Reflections on Kulin Polygamy - Nistarini Debi's Sekeley Katha

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Introduction

The legislative programme of the nineteenth century colonial state in India brought the private into the realm of public discourse. As is well-known, in Bengal, initiatives for intervention were by socially aware men like Rammohun Roy, Debendranath Tagore, Keshub Chunder Sen, Iswar Chandra Sarma (Vidyasagar), and organisations such as the Brahmo Samaj, Young Bengal Group and others. Through well-argued petitions, articles and essays, they both brought pressure on the state, as well as created public opinion on issues such as sati, widow remarriage, and the age of marriage for Hindu girls (Bose 1960; Chattopadhyay (ed.) 1965; Collet 1913; Kopf 1979; Heimsath 1964; Lethbridge 1972; Sastri 1911; Sen 1977). One issue, however, on which the state did not act was that of Kulin polygamy among the Brahmins of Bengal.

The ebbing of this tradition by the end of the century was due to a range of social and economic factors. While these are discussed in some detail elsewhere (Karlekar forthcoming), it would not be out of place to sketch a broad framework. Changing land relations, newer patterns of employment and increasing urban migration led to innovative household structures (Bose 1960; Ghosh 1972; Seal 1968; Sinha 1967) and some change in roles and relationships. While these factors affected overall styles of life, the growth of women's education and the impact of what is popularly known as the social reform movement, as well as a community's introspection and self-analysis, impinged more directly on certain practices - specifically those which violated a woman's sense of integrity and dignity. Kulin polygamy or polygamy among the highest-ranking Bengali Brahmins was certainly one of them. A literal translation of Kulin is 'of aristocratic and noble descent', the premier among lineages. According to the Census of 1881, Brahmins constituted over 6 per cent of the population of Bengal (i.e. ten lakhs or more individuals). Of these, the Rarhi and the Barendra were in a vast majority; it is among these sub-caste groups, in particular the Rarhi, that polygamy was widely practised.

This paper is an understanding of the institution of Kulin polygamy based on the narrative of Nistarini Debi. Born in 1832, to a poor Kulin family in Hooghly district, Nistarini was married in her early teens, and widowed when she was less than twenty. The memoir was dictated when she was almost blind and well over eighty years of age. One does not know the circumstances which prompted the unlettered Nistarini, to speak of her life to her nephew Manmathadhan in 1913, three years before she died. It may have been that, as the older sister of the Rev. Kalicharan Banerji and paternal aunt of Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, she was persuaded to do so by relatives, since her commentary would provide insights into the lives of these two eminent men.1 By then, the social reform movement was a part of recent history and Kulin polygamy had almost died out. Initially, her narrative was serialised in the journal Bharatvarsha and four parts appeared during her life time. The remaining three appeared posthumously, and the entire text was put together several decades later. It is one of the six personal narratives in Atmakatha (autobiography) edited by Naresh Chandra Jana and others (1982).

The Practice of Polygamy

As already noted Kulin polygamy was not outlawed despite a concerted and well orchestrated campaign which documented the historical genesis of the practice as well2. In the eleventh century AD., the ruler of Bengal, Adisara, is reputed to have brought five Brahmins known for their superior rank to the region. These Vedic Brahmins were supposed to have nine gunas (favoured attributes), among which was insistence on same rank marriages. The possession of these gunas caused them to be known as Kulins or those of superior rank. Kaulinya or the quality associated with being a Kulin 'was therefore perpetuated by proper marriage and reproduction' (Inden 1976:62). As this meant marriage strictly among a small group, isogamy was the preferred option.

In the next century, King Ballal Sen invited the 56 sons of these five Brahmins to his court and gifted them a village each. He also introduced a merit system among the Kuhns emphasising nine qualities 'as the touchstone of sacerdotal purity' (Risley 1891:145). As with his predecessor, Ballal Sen insisted on reciprocal exchange of daughters as being one of the qualities. Not all Kulins, however, were willing to accept this ruling on reciprocity. Those who set up their own rules were from then on known as srotriyas: those learned in the Vedas but of lower rank. The practice of non-isogamous marriages was introduced, leading to a certain amount of confusion about marriage and the exchange of daughters.

In an attempt to redeem what had apparently become a chaotic situation, the fifteenth century reformer-cum-genealogist, Pandit Debibar tried, according to some accounts, to abolish Kulinism (Bhattacharya 1968; Dutt 1965 [1931]; Ghurye 1969; Risley 1891). Having failed, Debibar then organised those who could still be called Kulins into 36 new endogamous groups or mels. In the present context, it is essential to grasp the importance of the elaborate kinship structure of the Kulins and of those who had lost rank. In particular, the rules of exogamy, hypergamy and polygamy were vital as they controlled the fate of countless women like Nistarini Debi. Most importantly, Debibar's reforms recognised the principle of hypergamy along well-worked out lines. Briefly, Kulin men could marry girls from srotriya Brahmin families which were further divided into siddha (perfect), sadhya (capable of attaining perfection) and kashta (difficult) sub-groups. The srotriya were downwardly mobile Kulins who had lost their position 'by inter-marrying with families of inferior birth' (Risley 1891: 146). Given that Debibar had further reduced the number of Kulin families, the pool of marriageable boys and men dwindled. Strictly applied, the rule of hypergamy implied that (a) Kulin men could marry Kulin women i.e. those from the 36 mels, as well as those from srotriya families (siddha, sadhya and kashta) (b) Kulin women could marry only Kulin men and (c) non-Kulin women (i.e. srotriyas) could marry other non-Kulins but only if they were in a hypergamous relationship (see Dumont 1970; 120; Stutchbury 1982:39). In addition, H.H. Risley deals at some length with the category of bangsaj or those Kulins 'who lost their distinction on account of misconduct, i.e. their want of charity, discipline and due observance of marriage law' (ibid: 146). It was usually Kulin girls without brothers or the daughters of widows who were married to bansaj men who became swakrit bhanga or those who had broken caste themselves3.

Thus, distinctions among the Kulin Brahmins were maintained on the basis of what A.M.Shah has called divisions, rooted in roti vyavahar (food transactions) and beti vyavahar (daughter exchange). In Gujarat each division consisted of several endogamous ekdas or gols. Among the Kulin, similar endogamous groups were in existence, and a swakrit bhanga was one who violated norms of intra-caste endogamy. Due to these established internal divisions as well as the possibility of independent initiative in marriage negotiations depending on the financial status of the man in question the community of the Kulin Brahmins in Bengal - which over here will include those who had left the fold - was in a state of constant flux and change. As we shall see, not only was hypergamy institutionalised, but also hypogamy was practised in some cases as with Nistarini.

Marriages performed according to the accepted formula involved not only the gift of the daughter to the superior Brahmin but also offerings of food and wealth (Inden, 1976: 105- 6). Often, a bridegroom-price (varadakshina) was also expected in addition to other material goods. Earlier, in medieval Bengal, hypergamous marriages among the upper castes enhanced the status of the bride's family and gift-giving was regarded as meritorious, ensuring 'fame, respect, glory and so forth' (ibid: 107). As with hypergamous castes elsewhere, Kulin polygamy meant that there was an excess of unmarried women among the Kulin mels and a surfeit of bachelors in the srotriya and other lineages. Rather than be tainted with the burden of unmarried daughters, fathers arranged marriages with much-married men, many of whom were prepared to violate strict marriage rules for monetary considerations. Calling it 'wholesale polygamy', H.H. Risley commented that 'several middle-aged Kulins are known to have had more than a hundred wives and to have spent their lives on a round of visits to their mothers-in-law' (Risley 1915: 166). Not unexpectedly, many of these women who were widowed or deserted found their way to the brothels of Calcutta (Banerjee 1993). According to one official estimate of the mid-nineteenth century, out of the 12,000 prostitutes in the growing metropolitan area, almost 10,000 were the wives, widows or daughters of Kulin Brahmins (Chakrabarty 1963).

Ethnographic evidence from other parts of the country indicate that the mandate of hypergamy often resulted in female infanticide, particularly among the Rajputs (Kasturi 1994; Pakrasi 1970 ; Parry 1979; Risley 1915): this violent option was preferable to the indignity of having unmarried daughters within the home or marrying them in violation of caste norms. However while there is no evidence to suggest that the Kulins of Bengal resorted to the practice, this does not imply that such families were any kinder to their womenfolk as is clear from the data on sati or widow immolation. Clearly the Kulins did not find it demeaning to marry their daughters, often merely nominally, to much-married elderly men. Nistarini Debi's description of women who drowned themselves with water pots tied around their necks and her pained comments on the premature death of her two married nieces in their conjugal homes, were indicative of a substantial degree of mental and physical torture of married women.

No other geographic region of India appears to have had a marriage system similar to that of Kulinism of Bengal, though there are some similarities with the Nambudiri and Nayars of Kerala. Traditionally, only the older sons of Nambudiri Brahmins were allowed to marry; younger sons contracted connubial relations (sambandhams) with Kshatriya or Nayar women. This form of hypergamy was also based on the tradition of visiting men, but the number of times a Nambudiri married or contracted relationships was limited. Among the matrilineal

Nayars, though the matrifocal household was the norm, the mother's brother had, as among the Kulins, important managerial and decision-making functions (Karve 1965).

These similarities apart, the cases of Bengal and Kerala were not fundamentally alike. To cite only a couple of differences: the hypergamous relationship (which was not necessarily a marriage) was across castes and there was a social acceptance of notionally female-headed households where the brother played a vital role. Among the Kulins, marriages took place within the caste and the fact that a wife rarely went to her husband's home may have been expedient but certainly did not conform to normatively acknowledged residential arrangements in a strongly patrilineal society. While for a Nayar woman and her children to live in the home managed by her brother was accepted practice, among the Kulins, this was more by default and there was never any question of matrilocality. In both cases, then, the mother's brother was a significant figure in the lives of his nephews and nieces.

Though polygamy and serial monogamy were common in many parts of India, nowhere did it result in situations of a man having dozens of wives of varying ages and lineage statuses. Apart from the obvious issue of the burden of asymmetrical gift-giving, the institution of Kulin polygamy raised some very interesting questions for the status of the married woman, her place of residence, rights to matrimonial property and so on. Nistarini Debi's narrative provides first hand insights into some of these: early on in her narrative, she states that the mother's brother's home (mamabari) became the home of the children born of Kulin unions. In other words, wives remained with their natal families, and husbands were occasional visitors. As Nistarini's story makes clear, this form of residence often led to the development of a strong mother-child bond, and of significant feminine personalities who look charge of their sons' and/or brothers' homes. While the Hindu wives' right to maintenance was enshrined in the Dharamshastras, (Kane 1974; Aiyar 1953), in the case of the Kulin wife who never even went to her conjugal home, this provision remained more inoperable than with other castes. It would not be out of place to draw attention to the fact that Bengal is governed by the Dayabhaga school of law which, in the absence of a son, grandson and great grandson, gives the wife a right not only in joint family property but also in her husband's self-acquired assets. The link between sati and women's inheritance has been discussed elsewhere (Nandy 1980; Mukherjee, 1957); here, it needs to be pointed out that the more liberal law of inheritance in Bengal appeared only to harden attitudes towards wives. Unwanted widows became prostitutes and satis as Kulin wives and widows were never welcome in their husbands' homes. Of course, the fact that many Kulin men were destitute and made a living out of marriage further complicated the situation (Dutt 1965 [1931]; Risley 1891).

It is likely that Kulin polygamy started declining before the middle of the last century. Though the colonial state failed to legislate against polygamy, the efforts of Iswar Chandra Sarma (Vidyasagar), and to some extent, Rammohun Roy, certainly provided the impetus for internal change and reflection (Karlekar, forthcoming). A careful analysis of the arguments of these two men, responses from the community as well as from the state makes clear that fundamental aspects of contemporary social arrangements were being opened up for debate. Quite unambiguously, social reformers were seeking to change rules governing marriage regulations and conditions. These in turn were inextricably linked to: (a) the control of female sexuality, (b) re-definition of familial roles and obligations and (c) the distribution of property and assets among inter-marrying families.

Nineteenth century debates on the status of women enhanced the scope for discourse and analysis by pointing to the unfair and discriminatory basis for marriage. Individual sexual and psychological needs were not uppermost considerations in the minds of those who negotiated marriages or decided against them. In the case of a girl - and indeed men - supposed proclivities - and it is important to note the distinction between 'needs' and 'proclivities' - resulted in early marriage and the subsequent repression of women. Kulin polygamy was an open acknowledgement of the right of men to be sexually active with several women; the fact than in reality many of these unions remained unconsumed was not important.

Brahmin society was merely acknowledging a reality where marriage as a social fact and not the fate of those involved, was of prime importance. The underlying ideology viewed a daughter as an unwanted burden whose sexual vulnerability was a cause of tremendous familial tension and concern. Marriage meant the safe transference of her sexuality to a man regarded as appropriate (Dube 1988; Fruzzetti and Ostor 1983). What is interesting is that Kulin Brahmin society seemed so concerned with social niceties that it ignored - or chose to ignore - the fact that women rarely changed residences, or indeed cohabited with husbands. Remaining within the jurisdiction of their natal homes did little to ensure sexual relations with a spouse, or indeed control of a woman's sexuality by her husband. A fundamental premise of marriage was thus overlooked; in part, the father only gained merit insofar as he had fulfilled his duty of having married his daughter: kanyadan (gift of the virgin, an essential component of the Hindu marriage ritual) took care of the burden of kanyadal (responsibility of an unmarried daughter). The wider implications of marriage which sanctified sexual relations, the begetting of children, the transfer of residence and so on were readily lost sight of in an environment where the commercial and transactional aspects dominated. Among the Hindus, polygamy continued to

be legal until 1956; however, the extreme case of Kulin polygamy the last years of the nineteenth century. There is clearly no one explanation started dying out by for this: the social reinforcement, internal differences in opinion within the community, urbanisation, the move to white collar occupations and so on, clearly contributed to a decline in the practice.

Literary Responses to Social Change

By the early decades of the last century, the indignities of Kulin polygamy, the horror of sati and child if not infant marriage, resulted in several important debates on the status of Bengali women. Combined with informed discussion and protest were active moves to meet orthodoxy and bigotry with reform: accordingly the introduction of education for women was an important issue throughout the second half of the century (Bagal 1956 ; Karlekar 1991). Apart from Ramrnohun and Vidyasagar, whose positions are well-known, Radhakanta Deb from the conservative section, and Progressives like Keshub Chunder Sen, Dwarakanath Ganguly and a host of others campaigned actively for a change in social practices.

These public men, together with many others, issued statements and wrote petitions to the government as well articles in journals and newspapers; at the same time, different levels of discourse and debate became increasingly evident. At an organisational level, the Brahmo Samaj grew, and then split precisely on important social issues such as women's education, marriage reform, religious practice and so on (Kopf 1979; Sastri 1911). In Calcutta, exclusive societies such as Derozio's Young Bengal Group and journal Pai-thenon, as well as the Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge (SAGK) founded in 1838, discussed issues from non-vegetarianism, 'the physiology of digestion' to 'the condition of the Hindu woman' and 'native female education' (Chattopadhyay 1965). Articles and debates were published in English and Bengali newspapers and journals. As expected, most authors were men; but there is growing evidence of a number of educated women who began writing as well as publishing their work. Access to education, reading and listening to stories, often with the encouragement of older men as well as brothers and cousins, provident the basic environment for literary self-expression. Equally important however, is the fact that women felt empowered to deal at last with the shroud of silence (Goldman 1992). Admittedly, it was only a handful of women who wrote - between 1856 and 1910 there is information on 400 published works which ranged from short poems to full-length works and autobiographies (Chakrabarty 1963). Of these, 50 were autobiographies or autobiographical sketches. These figures do not include unpublished letters, journals and diaries, many of which are still to be found decaying and neglected, in old homes.

Nineteenth century women were inveterate letter-writers and keepers of diaries and journals (Cooper 1987; Bunker 1987; Stanton 1987) and educated Bengali women were no exception. Here I class all these forms of writing as personal, narratives.

A genre of writing less easy to categorise is that of the dictated life story, such as Nistarini's Sekeley Katha (An Old-fashioned Tale). Here the literary text produced is the joint endeavour of an individual who cannot - or chooses not to - write, and a scribe who records all that is being said. If the scribe is diligent and honest, he or she will resist the temptation to interpolate. There is reason to believe that Nistarini's nephew, Manmathadhan, did precisely that. Apart from his statement to this effect, the quality of the text clearly belies much conscious attempts at editing. The writing has the staccato quality of an oral narrative; told over many months it is not difficult to imagine. Nistarini reminiscing, eyes rheumy and weak, in a little room in Kashi (Varanasi), lit perhaps by a small kerosene lantern. The elderly woman who had been a widow for most of her long life, wove an irregular, and at times fractured and confused account of several decades, thereby violating the preferred code of silence and forbearance laid down for upper caste women. In breaking this code, she provided later generations with a compelling first-hand account of the institution of Kulin polygamy. For her story is not merely an account of a woman's life, but a valuable social commentary.

An autobiographical writing can be read at different levels: as the story of a life, an exegesis on society and relationships or purely as fiction and fantasy. My reading here emphasises an individual's observations on a particular marriage system and concomitant social relations; for through Sekeley Katha, one learns as much about a woman's life as one does of events and social practices. Other women like Rassundari Debi and Kailashbashini Debi also wrote at length about painful traditions such as child marriage; Sarala Debi Chaudhurani's narration combines elements of her private life and relationships with later public roles. Almost half the book deals with a tormented relationship with her mother, the novelist Swarna Kumari Debi, a sister of Rabindranath Tagore (Karlekar 1991). Sekeley Katha is unique in that it is the only one that provides insights into the dynamics of Kulinism and how it affected families. Earlier, Kailashbashini Debi Gupta (1864) and Bamasundari Debi (1861) had, in their commentaries on the position of Hindu women, written self-righteous indictments of the system (Karlekar 1991: 58-60;). Their accounts, however, lack the authentic pain as well as the sneaking sympathy for men trapped by a humiliating custom that one finds in Sekeley Katha.

Sekeley Katha: The Story of A Kulin Widow

Written in the first person, the brief life story (50 printed pages) is divided into short paragraphs, each with a graphic heading.4 Reading through the text in an exercise in capturing the elusive nature of free association: the occasionally rambling laments of an aged, almost blind Brahmin widow give way sharply to lucid and highly detailed accounts of the crass transactions behind the notorious polygamous marriages of her caste fellow. At other moments, Nistarini regales the reader with birth practices, ghost stores and evocative descriptions of journeys down Bengal's haunting waterways. Like a few other of her time, Nistarini was a born sotry-teller: Rassundari Debi's anguish at being married, Kailashbashini Debi's accounts of long days alone and Sharadasundari's dextrous negotiations over family property, all find an echo in Sekeley Katha (Karlekar 1991). There is also a great deal of anger, resettlement and even moral judgements - response women were not usually to express (Heilbrun 1988). For instance, anecdotes in Sekeley Kathaoften and with judgmental criticisms of 'modern times': the extreme materialism of the dowry system, retionalisation of puja practices, the easy going indifference of the contemporary daughter-in-law - and the role of women's education in her creation - all find space in Nistarini's narraitive. At her age, she felt emboldened to justify certain traditions and values with which she had been brought up and were she felt, being eroded.

The paper looks at those parts of the dictated biography which deal with practices associated with Kulinism as well as Nistarini Debi's life as an abandoned wife, and later widow. Nistarini's paternal grandmother's father was the village priest in Khanyan (Hooglly district) who made a living from- the offerings to Panchannan Thakur, the local deity. Widely respected, he was quite obviously successful in satisfying the residents' wishes and hopes. When his wife died, he decided to marry again and moved to his new bride's village: in a custom which was obviously common in those days, he took an oath to become a gharajamai (literal translation, house bridegroom)5 This bound him to his conjugal home and he would visit his two children from his first marriage occasionally. Son Randhan officiated at the temple, while the argumentative though beautiful Jagadamba soon acquired the reputation of 'small brawler' in the village.

In time Ramdhan was married, and arranged a marriage for his sister jagadamba with a man from his father-in-law's lineage. However, Jagadamba continued living with her brother and his wife, creating tension within the home by complaining against her sister-in-law. She was devoted to her five nephews and took care of them with great affection. It is important to note that Ramdhan had brought his wife home. It would also appear that, unlike jagadamba's

husband, he was not polygamous and did not make a living out of multiple marriages. Nistarini clearly had tremendous admiration for her strong-willed, domineering though short-tempered grandmother, Jagadamba. When her grandfather visited, it was an occasion of joy - as well as considerable hardship:

The day Jagadamba's husband came to her brother's home, he demanded water to wash his feet - after all, he was a Kulin! If he were not given various gifts and honoured with ritual observances, he would not enter his in-laws' home (Nistarini Debi 1982:8).

Thus in order to make Madanmohan's visit worthwhile, Jagadamba's brother Ramdhan had to pawn vessels and utensils. As for Jagadamba, 'at seeing her husband, she was transformed into a new person. Her behaviour that day was as gentle as the Goddess Lakshmi' (ibid: 8). With her ghomta (part of the sari used to veil the face) drawn down, jagadainba hovered around her husband. For, 'as it was against shastri conventions to look at her husband during the day, it was almost as though she had captured a mental image of that handsome man in her mind's eye like that of a much desired deity' (ibid: 8).

As a Kulin wife jagadamba knew well what was expected from the family, and though she was careful in observing the elaborate rules of gift-giving, she was nonetheless resentful. While alone with him at night, she gave Madanmohan her armlet, anklets and bangles, thereby literally 'rescuing his pride' (that is ensuring he would not be insulted and have to go away empty-handed). Yet, she was upset at having had to pawn her nephews' dishes for the day, for the family was hard put to it to resist Madanmohan's demands.

Though he left, Madanmohan was clearly attracted to Jagadamba. Coming back to have a last look at her, he peeped through the thinks in the tattered reed matting walls. The sight of a weeping Jagadamba eating off the anchal (end piece) of her sari - the dishes had after all been pawned - made him change his mind. He thought, 'where will I get such a virtuous wife? Whatever I get from my other matrimonial homes. I'll give here'. Though the family fortunes looked up after Madanmohan came to stay, it never knew affluence, and when, after some years, it became impossible to carry on, Madanmohan left to visit the homes of his various wives in search of money and possessions. The process took several years.

Nistarini recounted in vivid detail incidents and ancedotes she must have heard from her parents and others. Madanmohan's departure brought further gloom and the quick marriage of his son Harcharan, her father. The dowry kept the family going for a while, until Madanmohan got to know of the wedding. In an attempt to assuage the enraged father, Ramdhan and Jagadamba resolved to send Harcharan with him to recover some jewels that were still due from the young bride's family. However, father and son were not as successful as

they had hoped to be, and in order to pacify his complaining father, the 13-year-old Harcharan offered to marry again. But his mother was not to know. On their travels, they came across a non-Kulin, srotriya zamindar who was looking for a Kulin son-in-law. There was however, one condition: the bridegroom would have to live in his wife's home. Due to this stipulation, it had not been easy to find a bridegroom. Nistarini commented, 'unless it was an absolute necessity, why would a Kulin son close off the options of subsequent lucrative options by agreeing to be a 'ghairjamai'? (ibid:12). Madammohan agreed as he felt that by becoming a well-placed man's son-in-law, Harcharan would get a job. This indeed he did, and son Harcharan joined Major Sleeman's operations against the thuggees.6

Nistarini contextualises well Jagadamba's resentment, young Harcharan's filial devotion and Madanmohan's essential greed. Her painstaking account of Kulin practices and management techniques makes amply clear that entire families and not merely boys and men - knew how the system worked:

Many girls would forget their wedding day, but the day the son-in-law came home was--remembered well. In those days, there was no particular need to invite the son-in-law home. He would come out of his own interest. With a bundle on his head, a staff in his hand and a towel (gamcha) over his shoulder and a whole lot of dust on his feet, he would crunch his wav into the house. At first chastisement, and then care, that is what jamai ador (literally, ministrations to the son-in-law) was all about(ibid: 6).

For their part, Kulin, husbands were extremely serious about the mercenary aspects of marriage. Detailed accounts were maintained and visits to affines were regular. Nistarini described in great detail the procedures involved in record keeping. Marriage was an elaborately worked out contract, where the comsummation of the union was of secondary importance; what was of vital relevance was the maintenance of the network of kinship and marriage relationships. Kulin polygamy not only reduced women to the status of mere barterable commodities but also, at a more subtle level provided structural conditions for tension between in-marrying women and their female affines.

In the opening paragraphs of her book, Nistarini stated, that 'in Kulin families everyone is reared in the mama's (maternal uncle's) homes. As the father's faces were barely seen, mamabari(maternal uncle' home) was our home' (p. 2). Thus, husbands' sisters, though married, often continued to live in their brother's homes where they soon acquired considerable power and authority. Young girls were socialised to accept that they would not live with their husbands and might never bear children, nor have a home to call their own apart from their mamabari. This physical and psychological deprivation must surely have resulted in complexes

and insecurities, if not perversions of various kinds. Vidyasagar's encounters with abandoned Kulin wives and daughters highlighted the fact that often women were ill-treated by their sisters-in-law, who in turn were married women struggling for survival and space in their brothers' homes. This led to competition - either actual or at the level of ideology - between sisters, who regarded their brothers' homes as their own, and brothers' or nephews' wives, who may or may not have been resident.

Nistarini recounted an instance where her grandmother sold her son's wife's jewels in order to keep the hearth going: in this case, though the daughter-in-law was brought to her husband's home for only a brief while, her mother-in-law had little hesitation in appropriating her jewels. This was of course in addition to those acquired during the marriage settlement. Such settlements involved many competences such as well-argued defences as well as the capacity to meet demands which were often extortionate and arbitrary. Nistarini's elaborate account of an organised bridegroom, in this case her paternal grandfather, is illuminating:

Wherever the Kulins married, they kept a book of records. My paternal grandfather Madanmohan Bandyopadhyay had an exercise book of this kind. In it were written the addresses of (the homes) of his fifty six marriages and wherever there was a little space in the book, he would fill in details of relevant monetary matters, information on his children and whatever was useful in securing his social dues. The copy book was like the ones which recorded the transactions of those who buy their daily essentials on credit. Like a register in a collectorate listing how much revenue was due from whom, it noted down which girl was married when and how much dowry was received. His visits were proportionately more frequent to homes where more was to be got, both financially and otherwise (ibid: 6-7).

Nistarini went on to describe an ancestor who was reputed to have had 108 wives. She commented, 'in those days whoever could marry the most was regarded as a better Kulin by society.' All expenses were met from the families of wives and 'it was difficult to find an utensil in the homes of Kulin men ... that a wife's welfare was a major responsibility did not even enter into the imagination of the married men of the days' (ibid: 9).

With great feeling Nistarini recounted how 'with my birth, life's sufferings began' as her mother lost three baby girls soon after. She wrote of a childhood of neglect, of a father overburdened with a large family and her mother and step-mother weary with caring and housework. Interestingly, Nistarini's father Harcharan, had married only twice, and chose to keep both wives and children with him in Gorakhpur (United Provinces). It is possible that he was different on both scores because he lived outside Bengal. When it came to daughter Nistarini's marriage, the family turned to traditional moorings. By the time she was ten years

old, there was great consternation over the question of arranging a match, as, living outside Bengal, eligible bridegrooms were not easy to find. Nistarini commented that her family behaved as though she was at fault, scolding and chiding her. She had also to listen to the loud complaints of her father and brothers of the expenses likely to be incurred. Finally, Nistarini, her two mothers and younger siblings were sent to her father's village in Hooghly district.

Harcharan's maternal cousin was charged with the responsibility of finding an appropriate bridegroom. But despite spreading the word far and wide, her uncle could not find an appropriate Kulin or srotriya Brahmin. Not unexpectedly, Nistarini did not comment on why it was so difficult. Here again it is possible that her father's employment in an unknown area may have raised doubts in conventional minds. Indeed, Nistarini had to settle for a swakrit bhanga Kulin, one who had lost Kulin rank. And it was reported that, though only twenty five years old, he had been married at least thirty or forty times to women from various sub-caste groups. The bridegroorn-to-be also came from a poor family, one where 'at the time of ritual tonsure, the boys wandered about getting married, unmindful of their kul' (ibid: 18). The young man had been married often to 'three and four sisters, thus rescuing parents' from the responsibility of unmarried daughters (kanyadai).' Obviously Iswarchandra Chattopadhyay was married after elaborate financial negotiations; Nistarini reported that her future husband could be brought to Khanyan only after an initial payment in the form of blessing (ashirwad) money signifying an engagement. Subsequently, though considerable bargaining took place, Nistarini's marriage was a modest affair, and cost only about rupees twelve. And then 'the wedding was over, the bridegroom left and like a dream my unmarried status disappeared' (ibid: 19).

Nistarini and Iswarchandra's marriage was a hypogamous one; in addition, Iswarchandra was, as already mentioned, a swakrit bhanga Kulin, quite the most lowly among Brahmins, who had made marriage a business. By marrying a daughter to such a man, Nistarini's family immediately lost rank. In any case, her family appeared to be a little different from the norm. Her father, Harcharan's mysterious disapperance, subsequent employment outside the region with an Englishman in a dangerous occupation and the family's apparent poverty implied that Nistarini did not come from a landed, established Kulin family for whom hypergamous matches would be relatively easy. In addition, her brother Kalicharan's conversion to Christianity and nephew Bhawani's revolutionary persona, implied an openess to external pressures and influences. It was therefore not difficult to visualise Nistarini's family as one accustomed to adjusting to changing circumstances with a certain measure of flexibility.

There were only two instances during her long life when Nistarini's husband came to her natal home. She, of course, never went to his village. On the first occasion, when Iswar's presence was required for a family wedding, he could only be lured on to the boat for the journey to his in-laws' home on the assurance of Rs. 5 per month being paid to his family. It is possible that this form of payment was a variation on the gharjamai system, where the services of the bridegroom as well as his presence in his wife's home meant compensating for his absence from his own home. It was decided that initially Iswar's father would send someone along with him to collect the money. However, Nistarini's brother reneged on this payment by duping the family retainer. This upset Nistarini considerably. During the long river journey Iswar persuaded his brother-in-law to dock the boat at Murshidabad: he wanted to visit another wife's home to collect what he could! Nistarini commented wryly:

He (Iswar) believed that we would support his family back home on a monthly basis. What a hope! You know why we refer to our husbands with the honorific He? God is referred to as He. Our husbands are our Gods, our all (ibid: 21).

On this occasion, Iswar lived in Nistarini's brother's home for about a year. As he had some training as a Brahmin pandit, he performed the rituals associated with the family's Durga puja celeberation. All along, Iswar was under the impression that his father was being sent Rs. 5 a month until one day a letter arrived. While expressing his happiness at his son's relatively comfortable situation, Nistarini's father-in-law wrote: 'here we are in great distress, our hearth can be barely kept going'. On getting to know of his brother-in-law's perfidy, Iswar was apparently very upset. Though the payment of Rs. 5 started forthwith, Iswar also found a temporary job for himself on Rs. 12 a month, which helped in supporting his father. He returned to his father's home soon after, leaving Nistarini to set up house once more in the thatched shack in Khanyan with her mother, older brother's wife, three sisters and two younger brothers. Nistarini resumed her role of care-giver with a sense of resignation.

In a few years, her father's financial situation improved and he built a fine brick and mortar home for his family: Nistarini commented proudly, 'we were now among the babus (respectable folk) of Khanyan'. The author does not give us a clear idea of years or specific dates, though she does have recollections of 1857. Shortly after that, her husband was brought to his wife's home for the second time. This time, he was suffering from jaundice. It is interesting that Iswar's wife's family decided to bring him to their home as they felt he required the relatively more specialised treatment of a vaid (apothecary). Nistarini's father's sister's husband was sent to fetch both Iswar and the apothecary. In some detail, Nistarini described the painful treatment, the onset of gangrene and maggots and Iswar's suffering. She wrote:

My mother wanted to feed him well. But other family members were irritated at this. After all, he wasn't supposed to stay in our home for so long (ibid: 27).

Nor could Nistarini help him as she was not to be seen in his company during the day. Ultimately, the unhappy Iswar went back to his father and son Ashu, by another marriage. Again, as there is no information on dates, it can be presumed that Iswar died not long after. His father conveyed the news to Nistarini's older brother who arranged for the usual rituals associated with death. The last rites, however, were performed by Iswar's son, Ashu. Nistarini lamented, in the manner of a traditional widow:

Everything of mine was finished. I removed my bangles and began to cry... I was at least fortunate that I could get news of my husband's death. My co-wives, denied of this information, continued eating rice and and fish7 for a long time... It was not my fortune to enjoy life with my husband (swamibhog) (Ibid: 28-9).

While Nistarini is somewhat vague about her age at the time, clearly she was not yet twenty. Many years later, Nistarini recounted how she met another elderly widow like herself at the Kalighat temple in Calcutta. In the course of conversation, she discovered that the woman was her co-wife who did not even know that their husband was dead! She narrated:

When I gave her the news, she started weeping, I felt then that it was genuine grief. Yet, from the day of her marriage; she had not even known what her husband looked like!

Nistarini continued cynically:

Those are indeed sad tales; if I think of them now, I am amused. Once I'd heard a story about a person who did not have a shoe for one foot; he was feeling sorry for himself, when by chance, a lame man passed him by. I was in that state (that is, like the man without a shoe) (ibid: 29).

Shortly afterwards, Nistarini's father died. Despite the overall improvement in the lives of individual members, Nistarini's natal family appears to have always lived on the verge of poverty. Her younger brother who became a Christian (later the Rev. Kalicharan Banerji) supported Nistarini for much of her long, tragic life. For, like many Kulin widows (and indeed wives), Nistarini spent the years shuttling between the homes of her brothers and their sons. While she enjoyed quite a bit of authority in the various households, it is clear that she had to struggle to justify her stay. Often enough, her brothers too were unsympathetic. When her older brother Devicharan's wife died, he married a much younger woman. Soon enough, according to Nistarini, her new sister-in-law started troubling her: she did not help with the housework, and

'did not even cut the vegetables'. Thus, the abstemious widow had to manage the household, and when, as a consequence she felt ill, her brother was not very charitable about it:

My dada (older brother) said 'What ailments can a widow have anyway?' So what option did I have? Feeling like death, I continued working, weeping at the same time... Even the servants, taking a cue from the daughter-in-law (her brother's second wife), ignored me. I did not ever have a share in dinner. If I asked the servants to hew some wood, the answer would be 'do it yourself'(Ibld: 32,34).

Halfway through, the narrative becomes somewhat erratic, with at times confusion, time sequences of Nistarini's life in Chinsurah, Khanyan and Calcutta. At one point her brother Kahcharan arranged for her to live on her own in a small house in Calcutta. However, this did not last long as she was required to help out in another brother's home. Her only real, attachment - apart perhaps from the somewhat awed respect and affection for Kalicharan - was to her younger brother Tarinicharan's son, Prandhan. It would appear from the narrative that her nephew too had a certain measure of affection for the aunt who had brought him up. Nistarini's family then, was an interesting mix of extreme conventionality and iconoclasm: while she herself was a victim of Kulinism, not too many in her generation and the next appear to have been a part of the system. None of her brothers were polygamous, and all brought their wives to live with them. The standard for daughters however, seems to have been different, as Nistarini was not only one of many wives, but had never been to her husband's home. In fact she commented:

those whose fathers were married twice yet whose co-wives, though not on good terms, brought up each other's children, and whose paternal grandfather had 56 wives and great-grandfather 108 - why they are so nervous of marriage is not dear. My elder brother's younger son Bhawani did not even marry. Younger brother's middle son wants to jump off the roof at the very mention of marriage... Thinking about all this I feel that what is good and what is true, that is what will survive. That which is bad or a lie and persists, and the society in which it does, will not survive (ibid: 41).

This is a clear indictment of the oppression from which Nistarini suffered for decades. Being a childless widow who had never known her husband's home, providing free service in her father's and brothers' homes, was viewed by all as her only role. Nistarini, nonetheless resented being regarded as an unpaid domestic servant, one who had a 'vessel perpetually around the neck'. However, there was little that she could do about it and when her brothers and nephews decided that, like countless other widows, she should go away to Kashi (Varanasi) and spend the rest of her days in prayer and meditation, she accepted unwillingly.

Around this time, there developed tensions between Nistarini and her niece-in-law, Prandhan's wife. She openly flouted his aunt's views on how to dress and on what to eat. Prandhan himself took a long time to become established, having failed in the B.A. examination seven times before he finally succeeded and then began reading law. He was clearly not willing to take on the responsibility of an almost blind aunt, who nonetheless knew how to stand her ground. When the family decided that she should go to Kashi she asked 'on whose assurance can I go?' To which there was no answer, and the childless woman 'cried out for one who could be my own'. As always, she had to do the rounds for money, and was met with the usual reluctance from her nephews and nieces.

In the last years of her life, Prandhan had finally set himself up as a successful lawyer and asked Nistarini to go and live with him and is family in Lucknow. But the elderly widow, who had by then seen enough of life and relationships said: 'I thought - why again? Now if I can go to him after I die, I'll be happy' (ibid: 48). The ultimate tragedy of her life was yet to come: while she could bear the agony of her younger brothers Kalicharan and Tarinicharan dying prematurly, Prandhan's accidental death shattered her fragile existence. On returning from a visit to Kashi, Prandhan was killed in an ekka (horse carriage) accident. Nistarini's book ends with a powerful statement on how decades of suffering destroys something within. At the same time, the pain brings forth defences, vital refuges in a cruel world. On hearing of Prandhan's death she said:

> *My tears did not come. My tears have dried up. Since then I have not cried... if any of you can make me cry I'll be grateful. I talk to my Prandhan in my dreams.*

Cynically she continues

What is my pain? Why should I need to cry? I know that I can talk to him in my dreams and that is how I'll get him alive. Ultimately if I can believe Prandhan to be my Bisheshwar, then I'll be able to love Bisheshwar like a son and all my pain will go (ibid: 49).

In order for Nistarini to cope with her grief, Prandhan has to become one with god (Bisheshwar). The son and the god merge as a single being to be loved selflessly by the widow. For, in order to be true to the only way of life she knew, Nistarini could give full, undivided love to the Divine Being alone. And only when the surrogate-son merged with divinity, could Nistarini love and dwell on him endlessly. Mortal love was, after all, of a much lower order than love for the Creator.

Conclusion

By the time Sekeley Katha was published, official records indicated that Kulin polygamy had virtually died out. Yet the narrative has a lasting importance with its interpretation of attitudes to femininity and female sexuality in particular. Its unstated comment-was that marriage is often a charade, a necessary convenience to keep intact a family's respectability - and indeed financial viability. At one level, Sekeley Katha provides a poignant insight into a perversion of the caste system caused by an obsessionwith kanyadai'and a daughter's sexuality. It is a telling example of how, in specific contexts, conventions were stood on their head: matrimony did not mean a change of residence for a girl nor did it give her the right to bear children. It merely provided her with the symbolic mark of sindur (vermillion) in the parting of her hair. And importantly, it redeemed her family's honour.

On a more general level, Sekeley Katha effectively merges the private with the social context of women's status and quality of life. In this case it provides insights into the lives of a particularly underprivileged segment of Bengali women, the Kulin widows. Ritual high status was hardly commensurate with the treatment they received within the home, in fact, an extraordinarily arbitrary system of marriage, exchange and caste purity hinged on the existence of these girls and women who were treated as little more than useful chattel. At many points, it is almost as though the arguments of Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Rammohun Roy and others found their well-spring in the lives of many like this old and neglected widow. Their writings reflect much of what Nistarini experienced; conversely, a reading of Sekeley Katha is enriched by an understanding of the broader context of nineteenth century Bengal. Personal narrative and public discourse meld to provide a fueller understanding of social process and the stranglehold of tradition.

Notes

1. Keshub Chunder Sen's mother Sharadasundari also dictated her memoirs to a grandson- in-law. In this case, the editor's introduction stated clearly that she was prevailed to speak about her life because a mother's reminiscences, it was felt, could have provided some insights into an eminent man's life. Thus, Atmakatha was regarded important not as a text on its own, but as a background commentary on a successful son. It is not unlikely that Sekeley Katha too was dictated at the instance of those who felt that

a woman who was the sister of a well-known Christian preacher, lawyer and nationalist as well as aunt of Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (whom David Kopf has referred to as a 'pioneer revolutionary nationalist) would surely say something relevant about these two leading male personalities of the times. In both cases then the women's voices were significant at the time because of what they had to say about the important men in their families.

2. Interestingly, though himself polygamous and known to have neglected his wives, Rammohun Roy wrote a useful tract on 'Modem Encroachments on the Ancient Rights of Females according to the Hindu Law of Inheritance'(1822). In this piece, citing a number of historical sources, he argues that 'all the ancient law-givers unanimously award to a mother an equal share with her son in the property left by her deceased husband in order that she may spend her remaining days independently of her children' (quoted in Collett 1913:109); however, social practices including that of polygamy resulted in situations which were 'directly contrary to the law given by ancient authors'. A plurality of wives in Bengal resulted in a high rate of suicide among such women. While Rammohun commented eloquently on nominal wives who were useful objects used for the aggrandisement of wealth by rapacious Brahmins he concentrated on abolishing sati and not polygamy (S.N. Mukheoee, 1982; Nandy, 1980). Yet, in abolishing sati he was also seeking to save Brahmin widows from murder as it is likely that many of those who were killed were in fact victims of Kulin polygamy (A. Mukheilee, 1957: 102).

For Iswar Chandra Sarma (Vidyasagar) and for nineteenth century Bengali women, the decade and a half from 1845 to 1860 was perhaps the most eventful and productive. Working tirelessly, for girls' schools on the one hand and for reform'to liberate those women who would never have-the chance for a formal education, Vidyasagar backed up his involvement with solid academic and empirical research. Using his deep knowledge of the shastras, he proved effectively that widow remarriage was more than justified. His views were enunciated in two well-documented tracts and officially put forth in a petition to the government. At around the same time, on December 27, 1855, Vidyasagar also submitted another well-argued petition against Kulin polygamy. This was followed by a second petition signed this time by 21,000 persons including .1 number of leading personalities and zamindars on July 22, 1856. The petition apprised the government of the situation whereby 'the female children married under the circumstances commonly continue after the marriage to live with their parents - their nominal husbands generally taking no note of them' (quoted in S.K. Adhikal-i, 1980: 54). However, when these distant strangers died, their widows were to observe 'all the disabilities which law and custom impose upon Hindu widows' (ibid). The government however, did not act on this petition: the onset of the events of 1857 completely altered its world view for many years to come. A decade later, a third petition was handed over to Sir

Cecil Beadon, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal who apparently responded positively. By then, of course, the powerful pro-Kulin lobby, including novelist Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, was opposed to any legislation. A shaky government appointed a Committee to go into the merits of legislation; in the meantime, a despatch from the Secretary of State objected to any reformist legislation which would result in further tension: according to C.E. Buckland, in Bengal under the Lieutenant Governors, the British in India felt extremely insecure after the violence and instability of the 'Sepoy Mutiny' and were unwilling undertake any legislative reform for some time to come (Adhikari, 1980: 55).

3 Note of the available sources is very clear on the categories of bangsaj and swakit blianga or on the relationship between the two. I would conclude - and this appears to be borne out by Nistarini's memoir - that while the bangsaj was the lowest-ranking group, a swaki-it bhanga was an individual who had broken caste norms on his own, chiefly by marrying randomly. Typically, he could have been born into a high-ranking family, unlike the bangsal'.

4 Some examples of such headings are: 'Harcharan disappears with watering can in hand', 'The right and left hands of Ramsey Sahib', 'He who takes a loan goes to the dogs', 'With ears drooping like a pig's' and 'Do not try and make a cockroach into a bird anymore'.

5 A gliail'amai is an uxorilocal son-in-law. In the present context this choice of residence was often an outcome of the son-in-law's less advantaged financial situation where I-le was supported by his wife's family and/or rendered them some service, either monetary or through his labour. Inden (ibid:117) has also pointed out that as it was not acceptable to perform kanyadan to a worthy but poor Kulin, the bide's family either gave land and money or maintained him in their home. In a society where patri-virilocality was the preferred norm, being a gliai7'aniai was a cause for some derision and shame.

6 The thuggees were criminal tribes who had origins in and around Delhi. By the 1820S when their operations extended throughout Northern and Central India, the Political Commissioner in charge of some districts in Central India appointed Major Sleeman as commissioner 'for the suppression of the crime'. In addition he had the 'especial duty of superintending the operations of the arrest of -the Thug gangs' as well as for collecting evidence 'for the cases in which they were to be committed for trial'. It is estimated that between 1830 and 1835, 2000 thugs had been arrested and tried in Indore, Hyderabad, Sagar and Jabbalpur. (From H.H.Wilson's The Histoi-y of Bi-itish India fi-om 1805 to 1835 London: James Madden, 1848, pp.303-4).

7 Nistarini was clearly appalled at her co-wife's involuntary violation of the norms of widowhood. Observances such as vegetarianism, ritual tonsure and rules of avoidance were essential for the maintenance of familial status and ritual purity.

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