

# 'THE PROPOSALS WERE WEIRD, THE GREED WAS WEIRDER'

**I** GAVE DOWRY. So what's the big deal, one may ask. In India, the give and take of dowry is part of getting married, brides are clobbered or burnt because of it, and no one gives a damn.

For me, it WAS a big deal. I was against it, and reacted strongly whenever anyone suggested that I would give in to societal pressure when the time came. I am no activist out to change the world, or even to change my community's view on the issue. It was a personal decision — I would not give dowry, or be party to giving it.

I wanted an arranged marriage. I was practical, guessed my parents would do a better job of finding me the right person. He had to be a nice boy (obviously), from the same background and community, with the right educational qualifications and a good job. That's all I wanted. From the family's perspective, the groom-to-be also had to have a good family name. The Malayalee Investigative Network would use this, the family name, as its starting point, the reference from where to dig and ferret for information with a thoroughness that would be the envy of the FBI. The family's educational qualifications and general state of mental health going back generations; its connections (who was related to whom and how many of them mattered); the skeletons in its vaults that it might otherwise be trying desperately to hide — all would be laid bare, in agonising detail. So, to have the right family name was extremely important. Of course, if you were rich or had a prominent family name, many of these factors were glossed over or ignored.

Going in for an arranged marriage without giving a dowry? Forget it, my friends said. But I believed there would be one person out there who shared my views, and would be willing to marry me.

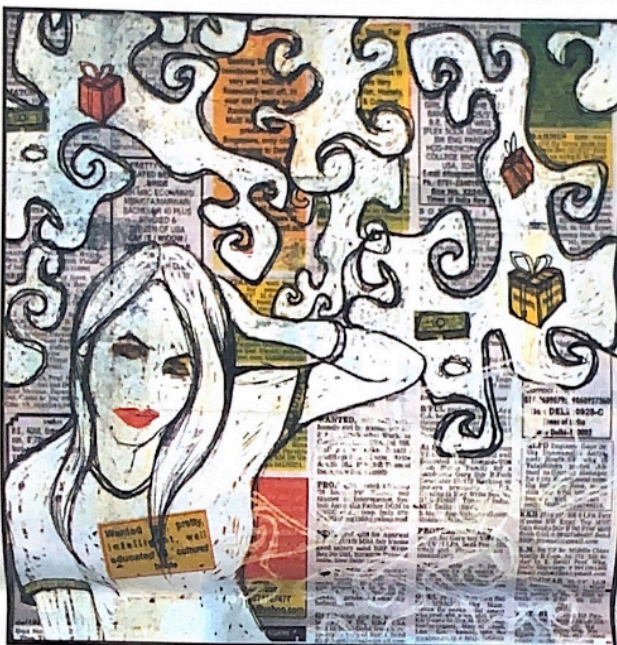
I had a tough time getting married. Rather, everyone else had a tough time getting me married! I had done a computer applications course and, in the early 90s when IT started taking off, I landed a great job. The matrimonial advertisement, placed by my indulgent father, read: "Nice-looking software professional, working in a top company." Of course I couldn't mention the 'No Dowry' clause. I thought I would handle it during the one-on-one meeting with the prospective candidates.

I got all kinds of weird proposals. Someone wanted me to change my name after marriage because he thought it meant 'snake charmer' in some convoluted way in Hindi; another wanted to know my height minus slippers, and yet another wanted



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ed my attested mark sheets from Class X! With a lot of sifting, a Top Ten list of suitable boys was selected. Then — nothing. All the people I said okay to didn't like me, and vice versa. Then the pressure started mounting — you must be asking too many questions, act docile, remember your age, don't be too opinionated, don't, don't, don't... and do, do, do... Everyone had

refrigerators, motorcycles and empty silver vessels. We don't call it dowry — that's dirty — we call it a 'share', 'girl's share'. The euphemism gives it respectability and a hushed halo. My Church, with the threat of ex-communication looming, recognises it unofficially because the Church also gets a share of the 'share'. Surprisingly, there are no overt demands for gold.

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something to say, and said it freely. With all this heaving and huffing and emotional bombarding, I lost it — my confidence, my self-esteem and my ability to think rationally. Suddenly, all I wanted to do was to get married, to get it all over with. I was tongue-tied at the meetings, unsure of what to say, and, as a result, never broached the dowry issue. My resolve against dowry crumbled and was consigned to the trash can of my life.

The last man listed was the chosen one. AND, of course, there was dowry. I was a mute witness to the discussions, humiliated beyond caring.

We Syrian Christians love hard cash — black or white. Not for us the

formed from confident, independent individuals to confused, sullen maids-in-waiting who swallow every barb (too fat, too thin, dark, ugly, short...) thrown at them, directly or otherwise, by prospective grooms and their families. I was no different — it was easier to give in, than to fight.

What baffles me is the attitude of these eligible men. These guys, many of them broad-minded, educated individuals, maintain a studied silence at the time of dowry negotiations. Too embarrassed to be a part of it, they are also too greedy to protest, and refuse the easy money flowing in.

**I** N HINDSIGHT, I should have stuck to what I believed in. So what, if I didn't get married? My conscience pricks me at times. It rangles that I gave in so easily. Then I think of the positives — marriage to the right person and parents are happy. Let bygones be bygones... Maybe I should let it pass, twelve years is too long to carry a blot.

Meanwhile the dowry demands in the community are increasing. Dowry for a doctor or an engineer is almost a crore — if not more. Parents of sons of even average intelligence get them admitted into self-financing engineering or medical colleges by giving a huge donation. They are confident they will get it all back when they make the boy a wealthy alliance.

Currently, with real estate booming, flats are in great demand too. So dowry is a package deal — cash plus a flat. In addition, some people insist that the girl be given 'pocket money' as part of the deal. Pocket money? Whose 'pocket' does the money go into? A know-all relative enlightened me: the girl's, of course. I haven't figured that one out yet.

There have been aha-moments too. Cousins, girls, who stubbornly refused to wed into families that wanted dowry, have found perfect mates through arranged marriages. I admire them for their stand and for not compromising on what they believed in. Even more, I respect the boys and their families for resisting the lure of money and choosing the girl for reasons other than a big fat cash packet. However, these alliances have been too few to have any radical impact on the community, fuelled as it is by greed.

Personally, writing this has been a cathartic process. It has brought to the surface what had been simmering inside. Of course, it cannot right the wrong or let out the hurt. Only time will heal.

Time will also bring a day when dowry is abolished from the face of the earth. Just so long as there are no greedy Indians around. Malayalees included.

Highly unlikely, the realist in me says.



