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## A BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF SATI TRADITION IN INDIA

Hindistan'daki Sati Geleneğinin Kısa bir Tarihsel Arka Planı

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## **A BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF SATI TRADITION IN INDIA**

Mohammed SHAMSUDDİN

### **ABSTRACT**

Hinduism, being the oldest religion, has many sacraments in it. Sati (also known as "suttee"), burning a woman alive with her husband's dead body, is the most influential and controversial sacrament. A woman dies alongside her husband because she believes it as her duty. When and how sati originated is a controversial topic among scholars because of conflicting data about it. However, Hindus regard it as a sacred tradition because many religious texts of Hindus have either directly or indirectly mentioned Sati practice and its afterlife benefits.

Some scholars believe that the first woman to burn herself was Goddess Sati. The word "sati" is derived from the name of the Goddess Sati, since she was the first woman to immolate herself. Mass suicide known as *Jauhar* is another form of Sati, it was performed by Rajput Hindu women at the end of the battle to prevent themselves from falling in the hands of enemy troop. In some Indian kingdoms, when a king died his court officers, and his servants were used to be accompanied him to his death. This tradition had been followed since ancient times in India. Sati was considered as a dignified sacrifice, a glory and a way to clean the sins of the spouse and his family but some consider it as a private matter of spouses who follow his/her loved one into death and with time it became public and society being a male dominant restricted it only to a woman. Globetrotters such as Al Biruni (973-1048 CE), and Ibn Battuta (b. 1304 CE) and many others who travelled to India have mentioned in their travel books about sati being performed openly and publicly. Some scholars claim that sati was an obligatory duty of a woman and she had to die alongside her husband's body to ensure that all the sins of them and their family were cleaned and also to prevent from bringing disgrace to herself and her family. Sometimes when woman denied performing sati, many people forced her to immolate herself, and many even tried to throw her into the fire forcefully. But other scholars say otherwise that the sati was an optional and a voluntary act and not a compulsory one. They believed that a Hindu widow was given some time to think about sati whether she wanted to die alongside her husband's body or continue with her life.

"Sati" became common after the 13th century in India it was because of the religious texts of Hindus such as Puranas, Mahabharata which talk about sati. Some religious texts of Hindus talk about sati in a clear way, but some don't. In Indian history, some Hindu scholars and poets have condemned the sati tradition. The first one who tried to put a stop to this inhuman tradition were Muslims rulers of India,



namely Mughals and Nizams. But when the Muslim rulers tried to end this tradition, they were criticized by many people, and the attempts made by them were proven unsuccessful. However, in the 19th century, during the British rule in India, Sati was abolished by the governor of India at that time, William Bentick. Practicing Sati was being continued despite being banned and prohibited time and again by Muslim rulers, Britishers who invaded India and the Indian constitution and Indian law. Some women still practice sati in some rural and remote places in India. This was because many Hindu women consider fire as a sacred thing and Sati as their duty. Their religious texts promise them an afterlife in Heaven with their husbands. Thus, they continue practicing Sati, believing that fire will not harm them, and they will be with their husband's even after death. Many people idolize and deify the woman who performs sati. The people and the family member of the dead construct a temple of the woman who performed sati. Many studies state that religious beliefs, social pressure and lack of education play a big role in this barbaric tradition. Today in India, almost every Indian citizen believe that sati was not a religious tradition even if it was mentioned in their sacred texts, and they interpret those texts differently in a more moral and human way. This paper will focus on the historical background of the Sati tradition.

**Keywords:** Sati, Self-Immolation, Hinduism, Widow, Fire, India.

## INTRODUCTION

Hinduism is one of the biggest and oldest religions in the world and had been continued for an extended period in the Indian sub-continent. Hinduism is a lifestyle bounded with Indian history and culture. The word "Hindu" is derived from the "Indus" and was taken from the Indus valley civilization. Hinduism has many religious texts.

Many Hindu believes in the term *Samskara*<sup>1</sup> which is taken from the Hindu religious texts. In Hinduism, the word *Samskara* is used to describe the essential traditions and rituals performed by Hindus. It also means to clean and purge oneself physically and spiritually from the evil. There are many rituals in Hinduism like when a woman is pregnant, a ritual called *Garbhadhana* is performed for having healthy children, and a ritual called *Jatkarma* is for the birth ceremony of the new-born baby. *Namkarana* is the naming ceremony of the baby, *Vidyarambha* ritual is performed when the child is initiated into the study. *Vivaha* ritual is for the lavish nuptial ceremony. *Antyeshthi* is the final rites of passage or Hindu corpse rites that is performed after death. The *Sati* is part of the last ritual called *Antyeshthi*. In *Sati* tradition, it is believed that the women clean theirs, their husband's sins and misdeeds, by entering the burning funeral pyre along with her husband's body.

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<sup>1</sup> In Indian philosophy and Indian religions, *samskaras* or *sanskaras* (Sanskrit: संस्कार) are mental impressions, recollections, or psychological imprints.



Though India has developed and the Indian society has been progressed and moved forward, the act of sati continues even today in the 21st century. For a long period, the practice of sati had been a part of Indian society. Sati is an illegal act and is condemned in Indian society. Sati was declared as illegal in 1829 but even today we see women committing it, which might be voluntarily or forcefully. If it was a voluntary act, then it was considered to be the greatest form of devotion of a wife towards her dead husband. As time passed sati became a forced practice. Women who did not wish to do die like this and end their marriage were forced to do so in different ways like she was asked to shave her head, she was asked to sleep on the ground, she was asked to do hard work, wear plain saree and was asked to remove her jewelry, etc.<sup>2</sup> The people who defend the sati ritual says that it glorifies the widow into a goddess, and in this way it is recognition of women power. Sati gives an opportunity for women to fulfill themselves magnificently in a society.<sup>3</sup> In ancient Hindu law, *stridharma*, where dharma signifies women's duty, responsibility, or moral responsibility, is the duty that is the dharma of women. *Stridharma* for women implies devotion to one's husband, a woman's husband is a sort of God and, in fact, the Sanskrit word for "husband" - "*Swami*" - literally means "Lord and Master". He is essentially her "lord" for the very meaning of the word husband (*Pati*) means both husband and lord. Sati was and even today is considered praiseworthy by Hindus.<sup>4</sup> Devotion to husband means *pativrata* and after his death, she dies with him this is her devotion to her husband after death and is called as *sativarata*. This devotion and perfection thus transcends her to the higher platform making her goddess worth of worship. The question here remains that is sati a good wife because her devotion transforms her into a sati goddess. Is she a goddess worthy of worship? or is it all just about material benefit for family and village?

This paper tries to uphold the human values especially women in the social contexts. This is not just narrative but too informative, to awake the sleeping senses of all rational minds. It is said "man is the crown of creations" is not just a saying, but every individual in the society need to live with understanding, brotherhood and behave patiently with all religious codes, taboos and practices, so as to live healthy and happy.

This paper deals with the history of *Sati* tradition and its religious beliefs among Hindus living in India. Why women sacrifice themselves on their husband's funeral pyre? Are they forced to sacrifice or are doing so voluntarily? Is it still carried on by Indian people? Answers to these questions will be the main topic of this article. We will answer these questions with references to Hindu religious texts. Besides, we will also see the views and opinions of Indians and Britishers on *Sati*. Later on, I will

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<sup>2</sup> Nehaluddin Ahmad, "Sati Tradition - Widow Burning in India: A Socio-Legal Examination," *Web J Curr Legal* 29 (2009): 5.

<sup>3</sup> Francis Jarman, "Sati: From Exotic Custom to Relativist Controversy," *Culture Scan* 2, no. 5 (2002): 12.

<sup>4</sup> Ahmad, "Sati Tradition - Widow Burning in India: A Socio-Legal Examination," 6.



try to explain the historical background of the *Sati* tradition by exploring different empires and dynasties that emerged in both North and South India. Finally, I will try to answer the cultural and religious influence that drives women to sacrifice themselves.

I chose this topic because in Turkey, very few works and studies have been done on Hinduism as compared to works on religions like Judaism and Christianity. The people of Turkey mostly don't know much about Hinduism. Also, I selected this topic due to the salient, intriguing, and horrifying *Sati* traditional practice followed by Hindus. Beside to satisfy my curiosity, and to enlighten the people about this tradition. I believe that this paper will be helpful for people who are interested in this topic. These traditions and rituals are usually hinted in their religious text and are still practiced by Hindus in some rural villages in India.

Firstly, I will discuss how and when the system came into existence. Then I will give the reference from Hindu religious texts like *Vedas, Puranas, Mahabharata*, later on, I will talk about how it developed, spread and expanded in different parts of India throughout history.

## 1. STATUS OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY

Women in South Asian society are usually treated badly. Cases like infanticide, child brides, the rape of low caste women, honor killings, dowry murders and temple prostitution (Devadasi's) are widely common in the society. In India this is because of some Hindu sacred texts which consider women as low castes, dogs and crows embody untruth, sin, and darkness", and says that they "have the hearts of hyenas". And proverbs like "The drum, the village fool, the low-caste, animals and women - all these are fit to be beaten" are the main reasons women are treated inhumanely. Woman has no existence in society without the context of men thus the sati ritual was considered logical to them. Many families were afraid that after the death of her husband the woman may go astray thus sati was the solution for them.<sup>5</sup> Women in India as history enlists were mere objects to be used by men. They had no right of freedom as widows or in education and child marriage was prevalent and through feudalism, women were more and more exploited by religion and society and thus they were excluded from all important social and economic parts of life.<sup>6</sup> She was treated as if she was a burden on the society. Social pressure was very strong in certain parts of India. In some regions, even today wife is treated as appendages to their husband and they must follow their husband to death or remain chaste throughout her life. A widow was not allowed to remarry whereas the widower was allowed to marry as many times he liked. Widow remarriage is a restricted practice even today and it's not easy for a widow to remarry irrespective of her age. Sati, Violence against women and Sexual and Gender-Based Violence are

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<sup>5</sup> Jarman, "Sati: From Exotic Custom to Relativist Controversy," 11.

<sup>6</sup> Sophie M. Tharakan and Michael Tharakan, "Status of Women in India: A Historical Perspective," *Social Scientist* 4, no. 4/5 (1975): 120.



the violent acts the victims of which are primarily or exclusively women or girls. Such Violence is considered as a form of 'Hate crimes' which are committed against women or girls just because they are female and can't take any forms. Such Violence arises from a sense of entitlement, superiority or misogyny or similar attitudes in the perpetrator or because of the violent nature of man against women. The position of women in modern India has changed considerably. Her position in modern Indian society is equal to that of men, socially, economically, educationally, politically and legally. To some extent sati, child marriage, and the institution of temple prostitution no longer exist to the same degree as earlier. The changing status of women in the context of the changing face of society when most people are yet to come to terms with changes taking place in all spheres of life. In the fast-changing Indian society, the old institution of joint family is facing a crisis and the number of single women including widows, divorcees or separated women, in both urban and rural areas is increasing. Even though women in today's generation are treated as equal to men but they don't seek such rights. Such kind of rights that "Women are equal to Men" is only printed in the books.

## 2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The exact origin of the *Sati* is unknown, but scholars say that it emerged for two reasons first, for the upper-class funerals; it added more grandeur to their funerals, and the idea of cremating the items of the deceased with him is applied here, as his wife is considered one of his possessions. Second to keep the women safe from the enemy invading their territory, for example, Mughals invading the Rajput territory. It is said that when a soldier of the Rajput army was killed in the battle, his wife would immolate herself on his funeral pyre to prevent herself from falling into the hands of Mughals.<sup>7</sup> In India, only the people of Rajput caste living in Rajasthan perform mass suicide called *Jauhar* when defeated in battles. For example, Queen Padmini and her womenfolk committed mass suicide to prevent the Muslim sultan of Delhi Alauddin Khilji from capturing them. Because of this incident, many believe that *Sati* came into existence just to avoid women from being captured by Muslims who invaded India. Among princes and the people of the higher caste, widow burning was regarded as a collective act. For example, in 1724, sixty-six women were burned alive at the funeral of Ajit Singh of Marwar Jodhpur, and eighty-four women were sacrificed at the funeral of Budh Singh, a king of Bundi. There is a resemblance in *Sati* and *Jauhar*, and the only difference is *Jauhar* was done by Rajput widows at the end of a defeated battle, while *Sati* by a normal Hindu widow in a religious context.<sup>8</sup> A widow gains dignity and power if she decides to die alongside her husband, and by doing that, she brings honour to her husband's family. Therefore, by her dignified sacrifice, the widow can avert being despised and procure glory for herself and her family.

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<sup>7</sup> Jennifer M. Bushaw, "Suicide or Sacrifice? An Examination of the Sati Ritual in India," *The University of Chicago* (2007): 5.

<sup>8</sup> Jarman, "Sati: From Exotic Custom to Relativist Controversy," 3.



Jörg Fisch, in his book *Journal of world history*, gives a different reason for the origin of *Sati*. He says "Only where either some kind of classes, estates, castes, or other social strata or a clear-cut division of labour with matching differences of power between the sexes, age groups, or races exist can custom of following into death develop." In this way, he concludes that we should not look too far back in history for the origin of *Sati*. He says it was a private matter where lovers or spouses either die together or follow each other into death disregarding man or woman. He further adds that when society became aware of this custom, it tried to control or limit it by incorporating it into a public ceremony, and prescribed who can die and who cannot.<sup>9</sup> Both Jörg and Dorothy say that this custom was not only practised in India but also in different parts of the world such as the Greeks, Egyptians, Chinese, Finns, and some American Indians used to practice it.<sup>10</sup>

Greek visitors who visited north India while travelling the world, states that *Sati* was practiced in 4<sup>th</sup>-century B.C<sup>11</sup> but others say that this tradition has been practiced since 510 AD, and there are hints in religious texts that indicates it was present even before 510 AD and practiced by only certain tribes.<sup>12</sup> In the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the practice was not followed by many people. It was just a starting point that actively encouraged women to perform *Sati*. However, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, it became a common practice.<sup>13</sup> We can conclude two things from this, first the conflict between scholars about the origin of *Sati*. Second, if we consider the first *Sati* was performed by goddess *Sati*, we don't know when was the second act was performed. If we accept that *Sati* was originated in 4<sup>th</sup>-century B.C then how do we explain the gap from 4<sup>th</sup>-century B.C to 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. After that up to 1000 A.D, *Sati* incidents were rare, we can even say that *Sati* spread all over India by the religious text after 13<sup>th</sup> century and became a common practice and spread all over India.

*Sati* was so famous that even the travelers who came to India were familiar with *Sati*. One such example is Al Biruni (973-1048 CE). He mentions *Sati* in his book. At the same time, he was writing about Hindu culture and customs.<sup>14</sup> Another example is of Ibn Battuta (b. 1304 CE), who wrote about *Sati* in his book and gives detail information on how several widows were burned to death for this *Sati* ritual.<sup>15</sup>

The religion played a vital role in developing and evolving and spreading *Sati* through examples and instructions which were given by the Brahmin priest. *Sati*, the Hindu goddess and the wife of God Shiva, is the best example of the *Sati* ritual. The father of goddess *Sati* didn't like *Sati* and her husband Lord Shiva, thus didn't invite

<sup>9</sup> Jörg Fisch, "Dying for the Dead: Sati in Universal Context," *Journal of World History* 16, no. 3 (2005): 318.

<sup>10</sup> Dorothy K. Stein, "Women to Burn: Suttee as a Normative Institution," *Signs* 4, no. 2 (1978): 253.

<sup>11</sup> Stein, "Women to Burn: Suttee as a Normative Institution," 253.

<sup>12</sup> Jarman, "Sati: From Exotic Custom to Relativist Controversy," 3.

<sup>13</sup> Tharakan and Tharakan, "Status of Women in India: A Historical Perspective," 120.

<sup>14</sup> Bushaw, "Suicide or Sacrifice? An Examination of the Sati Ritual in India," 8.

<sup>15</sup> Ahmad, "Sati Tradition - Widow Burning in India: A Socio-Legal Examination," 7.



them to an important ceremony. Goddess *Sati* went to confront her father about this matter but insulted her husband then she became furious and angry with her father. She could not accept this disgrace and dishonour of her husband and, in her fury, burned herself alive. Although she was not a widow or died alongside her husband, this became an example and initiation for the future *Sati* ritual. Marriage in Hinduism is an inseparable bond, and dying with the husband was like joining him in the afterlife and continuing being a couple. In Hinduism, they have a reincarnation system, which means they believe that after death, a soul enters a new body and continues to live in that body in the form of new life. Thus according to the vow taken by the bride, she has to be with her husband for seven lives. It was considered essential for another reason because this *Sati* ritual was believed to be the cleansing ritual of their sins and their family's sins.<sup>16</sup>

*Sati* is all about a woman dying alongside her husband. Some scholars say that *Sati* tradition was obligatory, but some say that after the death of their husbands, the wives were given a day to decide about *Sati*, and if she chose to die alongside her husband, then she can lie beside her husband's dead body, or jump in the fire or sit in a cross-legged position with the head of her husband on her lap and burn in the fire with him. After the *Sati* ritual, all the family members and all her community would worship and deify her and build a temple of her in the place where she was immolated. People from neighboring villages and cities would visit this temple in a pilgrimage to worship *Sati*. Many people oppose this *Sati* ritual and say this practice is ancient and outdated. Many argue that *Sati* is not mentioned in Hindu religious texts, and there is no evidence of *Sati* in these Hindu religious and sacred texts. Therefore, it is illogical and against human nature. But contrary to their argument and beliefs, *Sati* is mentioned in the Hindu sacred text, which I will cite below.

### 3. SATI IN RELIGIOUS TEXTS

The *Vedas* don't give the details about *Sati*; just it provides us with a hint and explains what should a woman do when her husband dies. For instance, *Rig Veda* doesn't indicate the burning of wife: "Let these unwidowed dames with noble husbands adorn themselves with fragrant balm and unguent. Decked with fair jewels, tearless, free from sorrow, first let the dames go up to where he lieth."<sup>17</sup> This *shloka*(verse) talks about the widow and says the widow should wear good perfume and apply creams to her body, should not grief or cry, should be free from sorrow and go up to the place where her husband lies. This verse doesn't say much about burning in the fire, but it just gives the hint of a woman being present in her husband's funeral pyre.

However, *Atharvaveda* a religious text which is also a part of *Vedas* says, a wife is advised to join the dead husband in the afterlife in the next world. So she

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<sup>16</sup> Bushaw, "Suicide or Sacrifice? An Examination of the Sati Ritual in India," 10.

<sup>17</sup> Rigveda, 10.18:7.





must die in the funeral pyre of her husband: "Choosing her husband's world, O man, this woman lays herself down beside thy lifeless body. Preserving the ancient custom faithfully. Bestow upon her both wealth and offspring."<sup>18</sup>

In addition to this, *Purana*, another religious text which is considered sacred by Hindus, has a clear verse that indicates *Sati* practice, this verse says that women have to immolate themselves after their husband's death: "It is the highest duty of the woman to burn herself after her husband."<sup>19</sup>

There is another religious text called "*Daksa Smruti*" that explains the situation of a woman who died with her husband on the funeral pyre, in this verse, *Sati* was described as a woman who enjoys an eternal bliss in heaven if she dies alongside her husband on his funeral pyre: "A *Sati* who dies on the funeral pyre of her husband enjoys an eternal bliss in heaven"<sup>20</sup> *Agni Purana* is a religious text of Hindus, and it talks about the widows who can self-restraint themselves and immolate themselves, they can enter heaven: "...The widow who practices self-control and austerities after the death of her husband goes to heaven...the widow who burns herself on the same funeral pyre with her husband also goes to heaven."<sup>21</sup> Another religious text named *Garuda Purana* says that if the dead person has hair on his body, his wife will live in heaven as many years as the count of his hair: "A Wife who dies in the company of her husband shall remain in heaven as many years as there are hairs on his person."<sup>22</sup> This text also says that the fire cannot kill the soul of a woman performing *Sati*: "When a woman burns her body with her husband's, the fire burns her limbs only but does not afflict her soul."<sup>23</sup>

Another sacred text named *Mahabharata* depicts the *Sati* of a woman who is the daughter of the king, and the wife of Pandu, as she entered the funeral pyre of her husband: "Vaisampayana continued, 'Having said this, the daughter of the king of Madras, the wedded wife of Pandu, ascended the funeral pyre of her lord, that bull among men."<sup>24</sup> Then another verse from the same text continues explaining the upper verse; we see how his wife entered the fire and sacrificed her life: "His wife Madri, beholding him placed in the funeral pyre and about to be consumed, herself ascended the same pyre, and sacrificing her life thus, hath gone with her lord to the region reserved for chaste wives."<sup>25</sup>

There is another verse from the same text that also talks about the Pandu, how he died, and then his wife Madri ascended her husband's funeral pyre: "And (one day) Pandu, beholding Madri decked with ornaments, had his desire kindled.

<sup>18</sup> Atharvaveda, 18.3:1.

<sup>19</sup> Brahma Purana, 80:75.

<sup>20</sup> Daksa Smruti, 4:18-19.

<sup>21</sup> Agni Purana, 222:19-23.

<sup>22</sup> Garuda Purana, 1.107:29.

<sup>23</sup> Garuda Purana, 10:42.

<sup>24</sup> Mahabharata, Adi Parva, 1:125.

<sup>25</sup> Mahabharata, Adi Parva, 1:126.



And, as soon as he touched her, he died. Madri ascended the funeral pyre with her Lord."<sup>26</sup> A verse from the different religious text called *Devi Bhagavatam* also describes the Pandu's death when he touched Madri and how Madri went into the fire and died: "...Once Madri, full of youth and beauty, was staying alone in a solitary place, and Pandu seeing her embraced her and due to the curse, died. When the funeral pyre was ablaze, the chaste Madri entered into the fire and died a *Sati*..."<sup>27</sup>. Then the text continues and explains that before the woman entered the fire, she handed her two sons to Kunti: "...Then those Munis, practising great vows, knew that Pandu was dead and performed duly, on the banks of the Ganges, the ceremony of burning the dead. At that time, Madri gave over to Kunti the charge of her two sons and followed the *Sati* practise along with her husband to go to Satyaloka..."<sup>28</sup>

In *Mahabharata*, we can also see other stories of *Sati* such as the *Sati* of the four wives of Sura when he died; all her wives escalated into their husband's funeral pyre. The son of Pandu used different scents and wood when he burned the body of his uncle along with his four wives: "The four wives of that heroic son of Sura ascended the funeral pyre and were consumed with the body of their Lord. All of them attained to those regions of felicity which were his. The son of Pandu burnt the body of his uncle together with those four wives of his, using diverse kinds of scents and perfumed wood. As the funeral pyre blazed up, a loud sound was heard of the burning wood and other combustible materials, along with the plainchant of Samans and the wailing of the citizens and others who witnessed the rite."<sup>29</sup>

"*Kurma Purana*" is a religious text in which a verse says that a woman who ascends the fire of her husband's funeral pyre, can forgive and pardon the sins committed by her husband: "A woman who enters the funeral pyre along with her husband shall uplift him even if it is a Brahmana-slayer, an ungrateful fellow or one defiled by great sins. learned men know this to be the greatest expiation for women."<sup>30</sup>

Of many religious texts, there is a text called "*Vishnu Purana*" that narrates about the wives of Krishna, who immolated themselves with their husband. "The eight queens of Krishna, who have been named, with Rukmini as their head, embraced the body of Hari and entered the funeral fire. Revati, also embracing the corpse of Rama, entered the blazing pile, which was cool to her, happy in contact with her Lord. Hearing these events, Ugrasena and Anakadundubhi, with Devaki and Rohini, committed themselves to the flames."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Mahabharata, Adi Parva, 1:95.

<sup>27</sup> Devi Bhagavatam, 6.25:35-50.

<sup>28</sup> Devi Bhagavatam, 2.6:53-71.

<sup>29</sup> Mahabharata, Mausala Parva, 16:7.

<sup>30</sup> Kurma Purana, 2.34:108b-109.

<sup>31</sup> Vishnu Purana, 5:38.



In "*Shiva Purana*", there is a verse that talks about a Brahmin lady entering the fire with her husband "The Brahmin lady desirous of entering the pyre to follow her husband cursed the Raksasa king. The chaste lady entered fire..."<sup>32</sup>

But there is verse in "*Brihaspati Smriti*" that gives woman a choice, either she can die alongside her husband, or she can continue living a virtuous life: "A wife is considered half the body (of her husband), equally sharing the result of his good or wicked deeds; whether she ascends the pile after him, or chooses to survive him leading a virtuous life, she promotes the welfare of her husband."<sup>33</sup>

Even though there are many direct indications of *Sati* practice in Hindu religious texts, many people still do not believe in *Sati* and say that the verses are misinterpreted. Some people interpret these verses as a voluntary act performed by widows and not an obligatory one. Today many believe that *Sati* just came into existence because of the invaders who invaded India and took the women hostages. Therefore, *Sati* originated to protect these women from the invaders.

#### 4. SATI IN MEDIEVAL INDIA

In the 7th century, a Sanskrit poet condemns this act as it was a common practice among upper Hindu classes. Many cases of *Sati* were reported in south India between 1057 AD to 1070 AD. *Sati* in the kakatiya domain was mentioned in *Nidubrolu* inscriptions. Between 1200 AD and 1700 AD *Sati* existed in all the south Indian kingdoms. When a south Indian king dies, his palace servants, his ministers, and his wives would also accompany him to the afterlife. Here *Sati* was not a voluntary act; once a woman says "yes," it was impossible to change that. Compared to Bengal, Bombay and Madras had less number of *Sati* practice. It was mostly seen during the rule of the Kakatiyas, Yadavas, Hoyasalas, Nayaks of Musunur, Padma Nayaks and the Reddy kingdom.<sup>34</sup>

*Sati* mostly prevailed in the Vijayanagar empire. *Sati* was more prevalent in the 14th century than any other period of the Vijayanagar empire. Many scholars like Nuniz, Caesar Frederick, and Barradas mention in their work that the 15th and 16 centuries also had many examples of *Sati* practices. In the 14th century, this was performed by the warriors, *Goudas*, and *Gayakas* classes of Hindus.<sup>35</sup> In 1688 young king of Madura died due to smallpox; his wife tried to commit *Sati*, but her mother in law dissuaded her, but in sheer despair, she killed herself. Another incident of *Sati* took place when Pandyan king Kalavan died, and his 47 wives immolated themselves on his funeral pyre. All of them covered with jewellery from head to toe as they said, there is nothing left in this world for them when their husband is dead. In medieval times many cases of *Sati* have been reported, such as Rani Yasomathi

<sup>32</sup> Shiva Purana, KotiRudra Samhita, 4.10: 23-24.

<sup>33</sup> Brihaspati Smriti, 24:11.

<sup>34</sup> V Lalitha, "Sati in the Deccan," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 51 (1990): 510-511.

<sup>35</sup> Sarojini Devi, "Sati in Vijayanagara [Summary]," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 24 (1961): 180.



performing *Sati* when her husband died. In Ranganatha Ramayanam, Sulochana, the wife of Indrajit, committed *Sati*. The wife of Alaraju para Devi and the wife of Balachandra Ayamangi also performed *Sati* when their husbands died. Many literary sources of medieval Andhra Desa gave evidence of *Sati*. In 1822 in the Nellore district of south India, the wife of Papireddy, Brudavolu Narayanamma, performed *Sati* after his death.<sup>36</sup>

In 1847 Nizam of Hyderabad prohibited *Sati*, but it was not sufficient because a woman performed *Sati* after her husband's death. This was because the Nizam government had an agreement with Hindus and would not interfere in their religious customs. But the Nizam reissued the judgment stating that no Hindu woman shall immolate herself with her dead husband's body if the relatives think that the widow will practice this forbidden act they have to prevent her from doing it. If she doesn't go along with the relatives or disobeys them, they have to report this to the government officers of that area. After hearing this, it was the duty of the officers to prevent her by any means from performing *Sati*. If this practice is to be performed after prohibiting it, first the relatives then the officers of that area will be held responsible and will be punished accordingly. This judgment was passed to different parts of Hyderabad but with no effect, because even after the prohibition, there were cases of *Sati* performed in various parts of Hyderabad.<sup>37</sup>

*Sati* was present in Telangana (present Hyderabad) and was prevalent in Indur Elgandar, Medak Sirpur, Tandur, Aurangabad, and in the Bid Perbani dynasty. The revenue minister of Nizam ul Mulk of the Asaf Jahi dynasty banned *Sati* in south India. There were steps taken by the collectors of these areas to ban *Sati* and described it as a crime on women. The Nawab Salarjung banned *Sati* in 1876 and stated that if any incident of *Sati* is to be reported, the officials of those areas would be punished accordingly. In south India, during the medieval period, *Sati* was mainly performed by royal families, nobles, and peasant from the lower caste. Still, in north India, the upper class of Hindus such as Brahmins practised it.<sup>38</sup>

Even before the British, the Christian missionaries resisted the *Sati* practice in the name of humanitarianism. The Bombay government banned *Sati* and warned the rulers of Gujarat such as Devgadhi Baria (1840), Baroda (1840), Lunawada (1840), Rajpipla (1840), Mahikantha (1843) and Palanpur (1848) on performing the *Sati* act. But many of them violated the law and were punished accordingly.<sup>39</sup>

*Sati* was a social institution during the Mughal period in India. *Sati* was a normal thing both for Muslims and Hindu, but it caught the eyes of many foreign

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<sup>36</sup> Lalitha, "Sati in the Deccan," 511-514.

<sup>37</sup> Nani Gopal Chaudhuri, "The Sati in Hyderabad," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 16 (1953): 342-243.

<sup>38</sup> Lalitha, "Sati in the Deccan," 512-514.

<sup>39</sup> GD Shukla, "British Attitude Towards the Practice of Sati in Gujarat in the 19th Century," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 48 (1987): 481-482.



travellers of this period. *Sati* was practised in almost all parts of Mughal India, the main focus areas were, the Ganges Valley, the Punjab and Rajputana in the North, and Madura and Vijaynagar in South India. In the 12th century, Bengal was the most common area for *Sati* practice. Della Valle says that *Sati* was practised voluntary, but at some other places, he says that it was forced upon the women by their relatives. But other scholars like Ibn Batuta, Terry, and Pelsaert say that it was a voluntary act and not an obligation. Sidi Ali Reis says in Muslim areas; women were not forced to practice *Sati*.<sup>40</sup>

Still, *Akbarnama* mentions that *Sati* is an ancient custom of Indian in which a woman immolates herself; however, unwilling she may be. Even Biruni says that the king's wives were immolated with or without their consent. We can conclude that *Sati* was compulsory in some parts of India and voluntary in others. Delhi sultans, when they first entered India, they did not interfere with the Indian customs and specially *Sati* practice. However, Mohammed bin Tughlak was the first Muslim king who opposed *Sati* and raised his voice against it. He made it compulsory to obtain a license to burn the widow, and this was to discourage *Sati* and put a stop to forcefully immolating a widow. But he didn't go beyond this to completely stop the *Sati* practice. After him, Mughal emperor Humayun was the one who took the big step and tried to end it altogether. He prohibited this practice even if a woman is willing to perform it. The Hindus did not oppose this law; however, the god-fearing king retracted his orders because he feared that the wrath of God would bring his kingdom down. But the system of obtaining license continued to prevent effective *Sati* practices. After him, Akbar stopped forceful *Sati* practice in his kingdom and said that if a Hindu woman wished to perform *Sati*, they should stop her but not force her against her will. He even appointed many men to stop this practice if performed forcefully. In some of the cases, he intervened personally to stop a woman from performing *Sati*.<sup>41</sup>

After him, Jahangir officially prohibited *Sati* and infanticide. But some say that the prohibition was only in the paper and not very strictly enforced. After him, Shah Jahan stopped women with children to practice *Sati* and allowed the children of widows to get an education. The people should get permission from the governor if they want to practice *Sati*, but the governor would not give it easily. After him, Aurangzeb banned the practice of *Sati* in his empire. But could do not abolish it permanently; there were cases reported where *Sati* was performed even after its prohibition. One can say that by different means, many Muslim emperors tried to save the widow and have succeeded in many of their attempts, if not all, thus many widows were saved by them.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Susil Chaudhuri, "Sati as Social Institution and the Mughals," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 37 (1976): 218-29.

<sup>41</sup> Chaudhuri, "Sati as Social Institution and the Mughals," 219-221.

<sup>42</sup> Chaudhuri, "Sati as Social Institution and the Mughals," 220-222.



## 5. SATI/ IN MODERN INDIA

*Sati* came to an end in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when India was under British rule. In 1829 a British man William Bentick prohibited *Sati* and by 1862 British forced the princes of India to put an end to the *Sati* practice.<sup>43</sup> Today *Sati* is regarded as a crime according to the Indian penal code and one who performs *Sati* will be given a punishment of mandatory life sentence.<sup>44</sup> However, the practice continued, and there are a lot of unreported cases every year. This is because the society and some important sects or caste of Hindu religion encourage *Sati* even after its prohibition. When the state banned *Sati* the society demands it; therefore, this creates a conflict between them. Nevertheless, *Sati* is still being practised in India. Here are some examples of *Sati* practices even after its abolition.

On September 4, 1987, Roop Kanwar entered the funeral pyre of her husband and died. This incident was prevalent and a controversial one. Roop Kanwar was only eighteen and married to a man from the northern Indian village of Deorala. Her husband died while he was being treated at a hospital. While her in-laws were preparing for the funeral, she knew that she would be burned along with her husband's dead body, thus tried to escape. Unfortunately, her husband's family found her and forcefully dragged her to the funeral pyre, and she was thrown into the fire to die alongside her husband. She screamed and tried to run away, but the men surrounding the funeral pyre stopped her and threw her back into the fire to die, on that day around 1.30 pm. After all, she was burned to death by her in-laws.<sup>45</sup> In Roop Kanwar's incident, the people who forced her to die were arrested, but Roop Kanwar became a deity, and a temple was built for her.<sup>46</sup>

There is another version of this story, which was narrated by her husband's family and the village members. According to this version, the wife upon hearing her husband's death calmly performed her prayer and showed her intention to sacrifice herself on her husband's funeral pyre. The witnesses claim that she was blessed with supernatural power, in Hinduism the power was called *sat*, and this power is only given to the chosen widows. Some relatives tried to prevent her from sacrificing herself, and some calmly respected her decision. She wore her wedding dress and sat on her husband's funeral pyre with her husband's head in her lap. The eyewitnesses claim that when she raised her hand, the fire lit itself because of her newly acquired supernatural power, which is *Sat*. She had a peaceful look on her face when the fire slowly covered her body. Some witnesses even claimed that their diseases were cured just because they were in the same area near the funeral and by witnessing this supernatural power. Both of these stories are of entirely different

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<sup>43</sup> Fisch, "Dying for the Dead: Sati in Universal Context," 294.

<sup>44</sup> Jörg Fisch, "Sati and the Task of the Historian," *Journal of World History* 18, No. 3 (2007): 361.

<sup>45</sup> Bushaw, "Suicide or Sacrifice? An Examination of the Sati Ritual in India," 1.

<sup>46</sup> Ahmad, "Sati Tradition - Widow Burning in India: A Socio-Legal Examination," 4.



incidents, but the only difference is the way incidents were approached, and the fact remains that life was sacrificed.<sup>47</sup>

Recently in 2008, a seventy-one-year-old woman sacrificed herself by performing the act of *Sati* in Chhattisgarh India. The witness claims that she wore a new dress and attended her husband's funeral. When the husband's body had been almost burnt, and the villagers were ready to leave, she jumped into her husband's funeral pyre and sacrificed herself by dying alongside her husband. This act dismayed many people because it was performed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century despite being illegal and forbidden by the Indian law. This incident is an example that shows us how these kinds of unfortunate happenings can occur in rural India. This was just a reported incident, and many unreported *Sati* incidents happen all over India, which we are unaware of, even in this 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>48</sup> Another incident was the case of Kuttu Bai (65) in 2002 in the state of Madhya Pradesh, Vidyawati (35) in 2006 in Uttar Pradesh, Janakrani (40) in 2006 in Madhya Pradesh.<sup>49</sup>

If we talk about classical Hindu culture, widows are not allowed to use jewellery, colours, flowers, or henna, and they have to shave their heads, sleep on the ground, do degrading and disgraceful work, fast and Pray for their dead husbands. The women from lower caste or an untouchable woman are exempted from the things mentioned above. In Rajput's caste, a widow has to sleep in the corner of a small room while atoning for a year, and she may be despised and exploited for sexual abuse by the relatives. Marwari caste describes a widow by saying, "The wedding bed just made, and she's already a whore." There is no other choice left for the widow except to beg or becoming a prostitute.<sup>50</sup>

There is a city in North India in Uttar Pradesh called "The City of Widows," and many widows are sent there to spend the rest of their life, and they earn money by chanting *Mantras* to Lord Krishna. Even in the shrine, they were exploited and used as sex slaves or sold off to the brothels. Varanasi is a city of pilgrims for Hindus in India; there are around sixty thousand widows living in this holy city. In many South Indian languages such as Kannada, Tamil, and Telugu, the term widow is an abusive word. For instance, "widow" and "prostitute" are very similar words, and they are abusive words. To escape from the torture and abuse, most of the widows would consider burning themselves alongside their husbands.<sup>51</sup>

## 6. IMPACT OF SATI ON SOCIETY

Sati affects the people of society both materially and spiritually. For example, if a woman performs sati then she brings honor and prestige to the family and village. Then the family or the village become sacred and advertised place. They

<sup>47</sup> Bushaw, "Suicide or Sacrifice? An Examination of the Sati Ritual in India," 1-2.

<sup>48</sup> Ahmad, "Sati Tradition - Widow Burning In India: A Socio-Legal Examination," 3.

<sup>49</sup> Ahmad, "Sati Tradition - Widow Burning In India: A Socio-Legal Examination," 4.

<sup>50</sup> Jarman, "Sati: From Exotic Custom to Relativist Controversy," 2.

<sup>51</sup> Jarman, "Sati: From Exotic Custom to Relativist Controversy," 3-4.



gain power or a better position in the society. Many consider sati as a way to increase their profits in business. Such as Brahmin priests gain prestige and wealth due to this holy event. The immediate family, local shopkeepers and transport companies can make huge profits out of the crowds coming to visit the sati site. The visitors buy refreshments, incense and coconuts as offerings, and commemorative items like photographs. Then in annual fairs and festivals, people collect money as offerings. The traders and priests may benefit financially more than the family. The village in which sati is performed it benefits form trade, the inflow of money, employment for laborers. The temple and family may get donations from the visitors and many donate to construct the temple of sati who has now become goddess worthy of worship due to her devotion towards her husband. Then after the temple is built it becomes a pilgrim place to visit annually. It starts with monthly fairs, feasts and festivals are then becoming annual events and many people benefit from it. In today's society, sati is not seen common in society but once a year is enough to sustain this ideology. By this woman can be controlled socially and people can benefit from the this materially.<sup>52</sup> Legally society the society would response by saying that arrest the people who carried the corpse and the priest for abetment of suicide or sati abolition act. But due to the lack of evidence, the cases would get dropped even though sati was witnessed by many people. The law was never practiced accordingly thus because of this in-action by the government sati was kind of tolerated in the society. Politically when many women ministers opposed the sati there was no response from the society and government. Many members of political parties go to the temples erected in honor of sati. Many government officials are supporters of sati and visits sati sites and even made donations there. But all this can be overcome if the state officials and the government takes these matters seriously. But on the contrary, they exploit and abuse their power to protect their police and administrative officials. The police and officials do not take serious and strict actions against them because sati is a religious matter and they do not want to upset the gods and higher priests of the religion.

### **CONCLUSION**

In other religions like Christianity and Islam we can see incidents such as a person is burnt in fire for the sake of love exist. It seems that the original basis of sati is very similar to the story from the Bible known as the Fiery Furnace. When three young men refuse to bow to a different God other than theirs, they are put into a furnace to be burned alive. The strength of their faith protects them and they leave the fire unscathed. As we can see how this is a story that illustrates the power of faith and trust and love for their God. Similarly, the story of Abraham, known as Ibrahim recognized as a prophet and messenger, a huge pit was dug up and a large quantity of wood was piled up. Then the biggest fire people ever witnessed was lit

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<sup>52</sup> Jarman, "Sati: From Exotic Custom to Relativist Controversy," 13.





and Ibrahim was thrown into the fire but Ibrahim came out from fire without any scratch on him.

As we have seen above, Sati began as a story illustrating the intense power of overwhelming love. But when people praised that act of love, it became an instruction manual for how everyone should be! It seemed an ideal goal to love that deeply. Thus the practice took hold in some communities and became solidified into a code. But with time Indian women, either physically forced by society or physiologically coerced by the religion, embrace the cult of sati. It also negates the cult of sati as a purely religious activity that reflects women's loyalty and devotion to their husbands and religion.

*Sati* tradition despite being banned by many Muslim rulers of India, by Britishers and recently by the Indian government, it remained in practice till today. Many factors such as holy rituals, religious beliefs, social pressure and lack of education are the main reasons which are why we cannot eradicate it.

We cannot find any clear information about exactly when and where *Sati* first came into existence. Religious texts such as *Vedas*, *Puranas*, *Mahabharata* helped *Sati* to spread vastly into Indian culture; during British rule, *Sati* increasingly widespread in India. By performing *Sati*, one woman can forgive her sins and her husband's as well. Another thing is according to religious texts if she performs *Sati*, she shall live in heaven in the afterlife. People idolize the women who performed *Sati* and make a temple of her on the place she immolated herself. *Sati* is still being practiced- even though rarely- by many Indians despite the severe laws imposed by the British and by the Indian government. Why don't people oppose it? The answer is very simple; first, they think of it as a religious practice; second, it has been so much blended into Indian society that it has become a normal practice for them. Nobody finds it odd, and the widow accepts it as a way of her life. It is not out of love for her husband but as tradition engraved in her heart by the Indian society.

Violence against women is a global problem. Violence against women manifests itself as rape, molestation, stripping, kidnapping and abduction, domestic violence including wife battery, dowry harassment, dowry death, cruelty to women driving them to commit suicide or other forms of murder like female feticides and sati. We can say that in other civilized societies or countries sati is considered as a murder but in India, the murdering of widows is still considered as a traditional ritual. Instead of outlawing sati, the Government should try and bring about a social transformation so that people abhor such acts. There is a need for more and more consciousness in this regard if we want to save the lives of innocent females at least in the coming age.

But, gone were the days, wherein some women, had no chance of survival after once she loses her husband, though capable of living. It is rather inauspicious or a crooked, in-human practice prevailed then and it is vanished now to a greater



extent. In the present social situations intolerance is growing rich day by day, due to which we witness many women immolations, it is not for one reason but many.

*Sati* tradition is difficult to comprehend because of its coercion and voluntary attributes. According to some scholars, it is a voluntary act, but some scholars consider it as obligatory. For I can say if it is a voluntary act, it is none other than suicide, and if it is obligatory, then it is murder. What happened to Roop Kanwar on the day she died is still a mystery. Normally any country would call it murder, but India calls it a traditional ritual. Indian males have prominently used religion as a weapon to dominate women. Social awakening is much needed now more than ever. We need to teach and enlighten people and make them aware of what is right and what is wrong regardless of what religion says. Obviously humanity lives at the highest point and level. The religion that one practices, need to have patience, tolerance and peace to promote humanity. Thus, a religion without mercy, love and compassion is like an empty vessel on a voyage. Lastly I hope this article will awaken the sleeping senses of the future readers. Hope this article makes many readers to shed their flowery tears to those innocent women who died for no reason, but victimized by the rituals.



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## ÖZ

### **Hindistan'daki Sati Geleneğinin Kısa bir Tarihsel Arka Planı**

Hinduizm, en eski din olup içinde birçok ayin bulunmaktadır. Sati, bir kadını kocasının cesediyle beraber canlı yakmak demektir ve günümüzde bu tartışmalı bir konudur. Bir kadının kocasıyla beraber ölmesinin bir görev olduğuna inanılmaktadır. Sati'nin ne zaman ve nasıl ortaya çıktığı akademisyenler arasında tartışmalı bir konudur, zira Sati uygulaması hakkında çelişkili veriler bulunmaktadır. Sati kelimesi Tanrıça Sati isminden türemiştir. Bazı bilginlere göre ona bu isim tarihte ilk defa kendini yakan kadın olması sebebiyle verilmiştir. Bununla birlikte, Hindular bunu kutsal bir gelenek olarak görmektedir, çünkü Hinduların birçok dini metninde Sati pratiği doğrudan ya da dolaylı olarak zikredilmiştir.

Sati, Hindistan'da 13. yüzyıldan sonra yaygınlaştı, bunun nedeni Sati hakkında içeriklere sahip Puranas, Mahabharata gibi Hinduların dini metinlerinden kaynaklanmaktadır. Hinduların bazı dini metinlerinde Sati uygulaması hakkında net bir şekilde bilgi bulunurken, bazılarında ise bulunmamaktadır. Hint tarihinde, bazı Hindu bilim adamları ve şairler Sati geleneğini kınamışlardır. Bu insanlık dışı geleneği durdurmaya çalışan ilk kişi, Hindistan'ın Müslüman yöneticileri olan Moğollar ve Nizamlık idi. Ancak Müslüman yöneticiler bu geleneği sona erdirmeye çalıştıklarında birçok kişi tarafından eleştirilmişler ve yaptıkları girişimler başarısız olmuştur. Fakat 19. yüzyılda, Hindistan'daki İngiliz yönetimi sırasında Sati, Hindistan valisi William Bentick tarafından kaldırılmıştır. Müslüman hükümdarlar, Hindistan'ı işgal eden İngilizler, Hint anayasası ve Hint yasaları tarafından defalarca yasaklanmasına rağmen Sati uygulaması bugüne değin devam etmiştir. Bazı kadınlar hala Hindistan'ın bazı kırsal ve uzak yerlerinde Sati uygulamasını tatbik etmektedirler. Çünkü birçok Hindu kadın, ateşi kutsal ve Sati uygulamasını da bir görev olarak görmektedir. Hindu dini metinleri, kocalarıyla birlikte onlara bir ahiret hayatı vaat etmektedir. Böylece, ateşin onlara zarar vermeyeceğine ve ölümden sonra bile kocalarının yanlarında olacaklarına inanarak Sati'yi uygulamaya devam etmektedirler.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Sati, Kendini Yakma, Hinduizm, Dul, Ateş, Hindistan.