

Battling the burning of brides

Indian-born engineer crusades against dowry killings

By Michael Kenney
GLOBE STAFF

In her wedding photograph, Sangeeta Goel is attired as befits a Hindu bride of high social and economic status: sari interwoven with gold threads, gold bangles on her wrists, a gold nose ring so large it covers the corner of her mouth, and ceremonial gold and vermilion markings on her forehead.

She had, after all, a doctorate in solid state physics and was marrying a chartered accountant that day in November 1993, in Kanpur, a city on the Ganges in northern India.

"If she was here in the U.S.," said Himendra B. Thakur, "she would be making \$70,000 a year at AT&T."

But Goel is not here. Within five months of the dowry and traditional Hindu marriage ceremony, she was dead — apparently one of nearly 6,000 young brides burned to death last year in India because their parents either could not, or would not, pay an additional dowry.

Thakur, a 60-year-old Indian-born civil engineer with the Massachusetts Highway Department, has made those deaths his cause. "I am tortured by it," he said. "These are disturbing things which must be stopped."

In 1993, Thakur organized an international society to combat the problem and persuaded Harvard University's Committee on South Asian Studies to



HIMENDRA B. THAKUR
"I am tortured by it."

Waging war on the dowry burnings of Hindu brides

■ DOWRY

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cosponsor an international conference on dowry burnings last weekend.

At Sunday's session, there was an emotional moment when Goel's uncle, New York businessman Satya Agarwal, described the events leading up to her death. "Only one word comes to mind," he said. "It was greed, greed, greed, greed."

Agarwal said that in addition to the substantial dowry given at the time of the wedding, Goel's husband

and family wanted her savings from her work as an engineer before her marriage. Her husband is now awaiting trial in her death.

Thakur, who lives Rockport, did not know about these things before he came to the United States in 1973 with his wife and now-grown children. He first learned about the dowry deaths from American news reports. Dowry giving had been illegal in India since 1961, and the practice — and the resulting deaths — appears to have quietly returned with the rise of a professional middle

class with working daughters past the customary age for marriage.

Because these deaths occur in the home and the perpetrators are family members, many "dowry deaths" are concealed as "kitchen accidents." In some cases in which the young woman has survived, she has told police that cooking oil had been poured over her as she worked in the kitchen and then set afire.

In one notorious — but not untypical — case in 1978 in New Delhi, a young woman ran shrieking from a house, covered in flames, and stum-

bled into a nearby police station. Before she died, she told police her sister-in-law had poured the oil and her mother-in-law had lit the match.

The conference brought to Harvard Law School's Pound Hall attorneys from India and academics — in such fields as anthropology, law, religion and women's studies — from the United States, Britain, South Africa, Australia and Canada.

Its aim, Thakur said, was "to draw world attention because in India there is a lot of hush-hush about this" and to uncover the reasons dow-

ry burnings are on the rise — up from 5,157 in 1991 to last year's 5,817, according to Indian government figures — and find a way to stop them.

The practice of dowry giving is apparently growing among Indians living in the United States — but no deaths have been reported. Sita Kapadia, an educational consultant in Houston, said the issue "troubles" Indian classmates of her nephew at the University of Houston. "They say they are opposed, but cannot go against their parents, who have invested so much in their education."

SA Indians free of evil customs

By Jaspreet Kindra

POVERTY, ratio of men to women, literacy, westernisation, religious reform and caste mobility could be among the reasons which may have forced Indian immigrants to abandon the practice of dowry in South Africa.

But, it also would have been dependent on whether the custom was prevalent during that period in India, observes Dr Bisraam Rambilass, deputy president of the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, in his paper *The Non-Prevalence of Dowry among Indian South Africans*.

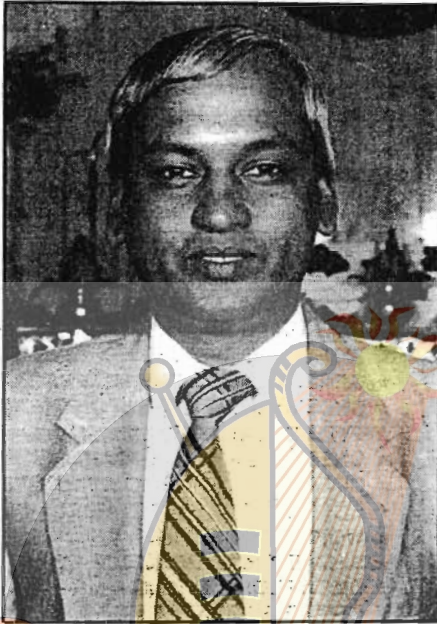
The paper was presented at the First International Conference on Dowry and Bride-Burning held at Harvard University, USA, recently.

The term 'dowry' as perceived today is a social evil having evolved from the customary tradition of the bride's parents giving gifts to the groom's family.

DEMANDED

In contemporary times, dowry in India is no longer a gift but rather a demand for cash and/or goods made by the groom and his family on the bride's parents.

Referring to the findings of a pilot study conducted in the form of interviews from each of the four main language groups - Hindi, Tamil, Telugu and Gujarati, Dr Rambilass points out that they were relatively ignorant about the practice of dowry in India or in South Africa.



Dr Bisraam Rambilass

But amongst the Hindi-speaking and Gujarati communities, it was found that as part of the pre-wedding nuptials, the maternal uncle of the bride is expected to buy a set of clothes for his sister, the bride's mother, and, among the Gujaratis, it is he who gives away the bride.

"While in India this is viewed as a veiled form of dowry in that the bride's mother and family can be put into enormous expense, in South Africa, the practice is a harmless one and done with much pride, by the uncle."

AFFLUENCE

He adds that the Gujarati community persists in following some of the orthodox practices and this is simply a result of their affluence (as they are the descendants of a trader class of passenger Indians).

"Dowry is not practised as in India but the giving of gifts can assume extravagant proportions," observes Dr Rambilass.

He points out that in the Hindi and Gujarati

speaking communities, the bride's family hosts and thus pays for the wedding expenses, while the practice is the reverse for the Tamil and Telugu communities.

Interestingly one of the respondents stated that it is not unusual to find in the Tamil community an amicable arrangement where both parties share costs.

"Where the groom's party meets the expenses, the practice does not qualify as 'bride-price' because there is no stipulated amounts of cash or prescribed gifts that are given to the bride's parents."

In his paper, Dr Rambilass also drew parallels between the African practice of *labolo* or 'bride-price' and that of dowry in India.

According to him, the intricacies of the prac-

tice of an indigenous tradition in a community influenced tremendously by urbanisation has devastating effects on African society.

"The inability to afford bride-price is a major cause of widespread illegitimate relationships that permeate African communities resulting in abortions, unwanted pregnancies and babies, infidelity, abuse and disempowerment of women.

"Be it bride-price or dowry, the unfortunate victim is always the woman," opines Dr Rambilass.

Thus, dowry or bride-price along with the other social evils common to the two countries must be given priority in the agenda of negotiations between them, he concludes.

Conference a protest platform

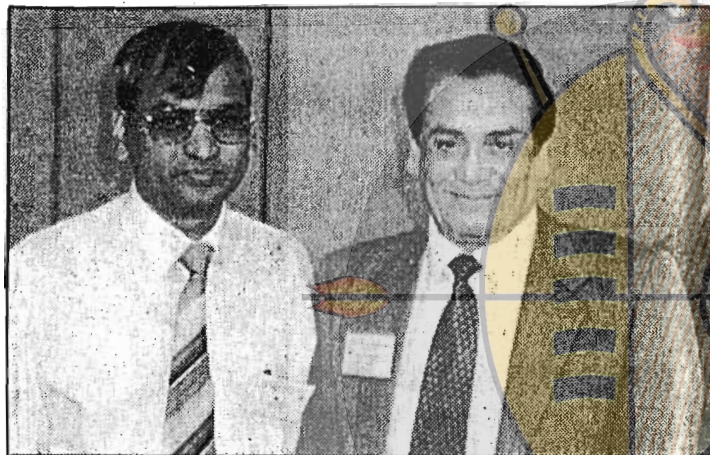
An abhorrent custom

Bride-burning is a practice that horrifies everyone, writes Daily News Reporter Ishani Bechoo.

SANSKRIT lecturer at the University of Durban-Westville, Dr Bisraam Rambilass, left for the United States of America on Tuesday to take part in a conference dealing with dowry and bride-burning in India.

Conference organisers Mr H.B. Thakur and Dr Michael Witzel said that thousands of newly-married girls in India whose fathers failed to pay the dowry instalment were burnt to death after being doused in petrol and set alight.

"The conference will platform a worldwide protest against the practice of dowry and bride-burning. International condemnation is necessary to arouse action in India against the crime," they said in a joint statement.



CONDEMNATION NEEDED: Dr Bisraam Rambilass, left, with Mr H.B. Thakur, chairman of the International Society Against Dowry and Bride-Burning in India, during their last meeting in Australia.

Dr Rambilass, who is also the deputy president of the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha of South Africa and the chairman of the Indological Society of Southern Africa, was invited by the International Society Against Dowry and Bride-Burning in India to participate in the conference being held at Harvard University in Massachusetts from tomorrow to

Monday, October 2.

He will deliver a paper entitled *The Non-Prevalence of Dowry among Indian South Africans*.

The lecturer, who takes a special interest in social issues of this nature, said that dowries are not prevalent in South Africa as they are considered a social evil with the

only semblances of dowry being the giving of gifts to the groom by the bride's parents which can be traced to the wedding ceremony itself.

He said that while forces of liberation in South Africa have enjoyed a longstanding ally in India and while these countries stood at the threshold of bilateral trade and other relations, it should not be forgotten that as developing countries, they also shared common cultural problems that reflected poorly on the state of human rights.

"Dowry or bride-price, street children, bonded labour, illiteracy, emancipation of women and eradication of poverty must stand equally high in the agenda of negotiations between these two countries or else the gloom of despair that prevails could well hinder their assimilation into the cosmopolitan global community," he said.

The conference will focus on the political, cultural and legal perspectives of the problem with survivors of dowry and bride-burning also present to tell their stories to a world audience.

Rambilass attends Harvard meeting

Leader Reporter *Africans.*

DR Bisraam Rambilass, deputy president of the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, left for the Harvard University, USA on Tuesday to attend the First International Conference on Dowry and Bride-Burning.

The conference is being jointly hosted by the Committee on South Asian Studies, Harvard University and the International Society Against Dowry and Bride-Burning in India Inc.

Dr Rambilass will be delivering a paper entitled *The Non-Prevalence of Dowry among Indian South*

prevalent in South Africa as a social evil, the only semblances of dowry as a giving of gifts to the groom by the bride's parents can be traced to the Hindu wedding ceremony itself," said Dr Rambilass.

Conference organisers H B Takur and Dr Michael Witzel, said in a joint statement that the conference which begins on September 30 will be a platform for a "worldwide protest" and hoped to shock Indians to take action.

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Meeting Decries Bride Burning

By AMITA M. SHUKLA

By the end of this decade, about 25,000 young brides in India will be burned to death by their in-laws over dowry disputes, according to government statistics.

This fact was the starting point for the First International Conference on Dowry and Bride Burning in India, which began Saturday at the Law School.

About 75 people, including international scholars and legal experts interested in the social problem of bride burning in India, are attending the conference, which ends today.

According to India's Home Ministry in 1994, there were 3,317 "dowry deaths" in India, and the unofficial estimates place the numbers much higher.

"It is a very peculiar type of violence," said H. B. Thakur, who organized the conference and is chair of the International Society Against Dowry and Bride-Burning in India, based in Salem, Mass. "We are appealing to the whole world to stop this and other kinds of violence."

The conference was designed to analyze the problem and present a forum for discussion, Thakur said.

Among the speakers were professors and professionals from London University, U.K.; Durban University, South Africa; Monash University, Australia; Copenhagen, Denmark; and the Supreme Court of India.

"We have established contacts between activists, lawyers, sociologists and all kinds of other academics with the hope that there will be an exchange of ideas so that our ideas here can be of help to those actually on the ground in India," said I. Julia Leslie, a professor at the London University School of Oriental and African Studies and a speaker at the conference.

Exposing an international audience to a Indian social problem may help to solve problems which India has not been able to tackle, said Thakur.

Conference on Brides

BURNING, from page 1

"This is the first time we are openly discussing this subject," Thakur said.

Thakur said he was inspired to start this conference after he first presented this issue at the World Sanskrit Conference held in Melbourne, Australia in Jan. 1994.

"It has opened up a big dialogue and minds are being opened," Thakur said. "But this is a continuous process."

Michael E.J. Witzel, Wales Professor of Sanskrit in the Committee of South Asian Studies at the College, helped organize the conference this weekend.

Future Plans

Thakur said he plans to continue his search for solutions by establishing shelters in India where women will feel comfortable expressing their

concerns and voicing their opinions. Few shelters currently exist in India.

Thakur said he hopes efforts in the United States will create awareness and raise funds for work to be done in India.

"This is only the beginning," Thakur said.

Participants at the conference said it is crucial to bring an issue like this into the public eye.

"It is a worthwhile effort," said Piyush K. G. Kaman, a student at the Law School.

"It is a problem which is far beyond what it is portrayed to be. I think people will realize that the magnitude of the problem is very immense," Kaman said.

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