



Human Rights in India

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Dowry Deaths

In India, the families of young women are expected to pay a dowry to a young man's family when they become engaged. It has been a long-time tradition in the country that the girl's family pays the boy's family a dowry when they get married. Some people say that this tradition is due to the fact that unmarried women are a drain on families and have no earning power of their own.

Over the years, families have come to expect a lot of dowry money and they get very upset if they get less than they want. A dowry and a wedding usually add up to over a million rupees, or about \$35,000 American dollars. This is a huge amount of money when the average Indian makes \$3,500 a year. A bride's new in-laws sometimes respond with violence if they don't receive what they think they deserve. One of the most common things to do is to pour kerosene on the bride and then light her on fire. These deaths are called "stove bursts" and are blamed on a kitchen accident. Last year the deaths of 7,000 women were attributed to dowry death.

Since 1961, dowries have been illegal in India, but many families, especially those in rural areas, still follow the custom. Parvathi Menon in the Hindu publication, *Frontline*, reports that out of 730 cases seen by the special prosecutor, 58 ended in acquittal and only 11 in conviction.

Baby Girls in Danger

Male children are very prized in India. They can work and bring money in to the family. Most boys live with their families when they are adults, and their wives move in with them. Boys also can bring in dowries when they marry, and many poor families depend on this money.

According to Ramachandran, in an article for the European Centre for Law and Justice, in most countries, like the United States, Europe, and Japan, there are 3-5% more females than males. In China and India, however, males outnumber females by 6-8%. With ultrasound technology, parents in India can tell if their babies are going to be girls or boys, and if they are going to be girls, the woman often gets an abortion. Even though ultrasound tests are illegal in India, the Indian Medical Association estimates that about 5 million female fetuses are aborted every year.

Unlike dowry death which occurs more often in rural areas where the people are uneducated, the aborting of female fetuses occurs more in the urban areas with caste Hindu population. Pravin Visaria, a sociologist, says that in the remote, tribal areas, women have more equality than in the urban areas. The percentage of females differs a great deal depending on religious and sociological factors, according to Ramachandran.

An article at the Women and Global Human Rights Web site describes some organizations are working to improve this situation. The Indians Council for Child Welfare is working with teen-age girls to teach them about health care, hygiene, and self-esteem. A street theater

project put on by the Danida Healthcare Project acts out stories about powerful women.



“You can’t shake hands with a clenched fist.”

Indira Gandhi

Although women in India often suffer because of their low status, there is one area in which Indian women have surpassed the United States. A woman has been the leader of India. That has not happened in the United States, yet, and it may be many years before it does happen.

Indira Gandhi served as prime minister from 1966 to 1977 when she was voted out of office. Then she was elected again in 1980 and served until 1984 when she was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards.

Indira’s father was Jawaharlal Nehru who served as the first prime minister of India after it gained its independence from England. He was active in the fight for independence and spent some time in prison. Mahatma Gandhi was a frequent visitor in their home.

As Indira was growing up, even though her mother died when she was young, she was determined not to be held down by her society’s prejudice against women. She was always active in politics. At the age of 11, she organized the Monkey Brigade, in which her friends and she worked for Indian independence by “writing and delivering notices, making flags, cooking food, and spying on the police” (womenshistory.com).

Because her father was a widower, Indira often served as a hostess for state functions. She was a natural politician and stateswoman who always worked for peace. She said, “You can’t shake hands with a clenched fist.”

She had some troubles while she was in office, too. When she didn’t like a ruling by the courts, she declared a state of emergency and suspended all civil liberties. Because of her actions to control Sikh rebels, she was assassinated in 1984.

In spite of her problems, Gandhi is admired and respected in India and throughout the world. She was named a Woman of the Millennium in a poll by the British Broadcasting Company.

Kashmir

One of the areas of the world that is of the most concern for people interested in human rights is Kashmir, a section of India located next to the border of Pakistan. Since their independence in 1947, both countries have been fighting over Kashmir.

As part of a peace agreement, the United Nations said that there should be a plebiscite in Kashmir to elect a leader, but India has claimed that residents of Kashmir vote in the regular Indian elections and have no need for a separate election.

Conditions got much worse in 1990 when the central government of India declared control over Kashmir. According to human rights watch, since then there have been many documented cases of human rights violations by people on all sides of the conflict. People who are held for questioning are often executed or “disappear,” never to be seen again. Women have also been raped by Indian authorities.

The situation is serious for the entire world because in 1998 India tested a nuclear bomb



and a few weeks later Pakistan did the same. This means that this conflict could have consequences for everyone.

One person who was active in the fight against human rights violations in Kashmir was Jalil Andrabi. He was a 36-year old attorney who, as the chairman of the Kashmir Commission of Jurists, worked very hard to document cases of human rights abuses and to improve the conditions in Kashmir.

One day in March, 1996, he was taken from his car as he was driving home with his family. On the 27th his body was found in the Jhelum River. His hands were tied and his face was mutilated.

Amnesty International asked that his death be investigated and that the people who did it be charged, but his murder still has not been solved.

Editorial

We have many problems in the United States. Things aren't perfect here. Women often don't have the same rights as men. Many suffer from violence of one kind or another. We have laws to protect people like they do in India, but the laws here are better enforced.

India is very far away, and the culture there seems exotic and strange to us, but they are people just like us. We should worry about what happens in India, partly because of the nuclear threat of war between India and Pakistan, but also because of the other abuses that occur there.

There are many ways that high school students can help. First of all, they can be informed. When we hear news about India, we can stop what we're doing and pay attention. We can also get involved. There is an organization called Youth for Human Rights International that teenagers can join at www.youthforhumanrights.org/kids/kids-index.htm*. Nobody can do everything that needs to be done to improve human rights around the world, but everybody can do something. It's part of being a human being.

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