A HINDU MARRIAGE IN BENGAL

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NEGOTIATIONS

Negotiations for marriages in a Bengali Hindu family start either directly or indirectly. In the former case a party of friends and relatives acting in behalf of a boy and one in behalf of a girl approach each other, usually through common friends and relatives; in the latter case, marriage-brokers or matchmakers—men and women—are engaged. The former are called ghatak and the latter ghatkis in Bengali. Both ghatak and ghatkis are usually illiterate and belong to the lower strata of society. There are, however, a few respectable and literate ghatak. These matchmakers supply information about a few boys to the guardian of a girl and about a few girls to the guardian of a boy; and, in most cases, they bring together both the parties. A few offices or organizations are also in existence for the negotiations of marriages; and, like the marriage-brokers, they put the guardians of the boys and girls in touch with each other. In all these cases, out-of-pocket expenses are to be paid; and, in the event of a successful negotiation, a certain fee or honorarium must also be paid. Matrimonial advertisements have been of late very much in vogue; and they are very interesting to read.

SEEING THE BOY AND THE GIRL

The next step is the “showing of girls and boys.” A party of persons acting in behalf of a boy will go to see the girls and a party in behalf of a girl will, similarly, see the boys. Formerly, the final selection of a boy or a girl depended upon the men of the family. But, for some time past, it has become common for the women relatives, acting for the boys, to see the girls. The procedure is for the men to see the girls first and to select one or two or more; then the women will see the girls one by one, and they may either finally select one or reject them all. A girl has thus to appear for selection or rejection several times before the persons—male or female—representing a boy. But a boy has also to appear more than once before a girl’s party because the male party in each case divides itself into groups—one group following the other. In some cases the boy, with his friends and relatives, goes to see the girl provisionally selected by the men and the women; and the final selection rests on him. But he is not allowed to talk freely with the girl, and sometimes he goes incognito. He should be satisfied with her appearance and with the words spoken by her in answer to the questions of others of the party.

A GIRL HAS TO FACE AN ORDEAL

It is an ordeal both for the boy and for the girl to appear before a party. But naturally it is a greater ordeal for the girl. She has to be dressed in her very best clothes, and she must put on jewelry to add beauty to her appearance; the jewels, in many cases, are borrowed. She is repeatedly warned by her family to walk slowly, to bow down her head before the party, to sit properly, and to answer their questions very mildly. Any smartness on her part may be regarded as a disqualification. Questions may be put to her by the members of the party to test her knowledge in a variety of subjects. It reminds me here of the ordeal of a girl-graduate who had to appear before the male party of a boy. After she was asked her name (and this is generally the first question put to a girl), she was asked what the results were of each of her examinations. She replied with all courtesy and mildness. She was then asked to write a few lines in both English and Bengali on any subject she liked. She complied with the request (or order) with all possible humility. The next questions were whether she knew music, needlework,
painting, cooking, etc., and in each case her reply was in the affirmative, and samples of her needlework and painting were immediately produced before the party by her guardians. She was then asked to play on an organ and to sing a song. This she did most gracefully. Then a youngster of the party asked her whether she knew dancing. This question was too much for her and exceeded the limits of her patience. She took an altogether different attitude and said very promptly in reply: "My mother has said, 'I have taught you everything except dancing, which your mother-in-law will teach you.'" With these words she left the room in disgust. The negotiations at once were discontinued.

**DOWRIES AND PRESENTS**

The final selection of a boy and a girl does not necessarily end in their marriage. The question of "dowries and presents" then comes in. Ordinarily it is the most important question and on its settlement the final marriage depends. The dowries and presents consist of cash, jewelry for the girl, presents such as dining-room, drawing-room, bedroom, and office furniture, silver, clothes, shoes, a car and a house, and what not! A valuable watch must be presented to the boy—no matter if he is a business man and possesses half-a-dozen watches. A list of dowries and presents is prepared. The items, of course, vary with parties according to their means, and the list is sometimes modified, omitting some items altogether. There are instances when the cash part of the dowry is demanded only to enable the boy's party to meet all the expenses of the marriage, and the rest is left to the discretion of the girl's party. In some cases no cash is demanded, but a demand for the rest is made. There are a few cases where no demand whatever is made and there is no talk about it between the parties. But generally these marriages take place in wealthy families and the boy's party knows very well that, without any demand, dowries and presents will flow in abundance. A girl of poor complexion and of inferior features may be selected through the strength of dowries and presents offered by her party. I knew of a highly educated and cultured man who used to say: "I have not married my wife but have married her wealth." I was told by a high official, in charge of the training of the newly recruited officers to the civil services, that he could negotiate marriages for them at a cost varying from 6,000 to 12,000 rupees (and these were pre-war prices), according to the different grades of service. And these prices were the minimum. I have two daughters to marry. Both of them are graduates, are good looking, and possess many accomplishments. I am, on principle, opposed to giving any dowries according to the prevailing market rates and demand. Nor can I afford it. I published two advertisements in the press. In the one I did not mention anything about the dowry and in the other I added: "No proposals with demand for dowry will be entertained." In response to the former I received a large number of letters and to the latter the number was only five—three of which were from widowers. This shows clearly in which direction the wind blows. Presents at the time of marriage are not the only ones that will be expected. They are to be given—though on a smaller scale—on the occasion of each festival in future years.

**BRIDE AND GROOM**

It will appear from the above that the boy and the girl to be wedded do not receive much consideration. Their wishes are seldom ascertained; they are thrust upon each other. They have no chance of knowing a bit of each other's nature, temperament, sentiments, feelings, or aspirations. But men and women of the older school are strongly in favor of this agelong custom. They say that marriages according to the old custom are much happier than those affected by the direct approach of boys and girls. They cite instances and quote statistics in support of their view. Their chief contention is that during the most plastic and emotional period of life a boy is not sound,
sober, and well balanced enough to choose the right partner for his life; and the same thing is also said about a girl.

They go on to say that a young man may be attracted by the beauty and appearance of one girl, by the high educational attainments of another, by other accomplishments of a third, etc. And ultimately he may choose the wrong one. The same remarks also apply to a girl. It is therefore safer and better to leave the matter to the saner judgment of the guardians of each. In this connection, horoscopes of the boy and of the girl are generally consulted to ascertain whether the match will be a happy and peaceful one. If the horoscopes do not agree, negotiations cease, in many cases, in spite of the desirability of the match. They will not take into consideration that, in spite of the agreement of the horoscopes, many marriages have been unhappy.

CEREMONIES

The _Pucca Dekha_ (the final seeing of the girl and of the boy), the _Gaye Halud_ (besmearing the bodies of the bride and bridegroom with a thick solution of turmeric), the marriage proper, and the _Ful Sajya_ (the first night on which the husband and the wife are allowed to meet freely and to spend the night together) are the chief items. The first ceremony takes place a few days or even a month or two before the marriage. On this occasion the boy’s party will come to the girl’s home, will see the girl again and will give her a valuable present of jewelry. The priests will be there and they will bless the girl with _dhan_ and _doorba_ (grains of paddy and dub grass). Others who are present and senior to the girl will similarly bless her. Refreshments will then be served. The same procedure also takes place in the case of the boy. The next ceremony, i.e., the _Gaye Halud_, will take place in the boy’s house: first a thick solution of turmeric is smeared on the body of the boy by the women and a little of it, taken from his body, is sent to the girl’s home to be smeared on her body. With it presents—various articles of food (raw and cooked), clothes, etc.—are sent. A number of men carry the presents, and they are to be fed and paid _baksis_, or _pour boire_. The marriage usually takes place after sunset on a night very auspicious for the purpose. The bridegroom goes to the bride’s home accompanied by the family priest, his father or guardian, relatives, friends, etc. He must fast the whole day. Similarly, the bride and her father or guardian also fast. At the time of the marriage the bridegroom must put on a special kind of _dhuti_ made of silk, and he must have a bare body—even if it is a winter night. He will put on a _topor_ (a helmet made of pith and mica). The girl will also put on special clothes of silk. The priests of both the parties will chant mantras before the deity and a fire. The fire should be fed with _ghee_ and parched rice. The essence of the mantras is that before the deity and the fire the boy will promise to maintain the girl and the girl will promise to be loyal and faithful to the boy for life. But in nine out of ten cases they do not understand the true import of the mantras, as they are in Sanskrit. The girl’s father also takes part in the proceedings. He gives away the girl. There is also a short comic ceremony in the course of which the girl squats, with her eyes closed, on a small plank of wood. She is lifted by four members of the family, and is carried around the boy seven times. At the last round she is raised high so that she can see the boy face to face as he stands. She is then asked to open her eyes in order to see the boy clearly, and the boy is asked to look at the girl. While they look at each other they are covered with a sheet of cloth so that nobody else can view their seeing each other. At this time garlands are exchanged. This ceremony is called the “Union of Four Eyes.”

After the marriage, the bride and the bridegroom are taken to a well-decorated room—called _Basar Ghar_—where they are given refreshments. Here the womenfolk rule. The whole night is spent in music and exchange of jokes. The next day, after more ceremonies, the bridegroom, escorted by some members of his family, goes with the bride to his home, taking with them their clothes.
tied in a piece of linen. After the arrival at his home they must attend more ceremonies, after which they are separated from each other and are not allowed to see each other until the next night.

On the next night the Ful Sajya ceremony is held. The husband and wife spend the night together on a bed decorated with flowers. The bride wears ornaments made of flowers, and the room must be well decorated. On this night presents, articles of food, etc., are sent by the girl’s family. This is in exchange for the presents sent on the occasion of the Gaye Halud ceremony by the boy’s family. Usually, on this night, the Bow bhat ceremony is also performed. The essence of the ceremony is that the bow, i.e., the bride, feeds the members of the family and other relations with bhat (cooked rice). The bow remains on a cushion in a decorated room, gorgeously dressed and wearing all her jewels. Those who are invited are taken to that room in groups and they give her presents. She is not allowed to speak to anyone but will accept the presents from each with a namaskar (bowing her head with her arms on her forehead). The menu of the Bow bhat, like the menu of the dinner given at the girl’s place on the night of the marriage, is rich indeed, and it is an expensive affair.

HOPEFUL SIGNS

There are instances—although very few compared with the magnitude of the evil—where young men are definitely opposed to the acceptance of dowry and have married without taking any dowry; in some cases they have married girls from very poor families. Similarly, young girls are rising to the occasion and have taken an attitude of opposition to marrying if dowry is demanded. Love marriages are also taking place, but, in most cases, these are intercaste marriages and not in accordance with the age-long Hindu custom.