

The Gift of a Daughter

Forum >
South Asia

Subhadra Butalia's father was determined to marry her to a husband who would not expect or demand a dowry. At the time she married, soon after the independence of India in 1947, a bride might be nagged or grumbled at for little or no dowry, but there were no threats of violence. However, many families 'taking' a bride had begun to expect, hint, demand, solicit, and finally threaten a woman and her parents for not giving expensive presents. By 1961, the Indian government recognized the custom had become an opportunity for extortion and passed a law to prohibit it. But a bride's wedding gifts had turned into a husband's entitlement, and Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, and Christian families increasingly began taking recourse to violence to obtain it.

By Shauna Singh Baldwin

In the 1970s, Subhadra Butalia found herself among a crowd watching in horror as the bride next door, Hardeep Kaur, became a human torch and was taken to hospital on a stretcher. With 70 per cent burns, Hardeep Kaur became yet another 'bride-burning' statistic, murdered by her in-laws for not bringing enough in cash and kind. Hardeep had been sent back to her parents with a list of her husband's dowry demands, but her parents decided she should be returned to her husband and in-laws. The blackmail continued until the parents could pay no more, and then Hardeep was murdered. Why did Hardeep's parents send her back, Butalia wondered? And she questioned why the newspapers had failed to carry a single report about Hardeep's murder. Of all the neighbours who had stood before the spectacle of a burning woman, only Subhadra Butalia agreed to testify. Thus began her 35-year struggle to help victims of dowry-related violence.

Now 81 years old, Subhadra Butalia has written a succinct volume that she describes as 'neither a memoir, nor a book about dowry'. Yet it has elements of both. Using names and stories of victims of dowry death and disagreement, the author explores this deeply embedded tradition and shows us the prob-

lems of social organizations and workers dealing with domestic violence in the extended family.

The memory of a childhood friend, Madhu, moved me to read *The Gift of a Daughter*. Madhu, a lovely young Punjabi woman, came from a wealthy, professional class family. She was head girl of my school, studied French and sociology at college and dreamed of travelling the world. She married for love in the early 1980s, and was shunned for it by her family. By 1983, she was gone. Poisoned, it was rumoured, by her in-laws. And the reaction from people in Delhi: 'What did she expect, marrying against her parents wishes? Her in-laws should have known there would be no dowry given to her, no matter what their demands. This is what happens to a disobedient girl.'

Madhu's story is not unique. The dowry tradition is now practised by Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, and Christians alike. Moreover, dowry demands have made their way overseas, so that wedding season for brides of Indian origin in the North American diaspora of Indians, is also dowry season. For all its sensational appeal when mentioned in the Western press, bride-burning and the dowry system are Indian expressions of 'domestic violence' in materially developed countries, spanning classes and education levels. A 1997

estimate by UNICEF placed the annual number of reported dowry deaths in India at 5,377, a 12 per cent increase on the previous year. While men living in North America who believe women to be non-persons, might verbally abuse, beat or eventually shoot them (with no statistics available as to whether economic demands were made to relatives), men and mothers-in-law without access to handguns might, in India, douse a woman in kerosene and light a match.

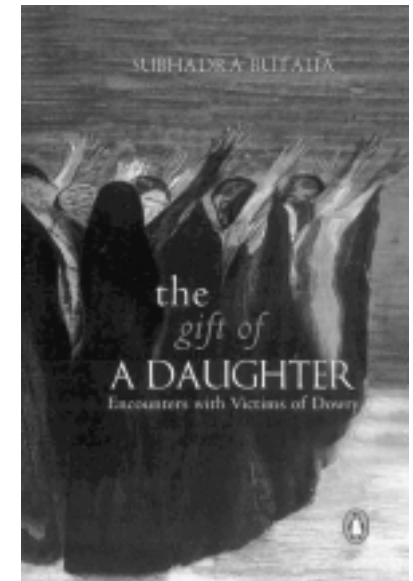
Subhadra Butalia and the organizations she has founded, Stree Sangarsh and Karmika, have intervened hundreds of times in India to prevent a dowry killing, or have sought to bring murderers to justice. In a tone of sadness, she describes the elusiveness of justice. Yet her outrage must have been strong enough to carry her through many rescue missions over the years, and to prompt her to write.

The perennial question arises: how can any parent value his or her respectability higher than the life of his or her daughter? As in Hardeep Kaur's case, an Indian daughter facing dowry demands is highly likely to be sent back to her in-laws to 'adjust', facing abuse, violence, and even death. Butalia offers two explanations, the first mythological – an unwed Hindu woman becomes a ghost – the second economic. Eco-

nomie reasons outweigh any myths in the stories she presents, for the list of explanations begins with the underground cash economy and the ostentatious display by the *nouveaux riches*. And the book's ever-present backdrop is the large-scale dependence of Indian women on husbands, and atavistic ideas of women as property.

Having introduced the problem of dowry by displaying the faces and names of its victims over her years of activism, Butalia leaves us with many open questions for further research, such as: why do women (sisters and mothers-in-law) participate in dowry demands? How can we penetrate the wilful denial of parents of married daughters that dowry demands are illegal and dangerous to their daughters' physical safety? How is the practice of bride-endowment (*mehar*) changing to dowry in the Indian Muslim community? How does the implementation of Hindu inheritance law underpin dowry demands experienced by women subject to Hindu personal law?

By the end of this little gem of a book, you feel the author's ruminating voice fill with wonder and delight in the stories of young women who, in the past few years, have thrown feminine respectability to the wind, and called off or walked out of weddings when a dowry demand was made. Subhadra



Butalia's father would have been proud of his courageous daughter's many arduous years of helping victims, and of agitating for changes in the law and its enforcement. Though too late for many like Hardeep and my friend Madhu, social workers like Butalia have raised our consciousness and made it conceivable for young women to question and protest at this pernicious institution. <

- Butalia, Subhadra, *The Gift of a Daughter. Encounters with Victims of Dowry*, Delhi: Penguin Books India (2002), pp. 170, ISBN 0143028715

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