

Sati: Historical Perspective and the Modern Form of Sati (Dowry Death)

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Abstract

In any society women occupy a most significant and vulnerable place. In Hindu society, during Rig Veda, the wife occupied an equal status with the husband but after that position of women declined. Sati practice, prohibition of widow remarriages, female illiteracy, malnutrition, female foeticide, etc have become the fate of Indian women.

Earlier women were burnt in the name of sati. Scriptural agreement was given for sati. In the attire of loyalty towards the deceased husband and gaining heaven for him, she committed sati either by her choice or burnt forcefully. Sati practice and Johar were evident in history but after sati prohibition by laws, a new form of burning of brides is taking place in recent times. Thousands of brides are burnt due to dowry. The customary nature of dowry has changed to a means of extortion. The purpose of the article is to bring out the exploitation of women in the name of customary practice at two different times. Johar and sati brought prestige to the woman who was burnt but in case of dowry death, a bride was burnt many times in the flames of domestic violence before she was finally and forcefully ablaze in fire, leaving her parents and relatives in eternal agony. Sati was result of deep sense of loyalty towards the husband, but dowry death is result of intense disloyalty of the husband toward his wife. Every minute one bride is burnt for the dowry.

Nearly two dozen of laws have been made by the government for the protection and safety of women, but efforts are needed on the part of the whole society, media, literature, and civil societies to come forward to mitigate all sorts of problems regarding women and change the gender stereotype ideology. Female education, their economic empowerment, strict implementation of laws regarding them, political motivation and more than that creation of a feeling of self-esteem in a girl's mind can bring remedy to the problem.

Keywords

Sati, Dowry, Dowry Death, Domestic Violence, Women Empowerment.

Reference to this paper
should be made as
follows:

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Perspective and the
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*RJPSS 2018, Vol. 43,
No. 2, pp. 122-129
Article No. 16*

Online available at:
[http://anubooks.com/
?page_id=442](http://anubooks.com/?page_id=442)

Introduction

In Hindu society, women occupy the most significant and vulnerable place. At one time during *Rig Veda*, the wife occupied an equal status with her husband. But in the post-Vedic period, the status of women declined. The literature pertaining to the *Brahmana period* witnesses a brutal spirit towards the female sex. *Maitreya Samhita* regards women as Nirriti i.e. evil personified.

Traditionally and historically, the norms of society have been somewhat partial towards women in Hindu society. Many restrictions regarding female literacy, nutrition, occupation, widow remarriage, and choice of mate selection were imposed on them. They were treated as puppets without rights. Whether it is a Hindu, Muslim or any other society, is predominantly ruled by orthodoxy. If we look at the orthodox discourse, we come across scriptural sanctions and prohibition. The practice of sati and prohibition of widow remarriage is the result of such scriptural sanction.

The word 'sati' comes from the Sanskrit word '*asti*', meaning "she is true/pure"¹. Sati or suttee is an obsolete Hindu and Nepalese practice of burning a widow. It is a funeral custom where a widow immolates herself on her husband's pyre or commits suicide in another fashion shortly after her husband's death.² The term 'sati' was originally interpreted as "chaste woman." Sati appears in Hindi and Sanskrit texts, where it is synonymous with "good wife".³ The practice is associated with Hindu tradition. The name is taken from the 'Goddess Sati', the wife of Shiva, who burned herself to protest her father's ill-treatment of her husband.

The Practice of sati finds its root in the sacramental Hindu marriage system. Marriage is essential for every Hindu for the fulfillment of dharma and repayment of social and parental debt with the wife. *Purushartha* i.e. Dharm, Karm, Arth and Moksha can be attained only after entering Grihastrashram. *P.V. Kane* said, "Marriage is the most important of all samskaras. Throughout the ages for which literary tradition is available, Indian marriage has been highly thought off."⁴ Similarly, *K.M. Kapadia* in his book '*Marriage and Family in India, 1958*' said that Hindu marriage is a sacrament and marriage is the only sacrament for a girl. To him fulfillment of the dharma is the aim of Hindu marriage rather than begetting a son and sexual pleasure. 'There was little idea of individual interest in the Hindu marriage. Marriage was considered to be a social duty towards the family and the community.'⁵ *Mahabharata* clearly indicates that an unmarried girl cannot enter heaven despite of all religious practices. For Hindus, marriage relations are indissoluble. It is a relationship of seven births. As a result, widow remarriage was prohibited. Generally males were permitted to remarry but not the female. The idea of Kanyadan strengthens this prohibition. As

anything can be donated at only one time, the same concept applies in the case of a girl. She cannot be donated twice by her father.

Manu said that a woman can retain her purity only when she remains faithful to her husband even after his death. To him a woman who loves her husband whether he treats her well or ill..... attains high status. A husband, even when he is wicked or lustful, is the highest God to the virtuous wife. The wife was not only attached to him as long as he lived but even after his death, because a sati could never conceive of a second husband. Naturally, then on the death of the husband the wife had either to live chastely, renouncing all the joys of life or to follow her husband by immolating herself with his body on the pyre. *Vishnumriti* mentions celibacy and immolation as the two courses open to a widow.⁶ The ideal of pativratiya gave rise to and glorified the practice of sati or immolation. So, the practice of sati i.e. burning of a widow on the same pyre with her deceased husband enforced this idea.

The reasons why this practice could have come into being are many. But the principle among them could be identified in the same milieu which gave birth to dowry. Even a casual observer will notice that immolation is more prevalent among the higher martial castes. Among the lower castes and aboriginal tribes it is nearly absent.⁷

Among the higher castes, a bride was looked upon as a burden as she represented a drain on the family's income while not contributing anything towards it. If this was her status as a bride, it is not surprising that if she had the misfortune to become a widow her presence in the family was dreaded. Apart from being considered an object of ill omen, her presence after her husband's demise was a dead weight to her in-laws family. A widow's status as an unwanted burden was also a result of the taboos that prevented a widow from participating in the household work as her touch, her voice and her very appearance were considered unholy, and impure. Thus, without her husband a woman's existence was not tolerated. *Manusmriti* says "A woman is undeserving of independence."⁸ Beliefs that a widow especially a young one would fall into immoral practices for sensual pleasures were also used to stoke the fires of sati. Widowers were never an underprivileged lot.

Another factor that attached to sati was the 'halo of honor'. In the medieval period, sati was given the status of an act of honor. In Rajputana, there was practice of 'Jauhar' i.e. collective suicide after a battle in which male members had suffered death at the enemy's hands. The most famous among them was Jauhar by *Rani Padmini of Chittor*, when faced by the prospect of dishonor at the hands of the sultan of Delhi.

In the medieval period, the position of women was insecure due to the arbitrary power structure associated with the feudal society and rules by invaders in Delhi. In this context, it is also to be mentioned that the grief and remorse experienced by a widowed lady, explained the readiness of some women to commit sati.

Scriptural agreement for sati was that the woman wanted to commit sati in order to get heaven for her husband for 3 million years. Seven generations of ancestors would also immediately be freed from all sins and they too will gain heaven. *Vatsyayan* condemned widow marriage and has written that the man who cohabits with a widow does so with a prostitute. In the 10th and 11th centuries widow remarriage was prohibited among Hindus. Only two ways for widows either to live a widow throughout the life or to become sati. Widow remarriage was strictly prohibited among upper-caste women. Lower-caste women possessed some mobility in this regard.

The practice of sati was abolished by the law 'Sati Prohibition Act., 1829' with the initiative of *Raja Ram Mohan Roy* in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Indeed, Rajasthan has been the focal point for this practice. India has witnessed a strong social reaction in the form of organized agitation in the late 1980s against sati following the burning of the young educated *Roop Kanwar* on the funeral pyre of her husband in Deorala, Rajasthan. In response to the public demand the parliament passed the Commission of *Sati Prevention Act, 1987*.⁹ The Act also makes glorification of the practice of sati an offense and goes a long way in refuting the myth that sati is a manifestation of the glory of Hindu woman (*Govt. of India, 1988:137-138*)

Between 1943 and 1987, some 30 women in Rajasthan immolated themselves on their husbands' pyres. This figure probably falls short of the actual number.¹⁰ In Rajasthan, the sudden outbreak of widow sacrifice recorded in the region since the 1950s ought not to be viewed as the revival of an ancient custom but rather as the deliberate adoption of a nontraditional ritual, by Rajputs and Marwaris, to further their caste interest in a variety of ways. Such is the analysis by *Sudesh Vaid* and *Kumkum Sangari* have put forward in their long article.¹¹ Thus, sati practice was scripturally imposed, surfaces deep sense of loyalty towards husband. Widows were burnt either by choice or societal choice.

But modern Hindu society is neutralizing the sacramental base of the marriage system and is suffering from hunger for dowry which is resulting in dowry death. Dowry death is emerging as another form of Sati in modern times. A dowry is considered a gift given by the parents and the relative of the bride to her. During the Epic age, dowry was recognized as a woman's property. Now the custom of dowry has undergone a great change.

Dowry atrocities range from physical and mental torture of brides in various forms for being insufficiently dowered. It is a barbaric traditional system that violates with impunity of the human rights of women. This tradition is anti-women, typically patriarchal. A dowry phenomenon enhances knowledge about understanding of kinship system, saving, expenditure and the economic behavior of the people and the role of the emulation of the higher castes by the lower in the spread of dowry.

Many are the causes for the spread of the dowry system. Hypergamy is one of them. It is a custom of marrying a man from a superior grade or clan. *Mackim Marriot*, who studied in the 1950s in a village near Aligarh in UP, states that the family to which a girl is given becomes respected and that from which a girl is taken, becomes low.¹² In the South India, the modern dowry is really a new development. Traditionally, weddings were much less asymmetrical in the South, but nowadays there is complete asymmetry among the dowry-paying castes.

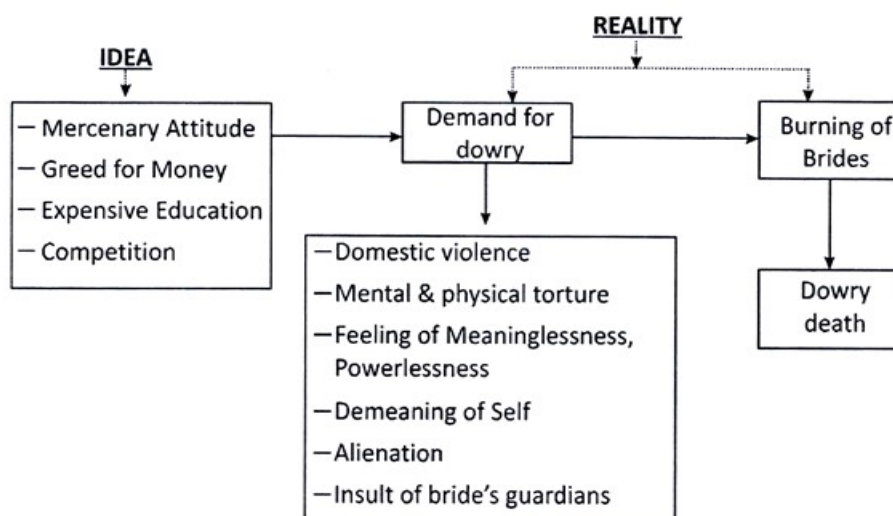
That is, dowry has introduced a new status in the South and to that extent it has become more like the North.¹³ The so-called eight forms of marriage among the Hindus are also potential sources of further information about the value attached to dowry transactions. In *Brahma Vivah*, which is the considered to be the best form of marriage, the bride herself is the sole consideration. It was done for the continuity of mankind, signified in the sacramental tie. Marriages like *Dev*, *Arsha*, *Prajapatya* and *Asura* signify the taking of gifts at time of the wedding from one or other side of marriage party. Besides this pressure of the caste system, false notions of social status, expensive education, and career competition, the process of Sanskritization has enhanced the phenomena of dowry. '*M.N. Srinivas* considers the change from bride price to dowry in the lower caste to be the result of emulation of the higher castes by the lower castes. Such emulation is facilitated by the latter's increased access to education and jobs in the organized sector and growing erosion of the moral authority of the dominant castes.'¹⁴

Dowry is also linked with the inheritance rights of women. A daughter clings to her dowry because that is all she is likely to see of her parental inheritance. "It is significant that historically, any attempt to ensure women's inheritance rights has been violently opposed by women's fathers and brothers."¹⁵

Vicious circle of dowry has many negative sociological implications. Dowry leads to the indebtedness of the bride's parents, ill-assorted marriages, family conflicts, female foeticide and infanticide, unequal marriages, child marriages, lowering of the status of women, dowry deaths and many psychological problems like irritation, frustration, repression, sense of insecurity, pessimism, loss of self-confidence, suicides, etc. *Veena Talwar* says that dowry and hypergamy are leading to female infanticide.¹⁶

But this mercenary ideology in the present era is fatal and has an ill effect on the psychological, physical and mental state of the bride. Dowry demands are made and numerous tortures are made on the bride and even on her family. Such tortures even lead to the burning of brides, the highest form of inhuman activity. Starting from her marriage till dowry death, a bride has to pass domestic violence, the state of a meaninglessness and powerlessness, and physical and mental torture. Applying *Hegel's* thought that idea begets reality, it can be traced that how materialistic ideology surfaces the reality i.e. demand for dowry and dowry death which is pathetic and lethal.

Model: 1.1 Dowry and Associated Effects



If we compare it with sati practice, widows might have had the choice to be burnt with their deceased husband but in case of dowry death a bride was burnt in the flames of domestic violence before she was finally ablaze in fire, leaving her parents and relatives in eternal agony. It is the result of deep sense of disloyalty of a husband towards the wife while sati is the result of deep sense of loyalty of a wife towards the husband.

A total of 24,771 dowry deaths were reported in the country in 2012-14, with a maximum of them occurring in UP with 7,048 deaths.¹⁷ As many as 22 women are killed for dowry in India every day.¹⁸ The dowry system, which is termed as 'Marriage by purchase' by Gandhi, was considered heartless by him.¹⁹ It is pathetic that even

after dozens of laws enacted for women's protection, such a heinous crime is still taking place. The custom of giving dowry to daughters as a gift has become a means of extortion and exploitation.

Many laws like the Dowry Prohibition Act, of 1961, Sati Prohibition Act of 1987, Divorce Act of 1969, Right to Succession Act of 1955, Child Marriage Restraint Act, of 2005, Marriage Law (Amendment) Bill, 2010 and various programs for single and abandoned women, the widow, girls and woman are run by the government. But efforts are needed on the part of whole society, media, literature, and civil societies to come forward to mitigate all sorts of problems regarding women and to change the gender stereotype ideology. Cases of domestic violence, harassment, and dowry violence must be reported without hitch. Executive powers must be given to woman-related institutions like the National Commission for Women; the provision of easy divorce must be there. The newer generation must adopt the ideology of aversion towards dowry. *M.N. Srinivas* pointed out that the passing of the Dowry Prohibition Act, of 1961 had no desirable effect. Only a powerful social movement among educated youth could have any impact on this great evil.²⁰

Female literacy, their economic empowerment, strict implementation of laws, political motivation and generation of the feeling of self-esteem among girls mind can bring remedy to the problem. Problems like dowry, dowry death, declining sex ratio, female foeticide and female illiteracy would stop only when people start celebrating the birth of a girl child. It is written in *Taittiriya Samhita* -

“O Agni (fire), I will observe the vow of following my husband. Do thou enable me to accomplish it.....to gain the heavenly mansion I enter into thee - inspire me with courage and take me to my lord.....”²¹

So, it can be concluded that whether it is the ‘Agni’ of sati or the flames of dowry burning, it burns the identity of a woman's self.

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