



Abolition of the ‘Sati Pratha’; an Outcome of the Unveiling of Liberal and Feminist Ideas in India

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I. Abstract

The growth of liberal ideas has always affected social, political, economic, cultural and various other aspects of human survival. Various philosophers and thinkers have given theories on how liberalist ideas made way for the social reforms and changes that were required. The practice of Individualism promoted the ideology of every human being to be unique. Primacy of an individual began to matter. This revolutionary approach led to abolition of various social evils like the Sati Pratha, Child Marriage and Untouchability in India. Western education and spread of western ideas due to colonialization helped the spread of liberal ideas in India. The Sati ritual gets its name from the Hindu goddess Sati, who, upon her rebirth, became goddess Parvati. Sati intentionally set herself on fire as retaliation for the disdain her husband had shown her spouse, the deity Shiva. Her act of devotion was appreciated, and eventually it became the more widely recognized practice of sati. From 1800 onwards, Christian missionaries documented between 10,000 and 1,00,000 instances of sati annually. A total of 8134 widows performed sati between 1815 and 1829, according to government statistics. Over 60% of these occurrences have reports from Calcutta. Aside from India, there are also very few instances of sati in Nepal, Russia, Fiji, and Vietnam. The death of 18-year-old Roop Kanwar stunned the country and led to a revision of the rules, making her the last recorded incidence of sati in India. 32 years later, two Rajasthani villages preserve her alive in pictures and as a "devi" who would be revered as the final case related to her death makes its way through a Jaipur court. This research paper shall exclusively deal with the abolition of sati pratha as a result of growth of liberalism.

II. Research Methodology

The research methodology that has been applied for this research paper is doctrinal research. Descriptive research shall also be incorporated. A population, circumstance, or phenomena is intended

to be correctly and methodically described through descriptive study. Works from scholarly journals, extracts from articles and references from various websites shall be included as a part of the doctrinal research.

III. What was the Sati Pratha?

In the Hindu tradition of Sati Pratha, the deceased man's widow voluntarily set herself ablaze (set fire) by sitting on the funeral pyre. In the past, Sati was a voluntary practice, but some widows may have been coerced into it throughout the mediaeval era. Without a doubt, this practice was cruel and savage, but many "Hindu haters" use it as a platform to criticize Hinduism while conveniently disregarding the fact that many other civilizations, including Greek, German, Slavic, Scandinavian, Egyptian, and Chinese, also engage in it.¹

IV. The Performance of the Sati

The practice varied from region to region. The widow would dress as a newlywed bride with beautiful ornaments on her body. Then she would bid farewell to her relatives and acquaintances and distribute her jewelry among them. In some instances, it was found that the widow sat on the funeral pyre with the head of her dead husband on her lap or sometimes lying down next to the dead body. Sometimes, the woman would walk or jump into the lit pyre. Some say the widow would light the pyre herself, while some reports say others lit the pyre.²

V. What was the debate around sati?

The nineteenth century saw a number of discussions on women's status in India as part of the process of deciding on an acceptable colonial policy

¹Sati Pratha, Hinduism Facts, <https://www.hinduismfacts.org/hindu-customs-and-traditions/sati-pratha/>, Last Visited on 10th October 2023-10:00 AM.

²Supra Note 1



regarding issues like "sati," which was perceived to signify women's inferior standing in society. It was believed that changing these customs was a component of colonization's goal of regeneration. Outlawing "sati" was the topic of the earliest and most spectacular argument. The modernization theory framework has been widely incorporated into the literature of the age on "sati" and social change. The article advances an argument that the official discussion was a conflict between impatient Westerners and "preservationists".³For example, proponents of the abolition of "sati" went to great lengths to demonstrate how the practice would be consistent with maintaining tradition, as opposed to arguing that it should be illegal because it is a cruel and barbaric deed. In "The Debate on Sati in Colonial India" Mani's claim that the concepts of "tradition" and "modernity" are inscribed and re-inscribed in the bodies of women who have been colonized has permanently altered our perceptions of patriarchy, nationalism, and colonialism. Mani skillfully demonstrates how discourse analysis and situated feminism force a rewriting of history, upending the ways we are used to viewing women and men, as well as "tradition," "custom," and modernity.

Cultural, social identity, and religious prohibitions have all played a significant role in the way the women's issue has developed in India. While Raja Rammohun Roy, sometimes regarded as the first modern Indian, established the Brahmo Samaj gathered a tonne of shastric (textual) material to demonstrate that sati is not required, The Dharma Sabha, an orthodox Hindu organization was opposed to any alteration to rituals and pled the British to prevent individuals who were ignorant of their traditions and faith from speaking, arguing that "in a matter as sensitive as the interpretation of our holy texts, and the legitimacy of our religious practices".⁴

VI. The Rise of Liberalism that led to Abolition of the Sati Pratha

In the Age of Enlightenment, liberalism emerged as a separate movement and gained acceptance among Western philosophers and economists. The goals of liberalism were to replace

conventional conservatism, absolute monarchy, the divine right of monarchs, and hereditary privilege with representative democracy, the rule of law, and equality before the law. Additionally, liberals opposed mercantilist practices, royal monopolies, and other forms of trade restraint in favour of free trade and marketization. John Locke, a philosopher, is frequently credited for establishing liberalism as a unique tradition based on the social compact. Locke claimed that each man has an inherent right to life, liberty, and property, and that governments cannot infringe on this right. French liberalism has placed a strong emphasis on resisting authoritarianism and is associated with nation-building, in contrast to the British liberal tradition, which has prioritized advancing democracy.⁵ The sati went through a social test of liberty under these ideals and could not pass it, thus stood abolished.

The then-Governor-General Lord William Bentinck signed the Bengal Sati Regulation on December 4, 1829, outlawing the practice of sati in all areas under British rule. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was the social reformer, who started working for ban on sati. Raja Rammohan Roy was an outspoken opponent of Sati (sometimes spelt Suttee). He contended that neither the Vedas nor other early Hindu literature supported Sati. In his publication *Sambad Kaumudi*, he published essays arguing for its outlawry. He pressed the East India Company's management to outlaw this behaviour. By such approach of Raja Rammohan Roy, we can infer that people had began thinking rationally and they started raising questions on the customs that were blindly followed. They wanted to know the answer of the word 'why'. If they were satisfied with the answer, they did not object but if they were not satisfied with the answer received, they wanted to stop the practice of such a custom. People had began to thinking of their natural rights, the ones that they were born with. Individual autonomy, equality of opportunity, and the defence of individual rights are central tenets of liberalism, a social, political, and economic philosophy is called liberalism. We can see clear traces of liberalism in the decline and abolition of the Sati Pratha. As liberalism had already spread its branches in the west, it was easier for the British to abolish Sati in India, triggering a wave of liberal ideas in India as well. Through a number of intellectual endeavors, the liberal philosophical tradition has looked for confirmation and justification. Natural rights and

³Mani, L. (1987), Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India. *Cultural Critique*, 7, 119–156. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354153>

⁴Maitrayee Chaudhuri, *Feminism in India; The Tale and Its Telling*, <https://researchgate.com>, Last Visited on 12th October 2023-:10:00 AM.

⁵ Liberalism, *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/liberalism> Last Visited on 14th October 2023-10:00 AM.



utilitarian theory have served as the foundation for liberalism's moral and political assumptions. This showed the strong sense of raw and classical liberalism which was growing amongst the people.

VII. Opening doors to Liberal Feminism and Nationalism

Depending on the period of colonization and the characteristics of the various locations, the effects of British colonization varied. Therefore, there were times when colonial authorities were reluctant to interfere with Indian social practices, such as those pertaining to women, out of fear of retaliation, and others when they were willing to do so actively, such when sati was outlawed in 1829. The abolition of evil practices had in a way given a boost to feminism and open doors for futuristic liberal feminism. Traces of this could be seen when post sati abolition, women participated in the freedom struggle in both major years 1857's first war of independence and in 1947 (year of attaining freedom). Later, under Universal Adult Franchise, in India, women were given equal right to vote. Thus, the abolition of sati helped in starting a non-recognized conversation of women; their rights, role and status in the society.

However, a far more nuanced understanding was required to fully comprehend the political significance of the women's question in relation to the nation-building enterprise. The articulation remained vague and insufficient. Members of Nehru's Sub-Committee on 'Women In a Planned Economy' attempted to define and articulate a women's perspective on restructuring Indian society as part of his National Planning Committee (NPC), established in 1939. However, the Report was never taken into consideration in the entire history of planning in independent India. Investigations into the causes of this peculiar omission are also necessary. The Fundamental Rights Resolution of 1931 was an attempt, in the annals of Indian nationalism, to subdue the disintegrating forces posing a threat to the nationalist cause. The majority of its clauses, particularly those that condemn inequality based on the interest of creating a new national identity, the majority of its provisions—particularly those that rejected inequality based on gender, caste, and religion—represented a complete "departure from the inherited social tradition."⁶

⁶Women Indian Nationalism, CWDS, <https://www.cwds.ac.in/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/WomenandIndianNationali>

VIII. Today's Scenario

According to Karl Marx, "*Social progress can be measured by the social position of female sex*". Marx suggested that women's standing in society may be used as a gauge for the state of society overall as early as 1844 in his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, Marx saw this as more than just a cry for males to elevate women; he was by no means the first to make a declaration of this kind (Charles Fourier is sometimes cited as the source of inspiration). Marx was, instead, advancing a dialectical argument that was closely tied to his general theory of society. New social interactions that did not rest just on an imprecise, detached conception of value would be necessary for society to progress beyond its capitalist structure. People would need to learn to value one another for who they are as individuals rather than just what they can do for one another. Given that women have historically been marginalized in the majority of countries, if not all of them, they would be particularly important in this respect. Men and women would thus need to mature to the point where each person is respected for their unique qualities rather than belonging to an impersonal category such as "man," "woman," etc.

Over the years, women in India have been awarded a number of legal rights to advance gender equality and safeguard their interests. India's attempts to empower women have seen a lot of encouraging advancements in recent years. The government has put in place a number of initiatives and regulations targeted at enhancing the economic, educational, and health prospects for women. Women are now making up a larger portion of the labour market and holding prominent positions in a variety of industries, including business, politics, and entertainment. Despite that, unfair pay, assault against women, and gender discrimination are still serious problems. Infanticide and female foeticide continue to be major concerns, especially in rural regions. Given the high number of sexual harassment and assault cases that are reported annually, women's safety and security are also major concerns. Since ancient times, women have played a significant role in Indian culture and society. However, there has long been discussion and worry about the situation of women in India. Even with the recent advancements, Indian women still face several obstacles in their daily lives.⁷

sm.pdf, Last Visited on 20th October 2023-10:00 AM.

⁷Status of Women in India, Times of India, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/readersblog/law>



IX. Conclusion

Women's rights are no special rights they are a part of human rights protected by international human rights treaties and other legal instruments. These rights include the freedom from discrimination, the right to life, the right not to be tortured, the right to privacy, the right to health care, the right to decent living conditions, the right to safety, and many more. Nonetheless, there exist human rights instruments that consider the unique circumstances of women in society concerning the exercise or accessibility of their human rights, or that seek to safeguard them from violence. Many remarkable women have made significant contributions to local or global history, but not all of them have been strong supporters of women's rights. The women's movement is made up of both men and women who strive to better the lives of women as a social group and to attain gender equality. Women were often restricted to the home as mothers, wives, and daughters in most civilizations, and the only reason we know about historical women is usually because of their connections to well-known males. Undoubtedly, a significant number of women have contributed to political and cultural life throughout history, but they are mostly unseen. Several people think that feminism is unnecessary in today's world, yet this couldn't be further from the reality. Women have fought for centuries against oppression and in favour of equality. While certain victories have been achieved, such as the right to vote and equal access to education, women continue to be disproportionately impacted by discrimination and all types of violence. Equality and feminism could be promoted by allowing women the seats on buses and trains and not requiring males to stand up. They should get a seat if they are paying for it, not because of their gender, by not requesting reservations based on gender anywhere, by not assuming full responsibility for household duties on your own. Simply because you are a woman does not mean that you have to clean the dishes. Just because you are a woman does not mean that you have to feed your family on plates. It should never be forced upon you, either by yourself or by another person.⁸ Families and communities rely heavily on their women members. They are crucial to the upbringing of children because they give their

families love, support, and care. In addition, women are important contributors to community development and frequently assume leadership positions in community organizations.

pedia/status-of-women-in-india-51422/ Last Visited on 21st October 2023-10:00 AM.

⁸ She ceased to be a woman; was a goddess, Indian Express, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/she-ceased-to-be-a-woman-was-a-goddess-6016915/>, Last Visited on 22nd October 2023-10:00 AM.