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### The Immolation of Sampati Kuer: Hindutva and the Defining of Volition and Agency in Sati

Sati, the “self”-immolation of a Hindu widow on her husband’s funeral pyre, though now obsolete, has been a widely contested practice since pre-colonial times. While the Indian Sati Prevention Act defines sati as the act itself, in Sanskrit sati is literally “faithful wife,” and is derived from the name of the goddess Sati, who, angered by her father, immolated her mortal body as she assumed her divine form (Kinsley 130). Though the goddess Sati’s death is later avenged by her living husband, the proponents of sati projected this and similar narratives of divine femininity onto real women, constructing a spiritual ideology around sati that contradicts the realities of its inherent violence and dehumanization. In direct opposition to this position, British colonialists and writers often portrayed sati as a symbol of Indian female oppression in the Western consciousness, although, even at its height, it was a rare occurrence within the communities where it was practiced (Mani 2). During late and post-colonial times, sati had been used by British colonialists, Indian colonial resisters, Hindu nationalists, and Indian women’s rights activists as evidence in various larger discourses about social reform and political self-determination. While sati is often considered within the context of religion and the contestation of “colonial and counter colonial discourses,” (Mani 1), its gendered causes are widely overlooked; sati was also a method by which the rules of female existence in patriarchal Hindu society were consolidated.

The sati of Sampati Kuer, which occurred in 1927, and the resulting media, social, and judiciary uproar around her death is especially revealing as to how sati is supported, opposed, and legislated without fully considering the colonial and patriarchal factors that contributed to it. The modern discourse around sati often confines the debate about the agency of the woman to whether or not she was forced to ascend the funeral pyre; this method of looking at sati erases not only the woman's subjective agency, but also the nature of her volition, and whether it is shaped by social mandates and cultural expectations. The reportage on this sati by the British Chief Justice and the Indian newspapers *Amrita Bazar Patrika* and *Searchlight*, reflect how sati was used by opposing groups to either defend a nationalist Hindu identity or justify a colonial presence (Major "Burning" 241), by preserving their own rigid expectations of womanhood and female agency. By defining volition as a rigid concept, projecting religious ideologies, and ignoring the subjective agency of the concerned women, the proponents of sati were able to craft narratives that satisfied nationalistic and patriarchal interests.

### **The Barh Sati of 1927**

The events surrounding the death of Sampati Kuer, is part of a narrative fraught with the conflicting details and motives of those involved; a basic sequence of the events can be put together from contents of the official police report, court judgement, and newspaper responses. A critical aspect of this sati is that it occurred years after the practice had been outlawed in 1829; while Indian and British opinions on sati were "internally differentiated", "forced" sati was generally proscribed (Mani 4; Major, "Burning" 232). While it is debated how far ahead this sati had been planned, according to the police report, on the eve of 21 November 1927, after the death of her husband, eighteen-year-old Sampati began the journey from the village of Barh to a cremation ground on the banks of the Ganges River (Chief Secretary H.K. Briscoe; cited in

Major “Anthology” 203). She and the rest of the small funeral party, which consisted of her and her husband’s relatives and acquaintances, were confronted by local police sub-inspectors, who had been informed of Sampati’s intentions of sati (Ibid.). The police and the funeral party came to the agreement that Sampati would return to her village, while the rest of the group would proceed towards the cremation ground; but once the police had left, Sampati and the funeral party continued towards their destination (Ibid.). By the time they reached the funeral site, large crowds had gathered, vocally encouraging the sati and physically resisting the preventive actions of the police who had also assembled there (Chief Justice Courtney Terrell; cited in Major “Anthology” 210). According to various reports, Sampati mounted the funeral pyre and waited for it catch fire; proponents of her sati claimed that she was waiting for the pyre to spontaneously ignite, a sign that her death would be a “true sati” (Ibid.). The police, either afraid to engage the crowds or unable to persuade Sampati to stop, decided to cordon off the pyre to prevent anyone from lighting the fire; they did not physically force Sampati to leave. Despite the cordon, Sampati’s sari caught fire, setting the rest of the pyre ablaze, apparently without outside intervention. Soon after, she jumped, fell, or was pushed by the crowds into the nearby river, when she was supposedly encouraged by those on the river bank to allow herself to drown, and “complete” the sati (Ibid.). With some help from police, she swam to the shore and lay on the bank under a tree, unable to move after the extensive burns she had sustained. Not only were the police prevented from providing medical treatment, but a second (unused) pyre was also constructed (Ibid.). She lay on the bank of the Ganges for two days, before the Sub-Divisional Officer was able to send in armed troops to remove her to the hospital of a nearby jail. She died on November 25<sup>th</sup>, four days after she had left home.

## **Hindutva and Gendered Visions of Morality and Nation**

While the exact origins of sati are contested by both scholars and ideologues, its existence well into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century is rooted in evolving ideas of patriarchy, nationalism, and Indian womanhood in the national imagination. In this imagination, as Sikata Banerjee argues, Indian women exist only in forms of “suffering mother as expressed by Mother India, or the vulnerable virgin signified by nationalist icons...or the warrior goddess embodied by...the Indian Durga” (Banerjee 273). It can be seen from the narratives that surround satis, like that of Sampati Kuer, that these women are often characterized as combinations of the above three tropes; they are as selfless and sacrificing as the “mother”, as morally pure as the “virgin”, and as fearless as the “warrior goddess.” In the article published in newspaper *Searchlight* after Sampati’s death, the construction of ideal womanhood in relation to these tropes is evident. Her sati is defended as the “acme of moral perfection” and as an expression of an “irresistible impulse of devotion” (*Searchlight*; cited in Major “Anthology” 220). To bolster the authenticity of these claims, the article quotes “the great Mahammadan poet Faizi,” who sang “There is none so brave in love as a Hindu woman” (Ibid.). While devotion, bravery, and love are almost universally valued, here it is represented as blind devotion to a deceased husband, bravery in face of self-immolation, and a symbolic love that necessitates an actual death. This posthumous glorification of women like Sampati is rooted in rigid and limited definitions of the roles Indian women can and should occupy; there is no symbolic space for the widow to exist within these definitions, except as a sati. *Searchlight* goes on to describe Sampati’s sati as “but a step or a means in realization of an ideal” (*Searchlight*; cited in Major “Anthology” 220). This assertion by *Searchlight* parallels Andrea Major’s argument that sati symbolized “a cathartic consummation of Hindu female/spiritual ideals” (Major “Burning” 232). The accounts of the

Barh sati suggest that this “realization” and “consummation” were not a part of Sampati’s own spiritual journey, but rather satisfied the ideals of those who encouraged it.

The ideals and ideologies of sati are entrenched in gendered views of nation; proponents of Hindutva, often used imagined visions of gender to assert a morally superior, culturally distinct, politically independent identity. Banerjee asserts that this imagining of “symbols of nation as woman” “stems from their role as border guard” between an “us” and “them” (Banerjee 273). This method of thinking uses women’s bodies and the moral ideologies associated with them to create a national identity distinguished by the “morality” and honor of its women. *Searchlight*, in its defense of Sampati’s death, claims that sati invokes “the profound reverence of all Hindus who have not divested themselves of their age-long culture” (Searchlight; cited in Major “Anthology” 220). In this way, the practice of sati is portrayed as an inherent part of Hindu culture and history; while this claim cannot be substantiated by historical events or religious texts, it manages to position sati within the sacred and “untouchable” category of culture and religion. In response to the British Chief Justice’s indictment of those arrested in relation to the Barh sati, *Searchlight* argues that “His Lordship went beyond his province,” “His Lordship is a stranger in this country,” and His Lordship “attack[ed] one of the most cherished sentiments of the Hindus” (Searchlight; cited in Major “Anthology” 221). In this way, the sati of Sampati Kuer is used to create an insurmountable cultural divide between India and its colonizers. As Tanika Sarkar argues, “...religious, cultural and domestic arenas came to symbolize an ‘uncolonized’ private space that was jealously guarded against real or perceived colonial incursions” (Sarkar 122). The political climate of 1920s India, allowed Hindu nationalists to utilize a discourse around sati and womanhood, one that had existed before and after colonial rule, to further a resistance movement based on political and cultural

independence.

### **Defining the Nature of Volition and Agency**

The claiming of voluntary, or “true”, sati became a method by which Hindu nationalists could project agency and implied legitimacy onto the “moral” practice. A true sati was one that was completely voluntary, spontaneous, and painless; this distinction between “true” and “forced” attempted to distance “voluntary” satis like that of Sampati Kuer from the satis of the past, where physical volition was not as prominent of an arguing point (Bacchus 169). Although the moderate, newspapers *Amrita Bazar Patrika* and *Searchlight*, commended the Indian reformer Rammohan Roy for his work in banning sati, they were able to defend Sampati’s death by categorizing it as a “true sati” (Major “Burning” 233). According to the article published in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (ABP) on November 29, 1927, Sampati “expressed her desire to become sati” while her husband was on his deathbed. This idea of “desire,” and implied agency, is mirrored in the active voice used to describe Sampati’s later actions: “she hired a *khatooli*, sat in it...and proceeded towards Barh with a view to taking permission of the Sub-Divisional Officer” (“ABP” 207). This portrayal, which contradicts the representations of Sampati in the official reports, aims to not only remove blame from the other members of the funeral party, but also to eliminate the criminal aspect of the sati. Gayatri Spivak, in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, asserts that portrayals like this helped advance the idea that “The women wanted to die” (Spivak 50). But, as Spivak argues, a “testimony of the women’s voice consciousness,” even one influenced by traditionalist ideology, does not exist. Even if, as the newspaper *Searchlight* attests, sati’s “whole merit is based upon its pure voluntariness,” by the nature of the practice, this “voluntariness” is always presumed (“Searchlight”; cited in Major, “Anthology” 220). Consequently, Hindu nationalist portrayals of sati effectively silenced the voices of the women

concerned, by projecting a narrative of the event that satisfied their own interests.

These constructed narratives, and some modern analyses, erase the complexities of female agency in sati by defining it within the mutually exclusive categories of “willing” or “unwilling” to die. While proponents of sati emphasize the complete agency of the woman, the opposing perspective, as Janaki Nair argues, is misleading: “...the assumption that a woman is an ‘untrammelled subject, freely exercising her will...mask[s] the way in which many women are left with little or no choice in such circumstances’” (Nair 240; cited in Bacchus 157). This perspective is paralleled in the response the Women’s India Association to Sampati’s death in their journal *Stri Dharma*, which asserted that “there is no voluntariness in conduct to the extent that it is wrought in deception...[and] induced by pressure...[and] inspired by fear” (*Stri Dharma*; cited in Major, “Anthology” 226). But while these “symbolic norms” are significant influencers, they are not “fully determining...because they also produce subjects with a capacity to subvert or resist them” (Bacchus 158). While Sampati apparently climbed onto the pyre herself, once she had fallen or jumped off the pyre, she did not drown herself or attempt a “second” sati, as she was encouraged to do by her family and onlookers. But publications like *Amrita Patrika Bazar* and *Searchlight*, which aimed to further the Hindutva agenda, consistently ignore this detail of Sampati’s resistance, instead assigning the entirety of her agency and free will to the act of climbing atop the pyre. This perspective not only erases Sampati’s resistance but also the immense pressure she faced, which potentially invalidates her initial act of “voluntariness.”

## Conclusion

The debate around sati can no more be simplified to “colonial versus counter-colonial” than it can be to “victim versus agent.” While gendered visions of nation perpetuated the ideologies that sustained the practice, the use of the discourse around sati to further political self-determination is a relatively modern development. After the sati of Sampati Kuer, Hindu nationalist publications, like *Amrita Patrika Bazar* and *Searchlight*, used her story to not only further a political agenda, but also to define womanhood within constraints of Hindu patriarchy. This symbolic space, in which the ideal femininity exists, is created by redefining actual women’s volition and agency to be consistent with religious visions of the divine female. The creation of narratives, like that around Sampati’s death, has a palpable effect on real women’s lives, restricting and harming them. While the practice of sati has now become obsolete, the ideals, visions, and narratives that accompanied it still exist, in one form or another.



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