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Q1(c)

Marriage as an institution has undergone a radical transformation from 'ritual' to 'commercial' in its outlook. Explain the factors behind this change.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 marks · Sociology

Sociology - The Discipline: Modernity and social changes in Europe and emergence of sociology; Scope of the subject and comparison with other social sciences; Sociology and common sense.

Core demand of the question

- **State the older ritual view of marriage:** sacrament, alliance, caste endogamy and family honour
- **Explain the commercial outlook:** market in grooms, dowry inflation, wedding industry and consumer display
- **Give factors:** property, **hypergamy**, media, urban middle class, and weak enforcement of law
- Keep a sociological explanation, not a moral sermon

Revision summary

Older marriage was a ritual alliance of families, caste and honour.

A commercial outlook prices grooms, dowry and wedding display.

Hypergamy and scarce high-status jobs inflate the market.

Media, urban consumption and the wedding industry make the ceremony a public show.

Law against dowry exists, but practice still follows family bargaining.

Ritual form can survive while the outlook becomes commercial.

Introduction

Marriage in much of India was long treated as a ritual alliance between families, not as a contract between two individuals. Hindu law books called it a sacrament. Caste endogamy, gifts and honour surrounded the rite. The same institution now often looks like a market. Families bargain over grooms, dowry, lifestyle and wedding display. The change is radical in outlook even where the ritual form survives. Sociology must name the factors, not only regret the cost.

Body

From ritual to commercial outlook

A ritual outlook treats marriage as a duty that completes householder life, transfers women between patrilineages, and reproduces caste. Louis Dumont and later kinship studies stressed alliance. The commercial outlook treats the wedding as a package of goods and the spouse as a bundle of credentials: job, salary, skin colour, overseas visa and family property. Matrimonial sites and newspaper columns make this market visible. Veena Das and others

have shown how honour still sits inside this market, so the change is not a simple move from sacred to secular. It is a move toward pricing of status.

Factors behind the change

Hypergamy pushes families to buy a higher-status groom. Uma Chakravarti's account of Brahmanical patriarchy links control of women's sexuality to caste property. Dowry inflation follows when education and government jobs become scarce status goods. M. N. Srinivas already noted the modernisation of dowry among groups that once practised bride-price. Urban middle-class consumer culture, television and social media turn the wedding into a public performance. The wedding industry, hotels and gold markets have a material interest in this display. Legal bans such as the **Dowry Prohibition Act** exist, but weak enforcement and family complicity keep the market alive. Migration and the NRI groom have added a global price list.

The commercial outlook does not mean that love or ritual has disappeared. Companionable marriage and court choice have grown in cities. The point of the question is the dominant public language of bargaining, costing and show. Capitalism did not invent arranged marriage. It has commercialised the search and the ceremony.

Flow diagram

Ritual alliance -> Marriage
Commercial outlook -> Marriage
Commercial outlook -> Dowry and credentials
Commercial outlook -> Wedding industry
Property hypergamy media -> Commercial outlook

Conclusion

Marriage has shifted from a mainly ritual alliance to an outlook that prices status, grooms and display. Property, **hypergamy**, media and a weak legal net explain the change. The rite continues, but the market now speaks loudly inside it.

Facts & figures

Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961

The main statute against dowry. Weak enforcement and family collusion limit its effect on the marriage market.

Srinivas on modernised dowry

Groups that once practised bride-price adopted and inflated dowry as they sought higher status.

Hypergamy

The preference for a higher-status groom, which turns credentials and property into bargaining chips.

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