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Monday , February 20, 2006

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NEWS

To do(wry) or not to do(wry), that is the Act

Nazir Ahmad Rather

Chandigarh, February 19: The stringent dowry laws, meant to deter dowry-seekers, are being increasingly misused by the very people they are meant to protect. The last three years have seen a steep rise in the number of cases of harassment for dowry with the Chandigarh police.

During this period — January, 2003, to January, 2006, — cases relating to 11 dowry deaths and 250 dowry-related harassment were registered in the city. Ajaib Singh, head of the Women and Child Support Unit, says 70 per cent of the 1,000-odd cases that they receive every year pertain to dowry, but only 20 per cent of these are genuine. "It is unfortunate that more and more people are misusing the stringent provisions of the law out of sheer spite."

"People generally make use this law to facilitate a divorce. And often, it's the lawyers who advise the women to implicate their in-laws under the provisions of this Act," says Shantosh Singh, chairperson of Women Welfare Counselling Cell at Sector 17.

A police officer narrated the case of a woman who had slapped a dowry case against her husband and in-laws only because she wanted the family house to be in her name.

Often, the number of items given in dowry is inflated to claim a high settlement amount. "At times, they add car and other consumer durables to the list even if these were never given in the dowry," says a cop.

Ajaib Singh cites the case of a middle-aged woman with a 19-year-old daughter who too took recourse to the Dowry Act to seek divorce. "She insisted that her husband was demanding dowry from her parents even though she had been married to him for over 20 years."

Lawyers also admit that the stringent laws against the dowry are misused to a great extent. "There are only 10 per cent cases based on truth, and people usually come to us and ask specifically to mention the element of dowry in their divorce petitions," says Amrikh Singh Kalra, advocate at Punjab and Haryana High Court.

"Most of the cases are fabricated and the element of dowry is exaggerated in them. Basically women want to have a quick solution to their problems and the laws against dowry provide the easiest way out," says advocate Amarjit Singh Jattana.

There are many who feel that legal luminaries should find out ways to prevent the misuse of this Act. "With so many people filing cases under this Act, there may come a time when we begin to suspect even a genuine case," says Ajaib Singh.

Experts believe that there are no foolproof solutions to the problem. Sociologists look at a more holistic solution. Dr Sangeeta, a sociologist in the Women Counselling Cell at the Support Unit in Sector 17, feels people should be more cautious at the time of getting into a matrimonial alliance.

"Factors like family background, financial position, health, mindset, aspirations, previous romantic interests, et al, must be taken into account before forging an alliance. Often people marry in a hurry and repent at leisure."

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