

## Introduction

The status of widows in many societies has been precarious because the deaths of husbands removed the primary source of their economic well-being as well as control over their sexuality. If there were no adult sons to support widowed mothers, other kinfolk might be reluctant or lack the means to care for widowed relatives. Many societies where men held dominant power evolved mechanisms to control the social and sexual relationships of widows. The burning or burying of widows with their deceased husbands occurred at various times in places as diverse as central Asia, South and Southeast Asia, and Fiji.

### Sati in India

In India the Laws of Manu, compiled around 200 C. E. declared that a Hindu widow was to remain *sati*, a Sanskrit word that was interpreted to mean chaste or pure, and was not to remarry, while a Hindu widower was permitted to marry again. Gradually, the word *sati* was used to designate the ritual of self-immolation or self-sacrifice by a Hindu widow on her husband's pyre. Through her self-sacrifice, a widow remained pure and demonstrated her everlasting devotion to her husband. Thus *sati* (a word that Europeans frequently transliterated as *suttee*) came to mean both the practice of self-immolation and the Hindu widow who died by this ritual. Such a widow was thought to become a goddess and to bring auspiciousness or good fortune to her birth and marital families. Her cremation site was also marked by a commemorative stone or temple and became a pilgrimage site for devotees seeking divine favors. Although it was never widespread, *sati* as self-immolation became and remains a potent source for stereotypes of Indian society as ridden with exotic and superstitious religious injunctions, and for images of Hindu women as oppressed.

### The Origins of Sati

The origins of *sati* as self-immolation are hotly debated. It is often associated with war and concepts of honor. One possible source was the deaths of four widows in the *Mahabharata*, a great epic about a war between two sets of cousins for a kingdom. Another is the custom of *jauhar* among Rajputs, groups from central Asia who migrated to northwestern India, who when confronted with certain defeat put their women and children to death by fire to prevent their enemy from capturing and dishonoring them. One religious source mentioned is the Hindu goddess named *Sati* who committed suicide in protest against her father's refusal to invite her divine husband *Shiva* to a royal sacrifice. But *Sati* died and the god *Shiva* was incapable of dying so she was not and could not be a widow.

There is much debate about when the practice of self-immolation began to be practiced in India. Some historians claim that there is material evidence in the form of commemorative stones of self-immolation as early as the 6th century C. E. and European accounts of the *sati* ritual begin with Marco Polo and proliferate from the 1500s onward. *Sati* stones exist in the Gujarat and Marathi areas of western India and in Karnataka and the eastern coast of south India. However, self-immolation was more prevalent among elite women in the princely states of Rajputana and in Bengal. Some scholars have

argued that the *dayabhaga* legal tradition that was unique to Bengal which allowed Hindu widows to inherit their *stridhan* (personal property, usually jewelry given at the time of her marriage) and a limited estate in real property (which they could use but not alienate) was perhaps a material reason why sati was more common in Bengal than elsewhere. Anand Yang, however, has documented that non-elite Hindu widows committed sati in the early 19th century in districts in Bihar and Bengal where women's property rights were not likely to be at stake. The social restrictions on Hindu widows that might include shaving one's hair, discarding all jewelry and wearing simple white saris, eating only one meal a day, and being excluded from celebrations such as weddings constituted "cold" sati and could have motivated some widows to willingly commit self-immolation.

### **European Views of Sati**

As more Europeans traveled to India from the 1500s onward to forge trade and diplomatic relations, they recorded their observations and attitudes towards sati and the Hindu culture that they asserted authorized such deaths. Their accounts tended to praise the devotion of Hindu wives to their husbands and to emphasize the religious injunctions for the ritual. As it expanded its political control during the 18th century, the English East India Company viewed sati as a disturbing religious practice but permitted it so as not to antagonize their Hindu subjects. By the early 1800s British officials and missionaries became more aggressive in their condemnation of sati although their accounts continued to have subtle praise for the wifely devotion of Hindu widows. At the same time high-caste Hindus, frequently of the *bhadralok* (respectable people) elite in Bengal, either defended the ritual or sought to prohibit it.

The debate over sati escalated when the East India Company, under pressure from evangelical groups in Britain, legalized sati in 1813 if the widow acted voluntarily. This legislation triggered intense debate in India and Britain both for and against sati. British missionaries as well as Indian advocates and opponents of sati sought sanction for their opposing positions in Hindu scriptural texts. Emboldened by support from Indians such as Ram Mohan Roy and influenced by the Utilitarian philosophy which sought the greatest good for the greatest number of people through legislation, Lord William Bentinck, governor-general of the Company's possessions in India from 1828 to 1835, promulgated legislation criminalizing sati in 1829. Controversy persisted during the 1830s because of continuing episodes of sati. It proved difficult to enforce the prohibition in a climate where cremation took place usually within 24 hours of death and British officials were widely dispersed. Contention resurfaced in the late 20th century after Roop Kanwar, an 18-year-old Rajput woman, allegedly committed sati at Deorala, Rajasthan on September 4, 1987 in very different political and social circumstances.

### **Sources About Sati**

European travelers, British officials, Indian reformers, orthodox Hindus, and Christian missionaries wrote extensively about sati while Europeans and Indians produced visual representations in prints, paintings, magazines, and eventually films. Men produced almost all of these primary sources that contained several themes. First, Indians and Europeans debated the origins of sati, traced where it occurred in India, and occasionally tried to ascertain which *varnas* (the four broad divisions of Hindu society-brahman or

priests, *kshatriya* or warriors and administrators, *vaishya* or merchants and *sudras* or artisans and peasants) and economic classes enjoined the practice of sati on Hindu widows. Second, both orthodox Hindus and those seeking to reform Hindu customs argued about the scriptural legitimacy or lack thereof for sati. Third, European travelers, officials, and missionaries revealed much about their changing attitudes toward Indian culture and specifically to Indian women in their accounts of sati from the 1600s onward. Fourth, during the early 1800s the campaign to prohibit sati produced official reports and polemical tracts that gave evidence of cultural arrogance among British officials and missionaries, defensiveness among Indian reformers, and assertiveness among orthodox Hindus.

Sources in English or available in English translations have told us more about European representations of and attitudes toward the ritual of sati, European ideas about Indian, specifically Hindu women, and about Hindu culture in India in general than about Indian attitudes toward sati. Even so, the positions of Indian men regarding sati are much more accessible in primary sources than those of Indian women. For the stories of Hindu widows who committed self-immolation or attempted to do so and decided against doing so at the last minute, historians must rely on British and Indian, usually male, witnesses of the spectacle of sati.