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UNRECIPROCATED AFFINAL GIFT-GIVING IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN MARRIAGES: A SOCIO-CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF THE PERSISTENT UNILATERAL BURDEN ON BRIDE'S FAMILIES AND CALLS FOR EQUITABLE CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

In many North Indian communities, the tradition of unilateral gift-giving from the bride's family to the groom's family—often termed *laina-daina*, *shagun*, or customary presents—extends well beyond the wedding ceremony into festivals, life-cycle events, and routine occasions. This practice, rooted in hypergamous kinship structures that position bride-givers as structurally subordinate, imposes ongoing financial, emotional, and social burdens on the bride's family. Despite the ¹Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, which criminalises demands for dowry while permitting voluntary listed gifts at marriage, social expectations frequently blur the line between custom and coercion. Drawing on anthropological studies, legal frameworks, empirical data, and qualitative accounts, this paper examines the unidirectional nature of these exchanges, their socio-economic impacts, and the resentment arising from perceived inadequacies in gift “standards.” It argues that this asymmetry perpetuates gender inequality and calls for cultural shifts toward reciprocity, stronger legal enforcement, and awareness initiatives to foster equitable affinal relationships.

This persistent asymmetry is not confined to the wedding day; it permeates post-marital life through festival-specific obligations and life-cycle events such as births, thread ceremonies, and funerals. Recent empirical analyses reveal that modernization—rising male education and urban employment—has paradoxically intensified rather than diminished these expectations, as higher-status grooms command larger “gifts” in competitive marriage markets. Drawing on updated National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data showing over 15,000 dowry-related cases and more than 6,000 dowry deaths annually in recent years, alongside anthropological insights into hypergamous kinship, this paper demonstrates how unilateral affinal giving reinforces structural subordination of bride-givers. It further examines the emotional toll on bride's families, including resentment over perceived shortfalls in gift “standards,” and proposes multi-pronged interventions:

¹ THE DOWRY PROHIBITION ACT, 1961, NO. 28, ACTS OF PARLIAMENT, 1961 (INDIA), S-3(2), [HTTPS://WWW.INDIACODE.NIC.IN](https://www.indiacode.nic.in).

legal reforms emphasizing post-marriage reciprocity tracking, community-led reciprocal gift norms, and educational curricula that explicitly challenge patriarchal interpretations of kinship obligations. Ultimately, the analysis advocates for a cultural reorientation toward equitable affinal alliances aligned with constitutional principles of gender equality and dignity.

Keywords: Affinal gift exchange, hypergamy, dowry, Indian kinship, gender inequality, post-marriage obligations.

INTRODUCTION

Marriage in India is not merely a union of individuals but a complex alliance between families, deeply embedded in kinship norms, status hierarchies, and economic transactions. Among the most enduring yet contentious practices is the expectation that the bride's (girl's) family must initiate and sustain gift-giving to the groom's (boy's) family—not only during the wedding but on every major festival (e.g., Diwali, Raksha Bandhan, Teej) and life event thereafter. These gifts typically include clothing, sweets, cash (shagun or token money), jewellery, or household items, framed culturally as gestures of “respect” and goodwill. However, reciprocity is rare or minimal, creating a one-way flow that many families on the bride's side experience as burdensome and unappreciated.

This paper addresses the specific grievance raised in contemporary discourse: the girl's family is compelled to send gifts and monetary tokens irrespective of the festival's inclusive nature, often facing criticism that the items fall short of the groom's family's “standards.” Such dissatisfaction exacerbates emotional strain and financial pressure. By synthesising anthropological literature on Indian kinship, legal analyses of dowry laws, empirical studies on marriage costs, and anecdotal evidence from public forums, this research highlights the persistence of these practices in modern India. It aims to raise awareness of the underlying patriarchy and hypergamy that sustain them, proposing pathways toward mutual respect and balanced kinship obligations. The analysis is particularly relevant in an era of rising female education and economic participation, where such traditions clash with ideals of gender equity.

The grievance is particularly acute in North Indian communities where hypergamy remains the normative ideal. Families of brides report not only the initial wedding outlay but a continuous stream of festival gifts—sarees for the mother-in-law, cash shagun envelopes, jewellery sets, and household appliances—expected irrespective of the bride's own financial circumstances or the groom's family's contributions. Qualitative accounts frequently highlight criticism of “inadequate standards,” such as the quality of fabric, the denomination of currency notes (often required to end in auspicious digits), or the absence of gold coins, which publicly signals the bride-giver's diminished status. This dynamic creates a feedback loop of anxiety and financial strain, as bride's families borrow heavily or liquidate assets to maintain social face.

Contemporary discourse, amplified through social media and public forums, increasingly frames these practices as “camouflaged dowry,” where voluntary cultural gestures blur into coercive demands. Despite decades of legislative intent, the practice endures because it is embedded in deeply internalized notions of respect (izzat) and familial duty. The 2025 Supreme Court observations describing dowry as a “cross-cultural evil” disguised as gifts and social expectations underscore the judiciary's recognition that statutory prohibition alone is insufficient without societal transformation. This paper therefore moves beyond the wedding-centric focus of most dowry scholarship to interrogate the lifelong unidirectional flow of resources and its implications for gender equity in modern India. By integrating historical kinship theory, recent econometric evidence on marriage

markets, updated crime statistics, and qualitative narratives, it illuminates how these obligations perpetuate intergenerational inequality and proposes concrete pathways toward reciprocity.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Gift exchange in Indian kinship has long served as a mechanism for reinforcing social bonds, status, and obligations. In North Indian patrilineal systems, hypergamy—marrying daughters into families of equal or higher social standing—creates a structural hierarchy: bride-givers (the girl’s family) are positioned as inferior to bride-takers (the groom’s family). Anthropologists such as ²Irawati Karve and Louis Dumont have documented how this leads to unidirectional gift flows from the bride’s side, extending beyond the wedding to include births, deaths, and festivals. Gifts such as *mamere* (from maternal kin) or ritual presentations affirm the superior status of the groom’s family rather than fostering equality.

Even on the occasion of *Karva Chauth*, which is the fast kept for the husband, the burden continues to fall heavily on the bride’s family. On this auspicious day, when a young bride is celebrating the festival for the first time in her life and keeping the fast at a young age, her family is still expected to give all the clothes, jewelry, shaguns, and other gifts to the groom’s mother and everybody else. This practice is very inappropriate and unfair, as it places an additional financial and emotional load on the girl’s family precisely when their daughter is already undertaking the physical hardship of the fast for her husband’s well-being.

The unidirectional nature of affinal gifting is not uniform across India but is most entrenched in the patrilineal, hypergamous belts of the North and Northwest. Anthropological literature consistently documents how bride-givers (*kanyadan*) enter a perpetual cycle of deference. Gifts flow not only at festivals but during every rite of passage in the groom’s family—mundan ceremonies, housewarmings, or even routine visits. On *Karva Chauth*, for instance, the bride’s family is expected to send a complete “*baya*” or festive *thali*, new clothes for the entire in-law household, and *shagun*, even as the young bride undertakes her first rigorous fast. This expectation persists even when the daughter is newly married and financially dependent, reinforcing the structural inferiority of her natal family.

In contrast, South Indian isogamous or bilateral kinship systems, as documented in classic ethnographies, often feature reciprocal exchanges of similar value and symbolic weight. These regional contrasts highlight that the burden is culturally constructed rather than inevitable. Historical evolution shows that colonial codification of personal laws and post-independence emphasis on nuclear families have not dismantled the underlying hypergamous ideology; instead, they have adapted it to modern consumption patterns. Today, “modern gifts” include branded electronics, international travel vouchers, or luxury cars—items that signal status but drain resources from bride’s families who may already face educational loans or housing costs for other children.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS: HYPERGAMY, GIFT THEORY, AND POWER ASYMMETRY

² IRAWATI KARVE, *KINSHIP ORGANIZATION IN INDIA* (2D ED. 1965); LOUIS DUMONT, *HOMO HIERARCHICUS: THE CASTE SYSTEM AND ITS IMPLICATIONS* (MARK SAINSBURY TRANS., 1970).

Drawing on Marcel Mauss's theory of gift exchange as a total social fact that creates ongoing obligations, North Indian affinal gifts operate as "generalized reciprocity" skewed in favor of bride-takers. Unlike balanced reciprocity in many global contexts, the Indian variant institutionalizes asymmetry: the gift of a daughter (*kanyadan*) is ideologically priceless, yet demands perpetual material compensation to affirm the superior ritual status of the groom's lineage. Scholars such as Sylvia Vatuk and Jonathan Parry have shown how this pattern extends to conjugal affines (relations through the bride's own marriage), creating lifelong networks of obligation that bind the bride's natal kin in perpetual deference.

This framework intersects with caste and class. Upper-caste families often amplify expectations to preserve endogamous prestige, while lower-caste and Dalit communities, though historically practicing bride-price in some regions, have increasingly adopted dowry-like practices as a marker of upward mobility. The result is a pan-Indian convergence toward bride-giver burden, albeit with local inflections.

In contrast, South Indian isogamous systems often feature more reciprocal exchanges, highlighting regional variations. Post-wedding, the practice manifests as ongoing shagun or festival gifts (*sarees*, cash envelopes ending in "1" for auspiciousness, household items), symbolising continued deference. Historical roots trace to views of daughters as economic liabilities, compounded by patrilocality (bride moving to groom's home). Colonial and post-independence records show these customs evolving but persisting, often reframed as voluntary "love" or "blessings" while retaining coercive undertones.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

³The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 (amended in 1984 and 1986), defines dowry broadly as any property or valuable security given or agreed to be given directly or indirectly in connection with marriage. It prohibits giving, taking, or demanding dowry, with penalties of up to five years' imprisonment and fines. Crucially, Section 3(2) exempts voluntary presents to the bride or groom if properly listed and maintained per rules, distinguishing them from demanded dowry. However, the Act's scope explicitly includes gifts "at any time after the marriage," meaning post-wedding festival obligations can fall under scrutiny if demanded.

Recent judicial pronouncements further illuminate enforcement gaps. In 2025, the Supreme Court explicitly noted that dowry persists under the guise of "gifts" and "social expectations," directing states to integrate constitutional equality principles into school curricula and to appoint dedicated Dowry Prohibition Officers with proactive monitoring roles. The Court also called for expedited disposal of pending cases and stricter scrutiny of post-marriage demands framed as voluntary.

NCRB data for 2023 recorded a 14% rise in cases under the Dowry Prohibition Act, with 6,156 dowry deaths—averaging nearly 17 women per day. Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Rajasthan continue to report the highest numbers, indicating that legal awareness has not translated into behavioral change. Conviction rates remain low (11–17% in dowry-related violence cases), attributed to evidentiary challenges, witness hostility, and institutional apathy. Courts have repeatedly observed that families

³ THE DOWRY PROHIBITION ACT, 1961, SUPRA NOTE 1.

camouflage ongoing demands as festival gifts or “love tokens,” making prosecution difficult without clear documentation of coercion.

Section 304-B of the Indian Penal Code (dowry death) and Section 498-A (cruelty) provide crucial safeguards, yet their application in post-marriage festival contexts remains contested. Judges increasingly demand detailed gift inventories in harassment complaints, but this burdens victims further. The 2025 directives emphasize preventive measures, including pre-marriage family agreements on reciprocal obligations, signaling a shift toward proactive rather than purely punitive jurisprudence.

In practice, enforcement is weak. The Supreme Court has clarified the distinction between stridhan (the bride’s personal property) and dowry, affirming women’s ownership rights (e.g., ⁴Pratibha Rani v. Suraj Kumar, 1985). Yet, social norms often camouflage ongoing demands as “customary gifts,” evading prosecution. ⁵National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data for 2022 reported 13,479 cases under the Act and 6,450 dowry deaths, underscoring underreporting and persistence. Courts have mandated gift lists to curb false claims, but this does little to address unilateral festival giving.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACTS

Empirical studies reveal substantial burdens. A ⁶REDS-World Bank analysis (covering 1960–2008) found dowry in 95% of marriages, with net transfers from bride’s to groom’s family averaging ₹27,000 (2007 prices, ~14% of rural household income). Bride’s families often deplete savings, borrow at exorbitant rates, or sell assets years in advance. ⁷Al Jazeera reports highlight how the poorest families face debt traps, social ostracism, or marriage cancellations for non-compliance, contributing to female foeticide and skewed sex ratios.

Econometric research by Chiplunkar and Weaver (2023), analyzing over 74,000 rural marriages from 1930–1999, demonstrates that dowry prevalence doubled and real values tripled between 1930 and 1975, driven not by worsening sex ratios but by rising differentiation in groom quality due to education and non-farm employment. Modernization has thus amplified rather than eroded the institution: educated grooms from desirable occupations command premium “gifts,” turning marriage into a competitive market where bride’s families compete through larger transfers.

Post-marriage festival obligations compound these costs. Families report annual expenditures of tens of thousands of rupees on sarees, jewellery, cash, and sweets for multiple festivals, often exceeding household savings. Migration studies further reveal that dowry functions as a de facto “pension” for grooms’ parents when sons move to urban areas, with parents retaining 29–45% of gifts while brides control only about 13%. This allocation pattern exacerbates the bride’s economic vulnerability and reinforces her natal family’s ongoing liability.

⁴ PRATIBHA RANI V. SURAJ KUMAR, AIR 1985 SC 628.

⁵ NATIONAL CRIME RECORDS BUREAU, CRIME IN INDIA 2022 (2023).

⁶ REDS-WORLD BANK, DOWRY IN RURAL INDIA: EVIDENCE FROM THE RURAL ECONOMIC AND DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY (2009).

⁷ AL JAZEERA, THE FINANCIAL BURDEN OF WEDDINGS ON INDIA’S POOREST FAMILIES, JAN. 31, 2021, [HTTPS://WWW.ALJAZEERA.COM/FEATURES/2021/1/31/THE-FINANCIAL-BURDEN-OF-WEDDINGS-ON-INDIAS-POOREST-FAMILIES](https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/1/31/the-financial-burden-of-weddings-on-indias-poorest-families).

Post-marriage, festival gifts add recurring costs. Families report pressure to match or exceed expectations, with criticism of “standards” (e.g., quality of sarees, jewellery value, or cash amounts) fostering resentment. Psychologically, this creates objectification of the bride, strained in-law relations, and emotional distress for the girl’s parents, who view it as perpetual “respect” without reciprocity. Gender inequality is reinforced: daughters are seen as burdens, perpetuating son preference and limiting women’s autonomy.

Qualitative accounts from forums and media echo the user’s concern—bride’s families feel the obligation is one-sided, festival-agnostic, and met with ingratitude, straining relationships and finances.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs secondary data analysis and qualitative synthesis. Sources include anthropological works (⁸Karve, Dumont, Mayer, Lewis), empirical surveys (REDS, NFHS), legal texts and judgments, NCRB statistics, media reports (BBC, Al Jazeera), and anonymised public discourse from online platforms. No primary fieldwork was conducted; instead, thematic analysis identifies patterns of unidirectionality, burden, and resistance. Limitations include reliance on reported data (underreporting of harassment) and regional focus on North India, where the practice is most pronounced.

CONTEMPORARY TRENDS AND RESISTANCE

Urbanisation, education, and women’s workforce participation are challenging traditions. Love marriages and nuclear families sometimes reduce expectations, while campaigns like #NoToBigFatWedding and mass weddings promote simplicity. Some grooms publicly reject lavish gifts (e.g., accepting only ₹1 as shagun). Yet, in arranged marriages and conservative families, the practice endures, adapting as “modern gifts.” South-North contrasts offer models for reciprocity.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE

Cultural Education: Premarital counselling and school curricula should emphasise mutual respect and reciprocity in kinship.

Legal Strengthening: Amend rules for mandatory post-marriage gift reporting in harassment cases; awareness drives on distinguishing voluntary vs. coerced giving.

Community Initiatives: Promote “reciprocal shagun” norms and family agreements pre-marriage outlining balanced obligations.

Economic Support: Financial literacy programs for brides’ families and incentives for dowry-free marriages.

Media and Advocacy: Leverage social media to normalise criticism of one-way burdens and highlight successful equitable models.

CONCLUSION

The unilateral gift-giving tradition, while culturally framed as respect, often masks inequality and imposes unreciprocated burdens on the bride’s families. Dissatisfaction with gift standards

⁸ KINSHIP IN CENTRAL INDIA (1960); OSCAR LEWIS, VILLAGE LIFE IN NORTHERN INDIA (1958).

underscores deeper power imbalances rather than mere entitlement. As India modernises, dismantling these norms is essential for gender equity and healthier family dynamics. By fostering reciprocity and enforcing legal intent, society can transform marriage alliances from hierarchical transactions into partnerships of mutual dignity. Future research could include longitudinal surveys on evolving attitudes among urban youth.

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