

Producing a Rationale for Dowry?

Gender in the Negotiation of Exchange at Marriage
in Kerala, South India

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Apparently against the grain of evidence of the expanding dimensions of dowry in India, the matrilineal castes in northern Kerala (India) rejected dowry transactions and considered them demeaning. They resorted to dowry only in circumstances considered exceptional. Foregrounding the negative discourse on dowry, this paper explores the ways in which gender enters into the negotiation of exchange during match making, producing a residual category of women for whom demands for dowry were entertained. These women were marked by a combination of poor social, economic and normative gender attributes, which restricted their access to patriarchal norms of femininity and relegated them to the margins of the marriage market. Their experience exposed the underbelly of 'respectability' in the region. The pressure to bring women under conjugal patronage compromised reciprocity in match making and generated a 'practical' rationale for dowry. Our analysis suggests that if it is to address dowry seriously, social policy in India must combat the centrality accorded to conjugality in the social construction of women's interests and identity.

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Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Sir Ratan Tata Trust for the fellowship that made it possible for me to work on this paper at the Asia Research Centre and Annu Jalais, Althar Hussain, Jonathan Parry, Chris Fuller and Sharad Chari for discussions.

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Introduction

In the budget speech for the year 2004-05, the Finance Minister of Kerala, on the south west coast of India, announced a marriage insurance scheme (*Mangalya Padbathi*) for girls in destitute families under which the government was to pay a monthly premium for eight years, and the amount that accrued, subject to a minimum of Rs.10,000 was to be given at the time of a girls marriage. It was conceived of as “a historical step towards affirming Government’s role in providing social security for the poorest of our poor” (<http://www.kerala.gov.in/>).¹ The allocation of scarce budgetary resources away from ‘alternative’ channels of social security underscores interlocking concerns: a) the financial drain that marriages of girls pose to families and b) the implication of the state in the identifying women’s interests with conjugality. In endorsing marriage as an important element of women’s social security, a scheme such as the above enables families to invest disproportionately in marriage and to pay dowries.²

Match making and formalisation of marriage are a severe financial strain on parents of girls, as the painstaking and often stressful process of ‘looking for a boy’ dovetail with the financial outlays for the wedding including dowries that are often disproportionate to the levels of family income. In this essay, I will explore the emergence of a ‘practical’ rationale for dowry among formerly matrilineal castes in Kerala who did not practice dowry till the early-mid twentieth century. Recent research shows that dowry has grown to be an important basis of match making among a cross section of social groups in southern Kerala and was implicated in strategies of upward mobility (Osella and Osella, 2000, Lindberg, 2001, Kodoth and Eapen, 2005). However, my informants in the midland region of northern Kerala denied paying dowry and there was sufficient indication that they considered it demeaning to do so. In this context, the term dowry (or *stridhanam*) took on a very specific meaning i.e., the negotiation of exchange or demand-based transfers of property. Despite denials, marriage proposals for a small section of women did involve open negotiation and payment of dowry. These women were marked by a combination of poor social and economic profile and gender (feminine) attributes, circumstances that located them on the margins of patriarchal femininity and of the marriage market. I will argue that the denial of dowry by the formerly matrilineal castes in north Kerala was deeply ambivalent, the open negotiation and payment of dowry among a section of women revealed the patriarchal underbelly of bourgeois respectability in the region sustained by a shared ideological emphasis on conjugality as a normative premise of feminine identity. Among those who denied resort to it, the rationale for dowry informed more sophisticated bargaining and trade offs that implicated property concerns.³

¹ The scheme was expected to incur an annual recurring expenditure of Rs.12.00 crore. State initiatives to organise marriages of poor women are not without precedent. Mass marriages have been conducted at public expense including gifts of household articles and cash for the couple in several parts of India. For instance, on June 29, 2006, the district administration in Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, organised the marriages of 24 women from a local women’s home and each couple was given Rs 5000 by the Government. A report of the event pointed out that mass marriages had become very popular among the poor as it eased the pressure on the bride’s family to spend huge sums as wedding expenses and dowry (<http://www.newkerala.com/news3.php?action=fullnews&id=16008>). Insurance companies have for long had special packages garnered towards marriages of girls (see AIDWA, 2003).

² There is an interesting irony in all this for Kerala is a region that was once famous for the scant regard among its people for the bourgeois institution of marriage. Until a hundred years ago, the considerable section of people who were matrilineal made little or no fuss at the formalisation of marriage, whether in terms of ritual or expense. The bare rituals and little expense of formalisation were drawn into the colonial interpretation of sexual relations as amounting to concubinage rather than marriage (Kodoth, 2001, 2006).

³ Yoko Nishimura (1998: 162) notices a related process at work among the Nagarattars of Chettinadu, where a sharp rise in cash payments at marriage since the 1960s has altered drastically a relationship based largely on trust where a promise to pay rather than down payments had been the norm. Poor families, who found it difficult to raise substantial dowries, paid the price. The Nagarattar “strategy of hedging a large part of their caste capital as

Dowry provides a novel entry point into the dominant discourse of development in Kerala, which highlights gender parity in creditable indicators of literacy, education and health. The oft told story of social development is underpinned by radical institutional change wherein anti-feudal caste and class struggle enabled a more democratic form of family (Ramachandran, 1997),⁴ an entrenched wisdom that has effectively obscured the transfer of patriarchal authority from feudal to modern conjugal institutions or the emergence of a conjugal regime of power. Significantly, it was within a conjugal regime of power that women's agency was mobilised towards the task of producing a literate, educated and healthy population. Social reform tied women's interests to caring capabilities, which it posed at once as natural to women but also cultural i.e., to be acquired in order to conform to emerging ideals of womanhood whether as mothers, wives or caregivers in the public domain (Devika, 2005). Drawing on a legacy of social reform, the framework of development legitimised marriage (patrilocal small family) as the appropriate anchor of women's interests as against previous institutional frames, which had privileged the natal (matrilineal) family or the patrilineal joint family (Kodoth and Eapen, 2005). The shift to a conjugal regime of power is reflected in the gradual decline in women's property rights independent of the conjugal family, a corresponding rise in dowry payments, the orientation of women's education towards domesticity and restrictions on women's employment (Ibid). In this context, the tendency in the mainstream development literature to pose dowry as aberrant or as an unfinished agenda in a linear trajectory of development (Ramachandran, 1997) is entirely at odds with the genealogy of dowry as a modern social practice embedded in the pursuit of development.

The exceptional character of dowry in northern Kerala is instructive precisely for its affirmation of the normative social order, founded upon conjugal property relations. Thus, the negative discourse on dowry was quite distinct from a feminist position that dowry is an affirmation of patriarchy or even a liberal position that it is a social evil. Here, property concerns were articulated through sophisticated gender 'bargaining' that stopped short of transfers of cash or real property. As the rationale for dowry came into the open among those who were poor, socially vulnerable and desperate, it also provided a contrast to the predominant tendency of the more educated and wealthy leading the way in adopting dowry or of the lower castes following the upper castes (Gough, 1956: 834, 845, Beck, 1972: 237, Epstein, 1973, Van der Veen, 1972:, Srinivas, 1996, Kapadia, 1995). It also militates against existing explanations that link dowry to prestige or social mobility by association with *kanyadana*, the notion of the gift of a maiden at marriage derived from the *dharmasastras* or to a mode of diverging devolution of property. The association with *kanyadana* has been made in empirical description (Van der Veen, 1972, Parry, 1979, Fruzzetti, 1982, Khare, 1970, Pocock, 1972, Raheja, 1988, Vatuk, 1972, Madan, 1975) and as such it indicates the importance of the ways in which *shastric* ideals circulate in local contexts, gain meanings and authorise patriarchal practices and patrilineal identities. The link with inheritance rights has been largely theoretical but it too has drawn on the *shastras* as the source of Hindu law, which contained a notion of women's property in the notion of *stridhana* (Goody and Tambiah, 1973, Tambiah, 1989). However, the *shastras* achieved the status of being the source

women's property... also works to eliminate poverty stricken families by barring poor women from marriage. Both the married woman's respectability and the egalitarianism between the wife taker and wife giver are secured by such a drastic measure" (Ibid: 207, 138).

⁴ Others have posed women's centrality to development as a legacy of matriliney (Jeffery, 1992) oblivious of the success of social reform in eliminating matriliney in favour of the patrilocal small family in the period leading up to development i.e., the early-mid twentieth century.

of Hindu law largely through the patronage of the colonial administration (Derrett, 1998).⁵ It has been shown that theorising of dowry (or for that matter empirical description) as inheritance is severely limiting. T. N. Madan (1975) emphasises the crucial gap between a notion of women's property, which may exist in the notion of dowry, and inheritance.⁶ The ambiguities of dowry are highlighted in discussions of the influence of the dynamic of match making on the size of a dowry on the one hand and the influence of the position of a bride in her marital home on her access to the dowry on the other (see also Sharma, 1984: 70, Raheja, 1995: 24).⁷ Crucially dowry and inheritance rights are strategies of patrilineal societies that differentiate men from women socially and appropriate women into a genealogy of the male gender.⁸

Dowry has been shaped in the context of the modern transformation of marriage, linked to broader shifts in political economy. Exploring the influence of state interventions on marriage through legal change and developmental processes, Kapila (2004: 384, 391) and Parry (2001: 794) document the emergence of dowry transactions in association with a new ideological emphasis on conjugality denoted by monogamy, indissolubility and intimacy. Srinivas, (1996: 162) is at pains to distinguish 'modern' dowry in several Indian contexts from previous custom linking the former to emergence of the modern sectors -- employment in the organised sectors, education and monetisation of the economy -- association with which privileged men as bridegrooms.⁹ At another level, significantly, it was men marked by their access to the modern sectors who maintained that women's place was in the home where their interests were to be directed towards conjugal domesticity (Walsh, 2004, Chatterjee, 1999). Thus, in contrast to the rift with the colonial state on interventions into several aspects of personal law, which have been much emphasised in the scholarship (Ibid), colonial state's perspective on property relations initiated by marriage was much more widely shared.¹⁰

⁵ The *shastras* were a code of ethics and reflections on morals of the times they were written in and their reincarnation as the source of Hindu law was a monumental feat of the British colonial administration (Derrett, 1985, 1999). *Kanyadana* and the associated notion of *stridhanam* gained legal authority and a normative status over diverse local usages in this process (Kishwar, 1994, Carroll, 1989, Sheel, 1999).

⁶ Indeed dowries could form substantial portions of natal family property. Gifts at and after marriage are consistent with a unilateral flow of gifts in hypergamous contexts, in isogamous contexts they reverse the flow observed until marriage (Mayer, 1965: 234). And significantly in both contexts, gifts embodied the enduring relationship of a married woman to her natal kin (Raheja, 1995, Vatuk, 1975, Kapadia, 1995).

⁷ As Raheja (1995: 24) points out, the failure to meet dowry demands has claimed women's lives and made women feel insecure and unwanted; "to speak, then of dowry as a form of 'inheritance' for women skirts these overwhelming important issues of power and authority" (see also Heyer, 1992: 425).

⁸ Luce Irigaray (1988) argues that patriliney denies a genealogy to the female gender by incorporating women through marriage into the genealogy of the male gender. There is an echo of resistance to this in a response to social reform by an early woman writer from Travancore. Ittichiriyamma, who starts by making fun of the emerging practice in 'sophisticated' circles of identifying a woman by her husband's name, eventually asks in exasperation why a woman couldn't be allowed to keep her own name? (Devika ed. 2005).

⁹ There are striking connections between the emergence of dowry and/or its growth and the processes of development -- industrialisation and urbanisation (Sen, 1999, de Haan, 2004, Parry, 2001, Lindberg, 2001, Kapadia, 1995, Bradford, 1985), commercialisation of agriculture (Upadhyaya, 1990, Heyer, 1992), land reforms (Gupta, 2000, Kodoth, 2005), remittances from international migration (Osella and Osella, 2000, Kurien, 2002) and Left political struggle, (Uyl, 1992, Ruud, 1999). A recent survey focussed on dowry in 18 states reveals its connections with developmental processes (AIDWA, 2003).

¹⁰ Thus, the Hindu Widow's Remarriage Act, 1856, held that remarriage would be at the cost of property rights from the previous marriage. As it was targeted at the prohibition on remarriage, which affected mostly upper caste widows, it enabled new restrictions on property rights of women not previously under prohibition from remarriage (Carroll, 1989). Where the colonial administration in the Punjab used levirate protect the patrilineal landed interests of dominant groups, conjugal property relations within a patrilineal framework was pitched against independent claims of widows (Chowdhry, 1996). Chandra (1998: 97) argues that the decision of the Appellate court to allow the plea for restitution of conjugal rights in the 1887 Rukhmabai case implicated important English legal assumptions of the day, which even denied the wife the right to sue her husband in a civil court.

Indeed, since the colonial period, the state in India has deployed a notion of marriage informed centrally by conjugal property relations. This perspective is most sharply illustrated in the case of the matrilineal 'Hindus' in Kerala, where socially sanctioned modes of sexual cohabitation were not locked into property rights (of maintenance and inheritance) and multiple sexual associations were sanctioned by custom. Under colonial law customary relations constituted not marriage but concubinage (Kodoth, 2001, 2004). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, social reformers combated this interpretation by campaigning for institutional change at the local level and through legal reform to sanction conjugal property relations and eventually the matrilineal castes were incorporated into the Hindu code bills, which became law in 1956.¹¹ Though the legal processes of the state had advanced the ideals of monogamy and conjugal stability, aspirations to this ideal were honed through 'development' that became widely accessible in the second half of the twentieth century, providing incentives for the spread of dowry among groups that previously had no such custom (Kodoth and Eapen, 2005). Thus the obvious growth of dowry since its prohibition in 1961 indicates that social processes were clearly at odd with legal change.

This paper draws on field work in 2001 and 2005 in Belur,¹² a village in the midland region of northern Kerala, and the taluka town and district headquarters. It is organised in three sections. In the following section, I explore a context for the emergence of a rationale for dowry in Kerala in the link between the generalisation of dowry in India and a gendered market dynamic that sustains it. Section three discusses dynamic of property negotiations among the matrilineal castes in northern Kerala focusing on the conditions under which dowry demands become explicit.

The Transformation of marriage in India

It has been argued that bride price, which was practiced widely in nineteenth century India has been replaced progressively by dowry in the twentieth century ((Bhatt and Halli, 1999, Srinivas, 1996, Banerjee and Jain, 1999).¹³ This proposition not only reduces the complex nature of exchange at marriage to overarching categories of dowry and bride price but also obscures the emergence of a fairly standardized notion of dowry at the cost of previously heterogeneous bases of marriage payments. In his essay *Some Reflections on Dowry*, one of its proponents M. N. Srinivas (1996: 161) locates the beginnings of 'modern' dowry in a market dynamic shaped in the colonial period, as against custom, embedded in a pre existing dynamic of kinship. "Young men who had salaried jobs or careers in the profession were sought after bridegrooms. *They were 'scarce commodities'*. The parents of the lucky youths demanded cash and such goods as cycles, woollen suits etc as part of the wedding agreement. The monster of modern dowry has grown from such humble beginnings" (emphasis added). However, a market dynamic of scarcity and competition regulated inflationary dowries under acute forms of customary hypergamy. In this context,

¹¹ The reform of family in Kerala was closely intertwined with reform of feudal property relations. Among the propertied sections, reforms that would enable the conjugal family and individual property rights was advocated by those who were tenants of feudal landholders or younger members of feudal landholding families (Kodoth 1988).

¹² Names of places and people have been changed to protect identity.

¹³ Banerjee and Jain (2001: 106) raise problems with the argument made by demographers that brideprice has given way to dowry on account of changes predominantly in population variables (see Bhatt and Halli, 1999), pointing out that if you take into account morbidity transition in the 1920s, the consequent decline in widowers joining the ranks of bride grooms, and the increasingly female adverse sex ratios since 1961, there should have been greater scarcity of men in each marriageable age cohort in the 1960s than now. But bride price was more prevalent in the mid twentieth century than now. By the demographic reasoning, by 2000 dowry should be declining rather than growing in Kerala, which achieved demographic transition in the 1970s.

‘modern’ dowry is distinguished by the conditions under which it is articulated, conditions specific to the twentieth century and to development and modernity.

Among isolated social groups mostly in northern India, hypergamy (marriage of women upwards in the social hierarchy) combined with ‘continuous internal hierarchy’, to enable social climbing permitting wealthy families lower in the social order (whether denoted by clans or villages) to buy connections with families higher than them by offering significant dowries.¹⁴ In such contexts, dowries were articulated explicitly as groom price, “reflected in the fact that the more ambitious a father and the higher in the hierarchy he aspires to marry his daughter, the more he must be prepared to pay as *daj*” (Parry, 1979: 240, see also Van der Veen, 1972: 102, Pocock, 1972, Khare, 1970, Shah, 1982).¹⁵ However, dowry was also implicated in the inferiority of wife givers to wife takers ‘in perpetuity’ i.e., not only could you not reverse the flow of women but hypergamy cast inferiority on families who married their girls among their social equals. In this context, the prospect of marrying girls horizontally on the social scale was an unhappy one, but keeping them unmarried spelt dishonour. Hence, there was sufficient pressure to offer sizeable dowries for bride grooms of high or adequate social status, for fear of being outbid, and/or to limit the number of girl children through infanticide or social neglect (Parry, 1979: 213-18, 237-246, Dumont, 1970, Kapadia, 1966, Miller, 1981).¹⁶

Significantly, the Nambudiri Brahmins in the southern Indian state of Kerala too practiced dowry linked to hypergamy. They however generated and resolved the problem of scarcity of bridegrooms quite differently. Sexual alliances between Nambudiri men and women of acceptable lower castes constituted an inter-caste version of hypergamy. However, lower caste families who married their women upward to Nambudiris did not pay dowries though well into the twentieth century they associated prestige with such an alliance (Panikkar, 1995). The Nambudiris had honed primogeniture to extreme dimensions whereby only the eldest male sibling in a family was permitted to marry within the community. Younger males had sexual alliances with women of permitted lower castes. Nambudiri women were governed by a different order of institutions. Polygyny was sanctioned and rampant in the community but could absorb only some of the excess of women generated by primogeniture. Spinsterhood too was sanctioned, contingent only upon the performance of marriage ceremonies when they died and before they were cremated (Mencher and Goldberg, 1967, Kapadia, 1966).¹⁷ In this context,

¹⁴ The rare instance of of hypergamy outside the north and west of India was among the Rarhi Brahmins in Bengal (Dumont, 1970). In the literature, hypergamy and isogamy have been drawn into a distinction between north and south India respectively (Dumont, 1983, Kapadia, 1995). Rigid distinctions between the north and south tend to underestimate the temporal and spatial diversity in marriage payments. However, the preference for marriage at close distance and among close kin in south India tempered patriliney, sometimes blurring the distinction between kin and affine and raising difficulties for established anthropological categories. This was emphasised where a girl married her maternal uncle or his son, which introduced a constant flow of women into their mother’s lineage (see Kapadia, 1995, Bradford, 1985, Good, 1991).

¹⁵ If marriage across ‘continuous internal hierarchies’ or status groups within castes was a means of mobility, prestige could be accumulated or lost according to the nature of marriage alliance, bringing hierarchy into a continuous state of flux (Parry, 1979, Van der Veen, 1972).

¹⁶ Hypergamy had its effect in making infanticide more general in the top clans. In three of the most superior royal clans in the region the sex ratios in 1852 were reported to be 40.31, 33.52 and 21.75 girls per 1000 boys (Parry, 1979: 215-16). However, the restricted nature of this lethal form of hypergamy meant that female infanticide was restricted to small groups i.e., higher ranks of the hypergamous groups. Thus, sex ratios were not skewed even at the macro regional level in northern and western India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century though female infanticide was rampant among specific groups. However, the spread of dowry across the country in the twentieth century generalised the incentive to discriminate against girl children. Significantly then sex ratios at the macro level began to indicate female disadvantage in survival since the 1950s (Banerjee and Jain, 1999).

¹⁷ A proclamation issued in 1864 by the regent queen of Travancore, Rani Parvati Bai, underscores this context and bears evidence to the emergence of governmental pressure to ensure that girls are brought necessarily within the

inflationary dowries were linked to acute primogeniture rather than hypergamy itself. My material from Kerala indicates that in poor families, unable or unwilling to pay the disproportionate rates of dowry that is expected by potential bride grooms, girls have to contend with the possibility of enforced spinsterhood or an even less 'respectable' option of seeking out sexual alliances which may or may not lead to marriage.

A consistent shift towards a system of dowry, indicating asymmetric exchange in favour of the bride groom's family is evident on at least three grounds: a) the emergence of dowry payments where no previous custom was known to exist, b) the denigration and associated decline of customary institutions of bride price involving nominal or substantial payments by the bride groom's family to the bride's, and c) an expansion of the relative contribution from the bride's family to the gifts exchanged at a marriage, particularly where such exchange was symmetrical in the past. However the shift to a system of dowry has also involved a new form of bride price, where women are literally sold in marriage to men, sometimes ending in sex trafficking, in regions marked by skewed sex ratios in northern India (Blanchet, 2005, Kaur, 2004).

As we have seen under conditions of hypergamy among groups with continuous internal hierarchies in northern and western India, dowry merged easily with groom price as the price of an alliance with a family of superior status. The flow of gifts was overwhelmingly in favour of the bridegroom's family blurring the boundaries between dowry and groom price. In these contexts, lower status groups of the hypergamous castes, lower castes and pastoral groups paid bride price (Parry, 1979, Pocock, 1972, Van der Veen, 1971: 27, 46-47, Kapila, 2004). Bride price marriages too were explicit market transactions and there was no confusion here with gifts.¹⁸ For instance, when a woman remarried the first husband was compensated by the second for the bride price he had paid. The groom price aspect was less apparent where internal hierarchies did not pre-exist a marriage but was brought into being by it (Vatuk, 1975: 159-63, Madan, 1975: 232) or where mutuality rather than hierarchy is believed to underpin the giving of gifts to the bride groom (Raheja, 1988: 118, 1995). Despite discursive distinctions on issues of hierarchy and mutuality, scholars agreed that gifts such as jewellery and clothes, usually seen as belonging to the bride, may be called upon to service the needs of her marital family or may have to be passed on as gifts (see particularly Madan, 1975: 234-37, Sharma, 1984, Raheja, 1995).

The discussion of dowry and bride price in isogamous contexts is quite distinct. In many such contexts, bride price referred to a monetary payment, sometimes denoted by a specific term and made by the bride groom's family to the bride's. For most part bride price was part of a web of ritual transactions that included gifts in both directions, endowment of the bride with jewellery, clothes and other customary articles, like vessels, which were also considered a woman's 'dowry'. In Malwa, in central India, bride price seems to have been outside ritual prestations. The prestations observed were remarkably similar to those in north India but "[t]he comparative expenses of marrying a son or daughter are fairly equal, with the boy's if anything the heavier" in the mid twentieth century (Mayer, 1965: 233). In lower caste and in some Rajput marriages too the bridegroom's family were called upon to pay a sum of money to the bride's father. "Unlike

framework of marriage. It notes that high dowries had led to the sale of properties and left women of 30 and 40 years unmarried, encouraging some of them to go astray and deems that henceforth all girls should be married between 10 and 14 years of age, that all girls currently age 14 or above should be married within the following year and limits the level of dowry that may be paid (Govindan Nair, nd: 181).

¹⁸ Writing about the Anavil Brahmins in Gujarat, Van der Veen (1972: 29) uses the terms dowry and bride price as inclusive of all other gifts, most of which went from the bride's family to the bride grooms, including that which the girl took with her as her dowry. Thus in cases of bride price marriage, the *dabey* (bride price) would be big enough to cover the expenses on the girl's dowry, gifts to the bride groom and others in his family. Van der Veen (1972: 51) points out that several Brahmin and upper caste groups in Gujarat engaged in bride price rather than dowry.

the lack of discussion of the size of the dowry (which consists only of furniture, vessels etc., and is not inflated with jewellery or cash) the size of this payment is the subject of hard discussion, one might even say bargaining, by the prospective affines” (Ibid, 234).¹⁹

Bride price was given up by some castes in a self conscious process of adopting a new identity.²⁰ New forms of dowry have been captured as a new monetary payment to the bride groom’s family, distinct from the exchange of gifts.²¹ Dowry is captured also in new kinds of pressures on the bride’s family. For instance, at the close of the twentieth century, Nagarattar parents were under pressure to match expectations of property transfers from a bride groom’s family, which had been telescoped into a one time payment, where previously they were projected into the future (as promissory notes) and met according to need (Nishimura, 1998). Customary institutions of women’s property among the landed groups of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, (Mukund, 1992); and among the Nagarattar of Chettinad and Nattati Nadar of Kanya Kumari are being sucked into a system of groom price (Nishimura, 1998, Kolenda, 1984). Besides, among the landed rural-urban elite in coastal Andhra, and upwardly mobile formerly matrilineal Ezhavas in southern Kerala there is increasing pressure to give dowry (*katnam, stridanam*) in gold and cash rather than land (Upadhya, 1990, Osella and Osella, 2000). In some accounts, however, the groom price and dowry have tended to merge as demands are made and settled directly or strategically, for the transfer variously of gold, cash, land, houses, household articles and consumer durables. For instance among a cross section of groups in West Bengal, dowry/groom price are embedded in grossly asymmetric exchange of gifts (Fruzzetti, 1982, Donner, 1999).

¹⁹ Significantly even where dowry was customary, direct negotiation was not necessarily the norm. The Rajputs in the Kangra observed dowry as a custom and were known for paying inflationary dowries but they avoided direct negotiations between families, settling the issue through mediators (Parry, 1979). In contrast, dowry was the subject of hard bargains made explicitly in rural West Bengal (Fruzzetti, 1982). Among the Okkaligas in Karnataka, up to the mid twentieth century the bride’s kin used to list their demands about the sarees and jewellery that the groom’s kin had to provide (Srinivas, 1996: 160).

²⁰ Nicholas (1967: 74) points out that in the 1920s the Mahisya peasant cultivator caste in Midnapur, Bengal, adopted a new identity, as a part of which they gave up bride price (*kane pan*) and replaced it dowry (*youtuk*), those these payments were minor compared to the gifts the bride took with her which was contributed by her natal and marital families. The Bagdis, an untouchable caste in Bardhaman district reforms itself under Communist patronage since the 1970s (Ruud, 1999: 260). Srinivas (1996: 174) points out that since at least the 1930s, educated Okkaligas in the Mysore-Mandhya region have considered bride price, referred to as *myyi*, as amounting to the sale of the bride and hence demeaning. By the 1950s they had started paying a dowry.

²¹ Ethnographies from different regions of India indicate that these payments have emerged progressively since the early-mid twentieth century. In Thanjavur, the lower castes still practiced bride price, while the Brahmins had adopted a new practice of paying cash dowries over and above the gifts they endowed their girls with at the beginning of the century (Gough, 1956:). Beck (1972: 237) finds that in Kongunadu (broadly western Tamil Nadu) many wealthy families had begun to adopt dowry in the sense of a lump sum paid by the bride’s father to the groom’s. She notes that the same families refuse to take *myy*, a payment made by guests, which went towards the expenses of the marriage. In the closing decades of the twentieth century, the practice of dowry payment in cash or gold had spread among the lower castes in different parts of Tamil Nadu (Kapadia, 1995, Srinivasan, 2005). Dowry was an established practice among the thottam farmers in rural Coimbatore in the 1980s (Heyer, 1994). Srinivas (1996: 166-168) writes about several groups that paid bride price until the early-mid twentieth century including the Okkaligas and Tamil Brahmins in Mysore. The Okkaligas in two villages shifted from bride price to dowry in the mid twentieth century (Epstien, 1973: 199). According to Bradford (1985), the Lingayats in a north Karnataka town shifted from bride price to dowry during the mid twentieth century. The urban-rural landed elite in coastal Andhra abandoned bride price and adopted dowry in the context of commercialisation of agriculture in the early decades of the twentieth century (Upadhya, 1990). In rural and urban areas around Pune in Maharashtra, non Brahmin castes had given up bride price denoted by the term *dyaj*, in favour of an entirely new payment in the reverse direction called *hunda* (Benei, 1996: 23-30). With the nominal exception of the Satnamis, a reformed untouchable caste, the non Brahmin castes in Chattisgarh in central India had virtually given up paying bride price (Parry, 2001). There are suggestions that bride price was practiced widely in West Bengal and came under the axe at different junctures in the twentieth century (Nicholas, 1967, Banerjee and Jain, 1999, Ruud, 1999).

'Modern' dowry has grown through the generalisation of a gendered market dynamic of match making at the cost of previously heterogeneous bases of exchange. Bridegrooms are privileged for their access to modern education and salaried jobs in the 'organised' sector, transnational employment in conditions of globalisation. The desire for bridegrooms with modern qualifications and assured income prospects but largely within acceptable social/caste boundaries creates a highly segmented market for bridegrooms (Banerjee and Jain, 1999).²² For women however education and employment are mediated by marriage, and subordinate to it.²³ Marriage is seen as a virtue in itself hence normative feminine values are dispersed over family economic background, bourgeois domesticity, which includes a measure of education, grooming and appearance. Notions of beauty were particularly important and fair skin and long black hair seems to have been emphasized in regions and cultures across the country (Vatuk, 1972: 78, Donner, 1999: 90, Fruzzetti, 1982). Further, there is pressure to get girls married at ages considerably lower than that of boys, allowing men to reach out to successively younger girls while shrinking options for older women. These factors make the marriage of girls considerably more urgent than that of boys of similar age groups. Along with the asymmetry in the basis of valuation of brides and bride grooms, the scarcity of the 'desirable' bride grooms in relation to the numbers of girls competing for them means that in theory even well educated, employed girls have to furnish a groom price, for fear of being outbid by those less qualified (Banerjee and Jain, 1999: 107).

However, dowries are not restricted to educated, 'well' employed sections of bride grooms or to the upper castes. At the lower levels of the income scale, men can and do delay their marriages in the search for steady livelihood options and hence parents of young unmarried women of this class offer dowries to draw them into a marriage (Banerjee and Jain, 1999: 107). Poor and lower middle class households pay dowries so that the bride groom may invest in small-scale trade or service sector work (Gupta, 2000). They use hard earned security benefits such as provident funds or gratuity payments in the factory sector or alienate land or other property to pay dowries (Lindberg, 2001, Gupta, 2000, Wadley, 1994, AIDWA, 2003: 78).²⁴ Families of boys have begun to claim dowry as their due even in the absence of any special qualification (Benei, 1995: 44). Kapadia (1995: 67) points out that impoverished young men make demands because it is the "sophisticated thing to do" (see also Srinivasan, 2005). Thus going beyond the scarcity of 'desirable' bridegrooms women seem to be paying the price for the importance attached to conjugal patronage.

²² The desire for bride grooms possessing modern qualifications and employment has been documented in a ethnographies of social groups that stressed clan based markers of status (Van der Veen, 1971: 63, Parry, 1979: 271-272, Khare, 1970) as well as others (Vatuk, 1972: 77, Wadley, 1994: 241, Kapadia, 1995, Upadhyaya, 1990, Nishimura, 1998, Bradford, 1985, Srinivas, 1996).

²³ See particularly Khare (1970: 100) who points out that despite norms of hypergamy, in practice poor but well educated and employed boys of low ranks may be offered girls from higher ranks but this does not hold true for poor educated or employed girls.

²⁴ This is heightened by the perception that marriage is the principal source of social security for women. Working class women in agricultural labour and traditional industries have invested inordinately in marriage payments in order to attract men who would 'shelter' their daughters from the harshness of capitalist labour. In some instances they had rendered their own livelihoods precarious, by converting their hard earned social security benefits from employment into marriage payments, or selling land received during the agrarian reform (Lindberg, 2000, den Uyl, 1994, Kodoth, 2005, AIDWA, 2003). An informal 'Mangalya scheme' in southern Tamil Nadu has touts mobilising poor women to go to work as casual labourers in Tirupur, a nodal point of garment manufacturing. After two or three years they are paid Rs 20,000 to finance their marriage (Business Line, May 7, 2004).

Negotiation of Exchange at Marriage

Among the matrilineal castes in Kerala marriage prestations were much less elaborate or simply didn't exist (Gough, 1950, Fuller, 1976). Negotiation and settlement of dowry grew to be a very general feature of marriage match making in Kerala in the second half of the twentieth century (Lindberg, 2001, Osella and Osella, 2000, Uyl, 1994, Billig, 1992, Kodoth and Eapen, 2003). Much of the material that bears evidence to this draws on the experience of a cross section of castes in southern Kerala. My informants from virtually all walks of life in the midland region of northern Kerala pointed to the absence of dowry as a distinguishing feature of 'Hindu' marriage in the region. Here, 'Hindu' referred to the non Brahman castes, who were mostly matrilineal Nair or Tiya.²⁵ The midland region of northern Kerala is one of the key support bases of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (henceforth CPM). However, unlike some of its neighbouring villages, which were densely communist, Belur had a more heterogeneous voter base with localities that were identified with the Congress party or the Muslim League. In the region dowry was associated foremost with the Muslims, who had a significant presence in Belur and then with Christians, Ezhavas and Nairs who had migrated from southern Kerala since the early decades of the twentieth century and settled in the eastern highlands of the region.²⁶ Migrant Ezhavas and Nairs acknowledged transferring property at the marriage of girls but for most part they legitimised it as a daughter's share of property in her natal family. An important factor here was the circulation of a notion of dowry (*stridhanam*) with a very specific meaning: the negotiation of property transfers at the marriage of girls.

Local Nairs and Tiyas considered explicit negotiation of property settlements during match making to be entirely inappropriate; it questioned one's good faith and a relationship of trust that marriage initiated. However, property concerns entered into negotiations of exchange in important ways. First, virtually every body I spoke to acknowledged that gold jewelry was given to girls at marriage and that there was considerable pressure to conform to expected standards. Expectations were honed around several factors: the relative socio-economic position of the two families, the standards established in the neighbourhood and among close relatives. In some cases, mediators would slip in a word about the amount of gold that was given at a previous wedding in the prospective bride groom's family. Even among families that lived by wage labour ten to fifteen sovereigns of gold (upwards of \$ 1000) was the norm. At the higher end upwardly mobile Tiya families gave up to 75 sovereigns of gold while Nair families with roots in the landed elite gave around 50 sovereigns. Nevertheless, most people spoke of gold as something parents gave 'with love', denying that it constituted dowry. If the gold that you gave your daughter expressed your concern for her, it also brought her prestige. I was told time and again that, "parents will do all they can for a daughter at the time of her marriage." Significantly, brides wore all their gold at the wedding.

²⁵ The Malayala Brahmins, the Nambudiris, practiced dowry and did not deny doing so. Among them it was considered customary but my Nambudiri informants thought that rising demands were making it difficult to raise resources to meet them.

²⁶ The major reference points were the other religious communities, Muslims and the Christians on the one hand and 'Hindus' in southern Kerala, who, it was widely held, practiced dowry. Belur had a significant Muslim population, and Muslims I spoke to admitted that dowry was draining their resources and had made it difficult for poor families to find husbands for their daughters. It was also readily admitted that the Christians, who had migrated from southern Kerala since the early twentieth century and settled mostly in the eastern highland areas of the region, paid dowry at the marriage of girls though it was sometimes qualified as representing a 'share' i.e., a girl's share of her natal family property.

Property status was ascertained through closely worked out strategies designed to circumvent the difficulty in direct negotiations. Thus there was fairly rigid preference for marriage within the midland area of the region and people not only resorted to familiar channels of match making – family networks, close associates in the village and work place, friends and the party channels – but held in suspicion the commercial marriage agencies and avoided them as far as possible. Preferences were articulated around the number and sex composition of siblings. These strategies suggested ‘ambivalence’ towards dowry, expressed in a tension between shared resistance towards explicit negotiations on the one hand and pressure to conform to expectations on the other hand.²⁷

Developmental attributes were closely implicated in match making. Younger women were generally better educated (in terms of numbers of years of schooling) than men but education was drawn into inferences about women’s ability to perform domestic responsibilities. Thus, prospective bride grooms saw education as bolstering women’s ability to rear children and particularly to teach them at home. ‘Respectable’ employment was seen as boosting a girl’s position on the marriage market but was also hard to come by. As a retired Nair school teacher who had paid a cash donation to get his daughter admission to the B. Ed course and after that to get her a job in a private school put it, ‘if a girl is employed, would it not ease her passage through the marriage market?’ Among the poorer families, respectable jobs included technical assistants in hospitals, para medical establishments, nursing and office assistants. A construction labourer whose twenty year old daughter worked as an X-ray technician in a private establishment said it ‘showed in the frequent inquiries for his daughter’. For men however emphasis was hugely on their ability to economically provision a family. Employment status was crucial. Public sector employed men continue to be sought after but drivers or technicians in the Gulf with at best higher secondary qualifications were married to women with graduate and postgraduate degrees. In a defining instance of the influence of development on the marriage market, a CPM leader described the status of toddy tapping, an occupation involving the extraction of the coconut sap to generate country liquor, in terms of its value on the marriage market. Inne chethekarane penne kodukkum (today a toddy tapper would be given a girl in marriage). The dubiousness of its association with country liquor had been offset in the last several decades as toddy tapping became one among the most protected segments of the informal sector in Kerala (Duvvury and George, 1997).

The ambivalence came to the fore in explicit demands for dowry in marriage inquiries directed at a small section of girls, who were described ubiquitously as ‘age over’ i.e., who were over the usual age of marriage. ‘Age over’ was an accumulated condition, attained by women under circumstances of constraint, denoted by inadequate social, economic and feminine resources; in contrast I was told that women in ‘normal’ circumstances ‘moved’ on the market.

Marginality on the Marriage Market

People in Belur approached the commercial marriage agencies usually only after they had explored more conventional channels of match making. It was a move that signaled difficulties in match making. Brokers suffered from a poor reputation as being interested in quick money rather than in ensuring a good match, but there was also considerable informal interaction with them. Many of them went from house to house, gathering information and suggesting possible

²⁷ Ambivalence seemed to define attitudes towards dowry elsewhere in the country as well. Dowry was condemned, attributed to the uneducated and at the same time seen as a compensation for education of boys among Brahmans in Pune (Benei, 1995: 36). In urban Calcutta, middle class families denied the practice but gifts and a discourse of voluntarism metamorphosed into dowry when a marriage ran into trouble, especially when it reached the courts (Donner, 1999: 189-91).

matches. They acted in their individual capacity, in co-ordination with others like them and as agents of commercial marriage bureaus in the towns, who referred to them as 'field workers'. When a local girl crossed 25 years and was still unmarried, her parents were much more likely than before to approach brokers and register her formally with marriage bureaus. People who ran bureaus pointed out that their custom came from parents of girls who were disadvantaged, ambitious parents who wanted a wider range of choice and people whose networks in the region had eroded as they lived elsewhere in the country. Where difficulties in match making were apparent, as in the case of girls being over age, brokers and bureaus quoted higher fees or commissions. Thus they were a difficult option for poor families.

This disadvantage of the 'age over' women was reflected in a big disparity in the numbers of applicants of either sex in the files of the bureaus. While agents of all the bureaus I spoke to affirmed this by quoting approximate figures, I was able to confirm this in the case of two bureaus. There was also a considerable overlap in the clientele of the bureaus in the town. Raghavan had been running a bureau for the past four years. On the day I checked his files, in October 2005, there were 90 Tiya girls (71 % were 26 years or more) as against only 9 Tiya boys and 117 Nair girls (68 % were 26 years or more) as against only 9 Nair boys. This disparity did not reflect the actual numbers of boys and girls on the market as boys were registered formally in fewer numbers. As they came at a premium and bureaus were in search of them, they were allowed to give their names and details informally, on slips of paper or as notebook entries rather than on the registration form. Raghavan had an additional 18 Tiya male applicants and 14 Nair male applicants of this kind. Thomas, who has been running a marriage bureau for the past six years, was more up market than Raghavan, reflected as much in the location and interior of his office as in the profile of his clients. He had a more varied set of applicants with a lower predominance of disadvantaged women – 122 Tiya women (56 % were 26 years or more) against 61 Tiya men and 130 Nair women (59 % were 26 years or more) against 103 Nair men.

The brokers and the smaller marriage bureaus in the town entertained proposals that involved demands for dowry in cash. They insisted however that these cases were rare, usually involving men who needed cash for a specific purpose and women who were 'age over'. Matches forged by bureaus on the basis of dowry are particularly instructive of the iniquitously gendered codes of exchange.²⁸ Raghavan arranged the marriage of a Tiya woman of 33 years with a man of the same age in Oct 2005. It was the man's second marriage. A wage labourer (a rubber tapper), he had asked for a dowry of Rs 1 lakh (\$ 2500) but had settled for Rs 70,000 during the negotiations. He needed the amount before November 2005 in order to get his divorce cleared in the family court. It was the girl's first marriage. The girl's family was in better financial circumstances than the boy's family; her brothers had regular work at a marble workshop and in a printing agency respectively. The constraint was poor feminine resources: the girl was considered not good looking and had studied only up to school final.

In 2005, Thomas arranged a match for a 24 year old Tiya girl from Belur involving a dowry of Rs 1 lakh (\$ 2500). The girl was the eldest of three girls; had studied up to only high school and was considered to be in 'poor health', a euphemism for being much too thin. Her father worked

²⁸ Of the five marriage bureaus with offices in the main market area of the taluk town in 2001, one had closed down in 2005, a few weeks before I went to the field in October. However, three had opened shop on the outer fringes of the market and one had gone into a new partnership. Most of them combined match making with other services, principally tailoring, reprography and related work. The bureaus had one or two branches in other market towns in the region or at least collaborated with specific bureaus in other places in order to facilitate matches. I was able to collect detailed information from two of these bureaus, who focused on match making not combining it at least formally with other services.

in Bombay and had resources to pay the dowry. The boy's family needed the money to conduct their daughters marriage, "for the expenses of the wedding", Thomas added, "and not to pay dowry". He was also considered a "capable" boy. People outside the immediate family were not told about the transaction. When he approached the bureau the girl's father had indicated that he was willing to pay something to settle a match. The boy's family on the other hand had indicated that they needed money. However, even these cases came with other 'demands' (market jargon for preferences) from men, making it difficult to match make. A tailor who had diversified in 2005 into a marriage bureau had an application from a 32 year old Nair man who wanted Rs 50,000 to invest in his cement business. He had further demands: the girl should not be above 27 years and should have a Bachelors degree. When the broker suggested a match with a girl whose father was willing to pay up to Rs 1 lakh, he refused because he thought she was too thin.

According to Raghavan, "people paid dowry not because they had the money; they sometimes took loans or sold property." He maintained a notebook where he recorded cases that involved demands for cash by men seeking wives. Among these was a Tiya wage labourer, who was then working at a hotel but also did agricultural work, needed money to renovate his house. He was seeking Rs 50,000 as dowry and was willing to consider girls who were old by the standards of the marriage market. A 28 year old driver from one of the lower service castes wanted Rs 1 lakh in order to buy his own vehicle. He was willing to marry outside his *jati* (caste). A 27 year old Tiya wage labourer was divorced and was looking for another match. He wanted Rs 50,000 to retrieve his first wife's gold which he had mortgaged earlier.

The first time anyone in Belur told me about a dowry demand at a marriage in their family it was in a manner that constituted it as an exception but also as the done thing among certain other groups. A 65 year old Tiya woman told me that nearly twenty five years ago her younger sister had married an Ezhava man from a family that had migrated from southern Kerala and settled in the eastern highlands. Local Tiyas did not usually marry migrant Ezhavas. Apparently, the boy had chanced to see the girl, who was working in a bank, took an interest and followed it up with his family. When contacted, her family did not object to the match but during the negotiations the boy's family had introduced a set of demands: a cash payment of Rs 40,000, a reformist marriage ceremony including vedic rites and chanting and that the girl's family join the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP), the caste association of the Ezhavas. For the Tiya family there was no question of joining the SNDP. "How could we," my informant had said, "when we already had a *sanghatana*." Following her father, an early adherent of the CPM in Belur, the family was committed to the party.

The SNDP had not taken roots in Belur and was identified with migrants from southern Kerala. Most Tiyas supported the CPM and realized this affiliation as an aspect of their social identity, thus its influence on the discursive rendering of dowry in the region needs to be borne in mind. They relied quite routinely upon CPM channels to facilitate match making and its cadre in making logistical arrangements for marriage and sometime even in raising funds. The CPM was against the practice of dowry, its local leaders admitted that they were not able to prevent such payments. In contrast, the SNDP witnessed, recorded and tried to enforce property agreements reached prior to marriage, took charge of the formalization of marriage and registered marriages. The SNDP was in the process of starting a marriage bureau to facilitate match making among its members. The Secretary of the Taluk union in the town explained that the demand had been raised by their units as people were now paying a considerable amount to marriage brokers, who charged a commission of five to ten percent of the dowry (including gold, cash, land and other articles). He pointed out that if the dowry were Rs 1 lakh and a car, the commission could run into Rs 20,000 and more. At this point he spoke of 'dowry' though in the early part of our

conversation he had emphasized that migrant Ezhavas did not pay dowry but negotiated and transferred a woman's share of property at marriage. Not surprisingly, the CPM defined itself against the caste associations and saw them as competing for the same social space.

The President of a unit (*karayogam*) of the Nair Service Society, the caste association of the Nairs, on the periphery of Belur contrasted the refusal of local Nairs to negotiate property concerns during match making with the attitude among Nair migrants. Himself a local Nair, he traced his association with the NSS to his days as a student in a college founded and managed by the NSS. Though he attributed the prevalence of dowry among the Nairs in southern Kerala to Christian influence, he thought it entailed an attitude of 'openness'. Thus, according to him, the resistance to accede to open negotiations of property at marriage in the northern part of the state amounted to a lack of transparency leading to "unnecessary tension". "When a property settlement is made at the time of marriage, the individual is benefited. Otherwise you get your share after a generation. The younger generation is kept waiting and this gives rise to ill feeling towards parents. Eventually children may find themselves waiting for their parents to die".

Differences between locals and migrants were embedded in larger issues of identity and political affiliation. Marriages between them were rare and appeared usually on the fringes of social arrangements, usually marked by some constraint.²⁹ The manager of the district branch of a bureau with branches across Kerala who was from Trivandrum in southern Kerala was further instructive about the projection of regional distinction into dowry. The bureau for its part did not mediate in dowry negotiations but he was aware of negotiations having broken down on matches they had suggested because demands were made for dowry. In an extreme instance – a woman of 42 years – they had suggested three possible matches. The woman was employed in a co-operative bank and her parents, who had paid money to get her the job, didn't find the matches suitable as it involved a widower of 48 years from central Kerala who had asked for dowry, a divorcee who they thought was not of good character and a man of 52 years, whom they didn't like. "They were willing to wait", he said to me in a manner suggesting that they were doomed. He said the bureau received a surprisingly large number of applications from parents of Nair girls who were 'age over' and attributed this to *stree vashi* – stubbornness of women. He contrasted the lack of careful planning towards a girl's future in the north to Travancore, where parents built up resources systematically to pay dowries and directed a girl's training and education towards marriage (see Osella and Osella, 2000). Parents in north Kerala simply didn't understand the market. The 'wisdom' of a marriage-centered approach towards girls that he advanced, carried with it the expectation that parents should be more flexible in the 'best interests of their daughters', which lay in getting them married.

I attempted to examine some of these views by looking more closely at the conditions under which women got to be 'age over'. There were unmarried women of 25 years and above in 32 of 306 Nair and Tiya households in three areas of Belur where I conducted a census in 2001.³⁰ As far as I could discern, for none of these girls was it a matter of 'choice' to stay unmarried. In a few instances, parents not only admitted to receiving demands for dowry but expressed their

²⁹ For instance, a poor Nair widow in Belur had got her daughter married to a migrant Nair settled in the eastern highland area. The bridegroom's family had asked for Rs 20,000 in cash as dowry but she had paid Rs 3,000 and 50 cents of land. This was a little less than half of her total landholding, which she cultivated for a livelihood.

³⁰ In five of the 32 households the unmarried women were above 50 years. One household was not marked by the 'usual constraints'. In this family a girl of 25 years was qualified with a Bachelors degree and a diploma and worked in a well established hospital in the district town. Her father had retired recently from Government service in Maharashtra and returned to his home town. The family owned an acre of paddy land and their son was studying hotel management after his higher secondary.

willingness to pay for 'suitable' bridegrooms. Karthiyayini amma had two daughters and a son and her younger daughter, Geetha, was unmarried at 31 years. She was at her wits end in searching for a bridegroom and displayed little reserve in telling me that she had contacted several brokers and registered at a bureau in the taluk town but had not received suitable proposals. In 2001 a broker had brought a proposal for Geetha from a man who demanded a lakh in dowry but had no job which she had refused to consider. "Even if we were to mobilise the money" she said, "why should we pay when he doesn't even have a job?" The man on offer didn't seem her money's worth, an attitude that the bureau manager in the district town had scorned. Karthiyayini amma and her husband had 30 cents of paddy land and a few cents of garden land around their house and both of them used to combine work on their own land with wage labour. In another instance, the harried mother of 33 year old Vasanthi, an unmarried Nair girl, told me that brokers had demanded dowry going up to Rs 2 lakhs. The family owned nine cents of paddy land and both parents were agricultural labourers. Vasanti worked as a construction labourer, which she had taken up after several years at home 'waiting to be married'. Clearly they could not afford the price that was being quoted. However, they were loath to lower the standard of 'suitability'. As we have seen the brokers had contracted marriages for Tiya girls for much less, which sometimes involved second marriages and the dubious honour of paying to relieve the bride grooms' from his previous marriage.

Inadequate feminine resources were underlined usually in the absence of adequate financial and social resources. Notions of beauty varied but fair skin was very generally emphasised even as dark skin, buck teeth, poor health (a euphemism for being too thin) figured generally as disadvantages. In poor households the lack of good looks accentuated and thus emphasized the problem. Karthiyayini amma identified Geetha's dark skin as the main problem blocking her marriage. To emphasise her point she showed me a picture of her elder daughter; the ease with which she had got married, her very fair skin and the fact that she was considered beautiful coalesced. Further, Geetha had studied up to school final. Their elder daughter was married at 22 after the prospective bride groom, who was on vacation from his job in the Gulf, had taken a preference to her. He had seen her when she was attending college and had approached her parents. They had not paid any dowry and had given very little gold but to meet wedding expenses they had to sell some of their land. Thirty one year old Shailaja's unmarried state too was attributed by her family entirely to her lack of good looks. Her parents concurred with her brother that "most of the proposals failed because the boys prioritized good looks." When I asked him whether he would consider good looks as a deciding factor when he looks for a girl, he said he would, that 'personal' preferences were important. However, Shailaja had not gone to work on dropping out of school in the eighth standard; she had waited at home for more than ten years during which time she worked only in and around the house.

The 26 years old daughter of a retired toddy tapper and one of five daughters was unmarried and suffered from a particularly poor set of teeth. Toddy tapping was wage labour but one of the more protected segments of the informal sector in Kerala. Her father received a pension from the Toddy Tappers Welfare Fund and had taken loans from the welfare fund to get his older daughter married. The family owned an acre of paddy land, which the girl and her mother helped cultivate. However, neither of them engaged in wage labour. Her four older sisters were all married before 25 years all to men who worked in the informal sector – toddy tapping, construction labour and as a tailor.

Chovva dosham, a particular astrological feature that created difficulties in finding partners with matching horoscopes, was emphasized discursively as a problem. It was cited as the problem in three households, all poor, with 'age over' women. The Secretary of a non governmental

organization in the village across the river from Belur given to a left secular perspective was particularly exercised over this issue. The NGO provided marriage counseling and when I was in the field in 2005, it was conducting a survey directed at least partly at debunking the association between horoscopes and marital health. According to the Secretary, problems with horoscope affected only poor families. It was clear from girls who had *chovva* but were married that it accentuated other constraints. In rare cases involving mutual affection or other contingencies, families had decided not to consult horoscopes.³¹

Of the factors that characterized 'age over' women, poverty and lack of feminine resources were clearly prominent. Eleven of the 32 households, with women who were considered to be over age, belonged to widows, most of who were wage labourers.³² In five of these households, there were no sons. When there were sons, the situation was only slightly different. However, where sons were of appropriate age, families attempted to arrange marriages by exchange. I will provide brief descriptions of three of these households.

Case 1: A Tiya widow had three daughters of whom the youngest was unmarried at 33 years in 2001. The daughter had studied up to the higher secondary level but worked as an agricultural labourer, going whenever she found work. They had contacted marriage brokers but nothing had worked out so far. According to her mother, the problem was poverty. "When ever an inquiry comes, people come and take a look around here and don't come back." They lived in the marshy poorer Tiya area in a small old style house. When I went back in 2005, she was still unmarried. The older daughters had late marriages and one of them married of her own choice. The second daughter, Kamala, met her husband, a Tamil man, in Coimbatore, where she had gone to work for a tailoring unit, and married him when she was 34 years. The marriage was organized by the husband's family and as it was held in Palghat, she said, nobody from her family had attended. A year or so after the marriage, however, Kamala had returned home. She lived with her mother and younger sister and worked from home. Her older sister was married at 32 years to a construction labourer who was ten years older than her and lived with him outside the village. Her mother received a small pension from the local panchayat. The household was run on the earnings of her two daughters.

Case 2: A Tiya widow/construction labourer had three daughters, all unmarried, two of whom were over 25 years. The eldest sister, who was 30 years in 2001, had not studied beyond school final and did not go to work outside the home. They had not been able to arrange her marriage as poverty was accentuated by the girl's lack of good looks. The second daughter who was 26 years was well qualified. She had studied nursing at a teaching hospital in Bangalore worked at a reputed Government medical facility there A Christian institution in the locality referred to as the convent, helped finance her education and a relative had helped with the necessary information initially. The family had received marriage inquiries for the second daughter but the men involved were not willing to marry her unless she shifted back home. Her job was not transferable so this would mean quitting her job. She supported the household financially and hence had been discouraging her mother from looking for a match for her. She was helping to

³¹ A 31 year old girl who unmarried in 2001, ostensibly due to *chovva*, was married two years later to a 42 year old man who was a labourer in the Gulf. The man liked her and they had decided not to check horoscopes. The girl's mother was a widow with two sons and two daughters. The brothers were wage labourers and the girl too had been a wage labourer before she got married. In other cases, it involved marriages which compromised on the education and/or employment of the groom.

³² Of these two households were of unmarried women of above 50 years living with their widowed mother. One of these was a Nair household with half an acre of agricultural land while the other was a Tiya household with little land, where the unmarried daughter worked as a tailor.

repay a loan of Rs 50,000 they had taken recently from the District Co-operative Bank to rebuild their old style house into a more solid brick and cement structure. The youngest sister was 23 years, had done her Masters degree in Economics but had not been able to find a job. Significantly, they also felt that their problems were heightened by the absence of boys in the family.

Case 3: A Nair widow, who had two unmarried daughters 28 and 32 years, lived with her mother in law in an old style nearly 75 years old wood and tile Nair *taravad* house. Her husband had died when the girls were still children. She worked on land owned by the family. Her daughters did not engage in agricultural work but helped with livestock and delivered milk at the co-operative society twice a day. Both the daughters had studied up to school final. In 2001 the widow and her daughters were planning to move into a small brick and cement house, which they had built on an adjacent plot as the family house was set apart for their paternal aunt, who lived in Bangalore with her husband and children. In fact a month before I interviewed them, the entire family had gone to Bangalore for the marriage of their father's sister's daughter who was 25 years old and an I.T. professional. The elder daughter was considered unattractive. She had a poor set of teeth and match making for her had had delayed the process of inquiries for the younger daughter. The family were reluctant to enter into a discussion but said that they were in touch with brokers and had registered both girls with a marriage bureau but had not received good proposals.

Labour, Sexuality, Marriage and Respectability

Older unmarried women were more likely than other women to be employed – as was the case in 17 of 32 households. A few of them worked in weaving units of which there were several in the area, one was a teacher in a temporary position and two worked in hospitals. Girls took to wage labour usually after a number of years of 'being at home' (between eight and ten years). The exceptions were where the family was simply too poor to afford to have a daughter 'waiting at home'.³³ Women seemed to enter wage labour as the possibility of an arranged marriage receded, betraying a narrowing of options. Sexuality was invariably drawn into a tension between marriage prospects of women and their participation in wage labour. In contrast, 'respectable' forms of employment, such as teaching or in government offices were perceived as boosting a girl's position on the marriage market but were also hard to come by. The informal work place afforded mobility and interaction between the sexes, which raised suspicions regarding women's sexual morality. Girls had become pregnant in relationships with fellow labourers. The instances I knew of had led to formalization of the most tenuous sort.³⁴

The position of unmarried women in relation to sexual norms was precarious to say the least. It was prefigured in two local sayings: 'a woman without a man is like a house without a pillar' and 'harm befalls the leaf whether the leaf falls on the thorn or the thorn on the leaf'. 'Love' marriages represented the materialization of this fear. In some of the cases discussed above, older daughters in poor families had married of their own choice. In more affluent families or

³³ This was the case of a widow with only two daughters of 25 and 30 years. All three of them engaged in wage labour. In the case of the girl I have called Padmini, her mother told me that she had to go to work as their father had fallen ill. On the other hand, in four wage labour households, unmarried daughters between 25 and 30 years were not working outside the home, though their education profile was poor i.e., not exceeding school final and their parents and/or brothers were construction or agricultural labourers signaling the waiting period.

³⁴ In the late 1990s a young girl became pregnant in an affair with a migrant wage labourer from Trivandrum, whom she met at work. He moved in with her family that included her mother and brother. About a year after the marriage, he went to Trivandrum. When he failed to return, the girl's brother went to meet him and found that he was married and had a family there as well. Her mother told me that her daughter knew he was married but when she became pregnant there didn't seem to be very much else she could do.

among Party cadre relationships were monitored and where they were found acceptable, absorbed under their respective patronage.³⁵ Dowry demands seemed to materialize outside these realms of patronage. A Nair widower had three daughters, of who the eldest was married to a migrant from the eastern highlands, a driver who was living in the neighbourhood with his uncle. The second daughter had a love marriage also in the same neighbourhood. The youngest daughter was 26 years, had done her Masters degree and was working at a private tutorial institute. They lived in a small old style house that was badly in need of repair. The father used to run a tea shop which he sold when his wife fell ill (she later died). He had a small income from a temple where he performed certain rituals. About his daughter's marriage prospects, he said, "for girls to get married, you must have a house and wealth. Some people ask for property directly others do so privately".

A conversation I had with Janaki, an older and committed local activist of the Party and a former Panchayat member brought to the fore the sense of shame associated with love marriages. I knew Janaki well and she was with me when I interviewed Kamala and her mother (see Case 1). After hearing so many older unmarried women and/or their families, I had been feeling discouraged. As we walked away from Kamala's house, I told Janaki how much I appreciated Kamala's grit in moving out of what seemed an impossible situation, not only finding work in far away Coimbatore but also a husband. Janaki turned to me in disbelief and said "Praveena, are you suggesting that women should make run away marriages?" She had always been sympathetic, when we discussed the situation of one or other of the unmarried women, pointing out that a family was just too poor to afford a match or that sadly a particular girl was just too unattractive. Janaki too had a story. From a Tiya family, she married when she was 20 years old and divorced her husband a year later because he was given to drinking which she found difficult to tolerate. Her family had supported her. A few years later she fell in love with a school teacher of another caste (*Kanisan* or astrologer) who was her father's friend. However, her father, a highly respected traditional healer, would have none of it and Janaki did not pursue it any further. Nor did she consider marrying again. That was the honourable thing to do.

As we have seen parents made desperate moves to arrange marriages for their daughters through channels (brokers/bureaus) and practices (dowry) they considered demeaning betraying the ideological emphasis on conjugality. 'Age over' women were perceived as sitting out the game. Frequently in conversations, they were referred to as women who were 'left behind' (*ozhingu poyathu*) signalling that women moved ahead in a substantial sense only through marriage. However, what did it mean for a woman to be single? I learnt something about this in my association with Thangam, an unmarried woman in her late forties who managed a Party run co-operative in Belur. Janaki had once described Thangam's situation to me as a "tragedy", using the English term to emphasis the point. The youngest of three sisters in a Nair family, Thangam's eldest sister had become pregnant in an affair with a fellow agricultural labourer, who was Pulaya (Scheduled Caste), nearly twenty five years ago. It created quite an uproar at the time but the Party had stepped in to ensure that the sister was allowed to remain in the family home. Their mother and two sisters had left instead. The second sister had taken up work at a convent

³⁵ Unconventional marriages, separations or divorce seemed to affect the marriage chances of younger siblings. The marriage of a 26 year old girl, who was considered rather attractive, had only just been fixed when I met the family in 2001. She had studied nursing after her higher secondary and had worked for two years in the district town but gave it up as the family felt it was not economical. The old couple (of 85 and 75 years), her parents, had three daughters and a son. One daughter was divorced and the son was separated. The elder daughter and her husband were construction labourers as was the son. She was going to marry an agricultural labourer, who had studied only up to school final, and the family were preparing to take a loan to buy her jewellery and for wedding expenses.

in the district town and converted eventually to Christianity. Thangam had spent a few years in central Kerala doing a diploma in agriculture and working but when the institution she worked for had wound up she had returned home. There had been faint attempts to find her a husband but when I met her in 2005 she was deeply affected by a proposal from a retired school teacher, which had almost led to marriage. The inquiry had come through a bureau and the agent had demanded Rs 13,000, which was on the high side. The agent told me that it was a particularly difficult case given the woman's age and circumstances. From a town further north of Belur, the man had lost his first wife many years ago, his children were all married and he had seemed genuinely interested. All of a sudden however he had broken off all contact. From our conversations I gathered that Thangam wanted to be married for many of the usual reasons, which included conjugal companionship and domesticity. And yet her perception of lack was linked inseparably to how she as a single woman was perceived. She explained to me that it was not as if people treated you badly because you were not married, "in fact they all call me Thangachi [*achi* is elder sister] but unless you are", she said "they don't really respect you."

Conclusion: The Rationale for Dowry

The emergence of a 'practical' rationale for dowry in northern Kerala is associated with the constitution of conjugality as a normative premise of feminine identity. It was manifested most sharply in explicit demands for cash payments from women on the margins of the marriage market who were marked by a combination of poor social, economic and feminine resources. The rationale for dowry was rooted in practice i.e., in the gendered conditions of match making, and quite distinct from existing legitimization of dowry ideologically as an aspect of *kanyadana* or theoretically and/or empirically as women's share of natal family property. However, for most part, my informants from the formerly matrilineal castes associated dowry payments with 'other' groups in a way that didn't necessarily worry them. Women on the margins of the marriage market were the least substantial of these 'others' but also the source of the greatest uneasiness. Thus, dowry transactions in their marriages were spoken of with a mixture of sympathy 'as something that enabled them to lead a (married) life' and derision 'for those who had been forced by circumstances to fall below the standards'. Importantly, the negotiation and payment of dowry by families of the marginal women questioned, most seriously, the dominant discourse of denial of dowry and revealed the terms upon which bourgeois respectability was maintained.

As pointed out earlier, dowry was prohibited in 1961. Currently under Hindu and Christian law daughters enjoy inheritance rights equal to that of sons, subject to testamentary rights of parents. Nevertheless, dowry has grown since the mid twentieth century. In this context, arguments in favour of and against dowry prohibition have tended to pose dowry against the denial of inheritance rights. Against prohibition it has been argued that inheritance rights have not been achieved in practice and unless it is assured women stand to lose from prohibition (Kishwar, 1989), a position that has been heavily criticised as an affirmation of patriarchy (see Sheel, 1999). On the other hand, dowry continues to be cited empirically as a reason for denying women their inheritance rights (Chowdhry, 1994: 330). Clearly the problem is much more complicated than this polarisation of responses allows us to contend with. As Carroll (1991: 791) notes, it would be a gross oversimplification to suggest that exclusion from inheritance is the sole reason for the dowry system as it exists today. Our analysis shows that the expansion of dowry (in the form of groom price) is closely associated with the identification of women with marriage and by consequence the sense of legitimization and social sanction that conjugal patronage imparts to women. Among the matrilineal castes in Kerala, women's identity had been anchored

principally to their natal family. Even if we argue against the grain of colonial legal interpretation that a notion of conjugality was very much a part of the matrilineal system, it still did not have the institutional implications of today, as it was not the primary factor that imparted meaning to women's lives. In this context, the rise of groom price in the second half of the twentieth century is particularly instructive of the conjugal regime in place. The shift to a conjugal regime of power was mediated actively by social reform at the local level, which culminated in legal change, and was facilitated through the wide diffusion of development. Ironically, the development literature on Kerala has celebrated a highly instrumentalist deployment of women towards the task of development. In Jeffrey's (1992: 228) words "[d]emocratic politics, involving large sections of a population, can be made to provide services that people need and, consequently, use. Literate, confident women will, as domestic managers, turn such services into better health for men and women alike." In this context, it is crucial that we recognise the implication of a conjugal regime of power, which privileges women's domesticity, in generating rather than curbing incentives to engage in dowry. Social policy must reckon with this if it is at all to combat dowry.

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