



## In The Month of April...

### A Report from Bihar

NOT a day passes without a dowry related death being reported in the newspapers. Here I am giving the details of a few recent cases from Bihar.

At 8 a.m. on April 6, 1984, Renu Singh was burnt to death by her husband, Arvind Singh. Renu had been married in July 1981 to Arvind, son of Yadunandan Singh of village Gehuni, Begusarai district. In his complaint, Renu's father Arjun Singh of village Dalsingh Sarai has alleged that ever since the marriage took place, the boy's family had been demanding a tape-recorder and a scooter. Renu, who was a final year student of BA Honours in the local

college, underwent much torture. In her last letter to her father, written on October 10, 1983, she said : "I was beaten until I became unconscious. Now I have fever. There is no one here to save me." The police arrested Arvind Singh.

On April 15, 1984, Santoshi Devi was beaten by her husband Koleshwar and thrown into the well where she died. She was eight months pregnant at the time. She had been married in June 1982 to Koleshwar Sahu, son of Punit Sahu of village Khirgaon, district Hazaribagh. Santoshi's elder brother, Nandkishor, alleges in his complaint that ever since marriage she had been tortured by her

in-laws who were not satisfied with the dowry given. She was told to bring Rs 10,000 from her parents. Her parents took her home to Ranchi where she stayed for a while. On the intervention of some elders of the city, a settlement was reached and she went back to her in-laws. There, the maltreatment continued until she was killed. The police registered a case and arrested the father-in-law.

Usha was murdered because she was not given sufficient jewellery in dowry. Her father, Tarini Singh, of Behrama, says that Usha was married to Ramkumar Sharma of village Pyarepur, Sarmera thana. The dowry included Rs 31,000 in

cash, 25 gold and five silver jewels. After marriage, Usha's husband and mother-in-law began to harass her to bring more jewellery from her parents. She was beaten and deprived of food. On April 12, 1984, they sprinkled kerosene on her and burnt her to death. On a complaint by Usha's father, the police arrested Ramkumar but later released him.

Hridaya Kumari, 18 year old daughter of Sukhdev Rai of village Sairena Bairganiya block, was married in 1983 to Zimedat Singh, son of Mohan, resident of Vikrampur. The dowry included cash and items like utensils. Sukhdev promised to give a watch, a radio and a cycle later, but could not fulfil this promise. On April 13, Hridaya was murdered by her father-in-law, husband and other relatives. The body was cremated without informing her parents. The police were bribed and insists that it was a natural death.

Radhi Mehtain of village Nandanvadi, Dhanbad district, was married eight years ago to Luti Mehto of village Pavapur. She was maltreated ever since. Radhi's parents say that her in-laws had recently demanded a sum of Rs 1,000 which they needed to get their daughter married.

Radhi's parents could give only Rs 100. Therefore, on April 28, 1984, Radhi's husband with three accomplices, Rati Mehto, Yugal Mehto and Rohan Mehto, killed her. Her brother, who happened to be in the vicinity, visiting a relative, heard about her death and rushed to the in-law's place. However, he was not allowed to see his sister's corpse. He returned to his village, from where he took five other relatives with him to Pavapur. But by the time they reached, the cremation had already taken place. The police have arrested the accused.

Sudha, 21 year old daughter of Gauri Dutt Misra, of a village near Jamalpur, was married in 1977 to Premnath Jha who works as a railway booking clerk in Jamalpur town. Sudha was harassed for dowry ever since her marriage. She used to write her parents about the tortures she was suffering. In April 1984, Sudha's father received a letter from her in which she said that her husband had sold her to Mausai Singh, a notorious flesh trader

in Dayalpur, Nalanda district, on the pretext of getting her married to him. When Sudha's father went to her in-law's house he was told that his daughter had run away with a man. The police arrested Sudha's father-in-law but her husband is absconding.

It seems impossible to bring to an end this account of the murders and tortures of women for dowry. While I am investigating a case in one area, right then, perhaps in my own neighbourhood, another Saroj or Radha is being burnt or buried alive. Usually, the police register a case under the Dowry Prohibition Act or the Penal Code or arrest the accused. Then they accept a big bribe, and release the accused after a few days.

I feel that to combat this dowry culture we should insist that a woman be at least 25 years old at the time of marriage. We should encourage marriages by free choice and intercaste marriages. It is even more important to implement the slogan "We will not take dowry, we will not give dowry." People wish to show off their status by giving a television or a Rajdoot in dowry but when the son-in-law makes a demand for something more, then they get annoyed. Passing laws in parliament will have no effect on the giving and taking of dowry. Only a movement against dowry culture can have some effect.

—C.A. Kumar

(translated from Hindi)

## And In Our Neighbourhood...

On October 17, 1982, Shail Khanna, a Delhi university graduate, aged 23, daughter of S. K. Khanna, resident of Lajpat Nagar, Delhi was married to Satish Kumar Chawla, whose family has a wholesale hosiery business. Shail's father, according to Shail and her mother, spent Rs 1,35,000 on the wedding and got heavily into debt.

Shail alleges that after marriage she found her husband was mentally deficient, bad tempered and violent. She also alleges that she was confined to the house, maltreated and overworked. All her jewellery was taken away from her.

Demands for more dowry were made, some of which her parents fulfilled.

She put up with all this for about a year. Finally, she was turned out of the house by her husband at a time when her father was in hospital. When she wanted to bring away her personal belongings from her house at Shastri Nagar to her parent's house at Lajpat Nagar, the house owners, who, she says, were bribed by Satish, intervened and stopped her. She went to the local police who referred her to the antidowry cell who in turn referred her to Lajpat Nagar police station. The Lajpat Nagar police retrieved the articles and kept them in the police station.

Both Satish and Shail went to court to claim the articles. Counsel for Satish contended that some of the articles had been bought by Satish to "please" Shail and others had been given jointly to husband and wife, therefore none of them could be claimed as *stridhan*. Shail's lawyer argued that all the articles had been given to Shail by her parents and relatives therefore Satish had no claim on them. On May 31, 1984, senior subjudge J.K. Pali, declared that husband and wife were in joint possession of the articles given by Shail's father. Since the marriage was subsisting, he went on, the articles should be given to Satish to keep them "safe and sound." He advised Shail to get the case decided by a "competent court" and said that Satish must furnish an indemnity bond for Rs 20,000.

It is clear that this order is completely illogical. On the one hand, the judge admits that husband and wife are joint owners of all the household articles but on the other, he does not give them equal control over the articles. Instead, he hands them over to the husband on the ground that they were recovered from 'his' house. He does not explain why he considers the joint residence to be the husband's house. There can be no explanation except the usual male bias according to which the man possesses the house and everything in it, including all that belongs to his wife. Does the court exist merely to put a stamp of approval on societal biases? Shail has now appealed to the high court.

—Prabha Rani