

Indian brides paying with their lives over dowry demands

By Rahul Bedi

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The number of Indian brides burned to death for not bringing adequate dowry is on the rise across India, following the spurt in commercialisation triggered by the booming economy.

In 2010, 8391 dowry death cases were reported across India - an average of a bride being burned every 90 minutes.

A decade earlier this number was 6995, but climbed steadily to 8093 dowry deaths in 2007 and to 8391 three years later, National Crime Records Bureau figures show.

Dowry, banned in 1961 but never seriously enforced, is an ancient tradition prevalent among most Indian families.

And with all-round prosperity burgeoning after the early 1990s when India's state-controlled economy mutated to a free market system, this custom became more acute with greedy grooms and their families seeking to get rich through brides.

If a bride refuses to satisfy incessant demands by her husband and in-laws for money and goods, despite having brought the mandatory dowry at the time of marriage, she can be subjected to inhuman treatment.



Brides are sometimes starved, beaten or "jailed" inside the bridal home and denied all contact with her family. Many families eventually pay up to ensure the woman's safety.

Sometimes in the case of a family refusing to pay or being unable to do so, in-laws, working with their son, force the bride into an inflammable nylon sari, douse her with paraffin and set her alight, claiming she had caught fire while cooking.

In the early 1980s dowry deaths became so commonplace that anti-dowry activists forced the Government in 1986 to change laws stacked against the bride.

Deaths by burning within seven years of marriage were deemed "unnatural" and cases of murder were immediately registered against the husband and his parents.

The bride's dying statement too was treated as inviolate evidence, a move that led to a reduction in the number of such cases.

But hundreds of bride-burning cases go unreported. It can also take decades for a ruling in the simplest of cases in India's overloaded courts.

Krishna Tirath, federal Minister for Women and Child Development, told Parliament last month that less than a third of registered dowry death cases since 2005 had led to convictions till 2010.

Three years ago India's Supreme Court declared that no mercy should be shown to those found guilty of burning brides over dowry.

"On one hand people regard women as devi [goddess], on the other hand they burn them alive. This is against the norms of civilised society. It's barbaric," said former Justice Markandey Katju.

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