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The Roop Kanwar Case: Feminist Responses

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On September 5, 1987, in Jaipur, Bal Singh Rathore and Sneh Kanwar discovered that their eighteen-year-old daughter Roop Kanwar—married only eight months before—had suddenly been widowed and then cremated along with the corpse of her husband in the manner of a sati in the village of Deorala, a two-hour drive away. They read this piece of information in the local Hindi language daily; they had not been informed either of the death of their son-in-law in a hospital in the district headquarters in Sikar, nor of their daughter's wish to die as a sati on her husband's funeral pyre. They were later persuaded by Roop Kanwar's in-laws that their daughter had, over efforts to dissuade her, chosen this way to die.

Under usual circumstances, this brief newspaper report would have caused little stir, not unlike the forty other cases of sati-style deaths recorded since 1947, when India became an independent and secular republic. Some twenty-eight of these have occurred in Rajasthan, mainly in and around Sikar district. What made the profound difference this time was the activism and concern of women. Arguably, the Roop Kanwar case has converted the idea that a woman can become (an alleged) sati—and be glorified for it—from a residual quasi-religious theme into a critical political issue on which women's voices were heard for the very first time.

In the colonial period it was chiefly men—Hindu reformers and British officials—who debated, and the East India Company that eventually legis-

lated, to abolish the practice in 1829. The Maharaja of Amber and Jaipur followed the company's lead in 1846. He banned the practice in his kingdom, as did eighteen other princely states in the Rajputana Agency. The Indian Penal Code, as revised in the early 1950s, did not incorporate the East India Company regulation. The presumption was that its sections on murder and abetment to suicide (sections 302 and 306, respectively) would be enough to deal with such a happening, and therefore no explicit reference to the custom of sati was made.

This implicit redefinition of sati as a crime is accepted by women opposed to the custom—they deem it to be murder or abetted suicide—and sati has, quite properly, no separate place in the penal code of a secular state. The redefinition also ought to have eliminated the possibility of further debate on the authenticity of such an event and on whether or not it enjoys scriptural sanction, issues much discussed and presumably settled before legislation was hammered out in 1829. With the law in place and enforced, the act of committing sati—whether the widow's participation was voluntary or coerced—was shorn of all mystification, glory, glamour, and ritual significance, and adjudged to be simply a crime. Those implicated in it would be equally punished by death or life imprisonment. After its abolition and an initial upsurge of incidents, the practice of sati faded into a very rare crime; and statistically speaking, today it is rarer still. Nonetheless, satis did still occur. The Roop Kanwar death mobilized feminists and liberals to ensure that the present crime and all others like it be punished, so that even a single sati would become unthinkable in the future in Rajasthan or anywhere else in India. On the other end of the spectrum of opinion are conservatives who believe that Roop Kanwar heroically sacrificed her own life, in keeping with the ideology of sati, which finds honor and pride in the most painful and brutal of deaths—the burning of a woman on her deceased husband's funeral pyre.

The purpose of this essay is to summarize the Indian feminists' response to Roop Kanwar's death.¹ This response has come in the shape of active protests, detailed reports of the knowable facts, and a stream of analytical articles. I expect to tell the story of the event as it emerges from this literature, which is published in English, and to distill its substantive and interpretive points. Before proceeding, however, a caveat is in order, and a word of preparation.

First the caveat: I use the word *feminist* advisedly, although I am more than aware that it is not accepted by some of the women activists and scholars whose work is reviewed in this essay. It is rejected by these women on the grounds that the term has specific meanings that grew out of the experience of women activists in the West, and that it is therefore unsuitable in the Indian context. I believe this is mistaken. Feminism has a long history

and is no longer monolithic; multiple feminisms abound, and *feminism* is capable of the same kinds of distinctions one would expect in any analysis of the word *patriarchy*. I define the word *feminist* in its simplest political sense, as a person (and not necessarily a woman) whose analytical perspective is informed by an understanding of the relationship between power and gender in any historical, social, or cultural context. To me, the argument against using the word *feminist* is weakened by the fact that terms and theories of equally Western provenance—*Marxist*, *socialist*, *Freudian*, or *post-structuralist*—do not arouse similar indignation and are in fact (over) used as standard frameworks for analyses of Indian society by Indian scholars. I rather suspect that gender analysis will one day trip off the scholarly tongue with the same panache as class analysis does now in Indian academic and activist circles; in the meantime, I will take my chances.

My second preliminary comment has to do with background. Historians are indispensable when a custom or tradition is being bruited about as a timeless phenomenon, and sati is clearly believed by many to be a Hindu tradition with such credentials. Therefore, before launching into my review of contemporary feminist reactions to the Roop Kanwar episode, I urge the reader to consult the account that has been provided by the leading historian of India, Romila Thapar. Her essay, entitled "In History," appears in the excellent issue of the journal *Seminar* which is devoted to sati (February 1988). This essay was prompted by Roop Kanwar's death; and although it does not deal directly with the event, it puts us in a position to appreciate both the discursive and material aspects of the response to it, providing a solid background to frame the contemporary event and gently but firmly clearing away the historical misinformation and misinterpretations that nonhistorians have produced in their own attempts to put the Roop Kanwar case into perspective.² Authoritative, rigorous, and elegant, Thapar's essay may be read in conjunction with my own historical construction of "The Continuing Invention of the Sati Tradition" in this volume. As one moves closer in time and space to the Roop Kanwar case, one should consult the work of Sudesh Vaid, whose detailed historical analysis of sati in the Shekhavati region provides the tools for best understanding the Roop Kanwar sati and the larger pattern to which her immolation belongs.³

After reading many reports of Roop Kanwar's death, it is possible to conclude that gender-sensitive scholars and activists in India—whatever their disagreements on a wide range of issues that concern women—are of one mind about the tragic end of Roop Kanwar. The consensus is profound; the analyses differ only in the method or details they choose to emphasize.

Feminists are united, first and foremost, in denouncing the event as one among many crimes against women. They do not admit any obfuscating rhetoric about whether this event was or was not an "authentic" sati;

coercion or consent is not really relevant to their formulations of the problem. Their concern is about the women involved—their lives, the pain they endure, the cruelty and barbarity they experience, and the resultant negation of the meaning of their separate existence. It is not far-fetched to say that feminists would be steadfast in their view of sati even if Roop Kanwar's volition could be established without doubt, by some magical replay of linear time. For them, sati as an issue was settled 175-odd years ago; the question is why it is still allowed to persist. Feminists unanimously reject the glorification that follows an alleged sati, what with the endowment of commemorative shrines and temples and the holding of festivals and anniversaries. They also continue to work hard to counter the propaganda in the media that represented Roop Kanwar as a symbol of an alleged ideal of Hindu womanhood—chaste, devoted, and able to sacrifice her very life for her husband. This propaganda is part of the agenda of the Bharatiya Janata Party, which has become the leading opposition party in the Indian Parliament by touting an essentialized and homogenized Hinduism while projecting itself as the defender of a beleaguered faith.

Another common strand is feminists' anger at the reactions of governments at the state and federal levels. Rajiv Gandhi's Congress government in New Delhi is sharply criticized, first for its apathy toward or tacit approval of the event, then for its ineptitude in trying to prevent the site of the sati from becoming a shrine for the offerings of the multitudes that converged on Deorala, and finally for its pernicious policy of giving in to demands by religious extremists to destroy the secular foundations of the constitution of India. All the reports also see caste more than class as the decisive factor behind the incident. They allege a conspiracy among the three dominant castes, which moved in swiftly to capitalize on the alleged sati. They blame Rajput men for using women's lives as the means of propping up old chivalric traditions in a time when they are otherwise disenfranchised. They censure the Marwari businessmen for imitating and supporting these traditions in their quest for status and power and for contributing their wealth and commercial acumen to perpetuate this custom. And they hold Brahmins responsible for lending an air of legitimacy to the ethos of sati as a way to bolster their own dwindling importance in the modern world. Through the efforts of these three castes, a combination of patriarchal values and opportunistic greed approves the event and orchestrates its aftermath by converting the site of the cremation into a shrine, inventing a *chunari* (veil) festival to glorify the painful death of a woman, and assisting a prosperous but undistinguished village to become a pilgrimage site. Finally, most feminists are agreed that, although each sati is projected as a rare and spontaneous happening, nonetheless all satis share a common plot or script, as well as the costuming and dramatization necessary to make sati a riveting spectacle for those who witness it. Witnesses affirm the nature of

the event as religious; their gaze makes it sati. I would add that the event also reinforces the base appetites of the male members of the audience to see women suffer, while in women sati confirms the ideology that women's strength lies in the act of sacrifice and the endurance of untold pain.

Feminists have pointed out that, as the news media lost interest in the issue, the battle of words finally narrowed into a duel between pro- and anti-sati scholars, unwittingly mimicking the tradition-versus-modernity debate on what British bureaucrats termed "social evils" in India in the colonial period. That debate pitted orthodox Hindu religionists against Hindu liberal reformers and British utilitarian-evangelicals.⁴ The former, who were temporarily eclipsed by the secular thrust of the Nehruvian era, have force-fully reappeared and been joined by scholars who defend sati as a widow's unique act of sacrifice incomprehensible to modern women. The latter groups have been replaced by feminists and secularists who are irate to see such a practice make a comeback, albeit in a modernized form.

All this has finally moved the sati debate from its familiar rut of profit and patriarchy onto new ground, where questions about women's subjectivity, about pain and suffering, and about culturally constructed and gendered notions of volition and sacrifice are explicitly asked. This last twist in the feminist argument has rescued the debate from being a mere replay of its nineteenth-century predecessor. The fact that women are now speaking for their sisters, who could not, may finally unmake the tradition of sati.

Feminists in Jaipur were alerted to the death of Roop Kanwar by the report of the first journalist who arrived in Deorala, Tej Pal Saini of the *Rashtrabhoor*, a newspaper that covers Sikar district.⁵ He probably did not realize that he had fired the opening salvo of a debate that was going to rage in the print media for years. Interpreting his mission as the need to establish whether or not Roop Kanwar's death was a "voluntary" or "authentic" sati, he visited Deorala for a week, interviewing all the relatives, friends, and other inhabitants of the village, and firmly concluded that the act was indeed voluntary. *India Today*, a major fortnightly newsmagazine, sent out its hounds, who later confirmed this view. An early editorial in the Hindi daily *Jansatta*, widely distributed in north India, wrote a ringing approval of the live burning:

Roop Kanwar did not become a sati because someone threatened her. . . . [S]he purposely followed the tradition of sati which is found in the Rajput families of Rajasthan. Even among Rajasthan's Rajputs sati is no ordinary event. Out of hundreds of thousands of widows perhaps one would resolve on a sati. It is quite natural that her self-sacrifice should become the centre of reverence and worship. This therefore cannot be called a question of women's civil rights or sexual discrimination. It is a matter of a society's religious and social beliefs. . . .

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People who accept that this life is the beginning and the end, and see the greatest happiness in their own individual happiness and pleasure, will never understand the practice of sati. . . . The practice of sati should now be totally reexamined. But this is not the right of people who neither know nor understand the faith and belief of the masses of India.⁶

This editorial summed up the general pro-sati, anti-woman, conservative position. The day after its publication, about fifty angry women stormed into the offices of *Jansatta*, besieged the author of the article, and obtained the right to publish a rebuttal in the same paper. The ensuing debate was defined by these reports, and a nation of historical amnesiacs ardently resumed the old arguments about voluntary versus coerced sati.

Among the first feminists to respond to the event was Dr. Sharada Jain, an activist, scholar, and teacher based in Jaipur. She was part of the delegation representing three women's organizations that called on Hardeo Joshi, the chief minister of Rajasthan, two days after the event. They reminded him that sati was a crime and urged prompt and stern action against the culprits, but were coolly and quickly dismissed. They did not fail to press the view that, as Sharada Jain put it, "Roop Kanwar's death could not have been an act of free will. She was murdered."⁷ In a chronology of the first few weeks after the event (including feminist responses to it), published in Bombay's *Economic and Political Weekly*, Sharada Jain and two colleagues pose what was to become the central question for feminists regarding the issue of sati:

Why was the burning of a girl [sic] described as "sati" and not as "murder" even in the first press reporting? Even if the overt "form" of a widow being dressed up and being taken to the funeral pyre with ostentatious celebration camouflaged the crime for the simple-minded, tradition-oriented villagers, why was the official perception not that of a violation of a law? . . . [T]he episode cannot be viewed as emerging out of an "illiterate", backward situation. Ironically, not only are Roop Kanwar's family and Maal Singh's father educated (in the conventional sense of the word), but she too had received formal education up to class ten. . . . This exposes the hollowness of the entire educational engagement, which leaves basic attitudes untouched.

The climax of the horror story in fact lies not in Deorala, or even in other parts of Rajasthan. It lies in the elitist "distanced" quarters. It is from the urban-educated elite that the oft-repeated question came: "Did Roop Kanwar commit sati of her own will or was she forced?" If, even at this level, the utter irrelevance of the question is not clear and if, even here, the condemnation or approval of the event depends on an answer to this question, then the focus of action has to be deliberated on with great care.⁸

These were the issues Jain and her delegation brought before the Rajasthan chief minister as well. They culminated in two unambiguous demands: one, that the alleged sati be named and booked as murder, and not

abatement to suicide; and two, that the public celebrations planned for the *chunari mahotsav* (a ritual held on the thirteenth day after the cremation when a red veil is placed on a trident at the site) be prevented. Both demands were ignored, but a case for abatement to suicide was registered the next day, and Roop Kanwar's fifteen-year-old brother-in-law was arrested. Yet the excitement over the planned *chunari* ceremony ballooned unchecked as news of the now "miraculous" sati, with burgeoning anecdotal evidence, spread from the village to the district, the state, New Delhi, and beyond. Several newspapers carried daily descriptions of the feverish anticipation of the *chunari* ceremony that probably served as unwitting advertisement for the action to come. Approximately 10,000 pilgrims were debouched daily from trucks, buses, and camel carts, and many traveled miles on foot to gather in the village of Deorala for the forthcoming ceremony, while the state government did nothing. The event also became a commercial opportunity, as crudely cut and pasted photographs of Roop Kanwar, often with her husband Mal Singh, were reprinted as lurid posters and icons for sale. Her marital home, particularly the bedroom she had shared with her husband, became consecrated as a site for pilgrims to view. Stalls selling sati memorabilia and snacks mushroomed, while thousands of handbills informing the visitors of the *chunari* ceremony were systematically distributed. An obscure village was ready for an obscurantists' carnival.

Four days before the *chunari* ceremony was to take place, seven women's groups in Rajasthan serving rural and urban constituencies came together for the first time to plan joint action. They agreed to condemn the barbaric murder of Roop Kanwar publicly and to appeal to citizens at large to demand immediate and appropriate action against the crime. They also planned to hold a public demonstration on September 14 to demand that the chief minister enforce the law and stop the planned celebrations on September 16. They sent telegrams to the prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, and to Margaret Alva, the minister of state for Women's Welfare, since the state government had virtually abetted the glorification of sati by its silence and inaction. According to Rajasthan state's own standard procedures, the offenders should have been charged under the Indian Penal Code, and the worship of the sati and the collection of donations should have been prohibited. By allowing thousands to congregate in Deorala, by sending messages to permit restricted numbers to worship at the site, and by failing to forestall the *chunari* ceremony, the chief minister proved his credentials as a puppet of Rajiv Gandhi's central government, which was unwilling to offend the powerful Rajput lobby in Rajasthan.

The anti-sati demonstration in Jaipur on September 14 was a small affair in contrast to the milling, jostling crowds in Deorala. About 350 people, including members of thirteen women's organizations, journalists,

scholars, college and university teachers, students, actors, and other professionals—people of all castes and creeds—marched in silence under a relentless midday sun to the state legislature. Their memorandum was finally accepted by a bureaucrat, because the elected leaders of the state (the chief minister and his cabinet) were curiously unavailable; even the women ministers showed little courage and did not meet the protestors, who waited for hours for them to appear. And while the government displayed “a total absence of political will” and disowned all responsibility to enforce the law, a “culture of silence emerged among the prominent citizens and intellectuals (barring the few who had joined the march).”⁹ This deliberate occlusion forced the next step: the feminist leaders decided to make a last-ditch appeal to the Jaipur high court, before it closed at five o’clock that evening, to direct the state government to prohibit the glorification ceremonies to be held two days later in Deorala, on the grounds that they were illegal. The next day, September 15, the advocate for the women’s groups persuaded the bench to admit the petition and to direct the state government to ensure that no public function be held in Deorala.

This injunction finally elicited a statement from the chief minister. He conceded that the act in Deorala had been “unlawful and improper.”¹⁰ But this statement failed to spur a resolutely inert government to take any steps to prevent the *chunari* ceremony; indeed, to the contrary, many members of the Rajasthan Legislative Assembly proceeded to join the throng that had gathered in Deorala. This provoked hitherto uncommitted scholars and teachers to join the discussions that the women’s groups were holding on the subject of sati the same evening. Their indignation was compounded by the fact that the state had accepted this murder as a matter of religious and communal pride for the Rajputs. Rajput youth were out in force, brandishing swords, to protect the site of the cremation. That the event in Deorala was not a religious matter but a question of women’s social identity and status was the crux of the deliberations by the women’s groups.

Margaret Alva chose to express her belated anguish in a telegram to the Women’s Studies Centre at Jaipur University after the festivities were safely over, and Rajiv Gandhi despatched his minister of state for home affairs, P. Chidambaram, to “inquire into the matter” on September 19. Chidambaram delivered the government’s assurances that the situation was now under control, since the main culprits—Roop Kanwar’s father-in-law and his three sons—had been arrested, and that no temple would be permitted to be built on the site to glorify the alleged sati. Later that afternoon he met with 500 or so young Rajput men, who had driven recklessly through the streets of Jaipur in triumph and demanded an audience, uninhibited by the police. The meeting was an angry one, since the minister held firm in his position against the event, and the youths went away swearing to protect *sati*

dharma. Public opinion seemed to polarize along gender lines. Women activists abhorred the event as the murder of a young and helpless widow; and men saw it as a mark of Rajput high society. As activists, the latter formed the overwhelming majority. The Congress Party is often thought of as a bulwark protecting secular values in India, but it was Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the nationally important leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party, who called a public meeting and roundly and unequivocally denounced the glorification of the Deorala incident. The Congress Party acted only when embarrassed by reminders from feminist groups.

Sikar, where the district headquarters governing Deorala are located, lacked any women’s organization that could raise consciousness and determine to prevent such acts in future; and indeed, only a few representatives of women’s groups in Jaipur visited Deorala after the event. These were glaring omissions. Finally on September 25, a select group of women from the various women’s organizations in Jaipur went to Sikar to help form a women’s organization in that district. Local women who responded to this initiative “were very clear that the religious cover given to the entire episode was false. It was a clear case of murder and needed to be condemned in unmixed terms.”¹¹ Meanwhile women’s groups from other parts of the country began to call and express their solidarity with the women in Rajasthan; women journalists working for national dailies had also convened in Jaipur, meeting with the women’s group to ensure better coverage of the steps taken to protest the event.

Unfortunate as Roop Kanwar’s death had been, it seemed to have given women’s organizations fresh impetus to come together and forge new alliances and put into place better networking procedures and strategies for mobilization. On September 29, the disparate women’s groups in Jaipur formed a joint action committee. It formally condemned “all atrocities committed on women in the name of religion or community” and stated that “the basic issue in our struggle was that of women’s identity and status.” It also decided that signatures should be collected from those who supported the groups’ stand, particularly among Rajputs. Further, it resolved to produce a pamphlet that would unambiguously spell out the groups’ position on the issue of sati. This pamphlet would be distributed to the national media and to women’s groups in other parts of India who were also in the process of forming anti-sati committees.¹²

These deliberations and exchanges resulted in plans for a large anti-sati rally on October 6, for which strict ground rules were laid down. It was agreed that the march would be silent, no political party or institutional banner would be allowed, and nobody would be paid even for transport; it had to be an entirely voluntary commitment. Selected people would speak, including a rural woman, a woman from an urban slum (*basti*), two men who

had proved very supportive, and two Rajput women. It was also decided that no political party or outside person would be given a platform.¹³ An open discussion at a local girls' high school on the eve of the rally attracted droves of new supporters, particularly male faculty from Rajasthan University and representatives of women's groups from Ahmedabad, New Delhi, Nagpur, and Pune. The decision to march without party banners and in silence is a recent departure for women's groups; from such small but significant strategic moves, a coherent feminist platform was built and shared by all groups, including male participants.

On October 6, 3,000 people marched through the streets of Jaipur. They represented some 25 organizations from Rajasthan and 31 from other cities. At the public meeting that followed, sati was proclaimed to be not just an issue that concerned women but a crime against women; it was seen as a move to manipulate religion and caste to exploit women. The state government was strongly criticized for its failure to enforce the law. Laxmi Kumari Chundawat, a Rajput writer and former member of the legislative assembly of Rajasthan, asserted that the burning of widows was a barbaric act and that no religion gave sanction to it; a Sanskrit scholar challenged anyone to prove that the *shastras*, the cultural repositories of Hindu legal wisdom, advocated sati. The feminist agenda for further thought and action on the matter of widow-burning emerged with clarity and force:

A systematic and sustained dialogue on this issue of widows (should they always be described as widows?) and their status needs to be carried on at all levels just as much as the even more sensitive issue of religious sanction. Unless the matter is brought out in the open and talked about, its supercharged emotive character will not wear off and rational decision making will always stand in danger of being swept away by the mere chanting of a few words.¹⁴

When reminded by an interviewer that the women who participated in the march had been accused by Rajput critics of being overly Westernized, Sharada Jain spoke passionately. "It is totally false to say that we are Westernized women. The Rajputs have taken to Western ways much more than any other community. The sati was not a question of tradition against modernity." In some ways, she went on to say, it was just the reverse. The glorification of sati was to be seen as the sly revival of a shameful custom by the three most powerful castes in Rajasthan, whose investment in the process of modernization was the greatest: Rajputs, Brahmins, and Marwaris. Jain charged that these three had promoted the murder as sati for their own gain:

Take the family that committed this murder. They are Rajputs. They pride themselves on their tradition of chivalry and valour. In villages throughout Rajasthan, the Rajputs were once the main landowners. Now there is little opportunity for deeds of chivalry, the government has taken away much of

their land, and so the Rajputs are in search of an identity. A sati by a woman of the Rajput caste was a tremendous boost to their morale and image. . . .

[The Brahmin priests'] approval was necessary before Roop Kanwar's sati could be accepted. Brahmins' prestige still depends on their priestly role. . . . They would certainly want to dip into something so unusual as a so-called sati. . . .

The banias [merchants, especially Marwaris] are a very rich and powerful caste. You could say that they are commercially very daring, but they are basically very superstitious. They are religious-minded but their religion is based on luck. They would want to touch the ground where a sati was committed because they would believe it would bring them luck. The banias have the economic power, the Rajputs the political power and the Brahmins the power of religious knowledge. Is it right that a woman's identity should be controlled by these vested interests?¹⁵

Sharada Jain's argument—albeit an oversimplification, because it attributes greater homogeneity of opinion to members of a caste than actually exists—contains the nucleus of the analysis that would be couched in more sophisticated language in several later articles by other scholars. Her question puts the central issue of woman's identity, autonomy, volition, and agency squarely into place: even if Roop Kanwar was willing, she would only have been responding to an internalized ideology. In that case she should be seen more as a puppet than as an agent. This line of argument, by no means new, finds its most detailed treatment in the work of Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid. These scholars have been investigating sati in the Shekhavati region for well over a decade; the Roop Kanwar sati spurred them to write a comprehensive article that collects and updates previous research and culminates in the Roop Kanwar case. They systematically expose the long collaboration between Rajputs and Banias in inventing a formula with an appealing blend of ideological, ritual, and commemorative elements for these periodic spectacles of sati. This formula judiciously borrows features from many traditions of goddess worship already prevalent in Rajasthan. They recount the earlier brutal murder of the young widow Om Kanwar, on August 30, 1980, ill-disguised by her in-laws as a sati and glorified through the erection of a shrine that has become a popular pilgrimage site in Jhardli, Rajasthan. From the details, they abstract what emerges as a model and horrifying inspiration for subsequent instances of sati. A chilling replay of this plot can be seen in the Roop Kanwar murder seven years later.¹⁶

In the weeks and months that followed the death of Roop Kanwar, a flood of articles on the subject appeared in newspapers, special numbers of journals, and independently produced reports and analyses. Every piece that lamented the event was matched by another that approved it. These pro-sati attacks, articulated by men who postured as keepers of a timeless Hindu

tradition, such as the Shankaracharya of Puri, challenged the right of feminists to act as spokespersons on behalf of the alleged satis, and served to focus the feminist position sharply. Nationally known women's groups such as the Women and Media Committee of the Bombay Union of Journalists and the editors of the leading women's journal *Manushi* were provoked to conduct their own fact-finding missions to reconstruct a clear narrative of events in Deorala. Both groups' reports are worth examining at some length.

Three members of the Women and Media Committee visited Deorala in the last week of September 1987.¹⁷ A part of their stated brief was to "examine the sequence of events that led to the sati and obtain a clear perspective on the debate on whether or not there was an element of coercion in the act." This may sound somewhat regressive, considering what has already been said about implicit coercion, but the Committee nevertheless unearthed some very startling facts. Its members had other purposes as well. They wanted to document the impact of the event on the village—"the communal overtones the incident had assumed" and the "socio-cultural influence of *sati* in the region, especially among the Rajputs"—and they wanted to analyze how this incident was reported in the mainstream press.¹⁸ Their report, *Trial by Fire*, deals systematically with each item on their agenda, although much of the reportage contains no new analytical perspective. They faithfully catalog the doings of the women's organizations and analyze the sensational way the English-language press in India reported the event, with journalists feeling free to make the most obvious and insensitive puns and jokes about fire and burning.

But the real value of *Trial by Fire* lies in the nuggets of information it reports that appear to have been overlooked by the rest of the media. At first the authors seem dispirited at finding "a conspiracy of silence in Deorala."¹⁹ Yet it was not quite silence, judging from the text that follows, although some residents refused to confirm that they had witnessed the event. This, of course, may be explained by the fact that a women's investigative team would be greeted with suspicion even if there had been no controversial event in the village.

Despite that "conspiracy of silence," the Bombay team amassed a wealth of amazing details showing how legends are made and how myths are perpetuated—the sorts of things Sangari and Vaid had assiduously tracked in other locations earlier, especially in the village of Jhardli.²⁰ The team also found some medical and material evidence in the police files that could eventually be used to cut through the mystique and solve the criminal case. The visual details recreate the scene. The now canopied *sati sthal* (cremation site) was raised into a brick platform, beside which was embedded a trident covered with Roop Kanwar's red *chunari*, which, they write,

ominously resembled the figure of a woman. Seven youths bearing swords and chanting slogans circumambulated the site; two-hour shifts had been organized to make this an around-the-clock vigil. The Women and Media Committee team also noted the odd little artifacts on sale: wedding pictures of the couple; the sati photomontage; ribbons; toys; and all the paraphernalia needed to offer prayers at the site, such as coconuts and incense sticks. The alliance of religion, commerce, and patriarchy was evident everywhere.

The Women and Media Committee members also recorded the stories circulating in Deorala about Roop, her marriage, her character, and the miraculous nature of the event. They went to Roop Kanwar's home and peered into the lamp-lit room, adorned with large framed photos of various gods and a color television set. This room now served as a new version of a shrine for a modern sati. They could not meet the mother-in-law, who was in the house, obstructed in their intent by a male relative; her husband and two sons had by now been arrested, and she, understandably, was not feeling too well. Elsewhere in the village they heard, from women who claimed to have heard it from others, an account of the sati itself. Immediately before the event

The girl, they say, acquired *sati*—a supernatural power which is akin to a trance-like state where the woman's body burns to the touch and her eyes redden and glow. No one dared dissuade her for fear of being cursed by *sati mata*. She is said to have led the procession, chanted the *gayatri mantra* and blessed people. Roop Kanwar, they say, had only raised her hands and the pyre lit itself.

This miraculous rendering of the event was not only believed by the villagers but also "shared by powerful Rajput politicians, her family and even the police."²¹ Government investigations, tardy and inadequate as they were, were perceived as meddling and intrusive by most people in Deorala. Reporters and cameramen were treated with hostility.

The Bombay team also interviewed the parents of Roop Kanwar. While the couple appeared "disturbed," they seemed reassured that the in-laws' delay in informing them of their daughter's decision to die was understandable, considering that they were devastated by the loss of their eldest son. This telling excuse was made by Sneh Kanwar, Roop Kanwar's mother; she betrays the view that a son's death is more serious than that of a daughter-in-law or a daughter. In normal circumstances in any Hindu household, the parents would have been instantly informed of the death of their son-in-law, no matter how upset the bereaved family might be. In this case they would have rushed to the funeral, being only two hours away and having a car at their disposal. Instead of questioning this serious failure to notify them of their daughter's intentions, Roop Kanwar's parents gave the team a well-

rehearsed summary of the pious character of their dead daughter: she was very religious, an indifferent student, a girl who preferred to play with idols rather than with toys, and a frequent visitor to the sati temple in Jhunjhunu. This evidently was intended to establish her predisposition to make the decision to commit sati.²²

A counternarrative, which was also somewhat problematic, emerged from the "bits and pieces" in "eyewitness accounts" provided to the same team. A Congress Party worker (who had not witnessed the event, but whose relatives confirmed the account) claimed that Roop had actually hidden herself in a nearby barn as she "got an inkling" of the planned immolation.²³ She was found and forcibly put on the pyre at 1:30 P.M. "She screamed and struggled to get out when the pyre was lit, but Rajput youths with swords surrounding her made escape impossible." Her flailing arms, seen by the crowd, were "interpreted by the villagers, not as a sign of her struggling to get out, but of her showering blessings on them."²⁴ One witness claimed that she "was frothing at the mouth"; another, that she had been swaying all the way from her home to the cremation site while ringed by Rajput sword bearers. Because the scene was obscured by the plumes of smoke, clouds of red powder (*gulaal*) flung on such auspicious occasions, and the pressing throng, few witnesses had a clear view of the cremation site itself, but there is no doubt that the younger brother of the dead man lit the pyre, because that is the ritual procedure in the case of a man who has no son. Given these circumstances, the team concluded that the crime committed was murder.²⁵

The Women and Media Committee's report also contained a detailed study of what the police had done until then, and the group's members seem to have had very easy access to all levels of police officers and their documents on this case. The only variance between the police view and the team's own assessment of the event was that the police seemed to be making one crucial distinction: sati, in their minds and in the minds of the population they were dealing with, was something other than murder or suicide. While they had booked the offenders—the deceased man's father and brothers—under sections 302 and 306 of the criminal code, they expressed a clear wish that a law specifically banning sati should be promptly enacted to strengthen their hand. The police did not explain their own bumbling incompetence in failing to cordon off the site so as to prevent the *chunari* ceremony planned for the thirteenth day. Through sins of careful omission such as these, sati rites found new legitimacy in Deorala. Of the hundred or more people who were alleged to have witnessed the cremation, not one was willing to provide testimony for the police. Given the widespread fear of policemen and their tactics, and considering the danger of becoming embroiled in a matter that was being billed as a miracle, it was by no means easy to step forward and

attest to the nature of the occurrence under oath. This explains the silence, the rumors, the myths, and the snippets of detail only heard from equally vague "others" who could not be named.

The police files yielded some intriguing material that other investigators seem not to have found, and it is surprising that the team did not work some of this into their conclusions or pursue a lead that might have answered the very first question on their list. These facts emerged from interviews with M. M. Meherishi of the Criminal Investigation Department (Vigilance Branch) and pertain to the medical history of Roop Kanwar's husband Mal Singh and the particulars of the dowry that she brought into his family at the time of their marriage. Meherishi spoke on the basis of information recorded in the police report.

Let us consider the medical history first. The circumstances of Mal Singh's death are even cloudier than those surrounding the death of Roop Kanwar. Meherishi asserted that the opportunity to collect valuable forensic information was lost because the police had not troubled to investigate the case after registering it. All they did was hand it over to the Criminal Investigation Department eighteen days after the event, when sufficient political pressure had been applied by women's groups. The Bombay team actually examined the police records, including the first information report (written on September 4, 1987), and took the trouble to verify the medical information in the police records directly from the medical personnel involved in treating Mal Singh.

Meherishi raised a brand new issue. He felt he had some facts and leads strongly indicating that the death of Mal Singh "appears to be suspicious." The evidence in support of this claim is as follows. Unaccountably Mal Singh, the acutely sick man, was taken to a hospital in Sikar instead of to one in Jaipur, which is not only closer to Deorala but has far better medical facilities. The doctors at Sikar were equivocal about the cause of the death. The initial diagnosis of gastroenteritis was later dismissed, since it was supported by symptoms recorded only as "acute abdominal pain" at the Sikar hospital. It was claimed that the patient arrived in a state of shock and with low blood pressure. The chief medical officer at Sikar, who later diagnosed Mal Singh's condition as pancreatitis, "felt that there was no need for a post mortem," and no autopsy was ever performed.²⁶

To compound the gravity of such evidence, it was established that the patient had been suffering "from shock and depression" and had been under the care of a Jaipur neuropsychiatrist, Dr. K. G. Thanvi, only a few months before his death. Mal Singh, Dr. Thanvi said, had twice failed to pass the premedical examination to enter medical school; the news of the results of his second attempt at the examination reached him only two weeks before his death. Dr. Thanvi told the team that Mal Singh had been under his care

from June 5 to July 1 in 1987. He "had complained of having lost interest in life and was suffering from androgynous depression. An outpatient, he had been prescribed the usual anti-depressants."²⁷ The doctor felt that the patient was "fully cured" but admitted the high possibility of a relapse. He added that he had not followed up the case and was only reminded of it when he was called up by some journalists in connection with the sati. A local doctor who was summoned to treat Mal Singh in Deorala and accompanied the patient to Sikar had in the meantime absconded, and the police were trying to locate him. He is also suspected by the police of having administered a strong drug to tranquilize Roop Kanwar prior to undergoing the live cremation ordeal so that she would go to her death without too much pain or obvious resistance.²⁸ This body of evidence would smell foul even to the most credulous of sati watchers. One suspicious death seems to have made the second one possible.

Now let us scrutinize the facts about the dowry. The police discovered that Roop Kanwar's dowry consisted of 40 *tolas* (a *tola* is approximately 11.6 grams) of gold, 30,000 rupees in fixed-deposit receipts in her own name, a color television, a cooking range, a refrigerator, and household furniture, apart from her personal wardrobe and other gifts. The police officers saw more significance in this dowry than did the Bombay investigative team, who merely saw it as "[a]nother aspect to be borne in mind."²⁹ The police officers were right. This is a very substantial dowry by Indian middle-class standards, a *tola* of gold being roughly worth 210 dollars in 1987. It was a fortune far beyond the dreams of a village schoolteacher such as Roop Kanwar's father-in-law. The team confirmed that the custom in the area was for a young, childless widow to return to her parents with all her dowry. The team saw the television set and the furniture that Roop Kanwar had brought, and the fact that her parents were very affluent is reported in several places. Yet none of the feminist reporters or scholars—not even the editors of *Manushi*—pursued this matter. The parents of Roop Kanwar would probably have been open to questions about how this marriage was arranged and what the wedding and alliance cost them in material terms.

It is incomprehensible that this very suggestive and potentially incriminating published information has been ignored or treated as insignificant by other feminists who reported on the case subsequently. Instead, implausible speculation about a supposed secret romantic past for Roop Kanwar and allegations of embarrassing ailments suffered by Mal Singh appeared in the press, eroding the possibility of ever getting close to what might have truly ailed Mal Singh and how he died. A story by a woman journalist in the Delhi paper, the *Hindustan Times*, published three-and-a-half weeks after Roop Kanwar's death, claimed that Mal Singh was being treated for impotency and that Roop Kanwar was having an affair with a man from a lower caste,

presumably to explain why her in-laws forced her onto the funeral pyre.³⁰ Such unsubstantiated and irresponsible stories justifiably outraged the villagers at Deorala and increased their mistrust of women reporters, which may account for much of the hostility that various feminist investigative teams report they encountered.

It has been impossible for me, as a feminist historian, to read the evidence gathered by the Women and Media Committee without speculating about what might really have happened. My own research over the past several years for a book on dowry murders, in connection with which I have read innumerable police reports, not to mention case files in a women's resource center, intensify my urge to help clarify some of the mystery shrouding Roop Kanwar's death. So, here is how I read it.

* * *

The village school teacher and his wife find that their eldest son is not particularly bright, is unemployed, and is prone to depression. He has already failed his entrance examination to medical school—a serious matter, since one can only take the test a few times—and the prospects for achieving his family's ambitions for him to become doctor seem dim. Yet the situation is not hopeless: his failure can be shielded from public view for a while. To give the boy a sense of purpose and responsibility, and possibly to help him get over his depression, it might be best to find him a suitable bride while he still appears to have at least the potential of becoming a physician. Marriage is often proposed to cure young men who have strayed from the socially acceptable path and begin to gamble, drink, womanize, or show sexually "deviant" interests; depression, as in Mal Singh's case, probably invited such intervention even sooner. Hindu wives are famous for their endurance of lackluster husbands and for their therapeutic and nurturing qualities. A good match is found in Roop Kanwar, an attractive and educated girl (but only up to the 10th grade) from Jaipur.

They probably did not need to demand a dowry, but they are delighted that their future daughter-in-law is from a wealthy family. As for Roop's parents, they regard this young man as a respectable, highly educated son-in-law with the potential to earn a high income as a doctor.

The young man's condition, however, does not improve; nor do his prospects for a job. He makes another attempt at the medical entrance examination, but that only confirms for him the doubts he has about his own worth. His marriage to this hopeful and beautiful eighteen-year-old heightens his chagrin and possibly his frustration at his own inadequacy. When he failed the examination for the first time, he may have been depressed enough to want to end his life. Failure in examinations prompts many young students to take their lives in India. Waiting for the dreaded results for a second time might bring him to the brink of a nervous collapse. The

seriousness of the situation—possibly even a failed suicide attempt?—now compels the family to seek the services of a “neuropsychiatrist” in Jaipur to treat their hapless eldest son. It is well known that resort to any kind of psychological help in India is seen as a drastic recourse and would be taken only in extreme circumstances. For a village family to go to the big city and seek this particular kind of help suggests that plenty more might have been wrong with the lad than even the Criminal Investigation Department knows.

In the meantime, Roop Kanwar spends most of her time with her parents in Jaipur. The Women and Media Committee team discovered that she had spent only twenty days with her husband after the wedding; she rejoined him only a few days before their deaths.³¹ It is even conceivable that Mal Singh’s psychiatric treatment was kept from his wife and in-laws so as not to alarm them. Another crisis might have forced them to send for Roop Kanwar. Perhaps he tried to take his life (again?) when the results of his failure came out, two weeks before he was to die. On the eve of his death, he is first treated by a local doctor—the one who later absconded and so could not be questioned by the police. Then he is inexplicably rushed to a hospital in Sikar, or so it is claimed. Mark Tully, incidentally, found a serious discrepancy in the story told to him by Mal Singh’s family about this event: he personally checked and found that there is no record of Mal Singh’s admission to the Sikar hospital.³² So the role of the local doctor, who is alleged to have treated him at home, is a vital—and missing—piece of the puzzle.

Whatever may have actually transpired the night before, we do know for certain that Mal Singh was dead and cremated in Deorala shortly after midday on September 4, along with his wife. Mal Singh’s death was probably a fate to which his parents were in some way already reconciled. Their problem suddenly was Roop Kanwar. She must have known what happened to her husband on the days just before he died. When death actually came, Roop Kanwar—as a young, attractive widow—would have presented them with two awkward possibilities. Either she could return to her parents’ home, taking back her dowry and dwelling sorrowfully there (because widows find it impossible to marry in the class and circles to which she belonged), or she could opt to remain with her parents-in-law in Deorala. Either way, as time went on, her sexuality would pose problems and be perceived as a threat to the honor of both families; a sati would convert impending shame into glory. Therefore, persuading her to commit sati seemed an attractive expedient and a culturally acceptable solution. Young women are presumed to be vulnerable and obedient. In this instance, persuasion may have meant anything from brainwashing her an already religious and sati-temple-visiting teenager to drugging her into compliance. The same local doctor would administer a drug, if needed.

The doctor’s sudden disappearance from the village suggests culpability on his part: he may even have suggested the latter course to the distraught parents. Deorala, it is reported, had already been the site for two earlier satIs. Whatever was done was done with speed, and Roop Kanwar took the story of her brief marriage to a troubled young man with her to her death. It was murder.

* * *

The above scenario, speculative and unspeakably evil as it may sound, would make sense of why Roop Kanwar’s parents were not informed until too late. There really was no good reason for keeping Mal Singh’s death and her resolve from them unless Roop Kanwar was not entirely persuaded and could not be relied on to go through with it. The presence of her own family—parents, brothers, possibly friends—would have made this act difficult, if not impossible. So the in-laws hastily decided that it would be best to inform the parents after the cremation; surely they would understand how grief and pain keep people from their worldly obligations. This, however, was also the case in all the preceding sati-style deaths in the Jhunjhunu-Shekhavati region: no parents were informed until after the cremation.³³ Prominent people in the village, who nostalgically approve of women’s sacrifice and purity, came to the cremation ground in every case. They certainly would have done so this time, since the school teacher commands some respect in the village, and his circle of acquaintances certainly would have exceeded the hundred or more who did come. And so they stood there and watched and approved, with their chants and slogans, and added coconuts and buckets of *ghee* to the flames, as they beheld the spectacle of Roop Kanwar’s flailing limbs showering blessings on them amid the smoke and *gulas*. This was not just a dowry murder but a doubly cynical and criminal act committed, not with the help of kerosene in the kitchen, but in the full gaze of an applauding and credulous multitude. As for Roop Kanwar’s parents, they not only believed the story of their daughter’s sacrifice, they donated 100,000 rupees toward its commemoration on its first anniversary. Are people capable of such self-serving evil? Yes, everywhere and in all cultures.

Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita, editors of *Manushi*, were the next major team of women to visit Deorala. They arrived in the last week of October; by then, all the possible interpretive angles on the event were already in print, and a heated “modernity-versus-tradition” debate was in full swing. While they rightly condemned the sterility of this controversy, they ironically furthered it by arguing that this so-called traditional event is a thoroughly modern phenomenon. By preserving the binary opposition of traditional versus modern in their analysis, they unwittingly proved that sati has resurfaced on the scene in modern-day India with inevitable modern-day political (instead of religious) trappings.

In their subsequent report, Kishwar and Vanita insist on calling the Deorala happening a "modern day Sati," conceding thereby that it was a sati.³⁴ They reinforce this impression by carefully explaining the distinctions between a dowry death and a sati. Interestingly, in their analysis of the ensuing debate on sati, they criticize the argument made by "most reformers" that the Deorala event was a product of "blind superstitiousness and excessive religiosity" and "backwardness and primitiveness . . . preserved in our rural vastness," because this unwittingly supports the position of the pro-sati camp, which sees modernity as the enemy of traditional values.³⁵ In distancing themselves from the anti-sati campaign, the editors write that "Somewhere along the way" it became "counterproductive," and the campaigners "became characterised as a handful of anti Hindu, anti Rajput, antireligion, progovernment, antimasses, urban, educated, westernised people, and the pro-Sati lobby as those sensitive to the sentiments of the rural traditional poor." The "reformers," they feel, saw the Roop Kanwar case as a "product of an old tradition, whereas in its present form it is a new created cult [sic], organised by political, not by religious, leaders." They go on to say that it was also a mistake to enter into the debate "on the religiosity or otherwise of the Deorala Sati." It should have been demystified and seen as "a case of a woman being hounded to death under a specious religious cover, and of her death being made a symbol by certain power groups to demonstrate their clout." Petitioning the government, they say, only let the government "off the hook for its complicity in Roop Kanwar's death" and gave it the opportunity "to pose as progressive by introducing a repressive law."³⁶ They suggest that human rights and women's organizations should use Mahatma Gandhi's weapon *satyagraha*, nonviolent civil disobedience, to protest "the murder and its subsequent glorification."³⁷

This sati was indubitably the creation of modern economic, political, and social forces. Deorala, the *Manushi* team points out, is a modern village of 10,000 inhabitants with a 70 percent literacy rate, electricity, and tap water—a relatively prosperous place dominated by Brahmins and Rajputs. It has brick houses, a large market well stocked with consumer goods, and inhabitants who dress as fashionably as their counterparts in the cities and who are not uninfluenced by the ubiquitous Hindi film manners and mores. Roop Kanwar's family is educated, as was she. Her father-in-law was a school teacher, her husband a science graduate, her brothers the owners of a thriving transport business in Jaipur. As for the sati event itself, Kishwar and Vanita show that it was no less modern than the setting in which it occurred. They list many crass adaptations from Hindi films, political rhetoric, and other aspects of popular culture that had been incorporated to valorize the sati. The slogans they heard voiced by youths near the cremation site were emended political slogans, shouted in a cheerleading

fashion rather than in the manner of chants at a religious ritual. The inspiration for the lurid photomontage on sale in the village was traced to a publicity poster for the film, *Sati Sulochana*, "The Sati with the Beautiful Eyes." The *arati* sung at what had now been instituted as a daily evening worship at the *sati shal* was a generic modern Hindi hymn popularized via the Hindi cinema.³⁸ And the *chunari rasam*, a solemn ritual performed for any deceased woman, was converted into a *chunari mahotsav*, a carnival with slogan-shouting, sword-wielding young men as the major attraction.

Kishwar and Vanita attempt to show—and largely succeed in doing so—that the environment of the Deorala sati is not only modern but primarily male. In their view, men created the cult, although women would seem complicit since they join in the singing. The power wielders of the newly formed Sati Dharma Raksha Samiti ("Committee for the Defense of the Religion of Sati": the word *sati* in the name was dropped after the government passed an ordinance that forbids the glorification of sati) are Jaipur-based men in their twenties and thirties; its secretary, Narendra Singh Rajawat, is educated, affluent, the owner of a leather-export business, and married to a graduate of one of Delhi's leading women's colleges. The sati rally they organized in Jaipur drew hundreds of young Rajput men from all over India. They danced, postured, and screamed slogans "as if part of a victory celebration."³⁹

Another dismaying part of this new trend is the construction and patronage of sati temples in the cities and hamlets of Rajasthan and elsewhere by Marwari businessmen. But all is not lost for women in Rajasthan. Kishwar and Vanita offer us a heartening counterexample to the sati ideal in the life and songs of the much loved Mirabai, a sixteenth-century *bhakti* saint who is revered by men and women alike in north India. Her

urge towards self definition and freedom . . . is much more integrally a part of Rajasthan traditions relating to women than is the cult being created around Roop Kanwar today. That the new self proclaimed leaders should choose a Roop Kanwar rather than a Mira as a symbol of Rajasthanian womanhood indicates what they believe is woman's place, but is no evidence that a major section of Rajasthanian women have chosen that ideal for themselves.⁴⁰

This last statement is more than amply bolstered in a very rich article based on interviews with thirty rural women of Bhilwara district published in *Seminar*. These outspoken village women remain unimpressed with attempts at reviving the sati cult in Rajasthan, and see right through the vested interests involved in the Deorala episode.⁴¹

The Kishwar and Vanita analysis of the actions and inaction of the state largely conforms with those already discussed. Briefly, they assert that "our government machinery, far from being progressive, is not even neutral. It is controlled by politicians for whom considerations of power and profit are far

more important than human rights."⁴² Few would disagree with the spirit of that generalization. Particular accusations by the *Manushi* team against the police, however, seem to be totally contradicted by the experience of other journalists—notably the encounter of the Women and Media team with the Deorala police discussed earlier. Kishwar and Vanita claim that “[a]ny attempts to challenge the cult are prevented by the police. . . . The facts of the case are being suppressed and the cult built up, under police protection.”⁴³ They seem unaware of the fact that the police have foiled several sats in the last decade, and that only four or five have been successfully carried out.⁴⁴ The *Manushi* editors appear to have made no attempt to interview the police and Criminal Investigation Department officers in charge of the case; instead they claim that Deorala was sprinkled with plainclothes policemen, making it difficult for them to distinguish villagers from policemen. Be that as it may, it explains why the *Manushi* team had nothing to say about Mal Singh’s illness or Roop Kanwar’s dowry.

A more trenchant critique of the state and its involvement in the Deorala episode was published in the *Economic and Political Weekly* in November 1987.⁴⁵ Using a broader perspective, the authors, both women professors at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, reflect on the Roop Kanwar death as one more dramatic example of the recent upsurge of communalism by both Hindu and Muslim obscurantist forces. However, “this particular incident has happened,” they write, “just as communal violence happens because the government is not willing to enforce the norms and laws of a modern and civilized state.”⁴⁶ In treating the Deorala episode neither as an isolated event nor as exclusively a women’s issue explainable in terms of local Rajashthani patriarchal pride and prejudice, they illumine the interconnected complexity of recent communal reactions and violence in India. “In sharp contrast to the past when Gandhi and Nehru forged a secular consensus,” write Imrana Qadeer and Zoya Hasan, “now, these backward social forces have entered the centre state with direct and indirect backing of the state.”⁴⁷

Imrana Qadeer goes further in a marxist-feminist critique entitled “Roop Kanwar and Shah Bano” (*Seminar*, February 1988), in which she explains how the prevarication of the Congress Party government, then headed by Rajiv Gandhi, led tacitly to the arousal of fundamentalist passions. In 1986, Rajiv Gandhi’s capitulations to Muslim fundamentalists in the Shah Bano case and to Hindu fundamentalists in the Babari Mosque-Ramjanmabhami dispute progressively frayed secular liberalism in India. Briefly, Shah Bano, a 75-year-old Muslim woman abruptly divorced by her very affluent lawyer husband, petitioned the Supreme Court for maintenance, which was granted. This judgment was perceived by fundamentalist Muslims as undermining Muslim family law, which does not recognize a

divorcee’s right to maintenance. A prolonged and bitter fight of Muslim women, Indian liberals of all religions, and women’s organizations ended in their defeat when Rajiv Gandhi’s government overturned the Supreme Court’s judgment by an Act of Parliament. The fundamentalist mullahs then cornered the powerless old woman and made her retract her demand for maintenance as a grave religious “error” and made her flout the judgment of the highest court in the land.⁴⁸ The Act of Parliament shredded the secular constitution of the country in the same way as did the government’s irresponsible opening of the locked doors of the Babari Mosque while the dispute over its proprietorship was awaiting judgment in the local courts. In each case either Muslim or Hindu extremists were given an extrajudicial arena to play out the dispute, transforming what might have remained longstanding grumbling matches into a make-or-break deal for the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party.⁴⁹

Qadeer describes the triumph of religious fundamentalists and militants who have brazenly exploited the tragic circumstances of powerless women in both Hindu and Muslim communities. She delineates the emerging trends as follows:

1. That fundamentalist forces are capitalising not upon an event or two but on a persistent feature of the social system: the position of women as second class citizens. This . . . strengthens their alliance with the ruling classes.
2. That fundamentalists have not only succeeded in capturing the imagination of the majority in their respective communities but also succeeded in confusing a section of their intelligentsia.
3. That the state not only gives in to their anti-secular demands but also justifies them—and its [own] actions—by changing the very definition of secularism. Then in the name of democratic practice it supports the majority view within religious communities.
4. That as a consequence of the above, the liberal democratic sections are becoming increasingly paralyzed and marginal.⁵⁰

This was said in 1987; the situation of late has grown far grimmer, and Qadeer’s verdict holds more true than ever before.

Now we can return to the issue of women’s identity and autonomy in the context of sati. In a thought-provoking recent article, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan expressly addresses the question of pain and agency in an effort to counter the absence or transcendence of pain that is claimed as reality by those who argue in defense of sati. While the results of her attempt to theorize female subjectivity as agency in this particular situation remain tentative, one cannot gainsay her observation that “in the discourse of the anti-sati position, however, while pain is undeniably everywhere present, it is nowhere represented.”⁵¹ She looks for signs of pain in a large assortment of “social texts” produced by this event, such as newspapers, photographs, and

documentary films, as well as in the law itself, and finds it only in a single feminist poster and in a consciousness-raising documentary. In the popular posters and commercial mementos of the Roop Kanwar sati, the woman's face and body show no marks of the experience of burning; the aforementioned photomontage (a version of which is Figure 1 in the present volume) shows her smiling as she sits serenely on the pyre in all her bridal finery while a small figure of a goddess beams down the magic ray to ignite it.⁵² Sunder Rajan argues that the subjectivity of pain is important to stress because it

needs to be conceptualized as a dynamic rather than a passive condition, on the premise that the subject in pain will be definitionally in transit towards a state of no-pain (even if this state is no more than a reflexivity . . . [T]he affect produced by a body in pain—pity, anger, sympathy, identification—is an important consideration in formulating the politics of intervention.⁵³

While Sunder Rajan has made the most valiant attempt yet, in the Indian context, to articulate the idea that a woman's pain is to be apprehended as subject-constitutive, the idea of a woman's agency in sati remains problematic at several levels. First, the belief in a woman's volition, her special power of *sati*—a "miraculous" driving force that enables her to shower blessings, heal the sick, and order the funeral pyre to ignite itself yet feel no pain—makes her the agent of her own destiny in the ideology and biographical narratives of sati. Sangari and Vaid point out the difficulties that arise in "squaring widow immolation as a product of the woman's own volition with the necessarily public and participatory nature of the funeral," in whose absence the miraculous nature of the event cannot be established.⁵⁴ In fact, one could go further and add that it makes female agency a very dangerous idea—one that sati perpetrators would be happy to appropriate in Deorala and elsewhere. Deeper still, even when agency can be forensically established, can the woman's act of self-immolation be judged to be a product of her own will, or must it be judged as a product of the very studious socialization and indoctrination of women (particularly for the role of wife) that shape her attitudes and actions from girlhood? At yet a fourth level, as Lata Mani points out, the current legislation on sati, by making a woman who escapes or otherwise survives the burning liable for attempting sati, implicitly conceives of her as a "free agent." The law is self-contradictory, in that case, for it cannot logically claim to locate coercion and agency in the same act. So the question of agency is delicate, complex, even contradictory, and it certainly cannot be conceptualized as neatly as it has been in liberal feminist theories in the West. In fact it might be better to settle for a provisional view of woman as victim until some way is found to resolve the question of woman's agency in this particular setting. As Lata Mani says,

The example of women's agency is a particularly good instance of the dilemmas confronted in simultaneously attempting to speak within different

historical moments and to discrepant audiences. What might be a valuable pushing of the limits of the current rethinking of agency in Anglo-American feminism, may, if not done with extreme care, be an unhelpful, if not disastrous move in the Indian context.⁵⁵

Perhaps the last word on "agency" should belong to a Rajput woman, Rani Chundawat, who has spoken eloquently against sati and is a prominent Rajasthan public figure. In commenting to the editors of *Manushi* on what Mal Singh's family maintains was Roop Kanwar's decision to commit sati, she poses a series of rhetorical questions that challenge the notion of woman's agency very profoundly in the context of sati: "How many women have the right to decide anything voluntarily?" "If a woman does not choose her husband and does not decide matters such as her own education or career, how can she choose in a matter as imperative as that of life and death?" Given that a woman's status is generally determined by her relationship to men (as daughter, wife, widow, mother), "can any decision . . . particularly such a momentous decision, really be called voluntary and self-chosen?"⁵⁶ The answer to the last question is, of course, no. Therefore, it may be ill-advised to seek female agency in the act of committing sati.

The question that has not come up anywhere in the literature and remains a silent subtext in other equally harrowing situations, whether dowry murders or other widow immolations in the Shekhavati region, is the question of the fear of a young woman's sexuality. If we see few images of her pain, we see even fewer images of her desire; and in the concept of sati, both the pain and the desire that arise in a woman's body are erased. Sati is about transcendent states, not embodied ones. For feminists it has been enough to invoke patriarchy, that umbrella term that serves as an explanatory backdrop for all crimes against women, including the punitive control of female sexuality. Like the wordless language of pain—flailing arms, screams, tears—desire is smothered at the source in the body language of modesty and in silence. It is easier to trot out the material reasons for sati and other violent crimes against women than to venture into the psychosexual realm of human motivations. The idea of a desirable and desiring widow whom no one will marry and whom many will want to exploit remains unexpressed—oddly, even more so than in the case of pain. This is true both with respect to the perpetrators of sati and with respect to its critics, opponents, and analysts. The need for a more forthright discussion of this issue is urgent. Feminists will have to take the lead in demolishing this blank wall.

But what of feminists' achievements so far? What have been the results of feminist intervention in Roop Kanwar's case? A law, called the Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act of 1987, has been inserted into the statute book. Vasudha Dhagamwar, a professor of law and an activist, offers a capsule history of the legislation that has attended the custom from the earliest legal

debates of 1805 to the present.⁵⁷ She recounts that the clamor for fresh and separate anti-sati legislation (which in her view was redundant with the existing Indian Penal Code) came entirely from anti-sati activists who were drawn into the debate on whether or not this event could have been voluntary. She pleaded, along with others, that there was no such thing as "voluntary sati" and that a law against murder already existed and simply needed to be enforced. After a fractious interlude, which Dhagamwar describes with zest, Parliament enacted comprehensive anti-sati legislation outlawing not only sati but its glorification in any way, shape, or form. Yet this piece of legislation was not drafted by feminists, and a close inspection of its many sections would please them little. It has replicated, in some parts verbatim, many of the prejudices, caveats, and ambiguities of the East India Company Regulation of 1829, and it adds a few complications of its own by attempting to define sati. In fact, if I may put a gloss on it, instead of making a law that prohibits an incontestable crime against women, the framers of the new law succeeded in defining sati as a woman's crime. Dhagamwar points out that, in refusing to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary sati, they have in effect managed to "treat all sati as voluntary. That is why the woman is punished and that is why those who kill her are punished for abetment, and not for murder."⁵⁸ So, should a woman by some chance manage to escape the pyre, she would be culpable first and foremost. This is not exactly a giant step forward for womankind, and it can be lamented as yet another inroad into the secular terrain of the Indian Penal Code.⁵⁹

What did this law achieve in the case of Roop Kanwar's death? Before it was promulgated the police had arrested her father-in-law and her two brothers-in-law; the village doctor had absconded. Then the law was enacted, but even so the culprits were eventually released without bail. The case against them is pending, but the frustrating reality is that they will not come up for trial; and no one quite knows or cares to determine the whereabouts of the doctor. Thus the case has effectively stalled; and as far as I am able to find out, no one plans to reactivate the charges. On the other side of the ledger, the glorification of sati has been curtailed to the extent that some sati temples find worship interrupted on occasion by a policeman on duty. Yet we will have to wait until the next festival season—or the next—to see what impact the anti-glorification legislation really has on popular reverence for sati. In the meantime, the silence is deafening. When in January 1993 a foreign traveler asked how he could get to Deorala, he was told, "Why do you want to go to Deorala? There is nothing to see."

Acknowledgments

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Philip Oldenburg, my captive editor and critic, helped in his usual manner with careful and constructive comments.

Notes

1. This is not the entire range of responses. Ashis Nandy's chapter, which follows this one, represents quite a different side of the debate, and I will respond to it subsequently. For brief feminist analyses of the various political positions—liberal, conservative, and feminist—see Lata Mani, "Multiple Mediations: Feminist Scholarship in the Age of Multinational Reception," *Feminist Review* 35 (Summer 1990), pp. 24–41, and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, "The Subject of Sati: Pain and Death in the Contemporary Discourse on Sati," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 3:2 (1990), pp. 1–23.
2. Romila Thapar, "In History," *Seminar* 342 (February 1988), pp. 14–19. For example, Ashis Nandy had claimed, in the *Indian Express* on October 5, 1987, that there had been only three historical periods when sati had become an epidemic. Without fuss, without even mentioning his name, Thapar offers a well-documented explanation for Nandy's misperception in the case of Vijayanagara in the sixteenth century (p. 17).
3. Sudesh Vaid, "Politics of Widow Immolation," in *Seminar* 342 (February 1988), pp. 20–23. This essay remains the clearest statement of the historicity and world view of sati in the Shekhavati region.
4. Lata Mani has written extensively on the colonial discourses on sati, and I refer liberally to her work in my response to Ashis Nandy's article in this volume. Her observations on the discursive continuities between the colonial and the present debates on Roop Kanwar in her "Multiple Mediations" are exceptionally pertinent here.
5. The information in the following paragraph is based on Mark Tully's chapter entitled "The Deorala Sati" in his book, *No Full Stops in India* (New Delhi: Viking Penguin India, 1991), pp. 210–36; also published in *The Defeat of a Congressman and Other Parables of Modern India* (New York: Knopf, 1992), pp. 191–215. His interview with Sharada Jain, the sociologist and women's rights activist who spearheaded the women's protest against the valorization of the sati, captures both her anger at and her analysis of Roop Kanwar's murder very well.
6. Prabhush Joshi, *Jansatta*, September 18, 1987, as translated in Tully, *No Full Stops*, p. 228.
7. Tully, *No Full Stops*, p. 222.
8. Sharada Jain, Nirja Misra, and Kavita Srivastava, "Deorala Episode: Women's Protest in Rajasthan," *Economic and Political Weekly* 22: 45 (November 7, 1987), p. 1894. The following account is abstracted from this chronology, pp. 1891–94.
9. Jain et al., "Deorala Episode," p. 1891.
10. Jain et al., "Deorala Episode," p. 1893.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*

13. Jain et al., "Deorala Episode," p. 1894. The entire chronology is taken from this source and checked against other newspaper reports.
14. Ibid.
15. Tully, *No Full Stops*, p. 223.
16. The article referred to here is their most recent piece, "Institutions, Beliefs, Ideologies: Widow Immolation in Contemporary Rajasthan," *Economic and Political Weekly* 26:17 (April 27, 1991), pp. WS-2-18, which subsumes earlier publications.
17. These three were Meena Menon, Geeta Seshu, and Sujata Anandan, and they produced a 33-page report entitled *Trial by Fire: A Report on Roop Kanwar's Death*, published in Bombay by the Bombay Union of Journalists. It has no date of publication but states that the authors visited Deorala, Sikar, and Jaipur between September 24 and 30, 1987, after the *chunari mahotsav* had already taken place. They must have written their report not long afterward.
18. Menon et al., *Trial by Fire*, p. 1.
19. Menon et al., *Trial by Fire*, p. 2.
20. Sangari and Vaid, "Institutions, Beliefs, Ideologies," pp. WS-3-6.
21. Menon et al., *Trial by Fire*, p. 3.
22. Menon et al., *Trial by Fire*, p. 4.
23. Menon et al., *Trial by Fire*, pp. 4-5.
24. Menon et al., *Trial by Fire*, p. 5.
25. Ibid.
26. Menon et al., *Trial by Fire*, pp. 6-7.
27. Menon et al., *Trial by Fire*, p. 7. The term "androgynous depression" is unusual but not explained. It may be a euphemism for repressed homosexual desire or for impotence caused by a lack of enthusiasm for heterosexual activity, such as Mal Singh might have experienced after marriage; it certainly merits further investigation.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Tully, *No Full Stops*, p. 215.
31. Menon et al., *Trial by Fire*, p. 1.
32. Tully, *No Full Stops*, p. 216.
33. This fact raises questions about the conventional view of the natal family's callousness toward daughters in India, especially after marriage—a view that has wide currency among feminists in the West.
34. Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita, "The Burning of Roop Kanwar," *Manushi* 42-43 (1987), p. 15.
35. Ibid., p. 16. These "reformers"—a puzzling usage at best—are not named, nor are the direct quotes used in the article attributed to any particular "reformer." The editors' report makes no mention of the other fact-finding teams' analyses of political slogans, although these had been published long before the *Manushi* team visited the site, and although these had argued in much the same way. *Manushi* is a leading feminist journal and carries many scholarly articles, yet its editors seldom practice the art of scholarly attribution of borrowed ideas. Their report develops the sati-as-a-modern-phenomenon argument more fully than did Sharada Jain et al.

- or the Women and Media Committee report, among others, but the editors waste no space on acknowledgments to suggest the provenance of the many themes they bring to a fullness in their own much later report.
36. Kishwar and Vanita, "Burning," p. 24.
37. Kishwar and Vanita, "Burning," p. 25.
38. Kishwar and Vanita, "Burning," pp. 16-18, 24.
39. Kishwar and Vanita, "Burning," p. 18.
40. Kishwar and Vanita, "Burning," p. 20.
41. Kavita, Shobha, Shobita, Kanchan, and Sharada, "Rural Women Speak," *Seminar* 342 (February 1988), pp. 40-44. The authors of this piece (who, like most feminist activists, do not use their family names) are affiliated with the Women's Development Programme in Rajasthan.
42. Kishwar and Vanita, "Burning," p. 21.
43. Kishwar and Vanita, "Burning," p. 22.
44. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, "The Subject of Sati," p. 3.
45. Imrana Qadeer and Zoya Hasan, "Deadly Politics of the State and Its Apologists," *Economic and Political Weekly* 22:46 (November 14, 1987), pp. 1946-49.
46. Qadeer and Hasan, "Deadly Politics," p. 1947.
47. Ibid.
48. Considering that Shah Bano succumbed to religious pressure to recant in the full glare of national multimedia publicity, one can imagine how easy it might have been to convince an eighteen-year-old widow in the privacy of her marital home in an obscure village in Rajasthan to immolate herself.
49. Briefly, Hindu militants claimed the soil as their god Rama's birthplace and wished to build a temple to him on the site where a Rama temple is believed to have once stood. This alleged space was since 1528 occupied by a mosque built by the Mughal Emperor-Babar's general. The critique is even more pertinent if we consider the habit of dangerous vacillation inherited by Narasimha Rao's government. The same apparent inertia overwhelmed it when throngs of hoodlums destroyed the Babari Mosque in Ayodhya on December 6, 1992, and an eminently preventable act became the signal for thousands to go berserk and bloody the face of a secular republic.
50. Imrana Qadeer, "Shah Bano and Roop Kanwar," *Seminar* 342 (February 1988), p. 33. In this essay Qadeer incorporates some of the points discussed in her other cited piece, but she goes much farther in producing a cogent and gender-sensitive analysis.
51. Sunder Rajan, "The Subject of Sati," p. 7.
52. Sunder Rajan, "The Subject of Sati," pp. 14-15. She discusses the very important ideas of Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) and in the process has stimulated discussions among Indian feminists about the inadequacy of current theory on the subjectivity and identity of women.
53. Sunder Rajan, "The Subject of Sati," p. 9.
54. Sangari and Vaid, "Institutions, Beliefs, Ideologies," p. WS-10.
55. Lata Mani, "Multiple Mediations," p. 38.

56. Kishwar and Vanita, "Burning," p. 21.
57. Vasudha Dhagamwar, "Saint, Victim or Criminal," *Seminar* 342 (February 1988), pp. 34–39. Apart from being a compact piece of legal history, this essay is valuable for its very careful comparative analysis of the Rajasthan and central government statutes on sati occasioned by the Roop Kanwar incident.
58. Dhagamwar, "Saint, Victim or Criminal," p. 38 (emphasis in the original).
59. The first was made in 1986 when the Shah Bano case led to the exemption of Muslim husbands from the requirement to pay maintenance for their abandoned or divorced wives under the Penal Code section designed to prevent vagrancy. This exemption, for Muslims only, was enacted separately as the Muslim Women's (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act.

5

Sati as Profit Versus Sati as a Spectacle: The Public Debate on Roop Kanwar's Death

ASHIS NANDY

The peculiar mix of fascination, fear, dramatics, moral self-righteousness, and anger with which India's Westernized middle classes reacted to the sati committed by Roop Kanwar at Deorala in Rajasthan in 1987 should have been a psychologist's delight. Evidently, the very idea of suicide on the funeral pyre of one's husband—or the possibility that someone might exploit this ancient and rare rite to hide the murder of a young widow—had its own strange fascination for the modern mind. For a small minority of thinking Indians, however, the middle-class reaction to the sati only deepened the tragedy of the death of a teenage widow.

This minority could not forget that during the previous decade, a number of such instances of sati had taken place in Rajasthan without arousing the same passions in urban India. These people remembered their discomfort at the unconcern with which most social activists and journalists greeted instances of sati even a few years before. Such events were almost invariably reported in the inside pages of the national dailies, usually as a form of esoterica that had survived the juggernaut of progress. A large majority of those who were ready to throw epileptic fits at the mention of the word *sati* after Roop's death, did not care to write even a few standard letters to the editor when, for instance, the last sati took place only a year earlier, even though that case, too, was duly mentioned in the English-language press.¹