

# **Dowry : The Increasing Menace in India**

**Shubhalakshmi Bagchi**

**Project Assistant (UGC Contractual) at Women's Studies Research Centre, University of Calcutta**

The term dowry denotes transfer of parental property at the time of daughter's marriage. The concept of dowry is closely linked with the system of 'Streedhan' which means women's share of personal wealth. Women in general were debarred from ancestral property. Thus 'Streedhan' was seen as a mechanism by which the family ensured that a woman had access to some of its wealth. Sociologists who belong to the South Indian society explained dowry as 'female inheritance'. It is referred to as 'Streedhanam' or 'Cidanam'. The North Indian Sociologists emphasize on the 'dana' or gift aspect of dowry. It is also referred to as 'Daun' or 'Dahej' in Western Uttar Pradesh.

## **Tracing the Historical Origins of Dowry**

The practise of giving wealth to daughter at the time of marriage can be dated back to the Vedic period. (c.1500-500 B.C.E). The concept of kanyadana also existed at that time. Giving gifts to a daughter was seen as a merit and it was customary to follow it. The system of dowry has been prevalent in the European countries as well. There is a controversy among scholars regarding the origins of dowry. Some believe that dowry was practised since ancient times while the others do not. The social anthropologist Stanley J Tambiah is of the opinion that the ancient code of Manu sanctioned dowry in ancient India. However, this custom was limited only to the Brahmanic (priestly) caste. In contrast Michael Witzel, the German American philologist pointed out that dowry practices were not prevalent in Vedic times. He further mentions that women in ancient India had access to parental property when they did not have brothers. From the above statements one can say that dowry was not a forced gesture in ancient India. In the medieval period the bride's family had to give dowry to meet the demands of the bridegroom's family. It can also be pointed

out that black money and unaccounted earnings have given a boost to dowry during the post independent period.

## **The Present Indian Scenario**

In contemporary times dowry has become a common phenomena. Women often become victims of domestic violence as a result of dowry demands. The groom's family shamelessly demands gifts from the bride's family at the time of marriage. The demands are increasing rapidly. This is prevalent mostly among middle class and poor families. There are educational and economic inequalities among men and women. Men with higher educational qualifications are likely to earn more. Thus they start demanding a larger dowry. This trend is particularly seen among Medical and Engineering Graduates. The bride's family tries to secure their daughter's future by means of dowry. However, the question of security remains ambiguous.

Daughters are often seen as an economic burden. Thus parents often opt for sex selective abortion. Social and Political activists have figured out dowry as the chief cause of maltreatment of wives at the hands of the husbands and their families. People become greedy. Parents of young girls tend to get their daughters married at any cost. This is also one of the driving forces of dowry. Failure to get daughters married at a suitable age is considered as a severe stigma.

At times the bride's parents are pressurized to such an extent that they have to give dowry beyond their means. Young girls often think that it is their parents' duty to give gifts at the time of marriage. Women have access to parental property in present times. Many women are not aware of this. Therefore they want to take maximum number of gifts at the time of marriage.

It was earlier thought that the evil practise of dowry would be eradicated in the light of education and economic independence. However, the actual scenario is completely different. Dowries continue to be demanded in the marriage of highly educated and employed women as well.

Poverty is another cause which gives rise to dowry system. Often men of poor families marry women belonging to higher economic status. In such cases parents give gifts beyond the expectations of the groom's family. They start demanding more from the bride's family. They start torturing the girl when her parents stop giving gifts.

Dowry acts as a tool of oppression and subjugation against women. It confiscates the basic rights of women. It allows men to put a price on their wives. He can thus accept or reject his wife according to the goods or money she brings. Dowry accords inferior status to women in their matrimonial homes. Men torture women to manifest their power and position in the society. They are often aided by their mothers and sisters in their demonstration of violence. Women tend to internalize patriarchal values. It is somewhat embedded in their minds. Thus young wives face harassment at the hands of their mothers in law and sisters in law for bringing insufficient dowry. It is one of the major causes of self immolation. The other forms of torture include verbal abuse, wife beating, burning of girls, acid throwing and marital rape. Young girls are often locked up in rooms and are even starved to death. The National Crime Records Bureau of India released a report in the year 2016. According to that report a total of 7621 cases have been found that deal with dowry death in India. The data also reveals that 7628 women have been victimized on account of dowry.

### **Measures to Combat Dowry**

The society should take necessary steps to abolish the system of dowry. It is deeply rooted among our cultures. The following measures are recommended for its eradication-

- To stop discrimination between a girl and a boy
- Girls must be sent to schools.
- Girls should not be married at an early age.
- Rejection of boys who demand dowry.

## **Legal Measures taken by the Government to Abolish**

### **Dowry**

The Dowry Prohibition Act was passed by the Parliament on 20<sup>th</sup> May 1961. Giving, taking and abetting of dowry became punishable under Section 3 of this Act. Section 3 of this Act lays down that if any person gives or takes or encourages dowry after the commencement of this Act will be punished and imprisoned for six months. That person might also be subjected to a fine of rupees ten thousand. It was amended thrice in the 1980s.

The National Commission for Women, New Delhi put forth that the law has not been successful in eradicating dowry. It thus proposed amendments to this law on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2005.

A woman can also seek protection against dowry harassment by approaching a Domestic Violence Protection Officer under the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA). The Act was passed in the year 2005.

Despite laws dowry is like an epidemic which is spreading rapidly.

Dowry can be eliminated completely when the society acts in unison. There has to be a change in the judicial system to implement the concerned laws. A complete revolution from within the minds of people will only be able to empower women. Both men and women should be given mutual love and respect. Parents of young girls should give proper education to their daughters. This would also sanction economic independence to them. Moreover, seeing marriage as an institution for receiving gifts should be stopped. Victims of dowry should be transported to shelter homes on an emergency basis. They must be given legal aid. The non government organizations and agencies which work for the development of women and must take corrective steps to put an end to the malpractice of dowry.

The issues concerning gender need to be reinforced by robust theorization. Unlike in the West gender issues in India unfortunately

lack theoretical support. Grass root activism flourishes only when strongly corroborated by theory. In addressing the problem of dowry too, India awaits sound theories.

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