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## दहेज: Dowry and Its Repercussions on Indian Society

*Lindy Miller*

In Dudu, a small village in the Indian state of Rajasthan, the bodies of three sisters and their children were found at the bottom of a well in the spring of 2022. Kalu, Kamlesh, and Mamta Meena stated in their suicide letter, “We don’t wish to die but death is better than their abuse. Our in-laws are the reason behind our deaths. We are dying together because it’s better than dying every day” (CBS 2022).

The Meena sisters married three brothers of the same family as child brides. As is the custom in rural areas, the sisters stayed in their family homes after marriage until their 20s and then moved in with their husbands’ family, bringing their dowries with them. For years, the sisters’ husbands and in-laws physically beat and verbally abused them in order to extract more dowry. The abuse worsened when the sisters’ family was unable to meet the growing demands. Sardar Meena, the sisters’ father, stated, “We had already given them so many things, you can see them in their home” (CBS 2022). He described the beds, TV, and refrigerator he had gifted to his daughters’ husbands. “I am the father of six girls, there is a limit to how much I can give. I had educated them and just doing that was difficult” (CBS 2022).

The difficulty and stigma of divorce trapped the sisters in their abusive relationships. “Once they were married, we thought they should remain in their marital homes, to maintain the dignity of the family,” Sardar said. Sardar retrieved the bodies of Mamta and Kamlesh, who were both pregnant, and Kalu and her two young boys: four-year-old Harshit and an infant. The

police arrested the three brothers, their mother, and sister on charges of dowry harassment and dowry deaths.

The efforts made by the Indian government to eradicate the practice of dowry have been unsuccessful. Why has dowry maintained its hold on Indian society, and how can the government mitigate its damaging and sometimes deadly effects? While the root of this problem can be traced back to patriarchy, dowry can be used as a microcosm to better understand why certain patriarchal practices have maintained prevalence despite development and government discouragement. This paper argues that by transitioning from prohibition to heavy regulation, the government could create better support for those who experience dowry abuse. Legalization creates opportunities for better management and documentation, providing legal aid for women before abuse can occur.

## Context

In 1961, India passed the Dowry Prohibition Act. However, dowry has continued to be practiced and, in fact, increased over the decades (Chiplunkar et al 2021). The Prohibition Act defines dowry as “any property or valuable security” given by either party in connection with a marriage. Dowry, or *dahej* in the Hindi language, is the transfer of wealth from the household of the bride to that of her groom. Dowry, to a large extent, drives who will marry whom in India. High-value grooms—men with higher education, proper caste, upstanding family, a government job, fair complexion, or with greater height—can demand more in dowry.

In the past, dowry looked different. Because married women would move out, parents rarely gave them immovable property in their inheritance. Instead, they gave movable property that they could take with them at the time of marriage. As they moved into their new household, they brought a sort of pre-mortem inheritance. Technically, the dowry is the bride’s property. However, dowry has evolved in a patriarchal environment, becoming something to secure a marriage and benefit the in-laws rather than the bride. Women no longer have control over their inheritance, and in most cases, it is no longer considered an inheritance at all.

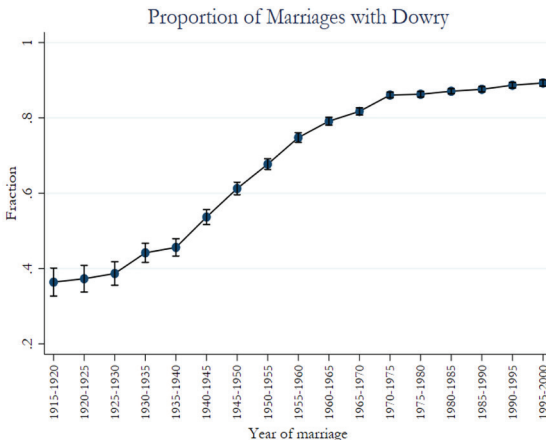
Despite being illegal, dowry remains a significant problem in India. Husbands and their families demand excessive transfers of wealth and gifts from their in-laws as a part of the marriage agreement. These demands can involve significant abuse, violence, and even murder. Most cases of dowry harassment take place among Northern, middle-class families. In 2022, 6,753 women died—almost 20 every day—due to dowry harassment. This includes women who were murdered or felt compelled to take their own lives (National Crime Records Bureau 2021). Compared to the 1.4 billion people currently living in India, this figure seems statistically

small. However, the patriarchal system and the apathy of many in law enforcement result in many unreported or unprosecuted cases, and the abuse doesn't always end in death. In addition to murder and harassment of brides, there are many cases of dowry-related infanticide. Dowry abuse is prevalent enough to shape Indian culture and media, often making an appearance in Bollywood cinema.

Despite the dangers dowry can bring, it also can have positive impacts on some of the women and families who participate in it. Women who bring dowry into the marriage are less likely to experience poverty and often have more say in the family finances (Teays, 1991). This tends to be more correlative than causative—wealthy families buying their daughters' marriage into wealthy families—but dowry gifting can help secure economic security. It can give less “desirable” brides a chance to compete for “better” grooms. But with these benefits come a host of potential problems, which largely stem from dowry greed. While beneficial to some, in the modern practice of dowry, “brides are more often controlled by rather than controllers of property” (Teays 1991).

Dowry practice has seen a significant increase over the years, even after its prohibition in 1961. While the increase has tapered recently, as shown in Figure 1, 90% of Indians continue to practice dowry (Chiplunkar et al 2021). In nearly every other case across the world, countries abandon dowry as they develop economically. What makes India different? The many crimes and tragedies associated with dowry and its unmodern, shameful appearance create a significant incentive for the government to take steps towards ending the practice. Why has the legislative effort failed?

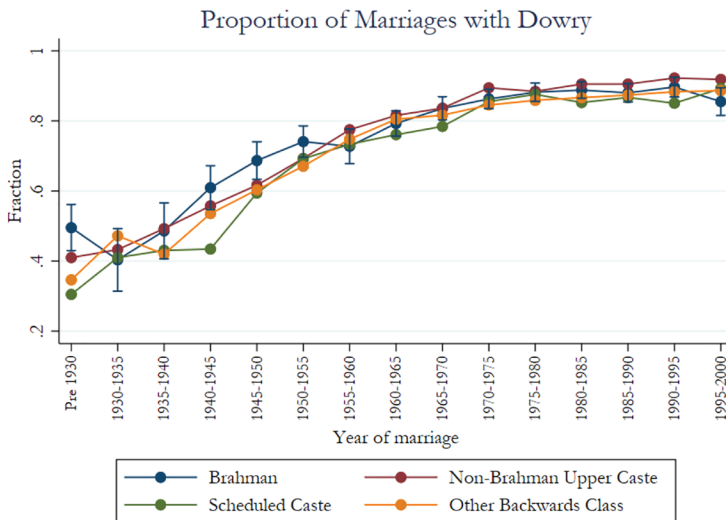
Figure 1. Chiplunkar et al, 2021



## Sanskritization Theory

Some have proposed Sanskritization as an explanation. A term coined by Prof. M.N. Srinivas, an Indian sociologist, Sanskritization refers to the process of adoption of upper caste practices into lower castes as an effort to increase standing. Traditionally, dowry was practiced among the priestly Brahmin caste, the highest and most powerful within the caste system. Hoping for social mobility, lower castes began to emulate the upper castes, adopting traditions and practices such as dowry. Its practice has increased in all classes, so it could explain some micro-level behavior. If Sanskritization alone explained the rise in dowry practice, we would see the rise concentrated in the lower castes. When separating the rise of dowry by caste, there is a consistent rise between caste groupings.

Figure 2. Chiplunkar et al, 2021

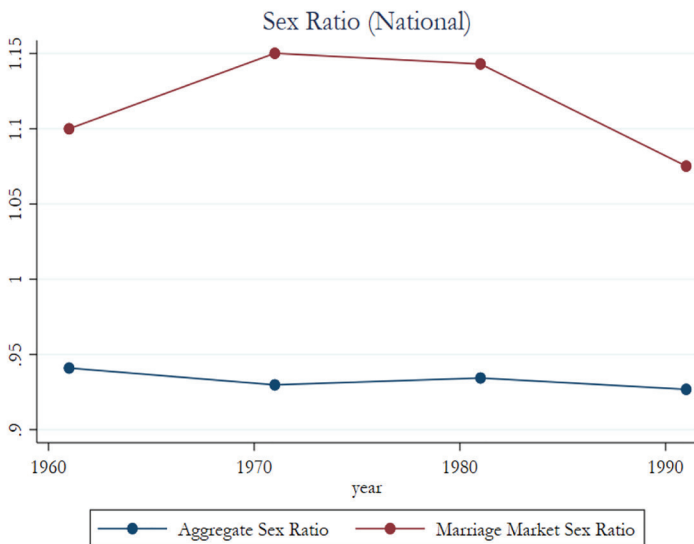


## Marriage Squeeze Theory

The second theory is labeled the marriage squeeze, which explains the rise in dowry practice through population imbalance. In 1990, the sex ratio in India was 94 women for every 100 men (Chiplunkar et al, 2021). But the marriage market sex ratio—sex ratio based on average marriageable age—shows a switch in the competing vs competed for sex, 107 women for every 100 men. Men traditionally get married at an older age than women:

25 years and 19 years, respectively. As India's population grows exponentially, each generation's population is larger than the last; thus, there are more women of marriageable age than men. There is a greater population of women than men looking to get married. Apply the laws of supply and demand, and it can be assumed that women and their families, looking to compete for grooms, turned to dowry. This theory is not wholly satisfying, as there is flexibility in the marriage age, but it could explain some pressures that women and their families experience.

Figure 3. Chiplunkar et al, 2021



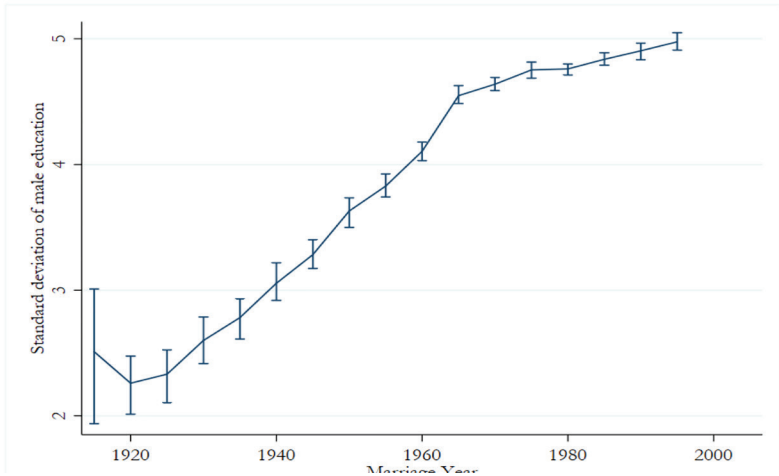
### Groom Price Theory

The third theory is the idea of groom price. Often, the dowry amount agreed upon directly correlates to the groom's "market price." To determine a groom's price, various factors are considered: Is he from an acceptable caste? Does he have a good job? Did he go to a good school? As India developed, as shown in Figure 4, education became more accessible; as a result, the average groom's price increased, and dowry became more widespread. At the same time, if a dowry negotiation failed, women and their families were now more likely to find another groom with similar qualities, creating a more negotiable dowry. While dowry practice has increased,

high-value dowry payments are declining. What used to be almost two years of annual income has dropped to one in recent years (Chiplunkar et al, 2021), making dowry cheaper. Dowry can be practiced by more because now it is affordable and therefore accessible. This theory, though still imperfect, has proven to be the most stable when applying it to the big picture.

**Figure 4. Chiplunkar et al, 2021**

Dispersion of education (overall)



No single explanation can diagnose an issue this complicated, but the underlying patterns supporting dowry over the years are helpful when attempting. For most Indians, when asked why they practice dowry, they would credit tradition, the same reason you might get if you asked brides in the Western world why they wear white. But this practice goes much deeper because of the economics and social systems to which it is connected. Families often pay over Rs. 30,000 for their daughters' marriage, about \$370 USD, or the equivalent of a full year's worth of wages. In turn, families encourage their sons to receive more in dowry, perhaps giving them more education, to recover or exceed their losses.

The vicious cycle is this: Women are considered an economic burden on her husband's family, despite the large amount of unpaid labor she provides, and so dowry is given as a way to "make up for" the supposed burden. Her family, a full year's salary poorer, sees proof of the economic burden of women. Her in-laws, a full year's salary richer, see proof of the economic boon of having a son. This perpetuated cycle, along with groom price, is more than enough to maintain and grow dowry practice. It also contributes to the rate of female infanticide. The price of gold is one way

to track this connection. Ninety percent of dowry payments include gold (Chiplunkar et al 2021), and studies show that dowry costs rise almost proportionally with gold prices, with no change in earnings or cost of living (Teays 1991). As gold becomes more expensive, dowry becomes more expensive, which in turn makes daughters more expensive. After 1985, a 1% rise in the global price of gold led to an extra 33,000 “missing” female births over the next few years (National Crime Records Bureau). Tests to determine a fetus’ sex are illegal in India for this reason, but it is common for families to pay a doctor for the service.

### Exploring Solutions

Because dowry is a large contributor to the accepted worth of women and girls in society, it needs to be minimized as much as possible, either through fewer or cheaper dowries. There are many hurdles in accomplishing this. Though the Dowry Prohibition Act specifies that Dowry Prohibition Officers should “prevent, as far as possible, the taking or abetting the taking of, of the demanding of, dowry,” there have been very few cases of action being taken against dowry by officers, and it continues to be demanded and paid openly. The 90% of Indians practicing dowry includes those in law enforcement. The government is fighting thousands of years of cultural and religious practice with an ineffective and inconsistent police force. What is the benefit of the law if there is no enforcement? Can a new law be written regarding dowry?

By switching the focus from prohibiting dowry to regulating dowry, the Indian government can better achieve the goals that motivated the Prohibition Act. Better records mean better data for further studies. Additionally, requiring a written contract and evidence of negotiated price could increase a woman’s standing in her home. The records then would act as a prenuptial agreement, making dowry a woman’s inheritance again. This would give her greater say in the family’s finances, and in the case of abuse, she would have property that she can take with her if she needs to escape a harmful situation. Including a cap on the expense of dowry, such as a percent of the family’s annual income, would minimize the importance of dowry on a marriage agreement. Cheaper dowry would mean less expensive daughters, hopefully decreasing sex-selective abortion and infanticide. If groom price is a large driver of dowry, then a focus on increasing the worth of brides could balance the scales. Education for women could help create that balance. When confronting problems with deep cultural roots, legislation must be flexible. With better records, the Indian government can track the effects of the new laws and adjust accordingly.



Expanding the dowry question exposes the fact that prohibiting deeply ingrained cultural practices does not always give the expected outcomes. But by using cultural fluency and working with the traditions of the area, governments can steer the practices and minimize violence against minority and marginalized groups. Exploring the theories behind dowry's continued hold on Indian society creates well-informed and effective actions. The theories of Sanskritization and groom price would call for vastly different solutions, one focusing on upper caste behavior, and the other looking at the socioeconomic and education status of a wider population. While there continues to be need for further research, through case study and historical comparisons, the stories of the women affected—women like Kalu, Kamlesh, and Mamta Meena—are enough to prove the need for change.

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