

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

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Case 1

Jessi is from Gannavaram and Suman is from Gudivada. Suman works as teacher in private school. Jessi is house wife and remains at home. She revealed the sad story of twice paying the dowry to the same family.

*Students of Licentiate in Moral Theology at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram (DVK) conduct a field study every year at the end of the first of their course. The topic for the field study for the academic year 2012-2013 was "The Impact of Dowry System in the Christian Communities: A Study Conducted in the States of Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Tamil Nadu." After due preparation, the study was conducted during the months of April and May, 2013 and the report was presented in July 2013. The study was guided by Prof. M.R. Sharma, a social scientist and Shaji George Kochuthara, director of the Moral Theology Licentiate programme at DVK.

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She was first married to Suman's brother but unfortunately he died of an accident within six months of their marriage. They did not have any child. Parents of both the parties came to an agreement that the brother of her deceased husband would marry her.

The saddest thing is that she had to give dowry even for the second time. The reason was that if he would have married anyone else, he would get a bigger amount as dowry since he was a teacher. Thus Jessi's family had to pay dowry twice to the same family. Even though they lost their son it was not a loss for them! But if they would lose dowry it would be a loss for them!

Case 2

Prabhakar is educated and is the owner of two transport vehicles. His wife Vimala is also educated. They got married seven years back. Their marriage was arranged by their parents and it was an intercaste marriage. They have two children.

Prabhakar received dowry from the Vimala's family. Since both of them are from well-to-do families, before marriage he asked for some gifts. The bride's family members happily assured that they would give their daughter some gold ornaments, share of the family property and give him an amount of money in cash. He took it as the expression of their love towards their daughter.

He told us that he was not aware of the dowry prohibition act, but later he regretted for receiving dowry from Vimala's family. Today he is unable to say anything to Vimala; whenever he asks her something, she does not listen to him saying that she did not come to his house empty-handed, but brought a lot of money from her family. Thus they frequently quarrel with each other and forget to be a good couple.

Case 3

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.

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 pay back 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!

Introduction

Cases narrated above are among the life stories that we came across in our field study, "The Impact of Dowry System in the Christian Communities in Reference to the States of Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Tamil Nadu." We interviewed twenty families each in each state; hence a total of sixty families. The location of the field study more precisely: Krishna and West Godavari Districts in Andhra Pradesh, Alappuzha district in Kerala, and Dindigul, Pudukottai and Kanyakumari Districts in Tamil Nadu. For this field study we followed the personal interview method with a rigid procedure and sought answers to a set of pre-conceived questions through personal interviews. This method of collecting data is usually carried out in structured way where output depends upon the ability of the interviewer to a large extent.¹ Through direct personal interviews we had the opportunity to collect the information personally from the sources concerned. We personally met people and interviewed them to collect the data for the study.

We should also admit the limitations of our study. Our study was limited to the Christian communities in the selected regions of three South Indian states. Considering how widespread the practice of dowry is, and how varied the situations in different states are, the sample size that we had decided upon could be considered small. We also did not select families affected with dowry deaths or extreme forms of violence. We selected families at random. Our main objective was to understand how the practice of dowry affected the life of Christian families in actualizing the ideals of Christian marriages.

In spite of all such limitations, this field study convinced us that dowry is widely practised among Christians. Due to issues related to dowry, often from the beginning of the married life, there are conflicts between the couple and between the bride/wife and the husband's family members. The study also helped us to understand the pain and anxieties of the families of the girls, who had to give huge amounts as dowry.

¹C.R. Kothari, *Research Methodology*, New Delhi: New Age International Limited Publishers, 2004, 17.

This is in fact a summary of the report of our field study. We shall present only a few cases that we came across. We do not intend to present statistical analysis. Beginning with an overview of the historical development of the practice of dowry in India and the present situation we try to highlight atrocities related to dowry, including deaths. We shall then proceed to understand the reasons behind the continuation of the practice of dowry as well as a critical analysis of the practice from a Christian perspective. Finally we shall propose some concrete solutions to eradicate this social menace. We shall also briefly reflect upon what the Church can do to fight this unjust and evil practice.

1. Historical Evolution of the Dowry System in India

The system of Dowry existed in India even before the British Rule, but not in the format that is prevalent in the society today. In the pre-colonial period, dowry was an institution managed by women, for women, to enable them to establish their status and have some resource for them to survive in an emergency. In this ancient system of dowry, the parents of the bride, even her kith and kin, all gave wealth to her in the form of valuable gifts. Just like parents used to give a part of wealth to their sons, so did they give it to their daughters at the time of the daughters' marriage.

Changes in the dowry system started with the Permanent Settlement of Bengal in 1793 by the British under Lord Cornwallis. This enabled private ownership of land in the present form, which was unknown in India till then. By introducing the permanent settlement, the British enabled the private ownership of land in India. It affected the status of the women in the Indian society. The British prohibited women from owning any property at all! Dowry system could be considered as an after effect of the regulation which entitled only men to own the land.

Once the British denied women of any property rights, it meant that all the wealth that a woman got from her parents would be owned by her husband instead. And the moment, this system of husband owning the wealth of his wife was created, the traditional dowry system got converted into a system of extortion, creating an institution of greed that oppressed, victimized and suppressed women. It was only as recently as in 2005, when the Hindu laws were

amended again, providing women equal status with men in terms of ancestral property.²

2. The Dowry Prohibition Act (1961)

This Act was passed in 1961 to prohibit the practice of giving or receiving dowry.³ After it was found to be ineffective in reducing the number of dowry deaths, the criminal procedure code was amended in 1984, making cruelty to and harassment of a woman by her dowry seeking husband or his relatives punishable. The dowry prohibition act 1961 was amended in 1986 defining more clearly dowry death and made it compulsory to conduct post-mortem of a woman who had committed suicide or died in suspicious circumstances within seven years of her marriage.

As an effect of the amendment it is now easier to prove the giving or taking of dowry as long as presents were made in connection with marriage. Another significant change which has been brought under the Dowry Prohibition (Amendment) Act 1986 in the definition of dowry is that it now includes the property given at any time after the marriage. Dowry Prohibition Act applies to all communities irrespective of the religion.⁴

3. Penalty for Giving or Receiving Dowry

Under the Dowry Prohibition (Amendment) Act 1984, the punishment was enhanced and a minimum and maximum punishment limits were laid down. It was increased from six months to two years imprisonment and the fine from Rs.5,000 to Rs.10,000. However, the amending Act 1986 further enhanced the punishment which may extend to five years and fine which may not be less than Rs.15,000 or the amount of the value of such dowry whichever is more.

The main loophole in the present Act is that it holds the giver as well as the acceptor of dowry equally guilty. The provision of the Act prevents the parents of the girl to come forward and make a

²Gurudev, "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/>

³Maya Majumdar, *Protecting Our Women, vol.1: Victimised Women: A Repression and Social Response*. New Delhi: Dominant Publishers and Distributors, 2001, 316.

⁴P.D. Mathew, *Law Relating to Dowry offences*, New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1998, 3.

complaint about the fact that they have been compelled to give dowry. So the giver of the dowry should be exempted from the clutches of law. The amended section of the Act does not specify the value of the gifts. It only states that this value should not be “excessive” in comparison with the financial status of the giver. But such vagueness opens scope for endless disputes and litigation. It is yet another loophole in the Act that allows dowry by the backdoor. This loophole needs to be plugged by placing a limit on the value of the gifts.⁵

4. The Practice of Dowry Today

Much debate and discussion have been going on around dowry but very few have attempted to clarify the concept of dowry. Even the Government of India is unable to define it. It seems that in the present Indian context the term dowry connotes a different meaning and purpose than what was customary in the earlier Vedic period. According to the present practice, dowry usually subsumes material gifts and cash paid to the bridegroom and his kin. This is done not only before and at the time of marriage but also goes on much after it. The commonest elements of dowry in north India include gifts for the bride such as clothes, jewels and other household and luxury goods like a refrigerator and kitchen utensils, etc.

In any case, the bride does not have any legal right over the gifts/dowry transferred with the establishment of marital relations with her conjugal family unless, of course, specifically mentioned and given to her with legal sanction mentioned in the Dowry Prohibition Act. Besides these gifts, the bride’s parents have to spend much more than the bridegroom’s parents do, for the celebration of the marital alliance. All these transactions form a part of the marriage ceremony and the expenses have to be borne by the bride’s family along perhaps with some help from their kith and kin. By and large, this is an unidirectional transaction. One should not try to make any distinction between the types of gifts and hard cash given. Instead one should view the whole range of gifts as part of property transaction between two parental families. Contextually, it is this system of *Kanya* (daughter) to be gifted as a *dan* (gift) along with numerous novel types of gifts in dowry that has strengthened the arrogance of patriarchy in the contemporary Indian society among all

⁵P.D. Mathew, “Law Relating to Dowry Offences,” 4-5.

religious communities. This is why the families searching for 'desirable' and qualified bridegrooms resort to "wealth transaction" in a milieu of insecurity in the modern life situation. In fact they try to buy the "qualified and desirable" match for their daughters as per the social psyche of the capitalist culture at present prevalent in our society. Because traditionally it is very vital for parents to give a daughter in marriage to acquire spiritual succour.⁶

However, the practice of dowry in its present form bears no traditional sanction. It is an outcome of the interplay of conflicting values of both traditional and modern forms, that is, the values of unequal capitalist development based on material comforts alone. The way the marriage negotiations are carried out by the parents in contemporary India has definite implications for the status and position of women in the present male dominated society. Also values such as false prestige and status competition are shaping the form and content of dowry.⁷

The demands in the name of dowry have increased considerably. Two generations back dowry consisted of clothes for the bride, gold or silver jewellery, several sets of bedding, cows, buffaloes and bedsteads, cots, etc. Some communities also gifted a portion of land – a tradition still common in many places of Andhra Pradesh. By 1970s and 80s, sofa sets and dressing tables had become mandatory and dinner sets and tea sets were included along with kitchen utensils. Watches, wall clocks and radio sets also became common because by then all these items had become customary parts of middle class life. Today, refrigerators, air conditioners, automobiles and a whole range of gadgetry are integral parts of upper class and upper middle class dowries because these families use many of these conveniences.

5. Reasons for the Continuation of the Practice of Dowry

5.1. Religious, Cultural and Economic Motives

In the traditional perspective, gifts given freely to the daughter at the time of marriage were considered to bring blessing of gods. Thus, without any compulsion, the dowry was practised by many families. The economic motives behind this practice also are to be considered.

⁶M.C. Paul, "Dowry as a Symbol of Women's Subordination in India," *Social Action* 42, 3 (1992) 305.

⁷M.C. Paul, "Dowry as a Symbol of Women's Subordination in India," 306.

For the bridegroom, it is an easy way of enhancing his financial status.

The supporters of the dowry system give numerous arguments to justify it. According to them, it is a fine method of setting up an establishment for the newlyweds. The second argument is that since the bride's parents are quite choosy about the groom's income, his qualifications, his property, the groom should get a price for what he has to offer. They think that marriage is a girls' life insurance and so the dowry is the premium. Thirdly, the supporters of this system argue, a girl carrying with her a respectable dowry feels confident while entering her in-law's house while a girl without dowry feels uneasy and apprehensive.

An important reason for growing cash demands and expensive gifts for the groom's family is that parents see this as their main, if not the only chance, to be compensated for the big bonanza they are offering the bride in the form of an earning son. They feel they should be recompensed for their investment in his education and upbringing since after marriage, his wife may influence him not to support his own parents. As long as joint families were the norm and most parents could count on their sons to support them in old age and treat their income as belonging to a common pool, dowry demands were not as much of an issue. However, with increasing breakdown of joint families and reluctance of many women to stay with in-laws, the insecurity of parents in many families takes the form of trying to extract what they can from the bride's family at the time of their son's marriage. Thus, the interplay of socio-cultural-economic factors strengthens the dowry system today.

5.2. Dowry as a Status Symbol

Unfortunately wrong values are attached to material riches. Since dowry has become a status symbol, many believe that it enhances the social status of those who receive as well as give the dowry, though many say that they are convinced that it is an evil practice. The social status of the family is judged from the amount of dowry the bride's father can afford to give to the groom's kith and kin. Aspirations of bride's family to establish relationship with a family in higher social strata through marriage, to a great extent are responsible for this sordid state of affairs.⁸

⁸R.C. Aggarwal, "The Crusade against Dowry," *Social Welfare* 23, 1 (1976) 7.

5.3. Fear and Discreet Silence

In dowry related violence and harassment, it may be surprising that the victim (bride), her family, and the neighbours do not report it. Strangely, often they believe that perhaps the victim has provoked the incident and they do not want to intervene in 'family affairs' of others. Secondly, neighbours may not report for fear of losing good relations. The victim's family may not report for fear that they may not find grooms for their other daughters. Lastly, they don't report because according to Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, the giving or taking of dowry is a crime and they think that if they report they will also be held responsible and they want to play safe, so in the process they become silent spectators of the crime.⁹

5.4. Dowry Related Violence and Punishment

The police face various difficulties in cases of violence related to dowry. Cases are registered only when the bride and her parents face too much harassment and can bear the violence no longer. It is quite a difficult task finding a witness to testify against the groom or his relatives. Neighbours are also reluctant to come forward. To prove harassment on account of dowry demand is again a difficult task. It is necessary to prove the actual incidence of harassment of the woman. Again, it has to be proved that the harassment has roots in motive for getting some material gain or any other related demands which are not fulfilled. For the case to be registered, often it is necessary for the bride and her relatives to have a record of dowry demands made directly or through the bride or even through any other channel. The next important problem is to prove that the death has an unnatural cause. In cases of dowry related deaths, naturally, those who commit the crime try to show it as a natural death. Besides, an unnatural death can be purely accidental and not on account of the dowry. Moreover, there are difficulties in estimating the nature of death, particularly, when a good amount of planning has gone into the murder. The difficulty arises when those who commit the crime destroy every shred of evidence.¹⁰

5.5. Women against Women?

⁹Naina Garg, "A Crime of which Everyone is Guilty." *Social Welfare* 37, 11((1991) 13.

¹⁰Naina Garg, "A Crime of Which Everyone is Guilty," 14.

It may be surprising that in most cases dowry related violence and death, women — mother-in-law, sisters-in-law are responsible or they are actively involved. Woman as a mother and as a mother-in-law takes totally different roles. A mother-in-law tries to extract the maximum possible dowry and can go to the extent of causing death if the demands after marriage are not fulfilled according to her expectations.¹¹ In the case of dowry, it seems that patriarchy has managed to make women themselves the instruments for reinforcing this oppressive system.

6. Our Findings

1. The dowry system prevails in the society, including the Christian community. In general, even those who received dowry acknowledged that the dowry system was evil and hence to be abolished.

2. Many of those who said that they did not ask for any dowry agreed that they received gifts at the time of marriage, or that the wife brought money and ornaments at the time of marriage. We know that different names are used for 'dowry' to escape the law. Often it is presented as 'gifts' or 'presents' from the bride's family. (We also have to take into consideration that even when confidentiality is assured, people are very hesitant to say that they received dowry or to reveal the amount of dowry that they received).

3. Many said that their parents were responsible for taking dowry. But, to the question whether they would demand dowry at the time of the marriage of their sons, many said that they would do that since it is a social custom. Even those who complain about the system of dowry at the time of their daughters' marriages, demand dowry for their sons' marriages. (There were also people who told that they would not demand any dowry for their sons' marriage, but added that if the bride would bring money and ornaments at the time of marriage, that would be left to her freedom).

4. In most cases, dowry is not a onetime payment. The wife's family is often expected to offer the husband 'gifts' on many occasions, for example when the wife becomes pregnant, on the occasion of the baptism of the child, or if he has to buy a new vehicle, construct a new house, begin a business, etc. Moreover, the wife's family is expected to give 'gifts' to the in-laws on many occasions,

¹¹Naina Garg, "A Crime of Which Everyone is Guilty," 15.

such as their wedding or any occasions important for them. These demands/expectations continue for years after marriage. If the woman's family fails to meet such expectations/demands, she and her parents will be criticised, she would be harassed, and in many cases she may even face physical torture. Such customs only increase with the passage of time. These continuing demands make the woman feel that she is never a full member of her husband's family. She belongs to her parents' family only. In her husband's family, she is always an outsider, whose continuing value depends on the financial benefits he continues to bring to the husband's family.

5. In our field study, we have not come across many stories of dowry deaths or extreme forms of violence related to dowry, though people narrated to us a few stories of dowry deaths. However, the evil of dowry cannot be limited to dowry deaths alone. Consequences of dowry include female infanticide, late marriages for many girls, unsuitable matches for girls, lowering of women's status, breakdown of marriages, unhappy married life, tension between two families, increase in immorality, increase in mental diseases, increased rate of suicide and impoverishment in poor and middle class families due to financial burden and so on.

6. Dowry, for many, is an accepted social system, which has implications for one's status in the society. Since giving and receiving dowry has become almost a status symbol even those who are against this practice continue it. Parents of the bride believe that she would not be respected in her husband's family, unless she is given a good amount of money as dowry. Hence, even in the case of 'love marriages', dowry is often given and received if the permission of the parents is sought.

7. Dowry continues to be practised in the Christian community. The Church does not seem to give adequate attention to conscientize the community of the malice of dowry. Instead, often we notice some kind of silent acceptance of the system even from the part of the leadership.

8. Though dowry is sometimes justified as the share of the family property due to the girl, often, what is demanded and given is much more than the share. Moreover, no talk on the share of the family property due to the bridegroom takes place at the time of marriage.

9. In practice dowry becomes an easy way for the bridegroom and his family for upward social and economic mobility.

10. Though all sections of society suffer from the dowry system, the middle class and the poor suffer the most. Many of them are compelled to sell their property, including their house, or to take loan on exorbitant interest rates.

11. That the bride is well-educated or employed does not remove the burden of dowry. On the contrary, the situation becomes worse. The bride's family will have to pay a higher amount as dowry to find a suitable bridegroom for her.

7. Violence Related to Dowry

7.1 Harassment and Humiliation

Though dowry-death is generally understood to involve the murder of a woman on dowry related issues in the marital home, before the actual act of killing, several forms of ill-treatment, harassment and humiliation take place against the victim. She has no freedom but just to suffer.¹² As already pointed out, her own parents/family usually pleads her to tolerate the suffering, including torture, since they think that a daughter leaving the husband is a disgrace to them. Moreover, the life of a woman is always considered as dependent on the man, and hence they are worried about her future if she would leave the husband. She would not get support from the neighbours, friends or relatives, since such a support would bring them in conflict with her husband's family.

7.2. Suicide

The demands for dowry in the form of gifts to the bride and groom and continued demand for money have become a predictable way in which young brides are humiliated. The parents of the girls spend huge amounts of money on lavish weddings to impress the in-laws and try to meet all demands for gifts and valuables with the hope that the girl would never return to her native home creating a 'stigma'. It is not uncommon that the young woman discovering that there is no place for her in their in-laws as well as parents' homes resort to commit suicide in a desperate bid to escape humiliation and violence. If the husband and in-laws receive insufficient dowry from her parents, it would make her even more vulnerable to violence and

¹²Ram Ahuja, *Violence against Women*, New Delhi: Rawat Publication, 1998, 129.

humiliation. At times the husband and his family directly or indirectly compel her to commit suicide.¹³

7.3. Murder

In our field study, we did not meet families of dowry related murders. However, Saramma and Jose had a very tragic story to narrate. Saramma and Jose were married in 1989; except Rs. 10000 as gift to the bridegroom, no dowry was given to Jose at the time of their marriage. But, Saramma narrated the tragic story of Sumadevi, who was her friend and classmate. Sumadevi was only 26 years old. She was the only sister of five brothers; their family was rich. At the time of her marriage, she was given her share of the property. After her marriage, her husband demanded that she should sell all her property and give him that money, to which she did not agree. Her husband continued to demand it and she was often mentally and physically tortured by him; this continued even after they had a child. Finally, she together with the child, was thrown into the nearby river and their bodies were recovered only after four days. Her family filed a complaint. The whole village knew that she and the child were murdered by the husband, but nobody would come forward to give witness against that man. The husband could easily influence the police and finally the case was written off as suicide.

Any number of such stories of dowry related murders can be heard in many parts of the country. The official website of the Crime Records Bureau of India lists thousands of dowry deaths a year. However, the actual numbers are much higher. Often, the relatives do not file the cases. If the cases are filed, in most cases they become only "suicides" or "unnatural deaths". But, even when they are proved not to be suicides, the culprits escape, since there would not be witnesses. Amendments in the law have brought about some changes, but dowry related violence and murder are on the increase. With the death of the wife, the man becomes 'eligible' marry again, and to obtain dowry again. Naturally, his family members also will benefit from a new marriage. This greed for money is not on the decrease, but on the increase. There is no consideration that the wife is already part of his life and family. She continues to be considered as a source of income; if such expectations are not responded, many do not hesitate to eliminate her!

¹³Mohd Umar, *Bride Burning in India: A Social Legal Study*, New Delhi: APH Publishing Corporation, 1998, 121

8. Dowry and the Christian Understanding of Marriage

8.1. Marriage as a Vocation to Love

In the Christian understanding, love is the basis of marriage. "The intimate community of life and love which constitutes the married state has been established by the Creator and endowed by him with its own proper laws... God himself is the author of marriage." Marriage is not a purely human institution despite the many variations it may have undergone through the centuries in different cultures, social structures, and spiritual attitudes. These differences should not cause us to forget its common and permanent characteristics. "The well-being of the individual person and of both human and Christian society is closely bound up with the healthy state of conjugal and family life."¹⁴ Paul says to the Ephesians: "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ also loved the Church, and delivered Himself up for it, that He might sanctify it. So also ought men to love their wives as their own bodies."¹⁵

The Catholic Church considers marriage as one of the sacraments. In the Catholic sacramental theology, the highest meaning of marriage is love.¹⁶ 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."¹⁷ The love union of the partners is associated with the sacramentality of marriage, and mutually pleasurable sex and children are expressive

¹⁴*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1603.

¹⁵John Paul II, "Life and Family," (Online).

¹⁶However, 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.

¹⁷B. Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*. II, Middlegreen: St Paul Publication, 1979, 534-535.

of this union.¹⁸ That is why Kasper says, "The love that exists between man and wife is... an epiphany of the love and faithfulness of God that was given once and for all time in Jesus Christ and is made present in the Church."¹⁹ Marriage is a life of love. The "vocation and fundamental option of couples is to love each other in the most complete and most profound way."²⁰ This conjugal love, which is the reflection of God's love is the essence of marriage. The self-giving that the conjugal love demands involves the whole, total person, including the affections and emotions, the mind and the will, and personal freedom.²¹ 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."²²

But today in the Indian context in the consideration of marriage, often, the first thing which comes into discussion is dowry. Because of dowry, marriage has lost its meaning and it has become merely a business deal. Dowry related violence shows clearly how the dowry system has made marriage devoid of love. What counts is the financial advantages from marriage, not the sacramentality of marriage or love. Dowry makes meaningless the Christian discourse on marital love.

8.2. Dowry and the Girl Child

Dowry makes the girl child a burden to the family. As already pointed out, dowry is not a onetime payment, but the financial demands from the husband and relatives continue for the life time. Thus, the girl, not only at the time of marriage, even later is a burden to her parents and family. On the other hand, sons are a source of income. As a result, many people prefer to have sons. Modern technological developments have made easy prenatal sex discernment and this has led to wide-spread sex-selective abortions. Millions of female foetuses are aborted in India every year. Widening gap in the sex ratio itself is sufficient to understand how widespread is the sex-selective abortions in the Indian society. Dowry can be said

¹⁸Cfr. L.S. Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 193.

¹⁹W. Kasper, *Theology of Christian Marriage*, New York: Crossroad, 1981, 30.

²⁰M. Attard, "Can Marriage Make You a Saint?," *Carmel in the World* 16 (1977) 211.

²¹M. Attard, "Can Marriage Make You a Saint?," 217.

²²M.G. Lawler, *Secular Marriage*, Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third, 1985, 70.

to be one of the major reasons for the preference of sons. Thus, dowry system promotes the “culture of death.” It is not clear how far sex-selective abortions are practised among Christians. However, Christian couples also prefer sons to daughters.

8.3. It Is against Human Dignity

Violence related to dowry is not limited murder and suicide. Several forms of ill-treatment, harassment and humiliation take place for years, violating the dignity of the woman. Even her basic needs of food, clothing and healthcare may be denied as forms of punishment if demands are not met. Her freedom to visit her parents, relatives and friends may be limited as ways of isolating her and torturing her mentally. Greed for money and other financial benefits make people forget the truth that the woman is also created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:27), that the denial of her dignity as a person is against God himself.

8.4. Dowry and Denial of Justice to Women

The dowry system results in the denial of justice to women. Parents feel that the male child is source of income and hence they are ready to spend any amount of money for him. But they feel that investment for the girl child is useless, because one day, she has to go out from the family. From childhood, this causes an unequal treatment of boys and girls; boys are given preference. Girls have limited opportunities for education and employment. Parental property is also not shared equally. It is a great injustice done to them. They are neither given equal opportunities nor equal property share along with the sons.²³

9. A Few Proposals

The practice of dowry is quiet prevalent equally in the states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. It is very much prevalent in the Catholic communities in these states. Besides creating problems in family life, the dowry system contradicts the Christian vision of marriage and family, making marriage a commercial arrangement. It may not be easy to eradicate the practice of dowry, since it is deep rooted and as it is practised in different forms. However, in light of our study we would like to propose a few ways to work against this

²³Thomas Srampickal and Joji Chirayil, *To act Justly and Deal Honestly. A Course in Justice and Truthfulness for Undergraduates in Theology*, Thrissur: Marymatha Publications, 2008, 39.

evil. These proposals pertain to society as a whole, but some are specifically for the Christian community.

- Prohibition of Dowry is not sufficient. Many do not even know about it. Public awareness programmes are necessary. This can be made more effective through the involvement of voluntary organisations.

- Women's cells could be formed, in the villages and cities, to create awareness of the evils of dowry and to work against it.

- More stringent regulations should be applied on public officials and politicians who demand dowry.

- Demonstrations, distribution of pamphlets, street theatre, Talk Shows, etc. can be organised to create awareness.

- The registration of marriage should be made compulsory to ensure protection of the bride/wife.

- In schools, colleges and offices, young men and women could be encouraged to take a pledge in public against dowry.

- More attention should be given to women's education. More schools and colleges for women could be opened wherever necessary. Similarly, free education could be offered for women up to the university level, especially in backward areas. If women are well-educated, and employed and thus economically independent, often they find more empowered to resist dowry related violence.

- The women themselves should come forward and fight against the practice of dowry. Besides the husband, the mother-in-law and other female members of the husband's family harass and inflict violence on the bride/wife, as they think that she could be a source of income for them. However, they should be conscientized that through this they are degrading womanhood itself.

- Women should be empowered to protect themselves, through making them aware of their rights, privileges and strengths. They should learn that they are not alone, but will be helped if they report the violence or harassment related to dowry.

- Women should be encourage and empowered to expose dowry practitioners.

- Dowry is only one symptom of patriarchy. To fight it effectively, women should become aware of the many forms of patriarchy prevalent in the society.

- Young men should be encouraged to reject the demand for dowry, showing them that conflicts over dowry actually destroys the possibility of a happy family life for them.
- The evil should be fought both on the levels of law and society. The law enforcing authorities should be encouraged to take strict action in case of complaints of dowry and dowry related violence.
- Encourage those parents who can afford it to ensure that their daughter has a house, room or a hut in her own name so that she is never rendered homeless, can never be thrown out of the house.
- Succession Acts of different communities should be amended in such a way as to give equal rights to daughters in par with sons.
- Mass media and social networks must be utilized for the empowerment of women and to conscientize the society of the evils of dowry.
- Evils of dowry should be highlighted in the catechetical programmes of the Church. Dowry should be presented as against the design of God, since it seriously damage marriage.
- Marriage preparation courses should address the issue of dowry, and how dowry is a threat to their marital life. That Christian marriage is above all a sacrament of love should be communicated clearly. Financial matters should not be allowed to eclipse love and sacramental character of marriage.
- Christian youth organisations should conscientize their members of the harm that dowry does to Christian family and encourage them to pledge that they will not receive dowry.
- If the bishops and other pastors exhort people from time to time through their pastoral letters and homilies that dowry is against the Christian vision of marriage, it could deter a number of Christians from demanding and offering dowry. Dowry should be presented as an evil, violating human dignity and justice, leading to many other evils. That it is widely practised is not a justification not to speak against it.
- Priests and others who are involved in pastoral ministry should be trained to understand that dowry is a form of male-domination and continuing injustice to women and thus to society as a whole.

- Pastors should be attentive to understand whether dowry related violence take place among Christians, and to intervene if necessary, as an essential part of their pastoral care for the families.

- Instead of offering dowry, Christian families should be encouraged to offer equal share of the property to the daughters. However, this should not become a demand from the part of the bridegroom/his family at the time of marriage. The share of the property may be given when it is given for other sons and daughters as well.

Conclusion

In spite of the Dowry Prohibition Act and other legislative measures, dowry continues to be widely practised and is on the increase, threatening peace and well-being of millions of families in India. Dowry is one of the major causes of domestic violence in India and extreme forms of violence including murder are not rare. Dowry is one of the major instruments of patriarchy, perpetuating the oppression of women strengthening the view that women are a burden to families.

This field study has convinced us that dowry is widely practised in the Christian community. There may be Christian communities in some regions of India, where dowry is not practised. But, in the South Indian states the dowry system is deep-rooted. Although it is clear that dowry leads to a lot of violence and that it is a sheer violation of the ideals of Christian marriage and family, the Christian leadership does not seem to be adequately responding to this evil practice. However, we believe that it is possible to change this practice, since most of the people believe that dowry system is to be abolished. But, they do not know how to change it or what to do to abolish this practice. If the leaders of the Church and society take concrete steps with determination, perhaps we can eradicate this deep-rooted social evil.