



HOW WE LOOK AT IT

MOST people are not even aware that the giving and taking of dowry is a legal offence. Since the Prohibition of Dowry Act was passed in 1961, the custom has flowered and flourished, invading castes and communities among whom it was hitherto unknown – sprouting new forms and varieties. It is percolating downwards and becoming so widespread even among the working classes that it is no longer possible to consider it a problem of the middle class alone.

With the entire bourgeois mass-media oriented towards viciously promoting the religion of mindless consumerism, demands for dowry are becoming more and more ‘modernized’. Marriages are made and broken for such items as cars, scooters, TVs, refrigerators and washing machines, wedding receptions in five-star hotels or an air ticket plus the promise of a job for the son-in-law in a foreign country.

In India, we have a glorious heritage of systematic violence on women in the family itself, sati and female infanticide being the two better-known forms. Today, we do not kill girl-babies at birth. We let them die through systematic neglect—the mortality rate among female children is 30-60 per cent higher than among male children. Today, we do not wait till a woman is widowed before we burn her to death. We burn her in the lifetime of her husband so that he can get a new bride with a fatter dowry.

“Woman burnt to death. A case of suicide has been registered. The police are enquiring into the matter”. For years, such three-line news-items have appeared almost everyday in the newspapers and gone unnoticed. It is only lately that dowry deaths are being given detailed coverage. It is not by accident that fuller reporting of such cases has coincided with a spurt of protest demonstrations.

It only shows the powerful role that mass media can play in consciousness – raising and yet does not choose to play. In fact, the major thrust of this powerful instrument wielded by the ruling classes has been to manipulate people’s consciousness into submission. And women have been special targets of this attack. The glorification of the dutiful wife and daughter-in-law by the cinema, television and most popular literature including textbooks, reinforcing the religious stereotype of Sati-Savitri, is in no small measure responsible for the submissive attitude of the victimized women themselves.

We as women have to long been silent spectators, often willing participants in the degrading drama of matrimony – when girls are advertised, displayed, bargained over, and disposed of with the pious injunction: “Daughter, we are sending you to your husband’s home. You are not to leave it till your corpse emerges from its doors.” It is significant that in

all the cases of dowry murders recently reported, the girls had on previous occasions left the in-laws’ houses where they were being tortured and felt insecure. Their parents had insisted on their going back and ‘adjusting’ there.

Death may be slow in coming – a long processes of killing the girl’s spirit by harassment, taunts, torture. It may be only too quick – fiery and sudden. Dousing the woman with kerosene and setting her on fire seems to have become the most popular way of murdering a daughter-in-law because with police connivance it is the easiest to make out as a case of suicide or accident.

And for every one reported murder, hundreds go unreported, especially in rural areas where it is almost impossible to get redress unless one is rich and influential. For years, the police and the administration have hushed up these cases under the plea that people are not willing to appear as witnesses, that they are indifferent.

This myth of public apathy was exploded when the recent protests against dowry deaths in Delhi drew such immediate support from the people in the neighbourhood, passers-by and onlookers. In the demonstration at Model town, Delhi, the organizers were hoping to get not more than 50-100 people for the protest. But the local people joined in spontaneously and brought with them a new vigour. By the time the protesters reached the house where the girl had died, their numbers had swelled to about 300. It was the same with the other demonstrations too.

It is obvious then, that there is a great deal of latent anger and indignation against injustice. Why then this veneer of cynicism and apathy? Why do people not come forward to give evidence against the murders, before the police?

In most of these cases, the same people who openly joined the protest demonstrations, were unwilling to give evidence before the police, the court. In one case, where the neighbours had themselves taken the initiative to get it registered as a murder case, the police threatened them into silence.

In fact, it is a matter of no small credit for those who rule this country that they have successfully trained us, the people, to accept injustice as part of our lives. The corruption and inefficiency that is cultivated by the rulers in all those forces which act as instruments of their rule – the police, the judiciary, the bureaucracy – have made the people dread these forces so much that today we fear to seek redress.

The reputation of the police force as ‘goondas in uniform’ who go about blatantly flouting every law in their law-book, harassing the innocent to extract money from them, actively conniving with criminals effectively prevents people from

wanting to get involved in cases of complaint. In our country, the job of subverting law by the ‘guardians’ of law and order has been made easier because people have lost faith in the law itself. This apathy has become the biggest asset for all those who have a vested interest in maintaining a corrupt and unjust society.

In this context we see as a hopeful sign the new spreading democratic consciousness among the lower ranks of the police as manifested in the recent agitation by police the country over. They are beginning to protest against the system that dehumanizes them and makes them instruments of oppression, of ‘legalized’ State violence. The rebel against injustice is most human and the policemen and policewomen, by fighting for their democratic rights, have asserted their nearly lost humanity.

As one of the agitators in Punjab put it : “All these years, we felt we were outcasts from the *biraderi* (society). The solidarity and support our agitation is receiving from people makes us feel part of the *biraderi* again.” The growth of such sentiments has exposed the way in which the ruling class forces one section of the people of perpetrate injustice against others.

If law enforcers have been working against the law, the law itself has been a dead-letter. One important reason is its consciously built-in loopholes. The Prohibition of Dowry Act declares the giving and taking of dowry illegal but allows ‘gifts’ at the time of marriage. No limit is set on such gifts. This has, therefore, become the most common way of demanding dowry – the girl’s parents are politely asked to give whatever they “happily wish to” (*apni khushi se*). They are a course aware that not only their daughter’s *khushi* but even her life depends on these ‘voluntary gifts’ of theirs.

Why is it that gifts have to be given with the daughter? Hindi scriptures proclaim that the girl herself is the most precious of gifts ‘presented’ by her father to her husband (*Kanyadaan*). Thus the money transaction between families is bound up with the marriage transaction whereby the girl becomes a piece of transferable property. So little is a woman worth that a man has literally to be paid to take her off her father’s hands. The dramatic increase in dowry-giving in the post-independence period, reflects the declining value of women in our society. Their only worth is as reproducers who provide ‘legitimate’ heirs for their husband’s property.

Most people opposing dowry feel that the problem can be solved by giving girls an equal share in their father’s property. This was one of the reasons why daughters were given near-equal rights in the Hindu Succession Act, 1956. And yet the law has been reduced to a farce because in most cases, daughters are pressurized to, or even willingly sign away their rights in favour of their brothers. In any case, it is the woman’s husband who usually controls any property she inherits. So the property transaction remains between men, women only acting as vehicles for this transaction.

This will continue to be so as long as the majority of women remain economically dependent on men and as long as this

dependence is reinforced by our social values and institutions so that even those women who earn, seldom have the right to control their own income.

The problem has other dimensions too. When marriages are arranged, it is not just the boy’s family who make sure that the girl’s family is “well settled and well connected” and can give their daughter a “decent marriage”. The girl’s family too judges the boy by his job, income inheritance prospects and social status. The worth of human beings is thus decided solely on the basis of the money and property they possess. Therefore, it is not just women who are unfree. Men too are denied their humanity when money and property are made the main criteria of judge their worth.

But this form of violation of human dignity is not even considered immoral – it is the ‘normal’ thing in our society based on private property. It continues to be so in countries where young people choose their own partners, so long as their choice is based on the criterion of social status or property owned.

The fight against dowry, therefore, has to be part of a larger fight against the system which makes human beings the slaves of money and property, which reduces human beings themselves to pieces of property. The solution is not to be found in making laws more stringent, because the essence of the existing legal system is the protection of private property. Witness the way the law discriminates between a ‘legitimate’ and an ‘illegitimate’ child, just because the former is owned by the father and the latter is unclaimed property.

What is needed is a widespread movement against dowry and allied social evils. A number of women’s organizations have recently been galvanized around this issue. But they have been working without proper coordination with each other, in fact often at cross-purposes with each other. This is most unfortunate as it will only dissipate the movement before it has even got off the ground. We appeal therefore to all the women’s organizations to undertake a broad-based united action on this issue and launch an intensive, concerted campaign instead of the isolated, sporadic protests which have so far been organized, and which can only have a short-term, limited impact.

Perhaps even more urgent is the need to begin the movement from our own homes. Are we sure that none of us who participated so vociferously in these demonstrations, will take dowry from our parents or give it to our daughters in however veiled a form? That we will rather say ‘No’ to marriage than live a life of humiliations and compromises? Do we have the courage to boycott marriages where dowry is given? Even the marriage of a brother or sister or of a dear friend? Will be socially ostracize such people, no matter how close they are to us? All the protest demonstrations will be only so much hot air unless we are prepared to create pressures against dowry beginning from our own homes.

- *Manushi Editorial Collective*