

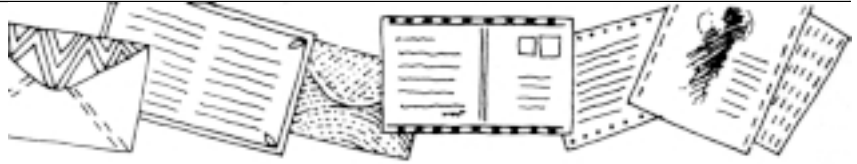
Misuse of Anti Dowry Laws

I live in the US. I want to thank you for your articles on laws against domestic violence and dowry in issue No.148. It helped me understand the quagmire that India's legal system is caught in and the reasons for the frequent abuse of the laws.

I am deeply saddened by the news about my friend's current predicament in India. This is his story: Over four years ago, my friend Ajay went home to his village to attend a cousin's wedding. That visit home turned into a nightmare for him as he was forced into a marriage that was decided by the elders of his community against his wishes. Ajay went along with this forced marriage because his grandfather received a token gift from the bride's father, meant to persuade Ajay's father to accept this marriage. Had Ajay not agreed to the marriage, his reputation would have been marred in the eyes of the family and community. It appears that emotional blackmail was the name of the game. Ajay says he did not have an option but to protect his grandfather and family from hurt and anguish.

But he never consummated the marriage.

The family tried to get him to accept the marriage to this woman but he refused. She and her father had a foul reputation. He returned to New Delhi without his wife, who stayed back in the village with his family. She treated his family horribly for three days. Ajay wouldn't stand for anyone treating his family with disrespect. Three days after the wedding, she returned to her father's home of her own accord. About three months after the ceremony, the father-in-law had a tiff with Ajay's dad and had him beaten up. Ajay had his father and sister move in with him in his house in New Delhi so as to protect them from further abuse. He and his family were threatened with dire consequences.



Readers' Responses

After Ajay's father was beaten up, his family realised that they had forced Ajay into a bad situation and wanted him to file for divorce. Ajay got legal counsel but the lawyers' biggest concern was that the bride's family would file a dowry suit against Ajay and his family. Ajay was aghast hearing this as there had been no dowry exchange. The lawyer, however, said the facts did not matter as the bride's family could always accuse Ajay of receiving dowry and get the family members jailed. He was counselled to wait at least two years before filing for divorce so that the court would take a more generous view towards him. His family stayed with him because there was the possibility that the father-in-law would force his wife to stay with his parents. If that happened, she could also accuse them of physical abuse and emotionally blackmail Ajay into either making the marriage work or give more money for a settlement. Ajay was willing to pay \$5,000 for the divorce settlement but the father-in-law wanted \$10,000.

Ajay waited for two years before filing for divorce; all this time, the father-in-law did everything in his power to put pressure on Ajay to take his wife back. Every time Ajay brought up the subject of divorce, the father-in-law would threaten to have his family thrown in jail by bringing a bogus dowry suit. He had cops as friends, who threatened Ajay's family members many times over the years.

Ajay kept his family's location secret from the father-in-law for four years. In fact, he moved his family three times in the first two years. His

uncle has been the prime negotiator in this divorce.

Last year, the father-in-law communicated that he was ready to settle this divorce with Ajay's family. He had found another groom for his daughter. However, he wanted Ajay's grandfather's land as a settlement. Ajay or his father could not give his grandfather's land away because it was still in his grandfather's name. Ajay's grandfather did not want this man to have the land. It seemed that the father-in-law had wanted his daughter to marry Ajay in the first place only because he had his eyes on the land. In case the land was not given, the father-in-law wanted \$12,000 for the divorce settlement.

Ajay drew up the papers. The father-in-law wanted the money upfront but Ajay was not about to give any money to the wife and her family until the divorce was finalised. I did not hear from my friend after this development. I was worried and called a couple of his friends in India. I learnt that Ajay was arrested after his wife filed a harassment suit against him, though he had not been in touch with her since his wedding night four years ago.

Paula Roy, via e-mail

While I sympathise with your friend's predicament, it seems likely that you have a very one-sided biased version of the marital conflict. It is indeed irresponsible for a grown man to marry under pressure from his family and then refuse to consummate the marriage. This does constitute cruelty towards the wife. The laws are

indeed loaded against the groom and his family. But before deciding whether your friend is a hapless victim, I suggest you probe the facts of the case more thoroughly and get to know the version of the bride's family as well.

-Editor

Need for a Fair Probe

I enjoyed reading your article about anti-dowry laws in issue No.148. I would like to share with you my concern about a human rights violation that has been suppressed in India for many decades. This has to do with my personal experience with Sathya Sai Baba (SSB).

My motive is to present this information in the most loving way as possible. Furthermore, I have great devotion and respect towards the true *satgurus* of India and I believe that India's greatest legacy is her spiritual heritage. I am a retired math teacher who was an ardent devotee of SSB for 27 years and active in the SSB Organisation in the US for 20 years. I also held offices in a SSB Centre. I have been called for interviews by SSB at his ashram in India, I have read his official monthly publication, *Sanathana Sarathi*, for about 15 years, and have attended at least 20 SSB conferences. In June 2000, I was devastated to learn of the sexual molestations of a young friend of mine from Arkansas by SSB.

At that time I was a member of the successful SSB Centre of Dallas. It is an irony that I had been acquainted with the family involved for over 15 years when I heard this very disturbing news. SSB had engaged in sex with the boy over 20 times during about 50 interviews, within a four-year period. The prominent UK newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* was one of the first publications to carry this story. At this time, some prominent devotees and officers resigned from the South

Central (SSB) Region of the US. I decided to conduct a slow and careful investigation. I got on the phone and made calls all over the world talking to victims, and parents and friends of victims. I will never be able to forget the phone conversation with a young Englishman whose close friend committed suicide after being sexually molested by SSB.

One of the most disturbing accounts of sexual abuse in the US involves a 15-year-old boy (now about 21), who used to visit the Hemet Sai center of southern California. The story was relayed to me by phone by a personal friend, the late Glen Meloy of Palm Desert, California. The 15-year-old was known to keep a diary especially when he travelled. In fact, the family had published his notes from previous trips in pamphlet form.

It was revealed that the boy, who was taught from birth that SSB was God, was abused by SSB on two consecutive days in September 1999. The mother had noticed that her son was acting strangely. She did something that's rare — read the boy's journal without his permission. One of those who received a photo copy of the diary from India was the late Glen Meloy, a retired management consultant and a high-profile SSB devotee for 26 years. Mr Meloy was very highly respected by the family involved. In hindsight, there are many contradictions or 'red flags' that I ignored as a devotee. For example, there had been evidence that SSB cheated when materializing objects.

I admit, however, that paranormal activity does surround him. He proved to me his power to 'imprint on people's perception' during my visit in the summer of 1987. Lest you think I am a lone voice in the wilderness, please check a few websites of former devotees such as <http://exbaba.com>, <http://saiguru.net/english/articles/new5.htm>, [<http://bdsteel.tripod.com/More/index.html>. Here are the URLs for a recent expose by a former lecturer at SSB's colleges, Barry Pittard: <http://www.saiguru.net/english/news/030925index.htm> and \[http://home.hetnet.nl/~ex_baba/engels/articles/barryexposeupdate.html\]\(http://home.hetnet.nl/~ex_baba/engels/articles/barryexposeupdate.html\). Would you, as a person engaged in a spiritual area, kindly note these very genuine concerns? I don't think anyone wants to directly or indirectly be the cause of a young boy being molested by SSB. Nor do I think that a Sathya Sai organisation member would wish forever to be branded with the reputation of failing in his or her duties of care and compassion towards those many reputable persons who have reported these allegations to its leading officials. Shouldn't people in India at least be told that such allegations are being made? And why can't there be at least an official investigation?](http://home.no.net/anir/</p></div><div data-bbox=)

Dennis J Hanisch, Washington, USA

MANUSHI has had no contact whatsoever with SSB. We neither have the power nor the resources to carry out a fair investigation into these allegations. However, we are publishing your letter in the hope that the relevant authorities may take note of these charges and conduct a thorough and fair probe.

-Editor □

If You Miss an Issue

If you do not receive a particular issue, please inform us within a month. We inform our subscribers via email every time we mail a new issue. Please send us your email id if you are not already on our email list. We will replace back issues only if you inform us within a month of the issue's release.