

# The Culture of Sati in Rajasthan

**Prahlad Singh Shekhawat explores the socioeconomic and cultural content**

AFTER the first phase of reportage and outrage against the Deorala Sati incident, there should be time to consider aspects beyond protest and immediate action. Sati is not only an evil force; it has the force of belief.

While the Sati phenomenon has to be countered on many fronts and the impact of civil rights groups and the press cannot be underestimated, some basic questions remain. What is the nature of the belief? Why does the belief carry conviction among so many? What makes Rajasthan, where Sati still recurs from time to time, different?

## Antecedents

The idea of Sati did not figure prominently or favourably in the early Hindu texts. Manu and Yajnavalkya had only recommended a chaste life for widows. Evidence of Sati being recommended is first found in *Vishnu Dharm Samhita* in the third century A.D.

of Sati narrates how a wife who had poisoned her husband, had to commit Sati as penance and to overcome guilt. In the Indian tradition, a wife is supposed to protect her husband from all evil through her rituals and virtues. If she is unable to protect him from death, she is in some way held responsible. That this



Regional customs rather than specific sanctions of the scriptures of Hinduism appear to have a more important bearing on the practice of Sati. But it is the absolute dependence of wife on husband and her self denial, which the Hindu tradition celebrates in its epics and legends and in its ethical order, that provides the larger context as well as ideological justification for Sati.

Significantly, one of the earliest tales

is not an abstract idea is indicated by the kinds of abuses a widow has to face.

The tale of Sati Savitri, the model Hindu wife, shows how she was able to bring her dead husband back to life through her power of devotion.

## Rajasthan Variation

The crucial distinction about Rajasthan is not that Sati still sometimes occurs (after all, compared to almost daily dowry deaths in the capital of modern

India, a Sati takes place once in several years) but that the cult of Sati, the miraculous and healing powers of Sati Mata, is a significant theme of legends and folk religion in Rajasthan. It is not as if, going back in time and space, one can simply equate today's Rajasthan with 19th century pre-renaissance Bengal. In

Sati shrines and temples as well as Sati fairs are almost entirely found in Rajasthan. The Sati temples in Delhi have come up because of the devotion of the Rajasthani Marwari community. In Rajasthan the emotions of pride and honour for the community code are powerful, but the possibility of attaining

Sati Matas in Rajasthan and there is the tale of a Charan woman across the border in Pakistan, who became a Sati for the sake of bringing good fortune to the village, even though her husband was still alive.

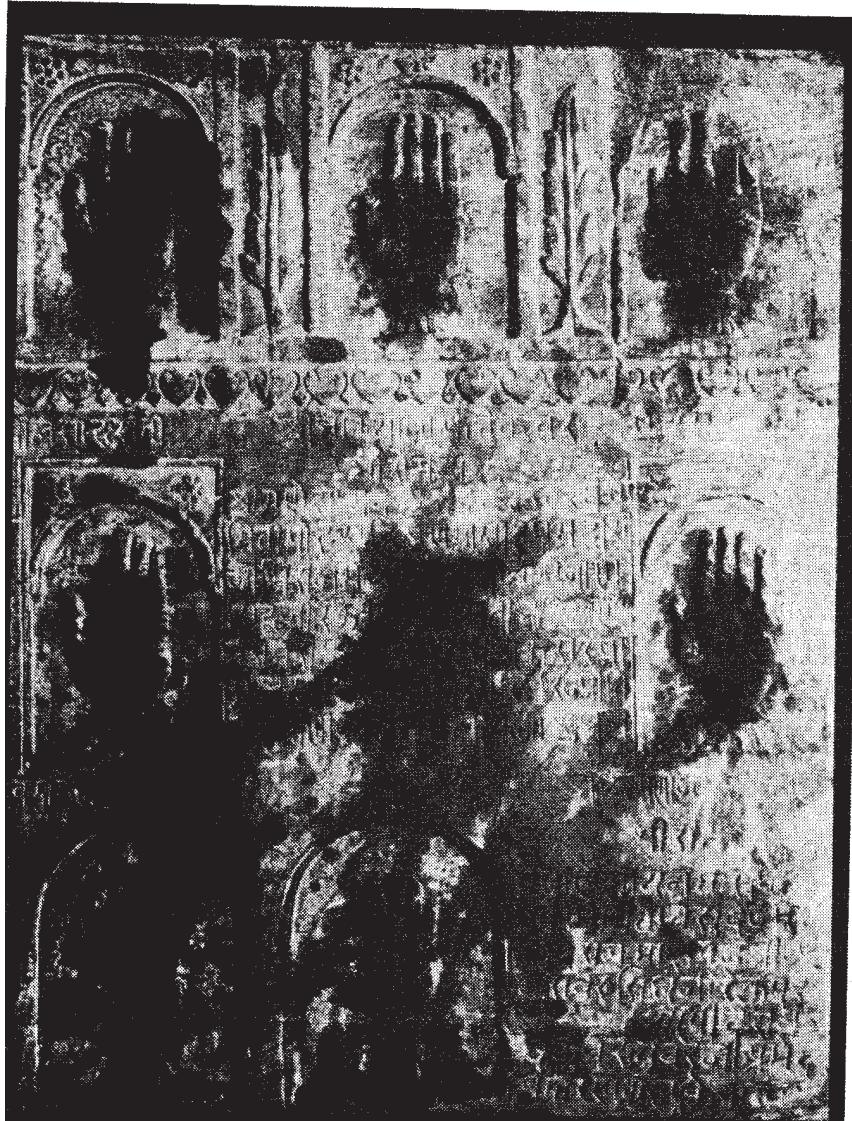
Although the dichotomy between idealising a woman in principle and treating her unequally in life is a familiar theme in Hinduism, the accentuation of this theme in the specific Rajasthani context is connected to the culture of Sati. Durga and Shakti and their various forms in Rajasthan like Silla Devi in Jaipur and Kami Mata in Bikaner, so widely worshipped in the Kshatriya tradition, are evocations of feminine energy for macho pursuits like war and power.

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**Left: Women's hands decorated with auspicious symbols in henna for a wedding**

**Right: Palm prints of queens who became Satis, Bikaner palace Rajasthan**

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early 19th century Bengal the element of physical coercion was more prominent.

Both in Bengal then and in Rajasthan now the intolerable status of the widow is a central issue but in Rajasthan more than anywhere else, a woman who commits Sati is a candidate for deification.

fame and higher status (and recently even riches), at least for the relatives of a Sati, is another compelling force.

Few widows were expected to or did commit Sati. Not all who committed Sati became celebrated as legends or were worshipped as Maha Sati. There are living

Perhaps the elevation of Sati as a female deity can also be seen as a glorification of feminine power for sacrifice and self denial, thereby fulfilling another macho norm.

It is interesting to compare the stuff of which heroes and heroines are made, in terms of deification, in the folk tradition of Rajasthan. Bhomiya, the central figure, is a landlord and is known for his chivalry and his miraculous powers. In a pastoral and livestock rearing society, he dies defending the village cattle. Lower down in status are the noble spirits who died fighting on the battlefield.

In the tradition of ancestor worship, only the male members are worshipped as spirits after death. A dead woman's spirit is regarded as evil and destructive like a witch or devil. Becoming a Sati offered the only possibility for a woman to become a heroine or deity. Untimely death for a cause (bringing glory to the village) and powers to perform miracles are the two basic qualifications for a deity in Rajasthan. These conditions are



fulfilled by a Sati but in her case the untimely death depends on the death of her spouse, denoting woman's ultimate dependence on man.

The five male deities—Bhomiya, Ramdev, Teja, Pabu and Goga, are more widely prevalent and generally occupy a high status in the rural consciousness. This is revealed in the legend of Pabu. Immediately after his marriage ceremony, Pabu responded to the call of duty and died fighting against the thieves stealing the village cattle, without consummating his marriage. His bride, on hearing of his death, asked for Pabu's severed head and, holding it in her lap, committed Sati. She became an honoured woman, but only as part of the legend of Pabu who is deified.

A platform and shrine of a Bhomiya or deity is to be found in nearly all villages. Sati Mata shrines are found only in those places where a woman is reported to have actually committed Sati.

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#### **Marwari women in a procession to honour the legendary Rani Sati, Delhi 1987**

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Sati worship is confined more to the realm of ancestor worship, except in the case of the three or four Maha Satis.

#### **Socio Ecology**

Women in tribal communities occupy a more free and equal position. The lower down one goes in the caste hierarchy, the greater are the possibilities for widow remarriage. Among the higher castes there is more segregation of sexes, more parda and more dependence of wife on husband. Nowhere among the ruling castes is this more fiercely exemplified than among the Rajputs of Rajasthan.

For hundreds of years Rajasthan

remained isolated from direct Mughal or British rule and later from the nationalist and social reform movements. The Rajputs not only dominated political life but also set cultural norms in the absence of any considerable Brahman presence or influence. These norms were not always enforced but came to acquire wide acceptance.

Even today, the Rajput women are the only rural women who do not go out of the house even to fetch water, fuelwood or fodder. Unlike in lower and peasant castes where a woman was valued for providing free agricultural labour, a Rajput woman's position was more vulnerable, especially if she could not provide a male successor. In a macho society, her life revolved around loyalty

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#### **The people spearheading, or swordheading the pro Sati movement are educated urban and semiurban youth**

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to her husband for whom she lived and died.

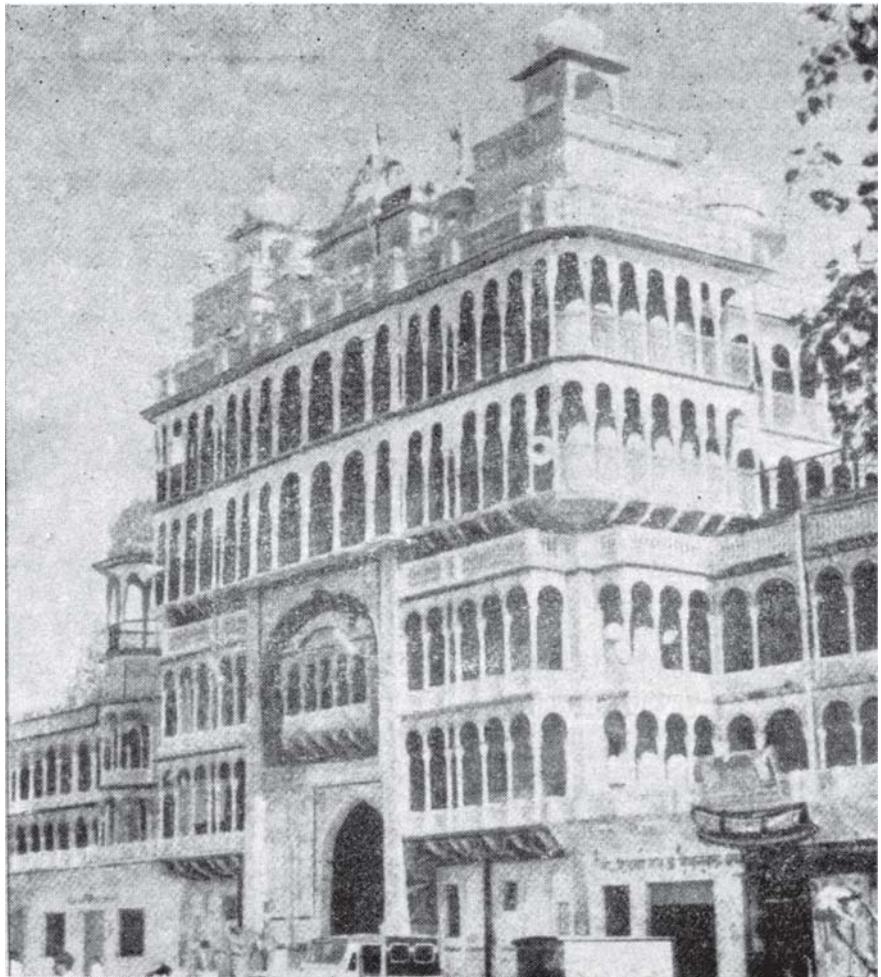
Within Rajasthan, the Shekhawati region has proved to be a more fertile ground for Sati. Incidents of Sati in recent times have mainly occurred here. The two biggest Sati temples, in Jhunjhunu and Dhandan (Sikar), host the biggest annual Sati fairs, with their sprawling buildings and *dharamsals*. Both the Jhunjhunu and Dhandan Satis were Bania women. The Marwaris of Shekhawati, who include some of the leading business houses, have done much to promote the cause of Sati through their devotion and donations. Even in Calcutta and Bombay, where many of these Marwari families are based for generations, the worship of Sati Mata continues.

Those who have been worshipping at the shrine of Sati Mata, when told that it is an evil, feel aggrieved. Some of them do not favour incidents of Sati in the present but defend the right to worship their traditional Sati Mata. The autonomy of the belief is also indicated by the two well known living Sati Matas who have acquired Satihood not by immolating themselves with their dead husbands but by the tales of their healing and miraculous powers, such as their reported power to survive without food for several years.

### New Features

A few new and disturbing features have been highlighted by the Deorala Sati. Deorala, with schools, electricity, a bank and lying close to the Jaipur-Delhi highway is by no means a remote and backward village. Roop Kanwar was educated and grew up as an urban girl. Her father-in-law is a school teacher.

The people spearheading (or swordheading) the pro Sati movement are educated urban and semi-urban youth. Contrary to what could be expected, the education system and economic development have not led to a change in attitudes but have given rise to new distortions. What then is the



The Sati Mata temple, Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan

quality of this modernisation which is being so widely emulated?

The other new aspect is the commercialisation of Sati as shown, for example, in the brisk sale of photographs and collection of massive funds. However, the most prominent feature of Deorala has been the projection of Rajput identity. Sati is by no means the monopoly of the Rajputs and most of the lakhs who came to pay homage at Deorala were non Rajputs. Out of the 41 recorded incidents of Sati in recent times, only 18 have been Rajput women.

But, for Rajputs, it has provided a rallying ground to assert their sagging identity and solidarity. Particularly for the unemployed youth, the Deorala Sati has

provided a cause to celebrate their new-found identity. The Rajputs, who comprise a marginal portion of the state's total population, have found it difficult to accept their very reduced role in the context of electoral politics, compared to their earlier total domination. Sati has the charisma of belief in a superior heritage of self sacrifice and honour, contrasted to the presentday world of mundane and uninspiring "modern" values.

### Reform

Reform through codification and refinement of law is important and can be used to their advantage by activist groups and reformers. Yet progress in law can also become an excuse for moral complacency and lack of social efforts.

Critique and reform of the Sati culture can be based mainly within the tradition or mainly outside it, but there is space for the two spheres to relate to each other.

The Indian tradition has room for many and diverse views Gandhiji's movement, for example, by emphasising nonviolence and fasting, brought out women in large numbers for political protest and stressed the value of integrating women's traditions in public life. This was in contrast to the dominant Kshatriya tradition of force, power and revenge. Gandhiji's assailant Godse had asserted that Gandhi had to be stopped from emasculating Hindu society. Yet the force of Gandhi's nonmacho movement was quite formidable.

The most important and successful reformers of the 19th and 20th centuries, Ram Mohan Roy and Gandhiji, who also made the issue of women's status central to their struggle, were both profoundly influenced by Western ideas. Yet, ultimately, particularly in the case of Gandhiji, their success lay in their ability to emphasise humane values within the idiom of local culture and within their vision of tradition.

More feasible efforts for reforming the culture of Sati lie in developing a dialogue with the cultural idiom by forging links between the essential critique from within and those who want an equal status for women based on secular human rights values.

Outright condemnation of the entire gamut of cultural traditions will make the task of reform ineffective. However, Sati, female infanticide and dowry are not mere aberrations in an otherwise sound social order. It is also essential to see them as symptoms of a deadly anti-women bias in some of our traditions.

## Woman

*How many promises you made to your friends to the servants to the midwife and minstrels.*

*Today, all of them look woebegone, and in you anger flares up anger at god, at your wife, for not having given you a son.*

*A son for you to rear not as a human being but as an heir- Your wife guilt ridden, covered in shame, fearing your wrath, lies, her back turned, hiding her face.*

*But tiny fingers touch her back, asking for a drop of milk.*

—Shashi Girdner  
(translated from Punjabi)



## Recognition

*You wonder when I will break beneath the burden of insults and degradations, when I will swing on a rope from the ceiling or soak myself in oil and explode like a firework.*

*Well, keep waiting, in the belief that finally, one day, defeated, I will go that way.*

*Do you think I would sacrifice this human form attained after countless births, merely to satisfy your sterile ego ?*

*No, I have no desire for the status of a Sati, a Suhagan, no longing for false glory. I want only to renew the quest for what I am, to recognise my self, and only that self will I wed.*



—Indu Sena

(translated from Hindi)