

The Deccan Herald, Bangalore, 15 Mar 2008

The dowry scourge persists

Shuriah Niazi

Recently-released data from the Crime Records bureau proves that there has been no decrease in the number of dowry deaths in India. In fact, the craze to become rich effortlessly may further fuel dowry demands,

Kanta Chauhan killed herself in July 2006. She was 26, and pregnant. She had been harassed for dowry by her husband, Hemant, and in-laws for the two years that she had been married. Arguments over dowry were a common occurrence in this household in Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh. Unable to endure the trauma any longer, the young woman hanged herself in her bedroom while her husband was at work. He was arrested promptly.

Beena Saktawat, a young woman, died of burns under suspicious circumstances in Bhopal, the capital of Madhya Pradesh, in December 2006. The police registered a case against her husband for allegedly instigating his wife to commit suicide as a result of his incessant demands for dowry. Investigations by the police, the medico-legal re-

ports as well as statements made by Beena's relatives established that her death was not accidental.

According to recently-released data of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), a total of 2,276 female suicides as a consequence of dowry disputes were reported in 2006. The numbers can be translated as around six dowry deaths a day over one year. The figures were 2,305 and 2,585 in 2005 and 2004, respectively.

Ironically, India has a number of laws intended to protect women from marital violence, abuse and extortionist dowry demands. The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, prohibits the request, payment or acceptance of dowry, "as consideration for the marriage". Dowry is defined as a gift demanded or given as a precondition for a marriage. According to the Act, the giving or taking or abetting the giving or



taking of dowry is a punishable offense. However, gifts given without a precondition are not considered dowry, and are legal.

Tipping the scale

Then, there is also the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, whose Section 5 defines domestic violence as those acts that harass, harm, injure or endanger the aggrieved person with a

view to coerce her or any other person related to her to meet any unlawful demand for any dowry or other property or valuable security.

While there does seem to be a marginal decline in dowry deaths across the country, Madhya Pradesh continued to top the national list for the fourth time running with 585 cases — accounting for around one-fourth of the total number of such incidents.

Situated in the heart of India, the state of Madhya Pradesh is fast becoming famous for the wrong reasons. In addition to tipping the scales in the number of dowry-related suicides, the state has witnessed one of the most ghastly killings — again related to dowry. Bhoomi Ramchandani, 19, was married to a businessman in Indore. In September 2006, her body was found, chopped into pieces and placed in two bundles

near the jogging track of a popular park in the city. The ghastly incident was brought to light when neighbouring residents found the mutilated body and notified the police.

As suspected, the guilty were her parents-in-law, Dhanwantari and Jamnadas, and their son and Bhoomi's husband, Manoj. Dhanwantari was reported to have said that her daughter-in-law would never listen to her and that there were constant arguments between the two. The real motive, it emerged, for the gruesome murder, was dowry.

Easy riches

But what is the reason behind the increasing number of such cases in Madhya Pradesh, a state known for its large tribal population that accords its women such respect? Vijay Pathak, a social worker, believes that the influx of people from other cities is certainly one of the causes for the rising number of dowry deaths.

Another reason for the increase in such incidents is the slow rate of conviction.

In 2004, disgusted by the trend of dowry, the priests

in Chhatarpur district had united against the social evil and resolved not to solemnise any marriage in which a dowry demand had been made. Unfortunately, all priests in the state did not comply with the decision and the initiative did not grow into a movement.

Pramod Soni, a sociologist, believes that people's urge to become rich effortlessly has resulted in the increasing demands for dowry. Pressurising a bride's family seems the easiest way to make easy money, as it is felt that people are ready to do anything for the sake of their daughters. Either the bride endures the trauma or urges her family to give in or, in extreme circumstances, eventually takes her life when neither she nor her family can tolerate any further harassment, he explains.

Not that a suicide prevents the guilty groom from seeking another match or rather another chance of acquiring easy wealth. Says Asha Mishra, National Coordinator of Samta, an NGO that works among women across 22 states of the country, "The biggest problem the girl's family members face is that they have to prove that the girl

has been murdered and that, too, for the sake of dowry. In most of the cases, they are unable to prove the crime due to the collusion between the police and the boy's family."

Lengthy procedure

Further, lengthy judicial procedures are often demoralising, restricting family of victims from getting justice.

What may help counter the many obstacles a harassed woman and her family may face in the pursuit of justice, are the Family Counselling Centres that are located in the Mahila Thanas (women-only police stations) and set up by the state in order to resolve marital disputes.

Alternatively, if a woman is unable to get to such a centre, she could lodge a complaint by dialling 100 and asking for the Women's Help Desk. Each of the 38 districts of the state has one such help desk functioning out of a prominent police station. Once the telephone report is registered, trained counselors, available round-the-clock, swing into action to solve the problem.

Women's Feature Service