

## Every four hours, one Indian woman ends life over dowry

On an average one Indian woman commits suicide every four hours over a dowry dispute, as per official data, despite a series of laws to empower them.

According to data compiled by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), a total of 2,276 female suicides due to dowry disputes were reported in 2006 that is six a day on an average, while the figure was 2,305 in 2005. In 2004, at least 2,585 such cases were registered across the country.

Statistics suggest that Madhya Pradesh topped the list for the fourth time with 585 cases, accounting for one-fourth of the total number of such suicides last year in the country. West Bengal was second with 445 cases and Uttar Pradesh third with 314 cases. The national capital was seventh with 69 cases.

Police officials in the capital told IANS that suicide by hanging was the most common means adopted to end life followed by self-immolation in such cases.

The NCRB is a central body assigned to compile crime figures in the country. Its figures also state that one case is registered almost every hour under Dowry Death, which includes suicides as well as murders.

'A total of 7,618 cases were registered under Dowry Death in 2006, while 6,787 cases were registered in 2005. In 2004, at least 7,026 such cases were recorded,' a police official said.

Dowry is a social evil but continues to be a common practice in almost every part of India. Women at the time of marriage are expected to bring with them jewellery, cash and even consumer durables are part of dowry to the in-laws and they are subsequently ill-treated, often violently, if they fail to do so.

Abetting suicide is punishable by imprisonment up to 10 years and a fine.

Anti-dowry laws in India were enacted in 1961 but the laws themselves have done nothing to halt dowry transactions. Many of the victims are burnt to death - they are doused in kerosene and set fire to. Routinely the in-laws claim that the death happened simply due to an accident.

When evidence of foul play is too obvious to ignore, the story changes to suicide - the wife, it is said, could not adjust to new family life and subsequently killed herself.

Maikrao H. Gavit, state minister in the ministry of home affairs, had recently informed the Rajya Sabha that his ministry from time-to-time has been issuing advisories to all the states and union territories to give more focused attention to prevention, detection, registration, investigation and prosecution in such cases.

'In the advisory dated Oct 27, 2004 they were requested to take action on the recommendations of the National Commission for Women regarding the Dowry Prohibition Act and its implementation,' Gavit said.

'The advisory covers that dowry related cases must be adjudicated expeditiously to avoid further

harassment of women. Police personnel dealing with dowry cases should be sensitised and given training to deal with such sensitive cases,' he added.

On the flip side, however, the dowry laws in India have also been misused.

Swarup Sarkar, an activist with Save India Family Foundation, an NGO, said men are subjected to severe discrimination under law and their basic human rights violated every day in the name more legal provisions that claim to empower and protect women.

'Thousands of men are becoming victims of 'legal terrorism' unleashed through the misuse of the Indian Penal Code section 498 A, the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, adultery laws, laws against rape and sexual harassment, and even laws pertaining to divorce, maintenance and child custody,' Sarkar said.

The government figures say a total of 396, 312, 365, 312 and 297 false cases were registered from 2002-2006 respectively under Dowry Deaths and 322, 175, 167, 238 and 210 false cases were registered during 2002-2006 respectively under the Dowry Prohibition Act.

*Sahil Makkar ( © IANS / India eNews)*