

Essay on Dowry: A Curse

"It is ironic that dowry was originally designed to safeguard the woman and the provision was made in the form of "Sthreedhan" ("Stree" means woman and "dhan" as wealth) consisting of money, property or gifts given solely to the woman by her parents at the marriage. The abuse of this custom eroded and aborted the original meaningful function where dowry was a safety net for the woman it was forcible made as a price tag for the groom."

Dowry or Dahej is served by payment in cash or/and kind by the bride's family to the bridegroom's family along with the bride (called Kanyadaan). Kanyadaan is an important part of Hindu marital rites. Kanya means daughter and dana means gift.

Dowry originated in upper caste families as the wedding gift to the bride. It was later given to help with marriage expenses and taken as insurance in case her in-laws mistreated her. Although the dowry was legally banned in 1961, it continues to be highly institutionalized. The groom often demands a dowry consisting of a large sum of money, farm animals, furniture, and electronics.

The practice of dowry abuse is still on the rise in India. The most severe is bride burning when it was considered insufficient dowry by her husband or in-laws. Most of these incidents are given the shape of accidental burns in the kitchen or are disguised as a suicide. It is evident that there exist deep-rooted prejudices against women in India. Cultural practices such as the payment of dowry are serving as death warrants for women in Indian society.

The need for the enactment of the 1961 Dowry Prohibition Act in the Indian Penal Code stemmed from a noticeable increase in the number of

Indian brides documented to have died in their early married years under suspicious and mysterious circumstances. The cause of death was characteristically labeled as “kitchen fires”. The rampant occurrence of bridal deaths by kitchen fires was usually uniform in nature with the classical setting of the young bride found dead in the kitchen, clad in a kerosene-soaked sari, trapped in flames and left alone to burn to ashes. Very often it was the groom’s mother or someone from the groom’s family. In some cases, the groom himself acted. The reward in these cases is another bride, another dowry.

Along with the curious vicissitudes of a modernizing India, the growing middle class with its opportunities for upward mobility also propagated inevitable inflationary monetary expectations to an already existing evil. This may be considered as one of the most promiscuous and prevalent linkages to the past and present of many cultures.

The term, “dowry” as a quantifiable offering does not have its roots solely in the Indian culture. It has been noted in early 12th century Europe and was often reflected in European fairy tales and literature making such references to a woman as offerings of a “straw mattress”, a “wooden stool” or “farm animals”. The amount of “money” for dowry depended on the status of being a rich or poor woman. Monetary exchanges also had the show of preserving the aristocracy as a class and as a means of cultural and economic determination. An interesting event utilization of dowry, symbolizing both marriages as well as a union of the aristocracy and colonial dominance was observed in 1662 when Charles II of England was given the Indian city of Bombay as a dowry for marrying Catherine of Braganza of Portugal.

The price of the Indian groom had considerably increased based on his qualifications, profession, and income. Doctors, Chartered Accountants, and Engineers expect a handsome dowry. A reactionary

wave of preserving oppressive practices of dowry demands appeared also in the West and other countries where immigrants of Indian origin established themselves.

The steady rise of the gruesome dowry deaths has spread a sense of hopelessness due to the lack of legal provisions and avenues made available to families who lost their daughters. In 1961 with the Dowry Prohibition Act, it was officially outlawed but in reality, eradication was far from accomplished. In 1986 harsher legal amendments to the 1961 Dowry Act such as Section 174 CrPC enforced investigations of suspicious bridal deaths and punishment of seven years to life imprisonment and possibly death for those found guilty and convicted of bride burning. In spite of these legal breakthroughs, shocking statistics on dowry deaths continued. The '90s showed a steady yearly increase in bridal death tolls with many more deaths unreported. Over 20,000 women across India between 1990 and 1993 are reported to have met with this fatal incidence.

The official records of these incidents are low because they are often reported as accidents or suicides by the family. In Delhi, a woman is burned to death almost every twelve hours. In 1988, 2,209 and in 1990, 4,835 women were reported killed in dowry-related incidents. It is important to reiterate that official records are immensely under-reported. The lack of official registration of this crime is apparent in Delhi where ninety percent of cases of women burnt were recorded as accidents, five percent as suicide, and only the remaining five percent were shown as murder. Police are also found playing cards in these cases for knitting their own nest.

According to Government figures, there were 5,377 dowry deaths in 1993 with an increase of 12% from 1992. Despite the existence of rigorous laws to prevent dowry-deaths under a 1986 amendment to the Indian Penal Code (IPC), convictions are rare, and judges (usual men)

are often seen uninterested and susceptible to bribery. Recent newspaper reports have focused on the alarming rate of such deaths in the Hamirpur, Mandi, and Bilaspur districts of Himachal Pradesh.

In spite of banning practices of dowry, harassment, extortion, and demands as a preventive measure to avoid dowry deaths, the social evil of dowry deaths continues. The recent update and legal outcome of some cases illustrate the other side of The Dowry Prohibition Act. The legal system should put the accused of false dowry claims as a possible counter mechanism to blackmail and extortion via matrimony. There is a considerable rise in “passport weddings” by Indians seek matrimony with non-resident Indians (NRI) holding foreign citizenships. Once they get married and arrive on the desired foreign soil, many of them resort to tactics to earn more “dollars” from the NRI they married and the females crying false allegations of dowry harassment. When the mentality of dowry demands, along with accusations of extortion and harassment whether true or false start to be part of the imported and migrating baggage, it marks a nouveau scenario among some immigrant marital problems and family law cases. The autopsy of some arranged marriages which extended beyond Indian soil and resulted in separation and breakdown started to reveal traces of carrying the burden of this imported baggage as the norm for negotiating marriages and staying “happily” married.

Social laws are required where culture failed to institutionally stop injustices of dowry deaths, infanticide in case the woman fails to produce sons and leading to family breakdown due to dowry harassment. More importantly, there needs to be a cultural reform on the status of women which can be done away with only through education. The problem is compounded by the fact that 63 percent of the female population in India is still illiterate. Perhaps a good starting point is population control and compulsory education for boys and girls alike.

The continuance of internal contradictions calmly coexisting with the cultural ethics of dowry, arranged marriages, and the rights of young girls and women remains a challenge. Ultimately social responsibility will rest upon the initiative and mentality of that segment of the Indian male population having a system entrapped in the extortion of dowry.

Dowry has reduced the status of women to that of a commodity, available in the market with so much cash and gifts. The grooms have also become a saleable commodity available at such a price, earning so much amount per month. The rates of dowry have been fixed for the grooms of different categories—Doctors, Engineers, Bank officers, Govt. officers, Businessmen, commands high ranking in dowry parameters.

The cancer of dowry is spreading in a virulent form while the law to curb dowry is a total failure. Huge dowry is still demanded, even when the girls are well educated and earn much more to supplement the income of the family. Sometimes, after the dowry is settled, further demands are increased at the marriage function itself, making plight the parents of the bride, very pitiable and pathetic.

In case the marriage with dowry lesser than the demand takes place a new chapter of mental and physical violence against the bride begins to extract more dowry. The violence starts from the first day one with taunting remarks from the in-laws and the docile husband also. Analyzing the things in their crude shape, we find, the women are the enemy of the women. Has the mother-in-law and sister-in-law of a girl opposed the demand for dowry, the harassment being done to the bride; in-law the position would have been different altogether. Generally, it is the female in a family inflicting verbal and physical violence upon the bride. In most of the cases of dowry death, the mother and sister of the groom are noticed to have active involvement.

Several laws are there to curb the dowry. Many NGOs and Social Institutions, Women organizations, National Human Rights Commission also there to help the women in such cases. Family courts are also established to settle disputes in an amicable way. Police are also taking immediate action in cases of violence and dowry deaths. Press and media also play a great role to make such incidence public, but in spite of all these, a social awakening is required to kill the devil of dowry.

Kudos to Nisha Sharma, a U.P. girl who returned back the 'would-be groom' backhanded for the demands of dowry. Kudos to the girls of Delhi and Chennai who dare to refuse to marry the boys demanding dowry and reported the matter to the police and they were put behind the bar. But every girl can't be Nisha Sharma and dare not to report the matter to the police. The need of the hour is social awareness at least among the females. If females of all families stop demanding dowry if they oppose their male counterparts for demanding dowry if females refuse to marry a boy demanding dowry, the state of women would be changed. But it also does not seem easy, in this materialistic world, where the lust for money, dominates all actions, moral or immoral.

More stringent laws, more awareness, more education to the girls more self-dependence of the girls, and a social awakening can only curb this ever-increasing evil of dowry.