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# 3

## Perfection and Devotion: Sati Tradition in Rajasthan

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Although English defines the term *suttee* as an act, the self-immolation of a widow on her husband's funeral pyre, the Sanskrit and Hindi term *sati* literally means "a good woman," a woman who has become capable of self-immolation. This distinction reveals a crucial presupposition: whereas suttee as an act is something one commits at a particular moment, *sati* as a person is something one becomes gradually through good behavior. This chapter examines the personal ideal of *sati* espoused by certain Rajput women—those belonging to the erstwhile aristocracy of Rajasthan. It then articulates two often interrelated ways in which those Rajput women practice good behavior by keeping in mind (that is to say, by remembering) those who have died as *satis*.<sup>1</sup>

My observations are based on fieldwork concentrated in the southwest portion of Rajasthan, particularly around the Udaipur area, where I lived for a year and a half in 1984–1985. When I arrived in Rajasthan, I had not expected to find *sati* veneration a thriving tradition. I had supposed that, because there was only passing mention of contemporary *sati* worship in the scant secondary literature available on religious tradition in Rajasthan and because self-immolation had been made illegal by the Indian government, the tradition of veneration would have largely disintegrated. My supposition turned out to be false: although very few women end their lives as *satis* these days in Rajasthan, *sati* veneration is a major

aspect of the religious lives of Rajput women. It shows no sign of diminishing.<sup>2</sup> To fulfill the terms of my proposal to study the religious traditions of Rajput women, I had to find out what this was all about.

One of the first things I learned is that, from the traditional Rajasthani Rajput perspective, a woman becomes a sati through the acquisition of virtue or goodness—that is, *sati*. Acquiring *sati* is thought to be the consequence of a personal transformation that comprises three conceptual stages, recognized in Rajput tradition as *pativrata*, *sativrata*, and *satimata*. The first is the *pativrata* stage. Rajput women assume that a sati who immolates herself has been a *pativrata*, a devoted wife. In fact, dying as a sati is said to prove that a Rajput woman has been a good wife. It demonstrates to all concerned, including the woman herself, that she has developed appropriate and admirable character.

The notion of *pativrata* is not the exclusive property of Rajput women. The Rajput women I came to know in Rajasthan, however, tend to understand their Rajput constitution as enabling them to be particularly good *pativratas*. Often in conversation Rajput women point out that the ethos of sacrifice with which Rajputs, soldiers by tradition, have been inculcated has enabled wives to sacrifice personal or selfish desires in order to serve their husbands better. This is why, the logic continues, the Hindu tradition of dying as a sati has been primarily practiced by (and so associated with) Rajput women. Self-sacrifice throughout life has predisposed Rajput women to sacrifice themselves at the time of their husbands' deaths.

The term *pativrata* has often been used to refer to any married woman. Even in this basic sense, however, it bears an ideological nuance, for it literally means someone who has made a vow (*vrata*) to her husband (*pati*). The substance of this vow is protection. If a wife is devoted to her husband and therefore protects him, he will prosper. If not, he will suffer and perhaps die.

A *pativrata* protects her husband in two basic ways. First, she serves him: she attends to his personal needs and encourages him to perform his duties. In other words, she both attends him as he is and helps him to become what he ought to be. This is clear not only from women's testimony, but also from the many Rajput stories that celebrate women who have driven their husbands from cowardly retreat into heroic battle. Second, she performs ritual vows (*vrats*), most of which involve fasting. By fasting she pleases various deities, who compensate her by protecting her husband and by helping her to be a better *pativrata*, thus increasing her personal capacity to protect her husband.

According to the traditional point of view, if the *pativrata*'s husband predeceases her, she is culpable. She may be suspected of insufficient or

insincere devotion. She can escape suspicion, however, if she takes yet another vow—a *vrata* to die as a sati. If she does so, she enters the second sati stage. She goes from being a *pativrata* (one who has taken a *vrata* to protect her husband) to a *sativrata* (one who has taken a *vrata* to join her husband in the afterlife).

When a woman utters her sati vow, she places herself in the context of a vivid temporal fiction. Time is condensed, so that she becomes a *sahagamini*, "one who goes (*gamiini*) together (*saha*) with one's husband." Hence, even though technically her husband has died before she has, she is absolved from blame if she burns herself during his cremation ceremony. Indeed, she is even absolved if she burns herself after his cremation, if his cremation occurs before she learns of his death.

The Rajput *sativrata*'s death is thought to be a manifestation of her goodness, her *sati*. The sacrifices she undertook as a *pativrata* built up in her stores of *sati*, which is a moral heat not unlike *tapas* (ascetic heat). It is said that when the *pativrata* learns of her husband's death, this heat begins to consume her body. So the woman who has taken a sincere *vrata* of *sati* quite literally becomes too hot to touch. Therefore, anyone who tries to restrain her will be burned in the process. When the *sativrata* mounts her husband's pyre, her body explodes into flames, and these cremate her own body and the body of her husband. In the process, the ashes of the two bodies become intermingled, which symbolically affirms the unity of husband and wife that was established at their wedding fire.

During the period between the *sati vrata* and the sati's death, a woman is considered extremely powerful. Because she has renounced life, she has in a sense progressed beyond life. She possesses special powers, among them the power to curse and the power to establish prohibitions, the nature of which will be explored shortly.

In the process of dying, the *sativrata* becomes transformed once again, this time into a *satimata*. The term *mata* (mother), often used as an epithet denoting female divinity, indicates the understanding that a *satimata* cares for the family amidst which she lived quite as a mother cares for children. As a *satimata*, the wife shares her husband's fate while continuing to protect her earthly household.<sup>3</sup>

As a transcendent being, the *satimata* personifies *saubhagya* (good fortune), for she remains married to her husband eternally. As wives live their lives day in and day out, and try to realize the *pativrata* ideal, they look to the *satimata* as a moral exemplar and they pray to her to help them acquire the fortitude essential to achieving the virtue she represents, the virtue that will make them better *pativratas*.

The notion of the *satimata* as a moral ideal and model is so prominent in the minds of her *pativrata* devotees that, however many satis

might have taken their lives in a particular family, these satis are almost invariably referred to in the singular. What is important is not the individual woman who dies on a pyre but the transformative reality that her death symbolizes. Thus, generally speaking, in the context of each Rajput family, all satis eventually become *hamari satimata*, as it is said: our *satimata*.<sup>4</sup> Particular features associated with individual satis come to be associated with the amalgamated, condensed, singular sati personality. Instead of many satis with many stories, there is one sati who possesses many aspects.

While reflecting *pativrata* morality, the *satimata* functions as a powerful, transcendent being. She protects by warding off or curing family sickness and financial misfortune. Often, however, she intervenes in family life by issuing warnings to women that, unless they faithfully and sincerely perform domestic and religious rituals—rituals she knows they have been slighting—they and their families will suffer great misfortune. To put women on notice, the *satimata* appears in their dreams, gives them visions, or sends them bad omens.

Rajputs understand the sati tradition I have described as being overwhelmingly their tradition: they believe Rajput women to be uniquely capable of possessing the motivation required for a woman to become a valid sati. Of course, non-Rajput women have immolated themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres. Consequently, although all non-Rajputs understand the Hindu sati tradition to have originated with the Rajputs, and although they concede that most satis have in fact been Rajput, they claim that non-Rajput women have also become satis.

On the whole, Rajput women dismiss these supposed non-Rajput satis as insincere and pretentious women. Many imply that most non-Rajput women who have died on their husbands' pyres were only emulating Rajput satis in hopes of gaining status, prestige, and upward mobility for themselves, their families, and their *jat*s (castes).

Rajputs often point out that members of various lower castes have adopted other Rajput customs, including wearing Rajput dress, using Rajput names, and even eating meat and drinking wine, activities that Rajasthani custom specifically designates as Rajput privileges. Given the prevalence of these multiple forms of emulation, Rajput women find it unsurprising that non-Rajput women have also taken to immolating themselves, hoping to elevate their caste position and perhaps eventually allow their caste members to infiltrate Rajput ranks through marriage. Thus Rajputs say that such non-Rajput women have immolated themselves not out of devotion, but for ulterior motives; they cannot, therefore, be considered legitimate satis.

This point is crucial. According to Rajput women, merely immolating oneself does not guarantee that one will become a *satimata*. One has

to have the proper motivation, which must be selfless. The aspirant must have no desire except to share her husband's fate. Because a Rajput woman naturally has this single-minded desire, she makes her *vrat* to die as a sati spontaneously. When she learns of her husband's death, she automatically (without consideration and without calculation) utters a *vrat* of sati, and so becomes a *sativrata*. Her intentions are selfless and her motives pure. Therefore, the Rajput *sativrata*'s death becomes a direct reflex of her character (*charitra*) and a manifestation of her goodness, her *sat*. This goodness or *sat* is presumed to build up easily in Rajput women because they have an inherent, caste-derived inclination to realize the role of the *pativrata*.<sup>5</sup> Being Rajput means knowing how to sacrifice; being predisposed to sacrifice makes Rajputs the very best wives.

This is especially significant in light of the primary meaning Rajput women attach to the sati's death: they believe that is serves as proof to the sati and to others that the sati has successfully led the life of a *pativrata*, a good wife. This proof is necessary because status as a *pativrata* is more or less uncertain during a woman's lifetime. Every wife and mother must make decisions that are unpopular. Many times a woman is unsure whether the course of action she is taking is right, particularly if it draws family criticism. By dying as a sati, however, she can be confident—and others can be confident—that she has, on the whole, made correct decisions and lived selflessly as a *pativrata*. Hence, the sati's death serves an important validating function.<sup>6</sup>

In the case of non-Rajput satis, however, immolation has not in and of itself served this function. For non-Rajputs, say Rajput women, validation requires additional evidence. This evidence is provided by the observed emergence from within a *sativrata*'s body of flames, which have been ignited by the fervor of moral goodness, *sat*. Here, one can see clearly that Rajputs understand goodness as being both a moral quality and a physical substance—moral fiber in the literal sense, "the right stuff." This substance manifests itself as virtue during life and as fire at the time of death.

The qualification that the wifely virtue of non-Rajputs must be seen to be believed raises an interesting practical problem. Usually a *sativrata* mounts a pyre that is already burning or is lit soon thereafter. Of course, if the *sativrata* is a Rajput, the presumption is that the fire that consumes her is not the fire lit by someone else's hand, but the internal fire of *sat*. If the *sativrata* is not a Rajput, such an assumption is not made. In that instance the flames of *sat* must be visibly distinct from the lit fire. This is a tall order, and an order seldom filled; hence, few instances of non-Rajput satis occur in Rajput tradition. There are occasional exceptions, however, and I will soon refer to one of them.

To summarize, the fundamental idea Rajputs have of the sati's death is that it represents a manifestation of the virtue of *sat*, a moral and sub-

stantive quality that is inherent but latent in the Rajput *pativrata*. *Sati* causes the *pativrata* to become a *sativrata* if her husband predeceases her, and it manifests itself in flames, which prove that the woman has been a *pativrata* even as they transform her into a *sativrata*.

With this schema in mind, let us return to examine more extensively the liminal stage in the sati scenario, the *sativrata* stage. During this period a sati sets the terms of the relationship she will share with the family members whom she will later protect; she also teaches that the sati's will must be respected, and her desires remembered.

### The Strap

The first way in which a *sativrata* may express her feelings is by issuing a curse. A *sativrata* pronounces a curse (*strap* or *shrap*) if she becomes angry while preparing to die. By cursing, she makes it known that some person or persons have behaved badly and that behavior of such a nature is unacceptable to her. The curse, which hangs over a family for a number of generations, usually seven, serves to encourage within it proper attitudes and activities. Some examples, stories drawn from my interviews with Rajput women in 1984-1985, follow.

The first illustrates a situation quite common in sati mythology: a situation in which someone misbehaves by interfering with a woman who has manifested her intention to die as a sati. The *sativrata* makes it clear that intervention is unacceptable, and in fact dangerous:

There once was a *sativrata* whose relatives failed to provide her with a horse and a drummer for her sati procession. Every *sativrata* is supposed to proceed from her home to her husband's pyre in grand style. A horse and a drummer are absolute essentials. Enraged, the slighted *sativrata* cursed her husband's family to the effect that for seven generations whenever it might require a horse or drummer for ritual purposes, neither would be available.

The consequences of this *strap* were far-reaching. Both horse and drummer have always been essential to many important rituals, among them marriage and Dashara rituals.<sup>7</sup> Thus the sati's curse subjected the family to hardship, albeit justifiable hardship.

Besides stories that demonstrate the perils of interfering with a *sativrata*'s intentions, there are stories that tell of the fury that may be unleashed if bad behavior by a family member, even a husband, has been the reason that the *sativrata* has had to become a *sativrata*. The following narrative serves as an example:

There once was a woman whose husband was fond of liquor. Rajputs are allowed to drink liquor. This husband, however, abused his prerogative by

overindulging regularly. This caused much unpleasantness within the family. One day while inebriated he fell off a roof and died. At that time his wife took a vow of sati. Before immolating herself, she pronounced a curse that from then on no male in the family would be allowed to drink liquor.

This story illustrates what might be called a conditional curse. It curses the family to be deprived of alcohol or else. Here the "or else" is an implicit, though apparently effective, threat. Family members say that, since the curse was pronounced, no one in their household has dared to drink. Like the first curse I described, this curse pronounces a punishment that teaches a lesson, but it is a lesson that promises further punishment if ignored or forgotten.

The third example involves a curse that is violated. As will soon be apparent, the secondary or conditional punishment implicitly established by the curse turns out to be quite severe. The story goes like this:

There once was a Rajput king who decided to get married. Not long after his wedding, he found that he liked being married so well that he wanted a second wife. When he returned home from his second wedding, however, his first wife, full of jealousy, sprang on him from behind the entryway and stabbed him to death. At that time the second wife, livid, took a vow of sati. Then later, before mounting her husband's pyre, she pronounced a curse. She said that from then on no king from that kingdom would ever be able to be married to more than one woman at the same time. Several generations later, however, a king from that family took a second bride while his first wife was still living. Not long after the wedding, he died. Since that time the curse has not been breached.

Ultimately this curse's consequence is serious: the foolhardy transgressor dies. Actually, the curse's impact is harsh even when the *strap* is not breached. Polygamy was an accepted practice, which even Rajput women today feel was necessary in times past to ensure that there would always be an heir to the throne. Back then, they say, wars, disease, and court intrigues (including not a few poisonings) depleted the population of royal heirs.

One particularly notable feature of the three straps described here is that all had a major impact on women, whether or not the women were the direct cause of the sati's ire. In the first case, the absence of a horse and a drummer meant that future satis would be deprived of these. In the second, the prohibition on drinking by men caused women, although technically allowed to drink, to abandon the habit, lest their enjoyment of alcohol tempt their husbands to partake of it. In the third, the remarriage ban meant an increased possibility that adoption, one of the major sources of disharmony, intrigue, and general unpleasantness within the *zanana* (women's quarters or harem) of a traditional Rajput household—would be necessary.

Thus, the curse is not simply aimed at punishing men for what they have or have not done. It is also designed to instruct and influence women, because, as the sati paradigm teaches, a woman must always share her husband's fate. By way of further illustration, one could point to the fact that the most common curse pronounced by *sativratas* upon men with whom they are angry is infertility, yet Rajputs understand infertility as biologically a woman's problem. The result is that, however many times a cursed husband might marry, if he produces no offspring, his wives are deemed infertile. Regardless of who is targeted by sati curses, then, the lives of women are inevitably affected.

Usually when a sati utters a curse, she, targets her husband's family. In the three curses described earlier, the husband's family was targeted. Occasionally, however, satsis aim their curses at other relatives. Sometimes a sati curses her husband's sisters or daughters. For example, in one royal estate, a sati cursed the daughters of her husband's family never to have both happiness and children. When the daughters married, their misfortunes traveled with them and plagued their husband's families.

Other times, a sati curses her father's family. A story that comes readily to mind is that of young girl, engaged to a prince of Mewar. Unfortunately, just after her engagement ceremony, her fiancé died. When the girl learned of his fate, she asked her father to take her to her fiancé's pyre. The father, however, was reluctant. He did not want his little girl to die.

The father and daughter argued with one another until finally the father, exasperated, said, "Very well, go ahead and kill yourself!" Then he rigged his bullock cart with a curtain so that the daughter could travel to Udaipur while maintaining *parda*, seclusion. By the time he had finished preparing the cart, however, his temper had cooled down and he was once again heavy-hearted. He simply could not bring himself to drive his daughter to Udaipur. Miraculously, however, the cart started up of its own accord and proceeded without a driver to the daughter's destination.

When the girl arrived in Udaipur, she dismounted the cart and circumambulated her fiancé's funeral pyre seven times. In this way she married her intended. Afterward, she ascended his pyre, sat down, and took her husband's head in her lap. As she did so, her body ignited spontaneously. Flames of *sati* consumed both her body and the body of her husband.

As the sati burned, she pronounced a curse on her father's family. Today no one in the family recalls the nature of that curse: family members simply say that it lasted seven generations and then lapsed. Evidently it no longer matters to them what the curse was. The important thing is that it instituted a tradition of venerating the *satimata* and of receiving the *satimata's* protection, for the *satimata* has become its guardian.

In sum, while *sativratas* usually curse their husband's families, they may curse other related families if given cause. In either case, the *sativrata's* curse is taken to be benevolent, instructing those whom she loves. Her curse discourages future bad behavior that would only cause the family greater heartache in the long run.

Thus, by cursing, the sati may well assume a permanent role as a protector of family health and welfare. Nevertheless, when a sati curses persons to whom she is not related it is understood that she punishes without providing protection. To outsiders, she is malevolent and vengeful. This point is illustrated beautifully by the following story told by women in one Rajput family about a Gujar woman who was a consort of one of their ancestors. When that nobleman died, the Gujar woman prepared to die as a sati. Skeptical, the daughters of the consort's family scoffed at her and said, "You won't go through with it. You're no Rajput." In effect, they felt that she lacked the requisite *sati*. Adding further insult to injury, the family priest, drummer, and barber also taunted her and refused to join her procession as they would a Rajput sati procession.

When the Gujar woman reached the *mahasatiyan*, the cremation ground, she cursed all who had ridiculed her, beginning with the daughters. She said that neither they nor daughters born to them would possess any of the three happinesses a woman wants: sons, wealth, and a decent husband. The crowd that had gathered to watch the sati's immolation was shocked by the severity of the Gujar's curse. It pleaded for mercy on behalf of the princesses. Moved, the sati reduced the sentence so that if a woman had two of these happinesses, she would be deprived of the third.

Today her family says that so far this curse has held true for six generations. It also points out that, although its daughters have suffered from this, both they and the entire family have benefitted from the sati's protection. The sati has been a good mother (*matra*) to them.

The sati also pronounced curses on the priest, the barber, and the drummer. She tailored each curse to fit its target. To the priest, who was a Brahmin, she said, "In each generation, your family will have one son and he'll be half-cracked." Brahmins are supposed to be intelligent; their traditional tasks required that they be learned if not wise. A halfwit Brahmin is thus worthless, professionally speaking.

To the barber she said, "Your family will have no sons." Many of the barber's chief ceremonial functions have to do with childbirth and its rituals. Hence once again, the curse is particularly appropriate to its target. Finally, to the drummer the sati said, "If you or your descendants are playing your drums at one end of the village, nobody will be able to hear your music at the other end of the village." All of these curses re-

main in effect today. The Rajput family says that it has received protection along with its problems, but the nonfamily targets have received only problems.

The last sati account is notable not only because it demonstrates the benevolence or malevolence of the sati according to the nature of her target, but also because it provides a rare example of a non-Rajput woman who is ultimately (although not easily) accepted by Rajputs as a legitimate sati. Thus the story is careful to record the witnessing of the Gujar consort's death by the crowd, who saw flames erupt from her body. Because of this testimony, the Rajput family venerates the Gujar woman as their sati. One might think that the undesirable consequences of the curse would be enough to convince the Rajputs of the Gujar's transformation, but here, as usual, the witnessing of *sati* flames is shown to be essential.

The explanation family members give of the Gujar woman's success in becoming a true sati accords with that given by Rajputs of all verified, non-Rajput sats. The Rajput family says that because the Gujar lived as part of their family and behaved as a Rajput wife—that is, as a woman selflessly devoted to her husband's welfare—she was able to improve her character, accumulate *sati*, and die as a sati in the Rajput fashion. Living in a Rajput environment, the Gujar became so “Rajputesque” that she acquired the power to die as a sati and thereafter to protect her Rajput family as a Rajput sati would. Her intentions were shown to be honest, her curse effective, and (for Rajputs) her power of protection real. Others whom she cursed were not protected. It was as if she had been adopted as a Rajput.

From these observations some conclusions can be drawn. First, we cannot understand the sati as malevolent simply because she utters a curse. We have to look at her intentions as they are understood by her protégés. In their view, the sati is malevolent toward outsiders who anger her; but she is benevolent toward insiders, relatives, for she is their mother and a mother is benevolent even when she punishes. The sati punishes to instruct her family and to correct its behavior. Her curses demonstrate her love.

Second, we must take into account the extraordinary extent to which intention is stressed by participants in the tradition. Even if a punitive sati pronounces a curse that appears to be effective, the curse will not be deemed effective unless the *sativrata*'s motivations are demonstrated to be pure, either by her possession of Rajput blood or by her eruption into flames of *sati*. In short, according to the traditional perspective of Rajput women, a sati is a person impelled by virtue (*sati*) to follow her husband in death. Any other source of inspiration is thought to

contaminate a woman's intentions and prevent her from becoming a true *sativrata*.

### The Ok

While not every *sativrata* becomes angry and pronounces a curse, every *sativrata* establishes an *ok*, which proscribes certain practices or possessions. By establishing an *ok*, a *sativrata* marks a household for protection. So long as the terms of the *ok* are remembered and respected, the sati, now a *sativrata*, will ward off and dispel bad fortune.

Widespread *oks* include the following: (1) bans on the wearing of traditional colors that women wear as brides (red, rose, and magenta) and colors women wear after giving birth (bright yellow speckled with red); (2) prohibitions against certain types of jewelry associated with marriage, such as jingly ankle bracelets (*chaurasi*) and various other bracelets and bangles; (3) rules against using baby cradles. The objects that are prohibited by *oks* are almost always associated with being a wife and mother. Each of them connotes female auspiciousness, *saubhagya*. They represent marriage, sexuality, fertility.

Paradoxically, however, the observance of an *ok* is considered auspicious, for it brings a woman and her household under the protection of the *sativrata*, who is, as we have seen, a paradigm of auspiciousness. On the one hand, observing an *ok* helps a woman be a *pativrata*, because worship of the *sativrata* is an essential part of a woman's duty as a wife. Women are generally responsible for performing rituals that honor the *sativrata* and for observing *oks*. On the other hand, observing an *ok* also causes the devotee to grow in goodness, *sati*, ultimately enabling her to become a sati should her husband predecease her.

This notion of giving up the auspicious to gain in auspiciousness is aptly illustrated by the following sati story, which combines the imposition of an *ok* with the pronouncing of a *sruti*; the two are frequently, though not always, found in combination. As the tale goes, there once was a woman who, having learned of her husband's death, took a vow to die as a sati. She tried to persuade a co-wife to die as a sati with her. The co-wife replied, “I'd love to, really, but you see I have all these dishes to do, and we both know a good wife never leaves dishes undone.”

The sati found this a weak excuse. She cursed the co-wife and all daughters-in-law that, from then on, no one would be able to do dishes after dinner. Here, obedience to the *sruti* is also the observance of an *ok*. Doing dishes is a wife's task; it is auspicious work and an integral part of caring for a husband's family. Yet when an auspicious activity such as this becomes so important in and of itself that it interferes with a woman's vow

(*vrat*) of loyalty and service to her husband, its status changes. What would have been auspicious becomes inauspicious.

The prohibitions demonstrate the assumption that items and activities associated with *saubhagya* (auspiciousness) are auspicious only if they reflect a woman's desire to fulfill her vow as a *pativrata*. If these items or activities, supposedly symbolic of *saubhagya*, are used or performed by a woman without sincere motivation to be a good wife, they become wholly inauspicious.

It is not that the items and activities themselves are inauspicious. Only their use or performance is so, for it reflects bad intentions, a lapse in the vow of total service to one's husband (*pativrata*). This distinction, subtle as it may seem, is illustrated candidly in the tradition: many items that are flatly prohibited by *oks* may actually be used if a woman's intention to revere her *satimata* is demonstrated in related way. Thus women whose families are not supposed to possess baby cradles almost always borrow baby cradles from others. The borrowing is understood as a tribute to the *satimata*. In borrowing rather than buying a baby cradle, the woman shows that she remembers her obligation to the *satimata*, and thus displays the purity of her motivation to be a good *pativrata*.

In a similar practice, women who are not allowed to wear certain kinds of jewelry may actually wear such jewelry if they receive it as a present from someone outside the conjugal family. In not buying the jewelry but waiting to receive it from her parents, say, a woman shows that she respects the jewelry *ok* and the *satimata* who imposed it and that she intends to be faithful to the ideal that the *satimata* represents.

In sum, the traditions of *srav* and *ok* require that family members remember and respect the sacrifices that satis have made. When I speak of sacrifice in this context, I do not refer simply to the *balidan* itself—"suttee," the ritual sacrifice in which a woman immolates herself. True, self-immolation is the central event that sati tradition celebrates, but it is not the only sacrifice venerated within the tradition. The act of self-immolation is really only the culmination of a series of sacrifices performed throughout life by a *pativrata* who has thus built up stores of expiatory moral substance, *sati*. Similarly, through a network of *sravs* and *oks*, it creates occasions for many other sacrifices to be performed.

By remembering the sacrifices that satis have made, Rajput family members seek to imbibe the spirit of sacrifice that has encouraged men and women to perform their duties properly. Not only does the sati influence family fortune through direct intervention in its affairs, she also serves as a paradigm of selflessness. Thus, like the hero who falls in battle, the sati stands for a way of life, a way of life informed by values that are only slowly changing to suit changing social norms and circumstances.

### Notes

1. More extensive treatment of traditional sati veneration in Rajasthan can be found in Harlan, *Religion and Rajput Women: The Ethic of Protection in Contemporary Narratives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
2. The self-immolation of the Rajput village woman, Roop Kanwar, on her husband's funeral pyre in September 1987 has brought international attention to the ongoing veneration of *satimatās*, as in the present volume.
3. David Mitten has discussed a parallel dual locality of familial spirits in ancient Greek conceptions of the afterlife. See Mitten, "Aspects of Meaning in Greek Burial Customs," paper presented at the conference, "Representations of Death," Harvard University, November 4, 1988. For similar reflections on Maharashtra tribal culture, see Günther-Dietz Sontheimer, "The Religion of the Dhangar Nomads," in Eleanor Zelliot and Maxine Bernisen, eds., *The Experience of Hinduism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), p. 115.
4. Similar observations are made about other classes of ancestors in rural Rajasthan by Ann Grodzins Gold in *Fruitful Journeys: The Ways of Rajasthani Pilgrims* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 91. This collectivization of spirits does not occur in the case of aristocratic Rajput hero spirits (*jihunjhars* and *virs*). See Harlan, *Religion and Rajput Women*, p. 178.
5. For a general discussion of caste norms understood as being transmitted genetically, see McKim Marriott and Ronald B. Inden, "Towards an Ethnoscology of South Asian Caste Systems," in Kenneth David, ed., *The New Wind: Changing Identities in South Asia* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1977), pp. 227-38.
6. For further discussion of the probative value of death scenarios, see Harlan, "Abandoning Shame: Mira Bai's Bad Behavior," paper presented to the Association for Asian Studies, Washington, D.C., March 17, 1989.
7. Dashara is a holiday celebrating the defeat of the demon Ravana by Rama, the hero of the *Rāmāyāna*. The principal rituals performed on this day by Rajputs are the cleaning of weapons and the veneration of horses.

### Comment: Good Mothers and Bad Mothers in the Rituals of Sati

KAREN MCCARTHY BROWN

In September of 1987, thousands gathered to watch Roop Kanwar, an eighteen-year-old Rajput woman, burn to death on her husband's funeral pyre. A shrine, built on the site in the town of Deorala, was for a time, at least, the center of intense devotional and political activity. The shocking nature of the event, as well as its obvious social and religious power, demands explanation. The sati of Roop Kanwar may be understood variously as an expression of Rajput chauvinism during a period of social and



economic flux, an assertion of Indian traditionalism and nationalism against the forces of modernity and Westernization, and a handy means of enforcing social norms and keeping women in their place. Somewhat on the side, the revivification of the sati cult allows Marwari businessmen to make a profit, build important networks between their urban business centers and their rural homelands, and share in the machismo glory of the warrior caste, an increasingly important ingredient in the generalized male image in modern India. Thus sati is not simply a religious ritual; it is a confluence of religious, political, and social ideologies.<sup>1</sup>

Setting Roop Kanwar's death in a complex matrix of social, political, and economic forces, and then placing that in conversation with Rajput gender roles and certain Hindu beliefs appropriately demystifies the event. It sweeps away much of the smoke and shadow (often rank with sentimentality) and allows the rawer dynamics of the event to emerge. It makes Roop Kanwar's immolation an event within its time and place, but it does not explore the reasons for the gender roles and religious beliefs that allow a sati to function as the organizing metaphor for such varied problems and issues.

I am an outsider to Indian Studies. I have never visited India, let alone carried out field research there. Yet the first time I heard Roop Kanwar's story, it was not lack of understanding I experienced but an instant stab of recognition. Cultural relativity and the importance of understanding context are key principles for me in my own fieldwork situation in the Caribbean. I am much more flexible and tolerant with Haitians than I am, for example, with my own family or my university colleagues. I withhold judgment longer and work harder to understand the cultural context of actions that, on the surface, I find offensive. Yet there have been times when this carefully cultivated attitude could not staunch a rush of judgment. It happened once in Haiti when I witnessed a brutal instance of domestic violence. I reacted without a second's analytic pause. My reaction was equally quick when I read the *New York Times* account of Roop Kanwar's sati. I immediately saw it as an instance of a people acting out its deep-seated hatred and fear of women. While I never felt that the context was irrelevant, I did not think I needed to know much about it to make such a diagnosis.

Therefore, as the nonspecialist in this group, I have chosen to respond to Lindsey Harlan's rich phenomenology of sati in Rajasthan by addressing sati on common human ground. I want to consider it as an extreme example of misogyny—the cultural component that comes as close as any I know to being a human universal.

There is another way to describe what I propose to do here. I want to ask why and how the burning of a young woman could come to be a powerfully articulate symbol, one capable of drawing to itself—like a

magnet—a diverse collection of social, political, and economic agitations and, in turn, making each of them more articulate. Answering this question requires beginning at a level of human universality. It requires looking at the special vulnerability that accrues to women because they bear and, for the most part, rear children. The specifics of childbearing and childrearing in India will then emerge as variations on a common human theme, variations that help explain the particular tone and direction misogyny takes in modern India.

We human beings, unlike other animals, are born almost entirely unprepared to deal with our environment. Our entry into the world is marked by a long period of profound and mute dependence, and a woman presides over this fearsome vulnerability. Dorothy Dinnerstein describes it this way:

The mother is in a literal sense, not just a figurative one, . . . in charge of the most intimate commerce between the child and the environment: the flow of substances between the flesh and the world. The infant gets from her the stuff that goes into its body and gives to her the stuff that comes out of it. And the sense of her presence—carnally apprehended in rocking and crooning, in cuddling and mutual gazing—is what makes the world feel safe. Separation from the touch, smell, taste, sound, sight of her is the forerunner of all isolation, and it eventually stands as the prototype of our fear of the final isolation. . . . In the body's pain, which it is up to the mother to prevent, is all the terror of annihilation. The sinking sense of falling—loss of maternal support—is the permanent archetype of catastrophe.<sup>2</sup>

The mothers we all carry within us are, by definition, both good mothers and bad mothers:

It is in interaction with woman that the child makes another basic carnal discovery: that the body's love of pleasure, and its vulnerability to deprivation and pain, can subject the person who inhabits it to the dominations of another person's opposing will. The least coercive of mothers must sometimes restrain an infant's movements, or make it wait against its wishes. . . .<sup>3</sup>

And from such inevitabilities, when experienced in the oceanic space of infancy—a timeless, wordless world of unbounded emotion—comes the image of mother as rapacious, polluting, and death-dealing.

A human being's attitude about the basic safety of the world is thus shaped in an intimate, fleshly, preverbal conversation with a woman's body. The maternal presence is, furthermore, so thoroughly enmeshed with the infantile world that a child's first experiences of pain and loss are, by default, experiences of her. As adults, we carry the inchoate memories of these primal moments of safety and panic, consolation and loss within us. They are the deep waters rushing through the basements of our carefully constructed edifices of culture and self.

It is not that these currents are more important than all others in shaping adult life. Most of the time we manage to stay on dry ground and act out of places in ourselves that can be influenced by later experiences, as well as by reason and personal and communal values. Yet, when stress mounts sufficiently, when fear grows and generalizes itself, and most of all when need for reassurance is profound enough, we plummet into these chaotic waters and the problems of the moment assume an aura of boundless infantile need and fear. At such times, something must be done about the Mother, and no other solution will suffice.

In the Marwari businessman's envy of the accouterments of *kshatriya* manhood; in the loss of Rajput hegemony as the larger world encroaches on Deorala; in the precarious jockeying for power characteristic of the nationalist arena; and in the disorientating incursions of Western culture and modern life—in such things begin the “sinking sense of falling” that Dinnerstein argues is always, at some level, felt as a loss of maternal support. When the immediate circumstances that cause those feelings cannot be controlled, there are always women around who can be. When it seems as if catastrophe might be lurking around the next corner, keeping women in their place—doing what they are supposed to be doing—can make the world feel safer.<sup>4</sup>

It is every woman's special vulnerability to carry (at least potentially) for every other human being in her world something of an aura of the mythic good and bad mothers. This is what makes women the frequent scapegoats of individual and social pathology. Turning women into scapegoats for needs and fears whose roots drink from the deep waters of helplessness infancy produces complex ritual forms in which the victim is forced to act out good and bad mother roles simultaneously. Just as devotees insist that a widow's pure devotion to her husband propels her toward sati (if it is a “true sati”), so rapists frequently insist that their victims express pleasure and arousal. Yet both rituals are patently punitive at the same time. Just as a Hindu woman may be held morally responsible if her husband predeceases her, so the victim of rape is told by the rapist (and too frequently also by the general public) that she brought it on herself. The two-sided nature of both these “rituals” allows for punishing the bad mother while, at the same time, calling on the good mother to give assurances that the world is ultimately safe and the raging infant still lovable.

While sati and rape may share some basic psychodynamics, they are also profoundly different. Sati is a public event, a type of ritualized theodicy, a religious drama called into being by the most threatening of human realities, death itself. As such, the rare occurrence of sati can speak meaningfully about many different types of loss and do so to large numbers of people. A religious event, unlike a political or social one, directly

addresses our multilayered selves. With touch and taste, sound and smell, image and act, religion can give solace to the screaming, preverbal infant as well as to the frightened adult. Religion binds the whole together. The richly sensual character of Hindu ritualizing adds an important nuance to this picture and suggests that Hinduism may be especially proficient at addressing the preverbal levels of psyche and society.

The particular forms of childbearing and childrearing in India add further nuances. In *The Inner World: A Psycho-analytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*, Sudhir Kakar argues that the bond between Indian mothers and children is especially intense and long-lasting for several reasons. First, the mother-child bond is strong because, in India, a woman's worth tends to be defined by her ability to bear children. The arrival of a child, particularly a son, saves a young bride from the suspicion and even open hostility that are frequently occasioned by her arrival in her husband's extended-family home. Women thus hold tightly to their children, because, to some extent, they experience them as saviors.<sup>5</sup> The second reason for such strong mother-child bonding is the prolonged period of infancy characteristic of Indian childrearing. Kakar says that the Indian child does not experience any significant separation from the intense, intimate, and exclusive bond it has with its mother until the age of four or five. These early years are characterized by the nearly constant presence of the mother and by large amounts of physical interaction with her. During this same period, according to Kakar, the father generally plays “no significant caretaking role.”<sup>6</sup> The third reason concerns Indian women's attitude toward developmental tasks. Kakar says that Indian mothers tend to be relaxed and accepting of the vicissitudes of childhood, following the child's inclinations in such things as weaning and toilet training, rather than imposing rules and limits of their own. Indian children, Kakar reports, routinely breastfeed until the age of two or three, but “it is not uncommon to see a five or six year old peremptorily lift up his [sic] mother's blouse for a drink.”<sup>7</sup> Kakar concludes: “the Indian infant's experience of his [sic] mother is a heady one, his contact with her is of an intensity and duration that differentiate it markedly from the experience of infancy in western worlds.”<sup>8</sup> From this configuration of the infant's world, Kakar sees strong images of both the good mother and the bad mother emerging, and he traces each type to multiple locations in Hindu mythology.<sup>9</sup>

In India, the expectations placed on women to offer selfless nurturance are great. The Hindu ideal of the *pativrata*, the self-sacrificial wife, mythologically represented through such characters as Sita and Parvati, is an especially potent expression of this expectation. And as might be expected, the fear that the mothering one will not give food but, instead, turn others into food for herself (think of the rapacious Kali) is equally great.

When viewed from a psychological perspective, such as the one I have suggested here, the symbolic language of sati opens up in a new way. A dialectical tension between images of woman—nurturer on the one hand, devourer on the other—reveals itself to be at the heart of sati practice. The drama of sati is shown to take place in the midst of a dense choreography of images of the eaters and the eaten, the consumers and the consumed. These images are transparent to the sort of infantile vulnerability experienced by all human beings, but they also gain specificity and intensity from the prolonged breastfeeding and strong mother-child bonding characteristic of India. The data in Lindsey Harlan's paper offer abundant illustrations in support of this analysis. Harlan has provided a text that makes it possible to read this subtext clearly.

The good wife, the *pativrata*, stands at the center of the sati drama. According to Harlan, the good wife offers her husband two kinds of protection: service and ritual austerities. The latter are vows, "most of which involve fasting." Through these dual activities—giving to him and withholding from herself—the wife assures her husband (and herself) that she is a self-sacrificing nurturer, one who has no hunger, need, or will of her own that could interfere with her caring for him. In other words, she shows herself to be a good mother.

But the good wife becomes frighteningly anomalous without her husband. Whereas before whatever she consumed, literally and figuratively, could be understood as fuel for further acts of self-sacrifice, as a widow she threatens to become a consumer of family resources, literally and figuratively, in her own right and for her own purposes. Whereas before her will (another form of hunger) was contained by being subject to that of her husband, there is now a danger that it may break loose, untempered by larger family agendas.

And this is exactly what happens during the liminal period in the sati rituals when a woman is a *sativrata*, one who has taken a vow to commit sati but has not yet carried it through. For the short period of time during which she is a *sativrata*, the woman gains a power and autonomy she knew at no other point in her life. "During this period," Harlan says, "a sati sets the terms of the relationship she will share with the family members whom she will later protect; she also teaches that the sati's will must be respected, and her desire remembered." In the transformation that occurs when a woman becomes a *sativrata*, a powerful social secret is briefly vented. Good mothers can also be bad mothers. Women have wills of their own. The *sativrata* becomes dangerous (she is said to be literally too hot to touch) and punitive. Against anyone who angers her, she delivers a curse (*strap*). Furthermore, she is expected to place prohibitions (*okas*) on the activities of the very family that until recently confined and

restricted her. But the secret of the bad mother is like a scary truth whispered quickly through a small crack in the ritual process. The bad mother fully emerges only for a brief moment and in ways that are ritually contained (she dies shortly after issuing her curses and proscriptions) and later rationalized (her curses are said to be blessings in disguise). As Harlan puts it, "a mother is benevolent even when she punishes."

On rare occasions a woman takes a vow to commit sati and is prevented from going through with it. This might happen because a family fears breaking the law or, in a few cases, because the woman is needed in the home. When the family prevents her sati, the woman may nevertheless become a "living *sativrata*." Harlan tells a story about such a woman who proved her virtue by miraculously needing to consume no food. This widow, confined to a tiny room, resolutely refused to eat any of the food offered to her, but did give blessings to all who came to see her.<sup>10</sup> The woman earned the title of living *sativrata* by acting out the part of a good mother. She denied herself but served others; she never took but always gave; she never consumed but nourished all who came to her.

When the sati event is actually carried through, as the *sativrata* mounts the funeral pyre, the dialogue between consumer and consumed, devourer and devoured becomes more convoluted and more highly charged. The bad mother, who made a brief appearance through the curses and prohibitions of the *sativrata*, has now retreated from the foreground. Her rapacious presence is still felt, however, beneath the increasingly intense images of beatific female self-sacrifice. For example, from the moment a woman takes a vow of sati, a process of self-devouring is said to begin. Harlan notes the belief that when a woman, on hearing of the death of her husband, utters the spontaneous vow that she will die with him, her *sati* (virtue) begins to heat up and "consume her body." This same *sati* is believed to ignite the funeral pyre and finally consume both husband and wife. But this does not happen until, as the devotional images of Roop Kanwar show, she mounts the funeral pyre and takes the body of her husband into her lap, in a breastfeeding posture. Then, as Harlan characterizes it, "her body explodes into flames, and these cremate her own body and the body of her husband."

As he feeds on her, she eats him up and, most important, devours herself as well. The nurturing woman and the devouring woman become one through a process in which fire transforms the rapacious, willful bad mother (who made an uncharacteristically direct appearance lest anyone should miss that she was there) into a self-devouring good mother. When woman's power is safely turned back against herself, the net result is that the bad mother gets burned up while the good mother survives. But the good woman who survives is very different from the one who mounted the funeral pyre.

The flames purge the actual woman of any blame in her husband's death. He did not die because her *sati* was insufficient. On the contrary, they both burned because her virtue was so great. Yet even as the good mother triumphs, the individual woman, who momentarily incarnated her, disappears. As Harlan reports, "satis are almost invariably referred to in the singular. What is important is not the individual woman who dies on a pyre but the transformative reality that her death symbolizes." The flames transform the untrustworthy, fallible, particular human woman into a safe, infallible, generalized, transcendent mother called Sati.

While much more detail could be added to this analysis, I think the point has been made: whatever else the rituals of *sati* are about, they are surely about "Mommy" and about putting Mommy in her place.

#### Notes

1. Sudesh Vaid and Kumkum Sangari, "Institutions, Beliefs, Ideologies: Widow Immolation in Contemporary Rajasthan," *Economic and Political Weekly* 26:17 (April 27, 1991), especially pp. WS-14-16; also, Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita, "The Burning of Roop Kanwar," *Manushi* 42-43 (1987), pp. 15-25.
2. Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1976), p. 131.
3. Dinnerstein, *Mermaid*, p. 132.
4. To some extent women, as well as men, support this maneuver. Women and men gathered to watch Roop Kanwar burn, and women are often eager devotees at *sati* shrines. Women have mothers just as men do, and they too hold deep in themselves a view of woman as a combination of a pure goddess, totally selfless and nurturant, and a polluting, rapacious witch. But women do not write the culture script (empathy alone might have prevented them from including the chapter on *sati*), even though they have to live (and sometimes die) on its terms.
5. Sudhir Kakar, *The Inner World: A Psycho-analytic Study of Childhood and Society in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2d ed., 1981), p. 79.
6. Kakar, *Inner World*, pp. 79-80.
7. Kakar, *Inner World*, pp. 80-81.
8. Kakar, *Inner World*, p. 80.
9. Kakar makes a connection between mythic images of the good mother and the extraordinary degree to which Indian women conform their lives to their children's needs. He also argues that these same childrearing practices create generalized Indian personality traits, principally trust in the world and openness to others. But Kakar attributes mythic images of the bad mother to a destructive pattern in which frustrated women overwhelm their children with needs that could more appropriately be met by their husbands, if it were not for the dense extended-family context in which marital life must be negotiated. While I find Kakar's connections between women's social roles and mythic images generally quite enlight-

ening, because of the near universality of the bad mother image, I find Dinnerstein's argument for the etiology of this image more convincing; it stresses the inevitability that a child will experience pain and frustration with even the best of mothering.

10. Lindsey Harlan, personal communication, September 27, 1988.