

The Sati- a matter of high caste Hindus or a general Hindu Culture: A case study of Roop Kanwar.

Syed Hussain Shaheed Soherwordi*

The immolation of a widow on her late husband's funeral pyre, which became known as sati, is considered to be the strongest expression of marital velour that a woman could demonstrate. It was declared illegal in 1829 by the British. Due to the low status of women in India, it is often the only way a widow will be revered following the passing of her husband and therefore often considered the only option appropriate. A prominent case of sati that has occurred within recent years has been the immolation of Roop Kanwar in the village of Rajasthan during September of 1987. With this case in view, Sati has become a modern phenomenon, and the reactions towards Roop Kanwar suggest that Sati is not wholly embodied within Hindu culture. Supporters of Sati are from the Rajput community and even then there is a definite line between the worship of Sati and the actual practice of it.

Key Words: Sati, India, Roop Kanwar, Hindu Culture, Rajputs.

Modern day sati is a subject under much scrutiny. It is a particularly startling concept traditionally bound within Hindu culture. Sati is an issue that people of the West find difficult to understand and one that is defined as something one commits, whereas Hindi speakers define sati as something in which one becomes. In Hindi, Sati means "good woman" (Harlan,1992: 115). It is this glorification of Sati, which led the Roop Kanwar case to have such great momentum. The issue surrounding Sati involves binary opposites and polar extremes, of people both favouring and opposing the tradition. Within this essay, I will discuss how Sati has become a modern phenomenon, and how the reactions towards Roop Kanwar suggest that Sati is not wholly embodied within Hindu culture. I suggest that the majority of

* Author is Lecturer in the Department of International Relations, University of Peshawar

supporters are from within the Rajput community and even then there is a definite line between the worship of Sati and the actual practice of it.

A Sati is a woman who immolates herself on her dead husband's funeral pyre and Roop Kanwar was an 18 year old girl from the small village of Deorala in Rajasthan, who immolated herself on the 4th September 1987. It is in the state of Rajasthan where the majority of the Rajput community live and so Roop Kanwar was part of this community. A Rajput is a person belonging to Kshatriya (warrior) caste and if not wealthy, then certainly well-to-do. Deorala is a relatively highly developed village and through this wealth and education was the reason why Roop Kanwar's Sati caused such a reaction. Especially because Roop Kanwar's father was a Headmaster of a district school and she herself was a graduate (Kumar: 1993, 174). Anti – sati organisations stress that sati is for the rural, uneducated and backwards classes. However, this is not the case. Sati today is funded by urban politicians, who often are educated. Being from an educated family suggests that they are aware of gender discrimination, communalism within India and that this type of tradition is endorsing a devaluation of women. However, it goes to show that even a woman who is educated within India can be subject to sati, as a result securing the cultural tradition within Hindu Culture.

Firstly, we must consider the nature of Sati before and around the time of its outlawing. Without a relative comparison for the present day situation it is hard to say how deeply embodied in Hindu culture it is currently. Having said this, it is not as easy to do as it might be considered. For example, according to Das (1994), in the Vedic ages there is no mention of Sati in the historical texts which are still in existence. Indeed, there are however references to ancient priests consoling widows in the wake of their husbands deaths. This strongly suggests the practise was not yet even in existence. Similarly Hindu widows were even known to remarry in this time (Das, 1994). Yet, progress through the ages and Sati begins to appear in south Asian texts. Such was its prevalence, and such was the Muslim dislike for the Hindu practise, that under the Mughal Empire widows had to apply and gain permission to partake in immolation (Das, 1994). This says two things; it shows the level and perceived severity of the situation and also suggests that during this period of time the numbers of cases of Sati occurring would be diminishing. According to Fisch (2005), in the period around the year 1810 there were up to 33,000 cases of Sati across India annually. On the wider subcontinent this increases to 100,000.

Yet, there are numerous, competing accounts of Sati in the 19th century. It could also be argued that the above figures are unrealistic; there are other sources which put the numbers at as low as 3,000 a year, going as far as to say that 'widow burning was statistically almost insignificant' (Fisch, 2005: 237). Similarly, Jacobson & Wadley state that in the 19th century 'Sati occurred in only a very small percentage of families' (1977: 53). This figure is curious as it suggests in turn that the modern day significance of Sati will be even smaller. In a country the size of India, the figures available are, in contrast to the overall population, very low. Despite this, though Fisch says it is 'statistically' not significant, this does not mean to say it is culturally unimportant. Additionally, there is the issue of the reliability of any statistical information. As Fisch (2005) notes, much of the research was done by missionaries through local agents. The information given then is not only third hand but is also therefore unreliable. Moreover, these statistics are generalisations, as often the research would only be conducted over a distance of around 50 kilometres. Such information can hardly be considered a dependable or accurate reflection of the country as a whole, especially not in a country as geographically and culturally variable as India. The fact that much of the research was conducted by missionaries raises another valuable point. As Mani (1998) considers, Sati was highly influenced by colonialisation and the imposition of Western, and specifically English, ideals. It is argued that in fact Sati was not that wide spread and what occurred was more a form of moral panic amongst the colonial forces. Significantly, what this all suggests is that Sati was not really that deeply embodied in Hindu culture anyway, if looking purely at the numbers involved.

Furthermore, it is not only in recent times that there has been an opposition to the idea of Sati. As early as the 7th century A.D., the poet Bana stated that 'the custom is a foolish mistake' (Bana cited in Sharma, 1988). He was not alone in his resistance towards the custom. Three large groups of Hindu's also rejected or at least refused to practise Sati. These were all followers of Vishnu, the Tantric sects and the cult of Shakti (Fisch, 2005). This is a large proportion of Hindu's who see no place for immolation in their religion. The decision to distance them from Sati is not a recent thing and shows the contentious nature of immolation even in earlier times. As far back as Bana, people have been voicing their concern with the practice. This would suggest that the ritual would in present times be considered even more barbaric.

The situation in recent times is of course very different. Much has improved for women in India as the country has progressed and

modernized. Cormack (1953) states that there is less 'need' for women to commit Sati because of the improvement of women's social situation and standing. There is now a greater focus on remarriage, training for the work place and social acceptance of widows. Women who in the past might have felt a social pressure to partake in immolation now have other options available to them. Jacobson and Wadley (1977) also include the legal enshrinement of their right to divorce or remarry. This arguably means that fewer women are tied into marriages to families that might pressure them into Sati and also offers another option for continued social life as a widow.

However, women still face great social difficulties in Indian society. According to the work of Chatterji (1988) in 1996 there was an astonishing 82,818 crimes recorded against women. This number is considered so large that two areas of India are setting up female-only courts to deal with these problems. As well as Sati, there is a growing problem in India, despite the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1984, of dowry deaths. These are suicides or murders which result from pressure on a bride to provide a dowry for her husband. Chatterji (1988) says that there are 17 confirmed deaths a year as of 1994, though CNN (1996) reports that the Indian police receive more than 2500 reports of dowry deaths every year. Such troubling reports say a lot about the realities faced by many Indian women every day. Furthermore, for those like Jules Verne (1873; Oldenburg, 1994; Fisch, 2005) who advocate Sati as most often being a coercive act, it shows a lot about the nature with which women are viewed in Indian society. Violence towards women is fairly common and deeply embedded in Indian culture.

Women in India are totally dependent on their husband and consequently live in very strict seclusion. It is often this that makes self-sacrifice seem appealing to some widows, as it is difficult for a woman to exist unblemished in society following the death of her husband. As well as this it is often apparent to a widow that she will remain a constant economic strain on her in-laws who are duty bound to care for her as long as they live as "families with a customary sense of honour would consider it unthinkable to deprive a widow her rights." (Sangari & Vaid, 1981: 1284) It is this fear that often persuade woman to commit acts of sati, as their alternative would be "living and leading a ghettoed and cloistered life." (Singh, 1991: 86) It is this that clearly demonstrates that sati is still a tradition deeply engrained in society due to the reality that many women would prefer immolation to the alternative of living as a widow. Feminists would argue that it is these factors that goad women into committing sati as opposed to a deep desire to out of love and

respect for a husband. As a result of Indian men having internalised norms regarding woman, and widows in particular, society could not imagine, or abide, a widow living as an individual entity.

It is this social control of women that persuades many into believing that sati is the only viable option for a widow. In a male-dominated society in which unattached women are perceived as “a grave danger to her community because of the supposedly irrepressible sexual powers she possessed” (Sarkar & Sarkar, 2008: 20) sati can often be perceived as the most appropriate option to bring an end to the “threat she posed to the spiritual welfare of others” while reaping “honour and merit for herself, her husband and their families.” (Sarkar & Sarkar, 2008: 21) Parents persuading their daughters to “adjust at all costs in the marital home” (Kishwar, 2002: 55) and accept mistreatment by their husbands further institutionalise these norms. As a result “they too are endorsing the norm that a woman’s life is worthless”. (Kishwar, 2002: 55) This was illustrated by the reaction of Roop Kanwar’s family to her death as, while acknowledging that they were saddened by her passing and were mourning their loss, they had no complaints regarding the circumstances of her death. This was in spite of having not been informed of the sati, which had been planned in advanced and occurred in Deolara; only two hours from where they lived. As well as this the family chose not to investigate the suspicious circumstances around Roop Kanwar’s death; where it was alleged that she had been drugged and forced to commit the act. This clearly demonstrates that sati is still a deeply embodied tradition in Hindu culture, as many families will often ignore the circumstances in which their relative died in favour of the benefits that can be reaped from the immolation.

Sati is today specifically absorbed within Rajput community and therefore not deeply embodied in Hindu culture. Sati is ‘projected as exemplifying the true Rajput identity’ (Kumar,1993: 176). This is because in short, Rajput ideals are central to sacrifice and donation. Therefore, Sati is the ultimate sacrifice, which personifies the ideal of a woman to a man. Roop Kanwar was a Rajput and it is important to point out that within this community ‘sati veneration is a living tradition’ (Harlan, 1992: 13). The Rajput community have a particularly specific way of following the tradition and it is important for them to understand Sati as a transformative process. This point highlights that Sati has become a localised tradition with a Rajput community rather than a widespread tradition across India.

The Rajputs are a highly influential community of people and they have a strong affirmation to Sati, so influential in fact that the state

government could have punished many ideologues and profiteers of Sati, however they haven't intervened because the issue was one of Rajput identity. This point highlights how politics dominates the issue of Sati (Kumar,1993: 177). Thus, the Rajput community fundamentally believe in Sati and continue in promoting Sati through alternative means. This is why some people would agree and say that Sati is still deeply embodied within Hindu culture because pro-sati organisations are using modern techniques in order to promote the cultural tradition. The *Rani Sati Sarva Sangha Trust* has built 105 temples all over India, in order to promote Sati traditions. The members of said organisation are generally Mahajans, in particular, Marwaris (Kumar, 176). (A Marwari is a person from a particular area of Rajasthan.) Alongside, the sati temples, pro-sati organisations hold annual fairs to bring prosperity to villages and to promote their support to Sati. Sati can be now viewed as a promotional ritual, which draws on modern techniques in order to keep its supporters and to spread the word to new people. Although, they have temples throughout India, it is mostly central to north India, particularly Rajasthan.

There is support throughout some other states in India, as head priests in Hindu temples in Benares, Uttah Pradesh and Puri, Orissa made statements which announced that Sati was not only 'one of the most noble elements...of Rajput culture, but of Hinduism, and claimed scriptural sanction for this view' (Kumar,1993: 178).

However, commercialism and the introduction of modern technology have made a considerable impact on the way Sati in India is advertised. Sati is now a big business. The Sati of Roop Kanwar is at the forefront of the propaganda. Photomontages of Roop Kanwar circulated throughout India to celebrate her death. These images were cleverly put together to combine 'pictures of the bridal couple at their wedding cut and pasted to show the bride in all her finery, smiling straight into the camera, with her husband's body laid in her lap; her red veil as backdrop stimulates flames' (Sunder Rajan: 1993, 27). More dramatically, an image of Roop Kanwar holding her husband surrounded by flames, while a small figure of a goddess hovers behind them in the open landscape sending a magic ray that lights the fire. These images have a profound effect on their audience, especially in fulfilling a narrative to the illiterate population of India. These photographic memoirs represent a 'deity picture', a symbol of the perfect women (1993, 27). This point refers to how Roop Kanwar is seen as ultimate women, to which all women should aspire to. Also, these images transmit two iconographies of sati. The first is an aggressive traditionalist perception, as she cradles her husband and the second is a political meaning, by which feminists

stand to argue against Sati having any religious meaning (Hawley,1994: 47).

These images could be bought in many different art forms; studio photo, poster size, comic strip, they were all items that could be purchased on a market stalls along with other offerings and mementos, that were set up at the site of her death in Deorala. Deorala became a pilgrimage site, a one that attracted many visitors. Thus modern technology became a powerful tool to organise the visitors around the site, for example, 'parking lots were arranged and traffic controllers appointed; a control tower was set up near the site and a fairly elaborate system of loud-speakers were strung around the area' (Kumar: 1993, 175). This highlights the extent to which Sati has become a modern phenomenon. It has become a ritual flanked with commercial attitudes that devalues the role of women all the more. These activities promote Sati throughout India and accentuate that modern day Sati is a spectacle, a rare yet public spectacle, which is 'conducted with the approval and applause of the local community' (Kishwar & Vanita, 1987 in Major (ed.), 2007: 356). At Roop Kanwar's Sati it is reported that it was witnessed by hundreds of people and around 300,000 people attended the *Chunari Mahotsav* (festival of death), which marks the 13th day after the Sati. The numbers here suggest that there is a significant backing of Sati.

Since India became independent in 1947, around 40 stray cases of Sati have been reported within the northern states. Throughout the late 1980's, there was a significant increase of sati attempts, that were subsequently averted due to police involvement, however four or five were successfully carried out (Rajan, 1993: 17). Again, these numbers highlight how Sati is still being attempted by women; even though many have been averted by police action.

On the other hand, Sati can be viewed as a tradition that is being gradually eliminated from Hindu culture. Sati is seen as the ultimate sacrifice and a one which many Rajput women admire, however many Rajput women now only worship Sati. This is largely due to the fact that 'becoming a sati would harm rather than help the family'. Sati is an illegal act, which was officially abolished in 1829, by British governor William Bentinck. Due to feminist interventions around the Roop Kanwar case, new legislation saw the Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act of 1987. Thus, Sati is illegal and 'today the practice of dying as a sati is largely extinct' because with new legislation, it is illegal to abet, glorify or attempt to commit Sati (Harlan, 1992: 118). This abolition of the act has not prevented women from worshipping Sati. Therefore, Sati is not still deeply embodied within Hindu culture

because it is now only valued through worship and not a practice. On the other hand, the argument could be posed that the new legislation highlights that Sati is still embodied within Hindu culture and still plays a prominent part with India, otherwise there would be no need to implement a stronger law against the act.

Despite general violence and female persecution being rather widespread, Cormack says that 'there is probably no aspect of womanhood that has received more sympathy than that of widowhood in India' (Cormack, 1953: 163). Widowhood, and particularly immolation, is seen in a completely different light from its previous position in colonial times. She states that the practise is for the most part condemned but moreover that, as a physical act not as a theoretical viewpoint, 'the practise, in any case, is now obsolete' (1953: 163). She views the issue of Sati as in the past due to the exceptionally small number of cases reported. It is currently estimated that between one in ten thousand and one in a million cases of widowhood end in immolation (Fisch, 2005). Another source (Jacobson & Wadley, 1977) reports that approximately two cases of Sati are confirmed every year currently in northern India. This number is remarkably low when compared with what was witnessed under colonial rule.

The wonders of modern media do however mean that reports of immolation can be widely viewed. The case of Roop Kanwar for example, became an overnight controversy. Though Sati's are reported occasionally without creating a great deal of uproar, for more than one reason, the Kanwar case has been resigned to the hallways of infamy. It stands as the enduring example of contemporary Indian society's reaction to Sati for the radical reactions it caused. It seems shocking to hear that, whilst in the wake of her death only 350 people attended the first anti-Sati march (Oldenburg, 1994), 70,000 people took to the streets of Jaipur in favour (Major, 2006). When the anti-Sati protest marched upon the state governments buildings they were met with a silence from officials. Not even the women in power would leave the offices to meet with them (Oldenburg, 1994). The silence at the state level was matched by that of Rajiv Gandhi's national government. Oldenburg goes as far as to say that the administration gave the events in Deorala their 'tacit approval' (1994: 104). Meanwhile, the wider public were glorifying the incident to intense levels. Between 250,000 and 300,000 people are estimated to have flocked to her home town to pay their respects, despite the process of glorification of Sati participants being illegal (Major, 2006). The *chunari* ceremony which took place in the days following her death drew a crowd of 10,000 daily (Oldenburg, 1994). Oldenburg also

anecdotally talks of the paraphernalia available throughout the town, with the masses able to buy large images of both Roop and her husband (1994). Tours were also made available of the marital home. At the same time as this was going on, it must also be considered that there were police investigations and at one stage 45 people were in the process of being charged for her murder (Fisch, 2005). Yet, even with this background of possible coercion and/or murder the second anti-Sati march only managed to garner a crowd of 3000. It would appear that the public support was firmly with the process of Sati in spite of the dubious nature of this particular case.

Oldenburg (1994) also picks up on another key issue pertaining to Sati as a whole. The Kanwar case shows particularly the institutional acceptance of immolation whether it be the denial of the government, the judicial decision to acquit those arrested or the slowness and reluctance of the police to investigate the situation as a murder. This is a significant problem with the reporting and investigating of Sati. Fisch (2005) notes that there is a significant problem with people not reporting possible cases of widow-burning or police ignoring complaints because they secretly agree with the practise. This is of course also of importance to current projections of Sati, meaning that figures may in fact be significantly higher than reported. Similarly, Thapar (1975) notes that generalising Sati figures to all widows is not possible, particularly in a country as vast as India. To say Sati takes place with the same frequency all over India would be highly unlikely to be true. Widow-burning is said to be more common in rural middle to lower class areas of the subcontinent (Fisch, 2005).

This does however, says something about how deeply embedded Sati is in Hindu and Indian culture. It is impossible to generalise on this topic over the whole country and any generalisations that have been made are therefore limited in their accuracy and relevance. It is impossible consequently to say how deeply embedded in the culture Sati is for numerous reasons. For one, it is not possible to say with any assurance how prevalent the practise was before it was made illegal, and it was never, even in the 19th century an uncontroversial idea. It has always had its opposition and critics. It could be argued that it was widespread and this shows by proxy that it is only loosely embodied in present day Hinduism. But reversely, such is the diversity of statistics available one could also conclude that Sati was never especially common and that in fact it is as embedded culturally today as it ever has been. What can be said however is that the situation socially has changed greatly, offering women a chance to better themselves following widowhood rather than opting or being forced to opt for Sati. Having said this, women are still subject to

violence and many feminists view Sati as highly coercive at best and murder at worse. In conclusion then, whilst we may not be able to accurately compare present day views of Sati with earlier beliefs, we can say that the case of Roop Kanwar shows a highly unusual level of social acceptance for a case many regarded with extreme suspicion. The level of support shown by the public and the institutional inaction spoke volumes to the social acceptance and deep embodiment of Sati in current Indian and Hindu culture.

I have discussed how commercialism has played a large part in developing Sati to be a 'new craze' and this draws attention from the traditional aspects of the ritual. Sati, today is essentially the same ritual, however it is the politics surrounding the issue which lead to commercialism defecting from the traditional cultural roles. Researchers and anti-sati organisations have remarked how 'next to the new temples there are sati memorial stones which lie neglected and unworshipped' (Kumar, 1993: 175). This draws attention to the ways in which Sati has become a product of a materialistic society. An interesting point is that straight after Roop Kanwar's death, urban men, professionals or businessmen from landowning families were instantly supportive and their influence extended over both rural and urban areas (1993, 176). I think this indicates how some middle to upper class males express traditional misogynistic views and are able to exploit this through the sati market.

It is fair to say that Sati has been turned into something quite commercialised and is now part of a political dispute rather than a religious one. The governors behind pro-sati rallies are rich business men from urban communities, who have connections with trade and Indian politics. These men have authority and much of the anger behind feminist reactions is because these men are supporting Sati as a means to their own end, in a quest for status and power. It is a combination of patriarchal views, which glorify the painful death of a woman and then assist the site to be a prosperous pilgrimage site (*Hinduism Today*, 1987 in Major (ed.), 2007, 380).

Even though, there is such an idealistic viewpoint within the Rajput community and there are many defenders of it, 'it is important to remember that many Rajputs are also totally opposed to sati' (Kishwar and Vanita, 1987 in Major (ed.), 2007, 365). Many people have also stood up against sati to dispute the spiritual 'sanction' of sati. Hinduism does not follow a complete book of gospel truths, like Christianity and therefore different Hindu communities follow different social practices, many of these are not mentioned in any text (2007: 363). Hence the reasons why some communities, i.e. Rajput have stronger hold over a specific ritual than others.

Within Rajasthan, many rural women demonstrated their opposition towards the sati of Roop Kanwar and the lack of state intervention at her death (Kumar, 1993: 181). Roop Kanwar's death was perhaps a blessing in disguise because it became a catalyst which seemed to bring women's organisations together to unite against Sati. On the 6th October 1987, 3,000 people marched through the streets of Jaipur, representing twenty five organisations from Rajasthan and thirty one from other cities, to proclaim that Sati is 'not just an issue that concerned women but a crime against women; it was seen as a move to manipulate religion and caste to exploit women' (Oldenburg, 1994 in Major (ed.), 2007: 386).

There are arguments against sati that question whether the woman was being forced by her family to become a sati or whether it was a voluntary act. This is a difficult distinction to make and a question which was asked after the Roop Kanwar case. It is an interesting discussion to note because traditionally women in India are seen as practically invisible and worthless. Their opinions don't count and their voices aren't heard. So when, defenders of Sati remark that Sati was a voluntary act on behalf of the women, it begs the question, why now all of a sudden does a woman get to choose her own fate? Questions towards woman's agency are expressed such as, if a woman cannot chose her husband or matters including her our education or career, how can she choose whether she lives or dies? (2007, 405)

The Roop Kanwar case in 1987 aroused a lot of hysteria and stimulated many women across India to fight back against the tradition. I have presented arguments for and against the view that Sati is a cultural tradition that is still deeply embodied in Hindu culture. As discussed there are communities especially in Rajasthan who strongly believe that it is culturally embodied but I would argue it is in the interests of urban politicians to maintain this position. For sati to be deeply embodied with Hindu culture there would need to be sufficient support for the tradition to embrace India nationwide. I think it is only a minority of the Hindi population who worship or follow sati as a tradition. This minority lies within the Rajput community, where Sati is now a localised tradition, which is not deeply embodied, as it is becoming less practised by women in India.

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