

The Status of Women in South Asia

By Anne B. Waters

THE FIRST CHALLENGE CONFRONTING AN EDUCATOR CONCERNED WITH ENDURING STEREOTYPES OF SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN IS WHERE TO START. SHOULD ONE BEGIN WITH THE STEREOTYPE OF SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN AS OPPRESSED BY RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL PRACTICE, SUCH AS SATI OR DOWRY-MARRIAGE? OR THE STEREOTYPE OF SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN AS SAVVY POLITICAL LEADERS AND HEADS OF STATE? WHAT OF THE STEREOTYPED PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN'S LABOR-FILLED LIVES, TOILING IN FIELDS AND FACTORIES? OR THE CONTRASTING IMAGE OF SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN VEILED OR IN PURDAH, RELEGATED TO THEIR HOMES? HOW SHOULD ONE ADDRESS THE COMMON STEREOTYPE OF SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN AS VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE, BOTH PUBLIC AND PRIVATE? STEREOTYPES ABOUT WOMEN IN SOUTH ASIA ABOUND, AND EDUCATORS HAVE A DIFFICULT TASK IN TRYING TO COUNTER THEM SUCCESSFULLY.

Purchasing a daughter's dowry
Maharashtra, 1983
Photo by Anne B. Waters

ENDURING STEREOTYPES ABOUT ASIA





A sister's blessing
 Maharashtra, 1993
 Photo by Anne B. Waters

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The term South Asia refers to the Indian subcontinent, which includes the contemporary nation-states of Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. This geographical spread has a corresponding range of cultural and linguistic diversity. Further, this region is home to over a billion persons. On any issue of global importance, be it social welfare, population growth, cultural and economic development, or the environment, what happens in South Asia, and to its peoples, is significant. Women's lives, from their symbolic representation to their material conditions, are of great importance in planning South Asia's future.

Women's daily lives as they are lived in the context of family and community are often overshadowed by pressing problems that form the basis for much scholarly research, social activism, and government intervention. South Asian feminist groups have directed their efforts to publicizing the difficulties women face as a crucial first step towards social change. This has included documenting girls' educational opportunities and women's rights within marriage, as well as activism against excessive dowry demands, rape and domestic violence.¹ As a result, women's status is a high-profile issue, part of an ongoing public debate in newspapers, television and film, as well as the politics of social welfare and entitlement programs.

I will address the above-mentioned stereotypes through an examination of contemporary concerns about women's status, including (1) the continuing debate over sati; (2) practice of dowry; (3) women's legal rights; (4) the experience of women workers; and (5) excess female mortality and morbidity.

1. SATI IS A POWERFUL IMAGE of women's oppression and one of the West's most enduring stereotypes of India. Sati refers to the burning of a Hindu woman on the funeral pyre of her husband. The term can refer to the woman who is burned (a *sati*, virtuous wife) and the ritual of burning itself. Some Hindus believe that the ritual ensures the salvation of the woman's husband and brings blessings upon her family.

The origins of sati are subject to debate. Accounts of the practice are found in classical texts, medieval stone inscriptions, court chronicles, poems, songs and other aspects of local history. There are descriptions from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by foreign travelers to South Asia, missionaries, and British colonial officials.

The question of coercion has always been central to the debate over sati. Sati grew even more controversial following the 1987 death of a young woman, Roop Kanwar, on her husband's funeral pyre. Was Roop Kanwar's action a "voluntary" sati, or was she forcibly burned by her husband's family? Roop Kanwar's death and its aftermath was a multimedia spectacle: the depiction of sati as a supposedly ancient tradition included eyewitness press accounts, video footage of her village, and souvenir photo-montage postcards. Roop Kanwar's death sparked strong opposition to sati by a wide range of groups and opened a critical national debate on the status of women in India. These groups posed a basic question: what progress does literacy and economic development bring to women if practices such as sati continue?

The Government of India's response was to strengthen the existing anti-sati laws and declare that assisting in the performance or glorification of sati (such as sales of cards, or tours of the sati-site) a crime. Recent scholarship and political

activism on sati has been very influential and has encouraged a re-thinking of women's status within Hindu ritual.² While arguments about sati, its historical evidence and interpretation, are strong and impassioned, it must be emphasized that the practice of sati has always been, and remains, extremely rare.

2. THE PRACTICE OF DOWRY is another leading stereotype about women's status in South Asia. The institution is complex and varies by region, community, and class. Anthropologists tend to view dowry as a form of property transfer at the time of marriage. Some regard dowry as a pre-mortem inheritance, the share of a family's wealth given to a daughter at the time of her marriage (rather than at the death of the family head). Others view dowry as an affinal presentation, that is, gifts to a family's new relatives that accompany the bride at her marriage. A key distinction between these two views centers on whether the dowry is a woman's own property to dispose of as she wishes, or if the dowry is absorbed into the property and shared wealth of her marital household.³

Dowry is not uniform and includes many kinds of things, such as jewelry for the bride, particular gifts to the groom, and a range of directed presents for specific relatives. Dowry items for a rural peasant family or a lower-middle-class urban household might include gold ornaments, gifts of cloth and clothes, and household items such as cooking utensils, furniture, or electrical appliances. The greatest inflation in dowry has occurred among urban salaried and middle-class business families for whom dowry can be more than one year's entire household income.

Other anthropologists argue that dowry must be understood not only as property but also as part of a prestige system.⁴ It is prestigious and auspicious to give dowry; what one is able to give to one's daughter at her marriage is a measure of one's own economic power, social standing, and generosity. Similarly, what a family receives as dowry at a son's marriage is a measure of the respect and prestige the family is accorded in their community. This view of dowry necessitates a distinction between gifts freely given and those requested or demanded. There are many families who make no demands for dowry at the marriage of their sons, but who will accept dowry if it is freely offered. There are others who take advantage of the prestige value of dowry and know that families will go to great lengths to uphold their social standing and honor to meet a new in-law's expectations, however unreasonable. Dowry demands can escalate, not infrequently accompanied by intimidation to the young bride.

In the early 1980s, feminist groups exerted great public pressure to force the government to study violence against young married women. Hospital and police records revealed a disturbing pattern of violence, particularly burns.⁵ The government's response was to pass strict laws against dowry offenses. Section 498A defines as "dowry death" those cases in which a woman dies at her home within seven years of her marriage, under abnormal circumstances, with evidence of cruelty prior to the death (cruelty in the attempt to extort greater dowry). The law specifies steps police may take to arrest the family.⁶ Passage of this law marked a clear victory for women's groups, yet the prosecution of dowry cases has not been as successful as initially hoped. It is frequently difficult to sort out

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Another scene depicting the purchasing of a daughter's dowry
Maharashtra, 1983
Photo by Anne B. Waters



Three generations meet at a wedding;
a mother, her three daughters,
and a granddaughter
Maharashtra, 1993
Photo by Anne B. Waters

evidence to determine among murder (due to burning or poisoning), accidental death (burning), or suicide (due to burning or poisoning). Dowry-related disputes continue to be cited as the leading cause for women's difficulties in marriage, and violence against women in the family.

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3. THE FIGHT AGAINST DOWRY DRAWS ATTENTION TO THE USE OF THE LEGAL SYSTEM to bring about change in women's status. Indian women are protected by a wide range of constitutional rights and other provisions. Much of Indian civil law comes under what has been termed "personal laws"—specified to acknowledge and protect the traditions of the nation's major religious groups. These "personal laws," (Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Parsi) are effectively family law, concerning the terms of marriage, divorce, adoption, property and succession, family duties, and responsibilities. Increasingly, the Indian judiciary has seen these "personal laws" as taking precedence over other legal statutes. It is in the realm of the family, the private or domestic sphere, that women's rights are debated.

The changes to personal laws which were adopted after Indian Independence in 1947 gave women equal inheritance rights with men under the Hindu Succession Act. (In a largely agricultural society, economic security and access to property is largely through land; rights to land and inheritance are very important.) However, enforcement of such rights lags. Women are frequently loathe to claim their legal shares, saying they are content to accept the customary gifts and expectations within traditional roles. It is likely that they are fearful of challenging male relatives, fathers, brothers, or husbands. When women do challenge family members for the portion of an estate to which they are entitled, court battles can drag on for many years. In contemporary India there is a gap between the rights promised to women in legislation and the benefits they are able to claim through the legal system.⁷ With increased literacy and education, women will be better able to protect their interests and secure their rights.

4. STUDIES OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT in South Asia have given particular emphasis to women's economic contributions. Women's labor, be it in fields, factories, offices, or at home, is a critical part of household economies throughout the region. Women's labor participation varies widely with the type of economic activity—raising animals, agricultural work in the fields (planting, transplanting, harvesting, and drying and storing food), as well as labor in the formal sector of small businesses, factories, and the self-employed or informal sector. The labor of women and girls is often not measured or is underestimated in economic surveys of peasant households. A woman's paid labor has been correlated to increased nutritional status for herself and her children. Government employment schemes, development projects by nongovernmental organizations, and self-help groups all recognize the great contribution a woman's labor makes to her own family and to improving women's status more generally. There is at present a conflict between notions of women's status and a family's best interests. It is considered more prestigious for a family if women do not work, yet women's labor can make a critical difference, such as the ability to purchase supplemental foods or expenses related to schooling of children. As in the West, most women work because they must; their labor is necessary for economic survival.

Women's participation in public life as citizens, community leaders, and voters is a critical component of the political order in South Asia. Throughout South Asia, women have occupied prominent places in public life including heads of

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state in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. These women were all from elite political families whose entry into public life came through influence of fathers or husbands. In recent years there have been experiments to reserve seats in local elections for women candidates, as much as one-third of all elected positions. These reserved seats open a crucial arena for women by insuring their representation in local decision making.

5. IT IS IMPORTANT to comment upon one final aspect of women's status. Demographers use the term sex-ratio of a given population to refer to the balance of males and females in society. Sex-ratios are computed for the population as a whole, and divided by age groups. Under ideal conditions the sex-ratio should be equal: for every 1,000 men, there should be 1,000 women. South Asia shares with East Asia a very dramatic statistic: a sex-ratio of the population which favors men. The latest census statistics report an all-India average of 927 women per 1,000 men.⁸ Women in South Asian societies experience what demographers call excess morbidity and mortality. Women get sick more often, and more seriously, than men. Women are more likely to die from their illnesses, and to die at younger ages, than men.⁹ Thus, there are fewer women than men in society. In Government of India census data, there are some forty million fewer women than men. As social scientists try to analyze what is behind these statistics to account for the missing women, we must recognize that this is an undeniable fact of gender. In South Asia there are differential life chances for women. This uneven sex-ratio reveals the status of women in a very different light.

Educators' efforts to move beyond common stereotypes can be very fruitful. The status of women in South Asia is complex, revealing both significant progress and formidable challenges ahead. ■

NOTES

1. For an excellent history of feminist struggles in South Asia, see Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India, 1800-1990* (London: Verso, 1993).
2. See the special issue of the journal *Seminar* (New Delhi), vol. 342 (1988) devoted to sati; S. Narasimhan, *Sati: A Study of Widow Burning in India* (New Delhi: Viking, 1990); Lata Mani, "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India," in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, Sangari and Vaid, eds. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1990); *Sati, the Blessing and the Curse*, ed. J. S. Hawley, (New York: Oxford, 1994); and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, "The Subject of Sati," in *Real and Imagined Women* (New York: Routledge, 1993). See also the reprint of Ram Mohan Roy's essays entitled *Sati*, edited by Mulk Raj Anand (Delhi: B. R. Publishers, 1989).
3. See S. Tambiah and J. Goody, *Bridewealth and Dowry*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973) and M. N. Srinivas, *Some Reflections on Dowry* (Delhi: Oxford, 1984). See also Madhu Kishwar's article "Toward More Just Norms for Marriage: Continuing the Dowry Debate," in *Manushi* (vol. 53), 1989.
4. Marguerite A. Roulet, "The Idea, Practice, and Politics of Dowry in Two North Indian Villages." Ph.D. diss. (Anthropology), University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1994.
5. D. N. Gautam and B. V. Trivedi, *Unnatural Deaths of Married Women with Special Reference to Dowry Deaths: A Sample Study of Delhi* (New Delhi: Bureau of Police Research and Development, Government of India, 1986).
6. Paras Diwan, *Dowry and Protection to Married Women*, (New Delhi: Deep and Deep Publications, 1987).
7. Archana Parashar, *Women and Family Law Reform in India* (New Delhi: Sage, 1992), and Bina Agrawal, *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Agrawal's work is an excellent treatment of gender relations, customary rights, economic entitlements, and legal reform in South Asia, with a superb bibliography.
8. *National Family Health Survey* (Maternal and Child Health and Family Planning) (Bombay: International Institute for Population Sciences, 1995).
9. The *National Family Health Survey* (1995) reports that for the age cohort five to fourteen years old in one province of India (Rajasthan), the sex ratio is 839 girls per 1,000 boys.



Selling vegetables
Maharashtra, 1983
Photo by Anne B. Waters

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