Grooms in Gucci

It's not need, it's greed when it comes to dowry among the Indian rich. Unless girls invest in self-worth instead of diamonds and insist on abiding by inheritance laws instead of flamboyant trousseaus, the happily-ever-after will remain just a dream. By **Shefalee Vasudev**

A good deal walks on two legs, he whispered to his bejewelled 51-year-old wife. She smiled. This comment was Mumbai-based industrialist Kailash Sangtani's observation as he sat with his young, successful son, Ritesh, to 'check out' a bride for him.

She was a 'good deal' all right. Amira*. Daughter of a rich Sindhi businessman, she was fair, tall, slim, presumably a virgin and could lower her eyes on cue. She was only 12th pass, but nobody would have reason to complain. Her father owned several factories and was keen to do a proper show-off *shaadi*. The match was fixed. Mrs Sangtani quickly added that they had "*Bhagwan ka diya sab kuch* (God had given them everything they needed)", but then customs and status must be respected. The bride's father sang along.

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Amira, smart as they come, recounts her older sister "milked my father as much as she could." Diamond sets, gold, cash, furniture, clothes, crockery, a honeymoon abroad… The father threw in a three-bedroom flat and a luxury car for the *doli*. The ring ceremony, *sangeet*, *mehendi*, cocktail, wedding and reception – events hosted by the bride's family – were at five-star venues, multi-cuisine, flamboyant affairs. The wedding cost a few crores.

So what's new? Aren't lavish affairs the face of the big fat Indian wedding? Ask Amira. She was back in her father's house in less than a year. She had been ill-treated and humiliated. Money bought her a groom but not respect or value. It didn't give her strength or security. As she hides tears, her sister adds that her in-laws refuse to return the multi-crore dowry. Not that they need anything.

Need? "It's not need, it's greed," shout the cynics. Among the rich, it's not even called dowry. Hypocritically labelled 'status wedding' or 'gifts', the give-and-take is vulgarly ostentatious. Call them grooms in Gucci, they now come asking for luxury labels. As global brands map out a new territory for spending, the marriage market flexes its muscles in response. Move over Karol Bagh, the Louis Vuitton showroom is here. Raymond Suitings have made way for Armani. No Titan watches please; only Tag Heuer or Rolex will do. Punjab's famous Maruti weddings have changed gears to catch up with the S-Class Mercedes. It's not about double beds and almirahs. It's acres of land with swimming pools or posh flats; Bang Olufsen systems or Italian glassware.

Nobody is talking dowry deaths or harassment among the rich. After all, stove deaths are passé and microwaves seldom kill, but money doesn't prevent short circuits in relationships. And once they blow, the wiring, you realise, is the same. Rich or super rich.

"We are so used to seeing the world divided into The Rich and The Rest of Us, that we don't pause to see how they, much more like the Rest of Us, are seldom in control of their lives," says *Hindustan* editor Mrinal Pande. "Think of all those big publicity divorces and wife-bashing cases among the bold and beautiful, and the truth will be inescapable. Poor self-esteem and fear of poverty can make us covetous; much more so someone who has not known want," she adds.

Many agree. "Dowry has nothing to do with provisioning of security any more," says popular society columnist Suhel Seth, managing partner of Counselage. "It defines your capacity for conspicuous consumption." He feels that in a society where the yardstick of success is money, weddings are the social denominator of status. "Why is it important to have 17 functions, even if they bring ▷