Uproar Over Rajput 'Sati'
Category : December 1987
Published by Anonymous on Dec. 01, 1987

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Wife Emolates Herself On Husband's Funeral Pyre

A pretty, young bride of eight months, Roop Kanwar gained universal fame September 4th at Rajasthan's Deorala Village in northwest India. She became a sati - burning herself to death on her husband's funeral pyre. The reaction in India was an unresolved mixture of shock, admiration, outrage, reverence and embarrassment over the young girl's action. Local police failed to stop the sati. The Indian press called the act "a pagan sacrifice" and "a barbaric incident which blackened India's image in the world." Women's groups demonstrated against the sati all across India, prompting belated government action against Roop's relatives. Yet private opinions, even of prominent politicians, were ambivalent.

Roop's people, the martial Rajputs (who have inspired fear in every invader of India from the Muslims to the British), claim sati as their custom and religious right-the free choice of the widow. Groups of Rajput women marched last month in favor of sati and burned copies of the anti-sati ordinance. The situation remains a stand-off, the Rajputs proceeding with plans to build a temple on the site (they have collected over $230,000), despite a government ban and demanding that those arrested be freed.

Many newspaper reports say the widow was forced into the deed; in a word, murdered. According to all available first-hand reports, however, it was Roop Kanwar's personal decision to commit this form of ritual suicide. "Roop did not weep [upon seeing her husband's body], but she kept saying, 'I will not let you go alone, I am also coming,'" recalled eyewitness and neighbor, Meenakshi Khandelwal. When Roop's relatives tried to talk her out of it, she threatened them with sati shraap-a curse put upon those who would oppose a sati and thought to bring ruin to not only the person but his entire village. The last sati of Deorala-69 years ago-in fact cursed and ruined a man who sought to dissuade her.

Contrary to many press reports, her intentions were not only known before the

funeral, but several village elders and holy men came to test her resolve, according to their tradition. Convinced that she had received the power to become a sati from the Goddess, the elders and her in-laws gave their blessings.

Meenakshi Khandelwal said, "I saw Roop dressed in bridal make-up walking along with her husband's body with a coconut in hand. There were about 900 people when the body was taken to the cremation ground. Later, the crowd swelled. It took about an hour for the preparation of the pyre. The girl stood like a rock chanting the Gayatri. Once the pyre was ready, she entered it and sat holding her husband's head in her lap. She ordered Pushpendra Singh, her brother-in-law, to light the pyre. As the fire engulfed her, Roop sat serenely talking to her relatives, not showing any sign of pain."

Many newspapers discounted this as incredible, saying she must have been heavily sedated or pushed in. But courageous willingness is, in fact, a common aspect of satis. A 17th century traveler, Francois Bernier, witnessed a sati where he "could not perceive the slightest indication of pain or even uneasiness in the victim." One witness to Roop's sati, Tej Singh, is quoted in Indian Today as saying, "She is from a well-educated family. Could this kind of woman have been forced? And there are hundreds of widows here whose husbands died even before there were pension schemes. Why were they not forced? She was a woman who believed her husband was a god and there could be no life for her without him."

Grief at the death of a loved one is one of the most common reasons for suicide in all societies. In America the suicide rate is very high, 1 in 2,000 for persons age 15 to 34 whose spouses die. Rejecting the concept that suicide is a sin, most westerners have accepted the idea, according to scholars, that man has a right to take his own life. In the last twenty years, nearly all countries have removed suicide from the law books; aiding a suicide remains a crime.

"Ritual suicide" is done in matters of injustice, honor and love. It is tied to belief in reincarnation and viewed as a sacrifice of the body, not a mortal sin against the soul. East or West, ritual suicide is regarded with respect and reverence. Will anyone forget the Buddhist priests who, in protest of the Vietnam war, burnt themselves to death in the Saigon town square? The Japanese samuri commits hari kari when his honor is lost.

Western reaction to sati-outside of missionary reports-has often been one of awe. The early Portugese traveler Pietro della Valle said, "If I knew [of a lady about to become a Sati], I will not fail to go and see her and honor by my presence her funeral with that compassionate affection, which such a great conjugal fidelity and love seem to deserve."

From its first instances in India, sati has been a practice of the warrior class, or kshatriyas. Later, other castes picked it up. Similar practices are found in the history of other peoples, e.g., American Indian, African, Chinese, Egyptian and Greek.

The first historical mention of sati in India is in the Mahabharata, composed around 300 B.C. There the wives of Lord Krishna-Rukumini, Gandhari, Sahya, Haimavati and Jambavati-ascended the funeral pyre upon his death. Sati is not mentioned in Hindu scriptures until the 1st century A.D. when the minor scripture Vishnusmriti commends it. This scripture claims a sati will be freed from rebirth as a women. Other commentators reject this logic. The hard life of a widow contributed to the occurrence of sati among those who did not feel they could live the required life of renunciation. Sati was formally outlawed in India in 1829 as a result of numerous reports of coercion on the part of relatives who sought to steal the widow's inheritance or avoid supporting her.

Without question, it is the duty of the police to make every effort to stop a sati from occurring. Yet it is doubtful whether such a determined person as Roop Kanwar could be thwarted. It may be impossible to dissuade fighting people such as the Rajputs from their ideals of self-sacrifice-either of their men in battle or their women in the love of their husbands. Western societies are embroiled in the ethical issues of terminal patients seeking "a conscious, dignified death." The customs of sati raise equally perplexing problems.

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