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Saint, Sucker, or Sacrifice: The Case of *Sati*

Kevin Kniffin

Introduced to many Americans as one of the "weird" things that "them other" people do, the Indian "tradition" of sati — the ritual immolation of a wife following her husband's death — can be handled in a variety of ways. While some praise the practice as an avenue of self-glorification open to the wife, others claim it is nothing but ritualistic murder. Of course, even if one wishes to assume that one of these claims is correct, the question of interference in another "culture" rises to the forefront. This paper will explores the meanings of sati in order to clear the clouds that shade the moral reasoning required by the question of interference.

It is worth noting first, however, that less ritualistic "dowry deaths" have become much more common in modern India — in New Delhi alone there was an average of 150 deaths per year during the mid-1980s (Nandy 1994:144). Dowry deaths are the murders of new wives whose dowries are considered unacceptable by the husbands' family. In contrast with the ceremonial sati, these events do not attempt to hide under the guise of any traditional religion; rather, one may claim they are expressive of the religion of capitalism. Sati's relationship with other aspects of Indian culture is responsible for the grayness associated with its analysis. Speculatively, it seems possible that dowry deaths are simply demystified satis. As religion is replaced by money as a behavioral motor, especially in urban centers such as New Delhi, it is possible that modern capitalist-oriented Indians disregard the ceremonial pretense of sati for the sake of efficiency.

Additionally, Nandy (1994) notes that dowry deaths attract much less attention than satis, prompting the hypothesis that sati, as an expressive form of "murder," threatens the value system of the modernized elites. Accordingly, dowry deaths are more acceptable since they do not conflict as deeply with modern values as do the more "religious" satis. In fact, it almost seems as if dowry deaths are sacred sacrifices of the profane, industrialized India performed on behalf of Mammon, or "god of the capitalists." One is left wondering if the relative acceptance of dowry deaths in modern capitalist India is similar to the acceptance of sati in earlier, more "religious" times.

When studying sati, one immediately recognizes that sati is rare. While it was likely more common during previous centuries, there are only records of 41 cases of sati deaths during the period 1947-1994 (Oldenburg 1994a:101). In fact, the most recent sati occurred on September 5, 1987 — more than eight years ago. For the sake of research, it was this most recent sati that produced a great deal of atten-

tion from both political activists and the more detached scholars. Prior to Roop Kanwar's "ritualistic immolation" in 1987, there was little research on the issue since "satis are rare, illegal, and take place with little advance notice" (Courtright 1994:28). A great deal of the available information recorded by Westerners prior to 1987 is in the form of travelers' or colonists' accounts that are often considered less reliable given their failure to provide more systematic, less personal analyses.

The image of a wife burning on her deceased husband's pyre disgusts many Westerners. Therefore, it is not surprising that something so weird as sati became one of the major symbols of India — a country that Britain and other colonial powers sought to conquer. Descriptions of savage rites practiced among the natives serves well the purposes of the savior colonists. Lewis notes the role of sati in "the paternalistic terms of imperialist discourse, which Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has schematized as 'white men saving brown women from brown men'" (1994:78). The initial distaste stirred by Western ethnocentrism prompts such interference; however, closer analysis reveals more of the shadows in the travelers' paintings.

Although people such as Mary Daly claim that research into topics such as sati promote their tacit acceptance by "explaining them away" (Leslie 1987/1988), I would argue that one of the greatest values of research is to discover the variety of edges on the sword of life. Of course, activists of one sort or another tend to steer clear of points that question the value of their causes. Leslie (1987/1988) claims that the other impediment to the study of sati is the reluctance to sensationalize such a rare event. Regardless of the intentions behind one's research into sati, the Roop Kanwar case illustrates the gray areas encountered by travelers of time and space.

Eighteen-year old Roop Kanwar was widowed and then quickly cremated with the corpse of her husband in September 1987. According to most Western discourse, one of the crucial questions that would determine the "legitimacy" and acceptability of such an event is whether or not Kanwar willingly took her place in the flames. Unfortunately, there is no definitive answer. Although several thousand people witnessed the event, Oldenburg notes that some interpreted Kanwar's flailing arms as signs of struggle, while others claimed she was "'showering blessings upon them'" (1994a:114). While this ambiguity represents the variety of meanings that can be read into a single physical event, Oldenburg's investigation into the case reveals the likelihood that Kanwar was drugged by her in-laws and "forced" onto the funeral pyre.

While the women that submit themselves to the practice of sati are "worshipped" by many as ideal wives, it is obvious that others gain from sati. Though such may not have been the case in earlier times, Oldenburg (1994a) notes that Kanwar's husband's parents, the local businessmen, the Rajputs, and the Brahmins all had vested interests in allowing, if not encouraging, Roop Kanwar's death. Specifically, the deceased man's parents would have needed to return Kanwar's dowry

to her parents. Considering they had just lost the economic potential of their son, the loss of Kanwar's dowry would have been even more disastrous. Therefore, to salvage a situation (i.e., the loss of their son), they had some motivation to encourage Kanwar's immolation. Not only would they not need to return the dowry, but they could expect even greater rewards traditionally associated with such close relations to the newly created sati.

The local businessmen were also likely to reap economic rewards from Kanwar's "self-sacrifice" since the establishment of sati temples at the sites of recognized satis creates a destination for pilgrims. Also within this "conspiracy of silence" (Oldenburg 1994a) are the Brahmins. A religious order on the verge of losing even more power to Western influences, the Brahmins would be able to stand in the spotlight once again by supervising a tradition of the past. While the groups' goals are ironically juxtaposed, some criticize Brahmins and local males that support sati for acting in accordance with more selfish agendas just as some American pro-life activists are suspected to be seeking personal power rather than protection for growing fetuses (Wood and Hughes 1984).

Lastly, Rajput men were blamed for "using women's lives as a means for propping up old chivalric traditions in a time when they are otherwise disenfranchised" (Oldenburg 1994a:105). Here, it must be noted that Rajputs are members of a warrior caste. Of course, since traditional warriors are less valuable in today's world, the Rajput caste has less status than in the past. Located primarily in the northwestern province of Rajasthan, the Rajputs still retain some respect. In fact, some have claimed that sati has been used in the past by members of other castes attempting to emulate Rajput behavior in the hopes of receiving Rajput-like prestige and status (Gujral 1987:52). Like the cargo cults of New Guinea, they thought the emulation of their superiors' practices would offer them the same level of prosperity typically afforded their models' position (Worsley 1990).

Kanwar's case occurs in an India that has been thoroughly influenced by Western ideals. Although it takes places in a rural setting, the profanity of the modern world is evident in the analysis of the ulterior motives of people who were strangers to Kanwar and her family. Of course, one must immediately wonder if this were not always the case. Although some have asserted that all satis have been murder (Jethmalani 1990), it is difficult to support this since there is little documentation. The question of "free will" seems crucial; however, it is not a question that can be easily answered since the principal agents (or victims) of sati are all dead. Additionally, one must recognize that the issue of "free will" itself is very sticky. While some people, such as Sartre, believe that we are all "condemned to freedom" (Cozzort and King 1989:258-259), there are many others who believe that there is some kind of underlying force that directs all of our actions (*e.g.*, Redfield 1993). While resolution between these poles likely results in a happy medium for most Americans, the same can not be said for everyone. Exposure to different belief systems affects the reality of "free will" — it is not a universal concept as many Americans may suspect.

While the motivations of others become obvious to the suspicious investigator, there are mythological supports for the wife to decide voluntarily to enter the pyre. Of course, over time it is certainly possible to shape past events to fit mythology or shape mythology to fit present practices. Courtright (1994) notes, however, that if the wife is found to have entered the pyre against her will, it is supposed to void the sacredness of the event. Just as many Europeans recognize nobility in Romeo and Juliet's personal decisions to kill themselves for their love, so, too, do Indians reserve honor exclusively for those willing to make the sacrifice. I have already mentioned the virtual impossibility of determining how many, if any, satis were performed with the informed consent of the wife. As a result, it is impossible to discover whether past satis were ever recognized exclusively as innocently "sacred" events. One should recognize, however, that "sacredness" emerges only after the consciousness of "profanity," prompting one to be wary of the tendency to romanticize "ideally sacred" events of the past. As Dekin (1996) notes, the search for the authentic, in the past or present, is a fool's errand.

The origin of sati is not clear, although there is a myth about the goddess Sati. Ironically, the goddess Sati did not commit sati. While she did sacrifice herself for the sake of her husband, Shiva, she died neither by fire nor following the death of her husband; rather, she retreated into an irreversible yogic coma while Shiva continued living (Hawley 1994a:14). So while Sati still serves as an ideal wife (*i.e.*, one whose life is tied to her husband), her story fails to account for the practice of wife-burning.

While various sources reveal different information, Dehejia (1994) claims that the practice of sati did not appear until after AD 500. In fact, she asserts that satis were not extolled until after AD 700. Searching history for a precursor to sati, some have pointed to juahar — the practice of self-immolation by the wives and children of warriors when the battlers seemed to be awaiting imminent death on the battlefield (Oldenburg 1994b:164). This practice, however, was done primarily by members of the royal class to prevent the encroaching enemy from raping and killing the royals. Oldenburg asserts that this action, though initially considered tragic, was eventually "gilded with notions of valor and honor" (1994b:166). Later the practice spread from the ruling warrior caste to the plebeian widows of the Brahmins. Nevertheless, these authors recognize their conclusions are problematic there are no consistent and reliable historical reports on juahar.

Another of the conspiracy theories that attempts to identify the "creators" of sati draws on the unusually long and intense mother-child bond in India (Brown 1994). Considering that children's relations with their mothers are so intense, it is probable that not only children will be drawn to their mothers. However, children will have hostility towards their mothers who inhibit some of their hedonistic impulses. This Freudian analysis predicts that the ambivalence towards women, stemming from their roles as mothers, will support rituals such as sati. Brown does not suggest this is the exclusive motivation behind sati; however, she asserts

"whatever else the rituals of sati are about, they are surely about 'Mommy' and about putting Mommy in her place" (1994:98). While this hypothesis is novel, it does not account for the infrequency of sati. The clouded history of sati prevents one from dismissing such an underlying explanation; however, I would suspect there are more pragmatic reasons sati occurs (*e.g.*, money, glory). If the Freudian analysis were correct, it is also puzzling that sati is an exclusive rite of the Rajput caste, given the assumption that mother-child bonds are fairly constant through all castes.

Another explanation lies in the preference for wives to avoid becoming widows. Leslie notes that "the hardships experienced by Hindu widows (such as severe restrictions on diet and dress, and the stigma of inauspiciousness) probably encouraged the spread of suttee" (1987/1988:6). If one were to recognize these burdens of widowhood, then it becomes possible to see that wives committing sati may actually be indulging themselves, in the sense that they can avoid becoming widowed. Of course, not only are there burdens avoided, but there are rewards promised. Specifically, satis are encouraged because their self-immolation will bring absolution of their sins along with karmic rewards in their future lives (Leslie 1987/1988).

The belief in metempsychosis, life after life, is at the base of the practice of sati. As such, it must be recognized. Criticized by many "enlightened" Europeans as an exemplary (and conveniently distant) illustration of the irrationality of religion, one must be wary of being too ethnocentric in an evaluation of sati (Figueira 1994). For example, if one does not believe in metempsychosis, then sati makes little sense; however, a belief in metempsychosis greatly increases the value of the ritual. As Courtright notes, in one view "sati is the ideal heroic and sacred action" while the Western view recognizes sati as a "paradigm of powerlessness" (1994:29). Quickly, one realizes that judgment on the practice of sati involves very complex issues such as freedom of religion.

Not only are there differences in understanding the meaning of "sati" as an event, but there are different uses of the word "sati." For instance, readers should recognize that this paper has already used the word in a variety of meanings. Generally, however, "sati" can refer to the woman who steps onto her husband's pyre, the event of the self-immolation, or the goddess named Sati. While Westerners have often referred to the practice as "suttee," they were attempting to describe the same event (Hawley 1994a). Additionally, many refer to the wife that enters the pyre as a widow and refer to sati as "widow-burning"; however, "wives" are recognized as such until their husbands' cremation (Leslie 1987/1988). They do not become "widows," or on rare occasions "satis," until this liminal phase is over (van Gennep 1908). These differences in labeling the same physical event with different words illustrates the differences in people's perceptions. Without a common language, whether one is referring to a moral or linguistic code, conflict is likely if people with alien systems engage each other for any substantial period

of time. As a result, it is not surprising that protests emerge against, and in support of, the practice of sati. Support of either view forces one to deny the worldview of the other. It is this fact that causes some to avoid what Conrad dubs "the horror, the horror" in *Heart of Darkness*. And, it is this fact that impels others to smother "the other." Since avoidance often seems impossible in today's world, one is forced to at least recognize the situation. Action is left to the individual.

Although there is no correct answer to the question, it is possible to delve further into the sea of gray. Hawley points to examples of altruistic suicides in other societies, emphasizing similarities with sati. He notes the relative frequency of young people "comparatively unanchored to family life" (1994b:178) that serve as "volunteers" for actions like sati or bomb raids into Lebanon. The altruism, whether accepted voluntarily or attributed posthumously, of these "volunteers" serves to unite the remaining members of society. Of course, in the case of Kanwar's sati, unity was created not only within the community of sati subscribers, but also within the community of protesters outraged by the event (Hawley 1994b).

The supposed altruism of the satis, or kamikaze pilots of World War II, serves functions outside of the immediate "rewards" they will gain in the "afterlife." While it is difficult to argue for or against the value of these ethereal posthumous rewards, one might recognize that nationalism, like religion, is a human invention. Whether one dies for the 200-year-old democratic ideals of American democracy or the sake of attaining a better position in one's next life, the point remains that both of these motivational bases — nations and religions — were created by humans. Nevertheless, the recognition of metempsychosis as a human invention should not lead to its dismissal as an irrational human superstition. It is possible to analyze sati without becoming embroiled in such a polarizing debate concerning the reality of the supernatural world.

Campbell (1991) notes that scholars have recognized that there are similarities between God and the collective good. In fact, this seems to be the basis of Durkheim's understanding of religion as the worship of one's society (Cozzort and King 1989). Therefore, if one were to recognize that "god is good" and "good is god," then belief in the "one, true almighty being called god" becomes superfluous, if not a hindrance. In application to an analysis of sati, one should recognize that sati, both its practice and glorification, is part of the fabric of Hinduism. As a result, within the Hindu community, the sacrifice of the sati has value; though, outside it seems like worthless killing. Of course, the same may be said for American soldiers killed in Vietnam. Within the community of those supporting American involvement in the "conflict," the deaths of the soldiers had value, while those in protest of the United States' involvement recognized the sacrifices as the products of extreme vanity. Resolution of these opposing worlds is difficult; however, a general pattern seems to emerge.

One of the prime archaeological markers of chiefdom-level, or "middle-range," societies is the presence of elaborate grave goods in the burial tombs of leaders

(Webster, Evans, and Sanders 1993). Often included among the goods are dead bodies interred around the leader. Sacrificed following the death of the leader, perhaps in similar but less personal fashion than sati, the concubines and guards of the leader serve to symbolize the importance of their fallen superior. These types of graves, and the inferred behaviors, are not found among egalitarian peoples. This recognition prompts the hypothesis that altruism, like selfishness, becomes more specialized with the emergence of densely populated communities, which are typically not egalitarian. As a result, it becomes difficult to expect to be able to live in a densely populated community, which most likely has a relatively high degree of social integration (Orme 1981), and not expect to need to watch some neighbors, if not yourself, become the objects of sacrifice. Along with this differentiation of status often comes corresponding religious beliefs that promise great rewards in the afterlife for those "chosen" or "called" to be "meek and humble" in their current lives.

While altruism of males is often more spectacular since they frequently die in battle, perhaps one of the reasons sati is so sensational is that it is a spectacular instance of female sacrifice. While the intention of the sati is important to most Westerners' judgments of the practice, I would suggest that life in a complex society demands such kinds of sacrifice. While many protest sati, I doubt that most "human-rights" activists can be satisfied in any tightly-woven, densely populated social system. The value of evolving into greater specialization that could one day culminate in an Orwellian future, however, is questionable. It seems possible that the effective protest of practices such as sati, and war, prevents the "further evolution" of human society into even larger units of social organization and even greater stratification.

Less specific to India, some have offered evidence that wife-burning or similar methods of "wife-disposal" are found among groups of people living "in ancient times in Europe, Central-West Asia, and the Far East" (Leslie 1987/1988). While many of these groups may have had some type of chiefdom-level society, it is still understandable why "sati" may have existed in egalitarian societies. Specifically, it is conceivable that some early societies did not have the capacity to support the widow role. Nevertheless, according to the 1971 Indian census there were 23 million live widows — indicative of modern India's ability to sustain widows, if only minimally (Gujral 1987). The argument that a society, especially modern India, cannot support widows, therefore, is weak; although, it is conceivable that such was the situation in other times and places.

As this paper has shown, the question of sati is complex. It would seem that the only way to avoid such problems of allowing other people to be so "altruistic" is to avoid living in complex, densely populated societies — to join Thoreau in the woods. But since most of the woods have been cut down, this option is not widely available. As a result, it would seem that one must decide which of the "crimes against humanity and reason" are most worthy of opposition. Cries against sati,

though understandable, would seem to be attacking a "smaller evil" than protests against the use of soldiers in war. Nevertheless, it may be that certain societies are not yet able to exist without the existence of an army; as a result, the abolition of the relatively infrequent practice of sati makes people feel good about themselves without radically changing the structure of a society. As Nandy notes, perhaps the "comic anti-hero in 'Monsieur Verdoux'" is correct "when he insists that if one kills a few one is a murderer, but if one kills a million, one is a hero, for number sanctifies" (1994:145-146). While Nandy refers to this in the context of psychological adaptation, I would offer the suggestion that the structural importance of war as an institution is more integrated than rituals such as sati.

Sati seems to act more as an expressive form than a source of structural altruism; as such, one would expect it to be less stable and less important, making it rather vulnerable to abolition movements. The position of other, more accepted forms of altruism are still too sacred for majorities to develop in opposition. Additionally, one should recognize that the displacement of sati by dowry deaths coincides with the displacement of traditional Indian Hindu culture with modern capitalist ways. This phenomenon suggests that there is no net gain towards a world with less extreme sacrifices given a highly integrated society. It will be interesting to see how these structures evolve in the future. As the world community becomes increasingly integrated, it would seem there exists a pressure toward increased specialization and stratification of social roles.

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