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Wedding website has 'no dowry' clause

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new delhi • Gifts of cash and gold may be essential to getting a husband in India, but hundreds of people are flocking to a matrimonial website which finds suitable partners averse to this traditional practice of dowry.

Nearly 6,000 people have signed up to www.idontwantdowry.com, which aims at eradicating the custom outlawed in India more than four decades ago but still widely practised. According to the tradition, brides must gift their future husbands with valuables — usually money and gold, but which can range from washing machines to plots of land.

The website, founded by software professional Satya Naresh in April 2006, met with little response initially as people seemed wary of admitting they did not want dowry. "There was this feeling that if a man didn't want dowry, there must be something wrong with him," said Naresh.

But things have improved since. At last count, around 3,800 men and 2,100 women had registered online. "When we started, we had expected the number of women and poor people to be more. But it's educated people like doctors and IT professionals who are a majority," said Naresh, who lives in Hyderabad.

Members, however, still pay close attention to factors such as social caste and religion while choosing potential mates. But the Web site's founder says these are minor hurdles.

"The dowry system is the major challenge. Women kill their daughter-in-laws for not bringing enough dowry, not for some other reason," said Naresh. "I just want to focus on this issue for now."

Police say the most common form of domestic violence in India is dowry-related and that one case of cruelty is committed by the husband or his relatives every nine minutes.

Taking inspiration from 2006 Nobel Peace Prize winner Muhammad Yunus, whose Grameen Bank in Bangladesh lifted millions out of poverty, Naresh said he wants to take the grassroots approach in his war against dowry. He has started a classifieds section on the Web site, aimed at people in rural areas who are unlikely to surf the Internet.

"They give us the details on our customer service helpline and we put it up as classifieds on the Web site, so that people can get back to them on the phone," said Naresh.

As part of the website's activities, all registered members can check out prospective brides and grooms face to face at 'Swayamvarams', or matrimonial meetings, held at a common venue. At these events, those in attendance take a pledge that they will not encourage the practice of dowry.

The website, with the tagline "I want just u, I don't want dowry" — does not owe its origin to its founder's personal experiences: At 34, Naresh is still unmarried.

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