

H. C. Upreti  
Nandini Upreti

# THE MYTH OF SATI



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(Some Dimensions of Widow Burning)

H. C. Upreti  
Nandini Upreti



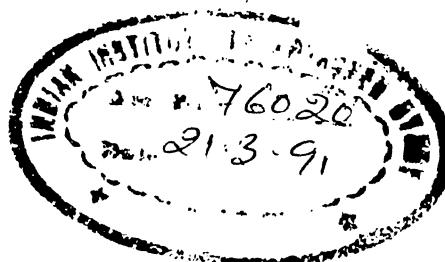
Himalaya Publishing House  
BOMBAY • NAGPUR • DELHI

*Published by: Mrs. Meena Pandey for*  
**HIMALAYA PUBLISHING HOUSE**  
*Head Office*  
"Ramdoot", Dr. Bhalerao Marg  
Girgaon (Kelewadi)  
Bombay-400 004.  
Phones: 363863 360170

*Branch Office*  
"Pooja Apartment" 4-B Murari Lal Street  
Ansari Road, Daryaganj  
New Delhi-110 002  
Phone: 270392

362.8

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*First Edition : 1991*

ISBN-81-7040-276-X

 Library IIAS, Shimla



00076020

*Composed by : Sanjeev Printers  
Printed at : G.R. Printers, Maujpur, Delhi-110053*

## Preface

Originally the word *Sati* had religious and spiritual significance for the Hindus. Hindu Mythology and folklores are full of stories describing the power and influence enjoyed by a 'Sati'. The word stood for a 'good or virtuous woman' or 'a chaste wife' devoted to her husband like *Sati Savitri* and Sita. Unfortunately, later on, this concept of an ideal woman increasingly came to be identified with the rite of widow burning.

There is reason and evidence enough to believe that in ancient times widow remarriage was practised. But over the centuries, rules and regulations about the life style of widows were made strict, corresponding to the declining status of women. Historically speaking, widow burning was restricted to the royal families. At that time it was identified as heroic sacrifice by the widow. In such cases the consent of widow in self-immolation was implied, it was never supposed to be thrust upon the poor victim.

During the 19th century the ritual took a different turn when widows were burnt by relatives and community members, to eliminate the successor to the property of the deceased. Widow burning in this period was identified as sign of barbarism and the victimisation of the widows invited the attention of the British government. Indigenous resistance to the ritual has nonetheless its own history. In the 19th century also the rite was criticized by progressive Hindus who challenged the sanctity of the custom. Records maintained by the Britishers about widow burning, largely referred to the event as *Sati*, and the same term was followed by later commentators. However, this rite of widow burning should be carefully distinguished from the ideal concept of womanhood *i.e.*, *Sati*, because the rite of widow burning was never universally accepted as a Hindu ideal of womanhood. But the synonymous use of these terms creates confusion and undesirable antagonism.

The debate about the nature of the rite of widow burning involved the whole nation in 1987 in the wake of the sacrifice of Roop Kanwar at Deorala (Rajasthan). Again, widow burning was equated with the ideal of *Sati* and a long debate between the supporters and the opponents of *Sati* took place. It is disappointing to note that without trying to verify the actual incident, a substantial segment of the mass media praised the incident as an event of the highest spiritual order. Community leaders tried to encash the issue for political re-alignments. The whole issue was politicised by different parties in order to extract political benefits. Despite the various efforts, women's organisations failed to mobilise the support of local women on the question of victimization of women. Supporters of widow burning refused to analyse the tragedy in the context of low status of women.

In this study different dimensions of widow burning, especially in the context of the Deorala episode, have been explored. The role of political parties, the various women's organisations and the local community has been examined. It is to be emphasised that in spite of independence and a written Constitution, the same arguments which were advanced in the 19th century were repeated in favour of widow burning. Thus, the progressive principle of 'gender justice', enshrined in the Constitution, has failed to make a substantial dent in the conscience of the Indian people.

In the whole episode, the issue of social transformation and change was side-tracked and a greater emphasis was laid in formulating a fresh legislation. Past experience has shown that the government, the administration and the legal structure failed to implement the existing legislation. The Deorala episode also verified the growing trend of Deification, glorification and commercialisation of widow burning. Besides the family even the village community was found to be playing a crucial role, transforming the event into a social murder.

In legal formulations once again widow burning has come to be equated with *Sati* and the glorification of *Sati* has to be penalised. However, keeping in view the religious and ritualistic context of the Hindu society, it will be very difficult

to restrict this type of behaviour. Thus, the law has been formulated without visualising its operational constraints. This also reflects either alienation or hypocrisy of the policy builders in the context of traditional Indian culture. It is to be noted that the concept of ideal womanhood *i.e.*, "a virtuous wife" still holds good over the whole process of the socialisation of girls through various rituals, norms and values.

Lastly, the low status of widows in Hindu society has been examined. Let us hope that with the increasing accessibility to education and development women will improve their self-confidence and widows shall not be compelled to lead a wretched, painful existence.

H. C. Upreti  
Nandini Upreti

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

We have many debts to record while writing to this work. We express our deeply felt thanks to Shri S. M. Saxena and Miss Anjali Raina who occasionally helped us in making available the relevant literature.

We acknowledge our gratitude to Shri Durga Prasad Pande of Himalaya Publishing House, Bombay, whose warm cooperation has facilitated the publication of this work.

Our thanks are also due to Miss Snigdha Poudrik for her interest and devotion in typing this manuscript in shortest possible time.

At the end, we are pleased to appreciate the invaluable support and patience of our daughters—Nidhi, Mani and Aparna. While Nidhi and Mani very often participated in the discussions, Aparna showed great patience in the completion of this work.

**H. C. Upreti**

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Jaipur

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## Sati Through the Ages

The word *Sati* has come to acquire a religious and spiritual significance for the Hindus. Scriptures are full of stories of the spiritual powers enjoyed by a *Sati* which were parallel to a *Rishi's* or a *Yogi's*. The word *Sati* literally means 'a good woman' or a 'true wife'. In Sanskrit 'sati' is a feminine noun, which bestows superlative praise on women as in the expression *Sati Savitri*, or *Sati Parvati*. This was most probably because the marital status of a woman stood out as a predominant phase in her entire life and her relation with her husband was regarded the most important aspect of her life.

*Sati* is also another name for *Parvati*. According to mythological accounts, Parvati was known as *Sati* in her former birth, when she was also the wife of *Shiva*. She gave up her life by burning herself as she could not hear criticism of her husband by her own father. In her next birth she was born at Himalaya. She symbolises a woman who passed the real test of love with pain and determination through a cycle of births. It should be remembered that the worship of this Goddess is an integral part of the Hindu culture. Unmarried girls worship her to get a good husband and married women keep fast for the safety of their husbands.<sup>1</sup> Thus, Parvati is one of the most important members of the triumvirate of Sita, Savitri and Parvati.

Mostly regarded as the highest model of *Sati*, *Sita* is a famous, eternally remembered, sweet, innocent, pure, self-sacrificing and self-effacing woman in Indian literature. Devoted, loyal and a faithful wife under all possible adversities—personal, familial and social—are qualities that symbolise

Sita.<sup>2</sup> There has probably not been a purer and a more tragic character in the whole of Indian literature and when life became unbearable, she renounced every thing and silently sought refuge in mother earth from which she had sprung.<sup>3</sup>

The third famous *Sati* is Savitri. She was also a princess. She was asked by her father to search a suitable husband for herself. She met Satyawan and decided to marry him. She knew that Satyawan was going to die within one year of their marriage. On his expiry after one year, *Yama* (the God of death) personally came to fetch his soul. Savitri followed *Yama* persistently and the God was pleased with her devotion. He asked her to name any boon but the life of her husband. She received four boons, by the first two boons, her father-in-law regained his eyesight, and empire. By the third boon the father-in-law obtained 100 sons and then she asked for the fourth boon which would enable her to obtain one hundred sons. By granting this, *Yama* fell into a trap; how could a chaste wife obtain children without a husband? By means of her single-minded devotion, tenacity and stratagem, Savitri brought her dead husband back to life and attained immortal fame and glory.<sup>4</sup> Savitri personifies triumph over death for the sake of her husband. Till today her story is popular with Indian woman and two difficult *Vrata* of *Bat Savitri* and *Karva Chauth* are observed by married women in order to avoid widowhood and to gain long life for their husbands.

The lives of these three women demonstrate that for women nothing matters more than their husbands. Sita and Savitri are household names among devoted Hindus. Their lives are remarkable for the absence of any interest outside their domestic affairs. Contrary to this triumvirate there are other famous characters especially the first five women known as Panchkanya—Ahilya, Dropadi, Tara, Kunti and Mandodari—who are remembered by devoted Hindus in their daily prayers but none of them is regarded as an ideal. It has been alleged that despite the several attributes, like wisdom, courage and sagacity of Dropadi, Tara and Damyanti, the keen and lively interest and also the part played by the former two in the management of their respective realms, the strong sense of duty, love and loyalty to their respective husbands are shown

by Kunti, Mandodari and Shakuntala, the craving for knowledge as expressed by Matreyi—none of them is a model for Hindu women. A loyal and chaste wife alone, having an abiding interest in her household affairs to the exclusion of all outside interests, came to be the ideal in Society.<sup>5</sup> This particular image of the ideal women has been projected and its memory kept alive through different mass media. Religion through rituals like *Vrata* and worship commemorated the triumph of fidelity over death, as in the case of Savitri, and immortalised Sita's sufferings and her implicit and blind loyalty to Rama.<sup>6</sup>

However, the ideal for women was not always like that. In the Vedic period, there was a tradition of women being educated and having intellectual pursuits. There were learned women scholars like Atreyi, Sulabha, Gargi, Ghosa, Lopamudra, Visvavara, and Apala.<sup>7</sup> Also there were strong women characters like Draupadi and Tara who were celebrated for their knowledge and learning and these can be analysed in the context of this tradition only. But, later on, women possessing the virtues of fidelity and constancy in love to their husbands, giving their undivided attention to the affinal family and ungrudgingly accepting the guardianship of men were accepted. It has been alleged, that the character portrayal of some of the epic women also got diluted in order to suit the needs of the hour.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Indian tradition has a record of these illustrious women though, later on, models of Sita-Savitri and Parvati became dominant.

Various factors are held responsible for this decline of Indian women. It has been a gradual decline from a position when women enjoyed a considerable degree of freedom to a state of dependence under the full control of their husbands. Later on, this dependence increased so much that life after the death of the husband seemed meaningless. The whole socialisation process for the girls insisted only on their marriage. Their education, training and development were increasingly neglected. Various reasons for this downfall have been advanced, such as the imposition of brahminical austerities on society, foreign invasions on India affecting the status of women adversely, the introduction of non-Aryan wives into the Aryan

households, discontinuance of *upnayana* of girls, lack of educational facilities for women and the role of the caste system and joint family system.<sup>9</sup> Proceeding down the ages we find that the idea held up before women is to be a submissive, dutiful and loyal wife totally dependent on her husband. An ideal woman is one, who is an ideal wife. In other words, it was rather an ideal wifehood, and not an ideal womanhood that all authorities described at great length.<sup>10</sup> Gandhi, the father of the nation, asked Indian women to follow the examples of pure and pious Sita, Savitri and Parvati and appreciated the firmness of the character of Draupadi and Damyanti.<sup>11</sup> Vivekanand, the religious and social reformer, also held Sita and Savitri in the highest esteem for their sacrifice of and fidelity to their respective husbands. According to him, they are ideals before the Indian Nation.<sup>12</sup> Through these ideals goodness to the husband was made central to the definition of *Stri Dharma*.

Such a religious psychology is largely inculcated in maidenhood through various means such as religious instructions for *Vratas* in *Gauri Pooja* in Rajasthan or *Gan Gaur* worship. It was believed that the good acts of a wife ensured her husband's longevity and prosperity.<sup>13</sup> This reasoning is still followed by a large number of women of different regions.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Rite of Sati**

The ideal of *Sati* woman or a chaste wife is a much wider term with scriptural and spiritual authenticity than the *Rite of Sati*—that is the burning of widow along with the dead husband. It should be carefully distinguished because the rite of widow burning was never accepted as an universal ideal of womanhood as was the model of *Sati Savitri*.

In *Mahabharata*, Bhishma, while lying on his death bed, instructed Yudhishthira on various topics, including the virtues and vices of a woman. The attributes considered to be the best feminine virtues were described as fidelity to husband, ability to forgive, absence of guile, piety and truthfulness.<sup>15</sup> Women who were adorned with these qualities have complete mastery over their 'senses', have *Sattava* elements in their nature and serve Gods and Brahmins. Though, *Mahabharata* has several

references of widow burning it has not been prescribed as an integral part of *Stri Dharma*.<sup>16</sup> Mahabharata describes the death ceremonies performed for the fallen Kauravas, but no mention is made of any widow immolating herself on the funeral pyre though the chariots, clothes and weapons of the warriors are said to have been consigned to fire.

Two authorities known for their authenticity and popularity—Kautilya, and Manu in *Arthashastra* and *Manusmriti* respectively—do not prescribe the *Kite of Sati* for a widow. According to Kautilya, in the case of death of a man two alternatives were open for his widow, she might decide to lead a 'virtuous' life and remain his widow. In that case the widow immediately received her ornaments as well the rest of the *Sulka*. But if she broke her vow of remaining a widow and married again, she had to return her ornaments and the rest of the *Sulka* with interest. She was also not allowed to retain her former husband's property and was obliged to leave her *stridhan* to her sons by him.<sup>17</sup> But Manu insisted that a widow must lead a 'celibate' life, never insult the memory of her dead husband, live on fruits and roots and undergo all kinds of austerities. By leading such a life she was guaranteed an immortal fame in this world, a place in heaven and a happy life there together with her husband. On the other hand, should she go to another person after her husband's death she was threatened with a terrible fate in her next birth.<sup>18</sup> Thus, widow remarriage cannot be ruled out in Manu's age. He also sanctioned the custom of *Niyoga*, primarily in connection with widows and their future life.<sup>19</sup> Manu did not mention the rite of Sati or widow burning in the context of widow while references of widow burning are found in the *Ramayana* as well as in the *Mahabharata*. This shows that the incident of widow burning was rather an exception and Manu who framed his laws according to the growing needs of the society, and who otherwise was not very considerate to woman as he remodelled the right of inheritance of property in such a way that the daughters were disqualified for inheritance, did not prescribe widow burning.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, later on, Kautilya also did not prescribe self-immolation as part of *Stri Dharma*, as he also instructed how a widow should lead a chaste life abiding by various rules and regulations.

It was in the second or the third century A.D. that Sati was first recommended in *Vishnu Dharm Samhita* and it was in medieval India that the rite began to gain a new legitimacy.<sup>21</sup> Various factors have been identified as responsible for the growing legitimization of the widow burning: deliberate mistranslation of the sacred texts by the Brahmins and the difficulty of protecting women in times of war. Particularly in the middle ages with the decline of Buddhism and its rationalist-pacifist influence, and because of the contact with some tribal and other cognate cultures it came to be believed that comfort of a dead man in his after-life could be ensured by burying with him his wives, jewellery, slaves and other favourite possessions.<sup>22</sup> Though there are many popular stories about how courageously Hindu widows in the middle ages committed *Jauhar* or mass Sati, there is, however, evidence also that it was not entirely a matter of courage and a strong element of compulsion persisted in such events.<sup>23</sup>

The rite of widow burning most probably received first official mention in 1787, when Sir Charles Malet, the Resident at Poona, enclosed an account by Mr. Crusoe of a Sati which took place in 1786.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the Sati model of an ideal Hindu married woman was exclusively identified with the ritual of widow burning by the Britishers.

### The Status of Widow and Rite of Widow Burning

When the term 'Sati' was applied to a widow it meant a woman who voluntarily sacrificed herself on the funeral pyre for the love of her husband. After the death of her husband the widow or *Vidhava* was considered to be unfortunate and inauspicious (*ashubha*), the Sati by contrast was considered as fortunate and auspicious.<sup>25</sup> This unfortunate state of widow was based on the notion of *Stri Dharma* where the whole life of a Hindu woman revolved around her husband, and to a great extent the wife was held responsible for the early death of her husband.<sup>26</sup> It was assumed that she failed to fulfil her duty as *Sati* and with the death of her husband her status was reduced to that of a *Vidhava*. It should be noted that in the earlier texts the burning of a widow on the death of her husband was called *Sahamaran* or *Sahagaman* (when widow ascended the funeral

pyre of her husband and was burnt along with his corpse) but when her husband was cremated elsewhere and she learnt of his death the widow resolved upon death and was burnt with her husband's ashes or his sandals,<sup>27</sup> it was called *Anumaran*. Shock, grief and guilt characterised a widow's response to her husband's death. Her immediate act was to undergo religious expiation, whether voluntary or socially imposed, so that she ensured her reunion with her husband in her next birth or for the next seven lives to come.<sup>28</sup>

This practice of widow sacrifice or widow burning was once almost universal and it prevailed among the Greeks and in Scandinavia, Egypt and Scythia.<sup>29</sup> This practice was generally confined to the great ones, the princes and the nobles.<sup>30</sup> The burning of women was supposed to add to the splendour of the funeral ceremony and it also served as an example for others to follow.<sup>31</sup> According to Thompson "to sum up: this relic of once widely spread savagery had sunk into destitute among the Aryans or their Hymns would have contained clear and full mention of it—the burning of the widow would hardly have been a less important and interesting incident than the bringing of the sacrificial butter or the holy Kusa-grass.<sup>32</sup> While passages on *Streedharma* are present in various scriptures, according to Kane, "there is no Vedic passage which can be cited as incontrovertibly referring to widow burning as then current practice nor is there any *mantra* which could be said to have repeated in very ancient times at such burnings, nor do the ancient *Ghrysutras* contain any direction prescribing the procedure of widow burning.<sup>33</sup> Women in the Vedic period enjoyed a high status. Because of the special position the Aryans gave to their women folk, the burning of women with the dead husband did not conform to the pattern of their life.<sup>34</sup> Education was not restricted and many of the women had specialised in the study of philosophy, grammar and theology.<sup>35</sup> A number of *Suktas* in Rigveda were composed by women poets. Women could participate in the sacrificial rites and Vedic knowledge was not restricted to men. Later on, the status of women declined as they were denied access to education. Widow remarriage was not allowed and strict rules were laid down for widows. Out of all the Dharma Shastras (400 B.C. to 100 A.D.) only *Vishnu Dharma Shastras* allows an option to the widow : she can either be celibate and

live like an ascetic or else could lay down her life. The writers of the early *Smritis* like Manu and Yajnavalkya (100 to 300 A.D.) the greatest scriptural authorities, have laid down specific rules on the duties of widows and have strongly recommended for them a pure, chaste and austere life. Manu commanded the wife, whom death had deprived of her support, not to contract new ties. He cursed her who dared to transgress this law and menaced her with the scorn of men and the ruin of her soul. He submitted the widows to an ascetic life, that by prayer and penitence, she might rejoin him, whom she had lost whether she had children or not, this conduct would make her honoured upon earth and admitted into heaven.<sup>86</sup> Thus, Manu insisted on an ascetic life of widow and denied her new relationship after the death of her husband, but he did not mention the rite of widow burning for a chaste woman after widowhood as was adapted later on by different commentators. Manu did not prescribe *Sahamaran* or *Anumaran* for widows, though it was mentioned in the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. It appears that the practice was originally confined to the Royal families and the great warriors even in India, and the cases of widow burning were rare.<sup>87</sup> It was not expected as a normal duty of widows. This was so because the lot of the wives of conquered kings and warriors was very miserable everywhere especially in India.<sup>88</sup>

The decline in the status of women is reflected in the low status of the widows as well. Gradually, the Hindu widow was barred from remarriage, devoid of social amenities of life, restricted even in thought and movement, and burned with a guilt for the death of her husband. A widow through no fault of her's became an unwanted member in society, she was treated as inauspicious at any social and religious function. It is, therefore, not surprising that some of the later law-makers tried to solve the unwelcome presence of widows by praising the meritorious act of their self-immolation in the pyre of the husband.<sup>89</sup>

However, by 700 A.D. and thereafter, many fiery advocates of widow burning like Angira, Harita, Vishnu and Mitakshara had emerged, who were subsequently quoted by the supporters of widow burning, and it came to be increasingly identified as

an integral part of *Sati Dharma* being recommended strongly on the grounds of divine bliss and reunion of souls.<sup>40</sup> Within the framework of marriage, the aim of the widow was to seek reunion with her husband. Her option was, how to do this immediately *i.e.*, by committing *Sahamaran* or slowly *i.e.*, by living out her life as a widow. In case of *Sahamaran*, she remained *Sati* even after the death of her husband, and this decision of committing *Sahamaran* was to be her own. It has been stated that the decision of self-immolation by a widow seems to be disputable given the hard life she had to lead, and in the face of the ostensible lack of self-respect, self-immolation might have seemed the best of two options. It has been reported that once a decision of self-immolation was taken by the widow, she could not change her mind and the force used after the formal declaration was viewed as help to hold her to her intention rather than forcing her to perform *Sati*.<sup>41</sup> Thus, the ideal of married womanhood degenerated in the forceful burning of the widow and it was also treated as an integral part of *Sati*. Mitakshara prescribing family law in the early second millennium A.D. argued that all women be permitted to become *Sati* and *Niyoga* be prohibited.<sup>42</sup> It should be noted that in these texts the act of widow burning was described as *Sahamaran* (dying together), *Sahagaman* (going together), *Anuvarohan* (ascending to the pyre) and not as *Sati* as was increasingly identified in later commentaries.<sup>43</sup> By the 6th century the practice of widow burning was well known. The practice in India predates emergence of Islam let alone its arrival in India. Inscriptions from the Peninsula refer to widow burning when their husbands died in battles fought by Hindu rulers such as the Chalukyas, Yadavas and Hoysalas.<sup>44</sup>

According to P. V. Kane, widow burning was not, in historic times, a practice imposed by priests or men on unwilling women. It somehow grew and it is improper to say that men imposed it on women. It may be that examples of *Sati* occurred because of the force of popular sentiment.<sup>45</sup> However, Thaper views the introduction of widow burning, apart from other things, as a deliberate subordination of women, who had earlier played an important role. Though the practice of widow burning existed in ancient societies in one or the other form, there is no other society where it was practised by variant social

groups for different reasons at various points of time and where the controversy over whether or not it should be practised was so clearly articulated over many centuries and though the decision of widow burning was maintained to be the free will of the widow but its practice was largely doubtful. As a ritual, it was most traumatic in underlining the subordination of women.<sup>46</sup> Giving explanation about widow immolation—Romila Thapar views its emergence against the many growing socio-religious movements, some of which disapproved of caste differentiation and supported the continuing participation of women in social roles whether as wives or widows and these movements were not always regarded favourably by the upper castes at the end of the first and the early second millennium.<sup>47</sup> This was a result of the ideology which made Hindu Society male dominated. The life of the Hindu woman revolved around her husband, so much so that he was treated as God or *Pati Parmeshwar*. After the death of her husband, the survival of the Hindu widow was made, if not impossible, then difficult enough through the imposition of various rules and regulations about her life style and her social seclusion and humiliation. Thus the frequency of widow burning is closely linked with the status of widowhood. In the ancient times, with the declining status of widow, the frequency of widow burning increased. Widow burning was justified on the basis of incentives to the woman as well as her relatives. It was suggested that her act of self-immolation will purify her of all sins, not only her husband's but her parents as well. The ultimate threat was that if she did not burn herself she will reborn as a woman in many successive births.<sup>48</sup> And obviously, enough, the successive births as woman was the greatest curse in Hindu society, so the only way of getting rid of this rebirth cycle was to commit self-immolation. This manifests the views of later commentators about the declining status of women. Thus the doctrine of *Karma*, which made woman responsible for her widowhood, and the concept of rebirth and the other world were also responsible for women's subordination in the Hindu society.

The practice of widow burning, sanctified by a long tradition and encouraged by Brahmins, was established firmly and became an integral part of the Hindu social system in the medieval period.<sup>49</sup> The practice of widow burning grew out of a social

system rather than scriptural support, and the social system proved stronger than scriptural support in context of widow burning. Once the practice took roots it was not difficult to find commentators and digest writers to justify the rituals on the basis of past examples. Thus, vested interests of dominating forces tried to cast the custom of widow burning<sup>50</sup> in a religious mould.

### **Historical Evidence of Widow Burning**

Precise historical evidence of widow burning comes from the various inscriptions. An inscription of A.D. 510, at Eran in central India, refers to the wife of Gopraja who immolated herself when her husband died in the battle.<sup>51</sup> Similar inscriptions found from Rajasthan and Nepal date back to the 7th and the 8th centuries.<sup>52</sup> Inscriptions from the peninsula refer to widow burning when their husbands died in battles fought between and among Hindu rulers. Many inscriptions are located in Maharashtra and Karnataka. These inscriptions largely referred to families of Kshatriyas' status or families seeking such status. Those who had high administrative and military positions were generally associated with the Kshatriyas.

Another historical evidence of widow burning is found in the existence of Sati Memorial stones. The location, number, chronology and the statements both inscriptional and visual of the hero memorial stones and the associated Sati stones have provided new insights into the history of these areas.<sup>53</sup> It has been found that Sati stones generally occur in the same locality as the hero stones which commemorate death in the course of a heroic act of either defending the village or a herd of cattle or killing predatory wild animals and so on. However, the heroic act on the part of the widow was to burn herself with her husband. The Sati stones were supposed to have standard symbols : the sun and the moon indicating eternity, an upright, open right arm and hand, bent at the elbow and clearly showing bangles intact (according to Hindu tradition a woman's bangles being broken when she is widowed, the bangles being intact would be an indication of her continuing marital status) and a lime held in the hand to ward off evil.<sup>54</sup> Sati stones like Hero stones occur more often not in fertile agricultural main-lands but in ecologically marginal areas, where local conflicts

would be frequent. It has been maintained that the practice of widow burning must have played an important role in kshatriyaisation and assimilation into the Sanskritic tradition. However, in this period there is little reference to the deification of the widow. Thus far, historically, the notion of widow burning was tied to the heroic ideal of the kshatriya and for a long time Brahmin women were not supposed to follow this practice.<sup>55</sup>

Alberuni (973—1048 A.D.), a distinguished scholar who made numerous insightful observations on the character, manners and customs of the Hindus, noticed the practice of widow burning among the Hindus. He wrote that the Hindu widows burnt themselves because they were ill-treated and they considered it preferable to die with their husbands.<sup>56</sup>

It has been maintained by various writers that a large number of women were burnt in some of the South Indian states like Vijayanagar in the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries. Several Sati Memorials were erected by Vijayanagar kings outside the temple of Uddona Virabhadra close to Krishnapuram.<sup>57</sup> In 1420, a Venetian traveller, Nicolo de Conti, visited Vijayanagar well before its peak period in the 16th century. He mentioned that about three thousand of the wives and concubines of the King of Vijayanagar were pledged to be burnt with their lord on his death.<sup>58</sup> However, there is no historical evidence whether the pledge was carried out. Historical records of the South show that generally widow burning was committed by women of the Royal family.<sup>59</sup> Given the feudalistic structure of society at that time, the voluntary nature of the action remains doubtful. In a feudalistic patriarchal system the decision-taking capacity of woman is hardly ever allowed to develop. Thus, though these widow burnings were maintained as voluntary acts of self-immolation, in practice suicide must have been thrust upon these unfortunate victims in the name of Royal tradition. It was an extreme type of victimisation of women in the given feudalistic structure and it was in no way related to the earlier conception of *Sati* i.e. virtuous wife. It has been assumed that the increased frequency of European traders after the Portugese established their settlements on the coast, and their anxiety about this

system, gives the impression that there was a substantial increase, to epidemic proportions, in self-immolation in the South at the time of Vijayanagar Kingdom in the late 16th century.<sup>60</sup>

In the 17th century, the practice of immolating of widows took a turn in a new direction. In Eastern India, it appears from the accounts of travellers and others that widow burning prevailed more in Bengal during the centuries immediately preceding its abolition than anywhere else in India.<sup>61</sup> The frequency of widow burning was highest among Kulin Brahmins.<sup>62</sup> Kulin males were in a position to demand large dowries and marry several women. It was necessary for a girl to be married before puberty, especially among the Brahmin castes and in many Kulin families the age of marriage was so pushed down that the girl was barely more than a baby.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, as polygamy was quite common among the high caste Kulins, there are cases where as many as 40 or 50 women were burnt at the death of their husbands, although this was by no means the norm.<sup>64</sup> Widow burning was earlier forbidden among the Brahmins, but the position was reconciled and Brahmin widows were also sacrificed for the greed of materialistic gains.<sup>65</sup> Towards the end of the 18th century, in Bengal, the rite suddenly came to acquire the popularity of legitimate orgy.<sup>66</sup> It has been also argued that the pathology of Sati emerged in West Bengal as the traditional way of life began to collapse due to the onslaught of outside forces. During this period also this rite remained an upper caste phenomenon which constituted less than 10 per cent of the population. The rite was most common in the westernised urban sectors and in all cases direct or indirect coercion was used on the widow to commit suicide.<sup>67</sup> It has, however, been disputed that the rite became popular among westernised and urbanised people,<sup>68</sup> and its occurrence cannot be attributed only to the disjunction caused by British colonial domination.<sup>69</sup>

The figures of Sati in Calcutta and Bengal during 1815-18, show that the Calcutta division alone contributed 1,485 and the Banaras Division, the seat of orthodoxy, contributed only 343 of the total 2,366 cases.<sup>70</sup> Thus, the number of *satis* in

Banaras was quite low as compared to Calcutta, where the rights of the widows were quite insignificant. Under the *Dayabhaga* system of the Hindu law operating only in Bengal and some parts of eastern India a widow succeeded to her husband's property on his death in the absence of a male issue even if the family was undivided.<sup>71</sup> This gave the women a legitimate right to property both as wives as well as mothers. Furthermore, this might have frequently induced the surviving members to get rid of the widow by appealing, at a most distressing hour, to her devotion to and love for her husband.<sup>72</sup> Thus, what was in origin a custom associated with the Kshatriya notion of heroism and honour was now converted into a convenient way of eliminating an inneritor.<sup>73</sup> However, many other reasons are also identified as factors responsible for the high frequency of widow burning in Bengal.<sup>74</sup>

Theoretically speaking, as has been mentioned earlier, widow burning was supposed to be a voluntary decision of the widow and it was always 'self-immolation'; but in practice it was reduced to a social murder. Widows were being drugged, tied to the bodies of their husbands, and forced down with bamboo sticks on the burning pyres. The duress exerted on the prospective *Sati* was seen as a test of the piety of a family. Taking advantage of the social sanction, the practitioners of the rite were most ruthless with the widow who after taking the fatal decision to commit *Sati*, later wavered.<sup>75</sup> It has also been suggested that the life of widow was made miserable. She was insulted and humiliated, she was not allowed to attend festive and religious occasions and there were serious restrictions about the food that she took and the decorative dresses and adornments that she wore. Bengali Brahmins also played a crucial role in popularising the practice. They claimed sacred sanction for widow burning. Indeed *Sati* was seen by many observers of Indian society as a conspiracy of Brahmins, as they tried to misguide the widow by glorifying the act of self-sacrifice by her.<sup>76</sup>

Some specific reasons have also been attributed by various scholars about the unprecedented increase in widow burning in Bengal. V. N. Dutta does not agree with the argument given by Edward Thompson that the increase in widow burning was

due to the worship of Goddess Kali which tended to encourage the propensity of violence.<sup>77</sup> However, it has been maintained that the increased frequency of widow burning in Bengal in the 18th century was the result of the increased greed and materialistic expectations of the relatives of the unfortunate widow, who otherwise would have inherited the property of her deceased husband.

It is evident that the use of force and coercion had reached its heights in widow burning during this period. Voluntary self-immolation was literally transformed into social murder in which relatives of the widow, kinship group, community and even the Brahmin priest all played a crucial role. If they had not participated willingly, this social evil would not have occurred on such a gigantic scale. In practice, most unwarrantable means were used to give the incident the appearance of a voluntary act, even though the woman concerned neither intended nor consented to self-immolation. Otherwise also the free will of a widow in a feudalistic Hindu society was beyond imagination, because free will implies the will of a free person, while the Hindu widow was hardly a free person. She was guided by others—throughout her life. She was dependent on others. When she could not take a single independent decision in her life, how could it be assumed that the decision of self-immolation was her voluntary decision? Pressures from relatives and Brahmin priests were responsible in the encouragement of *Sati*, being fully aware that she, a widow, would be a burden on the family.<sup>78</sup> While in Royal families women were burnt because of the feudalistic forces where independent will of women usually did not exist, in Bengal the fate of a Hindu widow was decided by social forces. It can be agreed upon that the high incidence of widow burning cannot be assigned exclusively to one or the other factor as has been done by some of the eminent scholars. It can be safely concluded that whenever some of these factors dominate, the frequency of such crimes against women is likely to increase.

### **Resistance to Widow Burning**

It seems that widow burning was never accepted as a normal course of *Stri Dharma*. From the very beginning the

practice was criticised by various scholars. The rite of widow burning had become a significant feature of Hindu social life 'a few centuries before Christ' as is supported by various historical evidences. However, none of the dharma-shastras except *Vishnu Dharmashastra* contain any reference to *Sati*.<sup>79</sup> Voices of protest against the ritual of widow burning were raised and registered even in ancient and medieval India.<sup>80</sup>

The Tantrics, as is well known, hold not only women but the female principle in high esteem. The Mahanirvan Tantrics prescribe a whole day's fast for the man who speaks rudely to his wife and enjoins the education of girls before their marriage.<sup>81</sup> In fact, *Sakta Tantra*, put a ban on such practices as *Sati*. It was pointed out that a woman was the embodiment of the Supreme Goddess and boldly declared that if a person burnt her with her husband, he would be condemned to eternal hell.<sup>82</sup> The *Mahanirvana Tantra* also states that 'every woman is embodiment of the Goddess.....(and) that the woman who in her delusion ascends the funeral pyre of her husband, shall go to hell.'<sup>83</sup>

It should be remembered that even the Buddhist texts did not support *Sati* and widows were instead welcomed as nuns. Some of the inscriptions on Buddhist Stupas record donations by widows. Similarly, Jainism also welcomed Jain widows as nuns.<sup>84</sup> Thus, from the very beginning the practice of widow burning was criticised.

The famous Sanskrit scholar, Bana Bhatt (7th century A.D.), was extremely critical of the custom. A. S. Altekar maintains that to the poet Bana belongs the credit of offering the most vehement, determined and rational opposition to this inhuman custom of *Anumaran* (dying together). He equated it to suicide and argued that woman who uselessly sacrificed her life went to the hell reserved for suiciders.<sup>85</sup> Some of the Smriti commentators also criticised the custom directly. While Manu remained silent on the issue of widow burning, Medhatithi (900 A.D.) commenting on Manu, said that though Angira allowed *Anugaman* it is suicide and was really forbidden for women and it was *adharma* and undesirable and besides it was-

against the Vedic text : "One should not leave this world before one has finished one's allotted span of life."<sup>86</sup> Medhatithi even urged that in some situations a widow should be permitted to remarry. The fact that while commenting on Manu, who was silent on widow burning, Medhatithi had to criticise widow burning, indicates the pressure of this evil in his times and he tried to criticise the evil by criticising its supporters like Angira. According to Romila Thaper, Medhatithi's position was not unique and the discussion was controversial and continued to be so over the centuries.<sup>87</sup> Later on, Apararka in the 12th century quoted views of Virata who 'positively prohibits the custom'. He pointed out that 'the widow can do some good to her husband if she survives and offers him the prescribed oblation at the *Sradha*, if she ascends the funeral pyre she will only be incurring the sin of suicide.<sup>88</sup> Similarly, in the 13th century Smriti Chandrika expressly said that *Anvarohan* though recommended by *Vishnu Dharma Sutra* (25.14) and *Angiras*, was inferior to *Brahamcharya* (leading a celibate life), since rewards of *anvarohan* are inferior to those of *brahamcharya*.<sup>89</sup> Thus, throughout its existence this practice of widow burning was criticised by scholars and commentators even within the Hindu fold.

It should, however, be noted that state intervention to control incidents of widow immolation began only during the time of the Sultans and the Mughals, though in the beginning they could not take effective measures to control incidents of widow immolation. Ibn Batuta, an African traveller, who spent several years in the service of Muhammed Tuglak until 1347 A.D., has given a vivid account of three cases of widow burning that he saw during his stay in India. He testified that widow burning was a custom of the Hindus in the Sultans' dominion, and permission had to be sought by the widow before burning herself in the kingdom and the permission was invariably given.<sup>90</sup> Thus, though they did not try to interfere directly, the emphasis on previous permission by the widow herself was designed to control involuntary self-immolation. If it was actually so then it might have acted as a deterrent.<sup>91</sup> No effective measures were taken by the Sultans to prevent widow burning until the reign of Humayun. But he also could not

restrict the voluntary immolation of widows.<sup>92</sup> The need for permission became part of the procedure. Short of prohibition of widow burning, Akbar did, whatever he could to discontinue the practice. He ordered that the *Kotwal* be instructed not to allow women to burn themselves contrary to their inclination for burning.

Thus, the Mughal rulers tried to ascertain that the widow was not burnt involuntarily in the name of *Sati*. In the period of Akbar and Jahangeer, the governors from whom permission had to be sought, put obstacles in the way of widow, gifts and assurances for her maintenance were offered as a bait to stop her from committing self-immolation.<sup>93</sup> Without initiating general prohibition on widow burning the Mughals tried to put hurdles in the path of such cases.

The Marathas also did not believe in burning their women. Towards the end of the 18th century the Maratha distaste for widow burning grew and the famous queen Ahalya Bai who died in 1795, discouraged it. Efforts were made in the Maratha States to abolish the practice.<sup>94</sup> Hindus, in general, started critically evaluating the prevalence of this custom in the early 19th century, which has not been appreciated fully.<sup>95</sup> Some Indians disputed the orthodox claim that widow burning was a part of the Hindu religion and gave a rationalistic interpretation of the scriptures and even under threat of ex-communication pleaded its abolition.<sup>96</sup> The Calcutta Journal noted that many learned Hindus displayed great courage to prove that by the Hindu laws such sacrifices were not binding and they insisted on abolition of such a practice.<sup>97</sup>

Christian Missionaries had 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'. A widely circulated publication, *Christian Researches in India* (published in 1811), gave the number of widows burnt on the funeral pyre of their husbands and William Wilberforce quoted the statistics of the *Satis* which the Baptist missionaries had compiled in the House of Commons on June 22, 1813. He mentioned that in the radius of 30 miles around Calcutta, 130 widows were burnt in six months.<sup>98</sup> Two Missionary Journals—*The*

*Missionary Register* and *The Missionary Papers*—circulated a series of authentic records of Sati forwarded by the missionaries in India. The papers emphasised in particular the horror of the ceremony with vivid engravings of the widows about to cast themselves into the flames.<sup>99</sup>

The Christian Missionaries were not alone in criticising the custom, and their interest in this social evil had certain other motives also. The Missionary idea of reform was not motivated to make the Hindu society or religion better by the removal of imperfections, faults or errors which had crept into it, their main aim was to point out the weaknesses of the Hindu society and to motivate more and more Hindus into Christianity. It has been alleged that their over-enthusiasm for conversion, the imperfect and superficial knowledge of native religion, their lack of understanding and crude ways of preaching were some of the factors responsible for depicting the missionaries as a 'comic figure'.<sup>100</sup> However, whatever may have been their ultimate aim, the missionaries tried to draw attention of the people towards the violent crime against women in the 19th century.

#### Opposition of Sati before Ram Mohan Roy

Ram Mohan Roy is regarded to be the chief social reformer, who worked hard to abolish this practice. But as has been already pointed out, indigenous efforts to challenge the age-old custom had started even earlier. In this reference Mazumdar has denied any originality to Ram Mohan Roy. He pointed out that the vast array of authorities which Ram Mohan Roy had assembled in defence of his criticism of this social evil, were already collected by Mritunjoy Vidyalankar, the head *Pandit* of Fort William College, and the Supreme Court, who gave his opinion on the question of *Sati* at the request of J. A. Harrington, Chief Judge of *Sadar Diwani Adalat*.<sup>101</sup> The method followed by Pandit Mritunjoy for the interpretation of Indian Scriptures was of Indian logical tradition, that in case of a conflict the lower authority should always give way to the higher. The *Shruti* in Vedic literature should prevail over *Smriti* which contains Hindu laws. Similarly, the ordinance of senior law makers should always

prevail over the minor ones.<sup>103</sup> So, Manu should prevail over *Yagnavalkya*, and *Yagnavalkya* over *Angira*, *Harita* and *Brahaspati*, etc. Thus, the credit of collecting arguments from *Shastra's* against the custom has been given to Pandit Mritunjoy Vidyalankar. By examining various religious texts on the subject of *Sati*, he preferred a widow to lead a life of austerity and chastity rather than self-immolation. After consulting nearabout thirty of the legal authorities in his treatises (which was written in Sanskrit) on the criminality of burning the widow alive, Pandit Mritunjoy declared that the custom of widow burning violated the dictates of the most authoritative *Shastras* and he attacked it as being irrational and inhuman.<sup>104</sup> Pandit Mritunjoy's argument proved most effective in the abolition of the rite, as it drew its strength from the *Shastras*, while proponents of widow burning had all the time insisted on the *Shastras* for this custom. Thus, his deep study wrecked the orthodox claim of religious sanction; and it also provided support to the hesitant government for the abolition of widow burning.

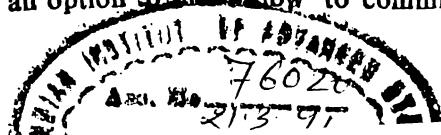
Later on, many of the arguments prepared by Pandit Mritunjoy were proposed by Ram Mohan Roy while fighting widow burning. Mritunjoy had prepared these arguments very carefully but he himself was not a social reformer like Ram Mohan Roy. He did not utilize these arguments in support of the abolition of *Sati*. An active social reformer like Ram Mohan Roy could utilize these arguments to fight the orthodox Hindus, who supported the rite of widow burning in the name of religion. Pandit Mritunjoy's views were also used by the British officials and extracts from his text were reproduced at length in the three issues of *The Friends of India* by the Baptist Missionaries.<sup>104</sup>

Ram Mohan Roy himself wrote two pamphlets favouring the abolition of *Sati*.<sup>105</sup> Thus, the analysis of the commentary of Pandit Mritunjoy was used by Ram Mohan Roy for wider circulation for making an appeal to the Indian for the regeneration of the Hindu Society. Ram Mohan Roy argued that *Angira* and few other commentators recommended self-immolation on the part of the widows, as a means of obtaining future carnal rewards which they declared as sole objective to

be achieved through such rite. While the *Bhagwat Gita*, whose authority was considered as the most sacred by the Hindus of all persuasions, repeatedly condemned the rites performed for future fruition.<sup>106</sup> In the *Shastras* such female murder was altogether forbidden, and our reason also declared, "that to bind down a woman for her destruction, holding out to her the inducement of heavenly rewards is most a sinful act."<sup>107</sup> He felt that the practice of widow burning was not voluntary, it was perpetuated by force and fraud and there was nothing admirable in it. He also denied any spiritual value to such rite.

However, in spite of his opposition to widow burning, Ram Mohan Roy was not in favour of a legislative enactment prohibiting *Sati* as was proposed by Lord William Bentinck—the Governor-General of India in 1928. He thought that a legislative enactment by a foreign government in social and religious matters might seem to threaten the existence of the Hindu Society. It would create mistrust in the minds of the Hindus and would hamper the growth of public interest in social reforms, which was gaining strength in some sections of the Hindu community. Ram Mohan Roy valued the social and religious liberty of the Hindus, which would be violated by such a legislation. He thought that an enlightened persuasion could even win over the fiercest antagonists, but not compulsion, if once the Britishers started using law in social matters, nothing would prevent them in future from legislating on other social and religious matters. Thus, Ram Mohan Roy recommended that the "practice might be suppressed quietly and unobtrusively by increasing the difficulty and by the indirect agency of the police."<sup>108</sup> However, he successfully led a forceful movement for the abolition of widow burning. Once the British Government passed the William Bentinck Bill on 8th December, 1829, which outlawed widow burning, Ram Mohan Roy supported it.

Ram Mohan Roy's challenge against the orthodoxy and his campaign for the reform of the Hindu Society had aroused the wrath of his country men. Ram Mohan Roy maintained that even those inferior commentators like Angira, Vyas and Harita, who provided an option to the widow to commit *Sati*,



provided it on the condition that it would be voluntary. But the common practice of tightly binding down a woman with the corpse of her husband, recently introduced in Bengal and of heaping on her a large quantity of wood, was violation of the rules laid down by some of the Shastras and was nothing short of wilful murder.<sup>109</sup> His real contribution in writing various essays was to show that the Hindu sentiment on Sati was divided in Bengal and the justification of *Sati* by the more articulate sections of orthodoxy was grounded on fallacious reasoning and misrepresentation of the Hindu texts.<sup>110</sup> Still, he was publicly denounced as a *Nastik* (atheist) and socially persecuted and reviled by both—the orthodox Christians and the Hindus.<sup>111</sup> Other names worth mentioning in the Anti-Sati movement were—Gauri Shankar Bhattacharya—the Editor of a Bengali weekly, *Sambad Bhaskar*. Kalanath Ray Chowdhary, Dwarka Nath Tagore, Prasanna Kumar Tagore, Munshi Mathuranath Mullick, Ram Krishna Sinha and Anand Prasad Bandyopadhyay.<sup>112</sup> A rigorous press campaign against the Sati rite was also launched through three Journals : *The Sambad Kaumudi*, *The Samachar Darpan* and *The Bangdoot*. By 1826 the attention of the English educated Bengali youth was drawn to the subject. Letters started appearing in the *Bengal Harkara* (30th January, 1826 and 1st February, 1826) denouncing widow burning and all those who encouraged it, and they called upon the Government to take effective measures to prevent the practice.<sup>113</sup> Thus, efforts of these social reformers, the mass media and the educated people made it possible to think of a social legislation which so far was not taken seriously by the British Government.

Lord William Bentinck's Regulation of *Sati* published on 8th December, 1829 outlawed the rite of widow burning in Bengal. Bentinck did not insist on the immediate acceptance of the Bengal Regulation by the Bombay and Madras Governments. It declared the practice of *Sati* or burning or burying alive of the widows of the Hindus as illegal and punishable by criminal courts. Section V of the Regulation pointedly declared that nothing contained in the regulation should be construed to prelude the Nizamat Adalat from passing a sentence of death on a person convicted of using violence or

compulsion or having assisted in burning or burying alive a Hindu widow while labouring under a state of intoxication or stupefication or other causes impending the exercise of her free will and there would be no mercy for the offender.<sup>114</sup> Bentinck was anxious to know the people's reaction to the regulation. It has been recorded that though the regulation did bring some protests from the orthodox sections but it did not cause any serious trouble as was envisaged.

Orthodox Calcutta elite submitted a petition against this Act, declaring it against the Hindu religion. They also organised a *Dharmasabha* to protect the Hindu religion. The Dharmasabha collected money in 1830 to meet the legal expenses for filing their appeal to the King-in-Council.<sup>115</sup> In 1830 Ram Mohan Roy published a pamphlet arguing that the *Sati* Regulation had not produced any discontent in India, but on the contrary evoked considerably appreciation from the Hindu community. He stated that it was not religious devotion which promoted the generality of the people in Bengal to commit *Sati* but the material interest which many, including the Brahmins and the widows, wished to serve under the cloak of religion.<sup>116</sup> The Dharmasabha, representing the orthodox Hindu view, pointed out in the petition that a group of Hindu reformists, "who have defied themselves by eating and drinking forbidden things in the society of the European, was trying to deceive 'your lordship in council' by asserting that there were no dictates of religion regarding the *Sati* rites, and they urged the Governor-General not to regard the assertion of men who neither have faith, nor care for the memory of their ancestors or their religion."<sup>117</sup> Thus, the Hindu community was divided into two hostile groups—the orthodox Hindu party wanting the practice to continue and the reformist group who supported the British initiative in the abolition of widow burning. The Privy Council in 1832 rejected the appeal of the pro-*Sati* party. Ram Mohan Roy procured a petition from the progressive and humane Hindus thanking Lord Bentinck for what he had done.<sup>118</sup> The 1829 Regulation declared *Sati* as illegal. Thus, the Act was a major departure on the previous policy on *Sati*, it was intended to punish *Sati* as a criminal act.<sup>119</sup>

However, the formulation of a social legislation abolishing widow burning was not supposed to abolish the evil totally as envisaged by some of the enthusiastic workers.<sup>120</sup> According to Kane, no disturbance of peace or even any great verbal protest from the vast Hindu population (except a petition to the Privy Council) against Bentinck's sweeping measures indicated two things *viz.* that the burning of widow was a rare occurrence and the people were not keen on observing the practice nor had they any deep-seated conviction about its absolute religious necessity.<sup>121</sup>

Though there is a difference of opinion about this analysis, some of the Western observers regarded the emergence of *Dharmasabha* as a 'Proto-nationalist movement' launched against the foreign intervention in the internal affairs of the Hindus. It has been argued that during the revolt of 1857 the mutineers saw in the abolition of *Sati* a deliberate design of the foreign rulers to annihilate their religion.<sup>122</sup>

It has been alleged that though the 1829 *Sati* Regulation Act had declared all *Sati* to be illegal, a few years later, Macaulay bowed to the pressures of liberalism, which required tolerance for other religions and allowed the offence of voluntary culpable homicide by consent to apply to *Sati*.<sup>123</sup> Macaulay Draft reintroduced the distinction between voluntary and involuntary *Sati*, which was abolished by the 1829 Act. In the context of voluntary *Sati* again all other requirements that made even voluntary *Sati* unpermissible and irregular as per the *Shastras* were omitted. Voluntariness was all that mattered. Fortunately the IPC, as enacted in 1860, did not go that far. Thus, the 1829 Act can be said to be a pioneering effort in the legal abolition of widow burning. But its effects were confined to British India. In the Indian states this task was fulfilled by Dalhousie. When prohibition of *Sati* by persuasion failed and some of the Indian rulers allowed the practice to continue unabated in their territories, Dalhousie imposed upon them the policy of coercive measures; and these coercive methods continued until the practice was almost suppressed.<sup>124</sup> What Bentinck did for British India, Dalhousie did for the princely states.

Though various reasons were given for the prevalence of this social evil in its crudest form in the beginning of 19th century in Bengal, yet bold steps from an alien Government could successfully restrict this evil which was supposed to enjoy scriptural sanction and popular support.

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## Sati in Rajasthan and the Rajput Revival

Sati in Rajasthan in its heroic aspect was prevalent among the Rajputs. It was supposed to be different from its barbarous counterpart in Bengal where the widow was tied to the corpse of her husband and men stood with poles to push her back. This difference was substantiated by the fact that in Rajasthan the Rajput women performed *Jauhar* which was lauded as a great deed of heroism on the part of Rajput women.<sup>1</sup> English Chronicles also confirm this belief that Sati in its heroic aspect was more prevalent among the Rajputs of Rajasthan and in western U.P.<sup>2</sup> There are a good number of inscribed slabs narrating the incidents of *Sati* from all parts of Rajasthan. Implementation of the abolition of Sati by the 1829 Act was achieved at different levels in different princely states of Rajasthan. Col. Tod was the first British Officer who advocated the abolition of *Sati* and out of fear the rulers followed the advice. The first step was taken by Maharao Bishan Singh of Bundi (1770-1821) who agreed that no female sacrifice should be made on his death, which was extremely unusual for a royal funeral. It is reported that since at the time of Maharao Bishan Singh's death Col. Tod was at Bundi, therefore, no Sati was committed. The Sati Abolition Act was implemented in British India in 1829. The History of Rajasthan is full of instances of the rulers of its 23 princely states making half-hearted efforts to ban Sati by enacting the law. The original law passed in 1829 could not be made applicable to the native states of Rajputana as each princely state entered into individual treaties with the British. These treaties had a clause preventing any British interference in the internal matters and the British had to coax

the local rulers to enact individual laws against *Sati*. Instances of *Sati*, in spite of the laws framed by the princely states were reported in the respective states.<sup>3</sup> In Mewar, despite demonstrations from the British authorities *Satis* were committed. When Maharana Bhim Singh died, on March 30, 1828, four queens and four concubines committed *Sati*.<sup>4</sup> After various political pressures Maharana Swaroop Singh issued a proclamation in 1861 that whenever persuasion to stop *Sati* proved ineffectual and *Sati* was carried out, a fine would be levied on the relations and other persons witnessing the act. He also desired that no *Sati* should be committed on his death. Therefore, on his death no queen committed *Sati* but one *Pashwan* (maid servant) was abetted to become *Sati*. The Udaipur state was asked to furnish a report on the incident. The Prime Minister of the State, Kesari Singh Kothari and Thakur Khuman Singh of Asind were banished from the State of Udaipur as they failed to check the incident. When Lt. Col. Eden took over as political agent of Mewar, he headed the Regency Council and dealt with the cases of *Sati* more strictly. In any *Jagir* area if *Sati* was committed the jagirdar was held responsible. It is recorded that jagirdars of Mewar lodged a complaint to the Government of India that they should not be involved in *Sati*, but the Government did not agree to this.

The Bikaner State issued such orders in 1854 prohibiting *Sati* throughout the State. The order made it specific that if any officer of State or Jagirdars and other failed to check *Sati* they would be solely responsible for it. The members of the family of *Sati* should be dealt under personal law.

In Jodhpur, John Sutherland tried to abolish *Sati* by enacting a legislation against it. He was convinced that the abolition of *Sati* was not possible without the threat of penal action. But in the beginning, Maharaja Man Singh was opposed by his chiefs in this respect. After some time such measures could be taken by the Jodhpur Riyasat.

The Jaipur Riyasat also had a background of *Satis* during the Kachchava rulers of Amber and Jaipur. Names of Raja Man Singh (6th July, 1846), Sawai Jai Singh (21st December, 1819 A.D.) are mentioned in this context, as their death was followed by *Sati* committed by a number of queens and

*pashwans*.<sup>5</sup> The first daring step was taken by Major John Ludlow, political agent and head of the regency council at Jaipur, during the minority of Maharaja Ram Singh (1844-48). Major Theresby was the A.G.G. Both of them decided to abolish *Sati* in Jaipur State. They invited the opinions of the leading chiefs, citizens and others. This assembly denounced the practice of *Sati*. A unanimous decision was taken to ban *Sati* in the state. After this decision, some incidents of sati did take place in the Jaipur Riyasat which were seriously dealt with.

It is recorded that by 1880 the abolition of *Sati* had its full effect in all the princely states of Rajasthan. Initially, the rulers, chiefs, Brahmins and others hesitated to stop *Sati*, fearing a curse from the women, but due to the pressures exerted by the British officials and social reformers the incidents of *Sati* were almost stopped.

The following measures were generally adopted :

- (1) In Jaipur area if a sati was committed the jagirdar was made solely responsible for it.
- (2) In Khalsa areas, where a *Sati* incident took place the local officers *i.e.*, tehsildars, patwaris, kanoongos, thanedars and others were punishable for it.
- (3) The members of family of *Sati* and others who participated in the *Sati* incident were to be dealt under personal laws.

The steps were sufficient to check the enthusiastic participation of people in such incidents. It should be remembered that even today, the villagers, the panchayat, the priest, and the traders are playing a crucial role in such incidents.<sup>6</sup> In 1880-84 Dayanand Saraswati visited the State and found a few cases of *Sati*. So he instructed the rulers, jagirdars and his followers to take active steps to check it.<sup>7</sup> A doubt still remains whether *Sati* was totally abolished in the princely states. Rajasthan's case is different from that of Bengal because the reform movement like that of Bengal could not precipitate in this area. It has been argued that Rajasthan as an insulated princely state prior to independence, has hardly undergone any basic changes in either the agrarian or industrial sectors of economy both of which could be potential agents of social change.

Women are specifically committed to *Sati Pratha*, among the Rajputs of the Shekhawati region where Deorala is situated. Specially the Sikar Thikana is known to have a maximum number of Satis. It is recorded long after the trend had developed to end Satis the incident occurred in this area.<sup>8</sup> The revival of *Sati Pratha* in this century is not strictly confined and identified to a specific community, as an act of heroism and sacrifice. The Shekhawati region in Rajasthan, consisting of Sikar and Jhunjhunu districts, has witnessed a deliberate and organised effort to revive the practice of widow immolation.<sup>9</sup> The present revival has been led by the three upper castes of the area—the Rajputs, the Mahajans and the Banias. It has been pointed out that a significant role has also been played by the Brahmins who gave religious sanction to the events and the *charanas* gave the incident a place ‘within’ the glories of the family history of Rajput custom and tradition. The role of the *Charanas* and *Bhats* in legitimising and glorifying the power of Rajputs was very crucial. The myth of Rajput Male Heroism and its feminine counterpart—*Jauhar* and *Sati*—were projected by the Brahmins as well as the *Charanas* and the *Bhats*.<sup>10</sup>

It has been maintained that the influence of Rajasthan Land Reforms Act which challenged the economic and social power of Rajput *thikanedars* (big landlords) should be examined in this context. The *Kshatriya Mahasabha* in 1954 challenged this Act in its anti-land reforms movement, which was followed by *Bhuswami Sangh agitation*, representing the interests of the small land-holders. Both movements tried to establish a cultural ideology combining Rajput identity and militant Hinduism. It has been argued that these movements played a tremendous role in preparing the social soil for *Sati* in this area, as the first sati here occurred in 1954, and the expansion of the Jhunjhunu temple started around the same period.<sup>11</sup> The role of Sati temples in propagating the myth of sati has also been crucial in this area specially temples built after the recent satis at Hathideh (1977), Jhadli (1979) and Deorala in 1987.

In 1954 also a sati took place in Rajput family. The incident is known as Madhav-ka-Vas Sati.<sup>12</sup> Tara Devi, the young widow, belonged to the Chauhan Rajput family, who was VIII class pass. Her father-in-law had four sons. Inheritance

appeared to be an underlying motivating factor for the incident. Though, nine months later when in the same family the elder sister herself became widow, she escaped her sister's fate as the armed police accompanied the bier to prevent sati.

On the occasion of the Jhadli incident in August 1980, the temple trust collected one lakh in donation and an annual fair at the spot became a source of regular income for the villagers.<sup>13</sup> The incidents of Jhadli and Deorala have striking similarities. Discussing the details of Jhadli incident, it has been reported that Om Kanwar, the 16-year-old widow, who committed sati also belonged to a Shekhawat Rajput family. Jhadli is situated in Sikar. Om Kanwar was married for six months only. Her in-laws were poor, owning five Bighas of the irrigated land, yielding a single crop a year. The village had a metalled road, a post office, electricity, a high school and two primary schools. It had a population of about 10,000. The social structure was strictly caste based. The land was primarily in the hands of the Shekhawat Rajputs and the Jats. Here also it was said that Om Kanwar herself had decided to commit sati and she was not persuaded to drop the idea as *Sati* is the extraordinary power in a woman which cannot be resisted by ordinary people. It is reported that thousands of people participated in the funeral from nearby areas, and two lakh people participated in the *Chunday Mahotsava*. No action was taken against the family members. Thus, the occasion was celebrated by the family, the community and villagers. The police and local administration failed to take any action.

Though commercialization and glamourisation increased in later satis, all incidents were on a set pattern. Alleged decision of the young widow to commit sati under so-called influence of *Sati*, who were not persuaded by the family members or kinship group to change their minds. In fact they were all the victims burnt by the in-laws and the natal family was never informed before the event.<sup>14</sup> The in-laws family remained the main instigators in perpetuating the crime, helped by the village mukhiya and the elite. Thus, the principal beneficiaries —the family, kinship group and villagers—cooperated in this inhuman task and the whole episode was spiritualised in the name of the myth of *Sati*. When the Britishers tried to restrain

this practice they decided to penalise all the active participants. But it seems that after independence, the government and the local authorities did not try to take necessary action, and as a result the glamour of incident was expanded by vested interests.

### **Sati Culture and Sati Temples**

Besides the Rajputs, other communities also have played a major role in propagation of the Sati cult. Sati ideology has been cultivated in this area by various forces. Though ideologically Sati has been defended in the name of Anti-Stateism, anti-westernization and a native-anti-colonialism, in fact the whole issue should be examined in the context of subjection of women and wretched conditions of the widows in some of the communities.

Lately, organised efforts have been made to rediscover and rebuild medieval sati shrines by the Marwari community in the Shekhawati region. It is alleged that the modes of worship and propaganda are interlinked with the vested interests. Rani Sati Temple, the top most temple in the chain of sati temples all over India, at Jhunjhunu, commemorates a medieval Agrawal Sati, Naraini Devi from Hissar whose insignificant memorial has been transformed into a huge marble complex. Though the Sati belonged to medieval period, the temple was made in the fifties after independence and an annual Sati fair was started with the first Rajput sati taking place in the Sikar district in 1954. *Rani Sati Seva Sangh* is the managing trust of the temple and by 1983 it had set up no less than 105 Rani Sati temples in different towns and cities.<sup>15</sup> The Goddess of Maha Sati Naraini Devi temple is also a community Goddess of the *Nai* Community. Another famous temple is dedicated to the memory of 13 satis all belonging to the Agarwal Mahajan community, located in Jhunjhunu in the Shekhawati region. An annual celebration is held at the temple in their honour, on *Bhadon Amavasya*, when over one hundred thousand village folk assemble to pay obeisance to the deities and seek their blessings. It is to be recalled that these sati 'Melas' have been recognised by the Government as an integral part of folk culture and tradition.<sup>16</sup> It has been alleged that

in this area, in past three decades, these temples with their annual melas, booklets, posters, Jhankis and cassettes have been pumping the ideology of Sati and *Nari Dhama*.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the Marwari Community is increasingly becoming interested in the contemporary satis in several ways. It has been alleged that in the past 15 years Satis have been inspired by the Rani Sati Temple and at least four Marwari *Bania* widows were forced to immolate themselves in the late 70's in this region alone.<sup>18</sup> The Jhunjhunu temple is a model for the Kotadi and Jhadli temples. These temples are also imitating the modes of public worship, organization, means of publicity and performance of *maha-yagyas*.

The act of Sati in Rajasthan today has acquired the shape of an industry. In Deorala almost the whole village was obsessed by the grotesque pictures of Roop Kanwar, sitting on the burning pyre with her husband's body in her lap, while a Goddess blessed her from the skies, an obvious scissor and paste job. All this was sufficient to commercialise the event for vested interests.

The Rani Sati Temple trust is privately controlled by the Marwari Agarwals from Bombay and Calcutta. The 105 temples the Sangh has helped to build all over India, consolidate a formidable network of donors within the trading-manufacturing community. Famous industrial and business houses belonging to this area have been involved in this business. Though now they do not have any direct local economic interests, still they have maintained links with Shekhawati through the huge sati temples that they have set up in the region.<sup>19</sup> This community has established temples at Calcutta also. It was reported that Calcutta alone has about 50 Sati temples. Most of these temples are branches of the original Sati temple in Jhunjhunu in Rajasthan. These temples are owned and patronised by families of Rajasthani Businessmen.<sup>20</sup> Even the priests are brought from the State. For at least four decades, Sati processions have been taken out every year regularly. A Sati Mela was held regularly on 15th November but after the Anti-Sati Bill, the West Bengal Government issued circulars not to allow the holding of the Sati fair nor of using loudspeakers to propagate the glorification of Sati. It

should be remembered that in this context a section of the Press started a campaign to the effect that the worship of Sati and the practice of Sati were two different things. Rajasthani businessmen in Calcutta were very critical of banning of the Sati fairs and processions. While justifying the behaviour of Roop Kanwar, it was argued that she was a great admirer of *Sati*. It was alleged that in the opposition launched by this community simply religious beliefs and sentiments were not involved and there was a strong commercial interest behind the chain of Sati temples and festivals.<sup>21</sup> The Burra Bazar area of Calcutta which saw a demonstration and a bandh by the pro-Sati Marwaris, is the business locality dominated by traders from this and other areas of Rajasthan.

At Deorala also it was reported that all the villagers were found very enthusiastic about building the temple and several hundred of them gathered at the spot to decide its construction. The financial remuneration such a temple would bring is no doubt a major consideration of the villagers, who saw nearly a thousand shops bloom during the '*Chundari Mahotsav*'.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the commercial interest of the villagers and the glorification of the Sati were quite mixed up.

In Rajasthan also these temples have institutionalized the system of Sati. Sati Melas are organised by the management committee of the temple trust. It has been reported that inspired by the roaring business the Rani Sati temple trust makes a sati temple has sprung up in almost every big village in the district of Sikar and Jhunjhunu and the people have learned how beneficial a Sati can be to the relatives and villagers in this part of the country. It has also been reported that the earnings of the Rani Sati Temples in various parts of the country, are next only to that of the Tirupati Balaji Temple. The Temple trust also gives loans to businessmen and provides them with an excellent opportunity of converting their black money into white. It is alleged that the management committee had already collected funds in lakhs in the name of the temple.<sup>23</sup> Thus, in the glorification of Sati, the business community in Rajasthan has been playing a crucial role and its vested business interests have raised various issues in this context. The Sati cult has increased with the increased pros-

perity of the Marwaris. The cult in its present form is primarily a product of phoney religiosity that is the accompaniment of new found prosperity, harnessed by political leaders for their own vested interests.<sup>24</sup> The Deorala incident is also a contemporary phenomenon in which vested interests of different castes have played a dominating role. The event is looked upon as a revival of tradition or what is considered tradition in the modern context in a forced, organized and politically anticipated manner. Though the Rajputs tried to identify the whole episode with the revival of community identity, in fact out of 41 recorded incidents of Sati only 18 have been from among the Rajput community.<sup>25</sup> Other main castes seem to be the Banias or the Agrawals.

Sati temples had been propagating the ideology of Sati in Shekhawati Region during the annual fairs and other celebrations. Printed material was distributed by the Sati Dharm Raksha Samiti in which Sati in Rajasthan was glorified and was identified as an exclusive idealistic Hindu Phenomenon. In 1980 also when the Sati incident at Jhadli in Sikar took place, such ideological propagation of Sati was made through a booklet, which glorified Sati as the supreme instance of Hindu religion and tradition and upheld it as the highest ideal of female spirituality, and achievement of *Nari Dharma* and *Pativrata Dharma*. Poems and songs were composed by enthusiastic supporters, and a play was also created called *Sati Ma* by the village youth club.<sup>26</sup> All this was done in the leadership of the temple committee. These temples are responsible for the geographical and numerical expansion of the Sati cult and for resurrecting an option for the families of the widows.<sup>27</sup> A similar role was played by the Sati Dharm Raksha Samiti and Rani Sati Seva Sangh. The pamphlet printed by the Samiti glorified Sati and asked the Hindus to unite in the name of religion. Thus, these temples tried to cultivate Sati ideology. It should be recalled that during the Deorala incident, prominent SDRS leaders condemned the Governments' interference in religious beliefs to the people. They announced that "We are in favour of voluntary Sati, we cannot help it, we cannot oppose it."<sup>28</sup> On the question of selection between law and religion on this issue, the SDRS

proclaimed, 'our religious heads (Shankaracharyas) will tell us'. Their verdict will be final to us in this matter." The Samiti also projected the opposition of Sati as an attack on the Hindu religion. They claimed that Anti-Sati legislation was blatantly anti-Hindu. As far as the religious heads of the Hindus were concerned there was no unanimity on this issue. The Shankaracharya of Puri, Swami Niranjan Deo Teerth, alone openly supported Sati, which was identified as the revival of fundamentalism in Hindu religion.<sup>29</sup> However, recently, when Shankaracharya Jainendra Saraswati of Kanchi visited Jaipur, he was questioned on issue of Sati. He maintained that in Rajasthan Sati has been interpreted wrongly, because scriptures and society both do not allow to burn widows; he also criticised the practice of child marriage in Rajasthan and hoped that with the increase in education these things will change.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the practice of Sati pursued by some castes, with specific vested interests was associated with the entire society, with a claim that it is the right of the whole Hindu community.<sup>31</sup> Sati ideologues utilised the existing structures of religious beliefs and rituals to gain mass support, the reby, projecting a micro-level phenomenon of a small area as 'Hindu' and even Indian culture.<sup>32</sup>

### **The Rajput Revival**

Historically, the majority of Sati incidents occurred in the Rajput community in Rajasthan. The Rajputs insisted that among them Sati was prevalent in its heroic aspect which was different from its practice elsewhere. Recently the Rajputs have tried to demonstrate their solidarity on this issue, and political leaders tried to mobilize the Rajputs as a political group. While all over India the incident of Deorala was condemned, it served as a catalyst for Rajput resurgence in Rajasthan. One of the Rajput leaders in Janata Party of that time emerged as an extremist leader to fight for Sati Dharma while the national executive of the party condemned Sati and asked for strict disciplinary action against the leaders who were engaged in the glorification of Sati. The Rajput community tried to mobilize public support in the name of *Dharma Raksha*. Young men of the community marched on the streets of Jaipur waving naked swords in the air. On the 8th of

October, 1987, 45,000 men and women gathered for a rally in support of Sati.<sup>83</sup>

The Rajputs faced with the decline in their political and economic role after the abolition of Zamindari, have tried to find ways to re-emerge in the new political order. The Deorala incident was exploited by the Rajput leaders to revive their old glory and fame. It has been alleged that political leaders also kept a mysterious silence over the issue for a long time as they were scared of annoying pro-sati voters. Great enthusiasm was displayed by the Thakur lobby in Rajasthan, which was regarded as an expression of *Thakurvad*.<sup>84</sup> Even educated Rajput leaders tried to justify the incident in its mystical character. Rajput leaders insisted that the Sati incident among Rajput widows demonstrated their heroic determination.<sup>85</sup> Thus, the Rajputs tried to compensate for the loss of political and economic power by making *Sati* a matter of identity. They were not ashamed of the fact that this identity was being reclaimed by burning a woman.<sup>86</sup>

These Rajputs tried to project the Deorala incident as a matter of community identity. The then State Janata Party Chief maintained that 'Sati represented the high place given to the women in their society', he did not agree with the view that it represented the worst form of institutionalised cruelty and injustice towards women.<sup>87</sup>

Several state and district level Rajput leaders prominently participated in pro-Sati activities. Rajput leaders also visited Deorala, to show their solidarity with the community. For the time being it seemed as though party allegiance was dominated by community feelings. Vijaya Raje Sindhwia also supported Sati while Janata Party and B.J.P. both had condemned the incident at the national level, the event was also supported by state level office bearers of these parties.

The Deorala incident was successfully used to mobilise Rajput youths to present themselves in a militant warlike mood. The size of violent crowd on 8th October, 1987, collected by the pro-sati lobby, was a shocking spectacle. It was alleged that in the beginning the management and the editors of papers were afraid to antagonise the local Rajput population. Rajput leaders from the ruling as well as the opposition parties

supported the call given by the pro-sati lobby. The Rajput community claimed it as their fundamental right to worship sati. It was reported that the 1,000 strong tiger force volunteers were willing to lay down their lives, if the police attempted to disrupt the Chundari Mahotsava. Their impassioned work round the clock with such dedication and fervour drove home the fact that caste had still not unwound its tentacles from the Indian society. The Rajputs continue to be a strongly integrated group.<sup>38</sup> The educated Rajput youth was convinced about the extraordinary power of *Sati* and they mingled it with Rajput valour. It should be recalled that such a custom as sati was widely practised by the Rajputs at the time when Rajput principalities were under attack in the middle ages.<sup>39</sup> Once the incident was identified with this community the whole Rajput community in the State was mobilised to support the incident and to glorify the event. It was regarded as a matter of prestige of the community and no information was given to the reporters coming from outside to collect facts and figures. The Rajput leaders did not allow outsiders to contact the local people, sword-wielding Rajput youths kept watch on the outsiders. The integration of the community was so great that any leader who tried to take a stand against sati, was condemned by the whole community. Even those Rajputs who did not agree with sati had to join a rally organised by the leaders to show their solidarity with the community. Patrick Harrigan, a teacher in South and South East Asian Studies at the University of California, also supported the feelings of the Rajput community and he claimed that Roop Kanwar's immolation was voluntary, courageous and reminiscent of Rajasthan's days of glory. He criticised the attitude of the government and all those who criticized the incident, he said that it was 'tyranny of the elect' and an unquestioning acceptance of 'anti-traditional value in the name of modernity and progress'.<sup>40</sup> Thus, the Rajputs in their identification of tradition, glory and courage, were supported by the right-wing ideologues, the orthodox sociologists and the dons of the American Academy.<sup>41</sup> The Rajput leaders tried to organize an internally divided community on this issue and helped them to emerge as a homogenous political group.<sup>42</sup> Thus, a social and religious ritual was exploited for political benefits. It was emphasized again and again that the Deorala episode brought back the old glory and fame

to the Rajput community which was not able to assert itself in state politics like in the olden days. The Rajputs regained their old glory and scores of Rajputs with hundred of thousands of followers started reaching Deorala to confirm their new found strength.<sup>43</sup> The dominance of the Rajputs was so great that practically the whole *Chundari Mahotsava* was managed by the Rajput Youth. Police were not found anywhere near the *Sati Sthal*, order was maintained in the crowd of three lakh devotees with the help of 1,000 sword-wielding Rajput youths.<sup>44</sup> After the Chundari Mahotsava at Deorala, Rajputs started gathering at the Rajput Sabha Bhavan, Jaipur, on the 18th of September, 1987. It was reported that a large number of Rajputs came from Sikar district. On 19th September, a morcha of about 1,000 Rajputs went to the Rajbhawan to meet the Union Minister of State and a memorandum was submitted by a 5-member delegation in which it was stated that nobody should interfere with the religious matters of their community.<sup>45</sup> It was reported that the Sati incident had initiated changes in political equations. After organizing a pro-sati rally, enthusiastic organiser, Kalyan Singh Kalvi, emerged as number one among the Rajput leaders, while Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, the present Chief Minister of Rajasthan, was accused of taking a 'wavering stand' as he decided not to address the pro-sati rally which was dominated by the Rajput leaders at Jaipur on 8th October, 1987, while earlier he had informed the Press of his acceptance. A pamphlet distributed at the meeting labelled Shekhawat as a traitor, who was only interested in political advantage. It implored the Rajput community to be aware of elements like Shekhawat who adopted a 'dual approach'.<sup>46</sup> Shekhawat the present Chief Minister of Rajasthan is regarded as prominent leader of the State. It was reported that he had already informed the Press about his decision not to address the rally. He maintained that his stand on the practice of Sati was at variance with that of the *Dharma Raksha Samiti* and the Chief Organiser of the rally, which was described as a Rajput rally. He said that he was told by other Rajput leaders on behalf of Dharma Raksha Samiti that his stand on Sati as well as that of the B.J.P. leader Atal Behari Vajpayee were not acceptable to the Samiti and so he was told not to attend the rally unless he changed his stand on Sati. Shekhawat made it clear that his party was against the Sati

Pratha, so he decided not to attend the rally. In view of his decision, other office bearers of B.J.P also did not attend the pro-sati rally on 8th October, 1987.<sup>47</sup> He was also criticized by Kalyan Singh Kalvi to postpone his visit to Deorala after September 29. It was reported that a Rajput commando force was being organised which pledged itself to uphold the religious freedom of worship, guaranteed by the Constitution at any cost. The long silence of the Central and State Governments on the incident which was broken only after the persistent efforts of women's organisations was also politically motivated because the ruling party was scared of offending the sentiments of the Rajput lobby.

Thus, the Rajput leaders used the incident to consolidate their position in state politics in the name of Dharma Raksha. It was treated as the most dangerous fallout of the Deorala incident.<sup>48</sup> Because of the involvement of the Rajput community, local newspapers were also misguided. The fact that the local Press tried to give the news without any comment on nature of incident proved that the management and the editors of papers were afraid to antagonise the local Rajput population, just as the politicians of all the parties had been, because by hurting the religious sentiments of their electorate the risk of losing the Rajput vote in the bargain would have increased.<sup>49</sup> The Rajput leaders even warned the government to continue their fight against violation of their freedom of religion.

Thus, Sati which was once identified with courage and sacrifice of Rajput women, was used by vested interests of the Rajput lobby to consolidate the political position of certain leaders of the community. The worst part of the story was that the religiosity of masses and the spirituality of Hinduism were used by these elements to disguise their vested interests. In the name of past sacrifices, these people tried to revive old glory and leadership among the masses. Their demand of the protection of the Hindu religion and rights was so emphatic that in the beginning the ruling party, the police and the administration, all stood paralysed and could not rise to the occasion as was expected from a popularly elected Government. This shows that increasingly our politics is becoming more and

more sensitive to communal slogans and the vision of a secular society is being overlooked in power game.

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# 3

## The Deorala Episode

On the 4th September, 1987, an 18-year-old widow Roop Kanwar committed self-immolation at Deorala, a village in the Sikar district. Her husband, Mal Singh, was 24-year-old graduate, who reportedly died of gastro-enteritis. Roop Kanwar was married to him just eight months before the incident. Her parents lived in Jaipur. She was a 10th pass, urban educated girl who stayed with her husband barely for 20 days.<sup>1</sup> Roop Kanwar was married in a rural family because of caste and dowry considerations.

Deorala is not a remote village. It has two Secondary Schools—one for boys and the other for girls—and it has a high literacy rate. There is a hospital and the village also has adult education facilities. A tar road leads to this village of about 1,200 people, most of whom live in brick and cement houses, equipped with electric lights and fans. The people of Deorala have been watching television for over 15 years. Roop's husband, Mal Singh, had a B.Sc. Degree. Her father-in-law himself is an M.A. in Hindi and is a School teacher.<sup>2</sup> Commenting on the incident, her father-in-law said that by her sacrifice she had immortalised her natal and her in-law's family. In explanation of her action he said that she was always deeply religious.

Her parents who lived in Jaipur, hardly 65 km. from Deorala, were not informed about the incident. They only came to know of the incident the next day. In statements of eye-witnesses recorded by the C.I.D (Crime), it was claimed that she was forced to commit Sati,<sup>3</sup> and she tried to escape from the funeral pyre.

It was reported that on her husband's death, Roop Kanwar decided to commit Sati. Primarily it was reported that about 4,000 villagers watched while Roop Kanwar prepared for the occasion. None of the family members tried to dissuade her from the immolating attempt either. On 7th September, 1987, the full details of the incident were given in local newspapers with the news that the police was making an inquiry. No arrests were made and the incident was reported as a religious ritual.<sup>4</sup> After the incident, Deorala was fast converted into a place of pilgrimage. From 11th September onwards, other newspapers also started covering the story with details. Visitors to the village were called devotees, Roop Kanwar became *Maha Sati* and a large-scale preparation was reported for Chundari Mahotsava to be held on the 13th day, *i.e.*, 16th September, 1987.<sup>5</sup> On 12th September, the State Government ordered a magisterial enquiry into the incident and the sub-divisional magistrate of the district was asked to submit his report at the earliest. According to the report of the Home Secretary, the local police had registered a case of abetting suicide against the persons including the father-in-law of Roop Kanwar.<sup>6</sup> Local newspapers reported that the police was not going to interfere before the *Chundari Mahotsava*, so that the religious feelings of the people were not hurt, though the 15-year-old brother-in-law of Roop Kanwar was arrested by the police.

On 12th September, the Women Organizations of Jaipur raised their voice against the passive attitude of the State Goverment over the incident. The newspapers reported that the Prime Minister and Women's Welfare Minister Ms. Margaret Alva, were informed by the women activists.<sup>7</sup> The women's group alleged that instead of criticising the primitive and barbarous incident, it was being deified and glorified. The national newspapers started criticising the government and the issue was seen as a case of injustice and subordination of women. As was commented by the Editor of the *Indian Express* that this approbation which this primitive act secured in some quarters was the reminder of the main fundamental issues with regard to women in this country. Despite being educated, Roop Kanwar did not know that her life had any worth beyond marriage.<sup>8</sup>

A public statement condemning Sati was made by the then Chief Minister Shri Hari Deo Joshi, on 14th September, 1987, but he also mentioned that the rural people were highly appreciative of the practice and since they worship *Sati Mata* they treated it as their religious rite.<sup>9</sup> Thirteen women's organisations demonstrated against the Sati incident and asked the State Government to stop the Chundari Mahotsava scheduled on 6th September at Deorala.<sup>10</sup> Women activists demanded the immediate arrest of the people guilty for abetting Roop Kanwar to commit suicide. They also submitted an application before the High Court, appealing that the 'Chundari ceremony' to be held at Deorala on 16th September should be declared illegal and the court should direct the Government to prohibit it. The then Home Minister Gulab Singh Shaktawat, said that the Government will comply with the court orders and will not let any public function be held at the spot. Chief Minister Joshi also expressed his commitment to end the evil of Sati. On 15th September, one day before the Chundari Mahotsava, the Rajasthan High Court directed the State Government to take necessary action to ensure that no public function was held at village Deorala.<sup>11</sup>

However, the *Chundari Mahotsava* held on 16th September was attended by two-and-a-half lakh pilgrims even though organisers had postponed the ceremony fearing police intervention following the High Court directive of 15th September. Originally the ceremony was to take place at 11.00 a.m. but it was held at 8.00 a.m.<sup>12</sup> It was reported that not a single uniformed police man was seen at the site. The organising committee had organised a 'tiger force' of about 1,000 volunteers. According to one member of the Sati Committee, these volunteers had pledged to "lay down their lives" to ensure that the ceremony was held. On their part the police admitted that it had at no stage planned to take any action.

At the *Chundari Mahotsava* a costly '*Chundari*' was brought by the brother and father of Roop Kanwar to the *Sati Sthal*, and it was draped round the pyre. The '*Chundari*' was reduced to ashes, after which the ashes were cooled with *Ganga Jal* and milk and collected in pots.

Political leaders also attended the ceremony. The State Janata Party chief, the State Chief of Yuva Janata and former President of the Rajasthan University Students Union offered prayers at the Sati Sthal on 16th September, 1987. The others who visited the place of pilgrimage were ex-M.L.As, M.L.As, Joint Secretary of P.C.C. and the acting President of the Rajput Sabha. Among the most articulate supporters of Sati was Kalyan Singh Kalvi who defended the act of Sati as a part of Rajput tradition.<sup>13</sup> These leaders criticised the district administration for not averting the incident in time, but they also criticised it for trying to prevent the *Chundari Mahotsava*. The Acting President of the Rajput Organization (with more than 20,000 members) refused to condemn the practice of Sati; he stated that a majority of the Hindu women held the custom of Sati in 'reverence'.<sup>14</sup>

Replying to the criticism of the *Chundari Mahotsava*, the State Home Minister, Mr. Gulab Singh Shaktawat, said, "to worship is the civil right granted under the Constitution. Should the government encroach upon the right of the citizen."<sup>15</sup> The government remained hesitant to take any step to arrest the people involved in the incident for fear of 'people's retaliation'.

On 18th September the President of the All India Mahila Morcha of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) condemned the incident, and criticized the Rajasthan Government for its failure to stop such gruesome happenings.<sup>16</sup> The Communist Party of India (CPI) demanded the resignation of the Joshi government for their connivance in the barbarious medieval crime. The executive committee of the Supreme Court Bar Association charged the Rajasthan Government with 'inaction' in preventing the Act of Sati. The government was asked to arrest all the abettors "in this ghastly and inhuman act and also those who were guarding the spot with drawn swords and contributing to the glorification of the Crime."<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, the first effective step taken by the government was the transfer of the Superintendent of Police and the District Magistrate of Sikar.

So far Sati was being treated as a heroic sacrifice by its supporters and voluntary suicide by its opponents. Now various informations started pouring in, which raised doubts about the

'voluntary sacrifice' of Roop Kanwar. It was found that the funeral of Mal Singh was arranged in hurry, and that the parents of Roop Kanwar who live in Jaipur, barely 65 km. from Sikar, were not informed about the incident. An eye-witness of the incident, a person from Shahpura, a nearby township, disclosed that Roop Kanwar tried to escape thrice but was pushed back to the pyre and forced to die. It was also alleged that no condemnation came from the government or other Ministers, till several women organisations filed a writ petition on 14th September—10 days after the incident and the government failed to take any action on the Sati Mahotsava becoming a public show.<sup>18</sup> In this episode, leaders, instead of providing leadership to the masses were found following the illiterate masses.<sup>19</sup> It was alleged that the police and the government did nothing to stop the incident. Law enforcement agencies, by and large, were not keen on implementing social reforms and worked in a limited extent of what was envisaged by the statute.<sup>20</sup>

The occasion was fully made use of by the Rajput community. On 19th September, thousands of Rajputs, wielding naked swords and lathis marched in a procession to the Raj Bhawan. The Rajputs submitted a memorandum to the Union Minister of State for Home Affairs, Mr. P. Chidambaram, and warned the government of 'drastic consequences' "if the five persons arrested by the police in connection with the Deorala incident were not released unconditionally and immediately". The General Secretary of the Rajput Mahasabha, Jaipur, said that the community was agitated over the State Government's attempt to 'victimise' them. He claimed that *Sati* had a 'glorious Saga' in Rajput history and the government had "no business to interfere in its religious matters."<sup>21</sup> The Union Minister of State attributed on 14th September the failure of government to 'the lack of prior information'. Talking to newsmen after having discussions with government officials, social workers, representatives of women's organisations and Rajput leaders, he declared that if the government had previous information then the incident would have been averted as it was done on three previous occasions. He maintained that law alone could not tackle a social evil. Voluntary agencies, colleges, schools, and the media would have to launch a concerted campaign to educate the people particularly in the rural areas.<sup>22</sup> The

delegation of Rajputs complained before the Union Minister also that the State Government was trying to interfere in their religious matters. On the other hand, women's groups in the city submitted a memorandum to the Union Minister, strongly condemning the public burning of women in the name of religion. It also demanded that the construction of a temple at the site of Roop Kanwar's cremation should not be allowed. They demanded that the money collected by the temple trust should be transferred to the Famine Relief Fund. The women's organisations suggested that the practice of Sati can be completely eliminated if long-term measures such as more job opportunities for widows, better educational avenues for rural women, and mobilisation of public opinion against the social evil were adopted.<sup>23</sup>

Susmita Srivastava, Chairperson of Central Social Welfare Board, who had accompanied the Union Minister of State on a 'fact finding' visit, alleged that 'the State Government was guilty of glorifying the act of Sati'. In an interview with the *Times of India*, she said she will submit a detailed report on the 4th September incident to the Prime Minister. After listening to women activists, she reportedly remarked that there was no hope for the cause of women till 'male chauvinistic politics' dominated the country.<sup>24</sup>

The State Government maintained its position that the first report of the incident was received at the Ajitgarh Police Chowki, 4 km. from Deorala, at 2.20 P.M. on September 4, 1987. The police reached the spot at 2.30 P.M. but the ceremony had already finished at 12.30 on 4th September, 1987.<sup>25</sup> A detailed report received by the Centre on the Sati episode pointed out that not only the State Government but also the opposition parties and social organisations failed to mobilize public opinion against this social evil. The Centre directed the State Government to launch a prosecution against persons directly responsible for the burning of Roop Kanwar. The Ruling party was likely to take action against partymen who associated themselves with the subsequent function held there.<sup>26</sup> At the national level, BJP leader Atal Behari Vajpayee, who had returned from his foreign tour, rapped his party workers, who had allegedly attended the *Sati Mahotsava*. He said, *Sati is*

abominable and such practices lowered the image of the country. The then Janata Party General Secretary, Mr Yashwant Sinha, strongly condemned the action of those who might have aided or abetted the committing of Sati by a young girl in Rajasthan and demanded punishment for all guilty of this heinous offence.<sup>27</sup> The Delhi Union of Journalists expressed concern at the publication of reports and editorials supporting and glorifying Sati.<sup>28</sup> It may be remembered that *Jansatta* editorial refused to see the episode as violence against women and it maintained that those who supported Sati were Indians and those who criticised it were 'westernized'. While in the next editorial of *Jansatta* it was maintained that the causes of Sati should be explored in our society and for that a knowledge of the history and culture of our own society and faith in it was a primary condition.<sup>29</sup> Union Minister P. Chidambaram expressed shock that a delegation comprising members of all major political parties including a member of Parliament met him and explained the Government's interference to start the Mahotsava.<sup>30</sup> Minister for Women and Child Development Margaret Alva described the Sati episode as a 'revivalism of crime against women', which ought to be put down firmly.<sup>31</sup> Union Home Minister P. Chidambaram maintained that if women were to get their due place in society the laws relating to property and the access to education would have to be greatly modified.<sup>32</sup> At present, every religion and every personal law is discriminatory against women with respect to property ownership. On 24th September, the Joint Action Committee Against Sati, comprising several women's organisations, held a public meeting in which the Rajasthan Government was strongly condemned for its failure to prevent the 'Chundary Mahotsava'. The committee demanded confiscation of funds collected and criminal action against those instrumental in such anti-social fund raising activities. The committee maintained that the State Government had 13 days to prevent *Chundari Mahotsava* but it did not take any steps in this direction. It was also stated that Roop Kanwar's case was only one among the growing number of such cases in the region and more and more families driven by financial and social ambitions were likely to force their daughters and daughter-in-laws to follow Roop Kanwar's example.<sup>33</sup> Vishal Mangalwadi, a social worker who was present at the *Chundari Mahotsava*,

alleged that the 'Sati' incident was a sign of the growing fundamentalism among the Hindus and Muslims. He believed that the growing trend of female foeticide, dowry deaths, trading in women and Sati incidents were all branches of the same tree and hence could not be viewed in isolation. He insisted on analysing this incident in its socio-economic-cultural aspects.<sup>34</sup> The committee decided to submit a memorandum to the President of India in this context, signed by thousands of people from all walks of life. Meanwhile, the *Sati Dharma Raksha Samiti* organised a meeting at Deorala in which Rajput leaders decided to build a temple at any cost. The Samiti criticised the government for victimizing innocent people in the context of Deorala incident. The meeting was addressed by the State President of Janata Party, Mr. Kalyan Singh Kalvi, ex-M.L.A. (BJP) Ram Karan Singh, Jaipur District leader of Janata Party, Gopi Ram Jat, Retired I.A.S. Officer Onkar Singh, Rajput leader Bhagirath Singh and Secretary of Dharma Raksha Samiti, Narendra Singh Rajawat.<sup>35</sup> Rajput leaders decided to organise a rally on 8th October, 1987, in Jaipur and a demonstration before the Assembly. Rajput leaders claimed that the Rajasthan Government was humiliating them and being a 'Martial Race', they were not going to tolerate it. These leaders asked the people to organise against the government. A delegation of villagers went to meet the S.P. of Sikar under the leadership of Kalyan Singh Kalvi to release the innocent villagers who were arrested by police. On 27th September, 1987, the Prime Minister sent a letter to State Chief Minister, directing him to forestall any celebration in his state which glorified the act of Sati. He asked the Chief Minister not to allow the celebrations of Vijayadashmi at Deorala. Further, he instructed that "the delays and lapses which occurred earlier must not be repeated. All civil and police officials must be strictly warned of severe punishment for any dereliction of duty".<sup>36</sup> Describing the Deorala incident as utterly reprehensible and barbaric he wrote that the incident was a national shame and all right thinking people should speak out against those who were glorifying the murder of a young woman.<sup>37</sup>

By this time reporters were equipped with the information which proved that Roop Kanwar's story of voluntary self-

immolation so far being praised by supporters of Sati was a plain myth.<sup>38</sup>

The episode was capable of starting a debate on the national level. The *Times of India* on September 30, 1987, reported that the Deorala incident had evoked a wave of indignation all over the country with just handful of voices outside Rajasthan supporting this medieval practice. The Prime Minister reacted to the incident only on its 24th day. The national political parties themselves were divided on this issue. Two major supporters of Sati incident were the Rajasthan Unit President of Janata Party, Mr. Kalyan Singh Kalvi, and Swami Niranjan Deo Teerth the Shankaracharya of Puri. While Ms. Mrinal Gore of the Janata Party condemned the incident and women organisations and social activists maintained that the response of the politicians in Rajasthan has been cautious because of the politics of vote. It was alleged that this approach will further consolidate fundamentalism. Women activists and leaders from all over India, journalists and editors, writers and academicians criticised the incident.<sup>39</sup> Women leaders broadly regarded Sati as the revival of inhuman practices against women.

On 29th September, addressing a crowded Press conference the *Sati Dharma Raksha Samiti* condemned the Government's interference in religious beliefs. While on the one hand they condemned 'forced Sati' and expressed the wish to go by the law, they also said "we are in favour of voluntary Sati. We cannot help it. We will not oppose it."<sup>40</sup> The Press conference was mainly addressed by Kalyan Singh Kalvi and members of SDRS Action Committee. Kalvi claimed that Government's attitude and the police atrocities at Deorala were hurting the religious feelings of the Hindus in general and the Rajputs in particular. The SDRS also claimed the right of Roop Kanwar's family members to build a memorial in her memory according to the custom of the community. The SDRS leaders declared that a demonstration would be held to protest against the police atrocities in Deorala and the government's interference in the religious feelings of the people on October 8, 1987. In the Rajasthan Assembly, 6th October, 1987, was fixed to discuss the Deorala incident.

At the national level, leaders of all political parties "unanimously and unequivocally" condemned the incident at Deorala and called upon all social and political organisations in the country to express their abhorrence and horror. The leaders were also of the view that firm steps should be taken by the Central and State Governments, not only to prohibit and prevent such criminal and inhuman practices, but also any act having the effect of supporting directly or indirectly or glorifying in any manner such criminal and reprehensible activities. Madhu Dandavate was also one of the participants. The Party President of Rajasthan Unit emerged as a leader of the prosati Lobby in the Rajput community. Thus, it can be said that party loyalty was subordinated by community feelings in the case of Kalyan Singh Kalvi.

Discussions on the nature of new legislative measures started at both the state as well as the central level. The central leaders were told that though Sati was banned under the law, and aspects of suicide, murder and abetment were covered by the Indian Penal Code, certain loopholes still remained.<sup>41</sup> The State Government had launched several prosecutions but the accused were acquitted by the courts.

In a statement the President of All India Newspapers' Editors' Conference (AINEC) said that it was deplorable that sections of the Press and political parties had actually either joined in this celebration or had written in justification of it as part of the religious tradition of the people.<sup>42</sup>

The Assembly session was convened on the 28th September, 1987. The Chief Minister could not attend the session on the 28th and the 29th as his presence in Delhi regarding the framing of the proposed anti-Sati Law was required.<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, the Sati incident was made a subject of adjournment motion and call attention motion in Rajasthan Assembly. The Janata Party itself was divided on this issue. Prof. Kedar Sharma and Jai Narayan Poonia had tabled a call attention motion saying that the 'Sati practice was an embodiment of barbarism'.<sup>44</sup> The main supporters of Sati, Kalyan Singh Kalvi, demanded that the "atrocities being committed by the police on the people of Deorala by way of more arrests, should

end forthwith.”<sup>45</sup> Janata member Devi Singh Bhati stated in the House that the “Sati incident represented our glorious past tradition”.<sup>46</sup> Thus, it seems that the Rajput members of Janata Party represented a different view on this issue from rest of the party. This also reveals that the major political parties at the state level had failed to evolve a consensus on social issues. The newspapers reported that, there were heated exchanges among members of the Assembly not only on the priority of the issues but also on the issue whether the Sati incident had damaged the image of the State or brought honour to it.<sup>47</sup>

The Business Advisory Committee of the House decided that the Deorala incident will be discussed in the Rajasthan Assembly on October 6, 1987 and on that day no other business would be taken up in the Assembly. Earlier several members had demanded a Government statement on the issue immediately. In the heated verbal exchange which continued for nearly 20 minutes, the Opposition members, though unanimous in their demand for a discussion, appeared to be divided on the issue of ‘*Sati Pratha*’.<sup>48</sup> However, the Rajasthan Assembly was adjourned sine die on 30th September, 1987, after meeting for two days only. The Governor, Mr. Vasant Dada Patil, prorogued the session of the Assembly under Art. 147, Clause A(2) of the Constitution. Political observers were surprised by the adjournment of the Assembly as the issue of Sati was to be taken by the House on 6th October. It was assumed that the decision to adjourn had been taken to facilitate an early action on the proposed Bill banning Sati on 1st October, 1987. The Governor promulgated the Rajasthan Sati Prevention Ordinance, 1987.

#### **Rajasthan Sati Prevention Ordinance**

The Ordinance provided for death penalty or life term for abetting Sati and imprisonment varying from one to five years and a fine to the widow who attempted to commit the act. Any attempt to glorify Sati was made punishable with rigorous imprisonment from one to seven years and fine up to Rs. 5,000/-.

The Ordinance, which came into force with immediate effect, defined Sati as “the practice of throwing or burying

alive any widow along with the body of her deceased husband, or with any article, object or thing associated with the husband, irrespective of whether such burning is voluntary on the part of the widow or otherwise.”

The acts which have been defined as abetment to Sati are inducement to a widow to get her burnt or buried alive whether she is in a fit state of mind or labouring under a state of intoxication or stupefaction or impeding the exercise of free will, to make her believe that the performance of Sati would result in some spiritual benefit to her or her deceased husband and the general well-being of the family; preventing the police from interfering with the act of Sati; preventing or obstructing the widow from saving herself from being burnt or buried alive; being present at the place where Sati is committed and the participation in such commission or in any ceremony connected with it; encouraging the widow to remain fixed in her resolve and thus, instigating her to carry out her intention to commit Sati; and participating in any procession in connection with the commission of Sati or intentionally aiding the widow in her decision to commit Sati.<sup>49</sup>

It was reported that the timing of the Ordinance showed that Government was keen to foil any attempt to build a temple at the Sati site. The Chief Minister, Mr. Harideo Joshi, admitted that the session of the Assembly had to be prorogued abruptly to tackle the law and order situation arising out of the Sati incident.<sup>50</sup> Commenting on the Ordinance the Sarvodaya leader Mr. Sidhraja Dhadda, described the Government move as “very unfortunate and short-sighted”. He stated, “so far the State Government has dealt with the situation with restraint, but it appears that political pressure has ultimately driven it into a hasty and ill advised action. A truly responsible and democratic Government would not resort to force to deal with sentiments of large masses of the people, however perverse these may appear”.<sup>51</sup> It may be recalled that the Rajput Sabha had decided to meet at the Sati Sthal on Dashera to ensure the construction of a memorial. The Rajasthan Government had to bring out the Ordinance to prohibit any such meeting. Reacting to the Rajasthan Ordinance, Shankaracharya of Puri, Swami Niranjan Dev Teerth, described

it as a great insult to democracy. He said that the introduction of the Ordinance on the eve of Vijayadashmi Day had put to 'deep shame', the sacrifice made by all the Rajput women who had committed *Sati*. He made it clear that he would support the 'voluntary Sati dharma' but was wholeheartedly against 'forcible Sati'.<sup>52</sup>

The Ordinance became effective and the people did not violate it on the crucial day of Dashera at Deorala, as was declared earlier. On Dashera it was expected that the people would go ahead with their plan to build a temple or raise a memorial at the *Sati Sthal*, despite the promulgation of Sec. 144 Cr.P.C., in the revenue tehsil of Deorala. On that day addressing a meeting at Deorala the then Opposition leader, Mr. Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, said that "the Sati incident brought a bad name to the Rajput community and to the entire country. It was a national shame and showed to the entire world how backward India was."<sup>53</sup>

However, the debate on the issue continued. On 6th October, an Anti-Sati Rally was organised by several women organisations that insisted that the Sati practice could not be linked with any religion. The rally was organised by a number of women organisations of Rajasthan. More than 25 women organizations from all over India also participated in the rally.<sup>54</sup> The public meeting was well attended. The audience included as many as five Ministers—two representing the Central and three the State Governments. The Janata M.P., Mrs. Pramila Dandvate, also addressed the meeting. Speakers at the rally also included women activists, writers and even a tribal woman. Mrs. Laxmi Kumari Chundawat, a well known writer of Rajasthan and former President of the PCC, said that the burning of widows was a barbaric act and a strong public opinion must be created against this.<sup>55</sup> The women organisations had a grouse against the Rajasthan Government as well as the Congress Party, as they were late in condemning Sati and the Chief Minister came out with a statement denouncing the event only after about a week. None of the women Congress MLAs or Ministers had come out openly against Sati.

On 8th October, 1987, defying the ban order, nearly one lakh persons thronged the Jaipur city streets, raising pro-Sati

slogans, participating in a rally organised by the '*Dharma Raksha Samiti*' to protest against the issuing of Rajasthan Sati (Prevention) Ordinance.<sup>56</sup> Rajputs dominated the scene. The speakers demanded the withdrawal of anti-sati Ordinance by the State Government and pressed for the erection of a memorial temple at the Sati Site in Deorala. The State Janata Chief, Mr. Kalyan Singh Kalvi, ignoring his party directive to dissociate himself from all Sati glorification activities, dominated the scene. The prominent State BJP leader, Mr. Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, said that he was opposed to the *Sati Pratha*, and he was also against the arrest of 'innocent persons' in connection with the Deorala incident.<sup>57</sup> The most significant feature of the Rajput rally on 8th October was the unprecedented turnout of women. About 3,000 women, young and old, from cities and villages and royal and 'not so royal' families, thronged the Ramlila Ground at Jaipur and lustily cheered the speakers delivering pro-Sati speeches.<sup>58</sup> The speakers, numbering over two dozens, repeatedly reminded the government that the Rajput community knew that its present struggle would be a long drawn one. They asserted that the community was ready for any sacrifice.<sup>59</sup> It was viewed that as organiser of the Rajput Rally, Kalvi emerged as 'number one' among the Rajput leaders. However, the continuance of Kalvi as State Janata Chief was seen as doubtful as the party President, Mr. Chandra Shekhar, condemned the Deorala incident and many prominent Janata leaders demanded the expulsion of Kalvi from the party. The leader of the Opposition in the Vidhan Sabha and a member of the national executive of Bharatiya Janata Party, Mr. Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, did not attend the rally and he went to attend the three-day national executive meeting of the BJP. He said in a statement that he did not attend the rally because his stand on the practice of Sati was at variance with that of the *Dharma Raksha Samiti*.<sup>60</sup> The Lok Dal leader, Mr. Nathu Ram Mirdha, addressing the rally asked the people to shun the path of unnecessary confrontation. He also said that the law should be obeyed, and even if it is to be challenged it should be done in the Assembly and not on the streets.<sup>61</sup> Thus, the 8th October rally of the Rajputs in favour of Sati was projected as an attempt to revive the community's image in State politics under Kalvi's leadership.

A case was registered against those who organised the rally at Jaipur on 8th October against the Anti-Sati Ordinance. An

eight-member delegation of *Dharma Raksha Samiti* led by Kalvi met Chief Minister Hari Deo Joshi and submitted a memorandum demanding the withdrawal of the Anti-Sati Ordinance and the release of all persons arrested in connection with the Deorala incident. The Chief Minister held a high level officers meeting to decide upon the further course of action against the speakers who 'glorified' Sati at the massive pro-Sati Rally held on 8th October, 1987.<sup>62</sup>

Meanwhile, it was reported that the statements of three eyewitnesses recorded in the court in context of the Deorala incident, confirmed that Roop Kanwar was forced to commit Sati. According to their statements, Roop Kanwar's cries for help could not be heard because of slogans like 'Sati Mata ki Jai' and the loud drum beating.<sup>63</sup>

The Bharatiya Janata Party was also divided on the issue. While Atal Behari Vajpayee condemned the Deorala incident,<sup>64</sup> Mrs. Vijaya Raje Scindia, the Vice-President of the BJP, said that she did not agree with the party's stand on the Deorala incident. She did not agree with the view that Deorala incident could be called 'murder' unless complete investigation into the matter was over. She compared the tradition of Sati with the practice of 'Santhara' and said that death in the latter case was more painful. If *Santhara* had not been banned, why ban only 'Sati', she asked.<sup>65</sup> On 14th October, 1987, it was also reported that the Jaipur District Janata Party had been divided on the question of Sati. While the president of the undivided committee, K. C. Singhvi said that he and his followers extended support to Kalyan Singh Kalvi who had taken a pro-Sati stand, the president of the new committee, Mr. Sharda Pathak, said that they will abide by the directives of the central leadership and continue to follow its stand. It may be recalled that Prof. Kedar, leader of the Janata legislative party, had said that none of the 10 MLAs other than Kalvi, was against the ordinance.<sup>66</sup> He also asked the central leadership of his party to take action against the President of the State Unit of the party, Kalyan Singh Kalvi.<sup>67</sup>

The former Judge of the Supreme Court, Justice V. R. Krishna Iyer, while speaking at a discussion on 'Sati, the Guilt of Indian Humanity', organised by the Capital Foundation Society and the Centre for Women Studies, said that there was absolutely

tely no need for the recent Rajasthan Ordinance against Sati as the existing law fully empowered the Government to deal with that social evil. He asserted that "what is lacking is not the law—but the will—social, political, administrative and judicial—to remove this inhuman perversion of our culture and punish the abettors of this crime against women."<sup>68</sup> He recalled that about three decades ago the Rajasthan High Court had upheld the conviction of all the people who had participated in a Sati procession. Speakers at the Seminar were of the view that because of the Government's short-sightedness Sati had become a communal issue, much in the same way as the Muslim Women's Bill had become last year. Expressing their resolve to fight against all manifestation of oppression against women, the speakers said that all the political parties which had by error of commission or omission abetted Sati, had permanently forfeited the votes of women.<sup>69</sup>

At the central level the need for a fresh law on Sati was expressed by political leaders. Speaking at a meeting of the consultative committee of Members of Parliament attached to Home Ministry the Minister announced that a meeting of all political parties represented in Parliament will be held to review the existing legislative measures to deal with the practice of Sati and decide on the steps to plug the loopholes. The consensus which emerged in the committee was that the practice of Sati should be fought with a firm hand by the Centre. Two members—Samar Mukherjee and Madhu Dandavate—reportedly regretted that some sections of mainstream parties appeared to support Sati and felt that the fight against Sati should be political but non-partisan.<sup>70</sup> Madhu Dandavate pointed out that it was going to be a long battle between the obscurantist and progressive forces. He sought expulsion of those from his party who were supporting Sati.<sup>71</sup> Ultimately the Central and State Governments succeeded in bringing about an Act against Sati which also restrained its glorification.

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## Traditional View on Deorala

The idealistic or mythological interpretation of the Deorala incident insisted on its being exemplary in nature. The ideological propagation of Sati glorified it as a supreme instance of Hindu religion. It was upheld as the highest ideal of female spirituality and achievement of 'Nari Dharma' and 'Pativrata' ideology. They maintained that it was only the symbol of spirituality among the Hindus which distinguished them from the materialistic west.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most controversial defence was made by the *Jansatta* Editorial.<sup>2</sup> The editorial maintained the fact that the gathering of 2 lakh people at the Chundari ceremony, proved that millions of Indians thought in ways that were radically different from the trend of thinking of those who had received an English education. The editorial emphasized that the Deorala Sati was voluntary Sati and no force and desperation had driven Roop Kanwar to self-immolation. However, eye-witnesses produced in Court refuted the 'voluntariness' of Roop Kanwar's tragedy. It was reported that she tried to run away from the funeral pyre thrice, but was thrown back by those surrounding the pyre and was soon buried under heavy logs.<sup>3</sup>

In their early reportings, all the newspapers were full of praise and admiration for the Deorala episode. Deorala was described as a place of pilgrimage and the visitors as pilgrims. This spirit continued till such time as the women organizations raised their voice against the whole issue. Inderjeet Budhwar maintained that the incident with massive social acceptance, even approbation, would probably not have attracted much national attention, were it not from the sustained opposition from women groups in the State.<sup>4</sup> In his earlier decision the

Home Minister of the State, Mr. Gulab Singh Shaktawat, described the incident as a purely religious one and directions were sent from the State Capital that the police should maintain a 'hands off policy' and not interfere with any of the post-sati ceremonies.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in the beginning it seemed that all were influenced by the spiritual power of *Sati* and they had lost the capacity of rational interpretation. As has been remarked, the lead was taken by the *Jansatta* editorial, which was the first serious reaction to Deorala. It claimed that Deorala was not a question of women's rights but of a society's religious and social beliefs. The editor maintained that those objecting to Deorala were a bunch of westernised Indians, alienated and out of touch of the Indian reality.<sup>6</sup> Another argument in support of Sati was that it was a 'rare event'. This argument was given by 'Sati Dharma Raksha Samiti', organised to fight for the religious rights of the Hindus. The samiti maintained that only 28 Satis had taken place since independence and this small number did not require new laws.<sup>7</sup> It was argued that this number was insignificant in comparison to the hundreds of dowry deaths taking place in Delhi in spite of the legislation against dowry. The role of the *Sati Dharma Raksha Samiti* had been controversial as far as glorification of Sati was concerned. The Samiti issued an appeal to the Hindus for mobilising their support for the 8th October, 1987, pro-Sati Rally at Jaipur. In a printed pamphlet, *Sati* was described as a Hindu event par-excellence; demonstrating the Pati-Bhakti of the Hindu woman.

Belief in the occurrence of 'Sat' in a woman was not only expressed by the ignorant villagers of Deorala but even by the well educated President of the *Dharma Raksha Samiti* and his graduate wife also believed that *Sat* was a rare, supernatural, religious phenomenon, which leads a woman to voluntarily join her husband on the pyre, so the question of murder does not arise.<sup>8</sup> Similar views were held by other writers also.<sup>9</sup> It was argued that in Rajasthan emphasis was placed on having 'Sat: a divine visitation as a necessary condition for becoming a Sati'. Studies reveal that in Rajasthan a number of *Satis* has occurred in this century. The Sati cult and the miraculous and healing powers of *Sati Mata* is a significant theme of legends and folk traditions in Rajasthan. Deification of *Satis* because of their

super-natural power, is supposed to be a specific feature of the Sati cult in Rajasthan.<sup>10</sup> The elevation of *Sati* as a female deity, can also be seen as a glorification of the feminine power for sacrifice and self-denial. Thus, *Sati* worship connotes the two aspects of the tradition of female divinity *i.e.*, the marital power and the power for sacrifice and self-denial. In practice this deification compensated for the inferior position of woman. This dichotomy between idealising women in the transcendental other world and treating her as a subordinate in this life is a familiar theme in Hinduism.<sup>11</sup> Belief in *Sat* (the woman possessed by *Sat* is believed to have special powers to bless and to curse) is used to elevate, what otherwise would be seen as suicide or ritualized murder, into a supremely holy act. Thus, the emphasis on the exemplary nature of *Sati* was used to project it as a rare phenomenon.<sup>12</sup> Sati ideologues also bestowed on *Sati* a miraculous power to maintain the extended family, Hindu tradition, *Nari Dharma*, *Pati Bhakti*, sanctioned group identities, a fundamentalist yet cross-caste Hinduism.<sup>13</sup> These were the feelings expressed and shared by the villagers for whom Roop Kanwar became a *Maha Sati*, the village Deorala became a pilgrimage and the visitors were devotees and pilgrims, as was reported earlier. Villagers throughout the episode insisted on the *Maha Sati* status of Roop Kanwar; she had achieved this status by burning herself alive on the funeral pyre of her husband. They believed that when the 'Sat' descends on any mortal, it makes her capable of anything. This barbaric incident was justified by the villagers on the basis of *Sat*.<sup>14</sup> They did not oppose her, being afraid of the cursing power of *Sati*.

The proponents of the *Sati Pratha* argued that in Rajasthan this custom has always been different from that in Bengal, where Raja Ram Mohan Roy led a movement to ban *Sati*. Local folklores maintain that no woman can be compelled to commit *Sati*. It is a rare woman who receives the power of Goddess *Sati* and proceeds to join her husband on his pyre. The event is great precisely because it is rare. Therefore, believers insist that this is a deeply felt religious sentiment beyond the purview of the laws of the modern State.<sup>15</sup> These sentiments were also expressed by the then Chief Minister of Rajasthan, who, while condemning *Sati* after 10 days of the incident, emphasised that the rural people were highly appreciative of the practice and they worshipped *Sati Mata* and they treated it as their religious

rite<sup>16</sup> It has been pointed out that in folklores and culture the most important circumstance of death, leading to deification is one in which a young mother dies, voluntarily by committing *Sati*. In various transcults in Rajasthan the central figure is *Ma-Sati*, these legends speak of woman who has committed *Sati* along with her son or grandson.<sup>17</sup>

In villages people still have the highest regard and sense of glorification for the woman who performed *Sati*. Their stories are narrated with great feeling and emotion. These stories describe the ritual in great details, highlighting especially the courage and devotion of the *Sati*. The account is generally concluded by emphasising that marriage indeed is a sacrament, a bond not only for a single life but for eternity.<sup>18</sup>

The *Sati Dharma Raksha Samiti* emphasised this aspect (faith in *Sat*, and power of *Sati*) of the custom and treated it as a legalistic evidence of divine inspiration. They even claimed *Sati* to be a phenomenon, not only for the devout but also fit for the scrutiny of scientists and psychologists.<sup>19</sup> Ashish Nandy was sharing this conviction. While analysing the glorification of *Sati*, he insisted that it should be analysed in its historical and mythical past, its persistence in folk culture and the belief of the 300,000 Indians who went to Deorala. According to him, the glorification of *Sati* in Rajasthan makes the practice acquire a different perspective than in West Bengal. In spite of the large number of *Satis* in West Bengal they were not treated as authentic and so they were not honoured. He also agreed that epics, folklores and ballads still continue to live in the hearts of millions of Indians, and they constitute part of the basic sub-structure of the Indian culture.<sup>20</sup> Giving a religious argument in favour of *Sati*, Nandy argued that the sacred and magical powers of women were accepted in religion as the ultimate carriers of the ultimate principle of Nature and the Cosmic feminine principle that woman was protector of man. He alleged that the mythology of the rite seems to us to be an insult to women mainly because these meanings are lost to us.<sup>21</sup>

In Rajasthan, given the historical background of *Jauhar*, *Sati* was also admired in its heroic aspect. It was supposed to be the only alternative available to woman to become a heroine

while men had diverse possibilities to become heroes. It was maintained by the local police officials that the Shekhawati Rajputs from this region were mostly recruited into the armed and police forces. It is this martial tendency coupled with the strong Rajput feeling for the bygone tradition, that makes for the high incidence of *Sati* in these areas. According to Baney Singh Shekhawat, the Public Prosecutor of Sikar district, for the last 17 years, it was recorded that in spite of social legislation, no person had ever been convicted for attempting to commit *Sati* or for abetting the crime.<sup>23</sup> The root cause of the problem lies in the villagers' refusal to adduce evidence in a case of *Sati*. It was reported that sometimes the police, comprising of God fearing Shekhawati Rajputs, arrive at the site of *Sati* with offerings of coconut. It could not be treated as an outrageous custom and justifying the behaviour of the villagers it was observed that the chivalrous inhabitants of Rajasthan held Roop Kanwar in reverence as we all do in the case of heroes who courageously and cheerfully sacrificed their lives for the cause of their religion or motherland, out of a sense of duty and patriotism.<sup>24</sup> Admirers of *Sati* compared it to the celebrated Japanese way of committing suicide, 'Harakiri' which was treated as a dignified one, a way of expressing our admiration for the sacrifice which our women make, which demands such terrible suffering.<sup>25</sup> The rite of *Sati* was also compared to the Jain mode of suicide called 'Santhara' and it was argued that if Santhara was not criticised, why should *Sati* be criticised?<sup>26</sup> However, there were strong reservations to the 'Rajput notion of heroism'.

On the question of heroism and the tradition of valour and justice, the entire process of socialization, the operation of subtle and overt pressures and the need to conform to certain ideals makes it difficult to determine if a widow has much of a free will of her own.<sup>27</sup> It was also argued that *Sati* in the past was not limited to the Rajputs alone and secondly, it was surely rather dishonourable that a society's honour should be dependent on the women having to immolate themselves.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, arguments given by *Sati* ideologues depicting the custom as a symbol of ideal husband-wife relationship were also challenged. *Sati* could not be treated as a symbol of idealised husband-wife relationship, as it has remained one-sided and an unbalanced manifestation, for there is never any

question of the husband immolating himself on the pyre of his wife. It was alleged that in the name of the revival of the tradition, an attempt was being made to transfer a ritual associated with a small segment of upper caste society to the entire society with the claim that it is the right of the whole Hindu community.<sup>28</sup>

Commenting on the belief in *Sati* (the woman possessed by *Sati* has special powers to bless and to curse), it was argued that this argument was being used to elevate what would otherwise be seen as suicide or ritualized murder into a supremely holy act. The emphasis on exemplary nature of *Sati*, the evocation of the event in idealised and euphemistic terms was restricted to the upper caste and classes. It was claimed that reaffirmation of the *Sati* ideology had been used to maintain status quo for women in face of the gradual change which will pose a threat to the stability of society.<sup>29</sup>

Admiration of *Sati* was based on the assumption of the heroic sacrifice of women, which differentiated it from the brutal murder committed in the name of *Sati* in West Bengal. However, this voluntariness of the widow's decision to commit *Sati* was also challenged on various grounds. During the course of research conducted by enthusiastic activists, it was found that there was nothing like voluntary *Sati*. It was informed that armed guards were used to ward off evil tantrics and to cut off the head of the women if she changed her mind and 'dishonoured' the family. And the haste shown by the family members of so-called *Sati*, family pressures, opiates, the photography of women imprisoned by wood and coconuts in a neck high pyre and the very notion of voluntary *Sati* so much praised and admired as cultural heritage, becomes a mystification.<sup>30</sup> It should be recalled that from early childhood girls are taught that their husbands are everything to them, these girls internalise norms of the patriarchal society, and given this, with a little pressure from the in-laws, a 'voluntary *Sati*' is created'.<sup>31</sup> The doubt about the decision-making capacity of the widow were also raised. 'Voluntariness' of committing *Sati* was related with the decision making capacity of the concerned widow. Given the socialisation pattern in our society, where a young woman is hardly offered

any choice and training to take independent decisions on important matters how can she suddenly be in a position to recognize and exercise her will? Instead of offering a convincing sociological explanation, the phenomenon of *Sati* was legitimised through the supposed conversion of the potential *Sati's* consciousness under the influence of divinity, thus nobody but divine power was made responsible for a *Sati's* action and people did not like to be questioned on the authenticity of this version of *Sati*.

This concept of spirituality and divineness has been challenged by different writers. It was regarded as legal alibi for the colluder's perpetrators as it makes for an eminently commodifiable event. The notion of voluntary immolation in any of the cases which have taken place in Rajasthan, including Deorala, is not only absurd but contradicted by the evidence at hand.<sup>32</sup>

To the contrary of popular belief that Deorala episode was a voluntary *Sati*. It was confirmed from later reports that Roop Kanwar was under a heavy dose of opium when she mounted the pyre. She tried to escape but was pushed back by guarding Rajputs.<sup>33</sup>

It was found by the six-member fact-finding committee of Joint Action Committee against *Sati* that visited Jaipur and Deorala between 28 and 30 September, 1987, that before a widow was taken to the pyre to be burnt she was fed '*panchamrita*' as part of the preparatory ritual. This '*panchamrita*' contained *Bhang* and *Dhatura* among other ingredients. Both these herbs were known to numb the senses. The team was told by the people that while walking the half furlong to the funeral pyre, Roop Kanwar was foaming at the mouth.<sup>34</sup>

It was reported that more than 200 villagers watched silently the cold-blooded murder of the young widow and nobody protested or made any attempt to save her life.<sup>35</sup> It should be recalled here that the women of the family started cursing Roop Kanwar as soon as the dead body of Mal Singh was brought home;<sup>36</sup> that funeral was arranged within less than three hours as the dead body was brought after 10 A.M. and

the funeral took place at 12.30 A.M.; that the parents of Roop Kanwar were not informed who lived at Jaipur, about 65 kilometres from Deorala. None of the family members of Roop Kanwar (parental family) attended the funeral; the parents came to know of the incident only on 5th September, 1987.<sup>37</sup>

The intellectuals, political and communal leaders tried to project the Deorala episode as an exceptional example of heroic sacrifice, relating it to our glorious, spiritualistic, cultural heritage, while it was simply a cold-blooded murder of an innocent 18 years old widow who was sacrificed at the altar of tradition.

Roop Kanwar was matric pass, urban, educated girl. In her marriage she was given 440 grams of gold, a fixed deposit of Rs. 30,000, a coloured television, a cooking range and refrigerator.<sup>38</sup> She was hardly married for six months, and facts establish clearly that there was no great attachment between the young girl and her husband.<sup>39</sup> It should be remembered that according to the Rajput custom when a man died without an issue his widow could go back to the parental home along with the dowry which she had brought. Thus, it was not religion or traditional and heroic death of the widow, but greed which led to the widow burning in the case of Deorala.<sup>40</sup> It was widely believed that by her act of immolation, Roop Kanwar brought a financial boon to her village, by turning it into a place of pilgrimage.<sup>41</sup> The *Sati Sthal* proved an extremely lucrative money spinner for the family, Rs. 95 lakhs, it was reported, had already been collected by Roop's in-laws.<sup>42</sup> Thus, the temptation of achieving quick prosperity for the family members also seemed to be a compelling force behind the whole episode.

All those who supported Deorala were not innocent and ignorant poor villagers and had been maintained by those who regarded it as a traditional phenomenon, reflecting the folk culture of rural India. To the contrary there were youngmen, most of them young college students, retired government servants and those who were still serving as teachers in government schools or as clerks in government offices.<sup>43</sup> This also

raises serious question about modern education and communication, which is supposed to enlighten millions and lift them out of ignorance.

Thus, the whole emphasis of the spiritualistic (normative) interpretation of the Deorala episode was based on the voluntariness of the sacrifice, the spiritualistic interpretation in form of *Sat* or the extraordinary power of *Sati*, the rarity of the phenomenon and lastly, the heroic valour of Rajputs as being a martial race. While, in fact, it turned out to be a murder sanctioned by the people in the name of *Sati* worship. The most critical part of the whole episode seems to be this that for a long period, political leaders, and newspapers failed to identify the incident in its reality and even some intellectuals praised the incident for the supreme sacrifice of the young widow. In short, the Deorala episode not only reflected the ignorance of our masses but it also manifested a confused state of mind of our intellectuals and political leaders.

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## **The Deorala Incident and Role of Women's Organizations**

It has been agreed upon that the burning of Roop Kanwar in Deorala village on 4th September, 1987, could not raise a public debate on the issue until such time as eleven women organizations of Jaipur raised their voice against this murder on 12th September, 1987.<sup>1</sup> The women organisations demonstrated before the State Secretariat in Jaipur on 14th September, 1987. The Prime Minister and Women's Welfare Minister, Ms. Margaret Alva, were informed by women activists. Local women leaders alleged that instead of criticizing this primitive and barbarious incident, it was being deified and glorified.<sup>2</sup> They demanded the immediate arrest of people guilty for abetting Roop Kanwar to commit suicide. Large-scale preparations for the 'Chundari Mahotsava' were also criticised. The activists demanded that the Chundari Mahotsava should not be allowed. When the Rajasthan Government failed to rise to the occasion, petitions were filed in the Court and the Rajasthan High Court obliged the women organizations by issuing a directive to the State Government that no public function or ceremony would be held at the place as this would glorify the institution.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of the High Court's directive was defeated as the Chundari Mahotsava was organised on a large scale. About two and a half lakh people participated in the ceremony. Organisers had postponed the ceremony by three hours fearing police intervention following the High Court decision.<sup>4</sup> As it was admitted by the police later on that at no stage had they planned to take any action.

From the very beginning it was largely the women activists or writers who treated the whole episode as a sign of low status of women in society. Romila Thapar stated that the whole debate on widow burning symbolised an attitude towards women. Similarly, opposition to Sati as a symbol of westernization, did not help to solve the issue. She observed that there was no other society, where widow burning was practised by variant social groups for different reasons at various point in time, and when the controversy was over whether or not should it be practised was so clearly articulated over many centuries.<sup>5</sup> It was argued against sati that no group can, on the grounds of cultural survival, establish such complete control over the lives and deaths of individual members. The most important argument against sati was that any custom that defined a human life in a manner that it can be only glorified in death, holds a seduction and that must be resisted.<sup>6</sup>

Roots of Sati were explored to extend to the low status of Hindu widows. Hindu widows are largely ill treated and exploited. They are exposed to sexual exploitation from the men in the family. They are made to live wretched lives and are branded as unlucky, considered responsible for the death of their husbands—‘kulakshini’. In some parts of the country, their heads are shaved and they are forced to wear only coarse clothes. They are not supposed to attend auspicious occasions.<sup>7</sup> Even at Deorala many a woman commented that widowhood was a living death in rural India and, therefore, women commit Sati.<sup>8</sup>

Similar sentiments were expressed about the life of Rajput widows, for them life was described as living hell. A Rajput widow had to live a life devoid of any joy, no new clothes or jewellery, no good food, she is forced to stay indoors, prevented from attending religious ceremonies and auspicious occasions and have to face the indignity of sexual advances from the male members of the family. The reason for this type of treatment for widows was supported by the conviction that a woman had no worth outside the institution of marriage through which she must save her man.<sup>9</sup>

The use of the term *Sati* which had various religious and mythological contexts was also challenged by some of the writers. Vasudha Bhagamwar was of the opinion that the whole problem had arisen because the term *Sati* was used instead of the more truthful and matter of fact phrase 'widow burning'. She suggested that we should use a non-religious phrase and keep religion out of this issue altogether.<sup>10</sup> It was realised that the term *Sati* was very difficult to be defined because of its spiritual connection.<sup>11</sup> It was also suggested that the term *Sati* tried to hide the ugly fact of a rigid control of a woman's sexuality, of confining her sexuality within the framework of marriage. It should be recalled that protesters against sati were criticised as proponents of "sexual anarchy" and "free love". In the present context, the concept of *Sati* would easily have to be differentiated from the act of *Sati* which is plainly *widow burning*, which has been idolised, picturised and commercialised by vested interests.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the act of *Sati* was to be regarded as an extreme manifestation of the control of women's sexuality.

The rally organised by women organisations on 6th October, insisted on this aspect that *Sati* may be viewed as a sign of exploitation and subordination of women. It was pointed out that there were villages in Rajasthan where female infanticide was practised—so systematically that there was no indigenous female population in some villages. Mass child marriages were performed on 'Akha Teej' and on other auspicious days with enthusiastic social sanction. Thus, the Deorala episode has to be viewed in the context of the general low status accorded to women in Rajasthan.<sup>13</sup> V. R. Krishna Iyer identified 'Sati' as one of the various victimisations, suffered by Indian women like—female foeticide, deprivation of educational and employment opportunities, dowry and dowry deaths, rape and murder, physical sale of girls, discriminatory marriage laws in all the religions and the devdasi tradition. He emphasised that struggles of gender justice and the dignity of women remain to be fought as a cause of humanity when men and women must fight together against the exploitation syndroms.<sup>14</sup>

Various social factors were held responsible for the Deorala incident. It was thought that the main ideology behind Sati was that a woman's life had no meaning and value for itself. So after the death of her husband there was nothing left for the wife to survive.

Sati also reflected a man's desire to acquire total control over the woman not only in his presence but even after his death in the name of high sounding ideals like love, devotion, duty and religion. Through the ideology of Sati Society refused to realise that a woman has her own identity. The patriarchal ideology and the oppressive family structure is responsible for the pathetic situation of women in the Indian society. From the women's movements' point of view *Sati* is the denial of basic human rights, right to existence and freedom of an individual.<sup>15</sup>

Women activists claimed that by adoring *Sati* with the notion of goodness, Sati supporters have attempted to undermine the very basis of the women's rights movement, which arises out of the discrimination and oppression of women.<sup>16</sup> Thus the ghastly incident of Deorala was regarded as one more crime against women, which also reflected a dramatic upsurge of obscurantism and communalism. The same views were expressed by many other women activists. It was suggested that widespread acceptance of 'wife murder' in our society today expresses the low value set on women's lives.<sup>17</sup> The women activists refused to accept the argument that the Deorala incident was a result of backwardness and poverty, a conflict between tradition and modernity, because Deorala is not a backward and neglected village. Nor were the people who supported Sati backward, rural and innocent villagers.

It was maintained that the total socialisation process for girls revolves around the husband. The girls internalise the norms of the patriarchal society. In such a society by burning a widow alive not only do her in-laws ensure that she does not bring 'disgrace' to the family by remaining sexually alive, but they also absolve themselves of their duty of taking care of her.<sup>18</sup>

While analysing various incidents of Sati in the last decades Sudesh Vaid insisted that all the victims were burnt by the in-laws and the natal family was never informed before the event. The in-law's family was clearly the principal in perpetuating the crime, helped by the village mukhiya and the elite. She alleged that the oppressed are made to furnish a victim, whose 'willed' death served to keep other women in patriarchal subordination in their daily lives.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the ritualistic burning of Roop Kanwar was seen as unholy alliance between religion, politics and patriarchy. All three endorse subordination of women and their continuous suppression. It was alleged that Deorala was the result of the overarching ideology of male superiority and female dispensability that sanctioned widow burning and led to its glorification.<sup>20</sup>

Parallels between the anti-sati upsurge and the struggle for the democratic rights of Muslim women were established and both of them brought into focus the condition of Hindu and Muslim women at large. Both cases revealed the pitiable conditions of widowed and divorced women in the two major communities. Complete control over women's life and action became obvious by the fact that a large number of women supported 'Sati' and demanded to deny Muslim women the protection provided by Section 125 of the Indian Penal Code.<sup>21</sup> The writers argued that women of all communities, given their insignificant social position and little or no bargaining power become the victims of the state's own political insecurity. Criticising those writers who treated Sati as a rare event or an individual case and neglected the behaviour of the majority in the name of social ethos, it was maintained that such an attitude diverted us from locating the problem in its entirety and from recognising the fact that the liberation of women from their miseries is a part of the struggle of the oppressed people. Brinda Karat believed that Deorala was a social murder approved by thousands of people. According to her, the women's movement has to confront the increasing power of religious fundamentalism that inflicts miseries on women, while a continuous compromise is reflected in the charter of the State of independent India.<sup>22</sup>

All these substantial questions were raised by Romila Thapar when she suggested that the social practice needs to be examined keeping in view kinship, property relations, rights of inheritance, approach to sexuality, ethics of the hero, attitudes to deity and adjustments to social change in the context of our history in order to understand why and how women were encouraged or forced to become Sati. The social groups supporting Sati have been changed from time to time, this change was related with the role, functions and rights of women in social relations, property relations and rituals. Refusing to accept widow immolation as an essential part of Hindu values, she commented that if it was so then it would seem that Hindu culture has a propensity to burn its women.<sup>23</sup>

On the Deorala issue women writers and activists succeeded in placing on record an essential voice of dissent. However, it is a paradox of the Indian society that simultaneously with the desire for change and struggle against oppressive norms that has been taking roots among many women, those women who have the will to work towards long-term change for a more humane system, lack the necessary base and the resources to build on, and the traditional leadership which could mobilise the necessary resources lacks the will and wisdom. Thus, the struggle against child marriage, female infanticide and other such evils remain peripheral.<sup>24</sup> It was also realised that on these crucial issues pertaining to exploitation and victimization of women, the women themselves were divided. While the women in the movement and organisations tried to project the episode of Deorala as a question of women's low status, the women in the villages did not come out to support them. Even the village women united with others in opposing outside interference. Modhumita Majumdar visited Deorala as a pilgrim, in a group of five. She had 'darshan' of holy shrine. At the *Sati Sthal* there was a crowd of hundreds of women who were performing arti, and this so-called pilgrim group of five was treated as an outsider, and its attempts to conclude any meaningful dialogue with men and women miserably failed. They were also warned not to write any unverified myths about the village.<sup>25</sup> The same divide among the women was confirmed by the Pro-Sati rally organised by

the *Dharma Raksha Samiti* and supported by the Rajput Sabha of Rajasthan. As was reported, the most significant feature of the Rajput Rally on 8th October, 1987, was the unprecedented turn-out of women. About 3,000 women, young and old from cities and villages, royal and not-so-royal families, thronged the Ramleela Ground and lustily cheered the speakers delivering pro-sati speeches.<sup>26</sup> Again this contradiction was reflected in the statement made by the BJP leader Mrs. Vijaya Raje Scindia, who did not agree with the party's stand on the Deorala incident. She was not prepared to accept it as a murder unless complete investigation into the matter was over. She compared the tradition of Sati with the practice of voluntary suicide among the Jain's called '*Santhara*' and said that death in the latter case was more painful. She argued that if '*Santhara*' had not been banned, why ban only 'Sati'?<sup>27</sup> So women were not only divided on the basis of the rural-urban background but otherwise also they failed to develop a broad consensus on the issue.

It was identified as a failure of the Anti-Sati campaign because it became counter productive in being characterised as anti-Hindu, anti-Rajput, anti-religion, pro-government, anti-masses, urban, educated and westernised. While the pro-sati lobby emerged as sensitive to the sentiments of the rural, the traditional, and the poor. It was pointed out that it was wrong to see Deorala as a product of illiteracy, poverty and tradition. It was alleged that the women's movement in Rajasthan had failed to mobilise a broader social consensus against the maltreatment of women and to provide an atmosphere conducive to the expression of dissent from local communities themselves.<sup>28</sup> However, Justice Krishna Iyer was highly influenced by the activeness of the women's organisations. He asked them to make a call for an All-India Bandh to banish Sati and suggested that the political parties and women's organisations who declined to join the bandh the Indian women must boycott them at the election and elsewhere.<sup>29</sup> Constant efforts at the grassroot level are required to achieve such power of mobilisation and decision making on women's issues. Like in Indian society, women are also divided on major issues and their emergence as a united force in the process of social change seems much more difficult.

However, the experience of those who joined the *Padayatra* organised by Swami Agnivesh, the Chair-person of 'Bandhuwa Mukti Marcha', was different. In this *Padayatra*, Sanyasins from Arya Samaj also participated. It was realised that this *padayatra* touched the ideas and life of common people. It also strengthened the women's movement in Rajasthan. Village women were exposed to new ideas. It was reported that 'a realism was dawning' that women should not be so self-denying because it weakens the society and the country. Now women were found conscious of self-reliance. Places where songs were being printed and sung in praise of Sati till yesterday, people started distributing literature on the self-respect and rights of women during the *padayatra*.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, on the Sati issue the women's movement could register its protest at the national level. It succeeded in influencing political leadership at the National as well as State level. It forced the government to think in terms of a fresh Anti-Sati Bill which emphasised opposition to the glorification of Sati. Unlike the Shah Bano case, in case of Deorala, the Indian Government could think of a retrograde step influenced by the fundamentalist lobby of the Hindus. At least at the State level it seems that the fundamentalists and obscurantist forces were bent upon glorifying Sati as symbol of traditional normative model of Sati-Sadhvi. Women activists were successful in restricting such forces by supporting the formation of Anti-Sati Bill. However, how this spirit of women's movement on all other relevant issue can be maintained is the biggest challenge faced by the women's organisations.<sup>31</sup> A sustained effort of gradual social change has to be maintained to achieve an overall improvement of the status of women. Women's organisations have to become more realistic so that they do not remain an educated middle class phenomenon, who are treated as westernised liberated modern women by a large number of the masses. Too much emphasis on State power and legislation has to be substantiated by real grassroot level work in order to change the attitude of the village women, who would ultimately provide the real support and strength to women's movement and organisations.

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## The Politics of Deorala

Three years ago widow burning at Deorala in Sikar (Rajasthan) which was admired as *Sati* by a substantial section of society, the Press, political leaders, journalists and intellectuals caused a serious debate at the national level. This debate revealed the confusion inherent in the Indian mind on crucial social issues, pertaining to the status of women in Indian society, the nature of the Indian state, the fundamentalist forces in Indian politics and the role of political parties in social transformation. This episode also revealed the hollowness of proclaimed official ideology of secularism and egalitarianism.

The Deorala episode had also made it clear that during the last 43 years of independent India, political parties of different shades had not found time to discuss the crucial issues of social change. It became obvious that after writing the Constitution political leaders stopped thinking on social issues, and the social problems pertaining to women were given the least importance by them. This apathy of the political leaders to social issues reached to such an extent that even on the question of widow burning all the political parties could not muster immediate courage to condemn the incident outrightly. For the first 15 days the Press was also full of praise and admiration for the spiritual power of *Sati*. Members of political parties visited the place to seek popular support. The Rajput community enthusiastically glorified the incident. The tragedy was multiplied when both the supporters of sati in the name of freedom of religion and conscience and the opponents in the name of women's rights claimed to draw their inspiration from the same Constitution.

The role of political parties—ruling as well as opposition—represented the existing confusion about the whole issue. Elected governments at the Centre and in the State who swore by the Constitution of India should have immediately condemned the incident and the State Government should have taken strong steps to restrain such activity on the part of communal groups, which glorified the incident. But developments in this context were contradictory and raised fundamental question about the nature of the State as far as social change and transformation of the Indian society is concerned.

The State Government failed to take a consistent stand on Deorala. Though the State Chief Minister criticised *Sati* as unlawful and improper, it is true that his Government failed to restrict the public celebrations in the name of *Chundari Mahotsava*. It was reported that the State Government was in no mood to interfere in the religious beliefs of the people. The State Home Minister justified the inactiveness of the Government by publicly announcing that *Sati* was an age-old religious practice. He said “to worship is a civil right granted under the Constitution, should the Government encroach upon the rights of the citizens?”<sup>1</sup> The Central Government took three weeks to react. The letter of Prime Minister was released to Press on 27th September, 1987, only in which the State Government was warned that the delays and lapses which occurred earlier must not be repeated. Rajiv Gandhi condemned the incident as utterly reprehensible and barbaric and maintained that the incident was a national shame and all the right thinking people should speak out against this and those who are glorifying the murder of a young woman.<sup>2</sup> However, this delayed reaction of the Central Government was widely criticised by the women’s organisations, a section of Press, writers and the intelligentsia. At the State level also leaders from the ruling as well as the opposition parties continued to support ‘*Sati*’ as their religious rights.<sup>3</sup> Some of the significant leaders included M.P.s and M.L.A.s from the ruling and Opposition parties. Some of them went to Deorala to seek the blessings of the *Sati*. Those who did not support the incident were frightened to make any statement against the Deorala incident. These leaders were more worried about the reaction of the masses and its impact on their voting behaviour. They

were least worried about the stigma attached to Sati as a social evil.

At the *Chundari Mahotsava* also, which was celebrated on the 13th day in spite of the High Court orders, leaders from various political parties were present. Janata Party, Congress Party and BJP were represented by their respective leaders.<sup>5</sup> These leaders visited the place to pay their homage to the Sati. It was reported that their presence proved that they approved of the incident.<sup>6</sup> Practically all the political parties were internally divided on the issue. Local and State leadership exploited the situation to win the support of the masses. However, later on the incident was condemned by various political parties at the national level.

From the very beginning women's organisation raised their voice against the incident. On the 13th of September, 1987, a demonstration was organised condemning the incident. The Prime Minister and Women Welfare Minister were informed by the women activists. It was alleged that instead of criticising the primitive and barbaric incident, it was being deified and glorified.<sup>7</sup> The Chief Minister was criticised as he could not avoid public celebrations at the Chunday Mahotsava.<sup>8</sup> Arrests of relatives of Roop Kanwar were also extraordinarily delayed. Ultimately the Central Government had to interfere to speed up the action. The Prime Minister sent the Minister of State to find out details about the incident. The detailed report submitted to the Prime Minister pointed out that the State Government, opposition parties and social organisations had failed to mobilise public opinion against this event. After receiving the report the ruling party decided to take action against the partymen who associated themselves with the subsequent functions held there.<sup>9</sup> This is sufficient to indicate that the ruling party took quite some time to evolve a uniform policy against the incident.

Meanwhile, the Press continued its criticism of the Government's passivity on the issue. It was alleged that like the Shah Bano case in this case also the ruling party was going to be dominated by obscurantist communal forces. The State Government had justified its attitude in the name of the blind

faith of the masses as is indicated by the statements made immediately after the incident.<sup>10</sup> The support and tolerance of local politicians and the reluctance of the official machinery to deal with the situation only demonstrated that the Government had no will to fight the evil. At the national level the Central Government was criticised for its apathy on social problems. It was clear that the Central as well as the State Governments were indulging in ballot-politicking.<sup>11</sup> The Prime Minister faced a dilemma : if he frowned and spontaneously denounced the incident the Rajput and the Hindu votes might well swing against his party, and if on the contrary, he overlooked the incident then he might have to face embarrassing questions at the Press conference abroad and his 21st century image would be marred.<sup>12</sup>

There was a section of the Press as well which admired the Sati episode. On 19th September, 1987, the Editor of *Jansatia* had admired Sati in his editorial highlighting it as *Pativrata Dharma*.<sup>13</sup> He discussed the mythological aspect of Sati and described it as the legacy of our glorious past. He refused to accept it as the result of the low status granted to the Hindu widow. Without verifying the facts he maintained that the sacrifice of Roop Kanwar was voluntary and no force and coercion was used against her. He also argued that the fact that 2 lakh people gathered at the *Chundari Mahotsava* proved that millions of Indians thought in ways that were radically different from those who had received an English education. Thus, a section of the Press, intellectuals and local leaders shared these feelings to a great extent. Local newspapers *i.e.* *Rajasthan Patrika*, *Rashtradoot*, *The Times of India* reported the news with great devotion and admiration as if some miracle had taken place. Deorala was called a pilgrim place and the visitors were called devotees of Sati Mata.<sup>14</sup> These newspapers in the beginning failed to examine the episode in the context of the pathetic state of Rajput widow in this region and the financial gains to the family and village while creating a Sati. Later on, it was verified by the eye-witnesses that Roop Kanwar was under the influence of intoxicants and three times she tried to run away from the pyre, but she was thrown back by those who were surrounding the pyre with naked swords and was soon buried under the heavy logs.<sup>15</sup>

The opposition to the supporters of Sati started at the national level. On 19th September the Editor of *Jansatta* was gheraoed by women teachers and academicians.<sup>16</sup> The Delhi Union of Journalist (DUJ) expressed its concern at the publication of reports and editorials supporting and glorifying the Deorala incident. The Union also cautioned the newspapers against sensationalism and excessive coverage as was being done by the local newspapers, without analysing the impact of such details. It was feared that such a glorification could encourage the revival of this inhuman practice. Sati was a criminal offence and it should be treated in the same spirit.<sup>17</sup> Similar views were expressed by the All-India Newspapers' Editors' Conference in its resolution passed on 29th September, 1987. The President of the Conference criticised the section of the Press and the political parties who had either joined the celebrations or had written in justification of it as part of the religious tradition of the people. He stated that no argument or a rationalisation could condone this barbarious act.<sup>18</sup>

The Executive Committee of the Supreme Court Bar Association also charged the Rajasthan Government with 'inaction' in preventing the act of Sati. In a statement issued by the Committee the Rajasthan Government was requested to arrest all 'abettors' in this ghastly and inhuman act and also those who were guarding the spot with drawn swords and contributing to the glorification of the crime.<sup>19</sup>

The State Government was criticised for lack of political as well as administrative will to deal with the situation. The neglect on the part of the State Government was politically motivated. Delayed reactions of the Central and the State Governments were treated as an indication of the carelessness of the Government on social issues.<sup>20</sup> The elected Government of free India could not take such strong steps against the evil as could be taken by the colonial Government nearly 125 years ago. The elected Government at Delhi proved so weak that it dared not utter a single word against the resurgence of this wicked obscurantism. Maha Sati Roop Kanwar demonstrated that the political power today will go where the voters are, not where the justice is.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the State Government was held responsible for mishandling the issue. However, the ruling

party was not alone in its intra-party conflicts. All the prominent political leaders had lost their voice to condemn the incident.<sup>23</sup> It seems that no political party had given serious thought to the social transformation of Indian society as no serious debate has been initiated on the social problems faced by the Indian Society. Social issues have always been neglected by the political parties. Thus, the work of social transformation has been persistently neglected by all of them.

At the national level, some of the political parties also started questionning the attitude of the ruling party over the issues. On 18th September the President of the All-India Mahila Morcha of Bharatiya Janata Party criticised the State Government for its failure to forestall such gruesome happenings.<sup>24</sup> Later on, similar feelings were expressed by the Communist Party of India. It maintained that law enforcement authorities by their inaction had committed contempt of court, because the Rajasthan Government had issued an injunction that the *Chundari Mahotsava* should not be allowed to take place. Thus, after the Press, the political parties started pressurising the national Government to take necessary steps to control such heinous and inhuman crime.<sup>25</sup>

The Government had to face strong criticism at the national level. The ruling party was badly exposed for its inefficiency and lack of decision-making. To protect the national Government from nation-wide criticism on Deorala, special representative of the Prime Minister, Mr. P Chidambaram, and Mrs. Margaret Alva sharply criticised the Rajasthan Goverernment for its failure to stem 'the glorification' of Sati following the Deorala episode. While Mr P. Chidambaram blamed the State Government as well as the various political parties and voluntary action groups, Mrs. Alva was more agitated over the issue as she alleged that the Chief Minister had asserted that the 'Chundari Mela' would not be allowed to take place, while he did not take worthwhile action to counter it.<sup>26</sup> She asked whether the Chief Minister had not made a categorical assertion to stop the 'Chundari Mela' then she could have dispatched contingents of dedicated women to build up public opinion. Thus, both the Central Ministers held the State Government responsible for not strictly handling the Deorala episode. The

Central Government issued directives to launch prosecution against persons directly responsible for Sati. It also decided to take action against the partymen who associated themselves with the subsequent functions held at Deorala. The Central Government also discussed with the Congress Chief in Rajasthan the need to organise public opinion against the practice of Sati. It was also agreed upon that a broad consensus had to be developed with the opposition parties over the abolition of Sati.<sup>26</sup> This whole development shows that the State Government itself failed to take independent and strict action on the issue. It watched helplessly the developments between the 4th and the 16th of September, 1987. It was reported that the State Government had decided not to interfere in the issue before the *Chundari Mahotsava*.

After allegations and counter allegations, ultimately the leaders of all political parties at the national level could unanimously resolve that firm steps should be taken by the Central and State Governments not only to prohibit and prevent such criminal and inhuman practices being repeated but also any act having the effect of supporting directly and indirectly or glorifying in any manner such criminal and reprehensible activity<sup>27</sup> But unfortunately such a consensus could not be achieved at the state level. Among the opposition parties, the Janata Party continued to organise Rajput rally along with the Dharma Raksha Samiti in support of Sati. The State Government expressed its inability to prosecute the accused in the case because of weak legislative provisions. The Central Government was informed that several prosecutions were launched but the accused were acquitted by the courts. The Chief Minister of the State maintained that previously several cases of Sati could be prevented by the Government's prompt action, because information was received in time, but in the case of Deorala things took place in such a haste that the information did not reach the nearest police station in time. However, no explanation could be given about the silence of the Government on the 13 days' long celebrations at the 'Sati Sthal' and on the passive cooperation of the police and the administration while the whole event was glorified, commercialised and was exploited by political parties, leaders and vested community interests. Some of the members of the ruling party

participated in the celebrations in the name of community solidarity, and the State Government avoided any strong action as it would offend the religious feelings and enthusiasm of the masses. Thus, instead of finding out the reality of the brutal murder, the Government found it convenient to transform the whole episode into a religious function.

On 28th September, 1987, the Assembly Session was convened. The State Government had to face strong criticism on the floor of the House. Criticising the Government, Lok Dal members said that they were sceptical about the State Government's earnestness as the Chief Minister himself had condemned the incident after about a week. They demanded his resignation and called the State Home Minister a devotee of 'Sati Mata' as he participated in 'Sati Mela' regularly.<sup>28</sup> But such consensus could not be evoked with other political parties at the State level. The State Janata Party continued with its pro-Sati propaganda and Rajput rallies were organised under the leadership of the Dharma Raksha Samiti. The State Government faced a serious dilemma in handling the situation. While pressure from the Central Government to take strong action in view of public criticism increased the existing laws were found insufficient to punish the abettors in the context of Deorala. In spite of the majority enjoyed by the ruling party in the State Assembly it was reported that the State Government was not in a position to introduce an Anti-Sati Bill in the Assembly. The Chief Minister was informed that if a Bill was introduced then his own party men would revolt and a similar split would take place in the other parties.<sup>29</sup>

The Chief Minister did not like to take any risk on this issue. So on 30th September, 1987, the Rajasthan Assembly was adjourned sine die after meeting only for two days. This sudden adjournment surprised the political observers as the issue of Sati was to be discussed by the Assembly on the 6th of October. The decision was taken by the State Government in consultation with the Central Government to facilitate an early action on Sati. On both the days when the Assembly met, the Chief Minister could not attend the session as he was discussing the proposed Bill in Delhi.<sup>30</sup> The proposal of the sudden adjournment of the House was resisted by the Speaker of

the Assembly, who was of the view that the State Government could seek prorogation of the House directly from the Governor. However, later on, he agreed for the sine die adjournment of the House.<sup>81</sup>

On the 1st of October, the Rajasthan Sati Prevention Ordinance, 1987, was promulgated by the Governor. It provided for death penalty or life imprisonment and fine for those who provoked a widow to commit Sati, witnessing or participation in Sati or any ceremony connected with it could also amount to abetment. It was specifically mentioned that the Ordinance shall not affect any temple or other structure constructed for Sati and existed on or before 1st September, 1987, to cover the Deorala incident. The Chief Minister declared that he intended to be very strict regarding the Sati issue. He maintained that the suspension of the Assembly was necessary to promulgate the Ordinance to tackle the law and order situation arising out of the Sati incident. It was also maintained that the enactment of law would have taken time, while the Government wanted to take immediate steps against the Sati supporters who had planned to raise a memorial at the Sati Sthal on Dashera, the 3rd of October, 1987. After the Ordinance, the Government could effectively restrain such an action by the Sati supporters. The BJP supported the ruling party on this issue. The Opposition leader of the BJP in the State Assembly addressed meetings at Deorala and said that the Sati incident had brought a bad name to the Rajput community and to the entire country.

However, the State Janata Party continued its movement in favour of Sati. In spite of the Anti-Sati Ordinance, defying the ban orders, thousands of Rajputs thronged Jaipur City. The rally was attended by more than 45,000 people. A large number of women also participated. In this rally about two dozen speakers glorified Sati in direct violation of the Ordinance, and the orders passed by the Magistrate on the eve of the proposed rally.<sup>82</sup> Those Opposition leaders who had opposed the Sati cult were abused. Speakers on behalf of the Rajput community asserted that they were prepared for 'any sacrifice'. The atmosphere was so much charged in favour of Sati that the crowd was not prepared to listen to any argument against it. One of the leaders who tried to speak in favour of the Anti-Sati Ordinance

was shouted down.<sup>33</sup> However, weak Government policy was held responsible for this violent attitude of the Rajput community. In fact the whole episode was politicised on community lines. Leaders of the Rajput community were well educated and were products of prestigious educational institutions, they were neither poor nor belonged to the rural areas. Educated and enlightened Rajput women were also seen participating in the Pro-Sati rally. By identifying Sati with their community, these leaders tried to revive their past glory. The power-hungry politicians succeeded in exploiting public sentiments for their political ambitions. Their ultimate aim was to consolidate the community votes in the name of Dharma Raksha movement.<sup>34</sup> It was reported that by leading Pro-Sati Movement, Kalyan Singh Kalvi emerged as a leader of the Rajput community in State politics against veteran BJP leaders such as Bhairon Singh Shekhawat. Kalvi continued his pro-sati activities in spite of the directives from the national executive of the Janata Party.

Thus, the initial hesitation and indecisiveness of State Government raised many fundamental questions about the nature of the Indian state and its role in social transformation. It was alleged that once again the Government might prove weak as it had done earlier on the Muslim Women's Bill. In passing the Bill for the protection of Divorced Muslim Women, the interests of the destitute Muslim women were far from the central concern and the main concern was the electoral politics to consolidate the Muslim votes.<sup>35</sup> It is possible that in this case also the Government would have been dominated by the fundamentalist and anti-secularist forces had the women's organisations and Anti-Sati Lobby failed to rigorously pursue the issue. It was realised that the State had proved weak and ineffective whenever it was confronted with the exploitation of the weaker genders and sections. Specially women of all communities, given their insignificant social position and little or no bargaining power, became the victims of the State's own political insecurity.<sup>36</sup> However, it was not realised that too much dependence on State authority in form of fresh strong legal measures, could have undesirable repercussions in the form of victimisation of the ignorant villagers.

This episode also revealed the weakness of the Indian State in confronting the increasing fundamentalist pressures in

politics. The State could not prove itself capable in pursuing the social transformation which alone could weaken the hold of the obscurantist forces. It was realised that at least in the beginning the State had succumbed to the temptation of revivalism and gone out of its way to accommodate the backward social forces. The State Government manifested its unwillingness in preventing the crime and later on in restricting its glorification. By and large, the political parties refused to analyse the event in that context of the general conditions and low status of women in Indian society. They tried to rarify the phenomenon, projecting it as an individual event. In the name of social ethos they tried to divert public attention from locating the problem. Liberation of women from their miseries could not be identified by the political parties as part of the struggle of oppressed people. For the time being it looked as if the fundamentalists had succeeded in capturing the imagination of the majority in their community, they also succeeded in confusing a section of the intelligentsia. The Government had not only given in to their anti-secular demands but also justified them by changing the very definition of secularism. It was clear that while the proclaimed Constitution and Government policies were different, the actual functioning of the Government was being directed by political calculations. All important political parties in State politics were bent upon strengthening the forces of religious revivalism. Political parties in Indian politics cannot be relied upon for developing a meaningful dialogue about desirable social change. Precautionary measures against this exploitative nature of political parties should be developed to restrain their activities. Excessive politicisation of social issues in the hands of political parties is bound to generate many more difficulties for the political system in future.

Some of the political observers overestimated the power of women's organisations and movement in this context. It was envisaged that since women were emerging as the most vulnerable victims of the present social order, they constituted a tremendous potential in the movement for change. Women were asked to transform this potential into actuality.<sup>57</sup> However, the women's organisations were also alienated from the

masses as far as the Sati episode was concerned.<sup>38</sup> Their consistent efforts for more powers to state machinery were also not going to help in changing the social norms and values in this region.

Political forces which either supported Sati or remained indifferent to the issue, tried to justify their attitude in the name of popular sentiments. It was claimed that they did not like to offend popular feelings. Supporters of Sati emerged as traditional leaders while those who opposed Sati were condemned as westernised educated elite who were alienated from their cultural roots. Instead of taking the initiative to find facts about Deorala these political parties were competing with each other to follow popular myths and sentiments. Commenting on this attitude of the political parties it was alleged that the root pathology was, that our Government and political leaders bothered for political power only. If by condoning the setting on fire to a live woman more votes can be secured, then the parties will compete in burning all the women in country.<sup>69</sup> Instead of giving political education and leadership to the masses the political parties tried to exploit popular sentiments.

The earlier attitude of the State Government in handling the situation, internal conflict of the ruling party, and the communication gap between the State and Central Governments is sufficient to indicate the confusion of our leaders about the fundamental social objectives to be achieved through the democratic process. It also revealed the total dependence of the State Government over the Central Government. The question of the autonomy of the State Government to handle local issues becomes pertinent in this context. Allegations and counter-allegations between State and Central leaders exposed the ruling party at the national level. The State Government was criticised at the national level for its inefficiency and carelessness over social issues.

However, later on, the Rajasthan Vidhan Sabha converted the Ordinance into a law on 10th November, 1987, which was followed by Central law. The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987, was passed by Parliament on 16th December, 1987. The State Government could only take effective steps

to fight the social evil nearly after one month. During this period of indecisiveness political calculations dominated. The incident which should have been outrightly condemned by all the political parties, was tolerated and even appreciated in the name of popular feelings and mass culture. Not only the State Government but the Central Government also watched the development silently for nearly two weeks. During this period it was alleged that like the Muslim Women's Bill, the Central Government may take retrogative step to appease the fundamentalist forces among the Hindus. Timely reports about the Deorala Episode, information about the functioning of the Sati temples having large funds catering to the vasted interests of certain communities, commercialisation of Sati in the last decades, and the consistent opposition by women's organisations, a section of Press and intelligentsia ultimately pressurised the Government into taking necessary action to restrict the further glorification of Sati.

On the first death anniversary of Roop Kanwar again the State administration failed to keep the spirit of the law, as the glorification of Sati could not be restricted. However, the following year when the Dharma Raksha Samiti repeated its decision to celebrate the death anniversary of Roop Kanwar, timely intervention by the State Government controlled the situation. The family members of Roop Kanwar were allowed to organise only a 'Ramayan Path' on the occasion. Peace could be maintained and ultimately the police succeeded in preventing the glorification of Sati.<sup>40</sup> Sati Melas organised by other Sati Temples were also not allowed under the Act, though they are held under different names. Supporters of Sati could not add another temple to the chain of Sati Temples in this region. The fund of lakhs of rupees could not be utilised by them as its possession was taken by the Government as authorised by the Act. Thus, legal measures succeeded in achieving their immediate objective. The Government succeeded in restraining commercialisation and glorification of Sati to a great extent. Thus, the earlier hesitation of the State Government proved baseless that it was dangerous to play with the religious feelings of the people. However, Kalyan Singh Kalvi who had played a major role in mobilizing the Rajput community in favour of Sati, has been again appointed

President of the State Janata Dal. The Central Executive of the Janata Dal could not find alternative to Kalvi in this state. This is sufficient to reveal the sensitivity of political parties to women's issues.

The ruling party has tried to focus its attention on women's problems. A national perspective plan was adopted. Recently 30 per cent reservation in panchayats for women has been promised. However, these promises may also remain unfulfilled like the Constitution of India unless serious efforts are made to improve the lot of women. Any real change in the status of Indian women demands consistent efforts from all sections of society. These issues should not be left to women organisations only. After all an integrated development of the society cannot be achieved if half of the population is left behind. The revival of fundamentalist tendencies in politics proves deterrent to women's development and Hinduism is no exception. Fortunately, organisation like the Dharma Raksha Samiti could not sustain its support as was claimed during 20 days in Deorala.<sup>41</sup> However, continuous vigilance on the part of conscious citizens of India is primary condition to restrain such developments in Indian politics. The gap between the constitutional framework and social reality keeps on widening. Political parties guided by their vested interests are least interested in social reconstruction. They are readily prepared to sacrifice social welfare to consolidate their position among the rural masses. Instead of providing leadership to the illiterate masses they are prepared to exploit their sentiments for political gains.

The Deorala episode should have sensitised the Indian social scientists about the various social problems, such as the status of Indian women, specially the rehabilitation of the Hindu widows, and destitute women, child marriage and illiteracy, ignorance and superstitions in village India. It should also be realised that the existing categories of tradition and modernity, rural and urban, Indian and Western are not sufficient to understand the Indian social reality. It should be remembered that in 1987 the supporters of Sati could mobilise vast popular support in favour of widow burning and they refused to see this issue in the context of the low

status of women, specially the Hindu widow and in this mobilisation they could extract support from a large number of educated women. The Deorala episode is sufficient to indicate that the challenges of social reconstruction cannot be left to the State alone. Consistent efforts on the part of social organisations, the mass media and the intelligentsia are its primary requirements because the political parties are likely to be motivated by political calculations and they can sacrifice social objectives for immediate political gains. These are the inherent compulsions of the democratic process in a pluralistic society which cannot be avoided, but they can be controlled by vigilant public consciousness and enlightened public opinion.

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## Social Movements and Legislation

Recurrence of widow burning again and again after intervals shows the deeprootedness of this evil. Doubts raised about the abolition of widow burning in the 19th century seem to be well founded.<sup>1</sup> It was also alleged that the Britishers, because of their modern outlook, could take an initiative in the abolition of this practice, but it was doubtful whether the practice could be wiped out after the British left India.<sup>2</sup> While discussing Sati, Kane commented that "this subject is now of academic interest in India, since for over a hundred years (*i.e.* from 1829) self-immolation of widows has been prohibited by law in British India and has been declared to be a crime.<sup>3</sup> However, it has been recorded that the incident of widow burning occurred in Independent India. Not only the frequency of these incidents increased but efforts were made to re-examine the whole issue. Even after more than 150 years the same debate between the supporters of the custom in the name of religion and the opponents in the name of modernism was repeated. Again, the question of scriptural sanctions was raised, 'as if widow burning was sanctioned by the scriptures then would it have been accepted by Hindu society.' Those who supported *Sati* proclaimed themselves to be the protectors of the Indian conscience, Indian culture and heritage, sympathetic to folkways and folk culture and criticised the critics of sati because they were alienated from the Indian masses. There has been a regular attempt to admire Sati as a symbol of heroism of a devoted wife.<sup>4</sup> The spiritual aspect of widow sacrifice was highlighted.<sup>5</sup>

When William Bentinck could successfully prescribe Sati Regulation Act in 1829 it was regarded as a victory of the

rising consciousness of the Indians who themselves had started questioning the relevance of this custom. At that time as has been recorded, the British Government was hesitant in taking this strong step as it may have been regarded as a direct interference in the socio-religious life of the Hindus. It was argued that with the expansion of education and the consciousness of these evils would be abolished. Though Ram Mohan Roy criticised widow burning, he was not in favour of a legislation by the Britishers. He thought that such a drastic measure would not only violate the British profession of a religious neutrality on which they had prided themselves, but would create a mistrust in the minds of the Hindus about British intentions and thus hamper the growth of public interest in social reforms, which was gaining strength in some sections.<sup>6</sup> With the support of some enlightened Indians the British Government continued its efforts in social engineering. Special Marriage Act (1872) and Har Bilas Sharda Act or Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929) were passed.

After independence all the high ideals of equality, liberty, and justice were enshrined in the Constitution. The Hindu Personal Law was amended to a great extent. However, the Sati incident of *Deorala* proved that social reforms in India had taken only a legal form, and they had failed to transform the social conscience. The Constitution was adopted unanimously and all these social laws were passed by the political majority, but the education and consciousness required for the implementation of these laws could not be achieved. The stringent laws about dowry prohibition, child marriage and untouchability have not been able to achieve the desired goals. These practices are based on customs and superstitions. It is disappointing to note that even a time span of 150 years, the transfer of power into indigenous hands and the proclamation of ideals and objectives in the Constitution, have not helped in the transformation of the Indian society, specially the status of women. Social prejudices about women continue to dominate our life, they manifest fully in bride-burning and widow-burning.

Our tendency to spiritualise social tragedy has reached to such an extent that without evaluating the factors involved in

the Deorala incident a section of the Press, the mass media, the community leaders and the intellectuals started glorifying the incident as a symbol of Indian culture and heritage. After the unfortunate and painful experiences of cruelty against widows in Bengal, so well recorded in reports, how could such violence and exploitation be totally ruled out in cases of the recently occurring widow burnings in independent India? Instead of analysing the misfortunes of a Hindu widow, widow-burning was made symbol of our religion and spirituality. It was maintained that the ordinary people of the country were getting extremely agitated about their beliefs and were ready to confront the entire State, and a dichotomy between the masses and westernised political elite was projected.<sup>7</sup>

Factual reports on the Deorala incident were regarded as a conspiracy of the so-called westernised elite to underestimate the sacrifice of Roop Kanwar.<sup>8</sup> With the increasing commercialization and glorification of widow burning in Rajasthan, the vested interest of the family, kinship group, the village and the community were overlooked. Though with the increase of information about the Deorala incident glorification of the incident decreased; yet the fact remains that even in this century a custom like widow-burning can be admired by well educated sections of the society.

A nation-wide debate was again raised on the issue of widow-burning in the context of the Deorala episode. Interestingly, various arguments in support and opposition were raised in the same spirit as they were raised in the beginning of 19th century. Sarva Dharma Raksha Samiti, an organisation made to fight the opposition to widow-burning, tried to re-establish that widow-burning was pro-religious and the abolition of *Sati* was an anti-Hindu Act.<sup>9</sup> In its support the committee proclaimed that since 1947 there had been only 28 *Satis*, a 'small number', requiring no new laws. It was argued that it could not be treated as a normal crime against woman as it was based on Dharma.<sup>10</sup>

### **Scriptural Sanction**

Once again the debate about the religious nature of the rite of widow-burning held in the beginning of 19th century in

Bengal became relevant. The distinction between voluntary and involuntary *Sati* was made. It was argued that voluntary *Sati* had the sanction of both the *Shastras* and of tradition and hailed back to Sati *i.e.* *Parvati*.<sup>11</sup> In case of Deorala, it was alleged that the anti-Sati protestors were making no distinction between Sati against the women's will or voluntary *Sati*. While a ban on forced Sati had all the moral force behind it, ban on Sati committed willingly had no moral force and a law without moral force could not be effective.<sup>12</sup> These admirers of voluntary Sati did not try to find out the independence enjoyed by the unfortunate widows to make them competent to take an individual decision. While in many reported cases the use of force was not ruled out.<sup>13</sup>

Unlike the debate in the 19th century about the nature of voluntary Sati, in the context of Deorala the concept of voluntary Sati which was supported by the so-called *Dharma Raksha Samiti* as a symbol of spirituality and heroism, was critically examined. Commenting acidly on the support expressed by a section of the Press it was remarked that widows were economically dependent, they were regarded inauspicious, they could not witness any auspicious occasions like weddings, etc., so at the time of death of husband a widow was concoured to commit Sati.<sup>14</sup> It should be recalled that Roop Kanwar was made to drink *Panchamrita*, which contained a heavy dose of opium before she was dragged and pushed to the funeral pyre which had been constructed at an easy distance from her father-in-law's home—and far away from the usual cremation ground.<sup>15</sup>

Veena Das maintained that the most important argument against *Sati* is that any custom that defines a human life in a manner that it can only be glorified in death holds a seduction that must be resisted. No group on the grounds of cultural survival can establish such a complete control over the lives of its individual members.<sup>16</sup> Still the Deorala episode was admired by a section of the Press, the intelligentsia, the political leaders and the masses in the name of heroic sacrifice of Roop Kanwar. However, the opponents of widow burning challenged the very question of scriptural sanction to widow burning. It was argued that the debate on the sanction of Hindu scriptures could not be given much importance, because the

Hindu scriptures appear to sanction a great deal which is anti-woman from the male right to polygamy and the women's total dependence on their menfolk with absolutely no right of their own, to the mandatory subservient devotion to the husband. If too much importance was attached to scriptures then all the rights protected by law, like widow remarriage, prohibition of polygamy, prohibition of child marriage, the rights to inheritance and property, women's right to divorce, maintenance, child custody—all of them would not have any scriptural sanction.<sup>17</sup> But the concern showed about scriptural sanction again reflects a conflict in the Indian mind and in the Indian value system. After passing all these social laws to improve the status of Indian women, again in 1987-88 scriptures became important. Articles were written about the passages which either supported widow burning or opposed it. It was argued that in case of the Deorala incident, the term *Sati* should not have been used, instead after finding the facts it should have been described as 'widow-burning' only. So religion could have been kept out of this issue altogether.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the rite of widow burning was differentiated from the concept of *Sati*, a confusion which had emerged over the centuries. Another question raised about the voluntariness of widow burning was the decision making capacity of widow or for that matter of a woman in the Hindu society. Attempts were made to understand the total socialisation pattern of girls in the Indian society, especially in rural India and in the lower and lower middle classes. Importance of marriage and husband in the life of an Indian woman and its re-enforcement by various rituals and occasions needs a deep study and reinterpretation in order to understand the status of Hindu woman. It was pointed out that the notion of voluntary immolation in any of the cases which had taken place in Rajasthan, including Deorala, was not only absurd but was also contradicted by the evidence at hand.<sup>19</sup> It was alleged that the incident was used to make a culturally useful, anti-woman symbolic ideological construct.<sup>20</sup>

The occurrence of widow burning was not unknown to free India but before Deorala it failed to sensitize the leaders, mass media, and women organisations. In December 1986, K. K. Birla, a Rajya Sabha Member, had drawn the attention of the

Government, through a question about the increasing incidence of Sati cases. But even the newspapers owned by him did not report either his question or the Government's response. It was only after the publicity received by the Deorala incident that one of his daily papers published the full text of his question and the Government's response in a staffer's weekly column.<sup>21</sup>

During the nation-wide debate on widow burning through the mass media a polarisation of views in favour or against widow burning emerged. The attitude of the State Government and its indifference in restricting the glorification of the event were criticised. It was alleged that the representative government of free India proved weaker than the alien government. Comparing the anti-Sati movement at different periods in time it was recorded that in the 19th century the social reformers had two advantages which were not present in our time. First, was the towering personality of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, second the missionary work done by William Carey and leadership of William Bentinck. In this context the work of Lord Dalhousie was also praised. But, the social reformer of today had to stand against forces unleashed by the Shankaracharyas themselves. Social reformers were advised to work not only against the blind cruelty of religious fanaticism but also politics wedded to power.<sup>22</sup>

Many of the opponents of the evil who were shocked by the incident did not see it as a failure of Indian culture so much as failure of the Indian State. Their anger and anguish, it seems, was directed at the Government officials, the police, the judiciary and the politicians for not having the will to enforce the law and their commitment to selfish political and commercial interest which puts a premium on not the alienating voters.<sup>23</sup> Otherwise also the failure of culture needs much more consistent efforts to fight any social evils and not just the passing of more stringent laws. Past experience had proved that fresh legislation could prove only a beginning to fight injustice.

Another dimension added to widow burning at Deorala was the emphasis laid on the different nature of the rite in Rajasthan.<sup>24</sup> Rajput links were asserted and this community

tried to demonstrate its solidarity by supporting this ritual. Rajput leaders insisted that the Sati incidence among the Rajput widows demonstrated their heroic determination.<sup>25</sup> The Deorala incident was successfully used to mobilise Rajput youth to identify themselves in militant war-like mood. Thus, while widow burning in Bengal was identified as barbaric in nature it was maintained that it existed in its heroic aspect among the Rajputs of Rajasthan and western U.P. A case for superiority of Rajasthan over the 19th century Bengal was made on the false ground that Sati in Rajasthan was never coerced but was always a voluntary act of inspired women too noble to be banned.<sup>26</sup> It has been recorded that the Rajput leaders at the national level failed to condemn the incident.<sup>27</sup> Not only did the community identify itself with this rite but it also tried to mobilise other people in the name of *Dharma Raksha*.<sup>28</sup> Many commentators admired the valour and the courage of the Rajput women on the basis of history and did not try to find out the compulsions of such widows like Roop Kanwar, who were sacrificed in the name of community tradition.

### **Deification**

Widow burning in Rajasthan was also differentiated on the basis of the deification of the incident. It was claimed that the incident of Sati in Rajasthan was different from Bengal, because it is rare women who received the powers of Goddess Sati and proceeded to join her husband on his pyre.<sup>29</sup> It was asserted that only blessed women could claim such divine transformation. Such women developed superhuman powers. Because of their heroic sacrifice such women were treated as goddesses.<sup>30</sup> Writers maintained that folk tales have the highest regard and a hallowed sense of glorification for such Satis. These stories also describe the ritual in great detail highlighting the courage and devotion of the widow. Elevation of Sati as a female deity, *Kuldevi* as claimed by many followers of Sati can also be seen as the glorification of the feminine power of self-sacrifice and self-denial. Deification also compensated for the practice of allocating to the women an inferior position. It was the only alternative available to women to become heroines while men had diverse possibilities to become heroes.<sup>31</sup> The worshipper's belief in an immolated

widow as a goddess is associated with her capacity to provide benefit such as security from some disease, good for children or protecting a particular community or village against bad luck.<sup>32</sup> These women are also associated with various miracles e.g. the *Madhava-ka-vas* Sati in 1954 in Jhunjhunu. It was mentioned that a few hours before her death, Taradevi miraculously bestowed a well on the village. She raised her hand and a well sprang up in the court-yard.<sup>33</sup> Marwaris have capitalised on the Rajput culture and innovatively merged *Sati* with *Shakti*. Rajput and other *Sati* temples have adopted the *trishul* as an appendage to the *murti* of a woman sitting on a pyre holding her husband in her lap.<sup>34</sup> *Sati* worship in *Sati* temples has been a recent phenomenon because these *Sati* temples in Rajasthan and Bengal have a recent origin.<sup>35</sup> Even in some old *Siva* temples the worship of *Sati* has started. *Sati* temples in Bengal are owned and patronised by families of Rajasthani businessmen. Even the priest is brought from the State.<sup>36</sup> However, a nexus between deification and commercialisation of widow burning has been proved by the various incidents over the years in Rajasthan, U.P. and M.P. Divine miracle is used not only as legal alibi for colluders-perpetrators, but it also makes for an eminently commodifiable event.<sup>37</sup> Rani *Sati* of Jhunjhunu is worshipped by all castes, and is best example of deification; other temples in the region have tried to follow the pattern.<sup>38</sup> The Rajasthan event was differentiated on the basis of deification. As in Bengal *Satis* were not transformed into supernatural powers, as they were not authentic, while people in Rajasthan treated their *Satis* as authentic.<sup>39</sup> *Sati* temples in Bengal were constructed by the Marwaris belonging to the Shekhawati region of Rajasthan.

#### Glorification and Commercialisation of Widow burning

Lately glorification of *Sati* has become an integral part of the *Sati* cult. This process has been facilitated by numerous *Sati* temples which have been built by different castes in the Shekhawati region. Temples of Rani *Sati* at Jhunjhunu at Kotdli in 1970's and Jhadli sell picture prints of Rani *Sati*, as a woman on a burning pyre holding her husband in her lap, on a large scale.<sup>40</sup> The Rani *Sati* Temple had 105 branches by 1983 in different towns and cities. It seems that the temple business

is exclusively controlled by the business community and it has to do nothing with Rajput 'Heroism'. Its managing trust spends crores of rupees for temple building, activities on mouldering medieval Sati mounds as well as on cremation sites of fresh victims in the vicinity, no matter of what castes.<sup>41</sup> Two Rani Sati temples in U.P. were reported to attract big gatherings during the annual Mela. The Rani Sati temple in Gutaiya, Kanpur, was constructed by Seth Patodia, a wealthy businessman from Jhunjhunu in 1977. The second temple on Birhana Road was constructed by Seth Gopinath Tulsiyan also of Jhunjhunu. Both Patodia and Tulsiyan were believed to have used bricks brought from Jhunjhunu for the foundation of the temples.<sup>42</sup> Among the temples the regular clientele were reported to be businessmen from Rajasthan.<sup>43</sup> In the past three decades, these temples with their annual Melas, booklets, posters, Jhankkis and cassettes, have been pumping sati ideology into the area.<sup>44</sup> The emergence of Sati temples has been identified as a recent phenomenon. While in Rajasthan they came into existence in the late 50's, in U.P. three temples commemorating actual sati events were constructed as recently as the 80's.<sup>45</sup> In Calcutta alone about 50 Sati temples are reported. Most of these temples are branches of the Rani Sati temple at Jhunjhunu in Rajasthan, they are owned and patronised by families from Rajasthan. There are strong commercial interests, behind the chain of Sati temples and festivals. The families, which own these temples, are beneficiaries of huge offerings in cash and kind made by the devotees.<sup>46</sup> Thus, glorification of Sati was not result of spiritual power of Sati but it was the result of a consistent effort by the vested interests. In Shekhawati region, inspired by roaring business the Rani Sati Temple Trust makes, in almost every big village in the districts of Sikar and Jhunjhunu, a temple of one or the other 'Sati', and the people have learned how beneficial a Sati can be to the relatives and villagers in this part of the country.<sup>47</sup> The temples' trust also gives loans to businessmen and provides them an excellent opportunity of converting their black money into white.<sup>48</sup> Thus, those who are involved in the propagation of the Sati cult and ideology are not religiously motivated or spiritual followers, but they are excessively greedy and they have used the event for materialistic games. In the 19th

century arguments in favour of widow burning were given on the basis of religious and scriptural sanction ; the same were repeated in the 20th century to hide the materialistic ambition of relatives, the community, the villagers and all other beneficiaries.

In the name of tradition, a whole industry of Sati developed.<sup>49</sup> This industry involved a whole range of profit makers, and it is sustained by widespread superstition, even among the highly educated. In Deorala, "the site of burning of Roop Kanwar on her dead husband's funeral pyre, is not even half a furlong away from the house of her in-laws. This is arranged so as to ensure the control of the family on the money and other goods like coconuts that keep pouring on the site."<sup>50</sup> Similar accounts of vested interests of the villagers and relatives were reported from other widow burning cases also. In 1979, when word went round that Javitri was going to commit sati at Jari village, 18 km. from Banda district in U.P., immediately bamboos were erected to mark the holy place and donation boxes were fixed at vantage points. A transporter reported that he made thousands of rupees by transporting pilgrims to the *Sati Sthal*. The coconut dealers too made thousands of rupees by selling and reselling fruits to the villagers who made their offerings at the *Samadhi*. Similarly, publishers of '*Javitri Chalisa*', photographers who sold her framed pictures and others made the Jari Sati, their source of business. At the place within a year, a two storey sati temple with a marble *Samadhi* came up.<sup>51</sup> Roop Kanwar's sacrifice had similar advantages for Deorala. The village economy got a shot in the arm. Business prospered. The increase in transport business was tenfold with the average of 10,000 pilgrims streaming in every day. Jeeps, buses, and tractors plied 24 hours. The villagers, recognising the opportunity, set up temporary shops, selling coconuts, sugar cane, sweetmeats and photographs of the couple. Offerings at the *Sati Sthal* within four to five days reached 2 lakhs, pre-recorded cassettes of devotional songs on Sati started selling. Thus, at Deorala these celebrations continued for 13 days.<sup>52</sup> The incoming stream of devotees increased day by day. Lakhs of devotees witnessed the '*Chundari Mahotsava*'.<sup>53</sup> The ceremony was marked as a final glorification of the Sati before a permanent memorial in the

form of a temple was constructed at the site. This ceremony was performed on a grand scale despite the fact that the Rajasthan High Court had issued directives not to hold public celebration at the Sati Site.<sup>54</sup> The public glorification of such incidents increased because of the increasing involvement of the State in such activities by providing public facilities. Fear of government was replaced by superstitious fear of the powers of *Sati Mata*.<sup>55</sup>

Besides glorification and commercialisation of the event one other dimension added to this social phenomenon was the analysing of it as a rare phenomenon in comparison to other types of violence against women. Thus, rarefaction of the phenomenon was pleaded as a cause in order not to invite the strong action of the Government.<sup>56</sup> It was also argued that violence against women in form of bride burning was much more serious than widow burning.<sup>57</sup> Thus, by projecting the event as a single incident or individual trait and not questioning the behaviour of the majority in the name of social ethos, diverted the people away from looking at the problem in its entirety.<sup>58</sup> By emphasising the singularity and superhuman nature of the act, abettors in the act tried to absolve themselves of taking any responsibility for the act.<sup>59</sup> For instance during an interview, Roop Kanwar's father-in-law expressed his inability to dissuade the widow from her supposed resolve to burn. "How could we stop her ? The spirit of *Sati* had entered her, who can interfere with God's will?"<sup>60</sup> These types of assertions were made to make the widow appear to be superhuman and rare, because the *Sat* or *Tej* of a *Sati* is not supposed to enter an ordinary woman. Such arguments were made by highly educated persons during pro-Sati movement.<sup>61</sup>

While supporters of Sati tried to justify the event in disguise of deification, women organisations condemned the whole episode as an example of violence against women. Prominent criticism was led by women organisations, and activists. Pro-Sati writers, leaders, and celebrations were criticised and condemned by the women organisations. Largely these organisations demanded fresh legislation to ban widow-burning. The legislation made by the British rulers to restrain this social evil in last century was found insufficient to control the practice in this century.

### Nature of Social Legislation

A majority of the opponents of widow burning argued that strong action against this evil could be taken only with the support of law. The impression was created that there was no law against widow burning that applied to the whole of India. The Rajputs maintained that they had not violated any law.<sup>62</sup> Efforts of formulating any law were declared as unwarranted interference in their religious and social practices and their glorious traditions were being sullied and insulted.<sup>63</sup> Supporters of Sati argued that the right to worship was an 'individual right granted in the Constitution and the Government could not take any step to hurt the religious feelings of the people'.<sup>64</sup> While anti-sati agitators pleaded for a strong action against the glorification of widow burning, Rajput leaders claimed the 'glorious Saga' in Rajput history and the government had no business to interfere in its religious matters.<sup>65</sup>

The State Government was criticised for its failure in restricting the glorification of sati as it failed to stop public celebrations on the 13th day of Roop Kanwar's death as was directed by the Rajasthan High Court. The Rajasthan Government maintained that no effective step could be taken by the Government as the present law was inadequate to do so.<sup>66</sup> The State Government wanted more effective legislation to check the glorification of Sati especially the building of temples and collection of funds. To achieve immediate effect, the Rajasthan Assembly was adjourned and the Governor promulgated the Rajasthan Sati Prevention Ordinance on 1st October, 1987. The Rajasthan Government wanted to prohibit the proposed meeting of Rajputs on Dassehra at the *Sati Sthal* at Deorala to ensure the construction of a memorial. Thus, the Rajasthan Government, which had remained practically inactive throughout the 14 days of the drama at Deorala, ultimately decided to become active and effective by passing the Ordinance under extraordinary circumstances.

There seems to be a substantial similarity between the events which occurred before the anti-Sati legislation in 1829 and later on in 1987. It has been suggested that the main argument given against taking any action against Sati was the fear of the political consequences of intervening in religion.<sup>67</sup> This type of

fear for alien rulers who had to stake in Indian society could be understood. But it seems that in free India also local politicians and State governments were afraid of the political consequences—loss of the Rajput vote and fear of tampering with religion. This type of fear was entertained by politicians at the cost of the values laid down in the Constitution. Electoral compulsions obviously exacted the same price as the needs of a new colonial government.<sup>68</sup> Elected governments of free Indian States as well as the Centre were motivated by vote calculations. They did not hesitate in justifying the incident in the name of religion, culture and masses.

Legal experts were of the opinion that no new law was required to deal with the cases of widow burning. The Indian Penal Code (Act XLV of 1860) declares the attempt to commit suicide (Sec. 306) and abetment of suicide (Sec. 306) grave crimes.<sup>69</sup> The Indian Constitution guarantees the right to life under Article 21, "life shall not be deprived even by the State, except according to fair, reasonable and just procedure". Article 51A includes, among the fundamental duties cast on every citizen of India, an obligation to renounce practices derogating to the dignity of women, to develop a scientific temper, humanism and compassion for living creatures.<sup>70</sup> It was further argued that violation of the Fundamental Rights in Art. 21 can be forbidden by the writ of court : enforcement of the fundamental duties under Art. 51-A is also within the jurisdiction of the court. It should be remembered that equality of sexes has been granted by this Constitution. Woman or man, the value is the same, is the mandate of our basic law.<sup>71</sup> But the Rajasthan Government had to do something to express its activeness, and to hide its delayed reaction, it made amends by passing an anti-sati ordinance, which was later on converted into a law on Nov. 10, 1987. Later on the Central Government also passed the Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act 1987. These legislations have been criticised on various grounds. Primarily these legislations were formulated to hide the inefficiency of the government and the administration. It was accepted that in spite of the Constitution and the penal code, terrible discrimination has been taking place against the Indian female. Violation of law in the context of dowry, dowry deaths, rape and murder of women.

are not infrequent.<sup>72</sup> Still in the context of Deorala more slogans were raised in favour of the new legislation. Earlier in the case of Tej Singh, (AIR 1958 Raj. 189) Chief Justice Wanchoo had declared that all the persons who had joined the procession were abettors in crime.<sup>73</sup> It was argued that whether the woman voluntarily committed sati or was forcibly pushed on to the pyre was a matter of no consequences. Those who conspired in the performance of act were culpable under Sec. 306 of the Indian Penal Code.<sup>74</sup>

These legislations were criticised for their inadequacies, nature and effect. The first objection about the legislation was that no one outside Parliament was openly consulted as had been done in case of other Bills like Dowry and Rape Amendments Bills, which were thrown open for public discussion to generate public opinion.<sup>75</sup> Central and State Acts in 1987 reproduced opening lines of Section I of the 1829 Regulation, which stated that "Sati or the burning or burying alive of widows or women is revolting to the feelings of human nature and is nowhere enjoined by any of the religions of India as an imperative duty". So Sati was not denounced on the basis of human values but on the insane grounds that no religion enjoins it as an imperative duty.<sup>76</sup> The fundamental question is that whether the questions regarding the status of women shall be decided on the basis of the Constitution or on the basis of religion and scriptures ? By this argument the government was trying to appease the pro-sati fundamentalist forces who maintained that any law against Sati was a direct interference in their religion.

Thirdly, the 1987 Indian Act maintained that "whoever attempts to commit Sati and does any act towards such commission shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term which shall not be less than one year or with a fine or with both". While in the Rajasthan Act, the quantum of punishment is more, but both Acts punish the women who is rescued.<sup>77</sup> In spite of the documented evidence that widows were being harassed and burnt, the government treated the widow as a decision maker in her own burning.<sup>78</sup> Thus, unlike the 1829 Regulation Act, the 1987 Act treats all Sati as voluntary, that is why the woman is punished, she is seen as the principal offender, and all those who kill her are punished for abetment

and not for murder. Thus, the act failed to recognise the fact that widow burnings are actually murders committed publicly, with the active participation of a number of people, because a victim should not be held responsible for victimisation and the act makes the victim liable to pay fine and the imprisonment.<sup>79</sup> It has been alleged that because of this legislation if Roop Kanwar had been saved then she would have been prosecuted as the principal offender.

In both the Acts people taking part in burning and burying the woman, whether as sightseers or organisers, have been called abettors. While organisers should be the principal accused in a case of the most heinous of murders. No distinction has been made on the one hand between those who lay the pyre or deck the women in her bridal attire and are, therefore, really her murderers; and others who may only be spectators. Thus, the deterrent punishment becomes extremely severe and counter productive because few judges are prepared to convict 'anybody'.<sup>80</sup> Commenting on the Central Act, Lotika Sarkar opined that the Act has made abetment punishable with death or life imprisonment. In the case of the commission of widow the punishment is death, in the case of attempted widow-death it is life imprisonment under this definition of abettor; thus equal punishment has been prescribed for unequal degrees of guilt. She has suggested that it would have been better if the collective fines were imposed on the village that has had a widow immolation and identify those who are closely associated with such immolation to be penalised according to the degree of their participation in the act.<sup>81</sup> Thus, both the acts have provided a stiffer punishment for abetment than for the principal offence, while the established principle is to impose the same sentence on both—the abettor and the chief offender.<sup>82</sup>

The main argument in support of fresh legislation against Sati was to punish the offence of glorification. However, the Rajasthan Sati (Prevention) Ordinance had refused to include the existing temples and the continuance of existing ceremonies in its ambit, thus preventing only further construction of such temples and the establishment of new ceremonies. Thus, the whole gamut of commercialisation of Sati has been left out of the definition of glorification. It has been alleged that in the

recent Sati events besides the intention to grab the bride's gold and her share in the family property, the desire to make a quick buck out of her public murder has been a great incentive in the performance of the grotesque ritual of widow burning.<sup>83</sup> Punishment for the offence of glorification of Sati has been questioned from different quarters.<sup>84</sup> The Rajasthan High Court struck down those parts of the Rajasthan law which sought to forbid worship at even those Sati temples where it was not established that the temple commemorated a woman who had been burnt or buried.<sup>85</sup>

It was argued that all the offences created by the new legislation are in fact covered by the existing criminal codes. If it was felt necessary to stress their existence, then a clarificatory Bill should have sufficed. Moreover, enactment of law is no guarantee for its implementation. However, the immediate objective of the Rajasthan ordinance was fulfilled as the pro-sati group could not build a temple at Deorala and the funds collected for the purpose were seized. Annual fairs at Sati Sthals have also been restricted.

However, the passing of a legislation is only one dimension of this deep-rooted evil. A majority of the supporters of the flesh Bill also failed to view the event in its totality. We should not forget that women themselves participated in the mass rally organised by the pro-Sati lobby after the ordinance was passed by the Rajasthan Government. A majority of Sati supporters refused to see the event in the context of low status of women. Problems and status of Hindu widow should be examined in this context. Sometimes constitutional provisions and legal formulations seem to be of peripheral importance for the large number of masses, specially with reference to the illiterate, poor and ignorant women in the villages in Rajasthan.

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## Status of Widow and Widow Burning

The Deorala incident was able to invite the attention of social scientists, activists and leaders about the low status of widows in our society. Widow burning was seen as a rigid control of women's sexuality.<sup>1</sup> Those who criticised widow burning were criticised as proponents of 'sexual anarchy' and 'free love'. This incident insisted that a woman's life in itself has no value, a married woman lives for her husband alone, and self-immolation was the supreme ideal in society's religious and social beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

By and large, the whole socialisation process for girls still insists on the value of the marital status. Marriage signifies good fortune and a state of bliss. The terms used for married women whose husband is alive are: *Sobhagywati* or *Suhagan* which means the fortunate one and *Sumanagali* which means the auspicious one. On all kinds of ceremonial occasions and rituals participation of these 'fortunates' and 'auspicious' women is essential. Thus, it is only the married woman with a living husband who can participate in digging the earth and carrying it to marriage pandal, spreading oil and turmeric paste on the bride or the bridegroom and performing an *arti* on these auspicious occasions.<sup>3</sup> The married woman's status is defined as much by its relation of opposition to widowhood, *i.e.*, avoiding widowhood, is as much the point of myths and rituals for benign goddesses as are the happy beautiful concepts.<sup>4</sup> If a married woman is auspicious, a widow is inauspicious and the significance of widowhood has to be

avoided. The symbols of the married state, *i.e.* bangles, *Mangalsutra*—a necklace with black beads, and vermillion, a *Kumum* mark on forehead, are removed at the husband's death. So these unfortunate women cannot continue with these signs of fortune. It has been seen that even among those communities which traditionally allow remarriage of widows, these practices are followed: at the time of second marriage the insignia are restored.<sup>5</sup> A special attire is prescribed for widows, and there are rules that married women should not wear it. Thus, widowhood is ugliness, tragedy and poverty contrasted to the married women's beauty, pleasure and wealth. The widow was traditionally forced, considered to be dangerous in supernatural and mystical ways, although she was utterly degraded in her social status and without any real power.<sup>6</sup> Many a time it has been expressed that to some extent there has been improvement in the status of widows, now they are no more disfigured with shaven heads as the practice of shaving heads has almost died down, yet there is reservation about girls cutting the ends of their hair in order to make them even.<sup>7</sup> The reality still is that the plight of widows has not improved as much, this was also expressed by the villagers during the Deorala episode. Among the Rajputs a widow is treated as *Kulakshini* (an evil woman) who has gobbled up her husband.<sup>8</sup> Women thought that life for a Rajput widow was living hell. She has to live a life devoid of any joy—no new clothes or jewellery, no good food, was forced to stay indoors, was prevented from attending religious ceremonies and auspicious occasions and had to face the indignity of sexual advances from male members of the family. The reason for this treatment of widows as lesser beings is the belief that a woman has no worth outside the institution of marriage through which she must serve her man.<sup>9</sup> Discussing the various incidents of widow burning in various parts of U.P., Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, Promila Kalhan maintained that the "question whether it was suicide, or plain brutal murder has never been determined in any of the cases including Deorala."<sup>10</sup> She agreed that still widows were illtreated and exploited by society and family members. They were branded unlucky and considered responsible for the deaths of their husbands. In some parts of the country their heads are still

shaven and they are forced to wear coarse cloth, and are not supposed to attend auspicious occasions.<sup>11</sup> Discrimination against women and violation of equality of sexes was obvious in case of status of widows because widowers do not suffer from any of these exploitations and disadvantages.

Young girls are exposed to the value of the married state from the very beginning as it signifies good fortune and a state of bliss. Blessings and *Vratas* for getting a good husband convey the message forcefully.<sup>12</sup> The purpose of two popular festivals specially meant for little girls, *Bhulabai* in parts of Maharashtra and *Gangaur* in parts of Gujarat and Rajasthan which are characterised by collective worship, singing and playing, is to obtain a good husband. There are parallels in collective and individual worships and fasts in other regions as well.<sup>13</sup> During the last few decades, with the expansion of education and available job opportunities for educated and trained girls, the age of marriage for girls has gone up. The number of young girls in white collar jobs has increased. But at the same time, the cultural impact of marriage has changed very little. Unmarried women are excluded from the 'auspicious' activities of the 'fortunate' women and are made to feel that there is something wrong with them. Those who remain unmarried, by choice or through the compulsions of circumstance, often prefer to live in large cities where it is possible for them to exist in relative anonymity, and where the norms are less stringent.<sup>14</sup> It has been maintained that the management of a girl's sexuality is tied to her future as a wife and mother. Motherhood is the highest achievement in a woman's life. Marriage is the gateway to motherhood. Everything else is secondary to these two goals.<sup>15</sup> With the notion of the necessity of marriage is attached the notion of their temporary membership within the natal home. Rituals provide one of the important means through which girls come to realise the inevitability of their transfer from the natal home to that of husband.<sup>16</sup> This tendency in socialisation of young girls seems to be a universal phenomenon despite the economic, cultural and social variations in India. Socialisation for an unfamiliar setting and uncertain future imparts a degree of tentativeness and provisionality to the process. This affects the development

of self-confidence and initiative in girls.<sup>17</sup> Largely, they are not made capable of taking independent decisions, such decision making capacity is hardly encouraged among girls. Their perpetual dependence on others, lack of social and economic autonomy, and subordination is reinforced throughout the socialisation process. Thus, the unfortunate state of widows should be analysed in this context.

The plight of widows in upper castes was not always similar. There was hardly any scope for doubt in the *Arthashastra* about the propriety of second marriage of a woman, although its practice was considerably limited. The widow could 'remarry'/'settle down'/'go' to another person. This was expressed in the *Arthashastra* through various terms like *Vedana* or *nivesa* or *gamana*.<sup>18</sup> However, in practice there were many factors like the father-in-law's approval, the time limit and the choice of persons, all of which hindered her almost at every step. She was passed on to the next person automatically like a piece of movable article, with her property, children, acquisitions, etc.<sup>19</sup> Manu, on the other hand, was resolute in his attitude towards the remarriage of woman. He maintained that a widow must lead a 'celibate' life, should emaciate her body by living on pure roots and fruits, but never should she mention the name of another man after her husband's death, otherwise she loses her place with her husband in heaven.<sup>20</sup> Manu under certain circumstances advised a widow to obtain a *Ksetraja* son. The custom was known as *Niyoga* and the son born in this form of union was known as *Ksetraja* son. The custom derived its name from the concept of the woman being compared to *ksetra* (field), her husband to its owner and the 'appointed' person to a seed-giver.<sup>21</sup> Such a son was given the right of inheritance in the family property. It has been suggested that the institution of *Niyoga* tended to substitute the custom of remarriage or any 'other permanent union of widows or of deserted women for that of mother'.<sup>22</sup> However, Manu Samhita and Dharmashastras have given different and contradictory interpretations of the custom at different places. Different provisions for the institution of *Niyoga* show that it was not an established institution and as it was gradually being introduced into the society the sacred

law had to accept it and make provision for it.<sup>23</sup> It seems that increasingly the practice of widow remarriage was being replaced by having children through *Niyoga*.<sup>24</sup> Slowly the ideal thrust upon woman was that a marriage was an eternal, inviolable relationship between a man and his wife based on religious sanction. A man was like a God to his wife for whom no other form of worship was necessary but attending to her husband with all devotion. After his death celibacy was advocated for her. A chaste widow was assured of all fame and eternal glory in this world and an honoured place in the next. But heaven was lost to her who married again.<sup>25</sup> However, man was not bound by any such restrictions, widow marriage was restricted because it ran entirely counter to the related ideals of male control of female sexuality and the eternal indissolubility of the marital bond.<sup>26</sup> In about the fourth century A.D., when Brahmanical prohibition against divorce initiated by women became widespread amongst the higher castes, so too was the remarriage of widows prohibited for all orthodox Hindus.<sup>27</sup> At first the prohibition applied only to adult widows, but by the sixth century A.D. even child widows were obliged to remain celibate for the rest of their lives.<sup>28</sup>

It should be noted that the status of widow and frequency of widow burning were inversely related. Widows had to pay the price for the purity of caste. Practices such as pre-pubertal marriage of females, Kulinism and the associated hypergamy and polygamy, and the injunction against widow remarriage are all based on the concern for the purity of women.<sup>29</sup> The development of a social hierarchy based on the notion of relative purity has had a doubly unfortunate effect on the lives of Hindu women. The widow's position in Hindu caste society was ambiguous although alive, her clan identification with her deceased husband meant that she was socially dead, subsumed in her relationship with him and highly polluted. The fire which consumed her body purified her and transported her essence to this other domain.<sup>30</sup> The link established between the husband's linkage—the sacrificing community, and the domain of the Gods is one of purity. The widow extremely polluted by her husband's death, through sacrifice was transformed and became *Sati* or pure, establishing a link which

we can encapsulate as purity, between the world of the living kin of her husband, and the domain of the Gods, and their devoted wives, and her own personal *Siva*-like God, her husband.<sup>31</sup>

It has been agreed upon that the lowest point in the life of Hindu society in Bengal was reached by the end of the eighteenth century. Polygamy and proliferation of ritualism and ostentatious worshipping went hand-in-hand with the utter degradation of women, especially in the institution of Kulinism.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the plight of widows was a reflection of the lower status of women at large in Bengal. Women were under subjugation. Widow remarriage was totally forbidden among higher castes, while among men, moral lapses were generally overlooked.<sup>33</sup> Widows were treated as marginal entities in society. Widowhood was a liminal phase in the life of a woman, a transitional period outside of normal existence, which only ended at death. A widow was not allowed to wear the insignia of her active marital state, that is, her clothes and her jewellery, but wore rags. In some cases her hair was shaven. She was not permitted to partake in the family meals. She could only sleep on the ground and in all ways was kept separate from the active social world of the living. She was treated by the family and the rest of society as unclean and polluting, and her marginality was enforced by these pollution taboos.<sup>34</sup>

Among the Hindus the sexual and reproductive powers of women have been rigorously controlled by men through such extreme institutions as child marriage, *purdah* no divorce for women, a prohibition against widow remarriage and either social isolation through stigmatisation or the burning of widows. It has been argued that the presence of a widow especially if she was still capable of sexual and reproductive activity, was a problem for her husband's surviving male kin. Her celibacy was guaranteed by imposing severe regulations on her social contracts. Thus, the fear of widows, generated by the magnitude of the problem that they posed for the maintenance of male control, took extreme form in the practice of their immolation on their deceased husbands' funeral pyre.

Eye-witness accounts verify that in many cases a greater or lesser amount of coercion, coming mainly from the widow's son and her husband's family or from the widow's father was exerted.<sup>35</sup> In the records the age of widows involved, ranged from four to one hundred years. As there was often considerable discrepancy in the ages of a man and his wife, with very young girls marrying old men, young widows were common.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore as polygamy was quite common among high caste Brahmins (Kulins) there were cases when as many as forty or so women were burnt at the death of their husbands, although this was by no means the norm. More often, there were two or three widows who burned with their husbands.<sup>37</sup> Increasing evidence of coercion in recorded cases of widow burning facilitated the task of the Britishers to treat it as murder for they had a policy of non-interference in Hindu religion, and so widow burning was banned in 1829. The Act proposed to punish all those who assisted in the rite, the priests, the washerman and barbers, the son and the husband's family and all who collected the wood for the fire. By these provisions, the government effectively removed a considerable part of the *raison de etre* for the rite, for it was not effective if the various parties did not perform the ritual tasks ascribed to them.<sup>38</sup> Social reformers in the 19th century concentrated their attention on the social evils affecting the status of women. Issues of child marriage, the plight of widows and education for women were discussed at length. These issues arose from the pivotal elements of the patriarchal system which measured the women's usefulness only in terms of her sexual and reproductive functions and dictated her inherently in subservient roles.<sup>39</sup> Other positive efforts were also made to improve the status of women. Schools were opened for girls, remarriage of upper caste widows was legalised (1856) and the minimum age at marriage for girls was raised to thirteen and for boys to seventeen (1891).<sup>40</sup>

Among the Hindus efforts were made to improve the status of widows. Two booklets, written by unknown Brahmins, provide elaborate formulations of the issue. The first booklet dated 1837 offered three alternatives by way of reform : that the pre-pubertal virgin widows should be remarried; that the girls should be married only after puberty. The second

booklet, dated 1841, analysed the evils attached to the ban on remarriage of Brahmin widows, namely death like existence of widows, adultery, abortion and infanticide, constant pain to parents, and the bad influence of adulterous widows on other women. It was suggested that these evils were curable by permitting widow remarriage. The author supported the abolition of child marriage, remarriage of child and adult widows, and the education of women, training for widows as teachers with the support of the British Government.<sup>41</sup> Similar sentiments to improve the status of widows were expressed by other social reformers in Maharashtra. Restrictions on widow remarriage were identified as obvious inequality between the sexes, which prohibited widows from remarrying but allowed widowers to remarry; it was malice towards the female sex on the part of the selfish and wicked law givers.<sup>42</sup> Social reformers also identified the low status of widows with the absence of education among women. It was maintained that women suffered from wicked practices such as disfigurement of widows, enforced widowhood and early consummation of marriage because no opportunities for development, education and training were given to them. Thus, while the issue of widow remarriage was considered to be a religious issue and was difficult to propagate, the widow's education, not being a religious issue, was easier for the people to accept.<sup>43</sup> However, the general tenor of the debate was the amelioration of the worst injustices within the traditional patriarchal societal framework which confined women in their subordinate position. Tilak in his writings suggested humane treatment of women, but also keeping them to the subordinate position within the home, the idea of equality of the sexes was not broached upon.<sup>44</sup> But there were some champions of the equality of sexes also, who condemned enforced widowhood as such behaviour was not expected from widowers.<sup>45</sup>

In Bengal also efforts to improve the status of widows were made by the Brahmo Samaj. The *Brahmo Samaj* took up widow remarriage as part of their social reform platform. Many widows, on their own initiative, escaped from their village homes to join a Brahmo community in one of the district towns in Calcutta. Brahmo Samaj provided them greater freedom. They took active part in religious worship,

and mixed freely with others as an equal rather than a servant. Once they joined, provisions were made for their education and vocational training and sometimes also their remarriage.<sup>46</sup> However, efforts to expand women's education, training and development were not given sufficient attention in other parts of the country. The low level of literacy among rural women is sufficient to indicate this anomaly.

In independent India though social and political equality was granted to women and they also became voters but still special efforts to draw women in the mainstream of national development were not made until 1975. Stray cases of widow burning continued to take place at various places. According to newspaper reports, there had been at least 25 cases of widow burning since independence, mostly in Rajasthan—and not only in the Rajput community.<sup>47</sup> In the beginning neither were they identified as injustice to women nor were any efforts made to fight the same. In the wake of widow burning in 1980 and specially after the Deorala incident the plight of widows was discussed in the context of social reality.

Though a compensatory treatment to widows of government servants has been in practice still no substantial effort has been made to take special care of these unfortunate women. In various parts of the country, still widows do not receive a fair treatment. After the death of the husband, young widows are largely held responsible for the early death of their husbands, and in the absence of any economic status, education and training they become a liability for the in-laws or the parents. Paternal property was found again and again to be the driving force behind each case of widow burning. It was remarked that by burning alive a widow, not only do her in-laws ensure that she does not bring 'disgrace' to the family by remarriage as she is sexually alive, but they also absolve themselves of their duty of taking care of her. By burning her alive they also ensure that she lays no claim on her husband's property.<sup>48</sup> Besides this a *Sati Sthal* proves an extremely lucrative money spinner for the family.

Similar sentiments were expressed by other writers also. Sati or widow burning was identified with the low status of

widow who are illtreated and exploited. However, women themselves play a crucial role in continuation of these taboos and stigmas against widows. Among the Iyer Brahins of Tamil Nadu, when the husband dies the wife continues to wear the insignia of married state for ten days. At midnight of the tenth day all these are removed. This job has to be done by women who have already become widows. *Sumangali* women have to scrupulously avoid being anywhere near the unfortunate and inauspicious women on this occasion.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, in the socialization process from the time of birth of a girl through her childhood, during the development, education and training facilities, they are neglected. The fact that ultimately the girl will leave her parental home is never forgotten. She does not belong to the family to which she is born and the family to which ultimately she will go, remains uncertain till her marriage. The notion of *paraya dhan* still dominates the overall socialization process of an average Indian girl. Since she has to adjust to an unfamiliar setting, development of identity and autonomy is hardly encouraged. She is regarded as water which does not have any shape of its own, and so it can take the shape of the vessel in which it is poured, or that woman should be like pliable mud—to be cast into a shape of the choice by the potter.<sup>50</sup> These types of feelings about girls are still largely shared by most of Indian families.

There are various customs and rituals which reaffirm feminine roles in Hindu society. The notion of tolerance and self-restraint are also rooted in a consciously cultivated feminine role which is embedded in and legitimised by culture and cultural ideology. Since all training and preparation for girls is for their married life, widowhood is the greatest tragedy which can occur to a young woman. Any substantial change in status of widows in various parts of country can be achieved only by making consious efforts to improve the general status of women. The social roots of 'Sati' are to be found in the helpless condition of the Hindu widows ; and in avoiding the social responsibility of rehabilitating them in family and society. Women should not treat their married life as the only goal in life. Widow burning or 'Sati' is anti-social as it denies social status to women as an individual."<sup>51</sup> This notion of women treats her as a sexual partner only and not as a person to play

an independent social role in a society. In case of Deorala, unless the life of Rajput women is made bearable and the terrible imprisonment they suffer in the name of marriage is reformed, there will always be people prepared to end their misery in suicide, especially if social recognition is also accorded to it.<sup>52</sup> It has been realised that the economic dependence of women should be reduced, they should be trained to work and helped to stand on their own, instead of being dependent on their fathers, husbands and sons at different stages of life.<sup>53</sup> Economic self-reliance will help in building self-confidence in widows. It was suggested that certain temporary relief measures were also essential to avoid such tragedies. There was an urgent need for battered women's short-stay homes so that those being pushed to the stove or the pyre can live outside the influence of their relations for a while. After such temporary relief victims may not think of ending their life.<sup>54</sup>

The widow burning incident remains a burning reminder of our apathy towards the social status of women. These incidents also remind us that social reforms expected to take place through progressive social legislation and education have belied our expectations. It is revealed that legal remedies for social problems have a limited use. These social legislations equip the government and authorities to penalise the offenders, but they cannot change the prevalent customs, superstitions or social taboos. It should be remembered that women in India suffer from all these three social drawbacks. With these existing discriminations simple, equal constitutional and legal status has not helped in bringing out the desirable change. All the progressive social legislations passed to improve the status of women have proved of little help in the context of actual social norms, customs and beliefs. In this context, the role of social reform movement in India has to be re-examined. It should be replanned and rephased to achieve the new social objectives.<sup>55</sup> Along with the necessary legislation to stop the barbaric practices against women, and to tone up the forces of enforcement to implement the law, we need a massive social movement of women to fight against the widespread oppression they are subjected to in our villages. In the absence of mobilization of women themselves on this score, a substantial change in the

present social structure and organisation is not possible. The lack of consciousness among women themselves on these issues was reflected by the participation of women in large numbers in pro-sati rallies organised by the community groups. It should be agreed upon that widow-burning is only one aspect of the various crimes against women.<sup>56</sup> We should not forget that female foeticide is still widely practised in different parts of India through traditional as well as modern techniques. Women are still quite backward in the field of education and employment. Rape and murder of women are not infrequent. Actual physical sale of girls still takes place in the feudal areas of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. Dowry burning, and dowry suicide, a peculiar pathology of Indian sex discrimination is rampant, noisy legislation notwithstanding.<sup>57</sup> Progressive laws on paper have created a false hope of improvement in the status of women. In fact, simply formulating progressive laws by a ruling party, without considering its operational constraints, is the easiest short-cut and populist tactic to be adopted to avoid any serious efforts for a planned reconstruction of Indian society. Our society has not been able to accept women as equal partners in social or individual life. In Hindu and Muslim family law, discrimination is alive, especially where marital rights and property relations are involved. The struggle for greater justice and deliverance for the dignity and personality of womanhood still remains to be fought as a cause of humanity. This battle has to be fought by men and women together. Unfortunately, so far all these women's issues are being left to be raised by women's organisations and women's groups. This type of segregation on these crucial issues will not help in the development of an integrated society. Ultimately a social order has to be evolved where a widow feels herself safe and secure and finds her life worth living.

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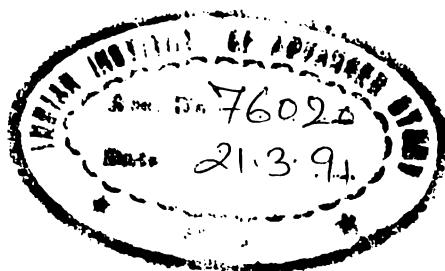
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