

Primary Source Packet

1. Letter, Francois Bernier

During the 17th century Louis XIV of France sought to strengthen the power of the monarchy in France and to enhance France's position in world politics. In 1664 Jean Colbert, his finance minister, established the French East India Company to develop French trade with India. Besides providing information on India for Colbert, Francois Bernier's observations on sati influenced generations of Europeans. Educated first in physiology and later in medicine at the University of Montpellier, Bernier (1620-1688) considered himself a modern man of science. In 1658 he sailed for Surat on the west coast of India and by March 1659 he joined the entourage of Dara Shukoh, a imperial Mughal prince, as his personal physician and wrote a vivid account of the succession war among Dara Shukoh and his brothers for the Mughal throne. He then produced several long letters about economic conditions and religious and social customs in northern India. The excerpt below is from his letter dated October 4, 1667 to Monsieur Jean Chapelain that is entitled "*Describing the Superstitions, strange customs, and Doctrines of the Indous or Gentiles [Hindus] of Hindoustan*" "From which it will be seen that there is no Doctrine too strange or too improbable for the Soul of man to conceive." Colbert had employed Chapelain to draw up a list of authors who should be considered for state pensions. The title and subtitle of this letter indicate that as a scientist, Bernier was highly critical of Hindu religious practices including sati. He claimed to have witnessed several instances of sati and to have persuaded one Hindu widow to refrain from self-immolation in order to ensure that her sons would receive a pension from the Mughal governor of Delhi. In this excerpt Bernier contrasts one Hindu widow who exemplified the voluntary sati with more reluctant widows and the options that they pursued and their consequences.

Source: Francois Bernier. *Travels in the Mogul Empire, AD 1656-1668*. Translated by Archibald Constable on the basis of Irving Brock's version. Edited by Vincent A. Smith. 1934. Reprint, Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1994.

Letter to Monsieur Chapelain, Despatched from Chiras in Persia, the 4th October 1667. Describing the Superstitions, strange customs, and Doctrines of the Indous or Gentiles of Hindoustan; From which it will be seen that there is no Doctrine too strange or too improbable for the Soul of man to conceive.

As I was leaving Sourate [Surat] for Persia, I witnessed the devotion and burning of another widow: several Englishmen and Dutchmen and Monsieur Chardin of Paris were present. She was of the middle age, and by no means uncomely. I do not expect, with my limited powers of expression, to convey a full idea of the brutish boldness, or ferocious gaiety depicted on this woman's countenance; of her undaunted step; of the freedom from all perturbation with which she conversed, and permitted herself to be washed; of the look of confidence or rather of insensibility which she cast upon us; or her easy air, free from dejection; of her lofty carriage, void of embarrassment, when she was examining her little cabin, composed of dry and thick millet straw, with an

intermixture of small wood; when she entered into that cabin, sat down upon the funeral pile, placed her deceased husband's head in her lap, took up a torch, and with her own hand lighted the fire within, while I know not how many Brahmens were busily engaged in kindling it without. Well indeed may I despair of representing this whole scene with proper and genuine feeling, such as I experienced at the spectacle itself, or of painting it in colours sufficiently vivid. My recollection of it indeed is so distinct that it seems only a few days since the horrid reality passed before my eyes, and with pain I persuade myself that it was anything but a frightful dream.

It is true, however, that I have known some of these unhappy widows shrink at the sight of the piled wood; so as to leave no doubt on my mind that they would willingly have recanted, if recantation had been permitted by the merciless Brahmens; but those demons excite or astound the affrighted victims, and even thrust them into the fire. I was present when a poor young woman, who had fallen back five or six paces from the pit, was thus driven forward; and I saw another of these wretched beings struggling to leave the funeral pile when the fire increased around her person, but she was prevented from escaping by the long poles of the diabolical executioners.

But sometimes the devoted widows elude the vigilance of the murderous priests. I have been often in the company of a fair Idolater, who contrived to save her life by throwing herself upon the the protection of the scavengers, who assemble on these occasions in considerable numbers, when they learn that the intended victim is young and handsome, that her relations are of little note, and that she is to be accompanied by only a few of her acquaintance. Yet the woman whose courage fails at the sight of the horrid apparatus of death, and who avails herself of the presence of these men to avoid the impending sacrifice, cannot hope to pass her days in happiness, or to be treated with respect or affection. Never again can she live with the Gentiles: no individual of that nation will at any time, or under any circumstances, associate with a creature so degraded, who is accounted utterly infamous, and execrated because of the dishonour which her conduct has brought upon the religion of the country. Consequently she is ever afterwards exposed to the ill-treatment of her low and vulgar protectors. There is no Mogol [Mughal] who does not dread the consequences of contributing to the preservation of a woman devoted to the burning pile, or who will venture to afford an asylum to one who escapes from the fangs of the Brahmens; but many widows have been rescued by the Portuguese, in sea-ports where that people happened to be in superior strength. I need scarcely say how much my own indignation has been excited, and how ardently I have wished for opportunities to exterminate those cursed Brahmens.

At Lahor I saw a most beautiful young widow sacrificed, who could not, I think, have been more than twelve years of age. The poor little creature appeared more dead than alive when she approached the dreadful pit: the agony of her mind cannot be described; she trembled and wept bitterly; but three or four of the Brahmens, assisted by an old woman who held her under the arm, forced the unwilling victim toward the fatal spot, seated her on the wood, tied her hands and feet, lest she should run away, and in that situation the innocent creature was burnt alive. I found it difficult to repress my feelings and to prevent their bursting forth into clamorous and unavailing rage; but restrained by prudential considerations, I contented myself with silently lamenting the abominable superstition of these people.

2. Engraving, Sati

From the late 1500s and into early 1800s, adventurous and artistically talented European men and a few women traveled to Asia and India in particular to see sites and cultures considered exotic. They recorded their impression in prose and in sketches, the latter being transformed into engravings that illustrated their published accounts of their travels. These books were significant sources of income for their authors, their engravers, and their publishers. They included engravings that were influential in forming the visual images of Asian lands, peoples and customs for literate Europeans. This engraving of a sati was published a century after Francois Bernier's 1667 letter to Monsieur Jean Chapelain in a collection of travel accounts covering Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas. In it all the people are portrayed as Europeans and in European style dress. For example the brahmans at the left side are attired as Baroque painters sometimes portrayed as Old Testament prophets. Consider what viewers might infer about the widow and the European observers.

Source: "A Gentoo Woman burning herself on the funeral Pile of her deceas'd Husband." Copper engraving from Edward Cavendish Drake. In *A New Universal Collection of Authentic and Entertaining Voyages and Travels*. London: J. Cooke, 1768.



3. Letter, Panduranga Joshi Kulkarni

Although the self-immolation of Hindu widows was less common in western India than in Bengal, this letter confirms its occurrence in Maratha-ruled areas during the 1700s. The Marathas were a distinctive ethnic group of peasants who spoke the Marathi language and achieved an impressive reputation as effective guerilla fighters. During the late 1600s Shivaji, a charismatic, courageous, and politically shrewd Maratha, had created a loose confederacy that gradually expanded from Poona (now Pune) in western India across much of central India. Shivaji's successors became the rajas (rulers) of Satara who sought to legitimate Shivaji's and their political control through claims to be defenders of Hindu traditions including the high ritual status of brahmans. Since the surname of Joshi indicates that deceased man in this letter was a brahman, his widow might have been socialized to accept sati as her religious duty to maintain and enhance the status of her family as brahmans. However, this letter also indicates that material motives might influence male relatives to prevent a Hindu widow from committing self-immolation.

Source: A letter from the secretariat to Panduranga Joshi Kulkarni of the town of Talegaon and the villages of Jategaon, Pabal sub-division, and Karandi, Chakan sub-division. Translated from Marathi by Sumit Guha. *Selections from the Satara Raja and the Peshwa's Diaries – Part 7 Peshwa Mahavrao I, Vol. 2.* Selected by the Ganesh Chimnaji Val. Edited by Babu Purushotam Joshi. Poona: The Poona Deccan Vernacular Translation Society, 1911.

Document no. 764 year 1769-70 pp.339-40

A letter from the Secretariat to Panduranga Joshi Kulkarni of the town of Talegaon and the villages of Jategaon, Pabal sub-division, and Karandi, Chakan sub-division stating:

Ramaji Malhar Joshi, the village accountant of the above-named villages came and petitioned stating "I own a share of the hereditary position of astrologer and accountant in these villages. I had one son, Naroba whose first wife bore him two daughters and so he married a second time in order to get a son. Then Naroba was suddenly stricken by paralysis and died in Talegaon town. Thereupon his wife, my daughter-in-law, Chimabai began to insist vehemently upon accompanying him (*sahagamana*). At that time all my relatives, and the headman of the township, the respectable villagers, the heads of the merchants, the hereditary township servants and affluent householders and local Brahman community all gathered to consider the matter. They thought :”Ramaji is aged and needs to be cared for but Chimabai will not live if she is without a son. Therefore a son should be found for her to adopt.” They sought my nephews Antaji Vinayak and Visaji Vinayak, but neither of them lived in the village; they were settled elsewhere along with their families. Meanwhile, night fell. There was little time left (before the cremation had to be performed). Then Visaji Vinayak had no son; Antaji had two sons. But there was a long-standing enmity between us, so it did not seem likely that he would give up a son. So they approached my cousin Abaji Moreshwar and asked for his son. Abaji

responded “I have two sons, but my wife has died. I have no hope of more sons. It is not expedient for me to give one of my sons.” Then everyone decided on another plan. “Ramaji Malhai’s relative Sadashiv Appaji is at hand; he has four sons. Furthermore, in the past Sadashiv Appaji’s father Girmaji Dadaji had no son, he sought and received Chinto Appaji Ramaji Malhar’s paternal uncle, from Annaji Kakdev, who was Ramaji’s grandfather. So brotherly relations have been long established and so let us seek one of Sadashiv Appaji’s four sons.” (Ramaji continues) So I went with all the villagers to *saubhagyavati* Manubai and we abased ourselves and begged her to give the youngest son, Pandurang so that I get a grandson and Naroba a son. After much pleading, *saubhagyavati* Manubai was forced to consent, and in everyone’s presence she gave Panduranga to me; I went and seated him in Chimabai’s lap. So she was comforted and stayed (from the fire). I and the villagers have written out declarations of all this addressed to Pandurang, and now let the Lord issue letters of enjoyment (of the hereditary offices) in the name of Panduranga Narayan ...”

4. Nonfiction, Rajah Rammohun Roy

Ram Mohan Roy (1774-1832), a highly educated Bengali brahman from a well-to-do landed family, had worked in the lower levels of the Company bureaucracy. Since Indians were excluded from the elite Indian Civil Service, Roy eventually left the Company service to advocate rationalist religious and social reform among Hindus. He sought to remove what he deemed later additions to Hindu religious practices such as the use of images and to improve the condition and social status of Hindu women. He helped to found the Brahmo Samaj in 1828, a reform society that had weekly congregational meetings patterned after Protestant services and promoted education and greater physical mobility for women. He considered the self-immolation of Hindu widows to be an unorthodox practice British officials and missionaries rightly condemned. His argument that Hindu scriptures did not enjoined self-immolation on Hindu widows was a significant factor in persuading British officials to prohibit sati.

In the first excerpt, Ram Mohan Roy as the Opponent argued with a generic Advocate of self-immolation by Hindu widows that there was no valid scriptural basis for this ritual. Roy claimed that the mythic lawgiver Manu who called for Hindu widows to lead an ascetic life superceded the quoted injunctions of Angira and other ancient Hindu sages in support of self-immolation.

In the second excerpt, the advocate of self-immolation provided the rationale for the socialization of Hindu women to accept self-immolation when widowed and the use of ropes to tie widows to the funeral pyre. Roy as the opponent criticized orthodox Hindu views in particular and of patriarchal views of women in general and argued that in many ways women are superior to men in virtue, trustworthiness and control of their passions.

Source: Roy, Rajah Rammohun. Translation of Several Principal Books, Passages and Texts of the Veds, and of some Controversial Works on Brahmunicipal Theology. London: Parbury, Allen, 1832.

Excerpt from “Translation of a Conference between an Advocate for, and an Opponent of, the Practice of Burning Widows Alive from the original Bungla”
30 November 1818.

CONFERENCE
BETWEEN
AN ADVOCATE FOR, AND AN OPPONENET OF
THE PRACTICE OF
BURNING WIDOWS ALIVE.

Advocate.—I AM surprised that you endeavour to oppose the practice of Concremation and Postcremation of Widows,* as long observed in this country.

Opponent—Those who have no reliance on the Shastru [Hindu sacred scripture], and those who take delight in the self-destruction of women, may well wonder that we should oppose that suicide which is forbidden by all the Shastrus, and by every race of men.

Advocate.—You have made an improper assertion, in alleging that Concremation and Postcremation are forbidden by the Shastrus. Hear what Unggira [Angira—one of the seven rishis or sages of the Hindu tradition] and other saints have said on this subject

“That woman who, on the death of her husband, ascends the burning pile with him, is exalted to heaven, as equal to Uroondhooti”.

“She who follows her husband to another world, shall dwell in a region of joy for so many years as there are hairs in the human body, or thirty-five millions.”

“As a serpent-catcher forcibly draws a snake from his hole, thus raising her husband by her power, she enjoys delight along with him.”

“The woman who follows her husband expiates the sins of three races; her father’s line, her mother’s line, and the family of him to whom she was given a virgin.”

“There possessing her husband as her chiefest good, herself the best of women, enjoying the highest delights, she partakes of bliss with her husband as long as fourteen Indrus reign.”

“Even though the man had slain a Brahman, or returned evil for good, or killed an intimate friend, the woman expiates those crimes.”

...

Concremation and Postcremation being thus established by the words of many sacred lawgivers, how can you say they are forbidden by the Shastrus, and desire to prevent their practice ?

Opponent.—All those passages you have quoted are indeed sacred law; and it is clear from those authorities, that if women perform Concremation or Postcremation, they will enjoy heaven for a considerable time. But attend to what Munoo [Manu—mythic lawgiver c. 200 C.E.] and others say respecting the duty of widows: “ Let her emaciate her body, by living voluntarily on pure flowers, roots, and fruits, but let her not, when her lord is deceased, even pronounce the name of another man.”

“Let her continue till death forgiving all injuries, performing harsh duties, avoiding every sensual pleasure, and cheerfully practising the incomparable rules of virtue which have been followed by such women as were devoted to one only husband.”

Here Munoo directs, that after the death of her husband, the widow should pass her whole life as an ascetic. Therefore, the laws given by Unggira and the others whom you have quoted, being contrary to the law of Munoo, cannot be accepted; because the Ved declares, “whatever Munoo has said is wholesome;” and Virhusputi, “whatever law is contrary to the law of Munoo is not commendable.” The Ved especially declares, “by living in the practice of regular and occasional duties the mind may be purified. Thereafter by hearing, reflecting, and constantly meditating on the Supreme Being, absorption in Bruhmu may be attained. Therefore from a desire during life of future fruition, life ought not to be destroyed.” Munoo, Yagnyuvulkyu [Yajñawalkya—sage and lawgiver], and others, have then, in their respective codes of laws, prescribed to widows the duties of ascetics only. By this passage of the Ved, therefore, and the authority of Munoo and others, the words you have quoted from Unggira and the rest are set aside; for by the express declaration of the former, widows after the death of their husbands may, by living as ascetics, obtain absorption.

* When a widow is absent from her husband at the time of his death, she may in certain cases burn herself along with some relick representing the deceased. This practice is called Unoomurun or Postcremation.

Excerpt from “A Second Conference between an Advocate for, and an Opponent of, the Practice of Burning Widows Alive. Calcutta: 1820.”

A
SECOND CONFERENCE
BETWEEN
AN ADVOCATE FOR, AND AN OPPONENT OF,
THE PRACTICE OF
BURNING WIDOWS ALIVE
CALCUTTA:
1829

Advocate.—I alluded, in p. 18, l. 18, to the real reason for our anxiety to persuade widows to follow their husbands, and for our endeavours to burn them, pressed down with ropes: *viz.* that women are by nature of inferior understanding, without resolution, unworthy of trust, subject to passions, and void of virtuous knowledge; they, according to the precepts of the Shastru[Hindu sacred scriptures], are not allowed to marry again after the demise of their husbands, and consequently despair at once of all worldly pleasure: hence it is evident, that death to these unfortunate widows is preferable to existence; for the great difficulty which a widow may experience by living a purely ascetic life, as prescribed by the Shastrus, is obvious;

therefore, if she do not perform Concremation, it is probable that she may be guilty of such acts as may bring disgrace upon her paternal and maternal relations, and those that may be connected with her husband. Under these circumstances, we instruct them from their early life in the idea of Concremation, holding out to them heavenly enjoyments in company with their husbands, as well as the beatitude of their relations, both by birth and marriage, and their reputation in this world. From this many of them, on the death of their husbands, become desirous of accompanying them; but to remove every chance of their trying to escape from the blazing fire, in burning them we first tie them down to the pile.

Opponent. –The reason you have now assigned for burning widows alive is indeed your true motive, as we are well aware; but the faults which you have imputed to women are not planted in their constitution by nature; it would be, therefore, grossly criminal to condemn that sex to death merely from precaution. By ascribing to them all sorts of improper conduct, you have indeed successfully persuaded the Hindoo community to look down upon them as contemptible and mischievous creatures, whence they have been subjected to constant miseries. I have, therefore, to offer a few remarks on this head.

Women are in general inferior to men in bodily strength and energy; consequently the male part of the community, taking advantage of their corporeal weakness, have denied to them those excellent merits that they are entitled to by nature, and afterwards they are apt to say that women are naturally incapable of acquiring those merits. But if we give the subject consideration, we may easily ascertain whether or not your accusation against them is consistent with justice. As to their inferiority in point of understanding, when did you ever afford them a fair opportunity of exhibiting their natural capacity? How then can you accuse them of want of understanding? If after instruction in knowledge and wisdom, a person cannot comprehend or retain what has been taught him, we may consider him as deficient; but as you keep women generally void of education and acquirements, you cannot, therefore, injustice pronounce on their inferiority.

...

Secondly. You charge them with want of resolution, at which I feel exceedingly surprised : for we constantly perceive, in a country where the name of death makes the male shudder, that the female, from her firmness of mind, offers to burn with the corpse of her deceased husband; and yet you accuse those women of deficiency in point of resolution.

Thirdly. With regard to their trustworthiness, let us look minutely into the conduct of both sexes, and we may be enabled to ascertain which of them is the most frequently guilty of betraying friends. If we enumerate such women in each village or town as have been deceived by men, and such men as have been betrayed by women, I presume that the number of the deceived women would be found ten times greater than that of the betrayed men. Men are, in general, able to read and write, and manage public affairs, by which means they easily

promulgate such faults as women occasionally commit, but never consider as criminal the misconduct of men towards women. One fault they have, it must be acknowledged; which is, by considering others equally void of duplicity as themselves, to give their confidence too readily, from which they suffer much misery, even so far that some of them are misled to suffer themselves to be burnt to death.

In the fourth place, with respect to their subjection to the passions, this may be judged of by the custom of marriage as to the respective sexes; or one man may marry two or three, sometimes even ten wives and upwards; while a woman, who marries but one husband; desires at his death to follow him, forsaking all worldly enjoyments, or to remain leading the austere life of an ascetic.

5. Diary, Fanny Parks

From 1600 to the early 1800s few officials of the English East Indian Company lived with English wives in India. This practice began to change as transportation became easier with the development of steamships. Born in 1794 Fanny Archer married Charles Parks, a writer (clerk) with the Company, in March 1822 and arrived in Calcutta in November 1822. She and her husband lived in India until 1845, mostly in and around Allahabad at the confluence of the Jumna and Ganges Rivers. Fanny Parks wrote her diary as a record for her mother in England and included descriptions of her daily activities and her observations of Indian religion, society, and customs. She never saw a sati ritual but described and commented on a sati cremation that her husband witnessed in Allahabad on November 7, 1828 when sati was legal if voluntary. Consider the similarities and differences in her account of the sati and that which Francois Bernier made in his 1667 letter and whether gender or the time period in which each was writing made any difference in their attitudes toward the ritual of sati and the Hindu widows who performed sati.

Source: Parks, Fanny. *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque*. With an introduction and notes by Esther Chawner. Vol. I. Oxford in Asia Historical Reprints. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1975. First published 1850 by Pelham Richardson, London.

THE SUTTEE.

A rich buniya [merchant], a corn chandler, whose house was near the gate of our grounds, departed this life; he was an Hindoo. On the 7th of November, the natives in the bazar were making a great noise with their tom-toms, drums, and other discordant musical instruments, rejoicing that his widow had determined to perform suttee, *i. e.* to burn on his funeral-pile.

The magistrate sent for the woman, used every argument to dissuade her, and offered her money. Her only answer was, dashing her head on the floor, and saying, "If you will not let me burn with my husband, I will hang myself in your court of

justice." The shastrs [Hindu scriptures] say, "The prayers and imprecations of a suttee are never uttered in vain ; the great gods themselves cannot listen to them unmoved."

If a widow touch either food or water from the time her husband expires until she ascend the pile, she cannot, by Hindoo law, be burned with the body; therefore the magistrate kept the corpse *forty-eight* hours, in the hope that hunger would compel the woman to eat. Guards were set over her, but she never touched any thing. My husband accompanied the magistrate to see the suttee : about 5000 people were collected together on the banks of the Ganges : the pile was then built, and the putrid body placed upon it; the magistrate stationed guards to prevent the people from approaching it. After having bathed in the river, the widow lighted a brand, walked round the pile, set it on fire, and then mounted cheerfully : the flame caught and blazed up instantly; she sat down, placing the head of the corpse on her lap, and repeated several times the usual form, "Ram, Ram, suttee; Ram, Ram, suttee;" *i. e.* "God, God, I am chaste."

As the wind drove the fierce fire upon her, she shook her arms and limbs as if in agony; at length she started up and approached the side to escape. An Hindoo, one of the police who had been placed near the pile to see she had fair play, and should not be burned by force, raised his sword to strike her, and the poor wretch shrank back into the flames. The magistrate seized and committed him to prison. The woman again approached the side of the blazing pile, sprang fairly out, and ran into the Ganges, which was within a few yards. When the crowd and the brothers of the dead man saw this, they called out, "Cut her down, knock her on the head with a bamboo; tie her hands and feet; and throw her in again;" and rushed down to execute their murderous intentions, when the gentlemen and the police drove them back.

The woman drank some water, and having extinguished the fire on her red garment, said she would mount the pile again and be burned.

The magistrate placed his hand on her shoulder (which rendered her impure), and said, "By your own law, having once quitted the pile you cannot ascend again; I forbid it. You are now an outcast from the Hindoos, but I will take charge of you, the Company will protect you, and you shall never want food or clothing."

He then sent her, in a palanquin, under a guard, to the hospital. The crowd made way, shrinking from her with signs of horror, but returned peaceably to their homes; the Hindoos annoyed at her escape, and the Mussulmans saying, "It was better that she should escape, but it was a pity we should have lost the *tamasha* (amusement) of seeing her burnt to death."

Had not the magistrate and the English gentlemen been present, the Hindoos would have cut her down when she attempted to quit the fire; or had she leapt out, would have thrown her in again, and have said, "She performed suttee of *her* own accord, how could we make her? it was the will of God." As a specimen of their religion the woman said, "I have transmigrated six times, and have been burned six times with six different husbands; if I do not burn the seventh time, it will prove unlucky for me!" "What good will burning do you?" asked a bystander. She replied, "The women of my husband's family have all been suttees, why should I bring disgrace

upon them? I shall go to heaven, and afterwards re-appear on earth, and be married to a very rich man.” She was about twenty or twenty-five years of age, and possessed of some property, for the sake of which her relatives wished to put her out of the world.

If every suttee were conducted in this way, very few would take place in India. The woman was not much burned, with the exception of some parts on her arms and legs. Had she performed suttee, they would have raised a little cenotaph, or a mound of earth by the side of the river, and every Hindoo who passed the place returning from bathing would have made salam to it; a high honour to the family.

6. Official Documents, Lord William Cavendish Bentinck

After having lost most of their first empire in north America, the British stabilized the basis for their second empire by expanding their territorial control in India through the instrument of their East India Company. Lord William Cavendish Bentinck (1774-1839), the second son in an aristocratic, landed family, had entered the British army. His influential contacts secured several major political offices for him including the governorship of Madras from 1803 to 1807 that he assumed when he was only 28 and much later the governor-generalship of India from 1828 to 1835.

In 1807 the directors of the English East India Company had decided that Lord Bentinck, then the youthful governor of Madras, was personally responsible for a mutiny among Indian soldiers or sepoys in the British Indian army in Vellore, Madras, over the issue of European headgear that was thought to infringe on Hindu religious customs. They recalled him in disgrace to London. This earlier experience probably influenced Bentinck as the new Governor-General in Calcutta to move cautiously in reaching a decision on the highly controversial ritual of sati.

Influenced by the utilitarian doctrines of James Mill, Bentinck had acquired a reputation as a liberal, even radical, reformer before he arrived in India in 1828 when British policy toward sati was a hotly debated topic. In response to claims that the British legalization of sati if voluntary in 1813 had actually increased the number of deaths by sati, Bentinck requested reports from British district officials about the occurrence of sati and solicited the opinions of Hindu elites in Calcutta about the legitimacy of the ritual. In November 1829 he circulated a minute or memorandum in which he outlined his reasons for deciding to prohibit the ritual of sati. In this minute written a year after his arrival Bentinck provided reasons why the British first allowed sati if it were legal and then the justification for his decision to prohibit the practice and thus reverse the policies of his predecessors.

In the following month Bentinck and his council of three other Britons promulgated a regulation or law declaring the practice of sati to be illegal and punishable in British criminal courts. Lord Bentinck was assisted by an Executive Council of three other British officers in formulating the policies to govern the Company’s political possessions in India. First, he had to convince his Councilors of the validity of his decision to prohibit sati so that they would vote to support his position. Then they collectively issued a Regulation that became the law within the areas that the Company

directly ruled that included about one third of the Indian subcontinent in 1829. Consider how this Regulation as a public document justified the prohibition on sati and then sought to answer objections to the prohibition among Hindu supporters of sati.

Source: The Correspondence of Lord William Cavendish Bentinck, Governor-General of India 1828-1835. Edited with an introduction by C. H. Philips. Vol. I. 1828-1831. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Bentinck's Minute on Sati: 8 November 1829

Whether the question be to continue or to discontinue the practice of suttee, the decision is equally surrounded by an awful responsibility. To consent to the consignment, year after year, of hundreds of innocent victims to a cruel and untimely end, when the power exists of preventing it, is a predicament which no conscience can contemplate without horror. But on the other hand, if heretofore received opinions are to be considered of any value, to put to hazard, by a contrary course, the very safety of the British empire in India, and to extinguish at once all hopes of those great improvements affecting the condition, not of hundreds and thousands, but of millions, which can only be expected from the continuance of our supremacy, is an alternative which, even in the light of humanity itself, may be considered as a still greater evil. It is upon this first and highest consideration alone, the good of man-kind, that the tolerance of this inhuman and impious rite can, in my opinion, be justified on the part of the government of a civilized nation. While the solution of this question is appalling from the unparalleled magnitude of its possible results, the considerations belonging to it are such as to make even the stoutest mind distrust its decision. On the one side, religion, humanity under the most appalling form, as well as vanity and ambition, in short all the most powerful influences over the human heart, are arrayed to bias and mislead the judgment. On the other side, the sanction of countless ages, the example of all the Mussulman conquerors, the unanimous concurrence in the same policy of our own most able rulers, together with the universal veneration of the people, seem authoritatively to forbid, both to feeling and to reason, any interference on the exercise of their natural prerogative. In venturing to be the first to deviate from this practice, it becomes me to shew, that nothing has been yielded to feeling, but that reason, and reason alone, has governed the decision. So far indeed from presuming to condemn the conduct of my predecessors, I am ready to say, that in the same circumstances, I should have acted as they have done. So far from being chargeable with political rashness, as this departure from an established policy might infer, I hope to be able so completely to prove the safety of the measure, as even to render unnecessary any calculation of the degree of risk, which for the attainment of so great a benefit, might wisely and justly be incurred. So far also from being the sole champion of a great and dangerous innovation, I shall be able to prove that the vast preponderance of present authority has long been in favour of abolition. Past experience indeed ought to prevent me, above all men, from coming lightly to so positive a conclusion. When governor of Madras, I saw, in the mutiny of Vellore, the dreadful consequences of a supposed violation of religious customs upon the minds of the native population and soldiery: I cannot forget that I was then the innocent victim of that unfortunate

catastrophe, and I might reasonably dread, when the responsibility would justly attach to *me* in the event of failure, a recurrence of the same fate. Prudence and self-interest would counsel me to tread in the footsteps of my predecessors. But in a case of such momentous importance to humanity and civilization, that man must be reckless of all his present or future happiness who could listen to the dictates of so wicked and selfish a policy. With the firm undoubting conviction entertained upon this question, I should be guilty of little short of the crime of multiplied murder, if I could hesitate in the performance of this solemn obligation. I have been already stung with this feeling. Every day's delay adds a victim to the dreadful list, which might perhaps have been prevented by a more early submission of the present question. But during the whole of the present year, much public agitation has been excited, and when discontent is abroad, when exaggerations of all kinds are busily circulated, and when the native army have been under a degree of alarm, lest their allowances should suffer with that of their European officers, it would have been unwise to have given a handle to artful and designing enemies to disturb the public peace. The recent measures of government for protecting the interests of the sepoys against the late reduction of companies, will have removed all apprehension of the intentions of government; and the consideration of this circumstance having been the sole cause of hesitation on my part, I will now proceed, praying the blessing of God upon our counsels, to state the grounds upon which my opinion has been formed.

We have now before us two reports of the nizamat adalat with statements of suttees in 1827 and 1828, exhibiting a decrease of 54 in the latter year as compared with 1827, and a still greater proportion as compared with former years. If this diminution could be ascribed to any change of opinion upon the question, produced by the progress of education or civilization, the fact would be most satisfactory; and to disturb this sure though slow process of self correction would be most impolite and unwise. But I think it may be safely affirmed, that though in Calcutta truth may be said to have made a considerable advance among the higher orders; yet in respect to the population at large, no change whatever has taken place, and that from these causes at least rite can be rationally entertained. The decrease, if it be real, may be the result of less sickly seasons, as the increase in 1824 and 1825 was of the greater prevalence of cholera. But it is probably in a greater measure due to the more open discouragement of the practice given by the greater part of the European functionaries in latter years; the effect of which would be to produce corresponding activity in the police officers, by which either the number would be really diminished, or would be made to appear so in the returns.

It seems to be the very general opinion that our interference has hitherto done more harm than good, by lending a sort of sanction to the ceremony, while it has undoubtedly tended to cripple the efforts of magistrates and others to prevent the practice.

I think it will clearly appear, from a perusal of the documents annexed to this minute, and from the facts which I shall have to adduce, that the passive submission of the people to the influence and power beyond the law, which in fact and practically may be and is often exercised without opposition by every public officer, is so great, that the suppression of the rite would be completely effected by

a tacit sanction alone on the part of government. This mode of extinguishing it has been recommended by many of those whose advice has been asked, and no doubt this, in several respects might be a preferable course, as being equally effectual, while more silent, not exciting the alarm which might possibly come from a public enactment, and from which, in case of failure, it would be easy to retreat with less inconvenience and without any compromise of character. But this course is clearly not open to government, bound by parliament to rule by law, and not by their good pleasure. Under the present position of the British empire moreover, it may be fairly doubted, if any such underhand proceeding would be really good policy. When we had powerful neighbours and had greater reason to doubt our own security, expediency might recommend an indirect and more cautious proceeding, but now that we are supreme, my opinion is decidedly in favour of an open, avowed and general prohibition, resting altogether upon the moral goodness of the act, and our power to enforce it, and so decided is my feeling against any half measure, that were I not convinced of the safety of total abolition, I certainly should have advised the cessation of all interference.

...

Sati Regulation XVII, A. D. 1829 of the Bengal Code: 4 December 1829

A regulation for declaring the practice of suttee, or of burning or burying alive the widows of Hindus, illegal, and punishable by the criminal courts. Passed by the governor-general in council on the 4th December 1829, corresponding with the loth Auhun 1236 Bengal era; ...

The practice of suttee, or of burning or burying alive the widows of Hindus, is revolting to the feelings of human nature; it is nowhere enjoined by the religion of the Hindus as an imperative duty; on the contrary a life of purity and retirement on the part of the widow is more especially and preferably inculcated, and by a vast majority of that people throughout India the practice is not kept up, nor observed: in some extensive districts it does not exist: in those in which it has been most frequent it is notorious that in many instances acts of atrocity have been perpetrated which have been shocking to the Hindus themselves, and in their eyes unlawful and wicked. The measures hitherto adopted to discourage and prevent such acts have failed of success, and the governor-general in council is deeply impressed with the conviction that the abuses in question cannot be effectually put an end to without abolishing the practice altogether. Actuated by these considerations the governor-general in council, without intending to depart from one of the first and most important principles of the system of British government in India, that all classes of the people be secure in the observance of their religious usages, so long as that system can be adhered to without violation of the paramount dictates of justice and humanity, has deemed it right to establish the following rules, which are hereby enacted to be in force from the time of their promulgation throughout the territories immediately subject to the presidency of Fort William.

II. The practice of suttee, or of burning or burying alive the widows of Hindus, is hereby declared illegal, and punishable by the criminal courts.

...

IV. First. On the receipt of the reports required to be made by the police daroghas, under the provisions of the foregoing section, the magistrate or joint magistrate of the jurisdiction in which the sacrifice may have taken place, shall enquire into the circumstances of the case, and shall adopt the necessary measures for bringing the parties concerned in promoting it to trial before the court of circuit.

Secondly. It is hereby declared, that after the promulgation of this regulation all persons convicted of aiding and abetting in the sacrifice of a Hindu widow, by burning or burying her alive, whether the sacrifice be voluntary on her part or not, shall be deemed guilty of culpable homicide, and shall be liable to punishment by fine or by both fine and imprisonment, at the discretion of the court of circuit, according to the nature and circumstances of the case, and the degree of guilt established against the offender; nor shall it be held to be any plea of justification that he or she was desired by the party sacrificed to assist in putting her to death.

Thirdly. Persons committed to take their trial before the court of circuit for the offence above mentioned shall be admitted to bail or not, at the discretion of the magistrate or joint magistrate, subject to the general rules in force in regard to the admission of bail.

V. It is further deemed necessary to declare, that nothing contained in this regulation shall be construed to preclude the court of nizamat adalat from passing sentence of death on persons convicted of using violence or compulsion, or of having assisted in burning or burying alive a Hindu widow while labouring under a state of intoxication, or stupefaction, or other cause impeding the exercise of her free will, when, from the aggravated nature of the offence, proved against the prisoner, the court may see no circumstances to render him or her a proper object of mercy.

7. Petition, Orthodox Hindus

The debates that led to the Company's prohibition of sati stimulated elite orthodox Hindus to form organizations such as the Dharma Society to protect what they deemed traditional Hindu practices. Orthodox Hindus staunchly argued that custom as well as Hindu scriptures supported self-immolation by Hindu widows as their sacred duty. Further they claimed that Hindu widows were willing participants in sati because of their devotion to their deceased husbands and the promised spiritual rewards for themselves and their marital and natal families. These supporters of sati viewed Lord Bentinck's Regulation of 4 December 1829 as an attack of the British imperial government in India on Hindu religion and undue governmental interference in the realm of religious practice and family life. Their arguments raise key questions about the legitimacy of government control of social practices and customs that people claim are integral to their religious beliefs.

Source: "The Petition of the Orthodox Hindu community of Calcutta against the Suttee Regulation." 14 January 1830. In J. K. Majumdar, ed. *Raja Rammohun Roy and Progressive Movements in India: A Selection from Records, 1775-1845*. Calcutta: Art Press, 1941

The Petition of the orthodox Hindu community of Calcutta against the Suttee Regulation, together with a paper of Authorities, and the Reply of the Governor-General thereto. (January 14, 1830).

"To The Right Hon. Lord William Cavendish Bentinck, &c.

"My Lord: We, the undersigned, beg leave respectfully to submit the following petition to your Lordship in Council, in consequence of having heard that certain persons, taking upon themselves to represent the opinions and feelings of the Hindoo inhabitants of Calcutta, have misrepresented these opinions and feelings, and that your Lordship in Council is about to pass a resolution, founded on such erroneous statements, to put a stop to the practice of performing suttees, an interference with the religion and customs of the Hindoos, which we most earnestly deprecate, and cannot view without the most serious alarm.

"With the most profound respect for your Lordship in Council, we, the undersigned Hindoo inhabitants of the city of Calcutta, beg leave to approach you in order to state such circumstances as appear to us necessary to draw the attention of government fully to the measure in contemplation, and the light in which it will be regarded by the greater part of the more respectable Hindoo population of the Company's territories, who are earnest in the belief, as well as in the profession of their religion.

From time immemorial the Hindoo religion has been established, and in proportion to its antiquity has been its influence over the minds of its followers. In no religion has apostacy been more rare, and none has resisted more successfully the fierce spirit of proselytism which animated the first Mahomedan conquerors.

That the Hindoo religion is founded, like all religions, on usage as well as precept, and one when immemorial is held equally sacred with the other. Under the sanction of immemorial usage as well as precept, Hindoo widows perform, of their own accord and pleasure, and for the benefit of their husbands' souls and for their own, the sacrifice of self-immolation called suttee, which is not merely a sacred duty but a high privilege to her who sincerely believes in the doctrines of their religion; and we humbly submit that any interference with a persuasion of so high and self-annihilating a nature, is not only an unjust and intolerant dictation in matters of conscience, but is likely wholly to fail in procuring the end proposed.

"Even under the first Mussulman conquerors of Hindostan, and certainly since this country came under the Mogul Government, notwithstanding the fanaticism and intolerance of their religion, no interference with the practice of suttee was ever attempted. Since that period, and for nearly a century, the power of the British government has been established in Bengal, Behar, and Orissa, and none of the governors-general, or their councils, have hitherto interfered in any manner to the prejudice of the Hindoo religion or customs; and we submit, that by various Acts of the Parliament of Great Britain, under the authority of which the

Hon. Company itself exists, our religion and Laws, usages and customs, such as they have existed from time immemorial, are inviolably secured to us.

We learn with surprise and grief, that while this is confessed on all hands, the abolition of the practice of suttee is attempted to be defended on the ground that there is no positive law or precept enjoining it: a doctrine derived from a number of Hindoos, who have apostatized from the religion of their forefathers, who have defiled themselves by eating and drinking forbidden things in the society of Europeans, and are endeavouring to deceive your Lordship in Council by assertions that there is no law regarding suttee practices, and that all Hindoos of intelligence and education are ready to assent to the abolition contemplated, on the ground that the practice of suttee is not authorized by the laws fundamentally established and acknowledged by all Hindoos as sacred. But we humbly submit that in a question so delicate as the interpretation of our sacred books, and the authority of our religious usages, none but pundits and brahmins, and teachers of holy lives, and known learning and authority, ought to be consulted; and we are satisfied, and flatter ourselves with the hope, that your Lordship in Council will not regard the assertion of men who have neither any faith nor care for the memory of their ancestors or their religion: and that of your Lordship in Council will assume to yourself the difficult and delicate task of regulating the conscience of a whole people, and deciding what it ought to believe, and what it ought to reject, on the authority of its own sacred writers, that such a task will be undertaken only after anxious and strict inquiry, and patient consultation with men known and revered for their attachment to the Hindoo religion, the authority of their lives, and their knowledge of the sacred books which contain its doctrines ; and if such an examination should be made, we are confident that your Lordship in Council will find our statements to be correct, and will learn that the measure will be regarded with honor and dismay throughout the Company's dominions, as the signal of an universal attack upon all we revere.

8. Engraving, James Peggs

Toward the end of the 1700s the evangelical movement in Britain argued that one's commitment to Christ should be reflected in action, primarily the effort to end slavery in the British empire and to proselytize or seek converts among the "heathen." Initially the English East India Company had prohibited Christian missionaries from living within their territories and seeking Indian converts in order to prevent any unrest or opposition to the Company's trade and political control. In 1813 when the British Parliament was considering the renewal of the charter that authorized the Company's trade and political control in India, members of Parliament who were committed evangelical Christians, mainly Baptists and Methodists, forced the Company to permit missionaries to settle in their territory. Once in India, Protestant missionaries criticized Hindu religious practices such as the use of images in worship and social customs such as early marriage and sati as superstitious and barbaric.

James Peggs (1793-1850) had been a missionary at Cuttack, Orissa, south of Calcutta, and published this edition of his book in 1832 when Parliament was again reviewing the charter of Company. Then residing in England, he sought to influence Parliament to give firm instructions to the Company to exert greater control over Hindu social customs and religious practices that he considered evil. Peggs claimed that self-immolation continued among Hindu widows and that the Company must take more vigorous measures to enforce the prohibition on sati.

This illustration “Burning a Hindoo Widow” appears opposite page 213, the first page of Peggs’s compendium of sources and commentary on “Suttees.” It is one of the most frequently reproduced 19th-century images of the ritual of sati. It was intended to influence Britons to support strong enforcement of the prohibition on sati. Compare this image to that in Drake’s travel collection of 1768 and note the details of this engraving that would serve Peggs’s goal.

Source: “Burning a Hindoo Widow”. In Peggs, James. *India’s Cries to British Humanity, Relative to Infanticide, British Connection with Idolatry, Ghau Murders, Suttee, Slavery, and Colonization in India*. Third edition, revised and enlarged. London: Published for the author by Simkin and Marshall, 1832.



9. Nonfiction, James Peggs

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In this book, Peggs includes a description of a sati witnessed Rev. J. England of Bangalore, in the princely state of Mysore (now the state of Karnataka in which the dominant language is Kannada or Carnatic) in south India, in June 1826. Although Company law, which permitted sati if it were voluntary, did not extend to a princely state, England is still concerned to indicate whether or not the widow was coerced to commit self-immolation. Peggs's stated that his image of "Burning a Hindoo Widow" was a representation of that sati.

Source: Peggs, James. *India's Cries to British Humanity, Relative to Infanticide, British Connection with Idolatry, Ghau Murders, Suttee, Slavery, and Colonization in India.* Third edition, revised and enlarged. London: Published for the author by Simkin and Marshall, 1832.

The account of the Suttee represented in the engraving, is from the pen of the Rev. J. England, of Bangalore, under the Madras Presidency, in June 1826.

"I received a note from a gentleman that a *Suttee* was about to take place near his house. On hastening to the spot, I found the preparations considerably advanced, and a large concourse of spectators assembled. On my left stood the horrid pile; it was an oblong bed of dry cow-dung cakes, about ten feet long, seven wide, and three high. At each corner of it, a rough stake, about eight feet in length, was driven into the ground, and about a foot from the top of these supporters was fastened, by cords, a frame of the same dimensions as the bed, and forming a canopy. This frame must have been of considerable weight; it was covered with very dry small faggots, which the officiating Brahmuns continued to throw upon it, till they rose two feet above the

frame-work. On my right, sat the poor deluded widow, who was to be the victim of this heart-rending display of Hindoo *purity and gentleness*; she was attended by a dozen or more Brahmuns; her mother, sister, and *son* (an interesting boy of about three years of age), and other relatives were also with her. *Her own infant, now twelve months old, was craftily kept from her by the Brahmuns.* She had already performed a number of preparatory ceremonies; one of which was washing herself in a strong decoction of saffron, which is supposed to have a purifying effect. It imparted to her a horrid ghastliness;—her eyes indicated a degree of melancholy wildness; an unnatural smile now and then played on her countenance: and everything about her person and her conduct indicated that *narcotics* had been administered in no small quantities. Close by me stood the *Fousdar*, a native officer, who, besides regulating the police, is the chief military officer of the station. So heartily did he engage in this murderous work, that he gave the poor widow twenty pagodas (between six and seven pounds sterling), *to confirm her resolution to be burned!*

“The Rev. Mr. Campbell addressed her in the Carnatic language, but the effect of his address was counteracted by the influence of the Brahmuns. The pile being completed, a quantity of straw as spread on the top. An increase of activity was soon visible among the men, whose *‘feet are swift to shed blood.’* Muntrams having been repeated over the pile, and the woman and every thing being in readiness, the hurdle to which the corpse of the husband had been fastened was now raised by six of the officiating Brahmuns; the end of a cord about two yards long, attached at the other end to the head of the bier, was taken by the widow, and the whole moved slowly towards the pile. The corpse was laid on the right side, and four men furnished with sharp swords, one stationed at each corner, now drew them from their scabbards. The trembling, ghastly offering to the Moloch of Hindoism, then began her *seven circuits* round the fatal pile, and finally halted opposite to her husband’s corpse, at the left side of it, where she was evidently greatly agitated. Five or six Brahmuns began to talk to her with much vehemence, till, in a paroxysm of desperation, assisted by the Brahmuns, the hapless widow ascended the bed of destruction. *Her mother and her sister* stood by, weeping and agonized; but all was in vain—the blood-thirsty men prevailed. The devoted woman then proceeded to disengage the rings from her fingers, wrists, and ears; her murderers stretching out their greedy hands to receive them: afterwards all her trinkets, &c., were distributed among the same relentless and rapacious priests. While in the act of taking a ring from her ear, her *mother and sister*, unable any longer to sustain the extremity of their anguish, went up to the side of the pile, and *entreated that the horrid purpose might be abandoned*; but the woman fearing the encounter, without uttering a word, or even casting a *parting glance* at her supplicating parent and sister, threw herself down on the pile, and clasped the half-putrid corpse in her arms. Straw in abundance was heaped on the dead and the *living*; guns, resin, and other inflammable substances were thrown upon the straw which covered the bodies, while muntrams were repeated at their head; six or eight pieces of kindled cow-dung were introduced among the straw, at different parts of the pile; ghee and inflammable materials were applied, and the whole blazed in as many places. The men with swords at each corner then hacked the cords, which supported the canopy of faggots—it fell and covered the lifeless corpse and the living woman! A piercing sound caught my ear; I listened a few seconds, and, notwithstanding the

noise of the multitude, heard the shrieks of misery which issued from the burning pile. In an agony of feeling, we directed the attention of the Brahmuns to this; and *while so doing*, again—still louder and more piercing than before—the burning woman rent the air with her shrieks! Several of the Brahmuns called out to the *half-consumed, still conscious and imploring widow*, TO COMFORT HER! The pile was now enveloped in flames, and so intense was the heat, that, as by one consent, the Brahmuns and spectators retreated several paces; they then sang a Sanscrit hymn; the hymn ended, but not the shrieks and groans of the agonized sufferer; *they* still pierced our ears, and almost rent our hearts! Scarcely conscious of what I did, I left this fiendish barbarity.

10. Nonfiction, Pandita Ramabai

Literacy among Indian women was low during the 19th century and so primary sources written by Indian women are rare for this period. One notable exception is Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922), an influential Indian woman social reformer from Maharashtra in western India. Her unorthodox brahman father educated her so that she earned the title of pandita because her knowledge of Hindu religious texts in Sanskrit was deemed equal to that of male pandits or scholars. Widowed at the age of 24 shortly after her one daughter was born, Ramabai traveled to England in 1883 to seek medical education. During her stay there she converted to Christianity and decided that her life mission was to educate and train Hindu child widows to be autonomous women. In February 1886 she sailed for the United States initially to attend the graduation of her cousin, Anandbai Joshi, from the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania. Ramabai wrote *The High Caste Hindu Woman* in 1886-7 to raise funds in the United States to pay for her expenses there and to build an endowment for her future work in India. In this excerpt from the chapter in her book on widows, Ramabai argued that claiming legitimacy for the self-immolation of Hindu widows resulted from an erroneous interpretation of one word in the Vedas.

Source: Ramabai, Pandita. The High-Caste Hindu Woman. 1887. Reprint, New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1901.

It is very difficult to ascertain the motives of those who invented the terrible custom of the so-called Sutte, which was regarded as a sublimely meritorious act. As Mann the greatest authority next to the Vedas did not sanction this sacrifice, the priests saw the necessity of producing some text which would overcome the natural fears of the widow as well as silence the critic who should refuse to allow such a horrid rite without strong authority. So the priests said there was a text in the Rig-veda which according to their own rendering reads thus:
“Om! let these women, not to be widowed, good wives, adorned with collyrium, holding clarified butter, consign themselves to the fire! Immortal, not childless, not husbandless, well adorned with gems, let them pass into the fire whose original element is water.”

Here was an authority greater than that of Mann or of any other law giver, which

could not be disobeyed. The priests and their allies, pictured heaven in the most beautiful colors and described various enjoyments so vividly that the poor widow became madly impatient to get to the blessed place in company with her departed husband. Not only was the woman assured of her getting into heaven by this sublime act, but also that by this great sacrifice she would secure salvation to herself and husband, and to their families to the seventh generation. Be they ever so sinful, they would surely attain the highest bliss in heaven, and prosperity on earth. Who would not sacrifice herself if she were sure of such a result to herself and her loved ones? Besides this, she was conscious of the miseries and degradation to which she would be subjected now that she had survived her husband. The momentary agony of suffocation in the flames was nothing compared to her lot as a widow. She gladly consented and voluntarily offered herself to please the gods and men.

...

The act was supposed to be altogether a voluntary one, and no doubt it was so in many cases. Some died for the love stronger than death which they cherished for their husbands. Some died not because they had been happy in this world, but because they believed with all the heart that they should be made happy hereafter. Some to obtain great renown, for tombstones and monuments were erected to those who thus died, and afterwards the names were inscribed on the long list of family gods; others again, to escape the thousand temptations, and sins and miseries which they knew would fall to their lot as widows. Those who from pure ambition or from momentary impulse, declared their intentions thus to die, very often shrank from the fearful altar; no sooner did they feel the heat of the flames than they tried to leap down and escape the terrible fate; but it was too late. They had taken the solemn oath which must never be broken, priests and other men were at hand to force them to re-mount the pyre.

...

That the text quoted from the Veda was mistranslated, and a part of it forged, could have been easily shown had all Brahmans known the meaning of the Veda. The Vedic language is the oldest form of Sanskrit, and greatly differs from the later form. Many know the Vedas by heart and repeat them without a mistake, but few indeed, are those that know the meaning of the texts they repeat.

11. Object, Sati Handprints

This image of the hands of Hindu widows and concubines of the ruling family of the Rajput state of Jodhpur also known as Marwar memorizes the devotion of these women and the high status of the men for whom the women committed sati. Indian princes such as the maharajas of Jodhpur, who had yielded control of their defense, foreign relations and communications to the English Company, were internally autonomous. Consequently the Sati Regulation of 1829 did not apply to their territories until individual princes, frequently under informal pressure from the British, decided to prohibit sati within their states. In some Rajput states such as Jodhpur, self-immolation continued to occur among widows and concubines in the ruling families until the mid-1800s.

Source: Photograph of handprints of satis impressed on a gateway when they left the Mehrangarh Fort in Jodhpur, Rajasthan on their way to commit self-immolation on their husbands' funeral pyres outside the Fort.

