

## Dowry—To Ensure Her Happiness Or To Disinherit Her ?



*The observations made in this exploratory article on dowry are based on dowry practices among the urban, educated middle and upper middle class families in India. The article does not take into account all the diversity that exists in the practices of different communities, nor the differences between urban and rural groups. The reason for taking a closer look at this particular group is that the diverse cultural practices throughout India are increasingly giving way to dowry practices similar to those discussed in this article, among those who can in any way find the money. Therefore, the descriptions given below are important for almost all other groups as well.*

**FOR** over a century, eradication of dowry has been a major item on the agenda of social reformers of all hues. In the last decade, it has perhaps received more attention than almost any other social issue. Yet, dowry is nowhere near being eradicated. In fact, the dowry system has flourished and spread through all levels of our society all over the country, simultaneously with the campaign against it.

The reasons commonly adduced for the increase in dowry are not reflective of much serious thinking about the reasons why people give and take dowry. Until we understand how dowry actually works, we will not be able to do anything meaningful about it.

### **Due To Growing Greed ?**

One argument repeated *ad nauseam* is that people in today's world have become very greedy hence the increasing demands for dowry. Often, this "greed" is seen as linked to the influence of western consumerist culture which leads people to want more and more gadgets and other consumer goods.

This tendency to view the present age as *kalyug* and the past as a golden era may be consoling, but is not grounded in fact. Nineteenth century literature, both

fiction and reformist propaganda, is full of laments over the increase in dowry and the growing materialism of people. This was much before refrigerators and videos appeared on the scene.

A common theme of many social protest movements is a harking back to an earlier golden age and a criticism of the current materialist culture in comparison to the good old days. The literature of the Bhakti movement (the writings of Kabir, Nanak and others) or even of such an early movement as Buddhism bears testimony to this. Gautam Buddha is supposed to have left his princely home in revulsion against the materialist culture it represented. There is nothing new in people's desire for more and more wealth. Nor is this trait specific to any particular culture. Dowry, however, is specific to certain cultures.

If increasing dowry demands were, in fact, merely related to the aping of the materialist culture and lifestyle of the west, we might expect to find even higher dowry demands manifested in many western countries. This is quite clearly not the case. People in the west have created a thousand other terrible problems for themselves but they do not show any inclination, at present, to foster the giving

and taking of dowry. This is not because people in one country are more or less greedy than people in other countries. However badly a man may currently maltreat his wife in a western country, he dare not demand a video and car from her parents as dowry, not because he is more enlightened than a husband in India, but because wife's parents will not normally entertain such demands. They do not feel that they must get their daughters married and see that they stay married at any cost. They would not consider it an unbearable social disgrace for themselves if their daughter stayed unmarried or left her husband, although they would prefer her to get married and to remain married.

The "greed" theory would make sense only if the world was divided into two sets of families—one set which produced only boys and another which produced only girls. In such a situation, the boy producing families would be at a permanent advantage. Despite the prevalence of various forms of female infanticide in India, our society is not yet divided into these two mutually exclusive camps. Thus, there are no permanent gainers or losers. In most families, dowries are both given and taken. Quite frequently, the same families whose daughters are harassed for more dowry

themselves harass daughters-in-law in similar ways.

One of the most notable features that emerges during antidowry campaigns is the small number of people who are consistently either genuinely for or against it. There is hardly anybody in the country, who, at one time or another, will not decry and lament its pernicious effects. Vast numbers of people are as unanimous in condemning it as they are persistent in practising it. It is common for a person to deplore dowry in one breath and justify it in the next. Some are content merely to express helplessness in breaking away from it.

The arguments generally put forward for and against dowry are in the nature of moralistic cliches rather than the results of careful analysis of our society. Why is it that even those who consider dowry transactions morally wrong and socially harmful insist that they must continue to practise it? The vast majority of parents, at the time of a daughter's marriage, appear as eager to give dowry as they are to receive it at the time of a son's marriage.

If dowry was basically the product of greed, the groom's family would not encourage extravagant expenditure on the wedding feast and entertainment of guests. In fact, the groom's family too spends substantial amounts on nonrecoverable expenses connected with the wedding such as extravagant receptions, music bands and gifts to various relatives.

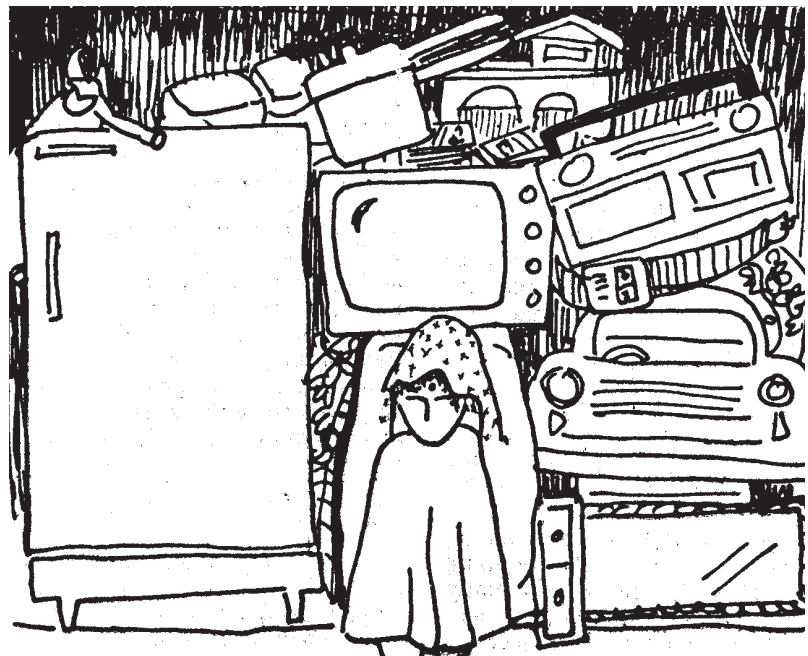
At a recent marriage in my neighbourhood, I observed that what the groom's family actually received in cash and kind did not exceed what they had themselves spent on the wedding of their son. The bride brought with her furniture, jewellery and other goods not worth more than Rs 60,000. This is about the amount that the groom's family had spent on their part of the wedding celebrations. A portion of the money they spent was borrowed on interest. Even though the bride's family spent twice as much as the groom's family, only a part of this money reached the groom's family in the form of durable

goods, much of it being spent on celebrations. In this instance, which I believe is fairly typical, the ultimate economic gain for the groom's family does not seem commensurate with the amount they spend on the marriage.

Even a cursory study of wife harassment cases shows that taunts flung at a daughter-in-law do not relate to major demands for cash or items like videos and scooters. Much more common are taunts regarding the number and quality of saris given to her, the quality of the wedding

daughter-in-law having some basis to exercise her rights over what are supposed, in some traditions, to be her personal dowry items.

When writing on dowry related harassment and murder, the media tends to mention failure to meet major demands such as that for a scooter or a colour TV, as the direct precursor of maltreatment. However, I believe that an indepth study of most cases would reveal that the harassment seldom ceases as and when these demands are met. The daily torture



—Pumima, PUCL bulletin

### The deadweight of dowry

feast and the presents given to her by her natal family at various festivals. If the main motive was avarice, it would be wiser for the in-laws to demand cash for themselves rather than grumble about the number of saris given to the bride. Instead of saying "Why only 21 saris and not 31?" or "Why cotton saris and not silk?" or "Why Indian gadgets and not imported ones?" they would say: "Why even 21 saris? Let her manage with her old saris and give us the rest of the money in cash. No need for an expensive mixer. She can use a grinding stone. We need the money." This would also eliminate the possibility of the

and harassment which breaks a woman down is more often related to constant taunts designed to humiliate her, make her feel a contemptible burden on the family, and put her on the defensive over every conceivable matter. For instance, recently, a young woman from a fairly wealthy business family came to us in connection with her divorce case. She had been married to a well off businessman who earns about Rs 30,000 a month. She complained that he would give her no money at all. Even if she needed to buy herself a pair of slippers, she would be told to get the money from her "wealthy father."