

# Widow Burning in India: A Socio-Legal Analysis of the Sati Tradition

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**ABSTRACT:** *The historic Indian (Hindu) practice of a widow immolating herself on her husband's funeral pyre is known as Sati (Su-thi or Suttee). In ancient India, the sati custom was widespread among some sections of society, who either took the vow or considered it a great honor to die on their husbands' funeral pyres. The British Government outlawed the sati ceremony in 1829 by Lord Bentinck, Governor-General of India (1828 to 1835), and subsequently in 1987 by the Sati (Prevention) Act. There have been a few cases of sati in modern times in Rajasthan (1987), Uttar Pradesh (2006), Madhya Pradesh (2002 and 2006), and Chhattisgarh (2008). Sati is primarily practiced in regions of northern and central India. Isolated occurrences, which may be more but are not officially recorded, have often sparked controversy and social unrest in the country. The origins of the sati ceremony may be traced back to a tale. Sati's love to her husband Lord Shiva is shown in the tale via her self-sacrifice. In protest of her father's reluctance to invite Shiva to a sacrificial meeting, she committed herself.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Sati's Myth, Sati System Abolition, Amiya Sabha, Self-Immolation.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Hindu women in India are no longer permitted to practice sati, notwithstanding religious reasons. Because the ceremony is seen as murder, the state condemns it. Sati is important to Hindu women because it allows them to express their femininity, yet the government has outlawed the practice. Because the Hindu faith promotes sati, but the state forbids it, there is conflict. The rationale behind sati isn't all terrible when seen through a critical lens. Its purpose is to commemorate deceased males while also preventing widowed ladies from engaging in deplorable behavior. However, the ceremony may not be the most effective means of expressing these intentions. The background of sati is something to think about. The ceremony is based on a tale that helps to communicate information. The events of a myth, on the other hand, should not necessarily be accepted literally. As a result, Hindus today should not embrace sati since it involves self-immolation. There are other methods for a lady to show her respect and devotion to her late spouse [1], [2].

### 1.1 Myth and Sati:

The sati ceremony is heavily inspired by Hindu mythology about self-immolation as a kind of valor. The central story depicts the assassination of a goddess called Sati. Author John S. Hawley portrays several variants of this story in his book *Sati, the Grace and the Curse: The Burning of Spouse in India*. In both tales, the goddess makes a self-sacrificial offering when her father refuses to include her husband, Shiva, in a sacrificial ceremony. Sati commits suicide in order to show her undying devotion to her husband. The myth may have two distinct endings. Sati is reincarnated as Parvati, Shiva's second wife, in one of the stories. Sati's body, on the other hand, is not devoured by the flames. Shiva exhumes her corpse and carries it across the globe on his back to convey his sorrow. The gods dismember [Sati's] corpse to end Shiva's suffering, and parts of it fall to the ground, each creating a shrine (Sati, both versions of the Sati story give essential components to the sati ceremony. Women have done sati to be recognized for their loyalty and courage, as well as to live an everlasting afterlife with their spouses.

Hawley recounts Hindu stories including local deities, known as satimatas, in addition to tales about the goddess Sati. These tales depict ordinary women who become deities as a result of their self-sacrificial deeds of sati. A lady called Karmavati is the subject of one of the legends. Karansainji, her newlywed husband, and she walk through the forest to Karansainji's native village. The pair takes a break for the day under a tree. When Karansainji falls asleep, a snake representing the Lord of Death bites him and transports him to paradise. As destiny had it, Dharmaraja [Yama, the Lord of Death] himself assumed the shape of a serpent to make this couple's love everlasting, as Hawley recounts. When Karmavati discovers that her husband is not awake that day, she summons

several local herders. These guys inspect Karansainji's corpse and declare him dead. Karmavati then tells the herders to build a funeral pyre for her husband so she may burn in it while holding his corpse. According to the tale, Karmavati's self-immolation gives her the ability to start the fire herself. Her goodness also enables her to leave an everlasting spring in response to the herdsmen's pleas for water [3], [4].

The myths surrounding the sati ceremony are similar in that they feature women sacrificing themselves for their husbands and the pair remaining together in the afterlife. In the stories, women sacrificed their lives in order to honor their husbands and join them in an afterlife in the heavenly realm. These ladies were able to accomplish so because of self-immolation. In the words of John S. Hawley, widow Karmavati "maintain[ed] her marriage even when death threatened to destroy it." According to legend, Karmavati was reunited with her spouse after completing the sati ceremony. It is also said that Karmavati was adored by the general population as a result of her act. People came to her temple to praise her for the serenity and prosperity that the spring Karmavati had left behind. For many reasons, the sati ritual is seen as a beneficial practice. It establishes an everlasting connection between a woman and her husband, and the performer is applauded for his bravery. Both myths emphasize the importance of a woman demonstrating loyalty to her spouse and only her husband. Despite the fact that the tales are just legends, they have been taken as instances of how women may gain respect from their families and society. This is how the sati ceremony became a Hindu woman's customary practice. The stories, on the other hand, do not always make sati acceptable as a rite. There are other methods for a wife to show her love for her husband.

### 1.2 Sati's Morality:

Because it is a custom that includes themes of subordination and murder, the sati rite is divisive. Women are supposed to put their lives on the line for their dead spouses as a sign of love. They are either compelled to do sati by those who applaud it, or they are pushed into it because they feel it is their responsibility as a woman. Author Anne McLeer discusses the problem in her essay *Saving the Victim: Convalescing the Victim's Language and Reassessing Global Feminism*. Sati, she argues, is a gender-determined behavior created by a framework (a local patriarchal religious and cultural belief system) that deprives women of autonomy by definition. By stating this, McLeer asserts that the sati ritual was formed by a population that oppresses women, and as a result, it perpetuates women's subjugation. We don't see men sacrificing their lives on their wives' funeral pyres, but women are supposed to bear the brunt of men's agony. In her essay, *The Burning Bride: The Dowry Problem in India*, Wanda Teays defines the religious act of sati as "worship of the spouse as a deity." If a sati can sacrifice her life for her spouse, it's safe to assume she did all she could for him before he died. It was her responsibility, in her opinion, to serve him like a slave. Women do sati, according to Teays, because it offers them authority, which they lack in Hindu culture. For Hindus, sati, which is based in religious and societal views regarding women's value, provides spiritual strength to women. Sati gives the lady power over one aspect of her life: her death. However, there are Hindus who praise satis. They appreciate the ceremony because it involves dedication and bravery. To worship Satis, large yagnas, or public fairs, are held. One was organized in 1996 to commemorate Rani Sati's 400th birthday. It was supposed to take place in India's Rani Sati temple, but a group of feminists took the matter to court, claiming that the yagna fair glorified widow immolation and was in violation of Indian women's dignity and democratic rights. Promote for sati is immoral in the same way as it is unethical to support female subjugation [5], [6].

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Background Information:

An Arab explorer named Ibn Batuta (1333 A.D.) noted that the Hindus regarded sati as desirable, but not compulsory. Even before the Moghul emperors came to power, there were attempts to suppress sati via official methods. Prior to committing sati, authorization was required during the Delhi Sultanates (Alauddin Khilji, 1294-1316, and Muhammad ibn Tughlaq, 1325-1351). This safeguard against coercion become a formality over time. Hindu ladies from royal households, on the other hand, continued to burn unabated (Mahajan, V. D, *History of Medieval India*, S. Chand, N. Delhi). Humayun (1530-1540) attempted to prohibit sati but ultimately revoked a royal decree against it. No lady could commit sati without the consent of his Kotwals, according to Akbar (1556-1606). (police officers in charge of police station). They were told to put off the woman's choice as long as they could. Pensions, gifts, and rehabilitative assistance were given to someone who may commit sati in order to wean her away from the act. The practice was severely prohibited for children. The subsequent Moghuls continued to

erect barriers, although the tradition persisted in places outside of Agra. The Portuguese, Dutch, and French all outlawed sati in their respective spheres of influence, but it wasn't until Lord William Bentinck's reign that sati was officially outlawed after 1829. (Anne E. Carr, *Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, Religion, Feminism, and the Family*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

### 2.2 British Legal Framework:

Regardless of how repulsive the tradition was to the British; they were unsure about their response to it. Following the Mughal lead, they attempted to control it for a while by forcing it to be performed in the presence of their authorities and precisely according to tradition. Perhaps the intolerable increase of sati in Bentinck's region, Bengal, prompted regulation (Sarkar, Jadunath, *A History of Jaipur*, Orient Longman 1984). Between 1815 and 1825, the number of people killed by fire more than quadrupled, to 639 (Binita Mehta, *Widows, Pariahs, and Bayadères: India as Spectacle*, Bucknell University Press, 2002). The repeated entreaties of missionaries put him under strain, and the sea shift being effected among an important segment of Hindus headed by Raja Ram Mohan Roy's Brahma Samaj pushed him to act.

After becoming the governorship of Bengal, Lord William Bentinck enacted the Sati Regulation, XVII of 1827 on December 4th. Sati was declared unlawful and punished by criminal courts in the rule, which was precise, succinct, and unambiguous in its denunciation (C. A. Bayly, General Editor, *The Raj: India and the British 1600-1947*. London: National Portrait Gallery Publications 1990). It held zamindars (landlords), small landowners, local agents, and tax collection officials in particular responsible for immediately notifying authorities at their closest police station of any planned sacrifice of the kind specified. In the event of intentional negligence, the accountable official faced a fine of Rs.200 or six months in prison (Andrea Major, *Sati: A Historical Anthology*, Oxford University Press, 2007) [7].

### 2.3 The Sati Commission (Prevention) Act of 1987:

The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Crime of 1987 replaced several pieces of legislation that had been in place in different regions of the nation with a single law that aimed to not only prohibit and punish the act itself, but also to make any celebration of the act of sati illegal. The Act includes measures for taking action against the exploitation of such criminal events for financial or political advantage. The Act specifically makes the abetment or facilitation of a Sati or an attempted Sati a criminal offense, punishable as if it were murder. Such behavior is punishable by death or life imprisonment, as well as a monetary punishment.[8]

### 2.4 The sati system is abolished:

Virtue, purity, and loyalty to her spouse are the greatest values for a woman in Indian society. The custom of a woman immolating herself on her dead husband's funeral pyre as evidence of her devotion originates from this practice. Sati is the practice of a woman burning herself either on the funeral pyre of her dead husband or by herself after his death. "Sati" was originally described as a lady who was "true to herself or her ideals." The term "Sati" is given to a devout and moral lady. Sati comes from the ancient Indian word Sat, which signifies truth. Rather than its original meaning of "virtuous lady," Sati has evolved to denote both the act of immolation of a widow and the victim. The Hindu goddess sati is usually linked with the word "sati." Sati was Lord Shiva's wife according to Hindu mythology. She was consumed by the sacred pyre. She did this in retaliation for her father's reluctance to invite Shiva to the Gods' gathering. She was so humiliated that she lit a spiritual fire and was burned to ashes. The original sati's self-sacrifice becomes a "Divine model of wifely love." The act of sati validated the idea that a widow would be honored if she puts up her life for her spouse. In terms of social status, the act of Sati was crucial in identifying a woman's real character.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy was a democrat and a humanist at heart. He was a voracious reader. He studied eastern languages such as Arabic, Persian, and Sanskrit, as well as European languages such as English, French, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. He was strongly inspired by Islam's monotheistic and anti-idolatry, Sufism's deism, Christianity's ethical teachings, and Western liberal and rationalist beliefs in his religio-philosophical societal perspective. In 1803, he wrote *Tuhfat-ul-Muwahidin*, or "A Gift to Monotheists," a Persian book in which he describes his monotheistic idea. He was particularly concerned with the abolition of societal ills such as sati, child marriage, and polygamy. When the letter passed laws eliminating sati in 1829, he enthusiastically backed Governor-General Lord William Bentick. In 1814, Raja Ram Mohan Roy founded the *Amiya Sabha* to promote monotheism and battle against Hinduism's harmful traditions and rituals [9][10].

### 3. DISCUSSION

Sati should not be encouraged since it is a violent religion. When a widow refuses to participate in the ceremony, it may be deemed murder. A lady may succumb to sati because her family believe it is the proper thing to do, rather than because she desires it. She is pushed into the funeral pyre because she is afraid that if she doesn't, her family will treat her badly. This was also a common occurrence among satists. Margaret Cormack describes a song about a lady going to become a sati in her book *Sacrificing the Self: Perspectives on Martyrdom and Religion*. With lines such, "Why the delay for the forehead adornment, Satimata?" the song has a hurried feel to it. Satimata, what's the hold-up with the earrings? The widow in the satimata is ready to set fire to her husband's corpse. She is supposed to dress up in her best clothes and jewels for the ceremony, but she seems to be putting it off. She clearly isn't getting dressed quickly enough for the singer, who is almost certainly a cousin. If the satimata really desired to conduct the sati rite, she would not be hurried. As a result, she is being forced into the position. According to Cormack, a woman who dies for any cause other than her husband's devotion is not regarded a sati: her death is suicide. The woman's ritual should be condemned for its brutality, not for its bravery. Anne McLeer describes a poster created by an anti-sati action organization to depict the agony and suffering a widow experiences during sati. A lady crawling upward from the flames is shown, and although there is no realistic emphasis on the mutilation of burning, the figure's position and face, while stylized, convey the spirit of agony. No one wants to experience the agony of dying by fire. The lady was permitted to take her life in such a painful way; it is a crime that she was allowed to do so. The practice is barbarous and culturally archaic, according to Anne Hardgrove. It is no longer accepted in Hindu culture because Hindus value life above a violent custom based on a fiction.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy was also an outspoken opponent of child marriage and a proponent of widow remarriage. The elimination of Sati is one of the most important turning points in contemporary India's social history. The idea of *pativrata* (lady of virginity) was stressed in many Indian girls' upbringing as the sole way for a woman to earn paradise. This idea of meriting paradise by self-sacrifice became ingrained in many people's minds as the only way for women to be saved. A woman's life must be spent in complete defiance of her husband; else, she will be condemned to remain a widow for all eternity. This era lady had to live under extreme peril.

A widow rescues herself from the harsh life of widowhood and removes the danger she posed to society by sacrificing herself. She is seen as a member of society who has uncontrolled sexual vitality and therefore has the potential to damage society via immoral behavior. A widow was seen as possessing uncontrollable sexual power and therefore being a threat to her community. During that time, widow remarriage was not permitted in India. A widow was not permitted to remarry, nor was she permitted to pursue religious studies, and so led a barren existence. Sati's agony on the pyre pales in comparison to the physical and mental torment she faces as a widow. She was cut off from the social realm of the living and labeled "cold sati." She was only permitted to wear rags and was regarded as an unclean, filthy person by her family and society. The restriction on her being allowed to decorate herself was deemed justifiable since it was done in the widow's "personal benefit".

### 3. CONCLUSION

In today's Hindu society, the sati practice is considered unethical to conduct or encourage. It is a mythological rite that lowers women, is a kind of murder, and degrades women. Despite its evil nature, sati became a practice because stories exist that highlight the value of self-sacrifice. The stories surrounding the ceremony communicate the notion that dedication is an essential aspect of a man-woman relationship. It maintains the purity of each relationship. A myth, on the other hand, does not legitimize individual offering as a kind of devotion. A myth's fundamental aim is to offer a behavioral model. Devotion between partners may take various forms, all of which are peaceful and respectful. Instead of surrendering one's life following the loss of a spouse, one should preserve faithfulness by avoiding prostitution or remarriage. Werner Menski defines the Hindu concept of *vivahasamaskara* as "the everlasting, invisible tie of human marriage that is believed to transcend even the boundaries of life and death" in his essay *Sati: A Review Article*. According to Hindu religion, death cannot destroy a married couple's connection; the pair will ultimately be reunited in the hereafter. All that is required of the woman is to accompany her husband everywhere he goes. If he is burned, his wife should be as well. Menski, on the other hand, is a supporter of widows who wait for their time to come and live out their lives organically. After her death and cremation, a widow may keep her husband's ashes to blend with her own. Gender equality should be enforced in the devotion among two Hindu couples, in addition to deviating from the violent element of sati. It is not usually the case that the husband dies before the woman. If the lady dies first, the husband should

remain pure for her and wait to reunite with her beyond death. Sati is a flawed practice that has to be altered for the sake of Hindu culture.

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