

**Globalization: Theoretical Perspectives**  
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**Lecture 53**  
**Gender, Dowry and the Migration System of Indian IT Professionals**

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**Gender, Dowry and the  
Migration System of Indian IT  
Professionals**

*Indian Journal of Gender Studies 2005 12: 357*

Xiang Biao

00:00:00



Welcome back to the next session. In this class, we are looking at yet another exciting topic as a part of our continuous discussions on themes related to globalization and Indian society. We discussed caste and its continuing influence or significance in the market economy in the last two sessions.

In this class, we are looking at Gender, Dowry and Migration Systems of Indian IT Professionals published in the Indian Journal of Gender Studies in 2005, Written by Xiang Biao. So, again I hope you realise the relevance of this particular topic because IT, Information Technology was brought to India due to globalization, and India became a significant player in the export of IT professionals.

India's GDP gained significantly; thousands of people migrated to the US and other countries. And that has changed the face of employment, especially since the 1990s. So, here this author tries to look at a fascinating topic of dowry in connection with this whole new economy and demand for IT professionals and their social mobility, their migration to the US; it is as though

the study is not based on the US. But, and though the studies were published in 2005, quite many other peculiar, particular aspects must have changed. But still, it is something important to look at that.

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- The spectacular growth of the information technology (IT) industry and the hyper-mobility of IT professionals are among the most significant social developments in India.
- Large scale migration to the US and other countries
- Under representation of women in the field
- That the migration of IT professionals is gendered, but also that the migration process as a whole is gendered in its construction. That is, gender relations are central in producing the migration system itself.



Now, the spectacular growth of information technology, the IT industry, and the hypermobility of IT professionals are among the most significant social developments in India in recent times. I do not think I need to elaborate on this. We know people we know are relatives or friends, people we know have completed either an engineering degree or a science degree in science, and then they become IT, professionals. And they work here for some time then they migrate to, then they go to the US, and either they settle down there or come back after some time.

And, that has changed the face of the Indian service industry, maybe for the last three decades. So, large scale migration to the US and other countries, but still the US constitutes the most important place of migration, which is the dream destination for most scholars. And if you look at that, the IT professionals are migrating, that is fine. But the moment you try to look at the gender of these people, among men or women, who are the most migrating people, we undoubtedly know that women are underrepresented in that migration.

It is men who go there either being sent from their host companies for a job for a stipulated period, onshore kind of assignments and later brought back or people who are recruited by say, body shopping agencies or recruitment agencies and who go there, there is a significant under-

representation of women. So, the author is trying to ask a fascinating question: why does this system favours men compare to women?

And, for example, if you contrast the scenario with that of nurses, nursing is another profession where you have a large number of migrations from India, India to that of the first world, especially that of the US, to the European things and the, to the Gulf countries. And the picture is entirely different. The vast majority of the nurses who migrate and eventually settle down are women, and male nurses are negligible.

But here, the dynamics work. Differently, there the dynamics work in a completely different way. The migration of IT professionals is gendered. The migration process is gendered in its construction; gender relations are central in producing the migration system itself. So, she makes a fascinating argument that it is straightforward for us to understand that it is, of course, men are predominantly. Men are the people who mostly tend to migrate, not women, that is fine, but she has something more to say.

She is talking about an ecosystem in which gender plays a vital role in facilitating the migration of men. So, why that, how gender plays an important role, how gender appears as an essential category, and the process that facilitates the availability of these many IT professionals who are willing to migrate. How does gender work in that? What is the role of women in that? That is the line of inquiry.

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- How the new dynamisms of the global economy, rather than geographic mobility per se, intersect with gender relations.
- How the globalised and volatile IT industry has affected marriage and dowry practices in local society and how, in turn, the institution of dowry functions as a means of mobilizing resources to support the production of the IT labour force.
- Fieldwork in Sydney (January 2000 to June 2001), Andhra Pradesh (from June to September 2001, mainly in the capital city, Hyderabad) and New Delhi (September to October 2001).
- Open-ended interviews with 180 IT professionals and relevant institutes and lived with about 20 Indian IT workers in Sydney and Hyderabad.



So, how does the new dynamism of the global economy rather than geographical mobility, per se, intersect with gender relations? How the globalised and volatile IT industry has affected marriage and dowry practices in local society and how the institution of dowry functions as a means of mobilising resources to support the production of the IT labour force is an exciting set of questions. What is dowry to do with IT professionals, or what is dowry to do with the migration of IT professionals to the US or the European countries?

We may not make immediate connections, powerful connections immediately, but this author makes a fascinating analysis; we can see that dowry plays a vital role, gender roles, what a woman is expected to do, what a man is expected to do, they play a critical role in creating this pool of highly mobile IT professionals who are men, and what happens to women, what happens to, so all these things are exciting kind of questions.

So, she has done fieldwork in Sydney. And please keep in mind, it was done in 2000 and 2001. It was almost published in 2005, so nearly 15-year-old study, but the arguments are still important. So, the fieldwork is done in Australia, Andhra Pradesh, in the capital city, Hyderabad, and New Delhi. So, it is not a study that is done in the US. But the study was done in Australia, Andhra Pradesh, and Delhi. Open-ended interviews with 180 IT professionals and relevant institutes and lived with around 20 Indian IT workforce in Sydney and Hyderabad.

So, this is a kind of an ethnographic study. I am not going into the excerpts of interviews and other things. Still, I hope you know that ethnography is a critical anthropological method, where the scholar spends a lot of time, researchers spend a lot of time with their interlocutors, their respondents, many times often live with them, interact with them very closely, observe things very closely. So that gives a lot of insights and in-depth information about how things work.

And here, the author has conducted 180 open-ended interviews. So, open-ended interviews are interviews without any rigid structure; you initiate a discussion and then allow the respondent to answer whichever way they want. You only try to steer this conversation into specific directions. So, you will listen to these people's more natural expressions and elaborations.

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- Indian workers proficiency in English, a relatively advanced higher education system as a result of the Nehruvian development agenda, and the connections with IT companies in the West established by earlier migrant professionals.
- A more fundamental reason is that Indians form a cheap and flexible labour force. In the United States, H-1B IT workers are reported to be paid 25 per cent less than the average and are not paid any compensation for overwork. More flexible with the willingness to be laid off.
- Recruitment through 'body shops.' Unlike the conventional recruitment agents who introduce employees to employers, body shops manage workers for employers. And the practice of 'benching'.



So, the Indian worker's proficiency in English, relatively advanced higher education system due to the Nehruvian development plan, and connections with IT companies in the West established by earlier migrant's professionals. So, these are all; we know that these are all the factors that are widely shown why India got an advantage over a host of other countries in IT, especially in comparison with China.

And several other Asian countries are relative proficiency in English. And the fact that we have had a host of engineering institutes, especially IITs, you know that IITs have a very high special status among the IT professionals because IT has produced many graduates who eventually settle down in the US.

So, including Sundar Pichai and a host of others. And which were all this IIT system, this education system established during Nehruvian development plan, and connections with IIT companies in the West, based on earlier migrant professionals, make India a significant supply place for IT professionals.

A more fundamental reason is that Indians form a cheap and flexible labour force. This may be not very pleasant to listen to, but that is a fact. Many Indian companies take so many people from India to work in the US because it is cheaper. It is much cheaper to pay Indians than hiring the Native Americans, whose pay would be much higher than that of the Indian people.

So, India provides a much cheaper and more abundant workforce. So, in the United States, H-1B IT workers are reported to be paid 25 per cent less than an average and not paid any (comp), a native worker and are not paid any compensation for overwork. And they are more flexible with the willingness to be laid off.

So they are less demanding, the level is also different. And they know that they will be, they will be laid off, and they are OK with that. They can be laid off for a couple of months, stay back, and look for something else they will get there. So, the author says that these kinds of uncertainty and high-risk people, men find it more suitable, maybe three or four men come together, and then they stay together, at a period when they do not have any job. And women find it more difficult.

And recruitment through body shops, unlike the conventional recruitment agents who introduce employees to employers, body shops manage workers for employers and the practice of benching. You know, Body Shop is a very, very common thing. It is not a recruitment agency that recruits you and supply to a particular company. Here, body shopping this specific agency themselves, they supply people, after some time they take them back and then give it to somebody.

So, you work for an intermediary, and you do not have any permanent employer. And also, this practice of benching, that for a temporary period, maybe even months together, you will be paid may be less amount, but you are not assigned any job but because there is simply no job available. This is many times seen as before retrenching, before dismissing people.

So, so it is a highly, of course, it is a highly paid job when you, when you take this conversion rate into account, but even otherwise, it is a highly volatile kind of a market, where men tend to thrive in comparison that of women. And, and why is that kind of a situation? How does gender work in that? That is a kind of an inquiry of this particular article?

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- Women are deemed less suitable for benching
- Despite the importance of the work done by wives, a working wife is not always culturally desirable.
- One informant in Sydney compared himself with his brother-in-law in the United States. "Both my wife and I have to work here. When we come home, I am tired, my wife is tired. In the US, my brother-in-law alone makes more money than the two of us. My sister doesn't need to work. She can look after the family and kids.. He decided to go to the United States where his wife could stay at home."



So, women are deemed less suitable for benching because, as I mentioned, benching requires quite a lot of flexibility, the ability to live without, social support, high-stress scenario, and everybody seems to agree that women are less deemed suitable for benching. Despite the importance of work done by wives, a working wife is not always culturally desirable. This is another exciting thing about how certain families and communities insist that their wives do not need to work.

So, wife working is seen as unnecessary, wife working is seen as unacceptable to a large extent, wife working is seen as an unwanted kind of scenario. So why that because the community or the family gives so much importance to family, essential to take care of the husband, take care of the children, look after their future, look after their education, and keep the family running.

So even educated wives are often encouraged not to look for employment but to take care of the family. And this is a fascinating topic. This is a fascinating topic because they say, on one side, it reinforces the gender roles in the family, that the father is the breadwinner, and the mother is the

household maker. So, it never comes to our mind that father can actively participate in the household chores.

Father can take part in cooking, cleaning, washing, and taking care of the children. And a mother can also work, provided both husband and wife take equal responsibility for all the household activities, which never occurred to us. And because it is being culturally conditioned that we have seen throughout our families and communities, we typically understand our family.

I do not need to elaborate that we all know how even the same we know that the tragedy of this whole thing is that men are also put under tremendous pressure. We cannot even accept a man who is not working but taking care of the child and the family while the wife is working. So that is a point of ridicule, is not it, that man will have very, very low social status esteem. He will be seen as a henpecked or a host, of adjectives will be given to him.

So our cultural conditioning about gender roles is very, very interesting. So, there is a snippet of an interview here. One informant in Sydney compared himself with his brother-in-law in the United States. Both my wife and I have to work here. When we come home, I am tired; my wife is exhausted. In the US, my brother in law alone makes more money than the two of us; my sister does not need to work; she can look after the family and kids; he decided to go to the US United States his wife could stay at home.

So, again, you know that a cultural framework is in mind that my wife does not need to work. And I am sure that whether the wife wants to work or not is hardly a consideration. And many times, women do not have the space or the right to choose; that choice is already taken. And especially when women are bombarded with many responsibilities and pressure both at home and in the family, many tend to leave the job and then stay home.

And never these possibilities are seen as a possibility by the men. If both are facing equality, are given equal salary, and face equal pressure, what prevents the man from sacrificing his job and taking care of the family never occurs.

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- The wives contribute to the construction and sustaining of the flexibility of the IT labour system, but they also suffer due to it. It has been documented in other migration cases that the pressures the husbands face in the destination countries often contribute to domestic violence against women.
- H-4 visa holders are deported immediately once they are divorced by spouses. This dependency renders Indian housewives in the United States vulnerable.



So, the wives contribute to the construction and sustaining of the flexibility of the IT labour system in various ways, she elaborates in the paper or by providing a support system at home, but they also suffer due to it. It has been documented in other migration cases that the pressure the husbands face in the destination countries often contributes to domestic violence against women.

And we have had several films about which tell the story of women, unemployed women in the US. I know that you, I hope you know that there are several viral films, fascinating telling stories about English Vinglish and a host of other films. Then H-4 visa holders are deported immediately once the spouses divorce them.

This dependency renders Indian homemakers in the United States vulnerable. If you are divorced, if you are no longer the wife of an IT professional, you could be deported, and these women are who are alone in a foreign land are pretty vulnerable.

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- Explore how particular gender relations in India, associated specifically with the institution of dowry, intertwine with the body shopping system.
- Kammas and Reddys as two dominant, agriculturalist castes in Andhra Pradesh who invested heavily in educational institutions. There is high prevalence of dowry system amongst them.
- While modernisation and Westernisation were responsible for the establishment of modern dowry, globalisation escalates the practice.
- An IT groom of the Kamma or Reddy caste, working in a big company, is expected to demand a dowry of Rs. 800,000 to 2 million in Hyderabad, more than double that of a non-IT engineer. If the boy is US-based, the figure could go up to US\$ 120,000 (Rs. 5.5 million).



This particular study explores how particular gender relations in India, explicitly associated with the institution of dowry, intertwine the body shopping system, that is, as I had mentioned, is the focus of this particular study. The study is fieldwork, as I told is done in Australia, also done in Andhra Pradesh. So, the community that she studies is two caste communities in Andhra Pradesh, the Kamma's and the Reddy's, as the two dominant agricultural castes in Andhra Pradesh who invested heavily in educational institutions is a high prevalence of dowry system among these two communities.

While modernisation and westernisation were responsible for establishing modern dowry, globalization escalates the process. And there are many interesting sociological studies to tell that this practice of dowry is a very modern phenomenon. Maybe we have had more instances of men giving money to women, Kaniyadan, a host of terms, rather than men demanding money from the woman's thing.

So, many scholars identify this as a process brought in during colonialism where certain sections, especially the bureaucrats and others, were seen as very prestigious. Then, families of women were forced to bargain to bid for them and were available for the highest bidder. So, there is a fascinating connection with colonialism, postcolonial economic transactions, and contemporary times.

So, globalization has not decreased the whole thing. Even though you are exposed to a wide variety of ideas and stuff from across the globe, you do not tend to leave this particular practice, but it seems to have escalated it. An IT groom of Kamma or Reddy caste working in a big company is expected to demand a dowry of rupees 80,000 to 2 million in Hyderabad, more than double that of a non-IT engineer.

If the boy is the US settled, the figure could go up to 5.5 million. And please keep in mind, a (5.5) please keep in mind this figure she recorded in 2000 in 2000, she did the fieldwork in 2000 and though article came out in 2005. And I am sure that this figure has gone much, much higher. It runs into crores now for a boy; IT boy settled in the US demands dowry in crores.

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- It is a surprise to many that IT professionals demand high dowries because they expect that highly educated professionals with a Western exposure would break with this kind of 'tradition'.
- Indeed, IT professionals are particularly proud that they can maintain Indian culture and at the same time succeed in the global IT market.
- Among the IT professionals, arranged intra-jati marriage remains the norm and a cross-caste love marriage brings suspicion on the entire family and may jeopardise the marriage prospects of siblings.
- Migration tends to escalate rather than undermine the institution of dowry. Migration enlarges the scope of search for a match and makes economic calculations more central to marriage negotiations.



So, exciting point, it is a surprise that IT professionals demand high degrees because they expect that highly educated professionals with Western exposure would break with this kind of tradition. That is a fascinating argument. Because taking dowry, first of all, is illegal, giving and taking dowry is unlawful. Secondly, we know that it is not a good practice. You are selling yourself to a rich person. You are not marrying another person based on your likeness. Your family decides your life partner, and you go and oblige.

But why do the vast majority of people do not say that we do not want a dowry? Why they cannot, they say that? That is why dowry is so structurally ingrained in this world of business. So, indeed IT professionals are particularly proud that they can maintain Indian culture and at the

same time succeed in the global IT market. Again, the fascinating question is, how do Indian IT professionals keep their so-called Indian culture in a foreign land.

And dowry plays a vital role; dowry is associated with family relationships, family commitments, family obligations, family culture, and first of all, I would say first and foremost, it is the practice of arranged marriage. The very fact that despite you being a professional with global exposure with highest of the salary and highest educational qualification, you choose not to select your life partner; you leave that your family and family does that on a host of other considerations.

And, this practice, which we consider is so usual, so familiar, is something so strange to host of other countries, a host of a different society, because they think it as inconceivable, extraordinary, how can somebody not to choose actively choose one's life partner, because they are the one who is supposed to live with them, how can they give ask to permit parents and family to find that.

So, we know that even in India, the number of people who get married outside once on caste is less than five per cent. So, 95 per cent of the people get married within the caste. And this 95 per cent could be mostly arranged marriages, maybe the trend is slightly changing, but that is a predominant system. So, there are numerous ways in which the IT professionals who have dismembered from India and settled down in foreign countries want to cling to specific Indian values and culture, and dowry assumes a central place in that.

Among the IT professionals, arranged intra-jati marriage remains the norm, and the cross-caste love marriage brings suspicion on the entire family. It may jeopardize the marriage prospects of siblings. I do not think I need to explain. We live in an era where honour killing, the ladies or the wife murders the boys were telling the story in 2020.

And because so much value and notions of honour are attached to this whole question of inter-caste marriage, especially if a girl gets married to somebody lower than her in the caste hierarchy. So, migration tends to escalate rather than undermine the institution of dowry. Migration enlarges the search scope for a match and makes economic calculations more central to marriage negotiations.

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- The mobility of IT professionals also escalates dowry rates because both dowry and being a mobile IT professional are loaded with tremendous cultural value, related to the notion of *kutumba gowravam* (family prestige [in Telugu]). The anxiety to ensure or, more often, to promote the *kutumba gowravam* impels young male IT workers to attach importance to dowries at their own marriages and also to contribute their incomes to their sister's dowries.
- A family is quite willing to exhaust its capacities to perform grand marriages for its daughters, and then wait for the son's dowries to come. As a result, it is common for an IT professional's sister to be married to an IT professional.



So, once there are people out looking for alliances, this whole status that somebody is in opens up many possibilities in the US. And if other factors are acceptable in terms of caste, sub-caste, then horoscope, then economic transaction alone becomes the most contentious and essential thing. The mobility of IT professionals also escalates dowry rates. Dowry and a mobile IT professional are loaded with tremendous cultural value related to the notion of Kutumba gowravam, family prestige in Telugu.

The anxiety to ensure or, more often, to promote the Kudumba graham impel young male IT workers to attach importance to dowries at their marriages and contribute their income to the sister's dowries. So, especially those coming from Andhra Pradesh or many communities across the country, will be able to see the importance of a dowry.


So, it is not only about getting more money from another household. It is also seen as a significant indication of the value attached to the home where this girl is supposed to come in. And there is a dowry from hard cash to that of an apartment, car, property, and a host of things it varies. But mostly, the families tend to attach so much value to dowry because they see it as an indication of the value of their family that the other family gives.

A family is willing to exhaust this capacity to perform great marriages for its daughters and then wait for the son's dowries to come. As a result, it is common for an IT professional's sisters to be married to an IT professional, exciting point. Usually, families who tend to pay a massive dowry for their own family, to their daughters and even if this man, the IT personnel is elder to this girl



and may exhaust all their money and then bargain hard with their son who is an IT professional may be in the US, so that maybe double the amount of money can be taken back.

And this also gives an impression to the girl's family that this boy's family has no longer any liabilities. They have married off all their daughters, and all the money and the remaining house and other things will come to this man, this IT professional. So, we are talking about very, very ruthless bargaining, we are talking about very, very severe economic considerations, but that is how it works.

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- A fundamental reason for the reinforcement of the institution of dowry through the IT boom is its channelling of local resources to produce an IT labour force for the global market. In the local society high dowry is seen as a direct reward to the groom's parents for their investment in his education.
- In sum, the institution of dowry and the asymmetrical gender relations associated with it have not only made the production of male IT professionals for the global market financially feasible and culturally meaningful, but have also pressurised IT professionals to participate in body shopping so as to emigrate. The dowries paid to India-based body shops directly subsidise the latter and the supply of IT labour in the international market.



So, a fundamental reason for reinforcing the institution of dowry through the IT boom is its channeling local resources to produce an IT labour force for the global market. In the local society, high dowry is seen as a direct reward to the groom's parents for the investment in education. We mentioned that ever since the 1990s, there had been a proliferation of education institutions, especially engineering institutions. And there is a mad rush for getting admission to IITs. But we know that IITs are significantly less in number, the seats are very less in number.

So that is a big rush; there is a mad rush to enroll their children into coaching factories, which is a costly affair. And engineering education private institutions are expensive. So, this IT boy, this boy, engineering boy is seen as an investment for the future financial returns by the parents. I know that it sounds very cynical. But this is a part of the reality.

The amount of love and pressure and affection that is shown to people to do well, in the exam to do, to get higher ranks in entrance examination also has this particular dimension of, of many nasty calculations for material gains, where the person is virtually sold, auctioned and sold to the highest bidder. It is a sad state of affairs. In some, the institution of dowry and the asymmetrical gender relations associated with it have made the production of male IT professionals for the global market financially feasible and culturally meaningful. It has also pressurized IT professionalized participation in body shopping immigrant.

The dowries paid to the Indian based body shoppers directly subsidise the latter and the supply of IT labours in the international market. So, she concludes this study by saying that how this dowry, in a way, makes this kind of Indian IT labour market such flexible with so many people who are willing to migrate, to relocate who have achieved this kind of educational qualification, who are will, who are, ready to migrate and how you know, it, this whole process has been gendered.

So, as she mentioned in the introduction, it is not to the gender dimension of this whole process is not only that, there is a greater number of men who are migrating than women, but the entire process of migrating, the entire creation of IT professionals, and their marriage market and their availability for this body shopping jobs and their willingness to, migrate and settle down there to raise a family, it is all been heavily gendered.

There are gender processes that heavily influence all these processes. And dowry place a very, very important central role in that. So, I hope you would have found this essay interesting because it brings up a very unusual relationship, the topic of the relationship between dowry and globalization and its effect on Indian society. So let us stop here. We will meet you for the next class later. Thank you.