

The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961

Introduction

The ancient marriage rites in the Vedic period are associated with Kanyadan.

It is laid down in Dharamshastra that the meritorious act of Kanyadan is not complete till the bridegroom was given a dakshina. So when a bride is given over to the bridegroom, he has to be given something in cash or kind which constitute varadakshina. Thus Kanyadan became associated with varadakshina i.e. the cash or gifts in kind by the parents or guardian of the bride to the bridegroom. The varadakshina was offered out of affection and did not constitute any kind of compulsion or consideration for the marriage. It was a voluntary practice without any coercive overtones. In the course of time, the voluntary element in varadakshina has disappeared and the coercive element has crept in. It has taken deep roots not only in the marriage ceremony but also post-marital relationship. What was originally intended to be a token dakshina for the bridegroom has now gone out of proportions and has assumed the nomenclature 'dowry'.

The social reformers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have striven hard for the abolition of various social evils including the evil of dowry system. Long before India gained independence, the then provincial Government of Sind passed an enactment known as "Sind Deti Leti Act, 1939" with a view to deal effectively with the evils of dowry system but the enactment had neither any impact nor could create the desired effect. During the last few decades the evils of dowry system has taken an acute form in almost all parts of the country and in almost all the sections of society. In a bid to eradicate this evil from the society, the State Governments of Bihar and Andhra Pradesh enacted "The Bihar Dowry Restraint Act, 1950" and "The Andhra Pradesh Dowry Prohibition Act, 1958" for the respective States, but both these enactments failed to achieve the objectives for which they were enacted.

The evil of dowry system was assuming enormous proportions and the minds of right thinking persons both outside and inside the State Legislatures and the Parliament were shattered. The matter was raised in the Parliament in very first session of the Lok Sabha. Many proposals for restraining dowry were placed in the Parliament in the form of Private Members Bills. During the course of discussions on a non-official Bill in the Lok Sabha in 1953, the then Minister of Law gave an assurance to the House that a bill on the subject would be prepared in consultation with the State Governments. In pursuance of the assurance, a Bill was subsequently submitted for consideration of the Cabinet. The Cabinet then decided that the proposal might be held in abeyance till the enactment of the Hindu Succession Act. After the enactment of the Hindu Succession Act in 1956, the Government felt that a separate legislation to prohibit dowry was not a matter of urgency. As the problem continued to increase the issue was again and again agitated in the Parliament as well as in State Legislatures. On account of pressure both at political and social levels, the Government finally decided to process the legislation. On 24th April, 1959 the Dowry Prohibition Bill, 1959 was introduced in the Lok Sabha. After some discussions, the Bill was referred to a Joint Committee of both the Houses of Parliament. The Joint Committee presented its report with some amendments in the Bill. Both the Houses of Parliament did not agree with the amendments as reported by the Joint Committee and ultimately the Bill was considered at the Joint Sittings of both the Houses of Parliament held on 06th and 09th May, 1961. After making necessary change the Dowry Prohibition Bill was reintroduced in the Parliament.

Statement of Objects and Reasons

The object of this Bill is to prohibit the evil practice of giving and taking of dowry. This question has been engaging the attention of the Government for some time past, and one of the methods by which this problem, which is essentially a social one, was sought to be tackled was by the conferment of improved property rights on women by the Hindu Succession Act, 1956. It is, however, felt that a law which makes the practice punishable and at the same time ensures that any dowry, if given does enure for the benefit of the wife will go a long way to educating public opinion and to the eradication of this evil.

There has also been a persistent demand for such a law both in and outside Parliament. Hence, the present Bill. It, however, takes care to exclude presents in the form of clothes, ornaments, etc., which are customary at marriages, provided the value thereof does not exceed Rs. 2,000. Such a provision appears to be necessary to make the law workable.

Act 28 of 1961

The Dowry Prohibition Bill having been passed by both the Houses of Parliament received the assent of the President on 20 May, 1961. It came on the Statute Book as The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 (28 of 1961).

Amendments

1. The Delegated Legislation Provisions (Amendment) Act, 1983 (20 of 1983).
2. The Dowry Prohibition (Amendment) Act, 1984 (63 of 1984).
3. The Dowry Prohibition (Amendment) Act, 1986 (43 of 1986).

THE DOWRY PROHIBITION ACT, 1961¹

(28 of 1961)

[20 May 1961]

An Act to prohibit the giving or taking of dowry.

Be it enacted by Parliament in the Twelfth Year of the Republic of India as follows:

1. Short title, extent and commencement

- (1) This Act may be called the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961.
- (2) It extends to the whole of India except the State of Jammu and Kashmir.
- (3) It shall come into force on such date² as the Central Government may, by notification in the Official Gazette, appoint.

2. Definition of 'dowry'

In this Act, "dowry" means 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 parent 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 ³[or any time after the marriage] ⁴[in connection with the marriage of the said parties, but does not include] dower or *mahr* in the case of persons to whom the Muslim Personal Law (*Sharia*) applies.

⁵[***]

Explanation II

The expression "valuable security" has the same meaning as in Section 30 of the Indian Penal Code (45 of 1860).

3. Penalty for giving or taking dowry

- ⁶(1) If any person, after the commencement of this Act, gives or takes or abets the giving or taking of dowry, he shall be punishable ⁷[with imprisonment for a term which shall not be less than ⁸[five years, and with fine which shall not be less than fifteen thousand rupees or the amount of the value of such dowry, whichever is more];
Provided that the Court may, for adequate and special reasons to be recorded in the judgment, impose a sentence of imprisonment for a term of less than ⁹[five years].]
- ¹⁰(2) Nothing in sub-section (1) shall apply to, or in relation to,-
 - (a) presents which are given at the time of a marriage to the bride (without any demand having been made in that behalf);
Provided that such presents are entered in a list maintained in accordance with the rules made under this Act;

¹ Statement of Objects and Reasons can be found at Gazette of India, Extra., 1959, Pt. II, Section 2, page 397

² Came into force on 01.07.1961, vide S.O. 1410, dated 20.06.1961

³ Substituted by Act 43 of 1986, Section 2, for "or after the marriage" (with effect from 19.11.1986)

⁴ Substituted by Act 63 of 1984, Section 2, for certain words (with effect from 02.10.1985)

⁵ Omitted by Act 63 of 1984, Section 2 (with effect from 02.10.1985)

⁶ Section 3 re-numbered as sub-section (1) thereof by Act 63 of 1984, Section 3 (with effect from 02.10.1985)

⁷ Substituted by Act 63 of 1984, Section 3, for certain words (with effect from 02.10.1985)

⁸ Substituted by Act 43 of 1986, Section 3, for certain words (with effect from 19.11.1986)

⁹ Substituted by Act 43 of 1986, Section 3, for "six months" (with effect from 19.11.1986)

¹⁰ Inserted by Act 63 of 1984, Section 3 (with effect from 02.10.1985)

- (b) presents which are given at the time of a marriage to the bridegroom (without any demand having been made in that behalf):

Provided that such presents are entered in a list maintained in accordance with the rules made under this Act:

Provided further that where such presents are made by or on behalf of the bride or any person related to the bride, such presents are of a customary nature and the value thereof is not excessive having regard to the financial status of the person by whom, or on whose behalf, such presents are given.]

¹¹**[4. Penalty for demanding dowry**

If any person demands, directly or indirectly, from the parents or other relatives or guardian of a bride or bridegroom, as the case may be, any dowry, he shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term which shall not be less than six months, but which may extend to two years and with fine which may extend to ten thousand rupees;

Provided that the Court may, for adequate and special reasons to be mentioned in the judgment, impose a sentence of imprisonment for a term of less than six months.]

¹²**[4A. Ban on advertisement**

If any person

- (a) offers, through any advertisement in any newspaper, periodical, journal or through any other media, any share in his property or of any money or both as a share in any business or other interest as consideration for the marriage of his son or daughter or any other relative;
- (b) prints or publishes or circulates any advertisement referred to in clause (a), he shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term which shall not be less than six months, but which may extend to five years, or with fine which may extend to fifteen thousand rupees:

Provided that the Court may, for adequate and special reasons to be recorded in the judgment, impose a sentence of imprisonment for a term of less than six months.]

5. Agreement for giving or taking dowry to be void

Any agreement for the giving or taking of dowry shall be void.

6. Dowry to be for the benefit of the wife or her heirs

- (1) Where any dowry is received by any person other than the woman in connection with whose marriage it is given, that person shall transfer it to the woman-
- (a) if the dowry was received before marriage, within ¹³[three months] after the date of marriage; or
- (b) if the dowry was received at the time of or after the marriage, within ¹⁴[three months] after the date of its receipt; or
- (c) if the dowry was received when the woman was a minor, within ¹⁵[three months] after she has attained the age of eighteen years, and pending such transfer, shall hold it in trust for the benefit of the woman.

- ¹⁶[(2) If any person fails to transfer any property as required by sub-section (1) within the time limit specified therefor, ¹⁷[or as required by sub-section (3),] he shall be punishable with

11 Substituted by Act 63 of 1984, Section 4, for section 4 (with effect from 02.10.1985)

12 Inserted by Act 43 of 1986, Section 4 (with effect from 19.11.1986)

13 Substituted by Act 63 of 1984, Section 5, for "one year" (with effect from 02.10.1985)

14 Ibid, Footnote 13

15 Ibid, Footnote 13

16 Substituted by Act 63 of 1984, Section 5, for sub-section (2) (with effect from 02.10.1985)

imprisonment for a term which shall not be less than six months, but which may extend to two years or with fine ¹⁸[which shall not be less than five thousand rupees, but which may extend to ten thousand rupees] or with both.]

- (3) Where the woman entitled to any property under sub-section (1) dies before receiving it, the heirs of the woman shall be entitled to claim it from the person holding it for the time being: ¹⁹[Provided that where such woman dies within seven years of her marriage, otherwise than due to natural causes, such property shall,
- (a) if she has no children, be transferred to her parents; or
 - (b) if she has children, be transferred to such children and pending such transfer, be held in trust for such children.]
- ²⁰[(3A) Where a person convicted under sub-section (2) for failure to transfer any property as required by sub-section (1) ²¹[or sub-section (3)] has not, before his conviction under that sub-section, transferred such property to the woman entitled thereto or, as the case may be, ²²[her heirs, parents or children] the Court shall, in addition to awarding punishment under that sub-section, direct, by order in writing, that such person shall transfer the property to such woman or, as the case may be, ²³[her heirs, parents or children] within such period as may be specified in the order, and if such person fails to comply with the direction within the period so specified, an amount equal to the value of the property may be recovered from him as if it were a fine imposed by such Court and paid to such woman or, as the case may be, ²⁴[her heirs, parents or children].
- (4) Nothing contained in this section shall affect the provisions of section 3 or section 4.

²⁵[7. Cognizance of offences]

- (1) Notwithstanding anything contained in the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 (2 of 1974),
- (a) no Court inferior to that of a Metropolitan Magistrate or a Judicial Magistrate of the first class shall try any offence under this Act;
 - (b) no Court shall take cognizance of an offence under this Act except upon-
 - (i) its own knowledge or a police report of the facts which constitute such offence, or
 - (ii) a complaint by the person aggrieved by the offence or a parent or other relative of such person, or by any recognized welfare institution or organisation;
 - (c) it shall be lawful for a Metropolitan Magistrate or a Judicial Magistrate of the first class to pass any sentence authorised by this Act on any person convicted of an offence under this Act.

Explanation

For the purposes of this sub-section, "recognized welfare institution or organisation" means a social welfare institution or organisation recognized in this behalf by the Central or State Government.

- (2) Nothing in Chapter XXXVI of the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 (2 of 1974) shall apply to any offence punishable under this Act.]

17 Inserted by Act 43 of 1986, Section 5 (with effect from 19.11.1986)

18 Substituted by Act 43 of 1986, Section 5, for certain words (with effect from 19.11.1986)

19 Inserted by Act 43 of 1986, Section 5 (with effect from 19.11.1986)

20 Inserted by Act 63 of 1984, Section 5 (with effect from 02.10.1985)

21 Inserted by Act 43 of 1986, Section 5 (with effect from 19.11.1986)

22 Substituted by Act 63 of 1986, Section 5, for "her heirs" (with effect from 19.11.1986)

23 Ibid, Footnote 22

24 Ibid, Footnote 22

25 Substituted by Act 63 of 1984, Section 6, for section 7 (with effect from 02.10.1985)

²⁶[(3) Notwithstanding anything contained in any law for the time being in force a statement made by the person aggrieved by the offence shall not subject such person to a prosecution under this Act.]

²⁷ **[8. Offences to be cognizable for certain purposes and to be ²⁸ [non-bailable] and non-compoundable**

- (1) The Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 (2 of 1974), shall apply to offences under this Act as if they were cognizable offences-
- (a) for the purposes of investigation of such offences; and
 - (b) for the purposes of matters other than-
 - (i) matters referred to in section 42 of that Code; and
 - (ii) the arrest of a person without a warrant or without an order of a Magistrate.
- (2) Every offence under this Act shall be ²⁹[non-bailable] and non-compoundable.]

2[8A. Burden of proof in 'certain cases

Where any person is prosecuted for taking or abetting the taking of any dowry under section 3, or the demanding of dowry under section 4, the burden of proving that he had not committed an offence under these sections shall be on him.]

³⁰**[8B. Dowry Prohibition Officers**

- (1) The State Government may appoint as many Dowry Prohibition Officers as it thinks fit and specify the areas in respect of which they shall exercise their jurisdiction and powers under this Act.
- (2) Every Dowry Prohibition Officer shall exercise and perform the following powers and functions, namely:-
- (a) to see that the provisions of this Act are complied with;
 - (b) to prevent, as far as possible, the taking or abetting the taking of, or the demanding of, dowry;
 - (c) to collect such evidence as may be necessary for the prosecution of persons committing offences under the Act; and
 - (d) to perform such additional functions as may be assigned to him by the State Government, or as may be specified in the rules made under this Act.
- (3) The State Government may, by notification in the Official Gazette, confer such powers of a police officer as may be specified in the notification on the Dowry Prohibition Officer who shall exercise such powers subject to such limitations and conditions as may be specified by rules made under this Act.
- (4) The State Government may, for the purpose of advising and assisting Dowry Prohibition Officers in the efficient performance of their functions under this Act, appoint an Advisory Board consisting of not more than five social welfare workers (out of whom at least two shall be women) from the area in respect of which such Dowry Prohibition Officer exercises jurisdiction under sub-section (1).]

26 Inserted by Act 43 of 1986, Section 6 (with effect from 19.11.1986)

27 Substituted by Act 63 of 1984, Section 7, for section 8 (with effect from 02.10.1985)

28 Substituted by Act 43 of 1986, Section 7, for "bailable" (with effect from 19.11.1986)

29 Substituted by Act 43 of 1986, Section 7, for "bailable" (with effect from 19.11.1986)

30 Inserted by Act 43 of 1986, Section 8 (with effect from 19.11.1986)

9. Power to make rules

- (1) The Central Government may, by notification in the Official Gazette, make rules for carrying out the purposes of this Act.
- ³¹[(2) In particular, and without prejudice to the generality of the foregoing power, such rules may provide for-
- (a) the form and manner in which, and the persons by whom, any list of presents referred to in sub-section (2) of section 3 shall be maintained and all other matters connected therewith; and
 - (b) the better co-ordination of policy and action with respect to the administration of this Act.]
- ³²[(3)] Every rule made under this section shall be laid as soon as may be after it is made before each House of Parliament while it is in session for a total period of thirty days which may be comprised in one session or ³³[in two or more successive sessions, and if, before the expiry of the session immediately following the session or the successive sessions aforesaid], both Houses agree in making any modification in the rule or both Houses agree that the rule should not be made, the rule shall thereafter have effect only in such modified form or be of no effect, as the case may be; so however that any such modification or annulment shall be without prejudice to the validity of anything previously done under that rule.

³⁴[10. Power of State Government to make rules

- (1) The State Government may, by notification in the Official Gazette, make rules for carrying out the purposes of this Act.
- (2) In particular, and without prejudice to the generality of the foregoing power, such rules may provide for all or any of the following matters, namely:-
- (a) the additional functions to be performed by the Dowry Prohibition Officers under sub-section (2) of section BB;
 - (b) limitations and conditions subject to which a Dowry Prohibition Officer may exercise his functions under sub-section (3) of section 8B.
- (3) Every rule made by the State Government under this section shall be laid as soon as may be after it is made before the State Legislature.]

31 Inserted by Act 63 of 1984, Section 8 (with effect from 02.10.1985)

32 Sub-section (2) renumbered as sub-section (3) thereof by Act 63 of 1984, Section 8 (with effect from 02.10.1985)

33 Substituted by Act 20 of 1983, Section 2 and Schedule, for certain words (with effect from 15-3-1984)

34 Substituted by Act 43 of 1986, Section 9, for Section 10 (with effect from 19.11.1986)