

SATI PRATHA - HEAVEN IN THE HEREAFTER

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ABSTRACT

Hinduism, being the oldest religion, had many sacraments in it. *sati* also known as 'suttee', burning a woman alive with her husband's dead body, was the most influential and controversial sacrament. It was an old practice in some cultures, especially in ancient India. The term '*sati*' means the Hindu practice of widow burning or the burning of the living widow with the corpse of her husband. In Sanskrit, the word '*sati*' thus means feminine noun from '*sat*' which means goodness, virtue and truth. The concept of *sati* was tied to ideas of devotion and loyalty. People believed that a woman's life was not complete without her husband. By sacrificing herself, the widow showed her dedication to her husband and aimed for spiritual benefits for both in the afterlife. This was because many Hindu women considered fire as a sacred thing and *sati* as their duty. Their religious texts promised them an afterlife in heaven with their husband. Thus, they continued practicing *sati*, believing that fire will not harm them, and they will be with their husband's even after. It was abolished by William Bentinck, yet *Sati* continues to be a reality in parts of rural India. The socio - religious awakening or reform movements were the expression of the national awakening in India and aimed at a revision of the medieval social structure and religious outlook. In the religious sphere, there sprang up a movement which till 1885, in last half of nineteenth century, an awakening in India was seen in the time of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who bridge the gap between ancient and modern India.

KEYWORDS: *sati*, *suttee*, widow burning, William Bentinck, socio – religious reform movements, social structure, religious outlook

Introduction

The *Sati* tradition was prevalent among certain sects of the society in ancient

India, who either took the vow or deemed it a great honour to die on the funeral pyres of their husbands. Raja Ram Mohan Roy gained more popularity through the activity of abolition of *Sati*. The abolition of *Sati* is one of the most significant turning points in the social history of modern India. He started a campaign for the abolition of *sati* system' in which wife of the dead burnt herself in the funeral pyre of her husband. He also condemned polygamy and child marriage, denounced casteism, advocated the right of Hindu widows to remarry, etc. With his active persuasion Lord William Bentinck, the then Governor General of British India passed the famous Bengal Sati Regulation XVII in 1829 stated *Sati* as illegal and punishable by courts. His social reforms made him the 'first Modern Man' in India.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy was not only a great social- religious reformer but was also a great educational thinker. He was a great scholar, independent thinker and a multilingual person. He believed that education was prime necessity for the uplift of Indian Society. His efforts to protect Hinduism and Indian rights by participating in British Government earned him the title 'The Father of the Bengal Renaissance'.

Early Life

Rajaram Mohan Roy, the first great modern Indian pioneer was born on 22nd May 1772 in an orthodox Brahmin family at Radhanagar a village in the Hooghly district in Bengal. He was the son of Ramakanto Roy and Tarini Devi who were devoted Hindus of the Vaishnava sect and socially conservative in outlook.

Education

During the Muslim rule in India, the language used was Persian. Proper knowledge of Persian and Arabic was also very essential to get employment or to correspond with the government. He was afterwards sent to Patna to learn Arabic and lastly to Banaras to obtain a knowledge of Sanskrit, the sacred language of the Hindus. His teacher at Patna set him to study Arabic translations of some of the writings of Aristotle and Euclid, besides Bengali and Sanskrit, he had mastered Arabic, Persian, Hebrew, Greek and Latin. Roy's familiarity with such diverse languages exposed him to a variety of cultural, philosophical and religious experiences. His comparative study of the various scriptures led him to discover the fundamental unity of all religions in their doctrines and principles, mainly the belief in monotheistic and universal brotherhood of man.

Career

In 1803, he began to work for the East India Company in the revenue department. He learned English under the guidance of Digby and read the works of contemporary European writers on politics, history, law and economics. In 1809, he was transferred to Rangpur as Dewan to the Collector of the district. After completed his studies, Ram Mohan Roy worked with the East India Company at various places in Bengal, before settling in Calcutta.

Eradicating Superstitious Beliefs

Raja Ram Mohan Roy lived in a period when child marriage and *sati* was highly practiced among the people in the society. Wives were burnt along with the dead husbands whether they were willing or not. Girls were married off when they were five or six years old. Ram Mohan was sick and tired of these practices. Though he had high regard for Hindu religion, but he felt that Hindus had yet to know about the religion correctly. He preached for equality among men and women and said people should also give up superstitious beliefs.

Efforts to Abolish Sati

In 1811, Roy witnessed his brother's widow being burned alive on her husband's funeral pyre. Three years later he retired and concentrated on complaining against the practice of woman dying as *sati*. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was the first Indian to protest against this custom. He advocated that this was completely against the women's right to live in the society as a human being. In 1818, Roy wrote his first essay on *sati*, in which he argued that the woman had an existence independent of her husband and hence, she had no reason to end her life on the demise of her husband. The society had no right over her life. Right to life of both men and women was equally important. He used his journal '*Sambad Kaumudi*', which began to appear from December 1821, 'as a regular weapon in this agitation'. In 1822, he published his 'Brief Remarks Regarding Modern Encroachments on the Ancient Rights of Females'. According to the 'Hindoo Law of Inheritance', wherein he noted: 'It is not from religious prejudices and early impressions only, that Hindoo widows burn themselves on the piles of their deceased husbands but also from their witnessing the distress in which the widows of the same rank in life are involved, and the insults and slights to which they are daily subjected, that they become in a great measure regardless of their existence after the death of their husbands; and this indifference, accompanied with the hope of a future reward held out to them, leads them to the

horrible act of suicide.’ It seems that Lord Hasting’s government recognized the importance of Ram Mohan’s campaign. By the year 1828, the company’s government also came to hold digenite opinions for the abolition of the *sati* rite.

Lord William Bentinck

The cruel custom of burning the widows had, the sanction of antiquity and the approbation of the Hindu people. The alien rulers did not venture to touch it lest thereby, they incurred the displeasure of the Hindus and stood the chance of losing their revenue and empire. The custom could have been stopped if the Nizamat Adalat had given rulings on the lines indicated by Rammohan Roy.

Lord William Bentinck was Governor of Madras from 1803 – 1807, but he was removed from his office on account of his failure to suppress the Mutiny at Vellore. He came back to India as the Governor-General in 1828. He was a conscientious man and felt it, his duty to promote the welfare of the Indians. On his arrival in India, he undertook an enquiry into the practice of *Sati* and on the basis of the information received he resolved to put a stop to the cruel system with an iron hand. He consulted many eminent persons including the Marquis of Hastings. Lord William Bentinck ascertained the views of the officers regarding the attitude of the troops.

Bengal Sati Regulation Act of 1829

The Bengal Sati Regulation, or Regulation XVII, A.D. 1829 of the Bengal Code was a legal act promulgated in British India under East India Company rule, by the then Governor-General Lord William Bentinck. The Act made the practice of *Sati* or *Sutteeor* the immolation of a Hindu widow on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband - illegal in all jurisdictions of British India and subject to legal prosecution.

The ban was the first major social reform legislation enacted by the British in India. It led to legislation against other old Hindu practices in the Indo-Aryan-speaking regions of India that limited the rights of women, especially those related to the inheritance of property. The Regulation was repealed and superseded by the Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987 when attempts to revive the custom in the 1980s brought further legislative focus on the practice.

In 1803, William Carey, a British missionary working in Bengal, set about collecting statistics on the number of women who burned to death in *Sati* rites, in order to urge the administration to stop the gruesome practice. According to his estimates, 438 widows had burned to death within a radius of thirty miles around

Calcutta in the span of a year. Lord Wellesley referred the matter to the Supreme Court in 1805.

February of that year, JR. Elphinstone, the Collector of Gaya, stopped a twelve year old widow from mounting the pile. In another incident, a girl named Ghoorna was being taken in a palanquin to the cremation ground for immolation when the Magistrate of Benares forbade her to proceed with the rite. The girl returned home. In the wake of an attempted immolation by another twelve year old widow, which the Magistrate of Bihar stopped, a letter was addressed to the Nizamat Adalat. As a result, the members of the council suggested that *Sati* burnings be banned by law.

These pressures on the Government to abolish *Sati* by law as the years passed. In the meantime, Rammohan Roy, a wealthy Brahmin intellectual of Bengal, who had been deeply shocked by the immolation of his brother's wife which he is said to have tried to launch a crusade against widow burning and published two pamphlets, one in Bengali and the other in English, pleading for the abolition of *Sati*. The first of these two tracts appeared in 1818 and was titled 'Conference between an advocate for and an opponent of the practice of burning widows alive'. The second tract followed two years later, Roy argued that *Sati* caused innocent blood to be spilt was a blot on Hindu society. Man of liberal leanings, Roy had founded newspapers and schools and wrote in Persian, Bengali and English condemning practices like caste discrimination and blind adherence to rituals. He later founded the Brahmo Samaj which sought to propagate a non-sectarian concept of religion. It stood for the freedom of the widow to remarry and equal rights of man and women. In 1830, he became one of the first Indian to travel to England, where he died three years later.

At the time of the publication of his two pamphlets on *Sati*, on an average one widow was being burnt to death every day in Calcutta alone. It is said that in subsequent years, Roy often went to the cremation grounds to try and stop widows from perishing on the pyre.

Successful Campaign of Abolition of Sati

Roy was famous for his long and successful campaign for the abolition of *Sati*, self-immolation of widows on the funeral pyre of their husbands. He wrote articles to show that the sacred books of Hindus did not sanction *Sati* and appealed to the reason, humanity and compassion of the people. The rite of *Sati* was the most furious social evil in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The *Sati* practice was prevalent in

the Hindu society from a long time past. From ancient time it is known to have been in vogue.

Rajaram Mohan Roy opposed this heinous practice. A case had occurred in his own family when the widow of his elder brother Jagmohan Roy committed *Sati* in 1811. Rajaram Mohan Roy published many books in Bengali and also translated into English against the practice of *Sati*. In 1818, his first tract was published and in 1819 the second one in Bengali and also translated it in 1820.

Pioneer of Modern Indian Renaissance

Raja Ram Mohan Roy was the first great modern reformer is popularly known as the ‘Maker of Modern India’. He was given the title ‘Raja’ by the then Mughal Emperor Akbar II of India in 1831. He stood firmly against all sort of social bigotry conservatism and superstitions. Among his efforts, the abolition of the brutal and inhuman Sati Pratha was the most prominent.

First Great Leader of Modern India

Rabindranath Tagore has rightly remarked Ram Mohan was the only person in his time, in the whole world of man, to realize completely the significance of the modern age. He knew that the ideal of human civilization does not lie in the isolation of independence, but in the brotherhood of inter dependence of individuals as well as nations in all spheres of thought and activity. He supported the cause of liberty, democracy and nationalism and opposed injustice, oppression and tyranny in every form.

As a Social Reformer

Roy rejected the barriers of caste divisions and stood forth as the high priest of universalism and love. The best example of his lifelong crusade against social evils was the historic agitation he organized against the inhuman custom of women becoming *Sati*. When the orthodox Hindus petitioned to parliament to withhold its approval of Bentinck’s action of banning the rite of *Sati*, he organized the counter petition of enlightened Hindus favour of Bentinck’s action. To raise the status of women he demanded that they should be given the right of inheritance and property. One of his greatest achievements is the uplift of the position of women in India. First of all, he tried to give women, proper education in order to give them better social status in society. His effort on the abolition of *Sati* made him immortal as a social reformer.

Untimely Death

After a point of time, he fell ill and became bedridden. There were some who respected and loved him actually took care of him. Doctors with great reputation treated him, but his health did not improve. Rajaram Mohan Roy on 19th September suddenly fell ill with meningitis. He passed away on 27th September 1883 and buried at the Arnos Vale Cemetery in Bristol itself, with a tombstone whose inscription notes his scholarship and mastery of language.

‘HIS UNWEARIED LABOURS TO PROMOTE THE SOCIAL, MORAL AND PHYSICAL CONDITION OF THE PEOPLE OF INDIA. HIS EARNEST ENDEAVOURS TO SUPPRESS IDOLATRY AND THE RITE OF SATI AND HIS CONSTANT ZEALOUS ADVOCACY OF WHATEVER TENDED TO ADVANCE THE GLORY OF GOD AND THE WELFARE OF MAN, LIVE IN THE GRATEFUL REMEMBRANCE OF HIS COUNTRYMEN’.

Conclusion

The practice of *sati*, or of burning or burying alive the widows of Hindus, is revolting to the feelings of human nature, is hereby declared illegal and punishable by the criminal courts. The Prohibition of Sati Act 1829, marked a significant turning point in India’s social and cultural history and was a crucial step towards the empowerment of women. The abolition of *sati* was instrumental in raising awareness about women’s rights and the need to challenge traditional social and cultural practices that were harmful to women. The Prohibition of the Sati Act remains an essential legislative landmark in India’s history, and its impact is still felt today. The government should try and bring a social transformation to save the lives of innocent females. Social awakening is much needed now more than ever. We need to teach and enlighten people and make them aware of what is right and what is wrong regardless of what religion says.

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