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## Transformation of the Dowry System from Traditional to Modern Marriage Institution in Contemporary India: A Comparative Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

The dowry system in India has undergone significant transformation from its traditional roots to its contemporary manifestations within the modern marriage institution. Historically associated With stridhan and women's financial security, dowry has evolved into a coercive socio-economic practice shaped by changing economic structures, urbanisation, and rising consumerism. This study examines the transition of the dowry system from agrarian-based traditional societies to contemporary urban contexts, highlighting its persistence despite legal prohibitions. Through a comparative analysis of rural and urban marriage practices, the paper explores how modernisation not eliminated dowry but instead restructured it into new forms such as lifestyle expectations and material exchanges. The study also analyses the role of education, caste endogamy, and marriage market competition in intensifying dowry demands. Furthermore, it investigates the implications of dowry on gender inequality, household economics, and social stratification. The findings suggest that dowry continues to function as a mechanism reinforcing patriarchal norms and economic disparities, thereby requiring both legal enforcement and social transformation for its eradication.

**Introduction:**

Marriage in India is not merely a union between two individuals; it is a socio-cultural institution deeply connected with traditions, caste structures, and economic exchanges. One of the most enduring elements of this institution is the dowry system. Dowry refers to the transfer of wealth, goods, or money from the bride's family to the groom or his family at the time of marriage. (Srinivas, 1984)

From a historical perspective, dowry was seen as a form of inheritance or financial security for women. (Agarwal, 1994) However, in contemporary Indian society, it has gradually transformed into a coercive demand, often placing significant social and economic pressure on the bride's family. (Kaur, 2004).

Marriage in India has historically been embedded within social, economic, and cultural institutions. One of the most important aspects of marriage transactions is the dowry system, defined as the transfer of money, goods, or property from the bride's family to the groom or his family. Although the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 legally banned this practice, dowry continues to exist in both rural and urban areas.

Studies indicate that over several decades, dowry transactions have been more prominently observed in the majority of marriages in rural India. (Rao, 1997). However, with the processes of urbanization, education, migration, and economic development, Indian society has undergone significant changes, which have also transformed the nature of marriage transactions. (Palriwala, 2009).

Despite these changes, the dowry system has not disappeared; instead, it has adapted to new social and economic realities and taken on a new form. (Anderson, 2003) It is often presented as "gifts" or "lifestyle expectations." (Donner, 2008). This study focuses on how dowry has evolved from its traditional historical context into a transformed practice in contemporary India.

**Historical Background:**

In ancient India, dowry was closely associated with the concept of stridhan, which referred to property voluntarily given to a woman at the time of marriage. This wealth was legally considered her own and served as a form of financial security (Kumar, 2019). Dowry during this period was not a demand but a customary exchange of gifts between families. (Srinivas, 1984). It symbolized affection, social bonding, and economic support rather than exploitation. The origin of dowry in India can be traced back to ancient traditions where gifts were given voluntarily to the bride at the time of marriage. These gifts were meant



to provide economic security to women after marriage. (Agarwal , 1994). Over time, however, the practice evolved into a mandatory transfer from the bride's family to the groom's household (Srinivas , 1984). In agrarian societies, dowry became closely linked with property rights. Since women were often excluded from inheriting family land, ( Agarwal, 1994). dowry functioned as a substitute form of inheritance. This paper suggests that the prevalence and value of dowry payments increased significantly during the twentieth century, particularly between 1930 and 1975, ( Anderson, 2003; Billing, 1992). The proportion of marriages involving dowry doubled and average payments rose sharply. During the medieval period, dowry began to shift from voluntary gifts to structured transfers of wealth. Social hierarchies, caste endogamy, and status competition intensified the practice. ( Chowdhury , 2007). Over time, the bride's family became increasingly responsible for financing marriages, reinforcing patriarchal norms.( Kishwar, 2003).

### **Literature review:**

Scholarly research on the dowry system highlights its complex socio-economic and cultural dimensions. Early studies emphasize the historical role of dowry as *stridhan*, a form of women's property that provided financial security (Agarwal, 1994). However, over time, this voluntary practice transformed into a compulsory transaction embedded in patriarchal structures (Srinivas, 1984). Research by Anderson (2003) explains the paradox of rising dowry in India despite modernization, attributing it to economic development and increased competition in the marriage market. Similarly, Billig (1992) introduced the concept of the "marriage squeeze," suggesting that demographic and social imbalances contribute to rising dowry demands. Dalmia (2005) further analysed dowry as an economic transaction influenced by the groom's education, occupation, and social status. Studies focusing on regional and cultural dynamics reveal that caste endogamy and social hierarchy play a crucial role in sustaining dowry practices (Chowdhry, 2007). Palriwala (2009) highlights how globalization and migration have reshaped marriage transactions, linking dowry with broader economic processes. Donner (2008) also points out the role of middle-class identity and consumerism in transforming dowry into a symbol of status. Research on gender inequality emphasizes the structural implications of dowry. Agarwal (1994) argues that women's exclusion from property rights reinforces dowry as a substitute for inheritance. Kishwar (2003) critiques the persistence of gender injustice despite legal reforms. Rao (1997) connects dowry-related pressures to domestic violence, particularly in rural contexts.

Recent studies indicate the phenomenon of "dowry inflation," where increasing education and economic aspirations lead to higher dowry expectations (Subramanian, 2023; Teerink, 2015). Jethwaney (2020)



further argues that modern marriages are increasingly commodified, with dowry functioning as an economic negotiation rather than a cultural ritual. Overall, the literature suggests that while the form of dowry has changed over time, its underlying function as a mechanism of social stratification and gender inequality remains largely intact.

### **Objectives of the study:**

- To examine the historical evolution of the dowry system from traditional to modern Indian contexts.
- To analyse the transformation of dowry practices in contemporary Indian marriage institutions. And
- To understand the relationship between marriage markets and socio-economic status, it focuses on gender bias in family structure.

### **Methodology:**

This study is based on a qualitative and analytical approach using secondary data sources. The research relies on the basis on existing literature, including books, journal articles, and Comparative analysis to understand differences between traditional agrarian societies and contemporary urban settings. The study also focuses on a historical perspective to trace the transformation of dowry practices over time. The methodology focuses on interpreting socio-economic patterns, cultural norms, and institutional changes influencing the dowry system.

### **Expansion of the Dowry System in the Modern Era in the Indian Marriage System:**

In the modern era, particularly from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, a significant expansion of the dowry system can be observed in Indian society. Despite structural changes such as economic development, urbanisation, and the spread of education and urbanisation, the dowry system did not decline; rather, it became more deeply entrenched in a transformed form. (Anderson, 2003). Studies show that during this period, both the prevalence of dowry and its monetary value increased significantly, a phenomenon often referred to as “dowry inflation” ( Subramanian, 2023). One of the main reasons behind this trend is the growing competition in the marriage market, where highly educated and professionally established men generally demand higher dowries. (Teerink, 2015). In other words, dowry demands are largely based on the economic status of the groom. (Dalmia, 2005). As a result, marriage has increasingly taken on the



characteristics of an economic transaction alongside its social and cultural significance. (Jethwaney, 2020). Furthermore, the rise of the middle class and the spread of consumerist culture have further strengthened this practice, as families use dowry as a means of displaying social status and economic prosperity. (Donner, 2008). Additionally, modern technology and mass media have indirectly contributed to this trend by encouraging consumer aspirations and material desires. (Palriwala, 2009). Thus, in the modern era, the dowry system has evolved beyond its traditional framework into a complex socio-economic institution.

In contemporary India, dowry has become a nearly obligatory practice. What was once voluntary has now turned into an expectation shaped by social pressure and negotiation. (Kishwar, 2003). At present, it is deeply embedded in arranged marriages, where the economic status of the groom plays a significant role in determining the amount of dowry (Kharub, 2013). Dowry has increasingly become a symbol of social prestige and status. Families use it to display their wealth and to secure advantageous marital alliances. (Donner, 2008). As a result, “dowry inflation” has emerged, where grooms with higher education and better professional status demand higher dowries, often beyond reasonable expectations. (Subramanian, 2023).

In other words, modernization has not eliminated the dowry system; rather, it has contributed to its expansion. Economic development has increased income inequality, turning marriage into a competitive market where dowry functions as a bargaining tool. (Jethwaney, 2020). In particular, higher education among men has increased their “marriage market value,” leading to higher dowry demands. This trend reflects the commodification of marriage, where educational qualifications are translated into financial expectations. Even today, the dowry system persists due to deeply rooted patriarchal norms that devalue women. (Kishwar, 2003). Women are often viewed as economic burdens, and since their financial contribution is considered limited, dowry is seen as a form of compensation. (Agarwal, 1994). This clearly highlights gender-based inequality.

Moreover, dowry is closely linked to caste-based marriage systems. Endogamy (marriage within the same caste) restricts economic transactions within the same social group, thereby maintaining social hierarchies and limiting social mobility. (Chowdhury, 2007). Despite the influence of modernity, this practice has not changed significantly; rather, it has taken on a new form.

### **Impact of the Dowry System in the Contemporary Indian Society:**



In contemporary India, the impact of dowry can be observed in a somewhat different form, which differs from traditional practices. Earlier, agricultural land or cash held greater importance, but now it has transformed into luxury goods such as electronic appliances, luxury furniture, cars, etc. (Donner, 2008). However, this dowry system still places immense financial pressure on the bride's family, often pushing them into debt and poverty. (Kaur, 2004). Many families begin saving for dowry from the birth of a daughter.

Even today, dowry-related violence such as harassment, domestic abuse, and dowry deaths remains a serious social problem (Rao, 1997), and dowry has been identified as a major cause of violence against married women. However, there is another issue: in contemporary society, dowry is often disguised as "gifts" or "voluntary contributions," allowing families to bypass legal restrictions while continuing the practice. (Kishwar, 2003).

Although urbanisation has taken place, changes in mindset have not fully followed. As a result, in some cases, love marriages and inter-caste marriages have increased, which sometimes reduces the influence of dowry. Nevertheless, dowry still exists in modern marriage systems. (Chowdhury, 2007). Online matrimonial platforms have further formalized the marriage market, where factors such as income, education, and social status indirectly influence dowry expectations.

One of the most significant consequences of the dowry system is the increasing financial burden on families with daughters. (Agarwal, 1994). In many societies, parents consider daughters to be a burden because having a daughter means they must start saving years in advance to meet expected dowry demands for marriage. (Kaur, 2004). In many cases, due to the pressure of dowry, families are forced to take loans or sell property, which may sometimes be their only asset. (Kishwar, 2003). Thinking about their daughter's happiness, they even sell that, which further strengthens their economic insecurity and poverty. Therefore, especially in low-income and rural families, it creates serious pressure on household resources, and many families begin to see their daughters as a burden. (Agarwal, 1994). On the other hand, in urban contexts, this financial pressure is often reflected through expensive consumer goods, luxurious wedding ceremonies, and gifts such as houses or cars for the newly married couple. The commercialization of weddings has increased social competition, which has also raised the cost of marriage. The economic pressure created by dowry expectations also affects family decisions regarding education, savings, and daily expenses. The financial burden of dowry further reinforces structural inequalities in society. Families with daughters often face more financial difficulties compared to those with sons, which increases gender-based economic inequality. The dowry system is closely linked to



broader patterns of gender inequality in Indian society. (Rao, 1997). By placing financial responsibility on the bride's family, dowry strengthens the perception that daughters are an economic burden, while sons are economic and social assets. This perception influences gender roles, inheritance, and social values within the family. In many families, sons are expected to support parents in old age, while daughters are seen as temporary members who will eventually move to their husband's family. Such attitudes affect investment in girls' education, healthcare, and overall well-being, and due to dowry pressure, many families prioritize sons over daughters.

Although women's access to education and employment has improved in urban areas, the persistence of the dowry system shows that patriarchal attitudes in marriage institutions have not weakened. (Donner, 2008). As a result, even highly educated women face dowry expectations during marriage. In other words, the dowry system functions as a mechanism that reproduces gender inequality across generations. It strengthens traditional gender hierarchies and limits women's economic independence. (Agarwal, 1994). From a historical perspective to the present day, in both rural and urban societies, the dowry system continues to influence the social position of women. In many cases, married women become victims of fatal violence or suspicious circumstances due to dowry-related conflicts. However, due to social stigma or shame, many victims do not have the courage to speak out or seek legal help. Because of financial dependence, lack of family support, and societal pressure to preserve marriage at any cost, many women remain trapped in abusive relationships.

To address dowry-related violence, it is necessary to enforce laws, increase social awareness, and provide support to victims. In some cases, love marriages may also help reduce such practices. Empowering women through education, employment, and legal protection can help eliminate the risk of dowry-related abuse in society.

### **Proposed Solutions:**

Although legal measures provide an important provision for addressing dowry-related crimes, their effectiveness depends on broader social change, increased awareness of women's rights, and the need for stronger institutional support systems. That is the persistence of the dowry system in India has compelled the government to adopt various legal measures to prevent dowry-related exploitation and violence. A formalised law in this regard is the 'Dowry Prohibition Act', which declares the giving, taking, or demanding of dowry in connection with marriage as a criminal offense. (Kishwar, 2003). This law broadly defines dowry to include property, valuable goods, or financial assets that are transferred from



one family to another as part of marriage arrangements. In addition to this law, various provisions of the Indian Penal Code also address dowry-related offenses. These include laws related to dowry harassment, cruelty against married women, and dowry deaths. (Rao, 1997). The purpose of these legal frameworks is to protect women from economic exploitation and domestic violence arising from dowry demands. However, despite the existence of these laws, their effective implementation remains a major challenge. (Kaur, 2004). The social acceptance of dowry practices often discourages families from reporting violations to authorities. As a result, in many cases, dowry transactions are presented as voluntary gifts exchanged during marriage ceremonies, which makes it difficult for law enforcement agencies to prove legal violations. (Donner, 2008). Moreover, this issue is not limited to rural areas alone; it exists in both rural and urban societies and persists in the present day. It contributes to placing women in a lower position within the social structure.

### **Conclusion:**

In contemporary India, the dowry system reflects a complex interplay of tradition, modernity, and economic change. Its persistence demonstrates that legal reforms alone are not sufficient to completely eliminate this practice. A broader transformation in societal attitudes, greater awareness of gender equality, and the empowerment of women through education and economic independence are essential to challenge and ultimately eradicate the dowry system. Only through the combined efforts of legal, social, and cultural measures can the institution of marriage become more equal and just. Paying attention to this is extremely important, because marriage is a beautiful institution through which we can improve other aspects of society and help move it forward in a way that ensures equal dignity and progress for both women and men.

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