



## THE PRACTICE OF DOWRY AND BRIDE PRICE AMONG THE PATIDARS OF GUJARAT

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### Abstract

Since ages the traditional Indian Marriages are characterized by transfers of money or goods made at the time of marriage between families involved which can go in both directions – from the bride’s family to the groom’s or vice versa. The former is known as dowry, while the latter is known as bride price. In this paper I have analyzed the practice of both the customs among the Lewa and Kadwa Patidars of Gujarat, using retrospective data from archival as well as various other secondary sources. The Patidars basically belonged to the agricultural community of Gujarat whose main occupation was farming but today they have excelled in business affairs, politics and governance as well as in community welfare works. They were also termed as kanbis which was applied to the cultivating castes only. Though various scholars have divided them into various sub-divisions, yet the most notable were the Lewa and Kadwa Patidars. This paper brings to light that while dowry was common among the former the practice of bride price was prevalent among the later. The paper shows that excessive dowry system among the Lewas was the result of hypergamic marriage system which allows marrying of girls only in families higher in social rank within the caste which stimulated a fierce competition amongst the ordinary kanbis for marriages with boys of the high prestige Patidars. When dowries became unaffordable they used to kill their daughters. The superior group accepted a girl for marriage from an inferior group on the condition of a large amount of dowry from the latter. On the other hand they considered it disgraceful to offer their girls to the inferior groups. The paper also shows that quite contrary to the practice of dowry among the Lewa Patidars, there was the practice of Bride Price among the Kadwa Patidars. The importance of women in the agrarian economy made marriage an acknowledged economic necessity where the work qualities of a prospective bride were looked for at the time of arranging marriages. As single man used to get married to more than one wife there was scarcity of girls among the community. Hence the girls were sought from Kathiawad and also from other places for marriage purpose in exchange of money. For an illustration the girls between four and nine years of age were sold to Gujarat for marriage purpose by their parents. In some cases people used to surrender their daughters to their creditors to pay back the loan who were tortured after marriage if their fathers failed to pay back the

*loans. Some greedy parents used to give their daughters even to married persons who could pay for them sufficiently well. Getting money for their daughters was all important for them. Findings in this paper expand our knowledge of the dynamics and key determinants of marriage transactions in India, contributing to the broader agenda of improving our understanding of an important social institution that is too often responsible for violating basic human rights as far as women are concerned.*

### *Introduction*

Since ages the traditional Indian Marriages are characterized by transfers made at the time of marriage between families involved. These transfers of money or goods can go in both directions – from the bride’s family to the groom’s or from a grooms family to the bride’s. The former is known as dowry, while the latter is known as bride price. Over time in India, dowry became a serious social problem when the practice changed from its voluntary root to a mandatory one for bride’s family and grooms and their families started to demand certain amount of dowry at the time of marriage negotiation. It is difficult to pinpoint the time when these transitions have actually begun due to lack of systematic research on this topic. It is claimed by anthropologists that the change occurred in the middle of nineteenth century. Around this time the so called lower castes also adopted the practice of dowry instead of bride price. Empirical studies on dowry expansion are mostly ethnographic. Thus, it is not clear whether the expansion of dowry is restricted within specific castes and communities or applicable throughout India.

On the other hand, based on anthropological research, it is argued that the practice of bride price has shrunk over time though it is difficult to draw conclusions about these trends at the country level without empirical evidence from large-scale survey data. The tradition of giving bride price is practiced in many Asian countries, the Middle East, parts of Africa and in some Pacific Island societies, notably those in Melanesia and also among the tribals of India. In anthropological literature bride price has often been explained in market terms, as payment made in “exchange” for the bride’s family’s loss of her labor and fertility within her kinship group. It may also be understood as a gift from the groom to his new bride’s family.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the payment of bride-price creates a contractual tie between lineages, being a sign of mutual trust.<sup>2</sup> Bride price and dowry are not necessarily the converse of each other. However, in the twentieth century, dowry payments in South Asia have increasingly been demanded by and paid to the

groom's family (and not just to the bride or the wedded couple). This suggests a usage of the term dowry to mean a *groom price*, the reverse of a bride price.

In this paper, I have analyzed the practices of dowry and bride price, among the Patidars of Gujarat using retrospective data from archival sources and secondary sources which shows prevalence of both the customs among the Patidars. But before going in details it is important to mention here who are the Patidars?

The Patidars basically belonged to the agricultural community of Gujarat whose main occupation was farming, but today with their hard work they have excelled in business and industry, governance, community welfare work, doctrines and art. With the passing of time the term 'Patidar' got replaced by 'Patel' which gradually became a surname. They were also termed as kanbis which was applied to the cultivating castes only.

They have various subdivisions. R. E. Enthoven divided them into nine endogamous divisions, viz. Anjana, Dangi, Gujar, Kadwa, Lewa, Matia, Momna, Pattani and Uda whereas another Scholar D. N. Majumdar has divided them into four divisions of Anjana, Kadwa, Lewa and Matia. But the most notable were the Lewa and Kadwa patidars who were found all over Gujarat. However, Lewas were found in overwhelming majority in Kheda district (Charotar), Baroda and Padra Mahals and some villages of Jambusar and Karjan . The Kadwa Patidars were found in overwhelming majority in the erstwhile Kadi Pranth, present Mehsana district. and also in Ahmedabad and Padra taluka.

M. N. Srinivas divided the village-groupings or *gols of Patidars* into three groups; i.e., "six villages"; "twelve villages" and "twenty-seven villages. Among these circles or *gols* the six village *gols* of lewa patidars of Charotar consisted of Nadiad, Vaso Sojitra, Bhadran Dharmaj and Karamsad were the first and the higher *gol* in status. Then come the twelve villages" and "twenty-seven village circles. The fierce competition among others to get their daughters married in high prestige patidars resulted in excessive dowry system. Among the Kadwa groups of Patidars . On the other hand the practice of bride price came to be prevalent among the kadwas, especially in Baroda, Viramgam Daskoshi, Padra, Patdi, Sanand, Dhragandra and Ahmedabad areas. In this paper in the foregoing pages both dowry and bride among the Lewa and Kadwa patidars (respectively) have been highlighted separately in two different sections.

## II

Among the Lewa Patidars dowry system was the natural sequence of the practices of hypergamy i.e., the practice of marrying girls in families higher in social rank within the caste than that of their parents. This system forbade women of a particular group to marry a man belonging to a lower rank than her in social status. Thus, this practice compelled the parents to marry their daughters with the boys belonging to a group equal or superior in rank. There was no such restrictions for the boys of the community who can marry a girl of inferior rank in exchange of excessive dowries.

M. N. Srinivars who divided the village-groupings or *gols of Patidars* into three groups; i.e., "six villages"; "twelve villages" and "twenty-seven villages-showed that, a girl from the twelve villages may not marry a boy from the twenty-seven villages. A girl from the twenty-seven villages had a relatively wide endogamous circle which included the twenty-six villages from her group, and the twelve and six of the others, a girl of the twelve villages had eleven of her own and six of the group above; and a girl of the six villages had only five.<sup>3</sup>

The six village gol patidars had arrogated to circulate their daughters within their *gol*. Even in this *gol* there were certain families of hierarchy who would not go out side their inner *gol* of three and half villages-namely, Vaso, Nadiad, Sojitra and Savli. Even in those three and half villages there were some top class families who had given their daughters to the top classes of these three and half villages. They were interested in obtaining wives with large dowries from the inferior groups, south of the river Mahi. Hence they reserved their sons for the "imported" families and suppressed the propagation of their own. This led to an excess of girls over the boys among the Charotar kanbis. These girls they sometimes killed.

The system of hypergamy stimulated a fierce competition amongst the ordinary kanbis for marriages with boys of the high prestige patidars. Dowries became unaffordable for many families which induced them to kill their daughters. Over a period of time a shortage of brides occurred, with the result that many boys faced a prospect of remaining bachelors. Naturally this created a perpetual tide of female migration from the south to the north of Gujarat.<sup>4</sup>

It was considered to be an honour for a Jambusar or Bharuch kanbi to offer his daughter in the kulin families of Charotar. The result was that the inferior families who inhabited south of the region of Charotar had

to pay a high price in the form of dowry to the superior families. Even the poorest parents were forced to marry their daughters by paying a dowry with the result that they had to sell their land and house. This brought them almost to the brink of beggary. If a man had one boy and two or three daughters, he could expect to get a dowry by marrying his son with a girl belonging to the "inferior" family or to the family equal in social status. But he had to pay two or three times more to marry his daughters with the boys of the superior families. Thus any excess of the girls to the boys was a source of big expenditure to the parents. If a poor parent had two or three daughters and no sons, he was sure to be ruined. Such circumstances led to a situation when a farmer preferred to kill a female infant than undergo terrible economic and social hardships. It was easy to kill a newly born infant.

Thus the custom of dowry among the kanbis led to their inhuman custom of female infanticide which was popularly known as '*dudh pitini chaal*'.<sup>5</sup>

The custom involved killing girl babies by plunging them into a pot of milk immediately after birth. Hence the process was known as '*dudh piti*' or making the child drink milk.<sup>6</sup>

The female infants were also killed by deliberate negligence in their upbringing. Some who do not destroy will take no care to bring up the female child and do not wish the infant to grow up.<sup>7</sup>

Once the Revenue Commissioner of Northern Division of Bombay Presidency while enquiring on the issue once asked a village headman how the new born children were killed. In reply the person said, "What labour is there in crushing a flower? Either starvation or placing the child face downwards in a pan of milk, is the usual course adopted. In the former case no evidence of the fact may be derivable from an examination of the body; and in the latter case also, death would probably be attributed to natural causes".<sup>8</sup>

Thus the superior or 'exclusive' families admitted the daughters for their sons but did not reciprocate by giving their own daughters into the families inferior to themselves. And Once the superiority and inferiority of a class or a group on the basis of the superior and inferior region was established, it was very difficult to check the evils of dowry system. Excessive dowry system which came out from hypergamic marriage system was a mode of exploitation by the elite Patidars of the poor Patidar peasants. Heavy dowries enriched them and they could

maintain some control over the peasants and thus maintain their social reputation.

### III

Quite contrary to the practice of dowry among the lewa patidars, there was the practice of Bride price among the Kadwa Patidars. The importance of women in the agrarian economy made marriage an acknowledged "economic necessity". Significantly, the so-called 'work qualities' of a prospective bride were looked for at the time of arranging marriages; the acknowledged requirement being, "*hath-paer ki mazboot boni chahiye, take khet-kivar ka kaam thik treh ho sake*" (she should be physically strong, so that agricultural work can be performed well). The practice came to be prevalent among the kadwas, especially in Baroda, Viramgam Daskoshi, Padra, Patdi, Sanand, Dhragandra and Ahmedabad areas.

Taking into consideration the conditions of brides' father, it was economic hardships which led them to sell their girls. Poor people found it as a source of earning money. Therefore they found it profitable to let their girls grow up. The greed to get more money sometimes tempted parents to break off their daughters' engagement and then sell them to a second party who could give more prices for her.<sup>9</sup>

Some poor people who had no money to pay for a bride used to exchange one another's daughters, i.e. to get a bride they used to give their own girls as brides (for brides brother) instead of giving money.

In some cases people used to surrender their daughters to their creditors to pay back the loan. This kind of brides were especially liked by those rich people whose family reputation was not good and therefore found it difficult to get brides from reputed families. That led them to happily take bride from poor families who had been indebted to them but were not in a position to pay back the loan. Such brides were tortured after marriage as their fathers failed to pay back the loans.

In some cases males from poor families remained unmarried for long and grew old unmarried as they had no money to pay for a bride. Some greedy parents used to give their daughters to such persons who could pay for them sufficiently well even if the person was already married, having wife at home. Getting money for their daughters was all important for them.

Such deals appeared to be legal where formalities of getting authoritative stamp were met with. The parents used to give in writing

in the presence of village headman that they were selling their girls; would have no claim over her and the girl belonged absolutely to the person to whom she was sold off. The writing was signed by the parties.

The custom became so vicious that sometimes even the unborn child was sold anticipating it to be a girl child. This was known as '*petu chal*'. Such fathers used to give in writing that if a girl child was born, she would be given to the creditor. In case the girl child died or for some other reason the promise was not kept the fight would ensue. Eventually the village headman would arbitrate the dispute and the responsibility of giving back the money was entrusted to any of the near relatives. In case the transactions still failed the indebted father would sell off their brother's or sister's girl child before their birth without informing such children's parents which resulted in bitter relations among the relatives. Sometimes for generations this kind of promises of giving girls in marriage used to remain unfulfilled. The practice of selling girls for money brought into prominence the problem of mismatches in the caste. Sometimes small girls were married to aged men and a mature lady with a small boy.

The custom of selling even wives to the rich men prevailed in the society. If someone's wife was beautiful, the very rich and influential men would forcefully get them from their husbands as wives in exchanges of money. Such husbands were forced to give in writing to that affect in the presence of village headmen and wife's parents. Sometimes husbands were scared to bring to their homes their childhood wives now grown up into beauties.

At times husbands themselves used to sell their wives for money. Men belonging to reputed families used to get other's wives in exchange of money, in case he liked her. If a man did not like his wife he could sell her at a price of Rs. 2000/- and if he found someone good he would buy her. The cost of wives depended on their beauty. Those who were more beautiful were sold at higher prices. The newly bought wife used to enjoy the same status as the first wife. Thus wives were sold like cattles.

As single man used to get married to two or three wife, s there was scarcity of girls among the community. Hence the girls were sought from Kathiawad for marriage purpose in exchange of money. During drought years situation would worsen. For an illustration the girls between four and nine years of age were sold to Gujarat for marriage purpose by their parents.<sup>10</sup>

however such disposals were not general nor they were found too high to make a legislative measure a necessity. And they occurred only among those who had neither sons nor daughters to exchange.<sup>11</sup>

#### IV

Thus bride price and dowry are not necessarily the converse of each other. However usage of the term dowry mean a *groom price*, the reverse of a bride price. Bride price and dowry need not be mutually exclusive, and marriage transfers in both directions can occur simultaneously. A complex set of norms may then govern the nature and the magnitude of payments in either direction.

The practice of dowry among lewas promoted gender discrimination as it compelled the parents to marry their daughters with the boys belonging to a group equal or superior in rank but there was no such restrictions for the boys of the community who can marry a girl of inferior rank in exchange of excessive dowries.

Among the lewas quite often the economic superiority of a particular group within the same caste decided their social status. Once the superiority and inferiority of a class or a group on the basis of the superior and inferior region was established, it was very difficult to check the evils of dowry system. Clearly class had come to play a crucial role besides caste for social purposes

The most aristocratic kanbis of six village *gols* (of Charotar) intermarried only to a small extent among themselves. They were interested in obtaining wives with large dowries from the inferior groups, south of the river Mahi. Hence they reserved their sons for the "imported" families and suppressed the propagation of their own. This led to an excess of girls over the boys among the Charotar kanbis. Dowries became unaffordable for many families which induced them to kill these girls. Over a period of time a shortage of brides occurred, with the result that many boys faced a prospect of remaining bachelors. Naturally this created a perpetual tide of female migration from the south to the north of Gujarat.

As discussed earlier, quite contrary to the practice of dowry among the lewa patidars, there was the practice of Bride price among the Kadwa Patidars. The important role played by women in the economy led to a wide acceptance of the prevalent custom of sale and purchase of brides among the economically hard up peasantry. In the nineteenth

century this custom was observed to have been universal among the agriculturist castes as well as the lower castes. As single man used to get married to two, three wives there was scarcity of girls among the community. Hence the girls were sought from Kathiawad for marriage purpose in exchange of money. Thus scarcity of brides resulted in migration of females from other places.

Thus the practices of dowry and bride price resulted in scarcity of women- in the former gave rise to female infanticide (due to killing of excess girls)and in the later the practice of polygamy gained prominence ( as a single man used to marry two to three times). In both cases Both the practise resulted in

Thus the practices of dowry and bride price resulted in scarcity of women in both the groups which resulted in the migration of females from one place to another. Moreover while dowry gave rise to female infanticide (due to killing of excess girls) bride price promoted the practise of polygamy. And all these happened due to sense of patriarchy which resulted in gender discrimination followed by various social evils as mentioned above.

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N. den Tuinder in his thesis on population and society in Kheda district.

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