

SATI CUSTOM IN NEPAL: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Basudevlal Das

Department of History, TU, Thakur Ram Multiple Campus, Birgunj, Nepal
E-mail: basudevlaldas@gmail.com

Abstract

Sati custom was a widow-burning custom prevalent in Hindu community in Indian sub-continent. This custom refers to a woman who burns herself willingly on the funeral pyre of her husband. The rationale behind the origin of sati custom was that a husband needed all the worldly belongings like wives also after his death. According to another notion, the fighting tribes of earlier times were proud of their women, thus they did not like to leave women astray after the death of their husbands, rather they preferred to kill them. So, they originated sati custom. The custom of sati was originally confined to royal families and to some high ranking noble families. We find the references of sati custom in many ancient literatures. In the age of 4th and 5th centuries B.C., the custom of sati was prevalent, which is confirmed by the writings of the Greek writers. In the history of Nepal, the Changu pillar inscription of 464 A.D. mentions about the custom of sati. This custom was more prevalent in later age where we find that there were one to thirty-three women in number were forced to become sati. Among them, there were wives, concubines and female slaves also. Right from the beginning, we see that the custom of sati, was not necessary. It was considered as a social evil. In India, due to the efforts of social reformers, the custom of sati was stopped in 1829 A.D. In Nepal, the first attempt in this end was made by Jang Bahadur Rana. In the period of Prime Minister Bir Shamsher (1885-1901 A.D.) the law about this was amended. Finally, Prime Minister Chandra Shamsher, on his 58th birthday, 8th July, 1920 A.D., enforced a legislation abolishing the longstanding horrible custom of sati. In this way, the custom of sati ended in Nepal.

Key words

Patriachal Society; Jang Bahadur Rana; Muluki Ain of 1854 AD; Chandra Shamsher; Legislation of 1920 AD

Introduction

Sati is a Sanskrit word which means a chaste and virtuous woman devoted to her husband. But in conventional meaning, it refers to a woman who burns herself willingly on the funeral pyre (*chita*) of her husband out of devotion (Chaturvedi and Tiwari, 1994, p.772). In this way, this was a widow-burning custom which was prevalent in the Hindu community in Indian sub-continent. This was a social evil of patriarchal society.

The rationale behind the origin of *sati* custom was that a husband needed all the worldly belongings like wives also after his death. It is in this belief the *sati* custom had its origin (Thapa, 1985, p.28). According to another notion, the fighting tribes of earlier times were proud of their women, thus they did not like to leave women astray after the death of their husbands, rather they preferred to kill them. So, they originated *sati* custom. This custom was beneficial for all husbands to be secured from the conspiracy of the wives because the husband's death would cause her immolation (Altekar, 1973, p.115-117). Thus, in propounding the *sati* custom, men neither cared the inhumane sacrifice of women nor they thought of the possible atrocities which made the *sati* custom a horror, later on though diluted in the name of religion (John and Jones, 1975, p.255). The custom of *sati* was originally confined to royal families and to some high ranking noble families. In later centuries, it was practiced by the Brahmana families also. But most of the available references refer to the custom prevalent only among the royal or Kshatriya families (Maskey, 1996, p. 65). In this way, we see that there were religious, social and economic causes, but, particularly, there were political causes also behind this custom.

References of *Sati* in ancient literatures

We find the references of *sati* custom in many ancient literatures. Rigveda, the most

ancient text of this sub-continent narrates of a woman who was lying on the funeral pyre of her husband and she was advised not to die with her husband, but to come in this world (*Rigveda*, 2040 V.S., p. 511-512). By this statement we are come to know that in those days the *sati* custom was in practice. Regarding this custom, we find similar narrations in the literatures like Atharvaveda, Taittiriya Aranyaka and Taittiriya Sanhita (Mishra, 1986, p. 438). In the Ramayana we find the references of this custom (*Valmikiya Ramayana*, 2045 V.S., p. 1497-1498). Likewise, in the Mahabharata also, there are several narrations about the *sati* custom. After the death of Maharaja Pandu, his wife Madri became *sati* (*Mahabharata*, 2045 V.S., p. 292). The death of Vasudeva, the father of Lord Krishna caused his four wives to become *sati* (*Mahabharata*, 2046 V.S., p. 6477-6478). So, after the death of Lord Krishna himself his eight queens (*pataranis*) became *sati* and his brother Balarama's wife Revati also became *sati* after her husband's death (*Vishnupurana*, 2041 V.S., p. 485). In the age of 4th and 5th centuries B.C., the custom of *sati* was prevalent. This is confirmed by the writings of the Greek writers (Kane, 1980. p. 348). Some historians argue that Scythians influenced the society of those days, because in Scythian society the wives and other useful things also were burnt with husband's dead body (Majumdar, 1953. p. 567). Kalidasa, a renowned poet of Sanskrit, narrates in his famous epic Kumarasambhavam (4th *sarga*) that Rati wanted to destroy her life entering into fire after her husband Kamadeva's death, but an oracle (*aakashvani*) forbidden her to do so (Tripathi, 1996. p. 200-201). Likewise, according to Vyasasmriti it was good for a Brahmana widow to set herself on the funeral pyre of her husband, otherwise she necessarily had to made her body pure performing the penance with shaving of her head (Chandra, 2006, p. 430). On the other hand, Brihaspatismriti also recommends the widow to enter into the funeral pyre of her

husband because this was good for her and performing this act she was adorable in the Brahmaloka, the world of Brahma (*ibid*, p. 232). Kalhana, a famous writer of 11th century, narrates in his book Rajatarangini many instances of *sati* custom (Kalhana, 1985, p. 142,168,194,220). Mrichchhakatikam, a well-known Sanskrit drama describes, in its 10th act, a widow who enters into the fire after her husband's death. In the Shrimadbhagavat Mahapurana, it is narrated that Gandhari became *sati* after her husband Dhritarashtra's death (*Shrimadbhagavata*, 2067 V.S., p. 99). The famous poet Somadeva Bhatta wrote a book named Kathasaritsagara in which he describes about the custom of *sati* (Bhatta, 2036 V.S., p. 728).

Sati custom in Nepal

The history of Nepal is written scientifically from the period of the Lichchhavi dynasty. The original place of the Lichchhavis was Vaishali. The Changu pillar inscription of 464 A.D., which is considered as the most ancient inscription in Nepal and founded by the Lichchhavi King Manadeva I, mentions about the custom of *sati*. There is a narration in this inscription that King Manadeva I forbidden his mother Rajyavati to become *sati*, when his father King Dharmadeva died (Joshi, 2030 V.S., Abhilekha No. 2). In this way, we know that though in those days the custom of *sati* was prevalent, but it was not considered as necessary. This custom was more prevalent in later age in medieval period, which is known as Malla period in the history of Nepal, because the rulers of Malla dynasty ruled over the country in this period. The Gopalarajavanshavali, a famous genealogy of Nepal narrates that in 1326 A.D., King Jayarudramalla died and his four queens became *sati* (Vajracharya and Malla, 1985, p. 35,54). Likewise, King Yakshamalla had two wives. When he died in 1481 A.D., one of his wives refused to become *sati* while other accepted and became *sati* (Regmi, 1966. Part III, p. 86-89). The image of God Narayana in Kirtipur has a pedestal inscription of 1530 A.D.

in which it is described that a person named Haku Joshi died and his wife Herabhi became *sati* (Shrestha, 2057 V.S. p. 92).

In medieval period there were three kingdoms within Kathmandu valley namely Kantipur or Kashtamandapa, Lalitapur and Bhaktapur. When Mahendramalla, the king of Kantipur, died then he was burnt with several women on the pyre. One of the famous kings of Kantipur, Pratapamalla's death in 1674 A.D. caused his nine queens to become *sati*. Likewise, nine queens became *sati* with Nripendramalla. In 1687 A.D. Parthivendramalla was assassinated with poison and twenty-four queens became *sati* with him. These both the kings were of Kantipur. When we study the history of Lalitapur, we find that after the death of king Shrinivasamalla in 1687 A.D., his nine women entered into the pyre. His son king Yoganarendramalla died in 1705 A.D., and his thirty-three women became *sati* among them twenty-four were his concubines. King Bhupalendramalla of Kantipur died in 1757 A.D. outside the kingdom. Then his women, keeping his horoscope with them, entered into the pyre (Regmi, 1966. Part II, p. 712-713). *Sati* custom was not only confined to the wives, female slaves, concubines, but mother also became *sati* on the death of her son. When king Vishvajitamalla of Lalitapur died in 1760 A.D., his mother also became *sati* (Joshi, 2068 V.S. p. 35). On the other hand, There are some examples of performing *sati* custom outside the royal family also. In 1680 A.D. Chikuti, the elder brother of the Chautara, died and his wife became *sati*. On that very year, his father died and his mother became *sati*. In 1678 A.D. a person named Tavadhika Khura died and his wife became *sati*. Likewise, in 1702 A.D. after the death of a person named Ishvaradasa his wife also became *sati* (Dhaubanjari,....., p. 194-195).

King Prithvinarayana Shaha of Gorkha conquered the Kathmandu valley kingdoms in middle of the 18th century and after this period the history of Nepal is described as modern period. In this period of history of Nepal

also, the custom of *sati* remained in practice, though not necessary like the previous period. Prithvinarayana Shaha died in 1775 A.D. and altogether nine women including his one queen Narendralakshmidēvi were burnt along with his dead body (Markham, 1971, p. 159). King Pratapasīngha Shaha, son of Prithvinarayana Shaha, died in 1777 A.D. and his dead body was cremated with seven female slaves (*keti*) and two illegitimate wives (Hasrat, 1970. p. 149). There can be no doubt that in some cases, for various reasons, unwilling widows were forced to burn themselves. King Ranabahadura Shaha was assassinated by his own step-brother in 1806 A.D. and then his fourteen female slaves and one concubine sent to *sati*. His senior queen was not present in capital. She was summoned and nine days after the death of the king, she was compelled to become *sati* due to the political conspiracy of Bhimasena Thapa (Chaudhari, 1960. p. 144). Bhimasena Thapa was so powerful that he forced the young queen of Girvanayuddha Vikrama Shaha to become *sati* for his political goal (Khatri and Dahal, 2053 V.S. p. 184). In an inscription of 1812 A.D., found in Gorkha, it is described that five wives of royal priest Radhavallabha Aryala became *sati* on his death (Vajracharya and Shrestha, 2037 V.S., p. 564). There are some instances in which we find that many widows immolated themselves on their own will. They did so, sometime, out of love for and devotion to their husbands whom they revered as God. On the other hand, it is said that the widows preferred to become *sati*, because of the life of widowhood was too hard for them to lead. In society, widows were not treated sympathetically and they were forbidden to re-marry. The attitude towards widows was very harsh (Wright, 1972, p.19).

Towards abolition

Right from the beginning, we see that the custom of *sati* was not necessary. On the other hand, it was confined in the royal and some high ranking noble families only. So, it was considered as a social evil. The beginning of

19th century was very important period in the social history of the Indian sub-continent. In India, social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy and others were starting movement for social and religious reforms. Due to the efforts of these reformers the custom of *sati* was stopped in 1829 A.D. in the time of Lord William Bentinck, the Governor-General of India (Majumdar and Chopra, 1994, p.143). In Nepal, the first attempt was made by Jang Bahadur Rana. He became Prime Minister of Nepal in 1846 A.D. He was more powerful than the reigning King Rajendra Vikrama Shaha. In fact, he was the *de facto* ruler of Nepal. He was impressed much by the Britishers and enjoyed their favours. He wanted to visit England and for this purpose, he departed on 15th January, 1850 A.D. from Kathmandu (Ramakant, 1968, p. 249). He reached London on 25th May and returned to Kathmandu next year on 6th February, 1851 A.D. (Yadav, 2043 V.S., p. 214). After returning from his visit to England, Jang Bahadur Rana made attempts to discourage the custom of *sati*. Though, he could not forbid the custom altogether, he was quite successful in his attempts to prevent it to a great extent (Oldfield, 1974, p.161). In the year of 1854 A.D., he promulgated a Civil Code named *Muluki Ain*. This was the first written code of the country (Yadav, *op.cit.* p. 241). In this code, there was a sub-heading named 'On *Sati*'. The main provisions pertaining to the *sati* practice in this code were as follow:

1. The widow below the age of eleven and having young sons of less than twelve years of age is not allowed to become a *sati*. Later in 1863 AD, this provision was amended as the widow below the age of sixteen and had either a son of less than sixteen years of age and or a daughter of less than three years of age is not allowed to become a *sati*.
2. A woman who had more than one husband was prohibited to become *sati*.
3. Slave girls and maid-servants should not be allowed to become *sati* on the death of

- the queen of the King, or of the wives of the members of the nobility.
4. A pregnant woman is not to be permitted to become *sati*.
 5. A mother is not allowed to become *sati* on the death of her son.
 6. A Brahmana widow could no become *sati* if her husband died abroad.
 7. Any person who burnt a widow forcibly or killed her by any means should be punished with branding, confiscation of property and life imprisonment according to the law.
 8. If a woman is forced to commit *sati* through the use of narcotics or by causing her to agree to be a *sati* by this means, the person to lit fire will be punished with a fine of Rs.40/- if he is her own son. If he is her step-son or any other person, he will be punished with a fine of Rs.100/- (Maskey, *op.cit.* p. 68-70).

In this way, Jang Bahadur Rana made a remarkable landmark in the line of abolition the custom. He himself forbade many persons of his family to become *sati*. But when he died on 25th February, 1877 A.D., his three wives burnt themselves on the funeral pyre four days after the death of their husband. In later period, the custom of *sati* was seen in practice, as the then British Resident in Nepal, C. Girdleston cites two cases of *sati* in his correspondence to C. Grant, Foreign Secretary of England in 1882 A.D. The Resident opposed the custom and complained to the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister, in reply to the Resident's complaint, informed that there were many more restrictions on *sati* custom now than before (*ibid.* p. 73-74). In the period of Prime Minister Bir Shamsheer (1885-1901 A.D.) the law was amended and now only a widow who had sons and daughters above the age of sixteen and twelve respectively could commit *sati* in her own decree. Furthermore, a provision was laid down that no widow

should be allowed to mount the funeral pyre without the permission of the Prime Minister or in outlying places its higher administrative authorities (Landon, 1976, p. 172).

Chandra Shamsheer assumed the post of Prime Minister of Nepal on 26th June, 1901 A.D. (Yadav, *op.cit.* p. 276). The period of his rule witnessed some remarkable changes in social field of the country. He proved himself the most capable ruler after Jang Bahadur. He was determined to stop the age-old cruel custom of *sati*. In 1910 A.D. a law was enacted declaring that no widow, even entitled by law to commit *sati*, should be allowed to immolate herself on the funeral pyre without obtaining the written permission of either Prime Minister or the highest legal authorities in outlying districts.

It is said that Prime Minister Chandra Shamsheer, who was determined to stop the custom of *sati*, consulted the scriptures and discussed the matter with the royal preceptors and priests, members of the nobility, officials and scholars. He was well aware of the fact that, sometimes, unwilling widows were persuaded to become *satis* by people with the objective of inheriting their property, or to fulfill their vested interests. As the illiterate women did not have any proper knowledge of scriptures, they were easily convinced to follow their deceased husbands. Thus, they were misled and thereby forced to become *sati*. In this way, the practice remained as a curse to humanity. So, on his 58th birthday, 8th July, 1920 A.D., Prime Minister Chandra Shamsheer enforced a legislation abolishing the longstanding horrible custom of *sati*. The legislation said "... all laws heretofore enacted to permit the *sati* custom are hereby repealed. From this time, the *sati* custom had been abolished all over the kingdom of Gorkha (Nepal). Not only the person who gave permission to become *sati*, but even those who were associated in any way with the act of *sati*, would be regarded as criminals (Maskey, *op.cit.* p.79-80). In this way, the custom of *sati* ended in Nepal.

Conclusion

Sati custom was most inhumane, cruel and horrible custom of Hindu society. Though, its basis is said to be established on social, religious, economic and political grounds, nevertheless, when we study this custom seriously, we find that in many cases this custom was applied to fulfill the political and economic matters. This custom was in use in the royal families and in some high ranking noble families. Now, it is totally stopped by the law in India and Nepal, but when it was prevailing, it was not even necessary, as we find many instances in history relating to this custom. This custom was an evil of society in Hindu community. As we see, this custom was abolished on the ground of positive and humanitarian thinking. Even now, the position of widows in society is not very well, particularly in the societies of rural areas. We have to do much, with strong will-power, for the betterment of the women community.

References

Altekar, A.S. (1973). *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization: From Prehistoric Times to the Present Day*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Bhatta, S. (2036 V.S.). *Kathasaritsagara*. Dvitiya Khanda. Patna: Bihar Rashtrabhasa Parisada.

Chandra, M. (2006). *Ashtadasha Smriti*. Delhi: Nag Publishers.

Chaturvedi, M. and Tiwari, B.N. (1994). *A Practical Hindi English Dictionary*. 20th Ed. New Delhi: National Publishing House.

Chaudhari, K. C. (1960). *Anglo-Nepalese Relations From the Earliest Times to the British Rule in India till the Gurkha War*. Calcutta: Modern Book Agency.

Dhaubanjari, G. B. (....). *Madhyakalina Nepal Upatyakako Samajika Jivana*, (Ph.D. Dissertation, submitted to Tribhuvan

University, Kathmandu). unpublished.

Hasrat, B. J. (ed.). (1970). *History of Nepal as Told by its Own and Contemporary Chronicles*. Hoshiyarpur (Punjab): the Author.

John, P. and Jones, D. D. (1975). *India: Its Life and Thought*, (reprint). New Delhi: Rare Books.

Joshi, H. R. (2030 V.S.). *Nepalako Prachina Abhilekha*. Kathmandu: Nepal Rajakiya Prajyna Pratishthana.

Joshi, H. R. (2068 V.S.). *Om Sati Pratha*. Kathmandu: Joshi Research Institute.

Kalhana. (1985). *Rajatarangini*. Delhi: Chaukhamba Sanskrit Pratishthana.

Kane, P. V. (1980). *Dharmashastra Ka Itihasa*. Prathama Bhaga. Lucknow: Uttara Pradesh Hindi Sansthan.

Khatri, P. and Dahal, P. (2053 V.S.). *Adhunik Nepalako Samajika Itihasa*. Kathmandu: Sajha Prakashana.

Landon, P. (1976). *Nepal*. Vol. II. Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar. (First published in 1928 AD).

Mahabharata. (2045 V.S.). Aadi Parva, Adhyaya 95, Shloka 64-65, Gorakhpur, Gita Press.

Mahabharata. (2046 V.S.). Mausala Parva, Adhyaya 7, Shloka 8-24, Gorakhpur: Gita Press.

Majumdar, R. C. (ed.). (1953). *The Age of Imperial Unity*. Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavana.

Majumdar, R. C. and Chopra, P. N. (1994). *Main Currents of Indian History*. 2nd ed. New Delhi: Academic Paperbacks.

Markham, C. R. (ed.). (1971). *Narratives of the Mission of George Bogle to Tibet and the Journey of Thomas Manning to Lhasa*.

- New Delhi: Manjusri Publishing House. (First published in 1876 AD).
- Maskey, G. (1996). *Social Life in Nepal: Form Tradition to Modernity (1901-1925)*. New Delhi: Anmol Publications Pvt. Ltd.
- Mishra, J. (1986). *Prachina Bharata ka Samajika Itihasa*. Patna: Bihar Hindi Grantha Akadami.
- Oldfield, H. A. (1974). *Sketches From Nepal*. Vol. I. Delhi: Cosmo Publications. (First published in 1880 AD).
- Ramakant. (1968). *Indo-Nepalese Relations*. Delhi: S.Chand & Co.
- Regmi, D. R. (1966). *Medieval Nepal*. Part II. Calcutta: Firma K.L.Mukhopadhyay.
- Regmi, D. R. (1966). *Medieval Nepal*. Part III. Calcutta: Firma K.L.Mukhopadhyay.
- Rigveda*. (2040 V.S.). Mandala 9,10. New Delhi: Sarvadeshika Aarya Pratinidhi Sabha.
- Shrestha, S. (2057 V.S.). *Kirtipurako Sanskritika Ra Puratatvika Itihasa*. Kathmandu: Nepal Ra Eshiyali Anusandhana Kendra (T.U.).
- Shrimadbhagavata*. (2067 V.S.). Skandha -1, Adhyaya-13, Shloka-57, Gorakhpur: Gita Press.
- Thapa, K. (1985). *Women and Social change in Nepal (1951-1960)*. Kathmandu: Mrs. Ambika Thapa.
- Tripathi, B. (1996). *Kalidasa Granthavali*. Varanasi: Chaukhamba Surabharati Prakashana.
- Vajracharya, D. and Malla, K.P. (eds.). (1985). *The Gopalarajavanshavali*. Kathmandu: Nepal Research Centre.
- Vajracharya, D. and Shrestha, T. B. (2037 V.S.). *Shahakalaka Abhilekha*, Pahilo Bhaga. Kathmandu: Nepal Ra Eshiyali Anusandhana Kendra (T.U.).
- Valmikiya Ramayana*. (2045 V. S.). Uttara Kanda. Gorakhpur: Gita Press,
- Vishnupurana*. (2041 V. S.). Gorakhpur: Gita Press.
- Wright, D. (1972). *History of Nepal*. Kathmandu: Nepal Antiquated Book Publishers. (First published in 1877 AD).
- Yadav, P. L. (2043 V.S.). *Nepalako Rajanaitika Itihasa*. 3rd ed. Rajbiraj: Mahanthi Yadav.