

The Gift of a Daughter

Forum >
South Asia

Subhadra Butalia's father was determined to marry her to a husband who would not expect or demand a dowry. At the time she married, soon after the independence of India in 1947, a bride might be nagged or grumbled at for little or no dowry, but there were no threats of violence. However, many families 'taking' a bride had begun to expect, hint, demand, solicit, and finally threaten a woman and her parents for not giving expensive presents. By 1961, the Indian government recognized the custom had become an opportunity for extortion and passed a law to prohibit it. But a bride's wedding gifts had turned into a husband's entitlement, and Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, and Christian families increasingly began taking recourse to violence to obtain it.

By Shauna Singh Baldwin

In the 1970s, Subhadra Butalia found herself among a crowd watching in horror as the bride next door, Hardeep Kaur, became a human torch and was taken to hospital on a stretcher. With 70 per cent burns, Hardeep Kaur became yet another 'bride-burning' statistic, murdered by her in-laws for not bringing enough in cash and kind. Hardeep had been sent back to her parents with a list of her husband's dowry demands, but her parents decided she should be returned to her husband and in-laws. The blackmail continued until the parents could pay no more, and then Hardeep was murdered. Why did Hardeep's parents send her back, Butalia wondered? And she questioned why the newspapers had failed to carry a single report about Hardeep's murder. Of all the neighbours who had stood before the spectacle of a burning woman, only Subhadra Butalia agreed to testify. Thus began her 35-year struggle to help victims of dowry-related violence.

Now 81 years old, Subhadra Butalia has written a succinct volume that she describes as 'neither a memoir, nor a book about dowry'. Yet it has elements of both. Using names and stories of victims of dowry death and disagreement, the author explores this deeply embedded tradition and shows us the prob-

lems of social organizations and workers dealing with domestic violence in the extended family.

The memory of a childhood friend, Madhu, moved me to read *The Gift of a Daughter*. Madhu, a lovely young Punjabi woman, came from a wealthy, professional class family. She was head girl of my school, studied French and sociology at college and dreamed of travelling the world. She married for love in the early 1980s, and was shunned for it by her family. By 1983, she was gone. Poisoned, it was rumoured, by her in-laws. And the reaction from people in Delhi: 'What did she expect, marrying against her parents wishes? Her in-laws should have known there would be no dowry given to her, no matter what their demands. This is what happens to a disobedient girl.'

Madhu's story is not unique. The dowry tradition is now practised by Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, and Christians alike. Moreover, dowry demands have made their way overseas, so that wedding season for brides of Indian origin in the North American diaspora of Indians, is also dowry season. For all its sensational appeal when mentioned in the Western press, bride-burning and the dowry system are Indian expressions of 'domestic violence' in materially developed countries, spanning classes and education levels. A 1997

estimate by UNICEF placed the annual number of reported dowry deaths in India at 5,377, a 12 per cent increase on the previous year. While men living in North America who believe women to be non-persons, might verbally abuse, beat or eventually shoot them (with no statistics available as to whether economic demands were made to relatives), men and mothers-in-law without access to handguns might, in India, douse a woman in kerosene and light a match.

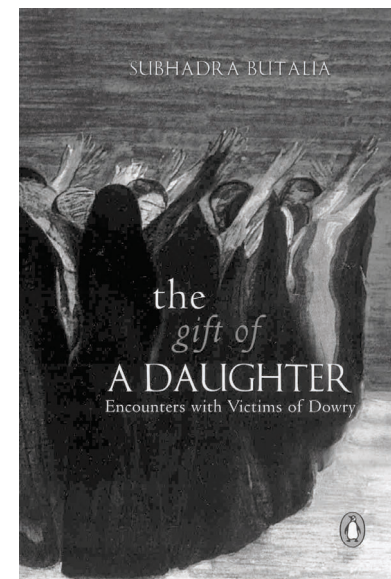
Subhadra Butalia and the organizations she has founded, Stree Sangarsh and Karmika, have intervened hundreds of times in India to prevent a dowry killing, or have sought to bring murderers to justice. In a tone of sadness, she describes the elusiveness of justice. Yet her outrage must have been strong enough to carry her through many rescue missions over the years, and to prompt her to write.

The perennial question arises: how can any parent value his or her respectability higher than the life of his or her daughter? As in Hardeep Kaur's case, an Indian daughter facing dowry demands is highly likely to be sent back to her in-laws to 'adjust', facing abuse, violence, and even death. Butalia offers two explanations, the first mythological – an unwed Hindu woman becomes a ghost – the second economic. Eco-

nomie reasons outweigh any myths in the stories she presents, for the list of explanations begins with the underground cash economy and the ostentatious display by the *nouveaux riches*. And the book's ever-present backdrop is the large-scale dependence of Indian women on husbands, and atavistic ideas of women as property.

Having introduced the problem of dowry by displaying the faces and names of its victims over her years of activism, Butalia leaves us with many open questions for further research, such as: why do women (sisters and mothers-in-law) participate in dowry demands? How can we penetrate the wilful denial of parents of married daughters that dowry demands are illegal and dangerous to their daughters' physical safety? How is the practice of bride-endowment (*mehar*) changing to dowry in the Indian Muslim community? How does the implementation of Hindu inheritance law underpin dowry demands experienced by women subject to Hindu personal law?

By the end of this little gem of a book, you feel the author's ruminating voice fill with wonder and delight in the stories of young women who, in the past few years, have thrown feminine respectability to the wind, and called off or walked out of weddings when a dowry demand was made. Subhadra



Butalia's father would have been proud of his courageous daughter's many arduous years of helping victims, and of agitating for changes in the law and its enforcement. Though too late for many like Hardeep and my friend Madhu, social workers like Butalia have raised our consciousness and made it conceivable for young women to question and protest at this pernicious institution. <

- Butalia, Subhadra, *The Gift of a Daughter. Encounters with Victims of Dowry*, Delhi: Penguin Books India (2002), pp. 170, ISBN 0143028715

Shauna Singh Baldwin is a Canadian-American writer of Indian origin. Her books of fiction include *What the Body Remembers* (Knopf Canada; Doubleday USA) and *English Lessons and Other Stories* (Goose Lane Editions, Canada). This review is also available online at BlueEar.com, and published in India by *Manushi* magazine. n@execpc.com

Preserving Tibetan Cultural Heritage

Research >
Central Asia

As the situation deteriorated in Tibet, the odds for Akong Tulku's refugee party looked more unfavourable each day of their perilous journey to India. Leaving behind the familiar and accommodating world of Eastern Tibet, which they had enjoyed and cherished for as long as their memories reached, they now found themselves displaced and lost in the freezing winter of the southern mountain ranges of Tibet, all of a sudden fugitives in their own land. After many months of arduous hardships, their group, which included the 11th Trungpa Tulku, the leader of the party, had dwindled from several hundreds to just a little more than a dozen. Too hungry and exhausted to move, they huddled together in a Himalayan cave, waiting for death to take them one by one. Fortunately, local hunters chanced upon them and took pity. Having thus escaped certain death through the kindness of strangers, Akong Tulku resolved to dedicate his remaining life to providing aid and refuge to people in distress, in Tibet and elsewhere.

By Pim Willems

It was with this defining experience in mind that Akong Tulku Rinpoche founded, in 1980, the humanitarian aid organization Rokpa, which in Tibetan signifies 'help'. Headed by Rokpa International in Switzerland, 17 branches in 16 countries raise funds for projects in education, healthcare, environment, culture, and social economy. At present, there are 135 projects in Tibet alone. Through publication of rare Tibetan texts, many of which are on the verge of being lost forever, preservation of Tibetan cultural heritage is actively sought. These efforts have so far resulted in two multi-volume collections: Tibetan medical texts and Kagyupa college texts. These collections will be entrusted to the care of libraries all over the world, in the hope to better preserve Tibetan heritage, which has proven to be so vulnerable to the vicissitudes of history.

Since 1998, members of Rokpa have actively searched many regions of Tibet for rare medical texts, while also trying to locate commentaries on the basic texts and documents identifying crucial medicinal herbs. The collected texts are electronically edited and arranged into volumes, while prefaces, illustrations, and footnotes are added. Ultimately, Rokpa Tibet and the Sichuan Minority Printing House will print some twenty-seven 600-page volumes of Tibetan medical texts.

Of the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism: the Gel-

ugpa, Sakyapa, Nyingmapa, and Kagyupa, the first three have their own college texts. To ensure that in Kagyupa college students can be taught from their own textbooks, and to save Kagyupa traditional knowledge from being lost, Rokpa International has decided to locate and collect all texts of the Kagyupa system of instruction in the ten traditional sciences or areas of learning. In a joint venture with the Xining Printing Press, 2,000 copies of the twenty-volume Kagyupa textbook collection will be printed for Tibetan colleges, universities, and libraries all over the world. The contents include:

poetry and modes of expression, dramatic and creative arts, the healing arts, valid cognition, graduated path, *abhidharma*, *madhyamika*, *prajnaparamita*, treatises relating sutra and tantra, commonalities of tantra, and commentaries on tantra.

The first copies were formally presented to the Kern Institute Library at Leiden University during the IIAS-initiated cultural event 'Appreciating Tibet in the West', held in November 2002 at the occasion of the official presentation of the proceedings of the ninth seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies. <

Pim Willems is secretary of Rokpa Netherlands. pim.willems@worldonline.nl

Information >

Rokpa International
rokpa.nl@worldmail.nl
www.rokpa.org

Tibetological Collections & Archives Series

Pim Willems's article on 'Preserving Tibetan Cultural Heritage' is the tenth contribution to the Tibetological Collections & Archives Series, which is devoted to important projects on cataloguing, 'computerization' (inputting and scanning), editing, and translation of important Tibetan language text-collections and archives. In this series various colleagues briefly present their initiatives to a larger public, or update the scholarly world on the progress of their already well-established projects. Some are high-profile projects, of which at least Tibetologists will generally be aware, yet some may also be less well known. Nevertheless, I trust that it will be useful to be informed or updated on all these initiatives and I also hope that the projects presented will profit from the exposure and the response that this coverage will engender. If you are interested in any of the projects described, feel free to contact the author of the article. In case you would like to introduce your own (planned) work in the field, please contact the editors of the *IIAS Newsletter* or the author of this introduction. We should very much like to encourage our contributors to keep us informed on the progress of their projects by means of regular updates. <

Henk Blezer, Researcher at the CNWS
h.w.a.blezer@let.leidenuniv.nl