

Dowry in India

counting the cost

Maya and John were young Indian believers, who worked in ministry together. They wanted to marry, but when John approached his parents for permission, they refused unless Maya could provide a dowry of Rs 500,000 (about USD \$12,500).

Maya had been abandoned by her family upon becoming a Christian, so even if she agreed to the terms, she had no family to provide that money for her. But she knew that in India the giving or taking of dowry was against the law, and also she was strongly opposed to the social expectation that she was worth so little as a woman that she had to buy a marriage partner. There is no happy ending to this true story from India... without dowry, the marriage never happened, and Maya remained single.

The dowry system is an ancient practice that existed well before the written record, and was common in many cultures around the world. The ancient Hammurabi law code, created in Babylon around 1760 BC, prescribed regulations on how to handle dowry. It was standard practice around

the 8th century BC in Greece, and also in the ancient Roman world. Dowry was also widely practised in Europe, to the extent that charities were formed to provide dowry for penniless young women, to enable them to marry. In Victorian England dowry was seen as an early payment of the daughter's inheritance: only daughters who had not received their dowry were entitled to part of the estate when their parents died. If a couple died without children, the dowry had to be returned to the bride's family.

Dowry – the money, goods, or estate that a woman brings to her soon-to-be husband in marriage – was originally given by the bride's parents in order to provide for her should anything unfortunate happen in the marriage, such as divorce or widowhood. However, the original intent of dowry – a means of protection for the woman – no longer applies, and dowry has become a requirement demanded by the man's parents, which greatly benefits his family but leaves the woman open to abuse. This social requirement makes the presence of a girl child in the family an extremely

expensive affair. Parents have to use all means possible, fair and foul, to gather enough wealth and material goods together to ensure their daughter can marry when she comes of age.

The custom of dowry is still practised in the Arab world, South Asia, parts of Africa, and anywhere their dispersed peoples settle. In recent years, particularly amongst South Asians, dowry has become a way of increasing family wealth without having to do much work. This is bad news for prospective brides and their families; according to an article published in 2003, the going rate for a doctor husband was \$80,000, and \$200,000 for a high-ranking government official.

Dowry can be in cash or in kind. It is based on the status of the man's family, the level of his education (the more highly educated he is, the more expensive the dowry), the community he belongs to, and family greed. The requirement for dowry often consists of a house, property, many sovereigns (a weight measure) of gold in the form of jewellery, and anything required to run a home: TVs, washing machines, air conditioners, furniture, vehicles etc. A dowry can range between USD \$2500 and \$250,000, depending on the status of the groom. Some families put the dowry in the name of the couple, but that is very rare... it will usually be claimed by the man's family.

Not infrequently, a man's family have agreed

on the dowry amount but escalated their demands after the wedding, using threats of violence, rejection and divorce. In order to avoid public shaming, the woman and her family bear these burdens in secret.

The Dowry Prohibition Act came into effect in 1961, and applies to the whole of India except the State of Jammu and Kashmir. The penalty for being found guilty of giving or taking dowry is imprisonment or a large fine. However, the authorities do not usually enforce the law except in extreme cases where murder or suicide is the result of dowry demands. Most dowry deaths occur when the wife commits suicide, unable to bear the torture and harassment by her husband and in-laws attempting to extort more dowry. The Indian National Crime Bureau reported 6787 dowry death cases registered in India in 2005, but any official figures are likely to be an understatement. Some unofficial estimates put the number of deaths at 25,000 women a year, with many more left maimed and scarred. Dowry victims are from a wide range of groups, social strata, geographical regions and religions, and articles about women who are abused,



Wedding singers at an Indian wedding.

tortured and killed for more money are regularly featured in Indian media.

Most college-educated Indians I have spoken to, both men and women, are firmly opposed in principle to the dowry system, and agree that the twisted form it has taken is responsible for the degradation of women. But there are very few who have the courage to fight against it, or withstand the family pressures that are exerted upon them by their family elders. The few who do stand up for the “girl child” and her rights, and refuse to practise dowry, are still very much in the minority.

Unfortunately, this social hazard exists even in Christian circles in India. A few churches are courageous enough to speak out against the “gift”, as it is now conveniently called, and oppose this system. However, many more churches accept the practice, and even benefit from it by imposing a tithe on all dowries.

I once shared a maternity ward in India with a woman who had given birth to twins. She had been supported by loving family – husband, parents, in-laws – in the hospital room until her labour began. After a long and very difficult labour she gave birth to two beautiful baby girls. Upon discovering the sex of the children, the entire family left the hospital in disgust. She received no visitors, and if we hadn't helped her, given her food and water, she would have had nothing. She told us she was now considered

a curse because she had produced girls, who were regarded as a curse. She felt that her only remaining options would be to abandon her daughters in the hospital chapel, or kill both herself and her children.

Women denied the happiness of marriage and family, women neglected by their families if they give birth to girl babies, and female infanticide, are just some of the horrendous social fallouts from the dowry system, which encourages the debasement of women and refuses to recognise their human dignity.

In recent years the infrastructure and systems that provide assistance to abused women and girls, and stand up for the basic rights of females, have increased in prominence and effectiveness. Unfortunately, this battle is being fought more by social activists and women's rights organisations than by, or within, the Church. For this battle to be won, it's vitally important that Christians practise the tenets of their faith that provide for the dignity and equality of both genders. Those who obey God rather than following unhealthy social systems can become instruments of change and help end this social crime. ✨

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The battle against dowry is being fought to ensure that girls like this little one don't end up as another tragic casualty.

