

[The Price Brides Pay](#)

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SOCIAL ISSUES

The Price Brides Pay

Karnataka's Truth Commission hears how brides find safety in neither caste nor class when avaricious in-laws demand more and more dowry

Choodie Shivaram, Bangalore, India

In return for outstanding service to her local community, Meena was gifted a piece of property near Chennai. "Meena" is not her real name, and the circumstances of her life have been disguised, for the state's largess allegedly and ironically resulted in her death. Her husband coveted the site and wanted it transferred to his name. Months later, Meena's body was found hanging from a ceiling fan in her husband's house. He was the prime suspect, yet he was acquitted for lack of evidence and Meena was posthumously declared a suicidal schizophrenic! Anandhi (all names have been changed), a scientist, was found burned to death in her house a few months after marriage. Earlier, her husband, Dr. Gupta, and his mother pressured Anandhi to get a house, a car and a research post for Gupta. Gupta also wanted Anandhi's brother, a highly placed government official, to provide Gupta's nephew with a public service job.

Amrita, the young wife of Kumar and her parents' only

daughter, was barbarously burnt with cigarette butts, starved and abused. "The more you beat her, the more money you get," Kumar's paternal uncle had advised. Amrita died. Her death, too, was decreed a suicide.

One would think that dowry deaths and harassments such as these occur mostly among the uneducated and lower strata of society. But listening to the cases deposed in Bangalore before the Truth Commission held in August of 1999 proved that torture, harassment and death at the hands of husbands and in-laws can strike women of all classes. I shuddered as I sat through the Commission hearings, listening to the stories of victim after victim.

The Truth Commission on Unnatural Deaths of Women in Marriage was jointly organized by Vimochana, a voluntary women's organization, and the National Law School University of India. Over 70 cases were presented before a jury comprising eminent representatives of the law commission, former judges, lawyers and social activists. Parents and brothers of victims came to tell their agonizing stories, giving the gory details of brides' deaths at the hands of husbands, in-laws and relatives. The pattern of torture and eventual death in all cases seemed the same--as if there were a common understanding among the perpetrators of the crime. They burn the girl with cigarette butts on her private parts, starve her, humiliate her and demand more and more dowry. Finally they immolate the girl by kerosene or hang her, and cover up the murder as a case of suicide.

One father lamented the death of his daughter. The brilliant

student was about to take exams, but suddenly the father was informed the girl had committed suicide. Later, he told the commission, he learned that the postmortem report indicated death by strangulation. "It meant my daughter was murdered," he wailed. A case was registered against the husband and in-laws. During the investigation, it was revealed that the daughter was being pressured to ask her father for money to send the husband abroad. Out of embarrassment, the girl concealed the torture she was being subjected to. One day, the father believes, her husband killed her. This happened in a financially and socially well-to-do family. "I don't want this to happen to anybody else. Please be careful with your daughters," warned the grieving father.

For three days, one after another, aggrieved families from all over Karnataka recalled their agonizing travails and subsequent humiliation at the hands of police, public prosecutors and delays in the court process. It was a narration of cruelty and justice denied. The end result left them physically, financially and emotionally battered. The culprits in all cases narrated were either acquitted or were free on bail.

Giving and taking dowry is a punishable offense under India's Dowry Prohibition Act. Despite this, parents of the victims had perpetuated the crime of giving dowry, either on their own volition or on demand. Dowry was given in the form of money, immovable property and hi-tech gadgets. After marriage, the girls were tortured for more. They were sent home to their parents with scars of torture. But the parents sent the girl back to her husband's house because, they believed, that is where she belonged. With difficulty, some of the parents arranged to partially meet the demands and promised the rest a little later.

But the ever insatiable in-laws chose to do away with the girl.

"It is amazing to see how daughters have been sent back even after knowledge of harassment and physical abuse. It was clearly a death sentence. What kind of society do we live in?" asked dismayed panelists. "On an average, every year in Karnataka alone 1,200 women are victims of such brutalities. If that is the society we are living in, we should hang our heads in shame," lamented panelist Dr. Madhava Menon.

During the past two years Karnataka alone saw 1,425 women dead in dowry related deaths, according to a study conducted by Vimochana. "These brutalities point to a very deep civilizational crisis in our society. Even when the girls have come back complaining of severe brutalities on their bodies, parents have sent them back. This goes to show how little worth we put on the lives of our daughters. In a society, if parents don't value their daughters, it's futile and stupid to expect the in-laws to respect and honor them. I don't think the problem can be resolved even with the best of the police force and laws. The best of it will not work if society is showing signs of such deep pathological disease symptoms," testified Madhu Kishwar, editor of Manushi, a journal on women and society [see her article on dowry deaths in Hinduism Today, October, 1999.]

The family has failed to provide elementary security to the girl. Men have behaved brutally as if it were a normal thing and a girl should quietly accept it. This was clearly evident from listening to the parents deposing before the commission. In almost all cases the police had abetted the criminals. Either

they did not record the complaint from the victim's parents or recorded it as a case of suicide or unnatural death instead of murder. "There is an incentive for corruption. There is no incentive for honesty," said an anguished brother whose sister perished under mysterious circumstances.

Once the girl has died, the boy's parents lose no time in searching for a new bride for their son, and getting more dowry. There are any number of gullible people who do not think twice before handing over their daughter to such families. "My son-in-law is out on bail, and his parents are now trying to bring him a bride from another village. Even while my daughter was battling for life in the hospital, they came and told me that they will look for another bride for their son, where they will get plenty of money and property," one lady told the commission.

With increasing reports of death of young brides, Vimochana began focusing on these cases. "We went to Victoria Hospital burns ward where the burn victims were brought, recorded the cases, took records from the Central Crime Research Bureau, went to each police station and pulled out cases of unnatural death reports. We started working backwards on these cases," stated Shakun.

"We felt that whatever we were doing was just not enough. We decided to go to the people. As a beginning, we went to four districts. We just opened shop, told the people that we are here and if they had any cases to please come forward. All-India Radio helped us in giving publicity and announcing our program to visit these districts. People came voluntarily

and reported 5,560 cases in two days," said Shakun. Vimochana organized a public hearing on this issue at the banquet hall of Vidhana Soudha in Bangalore. The hearing was in the presence of legislators and police chiefs in order to bring the issue to the very top political and governmental personnel. After this, they organized the Truth Commission, attended by 500 people over three days of hearings.

An important follow up of the Commission will be to put in place a system of justice and para-legal support which will be available to anyone who loses a daughter in suspicious circumstances. It will seek to make the process of justice more transparent, accessible and accountable. Parents and relatives will have access to information about the case, court, etc.

On the final day the jury members made their recommendations. They stated that an inquest must be completed within hours of the death in the presence of at least one member of a women's organization. The postmortem should be done within six hours by a doctor nominated by a women's commission. The body and the surrounding area must be videotaped. It was noticed during the hearings that in almost all the cases the girl's parents and relatives were not allowed to go near the body or survey the house and surroundings, nor were they provided access to the postmortem report.

The Commission also recommended that a panel of public prosecutors be specially appointed or invited to conduct trials in cases of unnatural deaths. There should also be provisions in the criminal procedure code to issue show-cause notices to

officers responsible for shoddy investigations. Harassed women can reach out for help, and the police can be put under scrutiny. The Commission recommended reinvestigation of twelve of the cases it heard where glaring errors on the part of the police were evident.

Vimochana will provide support against harassment or intimidation to the parties who brought cases before the Commission. Based on the recommendations made, Vimochana plans to have the cases reopened at an individual level. Her group seeks to bring out the common pattern and invite suggestions to effect institutional changes. They intend to take up and lobby for changes in the laws and enforcement, towards sensitizing the police, legal aid services, district administration and people in general. "Women need to have access to help," Shakun concludes. "We want to put the onus on society. What is happening is not the women's fault, it is being a woman that seems to have become an occupational hazard." 1Ã21Ã4

Vimochana, 26 17th Main, Hal Second Stage,
Bangalore 560008 India. phone:
080.527.8628.

Where'd We Get This Zany Idea?
Dowry didn't evolve from India;
Hindus got it from the Europeans

According to several sources, the present dowry

practice in India can be traced only to the 19th century--likely because that is when Indians observed the full-fledged practice of dowry among the British rulers. Here are some excerpts from a wonderfully enlightening book, *The Marriage Bargain, Women and Dowries in European History*.

"In Western societies, the dowry has been a payment made by the bride's family in cash, goods or property to the groom."

"Equipped with a substantial dowry, a young woman could expect to have her marriage arranged for her. Formal arranged marriages, with rare exception, were unions including dowry. Although the prospective bride and groom were invariably asked if they found their intended partner suited to them, before the turn of the 19th century it was the rare individual who answered in the negative. 'That would have been a gross insult, for in truth one married into a family,' wrote an 1870 commentator."

"At least until World War I, saving for her dowry

was an important aspect of a young working woman's life. In parts of Europe, a dowry was even required by law. After the War, the expectation that a woman would continue to earn a wage during the early years of her marriage relaxed the need for her premarital saving. But the dowry was not abandoned entirely. The German peasantry continued the tradition at least until World War II [1945]."

"In France, the dowry was almost a universal institution, even among servants, laborers and tenant farmers, until the interwar era [1918-1939]. Only the poorest urban industrial workers had no dowries, and as a result many of them did not marry at all. 'For the great majority of the bourgeoisie [middle class], marriage is the greatest financial operation of their lives,' wrote an observer of the French scene [in 1927]."

"Only when women began to reenter the economy as paid workers on a large scale in advanced capitalist societies did the pursuit of dowry decline. Still the dowry system is in evidence today in less industrialized areas of Europe, such

as Greece."

"What was the status of the daughter whose birth 'filled a father's heart with fear' [Dante, Renaissance poet, 1265-1321 ce] because of the large dowry which her marriage would require?"

"Girls from very poor families often worked as maids to earn money for dowry [in Sicily] and their mothers worked as laundresses to enhance the same fund."

The Marriage Bargain, Harrington Park Press,
28 East 22 Street, New York, New York 10010
USA.

Is There a Cure?

Dowry must yield to human respect and decency, suggests UK Scholar

Dr. Werner F. Menski, senior lecturer in law at the School of Oriental and African studies at the University of London, is one of the world's leading experts on dowry. The following is excerpted from his paper on the subject.

Back in 1978, Dr. Altekar wrote: "In ordinary families, the amount of dowry was [historically] a nominal one. It was a voluntary gift of pure affection and presented no impediment in the settlement of the daughter's marriage until the middle of the 19th century. It is only during the last 60 years that the amount of the dowry has assumed scandalous proportions."

The problem of dowry violence is a modern phenomenon. There is no need to rewrite Hindu scriptures--a ridiculous suggestion anyway, because one cannot undo the past. The Hindu texts, arguing from dharma, do not underwrite cruelty to women for the sake of material possessions. My reading of the scholastic literature suggests that neither legal reform nor social action can achieve improvements unless they take into account individual self-restraint. We need to discuss human psychology and morality rather than law and social policies.

How does one instill self-restraint in greedy or abusive individuals? So far, the arguments we can read all focus on external force: blacken the face

of dowry tormentors, boycott dowry weddings, ostracize those who beat women for cash, fridges and scooters, demonstrate against dowry murderers, drag them to court, even hang them in public! None of these deterrent strategies seems to work fully. Thousands of women continue to be killed every year.

The literature confirmed my latent cynicism about the force of self-control, which is also reflected in ancient arguments in Hindu philosophy, to the effect that selfishness and greed are ubiquitous forces in the world and that self-controlled order is not something that can be expected simply to happen by itself. Hindu philosophy and Hindu law show that dharma--doing the right thing at the right time--needs to be promoted by the state, by moral education and by the good example of individuals.

Only some dowry transactions lead to violent deaths. The "dowry problem" is not measurable in financial terms; it can arise among millionaires as well as lower-class families who barely have resources for a decent wedding ceremony.

If dowry-grabbing in-laws have taken not only to expecting but to actually demanding that the bride should arrive in her new home with specified amounts of goods, not only is the bride herself devalued, but the old form of dowry [the free gift] has been intermingled with, and virtually incorporated into, the new dominant form of the demanded assets. Some women, apart from the goods they bring, are seen as property of the family. This is a dangerous constellation and one of the potential scenarios for dowry-related violence, for it is easy to claim that the newly arrived chattels, including the human addition to the family, are not of adequate quality.

In my view, the feminist agenda to revise inheritance or property laws for getting round the dowry problem downplays the fact that dowry violence is not primarily a binary male-female problem, although it seems based on that polarity. The uncomfortable truth is that women themselves are among the worst perpetrators of dowry-related violence. Anyone doubting this should read Verghese's 1980 account of a dowry suicide.

Married women, over time, gain status and power, to be ultimately themselves found in the dread figure of the mother-in-law. Recently married women are their most vulnerable victims, which can easily deteriorate into bullying.

Ultimately, refraining from dowry violence in its various forms is a matter of individual conscience, for men and women alike. Significantly, the existing literature has not put this in terms of traditional Hindu law, presumably because that would be too "traditional" and therefore politically incorrect. Writing from the distance of London, and willfully disregarding such pressures, I would argue that tradition is a fruitful line of pursuit. At the end of the day, individual men and women have to stand up, in their own home environment and without the involvement of any law or social activist group, against the temptation to use dowry issues as an excuse for mental and physical torture. Dowry violence is not just a "men on women" issue; it goes much beyond the gender division, and our debates must address that fact, however uncomfortable we may be about the implications of it.

Dr. Werner F. Menski: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London WC1H0XG.

email: wm4@soas.ac.uk