
THE INVISIBLE PRICE TAG- INDIA'S OBSESSION WITH DOWRY

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ABSTRACT

One of the most prevalent institutions in society is marriage. It represents love, trust, companionship, and friendship. However, today the cultivating practice of dowry has turned this sacred union into a business transaction leading to an extensive discrimination and abuse of women. Some cases have come to light while many of these go unreported. The present paper has made an attempt to critically analyse the existing dowry system of India, following its historical origins and subsequent developments. The paper starts with examining the background of this evil practice. Further, the author has discovered the causes of such a practice. An attempt is made to detect the drive behind the commission of such dreadful acts. The present paper tries to examine how dowry has now become a gruesome custom that infringes the fundamental rights of women in our society. The paper has brought into light many heart wrenching tales of dowry deaths in the country. Additionally, the author has examined the role of Indian legislature and judiciary in dealing with these matters. In conclusion, the author has given numerous suggestions on steps to be taken to end these horrifying practices. The study has reached a conclusion that a woman's equality and rights cannot be determined by her material bringing. Marriage must not be viewed as a business instead it must continue as a partnership built on love, trust and cooperation by not just the couple but also by the families involved.

Key Words: - Dowry, Women, Violence, Death, Legislature, Judiciary

“Every woman is worthy of a man who supports her, loves her and above all respects her, no matter where she comes from!”

I. Introduction

Marriage is supposed to be one of the most beautiful moments for many people. It is a magnificent journey that two individuals venture into, which blooms on commitment and partnership. But today innumerable women engaging into marriage are subjected to a lot of violence, stress and torture. The desire of a joyful marriage is often shattered when huge demands for money and other valuables are made by the groom/husband and his family. This menace which has made marriage lose its significance today is commonly known as the “Dowry System”.

II. Meaning and Origin

Dowry/Dahej/Hunda in simple terms is the parental payment of cash, gold or any other item while giving the daughter's hand to the groom in marriage. Legally, it is any property or valuable security given or agreed to be given either directly or indirectly by one party to the marriage to the other party before, during or any time after the marriage. This practice is carried out irrespective of any religion. Among the Hindus, its origin can be traced back to the Vedic period where gifts received from parents, brother, and relatives out of love and affection were considered as a woman's property (Streedhan). In Islam, Jahez-E-Fatimi constituted gifts given to the bride by her family. This was also prevalent among the Christians and other religions to help the newly wedded couple to set up a household together. However, with the advent of economic relaxations this act of gesture turned into a compulsory ritual thereby leading to a lot of complications for the bride and her family. A sacred union slowly got converted into a financial deal between the parties.

III. Tradition or greed? - Reasons for taking/giving dowry

Today, taking and giving of dowry has grown into an indispensable part of an Indian wedding. There is a propelling force in the society to follow certain customs which are completely irrational. Under the garb of tradition, dowry has become mandatory in every cult. It's like a bidding event for the family to find the most suitable match for their daughter. Blatant demands are placed from the groom's side. The bride's family fulfils them by all means under the threat of withdrawal of marriage and in the fear of losing respect in the community. In most cases,

extended demands are put forth overtly before the wife by the husband and his family after marriage thereby making her life miserable. There is a general perception among people that a male is always a producer who earns for the family while a female is expected to undertake domestic work which has little or no value at all. So, she is often considered only as a consumer and a financial weight to the family. This outlook fuels the plague of dowry. Inadequate educational opportunities to girls have also contributed fiercely. In India there is a popular concept of 'Big fat Indian Weddings'. There is always a desire in the family to flaunt its social status by spending to a great extent. This also to a stretch contributes in the peril.

IV. Tears of sorrow-Effects of dowry system

India is a polestar for collective evils like dowry and deaths relating to same. According to the National Crime Record Bureau's "Crime in India" 2019 Report, in India after every 1 hour 30 minutes there is 1 dowry death and after every 4 minutes one woman is subjected to cruelty by her husband or in laws.²¹ women are killed each day in India due to dowry harassment. The highest cases are recoded from states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. These deaths are caused by means of burning, poisoning, strangulation, torture, domestic violence, confinement, slashing their genitals or breasts with razors and starvation. They are at times kicked out of the house and kept away from their children. Pouring out a flammable liquid and setting her ablaze is the most common heinous act. Approximately 8000 cases of bride burning are recorded annually in the country. At times, women who can't bear the harassment end up their own lives. Over the years the suicide rate in this context has also doubled.

To escape larger dowries many families, marry off their daughters at a very early age. In India, 1.5 million girls are married before they turn 18. Girls are also deprived of their Right to Education. The common mind set is that they belong to another household (Paraaya Dhan) and educating them would be a waste of money. Instead, they should be trained on how to be an ideal housewife. The difference between the male and female literacy rate is 20%. Enormous dowries also entangle poor parents into huge debts. Considering daughters as an economic burden many female foetuses are brutally murdered in the womb itself. An estimated of 45.8 million girls are missing from India's population.

The NCRB's Crimes in India 2025 report indicated that 5737 cases were registered under the Dowry Prohibition Act in 2025 averaging nearly one death per 90 minutes every day. All these figures are clearly indicative of how daughters are devalued in the society.

V. Chills down the spine- Horrifying tales

India has a lengthy list of dowry related cases. Monstrous and dreadful acts are performed mercilessly in the country by husbands and in laws who are consumed by greed. These narrations make us question marriage and humanity.

Recently, the Twisha Sharma Dowry case, 2026, is making headlines. Five months after her marriage, a 33-year-old actor-model was found death in her house, prompting a Supreme Court suo motu cognizance and a CBI probe into claims of physical and psychological abuse for dowry by her in-laws.

Deepika Nagar Case, 2026- A 24-year-old newlywed was discovered dead in Greater Noida. Her family claimed that she was troubled for dowry. Her husband and father-in-law were arrested due to persistent torture over demands for an SUV and ₹51 lakh.

In 2015, Raavi died on her way to the hospital after she was brutally tortured by her husband for money by locking her in a small room for over two months without water and food.

Tanya(Haryana) was administered sleeping pills and both her wrists were cut by her in laws for dowry.

Sumitra(Delhi) had to compensate for her dark complexion with her life. After marriage she was treated outrageously by her in laws with huge demands of gold, until one day she was found dead in her matrimonial house.

Another gruesome act where Kamlesh Rathore's (Uttar Pradesh) nose was chopped off by her husband as she could not afford to pay the ordered amount.

In yet another shocking incident, just for an amount of Rs.50,000 a husband tied his wife Gulab Kaur (Punjab) to a wooden bench and set her on fire. His cruelty did not end there. Just when their daughter started crying, he threw her also in the fire.

Married in 2018, Pinkie (Uttar Pradesh) was shot by her husband just ten days after marriage as her family could not give him a car.

VI. Brave hearts- Women who fought against the devil

“Why should I give dowry? My parents have provided me with education and I am capable of doing anything that a man can do!” Says Rani, who called off her marriage at the last moment when the groom’s demands went beyond limits.

“He never gave me the status of his wife. I was only asked to toil in the house. Now that I am free, I will fight for my rights no matter what!” says Komal, who was humiliated by her husband and in laws for dowry.

“He married me, took so much money from my family, ran away and now he says I want divorce. I want an answer to all the grief I have gone through!” says Paramjeet, a survivor of dowry violence.

VII. Legislative Approach

The fight against dowry started way back in 1939 when ‘The Sind Deti Leti Act, 1939’ was passed by the provisional government of Sind. However, the act did not yield the desired results. Eventually, ‘The Bihar Dowry Restraint Act, 1950’ and ‘The Andhra Pradesh Dowry Prohibition Act, 1958’ also failed to make a mark. Looking at the degrading scenario, the Central Legislature made its move towards prohibiting dowry in 1961 by passing “The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961”. This Act is currently operative and was amended twice in the year 1984 and 1986 to provide clear definitions of terms associated with dowry and improved stringent punishments. This act prohibits the taking/giving/demand of dowry and provides for an imprisonment up to 5 years and a fine up to Rs. 15,000. The Bhartiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 contains specific provisions dealing with the dowry death and cruelty by husband or his relative. The Bhartiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023 and The Bhartiya Sakshya Adhiniyam, 2023 also contains certain provisions dealing with dowry related offences.

VIII. Judicial Initiatives

The Supreme Court of India has time and again held that issuing a list of household items and gold at the time of settlement of marriage amounts to dowry. It has observed that the time for demand of dowry is not just restricted to before or during the marriage but it also includes demands made after marriage and the Dowry Prohibition Act which aims in keeping a check on the menace makes it punishable. The court has held that any man who deprives his wife of her right to Streedhan shall be liable for Criminal breach of trust and a case under Section 316 of BNS, 2023 is maintainable. In case of death of the wife, the husband or the in laws can be arrested on the basis of her dying declaration in the absence of any evidence. The court has also expressed its view on providing for death penalty in such brutal crimes against women.

IX. Conclusion and Recommendations

No doubt there is a wedding wish list in every heart and parents are over enlarging themselves to give their daughter a splendid wedding. Yet their happiness is evasive. The general belief is that dowry helps in intensifying her relations with her new family. But the question is, does she really need to undertake such a money-oriented business for the same? It is really regrettable to learn that a daughter's value is just cramped to these items of luxury. Where are we leading towards? What are the flaws? What is the rationale? All these questions are still left unanswered.

It's high time we need to raise our voice against it. Our daughters are exorbitantly precious to be accepted by anyone in exchange of such assets. Instead of saving up for their big day let's invest the same money in providing them with the best education, making them self-sufficient and let them choose their own partner without any fear of social standing of the family's honour. There is an immediate need of reform to the existing conservative society. We can't eradicate this practice simply by holding posters and shouting slogans. Women need to be fearless enough to reject boys who seek dowry and insist for a wedding and not a financial deal. Boys on the other hand should stand against such a tradition keeping in mind that they are marrying a girl and not a money minting machine. Life will be endlessly honourable and pleasing.

As far as the laws are concerned, it is not just sufficient to enact them. Proper implementation and conformity are of utmost importance. Despite the laws there are so many cases reported and unreported in India each day. Sadly, the conviction rate of the offenders is also very low. I do agree nowadays certain false cases are also filed by women, laws are been misused but I believe

an efficient mechanism can help in detecting such cases. But the actual crimes committed must not go unpunished. No doubt the Government is doing great to curb the danger but a lot more is needed to uproot it totally from mankind. We have a long way to go. Large scale awareness programs like seminars, panel discussions, debates, conferences, street plays, television series, movies, dramas can be of great help to come up with various solutions. Herein lies the biggest lesson for everyone that a woman's dignity cannot be traded off. To all the in laws out there, bring her home as a daughter and not as a daughter in law.

Let's stop buying grooms for brides!

Let's not put a price tag on our daughters as well on our sons!

Say a "Big No" to dowry!

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