

Thousands of Women Are Burnt Alive

Malladi Subbamma was married off when she was eleven years old. At the age of forty she wrote her first book. Today she is the leader of the fight against the inconceivable violations committed against women in the Indian confederate state of Andra Pradesh.

Every year thousands of Indian women are burnt to death by their husbands and mothers-in-law, because their own families cannot pay the dowry agreed upon at the time of marriage. Usually the women who are killed in this way are quite young and have small children. The Humanist Center in Hyderabad investigates about ten such cases a year. Malladi Subbamma is responsible for the investigations together with her husband, Ramamurthy, who is one of the leaders of the Radical Humanist Association and a lawyer. So far they have not succeeded in getting the culprits convicted. The crimes are concealed by means of bribery. The average price for a false death certificate, signed by a doctor, is 4,000 rupees.

The usual procedure in these murders is for the husband and his family to sprinkle the wife with paraffin or gasoline before setting fire to her clothes. In that way the family may declare that it was an accident of the wife's own making because she was careless with the fire when preparing a meal. Sometimes the women do not die immediately but are brought to a hospital where they may live for a few days.

"We have tried to make those women report their husbands to the authorities, but they dare not do it," says Subbamma. "The men threaten them by promising to take revenge on their own children or on the wife's family. Often both the wife and her family have been pressured and threatened for a long time before the murder takes place. 'If you do not pay the dowry, the wife will be killed next Friday,' the husband may tell her parents. The day may often be set at a distant time, and consequently the wife's family will try very hard and make personal sacrifices in order to get hold of the money."

FRAGELL: Is the dowry system not on the way out of Indian culture?

SUBBAMMA: No, on the contrary. Earlier it was usual in Hindu families only but now also Muslims will demand it, as do many Christian families.

FRAGELL: Is it only the bridegroom who has to be paid for? Is it always the family of the bride who has to pay?

SUBBAMMA: Yes. The justification has been that the cost of education has been spent on the men and that they represent a source of income. Among "ordinary" people and among the poor the dowry is not very big, maybe just a refrigerator or a moped. But if the husband has got an academic degree, the dowry may be very high indeed, often several hundred thousand rupees. Nowadays, many women are very well educated; sometimes they may even have obtained a higher degree than the husband. Nevertheless, the family of the



Malladi Subbamma discusses a new project with villagers.

husband demands a dowry.

Malladi Subbamma was given in marriage to Ramamurthy when she was eleven years old. At thirteen she had to leave her own home and move to her in-laws' house and start her married life. At the age of fourteen she was a mother, and as time went on she had four children.

Subbamma wrote her first book when she was forty years old. She has published in all thirty-four books on questions concerning women. Some of them are fiction, others are documentaries. She has also published thirty-six booklets for mass distribution, and is the editor of the review *Freedom for Women*. She has her own newspaper columns where she answers questions from women. She has been awarded two highly esteemed prizes for her work and one literary prize. Diplomas and awards adorn the walls of her home.

Both Subbamma and Ramamurthy descend from wealthy families. At the beginning of their marriage Ramamurthy had a profitable lawyer's office, but he left it and started working—free of charge—as a legal adviser for the projects and the clients of his wife. Their large estate has been turned into the Humanist Center of Hyderabad, and they lead a simple and spartan life. One of their sons is the head of a big concern. He puts a car and chauffeur at his parents' disposal when they visit the villages and inspect their projects, among which is one of the very few homes for the aged in the confederate state. The inhabitants are deserted and poor women who are unable to be self-supporting. Realizing that the women living in the villages are the most downtrodden of all, their current project is to establish an educational center for women living a few miles outside the city.

Subbamma has never been outside of India. Ramamurthy attended the humanist world congress in London in 1978. He says, "Just think of the number of desperate women we can help for the cost of an air ticket to Europe!"

The Committee Appointed to Investigate Dowry Crimes is one of twelve organizations that Malladi Subbamma directs from the Humanist Center in the capital of Andra Pradesh, Hyderabad. The others include the Institute of Feminism, the Family Counseling Office for Women, the Women's Library, the Emergency Center for Women, and the review *Freedom for Women*.

FRAGELL: Subbamma, what kind of experience was it for you to be married to Ramamurthy the way you were?

SUBBAMMA: It was a matter of course, just like being born. It was not a thing you ever discussed. My mother and my grandmother had been married in the same way, and neither I myself or any other girls had any notions about anything else.

FRAGELL: But how was your life as a child bride?

SUBBAMMA: I was happy. My husband was my god.

FRAGELL: But later on you started to examine your life and have other ideas?

SUBBAMMA: I grew up and asked myself why we women had to sit on the floor, eat after the men had left the table, ask permission to go for a walk, and ask for money to buy a newspaper. Fortunately, my husband gave me full support right from the start. At the age of thirty-four I started my systematic education and became a family therapist. The experiences I had in my professional life changed me into a humanist. I understood that the humanistic way of viewing life may contribute to changing the terrible conditions women have to face in Indian society as well as in family life. Those conditions are based on the holy books and traditions of religion and are constantly reinforced by the priests and religious leaders. ●

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