

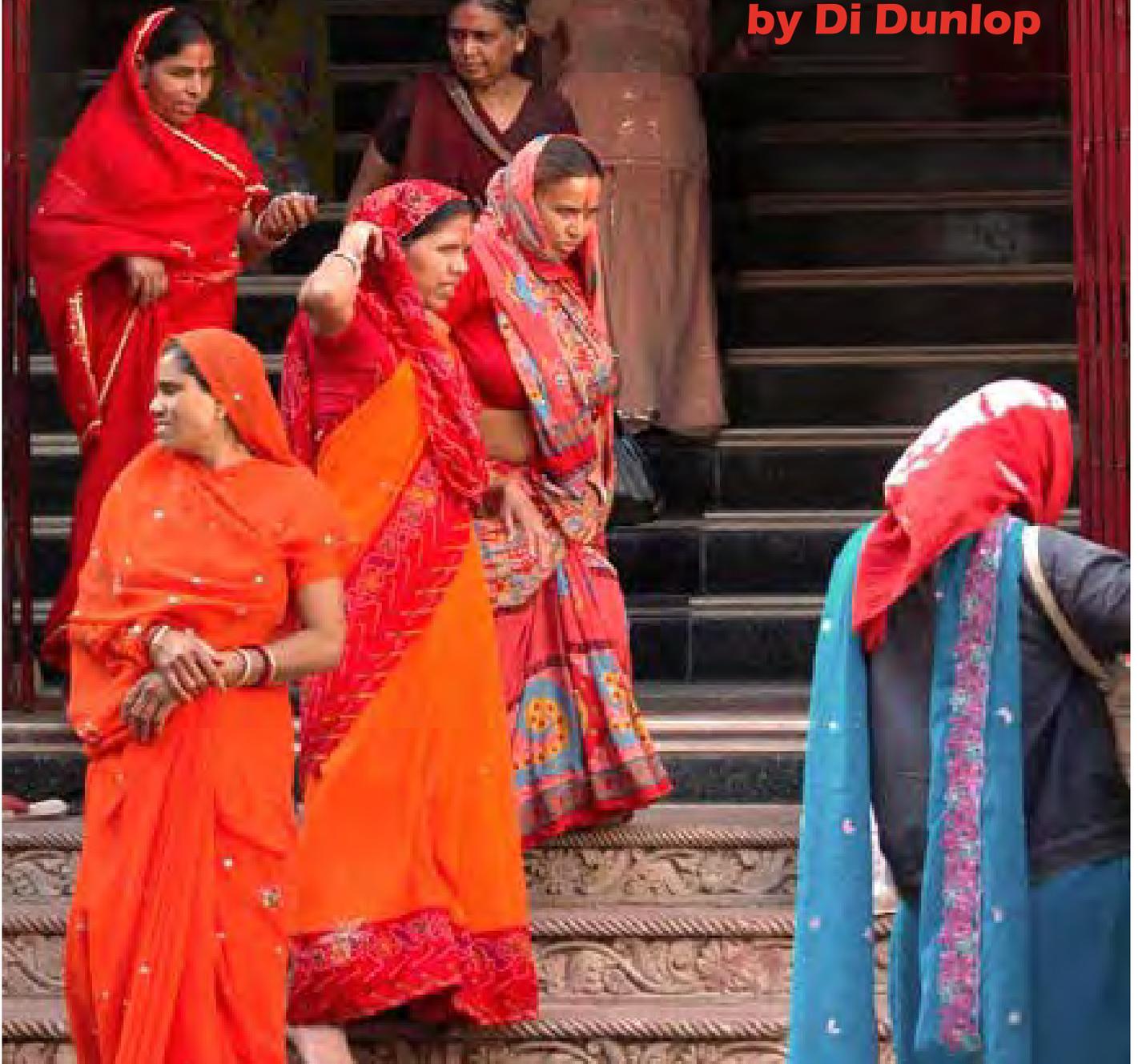


## Global Education – Learning Emphases

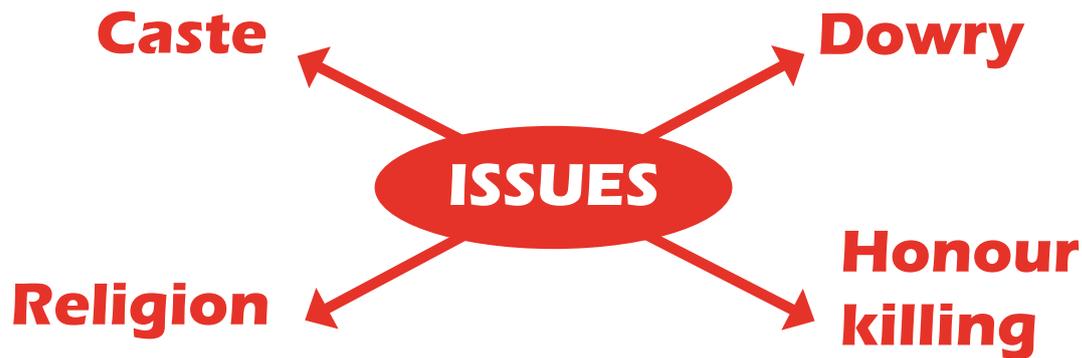
- Interdependence and globalisation
- Identity and cultural diversity
- Social justice and human rights
- Peace building and conflict resolution

# CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN INDIA

**Stage 5 and 6 History, Geography and Society and Culture and Legal Studies**  
**by Di Dunlop**



# CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN INDIA



Although these are distinct issues, each one sits within a religio/cultural context. Each has a significant impact on women and human rights. With Indian migration to Australia, some of these issues are relevant to the communities in Australia. This is relevant to Australians as practices such as dowry and honour killing are illegal in Australia.

## Caste in contemporary India

As increasing numbers of low caste Indians fight the traditional ways of the CASTE system, there has been a rise in attacks on lower class women in an attempt to keep them and their families 'in their place'. Recently, in the state of Uttar Pradesh, attacks on lower caste women gained media attention. In what is a mostly rural province, home to 200 million people, rape and murder of young, lower caste women is going unpunished. When a report is made to the police, they are often part of the problem. In 2013/2014 there have been ten rapes reported every day, more than 23,000 incidents against women. Badri Narayan of the Govind Ballabh Pant Social Science Institute said 'These rapes have little to do with sex, it's all about caste. Rape is a tool of oppression, of punishment, of humiliation and hanging women from trees serves as a warning to others.' It is believed that this is occurring because 'Dalits are speaking up, demanding their rights and land reform. The Yadav caste feels

threatened and so rape and murder are used to stop the lower castes from obtaining their rights.' Virek Kumar from Delhi's Nehru University [an expert on caste politics.] This very large rural state has very few police officers and there are hundreds of small villages and communities.

Meena Kandasamy, a novelist, wrote in *India Today*, 'rape becomes a dangerous weapon of war in the hands of caste, Hindu men use it to sustain a system that keeps intact their supremacy. This can only be halted by a responsive justice system but this does not exist in Uttar Pradesh, in fact the police and courts are often deliberately obstructive when complaints are made.'

With the recent election of Modi as Prime Minister, action has been promised. 'Respecting and protecting women should be a priority of the 1.25 billion people in this country. The Government will have to act.' he said. [in June 2014 Jason Koutsoukis wrote a piece on this in Sydney Morning Herald.]



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## Discussion points

- As an issue of social justice and human rights, how would you tackle this issue in India?
- Examine the historical and religious roots of the caste system and investigate the role/place of women in this context.

## Social Issues

*The spirit of the age is in favour of equality, although practice denies it almost everywhere...yet the spirit of the age will triumph.*

Jawaharlal Nehru, 1944

According to the Laws of Mann (a 2500-year-old source for Hinduism), life's rules for Hindus are clearly set out, and must be followed by orthodox Hindus. These rules are still practised today, even though 'caste' was abolished in India after Independence in 1947.

The caste system was originally based on four status categories called Varna-Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaisha, and Sudra.

Today, most Indians (except Brahmins) identify themselves by their local caste grouping, or *jati*. These are based on traditional occupation and heritage. It was a social system designed to 'keep people in their place' and maintain a stable society.

This is the face of Hinduism in India. However, it is changing in some areas as the people refuse to accept their 'historical place.'

The most important change is in attitude. Gone is the acceptance of *dharma* — which required them to live without complaining.

The Untouchables call themselves *Dalit*, the 'oppressed'. They find the name Mahatma Gandhi coined 'Children of God' patronising and won't accept it. One leader said: 'My father's generation accepted the humiliation, but we will not tolerate this injustice.'

This change has, of course, upset the higher castes in the area—who own most of the land. Increasingly, they are unwilling to work for substandard wages, but also they no longer show 'respect' for their 'betters.'

Such outward displays have led to violence by groups of higher caste youths against *Dalits* — violence which is often sanctioned by the police. A group of eight *Dalits* was hacked to death and their bodies dumped in canals. Although government compensation was paid to the families, and politicians spoke out about it, no trials or convictions occurred. The *Dalits*

responded by burying the bodies in the upper-caste area.

In the last 20 years increasing numbers are being killed in caste conflicts.

The hierarchical ethic of 'caste' is under attack by its worst victims—who no longer accept the Hindu virtue of fatalism as cause to tolerate their deprived conditions (Jose Kananakil, a Jesuit).

The 1950 Constitution pledged democratic government, universal suffrage, and a commitment to the removal of caste.

But the Government has not delivered; so the demand for change is coming from below as they realise that the vote is a powerful weapon. The Janata Dal Party made it part of their policy to improve the lot of the *Dalits*. This proved to be so popular that the Congress Party followed them, amid protests by upper-caste groups.

Historically, resistance to the caste system is not new. Both Buddhism and Jainism grew out of discontent with the ruling order. Buddhism and Jainism reject the emphasis on ritual and monopoly of the Brahmins on contact with the gods.

In 15th-century India, the *Bhakti* movement (Devotion) attacked the superior position of Brahmins in society. They argued that the common man could speak directly to God. This belief came about because of the influence of Islamic teachings of human equality. Sikhism, which developed in the 16th century, was also a rejection of the caste system.

A prominent Tamil Brahmin says 'People must travel, work and eat together. The old taboos become irrelevant in the context of an urban society.'

Whether the imposed government quotas will ultimately solve the problem remains to be seen. It is clear that it is an issue which creates violence in many areas of the country.

## The Caste System in India Today

### Brahmins (6% of the Hindu population).

Orthodox Brahmins wear a 'sacred thread' over their shoulders to show their 'twice born' superior status and conduct regular scripture readings and prayers three times a day to preserve their spiritual purity. They were traditionally priests who controlled all spiritual matters. They are now well represented in government jobs.

# CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN INDIA

## Other Upper Castes

(14% of the Hindu population)

These include *jatis* such as Rajputs, Banias, Thakurs and Kajasths. They are typically landholders, merchants and shopkeepers.

## Lower Castes

(52% of the Hindu population)

They include Yadars, Gujar and Yanadis in traditional occupations such as labourers, artisans, cowherds, carpenters and temple servants. Increasingly they have moved to the cities. They are socially and economically deprived, and the government reserves 27% of government jobs for members of these *jatis*.

## Dalits – ‘Untouchables’

(18% of the Hindu population)

They are so low as to be considered without caste. Hindus avoid all contact with them. They perform demeaning jobs such as human waste disposal, burying the dead and leather hide work (all considered impure). Although discrimination against them is illegal, it still occurs. The majority are desperately poor. The government reserves 15% of government jobs for them, but it is not a reality as they cannot get the required education.

## Dowry

Dowry is the payment of cash and gifts to the family of the bridegroom by the bride's family. It might include jewelry, gold, bedding, utensils, furniture etc. The Dowry system puts a great deal of pressure on the family of the bride.

The Dowry Prohibition Act was passed in India in 1961 under both civil and criminal codes. However, this has not meant that the practice no longer continues, it is still widespread especially in rural areas and extortion and violence are common.

The tradition of dowry arose in northern India where the structure of kinship marriage exists. The bride lives with the family of the husband [patrilocal] and the bride has little if any contact with her family. Brides do not have the ability to inherit property.

Attitudes to Dowry are changing but the system prevails in much of India. In 1993 a study showed that 75% of students said that Dowry was not important in marriage but that 40% of parents expected a Dowry. This is a significant human right's issue for women as they continue to be subject to their husband and family. India still limits women's social interactions and restricts economic and social rights.

As the Dowry system evolved it became a significant burden for the family of the bride and at times left the family destitute. In 1930, the typical amount of gold demanded was 8 grams, in 2000 it was nearly 1000 grams. Such an increase has significant implications for families and on women in Indian society and has led to physical and emotional abuse as well as murder and selective abortion to avoid having girls. The Indian National Crime Records report 6 to 7 thousand Dowry related deaths each year and up to 50,000 cases of physical and mental torture over the years 1999 to 2003. *The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act* was introduced in 2005.



Candlelight Rally Against Rape, Kolkata 2012. Source: Wikimedia Commons

## THE TIMES OF INDIA..September 2, 2014

A 22 year old pregnant woman was strangled to death by her husband and in-laws over Dowry. It took place in Saraha Village in the Bareilly District of Uttar Pradesh. The victim's family lodged a 'Dowry death case' against four people, including her husband. Her family claimed that her in-laws were not satisfied with the Dowry she had brought to the marriage and had allegedly tortured her daily to gain more Dowry from her family.

In 2013, 8,233 women were killed in India over Dowry disputes. The conviction rate for such crimes is 32%.

A Women's Rights Activist, Ranja Kumari, blamed a growing culture of greed as India opens its economy to foreign goods that the younger generation wants but cannot afford. 'Marriage has become commercialized. It's like a business proposition where the groom and his family make exorbitant demands, the wealthier the family, the more outrageous the demands.'

# CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN INDIA

In 2012, Melbourne's Indian community was rocked by a spate of horrific murders that were violence and Dowry related. One Indian woman died when her estranged husband stalked her and set fire to her home. Dr Manula O'Connor, a member of the Melbourne Indian community has been ostracized by sections of the community for her outspoken approach to family violence and her campaign against Dowry.

Pasanna Mutha, the Policy and Projects Manager for the Victorian Women's Legal Service says Indian women are their second biggest client group. 'Dowry is definitely a really important issue for our clients. It is very hard for them to get their dowry back if the relationship fails. It may be being held in India by the in-laws.' O'Connor has said, 'Young men need to understand that the Dowry will not be tolerated in Australia, just as it is not tolerated in India by law.'

The following article was from THE AGE..Friday 23 May, 2014.

## Is a woman worth more than a TV?

**Amrit Dhillon**  
Delhi

The custom of dowry in India is deeply rooted and shows no sign of disappearing. The act of giving or demanding dowry at the time of marriage was banned in 1961, yet it persists because of the arranged marriage system.

Parents will not find a man who is prepared to marry their daughter without offering a dowry. Since it will be shameful for an Indian woman to remain unmarried, a dowry is given. It is against the law but, since it suits both sides, who will report it to the police?

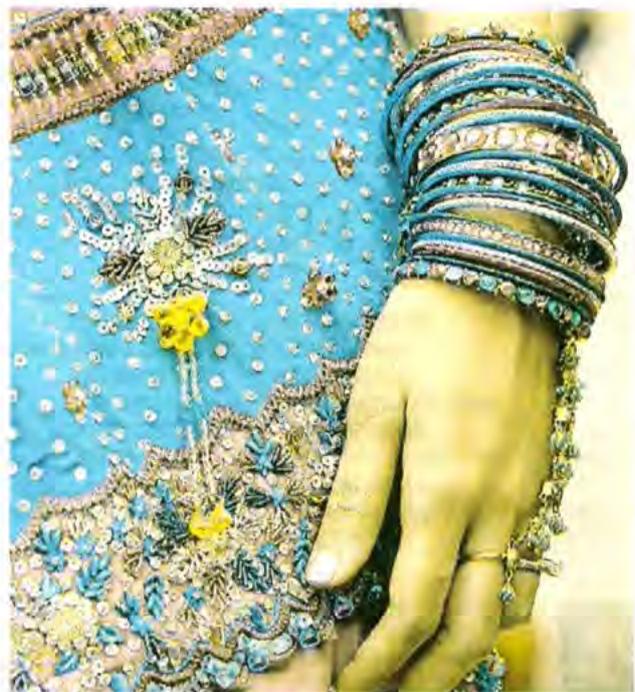
But what is meant to be a gift has turned into a brutal demand. The latest available official figures show that a woman was killed every hour in 2012 because her family could not satisfy her husband and in-laws' insatiable greed for cash and expensive gifts.

The statistics from the National Crime Records Bureau reveal that 8233 young women were killed in "dowry deaths" that year. These women were not murdered because their parents failed to give a dowry, but because husbands these days want even more - scooters, cars, washing machines, flat-screen TVs, an apartment, or money to start a business.

To that end, the woman is forced to keep going back to her parents for more dowry in the hope of not being treated badly in her marital home.

Dowry deaths cut across all caste and class divisions in India, though the new middle class, aspiring to the good life but with limited resources, tends to be the worst. Not only have dowry deaths not fallen over the years, the demands have become more expensive.

The decision to murder a woman who has not provided enough dowry is generally taken when her husband and in-laws decide they will be financially better off if, having killed her, the husband can remarry and secure a second dowry with more cash and commodities.



Invariably, the murder is passed off by the man's family as a "kitchen accident", after the woman's caught fire. What they don't say is that they poured kerosene over her and set her on fire.

More agony follows for the families of the victims, because the courts move slowly in India and justice can take 20 or 30 years. Indeed, about 25-30 million legal cases are winding their way through a clogged legal system..

Amarjit Dhami's only daughter, Anita, was murdered by her husband and in-laws 28 years ago in New Delhi. In the almost three decades since Dhami became a widow, grew old and was crippled by arthritis.

A frail 82-year-old, she kept dragging herself to the hearings to ensure justice for her daughter, whose name she could not mention without breaking down.

Two years ago Mrs Dhami died without seeing her daughter's husband (who had remarried while out on bail and had children) sent to jail.

According to the bureau's figures, charges are brought in 94 per cent of all dowry death cases, but the conviction rate is just 32 per cent because of the difficulty in proving the death was not accidental..