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A BRIEF STUDY OF SATI CUSTOM IN INDIA

The word Sati (Su-thi or Suttee) originally means “a virtuous or good women (wife)”, then, it literary came to be applied to those women, who out of affection for and loyalty towards, their husbands, sacrificed their lives on the death of their husbands. According to a Hindu scripture, “all the actions of a woman should be the same as that of her husband, if her husband is happy, she should be happy, if her husband is sad, she should be sad, and if he is death, she should also die”.

Sati began as a story illustrating the intense power of overwhelming love. But when people praised that act of love, it became an instruction manual for how everyone should be. It seemed an ideal goal to love that deeply. But with time Indian women, either physically forced by society or psychologically coerced by the religion, embrace the cult of Sati. The Sati custom was prevalent among certain sects of upper classes of the society in ancient India, who either took the vow or deemed it a great honor to die on the funeral pyre of their husbands. The horrible ritual of Sati was banned by the British government in 1829 by Lord Bentinck, the governor-General of India (1828-1835) and later the Sati Prevention Act 1987.

Key words: Sati, Vedas, Cast system, Hindu, widow, Lord Bentinck, Ram Mohan Roy.

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Үндістандағы Сати әдет-ғұрпын қысқаша зерттеу

Сати (Су-тхи немесе Сутти) сөзі бастапқыда «жақсы әйел (жар)» дегенді білдірді, кейінірек ол күйеулері қайтыс болғаннан кейін өз өмірлерін күйеулеріне деген сүйіспеншілік пен адалдықпен құрбан еткен әйелдерге қолданыла бастады. Үнді жазбаларына сәйкес, «әйелдің барлық әрекеттері күйеуімен бірдей болуы керек, егер күйеуі бақытты болса, ол бақытты болуы керек, егер күйеуі қайғылы болса, ол қайғылы болуы керек, егер ол қайтыс болса, ол да өлуі керек».

Сати махаббаттың құдіретті күшін суреттейтін оқиға ретінде басталды. Бірақ адамдар бұл махаббат әрекетін мадақтаған кезде, ол әр әйел қандай болу керектігін нұсқауға айналды. Бұл терең махаббатқа жетудің тамаша мақсаты болып көрінді. Бірақ уақыт өте келе, қоғам физикалық тұрғыдан мәжбүрлейтін немесе дін психологиялық тұрғыдан мәжбүрлейтін үнді әйелдері Сатиге табынуды қабылдады. Сати әдет-ғұрпы ежелгі Үндістандағы жоғары деңгейдегі секталардың арасында кең таралған, олар ант берген немесе күйеулерінің жерлеу бағанасында өлу үлкен мәртебе деп санаған. Сатидің қорқынышты рәсіміне 1829 жылы Ұлыбритания үкіметі Үндістанның генерал-губернаторы Лорд Бентинк (1828-1835), содан кейін 1987 жылы Сатидің алдын-алу туралы Заңы тыйым салған.

Түйін сөздер: Сати, Веда, Касталар жүйесі, индуит, жесір, Лорд Бентинкт, Рам Мохан Рой.

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Краткое изучение обычая Сати в Индии

Слово Сати (Су-тхи или Сутти) первоначально означает “добродетельная или хорошая женщина (жена)”, затем оно стало применяться к тем женщинам, которые из любви и верности своим мужьям пожертвовали своей жизнью после смерти своих мужей. Согласно индуистскому писанию, “все действия женщины должны быть такими же, как у ее мужа, если ее муж счастлив,

она должна быть счастлива, если ее муж печален, она должна быть печальна, и, если он умер, она тоже должна умереть”.

Сати начиналась как история, иллюстрирующая мощную силу всепоглощающей любви. Но когда люди восхваляли этот акт любви, он превратился в инструкцию какой должна быть каждая женщина. Оно казалось идеальной целью для глубокой любви. Но со временем индийские женщины, либо физически принуждаемые обществом, либо психологически принуждаемые религией, принимали культ Сати. Обычай Сати был распространен среди определенных сект высших слоев общества в Древней Индии, которые либо давали клятву, либо считали большой честью умереть на погребальном костре своих мужей. Ужасный ритуал Сати был запрещен британским правительством в 1829 году генерал-губернатором Индии лордом Бентинком (1828-1835), а затем Законом о предотвращении Сати в 1987 году.

Ключевые слова: Сати, Веды, Кастовая система, Индуитский, вдова, Лорд Бентинкт, Рам Мохан Рой.

Introduction

The position of the widow in Hindu society is one of the most important topics of women history. The death of a loving husband is painful in itself, but apart from the pain of lose; widows in Hindu culture have had to bear an additional burden of social opprobrium of many dimensions.

Widows are unlucky because other family members are reluctant to admit that a widow, particularly a young widow lives in the same households. Hindus believed that, misfortune is the result of bad karma earned by sins or wrongdoing of previous lives and widows may be blamed for their husbands' deaths (Leigh, 1993: 221).

Rammohan Roy, which known's as the father of modern India, said, “widows are left only three modes of conduct to pursue after the deaths of their husbands, first, to live a miserable life as complete slaves to others, without indulging any hope of support from another husband. Secondly, to walk in the paths of unrighteousness for their maintenance and independence. Thirdly, to die on the funeral pyre of their husbands (Iqbal, 1983: 19). Widows of high caste born, preferred to chose the third option.

Why death following her husband might be preferred? A widow should not eat more than one very plain meal a day, that she should perform the most minimal tasks, never sleep in a bed, leave the house only to go to temple, keep out of sights at all sorts of festivals, wear nothing but the drabest cloths, and of course, no jewelry. Perhaps the most humiliating all for a high born lady was having hair head shaved monthly by an untouchable male barber (Jill, 1992: 63). All this was to be necessary for the sake of her husband's soul and to keep herself from being reborn as a female animal.

A Hindu scripture, Shuddhitattva says, “all the actions of a woman should be the same as that of

her husband, if her husband is happy, she should be happy, if her husband is sad, she should be sad, and if he is death, she should also die”. Under the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that a woman often burned herself to death along with her husband's corpse (Sakantala, 1992: 31-39).

Materials and Methods

I used qualitative research methods, for collecting, analyzing and interpretation of available data regarding the Sati tradition in India. For the purpose of the present study, the data and literary sources have been closely observed. I also used historical books, journals, essays and newspaper about the Sati and condition of widows in Hindu societies. To indicate the real condition of widows, beside these resources, data on widows's conditions and life, literacy level, violence against women and the legal system and women's access to justice have been used.

Results and Discussion

Definition

Sati refers to the practice of a widow immolating herself on the cremation pyre of her husband. The word comes from the legend of Shiva and his first wife Sati, who went to attend her father's Daksha's yajna against Shiva's wishes. And seeing that her father had not invited Shiva, Sati threw herself in the sacrificial fire in rage.

The word Sati originally means “a virtuous or good woman”, the term was extended to mean the (True Wife) who remains faithful to the memory of her husband by not marrying again. Subsequently, the term was applied to the rite in which a widow committed herself to the flames of the pyre on which the body of her husband was cremated. The custom

of Sati, wherein a wife destroyed herself on the death of her husband, has been generally associated with India. Among many irrational social customs, the most unnatural was the custom of Sati or the immolation of the Hindu widow on the funeral pyre of her dead husband (Chopra, 2009: 88).

The origin of the system remains a mystery. At some unknown time in ancient days it began to take shape through some kind of misinterpretation or misrepresentation of a passage in the Rig Veda. At least that is what Max Muller believed: "A passage in the Rig Veda referring to widows contained the word *Agre*, while describing her position in the front. But when the word *Agre*, through some mysterious process, became *Agne*, it meant her position in the fire (Ibid, 89).

Historical Background

Much speculation invests the origins of Sati in ancient India. There is no evidence that it was ever practiced among the ancient Indo-Aryans, nor is there anything in the Vedas to show that it had Vedic sanction (Altakar, 1987: 143).

It is undisputed that we find no traces of Sati custom down to about 400 B.C. The Brahmanic literature, ranging from about 1500-700 B.C., is almost silent about it. The Buddhist literature also is unaware of the custom of Sati. If it had exist in the days of Buddha (563-483 B.C.) one feels quite certain that, Buddha would have started a vehement crusade against it. He, who even opposed sacrifices to gods, because dumb animals were immolated therein, would certainly have been exasperated by a custom which entailed the burning of precious beings alive. So we may well sum up that, even in Kshatrya caste circles to which Buddha himself belonged, the custom was not prevalent in somewhat around 500 B.C. (Ibid, 119).

We have some stray references to Sati in the Mahabharata and in the 4th century BCE, Megasthenes refers to a stray incident in the Gandhara region that Alexander had conquered. Traditionally, the popular belief was that the widow immolated herself willingly and the fire appeared cool to her. After the immolation, a memorial stone and often a shrine was erected for her and she was worshipped as a Goddess. We have such sati stones from coastal Andhra and parts of Madhya Pradesh in Central India, mostly belonging to the Vijayanagar period in the 14th century CE. Apart from this, we have some references to Sati in Rajasthan (Hawley, 1993: 149-152).

As mentioned above, the first instances of Sati are recorded in the Hindu epic poems, Mahabharata,

from about 300 B.C. This great epic scripture, however, contains only a few cases of Sati. The most important among them is that of Modri, the wife of Ponda (Altakar, 1987: 120). In ancient times there prevailed a belief in several societies that, the life and needs of the deaths in the next world are more or less similar to those in this world and life. It therefore be necessary and desirable to kill those all, and burn or to bury them with him (Banjamin, 1983: 116).

Probably the first earliest actual historical instances of Sati is reported in Greek chronicles which described the burning of the wife of the Indian general Keteus, who died in 317 B.C. while fighting Antigonus, one of the Alexander the great's general.

By the six and seven century A.D. the life of a widow apart from her husband was unequivocally condemned as sinful by the Smriti writers, it was declared preferable that she mount the funeral pyre. From that time onwards they began advocating it as a religious duty and the ideal of voluntary Sati was a religiously sanctified suicide or martyrdom. It was believed that, through the act of Sati, her husband, her husband's family, her mother's family and her father's family would be in paradise for 35 million year, no matter how sinful they all had been (Leigh, 1993: 229).

It was the hoe of attaining heaven which originally led the widows to experience the supreme ordeal. In the same superstitious faith, the society and its leaders did not suffer any revolt of conscience when the custom was celebrated. Superstition blinded the fathers to persuade their little daughters to burn themselves with the dead body of their old husbands. Sons pleaded with their old mothers to sacrifice themselves. Many Satis died willingly. But for many others, death in the fire could only have been torture. It was more or less forced on them by society (Chopra, 2009: 90).

Gandhi Ji, traced the genesis of the self immolation of wives to male chauvinism. "if the wife has to prove her loyalty and undivided devotion to her husband, so has the husband to prove his allegiance and devotion to his wife. Yet we have never heard of a husband mounting the funeral pyre of his deceased wife. It may therefore be taken for granted that the practice of the widow immolating herself of the death of the husband had its origins in superstition, ignorance, and blind egotism of man (Sakantala, 1992: 57).

The Sati custom was at first restricted to the wives of Kshatrya caste like princes and warriors, but in course of time the widows of even weavers,

barbers, masons and others of lower caste adopted the practice (Altakar, 1987: 116).

The advocacy of Sati was taken up in Puranic writings and the Padoma-Purana in the 11th century details the ceremonial procedure for the rite as it was then already established. Two kinds of Sati were distinguished, but neither offered any escape for the hopeless widow. One was Saka-Marona or "co-dying" in which a widow burnt herself on the same fire as that on which her husband's corpse was cremated. The other was Axu-Marona or "after-dying" in which the widow died not on the funeral pyre of her husband, but later on a pile lit with the embers preserved from the husband's pyre.

Most of the early historical references to Sati are in traveler accounts. Albironi, described it in the eleventh century: "if a wife of a Hindu loses her husband by death, she cannot marry another man, she has only to choose between two things, either to remain a widow as long as she lives or to burn herself, and the later eventually is considered the preferable, because as a widow she is ill-treated as long as she lives" (Chopra, 2009: 89).

Ibn-e-Batuta (1304-1378 A.D.), is said to have fainted on witnessing a Sati ritual in Bambah. Nicolo de Conti (d.1450), the Venetian traveler of the 15th century, recorded that, 3000 wives and concubines of the king of Vijayanagar empire had pledged to burn themselves on his pyre (Basham, 1990: 189).

Criticism and Prohibition of Sati

The Vedas make no reference to Sati and don't advise it. There was sufficient criticism of it available in pre-colonial times as well. The famous author Bana made a strong critique of sati in the 7th century. He calls it a foolish mistake of the ignorant that doesn't send the widow to heaven, but on the contrary, sends her to hell because of committing the sin of suicide. Medhatithi, the 10th century scholar, says that sati is against the Shastras and against the dharma. Virata prohibits the custom and citing him, Aparaka in the 12th century also criticises it and reiterates the sin of committing suicide incurred by the widow (Hawley, 1993: 171).

The Muslims, who first established their footholds in western India in 711 A.D., tried to check Sati by instituting a permit system based on a declaration made by the widow that she wished of her own free will to become a Sati. But the system was a mere formality for under pressure from their relations few women could resist making the declaration (Benjamin, 1983: 446).

Historically, efforts to prevent sati by formal means as earlier mentioned existed. Under the Delhi Sultanates (Alauddin Khilji, 1294-1316 and

Muhammad bin Tughlaq, 1325-1351) permission had to be sought prior for sati to be committed. In time this check against compulsion became a mere formality. In any case, Hindu women from royal families continued to burn unchecked. Humayun (1530-1540) tried to prevent sati, but eventually withdrew a royal fiat against it (Ahmad, 2009: 132).

During Mughul times, we have the Emperor Akbar's example, who tried to introduce social reforms in his Empire. Although he didn't formulate any law against it, he ordered his officials throughout the Empire to stop the immolation of a woman if they saw that, she was being forced (Hawley, 1993: 151).

Even the Sikh Guru, Amardas, and the Maratha Peshwas tried to stop it in their spheres of influence. But the custom was so much a matter blind faith among the orthodox that its eradication was only a remote possibility (Chopra, 2009: 89).

The British, who first set foot on the Indian soil at 1608 in the name of East India Company, took no decisive action on Sati for some 200 years. One of the great turning-points in the history of Sati came on the year of 1829, when Lord William Bentinck, the governor-general lunched legal assaults against Sati on the grounds of humanitarian principle (Stanly, 1993: 87).

In the Goa region, the Portuguese administration of Alfonso de Albuquerque banned Sati in 1510 A.D. and put a stop to further immolations. Francois Bernier at the 17th century told the case of a child widow of twelve being burnt at Lahore, Punjab, despite of her desperate struggle and piteous cries (Shamsuddin, 1990: 48).

The campaign against the Sati system seriously began in the in the British occupied territories in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Christian missionaries began the campaign. Some lone English officers, too, in their remote stations came across the horrid rite and felt moved to raise their voices against it. But the Company's Government was unprepared to offend Hindu sentiment by interfering in their religious customs. So, continued (Chopra, 2009: 90).

Official British efforts at reforming Indian society of its abuses were on the whole very meager and, therefore, bore little fruit. Their biggest achievement was the outlawing of the practice of Sati in 1829, when William Bentinck made it a crime to associate in any way with the burning of a widow on her husband's pyre. Earlier, the British rulers had been apathetic and afraid of arousing the anger of the orthodox Indians. It was only after Rammohun Roy and other enlightened Indians and

missionaries agitated persistently for the abolition of this monstrous custom that the government agreed to take this humanitarian step. In any case, Bentinck deserves praise for having acted resolutely in outlawing a practice which had taken a toll of 1800 lives in Bengal alone between 1815-1818, and for refusing to bow before the opposition of the orthodox supporters of the practice of Sati (Chandra, 2020: 121).

The act of Sati has been regarded as inhuman and in the 19th century, a strong movement against the practice was led by Raja Ram Mohun Roy leading to the enactment of law against it by Lord William Bentinck the Governor-General of India in 1829 (Hawley, 1993: 175). Even before the regulation was promulgated, some three hundred Hindus petitioned Lord Bentinck to stop the abolition. They pleaded that the practice of "self immolation", was not merely a sacred duty but a "privilege" of believers. Bentinck however would not relent.

In Independent India, one of the most sensational incidents of Sati took place in Deora, a small village of Rajasthan state. At the end of summer 1987, Roop Kanwar, a pretty, well educated Rajput girl, after her husband's death, committed to Sati which was vehemently denounced and led to legal action. The Commission of Sati (prevention) Act 1987, substituted the various legislation that had been operative in different parts of the country with a central law that sought not only to prevent and punish the commission of the act itself, but also to make any glorification of the act of Sati an offence. There are provisions in the Act to take action against exploitation of such criminal occurrences either for financial or political purposes. Specifically, the Act makes a criminal offence, equivalent to murder, the abetment or encouragement of a Sati or an attempted Sati. Such action is liable to sentence of death or life imprisonment, with an appropriate fine.

Roop Kanwar is idolized and has attained the status of a deity; a temple was built for her. Another incident was the case of Kuttu Bai (65-year widow) committed Sati in the state of Madhya Pradesh, in August 2002, another was Vidyawati (35-year-old) woman committed Sati by jumping into blazing funeral pyre of her husband, in the year 2006 in Uttar Pradesh, Janakrani (40 years old) was burnt to death on the funeral pyre of her husband in Sager District of Madhya Pradesh in August 2006 and very recently one Lalmati (71 years old) of Chhatisgarh has committed Sati in October 2008 (Ahmad, 2009: 134-136).

Conclusion

Sati refers to the practice of a widow immolating herself on the cremation pyre of her husband. The word comes from the legend of Shiva and his first wife Sati, who went to attend her father's Daksha's yajna against Shiva's wishes. Seeing that her father had not invited Shiva, Sati threw herself in the sacrificial fire in rage.

Sati began as a story illustrating the intense power of overwhelming love. But when people praised that act of love, it became an instruction manual for how everyone should be. It seemed an ideal goal to love that deeply. But with time Indian women, either physically forced by society or psychologically coerced by the religion, embrace the cult of Sati. It also negates the cult of Sati as a purely religious activity that reflects women's loyalty and devotion to their husbands and religion.

Sati custom despite being banned by many Muslim rulers of India, by Britisher and recently by the Indian government, it remained in practice till recent years. Many factors such as holy rituals, religious believes, social pressure and lack of education are the main reasons which cannot eradicate from society.

We cannot find any clear information about exactly when and where Sati first came into existence. Religious texts such as Purana and Mahabharata helped Sati to spread vastly into Indian culture. By performing Sati, one woman can forgive her sins and her husband's and their relatives as well. Another thing is according to religious texts, if she performs Sati, she shall live in heaven in the after live. People idolize the women who performed Sati and make a temple of her on the place she immolated herself.

Violence against women is a global problem and violence against women manifests itself as rape, molestation, kidnapping, domestic violence including wife battery, dowry harassment, dowry death, cruelty to women driving them to commit suicide or other forms of murder like female infanticide and Sati.

In other societies and countries, Sati is considered as a murder but in India, the murdering of widows was or is still considered as a traditional ritual. For eradication of this evil, social awakening is much needed now more than ever. The educational institutions need to teach and enlighten people and make them aware of what is right and what is wrong regardless of what a religion says.

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