

Paragon of Wifely Devotion or Victim of a Materialistic Patriarchal Culture: The Debate Over Sati

By Karolina Saghafi

“All the actions of a woman should be the same as that of her husband. If her husband is happy, she should be happy, if he is sad she should be sad, and if he is dead she should also die. Such a wife is called *pativrata*”

—Suddhitattva

On the fourth of September 1987, an eighteen year old Rajput woman attracted the world’s attention after she followed her deceased husband into the flames of his funeral pyre. Roop Kanwar’s death captured and provoked the fascination, anger, fear and moral self-righteousness of millions due to public alarm and media sensationalism. All of a sudden a seemingly extinct practice once again ignited a lively debate over the subject of Hindu women, as a great number of Western scholars published works denouncing the incident as ‘horrific’, ‘utterly gruesome’ and essentially ‘murder’. Hindu traditionalist quickly defended the practice, claiming it was a devout wife’s religious ‘right to die’ which only increased the misunderstanding between themselves and Western secular culture. The varied responses to the young woman’s death ranged from aggressive denunciation to fervent endorsement to ambivalence. As diverging witness accounts poured in, Roop Kanwar’s *sati* was both glorified and condemned.

The word *sati* is taken from the Sanskrit which translates as “virtuous woman.” It is derived from *sat*, a noun meaning “truth”, “virtue”, or “goodness” and the verb “to be”. The term may signify the person or the practice of self-immolation of a wife on her husband’s funeral pyre, as well as the early incarnation of the goddess Parvati, wife of Siva.¹ Although there is an etymological emphasis on **being** rather than **performing** *sati*, this emphasis is often ignored by Western scholars, who often discuss it as an act as opposed to an individual.

According to V. N. Datta, the rite of *sati* (or *suttee*) originated among the social elite, the kings and the aristocracy of the past. During times of war, “it became a point of honour [for] women on the side of the vanquished to die on the flames so that they d[id] not fall into the hands of the victors.”² Moreover, the burning of widows was supposed to “add to the splendor of the funeral ceremony and [to] serv[e] as an example for others to follow.”³ Since the loss of a husband symbolized the loss of a Hindu woman’s *raison d’être*, for the ideal wife, the *pativrata*, “there could be no existence apart from that of the husband.”⁴ In later times, while reminiscing over the past glory of their ancestors, ‘traditional’ Hindus would allude to *sati* as a courageous and loyal woman’s ultimate demonstration of love and fidelity, conveniently forgetting that this was a romanticized notion of a very painful practice.⁵

During the colonial period, incidents of *sati* horrified European audiences. As feminist scholar Lata Mani points out, the lure of a dreadful spectacle reflected the “twin compulsions of horror and fascination whereby Europeans were drawn to the site of burning even though they

claimed to be unwilling witnesses.”⁶ Although the British initially tried to turn a blind eye to widow burning, it soon became evident that the practice could be used to justify colonial intervention. As a result, this type of colonial discourse not only helped shape the concept of the Oriental ‘Other’, but also helped identify and support the construction of the Western ‘Self’. Thus widow burning became an important pretext for ‘civilizing’ the ‘barbaric Hindoos’ and validating the British presence in India.

As the British colonists gained a foothold in Bengal, significant social, political and economic factors gave rise to a new stratum of Bengali society, the middle class. This soon resulted in a modern intelligentsia, one “distinct from the literati in the tradition of the medieval Hindu and Muslim scholarship.”⁷ The social reform movement of the Bengali Renaissance had its roots in the birth of this new literate middle class. Although it is important to note that *sati* was never universally practiced or exceedingly popular, Bengal seemed to have the greatest concentration of widow burnings. According to official records, between 1815 and 1818, 1,528 of the 2,365 *satis* took place in the Calcutta division ⁸.

In 1818, Rammohun Roy, an important social reformer who worked tirelessly to abolish the practice, published the first anti-*sati* pamphlet. He utilized a variety of ancient texts to discredit and controvert the argument, suggested by previous traditionalist sources, that *sati* was an obligatory religious institution.⁹ He quoted from the Laws of Manu (*Manusmriti*) which urged a widow to live on, “forgiving all injuries, performing austere duties, avoiding every sensual pleasure, and cheerfully practicing the incomparable rules of virtue which have been followed by such women as were devoted to only one husband” (367-368).¹⁰ One of his greatest accomplishments was to show that “Hindu sentiment on *sati* was divided in Bengal, and [that] the justification of *sati* by more articulate sections of orthodoxy was grounded on fallacious reasoning and misrepresentation of the Hindu texts.”¹¹

The arguments of the pro-*sati* proponents can be summarized as follows: 1) *sati* is **always** voluntary and thus cannot be regarded as murder; 2) the number of women who receive the courageous ‘inspiration’ is miniscule compared to the overall population; 3) the ban would be a prohibition on an individual’s right to religious faith guaranteed under the constitution.¹² In 1820, Rammohun Roy published a second and third pamphlet in response to these arguments. The second pamphlet criticized “the inferior status, temperament, and faculties accorded to women”¹³ which he considered a factor in the oppressive custom of *sati*.¹⁴ The third pamphlet openly attacked the nefarious motives of those who encouraged *sati* in order to prevent the possibility of the widow’s future sexual activity, a practice considered dishonorable in Hindu society. In addition, it openly highlighted the incentive of the husband’s family in the widow’s suicide, since they were the next to inherit after the death of their daughter-in-law. In 19th century Bengal, under the *Dayabhaga* system, a widow succeeded to her husband’s property after his death. This, one can imagine, would have caused serious familial conflict, leading many scholars to believe that though *sati* was first associated with honor, it was later “converted into a convenient way of eliminating an inheritor.”¹⁵ This sort of argumentation is supported by numerous witness accounts that list coercion and intimidation as the real motive behind the practice.

In an 1817 account of an attempted widow burning, J Peggs related the condition of a 16 year old pregnant widow forced to wait until after her delivery to perform *sati*:

When called upon to fulfill her engagement, she had considered the subject more at leisure, and, being at home in the house of her own parents, she positively refused to destroy herself; nor could all the appeals made to her feelings, all the threats and reproaches poured upon her, alter her resolution. She was in the house of her parents, and completely independent of her husband's relatives; and, as everything which could be done was confined to verbal exertion, she determined to remain with her parents.¹⁶

Although J. Peggs has been heavily criticized for his Eurocentric Christian bias, he makes an excellent point when he comments :

by whom this crime is perpetrated is worthy of the strictest inquiry. With victims themselves it can scarcely be said to originate; for a few days previously they are often as void of all desire to destroy themselves as to destroy others; and they are generally averse to the deed till their minds are completely deluded by fallacious representations. *The deed is generally encouraged by the relatives of the husband* (authors emphasis).¹⁷

Elsewhere in India, the husband's family was faced with another set of material incentives to encourage the self-immolation of their daughter-in-law, since *sati* not only conferred honor on the deceased's family, but also relieved them of the financial burden of having to care for the inauspicious widow. While pro-*sati* activists used religion as a "cloak that hid [these] sordid material interests,"¹⁸ witness testimonials attest to the fact that "fear of future financial insecurity seems to have been a predominant consideration "for the widows who faced *sati*.¹⁹

The debate over *sati* lasted over half a century, during the period of British expansion from 1780 to 1833.²⁰ Whereas *sati* was initially understood as a religious rite and therefore protected under the banner of religious tolerance, horrific witness accounts soon made it a moral duty for those in power to outlaw the institution. Christian Missionaries "also tried to raise a voice against the custom in both India and Britain by giving an account of widow burning and calling it 'atrocious murder'."²¹ Although the overall goal of the Missionaries was to point out weaknesses in Hindu religion in order to convert its followers to Christianity, their criticism did draw attention to the plight of widows.

Widowhood was "the greatest possible misfortune imaginable for a woman in Indian society."²² Following the death of her husband, a widow, or *vidhava*, was considered unfortunate and inauspicious. She was shunned by society and was forced to live a life of strict asceticism. She was constantly insulted and humiliated, excluded from religious rituals and forbidden to participate in festivals. In addition to having to shave her head, she was severely restricted in her diet and dress.²³ Al-biruni, an eleventh century scholar of Hinduism, wrote that "Hindu widows burnt themselves because they were ill-treated and they considered it preferable to die with their husbands."²⁴ Numerous accounts support this claim, which was further promoted by pro-*sati* traditionalists who believed the practice would "purify [the widow] of all her sins, not only her husband's but her parents as well."²⁵ After the immolation, the widow, now a *sati*, would have

the power to bless her surviving family members. As such, she was regarded by many as a courageous heroine, the epitome of wifely devotion.

Scholars such as Julia Leslie consider *sati* a voluntary choice which could encourage women to “see themselves not as victims of their own culture but as active agents in the creation of their own identity.”²⁶ Interestingly, Leslie’s opinion in many ways echoes that of the British colonialists, who, before the banning of *sati* in 1829, legislated it as a voluntary act committed willingly by the woman.²⁷ This concept of the *sati* as a voluntary participant was again used by Hindu traditionalists as a ruse to dissuade Western intervention. Such arguments are rejected by scholars such as Lata Mani who have examined the testimonials of widows which “repeatedly addresses the material hardship and social dimensions of widowhood,”²⁸ and “challenge the dominant presentation of *sati* as a religiously inspired act.”²⁹ Numerous feminist scholars have deemed *sati* to be coerced suicide which, in their eyes, is the equivalent to murder.

This point of view is echoed in 19th century reports of European observers. In the book ‘The Satties Cry’ published in 1828, a British author horrified his audience with the statement:

Force is employed in the act of immolation—the use of force by means of bamboos is, as we believe universal through Bengal. It is intended to prevent the possibility of the widow’s escape from the flames as such an act would be thought to reflect indelible disgrace on the family.³⁰

There was a tendency among European observers (and especially the British officials) to view the widow as a poor, helpless victim without a will of her own, who required the assistance and protection of strong men. Yet in doing so, they had “merely projected their own European image of the dependent woman, who was entirely under her husband’s protection, onto the Indian widow, and had in a way deprived her of her agency.”³¹ The portrayal of widows as being weak justified Western intervention and validated British domination. However, the debate between colonialist and counter-colonialist discourse never addressed the suffering of the widow and the root of this suffering, thereby making *sati* “an alibi for the colonial civilizing mission on the one hand, and on the other hand, a significant occasion for indigenous autocritique, the women who burned were neither subjects nor even the primary objects of concern in the debate on its prohibition.”³² The victims thus became objects to be saved and never subjects to be addressed. As such, the concept of the Hindu woman is not constructed as someone who acts, but rather someone who is acted upon.³³

One of the major problems with trying to understand a ritual outside of its original cultural context is that there is a tendency to project one’s own standards and perceptions upon it, which misrepresents and de-emphasize its symbolic significance. But what does *sati* symbolize and how is it understood in Hindu society? Is it the product of the unconscious internalization of patriarchal structures? Is it a direct result of the proscribed devotion and dependent state of Hindu wife upon her husband? The truth is that there is no single universal explanation or answer to this question. Each case is unique, and though it is easy to criticize and dismiss the practice as ‘barbaric’ by Western standards, in doing so one fails to see the power of the underlying oppressive structures which made the practice possible in the first place. Perhaps a better question would be: why are women only valuable in service to their husbands? Or, why are

women so dependent upon men and how can one find empowering models which could offer alternatives?

I started my research eager to condemn this act which I considered the ultimate symbol of the patriarchal oppression of women. I never considered the fact that an act so painfully gruesome could be voluntary. However, although I am certain in most cases it is not voluntary, I now believe that in other cases, perhaps it was. This tension between cultural expectations and voluntary action is best described by Sharada Sugirtharajah who writes,

Devotion to one's husband, wife, friend, or country is to be appreciated, but when this devotion is used to indoctrinate, manipulate, or con women into believing that sati is the most appropriate means of demonstrating their virtuousness, then something is wrong.³⁴

This is further echoed in the words of Lourens P. Van den Bosch, who highlights the conflicting and harsh reality of the Hindu widow's life.

Moreover, freedom of choice is only possible in a situation where real alternatives are offered which make life worthwhile, but this is hardly the case with a widow who is regarded as highly inauspicious in a society which blames her for the death of her husband and only accepts her as an ascetic who practices austerities in devout memory of her deceased husband. Since remarriage and/or a new life in these circles is out of the question, she only can choose between physical death and social death.³⁵

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Figures

Image 1: <http://www.indhistory.com/sati.html>

Image 2: Peggs, J. *Cries of Agony: A Historical Account of Suttee, Infanticide, Ghat Murders & Slavery in India*. New Delhi: Discovery Publishing House, 1984 (1830).

Image 3: <http://www.csuchico.edu/~cheinz/syllabi/asst001/spring99/parrilla/parr1.htm>

Endnotes

- ¹ Sharada Sugirtharajah, "Courtly Text and Courting Sati," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 17. 1 (2001): 5-6.
- ² V.N. Datta, *Sati: A Historical, Social and Philosophical Enquiry into the Hindu Rite of Widow Burning* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1988), 207.
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ Sasuntala Narasimhan, *Sati: A Study of Widow Burning in India* (New Delhi: Viking, 1990), 29.
- ⁵ Datta, *Sati: A Historical, Social and Philosophical Enquiry*, 231.
- ⁶ Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 178.
- ⁷ K. Sangari and S. Vaid, "Sati in Modern India: A Report," *Economic and Political Weekly* 16.31 (1981): 1285.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ Mani, *Contentious Traditions*, 49.
- ¹¹ H.C Upreti and Nandini Upreti, *The Myth of Sati: Some Dimensions of Widow Burning* (Bombay: Himalaya Publishing House, 1991), 22.
- ¹² Narasimhan, *Sati: A Study of Widow Burning in India*, 79.
- ¹³ Sangari and Vaid, "Sati in Modern India: A Report," 1285.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ Upreti and Upreti, *The Myth of Sati*, 14.
- ¹⁶ Peggs, J. *Cries of Agony: A Historical Account of Suttee, Infanticide, Ghat Murders & Slavery in India* (New Delhi: Discovery Publishing House, 1984), 26.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.
- ¹⁸ Datta, *Sati: A Historical, Social and Philosophical Enquiry*, 219.
- ¹⁹ Mani, *Contentious Traditions*, 166.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.
- ²¹ Upreti and Upreti, *The Myth of Sati*, 18.
- ²² Datta, *Sati: A Historical, Social and Philosophical Enquiry*, 234.
- ²³ Upreti and Upreti, *The Myth of Sati*, 14.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ²⁶ Sugirtharajah, "Courtly Text and Courting Sati," 8.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.
- ²⁸ Mani, *Contentious Traditions*, 190.
- ²⁹ Sugirtharajah, "Courtly Text and Courting Sati," 9.
- ³⁰ Mulk Raj Anand, *Sati: A Writup of Raja Ram Mohan Roy About Burning of Widows Alive* (New Delhi: B.R. Pub Corp., 1989), 13.
- ³¹ Joerg Fisch, *Burning Women: A Global History of Widow Sacrifice from Ancient Times to the Present* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1988), 360.
- ³² Mani, *Contentious Traditions*, 2.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 162.
- ³⁴ Sugirtharajah, "Courtly Text and Courting Sati," 32.
- ³⁵ Lourens P. Van den Bosch, "A Burning Question: Sati and Sati Temples as the Focus of Political Interest," *Numen*. 37.2 (1990): 187.