

Cause and manner of suspected dowry deaths in a metro city of India**Indrani Das^a, Kanad Bag^{b*}**

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Abstract

Background : Even in the presence of stringent laws dowry-related violence, cruelty and dowry death is common in India. Understanding the cause and the manner of suspected dowry death is essential not only to bring the culprits to book but also to prevent these offences.

Objectives: This study attempts to elucidate the cause and manner of suspected dowry deaths.

Patients and methods: This is an Observational Descriptive Epidemiological study, Cross Sectional in design. This study was conducted at an autopsy centre of Kolkata, India for a period of one year. Data was obtained from reports of postmortem examinations, police and the magistrate inquest of suspected dowry deaths as reported in the institute. Compilation of the data was done in Microsoft Excel. Analysis of the compiled data was done by simple table.

Results: The study reveals 35% of the deceased died due to burns, 31% by poisoning and 25% by hanging. Suicide is the manner of death among 69% of the deceased and in 31% it is accident. No case of homicide was reported. Among the suicides, 46% are committed by consuming poisons, 36% by hanging and 18% by burns, while 70% of accidents are due to burns.

Conclusion: The study reveals that commonest cause of suspected dowry death is burns followed by poisoning. Suicide is the manner of death in 2/3 of the study population and in 1/3 it is accident. There is no homicidal death in the study population.

Keywords : Dowry; Unnatural Death; Magistrate Inquest; Indian Penal Code.

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Introduction

The institution of marriage is universal in India. Transfer of wealth and or property from the bride's family to the groom and his family called "Dowry" is a wide spread and an age-old custom of this country. There are many social explanations for it. One such is that it is some form of compensation paid to the groom's family for sheltering the bride for life (**Ahmad, 2008**). In reality, many a times it sets a vicious cycle of more and more demands from groom's family which never ends into satisfaction but often leads to extreme cruelty. Banerjee P observed that if demands for dowry in any form either cash or jewelry or goods do not match up to the expectations of the groom and his family in arranged marriage, there is extreme harassment of the woman and this may lead to even killing her or abetting her to commit suicide (**Banerjee, 2013**). Section 304B of IPC categorizes these deaths as 'Dowry Deaths'. This section defines dowry death as the unnatural death of a woman following harassment or cruelty by her husband or his relatives in connection with a demand for dowry. Thus if we consider the manner of unnatural death, 'dowry deaths' may be suicidal or homicidal. It has been six decades since criminalization of dowry by enacting The Dowry Prohibition Act (**Government of India, 1961**).

Additionally, the law has been amended in 1985 (**Government of India, 1985**) to specifically deal with cruelty, violence, and deaths among married women in relation to dowry. To enforce this law strictly, section 176 Code of Criminal Procedure provides that if a

woman dies within 7 years of marriage by committing suicide or if suspicion arises that some other person has committed an offence in relation to such woman then a magistrate inquest is held in addition to police inquest or independently to find out the facts behind that death. Yet, in spite of the strict law and stringent process of enforcement, the situation still remains one of real concern. In last three years (2018, 19 & 20) total cases of Dowry Deaths (IPC) remained more or less unchanged in India (7167, 7141 & 6966 respectively), as well as the crime rate (1.1) and its percentage to total IPC crimes (0.2%) (**Government of India, 2021**).

In this situation the knowledge of cause and the manner of suspected dowry death is of immense importance not only to deliver justice but, also to prevent these offences.

Patients and methods

This was an observational descriptive cross sectional study, with institution based data collection. The study was conducted at the autopsy centre, Department of Forensic and State Medicine, Institute of Post Graduate Medical Education and Research (IPGME&R), Kolkata, West Bengal, India, for a period of one year (1st January 2021 to 31st December 2021). The research activity included obtaining permission from competent authority. Data was then collected maintaining anonymity. Article was written after compiling and analyzing the collected data. The study population consisted of deceased of suspected Dowry Death as reported in the autopsy centre of IPGME&R, Kolkata. Sample size was complete enumeration. Ethical clearance

was obtained from the Institutional Ethics Committee and Research Advisory Committee of the institute after giving an undertaking that the identity of the deceased will not be revealed in any form.

During the study period total 2686 postmortem examination were conducted in this autopsy centre. Among them magistrate inquest in addition to police inquest or independently were conducted in 32 deceased of unnatural death of woman within 7 years of marriage. They constitute the population of this study. In this study, the life course is divided into: below the legal age of marriage in India (0—17 years), young adulthood (18–25 years); adulthood (26 years and over).

Statistical analysis

Data was obtained from postmortem reports, police and the magistrate inquest of suspected dowry deaths as reported in the institute. Compilation of the data was done in Microsoft Excel and then analyzed by simple table using frequency and percentages.

Results

Total number of study subjects in this period was 32. (**Table.1**) showed 69% of the deceased are in their life course of young adulthood (18-25 years), 25% are in adulthood (26 years and above), while 6% of the study populations are below the legal age of marriage in India i.e., 18 years.

Table 1. Distribution of the study population according to their age in years (n = 32)

Age of the deceased (in years)	Frequency	Percent
Below the legal age of marriage (0 —17 years)	2	6
Young adulthood (18 — 25 years)	22	69
Adulthood (26 years and above)	8	25
Total	32	100

Initial enquiry by police reports revealed, 35% of the deceased died due to burns, 31% by poisoning and 25% by

hanging, while 3% of each by snake bite, road traffic accident and fall, (**Table.2**).

Table 2. Distribution of study population according to the cause of death, as revealed on initial police enquiry (n = 32)

Cause of death	Frequency	Percent
Snake bite	01	3
Road Traffic Accident	01	3
Fall	01	3
Hanging	08	25
Poisoning	10	31
Burns	11	35
Total	32	100

Initial enquiry by police reports revealed that suicide as manner of death

among 69% of the deceased and accident among 31% of the deceased, (Table.3).

Table 3. Distribution of the study population according to manner of death as revealed on initial police enquiry (n = 32)

Manner of death	Frequency	Percentage
Suicide	22	69
Accident	10	31
Total	32	100

(Table.4) Showed suicide is the manner of death among 22 deceased in the study group. Among them 46% of suicides

are committed by consuming poisons, 36% by hanging and 18% by burns.

Table 4. Distribution of the study population according to the cause of death among the cases of suicide as revealed on initial police enquiry (n = 22)

Cause of death among the Suicidal cases	Frequency	Percentage
Burns	04	18
Hanging	08	36
Poisoning	10	46
Total	22	100

(Table.5) Showed accident is the manner of death among 10 deceased in the study group. Among them 70% of

accidents are due to burns, 10% each due to fall, RTA and snake bite.

Table 5. Distribution of the study population according to the cause of death among the cases of accident as revealed on initial police enquiry (n = 10)

Cause of death among accidental cases	Frequency	Percentage
Burns	07	70
Injury due to fall	01	10
Injury due to RTA	01	10
Snake bite	01	10
Total	10	100

Discussion

The institution of marriage is considered holy and sacred in India. The marriages are solemnized in the presence of large social gatherings with many religious ceremonies. But even then, many young brides are in constant threat due to the social evil called "Dowry". Statistics revealed an increasing trend of unnatural deaths among married women as

compared to the total female deaths during the recent past years, which may be suicide, homicide, or even accidents (Sinha et al., 1998). These cases of unnatural deaths are more commonly arising out of disputes related to dowry. Study conducted by Panneer et al. (2018) shows steady increase in incidence of dowry deaths.

In last three years (2018, 19 and 20) registered cases of Dowry Deaths (IPC) hovers around 7000 in India, as does the crime rate (1.1) and percentage of total IPC crimes (2%) (**Government of India, 2021**). When it comes to Crime as per Special Local Laws (SLL) under The Dowry Prohibition Act the cases are 12826, 13307 and 10366 as on 2018, 19 and 20 respectively at a crime rate of 2.0, 2.0, and 1.6 respectively (**Government of India, 2021**). During the period of 2020, West Bengal, a state in the eastern part of India, records 523 cases of Dowry death (Sec. 304B IPC), at a crime rate of 1.1 which is same that of India (**Government of India, 2021**). If we focus in Kolkata, a metropolitan city and the capital of West Bengal where the study had been conducted, we will find during the same period there were 09 such cases at a crime rate of 0.1 (**Government of India, 2021**).

In this study 69% of the deceased are in their life course of young adulthood (18-25 years) and 25% are in adulthood while 6% of the study populations are below the legal age of marriage (Table 1), with mean age of 24 years. This observation is in accordance with the results of studies conducted by researchers in this field. **Panneer Selvam et al. 2018** in their study report that these deaths occurred at any age (16 to 33 years), most commonly in between 20-24 years (42.59% cases), then in 16- 19 years (33.33% cases) and in 25-29 years (18.51% cases), In their study only 5.5% case has occurred in 30- 33 years of age. **Sharma et al. (2005)** reported 56% of victims belong to the age group of 18-25 years. While **Srivastava and Arora (2007)** in their study found most of the

deceased women were in between 18-26 years of age.

In this study, initial enquiry by police reports that 35% of the deceased died due to burns, 31% by poisoning and 25% by hanging, while 3% of each by snake bite, road traffic accident and fall (Table 2). In different other studies also, burning, poisoning and hanging are the three leading causes of suspected dowry deaths. In their article "Suspicious Deaths in Newly Married Females" **Srivastava and Arora (2007)** found, the three most common causes of death were burning (63 - 44.06%), hanging (42 - 29.37%) and poisoning (18 - 12.59%). **Panneer Selvam et al. (2018)** in their study found, hanging, poisoning, burns and drowning were the methods used in dowry deaths. In this report burns were again the most common cause of dowry deaths i.e., 28 (51.8%) cases out of 54 cases, next were hanging 26 (48.14%) cases followed by poisoning 8 (14.8%) cases and drowning 3 (5.55 %) cases.

In this study initial enquiry by police reports that suicide as manner of death among 69% of the deceased and accident among 31% of the deceased (Table 3). **Srivastava and Arora (2007)** in their study "Suspicious Deaths in Newly Married Females" observed that 50.35% of unnatural deaths were suicidal. This finding is in accordance with the present study. But in the same study they found 25.17% deaths were homicidal & 23.08% deaths were accidental in manner. This finding is not in accordance with the present study. No homicidal death is recorded in the present study.

In this study 46% of suicides are committed by consuming poisons, 36% by hanging and 18% by burns and 70% of accidents are due to burns, 10% each due to fall, Road Traffic Accident and snake bite. **Srivastava and Arora (2007)** also found that suicides were commonly committed by hanging (42- 29.37%), followed by burning (17- 23.61%). But in their study all accidental deaths are due to burns, which is not in accordance with the present study.

Belur et al. (2014) in their research concluded that the authoritative determination of a 'dowry death' follows complex social processes, with the police as the final arbiters. In this sense, the police comprise 'death brokers' (**Timmermans , 2005**). In India, the police are considered primary 'death brokers', employing culturally appropriate scripts to classify death of a woman within seven years of marriage as dowry-related (or not) (**Belur et al. 2014**).

Conclusion

The young brides are at risk of suspected dowry deaths. Most vulnerable are young adults of 18-25 years of age. Initial enquiry by police reports that more than 90% of the deceased of suspected dowry deaths died due to burns, poisoning and hanging, burns being the highest. Suicide is the manner of death in two third of the study population and one third being accident. Consuming poisons is the commonest form of suicide followed by hanging and sustaining burn injuries. Majority of the accidents are due to burns. A magistrate inquest in addition to police inquest or independently followed by thorough investigation along with the postmortem

findings and the circumstantial evidences taken together can only determine whether the death of a woman within seven years of marriage is related to dowry dispute (or not).

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