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## **The Dowry System and Education of Female Children: Attitudes Examined in Bihar, India**

IN Indian society marriage is considered to be a religious sacrament in which a father offers his daughter to a bridegroom's parents as 'Kanyadhan' (giving away the daughter). And as "Vara dakshina" is of supreme importance after "Kanyadhan", the evil system of dowry has gradually perpetuated in India. The transaction of wealth in the terms of 'Stridhan'(gifts given to the bride before or after marriage) along with a woman in marriage and 'Vara dakshina' offered to a bridegroom, a girl's parents and other kin do have a considerable sense of elevation of prestige of the donors and of the woman. It also helps the newly wed couple to establish their own household (Paul, 1986).

According to NFHS (1993) results, 77 per cent of women in Bihar said that cash is generally given as a dowry. Among those who said that cash was given as dowry, 32 per cent gave less than Rs. 10,000, 37 per cent gave Rs. 10,000 to 24,999 and 31 per cent gave Rs. 25,000 or more. Originally, "Dakshina" meant only the money paid and the gold given but dowry has grown in size to include a host of other things such as kitchen utensils, consumer durables like television, refrigerator, scooter, car and even a house. In Bihar (NFHS, 1993) for instance, the most common items given as dowry other than cash are radio or transistors (66 per cent), cycle (65 per cent) and utensils (64 per cent). Twenty nine percent of women said that generally in their families' furniture such as cots, chairs, and sofa sets, dining tables and cupboards are given to daughters at marriage.

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In Indian society so much importance is placed on getting a girl married that parents of unmarried girls are willing to meet any demand in order to get their daughters married. Further, as parents take utmost care in providing happiness to their daughters even after marriage, they do not mind offering a good amount of dowry. According to Mamoria (1969) in the Indian situation the amount of dowry is generally regulated by the social and economic status of the bridegroom's father. Although this attitude is still continuing, there is a slight change in the focus of mate selection. Now more importance is given to the socio-economic background of the groom rather than that of his parents, which however has not altered the practice of dowry. On the other hand, dowry demands are also being made at various stages such as at the time of the birth of children and on festival occasions. Even with an increase in the educational status of women and in the overall improvement of their status in the society, the practice of dowry still prevails. Researchers (Hooja, 1969; Rajaraman, 1983) are of the view that the growth of the dowry system in India seems to be the result of higher education among males and their increased participation in the organised sector. Hence, education instead of eradicating the evil, has worsened it to a greater extent.

While analysing the causes of marriage change in South India, Caldwell *et al.* (1983) observed that parents generally desire their daughters to marry educated men with urban jobs. But in a seller's market created by relative scarcity, there is no alternative but to offer dowry with one's daughter.

The problem of dowry is felt more among the middle class families than in the low and high class families, as they are the ones who are caught in between the dilemma of adapting either the rich one's way of life or the lower one's style of living. It has been observed by Paul (1992) that among Delhites the demand for dowry was more (41.7%) among the medium socio economic status (SES) households, followed by low (21.7%) and high (5%) SES households.

In 1961 the Indian Parliament passed the Dowry Prohibition Act (Government of India, 1961), under which "if any person gives, takes or abets the giving or taking of dowry they shall be punishable with imprisonment upto six months or a fine of Rs. 5000 or with both". However, the dowry system is still prevalent in most parts of India and continues unchecked because the laws are not effectively implemented.

Even prior to the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, the Bihar Dowry Restraint Act was passed in 1950. However, in Bihar the dowry system is still very much in evidence and there has been an alarmingly high incidence of dowry deaths from 1981 onwards. From nine in 1981 the dowry deaths has increased to 153 in 1986 in Bihar against less than 10 in Kerala. Harassment of brides because of non-payment of dowry (dowry assault) has also increased from 54 in 1981 to 274 in 1986 (Sinha, 1984). Dasgupta and his associates (1981) observed that dowry related problems usually arise out of

contexts such as failure to pay the remaining instalments of dowry, inability to fulfil extra demands made by the bridegrooms' family about the gifts or items given by the girl's parents.

Hence, the only way to tackle this problem is to understand the attitude of the people towards the dowry system and thereby modify our strategies accordingly. Keeping this in view, the paper tries to examine the following two issues in the state of Bihar.

- (1) To understand the attitude towards women towards the dowry system and the plausible factors associated with it; and
- (2) To unearth the relationship between the attitudes of women towards the dowry system and education of their daughters.

The information regarding the attitudes towards the dowry system and education for daughters were collected from the ever married women in the age group 13-49 by the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) in Bihar in 1992-93. In total, 5949 ever married women aged 13-49 years were interviewed and their views are analyzed in this paper. The basic finding is that still more than one-third of the ever married women (36.7 per cent) approve of the dowry system.

### **Current Age and Attitude towards Dowry System**

Age is an important demographic factor which influences most of the social issues in any society. Dowry being one of the serious social problems being faced by our country, the attitude towards this system is examined with regard to the current age of women (Table 1). It is generally expected that over the years the attitude towards dowry would definitely change due to the modern values built in by the modernization towards the status of women. However, it is observed that women aged less than 19 years disapprove of the dowry system less (62.1 %) as compared to women in the age group of 45-49 (64.9%). The insignificant variation in the attitude of the people over the years calls for further strengthening of the movement against dowry.

### **Religion and Attitude towards Dowry System**

It is generally argued that most of the social issues are governed by the religious affiliations. To understand a part of that the attitude towards dowry is studied among women of different religions. The results reveal that Hindu women disapprove less (62.6%) as compared to Muslims (66.3%) and those belonging to other religions (68.9%). A significant chi-square value also supports the relationship between

religion and attitude towards dowry system. Although it is difficult to explain the religious difference in the attitude towards dowry, a part of it could be explained after controlling for the socio-economic background of the women.

TABLE 1: WOMEN'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS DOWRY SYSTEM BY BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Attitude towards dowry system</i>		
	<i>Approve</i>	<i>Disapprove</i>	<i>N</i>
<i>Current Age</i>			
<=19	37.9	62.1	783
20-24	38.0	62.0	1224
25-29	35.3	64.7	1133
30-34	37.1	62.9	944
35-39	35.5	64.5	710
40-44	37.1	62.9	579
45-49	35.1	64.9	565
<i>Religion*</i>			
Hindu	37.4	62.6	4901
Muslim	33.7	66.3	920
Others	31.1	68.9	121
<i>Caste*</i>			
Scheduled Caste	40.8	59.2	599
Scheduled Tribe	31.8	68.2	477
Others	36.7	63.3	4866
<i>Education of Women*</i>			
Illiterate	39.9	60.1	4650
Literate-primary	30.4	69.6	627
Middle complete	30.7	69.3	185
High School +	16.6	83.4	480
<i>Place of Residence*</i>			
Urban	22.8	77.2	866
Rural	39.1	60.9	5076

Exposure to Mass Media*			
Not exposed	39.0	61.0	4186
Exposed	31.4	68.6	1753
Bearer of Marriage Expenses*			
Bride's family	35.6	64.4	4804
Bridegroom's family	40.5	59.4	261
Both Families share	41.7	58.3	865
Total Number of Living Daughters**			
0	38.3	61.7	1983
1	37.1	62.9	1715
2	35.0	65.0	2244
Type of Relationship Before Marriage*			
Not related	36.0	64.0	5509
Related	46.2	53.8	428
Standard of Living*			
Low	39.2	60.8	3784
Medium	36.4	63.6	1554
High	21.9	78.1	604
All	36.7	63.3	5942

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Note: \* Chi-square value significant at 5% level. \*\* Chi-square value significant at 10% level.

### **Caste and Attitude towards Dowry System**

Different caste groups prevalent in our society have different cultural practices. To meet the demands of the community certain caste groups favour dowry while others do not. To understand this, the views of the different caste groups are examined. The scheduled tribe women and forward caste women disapprove more (around 63%) as compared to scheduled caste women (59.2%). According to Dharam Vir *et al.* (1990) the practice of dowry is non-existent among many tribes. Hence, the scheduled tribe women are more likely to disapprove the dowry system compared to those belonging to other caste groups. A high chi-square value also supports this argument.

### **Place of Residence and Attitude towards Dowry System**

Due to the industrialization and modernization it is expected that those living in urban areas are more rational towards the social problems compared to their rural counterparts. With this view, the place of residence of women is related with their attitude towards dowry system. As expected women from urban areas disapprove more (77.2%) as compared to those residing in rural areas (60.9%). A high chi-square value also suggests a strong association between the place of residence and the attitude towards dowry system.

### **Educational Attainment and Attitude towards Dowry System**

In the present day's modern world the level of education, especially of women has a multi faceted role to play in changing the traditional attitude of the society towards various social problems which are as old as society itself. It is expected that as the education of a woman goes up her values attached to the prevailing norms would accordingly change to suit her role in improving her own status in the family and as well in society. To understand this the educational attainment of women and their attitude towards dowry system are tabulated. The results reveal that illiterate women disapprove of the dowry system less (60.1%) compared to those educated upto primary (69.6%) middle (69.3%) or high school and above level (83.4%). This clearly reveals that as the education of a woman increases she would be rational in thinking about the negative aspects of dowry and hence would disapprove the dowry system to a greater extent. A significant chi-square value also supports the above argument between education and the attitude towards dowry system.

### **Bearer of Marriage Expenses and Attitude towards Dowry System**

Nowadays, more than treating marriage as a religious sacrament, society gives importance to the way in which marriages are celebrated. Hence, the expenditure of the marriage goes up day-by-day as a lot of social prestige is attached to it. As a matter of fact, a majority of the marriage expenses in India are borne by the bride's family, alone. In Bihar, 81.0 percent of the marriage expenses are borne by the bride's family, 4.4 percent by the bridegroom's family and 14.6 percent by both the bride and bridegroom's families. This shows that the problems of arranging a marriage puts the bride's family to considerable financial strain. And hence it is expected that they would disapprove of the dowry system to a greater extent. The results reveal that women from families where the marriage expenses are borne by the bride's family disapprove of

the dowry system more (64.4%) as compared to those where the marriage expenses are borne by the bridegroom's family (59.4%) and by both the families (58.3%). A significant chi-square value also supports the relationship between these two variables. Another factor that has encouraged the pernicious system of dowry is that a boy's parents justify their demands stating that they in turn, would have to give dowry to get their own daughters married.

### **Exposure to Mass Media and Attitude towards Dowry System**

Mass media has its own role to play in bringing about the needed social change in society. With an increase in industrialization and modernization, there is a significant advancement in science and technology and thereby the electronic media has become a major source of communication. However, the newspapers too have still a significant contribution in disseminating the knowledge to the masses. According to NFHS (1993) 5.2 per cent of ever married women visit cinema/theatre at least once a month, 12.7 per cent watch television at least once a week and 25.9 per cent listen to the radio at least once a week. Overall, nearly two-thirds of ever married women are not regularly exposed to any mass media. By combining the three sources of communication i.e. newspaper, radio and television in this paper, women are grouped as those exposed to any of the mass media and those who have not been exposed. These two groups of women are cross-tabulated with their attitude towards dowry system. It is observed that women who are exposed to mass media disapprove more (68.6%) the dowry system as compared to those who are not exposed (61.0%). A significant chi-square value also strengthens this argument. This to an extent points out the need for further strengthening the role of mass media to eliminate the evil practice of dowry.

### **Number of Surviving Daughters and Attitude towards Dowry System**

In India as the problem of dowry lies only with the girl's parents it is expected that the attitude of women with a girl child would be different from those who do not. Hence women are grouped as those with no surviving daughters, one surviving daughter and two surviving daughters and are cross tabulated with their attitude towards dowry system. The results indicate that as expected women with two surviving daughters disapprove of the dowry system more (65.0%) as compared to those with one surviving daughter (62.9%) and those with no surviving daughter (61.7%), which is also found to be statistically significant at 10% level. Interviews with people in Madurai district of Tamil Nadu (Elangovan, 1986) have revealed that female infanticide is still being practised by the poorer sections of society because they cannot

afford to pay dowry. Hence, this calls for an immediate attention towards the issue of dowry system in Bihar.

### **Type of Marital Relationship and Attitude towards Dowry System**

In Bihar seven percent of the marriages are arranged within relatives. Although the practice of dowry is prevalent irrespective of the marital relationship, it is generally expected that among marriages within relatives, the practice would be slightly less as compared to marriages outside relation. This could be partly attributed to the fact that to keep the relationship intact, some compromises would be made in finalising the dowry amount. Further, there may not be much pressure from the relatives to pay the dowry at the time of marriage itself. However, this may not be possible in case of other marriages. Hence, it is expected that the pressure of dowry would be felt more by women who marry non-relatives. The results also reveal that women who marry non-relatives disapprove of the dowry system more (64.0%) as compared to those who marry relatives (53.8%). This variation in the attitude is also found to be statistically (chi-square value) significant.

### **Standard of Living and Attitude towards Dowry System**

It is generally felt that the concept of dowry is much popular among the rich rather than the poor. However, it is not true that there is no practice of dowry among the poor—it exists and whatever is possible is given by the bride's parents. The problem of dowry hence is different for people of varying economic backgrounds. To understand this, based on the household amenities and the possession of various items (which includes animals) a standard of living index is computed for each woman. It is observed that 64 percent of women in Bihar have a low standard of living while 26 percent and 10 percent of women have medium and high standards of living respectively. When related with the attitude towards dowry system, it is observed that women with a low standard of living disapprove of the dowry system less (60.8%) as compared to those with medium (63.6%) and high standards of living (78.1 %). This variation is also found to be statistically (chi-square value) significant. Earlier studies (Prasad, 1994; Ahuja, 1987) have also shown in Bihar that it is the middle class which is most adversely affected by the dowry system and also dowry deaths are found more in this group.

### **Multivariate Analysis**

In order to understand the true influence of each of the selected explanatory variables on the dependent variable a multivariate technique is used. Since the

dependent variable i.e. attitude towards dowry system is dichotomous, (Approve-0, Disapprove-1), a logistic regression model is applied. A few dummy variables are created for those explanatory variables which have more than two categories. The variables used for the logistic regression with their measurements are given in Table 2.

The logistic regression results reveal that among the selected explanatory variables, residence, marital relationship, surviving daughters, education of women, religion and caste are found to significantly influence the attitude towards the dowry system (see Table 3). To be more specific the odds ratio of the attitude towards the dowry system (ratio of those who approve vis-a-vis those who do not approve) is significantly lower in the case of urban residents (0.50 times) as compared to their rural counterparts. Similarly, disapproval of the dowry system is more in the case of those with two surviving daughters than those with no surviving daughters or those with one surviving daughter. Muslim and Scheduled tribe women are found to disapprove the dowry system more than Christians, Sikhs and Non-Scheduled caste/Scheduled caste women respectively. If the marriage expenses are borne by the bride's family they disapprove of the dowry system more as compared to those where the bridegroom's family takes care of the expenses. This clearly reveals the pressure of the dowry system on those parents who have a girl child. As expected, women with high school and above level of education disapprove of the dowry system to a greater extent than those women who are illiterates and those educated up to primary or middle school level. In case with the marital relationship of the couples, those who married relatives found to disapprove of the dowry system more than those married non-relatives.

In a nutshell, from the policy point of view, though it would be difficult to change the various religious and caste groups attitude in a short span, the need for improving female education is vital. It is generally expected that female education could cut across the attitudes of various sections of society and hence a real change can be brought about by concentrating on the ways and means of providing education to female children.

### **Consequences of the Dowry System on the Attitude towards Educating Daughters**

It is generally argued that female education could solve most of the social problems faced by society. However, it is still believed that daughters are the properties of their husbands and in-laws and their parents are the trustees of that property before marriage. Therefore, it is not considered necessary to spend a lot of

TABLE 2: VARIABLES AND THEIR MEASUREMENT CONSIDERED FOR ANALYSING ATTITUDE TOWARDS DOWRY SYSTEM

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Measurement</i>	<i>Reference category</i>
Current age	Continuous	
Residential Status	1-Urban 2-Rural	
Religion	0-Hindu 1-Muslim 2-Others	Others Others
Caste	0-Scheduled Caste 1-Scheduled Tribe 2-Others	Others Others
Bearer of marriage expenses	1-Bride's Family 2-Bridegroom's Family 3-Both Families Share	Bridegroom's family Bridegroom's family
Marital relationship	0-Not Related 1-Related	
Exposure to mass media	0-Not Exposed 1-Exposed	
Standard of living	0-Low 1-Medium 2-High	High High
Education of Women	0-Illiterate 1-Literate primary 2-Middle Complete 3-High School+	High School and above High School and above High School and above
No. of Surviving Daughters	0-No <b>Daughter</b> 1-One Daughter 2-Two Daughters	Two Daughters Two Daughters

TABLE 3: FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH ATTITUDE OF EVER MARRIED WOMEN TOWARDS DOWRY SYSTEM: RESULTS OF LOGISTIC REGRESSION

<i>Variables</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Wald</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>
Current age	-2.3E-05	.0034	.0000	.9947	.0000	1.0000
Place of Residence	-.5020	.0975	26.5308	.0000	-.0561	.6053
Hindu religion	.0182	.2129	.0073	.9320	.0000	1.0183
Muslim religion	.5033	.2279	4.8754	.0272	.0192	1.6541
Marriage expenses by Bride's family	.2528	.1331	3.6099	.0574	.0144	1.2876
Marriage expenses shared by both families	-.0673	.1448	.2161	.6420	.0000	.9349
Marital relationship	-.6525	.1152	32.0585	.0000	-.0621	.5207
Low standard of living	-.1120	.1374	.6639	.4152	.0000	.8941
Medium standard of living	-.1478	.1308	1.2754	.2587	.0000	.8626
Scheduled Caste	-.0289	.0915	.0999	.7520	.0000	.9715
Scheduled Tribe	.5093	.1140	19.9401	.0000	.0479	1.6641
Exposure to mass media	.0144	.0767	.0353	.8509	.0000	1.0145
No surviving daughter	-.1472	.0742	3.9406	.0471	-.0158	.8631
One surviving daughter	-.1191	.0703	2.8694	.0903	-.0106	.8877
Illiterate	-1.0082	.1467	47.2448	.0000	-.0761	.3649
Literate-primary	-.6570	.1580	17.2882	.0000	-.0443	.5184
Middle complete	-.6974	.2061	11.4556	.0007	-.0348	.4979

money on their education as there will be no return from this expenditure (Kulkami, 1992). Further, it is generally argued that it will be difficult to find out a husband for a girl if she is highly educated. Also, a highly qualified groom will have to be paid more dowry. To test this, the relationship between the attitude towards dowry system and the attitude towards educating the daughters in the state of Bihar is examined in his paper. It is hypothesized that if the parents are having a favourable attitude towards dowry system then their attitude towards educating their daughters would be negative.

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