

SATI

Derived from the Sanskrit term for pure or chaste (sef)A – the very term ‘*sati*’ is therefore a misnomer – sati has come to signify both the act of immolation of a wife on the funeral pyre of her husband (in some areas a widow was buried with her deceased husband or took poison) and the victim herself rather than its own original meaning of “a virtuous man” (see Yang 1989 : 8). Generally, an upper-caste Hindu woman was burnt together with her deceased husband, a practice termed ‘*sahamarna*’ or ‘*sahagamana*’ (dying together with). If concretion was not possible, such as when a husband died in a distant place or a woman’s pregnancy required that she wait till after her delivery, a sati confirmed to the practice of ‘*anumarna*’ or ‘*anugamana*’ : burning with the husbands ashes or with some other memento representing him, for example , his sandals , turban or piece of clothing” (Yang 1989 : 8).

The abolition of *sati* by the British in 1829 has become a founding moment in the history of women in modern India (Mani 1987, 119). In 1818, one of the chief opponent of *sati*, William Bentick who was the provincial governor of Bengal, prohibited sati in Bengal. The public debate on ‘sati’ was initiated by the colonial officers which grew out of their concern primarily for the status of women that emerges in the nineteenth century. This was part of the regenerating mission of colonisation. The debate , in this case, took place among British officials and different strands of the Indian literati, where Indian ‘reformers’ engaged in sustained arguments and conversations with one another and with their orthodox opponents in the public domain. The official view of ‘sati’ rested on three interdependent idea : the centrality of religion, the submission of indigenous people to its dictates and the ‘religious’ basis of sati. The chief players in the debate argued over the religious basis of sati and the fine points of scriptural interpretation. Though historiography has traditionally emphasized the colonial horror of *sati*, but there is an ambivalence which lies at the heart of the colonial attitude of ‘*sati*’. While its practice was generally condemned, there operated notions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ *satis*.(Mani 1986, 35). ‘Good *satis*’ were those that were seen to be true of their official reading of scriptures. Thus, colonial government distinguished between ‘voluntary’ and ‘enforced’ sati, granting permission to the former. The reformers opposing sati were displeased since these allowed ‘sati’ in some form.

The debate on ‘*sati*’ saw a heavy reliance on scriptures and texts for its authentication. Lata Mani opines that the privileging of Brahmanic scriptures and the equation of tradition with scripture is an effect of ‘colonial discourse’ on *sati*. However, the meaning of consent, in the case of voluntary sati was difficult to assess in the patriarchal context. Official discourse describes that in both conceding and resisting *sati*, women do not appear as subjects but as ‘victims’ of religion.(Mani 1987, 129).

There was a striking similarity between the views of officials and the indigenous male elite. They grounded their argument on scriptures over customs and overrode the latter in the former.

Rammohan Roy, a prominent figure who undertook a critical examination of Indian heritage, hold a privileged position both in his stand against *sati* and in his attempts to reformulate Hinduism. However, he too based his arguments against *sati* on Brahminical scriptures like *Vedas* and *Smritis*. In 1828, Rammohan Roy established a new forum called Brahma Sabha, which later became Brahmo Samaj, whose main aim was to promote socio religious reform movement in Bengal.

The ambivalence which can be found in the ‘liberal’ discourses on *sati* seemed to be absent from the conservative writing on *sati*. They eulogize the practice as willingly undertaken by devout Hindu widows. An association of orthodox Hindus, called Dharma Sabha which was opposed to Brahma Sabha, was established in January 1830 mainly to oppose the government regulation against the abolition of the practice of *sati*. This orthodox Hindu community was represented by Raja Radhakanta Deb. The chief public organ of the Dharma Sabha was the Bengali newspaper Samachar Chandrika whose editor Bhawani Charan Banerji was himself the secretary of Dharma Sabha.

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