

Dowry—Spreading Among More Communities

extracts from a survey conducted by N. S. Krishnakumari and A. S. Geetha of the Joint Women's Programme, Bangalore

THE object of this study was to find out how far the evils of dowry have spread in all communities and religions in the metropolitan city of Bangalore. A total of 35 families were selected from each of three groups—Hindus, Muslims and Christians, and thus 105 families were interviewed. Case studies of dowry victims were also made. A cross section of about 100 students representing both professional and non professional disciplines, and 10 prominent persons including an ex vice chancellor, a newspaper editor, a journalist, an administrator, a member of legislative council, a doctor, a writer, a social worker, and a college principal, were also interviewed to elicit their views on dowry. A majority of respondents from the families interviewed are women, since they happened to be at home at the time of the interviews.

Of all families interviewed 74 percent have a total income of Rs 500 and above per month. A majority of them are nuclear families. Of the families 85 percent have given dowry in cash ranging from Rs 1,000 to Rs 25,000 and above.

It is significant that 75 percent of families in all religious groups said they were forced to give dowry because it was demanded. In 57 percent cases, dowry was handed over to the son-in-law. It is interesting that while a majority of respondents feel that Rs 5,000 should be the ideal amount for solemnizing a marriage, and a small number think the expenses can go up to Rs 10,000, in actual practice most of them from all three religions are forced to spend more than Rs 15,000 to marry their daughters. This shows that there is a great difference

between what they think they should do and what they are compelled to do.

Debts had been incurred by 66 percent of the families, to marry off daughters. Tabulation revealed that highly educated and highly placed families demand more dowry than less educated and lower placed families. However, irrespective of religious and educational background, dowry was found to be practised, and the families expected to give and take dowry in future



**Kaushalya and her husband
Jayaprakash**

also, even though a large majority of them agreed that it is a social evil and a burden on the bride's family.

Of the families, 38 reported that they have heard of brides being harassed for not bringing enough dowry. From all three groups 22 families report that their daughters are being ill treated by their

husbands for not having brought enough dowry. The case histories of dowry victims reveal that the virus of dowry is not confined to any one group but appears to be in almost all communities, in varying degrees.

Phyllis belonged to a Protestant Christian family of five daughters. Her father is an estate superintendent. Her marriage was arranged with Mr Thomas, working in the post and telegraphs department, Bangalore. Mr Thomas' brother demanded Rs 10,000 in cash, 15 sovereigns in gold and a share in the immovable property. The family fulfilled the first two demands but did not give a share in the property. The marriage took place in September 1981. Mr Thomas started torturing Phyllis both physically and mentally, and demanding Rs 50,000 more in cash as he claimed he had debts to repay. She was made to go without food and water for many days and became very weak. Seeing her condition, her mother asked the couple to come and stay with her till Christmas. Both of them agreed to this, but on December 15, Thomas sent Phyllis to her mother's house and took her back to his house the same night, promising to bring her again the next day. On December 17, Thomas informed Phyllis' mother that Phyllis had burnt herself to death. Her family strongly suspects foul play. They say Phyllis did not want to get divorced because she had three unmarried sisters. They allege that though the post mortem shows the girl died of suffocation and brain congestion, no action has been taken due to the unhelpful attitude of the authorities. Thus ended the life of a bride within 88 days of her marriage.

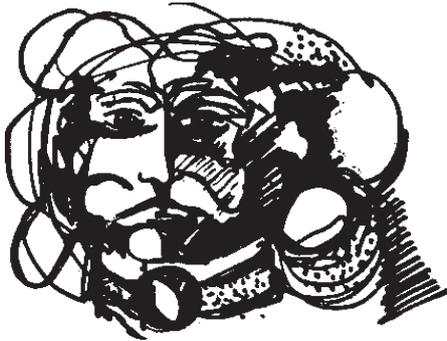
Kaushalya, aged 19, was the eldest

daughter of Shivananjamurthy, an employee of ITI, Bangalore. Her marriage was arranged with a postgraduate lecturer, Jayaprakash. Though he was slightly handicapped, Kaushalya agreed to marry him, thinking he would be loving. The marriage took place in April 1981. A dowry of Rs 9,000 in cash and 10 sovereigns of gold was given against a demand of 15 sovereigns. Kaushalya was constantly taunted by her mother-in-law for not having brought enough dowry. She told her father of this ill-treatment, but was advised to adjust herself to the situation. On November 5, Kaushalya wrote a letter to her father, informing him that she was being tortured physically and mentally. Her father sent his youngest son to fetch her, but the in-laws refused to send her. The next evening, Jayaprakash informed his father-in-law that Kaushalya had taken poison and was admitted to hospital. The doctors said she was out of danger. But soon she developed the toxic effects of poison and began to bleed from nose and mouth. Her husband's family then disclosed to the doctors that she had taken ethylene bromide and not rat poison. The hushing up of this vital information for so long proved fatal for Kaushalya.

Samshad Begum, aged 18, died on February 8, 1982. She was the eldest of six children. Her father was an autorickshaw driver but since he was ailing, her mother and younger sisters supported the family by rolling *bidis*. Samshad was married to Mayauddin in October 1981. He demanded Rs 5,000 as dowry but Samshad's family could pay only Rs 4,000 and 10 gold sovereigns. They also had to spend Rs 30,000 on the marriage. In the process they had to sell the autorickshaw. After marriage Mayauddin started demanding a scooter. Her parents promised to arrange for one by Ramzan. As a mark of protest, Mayauddin sent Samshad back to her parents' house. He constantly threatened to divorce her, saying she had neither beauty nor money. The community leaders said he would have to return the dowry if he wanted a divorce. Unable to do this, he planned to implant a love letter to prove

that she was unfaithful. He asked the former auto driver of Samshad's father to write a love letter to Samshad in return for a bribe. Since the plan leaked out, nothing came of it. On February 8, Samshad was invited to go to her husband's house, to perform a religious ceremony. On February 9, her parents were informed that Samshad had burnt herself to death. All the dowry items were returned to Samshad's father, who is now under pressure to marry his younger daughter to Mayauddin. The parents have refused to sacrifice another daughter.

Kokila, aged 26, was a first division clerk in a government office. Her father was a drunkard and did not support the family. Kokila was against the dowry system and refused many offers because of the demand for dowry. Her marriage was arranged to a man working as an attendant in a bank. At first he did not demand any dowry but when the marriage was settled he made various demands. Kokila persuaded her mother to meet his demands. Sharadamma sold two acres of



her land for Rs 12,000 and gave Rs 8,000 as dowry. She states that the couple were happy for sometime, but soon their relationship became strained. Kokila's husband did not want her to help her family. She was prevented from going to her mother's house for confinement. A child was born, but Kokila continued to be ill treated. One day Sharadamma was called by the police and told that her daughter had hanged herself in the bathroom. She suspects that Kokila was done to death, since the noose tied round her neck was too loose to strangulate her and there were marks of injuries on her

body.

There are also cases of girls putting an end to suffering by leaving their husbands. Such is the case of Saraswati, employed in a private firm. Her parents gave a dowry of Rs 40,000 but she was taunted and tortured unremittingly even after the birth of a child, until she left, and filed a case for divorce on grounds of cruelty.

Students and public persons, when solicited for their views, advocated inter caste marriages as in such cases parents are usually not involved so dowry cannot be given. They also stressed the need to build public opinion against dowry. Some of them condemned the practice in forceful terms. However, as many as 25 percent of students in professional colleges considered it their legitimate right to take dowry as a recompense for the money spent on their education. Surprisingly, even among the 10 prominent persons, a few had no objection to the giving or taking of dowry, if done voluntarily.

The case histories indicate that parents of girls, having given dowry, continue to yield to the demands made by son-in-law and their parents, in spite of the harassment and tortures meted out to the girls. Almost no effort was made to avert certain death to their daughters as such effort would affect the marriage possibilities of other daughters. Further, it is observed that the majority of the victims did not revolt but continued to suffer silently the brutal tortures meted out to them by their husbands and in-laws.

In conclusion, it may be noted that the dowry practice is prevalent among all religions, castes and classes irrespective, of their educational, occupational and income background. The trend that emerges is that there is every possibility of the practice continuing in future also, if commitment necessary for change is not developed among all concerned. The media and voluntary organizations will have to create awareness to bring about the desired behavioural change to wipe out the practice of dowry.

— extracted from *Banhi*