

Not A 'Priced Commodity'

Of Women and Dowry Deaths in India



WRITTEN BY:

Aparna Vats
Editor
Pratisandhi Foundation

COVER IMAGE:

Source: Aparna Vats
Displayed at MAP, Bengaluru,
this mural is a representation of how women in India are
'over-worked and never paid', less given a due

***śatarūpā mahā-rājñī
pāribarhān mahā-dhanān
dampatyoh paryadāt prītyā
bhūṣā-vāsaḥ paricchadān***

This text from Srimad-Bhagavatam (SB 3.22.23) translates to the instance when King Satrupa gave his daughter's hands in marriage to the bridegroom with 'maha dhan' or greatly valuable gifts that in this case, befits the dowry of an empress. It lists the items that can be provided such as ornamentals, clothing and various household items. The Hindu holy text also states that God can be pleased with a fruit, flower or even water if presented with genuine devotion (9.26).

This somewhat pious act of affection and generosity evolved to become the absolute Vedic way of marriage and today these 'gifts' or dowry, includes cars, fully-furnished houses, digital devices and even businesses.

The most recent harrowing interpretation of this 'tradition' is the murder of a 28-year-old woman in Greater Noida by her husband, Vipin Bharti and in-laws over the demand of ₹36 lakhs in cash or her father's Mercedes, as reported by the victim's father to the Times of India. Married in 2016, the groom had already been 'gifted' a Scorpio SUV, gold and cash. Her elder sister was also married into the same family and recounted nine years of physical and mental torture that they went through from their unemployed husbands and in-laws. When the daughters conceived a child, the grooms were given a motorcycle and more gold.



Parents of the victim knew of the dowry related harassment but kept making 'compromises' in the fear of the *samaaj* (society).
Source: Displayed at MAP, Bengaluru.

When the sisters opened a beauty parlour with the help of their father for both financial stability and independence, the accused and his brother regularly stole money from the business.

The victim was beaten, dragged by hair, drownsed in fuel and set ablaze with a lighter by the accused husband, Vipin, in front of their six-year-old child who narrated the chain of events, in his own understanding, to the police. When the sister tried to intervene, she was slapped and left unconscious. As the victim with 70% burns all over her body stumbled on the stairs and collapsed she was rushed to the Safdarjung Hospital where she succumbed to her injuries on the 21st of August.

Present laws, absent justice

The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 made a legal framework that criminalised both, the giving and taking of dowry with a minimum punishment of imprisonment for five years and a fine of at least Rupees fifteen thousand or the value of the dowry, whichever is greater. Other than this, demanding and advertising for dowry, as added by the 1984 amendment, both attract penalties. Extending to the whole of India, this cognisable, non-bailable and non-compoundable act is a social legislation that is gender-neutral in its prohibitions, while the purpose remains to protect the women from cruelty and violence. The standing features of this legislation is the reversed burden of proof, 7-year time period of presumption of dowry demand in case of the death of the wife in the same period and the secular application of this civil law. However, it excludes the 'dower' and the 'mahr' that is mandated in Muslim marriages as per their personal law.

On August 22, the First Information Report (FIR) was registered under Sections 103(1), 115(2) and 61(2) for murder, voluntarily causing hurt and attempting to commit offences punishable with life imprisonment respectively, under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS). Vipin was arrested the next day and when he tried to escape, he was shot on his leg. Following this his parents, Daya and Satyavir, and his brother Rohit are now also in custody.

When the victim's father, Bhikahri Singh Payla, was asked whether he had knowledge of dowry being a prohibited practice he said, *"In our clan, marriages happen through (dowry) mediators. And I had married off my daughter well. The wedding happened during demonetisation in 2016"*, as reported by NDTV India.

Evidently, this harassment was not a 'sudden occurrence'. From the time of marriage, as her elder sister recalled, these demands followed with abuse had been continuing. In fact, after Vipin assaulted the victim in February, the sisters left with her children and went to their maternal home. It was after repeated apologies that they returned only to be assaulted again on the day of Janmashtami this month. The father says that another compromise was made to make the daughter stay because, *"We need to listen to our samaj and clan members"*, as reported by NDTV India. It is indeed shocking to know that the parents had the knowledge that this household was unsafe for their daughters, yet they continued to, what they call, "compromise", for saving face in the society.

Now, Mr Payla and his wife demand justice from the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath and the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, asking for the accused to be given the death penalty.

Ongoing Horror, Normalised Violence

Dowry was the main motive behind 6100 murders across India from 2017 to 2022, reported the Hindu. In the same period, according to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) an average of 7000 cases of dowry deaths were reported. While Bihar, Odisha and West Bengal have recorded over 60% of murders, Uttar Pradesh (UP) leads in reported dowry-related cases. Recently, a woman died after being burnt with a hot iron in her private parts in Aligarh and another was burnt alive in Pilibhit. UP is joined by Haryana, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, where 80% of all dowry, death related cases have been recorded.

What is to say about our urban cities? Of the 19 Indian cities, Delhi leads with 30% of dowry death related cases followed by Kanpur, Bengaluru, Lucknow, and Patna.

Other than being murdered, women have died of suicide most recently in Chandigarh and Tamil Nadu, this one just four-days after her wedding, due to repeated dowry demand related harassment.

It must be remembered that these are the cases that have been filed. There are numerous that remain unheard, buried or silenced. Even out of the 7000 cases that were reported the chargesheet was filed in only 4500 cases. Some cases were stuck in investigation and the others were struck down or disposed of citing reasons of their being insufficient evidence, even if the case was true, there being a misunderstanding, false or incorrect information. Of the 3000 pending cases in 2022, 67% were struck down. There was also delay in filing the charge sheet and in 70% of the cases, the investigation lasted two months. After all of this, few resulted in convictions and many ended up in either plea bargain or the accused being acquitted due to lack of evidence. Out of the 6500 cases that went to trials, only a 100 resulted in conviction.



In a country which worships Durga, 6100 dowry deaths were reported between 2017-2022.
Source: Aparna Vats

Cost of aspirations

The victim and her sister had an account on social media with 54,000 followers and nearly 3,000,000 million views accumulated across their videos. Vipin and Rohit were opposed to their social media presence and had even reportedly, had once damaged their parlour.

On 21 August, the victim told her husband, Vipin that she would reopen her parlour and by the evening she won't be able to reopen her eyes to live that dream ever again.

As far as we wish to believe that social evils become a thing of the past after legislation is passed, there is a desperate need to reload into both the applicability and result of the cases found related to dowry, harassment and death. This has nothing to do with the social, economic or political background of the person. In Pune, this May, an NCP leader was expelled from the party and arrested after his daughter-in-law died of suicide following continued harassment demanding dowry.

In 2021, 7000 women aged between 18–35 died because of dowry harassment out of the total 2,28,000 non-maternal deaths. Everyday 18 women die out of dowry, harassment and murder. What had their married lives been? Starved, burnt, beaten, raped, spirits broken until death, with only the end result being reported about, that too not always.

Women are pulled out of school because their families want to save up not for the actual wedding, rituals or 'gifts of love and affection' but for that fear of demand of dowry on which their years of earned standing in the society, prestige, and power, relies upon.



The victim and her sister ran a beauty parlour and had a social media account with over 3 million views cumulatively.
Source: Aparna Vats

Not the future of my dreams

The next time, when someone questions why women are still considered a minority or victims of society, they must be reminded how females are not even considered a co-equal living being. Displayed and bartered like goods, they are treated as untamed animals and discarded as untreated waste.

Women in India are being shot dead by their own fathers for having a social media account and running an academy as a successful tennis player. They are being raped and murdered by a security guard while taking a nap after a long medical shift in a conference room because there was no other place designated for rest. Disgustingly, they are being molested and raped repeatedly by elected representatives as they do domestic work for them.

Yet, women in India come back every single time to challenge this patriarchal hegemony and demand justice. But when will the administration realise the root cause of this ever-increasing violence, that is the lack of education and stagnated legal redressal?

One dowry death by husband and in-laws every seventy-seven minutes, 34% of all crimes against women by their own family members, eighty six cases of rape, acid attacks and extreme violence every day- are all but some statistics that prove no amount of development can make this country truly 'viksit bharat' by 2047.

Rather than reading about violence in news media, the norm should be the public questioning the effective implementation of legislations and the socially responsible steps the government is taking to raise awareness at the grassroot level on a daily basis.

As a voice from the collective womanhood of this country, I declare that we refuse to live like this.



Every 77 minutes, India reports a dowry death caused by the husband and in-laws.
Source: Aparna Vats