



DOWRY DEATHS

SYLLABUS:

GS 1 > Society > Role of women > Women and Child issues

REFERENCE NEWS:

- Recent reports highlight a disturbing trend of increasing dowry deaths, with several cases being reported in the last three months alone. These tragic events are often linked to the illegal practice of dowry, where women are subjected to harassment, abuse, and even death for failing to meet the dowry demands of their in-laws.
- Several recent dowry-related deaths have drawn attention: In **Aligarh (Uttar Pradesh)**, a woman was tortured with a hot iron. In **Pilibhit (Uttar Pradesh)**, a woman was burned alive due to unmet dowry demands. In **Chandigarh**, a bride died by suicide from dowry harassment. In **Ponneri (Tamil Nadu)**, a woman took her life four days after marriage, and in **Tiruppur (Tamil Nadu)**, another woman committed suicide within two months due to dowry issues.

STATS:

- According to the **National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB)**, dowry deaths averaged around **7,000 cases per year from 2017-2022**. This number reflects **only reported cases**, suggesting that the actual figure could be higher, as many cases remain unreported.
- As of 2022, nearly **3,000 dowry death cases were still under investigation**. Of these, **67% remained unresolved** for over six months.
- Out of approximately 6,500 cases sent to trial each year, **only about 100 resulted in convictions**. **Over 90% of cases remained pending** at various stages in court.
- Over 60% of dowry deaths occurred in **West Bengal, Odisha, and Bihar**, with **Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Haryana, and Rajasthan** contributing to 80% of the cases.
- Among the 19 cities for which data was available, **Delhi** accounted for 30% of the cases, the highest among all cities.

EFFORTS TO CURB DOWRY IN INDIA:

I. Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961:

The **Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961** bans the giving and receiving of dowry, with penalties for violators. Its key provisions include:

- **Definition:** Dowry is defined as any property or "valuable security" given or agreed to be given in connection with marriage.
- **Prohibition:** The Act prohibits the giving, taking, or demanding of dowry.
- **Punishment:** Violation can result in imprisonment for up to 5 years and a fine of ₹15,000 or the value of the dowry, whichever is higher.
- **Ban on Advertisements:** It prohibits advertisements offering money or property in connection with marriage.
- **Dowry Prohibition Officers:** States can appoint officers to ensure compliance with the Act.
- **Exceptions:** Presents given to a bride or groom at the time of marriage are exempted from the purview of dowry.
- In **2025, Kerala** proposed an amendment to make only the groom's family criminally liable for receiving dowry.

II. Key Provisions in the BNS Addressing Dowry-Related Offenses:

- **Dowry Death:** Previously defined under **Section 304B of the IPC**, dowry death is now addressed in **Section 80 of the BNS**. This section maintains the essential criteria: if a woman's death is caused by burns, bodily injury, or occurs under abnormal circumstances **within seven years of marriage**, and it's established that she faced cruelty or harassment related to dowry demands from her husband or his relatives prior to her death, it is classified as a dowry death. The prescribed punishment **remains a minimum of seven years' imprisonment, extendable to life imprisonment**.
- **Cruelty by Husband or Relatives:** The offense of subjecting a woman to cruelty, formerly under **Section 498A of the IPC**, is now encapsulated in **Sections 85 and 86 of the BNS**. These sections continue to criminalize any willful conduct by the husband or his relatives that drives a woman to suicide or causes **grave injury, including harassment related to dowry demands**.

III. Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005

This Act offers protection to women from all forms of violence within the family, including dowry-related abuse. Key provisions include:

- **Protection Orders:** To prevent further abuse.
- **Residence Orders:** Ensuring the woman's right to reside in the shared household.
- **Monetary Relief:** Covering medical expenses, maintenance, and loss of earnings.
- **Custody Orders:** For children, where applicable.

In **2025, Bihar** approved the creation of **390 Protection Officer posts** to strengthen the implementation of this Act.

IV. National Commission for Women (NCW)

The **National Commission for Women (NCW)** advises the government on policies affecting women, including dowry-related harassment and death. It also helps register cases related to dowry abuse.

V. Telecommunication Efforts

Several helplines and initiatives have been established to assist women facing dowry-related issues:

- **1090 – Women Power Line (Uttar Pradesh):** A 24/7 assistance helpline.
- **181 – Women Helpline:** A national helpline for support and guidance.
- **112 – Emergency Services:** A unified emergency number for police, fire, and medical assistance.

WHY DOWRY PERSISTS?

- **Camouflaged as Gifts:**
 - The **Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 exempts gifts** given during marriage from being classified as dowry.
 - This loophole is exploited to disguise dowry as "gifts." Families often demand dowry under the pretext of these gifts, making it harder to regulate and enforce the law effectively.
 - As the **National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB)** data shows, despite the law, dowry-related deaths continue to rise, demonstrating how dowry remains camouflaged in the form of gifts. In the **2017-2022 period**, more than **6,100 murders** were attributed to dowry as the primary motive annually.
- **Economic Dependence of Women:**
 - India's **Female Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR)** has risen to **41.7%** in **2023-24**, yet a vast majority of women remain **financially dependent on their husbands or families**.
 - **Economic dependence makes it difficult for women to challenge dowry demands or leave abusive marriages.**
- **Economic Disparities:**
 - NCRB data shows that over **60% of dowry deaths** occur in **states with high economic disparities** like **West Bengal, Odisha, and Bihar**, where the financial pressure is immense.
 - These disparities exacerbate dowry-related violence, highlighting the intersection between economic inequality and the persistence of dowry practices.
- **Social Constraints:**
 - Cultural and religious norms play a significant role in perpetuating dowry.
 - The caste system and religion often impose strict limitations on interfaith marriages, supporting practices such as **caste endogamy** (marriage within the same caste) and **clan exogamy** (marriage outside the clan). These constraints create a **limited pool of marriageable men**, thereby intensifying the demand for dowry.
 - For example, in **West Bengal, Odisha, and Bihar**, dowry deaths are disproportionately high, where social structures heavily enforce caste-based marriage rules.
- **Reluctance to File Cases:**
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- Many women **perceive dowry abuse as a normal part of married life** and may suffer in silence. Even those aware of their legal rights are reluctant to file complaints due to fear of **dishonor, societal backlash, and the stigma attached to it**.
- The fear of **tarnishing their family's reputation** and **the long delays in the judicial process** discourage women from seeking justice.
- According to NCRB, of the **7,000 dowry deaths** reported annually, only about **4,500** cases are charge-sheeted, and many remain stuck in the investigation stage for more than six months. In 2022, **67% of cases** were still under investigation at the end of the year, highlighting the significant delays that victims face in seeking justice.
- **Societal Contempt:**
 - Dowry is often perceived as a **status symbol in India**. Families give dowry as a **means to display social and economic status**, particularly in affluent families.
 - This mindset reinforces the **cultural normalization of dowry**, leading to increased demands.
 - For instance, in **Delhi, one of the cities with the highest number of dowry death cases**, families use dowry as a marker of their social position.
 - The deeply ingrained **patriarchal mindset** in Indian society further exacerbates the situation, with the groom's family typically receiving sympathy while the bride is blamed for seeking legal remedies.
- **Low Conviction Rate:**
 - The conviction rate for dowry-related cases is alarmingly low.
 - For instance, out of an average of **6,500 dowry death cases sent for trial annually, only about 100 result in convictions**, reflecting a systemic failure to effectively address dowry-related crimes (Source: NCRB).
- **Encouraged to Secure Property:**
 - Dowry often serves as the **bride's only share of her father's property** in India's patriarchal society, where men are reluctant to share assets with daughters. It functions as a "**property exchange**," helping men retain control over wealth.
 - **Census 2011** data shows that many families, especially in economically disadvantaged areas, believe **dowry compensates for a woman's inheritance rights**, reinforcing the practice and its transfer of wealth to the groom's side.

IMPACT OF DOWRY:

- **Death and Domestic Violence:**
 - The most visible outcome of dowry is **violence against women**. According to **NCRB data**, over **6,000 dowry-related deaths** occur annually. Women often face physical abuse, emotional cruelty, and sometimes death if they fail to meet dowry demands. In severe cases, dowry harassment leads to suicides, with women being pushed to their limits due to the pressure to fulfill dowry requirements.

- **Promotes Child Marriage:**
 - India has the highest number of **child brides** in the world, and dowry is a key factor driving this phenomenon. The **younger a girl is, the lower her dowry price** tends to be. To minimize the dowry burden, families often marry off daughters at an early age. This leads to young girls being deprived of their rights to education, health, and self-development.
- **Prevents Female Education:**
 - Dowry demand is **inversely proportional to female education**. Families often see a **girl's education as a waste of money because it is perceived that the investment will not be returned**.
 - This discourages parents from investing in their daughters' education, further entrenching gender inequality. **In rural areas, this mindset is more pervasive**, with girls often pulled out of school to meet dowry demands.
- **Perpetuates Gender Inequality:**
 - The dowry system views women as a **burden** to be passed along to their husbands' families, reinforcing the idea of women as property rather than individuals with rights. This **dehumanization** contributes to the larger societal view of women as second-class citizens, hindering their social, economic, and political empowerment.
- **Debt Trap:**
 - Dowries often force families to take out loans with steep interest rates or sell off property to meet dowry demands. This can lead to severe financial strain and long-term debt. In many cases, families are forced into debt traps, with no way out, severely affecting their economic stability and well-being.
- **'Missing Girls':**
 - Due to dowry-related preferences for male children, **sex-selective abortions** and neglect of the girl child have become widespread. Dowry systems exacerbate the desire for boys, as they are seen as financial assets.
 - This cultural preference for male children results in skewed sex ratios, particularly in states like **Bihar** and **Uttar Pradesh**, where dowry is prevalent, and **sex-selective abortions** are common.
 - **One in three girls missing globally due to sex selection is from India** — 46 million out of the total 142 million, according to the UNFPA's State of the World Population 2020.
- **Loss of Human Resource:**
 - The dowry system **discourages women from working outside the home or participating in the labor force**. Since dowry reinforces the idea that a woman is taken care of by her husband's family, it leads to a **loss of valuable human resources**. Women are kept away from earning and contributing to the economy, which negatively impacts national growth and development.
- **Loss of Property Rights:**
 - Dowry is often viewed as the bride's share in property, even though her legal share would be much greater. This mindset leads to **systematic disenfranchisement of women** when it comes to inheritance, as men in the bride's family retain control over assets. As a result, many women are
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deprived of their rightful inheritance, which perpetuates economic dependency and inequality.

WAY FORWARD:

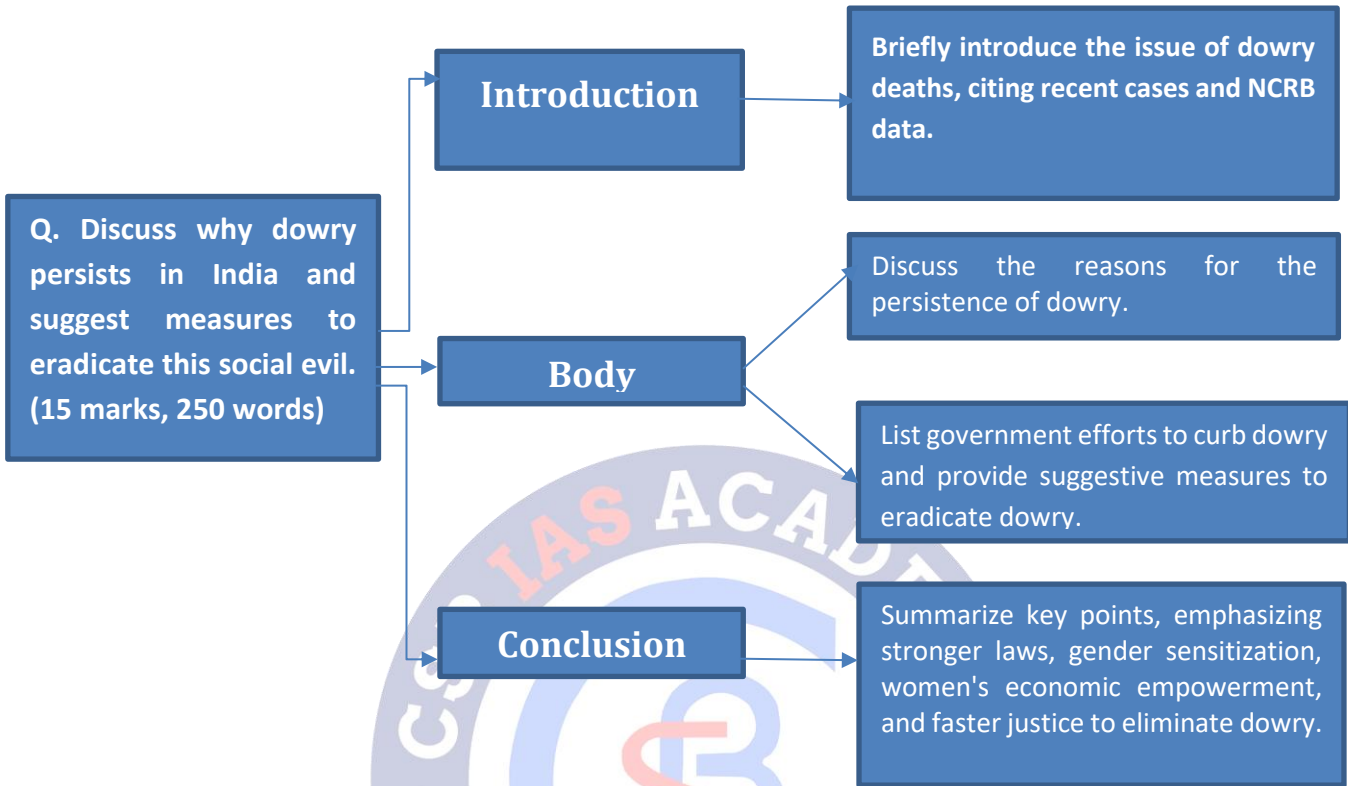
- **Behavioral Change:**
 - Long-term strategies are crucial for driving **gender sensitization** and creating equal opportunities for women within the family and society. Empowerment programs should focus on achieving **democracy in domestic relationships**, where both partners have equal rights, and the oppressive mindset surrounding dowry is eradicated.
- **Social Awareness:**
 - Effective **awareness campaigns** should begin in schools, targeting young minds to spread knowledge about the **legal provisions against dowry**. Such initiatives should reach even the deepest strata of society to combat the normalization of dowry and ensure that future generations do not perpetuate these harmful practices.
- **Education and Self-dependence of Women:**
 - Ensuring **quality education** and providing avenues for **self-reliance** for women will enable them to challenge dowry demands and address their marginalization. By investing in women's education and economic independence, society can reduce the reliance on dowry and improve women's social standing.
- **Judicial Changes:**
 - The existing legal provisions should be reviewed to acknowledge the **changing nature of dowries** and the complexities surrounding them. Additionally, the judiciary must focus on **expediting the delivery of justice** in dowry-related cases to ensure victims receive timely relief.
- **Community Participation:**
 - Community-driven measures are vital to address the **misogynistic culture** that perpetuates dowry. **Mass media campaigns** and community outreach programs can help break the cycle of dowry abuse by encouraging collective action and public awareness on the issue.
- **Capacity Building:**
 - Training **law enforcement agencies**, social service institutions, and other relevant bodies to effectively handle dowry-related violence is essential. Building **support systems for survivors**, such as more **swadhar homes**, medical facilities, and skill-training programs, is crucial to empowering women and ensuring they have the resources to rebuild their lives.

CONCLUSION:

- Dowry remains a deeply entrenched social issue in India, perpetuating violence, economic disparity, and gender inequality. Despite legal frameworks and efforts to combat it, the persistence of cultural norms, economic dependence, and societal pressures continue to fuel the practice. Addressing this requires a multi-faceted approach, including legal reforms, social awareness, economic empowerment for women, and community-driven initiatives.

Q. Discuss why dowry persists in India and suggest measures to eradicate this social evil. (15 marks, 250 words)

APPROACH:



MODEL ANSWER:

Recent reports highlight a disturbing rise in dowry deaths in India, with cases of torture, harassment, and suicides, particularly in **Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Chandigarh**. According to the **National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB)**, dowry deaths averaged around **7,000 cases annually** from **2017-2022**. **West Bengal, Odisha, and Bihar** account for over **60%** of these deaths. Despite legal frameworks, dowry continues to be a prevalent issue in India, leading to violence, economic disparity, and gender inequality.

Reasons for the Persistence of Dowry:

- 1. Cultural and Social Norms:** Dowry is deeply embedded in Indian culture as a status symbol, especially in affluent families. It is viewed as an essential component of marriage, with families feeling the pressure to maintain their social position.
- 2. Economic Dependence on Families:** With **41.7%** of women participating in the labor force (2023-24), a vast majority remain financially dependent on their families. This dependence restricts their ability to challenge dowry demands or escape abusive marriages.
- 3. Legal Loopholes and Ineffective Enforcement:** Despite the **Dowry Prohibition Act**, dowry is often disguised as "gifts," making it harder to regulate. **NCRB data** reveals that over **90% of dowry-related cases** remain unresolved due to legal loopholes and poor enforcement.

4. **Social and Religious Constraints:** The caste system and religious norms limit marriage choices, creating a narrow pool of marriageable men. This leads to higher dowry demands as families compete to marry off their daughters within these constraints.
5. **Reluctance to Report Abuse:** Many women view dowry abuse as part of their married life. Fear of dishonor, societal backlash, and long judicial delays discourage them from filing complaints, allowing dowry practices to persist.
6. **Patriarchal Mindset:** Dowry reinforces the patriarchal view of women as burdens to be passed along with financial compensation, perpetuating their subjugation and inequality within families and society.

Government Efforts to Curb Dowry:

- **Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961**
- **Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS)**
- **Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005**
- **National Commission for Women (NCW):** Advises the government on women's issues and addresses dowry-related harassment and death, helping register cases.
- **Telecommunication Efforts:** Launch of **helplines** like **1090 (Women Power Line)** and **181 (National Women Helpline)**, which offer 24/7 assistance for dowry-related issues.

Suggestive Measures to Eradicate Dowry:

1. **Stricter Enforcement of Dowry Laws:** The **Dowry Prohibition Act** should be strengthened to close legal loopholes, and **Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS)** provisions should be rigorously implemented to punish dowry deaths and related cruelty more effectively.
2. **Gender Sensitization Programs:** Government-led campaigns and **gender sensitization** programs must be introduced in schools, communities, and workplaces to change societal perceptions about dowry and promote equality in domestic relationships.
3. **Economic Empowerment of Women:** Increasing **women's participation in the labor force** through education, skills training, and employment opportunities will reduce financial dependence, making it easier for women to challenge dowry demands.
4. **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Awareness initiatives, especially targeting rural areas, should educate communities about the harms of dowry, the legal consequences, and the importance of women's empowerment.

5. **Judicial Reforms for Swift Justice:** **Judicial reforms** are essential to ensure faster resolution of dowry-related cases. Courts should prioritize these cases and ensure the timely delivery of justice.
6. **Community Engagement and Support Systems:** Establishing more **swadhar homes, helplines**, and support systems for dowry victims can help survivors rebuild their lives. Community-driven initiatives should work towards eliminating the patriarchal mindset and support women in distress.

In conclusion, dowry persists in India due to a combination of cultural, social, and economic factors. While legal frameworks like the **Dowry Prohibition Act** and **BNS** are in place, they need stronger enforcement and widespread societal awareness to combat the practice. A holistic approach focusing on **gender equality, economic empowerment, gender sensitization**, and **swift judicial action** will be crucial to eradicating dowry and creating a society where women are treated as equals.

