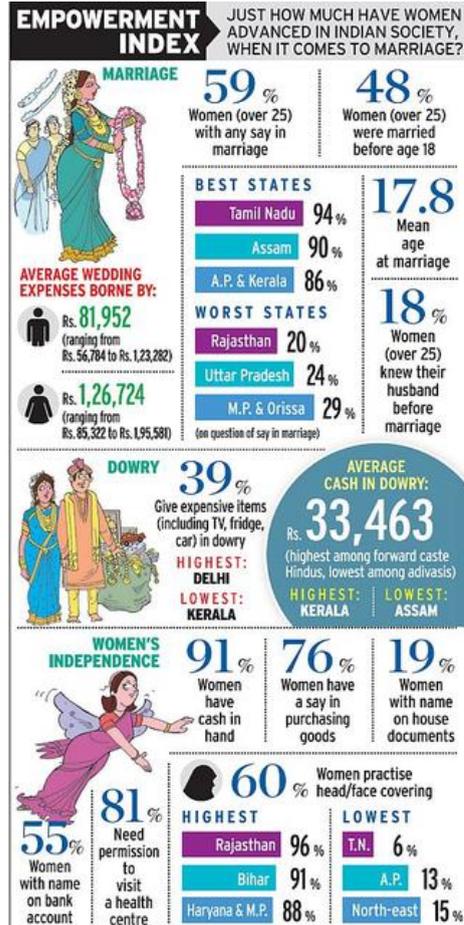


“Many women have no say in marriage”

Rukmini S



Four out of ten women in India still have no say in their marriage, eight out of ten need permission to visit a doctor, six out of ten practise some form of head covering, and the average Indian household gives over Rs. 30,000 in dowry. These are among the findings of a major new large-scale sample survey shared exclusively with The Hindu.

The National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER) conducts the India Human Development Survey (IHDS), the largest household survey in India after the government's Nation Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) surveys, and the NCAER is the only independent body that conducts such large-sample panel surveys. The survey covers economic data on income and expenditure, development data on education and health, and sociological data on caste, gender and religion. For the next two weeks, The Hindu will report exclusively on the key findings of NCAER's latest round that covers 2011-12 data. This survey covered 42,000 households across the country, weighted nationally, and 83% of them were also interviewed for the 2004-5 round of the IHDS.

The data shows that India has made progress in child marriage, with 48% of women over 25 reporting in 2011-12 that they were married before the age of 18 as opposed to 60% in 2004-5. The average number of children that women (over 40) reported they had had has also come down slightly to 3.55, indicating that fertility is falling. The practice of marrying a cousin or relative – more common in the south than the north – is becoming less common, but over 20% in Andhra Pradesh and Karnata still marry relatives.

However, women's autonomy remains severely constrained. 41% of women had no say in their marriage and just 18% knew their husbands before marriage, a statistic that has not improved. Women's say in marriage rose with their level of education, with income and with level of urbanisation and the southern states did better.

Just 10% said that they could take the primary decision to buy large items for the house, less than 20% had their names on the house's papers and 81% needed permission to visit a doctor. 60% of women – including 59% of forward caste Hindus and 83% of Muslim women – practised some form of 'purdah' or 'ghunghat'. Over half of all women said it was common for women in their community to be beaten if they went out without permission.

"Those of us in the women's movement and in progressive groups have been saying right from the beginning that instead of focussing on instruments of security like the police alone, there needs to be a transformation inside the home, in schools, in communities," Suneeta Dhar, director of the women's rights group Jagori told The Hindu.

The average Indian family gives over Rs. 30,000 in cash as dowry and 40% admitted to giving large items like TVs and cars as dowry. The practise of giving large items as dowry was most common among forward caste Hindus and lowest among Muslims. Wedding expenses ranged from nearly Rs 1 lakh in the poorest village to Rs 1.7 lakh in small cities, a big jump over the 2004-5 survey. Kerala and Delhi had the most expensive weddings.

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