

Infrastructures of Inattention and Necropolitical Kinship: Ritual, Capital, and the Time of the Law in India

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The Imaginary Institution of India: Art 1975–1998, a recent exhibition of Indian art in London (Barbican, October 5, 2024 to January 5, 2025) showed works by Indian artists made in these critical decades as artistic commentary on the social and political turbulence in the country at the time (Jhaveri 2024). Having grown up in India, the widespread ferment of those decades is vivid in my mind. I had seen many of these works either then or over the years in and outside of India. Therefore, there was much that was familiar. I was struck by how contemporary the issues raised in these works still were all these decades later. Religious bigotry and violence, sexual orthodoxy, labor conditions, oppressive state power, immiseration could well have been artistic themes for today's India. Until of course, I came to Room V. Here hung twenty black-and-white photographs, all of which were portraits of women, sometimes in a crowd of fellow protestors, in others as lone crusaders (figs. 1–3). Where other works in the exhibition had reflected a great sense of continuity between the India of 1970s and 1980s with the India of today (e.g., religious violence, bigotry, sexual orthodoxy), then the subject of these photographs at once evoked the historical past and marked a break with the present.

Room V displayed works from the series “Seven Lives and a Dream” (1988) by the feminist photographer Sheba Chhachhi comprising images taken in the 1970s and 1980s of women of all ages participating in protest rallies, either en masse or as lone figures. Some images portrayed elderly mothers holding photographic portraits of their young dead daughters—daughters who had become victims of “dowry deaths.” One arresting image was that of a lone mother sitting outside India's Supreme Court (fig. 1), with what were presumably litigation files laying strewn around her. According to the exhibition guide notes, all the photographs were “arranged portraits,” where women had been invited to choose a setting of their choice. Many women had

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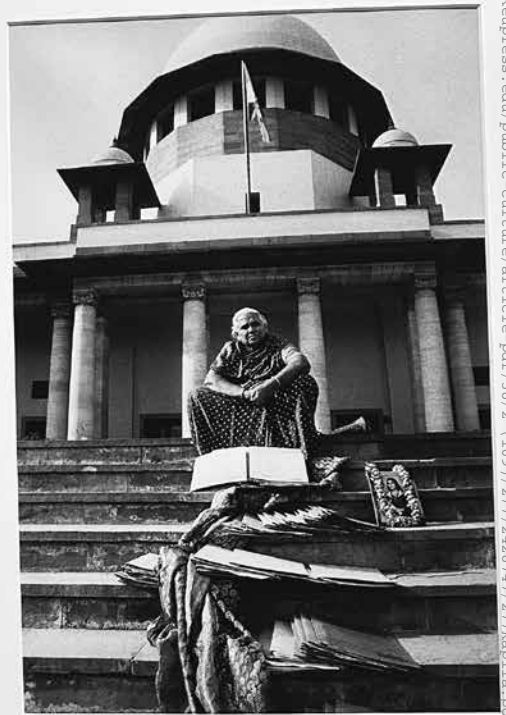


FIGURE 1 Selection of images by Sheba Chhachhi, Room V, *Imaginary Institution of India: Art 1975–78* (Barbican, London, 2024–25). Source: Author.



FIGURE 2 Selection of images by Sheba Chhachhi, Room V, *Imaginary Institution of India: Art 1975–78* (Barbican, London, 2024-25). Source: Author.



FIGURE 3 Selection of images by Sheba Chhachhi, Room V, *Imaginary Institution of India: Art 1975–78* (Barbican, London, 2024-25). Source: Author.

chosen their portrait to be taken in their own domestic space, often with little else in the frame other than the mother and her grief, a *mise-en-scène* of what Chhachhi calls “theatres of the self” (Feliciano 2022).¹ Quite apart from their artistic qualities and aesthetic breakthroughs, Chhachhi’s images brought back a flood of memories about an issue long receded in time. I was reminded of how pressing and raging the issue of dowry and dowry-deaths had once raged in public debate in the 1970s and 1980s. The images also brought back to mind the ever-present anxiety in ordinary conversation, and news media replete with horrific stories of recently married women burnt alive because of inadequate dowry. The photographs were a reminder of how different things are today. Even though dowry continues to be practiced and continues to be fatal for many women, it is curious that dowry-deaths no longer animate any political discussion or mobilization. When and how did these deaths come to be publicly ignored? This question prompted by seeing Sheba Chhachhi’s images at the exhibition offers a new aperture on inattention, the temporal work of the law and necropolitical kinship in India.

The Barbican exhibition displayed works from the 1970s and 1980s, which were turbulent and transformative decades, crucially shaped by the State of Emergency imposed from 1975 to 1977 (Das 1995; Prakash 2019; Tarlo 2003). This period also witnessed an upsurge in the killing of women by their husbands and in-laws because they had failed to meet dowry-related demands. Often, death came through “accidental” burning—ostensibly when the loose sari fabric caught the kitchen stove’s fire. In actuality, young brides had been doused in kerosene and burned alive, and their death made to look like an accident.² The spurt in dowry-related murders of young women was one of the first issues around which women in India mobilized as women to fight for an “end to the dowry system.” Yet, decades of protest and litigation has not solved or even attenuated the problem. The scale of dowry-related deaths today is higher than it was in the 1970s. In 2022, there were 6,516 reported dowry deaths in India, compared to 1988 when there were 1,841 dowry deaths registered with the National Crimes Records Bureau (NCRB), and 60,577 court cases pending decision related to dowry deaths (Kishore 2025). To date, families continue to incur severe indebtedness because of wedding and dowry-related expenditures. The NGOification of the women’s movement in India (Roy 2022), and the gradual transformation of dowry-deaths into litigation (S. Basu 2015) are said to have played a role in the disappearance of

1. Exhibition audio guide notes. See also Feliciano 2022.

2. In the 1970s, the use of cooking gas was not widespread and kerosene was the more ubiquitous kitchen fuel, especially in urban areas.

street-level protests against dowry, but they do not explain their disappearance as a matter of public concern. There remains yet an unanswered question:

What is the relationship between killing and attention?

Given the forever wars and the continual genocides amidst which we carry out our daily lives, the political work of attention acquires a new urgency. Though this paper is not concerned with large-scale killing in the spectacular context of war but instead visits this question in the context of everyday social structure and lived kinship, it offers a genealogy of the deep infrastructures of inattention that underpin collective apathy in the face of necropolitics. In recent years, the question of attention has attracted considerable critical scrutiny with the advent of “cognitive capitalism” (Schull 2012). Much of this critical literature focuses on the suturing of attention to consumption for profiteering in and through digital technologies and the manipulation of attention by technology platforms across a range of perspectives—from attention as care to attention as taste-making (Jablonsky et al. 2023; Pederson et al. 2021; Seaver 2022). This exciting and valuable literature for the most part configures the problematic of attention as a divisible and calculable human capacity that can be manipulated to yield value (Pederson, et al 2021; Seaver 2022). A second strand of scholarship examines the embodied nature of attention in moral, religious, and ethical cultivation as evident in practices such as meditation, mindfulness, and ecstatic religious experience, which also remains within individual and cognitive models of manipulation and control. (Cook 2023; Csordas 2002; Hirschkind 2001; Luhrmann 2020). To understand the political work of attention, on the other hand, may require us to step outside of neuro-manipulative, cognitivist, and individual models, and release the anthropological scholarship on attention from its current focus on algorithmic consumerism and individual cultivation.

The throwback in Chhachhi’s images prompts an exploration of the crucial role played by collective inattention toward killing at scale of female kin, or what I call “necropolitical kinship” and the structures that prevent these deaths from becoming a political concern. By “necropolitical kinship” I mean, following Achille Mbembe (2019), structures of relationality born under the sign of killing, and here I use it to describe two forms of structural femicide in Hindu kinship: dowry deaths and female feticide. I read the dissipation of attention to dowry deaths in conjunction with the non-politicization of female feticide, the second and much bigger form of structural femicide.³ Despite being a much larger killing force than dowry deaths,

3. In this paper, I restrict myself to femicide as a *structural feature* of kinship and therefore do not include other forms of (murderous) violence against women in India, such as domestic and sexual violence. The next decennial census has yet to take place. The negative sex-ratio in India’s population, where for every 1,000 male births, just 943 girls are born—a lag of 68 girls per thousand compared to the global sex ratio.

female feticide has never inspired any noteworthy mass-mobilization protests. Reading the political relegation of dowry killings alongside the birth and rise of female feticide reveals their shared necropolitical logic, and a politics of attention. Today, dowry deaths and female feticide are criminalized and are thus anchored in the law. The time of the law constitutes their eventfulness, and thereby the political attention that they (can) elicit. Taking a cue from Brian Larkin (2014), I lean on Bakhtin's concept of "addressivity" to mediate the relationship between eventfulness and attention, and argue that Chhachhi's images capture and evidence an exceptional moment of collective attention to killing. What pushes structural femicide away from political attention is the work of time, not as habituation, nor as loss of newness, nor even as that divisible unit of attention (span), but rather as a force, a "chronotope" made by the unique, if unanticipated work of the law in contestation with the all-too-well-known force of ritual. As we see, the law ushers in a radically altered temporality, which changes the register of dowry from ritual to capital, escalating female feticide, and reorienting the addressivity of killings to embed an infrastructure of inattention.

The Time of the Law

Dowry is officially considered and legally recognized as *streedhan*, or "women's wealth," are payments made by the wife-giver's family to the wife-taker's family at the time of marriage. These payments can take the form of cash, household items, white goods, services, and other financial products. A form of marriage payment that is inextricably tied to the ideology of ritual purity and pollution, this extractive practice is today primarily an articulation of the premium on the male child. In Hindu kinship, the ritual formulation of marriage is the exchange of pollution with gift-making, where the pollution of having a daughter is taken on by the wife-takers family in return for prestations, or dowry (Dumont 1980; Parry 1986; Raheja 1988). Dumont (1980), among others, highlighted that marriage doubly sutures kinship and caste in and through the practice of hypergamy, which stipulates that the wife-givers must come from a ritually lower status from that of the wife-takers. It is this dual disadvantage of the wife-givers that endows the wife-takers with the potential for extraction, or an advantageous exchange (Parry 1988).

Following the radical intervention by the Indian Constitution in kinship practices in the 1950s, important changes began to slowly take shape in kinship structures (Kapila 2022). The adoption of the Constitution in 1950 and the promulgation of the two Acts related to Hindu kinship under the new Constitution—The Hindu Marriage Act (1955) (HMA) and the Hindu Succession Act (1956) (HSA)—derived

from the shelved but larger Hindu Code Bill, reconfigured the Hindu marriage. To be sure, Hindu marriage had long been a matter of juridification. During colonial rule, several laws had been enacted to “reform” the institution. The colonial state had outlawed child marriage (Pande 2020), regulated the age of consent (Sarkar 2001), given widows new rights of remarriage (Carroll 1983), juridified household responsibility on men (Singha 1998), and legislated on rights of the conjugal couple in property (Sturman 2012).⁴ The Special Marriage Act of 1872, usually regarded as the first disembedding of Hindu marriage from ritual, applied eponymously to “special” circumstances—i.e. for the legal recognition of inter-religious marriages (Mody 2002). Compared to these legislations, the HSA and the HMA were altogether different and more radical in nature, not least because they were based in and underpinned by the hitherto unavailable constitutional guarantees of liberty and equality, making postcolonial legal subjectivity fundamentally different from its colonial counterpart. The comprehensive Hindu Code Bill was aimed at a fundamental rewriting of the grammar of Hindu society, rather than piecemeal reform of individual social practices envisaged in colonial laws. However, due to protests in Parliament and outside, a watered-down version in the form of these two Acts was passed by Parliament (Kapila 2003; Newbegin 2013; Som 1994). The architect of the Constitution, BR Ambedkar, whose main aim was to dismantle caste, categorically believed that the only way to get rid of the caste system was not to reform but to restructure Hindu marriage and kinship, as caste and kinship were inextricably linked. This is because caste is based in birth, and almost all Hindu marriages are arranged following caste-based rules of endogamy and hypergamy.⁵ For Ambedkar, political equality, as represented in popular sovereignty through universal suffrage, was meaningless if it was not accompanied by social and economic equality.⁶ The Hindu Marriage Act and the Hindu Succession Act were therefore promulgated to substantialize the formal equality guaranteed in the law and to endow women as well as men with new capacious subjectivities that would allow them to extricate themselves from prescribed relationalities, especially those defined by ritual status. The kinship and conjugal relations codified in these Acts were modelled on their Euro-American counterparts, which had historically become secularized through

4. The scholarship on colonial law, state, and to “women’s question” (Chatterjee 1994) is too long to cite in full, but see Arondekar 2009; H. Banerjee 2002; Chakravarti 2014; Majumdar 2006; Mani 1998; Sangari and Vaid 1989; and Sinha 2006.

5. Feminist historians have recently argued that endogamy is a concept that emerges from an “orientalist” reading of Indian society by early ethnologists (Mittra 2021), and primarily as a means of controlling women’s sexuality (Banerjee 2024).

6. For more on Ambedkar’s political thought, see Cháirez-Garza 2024 and A. Kumar 2015.

similar legal and political maneuvers (Donzelot 1979); Giddens 1992). The underlying hope, calculation, or assumption was that the experience of equality would eventually prevail over the existing hierarchical ordering, thus initiating a new structuration of society, eventually making the caste system a thing of the past.⁷ Over time, constitutional modernity did indeed change Hindu kinship, though as we will see, in unanticipated ways, and altogether differently as compared to Euro-America (Kapila 2004; 2022).⁸

The two Acts had sought to wrest marriage from its ritual habitus and insert it within a secular frame through a series of legal moves: the HSA aimed to achieve this by bestowing formal equality to women in kinship by giving women inheritance and property rights,⁹ while the HMA initiated this unmooring by creating the legal possibility of divorce. The legal possibility of divorce was significant not only for Hindu marriage, but for kinship more generally. By legally bringing the possibility of termination to a ritually indissoluble Hindu marriage, the law fundamentally altered the temporal framework of kinship relations from that of ritual to that of the law. As mentioned earlier, prior to these laws taking effect, terminating a Hindu marriage was a structural impossibility. Married women could be “abandoned” by their husbands, and men could marry polygamously, but the marriage itself could never be dissolved.¹⁰ This ritual permanence or interminability was rooted in the exchange that underpins kinship. Structurally, Hindu kinship is based in generalized and asymmetric exchange. In kinship structures that are based on generalized exchange, the temporality of reciprocity is an indeterminate long term, in which wife-givers receive a bride from the wife-takers in an indeterminate distant future in exchange for giving one in the present (Dumont 2006; Levi-Strauss 1971). Marriage payments such as dowry are therefore a recognition of the debt of the unreciprocated or incomplete exchange of wives between clans. These payments are placeholders for the long-term deferral (an interest payment, as it were)

7. The passing of these Bills was met with severe opposition both within and outside Parliament, including the then President of India Dr Rajendra Prasad threatening to resign.

On the history of India’s Constitution, see Austin 1966; Bhatia 2019; De 2018; and Khosla 2020. On the HSA and HMA, see Kapila 2022; Saxena 2023; Som 1996.

8. My research showed, contra Giddens 1997, that instead of becoming progressively sundered from each other with modernity, marriage, sex, and romance became ever more closely conjoined even in contexts where these may have been held apart premodernity (Kapila 2004).

9. I have discussed elsewhere at length the unanticipated consequences of the restructuring initiated through the HSA. See Kapila 2022: 25–48.

10. The two Acts were based in and addressing upper caste mores. In non-caste communities, divorce was prevalent and entailed rule-based compensatory practices. See Kapila 2003; Uberoi 2022.

for the unfulfilled exchange. In north Indian kinship where dowry has historically had a strong presence, exchange is not merely generalized but also takes the form of asymmetrical gift exchange, where the bride is a “gift” made by the wife-givers to the wife-takers. The deferred exchange binds the wife-givers and wife-takers in symbolic exchange that exceed lifetimes, where the former is in long-term debt to the latter for the incomplete exchange. Logically, it ought to be the wife-takers incurring debt because of their non-existent counter-gift, and it should be they who should be making marriage payments to the wife-givers in lieu of a bride. However, in Hindu kinship, the imbalance of exchange is counter-intuitively reversed. As Jonathan Parry (1986) explained in his influential essay, the “gift” of the bride results in a unique hierarchical asymmetry. In a reversal of the usual logic of gift-exchange, it is the donors who become inferior to the recipients, which Parry terms as “the Indian gift.”¹¹ This is because the ritually superior (caste) status of the wife-takers, or hypergamy, enables them to accept the ritually impure gift of a daughter. In doing so, the wife-takers benefact the wife-givers by helping them get rid of their pollution accrued by the birth of a daughter. Thus, ritual debt is incurred not by the wife-takers, but the wife-givers, and results in marriage payments taking the form of not bride-price but dowry. Dowry is therefore the manifestation of the temporality as well as the terms of ritual exchange.

The legal introduction of divorce in the mid-twentieth century through the HMA disrupted this temporal structure of marriage exchange in several important ways. It terminated the calculus of interminable exchange relations, which indeterminately stretched back into the past as well as cast into the future, and through which Hindu kinship is structured. The introduction of divorce cast the Hindu marriage into a new secular, pared down, and determinate temporality: that of the law. The HMA secularized the *temporality* within which marriage was structured but, as we explore below, secular temporality alone could not secularize marriage itself. Diluting the original ambition of the HMA, Hindu marriage instead came to inhabit a dual temporality: of ritual and of the law.

The Constitution had inaugurated a new temporal logic in which the past was non-citable, and the future indeterminate (Kapila 2003; Mehta 2017). The ability of the law to absorb as well as operate within multiple temporalities is well noted by scholars (Birla 2012; French 2001; Greenhouse 1996; Mawani 2014; Richland 2018). Mariana Valverde (2015, 2019) uses Bakhtin’s (1981) concept of the “chronotope” to

11. The wedding ceremony is called *kanyadaan* (literally, gift of the virgin). In unpacking the “Indian gift,” or the gift of ritual pollution in marriage and death ceremonies, where prestations are made for accepting the gift of ritual pollution, Parry (1986) made an important qualification to the Maussian paradigm of the gift, a foundational concept in anthropology.

frame the law and legal categories as spatio-temporal logics in which “time thickens and is made flesh.” Though different from the Canadian context theorized by Valverde, it is nevertheless useful to consider the Indian Constitution as a Bakhtian chronotope, containing within it several micro chronotopes, such as the HMA, each of which brings their own temporality and temporal logic into being.¹² In keeping with the Indian Constitution’s complete nonrecognition of anything that pre-existed it, the HMA takes cognizance of neither ritual time nor long-term ritual exchange cycles that structurate kinship. It could therefore introduce divorce, or the termination of marriage based on harm within the individual’s lifetime, rather than constitute marriage based in obligations exceeding the individual and their lifespan. In this way, the HMA initiates a new abridged temporality for Hindu marriage. Additionally, the companion legislation of the HSA 1956 constitutes conjugality as only weakly tied to, if not distinct from, kinship by paring down and reordering the schedule of heirs away from the web of male collaterals (Kapila 2003, 2022). The HSA’s temporal frame is that of the future where kinship is imagined in and through the protocols of succession and heirship, confined to the newly delimited nuclear family.

There exists rich scholarship on the effects of the HMA (as also HSA), which gives us valuable insight into the working of the law on the ground (S. Basu 2015; Majumdar 2010; Saxena 2022; Uberoi 1996). The focus of much of this scholarship, and more generally that on gender and the law in India, is predominantly concerned with the gap between the letter of the law and its everyday life and the attendant (gendered) subjectivities. While drawing valuable insights from this work, I depart from the focus on the subjective to instead examine the relational consequences of circumscribed temporality and relationality of marriage, and by extension exchange relations between wife-givers and wife-takers. The chronotope unleashed by the HMA gives us a new lens and insight into the collective anger, mobilization, and protests against dowry in the 1970s and 80s, which remain preserved in Chhachhi’s images. Those images capture the articulation of this restructured temporality and relationality because it is only in the vanishing of the specter of indeterminate long-term indebtedness that wife-givers could consider and express a relationship of hos-

12. In Canada “the Crown” legally underpins notions of perpetuity that become salient in a range of situations, such as Indigenous claims to the land to the state-citizen contracts. There cannot be any sense of perpetuity going into the deep and indeterminate past because the relationship of time in India’s Constitution is unique. It is inherently secular precisely because of the concreteness of the time of its origins—Independence Day (August 15, 1947) and its adoption on Republic Day (January 26, 1950). Having said that, under the new dispensation since 2014, the law is increasingly corralled into the recognition of pre-Constitutional categories and temporalities, a discussion of which is beyond the scope of this paper.

tility against wife-takers—such as that seen in the protests in the 1970s and 1980s. These protests have therefore been read as the enactment of a new and newly found freedom enabled by the law, whereby new relationalities were being experimented, politicized, and congealed across domains (see R. Kumar 1993). Yet, as I show, precisely because the aims of the HMA were only partly met, the moment of acting in and on liberty and the escape from the long temporal frame of kinship were partial and short-lived.

Despite working within a similar temporal frame of indeterminate futures, the respective futures envisaged in the law and in structural kinship are not just different but are in fact antithetical to each other. The indeterminate future of kinship exchange relations works to produce and preserve the ideology of social hierarchy constitutive of the caste system, while the indeterminate future in the law is aimed at replacing this very hierarchy with radical equality as the structuring principle of Indian society. Furthermore, kinship exchange relations do not merely extend into the future but are inherently a continuation of exchanges from the deep or ritual past. As a result, they are inherently different chronotopes, even when overlapping worlds. The abandoned Hindu Code Bill and its surviving two Acts were enacted to embed freedom and equality within kinship in the hope that one day marriage may become disembedded entirely from its ritual logic, thereby over time rooting out the caste system. The surge in dowry-deaths and the attendant politicization in those two decades reflected the attempted, if only partially successful, disembedding of marriage from its ritual habitus, and its fracture from the temporality of kinship exchange in and through the law. While equality and liberty became available to many more women in certain aspects of their lives, the disembedding of kinship from its ritual habitus remained incomplete, and as a result, marriage payments too have survived. Their criminalization through the Anti-Dowry Act of 1961 did not bring an end to marriage payments. Instead, as we explore below, these payments entered new temporal and exchange logics. Marriage itself came to inhabit a dual temporality—the long-term exchange which governed alliances—or the time of caste, and secular temporality ushered in by the law that governed payments, or as we will see, the logic of capital. The attempted disembedding of marriage from ritual had unforeseen effects, which went beyond marriage payments. These unintended effects help explain why dowry-deaths became a phenomenon in the 1970s and 1980s, and more importantly why they came to lose their “eventfulness.”

The Capital of Marriage

Marriage and the market have long been entangled though not quite at the scale they are today. Valued at \$130 billion, the Indian wedding industry is second only to food and groceries in terms of consumption (Gupta 2024). Marriage, as Dumont famously observed, is the biggest event in a Hindu's life: "It is the most prestigious family ceremony, and at various social levels constitutes the main occasion on which the greatest number of members of the caste and other persons gather together" (Dumont 1988: 110). An average Indian household spends four times its annual income on a wedding (Gupta 2024). To Dumont, the scale of expenditure and extravagance signaled the central place of marriage in connecting the domains of kinship and that of caste and the pivotal role of alliance in reproducing both these domains. Marriage payments therefore secure status by wealth transfer in the north, where wife-givers "commute status-irrelevant things like girls, money into social prestige" (Dumont 1959: 519. See also Pickles 2017). Not all forms of dowry produce asymmetry, notably for example in the Dravidian model, where marriage payments are matched with counter-gifts.¹³ In the past, there had existed marriage payments made by a woman's second husband to her first one at the time of remarriage. In north India, these were sometimes called *harjana* (literally, fine or compensation), registers of which were maintained at the village level and kept an account of repayments made to first husbands by a woman's second husband, erroneously read by the newly arrived British officials as sale deeds, or chattel slavery of women (Kapila 2022: 33; See also Valeri 1994).

In the wider anthropological literature, dowry is usually understood as groom-price (Goody and Tambiah 1973; Kodoth 2008; Levi-Strauss 1971; Strathern 1984). In north Indian kinship, structurally speaking, dowry is not groom-price. Rather, it is a prestation anchored within a calculus of purity and pollution, and as such, an acknowledgement of the premium of hypergamy and the cost of getting rid of the pollution of daughters. Dowry payments are therefore made not as repayment for the debt of the deferred exchange—as they would be in a kinship system based in generalized exchange—but are instead made for the debt of purification achieved through the gift of the polluting bride to the wife-takers (Parry 1986). Dowry is now the standard form of marriage payments for several caste communi-

13. Dravidian kinship is based in cross-cousin marriage and follows a different pattern of marriage payments. For Dumont (1959: 520), the gifts and counter-gifts exchanged at the time of marriage in southern India "are the immediate expression of the relationship in action." To go into greater detail on marriage payments in Dravidian kinship would be beyond the scope of this paper. For more on this, see Dumont 1959 and Trautmann 1981. On the north Indian bias in the HMA and the HSA and its consequences for the legal status of Dravidian marriage, see Uberoi 2022.

ties in India and has extended to communities which are not based in these rules of exchange.¹⁴ Although as a practice it had long been considered a “social ill” in the liberal politics that began to shape the “woman” question from the eighteenth century (see Bayly 2012; Chatterjee 1994), it was not until the mid-twentieth century that dowry became a matter of widespread social and political concern. As a purifying gift, dowry is by definition extractive (Parry 1986). However, these extractive capacities underwent a sea change in the 1970s and 1980s when dowry was transfigured from a gift to a demand.¹⁵ Instead of the bride’s family giving clothing, jewelry, and household goods in gift to the newlyweds, dowry became a violently extractive practice, its scale and components exceeding ritual calculus. Wife-takers began to “demand” exorbitant amounts of cash, alongside goods and services far in excess of what might have been exchanged in preceding generations. Demands, when not fulfilled, often resulted in physical and psychological violence visited on the bride, sometimes resulting in her death, usually by burning in faux kitchen accidents. In the scholarly literature of the time, these changes were broadly explained away as the “commercialisation of marriage” (e.g., Paliwala 1989; Sharma 1983), but why and in what ways marriage had become “commercial” in the first place remained unexplored. To be sure, the conjoining of commercial interest and marriage had been witnessed in earlier periods too, including in the marriage brokerage market in the nineteenth century, but this was largely restricted to the middle-classes, affluent castes, and bourgeois Bengali clans (Majumdar 2006; Sturman 2012). This late twentieth-century conjoining of marriage and commerce was different, for it spread across classes, whereby it rapidly became both commonplace and common sense.

Not that kinship and the economy were ever hermetically distinct spheres, but in this moment, they became entangled in new ways, making for new social formations and giving rise to new politics. In her careful account of the political life of the family in the United States in the twentieth century, Melinda Cooper writes that “the history of economic formations cannot be prized apart from the operations of gender, race, and sexuality without obscuring the politics of wealth and income

14. For example, dowry is a recent introduction in several tribal communities which were traditionally isogamous, and where brides receive their wedding attire and jewelry from the groom’s family on the wedding day (Kapila 2004; 2022), where bride-service was common. Sturman (2012: 166) argues that bride-price marriages were not considered “textually approved” in Brahminical scripture, but were instead deemed “demonic” (*asura*) marriages practised mainly by lower castes, and hence not approved under colonial law. See also Agrawal 2014.

15. See Parry (1986) on the extractive capacities of receivers of “impure” gifts, such as brahmin priests who perform mortuary rituals, an insight Parry extends to affines.

distribution itself” (Cooper 2017: 24). Though the political discourse of the family in India is distinctly different from that in the United States, it is extremely productive to think with Cooper (2017) and read the disappearance of dowry deaths from public attention in India in light of capital—the landscape within which kinship is made and unmade (see for example, Bhandari 2020; Donner 2022). Once the temporality of marriage became dislodged from its ritual habitus via the HMA and entered the temporal logic of the law, then marriage payments too followed suit and escaped their ritual calculus. To reiterate, marriage alliances remained within their ritual logic, and therefore the practice of dowry could not come to an end, but with the temporality of marriage changing to a calculable and finite lifetime, dowry became unmoored from its erstwhile singular calculus of purity and pollution and instead became recalibrated according to the logic of capital. Historians have noted a prior moment of recalibration when in the nineteenth century dowry had emerged as the cultural *raison d’être* for the devaluation of female labor (Sen 1999), rising indebtedness, and female infanticide (Oldenburg 2002; Majumdar 2005). The logic and result of the mid-twentieth century disambiguation however was altogether different. Recasting marriage into the secular temporality and untethering it from its atemporal indissolubility transmuted dowry from being a compensation for accepting the gift of pollution of the girl-child into primarily a premium on the male-child. This premium was computed not through the calculus of purity and pollution but through a secular logic of commodity pricing, as we will see.¹⁶ The disambiguation from the temporality of ritual exchange also allowed dowry to become increasingly claimed by women themselves as *streedhan*, understood not simply as “women’s wealth” but more as women’s share in the wealth of her natal family (cf. Kishwar 1993; Randeria and Visaria 1984), sometimes women themselves demanded elaborate dowries (Bhandari 2020).¹⁷ While the indeterminate future may have disappeared as the temporal horizon for calculating, honoring, or recognizing ritual exchange, the computation of alliance-making continued within the strictures of purity and pollution. Marriage as an institution remained within ritual sacrament and therefore continued to follow the prescriptions of caste-based alliance-making, including hypergamy, as evidenced in and through the continuation of the practice of dowry itself. Disembedded from the gift complex, marriage payments came to be demanded primarily as a premium on the male child, joining the commodity

16. For an economic modelling of this premium, see Anderson 2003.

17. Dowry is sometimes understood as a way of alienating property to daughters who until the promulgation of the Hindu Succession Act in 1956 had no formal inheritance rights (Goody and Tambiah 1973; Kodoth 2008; Oldenburg 2002).

circuit and translated through the logic of capital. As anthropologists have noted, the transformation of gifts into commodities entails the curtailment of temporality as well as a shift from indeterminacy to calculability (Callon and Muniesa 2005; Gregory 2014). Thus, instead of receiving the gift of dowry, grooms began to “command” a price, calculated through a complex rubric of caste, class, education, and professional status, which their families started to “demand.” These changes were also reflected in the expanded composition of “gift items” that began to be transacted in dowry. In the second half of the twentieth century, dowry began to far exceed customary household goods, clothes, and jewelry, where “cash” and financial products began to emerge as an important, if not the most important component of the dowry.

A postcolonial law aimed at structurally rooting out caste hierarchy from society, and by extension dowry, had thus only partially succeeded in its objectives. What followed was not exactly anticipated. Because caste had not evacuated marriage, instead of disappearing, dowry became embedded in a purely extractive logic tied to the extractive potential of the commodified male-child. In the context of a pessimistic economic outlook of the times, and the Indian economy trapped in what was called the “Hindu rate of growth,” this extractive potential came to be seen as the route to enrichment, if not prosperity.¹⁸ The groom’s elicitory potential began to expand and did not conclude at the point of marriage—the traditional transactional end-point of dowry. Instead, dowry came to be recast as a perennial and ongoing extractive potential, so that demands for more dowry sometimes continued to be made for several years after the wedding. It was not unusual for the ongoing extraction to be accompanied by force and physical and psychological violence. Aided by the extant antipathy towards women in north Indian kinship, especially towards incoming women, dowry-related violence sometimes resulted in the murder of, and more latterly suicide by, the bride.¹⁹ Evacuated from the gift complex, dowry now joined the commodity circuit, in the form of the premium on the male-child as extractive potential, which I propose eventually led to the spread of the male-child preference well beyond its customary domain of northwest India, thus

18. The Indian economist Raj Krishna coined the term “Hindu rate of growth” to contrast the stagnant economic growth of 4 percent in India—a predominantly Hindu society—with the rapidly growing of India’s neighbors in Southeast Asia, colloquially referred to as tiger economies. India’s economy in the 1970s was marked by sluggish growth, high rates of unemployment, and an overall tight state control of many sectors of the economy (also known as the License Raj). On the Hindu rate of growth, see Basu K. 2004; Rodrik and Subramaniam 2005. For an account of India’s political economy in the 1970s, see Raghavan 2025: 121–43. See also Srinivasan and Bardhan 1974; Kapadia 2023.

19. For a psychoanalytic account of affect in Indian kinship, see Kakkar 1990 and Trawick 1992.

the shrinking sex ratios across the country, as I discuss below.²⁰ It is also this transmutation that creates the infrastructure of inattention to structural femicide.

The Neoliberal Turn

The transformation of an exchange from gift to commodity cannot be understood outside the wider political and economic changes because it does not merely occur in certain historical moments; rather it comes to characterize those historical moments (Gregory 2014: 121–76). The transformation of dowry from gift to demand in the second half of the twentieth century brought about several structural as well as political changes. The widespread killing of women as retribution for unmet dowry demands galvanized women for the first time into the political arena to fight a battle for their kind (R. Kumar 1993; Ray 1997; Roy 2022). The political mobilization of women against dowry deaths catapulted private grief to a matter of public concern, the historical moment captured powerfully and movingly by Chhachhi.²¹ The 1970s and 1980s were perhaps the first time since the movement to outlaw *sati* (widow burning) or structural femicide, or the killing of women as kin had become a political issue. Though both *sati* and a majority of dowry deaths involved the burning of wives—in the case of the former as ostensible self-immolation and in the case of the latter as ostensible kitchen accidents—any similarity between them ended there.²² If *sati* had precipitated the inaugural intervention of the colonial state on the “woman question,” no doubt at the behest of men who petitioned the colonial state to “rescue” upper caste widows from being forced to self-immolate at their deceased husband’s pyre in the early nineteenth century (Bayly 2012; Mani 1998), then the socio-political movement that arose in the 1970s and 1980s against bride-burning had entirely different origins, protagonists, and consequences. Earlier, Parliament had passed the Anti-Dowry Act in 1961, which made the practice illegal, and partaking in it—not just receiving but also giving dowry, a cognizable offence. The promissory discourse of equality and secularity in the Indian Constitution had resignified the public life of pre-constitutional categories such as pollution, ritual, and hierarchy. Aided by the new legal framework and consciousness, dowry became

20. The literature on the “missing girl-child” and the adverse sex-ratio in India is vast. For an authoritative account see John 2011. See also Kaur 2017 for northwest India.

21. See Radha Kumar’s (1993: 115–126) classic documentation of India’s feminist movement, which also uses Chhachhi’s images for the chapter on dowry.

22. On self-immolation as a political weapon, see Bargu 2016. On *sati* and the women’s question, see Mani 1998. On the colonial state and *sati*, see Bayly 2012.

recast in public discourse as a relic from the past and inimical to modern relationality. The campaign against dowry more generally, and dowry deaths in particular, thus began to gradually mobilize (mostly urban) women as individuals and in collectives against the devouring practice (R. Kumar 1993; Ray 2000).

The state launched its own anti-dowry awareness campaigns, mostly aimed at young men and their families, appealing to their modern subjectivity and encouraging them to commit themselves to voluntary refusal (“Say no to dowry”). These campaigns were met with limited success, and the scale of dowry and the count of women dying at the altar of dowry demands rose exponentially in the late 1970s. No longer requiring a “behalfist” politics in their name, the unrelenting surge in dowry killings precipitated the first mass mobilization of women qua women. The dowry protests of the 1970s and 1980s were unique, but short lived. Chhachhi’s images document and archive that momentary political transformation of the much-maligned mother of a daughter. It was perhaps the only time that women in India mobilized themselves as mothers, and specifically as mothers of daughters. It was also the last moment, if not the only time when the unjust death of daughters was recognized as such, not just in private, but importantly, in public. Daughters were finally grievable: in the event of their killing and not just to be mourned for at their birth.

Today, women continue to be killed for dowry in huge numbers, yet there are neither protesting kin on the streets, nor publicly grieving mothers to be seen anywhere. Existing scholarship explains this retreat mainly in two ways. On the one hand, the advent of neoliberalism as “NGOfication” pushed movement-driven feminist activism in India towards more programmatic and identitarian concerns, such as securing well-overdue LGBTQ rights in law (see Roy 2022). On the other, marriage payments have become juridified, as a result of which dowry-deaths have been domesticated or accommodated within the law, and as such have become part of the volume of litigation and its infamous backlog (see S. Basu 2015). That much is true. However, neither the continued interventions by NGOs nor legal protection has made a dent in the fact or the scale of killing. My interest in drawing this genealogy of anti-dowry protests is to reveal the obduracy of structural femicide as well as the obduracy of the apathy towards it, or what I call the infrastructure of inattention underpinning necropolitical kinship in India.

A clue to unravelling the puzzle is provided by the next turn in the fate of daughters in Indian kinship. The fizzling out of anti-dowry protests coincided with the structural readjustment of the Indian economy in the early 1990s. This was also the period in which India is said to have entered the age of consumption, and a rapid flooding of the market with consumer goods (Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase

2008; Lukose 2009; Mazzarella 2003; Nakassis 2016). Mirroring the inflationary tendencies of commodities at the time, the “price” of the commodified male-child too increased, making for a vastly increased scale and scope of dowry extraction. Despite increased levels of education and participation in the workforce, daughters continued to be regarded as expensive to have. By the end 1990s, the issue of dowry deaths gradually began to fade from the streets as well as from public attention. In addition to the aforementioned NGOfication and legal domestication, their retreat was aided by two related developments. The first was the change in the mode of killing and the second concerned the temporality of killing. The 1990s saw an increase in the rate of suicide among young women in India (Mayer and Ziaian 2002). Though not all suicides would have been related to dowry, nevertheless, suicide rates began to camouflage many dowry-related deaths. Many young brides were no longer murdered by insatiable affines but instead began to take their own lives. Deadly violence against young women had been turned by women towards themselves. In such a situation, it became difficult to prosecute extractive affines. The gradual disappearance of kerosene as a cooking fuel from most urban kitchens on the other hand also made the alibi of death by kitchen accidents less plausible. And as murder became suicide, the once public outcry and grief of bereaved wife-givers became transmuted into private shame and sorrow.

The second structural turn in the fate of daughters in Indian kinship in the 1990s unfolded with the increasing role technology came to play in kinship. After being designated as “overpopulated,” in 1976 India introduced a population policy with a two-child policy norm. The adoption of a population control policy gave rise to a proliferation of reproductive health infrastructure across the country (Jeffrey et al. 1984), soon defying prior assumptions about access and usage (Dube 1983; cf. D. Kumar 1983). The widespread use of amniocentesis to determine the sex of the fetus had in short order begun to serve the needs of the male-child preference, resulting in the gradual rise of female feticide in the late 1990s (John et al. 2009; Ray 1999).²³ The Constitutional directive of equality may have ensured greater access to education and employment for women, rates of which rose steadily over the decades, yet the male-child preference remained virtually undisturbed. The growing adverse sex ratio in India was first identified in the decennial census of 1991. The following decennial census of 2001 recorded a record low sex ratio in the 0–6 age group at 927, a sharp decline from an already adverse 945 in the 1991 census (Jha et al. 2006). Crucially, the 2001 census also revealed that the largely northwestern Indian

23. On forcible population control experimented at scale during the Emergency, including forced sterilization, see Tarlo 2003.

male-child preference was fast spreading to new regions, a trend that was captured clearly in the subsequent census of 2011 (John 2011). When the 2001 census revealed that some northern Indian states had as few as 884 females for every 1000 men, in contradistinction to conventional demographic wisdom, the headline was met with hue and cry at the policy level and in civil society. Female feticide was made soon a punishable offence under the Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques Act of 1994 (amended in 2004), and the state launched a raft of disciplinary measures aimed at “awareness raising” against sex-selection (Purewal 2014). But unlike dowry-deaths, the now visibly missing daughters created no outpouring of bereavement, let alone any mass political strife. There were neither then, nor are there now mothers—or for that matter, any other kin—who have publicly grieved for the daughters they could not or did not have, their potential daughters lost to feticide. Who was to mourn the missing girl-child, let alone take up cudgels on her behalf, when natal kin were themselves her killers?!

While it is impossible to stage a protest against oneself, it is remarkable that there has been no wider political mobilization against female feticide either. When seen in the light of female feticide, the protests against dowry-deaths appear to be based not so much in the practice of dowry itself, but rather in its scaled-up version. In other words, those protests were really about the shift in payments from the register of ritual to that of capital. The anti-dowry protests were aimed at the unjust deaths caused by the unjustifiable demands of affines. Their target was therefore capital, or more precisely the deathly excess produced by the conjoining of kinship with extractive capital in the specific and unique form of the elicitory potential of the male child.²⁴ Female feticide, on the other hand, is an elimination of potential daughters, which is prompted by the same conjoining of capital with kinship, but only this time pre-emptively by natal kin. This pre-emptive elimination of daughters from kinship structures both reaffirms daughters as ritually polluting and also confirms the new conjoining of kinship with capital. In and through female feticide, natal kin thus uphold both the ritual as well as the secular (capitalist) logic of dowry. Unlike the protesting and grieving mothers of the 1970s and 1980s, in feticide, natal kin themselves eliminate the root of symbolic and material debt instead of opposing the logic—or indeed the scale of that debt.

The prevalence of male-child preference in north India is based in a longer history of necropolitical kinship practices. Contemporary female feticide is however

24. This is a different kind of conjoining of capital and kinship in the making of family firms, enterprises, and financial debt, which has been discussed widely. See for example, Birla 2009; Guerin et al 2023; Yanagisako 2002. It is also distinct from children being considered as investments (Donner 2005). For a historical account of the mutual imbrications of capital and kinship in colonial India, see Birla 2009; Majumdar 2010; Sturman 2012.

distinct from female infanticide practiced under colonialism in the nineteenth century, which was limited to northwestern India. Female infanticide in the nineteenth century was aimed at conserving landholdings and ideologically masked and emboldened by mythico-religious reasoning (Oldenburg 2002: 50–52). Death was perpetrated through cruel neglect and exposure to make the infant appear to have died of “natural” causes.²⁵ Contemporary female feticide, on the other hand, is rationalized as essentially an economically motivated decision, as a way of avoiding future expense and potential debt, hence the decision to prevent daughters from being born in the first place. Such a form of self-responsibilization can only be produced under neoliberalism, where “every aspect of human existence [is submitted] to investor calculations about its future value” (Brown 2019: 163). The neoliberal context in which this practice gained general acceptance and tacit legitimacy is predicated on a valuation of life itself according to the market logic (Tyner 2016: 10). Eliminating the “girl-child” from the matrix of kinship may appear to be a way of mitigating the risk of future indebtedness, but it neither questions nor refuses the basis of that risk (see Cooper 2017: 67–117). In practicing female feticide, natal kin appear indistinguishable from, if not complicit with affines in finding “the gift of death” as the only riposte to the force of capital in kinship. While natal kin gift death to ostensibly avoid debt, affines kill daughters-in-law to seek further profit from their value-eliciting son by arranging his remarriage(s). However, in twenty-first century India, affines no longer need to kill disappointing daughters-in-law. If daughters manage to escape the killer instincts of their natal kin, then in the event of dowry demands, they can always oblige their affines by the gift of their own death through suicide, in case they are unable to challenge their in-laws in court.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, other than their life in statistics, India’s missing, dead, and potential daughters now joined the vast swathe of ungrievable life on earth. “Without grievability, there is no life . . . Grievability precedes and makes possible the apprehension of the living being as living, exposed to non-life from the start” (Butler 2016: 15). Judith Butler was writing about the place of grieving in the context of war, where not all death is death, and while some lives count as lives, others must remain ungrieved. Butler (2003: 24) has elsewhere suggested that the prohibition on public grieving of (Palestinian) lives is an integral part of their ongoing dehumanization. It is the “silence of discourse,” the non-recognition of loss that rendered these lives as dehumanized, and death as a non-event. “None of this takes place in the order of event. *None of this takes place*” (Butler 2003: 25,

25. Newly born daughters would be left outside in the scorching heat or the freezing cold to die (Oldenburg 2002).

emphasis added). Clearly, feticide through sex-selection is not the same form of killing as life lost in war, yet, and beyond just scale, there is a striking parallel between grievability of war-killings as discussed by Butler and the grievability of (potential) daughters in kinship. Today, kin neither make a public hue and cry about daughters lost to extractive dowry, nor grieve their potential daughters lost to sex-selection. Undoubtedly, daughters lost in dowry-related cases are mourned, but now in private and in individual capacity. Private mourning, however, does not and cannot bring about a politics in public in the order of event. In public, *it is as if none of this (loss of daughters) takes place.*

Eventfulness and the Attention Economy

Eventfulness, according to Alain Badiou (2007: 179–80) is the acquisition or loss of properties that constitute a change or a break in the form of an (historical) object. We can thus see that when grief acquires a public form, it brings about a change in the form of politicization of death, while its repatriation to the private domain renders (dowry-related) death as uneventful, or unavailable for politicization. While it is helpful to think through the constitutiveness of event with Badiou, it does not throw much light on the politics of how or why properties come to be attached or unattached from (historical) objects. In other words, a transformation does occur—from deaths seen as unjust and therefore publicly grieved, to a statistic but a non-event nevertheless. Or in keeping with Badiou, one can say that there indeed exists a record of change, at least in the datasets of suicides, national death rates, etc. In that respect, the event does take place, except in a different “evental site” (Badiou: 2007: 175). The losing and gaining of qualities is the work of politics. Dowry-related deaths once came to inspire a very specific form of political attention—a unique moment in which structural femicide was politicized and dead daughters publicly mourned. Today, despite the increased scale and scope, structural femicide is domesticated and its eventfulness confined to the liveliness of datasets. This transformation hinges on whether the loss is seen as unjust and therefore grieved publicly. Why did kin stop feeling the injustice at the death of daughters and therefore stop publicly grieving their unjust killing? How and when did the daughter’s natal kin and hostile affines become allies in the war on daughters in India?

What we pay attention to and from what we (are made to) lose interest in or attention from is political. It is tempting to say when new issues come up, older issues lose their public interest value. However, that would not give us any greater clarity other than proposing a naturalistic explanation for an atrophy of interest in dowry-deaths, and certainly not about why female feticide never became a political

issue. The neoliberal ascent of self-responsibilization and the famous depoliticizing instincts of NGOs are well documented (*pace* Ferguson 1994; Freeman 2020). The same could be said for the domesticating instincts of the law (see Comaroff and Comaroff 2006). Situating this retreat in these wider socio-economic and political changes leaves something yet unanswered. The question at hand is therefore not just what begets attention but also inattention (see Larkin 2014). Things need to be endowed with “addressivity” (Bakhtin 1986), or their capacity to draw attention to themselves. Natal kin learn to become inattentive to the unjust killing of daughters for dowry, perhaps because dowry-deaths are no longer afflicted by hostile affines but by the bride herself. It becomes impossible to campaign against someone who has given themselves “the gift of death” (Derrida 1995). In the case of female feticide, it becomes impossible to campaign against oneself, because it is the potential natal kin (father, mother, grandparents) who participate in making the decision to abort the female fetus. The only recourse is therefore to develop not merely apathy towards their own complicity, but to become actively inattentive towards their own murderous turn in restructuring necropolitical kinship. Apathy comes to articulate the interplay of capital, time, and ritual, coalescing to form the deep infrastructure of inattention.

Coda

The arc of structural femicide of daughters in India as an object of attention in the twentieth century moved from the political life of dowry deaths to the depoliticization of female feticide. With ritual exchange mutating into commodity pricing, the perceived burden of bearing daughters doubled whereby their ritual pollution now came accompanied by the capitalist extraction at the hands of affines. The fragmentary incorporation of dowry into the law in the form of component culpable acts paved the way for its further depoliticization. What was once a regional male-child preference is now extant across India. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the disappearance of daughters from kinship in statistics is reported blandly as the “missing girl-child,” a category born without kinship. The widespread killing of newly married and unborn daughters is also the killing of relationality that originates in female children, for example, parallel and cross-sex sibling relations, which have affective as well as structural consequences (Kapila 2022: 25–48). Just as dowry-deaths progressively morphed into dowry-related suicides, similarly, instead of relying on affines to free them of pollution, natal kin today get rid of the pollution to come about in the first place. While Ambedkar and others fighting against the caste-system may have hoped that the Constitution and the discourse of equality

would one day free India from the paradigm of ritual pollution, perversely what we have instead today is the pursuit of full purity.

The last time women mobilized themselves in large numbers across the country in recent times was against the deadly and the unspeakably horrific gang-rape that took place in Delhi on December 16, 2013 and beamed on screens across the globe. Going into any detail about this form of violence is well beyond the scope of this paper, but what is pertinent here is the question of addressivity. Unlike dowry and feticide, the register of sexual violence is not one of purity and pollution but that of consent and its violation. Sexual violence as a political issue is constituted through the perceived and experienced infringement of freedoms, and in and through a breach of consent. As a stand-in for contract, consent is a long way away from the world of preconstitutional categories and temporalities of ritual purity and pollution. This is not to imply that sexual violence did not or does not occur within kinship, or that it is the disembedding of marriage from its ritual temporality to that of the law that has made rape possible. Quite the contrary—it is in fact the language of the law and constitutionally guaranteed freedoms, which had once made an anti-dowry politics possible, that has also enabled the legal cognizance and juridification of sexual violence, thus endowing it with political addressivity. One can see that in the current moment, the transition from status to contract, first proposed all the way back in the mid-nineteenth century by Henry Maine in *Ancient Law* (1861), has finally been realized, if not in fact, then at least in the basis for attention. Fortunately for us, Chhachhi's images have kept the receipts.

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