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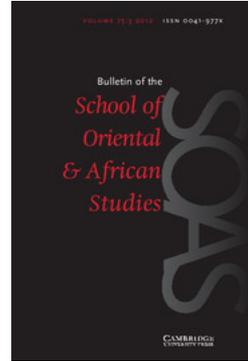
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# Sati: a review article

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## I

The last recorded case of sati in India, the murder (for such it undoubtedly was) of Roop Kanwar, which took place in the large Rajasthani village of Deorala in 1987, has had many reverberations. In particular, it has served as a focus for international and Indian women activists' opposition to continuing gender violence and to male domination in general. Not surprisingly, the responses have been wide-ranging, from individual and collective acts of feminist solidarity to various attempts at local level, mainly by men and political agencies, to discredit this particular women's movement.

The sati debate has also become part of the international discourse on human rights in which, it must be said, issues relating to South Asian cultures are typically treated as violations of international norms. Yet little seems to have been resolved by the wide-ranging debates that followed the immolation of Roop Kanwar. While the literature on sati (and on *zina*) has grown during the past decade, to such an extent that one can now produce a respectable reading list rather than a mere few references, a satisfactory understanding of the sati phenomenon has still not been reached. This is due to a number of reasons which have not, to my knowledge, been brought together for discussion anywhere. The analysis of what sati is and stands for has been too one-dimensional, too unhistorical, too uncompromisingly feminist rather than culture-specific. It has, in other words, ignored the ancient South Asian cultural evidence. The study of sati has in fact become so politicized that it is difficult to do more in such a climate than to join the chorus of those who deplore the phenomenon. The few contributors to this complex debate who have attempted to bring traditional elements into the analysis have generally come under attack as 're-inventors' of the sati tradition and have, not surprisingly, withdrawn from the field.

## II

Against this background any new book on the topic of sati must inevitably excite interest. The most recent work devoted to it, Hawley's edited volume, *Sati, the blessing and the curse*,<sup>1</sup> is no exception. But while containing much that is worth reading, in some respects it also provides for South Asia an illustration of Catherine Hakim's recent critique of the selective creation of feminist myths.<sup>2</sup> Or, as Ashis Nandy puts it in his contribution to the volume, 'when it comes to criticisms of modernity, the rationality of the rationalists all too easily collapses' (p. 141).

Sati has clearly become a heavily contested symbol, like arranged marriages and polygamy. Its discourse serves many agenda, is confusing and confused, and has been appropriated as a symbol of female subordination and feminist resistance. At the same time, it illustrates the unwillingness of modern scholars and activists of both sexes to allow individuals the very freedoms which

<sup>1</sup> John Stratton Hawley (ed): *Sati, the blessing and the curse: the burning of wives in India*. xiii, 214 pp. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> See Catherine Hakim, 'Five feminist myths about women's employment', *British Journal of Sociology*, 46/3, 1995, 429–55.

modernity purports to protect. Thus, the right to die, or to live in another world, is marginalized when the sati debate focuses only on secondary myths of women as servants of men and on female sacrifice, or even outright crime. Despite centuries of debate it is an uncomfortable truth, confirmed here, that we are still not studying the 'authentic sati'. There are indeed good reasons why we might not want to know whether sati ever was suicide rather than murder. But Veena Oldenburg simply proclaims: 'As a historian, I find no evidence that there was ever an institution of "authentic" sati' (p. 162), a statement quietly contradicted by much of this book, especially the editor's afterword.

The papers, from a conference at Columbia in 1988, were inspired by the 'verbal brouhaha' (p. 6) that followed on the 1987 sati case. The debate illustrates a persistent problem in modern scholarship on South Asia: how far back in 'tradition' does one need to go, if at all? Visible or imagined issues of concern today certainly raise a brouhaha, but where is attention being given to the less visible inputs and deeper layers of tradition?

If one seeks to discuss sati only as a manifestation of violence against women, there is actually little to debate. Most would agree that the sati cult helps to glorify murder. New debates, thus, simply reinforce (or damage, as the case may be) the writer's ideological credentials. The Roop Kanwar case leaves little doubt that she was murdered; so were many women before her. Even if she had agreed to die because she wanted to sacrifice herself for her husband, there can be no quarrel with the argument that she was murdered by a system that tricks women into defining themselves as perpetual servants of men.

But that is clearly not the whole story of sati, in breadth or in depth. Hawley's balanced introduction shows that sati needs to be studied in connection with Hindu concepts of death. That this is a line which merits further exploration is also borne out by a recent SOAS Ph.D. thesis which contains rich material on Hindu conceptualizations of post-death existence.<sup>3</sup> The older Hindu literature is full of questions about birth, death and afterlife and this abundant, male-focused material on the body and soul and their imagined journeys needs to be brought into the debate. The ancient Indian philosophers pursued all kinds of intricate questions relating to male salvation, which must surely be relevant to women as well. If male asceticism had to remain a minority phenomenon in order to ensure society's survival, does not the same logic apply, even more so, to the sati complex? There is a conceptual contradiction between expecting wives to bear children and killing them because the husband has died. Hawley's excellent afterword raises some promising lines of enquiry which could with profit be followed up by a scholar with a sound Sanskrit base and the courage to write a new book on sati.

A fine overview article on the iconographies of sati by Paul Courtright rightly appeals for sati to be seen as a complex Hindu phenomenon with many subtexts. Arguing that 'we need to see sati as a whole' (p. 48) Courtright sees that the subject cannot be understood without reference to the universalistic dharmic complex from which it derives. Courtright emphasizes the links of sati with concepts of marriage, seeing the virtuous Hindu woman as 'ontologically bonded' (p. 28) to the husband. On this, too, we need to dig deeper. Commenting on Courtright, Vidya Dehejia attempts to argue that sati must be a later phenomenon in the development of Hindu culture but fails to define

<sup>3</sup> Shirley Firth, 'Death, dying and bereavement in a Hindu community in Britain', London: SOAS 1994, to be published as *Dying, death and bereavement in a British Hindu community*, Leuven: Peeters (forthcoming).

her concept of sati. Otherwise, her points are valid: Vedic and early classical expectations of women's roles emphasized the need for progeny; immolating a fertile woman would violate such dominant expectations. Women, too, would internalize such world-views and would not want to become a sati unless they were beyond child-bearing age. Thus, the absence of evidence for very early sati cases does not surprise. Within the Vedic conceptual framework with its clear emphasis on the pre-eminence of procreation over chastity, burning widows did not fit.

Like Dehejia, most contributors to this book struggle with various secondary or even tertiary sati phenomena. This leads to some confused and superficial observations, the best example of which must be Veena Oldenburg's sati who wins the spiritual sweepstakes to gain '*moksha* for two' (p. 167). However, she would be making a dreadful mistake: the basic karmic rule is, after all, that husband and wife go their own way in a subsequent existence rather than ending up together in a lovers' paradise. The modern argument that any woman who chooses such an irrational course has been brainwashed into false consciousness and superstitious follies by a patriarchal ideology sidesteps the uncomfortable question of agency: could a Hindu woman ever want to die for herself rather than for someone else?

If the focus of the debate could be switched away from the overwhelming evidence of gender imbalance in India (it is, after all, a universal phenomenon), and turned to the core issue of individual agency, we might make some progress. Clearly, newly widowed Hindu women have always known several paths, restricted maybe, but still choices: to marry another man, to live as a widow or, indeed, to follow the husband on an imagined journey.

Careful research would confirm that the majority of Hindu widows have actually opted for eventual remarriage and certainly not for instant death. The widespread assumption that Hinduism does not allow remarriage to widows is yet another convenient myth, cultivated by Westerners and Muslims alike. It allows us to treat 'the other' as backward, discriminatory, misguided, and so forth, whereas the reality is that Hindu society has continued to exist for millennia by perpetually contradicting such orientalised, supposedly scripture-based assumptions. Feminist scholarship today, and any scholarship for that matter, does no one a service if it fails to question these myths of rigid traditions.

Nor can we simply define away the option of a willed death. That a Hindu woman who decides to follow the dead man becomes an ambiguous and dread figure for other Hindus and a misguided fool or a victim for those who question religion and the institution of marriage itself is neither here nor there. Where in Hinduism, as elsewhere, does one draw the line between rationality and superstition? Modern scholarship has clearly become too intent on censorship of 'the other'. It is reactionary modernism, or perhaps one should call it neo-fundamentalism, to oppose a holistic project aimed at understanding elements of the past which are relevant today.

Most contributors to Hawley's book are too involved with various modish topics relating to the 1987 sati case to attempt such a holistic analysis. As the introduction immediately reminds us (p. 3), the sati debate continues to be used as a stick with which to beat India. A lot of material in this book is actually quite irrelevant to a debate on sati, e.g. Dorothy Figueira's anecdote, about a suicide note in Sanskrit, left on the banks of the Rhine by a love-sick romantic, in her misleadingly entitled paper, '*Die flambierte Frau: sati in European culture*'. This is unfortunately not a contribution to comparative studies, but a testimony to Orientalist phantasies and the various '*Stilblüten*'

to which they have given rise. Figueira actually has much to say about metempsychosis and its representations, but otherwise her essay simply catalogues the multiplicity of images that surround sati.

Based on field-work, Lindsey Harlan's article, 'Perfection and devotion: sati tradition in Rajasthan' (pp. 79–91), examines what must by definition be recent local, ethnic representations of the sati tradition. Not surprisingly, therefore, Harlan depicts sati as a personal ideal illustrating the paradigm of selflessness (p. 90) espoused by certain Rajput women today. Assertions that women achieve the highest ideal when they sacrifice themselves for men can hardly be read as rules for the whole of Hindu tradition. What is presented here is only a small slice of history and tradition which sheds no great light on the 'real sati'. Harlan herself suggests as a key lesson of the sati paradigm that 'a woman must always share her husband's fate' (p. 86), but this can only be true to an extent, not absolutely. Since her research centred on how *satimata* myths are created and operate, Harlan does not establish the reasons why wives today would not normally cross the border of life and death with their husbands, but she does identify the element of eternal unity between husband and wife that is affirmed when the ashes of the two are intermingled (p. 81). It is a pity that obvious questions are not pursued at this point, such as why Rajput women today do not follow this model. It is not enough to explain this by reference to degenerate ages (the *kaliyuga*) and personal weaknesses.

Perceptive comments on Harlan's work by a Caribbean specialist, Karen McCarthy Brown, rightly emphasize that sati is not simply a religious ritual but a 'confluence of religious, political and social ideologies' (p. 92). However, having declared that she knows little about Indian culture but recognizes misogyny when she sees it (p. 92), Brown extrapolates stereotypes of 'Hindu tradition' as being entirely misogynist and sati as paradigmatic violence against women. Thus, the well-known image of the sati who holds the deceased's head in her lap is represented as breastfeeding the dead darling son of her mother-in-law (p. 97). Comparative analysis is a valuable tool, but speculations about snippets of traditional imagery are here juxtaposed to produce a universalized multicultural drama. Viewing sati as an extreme example of misogyny, ultimately 'putting Mommy in her place' (p. 98), gives an interesting slant to the debate but it misses the 'real sati' by a wide margin.

Veena Oldenburg, in 'The Roop Kanwar case: feminist responses' (pp. 101–30) claims to summarize the Indian feminists' reactions to Roop Kanwar's death but is soon immersed in constructing her own version. She quite plausibly suggests a dowry murder element. She also discusses the controversial issue of women's agency, only to dismiss it, but confidently asserts that women activists 'speaking for their sisters ... may finally unmake the tradition of sati' (p. 105).

While there is no commentary on Oldenburg's piece, Ashis Nandy's challenging essay on 'Sati as profit versus sati as a spectacle: the public debate on Roop Kanwar's death' (pp. 130–149) is followed by a comment from A. T. Embree and another piece by Veena Oldenburg, attacking the continuing 'invention' of the sati tradition—in other words criticizing an inquiring mind for daring to ask some of the right questions. Nandy's well-known argument about the modern symbolization of sati, which he characterizes as an 'ancient and rare rite' (p. 131), culminates in a critical question: why all this self-righteous breast-beating over Roop Kanwar, when many other Indian women die violently every day (p. 131)? Accepting that the potential for pushing a person to self-destruction continues to exist in many forms today (p. 135), he

refers to the Bengal sati epidemic of the colonial period as a modernity-induced phenomenon (as is certainly true of today's dowry murders) and argues that a real sati is almost impossible in the present *kaliyuga* (p. 137). Nandy, as before, pleads for respect for sati as a myth (p. 138) but without telling us what this entails.

Embree's comments range between explaining sati as an ancient escape mechanism from the horrors of widowhood, the special cosmic powers of women, Nandy's views on colonial influences and the role of Rammohun Roy. He refers to Nandy's claim that 'the original meanings are lost' (p. 151), which may explain why he, too, does not go back beyond late classical and medieval concepts. For a brief moment, though, he opens a window on to a scene of heavenly pleasure in marital company (p. 156) but is too overwhelmed by the manifold representations of gendered disempowerment and the 'dark irrationality of religious discourse' (p. 157) to take this any further. Here Embree comes fairly close to a glimpse of the 'real sati', but he, too, holds back from deeper analysis.

In contrast, Veena Oldenburg is quite militant in opposing what she calls 'the art of repackaging women's murders as suicides' (p. 159). As already indicated, she denies outright any evidence of an 'authentic sati' and proceeds to lay out her own theory in the form of 'some speculative answers' (p. 162). This is inevitably flawed from the start because the self-defined history starts too late and the author is too anxious to exclude religion (p. 166), to deny female agency again, and to demolish Nandy's arguments. The search for mythological and etymological explanations yields some interesting comments on medieval history, otherwise Oldenburg ends up merely acknowledging the existence of 'a more spiritual age' (p. 167).

In marked contrast, the editor's afterword digs more calmly and more deeply into the many layers of Indian tradition and rightly points out that fierce criticisms of sati have come from within ancient Hindu tradition itself. Oldenburg also made this point (see p. 169), but Hawley takes us much further back. Nevertheless, he still sees sati as a vicarious sacrifice. While he writes that 'she cooks herself into a substance that is death-resistant' (p. 180), he immediately assumes also that 'she' does this on behalf of her husband. It is precisely such assumptions that stand in the way of an understanding of the real sati, which this book has certainly not uncovered.

### III

The volume offers us various representations of sati as the object of economic, social and political machinations. These are at best tertiary phenomena and so are the sati cults observable in India today. If Hindus venerate rats, elephants, trees and a myriad other animate and inanimate things, including themselves, sati veneration proves nothing about the power of religion or tradition. It is merely an integral part of something larger, which is by definition also religious. In our scholarly searches, it is this larger sphere that has kept us guessing and, in the process, we have lost sight of what we were looking for. Today, it seems, the sati debates have become complex rituals themselves whose original meanings are lost on the participants.

A fuller investigation of how sati fits together with other Hindu conceptualizations is now an urgent task. One may compare the sati issue to the dilemma for Hindus in facing up to their beef-eating past. If they have not burnt their books but play with their interpretation, why should the same not be done for sati?

As already said, to find the 'authentic sati' must involve further research into a complex combination of Hindu concepts of life after death and assumptions about the eternal nature of marital ties. A genuine sati would have only one aim: to accompany her husband, through the flames, on the imagined journey to another world in which they would live together. The last option would have to be exercised with considerable speed since Hindus, like many other peoples, dispose of their dead quickly. The ideal sati, therefore, has to leave this world with the deceased; delayed action is inferior and, as was already argued thousands of years ago, pointless.<sup>4</sup>

The essence of the 'real sati' emerges rather more clearly in a forthcoming book by Professor Jörg Fisch of the University of Zürich on 'Totenfolge', which I have read in manuscript.<sup>5</sup> The key element in this context appears to be the idea of togetherness as found in the concept of *vivahasamskara*, the eternal, invisible bond of human marriage which is said to transcend even the barriers of life and death. If one believes that death cannot break that bond, if, and only if, in its most idealized conceptualization, a Hindu marriage is perceived to be forever, it becomes possible for an ideal Hindu wife to argue that she should follow her husband wherever he goes. Thus, if he dies and is to be cremated, she must have herself cremated with him to uphold the togetherness of *samskāra*.

In real life, of course, absolute togetherness often makes no sense. The marriages of traders, soldiers and many others, being marked by regular absences, preclude total physical proximity which is, indeed, purely an ideal. But temporary physical distance need not sever the bonds of *samskāra*, which are invisible. If physical proximity is not essential, the recently bereaved woman, clearly in a liminal state, has the capacity to remain a wife *if she so wishes*. After all, the concept of *vivahasamskāra* refers to a state of consciousness as well as a physical condition.<sup>6</sup> Let us note, at least, that some Hindu widows make their case for living out their life as widows with precisely this argument, waiting to be reunited when the time for it comes, not willed by themselves.

At some point in ancient Hindu cultural history, such assumptions about eternal togetherness and afterlife in a lovers' paradise had to confront significant changes in perceptions. Mainstream Hinduism, as it is lived today, emphasizes karmic *moksha*, re-incarnation according to one's deeds. If we build principles of *karma* into the conceptual network outlined here, we find that a woman who saw her husband dead before her could still assert her widowhood—but only if she really so wished. She could now argue instead that the law of *karma* would make her own sacrifice ineffective, given that she could no longer be sure that after cremation she would end up in the same place as her husband. Here there is clearly an irreconcilable clash between (presumably older) concepts of heavenly bliss and the karmic representations of a rebirth which depends on an individual's actions. It would therefore not be surprising to discover that many widowed Hindu women have called on both traditions:

<sup>4</sup> As Julia Leslie lightly but appositely puts it, the husband would not wait for her in some distant heaven. (Suttee or sati: victim or victor', in Leslie, I.J. (ed.) *Roles and rituals for Hindu women*, London: Pinter, 1991, 175–91, at p. 188.)

<sup>5</sup> Fisch's book takes sati as its central concern. Like Firth's thesis, mentioned earlier, Fisch's work incorporates key concepts from the distant past relating to Hindu perceptions of death and the afterlife which the current sati debates have not considered. My own doctoral work on ancient and modern Hindu marriage laws provided access to layers of Indian tradition which have also not been taken into account in these discussions (see Menski, W.F.: 'Role and ritual in the Hindu marriage', Ph.D., SOAS, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> So clearly Derrett, J. D. M., 'The discussion of marriage by Gadadhara', in J. D. M. Derrett, *Essays in classical and modern Hindu law*. vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 303–32.

that is, they built their case for living as widows, indeed as not-remarrying widows, on the old *samskara* argument, but without the eternal physical togetherness. So the deceased husband could be a cosmic wanderer anywhere, but the woman could still claim to be his wife, with no longer any need to endure the flames.

The above analysis shows us that the continuity of the marital link is central to understanding sati, but in itself it does not explain it. Otherwise millions of Hindu women would have gone on dying in this way. In other words, the 'faithful wife', the real sati, must also have had a firm belief in certain assumptions about life after death to justify her own cremation. Shirley Firth's field-work in India and Britain shows that blissful Vedic-style images of conjugal life after death are less prevalent today than the karmic complex. They still exist, however, now combined with all kinds of karmic perceptions in ways which indicate that people have not thought them through.

It is crucial to this analysis, then, that the emerging *karma*/reincarnation complex militated against sati. In loosening the eternal *vivāhasambandha* and no longer giving a wife any guarantee of reunion with her husband in one place, karma concepts thus actually prevented newly bereaved wives from considering religious suicide to achieve the continuation of their marriage in another sphere. A genuine sati would, therefore, have to be something of a pre-karmic phenomenon. She could only be a wife who believed in both the eternal link of the *vivāhasamskāra* and a joint afterlife in some form of heaven. Karmic doctrines thus actually protected, presumably at a rather early stage in the development of Hindu culture, Hindu widows against murder in the name of *vivāhasamskāra*.

It is only some time later that the karmic processes were redefined, now suggesting to Hindu wives that it might be beneficial to contemplate self-sacrifice. And so we are brought full circle, to Harlan's Rajput women for example, who have clearly imbibed such old reinterpretations of what the 'real sati' is all about. These linkages need to be researched in depth. All that can be done here is to note how changing combinations of ancient Hindu concepts have interacted to redefine sati to the point where modern historians, approaching the phenomenon from a non-Sanskritic perspective, seem almost justified in imagining that the 'real sati' never was.

There could indeed originally have been no 'real sati' unless several complex mental processes had come together. Ancient Hindu society, with its strong emphasis on reproduction, would not have countenanced great numbers of women refusing to live on after the husband's death and thus rejecting their primary social duty as procreators. The ancient literature is full of scathing references to male renunciation, while glorifying those few individuals who ventured to go to the extreme. Somewhere in these discourses there must be references to women renouncers and these need to be brought to light in the framework of the analysis outlined above. A re-examination of these sources would probably show that ancient Hindu tradition exercised a modicum of control over the 'real sati' before the phenomenon could get out of hand. After all, dharma as a self-controlling system of order has many ways of reinforcing itself.

As was said above, a real sati would have to make up her mind quickly. In observable reality, a mind that wavered could always abandon one of the key conceptual ingredients and there would be no sati. Attempts by colonial officers to test the resolve of women provide ample evidence of this, as do earlier sources. Some jumped at the chance to survive, others were too imbued with their own beliefs on female sacrifice, or too indoctrinated, and declined

to be 'rescued'. How many wanted to be united with their husband in some form of paradise? Nobody ever asked such women about the beliefs they held on the afterlife. Where, in fact, were they journeying to? This, as Paul Courtright rightly emphasizes (p. 28), is a crucial missing ingredient in the research on sati so far.

However, as Hawley's volume clearly confirms, the later pro-sati ideology gradually and cleverly reconstructed sati in karmic terms to justify murder. The process itself is not unique to the sati complex, since it is a prominent strategy in later shastric literature to recommend a wide variety of conduct by reference to future benefits, not so much for oneself as for generations of descendants. One can see why this happened so easily for sati. Since *vivahasamskara* itself reflects the post-classical shift of emphasis from progeny to female chastity and women's subservience, the sati complex was also redefined in these terms. The extension of this shift beyond the fault line of life and death, somewhere near the hidden and ragged borderlines between Vedic and classical Hinduism, was awesomely simple. When this development is tied in with patriarchal assumptions about women having to follow men, it leads almost directly to Harlan's contemporary model of sati as a paradigm of selflessness. But as soon as women were pushed into funeral pyres by reference to benefits for the husband, there could no longer be authentic sati. What we have witnessed, for millennia rather than centuries, is therefore the fine-tuning by a male-centred ideology of a theory justifying murder.

The 'real sati', then, was never just a quick killing but an ambiguous object of fear and admiration. For this very reason, and for obvious social reasons, too, she had to remain a minority phenomenon. I would suggest that there is yet another dimension to this: the sati is also a symbol of individual agency and power, rather than simply female procreative and ritual potency. Hawley's imagined 'Hindu legislators', like all professional rule-makers, were clearly ambivalent, if not hostile, as far as respect for an individual's power to choose between such dramatic options was concerned. For this reason, too, it is not surprising that suicide should already have been suppressed by ancient Hindu literature, probably much before it was redefined for patriarchal consumption.

While sympathizing with the anguish of those who fear a resurgence of sati, Hawley's volume as a whole supports the view that the panic is misplaced. There remains a huge difference, indeed, between the fully 'authentic' sati, who needs to become ashes to achieve her aim, and the murdered sati of the twentieth century, not to speak of the partially-burnt victims of dowry greed today.