

Ruminations of a Young Man on Marriage and Dowry

Vinay Kumar

Vinay was one of my most diligent and sincere students while I was teaching in one of the Delhi University colleges. These “ruminations” came in the form of letters to me much after he left college and during the time his family was trying to arrange his marriage. He has now been married three years. So far we have published a great deal of what women think and feel on the subject. However, in order to get to understand this issue in all its complexity, we will need to explore the private thoughts of both women and men. Therefore Manushi put together Vinay’s letters to share with our readers.

-Madhu Kishwar

After being introduced to a girl with a view to marriage, I was faced with family pressure to agree to the match and had great difficulty in resisting it. This gave rise to some thoughts which troubled me a great deal.

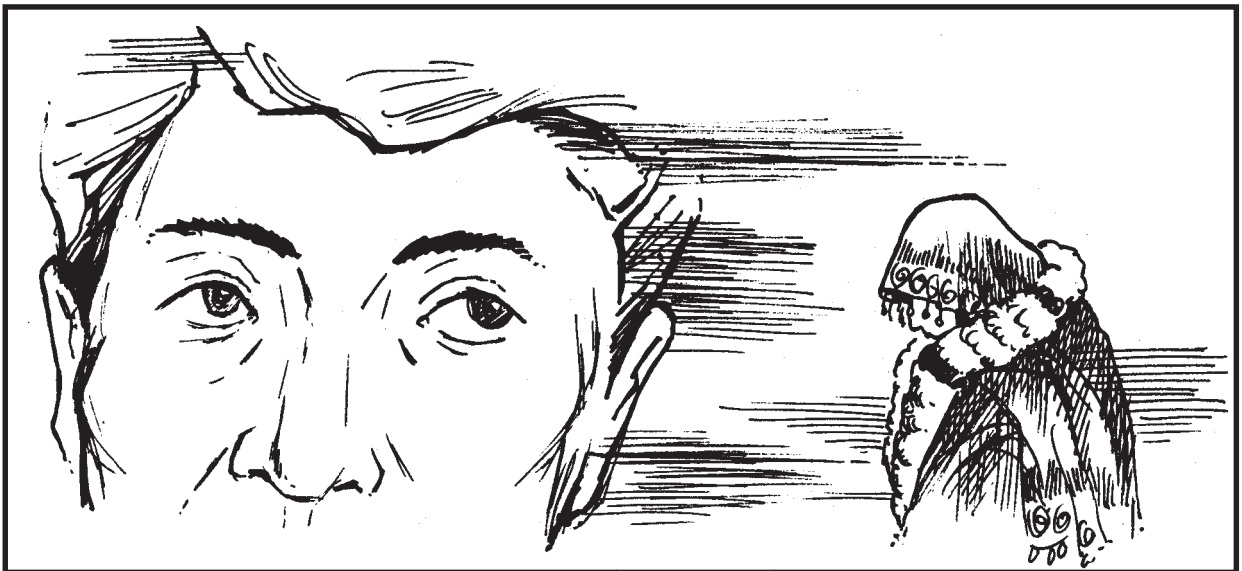
It has always been my desire not to accept dowry and get married with the least expense. In a country where over half the population sleeps on an empty stomach, an extravagant wedding is, in my view, a sinful waste of lakhs of rupees and a lot of grain. At weddings people eat half the food served and waste the rest. It is a proof

of our insensitivity to the poor that we spend money like water while there is so much hunger and disease. This arrogant display of wealth is like sprinkling salt on their wounds.

Instead of wasting this money, we could give it to a social welfare organisation or use it ourselves to help the poor. If we must spend money, we should do it quietly in the privacy of our homes so that our quest for pleasure and enjoyment does not seem to mock the poor. Along with women’s liberation, I give importance to social reform also. A reader of Manushi begins to hate inequality

between men and women, communal disharmony between Hindus and Sikhs and Sikhs and Christians and discrimination between the rich and the poor. Be it a matter of human rights violations or political tactics, Manushi speaks on all issues. So refusing to take dowry has become a principle of my life.

The second issue concerns my relationship with my future wife after our marriage. I do not like a married woman to wear a sari all the time. Saris impede the free movement of women, whether they are working or climbing into buses. I do not like the head



being covered *orapallu* being draped over the head. Nor do I care for a *bindi* on the forehead, *sindoor*, wearing bangles all the time or necklaces, *mangalsutra*, earrings, nose rings, toe rings, and so on. These are all linked with the old image of women as second class citizens. If these are worn because they are fashionable or for religious reasons, I have no objection. My wife will have the right to choose whether or not she wants to wear them.

Thirdly, I do not *Wsepujas*, *aartis*, singing of *bhajans*, idol worship, the *karva chauth* fast, going to temples out of blind faith, adhering to old customs such as taking the *nazar* of children, keeping an iron knife under the mattress, serving ancestral spirits or waking them up from the dead. Neither do I like the worship of a god for wealth, children, trade, a house or any position. I would not like my wife to believe in these practices either. In this regard, I am inspired by the philosophy of Rajneesh. If, despite reading Rajneesh, my wife still does all this, I will accept it. Should she wish to meditate, it will be acceptable to me. The only thing I am apprehensive about is that in her intense concentration she may forget me or feel less respect for me. I would not like her to be absorbed in her concentration on God. I have strong feelings of jealousy on this score, but they may be ill founded.

I would like the relationship between us to be that of friends. No matter what kind of lives we led before our marriage, it should not have any impact on our married lives. We should remain faithful to each other. We should have a relationship at two levels, one as impartial friends, the other as husband and wife, in which a little jealousy and selfishness does creep in. I would like to share my thoughts with her as I would with a close friend. She should listen to me, give me advice as a friend would, even

if what I tell her affects her as my wife. Yes, she can talk to me about the matter, but it would be up to me to take that advice or not. I would not like to look outside my house for a friend to whom I can reveal my thoughts.

I think that the housework should be done by her. I feel that a division of labour between men and women is necessary. To run their lives smoothly they have to share responsibility. If the man goes out to work, then the woman should do the housework. But I will not order her around. She will do the cooking, cleaning, and so on, but I will make the morning tea and breakfast. I will also leave my used dishes in the kitchen myself. If there are glass dishes, I will wash them myself.

We will sit down together at meals. I will not order her to get me a glass of water, an empty cup, plate, salt, and so on. I will get up myself to fetch them. I will conduct myself in such a way that there is a minimum burden on her. Despite this, the responsibility for cooking will be hers. If I know how to cook, I will also cook sometimes. On the whole, I will help her in every task, no matter what it is.

I will have great regard for her likes and wishes. I will entertain her on her birthdays and give her surprise gifts off and on. We will go out together and eat out sometimes at five-star hotels. She will come with me to see English plays. She will have no difficulty in going out anywhere alone. She can go to her parents' house alone and I will not have the responsibility of picking her up and dropping her. She will be able to go shopping alone, entertain and go to doctors and hospitals on her own.

In other words, she will not become a burden on me. She will do all her work on her own. Her marriage to me will have a beneficial impact on my knowledge and experience. She will teach me new things and I will

learn a lot from her. We should complement each other and serve as an ideal for others to follow. We should

live life differently from our forefathers.

I would like a pretty wife. On seeing her, I should be moved. I do not want an *apsara*, but she should be smart.

These are some of the expectations I have of my wife. I do not know what expectations she will have of me. Will her expectations be fulfilled by my above mentioned efforts or will she have other expectations? Also, I will have to pay attention to her financial needs. Can an independent girl, with strong desires and likes, make do with a modest sum of money? I cannot overlook this. In a traditional Indian marriage, a husband does not care about the desires, aspirations and hobbies of his wife. If these are not in keeping with the family's views, they are suppressed. But I will not do this. After fulfilling my own desires, I will have to fulfill her needs and desires. Can a man with a fixed income do this? Maybe I will have to control my wishes. This can be done by mutual understanding.

I do not wish my wife to be modern, sophisticated and convent educated because I am not sophisticated and convent educated. My views certainly are, but I am not modern in the generally accepted sense. The girl should not be overly ambitious, even if she does work.

However, to fulfill these aspirations, it is necessary for me to be strong willed, clear headed and financially strong. To bring home a wife of the kind I have described, there has to be a conducive home environment. But my home environment is not like that. Most of my family members are conservative. My parents are quite old fashioned. Also, on such matters, the views of my two paternal uncles and grandfather carry considerable weight.

My father is dependent on my uncles for his business. He takes little interest in business now, goes to the shop rarely and had stopped business transactions at the shop 15 years ago. That is why he has now to listen to his brothers more and more. My financial position and standing are zero. I only get pocket money from the shop. I have no share in it and my bank balance is absolutely nil. In this situation, I cannot put unnecessary pressure on my parents. To leave home and go somewhere else or to leave the shop and do something else or take a job is not possible at this stage. So the consent and support of my family is necessary for my marriage.

I have begun to realise that if I have to live life on my own terms, I will have to be financially independent and strong. I feel that I will not be able to get my family to accept my views unless I am economically independent. If I have money of my own, I will be able to get married on my own even without the consent of my family. They will realise that I can live away from them. I will not bother

about their false pride.

This will also put a stop to their saying that I have nothing of my own and that I am putting on airs about not taking any dowry, having a pretty wife and not observing rituals. They will also have to stop saying that if I get married without taking anything, how will I feed my wife? What they say is correct. But I will be able to escape being sacrificed at the altar of their pride because I believe that marriage is, in a sense, a personal matter between a girl and a boy. If the two are legal adults then they should have the right to decide their own future. If the boy does not like the girl then he should not be forced into marriage by saying, "What does your 'no' matter? We have to look at our *izzat*."

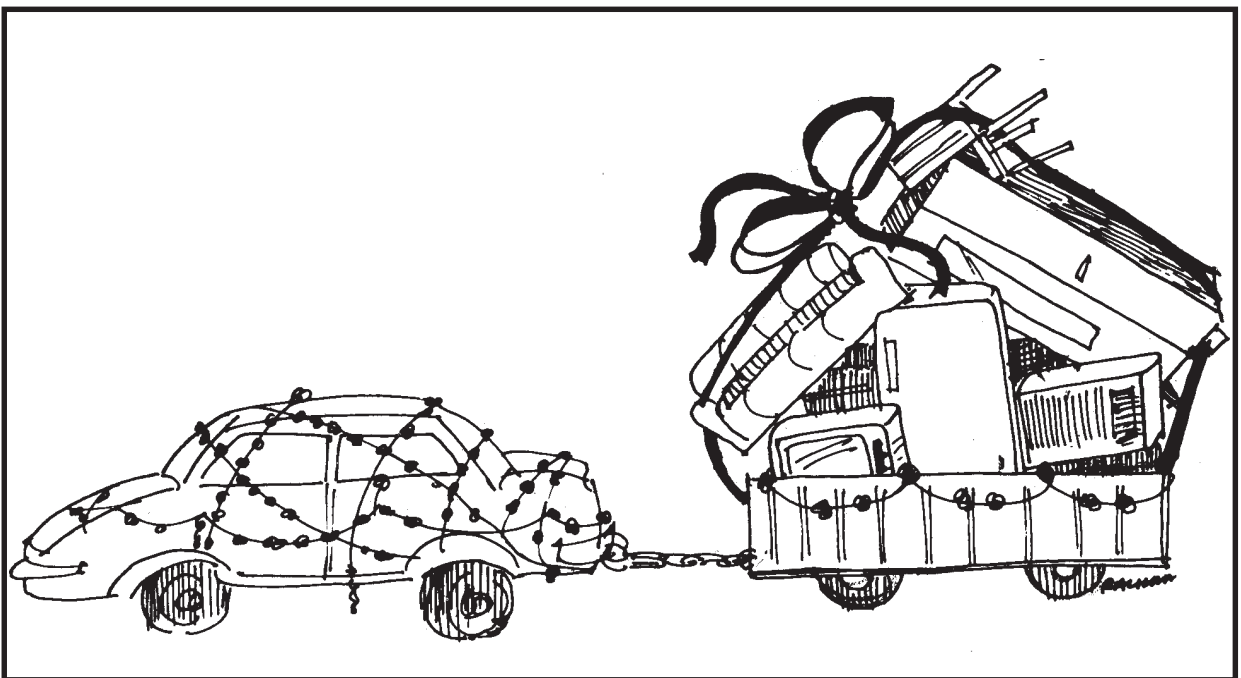
Further Reflections

Keeping in view the environment in my home and my own financial standing, I have formulated some new ideas about my marriage. I do not know if these ideas are right or wrong. Nor do I know if I am stepping down from my earlier idealistic position.

First, I feel that I will tell the parents of the girl selected for me by my family or the girl chosen by myself that they should not give anything at the time of the marriage. The girl can bring her own clothes or anything that she requires for herself. I feel I should tell them that whatever they want to give should be in the form of a fixed deposit in the girl's name. The wedding will be a traditional one. It will be simple, without give and take, except for some ordinary gifts.

After marriage, I will ask my wife to withdraw her money which is in a fixed deposit so that I can put it in a business and acquire some financial strength. After earning money, I will first return her money to her. The advantage of this is that the marriage will take place with the consent of my family. To some extent they will accept my views about dowry and a simple marriage, as also the changes I want to bring about in the relationship between my wife and me.

This will only be possible by my beginning an independent occupation. It will not make much difference how much I earn from this



work. It is enough if in the beginning I get enough to make do because the step that I take after marriage is very important. If I compromise on some of my views to get ahead, then I can bring about changes after my marriage and correct some of my earlier mistakes. My life can be more productive and meaningful. I can also do something for women. If I do not do this then maybe I will not be able to do anything. Life will then be a burden and change will remain a dream.

Some things bother me in such a marriage. First, by having a fixed deposit in my wife's name at the time of marriage, I am changing my decision not to take dowry in any form, whether as possessions or cash. This decision was not made today but has taken root in my mind and soul for the last 10 years. By taking dowry I will cheat my soul and conscience. Today, newly married brides and mothers of young children are harassed mercilessly for dowry, and then burnt. Sometimes the woman is pregnant, so two human beings die together. If the woman is not killed, she is subjected to physical and mental torture by her in-laws.

In our society, girls are regarded as a burden to be transferred to somebody else when they grow up. Money or dowry is also given to take care of the burden. God has made all human beings, whether women or men, equal. But we have taken a very one-sided position on women. If I take dowry in any form, I will not be able to save myself from falling into the category of murderers, people who inflict mental and physical torture or those who perpetuate inequality among human beings. If I take dowry, it will only prove that I support such inhuman acts if not directly, then in an indirect way. My hands will also be covered with the blood of those girls, women and unborn babies. I will enter the league of those miscreants

who inflict torture on women.

Second, if I discontinue my wife's fixed deposit and withdraw her money, how will I explain this to my wife? If at the time of our marriage, I make a big noise about dowry and rituals and

take nothing for myself, but I change my attitude as soon as I get married and wish to start a business with my wife's money, could there be a bigger hypocrite than me? What will my wife and in-laws think about me?

The alternative is to ask them for cash frankly before the marriage. Maybe they will give only cash or some part in cash. Some things may be given to the girl for her own use. It will be difficult for them to give the whole gift in the form of cash. Yes, they can give it to their daughter in a fixed deposit. But what will my position be if I take the fixed deposit? Even assuming that I can somehow convince my wife about my innocence, how will I be able to explain things to my in-laws and other people? How can they continue to have faith in my beliefs and character?

Also, if we ask them directly for all cash before the marriage to put into our business, it is possible that they will not agree to the marriage. They may disqualify people who do not have enough money to even run their own business and a boy who does not do any work or have any special attributes. They may question how a boy who is dependent on his parents can feed his wife after marriage or face up to his parents when they make unreasonable demands on the girl or ill treat her. If they have to buy a boy by paying money in this fashion, is there a shortage of other families and boys? In the process of looking for boys they will find 10 suitable matches.

Third, it is not certain that my business will take off with that money. If I run into a loss then I will have to wash my hands of the principal

amount as well. Even assuming that there is no loss and I make a small profit, that profit will go into the running of the house and the shop. Quite often, once one has put money into a business, it is difficult to take it out. If I have to put money into a business and return my

wife's money to her, then other things will get held up, such as building a new house or buying something. It is also possible that I do not wish to return the money to my wife, thinking that I am bearing her expenses and she may use up the money on some useless things.

Without financial strength how can I get married on my own terms, but with the consent of my family? There is one way in which my family's wishes and my own needs can be fulfilled. However, this is only a part of the solution and extends only to the point of liking or not liking a girl. Suppose a match does come up, then I can secretly see the girl beforehand. I can attempt to learn as much as possible about her, so that I know at least something about her disposition and hobbies. It is not possible to learn about other things such as her expectations about her husband, in-laws, career and so on, which may be necessary for me to know.

What I will learn about the girl in this way will be very superficial. It will extend to her appearance and colour. But in this way the *izzat* of my family will not be affected and they cannot force me unreasonably. However, all issues such as dowry, whether in cash or kind, or problems after marriage will not be solved in this manner.

Another way is that I put aside the thought of marriage for some time or until such time as I consider myself fit for it and can get married in the way that I choose without pressure from my family. At the present moment, the chances of my working alone are very few because I cannot get money from my father or brothers. We have

to buy a house for which we do not have sufficient money. If the family has to put money into a new venture for me, then perhaps they will not be able to buy a house. My independent venture or a house — a choice has to be made between these two. A house is our first requirement. The price of land is increasing every day. If some money is put into an independent business for me, then it will take another two or three years before arrangements are made for money for the house. In this time, the prices of houses will have risen proportionately.

So there is no reason why I should postpone getting married. I am of the right age. Second, matches from my own caste will stop coming in. Then I will have to get married into another caste and that too against the wishes of my family.

I want to get married with the consent of my family, but I also want them to agree to my wishes. It is a case of wanting to have one's cake and eat it too. I myself am aware that what I am saying is paradoxical. This issue concerns not only the differences between my family and me; this relates to conservatism, orthodoxy, superstition on the one hand, and unorthodox ways, broad mindedness (in relation to the caste system) and non conformism on the other hand.

One question that keeps cropping up is how the household work will be distributed. In the existing system, the man works outside the house and earns money, while the woman looks after the housework. This system is centuries old and according to our elders it is a healthy division of work.



This system is a major reason for women's bondage and dependence. But if women go out to work, should men do the housework? This is only to give a new form to the old situation. So both men and women should work outside the house. Work should be equally distributed in the house also. This is real equal distribution of work.

However, not everybody can get work. And no matter how much we want it, it takes considerable time to bring about social change. The age old bondage and dependence of women cannot be removed in a moment. Their fetters will have to be cut and they will have to learn to stand on their own feet. Women will have to be educated and not forced into marriage. Often people educate their daughters up to the degree level so that they can get married. The majority of these girls who have done their graduation and post graduation are not even aware of the shop in the backlane of their house.

At the time of marriage the parents

of the girl assert this fact with great pride to the boy's parents. The parents of one graduate girl wrote with pride in her biodata (which they sent to the boy's family) that she was humble, meek, honest, hardworking, homely, obedient and had done a course in cooking, embroidery and stitching. This is a reflection not on the girl but on her parents. Can we suppose that such girls will go out to work?

If it is assumed that men should also help in housework, how will the work be distributed between men and women and the members of a family? What about families which do not have a tradition of men doing

housework or who have not learnt to cook, make tea or work in the kitchen and have not made the effort either? If we say that every man should do his own work, will he have to wash his own clothes, iron them, make tea, get up to fetch his own glass, help himself to food, leave his used plates in the sink, make beds, look after his office belongings and briefcase, polish his shoes and so on? I have put aside the question of cooking because I have not formed any opinion on this issue. But who will look after the elders in a family? Who will take care of the cleaning of the entire house?

The reasoning behind dowry to a girl on her marriage has been that she will get all those things that will be needed in her new home and if she has to set up a separate home she will have all her daily requirements. In the same way, the boy's parents also give him things he may need for his new house at the time that he goes his own way. When a girl comes to her new

home after her marriage, it will also be necessary to take care of her needs. There is a new member in the family and the expenses also increase.

The new family member should work and bear her own expenses. But when the girl does not do any work, who will bear her expenses? So in a case where the parents of a non-working girl give her a share of the family money, is it wrong? Some-times it is spent on her marriage itself. If a girl brings her share of money or assets what is the harm? If the boy takes that money he can bear the girl's expenses very easily and the girl will not be a burden on anybody. So why is money taken like this called dowry?

After Marriage

Despite my not wanting anything at the time of marriage, things such as furniture, a fridge, TV, VCR, almirah, watch, diamond rings and utensils did come.

Before my marriage, I had put forward two main conditions to my family. First, that we would not accept any cash. However, they took Rs 2.11 lakh in cash. When I learnt from my family that we were receiving cash, I went straight to the girl's family. I told them that I would not accept any cash, but they told me that my family would not agree to the marriage without cash. I told them that in that case they should make a fixed deposit in her name for the sum of cash that they were going to give. They agreed but they made a fixed deposit for only Rs 50,000; Rs 1,61,000 was given in cash. However, my family did not even accept the Rs 50,000 fixed deposit and instead took the entire amount in cash.

I had clothes tailored for my marriage at my own expense; but the girl's family was made to pay for them. Until the end I had refused to accept a ring and a watch, yet both these things were given. There is very little that the girl has not brought with her.



This gives rise to a peculiar problem. If she brings a lot at the time of marriage and later gets nothing or little from her family on different occasions like the birth of a child, Diwali, Rakhi, Dusshera, *karva chauth*, *sawan ka singhara*, *barsaat ka bana*, and so on, do you think her husband's family will continue to respect her? No, it is unlikely. First, she is reminded about what she did not bring for different people. Then, she is informed about what other families get. She is always taunted for such lapses. A whispering campaign starts. Sometimes, some-one from the girl's side may have said that certain things would be given in marriage. Such things are never forgotten and if those things do not come then the girl is asked when her mother would be sending them. When the girl is around, the women of the family may say things like, 'The goods were very heavy, that is why they could not come in the train. They will be coming in a truck which is specially booked.' The girl then goes to her parents and asks for these things and they are forced to give in to the demands. Otherwise what they have done so far will be negated. There is a saying in Haryana that even if there are many good qualities in a person, if he commits a single error, all the good things are forgotten and only the wrong is remembered. So, if a girl brings a good dowry and money in marriage it is no guarantee that there will be no further expectations from her.

It has been just one and a half months since I got married, but I have many new insights. My family is well aware that I am against dowry, money and other exchange in marriage, yet they never let an opportunity pass to accept things. I am unable to do or say anything. There is an elaborate system of *fmilani* in our family. Whenever the girl's parents or anyone from their family visits our home, everyone right from the smallest child to the eldest person receives Rs 51 or Rs 101. Money is left even for those family members who are not present and relatives like uncles and aunts. The ritual of *milani* is repeated at any marriage where members from both the families are present. In such cases there is less love and affection and more helplessness in the face of circumstances. I have witnessed this right from the time when I was 10 years of age. Honestly, I have developed a hatred for this system which generates greed.

Recently when I was returning from Pune, my mother-in-law performed *tikka* and gave me Rs 501 and a shirt and a pair of trousers. I kept the shirt and trousers but refused to take the money. But my wife's family did not relent. I was alone and there were so many of them, so I had to keep the money as well. I was still upset when I came back to Delhi. First I thought of writing a letter to my wife's father explaining why I did not want to accept the money and also sending Rs 400 in the letter. I did not send the money, but I wrote the letter. I still have the Rs 400 with me. I have kept Rs 101 as I do not want them to feel that I did not even accept the first *tilak* from them. On my own I would like to return the entire Rs 501 because they have given me many things on different occasions. They gave me a gold chain at the time our marriage was settled, but I don't wear it. Whatever money I received from

them, except for this Rs 501,1 have handed over to my parents. The things that they have given prick me like thorns. I don't want any clothes from them, but they bring them of their own choice and give them to me.

When I think of all these things, I become very distressed. Even after

my marriage I am unable to stand by my beliefs; the decision to get married or not was not mine. My fears about my family taking things from my wife's family have come true. I was kept in the dark about this and they kept taking what was given to them. But now that the matter is in my hands, I

also accept the things given to me. I do not understand why I allow such things to happen. Perhaps, I am unable to fight all these people alone. It's very surprising that even in the girl's family there is no one who thinks like me on these issues. □

(Translated from Hindi by Manushi)

Exorbitant Dowries?

Madhu Kishwar

The imbalance between what sons inherit and what daughters get as dowry comes out clearly if we consider the marriage transactions for Vinay's wedding. At the rokna ceremony, the bride's family gave Rs 11,000 as sagan, a gold chain worth Rs 10,000, an athmasi of gold worth Rs 4,400 and lots of fruits and sweets. The total expenditure was between Rs 30,000 to Rs 35,000. Two days before the wedding, the sagai ceremony cost the girl's family as follows: Cash payment: Rs 200,000; Titan watch: Rs 2,545; Clothes for the groom Rs 3,500; Sarees for relatives, Toys Sweets and fruits.

Expense incurred by the groom's family were as follows:

The groom's family gave the bride jewellery worth Rs 1,40,000 and 11 sarees and other gifts. The jewellery was purchased from the Rs 2 lakhs cash that came from the bride's side. In addition the groom's family spent Rs 42,000 of their own money. The groom's family paid for the party as the ceremony was held in their home.

The bride's family spent as follows:

Wedding banquet: Rs 60,000-70,000; Two-in-one stereo: Rs 2,000; Thirty glasses of silver at Rs 500 per piece: Rs 15,000; Furniture: Rs 15,000; VCR and Onida TV: Rs 30,000; Double bed: Rs 8,000; *Almirah and sewing machine: Rs 7,000; Utensils: Rs*

10,000; Steel bhagunas 15 pairs: Rs 9,000; Seven pashmina shawls for relatives; Saree for sister: Rs 3,000; Clothes for brother-in-law, brothers, father, Gold jewellery: Rs 80,000, Thirty one sarees for bride, five pairs bed sheets, Iron and toaster: Rs 500.

Total expense incurred by the bride's side: Rs 5,60,000

On the first Diwali, the bride's family sent the customary gifts when their daughter gave birth to her first son. The gifts included the following:

A dozen suits for the child, a walker, diapers, pram, Yashica camera with zoom for Vinay, a dinner set, a gold ornament for the child and Rs 11,000 in cash given by the grandfather of the bride.

However, if we compare this to the property and wealth owned by the bride's family, we find that the amount spent on this wedding is far from exorbitant. Their family business includes: Sole proprietorship of one petrol pump worth Rs 40 lakhs, partnership in another petrol pump, a house worth Rs 15 lakhs. Other businesses include truck financing and share business and property buying and selling. All this totals to much more than Rs 70 lakhs. This will be inherited by one son. Even if each daughter gets Rs 5 lakhs to Rs 6 lakhs dowry, she still gets 1/14th the amount that the son will inherit. The son would get income generating forms of

property, while the daughters get no more than sarees, household goods and jewellery. A good part of the Rs 5.60 lakh went on wedding ceremonies, dinner, and gifts to relatives. Most important of all, the son would be educated and trained to take care of the family business, earn a handsome livelihood and enhance the family property, whereas the daughters were all under educated. (Vinay's wife has studied only up to class eleven and is unlikely to be able to ever earn her own living. She comes to her marital home as a lifelong economic liability.)

Many would consider the money spent on gifts to the groom's relatives as a total waste of money. They would argue, why not put all that money together and give it to the bride as a fixed deposit in her own name? Even then, however, the bride's parents have trained her only in housework and for a life of dependence. She is unfit to take care of her own economic needs.

Her well-being thus depends totally on how she gets to be treated by her husband's family. The gifts to various relatives are a subtle way of earning their goodwill and making them feel responsible for the young bride who is joining their family. With these gifts, they are also announcing her disinheritance from parental family property and procuring rights in her marital family property. □