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The Ambati family, which was embroiled in a dowry-harassment case in India in November 1995, has now been acquitted of all the charges in the dowry harassment case. Kolar Gold Fields sessions judge K.S. Venkoba Rao pronounced the order of acquittal on April 28, 1999.

Dr. Jayakrishna Ambati and his family were accused by his former wife Archana of taking Rs. 50,000 (US \$1,200) in dowry and of mental & physical abuse. The couple was married in June 1995 in Bangarpet, Karnataka and came to the United States shortly thereafter, but Archana returned to India in July.

However, she did not file a police complaint until 4 months later, in November, coinciding with the well-publicized visit of the Ambati family to Visakhapatnam. There they were taken into custody by Sub-Inspector T. Konappa Reddy of the Bangarpet police.

During the course of the trial, which lasted over 3 years, Konappa Reddy, also the investigating officer, admitted that the police had not ascertained the veracity of the complaint, or investigated the reason for the 4 month delay in filing the case, or interviewed any of the witnesses prior to the arrest.

Under cross-examination he also acknowledged that no permission from superior authorities was obtained to cross state lines and arrest the accused. He also admitted that the U.S. Embassy was not informed of the arrest of the Ambati family, who are American Citizens, as per the 1963 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations.

Although the initial chargesheet listed over 20 witnesses, only 2 of the material prosecution witnesses appeared in court during the trial. Even Archana's mother and sister, who initially provided statements to the police did not testify.

At the trial these two witnesses, recanted their earlier statements and testified that they did not witness any demand of dowry by the Ambati family. Assistant-sub-inspector H. Munivenkataiah who initially took the statements of the witnesses, stated under cross-examination that none of the witnesses told him that dowry was demanded by the Ambatis.

In an unrelated twist, Konappa Reddy is himself now facing murder charges for the July 1997 custodial death of Mr. Gopalappa in the Bangarpet police station.

In October 1996, Kolar sessions judge K. Sathyamurthy Holla discharged Dr. Balamurali K. Ambati from the case and dismissed all charges against him for lack of prima facie evidence. Although the state of Karnataka appealed this decision, Justice L. Sreenivasa Reddy of the Karnataka High Court upheld the discharge in April 1998. This decision was appealed by Archana but the Supreme Court of India dismissed the appeal earlier this year.

During the course of the trial the Ambatis produced a tape in which Nanda, the father of Archana, demanded US \$500,000 to drop all the charges. Although the prosecution opposed the production of this audiocassette, Justice Narayan of the Karnataka High Court ruled that such evidence was admissible in February 1999.

The Ambati family feels that although the courts have vindicated them after almost 4 years, the victory is bittersweet. Although Drs. Jayakrishna and Balamurali Ambati and their father Dr. Muralimohan Rao were allowed to leave India and return to India in January 1996, their mother Mrs. Gomathi was not permitted to do so. Despite 3 separate Karnataka High Court rulings that the trial should be completed within 3 months, the case dragged on, and the family was separated for more than 3 ½ years. In addition, Dr. Balamurali Ambati lost 2 years of his professional career because he had to wait until 1998 to commence his ophthalmology residency at Harvard, which he was supposed to join in 1996.

The Ambati family is well known in the New York area for their social and community service. For the last 10 years, they have been conducting free weekly academic classes for hundreds of middle and high school students. Also, they have established a charitable educational foundation, the Ashtavadhani Vidwan Ambati Subbaraya Chetty Foundation, which recognizes and rewards talented students in India and the U.S.

They believe that the close police ties of Nanda, a former honorary Home Guards Commandant, were responsible for the brazen actions of the police. The case achieved tremendous sensationalism because of the celebrity status of Dr. Balamurali Ambati, who at 17 became the world's youngest graduate in 1995. However, little press coverage was given to his discharge or to his family's subsequent acquittal.

The Ambatis feel that this case is a prime example of how the Dowry Prohibition Act can be abused by unscrupulous families to extort innocent families, especially NRIs. They also believe that NRI organizations and the Indian government should take notice of the growing epidemic of false dowry harassment cases filed against NRIs and take steps to curb the spiraling abuse of this law.