

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, 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 kilometers 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-

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 young 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. Asimilar 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.

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.

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?

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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 socio-political 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.

A 1996 UNDP study of dowry observed that in previous surveys, respondents rated dowry as their third most pressing problem but by 1996, both rural and urban respondents in Bangladesh felt that dowry was their most significant problem. The study goes on to state that dowry seems to have started only after independence and has increased dramatically since the 1980s.

Marriage among the different groups which, in the 19th century and afterwards came to be labeled Hindu, took a variety of forms. Dowry or voluntary gift giving was particularly linked to the Brahmanical form of marriage, which was prevalent mostly among the propertied and the upper castes. Notably, these were the same groups among whom inheritance and coparcenary rights for women did not exist. In this context, one plausible interpretation is that dowry represented a daughter's share of her family's wealth in the form of a pre-mortem inheritance. That is, it was a substitute for the inheritance of immovable property. It follows that class/caste and regional variations in inheritance customs would have considerable bearing on the practice of dowry. Along the lines of Oldenburg, Ranjana Sheet contends that dowry today, with its forced demands for gift-giving, derives from the colonial reinvention of a tradition whereby patriarchal Hindu traditions and customs were selectively appropriated and deployed. Simultaneously, the colonial restructuring of the socio-economic order strengthened the process of Brahmanization that in effect institutionalized and expanded dowry to other classes and castes of the society.

These are plausible arguments for the nineteenth and early twentieth century. In the meantime, dowry related violence against women appears to have intensified and increased greatly in the past few decades in 'Hindu' as well as non-Hindu communities in South Asia. Indeed, highly publicized dowry-related violence was a primary mobilizing force in the Indian feminist movement of the 1970s. Ironically, many of the same feminists and women's groups who were

Center for Research on Women in Washington DC, researcher Nata Duvvuri found that dowry had been overemphasized as a cause of abuse, and that the dowry focus distorted responses to the problem of domestic violence. The Research Center for Women's Studies in Bombay found that even investigators in all female police units set up to handle crimes against women often took only dowry related cases seriously and avoided other 'private family matters' they felt were not a concern for law enforcement officials. In fact, Oldenburg insists that until we get away from burning and dowry, we'll never get close to understanding violence against women in India.

In the case of Bangladesh, media and human rights reports on violence against women are horrifying, and seem to be multiplying at an exponential rate. However, despite the plethora of such reports, it's not always clear what is dowry related violence and what is domestic violence in general. This is an important distinction, one that concerns the production and validation of evidence. Without sustained research, one risks succumbing to a circular logic of knowledge production and validation – of newspaper reports being taken up by activists and rights groups, and circulated back as legitimate evidence.

Problems of classification aside,

the escalation of dowry related violence and deaths is undeniable. According to one source, deaths in India related to dowry demands have increased 15 fold from the mid 1980's, from 400 a year to 5,800 by the middle of the 1990s. Statistics abound and I won't bombard you with them. What's striking is that the period of intensification of dowry violence, from the 80's to the late 90s coincides with economic liberalization and

perhaps yet another change in the meaning and function of dowry, in the late twentieth century. The link between marriage, money, social mobility and social polarization gains support from a number of studies, which show that the lower ranks of the middle classes, and women from poorer families are especially vulnerable to dowry and its demands. Taking account of social and material polarization throws light on the heightened consumerism and greed that are taken to underlie middle class dowry demands. In this respect, it's critical not to individualize the problem, to demonize specific men (and their mothers) but to locate the question in a larger structural framework of social and economic pressures.

Again, in the context of Bangladesh, we see that it's only in the post-independence period, especially the 1980's and 1990's that dowry deaths emerge as a serious problem. A 1996 UNDP study of dowry observed that in previous surveys, respondents rated dowry as their third most pressing problem but by 1996, both rural and urban respondents in Bangladesh felt that dowry was their most significant problem. The study goes on to state that dowry seems to have started only after independence and has increased dramatically since the 1980s. This is also the period of increased social differentiation and disenfranchisement, especially in rural areas. It's also marked by highly visible demonstrations of wealth and the possibilities for capital accumulation, especially through migration to the Middle East. I don't want to speculate too much but given that the number of desertions, divorces and multiple marriages by men has also skyrocketed in the last two decades, per-

haps 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.

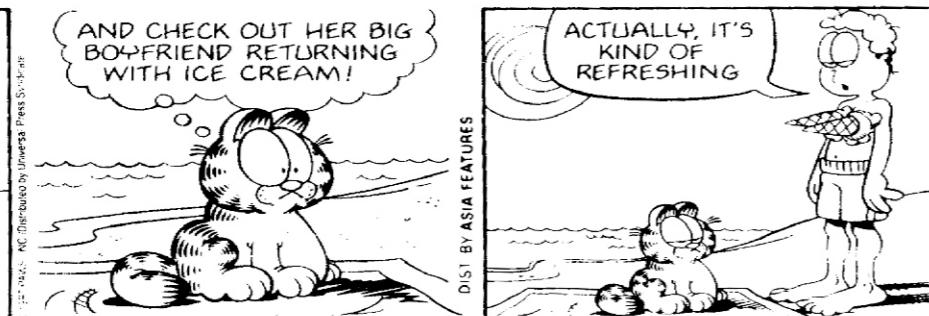
Conclusion

Let me summarize my arguments in conclusion:

- » 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.
- » 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.
- » 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.

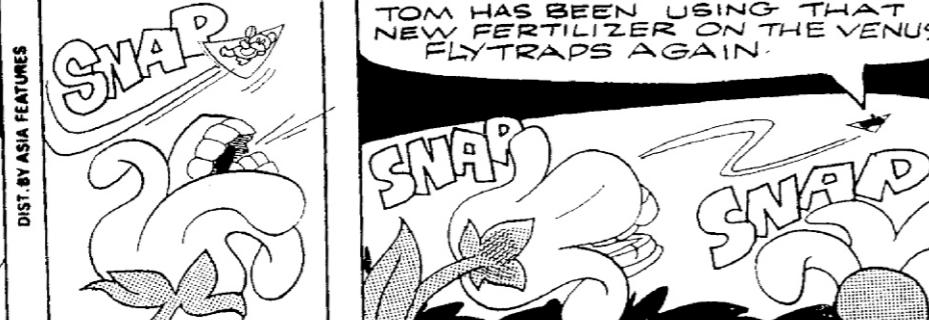
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Garfield ®



by Jim Davis

TOM & JERRY



TOM HAS BEEN USING THAT NEW FERTILIZER ON THE VENUS FLYTRAPS AGAIN.