

# Sati - Extending The Debate

On February 27 and 28, 1988, the Arya Samaj and the Bandhua Mukti Morcha organised a two day meet on women's rights at village Sidhrauli, Haryana. Swami Agnivesh said that when he and others were marching from Delhi to Deorala in protest against the burning to death of Roop Kanwar and subsequent glorification of it as Sati, women at Sidhrauli had come forward with their problems, so he felt it would be an appropriate venue for such a meet.

The organisers had announced that they expected 10,000 people but, in fact, at any one time, there were no more than 500 people present, about half of them women. It would perhaps be better for organisers of such gatherings not to make any claims regarding numbers, as in any case the purpose of such gatherings is to initiate a process of discussion on important issues and not a show of strength. The meet was held in the grounds of a girls' *gurukul*, many of whose staff and students attended. There was a constant trickle of people in and out of the meet.

There were a series of speeches by representatives of different Arya Samajes from other places, and by some local leaders. They spoke against the maltreatment of women, especially against Sati. These were interspersed with *bhajans* sung by local women, skits on women's issues by local schoolchildren and songs and plays put up by groups from Delhi. A *bhajan* competition was held. The head of the *gurukul* sang, *bhajans* composed by her on women's oppression; the other women sang religious songs. It was refreshing that local women felt free to come on stage and sing or speak without having to mouth any particular political

views even though many of them displayed a fairly strong antiwomen bias. Girls of the *gurukul* presented a *lathi* and sword display.

The gathering was called a *mahila panchayat*. The idea was to use a traditional decision making format to arrive at decisions on women's rights. The major resolutions put forward by Swami

3) At marriage, a woman should be able to get her share of their natal family's property in her own name;

4) If a divorce takes place, she should get an equal share of her marital family's property (joint matrimonial property);

5) If a woman is made to sign any document giving away her share of



Swami Agnivesh and others marching towards Pura Mahadev for the proposed debate with the Shankaracharya of Puri

Agnivesh were :

1) A woman should have equal rights from birth (coparcenary rights) in her natal family's property, both ancestral and self acquired;

2) The inheritance rights given by the Hindu Succession Act to women should be implemented;

property to any member of her natal or marital family, the document should be considered null and void (she should have the right to repudiate it);

6) A widow should have the same rights as a widower, that is, the right to remarry and not to be maltreated in any way.

The *panchayat* condemned the practice of Sati as an irreligious atrocity masquerading as a religious practice. It condemned the government for having *lathi* charged the anti Sati marchers, prevented them from entering Deorala, and arrested them.

The resolutions were read out, explained, and taken as passed by consensus. No discussion took place. A couple of questions from the floor, asking whether the proposals would not result in giving women double rights, were given the reply that since women have been deprived for so long, men should not resent such reparation, and, in any case, women are likely to use all their resources for the family's welfare. But most members of the audience did not participate in

anyway and are unlikely to have grasped the implications of the resolutions. It would perhaps have been more useful to have discussed each proposal in detail and left people to think them over than to pass them as resolutions for the record, while hardly any villager present is likely to implement them.

The meet was a worthwhile experiment, particularly as a symbolic statement that the forces who support Sati and other such inhuman practices are by no means the representatives of all Hindus.

Recently, Swami Agnivesh, accompanied by many supporters, set out for Pura Mahadev, near Meerut, to conduct a *shastrarth* or traditional philosophical debate on Sati with the Shankaracharya of Jagannathpuri who has been making pro

Sati statements and had issued a challenge to Agnivesh to debate the issue with him. However, as they approached Meerut, the police imposed section 144 in the area, arrested them and sent them back to Delhi, while the Shankaracharya was allowed to proceed with his *yajna*. This high handed prevention of debate and crushing of anti Sati protest indicates the futility of the stringent law against Sati with which government has recently armed itself. The laws have been consistently used against those who protest Sati while its glorifiers are allowed to proceed with their activities unchecked. Despite the repeated unjust use of laws to stifle protest and debate, it is unfortunate that many continue to demand more stringent laws in the hope that this will facilitate justice.

## Without Comment

This item appeared in the *Swadesamitran*, a social reform paper, of March 8, 1895:

### **The Cruelty Of Prostitutes Called Dasis**

In South Arcot district, Tiruvannamalai *taluk* and Tiruvannamalai *kasba* was a *dasi*, who had become a *devdasi* in the sanctum sanctorum of god Annamalai. The son of a wealthy man of village Meyyur Siddhilingamadam of Tirukoyllur *taluk* visited the *dasi* often and spent up to Rs 8,000 on her and lived in pleasure. Then, when a wedded wife entered his house he reduced the frequency of his visits to the *dasi*. A rift developed between the two on this issue. The *dasi* then brought up a case against this man of respectable caste, that he had cheated her of jewellery and money, and went to court in Vizhupuram. The case was heard by hon'ble *dasildar* Sanmugam Pillai, who, after hearing the arguments of able lawyers, required the man of

respectable caste to pay Rs 100 and spend two months in rigorous imprisonment. New, he has lost his money to the *dasi* and lawyers and is the object of ridicule by many, and he is spending his time with the police in Kepparmalai. O! sons of the rich who look for pleasure in *dasis*! Should you spend money to purchase tears? A prostitute's interest is in money and not in the husband. Would a lawful wife find it in her heart to be so cruel? No matter how cruel her husband is to her, will she agree to take her husband to court and have him imprisoned? It is not to the credit of our nation that such *dasis* should be serving in the temples of gods which serve as the abode of knowledge, purity and a vehicle for salvation. All members of committees of *devasthanams* should look into this and prevent these women from entering the temples.

—by a thinking man

(Sent in and translated from Tamil  
by Prabha Rani)

## Sponge

**One that uncomplainingly  
soaks up  
all the moisture  
in the atmosphere  
and in the heart,  
all the mist  
in the forest  
and in the mind,  
all the salt water  
from the eyes  
and beneath the earth,  
is a good sponge,  
and a successful woman too.  
Believe me,  
civilised people  
scarcely distinguish  
between the two.**

—Indu Sena

(translated from Hindi)