

# Understanding the Functional Significance of Dowry and Bridewealth: A Study of Reciprocity and Circulation in Marriage Alliances

**Torali Chetia**

M.A in Sociology  
Dibrugarh University

**Abstract-** Bridewealth and dowry are distinct concepts associated with the exchange of property or goods within the institution of marriage. While marriage holds universal significance across societies, its cultural practices and implications vary. It not only signifies the union between the bride and groom but also symbolizes an alliance between their respective families and kinship groups. Many societies, especially in India, have systems intended to redistribute wealth through marriage, facilitating alliances through the exchange of goods, services, money, or property etc . Despite being implicated in social issues, it is regarded as a substantial element of alliance under kinship studies. Even anthropological understanding has drawn dowry and bridewealth as symbols of the officialization of marriage. The significant works of many sociologists and anthropologists like Goody and Tambiah , social anthropologist John Beattie have immensely shown the significance of dowry and bridewealth in terms of reciprocity in societies. This paper is an attempt to study the functional significance of dowry and bridewealth as a conjugal and circulating fund beyond the contemporary social issues .

**Key Words:** Alliance , Bridewealth, Dowry, Function, Marriage, Transfer

## **INTRODUCTION:**

In almost all societies marriage is an institutionalized social relationship of crucial significance. More than this, it is generally associated with a number of other important social relationship (Beattie ,1964). The transfer of wealth during marriage holds significant Importance in many societies. Marriage serves not only to establish relationships, regulate sexual life, and facilitate child reproduction but also to embody a system of reciprocity. Anthropologist Levi Strauss highlighted the issue of marriage payments, viewing them as examples of reciprocity between social groups. Anthropologists and sociologists distinguish two primary forms of marriage transfer: bridewealth and dowry. Dowry comprises money, gold, and items given to the bride by her parents at marriage, while bridewealth involves the groom's family providing money or gifts to the bride's family. These transfers symbolize the shift of rights from one group to another, setting up a marital fund for the couple and serving as compensation to a group that has lost a family member. The practice of bridewealth and dowry can have different implications in different societies. Bridewealth can be seen in practice in many African societies and can be seen as a way to compensate the bride's family due to their loss of a daughter who has a potential child-bearing capacity. The tradition of dowry, established since the Hammurabi code, initially served to guarantee the independence and financial security of women before marriage. However, its role has evolved, particularly in Indian society. In India, the spectrum of marriage practices ranges from dowry to bride price. While dowry was originally meant to be given with the consent of the bride's family, in modern times, it has become a demand from the groom's family or by the groom itself. This demand often determines whether the marriage will take place and how much wealth the bride's family must provide to secure their daughter's place in the in-laws' household.

## **Objectives :**

The study aims to explore the functional significance of dowry and bridewealth as conjugal and circulating funds, transcending contemporary social issues, and to analyze their role in facilitating alliances and reciprocity within the context of marriage in diverse societies, with an emphasis on the writings of sociologists and anthropologists.

## **Methodology :**

The paper is an theoretical analysis from different writings of different anthropologists and sociologists that is primarily based on secondary data, such as – books, journals, working papers etc.

## **Result and Discussion :**

Dowry and bridewealth have historical origins in traditional agricultural societies where children are considered valuable assets and the need to remain in the family is a daunting reality. In monogamous virilocal economies where

agriculture is predominant, the concept of a daughter leaving home to unite with a husband comes along with the transfer of wealth, goods, and services to the bride's family as a form of compensation for the absence of a family member. Sons primarily receive inheritance, while daughters receive theirs in the form of dowries.

Over time, the practices of dowry and bride-price have evolved and spread to different regions and cultures. For instance, dowries were historically popular in the Near East, Europe, East Asia, South Asia, and some parts of the Americas, while bridewealth was more common in subsistence economies where horticultural or pastoral farming practices exist. Today, dowry is still popular in South Asia, particularly given high demand in the twentieth century, while bride-price is more prevalent in predominantly agricultural labor-intensive societies where the contribution of women and children is highly valued (Conteh, 2016). Worldwide bridewealth is a common and widespread practice, whereas dowry is rare and geographically clustered: of the 1267 societies included in the Ethnographic Atlas (Murdock, 1986), 66% are coded as bridewealth and 3% as dowry (Gaulin & Boster, 1990). Even Tambiah (1989), stated that bridewealth and dowry are not interchangeable concepts, and that they have different implications for women's status and power in marriage.

Bridewealth is a system in which there is a transfer of wealth from one group to another group. It is a lateral transfer that goes between groups on the same generation. It is not a form of inheritance between generations. Above all it is the rights in women's procreative ability that her lineage is buying. There's a compensation and reciprocity element where in patrilineal exogamous societies, bridewealth does have the character of indemnity. By the marriage the bride's group had lost a working member and a potential child bearer. The bridewealth is a kind of compensation for this loss and the wealth that comes in is often used so that the other members of the group specially males can then bring in other women (Beattie, 1964). The distribution of this marriage payments throughout the world has been of attention to anthropologists and its found in patrilineal societies. Its usually been found in pastoral societies for example in North & East Africa and in different societies. Bridewealth is important in establishing the legality of a marriage, and validating the social status of its offspring. The transfer of cattle or other goods from one group to another is a manifest sign of the marriage.

Dowry which is found in different parts of the world is a different marriage payments. It is usually paid from an individual to an individual rather than between groups. It can be defined as the property, money or any other things given to bride from the bride's family that will have to remain in the hands of the bride. Dowry may also compose an amount of bridewealth in terms of marriage. It is a vertical transaction of wealth between generations rather than lateral transactions. The system is tend to be found in large scale peasant societies or settled agricultural peasant societies. For example – it is found in Mediterranean regions and in many parts of India. Conteh (2016), highlights that dowry is a cultural and traditional practices predominantly found in Asia and Africa, being common in the Near East, Europe, East Asia, South Asia, and parts of the Americas. On the other hand, bride-prices and bridewealth are more prevalent in sub-Saharan African countries.

#### Anthropological Definition of Dowry and Bridewealth :

In the early 1970's anthropologists Goody and Tambiah (1973) presented an elaborate description of bridewealth and dowry practices in Africa and Eurasia. In the same publication, Tambiah presented a treatise of dowry and bridewealth in relation to property rights of women in South Asia. They had drawn out a map of transactions that happened during the time of marriage. According to them, Goods that goes from the groom's side to bride's side are known as bridewealth. Whereas goods that go from the bride's side to the groom's side (via the bride) they are called dowry. Ideally it remains under the ownership of the bride.

"...dowry is part of a conjugal or familial fund, which passes down from holder to heir, from the parents to the daughter. It is thus part and parcel of the transfer of familial property..." (Goody, 1973).

"...bridewealth forms a societal fund, a circulating pool of resources, the movement of which correspond to the movement of rights over spouses, usually women" (Goody, 1973).

#### **Functions of Bridewealth and Dowry :**

Bridewealth and dowry often symbolically marked the transaction between two social groups. But bridewealth and dowry are two distinct practices related to marriage with significant cultural variations across societies. There are certain functions of both dowry and bridewealth that makes it different from each other.

Bridewealth :-

- a. **Symbolic** : It symbolizes the transfer of rights and responsibilities over the bride from her family to the groom's family.
- b. **Economic**: Economic factors play a role in the practice of bridewealth, where it serves as compensation to the bride's family for the perceived loss of labor, support, and economic contributions previously provided by their daughter to the household.
- c. **Social**: It establishes social ties and alliances between the families involved, reinforcing social cohesion and creating obligations between them. In many societies, it is seen as a symbol of the groom's commitment to the marriage and his ability to provide for his wife, a way to demonstrate his respect for the bride and her family.

- d. **Cultural:** It is used to prevent incest in the family. It is a typical form of reciprocal gift that keeps the reciprocity between people.
- e. **Solidifying Respect:** In many societies bridewealth solidify respect and gratitude from the groom and his family to the bride's family. The payment represent the value that groom's family placed on the bride.
- f. **Financial Security:** In many societies, bridewealth is given to the bride's family to support them financially that serves as a form of financial security. For example in some parts of Uganda the bridewealth paid is used to support the bride's family.

Dowry :-

- a. **Financial Security:** Dowry is intended to provide the newly married couple with financial security or resources to start their life together. In certain parts of Africa dowry may include livestock, agricultural land or other resources. It works as a financial backup to the bride who newly joins the family of the groom.
- b. **Status Enhancement :** Dowry give assurance of respect and care of the bride as well as their families. Because the bride will adding to the property of the new family therefore her status will be secured even in case of death of her husband.
- c. **Transfer of Property :** Dowry involves the transfer of property such as land , money, jewelry or household items or any movable property from the bride's side to the groom's side. This transfer or exchange of resources can help to establish or reinforce alliance and social connections.
- d. **Inheritance and Succession :** Dowry can also serve as a form of inheritance, where the bride receives a share of her family's wealth or property upfront instead of waiting for it to be inherited later. This ensures that the daughter has some control over resources and can pass them on to her own children.

### Conclusion:

Dowry and bridewealth practices vary significantly across different cultures and regions. The variations in these practices are influenced by factors such as economic status, agricultural practices, societal norms, and historical traditions, leading to diverse manifestations of dowry and bridewealth across different societies. The writings of anthropologists and sociologists highlight that dowry creates a form of female competition, ensuring brides attain the fittest male for their continued survival. Families, therefore, compete to have their daughters married to the groom who can ensure the most stable conditions for their daughter. In such a case, the families of the bride gather resources to support the continued survival of their kindred under the most favorable conditions.

The historical context of dowry an" bridewealth reflects their role in traditional societies, where they served as mechanisms for wealth transfer, compensation for the loss of labor, and strategies for ensuring the survival and well-being of women within their marital households. However, as societies modernize and shift towards individual wealth accumulation, the significance of dowry and bridewealth may diminish, as seen in contemporary economies like the United States and many parts of India. The burden of responsibility for dowry payments has debilitating consequences for women, such as bride burning and suicide cases in India. However, dowry and bridewealth practices have significant implications for gender equality and wealth distribution, and there is a need for increased advocacy for the education of women in societies where these practices are prevalent to potentially increase possibilities for independence and control of resources.

### REFERENCES:

1. Beattie, John. (1964). *Other Cultures : Aims, Methods and Achievements in Social Anthropology* .London : Routledge &Kegan Paul.
2. Conteh, A, John (2016). Dowry and Bride price. *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies*.
3. Goody, J & Tambiah, J, Stanley(1973). *Bridewealth and Dowry*. London: Cambridge University Press.
4. Tambiah, J, Stanley. (1989). Bridewealth and Dowry Revisited. *Current Anthropology* .