

# Deadly Laws and Zealous Reformers

## The Conflicting Interpretations and Politics of Sati

○ Madhu Kishwar

**I**N large parts of the world people are busy making preparations to celebrate the end of the second millennium and the beginning of the third. This millennium has not been a particularly happy one for India. Throughout the past thousand years, this subcontinent witnessed a series of invasions with certain regions experiencing repeated plunder and political subjugation by rule of the conquerors. In some instances, however, instead of returning to their homelands after collecting enough loot, the invaders settled down in India giving impetus to a new cultural mix and thereby creating a need for building bridges of communication between the conflicting groups. But nothing disrupted and damaged this country as much as British colonisation, which lasted nearly two centuries.

Unlike earlier conquerors, the British didn't just stop at pillage and appropriation of wealth. They attempted to destroy almost all indigenous institutions, knowledge, notion of ethics, and most importantly, the sense of self-worth among the people of South Asia. The modern education system they imposed on us created an elite trained to look at their own society through colonial eyes, and to treat their own people as colonial subjects — especially if they happen to be poor and uneducated.



Our erstwhile colonial rulers who needed the pretense of being on a civilising mission here to justify their brutal reign had a vested interest in identifying select criminal acts and projecting them as Indian traditions in need of reform. They began this cultural invasion by deliberately targeting a few cases of young widows in Bengal who were forcibly

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burnt on their husband's pyres, calling those murders sati and banning it by law, so they could appear as agents of a superior civilisation rescuing victims from a savage culture. They even called their mission the White Man's Burden! Thereafter, the supposedly miserable plight of a newly invented creature called the Indian women became emblematic of the inferior civilisation and culture of the Indian people.

There is absolutely no evidence that any of our vast array of religious texts sanctified such murders as sati. The word "sati" derives from the word "sat" which means "truth." So sati means a woman who is true — not a woman who spontaneously combusts. In this context, it is noteworthy that none of the mythological heroines revered as mahasatis — Sati (Shiva's wife), Draupadi, Mandodari, Tara, Ahalya and Sita — burned on their husband's pyre. Though some references to women committing voluntary self-immolation along with their dead husbands can be found in the Mahabharata and Puranas, the practice never received much sanctity or popularity. It is only in 19th century British discourse that forced immolation of women on the husband's pyre came to be regarded as "sati."

It is understandable that the British should resort to such

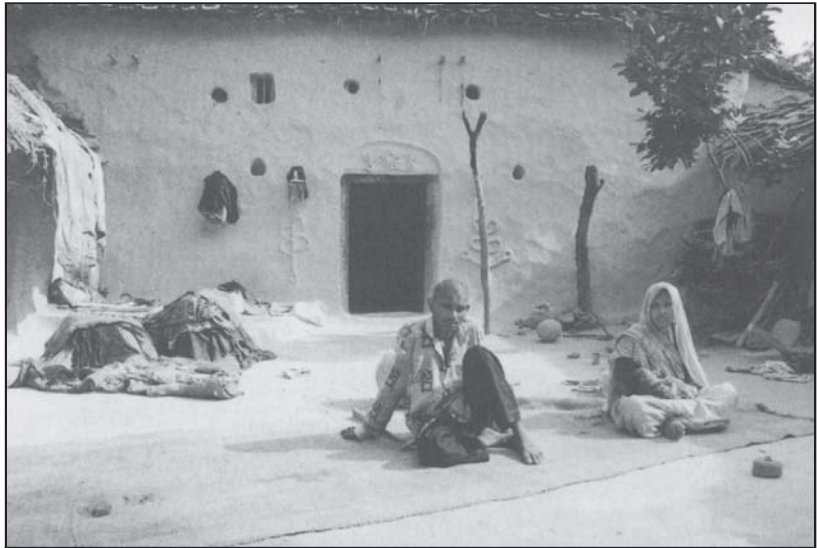
distortion and defamation as part of the imperial game of convincing Indians that they were “uncivilised” and hence unfit for self governance. When reformers in post-Independence India operate with the same colonial mindset while dealing with the customs of their own people, it only goes to prove that the brown sahibs of India have learnt to treat the people of this country with the same contempt as did our colonial masters.

The recent debate on sati, following Charan Shah’s self-immolation on November 11, 1999 in Satpura village located in Uttar Pradesh’s Mahoba district illustrates this attitude very well.

### Mis-Informed Verdict

Without as much as conducting a preliminary investigation into the circumstances under which the immolation took place, several activists passed a verdict solely on the basis of some sensational and misleading media reports that Charan Shah’s in-laws and other relatives are guilty of abetting her suicide.\* They, along with some powerful voices in the media, demanded that the family along with other villagers should be arrested and charged under the Sati Prevention Act. This was even before they checked to find out if her in-laws were indeed alive and/or living in that village. As it turned out, Charan Shah lived with her grown-up son and was surrounded by her own natal family

\* *Investigative reports by women’s organisations came several days later. All India Democratic Women’s Association released its reports on November 16, 1999 followed by another one by National Commission for Women. Since AIDWA’s findings went contrary to the demand for stringent action by several women activists, yet another multi-organisation team went and made their own enquiry. Two of these reports are published on pp 16 to 18 and 19 to 24. As is evident, there are substantial differences in their “factual narration” as also in their interpretation of events.*



**Charan Shah’s son Shishupal and his wife in their courtyard**

at the time of her husband’s death. Some had decided in advance that there must have been a property angle to it, without finding out whether this poor Dalit family had any land worth its name.

Among others, Charan Shah’s own sister, brother and son have repeatedly stated that they had no idea she was contemplating such an act. She quietly walked out of the house and rushed to the burning pyre while other women attended to post-cremation ceremonies and the men had left for the ritual bath. By the time people realised what had happened, Charan Shah was already in flames. Despite such repeated clarifications, some zealots are still insisting that the draconian provisions of the Sati Prevention Act must be invoked against the people of Satpura. Thanks

to this concerted pressure, the police felt compelled to save their skin by arresting Charan Shah’s son and maternal uncle. These two were kept in police custody for two days and pressured into stating that Charan Shah was mentally deranged.

One section of reformers is also demanding that all those who witnessed the event ought to be arrested and punished sternly. In addition, they demand action against all those who interpret her immolation as a case of sati, under the Sati Prevention Act. It is shocking that several responsible and respected people and even some human rights organisations should respond in such a high handed manner to the death of 55 year old Charan Shah.

### Forced into Stereotypes

No one actually knows whether Charan Shah killed herself on the spur of the moment, or if it was a premeditated act. One thing is certain: there was no ceremony, no ritual preparation, no ideological statement made before she flung herself on the pyre. Yet, it is assumed that Charan Shah acted out of an obscurantist belief that her life as a widow was

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**...it is assumed that Charan Shah acted out of an obscurantist belief that her life as a widow was useless... Why is she considered incapable of other motives or sentiments?**

## Calling for Repeal of Anti-Sati Law

The Sati Prevention Act of 1987 was added to the statute book under pressure from women's organisations and other progressive activists, following Roop Kanwar's sati in Deorala village. Even at that time, MANUSHI had protested against this ill-conceived and draconian piece of legislation (see issue 42-43). Unfortunately our voice went unheeded by obsessed reformers who campaigned for a stringent law to deal with sati. Recently, when the debate was revived following Charan Shah's immolation, we were surprised to find that not many people who vigorously demand its implementation are aware of its actual provisions - which are not only draconian but also just plain stupid.

To begin with, the Act states that if any person commits sati, all those accused of abetting sati, directly or indirectly, "shall be punishable

with death, or imprisonment for life and shall also be liable to a fine." Those accused of abetting any *attempt* to commit sati "shall be punishable with imprisonment for life and also be liable to fine." A woman accused of attempting sati is also liable to a prison term of up to six months plus a fine - the same as for attempted suicide.

How does the Act define "abetment"? Apart from inducing or encouraging a widow, "directly or indirectly," to commit sati, abetment includes "being present at the place where sati is committed as an active participant to such commission or to any ceremony connected with it." In addition, whoever performs any act for the 'glorification' of sati is also punishable with a fine and jail term not less than one year, but extendable to seven years.

Most important of all, when the state accuses any person of "abetting" sati, the burden of proving that he/she has not committed the offence shall be on the accused. That is, you are assumed guilty until you can prove, to the court's satisfaction, that you are innocent.

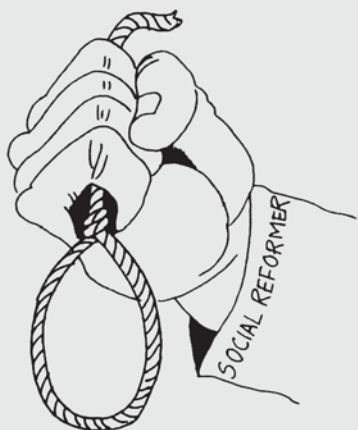
What would this mean in actual practice? That the police can arrest, as it did in Deorala, any number of people in an area where a woman, either voluntarily or through family pressure, ends up immolating herself. They can all be accused of "abetting" sati by having witnessed the act. Those accused will have to corroborate they were nowhere at the scene of crime. It is not enough for them to establish that they did not encourage the woman to die along with her husband. The accused have to convince the authorities that they tried to actively prevent her from committing suicide in order to certify innocence.

Here, it is necessary to point out that no such onus falls on those who may perchance witness a murder. They are not expected to offer proof of their innocence by demonstrating they tried to save the murdered person. Thus, the anti-sati law is very similar to anti-terrorist laws like TADA, where the burden of proof also rests with the accused. It is noteworthy that numerous civil liberties groups all over the country worked hard to have TADA repealed, dubbing it a "Black Act" because its draconian provisions allow for gross misuse. Many innocents have been implicated under TADA, and consequently are kept rotting in jail without trial. If a person is falsely charged by the police, it is as difficult for him/her to prove that he/she did not "actively" assist in disruptive or terrorist activities, as it is to prove that he/she was not present at an immolation site or that he/she did not "actively participate" in the event. Granting the state agencies the right to execute any number of people who are accused of "witnessing" one woman's immolation and thereby being declared guilty of abetting sati can by no stretch of imagination be called an exercise in dispensing justice, or an exemplary instance of judicious law making.

It is absurd to have a law which threatens to punish people with a death sentence, if they admit to having witnessed the voluntary or coerced immolation of a woman, because their presence at the site makes them guilty of having participated in sati. Would anyone in their right mind want to give evidence in court in such a case? Does the law not force people into lying out of sheer self-defence? Is a death sentence the appropriate response to such an event?

Given the ways of our police, it can well be imagined how opportunities for abuse are built into the anti-sati law, which gives the authorities arbitrary powers to arrest and implicate anyone they choose to target?

ANOOP KAMATH



This is exactly what happened in Deorala. Is it any surprise, then, that all the witnesses turned “hostile,” that is, denied having any knowledge of circumstances under which Roop Kanwar died? Consequently, all of the accused were acquitted by the lower courts and even today we don’t know whether Roop Kanwar killed herself voluntarily, or if she was forced into the act. For a change, the police have not shown much interest in arresting all and sundry in the Charan Shah matter, as they did previously in Deorala. One reason could be that there are some exceptionally decent officials overseeing this case. But a more likely (or at least additional) reason could be that seeing the community’s abject poverty, they don’t see any possibility of being able to extort money by arresting and harassing the villagers of Satpura and neighbouring regions. Deorala, by contrast, has many well off families because a large number of men from the village are in government jobs, notably the police.

Yet leading civil rights activists and other reformers want to see such a vicious law invoked on the villagers of Satpura. It is worth noting that these organisations have earlier valiantly fought for the democratic rights of even known terrorists because their treatment under TADA violated the whole idea of due process and fair trial. But when it comes to poor illiterate villagers of India, our fervour for social engineering makes us overlook the illegal and undemocratic nature of the enactments meant for the apparent reform of those we have unilaterally and presumptuously dubbed “backward.”

All those who have campaigned for the right to a fair trial of those accused of terrorism have not cared to raise similar objections against the inherently abusive provisions of the Sati Prevention Act. The fear of being “politically incorrect” has silenced the most courageous human rights campaigners, allowing extremely punitive provisions to receive enshrinement as pro-women laws in our statute books.

It is time to regain courage and demand the repeal, or at least improvement, of such a patently anti-people law. MANUSHI intends to do exactly that and invites others interested to join us.

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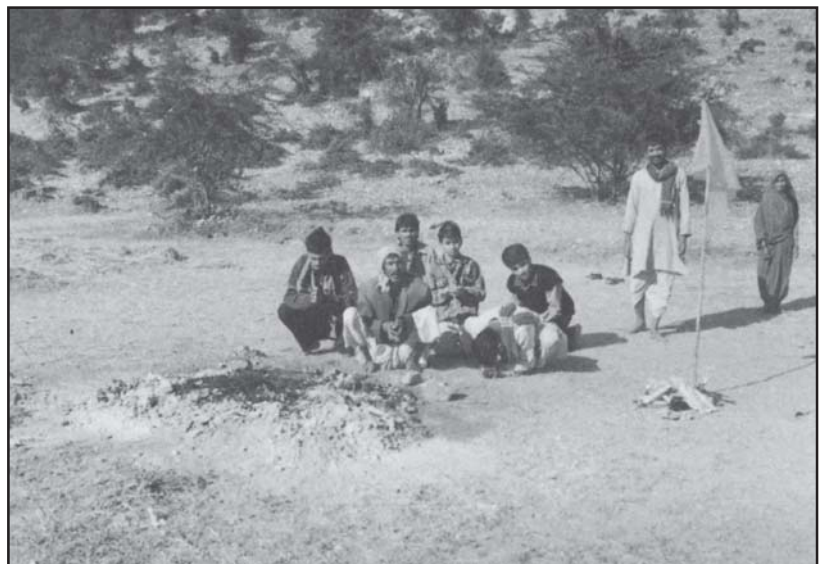
useless and that she would gain religious merit by following her husband in death.

Why is she considered incapable of other motives or sentiments? Could she not have acted out of love? After all, by all accounts, she nursed her husband for thirty long years with total dedication. Maybe, they had a tender loving relationship. Some villagers were reported to have remarked: “She has been a sati for 30 years. This was only the culminating act.” Or maybe she became so worn out from her life of poverty that she thought there would be no purpose in living on any further. Could it be that she killed herself in a mood of quiet rage and protest, because her son reportedly turned down her request for carrying Man Shah’s dead body in a decorated *doli*, and cremating him with ceremonial *band-baaja*? Could it be that Charan Shah felt hurt at this refusal and burnt herself on her husband’s pyre - as though to say “I save you the expense of my funeral as well?”

I am not suggesting that my speculations are correct. This is only to point out that no one really knows what transpired in Charan Shah’s mind, what motivated her to take her own life in such a painful way. Yet, the social reformers both in the media

and in some NGO’s have chosen to dub her act “medieval madness,” a symptom of her cultural backwardness. Why? Because she was a poor, illiterate, rural Indian woman who is only permitted to live

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**Pictures such as this one showing a handful of villagers, or members of Charan Shah’s family at the cremation site were used by the media to float stories that thousands were flocking to the *sati-sthal***

PHOTO: INDIA TODAY

## Only Approved Modes of Worship Allowed!

It has been a long-standing demand of feminist reformers that ancient sati temples must be declared illegal and shut down because they glorify the sati cult, thus beckoning women to follow suit.

Firstly, for all the so-called glorification of sati in certain regions, we have not witnessed anything resembling a sati epidemic. For all the sati temples in Rajasthan, not many women offer themselves for immolation, including those who might bow in reverence before a sati shrine. After Roop Kanwar's immolation in 1987, there have been no more than three cases of attempted self-immolations by widows in India. Each of these was easily averted by timely intervention. Even before the anti-sati act was passed, a very small number of women killed themselves on their husband's pyres within the last several decades.

Trying to close sati temples by force has the potential of setting into motion a very dangerous dynamic. Taking an authoritarian route to social reform is mostly counterproductive. Today, one group demands the closure of sati temples because they violate the values of one community. Tomorrow, another group might demand the closure of all Kali temples because they might see her worship as idealising vengeful aspects of femininity. Some others might want Krishna temples declared illegal because he was a known philanderer and polygamist. Still others might want Ram temples banned because he subjected his wife to a cruel *agnipariksha*. Then there will be some group of "rationalists" who might want all Churches closed down because Jesus Christ claimed to be the son of God without offering any "scientific" evidence for the same. There is indeed no end to this game of any self-declared group of social reformers seeking to discipline others into "approved" behaviour and making them worship only certain "approved" deities.

One of the great strengths of our civilisation is that people are free to choose their own gods, their own modes of worship. New icons are constantly invented without need for sanction from any hierarchical authority. Each village has its own preferred pantheon of gods and goddesses, with varied sets of qualities for which they are deified. For instance, Ram is valued because he was supposedly perfection incarnate. Likewise, Krishna is revered despite the fact that he deceived and played tricks on everyone – including his mother,

lovers, wives, friends and enemies as part of an elaborate *leela*. There are goddesses like Parvati who are approached as benign mothers, symbols of happy conjugality and wifely devotion. However, that does not come in the way of the same people celebrating Radha's 'illicit,' extramarital love for Krishna. In Mahoba itself, a Radha Krishna temple coexists with a sati mandir in the same complex (*photo on page 30*). Then, there are ferocious Chandi - Durga type of goddesses who strike fear in the hearts of devotees because any man who tried taming or desecrating them invited death in the most brutal manner.

Even Mahoba region has very recently created such an icon. To quote Smeeta Mishra Pandey: "...It was in March last year that I had visited Mahoba chasing yet another tale: The story of Ram Shree, the villagewoman who along with her brother and father killed her relatives. Shree was the first woman to have been given a death sentence after Independence... It was no different last year [in Shree's Tingra gaon in Mahoba district]. Villagers then spent their evening narrating tales about Ram Shree. They

often debated whether Ram Shree did the right thing. Shree had apparently killed her relatives because they had tortured her and beaten her up mercilessly. Women wondered... why the court had anything to do with happenings in their village. In no time, Ram Shree become a living legend. When the Supreme Court swapped her death sentence for life imprisonment, taking pity on her one-and-half-year-old daughter, the villagers believed the Goddess had come to her rescue." (*The Indian Express*, November 16, 1999)

The coexistence of Ram Shree legends along with Charan Shah's shows that the culture of this region allows for diverse ideals and icons to be celebrated simultaneously. The some people who worship Sita or Charan Shah as symbols of wifely devotion are also capable of valorising Durga like behaviour by ordinary village women.

Moreover, there is no sharp divide between divine and human in the Hindu tradition. On the one hand, gods



Courtesy: Encyclopaedia of Indian Iconography

come to earth in varied human *avatars* to share the trials and tribulations of ordinary human beings. On the other, human beings can easily achieve divine status by living extraordinary lives and displaying inspiring qualities. Numerous village gods and goddesses in India are creations of this latter process. What is best, deification is not confined to the human form of creation. We sanctify various living and non-living beings - cows, trees, elephants, snakes, mice, monkeys and even rivers, stones, mountains, earth, sun, moon and winds. At the same time in some states like Tamil Nadu there are temples where popular film stars are enshrined as deities.

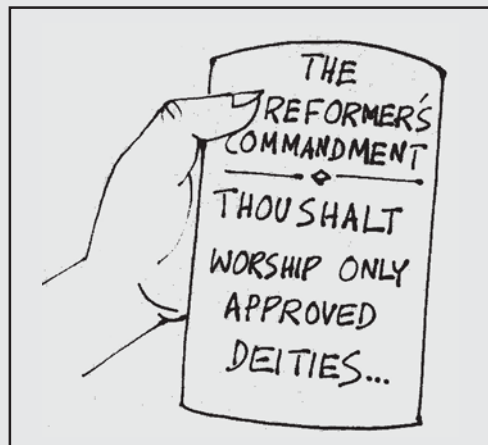
Those who have tried to cure us of polytheism and become subservient to the dictates of monotheistic faiths have inflicted a great deal of violence on our people throughout this millennium. Let us not become willing agents for carrying that legacy forward.

As long as sati shrines coexist with Durga and Yogini temples, as long as Parvati is not forced to repress her *Kali roop*, as long as none of our gods dare claim perfection and demand the banishment of others, we will continue to value tolerance, dissent, diversity, respect for different ways of doing and living - to have regard for the diverse species that inhabit this earth and life forces that coexist in this universe. As long as our people feel free and empowered to choose their own gods and goddesses, they will respect the choices of others as well.

Those who wish to arrogate to themselves the right to subject other people's modes of worship to an arbitrarily determined qualifying criteria - no matter how well intended - can easily veer towards Stalinist forms of repression or trigger off counterdemands for more censorship. If I demand a ban on sati worship through coercive means, others can very well demand a ban on *MANUSHI* because it advocates easy and stigma-free divorce. To safeguard my own freedom, I have to respect that of others.

However, as emphasised earlier, the call for state intervention is valid when there is evidence of force being used to make someone adopt a pernicious tradition, or when violence is committed in the name of religion and social custom. Invoking laws to deal with crime is perfectly legitimate, but using the *danda* of the police, and threatening imprisonment to force a change in cultural values, inevitably leads to backlash.

Real reform lies in creating viable options which are easily accessible and help women move out of dependence. We have to have faith that the vast majority of people tend to act in self-affirming ways when circumstances don't constrict their choices. But nihilistic acts come easily to defeated people whose life is a long, arduous struggle without hope.



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up to the stereotypes the so-called culturally advanced people have of her.

### **An Attack on the Defenceless**

There is something macabre about the fact that the torchbearers of modern civilisation who wish to cure Satpura villagers of their "cultural backwardness," "superstitious beliefs" and "obscurantism" are paying little attention to the fact that people of this region live in abject poverty. Situated in a chronically drought afflicted, neglected region of Uttar Pradesh, this particular village is located 7-8 kilom-

eters away from the main road, accessible only through a dirt track. Satpura lacks even a primary health centre. One located in a nearby village exists only in name and does not provide even minimal services as is the case with most PHCs in north India.

Charan Shah's own family has a small plot of unirrigated land which does not provide year round subsistence for them. Therefore, they work as labourers on other people's fields as well. Even land-owning families in this drought stricken region are pathetically poor. Thus, wage rates are also abysmally low. The

family is so poor that they could not afford medical treatment for either Charan Shah's tuberculosis - infected husband, or her elder son, who died earlier from the same disease. People succumbing in the prime of their lives to a curable disease like TB speaks volumes about the failure of our health care system.

What is the wonderful gesture of concern our reformers have to offer to all these people living such impoverished lives? Vigorous demands that the police should be sent to arrest them and criminal cases should be instituted for "murdering" Charan Shah, or at least, "abetting"



**Entrance to Sati Mohalla in Mahoba where a school, a Radha Krishna temple and a sati mandir exist in the same complex**

her suicide, since they did not or could not prevent her death. Thus, they are to be taught their mandatory lessons in modern cultural values through the agency of our notoriously corrupt and tyrannical police.

Despite the fact that no one has been able to provide any evidence of coercion in this case, Charan Shah's family and community are still considered liable for action because they effectively did nothing to prevent her from killing herself. The facts, as given in several reports, suggest otherwise. A shepherd boy did raise an alarm as soon he saw her moving towards the pyre. Women did come running after her as soon as they realised she had left for the cremation ground. Men who had left to bathe also rushed to the scene upon hearing this. But they all say she was already burning by then. At this point they are held guilty for failing to pull her out of the fire. I find this expectation unreasonable. Firstly, pulling someone out of a raging pyre amounts to running the risk of getting burnt yourself — the kind of courage even those recommending such action for Satpura villagers are not likely to have.

More important, who in their sane mind would want to pull out a half burnt person in a village which lacks treatment facilities even for ordinary diseases, leave alone for life-threatening injuries? If this family could not access T.B. treatment, could they possibly handle a case of severe burns without proper medical help? Charan Shah would have died a far more painful and slower death. Do we have to insist on interventions that make things worse for the victims?

### Conflicting Versions

Much is being made of the supposedly conflicting versions coming from villagers now. In the article, *Countering Earlier Reports: Charan Shah's Immolation* (see page 17) the versions of some neighbouring villagers in Imaliya is

**Satpura villagers are to be taught their mandatory lessons in modern cultural values through the agency of our notoriously corrupt and tyrannical police.**

counterpoised against those of Satpura's inhabitants to build a case that the latter's story cannot be trusted even with regard to the timing of Man Shah's death. By turning the village into a police camp and starting an aggressive campaign against a whole community through the national and international press to label them criminals, aren't we creating conditions for them to protect themselves by doctoring their story according to police requirements? However, even in these circumstances, the Satpura villagers have by and large given one consistent story. Narratives of nearby villagers are bound to vary with ones from Satpura, because those people are likely to depend on hearsay, rather than first-hand eyewitness accounts. Charan Shah's son's plea says it all: "I will call it whatever you want me to. If you want to call it a suicide then so be it. Equally, if you say it was a sati, then I will follow suit."

In this context, it is noteworthy that Satpura does not seem to have a very repressive code for widows. Several reports have told us that when Charan Shah's eldest son died, his widow was remarried to the younger brother, with whom she has raised a family. If a young widow in that family was not treated as an inauspicious pariah or forced to immolate herself, it is far-fetched to believe that Charan Shah's sons would have pushed their 55 year old mother to commit such an extreme act — especially when she was an earner, an authority figure and an effective head of the family, rather than a hapless dependent.

Moreover, as the AIDWA report points out, members of this family are followers of a progressive sect, the Charan Data Panth. Charan Shah's son let it be known in all the interviews

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## Commercialising Sati

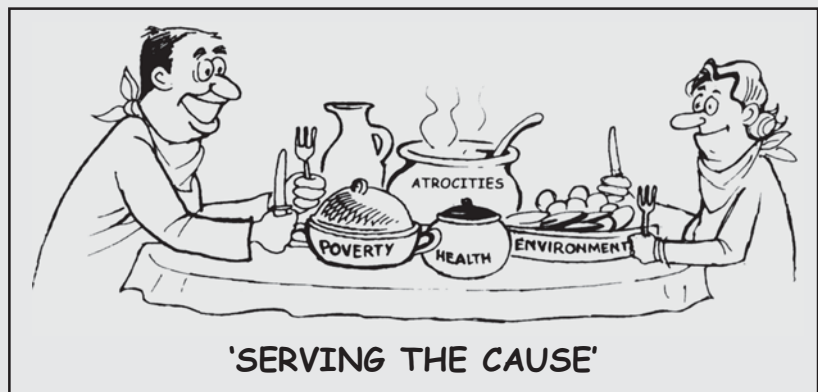
An additional concern voiced by our reformers is that the villagers of Satpura have started propagating a mystique about Charan Shah “in order to translate the alleged sati into a money spinning enterprise.” It has also been said that villagers are keen on converting that immolation site into a pilgrimage spot, since they expect many visitors after the interest generated by the event. This in turn may lead to some increased income for to the community.

First, most of this is in the realm of speculation. Both the NCW and AIDWA reports have emphasised that media reports about “devotees” thronging at the cremation site are highly exaggerated and irresponsible. Pressmen took photographs of a couple of family members of Charan Shah performing the usual post funeral rituals to build a case that they were promoting a sati cult.

Even if it were true that by romanticising the death of one Charan Shah, this horribly neglected and poverty stricken village hopes to receive a little cash flow, I find it a more understandable venture than other more modern and socially approved forms of commercialisation. Today, thanks to generous grants available from international aid organisations, a whole slew of educated, “enlightened” people are making a living from writing about atrocities on Indian women, organising seminars on the theme, and filming the subject. There won’t be any dearth of people likely to want to make documentaries on the Satpura sati; any number of research grants will be proposed to discuss the misery and cultural backwardness of this region where a few sati temples already exist. Myriad careers will be enhanced as people suddenly become experts on the culture of sati. Even those who would never subject themselves to the inconvenience of making a trip to Satpura village and spending a couple of days there, will organise glamorous conferences in foreign universities, write glamorous treatises on the subject, construct and deconstruct Charan Shah’s life until it becomes unrecognisable to even her own children. These will be important additions to various C.Vs, but there is not a faint chance that even one rupee from all the thousands of dollars or lakhs of rupees thus earned would reach those miserable creatures whose lives we castigate and pontificate upon.

What if Satpura villagers were to demand the enactment of a law which stipulates that anyone making money by writing about or filming a sati case should be declared a criminal? How about a law which lays down that getting hefty grants to produce “research” for foreign universities and international aid agencies will invite life imprisonment? Or those making films on the real or imagined miseries of Indian women will be subjected to punitive fines if they make any money for it?

Today, these activities documenting the event fetch far more money, name and fame than running a sati temple in India. Those who disapprove of commercialising Roop Kanwar or Charan Shah’s sati cults by people of their respective communities, ought to be willing to have similar curbs put on the commercialisation of social concern, whereby a whole tribe of people have made hi-fi, jet-set careers out of peddling the poverty and misery of Indian women in the international arena - of making a lucrative profession of defaming and condemning people with whom they have no relationship. More often than not, these commentators do not even embrace the ethical responsibility which calls for accuracy in their facts and credibility in their interpretations. Information is disseminated to the world on BBC, CNN, and ABC - not to those people whose lives are to be critiqued and presumably reformed. If a money-making scheme in the name of various Charan Shahs and Roop Kanwars is a condemnable practice when done by their own communities, how does it become a respectable moral intervention when taken up by total strangers?





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that among their community, they did not encourage practices such as sati. Had the family any intention of building a sati cult and temple around her, they would not have chosen the common cremation ground of the village for the last rites because according to traditional beliefs a temple cannot be built on such a site. They would have chosen a special spot as happened in the Roop Kanwar's case. But once Charan Shah committed the act, it was not within their control to stop others from treating it with awe and reverence. Dramatic acts of self-sacrifice in any society evoke such sentiments.

Even after it was grudgingly acknowledged after more careful investigations that Charan Shah was not impelled to burn at her husband's pyre, many social justice advocates are convinced that the Sati Prevention Act must be invoked against the people of Mahoba region. They are upset at "the local people who refuse to regard the incident as a crime." Their reasoning: irrespective of whether she died voluntarily or whether she was pressured into the act, the very fact of her deification by villagers, and evidence indicating the existence of a whole sati cult centering her, consolidates and propagates injurious traditions against women. The reformers insist that anyone from a neighbouring village who comes to pay respects at Charan Shah's cremation site should also be arrested and tried for the crime of glorifying sati.

### **Zeal without Compassion**

The truth is, despite a highly draconian law, that provides for the death penalty for anyone accused of participating in sati, and life-imprisonment for anyone glorifying sati, several million people in this country refuse to be "modernised"

into believing that voluntary self immolation is a crime. Just as most people don't believe that suicide is a crime though many modern states in the world (even India) have declared it to be so. The question is, how do we wish to deal with people who hold different values? How many millions do we want to imprison for life and put to death for subscribing to cultural norms which somehow do not meet the approval of "modernists" like us?

I personally abhor the practice of sati and would do everything in my power to persuade or prevent a woman from killing herself in such a gruesome fashion. Similarly, I abhor killings in the name of national wars and do all I can to build opinion against warmongering. However, I would not suggest "ruthless action" against those who refuse to heed me.

Responsible societies lay down certain limits of conduct even during war, such as the principle of not attacking unarmed populations. The fervour of self-appointed reformers knows no limits. They are not bothered with mundane details like confirming if even one family in that entire village has the means and money to secure bail, or to hire lawyers for fighting the prolonged litigation that would follow such a case. In all likelihood, the accused would rot in jail till death do them

**...what is it about her death that bothers us? ...that she chose a politically incorrect form of death? Would Charan Shah's death evoke similar outrage, had she popped a few dozen sleeping pills along with a few pegs of liquor in Marilyn Monroe style...**

release from the benevolent concern of our social activists. The Charan Shah episode only underscores how reforming zeal without respect for facts, empathic understanding and compassion can easily degenerate into Khomeinivaad.

Why doesn't anyone demand the arrest and conviction of health ministry officials of the UP government for criminal negligence and dereliction of duty, since they failed to provide a decent health centre in Satpura? Or that public works department officials face trial and also to link this village by road, for failing to provide basic public transport in five decades of independence - so that it would have been easier for Charan Shah to take her spouse to a city hospital? If both her eldest son and her husband did not have easily avoidable premature deaths, she may not have felt the need to end her own life in such a way.

### **An Unfashionable Death**

Let's face the question squarely: what is it about her death that bothers us? That she did not want to outlive her husband? Or that she chose a politically incorrect form of death? Is it conceivable that Charan Shah's death would have evoked similar outrage, had she popped a few dozen sleeping pills along with a few pegs of liquor in Marilyn Monroe style, and let it be known through a poetic suicide note that she was ending her life because she felt jilted by a lover? Then she might have qualified as a subject for many a bestseller, as well as Hollywood romance. Monroe continues to be one of the most celebrated icons of femininity in the western world. But Charan Shah was foolish enough to be born poor in a country which is the favourite object of contempt and flagellation for 20th century modernists, and so she becomes a

symbol of Indian primitivism. Would we be as outraged if, out of grief, she stopped eating and slowly starved herself to death?

The sad truth is that the educated elite expresses horror mostly about those things which the West looks down upon. People who cremate their dead instead of giving them a decent Christian burial are already somewhat uncivilised in the eyes of many westerners. Therefore, a Charan Shah who jumps onto her husband's pyre instead of swallowing sleeping pills becomes ten times more uncivilised. When women demean themselves in ways currently approved by the West, nobody is particularly upset.

There is some validity in the argument that by idealising such sacrificial acts, women are conditioned into believing that their lives are essentially worthless after their husband's death. But is it fair that people whose value system meets our disapproval, or whose deities we don't judge worthy of respect, should be treated as criminals simply because we have the privilege and power to implement any kind of legislation against them? Do the reformers give others similar rights to impose restrictions on their practices, values and objects of worship?

Some others taking a more benign approach argue that the poor villagers of Satpura take to extolling sati because they have been denied the benefits of modern, liberal education. Hence they retain 'primitive' cultural practices. Reformers are convinced it is "a lethal combination of superstition and prejudice that accounts for the veneration elicited by Charan Shah." They tell us that "apart from stern official measures, it will take years of educational effort with a pronounced bias in favour of the



cultivation of a rational and scientific temper," and "a genuine campaign for the empowerment of women through a sustained liberal education" to combat the culture which valorises anti-women traditions like sati.

### Icons of "Modern" Times

However, the beneficiaries of liberal and rational education often worship and deify far more harmful varieties of icons on a much grander scale - and that too proudly - without granting others the right to protest or condemnation.

A good example of a lavish glorification cult constructed around a negative role model is that of Princess Diana, a woman who led a very self-destructive existence. She began her public life by willingly offering a virginity test to prove herself worthy of marrying a known philanderer - all because he belonged to a rich and royal family. Despite that, she failed to win either his respect or love. Diana herself admitted to constant humiliation and neglect by her husband while he had a merry time with his mistress. Yet, she desperately kept trying to be sexually attractive for him. In the process, she developed severe eating disorders, starved herself until she became a mental, emotional and physical wreck - all so

that she could stay fashionably trim and beautiful for her uncaring prince. She spent a good part of her life shopping, buying designer clothes and jewellery in order to mesmerise people with her glamour and charm. When all those tactics failed with her princy, she got into a series of exploitative clandestine relationships - including one with her riding instructor, who literally auctioned their love story for millions of pounds. Finally, she died a perfectly unheroic death with yet another clandestine lover.

Ms. Diana had everything going for her - a rich family, good, modern, 'liberal' education, beauty, health, social status, and powerful connections. Yet, what a sorry mess she made of her life. She lent a bit of glamour to a few good causes by occasional forays into social work, but the bulk of her energy seems to have been channelled into looking pretty, engaging in unsatisfactory romantic alliances, and copying with the resultant emotional melodramas.

Not just the royalty-stricken Brits, but millions all over Europe, America, Australia and other parts of the world have remained star struck, obsessively following the shenanigans of this foolish woman. When Diana died, thousands of people - all beneficiaries of modern, liberal education - queued up to offer tributes to her. Even today they buy tickets to have a *darshan* of her grave, which is crowded with mounds of flowers, trinkets, love epistles and much more. Dresses worn by her are auctioned at astronomical prices. A whole industry has emerged around the myth and legend of Lady Diana. Even the saintly Mother Teresa's demise was overshadowed by the mass mourning and hysteria evoked by Diana's filmy death.

Now, many of us do find this whole drama and glorification not

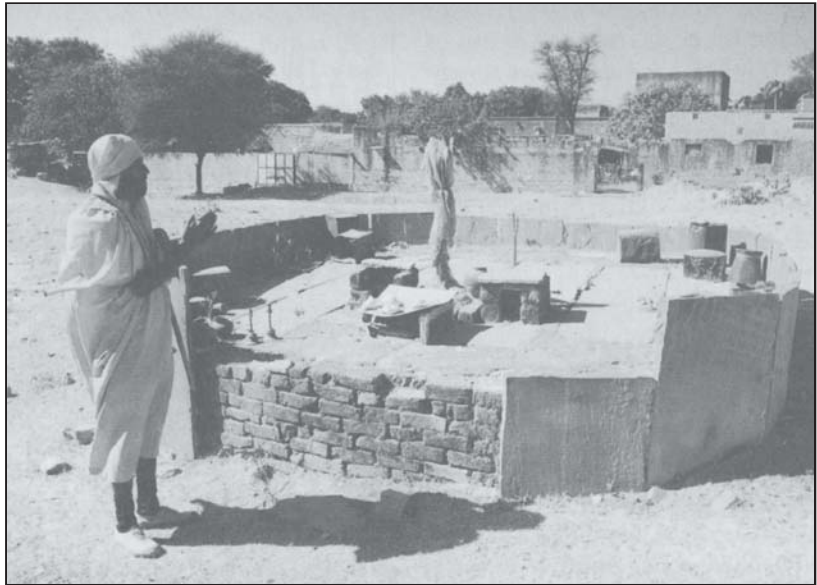
just silly but also damaging. Diana's life holds up a very negative role model for women. It teaches women to be self-pitying, hungry and desperate for male attention, and to give in to feelings of worthlessness if men don't respond as desired. Yet would I have the right to propose that the crowds thronging Diana's grave should be declared criminals, lathi charged by police (as was done at Charan Shah's immolation site), arrested on charges of idealising this woman, and then sentenced to life imprisonment or death?

Since I don't believe in authoritarian, statist measures for reforming or curing people out of their mental kinks or personal values, I wouldn't actually suggest death sentences or prison terms for the crazies who went into mass madness over Diana. But I would certainly want to recommend psychiatric treatment for all such people, including some in our country who stayed glued to television for days on end, wallowing in Diana's tragic saga, and those who wasted huge amounts of newspaper space to give us detailed glimpses of that fairly flimsy life.

Needless to say, we wouldn't be allowed the right to rectify the worldviews of Diana devotees. But the rest of the world thinks it has the right to 'educate', to 'civilise', to 'modernise' those who consider Charan Shah praiseworthy.

### Secular Icons More Sacred?

Some "rationalists" might well argue that the exaltation of Diana or Marilyn Monroe is secular whereas Charan Shah has become a religious icon. There are serious flaws in this line of argument. Are we concerned about potentially harmful icons and role models or about whether they come with religious or secular



**Roop Kanwar immolation site in Deorala**

connotations? Why should only religious icons be banned and why not secular ones as well? What is so sacred about the secular domain?

All this however is not in support of a culture that encourages women to devalue their own being and adjudge their own worth only as *suhagins*. There is an urgent need to actively combat all those received notions which condition women to act in destructive ways. To do that effectively we need to learn to distinguish between crime and culture. For example, if honest and judicious investigations reveal that Charan had been goaded into killing herself, then the act can be legitimately classified as murder - in which case the Indian Penal Code

can be justifiably invoked. Even calling it "sati murder" as some reformers have done is absurd because two words are mutually contradictory. Even supporters of sati cults would be able to make common cause in preventing such acts because according to the logic of their own value system, they cannot possibly apotheosise a murdered woman as a sati. However, if Charan Shah's devotion to her spouse and unwillingness to live without him leads to a whole heroic cult emerging around her, this falls in the realm of culture, not crime.

In such situations, there is need for not only a dialogue, for understanding the mainsprings of such ideologies, but also for channelling the idealism that sustains them into more creative expressions. We have to approach people as caring insiders rather than as attacking outsiders if we want their cooperation in building a new, life-affirming culture of respect for women. By refusing to draw a distinction between coerced immolation and a voluntary act of Charan Shah's, we are needlessly lending respectability to criminal acts of violence against women. □

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