The Many Faces Of Sati In The Early Nineteenth Century

We present extracts from a paper by Anand Yang, which attempts to construct a social profile of women in 19th century Bengal who became Satis

IN pursuing an institutional approach to the subject of Sati, most scholarly studies have failed so far to view this historical phenomenon from a human perspective. In part, the oversight exists because the prevailing modes of enquiry do not seek to penetrate the veil of rhetoric imposed on Sati, whether that made out of the fabric of discourse woven from the religious ideology sanctioning its practice, or that stitched together from the doctrines of policy makers and reformers seeking its abolition. Still largely shrouded therefore is the human face of Sati, as neither the identities of those who committed Sati, nor their reasons for seeking "virtue" in death have received much attention.

In part, the peculiar emphases in the scholarly focus on Sati reflect the predominant orientation of South Asian studies towards traditional political history and not the "new" social history which treats the pasts of women as a major topic of re-search and concern. The omissions are all the more lamentable because a wealth of source material exists to identify the faces of widows who became Satis in the early 19th century.

Local British officials after 1815 compiled annual reports on Satis containing information on : name (of widow), age, caste name and caste of husband, date of burning, name of police jurisdiction, and in a separate column entitled "Remarks," "Any particular

Early 19th century painting by bazar artist, for sale to pilgrims at Kalighat temple, Calcutta, shows the mythological Sati Savitri, who, by her persistence and intelligence, compelled Yama, god of death, to return to life her dead husband, Satyavan.

circumstances in the reports of the police officers, which may appear to deserve notice."

Between 1815 and 1821, official records closely followed this format, with the "Remarks" column serving principally as a place to present information on those aspects of a case, if any, which violated the offi-cial conception of a legal Sati. In 1821, government turned its attention to securing information on the kind of Sati committed—*sahamarana* or *anumarana*, as well as on the econo-mic background of the deceased husband. Although the latter directive was not scrupulously observed in the 1822 report, it be-came a regular feature of the 1824 report. *Sahamarana* was immolation with the husband's body, and *anumarana* was immolation later, • along with the husband's ashes or some other memento representing him, such as his sandals or turban.

To what extent Sati persisted in British India beyond 1828 cannot be gauged comprehensively because its abolition led to the suspension of systematic official collection of data. No doubt, the practice did not fall into disuse entirely, although government vigilance and enforce-ment of severe punishments for offenders must have sharply reduced the number.

The incidence of Sati also tape-red off dramatically because of the official ban on it—notwithstanding the fact that implementation of legal sanctions was entrusted to the weak administrative infrastructure of the fledgling colonial state—proved to be enough of a blow to shake the foundations of an institution which, as will be evident from the discussion below, enjoyed greater support in the spirit than in the actual practice. For the number of widows who resorted to immolation never amounted to a sizeable proportion of the population.

Furthermore, the attack on it was launched with the active co-operation of Indian reformers. Thus, in the initial years after its prohibition, as police and crime reports indicate, the numbers were

Sati stone from Madhya Pradesh 18th century

quickly down to only one or two in districts where there had formerly been considerably more cases.

Nevertheless, even in the 20th century, an occasional case or two were known to have taken place and, as before, ostensibly with com-munity support. In the highly publicised Barh case (Patna district) of 1927, the immolation of a Brahman woman with her husband was witnessed by a crowd of about 5,000 people who shouted "Sati ki jai" (Long Live Sati) when the widow's clothes caught fire. A more recent instance was the burning of a 45 year old widow in Madhya Pradesh in November 1983.

Who Committed Sati And Why?

According to one official calcula-tion in 1824, the annual death rate in the Bengal Presidency, an area comprising a population of 50 million people, was 1 in 33, that is, approximately 1,500,000 people. A sixth of this total, or 250,000; represented the number of Hindu women who became widows. Rounding out to 600 the figure for those who burned themselves that year, the number of Satis only constituted 0.2 percent of the overall number of widows.

Another instructive clue as to the proportion of widows who actually burnt themselves can be gained by manipulating the data for Hughli which consistently reported one of the highest rates of Sati in British India. Take the year 1822, for instance, when 79 cases of Sati occurred in a population of 1,239,150. Assume, on the basis of a demographic profile drawn from the more systematic census figures available for the late 19th century, that males and females comprised an equal number in the population, that is, 619,575 each. Again, from what is known about the age distribution pattern for the later period, a rough estimate can be made that 60 percent of the males were over the age of 15, that is 371,745. If this number is taken to represent all the married men in the district, and their annual mortality rate placed at 1 in 33, as many as 11,265 women would have been widowed annually. Yet of these, 79, or only 0.7 percent, joined their husbands on the funeral pyre.

The practice of Sati, in short, was not only peculiar to certain regions of the subco'ntient, but within those particular areas, taken up by only a small fraction of the widows. Although difficult to verify because the data say little about kinship ties between Satis, this restricted scope of the rite probably indicates, as many scholars suspect, that it was a practice which must have been a tradition only in certain lineages.

From almost every district examples can be found of women who had not only reached a ripe old age but who immolated themselves long after their husbands had died

Another aspect of the identity of Sati victims in the early nineteenth century

Table 1 : Sati Cases in Bengal Presidency, 1815-1828

Division	1815	1816	1817	1818	1819	1820	1821	1822	1823	1824	1825	1826	1827	1828	total
Calcutta*	253	289	442	544	421	370	392	328	340	373	398	324	337	308	5119
Dacca	31	24	52	58	55	51	52	45	40	40	101	65	49	47	710
Murshidabad	11	22	42	30	25	21	11	22	13	14	21	8	9	10	259
Patna+	20	29	49	57	40	42	69	70	49	42	38	43	55	55	689
Banaras	48	65	103	137	92	93	114	102	121	93	64	70	49	33	1153
Bareilly	15	13	19	13	17	20	15	16	12	10	17	8	18	10	203
Total	378	442	707	839	650	597	653	583	575	572	639	518	517	463	8133

Source : Compiled from "Sati Papers"
*The figures include the numbers for the Orissan "districts" of Cuttack, Khurda, Puri and Balasore which then formed part of Calcutta division. The totals for these districts varied from 9 in 1815 to a high of 45 in 1825.
+I have corrected for Patna Division figures because the official source add on the number for Gorakhpur beginning in 1824 when that district was shifted from Banaras to Patna. I have retained the numbers for Gorakhpur in the Banaras totals.

Table 2 : Age Composition of Sati Victims in Bengal Presidency in 1825 and 1826

	0-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	80-89	90-99	100+	total
1825	17	98	104	122	110	112	46	26	3	1	639
	(2.7)	(15.3)	(16.3)	(19.1)	(17.2)	(17.5)	(7.2)	(4.1)	(0.5)	(0.1)	100%
1826	20	104	70	77	84	81	53	24	3	2	518
	(4)	(20)	(13.5)	(14.9)	(16.2)	(15.6)	(10.2)	(4.6)	(0.6)	(0.4)	100%

Source : Compiled from "Sati Papers, 1830," pp. 113-118, 208-213.

which explains the phenomenon better is their caste and economic backgrounds. Contrary to the conventional wisdom regard-ing high caste status of Sati victims, a different portrait emerges from a close examination of the detailed information. Official breakdown of the 575 cases reported in 1823 reveals the following distributior according to *varna* categories : 234 Brahmans (41 percent), 35 Kshatriyas (6 percent), 14 Vaishyas (2 percent) and 292 Sudras (51 percent).

A different light on the practice of Sati is also cast by analysing the ages of its victims. In any given year (see table 2) almost half of the widows committing Sati were 50 and over, and two thirds 40 years and more. In 1818, 123 out of 839 cases or 14.6 percent, were 70 and over ; but only 98, or 11.6 percent, aged 25 or under. The overwhelming majority, as in other years, were 40 years old or more. As the official report concluded in presenting these statistics, "a great proportion of these acts of self-devotion

Almost 50 percent of the widows were 50 and over; 75 percent 40 and over

have not taken place in youth, or even in the vigor of age; but a period when life, in the common course of nature, must have been near its close." (Proceedings of the *Nizamat adalut* Mav 21, 1819).

Further indications of the nature of Sati as a practice serving in some instances as a kind of ritual suicide at the close of one's life can be gleaned from reports on individual cases. From almost every district examples can be found of women who had not only reached a ripe old age but who immolated themselves long after their husbands had died. To draw on illustrations from the Bihar districts : Lugnee burnt herself at the age of 90, 25 years after the death of her husband; Namau ascended the funeral pyre at the age of 80 following the absence of her husband, presumed dead, for a period of 15 years. Similarly, in 1819, two notable cases stand out for Shahabad : 50 year old Bukhtee who became a Sati 12 years after the demise of her husband, and 72 year old Futree

who became a Sati 17 years after her husband had died. Again from Shahabad, among the Satis for 1821, was the widow Khooshaulee, age 80, who burnt her-self with the clothes of her husband, 20 years after his death.

This aspect of Sati, as a form of ritual suicide, conditioned at least in part by personal considerations, also shows up in the economic conditions of many widows. Relying on information on the economic backgrounds of Satis, compiled beginning with the reports of 1822, a profile can be drawn up which reveals that many of the widows came from impoverished families. Of the 40 cases reported for Burdwan that year, only three or four of the deceased "left any considerable property ... the greater proportion were in a state of poverty." Similar observations were filed for other districts that year : Hughli's 79 Satis followed 25 husbands who had died in "opulent circumstances, thirteen in middling, and forty-one in poor circumstances"; Backergunge's 18 cases involved only five deceased husbands who were "in respectable circumstances, all the rest died indigent."

The high representation of poor widows who took their lives after the demise of their husbands is again borne out by the statistics for 1823. Hughli's 81 cases included 37 husbands who were "poor, sixteen in middling, and twenty-four in opulent circumstances"; Jessore's 14 incidents involved six husbands in "good (condition), three in middl-ing, and five in bad circumstances"; Jungle Mehals' 27 cases included 10 said to be "poor, the rest were generally in moderate circumstances"; and "the greater part" of the 31 cases in Cuttack "appear to have been in low circumstances."

Much the same conclusions regarding the advanced age and impoverished conditions of Sati victims emerges from the information collected for 1826 when almost every district report turned in full details on these subjects. Burdwan's report on 45 satis referred to women who "generally speaking...have attained mature ages, and their deceased husbands to have been in low circumstances"; Hughli's 98 cases evoked the observation that the "greater proportion of the hus-bands appear to have been in poor or middling circumstances"; Nadia's 44 "female sacrifices... [involved] parties...for the most part...in poor circumstances ; and the widows were, generally speaking, of an advanced age."

Conclusions

Sati, prescribed by Hindu scriptures as a way for widows to attain spiritual fulfilment for themselves and their kinsfolk through their own ritual burning rather than live on as the inauspicious women they were regarded as with the death of their husbands, became more widespread in medieval India. By the time the British emerged as the rulers of Bengal, Bombay and Madras Presidencies in the late eighteenth century, it had become a well established ritual in many areas. However, as the documentation of the practice in the early nineteenth century reveals, it never acquired a popular constituency. Of the three major areas under the Raj in that period it was much more common in Bengal than in Bombay and Madras, the number of cases in the former area constituting over 90 percent of the total for all three Presidencies.

But within Bengal there were also variations. The greatest concentration of incidents occurred in the Presidency division, particularly in the districts of Hughli, Burdwan, and Nadia, and the suburbs of Calcutta which returned an annual average of 94, 66, 61 and 41 cases respectively between 1815 and 1821. Banaras division showed the next highest number, most of its Satis taking place in Ghazipur and Gorakhpur districts. Patna division produced the third highest total— there too the practice appeared not to be followed uniformly through-out the region but primarily in Saran and Shahabad.

To what extent Sati was a kind of ritual suicide is further emphasi-sed by the social, economic and personal characterististics of women who burnt themselves in the early nineteenth century. Almost 50 percent of the widows were 50 and over, and 75 percent 40 and over in a society when reaching those ages meant passing into the realm of the elderly.

Furthermore, a substantial number of Satis ranging from an overwhelming majority to slightly less than a simple majority in different areas were women of poor families. For them a life of widowhood carried a double jeopardy, for they were considered not only inauspici-ous women but also an economic drain on scarce family resources. Thus, for many widows in early nineteenth century India, the virtue of becoming a Sati lay in the deliverance it promised from a life of certain misery.