

Dowry as a Social Problem

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 15 May 2019

Keywords

Social evil dowry etc.

ABSTRACT

Marriage is an integral part of society, a source of joy and festivities as well as of new beginnings. Yet, one of the longest standing evils associated with marriage from a woman's point of view in the Indian society is the Dowry system. Despite a lot being said and done against the custom, it is still prevalent in the 21st century, in both subtle and obvious ways. The root of a host of social atrocities against women, the custom of presenting dowry is the crudest expression of the male-dominance in the society. It is most often the mandatory custom of a girl's parents having to provide a considerable amount of cash, gold in the form of jewelry, electronic equipment, movable or immovable properties, to the groom and his family, at the time of marriage.

1. Introduction

Although the origin of the custom lies with parents trying to assure financial stability for their daughters, in current perspective it has translated into parents paying up for the assurance of well-being of their daughters. The jewelry and cash that a bride brings with her from her parents' house is often referred to as "Streedhan" and in theory is the property of the girl, but in reality it is often treated as their rightful due by the groom's family. The sum to be paid as dowry has no set standard, the yardstick greatly depends on the groom's profession/social standing and is often perceived as the groom's family as the compensation of efforts they have made to educate their boy. In a more subtle perspective, one may define this custom as the unquestioned idea that the girl's family is inferior in standing with the boy's family, no matter what her qualities are. Thus they need to be on their best behavior and offer lavish "gifts" to please the boy's family. This ideal is so ingrained in the psyche of a large number of Indians, they either practically ruin themselves financially in order to pay for the appropriate price of the chosen groom, or make a bid to eradicate the prospect of this financial burden by selective gender-biased abortion or female infanticide. This exploitative system that has turned the custom of giving gifts and well wishes into a compulsory demand for money, respect and subjugation, is the one of the major contributing factors hindering the growth of the Indian society where being a woman is still viewed synonymous to being a burden.

2. Causes of Dowry System

1. **Greed Factor** – dowry demands often is exemplary of the collective greed of the society. Extortion in the name of social standing, compensation for the cost of groom's education, his financial stability is a key feature of Indian marriages. Demands are put forward shamelessly and are expected to be met with silence. Threats of withdrawing the proposal looms on the bride's family's head at the cost of losing face in the community, and portions of the agreed upon sum is often demanded before the actual ceremony.
2. **Society Structure** – the dowry system is largely the manifestation of the patriarchal nature of the Indian

society where men are considered superior to women in aspects of physical and mental capabilities. With the backdrop of such societal structure, women are often considered second-tier citizens, fit to assume only domesticated roles. Such perceptions are often associated of them being treated as a burden in economic terms first by the father and then by the husband. This feeling is further compounded by the dowry system which fuels the belief that girl child is a potential cause of drain of family finances.

3. **Religious Dictates** – Religious constraints imposed by the society on marriage customs, mainly suitability of groom have a contributing factor towards the dowry problem. These constraints do not condone inter-religious marriages or even between different religious sects and a suitable groom has to be found from the same religious backgrounds. These restrictions limit the number of suitable matches. Boys of marriageable age with desirable qualifications become a prize and this in turn encourages the practice of the catch being caught by the highest bidder.
4. **Social Constraints** – Aside from similar religious backgrounds, further constrains are imposed based on caste system and social status. Practices like caste endogamy and clan exogamy, has to be kept in mind while arranging a match. Preferred matches have to belong to the same caste, different clan and same or higher social standings. These limitations again severely deplete the pool of marriageable men leading to similar consequences for demanding dowry.
5. **Social Status of Women** – the inferior social standing of women in Indian society is so deep-rooted in the psyche of the nation, that this treatment of them as mere commodities is accepted without question, not only by the family but by the women themselves. When marriage is viewed as the ultimate achievement for women, evil practices like dowry takes its roots deeper in the society.
6. **Illiteracy** – lack of formal education is another cause for the prevalence of the dowry system. A large number of women are deliberately kept from schools either due to certain superstitions or from the belief

that educating girls will take away from their eligibility as good wives.

7. **Propulsion Towards Adhering to Customs** – Indians value traditions a lot and they tend not to question customs. They follow traditions blindly and provide dowry because it is the norm handed down through generations.
8. **Urge to Show Off** – dowry is often a means for showing off social stature in our country. One's worth in society is often measured by how much one spends in daughter's wedding or how much gold one gives to them. This perspective heavily justifies the practice of dowry demands. The boy's family in turns gains new heights of social standings based of the amount of dowry their new bride brings in which is indicator of how desirable their boy was in the marriage market.

3. Effects of Dowry System

1. **Short Term Effects of Dowry System** – these effects of the dowry system are immediate and are a permanent fixture in the daily news.
 - a. **Injustice towards girls** – dowry bears a huge financial obligation for the bride's family. As a consequence, a girl child is viewed a possible source of drain on the family's finances, ultimately an onus. This view evolves into gigantic proportions taking the shape of infanticides and feticides of girl child. Girls are often marginalized in the areas of education where boys of the family are given preference. They are thrust towards domestic chores from a very early age. A host of restrictions are imposed on them in the name of family honour and they are made to stay indoors. Child marriages are still practiced because age is counted as an index of purity. It also stems from the belief that young girls can be better molded into the household roles than older girls. The amount of dowry increases according to the girl's age, fuelling the practice.
 - b. **Violence against women** – contrary to hopeful parents, dowry is often not a one-time pay up. Demands are continuously made by the husband's family who consider the girl's family as a never ending source of finance. Inability by the girl's family often leads to verbal abuse, domestic violence and even deaths. Brides being burned by the in-laws are hardly a novelty in this country. Continuous physical and mental torture instigates women to go into depression and commit suicide. 2016 figures indicate that in India, 20 women die every day due to dowry related issues.
 - c. **Economic burden** – getting a girl married is associated with a hefty amount of money by Indian parents due to direct or subtle demands for dowry by the groom's family. Families often borrow heavily, mortgage properties leading to major decline in economic health.
 - d. **Gender inequality** – the idea of paying dowry in order to get a girl married generates an increased sense of inequality among the genders, placing men superior to women. Young girls are kept from schools while their brothers are given access to education. They are regarded incompetent for roles other than housework and are often discouraged from taking up jobs. Their opinions are suppressed, not valued or ignored more often than not.

Physical and behavioral restrictions are imposed on girls that are completely natural for boys.

2. **Long Term Effects of Dowry System** – the short term effects lead to the following long-term consequences

- a. **Gender imbalance** – the much abhorred practices like abortion of female fetuses and killing of girl babies have resulted into an unnaturally skewed child sex ratio (CSR) in India. In states like Haryana and Rajasthan where these practices are most prevalent, the CSR stands at 830 girls per 1000 boys. This in turn leads to peculiar practices like polyandry and an increase in violence against women.
- b. **Loss of self-esteem in women** – in a country which has experienced centuries of inferior attitude towards women, it is very hard to maintain a high level of self-regard if you are a woman. Naturally, women themselves are bound in the shackles of an idea that they are incapable of any contributions to the society. Their sense of self-worth hits rock bottom and they are increasingly subjugated to injustice.
- c. **Status of women** – practices like dowry are social evils and a huge deterrent towards improvement of social status of women in India. Inferiority of women has been impressed upon the minds of the nation time and again by the demands of dowry.

4. Solutions to Dowry System

1. **Law** – several laws have been enacted to prohibit the practice of dowry and the injustice against women stemming from it. The Dowry Prohibition Act was passed on 20th May, 1961 with an aim to eradicate the evil practice from the society. The act declares not only the practice of accepting dowry unlawful, but also penalizes giving of the same. It includes property, valuable security like cash and jewelry exchanging hand during the marriage. Making demands of dowry is punishable by a minimum imprisonment of 5 years and a minimum fine of 15,000 rupees. Incidences of cruelty by the husband or his family against the wife have been addressed in the Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code and Section 198A in the Criminal Procedure Code. Section 113A added in the Indian Evidence Act further provides the family of the bride to charge the husband's family of abetting suicide of their daughter within 7 years from the date of marriage.
2. **Enforcement** – it is never enough to just introduce acts and amend sections to fight against a social evil. This requires strict and ruthless enforcement of such laws. That aspect still leaves a lot to be desired. Although such allegations are taken very seriously by the authorities, lack of proper investigative procedures often leads to the accused going free. The government needs to ensure a zero-tolerance policy for such offenders and ensure enforcement of the law through systemic changes.
3. **Social Awareness** – creating a widespread awareness against the evils of the dowry system is key first step towards eradicating the practice. Campaigns should be designed to reach the deepest strata of the society and aim to spread

knowledge about the legal provisions against dowry. There also is the need to promote the need for educating the girl children.

4. **Education and self-dependence of women** – education is not just required to find your vocation in life, it is essential to gain eyes and ears to a world beyond the one you can immediately see. It is important or all of us to emphasize on educating the girls in order to fight widespread social evils like dowry. Knowledge of their rights will enable them to speak up against practice of dowry and ongoing marginalization. They will also be able to strive for self-dependence and not view marriage as their only salvation.
5. **Overhaul of mindsets** – India as a country requires major overhaul of its existing mindsets in order to push back against the iniquitous custom of dowry. They need to realise the fact that in today's society women are perfectly capable of doing anything that men can. Women themselves need to come out of the belief that they are inferior to men and they need to depend on men to provide for them.

5. Conclusion

It very well might be reasoned that endowment a social detestable exists in the society. Society keeps on sustaining

the distinction between a young lady and a kid with the end goal of marriage, and it is this differentiation, which makes the share framework, flourishes. It is very dismal, that in our general public, a female is viewed as a weight to a

family or a risk for her folks. She is considered as a more vulnerable segment in our general public. On the off chance that we find the cause of share we find that during the antiquated period the endowment framework was obscure.

Vedic period was the brilliant time of ladies. Since marriage was viewed as fundamental for young ladies. During marriage the custom of kanyadaan was a fundamental angle, 'dakshina' as gold coin and money was given to the husband to be. This was done out of

love and affection. After the Vedic period 'Smriti's' and 'Manu Smriti's' pictured ladies in subordinate situation to men. Her instructive rights were denied and afterward she was considered as a trouble. Later with the developing pressing factors of the Islamite's upon

India, position of ladies had further deteriorated. They were to live in purdah. Her whole rights were grabbed. She just held her privilege of stridhan. Later the British had attacked India, they forced expenses. Thus the situation of ladies had further corrected. Extraordinary reformers like Gandhi, Raja Ram Mohan Roy and so forth battled for ladies opportunity. It was solely after nineteenth century that ladies opportunity and solidarity development took energy.

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