

The Impact of Class Background on South Asian Marriages: A Study of Dowry Practices

Abstract

Giving and receiving dowries is a tradition among South Asian families. The practice of dowry in the context of class background has received relatively little attention in the UK. This paper examines the experiences of South Asian women of different class backgrounds in Birmingham, with a focus on their attitudes towards receiving or giving dowries and what role dowry plays in class mobility and maintenance. The case study design with the use of a qualitative method approach investigates the attitudes and experiences of women who belong to different class backgrounds. Data obtained from these interviews were subjected to the grounded theory approach. The findings show that attitudes toward the continuity of dowry practices differed according to the social class in which the women were in. There is also evidence that women have different experiences according to their family background, education, social class, cultural background and their religion.

Keywords: Social class, Marriages, Dowry, Social burden, Cultural pressure, Religion

INTRODUCTION

The practice of paying brides a price or dowry for the purpose of marriage is notably common and recognized as part of Indian culture. It is also true to say that this tradition has existed for a long time in other parts of the world, including Europe and Africa, according to anthropologists. However, the ideology of dowry has proved a complex undertaking due to variations in understanding and practices among

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families in different parts of India. The practice has recently undergone considerable changes, including legal reforms, even though the original rituals are still respected among modern and well educated people (Bhopal. K, 1999; Bhacho. P, 1985; Caldwell, J. C., Reddy, P. H., & Caldwell, P, 1983).

South Asian women receive dowries at the marriage ceremony. These are gifts that may consist of clothes and jewelry (gold, silver, etc) to the bride herself, and household items such as TVs, fridges and furniture, for their new house. The groom and groom's family are given clothes, jewelry, watches, a car, bikes and cash, among other things (Bhopal, 1999).

Among Muslim families in India, Pakistan and other parts of the Middle East, the customs of payment relating to marriage are almost the reverse. A bride price (called "Mehr") is normally fixed at the time of the negotiations by the family of the bride, which in most cases is settled in terms of cash payment and would be amicably sanctioned as a refund to be made by the bride's family in the event of a failed relationship and eventual divorce from the husband. The bride price is usually higher when the bride belongs to an above average social class and is a virgin or has not previously been in a relationship.

A peculiarity of South Asian cultures is their strong and distinctive class differences. These differences are addressed at an everyday level by an individual's attitudes, appearance, living style, work and background. People with similar income probably have similar living styles and thus other aspects of their lives will also overlap (Reid, 1998). The importance of dowry practice among South Asian communities has been given different explanations in the context of social research. It presents the status of the bride's family and also of the groom's family who receives the dowry. Beyond this, the amount of dowry represents the family background of the bride. A large dowry shows that the bride belongs to relatively high class in the community. It also demonstrates that a part of the inheritance can go to the daughter.

Dowry is a practice that exists in many societies and religions (Harrell and Dickey, 1985). In South Asian culture it is a custom which is practiced from generation to generation. It is also practised among various castes and social classes. Dowry is exercised even among South Asian communities which have migrated to Western societies (Bhopal, 1999; Goody, 1971; Caldwell, Reddy and Caldwell, 1983;

Srinivasan and Lee, 2004; Waheed, 2009; Jhutti, 1998; Rao, 1993).

Various religions perceive and have different expectations and definitions of dowry. Among Hindus, traditionally the upper caste practises the “kanyadhan”, the literal meaning of which is the gifts which are given by the bride (Srinivasan and Lee, 2004, p.1108). In the Sikh religion, the dowry is given to a daughter at the time of her marriage. It is framed in two parts. The first is “daj” (dowry) and the second is “affinal” (gifts). The “daj” is commonly related to the bridal gifts and “affinal” gifts refer to the gifts from the groom and his family (Jhutti, 1998, p. 175). Among Muslims, the dowry is called the “jahz” but this word among Muslims has many other variations. The “jahz” is practised at the time of a daughter’s marriage and commonly a variety of gifts are presented by the bride’s parents to the bride (Waheed, 2009, p.53).

The Enduring Importance of the Dowry

In the growing literature on dowry, evidence shows that its importance is rising over time. Rao (1993) states that South Asian dowries now account for up to fifty percent of a household’s assets, and this has been increasing for the last four decades. Rao used Rosen’s implicit market model and data from six Indian villages and the Indian census; the results show that the population growth has caused a marriage squeeze and consequently, a surplus of women in the marriage market has played an important role in the increase in dowries (Rao, 1993, p.666).

The public exhibition of dowry is common among South Asians. Wilson (2006, p.105) illustrate that “marriages between different castes normally forbidden but in these marriages the condition is that the parent of the women paid the huge dowries to acknowledge her rise in status”. Similarly, Liddle and Joshi (1986, p.58) explain that the “in- marrying system is very common among caste based societies which mean they will in general not marry outside their own caste and sub-caste. There are expectations, notably of women marrying ‘up’ to man of a higher caste”. They further describe that in the “caste based societies the upper caste never tried to impose their strict rules of conduct on the lower castes; in fact they forbade the lower castes from following the upper caste lifestyle, and used the differences to distinguish the lower orders from themselves”. In- marrying and dowry practice among caste based societies, particularly among Hindus, is very common. Anderson (2003, p.273; 2007; 2010) examines dowry payments in two societies: caste-based

and non-caste-based. She argues that increasing price of dowry once terminated in those endogamous societies; the reason is that these societies eventually broke down.

Goody (1973, p.17) contends that usually the parents of the bride give the dowry to their daughter. The dowry is a part of the girl's parental inheritance. He further explains that most families marry among families of equal status and wealth. This is a reason that increases the gap between rich and poor. Caplan (1984, p.216) explains the practice of bride groom price among the Christians in Madras on the basis of the class and caste system. He states that bride groom price is only practised among families who have an affiliation with the caste system; if they marry out side the caste then they do not pay the bridegroom price. He concludes that this is evidence that bridegroom price is a means to enhance class position, as well as to maintain the boundaries of endogamy. Wessel (2006, p.511) explains that when a woman marries, the women's parents and family give her all the essentials of a dowry. The main purpose of giving a dowry to the daughter is to marry well in accordance with her social class. Dowries from the girl's families may play an important role in the enhancement of the groom and his family income and status. The giving of a large dowry may enhance the groom's family status (Srinivasan and Lee, 2004, p.1115).

The practice of dowry does exist in South Asian culture and that women face harassment due to dowry before or after marriage. Some researchers argue that this violence has increased in India. In the cases where a husband or husband's family is not satisfied with the dowry payment, they may cause trouble for the wife and abuse her (Suran et al, 2004, p.5; Srinivasan and Lee, 2004). Husband and wife exchange goods, income and services within the household and all household members have access to these resources that available for husband and wife. Because of the sexual hierarchy in the family, these resources cause conflict between the family members, especially between husband and wife (Whitehead, in Young, Wolkowitz & McCullagh, 1981, p.88). Dowry exists among all social classes and this practice also causes domestic violence and physical and psychological abuse of the wife. These physical abuses cause the dowry deaths and betrayal of the wife and psychological abuse causes "depression, low self-esteem, fear, loneliness, guilt and shame".Rastogi and Therly (2006, p.73) explain that

As it is assumed that dowry problems are not very severe among Muslims" (Waheed, 2009, p.48), in spite of the fact that many Muslim women have been

victimized (Suran et al, 2004). It therefore becomes very important to explore this controversy regarding dowry among Muslims.

The size of the dowry may have two effects on the bride's status; first, the dowry may increase the income and wealth resources of the material household and it may have an impact on the bride's welfare in her marital life, and second, a larger dowry is a source of pride for the groom and his family" (Srinivasan & Bedi, 2007; Rao, 1997; Zhang and Chan, 1999).

Research on dowry in the UK

Dowry is also found to be practised in the UK among south Asian communities that are composed of people belonging to different religions and caste systems. They are part of diverse social and cultural backgrounds and belong to different regional and language groups (Ghuman, 1994, p.15).

Although there is a wealth of literature available on dowry practices that is based on studies carried out in Bangladesh (Suran et al, 2004) and India (Anderson, 2003) little attention has been paid to studying the phenomenon of dowry practices among South Asian communities in the UK. This research examines the phenomenon by investigating class background, the role of dowry in class maintenance and mobility, and Sparkhill women's personal experiences of giving or receiving dowries, which may have an influence on their attitudes towards dowries. This research also addresses the question of the description of dowries among Sparkhill South Asian women in order to understand and see the variations between different cultures and different class backgrounds.

The key questions to be addressed in this study are:

1. How do the participants perceive dowry practices in the context of their personal experiences and their class and cultural backgrounds?
2. Relating to the participants, what are the social impacts of dowry giving and receiving among different classes of South Asian communities in Birmingham?
3. In what ways do the participants feel the giving and receiving of dowries helps or inhibits social class

mobility?

4. How do these findings relate to previous and future studies on the topic of dowry?

METHODOLOGY

In this study, social class is measured according to the participant's father's occupation through the Registrar General scheme (1971). This consisted of five occupational groups: "Professional Occupations", "Intermediate Occupations", "Skilled Non-manual Occupations" and "Skilled Manual Occupations", "Partly Skilled Occupations" and "Unskilled Occupations" (Crompton, 1998, p.59).

Social class is measured in various ways. The Office of National Statistics has maintained a register journal in which occupation is used to group people of the same class. Occupation is also the best indicator for measuring material and non-material rewards in social settings. This also helps to see other factors in society; for example, education and voting behaviour (Crompton, 1998). To investigate a woman's class background in this study, a woman's father's occupation is used that provide information about social mobility on the basis of dowry practices among South Asian communities belonging to different social class backgrounds in Birmingham.

The parameters for this study are to explore the attitudes and experiences of South Asian women in the context of class background. To explore this phenomenon, Birmingham has been selected because it is an ethnically and culturally diverse city. Within Birmingham, Sparkhill has been chosen because the area has a large population of ethnic minorities of South Asian communities. The makeup of the Asian ethnic community as a percentage of the population is shown in Table 1;

Table 1: Ethnic groups in the Sparkhill population

Ethnic Group	Spark hill
Indian	10.4%
Pakistani	45%
Bangladeshi	3.8%

Source: 2001 census of population

Table 2: Religion profile of Sparkhill

Religion	Sparkhill
Hindu	5.3%
Muslim	54%
Sikh	3.3%

Source: 2001 census of population

Within case study design, semi-structured interviews are employed to study underlying social phenomenon. Semi-structured interviews are a useful tool to gather in-depth information. The research participants were located through the snowball method. In this method, the participants are located through personal contacts and sometimes a research participant identifies other potential participants (Bryman, 2008). In this research the researcher conducted eight semi-structured interviews with South Asian married women who were born and live in Sparkhill and whose forefathers might have migrated from Pakistan, India or Bangladesh. Among the women interviewed, three were Hindu, three were Muslim and two were Sikh. The women that were researched belong to the age group of 20-40 years old. This particular age group was selected because it indicates marital status and is also useful to investigate varying patterns of dowry practices.

Grounded theory is used for the grounded analysis of data because it directs the data analysis process in a consistent and coherent way. (Denscombe , 2007, p.88). Although data is continuously analyzed during the fieldwork actual data analysis starts after the data collection is completed. The data is analyzed in relation to particular themes that emerged from the data. These themes were coded and categorized according to grounded theory in the relation to women's responses on dowries.

To see alternative explanations and differences, a constant comparative approach was also used in addition to grounded theory with regard to the women's personal experiences of marriage and dowries and how these experiences might have an impact on their attitudes towards giving or receiving dowry in relation to different class and religious backgrounds. In order to make this systematic, NVivo is used, which facilitates the data analysis process and provides deep and enriched information.

ANALYSIS

Dowry in practice among sparkhill south Asian women

In this part, I will examine the various definitions and descriptions of dowry need by the participants and analyze this from a sociological perspective. This also provides insights related to the continuity of this practice among the South Asian communities in Birmingham. In the response to dowry definition and dowry description, respondents provided a variety of answers.

One Hindu woman replied that:

“For me, dowry is those things that parents give to their daughter at her wedding eve e.g. dresses, jewelry, household things etc” (Hindu, 1. Class, II)

This kind of definition and perception is current among the South Asian communities and there is evidence that the dowry is related to the women and that a bride receives the dowry at the time of her marriage from her parents (Bhopal, 1999; Jhutti, 1998; Waheed, 2009).

Anderson (2007) explains that the marriage payments come in two forms: the payment that is transferred from the bride's family to the groom's family is usually called the dowry and the payment that is transferred from the groom's side to the bride's is called the bride price. Bride price occurs in two thirds of societies. Anderson further explains that dowry play a more significant role in Europe and Asia (p.152).

My sample suggests that dowry and bride price exists among Sparkhill South Asians. The dowry and bride price co-exist and they practice both dowry and bride price at the time of marriage.

Muslim woman answered:

“In my point of view, dowry is those things that parents and in laws give to bride at the eve of marriage” (Muslim, 2. Class, II).

For her, dowry is a combination of gifts from the parents and from the in-laws.

The other interesting factor is that dowry seems or is perceived to be something which the groom and groom's family demand from the bride's family.

“For me, dowry is the demand of those things that [the] groom and groom's family demands from the bride's family at marriage, e.g house, car and household things” (Hindu, 3 Class, IV).

This quotation shows that the dowry is related to those things that the groom and groom's family demand from the bride's family at the time of marriage. This response was quite surprising for me and when I asked the question related to the things which she received from her parents she replied: “*we called these things “Bhaint”, it means gifts” (Hindu, 3, Class, IV)*. This provides the clear justification that for her dowry is not the things that the bride's parents give their daughter at the time of her marriage; it is the things that the groom and groom's family demand from the bride's family. The definition of dowry from a sociological perspective and in practice among Sparkhill South Asian women of different class backgrounds is differently perceived.

Continuity in Dowry Practice

Beyond the variety of definitions that the respondents present, they also show their intentions to continue this practice. Those who define dowry as the things which the groom and groom's family demand from the bride's family were against this practice.

“I am against dowry, I dislike it and it should not be given.....if [the] groom or groom's family demand dowry I will never ever marry my daughter in that family because it seems that they are insulting a woman”.(Hindu, 3. Class, IV)

Bhopal (1997, p.488) also finds that South Asian women feel that dowries are an oppressive and degrading practice for them. Those women who define dowry as these demands are more likely to feel that dowries are degrading. We can say that this factor is also related to the individual's own perception of dowry and it is very important to explore the individual perceptions in relation to dowry practice.

On the other hand, those who define the dowry as gifts which the parents of the bride give her for her happiness and for her new life or home were in favour of this

practice and want to continue it.

“I want to give them dowry as much as I can. For me, dowry is a good thing because it helps after marriage in spending life” (Muslim, 1. Class, IV)

In this quotation the respondent, who belongs to the working class, is in favour of the practice of dowry; for her it is good practice and she wants to continue it. The working class wants to continue the dowry practices to maintain their cultural goodwill and to achieve cultural self-betterment (Weininger, in Wright, 2005, p.94). We can see that her personal experience of receiving dowry and her class background have an impact on her decision to continue this practice, as at the time of her marriage her parent gave her a large dowry and according to her it was very helpful for her in starting her new life. We can say that the definition and personal experiences of receiving dowries also have an influence on the giving of dowries. There is also some evidence that demonstrates that the women who dislike this practice may still want to continue it because of their personal experiences. As one Muslim woman said:

“I want to give my daughter everything at the time of her marriage because I know it is our cultural custom and I know that’s how I was treated in the context of dowry, so I will give her everything” (Muslim, 3. Class, IIIA).

Even though she dislikes the practice and does not want to continue it, her personal experiences are too influential on her and she realises that a big dowry may enhance the wellbeing of the bride’s married life, so she wants to continue this practice.

Bhopal (1999, p.98) suggests that South Asian parents want to continue the practice of dowry and they want to give dowries to their daughters according to their status and, most importantly, according to the expectations of the groom and the groom’s family. The common factors found in the data indicate that dowry is typically given to the brides of all class origins at the time of marriage and relate to the women among South Asian communities. Another important aspect my data presents is that all the Sparkhill South Asian women were against the demand for dowry, even those preferring one otherwise. This informs us about the participants’ viewpoint that the demand for dowry is disliked among Sparkhill South Asian women of different class

backgrounds but its practice is considered relatively good by them.

Is Dowry a Burden (among Sparkhill South Asian families)?

The comprehensive review of the literature reveals that dowry is practised in many countries of South Asia, such as India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Individuals perceive dowry in different ways depending on their situation; for example, when the parents of a bride give a dowry to their daughter to make her happy, they see dowry as an expression of love and care, but when it is demanded by the groom's family, the bride's parents might perceive it as a burden.

Dowry as Demand

Traditionally, dowry consists of a number of household goods that are given by the bride's parents to their daughter depending on their financial situation and the affordability of the goods, but making demands in the name of dowry might not be liked in South Asian society. The notion of demand is interesting as some participants define dowry as something that is demanded. According to them, anything that is given by the parents to their daughter for her happiness and satisfaction of themselves a gift except those things that are demanded by the groom's family.

The data suggests that dowry is something that is demanded at the time of marriage in the shape of household essentials among Sparkhill South Asian communities. One participant said in the interviews *"According to me, any kind of demands that [the] groom or groom's family demand from the bride's family [is] called dowry"* (Hindu, 2. Class, IV). Another participant said that

"For me, dowry is the demand of those things that [the] groom and groom's family demands from the bride's family at marriage, e.g house, car and household things" (Hindu, 3 Class, IV).

These two interviewees' are defining dowry in the same way; however, looking at these quotations critically, one might think that there is a religious and class impact on both of these interviewees' accounts as both are Hindu women and both belong to Class IV, "Partly skilled" (Registrar General, 197, in Crompton, 1998, p.59). I would not strongly claim that there is definitely a religious and class background playing a role because of the following interviewees who are Muslim and belong to the "Skilled non-manual" group (Registrar General, 1971, in Crompton, 1998, p.59)

class IIIV said that “*We define dowry as the thing which [are] demanded of [the] groom or groom’s family from the bride’s family at the time of marriage*” (Muslim, 3. Class, IIIA).

The above quotation gives voice to the notion of the demands being made by the groom’s family before or after marriage. When something is demanded before or after the marriage, the bride’s family might be pressurized to fulfill it in order to maintain their social class position in society.

“Before my marriage my mother-in-law called my father and demanded lot of sweets for [the] “*valimah*” function. My father was rich.....that’s why he brought sweets of different types in different quantities”(Muslim, 2. Class, II).

This excerpt is taken from the interview with a woman whose father belongs to the “Intermediate Class” (Registrar General, 1971, in Crompton, 1998, p. 59). He was able to fulfill these types of demand in the name of dowry. The ease of fulfilling these demands is visible from the quotation. In this way, it can be said that Muslim respondent 2, who belongs to class I “Intermediate Class”, did not face any trouble in fulfilling the groom’s and groom’s family’s demands, but how can the other class background fathers do all this?

A Class IIIA (Skilled non-manual) man will perceive such demands as burden some and might take out a loan in order to satisfy the groom’s family and spend his remaining life in paying this back. The quotation below talks about the troubles faced by the bride’s father, who was a pensioner (Skilled non-manual, Class, IIIV) and could not afford the high demands from the groom’s side.

“My father paid installments of my dowry for five years” (Muslim 3 Class, IIIA.)

This interviewee is the same woman who defines dowry as something that is demanded. Once the groom’s family makes demands at the marriage, it might be useful to say that dowry is a burden, especially when the bride’s family cannot afford it.

Ebrey (2003, p.77) states that demands for large dowries sometimes cause delays or make it impossible for girls to marry. “Demands for excessively large dowries were

making it impossible for girls to marry, or were forcing their families to sell the land or borrow money to pay for them.” These high demands for dowries are seen as burdens for the girl’s family. Dowry is also a problem that exists among ordinary families.

There is other evidence which suggests that although the definition and description of dowry are different, in practice the dowry seems to be a kind of demand or duty and is seen as a burden for the bride’s family, and at least one Hindu woman has differently defined this dowry practice and has a different experience of receiving dowry.

Dowry may seem to be combination of demands and duty. Among South Asian families dowries are exercised according to the situation and according to the family background. Parents of brides have to give the dowry even if the groom and groom’s family do not demand it. The reason is that they have strong cultural boundaries and dowry is seen as a custom among them which they want to practise and they also want to continue this practice to maintain their identities as South Asian. South Asian people see the dowry as being part of their unique South Asian identities (Bhopal 1999, p.97).

In line with the literature, the data suggests that South Asian parents in Sparkhill felt that giving a dowry to their daughters is a duty and they have to do their duties even in the shape of demands. When asked the question on their importance and why dowries are given in their culture, one Sikh woman who belongs to the “Intermediate Class” (Registrar General, 1971, in Crompton, 1998, p.59) answered:

“I think it is like a duty which they have to do. Every parent has to give the dowry to their daughter because of cultural and people pressure” (Sikh, 1. Class, II).

Parents have to give dowries to their daughters for many reasons; as this woman said, there is cultural and personal pressure. Bourdieu (1986) explains that all social groups want to maintain their class solidarity and relationships. In their social services individuals want to continue the exchange or exclude those things which they perceive are right or wrong to maintain their class through occasions, places and practises. So the parents of the bride feel that they have to practice the dowry and they feel that giving dowry to their daughters is a duty.

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that for these research participants the demanding of dowry and perception of dowry as a burden in the context of demands or duty seem to depend on the family's financial position, as one respondent (Muslim, 2 Class, II) commented that at the time of her marriage the groom's family demanded a lot of sweets. When the interviewee talked about the demands for sweets, at the same time she said "*My father was rich.....that's why he brought sweets of different types in different quantities*" (Muslim, 2. Class, II). It is evident from the excerpt that her father provided the sweets to the groom's family because it was their duty in the shape of social pressure and they had to do so. The other reason may be the welfare of the daughter in her marital life. On the other hand, the respondent (Muslim, 3 Class, IIIV) whose father belongs to the "Skilled non- manual" class IIIV and was not able to fulfill the demands made by the groom's family reports that her family have been struggling for five years to pay back the loan taken out for her dowry. Although another respondent's family background and class are different and there were no dowry demands by the groom's family, her parents gave her a dowry because of cultural pressure and felt that it was their duty to practiced the dowry and give one to their daughter at the time of her marriage. According to one respondent (Hindu 2 Class, IV), her father, who belongs to the "Partly Skilled class"(Registrar General, 1971, in Crompton, 1998, p.59) had many other responsibilities related to his children was facing difficulties in fulfilling the demands of the groom's family at the time of his daughter's marriage.

A part from the financial affordability, if the above four quotations (Muslim, 2 Class, II; Muslim, 3, Class, IIIA; Hindu, 2, Class, IV and Sikh, 1, Class, II) are analyzed in the context of social class, it reveals that the four interviewees have experienced dowry differently depending on their class, religion and family background. The data suggests that in Sparkhill among the South Asian communities, dowry practices exist and are experienced as a burden or pressure for the bride's family at the time of marriage. We can say that women who belong to different class backgrounds and religions also have different experiences of receiving dowry among the South Asian communities in Sparkhill, Birmingham.

Dowry: Pride or Shame?

Pride and shame are cultural instruments employed by the members of a community to encourage or discourage certain behaviours or actions in the society. Dowry is a

social and cultural practice that might cause either shame or pride for the social actors. In this part, I will discuss how dowry can make someone proud or ashamed among the members of a community. These societal rewards have an influence on the married life of the bride, as when the groom or groom's family receives a dowry, they feel proud and it might be a source of satisfaction for the bride and bride's family and leads to the bride's marital wellbeing. On the other hand, if the groom and groom's family do not receive a dowry, they might be ashamed within their society and it might cause resentment or even abuse for the bride and bride's family after marriage.

In particular, the practice of dowry informs others about the identity of the individual; for example, his/her religion, cultural background and social status in society. The practice of dowry is a tool that might be practiced to exhibit one's social status. It not only informs about a bride's and groom's social status, but also confirms it.

People have to keep up with social and cultural traditions in order to be proud of their high social status in society. Other community members also have some expectation regarding dowry depending on the social status of the bride's family; for example, society expects that a rich man's daughter will bring a good size dowry.

“My parents are richer than my in-laws. My mother-in-law was expecting that I am a daughter of [a] rich man I would bring many things in the shape of dowry” (Muslim, 2. Class, II).

In this case, when expectations are not met, the bride and bride's family are sometimes humiliated or even punished. They are made to feel ashamed by community and the woman is abused and blamed in her husband's house.

“My mother-in-law teased me by showing and comparing the dowries of other girls with that of mine” (Muslim, 2. Class, II).

This quotation shows that the husband's family made the bride feels ashamed for not bringing dowry according to their expectations.

All the above discussion shows how a smaller dowry can cause shame and abuse for the bride. However, how can what constitutes an insufficient or sufficient amount of dowry be measured? This is an interesting notion; another research project was conducted on it by Suran et al (2004, p.12) on the relation of dowry and abuse in

rural Bangladesh. They explain that the amount and size of dowry is dependent on the wealth of the bride's family and the bride's family financial position and this plays an important role in the perception and expectation of the dowry size.

There is also evidence that shows that among South Asian communities domestic violence related to dowry practice exists and that women are faced with violence related to dowries. The data suggests that the violence related to dowry among the Sparkhill South Asian women is psychological rather than physical. One Muslim woman said that:

“Yeah, there were some comments. After I got married she [mother in law] said to me my parents did not give this, did not give that” (Muslim, 3. Class, IIIA).

Respondents' personal experiences give us clear information regarding psychological violence related to the size of dowry.

Just as dowry can cause shame, it also causes pride for the bride and bride's family; one of the interviewees talked about this in the following ways:

“If a woman [is] brought more things in a dowry she is considered honorable in the society and she feels proud that she comes from a rich family” (Muslim, 1 Class, IV).

One Muslim woman who supports the dowry practice explains that the dowry is cause of women social position in her in-laws as a large dowry provides or enhances the position of women in the family and South Asian society. The amount of dowry also shows the family background and status of the bride's family. We can say that at the time of marriage in the Sparkhill South Asian community this practice is a tool to confirm and make the society realize what the status of the family is and which family belongs to which social class. All this influences the ordinary members of the community, who perceive social class on an everyday basis as appearance, way of living and consuming patterns (Ride, 1998).

South Asian communities have some expectation regarding the size of the dowry. These expectations depend on the bride's father's financial position and social status. If these expectations are not sufficient for them they claim for this and this claim is related to the way they feel ashamed that they are not able to fulfill their

expectations. In the same way, if the South Asian society feels satisfied with this, they are rewarded by feelings of pride. And these rewards (shame and pride) are for the bride and bride's family. Other researchers also demonstrate that the amount and size of dowry play an important role in the welfare of the bride (Bhopal, 1997, 1999, 2009; Zhang and Chan, 1999).

The literature and the data itself also provide some evidence that suggests that in this specific area of Sparkhill members of the South Asian communities have also received these rewards related to dowry from their communities and this also shows that they still have strong cultural boundaries, so it is not easy for them to break these boundaries even if they want to.

Is dowry payment perceived as class shift and maintenance among the Sparkhill South Asian community?

In this research I have tried to focus on the respondent's father's occupation to measure the respondent's social class. To establish whether people who belong to different class backgrounds have different experiences of receiving or giving dowries and also if the dowry is playing or having any role in the class shift and maintenance in the South Asian communities, I used the Britain Registrar General Class scheme which is based on occupation. Women were asked about their fathers' occupations (Crompton, 1998, p.59).

With this I have tried to understand how these South Asian women perceive their social class and how they perceive which class they belong to before and after marriage. This direct question related to individual social class is also important to explore if dowry is playing any role in the class shift and maintenance or if dowry is perceived as class shift and maintenance.

Respondents were asked about what class they felt they belonged to before or after marriage or at the time of marriage. Five women responded that they belonged to the middle class and also defined their class on the basis of income and their family financial position:

One respondent replied;

“My father has a better financial position’.....I feel I am in[a] lower class now because my father had a quite a good earning” (Hindu, 2 Class, IV).

This interviewee is defining her class on the basis of her father's income and financial position. This quotation gives us the information that she perceives that her class has shifted after marriage and she feels that she belongs to a lower class now because of her financial position. It is not this woman alone who defines her class on the basis of her father's income and family financial position: in fact, other participants also perceive their class on the same basis of income and financial position of the family in their interviews. One Sikh woman replied similarly that *"before marriage and after marriage I can say that I [am] in the middle class I don't want to say that I am too poor or I am too rich"* (Sikh, 2. Class, IIIA). This quotation also demonstrates the point made in the previous quotation that the interviewee measures or sees her social class on the notion of poor or rich and measures her social class on the basis of the financial position of her family. Wright (2005, p.184) explains that "classes are social categories that generate subjectively salient experiences which shape the identities used by people to locate those categories within a system of economic stratification.

These respondents' provide evidence to support the literature that among South Asian communities marriage is a means of social mobility and that South Asian women feel that their class and status is changed due to marriage. Hamilton and Hirszowicz (1993, p.198) explain that "social mobility is a process in which people change their class and status position this changes either upward or downward in the hierarchy.

In the literature and data itself, the dominating factor to measure class has been the occupation and financial position of the family, but there is evidence that education can also be taken as a class measurement as two of the interviewees mention education as a crucial factor in measuring class. It is very interesting to see the way interviewees talk about this factor. There is a quotation given below in which an educated woman defines her class before and after marriage on the basis of her parents' education and her in-laws' education.

"My parents are financially strong but not educationally so, in this way I belong to [the] poor class. Still I belong to a poor class because my in-laws are also not educated" (Muslim, 2. Class, II).

Among Sparkhill South Asian women dowry has no significant role in class mobility and maintenance, and that level of education has played an important role

in the perception of class mobility and maintenance and also to establish individuals' social class membership.

After exploring respondent's class backgrounds pre- and post-marriage on the basis of father's occupation some important factors have appeared. First, the majority of women who define their class on the basis of income are less educated. On the other hand, those who define, and perceive, their class on the basis of education are more educated. The data itself indicates that on the basis of occupation these two respondents' class is shifting to the upper level, but personally they felt that their class had shifted to a lower level or stayed at the same level after marriage. We can say that in the Sparkhill South Asian community, education and individuals' personal experiences may impact on their views and perception of their social class at an everyday level.

Although dowry may have no prominent role in class shift and maintenance, it might play a role in the maintenance of the family background and family status for the new married couple.

“Dowry that was given by my parents helped me a lot in spending life after marriage. I remember that my father gave me 2 thousand [pounds] so that I could buy anything that I needed.” (Muslim, 1 Class, IV).

This quotation suggests that the amount of dowry has an impact on a couple's wellbeing and living style and in the context of social class it may maintain class status according to the family's class background. A member of the same class helps the new family in the building and maintenance of their social class status. She further stated that “*[if] the families are financially strong they give more dowries to their daughter and if they are not they give according to their status*” (Muslim, 1. Class, IV). This quotation shows that for her dowry is given according to the family's financial position and status. This gives some indication that if the dowry is given according to the financial position and status of the family it may also help to maintain the family status and also helps to maintain the class background of the family. This also gives us evidence that Sparkhill South Asian women perceive that the amount of dowry may maintain or even enhance their social class in society. Individuals want to maintain their status and class in society. They may perceive that dowry at the time of marriage is a good way of showing the family status. Giving or

receiving dowry may also maintain family status among South Asian communities. Dowry is a way of showing and enhancing the family's status (Bhopal, 1999, p.97).

When the new married couple starts their life they are also a part of the family and the family does not want to lose class status in society so they give a dowry in the form of material and non-material household goods which may help the newly married couple to start their new life. It may also help to maintain their class according to the family's class background in society. The amount of dowry also shows the family background and status of the bride's family. We can say that at the time of marriage this practice is a tool to confirm to society what the status of this family is and which family belongs to which social class background.

CONCLUSION

Exploring dowry practice and investigating class mobility and maintenance, the data of this research shows that dowry among South Asian women is likely to have different definitions and perceptions.

Women's perception of dowry and class also vary according to their education, religion, and family background. As Crompton (2008) explains, the term class is perceived and used in different ways between laymen and academics. Similarly, the results of this study demonstrate that some of the women studied relate class with family income; however, others perceive that class is based on education.

From the in depth data collected, despite the limited size of the sample used for this research, it appears that the understanding of dowry varies between the Sparkhill South Asian women. The perception of dowries has an impact on their attitude towards giving and receiving dowry and the continuity of this practice. In this study women's personal experiences on receiving dowry also influence their attitudes towards giving dowries to their own children. That personal experience provides a clear indication of the continuity of this practice and the demand for dowry by in-laws is disliked but the dowry is considered relatively good among South Asian communities in Birmingham.

Furthermore, this study indicates that dowry is a cultural practice and Sparkhill South Asian parents have to exercise this practice at the time of their daughter's marriage to maintain their social identity, social class and status in the community. The results of this research are in line with the findings of some other researchers.

Bhopal (1997, 1999, 2009), Goody (1973), and Welles (2006) note that dowry is a way of showing family class and status at the time of marriage.

The practice of dowry persists in all social classes in South Asian communities (Srinivasan, 2005; Caplan, 1984; Ebrey, 2003). The dowry payment is a cause of brides' welfare or abuse (Waheed, 2009; Srinivasan and Lee, 2004; Suran et al, 2004). This study shows that a large dowry plays a significant role in a bride's pride in society and the welfare of a bride's married life in Sparkhill South Asian culture.

The data demonstrates that giving dowry to the daughter is a duty and the bride's family has to perform this duty whether it is demanded by the groom's family or not. This research finding is similar to the results of Manushi (1993), Ebrey (2003) and Bhopal (2009), who found that South Asian parents want to maintain their identities through practising dowry, even if dowry payment is an economic burden for them.

Although this study has some limitations in the religion and dowry relationship, religion can be important in the practice of dowry as the data illustrates that there are some differences between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, women in their perception of dowry in their religion. However, this research found that dowry is a cultural practice rather than a religious one. All the respondents demonstrate that in their religion there is no concept of demand for dowry, but the dowry practice still exists in their culture and families. On the contrary, evidence in some research shows that in the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh religions there is a concept of dowry (Srinivasan and Lee, 2004; Waheed, 2009; Jutti, in Menski, 1998).

The result of this limitation this study does not asked the question related to the "Mehr" to the Muslim respondents, which is very important to see the attitude of Muslim women towards dowry practice and also to see the difference between dowry and "Mehr" among the sample of Muslim women in sparkhill South Asian community. However, I feel that this study does work as a good in- road or foundation for further study on this topic.

This research can be extended to include the attitude and experiences of the groom and groom's family. The results of this research provide the base for further research in the area of dowry practice. A comparative study can be conducted to establish the perception of South Asian men and women on dowry practices in the UK. Secondly, it would be important to explore this practice in cross religion marriages in South Asian communities. This may provide knowledge related to the continuity of this

practice and the importance of this practice in the different religions and cultures.

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