

Tradition of Sati in Indian Culture

Ashok Kumar*

Sati is a practice of self-immolation of a widow either on her husband's pyre or separately after her husband's death. Polemics against Hinduism or India, always talk about sati along with other "evils" like caste system, oppression of women and superstitious practices. Sati is portrayed as a regressive as a regressive custom which was widely prevalent throughout India. It is to be distinguished from the practice of Jauhar in northwestern India, which grew during the 14th-15th century, and where Hindu women preferred death by collective suicide rather than slavery rape they faced if captured by barbaric Islamic hordes.

The Sati Narrative

British records as well as Christian Missionary records from 1800 onwards indicate anywhere between 10,000 to 100,000 cases of satis every year. It is said that when the British could not tolerate the injustice against women anymore, they abolished sati under British rule in the 1829 after sustained campaigns by Christian missionaries such as William Carey and reformers such as Ram Mohan Roy. Luke Harding of The Guardian writes:

"It has its origins in Hinduism ... The practice is particularly associated with the north Indian state of Rajasthan, where the queens of the Rajput rulers would traditionally immolate themselves en masse. But memorials to women who have committed suttee exist all over India ... There have been repeated official attempts to discourage the cult – by the reformist Mughal emperor Akbar, for example, in the 16th century, and by the British, who banned it in 1829."

The government of India also enacted the Sati revention Act in 1988 which aims to prevent the "the commission of sati and its glorification and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto". There has been a huge amount of research and scholarly papers by feminists, social scientists and human rights activists of different colors and hues on sati-

pratha and the plight of women in India, patriarchy, and regressive nature of Hinduism.

This essay is specifically about Sati-pratha and not Jauhar. I do not focus on the ethical, moral, social or spiritual background of the practice. Instead, my focus in this article is to understand the written and epigraphic evidence of actual eyewitness accounts and other evidence of Sati like inscriptions and monuments. Given the extensive literature on Sati- pratha, especially in modern times, and the fact that various reformers have tried to stop the practice, and also given that there was the need to enact multiple laws over the ages to ban this practice, it would seem to appear that sati-pratha was widely prevalent. In this essay, we will analyze empirical data to examine this claim. We will try to understand the degree of pervasiveness of this practice, its geographic spread and its demographic aspects.

Evidence of Sati in Veda and Itihasa

The Rig Veda (10:18:7-8) talks about the first known instance of an aborted sati. It describes a cremation where a widow who was lying beside her husband was not allowed to kill herself. Scholars like Michael Witzel generally date the Rig Veda between 1900 B.C.E and 1200 B.C.E [3] [4], and thus we have only 1 recorded aborted instance of Sati in this -700 year period.

The Mahabharata records at least three events of self-immolation, that of Pandu's wife Madri, that of Vasudeva's four wives and the self-immolation of five of Krishna's wives after his death. The Ramayana whose origins are more eastern (Ikshvaku clan) record no evidence of self-immolation. The Mahabharata is generally dated by western scholars between 1200 BCE and 400 BCE and they typically argue that the current text has many layers incorporating different features over the ages. It is as if Mahabharata is a snapshot of the period 1200 BCE to 400 BCE and in this -800 years there are only 3 documented instances of self-immolation with 10 deaths, all restricted to northern and western Indian sub-continent.

It is evident that during the Vedic period at least, Sati was an exceedingly uncommon practice. In a span of 1500 years from 1900 BCE to 400 BCE, there are only 4 recorded instances!

Epigraphic and Written Evidence of Sati

Below I have presented empirical data for actual instances of Sati based on eyewitness accounts and epigraphic evidence. This data

*Research Scholar Dept. of History M.U., Bodh-Gaya

has been sourced from Meenakshi Jain's meticulous and exhaustive research of various primary and secondary sources.

The first recorded foreign account of Sati-pratha is that by Diodorus of Sicily and describes an eyewitness account of Hieronymus of Cardia (-326 BCE) who describes the quarrel between two widows as to who would have the honor of dying along with her husband. A lady called Pustika, the wife of one Ayamani of Guntur region of Andhra Pradesh committed self-immolation around 300 CE and their remains were discovered in a pot unearthed in a village in the region.

In 464 CE, Queen Rajyavati, the widow of Dharmadeva of Nepal, decided to commit Sati but later did not go through with it and lived a long life. In 510 CE, Goparaja, the chieftain of king Bhanugupta died while fighting against the Maitras, and his widow committed self-immolation in Eran, Sagar District. In Sanski, a village in Kolhapur district of Maharashtra, a sati stone inscription dated to 550 CE was found. In 606 CE, Queen Yashomati, the mother of Harsha and the wife of King Prabhakaravardhana committed pre-emptive Sati when it became apparent that her husband had no chance of survival. The 842 CE Dholpur Inscription of Rajasthan records the sati of one Kanahulla, wife of one Chandamahasena. The Ghatiyala Inscription of Rajasthan dated to 890 CE records the sati of one Samvaladevi wife of Ranuka.

In 955 CE, the wives of Parantaka Chola I committed self-immolation. It is said that he had 11 wives. In 973 CE, Vanavan Mahadevi, the queen of Sundara Chola (Parantaka II) self-immolated herself on her husband's pyre. In 1044 CE, the consorts of Rajendra Chola, Vanavan Mahadeviar, Mukkokilan, Panchavan Mahadevi, Arindhavan Madevi and Viramadevi who committed sati. In 1057 CE, a Sudra woman Dekabbe committed sati, despite fierce opposition from her parents, when her husband was killed in a battle against a Ganga king. In 1218 CE, Bhuvanamuludaiyal the wife of Kulothunga Chola III committed Sati. In c1290 CE, the Venetian traveler, Marco Polo, reported a sati in Malabar. The Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta saw the self-immolation of three women in Dhar, Madhya Pradesh. The husbands of these three women had died while fighting against the Sumras of Sind.

Sati was rare enough that instances of it were memorialized and valorized. Based on memorial stones raised as tribute to women who committed satis, it can be said that not more than 100 sati incidents took place in Vijaynagar (1336 to 1646 CE). In 1606, Jesuit missionary

Roberto de Nobili reported a sati iri Madurai. Till 1700 CE, there are perhaps a few more eyewitness accounts of Sati by foreign travelers and missionaries. As per a local tradition, eight four women in Rajasthan are said have committed sati in 1735 CE on the death of Raja Budh Singh of Bundi.

Epigraphic evidence from Karnataka records eleven instances of Sati in southern India between 1000 CE to 1400 CE, and 41 instances between 1400 CE to 1600 CE. In 1680, one wife of Shivaji became a Sati and in 1700 the wife of Rajaram performed sati. In 1749, the wife of Shivaji's grandson Shahu committed sati. As per an estimate by Altekari, quoted by Meenakshi Jain, from the period 1300 CE to 1800 CE, the incident of sati among royal families of Rajasthan was as high as 10%. In Marwar, between 1562 CE to 1843 CE, over a period of 281 years, there are 222 recorded instances of self-immolation on the death of rulers.

Till 12th century there are no epigraphic evidence of sati-pratha in Bengal. Kulluka Bhatta was a commentator on Manusmriti and Jimutavahana (c. 12th century) was the earliest writer on smriti (law) from Bengal whose texts are extant. Neither of them talk about sati. In fact Jimutavahana had a decidedly anti-sati approach and a modern outlook on widow rights; in his seminal text Dayabhaga he recognizes the right of a widow without any male issue to inherit the properties of her deceased husband. From 1700 CE to 1800 CE, as per European records there were only 5 eyewitness accounts of sati in Bengal – in 1742, 1770, 1779, 1793 and 1799.

As Evangelical Christian movement started gaining more prominence in India starting from 1800, enumeration of sati incidents sky-rocketed and suddenly annual 10,000 sati incidents were being reported from Bengal alone in 1803, a mind-boggling increase of 2000x, and some even suggested 50,000 sati occurrences annually! According to government figures, 8134 widows performed sati in the 14 years between 1815 and 1829, of which more than 60% cases were recorded in Calcutta, a region which had almost no history of sati, thereby

A coloured aquatint by the caricaturist Thomas Rowlandson (1756-1827), after Quiz (John Page Mellor), from 1815. Source: The Welcome Institute | Source: victorianweb.org

The sudden increase in the documented rate of Sati under the British government can be due to one of the following reasons. One, the data is unreliable and fabricated, exaggerated to support missionary

propaganda and justify the civilizing mission of the British. On the other hand, if the data is accurate, what change of conditions during the British Raj in Calcutta, led to this spike?

Analysis of 2500 years of data

If we add up all the Sati incidents from 1900 BCE till 1900 CE, based on actual eyewitness accounts and epigraphic records, there are hardly more than 500 unique incidents over a -4000 year period, or an average of 1 sati every 8 years, and nowhere near the 10,000 per year incidents recorded by British Colonizers and Christian missionaries. Having said that, we prefer to err on the side of conservatism and thus apply two conditions to our data set:

1. We change the starting point of our analysis from 1900 BCE to 500 BCE without changing the total number of incidents (-500)
2. We also assume that the evidence represents only 5% of the self-immolation incidents and that 95% incidents remained unreported. Studies have shown that 52% of all violent crimes goes unreported and thus any data is generally normalized to reflect the under-reporting. However, following our conservative approach we will assume that 95% of self-immolation incidents were not reported and recorded, and we normalize our data accordingly.

Based on the above, we may make an estimate that no more than 10,000 Sati-pratha incidents took place, assuming that the recorded -500 incidents reflect only 5% of actual estimated cases. Moreover, we have shaved off 1,500 years of the timeline from our dataset and thus the period in question is now 2,500 years. Assuming that the geographic distribution and other criteria hold good we can conclude that:

- Most of the incidents were restricted to northern and northwestern part of India
- The majority of the women who committed Sati belonged to Kshatriya community/ warrior or princely class
- More than 90% of the incidents took place after 1400 CE

Analysis of Data for 1400 CE to 1800 CE

If we restrict ourselves to the period between 1400 CE and 1800 CE, we come across not more than -400 reported cases, which translates to 8,000 estimated cases of Sati. In 1400 CE, India's population was around 98 million (9.8 Crores) and by 1800 CE, the population increased to 189 million (18.9 Crores). The average annual population during this period 144 million (14.4 crores). With respect to the average

population in those 4 centuries, how significant is the estimated 8,000 Sati cases? Let us do a quick calculation to estimate the significance of Sati. We will try to estimate what percentage of widows actually committed sati.

Today, death rate in India is 7.3 out of 1000. In earlier eras, when medical science was not as advanced as today, the average death rate was much higher. Since we don't have data for this, we have assumed that 4.5% (see Note 9) of the population died every year, which translates to a death rate of 45 out of 1000. Thus the average deaths per year were 4.5% of 144 million or 6.5 million (65 Lakhs). Of those 6.5 million, many were children, as infant mortality was very high in those centuries. Many deaths were of unmarried people and so on. It is assumed that 1/6th of those who died were men who left behind widows (the factor of 1/6 is based on a British record and is discussed in Meenakshi Jain's book). This translates to 10 lakh widows on average per year. Of these 10 lakh widows every year, only 20 committed self-immolation.

Death Rate	4.5%	Today in India it is 0.73%
Average Deaths/ Year	6,457,500	
Widows	1,076,250	Assuming that 1/6 th were windows
SatiCases Reported	400	
Unreported Cases	95	
Estimated Sati cases	8,000	
Estimated Sati/ Year	20	

It is obvious that even assuming 95% under-reporting, Sati-pratha was a **very rare event**, and only 1 out of 50,000 widows committed Sati (1 in 53,813 to be exact) . Assuming lower death rates, the instances of Sati are still quite low as seen below:

Crude Death Rate	Sati Instances
4%	1 in 45,000
3%	1 in 35,000
2%	1 in 24,000

Conclusion

Sati was an obscure practice for all practical purposes. Yet the British colonizers and Christian Missionaries decided to collaborate despite being sworn enemies and sensationalize the obscure tradition by bringing it into the limelight. The fabrication of data and the subsequent enactment of Sati prohibition helped both groups. The Colonizers could

now show a legitimate reason for ruling over India and continue their “civilizing mission” and the Christian Missionaries could continue their program to convert the heathens. In fact a majority of foreign writers before colonial times actually talk about how rare the practice of self-immolation was. However, such voices were ignored when data for suttee was being “tabulated” and fantastic numbers like 10,000 incidents per year were being fabricated.

The data we have furnished indicates that there was a surge in the number of Sati incidents after 12th century, when Islam became a dominant force in India and when northern India started being ruled by various Muslim warlords. Even in Bengal, sati incidents started getting reported only after 12th century, when eastern Bengal was taken over by Muslims.

Yet Sati was painted as an extraordinary abuse of imagined proportions, requiring urgent and immediate intervention by the British Crown. Rarer than Sati was perhaps becoming a Prophet of an Abrahamic religion; 1 out of 50 million became Prophets [19]. Thankfully there has been a lull for the past 1400 years, else we would have had to deal with 70 more prophets.

An anecdote which I have heard from elders in my family is that many British men of the East India Company in Bengal, in fact wanted the young Hindu widows as their mistresses and hence the urgency to ban sati. They would often paint themselves as saviors and forcefully “marry” these widows claiming that they were saving them from a plight far worse, despite stiff opposition from the women and their families. Many say that this is in fact the origin of many of the Anglo-Indian communities of Bengal, although I personally have not done any research on this.

Whatever be the case, Sati has always been a rare custom since Rig Vedic times. Post-independence, 40 odd cases of Sati have been reported of which a majority are unsurprisingly from Rajasthan. However, starting from 1800s till date, Sati (along with issues like caste system, Dalit oppression, Brahmin supremacy, Hindu patriarchy) has been used as a tool of propaganda by different anti-Hindu forces like British colonizers, Christian Evangelists and now, by social scientists and human rights activists.

The Sati that we know of today in our history and social studies textbooks, must be viewed in a historical context for what it is – an almost

forgotten obscure custom, exceedingly rare, practiced by perhaps a handful of communities in some specific geographies, being suddenly brought into spotlight and sensationalized so as to shame, control and convert the Hindu.

References and Notes:-

- (1) Book Review: Sati by Meenakshi Jain <http://indiafacts.org/book-review-sati-meenakshi-jain/>
- (2) The ultimate sacrifice <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/aug/23/gender.uk1>
- (3) Early Sanskritization. Origins and Development of the Kuru State. Michael Witzel (1995) <https://web.archive.org/web/20120220153727/http://www.ejvs.laurasianacademhw.com/ejvsO104/ejvs0104article.pdf>
- (4) I personally don't agree with this date or its premise, the so-called Aryan Migration Theory. The historic context in which the Rig Vedic hymns were composed points to much earlier dates.
- (5) The Sati Strategy. Review of Meenakshi Jain's book Sati <http://koenraadelst.biogs.pot.in/2016/03/the-sati-strategy-review-of-meenaksh-i.html>.
- (6) Sati. Evangelicals, Baptist Missionaries, and the Changing Colonial Discourse (Aryan Books International, Delhi 2016) by Meenkashi Jain.
- (7) More than 3 Million Violent Crimes in U.S. go Unreported Every Year <http://www.allgov.com/news/top-stories/more-than-3-million-violent-crimes-in-us-go-unreported-every-year?news=844943>.
- (8) World Population <http://www.worldhistorysite.com/population.html>.
- (9) Earliest available Crude Death Rates (CDR) in India is between 4% and 5% in the period 1900 to 1925. We have assumed the CDR in our analysis to be the average of earliest available data at 4.5%, although in earlier centuries it would probably have been higher than that.
<https://image.slidesharecdn.com/populationstabilizationinindia13-140429233445-phpapp01/95/population-stabilization-in-india-13022014-26-638.jpg?cb=1398814569>.

