in marriage. As one informant put it, "only wives can be sold, never daughters," referring to monetary compensation made by a man to the husband of a woman he wishes to marry (compensation for "stealing" one's wife, as the villagers put it), called *jaari*. It is money demanded for a wife by her husband and her in-laws, which by definition goes to her husband. Accepting money for a daughter makes her structurally close to a wife—and thus the father is gravely close to a symbolically incestuous act.⁶

To remedy the transgression (*paap*) of selling daughters and to publicly acknowledge that they relinquish the merit of *kanyadaan*, the bride's parents do not perform some of the central rituals present in *kanyadaan* marriage. The absence of the "gift" is reflected in the absence at the bride's house of its two corresponding ritual components: the presentation of money offerings (*dakshina*) during foot washing (*kuta dunay*) when the bride's parents and other natal relatives wash her feet, and marriage (*behaunay*) when the couple walk around the fire god Agni and the groom puts vermilion powder in the girl's parted hair. In weddings that involve the giving of brideprice, these rites are performed at the groom's house. There his male relatives who are in a respect relationship to her wash her feet and present her with token gifts and money. But because *dakshina* is not given to the bride during the foot washing at her natal home, she does not receive the larger amounts of gifts and money associated with that rite.

Importantly, while brideprice symbolically affirms the value of lower-caste women's labor, it does not negate her ritual value to her natal and marital homes. Before marriage, daughters' ritual roles are many, particularly as *panchakanya* ("five virgin girls"). In fact, lower-caste families in Bhalaria used *panchakanya* in rituals more frequently than upper castes. *Panchakanya* participate in the infant's naming ceremony (*nuaran*) the infant's first rice feeding (*pasnay*), and in marriage. Second, a lower-caste woman's marriage sets in motion one of the most enduring ritual roles of daughters and sisters. This role involves the designation of lower-caste priests (*bamin*) who are selected from among a male's matrilineal male kin—specifically, sons-in-law or brothers-in-law (*joi* or *bhaanja*), who are related to a man through his wife or mother. This category of men can receive *dakshina*—offerings given to one higher in ritual status, such as a daughter and her affinal relatives—from a woman's marital home relatives because they, like the woman, are "sacred" to the man's family. The authority of *bamin* to perform religious roles derives from their consanguinal relationship to females. Lower-caste families retain priests traced through agnatic females for all rituals, and they are honored and remunerated in ways similar to caste Brahmins.

"Eating Wealth" (Dhan Khannu): The Cultural Politics of Brideprice

A local expression for accepting brideprice is *dhan khannu*, "eating wealth." Villagers talk of recent and up-coming weddings with inquiries into how much *dhan* was or will be "eaten." This is phrased simply as *kati kaiyo* ("how much eaten?"). By taking *dhan*, a bride's parents, in effect, cancel the merit of giving the girl freely to the groom and his family. Accepting brideprice negates the "gift of a virgin," the ideal form of marriage.

When people speak of "eating wealth," there are three amounts that are discussed: (1) the original amount requested by the bride's family; (2) the total amount agreed upon by both parties to cover expenses; and (3) the actual amount of cash taken by the bride's family after all other food donations are subtracted.

The final amount is usually much less than the original amount requested, and discrepancies in expectations create a potential conflict in all such weddings. In general, brideprice is not a large amount and is used primarily to cover feasting expenses. Among a cohort of women interviewed, the average amount of money given to the low-caste bride's family by the groom's was Rs.419 (US\$17)⁷.

Lower-caste women whose parents accept brideprice are sometimes displeased. They would have preferred the prestige of a *kanyadaan* marriage. Brideprice is, however, one part of a matrix of concepts and practices that confer autonomy and power on lower-caste women. The unfortunate social fact is that relinquishing social prestige for a modicum of autonomy is precisely what the caste system engenders for women.

THE CULTURAL ECONOMICS OF BRIDEPRICE

Low-Caste Poverty and Women's Socioeconomic Power

The greater prevalence of brideprice among lower-caste families is related to the social recognition and acceptance of lower-caste women's roles as self-sufficient and powerful economic actors. Their economic and social power includes decision-making control over daily production processes such as wage labor, family farm production (albeit within the limits of a marginal or landless situation), artisan production, and travel. It also includes control over the distribution of resources within the family and remarriage in the case of unsatisfying or widowed circumstances (Cameron 1998), and less dependency on males for subsistence. Within agricultural production, lower-caste women work on their own small family plots or as laborers for upper caste families. Within non-agricultural production, lower caste women are informal daily wage laborers and producers of caste-specific commodities and services.

Many scholars of gender, culture, and society note the association between lack of female property inheritance and lack of power over economic, social, cultural, and religious resources (Acharya and Bennett 1981; Beneria and Sen 1986; Bjorkman 1986; Borque and Warren 1981; Bossen 1984; Collier and Rosaldo 1981; Coontz and Henderson 1986; Goody 1973; Mackintosh 1981; Mies 1986; Miller 1981; Sacks 1989; Sanday 1981; Schneider 1971; Sharma 1980; Whyte 1978). To control property and valuable resources is to have power of many forms. To control women as a form of property, or, more precisely, to lay rightful claim to their services, is to ultimately control many aspects of kinship organization, including the terms of a dowry marriage. Tambiah (1973) suggests that South Asia's patrilineal and patrilocal groups, which stress male inheritance of land and other property, stage their marriages as a transfer of rights in the girl from the girl's parents to the patriline. While ideally the idiom of the virgin gift symbolizes her parents' sacrifice, the recipients of the gift gain rights in the girl's reproductive and

productive potential. From a materialist perspective, the groom's postmarital jural authority over his wife lies in his family's control over the land which will be her primary source of subsistence throughout the remainder of her life.

The idea that women are a form of "property" transferred between families has undergone many theoretical permutations within anthropology (Collier and Yanagisako 1981; Levi-Strauss 1969; Rubin 1975; Llewellyn-Davies 1981). Strathern (1988) proposes a model that locates "ownership" in rights to the services and products of another person (as in the case of the husband over the wife) which emphasizes social relational aspects of ownership over commodity aspects. In comparing high-caste patrilineal land inheritances and its control over women to that of low-caste families, we find that the lack of land diminishes one aspect of rights that would normally inhere in a patriline, namely, the husband's control over the fruits of a wife's productive labor on his land. In practice, most land farmed by low-caste households is jointly acquired by women and men as rented land.

The economic power of low-caste women contrasts with that prescribed for high-caste women in the village, who are forbidden to work for others and whose status depends upon acceptance of, and submission to, patriarchal authority. Thus, opposite to the ideological principles of caste hierarchy, brideprice privileges untouchable women's labor value over her ritual value. One lower-caste parent spoke frankly and rhetorically when asked why he "ate wealth" for his daughter's marriage:

Why shouldn't we take money for our daughters' weddings? We are poor. Even so we raised our daughters to adulthood, only to eventually send them away to work for another family.

Parental rights to compensation are framed within the consensual recognition of the labor value of the low-caste daughter. In Africa, for example, the presentation of many heads of livestock as brideprice serves several functions: it legitimizes the marriage, is part of the process of becoming a full adult, demonstrates the sincerity to honor and respect affinal relations, recognizes the labor value of the daughter and its loss to her parents, and is the norm (Goody and Tambiah 1973). In Bhalara brideprice is an alternative form of marriage, but as in Africa, it recognizes the economic value of the daughter.

However, the history of low-caste poverty in the Himalayas presents a different economic context within which to understand the practice of brideprice. The economic need to sell daughters in marriage has developed out of the social and historical construction of low-caste poverty and increased pressure on land for farming. From the advent of lower-caste migration into western Nepal from northern India several centuries ago, they have continuously lost in the competition for land because of social and political discrimination against them by those in power. Informal land tenancy and sharecropping arrangements of the past have been eroded by modern certification requirements of land reform and land registration (Cameron 1997).

In many areas of the world poverty induces greater power of women's labor (Bossen 1984). This is also the case among Bhalara's untouchables who are the victims of structural poverty in what is already a marginal subsistence economy. Because of the recognized value of lower-caste women's labor, fulfilling a proposal of marriage requires the groom's family to pay what the bride's family demands. The evidence is convincing that untouchable women have more decision-making power and control in their marital lives than do upper-caste women. For example, lower-caste women do not tolerate unhappy marriages in which the husband has taken a second wife or is suspected of having a lover. Nor are lower-caste women forced to stay in marriages that may be abusive. Finally, untouchable women remarry when the first husband dies, in contrast to upper-caste widows, who are forbidden to remarry if they wish to retain their caste and economic status. Still, women who remarry risk losing their children to the first husband's patriline.

Thus, all things being equal, lower-caste families of Bhalara might prefer the dowry-based *kanyadaan* marriages, than to follow the more prestigious marriage form. Indeed, on those occasions when they are able, they do. However, all things are not equal. First, as a group, the lower castes' commitment to high-caste beliefs such as religious merit via the "gifting" of a daughter are, at best, equivocal. Second, they lack in most cases the resources to give dowry to a daughter, a requirement of *kanyadaan*. Third, taking brideprice from the groom's family has become part of lower caste culture that distinguishes them from those of upper caste. And finally, lower-caste people value the economic autonomy of their women. With horror and concern, we read how astronomical dowry demands in India's urban areas have become life-threatening to new brides. In sharp contrast, untouchable women enter a set of social relationships at marriage that allow them a position of relative equal status with the husband. This is true despite having been exchanged with brideprice in a Hindu society that idealizes *kanyadaan* marriage, large dowry, and the subservience of women.

NOTES

1. This structure mirrors that of India (Dumont 1970) but with two unique features. There are no recognizable Vaisya groups, who occupy the third level on the Indian ranking system (Hitchcock 1978; Hofer 1979). Rather, at this third level are the Matwali groups which include the numerous Tibeto-Burman (and largely Buddhist) ethnic groups in Nepal, such as the Newar, Tamang, Sherpa, and Magar. There are no families from these ethnic groups in Bhalara.

2. The exception are the Thakuri who consider great distance to be prestigious.

3. For example, while sleeping a person's *hangsa* (soul/spirit/voice) travels. A married woman's soul often returns to her natal home to see the people there, as they appear in her dreams. Spirits identified by the in-laws' shamans as possessing women and causing illness are often associated with the woman's *maiti*, either as having possessed her during travels from the natal home during her wedding, or actually coming from the *maiti* to cause her problems.

4. There are other equivocations of patriarchal authority among low-caste groups. Men never carry the middle name "Bahadur," which means "brave," a signifier of aggressive masculinity and common to all non-Brahmin upper-caste men—Thakuri and Chhetri. Nor do lower-caste men acquire ritually

ascribed authority for the *barthaman* thread-investiture ceremony. This ritual elevates a male to a position of authority based on purity that involves, among other things, control of females. Low-caste women do not participate in the *Tij-Rishi Pancami* ritual complex, the meaning of which embodies the subservient role of females in Hindu society. Thus, in marital ritual and in material reality, the basis for male domination over women is less for people of low caste than for people of high caste.

5. The lowest caste group, the Baadi, have the highest frequency of elopements. Elopement (*poil gaya*) is the least prestigious form of marriage, and occurs in some cases of inter-caste marriage, or, as in the Baadi case, when a couple starts living together and the families are without resources to stage an accompanying marriage. Elopement is also preferred in the relatively uncommon serial monogamy of women (in contrast to men's polygamy, which is common and generally marked by a wedding ceremony, largely for the bride's benefit).

6. A similar contrast is recognized in the view that a man may hit his wife but should never strike his daughters.

7. Four out of 31 high-caste women said their parents had received brideprice for their marriages, the average given per woman being almost one hundred rupees less than that given for low-caste women.

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