

Sati Pratha

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ABSTRACT: Sati or suttee was a [Hindu](#) practice, now largely historical, in which a [widow](#) sacrifices herself by sitting atop her deceased husband's funeral [pyre](#).^{[2][3][4][5][6]} Although it is debated whether it received scriptural mention in early Hinduism, it has been linked to related Hindu practices in the [Indo-Aryan speaking](#) regions of India & Nepal which diminished the rights of women, especially those to the inheritance of property. A cold form of sati, or the neglect and casting out of Hindu widows has been prevalent from ancient times. Greek sources from around 300 BCE make isolated mention of sati,^{[1][12][13]} but it probably developed into a real fire sacrifice in the medieval era within the northwestern [Rajput](#) clans to which it initially remained limited,^[14] to become more widespread during the late medieval era.^{[15][16][17]}

KEYWORDS: sati, pratha, rajput, hindu, sacrifices, medieval, regions, India, widows, burnt, fire

1. INTRODUCTION

During the early-modern [Mughal](#) period of 1526–1857, it was notably associated with elite Hindu Rajput clans in western [India](#), marking one of the points of divergence between Hindu Rajputs and the Muslim [Mughals](#), who banned the practice.^[18] In the early 19th century, the British [East India Company](#), in the process of extending its [rule](#) to most of India, initially tolerated the practice; [William Carey](#), a British Christian evangelist, noted 438 incidents within a 30-mile (48-km) radius of the capital, Calcutta, in 1803, despite its ban within Calcutta.^[19] Between 1815 and 1818 the number of incidents of sati in Bengal doubled from 378 to 839. Opposition to the practice of sati by evangelists like Carey, and by Hindu reformers such as [Ram Mohan Roy](#), ultimately led the British [Governor-General of India Lord William Bentinck](#) to enact the [Bengal Sati Regulation, 1829](#), declaring the practice of burning or burying alive of Hindu widows to be punishable by the criminal courts.^{[20][21][22]} Other legislation followed, countering what the British perceived to be interrelated issues involving violence against Hindu women, including: [Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act, 1856](#), [Female Infanticide Prevention Act, 1870](#), and [Age of Consent Act, 1891](#). Ram Mohan Roy observed that when women allow themselves to be consigned to the funeral pyre of a deceased husband it results not just "from religious prejudices only," but, "also from witnessing the distress in which widows of the same rank in life are involved, and the insults and slights to which they are daily subject."^[23]

Isolated incidents of sati were recorded in India in the late-20th century, leading the Indian government to promulgate the [Sati \(Prevention\) Act, 1987](#), criminalising the aiding or glorifying of sati.^[24] The modern laws have proved difficult to implement; as of 2015, at least 250 sati temples existed in India in which prayer ceremonies, or [pujas](#), were performed to glorify the avatar of a mother goddess who immolated herself on a husband's funeral pyre after hearing her father insult him; prayers were also performed to the practice of a wife immolating herself alive on a deceased husband's funeral pyre

Sati (Sanskrit: सती / satī) is derived from the name of the goddess Sati, who self-immolated because she was unable to bear her father Daksha's humiliation of her and her husband Shiva.

The term sati was originally interpreted as "chaste woman". Sati appears in Hindi and Sanskrit texts, where it is synonymous with "good wife";^[25] the term suttee was commonly used by Anglo-Indian English writers.^[26] Sati designates therefore originally the woman, rather than the rite. Variants are:

- Sativrata, an uncommon and seldom used term,^[27] denotes the woman who makes a vow, vrata, to protect her husband while he is alive and then die with her husband.
- Satimata denotes a venerated widow who committed sati.^[28]

The rite itself had technical names:

- Sahagamana ("going with") or sahamarana ("dying with").

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- Anvarohana ("ascension" to the pyre) is occasionally met, as well as satidaha as terms to designate the process.^[29]
- Satipratha is also, on occasion, used as a term signifying the custom of burning widows alive.^[30]

The Indian Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987 Part I, Section 2(c) defines sati as the act or rite itself.^[31]

The origins and spread of the practice of sati are complex and much debated questions, without a general consensus.^{[15][17]} It has been speculated that rituals such as widow sacrifice or widow burning have prehistoric roots. The archaeologist [Elena Efimovna Kuzmina](#) has listed several parallels between the burial practices of the ancient Asiatic steppe [Andronovo cultures](#) (fl. 1800–1400 BCE) and the [Vedic Age](#).^[35] She considers sati to be a largely symbolic double burial or a double cremation, a feature she argues is to be found in both cultures,^[36] with neither culture observing it strictly.^[37]

II.DISCUSSION

According to [Romila Thapar](#), in the [Vedic period](#), when "mores of the clan gave way to the norms of caste", wives were obliged to join in quite a few rituals but without much authority. A ritual with support in a Vedic text was a "symbolic self-immolation" which it is believed a widow of status needed to perform at the death of her husband, the widow subsequently marrying her husband's brother.^[38] In later centuries, the text was cited as the origin of Sati, with a variant reading allowing the authorities to insist that the widow sacrifice herself in reality by joining her deceased husband on the funeral pyre.^[38]

[Anand A. Yang](#) notes that the Rig Veda refers to a "mimetic ceremony" where a "widow lay on her husband's funeral pyre before it was lit but was raised from it by a male relative of her dead husband."^[39] According to Yang, the word *agre*, "to go forth," was (probably in the 16th century) mistranslated into *agneh*, "into the fire," to give Vedic sanction for sati.^[39]

Sati as the burning of a widow with her deceased husband seems to have been introduced in the post-[Gupta times](#), after 500 CE.^[42] [Vidya Dehejia](#) states that sati was introduced late into Indian society, and became regular only after 500 CE.^[43] According to [Ashis Nandy](#), the practice became prevalent from the 7th century onward and declined to its elimination in the 17th century to gain resurgence in Bengal in the 18th century.^[44] Historian [Roshen Dalal](#) postulates that its mention in some of the [Puranas](#) indicates that it slowly grew in prevalence from 5th–7th century and later became an accepted custom around 1000 CE among those of higher classes, especially the [Rajputs](#).^{[45][15]} One of the stanzas in the [Mahabharata](#) describes [Madri's](#) suicide by sati, but is likely an [interpolation](#) given that it has contradictions with the succeeding verses.^[46]

According to Dehejia, sati originated within the [kshatriyas](#) (warrior) aristocracy and remained mostly limited to the warrior class among Hindus.^[47] According to Thapar, the introduction and growth of the practice of sati as a fire sacrifice is related to new Kshatriyas, who forged their own culture and took some rules "rather literally,"^[42] with a variant reading of the Veda turning the symbolic practice into the practice of a widow burning herself with her husband.^[38] Thapar further points to the "subordination of women in patriarchal society," "changing 'systems of kinship'," and "control over female sexuality" as factors in the rise of sati.^[48]

The practice of sati was emulated by those seeking to achieve high status of the royalty and the warriors as part of the process of [sanskritisation](#),^[15] but its spread was also related to the centuries of Islamic invasion and its expansion in South Asia,^{[15][49]} and to the hardship and marginalisation that widows endured.^[50] Crucial was the adoption of the practice by Brahmins, despite prohibitions for them to do so.^[51]

Sati acquired an additional meaning as a means to preserve the honour of women whose men had been slain,^[15] akin to the practice of [jauhar](#),^{[52][53]} with the ideologies of [jauhar](#) and sati reinforcing each other.^[52] Jauhar was originally a self-chosen death for noble women facing defeat in war, and practised especially among the warrior Rajputs.^[52] Oldenburg posits that the enslavement of women by Greek conquerors may have started this practice,^[17] On attested Rajput practice of jauhar during wars, and notes that the kshatriyas or Rajput castes, not the Brahmins, were the most respected community in Rajasthan in north-west India, as they defended the land against invaders centuries before the coming of the Muslims.^[54] She proposes that Brahmins of the north-west copied Rajput practices, and transformed sati ideologically from the 'brave woman' into the 'good woman'.^[54] From those Brahmins, the practice spread to other non-warrior castes.^[52]

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According to David Brick of Yale University, sati, which was initially rejected by the Brahmins of Kashmir, spread among them in the later half of the first millennium. Brick's evidence for claiming this spread is the mention of sati-like practices in the [Vishnu Smriti](#) (700–1000 CE), which is believed to have been written in Kashmir. Brick argues that the author of the Vishnu Smriti may have been mentioning practices existing in his own community. Brick notes that the dates of other Dharmasastra texts mentioning sahgamana are not known with certainty, but posits that the priestly class throughout India was aware of the texts and the practice itself by the 12th century.^[16] According to Anand Yang, it was practised in Bengal as early as the 12th century, where it was originally practised by the Kshatriya caste and later spread to other upper and lower castes including Brahmins.^[51] Julia Leslie writes that the practice increased among Bengal Brahmins between 1680 and 1830, after widows gained inheritance rights.^[50]

Sati practice resumed during the colonial era, particularly in significant numbers in colonial [Bengal Presidency](#).^[55] Three factors may have contributed this revival: sati was believed to be supported by Hindu scriptures by the 19th century; sati was encouraged by unscrupulous neighbours as it was a means of property annexation from a widow who had the right to inherit her dead husband's property under Hindu law, and sati helped eliminate the inheritor; [poverty](#) was so extreme during the 19th century that sati was a means of escape for a woman with no means or hope of survival.^[55]

Daniel Grey states that the understanding of origins and spread of sati were distorted in the colonial era because of a concerted effort to push "problem Hindu" theories in the 19th and early 20th centuries.^[56] Lata Mani wrote that all of the parties during the British colonial era that debated the issue, prescribed to the belief in a "[golden age](#)" of Indian women followed by a decline in concurrence to the Muslim conquests. This discourse also resulted in promotion of a view of British missionaries rescuing "Hindu India from Islamic tyranny".^[57] Several British missionaries who had studied classical Indian literature attempted to employ Hindu scriptural interpretations in their missionary work to convince their followers that Sati was not mandated by Hinduism.^[58]

III.RESULTS

Among those that do reference the practice, the lost works of the [Greek](#) historian [Aristobulus of Cassandreia](#), who travelled to India with the expedition of [Alexander the Great](#) in c. 327 BCE, are preserved in the fragments of [Strabo](#). There are different views by authors on what Aristobulus hears as widows of one or more tribes in India performing self-sacrifice on the husband's pyre, one author also mentions that widows who declined to die were held in disgrace.^{[11][12][13]} In contrast, [Megasthenes](#) who visited India during 300 BCE does not mention any specific reference to the practice,^{[59][13]} which Dehejia takes as an indication that the practice was non-existent then.^[60]

[Diodorus](#) writes about the wives of Ceteus, the Indian captain of [Eumenes](#), competing for burning themselves after his death in the [Battle of Paraitakene](#) (317 BCE). The younger one is permitted to mount the pyre. Modern historians believe Diodorus's source for this episode was the eyewitness account of the now lost historian [Hieronymus of Cardia](#). Hieronymus' explanation of the origin of sati appears to be his own composite, created from a variety of Indian traditions and practices to form a moral lesson upholding traditional Greek values.^[61] Modern scholarship has generally treated this instance as an isolated incident, not representative of general culture.

Two other independent sources that mention widows who voluntarily joined their husbands' pyres as a mark of their love are [Cicero](#) and [Nicolaus of Damascus](#)

Some of the early Sanskrit authors like [Dandin](#) in [Daśakumāracarita](#) and [Banabhatta](#) in [Harshacharita](#) mention that women who burnt themselves wore extravagant dresses. Bana tells about Yasomati who, after choosing to mount the pyre, bids farewell to her relatives and servants. She then decks herself in jewellery which she later distributes to others.^[63] Although [Prabhakaravardhana](#)'s death is expected, Arvind Sharma suggests it is another form of sati.^[64] The same work mentions [Harsha](#)'s sister Rajyasri trying to commit sati after her husband died.^{[65][66]} In [Kadambari](#), Bana greatly opposes sati and gives examples of women who did not choose sahgamana Padma Sree asserts that other evidence for some form of sati comes from [Sangam literature](#) in [Tamil](#): for instance the [Silappatikaram](#) written in the 2nd century CE. In this tale, Kannagi, the chaste wife of her wayward husband Kovalan, burns Madurai to the ground when her husband is executed unjustly, then climbs a cliff to join Kovalan in heaven. She became an object of worship as a chaste wife, called [Pattini](#) in Sinhala and Kannagiamman in Tamil, and is still worshipped today. An

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inscription in an urn burial from the 1st century CE tells of a widow who told the potter to make the urn big enough for both her and her husband. The [Manimekalai](#) similarly provides evidence that such practices existed in Tamil lands, and the [Purananuru](#) claims widows prefer to die with their husband due to the dangerous negative power associated with them. However she notes that this glorification of sacrifice was not unique to women: just as the texts glorified "good" wives who sacrificed themselves for their husbands and families, "good" warriors similarly sacrificed themselves for their kings and lands. It is even possible that the sacrifice of the "good" wives originated from the warrior sacrifice tradition. Today, such women are still worshipped as [Gramadevatas](#) throughout South India

According to [Axel Michaels](#), the first inscriptional evidence of the practice is from [Nepal](#) in 464 CE, and in India from 510 CE.^[69] The early evidence suggests that widow-burning practice was seldom carried out in the general population.^[69] Centuries later, instances of sati began to be marked by inscribed memorial stones called Sati stones. According to J.C. Harle, the medieval memorial stones appear in two forms – viragal (hero stone) and satigal (sati stone), each to memorialise something different. Both of these are found in many regions of India, but "rarely if ever earlier in date than the 8th or 9th century".^[70] Numerous memorial sati stones appear 11th-century onwards, states Michaels, and the largest collections are found in [Rajasthan](#).^[69] There have been few instances of sati in the [Chola Empire](#) in [South India](#). Vanavan Mahadevi, the mother of [Rajaraja Chola I](#) (10th century) and Viramahadevi the queen of [Rajendra Chola I](#) (11th century) both committed Sati upon their husband's death by ascending the pyre.^{[71][72]} The 510 CE inscription at [Eran](#) mentioning the wife of Goparaja, a vassal of [Bhanugupta](#), burning herself on her husband's pyre is considered to be a Sati stone

IV.CONCLUSIONS

In 1812, [Raja Ram Mohan Roy](#), founder of [Brahmo Samaj](#), began to champion the cause of banning sati practice. He was motivated by the experience of seeing his own sister-in-law being forced to commit sati.^[112] He visited Kolkata's cremation grounds to persuade widows against immolation, formed watch groups to do the same, sought the support of other elite Bengali classes, and wrote and disseminated articles to show that it was not required by Hindu scripture.^[112] He was at loggerheads with Hindu groups which did not want the Government to interfere in religious practices.^[113]

From 1815 to 1818 Sati deaths doubled. Ram Mohan Roy launched an attack on Sati that "aroused such anger that for awhile his life was in danger"^[114] In 1821 he published a tract opposing Sati, and in 1823 the Serampore missionaries led by Carey published a book containing their earlier essays, of which the first three chapters opposed Sati. Another Christian missionary published a tract against Sati in 1827.

[Sahajanand Swami](#), the founder of the [Swaminarayan sect](#), preached against the practice of sati in his area of influence, that is [Gujarat](#). He argued that the practice had no [Vedic](#) standing and only God could take a life he had given. He also opined that widows could lead lives that would eventually lead to salvation. [Sir John Malcolm](#), the [Governor of Bombay](#) supported Sahajanand Swami in this endeavour.^[115]

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