
The Dowry System in Northern India: Women's Attitudes and Social Change

In spite of modernization and women's increasing role in the market economy, the practice of the dowry in India is becoming more widespread, and the value of dowries is increasing. There are many well-documented adverse consequences of the dowry system, particularly for women. This is a study of attitudes toward the dowry system among married women in the northern province of Bihar (N = 4,603), in which the dowry has strong roots in tradition. Hypotheses regarding antecedents involving attachment to tradition, exposure to modernizing influences, and self-interest were developed. Each set of factors has some effects, and nearly two thirds of the women in the survey disapprove of the dowry. The practice may be quite resistant to change, however, because its social and economic consequences carry tangible benefits in an increasingly materialistic culture.

The dowry system—payments from the bride's family to the groom or groom's family at the time of marriage—has a long history in India and other Asian societies (Lee, 1982). The modern Indian dowry system has its roots in the traditional upper-caste practices of *kanyadhan*

(literal meaning: gift of the virgin bride), *varadakshina* (voluntary gifts given by the bride's father to the groom), and *stridhan* (voluntary gifts given by relatives and friends to the bride; Diwan, 1987; Van der Veen, 1972). Traditionally, although these gifts could be significant, they were often small tokens of good wishes. More recently, however, the dowry has come to involve a substantial transfer of wealth from the bride's family to the groom's, and has become a major factor in marriage negotiations (Nadagouda, Krishnaswamy, & Aruna, 1992; Paul, 1985; Teja, 1991).

This is a study of married women's attitudes toward the dowry system in the northern Indian state of Bihar. Evidence is mounting that the dowry has some extremely serious adverse consequences for women. At the same time, however, women benefit from dowries in several ways, and these benefits may be increasingly important in a culture that is becoming more materialistic and consumer-oriented. Understanding the antecedents of women's attitudes may help in assessing the potential for processes of social change to eventuate in either the strengthening or the weakening of the dowry system.

Historically, the dowry may have served as a form of premortem inheritance for women, because only men were entitled to inherit family property (Sharma, 1980). It may also have been a way of compensating the groom and his family for the economic support they would provide to the new wife, because women had little or no role in the market economy and

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would be dependent upon their husbands and in-laws (Boserup, 1970). This interpretation is consistent with the fact that the dowry was historically practiced largely in the upper castes, among whom women's economic roles were particularly restricted. In the lower castes, where women were more likely to be economic contributors to their families, the custom of the bride-price was more common (Srinivas, 1994).

If the economic dependence of women is causally related to the custom of the dowry, women's increasing role in the market economy of India should bring about a decrease in the occurrence and magnitude of dowries. Although there are state-level variations, the ratio of female workers per 100 male workers in India has been increasing steadily in the last several decades, from 22.7 in 1971 to 29.0 in 1991 (Srinivasan, Shariff, Zaman, & Bierring, 1997). These ratios are considerably underestimated in official statistics because female workers are often missed during data collection, or families do not acknowledge women's contributions to household income because of cultural disapproval of women working outside the home (Srinivasan et al.). But despite the significant participation of women in the labor force, dowries are becoming even more common. The custom has permeated all religions and social classes (Caldwell, Reddy, & Caldwell, 1983; Caplan, 1984; Mandelbaum, 1999; Stone & James, 1995), has spread to neighboring countries (Amin & Cain, 1997), and is flourishing even among South Asian immigrants to Western societies (Barot, 1998; Jhutti, 1998). Further, the value of dowries has been inflating rapidly, such that the expenses of daughters' marriages may be financially devastating for their parents (Bhat & Halli, 1999; McCoid, 1989; Nadagouda et al., 1992; Rao, 1993).

This situation has a variety of consequences. Because daughters require extreme financial investments with no material return, rates of female feticide (abortion of female fetuses) and infanticide are high in some parts of the country (Das Gupta, 1994; Das Gupta & Bhat, 1998). The frequency and severity of violence against wives who bring too small a dowry to their marriages, perpetrated both by their husbands and their husbands' families, is a growing problem. The National Crime Records Bureau of the Government of India keeps track of crimes against women over dowry-related issues. In 1998, 6,917 *dowry deaths* were recorded in

India, an increase of 15.2% over the 6,006 deaths in 1997 (National Crime Records Bureau, 1998). This figure is likely to be underestimated because crimes against women are often not reported because of social stigma. There are many reports of violence against women whose dowries are deemed insufficient by their husbands or the husbands' families (Kumari, 1989; Mandelbaum, 1999; Stone & James, 1995).

Given that the historical functions of the dowry have become less important, why is the practice becoming more widespread and the monetary value of dowries inflating? The answer may be in part demographic. The mate selection system of India has long been characterized by hypergamy, with women from lower status families marrying higher status men within the same caste (Van der Veen, 1972). This constrains the number of potential husbands available to women above the lowest status levels, particularly when combined with other selection restrictions, such as village and lineage exogamy, which are characteristic of northern provinces (Karve, 1965). And, in recent years, "High status families ... have been leading the way to lower fertility" (Billig, 1991, p. 356). This means that there are fewer higher status men for women to marry, creating a *marriage squeeze* (Bhat & Halli, 1999; Rao, 1993) for women and intensifying the competition for suitable grooms.

Because marriages are traditionally status-hypergamous, the dowry is also a vehicle by which brides' families make status claims. The size of the dowry provides the bride-giver with an opportunity for social advancement by attracting a groom from a higher position in the status hierarchy; the groom's family may select the economically most desirable bride from among a pool of eligible brides (Kumari, 1989). Because the dowry is symbolic of the social and economic standing of the bride-giving family, ostentatious dowry payments increase the status of the bride's family (Van der Veen, 1972).

Because arranged marriages characterize the Indian marriage system, parents of a daughter are often willing to provide a good dowry to secure a suitable husband for her, partly to avoid the prospect of the daughter's long-term dependence on the parents (Krishnaswamy, 1995). In addition, a bride's parents may believe that a generous dowry is essential to ensure that their daughter is treated well in

her new home. The parents-in-law may show preferential treatment to a daughter-in-law who brings a large dowry by giving her fewer household responsibilities, allowing more autonomy, and treating her more courteously (Minturn, 1993; Sharma, 1980).

Finally, many scholars (e.g., Krishnaswamy, 1995; Nadagouda et al., 1992) have decried the growing consumerism in Indian culture. Young men and their families have come to see the dowry as a route to sudden affluence and rapid upward mobility (McCoid, 1989). The flow of resources from parents-in-law often continues over the lifetime of the parents in northern India, in the form of substantial gifts to daughters' husbands and in-laws for every major occasion. As Sharma (1993) observes, "When they arrange the marriage of a son, parents do not just look forward to the dowry they will receive at the wedding. They look at the bride's family's general capacity to give" (p. 343).

In some cases where these expectations are not fulfilled, wives may suffer severe consequences, including physical abuse and death. But although women are regularly victims of dowry violence if their dowries are judged to be too small, they are also beneficiaries of the dowry system in some ways. Women play major roles in negotiating dowries for their sons, in determining how the dowries will be used, and in encouraging daughters-in-law to seek more gifts from their families (Awasthi, 1996; Kumari, 1989; Prasad, 1994). Daughters too may value the monetary and material transfers of wealth from their parents because they increase the affluence of their new families (Krishnaswamy, 1995; Mathew, 1987). Cash and household items included in dowries are likely to be used by the new couple for their benefit, and clothes and jewelry may be used by the mother-in-law and sisters-in-law. Other items may be given as dowry to the groom's sisters. Thus, there are some reasons that women may be supportive of the dowry system. Some of these reasons are connected to modernization, because the mounting consumerism of Indian culture increases the demand for material goods among young couples that may be acquired via dowries.

To understand why the dowry continues to be an influential part of the Indian mate selection system in spite of its problematic consequences, it is necessary to understand the attitudes of women toward it. This is a study of married

women's attitudes in the northern province of Bihar. Bihar is a relatively poor state that is still strongly traditional and has been minimally influenced by modernization; the dowry has been practiced there for centuries (Srinivasan, 1995). The factors that affect women's attitudes under these conditions provide important insights into the potential for social change.

HYPOTHESES

Processes of modernization and social change tend to eventuate in the gradual disappearance of customs such as the bride-price and dowry, along with arranged marriage customs in general (Lee, 1982). Indian arranged marriages and the accompanying dowry system have proved to be extremely resistant to social change, however. There are even indications that younger persons may hold more favorable attitudes toward the dowry system than their parents (Mathew, 1987) and that higher status persons, who are usually in the vanguard of social change, may favor dowries more strongly than lower status persons (Krishnaswamy, 1995; Nadagouda et al., 1992). These findings, however, are based on small, nonrepresentative samples. Our sample is highly representative of the population of married women in the northern province of Bihar, so we expect somewhat different results.

For contemporary Indian women, we expect attitudes toward the dowry system to be a function of exposure to traditional norms supporting the dowry, exposure to modernizing influences that would reduce support for the dowry, and self-interest.

On one hand, traditional norms supporting the dowry system are more likely to be found among women of the Hindu religion and the upper castes, because the custom has its historical roots among these groups. Similarly, the dowry system is more rigid in the northern Hindi-speaking region consisting of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan states (Dyson & Moore, 1983). Women who are native to these states have been exposed to the practice of the dowry from childhood, and are thus predicted to be more supportive of the dowry than those born elsewhere in India.

On the other hand, modernizing influences are likely to reduce support for the dowry system. Younger women and those with more education are more likely to be exposed to modern

ideas and less likely to follow conventional customs, especially those that undermine the status of women, such as the dowry. Women who are regularly exposed to media are also likely to be less supportive of tradition. Those who live in urban areas have more access to modern educational systems and media, and are exposed to more cosmopolitan environments that challenge conventional thinking and lifestyles. Employed women are more likely to be exposed to liberalizing influences in the workplace (Malhotra & Mathar, 1997), and their greater financial resources allow them to question traditional practices that pose burdens to their families and undermine their status.

In terms of self-interest, the more unmarried sons a woman has, the more she and her family are likely to benefit from the dowry system. Women with more daughters, conversely, will experience a greater financial burden because of the dowry system, and are thus less likely to support it. In addition, women who are married consanguineously (i.e., to husbands to whom they were related prior to marriage) are likely to have had a less aversive experience with the dowry, and thus are more likely to support it. Dowries in such cases are usually smaller (Reddy, 1988), because the groom's parents are hesitant to make exorbitant demands on relatives, and the bride's parents are often able to exercise some control over the disposition of the dowry. This means that the dowry is often used for the benefit of the newly married couple rather than the groom's parents.

METHOD

The Sample

Data for this study were obtained from the National Family Health Survey conducted in India in 1992–1993. The objectives of the survey were to collect data on demographic and health variables at the individual and household levels from married women. Although core questions on fertility, mortality, and health were asked of women in all 24 states, additional questions on selected topics such as AIDS, infanticide, and the dowry were asked in only a few states. The question on attitudes toward the dowry was asked only in Bihar, a northern state in which the dowry has long been customary.

The sample was selected using a systematic multistage stratified method to ensure representativeness within the state. A total of 5,949 married women under age 50 were interviewed; the response rate was 97.9%. Further details on the sampling method are available in the National Family Health Survey report (International Institute for Population Sciences, 1995). Because of the small numbers of women who were currently divorced ($n = 6$, 0.1%), separated ($n = 41$, 0.7%), widowed ($n = 207$, 3.5%), or married more than once ($n = 129$, 2.2%), analyses reported here were restricted to currently married women in their first marriages. Thirty-two women (0.5%) aged 13 or 14 were removed from the sample because of the small number of married women in this age range. Further, because the question of the dowry is much more relevant to parents than nonparents, the analysis is restricted to the 85.5% of women in the sample who had given birth, and the 96.8% of these women who still had children living in the home. These restrictions leave a sample of 4,920. The sample was further reduced by 317 (6.5%) to 4,603 by item-specific missing data.

Measures

Dowry attitudes. The dependent variable is a simple dichotomy. Respondents were asked whether they *approved* (1) or *disapproved* (0) of the dowry system.

Tradition. Exposure to the dowry as a traditional practice was indicated by age, religion, nativity, and caste. Age is measured in years. Two dummy variables were created to measure religion. One identified Muslims; the second indexed other religions (Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, and so on). Hindu was the reference category. The relevant dimension of nativity is birth in the northern states where Hindi is spoken. Therefore, a dummy variable was created indicating that the respondent's native language was Hindi.

Caste is indicated by two dummy variables referencing *scheduled castes* and *scheduled tribes*. The scheduled castes are those who are identified by the government in the constitution of 1950 as lower castes who have been disadvantaged historically in social and economic terms, and who therefore receive some benefits designed to remedy these disadvantages. The

caste system, however, is Hindu in origin; consequently, some Indian residents (those identified as belonging to tribes) are not part of the system. The scheduled tribes represent ethnic groups that do not belong to castes, but are similarly disadvantaged. Because some members of these tribes have converted to Hinduism over the years, religion and caste are not so highly correlated as to cause multicollinearity problems. The reference category consists of the higher castes in the traditional Hindu system.

Modernization. Exposure to modernization is given by five variables. Education is measured in five categories ranging from no education (illiterate) to high school graduation or greater. Employment status is measured by two dummies indicating that the respondent works for pay or does unpaid work in a family enterprise; the reference category is nonemployed women.

The influence of media is tapped by exposure to television (*watches more than once a week* = 1) and radio (*listens more than once a week* = 1). Finally, residential location is differentiated into *urban* (1) and *rural* (0).

Self-interest. The respondent's self-interest in the dowry system is given by three variables: number of sons living at home, number of daughters living at home, and whether she was related to her husband prior to marriage. Those with more sons and those related to their husbands are expected to be more favorable toward the dowry system, whereas number of daughters is hypothesized to be related to disapproval.

Analysis

Because the dependent variable is a dichotomy, logistic regression is an appropriate mode of data analysis (DeMaris, 1995). In linear form, the model is written as

$$\ln(P/1 - P) = b_0 + b_1X_1 + b_2X_2 \dots b_kX_k + e,$$

where $(P/1 - P)$ is the estimated odds of approving of the dowry, $X_1 \dots X_k$ are explanatory variables, $b_1 \dots b_k$ are parameter estimates, b_0 is the constant, and e is the residual.

In the regression analysis, we enter variables in three blocks, consistent with our major hypotheses. First, the variables indexing exposure to traditional culture (religion, caste, nativity, and age) are entered. These are followed in the

second block by the measures of exposure to modernization (education, access to media, residential location, employment). Finally, the measures of self-interest (number of sons, number of daughters, relation to husband) are entered.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the distribution of the sample ($N = 4,603$) on all variables in the analysis for the total sample and for each value of the dependent variable. Just over one third (35.5%) of the married women in this sample approve of the dowry, indicating that the custom is widely unpopular. This is interesting because the sample consists largely of women with very traditional characteristics: rural residents (78%),

TABLE 1. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE BY APPROVAL OF DOWRY: MEAN (SD) OR PERCENT

| Variable | Approve ($n = 1,632$) | Disapprove ($n = 2,971$) | Total ($N = 4,603$) |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Age | 10.9 (8.5) | 10.3 (8.5) | 30.5 (8.5) |
| Residence: Urban | 14.8%* | 26.6% | 22.4% |
| Education: Illiterate | 84.1%* | 70.4% | 75.3% |
| < Primary | 2.2% | 3.8% | 3.2% |
| Primary | 7.0% | 8.8% | 8.2% |
| Middle school | 2.5% | 3.8% | 3.3% |
| ≥ High school | 4.2%* | 13.1% | 10.0% |
| Children: # sons | 1.7 (1.2) | 1.6 (1.2) | 1.6 (1.2) |
| # daughters | 1.2 (1.1)* | 1.3 (1.1) | 1.3 (1.1) |
| Religion: Muslim | 12.0%* | 15.5% | 14.3% |
| Other | 2.2% | 2.2% | 2.2% |
| Hindu | 85.8% | 82.3% | 83.5% |
| Caste: Sched. caste | 9.8% | 9.1% | 9.3% |
| Sched. tribe | 5.1% | 6.0% | 5.7% |
| Higher caste | 85.1% | 84.9% | 85.0% |
| Employment: | | | |
| Works/paid | 12.1% | 12.3% | 12.2% |
| Works/unpaid | 17.7%* | 11.8% | 13.9% |
| Not employed | 70.2% | 75.8% | 73.8% |
| Nativity: Hindi | 82.2% | 86.6% | 85.0% |
| Consanguineous marriage | 7.5%* | 5.8% | 6.4% |
| Watches television ≥ 1/wk | 9.1%* | 20.8% | 16.6% |
| Listens to radio ≥ 1/wk | 23.6%* | 31.1% | 28.4% |

* $p \leq .05$.

TABLE 2. LOGISTIC REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF APPROVAL OF DOWRY

| Variable | Model 1 | | Model 2 | | Model 3 | |
|---------------------|-----------------|--------|-----------------|--------|-----------------|--------|
| | B(SE) | Exp(B) | B(SE) | Exp(B) | B(SE) | Exp(B) |
| Muslim | -.297** (.093) | .743 | -.436*** (.095) | .646 | -.619*** (.108) | .538 |
| Other religion | .010 (.219) | 1.010 | .270 (.228) | 1.310 | .246 (.229) | 1.279 |
| Scheduled caste | .016 (.106) | 1.016 | -.109 (.109) | .897 | -.105 (.109) | .900 |
| Scheduled tribe | -.230 (.142) | .794 | -.374* (.145) | .688 | -.361* (.145) | .697 |
| Hindi speaker | -.323*** (.084) | .724 | -.152 (.086) | .859 | -.146 (.087) | .864 |
| Age | -.005 (.004) | .995 | -.005 (.004) | .995 | -.006 (.004) | .994 |
| Education | | | -.193*** (.032) | .824 | -.196*** (.033) | .822 |
| Listens to radio | | | .062 (.082) | 1.064 | .052 (.082) | 1.053 |
| Watches television | | | -.411** (.128) | .663 | -.404** (.128) | .667 |
| Urban | | | -.350** (.095) | .705 | -.344*** (.095) | .709 |
| Does paid work | | | -.104 (.100) | .901 | -.089 (.100) | .915 |
| Does unpaid work | | | .195* (.091) | 1.215 | .198* (.092) | 1.219 |
| Number of sons | | | | | .050 (.030) | 1.051 |
| Number of daughters | | | | | -.076* (.029) | .927 |
| Related to husband | | | | | .628*** (.142) | 1.873 |
| -2LL | 5956.118 | | 5772.464 | | 5742.035 | |
| F (block) | 29.80*** | | 183.66*** | | 30.43*** | |
| F (model) | 27.04*** | | 206.02*** | | 236.98*** | |

*p ≤ .05. **p ≤ .01. ***p ≤ .001.

the illiterate (75%), Hindus (84%), the non-employed (74%), and those who speak Hindi (85%). Relatively small proportions of these women listen to the radio (17%) or watch television (28%) as frequently as once a week. To find such widespread opposition to the dowry in a population so traditional suggests a high potential for change.

The differences between those who approve and those who disapprove of the dowry provide evidence in support of only some of our hypotheses. As we expected, compared with those who approve of the dowry, those who disapprove are more likely to be urban (26.6% vs. 14.8%), educated (13.1% vs. 4.2% with a high school education or more), and Muslim (15.5% vs. 12.0%). They are also more likely to watch television (20.8% vs. 9.1%) and listen to radio (31.1% vs. 23.6%) at least once a week, and they average 1.3 daughters, versus 1.2 for those who approve. Those who disapprove are also slightly less likely to be involved in consanguineous marriages (5.8% vs. 7.5%). Each of these differences is consistent with our hypotheses.

Age, number of sons, caste, and nativity are unrelated to approval of the dowry system, however, and women who work for pay are

evenly distributed between those who do and do not approve. Surprisingly, there is a higher proportion of women who do unpaid work among those approving of the dowry (17.7%) than among those who disapprove (11.8%). Caste is unrelated to approval. These findings do not conform to our hypotheses.

The logistic regression analysis is shown in Table 2. Hypothesis 1 predicts that exposure to traditional norms is positively related to approval of the dowry. This implies that Hindus, members of higher castes, native Hindi speakers, and older respondents should be more approving. The results are mixed. Muslims are indeed less likely than Hindus to approve of the dowry, and this effect strengthens slightly when subsequent blocks of variables are entered. Members of other religions do not differ from Hindus, however. Membership in a lower caste does not reduce the odds of approving of the dowry system, but those who belong to lower tribes are less likely than upper-caste respondents to approve once variables indexing exposure to modernizing influences are added to the equation. Hindi-speaking respondents are slightly less likely to approve of the dowry than non-Hindi speakers; this was unexpected. The

effect disappears when the measures of modernization are added in the second block, however.

We expected age to be related to approval of the dowry, but it is not. Age and cohort effects are, of course, confounded in cross-sectional data, and it is possible that these effects are countervailing and cancel each other, although we have no reason to expect this. Because younger women are no more disapproving of the dowry than their elders, it appears that cohort succession by itself will not be sufficient to eventuate in decreasing support for the dowry in the foreseeable future.

Hypothesis 2 says that exposure to modernization reduces approval of the dowry system. Among the measures of modernizing influences, education, watching television (although not listening to radio), and urban residence all have the expected negative effects on approval of the dowry. Each of these factors increases exposure to more modern norms and behaviors, and perhaps to cultures in which the dowry is not practiced. Their effects do not diminish when measures of self-interest are added.

We also tested for interactions between education and both urban residence and exposure to media. Urban areas have higher quality schools that provide a more modern education; it is reasonable to suppose that education might have a stronger negative effect on approval of the dowry for urban residents. The interaction term did not approach significance, however. The interaction between education and watching television was tested because television might have stronger effects on those with more education, who are both more likely to watch and more likely to be affected by "progressive" programming. This term also did not approach significance. There was also no interaction between education and age. Thus, the negative effect of education appears to be relatively constant across population categories.

Employment, however, does not operate as predicted. Women who work for pay are indistinguishable from those who do not in terms of attitude toward the dowry. Those who do unpaid work, however, are significantly more favorable toward the dowry than the nonemployed. This may have to do with the nature of their work in family enterprises, and their consequent sensitivity to the needs of their families for goods and services.

Hypothesis 3 predicts that self-interest in the dowry system is positively related to approval.

The number of sons a woman has increases the extent to which she benefits from the dowry, whereas her number of daughters increases her costs. Those who were related to their husbands prior to marriage experienced fewer costs associated with the dowry. This hypothesis also met with mixed success. The number of sons a woman has does not significantly increase her favorability toward the dowry. Those with more daughters, however, are somewhat less likely to approve, presumably because they anticipate the expenses of upcoming dowries. The effect of being in a consanguineous marriage is significant and quite strong, as predicted, with those who were related to their husbands prior to marriage nearly twice as likely as others to approve of the dowry.

CONCLUSIONS

One would normally expect processes of social change and modernization to diminish both the practice of and attitudinal support for customs such as the dowry. Our data show that nearly two thirds of married women in the province of Bihar, where the dowry has a long history and the pace of modernization is slow, do not favor the dowry. We have no historical data on attitudes toward the dowry, but given its long history and roots in cultural traditions, it is unlikely that women have become more favorable toward it in recent years. Although we cannot be certain without data, the low levels of current support are probably indicative of decreased support over time. We can also speculate about the direction of change in women's attitudes based on the effects of factors reflecting the relative influences of traditionalism and modernization.

Several of our results show differences between categories of individuals in their support of the dowry system. Muslims and members of lower status tribes, for example, are less likely than others to support the dowry. These differences do not portend social change unless the proportions of the population in these categories are increasing, which is not the case.

Some dimensions of modernization do appear to result in diminished support for the dowry system. Education, urban residence, and exposure to television are all negatively related to support, and each of these is likely to become more common in the future. Age is unrelated to attitudes, however, implying that cohort succession by itself will not result in attitudinal

change. Although younger women may be somewhat less influenced by tradition, they are also closer in time to their own marriages. In this era of increasing materialism in Indian culture (Krishnaswamy, 1995; Nadagouda et al., 1992), they may value the increment to their new families' economic status that dowries from their parents provided. They may also value the enhanced status in their husbands' families that high dowries have given them. The influences of modernization and self-interest may be countervailing here, producing a situation where age has no net effect on attitudes toward the dowry.

Although employment in the market economy is often seen as a modernizing influence, it has no such effect here. It is possible that employed women in Bihar work in such menial occupations that they are not exposed to career opportunities or liberal ideas among coworkers. Doing unpaid work, however, is positively related to support of the dowry. Unpaid work generally means working in a family enterprise, so women who contribute their labor to the economic security of their families may value the resources that dowries bring. To the extent that women move out of unpaid employment in family enterprises and into paid positions in the market economy, support for the dowry may diminish in the future.

We have taken children's gender to represent women's self-interests in the perpetuation of the dowry system. As predicted, number of daughters is modestly negatively related to support of the dowry, but number of sons does not increase support. It is likely that most women in our sample have or anticipate having children of both genders. The effects of having sons and daughters may be countervailing.

Our results suggest that the Indian dowry system should not be viewed simply as a traditional practice that will eventually be eliminated by processes of social change, but rather as an important component of a marriage system that is changing in response to a progressively more materialistic culture (Paul, 1985; Teja, 1991). Although education and exposure to modern media may diminish support for the dowry among women, it also appears that women value the resources that their dowries bring to their families of procreation. Paradoxically, modernization has increased the desirability of consumer goods, and young married couples may see the dowry as a way of obtaining them.

Other studies (e.g., Krishnaswamy, 1995; Mathew, 1987) suggest that even parents of daughters see the dowry as an opportunity to make status claims and to ensure good treatment of their daughters by their new husbands' families. Thus, although most married women in Bihar disapprove of the dowry system, and the Indian government has legally outlawed the dowry through the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, the practice is flourishing (Bhat & Halli, 1999; Stone & James, 1995).

The extent of women's disapproval of the dowry might suggest a high potential for social change. Because some modernizing influences do predict disapproval of the dowry system among married women, it is possible that the extent of this disapproval will increase as modernization proceeds. But because modernization is also producing an increasingly materialistic culture, which in turn increases the value of the money and goods that dowries provide, it is not yet clear that modernization will negatively affect women's approval of the dowry system.

In addition, for women's attitudes to have an effect on the actual practice of the dowry, women must have sufficient power or influence to implement their preferences, or to sway men to their position. There is little evidence that women's power is increasing in India; instead it remains a thoroughly patriarchal culture (Das Gupta & Bhat, 1998; Stone & James, 1995). And, as noted earlier, decreased fertility among higher status families increases the competition for desirable husbands by reducing the supply. Because this competition is largely economic, dowries may be regarded as undesirable but necessary for successful mate selection.

A major limitation of this study is that we have no comparable data on attitudes toward the dowry among men. To the extent that India remains a patriarchal culture, men's attitudes may be more important than women's in determining whether the actual practice of the dowry expands or contracts (Paul, 1985). We also have no data on married women's personal experiences with the dowry, which certainly may influence women's attitudes; the absence of such data is another limitation of the study. Finally, the degree of change or stability in attitudes toward the dowry can only be assessed with longitudinal data, which are not currently available.

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