
THE DOWRY SYSTEM: A TRADITION TURNED SOCIAL CURSE

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ABSTRACT

The dowry system, once rooted in ancient tradition as a form of inheritance or support for brides, has transformed into a damaging social evil that continues to affect millions of women across India and South Asia. This article explores the origins, evolution, and modern day consequences of dowry, highlighting how it has shifted from voluntary gifting to a system of financial coercion and exploitation. It examines the emotional, social, and economic toll of dowry on women and their families, including issues like gender-based violence, female foeticide, and mental trauma.

Despite the existence of legal frameworks such as the Dowry Prohibition Act and provisions under the Indian Penal Code, poor enforcement and societal silence allow dowry practices to persist. The article also discusses why the system remains deeply embedded in culture, despite its legal ban. Finally, it proposes realistic solutions such as education, stronger law enforcement, women's empowerment, and youth participation as key steps toward eradicating dowry.

The paper concludes that dowry is not simply a legal issue but a human rights concern, and ending it requires collective social reform, awareness, and courage to challenge harmful norms.

Origin and Evolution of the Dowry System:

The dowry system has a long and complex history that dates back to ancient civilizations. In its original form, dowry was not associated with greed or coercion but was considered a voluntary practice, often referred to in ancient Indian texts as *streedhan*. This term, meaning “woman’s wealth,” referred to the gifts, jewelry, property, or valuables given to a woman by her parents at the time of her marriage. These assets were solely hers to use and served as a form of financial security in case of widowhood, divorce, or neglect. It was a way to empower women in a time when they had little access to inherited family wealth, especially in patriarchal societies where property typically passed through the male line.

Over time, however, the noble intention behind dowry began to deteriorate. As patriarchal values deepened and women’s autonomy decreased, the control of a woman’s assets often passed into the hands of her husband and his family. What was once given out of love and support started turning into an expectation or worse, a demand. The social focus shifted from protecting the bride to appeasing the groom’s family. Marriages became transactional, with the bride’s family expected to “pay” for a good alliance through cash, gold, furniture, vehicles, or land.

The practice evolved further during colonial times, especially under British rule, when property rights for women were further restricted. This economic inequality deepened the dowry culture, as women could not legally inherit or hold property, making dowry the only form of wealth transfer available to them. However, this also made them more vulnerable to exploitation.

By the modern era, dowry became a symbol of status, pride, and social standing, with the value of dowry directly linked to the groom’s qualifications, job, or family background. Highly educated or well-placed grooms were considered more “expensive” to marry. In this way, women began to be treated like commodities, and marriage negotiations resembled financial transactions rather than sacred unions.

This shift marks the point where dowry transformed from a tradition rooted in care and respect to a harmful system of oppression and control. Today, it has become a major cause of gender-based discrimination, abuse, and financial burden. Understanding this evolution is crucial to dismantling the cultural and social norms that continue to support the dowry system in the 21st century.

Development of Dowry System:

Babylon:

To truly understand the roots of the dowry system, we need to travel back thousands of years to ancient Babylon a powerful civilization where one of the earliest legal codes, the Code of Hammurabi, recorded dowry as a well-established tradition. Even back then, dowry wasn't a new or unfamiliar idea. It was already woven into the way society functioned.

In Babylonian culture, daughters usually didn't inherit property from their father's estate the way sons did. So, when a girl got married, her parents gave her a dowry a collection of goods, money, or property. This wasn't just a gift; it was meant to secure her future, to ensure she had some financial stability in her new life. In a way, it was her family's way of protecting her once she left their home.

Interestingly, Babylon practiced both bride price and dowry. Bride price was what the groom gave to the bride's family, and dowry was what the bride's family gave to her. But in many cases, the bride price ended up being added to the dowry, making the financial transaction quite complex. These customs were not just emotional or cultural they were written into law.

If a marriage ended in divorce without a valid reason, Babylonian law protected the woman. The husband had to return not just the dowry she brought but also the bride price he had given. But if the divorce was legally justified say, for infidelity or abandonment then the return of the dowry could be contested.

Another notable part of this system was how the dowry was handled during the marriage. The husband managed it as part of the household's wealth, but legally, he couldn't claim ownership. The dowry was seen as the wife's safety net it was meant to support her and her children if anything happened to the marriage. At the husband's death, the wife had full rights to her dowry.

And if the wife passed away without children, the dowry went back to her original family her father if he was alive, or her brothers if not. If she had sons, they would inherit it equally. These rules show that, even in ancient times, there was an effort to keep the dowry tied to the woman's bloodline and her future security.

Though times have changed, understanding how dowry functioned in early societies like Babylon helps us see where the practice began—and how far we still need to go in making sure it doesn't harm the very people it was once meant to protect. Ancient Greece:

As we trace the journey of dowry through time, we find that it played very different roles in different civilizations. In Ancient Greece, the dowry system didn't start immediately. Early on, during the Archaic period, families followed a tradition of giving a bride price a payment from the groom's family to the bride's family.

In Greece, the husband gained some legal control over the dowry, but interestingly, the wife could also bring personal property into the marriage that wasn't part of the dowry. This separate property was called *paraphernalia* meaning it remained hers alone and was not to be managed by the husband.

In societies where dowries had to be returned if the wife was harmed or died soon after marriage, it gave the husband a reason to treat his wife well. No one wanted to lose money or face shame by returning a dowry. So, in a subtle way, it acted as a check against abuse.

Fast forward to modern Greece, dowries were part of life until 1983, when legal reforms finally removed them from family law, signaling a major cultural shift toward equality and modernization.

Meanwhile, in the Roman Empire, the practice of giving a dowry called *dos* was deeply rooted in society. It wasn't just tradition it was seen as necessary support for setting up a new household and covering the costs of married life.

While the husband had control over the dowry, anything that the woman owned outside of it like personal belongings not tied to marriage remained her *paraphernalia*, her own separate property. This helped protect her financial identity in the marriage.

There was also *dos receptitia*, a type of dowry that had to be returned to the person who gave it after the wife's death, which created a built-in financial responsibility tied to the woman's well-being.

Families were expected to provide dowries according to their wealth, and sometimes they were paid in instalments over three years. However, some families gained respect by giving it all at

once a symbol of status and pride.

Both Greek and Roman practices show that dowry was never just about gifts. It was about power, protection, ownership, and control a system that shaped how women were seen, treated, and valued in society.

India:

The story of dowry in India is complex and debated, with different scholars offering different views about when and how it actually began. Some believe that dowry was always part of ancient Indian customs, while others argue that it wasn't significant in early times and that women had actual inheritance rights, especially when they had no brothers. These rights were often given during the marriage, allowing women to carry part of their family wealth with them when they left home.

Historian Stanley J. Tambiah argues that the ancient Code of Manu—a traditional Hindu legal text allowed both dowry and bride price, but dowry was seen as more prestigious. It was usually practiced by higher castes like the Brahmins, while bride price (where the groom's family paid the bride's) was more common among lower castes, who were not allowed to give dowry. According to Tambiah, in many cases, even when the groom's family gave something (as bride wealth), it was culturally expected to be returned as dowry to the bride—making it more of an exchange than a one-way transaction.

On the other hand, scholar Michael Wetzell challenges this idea. He suggests that in Vedic times, dowry wasn't really a significant practice, and that women could inherit property, either through formal appointment or when there were no male heirs. This points to a more equal system of inheritance in early Indian society than we usually imagine.

MacDonell and Keith, two other researchers, support Wetzell's view. They say that bride price was actually the more common practice even among the upper castes, except in rare cases—like when the bride had a visible physical defect, then a dowry might be added. Interestingly, they found that women's property rights grew stronger during the period of Indian epics, from around 200 BCE to 700 CE, suggesting an evolving role for women in family wealth.

Meanwhile, scholar Kane says that giving a bride price was tied to a certain kind of marriage (the "asura-type") which was frowned upon by ancient Hindu texts like Manu. He implies that

respectable marriages were not supposed to involve payment at all, and certainly not in the way we see dowry today.

Author Lochtefeld adds a fresh perspective. He says that when ancient texts talked about the bride being “richly adorned,” it referred to ceremonial jewellery and gifts meant for the bride herself—not payments demanded by the groom’s family. In today’s culture too, people still make this distinction: gifts for the bride are seen as part of tradition, not dowry.

What’s most fascinating is that many of these views are based on interpretations of ancient texts—not real, lived experiences. But eyewitness accounts from ancient India tell a different story. For example, Greek historians like Arrian and Megasthenes, who came with Alexander the Great around 300 BCE, wrote that dowry did not exist in Indian society at that time.

Dowry System In Different Region:

1. Islam

In Islam, marriage is considered both a sacred bond and a legal contract. This union, known as Nikah, is not just a spiritual commitment but also a mutual agreement between the husband and wife that carries specific rights and responsibilities.

Importantly, Islam strictly separates “dowry” and “dower”. While dowry (money or gifts demanded by the groom’s side) is prohibited, dower (called “Mahr”) is encouraged and required. Mahr is a mandatory gift often money or property that a husband gives directly to his wife at the time of marriage. It’s not a payment to her family, but a token of respect, honor, and financial security for the woman.

The value of Mahr is usually agreed upon by both parties before the marriage. Its purpose is to protect the woman’s financial independence and provide her with security in case the marriage ends or the husband fails to support her. In essence, Islam upholds the dignity of the woman by legally ensuring she receives support, not through dowry, but through dower as her right

2. Hinduism

In early Hindu society, the concept of dowry as we know it today didn’t really exist. Instead, in some wealthy or royal families, gifts were voluntarily given to the groom as a gesture of

goodwill. The ancient text Atharvaveda describes eight forms of marriage, of which Brahma, Daiva, Arsha, and Prajapatya were considered honorable.

In the Brahma form, a girl was married to a man of learning and good character, and her father might offer him ornaments or gifts not as demands, but as a sign of love and appreciation. These gifts were never forced, nor were they an obstacle to arranging a daughter's marriage.

However, over time especially in the Vedic period gifts to attract good suitors slowly evolved into expectations, and eventually, into pressures and obligations, giving rise to the harmful dowry system we see today in some areas.

3. Christianity

While Christian doctrine itself does not promote the dowry system, many Christian communities in India have absorbed traditions from Hindu culture over the centuries, including dowry practices. Particularly among Roman Catholics, the dowry system has taken deep root often influenced by both Hindu customs and European (Latin) traditions.

In some Christian weddings today, it's common for the bride's family to provide not just jewelry, clothing, and money, but also luxuries like furniture, appliances, and even vehicles. The bride is expected to come into the marriage fully equipped not just emotionally, but materially which puts immense financial pressure on her family.

While the practice is cultural rather than religious, its impact especially on women can be profound and painful.

Reasons For Dowry System:

Social Custom and Tradition

In many communities, dowry has become a deeply rooted tradition, passed down through generations. Families feel pressured to follow what others have done before them. Just like certain festivals, dress codes, or rituals are followed, giving dowry is often seen as "just the way things are done." Sadly, even when people know it's wrong, they go along with it out of fear of being judged or excluded by society.

Security for the Bride

Originally, dowry was meant to help the bride feel financially secure as she moved into her new home. It was seen as a gesture of love and protection from her parents, ensuring that she wouldn't be helpless if anything went wrong in her marriage. But over time, this caring intention has been twisted into a social compulsion and demand, placing enormous burden on the bride's family.

Gifts and Celebrations

Giving gifts during weddings is a natural expression of love and joy. Friends and relatives give items to the couple as blessings and memories of their bond. However, what once started as small, heartfelt gifts has now turned into lavish, competitive displays of wealth. The lines between voluntary gifts and forced dowry have become dangerously blurred.

Pressure from the Caste System

In many parts of India, caste plays a significant role in who can marry whom. Since matches must often be made within the same caste or sub-caste, families feel trapped by limited choices. This pressure makes marriages more like negotiations, where dowry becomes a tool to "seal the deal" with a desirable groom within their caste.

Rising Prices and Materialism

As the cost of living increases and society becomes more materialistic, families are tempted to use weddings as an opportunity to gain wealth. Gold, electronics, and cash are now seen as essentials rather than extras. The groom's family, facing their own financial pressures, may view the bride's dowry as a way to ease their burdens, ignoring the emotional and ethical damage it causes.

Income for the Groom's Family

In some families, sons are treated as "investments"—parents spend on their education and upbringing, not just out of love, but with the hope of "recouping" that expense through a wealthy marriage. As unfair as it is, the groom's family often demands dowry to profit from the marriage, forgetting that marriage is supposed to be about companionship, not commerce.

Prestige and Caste-Based Pride

For many families, marrying within the same caste is not just tradition but a matter of pride. If a girl marries outside her caste, it is often seen as a loss of status. To maintain this so-called honor, families offer larger dowries to secure a “suitable” match within their caste. It becomes more about appearances than the happiness or well-being of the couple.

The Modern Reality of Dowry:

In today’s society, the dowry system remains deeply rooted—not just in rural communities, but also among educated, urban families. Although in many cases the exchange is disguised as “traditional gifts” or a “cultural formality,” the truth is often much more troubling. Behind the surface of celebration and rituals lies a harsh reality: the pressure placed on a bride’s family to meet dowry expectations is intense and, in many cases, destructive.

Dowry demands are rarely as simple as giving a token amount of jewelry or household items. In reality, families are expected to provide cash, expensive gifts, gold, electronics, furniture, vehicles, or even real estate to the groom’s side. This so-called “gift-giving” is often not optional. For many families, especially those from lower or middle-income groups, the financial burden is crushing. In their desperation to meet these expectations, some families go into massive debt, mortgage their property, or even sell off ancestral land.

What makes it worse is that this pressure doesn’t end with the wedding. In many cases, the groom’s family continues to demand more items or money even after the marriage. If these ongoing expectations are not met, the bride is often the one who suffers. She may face emotional harassment, physical violence, or even be abandoned. In the worst situations, dowry-related abuse has led to burning cases, suicide, and dowry deaths, which still occur across South Asia despite legal protections.

For families with more than one daughter, the dowry system becomes a repeating cycle of anxiety and poverty. It creates a mindset where daughters are seen as financial liabilities rather than individuals with their own worth and potential. The result is not just economic harm but a deep and lasting impact on how women are valued in society.

People may say “It’s just how things are,” or “This is part of our tradition,” but traditions should never cause pain or injustice. Recognizing the ongoing harm of the dowry system is the first

step toward breaking the cycle and ensuring that marriage is a union of hearts not a business transaction.

Impact on Women: The Hidden Suffering Behind the Dowry System:

The dowry system leaves a lasting scar on the lives of countless women, even long after the wedding celebrations are over. What should be a joyous new beginning often becomes a nightmare, where a woman's worth is reduced to what she "brings" into the marriage. Her identity is tied not to who she is, but to how much gold, cash, or material goods her family can offer. This deeply unfair mindset leads to serious emotional, social, and even life-threatening consequences.

First and foremost, dowry-related violence is tragically common. If the bride's family fails to meet dowry demands either at the time of marriage or afterward the woman is often subjected to verbal abuse, emotional blackmail, and in many heartbreaking cases, physical assault. Some women are tortured or even killed in what are known as "dowry deaths." These are not isolated incidents they are part of a larger pattern of cruelty masked as tradition.

The pressure to avoid dowry altogether has led to another tragic outcome: female foeticide and infanticide. Many families, especially in areas where dowry is expected, start to see daughters as an economic burden before they're even born. This has led to a terrifying gender imbalance in some parts of the world, where sons are preferred and girls are selectively aborted or neglected after birth.

Women who survive the system often carry deep emotional trauma. Living in a household where they are constantly reminded of being a "burden" can lead to anxiety, depression, and a complete loss of self-worth. Many are silenced by fear, isolated from their families, and denied access to help or support.

In a society where a woman's value is linked to money instead of her humanity, her dignity, dreams, and independence are crushed. The dowry system doesn't just hurt women physically—it breaks them emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. Until society chooses to see women as equals and not as economic transactions, this cycle of injustice will continue.

Legal Framework And Its Limitations:

India has implemented strong legal measures to stop the dowry system—but the reality on the ground tells a different story. While these laws look powerful on paper, their impact is often watered down by poor enforcement, lack of awareness, and deep-rooted social stigma.

The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 was a major step toward justice. It made both giving and receiving dowry a punishable offense. However, in many families, dowry still happens quietly disguised as “gifts” or “traditions” and very few cases ever reach court.

Another important law, Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code, deals specifically with cruelty against a woman by her husband or in-laws, especially related to dowry. If a woman is harassed, tortured, or emotionally abused because of dowry demands, she has the right to file a complaint under this section. Yet, in many cases, women are either too afraid to report abuse or discouraged by family members who don’t want “family matters” to go public.

In 2005, the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act added another layer of legal protection. It allows victims to seek restraining orders, shelter, financial compensation, and more. But even with these legal tools, justice often moves slowly. Police sometimes hesitate to register cases, especially in small towns. Court trials may drag on for years. Worse, many victims are blamed or shamed instead of being supported.

Corruption, victim-blaming, and the fear of social isolation make it difficult for women to speak up. As a result, the dowry system continues in the shadows, despite being illegal.

Laws are important but until society changes its mindset, real justice will remain out of reach for many women.

Social Awareness and Cultural Mindset:

Changing a law is easier than changing a mindset and that’s where the real challenge lies with the dowry system. While legal measures exist, the deep cultural acceptance of dowry still keeps it alive. Many families don’t see it as a crime; they see it as tradition, as something “everyone does.” But normalizing injustice doesn’t make it right it only helps it survive.

One of the biggest barriers to ending dowry is the fear of social rejection. If a family refuses to

give dowry, they might be seen as stubborn or disrespectful. Worse, if a bride brings no dowry, she is sometimes treated as “less worthy” in her in-laws’ home. These outdated ideas are passed from one generation to the next quietly accepted, rarely questioned.

It’s also shocking how educated people, who know that dowry is illegal and harmful, still demand or accept it. This proves that awareness alone isn’t enough. Real change happens when we challenge what we’ve been taught, when we stop making excuses for wrong practices just because they are “part of our culture.”

Media, schools, and community leaders play a powerful role in transforming this mindset. Conversations in classrooms, at home, and even on social media can help young people unlearn what’s been normalized for so long.

But awareness must be followed by action. Parents must raise their daughters with confidence not as future brides who need to “come with a price.” Boys must be taught from a young age that marriage is a partnership, not a transaction. And society must celebrate marriages where no dowry is given or taken, instead of whispering about them.

True change begins when we stop asking, “What will people say?” and start asking, “Is this fair?” The dowry system lives in silence, fear, and habit. To defeat it, we must speak up, stay aware, and choose courage over custom.

Case Laws Related To Dowry:

1. Reema Agarwal v. Anupam

The Supreme Court made it clear that protection from dowry harassment and cruelty isn’t just for legally married women. Even if a marriage isn’t official, abuse is still abuse. This ruling helps more women find justice. It breaks the barrier of legality in matters of cruelty. It was a big step for human rights and gender equality.

2. S. Gopal Reddy v. State of A.P.

This case stressed that dowry demands must be proven with real, strong evidence. You can’t just accuse without facts—proof matters. The court also defined dowry as something linked directly to marriage. It protected innocent families from false claims. Justice must be truthful,

not just emotional.

3. Rithanya Case (Madras High Court, 2025)

Rithanya, a young bride, took her life after facing harassment soon after her marriage. Her voice messages to her father revealed heartbreaking pain and emotional abuse. The court criticized the police for not investigating properly. Her story shows how deeply dowry pressure can affect a woman's mental health. Her final words still echo: "I hoped life would change, but it won't."

4. Phulel Singh v. State of Haryana (2023)

This case involved a woman who died after being burned, allegedly by her husband. The court questioned her dying declaration since it was taken before a doctor certified her mental state. The evidence wasn't strong or clear enough. Because of this, the accused was acquitted. The case reminded everyone that justice depends on clear, trustworthy proof—even in painful case.

Conclusion:

Dowry is not just a social custom it has become a deadly expectation that destroys lives, dreams, and families. Through the voices of victims like Rithanya and the rulings of India's highest courts, it becomes clear that this is not merely a legal issue, but a deeply human one. Behind every case is a woman who hoped for love and respect but faced pressure, abuse, and often silence.

The judiciary has taken important steps to expand the meaning of protection by including women in non-legal relationships, demanding strong proof for accusations, and emphasizing fair investigation. Real change must begin in our homes, mindsets, and communities. Parents must stop treating daughters as liabilities, and marriage must never come with a price tag.

Until society stops normalizing dowry as tradition and starts treating it as violence, many more women will suffer in silence. This fight isn't only for lawmakers or victims it's for all of us. Ending dowry begins with choosing dignity over demands, and humanity over habit.