

Centre setting up web portal to track NRI marriages, protect wives

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NEW DELHI: The ministry for Women and Child Development is setting up a website on which registrars from states across the country will have to upload details related to NRI marriages, in a move aimed at tacking the issue of NRI husbands abandoning or ill-treating their wives, sometimes abandoning them in India soon after marriage.

On 20 December, the ministry also constituted an integrated nodal agency headed by its secretary to address all issues related to NRI marital disputes. The developments follow recommendations made by an inter-ministerial panel headed by external affairs minister Sushma Swaraj to review the legal and regulatory challenges faced by women deserted by NRI men.

“Having a website that has all data related to marriages of NRIs with Indian nationals, including the address of the NRI groom, where he works, etc. will help us to tackle complaints more promptly.

CONTINUED ON P 6

NRI marriages

“It will be mandatory for registrars to upload all details soon after a marriage is registered,” said a senior official of the ministry on condition of anonymity.

Although there is no consolidated data available with the government on the number of women who marry NRIs every year (on average), on December 21, junior external affairs minister VK Singh told Parliament that Indian missions abroad received 3328 complaints from Indian women about marital disputes with their NRI spouses since 2015. Of this, 3268 were addressed by way of providing counselling to the women, and guidance and information about procedures, including on how to serve judicial summons to NRI husbands.

The complaints ranged from grooms who disappeared soon after marrying women in India to husbands who were preventing their wives from travelling to India (and who had seized their passports); from husbands who abandoned their wives in a foreign country to those who had sent their wives back home but were not giving up the custody of their children.

The increase in such cases in recent years hasn't gone unnoticed. Both Swaraj and the minister for women and child development Maneka Gandhi have been pushing for a legal framework to address these issues.

The ministerial panel led by Swaraj has also recommended uploading the court summons issued to NRI men on the website. “The panel has suggested that the law ministry amend the Indian Evidence Act to make the summons served on the website legally tenable,” said a second government official who too spoke on condition of anonymity.

That could address a major problem Indian authorities face in dealing with NRI husbands: Indian Missions and Posts have no means enforcing the order abroad, except when the other country accepts the request for mutual legal assistance.

The panel also recommended that all NRI marriages be registered within a week after they are solemnised. “The law minis-

try, which is in the process of bringing a law to make registration of all marriage mandatory, has been directed to examine the proposal,” added the official in the ministry of women and child development.

Currently, only a handful of states including Punjab, which was the first, compulsorily register NRI marriages.

The MEA had in May set up a nine-member panel headed by retired judge Arvind Kumar Goel (who is also the former chairman of Punjab's state commission for NRIs). In its report submitted last month, the Goel panel had recommended impounding/cancelling the passport of NRIs who harass their wives for dowry or abuse and desert them in foreignland.

It also recommended that cases of domestic violence be included in the scope of India's extradition treaties with other countries.