

## Continuing the Dowry Debate

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MANY of the readers of *EPW* who have read C S Lakshmi's (*EPW*, January 28 and May 13) and Rajni Palriwala's (April 29) rejoinders to my article 'Rethinking Dowry Boycott' in *Manushi* (No 48, 1988) may not have read the original article. The rejoinders have seriously misrepresented my position. To begin with, my article must be read in the context of *Manushi*'s ten-year long engagement with the questions of dowry and marital violence, and my earlier articles on these issues, particularly 'Dowry—To Ensure Her Happiness or to Disinherit Her?' in *Manushi* (No 34, 1986). The rejoinders have chosen to read my latest article in complete isolation from the context in which it was written, addressed to *Manushi* readers who are familiar with *Manushi*'s overall thrust.

The article, as its title 'Rethinking Dowry Boycott' makes clear, was not evaluating dowry but rather evaluating the impact of the strategy of boycotting dowry weddings which some of us at *Manushi* personally implemented for a decade. Palriwala's long exposition of various sociologists' works on the history of dowry has, therefore, little bearing on the subject. I have nowhere disputed the fact that dowry, like any other phenomenon changes in a changing world. Since Palriwala's account of 'five dimensions' of dowry today substantially repeats my extended analysis in *Manushi* (No 34, 1986), it is difficult to understand why a mutilated version of my earlier article is being cited as a critique of my recent article.

The call to activists to boycott dowry weddings in their social circles was a failure. Even at a personal level, while my keeping away from dowry weddings was met with by a great deal of verbal approval, it did not bring about any change in dowry practices in my social circle, except for my immediate family.

More important, by talking to and listening to numerous women recount their experiences of marriage, I found that women did not believe that merely getting married without dowry, all else remaining the same, would alter their powerless position within marriage for the better. In the absence of any better option, most of them even perceived dowry as having some justification, given their dependent situation. This experience compelled me to review the strategy of boycott, and to try to think of more effective ways of equipping women to refuse dowry.

I expected that my account would lead other activists of the anti-dowry campaign to relate their own experiences. However, this did not happen. I would in particular like to know from those who have reacted to my article the answers to a few questions regarding their experiences in anti-dowry action programmes. Have they boycotted dowry weddings? If so, what has been the effect of this action in their communities? How many dowryless weddings have they attended in the last decade? What were their criteria for distinguishing a dowry wedding from a

dowryless one? If they believe boycotting dowry weddings is an ineffective strategy, what other strategies have they pursued to eradicate dowry, apart from condemning it in words, oral or written? Which strategies do they perceive as having been effective, and would they, therefore, recommend to others? Since Palriwala ridicules me for constructing 'straw models of the anti-dowry struggle to knock down' it is not unreasonable to expect her to offer an alternative model with a proven record of success. In this context, I may also disclaim the keenness Palriwala attributes to me to construct a category of 'Eurasian societies', as I have never used this term and do not know what Palriwala means by it.

I wonder why Palriwala prefers to write as a spokesperson for the now defunct Dahej Virodhi Chetna Manch (a platform for many organisations of varied hues which came into existence in 1982) rather than for the Janvadi Mahila Samiti, the CPI(M) women's front, of which she is a member. The only activities of the Dahej Virodhi Chetna Manch that Palriwala mentions are its August 1982 memorandum against dowry and its March 8, 1983 focus on women's employment. In fact, after 1983 the Manch did very little, and its various constituent organisations pursued their own activities separately. Since the Janvadi Mahila Samiti is one of the bigger, all-India, mass-based women's organisations, it would be much more useful if Palriwala gave a concrete account of the Samiti's and the CPI(M)'s activities on the anti-dowry front, and also of whether these have led to a diminishing of dowry among the communities with whom they work. It would be useful, for instance, to know what steps have been taken at an organisational level (and at a governmental level in the state where the CPI(M) is in power) to eradicate dowry and to implement women's inheritance rights. Is it a condition for membership of the party or of its mass fronts that a person will not participate in dowry transactions or will not disinherit daughters? Why is it that the West Bengal government has not even amended the Hindu Succession Act, as some other state governments have done, to make daughters equal inheritors of ancestral property?

I would like concrete answers to these questions, not merely a string of quotations from various organisational documents to prove that the organisations have verbally committed themselves to women's inheritance rights. Such a commitment is nothing new—it was already made by many groups in pre-independence India. If we have progressed no further in implementation we have not much to boast of.

I am addressing these questions to the CPI(M) and the Janvadi Mahila Samiti not in order to imply that their record is any worse than that of other political parties or their women's fronts in this regard, but merely because Palriwala's vituperation leads

one to imagine, that her own organisation has a more successful model for change.

Palriwala contends that strategies proposed by me are 'mechanical' and that we need to 'transform that society which cannot give women their due'. Such an assertion amounts to meaningless chanting of learnt up mantras unless accompanied by an attempt to spell out concretely what kind of transformation one has in mind and what practical steps are envisaged to bring about that transformation.

My purpose in requiring answers to these questions is to bring the debate down to a practical level of implementation from the heights of rhetoric and sloganeering to which it has remained confined all these years, while women continue to be devastated by oppression within marriage. By Palriwala's own account, the anti-dowry campaign has worked for change basically through 'meetings and marches', that is, through slogans and speech making, and, second, by putting the rhetoric down in written form, in legislation which is incapable of being implemented, like the Dowry Prohibition Act amendments. But, simultaneous with the growth of the new anti-dowry campaign, over the last decade, dowry has grown and spread instead of diminishing. This is an acknowledged fact. If this does not compel us to pause and reconsider our strategies, this only shows that we have been so enamoured of the reformist postures we have adopted that we have stopped caring whether or not they have the potential of doing social good.

I use the word 'we' advisedly. *Manushi* has been an active participant in the campaign against dowry weddings ever since its inception. *Manushi* was among the organisers of one of the first demonstrations in Model Town, Delhi, against the in-laws of a woman who was murdered following brutal maltreatment accompanied by dowry demands (*Manushi*, No 3, 1979). *Manushi* continued to be active on the issue over the next ten years in various ways—organising protest demonstrations, issuing a call for boycotting dowry weddings, offering legal and other aid to victims of marital violence, conducting research investigations on dowry practices in various communities, and reporting in detail on cases of marital violence based on investigating these cases and interviewing the women and/or their families. Hence, my critique was not in the nature of passing judgment on any one. It was in the nature of self critical reflection.

Despite my critique of the strategies of the anti-dowry campaign, I have consistently maintained that dowry in its present form works against the overall interests of women. This is a widely acknowledged fact which needs no labouring. I had already in an earlier article (*Manushi*, No 34) analysed dowry as a device used to disinherit women. Dowry in its present form in India is pernicious not because there is anything inherently wrong in a woman's parents giving her assets at her wedding. Nor even because extravagant display and consumption are pernicious. There is no reason why extravagant consumption, however we may oppose it on other grounds, should necessarily

work against the interests of the women involved. Dowry becomes pernicious in our present social and familial structure because it is used as another pretext (amongst many others) to degrade and harass the woman. She is vulnerable to such degradation by virtue of her devalued position in the family and society. She is not perceived as an agent in a transaction but as an object used in it. Being herself devalued, everything associated with her, from her personal characteristics to her family and her dowry is devalued, and becomes an occasion to berate her. Divested of control over her own life, she is unable to exercise independent control over the dowry either. So it fails to act to help empower her, as economic contributions would normally be expected to do.

Further, dowry also frequently serves as one of the justifications for her parents to abandon her to the mercies of her husband and in-laws. One reason parents of girls are so anxious to pay a dowry despite their periodic lamentations over it, is because once they have paid it, they consider themselves far less responsible for her welfare. The woman who is maltreated by her in-laws often pleads with her parents like a supplicant for charity, but feels guilty for doing so, since she is in a much weaker position to make any claims on them.

However, I felt that simply repeating *ad infinitum* that dowry is bad and telling people not to practise it, is not enough. We need to go further, and to work out concrete strategies for empowering women in a way that will enable them to oppose dowry and to obtain something better. Women have to be able to see how their lives will substantially improve by refusing dowry. They have to develop a stake in doing so. If they merely refuse dowry but have to marry under the usual conditions, accepting a subordinate, dependent position in the family with few intrinsic rights, few women will see any point in refusing dowry. Numerous cases recounted in *Manushi* testify to the fact that the absence of dowry is no guarantee that marital violence will not occur.

This analysis of mine was misread as my having turned 'pro-dowry' or my justifying it as 'premortem inheritance'. In fact, it was as part of a strategy to combat the culture of disinheritance, moral and material, of daughters, that I had suggested that the anti-dowry campaign shift its focus to inheritance rights. No doubt, inheritance rights have figured somewhere on the agenda of most women's organisations at least since independence and even before, but daughters continue to be near-universally disinherited, and no campaign has been organised to focus on this important issue. Whatever attempts have been made to challenge unequal laws, have been by individual women with little or no success, and even state governments that have changed the laws acknowledge that this has not been followed by large scale implementation.

Palriwala and others contend that inheritance rights are not of key importance because they affect only the propertied. When the anti-dowry campaign was launched in the 1970s, this was precisely the criticism that the CPI(M) women used to dismiss it as a bourgeois women's pre-occupation. It was only in the early 1980s

that they chose to get involved with the dowry issue. They did not consider it necessary to explain this shift in stand, why they now define dowry as an issue affecting all women, not just bourgeois women. Dowry, like inheritance, is a major issue amongst those who own some assets and/or have the ability to raise loans. The norm of dowry as a desirable practice emanated from the propertied groups, and it is in imitation of these groups that other lower status groups have taken to dowry, switching over from their own earlier different practices. Therefore, the culture of dowry and of devaluation and disinheritance of daughters has to be combated primarily amongst the groups from whence it emanates. Among these groups, the pattern of sons inheriting and daughters being disinherited is the dominant one. That the inheritance question is significant is testified to by the storm of protest occasioned whenever some move is made towards giving women rights in this matter. A glance at the parliamentary debates in the years preceding the Hindu Succession Act, 1956, is enlightening in this regard. The act was postponed for a long time and finally passed in a severely truncated form, because in both houses it met with furious opposition from male members uniting across party lines to decry it on the ground that it would sow discord between brothers and sisters, destroying the beautiful relationship they described as hitherto existing in India. It was virtually admitted that this beautiful relationship would only continue for as long as women continued to be disinherited and dependent on their brothers.

My proposal that any will or other deed disinheriting a daughter, including any document by her abdicating her rights in favour of a male heir, be treated as an invalid document was intended to trigger off a debate on how equal inheritance can be made a reality. The proposal has serious difficulties, and I expected it to be the main focus of controversy. Instead, the debate has centred around a meaningless discussion on whether I am 'pro-dowry' or 'anti-dowry' and what my bona fides are. The failure of activists to notice and react to my proposal on inheritance, which goes against the current mainstream trend of development of property laws in India and the world over, shows how little thought has thus far been given to the question of inheritance for women, despite much lipservice.

Palriwala has much sympathy for helpless parents of women who have no option but to 'agonise', advise the woman to adjust, or 'bribe her in-laws' who she sees as trying to achieve 'upward economic mobility' by extracting large dowries. This analysis is oversimplistic since families are not divided into the son-producing and the daughter-producing kind. Most families have both sons and daughters. So if dowry brought about any 'upward economic mobility' this would be fairly evenly spread out, since most families are both at the giving and the receiving end. Those who insist on receiving lavish dowries help set a norm within their community which will entail their giving lavishly as well.

Dowry on a societal level does not function to transform the economic status of

men—it mirrors their status. Dowry functions as a public statement of the superior value set on men and the devalued status of the woman. It is simplistic to argue as Palriwala does, that this devaluation springs from women's lower productivity—even women who earn as much as their husbands (for example, when both are bank officers or teachers) are expected to bring no less of a dowry than unemployed women.

The parents of women are not mere victims of this syndrome. They actively participate in women's devaluation—by discriminatory upbringing, by applying pressure on her to view marriage as the summum bonum of life, and to stay married at all costs, even at the cost of her survival. Palriwala accuses me of wanting 'women's parents single-handedly (to) change socially constructed relationships'. I fail to understand how 'socially constructed relationships' are to be changed if not by those who participate in them. I did not advocate that a woman's dependence on her in-laws be replaced by dependence on her natal family. I advocated her parents' equipping her to act as an independent agent and supporting her in the choices she makes, and that they be disallowed from disinheriting her. Palriwala cites 'economic dependence of the woman and 'her own desire' to remain with her husband as reasons for the parents' option to recall her from a degrading marriage not being a viable option. She advocates a 'fourth option'—that women's organisations pressure the woman's in-laws 'into treating the woman better'. Although Palriwala does not mention the husband here, presumably he too is to be pressured into reforming. Two questions arise. First, is policing by women's organisations (on the lines of the special police cells to deal with atrocities on women equivalent to the 'societal transformation' that Palriwala advocates? The experience of most women's organisations is that wife beating husbands and in-laws are not, on a significant scale, amenable to reform by these organisations. In fact, a *Manushi* survey of the work of the crimes against women police cell, Delhi, showed that husbands and in-laws are not amenable to reform even under pressure from the police.

The second question is: how much better is better? Even if some in-laws are pressured into treating women 'better', will this alter the subordinate position of women in the family? The slogan Palriwala approvingly quotes: *Parivar mein rishta vaisa ho, bahu beti samaan ho* (relationships within the family should be such that the daughter and the daughter-in-law are treated the same) shows how inadequate such a strategy is to alter power relations in the family. Families who harass their daughters-in-law are unlikely to be truly empowering their daughters. Most daughters in our country are subject to severe discrimination, restrictions and deprivations. Even if people could be pressured into treating daughters-in-law like daughters, this would not be much of an improvement as far as women's human rights are concerned.

The anti-dowry campaign has thus far failed to distinguish between the victims of dowry and the perpetrators of it. Women's parents have been seen as just as much victims of dowry as the woman. As many tears

are shed over the woman's father's or brother's plight as over her plight. Witness C S Lakshmi's focus on fathers who have to get into debt and make tremendous sacrifices to save for their daughters' dowries. We should pause to consider where this takes us conceptually. If every family that has daughters is a victim of the dowry system, then who is really to blame for perpetrating it? After all, even most wife murderer families are at some time givers of dowry. The only conclusion one can draw from such a schema—a conclusion most people do draw—is that women are to blame, the daughter herself is the source of

her parents' suffering. Parents of girls are able to see themselves as victims and indulge in self pity when they have to give, without acknowledging the benefits they cheerfully derive when it is their turn to receive.

Tears expended over fathers of minor daughters who begin saving for their dowries from the girls' childhood only obfuscate the issue. Such fathers are in effect acting to deprive their daughters of a choice. They are exercising the choice to make a marriage of dependence their daughters' only option in life. As such, they are responsible for crippling their daughters, even if they have to

make sacrifices to this end. Their making sacrifices does not empower their daughters; it only cripples them further by making them feel guilty, a burden and a liability.

As far as the dowry boycott is concerned, my rethinking regarding its ineffectiveness as a strategy to end dowry does not mean that I will now start attending dowry weddings. I still do not attend them. A further discussion of this issue and of other proposals to build principles of mutuality into the marriage agreement itself, as also sanctions to safeguard the woman, are carried in *Manushi*, No 53, 1989.

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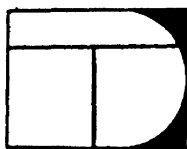
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