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Institution of Dowry in India: A Theoretical Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

Originally conceived as a voluntary marriage gift, dowry has developed into an obligatory payment by the bride's family to the groom's family. Moreover, the institution of dowry has persisted even in the face of legal prohibition. Though women substantially contribute to the economic wellbeing of a family, the legitimization of dowry typically reflects the cultural bias of the marriage market, in which a woman's value is either discounted or taken for granted. Ironically, existing studies also tend to implicitly accept this prevailing cultural bias of the marriage market. The existing literature can be categorized into two groups. While some studies highlight the origin of dowry practice, many others provide post-hoc explanations for the contemporary practice of dowry. Although these studies provide partial explanations to the existing phenomena of dowry inflation, they mostly neglect the woman's value when explaining the "value" based phenomena of dowry in the marriage market. Moreover, we know little about the mechanism that led dowry to evolve and persist over time as a social institution. This study modifies the marriage market argument and integrates the structural aspects of actors' beliefs and cultural context. It argues that actors' beliefs tied with cultural context creates a self-reinforcing path-dependent mechanism, which contributes to the change and persistence of dowry practice.

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INTRODUCTION

Dowry was customarily a voluntary marriage gift from the bride's family to the bride on her marriage. The practice was historically confined to the upper caste community of northern India (Miller 198; Kolenda 1987); however, eventually, it developed into an all-region, caste, and class practice. Although a precise chronological order of the development of dowry is not available, some literature (Srinivas 1966; Sheel 1997) suggests that the system of dowry was gradually institutionalized and expanded during the British period in India. The practice, which was limited to the upper caste/class community of the society, expanded into an all caste/class phenomenon and resulted in several harmful societal consequences (Kapadia 1993; Srinivas 1984). The voluntary aspect of the practice hardened into compulsion for parents of young daughters to make a large payment to the groom's family in order to get their daughter married. There are cases when a demand for dowry from the groom's family continues even after the marriage ceremony.

The 'Dowry Prohibition Act' was enacted by the Indian Parliament in 1961 and has since been amended several times. Nonetheless, the legislation proved to be ineffective in restraining the practice of dowry. Although social and economic development alone is often enough to erode many traditional institutions, the practice of dowry has increased across Indian society both in the total amount of wealth implicated and in geographical extent. Though the face of dowry has changed, dowry as an institution persists.¹

At present, scholarly literature on dowry practice fits roughly into two categories—studies that provide accounts of the origins of dowry practice and studies that offer post-hoc explanations of dowry practice as it exists today. Although the existing literature provides partial explanations, they often reify the cultural bias of the marriage market in which dowry practice is nested, which omits women's value. Regardless of being educated or employed, women substantially contribute to the economic wellbeing of a family as a child-bearer and homemaker (Oxfam 2019; Singh and Morey 1987). Nevertheless, the societies, in general, either do not count or take these contributions for granted, which reflects the cultural bias of the marriage market that embrace dowry. Ironically, theories explaining the phenomenon of dowry as an outcome of the marriage market equilibrium also implicitly accept and conform to this cultural bias of the marriage market.

Institutions often exhibit “enduring” and “resilient” phenomena (March and Olsen 1996). Scholars (Aminzade 1992; Griffin 1992; Isaac 1997; Sewell 1996; Somers 1998; Tilly 1994) suggest that many crucial social phenomena can be adequately explained while utilizing the path-dependence framework. Path dependence involves both tracing a given outcome back to a particular set of historical events and showing how these events are themselves contingent occurrences that cannot be explained based on prior historical conditions (Goldstone 1998). Although the path dependence framework is highly useful in explaining institutional development, it is also susceptible to conceptual strain. Avoiding conceptual strain requires scholars to specify mechanisms of path dependence. These mechanisms are instrumental in

¹ For instance, the notion of voluntary gift is replaced by imposed dowry demand; traditional dowry items that include jewelry, clothes, and utensils are replaced by modern consumer goods (i.e., car, motorbike), cash payments, and cost of lavish weddings.

studying specific institutional patterns of change and persistence. This paper adopts the path dependence framework to analyze the enduring phenomena of dowry and identifies specific mechanisms by that account for the persistence and change of this institution over time.

This paper revises the “value” based marriage market arguments while integrating the aspects of social legitimation and the cultural context of dowry practice. It provides a comprehensive explanation for the enduring phenomenon of dowry by highlighting the mechanism that creates a conducive environment for the practice to change and persist over time. It argues that actors’ beliefs tied with cultural context creates a self-reinforcing path-dependent mechanism, which contributes to the enduring phenomenon of dowry.

The organization of the paper is as follows. Section 2 reviews the existing body of literature on dowry. Section 3 delves into the theory of path dependence and its applicability to the institution of dowry. Section 4 concludes with a discussion of policy implications.

EXISTING THEORIES/ EXPLANATION FOR DOWRY PRACTICE

This section examines the existing literature on dowry, which can be categorized into two groups. While one group of studies highlight the origin of dowry practice, another group of studies provide several post-hoc explanations to make sense of the phenomena. Nonetheless, these explanations implicitly accept the existing cultural bias of the marriage market in the social contexts in which dowry is practiced. Moreover, we find a disconnect between the origin and contemporary practice of dowry; in a sense, we know little about the mechanism that led the practice to change and persist in the face of legal prohibition.

The Origin of Dowry: Voluntary Gift & Bequest

The practice of dowry, as suggested by scholars, was originated as righteous concepts of *kanyadan* (voluntary gift), and *streedhan* (pre-mortem inheritance) (Risley 1915; Blunt 1931; Hutton 1963). Traditionally, dowry was conceived as *kanyadan*, a voluntary practice of offering gifts to a girl at her wedding. Dowry is also argued as *streedhan*, a woman's property, and bequest. As in traditional Hindu families, a daughter had no share in her parental family's property, and dowry was offered (arguably) as a daughter's pre-mortem inheritance or anticipated inheritance. Thus, the literature suggests that dowry was originated as a customary practice of voluntary gift or bequest offered to a girl on her wedding from her parental family.

Conversely, the original context of *kanyadan* and *streedhan* are no longer relatable to the contemporary practice of dowry. The modern practice of dowry is imposed on the bride’s family, who is forced to pay a massive amount of money (cash and kind) to get their daughters married. Additionally, while a large dowry raises the bride's prestige, a small one can make her life miserable in the new home (Bhat and Halli 1999). Similarly, the modern practice of ‘dowry’ obtained in upper caste/class families in India bears no resemblance to the traditional idea of *streedhan* or bequest (Srinivas 1984; Srinivasan 2005). Specifically, the amount expected in payment of dowry often exceeds the financial ability of the girl’s family, and women (the brides) have no control or access over their dowries (Miller 1980).²

² In some cases, payment of dowry is even required from the families, which have no inheritance/property, or the dowry amount is far beyond their capacity. As the items that are given in dowry nowadays, including cash payment, motorbike, or other large items, for which the woman may not have the use of or claim to.

Moreover, the practice of dowry in contemporary society is more identifiable with groom price (Caplan 1984; Srinivas 1984), in which the amount of dowry payment is often guided by the “market value” of a groom.³ This further explicates the scope for extortion threats of violence (for perpetual dowry demand even after wedding) (Bloch and Rao 2002), “dowry murders” (Sekhri and Storeygard 2014), sex-selective abortion (Basu 2005), and female infanticide (Setalvad 200; Menski 1998; Basu 2005).⁴

Thus, the modern practice of dowry has no resemblance to the original context of voluntary gift or women's bequest. The contemporary practice of dowry is crucially distinct from concepts of voluntary gift or pre-mortem inheritance, to which the origins of dowry are attributed.

Explanations for the Contemporary Practice of Dowry

Ethnologists (Risley 1915; Blunt 1931; Hutton 1963), explain dowry as a means of *hypergamy* (upward mobility), within a society that practices endogamy and arrange-marriage as a cultural norm.⁵ These researchers note that dowry is found in socially stratified monogamous societies that are economically complex and where women have a relatively limited role in the labor force. For example, in northern India, marriages are hypergamous among the upper castes; a woman is given in marriage to a man of a superior clan or division of the same caste, but seldom to a lower one. Dowry is considered as an essential part of hypergamy among high caste/status families. Such families practice marriage to consolidate or enhance their social status (Srinivasan 2005:596). Thus, the theory explains dowry payments as a product of hypergamous marriages, in which family prestige is associated with marrying a daughter to someone within the higher social status.

Researchers (Srinivasan 2005; Srinivas 1984) also believe that the tradition of hypergamy is still prevalent and has gained reinforcement with economic development. These studies generally suggest that modernization has no effect on the structural caste system in India. The increase in wealth dispersion accompanied by modernization led to an increase in dowry payment in these societies (Anderson 2003). Additionally, men are the primary recipients of the new economic opportunities, and women, in contrast, do not directly obtain the benefit of economic development and remain with less economic value (Anderson 2007). Thus, these literatures suggest that while dowry began as a payment of hypergamous marriages, modernization and increase in wealth dispersion led to dowry inflation.

Furthermore, Becker (1991) suggests a marriage market model in which marriage is viewed as a joint venture that offers greater efficiency in household activity. Meaning, the marriage payment is based on the economic value of each of the partners. According to the model, bride price is typically the payment a husband owes a bride's parents for the right to her labor and reproductive capabilities, while the dowry is the payment for a groom for his social status and earning capacity. The model suggests that dowry existed in a socially stratified,

³ In most cases, the profession and socio-economic status of a groom determines the amount of dowry he would receive. An Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer would usually get the highest rate, followed by doctors, engineers, and other professionals (Borah 2008:382; Shenk 2007:258).

⁴ As parents anticipate future cost of dowry (Maertens and Chari 2012).

⁵ Endogamy denotes the culture, in which marriage occurs within one's caste or group. Whereas in arrange marriages, families hold a moral obligation to find a suitable match for their marriageable kids and make all the arrangements for kid's weddings.

monogamous, and economically complex society, in which women have a relatively limited role in the labor force.

Likewise, Rao's (1993) theory of 'marriage squeeze' considers demography as the main component in dowry increase and inflation. He argues that since women between the ages of 10-19 are likely to marry men between the ages of 20-29, the number of marriageable girls in the marriage market has increased with the overall population growth of the country. Thus, the theory states that the common practice of men marrying younger women in combination with the overall population growth has resulted in a surplus of potential brides in the marriage market, which led to dowry inflation.

Thus, these theoretical arguments propose several post-hoc explanations to make sense of the phenomenon of dowry. These theories commonly identify dowry as a payment for the "value" of men in comparison to the "value" of women. However, the "value" based theoretical assertions manifest several limitations. First of all, they mostly neglect a woman's value in their calculations. Though women substantially contribute to the economic wellbeing of a family, the culturally biased marriage market of dowry often either discount or take for granted women's contributions. Similarly, while accepting such cultural bias, most of these explanations neglects women's value in explaining dowry payments. Furthermore, literature (Desai and Jain 1994; Rao 1997) suggests that education and increased economic value of women (as being employed) does not have an inverse relationship with the dowry practice. In some cases, the amount of dowry payment increases with the educational level of the girl to match with the level of education of the groom. In addition, the current imbalance in gender ratio and the shortage of marriageable girls in society does not seem to improve the status of women in society. On the contrary, anecdotal evidence suggests that the shortage of females in a society leads to sexual objectification of women, and further adds to their general suppression and subjugation (Hesketh and Xing 2006; Hudson and Boer 2002). Accordingly, these theories bear limited explanatory power to unravel the phenomena of dowry.

In summary, while the original context of *kanyadan* and *streedhan* are no longer relatable to the contemporary practice of dowry, the post-hoc explanations of the marriage market provide rationales in an attempt to make sense of the phenomena that may exist for other reasons. Besides the limitations in existing literature, we find a disconnect between the original conditions of dowry practice and its subsequent development. We often find evidence that institutional choices depend in some way on a society's culture and that culture is deeply rooted in the past (Page 2006). However, as Stinchcombe identifies, the causes of institutional reproduction are distinct from the processes that bring about the institution in the first place" (Stinchcombe 1987:103-104). Accordingly, our knowledge remains limited in recognizing the specific mechanism that led dowry, as a social institution, to change, adjust, and persist over time.

THE INSTITUTION OF DOWRY

Often "it is not possible to uncover the logic (or illogic) of the world around us without understanding how it got that way" (David 2007:2). Historical sociologists (Aminzade 1992; Griffin 1992; Isaac 1997; Sewell 1996; Somers 1998; Tilly 1994) suggest that many crucial social phenomena can be adequately explained in terms of path dependence. Hence, this study explores the phenomena of dowry while adopting the lens of a path dependence framework.

A Path Dependence Analysis of Dowry

Path dependence is a theoretical framework to analyze institutional patterns and change over time. However, the concept of path dependence is not merely implying that "history matters" or "the past influences the future" (Mahoney 2000). Path dependence involves both tracing a given outcome back to a set of historical events and showing how these events are themselves contingent occurrences that cannot be explained based on prior historical conditions (Goldstone 1998). Although the path dependence framework is very enriched, it is often susceptible to conceptual strain. Therefore, scholars, who take this framework seriously, suggest specific mechanisms of institutional path dependence, which include utilitarian, functional, power, legitimation, and culture. Each mechanism is separately assessed in terms of its relevance in explaining the enduring phenomena of dowry in the following section.

First, in the utilitarian theoretical framework, actors rationally choose to reproduce institutions because the costs outweigh any potential benefits of transformation. (Camic 1979:516-550; Coleman 1990; Collins 1994). An institutional pattern once adopted delivers increasing benefits, and thus, over time, it becomes difficult to transform the pattern (North 1971; Page 2006). In a utilitarian framework, institutional change occurs when it is no longer in the self-interest of actors to reproduce a given institution. However, the notion of increasing returns is purely derived from the utilitarian cost-benefit mechanisms. Such utilitarian mechanisms of institutional transformation are often not salient outside the market, where it is difficult for rational actors to evaluate the costs and benefits of alternative institutional outcomes (Pierson 2000).

In particular, regarding dowry, actors involved in the dowry practice (either by offering or demanding dowry) may not necessarily base their action on a precise cost-benefit analysis. Although economic models (groom-price model) imply that dowry is transferred from the bride's family to the groom's family to equilibrate the marriage market (Becker 1981; Rao 1993; Dalmia 2004; Anderson 2003), these post-hoc explanations have limited generalizability. These explanations generally portray the cultural bias of the marriage market, which systematically excludes women's value while legitimizing the system of dowry.

Second, the functional explanation indicates that institutions are reproduced because it serves functional consequences for an overall system (Stinchcombe 1987; Merton and Merton 1968). Scholars assume that the beneficial effects explain the initial origins of an institution (Rueschemeyer 1986; Wallerstein 1974). According to the functionalist accounts, change requires an exogenous shock that puts pressure on the overall system, which makes a given institution's function obsolete and results in demand for transformation (Bock 1963; Dore 1961; Parsons 1951).

Functionalism is less relevant in explaining the phenomena of dowry. The practice of dowry does not necessarily serve any specific function to the larger system. Some studies, however, suggest that dowry may serve some function of benefiting families by making their daughters' life better (Shenk 2007:260) or by helping their upward mobility, hypergamy, (Risley 1915; Blunt 1931; Hutton 1963) in the society. However, these arguments also depict a systematic cultural bias in which women's value is undermined without dowry. Such an account assumes a natural social order in which women, as a matter of course, must purchase (often at great expense) a life-long bond with a man. Absent the dowry payment, the would-be bride is an unworthy companion to her male counterpart.

Third, the power explanation entails that institutions can sustain if the elite group benefits from the existing arrangements and has enough strength to promote its reproduction. In the power-centered approach, an institution can persist when the elite benefits and has the strength

to promote it, even though most individuals or groups prefer to change (Collins 1975; Rueschemeyer 1986; Oberschall and Leifer 1986). Thus, the power framework assumes that institutional reproduction is a conflictual process, in which the elite group benefits and the subordinate groups remain disadvantaged. In the power framework, change is possible in the case of weakening elites and strengthening of subordinate groups, that can successfully challenge the existing arrangements (Eisenstadt 1964; Burawoy 1985; Evans 2012).

Nevertheless, with the dowry system, the power mechanism appears to have very narrow applicability. The system of dowry, apparently, does not depict mutually distinct social groups of elite and subordinate. An actor (a family) may fall into either group at any point of time, by being a payer or receiver of dowry. Though, people tend to dislike dowry when they need to get their daughter married (pay dowry) and enjoy when they get their son married (receive dowry). This ties to the phenomenon of preferring a male child over females.

Fourth, legitimation frameworks suggest that institutional reproduction is grounded in actors' subjective orientations and beliefs about what is appropriate or morally correct (Dowling and Pfeffer 1975; Scott 1991; Thelen 1999). An institution persists and gets reproduced because of the actors who believe that the institution is legitimate. Actors' belief in the institution is often manifested either by their active moral compliance or only by their passive confirmation, which helps to maintain the status quo. Meaning, once a given institution is selected in a contingent manner, it is reinforced through the processes of increasing legitimation marked by a positive feedback cycle (Mahoney 2000). According to Orren's example of the law of master and servant, the law was upheld because judges believed it was legitimate; "the judges believed that what was at stake was no less than the moral order of thing" (1991:144). Thus, the legitimation explanation suggests that institutions persist as a result of actors' beliefs that the institution is appropriate, and, accordingly, change is possible only when the values or subjective beliefs of actors change.

Unlike previous mechanisms, the legitimation framework is quite relevant to explaining the phenomena of dowry. Actors arguably believe that the practice of dowry is morally just, and legitimate. The actors' legitimization is often reflected in their active compliance of accepting/offering dowry and in their passive conformation to the social norm, which undermines the legal implications of dowry practice and ultimately helps to maintain the status quo. Though peoples' behavior is not necessarily guided by their belief, people also often behave against their belief system.

Lastly, culture has been suggested as another possible mechanism for institutional path dependence.⁶ The study by Bednar and Page (2006) argues that a clear feedback between institution and culture exists; institutions create behavioral regularities which become part of a culture, and the performance of an institution depends upon how a community (and its culture) reacts to it. Actor's behavior in strategic contexts depend crucially on the cultural context of beliefs, and the performance of an institution depends upon the state of a system and how the agents respond. In other words, people do not act in isolation; clear feedback between institution and culture always exist. Thus, according to the cultural framework, people's behavior in one context depends upon other current contexts of social networks and trust relations.

⁶ Culture, a state of dynamic system, can be seen as cognitive and behavioral repertoires based on social networks, and trust relationships. Although social scientists generally agree that culture matters in institutional path dependence, it is often treated as an exogenous feature, which excludes feedbacks between institution and culture (Bednar and Page 2006).

Accordingly, the cultural framework is very applicable to explain the institution of dowry. In the context of dowry practice, peoples' behaviors are crucially dependent upon several contextual factors. Notably, the caste-based hypergamous marriages are based on social networks and how people are connected. Peoples' actions of dowry negotiations are primarily guided by their contextual factors, which includes how people are connected, how they classify the world, how they interpret signs, and what they expect from each other (Bednar and Page 2006:34). In other words, all actions involved in dowry negotiations (i.e., identifying a suitable match, determining the amount of dowry, using underhand methods in dowry dealings) are typically guided by the contextual factors of social networks and trust relations.

Thus, by combining the legitimation and cultural frameworks, we see that the social institution of dowry persists not only because of the actors who believe that it is morally just or appropriate, but also because of the cultural context as how people are connected through trust relations, how they classify the world, how they interpret signals, and what they expect from each other. While peoples' beliefs guide their behavior to conform to the norm of the dowry practice, cultural context provides a setting for the feedback necessary to reconfigure and reproduce the institution of dowry. Such belief and cultural mechanisms of reproduction seem to "lock-in" the institutional pattern of dowry and making it extremely difficult to abolish, socially.

Moreover, institutions that rapidly and decisively trigger mechanisms of reproduction are uniquely capable of seizing opportunities provided by contingent events and thus setting into motion self-reinforcing sequences that are path-dependent (Stinchcombe 1987). The institution of dowry, likewise, reflects this unique capability of seizing opportunities of self-reinforcing sequences, as the rationale and motives of dowry have been changing over time. Dowry, which was initiated as a voluntary gift, turned into an imposed demand for cash and commodity items, and then eventually included the cost of lavish weddings while utilizing the opportunities of modernization and wealth dispersions. Thus, the culturally biased marriage market has frequently been seizing opportunities to reconfigure the institution of dowry.

In summary, while people's beliefs that the practice of dowry is morally just or an appropriate guide for their behavior, culture (that is based on cognitive structure, social networks, and trust relations) provides necessary feedback and a conducive environment to sustain and seize the opportunities of self-reinforcing sequences to reproduce the institution of dowry. The society, by and large, has acceptance and approval for dowry as a just practice; offering and accepting dowry is socially respected and cherished. However, the actors' behavior in strategic contexts also depend crucially on the cultural context of beliefs. In other words, people's behaviors are guided not only by their belief system but also by how they connect with the world around them. Thus, subjective belief ties with the cultural context to create a conducive setting for a culturally biased marriage market, which legitimizes and continues to preserve the enduring practice of dowry.

Cultural Legitimation & The Marriage Market of Dowry

The legitimization of dowry typically depicts a cultural bias of the marriage market, in which a woman's value is often undermined. Moreover, while people's subjective belief legitimizes the practice of dowry, the cultural context of social networks and trust relations provides a favorable environment necessary to seize the opportunities of self-reinforcing sequences, which leads to the practice of dowry to change, adapt, and persist over time.

To illustrate, while people's belief that the practice of dowry is morally just or appropriate guides their behavior, this legitimization of dowry practice is primarily founded on a systematic

cultural bias of the marriage market. Women, regardless of being educated or employed, substantially contribute to the economic wellbeing of a society by being a child-bearer or homemaker, or both (if we put \$ value to her work). According to an Oxfam study (2019), unpaid work done by women across the globe amounts to an overwhelming \$10 trillion a year, which is 43 times the annual turnover of the world's biggest company Apple. In India, the unpaid work done by women looking after their homes and children is worth 3.1 percent of the country's GDP. Women spend 312 minutes per day in urban areas and 291 minutes per day in rural areas on such unpaid care work. In comparison, men spend only 29 minutes in urban and 32 minutes in rural areas on unpaid care work. Nevertheless, the actors, who believe that dowry is morally just, either discount women's value or take their contribution for granted in legitimizing the marriage market of dowry. Thus, the institution of dowry is crucially based on the legitimization of a culturally biased marriage market, which devalues women and puts them a lower social stratum than the men.

Furthermore, dowry negotiations are usually based on social networks and trust relations. Negotiations typically take place through subtle hints and suggestions (which include the amount and items of dowry, and wedding cost) between the bride's and groom's families, and rarely as outright demand (Shenk, 2007:258-259). These suggestions and hints are also interpreted based on what they expect from each other. Likewise, the grooms' price is determined as to how the actors classify the world around them based on their social and economic status. While dowry is associated with status symbol for both parties, inter-caste marriages (which usually skips dowry) is considered as a social taboo. Weddings are lavish and usually paid by the family of the bride, and joint expenditures on weddings have become less frequent (Caldwell et al. 1983; Srinivas 1984; Kapadia 1995). Low-cost marriages, which are often exclusive of dowry, are rarely appreciated in society. Thus, social networks and trust relations generally embrace (normatively and behaviorally) caste-based hypergamous marriages, which involve dowry payments and lavish weddings.

In addition, people often are aware of the social cost (future cost) of not paying dowry or going against the norm. Therefore, the family of a bride, being harassed or abused over an inadequate dowry, often avoid complaining or filing a case against the groom's family (Basu 2001). Furthermore, actors often find ways and means to get away with the legal implications of the Dowry Prohibition Act (Basu 2001; Srinivasan and Lee 2004) because of the cultural context of social network and trust relations. For instance, people often claim that transfers are gifts, not dowry while finding a loophole in section 3 of the 1961 Act, which allows gifts to be given at the time of the weddings (Basu 2001; Diwan and Diwan 1995). Correspondingly, within a social system, peoples' behaviors are guided by several contextual factors, which includes how people are connected, how they classify the world, how they interpret signs, and what they expect from each other. Accordingly, communities' responses to the institution of dowry are crucially based on cultural context as how people connect with the world around.

Thus, this paper revises the marriage market argument by integrating the aspects of subjective belief and cultural context, which creates a self-reinforcing mechanism for the enduring practice of dowry. It suggests that the phenomenon of dowry is instituted on a culturally biased marriage market, in which women are placed at a lower stratum irrespective of their contributions and value. People's subjective belief while legitimizes the practice of dowry, culture context of social networks, and trust relations provides favorable environment necessary to seize the opportunities of self-reinforcing sequences to sustain and reconfigure the institution of dowry.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The practice of dowry exhibits a complex and enduring institutional phenomenon, which is culturally ingrained and hence resilient to the actor's preferences. Although dowry originated as a voluntary gift (*kanyadan*) or pre-mortem inheritance (*streedhan*), the mechanisms that led dowry, as a social institution, to change and persist are distinct. In other words, the causal mechanism of the contemporary practice of dowry is very distinguishable from the process of the origin of dowry. The existing theories, though, provide partial explanations for the phenomenon of dowry, they implicitly accept the cultural bias of the marriage market and exclude women's value in explaining the "value" based manifestation of dowry payment. Hence, theories that often accept this culturally biased marriage market remain limited in explaining the enduring practice of dowry.

As a revision of the marriage market argument, this paper argues that actors' subjective belief coupled with cultural context creates self-reinforcing path-dependent sequences for the enduring phenomenon of dowry practice. This paper contributes to the literature by highlighting the cultural bias of the marriage market. A woman, regardless of being formally employed, contributes substantially to the economic wellbeing of a family as a child bearer or house maker, if we put \$ value to her contributions. Nevertheless, the culturally biased marriage market of dowry systematically discounts or takes women's contributions for granted when legitimizing dowry. This paper revises the marriage market arguments by integrating the aspects of subjective belief, cultural context, and legitimization, which critically contributes to the enduring phenomenon of dowry. It provides a comprehensive explanation for the phenomenon of dowry by analyzing a self-reinforcing path-dependent mechanism that causes dowry to change and persist over time.

This paper further draws insights from the path-dependent analysis to identify essential measures to combat the issue of dowry. According to the legitimation argument, change is possible when the values or subjective beliefs of actors change. Such changes, in the subjective perception of actors, could be triggered by the decline in institutional efficacy or, with the introduction of new ideas by the social or political leaders (Meyer and Rowan 1977). However, the cultural account suggests that change is not possible by merely changing the belief system. It would require changing how people behave toward one another while influencing the institutional externalities, which possibly can undermine existing institutions. Thus, by combining these arguments, change is possible through not only by altering the belief system but also by changing the cultural context in which actors behave toward one another.

Accordingly, the institution of dowry should not be seen in isolation, as actors behave in one context is dependent upon other current contexts. Likewise, actors "respond to incentives or disincentives not on an institution-by-institution basis, but with an eye on the broader context" (Bednar and Page 2006:10). Hence, policy measures should be geared towards declining institutional efficacy while altering the broader context in which actors behave. For instance, positives incentives and recognition for non-dowry marriages, inter-caste marriages (that skips dowry), and low-cost weddings could be considered. Meaning, a supportive structure that will reinforce the value and preference of society for "dowryless marriages" (Saini 1983:1), could alter the cultural context which approves dowry. Marriages without dowry are neither valued nor appreciated socially, which often demotivates actors in practicing such events. While these incentives encourage people to skip dowry, it could also help to alter the cultural externalities in which actors behave.

Furthermore, informal rewards (such as praise in public, letter of recognition, and other social incentives) are also suggested to be useful in securing compliance (Braithwaite 2002). The state capacity to monitor and punish noncompliance with the Dowry Prohibition Act is often limited, especially when society embraces it. Therefore, policy should focus on voluntary compliance rather than coercion (Tyler 1997). Positive incentives will create a favorable cultural context for securing voluntary compliance. In addition, specific measures could be considered to recognize the economic and social value of women. The introduction of new ideas by the social or political leaders could be useful in creating awareness for women's value for their contributions in formal or informal sectors. Recognition for women's contribution should eventually help to delegitimize the institution of dowry practice.

Thus, policy measures to combat the issue of dowry should consider a full strategic environment in which actors behave. Hence, change is possible not merely by the change in belief system, but by changing how people behave toward one another. In other words, changing institutional externalities is crucial to undermining the existing institution of dowry. Nonetheless, as Bednar and Page's behavioral approach explains, an intervention to bring about institutional change may create fear or resilience in the beginning (2006: 5-6). Hence, policy measures should recognize this behavioral aspect of change, which requires persistent and deliberate efforts to institutional change.

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