



The Indian Journal for Research in Law and Management

Open Access Law Journal – Copyright © 2026

Editor-in-Chief – Dr. Muktai Deb Chavan; Publisher – Alden Vas; ISSN: 2583-9896

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share Alike 4.0 International (CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0) License, which permits unrestricted non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium provided the original work is properly cited.

THE CONTINUING CRISIS OF DOWRY DEATHS IN INDIA

~Anshika Singh

ABSTRACT

Dowry death refers to the unfortunate event of death of women who are tortured or driven to suicide because of arguments over unnecessary demands of dowry, a system which is rooted deeply in the society of India. These incidents often involve physical and mental abuse of the victim leading to severe psychological trauma. Even the government and various organizations aim and make efforts to combat dowry-related violence but many challenges negate these actions. Despite the enactment of various laws with the aim to curb this issue, yet this vile practice remains a pervasive issue and cases of horrendous deaths of women can be heard in everyday news.

This article pertains to explore the concurrent issue of the dowry deaths in India. The rising cases of dowry deaths in India generate a need to discuss this issue. By examining the history of dowry, the statistics related to dowry deaths as well as the legislation to combat this practice, the paper also discusses the ground level challenges faced by the institutions. The paper also suggests probable reforms which may bring advancement towards the position of women in our society.

I. INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality is particularly prevalent in South Asia. Women generally have limited power in household decision making and are often discriminated. As in many other countries,

Indian women also fall victim to violent crime at high rates¹. Women in India are still considered as a financial burden; even though India is growing at a transformative rate, yet we still receive news about abhorrent cases of dowry death in our daily lives. The recent cases such as of *Twisha Sharma and Deepika Nagar* raise this question that even in this evolved world, our country is still stuck within the orthodox norms? And how and when will these unnecessary deaths come to an end?

II. THE DOWRY CULTURE AND DOWRY DEATHS

The dowry system dates back to Roman times and refers to the transfer of goods, money, and property given to a bridegroom, his parents, or his relatives from a bride's family as a requisite for marriage². Although marriage has always been considered as a religious sacrament in Indian culture, a dowry has neither any religious significance nor any cultural footprint; it is just a reflection of the society's perception towards marriage and women.

“**Dowry**” refers to- “any property or valuable security given or agreed to be given either directly or indirectly—

- a) by one party to a marriage to the other party to the marriage; or
- b) by the parents of either party to a marriage or by any other person, to either party to the marriage or to any other person; at or before or any time after the marriage in connection with the marriage of the said parties.”³

A dowry is often given in the hope of obtaining a favourable marriage and is not limited to economically-weaker sections of the Indian society which results in significant debt. In fact, the custom is often followed in advanced sections also, as can be seen in the *Twisha Sharma* case, the family of the groom was not a financially deprived one, rather of an elite status, yet they resorted to this vile practice of dowry. It is suggested that 26% of husbands and in-laws are not satisfied with the amount of dowry that is given⁴. Dowry deaths (65%) occur within

¹ Sheetal Sekhri, Adam Storeyguard, *Dowry deaths: Response to weather variability in India*, Science Direct, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S030438781400100X?via%3Dihub#preview-section-references>

² Navpreet Kaur, Roger.w. Byard, *Bride burning: A unique and ongoing form of gender-based violence*, Volume 75, October 2020, Journal of Forensic and Legal Medicine, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1752928X20301426?ref=pdf_download&fr=RR-2&rr=a134924b5da9efe6

³ The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, ACT NO. 28 OF 1961 (India).

⁴ Priya R Banerjee, *Dowry in 21st-century India: the sociocultural face of exploitation*, National Library of Medicine, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23897921/>

the first three years of marriage with one Northern Indian study showing that ***one third of cases of dowry deaths in the areas studied were homicides***, with the remaining two thirds being suicides⁵.

Between **2017 and 2022**, the country recorded roughly **7,000 dowry deaths** per year according to the reports by National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). In **2022, 6,450 dowry deaths** were officially recorded. And these numbers are widely considered a lower estimate because many deaths go unreported or are misclassified.⁶

Despite insignificant long-term decline, India recorded **5,737 dowry deaths in the year 2024**⁷. **Uttar Pradesh** alone reported 2,038 cases in 2024, accounting for over one-third of the national total. Subsequently, **Bihar** with 1,078 cases, while **Madhya Pradesh** reported 450. Rajasthan and West Bengal also registered high numbers, with 386 and 337 cases, respectively. The concentration of cases in these states indicates that dowry-related violence remains deeply embedded in certain regions⁸.

III. LEGAL FRAMEWORK TO COUNTER DOWRY DEATHS

A. PRE-LEGISLATIVE POSITION: The custom of Dowry has always been well rooted in the Indian society; from ages it has been a socially accepted and normalised practice as if a custom within marriage itself. This practice has been an abomination for women in India as it creates an unnecessary financial burden over the bride's family. This practice was such deeply rooted that the brides were mistreated just for the sake of extra dowry even after marriage, some even burned or killed. The excessive increase in crimes against brides provoked a necessity for some legislation to protect them.

B. LEGISLATIVE EVOLUTION: The Indian government has enacted several laws to address dowry-related violence, most notably the Dowry Prohibition Act (1961) and the Criminal Law (Second Amendment) Act (1983), which introduced Section 304B

⁵ Sharma BR, Harish D, Gupta M, Singh VP, *Dowry: a deep-rooted cause of violence against women in India*, Med Sci Law. 2005;45:161–168.

⁶ PubAdmin.Institute, <https://pubadmin.institute/gender-sensitization/combating-dowry-violence-india-legal-measures>, (accessed June 29, 2026)

⁷ VISION IAS, <https://visionias.in/current-affairs/news-today/2026-05-29/society/social-crisis-of-dowry-deaths-in-india>, (accessed June 28, 2026)

⁸ NDTV, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/dowry-deaths-falling-in-india-but-a-woman-still-dies-every-90-minutes-11529721>, (accessed June 28, 2026)

in the Indian Penal Code, now under section 80 of Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (2023) making dowry death a criminal offence. The major provisions include:-

- **DOWRY PROHIBITION ACT (1961)** - the first national legislation enacted with the motive to curb the issue of dowry is the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961. The act lays down certain number of preventive and punitive measures, although its objectives have yet not been achieved. This act has even been amended twice to widen the scope of the term “dowry” and to enhance the punishment for violations of provisions of the Act. Under *Section 3* of the Act, the punishment for taking dowry is prescribed as - *imprisonment for a term not less than five years*, and fine which shall not be less than fifteen thousand rupees or the amount of the value of dowry, whichever is more. The Act also provides for the appointment of Dowry Prohibition Officers at the state level, whose job is to prevent dowry transactions, investigate complaints, and collect evidence. On ground level, however, most states have either not appointed these officers or have left the positions largely inoperative⁹.
- **BHARTIYA NYAYA SANHITA, 2023** – The target of criminal law is not limited to dowry issue but the violence, mental and physical abuse connected with the dowry also comes under the ambit of criminal law. Failure of dowry legislation and increased in rate of dowry deaths led to the amendment in the year 1983 and 1986 by adding Section 304-B and 498-A.

SECTION 304B IPC NOW SECTION 80 BNS: *Definition of Dowry Death (Section 80): Dowry death refers to the death of a woman caused by any burns, bodily injury, or other unnatural causes, within 7 years of marriage, where it is shown that the woman was subjected to cruelty or harassment by her husband or in-laws, in connection with the demand for dowry. **Punishment for Dowry Death:** If a woman dies under such circumstances, the husband or in-laws are punishable with imprisonment for a minimum of 7 years which may extend to life imprisonment. In extreme cases, the punishment can be death. There are four major essentials to constitute Dowry Death:-

- ✧ **CHRONOLOGICAL REQUIREMENT:** The death must occur within seven years of marriage, establishing a specific timeframe within which the

⁹ PubAdmin.Institute, *supra* note 6

legal presumption operates. This temporal limitation recognizes that dowry-related harassment typically manifests in the initial years of marriage.

- ✧ **NATURE OF DEATH:** The death must be caused by burns, bodily injury, or occur under circumstances other than normal. This broad categorization encompasses various methods through which dowry deaths typically occur, including immolation, physical assault, or suspicious circumstances that deviate from natural death.
- ✧ **CAUSAL CONNECTION:** There must be evidence that the deceased woman was subjected to cruelty or harassment by her husband or his relatives soon before her death. The proximity between the harassment and death is crucial for establishing the requisite nexus.
- ✧ **DOWRY NEXUS:** The cruelty or harassment must be connected with demands for dowry, as defined under Section 2 of the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961. This reference maintains consistency with existing anti-dowry legislation.

***Section 498A IPC now Section 85 and 86 BNS - Cruelty by Husband or Relatives:** This section criminalizes cruelty by the husband or his relatives towards a woman, which includes harassment for dowry. Cruelty is defined as: Any act of physical or mental harm, any conduct that forces the woman to commit suicide or endure grave mental distress. **Punishment:** The offender can be punished with imprisonment for up to 3 years and/or a fine.

- **SECTION 113B OF THE INDIAN EVIDENCE ACT NOW SECTION 113 OF BHARATIYA SAKSHYA ADHINIYAM, 2023 - Presumption of Dowry Death:** In view of the nature of the dowry offences that are generally committed in the privacy of residential homes and in secrecy, independent and direct evidence necessary for conviction is not easy to get. Accordingly, amendment act 43 of 1986 has inserted Section 113-B in the Evidence Act, 1872 to strengthen the prosecution hands by permitting a certain presumption to be raised if certain fundamental facts are established and the unfortunate incident of death has taken place within seven years of marriage. Under this section, in cases where a woman's death occurs within 7 years of marriage and it is shown that she was subjected to cruelty or harassment for dowry, the court may presume that the death was a result of dowry harassment unless the husband or his relatives prove otherwise.

IV. CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTATION OF LEGISLATION

Despite these legislative measures, the enforcement of such laws has been inconsistent, with many cases going unreported or being poorly investigated. Scholars argue that while laws exist to curb dowry deaths, societal attitudes and inadequate implementation hinder their effectiveness¹⁰. Despite the legal framework being modified to face this issue, the implementation of these laws to prevent dowry deaths has faced various challenges:

- **UNDER-REPORTING, DELAYED COMPLAINTS AND SOCIAL STIGMA:** Dowry deaths are often underreported due to social stigma, fear of backlash, and a reluctance to bring dishonour to the family. This hampers effective investigation and prosecution. Even the family of the bride are hesitant to report these incidents as they fear societal shame.
- **CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE:** Generally, there are no witnesses to the incidents leading to cruelty and unnatural death except the family members, some of whom might be an accomplice themselves and some might not support due to family pressure. More often than not, the neighbours who might be having some information or evidence against the accused are unwilling to testify because of the fear of spoiling the neighbourly relation¹¹.
- **SUPERFICIAL OR FLAWED INVESTIGATION:** There are frequent delays in the investigation process and weak evidence collection, due to the nature of this crime (as it occurs behind closed doors) which undermine the prosecution's case. The police are also accused of certain practices which reduces the likelihood of the successful execution of the proceedings. The usual accusations brought against the police are: they reach extremely late on a crime scene, altering the events in recording the First Information Report (FIR), they always try to prefer dowry deaths as suicide and carrying the investigation in less proficient manner and leisurely fashion.
- **FORENSIC LIMITATIONS:** Inadequate forensic evidence and slow-moving judicial proceedings result in acquittals or lenient sentences for the accused. The lack of knowledge amongst the police officials about how to preserve the forensic

¹⁰ Devendra Dubey, *Dowry Death in India*, Vol. 7 Iss 2, International Journal of Legal Science and Innovation, 145, 2025, <https://ijlsi.com/wp-content/uploads/Dowry-Death-in-India.pdf>

¹¹ Ipleaders, <https://blog.ipleaders.in/dowry-deaths-india-legal-study/>, (accessed June 30, 2026)

evidence also leads to collection of corrupt evidence and therefore hinders the procurement of clear evidence.

- **CORRUPTION AND INFLUENCE OF POWERFUL FAMILIES:** In some cases, the influence of powerful families, including the wealthy and politically connected ones, has led to cases being dismissed or watered down. The lack of political will to address dowry deaths also plays a significant role such as in the *Twisha Sharma* case¹².
- **JUDICIAL LIMITATIONS:** Our judicial system is already heavily burdened with millions of pending cases across courts; dowry-related trials drag on for years. The absence of dedicated fast-track courts for such cases adds to the problem. With the passage of time some links to the case also fade away.

V. THE PATH TOWARDS REDEMPTION

Legal reforms are a requisite in consideration of the rising cases, but not sufficient. Lasting change requires a shift in the cultural norms that sustain the dowry system. Several approaches deserve attention:

- A. **LEGAL REFORMS:** although there are various legislative provisions existing, there still exist a void between the laws and their enforcement. Thus there is need for certain legal reforms:
- ✧ **STRENGTHEN INVESTIGATION STANDARDS-** the procedure for investigation must be stricten, there must be set time limits for investigation, police officials must be trained how to preserve forensic evidence.
 - ✧ **FAST-TRACK COURTS-** special courts must be created specifically for dowry death cases or atleast these cases must be considered within the fast-track courts so that timely justice is delivered.
 - ✧ **VICTIM AND WITNESS PROTECTION-** in these cases, often the witnesses are either the family members or the neighbours. During investigation, they usually hesitate to testify due to fear of societal judgment or most of the times to protect themselves from the unnecessary involvement in the case. Thus, witness protection schemes may help in a fluent investigation process.

¹² Devendra Dubey, *supra* note 10

✧ **STRICTER PENALTIES-** The penalties for those convicted of dowry deaths should be more stringent to serve as a deterrent. The law should provide for capital punishment in extreme cases where it is clear that the victim was subjected to severe violence and harassment.

B. **SOCIAL REFORMS:** only legal reforms are not sufficient to eliminate this vile practice, rather change in the societal perception is also an essential element. Some social reforms could be-

✧ **PUBLIC AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS-** Social awareness programs and community-based interventions can play a crucial role in changing attitudes toward dowry and gender-based violence. Efforts should be made to sensitize both men and women about the harmful effects of dowry.

✧ **EDUCATION-** States with higher literacy rates, such as Kerala (94% literacy) and Tamil Nadu (80% literacy), consistently report far fewer dowry deaths compared to states with lower educational attainment. Education – particularly of girls – empowers women to recognise abuse, seek help, and become financially independent¹³.

✧ **ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN-** Research indicates that dowry murder rates tend to be lower in regions where women have greater economic value and participation in the workforce. Policies that promote women's property rights, employment opportunities, and financial literacy can reduce their vulnerability.

✧ **COMMUNITY-LEVEL INTERVENTIONS-** Campaigns at grassroot level that celebrate dowry-free marriages, public naming-and-shaming of dowry demanders, and community pledges against the practice have shown promise in several states.

VI. CONCLUSION

Dowry in itself is a bane, but dowry death is a repugnant practice which must be eliminated from the society. This issue of dowry death is tragic reflections of gender inequality, patriarchal norms, and deeply rooted cultural practices that devalues women's lives and assess them with property. Legal measures, such as the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961; the Bhartiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023(Section 80)

¹³ PubAdmin.Institute, *supra* note 6

and stringent laws against dowry-related violence, have been put in place and aim to protect women. However, there is still much work to be done in terms of societal change, awareness at ground level and enforcement of these laws, these require a stricter implementation, enhance of punishment. Although the legal framework is continuously evolving, dowry death still remains a challenge in the society. Some reforms in terms of legislation i.e. to strengthen investigation standards, enhance punishment, establish proper guidelines for police officials with respect to forensic handling, create victim and witness protection schemes. Some social reforms are also required for a substantive change in this scenario which may be- public awareness campaigns, education and economic empowerment of women. By strengthening legal mechanisms and addressing the root social causes of dowry violence, dowry deaths can be significantly reduced, leading to a more just society where women's rights are respected and upheld.