

## Essay on Curse of Dowry System

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In a patriarchal society such as ours that accords sub-ordinate status to women, the position of a girl child is indeed vulnerable. In case of financial difficulties, it is the girl child whose education is sacrificed in order to manage the household and take care of the other younger children at home. The dowry system, deeply rooted in the culture and customs of most communities in India, is a cause of harassment for most women. This has led to a situation where the girl child is treated as a guest in her own home.

Dowry means the demand made by the bridegroom's family from the bride's parents for the payment of money as well as other costly gifts like land, house, clothes and jewels, a condition precedent to the alliance. Dowry, in fact, is not a recent development. History is full of examples where daughters have been married off with immense wealth given to them at the time of wedding.

Gifts, presents and things given to the daughter in marriage are nothing bad in itself. It is a token of her parent's love and happiness. Even the Bible preaches:

"Ask me never so much dowry and gifts, and I will give according as ye shall say unto me: but give me the damsel to wife."

When the groom's family tries to extract the expenses made by them on their son's upbringing and education from the bride's family, it takes the shape of dowry. Dowry thus smears the sacred relationship of marriage and converts it into a base, mean and cheap financial deal.

There are several reasons for the occurrence of the dowry system, but the core reason is that it is considered a necessary pre-condition for marriage. Other being that, female based inheritance was not legal in India until law reforms in the 1950's, so dowry may have begun as a form of legal inheritance for daughters. However, as the system evolved, dowry has become a greater financial burden on bride's family. The price tag for the groom is now bigger and bolder. 'No dowry, no marriage' is a widespread fear. Dowry as a phenomenon has gone beyond the ritual of marriage. Pregnancy, childbirth and all kinds of religious and family functions are occasions when such demands are made. A more sophisticated public image of an extended gifting session has replaced the old system. Now there is demand for exclusive reception or destination wedding. The trousseau includes designer wear for the bride and groom's family. Chefs are flown in for multi cuisine wedding dinners. The bride's family usually pays for all this.

Another major reason for the existence of dowry system and its atrocities is the lack of women's education. They remain unaware of their rights. The lack of education also leads to their lack of empowerment. They remain economically dependent on others and fail to be the masters of their own life. Another cause of dowry is the rigid caste system prevalent in our society. Parents are determined to marry their daughters to a boy of their own caste, they are left with restricted choice of suitable boys and thus parents are compelled to subdue to the demands of the groom's family. This ends up like choosing between many evils. Moreover, the tendency of marrying daughters at an early age without paying attention to their education and career, pushes them to a bleak future without any self-confidence and education. The tendency of parents to get a rich boy to marry their daughter off further increases the pressure of dowry on them.

Shockingly, even after so much gifting and exchanges, one woman dies every hour due to dowry related reason on an average in the country, which has seen a steady rise between 2007 to 2011, according to official data. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) statistics show that 91,202 dowry deaths were reported in the country from 1st January, 2001 to 31st December, 2012. Bihar and Uttar Pradesh record the maximum number of dowry crimes, but Bengaluru, India's fastest growing city also shows an alarming rise where four women reportedly die every day because of dowry harassment and domestic violence. The cases of dowry torture are the highest accounting for

32.4% of crimes against women in the country.

Even the social reformers like Mahatma Gandhi, Swami Dayanand tried their best to create a social consciousness against this practice. Dowry became prohibited by law under the 1961 Dowry Prohibition Act in Indian, Civil Law and subsequently by Section 304B of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) with the purpose of prohibiting the demanding, giving and taking of dowry. To stop offences of cruelty by the husband or his relatives against the wife, Section 498A was added to the IPC and Section 198A to the Criminal Procedure Code in 1983. Although providing dowry is illegal, it is still common in many parts and sections of India in lieu of government regulated equal rights for girls in parental property.

Time and again, women groups have protested against many cases of dowry deaths. A national campaign focussed on humiliating and socially boycotting the families in these cases was held. The campaign also demanded that mysterious deaths be presumed to be murders until investigated and proved otherwise by the police. To counter this social menace, group comprising 15 to 16 NGOs have been created. Independent social workers working in localities have also been roped in for the project. Volunteers, hailing from the Mahila Panchayats and other such committees have also been incorporated in the project. Serious activism, special police cells for women, media support, heightened awareness of dowry being a crime, has been done.

Other life-saving mechanism includes—Womens Action Research and Legal Action for Women (WARLAW): led by Attorney Rani Jethmalani of New Delhi, this is a group of dedicated attorneys, who provide free legal protection and assistance to the dowry victims in India. There are many specialised centres which help women to be self-supporting by training them in crafts, like knitting, sewing etc. Other groups run small shelter homes for helpless women.

Despite the amendments made to the Dowry Act in 1983, there are certain loopholes that need to be checked. There is an urgent need to promote mass communication and education programmes to publicise anti-dowry ideology through drama, street plays, music, movies, radio and television programmes, books, periodicals, journals, handbills and other audio-visual media. Methods like interviews, group/panel discussions, meetings, seminars, conferences, internet discussions, legal, psychological, spiritual and social remedies should be adopted to wipe out the evil of dowry and bride burning.

Women should be encouraged and educated, so that they become self-reliant. Time is now changing. Educated girls have now taken upon themselves to combat this evil in our society. Girls like Nisha Sharma, Farzana and Vidya Balasubramanian have been courageous enough to call off their weddings at the last moment because of the dowry demands, yet a lot needs to be done. It is high time that the society should realise the dignity of a woman, the sacredness and sanctity of marriage and unite to fight against the evil custom of dowry.