Origins and Realities of Suttee in Hinduism

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For the Western observer, the Indian practice of "suttee" or widow-burning, the Japanese ritual suicide "harakiri" or disembowelling, and the Jain performance of non-resistant death from starvation - all these are both shocking and difficult to understand. In Judeo-Christian tradition, suicide for any purpose or motive is not generally deemed acceptable, for God alone is entrusted with power over life and death.

Yet from the time of Marco Polo (1254-1324), the Venetian traveler, in the early fourteenth century until well into the nineteenth century, Western travelers and Christian missionaries in India always mentioned suttee they had witnessed. These men watched the Indian suttee in horror but with great admiration, too, for the superhuman courage and dignity of the women involved. In Japan, the tradition of voluntary death called harakiri has existed for more than a millennium. The suicides of samurai warriors, of kamikaze pilots, and of artists and lovers are part of a tradition which stretches back over many centuries. In Jainism, various instances of the fast into death are found in the canon of the Svetambara sect, most of which are modeled on the spiritual career of Khandaga Kaccayana, a disciple of Mahavira (599-527 B.C.), the founder of Jainism, who led an exemplary life as an ascetic Jain monk.

Ritual human sacrifice has always been carried out with noble intentions and, more significantly, has been based on religious ideas. It is generally believed that the victims' deaths were the most direct means of achieving the desired purposes, whether this was the restoration of the cosmic order or the reunion of the gods with man, and these deaths were accompanied by elaborate rituals.

This paper examines and explores the origins, development
and reality of Hindu self-immolation called "suttee," or widow-burning.

The position of the widow in Hindu society is one of the most important topics which the historian of women has to discuss and elucidate. The death of a loving husband is painful in itself whatever the circumstances, but apart from the pain of loss, widows in Hindu culture have had to bear an additional burden of social opprobrium of many dimensions, through every period in history, ancient, medieval and modern. Widows are unlucky, so unlucky that they are frequently under-reported in census figures, because other family members are reluctant to admit that a widow, particularly a young widow, lives in the same household. Hindus believe that misfortune is the result of bad karma earned by sins or wrongdoings of previous lives, and widows may be blamed for their husbands' deaths².

Rammohan Roy (1772-1833), popularly known as the "Father of Modern India," said, "Widows are left only three modes of conduct to pursue after the death of their husbands. First, to live a miserable life as complete slaves to others, without indulging any hope of support from another husband. Secondly, to walk in the paths of unrighteousness for their maintenance and independence. Thirdly, to die on the funeral pyre of their husbands, loaded with applause and honor of their neighbors."³

It is not hard to see why death following her husband might be preferred to widowhood. Prescriptions, often reiterated, for the proper conduct of a widow included some instructions that she should not eat more than one very plain meal a day, that she should perform the most menial tasks, never sleep in a bed, leave the house only to go to the temple, keep out of sight at all sorts of festivals (since she was inauspicious to everyone but her own children), wear nothing but the drabbest clothes, and, of course, no jewelry. Perhaps the most humiliating of all for a high-born lady was having her head shaved monthly by an untouchable male barber.⁴ All this was held to be necessary for the sake of her husband's soul and to keep herself from being reborn as a female animal.
A report published in Calcutta's Telegraph in October 1987 quoted a widow who confessed that she had been reprimanded for trying to embrace her own twelve-year-old son on the day of his "upanayana" (thread ceremony). As an inauspicious woman, she was not supposed to pollute the boy with her touch. A widowed mother is not normally permitted to be present at - much less participate in - the sacred ceremonies of her own son's or daughter's marriage. A Hindu scripture Shuddhitattva says, "All the actions of a woman should be the same as that of her husband. If her husband is happy, she should be happy, if he is sad she should be sad, and if he is dead she should also die. Such a wife is called 'pativratā'." As the noted Indian scholar Sakuntala Narasimhan observed in her recent book Sati, a widow's life-span was considered to be a "waiting period," to be spent in prayer so that when she eventually dies she might in the after life be reunited with her husband. Under the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that a woman often burned herself to death along with her husband's corpse.

Suttee is the anglicized orthography for the Sanscrit "sati," the Hindu rite of suicide of widows by self-immolation. The word is derived from Sati (wife of Siva) who committed suicide because of an insult to which her husband had been subjected by Daksha (her own father). The term was extended to mean the "true wife" who remains faithful to the memory of her husband by not marrying again. Subsequently, the term was applied to the rite in which a widow committed herself to the flames of the pyre on which the body of her husband was cremated.

The custom of the sacrifice of the widow at the funeral of her husband was widely practiced in ancient times. In China, for instance, the custom of immolation is reported from an early period and it survived there even longer than in India. Large scale burials of the living with royal dead, dating from the Shang dynasty (1523-1027 B.C.), have been recorded. Written texts support the archaeological record and show that mass burials in royal tombs had not ceased by the time of Confucius (551-479 B.C.), the founder of Confucianism. In ancient China if a widow killed herself in order to follow her husband to heaven, her corpse was...
taken out in a great procession. The Egyptian Pharaoh Amenhotep II (1450-1425 B.C.) of the 18th dynasty was accompanied to the other world by four of his wives. The custom was also observed by the pagan Scandinavians and the Slavs of Eastern Europe. In pre-Christian Poland, as late as the tenth century A.D., spouses often died with their husbands; Arab travelers recorded that in southern Russia, if a man had three wives, the favorite one would be first strangled and then burned on the man's pyre.

Much speculation invests the origins of suttee in ancient India. There is no evidence that it was ever practiced among the ancient Indo-Aryans who only used to bury a few of the chief possessions of the deceased along with him. Nor is there anything in the Vedas to show that it had Vedic sanction. One of the funeral hymns of the Rig-veda indicates that in the early obsequial ceremonies the widow lay down beside the dead man after he had been placed on the unlit pyre; his bow was placed in her hand for a while, then the bow was taken and she was called to "return to the land of the living." She was allowed to marry the dead man's brother or continue to produce children by so-called "niyoga," or levirate. The reason why the custom of suttee was not performed during the Vedic period is not known. As some scholars assert, probably Vedic Aryan conquerors found themselves in minority in India and felt the compelling necessity to increase their population in order to ensure their political domination. Instead of allowing widows to be burnt, they thought that it would be better to encourage them to live and increase the population by remarriage.

Whatever the reasons may have been, it is undisputed that we find no traces of suttee custom down to about 400 B.C. The Brahmanic literature, ranging from about 1500 to 700 B.C., is almost silent about it. The Buddhist literature also is unaware of the custom of suttee. If it had existed in the days of Gautama Buddha (563-483 B.C.), one feels quite certain that the great Sakya sage would have started a vehement crusade against it. He who even opposed sacrifices to gods, because dumb animals were
immolated therein, would certainly have been exasperated by a
custom which entailed the burning of precious human beings
alive. So we may well conclude that even in Kshatriya caste cir-
cles, to which Gautama belonged, the custom was not prevalent
in somewhat around 500 B.C.  

The first instances of suttee are recorded in the Hindu epic
poems, Mahabharata, from about 300 B.C. Probably the longest
of all the world's epic poems, the Mahabharata consists of
110,000 couplets, or 220,000 lines, was compiled from about 200
B.C. to 400 A.D., even though the events in the stories may have
occurred much earlier. This great epic scripture, however, con-
tains only a few cases of suttee. The most important among them
is that of Madri, the wife of Pandu. But in her case, it is interest-
ing that the assembled sages try their best to dissuade her from her
resolve. Madri, however, is unmoved by their arguments. She
says that she is determined to die with her husband, firstly
because she was the cause of his death, secondly because she
would be unable to control her passions, and thirdly because she
might find it difficult to treat evenly her sons and stepsons. The
important thing here is that no argument of any religious merit is
assigned by her or by anybody else.  

Again in the Mausala-pavan of the Mahabharata, we find
that the four wives of Vasudeva (father of Krishna), Devaki,
Bhadra, Rohini and Madira, are all voluntarily burned with their
husband. When the news of Krishna's death reaches
Hastinapura, five of his wives, Rukumini, Gandhari, Sahya,
Haimavati and Jambavati immolate themselves on a pyre, of
course without their husband's body. It can safely be said that
these three instances were the earliest available records to be
found in the Hindu scripture.

In ancient times there prevailed a belief in several societies
that the life and needs of the dead in the next world are more or
less similar to those in this life. It therefore became a pious duty
of surviving relations to provide a dead person with all the things
that he usually needed when alive. Especially when an important
personage like a king, a nobleman or a warrior died, it was felt
that his usual paraphernalia should be "sent" along with him. He
would of course require his wives, servants, horses in the next
world, and it would therefore be necessary and desirable to kill
these all, and burn or to bury them with him. Such a belief should
have given rise partly to the custom of burning or burying the hus-
band also along with the wife.\textsuperscript{19} The wife is usually the dearest
relation of a man, and the visitations of a dead man's ghost were
popularly attributed to his desire to be united with his quondam
wife. Why not lessen these dreaded visitations by burning or
burying her along with his remains? This custom also made the
life of the patriarch very safe; it practically eliminated all possi-
bility of any one among his numerous mutually envious wives
intriguing against his life.\textsuperscript{20}

 Probably the earliest actual historical instance of suttee is
reported in the Greek chronicles which describe the burning of the
wife of the Indian general Keteus who died in 317 B.C. while
fighting Antigonus, one of Alexander the Great's (356-323 B.C.)
generals.\textsuperscript{21} Then both the wives of Keteus were very anxious to
accompany their husband on the funeral pyre, but as the elder one
was with child, the younger one alone was allowed to carry out
her wish. Greek writers tell us that she was led to the pyre by her
brother, and she was all gleeful even when the flames enveloped
her body. Some Greek historians tell us that the custom of suttee
was widely prevalent among the Kathia tribes of the Punjab.\textsuperscript{22}
According to the Indian historian Upendra Thakur, in his cam-
paign in Punjab, Alexander the Great routed the Agalassai king-
dom but survivors, said to number 20,000, set fire to their capital
and cast themselves with all their wives and children into the
flames.\textsuperscript{23} This practice of mass suicide called "Jauhar" can be
traced back to about 1000 B.C., where a whole tribe or kingdom
- both men and women - become extinct in a matter of hours to
avoid the horrors of captivity after defeat.\textsuperscript{24}

 The suttee custom began to become gradually popular and
prevalent from about 400 A.D. in a significant way. A number of
Hindu scriptures such as \textit{Vatsyayana}, \textit{Bhasa}, \textit{Kalidasa} and
\textit{Sudraka} record the custom. \textit{Vatsyayana}, for instance, points out

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how clever dancing girls gain ascendancy over the mind of their lovers by swearing that they would burn themselves on their funeral pyres.25

To turn to historic cases of the period, we find that the wife of general Goparaja, who fell in 510 A.D. while fighting for his kingdom against the Hunas, immolated herself on her husband's funeral pyre.26 In 606 A.D. the mother of king Harsha chose to predecease her husband by committing herself to flames, when it was declared that there was no chance of her husband's recovery.27 By the sixth and seventh centuries A.D. the life of a widow apart from her husband was unequivocally condemned as sinful by the smriti writers; it was declared preferable that she mount the funer-al pyre. From that time onwards they began advocating it as a reli-gious duty, and the ideal of voluntary suttee was a religiously sanctified suicide or martyrdom. Also the act of suttee conferred economic benefits on her husband's relatives. It was believed that through the act of suttee, her husband, her husband's family, her mother's family and her father's family would be in paradise for 35 million years, no matter how sinful they all had been.28

The suttee custom was at first restricted to the wives of Kshatriya caste like princes and warriors, but in course of time the widows of even weavers, barbers, masons and others of lower caste adopted the practice. The general prevalence of this custom first among the primitive warriors is not difficult to understand. Fighting races or tribes are very jealous of their women and often prefer to kill them, rather than take the risk of their going astray after their husbands' deaths.29

The advocacy of suttee was taken up in Puranic writings, and the Padma-purana in the eleventh century details the ceremonial procedure for the rite as it was then already established. Two kinds of suttee were distinguished, but neither offered any escape for the hapless widow. One was saha-marana or "co-dying," in which a widow burnt herself on the same fire as that on which her husband's corpse was cremated. The other was anu-marana or "after-dying," in which the widow died not on the funeral pyre of her husband, but later, on a pile lit with the embers preserved from
the husband's pyre. This took place if the widow was in an "impure" state, for example, menstruating (when a week was allowed to pass after the cessation of the flow), or pregnant (when two months were allowed to pass after the birth of the child).30

We have already observed that suttee was originally a Kshatriya custom. The Padma-purana extols the custom, but expressly prohibits it to the Brahmin women.31 A logical question arises. Why were the Brahmin women forbidden to burn themselves through suttee? If self-immolation promised salvation and eternal bliss in heaven, why were they excluded from this great privilege? Narasimhan provides two plausible explanations - one is that chicanery and motives of selfishness induced the Brahmins to exempt their own women from a fiery death; the other is that immolations originated not as a religious rite for salvation but as a political device among the nobility and warrior classes, to ensure that the "purity" of their women was not violated by the invading armies.32 The Brahmin community was originally accustomed to pride itself on following the most ascetic and self-denying code of life; eventually it began to feel that it should not allow itself to be outdistanced by the Kshatriyas in the custom of suttee. Consequently the custom began to be followed by some Brahmin families soon after 1000 A.D. A Brahmin widow must be always burnt along with her husband's remains on the same pyre.33

Most of the early historical references to suttee are in travelers' accounts. Alberuni, an Italian traveler in the tenth century, recorded that Hindu wives chose to burn themselves on the death of the husband "in order to be spared the miseries of widowhood." Ibn Batuta (1304-1378), the African Muslim traveler known as the "Arab Marco Polo," is said to have fainted on witnessing a suttee ritual in Bombay. Nicolo de Conti (c.1450), the Venetian traveler of the fifteenth century, recorded that 3,000 wives and concubines of the king of Vijayanagar empire had pledged to burn themselves on his pyre.34 In the southern India, the Vijayanagar empire re-corded several infamous incidents between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries and a number of suttee stones were raised to commemorate these events. In the Goa region, the
Portuguese administration of Afonso de Albuquerque (1453-1515) banned suttee in 1510 A.D. and put a stop to further immolations. Francois Bernier (c. 1660), the widely-traveled physician of the seventeenth century, told the case of a child widow of twelve being burnt at Lahore, Punjab, in spite of her desperate struggles and piteous cries. In a case reported in 1798 the wife was fastened on to the funeral pile of her husband, but as the night was dark and it was raining the woman managed to disengage herself and escape unseen. When it was discovered that there was only one body on the pyre, a search was made and she was dragged from her hiding place. She pleaded to be spared but her own son insisted that she throw herself on the pile as he would lose caste and suffer everlasting humiliation. When she still refused, the son with the help of some others present bound her hands and feet and hurled her into the blaze.35

The Muslims, who first established their foothold in western India in 711 A.D., tried to check suttee by instituting a permit system based on a declaration made by the widow that she wished of her own free will to become a suttee, but the system was a mere formality for under pressure from their relations few women could resist making the declaration.36

Seen as a percentage of the population, the number of women who burned on the pyres of their husbands may be "insignificant," but it is not the numbers but the significance attached to the beliefs that eulogize the rite that is the issue. As far as the general population is concerned, perhaps one widow in a thousand became a suttee, when the custom was in its greatest vogue.37 Public opinion and government had not begun to assert themselves against the custom in the first quarter of the nineteenth century; we may therefore well presume that the prevalence of the custom at this time was more or less the same as it was during the preceding four or five centuries. Between 1815, the year when official figures became available on suttee, and 1828, the last year before suttee was legally prohibited, a total of 7,941 incidents of widow burning had taken place in Bengal alone (not counting those that did not get reported officially).38
The British, who first set foot on the Indian soil on August 24, 1608 in the name of East India Company, took no decisive action on suttee for some 200 years until the reports of missionaries and reformers showed it to be an evil whose extermination could brook no further delay. One of the great turning-points in the history of sutte came on November 8, 1829, when the British governor-general Lord William Bentinck (r.1828-1835) launched legal assaults against suttee and thugi on the grounds of humanitarian principle. The Reformer, a weekly publication in Calcutta, then hailed Lord Bentinck's enactment as one of the "noblest triumphs ever achieved in the cause of humanity." The editorial went on to say, "No longer shall legalized murder stalk through the land, blasting the fair forms of those beings whom heaven gave us for our comfort and solace through the pilgrimage of life." Although this legal proscription could not abolish so deep-rooted a religious custom overnight, and suttee deaths continued to be reported in remote regions in India well into the twentieth century, Lord's Bentinck's act, nonetheless, established a precedent for government intervention into the most sacred areas of Indian ritual practice.

In the case of suttee's greatest stronghold Rajasthan (then Rajputana) state the custom continued to linger for about thirty years more after the official prohibition in 1829. Since 1861 A.D., virtually no case has occurred of a public legal suttee. During the subsequent years of course some Hindu widows, who intensely believed that it was their bounden religious duty to accompany their husbands, have tried to ascend their funeral pyres, but have been usually prevented from achieving their object by the public and the police. Foiled in this attempt, some of them often shut themselves in a room and put an end to their lives by igniting their saris.

Rajasthan has one of the lowest literacy rates in India today, and this is the region that has seen the largest number of suttee incidents occurred in the last 150 years. Only one in ten among the urban women is literate; for the rural areas the figures are even much higher. In contrast, Kerala state where the largest Christian
population resides, boasts the highest literacy for women, at 65.7 percent.\(^42\)

Recently, one of the most sensational incidents of suttee took place in Deorala, a small village of Rajasthan state. At the end of summer 1987, Roop Kanwar, a pretty, well-educated Rajput girl of eighteen, had been married for less than eight months to a twenty-four-old Rajput man by the name of Maal Singh. On September 3, Maal Singh died suddenly from a malady that has been variously diagnosed as acute gastroenteritis, a burst appendix, and suicide by poisoning. The motive for the last one might have been supplied - at least partially - by the fact that Maal Singh had recently failed his examinations for admission to medical school the second time.\(^43\) Whatever the cause, its effect was that the next day Roop Kanwar, dressed in bridal finery, walked at the head of the funeral procession to the center of the village, ascended the funeral pyre in the presence of a crowd numbering 4,000 strong, and was finally consumed in the flames along with Maal Singh.\(^44\)

This suttee and the events that followed in its wake prompted a nationwide debate and were covered substantially in the international press. Under normal circumstances, the incident would have caused little stir, not unlike the 40 other cases of suttee-style deaths officially recorded since August 14, 1947, when India became an independent and secular republic. Some 28 of these have occurred in Rajasthan state alone, mainly in and around Sikar district. What made the profound difference this time was the activism and concern of women themselves. Arguably, as Professor Veena T. Oldenburg observed, the Roop Kanwar case has converted the idea that a woman can become a suttee and be glorified for it, from a residual quasi-religious theme into a critical political issue on which women's voices were heard for the first time.\(^45\)

The issues raised for feminists by Roop Kanwar's death persist in the maltreatment of women elsewhere in Hindu life, particularly in the numerous "dowry deaths" of young urban women in recent years. Many observers think these deaths are virtually
murders committed by in-laws disappointed by the amount of money and goods brought into their families when their new daughters-in-law arrived.\textsuperscript{46}

The significant thing is that in the colonial period it was chiefly men - Hindu reformers headed by Rammohan Roy (1772-1833), Christian missionaries headed by William Carey (1761-1834), and British officials - who debated the issue, and the East India Company (1600-1858) that eventually legislated, to abolish the practice in 1829. Now it was the women, not the men, that initiated the issue. Feminists were united, first and foremost, in denouncing the event as one among many crimes against women. They did not admit any obfuscating rhetoric about whether this event was or was not an "authentic" issue; coercion or consent is "not" really relevant to their formulations of the problem. For them, suttee as an issue was settled 175 years ago; the question is why it was still allowed to persist. Feminists unanimously rejected the glorification that followed an alleged suttee, what with the endowment of commemorative shrines and temples and the holding of festivals and anniversaries. They also continued to work hard to counter the propaganda in the media that represented Roop Kanwar as a symbol of an alleged ideal of Hindu womanhood - chaste, devoted and able to sacrifice her very life for her husband.\textsuperscript{47}

Commenting on a suttee incident back in 1931, Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), popularly known as the "Father of Independent India," traced the genesis of the self-immolation of wives to male chauvinism, "if the wife has to prove her loyalty and undivided devotion to her husband, so has the husband to prove his allegiance and devotion to his wife. Yet, we have never heard of a husband mounting the funeral pyre of his deceased wife. It may therefore be taken for granted that the practice of the widow immolating herself at the death of the husband had its origins in superstitions, ignorance, and blind egotism of man."\textsuperscript{48}

Suttee has been represented in Hindu and Western conceptions in a number of ways and contexts. Of these, probably three possible modes of representation take on more or less coherent
shape. The first is the suttee of traditional Hinduism, in which the suttee appears as a sacred person and event, whose stories and shrines serve as focal points for religious activity and values among particular communities. The second is the suttee viewed from Western travelers and British colonial culture. Here suttee is problematic in the extreme the very measure of Hinduism's irrationality and superstition. The third is the suttee of contemporary Indian society, shaped in large measure by the discourse of feminism, in which suttee functions as a limiting case that displays the violence and deceit toward women that patriarchal cultures make possible.49

Let me conclude by introducing the ten most-suggested reasons underlying the custom of suttee. (1) Since Hindu tradition holds chastity, purity and loyalty to the husband (pativrata) as the highest ideals for women, there appears to be inexorable logic behind a decision to give up one's life on the death of the husband as proof of chastity or the ultimate expression of a wife's fidelity.50 (2) The belief that a suttee has great supernatural powers provides the motive for others to ensure that she burns herself for their benefit. It was thought that a woman on her way to the pyre is capable of bestowing eternal bliss on anyone she cares to look upon; that by her act of devotion she earns for her husband and herself 35 million years of heavenly bliss; that she can descend to hell and force the powers of the pit to yield up her ancestors, relatives and friends and thus bring them salvation. Parasara Samhita says, "She who follows her husband in death dwells in heaven for as many as there are hairs on the human body - that is, 35 million years..."51 (3) The ancient belief that a man's possessions can be sent with him for use in the next world if they are burned or buried with him; his wife or wives being his chief possessions and the source of his greatest pleasure has to be dispatched to serve him in his next life. (4) Male jealousy at the thought of leaving beautiful women behind after his death for others to enjoy. (5) The hard-headed Greeks were not moved by what they regarded as a barbarous custom, and surmised that the real reason for suttee is to prevent a wife from poisoning her husband;
the fact that she would have to die with him will serve to inhibit any such intentions. (6) Fear of relations that the widow may misbehave and bring disgrace on the family. (7) Relatives do not wish to be burdened with the responsibility of having to support a widow; they covet her wealth and want her out of the way; the son is relieved of the necessity of maintaining his mother; the male relatives take possession of the estate that the widow would otherwise have held for life. (8) The compulsion of Brahmins, home, village and tradition. Recorded instances show that in the majority of cases the women who "ascend the pyre" were forced to do so. They were drugged or carried forcibly to the scene, tied to the logs, held down. (9) Cases of suttee freely undertaken are sometimes based on true affection, but in medieval times an important factor was the dread of facing the life of a widow. To some even a painful death was preferable to the living hell of widow. (10) The vanity and hope of enduring fame; in same Hindu houses the handmarks of women who underwent suttee were left imprinted on walls with turmeric paste; many of these women were honoured and almost deified and special "suttee stones" recording their virtue and fortitude were inscribed in their honor.

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NOTES

6. Ibid., p. 11.
7. Ibid., p. 37
11. Ibid., p. 104.
13. Ibid., p. 118.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., p. 119.
16. Ibid., p. 120.
18. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
University Press, 1993.)
42. *Sati*, p. 56.
44. *Sati*, p. 2.
46. Ibid. p. 7.
47. Ibid., p. 103.
50. *Sati*, p. 11.
51. Quoted from *Sati*, p. 11.
53. Ibid., p. 465.