

THE BRIDEGROOM'S PRICE.

BY CHINMOY.

THE tragic tale that was unfolded at the Coroner's Court in Calcutta the other day, in course of an inquest touching the death of a Brahmin maid of 16 of respectable parentage, has stirred Hindu India to the quick. The police report showed that at midnight, people living in neighboring houses in a populous quarter of the city roused the parents of the deceased, informing them that a fire was burning on the roof of the house. The father and some of the neighbors got up on the roof, and to their horror found the girl enveloped in flames. The fire was put out with as much promptitude as was possible under the circumstances, and the girl, who had already sustained severe injuries, was removed to the hospital where she died the same day. The evidence collected at the Coroner's Court went to show that the deceased girl was to be given in marriage to a graduate law student, and it was decided to mortgage her father's ancestral house in order to raise the money necessary for meeting the marriage expenses. This item included a demand from the bridegroom's father for 800 rupees (about \$265.00) in cash as the *Pan* or the "bridegroom's price," and jewelry for the bride which, as stipulated with the bridegroom's father, must not fall below 1200 rupees (\$400) in value.

Snehalata ("the creeper of affection")—for that was the name of the girl—came to know about the loan transaction, and made up her mind to sacrifice herself rather than reduce her nearest and dearest to such straits. A bottle of kerosine oil and a match box helped her carry out her grim resolve.

This martyrdom of a little girl has forcibly turned the eyes of the thinking Indian public to the objectionable practice of charging a "bridegroom's price" in the upper Hindu Society of Bengal.

According to the custom that now prevails in Hindu India, neither the boy nor the girl has any voice in any of the slightest details about their marriage. It is their parents or, in their absence, other near male relatives who possess absolute discretion in matters relating to the marriage of their wards. But as a result of the tragedy related above, a Hindu publicist has gone so far as to preach to the young men of Bengal that open disobedience of their parents would be no sin, if they were asked to be party to any dishonorable act such as taking "bridegroom's price" would constitute.

It would appear that the charging of a price either for the bride or for the bridegroom is not authorized by the Hindu Sastras. Although even from the times of the Rik-Veda, the bride is enjoined in the "mantra" that is chanted at the time of marriage to take to her husband's house ample presents, and although she is supposed to be given away with befitting clothes and ornaments, the sacred texts never mention bridegroom's price except to condemn it. But as irony of fate would have it, the grinding pressure of this noxious custom is felt the most in this century of enlightenment and broad culture, and the old quotation that "she that is good and fayre nede none other dowrie" has lost all its significance in British India. A well-known proverb in one of the Indian vernaculars says that the death of an unmarried girl, the sale of standing sugar cane, the death of an enemy are the three fortunate things. The compulsory system of marriage of Hindu girls and the exaggerated notions about the social status of various families or sub-castes within the same caste, have helped to brand the female child as a degraded being who brings nothing but dishonor on her paternal line.

This has largely been responsible for female infanticide that was practised among the Hindus before the British government put it down with a firm hand. With the spread of education and the growth of liberal ideas, the narrow code of social virtues and etiquette has undergone a change in many directions. But the "bridegroom's price," which is much in vogue in upper classes of the Hindus, particularly in Bengal, is to be largely attributed to the influence of education itself. In the last census report of India we read that educational qualifications put up a price of a bridegroom, not so much because of any belief in education as an advantage *per se*, but because the bridegroom is more likely to get remunerative employment. Besides this potential value of university degrees as a good asset in the matrimonial market, high price argues high

position. The following table taken from the official report will prove interesting in this connection.

(BENGALI) CASTE	BRIDEGROOM'S PRICE	BRIDE'S AGE	BRIDEGROOM'S AGE
Brahmin.....	500 to 5000 Rupees	8-14	17-20
Vaidya	500 to 3000 Rupees	10-14	20-25
Kaystha.....	200 to 5000 Rupees	9-14	16-25

This illustrates the average rate of the bridegroom's price charged in Bengal. As to the uses this money is put to, it is interesting to note that after deducting the necessary marriage expenses on the bridegroom's side, in most instances it is devoted towards the educational expenses of the bridegroom who has perhaps a few years more to be maintained at college. In many instances a certain monthly allowance has to be paid by the father-in-law direct to the son-in-law till the latter finishes his studies. The price of a bridegroom varies with the number of university examinations he has passed, and is sometimes in inverse ratio to the beauty of the girl.

It is curious that among higher castes who are educated and take a price for the bridegroom, it is considered a disgraceful thing to take anything for the girls, and that only those who are poor and had not the benefit of education will do so. There is decidedly less to be said against the system of taking a bride's price which prevails in certain parts of India, and has been interpreted as back payment by the bridegroom's father for the girl's upbringing in her father's house. If the bridegroom's price continues to go up, a time may come when a considerable number of girls will remain unmarried in spite of the rigorous injunctions of the Sastras to the contrary. Already the marriageable age of girls has increased in Bengal, and what was the dream of reformers and legislators has been accomplished by the mere fact that to-day the marriage of a girl deferred means a lot of money saved.

This mercenary element in matrimony in India, where marriage is looked upon as a most holy sacrament and not a contract, is disapproved by a limited section of men of advanced ideas who have already formed associations for stamping this scourge out of the Hindu society. If they can rouse the conscience of their country, a task which has been simplified by the self-slaughter of Snehalata, they can yet succeed. Will the government of the country—which put a stop to Sati and legalized re-marriage of Hindu widows—do nothing to strengthen the hands of these reformers? This is a question which is on everybody's lips in India just now.

It is curious, however, that the noble self-sacrifice of this young Brahmin girl should have given a handle to the orthodox Hindu to preach the benefits of child-marriage. At a meeting, which was presided over by a Hindu ex-Justice of the High Court, another eminent member of the orthodox Hindu society, Sir Gurudas Banerjea, also an ex-Justice of the Calcutta High Court, propounded the view that child-marriages are not so bad as they are represented to be, from the social point of view. It was pointed out that the rise in the price of bridegrooms was due to the tendency to postpone the marriage of boys, and it was solemnly urged that the remedy for the situation was that young men should marry at an earlier age. This orthodox view, however grotesque, is not without a substratum of truth; for it must be recognized that the tendency to defer the marriage of boys is the cause of the difficulty under which the parents of the girls labor. By the inexorable decree and usage of Hindu society, girls must be married before a certain age. The boys, on the other hand, being free to marry whenever they and their parents choose, the supply of bridegrooms, eligible according to the laws of hypergamy,¹ naturally falls below the demand, and the fathers of boys can then very well ask for high dowries.

Whatever be the orthodox view on the matter, the young men of India do not seem to be in a mood to tolerate these evil practices any longer. Meetings are being held all over the country, and young bachelors are registering their vows to refuse any payment at marriage, and are collecting funds to perpetuate the memory of the martyred Brahmin girl Snehalata. In the last letter which this girl addressed to her father, she made a piteous appeal to the young men of her country.

"Father," she wrote, "I have heard that many noble-hearted and educated young men volunteered for philanthropic work for the

¹ Hypergamy is an Indian custom sanctioned by tradition that the man should marry in or above his caste but never below it.

relief of the sufferers from the Burdwan floods. God bless their kindly hearts, so full of compassion for their suffering fellow-beings. I have also heard that many young men have taken a vow not to buy *bideshi* (foreign) articles. Only the other day I heard how bands of noble-minded youths had gone from door to door to raise funds for the relief of some people in far away South Africa. But is there no one among them to feel for their own people?"

Describing the vision which prompted her to take her own life, the letter continues:

"Last night I dreamt a dream, father, which made me take my vow. To the entralling strains of a music unheard before, and amid a blaze of light as never was on land or sea, I saw the Divine Mother Durga, with benignant smile, beckoning me to the abode of the blest, up above, and then I thought of you father, of the ever sorrow-laden face of my beloved mother and of the dear little ones who have done so much to brighten our home. And then I resolved to save you all and made a sign to the Divine Mother that I would not delay obeying her merciful call."

But the concluding portion is most touching and is not without a prophetic vein:

"After I am gone, father, I know you will shed tears over my ashes. I shall be gone—but the house will be saved. Since then I have been pondering on the best way of ending my worldly pilgrimage—fire, water, or poison, I have preferred the first, and may the conflagration I shall kindle set the whole country on fire!"

We say, Amen!