

SOME REFLECTIONS ON DOWRY (1984). M.N. Srinivas. Published for the Centre for Women's Development Studies by Oxford University Press, New Delhi. Pp. 32. Price Rs. 10.

THE WORK<sup>1</sup> under review concentrates on (i) the difference between ancient and modern dowry, (ii) the difference between bride-price and dowry, and (iii) how dowry has replaced the more rampant practice of bride-price.

The author has traced the evolution of the practice of dowry and he holds that dowry should be studied in relation to the caste system, and its effect on kin and affinal relations also needs to be examined. A narrow economic interpretation of dowry, feels the author, "will miss out crucial facts and misinterpret even the selected facts."<sup>2</sup> A thorough understanding of dowry is necessary before any successful movement to eradicate it is launched.

In his discourse the author has also dealt with other studies and theories on dowry. He desires re-examination of the belief that bride-price was paid in compensation to the bride's family for the loss of her services. He points out that the practice was prevalent even in *Brahmin* families even though *Brahmin* women do not work outside the home and certainly not for wages. He suggests that dowry and bride-price can be studied in relation to the male-female sex ratio. Useful insights can also be had if dowry is seen as an integral part of hypergamy.

Following from the above the author does not also believe that bride-price disappeared as women were withdrawn from their extra-mural functions. "Tadavi women continue to work for wages on the Narmada dam but they are no longer paid bride-price. Scheduled Castes in West Bengal pay dowry even while their women continue to work as labourers."<sup>3</sup> He holds that the practice of dowry spread in emulation of the higher castes. It was a means of acquiring status and respectability.

However, the above analysis holds true for ancient dowry; "modern dowry is entirely the product of the forces let loose by British rule such as monetization, education and the introduction of the 'organized sector'."<sup>4</sup>

Whilst the practice of ancient dowry has been examined in some detail the phenomenon of modern dowry has cursorily been explained. This omission can be a little irksome for the modern reader faced with the problem of dowry.

The author has summarily dealt with the inadequacies of implementa-

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1. M.N. Srinivas, *Some Reflections on Dowry* (1984).
  2. *Id.* at 8.
  3. *Id.* at 22.
  4. *Id.* at 13.

tion machinery which has failed to wipe out modern dowry. He has platitudinously concluded that "nothing less than a powerful and wide-ranging social movement will be adequate to wipe it off the face of the country."<sup>5</sup> And this comment if translated into layman's language could well mean that nothing can be done. (We wonder if this was the intention.)

The book should be of interest to a researcher wishing to delve in some basic issues on the question of dowry. It is also good fishing ground for a number of interesting ideas the author casually lets drop.

One's basic problem with the book is its lack of systematic presentation. A number of ideas and themes are simultaneously dealt with and the author moves from one to the other without in any way preparing or warning his reader. Even though the loose structure and manifold ideas running into each other detract from the richness of the discourse, the experience of reflecting with him on dowry is in the main rewarding.

*Amita Dhanda\**

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5. *Id.* at 31-32.

\*Assistant Research Professor, Indian Law Institute.