**India burning brides and ancient practice is on the rise**

**By Jason Koutsoukis**

January 21, 2015 — 11.46am

**Bangalore:**It was after sunset on a Sunday last November when Sushila found her daughter Laxmi lying naked on the front step of the house she shared with her husband and two children on the outskirts of Bangalore.

Laxmi had burns to more than 80 per cent of her body and in the darkness Sushila could hear more than she could see.

A demonstration in Patna on January 28 against dowry deaths. Courtesy *Frontline* magazine, India.*CREDIT:LEIGH HENNINGHAM*

"I heard her crying, she was in agony, but I didn't know how bad it was," says Sushila. "There was no one to help her, no one wanted to come to her. I was the only person she could call for help and I live 12 kilometres away."

Laxmi was eventually taken to the Victoria Hospital in central Bangalore, which has a 50-bed burns ward, one of the most advanced in the country.

Advertisement

She survived three days, enough time to describe to police how she came to be doused in kerosene by her mother-in-law and set alight by her husband.

Bride-burning, as this type of crime is most commonly referred to, accounts for the death of at least one woman every hour in India, more than 8000 women a year.

"We also call it dowry death," says Donna Fernandes, the founder of Vimochana, a women's rights organisation established in Bangalore in 1975 with the aim of preventing violent against women.

"The husband's family believes they have not received enough money for their son at the time of the wedding, perhaps because they are of a higher caste or some such reason, and that's when the harassment starts."

Often, says Fernandes, the husband's family begin pressuring the wife's family right after the wedding.

"They start asking for cash, or gold, or consumer goods like washing machines or televisions. Whatever it is they believe is owed to them or was promised to them, luxury goods that they can get the bride's family to pay for."

In many cases the husband's family decide after the marriage has taken place that the original dowry was not sufficient.

"They know the bride's family is vulnerable, because of subjugated role of women in our society, and what begins is a process of extortion. Demands for money turn into threats of violence, and when the family can't pay any more, the bride is killed."

*Bride-burning accounts for the death of at least one woman every hour in India.*

Leafing through a pile of emails on her desk, Fernandes reads one cry for help from a woman who had reached out for help.

"You might think this only affects poor, uneducated communities, but this woman is from an educated family," she says.

"The harassment began on their supposed honeymoon. She claims her husband started beating her immediately, demanding her parents hand over more money. They did [paid more] but they keep demanding more and she says she is now in fear of her life. There is a famous saying, a rule that certain people in India follow: the more you beat her, the more you get."

Yet despite seeking the Vimochana's help in getting protection, Fernandes said the woman had since withdrawn her request.

"She told us this morning that everything she had told us was untrue and that we should please leave her alone and not do anything. Clearly the husband has found out that she contacted us, but she is still in danger. If we intervene, she may be in more danger. I don't know what to do in this case."

Satya K, a social worker at Vimochana since 1998, says that most dowry deaths are not reported.

"Thousands and thousands of cases each year are recorded as accidental deaths, or suicide. We estimate that the real number of deaths each year is up to three or four times the official statistics," Satya says. "Because most people involved, including the wife's family, the husband's family and the police have an interest in covering up the truth."

In Laxmi's case,, however, at least an official police investigation has been registered.

"Laxmi's case was unusual in some respects," Satya says.

Only 28 when she died, Laxmi had been married to her husband, Majunath, 35, for 10 years, during which time they had two children, a daughter aged eight and a son aged five.

Instead of being arranged by their respective parents, as is most often the case, this had been a love marriage, with Laxmi coming from a higher caste than her husband.

"Majunath became a drunkard and he was increasingly unable to find regular work and most of the money Laxmi earned from her work as a housemaid went on liquor."

Under increasing pressure from her husband's family to provide, Laxmi turned to her mother, who agreed to provide limited financial support.

"Laxmi began to face a lot of harassment from her husband's family. His mother, his sisters. They accused her of carrying on an affair with a neighbour, and Majunath began beating her."

Several times, Laxmi left her husband, taking the children back to her mother's house, but each time Majunath persuaded her to come back, promising to end the harassment.

"She had been staying with me for five or six days before she went back for the last time. I begged her not to go," says Laxmi's mother Sushila. "She went, and for one day she was OK."

As Laxmi recounted to her mother in an auto-rickshaw as they drove to the hospital the night she had been set on fire, it was around 8pm on Sunday, November 23, and Laxmi was preparing the evening meal in the kitchen when her mother-in-law suddenly entered the kitchen and soaked her in kerosene.

According to Satya K, the social worker from Vimochana who interviewed Laxmi in the Victoria Hospital burns ward before she died, it was Majunath's mother who compelled her son to set his wife on fire.

"She was screaming abuse at Laxmi, saying that she had ruined her son, and, according to Laxmi, it was the mother-in-law who urged her son to light her."

Her clothes soaked in kerosene, Laxmi burned quickly, and in desperation she lunged for husband and hugged him in an attempt to put the flames out.

"There was so much kerosene that instead of putting the fire out, she set him on fire also."

Early on the morning of November 24th, Majunath was also admitted to Victoria Hospital with third-degree burns to 40 per cent of his body. Majunath told police that the fire was accidental and that he had tried to help his wife.

"This is also common," says Satya. "But from the burns to Laxmi's body, to her head, her back, it's clear to everyone that there this is no accident."

Majunath died the day after Laxmi, and police have issued an arrest warrant for his mother, who has since disappeared.

Satya believes the chances of an arrest are low.

Of the 671 bride burnings she knew of in the area surrounding Bangalore last year, only about 50 cases had been formally registered by police last year. Nationally, convictions are secured in only about 15 per cent of cases that make it to court.

In a 2005 study of bride-burning "Bride-Burning: The Elephant In the Room is Out of Control", Dr Avnita Lakhani, an assistant professor of law at the City University of Hong Kong, wrote that out-dated, mythological misconceptions of women combined with the grossly manipulative practice of dowry meant that bride-burning today was as rampant in India today as it was 2500 years ago.

"And the Indian government and society implicitly sanction dowry murders by not adequately prosecuting it," Makhani wrote.

A decade since her paper was published, Lakhani told Fairfax Media this week that despite attempts by legislators to protect women, the situation had not improved.

"Since I published my article, there has been little to no progress," says Lakhani. "I would even go so far as to say that the situation has got worse because I believe the upward mobility of primarily men in modern areas is creating economic and cultural tensions and any educational progress by men and women is not being filtered to the outlying areas."

Even the courts appear to be losing sympathy with prosecutors over alleged dowry death cases, with India's highest court ruling in July last year that anti-dowry laws were being used to unjustly harass husbands and in-laws.

According Justice C. K. Prasad of the Supreme Court of India, the proof of this was that there had been a phenomenal increase in dowry harassment cases in India over the past few years.

"The fact that [the law] is a cognisable and non-bailable offence has lent it a dubious place of pride amongst the provisions that are used as weapons rather than a shield by disgruntled wives," wrote Justice Prasad.

"The simplest way to harass is to get the husband and his relatives arrested under this provision. In a quite number of cases, bed-ridden grandfathers and grandmothers of the husbands, their sisters living abroad for decades are arrested," he said.

Yet despite this alleged abuse of apparently innocent in-laws, the number of dowry deaths keep piling up.

Official figures from India's National Crime Records Bureau revealed that 8233 young women, many of them new brides, were killed in so-called dowry deaths in 2012. National crime records for 2013 indicated that 8083 had died in this way.

"The United Nations says this is a form of genocide," says women' rights activist Donna Fernandes. "This is a crime on huge scale, and we're losing the fight."