

UNIT 52 – UPSC - Abolition of Sati

India's History : Modern India : Prohibition of Sati - 1829

Sati Stigma

Within the Indian culture, the highest ideal for a woman are virtue, purity, and allegiance to her husband. From this tradition stems the custom in which a wife immolates herself on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband as proof of her loyalty. This custom in which a woman burns herself either on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband or by herself with a momento after his death is now referred to as sati or, in England, as suttee. In the original meaning, "Sati" was defined as a woman who was "true to her ideals". A pious and virtuous woman would receive the title of "Sati." Sati was derived from the ancient Indic language term, sat, which means truth. Sati has come to signify both the act of immolation of a widow and the victim herself, rather than its original meaning of "a virtuous woman".



The term "sati" is associated with the Hindu goddess Sati. In the Hindu mythology, Sati who was the wife of Lord Shiva, consumed herself in a holy pyre. She did this in response to her father's refusal to invite Shiva to the assembly of the Gods. She was so mortified that she invoked a yogic fire and was reduced to ashes. Self-sacrifice, like that of the original Sati, became a "divine example of wifely devotion". The act of Sati propagated the belief that if a widow gives up her life for her husband, she will be honored. Socially, the act of sati played a major role in determining the true nature of a woman. Self-sacrifice is considered the best measure of judging the woman's virtue as well as her loyalty to her husband. The following applies to the ideal wife: "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 a Pativrata". The upbringing of many Indian girls emphasized the concept of Pativrata as the only way for a woman to merit heaven.



This concept of meriting heaven through self-sacrifice became embedded within the minds of many as the only assurance for a female to gain salvation. A female's life must be lived in full devotion to her husband; otherwise she will be doomed for eternity and will live a cruel existence as a widow. According to Ananda Kumaraswamy: "Women were socially dead after the death of their husbands and were thought to be polluting". Only a woman who is sexually and legally possessed by a husband is respected within the Indian society.

By sacrificing herself a widow saves herself from the cruel existence of widowhood and ends the threat she possesses for society. She is considered a member of society who has unrestrained sexual vigor, and thus may harm society with immoral acts. A widow was seen as having irrepressible sexual powers and could be a danger to her society. Remarriage in India was not favored. A widow was not allowed to remarry, nor was she able to turn to religious learning, and hence lived a bleak and barren life. The pain that a sati endures on the pyre was less painful of an experience than the torture she must endure physically and emotionally as a widow. If a widow decided not to join her husband, she was separated from the social world of the living and considered to be a "cold sati". She was only allowed to wear rags and was treated by her family and members of society as an impure, polluted being. The prohibition, in which she is unable to adorn herself, was considered justifiable, done for the widow's "own interest".

The British government in 1829 prohibited the custom of sati. British India declared the practice of sati as illegal and punishable by criminal courts. Such a law revealed much about the British thought and opinion of India and its customs.