

Dowry and Public Policy in Contemporary India The Behavioral Ecology of a “Social Evil”

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Abstract In modern Indian political discourse the custom of dowry is often represented as the cause of serious social problems, including the neglect of daughters, sex-selective abortion, female infanticide, and the harassment, abuse, and murder of brides. Attempts to deal with these problems through legislative prohibition of dowry, however, have resulted in virtually no diminution of either dowry or violence against women. In contrast, radically different interpretations of dowry can be found in the literatures of structural-functionalist anthropology, economics, and human behavioral ecology which muster wide-ranging forms of qualitative and quantitative evidence to support functional models of dowry as a form of inheritance or investment in daughters and/or their children. This paper argues that a functionalist perspective on dowry could lead to improved dowry policy, and that an approach based in human behavioral ecology (HBE) is uniquely suited to this task. After reviewing the relevant literature on dowry in South Asia, I discuss current dowry legislation and its limitations. I then develop a behavioral ecology model of Indian dowry and test it with quantitative and qualitative data. I conclude that if dowry legislation is to achieve broad support or bring about effective social change, it must address and support the positive motivations for and effects of dowry and take a targeted approach to dowry violence, which is not uniformly distributed across regions, castes, or social classes.

Keywords Dowry · Human behavioral ecology · India · Marriage · Public policy

Social and political discourse about dowry in India is often dominated by rhetoric which claims that in its modern incarnation the practice is the cause of widespread discrimination against daughters and violence against brides (e.g., Kumari 1989;

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Oldenburg 2002; Palriwala 1989; Samuel 2002; Thakur 1998a). This theme is echoed in more reserved form in the social science literature on gender, family, and public policy in South Asia (e.g., Basu 2001; Samuel 2002; Sharma 1993; Srinivas 1984; Srinivasan and Lee 2004; Suran et al. 2004). Acceptance of this perspective among some in political power in India has led to sweeping legislation which seeks to deter the giving and taking of dowry (Basu 2001; Diwan and Diwan 1995), yet good evidence (e.g., Oldenburg 2002; Srinivasan and Lee 2004; Van Willigen and Channa 1991) attests that such legislation has had little effect on actual practices.

This characterization of dowry as a “social evil” is at odds with work in structural-functionalist anthropology, economics, and human behavioral ecology which characterizes dowry as purposeful, strategic, and often in the best interests of the parents paying the dowry and the daughter for whom it is given (e.g., Becker 1991; Boserup 1970; Botticini and Siow 2003; Dalmia and Lawrence 2005; Dickemann 1979; Gaulin and Boster 1990; Goody 1976; Goody and Tambiah 1973; Harrell and Dickey 1985). Such functional models share a focus on dowry as a form of investment, inheritance, or bargaining power directed at maintaining or improving the quality of a married daughter’s husband or children, her quality of life, or the long-term interests of her family. This literature accepts evidence for dowry as functional while debating its mechanisms and details, and often ignores the political implications of dowry.

Critiques of dowry policy have come from applied and interpretive anthropology, but not from the theoretical literature in behavioral ecology or economics. It is my intent in this paper to begin to address this gap in the literature. I argue that the paucity of communication between those who view dowry as a social evil and those who view it as a form of positive investment is a major cause of the ineffectiveness of Indian dowry policy. Treating dowry as primarily a social problem contradicts the lived reality of many Indians who use dowry and dowry negotiations to ensure favorable situations for their out-marrying daughters—and who consequently resist dowry legislation by ignoring it. Meanwhile, the failure of many theoretically oriented social scientists to address possible links between dowry, discrimination, and violence against women allows functional perspectives to be ignored and/or caricatured by political activists and policy makers. The irony of the situation is that improved academic understanding and more effective public policy both depend on the ability of scholars and activists to understand and address each other’s contentions.

Background

Marriage and Dowry in Modern India

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* (e.g., Caldwell et al. 1983; Goody and Tambiah 1973; Srinivas 1984). While there is

evidence for deep time depth in dowry practices among some social groups (e.g., Srinivas 1984; Uberoi 1994), others have adopted the practice of dowry in recent decades in response to social and economic change (e.g., Caldwell et al. 1983; Kapadia 1995; Shenk 2005b; Srinivas 1984). 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, hypergyny, 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 brideprice was common (Shenk 2005b; Srinivas 1984). In recent decades, marriages with close relatives have declined sharply, brideprice 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.

Dowry as a Social Evil

From the perspective of anti-dowry activists, dowries in modern India are bribes extorted from the families of brides to benefit the families of grooms. Proponents of this view also argue that dowry is a cause of serious social problems for women: specifically, (a) female infanticide, sex-selective abortion, and neglect of or discrimination against daughters as parents seek to avoid the high expenses they will be forced to pay to see a daughter safely married (e.g., Das Gupta 1997; Kishor

1993; Miller 1981, 2001), and (b) violence against women, particularly brides, as husbands and in-laws attempt to extort monetary transfers from the bride's parents (Kumari 1989; Oldenburg 2002; Prasad 1994; Samuel 2002).

The view of dowry as a social problem goes back to the days of the British Raj in the mid-nineteenth century when administrators in Northwest India criticized the “ruinous” spending of Punjabi peasants on wedding celebrations (Oldenburg 2002; Sheel 1999), arguing that it was the cause of the practice of female infanticide in that region. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries this critique gained currency among colonial officials and Indian reformers in other parts of the country who were working to end the custom of child marriage and the practice of female infanticide (Oldenburg 2002; Sheel 1999).

During the twentieth century, the custom of giving large dowries for educated grooms began to spread from large North Indian urban centers to smaller northern cities and cities in South India (Srinivas 1984). Dowry also began to replace brideprice as the common practice among middle and low castes throughout the country (e.g., Kapadia 1995; Shenk 2005b; Srinivas 1984). Although the incidence of female infanticide declined during this period, high and sometimes increasing child sex ratios, especially in Northwest India, indicated continuing discrimination against daughters and the adoption of sex-selective abortion (Das Gupta 1997; Das Gupta and Bhat 1997; Miller 2001). And along with the rise and spread of dowry came increasingly common reports of the suicide, abuse, and murder of brides, in some cases related to dowry demands by prospective or actual in-laws (Oldenburg 2002; Sheel 1999). On the basis of these trends, the Indian parliament passed laws to combat the “scourge” of dowry (Basu 2001), activist groups formed to help protect and legally assist women escaping from abusive marriages or dowry demands (Oldenburg 2002; Sheel 1999; Van Willigen and Channa 1991), and members of the women's movement in India began calling for a boycott of dowry (e.g., Kishwar 2005a).

Limitations of the “Social Evil” Perspective

A simple association among dowry, violence, and discrimination is called into question by several types of evidence. Although the giving of dowry is near-universal in modern India (Srinivas 1984), the incidence of dowry violence and discrimination against daughters is not uniformly distributed by region or social class, nor is dowry the only motivation for such behaviors (Kumari 1989; Oldenburg 2002; Prasad 1994; Sheel 1999; Van Willigen and Channa 1991).

Evidence of son preference is long-standing in India for reasons not directly related to dowry: for instance, militarism (Oldenburg 2002), social support in old age (Caldwell 2005), family labor (Botticini and Siow 2003; Goody 1976), and ritual or family continuity (Harrell 1997). Furthermore, when fertility is decreasing as a result of economic development, discrimination against daughters can be prompted by the desire of parents to have at least one son (Das Gupta 1997; Das Gupta and Bhat 1997).

Violence and discrimination against daughters are more common in North India, where hypergyny is common and claustration of women more complete (Miller 1981; Prasad 1994; Oldenburg 2002; Sharma 1993; Srinivas 1984; Srinivasan and Lee 2004; Thakur 1998a). Dowry demands and dowry violence are also more

common in urban than rural areas, where prestige competition is stronger and brides are separated from the supervision of kin networks and traditional village socio-religious authorities (Kapadia 1995; Oldenburg 2002; Paul 1985; Prasad 1994; Srinivas 1984). Dowry violence is often found to be most common among the middle or lower middle classes, where there is knowledge of and envy over consumer goods but often limited means to acquire them (Kumari 1989; Prasad 1994; Paul 1985; Suran et al. 2004). Dowry violence is also more common in joint families than in nuclear families (Oldenburg 2002; Prasad 1994; Sharma 1993) because of greater social conservatism or the larger number of potentially abusive in-laws in the household. In North India, dowry demands and dowry violence are often higher among middle or high castes, where traditions of family honor and female subjugation are more developed (Kumari 1989; Oldenburg 2002; Prasad 1994; Paul 1985), whereas low castes tend to pay lower dowries and have lower incidences of dowry-related violence or harassment (Kumari 1989), though not necessarily lower rates of domestic violence. Dowries are also found to be higher when women remain in the home (Paul 1985), and several studies suggest that education and outside work may help protect women from violence (Kumari 1989; Prasad 1994; Thakur 1998b).

The weight of the evidence appears to indicate that dowry violence is more common when women are economically dependent or have reduced social networks. Not coincidentally, these are risk factors for violence against women in other cultures (Prasad 1994) as well as clear correlates of non-dowry-related domestic violence in India (Rao 1998). Taken together, these data call into question claims of a simple causal relationship among dowry, discrimination, and violence in India.

Dowry Prohibition and Its Failure

The most notable attempted solution to social problems thought to be linked to dowry is the sweeping laws enacted by India's parliament at the urging of reformist legislators during the 1960s and 1980s. Although several Indian states had previously enacted relevant statutes, the first national law was the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961. The Act defined dowry broadly as "any property of valuable security given or agreed to be given either directly or indirectly...by one party to a marriage to the other party to a marriage" (Basu 2001; Diwan and Diwan 1995). The Act made both the giving and the taking of dowry crimes punishable by prison sentences and fines. It exempted gifts given at the time of marriage, but required that a list of them be kept and that their financial value not be "excessive" in relation to the means of the parties to the marriage. The law also treated any dowry given as a trust in favor of the bride, and defined a time limit by which this amount should be given to her if she requested it.

Twenty years after passage of this initial law activists argued that portions of the Dowry Prohibition Act should be strengthened and updated; after some debate, parliament passed two amendments. The Dowry Prohibition Amendment Act of 1984 increased the punishment for giving or taking dowry and reduced the time limit for restoration of requested dowry to the bride. It also made demanding and advertising for dowry illegal and all such crimes cognizable, meaning that police or community groups could report offences to a court without a formal complaint from

one of the parties involved. In 1986, a further amendment was passed that defined the crime of “dowry death” and made it an offense under the Indian Penal Code. This amendment required that the Indian Evidence Act of 1871 be changed so that in such cases the burden of proof rested on the accused.

Despite the strength of the legal measures enacted, most scholars concur that dowry prohibition has failed to curb the giving and taking of dowry, reduce discrimination against female children, and reduce violence against brides (e.g., Basu 2001; Dalmia and Lawrence 2005; Diwan and Diwan 1995; Prasad 1994; Srinivas 1984; Srinivasan and Lee 2004; Van Willigen and Channa 1991).

One reason for this failure may be key problems with current dowry legislation. For instance, section 3 of the 1961 Act allows gifts to be given at the time of the wedding (Basu 2001; Diwan and Diwan 1995), thus providing a loophole whereby parties to a marriage can claim that transfers are gifts, not dowry. Moreover, since both giving and taking of dowry are illegal, the family of a bride who is being harassed or abused over inadequate dowry will implicate themselves by complaining (Basu 2001). Finally, people rarely comply with the legal provisions requiring enumeration of gifts, thus undermining any legal basis they might have for reclaiming property (Basu 2001; Srinivasan and Lee 2004).

These legislative concerns, however, are minor in comparison with the two most fundamental problems with dowry prohibition: its lack of public support, and its lack of legal enforcement. Public outcry against dowry violence tends to be limited to progressive elements of Indian society; most Indians simply ignore the laws and continue to give and receive dowry either openly or with a modicum of secrecy. Public apathy also affects the ability of law enforcement officers to investigate and prosecute dowry-related violence since family members or neighbors are often unwilling to testify or otherwise aid police in their work (Diwan and Diwan 1995). Finally, a long-standing cultural tradition in India defines domestic violence as a “family matter” not suitable for the intervention of the police (Basu 2001; Diwan and Diwan 1995; Oldenburg 2002). Thus, politicians and members of local law enforcement generally do not give dowry prohibition much priority, nor are they called on to do so by most of their constituents.

Several reasons for this apathy or resistance are discussed in the literature. First, any family with sons as well as daughters is likely to take dowry as well as give it (e.g., Basu 2001), creating a natural conflict of interests. Second, daughters often actively seek dowry from their parents as their right under Indian tradition (e.g., Kishwar 2005b; Srinivasan and Lee 2004) and fear that opposing dowry would harm their interests. Third, many Hindus view dowry as part of the Hindu ideal of *kanyadan* marriage (Goody and Tambiah 1973; Sheel 1999; Srinivas 1984) and feel attempts to undermine it are inappropriate.

In this paper I propose an additional reason for widespread public ambivalence about dowry prohibition, namely that dowry serves a useful purpose which directly motivates people to invest in it. This type of functionalist argument is often dismissed or rejected (e.g., Palriwala 1989; Samuel 2002; Thakur 1998a) in the anti-dowry literature, yet decades of academic research provide evidence that practical motivations for dowry are found among many groups in India in both the past and the present.

Functional Approaches to Dowry

In the 1970s and 1980s a number of structural-functionalist anthropologists carried out cross-cultural comparisons to establish common functional themes in regional or global marriage and family systems. Most notably, Goody (1976) and Goody and Tambiah (1973) used comparative data to argue that dowry is a form of premortem inheritance for daughters meant to perpetuate or improve their social status vis-a-vis that of their parents in much the same way that postmortem inheritance works for their brothers. Meanwhile, Srinivas (1984) argued that increases in Indian dowries in the twentieth century were related to the growth of a capitalist economy and the emergence of a wealth-based class system. Within this class system, capital, education, and high-paying jobs are relatively scarce, and husbands with these attributes are desirable and command higher dowries. Kapadia (1995) found evidence for this in rural South India, where groom-price dowries had been most widely adopted and dowry competition was most intense in castes that had experienced differentiation in income. Finally, Harrell and Dickey (1985) compared studies from various parts of Eurasia to show that dowry is both a form of premortem inheritance and a means of public display of wealth and status. They contend that dowry occurs in hierarchical cultures wherein status is wealth-based and displays of wealth play a role in status competition.

Many economists who address the topic of dowry have also taken a functional approach. Using data from Europe and Africa, Boserup (1970) argued that dowry serves as compensation paid by the bride's family to the groom's family to help defray the costs of accepting a dependent family member. Boserup's ideas were applied to the case of North and South India by Miller (1981), an anthropologist. A more general model than Boserup's was introduced by Gary Becker (1991), who argued that the spouse with more to gain from a marriage will pay the difference to the spouse with less to gain. Becker's model has been tested for the Indian case by Dalmia and Lawrence (2005), who found that in both North and South India dowry serves to equalize individual and household characteristics of the bride and groom. Botticini and Siow (2003) argued that dowry is a form of inheritance occurring in monogamous, patrilocal cultures in which sons remain tied to their family farm or business. In such circumstances, parents give daughters their inheritance at marriage to avoid their free-riding on improvements to the parental property that their brothers may make. The authors present data from colonial Brazil and historic Italy to support their model, but the model is not supported in modern India where dowries are rising with economic development.

Human behavioral ecologists have also taken an interest in the topic of dowries. Dickemann (1979) examined hypergynous dowry societies using historical data from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century North India. She argued that parents of middle rank used dowries to compete for grooms of higher rank, motivated by an expectation of higher reproductive success (RS) for grandsons who would inherit wealth and marry polygynously. She predicted that the value of dowries should increase with the social rank of husbands, and argued that dowry amounts to a "direct purchase of RS" (1979:171). Testing Dickemann's model in modern India is problematic, however, because polygynous marriage is no longer practiced among

high-status Indians. A decade later, Gaulin and Boster (1990) argued that dowry was a form of mating effort, specifically female–female competition, in which women and their families bid over access to the best (i.e., wealthiest) mates in stratified societies. Unlike Dickemann, Gaulin and Boster specify that dowry systems should be associated with monogamy since the resources of highly ranked men will not be diverted to additional wives or their children. They test this model using a cross-cultural sample and find that monogamy and stratification are strong predictors of dowry. Building on this work, Shenk has argued (Shenk 2004, 2005a,b) that dowry can be viewed as a form of parental investment in a daughter because it helps determine the quality of her spouse and his family. Dowry expenditures can thus perpetuate or improve a daughter's standard of living and help ensure high levels of investment in her future offspring. Testing this model with quantitative microdata from urban South India, Shenk found broad support for the parental investment approach.

This review makes clear that there is broad academic interest in as well as a significant amount of empirical support for functional models of dowry. However, most functionalist work either does not address the politics of dowry, or does so only in brief, limited form (e.g., Dalmia and Lawrence 2005; Edlund 2006). Critiques of dowry policy have come from applied (e.g., Van Willigen and Channa 1991) and interpretive (e.g., Oldenburg 2002) perspectives, but not from the theoretical literature in behavioral ecology or economics. It is my intent in this paper to show how the adoption of a functional perspective on dowry, and particularly an approach from behavioral ecology, might lead to improvements in our understanding of why dowry is paid and thus to better and more effective dowry policy.

A Behavioral Ecology Approach to Dowry

Why HBE?

It is not necessary to use human behavioral ecology (HBE) in order to make an argument for the functional nature of dowry or against modern dowry policy. However, HBE theory does provide some significant advantages over other common theoretical approaches when addressing policy issues of this sort. First, using concepts such as reproductive success or parental investment may provide unique predictions that are not obvious from an economic or demographic perspective alone. In the case of Indian dowry, behavioral ecology focuses our attention on the children resulting from a daughter's marriage in addition to the more commonly studied qualities of the bride, the groom, and their parents. Second, the HBE approach explicitly encourages researchers to look at multiple currencies as well as constraints. Regarding dowry, these might include (a) direct determinants of fitness, such as access to resources and mortality risks; (b) indirect determinants of fitness, such as social status linked to wealth, education, or caste; and (c) structural elements of culture, such as religious beliefs, inheritance patterns, and marriage market conditions that may constrain individual behavior. A final advantage of the HBE approach is that it utilizes a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods which can result in an unusually well-rounded perspective. This combination of methods is particularly appropriate for policy work because without ethnographic

understanding one has little authority to speak on policy issues, but without quantitative evidence one's recommendations are unlikely to be convincing.

A Behavioral Ecology Model of Dowry

The approaches of Dickemann (1979), Gaulin and Boster (1990), and Shenk (2004, 2005a) are compatible in treating dowry as a mechanism by which greater reproductive success can be achieved. A difficulty exists, however, with defining and operationalizing reproductive success for the contemporary Indian context. Much of India is a post-demographic-transition society with both heritable wealth and a wage-labor economy based on education. As in many other stratified, industrial societies, wealth and education are often inversely related to fertility (Bhat 2002; Drèze and Murthi 2001; Yadava and Yadava 1999), fertility is inversely related to child survival and/or child health (Das Gupta 1997; Das Gupta and Bhat 1997; Kishor 1993; Malhotra et al. 1995; Miller 1981), and contemporary Indian parents emphasize gender, education, occupation, income, and marriage partner choice in parental investment decisions (Bhat 2002; Caldwell and Caldwell 2003; Caldwell et al. 1983; Shenk 2004). For these reasons, measuring quantity-related outcomes is unlikely to capture successful reproduction.

However, recent work in behavioral ecology has emphasized that even in traditional foraging or pastoralist societies humans do not maximize reproductive success in terms of quantity of offspring but rather optimize between offspring quantity and quality in a manner that varies with ecological circumstances (Kaplan 1996; Kaplan and Lancaster 2000; Mace 1998, 2000). In a detailed look at this question in education-based wage-labor economies, Kaplan (1996) and Kaplan and Lancaster (2000) argue that offspring quantity may decrease to low levels because of high payoffs to investment in offspring quality. They suggest that in such circumstances the amount of parental investment is most appropriately measured using indices of quality rather than quantity. Whether such quality-focused strategies result in long-term reproductive success is an open question. Higher levels of parental investment are, however, consistent with evolutionary motivations that may have produced higher numbers of descendants in the past. As I have argued elsewhere (Shenk 2004), the two most relevant measures of quality in the modern Indian social environment are (a) wealth, especially in terms of income, and (b) education or other forms of skills or human capital, the first because it is necessary for procuring goods and services needed to raise healthy, high-quality children and the second because it is a primary means by which the first can be obtained in India's developing market economy. In the following analysis, I use income and education as measures of quality, and thus level of parental investment.

Using this perspective, we can formulate a general hypothesis and three specific predictions about how dowries should function as tools for parental investment in the Indian cultural context:

Hypothesis Dowry is a form of parental investment and/or mating effort with the goal of increasing investment in the children of daughters in patrilocal, stratified societies.

Prediction 1 Dowry will function to attract a higher-quality groom.

Prediction 2 The amount of dowry will be related to the degree of hypergyny.

Prediction 3 Dowry will function to help produce high-quality offspring.

I hypothesize that dowry affects the quality of a daughter's children through both (a) the quality of the groom (predictions 1 and 2) she attracts and (b) effects on the children themselves (prediction 3). Predictions 1 and 2 rely on the logic that high-quality grooms will be in a better position to invest in their children, either monetarily or in terms of high-quality interactions. The link between the quality of a groom and the quality of his offspring in the Indian context has been established elsewhere (e.g., Drèze and Murthi 2001; Caldwell 2005; Shenk 2004) and will not be discussed further here. Prediction 3 suggests that a bride who brings a generous dowry may have higher-quality children even once the groom's characteristics, as well as her own, are controlled for. This effect could occur through greater expenditure on children from dowry resources, or through an enhanced status of the bride in her marital family which could enable her to procure more resources for her children.

Data and Methods

Study Population

The data on which this article is based come from the author's dissertation research conducted from September 2001 to September 2002 in Bangalore, India, a city of approximately 8 million people which has experienced rapid economic and population growth since the mid-1980s related to the booming software industry centered in the city. Residents of Bangalore are primarily ethnic Kannadigas from surrounding Karnataka state or ethnic Tamils and Telegus who have migrated to Bangalore from nearby states in South India.

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.

Qualitative ethnographic research included (a) key informant interviews with social scientists, priests, astrologers, matchmakers, caste association directors, and other people knowledgeable about marriage in Bangalore; (b) 19 in-depth, structured interviews with selected survey respondents chosen to reflect the breadth of the survey sample in terms of caste and social class; (c) extensive and varied informal

conversations with Indian friends and colleagues on topics related to marriage and dowry; and (d) participant observation through attending and interacting with people at more than 40 weddings and other marriage-related events such as engagement rituals, shopping trips for wedding gold and saris, and gatherings hosted by the groom's family after the wedding.

Attempting to sample randomly within or across caste or class communities in Bangalore was not realistic. Unbiased enumeration would have been a complicated task well beyond the resources of the project, and existing lists of people by residence or caste membership are rare, incomplete, biased, or otherwise problematic. Most important, without a personal introduction many potential respondents would refuse to participate in a survey or interview. Given these circumstances, recruiting respondents through personal contacts and referrals by snowball sampling (Bernard 1995) was the only feasible way of collecting data. Sampling started through my social network and the social networks of five research assistants who came from different communities within Bangalore. My friends were primarily well-educated English speakers, so informal qualitative data is biased toward the middle class. However, survey data and formal qualitative data (key informant and in-depth interviews) included informants from widely varying backgrounds and thus should not display a strong bias of this type.

Variables

Dowry

Dowry can be complicated to study because both social scientists and Indians have multiple definitions of it. In Bangalore, there are two main usages. One is the value of all wealth given by a bride's parents when she is married, whether that wealth is given to her or to her husband or in-laws. The second usage, a negative connotation, is the value of a groom-price in cash or kind that is demanded by a groom's family before the wedding. The first type of dowry is nearly universal in Bangalore, the second is not. However, what is given as part of the first type of dowry may often be similar to what is demanded as the second type of dowry. Thus, a clear line of demarcation usually cannot be made.

In this paper I will use the first definition of dowry—in other words, all property transfers from the bride's family to the bride, the groom, or his parents. Dowry transfers can include many types of items, the most common being gold, clothing, furniture, kitchen items, vehicles, land, houses, and cash. After marriage, the bride often has some control over portions of her dowry. As with most financial matters, however, authority often ultimately rests with the senior household members (her new in-laws). Nevertheless, there is evidence that women in South India are typically given greater control over their dowries than women in the North (Basu 2001; Goody and Tambiah 1973; Miller 1981; Uberoi 1994).

Two measures of dowry are used in this paper. 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,

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 paper can be found in Table 1. 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

Table 1 Summary statistics

Variable	Mean	SD	Number of observations
Dowry measures ^a			
Daughter's value of gold given	22,954.45	36,487.83	548
Daughter's total marriage costs	276,657.50	500,602.30	691
Mother's value of gold given	11,147.60	23,586.14	267
Mother's total marriage costs	560,929.50	578,047.60	339
Bride's family characteristics			
Father's education ^b	7.83	6.80	754
Mother's education	4.08	5.25	744
Daughter's education	10.05	6.70	719
Father's income ^c	8,727.01	8,426.69	770
Daughter's income	9,813.28	7,348.35	99
Daughter works (Y=1, N=0)	0.23	0.42	727
Number of children in family	3.77	1.83	706
Proportion of daughters	0.56	0.22	705
Groom's family characteristics			
Groom's education	12.88	6.43	721
Groom's income	12,345.78	18,100.39	717
Groom's father's education	6.18	6.98	758
Groom's father's income	8,083.69	7,727.05	786

^aAll dowry measures are in rupees.

^bAll education variables are in years of schooling.

^cAll income variables are in rupees per month.

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. All incomes are given in 2002 rupees.

Analysis

Analyses take the form of either multiple linear regressions or logistic regressions, both of which were performed in Stata SE version 9. Since it is possible for the marriages of siblings and parents to be included as separate cases in the same analysis, all analyses presented in this paper were performed using Stata's clustered standard error option which adjusts standard errors and thus *p* values for the clustering of cases within families. For multiple linear regressions, standardized betas are reported so the strength of the effects can be compared between variables; betas show how many standard deviations the dependent variable changes when the independent variable changes by one standard deviation. For logistic regressions, probabilities are reported for ease of interpretation. For dichotomous outcome variables, probabilities show how much the probability of the outcome variable will increase when the predictor variable experiences a one-unit increase.

Results and Discussion

Quantitative Evidence

Prediction 1 states that a higher dowry will function to attract a higher-quality groom. Results for this prediction can be found in Table 2; sample sizes range between 499 and 670 depending on which model specification is being used. Panel 2A shows results for the dependent variable "groom's education" for the dowry measures "value of gold given" and "total marriage costs." Both dowry measures are significant predictors of groom's education when the regression is controlled only for the year of marriage. Adding controls for the education, income, and employment status of the bride and her parents (all factors shown to have a positive effect on groom's education) progressively decreases both the effect size and the significance of dowry on groom's education until none is significant at the 0.05 level. The safest conclusion here is that groom's education is only slightly affected by the amount of dowry given.

Panel 2B contains results for the dependent variable "groom's income." Both dowry measures are highly significant predictors of income when the regression is controlled only for year of marriage. Although progressively adding controls for possible confounders (the education and income of the bride and her parents) reduces both the betas and the level of significance, the relationships remain. Thus, consistent with prediction 1, we can conclude that dowry may help attract grooms with higher incomes.

The results for prediction 2, which states that the amount of dowry will be directly related to the degree of hypergyny, can be found in Table 3. The degree of hypergyny

Table 2 Results for prediction 1: effects of dowry on husband's characteristics

Independent variables	Dependent variables	
	2A. Groom's education	2B. Groom's income
Value of gold ^a	0.230***	0.339***
Value of gold ^{a,b}	0.050	0.229***
Bride's education	0.750***	0.503***
Bride works	-0.117***	-0.153***
Value of gold ^{a,b}	0.011	0.171*
Bride's education	0.585***	0.291***
Bride works	-0.105***	-0.129***
Bride's parents' education	0.211***	0.169*
Bride's father's income	0.057	0.197**
Total marriage costs ^a	0.227***	0.327***
Total marriage costs ^{a,b}	0.072**	0.231***
Bride's education	0.762***	0.514***
Bride works	-0.101***	-0.081*
Total marriage costs ^{a,b}	0.044	0.205***
Bride's education	0.596***	0.354***
Bride works	-0.087***	-0.059
Bride's parents' education	0.192***	0.076
Bride's father's income	0.074	0.202***

Results are reported in standardized beta coefficients. For both “value of gold” and “total marriage costs” three models were run with different sets of controls and independent variables.

^a Controlled for the year of marriage.

^b Controlled for number of siblings and proportion of daughters in bride's family.

Significance is indicated as follows: *at the .05 level, ** at the .01 level, and *** at the .001 level.

is operationalized in these analyses using two variables: (a) the ratio of the groom's education to the bride's father's education (the “education ratio”), and (b) the ratio of the groom's income to the bride's father's income (the “income ratio”). The bride's father is used in comparison to the groom because his characteristics define the socioeconomic status of the bride's natal household, and because brides often do not have brothers or have no brothers of an appropriate age to serve as a comparison.

Panel 3A presents the results for value of gold, and panel 3B presents results for total marriage costs. Sample sizes range between 499 and 670 depending on which model specification is being used. As panel 3A indicates, the education ratio has little effect on the value of gold given whereas the income ratio has a stronger, positive effect. Yet when controls for education and income of the bride, bride's mother, and groom's father are added, both the beta value and the degree of significance of the income ratio increase. Using a weighted income ratio to decrease the effect of outliers on the results strongly increases both the beta and the significance of the income ratio as a predictor of value of gold given. The results for total marriage costs, found in panel 3B, are similar to those for value of gold given. We thus find support for prediction 2 as regards hypergyny with respect to income but not with respect to education. These results are similar to those discussed above

Table 3 Results for prediction 2: effects of hypergyny on dowry

Independent variables	Dependent variables			
	3A. Value of gold given		3B. Total marriage costs	
	As given	Weighted income ratio	As given	Weighted income ratio
Groom to father education ratio ^a	0.041	-0.032	-0.118	-0.081
Groom to father income ratio	0.119	0.375***	0.144*	0.244***
Bride's father's education	0.149	0.045	-0.008	0.051
Bride's father's income	0.303***	0.312***	0.151*	0.078
Groom's education	-0.085	-0.037	0.100	-0.082
Groom's income	0.112	0.102	0.152*	0.294***
Groom to father education ratio ^{a,b}	0.026	-0.003	-0.113	0.003
Groom to father income ratio	0.170*	0.387***	0.174**	0.224***
Bride's father's education	0.076	0.047	0.002	0.205
Bride's father's income	0.349***	0.293***	0.126	0.045
Groom's education	-0.086	-0.034	0.097	-0.056
Groom's income	0.075	0.127	0.157*	0.359***
Bride's education	-0.046	-0.172*	-0.110	-0.284***
Bride works	0.031	0.091*	-0.024	0.025
Bride's mother's education	-0.012	-0.018	0.079	0.008
Groom's father's education	0.183**	0.268***	-0.019	0.111
Groom's father's income	-0.038	-0.086	0.143**	0.024

Results are reported in standardized beta coefficients. Two models were run with different sets of controls and independent variables.

^a Controlled for the year of marriage.

^b Controlled for number of siblings and proportion of daughters in bride's family.

Significance is indicated as follows: * at the .05 level, ** at the .01 level, and *** at the .001 level.

for prediction 1, indicating that the main effects of dowry come through attracting a richer husband rather than a better-educated one.

Prediction 3 states that dowry will function to help produce high-quality grandchildren. To test this prediction, measures for the mother's dowry were used as predictors of her children's characteristics. OLS multivariate regression results for the dependent variable "child's education" can be found in Table 4 panel 4A, and logistic regression results for the dependent dichotomous variable "daughter works" can be found in panel 4B. Sample sizes for these analyses range between 263 and 336 depending on which model specification is being used. Sample size is significantly reduced for these analyses because the marriages of many women had to be withdrawn since the sample did not include dowry information for their mothers.

Results in panel 4A indicate that mother's dowry as proxied by value of gold given has a significant, positive effect on the education of daughters but not sons. Although this effect is reduced by controls for mother's and father's education and income, it remains significant. Results for mother's dowry as proxied by total marriage costs are close to significant for daughters to begin with, but the effect disappears when controls are added. No results for sons are significant. Results in panel 4B show the effects of a mother's dowry on her daughter's likelihood of working. Sons are not included in this analysis because virtually all sons work. The results for mother's value of gold given indicate that an increase of Rs. 5,000 in

Table 4 Results for prediction 3: effects of a mother's dowry on her children's characteristics

Independent variables	Dependent variables		
	4A. Child's education		4B. Daughter works
	Sons (Standardized beta)	Daughters (Standardized beta)	Probability of working ^c
Mother's value of gold given ^a	0.021	0.226***	0.021**
Mother's value of gold given ^{a,b}	-0.012	0.095*	0.019***
Mother's education	0.201**	0.324***	0.020**
Father's education	0.517***	0.473***	0.007
Father's income	0.057*	0.003	-0.010
Mother's total marriage costs ^a	0.027	0.111	0.009
Mother's total marriage costs ^{a,b}	0.000	0.007	0.007
Mother's education	0.230***	0.270***	0.017*
Father's education	0.490***	0.528***	0.008
Father's income	0.070***	0.048	-0.003

Results are reported in standardized beta coefficients and probabilities. For both "mother's value of gold given" and "mother's total marriage costs" two models were run with different sets of controls and independent variables.

^a Controlled for mother's year of marriage.

^b Controlled for number of siblings and proportion of daughters in the child's family.

^c Units for each variable are approximately 1/5 of the mean, as follows: Rs. 5,000 value of gold, 1 year of education, Rs. 1,500 monthly income, Rs. 100,000 total marriage costs.

Significance is indicated as follows: * at the .05 level, ** at the .01 level, and *** at the .001 level.

dowry will yield nearly a 2% increase in the probability that her daughter will work after marriage, nearly equal to the value of a year of mother's education. This result is highly significant, and the effect increases in significance when education and income variables are added as controls. Mother's total marriage costs, in contrast, have a much smaller effect on the likelihood of her daughter working. This relationship also improves with the addition of parent controls, but it attains only modest significance.

These results suggest that a mother's dowry has appreciable positive effects on her daughters in terms of both their education and their likelihood of being employed. Moreover, these effects are independent of the education and income of either her husband or herself. Whereas poor women may work out of necessity, in the middle class a working daughter is often a sign of a progressive family. Though a large portion of her earnings will be given to the household head, employment often allows a woman greater autonomy and status within both her natal and her married households (for a more detailed discussion of work patterns see Shenk 2004). Moreover, both education and employment have been demonstrated to improve a daughter's value in the marriage market (Dhesi 2002; Kingdon and Unni 2001; Shenk 2004).

The results for all three predictions suggest that investment in dowry has the potential for important functional payoffs in terms of the quality of offspring produced from a match. Specifically, dowry can be useful in attracting a wealthier

son-in-law and in marrying one's daughter up in terms of income, both of which have been shown to have positive effects on the education, income, survival and health of children of both sexes who might result from the marriage (Bhat 2002; Caldwell and Caldwell 2003; Dhesi 2002; Kingdon and Unni 2001; Shenk 2004). Moreover, a higher mother's dowry can also improve the education and employment prospects of her daughters in a more direct fashion. Each of these mechanisms thus increases the quality of the children likely to result from the marriage, whether that quality is defined as education, income, or the ability to attract a quality spouse.

It could be suggested that the benefits I find to be associated with dowry are not due to dowry per se but rather simply to wealth. I disagree with this perspective for two reasons. First, I have attempted to remove the effects of wealth by using measures of income as a control variable in all analyses. Although income may not be a perfect measure of wealth, the results I have presented are reasonably convincing because they hold true in the absence of some significant portion of wealth effects. Second, when the sample is stratified by income (results not shown) most results still hold true for poor women—in fact, some results are stronger for poorer women than for richer ones (see Shenk 2004 for a related analysis of class differences).

Qualitative Evidence

During my fieldwork in South India I had detailed conversations with more than thirty people about their own marriages and heard hundreds of less-detailed comments or stories about the marriages of others, both first- and secondhand. Many of my informants were middle-class women whom I met in the student hostel where I lived or through my research, but many others (of both sexes) were servants, priests, marriage brokers, small business owners, social scientists, students, and older relatives and friends of friends. Among those I knew and interviewed, dowries were moderate by Indian standards, dowry demands after marriage were not routine, pronounced discrimination against daughters was uncommon, domestic violence relatively unusual, and dowry-related violence almost unheard of.

The amount and sometimes the contents of dowry were negotiated by the parents of the bride and groom based on the characteristics of the groom, and to a lesser extent the characteristics of the bride and of their respective families. The parents of wealthier, better-educated grooms were generally able to negotiate for larger amounts of dowry (in gold for the bride, consumer items, or occasionally cash) or more lavish wedding celebrations. They also had an easier time attracting brides with impressive characteristics, such as unusual beauty or a high-paying job. Also in demand on the marriage market were brides with no siblings or a small number of sisters, as this meant that a daughter could expect an inheritance on the death of her parents in addition to a dowry on her marriage. Families of grooms sometimes expressed a willingness to trade off dowry for other desired characteristics, such as a bride's employment or her family status. Usually, however, favorable characteristics of daughters were used to attract better grooms, meaning that the dowry given was likely to be higher. Dowry negotiations typically took the form of a series of more or less subtle hints and suggestions about the amount of gold expected or offered and the type

of wedding hoped or planned for. Sometimes these suggestions were very subtle, sometimes they were more direct, but only rarely were they outright demands.

Both the participants in my study and my friends emphasized functional conceptualizations of dowry. Most prominently, they spoke of dowry as a daughter's "share" of her parents' wealth essentially equivalent to her inheritance. For instance, the father of a married friend once commented that "I don't approve of dowry [meaning demanded dowry], but *share*, that is different." And one educated woman summed up a general feeling among her social group when she said "Dowry is *my* right, as it is my brothers' right to inherit from my parents." Another common functional view of dowry was as recompense for the education of the groom. Since high-salary occupations often involved high school fees and large "donations" for admission, many people thought it reasonable or even fair to give dowry in proportion to what had already been spent on the groom.

Moreover, those I interviewed rarely held a strong negative view of dowry *per se*. Though they often expressed disapproval of the practice of "demanding" dowry—in other words, making demands after marriage negotiations had been completed, making the marriage conditional on it, or otherwise acting in a greedy fashion—they rarely disapproved of the giving or taking of dowry as it was usually practiced among those they knew. In fact, many viewed dowry in a positive light—as an important Hindu tradition, as a form of women's wealth, as a way for a daughter to maintain her status in her marital household. Even among those who viewed themselves as politically progressive, and thus anti-dowry, disapproval of dowry often coexisted with a privately admitted subtext of resignation toward or even acceptance of the practice.

In contrast, my contacts expressed little ambivalence about dowry-related violence. They viewed with disapprobation the harassment of brides or families for dowry, and stories of bride burnings or other dowry deaths elicited strong disapproval, often verging on horror. Dowry-related violence was thought of as something that primarily happened "in other communities" or "in the North" and was therefore viewed as culturally contingent rather than linked to dowry *per se*. These strongly negative views of dowry violence stand in stark contrast to the ambivalence of my informants toward domestic violence; unless extreme, physical abuse did not excite more than moderate disapproval and was usually not viewed as reasonable grounds for divorce, desertion, or legal intervention.

Finally, dowry prohibition was viewed by my informants with very mixed feelings. Several people said that the Dowry Prohibition Act was primarily a political gesture, and cited cases of liberal politicians hosting lavish weddings (with proportionate amounts of dowry) for their own daughters. Yet at the same time many felt that dowry laws were a good thing because they sent an appropriate message of disapproval regarding such practices as dowry demands and dowry-related violence. But primarily my informants saw dowry prohibition laws as irrelevant to daily life because dowry laws weren't enforced and dowry problems were seen as rare. I was often told by informants that "Dowry is not a problem in our community" and was rarely able to discover any evidence to the contrary. I did sometimes hear women complain about the greed of grooms' families, though their primary concerns were not with violence but with their marital prospects or the consequences of debt.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Although many authors acknowledge the limitations of current dowry policy, most do not challenge the ideology of dowry as a social evil. One reason for this orthodoxy may be that many reformers focus on Northwest India where the negative correlates of dowry are most pronounced. Observing how the dowry system works outside this context, and especially in the more egalitarian South, may make the positive aspects of dowry appear more obvious and the relationship between dowry, violence, and discrimination less inevitable. I have argued in this paper that dowry has a positive, functional role in the lives of many South Indians, and that at least in Bangalore dowry is not necessarily associated with violence and significant discrimination against women. While one cannot extrapolate from findings in Bangalore to the whole of India, a great deal of research (e.g., Dalmia and Lawrence 2005; Kishor 1993; Malhotra et al. 1995; Miller 1981; Uberoi 1994) suggests that many parts of the South and East might share this pattern—in other words, that many parts of India do not show the pattern of the Northwest.

I have argued in this paper that one important reason why Indians resist dowry prohibition is that many of them benefit from dowry through its positive effects on their daughters and grandchildren. I am aware that these benefits of dowry may not explain why dowry evolved, and they may not entirely account for why it is practiced. I also recognize that simply because dowry is functional does not necessarily make it a social good. However, I believe that to ignore the positive aspects of dowry when crafting policy risks throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Simplistic, sweeping reform efforts such as dowry prohibition may undermine the efficacious effects of dowry at the same time that they attempt to address violence and discrimination. Instead, I advocate a targeted approach to dowry policy aimed at supporting the positive attributes of dowry while discouraging its negative correlates. In addition to preserving dowry's benefits, targeted policies would be more feasible to implement and might help to reduce some of the apathy and resistance surrounding dowry prohibition.

Regarding legal reforms of dowry legislation, I offer two proposals. First, that the prohibition against the giving or taking of dowry at marriage be abolished. The law serves no useful purpose under current conditions, and its enforcement might actually harm the interests of women since there is no way to guarantee that parents would spend freed dowry funds in ways that benefitted daughters. The prohibition against demanding dowry after marriage, however, should be retained because such demands allow no reasonable option of refusal and are more often associated with violence. Second, I advocate for greater enforcement of section 6 of the current Act which specifies that all dowry or gifts to a bride be documented at the time of marriage and legally acknowledged as a trust in favor of the bride (Basu 2001). These provisions have been useful in securing the return of women's property in cases of desertion, abuse, suicide, or murder (Oldenburg 2002) and should continue to serve this valuable function.

In terms of social activism on the subject of dowry, I also have two suggestions. First, activists should work to encourage families to give a substantial portion of the dowry in forms that cannot be easily alienated from the daughter or her children. Some examples are land or other property in her name, trusts for her or her children,

and investments in her name or her children's names. Second, activists should also work to encourage families to educate their daughters in a manner that will allow them to gain employment if such a contingency becomes necessary. Some evidence suggests that employment may help protect women from domestic violence, but more importantly employability provides an improved possibility of escape from abusive marital situations (e.g., Kumari 1989; Oldenburg 2002).

Regarding violence, I agree with most activists that the statutes against dowry death should be retained, and actual or suspected cases of dowry-related violence prosecuted vigorously. I hope that removing the prohibition against the giving of dowry will release the relatives of brides from their double jeopardy, thus making families more willing to bring charges in cases of abuse. However, given the complex etiology of violence against brides, much of what is called “dowry violence” may not in fact be related to dowry demands or disputes (e.g., Oldenburg 2002). Thus what is needed is more broad-based enforcement of existing legislation against domestic violence provided in the Criminal Law (Second Amendment) Act of 1983 (Diwan and Diwan 1995).

Even if these suggestions are adopted, rapid change is unlikely. Their primary goal, however, is to align the laws of India more closely with the important positive motivations and consequences of dowry as a form of investment while ideally combating the negative outcomes of the type of extortionate dowry demands found in certain parts of India. Any movement in the direction of a more balanced treatment of the custom of dowry under Indian law and more successful prosecutions of dowry-related violence will be an improvement on the current situation.

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