

BLASPHEMY OF DOWRY IN INDIA AND AN INSURGENCE OF AN ARTIST: NEELIMA SHEIKH AGAINST THE SYSTEM

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Abstract

The tradition of presenting gifts to the daughter by parents on the occasion of marriage initiated during Vedic society with a feeling of love and affection and honoring the groom, this tradition later transformed into dowry system and greed and encouraged greed and malfunctioning, hence, child marriage, sati-Jauhar and restriction to girl's education occurred in the society.

During Modern period, when India became independent, the great reformers like Mahatma Gandhi, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chander Vidya Sagar etc. put their tireless efforts to remove these social evils. An enactment called 'Leti-Deti Act' was passed in 1939 followed by the dowry prohibition Act 1961. In spite of all endeavors the tradition of dowry is still in vogue and at times the lust of dowry increased to such heights that in-laws of the bride ends up with offences of burning, strangulating or murdering the bride. The present research paper encompasses the origin and evolution of dowry system in India, development of this evil, malpractices of exploitations, actions taken against the immoral and criminal practice, its repercussions on contemporary society and further concludes with an insurgence of an artist 'Neelima Sheikh' against the sinful crime through a series of her creative art-works in which agonizing ache can be sensed. Neelima says that this is her way to pay tribute to Champa or the deceased, which is also a powerful media for influencing people in eradicating such type of wicked practices from Indian society.

Keywords: Exploitation, Social evil, Bride-burning, Dowry-Death

Introduction

The term dowry is derived from the ancient Hindu custom of "Kanyadan" which is the essential ritual of Hindu marital ties. 'Kanya' means daughter and 'dena' means gift.¹ An approved marriage among Hindus has always considered Kanyadan, be it marriage in any form. According to the Dharmashastras the meritorious act of Kanyadan is not complete till the bridegroom was given a dakshina.² The word "Hunda" appears to be derived from "Handa" which means pot. This could be due to the practice of offering dowry in pot.³ According to the tradition the father of the bride presents his daughter jewelry and clothes at the time of her marriage. "Varadakshina" is given to the groom. "Vara" means groom and "Dakshina" means gifts that are paid in the form of dowry cash, property and material to the groom. Varadakshina was a present to the bridegroom and obviously it constituted his property. It need not be doubted that then Varadakshina was given out of love and affection and with feeling of honoring the groom.⁴ Some other terms such as Stridhan, Yautuka and Dahej which describe the same concept. "Stridhan" is particularly related with the gifts, jewelry, clothes etc. given to the bride at the time of her marriage, usually from her relatives or friends. Dharmashastras clearly indicate that the bride had complete rights over the Streedhan – even to dispose them in the case of her husband's death and yet the form Streedhan that would concretize in course of time was a serious aberration. A note of course needs to be emphasized here is that dowry and Streedhan need to be clearly dissimilar and the distinguishing feature was that the core of Streedhan was voluntarily given to the bride but

dowry in its elementary form is necessarily an extraction and compulsory ritual.⁵ Accordingly Yautuka system, it was considered honorable for the bride's father to offer dresses, vehicles, ornaments etc. to the bridegroom.⁶

In the pre-vedic period, the dowry system was probably unknown.⁷ In Vedic era, women had sufficient freedom. In this present era, she possessed equal rights and status with men. It is known as the golden age of women, their social position and status was at the apex and they enjoyed considerable freedom and privilege in the sphere of family, religion and public life.⁸ Though women had experienced equal rights and freedom during Vedic era, yet dowry system existed there. The practice was reasonably well entrenched during the Vedic times as indicated in various hymns. Just as Vedic brides went to their new homes in chariots or animal drawn carts – carrying along in a trunk their prized possessions—conspicuously displayed alongside the bride.⁹ Aitareya Brahamana projected the thought regarding status of contemporary women that 'a daughter is a source of misery and son alone can be the savior of the family and Atharva Veda also deplored the birth of the daughter. It was so because, a son would support his parents in old age and would live with but this was not to happen with girl, for whom substantial dowry has to be given on occasion of her marriage who had to be maintained in case of her husband's poverty or death and in the event of being unmarried had to be provided ancestral property'.¹⁰ It is also mentioned that such kind of scenes were very common those days.

After the Vedic period, during and after the period of 'Manu Smriti' status of woman is narrated in a subordinate position to man.¹¹ During Smriti period women were exploited in all walks of life. It was termed as Dark Age for women's progress. Manu stipulated that, "A women must be dependent upon her father in childhood, her husband in youth and upon her son in old age."¹² Meaning she should never be left free in life. During this period many crimes such as dowry, child marriage, sati etc. were developed and women had to suffer and became the victim.

However during the epic age contradictory statements speak out about disapproval of contemporary society for dowry system as mentioned in the Mahabharata, "a person who sells his son for money and are who takes bride – price for earning a living are both great thieves and go to hell."¹³ The dowry system, though a social evil, was not initially thought bad. It was considered honorable for the bride's father to offer dresses, vehicles, ornament's etc. to the bridegroom, all of which was called 'Yautuka'. The bridegroom's father and close relations were also given gifts. All this was done voluntarily and it was never a precondition to marriage.¹⁴ With the unconditional tradition of offering 'Yautuka' to bridegroom Chandra Mauli Mani throws lights on some cases where dowry was returned back to the bride's father. The case of Sukanya mentioned in 'The evolution of ideals of womanhood in Indian Society' is significant in connection of the above. It simultaneously high lights that the tradition of dowry was not compulsorily imposed on the society during ancient times. The Ramayana and Mahabharata are replete with examples of Yautuka amongst the high-ups. Even ordinary people are seen to be taking pride in pleasing the bride and groom with gifts.¹⁵ Ghosh mentions that "Bimbisara had married the daughter of the Koshala King, Mahakoshala, who had given a village of Kashi to him in dowry."¹⁶ But the custom of yautuka which was started to satisfy the ego of elite class of society became a cancer for society in later years. There is no doubt that disregard of ideals of child marriage lay at the root. By and by interest in shastric studies and brahamacharya waned resulting in decrease in the marriageable age of the brides and bridegroom. Further with the prohibition of Vedic studies and brahmachary ashrama for the girl's tendency of marrying them off at an early age gained ground. Resultantly Smritis started stressing that if the father did not marry off the girl before she started her menses, he invited the sin. This also resulted in fathers of girls tempting eligible boys with the lure of good dowry. Many fathers succumbed to the temptation and the boys themselves were too small to decide for themselves. The outcome was marriage between very

young boys and girls. In the course of time, the fathers of grooms stooped down to the level of settling a dowry in the shape of money, horses and elephants etc. Thus the curse of dowry replaced the voluntary offering of Yautuka.¹⁷

Medieval India was not observed as women's age. It is considered as the 'Dark age'. When Muslims conquerors invaded India a new culture was brought with them. Mughals kept women in purdah which later became more prevalent amongst all kinds of society. Freedom was curbed and too much restriction on women caused insecurity amongst Indian women. Such socio-political circumstance influenced indigenous psychology and resulted into various apprehensions. Girls became burden and needed extra care, whereas a boy child would not need such extra care, instead would be helpful as an earning hand. Thus a vicious phenomenon was introduced in which women was at the receiving end. All this gave rise to new evils such as Child Marriage, Sati-Jauhar and restriction to girl's education.¹⁸

Accordingly Madan C. Paul it is said that during medieval period the ruling class of Kshatriyas and other dominant castes/classes used to transact lots of property, both movable and immovable, along with their daughters at marriage to elevate their status and get recognition from others.¹⁹

Vinay Sharma commented on growing system/tradition of dowry in her book 'Dowry Death' that When the British took over around mid-nineteenth century dowry system had grown up into a monstrous curse throughout the country. A preliminary examinations of the historical evidence commented that during this period the old customs of dowry had been perverted. Vinay Sharma justified the above that the tradition of dowry developed due to the burden of heavy land taxes imposed on peasant families. He says, "...in mid nineteenth century, during the reign of Britisher, heavy land taxes was imposed. Therefore, peasant families were inevitable, to find money cash from where ever they could get, failing which they had to lose their land. As a result the dowry increasingly came to be seen as a vital source of income for the husband's family".²⁰ They found dowry system was the easiest means of income to acquire the money and fulfill their mission.

Although the status of women was deteriorated due to the social evils such as dowry, Sati, purdah system, restriction of widow remarriage, women's education and Jauhar, yet there were social reformers who did a lot for the upliftment of women in the revitalization of India. In British India there had been social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Vivekananda, and Swami Dayananda Saraswati who have helped women to gain their previous status in society. It was due to the efforts of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Lord William Bentinck custom of Sati was banned. He was against child marriage and favored widow remarriage. He himself married a widow thus setting the example for the whole society. Along with 'Dwarkanath Tagore' he founded 'Brahmo Samaj' for the reform of Indian society and emancipation of women. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar contributed his efforts for girl's education and in the field of widow-remarriage. He opened many schools for girls. Mahatma Jyotirao Phule was a real philanthropist. He was the one to open first girl school in India. He is also credited with opening first home for widows of the upper caste and a home for newborn girl children so that they can be saved from female infanticide. Swami Dayananda Saraswati, the founder of Arya Samaj, gave a cry, 'back to Vedas'. He was in favors of equal rights for women in every field. He tried to change the mindset of people with his Vedic teachings.²¹

Another most important social reformer and freedom fighter was Mohandas Karam Chandra Gandhi. Gandhi has commented that "Any young man who makes dowry a condition for marriage discredits his education and his country and dishonors womanhood....."²² Gandhi was uncompromising in the matter of woman's rights as he said, "In my opinion she (woman) should labor under no legal disability not suffered by men. I should treat daughters and sons on a footing of perfect equality."²³ Gandhi declared that men and women are equal, but not identical. "Intellectually, mentally, and spiritually, woman is equivalent to a male and

she can participate in every activity.”²⁴ Gandhi believed that “the custom of dowry turned young girls into mere chattels to be bought and sold. He called this custom pernicious as it lowered the status of women; destroyed their sense of equality with men and defiled the institution of marriage. To curb the venomous dowry system he advised every parent to educate their daughters so that they refuse to marry a young man who wanted a price for marrying and would remain spinster than to be party to the degrading terms. He suggested that a strong public opinion needs to be formulated against dowry and such young men who soil their fingers with such ill-gotten gold should be excommunicated from society. He advocated change in education and also stressed the need of taking recourse to radical measure like organizing youth movements and offering Satyagraha against those perpetuating the custom.”²⁵

Due to the efforts of these social reformers and support of the British legislative decisions were taken to eradicate the evil of dowry from the society. The first concrete attempt in this direction was the Sind Deti-Leti Act, 1939 passed by Sind Provincial Government. This Act contained exhaustive provisions which prohibited giving and taking of dowry as part of contract of betroth of marriage. It prohibited payment in excess of limits specified in the list applicable to the girl’s family, which were drawn either by respective Panchayats, or failing which, by the provincial governments. Such list were registered and published, were binding upon every member of the Panchayat and also provided punishment for contravention of the provisions of the Act. But the Act failed to achieve its objectives. Vinay Sharma mentions in his book ‘Dowry Deaths’ that “After independence, the two states of Bihar and Andhra Pradesh enacted their own states laws. These were enacted out of their own keenness to stamp out the evil effects of dowry system. The first was the Bihar Dowry Restraint Act, 1950. It defined ‘dowry’ as ‘anything paid or delivered as consideration of a contract of any betrothal or marriage’ and prescribed a limit on the amount that could be paid in cash or kind on different occasions excluding the voluntary gifts. The giving and taking of dowry was made punishable offence. Similarly, Andhra Pradesh Dowry Restraint Act was enacted in the year 1958. It defined ‘dowry’ as any property or valuable security given or agreed to be given as consideration for any betrothal or marriage. Any Agreement in regard to dowry was void. Giving and taking of dowry were made non-cognizable, bailable and non-compoundable”.²⁶ But the above restrictions imposed on dowry could not be of great help in eradicating evil of dowry tradition from Indian society. These Acts also failed to achieve respective objectives.

Paul. C. Madan agrees that “Dowry as modern phenomenon has been compounded by certain other conditions of the economy and society. For example, for some people it is a customary or religious practice and for others it is to maintain or acquire a new status and prestige. Still for some others it may be an instrument to accumulate easy money out of greediness for varied purposes like to marry their own daughters and / or acquire economic security for the parents who would have invested much many in the placement of their son and now may think that after marriage their earning son may go away and stay outside without caring for them in the old age. Other purpose may be to start and invest the money received in dowry in business at the cost of bride’s father. All these tendencies are, in varying degrees, very preeminent among different social groups who have different calculations in mind and articulations of the same through marital arrangement.”²⁷

Ultimately after all untiring efforts Parliament passed the comprehensive legislation called the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 which was consented by the President of India on 20 May 1961 and was enforced with effect from 1 July 1961..... It covers section 1 to 10 and deals with all atrocities & violence produced due to dowry. To substantiate and assist the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 in preventing the increasing dowry related violence, Section 498A was thus introduced in the IPC in 1983 closely followed by Section 304B which defined the special offence of dowry-related death of a woman in 1986.²⁸

The evil of dowry system is spread in almost all parts of the country. It is quite an abominable and shameful fact that dowry system caused a large number of dowry deaths and suicides in India. Some respective cases are narrated as under to highlight the curse of evil destroyed many lives:

To support the above statement a case narrated by Vinay Sharma in his book entitled 'Dowry Deaths' has been quoted here. "There was a case in the state of Rajasthan filed by Smt. Lichhamadevi. The appellant was tried for an offence under section 302, I.P.C. for the murder of her daughter – in- law. High Court reversed the order of acquittal that she might have burnt Pushpa. Jagdish, the husband of Pushpa appears to have no human qualities. He was silent spectator for all the dastardly attack on his wife. He had not even the courtesy to take his wife to the hospital. He did not even make arrangement for securing blood when Pushpa was struggling for life. Yet he was not charge sheeted. The indifferent attitude of the investigating agency should be deprecated"..... "The deceased has been burnt is not in dispute. It is a case of bride burning. This court in State V. Lakshman Kumar has observed that in the cases of bride burning death sentence may not be improper. The persons who perpetrate such barbaric crimes without any human consideration must be given the extreme penalty".²⁹

In another case narrated by Amanda Hitchcock, "A young housewife was burnt alive for dowry in Lucknow, in which nineteen-year-old Rinki dreams of a happily married life. Barely a month after her marriage, she was allegedly tortured and then set ablaze by her in-laws for dowry in Indranagar in small hours of Saturday. Daughter of late Gyan Chand, a fish contractor who expired a year ago, Rinki was married to Anil on April 19.... However, soon after the marriage, Bulakram [Anil's father] demanded a color television instead of a black and white one and a motorcycle as well. When Rinki's mother failed to meet their demands, the teenage house-wife was subjected to severe physical torture, allegedly by her husband and mother-in-law... On Saturday morning she [Rinki's mother] was informed that Rinki was charred to death when a kerosene lamp accidentally fell on her and her clothes caught fire. However, prima -facie it appeared that the victim was first attacked as her teeth were found broken. Injuries were also apparent on her wrist and chest."³⁰

In a case of the State of Punjab "... Amarjit Singh had

Lodged a complaint against a dowry crime, in which newly wedded wife Balvinder was set on fire. She was burnt for dowry. The accused, who returned from abroad, wished to go again. For this purpose he demanded money from his wife. On her pleading helplessness within three months of marriage, he tried to throttle her. On her brother coming to visit her, she told him of an attempt to kill her, if she was not able to satisfy her husband's demand. On 20th March, 1985, Balwinder Kaur was found in flames in the kitchen. On hearing her shrieks neighbors collected and extinguished the fire. She was taken to hospital where she died. The young wife, in her statement to the assistant sub-inspector said that her husband had set her on fire. The trial court accepted the statement of the deceased and held the husband guilty. High Court reversed the judgment. But Supreme Court, affirming the judgment of trial court convicted the husband under section 302 I.P.C. and sentenced him to life imprisonment."³¹

"Dowry harassment claimed life of Jyoti, who was daughter of Chandrashekhar Byadagi, married to Ajjappa Siddappa Kaginele in Guttal village (Haveritalul) had taken her life after being allegedly harassed by her husband. As per the report of the Police Ajjappa's mother- in -law, Nagavva, sister-in-law and father in law harassed her for more money. Police said that the harassment compelled her to consume poison...The Guttal police have arrested her husband and father-in-law."³²

"Mr. Wazir Chand of Haryana filed a case against dowry crime. The case was about that not being satisfied with the dowry she brought, her husband and in-laws were making demands for further articles of dowry from Veena and her relatives and were harassing,

humiliating and insulting her and ultimately she was driven to commit suicide by setting herself on fire. Accused were tried before the court of the learned additional session Judge, Faridabad under Section 306 and 498 – A respectively of the Indian Penal Code. The Supreme Court confirmed the verdict of High Court.”³³

“In state of Punjab V. Iqbal Singh the deceased set herself along with her three children oblige in the afternoon. Because her husband, mother-in-law and sister-in-law taunted and tortured her for demand of dowry so much that she was made to commit suicide. The trial court convicted all of them under section 306. On further appeal, the Supreme Court restored the conviction made by the trial court.”³⁴

In conclusion of the above cases related with dowry it can be said that the tradition of offering dowry which started in Indian society as a voluntary gesture later transformed as an essential custom. As evident this custom usually put burden on the parents of bride, sometimes they undergo through psycho-fear. To eradicate this evil some social and legislative bodies came forward and endeavored to eradicate it from the society so that a pleasant atmosphere could be built up especially for the parents of bride.

But it is very surprising that even after imposing judiciary restrictions such as ‘Sind Deti-Leti Act,1939’, ‘Bihar Dowry Restraint Act, 1950’, ‘Andhra Pradesh Dowry Restraint Act, 1958’, and ‘Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 (Section-498-A, IPC,1983 & Section- 304 BC,1986)’, the custom of receiving dowry could not be reduced, instead swelled its volume at objectionable and torturous level. Still it is infecting our society.

According to the report of National Crime Bureau of Government of India about 6,000 dowry deaths are committed all over India every year.³⁵ While Partha Banerjee in her article ‘Bride burning and dowry deaths in India’ had written the statement of Ram Jethmalani that near about 15,000 dowry deaths are occurred every year in India.³⁶ And according to the article ‘Dowry System in India’ at least 9, 5000 women are killed every year over dowry.³⁷ It is very painful to know that only very few people suffered by dowry crimes finds positive judgment. According to the article ‘19 Dowry deaths every day, UP tops in killing bride’ in 2005 of the 6,787 dowry deaths cases registered, about 3,719 resulted in acquittals and only in 1,861 incident conviction occurred. Similarly in 2004 of the 7,026 dowry deaths cases registered, 3671 resulted in acquittals while only 1,735 were convicted. The situations were more or less similar in 2003 when of the 6,208 firs of dowry deaths registered only 1,708 witnessed conviction and 3,566 were acquitted.³⁸ 19 Dowry deaths occur every day on an average with one women dying every 77 minutes in the country.³⁹ It is very horrible and shameful to know that the cases of dowry torture are the highest accounting for 32.4% of crimes against women in the Country.⁴⁰ In India state of Uttar Pradesh topped the list with maximum number of dowry deaths as mentioned in the following tables. After Uttar Pradesh Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh are the most dominant and significant states where dowry crimes are committed.⁴¹

The reason behind the development of dowry crimes is somewhere, still related with inferior status of women. The concept of her being weak, fragile, incapable is deep rooted in the psychology of people and religion is used as a tool to make her realize more weak. Sometimes women willingly accept bindings and never wanted to raise her voice against any discrimination or torture under the pressure established due to emotional bondage or religious fear. There is one more major reason which has promoted dowry custom i.e. because the law maker and law followers are the same. When the party is at receiving end, greed tempts them, while at giving end their moral values get changed. In contemporary period dowry custom has transformed into fashion. People usually gave their concert for lavish marriages. It is mutually agreed system and everybody has adjusted to the situation. The tradition of dowry was never a problem for rich people but when it comes to medieval class or poor people it becomes a burden. Record of Dowry Deaths in some major States of India from 2003 to 2005 as

mentioned in the article entitled ‘19 Dowry deaths every day, UP tops in killing bride’ is a concrete evidence for existing channelize crime.⁴² The above respective data is given below:-

TABLE 1

State Name	2003	2004	2005
Uttar Pradesh	1,322	1,708	1,564
Bihar	909	1,029	1,014
Madhya Pradesh	648	751	739
West Bengal	329	396	446
Andhra Pradesh	466	512	443
Rajasthan	389	379	361
Orissa	279	319	334
Maharashtra	368	314	341
Delhi	130	126	114
Chennai	18	23	30
Kolkata	16	10	6
Mumbai	8	13	9

Shiva has reported Bride Burning Deaths from – 1987-1994 in various states and union territories of India,⁴³ which is mentioned under the table 2.

TABLE 2

State/Territory	Total
Andhra Pradesh	2481
Arunachal Pradesh	1
Assam	68
Bihar	1894
Goa	3
Gujarat	604
Haryana	1626
Himachal Pradesh	98
J & K	129
Karnataka	1444
Kerala	63
Madhya Pradesh	3012
Maharashtra	4542
Manipur	0
Meghalaya	2
Mizoram	0
Nagaland	2
Orissa	651
Punjab	946
Rajasthan	1848
Sikkim	0
Tamil Nadu	672
Tripura	42
Uttar Pradesh	11118
West Bengal	1999
Chandigarh	9
Delhi	1037
Pondicherry	14
India overall	34297

Year wise data related to dowry crimes is significant from the existing crime point of view given as under:-

TABLE 3

Year	Dowry Deaths	Foot note
1988	2,209	
1990	4,835	44
1993	5,377	
1994	4,935	45
1996	5,513	
1997	6,006	46
1998	6,975	

1999	6,699	
2000	6,995	
2001	6,851	
2002	6,822	
2005	6,7000	47

In the history of India dowry was started as a mark of respect and to create harmony entering into relationship between two families. The intension behind the tradition was pious, determining happiness but it's out cum, after centuries, became a crime under the guise of ritual and tradition. Greed of bride-groom for materialistic assets promoted an immoral and inhuman practice amongst even educated people of contemporary time. Those who are rich have regarded the tradition as fashion but middle and poor class is the real sufferer; immensely exploited and become the victim of the evils. A relative comparative data of dowry crime is mentioned here to elucidate and evaluate the effect of custom on contemporary society. It is indeed unfortunate that in spite of all efforts made by the government crimes related with dowry are increased, and more methods of exploitations are being encroached. The victims are no one but the fifty percent population of the nation i.e. women. Some glimpses are illustrated as under:

Fig. 1 (f.n.⁴⁸)

Artist Neelima Sheikh's Insurgence Against The Dowry System



Nilima Sheikh, one of the pioneers amongst feminist artist of India focuses on the happenings occurring around her. An exhibition 'Conversations with Traditions'⁴⁹ featured the paintings of Neelima Sheikh, her work is shaped by her exposure to traditional Indian tales and folk songs as well as actual events imparted a greater emphasis to narratives. Mostly she chooses the subject for her paintings which encompasses various aspects of female life, specifically her contribution to the family, her passion and patience, devotion, sacrifice, ache, suffering etc. As a woman, she is very sensitive towards inhuman and unethical state of a woman; hence she always reciprocates her vulnerability through inventive genres. During the interview she disclosed that she attended some workshops where issues of women were deliberated. She also participated in a theater 'Vivadi' as feminist performer. Her tribute to the victims is generally conveyed in the form of paintings. Neelima has the skill to define abstract expressions in various forms such as pain, melancholy, trauma and sufferings are successfully depicted in her paintings through images, color and texture. Imagery transformation of feelings and depiction of psychological state can be comprehended in her paintings. Art critic Randi Hoffman evaluates her work and says, "Sheikh is painterly and graceful. Her symbols are simpler and profound, and her subject matter is emotional."⁵⁰ Neelima's woman is a complete woman who sets ideological frame for the women community of the universe. Her art work encompasses various aspects of women's life such as wife, beloved, mother, an

ascetic, etc. Her paintings on dowry system accentuate women's devastation in contemporary time. Neelima's boldness as feminist is indubitably appreciable. Specifically on dowry she presents the whole catastrophe symbolically through a series of paintings entitled 'When Champa grew-up' (Plate no. 1-12).

History claims the dowry system is derived from the ancient Hindu custom of 'kanyadan', where father presents his daughter jewelry and clothes at the time of her marriage, and "vardakshina" to the groom in cash or kind. The above customs used to accomplish voluntarily out of affection and love of parents towards their daughter. But these days' dowry customs have become unethical and dangerous. As a feminist artist Neelima's earliest work speaks about this socio-religious system of contemporary India under the title 'Champa Grew Up' (not the girl's real name) which is a twelve panel story painted in 1984. It clearly corresponds about the incident occurred as 'Dowry murder' based on a true incident of a young bride murdered by her in-laws. The above series-work presents a sequence of incidents. Neelima narrated the whole story to me, "the girl whose name was Champa used to live near my house in Baroda. There was a children garden in close vicinity where I saw a beautiful girl used to come every day known as Champa, always playing, riding on a bicycle, swinging, giggling, and enjoying freedom of independence with other children. Suddenly Champa disappeared and I was told she got married which shocked me that marriage at such a tender age of sixteen and seventeen is indeed unethical and illegal. After some time when I was crossing her house I saw a huge crowd lamenting, shouting and beating their chests in traditional manner. On enquiry I was told that Champa is dead. Her in-laws tortured her and never allowed her to visit her parents. It was told that they burnt her with Kerosene oil.....I was aghast, condemned the offence. I consoled her parents and promised them to represent her case to police department for justice and to punish the culprit. Resentfully I lodged the F.I.R., involved media and social activists but surprisingly after sometime Champa's parents left the case. At that time I decided to pay my tribute to Champa through a series of paintings".⁵¹ The paintings are discussed below:

The first few panels show a happy school girl, playing on a swing and riding a bicycle (Plate no.1, 2). Then her marriage ceremony is shown and she is leaving her parents' house (Plate no.5). Next as an abused young wife cowering in her husband's family's household and then is set ablaze in the kitchen. (Plate no. 6- 10). In the last two panels, hired mourners in a tight black circle raising their arms toward the heavens as Champa rises above the smoke like a descending angel (Plate no.11, 12).

Neelima informed that to make the paintings more realistic and representing a particular culture Gulam Mohammed Sheikh, her husband, helped her finding folk songs from the Gujarati tradition that actually worked as texts making painted episode more expressive. It was both ironic and gratifying for the artist to find traditional verses closely related to her paintings and used as means of enhancing expressions of the paintings. These traditional songs are usually full of emotions expressing sorrow, melting out their grief through words.

Through traditional idioms Neelima portrayed the grim reality and violence of contemporary life. The painter recollects, "It seemed inevitable that I would paint her story. I had wanted to paint dowry-deaths prior to Champa's death because they confronted us daily in the newspapers. But I struggled to find a mode that could contain anguish without reducing it to cliché".⁵²

It is unfortunate and shameful that according to Indian government report in 1988, 2,209 women were killed in dowry related incidents and in 1990, 4,835 women were again killed. It is important to reiterate that these are official records, which are under reported. The manipulation in official registration of this kind of crime is apparent in Delhi, where ninety percent of cases of women burnt recorded as accidents, five percent as suicide and only the remaining five percent are shown as murder .According to Government figures there were a total of 5,377 dowry deaths in 1993, an increase of 12% from 1992.⁵³

Neelima’s sensitivity forced her to bring reality in front of the world so that the message should reach to people for stern disapproval and condemnation of inhuman act and if not at least who else would witness such paintings ‘will never lower down the dignity of women. These paintings ‘Champa Grew Up’ are executed in Tempera on sanganer paper and are in the collection of New Walk Museum & Art Gallery, Leicester City.

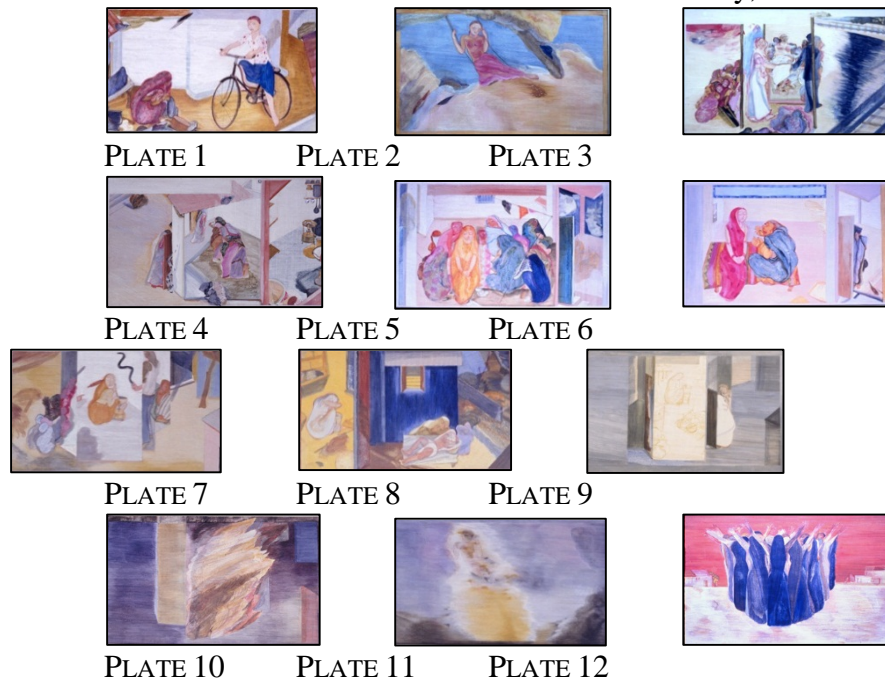


Fig. 2 ‘When Champa Grew up’ (Plate 1-12)

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Conversations with Traditions' is a series of exhibitions explore the dialogue between contemporary issues and indigenous artistic languages expressed in the work of Asian and Asian American artists. The series will focus on artists who are developing new expressions out of traditional visual idioms or who create new ways to connect with or challenge centuries-old cultural norms.

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From an interview with Neelima Sheikh

Artist Profile-Saffron Art: Neelima Sheikh

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