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**Patriarchal investments: Marriage,  
dowry and economic change in rural  
Bangladesh**

Sarah C. White

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# **PATRIARCHAL INVESTMENTS: MARRIAGE, DOWRY AND ECONOMIC CHANGE IN RURAL BANGLADESH**

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*Sarah C. White, University of Bath*

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**January, 2013**

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Series Editor: Susan Johnson

Website: <http://www.bath.ac.uk/cds/bpidw>

Email: [s.z.johnson@bath.ac.uk](mailto:s.z.johnson@bath.ac.uk)

# **Patriarchal Investments: Marriage, Dowry and Economic Change in Rural Bangladesh**

**Sarah C. White**

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# **Patriarchal Investments: Marriage, Dowry and Economic Change in Rural Bangladesh**

**Sarah C. White**

## **Abstract**

Contemporary studies of marriage around the world note increased emphasis on 'choice' and 'conjuality'. In South Asia, such discussions have largely displaced an earlier focus on 'dowry' and its implications for the gendered vulnerability of women. This paper argues that considering together discourses of affinity and practices of dowry adds significantly to understanding of the complex inter-relations of social and economic change. Drawing on data from rural Bangladesh, it emphasises the materiality of marriage, its centrality to family advancement strategies and ongoing commitment to the governing idioms of masculine provision and protection. Against conventional views that dowry compensates for a perceived weakness in *women's* contribution, the paper argues that it functions to bolster *men's*. The contradictory faces of marriage as dowry or conjuality in South Asia may cast light on the broader political and economic transformations in which they arise.

## 1 Introduction

It has long been recognised that economic modernisation is associated with changes in family and household structures and the ways that personal identity is construed (see e.g. Engels, 1884; Stone, 1990; Carsten, 2004). In accordance with this, contemporary studies across the world identify apparently similar tendencies towards more nucleated household structures; growing stress on individual agency and personal choice in narratives of how marriages occur; and greater emphasis on and expectations of the conjugal relationship (e.g. see Hirsch and Wardlow, 2006; Abu Lughod, 1990 for Egypt; Cole and Thomas, 2009 for Africa; Giddens, 1992 for UK; Kendall, 1996 for Korea; Collier, 1997 for Spain; Illouz, 1997 for USA; Ahearn, 2001 for Nepal; Osella and Osella, 2000 for India). Interpretations vary as to how radical these changes really are, and whether they represent liberation for women or enrolment in 'new structures of domination' (Abu Lughod, 1990: 52). As seen below, these issues have been quite extensively discussed in South Asia and especially in India. What is unusual in the case of South Asia, however, is that this relatively upbeat, agency focused literature on affinity exists in parallel to a shadow-side literature on dowry which stresses immiserisation, coercive demand, and many forms of violence against women.

Conventional modernist scripts would tend to explain this duality in terms of a tension between modern trends towards increased agency and conjugality and inertia in relinquishing traditions of dowry. However, the rapid expansion and inflation of dowry gifting is, in fact, itself associated with modernisation. Traditionally, dowry was practised only amongst high caste Hindus, but it is now virtually universal in much of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, across all communities and social groups. Provocatively termed as 'bridegroom-price' by Caplan (1984), the contemporary form of dowry is distinctive in the high levels of payment involved, the fact that the amount to be given is integral to marriage negotiations, and the fact that the transfer goes directly to the groom or his family. While the picture varies somewhat by geography and community, it is clear that this is largely a post-colonial phenomenon, emergent in the 1950s and 1960s but gathering pace since the 1970s and 1980s. Consumer goods transferred symbolise modern masculinity, with the motorbike as emblematic example (Lindenbaum, 1981). Materially, dowries have become increasingly central to young men's ability to establish themselves in the modern economy, providing capital for business or the cash or connections required for career advancement (Banerjee, 2002; Tenhunen, 2007; Rosario, 2009).

This paper discusses developments in marriage in rural Bangladesh against the background of these apparently contradictory trends. At its most straightforward, it reviews the evidence on changing patterns of marriage in South Asia and explores the extent to which similar tendencies are shown in rural Bangladesh. More ambitiously, the paper asks what bringing together discussions of marriage and dowry may add to understanding of the complex inter-relations of social and economic change.

The materials for this paper is derived a field research that was conducted in 2006 in two villages, one in North-West Bangladesh (Dinajpur district) and the other from a more central area (Manikganj district). The locations were chosen as part of a much larger study of 1500 households, which sought to explore differences in levels of wellbeing across six rural and urban sites (see [www.welldev.org.uk](http://www.welldev.org.uk)). This larger project provided important background material on



the two villages, and also meant that the research team was already familiar to local people. However, the small numbers involved in the sub-project reported here make it dubious to generalise about differences by site. I, therefore, differentiate respondents by religion, economic status, gender and age, but not by location.<sup>1</sup> The sub-project involved individual interviews with 70 respondents and 16 focus group discussions. Of the 70 respondents, 58 were from couples in which husband and wife were interviewed separately; ten were elderly people who provided individual life histories; and two were focused on religion and family life. I drew up checklists of key issues, which the local researchers used in conducting a first round of interviews. They produced transcripts in Bengali and English, which they sent to me, and gave some reflections on the initial analysis I produced. We then met as a research team to discuss these and I produced a further checklist for a second round of interviews. While most people were interviewed once, twenty of the couple informants were re-visited with the more targeted set of questions.

## 2 Marriage in South Asia

Giddens (1992) sets the global frame for studies of marriage and modernity. He talks of the 'pure relationship' of late modernity, in which the old compulsions to stay together because of economic dependence or fear of scandal are no more. The purity he talks of is pure utility, where the only binding is the mutual satisfaction of the partners involved, based on their mutual self-disclosure. When partners are no longer getting what they seek, the relationship can be dissolved and new more fruitful partnerships formed. While this essentially transactional view of relationships might seem best fitted to a market analogy, Giddens himself prefers a political image, describing this as presaging the 'democratisation of the personal life'. As Jamieson (1999) states, this is an extraordinarily optimistic and individualistic vision, in which the structures of (in particular) gender inequality are eclipsed by the power of agency to make and re-make 'the reflexive project of the self' (Giddens, 1991: 5). Craib (1994: 119) claims more starkly that this notion of an all-powerful self that can create itself is illusory, part of the myth of our times: "As individuals become increasingly powerless, we develop an ideology of self-control and self-creation" (Craib, 1998: 107).

While none of the anthropological writers on marriage comes near to endorsing Giddens' picture of the 'pure relationship', they all do remark some shifts in discourse and practice, and in most cases, towards a greater stress on the agency of young people and expectations of marital intimacy. However, for communities that have historically been marginal in some way, changing practices may mean less room for manoeuvre for young people rather than more. Kapila (2004: 382) describes how the Gaddis, a pastoral people in Himachal Pradesh (North India), are indeed increasingly stressing conjugality, but that this means more restrictions on sexual expression, especially for women. The changes, in part, reflect state legislation, and in part social aspirations, which involve becoming more mainstream, more middle class, and more Hindu. Parry (2001) makes some similar observations of industrial workers in Chhattisgarh. While he believes that there is nothing new in hopes of intimacy in marriage, especially amongst women, what seems to him to have changed is that amongst the better off working class, these have moved from an alternative to an authorised discourse, to which men also increasingly subscribe (Ibid: 816). Marriages for this group of workers seem more stable than in the past, with less scope for the secondary relationships in which both men and women historically enjoyed

considerable flexibility. The stress on romance does not then lead to Giddens' pure pragmatism, but to a belief in the 'indissolubility of young love' (Ibid: 817).

This point of Parry's is very important, because it shows how different are modern Indian myths of marriage as 'once for all' romance, to the mix of idealism and utility that Giddens puts forward. Abeyasekera (forthcoming) reinforces Parry's comment, in her observation that while middle class young people in Sri Lanka are encouraged to find their own marriage partner, there is great pressure on them to 'choose right', first time and swiftly, as especially girls' reputations will suffer if they are seen to have 'got friendly' with more than one boy. Marriage videos constructed on a motif of Bollywood romance are laced with implications of sexual interest between the couple that would have been unthinkable a generation ago. This may indeed appear a kind of liberation where young people's sexual behaviour – after as well as before marriage – has historically been significantly controlled by the older generation (e.g. Fuller and Narasimhan, 2008). It is, however, at least as deeply inscribed with gender difference as the earlier models of proper relationship, and very far indeed from any feminist-inspired vision of gender equality. It is also important to recognize, as the 'offstage' songs and stories reported by Raheja and Gold (1994) attest, that Indian women's sexual awareness and expression are not new creations of the Bollywood age. What has changed is that they may now be more openly displayed, if generally in somewhat coy form. In both cases, of course, as Abu Lughod (1988) argues in her study of women's songs and poetry in Bedouin society, these are cultural productions, not simple revelations of women's 'true feelings'. And the stage on which they are produced significantly shapes the form that they take. The frank vulgarity of village women's everyday joking in India and Bangladesh as well as some of the songs and stories that Raheja and Gold (1994) present is very different from the authorized, sanitised desiring for one's true love depicted in the wedding video.

The most striking challenge to marriage as 'pure relationship' in South Asia, however, is its importance to family strategies for class and/or caste advancement. Changing norms of marriage arrangement, which occupy a pivotal place in this literature, clearly exemplify this. Ahearn (2001) analyses love letters in Nepal, and she considers how literacy combines with changing discourses of development and nationalism to give young people new notions of agency, including in love. This is, nonetheless, still cast in patriarchal terms, in which young women's consent must be wrested from them, but as Ahearn says, at least their consent is required (Ibid: 250). Many authors contest the opposition of 'love marriage' and 'arranged marriage' pointing instead to similarities or hybrid forms between them. Donner (2002) is one of these, writing of middle class Bengali households in Calcutta. She stresses that marriages of all kinds are major sources of anxiety (Ibid: 85) and that whatever their forms are, 'the perfect match never seems to materialise' (Ibid: 94). Most women, she says, consider the best way of managing love marriages is by treating them as arranged marriages. This is only a problem if the match crosses the accepted rules of appropriate partnering (Ibid: 88).

Grover (2009) is an exception in this predominantly middle class literature, as she researched people living in slums in Delhi. Inverting the conventional wisdom, she finds that for this population, the lack of kin support amongst people who have made love marriages actually makes their marriages more stable. Where marriages are arranged in the neighbourhood, women can easily take refuge with their natal families if things get tough and so may never develop a strong presence in their marital household. If nearby, the woman's natal family is also

more likely to get involved if there are disputes in the marital family, which can mean the difficulties escalate (Grover, 2009).<sup>ii</sup> Caplan (1998) discusses Anglo-Indians who have historically been identified by themselves and others as choosing their own marriage partners. Even so, he states, it was important that the match be suitable, and pre-nuptial contact to be supervised by elders (Ibid: 22). Indeed, the involvement of elders in marriage arrangement may be becoming greater, he believes, due to a combination of dependence on elders' networks with Diaspora settlement and the financial pressures of the 'competitive wedding scene' (Ibid: 24).

In the case of South Indian Tamil Brahmins, Fuller and Narasimhan (2008) similarly find that companionate marriage is the 'modern ideal', and that this includes emotional satisfaction. However, they point out that this is very different from 'love marriage' as it involves collaboration between parents and children and a strong belief that 'matching' of backgrounds – including ideally caste endogamy – is most likely to produce marital happiness. The result, they emphasise, is very important in the reproduction not only of caste, but also of the (still largely upper caste) middle-class (Ibid: 752). The significance of marriage to caste and class relations is also a central theme for the Osellas' study of the low caste Hindu Izhava community in Kerala (Osella and Osella, 2000). Large dowries and elaborate wedding celebrations provide a means of both demonstrating and achieving the status to which they aspire. In a later publication, Osella (2012) note the changing form of weddings from the couple as bearers of a ritual into a 'filmi' spectacle or show (see also Kendall, 1996 on Korea, and Abeyasekera, forthcoming on Sri Lanka).<sup>iii</sup> Unusually, in this set of literature, the Osellas also draw attention to the ways that the new emphasis on romance and conjugal relationships is crowding out established patterns of same-sex sociality and queer sexualities.

### 3 Dowry in South Asia

Where dowry appears in the marriage literature, it tends to be represented in relatively positive and voluntaristic terms. Osella and Osella (2000: 97), for example, describe poor families as marrying with minimal dowry, but large amounts being given willingly by those with high aspirations in a 'fierce hypergamous marriage market in which opportunities to display and augment prestige are maximised'. Amongst middle-class and elite families in Bangladesh as elsewhere in South Asia, gifting at marriage is seen as the willing demonstration of love for one's daughter.

Representation of dowry in the poverty and gender literature, by contrast, tends to be much more negative. There are three main aspects to this. The first aspect is its ruinous impact on household economic status of having many daughters. Davis (2007: 3) notes that dowry was rated first amongst causes of household economic decline by 116 focus groups across 11 districts in Bangladesh in 2006, including 62% of poor female and 55% of poor male groups. Tomalin (2009: 2) states that the economic pressure of dowries has exacerbated tendencies to son preference and resulted in a 'well documented' impact on adverse sex ratios in many regions of India, due to sex selective abortion and female infanticide. A second aspect is the representation of dowry as an unfree exchange, as brides' families are forced to give more than they can afford or face their daughter remaining unmarried as they compete with other families to 'buy' a groom (Rozario, 2009). In Bangladesh, dowries are thus commonly referred to by the English term, *demand*. Third is the strong association of dowry with violence, that women may

be threatened or beaten either when their parents have failed to pay what they promised, or as a means to extort more money after marriage, leading in the worst cases to 'dowry deaths'.

Identification of dowry as a social evil has led to both legislation and social activism. Dowry was first outlawed in India in 1961 and then in Bangladesh in 1980. In neither case was the ban effective. From the 1980s, publicity surrounding 'dowry deaths' and other forms of violence against women led to demands by feminists in India for a 'dowry boycott' (Kishwar and Five Others, 2005 [1980]) and for new legislation to strengthen protection for women against dowry-linked abuse. Subsequent amendments to the Dowry Act in India have hardened its provisions, to the point that the Law Commission has suggested that new amendments are now required to protect grooms' families against abuse (*Times of India*, 2012: June 16). A similar shift is evident in the academic literature. More recent commentators want to problematise the widespread identification of dowry with 'dowry deaths' and 'bride burning,' (see e.g., Tomalin, 2009; Wyatt, 2010). Wyatt (2010) describes how closer investigation of 'dowry deaths' reveals that there are often much more complex stories of unhappy marriages behind them. Tomalin (2009) argues both that there are other bases of gender violence than dowry, and that dowry is not necessarily associated with violence.

Attempts to explain the rise of 'demand dowry' seek to ground the social in the material. Its early identification as women's 'pre-mortem inheritance' (Goody and Tambiah, 1973) has been rejected, both on the grounds that it goes to the groom not the bride and that it constitutes in many cases a far larger amount than could be expected as share in ancestral property (Osella and Osella, 2000: 100). The 'economic compensation theory' takes various forms. At its simplest, it holds that the groom's family needs to be compensated for taking on an unproductive member. This sits rather uneasily with the fact that, at least in poorer households, the need for women's household work is one of the main factors motivating grooms' households to seek a new bride (Grover, 2009). More sophisticated versions suggest that the economic value of women's work is falling relative to men's; or that the need for cash income makes households newly dependent on male earning capacity (Sharma, 1984). Other theories look to population. A simpler version holds that the population growth rate combined with the fact that brides are generally several years younger than grooms means that there will always be more girls seeking a smaller absolute number of boys (Rozario, 2009). If this were correct, one might expect that dowry competition would have eased in recent years, as the rate of population growth has fallen sharply. A more nuanced version links this to modernisation, holding that it is the relative scarcity of grooms with the desirable quality of salaried employment, which engenders competition (Lindenbaum, 1981).

Whether the explanations look to economics or population they seem to share two fundamental assumptions. The first is the attempt to derive price (the dowry) from some notion of real value, rather than seeing notions of relative value as themselves socially determined. The second is that 'dowry gifting' is seen as the response to some kind of deficit (economic or numerical) on the women's side and advantage on the men's. Evidence presented later in the paper on dowry practice in Bangladesh suggests that both of these need reconsideration.

The widespread practice of dowry reinforces the evidence reviewed above that there remains strong parental involvement in the arrangement of marriages in South Asia. For the parents of daughters the threat of economic ruin can make love marriages appear in a more positive light,

as the only chance to escape paying a hefty dowry. Overwhelmingly, however, dowry gifting indicates that marriage in South Asia is not predominantly about the romance of young love, but a structural alliance between two families. It also shifts the emphasis from the social or emotional strongly onto the economic. The issue of agency is similarly re-focused. Whereas the marriage literature tends to be concerned with shifts between the generations, dowries bring gender into much sharper focus. Primarily, however, this is not about power relations between husband and wife directly, but between the families of grooms and the families of brides, in which the young people are presented as allied with their natal family's interests, rather than with one another.

#### **4 Marriage and the order of things in Bangladesh**

Marriage in Bangladesh is governed by a mixture of religion, state, community and family. Formerly known as East Bengal (till 1948) and then East Pakistan (till 1971), the majority of Bangladeshi people are Bengali by ethnicity (98%) and Muslim by religion (90%). Over the past thirty years, Bangladesh has seen a rapid and accelerating rate of exposure to and integration within and outside forces, or globalised development.<sup>iv</sup> This takes material form in new roads, new businesses, new schools and offices, increased traffic of people and goods, more electrification, more sanitation, more media and communication. Fertility rates have declined sharply, from an average of 6.3 births per woman in the late 1970s to 2.7 in 2007 (NIPORT *et al.*, 2009). Literacy rate has increased, from 23.8% in 1981 to 43% in 2000 (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2002). Girls' education has risen particularly rapidly, with female literacy of 16% in 1981 rising to 39% in 2001 (*Ibid*). From a historically very low base, women's economic activity has grown markedly, with the mushrooming of garment factories in the urban areas and micro-credit schemes in the rural. These material changes are accompanied by a proliferation of discourse about how the world is and should be as people seek to make sense of the changes they are experiencing. Conservative nostalgic discourses jostle with those of liberal development; folk Bengali oral traditions contend with the injunctions of self-consciously textual reformist Islam. Marriage is at the centre of such debates, as a critical focus both of gender and generational relations and of the significant transfer of resources.

Marriage in Bangladesh is virilocal and kinship patrilineal. The culturally approved model is for a bride to join the household of her father-in-law, and this is still what happens for at least a period in most cases.<sup>v</sup> Overall, the proportion of nuclear family households has increased, but less rapidly than the expectations of many villagers and scholars. Village studies show percentages of nuclear households in the low 50s in the 1960s and 1970s to the low 60s at present.<sup>vi</sup> Polygyny is allowed amongst Muslims but it is relatively uncommon, being seen as both economically and socially undesirable.<sup>vii</sup> There was only one case in our sub-sample of 58 marriages and only 16 (1%) in the wider survey of 1500 households.<sup>viii</sup> Divorce is much more common amongst Muslims than Hindus, with village studies recording rates between 15 and 30 percent. Hindu widows are not allowed to re-marry. (Young) Muslim widows and divorcees may re-marry, but do so on very unfavourable terms – often as second wife or to a much poorer and/or older man.

The influence of the state is uneven. From low levels of formal registration historically, Shehabuddin (2008: 83) found that 72% of informants' marriages were registered.<sup>ix</sup> Despite laws

prohibiting child marriage, UNICEF reports around one third of Bangladeshi women aged 20–24 were married by the age of 15 (UNICEF 2011: 33). Our research found age of marriage was rising in both locations, but some people noted contradictory pressures to marry girls younger. These derive on the one hand from fears that higher dowries will have to be given for older girls; and on the other from a sense that society is becoming increasingly lawless, jeopardising their daughters' honour.

In our Dinajpur study village, which was near the administrative centre, marriage disputes were frequently brought to local government (*union parishad*) for adjudication, but in most villages they are still mainly heard by the customary gathering of (male) village elders (*shalish*). Issues of dowry, maintenance, sexual misdemeanours and domestic violence constitute around half of all disputes that go before the *shalish* (Siddiqi, 2004: 58). Unlike a court of law, the people Siddiqi spoke to saw the primary orientation of the *shalish* as to restore harmony and secure reconciliation (Ibid: 50). The power they wield is grounded in the dominance of wealth, age and gender, and the settlements that they deliver reflect this.

The idiom of guardianship dominates both family and community, and these are closely intertwined.<sup>x</sup> Members of the *shalish* are guardians of the community, as the husband and father is the guardian of the home. Like Hindu women in India, women in Bangladesh should always be under male guardianship, of their fathers in childhood, their husbands (and fathers-in-law) in marriage, and their sons in widowhood. The guardian is responsible *to* his wife and children for provision and protection. A guardian is also responsible *for* his wife and children to the social and religious community (*somaj*). This entails rights to discipline through violence. If they misbehave, he will be held at least partly to blame: his honour, and the honour of their lineage, depends on their compliance. In Bangladesh, therefore, marriage is not only concerned with individuals, or even couples or families. It is a core social institution, which both materialises and symbolises the underlying moral order, which configures people being in the right position and living in right relationship with one another, each following his or her proper path in life.<sup>xi</sup>

#### 4.1 Affinity, conjugality and choice

Confirming the broader pattern in South Asia, there is clear evidence in rural Bangladesh of shifts in the norms governing the arrangement of marriage. While marriages should still be arranged through family negotiations, pre-marital relationships are becoming increasingly common, and considerably more open, than they were thirty years ago. This is particularly evident in towns and university campuses, where young unmarried couples can be seen openly sitting or walking together. Such inappropriate mixing, especially in educational contexts, transgressing class or religious boundaries, was the stuff of scandalous stories in our research villages.<sup>xii</sup> In fact, the only case of 'love marriage' in our sample was well matched in terms of class, religion and education.<sup>xiii</sup> The couple tried to get their families to agree to the marriage, and only when this was refused did they decide to elope. Even then, they worked hard thereafter to re-build relationships, and were eventually accepted into the man's parents' house six years later.

In general, young people conducting pre-marital relationships still had to keep them hidden, with girls seen as 'spoiled' if it became known. In our focus groups especially, 'love marriages' based on sexual attraction rather than parental wisdom were evoked as figures of disorder

incarnate. This reflects conflicting ideas about sexuality. On the one hand, sexual compatibility is an important part of the force of attraction that people value in a marriage. On the other hand, sexual attraction and the 'love' that it evokes is seen as treacherous, short-lived, and non-dependable, putting girls in particular in positions of great vulnerability. Instead of instantiating the moral order, marriage on such grounds constitutes a threat to it: a decline in family authority; the basis of inappropriate alliances; and resulting in households adrift, without the social support they will need to sustain them.

More common than open challenge are moves to accommodate new patterns of relationship within existing idioms. The norm has shifted to involving greater consultation with the couple themselves, backed up by a legal requirement that the girl's consent should be given. There is also some evidence of young people deciding whom they want to marry, and then getting their parents to arrange it. There are several reasons that parents may be only too happy to accept their children's increased involvement. As mentioned above, many parents perceive a love marriage as their main chance of avoiding having to pay for a dowry. Parents also say that since marriages are now happening when the couple are more mature, and especially when they are educated, then they have more of a right to a say. Finally, parents also express the fear that if things go wrong in the marriage, they will bear all the blame. To involve the couple themselves in the choice offers some protection against this. Again, it is important not to exaggerate the change. There are cases amongst the grandparents of marriage based on the couple's desire, as well as cases of very minimal contact amongst the young.

Confirming the wider patterns noted above, we found that people talked openly about the importance of intimacy in marriage, in terms of a force of attraction (*moner tan*) or like-mindedness (*moner mil*) between husband and wife. Women especially spoke of how their husbands were everything to them, and widows about the pain and loss of colour in life when their husbands died. While material sufficiency was valued, the quality of the marital relationship was also crucial. A poor Muslim widow, Anjumon Bewa, states this clearly:

*In a good marriage, there is no fighting, no arguing between husband and wife and they don't lack anything they need. Someone who can provide wealth, but no peace is not a good husband.*

A middle income Hindu woman, Shanti, puts this more positively:

*If your husband is good you can be happy even living in the forest!*

Aside from this, people spoke of understanding without need for words, being able to say to one's spouse what you couldn't say to anyone else, thoughtfulness about what the other might like, bringing gifts and food, looking out for each other, care shown by the other to one's parents or children, or of the spouse as a treasure which cannot be replaced. References to mutual support and commitment, indexed by the pairs of terms, good and bad, advantage and problem; security and danger (*bhalo/mondo; subidha/osubidha; apod/bipod*) are common. An elderly middle income Muslim man, Aynuddin Serkar, sums it up simply:

*I am there in her bad times, she is there in mine, we live side by side [tar bipode ami, amar bipode se thake, pasapasi thaki].*

Such statements seem compatible with the wider literature, which finds a growing emphasis on the marriage relationship. However, without similar data reported in previous studies it is hard to be sure of how much this represents a real change, or simply that attention is now being paid where formerly such comments would be overlooked. It is notable that many of the ways people talk about intimacy are still embodied in the material provision of resources or care, rather than abstracted in purely emotional terms. Also, from previous fieldwork in 1985-6 I feel doubtful that the substance here is new - marital intimacy then also seemed critical to people's sense of wellbeing. However, it may be that people now feel freer to talk in such ways than they did before, and there are certainly some shifts in form. Nazma, a wealthy Muslim woman in her mid-thirties, for example, told how she and her husband give each other gifts on their wedding anniversary, which is not a traditional practice. Older people talk about shifts in style of address, that in their day husband and wife never used each other's names, whereas this is a common practice now. In fact, however, only Nazma said that she had called her husband by name. Three women in their twenties and thirties kept their own names on marriage: they all were of middle wealth with at least undergraduate level education, and two were teachers. However, all of the women who had children, these included, had come to be generally known as (their child's name)'s Ma. While this practice is interpreted in the gender literature as part of women's subordination, a denial of their individuality, the women themselves universally welcomed it, seeing it as a celebration of the identity of which they were most proud. Many of the men similarly welcomed being known as their child's father, and said their greatest happiness was to hear their children calling them Dad. Or, as Hasina Bewa, a Muslim middle income widow, put it:

*What could be nicer than hearing my children calling me 'ma' with their mouths full!*

Sometimes intimacy is expressed in an elliptical way, by a more distant form of address. Thus little girls are affectionately called 'old lady'. Ayesha Begum, a middle aged, middle income Muslim woman, declared:

*Whoever calls me whatever, I'm happy with it. Yet when my husband calls me 'Begum', I like it most.<sup>xiv</sup> In this name there is affection, and at the same time it expresses that I am the head woman of this household.*

## **4.2 Guardianship: Provision and protection**

As introduced above, in Bangladesh the dominant idiom for marriage is guardianship. This involves the twin aspects of male provision and protection, along with the right – and duty – to discipline, including if necessary through violence (White, 2007). The dominance of development concerns in Bangladeshi social science means that the economic aspect of marriage has received the most attention. This follows the assumption that increasing women's economic activity and so reducing their dependence on men constitutes the predominant way to advance gender equality. It is not surprising, therefore, that discussion of changes in marital relationships in Bangladesh is mainly found in studies of women factory workers (e.g. Kabeer, 1997, 2002; Dannecker, 2002); women's use of microfinance (e.g. Kabeer, 2001, Goetz and Sen Gupta, 1996); and migrant workers (Blanchet, 2010; Rao, 2012).

Rather than emphasising women's dependence, Dina Siddiqi casts it in terms of rights, remarking: 'the right to maintenance is at the heart of the marital relationship' (Siddiqi, 2004: 22). This is at once symbolic and substantive. One of the commonest ways to describe marriage



is to say a woman 'eats her husband's rice' (*swamir bhat khai*). Marriage breakdown is signalled similarly: 'she won't eat her husband's rice' or 'he wouldn't give her rice.'

Such statements conjure male provisioning and female consumption, and this is an important motif in Bangladeshi narratives of marriage. To be able to provide adequately for one's wife and family is a significant aspect of male honour, which receives cultural emphasis in the *purdah* prohibition on women working outside of the house. What this suppresses is the complement to male provision of resources – female nurture and stewardship. Thus, while men are to provide the resources through cultivation or purchase, it is women's thrift and skills in storage, processing and preparation that transform these into food to sustain the family.

The figure of the house is central to the imagination of male-female relations. Repeating the same pattern, house construction is men's work, but the day-to-day care and maintenance of the house belongs to women. '*Ghor-songsar kora*', to run a house and family, is another common way of describing married life. This applies to both men and women. Husbands should be family-centred: hard-working; of good character; free of harmful addictions (to drugs or alcohol) and extra-marital affairs. For women, however, the associations with the house are far more elaborate and explicit. The following quote from middle income Abdul Karim, gives a typical example:

*The ideal mother will raise the children according to the tenets of Islam, and she won't give value to what outside people say. The ideal mother should be kept busy with the children, family, cooking and general cleaning in the house. The ideal mother won't go outside to gossip. Nowadays, mothers are going out to work because of shortage, this isn't anything bad... but they have to maintain purdah. This is an Islamic rule.*

This shows the fusion of the spatial and the gender order - women are both the centre of and (properly) centred (and contained) in the house. It links together the values of hard work, self-sacrifice, right speech, care and right example. Although this speaker refers to Islam, these values are closely associated with the figure of Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth. A strong presence in the common cultural fund of imagery in Bengal, Lakshmi's qualities include deification of thrift; order; and the use of nature's gifts; and that she symbolises wealth, property, fertility, and new kinship ties (Fruzzetti, 1990:123-4). Known locally as 'Lokkhi', she has also been incorporated as an adjective, which is used freely by Hindus and Muslims to describe one who is particularly good, fortunate or blessed (usually a woman, or a young person of either sex). The association between a wife and Lakshmi, and a house without a wife being like one without wealth, goes back to the ninth century (Fruzzetti, 1990:123). Two women, the first Muslim and the second Hindu, show how this has become a common saying, which is enlisted in the contemporary debates about women's work:

*A Muslim woman: Women are the Lakshmi of the home. If they go outside, there will be no Lakshmi in the home.*

*A Hindu woman: Since my younger daughter has gone out for work the Lakshmi of her house has also left. That's why they can't get out of deficit even with both their incomes.*

It may not be coincidental that both of these women are poor, and so are likely to be thinking of manual, degrading 'outside' work.

With increasing landlessness, high yielding varieties of rice which require irrigation, fertiliser and pesticides, rice mills in place of manual husking, and increased urbanisation, 'traditional' gender complementarities have been replaced by a greater demand for cash.<sup>xv</sup> This has combined with growing numbers of women having to take paid work because of poverty and increased employment opportunities for women as the economy has developed. Purdah prohibitions on women doing work 'outside' the household have accordingly shifted. While some of our respondents still maintain that women should not 'go out', for most people the major issues now are the kind of work, what and where it is done, and how women conduct themselves within it. Office work or teaching, for example, are seen as enhancing status, fusing as they do the symbolic capital of salaried employment in public service; educational achievement which serves as an index of moral intelligence as well as formal qualifications; a genteel modern occupation involving non-manual labour; and an inside location. For women to work in a rice mill or road construction is, by contrast, widely disapproved. Here the symbolism is reversed, with heavy, manual labour, attracting low rates of pay and carried out under the hot sun in full public view. These criteria of value are obviously not limited to women; they are more general indices of class-based status in Bangladesh. For women, however, there are two additional dimensions. First, teaching, in particular, links to ideas of women as mothers, passing on knowledge and guidance to the new generation (Saraswati, the goddess of education), and so is easily assimilated as gender appropriate. Conversely, women working on the roads or in construction constitutes a direct affront to gender norms. Secondly, norms of female modesty are easily accommodated within office work, including the wearing of a *burkah* if desired.<sup>xvi</sup> This is compounded by the view that educated women know how to conduct themselves with honour. By contrast, physical labour outside is seen as immodest, as a woman will not be able to keep her body properly covered. Again, this is intensified by the cultural association between lower class status and greater proclivity towards sexual misconduct.

There is a clear parallel here with the analysis of marriage arrangement presented above. The shift in discourses around women's work clearly reflects an attempt to accommodate the 'new' circumstances within the 'old' status markers. But perhaps more significant is the intertwining once more of material and symbolic, gender and class or social status. The new economy requires women's labour and their families need the income it brings to defend or advance their economic position. Notions of respectability, which bear class and gender marking, are re-deployed to ensure that this augments, rather than compromises, broader differentiation in families' social status.

While women's outside work is increasingly accepted, this doesn't mean that the ideology of male provisioning has necessarily weakened. Confounding expectations in the gender and development literature, women's status often depends on their *hiding* the extent of their earnings, and colluding in conventional narratives of female dependence. Kabeer (1997: 271) describes how husbands of garment workers in Dhaka feared their wives' reduced economic dependence could undermine their own dominance at home. By contrast, women went to considerable lengths to say their earnings had no effect, and tended to avoid any overt challenge to their husbands' roles as breadwinner. For some women, being able to support themselves through their wages meant they could leave unhappy marriages and/or avoid having to re-marry

Kabeer (1997: 293-5). In general, however, both Kabeer (1997: 298) and Dannecker (2002: 198-9) report that women felt the fact they were working in itself signalled a major battle won, without need for any broader challenge to male authority.

Blanchet (2010) reports similar findings amongst women who had migrated unaccompanied from a village in Bangladesh to work in the bars in Bombay. She recounts an example of a daughter-in-law heralded by her marital family as '*lokki bou*'<sup>xvii</sup> after sending large amounts of earnings home from (sex) work in Malaysia, because she colluded in the fiction that it was her husband who had earned the money. Blanchet also describes how once the opportunities for bar work declined and thus the flow of money dwindled the voices of conventional morality in the village were able to reassert themselves. Some of the women who had worked in bars were brought before the *shalish* and required to undergo the ritual cleansing and humiliation usually reserved for prostitutes. Some resisted this, however, and bar work continues. Taken as a whole the paper emphasises the territoriality of morality in Bangladesh, and the way that 'border crossings' enable the shift from one moral regime into another. Despite all the difficulties, Blanchet (2010) states, the women experienced the employment as liberating. Their status within the village, however, required the women not to display their earnings, but rather to conceal them so as to bolster the fiction that their husbands were competent providers.

Kabeer (1997:296) locates the reason for women's collusion with ideologies of male provision in the other aspect of guardianship and protection. She states: "In the context of Bangladesh, a striking feature of gender subordination is the extent to which women rely on male protection as much as they rely on male provision. Consequently, there is a social as well as an economic dimension to female dependence." This notion of male protection is a core but under-researched aspect of the construction of marriage – and indeed patriarchy - in contemporary Bangladesh. The growth in numbers of women and girls going out to work or study has been accompanied by an increase in, sometimes violent, sexual harassment (Siddiqi, 2004; Chowdhury, 2005). One of Kabeer's informants captures this beautifully as she talks about 'the fear women have,' which makes them value even the equivocal 'protection' of a violent husband (Kabeer, 1997:297). Constructions of male protection rely heavily on the inside/outside axis noted above. Violence against women in the home is rife. The 2007 Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (NIPORT *et al.*, 2009: 201) states that more than half of all women reported having experienced physical or sexual violence in marriage, and 18% in the year before the survey. The importance accorded to having a male guardian reflects the extent to which the honour-sexuality nexus constitutes extreme jeopardy for women, rather than any guarantee of female safety or security (see also Chowdhury, 2005; Feldman, 2010).

The social necessity of male protection constitutes a significant brake on the capacity of women's independent earning to deliver the 'empowerment' that liberal/development discourses envisage. In our research, women in particular repeatedly emphasised that a woman without a guardian is highly vulnerable to unwelcome attention or abuse from other men and the gossip that surrounds the suspicion of sexual misbehaviour. In one of many such statements by our informants, Maya Rani, a poor Hindu woman, puts it like this:

*My husband is the power, like the pillar of the house. If I go out with my husband no one dares to say anything to me. Even if I go out without my husband, since I am*

*married no one troubles me because I have a husband. If I do anything bad, it is no one but my husband's duty to account for that.*

### 4.3 The logic of dowry

As introduced above, demand dowries are tightly tied symbolically and materially both to economic modernisation, and to masculinity. Lindenbaum (1981: 396), one of the earliest commentators on this, notes how the Japanese and American origin of dowry goods also signified Bangladesh's role as consumer in the global marketplace. It is a sign of the times that in our research the only case of successful resistance to dowry took a rather different symbolic form. Wealthy pharmacy owner, Mahbul, recounted how both he and his brother-in-law have managed to marry their daughters without any dowry. In explanation, he exclaimed, 'There is God!' The girls were kept in strict purdah, but both studied – his daughter at school to grade 10 (16 years old), his niece tutored by his wife at home to MA level. Both grooms had studied, and one taught, in an Islamic institution, and both were similarly strict in their observance of (reformist) Islam. The son-in-law's conduct in the pre-marriage negotiations was also distinctive. When he came to see the bride he asked her name and nothing else. When her (married) sister said he could ask more he demurred: girls are not cattle in a market that need to be checked over thoroughly. This re-doubled the approval he won in his future mother-in-law's eyes.

While the heightened profile of Islam is certainly a feature of contemporary Bangladesh, the tide of accumulation and consumption still constitutes a powerful undertow. Tellingly, in research between 1963 and 1974, Lindenbaum (1981: 398) already found some cases in which brides' parents were paying for grooms' higher education, to the point of commenting, 'In many respects, the groom payment makes the man'. This trend has only intensified since. Since the mid 1980s, Ahmed and Naher (1987: 160), Rozario (1992) and Rao (2012) found jobs for the groom in Dhaka or the Middle East forming a part of marriage settlements, and even being demanded after marriage, against threat of divorce. In our own research, dowry similarly featured significant amounts of cash, gold, or the promise of a job. Grooms were commonly using the payment that they gained on marriage to establish themselves in business. Rozario (2009: 48) sums the situation up: "for many grooms' families, access to modern goods, modern salaried jobs...a new business venture, or expansion of an existing business is only possible through a large *dabi* (demand dowry) from the brides' families".

What has been the effect on dowry of the two most famous economic developments for women, the rise of the garment and microfinance sectors? Kabeer (1997: 291) reports cases of women working in garment factories who were able to marry without dowry, but none of these was amongst her own respondents, so the information might not be reliable. Her informants did, however, include mothers who were working to help pay daughters' salaries, and unmarried women who were aiming to help earn their own (Ibid: 289-90). Dannecker (2002: 188) less positively reports that few of her respondents had been able to save much for their dowries. A garment factory worker who had managed to marry without dowry had an ongoing responsibility to send her wages to her parents-in-law (Ibid: 162). More evidence is thus required on whether work in garment factories is a means to offset heavy dowry demands, or helps to fund them. Rozario (2009) reports that the two major suppliers of microcredit to women in Bangladesh – the Grameen Bank and the BRAC (the largest NGO) – have anti-dowry policies. In practice, however, their loans are frequently used for dowries. Even more worryingly,

she states that families of grooms use the availability of such credit to argue for even higher dowry payments (Ibid: 48).

Far from *women's* contribution being in decline, the data suggest the need to bolster *men's*. The material security of former days, i.e., land to be inherited from the father, is no longer available, or no longer sufficient, to guarantee the male provisioning role. The desirable alternative (or supplement) of salaried employment is difficult to achieve. Read this way, one might say that demand dowry does not constitute as some have argued a form of female inheritance, but rather male, through the affinal line. Transfer from older to younger men is now bi-partite, following the ties of birth and ties of marriage, a form of collective (though not free) investment in the male provisioning role. If we follow the logic of practice, it seems that the symbolics of demand dowry may be not a veil for economics, but in a sense the economics themselves.

At least as significant, however, are the continuing stress on male protection and its ambivalent combination of threat and security for women. The globalised market of late capitalism combined with a weak and factionalised state has spawned a parallel network of touts and gangsters, who control access to virtually all the public and private goods of modernity, and demand extra payment if any business is to get done (Devine, 2007). This is the home context of demand dowry: something forced and without normative legitimacy, yet an unavoidable fact of social practice. The coercive formalised informality of the organisation of public space is quintessentially male; few women can navigate it successfully. Its (anti) heroes are the live fast die young *maastans* (godfathers), who codify a modern, violent masculinity, which offers both practical and symbolic challenge to the cultural norms of family values and age-based deference. The inflation of the groom's value that is the demand dowry may thus stand precisely for itself. However much women come to earn, however central they may be in managing household resources, the cultural investment in the priority of males will continue to be made, so long as the politicisation of resource access depends on the mobilisation of a man among men.

The rise of demand dowry represents the most significant challenge to the association of marriage and the moral order in both practical and symbolic terms. Against a vision of the moral order as grounded in virtuous exchange, this stands like a cultural vortex, an ironic caricature of the rampant growth of the market; the rewards it brings to some and the ruin to others; and its erosion of moral relationship. Practically, it exposes women and girls to additional violence, and can bring economic disaster to families with more daughters than sons. Symbolically, it rejects the virtues of living in one's right position and right relationships, for an absolute priority to financial gain. Whether this represents a new moral order based on the primacy of competitive advantage over social responsibility, or a choice for personal economic gain against the moral virtues of relational wellbeing, is a matter for future research.

## 5 Conclusion

The paper suggests that in rural Bangladesh as elsewhere, shifts in the structure of economy and polity are affecting the ways people practise and talk about marriage. It cautions, however, that change may be less radical, and continuities more marked, than either local people or wider scholarship would sometimes imply. Through a look at the first hand data, the following arguments are advanced.

First, that despite a shift in symbolism to romance and coupledness, families remain heavily involved in South Asian marriages, and a critical aim in marriage is to secure or advance the family's status in class and/or caste terms. The practice of dowry offers a powerful instantiation of this collective investment in marriage. While there are commonalities in this across contexts, it does seem to be bifurcated by class. Where the rich extend conspicuous dowries 'for love and in happiness,' amongst cash-strapped parents of daughters they are experienced as demand and plunder.

Second, that while a stress on affinity, conjugality and choice is evident in discussions of marriage in rural Bangladesh, the structural idioms of male provision and protection are still of far greater importance than is suggested by much of the literature on India. This may in part reflect the difference in populations studied, poorer and more rural in the case of Bangladesh, more urban, middle class and upper caste in the case of India.

Third, that demand dowry is better understood as a response not to the perceived weakness of *women's* economic contribution, but rather to bolster *men's*. It, therefore, represents a symbolic and material investment in the patriarchal idioms of male provision and protection, which stands in stark contrast to modernist ideologies of growing gender equality.

Finally, the paper suggests that the association between economic modernisation and changing marriage practices can usefully be read both ways. Where the literature has tended to emphasise changing 'structures of feeling' (Williams, 2007) at family and individual level, these can also be used as vantage point to provide insight into the particular form that economic development is taking in South Asia. Bringing demand dowry into the centre of discussions of changes in marriage is critical to this, as it brings into sharp relief the contradictory character of capitalist development in South Asia, its ideology of individual merit, and the material practices of class and gender closure.

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> The respondent profile is as follows: Manikganj total 33: 7 Hindu 26 Muslim; 7 rich 13 middle, 13 poor; Dinajpur: total 37: 5 Hindu, 30 Muslim, 2 Santal (Adivasi); 4 rich, 26 middle, 7 poor. The sample was chosen to provide a range of experience, not to be representative of the villages as a whole. All names have been changed.

<sup>ii</sup> The latter point is echoed by White (1992: 108-9) for the rural Bangladesh of mid-1980s, and by Osella and Osella (2000:91) for Kerala in the early 1990s.

<sup>iii</sup> The urge to display may be quite generalised – see for example 'Aisha and Usman N.D.E.' (n.d) on youtube.

<sup>iv</sup> This does not imply earlier isolation (see Van Schendel, 2009).

<sup>v</sup> 'Ghar jamai' (literally, son-in-law of the house') marriages, where the groom goes to live at the bride's family home, are relatively rare, usually occurring when the bride's family has some land but no sons.

<sup>vi</sup> These figures are necessarily tentative, since different authors classify household structures in somewhat different ways.

<sup>vii</sup> I know of no case where polygyny openly involved more than two wives.

<sup>viii</sup> This is almost certainly under-reporting. As well as open polygyny where all three marriage partners live together, there are hidden cases where men have a second family living elsewhere, which may or may not be widely known – or even by the first family.

<sup>ix</sup> Since colonial times marriage has been covered by separate religious personal laws. The (1974) law requires legal registration of marriage and divorce for Muslims and Christians; no such law applies to Hindus.

<sup>x</sup> The English word, 'guardian', is an everyday term in vernacular Bengali.

<sup>xi</sup> The Bengali term for this moral order is *dharma*. Although this is a Hindu term, both the word and the concept are used on a daily basis in Bangladesh. For more discussion see Devine and White (2013).

<sup>xii</sup> Such stories are not anything new – Hartmann and Boyce (1983:110) report from their 1975 fieldwork how scandalous stories of Muslim girls eloping with Hindu boy classmates were used to justify keeping girls out of school.

<sup>xiii</sup> It may be that people did not report love marriages because they are not well regarded socially, as observed by Asha Abeyasekera in Sri Lanka (pers. comm.).

<sup>xiv</sup> 'Begum' is an honorific title, signifying a married woman. The nearest English equivalent would be 'Mrs.', although in this sentence the sense might be captured better by 'madam'.

<sup>xv</sup> Similar dynamics are observed by Ursula Sharma (1985) in urban North India and Lila Abu Lughod (1990) amongst the Bedouin in Egypt

<sup>xvi</sup> The *burkah* is a head to foot over-garment worn by some Muslim women. It has become markedly more common in Bangladesh over the past 30 years.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Bou* means daughter-in-law, *lokkhi* is the local term for *Lakshmi*, as described above.

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