

Teaching Materials

Teaching Strategies

This section provides primary sources that document how Indian and European men and one English and one Indian woman have described the practice of sati or the self-immolation of Hindu widows.

Although they are all critical of self-immolation, Francois Bernier, Fanny Parks, Lord William Bentinck, and Rev. England present four different European perspectives on the practice of sati and what it represents about Indian culture in general, and the Hindu religion and Hindu women in particular. They also indicate increasing negativism in European attitudes toward India and the Hindu religion in general. It would be useful to compare the attitudes of Bentinck and England as representing the secular and sacred aspects of British criticism of sati. A comparison of Bentinck's minute with the subsequent legislation also reveals differences in tone between private and public documents of colonial officials. Finally, a comparison between the Fanny Parks and the three men should raise discussion on whether or not the gender and social status of the writer made any difference in his or her appraisal of the practice of self-immolation.

The three sources by Indian men and one by an Indian woman illustrate the diversity of their attitudes toward sati. The Marathi source illuminates the material concerns of relatives of the Hindu widow who is urged to adopt a son so as to keep a potentially lucrative office within the extended family. These men are willing to undertake intense and delicate negotiations to secure a suitably related male child who could be adopted. This letter also documents that adoption was a legitimate practice among Hindus and that Hindu women as well as men could adopt an heir. Ram Mohan Roy's argument illustrates a rationalist effort to reform Hindu customs with the assistance of British legislation. Roy illustrates one of the many ways in which Indians collaborate with British political power in order to secure change within Indian society. He also enabled the British to counter arguments of orthodox Hindus about the scriptural basis for the legitimacy of self-immolation of Hindu widows. The petition of the orthodox Hindu community in Calcutta, the capital of the Company's territories in India, documents an early effort of Indians to keep the British colonial power from legislating on matters pertaining to the private sphere of Indian family life. Finally, Pandita Ramabai reflects the ways in which ancient Hindu scriptures and their interpretation continued to dominate debate. Students should consider how Ramabai's effort to raise funds for her future work among child widows in India might have influenced her discussion of sati.

Two key issues should be emphasized. First, both Indian supporters and European and Indian opponents of the practice of self-immolation argue their positions on the bodies of Hindu women and all the men involved appeal to Hindu scriptures to legitimate their support or opposition. Second, the voices of Indian women were filtered through the sieve of Indian and European men and a very few British women until the late 19th century.

Discussion Questions:

- How do the written and visual sources portray the Hindu women who commit self-immolation? Possible aspects range from physical appearance and age, motivation, evidence of physical pain that even the most devoted woman must suffer while burning to death to any evidence of the agency or autonomy of the Hindu widow in deciding to commit sati. Are any differences discernible and if so, do they seem related to gender or nationality of the observer or time period in which they were observed?
- How are the brahman priests who preside at the self-immolation portrayed in Indian and European sources? What might account for any similarities and differences?
- What reasons are used to deter Hindu widows from committing sati? What do these reasons reveal about the nature of family life in India and the relationships between men and women?
- What do the reasons that orthodox Hindus provide to European observers and to Indian reformers reveal about the significance of sati for the practice of the Hindu religion? What do their arguments reveal about orthodox Hindu attitudes toward women and the family?
- How are Hindu scriptures used in various ways in the debates before and after the prohibition of sati?
- What is the tone of the petition from 800 Hindu to their British governor? Whom do they claim to represent? What is their justification for the ritual of self-immolation? What is their attitude toward the Mughal empire whose Muslim rulers had preceded the British? What is their characterization of the petitioners toward those Hindus who support the prohibition on sati? How do the petitioners envision the proper relationship between the state and the practice of religion among its subjects?
- Who or what factors do European observers, British officials, and Indian opponents of sati hold to be responsible for the continuance of the practice of sati?
- What were the reasons that widows gave for committing sati? Were they religious, social or material motives? What is the evidence that the widows were voluntarily committing sati before 1829? What reasons did the opponents of sati give for the decisions of widows to commit self-immolation? What reasons did opponents give for widows who tried to escape from their husbands' pyres?
- What are the reasons that Lord Bentinck and his Executive Council cite for their decision to declare the practice of sati illegal? Are the arguments similar to or different from his arguments in his minute a month earlier? What do these reasons reveal about British attitudes toward their role or mission in India? Do they use

any of the arguments cited by Ram Mohan Roy or Pandita Ramabai?

- What do these sources, both those who oppose sati and those who advocate it, reveal about their attitudes to the Hindu religion in particular and Indian culture in general?

Lesson Plan: Perceptions of Sati: A Comparative Analysis

Time Estimate

Five 50-minute class periods and DBQ as an independent assignment.

Objectives

After completing this lesson, students will be able to:

1. analyze textual primary sources.
2. analyze visual primary sources.
3. recognize the ways that language reveals point-of-view.
4. analyze how the cultural biases of Europeans and Indians influence their attitudes toward the act of sati.

Materials

- Sufficient copies of the [Sati Introduction](#)
- Sufficient copies of the following sources (European viewpoint), stapled together:
 - [Source 1: Letter, Francois Bernier](#)
 - [Source 5: Diary, Fanny Parks](#)
 - [Source 8: Engraving, James Peggs](#)
 - [Source 9: Nonfiction, James Peggs](#)
- Sufficient copies of the following sources (Indian viewpoint), stapled together:
 - [Source 4: Nonfiction, Rajah Rammohun Roy](#)
 - [Source 7: Petition, Orthodox Hindus](#)
 - [Source 10: Nonfiction, Pandita Ramabai](#)
 - [Source 11: Object, Sati Handprints](#)
- Sufficient copies of [Primary Source Analysis Worksheet: Images](#)
- Sufficient copies of [Primary Source Analysis Worksheet: Texts](#)

Strategies

- **Hook:**
 - Ask students to respond on paper to the following question, “What traditions does your family engage in that other families might think are strange or unusual?”
 - After students have written down their individual answers, have them share them with the class.
 - Write the words “cultural bias” on the board and give students the definition: cultural bias is when we judge others according to the standards or norms of our own culture. Lead a discussion linking that definition back to the examples they shared.

- **Contextualizing the Sources:**
 - Direct students to read the [Sati Introduction](#).
 - After they have read the selection, have students answer the following questions on paper, then discuss as a class:
 - Define what the word “sati” refers to today.
 - What is the literal translation of the word in Sanskrit? Why might that word have been chosen to refer to the self-immolation ritual of widows?
 - What other restrictions have historically been put on widows?
 - Why might widows as a social group have had restrictions put on them? What about them makes them vulnerable? What about them makes them a possible threat to society?
 - Create a chronology of European views of sati.
 - How did European views of sati change over time?

- **Interpreting the Sources:**
 - Direct students to read each of the primary sources, being sure to keep the European sources separate from the Indian sources.
 - Distribute [Primary Source Analysis Worksheet: Images](#) and [Primary Source Analysis Worksheet: Texts](#).
 - Direct students to fill out the worksheets for each of the eight assigned sources. They should complete this individually, either for homework or in class.
 - Discuss their responses as a class.

- **Comparing Points-of-View:**
 - Have students go back through the textual sources and circle words used to characterize: the widows, the Brahmins, and the act of sati. Remind them to keep the sources written by Europeans separate from the sources written by Indians.
 - Divide students into small groups, then ask them to create charts of the words they circled in the documents. They must create two separate charts: the first will list words used by Europeans to describe widows, Brahmins, and sati. The second chart will list words used by Indians to describe widows, Brahmins, and sati.
 - Instruct students to use their charts to answer the questions below, continuing to work in small groups.
 - How would you characterize the language used by Europeans to describe the widows? The Brahmins? The act of sati?
 - Students should understand that the Europeans tend to

describe the widows as victims, the Brahmins as perpetrators of evil, and the act of sati as a strange, barbaric ritual. Be sure to link these characterizations back to the concept of cultural bias.

- How would you characterize the language used by Indians to describe the widows? The Brahmins? The act of sati?
 - Students should see that the language used by Indians allows for more agency on the part of widows. Widows are seen as having a variety of motives for engaging in the act of sati and having some control over the act itself. Brahmins are characterized in multiple ways but are generally not demonized. The act itself is described in more neutral language than the Europeans used. In general, Indians do less stereotyping and generalizing about the act and its participants.
- Discuss their answers as a class.
- Conclude by discussing why European and Indian perceptions may have differed and what motives the Europeans and the Indians may have had for using the language they did.
 - Students should again connect European and Indian perceptions with the concept of cultural bias. Because the Indians are familiar with sati and see it as part of their cultural standard, their characterizations of it are more complex. Indians are also less likely to characterize women as being victims than are Europeans. Both sides use inflammatory language to try to persuade their audiences to support their argument.
- **Document-Based Essay Question:**
 - Distribute copies of the Document-Based Essay Question.
 - Allow students time in class to brainstorm and outline their ideas.
 - Instruct students to complete the essay outside of class. Collect in the next class period.

Differentiation

Technology:

Teachers in classrooms with SMART Boards, student laptops and access to SMART programs may wish to integrate their technology into the “comparing points-of-view” portion of the lesson. After students circle the language choices made by the Europeans and the Indians, divide them into groups, giving one laptop to each group. Instruct

students to use the laptops to create two concept maps in SMART Ideas, one mapping the words used in the European sources, and one mapping the words used in the Indian sources. Then, have the groups e-mail their concept maps to the teacher. Choose the best ones, display them on the SMART Board, and use them as a model for the class discussion about how to characterize the language choices found in both sets of sources.

Advanced Students:

As a hook, ask students what rituals they can think of that involve the use of fire. Brainstorm a list as a class, then ask students to write down any themes that they see. One theme should be the association of fire with purification or chasteness. Discuss why this is true. Bring this theme up again at the end of the “Comparing Points of View” section of the lesson by asking students to compare European and Indian uses of fire and concepts of what it means to be pure.

In the “Interpreting Sources” step, only have students fill out a complete worksheet for visual image and one textual source. Rather than filling out the rest of the worksheets alone, then discussing them, accelerate the lesson by having students fill them out as you discuss the documents.

Instruct students to complete the Document-Based Essay at home; do not allow for extra in-class time to complete outlines and do brainstorming around the question.

Less Advanced Students:

Complete more steps of the lesson as a class rather than asking students to complete them individually. This is particularly necessary for the document interpretations: read the documents out loud as a class, then complete the text worksheets as a class. Add an intermediate step in creating the document-based essay: ask students to hand in an outline of their answer, receive feedback from you, then turn the outline into an essay.

Document Based Question (Suggested writing time: 40 minutes)

Directions: The following question is based on the documents included in this module. This question is designed to test your ability to work with and understand historical documents. Write an essay that:

- Has a relevant thesis and supports that thesis with evidence from the documents.
- Uses at least five sources in the module.
- Analyzes the documents by grouping them in as many appropriate ways as possible.
Does not simply summarize the documents individually.
- Takes into account both the sources of the documents and the authors' points of view.

You may refer to relevant historical information not mentioned in the documents.

Question: Significant differences exist between the European and Indian attitudes toward the act of sati and toward the participants in that act. Account for why those differences exist.

Be sure to analyze point of view in at least three documents or images.

What additional sources, types of documents, or information would you need to have a more complete view of this topic?

Bibliography

Anand, Mulk Raj. *Sati: A Writeup of Raja Ram Mohan Roy About Burning of Widows Alive*. Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation, 1989

This volume republishes tracts by Roy arguing against the legitimacy of the practice of self-immolation, related petitions from the 1820s, and articles from newspapers, news magazines, and left journals about the alleged sati of Roop Kanwar in 1987.

Banerjee, Pompa. *Burning Women: Widows, Witches, and Early Modern European Travelers in India*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

An exploration of how European accounts from the 1500s to the 1700s of the ritualized violence involved in the self-immolation of Hindu widows intersected with the burning of witches and criminal wives in Europe during the same centuries.

Hawley, John Stratton, ed. *Sati The Blessing and the Curse: The Burning of Wives in India*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

A collection of essays representing diverse viewpoints from a conference at Columbia University held in 1988 after the alleged sati of Roop Kanwar in 1987. The essays range from theoretical analyses to an intensive dissection of events in Deorala. The bibliography of primary and secondary sources is extensive.

Mani, Lata. *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998.

A highly influential analysis of the arguments and eyewitness accounts of British officials, Indian elites, and Christian missionaries about self-immolation that emphasizes how the debates were waged on the bodies of Indian women.

Yang, Anand A. "Whose Sati? Widow Burning in Early Nineteenth Century India." *Journal of Women's History*, 1, 2 (1989), 8-33.

A landmark analysis based on British district records in Bihar and Bengal from 1815 to 1828 that reveals the limited incidence of sati, the preponderance of low caste widows in most districts who committed self-immolation during this period, and probably the significance of economic motives in determining who committed sati.