



Dowry Deaths in India

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Abstract

Dowry related-violence is a type of gender-based violence where marriage is used as a means of making demands, extracting monetary and/or economic resources and controlling people. Despite the prohibition of the giving, taking and demanding of dowry under Indian law, the incidents of dowry cruelty and unnatural death continue to highlight the gap between the law and reality. This paper explores the nature of dowry as a social institution, the pressures that enable it to exist, the key provisions of the criminal law and the evidentiary rules, and the ability of preventive measures to respond. It uses secondary sources such as law, judicial rulings, published scholarship and official police statistics. The central thesis is that punishment alone is not enough to eradicate dowry violence; the rights of women to property and economic independence, early reporting, support for the survivors, accountability of investigation and continued social condemnation of marriage transaction are also essential.

Keywords: Dowry death; cruelty; gender-based violence; marriage payments; criminal justice; prevention

1. Introduction:

While the Constitution of India guarantees equality, it also guarantees life and personal liberty, still face discrimination and violence within the household. Dowry-related abuse can be particularly severe as it can start before marriage, persist with the constant expectation of payment after marriage, and be accompanied by the feelings of isolation, humiliation, violence or death. It transcends social and economic groups, but manifests itself differently in terms of visibility and impact.

Not all voluntary gifts are considered dowries. The legal and moral dilemma is when the property or valuable security is demanded, promised or transferred during or because of a marriage, or when the woman suffers a punishment because her family has failed to meet expectations. A customary gift can thus be a public description of bargaining, compulsion or an ongoing claim.

The worst consequences of this continuum are dowry deaths. Any forms include of homicide, burning the body, bodily harm or suicide after prolonged inhumane treatment. The offence should be seen as a breach of dignity, autonomy, equality and the right to be free from violence, and not simply a domestic dispute.

2. Objectives, Method and Scope:

This paper has four objectives:

- to identify the reasons for dowry demands to be socially resilient despite the statutory ban;
- to recognize the main types of economic, psychological and physical abuse suffered by the abused women;
- to discuss the ongoing validity of previous provisions and decisions.
- to suggest preventive actions which link criminal justice and social, educational and economic reform.

The research utilizes a socio-legal approach which is done at the desk. No interviews, surveys or field observations were conducted. Figures on registered crime are indicators of actual crime and due to under-reporting, classification procedures and delays in investigation or trial.

3. Meaning and Social Transformation of Dowry:

This is the wealth passed as a gift. Act 1961 provides a working definition of the term: It refers to the property or valuable security received, or other persons in connection with the marriage by the other party, or by any other person. The Act differentiates between transfers made as part of Muslim personal law (dower and mahr) and those that are truly voluntary and properly recorded customary gifts.

They were a daughter's portion of family property, a supply of newly founded family home or ceremonial gift from kin. However, over time, the transfer could become uncontrollable and something that the bride has to pay for, in exchange for marrying the groom, and his occupation or perceived desirability.

The negative aspect of dowry is thus more appropriately viewed as a system of entitlement. The marriage does not extinguish the transaction, demands still arise again for cash, vehicles, property, consumer goods, business capital or business expenses. Failure or inability to obey may result in punishment in the home.

4. Explanatory Perspectives:

4.1 Gift exchange and the language of custom

The anthropological studies of gift exchange reveal that gifts can give rise to obligations as well as a manifestation of affection. This ambiguity can be justified as acts of honor, tradition or generosity in marriage. Religious terminology to justify demands in the context of kanyadaan or dakshina may also deter families from challenging demands, even if the demands are not justified by religious symbolism.

4.2 Pre-mortem inheritance and women's property

Historically, women received less of the family's inheritance than males, and the family might consider a wedding transfer as a form of inheritance. This rationale turns unjust if the assets are owned by the husband/ in-laws instead of the wife. Therefore, inheritance and ownership rights are relevant in the prevention, so as to ensure that the rights are enforceable and strong.

4.3 Hypergamy, status competition and the marriage market

There may be greater bargaining over the education, occupation, caste position or the reputation of the groom's family in status-oriented marriage practices. If marriage is seen as a competitive market, the transfer expected could be larger if it is a high-status choose. Consumerism and public display can further exacerbate this process: By making weddings

an act of prestige, they can be used and abused to boost consumerism. This process can be compounded by consumerism and public display by turning weddings into acts of prestige.

4.4 Patriarchal dependence and social conformity

It is maintained because of an imbalance of power in the family. Women with no means of income, safe housing, assets, or support from her natal family can be vulnerable to abuse and may not have the resources to leave an unsafe home. Families may comply due to social stigma, engagement breakdown, marital separation or loss of younger siblings' opportunities. What happens when people conform together, one person's dissent becomes another's conformity. When people conform together, one person's dissent becomes another's conformity, this is called collective conformity.

5. Contemporary Manifestations and Harms:

Dowry-related violence often is not a one-time occurrence. Typically, it emerges in stages: first it's a request, then a condemnation of the gifts received, a pressure to give more, a limitation of communication, a threat to leave, a threat to remarry, and an increased level of abuse. The woman could be blamed for her family's financial problems, and become a means of further extraction of resources.

5.1 Economic abuse

- assuming responsibility for jewelry, money, household belongings or other valuables in the woman's name;
- continuously asking her for money and/or property from parents and relatives;
- withholding food, medical care or ordinary household expenditure as punishment; and
- restricting her income, savings or personal papers to other people.

5.2 Psychological and social abuse

- insults, ridicule and comparisons with other brides or families;
- divorce threats, expulsion, second marriage and threats against woman or her family;
- control and/or avoidance of calls and visits to her natal family;
- pitting fear and shame on the victim to make him disinclined to report the abuse.

5.3 Physical and fatal violence

Physical beatings, to confinement, starvation, forced labor, burns and injuries. In the worst cases, a woman's life is lost under mysterious or peculiar circumstances, with previous dowry claims dominating the investigation into her murder.

6. Factors Sustaining Dowry-Related Violence:

Gender hierarchy: Norms which give more authority and control over property to men.

Economic bargaining: Marriage can be arranged for transfer of wealth, or to provide financing for consumption, housing, vehicles or business activity.

Status anxiety: Families may overspend to prevent embarrassment and to prove superiority to their families and neighborhood.

Poor reporting structures: Victim may be afraid of retaliation, marital separation, police response, social stigma or loss of financial support.

Poor documentation: Compromised scenes: If the evidence from the scene is not documented, or has been corrupted because of the time that passed, then the evidence could be weak.

Normalization: Things such as demands may be put in a manner that is disguised as a gift or family expectations.

There can be a certain cause for the dissatisfaction, such as a promise of payment not upheld, or the lack of satisfaction with what was received – or perhaps a new demand later. The root cause is a culture that sees the woman's family as financially responsible for the family of her husband.

7. Legal and Institutional Framework:

It is being tackled in India through special laws, general criminal law, presumptions and procedures. The provisions are all interconnected: Dowry Prohibition Act relates to the transaction and the demand, criminal law relates to the cruelty and the death, and evidence law provides for the time when the court is compelled to draw a presumption from the proven facts.

7.1 Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961

No agreement on dowry will be valid, and property exchanged as dowry be given to the wife or her heirs. The law also allows for the appointment of Dowry Prohibition Officers and 2 forms of customary gifts; one the voluntary gift, which will not be regarded as dowry, and one which will be listed and treated as such, if not demanded.

Whether a transfer is voluntary or coerced is not determined by the name that the parties give it, but by the circumstances. Examples of evidence are messages, negotiations for marriage, bank statements, lists, witness statements, and the timing of further demands.

7.2 Maintenance of lists of marriage presents

Under the Dowry Prohibition Rules, 1985, separate lists of presents to bride and the bridegroom. Each should read: What, how much, who gave it to them and a relationship with the couple, what is it. The lists shall be compiled at or as soon as may be convenient after the marriage; and be signed by the parties to the marriage. Genuine gifts can be safeguarded by appropriate documentation and if they are subsequently misappropriated or misrepresented, they can be traced back.

7.3 Criminal law after 1 July 2024

The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 (BNS) was enacted on 1st July 2024. It is dealt with in Section 80. It is applicable where within 7 years from marriage, she dies with burns or injury or other cause which is not usual.

Section 85 and 86 BNS speak of cruelty by the husband/his relatives and what constitutes a cruel act of the statute includes serious acts which have a deleterious effect on the life or health of the woman, or acts of harassment with an intention to compel her or her relatives to pay an unlawful demand for property or valuable security. IPC such as sections 304B and 498A, are also relevant until the date of the coming into force of the new codes under the relevant saving and transitional provisions.

7.4 Evidentiary presumptions and procedure

The term “soon before” does not specify a set number of days. The courts look to the relationship between the cruelty and the death to see if it is a close and continuing relationship. A remote or disconnected incident is usually not enough, but a live and proximate connection is necessary.

The procedural schedule allows the cognizance of dowry death, makes it a non-bailable offence. Investigation should include preservation of the scene, financial and communication evidence, prompt examination of relatives, neighbors and other witnesses and collection of medical and forensic material. The requirements of Statutory Inquest and

Post Mortem become especially significant in deaths occurring in the early times of marriage in a case of suspicious death.

7.5 Summary of principal provisions

Provision	Subject	Core legal effect	Forum / consequence
Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961	Giving, taking or demanding dowry	Declares the contract invalid, annuls agreements, safeguards the wife's interest.	Criminal sanctions and police action.
BNS, s. 80	Dowry death	Unnatural death within 7 yrs and/or the presence of proximate dowry related cruelty/harassment.	Minimum – 7 years, up to life imprisonment, Court of Session.
BNS, ss. 85–86	When husband and/or relative cruel to...	Cruelty and coercive harassment related to unlawful property demands are punishable by the following:	Prosecuting crime, including where there is no death.
BSA, s. 118	Presumption as to dowry death	If the court accepts the foundation facts, then it is presumed.	Presumption of fact at trial.
1985 Present-List Rules	Records of gifts made freely.	Needs the bride and bridegroom to keep detailed lists.	Promotes transparency and ownership/voluntariness.

8. Judicial Interpretation:

There has been a recurring theme across judicial decisions that the prosecution has to first prove the statutory basis for a conviction: that the death occurred within the prescribed time frame and circumstances must have been connected to dowry; and that there is credible evidence of cruelty or harassment by the husband that was connected to the dowry soon before the death. That being said, the presumption of the evidence comes into play once the facts are established.

Baldev Singh v. State of Punjab, AIR 2009 SC 913. The decision is commonly discussed in relation to repeated monetary demands, cruelty shortly after marriage and the use of family testimony to assess abetment and matrimonial cruelty.

Sahebrao v. State of Maharashtra, AIR 2006 SC 2002. The case illustrates the evaluation of a suspicious death occurring soon after marriage and the need to consider evidence of demands, payments and conduct as a connected whole rather than as isolated discrepancies.

State of Karnataka v. M. V. Manjunathgowda, (2003) 2 SCC 188. The judgment is cited on the operation of the statutory presumption after foundational facts are proved and on the accused's burden to rebut the inference arising from dowry-linked cruelty.

The final outcome of a case depends on the whole case record. There is no automatic destruction of a prosecution as a result of any minor differences of recollection by witnesses, but there must be a clear difference between reliable evidence and assumption on the part of the court. On the other hand, the presumption of law will not supplant the requirement to establish the simple facts which trigger the presumption.

9. Statistical Overview:

According to the official parliamentary data of 6,450 dowry-death cases are reported in India every year in 2022 and 6,156 were reported in 2023. For the year 2023, 4284 trials were completed and out of this, 1501 cases were convicted, leading to an all-India conviction rate of 35.0 per cent for the year 2023. Data do not suggest that the cases registered and trials completed in the same year are from the same incidents.

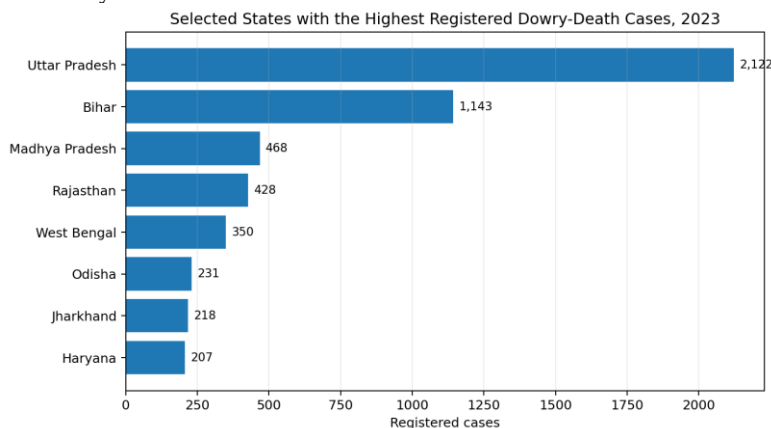


Figure 1. Registered dowry-death cases in selected high-burden States, 2023

Source: Ministry of Home Affairs, Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No. 5086, answered 24 March 2026; data attributed to Crime in India.

State / UT	Cases registered (2022)	Cases registered (2023)	Convictions (2023)	Conviction rate (2023)
Uttar Pradesh	2138	2122	887	65.3
Bihar	1057	1143	73	34.8
Madhya Pradesh	518	468	193	27.2
Rajasthan	451	428	60	45.5
West Bengal	406	350	8	6.3
Odisha	263	231	18	12.8
Jharkhand	208	218	92	27.8
Haryana	234	207	21	10.8
Total (All India)	6450	6156	1501	35.0

CR = cases registered; CON = cases convicted; conviction rate = convictions divided by trials completed $\times 100$. Full State/UT table appears in Appendix A.

Ranking of social attitudes that can be drawn from a high proportion of registered cases is concentrated in a few high-population States. Recorded totals are impacted by population size, reporting practices, police registration, and classification and institutional capacity.

10. Comparative Perspective:

The concept of marriage transfer is not exclusive and has varied in different places and times. Historical European dowry typically referred to property that was given to aid in marriage or resolve an inheritance. Today the word is often linked with gifts from the groom's family or, in its destructive usage, to oppressive requests from the bride's family.

Nepal: Referred to as daijo or dajjo. While some communities have a strong legal prohibition on polygyny, this is not the case in others, and forced demands could leave women vulnerable to abuse.

Although there are legal measures in place to control dowry, it is still a known practice of economic pressure in Bangladesh, known as joutuk. It is different from the traditional bride price.

Pakistan: Jahez is a gift brought by the bride, and mahr is a legal obligation to the bride. Mixing these two up can make it difficult to understand the woman's rights to mahr and the force behind the other demands.

Iran & Turkey: Household goods brought by the bride's family, usually called “jahiziye” or “ceyiz” may serve as a trousseau; the presents might take the form of household items. These practices are not the same as criminal dowry but can lead to inequality through display and pressure from the family.

Without differentiated consideration of local law and custom, comparative discussion cannot aid. A shared label might apply to various property arrangements – the issue of human rights is whether the transfer is voluntary, involves choice and is not punishable or violent for the woman.

11. Prevention and Remedial Measures:

11.1 Strengthen women's economic and property position

Ownership and control of assets should not be replaced by husbands' wedding costs and daughters' inheritance should be considered as common property rather than a special one. Education, employment, banking, and access to digital records and secure housing decreases dependency and facilitates access to help.

11.2 Make marriage transactions transparent

Families should NOT accept negotiations where there is a cost involved in marriage. Modest voluntary gifts in the statutory lists and kept the person receiving the gift. Registrars, religious institutions and community organizations may provide normal gift list forms and information about demands that are prohibited.

11.3 Improve early reporting and survivor support

Safe reporting channels in police stations, women's help desks, protection officers, legal services authorities and health facilities. Complaints should result in risk assessment, saving of messages and financial records, medical treatment, if needed, shelter if needed, and protection from retaliation.

11.4 Ensure prompt and professional investigation

As soon as a suspicious death is suspected, the scene needs to be protected, a forensic examination, collection of digital and financial evidence, and documentation of the post-mortem. Coercive control, legal definition of dowry, evidentiary presumptions and trauma-informed interviewing should be taught to investigators and prosecutors.

11.5 Build accountable institutions

It is necessary for Dowry Prohibition Officers and anti-dowry cells to have clear jurisdiction, staffing, systems to keep records and review systems. The number of settlements and arrests should be just one of several indicators of performance and the recovery of the woman's property and the fairness of the law.

11.6 Change social incentives

Instead of slogans, mass media campaigns and surveys must inform people of their rights on a practical level and in terms of what constitutes a demand, how to keep evidence, where to complain, and how to protect assets. Public no dowry commitments can be taken by schools, colleges, public offices and professional associations. Men and families that stand in opposition to transactional marriages should be visible in the reform struggle.

11.7 A coordinated prevention framework

Stage	Priority action	Responsible actors
Before marriage	Deny demands, accept voluntary presents and ensure that the woman is in control of her assets.	Families, registrars, community and religious institutions
Early warning	Record threats and payments; confidential counselling, planning for safety, and legal support.	All police help desks, protection officers, legal services, and NGOs are given a warning. All police help desks, protection officers, legal services and NGOs receive warning.
After violence	Medical treatment, accommodation, financial assistance, recovery and protection from intimidation of property.	The health system, district administration, courts, support services.
After suspicious death	Immediate inquest, forensic preservation, digital/financial investigation and witness protection.	Prosecutors, executive magistracy, police
Long-term prevention	Enforcement of inheritance, education, employment and public awareness of institutions.	The government, schools, employers, civil society, media.

12. Conclusion:

Dowry death is the extreme form of an overall trend involving the acquisition of wealth and new subservient status through marriage. Preservation of the practice doesn't imply lack of law, it implies that economic dependency, social silence and institutional delay are prevailing which means legal rules are not strong enough.

Any credible response will be a combination of prohibition and prevention. Criminal provisions should be used judiciously and at the earliest, the statutory presumptions should be based on sound evidence, and the woman's safety and assets should be safeguarded since the first report. In parallel, equal inheritance, education, employment and the denial of status-based marriage bargaining is necessary to decrease social supply of dowry demands. The long-term goal isn't only prevention. It is a marriage culture where gifts are truly given freely, women manage their own wealth, families don't buy a position, and nobody is jeopardized when a financial promise is not fulfilled.

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Appendix A: State/UT-wise Recorded Cases and Trial Outcomes, 2022–2023

CR = cases registered; CTC = cases in which trials were completed; CON = cases convicted; CVR = conviction rate. The annual registration and trial columns are flow measures and should not be matched case-for-case.

Sl.	State / Union Territory	2022				2023			
		CR	CTC	CON	CVR	CR	CTC	CON	CVR
1	Andhra Pradesh	100	93	8	8.6	95	148	17	11.5
2	Arunachal Pradesh	0	0	0	-	1	0	0	-
3	Assam	175	65	7	10.8	101	77	7	9.1
4	Bihar	1057	249	89	35.7	1143	210	73	34.8
5	Chhattisgarh	57	53	27	50.9	46	64	13	20.3
6	Goa	0	0	0	-	1	0	0	-
7	Gujarat	10	9	0	0.0	12	3	0	0.0
8	Haryana	234	140	20	14.3	207	194	21	10.8
9	Himachal Pradesh	1	0	0	-	0	1	0	0.0
10	Jharkhand	208	238	61	25.6	218	331	92	27.8
11	Karnataka	165	173	1	0.6	156	238	6	2.5
12	Kerala	11	6	1	16.7	8	3	0	0.0
13	Madhya Pradesh	518	697	185	26.5	468	710	193	27.2

Sl.	State / Union Territory	2022				2023			
		CR	CTC	CON	CVR	CR	CTC	CON	CVR
14	Maharashtra	180	143	7	4.9	170	157	7	4.5
15	Manipur	0	0	0	-	1	0	0	-
16	Meghalaya	1	1	0	0.0	0	1	1	100.0
17	Mizoram	0	0	0	-	0	0	0	-
18	Nagaland	0	0	0	-	0	0	0	-
19	Odisha	263	177	19	10.7	231	141	18	12.8
20	Punjab	71	26	4	15.4	44	48	6	12.5
21	Rajasthan	451	167	66	39.5	428	132	60	45.5
22	Sikkim	0	0	0	-	0	0	0	-
23	Tamil Nadu	29	37	6	16.2	11	33	8	24.2
24	Telangana	137	140	24	17.1	145	180	26	14.4
25	Tripura	25	4	1	25.0	21	14	5	35.7
26	Uttar Pradesh	2138	1134	686	60.5	2122	1358	887	65.3
27	Uttarakhand	70	24	3	12.5	48	57	25	43.9
28	West Bengal	406	100	14	14.0	350	127	8	6.3
	TOTAL STATE(S)	6307	3676	1229	33.4	6027	4227	1473	34.8
29	A&N Islands	0	0	0	-	0	1	0	0.0
30	Chandigarh	1	1	1	100.0	4	1	0	0.0
31	D&N Haveli and Daman & Diu	1	0	0	-	0	3	1	33.3
32	Delhi	131	9	1	11.1	115	43	26	60.5
33	Jammu & Kashmir	9	3	0	0.0	9	9	1	11.1
34	Ladakh	0	0	0	-	0	0	0	-
35	Lakshadweep	0	0	0	-	0	0	0	-
36	Puducherry	1	0	0	-	1	0	0	-
	TOTAL UT(S)	143	13	2	15.4	129	57	28	49.1
	TOTAL (ALL INDIA)	6450	3689	1231	33.4	6156	4284	1501	35.0

Source: Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No. 5086, Annexure (data attributed to Crime in India).

Appendix B: State/UT-wise Recorded Dowry-Death Cases and Trial Outcomes (Official Update, 2025–2026)

Scope note: “2025–2026” identifies the period in which the official statistical updates were published; it does not represent the years in which the cases occurred. The State/UT-wise trial-outcome figures reproduced below cover 2022–2023, which are the years reported in the cited parliamentary annexure. CR = cases registered; CTC = cases in which trials were completed; CON = cases convicted; and CVR = conviction rate.

Sl.	State / Union Territory	2022				2023			
		CR	CTC	CON	CVR	CR	CTC	CON	CVR
1	Andhra Pradesh	100	93	8	8.6	95	148	17	11.5
2	Arunachal Pradesh	0	0	0	-	1	0	0	-
3	Assam	175	65	7	10.8	101	77	7	9.1
4	Bihar	1057	249	89	35.7	1143	210	73	34.8
5	Chhattisgarh	57	53	27	50.9	46	64	13	20.3
6	Goa	0	0	0	-	1	0	0	-
7	Gujarat	10	9	0	0.0	12	3	0	0.0
8	Haryana	234	140	20	14.3	207	194	21	10.8
9	Himachal Pradesh	1	0	0	-	0	1	0	0.0
10	Jharkhand	208	238	61	25.6	218	331	92	27.8
11	Karnataka	165	173	1	0.6	156	238	6	2.5
12	Kerala	11	6	1	16.7	8	3	0	0.0
13	Madhya Pradesh	518	697	185	26.5	468	710	193	27.2
14	Maharashtra	180	143	7	4.9	170	157	7	4.5
15	Manipur	0	0	0	-	1	0	0	-
16	Meghalaya	1	1	0	0.0	0	1	1	100.0
17	Mizoram	0	0	0	-	0	0	0	-
18	Nagaland	0	0	0	-	0	0	0	-
19	Odisha	263	177	19	10.7	231	141	18	12.8
20	Punjab	71	26	4	15.4	44	48	6	12.5
21	Rajasthan	451	167	66	39.5	428	132	60	45.5
22	Sikkim	0	0	0	-	0	0	0	-
23	Tamil Nadu	29	37	6	16.2	11	33	8	24.2
24	Telangana	137	140	24	17.1	145	180	26	14.4
25	Tripura	25	4	1	25.0	21	14	5	35.7
26	Uttar Pradesh	2138	1134	686	60.5	2122	1358	887	65.3
27	Uttarakhand	70	24	3	12.5	48	57	25	43.9
28	West Bengal	406	100	14	14.0	350	127	8	6.3
	TOTAL STATE(S)	6307	3676	1229	33.4	6027	4227	1473	34.8
29	A&N Islands	0	0	0	-	0	1	0	0.0

Sl.	State / Union Territory	2022				2023			
		CR	CTC	CON	CVR	CR	CTC	CON	CVR
30	Chandigarh	1	1	1	100.0	4	1	0	0.0
31	D&N Haveli and Daman & Diu	1	0	0	-	0	3	1	33.3
32	Delhi	131	9	1	11.1	115	43	26	60.5
33	Jammu & Kashmir	9	3	0	0.0	9	9	1	11.1
34	Ladakh	0	0	0	-	0	0	0	-
35	Lakshadweep	0	0	0	-	0	0	0	-
36	Puducherry	1	0	0	-	1	0	0	-
	TOTAL UT(S)	143	13	2	15.4	129	57	28	49.1
	TOTAL (ALL INDIA)	6450	3689	1231	33.4	6156	4284	1501	35.0

Source: Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No. 5086, Annexure (data attributed to Crime in India).

Current-data note: NCRB released Crime in India 2024 in May 2026. That publication reports 5,737 dowry-death cases for 2024. Final State/UT annual data for 2025 have not yet been published, and 2026 is an ongoing year.