

## Satyarani Chadha: The Stalwart Warrior against Dowry

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### Introduction

Why are there dowries? In Indian society a girl is considered a liability. Since she is not an equal of man, her father has to give dowry to her groom to make up for her inferiority. Fathers often become indebted for life if they have more than one daughter to marry. Dowries have not only increased in recent years but created new and alarming problems of suicide and murder.

It is bad enough that a girl should be bartered and sold as a commodity. It is worse when the demands continue after her marriage. If her parents do not provide what their son-in-law or his family ask for, their daughter can be beaten or murdered. (in which case the boy becomes free to remarry). In most cases the dowry the boy receives is used to marry off his sisters, perpetuating a vicious circle. In recent months an increasing number of cases have come to light in Delhi about the burning of brides. One government hospital registers about 4000 burn cases a year, of which 75 per cent are women. Hospital authorities suspect that 9 out of 10 of these are dowry burns or deaths.

Though the anti-dowry movement in Delhi is spear-headed by three women's organisations – Mahila Dakshata Samiti, Nari Raksha Samiti and Istri Sangharsh Samiti – unfortunately there is little coordination between them. When cases of harassment are brought to their notice, at first they try for a compromise. Mrs Krishan Kant, who heads the anti-dowry cell of the Mahila Dakshata Samiti, described one such effort: 'I made it clear to the girl's mother in-law that from now on we would be the girl's guardians and take necessary action. It had the desired effect; the ill-treatment stopped.

### Satyarani Chadha's daughter's Tragedy

Satyarani Chadha was a stalwart of the 1980s anti-dowry movement in Delhi, a founder member (along with Shahjehan Aapa) of ShaktiShalini, a women's organization cum shelter for girls and women survivors of dowry and domestic violence.

Satyarani Chadha did not have the benefit of either vernacular or English education, nor the privileges of an elite class. She was a shy, middle class family woman until the tragic death of her 20 year old, six month pregnant daughter Shashi Bala, with 100% burns in her marital home. This event in 1979, 35 years ago changed her into an activist and a relentless crusader for women's rights and justice. Along with the parents of over 20 dowry victims, she spent 27 years of stubborn pursuit and dogged determination, battling legal cases and visiting courts, till she finally got justice when the High Court upheld the conviction of her son-in-law for abetting Shashi Bala's suicide.

For Satyarani Chadha life will never be the same after March 17 this year when she saw her 24-year-old pregnant daughter burnt like a pile of garbage in the home of her mother-in-law, 'I had never seen anything like it,' she wept uncontrollably. 'There were no eyes, no mouth ... it was just a twisted black bundle lying in a corner.' The mother-in-law refused to give Satyarani even a sheet to cover her daughter's remains. 'Instead she told me to pick up my rubbish and clear her courtyard.'

Signs of trouble could be discerned even before the wedding of Satyarani's daughter Shashi Bala – a graduate – when the mother in-law-to-be began demanding a scooter, a television set and a refrigerator as part of the dowry. Satyarani, a widow with modest means and five children to bring up, could not afford all of them. However, she agreed to give a refrigerator. But demands for dowry continued even after the marriage. At first Satyarani gave her son-in-law 1000 Rupees (\$130). Soon after that she was confronted with another demand from him for a scooter.

Two days after this demand Shashi Bala was burnt to death. Her husband's family allege that it was suicide. In that case how did the husband's brother, mother and two sisters who were in the small house not hear or smell anything when Shashi Bala poured petrol over herself and set herself on fire? The police could not care less. To them it was just one more girl who had either killed herself or been killed because her parents could not give her enough dowry. But for Satyarani it became a one-woman crusade to bring to book those responsible for her daughter's death.

### Her Crusade

She knocked on many doors for justice. The response was indifferent. Finally she met the Prime Minister of India and the Home Minister. As a result the case came under investigation.

Satyarani says "I lost my daughter 35 years ago but in that process I saved thousands and thousands of others. But in the end, what did I get? He is alive, married and absconding, he is not in prison, but my daughter is dead. This disillusionment with law will always stay with me."

Turning her grief into courage and deriving strength from her personal trauma Satyarani embarked on a life long struggle through her organization ShaktiShalini for women survivors facing domestic violence, dowry abuse and harassment in their marital homes. She spent many years guiding, counselling and supporting parents and girls facing harassment and violence at the hands of their husbands and in-laws for dowry.

Ms. Chadha, 85, had cancer and dementia and did not always remember that she had finally won the battle that consumed the second half of her life. But when she notices Shashi Bala's graduation picture, speckled by age in a battered frame, on a nearby table, the events of more than 30 years ago rush back to her, and the tears that come many times each day begin to pool again in the deep creases beneath her eyes.

### **Satyarani's Courage and Helping Hand to the Victims**

Juhi Jain met Satyarani (or Mataji as she was known to many) for the first time in the 80s at a meeting to discuss the dowry death of a young 19 year old girl in a posh locality in South Delhi. The distraught parents of the deceased girl sat numb staring into space, the atmosphere was heavy and no one knew what to do as the police had refused to register a case of murder.

Satyarani Chadha immediately took the parents to the police station and ensured that the FIR was recorded. Her words, 'rone se kaam nahi chalta (it does not help to cry) hume apni betiyon ke liye sirf insaaf chahiye, tumhe hamari madad karni hogi (we want nothing short of justice for our daughters, you will have to help us)' to the station officer resonated with a firm commitment to the cause for justice. The parents left the police station feeling confident and hopeful; young activists like me felt empowered and in control. This is how we have known Satyarani Chadha- strong, confident and ready to help.

### **Satyarani's Crusade Results in Significant Changes in Law**

The image of Satyarani holding her daughter's graduation photograph and sitting on the steps of the Supreme Court became synonymous with the anti dowry protests in the country. These were instrumental in bringing about two vital amendments to the anti dowry law of the nation, thus strengthening the rights of women and girls.

The first amendment, made in 1983, changed the definition of dowry in the law to include any demand for gifts at any time during the marriage. The second amendment was brought about in Section 113 A of the Indian Evidence Act (of 1986), according to which an abetment to suicide was presumed if a married woman killed herself within seven years of marriage and if her husband/in-laws had subjected her to any form of violence and cruelty.

The story of Shashi Bala, burned alive by her husband's family, is also the story of India's flawed justice system, which has come under the spotlight with the rash of high-profile rape cases in recent months. Ms. Chadha's long battle to see her son-in-law convicted brought about major changes in the penal code and drew nationwide attention to crimes against women.