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FROM GIFTS TO VIOLENCE: THE NORMALISATION OF DOWRY THROUGH HUMOUR ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS IMPACT ON CHILDREN'S ATTITUDES

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ABSTRACT

Dowry, although prohibited by the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, still remains a deep-rooted social practice in India. The culture of online humour not only reinforces its ongoing existence in the digital age, but also tradition. Dowry is often depicted on social media platforms, in memes, reels and funny posts as cars, cash, property and luxury gifts, portraying it as a sign of success, prestige or comic entertainment, rather than as an expression of gender-based discrimination and criminal activity. Such representations are at risk of normalizing an illegal behaviour, especially for children, who are increasingly exposed to digital media in their early years.

While existing legal scholarship has extensively analysed the statutory regulation of dowry and the enforcement of anti-dowry laws, comparatively little attention has been devoted to examining how humorous digital content contributes to the normalisation of dowry and influences children's attitudes towards marriage, gender roles and material expectations. This paper argues that social media humour acts as an informal mechanism of socialisation by constantly representing dowry as desirable and culturally appropriate. The study, which is guided by Social Learning Theory, media desensitisation and normative social influence, argues that the constant exposure of children to such content might gradually reduce the seriousness of dowry and thereby erode the social stigma that anti-dowry laws aim to build.

The article undertakes a doctrinal and interdisciplinary examination of the growing gap between legal prohibition and digital normalization by examining the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, constitutional principles, relevant judicial developments and current literature in the

fields of psychology and media studies. The paper concludes that criminal sanctions alone will not be sufficient to eradicate dowry. Legal reform must be accompanied by digital literacy initiatives, responsible platform governance, educational interventions and public awareness efforts that can challenge online narratives that trivialise and legitimate dowry through humour. This study seeks to contribute to the current discussion of the efficacy of anti-dowry legislation in a more networked society by positioning the issue at the confluence of law, digital culture and childhood socialisation.

Keywords: Dowry; Social Media; Humour; Memes; Children; Social Learning Theory; Digital Culture; Gender Justice; Dowry Prohibition Act; Media Psychology.

INTRODUCTION

Dowry is one of the most long-lasting social customs in India, despite it being explicitly prohibited under the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961.¹ The legislation was passed to stop the exchange of property, money or valuable security in relation to marriage. The legislation was intended to eliminate a practice that had become increasingly associated with gender inequality, coercion, domestic violence and dowry-related deaths. But more than six decades after it was passed, the persistence of dowry demonstrates that legal prohibition has not been enough in itself to end a practice that is deeply embedded in social attitudes and cultural expectations. Although the demand and acceptance of dowry is criminalised under law, the societal acceptance of the practice continues to provide legitimacy to the practice, and it persists despite statutory sanctions.

The rapid growth of social media has added a new dimension to this age-old social problem. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter have made humour one of the most potent forms of digital communication. Memes, reels, short-form videos and satire are no longer just for entertainment. They are increasingly shaping and influencing perceptions and reinforcing social norms. Humour has a strong persuasive power, as controversial ideas are generally presented in a less confrontational way, and the audience is more likely to accept the underlying message. As a result, repeated exposure to humorous portrayals of sensitive social issues may gradually influence public perceptions of what is normal, acceptable or desirable. Increasingly, in the digital world dowry is being made the subject of jokes online.

¹ The Dowry Prohibition Act, No. 28 of 1961, INDIA CODE (1961).

On social media, viral memes mocking the concept of receiving luxury cars, cash, expensive gifts or property upon getting married are widely circulated. Similarly, the humorous depiction of government employment, professional qualifications or well-paying jobs as adding to a groom's perceived 'market value' in the marriage market often belittles the commodification of marriage. Often dismissed as "just jokes," the continued spread of these ideas raises serious social concerns. Such representations, which depict dowry as a comic rather than a destructive practice, risk normalising an illegal practice as an everyday cultural expectation. The concern is not that humour causes people to demand dowry, but that repeated exposure can contribute to the normalisation of attitudes that make a practice the law wants to eliminate, seem less serious.

This concern is especially important when looking at it from a child's perspective. Children of the present digital era are exposed to social media and online content from a very young age. The constant exposure to digital stories shapes their understanding of social relationships, gender roles, and cultural expectations. Based on Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory,² people develop their attitudes and behaviours based on their own experiences, as well as by observing the actions, values, and rewards of others. Therefore, the constant viewing of humorous representation of dowry may lead the children to believe that dowry is a common practice in marriage and not an illegal one. The effect is subtle but significant. Humour can normalize ideas without endorsing them. Repetition can influence perceptions without conscious persuasion.

Digital media today shapes social practices. Legal studies, however, have primarily examined dowry through the lens of criminal law, women's rights, constitutional protections, and the enforcement of law. Much attention has been paid by scholars to legislative measures, court interpretations and the social and economic reasons for the continuing problem of dowry. However, there is comparatively little academic focus on how humour in social media adds to the normalization of dowry and affects children's views on marriage and gender roles. This gap matters because the success of law relies not only on enforcement but also on how much the community recognizes the banned actions as socially unacceptable.

This paper focuses to fill this gap by looking at the connection between law, digital sphere, psychology, and how children are socialized. The constitutional value of free speech,³ the paper suggests that we should also consider the wider social effects when such humour makes

² Albert Bandura, Social Learning Theory

³ INDIA CONST. art. 19(1)(a).

light of actions tied to gender discrimination and violence. Through a detailed study of the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, constitutional principles, psychological theories, media studies, and modern digital practices, the research looks into the growing gap between legal bans and social normalization online.

This paper cites that the end of dowry requires more than just criminal penalties and laws. Laws can regulate behaviour, but lasting social change depends on changing the attitudes and cultural stories that permit illegal practices to continue for generations. Investigating how online humour influences children's attitudes towards dowry is timely and important at a time when digital content is shaping public awareness at an unprecedented speed and reach. This study aims to contribute to the ongoing discussions on gender justice, child socialization, media responsibility and the new challenges that confront law in the digital age, by examining the ways in which digital stories influence the social acceptance of an illegal practice.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions are to be answered by the present study:

1. The spread of jokes about dowry on social media has helped normalise the practice, even though dowry is illegal in India. What are the impacts of children being exposed to dowry memes, reels and other humorous digital content, on their attitudes towards marriage, gender roles and material expectations?
2. To what extent does India's current legal framework address the cultural normalization of dowry through online humour and social media platforms?
3. What legal, educational and policy interventions are effective in preventing the trivialization and normalization of dowry among children in the digital age?

OBJECTIVES OF RESEARCH

The following are the objectives of the present study:

1. To study the representation of dowry through satirical content on social media platforms and to analyse its role in normalization of the practice
2. To assess, within the framework of existing psychological theories, the potential effects of frequent exposure to humour content related to dowry on children's views of marriage, gender roles and material expectations.

3. To critically evaluate the sufficiency and efficacy of the current Indian legal framework in tackling the digital normalisation of dowry and the issues emanating from online content.
4. To suggest legal, educational and policy measures to combat the normalisation of dowry via social media and to foster greater awareness among children and young audiences.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present research study the relationship between social media humour, normalisation of dowry and its influence on children's attitudes. The doctrinal component requires critical analysis of the legal regime governing dowry in India, including the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, relevant constitutional provisions, judicial precedents and other statutory provisions concerning dowry-related offences, women's rights and gender justice.⁴ This paper assesses the extent to which the existing legal framework addresses not only the criminalisation of dowry, but also the social realities that continue to sustain the practice.

The research problem is not of the nature that the legal analysis alone can provide a solution to it. The study is interdisciplinary and has used the knowledge of psychology, media studies, sociology, and communication studies. Drawing on Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory,⁵ theories of media desensitisation, and scholarly literature on digital culture and online humour, this paper explores how repeated exposure to humorous content may affect children's perceptions of dowry, and contribute to the normalisation of the practice.

In the entire research qualitative and analytical approach has been used to critically analyse whether humorous content shared on social media can impact children's attitudes by showing dowry as culturally acceptable instead of legally forbidden. The study does not claim a direct causal effect of online humour on future conduct, but rather investigates how repeated exposure to such content may shape perceptions, reinforce existing social norms, and develop a disconnect between the legal prohibition of dowry and its continued social acceptance in contemporary digital culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Dowry as a Socio-Legal Institution

⁴ The Dowry Prohibition Act, No. 28 of 1961, INDIA CODE (1961); INDIA CONST. arts. 14, 15 & 21.

⁵ Albert Bandura, Social Learning Theory

In Indian society, dowry occupies a somewhat unique social-legal position. It has historically evolved from being a simple matrimonial custom into a multi-faceted phenomenon. Early texts mention wedding gifts to a bride being called 'stridhan,' or property transferred to her voluntarily at marriage and meant to ensure her economic security and exclusive ownership thereafter. These were not conditions to marry nor something demanded from the groom's family. However, various developments including increased socio-economic stress, increasing commodification have converted this informal voluntary system of marital presents into one wherein money, jewellery, cars, property and other valuable assets are often coercively demanded. Thus, what once began as a device for women's economic empowerment gradually degenerated into a tool for their economic exploitation and for discrimination. The institution has been subject of critical analysis in legal, sociological, and feminist literature. It is argued that dowry is entrenched within larger systems of hierarchy, status and the cultural structure of family status in India, not simply existing as an individual matrimonial practice.

Similarly, some argue that dowry's operation reflects those cultural systems where structural Inequalities render a woman's value contingent upon the benefits that flow from her body or her symbolic position to the groom's family, thus turning marriage and woman central resources for private capitalist accumulation via informal mechanisms rather than solely by virtue of the legal or political nature of the transaction.

Thus, it is not just the 'illegal' nature of cash, jewellery, other assets provided and demanded as dowry, but also the social practice that 'legalises' dowry as well as constitutes Dowry as a social institution with deep entrenched practices, and social approval. In recognition of such increasing occurrences of dowry-related exploitation, dowry has been made illegal under the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961.⁶ The scope of law was strengthened with the introduction of new sections into criminal law dealing with cruelty to married women, dowry deaths in India.⁷

Thus, a legislative attempt was made to give effect to Indian Constitutional ideals of equality, dignity and justice for women as guaranteed under Articles 14, 15 and 21 of Indian Constitution.⁸ Court has stated that "Dowry is the last indignity to womanhood that may be inflicted with impunity on Indian society". However, law and judiciary acknowledged that

⁶ The Dowry Prohibition Act, No. 28 of 1961, INDIA CODE (1961).

⁷ Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, No. 45 of 2023, §§ 80 & 85, INDIA CODE (2023).

⁸ INDIA CONST. arts. 14, 15 & 21.

any legislative attempt can't wipe out any such deep seated practice.⁹ Even in countries like India with extensive legislation forbidding, dowry can neither be eradicated just by law enforcement and criminal legislation, nor simply as a social evil.

Further, the fact that dowry continues to remain as much embedded in social values. Dowry's persistence is attributed to informal processes wherein people deliberately obscure the exchange as "wedding gifts", "honorary gifts", "loans or gifts of affection" to avoid its categorization as "dowry" under the law; or present it as a sign of love or solidarity, or family prestige. They manage to reconcile formal prohibition with social validation. It has critically analysed the discourse in digital media on dowry culture and especially, meme-based comedy on dowry among children, thereby constituting a major gap within legal discourse on this particular phenomenon. Humour may contribute to the normalization of dowry as it normalises illegal exchange to laugh about rather than see as unacceptable.

While continuing and further exploring themes, the present research aims to add knowledge to this emerging body by developing an inter-disciplinary understanding that links law with digital media studies, psychology and the field of childhood socialisation. Specifically it seeks to understand how the popular social media practice of generating humour around dowry amongst children, impact their perception of the legality of dowry, its values associated with the marriage economy.

2. Social Media Humour and the Construction of Social Norms

The recent rise of social media has allowed humour to evolve beyond merely entertainment among social circles to a powerful tool for digital communication used to frame public opinions and influence social behaviours. Technologies like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube offer their users the ability to remix and transmit humour at a volume and speed previously unattainable. Unlike traditional media systems where messages predominantly travel from one point to many, social media platforms function with user generated content that is frequently shared, critiqued, remixed, and re-shared. In this capacity, humour on social media does not simply generate entertainment, but actively reproduces, reinforces, or even challenges prevailing social norms.

One prominent concept in humour and media studies to explain the internet's collective use of memes is derived from the biological work of Richard Dawkins¹⁰ who created the "meme"

⁹ Pawan Kumar v. State of Haryana, (1998) 3 SCC 309.

¹⁰ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* 192–201 (Oxford Univ. Press 1976).

to describe the basic units of culture through which they were transmitted among a group of people. Dawkins originally presented this theory to explain biological and evolutionary factors; yet social media researchers have developed the concept of internet memes to explain digital forms of communication.¹¹ Internet memes are no longer simply jokes or funny images, but rather participating culture, the vehicles through which societies construct, create and maintain a shared world with each other. As such, it makes clear that memes contribute to the reinforcement or subversion of social and gendered normative perceptions as it presents to a multitude of users a perceived social reality or an alternative reality.

Likewise, much humour suggests that jokes, satire and comical content have much potential for convincing audiences. They make “difficult” information approachable and can normalize problematic messages, making them seemingly non-threatening. As humour is primarily used for Entertainment: Users may not be critical of information that is primarily intended as such. As noted in the humour literature discussed above, the use of humour can be both a catalyst and maintainer of democratic ideas and values by raising issues, exposing injustices and promoting discourse around those. Conversely humour can often reinforce social norms or make problematic stereotypes palatable as some discrimination continues as the object of jokes.

How one experiences and reacts to humour varies with intentions of the humour provider and context in which the audience receives it. Within the context of the Indian digital space, marriage is among one of the most frequently depicted subjects in humorous content across numerous social media platforms. Dowry is commonly a thematic recurring feature in these forms of communication, taking shape as memes, reels and short-form videos. Luxury vehicles, expensive gifts, property and cash are often represented, both subtly and unsubtly, as mandatory and obvious components of marriage proceedings. Similar content frequently pokes fun at government jobs, respectable professions and as ways of indicating a groom’s ‘worth’ in marriage discussions.

While most of these videos and images are offered in a light-hearted spirit and presented as satirical commentary, these discussions risk belittling the seriousness of an activity that is legally proscribed by Dowry Prohibition Act 1961.¹² More importantly it is not that these single images promote illegal action but by frequent depictions of dowry related jokes it normalizes the behaviour making it more culturally acceptable and less stigma attached to

¹¹ Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (MIT Press 2014).

¹² The Dowry Prohibition Act, No. 28 of 1961, INDIA CODE (1961).

practicing it. As the literature on communication and media suggest that social perceptions of how things ought to be that is social norms – are built and reinforced through a repeated range of exposures in one's life. Law and educational systems are among several prominent institutional channels by which these ideas are conveyed, but equally important, so to do are representations found within media and culture.

The rapid proliferation of the internet has amplified this form of repetition with its sophisticated recommendation algorithms that prioritize engagement, which often favors content that aligns with, existing narratives. As a consequence, jokes related to social norms which fit with or resonate with those attitudes may often have greater visibility to a large audience. Although these algorithmic pathways do not mandate individual behaviour change, they may increase prevalence, and thus visibility, making certain messages seem normalized by repetition within digital spaces. The legal relevance of this phenomenon arises from the relationship between social and legal norms: the effective operation of laws often depends on their social acceptance. While anti-dowry laws serve important legislative goals to achieve equality and prevent gender based discrimination and violence by outlawing dowry transactions and its demand through criminalization and imposition of fine, if social perception gradually change based on repeated presentations on social media depicting dowry as an amusing tradition or the prerequisite condition for marital unions and an ordinary element of matrimonial marketization, it could undermine the social and legal stigma against the practice.

Of course as a matter of democratic values freedom of speech¹³ must be protected and this include humour. But as previously addressed in the humour literature, not all humour has same implications or benefits for a society. There are harmful forms of humour too. The present article focuses on how online humour can be viewed as one important factor through which outlawed practices gain further social validation.

3. Socialization of Children in the Digital Era

Insights from Social Learning Theory¹⁴ Socializing into Children society, it is a dynamic and ongoing process of socialization where, by experiencing the external environment, individuals progressively absorb values, beliefs, attitudes, preferences, habits and values that are dominant. Traditionally these influences would have been the home and schools, friends,

¹³ INDIA CONST. art. 19(1)(a).

¹⁴ Albert Bandura, Social Learning Theory (Prentice-Hall 1977).

local communities, media outlets etc., the modern-day is however an internet-enabled universe. This global and increasing presence of digital spaces, particularly social media platforms – act as new arenas of childhood socialize where children are exposed to notions regarding love, family relationships, gender relations, success, social status, culture at an early age, even before they are aware, ready and able to critically evaluate this information. As, children get exposed to digital environments very early, it becomes an important socialize agent which inculcates social norms into children's thought process and behavioural patterns.

Social Learning Theory One of the most extensively investigated and significant perspective on observing and learning behaviour is provided by Social Learning Theory of Albert Bandura: those individuals learn new behaviours and Attitudes not only from one experience but also from observing others 'behaviours' along with consequence of such behaviours. He proposes four processes: attention, retention, production and motivation, through which learning from others' observation takes place and such observation's affects present thinking & future's behaviour & thinking process. There does not mean every such behaviour and even such attitudes observed are will be imitated. Through continuous witnessing such repeated exposure to specific perspectives and behaviours will build schemas which make us perceive and understand society. In digital realm these "others" may range from your parents and school teachers to influencers, comedians or some anonymous other; content created by such will be visible to millions of kids every hour and every day.

Development theorists like Piaget¹⁵ (children develop through various cognitive stages, understanding the word and abstract logical ability to analyse appropriate behaviour towards others.) And Vygotsky (developmental task are mediated by society, learning takes over in and interactional context, and interaction itself plays important role in it.¹⁶ They were developed before the internet was introduced into children's lives but it's the logic applicable today also with addition of the concept of children are now more as consumers than merely passively absorbing material.

Modern Scholars continue to cite the relevance of such principles in a world where internet is everywhere and has influence the socializing of Children. For instance, media scholars argued that children were not passive consumers of the internet, instead, children now engage in digital activities like watching, sharing, liking, commenting and contributing their own on

¹⁵ Jean Piaget, *the Origins of Intelligence in Children* (Margaret Cook trans., Int'l Universities Press 1952).

¹⁶ Lev S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Harvard Univ. Press 1978).

online platforms. Such an interaction is no less a form of communication where a culture of social norms is shared, communicated and in turn reaffirmed. Furthermore, digital platforms make such interactions more reinforced through algorithms, where recommendations are made that reflect creating and enforcing greater familiarity with similar perspectives, stereotypic notions and narratives for example, love and affection associated directly with materialistic possessions.

While, it cannot say that such algorithms directly influence an individual's attitudes, beliefs or mental state; however, its continuous exposure to similar concepts significantly raises or lower the visibility of the presented messages. Role of Humour- In digital environment, one medium which often makes sensitive issue of Marriage easy to process through the way it presents the information is by using humour; making it appear harmless, socially acceptable and easy to consume with in casual context. Videos that show a woman's parents to be gifting the couple a huge brand-new car, giving jewellery, providing piles of cash or gifting houses in a wedding are often viewed as satire; however, it can shape children's attitude by making them consider some forms of marriage as "culturally known" "acceptable to norms". This paper argues that not necessarily would viewing one such image, for instance will lead an individual to adopt or expect "dowry" as stipulated under law. Instead, what I aim to focus is on this accumulation of informal cultural information, shared through memes and humorous online content which influences children's perceptions of whether marriage in reality 'justifies' some kind of transfer of goods within a context the law deems to stigmatize it.

And in the process helps maintain, if not actually legitimize, a particular idea of what marriage is; without directly necessitating a direct adoption of behaviour based on such idea, but constructing a way of seeing, relating to it. Law Consciousness of Children, the concept of law awareness means; awareness of the people of laws that govern their behaviour, their understanding of law; their attitude toward the same.. However, the law of how ordinary people use legal norms varies based on different discourses.

Therefore, in addition to law instruction from the home, schools and public institutions, such discourse is derived from media and internet as well, social values and norms, and cultural practices. If children watch continuously those types of funny jokes that suggest dowry in some circumstances "appropriate to have fun," while schooling may be preaching the equality of gender, the anti-dowry law, dignity etc. of women at large; that could confuse children about their understanding of marriage.

For example - laws are made to deter criminal activities around us and also for maintaining civil society. But the law will be effectively implemented only when there is a high degree of acceptance in society and people perceive the laws as righteous. Many scholars around the globe had analysed the relation between the legal issues around them; however relatively less work has done to analyse such relation between online humours of social media sites that depicts such unlawful social practices. Dowry and children's attitude towards it. Many psychologists and educators focus on the implications of a child's media usage for their personality development and attitudes about relationships and gender without focusing the impact that the normalisation of an unlawful practice through online media could create on children. Legal research regarding women , mostly the one that is conducted from legal perspective focus only and the legislation, judicial decision, but no one have shown sufficient insight into how children come to perceive and internalize certain 'cultural' practices related to marriage even if it goes beyond the jurisdiction the laws of our country .

In an era where increasingly, a large portion of young population obtain knowledge of our society through internet , the need of developing a framework to gauge effect of online content on youth's knowledge on such taboo and thus to bring out a meaningful intervention to support the 'Anti Dowry Law', becomes vital. The idea of law and our relation to that legal regime is constantly influenced, modified and shaped by our experience and observations about society and interactions with others. Since, the online cultural landscape has to some extend changed the very nature of these 'socializing experiences,' this paper's approach toward 'law consciousness' attempts to contribute 'something to how law can exist in lives of Children within this new globalize world.

INDIAN LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND THE ISSUE OF DIGITAL NORMALISATION

The perpetuation of dowry, in the face of decades of legislation, reveals the shortcomings of legal prohibition as the sole solution for the amelioration of entrenched social practices. As the Indian state has put in place a strong legal framework to address the prevalence of dowry in a country through statutory prohibitions, sanctions under criminal law, and constitutional protections relating to human dignity and equality, continued social norms and expectations around the provision of dowry indicate law operates within the parameters of culture, tradition, and popular perceptions. The challenge becomes in the new era as the digitally transformed social world as new spaces and sites of public consumption for the display and appropriation of culturally sanctioned traits which are ironically used as a source of comedy

and entertainment through humour. As a result, one needs to look not at legal frameworks of anti-dowry Legislation but also as the relation between law and social behaviour.

Legal framework against dowry, India has legislated against the menace of dowry with its first leg at the institution of dowry's illegality. Legislation is made in accordance to eradicate the practice through prohibiting and outlawing 'gifting,' 'taking,' and 'demanding' dowry on marriage and by criminalising such activities. To curb this, the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961¹⁷ was enacted with the intent to do away with the practice by criminalising, outlawing as gifts, the demands made under the social practice of marriage and the giving and taking of dowry. Under the Act, dowry was to be read widely in such a manner that in no form, property or valuable security given or agreed to be given directly or indirectly in relation to a marriage becomes any dowry for marriage.

It is a fact that there have been laws to prevent this practice for more than half century in India, but it has had minimal success. This problem could arise either due to inadequate legal machinery for the prevention of the crime or because the entire legal process in case of such incidences is complex for an offender and even for a complainant especially those from poor socio-economic stratum. Also it is very difficult to legally prove a dowry death/attack as, to prove a dowry case, prosecution needs concrete evidence, while to do so, the family or the close associates have to be involved in the process to provide such concrete and documented evidence.

Constitution as anti-dower framework ,The Indian Constitution, as well, provides mechanisms for tackling such age-old practices, promoting Gender Equality through Article 14: Equality before law; ¹⁸The State shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India and further, Article15(3): 'Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making any special provision for women and children,' which allow the state to provide for special provisions that shall be made to uplift or support women in any form that it thinks fit. ¹⁹Article 21: 'Protection of life and personal liberty; No person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law,' which is a broader statement about an individual's personal rights; this aspect is also reinforced through Supreme Court of India judgement in many cases

¹⁷ The Dowry Prohibition Act, No. 28 of 1961, INDIA CODE (1961); INDIA CONST. arts. 14, 15 & 21.

¹⁸ INDIA CONST. art. 14.

¹⁹ INDIA CONST. art. 15(3).

as a right to human dignity.²⁰ A legal framework,²¹ as established by the Indian state to eradicate the practices of dowry cannot be seen in isolation but within a spectrum of social behaviours and conventions existing within the existing society.

This limitation of law to not address the gradual societal behaviours in any given space would thus pose another new set of a challenge with the advent of digital realm/culture where new forms and norms are being created. Any humour or content which creates any stigma or marginalisation; needs an intervention and not criminalisation and must be contextualized by the legal fraternity/judiciary where not every digital intervention is seen to be illegal. Hence, law can play vital role but not the role of social change alone, so it needs other mechanism to work in this connection like of legal literacy, societal sensitization, and responsible content creation etc. For the successful implementation of 'The Dowry Prohibition Act' and 'The Criminal Law' against any kind of malicious use by some portion of media, 'digital space/internet can also be an avenue to bring more awareness; but simultaneously this area needs to be clearly demarcated with cautious approach so that it is not misused or to ban freedom of speech/humour.'²²

RECOMMENDATIONS

While extensive legal regulation has not succeeded in eliminating dowry, criminalizing a social convention strongly influenced by cultural values and deeply held social attitudes can only form one facet of solutions to the modern problem posed by social media normalization. Only through a combination of legal regulation, sensitization, digital governance and public discourse is it possible to combat the modern manifestations of the practice. Legal literacy and awareness programmes need to be implemented vigorously both in schools and institutions of higher learning. Students must be equipped with an understanding of legal remedies available, the reasons for social stigma associated with marriage, gender equality in terms of constitutional values and the constitutional vision of human dignity.²³

Curriculum also must cover digital and media literacy ensuring that social media humour (satire/mockery) does not morph into normalised and justified criminal act(dowry). There should be enhanced social media self-regulation, through stronger community policies that condemn glorification/trivialization of problematic social issues. This will include the

²⁰ INDIA CONST. art. 21.

²¹ Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India, (1978) 1 SCC 248.

²² INDIA CONST. art. 19(1)(a).

²³ INDIA CONST. arts. 14, 15 & 21.

education of social media users on what constitutes prohibited content and how to actively de-prioritize harmful content while empowering them to actively share socially appropriate content and engage in a digital space where norms of content must contribute to social progress. Social media firms must invest in digital literacy programmes and social awareness campaigns that push against social stereotyping of wedding rituals, against notionally linked ideas of marital status linked to material possessions and social prestige.

Such digital campaigns that can both highlight legal ramifications and offer support services for potential survivors of dowry and advocates can achieve a greater level of influence than laws currently are capable of. Future policy interventions must also recognise the link between formal legislation and its social context; legal reform must be guided by this reality. Inter disciplinary cooperation between legislators, psychologists, educators; communications experts can create more holistic and pragmatic responses.

CONCLUSION

One of India's most intractable social-legal issues, dowry, illustrates that a purely legal prohibition can scarcely dismantle practices entrenched in deeply ingrained social attitudes, cultural imperatives and the communal mindset. Despite having a solid legal apparatus to counteract dowry in the form of the Prohibition of Dowry Act, 1961,²⁴ constitutional principles of equality and dignity, and interventions of the judiciary, the continued pervasiveness of the problem signals the shortcomings of laws. The success of any reform depends equally, and indeed perhaps more, on changes to societal conditions and a modification of social attitudes as on punishment. This research discussed that how digital culture, especially humour in social media and memes-through the constant depiction of the familiar, entertaining and normalized associations between marriage and material exchanges, for example, might normalize practices such as dowry.

Although humour is often employed for criticism and commentary, its continuous humorous portrayal of the dowry might affect the mindsets of younger people and their perceptions on the prevailing normality in society. By incorporating law, media studies and developmental psychology into one coherent narrative, this study provides that children 'acquire knowledge of and attitudes towards social practice in more varied ways' than through family and education alone: "children spend ever-increasing amount of time on-line, thus digital spaces increasingly exert influence". As a consequence, the study advocates an inclusive strategy,

²⁴ The Dowry Prohibition Act, No. 28 of 1961, INDIA CODE (1961); INDIA CONST. arts. 14, 15 & 21.

including promoting legal awareness, training for digital literacy, mindful on-line discourse, and gender equal education in order to create socially normalized respect for legal rights. The greatest challenge that the legal system in our time faces today is not simply that of prohibition, but of preventing normalization of wrongful practice in the socio-digital space.

“Ultimately, the true success of the anti-dowry law will be realised not because it instils fear of legal consequences, but because society itself rejects dowry as an unacceptable practice.”