

The Phensedyl menace: Wake-up call for everyone

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As a result of the gap between Bangladesh and Indian pharmaceutical (medical) policies Phensedyl has caused massive addiction problem amongst the Bangladeshi youths in recent years. Phensedyl is produced in India licitly, but banned in Bangladesh, Nepal and Philippines for its sedative properties. This variation in the Indian medical policy has encouraged many cross-border traffickers to increasingly smuggle Phensedyl into the black markets in Bangladesh. The enormous supply of this drug from across the border has created an epidemic with an estimated 1.5 million Phensedyl addicts in the country.

Enveloped from three sides Bangladesh shares a 4,144 kilometre long border with India, which is dotted by smuggling routes for Phensedyl and other contraband items. In this underground trade many cross-border drug syndicates are involved. However, the manufacturer Rhone-Poulenc authority claims that its production is domes-

tic 'market-share' oriented rather than for any export market. Narcotics control authorities in India also maintain their ignorance about any information in regard to the production of illicit Phensedyl along Bangladesh borders. With the frequent seizure of contraband Phensedyl by law enforcement authorities in Bangladesh, the extent of cross-border drug trade has become increasingly evident during the last two decades.

In pursuance of colonial drug policies of the nineteenth century Indian manufacturers rather have created an external market for Phensedyl in Bangladesh. It can be recalled here that throughout the nineteenth century the supply of contraband opium from India had created addiction problem for 30 per cent of the Chinese population. For running Phensedyl traffic Indian traders are copying British traders who owned most of the private companies that took part in the Indo-China opium trade. Recall that to stop the supply of opium from India the Chinese Emperor, as early as 1800, had issued an edict prohibiting the import of the Indian drugs altogether. As in China in the previ-

In a flavoured syrupy base Phensedyl contains codeine-phosphate, chlorpheniramine maleate and ephedrine in variable amounts. The 'magic' substance in the Phensedyl syrup is codeine-phosphate, and this eventually makes users addicted to the drug. The presence of ephedrine hydrochloride in Phensedyl creates high blood pressure and can cause sudden death due to cardiac problem or heart failure. Without realizing the harmful consequences of the above chemical agents many Bangladeshi youths feel that it would be smart and fashionable to take Phensedyl.

ous century, the increased supply of Phensedyl from India has continued in violation of Bangladeshi laws of 1982. So much so that it is now vandalizing the credibility of the legal measures in Bangladesh.

Contemporary Bangladeshi reports suggest that alongside the licit production, classified traffickers along Bangladesh borders were producing low grade Phensedyl. In April 2000, *Brahmanbaria Shangbad* reported that to meet the growing demands in Bangladesh fresh Phensedyl factories started running in Agartala, the capital of northeastern state of Tripura. These factories mostly manufacture impure Phensedyl to feed Bangladeshi teenagers. Being attracted by the fabulous under-

ground market, Indian drug traffickers were also selling 'date-expired and waste consignments' of Phensedyl, which were then expeditiously sold to country's customers. Like the nineteenth-century Chinese addicts, who could only afford adulterated opium, the Bangladeshi addicts were mostly grabbing impure Phensedyl. The hazard of adulterated Phensedyl was twice that of normal cough syrups.

As a result of the large profit margins achieved from Phensedyl trafficking, the trade has augmented tremendously. In India, the maximum retail price for this medicine is about Rs.29 for one bottle, while it sold in the bordering districts between Tk.60 and 70, and in Dhaka for Tk.120 or even more.

Consequently, once available only in 100ml bottles smuggled into Bangladesh out of India, Phensedyl can now also be found in large barrels, or plastic drums and containers, which smugglers then supply in bottles to the local market to meet the enormous local demand. In an attempt to combat cross-border traffickers, the BDR personnel sometimes arrange 'Flag' meetings with the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) authorities, when the former agree on measures in vain on drug traffickers with their counterparts in India.

As happened with the Indo-China opium trade during the nineteenth century, the economic value of the Indo-Bangladesh Phensedyl trade is mounting. Recall that the Government of British India had earned

annually from the foreign market total opium revenue of Rs38 million in the mid-1850s. A similar commercial trend is evident in the Indo-Bangladesh Phensedyl trafficking in recent years. Contemporary reports reveal that the annual distribution of Phensedyl in the Dhaka City crossed 20 million bottles at the turn of the twentieth century. Given that the average cost for each bottle of Phensedyl in Dhaka being about Tk.120, Tk.6.6 million worth of Phensedyl was sold each day and Tk.2,400 million every year in the capital city alone. This amount of money was almost half of the total annual budget of the Dhaka City Corporation. Given the size of the contraband trade in Phensedyl throughout the country, and the cumulative costs of its sedative

impact the users, a big threat has been created for the country's economy and the health of its younger generation.

As in India, the patent medicine industries in England and the US in the late eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth century had used opium alkaloid under various brand names. These drugs were popularly known as Dover's Powder, Laudanum, Ayer's Cherry Pectoral, Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup, Mc Munn's Elixir, Magendie's Solution, Godfrey's Cordial, and Hamlin's Wizard Oil etc. A similar patent trade was also evident in Turkey and Iran, where pharmaceutical industries marketed opium lozenges with religious labels: *Mash-Allah*, and the 'Gift of God'. As it happened with the opium and morphine content of these medicines in the West and elsewhere, information about the psycho-physical and bio-chemical reactions of Phensedyl has been ignored by chemists and manufacturers in India for commercial purposes.

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the Phensedyl syrup is codeine-phosphate, and this eventually makes users addicted to the drug. The presence of ephedrine hydrochloride in Phensedyl creates high blood pressure and can cause sudden death due to cardiac problem or heart failure. Without realizing the harmful consequences of the above chemical agents many Bangladeshi youths feel that it would be smart and fashionable to take Phensedyl. Many of them abuse the drug to forget the grim reality of their existence. As a result of the continued misuse, the addicts are becoming victims of many physical ailments: irreversible damage of brain cells, hallucination, manic depression, heart disease, cancer, liver damage and ultimately dying. Despite the availability of medical evidences that the drug has devastating consequences on the body's vital organs, very little is known to the outside world about the escalation of Phensedyl menace in Bangladesh. The country needs a comprehensive approach to address this cross-border issue of a complex nature.

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Dowry: Ancient custom or modern malaise?

DINA M SIDDIQI

DOWRY and dowry-related violence, in the highly coercive and often horrific forms we see today, appear to be of fairly recent origin in Bangladesh. I would like to suggest possible reasons for the emergence and widespread institutionalization of dowry demands in present-day rural and urban Bangladesh. Like all cultural phenomena, dowry has had different meanings in different places and times. The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines dowry as the property that a wife or wife's family gives to her husband upon marriage. It notes that dowries have a long history in Europe, Africa, India and other parts of the world. Giving dowry to daughters at the time of marriage, especially in lieu of inheritance was common practice in medieval Europe; studies show that even women who became nuns insisted on taking their dowries with them as they entered convent life. And of course, there are many societies in Africa that have either bride price or dowry as part of marriage exchanges. Dowry, in other words, is not a static custom but one embedded in changing sociopolitical and economic formations. One needs to ask, then, what dowry means today in various parts of South Asia, and what its relationship is to domestic violence and women's status in general.

Given popular associations between stridhan, kanyadan and dowry, it's tempting to come up with a unified narrative of dowry in South Asia, one that starts from the Vedic period and ends in 2002. Such an approach, paradoxically, ends up being profoundly ahistorical, and often extremely partisan, not least because what we call South Asia simply did not exist as a coherent cultural complex for much of its history. Moreover, as Romila Thapar and others have pointed out, carving up histories of the region into an ancient golden age that went into decline, or into Hindu, Muslim and British (why not Christian?) periods merely reproduces earlier orientalist stereotypes, glossing over complex social organizations and cultural formations on the ground.

But we do need histories. Tracing the shifting meanings of apparently timeless cultural traditions, (whether it be sati, parda or dowry) is a critical weapon in the struggle for social justice, as activists have long known. In this context, one of the most interesting theoretical interventions on the question of dowry comes from feminist historian, Veena Talwar Oldenburg. In her forthcoming book on colonial Punjab, Professor Oldenburg argues that, under the pressures of the cash economy introduced by the British, dowry, like many other pre-colonial structures, was profoundly transformed. In her words, "The will to obtain large dowries from the family of daughters-in-law, to demand more in cash, gold and liquid assets, becomes vivid, after leafing through pages of official reports that dutifully record the

effects of indebtedness, foreclosures, barren plots and cattle dying for lack of fodder. The voluntary aspects of dowry gradually evaporate. Dowry becomes dreaded payments on demand that accompany and follow the marriage of a daughter."

Now, one need not accept wholesale this provocative proposition about the omnipotence of the colonial state or of the malleability of the practice of dowry. Still, as I hope to show, Oldenburg's thesis provides an important insight into the links between structural changes in the economy and shifts in institutions like dowry in the recent past.

Culture
It's not unusual to hear the argument that dowry as a practice was restricted to the Hindu community until very recently. Whatever the validity of this statement, we need first and foremost to qualify the category of 'Hindu' community.

active then are now charged with ignoring or being disillusioned with the dowry issue. Their response has been to claim that dowry, as opposed to domestic violence, has been overstated and too often sensationalized in the media, especially in the West. After all, what could be more exotic (and suggestive of sati, so emblematic of 'eastern barbarity') than reports of women being burnt to death in their kitchens by their own mothers-in-law? Recent studies by groups such as Vimochana in Bangalore, do suggest that the anti-dowry movement has been a little too 'successful,' in that domestic violence cases are often inaccurately classified as dowry deaths. Moreover, trying to squeeze women's accounts of violence into the box of dowry harassment, can result in defendants being easily acquitted in court. In a survey of Indian women carried out by the International

ization and structural adjustment measures. India now has the fastest growing middle class in the world, and the consumption of modernity through the consumption of material goods has become all-pervasive. At the same time, with the opening up of the market, the gap between rich and poor has increased, as has the economic uncertainty facing most people including the relatively well-off. It is not surprising then, as one activist noted, that tradition has been transformed into a way to escape poverty, augment one's wealth or to acquire the modern conveniences now advertise daily on television.

Social commentators are all too willing to attribute 'rampant consumerism and rampant social greed' for the new prominence of dowry demands, without delving too deeply into causes. This is where Veena Oldenburg's thesis can be usefully explored, to elucidate

haps the term Demand System, as anthropologist Rehnuma Ahmed once characterized it, rather than dowry, might more accurately capture some aspects of the social reality of Bangladesh. For the meaning -- and practices -- of marriage appear to have shifted considerably for most classes and groups.

Community
From the Indian evidence, it is clear that the meanings and effects of dowry have historically varied with class, caste and region. Partha Banerjee claims that despite its recent appearance in traditionally 'incidence-free' areas and communities, dowry deaths are concentrated in urban, affluent upper caste Hindu communities. If we look at geographical distribution, the highest numbers of dowry incidents since 1987 are concentrated in the so-called Hindi-Hindu heartland states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, etc. The traditionally 'incidence-free' non-Hindi speaking south Indian and eastern states (such as West Bengal) have seen a rapid rise in dowry deaths since 1987. By contrast, a number of states as varied as Kerala, Mizoram, Jammu and Kashmir, and Manipur still have low incidences of dowry deaths. The latter group of states tend to have higher literacy rates, more women in the productive labour force, higher standards of living and, in the case of the North East, more flexible and equitable marriage practices. In other words, these are places where the social organization is such that the status of women has tended to be traditionally high. However, it appears that demands for dowry as part of marriage practices have in the last decade or so, become much more common among some scheduled castes, 'tribals' and Muslim communities in India. Now, if we accept that dowry demands have become a critical avenue for social mobility in the face of liberalization and rising economic disparity, we might gain some insight into why dowry demands are no longer limited (if they ever were) to caste Hindu groups in South Asia. In addition, I would venture to say that in Bangladesh, there has been for quite some time a crisis of masculinity, especially of subaltern masculinity. The inability of the male to fulfill the role of the Bhatar, paradoxically enough, contributes to the escalating violence associated with dowry demands.

The above analysis begs the question of why it should be dowry that becomes a primary vehicle for social mobility. The low status of women in general -- in everyday cultural discourse and as productive members of society cannot help but have such repercussions.

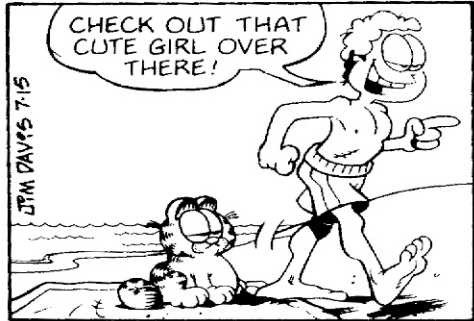
Conclusion

Let me summarize my arguments in conclusion:

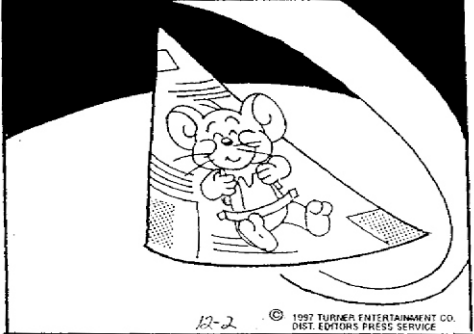
1. Rather than conceptualizing dowry as a problem of religion or of community, it would be more productive to explore issues of social stratification cutting across religious communities in contemporary South Asia. The concept of religious communities with rigid boundaries is problematic and susceptible to becoming politicized and damaging for women, as in the Shahbano case in India.
2. In the same vein, it would be misleading to conceptualize strategies around South Asia as an exceptional cultural zone, for instance as a zone in which notions of equality would be completely inappropriate.
3. The societies under consideration are sufficiently complex and diverse, so that we need to locate causes that would have similar effects on diverse cultural formations and marital practices. What is it that makes the pursuit of dowry so widespread, and so potentially violent? This is a question that requires much more sustained research in the future.

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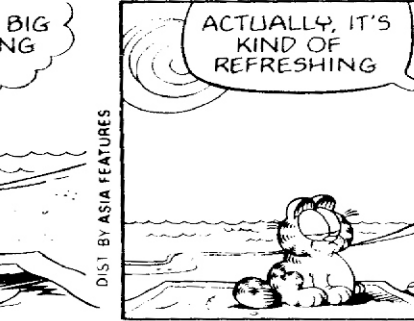
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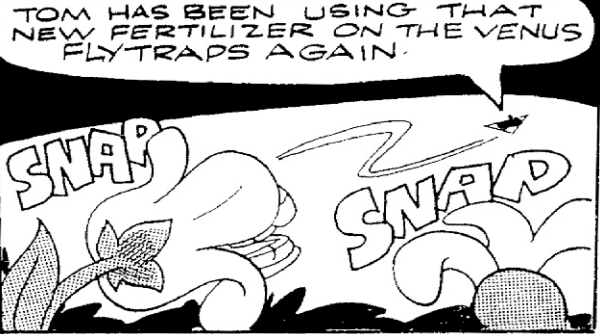
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