

An Ethical Critique of the practice of Suttee in India.

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Introduction

A group of feminist in Maharashtra produced a street play which sums up the do's and don'ts administered to a young girl in India.

Do not abandon the vow of womanhood taken by you
You have to follow your mother, grandmother, and great grandmother
You have to mind the hearth and children
Do not ask odd questions, Do not exceed the boundaries
Do not get out of control, Do not abandon the vow of womanhood
Do not speak with your face up, Be inside the house
Wash cloths, clean the utensils, Cook and serve food
Clear the leavings and remove the soiled plates
Bend your neck downwards, Look downwards
Walk without looking up, do not let your eyes wander
Do not abandon the vow of womanhood.¹

The burning of Roop Kanwar on September 4, 1987 on the funeral pyre of her dead husband is a manifestation of this malefic culture of domination, in which women and men are placed in a relationship of master and slave. Roop Kanwar, an-18-year old educated girl of middle class parentage, who had stayed barely twenty days with her husband Maal Singh, was burned on his funeral pyre with social approval. Kanwar was forcibly dragged and put on the pyre, while the Rajput youth chanted slogans include: "Sati ke pati ke jai" (Glory to the husband of the sati).²

According to the newspaper reports Roop Kanwar told her father-in-law about her calling to become a 'satimata' and reportedly decked herself in bridal finery, and, in keeping with the tradition, led the funeral procession to the cremation ground. She then ascended to the pyre and placed her husband's head in her lap, blessed the crowd by chanting 'gayatri mantra', and slowly burnt to death.³

The social murder of widows, theologically euphemized as suttee, reveals an overarching ideology of male superiority and female dispensability that accepts the silent and brutal violence against women that rages practically in every home in India. This paper is an attempt to (a) analyze the practice of suttee (b) to trace the link between the practice of suttee and women's oppression in Indian society and (c) to critique the practice from an ethical perspective.

¹ Jyoti Mhapasekar Mulagi Jhali Ho (A girl is born) quoted by Leela Dube "On the construction of Gender" Economic and Political Weekly (hereafter EPW) April, 1988, WS 15,16.

² Reported by the fact-finding team of the Women and Media Committee of Bombay. See their report Trial by Fire Bombay, 1987.

³ Both national and local papers reported extensively on the incident after their period of silence for the first few days. For the traditional male version of the incident see among others Rajasthan Partika, Sept.5, 1987, Indian Post, Sept. 13 & 15, and Times of India Sept. 17.

2.1.1. SUTTEE; EPISTEMOLOGY

The word 'sati' a feminine noun in Sanskrit meaning a good women, derives from the Sanskrit root ' Sat' or truth, and reflects the myth that woman who immolate herself through devotion to her husband becomes the goddess 'Satimata'. The origin of the myth involved the goddess Sati, Brahma's daughter, who burned herself in the sacrificial altar out of the affection to her husband, Lord Shiva.⁴ The women who sacrifice themselves, the sati, reveal the attributes of the goddess Sati herself.⁵ Yet, according to Rajput religious leaders, there are only very few cases when 'sat' comes to a woman. Sat to them is a supernatural force which comes out of dedication, extreme devotion, submission and attachment in absolute terms.⁶

2.2.1. A HISTORICAL ENQUIRY

The origin of suttee is still a subject of debate. It is said to be a symbol of aristocratic status associated with certain early societies such as those of Greeks and the Scythians.⁷ Probably it is a refinement of the Greek aristocratic custom of burning widows and slave women at the master's sepulchre. Penzer observed that this savage system was prevalent among many tribes in Asia and Europe.⁸ Widow-burning was once almost universal; the custom was practiced by the Scandinavian people, the Russians on the Volga, the Teutonic tribes and the Egyptians. It was known among the tribes in the Tonga and Fiji Islands and among the Maoris.⁹ There are relics of it in the funeral custom of some American Indian tribes, which require the widow to lie beside her husband on the pyre until the smoke begins to be suffocating (when she may escape). But among Comanche tribes, when a man died one of his wives (probably the superior

⁴ V. N. Datta Sati, Manohar Publications, New Delhi, 1988, p.8

⁵ Raja Rammohun Roy quotes from Unggira, the first century theologian of Hinduism "That women who, on the death of her husband, ascends the burning pile with him, is exalted to heaven, as equal to Uroondhooti." Translations of the Vedas and some controversial works, Parbury, London, 1832 (second edition) p.201.

⁶ Trial by Fire, 1987.

⁷ Smith, Vincent A. The Oxford history of India, Oxford, 1920, p.665; Edward Thompson (1928) p.20; Romila Thapar "In History" Seminar, Feb. 1988 p.15; Datta (1988), p.2.

⁸ Smith (1920) p.665

⁹ N. M. Penzer "Terminal Essay on Suttee" in C.H. Tawney's Ocean of Story, (a translation of Somadeva's Katha Sarit Sangraha) Mohanlal Banarasida, Delhi, 1926. Penzer writes: "The practice of burning the living widow with the corpse of the husband is stated to have been an ancient Indo-Germanic custom, based upon the belief that life in the next world is a reflex of this life." p. 225.

one in the hierarchy of wives) was killed to give him company in the next world.¹⁰ In China, re-marriage of widows was always considered an act of unchastity, while widows who committed suicide at their husband's death had acquired divinity.¹¹ However, there is no other society other than India, where the practice has withstood social and political changes and continued to gather social acceptance and theological justifications over the centuries.

The earliest account of widow burning in India was described in Greek texts of the first century B.C. which quoted fourth century accounts of Alexander's soldiers.¹² Unable to rationalize the practice, the authors remarked that it was an early form of deterrence against women from poisoning their husbands in order to enjoy themselves with their paramours. Hence the compulsion to burn the widow with their husband prevented the husbands becoming the victims of their wives. (!)¹³

2.2.2. IS SUTTEE A RELIGIOUS RITE?

The Mahabharata, the Hindu epic probably written in the fifth century BC, has references to some widows becoming satis such as Madiri and the wife of Lord Krishna.¹⁴ But obviously the custom was never universal either among the tribes of Madiri or Krishna or among other tribes and castes. In its extensive explanations of murder and death during the Kurukshetra war, Mahabharata gives no account of other widows burned. On the other hand, Vedas and Dharma-shatras, the earliest written scripts of Hinduism, allow widows re-marriage, preferably to the husband's brother, a patrilineal innovation to consolidate property. In the Vedic times, the widow lay on her husband's funeral pyre before it was lit but was raised from it by the brother of her dead husband¹⁵ (a practice similar to that of the American Indian tribes). Albeit, the early scriptures such as the Vedas and the Dharmashatras does not recommend widows becoming sati, the theologians (obviously the male theologians) knavishly reconstructed many of the scriptural passages in support of the rite. Max Muller noted that attempts were made in a later time to seek Vedic justification of the rite by changes of characters in the original text, "perhaps the most flagrant instance of what can be done by an unscrupulous priesthood."¹⁶ Unggira is another theologian of the

¹⁰ Ajit Kumar Ray Widows are not for burning: Actions and attitudes of Christian Missionaries, the native Hindus, and Lord William Bentinck, ABC Publishing House, New Delhi, 1985.

¹¹ Penzer (1926) p.256.

¹² Quoted by Smith (1920) "That it was practiced by the half-foreign city of Taxila along with other startling customs, and that it also prevailed among the Kathaioi, who dwelt on the banks of the Ravi." p.225.

¹³ Datta (1988) p.4.

¹⁴ Romila Thapar argues that these are later interpolations by the brahmin hierarchy who has the exclusive right on the theological hermeneutics. Thapar, an interview in Sunday Telegraph, March 12, 1988.

¹⁵ Quoted by Thompson (1928)

¹⁶ Max Muller Selected Essays on Language, Myth and Religion

early period. Based on the Mahabharata position on women he writes:

"There is no other way known for a virtuous women except ascending the pile of her husband. It should be understood that there is no other duty whatever after the death of her husband."¹⁷

In the Buddhist period, although women were viewed as chattel, suttee were not acknowledged.¹⁸ Manu, the parent of Hindu jurisprudence has a heterogenous view about the position of women, particularly widows. While accepting the dignity of womanhood as equal to male in certain poems, in its totality it appears that Manu introduces the philosophy of domestication of women as a theological necessity¹⁹. He did not even mention suttee but instead glorified ascetic widowhood. Also Medhatithi, the classical hermeneutist of Manusmriti, writing in about tenth century AD, is tenaciously opposed to the practice of suttee. He argues that the practice is 'adharmā' (unethical) and 'ashastriya' (unscientific). He maintains that it amounts to suicide which is forbidden and that each person must live their allotted span of life.²⁰

With the preoccupation of the Aryan invasion theory²¹ Altekar finds racist reasons for the vedic prohibition of suttee. Since the local inhabitants outnumbered the invading Aryans, it would have been a suicidal policy for Aryans to encourage suttee or to prohibit widow re-marriage.²² His underlying assumption was that [a male stereotype vision of women] Aryans consider women as baby-producing machines and

1881, p.335. He observed that the letter 'agre' was changed to 'agnesh', the genitive of 'agni' or fire.

¹⁷ Mohun Roy (1832) p.202.

¹⁸ For an extensive discussion see Uma Chakravarti Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1988.

¹⁹ The recent scholarship in Hinduism suggests that Manusmriti was written in two different historical periods, one the early vedic period and two around 400 AD and compiled together as one book. The dualism of Manusmriti in its views on women and caste are attributed to the different views in these socially and economically different periods.

²⁰ Thapar (1988) p.15. Meddhatithi argues with the supposition that suttee is a voluntary act and not a forced murder.

²¹ The traditional historiography of India traces the invasion of Aryans, an Indo-Iranian nomadic tribes into the planes of Punjab between 3000 BC to 1200 BC. The Aryans with their possession of cavalry conquered the local inhabitants, the Dravidians, and reduced them to the position of slaves. This theory, known as the Aryan Invasion theory identifies the contradiction in Indian society as a racial tension, between the fair skin Aryans and the darker skinned Dravidians. This theory was first developed by the Western scholarship and later picked up and developed by the Indian elites to justify their superior position over the dark skinned working people.

²² A.S. Altekar The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization, Benares Hindu University, Benares, 1938, p.342

encouraged the tribe to produce more and more babies to multiply the stock. Under these circumstances, male members were encouraged to take wives from other caste groups, and widow re-marriage was promoted.²³

2.2.3. INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF THE PRACTICE.

As a social custom suttee was believed to have been instituted to glorify the warrior caste. Burning of widows was often obligatory and forceful, especially among the rulers, as a symbol of honor to the dead.

The macabre sequence of wholesale burning of widows occurred due to this male consciousness of honor. Nicolo Conti, a traveler to Vijayanagar during the reign of Deva Raya II in 1420, observed that the king had 12,000 wives of whom no less than 2,000 to 3,000 were required to burn with him when he died.²⁴

The major indications of the existence of suttee are the sati inscriptions and the sati memorial stones. The first inscription from 510 AD at Eran in Central India refers to the wife of Goparaja who immolated herself when her husband died in battle.²⁵ Such inscriptions, an early form of war memorials, are numerous in Maharastra and Karnataka erected in the period from 10th to 14th AD. Based on these inscriptions, Romila Thapar made the observation that²⁶ (a) the Muslim invasions were not the cause of the sati's as traditionally been believed, because the peak of the sati's were pre-Islamic; and (b) most of these inscriptions refer either to families of Kshatriya (second in the caste hierarchy) status or those seeking such a status. Her observations point to the fact that historically suttee was a custom predominantly among the upper caste groups, especially among the social groups who held hegemonic power over the political institution of the state. The burning of Roop Kanwar in 1987 reasserts Thapar's nuance regarding the dialectical relationship between political control and that of a total control over women. In most these cases widow burning, which manifests the male dominance over women's lives and bodies was a vehicle for males to claim social status in a hierarchically stratified society. Ashis Nandy's studies on the late eighteenth century society also shows the same trend which Thapar introduces:

"Sati in the late 18th century and early 19th century in East India was, first of all, an uppercaste phenomenon. Castes which constituted less than 10% of the population in Eastern India contributed more than half the cases of sati. The other group involved were the upwardly mobile castes trying to take advantage of the new colonial system emerging in India."²⁷

2.3.1. SUTTEE IN MODERN INDIA

²³ Altekar make a comparison between Hitler, Mussolini and the vedic chief. Like Hitler, vedic chief were promoting a fascist, and of course patriarchal interest "Heroes, more heroes and still more heroes. See Manusmriti III. 13 for scriptural evidence.

²⁴ Quoted by Smith (1920) p.308

²⁵ A.L. Basham The Wonder that was India, Macmillian Co., New York, 1954. p. 187.

²⁶ Thapar (1988) p.16.

²⁷ Ashis Nandy "The Sociology of Sati." Indian Express, October 5, 1987.

Deliberate and organized efforts for the revival of suttee were witnessed in colonial and post-colonial India in two regions; (i) the Zamindari land-owning class in Bengal and (ii) the warrior caste known as the Rajputs in Rajasthan. The social resistance organized under the leadership of Ram Mohun Roy and the weak legislation passed by the colonial leadership making sati a crime did not prevent the steep growth of widow burning in Bengal during the colonial period. The figures given for registered cases of suttee in the early nineteenth century in the Bengal Presidency are staggering: 378 cases in 1815 and 839 cases in 1818. This report shows that there is a marked increase in the number of reported cases even after the efforts of the colonial government and the social reformers.

2.3.2. FEAR OF BREAKDOWN IN THE PATRIARCHAL STRUCTURE.

In Rajasthan suttee developed as a cult which lies behind major contemporary episodes in 1979, 1980, 1982 and 1983. Once a powerful warrior community of Rajasthan, Rajput's experienced the erosion of their power in the post-independence era. The new power alignment brought together by secularism and the new consciousness among the oppressed, particularly among women and untouchables challenged certain power relationships which had existed for centuries. The values which are taught to be normative, concerning divorce, widow marriage, women's mobility, caste practices were placed under the 'hermeneutics of suspicion'(Hugo Assman) by the emerging feminist movements. The economic deterioration of the peasant families in the rural areas furthered this process by leaving no option for the male members of the family but to allow mobility to women. As women moved out of the house they moved away from the control of family patriarchs into the male space in search of wage labor. The mobility of women from the containment of domesticity led to efforts by village patriarchs to²⁸ reassert their control through revitalized anti-women traditions. Fatima Mernissi's observation in relation to the Pakistani fundamentalism, "if fundamentalists are calling for a return to the veil, it must be because women have been taking off the veil"²⁹ is vital for comprehending the revival of brutal practices against women. In the last decade India experienced a growth in the militancy and consciousness of its women movement, not only in the urban centers but also in the villages. Political parties and trade unions each began to organize women's movement apart from the emergence of numerous movements by independent women's organizations. One could proudly refer to several historic struggles led by these militant women's movement for the issues related to women's basic rights to the reorganization of the countries economic political structure.³⁰ The resolution of the women's forum met in Bombay is an evidence to this growth in consciousness "What we demand is not just a temple entry but the power to re-design the temple."³¹

²⁸ Marty Chen describes that patriarchal control women is operated not only by the family patriarchs but by the village patriarchs, who finally dictate the norms and status of women in society. "Poverty, Gender and Work in Bangladesh" EPW, Feb. 1, 1986, p.221.

²⁹ Fatima Mernissi The fundamentalist obsession with women, Simorgh, Lahore, 1987, p.8.

³⁰ See report of the Joint Women's Program, CISRS, Delhi, 1989. Manushi serialize the stories of struggle by different women's organization. There is also a qualitative and quantitative increase in Women's journals in the last decade.

³¹ Maithereyi Krishna Raj "Women's Studies: Case for a new

Thus the suttee cult became a powerful symbol for reclaiming the militant Rajput identity. To do so the theologians and the patriarchal power structures glorified the practice and eulogized it as an essential caste symbol. The word sati now became a word of social approval in the Rajastani vocabulary, prescribing respect and homage. It is a word now which excites hopes and expectations of miracles. In the post-independence era, Rajasthan witnessed twenty four cases of widow burning. What is alarming in the Rajasthan episodes is not only the number of suttee incidents but also the public approval of them. Suttee is a public spectacle, conducted with sanction and protection of local communities.³²

2.4.1. LEGAL ABOLITION OF SUTTEE

Suttee was officially abolished in December 1829,³³ but it was not a serious attempt to halt the practice. Rather one could argue that the British promulgation functionally helped the practice by its spurious distinction between legal and illegal suttee. Legal suttee, according to the colonial rule, was done voluntarily, with rational consent done congenial to an official reading of the scripture.³⁴ It was considered illegal only when the woman was under compulsion,³⁵ intoxicated, pregnant or had a child under three

paradigm." EPW, April 30, 1988. p.892.

³² The large number of people participating in these macabre sequence demonstrate that these sombre incidents became a village festivals of interest. In the case of Roop Kanwar more than 5,000 people, (Deorala village has a population of only 10,000 people) witnessed the burning of this young widow. Breaking a judicial ban on conducting the "Chunri mahotsav" (a festival after 12 days of a sati) more than hundred thousand people gathered for glorifying the 'satimata'. Villages committees were formed to protect the site of sati, and hailed it as a pilgrimage place. See Link, Sept. 27, 1987.

³³ General William Bentinck's Minute on suttee says: "Now that we are supreme, my opinion is decidedly in favor of an open, avowed and general prohibition, resting altogether upon the moral goodness of the act and our power to enforce it." J.K.Majumdar (ed) Raja Rammohun Roy and Progressive Movements in India, Calcutta, 1941, p.141. It is evident that the desirability of the abolition had never been a matter of debate. The benefit for the greater political stability of the East India Company by abolition or support of suttee was the issue of concern before the colonial rulers.

³⁴ The theologians as an official reading promote suttee in all cases except for girls under the age of puberty and women in an 'unclean' state. In the latter case, the pyre will be kept alight to burn the women after her menstruation.

³⁵ But the historical documents proves without doubt that the practice was always forceful. Essays relative to the habits, character and moral improvement of the Hindoos (Parbury and Allen, London, 1823) document the practice of suttee in 1800's. "Force is

whose nurture was not undertaken by another. The colonial prohibition of suttee was based on three interlocking assumptions. (a) The hegemony of religious texts, (b) total indigenous submission to the religious dictates and (c) that suttee was recommended by the Hindu scriptures.³⁶ Such a taxonomy gave official legitimacy to the invidious notion of voluntary sati, as well as to the idea that the practice was based on the Hindu scriptures rather than the ideology of patriarchal Brahminism.

Long before the British law prohibiting suttee, the Muslim rulers had prevented the practice in their states.³⁷ King Akbar was said to have ridden nearly one hundred miles at utmost speed to rescue the daughter of the Raja of Jodhpur.³⁸ Some Mugulas insisted on widows obtaining permission from the rulers before committing sati, which served as a form of prevention.³⁹ In the case of Goa, Francisco de Almeida, the first Portuguese viceroy, reported that suttee was abolished in Goa by the local Sultan long before his arrival in 1510.⁴⁰

3.1. DISCOURSE ON SUTTEE.

A bizarre ramification of what Foucault calls the collaboration of power and knowledge in the production of discourse⁴¹ is present in the history of suttee in India. As Belo shows in regard to the semantic religion, scholars, intellectuals (in the case of India, Brahmin pundits) and theologians appropriate the hegemonic ideologies and produce, to the advantage of the dominant class, a certain deformation of the

employed in the act of immolation. After she has circumambulated and ascended the pile, several natives leap on it, and pressing her down on the wood, bind her with two or three ropes to the corpse of her husband, and instantly throw over the two bodies thus bound to each other, several large bamboos, which being firmly fixed to the ground on both sides of the pile, prevent the possibility of her extricating herself when the flames reach her." In the case of Roop Kanwar's murder, as soon as the in-laws were managed to put her in the pyre, heavy logs of fire wood and coconuts thrown over her. One she managed to get out of the flame, but the sword wielding Rajput men put her back in the pyre. Trial by fire, p.5

³⁶ Lata Mani "Production of an official discourse on sati In early nineteenth century Bengal" EPW, April 26, 1986.

³⁷ Dubois Hindu Manners Customs and Ceremonies, Oxford, 1897 p. 359.

³⁸ Edward Balfour Cyclopedia of India, London, 1882, p.783.

³⁹ F. Bernier Voyage to the East India, Calcutta, 1909, p.92.

⁴⁰ Smith (1920) p.332.

⁴¹ M. Foucault Discipline and Punish, Vintage Books, New York, 1979.

reading of history and scripture.⁴² In the case of suttee, this production of discourse was controlled by the patriarchal structure which inflicted injustice and atrocities on women, without challenging the justification of the system. In India, women, due to their position in society have rarely been in the forefront of ideological production, to the effect that the experience and the measures of women were not reflected in the discourse.

The general types of discourse on the emergence of the practice of suttee that appeared in the literature are (1) the notion of honor among the warrior caste, (2) pati-bkati;the self-immolation out of devotion. (3) the economic structure of the clans (4) caste practice of exogamy (5) religious rite (6) superstition (7) a political assertion of certain communities and (8) patriarchal oppression of women.

3.2.1. SUTTEE: A WARRIOR CUSTOM OF HONOR.

To many indologists, suttee seems to have originated with fighting men trying to prevent the enemy from capturing their goods and chattel. Altekar, while subscribing to this notion of origin, proposed two other reasons. To him, fighting races are very jealous of their women and often prefer to kill them, rather than take the risk of their going astray after their husband's death. Secondly, there is a general belief among the warrior community that the warrior requires all of his properties for his next life. Since the position of women was that of chattel, they too were burned with the husband's bows and arrows and horses.⁴³ Though Altekar noted the vulnerability of women in Hindu society, his observations fell short of suggesting that the notion of honor at the expense of women was a fabrication of patriarchal ideology.

Traditional historians related the reason for suttee to the possibility of Muslim invaders molesting Hindu women on conquest. This violation of the honor of womanhood would be avoided by self-immolation. Thapar strongly rejects this theory with the evidence from the sati inscriptions.⁴⁴ It is also evident that this historical reading is a Brahmin invention to uphold the traditions of Hinduism over against other religious practices and to sustain false claims about the high status of women in Hindu tradition.

Based on this historical reading of the social location of the practice of early suttees, Dorothy Stein argues that, as a practice of kings and warriors, it acquired a social prestige which made it a social indicator to determine the status of a group or tribe in a hierarchically stratified society.⁴⁵ The distinction the ritual acquired in the society functioned as an impetus for people who belonged to other caste groups to start the practice of suttee as a measure of their status.

3.3.1. PATI-BHAKTI:⁴⁶ AN IDEOLOGY OF MALE DOMINATION.

⁴² F. Belo A Materialist reading of the Gospel of Mark, Orbis, New York, 1981.

⁴³ A.S. Altekar The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization, Benares Hindu University, Benares, 1938, p. 137.

⁴⁴ Thapar (1988) p.16. See the treatment of this subject in page 9 of this paper.

⁴⁵ Dorothy Stein "Burning Widows, Burning Brides: The Perils of Daughterhood in India." in Pacific Affairs, Fall 1988, p. 466

⁴⁶ the word pati means husband and bhakti means devotion.

Claiming that the quintessence of Indian culture is the closely knit family relationship, the popular justification for widow burning propagates the idea that sati is an expression of one's wifely attachment, love and devotion to one's husband. This popular belief is based on the unequal relationship between husband and wife in the brahmanic tradition. The code of Manu and the brahmanic tradition made the institution of marriage indissoluble and eulogized it as a sacrament for women, however, without any challenge to the status of women as chattel. Manu says:

Neither by sale nor by repudiation is a wife released from her husband; such we know the law to be which the lord of creatures made of old.⁴⁷

Brahmin hermeneutics abused this tradition further as expressed in Unggira's theological debates.

" Those possessing her husband as her chiefest good, herself the best of women, enjoying the highest delight, she partake of bliss with her husband as long as fourteen Indrus reign."⁴⁸

With this theological notion of husband as deity, suttee became an inevitable practice in Indian society. Deification of husband (man in general) became the most venerated ideology that patriarchal brahmanism has ever produced in India. Daksha Sutra elucidate this patriarchal construction: "Even if the husband is cruel, self willed, devoid of merits, however bad, wives should serve him like a god."⁴⁹

In the present day Indian society, this deification of husband had been modified into a king-queen syndrome, directed towards binding women into the restrictive frame of domesticity. Based on an early concept of 'Grihapatni' (queen in the house who has existence only with the grihapati, the house king) the ideology of 'pativrata' (the one who's devotion to her husband is total) was propagated as the highest duty of women. Chastity, passivity, and fidelity (meaning one-way entry of the king of the house to the services and pleasure of the queen) are the essential characteristics of this pativrata concept.⁵⁰

The creation of a Sita⁵¹ ideal in the modern India is a further jolt to the freedom of women since it crystallized the pativrata concept as the undisputed model for Indian womanhood - the passive, chaste, faithful wife who worships her husband. The fire ordeal of Sita to prove her chastity and devotion to Rama is tied up with the present notion of suttee, as a demonstration of faithfulness and love of one's husband.⁵² According to the epic Ramayana, Sita agreed for the fire ordeal under coercion by her husband, who was afraid that Sita's sexuality had become polluted due to the presence of another

⁴⁷ Manusmriti IX. 46.

⁴⁸ Quoted in the report of A Conference between an advocate and an opponent of the practice of Burning widow alive, Calcutta, Nov. 30, 1818 p.6.

⁴⁹ Quoted in the Notes on the position of Women compiled by the Ethnographic Survey of India, Government Press, Calcutta, 1910, p.2.

⁵⁰ See Uma Chakravarti "Pativrata" in Seminar, 318, Feb. 1986 for a detailed analysis of this ideology.

⁵¹ Sita, the daughter of earth is presented as the wife of Lord Rama in the Valmiki edition of the epic Ramayana.

⁵² See the interview with Romila Thapar in the Weekend Telegraph, March 12, 1988 titled "Sita's popularity is due to the deliberate propagation of her as an idea; women."

male. Her husband's demand represents the general brahmenical view regarding women's sexuality as a curse to the well being of the society.⁵³ Apart from the firm containment and stringent control of women's sexuality, the Sita model created a perverse ethics in which the women's body itself represented a potential danger to the society, a sin.⁵⁴

Gandhi gave a fitting answer to the concept of devotion presented by the traditional apologists. More than a half century ago he wrote in his journal Young India:

"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."⁵⁵

3.4.1. ECONOMICS OF PATI-BHAKTI.

The shaping of the pati-bhakti concept which dictated the specific functions of women was dialectical. It paralleled two significant trends in Indian society, viz., the development of caste stratification and the institution of private property. It is evident from the given literature of the ancient times that economic and social institutions were crucial determinants of the status of women and their relative freedom or the lack of it.

The changes in the economic structure from the vedic period to the time of the puranas witnessed a marked shift in the status of women. Vedic times apparently had a pastoral economy where the production unit was the family. Women were central to pastoral production, managing the dairy aspects of cattle production and the day to day running of it.⁵⁶ This economic structure produced an absolutely androgynous Hinduism as represented in the vedic literature.⁵⁷ But this metaphysical androgyny,

⁵³ It is also to be noted that the main Hindu temple in Kerala (Thirty five million worshippers attended for last years festival from Dec.15 through 29th.), the Ayyappa temple of Sabarimala, prohibits women from the ages of 13 to 55 from entering the temple gates. Not only it is a denial of the civil rights of the women to worship, but it is an abuse of women to propose that their very body, their sexuality is an anathema.

⁵⁴ According to the Buddhist texts, women are depicted as being permanently on the look-out for an opportunity to seduce men. The inception of ascetic order in Buddhist tradition was very much tied up with this bias towards women's sexuality. See Uma Chakravarti, "The rise of Buddhism as experienced by women." in Manushi August, 1981, p.6-10.

⁵⁵ M. K. Gandhi Young India, May 21, 1931.

⁵⁶ Linguistic expressions like 'duhita' meaning daughter and the one who milks the cow demonstrate this relations.

⁵⁷ The virtues and female adjectives are used to qualify the gods and goddesses in vedic literature. Hierarchically, the god images are of equal status. Knowledge, wealth, supreme creator are all represented by female names. The eternal elements are neither male or female but 'Ardhanareshwar' meaning the soul which is born

synonymous with the social equality of women, began to disappear as the relations of production changed from pastoral economy to privatized farming.⁵⁸ The study by Gerda Lerner on the origin of patriarchy suggests that though biological difference proved basic for an early gender division of labor with the development of agriculture men seized control. In the agricultural society 'elders' came to dominate over 'juniors' and men over women in a lineage society with norms of patrilineal kinship.⁵⁹ Federic Engels too, using the anthropological studies of Henry Morgan conclude that the class differentiation and man's control of property and the surplus in an early agricultural production unit became the locus for the emergence of male dominance and patriarchy.

Later documents in Manusmriti are good examples for this shift. As against the non-biased references to women by the early Manu, the following quotation, probably written by the second Manu after the development of a class oriented agricultural production express the nature of patriarchal values.

"Wife, son, and slave, these three are said to be without property they acquire is his to whom they (belong)".⁶⁰ "No act is to be done according to (her) own will by a young girl, a young woman, or even by an old woman, though in (their own) houses. In her childhood (a girl) should be under the will of her father; in (her) youth, of (her) husband; Her husband being dead, of her sons; a woman should never enjoy her own will."⁶¹

Several economic factors, some seemingly diverse, played important roles in the incitation and continuance of the practice of widow-burning. Three issues are of major importance: (1) the inheritance law; (2) the commodification of the rituals and (3) the crisis in the middle class economy.

3.4.2. PROPERTY RIGHTS OF WOMEN.

The inheritance law, developed among the upper caste groups, intensified the subjugation of women and affected the suttee practice in two ways. First, Tambiah cites the example of the Dayabagha system of inheritance among the brahmins in Bengal.⁶² In the seventeenth century, when the Dayabhaga system of

alternatively as male and female. For a more detailed discussion see K.V.K. Thampuran "Hinduism and its impact on women" Religion and Society, June 1985, p 11-19.

⁵⁸ See D.D. Kosambi The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India: In Historical Outline, Routledge & Kegan, London 1970. Kosambi does not use the male stereotype argument on hunting society but about agricultural society where the introduction of the bull for ploughing was a turning point in the relative power positions between men and women.

⁵⁹ Gerda Lerner The Creation of Patriarchy, Oxford University Press, New York, 1986.

⁶⁰ Manusmriti, VIII. 416 Translated by Arthur Coke Burnell, Kegan Paul, London, 1891. The same theme appears four times in Mahabharata, showing the tenacious effort of the later religious leaders in robbing the land and property from the women.

⁶¹ *ibid.* V. 147, 148.

⁶² See S.J. Tambiah "Dowry and Bride wealth and the Property

inheritance was introduced as a legal system, an increased number of widow burnings was reported. Under the Dayabhaga system, women were entitled to have a share in the inheritance of immovable property on the death of their husbands. Romila Thapar argues that suttee became a means of removing one among the claimants to inheritance.⁶³ It is also interesting to consider that "during the second millennium AD, when brahmin widows were permitted to become satis, this was also the time when brahmin property holders increased both in numbers as well as in the size of their holdings"⁶⁴ The link between sati and property rights is more evident from the 'smritikaras' grant to women for limited property rights as a means of preventing suttee.⁶⁵ But at the same time, society encouraged women to commit sati (in order to take the land from women) owing to the fact that they had this new right to own property.⁶⁶

Second, the inheritance law for other caste groups, particularly among the Kshyatriya community, made the position of women very vulnerable. When she married, a woman was transferred to the patrilineage of her husband, and the ties of responsibility to and maintenance by her natal family were severed. Yet, with the death of her husband, she was not entitled to any of her husband's property. The writer of 'Dayutuwu', the modern expounder of Hindu law, had no moral guilt about propagating this law. It says:

"When a person is willing to divide his property among his heirs during his life time, he should entitle only those wives by whom he has no issue to an equal share with his sons, but if he omit such a division, those wives can have no claim to the property he leaves."⁶⁷

The colonial rulers who codified the religious traditions into legal systems further lowered the status of women. They advocated that if a person die leaving a widow and a son or sons, and also one or more grandsons whose father is not alive, the property so left is to be divided among his sons and his grandsons. The widow in this case was entitled to no share in the property.⁶⁸ With these forms of laws and traditions, a widow appeared practically as a burden to her in-laws. Adding to this economic factor is

Rights of Women in South Asia." in J. Goody and S.J. Tambiah (ed) Bride wealth and Dowry, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1973. See also J. Derrett Introduction to Modern Hindu Law, Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1963.

⁶³ Thapar (1988) p. 18

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ S. Gulati Women and Society, Chanakya Publication, Delhi, 1985, p. 178.

⁶⁶ *ibid.* p.172.

⁶⁷ "Brief remarks regarding Modern encroachments on the ancient rights of females according to the Hindoo laws of inheritance" Friends of India, Calcutta, 1822. Quoted by Roy, (1832) p.272.

⁶⁸ *ibid.* p. 273 The colonial policy of promoting patriarchal authority is more evident in other cases. For example in Kerala, where matrilineal forms existed (particularly in the case of Nair community) the colonial legislation invested de facto rights over property in the hands of men.

the culture which stigmatized widows as inauspicious creatures. Stepmothers, often numerous because of polygamy, are even more vulnerable after the death of their husbands.⁶⁹ Rammohun Roy, who was also a religious leader (Swami), commented that the Indian widows are left with only three modes of conduct to pursue after the death of their husbands: (1) to live a miserable life entirely as slaves to others; (2) to walk in the path of unrighteousness for their maintenance and independence; and (3) to die on the funeral pyre of their husbands, loaded with the applause and honor of their neighbors.⁷⁰ If in history there took place one voluntary suttee, it is because of these draconian laws of property rights coupled with the patriarchal norms which women are forced to internalize from birth, that a husband is the be-all and end-all of her existence.

3.4.3. COMMODIFICATION OF THE RITUAL

The second economic factor, the commodification of ritual, was evident in the recent incident of suttee. On the second day after the death of Roop Kanwar, her in-laws, aided by the religious authorities, erected a worship place with the name the 'sati sthal' (a divinified form of the crime) on the site of her murder, which now turned to be a lucrative money spinner for the family. News-paper reports indicated that in 3 months after Roop's murder, her in-laws amassed 9.5 million Indian Rupees from offerings and contributions.⁷¹ The suttee festival became a 'trump' not only for the in-laws but for the entire village, with new shops, restaurants, increased transportation and direct employment in the sati-temples. As the Inspector General of Rajasthan Police stated, "Sati is committed in this region because the economic gains from sati are tremendous."⁷²

Sati temples now institutionalized the practice of suttee. For instance, in Jhunjunu in the fourteenth century, one Narayani Devi was murdered as suttee. After independence, with the blessings of the state authorities, Rani Sati mela (festival) was and is organized every year by a committee of religious authorities and village patriarchs. This committee now sets up Rani sati temples in several parts of the state, with earnings of many millions of rupees every year. The temple has been accepted as a legitimate economic and religious institution both by capitalists and the state.⁷³ The festival day of the temple is declared as a state holiday by the government machinery, with much publicity to make this festival a tourist attraction. Government participation in the temple festival glorifying the practice of suttee is a clear indication of its support to this cruel practice.

This is not a new development. In the seventeenth century, suttee was a profitable source of income for the brahmin priests. A traveller to India at that time wrote: "As soon as the fire was out, the brahmins would go and gather all the melted gold, silver and copper."⁷⁴ Only the brahmins enjoyed the right to

⁶⁹ Roy documents that brahmins in some occasions married to ten, twenty or thirty wives. It was an indicator of social status and wealth. *ibid.* p.275.

⁷⁰ *ibid.* p.274-275.

⁷¹ Mainstream, December 19.

⁷² Trial by Fire (1987) p.6

⁷³ "Sati: Fortune Behind the Crime." Link, September 27, 1987, pp 4-7.

⁷⁴ Thomas Herbert, Some years travels into Africa and Asia, quoted by Datta (1988) p.213. Widows were burned with their

touch the ashes and they appropriated all the valuables. Apart from the gold from the pyre, brahmin priests received Rs. 200 or more (in the 1700's) as a fee for performing the religious rites for widow-burning.⁷⁵ From this economic interest brahmins stipulated theological justifications for the practice which they presented as normative for true believers.

3.4.4. CRISIS IN THE ECONOMY OF THE MIDDLE CLASS AND THE REVIVAL OF FUNDAMENTALISM.

Thirdly, the revival in India of religious fundamentalism, a force demanding women's subjugation, is closely linked to the economic interest of the emerging middle class, under the slow growth of the capitalist [backyard] economy. The breakdown of existing class identities and status systems, along with economic stagnation, has forced the middle class to compete with each other for scarce resources.⁷⁶ This competition led to the worst forms of communalism that Indians have experienced in recent years, and a return to strict religious practices as an effective divisive force. The reassertion of fundamentalism provides also renewed patriarchal control over women.⁷⁷ On the one hand, revival of religious fundamentalism robbed all the rights women gained through years of brave struggle and, on the other hand, the new economic formations marginalized women in the confined sphere of domesticity. The 1981 census showed that the number of female cultivators has declined relative to men, highlighting women's lack of independent access to means of production.⁷⁸ In 1961, 35% of the working class were women, but this declined to a mere 14.4% by 1981.⁷⁹ In the organized sector, the decline is more steep and alarming. In March, 1980 2.874 million women were employed in the organized sector, which declined to 2.732 million in June of the same year, a reduction of 4% in four months time.⁸⁰ More alarming is the trend in certain traditional sectors where women had enjoyed a preference in employment. For instance,

finest bridal dress and all ornaments.

⁷⁵ Friends of India, July 1819, Vol. XV, p.326. It should be noted that my father who commenced working as a trained teacher in the 1930's received only 84 rupees per year. (7 Rs per month). 200 Rs in the 1700's considering the relative price index was a quiet substantial amount of money. It also points to the fact that suttee was a practice of the rich.

⁷⁶ For a detailed discussion on communalism and its effect on social institutions see Bipin Chandra Communalism in Modern India, Vikas Publishing House, Delhi, 1984.

⁷⁷ For example, in Iran as a symbol of solidarity with religious fundamentalist, women resumed wearing the purdha, which represented an ideology of confinement of women, women's sexuality and fertility.

⁷⁸ Amrita Chhachhi "The state, Religious fundamentalism and Women" EPW, March 18, 1989 p.571.

⁷⁹ C. Baskharan "Indian Viplavaum Strikalum" Dynamic Action, March 1986, p.14

⁸⁰ *ibid.* p.15.

25% of the textile workers in the mills in Bombay and Ahambad were women during the period of 1950-51, but by 1985 this number was reduced to 5% of the labor force.⁸¹ Automation and computerization of industries was a further jolt to women, as it eliminated many unskilled positions which employed women. This economic reorganization after the emergence of religious fundamentalism effectively reassigned women to the restrictive space of domestic life. This shift is in variance to the professed goal of the independent secular India, where women's education, employment, and legal rights enjoyed the preference in policy planning.

The emergence of fundamentalism and the relative loss of independence of women in practice has its links to the economic re-organization, and enabled the successful revival of the practice of suttee and other forms of women's oppression. Amrite Chhachhi, in her extensive study, observed that an examination of the content of religious fundamentalism shows that it could ensure state interests as well as patriarchal interests which were not necessarily in conflict with capitalist interest.⁸²

3.5.1. PRACTICE OF ENDOGAMY AND SUTTEE.

Equally important is the revival of the caste discrimination which is dialectically related to women's oppression. The organization of caste, with its nexus - the institution of private property, allowed patriarchal lineage to function as a monolithic formulation, artificially chopping groups into definite and fixed units, 'each one prevented from fusing into another through the custom of endogamy.' Women in this family unit of caste were reduced to reproductive machines, producing legitimate heirs to the patriarchal property. One text in Dharmasharsta instruct a husband that "he must ensure that no man goes near his wife lest his seed get into her."⁸³ The immediate effect of this patriarchal morality was the containment of women's sexuality, fertility and mobility in general. Early allegoric religious presentations of women being the earth and man the seed had its origin in this concept of women as the private genital industry of a single man.

Suttee arose, according to the Untouchable leader Ambedkar, from strict adherence to endogamous practice. In endogamy, maintenance of caste revolved with the parity of reproducible unity of the sexes within one caste. It had a dual effect in relation to the fate of women. The institution of polygamy and sati both became a means to deal with 'surplus women'. Ambedkar explains the latter effect:

"The husband may die before the wife and create a surplus woman, who must be disposed of, else through intermarriage she will violate the endogamy of the group,"⁸⁴

Such marriage would be a menace to the caste organization not only because such practice is in direct opposition to the caste rules, but the existence of children from such marriages could endanger the very institution of caste division. Burning the widow with her husband was an effective way to contain this danger of surplus women, and maintained numerical parity between men and women.

In East India, among the traditional endogamous Kulin brahmins, the ratio of male and female seems to have been severely out of balance, requiring that the kulin marry many wives from within the community.

⁸¹ *ibid.* p.15.

⁸² Chhachhi (1989) p.570.

⁸³ Apastamba Dharmasutra, II.6:13, quoted by Uma Chakravarti "Pativrata" Seminar, 318, Feb. 1986. p. 19.

⁸⁴ Ambedkar (1979), p.10.

It has been reported that in "1871, thirty three Kulin Brahmins of Hoogly district were married to 2151 women."⁸⁵ Widow burning in turn was the highest among this group. There were occasions where the pyre was kept alight for three days while relays of widows were burned one after another.⁸⁶ A Serampore Circular letter of February, 1812, reported the burning of 40 widows of one man,⁸⁷ to obliterate the possibility of violating caste laws. Though Ambedkar reduced the question of women's subjugation into an organizational problem of caste, his analysis in its totality showed that women suffered a double oppression under the system of caste.

3.6.1. RELIGIOUS JUSTIFICATION OF SUTTEE.

The religious pundits who were appointed by the British legal system in 1772 to elaborate the dictates of the scripture on matters of suttee [and other civil matters such as marriage, divorce, inheritance] declared suttee to be a practice founded in the religious belief of the Hindus. They hold the view that only on rare occasions women became firm on 'sat'. 'Sat' derives from 'satya' which literally means truth, but to the religious pundits meant a woman's total faith and belief in the husband. 'Sat' is supposed to be attained by a woman before she becomes a sati, a supernatural force which sends the woman into a trance-like state. The purpose behind this extravaganza of hermeneutics was to establish the overarching ideology of male superiority and female dispensibility. The definition of femaleness as an object under male authority (an object of pleasure) is more evident from the statements of the modern apologists, who took upon themselves the responsibility to give the act of suttee a new vindication and meaning. They argue that sati means following the path of truth, and can be achieved by one's conduct, and not merely by burning oneself.⁸⁸

These apologists found refuge in Sankara's vedanta philosophy on sacrifice as a high ideal demonstrating real courage. They proposed that by becoming sati, women expiate the sins of others. The notorious theologian Unggira says: "Even though the man had slain a Brahmin or returned evil for good, or killed an intimate friend, the woman (by becoming sati) expiates these crimes."⁸⁹ As a reward to this sacrifice and dedication the wife is offered eternity, to live after death with her husband in heaven.⁹⁰

By using these notions about the rarity of the occurrence of 'sat' and ideal sacrifice, the apologists have proposed that sati cannot be termed either as an issue of women's civil rights or of gender discrimination. For them, "it is simply a question of a society's social and religious belief."⁹¹ They argued that the

⁸⁵ Sankar Sen Gupta A Study of Women of Bengal, Indian Publications, Calcutta, 1970, p.182.

⁸⁶ Thompson (1928) p.36.

⁸⁷ Quoted by Datta (1988) p. 197.

⁸⁸ Editorial, Janasatta, Sept, 19, 1987.

⁸⁹ Rammohun Roy (1832) p. 202. According to Manu's dharmashastra, the severest crime for any one is to harm a brahmin.

⁹⁰ *ibid.* p. 201.

⁹¹ Janasatta, Sept. 19, 1987.

debate on abolition, to be effective, should take place within the realm of scriptural hermeneutics. Thus by rarification of the practice of suttee they absolutely closed the possibility of relating suttee to the larger issues of the position of women in society and to particularities such as the status of widows in relation to social and religious belief.

3.6.2. DEIFICATION OF WOMEN.

A significant amplification of the religious vindication has been the deification of the women burned with their husbands. The sati temples exalt the idea that the 'sati' become goddesses, ascending from the pyre with a 'thrishul' in one hand and a revolving 'charka' around the head. This romantic representation of sati as 'skakti' (power) [thrishul, the powerful weapon of Shiva and chakra, that of Vishnu both reified in women] is a later theological canard to further elucidate the ideology of suttee, which is functional to bind women into the restrictive frames of domesticity through an imposition of a superficial morality of blind devotion to her husband.

3.7.1. SUTTEE: A SUPERSTITION.

As in the case of the apologists, a section of the rabid opponents of suttee viewed it as a problem developed within the ambit of religion. They tenaciously condemned it simply as superstition, a revival of obscurantism. The first category of these opponents, the Christian Missionaries, propagated that Hinduism in its essence was representing an idolatry, a manifestation of paganism, so that institutions such as caste and suttee were 'filthy act invented by the devil'.⁹² The protest against suttee appeared thus not as a negation of what negated women's lives, but, rather, as a judgement from a position of superiority over Hinduism, a religion which refused to submit itself to the philosophical onslaught by Christian missionary religion. Everything, good and bad, connected to Hinduism was characterized as heathen. Theologically, this polemic of missionary religion reflects its own inability to accept the 'other' as 'other', a significant ethical debate Dussel has proposed.⁹³ Western writers like Abbe Dubois, also rejected the custom as 'superstitious fanaticism whose characteristic feature is to suppress all natural and rational sentiment.'⁹⁴ Though suttee should be damned with all possible might, the pre-occupation of the missionary views on Hinduism made their protests mere declarations and never touched the issues of women's subordination.

Modernist Indians who favor a crude materialist explanation of suttee, share the notions of Dubois and the missionaries and place it within their general genre of religion as superstition. They locate sati as a practice of religion which itself represent the irrationality of a 'superstructure', built on an unjust 'base' a flagrant case of false consciousness, superstition, and material class interest. Suneet Chopra's (a communist party activist) statement in the party journal is a clear example of the base-superstructure schema, which the party elucidates as the philosophical framework for situating seeming religious issues. He writes: "If the very basic things necessary for human existence are lacking, then the supernatural

⁹² Missionary Herald, May, 1827, p.33.

⁹³ See Enrique Dussel Ethics and Theology of Liberation, Orbis Books, New York, 1978. This debate is continued in the new English language book Ethics and Community, Orbis, 1988.

⁹⁴ Dubois (1897) p.370.

must take over."⁹⁵

By rejecting suttee as a manifestation of superstition, both the missionaries and the crude materialists, similar to the religious apologists, approached the problem within the restricted ambit of religion and thus isolated widow burning from the central question of patriarchal oppression. Thus the fight against suttee became unconnected with the general demands of women for dignity, equal rights, and with their fight against domestication and containment in the male space.

3.8.1. SUTTEE: A POLITICAL WEAPON FOR POWER

On the ideological level the materialists have observed the revival of suttee as a crisis in the political system of India. According to Asish Nandy, there have been three periods in Indian history when Suttee was a large scale problem.⁹⁶ The first was during the collapse of the Vijayanagar kingdom in the south, the second when the Rajput principalities were under attack in the middle ages and the third, when British colonizers were establishing their domination in India. What Nandi wrestle with is to establish the hypothesis that suttee, as an epidemic occurs, when a deep rooted crisis challenge the traditional life style and political economy of the nation or community. With regard to Roop Kanwar's death, Nandy attribute the problem to the onslaught on the Rajastani life style by the market oriented political economy which challenged the power structures including the patriarchal authorities.

"through the market morality to the Rajastani life style as the only moral principal in social relations, the emergence of modern political economy as the only organizing principle of material life and the state as the only arbiter in inter-community relation..."⁹⁷

With such a break down of the life-support systems sati became an attempt, in a bizarre, violent and perverted fashion, to reassert the savage status and hegemony the Rajastani patriarchs had exercised through the centuries.

Nandy's tradition-modernity syndrome seldom reckons with the fact that suttee or other encroachments on women's rights, such as the denial of the muslim women's right to maintenance, is part of an organized revival of tradition for the sake of survival that take place with the approval of the Indian state. In the Indian system of parliamentary democracy (inherited from the colonial masters), the votaries cannot stay in power without convincing the powerful groups of their loyalty to and ability of preserving their vested group interests. In Bangladesh, Muslim identity was perpetuated as the national symbol to capture power. But in India, within the theoretical frame-work of secularism, state rulers promoted indirectly the communal ideology with religious fundamentalism as its dominant component. The individual religious emphasis changes according to the context of the voting constituency, as an electoral strategy to cash the votes. Thus we experience state sponsored Hindu fundamentalism in Uttar Pradesh, Islamic fundamentalism in Kashmir, and Christian fundamentalism in Kerala. This reemergence of religious fundamentalism functionally represents the preservation or destruction of the old hegemonic power status of the politically active middle class constituency.

⁹⁵ Suneet Chopra "Why should widows burn" [Link](#), 18 October, 1987, p. 19.

⁹⁶ A. Nandy "The Sociology of Sati." [Indian Express](#), editorial page, October 5, 1987.

⁹⁷ *ibid.*

In the case of Roop Kanwar, the Rajput militants are distressed with the present political alignment which help the erosion of their political clout within the echelons of power. Rajputs therefore seek to demonstrate their solidarity and power through the symbols which provide them the phenomenological satisfaction of superiority. Apart from this demonstration of solidarity, there is also a covert attempt to abort the gains women's and other progressive groups have secured through years of struggle.

3.9.1. STATUS OF A WIDOW IN INDIAN SOCIETY

The locus of these macabre incidents of widow burning is the question of the position of women in Indian society, particularly that of widows. The response of a local village women in Derola to a women's journalist team shows the intensity of this problem. "How would you react if you were just singled while making rotis (local bread)."⁹⁸ This statements expound the patriarchal ideology that women's existence has meaning only as a subordinate extension of man. Within the ideological construct such as the 'the queen of the house' syndrome, the ideal cult of 'Sita', and the religious concept of 'Pativrta', women's function in society was reduced to the realm of domesticity, subordinated to one man. She is eulogized for her 'womanly' virtues such as chastity, patience and submissiveness. This ideology, thus controlled the life and sexuality of women firmly under the husband, especially in the patriarchal family, with all attached virolocal values such as marital fidelity and obedience. Female sex is mediated in this patriarchal nexus only through her sex ties to a man, which even serves as an epistemological foundation for the categorization of respectful (women sexually attached one man) and disrespectful (women who is not under the control of a man).⁹⁹ When the husband dies, the life of the widow becomes meaningless, a state of social outcaste. Throughout India, irrespective of caste and religion, widowhood is regarded as the punishment for a horrible crime committed by a woman (attached to the notion of Karma). Widows are considered inauspicious and may not witness weddings, or take part in wedding rituals. They are not supposed to wear any ornaments (at the husband's death the bangles are ceremoniously broken), or any bright colored garments. Among the Brahmins in Andhra a widow should shave her head.¹⁰⁰ They are not allowed to re-marry but must live a life of not only strict celibacy, but also austerity, that enjoins the forging of all fun and pleasure. The codes of Manu required the widow:

"At her pleasure let her emancipate her body by living on pure flowers, roots and fruits; but she must never even mention the name of another man after her husband had died. Until death let her be patient of hardships, self-controlled, and chaste, and strive to fulfill that most excellent duty which is prescribed for wives who have one husband only."¹⁰¹ "....Nor is a second husband anywhere prescribed for virtues women."¹⁰²

The fetishisation of the Manu tradition metamorphosed a widow into an un-wanted thing, an ugly

⁹⁸ Trial by Fire, (1987) p. 5.

⁹⁹ Lerner (1987)

¹⁰⁰ Pundita Ramabai Sarasvati The High-Caste Hindu Women, Jas B. Rodgers, Philadelphia, 1887, p.82. In the urban society where the practice is almost died out, there is still an association of scissors and razors with widowhood. (Leela Dube, 1988)

¹⁰¹ Manusmriti, V:157, 158.

¹⁰² Manusmriti, V:162.

appendix in the body of society. This notion is tenacious because of the patriarchal religious ideology which suggest that women is created 'only' to become a wife to the man. Thus widowhood become negative to whatever is positive to life. Married life and widowhood function as antonyms equal to life and death in the Indian cultural vocabulary. A married women is 'subhaga' (propitious or auspicious) while widow is 'a-subhaga'. The customs and practices are the reified form of this ideology. At marriage, women are tied with 'mangalsutra' (a tali or necklace but literally means the secret of good fortune) which must be removed at widowhood. The snare in this tradition is the idea it depicts; women's existence is complete only as an extension of man.

There are many more patriarchal values and practices which has a caustic role, either directly or indirectly, on suttee. Ram Mohun Roy was convinced that the institutions of polygamy, child marriage and the prohibition of widow marriage are directly related to the increased incidents of widow burning.¹⁰³ Two more issues are of importance. (1) The patriarchal condemnation of divorce strengthened the containment of women, sociologically and phenomenologically, under the closed boundaries of one man, as his property. Anti-divorce laws deny women's mobility and freedom. (2) The lack of consciousness or the lack of the freedom to express women's consciousness of an alternative life pattern, for them as opposition to the institution of the bourgeois family. A life pattern which allows women to enjoy their life and to experience the fullness of it without becoming an appendage to a man. At present the patriarchal institutions in India condemn as unethical any such attempts by women to seek an alternative to traditional family in order to keep women under control.

4.1. Conclusion

Over time, the justifications for widow burning moved from the question of honor to faithfulness to deification of widow. The early discourse on suttee suggested that suttee started as an escape women found to save their honor from the invaders after their husbands were killed on the battlefields. The second justification discloses the patriarchal values underlying it directly. It prescribed that women should be dependent on men - be they father, husband or son - for her very survival. She has no status, no financial security and lived only for the pleasure of her husband. Once he was dead, the widow has no right to live. Moreover this vindication counsels the women that she express her pati-bkati only by immolating herself with the dead husband.

The third justification says that suttee marks a rare event in which a woman gains the divine power 'sat'. This deification of women finds expression in the form of the numerous sati temples in India and in the miracle stories among the people.

The practice is a pathology of different forces, economic, social, religious and above all, patriarchal.

Though suttee was never a voluntary act, theologically this practice was always tied to the question of sacrifice. A women who sacrifices will be honored, or will be deified. The 'pativritha' concept of faithfulness offers women the possibility to live with her husband for thirty-five million years in heaven as the reward for such earthly sacrifice. Unggira's exegetical discourse on Shastras explains another dimension to the theology of sacrifice.

"The women who follow her husband expiates the sins of three races, her fathers line, her mother's line, and the family of him to whom she was given a virgin."

He further claimed that by the self sacrifice, a woman may redeem the highest sin her husband could commit in the Hindu world, the murder of a Brahmin, along with the redemption of sins of all her tribe.

¹⁰³ Raja Ram Mohun Roy Some controversial works, Parbury Allen & Co., London, 1832. pp.273- 276.

Thus the women who sacrifice themselves are exalted as redeemers of the whole society.

4.2.1. Sacrifice a theological euphemism for widow burning

Exploring the story of Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac, Dorothee Soelle proposes three readings of the story:¹⁰⁴(i) it reflects a sadistic understanding of God, a God who demands absurdity; (ii) based on Kierkegaard's reading of the story as a 'teleological suspension of the ethical'; it "contains a masochistic understanding of humanity...an understanding of devotion which can go all the way to the sacrifice of one's own life"; and (iii) the story is only a test of Abraham, "whether he feared and loved God above all". But the narration about the demonstration of Abraham's loyalty reflects an absurdity, an absurdity which reflects the dominant ideology of victimizing the 'other', the weak, the oppressed, women, and children for the salvation of the dominant.

Soelle's reading refrained from the critique on the manner which Abraham, the patriarch, selected to demonstrate his devotion and fear of his God. In the story, Isaac is a victim of Abraham's spirituality, Abraham's personal relationship with his God. Sara the mother of the victim is not even informed about the bloody sacrifice the patriarch was intent upon. This story not only reflects the sociological nature of a tribal society, where a hegemonic relationship existed between male-female and elder-minor, but it also exhibits the crude reality that the religious ethos of this tribal society promoted the victimization of the dominated for the personal salvation of the dominant. This nuance runs through the popular reading of the creation story as well. All creations are either for the prime of the creation, the man (Gen.2:4-25) or else human beings are created as a supreme being of all existing creations (Gen.1:1-2:3). The existence of other creations have meaning only as a catalyst to the life of the supreme.

Abraham was about to stage the sacrifice of the minor not as a way of introducing the reality of God to the victim, nor for the salvation of Sarah, nor for the tribal formations of his time. The single purpose behind the decision for the sacrifice, though bloody, was the enhancement of the power of the patriarch in his relation with his God.¹⁰⁵ It is important to make the connection that Abraham's God image¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Dorothee Soelle Suffering, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1975, pp.28-32.

¹⁰⁵ Dharmaraj Adad's study on the early formation of religion shows that the sacrifices were made in an attempt to influence the eternal, the powerful which was beyond the comprehension of the people. He showed that the early forms of witchcraft was aimed at taming the nature, the rain, thunder, fire, sun etc, the most powerful realities of the people. Budhan Muthel Marx Vare (Malayalam) Dialogue Books, Taliparambu, Kerala, 1987.

¹⁰⁶ When the tribal religion got organized they identified their God as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, starting from the God experience of Abraham who in effect defined the knowledge of God. Abraham appeared to be a turning point in the faith journey of the people, giving new meaning to their Godding. The concept of Yahweh had its nexus in the aspirations of Abraham to acquire land, and that may be the reason for the God image of Abraham becoming more crucial than that of the God of the creation. [This is not an attempt to elucidate the Feuerbachian nuance of religion as a reflection of the self-alienated 'man'. It

evolved on his journey in search of material success (the dream of appropriating the land of the Canaanites) and happiness.

4.2.2. WHY SACRIFICE OF THE 'OTHER'.

The kernel of the question to be raised is why women and children, always the dominated, should be sacrificed in the religious rites. If sins could be forgiven by human sacrifice, why do not the dominant engage in self-sacrifice?¹⁰⁷ Another cruel human sacrifice in Indian history was the murder of workers in the foundation pit of big dams and bridges because of the faith that human blood is important for the durability of such massive constructions. But history never tells about rich contractors or the engineers being sacrificed, but only poor workers. The difference between the sacrificial object and the sacrificer is always a difference of dominant-dominated.

This view raises questions to us about the reading of scripture. Unigra's exegesis compel us to jump to the conclusion that the God image of Unigra is a justification of domination.¹⁰⁸ Western scriptural exegesis by women, Afro-Americans and other people in the periphery demonstrate the possibility of new meaning through destruction of the traditional exegetical discourse vindicating domination. But in the absence of any such tools for a new hermeneutical discourse in Hinduism, what meaning can the present form of religion offer to the people, particularly to women and the untouchables?

Romila Thapar warns us about another serious onslaught on Hinduism. She says that the widely circulated scriptures, particularly the most popular Mahabharata, Ramayana, and the Shatras are later editions or interpolations) by the brahmin priesthood.¹⁰⁹ It means the utopia (ultimate ethics according to Dussel) is a production of dominants, and the utopia they commend is an agent of alienation, lest its hermeneutics.¹¹⁰ How can people's praxis move beyond the bourgeois interest reified as religious

is more in agreement with Otto Maduro's explanation of the material basis for evolving the God images of different class societies. See Religion and Social Conflicts, Orbis Books, New York, 1982.

¹⁰⁷ The rare stories of Buddhist sacrifices again are not by the religious hierarchy, but the monks in the periphery who have practically no visibility.

¹⁰⁸ The irony of Unigra's God image is that it does not even present the dualism of Abraham's God image. The God who demanded the sacrifice also prevented the boy from being victimized. The action could be seen as a demonstration of God's determination to stop the practice of human sacrifice. (Gottwald too shares this nuance in his The Hebrew Bible, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1985 p.215) But the dualism continued in the later periods when we witness scriptural sources of a God image which supports the hegemonic regimes of David and Solomon (emergence of latifundialism) along with the God image of the prophets who declares judgement against all forms of domination.

¹⁰⁹ Thapar, interview Sunday Telegraph, March 12, 1988.

¹¹⁰ Ramayana propose the utopia of 'Ramarajya', the rule of

tradition, to dream new utopias and to create a meaningful hermeneutics that enable the people to dream pleasant dreams, and strengthen them to act towards the realization of their utopias? One of the major theological ethical challenges in India is to walk with the people in their search for the production of a meaningful discourse which does justice to their religious experiences and non-alienated dreams.

4.2.3. NOT SACRIFICE BUT 'RADICAL LOVE'.

Beverly Harrison's discussion on 'radical love' as opposed to sacrifice provide a sharp critique of the sacrifice of widows in India today.¹¹¹ Pati-bhakti, which patriarchal religion demands from women, is a negation of the possibility of practicing 'mutual love' in male -female relationship. The 'radical love' could become radical consciousness to the women in India to collect the burned bodies of their sisters and mothers in the pyre and to restore life to them. It could demand that women shatter the patriarchal walls built around them by the 'masculinist reified' (p.18) religion, political, social, economic institutions and the bourgeois structured family in order to walk into a new freedom in search of the fullness of their life. Beverly Harrison speaks powerfully:

"We are not called to practice the virtue of sacrifice. We are called to express, embody, share, celebrate the gift of life, and to pass it on! We are called to reach out, to deepen relationship, or to right wrong relations-those that deny, distort, or prevent human dignity from arising."¹¹²

Suttee is a negation of this celebration of life. It is a cruel demonstration of the hegemonic patriarchal power over the life and body of women.

Rama, the ancient mythical king who represent fundamentally, feudalism, patriarchal oppression and the institutionalization of caste discriminations. Mahatma Gandhi built his political ethics on this notion of 'ramarajya'. Women and untouchables rejected his ethics largely because of his call for a return to the village which involved an idealization of the patriarchal, caste ridden traditional villages (ramarajya) whose solidarity was actually embedded in a high degree of inequality.

¹¹¹ Beverly Harrison Making the Connection, Beacon Press, Boston, 1985 p. 3-21.

¹¹² ibid. p. 19.