

AW041

If Indian men wish...

Dowry deaths take place on a large scale and neglect of girl child, female foeticide and infanticide are common to the extent that Bihar alone has 2 million and India has 16 million "missing" women and girls. "Doesn't the Government of India have a responsibility?" asks Viji Srinivasan

Dear Prime Minister

Recently, we celebrated the International Women's Day. Yet, as women of India and girl children, we are adamant that we cannot give you a grand reception. Our situation is deteriorating day by day. You know how the sex ratio -- number of women per 1000 men -- is steadily falling. It has gone down from 972 in 1901 to 927 in 1991. I am writing from a network of women's organisations in Bihar called Adithi Shrinkhala. In Bihar, it has fallen from 954 women per 1000 men in 1971 to 912 in 1991. We could give more statistics, but we do not want to waste time in lamentation. We have documented female infanticide for you, first in Usilampatti, then in Salem district of Tamil Nadu, then in Bihar, especially in Katihar and Sitamarhi districts. We have facts about scanning and female foeticide all over the country; the 0-6 sex ratio in some of these high-risk areas is nearer 700 girls to 1000 boys.

If these figures do not move you -- and the men of India -- then what will? The high-pitched screams of the dying burnt dowry victims? Or the prolonged agony of Mekhala in Tamil Nadu who was forced to drink a glass of acid by her husband and his relatives who were eating apples and oranges as her charred, singed body lay in the house, rolled in bedsheets, described as 'kuda' (rubbish) by her in-laws? Was she wrong in dreaming of a paradisaical life with her husband?



Lallan Kumar

CONFINED TO FOUR WALLS OF HER HOUSE: A victim of apathy

her? But in my experience with female infanticide, the men never killed a baby girl themselves. They hid themselves behind the crimes! I think it is time Indian men took a stand against dowry, dowry deaths, female infanticide, and all the atrocities committed on women and girl children. It is time to stop perpetuating the myth "women are women's own enemies". They may appear to be so, but there are several

said, "We may be able to afford a dowry, but for those who cannot afford a dowry, it results in harassment. Besides, the concept of dowry has roots in subordination of women; so we do not accept dowry. We are only giving an inheritance to our daughter. All men in India please do the same." There are many fora for these men -- Lions Clubs, Rotary Clubs, Jaycees, their own offices, the religious groupings. As in immunisation, these

Eradication of dowry harassment and deaths and female foeticide and infanticide in Bihar, or for that matter in India, needs four remedial measures. The first is an alternative for the daughters. If they do not get a dowry nor an inheritance, they themselves are going to clamour for a dowry. This decision is too difficult to be taken by women as they don't own the assets of the family anyway. The second is enforcement of anti-dowry laws. proper in-

in society what girl children can be. Only then will female babies be wanted and dowry be eradicated.

But all this can happen... only if Indian men wish...

And you wish -- the Prime Minister.

If I were you I would declare 1999 as Anti-Dowry Year.

Then I would fix a statutory ceiling on marriage expenses. This would either be based on a percentage of yearly income or assets of the family. I would also fix a statutory limit on guests at weddings. NGOs would be given identity cards so that their members could go to every wedding and check on expenses and guests. The culprits would be strictly penalised throughout 1999. And beyond.

All police commissioners and other police officials of high ranks would be made responsible for ensuring speedy, proper and fair investigation of dowry deaths. The 'Crimes Against Women' cells would be strengthened and empowered to receive directly FIRs lodged by the NGOs having identity cards. Dowry offenders would liable to be arrested without warrant and it would also be non-bailable.

I would make it mandatory that whenever a woman commits "suicide" or death occurs in the in-laws' house her body would not be allowed to be cremated till her parents come. In case the husband or in-laws dispose of the body before the parents' arrival, they would be tried for murder. The police officer or any person who permits such hasty disposal would also be tried

wrong in dreaming of a paradisaical life with her husband?

The thousands and thousands of silent, innocent girls who enter their husbands' homes with stars in their eyes and love in their hearts, are little aware of what the future has in store for them. Is that they do not have an informed choice? Whose primary responsibility is it to give them this power, the right, the discrimination? Yes, it is that of the parents. But when dowry deaths take place on a large scale, when neglect of girl child, female foeticide and infanticide are common to the extent that Bihar alone has 2 million and India has 16 million "missing" women and girls, doesn't the Government of India have a responsibility?

And if the Government of India does have a responsibility, you stand first before my eyes because you represent the two eyes of this country. Probably two male eyes, though I must explain and illustrate why I say this.

From my experience of patriarchal families and of the areas I have worked in, men are supreme. They may pretend all they like that it is not they who want dowry, it is their wives (the mothers-in-law); or that it is not they who want to kill the girl babies, it is their wives. But the fact remains that it is the men who have the power, even within the families. If the husband was to say to his mother "my wife should not be ill-treated", there is no way the mother-in-law can continue to subject her to repeated ill-treatment. Similarly if the husband (or the father-in-law) was to say "I don't want my baby daughter (or grand-daughter) to be killed", who will dare to kill

women's own enemies". They may appear to be so, but there are several reasons for this. The mother-in-law has had no education, she has no control over the family income, no 'job', her marriage has been bad, she has not had a companionship with her husband; her only real 'meaning' in life is through her son, so she remains very possessive. When he gets married, she finds that she cannot have the same relationship with her son as the daughter-in-law has, and she is afraid she will lose her son's affection, her 'meaning' in life, her power. The dowry is often only an excuse to harass, persecute or tyrannise the daughter-in-law; the real reason is the mother-in-law's jealousy, fear of loss of power. If she had had other interests in life, if her husband had tried to develop a real relationship and friendship with her, she would have lost her jealousy and fear.

In a survey conducted in Bihar covering 100 educated and working mothers-in-law (e.g. teachers) and 100 illiterate mothers-in-law, 92 of the daughters-in-law of the educated and working women had very good relationships with their mothers-in-law; 98 of the daughters-in-law of illiterate women talked of substantial ill-treatment.

So if Indian men wish, they can stop dowry and female infanticide.

Then why don't they? This question has to be answered in the perspective of class/geography etc. The affluent; urban, upper middle class think, "We are not giving dowry, there are no demands, we are only giving gifts to our daughter". But it is time they came out and

Clubs, Rotary Clubs, Jaycees, their own offices, the religious groupings. As in immunisation, these groups should begin a campaign: "Don't give a dowry, give a share of the inheritance to your daughter", "She is equal; don't kill her!", "We men in our society now must take the lead".

Everyone says, "It will take a long time". But we have to begin sometime. Everyone says, "Oh, dowry is growing, nobody wants to stop it!" But no one tries to raise his voice against it in a sustained manner. Even NGOs think it is not possible to do anything about it. The urban upper middle-class men... they have to come out of their shells.

Then come the men of urban middle and lower middle classes. They don't want to oppose dowry because they benefit as men, as fathers-in-law, as husbands. To them I say, "Don't do this to your daughters. Think. Stop." The men of this class have to take the lead. If they wish... They have to talk about it in their caste groupings, parents-teachers associations, religious groupings. This is the worst group. This is the group which, in a way, was responsible for dowry deaths in Delhi in the beginning. If they come out and say, "We are going to give a 'share' in our property to our daughters and allow no dowry or conspicuously consumptive weddings", there can be a real difference.

In the rural community though the alienation from the kith and kin is less marked than in the urban areas, the demand for dowry is rising due to the acute materialism prevailing all over.

don't own the assets of the family anyway. The second is enforcement of anti-dowry laws, proper investigation, chargesheeting, filing of case in the law court and speedy deterrent punishment. Since this entire system is controlled by men, a powerful movement has to be built up to sensitise it. The third is to make the fathers who take dowry, who kill their daughters-in-law, female infants (who can do this except powerful men?), feel ashamed of their covetousness or if need be, ostracise them. The fourth is using religion or old value-system to fight the menace. The elite (and the feminists) may reject ritualistic religion, but its hold on the middle class and the poor is undisputed. How about posters about dowry deaths in temples?

Once these four measures come into play, women's organisations and NGOs can lend a helping hand. They will run shelters all over the country; for example, in Bihar, Adithi Shrinkhala will run a network of shelters along with other NGOs. The women's organisations, acting as pressure groups, will make sure that anti-dowry laws are enforced and cases are taken to court. Girl children will be made strong; they will discover their potential; they will be in discordance with the present framework of their lives; they will develop a sense of equality with their brothers; they will learn income-generating skills so that they can flee a violent marriage with impunity. They will get an inheritance, reject the dowry system and will refuse to marry till they are eighteen. They will be role-models to other girl children. They will be an indicator to parents

tried for murder. The police officer or any person who permits such hasty disposal would also be tried as abettor.

I would also set up a special court for dowry related offences and dowry deaths, which, from January 1, 1999, will speedily dispose of all pending cases as well as new ones.

You have money for such a big media campaign on child labour. You have funds too for such a big media campaign on the elections. Is it because both are 'neutral' subjects? Or because male children and male candidates are in majority? Why not a large-scale media campaign against dowry?

I would also like NGOs to run the adolescent girl component of the Integrated Child Development Services and introduce broad-based life skills education on the lines of the Balika Kishori Chetna Kendras in Bihar (first supported by UNICEF). These along with village consultative committees have already brought in good results in the emergence of a 'safety-net' for women and girl children in terms of crime reportage and returning to parents' house after violence. There can be no substitute for strengthening of girls themselves -- to resist marriages with dowry, to insist on a share in the parents' property (instead of dowry). Village consultative committees with both men and women of the village, along with NGOs, should be empowered to report crimes against women.

If I were you, I would do this for a variety of reasons -- common sense, social justice and for the emergence of a "modern" nation.

It can be done if you wish... and Indian men wish!