Illustration by NILANJAN DAS

Marriages may be made in heaven but grooms have always been on sale. And now their price tags have become bigger, bolder and flashier.

■ by Shefalee VASUDEV

NISHA SHARMA BECAME an overnight celebrity, an icon for the women's movement because she refused to marry the man whose family upped its dowry demands. She is now a regular on television debates on dowry and has been felicitated by numerous organisations. The middle-class girl may deserve some credit for calling the police and sending her prospective in-laws to jail, but the complicity of her own parents has been concealed. The defining photographs that appeared in national dailies showed her in front of a pile of cardboard boxes containing high-end televisions, washing machines and other consumer items, not to mention the Maruti Esteem her family had bought as part of a groom price. The shocker? All items were duplicated: Sharma's family had agreed to give a set of the same items to the groom's already married brother.

It was the stand against dowry that gave birth to the women's movement in India. Now, 30-odd years after the first rumblings against "stove deaths" and "groom price" were heard, dowry has reached a new high. The price tag for the groom is bigger, bolder and gaudier. Young girls from all over the country who recently called off their weddings resisting dowry demands are new symbols of an old problem. What they reveal is that dowry has reached a never-before level.

More so in cities, where resides the educated, intelligent class, ostensibly the torchbearer of a gamut of social changes that now define modern India. It is this same class that demands bigger dowries, more cash, heavier jewellery, luxury cars and flashy, flamboyant weddings. Dowry with kanyadaan received sanction from the ancient scriptures and was deified as an act. But now marriage is an indecent display of conspicuous consumption. The father of the bride buys the groom and the groom buys social status wrapped in designer events sold by the marriage industry.

Five years ago, if a Rs 10-15 lakh wedding was big, now negotiations for grooms from affluent families start at Rs 30 lakh, going up to Rs 1 crore or more. And it is not just the money. Maruti cars have been replaced by luxury cars and VCRs by home theatres. Instead of Banarasi zari sarees for the bride's trousseau, her parents now buy heavy lehngas with real gold and silver work on them, often with designer labels. In Punjab, the demand is for receptions in "marriage palaces"—huge, palatial wedding venues. Chefs are flown in for multi-cuisine wedding dinners. All this is usually paid for by the bride's family.

"The rich revel in the exchange of their black money, but the pressure on the other classes to ape them has serious social consequences," says Shahjehan Appa of Delhi's Shakti Shalini, an 18-year-old anti-dowry organisation. Appa lost her own daughter to dowry two decades ago. What is astounding is that despite thousands of women's organisations, serious activism, legal amendments, special police cells for women, media support and heightened awareness that giving or taking dowry is a crime, the practice stays firmly stuck in a time warp. It has brought the women's movement to a staggering pause.

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Official statistics show a steady rise in dowry crimes. More than 9,500 women are killed every year in India over dowry. The decade from 1990-2000 showed a 38 per cent increase in dowry deaths over the previous decade. And a 225 per cent increase in cases of dowry harassment. Bihar and Uttar Pradesh still record the maximum number of dowry crimes, but Bangalore, India's fastest growing city, also shows an alarming rise—four women reportedly die every day because of dowry harassment and domestic violence. According to Donna Fernandes of Bangalore-based Vimochana, one of the oldest women's organisations of the country, dowry crimes in the city have doubled in the past few years.

The scene is not very different in Punjab, one of the most prosperous states of India. Every 13th family from the upper middle class in the state has reported a dowry case. In Haryana, there has been an unbelievable 871 per cent increase in dowry crimes in the past two decades. Police records of Andhra Pradesh echo these numbers. "Cases of dowry torture are the highest, accounting for 32.4 per cent of crimes against women in the country," says Hyderabad-based Inspector-General of Police Tejdeep Kaur Menon. A sample survey conducted in parts of Chennai by the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) reveals that dowry demands in the city have multiplied over the past three generations. These frightening numbers do not include kitchen accidents or suicides, not to mention crimes that go completely unreported.

But numbers are just one part of this *dans macabre*. There is a sticky web of issues surrounding it. The much-hyped luxury needs of the consumerist society is one. Dowry is the easiest short cut to such wish fulfillment. "Upper-middle-class families have realised that this is an easy way to set up their sons," says Urvashi Butalia, who set up Kali for Women in India, a publishing house that specialises in women's writings. "Most people find it easy to believe in the positive potential of a social practice, unless it is proved otherwise," she adds.

In Andhra Pradesh, for instance, there have been at least three recent cases in which the anti-dowry law was invoked against IPS officers, all well-placed young men. One of these is 35-year-old N. Sridhar Rao, posted in Sikkim. He harassed his wife Sharmila because she did not give birth to a boy and now accuses her of being mentally unstable. Sharmila's father has been asked to settle the "marital dispute" by paying Rs 50 lakh. The case of Nirmala Padmanabhaiah, student of Bangalore's prestigious National Law School of India University, is similar. The only daughter of a rich builder, she was married to a doctor in a glittering ceremony. A dowry worth lakhs of rupees, which included a car, accompanied Nirmala to her husband's home. But within five weeks of the wedding, her body was found hanging from the ceiling in her parents' house.

There is, as many say, the socially safe but toothless attitude of a majority of modern families who participate in dowry-based marriages instead of opposing them. It is all very well to applaud the Nisha Sharmas of the world but when it comes to the weddings of their own children, most people will just

THE GOING RATES

RAJASTHAN
Opulent receptions, gold above 50 tolas, plus all dowry items. Factory or office space and/or flat. Groom prices zoom up to Rs 1 crore.

TAMIL NADU Nadars
Well-educated, affluent grooms ask for as much as Rs 1 crore. Gold: over 70 tolas.

PUNJAB
"Maruti marriages" are passe. Luxury cars, receptions in marriage palaces, cash and preferably a job for the groom. Gold over 50 tolas.

KERALA Syrian Christians
From Rs 30 lakh to over Rs 1 crore. Some families give the bride gold by the kilos.

ANDHRA PRADESH Kammas and Reddys
Grooms from civil services: Rs 1-3 crore. Postgraduate doctor or engineer: at least Rs 75 lakh. Yadavs and Gouds, from among the OBCs, are in a similar competition.

BIHAR
IAS grooms: Rs 50,000 to Rs 2 crore, plus a flat or property, car, political favours, gold. Doctors: Rs 20-30 lakh, engineers Rs 20 lakh. College lecturers: less than Rs 2 lakh. Bhoomihar Brahmin grooms are the most expensive.

GUJARAT Patels
Besides a huge dowry and gold when children are born, the bride's parents have to pay for her funeral rites.

NAGAR BRAHMINS
The girl's father washes the groom's feet and worships them in a ritual called *saptapadi*. Then gifts, cash or jewellery are handed over.

SINDHIS
Cash (from Rs 35 lakh onwards for affluent grooms), diamond jewellery for the bride and mother-in-law, rings for men in the groom's family, flat and/or car and over 50 kg of dry fruits and papads.

HYDERABADI MUSLIMS
Doctors, engineers: Rs 5-10 lakh as *jode ki raqam* (price for bridal attire) plus gifts for the groom's family. Rickshaw drivers: Rs 5,000 plus household items.

MARWARIS
***Milni ke sikke*—symbolises giving of four rupees. Now it is four silver or gold coins given to every person in the groom's family. Minimum 11 people, maximum 51 people.**

BANIAS
Each ceremony—roka, tilak, jaymala, pheras and vidaai—involves gifts of cash, clothes, jewellery and watches for the groom's family. Dowry is displayed during tilak.

Dowry rates vary according to social status, customs, groom's qualifications and negotiations. These are the upper-end rates.

ISHAAN TANKHA

DOUBLE TROUBLE: Sharma with two sets of household items as part of her dowry

do the done thing. "No political party has made it mandatory for members to take an oath that they shall neither give nor receive dowry," says senior journalist and writer Mrinal Pande, citing opulent weddings in the families of Om Prakash Chautala, Laloo Prasad Yadav and Mulayam Singh Yadav, all of which were attended by the who's who of politics.

Down the years, the lack of collective political will to curb dowry has become obvious. In 1980, the Government set up a committee on the issue, which besides recommending amendments in the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, suggested expanding the definition of dowry and instituting family courts and a National Commission for Women. It also suggested making inheritance rights equal for men and women. Umpteen parliamentary debates led to some amendments in 1984, 1985 and 1986, but the power domination system through exchange of money between families still thrives.

Caste-based practices have only added fuel to the fire. "Marriages in politicians' families are arranged to consolidate the caste base for support in electoral politics, so they don't challenge the dowry system," says Ranjana Kumari, director of the Delhi-based Centre for Social Research, who wrote *Brides Are Not For Burning* way back in 1989. And as Pande points out, "There has been no serious effort at amending property rights that deny girls a share in

"IT IS CONSUMER CULTURE THAT DICTATES THE RISE AND RISE OF DOWRY."

URVASHI BUTALIA, author and publisher

immovable paternal property. Most Indian states have amended land distribution laws in favour of married sons and barred married daughters from the same."

So while boys inherit businesses, land and property, girls are given kitchen utensils, jewellery, sewing and washing machines, and now cars, cruise tickets and suitcases heavy with cash. According to a 2001 field study done by Chandigarh-based institute of Development and Communication (IDC), girls in rural Punjab themselves demand dowry—a trend that is pinching the debt-ridden peasantry. "Awareness about property rights has made girls think that they have a right to dowry as part of their inherited property," says IDC Director Pramod Kumar.

SIPRA DAS

ME TOO: Farzana Begum (left) of Ballimaran in Delhi refused to accompany her groom because he upped his dowry demands after the wedding was solemnised

AND it is not as if the families of girls are always innocent victims. Manuvendra Verma, a 34-year-old television journalist, explains how the marriage market in Bihar works. The sons of Bhoomihar Brahmins are considered top-notch catches in the groom bazaar. From their student days to when they join a service, their prices inflate with each passing year. But girls from the civil services do not get any dowry discount in exchange for their qualifications. The parents of eligible girls visit houses of prospective grooms, often flaunting political connections. Verma adds how some fathers unashamedly offer "contracts and tenders" as dowry. Bihar is also the land of the most expensive grooms, with IAS officers demanding between Rs 50 lakh and Rs 1 crore in dowry.

"A tool of empowerment is what you make of it," says Butalia, explaining why girls and their parents think that big dowries will strengthen their positions in the husband's family. "This then becomes the stick to beat the girls with," she continues. Should the marriage go wrong, there is no basis on which this "streedhan" can be retrieved. Mothers-in-law, who are often collaborators in the violence against their son's wives, usually take away the bride's jewellery. Other items are consumed by all. So what is rationalised as the girl's share of the father's property is seldom only hers. But photographer, artist and activist Sheba Chhachhi, an active participant in the 1980s anti-dowry movement, says that the number of girls who are left out of these money contracts is much larger than those who participate in the deal. Dowry is most often a monetary agreement between two men—the bride's father and the groom.

Dowry rituals have now spread even to communities where they were unknown, such as the Syrian Christians of Kerala and the Roman Catholics of Mangalore (*see box*). Jamila Nishat, of the Hyderabad-based organisation Shaheen Asmita, talks about the numerous dowry crimes amongst Muslims in the Sultanshahi area of the city. She cites a recent case where a girl who had been married for two months was tied up, pushed beneath the bed and burnt to death for dowry.

The much debated law against dowry seems to be of limited use. Joint Commissioner of Police Vimla Mehra, who heads the Crime Against Women cell in Delhi, says it seldom helps women. "The law may help take temporary punitive action, but later women need real social, financial, moral and ideological support to stick to their chosen paths," says Mehra. "Before talking about misuse of the anti-dowry law, some organisation should study its use," she adds.

While the passing of the dowry buck continues, there have to be basic changes in bringing up girls and boys. "Ultimately, the effective resistance will have to come from the girls and their parents, not after being abused but before," says Pande. "They will have to risk raising their daughters as strong-willed, uncompromising individuals who will exercise their own choices to marry or remain single." That's an empowering thought, but Nazia, a 20-year-old girl from Hyderabad, who recently refused a marriage proposal because of high dowry demands, has a sensitive question. "When the strain of my burden on my parents becomes evident, will I be able to refuse marriage?" she asks. Nazia, and many others who are not financially independent, need to be answered, otherwise stories like this will continue to flare up and then die out, till yet again another Nazia or Nisha drags them to the headlines.

—with Amarnath Menon, Ramesh Vinayak, Stephen David and Kavitha Muralidharan