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REVIEW ARTICLE

DOWRY SYSTEM: DESTRUCTION OF ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND MORAL VALUES

Dowry System: Destruction of Economic, Social and Moral Values

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ECONOMIC AFTER EFFECTS

Most of us in the western world would shudder at the news of economic recession. Recession means the economy is not doing well, and people are going to be laid out or loose their jobs. In simpler term, recession means that the people are not spending enough outside their homes. Its only when people spend out side their homes, the economy of any society or country moves forward.

Let me give an example here: Say the Brown family from California – consisting five people- decides to travel from Los Angeles to Seattle by car, and then fly out to Alaska for their summer vacation. They decide to rent a car in LA (auto industry). On their way to Seattle they eat only at restaurants (Restaurant industry). They fill gas once a day (oil industry). They concede to request of their children by stopping at some of the famous theme parks (leisure industry). They spend their nights at reasonably priced motels (hotel industry). When they reach Seattle, they catch a flight to Alaska (air lines industry).

The above example shows how the Brown family has contributed to the economy in each sector – in parenthesis. Just imagine if thousands of Browns' do the same. This not only creates enough employment in each sector, but also gives rise to a booming economy. This is exactly what you see in the western world where the economies are so successful.

Now let us take another example of Kandasamy family of Eelam – a middle class family with two teenage girls and a boy - going on vacation from Jaffna to Colombo. In spite of owing a new car, Kandasamy decides to use the warrant and takes the train. He has safely locked the car in the garage contemplating that this might be used as a part of the dowry for his daughters.

The Kandasamys' had reservation of purchasing a gift for their host. So, they pack a box of Murunga and Mangoes - picked from their garden. Instead of taking a comfortable drive in a taxi to the train station (2 km), the Kandasamys' decide to walk - with all the luggages' balancing on their heads and shoulders.

Mrs.Kandasamy had dutifully done her part by packing not only the breakfast, but also the mid-morning snacks and the lunch- the train will reach Colombo only in the late afternoon. When the train reaches Anuradapura, the children gleefully look at the people who sell sodas. But with the stern look, the mother pulls out a big flask of tender coconut water - from their tree – and serves it to the family. When the train pulls in to the Maho station Mr. Kandasamy hurriedly picks up the morning papers left on the seat by a departing passenger. At Colombo Fort, their host picks them up and drives them in their car.

During the whole journey, the Kandasamy did not have to take out his wallet even once. Most would argue that Kandasamys' were smart and careful. Most of Kandasamys' frugal behavior could be traced to their obsessive compulsive nature of saving dowry money for their two daughters. But the spending attitude of Kandasamys' and other Eelam Tamils, spells doom for the Tamil economy.

I have always argued that the Eelam economy- especially that of Jaffna – has been in a perpetual recession for this same reason. For those economists who want to learn and taste about recession, the Tamil economy would be the most perfect example. The economy thrives and flourishes only when people have the habit of spending. This is the very reason why the Sinhala economy is much more vibrant than that of the Tamil economy - the Sinhala man has no hesitation of spending his money out side the house.

Sure, people should learn about saving for their future. However, excessive saving by the Eelam Tamils not only dulls the economy but also its growth. It dampens free money circulation in the society. All this leads to an economic recession. Most of this obsessive frugal habit of the Tamil society can be traced to the dowry system . This has been an absolute disaster for the Eelam economy. As long as the dowry system is allowed to perpetuate, the Eelam economy will never prosper.

SOCIAL FACTORS

I still vividly recall the two Banana shops behind the main Wellawatte bus station in the late seventies. One was owned by a young Sinhala lad from Aluthgama. Other by a Tamil man in his early twenties from Chankanai in Jaffna.

The Sinhala chap was always well dressed – nylon shirts and terricot pants. The young Tamil man never had a shirt on him - only a dirty/torn verti around his waist. The skin in the upper torso of the Tamil man had many burnt scar marks – secondary to the banana stains falling and burning his skin. The Sinhala man had ample amount of cream on his hair and combed.

I doubt the Tamil chap ever combed his hair- it was almost fit for the crows to nest. Sinhala chap opened his store at nine in the morning and closed promptly at seven in the evening. The Tamil lad opened his shop at five in the morning – to catch the business of the temple crowd – and closed it around eleven at night. The Sinhala man never opened his shop during the weekends, while the Tamil chap worked seven days a week. The Sinhala man had a small apartment in the adjoining lane while the Tamil man used the small room in the back of his shop both as living quarters as well kitchen.

These contrast behaviors of two young men coming from two different communities were noticeable for those of who frequented both the shops. One day, when I asked the Tamil man, why he was working himself to death, his answer was that he came from a poor family, and he had four sisters to be married off. When questioned further, he stated that he only has enough dowries for two of his sisters, and has to work like this till he saved enough for the other two sisters.

Though his commitment and sacrifice to his family and sisters is laudable, the system (dowry) that had been thrust upon him by his society is not only abominable but also sickening. Here is a young Tamil man who in his prime life – he had not enjoyed a bit of the teenage life- working to death to satisfy a notorious and scandalous system thrust upon him by his society. The social effects due the infamous dowry system on this Tamil man will be far reaching, and will not only affect him but that also of his family. There is a good chance he too will demand a hefty dowry from the girl he marries, and this will only lead to a vicious after effects. (Note: I was told that his shop was burnt to ground in the 83 riots: He took refuge at one of the camps, and was heard lamenting about his lost savings.)

MORAL FACTORS

Most of the decaying moral characters of the Tamil society can be directly or indirectly traced to the dowry system. The Dowry system not only gives rise to but also perpetuates envy, jealousy, competitiveness and even murder among the Tamils. The dowry system is

the cause of most of the misunderstandings between parents and children, between brothers and sisters, between relatives, and even among communities. Though there are only few documented 'dowry deaths' in Eelam, there are significant mental and physical torture perpetrated by the men on their wives that can be directly traced to the dowry. There have been many documented cases where the sexual lives have been totally ruined between couples over the dowry.

Here I would like to recall a true incident. There was a Jaffna family that lived at the top of my road. They lived in a single storied house – with four bedrooms. The daughter occupied the main house with her husband and their four-year child. The elderly parents of the daughter occupied the small garage adjoining the house. The parents used the small garage as their living quarters as well as the kitchen. The daughter did not allow the parents to use the bathroom inside the house. So the parents had use a public bathroom. Apparently the daughter was their only child. They found a good match for the daughter after having given a sizable dowry. They readily wrote the house for their daughter. However, after about a year, the daughter started bossing the parents and told the parents that the house has to be run her way, ultimately kicking out them in to the garage. There are many such pathetic incidences among the Tamil society.

In Hindu tradition, the parents are given a higher place than even the gods (Matha, Pitha, Guru, Theivam-God). The above true incident is a clear example what the evil dowry system can do to destroy the moral and ethical values of the human beings. The Tamil man loves his daughter to death. From the time a daughter is born he focuses all his energy in saving money for her dowry. He sacrifices his needs and comforts in achieving this. When the daughter is married off, he gives her everything, including his only house.

But what the poor fellow does not understand is the loyalty of the daughter - whom he had loved so much - changes the minute she finds her husband. After the marriage, the daughter's interests are primarily focused on her husband and her children. Her interest in her parents is only secondary. We cannot blame the daughter because that is the human nature. So it is foolish for the Tamil parents to donate everything to their daughters as dowry- including their house – and find themselves with nothing. They now become totally dependent on their daughters for a living. This is what perpetuates such gross moral decay in our society.

How do you prevent & eliminate the Dowry System?

Below are some of the measures that can be implemented to eliminate the dowry system from the Tamil society.

1) TURNING AWAY FROM SOCIAL CONSERVATISM

The Tamil society is one of the most ultra conservative societies when it comes to the social issues. Most of the ills of the Sinhala nation can be traced to its religious ultra conservatism. Likewise, most of the social mishaps and tragedies- including the dowry system - of the Tamil society can be traced to its social conservatism. This is especially so when it comes to the openness and social mingling of the young Tamil men and women.

It is wrong for the Tamil society to assume that a woman loses her virginity by merely talking to an unknown boy at the bus station. It is also wrong to compare openness and free mingling among young people to flirting. This closed-door policy of the social mingling virtually shuts the opportunities for any friendship to blossom between the young men and women in our society. The Tamil society should get rid of its phobia of love marriages among its young people.

Let the women of Eelam marry men of their choice than some one who had been forced on them by their parents. The habit of the neighbors and the village as the watchdogs of Tamil women should be discarded. Otherwise there will be no difference between the Islamic Mullahs and us. The elders of the Tamil society should take a more liberal attitude for such free mingling among the younger generation. This certainly leads to young Tamils choosing their own partners and decreases the dependence on the arranged marriages and dowry system. It also helps to promote relationships between various sections of the Tamil society.

2) ATTITUDE TOWARDS PROFESSIONS

Most of the Tamil parents want to choose a doctor or an engineer as their sons- in laws. This was mainly because in Srilanka these two professions not only offered job security but also a decent income and social prestige. However, the Tamil society - especially Jaffna people – took this task to a Himalayan peak by offering ludicrous amounts of dowries to net the right grooms for their daughters.

In Eelam the attitudes towards medical/engineering professions should be drastically changed. Both these professions should be made less lucrative and secure. Eelam should promote, encourage and make lucrative, those jobs, which requires hard physical work- like plumbing, technicians, truck drivers, sanitation workers, etc. This will offer a vast pool of Tamil men with enough earning capacity to maintain a decent

standard of living. Minimum wage should be introduced to maintain an economic equality.

The century long dependence of the Tamil society on those so-called government jobs should be given up. It has been proved beyond doubt that too much of dependence on the government creates inefficiency and stagnation in economy. Eelam and its people should be bold to venture in to various private sectors and create ample jobs. This will certainly lead to economic prosperity and decent wages among the working class. Such measures will certainly decrease the demand for those privileged professions such as Doctors/Engineers.

3) TRANSFER OF REAL ESTATE

The major asset transfer in the dowry process is the transfer of the primary residence of the parents. Most of the misunderstandings among the family and relatives arise over this single issue of transfer of the primary residence. It is not only pathetic but also ironic that the parents who had worked so hard to obtain this primary residence become almost homeless at the time of the transfer of their property. Most of the time the daughters on whose name the residence has been transferred start to act on behalf of the interests of her newfound husband and her family. The ultimate victims of this malicious attitude are the parents themselves.

Here are some of my suggestions to completely wipe out the transfer of houses in the dowry system

- 1) Enact laws that absolutely bars the transfer of the PRIMARY RESIDENCE of the parents to any children until both parents have died. If parents have more than one house, and want to transfer it to a child before they die, tax the second and the subsequent houses at a very high tax rate- say 70 to 75 %.
- 2) When one parent dies the entire movable and non-movable properties are transferred in to the estate of the surviving parent.
- 3) When the both parents die the estates of the deceased parents will be distributed according their will.
- 4) Allow only one house in the estate to be transferred free of federal taxes to the child – as indicated in the will. If there are more than one house in the estate, then the second and the subsequent house be taxed heavily –as much as 55 to 60 percent. This will prevent greediness among the Tamil society to accumulate houses. It will also

dampen the practice that every daughter has to be given a house.

5) Encourage laws that allows the estate of the parents be distributed equally among all children in the will .If any one of the children is given more than 50 percent of the estate, then impose stiffer taxes.

6) If the estate has only one person in the will, then put a limit on the amount -both movable and non movable- that can be transferred (Ex- any thing more than half a million should be taxed around 60 percent)

7) Allow estates to donate more towards the charity by eliminating all taxes – it encourages the Tamil society to get more involved in charity work.

8) Strongly encourage the newly wedded couple to purchase their new dream homes. This might include tax write off on the mortgage interest. One time tax write off of ten to fifteen percent of the purchase price of the primary residence (ex – bought a house for 100,000 – you get to write off 10,000). Encourage lenders to reduce the interest rates by ¼ to ½ points for those buying house for the first time for 3 to 4 years. Such measures will strongly stimulate the growth of the housing market in Eelam and decrease the dependence on properties transferred from their parents.

9) Similar policy should be adopted as regards to the transfer of vacant lands.

4) TRANSFER OF JEWELLERY

Here are some suggestions: 1) Put a limit on the amount of money that can be transferred at the time of the marriage of any children- say a sum of 50,000 tax-free. Any amount over this to be taxed heavily. 2) Each year the parents can donate a smaller amount – say 10,000- to their adult children (over 18 years). Again, any thing that is donated over this amount be taxed as high as 60 to 70 %.

1) The Tamil parents are overburdened by the heavy demand of jewelry during the dowry process. There is also over zealous enthusiasm from the Tamil parents to give as much as jewelry to their daughters beyond their means. This leads to an unusually high demand for gold in Eelam leading to higher prices for jewelry.

2) Like the transfer of cash, place a limit on the amount of jewelry that can be transferred at the time of marriage of their children. 2) Parents can donate jewelry to their adult children each year. But this amount should substantially lower than the amount in item one. 3) Any amount of jewelry that exceeds the allowable amount be taxed very high.

The anti dowry laws should be strictly implemented. Those who violate the laws should be shown no mercy. This will not only help to prevent the practice of

dowry, but also bring enough revenue to the state coffers.

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