Gender, Caste and Matchmaking in Kerala: A Rationale for Dowry

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ABSTRACT

The matrilineal castes of northern Kerala consider dowry demeaning and resort to it only in 'exceptional' circumstances. In local discourse, dowry is transacted when women are considered 'old' by the standards of the marriage market, where over-age is a condition reached usually on account of what is considered a deficit of a normative conception of femininity. Dowry is practised openly only by poor and socially vulnerable households, as the relatively affluent could mask dowry with hidden compensations. This article explores the ways in which gender mediates matchmaking and generates a residual category of women for whom dowry is openly negotiated. Open negotiation on the margins of the marriage market expose the terms of exchange in 'respectable' society, where matchmaking strategies reveal the emphasis placed on conjugality and on caste in the social construction of women's interests and identity. Up to the mid-twentieth century, matrilineal women derived their identity from their natal families. The political economy of marriage in Kerala brought a new emphasis to bear on conjugality and on caste, which generated new restrictions on women and produced a rationale for dowry.

INTRODUCTION

Dowry has become an important basis of matchmaking in the south-western Indian state of Kerala, better known for its development experience and its matrilineal traditions. Until around the middle of the twentieth century, formalization of marriage among the matrilineal castes was not elaborate and matchmaking involved few if any exchanges of gifts or unilateral transfers of goods or cash (Aiyappan, 1944; Fuller, 1976; Gough, 1961; Mencher, 1965). The existing evidence of the spread and growing scale of dowry comes almost entirely from southern and central Kerala (AIDWA, 2003; Kodoth, 2007; Lindberg, 2001; Osella and Osella, 2000). My fieldwork in northern

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Kerala[1] indicates that the matrilineal castes not only deny dowry but also consider it demeaning. This article is based on primary material collected from a village in the northern midlands (here called Belur), the adjoining taluka town and the district headquarters, where the commercial marriage agencies, marriage bureaux and brokers were located. The data relate to the major matrilineal castes in the region, the Nairs and the Tiyas, and were collected over two phases in 2001 and 2005.

Dowry and *stridhanam* are used interchangeably in the northern midlands to refer to negotiated and/or demand-based property settlements from the bride's family as the basis of a marriage. People acknowledge dowry payments in 'exceptional' circumstances, usually in the case of women who are 'age over', a phrase used locally in English to denote women who are considered above the preferred age of marriage. As marriage is imperative, over-age is a condition reached only by women with 'disadvantages', in particular the lack of 'healthy good looks' or sometimes a difficult horoscope. Thus, in local discourse, women generate demands for dowry substantially on account of a deficit of normative femininity. However, my analysis suggests that dowry is openly entertained for women marked by a combination of poor economic, social and normative feminine attributes, whereas relative affluence is likely to result in hidden compensations. The denial of dowry is also drawn into a tension with expectations of a girl's eventual entitlement by way of an inheritance, or in terms of gold jewellery, suggesting ambivalence towards dowry rather than full-fledged resistance.[2] Thus, open negotiation is only the tip of the iceberg. Those who do not transact dowry or do not make hidden compensations use matchmaking strategies that compromise reciprocity through the differential valuation of brides and grooms. They also adhere strictly to the endogamous boundaries of caste. In this context, a deficit of normative femininity is only the ostensible rationale for dowry. Dowry has deeper roots in the compulsion to bring women under conjugal patronage, within a social framework that ties women's interests and identity to conjugality and to caste. Rejection of dowry in north Kerala is thus distinct from the feminist position that dowry is an affirmation of patriarchy or even a liberal position that it is a social evil.

An ideological emphasis on conjugality serves to enforce women's entry into marriage but also restricts their ability to separate, divorce or remarry and raises the need to monitor their sexuality. Two factors are worth mentioning here. Firstly, men are better able to delay marriage by drawing on the higher acceptable age of marriage, the legitimacy of pursuing an occupation with

1. Kerala was constituted in 1956 from the British residencies of Travancore and Cochin and the directly-administered British districts of Malabar and Kasargod taluk of South Canara, both part of the Madras Presidency. In this article, northern Kerala refers to north Malabar.
2. Suggesting ambivalence, the Brahmans in urban and rural Pune maintained that dowry was demeaning and the resort of the uneducated, but also saw it as a compensation for the education of boys (Benei, 1995: 36).

earning prospects and, crucially, a less substantive identification of their interests with marriage; moreover, divorce and remarriage are more easily condoned for men. Secondly, until the reform of personal law in the first half of the twentieth century, the matrilineal castes were caricatured for their 'permissive' sexual institutions, particularly women's ability to enter and exit sexual arrangements, which contributed to colonial legal interpretation of the customary forms of sexual association as not marriage but concubinage (Kodoth, 2004). Custom sanctioned serial monogamy for women and polygyny in northern Kerala. Pre-marital sex, particularly among cross cousins, was condoned and pre-marital conception was legitimized *post hoc* if it was not known to have breached the norms of *jati* (social rank) (Gough, 1950).

Dowry is rooted in the political economy of marriage. This challenges the mainstream story of development — typically, that radical institutional change over the early to mid-twentieth century shaped an egalitarian basis to families and fostered gender parity in social development (see Parayil, 2000). Importantly, institutional change enabled the transfer of patriarchal authority from an older framework of *jati* and agrarian relations to modern conjugal institutions, which include strict endogamy, monogamy and restrictions on women's claims to divorce and remarriage. Class struggle and community movements spurred by left and enlightenment ideologies refuted *jati* and existing agrarian relations, which had 'privileged' higher ranked men also allowing them sexual access to lower ranked women. Community movements envisioned modern caste identities within new and rigid endogamous boundaries. In this process, men gained new kinds of power over women of their caste and individually over their wives, as their principal guardians, the sole legitimate custodians of their sexuality and protectors of their property (Kodoth, 2004).[3]

The cultural coding of dowry in northern Kerala, where a demand for dowry does not speak well of a man, renders it rather specific. Elsewhere in south India, mobility and consumerism have transformed social identities among middle and lower castes, turning dowry into an institution that affirms the value of a man, where previously equal status marriage among close kin had kept the practice at bay (Kapadia, 2003).[4] The predominant

3. Colonial state intervention through criminal and civil laws generalized higher caste restrictions on divorce to all women, assuming that they were monogamous for life even while permitting male polygamy, thereby granting men new powers (Sen, 2003: 471).
4. Among the lower castes in north India, dowry has emerged in association with new ideals of conjugality, fostered by state legal and developmental processes. Parry (2001) shows that employment in a public sector steel plant in central India raised marriage prospects for young men, giving them certain access to dowry, but also enforced caste endogamy and rendered marriage stable. In contrast, casual workers in the informal sector were more likely to engage in inter-caste and multiple sexual associations. Kapila (2004) maps the transformation of the Gaddi, a pastoral people in northern India, who, as they settled down and gained access to modern education and employment, abandoned multiple institutions of marriage and adopted dowry.

tendency across India has been for the more educated and wealthy to lead the way in the adoption of dowry or for the lower castes to follow the upper castes (Beck, 1972; Kapadia, 1995; Nishimura, 1998; Parry, 2001; Srinivas, 1996; Srinivasan, 2005; van der Veen, 1972). In contrast, dowry has emerged at the lower end of the class hierarchy in northern Kerala. This experience does not accord with the dominant explanations of dowry either as a mode of devolution of property or pre-mortem inheritance (Tambiah, 1989; Upadhya, 1990) or as an aspect of gift-giving relations that regulated kinship (Raheja, 1995; Vatuk, 1975). Nor does it support the theory that dowry has expanded through the influence of *kanyadana* as an ideology (in which a girl is conceived of as a gift and given in marriage with other expensive gifts), and the adoption of its forms of marriage as a mode of achieving upward social mobility (Benei, 1995; Kapila, 2004: Parry, 1979, 2001; van der Veen, 1972).

Dowry demands, and/or the inability to achieve marriage, cast a shadow of indignity upon a section of women in north Kerala, but their marginality only exposed the terms of matchmaking in respectable society. It showed that respectability was achieved on gendered terms tied to the social construction of conjugality as central to women's interests and identity. Thus, dowry was the price that poor and socially vulnerable families were called upon to pay for aspiring to the markers of respectability in sexual discipline, endogamy and stable marriage. In the process, 'disadvantaged' women from families which were unable or unwilling to pay, had to contend with the possibility of enforced spinsterhood or sexual liaisons that were condemned.[5]

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF MARRIAGE

A modern framework of caste regulates matchmaking in Kerala. Today, 'Nair' is a readily recognized endogamous category across Kerala but until the early to mid-twentieth century it comprised subgroups, which maintained regional distinctions and neither inter-dined nor inter-married. In the *jati* order, Nair subgroups were positioned below the Nambudiris (Malayala Brahmins) and women of Nair and higher ranks had sexual associations with Nambudiris (hypergamy) and reciprocal ties with men of equal rank. In the colonial period, hypergamy was intertwined with superior rights over land granted to the Nambudiris. Community reform challenged both as exploitative and shameful and sought comprehensive reform (Kodoth, 2004).[6] The Tiyas

5. The Nagarattars of eastern Tamil Nadu witnessed a sharp rise in cash payments at marriage from the 1960s, restricting the marriage chances of girls from poor families: 'Both the married woman's respectability and the egalitarianism between the wife taker and wife giver are secured by such a drastic measure' (Nishimura, 1998:138, 207).
6. In north India, hypergamy was closely linked to the practice of dowry. Inter-caste hypergamy in Kerala was not accompanied by dowry, but it added to a scarcity of grooms among the Nambudiris, who anyway followed a form of primogeniture that permitted only the eldest male sibling in a family to marry within the caste. Thus, it accentuated dowry in reciprocal marriages among Nambudiris.

of north Kerala were considered on a par with the Ezhavas of southern and central Kerala in colonial administrative records, drawing largely on a similar occupational profile. They were placed outside caste (the four-fold *varna* system) as untouchable. With little to lose by way of social rank, a section of Tiya women in the towns of north Kerala had liaisons with European men, gaining significant upward mobility in the process. The community proscribed these unions only in the late-nineteenth century when it began to reform (Puthenkalam, 1977).

Nair and Tiya men had received early access to modern education and employment creating new community elites who pioneered reform (Kodoth, 2004). They sought to build new links by bridging subgroup and regional distinctions and setting up broad-based caste identities with a pan Kerala scope. Crucial to the crafting of modern caste identities was the need to frame a new marriage regime that would enforce male responsibility as husbands and fathers and bring women under conjugal patronage, thereby extending recognition and protection to them primarily in their capacity as wives. These concerns were evoked explicitly. Reform furnished the outlines of an argument for the transfer of a woman's property at marriage to her husband:[7] 'It is the husband's responsibility to protect the property of his wife... So long as our marriages want for legal sanction the husbands of Nair women will resort to irresponsible ways'.[8] A reformer-legislator underscored marriage as the principal aspect of women's interests. 'Unmarried women are a burden and could hinder moral pursuit. Besides as marriage also has a desirable cultural aspect, as far as possible we should strive to see that women are married'.[9] Far from seeking to render women powerless, reform defined their subjectivity within a conjugal regime, posing the conjugal unit as the 'natural' site of affective ties and thus most conducive both

7. Marriage mediation of women's property rights gradually made way for matchmaking on the basis of property bargains or dowry and introduced a new marriage market dynamic. In a 1923 essay in a journal from Travancore, Padmavathy Amma flays the emerging modes of trading on the marriage market which reserved the highest dowry for the most educated and well-employed men (Devika, 2005). The association between modern education and dowry has endured since the colonial era. H.T. Prinsep, a member of the committee that inquired into Kulin polygamy in 1866, underlined the role of higher education in raising dowry rates in Calcutta (Srinivas, 1996: 164).
8. Parameshwaran Pillai, a prominent reformer from Travancore speaking to an audience in north Malabar in 1928, the year comprehensive legislation was enacted in Travancore which was extended to Malabar only in 1933 and 1956 (Kodoth, 2004).
9. Machchingal Krishna Menon was speaking at the Travancore–Kochi Joint Nair Conference in 1947. He pointed out that higher education reduced the chances of women getting married. As a legislator he had called for information about the marital status of Nair women, which showed that while 50 per cent of school finalists and 40 per cent of intermediate-pass category were married, only 20 per cent of graduates were married (*Nasrani Deepika*, 1947: 3).

to 'morality' and to the growth of capitalist enterprise.[10] Their efforts paved the way for legislation, which instituted monogamy, spousal and patrilineal inheritance and maintenance rights. Eventually, the matrilineal castes were incorporated into the Hindu code in 1955–56, but free divorce was protected as a custom. Subsequently, the Kerala government referred the clause on divorce to the first law commission, which recommended restrictions, describing divorce on unilateral grounds 'as opposed to public policy' and not in 'consonance with ordinary notions of decency and morals' (Government of Kerala, 1972: 1–3). A bill introduced in the state assembly in 1973 to restrict divorce was, however, dropped as Parliament moved to allow mutual consent as a ground for divorce. The Kerala Joint family (abolition) Act, 1976, eliminated the legal conception of matrilineal property, a source of power and property outside marriage to which women had privileged claims.

Agrarian transformation proceeded alongside family reform and culminated in the land reforms of 1970. This enabled the mostly male 'heads' of tenant families to gain title over land. In the decades that followed, not only did men register higher occupational mobility than women; women were also seen to withdraw from paid manual work (Kodoth, 2007). Anthropologists have documented the elaboration of a conjugal regime over the twentieth century: Ezhava men 'began to regard it a shame for their women to go out and work. Even those who could ill afford to do so withdrew their women from outdoor work, due to the newly engendered sense of respectability' (Aiyappan, 1944: 122).[11] There was a new emphasis on pre-marital virginity of women and sexual constancy in marriage among the Nairs in central Travancore (Fuller, 1976: 149). In the 1990s, Menon (1996) who studied a village in central Kerala noted that 'it is no longer considered "respectable" for a woman to divorce her husband and it is difficult for a woman to remarry, whether she is divorced or widowed'.

The growing importance of class distinction and the difficulty in negotiating dowry with one's own kin steadily undercut the basis of customary cross cousin marriage (Puthenkalam, 1977). Since the 1980s, dowry levels have soared along with parental ambitions for bridegrooms who are migrants in the Gulf or in other parts of the world (Kodoth, 2007). In the closing decades of the twentieth century, working class matrilineal families in southern Kerala were mobilizing dowries by alienating land received through the

10. The belief that matriliny was detrimental to capitalist enterprise has had a long innings. In 1881, William Logan, a well-known colonial administrator in Malabar, pointed out that matriliny prevented the accumulation of wealth as it placed men in a false position with their natural inclinations pointing in one direction (their wives and children) and custom in another (sisters and their children). Nair reformers in Malabar rehearsed this theory even in the 1930s (Kodoth, 2004: 43).

11. Social reform in the 1910s and 1920s corresponded to a sharp decline in female agricultural labourers in Malabar (Kodoth, 2004). Significantly, women's work participation in Kerala was lower than the all-India average over the second half of the twentieth century (Kodoth, 2007).

land reforms and social security benefits from factory employment to pay for bridegrooms, who were likely to 'shelter' their daughters as full-time housewives. Some of these families had begun paying dowries in the 1950s (Lindberg, 2001). People interviewed in the northern districts said they were increasingly coming under pressure to pay dowry 'to ensure a good future for their daughters' (AIDWA, 2003: 179).

Why was dowry denied by the matrilineal castes in north Kerala but routinely transacted as the basis of marriage in the south? The regional dimensions of matriliny and community reform offer some clues. Matrilineal reformers in Travancore admired the Syrian Christians for their commercial success and attributed it to their family, which was not only anchored to marriage but also sanctioned dowry (Fuller, 1976).[12] In contrast there was resistance in north Kerala to doing away altogether with matriliny, slowing the pace of reform. The Nairs were the principal landlords in the region and sought to preserve their property interests (Kodoth, 2004). Further, matrilineal women in north Kerala resided in their husband's home after marriage without either losing property rights in their natal family or raising the institution of dowry (Gough, 1961). Thus reform meant less dramatic change, but also provided less ground for rationalizing dowry.

BELUR, NORTHERN KERALA

The village of Belur is in the northern midlands of Kerala, a region that witnessed intense agrarian struggle in the early to mid-twentieth century alongside the emergence and consolidation of Left politics. The land reform of 1970 had a significant influence on redistributing land and power among former tenants, who constitute the middle sections of society today and include the Nairs and Tiyas (Kodoth, 2007). Reflecting the extent of change, by 2001 Belur had only one household from the previous land-owning elite that owned up to 20 acres of land. Some villages in the region boasted of a voter base of 90 per cent and more for the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (henceforth CPM or the Party). However, Belur was relatively heterogeneous with entire localities identified with the Muslim League and sometimes the Congress party. The Left alliance wrested control over local government only in the mid-1980s, building on the land reform and trade union expansion since the 1970s. The Tiyas and lower castes formed their main support base.

Matriliny was the rule rather than the exception in north Kerala. The major social groups — the Tiyas, Nairs and Mappila Muslims — among others, practised matriliny. The Nair reform association of the early twentieth century

12. Until large-scale migration to Malabar began in the first half of the twentieth century, Syrian Christians were concentrated in Travancore and Cochin, whereas Malabar accounted for the majority of Muslims in Kerala.

was defunct; those of the Tiyas limited themselves largely to running temples in two major towns. By contrast, the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) and the Nair Service Society (NSS), associations founded in southern Kerala among Ezhavas and Nairs respectively, had expanded following an influx of southern Ezhavas and Nairs since the early twentieth century to settle mostly in the eastern highlands of north Kerala. They had units on the fringes of Belur and in the taluka and district towns, which reached out to locals through services related to marriage. However, local Tiyas and Nairs identified the SNDP and NSS with the settlers and were wary of them.

Belur is visibly agricultural with wide valleys and sloping hillsides that support paddy and garden cultivation respectively. By the time of the fieldwork, households had diversified their income and the younger generation was increasingly turning to service sector jobs in construction or more skilled occupations, although not often as qualified professionals. As part of the study, a census was carried out in early 2001 of the 306 Nair and Tiya households in three wards (local government electoral divisions) of Belur.[13] The residence pattern followed the lines of caste and religion surprisingly closely.

The first area had near equal numbers of Nair and Tiya households in separate but adjacent localities. The landholdings derived from former tenancies from a Nambudiri landlord. Significantly, the Nairs here were mostly from the lower subgroups and many families had members who had migrated to urban centres in India in search of low-skilled work during the second half of the twentieth century. Today, the younger generation hold formal sector jobs in teaching, para-military forces and lower cadres of the army, and sometimes in the Gulf. The rare Tiya house in the Nair locality was built with Gulf remittances. The Tiya households were on poorer quality land and distinctly less well-to-do. The second area was predominantly Nair but more heterogeneous, with those from previously landed elite interspersed with lower subgroups. By the second quarter of the twentieth century, these families had gained access to formal sector employment as teachers and in government service, and many of them had migrated out of the village. The third area was predominantly Tiya, former tenants of Muslim trader-landholders and relatively poor but upwardly mobile. There were a handful of Nair households on its outer edge. In this area, several Tiya families had less skilled migrants in the Gulf. This was apparent more in the profile of bridegrooms than that of the brides' father, reflecting the recent nature of the change. The Tiyas controlled toddy tapping (extraction of sap from the coconut bud which is then consumed as liquor), which is widely considered their caste occupation but is also an important source of livelihoods and the mainstay of the trade union movement in Belur.

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13. I followed this up with detailed interviews with members of ninety of these households. However, my fieldwork was not limited to these localities alone.

Politics, Caste and Dowry

The first time I was told of a dowry transaction in Belur, it was presented as an exception. Ramani, a Tiya woman of over sixty, told me that there was a demand for dowry when her younger sister married an Ezhava man from a settler family nearly twenty-five years ago. Marriages across regional identities appeared only on the fringes of social arrangements. The boy had chanced to see the girl, who worked in a co-operative bank, and took an interest in her. During marriage negotiations the boy's family asked for Rs 40,000 in cash, a reformist wedding ceremony with scriptural rites upheld by SNDP and that the girl's family join the SNDP. The marriage was agreed upon; the boy's family agreed to bring the priest and the girl's family facilitated an unusually long wedding. However, there was no question of the Tiya family joining the SNDP. As Ramani said, 'how could we? When we already had a *sanghatana* (association)'. Following her father, an early adherent of the CPM, the family was committed to the Party.

The CPM entered into the social lives of its adherents in much the same manner as the caste associations. It had excellent credentials in matchmaking, with an extensive network in the region that facilitated quick and trusted marriage inquiries. Informally, it facilitated the organization of marriage among supporters' families, even raising funds where necessary. As a senior member of the CPM local unit explained, the Party had inherited the institutional position traditionally occupied by community elders or intermediating authorities such as village chiefs: 'Further north in parts of Kasargod, temples or *kazhakam* [community forum] wielded influence and their authorization is sought to conduct weddings. Where the Party is strong such associations do not wield authority. Here even non-Party families come to us because we can resolve problems'. Officially, the CPM was against both caste and dowry but in matchmaking its leaders and adherents not only did not question caste, but also conformed rigorously to the requirement of endogamy. A younger CPM leader and employee of the local co-operative bank had carried out several matchmaking inquiries on behalf of the Party. He said, 'I have not grown so much as to discard caste altogether'. Far from resisting the interests of family/caste, the Party usually toed their line even chastising young people of adherent families who sought to make 'love'/inter-caste matches and relenting only when they found it impossible to bring them around. Its members admitted that they were unable to prevent dowry payments, but also sympathized that it allowed 'unfortunately placed' girls to achieve a marriage.

In contrast, the caste associations witnessed and sought to enforce property agreements, swore by caste endogamy and persevered to popularize a reformist sacramental form of the wedding. Their officials rationalized endogamy primarily in terms of cultural compatibility fostered through shared customs and rituals, which they believed bound a marriage together and allowed it to endure. According to them, inter-caste connections were

inherently fragile and thus undesirable. Caste associations saw marriage as pre-eminently their terrain. Not surprisingly, the CPM perceived them as a threat to its social base. However, in seeking to keep the caste associations at bay and for fear of losing its social base, the CPM had accommodated caste.

In maintaining that they did not practise 'dowry', local people were rejecting matchmaking on the basis of property settlements. It was readily acknowledged that girls were given gold jewelry. People associated dowry with Muslims and with the settlers, whether Christians, Ezhavas or Nairs. The Muslims generally acknowledged that dowry was draining the resources of poor families. Settler Christians, Ezhavas and Nairs usually admitted that a girl's family transferred property to her marital family at the time of her marriage but represented it as her 'share' of natal family property. However, settler parents in the eastern highlands spoke of such transfers with a sense of pride, a substantial dowry reflecting their achievements in difficult conditions after migration. Families in the midlands were more wary of expressing such sentiments, but there was frequent slippage between 'share' and 'dowry'. For instance, the SNDP was in the process of starting a marriage bureau in late 2005, to provide matchmaking services, and a regional official explained that requests had come from their units as people were now paying a considerable amount to marriage brokers, who charged a commission of 5 to 10 per cent of the dowry (including gold, cash, land and other articles). He pointed out that if the dowry was Rs 100,000 and a car, the commission could run to Rs 20,000 and more. In the early part of our conversation he had emphasized that settler Ezhavas did not pay dowry but transferred a woman's share of property at marriage. He said the only difference between locals and settlers was that the former gave their girls inheritance rights in addition to gold already given at marriage while the latter gave a share of family property at marriage, which included gold.

The President of an NSS unit on the periphery of Belur, himself a local Nair, said the local attitude to dowry amounted to lack of transparency and led to 'unnecessary tension'. 'The couple benefits when a property settlement is made at the time of marriage. Otherwise. . . the younger generation is kept waiting and this gives rise to ill feeling towards parents. Eventually children may find themselves waiting for their parents to die'. The manager of the district branch of a large scale marriage bureau who was from southern Kerala endorsed the views of the NSS unit President. He was aware of cases where negotiations had broken down due to dowry demands. In an extreme example — a woman of forty-two — the bureau had suggested three possible matches. The woman was employed in a co-operative bank and her parents, who had paid money to get her the job, didn't find the matches suitable: one involved a widower of forty-eight who had asked for dowry; another a divorcee who they thought was not of good character; and the third a man of fifty-two, who they didn't like. 'They were willing to wait', he said to me in a manner suggesting that they were doomed. According to him, the bureau received a surprisingly large number of applications from parents of Nair girls who

were over-age, which was not the case in southern Kerala. He went on to contrast the systematic planning towards a girl's future in the south, where parents planned a girl's education and training towards marriage and built up resources systematically to pay dowries (see Osella and Osella, 2000) to the north where parents seemed to wake up rather late to the need to 'marry off' their daughters. The 'wisdom' of a marriage-centred approach towards girls carried the expectation that parents should be flexible in the 'best interests of their daughters'.

Negotiation of 'Exchange' at Marriage

'Exchange' through matchmaking depended on the valuation of masculine and feminine qualities but also an assessment of the property status of possible partners. Adherence to codes regarding dowry and caste is an aspect of 'respectability'. Local Nairs and Tiyas view property settlements at matchmaking as a betrayal of 'trust'. A landed Nair father had refused a proposal for his doctor son, which included an offer of a well-known hospital in the district town and cash. Such offers entail a risk of losing the son altogether through a gradual process of his shifting allegiance to his parents-in-law. Instead, the son had married an information technology student with a similar family background, gauged importantly in terms of class. Despite this refusal of property settlements, however, property concerns are at the core of matchmaking. There is a range of manoeuvres to ascertain class/family backgrounds and to secure the property claims of potential brides and grooms. A rigid preference for marriage within the region made it easier to gather reliable information. Conventional channels of matchmaking — family networks, close associates and political parties, particularly the CPM — carry 'trust'. Marriage inquiries routed through the CPM are particularly instructive. The President of a co-operative bank, one of the few well-employed older women in the village, had got her daughter married at barely nineteen years. She wanted her daughter to study further, but the proposal had come through the Party, she said with finality. The desirability of the proposal was posed as self explanatory, underlining the 'trust' it carried.

The number and sex composition of siblings in a family is an important consideration. An only daughter is perceived with mixed feelings by the family of the potential groom; she gets all the property (*adichu mattuka*) but is likely to be accustomed to getting her own way. If a son and a daughter is seen as the preferred combination, too many daughters and no son is the worst. Sons/brothers are expected to take responsibility for their parents and to discipline their sisters. For instance, a brother could force a reluctant girl to return to her husband. Similarly, parents of girls would be wary of a prospective groom who was an older son with several unmarried sisters. This is seen as a huge responsibility. These factors are used to evaluate and protect the property claims of potential brides and grooms but they also serve as informal guarantees that marriages will endure.

The custom of giving gold jewelry to girls has made way for more explicit expressions of property concerns. Gold was considered a gift of affection and emphatically not a dowry. It was not usually subject to negotiations, but generous gifts brought a girl and her family prestige. Expectations brought pressure to conform but were subject to several factors, including the relative socio-economic position of the families and the standards observed in the locality and among close relatives. Indirect signals are sometimes used to convey the expectations of the bridegroom's family — mediators, for example, would slip in a word about gold given in an earlier marriage in the boy's family. But they are avoided when using the more 'trusted' channels of matchmaking. Gifts of gold in excess of local standards are a mark of the upwardly mobile. Gulf migration is yet to affect gold levels dramatically: in the late 1990s, Tiya girls married to less skilled Gulf bridegrooms — drivers, electricians and mechanics — had received between twenty and forty sovereigns (one sovereign is 8 grams). On the other hand, excess of gold could be read pejoratively, as a compensation for something.

At the higher end, Tiya families that benefited from formal employment had given up to seventy-five sovereigns of gold. A retired central government employee had given seventy sovereigns to his daughter, who got married in the late 1990s. He was embarrassed and defensive saying that they had not intended to give that much but gifts had all added up. He had only a son and a daughter and both were well-educated. Here, concerns of property and normative femininity were subsumed by the certainties of class and the social profile of the family, which ensured proper grooming and formed the basis of 'trust'. A retired Nair school teacher had given his daughter about fifty sovereigns when she married a school teacher in the late 1990s. When I probed further, the girl's mother said that marriage did not mean they were giving up their daughter. The girl was a graduate and her brothers were well-educated and employed. However, one brother, a teacher and an activist of a well-known Left civil societal organization, said it was fashionable in families like theirs to give a hundred sovereigns.

Striking a different attitude, the mother of two well-educated girls, who gave her elder daughter seventy-five sovereigns, said: 'You saw how dark she is, so we had to "show" something on her'. The girl, whose father was retired from the lower cadre of the Army, was married in 2003. Her younger sister was engaged in 2005 to an engineer working in South Africa. Her mother added that they could give her less jewelry, as she was attractive. The extra gold given to the elder daughter was posed as a compensation for a deficit of normative femininity, but the mother's words also revealed the internalization of a social prejudice and a response to it without any external bidding. In this class, if people negotiated and paid dowry they preferred not to acknowledge it. Families that lived by wage labour gave ten to fifteen sovereigns of gold, invariably bought with loans from the local co-operative bank. It was in these

families that a deficit in normative femininity was likely to accumulate into the basis of open negotiation of dowry.

Gender mediated how levels of education, health and employment were drawn into matchmaking. Healthy good looks were highly prized in young women, who generally were better educated (in terms of numbers of years of schooling) than men. Most girls had secondary or higher secondary qualifications and many even entered a graduate education, not always completing it. Education was expected to enhance domestic management skills. Along with health, it was drawn into inferences about a woman's capability for her reproductive roles, ranging from bearing and nurturing children to tutoring and grooming them. Women's employment was contingent upon the claims of the reproductive realm. Preferred jobs were 'nine to five' positions in teaching or clerical posts in the formal sector. These boosted a girl's marriage prospects. A retired Nair school teacher had paid a cash donation to get his daughter admission to a teachers' training course and after that to get her a job in a private school. In his words, 'if a girl is employed, would it not ease her passage through the marriage market?'. Among the poorer families, respectable jobs included working as technical assistants in hospitals and para-medical units, as nurses and office assistants, and in the co-operative weaving units in the area. It was not unusual even in wage labour households to educate girls up to higher secondary level. In poor families, this was not enough for the younger generation to break into the preferred formal sector jobs, but the threshold for matchmaking was lower. A construction labourer whose twenty-year-old daughter worked as an X-ray technician in a private establishment pointed out that her employment 'showed in the frequent [marriage] inquiries for his daughter'.

A man's marriage prospects depended crucially on his ability to provide for a family, represented most importantly by income-earning work. Masculine value was affirmed and denied substantially on this terrain. After school, boys were more likely to drop out than girls and to seek job-oriented skills in formal and informal ways. Young men's occupational status and ability to earn were central concerns of parents of prospective brides. Indicating this, a senior local leader of the CPM described the status of toddy tapping in terms of its favourable rating on the marriage market: '*Enne chethekarane penna kodukkum* (today, a girl may be entrusted to a toddy tapper)'. The economic securities of toddy tapping, as a protected segment of the informal sector in Kerala, had offset the dubiousness of its association with liquor and with a *jati*-based occupation. Across class, however, there was preference for men with government or formal sector jobs; but drivers or technicians in the Gulf with secondary and higher secondary qualifications were married to women with graduate and even postgraduate degrees. This was usually the case with middle level Tiya families. Gulf bridegrooms staked their 'worth' through brides with prized social and feminine attributes, especially education. The CPM leader commented, 'when the bridegroom is not equally well-educated, the girls may have their desires, but they do not voice it openly'. In

families with early exposure to higher education and formal sector employment, parents sometimes expressed a preference against Gulf bridegrooms.

Education and appropriate kinds of employment honed the marriage prospects of girls even if people did not always plan rigorously to such an end. Girls with comparatively higher levels of education and married to toddy tappers and construction workers had given up informal sector jobs for full-time domesticity. Male qualifications did not subserve marriage so substantially. Matchmaking involved multiple trade-offs; for instance, the family of an army employee had rejected a proposal from an executive in a private company who was twelve years older than their daughter, a post-graduate student. The mother said, 'we may have considered it if he had a government job but even then a difference of more than ten years is not desirable'. The desirable age difference was between five and seven years. Parents of girls began to make inquiries when a girl was close to twenty and were deeply worried if she reached twenty-five unmarried. According to the commercial agents, the marriage market 'cleared' for boys between twenty-eight and thirty, making it difficult to find grooms for girls beyond twenty-five.

Horoscope compatibility was considered mandatory. Older communists rejected the belief in horoscopes but had conceded to their children's wishes to have them matched. Generally, parents were wary when there was a problem horoscope, particularly *chovva dosham*, an astrological feature that made it difficult to find partners. In such cases, they were more willing to make concessions. When horoscope readings had already caused delays, marriages had been settled without consulting them futher. A low-skilled Gulf migrant of nearly forty married a girl who was over thirty without consulting horoscopes. Both of them suffered from *chovva* in their horoscopes. After marriage, the girl had stopped working as a construction labourer. When a person had *chovva*, it was the practice to look for partners in a similar situation. A toddy tapper had already seen thirty girls, all with *chovva*, but had not yet found his preferred match.

Defining a Margin on the Marriage Market

So far we have considered matchmaking strategies adopted within the bounds of 'respectable' society. This section deals with households that are forced to look outside these boundaries in an effort to hold on to at least the vestiges of respectability. People approached the commercial marriage agencies, marriage brokers and bureaux only after they had explored the conventional channels of matchmaking, and it was usually a move that signalled difficulties in matchmaking. Marriage brokers suffered from a poor reputation as being interested in quick money rather than in ensuring a good match, but there was also considerable informal interaction with them. Brokers entertained

proposals with explicit demands for dowry.[14] They insisted that these cases were rare, usually involving men who needed cash for a specific purpose and women who were over-age. Women applicants who were over-age accumulated in the files of the bureaux as against women in 'normal' circumstances who, I was told, 'moved' on the market. The brokers had arranged a large number of matches in the preceding years with dowry and had several clients on their records seeking dowry. They dealt closely with their clients, knew why they needed dowry and used this information to further negotiations. Men asked for dowry usually to meet financial constraints or to make new investments. Dowries had served to mobilize funds for a sister's marriage, for house repairs, to set up independent trades, invest in small businesses, buy equipment, vehicles etc. and on a few occasions to pay divorce settlements, which would enable a man to marry again.

One broker had clients who were wage labourers, tailors, drivers and small-scale traders and who demanded between Rs 50,000 and Rs 100,000. Even in such cases men could make additional demands. A second broker, who also ran a tailoring unit, had a thirty-two year old Nair applicant who wanted Rs 50,000 to invest in his cement business. There were further demands: the girl should be a graduate and not older than twenty-seven. He refused to consider a match with a girl whose father was willing to pay up to Rs 100,000, saying she was too thin. In 2005, a third broker, who was more up-market than the first and second, had arranged a match for a twenty-four year old Tiya girl from Belur involving a dowry of Rs 100,000. The girl was the eldest of three daughters; had studied only up to secondary school and was considered to be in 'poor health'. The boy did not have a steady job but the broker described him as 'capable'. The girl's father worked in Bombay and had resources to pay the dowry but only the close family knew about the transaction, signalling a case of hidden dowry where the girl's family was relatively well-to-do.

Women's disadvantage, which was expressed in terms of physical attributes, the lack of good looks, being too thin or the lack of health (*arogya koravae*), held another level of meaning. Poor health, I was told by the marriage brokers in particular, was used to refer to the physical condition of leanness. In its everyday usage, 'to become thin' (*melingu poyzi*) referred to a decline in physical appeal. To denote loss of appeal/thinness, people also used the terms *vaduga* or *onanguka*, which mean literally 'to dry up'. Fullness of body was an important aspect of the dominant conception of womanhood, implicating notions of sexual and reproductive potential. The reference to health did not imply illness or nutritional deficiency but pointed

14. The taluka town bordering Belur was an acknowledged centre for bureaux and brokers who negotiated dowry. Of the five marriage bureaux with offices in the main market area in 2001, one had closed down in 2005. Three had opened shops on the outer fringes of the market and one had gone into a new partnership. Brokers were constantly hovering around these offices. The large-scale bureaux were located in the district headquarters.

to the expected effects on sexuality, reproduction and domestic abilities of being thin, pale or seeming unenergetic. Normative femininity thus went beyond an aesthetic conception that was voiced upfront.

In Belur, parents of older unmarried girls not only admitted receiving demands for dowry, but some of them expressed willingness to pay for 'suitable' bridegrooms.[15] The mother of a thirty-one year old unmarried girl, Geetha, was desperate when I spoke to her in 2001 and displayed little reserve in telling me that she had contacted several brokers. Earlier in the year, a broker had brought a proposal from a man who demanded Rs 100,000 in dowry but had no job. 'Even if we were to mobilize the money', the mother said 'why should we pay when he doesn't even have a job?'. She felt that the man on offer was not worth her money, an attitude that the bureau manager in the district town, referred to earlier, had scorned. Other Nair families, similarly placed, could not afford the price that was being quoted, but were loath to lower the standard of 'suitability'. Such families sometimes resort to marriages with settlers, which involve dowry and lead to sale or alienation of land, which is their main source of livelihood.

What are the circumstances in which girls grow to be over-age in Belur? Poor gender attributes were underlined in several cases. Geetha's mother identified her daughter's dark skin and looks as the main problem, but Geetha had also completed only secondary school. The parents were relatively poor, combining agricultural labour with work on their own farm for a livelihood. To emphasize her point the mother showed me a picture of her elder daughter, who was married at twenty-two after the Gulf bridegroom had seen her on her way to college and approached her parents. The girl was feminine by the dominant conception, with fair skin and a well-rounded body. No dowry was paid. She received little gold, but to meet wedding expenses the family sold some land. Girls with feminine disadvantage surfaced in households of toddy tappers and construction workers. Girls considered attractive usually presented few problems in matchmaking even where the family was not affluent, although educational qualifications could better their prospects. Previous marriages in these households indicated that economic difficulties owing to marriage expenses were eased through marriage loans, which are earmarked for girls alone, from informal sector welfare funds and from the local co-operative bank. Horoscope problems could be trying: in the fieldwork, they figured in three poor households with over-age girls. In several instances of married girls who had encountered horoscope problems, their families had struggled to find matches leading invariably to delayed marriage.

15. There were never-married women of twenty-five and above in thirty-two of 306 households in my 2001 census of Nair and Tiya households. In five of the thirty-two households these women were above fifty. One household was not marked by the 'usual constraints': in this family there was a girl of twenty-five who was a graduate with a diploma, working in a hospital in the district town. Her father had retired recently from government service in Maharashtra. Some of the households were followed up in the 2005 visit.

Matchmaking problems are heightened by social disadvantage, especially where poor widows are concerned.[16] Widows with sons of appropriate age made efforts to arrange 'exchange marriages', or a brother–sister pair for one another. However, there were instances where boys had refused to comply as it curtailed their choice. Poor widows with no sons were in the most difficult position. This circumstance affected the marriage prospects even of girls with reasonably good social profiles as in the case of two of three unmarried daughters of a Tiya widow and wage labourer. At twenty-six years, the second daughter was a nurse in a reputable government medical facility in Bangalore. The youngest daughter had a Masters degree and was looking for work. The oldest daughter was over thirty. She was considered unattractive on account of a poor set of teeth and had not studied beyond secondary school. The family had received marriage inquiries for the second daughter but the prospective bridegrooms had wanted her to move to their place of residence. The family depended on her financially for maintenance and to repay a loan taken to rebuild their house.

The difficulties arising from widowhood showed up even when the family was a segment of a fairly well-to-do extended family. A Nair widow with two unmarried daughters of thirty-one and twenty-eight lived with her husband's mother in an old style wood-and-tile ancestral house, surrounded by rice and garden land. The house was ear-marked for the widow's husband's sister, who lived in Bangalore. The husband's early death had stretched their resources thin and his widow worked on the family land. The elder daughter was considered unattractive because of poor teeth and the younger one had dark skin. The girls had not studied beyond secondary school and neither of them worked outside the home.

The case of a poor Tiya widow indicated the possible futures of girls in such households. The widow was a former agricultural labourer who was too ill to work. The youngest daughter was thirty-seven and unmarried in 2005. She had higher secondary qualifications but worked as an agricultural labourer. They lived in a visibly poor marshy locality in a small mud-and-tile house. The mother said that brokers had brought inquiries but 'people come and take a look around here and don't come back'. The two older daughters had married after they were thirty. The second daughter, Kamala, had gone to work in an informal-sector tailoring unit in Coimbatore. At thirty-four, she married a Tamil man she met there but returned home with a daughter after a year of marriage. She now worked as a tailor from home.

16. Eleven of the thirty-two households with women who were considered to be over-age, belonged to widows, most of who were wage labourers. Of these, two households comprised unmarried women of over fifty living with their widowed mother. In five widow households, there were no sons.

Single Women, Sexuality and Wage Labour

In the local scheme of things, when women were unmarried it was because 'nobody had come for them' (*arum vanhilla*). They were 'left behind' (*ozhinghu poyathe*), signalling that women moved ahead in a substantive sense only through marriage. Posed thus, marriage is the principal aspect of the feminine self. It is also the principal source of livelihood for women. Single women were more likely than other women to be employed, and most were in wage labour.[17] They entered wage labour as the possibility of an arranged marriage receded. Since wage labour was perceived as diminishing a girl's prospects of making an arranged marriage, girls were likely to spend a number of years at home 'waiting', unless the family was too poor to afford such a luxury.[18] This introduced a tension between the marriage prospects of women and their participation in wage labour, rendering the position of single women rather precarious. It was prefigured in two local sayings: 'a woman without a man is like a house without a pillar' and 'harm befalls the leaf whether the leaf falls on the thorn or the thorn on the leaf'. The informal work place afforded mobility and interaction between the sexes, fuelling suspicions regarding women's sexual morality. Own choice or 'love' marriages represented the materialization of this fear. Girls sometimes became pregnant in relationships with fellow wage labourers. In one case in the 1990s, a young girl had an affair with a migrant labourer and got pregnant; he then moved in with her family, which included her widowed mother and her brother. It was discovered later that he was already married and had a family in south Kerala. According to her mother, the girl knew this but when she became pregnant there was little else she could do. Own choice marriages are thought to reflect poor grooming and could affect the marriage prospects of younger female siblings. They are also considered inherently fragile as they lack the structures that enforce discipline. Over the years the Party had interceded to allow inter-caste and inter-religious marriage, but only after making every attempt to dissuade the couple. In such cases, Party patronage may be used to enforce discipline in marriage.

Janaki, an older local activist of the CPM, brought home to me the sense of shame associated with 'love' marriages. Usually sympathetic to the circumstances of the older unmarried women, she judged the actions of Kamala (above) very harshly. Reacting to my appreciation of Kamala's courage in seeking work far away from home and making her own marriage, she said 'are you suggesting that women should make run away marriages?'. Janaki was married at twenty and divorced her husband a year later because he was

17. This was the case in seventeen of the thirty-two households with over-age women.
18. This was the case of a widow with two daughters of twenty-five and thirty; they were all wage labourers. In one case, a daughter went to work immediately after her secondary education as her father was ill. In four wage labour households, unmarried daughters between twenty-five and thirty were not working outside the home, though their education profile was poor.

given to drinking, which she found difficult to tolerate. Back in her natal family she fell in love with a school teacher of another *jati*. However, her father, a respected Tiya traditional healer, refused to consider it and she did not pursue it any further. Nor did she marry again. Kamala, in contrast, has crossed all 'acceptable' boundaries, married a Tamil man under somewhat vague circumstances, and then returned home with a child. Even where it involves dowries, arranged matchmaking carries a certain extent of institutional 'cover' that is expected to enforce discipline in marriage. The desperate moves made by parents to arrange marriages for their daughters using channels (brokers/bureaux) and practices (dowry) they consider demeaning thus underscores the importance of conjugal patronage. By signalling the denial of legitimacy to women outside the frameworks of conjugality and caste, dowry reveals the devaluation of women.

THE RATIONALE FOR DOWRY

Over the past half a century, dowry has made firm inroads into matrilineal society in Kerala. In northern Kerala, it retains inferior connotations and is openly acknowledged only in the case of older unmarried women from poor and socially vulnerable households. These households have limited options — either to try to arrange marriages with dowries, or to leave their girls unmarried and risk sexual transgression. Households with less social disadvantage and those under relatively better economic circumstances use dowry to arrange marriages for girls with a deficit of normative femininity, but are unlikely to acknowledge it. Relatively more affluent families compensate deficits of normative femininity by giving girls additional gold jewelry, which is usually not subject to negotiation. At the higher levels of the class hierarchy, households are less likely to transact dowry or to make other compensations. Here, concerns of normative femininity are subsumed under the securities of class, social profile and appropriate grooming.

In the absence of dowry or other compensations, matchmaking strategies throw into sharp relief the differential valuation of femininity and masculinity, even when potential partners have roughly comparable levels of qualification. I have attempted to argue that dowry is the logical extension of the valuation of women centrally in terms of domesticity, sexuality and reproduction, and the confinement of all licit expressions of these within marriage and caste. Thus, it becomes desirable that women seek arranged marriages. Masculinity is prized for the ability to dispense conjugal patronage, but male qualifications are not made to subserve marriage. That even men without jobs could command dowry underscores the importance of conjugal patronage for women.

Significantly, the caste associations and the CPM subscribe to this mode of 'exchange'; the former endorse dowry and caste explicitly and the latter adopt an attitude of sympathetic accommodation. The state in Kerala

substantially shares the CPM's position. It intervenes to provide grants to socially disadvantaged families for daughters' marriages and introduced a marriage insurance scheme for girls in destitute families (Sankaranarayanan and Department of Finance, Kerala, 2004), in an effort to ease the burden of poor families. Girls' marriages pose difficulties because they involve expenditures, which include gold and cash dowries, and more importantly because without them, families risk disrepute. Hence, state handouts could help to pay dowry and to subscribe to a dominant notion of 'respectability'. Critically, the position of the state and the CPM is founded on a refusal to challenge a conjugal framework held together by reactionary caste and gender ideologies.

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