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Andy Skyprek
St. John Fisher College

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The Immoral Sati Ritual

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"On September 4th of 1987, Roop Kanwar died in the flames of her husband's funeralpyre. She, like other Hindu women before her, made this self sacrifice in the customary act of sati to prove her devotion to her husband, and to honor his life. Sati is a controversial topic. It is prohibited by the Indian government for its inhumanity, but there are people who find it critical to the Hindu faith."



Andy Skyprek

The Immoral Sati Ritual

Introduction

On September 4th of 1987, Roop Kanwar died in the flames of her husband's funeral pyre. She, like other Hindu women before her, made this self sacrifice in the customary act of sati to prove her devotion to her husband, and to honor his life. Sati is a controversial topic. It is prohibited by the Indian government for its inhumanity, but there are people who find it critical to the Hindu faith.

The sati ritual has its foundation in a myth. The myth describes Sati's devotion to her husband Shiva through her self-sacrifice. She committed suicide in protest against her father's refusal to invite Shiva to a sacrificial gathering. Despite religious purposes, by law Hindu women in India are no longer allowed to perform sati. The state denounces it, because the ritual is viewed as murder. The importance of sati to Hindus is for women to fulfill their womanhood, but the government has banned the ritual. Conflict exists because the Hindu religion encourages sati, yet the state prohibits it.

When observed from a critically tolerant eye, the reasoning behind sati is not all bad. Its function is to honor dead men, and to prevent widowed women from turning to condemnable actions. However, the ritual itself may not be the best way to express these intentions. A point to

consider is the background of sati. The ritual comes from a myth, which serves to convey a truth. However, the events within a myth should not always be taken literally. Therefore, because sati is self immolation, it is immoral for Hindus to support it today. There are other ways that would allow a woman to express honor and loyalty to her deceased husband.

I. Sati and Myth

The sati ritual is highly influenced by Hindu myths that observe the heroism in self immolation. The fundamental myth describes the burning of a goddess named Sati. In the book *Sati, the Blessing and the Curse: The Burning of Wives in India*, author John S. Hawley depicts different versions of this myth. In both stories, the goddess sacrifices herself when she is deeply insulted by her father's refusal to involve her husband, Shiva, in a sacrificial gathering. Sati throws herself into a fire to "display her ultimate loyalty to her husband" (*Sati, the Blessing* 30). There are two different endings to the myth. In one, Sati is reborn as the goddess Parvati, who becomes Shiva's second wife. In the other, Sati's body remains unconsumed by the flames of the fire. Shiva pulls her body out, and carries it on his back across the world to express his grief. To end Shiva's misery, "[t]he gods dismember [Sati's] body, and pieces of it fall to the earth, each forming a shrine" (*Sati, the Blessing* 31). Both versions of the myth about Sati provide key elements to the sati ritual. Women have performed sati to enjoy an eternal afterlife with their husbands, and to be honored for their faithfulness and bravery.

In addition to the tales of the goddess Sati, Hawley describes Hindu myths that involve local goddesses, known as satimatas. These myths illustrate common women who become worshipped goddesses for their self sacrificial acts of sati. One myth involves a woman named Karmavati. She and her newlywed husband, Karansainji, travel through a jungle to move to Karansainji's home village. The couple stops at a tree to rest for the day. When Karansainji falls

asleep, he is bitten and taken to heaven by a serpent that represents the Lord of Death. Hawley describes, “As fate had arranged it, Dharmaraja [Yama, the Lord of Death] himself took the form of a snake to make this couple’s love eternal” (*Sati, the Blessing* 32). Karmavati notices that her husband does not wake up that day, so she calls upon some local herdsmen. These men examine Karansainji’s body, and claim that he is dead. Karmavati then instructs the herdsmen to make a funeral pyre for her husband so she can burn in its fire with his body on her lap. The story insists that Karmavati’s self immolation gives her enough power to ignite the fire herself. Her virtue also allows her to leave behind an eternal spring to answer the prayers of the herdsmen for water.

Myths related to the sati ritual are similar, because they involve self-sacrifice of women for their husband, and unity of the couple in the afterlife. The wives in the expounded myths gave up their lives to honor their husbands, and to join them in an afterlife in the divine world. Self immolation gave these women the strength to do so. In John S. Hawley’s words, widow Karmavati “maintain[ed] her marriage even when death itself threaten[ed] to deny it” (*Sati, the Blessing* 34). In the myth, it is believed that Karmavati was reunited with her husband by performing the sati ritual. It is also stressed that Karmavati became admired by the public for her deed. People worshipped her shrine to express their thanks for the peace and prosperity provided by the spring Karmavati left behind. The sati ritual is expressed as a positive practice for several reasons. It creates an eternal bond between a wife and husband, and the performer is praised for carrying out the courageous act. Both myths show that a woman must demonstrate devotion for her husband, and only her husband. Though the stories are just myths, they have been interpreted as examples of how women can become respected by their families and their society. This is how the sati ritual became a traditional ritual among Hindu women. However, the myths do not

necessarily make sati acceptable as a ritual. There are other ways a woman can express her devotion for her husband.

II. Morality of Sati

The sati ritual is controversial, because it is a tradition that involves issues of subordination and murder. Women are expected to sacrifice their lives for their deceased husbands, because it shows devotion. They are either pressured into sati because they believe it is their duty as a woman, or they are forced to perform the ritual by others who praise it. In the article “Saving the Victim: Recuperating the Language of the Victim and Reassessing Global Feminism,” author Anne McLeer comments on the issue. She claims, “Sati is a gender-determined behavior constructed by a system (a local patriarchal religious and cultural belief system) that by definition denies agency to women” (“Saving the Victim” 50). By saying this, McLeer insists that the sati ritual was shaped by a population that subjects women, and therefore it reinforces subordination of women. We do not see men sacrificing their lives on the funeral pyres of their wives, but women are expected to endure pain and suffering for men. Wanda Teays interprets the religious act of sati as “worship of the husband as a god” in her article, “The Burning Bride: The Dowry Problem in India” (“The Burning Bride” 41). If a sati can give up her life for her husband, it is likely that she did anything for him before his death. In her eyes, it was her duty to act as a slave to him. Teays also suggests that women perform sati because it gives them power, something they don’t have in Hindu society. “For Hindus, sati, rooted in the religious and social attitudes about women’s worth, offers the woman ‘spiritual power’” (“The Burning Bride” 41). Sati allows the woman to have control over something: her death. Yet, there are Hindu people who commend satis. They value the ritual for the devotion and courage it entails. Large yagnas, or public fairs, are organized to worship satis. In 1996, one was held to

celebrate the 400th anniversary of Rani Sati (Hardgrove 725). It was expected to take place at the Rani Sati temple in India, but a group of feminists brought up the issue with the court system, “claiming that the yagna fair glorified widow immolation and was against the dignity and democratic rights of Indian women” (Hardgrove 725). Support for sati is analogous with support for female subordination, which is unethical.

Sati should not be supported, because it is violent. It can even be considered murder when a widow does not give consent to perform the ritual. A woman may result to sati because her relatives think it is the right action to take, not because she wishes to herself. She is driven upon the funeral pyre in fear that her relatives will disrespect her if she doesn't. This was often the case among satins, too. Margaret Cormack, in the book *Sacrificing the Self: Perspectives in Martyrdom and Religion*, mentions a song about a woman about to become a sati. The song conveys a rushed tone with lyrics like, “Why the delay for the forehead ornament, Satimata?,” and “Why the delay for the earrings, Satimata?” (*Sacrificing the Self* 125). The satimata is the widow about to burn with her husband's body. She is expected to prepare herself with her finest clothing and jewelry for the ceremony, but she seems to be delaying. It is apparent that she is not getting ready fast enough for the singer, which most likely represents a relative. The satimata would not be rushed to perform the sati ritual if she truly wanted to do it. Therefore, she is being pressured into the situation. Cormack explains, “A woman who dies for any reason besides loyalty to the husband is not considered a sati: her death is suicide” (*Sacrificing the Self* 126). The woman's ritual should not be praised for its valor, but disapproved for its violence. Anne McLeer illustrates the pain and anguish a widow feels during sati by describing a poster made by an anti-sati activist group. Depicted is “a woman writhing upward from the flames,” and, “There is no naturalistic insistence on the mutilation of burning, but the posture and expression of the

figure, though stylized, capture the essence of pain” (“Saving the Victim” 51). No one wants to feel the pain of burning to death. It is so torturous, it is a crime that the woman was allowed to end her life in such a manner. As expressed by Anne Hardgrove, the ritual is “barbaric” and “culturally backward” (“Sati Worship” 728). It is rejected by Hindu society today, because Hindus value life over a violent tradition that is a misinterpretation of a myth.

Conclusion

The sati ritual is an act that is immoral to perform or support in present Hindu culture. It degrades women, it is a form of murder, and it is a ritual that comes from mythology. Despite its malevolence, sati became a tradition because there are myths that reveal the importance of self-sacrifice. The myths involved with the ritual convey the idea that devotion is an important part to a relationship between a man and a woman. It keeps each partner pure. However, a myth does not justify human sacrifice as an expression of devotion. The underlying purpose of a myth is to provide a model of behavior. Devotion between partners can be displayed in many nonviolent and respectful manners. Instead of sacrificing life after a spouse’s death, one should maintain fidelity by staying away from prostitution or remarriage. In the article “Sati: A Review Article,” Werner Menski describes the Hindu concept of vivahasamaskara as “The eternal, invisible bond of human marriage which is said to transcend even the barriers of life and death” (“Sati: A Review” 79). Thus, according to Hindu belief, death cannot break a bond between married partners; the couple will be reunited eventually in the afterlife. The wife just has to “follow her husband wherever he goes” (“Sati: A Review” 79). If he is cremated, the wife should also be cremated. Though, Menski advocates widows who wait for their time for reunion and finished their lives naturally. A widow can save her husband’s ashes to mix with her own after her death and cremation. In addition to diverging from the violent aspect of sati, gender equality should

also be implemented in the devotion between two Hindu partners. The husband does not always die before the wife. If the woman is to die first, the husband should also stay pure for her, and wait to rejoin her in the afterlife. Sati is a tradition with flaws that must be changed for the benefit of Hindu culture.

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