

Dowry in India and bride price in Thailand

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Abstract

This paper makes a modest attempt to provide a comprehensive description of the institution of marriage transaction in India and Thailand. In most societies and their marriage institutions, an important aspect characterizing marriage is the financial transfer. This transfer is usually made at the time of marriage between families involved. It can be in two forms: transfer from the bride's family to the groom's known as dowry as practiced widely in India or from the groom's family to the bride's known as bride price as practiced in Thailand at the time of marriage. The present paper uses mostly secondary source of data by reviewing the literature available from books, journals and electronic sources. Findings in this paper may help to bridge the gap in the available knowledge and literature about the origin, forms, changes and factors of the prevalence of the institutions of dowry in India and bride price in Thailand, to highlight positive and negative effects from its analysis, thereby contributing to the policy makers to understanding this social institution which may create social problems or be beneficial to the bride, family or to the society at large.

Keywords: financial transfer, marriage transaction, dowry, bride price

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1. Introduction

Most societies, have been characterized by payments at the time of marriage in their history. In many cultures of the world, dowry and bride price are terms that refer to payments made at the time of marriage. These marriage payments come in various forms and sizes but can be classified into two broad categories: transfers from the family of the bride to that of the groom, broadly termed as "*dowry*," or from the groom's side to the bride's, broadly termed as "*bride price*." Bride price is a common practice in Africa and South East Asia such as Thailand while dowry is a common practice in India [1].

Dowry is defined as wealth given to a daughter at her marriage for contributing to the practical life of the newly married couple. These wealth are inheritance of property given from parents to the daughter to take with her into marriage [2]. Apart from the variations of dowry definitions, there are many variations, across time and space, to the practice of dowry payments - the size, form and function of payments [3, 4].

This paper has been written using both primary and secondary sources. Primary data has been collected by observation and interviewing of a few selected respondents both from India and Thailand according to the convenience of the researcher. An open ended questionnaire has been used. The respondents were asked to write whether payment of dowry items were compulsory or voluntary. They were also asked to specify the items paid on the marriage of themselves or their family members. Regarding the secondary

sources, the researcher reviewed literature from online sources and published articles and books. This paper is in fact mostly a descriptive study.

This paper attempts to bring out the description of the dowry system in India and the bride price system in Thailand, to compare and contrast them and to bring out the positive and negative effects of the institutions.

One of the key objectives of development research is to broaden our understanding on pressing social issues that threaten the welfare of individuals in a society. One such pressing issue is the marriage transaction. Marriage transaction is a burning topic in the Indian context because of its potential adverse effect on women and on marriage union in general. But there is no available study of the nature and its positive or negative effects in the case of Thai Marriage transaction. Marriage transaction can be studied from a multidimensional perspective. This paper examines the institution of dowry and bride price, their prevalence in the community and factors that influence practices and their magnitudes. By doing that, it tries to bring out the advantages and disadvantages of the system in the marriage union. Thus, this paper provides a more comprehensive picture of Indian and Thai marriage transactions and fills up some of the gaps that exist in the literature.

2. Bride price versus dowry

There are many definitions and concepts of dowry which interlink with each other [3]. The bride

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price is a payment that is given by the groom and his family to the bride's family. It is usually paid to the bride's father or family, not the bride herself. It is different from dowry, which is a valuable gift like expensive jewelry that may also be worn as a bridal jewelry given directly to the bride from the groom.

Bride price is also termed as bride wealth [5, 6]. Dowry has been referred to as a gift or transfer by a bride's family to the groom or his family at the time of marriage. They are property or wealth given from parents to the daughter to take with her into marriage. Dowry given to a wife is ought to form part of the conjugal estate, to be enjoyed by husband and wife and to be transmitted in time to their children [2]. Another definition to dowry is the property a woman brings to the marriage partnership, that is, the property a bride receives from her parents, or she previously inherited and brings to the marriage, or property she owns as a widow and brings when she remarries [7]. Dowry is mainly found in societies exhibiting substantial class stratification and socioeconomic differentiation [1]. Dowry-paying societies' marriage practices are typically monogamous/nonpolygynous (men having one wife), virilocal (married daughters leave their parental home), patrilineal (inheritance through men) and endogamous (marrying within a social group/ similar status) and low female contribution to agriculture, low incidence of polygyny and high levels of dependence of women and children on husband's economic support [8]. On the other hand, bride price societies are in contrast characterized by a high female contribution to agriculture, high female reproductive and economic autonomy and high incidences of polygyny.

3. Historical background of dowry and bride price

The origins of dowry or bride price would have to move backwards into the remote past. It may not be possible to ascertain when and where these practices originated. However, it can be supposed that dowry and bride price came into being after the practice of monogamous marriage had become prevalent. Man is the only species practicing monogamy, all other species are promiscuous. Promiscuity gave way to *polygamy* (having more than one wife) or *polyandry* (having more than one husband), and after various reasoning, monogamy became the established system. As long as promiscuity existed there was no question of dowry or bride price. The origin of these two practices could be linked up with the discarding of promiscuity in favor of Polygamy and Polyandry. The formation of polygamous and polyandrous forms of marriage could have been made necessary by changes in the demographic balance between the sexes. A rise in the number of females as compared to that of males is a congenial situation for the emergence of polygamy. In absence of polygamy, in a society having a larger number of females as compared to males, many female members would have to be deprived of marital life. The obligation to get more

than one female member into wedlock with one male member could have been the situation which gave birth to dowry as a price obtained by the male and his family from the female's family.

The origin of bride-price could have taken place in opposite circumstances where the sex ratio favored females and as there was a large number of males for every female, polyandry and bride-price could have been the result. Along with this generalized hypothesis there were many factors related to different situations which gave birth to dowry and bride-price. In India's context, these practices can be seen to be a result of the dialectics of the caste system. The caste hierarchy has resulted in endogamy (marriage to one's own caste), preventing inter-marriage between members of different castes [9].

Historically, bride price tends to exist more often in societies that are characterized by high female reproductive and economic autonomy, high female contribution to agricultural work, and a high incidence of polygynous marriage [2]. The payment of bride price has been a more common occurrence than that of dowry. On analysis of Murdock's (1967) [10] World Ethnographic Atlas of 1167 pre industrial societies, bride price occurs in two - thirds of societies. On the other hand, dowry occurs in less than 4 percent of this sample. Dowry has played a more significant role, because the tradition of dowry has occurred mainly in Europe and Asia, where more than 70 percent of the world's population resides [1].

Dowry payments were common in seventeenth and eighteenth century Mexico and Brazil, where Spanish and Portuguese family law governed colonial marriages until those countries gained their independence [7]. Although the custom of dowry payment has disappeared in most regions in the West, it remains widespread in South Asia. Bride prices were known to have prevailed extensively in Africa and also in areas of mainland, South and East Asia, and North and South America. The custom of bride price dates back as far as 3000 BCE. The ancient civilizations of Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Hebrews, Aztecs, and Incas all used bride price [11]. The Germanic tribes, who date from 2000 BCE and ruled western Europe required bride price for a marriage to be legal [12]. A valid marriage contract in Islamic law required a form of bride price [13, 14]. Traditional China required the negotiation of a bride price for the validity of a marriage, and these transfers continue to be the norm in many rural areas today [15]. China also seems to be one of the few examples where bride price and dowry coexist, with the bride price being compulsory and the dowry, which is more voluntary in nature (Engel, 1984). Taiwan also seems to follow the traditional Chinese practice of exchanging marriage payments in both directions [1]. Other countries in Southeast Asia, such as Thailand, Indonesia, and Myanmar, practice only bride price [18, 19]. Bride prices are most prevalent in Africa [5, 10].

4. Factors of giving dowry or bride price

There are many reasons behind giving dowry or bride price. It is grouped under the following theoretical headlines as:

4.1 Bequest theory

According to the bequest theory, dowry is considered as a form of pre-mortem inheritance, an intergenerational transfer of inheritance to the bride from her kin, under her control, upon marriage. In general, regardless of gender, parents tend to provide transfers to children who marry off and leave the paternal household. Hindu Societies being patrilocal/virilocal societies, parents provide dowries for daughters and bequests for sons to alleviate a potential free-riding problem among their married sons and daughters [20, 21]. According to the bequest theory, while sons obtain their inheritance upon the death of the parents, daughters receive their share of the family wealth at marriage [22].

4.2 Price model

The price model views dowries not as marriage payment but as gifts for alliance or transfers between families [23]. Dowries are transferred from the bride's families to the groom's families to balance the marriage market [4, 24]. Dowry is considered to be given to compensate the groom's family for supporting a woman after her marriage, as women are often prohibited by social customs from entering the productive economy and earning an income that would contribute economically to the family [24]. The price model views dowry as an instrument whereby parents of daughters secure alliances with high-quality in-laws [23]. Dowries are considered as opportunities for daughters to attract resourceful men and means to ensure a better future for one's daughter and to enhance one's own prestige in the community.

4.3 Female competition model

According to this theory, dowry is the product of competition among women to attract resourceful men so as to maximize genetic representation in future generations [1, 8]. Females prefer males who provide the best supply of resources, as females who do so would have the highest reproductive success. Dowries are investments of resources and reproductive tactics used by prospective brides and their kinsmen to attract the wealthiest bridegroom [1, 8]. The female competition model seems particularly relevant to understanding the Indian marriage market as "Hindu social organization is essentially hierarchical in the caste lines, and dowry has been traditionally linked to "hypergamy" that is, *marriage to a spouse of a higher socioeconomic status* [24].

5. Dowry system in India

Exchanging goods and services on the occasion of marriage is one of the prime characteristics of traditional Indian marriages. In the Hindu marriage rituals, *Dowry* or *Dahej* is the payment in cash or/and kind by the bride's family to the bridegroom's family along with the giving away (*daan*) of the bride

(*kanya*) (called *Kanyadaan*). Dowry is one of those social practices which continue from the past to the present in Indian society. During the marriage ceremony, the transfer comprising the dowry are proudly displayed in the wedding venue [25].

The dowry system has existed historically in India for a variety of reasons. The practice of giving dowry in India can be traced to the Hindu succession laws. Under the Hindu law, a female was not entitled to inherit parental wealth while a male is entitled to a share of parental wealth at birth. Through dowry, daughters receive their share of the family wealth at marriage [4]. A dowry is traditionally a form of gift given from the bride's parents to the proposed groom's family. It was originally intended to protect the bride from poor future circumstances as it would finance her new family in times of unforeseen adversity. The gift is not only the exchange of money but also goods such as furniture, livestock, appliances or even a car. Dowry has economic functions and is a way of redistributing property. Dowry may also improve the welfare of brides by serving as a form of pre-mortem inheritance and to help the couple to start their conjugal unit.

The dowry system today is not as widely accepted in India; however, it is still practiced although now in an indirect way or voluntarily. The items comprising a dowry are all modern household gadgetry such as furniture, crockery, electrical appliances (in modern days refrigerators, television, sofa and household furniture, Honda scooter, car, etc.) as well as personal items of clothing, jewelry and cash. Some parents also give a car among dowry items. The value of the dowry depends on the jobs the grooms may be holding at the time of marriage.

However, in India, the practice of dowry abuse is rising. Dowry has become a serious social problem when grooms and their families start to demand certain amount of dowry at the time of marriage negotiation. The practice of dowry has changed from its voluntary root to a mandatory one for bride's family. Therefore, the custom has deteriorated to a point in the recent decades, whereby the prospective groom and his family have become very greedy. They make tremendous demands, which if not met after marriage result in dowry deaths - burning girls alive if the dowry is insufficient, so that the boy can remarry another girl for a higher or better dowry [26]. The more educated a man is, the higher the family is in the caste and social hierarchy, the better his employment prospects, the higher is the expectation for dowry at the time of marriage [3, 27].

There are many cases of bride burning because of dowry abuse which we can read or hear from the news and other mass media from time to time. However, most of these incidents are reported as accidental burns in the kitchen or are disguised as suicide. It is evident that there exist deep rooted prejudices against women in India. Cultural practices such as the payment of dowry tend to subordinate women in

Indian society. Though prohibited by law in 1961, the extraction of DOWRY from the bride's family prior to marriage still occurs. When the dowry amount is not according to the demand or to the expectation, the bride is often harassed, abused, made miserable or even killed. The official records of such incidents of bride abuse are low because they are often reported as accidents or suicides by the family [9].

6. Bride price in Thailand

Bride price implies transfer of gifts from the family of the groom to that of the bride with or without similar transfer from the family of the bride to that of the groom. The practice of giving bride price is common in South East Asia. In the past, before marriage there is a practice called *bride service* (*kuey-kwaan*, *kuey-asaa*), where the prospective groom worked for the family of the bride for a period of time in order to prove himself worthy [1]. Studies found that the amount of bride price payment has usually been constant and uniform throughout society and across families of different income levels [28, 29].

Thailand is one of the South East Asian Countries where the institution of *bride price* or locally know as *sinsod* is commonly practiced at marriage to both Thai-Thai and Thai-Non-thai marriages. The *sinsod* and *thongman* are commonly referred to mean either the *bride price* or *bride wealth*. These concepts are different in items and different in different social contexts. However, *sinsod* (*literally meaning an inserted money*) is considered as a bride price since it is an amount of money given to the bride's parents as a token of appreciation for the upbringing and education they provided for their daughter. Frequently it is called *ka-nam-nom* or 'milk-money' to indicate the repayment for milk and nursing. Therefore, the amount of 'milk-money' differs according to the cost that parents have invested in their daughters. The *sinsod* is naturally more expensive for marrying a daughter of the rich than for a daughter of the poor [6]. The *thongman* (*literally meaning engagement gold*), which can be considered a *bride wealth*, usually comes in the form of gold ornaments and jewelry. They are presented directly to the bride at the engagement or wedding ceremony. The *thongman* becomes the bride's personal possession that she keeps and manages at her own will. It should be noted that in most cases the bride brings all these items with her to her new family or household. In that sense, these items of bride wealth become a dowry which she shares it with her husband.

The rationale for the bride price in Thailand is that it demonstrates that the groom has enough financial resources to support the bride and her family after the wedding. Another reason for the payment of bride price in Thailand supports the findings of Anderson (2007) [1] in that traditionally, when a daughter leaves her parents after marriage, they are "compensated" with the bride price since the daughter will now "work" for her husband. To analyze the

prevalence of *bride price* or *sinsod*, it is necessary to analyze briefly the Thai family in the past and present. It is the Thai cultural trait for daughters to take care of their parents until she gets married. When the daughter has got married the groom pays a *sinsod* or bride price to the parents to compensate them for the loss of her labour or contribution to the family. Today the *sinsod* is used mostly as a way of showing the wealth or status symbol, prestige or generosity of a groom. To be generous is highly respected in Thai society. The newly married couple will gain prestige and respect or status if the groom can afford to pay a handsome amount of bride price to the bride's family. As it is symbolic, the bride price is commonly displayed in the wedding ritual or ceremonies [31].

Now-a-days, there are many changes in Thailand in both marriage rituals as well as marriage transactions. *Sinsod* and *thongman* are merged into one category. It can be money or any valuable materials like diamond ring, a lot of land, a house, a car, a bank account, and so on. The practice of *brideservice* (*kuey-kwaan*, *kuey-asaa*) is disappearing even though the concept continues to exist. The diversity of occupations and changes of life style greatly affect the discontinuity of the *brideservice* practice. This is replaced by a new category of marriage transaction called *sinsodthongman* [6].

With the rise of upper middle class Thai culture, many parents are liberal in their outlook and choose to give the *sinsod* money back to their daughter after the wedding and in fact it is traditional for the parents to give the gold to the daughter. The amount of bride price is usually negotiated with the elder family member. The amount of bride price varies according to the economic, education qualification and social status of both the groom and the bride and also on the family's social status. No bride price may be given if the woman (bride) is divorced, has a child fathered by another man. A high amount of bride price in millions or diamond jewelry may be given for a woman of high social standing, a beauty queen, or a highly educated woman. In many cases, the parents of a Thai bride may return all or part of the bride price to the couple in the form of a wedding gift following the engagement ceremony.

7. Findings and conclusion

From the above review of literature and analysis, it is found that the practice of marriage transfer or payments existed since the remote past. As societies evolve from the primitive to the modern age, the nature of payment or transfer too, changes. The present paper brings out the positive and negative effects by comparing and contrasting between the dowry system in India and the bride price system in Thailand.

One important point of similarity is that both dowry and bride price are form of marriage payments at the time of marriage. The second point of similarity is that the magnitude of payment varies from family

to family depending on the social status or education qualification of the bride or the groom. Thirdly, the amount of payment is usually negotiated with the family before marriage. Lastly, the forms of them are changing in the present decade. Nowadays, most gifts of dowry or bride price are transaction as voluntary gift and mutually consented from both sides especially among the educated urbanized community where marriage is self arranged. The differences are as given below:

Bride price is an amount of money or property paid by the man (groom) or his family to the family of the woman (bride) upon her marriage to the man. On the other hand, dowry refers to property or money brought by a bride or her family to her husband on their marriage. Giving of dowry of India is a status symbol. Dowry is present mostly in societies with endogamous marriage practices (that is, where men and women from families of equal social status marry). Dowry then becomes a means to maintain social status by attracting a husband of at least equal standing for one's daughter. It correlates with strongly class-based social systems where higher-level individuals—by virtue of wealth, power, and possibly claim to a superior hereditary status—do not willingly intermarry with the lower levels. As a result, the amount of dowry generally increases not only with the wealth of the bride's father, but also with the groom's future prospects. Similar patterns are confirmed for modern India. Dowries are largest amongst the highest ranking castes [4, 30].

Dowry is considered as a gift for alliance and not marriage payment which is given to compensate the groom's family for supporting a woman after her marriage. In the case of India, most marriage is arranged marriage by the parents. Husbands are considered as guardian of their wives after marriage and divorce is very rare. On the other hand, Thai bride price (*sinsod*) is opposite as it is compensation to the parents for her economic worth. As women generally join the household of their groom at the time of marriage, bride price in Thailand is considered to be the payment a husband owes to a bride's parents for the labor value of the woman offspring, the compensation for losing her and for the cost of bringing her up. Dowries are considered as opportunities for daughters to attract resourceful men and means to ensure a better future for one's daughter and to enhance one's own prestige in the community. In contrast, Thai *sinsod* or *bride price* system is simply a symbol of payment whereby the grooms are expected to show their absolute generosity as well as their social status, prestige and affection. Most marriages in Thailand are self-arranged and divorce is very common in the Thai society. Divorce women are not frowned upon in the Thai Society whereas in the Indian Society, there is a social stigma attached to divorcee.

Another difference is that dowry of India is a form of pre mortem inheritance. According to the

Hindu law, a female was not entitled to inherit parental wealth while a male has the right to a share of parental wealth. Through dowry, daughters receive their share of the family wealth at marriage. In the case of Thailand, woman has the right to inheritance as the male. The items comprising dowry in the case of India comprises cash, household items, jewelry, furniture and so on, whereas in the case of Thailand bride price comprises mostly cash and jewelry such as gold, diamond. Sometimes, the parents returned back this bride price to the couple so that they can use it to start a new family life. Lastly, in India dowry system is persisting because there is preference of endogamous marriage, that is, marriage within one's own caste or *hypergamy* (marriage to a higher caste or socio economic status). As result, most marriages in India are arranged by parents. On the other hand, in Thailand, there is no caste system and most marriages are self arranged in consultation with their parents. The dowry system of India is considered as a social problem as there are many cases of dowry abuse and bride burning cases when the demand for dowry by the grooms is not met. Initially dowry was considered as a gift given to the daughter compensating her share in family property. With growing capitalism, the concept of gift vanished and people's greed for material gains in the form of dowry has increased. This has resulted in domestic violence and dowry death. Stringent dowry related laws have been framed (Dowry Prohibition Act 1961 and Indian Penal Code under Section 304B and 498A). This has curbed the problem to some extent. But now some of the girls are misusing this law as a weapon to teach a lesson to her in laws/ husband and settle their personal score. However, in Thailand, mostly it is a case of voluntary gift mutually negotiated and is not considered as a social problem. There are no such cases of bride burning or abuse case in Thailand.

From the above analysis, it can be concluded that both bride price and dowry are forms of marriage payment. However, there are variations to its practice in the size, the form and functions of payments. It has been demonstrated from the above review of literatures that dowry-paying societies tend to have more complex societal structures, substantial socioeconomic differentiation and class stratification, and monogamous, virilocal, patrilineal and endogamous marriage practices. These societies also typically feature low female contribution to agriculture, and high levels of dependence of women and children on husband's economic support. This is the contrary to the bride price paying societies like Thailand, where women are the main economic providers, high female reproductive and economic autonomy and high incidences of polygyny and divorce. In conclusion, it is important to understand how certain institutions functions in order to design effective solution delivered to the society through social policies. Despite its limitations, this paper sheds light on some of the uncertainties that existed in the literature. Therefore, it has taken an important step

to further our knowledge on the marriage transactions in India and Thailand and some of its key factors. This paper thus contributes to the broader agenda of improving our understanding of an important social institution as dowry or bride price that is too often responsible for violating the basic human rights of the traditionally disadvantaged gender group and their families. It is hoped that this study not only enriches our knowledge about marriage transactions in different societies but also adds value for social policy actions required to address the issue.

8. Recommendations

First of all, based on the researcher's review of literature, there is a lack of study on the bride price system of Thailand but in the case of dowry system of India, there are a number of studies available both in printed as well as non-printed literatures. As a result, the researcher felt that there should be a proper and deeper study of Thai bride price system through systematic research procedure to fill in the gap of available literature in this area.

Secondly, there are many social problems in the Indian society because of dowry abuse such as bride burning cases, strained family relations, etc. However, in the case of bride price in Thailand there is a lack of literature in this study. As a result, it is felt there needs a further thorough case study to explore it in-depth of its practice individually as well in society in this issue.

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