

Dowry didn't go away

Don't talk of it as an evil from our past that we successfully eradicated

By Priya Ramani

1. Introduction

- The metaphor of a woman "on fire" reflects the grim reality of dowry-related violence in India.
- Despite legal bans, dowry continues to claim lives.
- Families often blame themselves for not being "generous enough" in providing dowry.

2. Statistics & Reality

- **NCRB 2022 data:**
 - **6,450 dowry deaths** reported (17.6 deaths every day).
 - Equivalent to one dowry death every 81 minutes.
- Real numbers likely higher.
- Dowry rarely makes it to mainstream headlines despite the scale of violence.

3. Case Examples

- **Nikki Bhati (2016):**
 - Victim of dowry killing along with 16 others on the same day.
 - Faced torture, harassment, and eventually death by in-laws.
- Reflects how educated, financially independent women are still vulnerable if dowry expectations are unmet.

4. Structural Issues

- Dowry persists across **all religions, castes, and classes**.
- It is not restricted to rural/urban divide.
- Seen as a way to "transfer resources from bride's to groom's family."

- System treats women as liabilities unless they "bring" dowry.
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5. Social Commentary

- **Brinda Adige (activist):** Dowry demand & giving is “prevalent in every religion, caste, every class.”
 - Jeffrey Weaver (sociologist): Dowry is a systemic issue, not just a cultural leftover.
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6. Violence & Consequences

- Women killed, harassed, forced into suicide, or burned alive.
 - Dowry-related cruelty continues despite awareness campaigns.
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7. Resistance & Change

- Individual stories of resistance:
 - A math teacher petitioned police to curb marriage questions on dowry.
 - A woman fought a dowry case, later became a **Supreme Court lawyer**.
 - **Padma Shri awardee Archana** spoke against dowry.
 - Suggested reforms:
 - National awards to activists fighting dowry.
 - Stronger enforcement of laws.
 - Changing cultural attitudes through films like *Malayalam film Joji*.
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8. Conclusion

- Dowry is **not an old evil eradicated**, but an ongoing reality.
- Society must **acknowledge and act** against it rather than dismiss it as past history.

1. Sociology of Marriage & Family

- **Institution of Marriage** → Dowry highlights persistence of patriarchy; marriage often becomes exchange of property rather than union of equals.
- **Functionalist View** → Dowry once functioned as inheritance for daughters in patrilineal systems. Today it is dysfunctional, producing violence, deaths, and social disruption.
- **Conflict Perspective (Marxist Lens)** → Dowry = economic transaction rooted in property relations & male dominance, reinforcing women's subordination.
- **Feminist Perspective** → Dowry = patriarchal control + commodification of women. Symbolises women as "burdens" who must be compensated for in material goods.

2. Social Stratification

- **Caste & Class Dimensions**
 - Prevalent in caste-based arranged marriages → helps preserve status and hierarchy.
 - Middle class uses dowry as a status symbol (M.N. Srinivas' concept of **status anxiety**).
- **Intersectionality**
 - Women face **double oppression**:
 - as women in patriarchal society
 - as members of lower/middle classes where marriage = only path of upward mobility.

3. Social Change & Modernization

- **Persistence despite modernity** → Dowry continues even with urbanisation, education, women's employment.
- **Cultural Lag (Ogburn)** → Laws exist (Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961), but social norms still favour dowry.
- **Technology & Media**
 - Campaigns like Beti Bachao and films like Joji spread awareness.
 - Yet, structural inequalities and patriarchy blunt their impact.

4. Deviance & Social Control

- **Dowry Deaths** = extreme deviance within the family institution.
 - **Formal Social Control** → Laws like Dowry Prohibition Act (1961), IPC Sec 498A.
 - **Informal Social Norms** → Patriarchal kinship networks & customary practices override legal prohibitions → weak enforcement.
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5. Key Sociological Concepts

- **Commodification of Women** → Women valued by material dowry, not identity/education (e.g., Nikki Bhati case).
 - **Patriarchy & Son Preference** → Daughters seen as drains → reinforces sex-selective practices.
 - **Cultural Capital (Bourdieu)** → Families treat dowry as honour/status maintenance.
 - **Anomie (Durkheim)** → Conflict between legal norms vs cultural norms → creates normlessness, sustaining the practice.
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Paper 2 – Indian Society: Structures & Issues

1. Caste, Kinship & Marriage

- **Patrilocal & Patrilineal families** → dowry entrenched in kinship.
 - **Hypergamy** → dowry as a way to secure higher-status alliances.
 - **Endogamy** (caste-based marriages) → sustains dowry for preserving caste purity and social prestige.
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2. Social Institutions in India

- Marriage becomes an **economic transaction** rather than sacred union.
 - **Dowry vs Bride Price Transformation** → reflects **loss of women's economic value** over time.
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3. Gender & Social Issues

- **Gender Inequality & Violence** → NCRB (2022) reported 6,450 dowry deaths (~17/day).
- **Illusion of Empowerment** → Even educated, independent women (Nikki Bhati) fall victim, showing structural norms overpower individual autonomy.
- **Women's Resistance** →

- Teacher petitioning police against dowry.
- Woman lawyer fighting dowry → became Supreme Court advocate.
- Padma Shri awardees raising voice.

4. Development, Modernization & Cultural Lag

- **Contradiction of Modernity** → Education, nuclear families, UPI etc. should weaken dowry, but **consumerism & status display** strengthen it.
- **Education Paradox** → Higher groom education → higher dowry demand.

5. State, Policy & Social Change

- **Legal Measures:** Dowry Prohibition Act (1961), IPC 498A, Women Protection Laws.
- **Ineffective Deterrence:** Weak enforcement, patriarchal bias in police/judiciary.
- **Structural Change Needed:** Beyond individual agency → systemic reforms.
- **Cultural Tools:** Media, films, awards, campaigns → shape public discourse and counter regressive norms.

Conclusion

- Dowry is **not a relic of tradition but a systemic reality** in India.

True eradication demands:

- **Structural transformation** of kinship & patriarchy
- **Resocialization** through education & media
- **Stronger institutional enforcement**
- **Empowerment beyond economics** → redefining gender relations.

Reasons for continuity of dowry in modern India

1. Deep-Rooted Cultural & Traditional Factors

- **Patriarchal Norms:** Marriage is viewed through a transactional lens where women are “given away” (kanyadaan) to another family. This reinforces the idea that the bride's family must compensate the groom's family for taking on a “burden.”

- **Ritual Justification & Customary Obligation:** In many communities, giving dowry is sanitized as a traditional practice or even a religious duty (dharma), often mislabeled as "streedhan" (a woman's wealth), though it is rarely under her control.
- **Status Symbol:** Providing a lavish dowry is a powerful way for a family to display its wealth and enhance its prestige and social standing within the community.

2. Pervasive Social Pressures

- **Hypergamy and Upward Mobility:** The practice of hypergamy (marrying into a higher caste or socio-economic class) leads families to use dowry as a tool to "buy" what they perceive as a better and more prestigious alliance for their daughters.
- **The Marriage Squeeze:** A severely skewed sex ratio in certain states has created a deficit of women. Ironically, this intensifies competition among brides' families for the fewer eligible grooms, allowing groom's families to command higher dowries.
- **Community Pressure and Sanction:** The fear of social ostracization is a powerful motivator. Families that refuse to give or take dowry may face gossip, criticism, or even have difficulty finding a match, thereby reinforcing the practice.

3. Economic Rationalizations and Incentives

- **The Groom Price Phenomenon:** With economic development, grooms with higher education or stable government jobs are treated as "appreciating assets." This has caused a transition from bride-price to dowry, where a premium is paid to access a groom's future earning potential ("dowry inflation").
- **Consumerism & Rising Aspirations:** Dowry has become a convenient mechanism for the groom's family to acquire liquid wealth, property, and luxury goods like cars, apartments, and high-end electronics without direct cost.
- **Perceived Inheritance Share:** In a patrilineal society, daughters have been historically excluded from inheriting parental property. Dowry is often rationalized as an upfront, pre-mortem substitute for a woman's rightful share in her parental wealth, even though laws now grant her equal inheritance rights.

4. Weak Legal Enforcement and Institutional Failure

- **Weak Implementation of Laws:** Despite strong laws like the Dowry Prohibition Act (1961) and sections 498A/304B IPC, enforcement is poor. Police reluctance to register cases, lengthy and expensive legal battles, and low conviction rates significantly reduce deterrence.
- **The Misuse Debate:** Isolated cases of alleged misuse of anti-dowry laws have been used to create a counter-narrative that paints all cases with suspicion. This debate has, unfortunately, diluted the seriousness of the law and reduced social stigma around the practice.

5. Underlying Gender Inequality

- **Economic Dependence of Women:** Low female labor force participation and significant wage inequality perpetuate the perception of women as financial burdens, thereby justifying the "need" for a dowry to offset this cost.
- **Control over Women's Agency:** The system of dowry legitimizes and reinforces male dominance and control over economic resources and decision-making within the marriage and the household.

6. Modern Transformations Reinforcing Dowry

- **The Education Paradox:** An educated groom does not necessarily reject dowry; instead, his qualifications often become a reason to demand a higher amount, as it is seen as compensation for his investment in education.
- **Urbanization & Globalization:** Rather than eradicating dowry, these forces have transformed it. Demands now include modern assets like cars, foreign visas, and funds for emigrating (NRI marriages), giving the practice a new, globalized form.
- **Media & Social Display:** The glamorization of extravagant "big fat Indian weddings" on social media and in popular culture normalizes excessive spending and gift-giving, indirectly sustaining dowry-like practices.

Conclusion: A Vicious Cycle

The practice continues because it is embedded in a **self-perpetuating cycle**:

1. A family pays a large dowry to secure a "good" groom for their daughter.
2. This sets a new benchmark for their community, raising the standard for what is considered an "appropriate" dowry.
3. The same family, now with sons to marry, expects a similar or larger dowry to "recoup" their costs and maintain status.
4. This cycle repeats, inflating demands with each generation.

Breaking this cycle requires not just stricter law enforcement but a fundamental shift in social attitudes toward women's value, a rejection of patriarchy, and the promotion of equitable inheritance practices. Education and empowerment that challenge the very roots of the tradition are essential for its eventual eradication.