

Marriage in India is steeped in traditions and deep-rooted cultural beliefs passed down by word of mouth and in some cases, re-interpreted to adapt to changing times. There is, however, one custom that stubbornly resists change: the dowry system.

In India, it has its roots in medieval times when a gift in cash or kind was given by her family to maintain her independence after marriage. During the British colonial era, it became the only legal way to get married, with the British making it mandatory. The trend in present India, with its booming economy, is now an ever-higher bride price among all socioeconomic strata. But the rising dowry prices brought with it an increase in violence against women.

Dowry violence is usually perpetrated by the husband or the in-laws in the name of a higher dowry from the bride's family. The dowry price paid at the time of marriage may be significant, but the greed of husbands and in-laws can grow after marriage and frequently translates into physical, mental or sexual violence against the bride. The violence ranges from slashing genitalia or breasts with razors to burning the bride by pouring kerosene on her. In some cases, women are driven to suicide.

Although seeking a dowry has been outlawed in India since 1961, the law is a constant challenge to enforce. An amendment to the law in 1986 mandated that dowry deaths and violence within the first seven years of marriage would be tried as dowry deaths. The reality is that most cases of dowry violence go unreported.