

Dowry Practice and Rural Society: An Investigation of Khanshama Upazila in Bangladesh

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Abstract

The practice of the dowry has gradually been spreading in Bangladesh society since the ancient time. The main objective of this study was to explore social implications of this dowry practice in the Hindu Community of Bangladesh. The study area is purposively selected and 351 household heads were interviewed using purposive sampling. A total number of marriage ceremonies took in the last two decades is 526. This study found variation in the dowry amount across the social classes and also noticed various reasons, some of them are bettering daughter's marital life, upgrading social status, unwillingness of groom's family in marriage without dowry and so on. All these factors led people to sell or mortgage their most valuable properties (cattle, land, the gold ornament and so on). It concludes that such kind of the cursed system is a furuncle to the poorer section of the society.

Keywords: dowry, Hindu community, land sold, land mortgaged and Bangladesh.

Introduction

Marriage is one of the most important rites of passage for both men and women in Indian Sub-continent (08 March, 2015, *The Daily Star*). This marriage has been considered a special event in Hindu Community due to existing practice of transferring assets from one family to another. This transfer of money or goods or both are generally taken from the bride's family to the groom's one. As Makino (2014) claimed that in the Indian Sub-continent, dowry had been traditionally practiced only by Hindu higher caste in Northern India.

However, according to the holy scripture of Hindu Religion 'The Laws of Manu', one of the ten paths to reach *Maksha* or enlightenment in Hinduism is *Kanayadan Dakhsina* or dowry (08 March, 2015, *The Daily Star*). For the welfare and security of daughter, the parents often give dowry willingly. However, the demand for dowry has been rising over time (Srinivasan, 2004). However, this argument is not

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applicable for the rich family who pays higher amount of money as dowry. Ali (2004) found the prevalence of dowry in both rural and urban areas. However, this practice has bad consequences for people of all religions and classes here. Despite having bad consequences, this practice has been well accepted at the community level (08 March, 2015, *The Daily Star*). Nowadays, dowry is fairly practicing in all segments of population irrespective of religion, creed, level of education and social class (Rao, 1993; Uddin, Hamna, Talukder and Ahmed, 2019).

The recently developing capitalist society forces newly developed rich families to upgrade their social status by making marital alliance with higher social status vis-a-vis caste. Dowry makes this opportunity to make marital alliance easy (Oldenburg, 2002). Mainly dowry has become a serious social problem when grooms and their families demand higher amount during the time of marriage negotiation. If the groom possesses better social status and qualities, a large amount of money and other assets as dowry is demanded from the bride's family that causes big troubles for the bride's family. In extreme cases, the bride's families are forced to sell land or other valuable articles to pay dowry that turns down their family status. One study suggests that two-third medium families sold their land for the payment of dowry in rural Bangladesh (Islam and Shoichi, 2008).

A number of studies found different reasons for the long-lasting practice of dowry which has been rooted in South Asian culture. Some studies showed the connection between dowry and economy and identified some reasons, such as, excessive materialism and growing consumerism (Chowdhury, 2010); getting rich overnight, leading a comfortable and luxurious life and displaying wealth (Monsoor, 2003; Chowdhury, 2010); hoping happiness in conjugal life (Rahman and Lieberman, 2019) and stabilizing family economy and maintaining daughters domination (Mir, 2021). Other studies also found relations of dowry with level of education. They found that the amount of dowry increases with the rise of the level of education. They also found some reasons, such as, willingness of the father of low educated daughter to give higher amount of dowry to enhance social status of daughter's father (Chowdhury, 1999; Mota and Falco, 2016) to buy happiness for daughter from highly qualified husband (Huda, 2006). On the other hand, keeping domination of daughters on husbands of low level of education is the main reason for paying higher amount of dowry as reported in Dalmia and Lawrence (2005). Some other studies showed that dowry has connected with socio-economic status and also identified some reasons, such as, losing social status to the groom's family (Kashem and Ahmed, 2015); bringing happiness of daughters (Reshma and Ramegowda, 2014; Ali, 2008; Khanal and Sen, 2020; Ghosh, 2010); maintaining caste system (Anderson, 2003) and increasing decision-making power of daughters (Makino, 2014). All these studies led us to take an attempt to explore whether dowry practice has any effects in the North Bengal of Bangladesh.

Dowry is thus developed as a pattern of marriage payment that is mostly settled openly or directly before marriage ceremony. This practice has widely been followed in our country since immemorial time. Many laws, prohibiting this practice, are available on paper but not implemented in reality that cause in reducing or stopping the dowry practice. In some cases, this social evil has become pandemic which is seriously affecting the lives of married women and, in many cases, forces the bride families to fall into vicious poverty cycle.

Objectives of the Study

The study objectives are

1. To overview the rate of dowry within two decades (2001-2010 and 2011- 2020).

2. To find out the amount of land sold and mortgaged for dowry.
3. To explore reasons for continuing the dowry practice.

Literature Review

Chowdhury (1999) conducted a study on 4,527 households over 259 villages from major states of India through survey method to find out how dowry spreads and what factors help to expand such a bad practice throughout the country. The study explored that dowry had gradually expanded at every parts of the country for various reasons, such as, groom's parental landholding, educational status influenced the amount of dowry. The parents of daughters think that having a qualified son-in-law may upgrade their status in the society.

Kashem and Ahmed (2015) conducted a study using qualitative method based on 21 cases in Bangladesh. It found that the practice of dowry is not similar in all parts of Bangladesh due to cultural, social and economic conditions. Besides, people are more likely to take it as a custom rather than an offence. Due to fear of losing social status they pay dowry to the groom's family.

Chowdhury (2010) conducted a study on 50 middle class households through qualitative method in Bangladesh. The study indicated that rising dowry amount due to the expansion of capitalist relations help some people of Bangladesh to accumulate capital. Gradually, it has been turned into demand, material gain, extortion and profit maximization. Behind the dowry system, some most common motives are the grooms' and their families' greed, excessive materialism, growing consumerism, rising expectations of luxurious and better life and the need for better status seeking.

Monsoor (2003) conducted a study to explore how dowry practice is increasing in every parts of Bangladesh through qualitative method. The study showed that the present dimensions of the dowry evil are the result of increasing industrial culture and the fascination for material prosperity, to get rich overnight, to possess the latest gadgets of comfort and luxury and display of wealth.

Rahman and Lieberman (2019) revealed a study on women through mixed method in Sylhet. The major findings of the study indicated that the bride's party paid dowries, such as, cash money, jewelry, land, furniture etc. to the groom's party before or after or during marriage ceremony hoping happiness of their bride conjugal life.

Ali (2008) conducted a study which showed dowry a social custom that arises from the pervasive greed. Dowry practice is prevailing in both urban and rural sectors and among non-affluent and affluent sections of the people of Bangladesh. Parents pay dowry to the groom's family as a social custom to reduce repression, deprivation of their daughters and stable their marital lives.

Anderson (2003) conducted a study in India through qualitative method to find out the influential reasons behind the bad practice of dowry. The study showed that with modernization, the dowry rate of most dowry- oriented societies has declined but has been rising in India for the past five decades. Here the caste system is seen as one of the main reasons for this. There is a dispersal of wealth and social status among the people of the modern age which has resulted in an increase in the dowry rate in the caste society but a much lower rate in the non-caste society.

Billing (1992) conducted a study which presented an analysis of the rise of the dowry in Kerala. It showed that the adoption of exorbitant payments from the families of brides to those of grooms was mainly caused by changes in the marriage market and the rise of new criteria of spouse choice based upon achieved status.

Reshma and Ramegowda (2014) conducted a study in Indian society through mixed method. It showed that the practice of dowry abuse is rising in India. Payment of dowry, a cultural practice tends to

subordinate women in Indian society. When the dowry amount is not considered sufficient, the bride is often abused, harassed and made miserable.

Makino (2014) revealed a study on 1,206 married women who were 15-40 aged through quantitative method to investigate the effects of dowry on women's status in Rural Pakistan. The results showed that a higher dowry amount enhances women's decision-making power and decreases the likelihood of women's exposure to fatal domestic violence in the marital household.

Mota and Falco (2016) conducted a study on 32 cases through qualitative method in India. It explored that the higher the educational level, the more critical accounts are found in relation to the dowry system as a mechanism of reproduction of the low status of women.

Khanal and Sen (2020) revealed a study through a substantives method that combines culture, anthropology and economic history to explain the problem of motives of dowry. It showed that new dowry is heavily composed of market goods and cash, including land and is frequently accompanied by violence against new brides when their families fail to make larger dowry gifts with higher market value. Ghosh (2010) conducted a study through qualitative method to find out the relation between dowry and violence against women in India. The result showed that the problem escalating dowry demands and related post marriage atrocities on wives at matrimonial homes in contemporary Bengal has become a matter of serious concern for the society.

Huda (2006) conducted a study through qualitative method in Bangladesh. The study found that the dowry system indicates the superiority of the man and is a way to establish patriarchal norms. Parents pay dowry to buy happiness for their daughter's. A woman said that if she does not pay dowry for her daughters, anybody else will pay and get an eligible husband for their daughter. As it is found, the size of dowry depends on factors like the quality of brides and bridegrooms, beauty, age, fathers' status and education.

Dalmia and Lawrence (2005) conducted a study through qualitative method in India to examine how dowry is related with education. The study showed that educated girls are more likely to pay dowry than the uneducated girls whose husband is also not educated for dominance.

Mir (2021) conducted a study through qualitative method to find out how dowry is being practiced at Kashmir in India. The study explored that they pay dowry so that their daughters can make financial stability when they go to their husbands' houses and also nobody can misbehave with them.

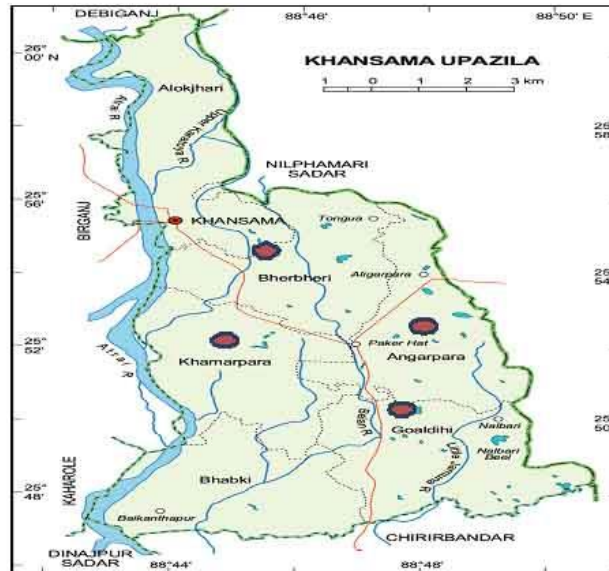
Research Methodology

Primary data was collected by using questionnaire interviews. Initially a draft questionnaire was developed on issues, such as, demographic and socio-economic background of the respondents. The questionnaire used in the study had three parts. The first part asked some general questions like age, sex, educational qualification, occupation, household size, monthly family income and region. The following part put some questions on socio-economic aspects of dowry, such as, land sold and mortgaged, social consequences of loan received. In the last part, few questions on people's perception of the prevailing dowry system were asked. The researchers found certain anomalies regarding ordering the questions and then felt the necessity of adding few more questions with changes and adjusting in the questionnaire. With some addition and correction, the questionnaire was finalized for pre-testing. Both open and close-ended questions were incorporated in the questionnaire.

The pre-testing was conducted among five respondents for testing the effectiveness of suitability of the research instrument and discovering possible weakness, inadequacies, ambiguities and problems that

could be corrected before actual data collection took place. It was also done with the objectives of exploring the necessity of adding new questions. Clear information on certain issues, as assumed, could be gathered by doing so. After the pre-testing, necessary corrections and modifications were made in the questionnaire. It was then ready for conducting interviews among the household heads. Field investigation began from 20 June, 2020 and ended in 12 July, 2020 from the villages of four unions (Bherbheri, Angarpara, Khamarpara and Goyal dihi) within six unions, those are located at Khansama Upazila of Dinajpur District in Bangladesh which were selected purposively. Using purposive sampling, the study conducted on 351 households where a total of 526 marriages were held among which 235 marriages were arranged in 2001-2010 and the rest (291 marriages) were set in 2011-2020. Once the field investigation was over, all the questionnaires were edited and some errors were detected and corrected accordingly. Frequency distribution tables with percentage and graph were provided to describe responses. All kinds of data processing activities were done manually.

Figure 1: Map of the study area



Source: <https://khansama.dinajpur.gov.bd/bn/site/page/z5D9>

Findings of the Study

Table 1 Demographic profile of the respondents

Different Criteria	Respondents	
	n	%
Age (Year)		
41-50	136	38.46
51-60	117	33.33
61-70	75	21.37
71-80	24	6.84
Total	351	100.00
Sex		
Male	205	58.40
Female	146	41.60

Total	351	100.00
Family Size		
Nuclear	146	41.60
Extended	205	58.40
Total	351	100.00

Source: Field Work

Table 1 revealed the demographic data (age, sex and family size) of the respondents of the study area. Data were collected from 351 respondents, among them 38.46 percent (n=136) were 41-50 years old, 33.33 percent (n=117) were 51-60 years old, 21.37 percent (n=75) were 61-70 years old, and rest of them (n=24; 6.84% were 71-80 years old. Among the respondents, 58.40 percent (n=205) are males and 41.60 percent (n=146) are females. Besides, 41.60 percent (n=146) of the respondents were from nuclear family whereas 58.40 percent (n=205) of the respondents were from extended/joint family. Generally, the former group (nuclear family) consists of four members whereas the latter one consists of more than four members.

Table 2 Socio-economic profile of the respondents

Different Criteria	Respondents	
	n	%
Level of Education		
Primary (1-5 year)	176	50.14
Secondary (6-10 year)	109	31.06
Higher Secondary (11-12 year)	45	12.82
Tertiary (13 ⁺ year)	21	5.98
Total	351	100.00
Level of Monthly Income (Taka)		
Less than 8,000	169	48.15
8,000-10,000	93	26.50
10,000-12,000	55	15.67
More than 12,000	34	9.68
Total	351	100.00
Land Ownership (Acre)		
Landless (0.00-0.05)	96	27.35
Small (0.05-2.49)	177	50.43
Medium (2.50-7.49)	53	15.10
Large (7.50 and above)	25	7.12
Total	351	100.00

Source: Field Work

Table 2 shows the socio-economic data about the respondents of the study area. Majority of the respondents (n=176; 50.14 %) had primary level of education qualifications, 31.06 percent (n=109) had secondary qualifications, 12.82 percent (n=45) had higher secondary qualifications and the rest of them (n=21; 5.98%) had tertiary qualifications. Among the respondents, majority of them (n=169; 48.15%) were from less than 8,000 (taka) monthly family income; 26.50 percent (n=93) were from 8,000-10,000

(taka) income, 15.67 percent (n=55) were from 10,000-12,000 (taka) income and rest of them (n=17; 6.77%) were from more than 12,000 (taka) income. Meanwhile, among the respondents, 27.35 percent (n=96) were landless (0.00-0.05 acre); 50.43 percent (n=177) were small (0.05-2.49 acre) land owner; 15.10 percent (n=53) were medium (2.50-7.49 acre) land owner and finally, 7.12 percent (n=25) were large (7.50 and above acre) land owner.

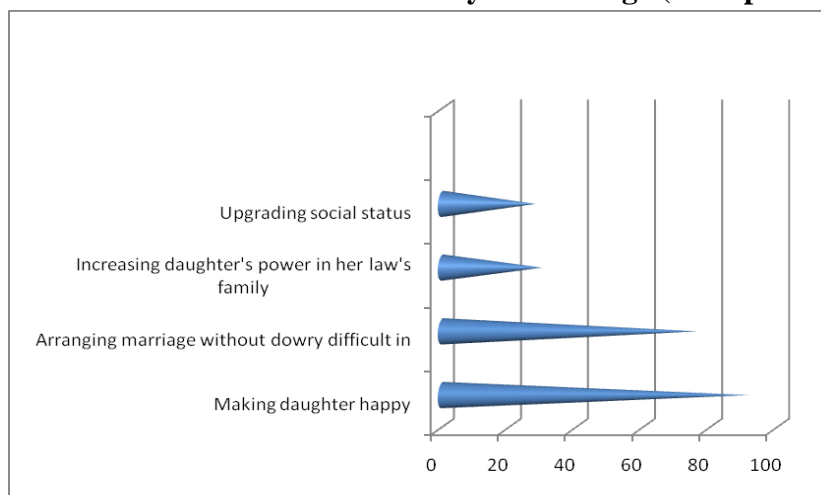
Table 3 Differences in rate and amount of dowry for marriage

Items	2001-2010	2011-2020
Average amount of dowry (lakh)	1.04	2.88
Amount of land sold per marriage (acre)	0.12	0.11
Amount of land mortgaged per marriage (acre)	0.16	0.21
Land sold for marriage (percentage of land sold)	34.43%	29.25%
Land mortgaged for marriage (percentage of land mortgaged)	42.62%	30.25%
Land both sold and mortgaged for marriage (percentage of land sold and mortgaged)	22.95%	40.50%

Source: Field Work

Table 3 indicates differences in rate and amount of dowry for marriage. An average amount the bride family gave to the groom family was 1.04 lakh in 2001-2010 whereas that amount has currently been estimated at 2.88 lakh. Similarly, the amount of land sold for marriage was 0.12 acre on average while that has been turned into 0.11 acre now. The table shows that the rate of land sold in every marriage has slightly been decreased between two decades. As average amount of land sold was 0.12 acre in 2001-2010 while that amount has been estimated at 0.11 acre in 2011-2020. But the rate of the mortgaged land has been increased rapidly. Now the average land amount is 0.21 acre per marriage which was 0.16 acre in the last decade. At the present decade, 29.25% of land had been sold for marriage this percentage was 34.43 in 2001-2010. Alongside, 42.62% of land was mortgaged for marriage in the last decade while that percentage has been estimated at 30.25. The table also shows that the percentage of land both sold and mortgaged for marriage was 22.95 in 2001-2010 where that is 40.50 in 2011-2020

Figure 2 Reasons for transaction of dowry in marriage (multiple responses)



Source: Field Work

Figure 2 shows reasons for dowry transaction in marriage. As found, 91.39 percent parents reported that they gave dowry only for their daughter's happiness. Whereas, 76.16 percent parents said that they were compelled to give dowry. They opined that it is completely impossible for them to arrange marriage of their daughters without dowry. Meanwhile, 29.80 percent parents thought that they gave dowry so that their daughters could get power or none could rebuke their daughters in their father-in-laws' houses. On the other side, 27.81 percent parents reported that giving such a higher amount of money as dowry enhanced their status in their society.

Table 4 Reasons for higher dowry rate in the study area (multiple responses)

Types of reasons	Percentage
Mental construction of dowry system	201(57.26)
Popularizing dowry practice from surrounding situation	245(69.80)
Unwillingness of groom's family in marriage without dowry	291(82.91)
Developing dowry practice a part of culture	75(21.37)
Being rich with other assets	251(71.51)
Increasing the rate of dowry by the rich people	95(27.07)
Bettering daughter's marital life	326(92.88)
Competition for an eligible groom	145(41.31)

Source: Field Work

Most of the respondents mentioned that the amount of dowry they paid was higher than other the parts of Bangladesh and found reasons for this higher payment which are reported in table 5 The percentage of respondents reporting impossibility of arranging marriage ceremony without dowry was 82.91 followed by being rich with other assets (71.51%), popularizing dowry practice (61.59%), mental construction of dowry (57.26%), competition for an eligible groom (41.31%), bettering marital life of daughters (92.88%), increasing rate of dowry (27.07%) and developing dowry culture (21.37%).

Discussion

The practice of dowry has highly been noticed in the Northern part of Bangladesh and the dowry negotiations have become direct and open. This bad custom is creating social problems. In this study, it seems that the birth of a daughter is not welcomed and most families consider dowry as a social curse. The amount of dowry in the last decade (1.04 lakh) was comparatively lower than that of the current decade (2.88 lakh). So, at present, the rate has been increasing rapidly. The widely practicing dowry system, the result of the expectation and compulsion from grooms' families, forces the brides' families to give a huge amount of dowry that ultimately creates financial crisis for the brides' families. Dalmia and Lawrence, (2005) showed in a study on Bangladesh, dowry has become a greater financial burden for the family. To fulfill this demand most of the families have to sell their most valuable property, such as, cattle, gold ornament, land and so on. They have also mortgaged land to manage extra money when needed. Although the amount of sale land (0.12 acre per marriage) has been a little bit curtailed at the running decade than the last one (0.11 acre per marriage) meanwhile the rate of mortgage land (per marriage 0.16 acre in 2001-2010 and 0.21 acre in 2011-2020) has been increased at a remarkable rate. The study found that although the rate of land sale (34.43% in 2001-2010 and 29.25% in 2011-2020) and mortgage (42.62% in 2001-2010 and 30.25% in 2011-2020) has decreased in the current decade compared to the previous one, an increasing trend found when comparing land (both sold and

mortgaged) between two decades (22.95% in 2001-2010 and 40.50% in 2011-2020) in the same Hindu Areas.

The study found some contributing factors for this situation. 'Making daughter happy' (91.39%) is the first factor. Some studies (Huda, 2006; Rahman and Lieberman, 2019; Ali, 2008; Reshma and Ranegowda, 2014 and Ghosh, 2010) supported the first factor and expressed that dowry is the price that parents pay to buy their daughters' happiness. 'Upgrading social status' (27.81%) is the second factor. Mota and Falco (2016), Chowdhury (1999), Kashem and Ahmed (2015) found that parents gave dowry in their daughters' marriages to upgrade their social status in the society. 'Increasing daughter's power in her law's family' (29.80%) is the third factor. Makino (2014) supported the third factor and expressed that higher amount of dowry enhances women's decision-making power in their father-in-law's houses. 'Mental construction' (57.26%) is fourth factor. 'Surrounding situation is playing an important role' (69.80%) is the fifth factor. Huda (2006) supported the fifth factor and expressed that a village woman told, "If I do not pay dowry for my daughters, some else will pay and get an eligible husband for their daughters". 'Competition for an eligible groom' (41.31%) is the last factor. Chowdhury (2010) found that dowry is an element in the competition for an eligible groom in Bangladesh.

Thus, the bad practice has become a part of culture in today's society which increases the dowry rate in the study area. As a result, the poor families have to sell the last piece of land or mortgage or both that force them to fall into deeper poverty. Kanchhi (2014), Davis (2011), Tomlinson and Tariquzzaman (2009) also showed in their studies that dowry, a widely practiced social malaise, pushes many families deeper into poverty cycle.

Conclusion

Despite societal advancement and modernization, the practice of dowry has been increasing gradually. This practice ultimately forces poor families to be poorer. But this practice is not a problem for rich families. Although nowadays people are living in an advanced society or they are educated and progressive as claimed, they seem not to come out of such a social curse (dowry) rather the practice of dowry has rapidly been increasing day by day. The study has overviewed such a phenomenon in the study area. There has been an increase in the rate and amount of dowry in the study area. This widely practicing dowry system forces poor families to either sale land, mortgage land or both for their daughters' marriage. Even in some cases, these poor families sold their valuable assets like cattle and gold ornament. The study explored some causes why people paid dowry, such as, bettering daughter's marital life, increasing daughter's power in her law's family, upgrading social status, popularizing dowry practice from surrounding situation, unwillingness of groom's family in marriage without dowry and competition for an eligible groom. For now, though, it seems to be the mind that the rate of dowry is increasing at unprecedentedly but the comparison to time, income and value of money is not remarkable. Nevertheless, such a cursed dowry system is furuncle to some parents of the daughters which makes them impoverish by taking away everything.

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