

Bollywood Images:

The illusions and realities of arranged marriages, weddings, dowries, and attitudes toward  
the girl child in the lives of women in India

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Bollywood films today present a view of Indian life that is filled with images of romance, tradition and love of family above all else. Jam-packed with energetic music, vivid colors, and beautiful portrayals of Indian wedding rituals, these films can be easily lull the viewer into believing that these depictions are accurate representations of Indian life—or at least the attitudes and beliefs of society at large. But the realities of life do not always measure up to the images presented in these films. For many, the call of family loyalty and tradition leads to a second-class status, and becoming literally unwanted. Women and girls especially, pay a high price simply for their existence—and many pay with their lives. Bollywood images just aren't holding up to the realities of Indian life.

My intent is to explore three Bollywood films and the depictions of Indian life that they offer, especially as they relate to attitudes toward women and girls. The ideals held up within each film will be discussed side by side with the images that each presents, then compared and contrasted with the current realities of life for these women and their daughters—looking especially at those involving the abilities of women to choose their husbands, the high cost of weddings and/or dowries, and the all-too-frequent violence inflicted on women and girls in India in the way of dowry-related cruelty, torture and sometimes death. Due to a strong son preference—a historical issue, but one that has been amplified due to the high cost of weddings and dowries—there has been a great increase in gender-related abortions, abandonment and neglect of daughters, and violence against women and girls. This paper will also examine the idea that Bollywood itself is using film as a way to attempt to create social change regarding attitudes toward traditional female roles and the status of women in India—an idea I have not

seen previously addressed—especially as it relates to the high costs of weddings, demand for dowries, son preference and the resulting attitudes toward the girl child.

## **The Films**

As Western ideas have seeped into Indian society along with tremendous economic growth, Bollywood movies have changed as well. Stories revolving around marriages between couples who have never laid eyes on each other before their wedding are giving way to love stories based on mutual attraction. Plot changes such as these are causing traditions like “arranged marriage” to morph into “arranged meetings,” where parents, family friends—or even an occasional “marriage broker” are called in to help find likely prospects. Meetings now take place between *couples* to judge compatibility for themselves (after all, the parents have already approved the match!) and if all are in agreement, a wedding date is set. Marriage itself is the main theme of each of the three films I am examining, and each deals with a different aspect (or two) of Indian tradition as it affects the life of women throughout Indian society. Although not basing my paper on these films, I want to use them as a lens with which to view these issues of extravagant weddings, dowry demands and violence that result both *from* and *in* son preference among Indian families.

### ***Vivah***

The first, *Vivah—a Journey from Engagement to Marriage* (Barjatya, 2006), is a film that tells the story of a young couple from before their first meeting to the day of their wedding.

Offering a very traditional view of Hindu engagement and marriage customs, it nonetheless offers a few little twists that make the story much more compelling, albeit a bit idealistic.

As the opening credits roll, we see a montage of a father watching his two young daughters at work and play; he is remembering their childhood as he thinks ahead to the days when they will marry and leave him. Musing on the relationship, he says to himself, “With so much love, a daughter cares for her parents, her siblings, everyone... How dismal are some thoughts of men who think daughters are so burdensome.” As the film moves from past daydreams to present realities, the father offers the audience one last thought: “Giving daughters away in marriage is a most sacred act...” (*Vivah*, 2006), and it is on this note that the film moves forward into the story.

Prem, the future groom, is called to his father’s office where it is announced that he has at last reached the proper age to get married. Although he is concerned that he is too young and should be focusing on his career right now, he is dutiful son, and simply asks, to whom? A jeweler who is a mutual friend of both families has brought a picture of a potential bride, and instantly smitten, Prem agrees to meet her.

Meanwhile, orphaned Poonam (who has been raised by her doting uncle and not-so-caring aunt)—the future bride—is also told of the potential match, and a visit between the families is arranged. Although the first meeting is awkward as both are extremely shy, their instant attraction is evident. With the agreement of both the couple and their families, the engagement is set.

As the traditional rites are being prepared, the future father-in-law requests of Poonam’s uncle/father-figure: “Please give Prem a token [dowry] of one rupee and a coconut, and accept

him into your family. We want Poonam and nothing else” (Vivah, 2006). Both touched and relieved that no dowry is demanded, he agrees to the terms, and so begins the titular “journey.”

### ***Paheli***

The second film, *Paheli* (Palekar, 2010), is based on an old Rajasthani folk tale. This period-film begins with a woman coming face-to-face with her husband for the very first time— at their wedding. It is a long and complicated story, with a husband (Kishan) who leaves on a five-year business trip on the morning after the wedding (with the marriage unconsummated on the advice of his mother), and a wife (Lachchi) who finds herself just days later faced with a “ghost” who has fallen in love with her and taken her husband’s form just to be near her. He woos her gently, and wins her heart; but admitting his deception just before they make love, the ghost tells Lachchi that he will leave her if that is her choice. But she— overcome by his love, but especially his willingness to allow her a *choice* in her future for the first time in her life— asks him to stay. Blissfully in love, they discover one day that Lachchi is pregnant. As they discuss the impending child, the “husband” declares his desire for a girl, whom they will name Anjali (“gift”). To the delight of her father, a daughter *is* born— just as the real husband returns home. Chaos ensues, and the already complicated plot becomes even more so. (But never fear, it all ends happily—this is Bollywood, after all!)

### ***Band Baaja Baarat (BBB)***

The last film I will be examining is a very “modern” Indian film. *BBB* (Sharma, 2011) tells the story of two young, urban “twenty-somethings” who begin a wedding planning business

in Delhi. The film offers a view of Indian weddings as bright colors, elaborate settings, music, and entertainment, including lavish engagement parties, and elaborate wedding rituals. The main characters—Shruti and Bittoo—work together planning extravagant Delhi weddings, acting as hosts and often entertainers as well, and eventually become the “hottest wedding planners in town.” Being a Bollywood film, they—of course—fall in love, have a falling out and break up the business, but find their way back together through planning the biggest wedding event of the year. Dealing with caterers who don’t come through (at weddings for hundreds of guests!), and ultimately with a film superstar who cancels a wedding appearance at the last minute due to illness—they are forced to work together again as the wedding’s entertainment. Bright, colorful, and full of amazing music and dance—this is one fun movie! But it also offers a glimpse of the Indian wedding industry that has become a driving force in the upward spiral of wedding costs, and one that has seemingly led straight to some of the ugly realities that lay behind to the attractive images presented in these three films.

### **Arranged Marriages vs. Arranged Meetings**

Like Lachchi in *Paheli* (Palekar, 2010), most Indian women still have little to no say in the choice of their future husbands. Grooms have been traditionally selected by the girls’ parents, as they “shopped around” for the most advantageous match for their daughter, with parents most desirous of a marriage that will unite them with a family from a higher (or at least not lower) caste than their own. Even in this “modern” era, a very large majority of marriages (estimated at 90% in 2006) are still arranged by the families of the bride and groom (Uberoi, 2006, p. 24).

Although the incidence of what is known as “arranged meetings”—such as that in *Vivah* (Barjatya, 2006)—is growing, those meetings are still arranged by the families. Parents are becoming more willing—as young adults are entering the work force, and meeting potential mates for themselves—to consider their children’s choices (or at least the choices of their sons; daughter’s choices are not accounted for quite so often), parents are still requiring that their children at least *meet* potential mates chosen for them (Uberoi, p. 25) before they agree to those their children have chosen. According to Uberoi, children may also confide their choice to a parent, who will then proceed through the arrangements to secure the match (p. 25). Once the match is made, the parents will also supervise the courtship, to assure that things proceed as planned.

In more rural areas, however, away from the “modern” atmosphere of the city, most marriages are still arranged solely by parents. According to Srinivasan and Lee (2004), these marriages are negotiated as a way for each party to gain the most from the union: the family of the bride is usually looking for a bump in status (hypergamy) by marrying their daughter to a groom from a higher caste, with the family of the groom seeking to increase familial wealth through the bride’s dowry. Even amongst wealthy families, there is still that same drive for status and wealth behind most marriage arrangements (Srinivasan and Lee, 2004, p. 1109).

### ***Bollywood Weddings***

Once a match has been made, the wedding preparations begin. Just as in *Band Baaja Baarat* (Sharma, 2011), the “big, fat Bollywood wedding” has become a staple feature in modern Indian culture, as real weddings have begun to take on progressively more extravagant aspects

by an emerging wedding industry. Beginning with the spectacularly popular Bollywood film *Hum Apke Hain Kaun/ Can you Name our Relationship?* (Sooraj Barjatya, 1995), the traditional Indian wedding—combined with the emergence of an Indian neoliberal culture of “conspicuous consumption,”—has morphed into the development and massive growth of the Indian wedding industry that we see depicted in *Band Baaja Baarat*. This lavish display of wealth has become “necessary...to gain recognition, improve social standing, and receive the endorsement of family and friends” (Chandra, 2010, p. 1). In Chandra’s online blog, she even mentions the Guinness record-holder for the most extravagant wedding ever as a 10 day event taking place in three different Indian cities, with guests from 26 countries flying in on chartered jets.

While weddings have always had a very large part in Indian society—historically, wedding celebrations lasted for days, and for the upper classes offered a lavish display of a family’s wealth and status. Since the advent of “Bollywood wedding films,” this industry has expanded massively, growing at a rate of about twenty-five percent a year (Phillip, 2007). These ostentatious weddings themselves have become the “signifiers of high status” (Patel, 2008, p. 10), and the price of admission to the upper echelons of society for a family looking to increase its social status.

As weddings have begun to look like film sets, it is the concept of a “theme wedding” that has really taken off, with film studios now renting out space, designing sets, and organizing weddings around movie themes—or even around films of a certain film star. These actors—like Shah Ruhk Khan (*Paheli*, 2006)—have been reported by Indian newspapers like the Deccan Herald to charge up to 10 million rupees (approximately \$750,000) for a two hour appearance and dance number (Kapur, 2009). In the film *Band Baaja Baarat* (Manesh Sharma, 2011), one

major crisis that the main characters have to deal with is a \$2 million wedding for which the film star booked to perform—Shah Ruhk Khan himself—has to cancel at the last minute due to illness. With his cancellation threatening to derail all of their plans, the two have to scramble to come up with last minute entertainment that will pacify the hysterical bride and her family.

These massive wedding spectacles have also spawned a side industry for “film[ing] the wedding in a way that would outdo Bollywood itself” (Kapur, 2009, p. 225), with the cost of these documentary-like films running between \$20,000-50,000 each. Aside from just documenting their wedding day, these wedding films are just another way for Indian couples to set themselves apart as individuals (Kapur, p. 225).

The rapidly growing Indian economy has brought a large infusion of wealth to many, creating a nouveau riche mentality and a desire for “one-upmanship” that has led to the rapid growth of the wedding industry. Having never experienced this kind of wealth before, many are anxious to show it off, with some spending easily \$3-4 million on these lavish weddings. This outrageous spending is creating pressure even among the wealthiest families (Hannon, 2011).

Among the middle class—and even the poor—there is also an increasing burden to keep up. This excessive spending is symptomatic of another significant problem: people are spending money that they don’t really have. Even low earners, such as taxi drivers may spend up to 10,000 GBP on massive family weddings. Some are taking out large loans, to finance not only expensive weddings that sometimes cost up to ten times their income (Nelson, 2012), but also to finance the dowries that are still being demanded, in spite of their illegality. The Indian government, concerned by this show of extravagance, has discussed the idea of a government cap on the number of wedding guests, and dishes served as a way to cut down on this upward spiral of spending by rich and poor alike. Manmohan Singh, the Indian Prime Minister is quoted

by Kapur as “call[ing] for restraint in the ‘vulgar display of wealth’ around weddings, which, according to him, ‘insult the poverty of the less-privileged, is socially wasteful, and plants seeds of resentment in the minds of the have nots’” (Kapur, 2009, p. 231).

But developing alongside this increased extravagance of wedding celebrations, is another social problem that has become nothing more than “dowry extortion” (Chandra, 2010), with some families even viewing this demand for dowry as proof of their observance of traditional Indian values (Juluri, 1999, p.238).

### *Dowry*

The film “Vivah” introduces us to the idea of dowry, and offers the touching image of a groom’s father who wants nothing more for his son than a virtuous and beautiful wife—dowry is unimportant and unwanted. Just as Poonam’s father/uncle is told to merely offer a token, we are assured that a dowry is unnecessary when two families are as well-suited as these. But the reality of dowry demands in India is quite different from its portrayal on film.

Historically, the practice of dowry in India began in the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> century CE, and can be found first in the Hindu succession laws of the Mitakshara system (Dalmia and Lawrence, 2005, p. 73). Under this system, females were not allowed a share in parental wealth, unlike males who were considered entitled from birth. The tradition of dowry seems to have been devised as a way to allow for some of the family’s wealth to be passed to the daughter at the time of her marriage (p. 73). Unmarried daughters were not given any sort of “inheritance” (Dalmia and Lawrence, p.73), since an unmarried daughter was considered a shame to her family. With the giving of a daughter in marriage seen as a religious gift (Rastogi and Therly, 2006, p. 68), the

dowry gift (*dakshina*) was viewed as an additional gift to accompany the *Kanyadhan* or the gift of the “virgin bride” (Srinivasan and Lee 2004, p. 1108; Rastogi and Therly, p. 68). In its early days, dowry (*Stridhanam*—or the “wedding settlement”) was considered to belong to the bride, and remained under her control (Dalmia and Lawrence, p. 73). Over time, though, the custom came to “involve a substantial transfer of wealth from the bride’s family to the groom’s,” and also play a major part in marriage negotiations between parents of the bride and groom (Rastogi and Therly, p. 67-68). Most dowry funds or goods no longer remain the property of the bride after her marriage (Dalmia and Lawrence, p. 73), becoming instead the property of her new family.

The dowry had historically been considered a daughter's "security," an inheritance from her natal family that goes with her to her *new* family. Since daughters do not inherit land or property as does a son, this dowry is generally all that she will receive, even with the changes brought about by the Hindu Succession Acts of 1956 (Deshpande, 2005, p.1) that gave Indian women legal rights of inheritance. But since most women are ignorant of the law—which is rarely enforced anyway—dowry is also seen as a way to “offset” the cost for her upkeep to her new family, where she will be seen as an "unproductive" member-- at least until she has given birth to a son (Oldenburg 2002, p. 25). Parents often expect that a large dowry will gain better treatment of their daughter by her in-laws, so will believe that it is an essential part in assuring her future happiness and well-being (Srinivasan and Lee, p. 1109). But what began, historically, as a voluntary act, has evolved into a feeling of “entitlement” on the part of the groom and his family ( Rastogi and Therly, 2006, p. 67) that has grown ever larger, to the point that brides’ families are often forced to borrow huge sums of money or mortgage their properties, just to

pacify the prospective in-laws (Sharma, Harish, Gupta, and Singh 2005, p. 165) and assure a good husband for their daughters (Srinivasan and Lee, p. 1109).

Dowry was technically considered as a "gift" consisting of three parts-- gifts given to the bride, and agreed on beforehand with the groom and his family. These are things that may or may not be considered the exclusive property of the bride. Often these gifts are family jewelry handed down from mother to daughter. The second part of the dowry is gifts that are given to the groom and his family—generally cash or gifts “in kind” which can include goods such as TV’s, cars, furniture, or simply cash. Sometimes gifts are also demanded after the marriage as well; with wives being encouraged by their mothers-in-law to ask for more money or goods from their parents—sometimes years after the wedding has taken place (Srinivasan and Lee, 2004, p.1110). The third portion is the payment to cover the groom's *baraat*, or the expenses of travel to the wedding festivities of the bridegroom's party. All of this is in addition to the cost involved in increasingly elaborate and expensive weddings, even among those in lower income levels (Kapur, p. 231). With costs to marry off daughters so outrageously high (and often growing even larger after the wedding), it is no wonder that daughters are seen as little more than a financial drain on the family.

In an interesting scene from the film *Vivah*, Poonam’s aunt/mother-figure grudgingly hands over to the uncle/father jewelry left by Poonam's mother to be given at her marriage, knowing that this is taking away from dowry that could be available for securing a good match for her own not-so-attractive daughter (Barjatya, 2010). The attitude of the aunt/mother makes clear that for families with more than one daughter; the dowry of the eldest can devastate a family’s finances and make a decent marriage for the younger ones nearly impossible.

This upward spiral of dowry demands began to increase rapidly as India's economy opened into a free-market system in the early 1990's. It was then, observed Rahul Bedi in an article for *The Telegraph*, that greed seemed to take over as grooms and their families sought a way to "get rich quick" at the expense of their would-be brides and their families (Bedi, 2012, p. 1). Dowry has now become the "payment" required to make possible a "good match" for a bride for most throughout India (Dalmia and Lawrence, 2005, p. 71).

### ***Dowry Violence***

Although dowry has been illegal in India since the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, dowry is still occasionally mentioned in Bollywood films, just as it was in *Vivah* where a "token" dowry was offered. The image not usually presented is what all-too-frequently comes to pass for a woman after her marriage, and the giving of her dowry. In the daily realities of Indian marriage, the bride's treatment at the hands of her in-laws is often tied to the amount of dowry she receives. Yet dowry demands don't always end with the wedding; demands for more money on the part of husband and his family are often the impetus for many instances of dowry violence and death (Srinivasan and Lee, p. 1109). In spite of the elaborate negotiations that take place before a marriage is ever agreed on, the groom or his parents, may one day demand even more money, and begin to abuse or torture—or sometimes return the now-shamed bride to her parents—for what they have decided was not a large enough dowry (Rastogi and Therly, p. 68). In the eyes of some it is India's rapidly-expanding consumer society that has caused this "shameless" greed in the form of dowry demands (Mojumdar, 1990, p. 13), not only at the time

of the marriage but that often continue for years after the wedding, with suggestions of further gifts to be made—for celebrations of the birth, naming and initiation of grandchildren.

Ever-increasing demands for dowry have led to an increase in dowry-related violence and death among young married women in India, with 8391 dowry death cases in 2010 alone (Bedi, 2012). This dowry violence, which happens in spite of the fact that both taking *and* giving a dowry are illegal, has increased along with the demands for ever larger dowries. According to Sharma, Harish, Gupta and Singh, this dowry-related violence is rarely the result of random anger on the part of the groom against the bride, but is nearly always an organized assault that takes place within the woman's home. Many of these violent acts are severe burnings, poisonings, hangings, gunshots, sharp objects, and jumping from height, generally resulting in the immediate deaths of the women. Those who do survive often do not report the crimes, due to fear of reprisals by their husbands or in-laws—or just because society has conditioned them to accept the abuse as the price of keeping their families intact (Sharma, Harish, Gupta, and Singh, 2005, p. 162). There are also many cases of women who, after a few years of abuse or constant haranguing for more money from husbands or in-laws, finally commit suicide to escape (Oldenburg, 2002, p. 207). Many dowry murders are also reported as suicides (Oldenburg, p. 201) as families attempt to protect themselves from possible prosecution.

In what unfortunately comes across as a terrible case of “blame the victim,” there is also a growing awareness by feminist activists that women themselves are perpetuating some of the worst of this crime of dowry-related violence. According to Oldenberg (2002) many of the perpetrators (or at the very least, enablers) of this violence are mothers-in-law. Often the brides themselves often add to the problem by “insisting on the best dowry their parents can afford,

[without which] dowries would indeed have become a thing of the past” (Oldenburg, 2002, p. 201). Some women may indeed be their own worst enemies when it comes to dowry violence.

But the mental and physical violence that often follows dowry demands has another aspect that has also increased over the last twenty years. This seemingly unrelated side-effect of dowry has resulted in about forty million “missing” girls since 1980—or about 50,000 every single month (Sieczkowski, 2011, p. 1).

### *India’s “Missing” Daughters*

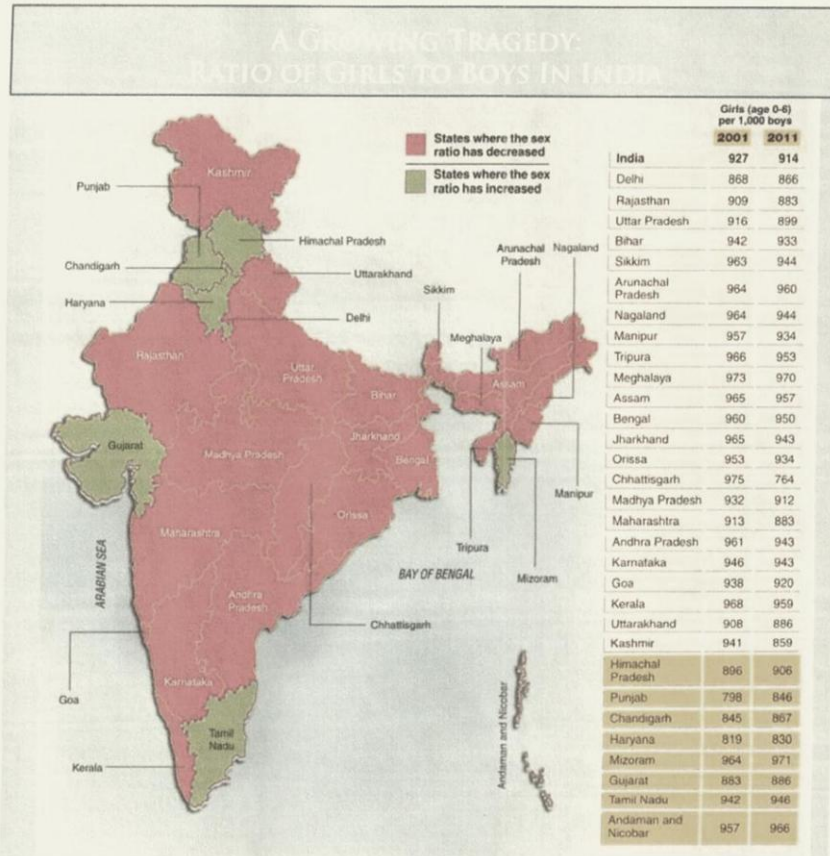
The thought that it is more humane to eliminate a female foetus than subjugate her to a life of discrimination is a fallacy. By the same logic, it would be justifiable to eliminate poor people than let them suffer a life of poverty and deprivation. The girl child is not the problem, the practice of sex selection is.

United Nations Population Fund- India

Throughout the world, it is a biological fact that the sex-ratio at birth balances towards boys, usually averaging between 103 and 107 males to every 100 females—a ratio that generally balances out by adolescence, and thereafter gives prominence to females (Singh, 2010, p. 633). In recent years, however, the world-wide sex-ratio is rising as it balances among the two most populous nations—China and India—which have both skewed significantly male (Gill and Mitra-Kahn, 2009, p. 685). In India the balance is so far slanted toward male children that all

statistics are now offered as girls to boys, rather than the usual world-wide standard statistic of boys to girls (<http://chartsbin.com/view/2332>). Although the sex-ratio has always leaned heavily toward boys in India, over the last decades it has dropped alarmingly, with the sex-ratio now standing at 914 girls to 1000 boys nation-wide, with some areas falling well below 900 (Mani, 2011, p. 1). Mani also discusses a village in India known as “The Village of No Women” which has one of the lowest sex-ratios on the planet; no girls have been born there for decades! It is estimated that there are now “40 million missing women in India...[a number] larger than the combined death toll of both world wars” (Klasen and Wink, 2003, quoted by Gill and Mitra-Kahn, 2009, p. 686). As you can see in the graphic below, the situation in this village in Haryana is no anomaly, but the consequence of the systematic and purposeful elimination of daughters throughout the nation.

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ago as a result of the growing availability of fetal sex-testing services.”<sup>8</sup>

Figure 1- Society for the Protection of the Girl Child (2011). Sex-ratio by state in India- 2001 to 2011 (Girls age 0-6 per 1,000 boys)

The birth of a daughter in India is not seen as an event to celebrate. In the words of an old Indian proverb: “Crying when she’s born, and crying when she goes away,” the birth of a daughter is considered an event of great unhappiness. Neighbors come to offer sympathy, saying “Whatever God has given has been given.” There is no singing and no celebration. The worry about dowry has begun (Harlan and Courtright, 1995, p. 26-27).

Son preference, for a variety of different reasons, has been historically strong. In the Hindu religion, practiced by about 80% of the India (Government of India, 2001 census), only a son can light a parent’s funeral pyre, which will enable the soul to reach heaven; daughters cannot perform this important religious rite. But the desire for sons is not restricted just to Hindu

families—it is prevalent within every religion, caste, and socio-economic level of society (Mojumdar, 1990, p. 13). Daughters are considered a drain on family finances, since they do nothing to add to familial wealth or security because of their inability to create income, unlike sons who would create income for the family, and would stay to care for the parents in their old age. Indian thought likens raising a daughter to “watering a plant in your neighbor’s garden,” an expense that brings no return (Saldanha, 2011). Daughters will one day leave the family, and take their labor with them, and as the dowry system begins to spread through society from its original position within the higher castes, raising a daughter comes to be seen as an increasing financial drain on families from every walk of life. Surprisingly, in spite of the fact that it is the cost of raising a daughter that appears to be behind choices that lead to this skewed sex-ratio, it is the richest Indian states that show the worst imbalance—Punjab (754 girls/1000 boys), Haryana (770), and Gujarat (886) (*Gendercide in India*, 2011). Higher incomes typically mean higher dowries for daughters, thereby taking more wealth away from the family (Gill and Mitra-Kahn, 2009, p.689).

Female infanticide is nothing new in Indian culture. In the past, when a family had “too many daughters,” newborn girls were routinely abandoned or killed. What makes the situation different today is the technology available to easily accomplish this “gendercide.” Discussed by Rakesh Mani in an article for the *Global Public Square* blogs on [cnn.com](http://cnn.com), these inexpensive and easily accessible ultrasound machines—available in nearly every large city hospital and rural clinic—have made prenatal sex-determination easy (Gill and Mitra-Kahn, 2009, p. 686). Abortion, which allows for giving birth only to the children that you wish, is easier to get to than ever before as well. Although using ultrasound and abortion for sex-selection is illegal in India, it

is difficult to prove and rarely prosecuted—so it continues unabated throughout the nation (Mani, 2011).

Each year in India, 700,000 girls are killed by their parents—before they are even born—simply because they are not boys. But this bias against girls doesn't stop at birth; many more die after their births at the hands of midwives, grandmothers, and fathers. Newborn girls are smothered, poisoned, buried alive, or just abandoned to the elements. Those not murdered at birth may be purposely underfed, or literally starved to death. Others may be force-fed seeds or cornhusks, choking to death in the process. Out of the 12 million girls born in India each year, 1.5 million will not live until their first birthday, and just 9 million will reach age 15. Of those who are allowed to live, many will get less food, less health care, fewer immunizations, and less medicine than their brothers, simply because of their gender (Society for the Protection of the Girl Child, 2011). According to Gill and Mitra-Kahn, it is due to this strong son preference that “daughters must suffer in order that a family's personal and culturally mandated needs are fulfilled” (2009, p. 686).

Indians have recently discovered a new way to exploit technology, one that enables them to take unwanted baby girls and change them into the boys they greatly desire—through sex-change operations performed on these little girls. The state government in Madhya Pradesh is looking into claims that girls have been surgically altered—as many as 300 of them, at the cost of about 2000GBP each—by parents hoping for sons (Nelson, 2011). Nelson contends that doctors involved have denied any wrong-doing, stating that they were merely “surgically correcting” children born with both male and female sex characteristics. But children's rights campaigners insist that both doctors and parents are “misidentifying the children's conditions to turn girls into boys.” Calling this development a “sign of India's growing “social madness,”

Nelson quotes Ranjana Kumari, of the Indian Center for Social Research, who goes on to state that she despairs of the fact that public education doesn't seem to be working to slow India's rejection of its daughters (2011).

According to Ruchira Gupta, an Indian women's rights activist, what we are seeing is the "...obliteration of a whole class, race, of human beings. It's half the population of India" (quoted by Sieczkowski, 2011, p. 1). In a nation that places very little value in girls and women, we are perhaps witnessing the only possible end when a culture utterly devalues one half of its members.

### ***Bollywood and Attitudes toward Women and the Girl Child***

Cinema not only reflects culture, it also shapes culture. When we consider Indian films, we see how they have promoted modernization, westernization, urbanization, new ways of life...the emancipation of women and the rights of minorities...

(Gokulsing and Dissanayake, 1998, p. 9)

Since this paper began with the idea that Bollywood films could offer a certain understanding of Indian culture, it seems that this is a good time to circle back to peer again through that window.

In Indian society, film is the principal form of entertainment, and film stars are accorded a respect otherwise offered only to "family elders and men of God" (Chopra, 2007, p. 4). An average of ten million people a day spend the average equivalent of a day's wages just to "sit in

the dark for three hours” and enter into a fantasy world offering images of “ bad landlords, greedy industrialists, corrupt politicians...and [the] traditional virtues of virginity, devotion to God and family and service to men” (Gokulsing and Dissanayake, p. 10). Films are both an escape from the harsh realities of life, and a window the psyche of the nation. As Anupama Chopra stated in her book *King of Bollywood- Shah Rukh Khan and the Seductive World of Indian Cinema*, “Bollywood plots are overwrought but uncomplicated.... [The films are] wholesome entertainment in which family values and the heroine’s virtue stay intact. Hindi films present life not as it is but as it should be...” (Chopra, 2007, p. 7). Indian film both reflects and shapes the surrounding culture. The United Nations Population Fund website, in discussing their “Let Girls be Born” campaign agrees with the assessment that film can have an impact of the understanding of a people, and observes that “It has been argued that there is no better route for this [viewpoint] than the field of arts, be it music, a 'nukkad natak', a verse, a 'ghazal', a painting or a film” (creative-excellence.org). Indian people watch films, love films, and are greatly influenced by the images they present—just as are others the world over.

But is it possible that Bollywood film stars—if not the films themselves—are stepping up in an attempt to use the influence their position has afforded them?

In an interview cited on TopBollywoodActress.com, Ramy states that, “Dada [Amitabh] Bachchan says they are all very happy that the baby is a girl revealing that, ‘We wanted a baby and by the grace of god a girl has been born and there cannot be a more happy moment for us all.’ Apparently both Jaya and Abhishek (Amitabh’s wife and son) wanted a baby girl. ‘Jaya has given all her time to the child and she is very happy that a daughter has been born, Abhishek also wanted a daughter, I have said I don’t mind anything happening just let it happen that’s it,’ Amitabh added” (Ramy, 2011). Speaking for his family and openly displaying this attitude of

the desirability of having a daughter, is it possible that Bachchan—often viewed as the “elder statesman” and public face of both India *and* Bollywood films—is attempting to use his social capital as a form of “bully pulpit” to begin to change the hearts and minds of the people? Jaya Bachchan, proud grandmother of this latest member of “Bollywood royalty” declared her joy at the birth of a granddaughter in an interview with Planet Bollywood News, stating that, “Girls are smarter than boys, and I can dress her up” (youtube.com, 2011). Silly as it may sound, Bollywood actors are greatly revered by the Indian public—“star worship” offers a mental escape from the pressures and poverty of everyday life, according to Gokulsing and Dissanayake (1998, p. 63)—and statements like the Bachchans’ can have a great effect on public attitudes.

In India, there may be no one better than a Bollywood film star to get the word out that daughters are a family’s blessing, not a curse.

### *Current Solutions*

An organization called **Plan India** has launched a campaign called “Let Girls be Born,” with the stated objective “to realize a gender balance in society by eliminating female foeticide/infanticide and ensuring the right to identity, name and citizenship for the girl child” (planindia.org, 2012). With a call to action that includes a message of cherishing the girl child, and resisting pressures for pre-natal sex-selection, they are also working to raise social consciousness, develop support systems for married women, and to strengthen government responses to this devastating state of affairs. On the following page is one of the advertisements used as a part of the campaign:

*i am strength*  
*i am compassion*  
*i am love*  
*i am existence*  
*i am the seed of life*


***i am***  
***a daughter***

**But where are those 71 lakh\* daughters?**  
 According to the Census of India 2011, there are only 914 girls per 1000 boys (0–6 years). This is a matter of grave concern for all of us.

We believe that the birth of daughters is a matter of pride and importance. Let us join hands, raise our voice against sex determination and sex selection of unborn child and proudly say **"Let Girls Be Born"**.

\*Difference between total number of Boys and total number of Girls (0–6 years) as per Census 2011.

**Let Girls Be Born**  
 A Plan India Initiative

 **Because I am a Girl**

For more information log on to [www.planindia.org](http://www.planindia.org)

Figure 2- planindia.org (2012)

Another illustration is this (edited) excerpt from a web article offering advice on ways that a girl can protect herself from dowry violence. It is a significant example of one way that organizations are trying to reach out to women and their families with information about dowry violence—in an effort to save lives, and change societal attitudes. Although a bit lengthy, I felt that it was important to include here:

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**Advice on How to Protect Yourself from Dowry Extortion and Violence**

**1. Back Out Of Any Wedding Arrangement Where Any Kind of Financial Demand is made in Cash or Kind:**

A gift is something given with love; it is never asked for. But when grooms and their families start specifying how much money they want for the wedding, what kinds of gifts – houses, cars, etc. they want for the wedding, what other favors such as jobs, promotions etc. they want... and they threaten to call the wedding off if these ‘gifts’ are not given to them, then this is not gift-giving... Get out fast! No matter how far into the wedding preparations you are! Even if it is the wedding day!

**2. The Bride Must Quickly Leave the Marital Home if Any Kind of Financial Demand is Made Any Time after the Wedding:**

Nowadays, dowry demands are often mad after the wedding... The families realize that if they make a demand ... the bride’s family might not agree to the marriage, so they wait till after the wedding to make the dowry demand. Because there is such taboo against divorce in India, and a girl is considered ‘spoiled’ once she is married...many families of brides who might not give in to dowry extortion before the wedding, will give in to the sustained blackmail after the wedding.

**3. Make Sure The Wedding Is Legally Registered Before The Traditional Ceremony:**

Most Indian families focus on a fancy and traditional Indian wedding and neglect to get an official registration. ...Indian laws on religion based traditional marriages are murky... there have been situations where the families of women killed for dowry have been unable to press charges because they could not prove that the couples were even married.

**4. Do A Pre-Nuptial To Register Everything Given In Gift To The Bride As ‘Stree-Dhan’ [bride-wealth]:**

ALL dowry murders are the end result of extortion. ... Violence is inflicted on the bride to put pressure on her and her family to keep meeting the financial demands of the husband and the in-laws.... But the reason the bride is murdered is because legally in India it is easier to get away with murder than with divorce! In a divorce, the bride can demand her money and goods back from her in-laws.... But if she is murdered, most cases of dowry murder are not even properly investigated by the police. They are written off as ‘suicide’ or ‘accident’ and the case is closed.

**5. File A Police Report Against The Family That Makes A Dowry Demand:**

If a prospective groom’s family makes a dowry demand, do not agree to that marriage arrangement.... File a report against them with the police, so they will think twice before harassing another family.... Simply asking for dowry is punishable under law and can get you 2 years of imprisonment and a fine of Rs.10,000/-

Figure 3- <http://genderbytes.wordpress.com/2011/12/05/advice-on-how-to-protect-yourself-from-dowry-extortion-and-violence/>

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Groups such as Plan India and the United Nations Population Fund for India, with their Girl Child Campaign are working to create inroads into the hearts and minds of the people of India. Genderbytes.wordpress.com has an entire website devoted to information about the crime of dowry and its related violence. In 2005, UNICEF launched an awareness campaign called *Beti Bachao Abhiyan (Save the Daughter)* in an effort to change attitudes towards the girl child in the midst of rapidly falling sex-ratios throughout the country (Gulati, 2011). A documentary film, being produced by Shadowline Films, explores the themes of gendercide, trafficking, violence and neglect faced by as many as 200 million girls world-wide—especially in Asia. Filmed in China and India, and titled “It’s a Girl!” the film is slated for release in 2012 (itsagirlmovie.com). A Facebook game—created online by the Indian matrimonial service shaadi.com—called “Angry Brides” (2012) was created to bring awareness and education about dowry demands in an entertaining and accessible fashion—especially among this current increasingly tech-savvy generation. Organizations like these, and countless others, are doing everything they can to raise awareness and effect societal change.

### ***Conclusion***

We have looked at images of women and girls, weddings, and dowry through the lens of Bollywood film, and examined the realities of life for women in India as related to those same topics. In spite of the sentimental portrayals of home and family that we see in these films, it is evident that reality just doesn’t measure up. Women—like Lachchi in *Paheli*—are still, in many ways, unable to make choices for themselves, and families are not elated at the birth of a daughter. Unlike the request for a token dowry in *Vivah*, the realities of greedy dowry demands are devastating the finances of millions of families and leading to an upward spiral of violence

against women when those demands aren't met. Extravagant weddings, such as those seen in *Band Baaja Baarat*, are contributing to that financial distress as well, and creating a climate that makes the birth and raising of a daughter an expense that families will kill to avoid. Women and girls have come to be seen as an expense no one can afford.

In drawing this paper to a close, it is clear that the problems of extravagant weddings, dowry demands and the accompanying violence, infanticide and gender imbalance in India will not be easily solved through the fanciful images and ideas found during the course of a three hour Bollywood film. These are cultural issues with deep and tangled roots; if you tug on any one of them it is obvious that all of the others are profoundly entangled with it. It would be far too easy to say that problems this massive and culturally-established can never be solved; we would be equally mistaken to believe that they will be easily solved if only India would adopt ideas of Western morality. The solutions to these tragedies must arise from within the Indian culture itself. Until the people of India can see the ugly facts hiding behind their traditional beliefs, and come to understand that by devaluing women they devalue their entire culture, these problems will continue unabated.

Education efforts and campaigns against gendercide, dowry and dowry-related violence such as those mentioned in this paper must continue. It is vital that those who have the hearts, minds and ears of the people of India continue in their efforts to raise awareness and offer an alternative viewpoint—and for Indians that also means film. As Gokulsing and Dissanayake state, “A journey into Indian cinema and culture is a journey into ourselves” (1998). I believe that for Indians worldwide, Bollywood—although certainly not the only answer—truly has the power to make a difference, in films that offer people a chance to see themselves, not as they are, but as what they could hope to become.

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*Figures*

Figure 1- *Society for the protection of the girl child* (2011). Sex-ratio by state in India- 2001 to 2011 (Girls age 0-6 per 1,000 boys)

Figure 2- *Let girls be born campaign*. (2012). Retrieved March 1, 2012 from <http://www.planindia.org/be-a-part-of-it/donation-faqs>

Figure 3- *Advice on how to protect yourself from dowry extortion and violence*. (2011). Retrieved Feb. 26, 2012 from <http://genderbytes.wordpress.com/2011/12/05/advice-on-how-to-protect-yourself-from-dowry-extortion-and-violence/>