

Reaffirming the Anti-Dowry Struggle

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Mental acrobatics may leave the writer and readers gasping—with wonder at one's own daring or with amazement at the distortions of peripheral vision. Thus it is so with Madhu Kishwar's pronouncements on dowry [Kishwar, 1988]. Rather than a rethinking of issues which have been central to the women's movement Kishwar constructs straw models of the anti-dowry struggle to knock down. In her search for *apparently* 'independent thought and creativity', she isolates elements of social reality in a manner in which no person directly involved in the struggle could. Thus for her dowry is the "transfer of wealth at the time of marriage. In itself, this is neither good nor evil" (Kishwar, 1988: 10). I wish to present here a very condensed analysis of some aspects of dowry in India and of the anti-dowry movement which I think are necessary to clarify the issues which Kishwar's 'argument' has obfuscated. This analysis is based on participatory research and on written and oral documents of the movement as well as secondary material.

Why did dowry become such a 'burning' issue at the end of the 1970s? Why did it bring women on to the streets in various forms of collective protest, establishing in the process the basis for a renewed women's movement in Delhi? Dowry, after all, is not a new practice. But the increased incidence of what are acknowledged to be dowry related murders was. It was this, rather than the dowry system itself, which spurred the movement. Kishwar argues that the harassment and murder of young

brides had little to do with dowry. I argue that this intensification of homicidal violence against wives was a consequence of changes in dowry practices due to social and economic changes resulting from the colonial and post-colonial capitalist development in India. This is premised on the understanding that dowry, and indeed most forms of "transfer of wealth at marriage", cannot be understood "in itself".

In the feudal society of pre-colonial India, land and caste defined the parameters of power. Marriage was central to social strategy and an important instrument of social control. Dowry highlighted and cemented marriage alliances between landed, high status and powerful families. Although according to Manu, dowry was the lawful form of marriage presentations for Brahmins only, it was in fact associated as much if not more with castes such as the Rajputs. Dowry and hypergamy were practised only by 'high' or 'middle' ranking and upwardly mobile castes even during the colonial period, for restrictions were placed on 'lower' caste emulation of the customs and ritual of the 'high' castes (Srinivas, 1984). Hypergamy, the marriage of a woman into a family belonging to a clan or a sub-caste of slightly 'higher' status than her own, was an important feature of this complex (Srinivas, 1984; Das 1975; Committee on the Status of Women in India, 1974). The ideology of hypergamy, tied to the caste system, meant status asymmetry between the affinal groups, such that the relation between dowry and hypergamy may be seen as an exchange of goods for an increase in the status of the bride's family. Dowry and hypergamy were also tied to the 'upper' caste ideology which entailed seclusion of women, their exclusion from productive work, their categorisation as economic burdens as well as status asymmetry between husband and wife. Dowry helped 'ease' the entry of women into their marital homes (Das 1975). While in material form and content, as well as the social groups among whom it is found, dowry has changed radically, it continues to carry with it this ideological complex.

Changed practices

A number of anthropologists have discussed dowry in terms of *stridhana* (Das, 1976), female property (Tambiah, 1973) or pre-mortem inheritance (Goody, 1976), (the last especially where there has been an attempt to construct a category of Eurasian societies which Kishwar seems keen to do). Contemporary dowry not only has little to do in form and content with the classical *stridhana* (Srinivas, 1984), evidence indicates the lack of control by the bride over a major portion of 'her' dowry in earlier times too (Tambiah, 1973; Desai, 1957; Altekar, 1956). This was not a case of reality diverging from the ideal. Rather, as is true today also, normatively a substantial part of the dowry was not meant for her or her husband, but for the latter's kin. Furthermore, in north India, land was not given in dowry. In the context of patrilineal inheritance and the exclusion of daughters from ancestral property, this ensured the separation of the outgoing woman from the material symbol of the preeminent social group, the family, as well as from the most valuable economic resource. The linkage between dowry and hypergamy also points to an inherent tendency, intensified in later periods, of continuous inflation in the amount of dowry, and of the possibility that the demands of the bridegroom's family rather than custom determined the amount and kind of gifts to be given. Thus while dowry was an indication of the status of the families uniting in marriage, it was also symptomatic of the control and dependence of 'high' caste women.

As Srinivas notes, contemporary dowry practices are quite different from earlier patterns. Five dimensions of this change may be noted. First, dowry has spread to all castes, communities, religions and regions. It is practised in all classes to varying degrees. Second, the 'voluntary' character of the 'gifts' is disappearing. The 'gifts' are dictated by the demands of the groom's family as well as the status symbols of the groups within which the natal and marital family wish to project themselves, rather than 'tradition'. Indulgence of the bride and her choice

has little to do with the dowry 'gifts', except among upper class and upper middle class households. Third, the money value of dowry has increased and there has been a qualitative change in the goods given, following on from the above. Often the dowry is worth significantly more than a daughter's equal share in her father's property, leading to resentment on the part of the other members of the family and a disinclination for further support. The inflationary cycle continues as families are pressured to recuperate economically from a daughter's dowry through the marriage of a son. Fourth, dowry has come to encompass the entire marital relationship and customary gift exchange between affines. Truly there is 'extended dowry' (Kishwar, 1988: 10)! Demands begin at the engagement and may continue at frequent intervals and on special occasions during the life of the marriage. Gifts given directly to the married daughter are but a portion of what is transferred. The women's parents comply with the continuing demands—made on the grounds of alleged inadequacy in the dowry at the wedding—in the hope of 'saving their daughter's home'. Finally, while the extent to which women ever have had control of the major portion of their dowries is questionable, their lack of control in contemporary times has been intensified. This has been a result both of the changing nature of gifts, its rising value and, more significantly, the overall change in women's position.

The imposition of a market economy and capitalist development during the colonial period and its spread in independent India has loosened, but not wholly transformed, earlier patterns of feudal land control and has increased liquid forms of wealth. New groups joined the elite and new avenues for economic and social mobility opened up, particularly after 1947. However, increasing economic differentiation accompanied these processes. While intra-caste and intra-kin economic heterogeneity deepened, caste and kinship have remained central to social life, but with a new freedom for 'lower' castes to emulate the behaviour of 'high' castes. Norms of 'high'

traditionality in pre-colonial India—dowry, ritual expenditure, conspicuous consumption—are now being adopted by 'lower' castes, non-Hindu groups and middle and low income groups. It may be true to say "a critique of waste and ostentation should not be confused with a critique of what goes specially against women's interests" (Kishwar, 1988: 11). However, not to see the link between conspicuous consumption and the spread of dowry as status symbols in contemporary India is to miss the wood for the trees. After all, despite the ideology of patrilineality, the mother's natal family may make a substantial contribution to the child's birthday party, held at the mother's marital home, as part of extended dowry!

In addition with rising costs of living and increasing unemployment, dowry has become a means of obtaining the necessities of life and achieving upward economic mobility for the husband's family. The dowry is to provide the in-laws of the bride the capital for a business investment, the fee to be paid to a broker for a job for the young man, the gifts to be given to the husband's sister, publicly and ostentatiously, or the bicycle, television or house for their own use. Further, the need to accumulate a daughter's dowry is often given as the reason why an individual starts accepting bribes.

The spread of dowry is crucially linked to the devaluation of women in latter-day India. Women of the 'lower' castes were increasingly eliminated from their traditional areas of production (Mitra, 1979; Mitra, Srimany and Pathak, 1979). As new opportunities were closed to them, they became confined to jobs in the most menial and lowpaid sectors. Increasing economic dependence reinforced the traditional dependence of women on kin and marriage, emphasising the idea that women were an economic burden for which their in-laws must be compensated. Sharma postulates that the "expansion of dowry has been accompanied by a decline in women's capacity to contribute to household income *compared with that of men*, even though there has been no absolute diminution of women's economic activities" (1984: 67–68). As money has become a

measure of value, women's declining ability to bring in cash has led to a devaluation of women.

Anti-dowry movement

The above analysis was reflected in the anti-dowry movement. The Dahej Virodhi Chetna Manch (DVCM), the co-ordinating forum of a range of organisations involved the anti-dowry movement, said that dowry cannot be viewed as an 'isolated phenomenon'. In its August 1982 memorandum it stated that dowry was "linked with the entire gamut of inferior female condition: Its increasing incidence is symptomatic of the continuing erosion of women's status and devaluation of female life in independent India. It is equally related to the worsening socio-economic crisis within which structural inequalities have accentuated and black money power grown to fuel greater human oppression". Thus the DVCM did not see dowry as the root cause of the harassment of women, which Kishwar may once have seen it as, but as symptomatic of many causes. Dowry was and is no phoney symbol. Dowry and harassment and murder for dowry are the most immediate and inhuman expression of the coalescence of those processes and relationships which are objectifying and degrading women, turning them into commodities and into means for commodities, in the context of a largely patrilineal, patri-virilocal society.

The spread of dowry is not the spread of a practice of the transfer of wealth at marriage 'in itself'. It indicates the commercialisation of the marriage relationship in addition to its earlier importance in terms of establishing alliances between elite families. But most importantly it meant the equation of the woman with the dowry. Thus, unmarried working class and educated middle class women work to accumulate their dowry. Rural women in Rajasthan working on family farms are seen as contributing to 'their' dowry or to their daughter's 'extended dowry', not to the family in terms of basic subsistence or surplus accumulation. Daughters indeed grow up looking forward to their marriage, to being 'adult', to having a

husband and children. They look forward to the wedding when they will be the centre of attention and, among the middle class, to the nice clothes and the 'wealth' they will be given. Marriage is essential to attain social adulthood, but problems of accumulating the dowry can delay the marriage. Young girls grow up sensitive to this and sensitive to the fact that their marriage can mean the ruin of their natal family. The psychological traumas that are generated were sharply forced on all of us in the suicide pact of the three young sisters in Kanpur. Soon after marriage a significant enough number of brides who had looked forward to being recipients of 'gifts' find they have little control over, or access to, their 'gifts'. They find that the dowry given is taken as a measure of the affection their parents hold them in and the esteem of their in-laws. Kishwar says that "dissatisfaction is expressed not only with the quality and quantity of the dowry, but equally with the woman herself" (Kishwar, 1988: 12). Yes, for the woman is the dowry and the dowry is the woman. Much before the anti-dowry movement it could be observed how in urban middle class households and among rural peasants, criticism of a daughter was seen by her, her parents and neighbours to relate to the dowry she had not brought or the post-wedding gifts with which she did not return from her natal home. One can understand Kishwar's reluctance to accept that there is a social equation between the woman and her dowry, for it is indeed bitter and inhuman. But even more important, Kishwar's framework, where it is paramount that one accepts the socially constructed desires of some sections of women as what they 'truly' want, as the basis of struggle, would imply also accepting this equation.

Kishwar tells us that dowry was highlighted in the cases of harassment and murder which came to women's organisations because the bride's father and brother were interested only in dowry-related harassment since it directly affected them, while other abuses affected only the daughter. (Kishwar confuses forms of harassment with reasons for abuse so that one is left wondering if there are particularities in the forms of abuse for

dowry related reasons as against for other reasons.) What happened to kill the love and affection in which they held the girls and which allowed them to "indulge and make much of her" at her wedding (Kishwar, 1988: 10)? Anyone who has been involved in some minimum counselling or engaged in intensive fieldwork will know that a constant topic of conversation among those with recently married daughters or daughters who are harassed, is the latter's situation in their marital homes. Parents agonise over it, bemoan their inability to do much, discuss their advice to their daughters to 'adjust'. What are the options before them? They can bribe their daughter's in-laws into treating their daughters better. They can leave her alone to 'adjust'. Or they can bring her back, with all possibility that this will mean the end of the marriage. Economic dependence of the woman, the expenses incurred on her marriage and the social stigma attached to a woman with a broken marriage reinforce her natal family's and her own desire that she remain with her husband. In addition there is her fear that she will lose her children if she leaves her husband. The social obligation on the bride to 'adjust' and the acceptance that once she enters her in-laws' home, she will leave it permanently only on her funeral bier is reinforced by the fact that she has become her dowry, not only for her in-laws, but for her parents too. Dowry as a social fact cannot be treated in isolation, but it is increasingly isolating the woman from her own kin, constraining the bonds of affection and the tie of support. The prescription for continuing gifts, whether a family can afford them or not, adds to the resentment of the woman's natal kin and her own insecurity. She hears people say of another woman "She works there [in her *sastra*] and consumes here [in her *peehar*]". Her in-laws tell her, "Don't expect that just because you live here we have to keep you—your parents cannot even give us what self-respect demands" (clothes for the woman and her husband and his kin). Just as neither marriage nor dowry were issues of individual choice in pre-colonial India, they remain

instruments of social control, of women and of their families too.

After the anti-dowry movement, a fourth option has emerged for her and her parents. A women's organisation may be asked to intercede on the woman's behalf, so that the in-laws are pressured into treating the woman better, in the process reducing the isolation of the woman. Kishwar of course sees another possibility, of the woman's parents single-handedly changing socially constructed relationships in the same manner in which she wished to end dowry with her boycott.

Many forms of struggle

Many trends of thinking and consciousness made up the anti-dowry movement. It ran at many levels and through various forms of struggle ranging from legal action, seminars and corner meetings, neighbourhood demonstrations, *dharnas* and public marches. The agreement within the Dahej Virodhi Chetna Manch was that despite differences on particular points the Joint Select Committee report and recommendations would be taken as the consensus. The recommendations included suggestions for comprehensive legal reform, not only of the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, but also on inheritance rights for daughters, registration of marriages and all gifts given at marriage, custody of children, family courts, legal aid and a common civil code. Other recommendations were on the use of mass media and school textbooks for public education, the establishment of vigilance committees with representatives of women's organisations as members, dowry prohibition officers and a national commission on women. The understanding was clearly that dowry cannot be fought in isolation. As a fight against dowry it was not a call for dowry boycott by itself, but raised a gamut of issues related to women's economic dependence and their legal and social rights in both their natal and marital homes. With the further specification which one finds in the August 1982 memorandum of the DVCN, the first three demands in the section on legal action related to

women's rights in property. These included demands for amendments to provide equal property rights for women under all prevailing laws, a compulsory share for a daughter in a testator's property and a half share for the wife in all assets acquired by the couple after marriage. In 1983, the anti-dowry movement's concern with women's dependent status continued in the focus on the issue of women's employment by women's organisations on March 8, International Women's Day.

Activists had found that the inadequacies in the law and the collusion and connivance of the police and local administration added to the problems of dowry harassment. However, for many sections in the anti-dowry movement, legal changes were viewed only as an instrument of social change. Thus the emphasis was on public campaigns in order to build the necessary political and social will to ensure action that would be effective in eradicating dowry and the increasing harassment of brides. Included in the written list of slogans circulated and raised at meetings and marches were "*parivar mein rishta vaisa ho, bahu-beti samaan ho*" (relationships within the family should be such that the daughter and the daughter-in-law are treated the same) and "*stri par na ho atyachar, ham parosi hain zimmedar*" (we neighbours are responsible that women are not abused).

Hindsight can and must clarify and sharpen our understanding, must aid activists in correcting mistakes, in rethinking issues and future struggles; and it must be based on the concrete experience of struggle. In relooking at the anti-dowry movement and examining the developments of the last few years, the essential understanding of the anti-dowry movement is reaffirmed. The experience of the participating organisations and women made it clear that it was not a question of dowry first or inheritance first, but that both struggles have to take place together. Simultaneously, immediate and urgent measures were needed—legal, social and administrative—to tackle the harassment and murder of women for dowry. Whatever Kishwar may argue, dowry did not, and does not, give women much in material terms, while as a social phenomenon it takes

away their very right to humanity and to life. The continuation of dowry acts as a justification for the daughter's exclusion from her father's property, leave alone devaluing her and her economic contribution to her family. Being attached to dowry and excluded from property, she can never be a full member of any family, where no family wants the complete responsibility for her or can give her a share in their unity, their property. If, socially, women are to be accepted as complete persons, in their self-conception as well as the perception of society at large, the equation of women with dowry has to be broken and they have to become equal members, equal shareholders in the family property. The fight for the latter has to be in conjunction with the fight against dowry. Kishwar's argument for first one and then the other is as mechanical as was the idea that dowry boycott would by itself end dowry. In conclusion I would like to quote a slogan which the anti-dowry movement can take much of the credit for popularising: "*jo aurat ko hak de na sake, woh samaj badalna hai*"—we must transform that society which cannot give women their due.

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