

The *Sati* System in Nepal: Religious Conviction and Social Complications

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Abstract

The practice of widow burning 'Sati Pratha' was prevalent in Nepal from the ancient period up to its abolishment during the Rana regime by Prime Minister Chandra Shamsher. The practice was at its apex during the medieval period in Nepal when not only the widow but in some cases mother, slave girls, and even boys were immolated most probably against their wish. This was because most of the religious texts praised it and took it as one of the glorious acts one can perform to sanctify themselves and their lineage. Such religious conviction encouraged social complications and in some cases, such acts were performed to gain political advancements also. This paper tends to analyze the different factors which encouraged/forced innocent women to give up their life and how the cruel act of burning a person gained such popularity among the people. Along with its history to the actions taken in phase-wise for its abolishment in case of Nepal are discussed.

Keywords: Sati, Sati Vrata, Abolishment

Introduction

Sati, a word derived from the word *Sat*, means truth in Sanskrit. It can be inferred that *sati* means a virtuous woman or a woman who is faithful to her husband. There is also one mythological figure whose name was *Sati*, the daughter of Dakshya, who, against her parent's will, got married to Lord Shiva. Later on one occasion, when her father insulted Lord Shiva, she immolated herself in the *Yagya* (a sacrificial fire-pit) and died proving her loyalty to her husband. (Swasthani Vrata Katha unpublished Newari manuscript in personal collection) In the *sati* system, *sati* is the practice in which a widow sacrifices her life just as *Sati* did in *Yagya* but this time in the funeral pyre of her husband. In this paper, an attempt

has been made to analyze the religious and social implications that encouraged women to sacrifice their lives without any reason.

Methodology

This research is purely qualitative research. It is descriptive and analytical in nature. The research was carried out mainly using primary and secondary sources like the articles published in the journals and the books. As the custom of burning widows in the case of Nepal was abolished a long time ago and since then there has not been a single case of violence the researcher has to depend upon the written documents either primary or secondary sources for this research. Due acknowledgment is made and references are cited as per the rule of research methodology.

Scriptural Enforcement

It isn't easy to trace the history of *sati* system. There are two versions of whether widow burning was practiced in the Vedic period or not. Even there are examples of women popularly known as Sati who did not immolate themselves in the funeral pyre of their husbands. Vedic texts though explain the details of funeral procedures; it is silent about the custom of Sati. In such a case one can assume that the widow burning was unknown in the Vedic period. Yet a verse in the *Veda - Rig Veda*, is often interpreted as the one which talks about the Sati or widow immolation.

“Ima nariravidhavah sapatneeranjanena sarpisha samvishantu Anashravoanameevah suratna arohantu janayo yonim agre”

(Quoted in Narasimhan, 1990:14)

"Let these women whose husbands are worthy and are living, enter the house with ghee as collyrium (to their eyes). Let these wives first step into the pyre, tearless without any affliction and well adorned" this verse from the *Rig Veda* is still believed to be a reinterpreted one. People, who are trying to prove that the text is different from the original one, hold a view that there might be some replacement in the words eg. *agre* (which means just to come forward) by *agni*, meaning fire. (Basham, 1981:189).

Another accepted view is the hymn one in which the widow is asked to mount the funeral pyre and lay down beside the dead body holding bow in one hand. She is then called back to live in earth. People believe this hymn represents the symbolic representation of the custom which was then reduced to the symbolic act of lying down beside the dead body in the funeral pyre. In *Athrvya Veda*, widow marriage is mentioned which means that *sati* system was optional. (Altekar, 1999:118). It seems that the *sati* system was later developed during the later *Vedic* age because almost all of the Hindu texts which were written during that period not only mention the system but also praise it. So we can say that during that period

the system was at its peak, as people were religious-minded, and doing whatever is written in the text was their main duty.

Another notable Hindu scripture *Arthashastra* by Kautilya during the 3rd century B.C, not only mentions widow marriage but also *Niyoga* under which a widow was permitted to take a second husband just to give birth to a son. (Narasimhan, 1990:16) Although some Hindu texts are silent about the system, we can get enough examples in other Hindu scriptures that mention and praise the system, thus encouraging innocent women to give their life for no good reason.

The *Garuda Purana* mentions the immolation of a widow on the funeral pyre of her husband and also writes that a woman will be reborn again till she performs *sati*. But the system is not compulsory to those who are pregnant or have young child. (Narasimhan, 1990:22) Likewise, in another Hindu text, the system is praised as it says,

"A *sati* who dies on the funeral pyre of her husband enjoys an eternal bliss".

According to *Brahma Purana*, "It is the highest duty of a woman to immolate herself after her husband., She after being *sati* enjoys heavenly peace for as many years as there are pores in a human body i.e. for 35 million years". In Vasista's *Padama Purana*, *sati* system is taken as a compulsory act to women as it is written that a widow must, on the death of her husband, allow herself to burn alive on the same funeral pyre. These all Hindu texts mentioned the system with much importance and gave it the status of the most sacred act. (Narasimhan, 1990:22)

Women were forced to become *sati* as people thought that becoming a *sati*, she would sanctify her ancestors; both maternal, and paternal, and her husband. Hindus believe that the act of self-immolation by a widow facilitates the attainment of spiritual salvation for her dead husband. She is revered as a goddess as people admired their courage to sit on a funeral pyre with flames without any kind of fear.

Sati System in Ancient and Medieval Nepal

We don't find much substantial evidence that can suggest the history of *sati* system in ancient Nepal. After the *Gopals*, *Mahispals*, and *Kiratas*, the *Licchavis* ruled this country during which we have plenty of inscriptions to know about their rule. From the *Changu* inscription of King Manadev I, dated 464 A.D. it is clear that the *sati* system existed in *Licchavi* period. It says that

King Dharma Dev, father of King Manadeva I, died rather mysteriously. Queen Rajyawati, then expressed her desire to become *sati*, but Manadeva I requested her to quit the idea as he was very young and needed her help. Hence the queen acknowledged to her son and instead of becoming a *sati*, observed *satibrata*. (Regmi, 1983:2-3). This reflects that *sati*,

during the *Licchavi* period, was not compulsory. Besides Rajyawati, there are also examples of several other women who took *satibrata* instead of becoming a *sati*. (Vajracharya, 2030 B.S.:22) Apart from that, an inscription dated 633 A D mentions about second marriage of a woman following the death of her first husband. (Vajracharya, 2030 B.S.: 439) Hence, it can be said that during the *Licchavi* period, a widow would basically have three options - to become a *sati*, observe *satibrata* or in a few cases, take a second husband.

After the fall of Licchavis, the Mallas ruled the country.

These Malla rulers were Hindus and so, this was the time when Hinduism was at its apex. During this period, laws were framed being based on Manu's code, which made all Hindu rites compulsory. (Maskey, 1996:65) So the burning of a widow in a funeral pyre (or *sati*) was strictly followed. Not only the queens but wives of royal priests, governors, and other high-class officers – all followed the system. The *sati* system was more strictly followed during the later medieval period, where no king's corpse was burnt without his wife's. (Regmi, 1996: 712)

For a woman, to burn herself on the funeral pyre of her dead husband was a religious duty. Not only the wife but in some cases we get examples of even sisters and mothers sacrificing their lives on the funeral pyre of their brothers or sons. Apart from his wives, King Mahendra Malla of Kantipur was followed by his sisters on his funeral pyre while the mother of King Biswajeet Malla of Patan allowed herself to burn on the funeral pyre of her son. The number of wives becoming *sati* kept on rising: as nine wives of King Pratap Malla, the same number in the case of King Nripendra Malla and Srinivas Malla went *sati*. The number increased to twenty-four when King Parthivendra Malla died and the highest one was thirty-three when King Yognarendra Malla died. Not only with the dead husband's body but also in some cases, wives immolated themselves holding just their husband's horoscope. (Regmi, 1996:713-14) Still then, *sati* was not compulsory among the common people, as widow marriage, divorce, and second marriage were legally accepted, and becoming a *sati* was rare. One instance of self-immolation is mentioned by Capuchin missionary Loro. He wrote that on 15th June 1743 when a noble died his wives showed interest to become *sati*, for which the missionary was surprised by the courage shown by those ladies. (Vaidya, 1993:287). We don't have many examples of widow marriages in the royal family but in the case of a minor child who would become a King following the death of his father, the queen was not forced to become a *sati*. Sometimes the widows who were forced to become *sati* used to run away from the funeral pyre. Earlier, in such cases, they were beaten to death and burnt again but later on, in those circumstances, they were allowed to live but were regarded as untouchables and were not accepted back to their former caste. (Regmi, 1979:168)

Modern Nepal

During the medieval period, Nepal was divided into small states which were unified into one single state by King Prithvi Narayan Shah of Gorkha. Though the political scenario of Nepal changed a lot, the social customs and religious practices remained the same. And so did the custom of burning widows. King Prithvi Narayan Shah was followed by nine women including his queen Narendra Laxmi on his funeral pyre. (Acharya, 2025 B.S.:633). The trend continued in case of his son King Pratap Singh.

In some cases, unwilling widow queens were also forced to be burnt for various royal conspiracies, but in most of the cases, they did it on their own wish as they thought that becoming a *sati* was the way to pay the highest devotion towards her husband whom they worshipped as a god. One another reason for widows to choose death instead of life might have been the worry of living a painful life after the death of her husband, because people, in most cases, would blame and curse the widow for the death of her husband. Hardly ever would she be allowed to get remarried and further less would she be given the same stance in a society where she could lead a normal life.

The practice of *sati* system was almost the same until the first half of the 19th century. Hamilton, who was in Nepal in the early 19th century writes that *sati* used to be a common practice. (Hamilton, 1971:23). Similarly, on November 5, 1845, Resident Henry Lawrence himself witnessed one such incident which was reported by Residency Surgeon as follows

Fully half an hour passed in preparations, and giving rice and money to the attendant priests, and marking their foreheads. Mounted on a man's back the victim (widow) then went seven times round the pile, distributing alms all the while to hungry yelling mendicants who were encircling her. She then dismounted, kissed her husband's feet, washed her hands, and leisurely ascended the pile, where she took off her tinsel crown, arm and leg ornaments, and upper clothing of yellow and scarlet silk, leaving only a close vest and petticoat. She then lay close behind the corpse and pulled the sheet that covered it over her, when she was thus lay down, four bamboos were pushed across the body and legs and held at either end by men, so as effectually to prevent the victim rising. The interval between the platforms were filled with dry wood, rosin and ghee and set on fire close under the victim's head. A strong flame instantly arose, and was fed by men throwing in rosin and ghee. So that in one minute, or perhaps less, life must have been extinct. (Wheeler, 1996: 112-13) Another British Resident wrote after a few years:

A Thakuri of proper Tanahu died after long illness at the age of sixty. His wife was determined to become *sati*. She was dressed like a new bride. The determination of the widow spread like wildfire in the neighbouring villages, and the villagers, mostly women gathered at the road to the cremation ground and at the cremation *ghat*. The funeral procession reached the *ghat* where a pyre was already prepared. After completing the ritual performance, the

widow went round the pyre of her husband three times, and then ascended the pyre and laid herself beside her husband's dead body. Two or three bamboo sticks were placed over them and up with a rope, so that the widow could not run away. A relative of the Thakuri lit the pyre and within hours everything was finished. (Maskey, 1996:76)

Social, Religious and Political Implications

“Accompanying her husband in the funeral pyre she shall reside in *Swarga* (heaven) for 35 million years or dying with her husband, she sanctifies her maternal, paternal and husband's ancestors”. The above quotes are only a few amongst many examples that are mentioned in the holy Hindu texts which describe how much religion can force a woman to sacrifice her life. These texts have created common thinking amongst the girls right from their childhood that to immolate herself in the funeral pyre of her husband is the greatest duty of a married woman as husband is being considered as a god to her on earth. On one hand, these texts glorify the widow burning system while on the other hand, they describe the way of life for a widow, which is much more difficult than facing the fire of a funeral pyre.

While observing a widow's life, she would not be allowed to eat meat, sweets, honey, liquor, and salt for one whole year. She had to sleep on the floor without any proper bedding. She should eat only roots and fruits. She could take meal just once in a day, had to wear plain white clothes, no ornaments, and no perfumes. Widows were not allowed to participate in any auspicious occasions. They were not permitted even to laugh. So in another way, it is quite clear that the Hindu texts have made a widow's life like a hell on earth. That is why a widow would choose to be burnt alive rather than living a most miserable life on earth. (Narasimhan, 1990:19) A woman who would commit *sati* was honored as a goddess and her blessings were taken. People used to bring their ornaments to be touched by the *sati* on her way to the cremating place as it was regarded auspicious. No one would oppose the decision or try convincing the women not to become *sati* as they had the strong belief or superstition that such an act would bring bad luck to them and their families as well. (Maskey, 1996:196). In some cases, in-law relatives used to force the widow to become *sati*, when the couple (widow) had no son, and so if she committed *sati*, the whole property would then be passed on to their in-law relatives.

The *sati* system in Nepal had an indirect but close connection with the political conspiracies especially in the royal family and among high-ranking officials. To mention a few – King Pratap Singh's second wife, who was not legally married, was pregnant during the death of her husband; she was forced to commit *sati* after the birth of the child, because she was more powerful in the palace than the legitimate queen of the King. (Acharya, 2022 B.S.:78)

Similarly, the senior wife of King Rana Bahadur who was not present at the capital when her husband was assassinated was immediately called upon the death of her husband and was forced to become *sati* following the order of Prime Minister Bhimsen Thapa who thought that the senior queen might create obstacles in his way. One folk song written during that time clearly describes the intention of Bhimsen Thapa and the helpless situation of the queen. (Acharya, 2022 B.S.:125-26)

Similarly, Jang Bahadur Rana, who himself discouraged the *sati* system a lot, told his wives to become *sati* after his death just because of the fear that his brothers might take political revenge against his wives.

Discouragement and abolition

Jang Bahadur was the first ruler to make efforts in discouraging the inhuman practice of burning a widow alive. Though he was not able to abolish it completely, his efforts minimized the rate to a large extent. He was able to discourage *sati* in some of his family relations and by doing that, he wanted to exemplify to the common people who would follow the higher classes.

The civil code of 1854 imposed several restrictions on the system which are as follows: - The widow would not have to become/observe *sati*:

if she was below the age of 11. The age bar was later changed to 16 through an amendment in 1863.

if the widow had more than one husband.

if the widow had a son of less than twelve years which was changed to

16 through an amendment, and daughter of three years, this was changed to five years in the amendment.

if she was pregnant during the death of her husband.

if she was a widow of a Brahmin whose husband died outside the country. This was because once the dead body of a Brahmin is cremated another funeral pyre was not supposed to be created.

Besides, a mother was disallowed to become *sati* on the death of her son. Similarly, slave girls were not allowed to become *sati* upon the death of their masters.

And any person who burnt a widow forcibly by any means would be punished with confiscation of property and life imprisonment (The 1854 Code, 421-422)

Apart from the above-mentioned restrictions, the widow's relatives were also supposed to discourage the widow not to become *sati*, and failing to do so, they would be liable to punishment ranging from six years of imprisonment along with the confiscation of property to the death penalty (in rare cases). (The 1854 Code, 422)

According to the Hindu rituals, once a widow expressed her desire to become a *sati*, she would be disallowed to alter that decision. In case she jumped off the funeral pyre she would then be beaten to death on the spot by the relatives. The 1854 civil code forbade doing so, and it fixed punishment in such cases also. (The 1854 Code, 423-424)

As such, the above points make it clear that the 1854 code, though did not abolish the system completely, discouraged it a lot. However, the unawareness and illiteracy in the society and the lack of meticulous records of birth and mortality made it difficult for the government efficiency in successfully implement it.

Jang Bahadur succeeded in preventing a number of widows from becoming *sati* even before the enactment of the law. He knew that once the higher class families gave up such inhuman and unreasonable practice, the common people would follow them accordingly.

When his brother Bom Bahadur passed away, his wives were disallowed to become *sati*. Likewise, wives of General Krishna Bahadur and Badri Narshima (brothers of Jang Bahadur) were prohibited from becoming *sati*. In 1876, one of his sons-in-law died and his daughter poured water over her head showing her interest to become *sati*. Jang Bahadur tried to convince his daughter and prevent her from becoming a *sati* but the Brahmin priest, who was performing the funeral rites, opposed Jang Bahadur saying that nothing could be done as the widow (i.e. his daughter) had already showered water over her head. Jang Bahadur then had to take the help of the then British Resident to persuade the priest and his daughter to prevent her from becoming a *sati*. Convinced, his daughter altered her previous decision.

The restrictions on becoming a *sati* continued even after the death of Jang Bahadur. King Surendra, Crown Prince Trailokya, Commander in Chief Jagat Shamsher, Dhir Shamsher, and Rana Shamsher - all were cremated without their wives.

Bir Shamsher, the successor of Ranodip, made a provision which forbade a widow having a daughter below the age of twelve to commit *sati*. Before that, she could have committed *sati* if her daughter was just above five years old. The second provision he constituted was that the widow willing to commit *sati* would have to get permission from Prime Minister or higher- ranking government officials even though this process would have been lengthy and consumed a few days. The violation of this rule could be punished most heavily. So Bir Shamsher made more efforts to discourage the *sati* system and made a smooth path for its abolition. (Vaidya and Manandhar, 1985:277)

With the assumption of power by Chandra Shamsher, the Nepalese society saw some remarkable social changes. Though it was difficult to uproot the system which was blindly followed by the people from generation to generation in the name of religion, Chandra Shamsher consulted the matter with the royal priests and other noble scholars and put on the fact how innocent illiterate widows were forced by their relatives to become *sati* just to fulfill their interest which had made the practice as a curse to humanity. He suggested that instead of being burnt alive, a widow could choose a secondary path which is equivalent to being a *sati* i.e, to remain faithful to her husband even after his death for her whole life. Though the priests raised questions/opposition against it, the Prime minister was determined to abolish the system, and so on his 58th Birthday in 1920, he enforced the legislation abolishing the widow-burning custom. (Maskey, 1996:80). High-class government officials in remote districts were given strict orders to prevent this act at any cost. Anyone who tried to offend the law by allowing a widow to commit *sati* was punished just as a murderer. Since the enforcement of the Law in 1920, there has never been a single reported case of violation of the law to date.

Conclusion

Nepal was a Hindu state till May 2006, and as a Hindu State, sati system was in practice in Nepal from the earliest time. During the ancient period, the system was based on religious conviction and it was not compulsory. But in the medieval period, it became a part of social obligation. Among the rulers, the system became a question of prestige, and among the high authorities, it came as a part of social complications. The system continued after the unification of Nepal, but from 1839 onwards, the rulers discouraged the system through royal orders or legal codes. As a result of which the sati system was finally abolished in 1920. One striking aspect of the abolition of sati system was that there was not a single case of violation of the government decree. It explains how the sati system had already lost its religious and social values, and the people were greatly satisfied with its abolition.

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