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**Ranjit Roy**  
 State Aided College Teacher,  
 Raiganj Surendranath  
 Mahavidyalaya,  
 Uttar Dinajpur, West Bengal,  
 India

**Corresponding Author:**  
**Ranjit Roy**  
 State Aided College Teacher,  
 Raiganj Surendranath  
 Mahavidyalaya,  
 Uttar Dinajpur, West Bengal,  
 India

## The practice of “Sati”: A historical and socio-cultural analysis

**Ranjit Roy**

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### Abstract

The term “Sati”, or “Suttee” has come from the Sanskrit term " Satī " (Sanskrit: सती). It is a female form of word “Sat” (Sanskrit: सत्), that means truth or real or pure. The term “Sati”, apparently refers to chastity of women. According to Hindu mythology, the goddess Sati (who became Pavarti upon rebirth) is the one who gives this practice its name. In response to the disrespect her husband showed her husband, the god Shiva, Sati willingly burned herself. Her act of devotion was celebrated and, over time, became the practice of sati more commonly known today. “Sati”, or “Suttee”, was a well-known social practice in Hinduism in ancient India where a widow would burn herself alive on her husband's funeral pyre. The Sanskrit term " Satī " (Sanskrit: सती) is used in Hinduism to refer to ritual suicide. Typically, people use sati to refer to the practice of a widow joining the funeral pyre of her recently-deceased husband. It is believed by scholars to have been a widespread practice in ancient India. The widow would join her husband's funeral pyre voluntarily, by force, or because she felt she had no other options. It was a largely historical practice that was outlawed in British-ruled India in 1829. In 1829, Lord William Bentinck, the first governor general of British-ruled India, outlawed sati by passing The Bengal Sati Regulation of 1829. The Bengal Sati Regulation of 1829 was a law that made the practice of sati illegal and banned the practice of sati, or burning Hindu widows on their husband's funeral pyre. This regulation stated that sati was "revolting to the feelings of human nature" and "unlawful and wicked". It also made it a crime to "aid and abet" in the burning of a Hindu widow. The practice of sati has largely ceased since the British outlawed it. The practice was considered a barbaric and abhorrent practice by the British. An aged long struggle by the social reformers against this inhuman practice has helped to stop it from the society.

**Keywords:** Ancient India, Hinduism, Satī, social practice, inhuman, barbaric, illegal, banned, society

### Introduction

The practice of “Sati” is a highly controversial and painful chapter in Indian history. It was originally practiced in ancient Hindu society, where a widow would cremate herself alive along with her husband's cremation either voluntarily or under pressure from society. This practice is not only a reflection of the society's strict attitude towards women, but it is also indicative of the social, religious and political context of the time. Just as sati-immolation was considered a symbol of women's self-sacrifice, it was also an example of women's disempowerment. Although the practice continued for centuries in the Indian subcontinent, it was eventually outlawed due to the efforts of the colonial regime and social reformers. In this article we will discuss in detail the origin, social and religious importance of the practice of Sati, its impact, and the process of its abolition.

Before discussing its impacts in the life of women, we must search the root of its origin or origins. The origins and spread of the practice of sati are complex and much debated questions. It has been speculated that rituals, such as widow sacrifice or widow burning, have prehistoric roots. Historians differ on the exact origin of the practice of Sati. Although the practice is not directly mentioned in ancient Indian scriptures, its existence can be found in some historical and religious interpretations. Some researchers believe that although the Rigveda contains instructions about the lifestyle of widows, there is no direct reference to the practice of Sati. Rather, the Rigveda also allowed widow remarriage. However, later Dharmashastras, Puranas and some Smriti literature emphasized the chastity and chastity of women, forming the social basis of the practice of Sati.

The practice of Sati can be seen in the Gupta period and later. Some historians believe that during foreign invasions, especially during Muslim rule, society encouraged the practice of Sati on the pretext of protecting women's chastity. Society encouraged women to sacrifice themselves along with their husbands to protect their chastity and dignity. Sati originated within the Kshatriya (warrior) aristocracy and remained mostly limited to the warrior class among and Hindus. But with the passage of time it spread to other upper and lower castes including Brahmins and became a social custom. Irrespective of any social distinction it became a common practice in Hinduism. A voluntary practice converted into the common practice of pushing a widow and burning her with her husband. Romila Thapar further points to the "subordination of women in patriarchal society", "changing 'systems of kinship'", and "control over female sexuality" as factors in the rise of "Sati". The practice of Sati was fading in some extent later but not stopped.

The practice of Sati resumed during the colonial era, particularly in significant numbers in colonial Bengal. Three factors may have contributed this revival: sati was believed to be supported by Hindu scriptures by the 19th century; sati was encouraged by unscrupulous neighbours as it was a means of property annexation from a widow who had the right to inherit her dead husband's property under Hindu law, and sati helped eliminate the inheritor; poverty was so extreme during the 19th century that sati was a means of escape for a woman with no means or hope of survival.

The practice of Sati-immolation was not only a social practice but was also considered a religious ritual. It is not just a consequence of over integration into the society but also because of the overbearing and rigid norms hovering over women. The concept of "Sati" was developed from religious and social point of views. The word 'Sati' is derived from sat (truth), which refers to a woman who is devoted and supremely devoted to her husband. In the story of Daksha Yajna in Hindu mythology, Goddess Sati sacrificed herself in protest against Lord Shiva's insult. From this myth, the idea of being a 'Sati' was popularized in society, and expectations of such self-sacrifice developed for women. The purpose of "Sati" is to show devotion to one's husband. A wife, in traditional Hindu belief, should be dedicated to her husband in life and death, and this was a way to do that. It is likely also motivated, at least in part, by the historically negative attitude towards widows in Hinduism, leaving some women to choose death over widowhood. The social perspective of this practice signifies extreme female subordination. A widowed woman was seen as a burden in the society. In many societies widows were subjected to various forms of social oppression and deprivation. Widow remarriage is prohibited in many places, and their lives were bound by strict social and family rules. In this situation, the practice of "Sati" had come to be considered by many as a way of 'honourable death.' Apart from social and religious shortcomings, economic factors also responsible for this evil practice. In many cases the practice of "Sati" was also encouraged to reduce the economic pressure on the family. A widow's family would not be willing to take up the responsibility of supporting her; on the other side, the parents' family also denied to take any responsibility of their widow daughters. So, social pressure or family pressure would push her to self-

immolation.

Implementation of Sati Burning Ritual was the most inhumane tradition in the society. 'Satidah' ritual was usually performed with great fanfare. People from different strata of society participated in it and it was considered as a religious festival. After the death of the husband, the widow had to face social pressure. Influential people in the society and family members mentally prepared her for 'Satidah'. While in some cases women chose this path voluntarily, most of the time it was forced or induced. On the day of cremation, widows are dressed in special clothes and religious rituals are performed. After that, the dead body of the husband was put on the pyre. Publicly this self-sacrifice was presented as a 'holy' and 'heroic' act. After 'Satidah', in many places temples or structures were built in memory of the woman. She was worshiped as 'Devi'. This practice inspired more women to follow the same path.

The practice of burning sati has had a profound effect on the position of women in society and their freedom. It undermines the rights and freedom of women and confines their lives to a narrow religious and social frame. The practice of 'Satidah' has undermined women's right to life, liberty and survival. A woman was considered a person related only to her husband, whose existence was supposed to cease with the death of the husband. The other family members or even the society had no responsibility to the helpless women. Fortunately if a woman survived, he is forced to leave a life of unbearable social impediment. Women who survived sati-burning were subjected to social scorn and deprivation. They were considered 'impure', and could not participate in social events. The practice of burning "Sati" created a kind of fear in the minds of women. After marriage, women used to fear that after the death of their husbands, they might have to face the same fate. This thought caused the fear and stress of social insecurity.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, various social reformers and colonial administrations led to the abolition of the practice of "Sati". Raja Rammohan, one of the leading social reformers, gave his verdict on the abolition of sati-immolation. In 1811, his brother Jagmohan Roy died and the widow was forcibly burnt alive. This shocked Ram Mohan and he decided not to rest till the custom was totally banned. He said, "To bind down a woman for her destruction, holding out to her the inducement of heavenly rewards, is a most sinful act."

He took a strong stand against this practice and highlighted its horrors in various papers and speeches. He wanted to prove that the true teachings of Hinduism do not permit such cruelty. He condemned this practice as a religious practice, and raised his voice to come out from this narrow and rubbish custom. He believed that religion must include knowledge, love of God and sympathy for men and women. He motivated people for socio-ethical consideration and rouse social consciousness among people. He realised the urge of social and religious reforms in order to remove the misinterpretation of Hindu customs. He attempted to make the abolition this inhuman custom that prevailed in the country for many centuries. During the British rule, the controversy over the practice of burning sati started. The Bengal Sati Regulation, 1829 was introduced during the rule of Lord William Bentinck in 1829. The Bengal Sati Regulation of 1829 was a law that made the practice of sati illegal and banned the practice of sati, or burning Hindu widows on their husband's funeral pyre. This regulation

stated that sati was "revolting to the feelings of human nature" and "unlawful and wicked". It also made it a crime to "aid and abet" in the burning of a Hindu widow. The practice of sati has largely ceased since the British outlawed it. The practice was considered a barbaric and abhorrent practice by the British. According to this law, sati-immolation is considered 'illegal' and 'murder'. Even after the enactment of the law, sati-immolation was practiced secretly in some places. But with the passage of time, this custom gradually disappeared completely with the change of society's attitude and spread of education.

After the abolition of the practice of "Sati", the position of women in the society changed somewhat. Improvement of position of women was notice gradually. After the abolition of this social evil practice, social attitudes towards women began to change. Various movements started on widow marriage, women's education, and women's rights. Promotion of women's education made the women aware about their existence and importance in the society. The efforts of social reformers led to the expansion of women's education, which made women more aware and self-reliant. Abolition of the practice of "Sati" marks a major change not only for women, but for the entire society. It proves that change is possible by going against the prevailing customs and norms of the society. We began to look widows in new perspectives on Society.

### Conclusion

The practice of "Sati" cannot be supported in any circumstance. "Sati" burning is a dark chapter in Indian history. It symbolizes society's harshness towards women, misinterpretation of religion and social injustice. However, the abolition of this practice proves that social change is possible, if educated and conscious people come forward. The contribution of Raja Rammohan Roy, Lord William Bentinck and other social reformers teaches us that truth wins when fighting against social prejudices and injustices. Today, even though the practice of "Sati" is only a sad memory of the past, it reminds us that society must always be vigilant to protect women's rights. Religion, society and above all human beings must stand by the side of women to protect their rights. The struggle for equal rights, dignity and freedom for women should never stop, as it is crucial to building a just society.

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