

ATTITUDES TOWARDS DOWRY

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Legal efforts have failed to combat the age old custom of dowry. In this study, the youth, who should be the generators of change, have shown, on the contrary, a greater inclination towards dowry than their parents. Because of the rise in material aspirations and expectations, they seem to have come to depend heavily on the institution of dowry. It is only in the middle socio-economic status group that the students have come out strongly against the practice of dowry. Education, which could have helped to remove this evil, has failed to bring about an attitudinal change in the youth towards dowry.

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Introduction

Dowry, an age old custom in Indian society, has, of late, become an indispensable ritual in marriage alliances. However, useful and essential the practice might have been when it originated, it has become corrupted out of all proportion. Dowry, which was earlier regarded as a token of love and affection, given by the girl's parents according to their ability, has now become institutionalised as a right to be demanded by the boy's parents. While the necessity for putting an end to this practice has been recognised by many, studies show that legal efforts, culminating in the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, have failed to combat this age old custom (Saini, 1983).

Therefore, it would seem that unless there is a radical change in our value system, this problem of dowry will continue to exist. This process of change, naturally, must originate from within the younger generation. If a definite change in their attitudes towards dowry can be found (as compared to those of their parents), they may be considered to be generators of change.

In this connection, a few empirical studies on the attitudes towards dowry have already been made. Hooja (1969) has examined the attitudes of families belonging to the three upper castes and those of the scheduled castes and backward classes. According to her findings, the lower the levels of income and education, the greater was the adherence to the custom of dowry. Khanna and Verghese (1978) have studied the attitudes towards dowry of women belonging to different socio-economic strata. The findings revealed that the lower stratum seemed to be more favourable to the practice than the other two groups. Dowry practices among the urban poor were examined by Luthra (1983). The attitudes expressed indicated that they did not view dowry as a problem. Like any other expenditure, it pinched them, but this was accepted since marriage was the only occasion where so much expenditure was incurred.

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Other studies have shown that a high level of education, occupation, income and liberal atmosphere of urban living (which may be considered as indicators of high socio-economic status), would arouse consciousness among individuals to develop unfavourable attitudes towards dowry. Ross (1955), Gore (1968) and Kuppaswamy (1972) have felt that as the educated reflected more westernised outlook, it was possible for the children to be more liberal in their attitudes and, consequentially, reject the idea of dowry. Vanderveen (1972), in a study of marriage and hierarchy among the Anavil Brahmins of South Gujarat, pointed out that girls with more academic training brought in smaller dowries than girls with less extensive education. The findings of Rao and Rao (1982), clearly show that students with a high socio-economic status felt that dowry payment was an unimportant factor in settling their marriages. In the same study, while breaking down the sample of father's education into two categories—those whose father's education was till high school or less, and those whose father's education was beyond high school education—a strong negative relationship was indicated between parents' education and attitudes towards the dowry of male and female students. Therefore, it was expected that the student youth today, who are radically influenced by and more amenable to social change, would be the potential generators of the attitudes to disfavour the practice.

Parents have an important role to play in the continuance or elimination of this practice. It is, however, difficult to discern whether the students with higher education will exert any influence on the parents. For most parents, providing a suitable dowry for a daughter is inseparable from marriage (Naik, 1986). Dowry demands have increased significantly and have become a prestige issue (Rao and Rao, 1982). So strong is the hold of the custom, that few fathers would hesitate to spend even beyond their means to provide a befitting dowry to their daughters (Kapadia, 1966). Parents would like to give dowry to get a match for the girl, for her security and for setting her up in her new home (Naik, 1986). Since most parents visualise the practice of dowry as a universal problem, it was felt that there may not be a correlation between the socio-economic status of the parents and their attitudes towards dowry.

In the literature reviewed so far, we do not find any detailed work on a comparative study of the attitudes of the students and their parents. In order to obtain evidence, some research work is needed. Hence, the study sought to compare the attitudes of the students with those of their parents. More specifically, the following theoretical hypotheses were formulated for the study:

1. The higher the socio-economic status of the students, the more unfavourable their attitudes towards dowry.
2. The socio-economic status of the parents and their attitudes towards dowry are positively correlated.
3. The attitudes of the students and the attitudes of the parents are significantly different.

Some of the terms used frequently, in this study, are explained below:

Attitude: A culmination of beliefs which predispose one to respond in a preferential manner, either favourably or unfavourably.

Favourable Attitudes Towards Dowry: Attitudes which are in support of the practice of dowry.

Unfavourable attitudes towards dowry: Attitudes which disapprove of the practice of dowry.

Socio-Economic Status (SES): A combination of the social and economic positions of the respondents which determine the respondent's status in society.

Methodology

The study has been confined to post-graduate students, as it was expected that they would be more mature, would have developed definite views on marriage and dowry, and are eligible for and contemplating marriage.

Sample: A sample of 50 post-graduate students was drawn from the campus colleges of Osmania University in the academic year 1983-84, following the systematic random sampling method. The views of the students and their parents were obtained through personal interviews, based on an interview schedule.

Measurement Scales:

(a) *Attitude Scale:* To assess the attitudes of the students and their parents, a scale was formulated. The "attitudes towards dowry" scale consisted of the following twelve items:

1. Dowry helps a boy and girl to settle down.
2. Dowry is an economic security for the bride.
3. Demanding dowry is exploiting the girl's family.
4. Dowry compensates for the groom's educational expenses.
5. A man who demands dowry goes against the ethics of the society.
6. Taking dowry can improve one's social and economic status.
7. Dowry, if not given, can cause marital unhappiness.
8. The bride's parents offer dowry because they think that the girl is a burden to them.
9. Dowry is given to attract a better groom.
10. Dowry can ruin a family.
11. The practice of dowry is a social evil and should be put an end to.
12. Dowry is a share of the parental property and should not be forcefully demanded.

The Likert technique was applied. The points ranged from one to three. The response categories used in the scale for this study were favourable, indifferent and unfavourable. The composite weights of all these statements were taken to measure the attitudes towards dowry. Lower scores on the scale were indicative of unfavourable attitudes and vice versa. The scale was common to both the students

and their parents. The reliability co-efficient of the scales for the students and their parents (Spearman Brown) were 0.51 (students) and 0.63 (parents) respectively.

(b) *Socio-Economic Status Scale (SES Scale)*: Six indicators were selected to measure the SES of the respondents. These were:

1. Social Status
 - (i) Level of Education
 - (ii) Membership of associations
 - (iii) Caste.
2. Economic Status
 - (i) Material possessions
 - (ii) Income
 - (iii) Occupation.

Each indicator was measured on a scale ranging from zero to eight points. The composite weights of all these indicators were taken to measure the level of the SES. Lower scores on the scale were indicative of being in the lower SES and vice versa. The scale was administered to parents. The reliability co-efficient of the scale (Spearman Brown) was 0.58.

Results

The possible scores of the attitudes towards dowry of the students and the parents ranged from 12 to 36. The score range obtained for the students was from 12.50 to 19.75 and for the parents was from 12.60 to 17.50. The mean score of the attitudes of the students was 17.18 and 64 per cent of the students had scores below the mean score. Similarly, the mean scores of the parents was 14.84 and 70 per cent of the parents obtained scores below the mean score.

Table 1
SUMMARY OF SCORE FOR THE MEASUREMENT OF ATTITUDES TOWARDS DOWRY

Attitude Score	Students		Attitude Score	Parents	
	Frequency	Percent		Frequency	Percent
12-13 (Unfavourable)	22	44	12-13 (Unfavourable)	22	44
14-18 (Indifferent)	10	20	14-16 (Indifferent)	13	26
19-32 (Favourable)	18	36	17-24 (Favourable)	15	30
	N = 50			N = 50	
Statistics			Statistics		
Mean	17.18		Mean	14.84	
Median	15		Median	14	
1st Quartile	12.50		1st Quartile	12.60	
3rd Quartile	19.75		3rd Quartile	17.50	
S.D.	5.40		S.D.	3.28	
Coefficient of Variation	27.70		Coefficient of Variation	17.99	
Quartile Deviation	0.22		Quartile Deviation	0.16	

As seen in Table 1, the scores of the students and parents have been divided into three groups of unfavourable, indifferent and favourable on the basis of the values of first and third quartiles. Thirtysix per cent of the students scored more than the value of the third quartile, whereas, only 30 per cent of the parents scored at that level. When we examine the distribution on the basis of the first quartile, we unexpectedly find, approximately, the same values for both the groups—12,50 and 12.60 for the students and parents respectively.

The values of standard deviation and co-efficient of variation highlight the level of attitudinal consistency and homogeneity in the scores of the students and parents. The data revealed that the level of consistency and homogeneity was higher among the parents than among the students.

Table 2
SUMMARY OF SCORE FOR THE MEASUREMENT OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

SES Scores	Frequency	Percent	Statistics	
15-26 (Low)	15	30	Mean	31.80
27-34 (Middle)	14	28	Median	31
35-44 (High)	21	42	1st Quartile	25.12
N = 50			3rd Quartile	35.85
			S.D.	7.30
			Coefficient of Variation	23.00
			Quartile Deviation	0.17

The scores of the socio-economic status (SES) ranged from 15 to 44. The range of scores obtained was from 25.12 to 35.85. The mean score for the SES was 31.80, and 58 per cent of the respondents had scores below the mean. The SES scores, which were the same for both the groups, have been divided into three groups of low, middle and high, on the basis of the values of the first and third quartiles. The values of the standard deviation and co-efficient of variation showed that the group was heterogeneous and diverse.

To test the first hypothesis, correlation between the scores of the SES and the attitudes of the students was computed. The obtained results have been summarised in Table 3.

Table 3
SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS DOWRY

Attitudes towards dowry	Favourable		Indifferent		Unfavourable		Total	
	S	P	S	P	S	P	S	P
High	11	6	2	4	7	10	20	20
Middle	3	5	2	5	10	5	15	15
Low	4	4	6	4	5	7	15	15
Total	18	15	10	13	22	22	50	50

S = Students P = Parents
 Correlation coefficient (Pearson r) between SES and Attitudes of Students = 0.237 Significant (one-tailed test).
 Correlation coefficient (Pearson r) between SES and Attitudes of Parents = 0.08 Not significant.

As illustrated by the results in Table 3, the correlation was significant (correlation coefficient = 0.237—one-tailed test). It was, however, not in the expected direction. It shows that the higher the SES, the more favourable their attitude towards dowry. The data were further analysed to investigate the second hypothesis. The results in Table 3 show clearly that the SES and the attitudes of the parents are not correlated.

To test that there is a significant difference in the attitudes of the students and parents towards dowry, the 't' test was applied. The distribution of the mean attitude scores of the students and parents is presented in Table 4.

Table 4
ATTITUDE SCORE

	W	Mean	S.D.	t	df	Probability
Students	50	17.18	5.40			
				2.617	98	P<0.01
Parents	50	14.84	3.28			

It is clear from the Table that the mean attitude score of the students (17.18 ± 5.40) is significantly higher than the mean attitude score of the parents (14.84 ± 3.28), ($t=2,627$; $P<0.01$).

Discussion

Contrary to the hypothesis that the higher the SES, the more unfavourable the attitudes of the students, the data indicate that the majority of the students of the high SES group were in favour of dowry. They felt that it was an important appendage of marriage and that it helped a boy and girl to settle down. Some of them also opined that dowry was a compensation for the groom's educational expenses. However, two-thirds, of the students in the middle SES expressed their desire to put an end to this practice as they felt it was against the ethics of society. In the low SES group, particularly amongst the girls, an ambivalent attitude prevailed. Many of them felt that while dowry was something unpleasant which was forced upon them, not giving dowry might mean that they would remain unmarried and be a burden to their parents.

Furthermore, the results of Table 3 show that there is an insignificant correlation between the SES and the attitudes of the parents. The findings reflect that SES has failed to affect the attitudes of the parents toward dowry. The results in Table 4 clearly indicate that there is a significant difference in the mean attitude scores of the students and parents. One would have expected the post-graduate students, who have had an exposure to liberal values and education, to hold the practice of dowry in disfavour, but the opposite was found to be true. Instead of mitigating this evil, education has only helped to perpetuate it.

Educated young men insist on fabulous sums of money as bridegroom price, and, in almost all the cases, the amount of dowry is regulated by the educational qualification of the bridegroom, along with his economic status and prestige (Kapadia, 1966). While examining the dowry expectation of men with different educational background, it was found that the mean value of the expected dowry increased with the prestige of

education. While foreign degrees drew the highest dowries, the Ph.D. degree received lower dowries than engineering and medical degrees (Rao and Rao 1982). Luthra (1983) revealed in her study that, as boys were becoming more educated, their parents felt that it was their right to ask for more dowry in order to recover their investment in the boy's education. With parents who had paid dowry for their daughters, demanding the same for their sons, as a *quid pro quo*, dowry as an institution, has come to stay, and is even considered by many of the present generation as a legitimate stepping stone to a higher socio-economic status. In a society, which is becoming increasingly materialistic, where the accumulation of wealth has replaced most other factors as a sure sign of success, the expectations and aspirations of the youth have increased considerably. It would seem that many of them are beginning to realise that one of the easiest ways to bridge the gap between actual economic realities and inflated aspirations, is to demand more dowry (Ahuja, 1982).

Conclusion

The attitude score results of the parent respondents were more homogeneous than those of the student respondents. This indicates that the parents, who are more directly exposed to the problems of dowry, have developed more uniformly unfavourable attitudes towards dowry, as compared to the students.

That the parents had more unfavourable attitudes towards dowry is evident from the difference in the mean attitude score. The mean attitude score of the students was significantly higher than that of the parents. This may be due to the rise in the level of material expectations in the youth over the recent past. With the rise in the material aspirations and expectations, the youth have come to depend heavily on the institution of dowry.

The findings in the study revealed that there was a positive correlation between SES and attitudes towards dowry of the students. The higher the SES, the more favourable the attitudes of the students towards dowry. While the majority of the students belonging to the high SES supported the practice of dowry, a large percentage of the students in the middle SES came out strongly against it. A significant proportion of the students in the low SES, however, took a neutral stand. This tends to confirm the widely held view that it is the middle class which is most affected by the practice of dowry. Unlike other empirical studies (Hooja, 1969, Khanna and Verghese, 1978), where the findings have revealed that the lower the levels of income, the greater the adherence to the practice of dowry, this study shows that the higher the SES, the greater the conformity to the practice of dowry.

The insignificant correlation between the SES of the parents and their attitudes indicates that SES has not influenced their attitudes towards dowry. To a large extent, they still seem to be conventional, bound by customs and traditions.

It is distressing to note that, in spite of higher education, students had more favourable attitudes towards dowry. Higher education, received by the groom, has increased the value of the dowry. Education, therefore, seems to have failed to inculcate in the students a sense of values and ethics necessary for the eradication of this evil. In the absence of these values and ethics, the practice of dowry is likely to persist.

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