

The Nexus of Power and Patriarchy: Analysing the Dowry System in Indian Society

As I watched my 23-year-old cousin toil away for 10-12 hours every day over the past four years, saving diligently for her wedding—her cherished childhood dream and her parents' sole expectation—I couldn't help but overhear my uncle's hushed conversation with my father. "With two daughters, I can't imagine what you'll go through when they marry," he chuckled. "I've been saving for ages to ensure we meet every demand of my daughters' future in-laws. You'll need two lifetimes to fulfil their expectations." To my surprise, my father responded, "Times are changing; the dowry system will change too" but I wondered, will the

dowry system truly change, or will it remain a burden on families for generations to come? In the intricate web of power dynamics and patriarchal structures, the practice of dowry in Indian society stands as a stark embodiment of entrenched inequalities. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks presented in Moya Lloyd's "Power, Politics, Domination, Oppression," Allan Johnson's "Patriarchy: An It, not a He, a Them or an Us," and Deniz Kandiyoti "Bargaining with the Patriarchy". This paper examines that the practice of dowry creates unequal power relations between males and females because of the patriarchal structure that values sons and devalues daughters, ultimately reinforcing gender inequality and limiting women's agency and autonomy.

According to the Cambridge dictionary, Dowry is referred to as an amount of money or property that a woman's parents give to the man she marries. In Indian society, the practice of dowry exemplifies the entrenched power dynamics and patriarchal norms. This cultural practice not only reinforces gender-based discrimination but also underscores the complexities of power and patriarchy within Indian social structures. Whether the prevalent marriage payment is dowry or bride-price, in classic patriarchy, women do not normally have any claim on their father's patrimony (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 279). This highlights the systematic disadvantage women face within patriarchal systems, where their access to economic resources and inheritance rights are often limited. It aligns with historical evidence of patriarchal systems where property rights were typically vested in men, perpetuating women's economic dependence and subordination. However, patriarchy cannot be framed solely as a system that disadvantages women. While Kandiyoti rightly identifies the economic inequalities embedded in patriarchy, Johnson's perspective offers a broader understanding that patriarchy impacts individuals of all genders by perpetuating rigid gender norms and hierarchical power structures. Patriarchy puts issues of power, dominance, and control at the centre of human existence, not only in relationships between men and women,

but among men as they compete and struggle to gain status, maintain control, and protect themselves from what other men might do to them (Johnson, 1997, p. 88). For instance, in my family I would always watch my uncles compete to prove their masculinity and dominance which resulted in betrayal, jealousy and competition among siblings.

Additionally, Kandiyoti mentions that according to her the clearest instance of classic patriarchy may be found in a geographical area that includes North Africa, the Muslim Middle East (including Turkey, Pakistan, and Iran), and South and East Asia (specifically, India and China). However, regions such as North Africa, Middle East and South and East Asia have a diverse population wherein households that are dominated by women exist as well. For instance, In India, while patriarchy is deeply ingrained in many aspects of society, it's important to recognize the existence of matrilineal and matrilocal family structures in certain regions and communities. Matrilineal societies trace descent through the female line, meaning lineage, inheritance, and family ties are passed down through the mother's side of the family. In our gender studies class, a student from India mentioned that his family does not follow the classic patriarchal system, after marriage the groom moves into the bride's house instead of the bride. The author did not provide a diverse perspective in her reading and generalised experiences of women in a classic patriarchal system. She suggested how women in a traditional extended family go through a cycle where they start as young brides facing difficulties, but eventually gain authority over their daughters-in-law. This pattern of power shifting within the household encourages women to accept and internalise patriarchal norms. However, the author fails to acknowledge the agency and resistance exhibited by women within patriarchal systems. While some women may indeed internalise patriarchal norms, others actively challenge and resist them through various means, including grassroots movements, feminist activism, and individual acts of defiance.

Another instance that left an impact on my values and beliefs was that in my family, being the eldest son came with a whole package of perks. My father got more pocket money, more freedom—all because he was born a boy and happened to be first in line among eight other siblings. My grandfather had big plans for him, promising him a bigger share in the family business, but on one condition, he needed a son of his own to seal the deal but to my grandfather's surprise, my father had two daughters. And with the birth of each precious girl, the promises once whispered in paternal confidence dissolved into bitter betrayal. In a cruel twist of fate, my father's birth right was snatched away and gifted to his younger brother, simply because he had a son. And when my father passed away, leaving us dependent on our uncles, I was infuriated by the unfairness. It wasn't until my mom's friend offered some perspective that I realised this wasn't just our story—it was a pattern. Women everywhere, whether they lost their fathers or had brothers, had faced the same inequality. As Moya Lloyd argues, “sexual inequality arises from the fact that power is distributed in a way that disadvantages women as a group, without any consideration for the talents, abilities, or desires of individual women” (Lloyd, 2013, p. 113). This illustrates how dowry becomes a tool to perpetuate this cycle. The bride's family essentially pays for the "burden" of having a daughter, while sons inherit wealth and privilege.

My own story reflects this – my father, denied his birth right for having daughters, couldn't even pass it on to us. This societal devaluation of women, as Lloyd suggests, is a systemic issue, not one based on individual merit. However, while power may indeed be distributed unequally in society, reducing the issue solely to the disadvantage of women overlooks the complexity of patriarchy. As Allan Johnson argues, to demonstrate gender oppression exists, we don't have to show men are villains, that women are good-hearted victims, that women don't participate in their own oppression, or that men never oppose it. Patriarchal systems harm both men and women, in different ways, by enforcing rigid gender

roles and expectations, focusing solely on the disadvantage of women may neglect the ways in which men are also constrained by gender norms and expectations. For instance, many men face pressure to conform to traditional masculine ideals such as not showing signs of weakness or only being attracted to the opposite gender, which limits their ability to express vulnerability or pursue non-traditional roles like being a stay at home dad or exploring their sexuality. By emphasising the collective disadvantage of women without considering individual agency or the diversity of women's experiences, Lloyd's argument risks homogenising women as a uniform group. This overlooks intersecting factors such as race, class, sexuality, and ability, which can significantly shape women's experiences of inequality. As Allan Johnson states, it is possible for heterosexual men to love women without fragmenting them into desirable body parts.

In conclusion, the entrenched practice of dowry in Indian society serves as a poignant manifestation of patriarchal structures, perpetuating gender inequality and limiting women's agency and autonomy. Through critically responding and analysing the readings by Moya Lloyd, Deniz Kandiyoti and Allan Johnson and relating them to the context of Indian society and prevalence of the dowry system, it is evident that dowry reinforces unequal power dynamics rooted in patriarchal norms, where daughters are devalued compared to sons. However, it's essential to recognize that patriarchy doesn't solely disadvantage women but impacts individuals of all genders by perpetuating rigid gender norms and hierarchical power structures. While acknowledging the collective disadvantage faced by women, it's crucial to recognize individual agency and resistance within patriarchal systems. Women exhibit resilience and challenge norms through various means, indicating the complexity of gender dynamics and the diverse experiences of individuals within patriarchal societies such as not conforming to the practice of dowry and standing up for their own rights.

Furthermore, it's imperative to understand that patriarchy impacts men as well, constraining them within traditional masculine ideals and limiting their ability to express vulnerability or pursue non-traditional roles. By homogenising women's experiences and neglecting intersecting factors such as race, class, sexuality, and ability, we risk oversimplifying the issue of gender inequality. Therefore, addressing the practice of dowry and challenging patriarchal structures requires a nuanced understanding of power dynamics, individual agency, and the diverse experiences of individuals within society. It necessitates collective efforts to dismantle rigid gender norms and promote gender equality, recognizing the inherent worth and autonomy of all individuals regardless of gender.