

The ritual of sati in hindu religioun



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The practice of sati, the immolation of widows, is the most tenacious example of religious customs. Many people often associate the concept of sati with just India; however, the practice of self-immolation has been widespread in world history. The article written by Jorg Fisch, claims that examples of sati can be traced to incidents of headhunting in Southeast Asia (Fisch 2001: 301) and the ritual murder of a king's cook, brewer, and shepherd in Baganda (Fisch 2001: 299). In order to understand the reasoning behind the ritual one must look into every aspect of it from the angles of different religious traditions. So, as one can see sati is not unique to India. However, the cases of sati, even though, rare, have still taken place since the proclamation of India's independence in 1947. The most recent case that has sparked a heated debate is the sati of eighteen-year old widow, Roop Kanwar. The most surprising consequence of young woman's death was the fact that women from different parts of the country rallied demanding to be permitted to commit sati (Kumar 1995: 76). The pro-sati lobbyists fought for their rights to commit, worship, and propagate sati; it got to the point where the Sati Dharma Raksha Samiti (the "Committee for the Defense of the Religion of Sati") was formed (Hawley 1994: 9). This group was run by educated Rajput men in their twenties and thirties who claimed that sati was a "fundamental part of their traditions; a refusal to legitimize sati, they said, was a deliberate attempt to marginalize the Rajputs" (Kumar 1995: 81). To fully grasp the concept of sati one must look into history of the ritual and not only in India but in other countries as well; search for examples and reasoning in sacred texts; and discover the attitudes both supporting and opposing sati that exist in modern day India.

The rituals of sati exist throughout the world in documented cases that were reported in various countries. Jorg Fisch reports, in his paper, that human sacrifice was practiced frequently in China. He follows the pioneering scholar of Chinese religion J. J. M. de Groot in saying that Confucius and his followers opposed it, however de Groot disagrees that it was Confucian opposition that ended the practice in China (de Groot 1976: 300-301, 310, 320). The history reports that sometimes great numbers of ordinary people were lured to the mausoleum of an emperor only to be locked up to be buried alive (Fisch 2001: 313). But it is not the brutal practice of massive murders of ordinary people that makes the ritual of sati come alive in Chinese history but rather the account of childless concubines being buried with the first emperor. Later, the custom of following emperors in death which was reserved for only those from the lower class was followed by the suicide of widows. It was considered to be a form of faithfulness and a reflection of not only on the changing nature of Confucianism but also other religious traditions emerging in China. Regardless of the religious opposition the practice remained in place for a while. Just like in India, Chinese religious opposition failed to convince people that sati is inhumane and unnecessary. Just like in India, it was due to the fact that general population held strong beliefs in life after death and that by following their husbands the widows were fulfilling their dharma therefore it could not be wrong. The reasons that drove Chinese widows to commit sati included deep sorrow at the death of a beloved spouse; the anticipated difficulties of life as a widow, including the threat of forced remarriage; and, as for Indian sati widows, the possibility of honor, enshrinement, even deification (Fisch 2001: 311, 316). But within the same faiths, as daughters and daughters-in-law with seniors to care for, as

beneficiaries of their parents' gift of life and body, as mothers to their husbands' heirs, as officiants in the ancestral cult, as lay Buddhist devotees, or as women tough enough to honor life-long vows of chastity, they might also choose to live an honorable life. They could do so while still believing in a life after death, or in repeated, rather than final, judgment of their sins and virtues, or they might believe in honor for its own sake and the immortality of their name. Just like India, China held belief that everyone holds a choice over their own destiny and are free to either follow the dead or remain alive. There is no stigma or shame attached to either.

The ritual of sati has been in the lives of Hindus for many generations. There are accounts of sati or the refusal of thereof in the sacred texts of Hinduism. Sati is mentioned in both the Rig Veda and the Atharva Veda, two sacred texts in the Hindu tradition. The reason why it was practiced for so many years was because of discussion in these texts. One of the sections of the Vedas is known as Samhitas, and it contains a section called the Rig Veda Samhita, which includes a passage defending sati as it states:

Let these women, whose husbands are worthy and are living, enter the house with ghee (applied) as corrylium (to their eyes). Let these wives first step into the pyre, tearless without any affliction and well adorned. (Rig Veda 10. 18. 7)

The verse encourages a widow to throw herself on her dead husband's pyre as a personal sacrifice to her husband. In the scripture, sati is a wife entering the funeral pyre, and the practice has started because it is a part of a sacred

text. It is described with many other ritual practices prescribed to the followers of Hinduism.

Another sacred text that defends the practice of sati is the Atharva Veda Samhita. It is from the same collection of Samhita as the Rig Veda and the funeral verse in the Atharva Veda in Kanda 18, Sukta 3 states:

This woman, choosing her husband's world, lies down (nipad) by you that are departed, O mortal, continuing to keep [her] ancient duty (dharma); to her assign you here progeny and property.

Sati is also mentioned in Mahabharata in the story of the pigeon and the hunter. Sati is described as a "ritual suicide" because after the passing of the husband the wife has to follow him too. Bhisma tells the story where the pigeon's wife decides that no moral woman could still live if her husband was dead and so she decides to throw herself into her husband's funeral fire (Sutton 2000: 87). The result of her actions is that she is sent to svarga-loca (celestial world) alongside her husband in a "celestial chariot" (Sutton 2000: 87). The mention of the sati ritual on the pages of often read Mahabharata is regarded as another justification of the ritual.

However, despite the fact that the ritual of sati is discussed in sacred texts for any Hindu, people started to seek another interpretation for the same verses. The understanding of the tradition is different now than it was at the beginning of the religion. The human rights activists and feminist lobbyists are fighting to liquidate the tradition completely. Those who oppose the ritual of sati claim that it is simply appalling and should be abolished forever. It seems like there shouldn't be a conflict as the practice became illegal

many times. First, it was abolished by the British in 1829; and then again in late 1980's after the sati of Roop Kanwar. Indian feminists argue that the proclamation of Roop as an exemplary and chaste wife is revolting. The idea behind the ritual is the one of grave oppression of women and vivid representation of their secondary status and lack of choices. For centuries, the social status of women was closely related to the one of their fathers' and later, their husbands'. It was never an option for a female to be considered an equal in everything to her husband. After the independence of India was proclaimed women got their chance to build their lives the way they desire. But, sadly, many were clinging to the past, to something they have always known, the traditional way of life and thinking. The feminist leaders stepped up and encouraged the female population to take the reins of their destinies and think for themselves. It is unthinkable that in this day and age, anyone would consider a ritual suicide just because of the tradition that dates couple millennia back.

In conclusion, the ritual of sati has rich and intriguing history. The account of sati examples were discovered in numerous documents all over the world. It can be determined to certain that India was not the only country that practiced ritual sacrifices of innocent women in order to fulfill their dharma and show off their chaste and pure nature. China had centuries of regular practice of sati, but unlike in India, the practice was long abolished. Concrete evidence that supports the ritual of sati is found in several sacred texts in Hinduism. It makes it harder to argue that sati is rather a choice a widow must make and not a predestined certainty. The evidence from the texts can be interpreted as a supporting ground for sati. It sounds noble, and pure, and

chaste, to show the world the devotion the widow has for her deceased husband. In reality, it is just a tradition, a ritual like any other, that one can chose to forgo. In modern times there is no more stigma attached to being a widow, no shame to carry with the title, no burden to lay on those who are still alive. Modern society is all about equality of rights for everyone. And Indian feminists argue just that, the tradition of sati had its place in history and lives of Hindus, but now, it is time to make wiser choices and live, instead of committing sacrificial suicide.