

Digital Dowry : Emerging Forms of Economic Coercion in the Age of Technology and Social Media

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Abstract

In the modern digital age, the traditional practice of dowry in India has evolved into newer, less visible forms of economic coercion. While the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, aims to curb dowry-related abuse, it fails to address the rising trend of “Digital Dowry”—wherein demands are made for gadgets, cryptocurrency, social media-worthy weddings, and online income. This paper explores the concept of digital dowry in simple terms, highlighting how social media, influencer culture, and digital payment platforms have normalized these demands. It compares traditional and digital dowry, discusses various forms of digital coercion, and outlines the gaps in existing legal frameworks. The paper also presents case studies, legal reforms, policy recommendations, and the social impact of this silent but damaging practice. It concludes that as India embraces technological advancement, there is a pressing need to update laws and spread awareness to ensure ethical and gender-just digital growth.

Keywords : Digital Dowry, Economic Coercion, Cyber Abuse, Marriage Law, Social Media, Gender Justice, Technology Misuse, Domestic Violence, Legal Reforms, India

Introduction

The institution of marriage is one of the most important social structures in Indian society, but it has long been tainted by the practice of dowry. Traditionally, dowry involved the transfer of cash, property, and valuable items from the bride’s family to the groom’s family. Despite legal prohibitions, dowry-related demands and harassment continue to exist, evolving into less visible but equally harmful forms. One such modern variant is 'Digital Dowry,' which uses technology and social media to make demands that may seem acceptable but are rooted in economic coercion. This paper aims to understand how this practice has emerged and the consequences it has on individuals, families, and society at large.

What is Digital Dowry?

Digital dowry can be defined as the demand for digital or high-tech assets either before, during, or after marriage. Examples include the request for an iPhone, a gaming setup, high-end laptops, cryptocurrency, or even a demand to fund a wedding that looks glamorous on social media. In some cases, grooms expect the bride to contribute financially from her YouTube or Instagram income. These digital demands are often justified under the guise of 'gifting' or 'contribution,' making them hard to detect and report legally. The underlying issue, however, remains the same—economic pressure and gender-based inequality.

Historical Context: Dowry in India

Dowry as a concept is not new. It originally served as a means for the bride’s family to ensure financial security for their daughter. However, during British colonial rule, the custom transformed into a transactional system where dowry became a mandatory obligation rather than a voluntary gift. Over time, this led to severe abuse, harassment, and even deaths related to dowry disputes. Even though the Dowry Prohibition Act was passed in 1961, the problem persists

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in modern India. Now, with the advent of technology, the dowry system has taken on new digital forms, making it harder to detect and regulate.

How Technology Is Normalizing Digital Dowry

Technology has had a dual impact on society—it has improved communication and access to information, but it has also been misused. Social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube promote influencer culture, where extravagant weddings, luxury items, and idealized relationships are glamorized. Young people feel pressured to match these online standards. In this environment, digital dowry becomes normalized. Digital gift registries, cryptocurrency transfers, and social media image-building have made these demands seem less like dowry and more like 'modern expectations.' This normalization makes digital dowry a silent but serious problem.

Forms of Digital Economic Coercion

Digital dowry shows up in several forms across different phases of a marriage. Before marriage, families may demand social media visibility, expensive gadgets, or evidence of digital income. During marriage, expectations may include funding a wedding with live streaming or drone videography, giving high-end gadgets, or transferring large sums via UPI or other digital wallets. After marriage, the bride might face digital surveillance, with her online accounts and spending habits being monitored. Some women are even forced to hand over control of their social media pages or income streams. Failure to meet these expectations can result in cyberbullying or mental harassment.

Digital Dowry vs. Traditional Dowry

Traditional dowry involved visible and tangible goods like jewelry, land, and household items. These were easier to track, report, and legally address. Digital dowry, on the other hand, often occurs through untraceable channels like cryptocurrency or hidden under the guise of modern gifting. This makes it harder to classify as dowry in legal terms. Moreover, while traditional dowry is publicly frowned upon, digital dowry often escapes criticism because it aligns with modern consumer culture. This deceptive acceptance makes it all the more dangerous and deeply embedded.

Case Studies & Media Reports

Several cases reported in Indian media underline the seriousness of this issue. In one incident, a groom refused to marry a girl because she used a low-end

smartphone. In another, a bride's family was asked to provide Bitcoin as part of the wedding arrangement. NCRB (National Crime Records Bureau) data shows a significant rise in tech-enabled dowry harassment, though the numbers are believed to be underreported. The digital nature of these transactions makes them hard to prove in court, and victims often hesitate to report due to fear of social stigma.

Existing Laws and Their Gaps

Several laws exist to combat dowry and domestic violence, but they are not updated to handle digital issues. The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, does not mention electronic or digital assets. IPC Section 498A addresses cruelty to married women but does not include digital coercion. The IT Act, 2000, mainly handles data breaches and cybercrime, not domestic abuse. Even the new Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), under Section 84, talks about cruelty but fails to define it in the digital context. There is an urgent need to amend these laws to make them relevant in today's tech-savvy world.

Social and Psychological Impact

The psychological toll of digital dowry on women is massive. They often suffer in silence, trying to meet unrealistic standards. This leads to anxiety, depression, and feelings of inadequacy. In many cases, women are forced to abandon their careers or hand over control of their online earnings. The practice also widens the gap between rich and poor, as lower-income families struggle to match the digital expectations of wealthier ones. In the long run, it harms the national agenda of Digital India by turning technology into a tool of oppression instead of empowerment.

Vision for Legal Reform

To tackle digital dowry effectively, existing laws must be updated. The Dowry Prohibition Act should include digital and e-assets under its purview. IPC Section 498A and the IT Act need amendments to cover tech-based domestic abuse. Pre-marital counseling sessions should include digital literacy and cyber rights education. Law enforcement officials should be trained to handle digital coercion cases. These steps are essential to bring India's legal system in line with the realities of modern marriages.

Policy and Awareness Recommendations

Policy changes must be accompanied by awareness campaigns. Schools and colleges should include education on digital rights and gender equality.

Government campaigns can raise awareness through TV, radio, and social media. Anonymous platforms should be created to report digital dowry. Police, lawyers, and judges must be trained in identifying and acting on such cases. Use of AI to detect patterns of digital financial abuse could be explored. Only a combined legal and social approach can tackle this growing issue.

Judicial Trends & Judgments

Although digital dowry is still a grey area in Indian law, courts have begun to address its implications. In the case of *Satya Narayan Tiwari v. State of U.P.*, the court discussed indirect dowry demands and their harmful consequences. Public Interest Litigations (PILs) are being filed seeking recognition of digital

dowry as a form of domestic violence. While progress is slow, judicial awareness is increasing, offering hope for more concrete action in the future.

Conclusion

Digital dowry is a modern form of an age-old evil. As India becomes more advanced and connected, its social customs must evolve as well. The use of technology should be ethical and equitable. Digital dowry reflects the misuse of tech to continue patriarchal practices. Strong laws, social awareness, and digital education are essential to stop this silent coercion. Only then can India truly achieve its vision of *Viksit Bharat by 2047*—technologically strong, but also socially just and inclusive.

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