

= Tarakeswar affair =

The Tarakeswar affair ( also known as the Tarakeswar scandal or the Mahant @-@ Elokeshi affair ) refers to a public scandal in 19th @-@ century Bengal during the British Raj . It resulted from an illicit love affair between Elokeshi , the wife of a government employee Nobin Chandra , and the Brahmin head priest ( or mahant ) of the Tarakeswar Shiva temple . Nobin subsequently decapitated his wife Elokeshi because of the love affair . A highly publicised trial followed , dubbed the Tarakeswar murder case of 1873 , in which both the husband and the mahant were found guilty in varying degrees .

Bengali society considered the mahant 's actions as punishable and criminal , while justifying Nobin 's action of killing an unchaste wife . The resulting public outrage forced authorities to release Nobin after two years . The scandal became the subject of Kalighat paintings and several popular Bengali plays , which often portrayed Nobin as a devoted husband . The mahant was generally presented as a womaniser , who took advantage of young women . The murder victim Elokeshi was sometimes blamed as a seductress and the root cause of the affair . In other plays , she was absolved of all guilt and was portrayed to have been tricked and raped by the mahant .

= = Summary = =

Elokeshi , the sixteen @-@ year @-@ old housewife of the Bengali government employee Nobin Chandra ( Nobinchandra / Nabinchandra / Nobin Chandra ) Banerjee , lived in the village of Tarakeswar with her parents , while Nobin was away for work in a military press in Calcutta . She approached Madhavchandra Giri , the " powerful " mahant of the popular and prosperous Tarakeswar temple , seeking fertility medication ; however the mahant allegedly seduced and raped her . An affair began with the " connivance " of Elokeshi 's parents .

When Nobin returned to the village , he learned about the affair from village gossip . Nobin was publicly humiliated following the discovery of the affair . He confronted Elokeshi , who confessed and begged him for forgiveness . Not only did Nobin forgive her but he decided to run away with her from Tarakeswar . However , the mahant did not allow the couple to escape ; his goons blocked their way . Overcome with anger and jealousy , Nobin slit his wife 's throat with a fish knife , decapitating her , on 27 May 1873 . Full of remorse , Nobin surrendered to the local police station and confessed his crime .

The Tarakeswar murder case of 1873 ( Queen vs Nobin Chandra Banerjee ) first stood in the Hoogly Sessions Court at Serampore in south @-@ west Bengal . The Indian jury acquitted Nobin , accepting his plea of insanity , but the British judge Field overruled the jury 's decision and forwarded the matter to the Calcutta High Court . However , Judge Field accepted that there was an adulterous relationship between Elokeshi and the mahant , with whom she was seen " joking and flirting " . Judge Markby , who presided over the case in the High Court , also accepted the evidence proving adultery . The High Court convicted both Nobin and the mahant . Nobin was sentenced to life imprisonment ; the mahant got 3 years rigorous imprisonment and a fine of 2000 rupees .

= = Public reaction = =

The newspaper Bengalee remarked : " People flock to the Sessions Court as they would flock to the Lewis Theatre to watch Othello being performed " . The courtroom drama became a public spectacle . Authorities had to charge an entrance fee to control the crowds at the Hoogly Sessions Court . The right of admission was also restricted to those literate in English , citing that the mahant 's British lawyer and the judge only spoke in English .

The overruling of the Indian jury 's decision by the Sessions Court judge was heavily debated . According to Swati Chattopadhyay ( author of Representing Calcutta : Modernity , Nationalism and the Colonial Uncanny ) , the court proceedings were seen as an interference by the British in local matters . The court represented a conflict between village and city , the priest and bhadralok ( Bengali gentleman class ) and the colonial state and nationalist subjects . The court proceedings

were disturbed several times by crowds demanding clemency for Nobin or stringency for the mahant . The mahant and his English lawyer were often attacked outside the court . The mahant 's punishment was termed lenient by the Bengali public . Nobin was released in 1875 , following several public petitions for pardon . Such pleas came from members of the Calcutta elite and district town notables , local royals and " acknowledged leaders of native society " , as well as from the " lower middle class " ? from whom a 10 @, @ 000 @-@ signature mercy plea was received .

The 1873 mahant ? Elokeshi incident was not the first incident against a mahant of Tarakeswar . Mahant Shrimanta Giri was executed in 1824 for the murder of his mistress 's lover . However , according to Sarkar ( author of Hindu wife , Hindu nation ) , while the 1824 scandal hardly created any public outrage and faded quickly from public memory , the 1873 affair was embedded in public memory and created a huge sensation in contemporary Bengal . When a satyagraha was organised against the reigning mahant of Tarakeswar , Satish Giri , in 1974 for his sexual and financial misconduct , the 1873 affair was alluded to several times .

A regional daily reported that the mahant 's affair with Elokeshi was still discussed by the common people of Bengal , who did not know of other current affairs , even six months after the murder . Bengali newspapers followed the court trial on a day @-@ to @-@ day basis , often reporting it verbatim and capturing the responses of all parties involved : judges , jury , lawyers and the common man . The " culpability " of each of the characters of the scandal was debated , and British justice and Hindu norms were analysed , especially by British @-@ owned newspapers . While Missionaries interpreted the public outcry against the mahant as the " disenchantment " of the Hindus , British @-@ owned newspapers also pondered over the question of asserting more control on Hindu temples and organisations . In an era when Hindu reform movements were blossoming in Bengal , the scandal led the reformist as well as orthodox society to re @-@ examine " the relationship between Hindu norms , leaders and women " .

Many products were specially manufactured to commemorate the event . Saris , fish knives , betel @-@ leaf boxes and other memorabilia with Elokeshi 's name printed or inscribed on them were made . A balm for headache was advertised as using the oil made by the mahant in the jail oil press . Such commemorative items were still in sale in as late as 1894 . These items were unique in the sense that they were the only such commemorative items modelled on an event .

= = In the arts = =

At least 34 farces were published by the " popular press " on the events of the Tarakeswar affair ? the rape , the murder and the trial . At least four of these were reprinted several times . This is the largest number of 19th @-@ century farces in Bengal created in response to a contemporary event . Farces and plays of the era were often inspired by the real courtroom drama . At least 19 plays were also based on the scandal , all of which became very popular and big money @-@ makers ; especially Mohanter Ei ki Kaj ! became a huge hit on stage . Plays written as late as 1924 referred to the affair as if it was common public knowledge .

Numerous Kalighat paintings and Battala woodwork prints ? created in the decade after the scandal ? depicted the " immoral " affair , the gruesome murder and the resultant trial . According to Chattopadhyay ( author of Representing Calcutta : modernity , nationalism , and the colonial uncanny ) , it was the popularity of the plays combined with " the rhetoric of sin and morality " that inspired Kalighat painters to present this " tragedy as a spectacle " . Kalighat painters often chose to paint mythological themes and Bengali day @-@ to @-@ day life ; the paintings on the Tarakeswar affair were a unique exception .

Often painted as a series , the Kalighat paintings depict various scenes related to the affair : the mahant riding on an elephant howdah ; The Meeting of Elokeshi and the mahant ? Elokeshi goes to the temple with her sister and meets the mahant ; The Seduction ? Elokeshi offering paan ( betel nut leaf ) , the mahant fans Elokeshi and / or the mahant offering her childbirth medicine in order to drug her before raping her ; Elokeshi embracing Nobin and asking his forgiveness ; the three stages of the murder such as The Fatal / First Blow ( Nobin about to decapitate Elokeshi with a fish knife ) and After the murder ( Nobin with the decapitated body of Elokeshi ) . The Kalighat paintings also depict

a courtroom scene of the trial of the mahant followed by the mahant in jail , enduring rigorous labour turning an oil press or working as a jail gardener , while jail guards or the superintendent watch over him .

The plays and the paintings suggested the theme of loss of traditional Indian culture in the face of colonialism .

= = Assessment and portrayal of the characters = =

Most accounts agree that Nobin loved his wife dearly , evidenced by the fact that he was ready to accept his wife at first and run away with her , even after knowledge of the affair . In an era where the chastity of a wife was highly valued , Nobin 's blind love and acceptance of a guilty wife were deemed inappropriate by a large section of society . Her murder was considered justifiable . Some songs criticise Nobin 's stupidity of trying to save his adulterous wife and thereby risking his own life . Police reports , confirming Nobin 's love , read that after the murder , Nobin rushed to the police saying : " Hang me quick . This world is wilderness to me . I am impatient to join my wife in the next [ world / life ] " , a line reported verbatim in newspapers as well as used in plays and songs . Some public petitions argued that given a choice to leave Elokeshi in the arms of the mahant to live a life of dishonour ? which was worse than death ? and to kill her , like a true husband , Nobin chose the latter to end her misery . However , some plays portray that Nobin has a mistress in town so leaves his wife in the village .

Most of the plays were named to suggest the main crime was not Elokeshi 's murder by Nobin , but the immoral activities of the mahant . The mahant is portrayed as the root cause of Elokeshi 's death , which was an " inevitable conclusion " of the mahant 's activities . Elokeshi , " the object of desire " , had to be killed by Nobin to restore his honour . Titles of such plays reinforce the theme and focus on the mahant 's crime . Examples include : Mohanter Chakrabhraman , Mohanter Ki Saja , Mohanter Karabash and Mohanter Ei Ki Dasha .

The Kalighat paintings and Battala woodcuts often depict the mahant as a womaniser and the temple as " a haven for pimps " . He was also described as " a vile seducer " . The Tarakeswar shrine was a famed cure for barren women . The mahant was rumoured to seduce women like Elokeshi who came to him for childbirth medicine and appropriate them with the help of his goons . After being raped , the women could not return to their family and languished in the brothels of Tarakeswar . In most plays , the mahant is described as drugging Elokeshi ? by offering fake childbirth medicine ? and then raping her . In the play Mohanter Dafarafa , a rare exception to the general theme of immorality in plays where the mahant misuses Elokeshi , his love is portrayed to be genuine and her seduction by him a resultant after @-@ effect . However , later he is repentant .

The Bengalee , a reformist newspaper , presents a rare view of the true victim Elokeshi being forgotten in the debate of the trial and sympathy towards Nobin . In the First Meeting painting , Elokeshi is sometimes depicted as a courtesan , indicating that she is the one who seduces the mahant . She is often described as unchaste and to have developed the adulterous affair and even lived with him for some time despite the fact that he first rapes her . In one play , Elokeshi 's character is debated by village wives and prostitutes . The wives vilify Elokeshi as an unchaste woman , question her devotion for Nobin and express the belief that a woman cannot be raped without her consent . The prostitutes empathise with Elokeshi , another victim of male lust and lament her fall from grace , which for them illustrates the brittle status of a wife . Some plays depict Elokeshi as having no choice but to surrender to the mahant 's lust on her father 's command . Such plays concentrate more on scenes where Elokeshi gives in to her father 's orders than on the depiction of rape .

One farce depicts a divine trial of not only Elokeshi and the mahant , but also of her parents , who are portrayed as being equally guilty . Elokeshi is condemned for seducing the mahant and tarnishing the name of the holy shrine of Tarakeswar . The mahant is punished for misusing the authority and money of the temple . One newspaper describes Elokeshi 's father as " the still worse scoundrel ( worse than the mahant ) who bartered his daughter 's virtue " . In many plays , Elokeshi 's father , who is now sexually incompetent , is driven by the greed of Elokeshi 's young stepmother

and he resorts to pleasing his wife by giving gifts like jewellery , for which he sells off his daughter to the mahant . Elokeshi 's staying at her parents ' home ? and not with her husband ? is also blamed for their excessive control over her .