

Sadgati ?

The Deaths Of "Blessed" Women

We present here accounts by two Maharashtrian Brahman men of how, in the early years of this century, their sisters resorted to suicide to escape maltreatment and humiliation at the hands of their in-laws. What is most interesting about these suicides is that they occurred with the knowledge and apparently passive consent of those around, including the women's families. The way the women prepared for death suggests that this was an escape route chosen by many suffering women, and is in some ways comparable to Sati by fire which was earlier prevalent in other parts of the country, it also suggests that the maltreatment of wives is by no means a recent phenomenon caused by 'modern materialism', as many people think it is.

An extract from "Pundalik" the autobiography of NT. Katagade, Gandhian constructive worker, later Bhoodan worker, born 1895

Within four or five months of Mother's death my sister Gita died of poisoning. Gita had been married to my mother's brother.* My eldest sister was first married to this uncle, but she had died at the time of the birth of her first child, so the second sister, Gita, was given to him as his second wife. Gita was a very handsome girl, but my uncle had got into the habit of visiting prostitutes. He actually had a kept woman. After the death of my father, grandmother, and mother, this prostitute, Radhasani, began to come to our house. Then she even began to eat with us, first once and then both times every day. Gita naturally thoroughly disapproved of this.

One day Radhasani asked for the gold necklace Gita was wearing. Gita informed her husband that she would never yield to this demand. My eldest brother, Gopal, had also begun to spend his nights away from home, so that the only persons at home

*Such uncle-niece marriages are quite common in the south of India in the southern part of Maharashtra, where Miraj is located

that night were my uncle, Gita, Radhasani, my widowed sister, myself, and my younger brother. My uncle closed the door of the



inside room and began to beat Gita to make her hand over the necklace. We children, seeing this atrocity, hid ourselves behind the prayer room in our house. Gita was trying to keep down her wails so that the neighbours might not hear her and think badly of our family; otherwise they might gather together and see this despicable spectacle. She had removed the necklace

from her throat and held it firmly in her hand. However, my uncle tried, she did not let it go. Finally, my uncle hit her hand with a wooden pounding pestle used in polishing grain, and Radhasani threw her shoe at Gita. At that moment Gita gave up any hope of retaining the necklace. Soon after, my uncle and Radhasani went out of the house. It was about midnight. After the two had gone, all of us brothers and sisters sat together weeping. Even today this scene stands vividly before my mind's eye.

Later, after we had all dozed off, Gita sat on her bed for a long time. She must have fallen asleep toward morning, for she did not get up at the usual time. My uncle returned home at about ten o'clock and tried to rouse her. She flatly refused to get up and look to the cooking and said to him, "Why don't you give me some poison and kill me?" My uncle replied, "All right, I will get some poison." That day, my uncle cooked the food and fed us. My eldest brother Gopal came home very late and as soon as I saw him I told him about the events of the previous night. He went to

Gita, who was still lying on her bed, but she did not speak to him. My uncle served food for her on a plate and took it in to her. After leaving the plate near her, he left the house. Gopal told me to go to Gita and swear by my own life to get her to eat her food. But Gita heard this and said, "Pundalik, please do no-thing of the kind. I am going to get up in the evening."

About three in the afternoon my uncle came home again, and Gita immediately asked him, "Have you brought it?" Uncle gave her a small white package. Gita arose at once, washed her face, and took some food. By that time my uncle and brother had left again. She took out a very costly *sari* with gold embroidery on it, cut it into several blouse pieces, sent for some coconuts from the market, and went out to the houses of several married women in the neighbourhood, to whom she presented these sacred symbols of good luck.

In our house there was an old

maidservant who was in the habit of eating opium whom Gita sent to buy some opium, in case the pack-age her husband had brought did not contain poison ; for if after taking it she did not die, people would laugh at her. Hence she was making everything doubly sure. In the evening she prepared an early meal of rice and a thin curry of garbanzo flour and gave us our food. She also gave us all the curds with cream that was in the house. She even mixed the rice with the curry for each one of us with her own hand. She pressed us to eat as much as we could, repeating again and again, "Eat the food I have cooked with my own hands." By seven in the evening we had all finished our meal.

"Now children, go to bed, all of you. I shall now prepare my medi-cine." With these words she went into the kitchen. There she took out two of her glass bangles, powdered them in the mortar, then mixed in the opium and the powder uncle had brought. She stirred this mixture in milk

and prepared her "medicine." Then she called me and my sister, asked me to sit by her, and caressed me for a little while. "Now I will take my medicine," she said ; with that she drank the cup of poison. In a few mo-ments she fell down on her bed and began to cry out loudly. We went to Narudada, roused him and brought him to the house. He called the doctor. My uncle also returned. At about 11.30 that night, Gita died. The doctor probably helped my uncle to escape the hand of the law ; possibly he got some money for it. In about an hour and a half the dead body was taken to the cremation ground. At about six o'clock in the morning uncle came back, took his bicycle, and again went out.

Later that morning a neighbour came in a *tonga* with the doctor and the inspector of police and asked me when Gita's dead body was removed from the house. Without waiting for my reply, they drove on to the cremation ground, but the body had nearly been consumed by the fire.

An extract from "Bahurupi", the autobiography of C-G- Kolhatkar, leading Marathi actor :

My brother-in-law was a well-educated and successful man, but his domestic life was entirely gover-ned by his mother. In fact, he never got free from his mother's apron-strings. His love for his mother went so far that even when he saw the extraordinary ill-treatment of his wife at her hands, he did not utter a word of protest. Apparently the fact that my sister came from a respectable family and had received some education, unlike most girls of those times, were crimes in the eyes of her mother-in-law.

Her ill-treatment included actual physical violence ; she was beaten and also starved. She was made to sleep in the stable, had to do hand-polishing of rice used in the house and got only the broken rice together with some very sour butter-milk which she hated, and was

given only the coarsest of *saris* and sackcloth for bedding. She was continuously abused with the most offensive of epithets. On special occasions the poor girl's father and mother were also roundly denoun-ced with selected epithets.

But my sister went through all these ordeals with the determination of a true Hindu woman. Then the mother-in-law allowed her, after she had her first flux, to go to her hus-band as a kind of favour. This resulted in the birth of a daughter. Then the tragedy reached its climax. My brother-in-law developed diabe-tes and was confined to bed, and the newly born child and her mother were accused of being an evil omen.

During all his illness my sister could hardly see her husband, let alone nurse

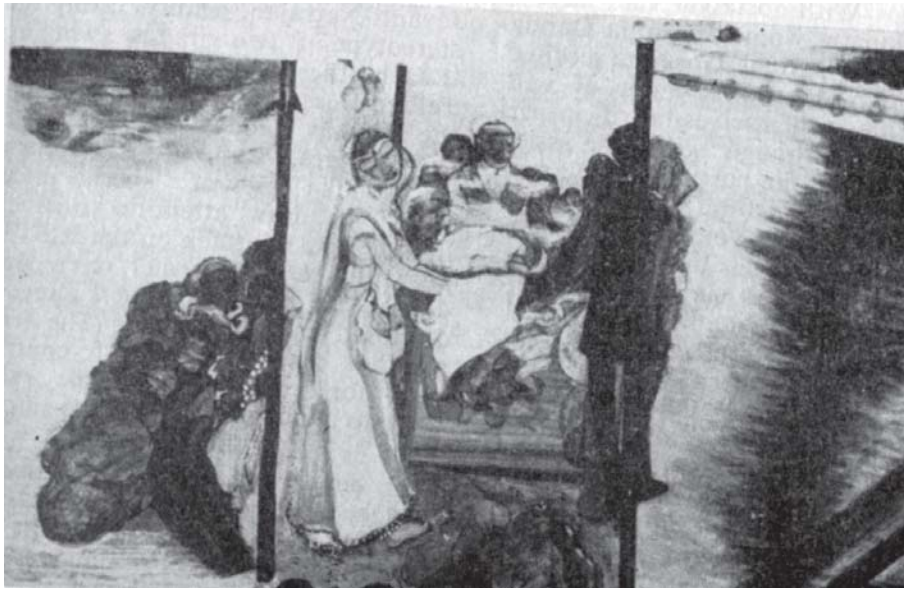
him. The doctors tried their best but feared the worst. One night my sister caught hold of one of the doctors and pressed him with all the earnestness at her command to tell her the worst. The doctor was moved, because the story of the terrible ill-treatment of the helpless young woman was known to young and old in Miraj. He merely heaved a sigh and grunted.

My sister at once realised the true state of affairs. Then she appeared to have come to some kind of decision. She called in, one by one, all the married women she

* Applying red *kunku* to the foreheads of married women whose husbands were living and a spot of yellow turmeric powder beneath it was the traditional ceremo-nial honouring such women, who were considered auspicious. To die before one's husband is considered good fortune for a woman because she will not have to suffer the trauma of widowhood.

knew whose husbands were living, gave them red *kunku* and yellow turmeric powder,* and presented them with some out she was dead. Just at that moment, somebody cried out that her husband had breathed his last. Whether from the sick bed or from the bottom of the well, the two souls had the same destination and went along their path together.

The news of the double tragedy spread like wildfire in the town and everybody rushed to the house. Everybody said,



“blessed woman” when they saw the dead girl’s body. The police carried out a routine examination and handed back the body for cremation. But now, just as certain playwrights, even after they have reached the climax in the unfolding of the drama, continue to harp on the same theme and disgust the discerning spectator, the mother-in-law stepped in with an anticlimax.

As some married women from the neighbourhood were preparing the body in a manner suitable for a woman who had died before her husband* the mother-in-law cried out, “Wait, do not take the widow** like that. She has become a bare-headed one*** after her husband’s death!” These words horrified those assembled. They silenced her by their

denouncing words and scornful laughter, put the ceremonial red *kunku* powder on the forehead of the dead girl, placed the traditional coconut and grain in the end of her *sari*, strewed flowers on her head and body, and carried out all the prescribed rites for a woman who dies before her husband.

It was afternoon before the legal formalities and the religious rites were over. Then a long procession of mourners, young and old, started towards the

cremation ground. The dead woman as an eternal *soubhagyavati***** preceded her husband’s body in the funeral procession in the traditional manner. Many people, particularly the late sportsman’s

*The bodies of such women, in Maharashtra, are clad in a green *sari* with green bangles on their wrists and red *kunku* marks on their foreheads.

**The Marathi word she uses has the meaning of both widow and prostitute and is not used for a widow unless the speaker intends to show the utmost contempt and to defame her.

***That is, she ought to be shaved like a widow. This custom was prevalent only in the Brahman castes and in one or two other higher castes.

****This untranslatable word traditionally means a woman whose husband is living, hence a woman of good fortune.

colleagues, threw little flowers of wrought silver or gold or fresh flowers over the bodies. Even though the cremation ground in Miraj is three miles from the town, a large number of citizens followed the procession and with heavy hearts set fire to the funeral pyre.

Some people tell a wonder story about this funeral. After the pyres were lighted, a cow came up to them again and again, even though people tried to drive it away. Finally someone suggested that it should be allowed to do what it apparently wanted to do. So people moved to one side. Then the cow performed the sacred round of the pyre in the traditional right-hand circle. We can, of course, say that this was a story started and spread by those who were touched by the tragedy, but the newspapers gave it considerable publicity at the time.

When Achyut heard of this sad affair, he wrote a letter from Poona to my mother. It said,

‘I received your letter, which saddened and shocked me. I admire the courage shown by Tai. (Tai was my sister’s pet name.) When I think of her behaviour, I say to myself, “What meritorious action !” I think she acted in a way which is very creditable to our family. As the poet Moropant has said, “What great good fortune that a woman should die before her husband.” My revered aunt should try to think of her daughter as an ornament to our family and try to console her-self. The series of calamities she has had to face is greater even than those which befell the women in our epics. But God, the friend at the end of one’s days, will not leave her...’

That was the end of our Tai. Even today, after so many years, my heart becomes full when I write this terrible story of her life.

My mother’s condition was like that of a sinless, dumb cow. Even her tears dried up. She could hardly say anything. To whom could she talk—and about whom ? And how could she express what she felt?

(These two extracts are from the English translation of the original Marathi, in “*The New Brahmins*” ed. D.D. Karve, 1963)