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Features: [Magazine](#) | [Literary Review](#) | [Life](#) | [Metro Plus](#) | [Open Page](#) | [Education Plus](#) | [Book Review](#) | [Business](#) | [SciTech](#) | [NXg](#) | [Friday Review](#) | [Cinema Plus](#) | [Young World](#) | [Property Plus](#) | [Quest](#) | [Magazine](#)



Saying no to dowry

EMMA COTT

A website offers some respite from a social problem that has vexed lawmakers and activists for decades.

PHOTO: EMMA COTT



Trust in their talents: Ayyappa and Lakshmi.

Satya Naresh is hunched over a laptop in his office, waiting for his website to open. "I need to upgrade the server," beams the 38-year-old founder and CEO of *idontwantdowry.com*, India's first and only matrimonial website for brides and grooms that want to marry without dowry.

Ever since the success of his third matrimonial meet-up, or Swayamvaram, last December, curious young people have been logging in, and 300 new profiles are awaiting approval. As the site enters its fourth year, membership is still shy of 10,000, but Naresh is confident that as more people speak out against dowry while finding happy matches, the idea will catch on. He gushes about each of his 13 "success couples" like a proud parent.

Still prevalent

Although dowry was outlawed in 1961, it is still practised to different extents in different castes. Dowry harassment can range from a lifetime of verbal abuse to extreme physical and sexual abuse to murder. But few are willing to speak about it from their own experience.

Vasantha, a producer at a television station, said that she attempted suicide after the beatings and emotional abuse by her husband and in-laws became too severe. Her two-year-long marriage was "like a hell for me. Every day they were torturing me..."

Thanks to the support of her parents, who moved to Hyderabad to care for her after her subsequent divorce, Vasantha escaped a deadly fate. But many don't.

Archives
| [Datewise](#)
| [Issues](#)
| [Cuisine](#)
| [Travel](#)
| [Gardening](#)

News
[News Update](#)
[Front Page](#)
[National](#)
States:
• [Tamil Nadu](#)
• [Andhra Pradesh](#)
• [Karnataka](#)
• [Kerala](#)
• [New Delhi](#)
• [Other States](#)
[International](#)
[Opinion](#)
[Business](#)
[Sport](#)
[Miscellaneous](#)
[Index](#)

Advts
[Retail Plus](#)
[Classifieds](#)
[Jobs](#)
[Obituary](#)

In 2006, The National Crime Records Bureau reported 7,618 "dowry deaths". Dowry death, a provision unique to the Indian Penal Code, is defined as any unnatural death of the woman that occurs within seven years of marriage, where it can be proven that she was previously being harassed for dowry by the groom and his family. However, the criminal courts are backlogged and conviction rates hover at 0.6 per cent.

The fact that dowry is linked to prestige and accomplishment is part of what makes it so difficult to say no. As Vaijayanti Gupta, a feminist activist, explained, dowry-free people can be compared to a piece of clothing on the sale rack at the department store. If it's 50 per cent off, it probably has some defect.

The influx of Western-style consumerism has only made the dowry issue worse as a traditionally ascetic people have become needy and greedy, scholars and activists say.

A new materialism

"Today, this consumerism is really at the heart of the dowry issue... dowry is seen as a way of accumulating economic capital," says Donna Fernandes, the head of Vimochana, a women's rights organisation in Bangalore that has worked with dowry victims since the 1980s. Ayyappa and Lakshmi Nagubandi are one couple who found each other using Naresh's site. They have only been married only two months, and they both have the bright eyes and nervous energy of a couple newly in love.

Ayyappa says that he knew from a young age that he would not accept dowry. "I've never depended on anybody, not even my family. I have good brains. If I use that I can earn the kind of money I want to earn," he says.

Not in the market

Ayyappa has worked as a web designer and programmer for Satyam in Singapore and London, and for the World Bank in Washington D.C. Now, at age 32, he runs his own tech company in Hyderabad. He is exactly the type who could command a hefty dowry. When he was in his late twenties, he says he turned down several offers from overzealous fathers.

Lakshmi's father hadn't yet met Ayyappa, but he too was ready to pay. However, when interested grooms started asking for a minimum of Rs. 30 lakh cash, plus gold, land, and furniture, Lakshmi registered her profile on *idontwantdowry.com*. "I thought I should not be a burden to my father," she says.

Ayyappa insisted that they first meet at a restaurant — alone. Lakshmi says she expected to be there for 20 minutes, but before she knew it an hour and a half had passed. "I thought, 'Ok, I can live comfortably with this person. What he's speaking is genuine.' Everything was matching."

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