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**A STUDY ON MARRIAGE AND DOWRY IN
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A Study on Marriage and Dowry in Modern India

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Abstract – Marriage in India is nearly universal, traditionally endogamous in terms of caste, monogamous for both legal and social reasons, and most commonly arranged by the parents or close relatives of the bride and groom (e.g., Harrell 1997; Srinivas 1984; Uberoi 1994). Weddings are lavish social occasions, usually paid for by the family of the bride, and may entail a significant transfer of wealth from the family of the bride to the bride, the groom, or the groom's family referred to as dowry.

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INTRODUCTION

Traditional dowry consisted mainly of clothing, jewelry and household items; recent trends which emphasize cash or large consumer items are often thought to be related to stiff competition for grooms and are sometimes termed groom-price (Caplan 1983; Srinivas 1984).

Indian society traditionally prescribes different social roles for men and women in relation to marriage and the family (Boserup 1970; Goody and Tambiah 1973; Srinivas 1984; Uberoi 1994). Women are expected to leave their natal homes at marriage to live with the family of the groom, to whose customs they are expected to adapt. Although education and job opportunities are increasingly accessible to women, most Indian women remain housewives. Traditionally, daughters receive their share of inheritance as dowry at marriage, whereas sons receive their share on the death of their father (Basu 2001; Goody and Tambiah 1973; Uberoi 1994).

Although equal inheritance by all children is now stipulated by law (Basu 2001; Diwan and Diwan 1995) in practice it is rarely implemented. There are also important regional and caste differences in India which influence choices of spouses, marriage-related expenditures, and relations between in-laws. North Indian, and especially Northwest Indian, tradition emphasizes village exogamy, hypogyny, separation of the bride from her natal family, and subservience of the bride to her husband and in-laws (Malhotra et al. 1995; Miller 1981; Sharma 1993). Dowries were historically given by high and middle castes, and wedding expenses were traditionally paid by the bride's family. In recent decades, very high dowries including demands for cash and consumer items have become increasingly common in North India e.g., Miller 1981; Oldenburg 2002; Sharma 1993. In contrast, women in South India are more likely to marry cousins or other close kin, to settle relatively near their parents, and to have significant interactions with their natal families after marriage (Malhotra et al. 1995; Miller

1981; Uberoi 1994). Whereas dowry was historically given in the priestly and business castes, among peasant castes marriage costs were often split between the families of the bride and the groom, and in low castes the tradition of bride price was common (Shenk 2005b; Srinivas 1984). In recent decades, marriages with close relatives have declined sharply, bride price has been replaced by dowry, and joint expenditures on weddings have become less common (Caldwell et al. 1983; Kapadia 1995; Shenk 2005b; Srinivas 1984). Yet brides continue to have frequent contact with their natal families after marriage, and dowries have remained at more moderate levels than in the North.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

The Nussbaum (2004) study provides minimal supporting evidence in how dowry influences or impacts literacy rates except for the fact that it limits women's opportunities or life chances whereas the Srinivasan and Lee (2004) study explores women's attitudes towards the dowry system in the Northern province of Bihar where dowry is rooted in culture and tradition but does not provide evidence in regards to how the dowry system influences or impacts female literacy rates.

Nussbaum argues (2004), "dowry is a major cause of women's poor life chances in India". She posits two reasons to back up her stance on the issue; one that speaks of a girl child as a drain on family resources, and the other that speaks of how the practice can be used as grounds to extort additional money from the girl's family at a later time, which if not met, can lead to domestic violence and death.

The fact that the author views dowry as one of the major reasons why women in India have fewer opportunities does speak for itself. However, Nussbaum (2004) does not provide convincing evidence to back up her stance on the subject matter of dowry as she has not shown in her writing how dowry can cause women to have limited

opportunities. She does not delve deeper into the subject but explores it on the surface. She also does not provide specifics of the kind of opportunities that are limited as a result of dowry. It is assumed that when she says, women in India have poor life chances what she means is that women have fewer opportunities when it comes to education, career, and employment.

The rise of the dowry system among Muslims of sub-continent appears to date back only some decades. White (1992: 102) and Rozario (1992: 134) note that the prevalence of the system reflects a change over the last two generations, following the independence of Bangladesh. Dowry was previously practiced mainly in urbanized, more affluent classes. The „tyranny of dowry“ existed in urban areas since the late 1960s, but has now spread to rural populations (Alam and Matin, 1984:7).

Like many other customs and social institutions in subcontinent, dowry is said to originate from Hindu customs. Traditional Hindu law recognizes several types of marriage; the most approved being the Brahma form, where the bride's father gives her away without any consideration (Jhabvala, 1981: 18). In the Brahma form, the bride's father offered his daughter adorned properly, but was under no compulsion, and these gifts were given to the daughter personally (Apte, 1978: 201). Such voluntary gifts were to provide economic security for the daughter in her new home and were considered as stridhan (property of the woman). Ahmed and Naher (1987: 137) refer to Brahma marriage as dowry or joutuk marriage and argue that, though this form was once confined to Brahmins, it later became accepted by other castes.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

The objectives of current research are as follows:

- To study the impact of dowry system on female literacy rates.
- To study the consequences of dowry system on Indian society.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

Quantitative data collection consisted of a survey administered to 403 married men and women between the ages of 45 and 70. Survey respondents came from a broad range of social classes and from all of the major caste groups in Bangalore. The sample is approximately evenly divided between upper-caste Brahmins and Vaishyas, dominant middle-rank peasant castes such as Gowdas and Lingayats, and members of traditionally low-status, “backwards” castes and former untouchables (predominantly Madigas and Holeyas). Although members of higher castes tend to be better educated and have higher incomes, caste and class designations are far from synonymous, and there is a great deal of variation in

education and income within castes as well as overlap across castes in the sample. The survey collected data on education, occupation, income, and other relevant characteristics of the respondent, his or her spouse, their children, and their children's spouses. It also collected detailed information on the marriages of the respondent and the respondent's children.

Two measures of dowry are used in this study. The first, value of gold, was constructed by multiplying the weight of gold given in grams by the price of gold in rupees (Rs.) during the year of marriage. Gold is used relatively commonly in the literature as a measure of dowry (e.g., Rao 1993; Edlund 2006; Shenk 2005b) because it is universally given, typically one of the most expensive items in a dowry, 252 Hum Nat (2007) 18:242–263 strongly correlated with the overall value of goods transferred at marriage, and politically uncomplicated to discuss (Shenk 2005b). The second measure, total marriage costs, reflects the rupee amount reported by the respondent as being spent on all marriage-related gifts and functions combined. It is used to capture dowry effects that may be obscured by focusing only on gold. Both variables are adjusted for inflation using the Cost of Living and Consumer Price Index numbers for Madras (1940–1949) and Bangalore (1950–2002) found in Statistical Abstract, India (Government of India 1940–1945, 1946–1957, 1958–2002).

Average values for these and other variables used in this study can be found in Table. All dowry amounts are given in 2002 Rupees. Education: Education variables were coded and analyzed in culturally appropriate units, each representing a level of meaningful academic attainment of approximately 2.5 years (details in Shenk 2005b). Educational levels can be easily transformed into years of schooling when appropriate, and summary statistics and logistic regression units are in years of education for ease of interpretation. Income Bangalore is an urban area, and virtually all men and many women in my sample were engaged in wage labor; those who were not typically owned businesses that returned a regular income. Most respondents were able to provide plausible and consistent income figures, and other methods of assessing wealth were judged by the research team to be less reliable. The income variable reflects income in rupees per month as given by the respondent. In cases where no income was given, it was estimated as the average monthly income of those in the sample with the same occupation.

CONCLUSION:

The media certainly has power to influence and create awareness of social issues like dowry in the Indian society and may highlight certain problems to policy-makers on the national and international level. Although this study is very limited and it would require a much larger sample to draw any conclusion about newspapers attitudes to dowry-related issues, it may

still indicate that journalists employ certain frames when constructing stories about dowry and informing the public about dowry issue in the Indian society.

The aim for choosing certain frames, such as the many crime reports and only a few in depth stories in this sample, may simply be motivated by agendas of newsworthiness. Deeper discussions on dowry as a social and economic problem in the Indian society may not be considered of interest to the public or good for marketability, while crime reports have a more sensational value. The small number of in-depth stories of dowry became newsworthy when they involved the involvement of a high profile in the society or addressed larger public concerns. Although a more comprehensive study of how Indian newspapers select and frame dowry-related is needed, the small sample of this study may indicate that an important social issue like dowry is not always taken seriously by the media, but is addressed for market interests rather than for the purpose of influencing politicians and the general public.

The content analysis of the news items in the two newspapers shows that Indian journalists often provide detailed information about the contexts of dowry-related crimes. Almost all crime reports (92 percent) informed that the victim and/or the victim's parents filed a case against the offender, which in most cases were the husband and the in-laws. It is important to note that the incidents of dowry-related violence which reach the media have often been reported. to the police and the journalists are merely informing about news they have in their turn received from authorities. What is not paid attention to by the newspapers and is difficult to find information about are dowry-related crimes that are conducted in the private sphere and never reported to the police. The high number of cases that are reported to the police and taken to court in this sample may not be representative of a social reality in the Indian society but merely reflect that newspapers merely report on crimes that are already in the hands of legal authorities.

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