

Original Research Paper

Study of Unnatural Deaths in Married Females Within Seven Years of Marriage in Allahabad

¹Rajesh Kumar Verma, ²P.C. Srivastava, ³U.S. Sinha, ⁴Archana Kaul

Abstract

Throughout most of India's history, women have been targeted as unimportant, burdensome, and disposable. This tragedy begins shortly after conception and continues until their death. A prospective cross-sectional study was carried out comprising 221 medico-legal cases of unnatural death of females within seven years of their marriage brought to the mortuary at S.R.N. Hospital, Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh for autopsy during one year study period. Amongst 864 female victims, 467 females were married and 221 females died within seven years of their marriage. Maximum number of death (56.56%) occurred between 18-25 years of age and that too within first 3 years of marriage (57.47%). Accidental burn was most common cause of death and most common manner of death was suicide (47.98%) followed by accident (42.07%) and homicide (9.95%). Quarrel with husband/ in-laws and dowry demand by husband or his family members were two important reasons behind suicidal as well as homicidal deaths. 15.84% cases were labelled as Alleged Dowry Deaths. Comprehensive study was done revealing the need of various socio-cultural and legal measures to be taken to handle the grave results of this study.

Key Words: Within seven years of marriage, Burn, Dowry death, Socio-cultural and legal measures

Introduction:

Manu, the great law-giver, said "*YatraNaryastuPujyante, RamanteTatraDevata*" meaning the Gods reside in places where women are worshipped. The worth of a civilization can be judged by the place given to women in the society. One of several factors that justify the greatness of India's ancient culture is the honorable place granted to women.

During the Vedic period, women had equal rights and status with men. Widows were permitted to re-marry; they enjoyed equality in the learning of Vedas and in the performance of religious rituals, as Vedic religion required the performance of rituals jointly by husband and wife. In the post-Vedic period between 1000 B.C. and 200 A.D., the status of women suffered a set-back when their role got restricted to the four walls of their home.

The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millennia. From equal status with men in ancient times through the low points of the medieval period to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers, the history of women in India has been eventful. However, women in India continue to face discrimination and other social challenges and are often victims of abuse and violent crimes. Indians' attitudes towards women have always been under scrutiny and crimes against women have galvanised India at many moments of time. Women always have been at receiving end of male dominated society.

Types and trends of crime however, kept changing with change in mind-set and techniques. Death is called unnatural if it results directly from an injury or poison or indirectly an injury which may precipitate pre-existing natural disease in an individual. In other words, death is unnatural when caused prematurely against the order of nature by injury, poison or other means of violence. This could be homicidal, suicidal, accidental or of unexplained origin.

In our Indian set-up, the enormous numbers of deaths in females occur in unnatural conditions and among young married women, "Bride burning" commonly known as dowry deaths assumes much importance. In the present Indian scenario, dowry death is a buzz word because the incidents are increasing leaps

Corresponding Author:

¹Assistant Professor,
Department of Forensic Medicine & Toxicology
Rohilkhand Medical College and Hospital, Bareilly
E-mail: drkverma2910@gmail.com

²Prof, Dept. of FMT
Rohilkhand Medical College and Hospital, Bareilly

³Professor, Dept. of FMT
M. L. N. Medical College, Allahabad, UP

⁴Assist. Professor, Dept. of FMT
M. L. N. Medical College, Allahabad, UP
DOR: 24.07.2014 DOA: 10.08.2015
DOI: 10.5958/0974-0848.2015.00105.0

and bounds and the number of dowry deaths has reached an alarming proportion.

Dowry deaths or suicide by young married women consequent to their cruelty or harassment by the husband or in-laws constitutes a slur on Indian society.

Material and Methods:

This study was a prospective cross-sectional descriptive study comprising the profile of all medico-legal cases (n=221) of unnatural deaths of married females within seven years of their marriage who were brought to the mortuary at the S.R.N. Hospital/ M.L.N. Medical College, Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh for medico-legal autopsy during the study period of one year extending from 11th April, 2012 to 10th April, 2013. Permission from Institutional Ethical Committee was taken for the same.

The unidentified bodies and bodies in advanced state of decomposition, and the cases where death was opined to be due to a natural cause after the autopsy were excluded from the sample of study.

A standard proforma was used to collect information regarding age, socio-economic background, education, occupation, marital status, residential status and manner of death after detailed enquiry with investigating officers, relatives and friends and hospital records of the deceased. Standard autopsy protocol was followed and relevant samples/ viscera subjected to chemical analysis and histopathology to arrive at a conclusion.

Number of dowry deaths comprised those alleged cases in which F.I.R. was lodged under Sec. 304-B I.P.C. before autopsy as well as any natural cause of death was excluded in those alleged cases after autopsy.

Observations and Results:

During the study period of one year extending from 11th April, 2012 to 10th April, 2013, a total of 2857 autopsies were done at mortuary, S.R.N. Hospital, Allahabad with 1993 (69.76%) male victims and 864 (30.24%) female victims, which gave a male-to-female ratio of 2.3:1. Amongst 864 female victims, 467 females were married and 221 females died within seven years of their marriage. So the percentage of death of females within seven years of marriage out of total female mortality was found to be 25.58% and that out of total unnatural deaths during study period was 7.74%.

In the present study, maximum number of deaths (56.56%) occurred between 18-25 years of age and least (5.43%) in the age-group 31-35 years. (Table 1) In our study maximum number of death occurred within first 3 years of

marriage 127 (57.47%) cases, among these, 41 (18.55%) in first years, 52 (23.53%) cases in 1-2 years and 34 (15.38%) in 2-3 years, and only 14 (6.34%) cases in 6 to 7 years of marriage. (Table 2)

Majority of the victims were Hindu (79.64%) and used to live in the rural areas (66.52%). During this study period, no unnatural death was reported from the Sikh community while only one Christian female died within seven years of her marriage and she belonged to urban area of Allahabad. (Table 3 & 4)

In our study maximum numbers of cases were either illiterate (35.75%) or just educated up to primary standard (25.79%). Only two victims (0.90%) were graduate and belonged to Hindu community from urban area whereas one (0.45%) was post-graduate and belonged to Christian community from urban area. (Table 5)

Present study showed that most of the cases were seen from lower socio-economic strata (37.10%) and lower middle socio-economic strata (35.29%) whereas only two cases (0.90%) were seen from upper socio-economic strata. (Table 6)

Almost all the marriages were arranged and 184 cases (83.26%) belonged to joint type of family. (Table 7) The distribution of cases according to cause of death in this study showed that burns was the leading cause of death (39.82%) cases followed by death due to road traffic and railway track injuries (19%) cases.

Hanging was found as a cause of death in 18.56% cases, strangulation/ throttling 4.07% cases, drowning 2.26% cases, stampede only 1.81% cases, electrocution 1.36% cases and one case each died due to gun-shot injury and anaesthesia-cum-operative procedure related cause for which the case was registered under sec. 304-A I.P.C. In 12.22% cases, the cause of death was concluded as a result of poisoning on the basis of history, police-inquest papers, hospital records (if available), remaining part/ source of poison and suggestive autopsy findings. However, viscera were preserved and sent to FSL for toxicological analysis to confirm the suspicion of poisoning.

As per the history, circumstantial evidences and post-mortem findings, it was noticed that in most of the victims the manner of death was suicide (47.98%) followed by accident (42.07%) and homicide (9.95%). (Table 8)

In suicidal cases, hanging was the commonest (18.56%) cause of death, followed by burning (13.12%) and poisoning (11.32%). Quarrel with husband/ in-laws (49.06%) and excessive dowry demand by husband or his family members (32.07%) were two important

reasons behind suicidal deaths. In homicidal cases also, burning was the commonest (5.43 %) cause of death, followed by strangulation/ throttling (3.62 %) and failure to fulfil dowry demands (31.82%) & quarrel with husband/ in-laws (27.28%) were main reasons behind murders. Majority of accidental deaths were due to burning (21.27%) followed by deaths due to road traffic and railway track injuries. (Table 9)

Out of 221 cases of unnatural death of married females within seven years of marriage, a total of 35 cases (15.84%) were labelled as Alleged Dowry Deaths in which F.I.R. was lodged under sec. 304-B I.P.C. before autopsy as well as any natural cause of death was excluded after autopsy. Burning constituted the maximum number of dowry deaths 15 (42.86%), followed by poisoning 11 (31.43%) cases, hanging 4 (11.43%) cases, throttling 4 (11.43%) cases and injuries by assault 1 (2.85%) case.

In this study 68.57% cases were suicidal and again the burning was most common (31.43%) cause of these alleged dowry deaths followed by poisoning (25.71%) and hanging (11.43%). Remaining 31.43% cases were homicidal in nature, and burning and throttling each method had the equal share (11.43%) with regards to the cause of death followed by the poisoning (5.71%). (Table 10)

Discussion:

The high incidence of unnatural death in young Hindu females belonging to rural areas, within 3 yrs of their marriage was most probably due to unending demands of dowry (cash/ kinds) by their husbands and/or in-laws, for which they sometimes kill or torture the bride in such a way that she commits suicide, which is consistent with other authors findings [1-9].

The other reason was of higher incidence of accidental deaths of females in this age was due to kitchen accidents as well as involvement and exposure of young married females to the outdoor world.

The higher incidence of unnatural death in illiterate and low-standard educated population was due to the more number of the cases belonging to rural areas [7,8] and lower as well as lower middle socio-economic strata. [3, 4] However, study of Srivastava & Arora [1] showed that incidence of death in married females was higher in lower middle socio-economic and middle socio-economic strata and this dissimilarity with our findings could be due to more urban population in their study.

With respect to duration of married life, our findings were similar with others. [1, 3] Religion wise distribution of cases showed the

results similar to those of others [9,10]. However, the findings were in slight variance with the work of Kulshrestha et al [2] who observed in their study that 88% affected females belonged to Hindu followed by 10.25% Muslims and 1.7% Sikhs.

Sinha et al [4] found 94.9% Hindus, 4.22% Muslims, 0.53% Sikhs and 0.35% Christians in their study. Very low population and higher and professional qualification and cultural differences may be responsible for no case having been reported from Sikh religion.

The incidences of cause of death in female showed that in maximum cases, the victims had died due to burns, followed by injuries sustained. Burns as a major cause of death in females was also concluded by other authors in their study [2-6] but this was in variance with the study of Lalwani [11] observed that vehicular accidents (32.6%) followed by hanging (17.3%), poisoning (12.6%) and burns (n = 123; 10.2%) as the common modes of unnatural deaths in females. In another study, poisoning was most common cause of death followed by thermal injuries. The difference in the observation and result with other studies could be due to deficient availability of poisons and the fact that in our study, more victims belonged to rural areas and constitute major chunk to lower sections of the society. Amongst the cases of deaths due to burn, accident was the most common manner of death and homicide was the least common manner of death.

In the present study, the higher incidence of accidental deaths due to burn in young, newly married females from lower socio-economic class, helps to emphasize the fact that the burn fatalities in India go beyond the meaning implied in the term 'accident' to be aptly termed as a 'Social Calamity'. These deaths in general and homicidal and suicidal burn deaths in particular have genuinely been termed as 'Bride Burning' or 'Dowry Deaths'. The high incidence of burn deaths, especially among the young females is often attributed to cooking on open unguarded flames. Loose, voluminous, highly inflammable, synthetic garments / saris of the victims are alleged to catch fire suddenly while cooking.

Kerosene oil, match sticks, and other cooking material, being easily available in houses, is usually preferred by Indian women to commit suicide, and as for killing, it helps to hide not only the torture and other means of violence but also helps to tamper with or even destroy the circumstantial evidences. Moreover, the most common manner of burns was accidental

followed by the suicidal and homicidal types as per the reports, but these data may not be factual due to under reporting.

In India, many deaths are not registered as suicide due to fear of social and legal consequences associated with the same (IPC 306 and 309). Same was the opinion and findings of Batra [12], Ambade & Godbole [13], Singh et al [14] and Singh et al [15].

Hanging was concluded as a cause of death in 18.56% victims, almost similar to Srivastava et al [1] (29.37% cases) and Kulshrestha et al [2] (11.96%), while Sinha et al [4] noticed hanging as a cause of death in 4.22% cases and Sharma et al [3] in 3.81% cases.

Drowning was found as a cause of death in 2.26% cases, which was in variance with that noticed by Sharma et al [3] in 1.0% cases and Srivastava & Arora [1] in 0.7% cases and this variation can be attributed to the fact that Allahabad is situated at and near the banks of rivers the Ganges and the Yamuna, and also the occurrence of mega event Mahakumbh during the study period, making people more prone for accidental and suicidal drowning.

Our study included 1.81% cases due to stampede that broke out at railway station, Allahabad on 10 Feb., 2013 during the grand organisation of Mahakumbh.

Due to the huge number of attendees stampedes are relatively common during Kumbh Mela festivals. The 1954 KumbhMela stampede was the deadliest since India's independence, with an estimated 1,000 deaths.

The 2003 KumbhMela stampede killed 39 people in the city of Nashik, and seven were killed during the 2010 KumbhMela in Haridwar [16]. Quarrel with husband/ in-laws and dowry demand by husband or his family members were two important reasons behind suicidal as well as homicidal deaths and this finding was consistent with other authors too. [2]

Prajapati et al [17] and Kailash et al [18] observed that dowry demand, ill treatment by in-laws, rash and negligent behaviour of husbands and infidelity were the most common reasons for unhappy married lives in all such cases.

The findings of present study were similar to the findings of many other authors [7, 8, 19, 20] as far as age, community, habitat and manner of alleged dowry death was concern. India's National Crime Records Bureau reported that 8,233 Indian women were killed in 2012 in dowry-related violence, or nearly one per hour. [21, 22] The incidence of dowry deaths grew by nearly 3% over the previous five years, and torture at the hands of a husband or family increased by 5.4%, with 99,135 cases reported

by survivors in 2011.

The scope of the problems is likely to be wider than the statistics suggests, as many women and their parents are reluctant to seek prosecution for fear of scandal that would destroy their other daughters' chances of getting married, analysts say. Sociologists and women's rights advocates attribute the disturbingly persistent trends to rising consumerism in India, where once-scarce and unaffordable goods like appliances and motor vehicles are now available but still beyond the reach of many families.

Conclusions:

In spite of stringent laws and their amendments, awareness programs and specialized cells, incidence of unnatural female deaths is continuously increasing. The prevailing system of dowry, which is mainly responsible for all such deaths, is a product of emerging capitalist ethos the offshoot of an unequal society, a result of rampant consumerism, aided and abetted by the black market economy.

Its increasing incidence is symbolic of continuing erosion and devaluation of women's status in independent India. Now the time has come to pay sincere attention and take important stringent and strict social and legal measures by the government and law enforcing agencies so that we can save our sisters' and our daughter's lives from devil of Dowry !

References:

1. **Srivastava AK & Arora P.** Suspicious deaths in newly married females - a medico legal analysis. *JIAFM.* 2007; 29(4): 63-67.
2. **Kulshrestha P, Sharma RK and Dogra TD.** The study of sociological and epidemiological variables of unnatural deaths among young women in South Delhi within seven years of marriage. *JPAFMT.* 2002; 2: 7-17.
3. **Sharma BR, Singh VP, Sharma R and Sumedha.** Unnatural deaths in northern India - A profile. *JIAFM.* 2004; 26(4): 140-46.
4. **Sinha US, Kapoor AK and Pandey SK.** Medico legal aspects of dowry death cases in Allahabad range (UP). *Int J of Med Toxicol & Legal Med.* 2002; 5(1): 35-40.
5. **Sharma BR, Harish D, Sharma A, Sharma and Singh H.** Accidental burns in Indian kitchen; Are they really accidents? *JIAFM.* 2006; 28(1): 14-17.
6. **Ghaffar UB, Husain M and Rizvi SJ.** Thermal burn: An epidemiological prospective study. *JIAFM.* 2008; 30(1): 10-14.
7. **Kumar V, Tripathi CB, Kanth S.** Burn Wives - A Sociologic Study. *International Journal of Medical Toxicology & Legal Medicine.* 1999; 2(1): 18.
8. **Saha KK, Mohanty S.** Alleged Dowry Death: A study of homicidal burns. *Med. Sci. Law.* 2006; 46 (2):105.
9. **Agnihotri A.** The Epidemiological Study of Dowry Death Cases with Special references to burn cases in Allahabad zone. *Anil Aggarwal's Internet Journal of F.M & T.* 2001; 2 (1).
10. **Satpathy DK.** Burning Brides - A medicolegal study. *Med Law.* 14: 547-52.
11. **Lalwani S.** Profile of unnatural deaths of females at AIIMS - A retrospective review. *FORENSICON* 2001, 49.
12. **Batra AK.** Burn mortality: recent trends and sociocultural determinants in rural India, *Burns;* May 2003; 29(3): 270-5.
13. **Ambade VN, Godbole HV.** Study of burn deaths in Nagpur, Central India. *Burns.* Nov 2006; 32(7): 902-8.

14. Singh D, Jash P, Tyagi S. Recent trends in burn mortality in northwest India and its preventive aspects. JIAFM. 1998; 19(4): 79-88.
15. Singh D, Singh A, Sharma AK, Sodhi L. Burn mortality in Chandigarh zone: 25 years autopsy experience from a tertiary care hospital of India. Burns. Mar 1998; 24(2): 150-56.
16. "Why We Shouldn't Be Surprised by the KumbhMela Stampede". Wall Street Journal. 2013-02-11. Retrieved 2013-02-12.
17. Prajapati P, Prajapati S, Pandey A, Joshi V, and Prajapati N. Pattern Of Suicidal Deaths in Females of South Gujarat Region. NJMR. Jan – March 2012; 2(1): 31-34.
18. Kailash UZ, Mugadlimath A, Gadge SJ, Kalokhe VS, Bhusale RG. Study of some socio-etiological aspects of unnatural female deaths at Government Medical College, Aurangabad. JIAFM. 2009; 31(3): 210-17
19. Sharma BR, Harish D, Singh VP, Bengar S. Septicemia as a cause of death in burns: an autopsy study. 2007; PMID:16797127 [PubMed - indexed for MEDLINE]
20. Agnihotri AK, Sinha US, Kapoor AK, Srivastava PC. The epidemiological study of dowry deaths with special reference to burn cases in Allahabad range (UP). International Journal of Medical Toxicology and legal Medicine. 1998; 1(1): 65-71.
21. Crime against Women (Chapter-5) in Crime in India 2012. National Crime Records Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs. p. 81-84. Available from: <http://ncrb.nic.in/CD-CII2012/cii-2012/Chapter%205.pdf> accessed on 22/06/2015.
22. Dowry deaths: One woman dies every hour. The Times of India. Sept. 1, 2013. Available from: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Dowry-deaths-One-woman-dies-every-hour/articleshow/22201659.cms> accessed on 22/06/2015.

Table 1: Age wise Distribution of the Victims

Age-group (yrs)	Cases	Percentage (%)
18-25	125	56.56
26-30	84	38.01
31-35	12	5.43
Total	221	100

Table 2: Duration since Marriage of Victims

Duration of marriage (Yrs)	Cases	Percentage (%)
<1	41	18.55
1-2	52	23.53
2-3	34	15.38
3-4	23	10.41
4-5	26	11.76
5-6	31	14.03
6-7	14	6.34
Total	221	100

Table 3: Religion of Victims

Religion	Cases	Percentage (%)
Hindu	176	79.64
Muslim	44	19.91
Christian	01	0.45
Sikh	00	00
Total	221	100

Table 4: Residential Status of Victims

Residential status	Cases	Percentage (%)
Rural	147	66.52
Urban	74	33.48
Total	221	100

Table 5: Educational Status of Victims

Educational status	Cases	Percentage (%)
Illiterate	79	35.75
Primary	57	25.79
Jr. High School	36	16.29
High School	29	13.13
Intermediate	17	7.69
Graduate	02	0.90
Post-graduate	01	0.45
Total	221	100

Table 6: Socio-economic Status of Victims

Socioeconomic status	Cases	Percentage (%)
Lower (Class V)	82	37.10
Lower middle (class IV)	78	35.29
Middle (class III)	41	18.56
Upper middle(class II)	18	8.15
Upper (class I)	02	0.9.
Total	221	100

Table 7: Type of family of victims

Type of family	Cases	Percentage (%)
Joint	184	83.26
Nuclear	37	16.74
Total	221	100

Table 9: Reasons behind Suicidal and Homicidal Deaths

Reason	Manner of Death	
	Suicide (%)	Homicide (%)
Quarrel with spouse/ in-laws	52(49.06)	06(27.28)
Dowry demands	34(32.07)	07(31.82)
Infertility in females	01(.95)	02(9.09)
Extra-marital affairs	00(00)	01(4.54)
Chronic illness	07(6.60)	00(00)
Property disputes	00(00)	01(4.54)
Not known	12(11.32)	05(22.73)
Total	106(100)	22(100)

Table 10: Cause and Manner of Death in Cases of Alleged Dowry Deaths

Cause of Death	Manner of Death		
	Suicide (%)	Homicide (%)	Total (%)
Burning	11(31.43)	04	15
Poisoning	09(25.71)	02(5.71)	11(31.43)
Hanging	04(11.43)	00(00)	04(11.43)
Strangulation	00(00)	04(11.43)	04(11.43)
Assault	00(00)	01(2.86)	01(2.85)
Total	24(68.57)	11(31.43)	35(100)

Table 8 Cause and Manner of Death of Victims

Cause of Death	Manner of Death			
	Suicide	Accident	Homicide	Total
Burning	29(13.12)	47(21.27)	12(5.43)	88(39.82)
Road traffic and railway injuries	08(3.62)	34(15.38)	00(00)	42(19.0)
Hanging	41(18.56)	00(00)	00(00)	41(18.56)
Strangulation	00(00)	01(.45)	08(3.62)	09(4.07)
Drowning	03(1.36)	02(.90)	00(00)	05(2.26)
Stampede	00(00)	04(1.81)	00(00)	04(1.81)
Poisoning	25(11.32)	02(.90)	00(00)	27(12.22)
Others	00(00)	03(1.36)	02(.90)	05(2.26)
Total	106(47.98)	93(42.07)	22(9.95)	221(100)