

# All that glitters...

**Is the Arundhati Gold Scheme a boon or bane?**

**T**he Arundhati Gold Scheme is a new policy made by the Government of Assam, under which the government will now offer ten grams of gold to young women for their weddings. But whether this scheme will be a boon or bane can only be ascertained in the coming years. Here are a few of my observations on the scheme.

The moment a girl turns 18 or is close to that age, which is the legal marriageable age for Indian women, there could be a rush, rather a mental and emotional pressure to get married for the sake of procuring one *tol* or 10 grams of gold or Rs. 30,000 to purchase gold. Women's education would also receive a setback – as there is no guarantee that a woman would be able to continue her education after marriage, given the social norms and conditions in which married women live or are expected to live. Villages that saw upcoming women graduates/postgraduates, professionals, or sportswomen, will now see more brides, rather than Hima Dases or Rima Dases. While we are striving to enhance, strengthen and upscale women's education, not just in the academic field, but in fine arts, sports, etc., the scheme will definitely lead to a lesser number of women who have passed Class -XII or graduation, and, therefore, in all possibility, lead to a rise in early marriages in the State. Is marriage the sole aim of a girl's life? Not all girls want to marry. Some may remain single by choice. Different girls have different gender and sexual identities whose choices of marriage may not fall within the ambit of a so called normal definition of marriage. So the scheme is not inclusive. It does not cater to all woman and girls, does not assure them any State assistance.

Another point to ponder is the increased violence against women in the State. Assam is at the top when it comes to crimes against women. It is one of the states that has recorded the highest rate of crimes against women in 2017, according to the National Crime Records Bureau. The majority of these cases are cruelty by husband, and the State has also registered one of the highest crime rates under kidnapping to compel women for marriage. The gold scheme could likely become a bait to commit further abuse on women. It wouldn't be surprising if the cause of domestic violence, especially dowry and partner abuse, in the next few months, would be this scheme.

Moreover, the control and access to the 'gold' or its equivalent cash would not be in the hands of the woman in a patriarchal society like ours. Gold, it seems, is being understood as a symbol of marriage. But is 'gold' central to weddings in our State? It was never so in Assam, at least. Here *gamosa*, *tamul*



*paan*, *mekhela-sador*, *kahi-bati*, and other essential items are given to a bride for her convenience as she begins a new phase in her life. These will now be less attractive in comparison to gold. Women will be further commodified in the marriage market.

The use/access/control on the *tol* of gold or its equivalent cash must be in the hands of the young adult woman. However, the reality is different, as a woman generally remains under the control of her family, both natal and marital, who will eventually decide and manipulate the fortune of the *tol* of gold during or post-marriage. There is every possibility of manipulation of certificates related to age, marriage, education and even the bills related to the purchase of gold. Women are not recognised as agencies of their own. So, a scheme with the best intentions, as claimed by the government, may remain defeated in the long run and render women disempowered.

Rather, the Rs. 800 crores annually earmarked for the scheme must be allotted to make safety plans for women in public and private spaces which are accessible, affordable and functional for all women and girls, especially the most distressed women. The amount must, instead, be invested in initiatives like helplines, legal aid, institutional care services, safe streets, transport and workplaces, etc., and incentives in education and literacy, literary clubs, sports, fine arts, technical skills, promotion of non-conventional livelihoods, health care, building women's capacities to participate in public and political life, etc.

Will 'Arundhati' make women 'glitter in gold'?

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Will they be ornamental recipients of a regressive scheme? Will the scheme liberate or subordinate women? The questions remain unanswered. The public must be alert. Larger implications of the scheme on women must be critically understood by all, including the government agencies.