CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Dowry has become a burning issue in the recent times, in the Indian society both metaphorically and literally. For instance, "bride-burning" for dowry or "dowry deaths", have been reported with increasing frequency in the media. At the same time, issue of dowry has become the central point of contention for activists, feminists, academics and others who are concerned with women's rights. There is a growing perception that the economic and social changes, that have accompanied the developmental process during the last forty years has led to the declining status of women in India. Numerous illustrations are cited in support of this, be it the ethics of amniocentesis or "bride-burning".

The present study is an attempt at understanding the various factors that explain the marital transfer payments involving dowry and bride-price in the context of Tamil Nadu. It is well known that most of the South Indian marriages are characterised by transfers of assets or cash or both from one party to the other. However, these transfers can be classified according to their directional uniqueness. For instance, a unilateral flow from the bride's party to the
groom's party is broadly known as dowry (varadakshinai) and a similar flow in the opposite direction is known as bride-price (parisam). Available evidence through sociological, ethnographic and literary sources suggest that these transfer payments are both community (Jati) specific, as well as possessive of elements of change over time. For instance, among certain peasant castes in Tamil Nadu, the system of bride-price once given as a compensation to the bride's kin by the groom's kin is now being transformed into a 'token' payment. Moreover, the grooms' kin now 'demand' dowry which shows that a transition from bride-price to dowry is underway. There is, therefore, great deal of dynamics in the nature and magnitude of the marital transfer payments. It will be our attempt in the present study to undertake an indepth analysis of the factors that lead to particular directions and magnitudes involved in such marital transfer payments both cross-sectionally and over time.

Marital transfer payments in the form of dowries and bride-prices are in reality socio-economic issues and not merely economic issues. If anything, these are social issues with powerful economic ramifications. We therefore propose to analyse the strongly present economic dimensions of this socio-economic problem.
1.2 Objectives

Based on this, we have developed the following research questions which ultimately form the objectives of this research.

1. What is the socio-economic background of a household offering dowry/bride-price?

2. Are there directional and magnitudinal variations which are causally traceable to the socio-economic background?

3. How are marriage decisions related to the occupational background of the household and do shifts in occupations and incomes affect the directional and magnitudinal aspects of marital transfer payments?

4. What is the influence of various sociological and socio-demographic factors such as caste, age at marriage of the bride and the groom and education on the marital transfer payments?

5. What are the determinants in the upward or downward mobility of the entire social group to which the household belongs, in the understanding of marital economic transfers?

6. What are the policy implications from the behavioural conclusions emerging out of the above questions?
These objectives are, in fact, derived from the following observations:

1. The crucial decision-making agent in the model type of marriage in Tamil Nadu is the household of the concerned person.

2. There are cross-sectional and inter-temporal variations in the household level relationship between asset stocks and income flows.

3. The economic behaviour of the household concerned is greatly influenced by these stock and flow magnitudes, and the decisions regarding marriages and marital transfer payments within the household.

4. These decisions, in the long run, reflect the relative fortunes of the social groups in the broader society and, finally,

5. The variations in the relationship between stock and flow magnitudes within households could itself lead to the occurrence of inter-jati marriages, thereby disturbing the group endogamy.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to throw up meaningful information on dowry and bride-price and to
undertake an indepth study of the socio-economic background of the sample households belonging to different generations.

1.3 Methodology of Research

Studies such as the present one can be undertaken only if we are able to generate primary data of our own. Because of the nature of our research questions, we collected data on both the cases of dowry and bride-price in order to enable a simultaneous, as well as comparative, analysis of both these systems.

In the first stage of data gathering, our interview technique was of a non-participating nature and generally focussed. Using structured schedules, information on occupation, income, household composition and size, education and caste was obtained. In the second stage, our interview technique was free-associational and of the quasi-participant type. Here unstructured interviews were extensively undertaken for the purpose of gathering information on marriage ritual practices and marital transfer payments. In the third stage, all forms of interview were subsumed under participant observation. In this stage, free association was the basic approach and much of the information gathered during the first two stages were cross-checked during this stage.
Field work was undertaken in three spatial contexts: metropolitan, urban and rural. We selected households belonging to two castes namely the brahmin and the muthuraja on a random basis. The data on 288 cases of brahmin households have been collected in the metropolitan and urban areas from Madras city and Srirangam municipality in Tiruchirapalli district. Data on 249 peasant households of muthuraja have been gathered from three villages namely Mahadanapuram, Mettu Mahadanapuram and Kammanallur villages in Kulitalai Taluk in Tiruchirapalli district. In all, we gathered information on 537 cases involving dowries and bride-prices in Tamil Nadu. A total of eighteen months was spent on field work from June 1986 to January 1988.

The data have been analysed generation-wise, by distributing the samples married during different decades, starting from 1940 to the period of survey (1986-87). The study involved two levels of data processing. At the first level, data pertaining to various socio-economic factors and their influence on marital transfers have been analysed. In addition to these distributions, correlation and multiple regression analyses between the socio-economic factors and marital transfers have been carried out. At the second level involving interactive dynamics, ideology, social values etc., data have been processed manually and inferentially. In addition, some case studies involving dowries and bride-prices have been discussed.
A schematic representation of the chapters that follow is given as under:

Chapter II pertains to a detailed survey of literature regarding marriage and marital transfer payments.

In Chapter III we discuss the economic aspects of marriage rituals among the brahmin and non-brahmin castes selected for the study.

Chapters IV and V consist of a detailed analysis of the marital transfer payments of the samples married during the decades from 1940 to 1960 and from 1960 to 1987 respectively.

In Chapter VI, we present an analytical model assessing the influence of various socio-economic factors on the marital transfer payments, and

Chapter VII consists of the summary and conclusions emerging out of the results.

Finally, detailed case studies have been incorporated as appendices.