

An autopsy based study of unnatural deaths among newly married women in and around Silchar, Assam

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Abstract

It has been observed that there is a substantial increase in unnatural and premature demise of newlywed female in Indian society in recent times. To curb down this alarming situation requires social awareness, female empowerment and a redefined approach of the administration with proper and complete investigation. In this study most of the victims were young (18-24 years) Hindu females of middle or lower-middle socioeconomic status with poor educational qualification living in a joint family with their husband and in-laws and died in suspicious circumstances within three years of their marriage. Majority of such deaths were suicidal or homicidal. Burning was the most common cause of death, followed by hanging and poisoning. Few of them were strangled to death and then burned to temper the evidences. Pressure for dowry was the single largest reason behind such deaths. Ill-treatment by the in-laws, rash and negligent behaviour or extra-marital affairs of husbands, and mal-adjustment in females were other important reasons. Many of these deaths were also accidental, catching fire while cooking or handling open lamp/fire carelessly. Loose synthetic saris of the victims were responsible for large number of mortalities in this study.

Key Word: Dowry, Newly married female, Husband and in-laws, arranged marriage.

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INTRODUCTION

Violence against women is one of the major public concerns in our patriarchal society today. Domestic violence is the one which concern today's civilized society the most. It refers to violence arising from the household and within relationships covered by familial or emotional attachment. It includes all form of violence e.g. physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the domestic sphere. Crime statistics at national level in India highlight the seriousness of the problem. The severe underreporting of all crimes against women due to social

and cultural taboos notwithstanding, statistics show that five women face severe cruelty in her home every hour and 18 cases of dowry deaths occur every day in India. Moreover, whilst total crime rates are falling in India, crimes against women in all categories (rape, molestation, sexual harassment, cruelty at home which includes dowry harassment, dowry deaths and abduction) are on the rise. The present study deals with the epidemiological, social and medicolegal aspects of unnatural deaths in newly married females.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The material for the present study comprises of all the cases of newly married females died within seven years of their marriage that were brought for post mortem examination to the department of Forensic medicine, SMCH during the period from June 2013 to May 2014. To concentrate more on unnatural deaths due to family problems, the women died due to mass casualties, road traffic accidents, natural deaths and unidentified bodies were not included in this study. All the relevant information regarding epidemiological characteristic and their medicolegal aspects were gathered from the perusal

of police papers, from interrogation of police officers, relatives, friends and others accompanying the dead bodies. Causes of death were noted from medicolegal autopsy.

RESULT AND OBSERVATIONS

Prevalence: Total numbers of unnatural deaths in newly married females during the period from June 2013 to May 2014 were 69, which constitute 10.04% of total 687 deaths autopsied during the same period.

Table 1:

Total autopsy	No of female died within 7 years of marriage
687	69

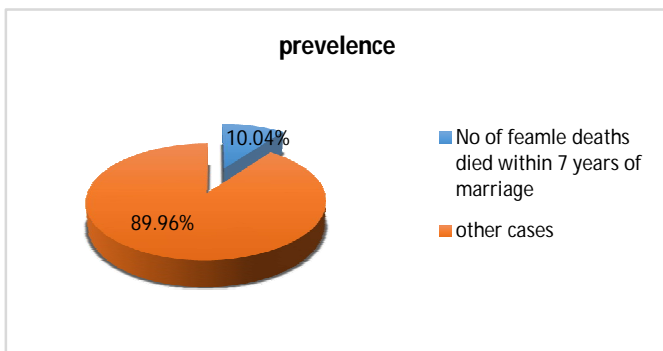


Figure 1:

Age distribution: Most of the victims were young adults between 18 to 26 years of age, of which 25 victims (36.23%) were between 21-22 years of age

Table 2:

Age group	No of cases	%
18-20	14	20.29
21-22	25	36.23
23-24	16	23.19
25-26	3	4.35
27-28	7	10.15
29-30	4	5.80
Total	69	100

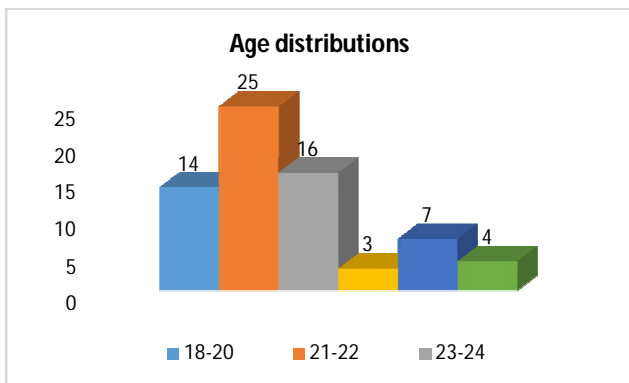


Figure 2:

Duration of marriage: Majority of the deaths (86-60.01%) happened within 3 years of marriage. The maximum number of cases – 21 (30.43%) were found between 1-2 years of marriage

Table 3:

Duration of Marriage	Nos. of cases	%
<1yr	17	24.64
1yr-2yr	21	30.43
2yr-3yr	11	15.94
3yr-4yr	6	8.70
4yr-5yr	5	7.25
5yr-6yr	4	5.80
6yr-7yr	5	7.25
Total	69	100

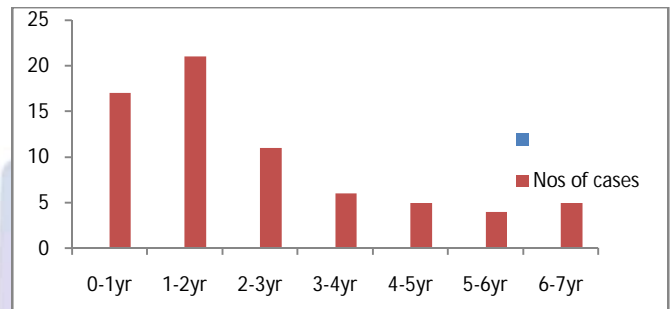


Figure 3:

Religion: Maximum numbers of victims (60 – 86.96%) were Hindu females.

Table 4:

Religion	No. of cases	%
Hindu	60	86.96
Islam	07	10.14
Christian	02	2.90

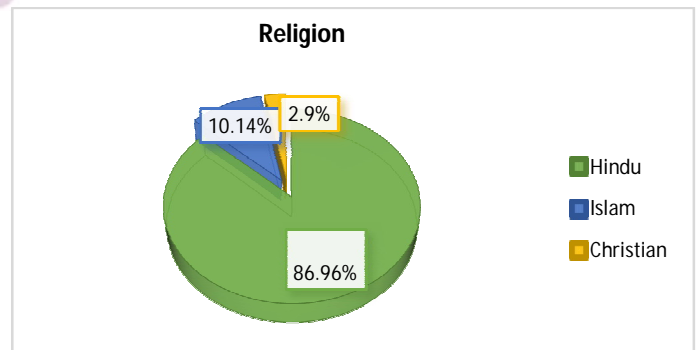


Figure 4:

Educational qualification: Majority of the victims were either illiterate (18 – 26.09%) or poorly educated. Only 4 (5.80%) of the victims were intermediate. None of them was graduate or professionally qualified.

Table 5:

Education	No. of cases	%
Illiterate	18	26.09
Primary	27	39.13
Jr. High School	7	10.14
High School	13	18.84
Intermediate	4	5.80
Graduate	0	0
Post-Graduate	0	0
Technical / Professional	0	0
Total	69	100

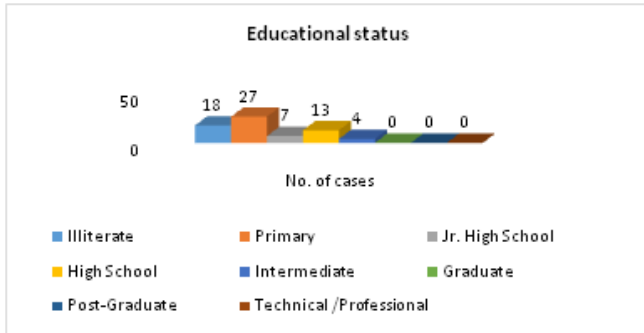


Figure 5:

Socio-economic Status of victims: Majority (41- 59.42%) belonged to lower middle (class IV), followed by 18 (26.09%) of middle (class III) socio-economic group.

Table 6:

SE Class	No. Of Cases	%
Lower (Class V)	08	11.59
Lower middle (Class IV)	41	59.42
Middle (Class III)	18	26.09
Upper Middle (Class II)	02	2.90
Upper	00	00
Total	69	100

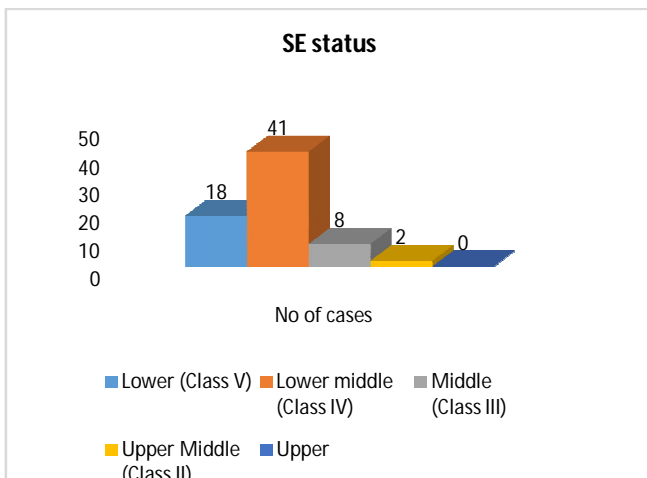


Figure 6:

Occupation of the victims: Maximum numbers 61cases (88.40%) of victims were domestic worker or housewives who depends on husband for livelihood.

Table 7:

Occupation of the victims	Nos.	%
House wives	61	88.40
Labour	6	8.70
Service	2	2.90
Total	69	100

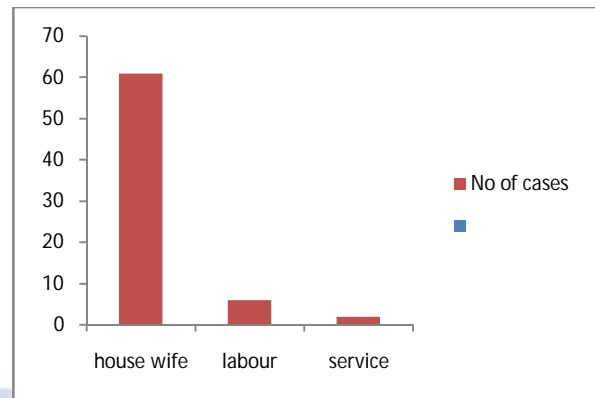


Figure 7:

Occupation of the victims' husband: Majority victim's husband were either unemployed (27- 39.13%) or doing private jobs (17- 24.64%).

Table 8:

Occupation	No. of cases	%
Unemployed	27	39.13
Private jobs	17	24.64
Govt. Service	2	10.14
Own business	12	17.39
Labour	3	4.35
Drivers	3	4.35
Others	5	7.25

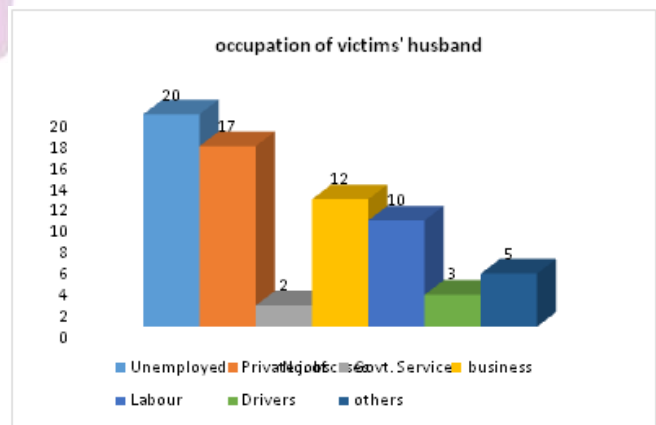


Figure 8:

Reasons behind unhappy married life of the victims: Family life was not happy in all of the cases. The prime cause of unhappiness was the pressure for dowry by in-laws and its inability to pay by the parents, which was observed in 19 (27.54%) cases.

Table 9:

	No. of cases	%
Dowry	19	27.54
Ill-treatment by in-laws	12	17.39
Rash and negligent behaviour of husband	15	21.74
Extra-marital affairs	4	5.80
Drunkenness	7	10.14
Mal-adjustment of wife	6	8.70
Poverty	5	7.25
Infertility in female	1	1.45
Total	69	100

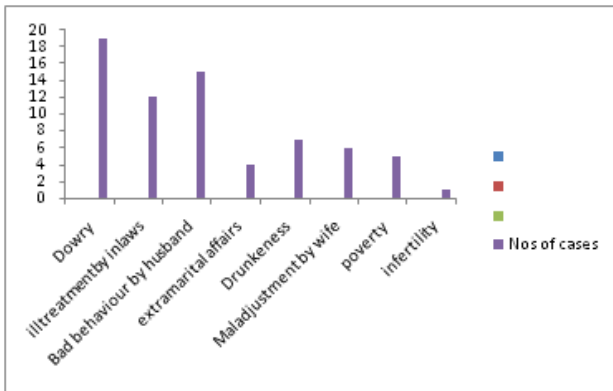


Figure 9:

Cause of Death: Maximum numbers of cases died due to burning 35 (50.72%) cases followed by hanging 14 (20.29%) cases

Table 10:

Cause of death	No. of cases	%
Burning	35	50.72
Hanging	14	20.29
Poisoning	12	17.39
Strang./throttling	2	2.90
Drowning	4	5.80
Others	2	2.90
Total	69	100

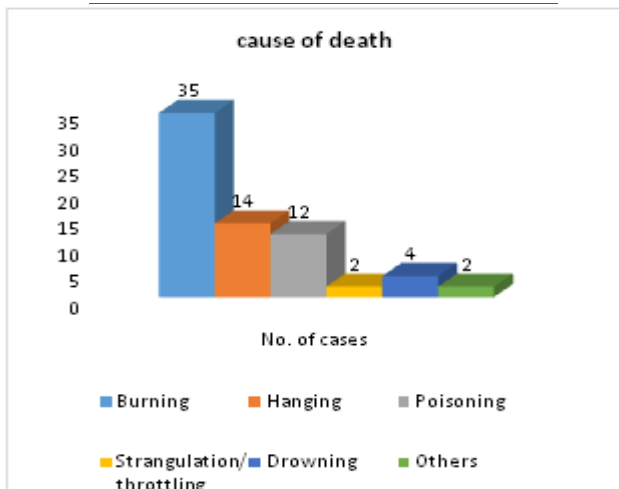


Figure 10:

Manner of death: In more than half of the cases manner of death was Suicidal with 39(56.52%) cases followed by Accidental 20 (28.99%) cases

Table 11:

Manner of death	No. of cases	%
Suicidal	39	56.52
Accidental	20	28.99
Homicidal	10	14.49
Total	69	100

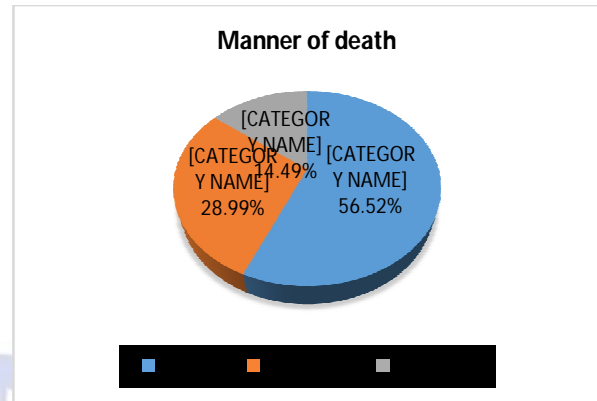


Figure 11:

DISCUSSION

The incidence of unnatural death in young Hindu females, within 3 yrs. of their marriage was alarmingly high. This was probably due to prevalent dowry system amongst the Hindus, where the newly married victims were tortured for inability to fulfil dowry demand. Again for social taboos brides has to suffer every things. Once married, a woman is expected to stay married, regardless of the violence in her life. At times, the intensity of violence reaches extreme limit which ultimately forces her to end her life. In some cases husband or his family murder the bride so that he can be free to engage in another marriage and get more dowries. Most popular means adopted by perpetrators to kill wives is burning so that a homicide can easily be presented as an accident. Thus, the perpetrators get enough opportunity to tamper with or destroy the circumstantial evidences. Besides dowry, ill-treatment/torture by the in-laws, extra-marital affairs, rash and negligent behaviour and drunkenness of husband and non-adjusting nature of wives were the other reasons behind such deaths. Illiteracy, early marriage of girls, joint family structure, unemployment and economic dependence of husband on their parents and nearly complete dependence of women on their husband and/or in-laws were other contributory factors affecting the marital unhappiness in one or the other way.

CONCLUSION

Deaths in newly married females due to various family problems account for 10% of the total unnatural deaths. Most of the victims were young Hindu women between 18-26 years of age who died within three years of their marriage. Majority of the victims were poorly educated, non-working. (Housewives) and belonged to middle or lower-middle socio-economic groups. Their marriage was arranged and they were living with their in-laws in joint family. The husbands were either unemployed or poorly salaried and they were dependent on parents for most of their expenses. The marital life of the victim was not happy in most cases. The demand for more dowry, ill-treatment/torture by the in-laws, rash and negligent behaviour or extra-marital affairs of husband were the important reasons behind family unhappiness. More than half of the deaths were suicidal. Homicidal and accidental cases accounted for the rest of cases. As a whole, burning was the most common cause of death followed by hanging and then poisoning. Ill-treatment by the in-laws, excessive demand for dowry and negligent/ill behaviour

of husband were the main reasons behind suicidal deaths. Failure to fulfil dowry demands and extra-marital affairs of the husband were the main reasons of homicidal deaths and wearing loose synthetic sari while cooking on unprotected flame in cases of accidental deaths.

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