

Seven Decades Ago . . .



Is self sacrifice for a Father, husband or son the only way for a woman to attain deification? Sandip Bandhopadhyay reports on the Sneh Lalata self immolation case of 1914

ON January 30, 1914, Sneh Lalata Mukhopadhyay, a 15 year old girl, committed suicide by setting herself on fire? Her father, Shri Harindrachandra Mukhopadhyay, who lived in the Shyambazar area, of Calcutta, had arranged for Sneh Lalata's marriage to a young boy whose father claimed Rs 800 as dowry in cash and jewellery worth about Rs 1200. Mukhopadhyay was unable to muster up the amount and he finally decided to mortgage his house. Observing this, Sneh Lalata chose to put an end to her life, in order to "save her father from ruin for her marriage."

Dowry was a common theme in early 20th century Bengali literature. In a number of stories, young brides either die as a result of severe oppression at the hands of their in-laws or kill themselves only to escape from the cruel treatment, often physical torture, inflicted on them by their husbands and in-laws.

A number of letters and articles published after Sneh Lalata's death also refer to real life cases of girls committing suicide before marriage, in a bid to save their fathers from financial ruin. Sneh Lalata's story was, however, exceptional in its consequences. It

created an unprecedented stir in Bengali middle class society and almost led to a movement against dowry, which also reached rural Bengal.

Several Bengali poets, including Satyendranath Datta, Pramatha Chaudhury and Govindachandra Das wrote poems on Sneh Lalata. That in the same year, 1914, Rabindranath Tagore wrote three short stories, *Haimanti*, *Strir Patra* (Letter from a wife) and *Aparichita* (An unknown woman) which espouse women's freedom, and make a scathing attack on dowry, may have some association with Sneh Lalata's death.

Almost all the Bengali periodicals of those days reacted strongly and passionately to Sneh Lalata's death, and published a series of articles in bitter condemnation of the dowry system. The bridegroom's father was described as a "vile creature", a "confirmed mercenary", and the system was attacked virulently.

But the most significant part of the reaction seems to tie the series of meetings held, only a few days after the girl's death in Calcutta and in such remote places as Mymensingh an eastern Bengal district now in Bangladesh, Muzaffarpur in Bihar. There, the speakers

not only condemned the practice of extorting money from the bride's father but many "unmarried youths took solemn vows before fire that they would not accept dowry from, bride's father and would strongly protest against the will of their parents if they wanted to enforce the evil system." (*Amrita Bazar Patrika*, February 18, 1914).

An Anti Dowry Marriage League was formed and even caste based, orthodox associations like the Brahman Sabha and the Kayastha Sabha were critical of the dowry system which they, said, was injurious to Hindu society. The Kayastha Sabha journal of March-April 1914 published a list of non-dowry marriages held in the previous month, obviously to strengthen the sentiment against dowry.

But what was the gamut of the discussion on dowry that followed Sneh Lalata's death? Let us first see how the death was viewed.

It is curious that a section of the writers betrayed a tendency to equate

Photograph of Sneh Lalata from 'Pravasi' March-April 1914, courtesy Vanguja Sahetya Pareshad.

Snehalata with a *devi* or a Sati who had set up a glorious example of self sacrifice. Thus, according to Praniatha Chaudhuri, the girl had “courted the fire god of her own choice.” Poet Kalidas Roy addressed her as “*devi*” and some speakers at a meeting organised by Kalighat People’s Association on February 15 compared Snehalata’s self immolation to *Jauhar*—the practice of self immolation by Rajput women to save their “chastity” from being defiled by invaders. (*Amrita Bazar Pairika*, February 20, 1914).

Some others, the poet Govmda Das, for example, scolded the little girl for her “sinful act” and *Brahman Samaj* a journal of the Bangiya Brahman Sabha, August 1914 issue, gave its verdict that while Sati was sanctioned by the Vedas, suicide had always been considered sinful, hence Snehalata’s act should be condemned.

The criticism of dowry and the suggestions put forward to eliminate it also took several contradictory forms. While one section of writer identified early marriage as the root cause of dowry, another section came down on the spread of modern education among young boys which, according to them, had made the groom’s “personal qualification” more important than his family background and had encourage dowry.

Those who were against early marriage for girls claimed that the Hindu custom which compelled a father to marry his daughter at an early age resulted in his succumbing to dowry demands, because the girl’s father had to marry off his daughter at any cost, for fear of social stigma. Some even went to the extent of saying that parents should keep their daughters, unmarried rather than marry them to undesirable grooms “who are after money only”. One woman writer in the May 1914 issue of *Bamabodhini*, a journal for women, called on mothers to pledge that they would not consent to their daughters’ marriages on unjust terms. Interestingly, almost all the writers laughed at the “recent fashion” of young men pledging not to take dowry,

overlooking the symbolic value of this expression of resentment against dowry.

However, all these views were sharply combatted. Most of the speakers at the town ball meeting in Calcutta spoke in favour of early marriage; whereas *Pravasi* edited by Ramananda Chatterjee, and *Bharati*, edited by Swarnakumari Devi, Tagore’s elder sister, strongly pleaded for women’s education and stated that the abolition of the system of early marriage would facilitate the spread of education among young girls, Rasiklal Roy voiced the same opinion in *Navya Bharat* of March 1914,

Some other significant questions were also, raised. Bhirendhranath Roy Chaudhuri in the *Pravasi* of March-April 1914, argued that unless the system was uprooted, fathers would be forced to pay dowry in secret. He also dismissed as “impractical” the view that girls had better not marry rather than marry on insulting terms Kasiklal Roy in the *Navya Bharat* of March 14, suggested intercommunity marriage and a fight against caste prejudices to combat the evil of dowry, while Nagerdra. Nath Roy in the *Bharati* of May-June 1914, pleaded for the individual’s freedom to choose a marriage partner. The Kayastha Sabha journal of March-April 1914 emphasised the need to provide the “same kind of freedom and education for boys and girls.”

While all the waiters and speakers unanimously condemned the practice of dowry and used a flood of invective against it, not all of them were in favour of its total abolition. *Pravasi* and *Bharati* argued that while forcible extortion of money as dowry should be condemned and done away with immediately, no stigma should be attached to the “gifts” that a father gives to his daughter as a token of love at the time of her marriage.

There was also a tendency to ridicule the recent uproar over dowry and to divert the focus of discussion to such questions as whether dowry had any religious sanction and whether it was uniquely Indian. The glorification of Snehalata as a goddess and her death as

an immortal example of sacrifice also seems to be a deliberate attempt to mystify the whole question.

A survey of the articles thus points to a clear trend. There is general resentment against dowry but no unanimity about whether dowry should be totally abolished. The system is criticised but the forces responsible for it are not adequately exposed. Some writers saw society as an abstract entity and held it responsible for this cruel practice and others tried to explain the cruelty of the system in the light of man’s innate greed for money.

The most popular technique was to rouse passions by stressing notions of traditional personal morality. For example, the Brahman Sabha journal of April-May 1914 opined: “We must get rid of the fire of greed first; otherwise we shall not be able to stop this practice” and one writer exclaimed: “Oh, how long should this thirst for blood go on?”

Surprisingly, the two well known journals for women, *Bamabodhini* and *Mahila* apparently did not take the issue very seriously. Their criticism of the dowry system seems to be rather mild and *Mahila* could not even afford to support the movement against early marriage. One reason may be that though these journals, edited by men, upheld women’s right to freedom and education, they were also much concerned about the chastity of women and deemed it their duty to inculcate in women the ideals of service (*Sevadharma*) and self restraint (atmasamjam).

Strong feelings against dowry had been brewing in Bengali middle class society since the early years of the 20th century, Snehalata’s death snowballed them into something like a movement. The movement failed to launch an all out attack on the system and even hesitated to call for its total abolition. However, the significance of the dispute was that it tried to raise some questions relating to the basis of the prevailing marriage system which, ironically enough, still remain relevant as the country is said to be proudly heading for the 21st century.