

**ASIAN  
HORIZONS**

Vol. 8, No. 2, June 2014

Pages: 337-356

## **DOWRY AS A SOCIAL-STRUCTURAL SIN\***

**Shaji George Kochuthara, CMI\***

*DVK, Bangalore*

### **Abstract**

The Preparatory Document of the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops considers dowry as one of the situations that requires the attention and pastoral care of the Church. This applies specially to India, as dowry is widely practised in India. In spite of the prohibition of dowry by the law, it is practised in almost all regions, irrespective of caste or creed. Though dowry was practised in some forms from ancient times, it was much different from the current practice. Today, the dowry system has become a sort of extortion of money and property from the bride's family, causing constant tensions and violence in family life. Dowry is a social-structural sin and should be considered a personal sin that is against the Christian vision of the family. Although the Church is not supporting the dowry system, it has not undertaken any committed action to eradicate this evil that causes a lot of unjust suffering and violence, and contradicts the Christian concept of marriage and family.

---

\*A shorter version of this article was published originally in *Feminist Catholic Theological Ethics: Conversations in the World Church*, ed. Linda Hogan and Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, New York: Orbis Books, 2014.

\***Shaji George Kochuthara, CMI** is Associate Professor of Moral Theology at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore. He is also the Chief Editor of *Asian Horizons*, Dharmaram Journal of Theology, the Chairperson of the Institutional Ethical Board of St John's Medical College, Bangalore, Religious Adviser of the Ethics Committee of St Martha's Hospital, Bangalore, and a member of the Asian Regional Committee of "Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church" and the Head of its Asian Forum. He completed his undergraduate studies at DVK in India and the post-graduate and doctoral studies in moral theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome. His publications include *The Concept of Sexual Pleasure in the Catholic Moral Tradition* (Rome: Gregorian, 2007), *Moral Theology in India Today*, ed. (2013) and *Revisiting Vatican II: 50 Years of Renewal*, Vol. 1 (2014) (both, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications) and over 30 articles. Email: kochuthshaji@gmail.com

## 1. Introduction

The Preparatory Document of the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the “Pastoral Challenges to the Family in the Context of Evangelization,” lists some of the situations requiring the Church’s attention and pastoral care. “[M]arriages with the consequent problem of a dowry, sometimes understood as the purchase price of the woman” is one such situation that requires the Church’s attention and care.<sup>1</sup> Considering the Indian context, dowry is one of the major causes of many of the family problems. Besides leading to the disruption of family life, dowry is a major reason for physical violence, including killing of women. Moreover, the dowry system, as it is practised today, results in constant tensions in the interpersonal relationship of the spouses. In spite of these, it seems that the Church has not taken sufficient measures to fight this evil that radically contradicts the Christian vision of marriage and family and leads to sheer violence and unjust suffering of many, especially women. Beginning with the presentation of a few cases, we shall consider the practice of dowry today as well as its historical background. Following that we shall consider how dowry is a social-structural evil as well as a personal sin. We shall also critically evaluate whether the Church is doing enough to prevent the unjust practice of dowry.

## 2. Understanding the Context

### Case 1

I have come here to share the story of my daughter Bismayati Patro. She was a graduate, 22 years old and had completed a Post Graduate Diploma in Computer Application. She was also a National and State awardee in kabbadi, swimming and football... The man who became her father-in-law (Ramachandra Rout) saw her once on the way back home from her college and sent the proposal of her marriage with his son. As we were not ready for it, we refused. But he came frequently to our home and requested to give our daughter. He told us that they didn’t need anything... finally we did her marriage at a temple on April 25, 2008 with Amiya. Though there was no demand from their side, we had given some jewellery to both of them and had told them we would give Rupees 50000 for buying some assets for Bismayati... Barely two days after the marriage, our daughter, her husband, and her father-in-law left for Delhi, where her husband was working. We gave again Rupees 20000 for purchasing some required assets at Delhi... After four months they came back. Two days

---

<sup>1</sup>[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/synod/documents/rc\\_synod\\_doc\\_20131105\\_iii-assemblea-sinodo-vescovi\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20131105_iii-assemblea-sinodo-vescovi_en.html)

after their arrival, my husband visited our daughter... but Ramachandra Rout did not allow her to talk to him. This worried us and made us begin to suspect that she was being tortured by her in-laws. Then we came to know that her mother-in-law had committed suicide because of dowry torture. We then went to her family to bring back our daughter if she was in trouble... She stayed with us for two months after which the father and son came and begged our apology... Bismayati went back, believing that she could manage the situation by herself... After returning to her husband's home she was again tortured by them physically and mentally. Again after two weeks we brought her back, and again Bismayati's husband took her back... Again father and son put more pressure on us from time to time for money... On December 3, Amiya came with Bismayati for money, but it was not possible for us to arrange money at that time. We promised to give it within a week. In spite of our request that they stay at our house, they went back to their village the same day. After two days of their return, on december 5, Amiya contacted us over phone to enquire whether we had arranged the money or not and threatened that if we did not arrange the money to be given to them, we would have to forget our daughter. On December 6 at 4.15 in the morning we got a phone call from Amiya, the husband of Bismayati that our daughter had committed suicide... After seeing the truth we were shocked. It was not a suicide, it was a murder... It was very much clear that they had poured kerosene and set fire on the dead body..."<sup>2</sup>

## Case 2

A woman training for the Indian Revenue Service (IRS) has complained to the city police that her husband, who is also an IRS trainee, filmed their sexual acts including some unnatural acts. The man was threatening to make the videos public if she did not pay him more dowry. The couple, both from affluent families, had got married just seven months ago after meeting at the IRS entrance exam. The cops have booked the husband, his mother and sister under various laws.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>Binapani Patro, "Mother of Bismayati," in Vimochana Editorial Collective, *Daughters of Fire. Speaking Pain, Seeking Justice, Sustaining Resistance. Voices and Visions from the Court of Women on Dowry and Related Forms of Violence against Women*, Bangalore: Streelekha Publications, 2011, 48-50. The book contains anecdotes, papers, poems, etc presented at the "Daughters of Fire, the India Court of Women on Dowry and Related Forms of Violence," held from July 26-29, 2009 in Bangalore, India (Hereafter referred to as Daughters of Fire). The India Court of Women on Dowry was organised by Vimochana, an NGO, which has been working for the empowerment of women, and especially fighting against dowry and violence related to dowry. The court was organised in collaboration with a number of organisations both in India and abroad, and was conducted at Christ University (Bangalore) and Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram (Bangalore).

<sup>3</sup>"IRS Trainee Booked for Filming Wife, Threatening to Release Videos," [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-09-20/nagpur/33975886\\_1\\_irs-nishant-mona](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-09-20/nagpur/33975886_1_irs-nishant-mona).

**Case 3**

Mysore: Police registered a complaint against a judge attached to the Chitradurga district court on charges of dowry harassment. DCP (crime) Rajendra Prasad told that Vidya, a legal adviser, has accused her husband Shivashankar, in-laws and the judge, Shashikala, of harassing her for dowry. Shashikala is Shivashankar's sister.<sup>4</sup>

**Case 4**

Fr Cherian Kolanjikombil, a 70 year old priest of the diocese of Mavelikara says that the practice of dowry is so deeply rooted in the society and is practised under different names such as gift or financial tip. The present trend is that the boy demands much more than the share in the property along with the dowry at the time of marriage. He narrated the following story:

I know a gentle man of minimum income level. He has a daughter who earns 25,000/- per month. He gave her in marriage and spent 15, 00,000/- for the marriage, inclusive of dowry and the expenses for the marriage celebrations. He managed to get that money by pledging his property in the bank. Consequently, he has to pay 15,000/- per month to the bank for the interest. When asked how he manages to survive, he simply answered that he would sell off the whole property and payback the whole amount and settle in a rented house. He has a son who is married and who lives in the same house. To the question what property he will give for his son and family, there is no answer!<sup>5</sup>

Any number of such stories can be narrated. For a foreigner, these stories may be strange and shocking. But, those in India may not feel these stories as strange, because almost every day, there are such incidents reported in the newspapers. Such stories do not have much news value; often they would be given as an insignificant news item. And, many more incidents are not reported at all.

---

<sup>4</sup>"Chitradurga Judge Faces Dowry Case," [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2010-10-24/bangalore/28221816\\_1\\_dowry-case-charges-of-dowry-harassment-dowry-prohibition-act](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2010-10-24/bangalore/28221816_1_dowry-case-charges-of-dowry-harassment-dowry-prohibition-act).

<sup>5</sup>From the report of the field study on "The Impact of Dowry System in the Christian Communities: A Study Conducted in the States of Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Tamil Nadu," conducted by the Licentiate in Moral Theology students at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram (DVK), in April-May 2013. See, A. Vimal Kumar, MMI, Bala Kiran Vannekuty, Joseph Thambi Gone, M.R. Sharma, Shaji George Kochuthara, CMI, The Impact of Dowry System in the Christian Communities — Report of the Field Study Conducted in the States of Andhra Pradesh, Kerala And Tamil Nadu," *Asian Horizons* 7, 2 (2013) 358-359.

In India, the dowry system,<sup>6</sup> the practice of paying an amount of money to the bridegroom's family by the bride's family, has been the leading cause of the continuing degradation of women and discrimination against them. Consequently, the girl child/woman is considered to be a burden and curse to the family. In practice, dowry is not merely a one-time payment at the time of the marriage. Often, demands for money/property/gifts continue even years after marriage. The estimated number of dowry related deaths in India is above 25000 a year.<sup>7</sup> But the evil of dowry is not limited to killings and suicides related to it. The lives of millions of women are made unbearable due to dowry. Many other social evils have their roots in the dowry system. Dowry has become a powerful and oppressive structure that continues to degrade women and promote a number of evils like female foeticide, malnutrition of the girl child, prostitution, sex trafficking, divorce and constant tensions and conflicts in family life.

Religions, including Christianity, consider marriage a sacred rite of the union of man and woman. Invariably, the essence of marriage is considered to be love and mutual affection, based on the equal dignity (though different religions may interpret this equality differently). But, the practice of dowry makes marriage an unequal and exploitative union from the very beginning, contradicting the meaning of marriage. However, religions haven't taken the issue of dowry with adequate seriousness. Christianity does not seem to be an exception to this.

### 3. The Dowry System in India

According to the Dowry Prohibition Act (originally passed in 1961 and amended three times in 1980's) of the Indian Civil Law, dowry is defined as, "any property or valuable security given or agreed to be given either directly or indirectly by one party to a marriage to the other party to the marriage or by any other person, to either party to the marriage or to any other person at or before (or any other time

---

<sup>6</sup>Although the dowry system exists in different forms in many countries, we are addressing here only the practice of dowry in India. For a detailed analysis of the dowry system in South Asia, see Werner Menski, *South Asians and the Dowry Problems*, New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 1998.

<sup>7</sup>According to official records, more than 2500 bride-burning deaths are recorded every year. Unofficial sources estimate more than 25000 cases of bride-burning every year. Many more are left maimed and scarred as a result of attempts on their lives. In spite of the prohibition of dowry by law, in the recent decades there has been a steady increase of dowry-related violence — 10-15% of increase every year.

after the marriage) in connection with the marriage of the said parties.”<sup>8</sup> Dowry is punishable by law. In spite of that it continues to be widely practised in the Indian society. No religion/caste/region/socio-economic group is free from the practice of dowry.<sup>9</sup> “Eradication of dowry from the Indian society has always been a losing battle for social reformers.”<sup>10</sup>

Even today, most of the marriages in India are arranged by the family. Issues of status, caste and religion may come into the decision, but dowry is nevertheless central to the transactions between the families of the bride and groom. By custom the wife goes to live in the house of her husband’s family following the wedding. The wife is often seen as a servant, or if she is employed, a source of income, but has no special relationship with the members of her new household and therefore no base of support. Some 40 percent of women are married before the legal age of 18. Illiteracy among women is high, in some rural areas up to 63 percent. As a result they are isolated and often in no position to assert themselves. All these make the condition of married women precarious. “Love marriages” (that is, love affairs that lead to marriage) are on the increase, but even that has not succeed in evading the menace of dowry. Even in the love marriages, if it takes place with the agreement or collaboration of the families, dowry becomes a decisive element. The boy’s family demands dowry as a legitimate claim; the girl’s family may offer the dowry even if they are not demanded (exceptionally!) thinking that their daughter would be humiliated and harassed otherwise. It is not rare that many such love affairs end up tragically due to disagreements on the amount of dowry. Even the boys who are courageous enough to break the tradition of arranged marriages often become timid at the end over the issue of dowry.

Dowry can take place different forms. Usually it consists of an amount of money and jewellery and/or property offered to the bridegroom or his family by the bride’s family when the marriage is fixed. But, in most cases it is a demand from the bridegroom’s family. Even a middle class family may demand millions of rupees from the

---

<sup>8</sup>“Know Your Law. Law Relating to Dowry Offences (The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961),” *Legal News and Views* 22, 6 (June 2008) 29.

<sup>9</sup>Abraham M. George, *India Untouched. The Forgotten Face of Rural Poverty*, Chennai: East West Books Pvt. Ltd., 2004, 207.

<sup>10</sup>Aika Kurian, “Feminism and the Developing World,” in Sarah Gamble, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001, 74.

bride's family. In recent years it may also include the expenses of further studies (often in a foreign country) of the bridegroom, or the money he needs to begin a new business, etc. The demands may differ depending on the socio-economic status: For example, "A high-flying south Delhi family may demand a Mercedes, while one in a rural area of northwest Delhi may settle for a motorcycle."<sup>11</sup> That is, the difference is not in the demand, but only in the amount of money or the type of gift demanded. Besides such expenses at the time of marriage, which are properly classified as dowry, the demands from the part of the bridegroom or his family continue for years. For example, jewellery and gifts expected when the wife becomes pregnant, hospital expenses related to pregnancy and childbirth, when the child is born, when the husband needs a new vehicle, when there is a celebration in the family of the husband, important religious festivals... On every such occasion, the wife's family is demanded or supposed to give the husband/his family money, jewellery, other gifts or properties. The demand may be explicit or implicit. If the demands are not met, the wife/bride will have to face humiliation, mental and physical harassment and torture. These demands are considered as the legitimate 'right' of the husband/his family. When one demand is met, another demand surfaces on the very next occasion. In the worst cases, wives are simply killed to make way for a new financial transaction — that is, another marriage. It may be even shocking to learn that even men (husbands) who are convicted and imprisoned for killing their wives find another bride soon after the completion of their term in the prison.

Dowry is sometimes justified as the right of the bride to have her share of the family property, just as the bridegroom has his share of the property of his family. Undoubtedly, the woman has a legitimate right to own her share of the family property. But, what happens in the dowry system as it is practised today, is that an amount of money, often much higher than the actual share of the girl, is demanded by the bridegroom/his family. The dowry is not usually kept as a property of the bride, but it becomes the property of the bridegroom's family. Moreover, no transferring of the property to the bridegroom takes place at the time of marriage. Another argument is that since the parents of the bridegroom have spent a lot of money for his upbringing and education, it is legitimate that his family demands

---

<sup>11</sup>Maneesh Pandey, "Dowry Deaths on the Rise in City," [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2003-05-12/delhi/27287993\\_1\\_dowry-deaths-dowry-related-crime-against-women-cell](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2003-05-12/delhi/27287993_1_dowry-deaths-dowry-related-crime-against-women-cell).

a payment from the bride's family at the time of marriage. Here it is easily forgotten that the bride's family also has spent for her upbringing and education. Even if the bride is well-educated and earning good salary from work, such things are not at all counted. On the contrary, if the bride (girl) is well-educated and earning good salary, her parents have to pay a greater amount as dowry to find a suitable match. It is also argued that since the bridegroom's family has to spend a lot of money for the wedding celebrations, they have a right to ask for the dowry. However, it is easily ignored that the dowry demanded is many times more than the actual expense of the wedding; moreover, the bride's family also spends a lot of money for the celebrations. Many think that since the bride is going to the bridegroom's family, dowry is necessary to obtain a decent status for her in the new family. Here, the ethical issue is considering her worth in terms of the material property she brings, and not in terms of her worth as a person.

#### 4. Dowry System in India: A Historical Overview

The custom of dowry started with the giving of presents to the young woman entering upon marriage by her parents and relatives as an expression of love and affection. Gradually it became a monstrously corrupt practice involving the questions of family prestige and social status.<sup>12</sup> In the traditional dowry system, dowry was said to connote female property or female right to property which is transferred at a woman's marriage as a sort of pre-mortem inheritance. Dowry was associated with caste and status. It was a way of demonstrating, and sometimes obtaining status. A father received no material gain when he properly dowered his daughter, but achieved status and honour. The practice of dowry in this way was restricted to high castes, especially Brahmins. The dowry consisted of *stridhan* (=woman's wealth) and *dakshina* (=gift destined to the groom and his family). *Dakshina*, which was a free gift, had a religious significance, in that it was supposed to raise the status of the giver.<sup>13</sup> Other castes had the 'inferior' tradition of bride-price, that is, the family of the bride received gifts from the family of the bridegroom as a compensation for giving away their daughter.

---

<sup>12</sup>P.D. Mathew, "Law Relating to Dowry Offences," New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1989, 1 (revised edition 1998).

<sup>13</sup>Neena Joseph, "Stridhanavum Charitra Paschathalavum," (In Malayalam; = "The Dowry and the Historical Background"), *Stridhanathinetire Streesakthi* (=The Power of Women against Dowry), Neyyattinkara: Neyyattinkara Integral Development Society, 2002, 4-6.



But, with the changing socio-economic structure, dowry has changed shape and meaning. It has become a modern monstrosity, which people try to legitimise by linking it to the ancient custom, which in fact was totally different. Dowry has deteriorated into a bargaining system in which bridegrooms look for the highest bidder. The main reason for this deviation is said to be the cash-based economy that has commercialised the dowry system.<sup>14</sup> As Shiv Visvanathan points out, "In fact the irony of dowry is that the same word describes two systems. The first is the idea of dowry in a *gift economy*, where it was a token, a presentation from a father to a daughter, or guarantee of security and dignity in times to come. But dowry is no longer a gift but a *demand*. Today dowry is capital, which pump primes a parasitic economy of males living off ransom or surplus generated from the girl."<sup>15</sup> Today, dowry is not limited to any social group or caste.

### 5. Dowry and 'Unnatural Deaths'

A rather new development associated with the dowry system is the widespread and extreme forms of violence associated with it. As indicated above, there are thousands of women "tortured, killed and driven to suicide by the menace of dowry and other demands associated with marriage, which is one of the new manifestations of India in transition."<sup>16</sup> Bride price, dowry and economic transactions associated with marriage were known in the past, but not murders and tortures for dowry as we find today. Vimochana, a Bangalore based NGO that deals with women's issues, initiated in 1997 a study campaign on "Dowry Violence and the Unnatural Deaths of Women in Marriage." It was found that 1133 cases of unnatural deaths of women in Bangalore were reported in 1997. Vast majority of these cases were categorised as 'suicides' or 'kitchen/cooking accidents', but the reality was different. In 2009, just in the Victoria Hospital (Bangalore) "Burns Ward" 438 women were admitted, of which 292 died. The majority of women killed or driven to suicide were between the ages of 18 and 25, married for a period of three months to one year. From one woman dying in every three days in the 80's and mid

---

<sup>14</sup>Jane Rudd, "Dowry-murder: An Example of Violence against Women," in Meredith Turshen and Briavel Holcomb, ed., *Women's Lives and Public Policy: The International Experience*, 1993, CT: Greenwood Press, 92-94.

<sup>15</sup>Shiv Visvanathan, "Dowry: Beyond the Sociology of Despair," in *Daughters of Fire*, 39.

<sup>16</sup>Rita Noronha, "Empowerment of Women in the Church and Society," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 72, 6 (2008) 410.

90's, today dowry related deaths of at least three women are reported in a single day just in the city of Bangalore.<sup>17</sup> "We come across three dowry deaths every day, that builds into a monthly total of 100. However, we suspect hundreds more go unreported," says Donna Fernandes, head of Vimochana. "Very few women survive the tragedy. Shockingly, almost all cases are booked as accident cases," Donna adds.<sup>18</sup> This does not mean that other parts of the country are free from this evil. According to the Crime Clock 2005 of the National Crime Records Bureau, India reported one dowry death every 77 minutes.

Many of the victims are burnt to death — they are doused in kerosene and set light to. Routinely the in-laws claim that what happened was simply an accident. When evidence of foul play is too obvious to ignore, the story changes to suicide. In the wake of growing number of violence and death associated with dowry, the Indian Penal Code has defined dowry death as follows:

If a woman dies due to burns or bodily injury and in suspicious circumstances within seven years of her marriage and if it is shown that just before her death she was subjected to cruelty or harassment by her husband or his relatives in connection with demands for dowry, such death will be known as 'dowry death'. In this case her husband or his relatives will be considered to cause her death.<sup>19</sup>

This shows a greater sensitivity in the legal system towards the suffering and pain of women due to dowry. However, even today, many such cases are not reported to the police; the family of the woman who is tortured or even killed, generally considers a court case as causing more shame to the family. Naturally, the husband's family would make use of all the means including bribery to present the death of the woman as natural. Moreover, patriarchal prejudices of the investigating officers and judges often turn such cases in favour of the husband/his family.

---

<sup>17</sup>Vimochana Editorial Collective, "A Web of Violence," in *Daughters of Fire*, 3; See also, Vimochana, "When Homes are Torture Chambers: Vimochana's Work with Victims of Domestic Violence," in Rehana Ghadially, *Urban Women in Contemporary India*, Los Angeles, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2007, 100-108.

<sup>18</sup>"IT City Plagued by Dowry Deaths," [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2007-07-16/bangalore/27993561\\_1\\_dowry-deaths-harassment-cases-dubious-distinction](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2007-07-16/bangalore/27993561_1_dowry-deaths-harassment-cases-dubious-distinction).

<sup>19</sup>"Know Your Law. Law Relating to Dowry Offences (The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961)," *Legal News and Views* 22, 6 (June 2008) 30.

If the figures of deaths and violence against women related to dowry and domestic violence are systematically collated and projected onto a national level, it should shock an apathetic and complacent polity to wake up to the fact that what we are living with and enduring is the incredible genocide of women that is not being addressed in any systemic way either by civil society or the State.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, this systemic evil cannot be seen just as an individual case of violence, but it promotes a series of evils and violence. As Shiv Visvanathan says, "A dowry death is not one act or one event. It does not begin with torture or end with burning. It is a charm of *unbeing* we must comprehend because it cannibalises the idea of women and spreads it over an assembly line of violence."<sup>21</sup> He lists female foeticide, malnutrition of the girl child, forced prostitution, sexual trafficking, etc. as connected to dowry and argues that "dowry is no longer a domestic problem."<sup>22</sup>

## 6. Social-Structural Sin

In the recent decades moral theologians have pointed out that "One of the greatest failures of Catholic moral theology in the past was the failure to consider the structural problems."<sup>23</sup> While engaging in a minute analysis of the individual person rejecting God or undergoing conversion, moral theology did not give much attention to the institutional and structural nature of sin, grace and conversion.<sup>24</sup> Thanks to the renewal of Vatican II, the Latin American liberation theologies of the 1970's, and the studies of other human sciences such as sociology and anthropology, today, in general, there is a greater awareness of social sins within the Church.<sup>25</sup> S. Arokiasamy underscores that a "theology of sin should clearly include a challenge to, and conscientization about the societal dimensions of sin, virtue, conversion and reconciliation. The 'hardness of heart' spoken of in the Bible is not a matter of the heart of individuals alone, but also of the compulsions and oppressions which get embodied in laws, customs and structures of society."<sup>26</sup> In

---

<sup>20</sup>Vimochana Editorial Collective, "A Web of Violence," in *Daughters of Fire*, 3.

<sup>21</sup>Shiv Visvanathan, "Dowry: Beyond the Sociology of Despair," in *Daughters of Fire*, 39.

<sup>22</sup>Shiv Visvanathan, "Dowry: Beyond the Sociology of Despair," 39.

<sup>23</sup>Hormis Mynatty, *Proposals for a Comprehensive Moral Methodology*, Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2008, 149.

<sup>24</sup>Vimal Tirimanna, "The Sinful Talk of Sin," *Asian Horizons* 4, 2 (2010) 444.

<sup>25</sup>Vimal Tirimanna, "The Sinful Talk of Sin," 444.

<sup>26</sup>S. Arokiasamy, "Sinful Structures in the Theology of Sin, Conversion and Reconciliation," in S. Arokiasamy & F. Podimattam, ed., *Social Sin. Its Challenges to Christian Life*, Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 1991, 111.

the New Testament, sin is seen not merely as a personal failure of the person in his/her relationship with God, but also as something preventing the Kingdom of God becoming a reality.<sup>27</sup> That is, sin does not appear in the heart of humans, but is also incarnated in social structures and situations that contradict the Kingdom of God.<sup>28</sup> A greater understanding of the call to conversion to the Kingdom of God and the relationship between the person and the society "reveals forces and structures that work to the detriment of justice and of the freedom and dignity of the people."<sup>29</sup> Though human persons are the agents of sin, sin is often mediated through social institutions and structures. Gradually these structures attain a kind of autonomy and cause evil without conscious participation of the individuals. As Hormis Mynatty points out,

Even though human persons are the agents of sin, sin often is mediated through social institutions and structures... In the long run, these structures and institutions attain quasi-autonomy and produce evil without conscious participation of the individuals. Individuals and society as a whole internalize such unjust structures and institutions without much critical consciousness and thus reproduce them, and perpetuate evil in the society out of proportion.<sup>30</sup>

That is, on the one hand individuals are determined by these unjust structures, but on the other hand they maintain and perpetuate them. The habits of thinking, attitudes of mind, customs, traditions, cultural practices, laws and institutions of society that embody the structural dimension of human behaviour influence human behaviour like a kind of social unconscious. Social sin is the conscious and wilful participation of a group or a society in co-operating with sinful social structures and thus maintaining and perpetuating them and failing to do anything to change them when it is possible.<sup>31</sup> When the social sin continues to perpetuate, they become powerful sources of evil and thus become oppressive, determining to a large extent the self-realization of the person and the development of the society in the long run.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup>John Sobrino, "Jesus' Relationship with the Poor and Outcasts: Its Importance for Fundamental Moral Theology," *Concilium* 130 (1979) 16.

<sup>28</sup>Hormis Mynatty, *Proposals for a Comprehensive Moral Methodology*, 147.

<sup>29</sup>S. Arokiasamy, "Sinful Structures in the Theology of Sin, Conversion and Reconciliation," 90.

<sup>30</sup>Hormis Mynatty, *Proposals for a Comprehensive Moral Methodology*, 146.

<sup>31</sup>Hormis Mynatty, "Concept of Social Sin," *Louvain Studies*, 16, 1, (1991), 17.

<sup>32</sup>Hormis Mynatty, "Concept of Social Sin," 9.

Does it mean that the persons are not responsible for the structural evil and its evil effects? We can say that though such evil is mediated through the structure, moral responsibility for sinful structures rests on concrete persons. Moral commitment to the transformation of society and the creation of a new humanity demands taking a stand against sinful structures.<sup>33</sup> Regarding social-structural sins, one difficulty is that many may not consider themselves personally responsible for them. They may say that they are helpless in changing it and are just following the tradition or are compelled to act in that way. But, becoming morally responsible means becoming aware of our own life — our fundamental option, attitudes, values and actions. Christian moral formation has focussed more on personal choices, actions and sins and hence we are more consciously aware of our personal sins. But, it seems that Christian moral formation did not give an equal importance to the social dimensions of our choices, actions and sins and hence we are often ignorant of our responsibility for social sins. Growing to moral maturity demands also becoming aware of and taking responsibility of the social dimension of our life. People participate in social-structural sin either by conscious participation and perpetuation of sinful structures or simply by the omission of possible action to change them. There is a dialectical relationship between the sinful social structures, social and personal sin.<sup>34</sup> Pope John Paul II has pointed out that social structure cannot sin by themselves because sin by its definition needs a human agent. Persons are responsible for social-structural sins. Therefore, one cannot speak about social sin as against personal sin.<sup>35</sup>

## 7. Dowry: A Social-Structural Sin

Dowry is a typical case of social-structural sin. "Dowry has become a social menace in modern India leading to the oppression on women, physical violence on the bride, causing a financial and emotional stress on the parents of the bride, marital conflict and so on."<sup>36</sup> It is being practised with the justification that it is a custom, though, as we have seen above, the practice of dowry was different in the past. We have also seen that other arguments to defend dowry are

---

<sup>33</sup>S. Arokiasamy, "Sinful Structures in the Theology of Sin, Conversion and Reconciliation," 107.

<sup>34</sup>Hormis Mynatty, *Proposals for a Comprehensive Moral Methodology*, 172.

<sup>35</sup>John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, no.16.

<sup>36</sup>Gurudeve, "The Origin of Dowry System – British Policies Convert Gifts to Bride into an Instrument of Oppression against Women," <http://www.hitxp.com/articles/history/origin-dowry-system-bride-woman-india-british/>

not reasonable. As in the case of other social-structural sins, no one takes up the responsibility for this evil. Everyone seems to be happy to pretend helplessness evading one's responsibility. Strangely, people who are otherwise non-violent and peaceful, who may not take resort to any kind of aggression, may adopt any kind of violent measures including killing for dowry. That is an indication that a kind of unconscious and uncritical following of a system, which is characteristic of social-structural evil, is at work in the practice of dowry and dowry related violence. Any social-structural evil causes a number of other evils. This is true with regard to dowry. Some of the evils resulting from dowry:

1. Dowry is the leading cause of the continuing belief that woman is inferior and a burden to the family. This belief influence the treatment that a woman receives at every phase of her life. "There is no doubt that dowry demands and sharp escalation in the amounts of money being spent by families in putting together dowries has contributed to viewing daughters as a burden and consequent devaluation of women's status."<sup>37</sup>

2. Since girls are considered to be a burden forever, millions of female foetuses are aborted. There are places where girl children are killed immediately after birth or even later. According to the 2011 census of India, the sex ratio is 914 females per 1000 males. It is the lowest since India's independence. The main reason for this is selective female foeticide. According to some studies, selective abortion of female foetuses account for up to 12 million missing girls in India over the last three decades. Some studies say that up to 35/40 million female foeticide have taken place in India.<sup>38</sup>

3. The belief that the woman is inferior and a burden results in the malnutrition of girl children. Parents naturally prefer to feed better the boys who will be 'assets' for the family, ignoring the girls who will be only 'burden' for the family.

4. Dowry results in the denial of education/higher education for girls. The better she is qualified, the more burdensome she becomes for the family, because to find a boy of equal status means paying more dowry.

---

<sup>37</sup> Madhu Purnima Kishwar, "Strategies for Combating the Culture of Dowry and Domestic Violence in India," in *Daughters of Fire*, 89.

<sup>38</sup>Shaji George Kochuthara, "Millions of Missing Girls! Female Foeticide and Ethical Concerns," *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church Newsletter Forum* (2012) <http://www.catholicethics.com/july2012>.

5. Many girls are compelled to remain unmarried, who are an unwelcome presence in their own families. Their dignity and rights are denied and their life becomes a life of suffering.

6. Impossibility of paying dowry and thus remaining unmarried is one of the factors that pushes many women into prostitution.

7. Many families have to sell their property or incur huge amounts of debt to pay the dowry of their daughters. Often they never manage to pay the debt and many such families end up in mass suicides.

8. Dowry makes marriage an unequal relationship from the beginning. Many realise that the real motive for marriage was not love, but economic gain. This spreads dissatisfaction and unhappiness from the beginning of their family life. Moreover, ongoing demands from the part of the husband/his family leave the wife to suffer silently between the unjust demands of the husband and his family and the agony of her parents. Dowry thus denies the possibility of a marital life built on love, mutuality and reciprocity. This denial of love and support from the part of the husband and the family context where the woman has to live always as a subordinate and a source of income for the husband's family is one of the leading causes of female suicides.<sup>39</sup>

9. The dowry system encourages domestic violence. Women are harassed, tortured and even killed by the husband/his family for continuing economic benefits. There is no doubt that "violence in the private sphere is as serious and heinous as violence in the public."<sup>40</sup> But the husband/his family feel a sense of legitimacy in doing so, since it has become an essential part of the present day dowry system. Since the girl children are considered a burden mainly due to dowry, the woman is ill-treated, tortured and even killed, if she gives birth to a girl child. This is another form of violence resulting from the dowry system.

10. Relationships between the families of the husband and wife are often tensed due to the dowry system.

11. The present dowry system and the concept of woman as a burden deny her the possibility of becoming independent. In general, whatever she brings as the dowry or whatever she earns even after

---

<sup>39</sup>Alka Kurian, "Feminism and the Developing World," in Sarah Gamble, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001, 75.

<sup>40</sup>Donna Fernandes, "Investigating Kitchen Accidents," in *Daughters of Fire*, 45.

marriage is considered the property of the husband/his family, a 'payment' due for taking care of her who is only a 'burden'. She has to live forever as a 'bonded labourer' or a slave.

12. Dowry violates basic human dignity, in that the worth of a person is calculated by the material benefit from that person. Dowry commodifies and degrades women.<sup>41</sup>

## 8. Dowry and the Christian Community

Dowry is widely practised among Christians, though there may be some regional differences. However, the Christian community including the leadership is rather silent about it. Dowry makes marriage an unequal and exploitative relationship from the beginning. Moreover, dowry-related violence becomes part of the life of many Christian families. Evidently, the Church leadership does not accept it as legal, but practically committed action to resist this practice or to present it as against the Christian vision of man-woman relationship and family is not done. Only passing comments are made in the documents dealing with women or the family. For example, the CBCI Plenary Assembly acknowledges that the reality of women of all sections reveals instances of domestic and societal violence on women. It invites to follow the model of Christ in liberating women from oppressive structures: "In a culture where women were seen only in relation to men, Christ not only liberated them from their oppressive traditions but upheld their dignity."<sup>42</sup> The Plenary Assembly acknowledges the continuing violence against women violating their dignity: "Depending on the regions, female feticide, infanticide, rape, molestation, kidnapping, abduction, battering, dowry deaths, murdering, trafficking for sex and slavery exist even today."<sup>43</sup> This stance against dowry is indeed commendable. Though dowry is not the only factor that damages the dignity of women, when we understand that it is the most powerful patriarchal custom that denies the dignity and equality of women

---

<sup>41</sup>Alka Kurian, "Feminism and the Developing World," in Sarah Gamble, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001, 74; Veena Oldenburg, "Dowry Murders in India: A Preliminary Examination of the Historical Evidence," in Meredith Turshen and Briavel Holcomb, ed., *Women's Lives and Public Policy: The International Experience*, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993, 145-157.

<sup>42</sup>"Empowerment of Women in the Church and Society" (Statement of CBCI in the 28th Plenary Assembly of the CBCI, Jamshedpur, 13-20 February, 2008), in *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 72, 4 (2008) 303.

<sup>43</sup>"Empowerment of Women in the Church and Society" (Statement of CBCI in the 28th Plenary Assembly of the CBCI), 301.



and promotes violence against women, we may feel that a stronger condemnation and rejection of the dowry system is required. Only rarely the Church leaders pronounce something against dowry. Catechetical programme of the Church does not include, in general, any teaching against dowry. Marriage preparation courses also are usually silent about the practice of dowry and dowry related violence. Even when it is clear that dowry is given and received, no attempt is made to show that it contradicts the Christian concept of marriage. Similarly, youth movements or women groups in the Church hardly ever take up this issue with seriousness and sincerity. Everyone seems to accept it passively. On the contrary, implicit acceptance of the system can be seen in practice. For example, many parishes ask for a contribution to the Church on the occasion of marriage. A bigger amount is demanded from the bridegroom on the ground that he/his family receives dowry. Instead of fighting against the evil of dowry, it seems that the Church is satisfied if it gets a share of it! Funds to help poor families to pay dowry are collected without ever conscientizing the faithful of the evil and sinfulness of dowry.

Catholic Church considers marriage as one of the sacraments. In the Catholic sacramental theology, the highest meaning of marriage is love.<sup>44</sup> Bernard Häring says,

The one vocation of all the faithful in Christ is to become ever more a visible image of God's love and to guide others towards the same goal. Marriage as sacrament has to be seen in this light, where the two persons become one flesh, one in a community of life and love, helping each other in their complementarity and reciprocity. Together they come to a true image of God's fatherly-motherly love, and an image at the same time of the covenant of love and fidelity between Christ and the Church.<sup>45</sup>

The love union of the partners is associated with the sacramentality of marriage, and mutually pleasurable sex and children are expressive of this union.<sup>46</sup> Marriage is a life of love. The "vocation and fundamental option of couples is to love each other in the most

---

<sup>44</sup>However, the acceptance of marriage as a sacrament was not an easy process. Often there were doubts whether marriage could be considered a sacrament. It may be interesting to note here that one of the greatest difficulties raised by canonists and medieval theologians regarding the full sacramentality of marriage was the frequent economic clauses tied to marriages. It was argued that considering marriage as a sacrament created the risk of simony. Cfr. Angelo Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 194-197.

<sup>45</sup>Bernard Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*. II, Middlegreen: St Paul Publication, 1979, 534-535.

<sup>46</sup>Cfr. Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 193.

complete and most profound way."<sup>47</sup> This conjugal love, which is the reflection of God's love is the essence of marriage. In addition to their acknowledgement of mutual love and self-giving, they are proclaiming to each other, in effect, "I love you as myself, as God loves his people and as Christ loves his Church."<sup>48</sup>

But, dowry makes all these discourses on the sacramental meaning of marriage and love meaningless. Dowry reduces marriage to an economic transaction. In practice, often dowry becomes the only criterion for marriage. Even when everything else is perfect, the proposed bridegroom and his family abandon the plan of marriage if the demanded amount is not paid as dowry; or, even when there is no motivation of love, marriage may be decided upon if a higher amount is offered as dowry. Thus, the dowry system completely contradicts the Christian meaning of marriage. And, sadly, considering marriage as a source of financial income continues even years after marriage. That Christians are a minority and hence they cannot challenge and change the traditional customs is not a convincing argument. Often when there are legislations regarding homosexuality, premarital sex, euthanasia, artificial reproduction, contraception, abortion, etc. which are not in agreement with the Christian understanding, we challenge them and organise even public protests against them. Then, why can't we take the leadership in changing the dowry system which violates the Christian conviction of the dignity of women and totally contradicts the Christian understanding of marriage? The Christian community is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Mt 5:13-14).

The Christian community should make a critical analysis of the dowry system, in which it participates, in light of Jesus' call for integral liberation. The dowry system demands a reconsideration of our understanding of sin that focuses only on personal sin. Sin is a negative and destructive relationship with the society, resulting either in the breaking of positive relationships or refusal to develop them, hindering both the personal development and that of the society.<sup>49</sup> "Our Christian vocation requires that we become aware of the structures of sin around us and within us, and of our responsibility for their removal."<sup>50</sup> A deeper understanding of sin

---

<sup>47</sup>Mark Attard, "Can Marriage Make You a Saint?," *Carmel in the World* 16 (1977) 211.

<sup>48</sup>Michael G. Lawler, *Secular Marriage*, Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third, 1985, 70.

<sup>49</sup>Hormis Mynatty, *Proposals for a Comprehensive Moral Methodology*, 149.

<sup>50</sup>S. Arokiasamy, "Sinful Structures in the Theology of Sin, Conversion and Reconciliation," 90.

includes its expressions not only in intra-personal and inter-personal relationships, but also in the socio-economic, political and cultural life. Call to conversion includes this whole fabric of the reality of sin. S. Arokiasamy says that, "social sin creates an environment in which personal sin becomes easy and acceptable, and virtue is made socially — we could also add culturally — difficult."<sup>51</sup> He considers dowry system as a sinful expression in culture, a structural sin that is rooted in the image of woman as inferior and which reinforces further that image.<sup>52</sup> Dowry violates the basic human dignity of women. Denying the dignity of any human person, whether man or woman, is against the Kingdom values "Undoubtedly, a structure that violates human dignity is a sinful structure."<sup>53</sup>

Here, one dimension to be specially taken care of is that often with social-structural sin persons do not feel the responsibility. The catechetical formation should include steps to make the faithful aware of the social-structural dimension of sin and the responsibility that each one has in fighting against the social-structural sin. Participating, sustaining and perpetuating social-structural sin should not be presented as nobody's sinfulness, but as the sinfulness of each person involved.

Considering the evils that the dowry system brings about, dowry should be presented as a sin. If sin is understood as an alienation from God, from others and from oneself, dowry is a typical example for that. It is an alienation from God since it is against God's design for man-woman relationship and family. It is an alienation from others, since it leads to conflicts and tensions in one's relationship with one's own spouse and other family members, and since it leads to violence and injustice against others. It is an alienation from oneself as it denies to oneself the God-given possibility of finding one's realization and happiness in the mutual and reciprocal relationship with one's partner.

Moreover, the Christian community also should make a critical analysis of its structures that discriminate women and denies them equal dignity. Social-structural evils are often interrelated. Any

---

<sup>51</sup>S. Arokiasamy, "Sinful Structures in the Theology of Sin, Conversion and Reconciliation," 93.

<sup>52</sup>S. Arokiasamy, "Sinful Structures in the Theology of Sin, Conversion and Reconciliation," 103-104.

<sup>53</sup>Felix Podimattam, "Theology of Social Sin," in S. Arokiasamy & F. Podimattam, ed., *Social Sin. Its Challenges to Christian Life*, Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 1991, 70.

system, structure or tradition that discriminate women will only facilitate discrimination against them in other forms and practices.

## **9. Conclusion**

In the Indian society, dowry is the strongest agent that perpetuates the patriarchy, and the Christian community is an active participant in it. Theologians, including feminist theologians, have not done serious attempts to challenge and change the practice of dowry and to show it as a crime and sin. Dowry continues to be practised in the Christian community without being questioned, destroying further the dignity of women, denying them equality and inflicting injustice on them. Moreover, it contradicts the very meaning of marriage. A clear stance against the dowry system and concrete action plan to prevent it are integral to the Christian commitment to the Kingdom values. That will be a great witness that the Christian community can give in the multi-religious, multi-cultural context of India.

Church leaders and ministers should conscientize the faithful of the evils of dowry and the havoc that it does to the Christian community. Creating awareness against the practice of dowry should become an integral part of the catechetical programmes, marriage preparation courses and ongoing pastoral care of the family.