



## Marriages at Gunpoint

### Bihar's Unique Response to Exorbitant Dowries

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**I**t is widely believed that the tradition of dowry as practiced today is harmful for our society, but so far nobody has taken steps in the right direction to uproot this evil. Today it has become so pernicious that a girl from a poor family cannot dream of marrying a wealthy man. All IAS or IPS-trained men are picked up by families that can pay heavy dowries. It is a rare case when a high ranking government official chooses to marry without dowry. Normally the 'price' is fixed according to the groom's designation. When custodians of the state themselves indulge in such practices, can they be expected to check others?

The people of northern Bihar have come up with a unique response to this depressing scenario. They have begun committing another crime in the cause of checking the evil of dowry. These opponents of the system have devised a method called *pakarva bibah* (marriage by abduction) to fight this form of exploitation.

The father or brother of a girl first kidnaps a marriageable man and then forces him to marry his own daughter or sister at gunpoint. Begusarai, a district in northern Bihar which has been in the news for criminal activities over the past two decades, has advanced greatly in this campaign for the "eradication of dowry". A small, proportion of the 'respectable' population here wields a lot of criminal power, and approach the groom's family and force the marriage. If the groom resists or rejects the proposal, he is kidnapped and, sent back only when he agrees to marry the girl. Also, the groom's family is warned to treat the girl well; death for the entire family is the consequence if this is not done. Every year, 200 *pakarva bibahs* take place in Begusarai, which has won notoriety because of this trend.

It is said that the first such marriage was brought about by a villager, who had seven sisters who remained unmarried because of poverty. One day, all seven girls swallowed poison

and died. Incensed, the man swore that he would put an end to the dowry system forever, and initiated the trend of kidnapping prospective grooms and forcing them to marry at gunpoint. Many poor girls have been able to get married to wealthy men with the help of this man. Now the *pakarva bibah* has become fashionable without any resistance from society.

Between 1995 and 2000, 845 men were kidnapped, of whom 566 were forced to marry at gunpoint. According to police reports, only 299 marriages were successful; the rest were either broken or the grooms were killed because they did not accept the dowryless matrimony. The grieving families sought justice in court, but received no effective relief. Eventually they accepted what occurred as their fate, even though the court's verdict was in their favour. Mr. Shridhar Singh, for instance, a resident of Begusarai market, has three children, all studying in college. "When I was

22 years old, my marriage was fixed with the daughter of Mr. Rajesh Singh of Devaria, but due to differences over dowry, the marriage could not take place,” says Shridhar. According to his wife, Anita, her parents were very upset after the cancellation of her marriage. “One day my father received a letter in which it was written that he should take me to Jayamanglagarh on a particular day, if he wanted to get me married to the same boy,” she says. “When my father reached Jaymanglagarh with me, we found that the boy was already there and our marriage was performed”. As per Shridhar’s statement, he did not go there voluntarily, but was taken there at gunpoint. “I could not resist this marriage because I was terrified,” he says. Anita finally entered the groom’s house, but she had to face the opposition of his family. However, after some time, everything became normal. “In the beginning I accepted Anita as my wife out of fear, but after a period I compromised with the circumstances and today we are a happy couple,” says Shridhar Singh. There are several other cases where marriages were arranged at gunpoint, yet the couples are living together happily. But many of the marriages did not succeed, thus leading to bloodshed. Consider the case of Garima, who comes from a Kurmi family. Her brother too fixed her marriage at gunpoint. The groom’s Bhoomihar family took it as a matter of family prestige and registered a First Information Report (FIR) at the police station. The court also declared it a void marriage, but Garima’s brother was adamant and this decision led to bloodshed. Garima’s husband was murdered. She herself was thrown out of her in-laws’ house, but did not return to her brother. “My brother ruined my life and made me a widow in my youth. Why should I go to his house now?” she asks.

This method of arranging marriages at gunpoint has become increasingly prevalent in certain communities. By its inaction, perhaps the administration has also given its silent assent to this practice.

However, the violent means adopted by men on behalf of their

sisters, as in the case of the brothers of Anita and Garima’s will only encourage crime, thus promoting enmity and hatred in society. The women, who are the real sufferers, will continue to remain passive objects of violent contentions involving money, prestige, and muscle-power. □

## Tell us a Story



**Each of the regional languages of India has a vast and rich repertoire of grandmother’s tales, folk stories, poems, sayings, jokes, witticisms, etc. Unfortunately, these are inaccessible to those of us unfamiliar with languages other than our own mother tongues.**

**We invite AAAnushi readers to share with us what has struck you as significant from this repertoire in your mother tongue, that has not previously appeared in English. Please send us the original with a fresh English translation, identifying its oral or written source.**

**-Editor**