

Francis Jarman (University of Hildesheim)

Sati: From exotic custom to relativist controversy

Along with female circumcision, cannibalism and female infanticide, Indian widow-burning or *sati* is one of the key arguments presented by critics of cultural relativism. Surely gross acts of misogynistic cruelty can be seen as something like negative human universals, in which the appeal of basic common humanity must be allowed to outweigh the demands of a specific culture? The conservative American critic Allan Bloom in his book *The Closing of the American Mind* famously uses *sati* as a classic example of the relativistic apathy of American students. In answer to his question, "If you had been a British administrator in India, would you have let the natives under your governance burn the widow at the funeral of a man who had died?" they "either remain silent or reply that the British should never have been there in the first place" (Bloom 1987: 26). I had a similar experience in a seminar on intercultural communication in which we discussed female circumcision and I found myself arguing against all the female students present, who insisted that, unpleasant as it was, female circumcision had to be allowed for reasons of intercultural respect. Furthermore, what right had I as a man to express strong opinions on such a subject? Wasn't my interest dirty-minded? Or just a male chauvinist attitude of moral superiority, a racist leftover from colonialism?

It was a clear demonstration to me that the discussion that has been going on in American academic circles recently, under the heading: Is multiculturalism bad for women? is indeed completely topical. As the journalist Katha Pollitt puts it: "In its demand for equality for women, feminism sets itself in opposition to virtually every culture on earth. You could say that multiculturalism demands respect for all cultural traditions, while feminism interrogates and challenges all cultural traditions. [...] Fundamentally, the ethical claims of feminism run counter to the cultural relativism of [...] multiculturalism" (Pollitt 1999: 27).

Sati is therefore a sensitive subject in the debate on cultural relativism. Internationally it has been tied too closely to what is believed to be racial and colonial stereotyping for Western intellectuals to have shown much courage in speaking out against it. The most substantial Western study of *sati*, by the indologist Catherine Weinberger-Thomas, skirts cautiously around questions of "for" and "against" to focus on the phenomenon of "sati-hood"; her account seems confusing and unconvincing – "distinctly shaggy and perplexing", according to one reviewer (Pinney 2001) – almost a classic example of what happens when an anthropologist fails to translate the categories of the Other into terms meaningful to her own culture. In India, feminists are generally opposed to *sati*, but they have drawn the censure of intellectuals like Ashis Nandy for setting up "a new form of internal colonialism" – the

feminists are westernised, Anglophone city-folk rubbishing the India of the villages and small towns as backward and barbarous because they feel threatened by it (Nandy 1994: 142).

Let us approach *sati* from three directions – firstly, as an Indian religious and cultural phenomenon; secondly, as a Western discourse, supposedly a proof of Hindu backwardness and cruelty; and finally *sati* as it is analysed by Indian feminists.

What is *sati*?

"The happiest death for a woman is that which overtakes her while she is still in a wedded state," wrote the great French indologist Abbé Dubois in his *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* (1816 / 1983: 350), "[...] on the other hand, the greatest misfortune that can befall a wife is to survive her husband." In traditional Hindu society, widows are forbidden to wear colours, flowers, henna or turmeric decoration, or jewellery, or to eat meat. Except for lower caste or Untouchable women, they are forbidden to remarry. They are expected to shave their heads, sleep on the ground, do menial work, fast, and pray for their dead husband. Among the Rajputs, in the classic *sati* area of modern India, the widow spends a year in penance, sleeping in one corner of a tiny room – "she of the corner" (*kunevali*) is an insult (Weinberger-Thomas 1996 / 1999: 146). Despised and helpless, and living under crowded conditions, the widow may be the object of sexual abuse within the extended family. A Marwari saying describes a young woman widowed just after her marriage: "The wedding bed just made, and she's already a whore" (*sej carhte hi rand*) (*op. cit.*: 147). Many widows are simply thrown out – for example, by a daughter-in-law, taking revenge for years of bullying. The choice is then often between prostitution (for younger widows) or begging.

Some are sent off to Vrindavan, Uttar Pradesh, the "city of widows"] (see Dalrymple 1998: 49-59; also Narasimhan 1990: 54f.), where 8-10,000 widows now spend their time chanting mantras to Lord Krishna (four hours of chanting for a cupful of rice and two rupees). Reportedly, the ashrams where they live are often centres of money-laundering through faked "donations". Younger widows, who may be as young as ten years old, may be sold off by the ashram managers, as concubines (sex-slaves) to local landowners or straight into brothels. In Varanasi, the holy city, there may be 20,000-60,000 widows in a similar situation, but they are less noticeable (Varanasi is a very large city, always full of pilgrims).

In the South Indian languages Kannada, Tamil and Telugu, "widow" is a term of abuse (for men, too), and a Tamil euphemism for "widow" is "she who is no longer alive" (Narasimhan: 40); in some northern Indian languages, the words for "widow" and "prostitute" are either very similar or identical, and "widow" (*rand*) is a term of abuse (Jamanadas, *Devadasis*). In earlier times it was often said that the plight of a widow was so unpleasant that the brief agony of *sati* was better than the long agony of widowhood. In the words of a British observer at the height of the Raj, "The wretched condition forced on widows by national custom causes many of them to prefer being burnt on the pile with their dead husbands" (Eden 1876: 120f.).

Widow-burning can be found in many historical cultures, along with the immolation of a ruler's or a nobleman's slaves, horses and favourite objects. It has existed in India since at least 510 AD (Thapar 1966: 152), although there are earlier references in religious texts, probably to a symbolic enactment, and in the account of India in the late 4th century BC by Megasthenes, ambassador of the Greek king Seleucus Nicator (Rawlinson 1925: 59), where it is a curiosity practised only among certain tribes.

In more modern times, *sati* has been particularly associated with the warlike Rajputs of what is now Rajasthan, an area roughly the same size as the present *Bundesrepublik*, whose womenfolk had a tradition, *jauhar*, of mass suicide in defeat. At the end of a battle a flag would be raised to signal victory or defeat, and if it was the latter, the women would kill themselves. The most famous, albeit possibly mythical, story concerns the mass suttee of Queen Padmini and her women at Chittor, to avoid capture by the Muslim Sultan of Delhi, Ala-ud-din Khilji, in 1303 (Weinberger-Thomas: 122). In 1534 (or 1535) and 1568 (1569) there were further large-scale acts of *jauhar* at Chittor, reportedly involving vast numbers of women. Widow-burning was common among the princes and the higher castes. Sixty-six women were burnt at the funeral of Ajit Singh of Marwar (Jodhpur) in 1724, and eighty-four died at the funeral of Budh Singh, Rajah of Bundi (Narasimhan: 119). It is easy to see a connection between *jauhar* and *sati*, at least in the sense that the Rajput custom made the Rajputs favourably inclined towards *sati* – and perhaps there *is* a homology here, but *jauhar* is something that took place in a military rather than religious context.

The Muslim rulers of India – the Sultans of Delhi, and later the Mughal emperors – discouraged *sati*, but they didn't forbid it, for fear of causing rebellion among their Hindu subjects. They were not being soft-hearted (bear in mind that traitors or convicted criminals might be impaled, skinned alive or crushed by an elephant), however, Hindu widows were seen as innocent victims of an irrational heathen religion. Although *sati* was seen as suicide, which was forbidden by *Sharia* law, it was permitted to Hindu widows provided that it genuinely was voluntary (Thapar: 292). Akbar (1556-1605), the greatest of the Mughals, "took personal pains to see that no compulsion should be used" (Lane-Poole 1903: 253), and reportedly rode a hundred miles in an attempt to prevent the *sati* of a Rajput princess (Narasimhan: 109).

The attitude of the British during the early years of East India Company rule was very similar, and they only took steps against *sati* when they realised that they would not be opposed by the Hindu community. In contrast, the Portuguese administration in Goa forbade *sati* as early as 1510 (*ibid.*). The richest part of British India was Bengal, and the Bengali city of Calcutta was the capital of British India and the residence of the British governor-general. The Bengali intellectual and reformer Ram Mohan Roy, who had seen his own widowed sister-in-law burnt in 1812 – "an hysterical and unhappy sacrifice" (quoted in Allan / Haig / Dodwell 1934: 722) – without being able to help her, led a campaign against *sati* in print and also by trying to stop actual burnings in Calcutta (there was an average of one a day). He suggested that *sati* in Bengal was often motivated by the greed of the dead man's family, since under the inheritance law prevalent in Bengal, *dayabhaga*, widows inherited the whole estate of the

dead husband and could not sell or mortgage it or give it away (Narasimhan: 115f.). Roy's efforts strengthened the resolve of reformers in the BEIC to do something about *sati*. Previously they had tended to follow a "hands off" policy, in order to avoid offending Hindu sensibilities. A regulation in 1812, for example, announced that *sati* was permitted if voluntary – many widows have been brought to the pyre sedated with opium or other drugs – and if the widow was not under 16 and not pregnant (Moon 1989: 457).

The presence of a police officer to enforce these details effectively gave *sati* official sanction in the eyes of the local population, a rather unfortunate effect, and in Bengal the number of cases of *sati* increased drastically, although a cholera epidemic might also have been responsible, in the sense that there were suddenly a lot more widows (Narasimhan: 68). In 1829, however, the British governor-general Lord William Bentinck banned it. Under Regulation XVII, *sati* was declared to be either culpable homicide, punishable with imprisonment, or murder, punishable with death. Bentinck was clever enough to consult opinion among the sepoy – the Indian soldiers – first, and he found that they were fairly indifferent – they came mostly from areas where *sati* was uncommon (Moon: 456). He also consulted Sanskrit scholars, police inspectors, local administrators, and Ram Mohan Roy. Not all Indians were opposed to *sati*. Roy himself was not actually in favour of a direct ban (Embree 1994: 153f.). Many Indians saw the *sati* – the burning widow – as an important national symbol, the epitome of self-sacrifice and of moral and spiritual energy.

This attitude is still surprisingly prevalent today. A quick tour through Indian web sites and discussion forums soon reveals people willing to glorify the *sati* or anxious to repeal or modify anti-*sati* legislation. *Sati*, like female infanticide and human sacrifice (see Karmakar, *Indian temple*, on the attempts to revive human sacrifice in Assam), has never completely died out in India. Today the centre of *sati* is Rajasthan, the land of the Rajputs, in particular the semi-desert area called Marwar ("the region of death"), where there are cult centres of Sati Mata ("Mother Suttee"). Those who burn themselves bring good fortune to their families and villages for seven generations. In country areas you see little *sati* cenotaphs, or *chattris*; in forts or palaces, the *nishan* (mark) of a hand on a stone tablet or painted on the wall commemorates a *sati* (traditionally, a *sati* would make the mark in henna just before mounting the pyre).

In the past half century since Independence there have been at least forty cases of *sati* in rural areas (Weinberger-Thomas: 182f.), three-quarters of them in Rajasthan and most of these in the district of Sikar near Jaipur, though possibly many more unpublicised cases. The number will now need to be increased by one more since the burning of 65-year-old Kuttu Bai in a village in Madhya Pradesh on August 6th, 2002 (Anonymous, *Outrage*). The most notorious *sati* was the burning of 18-year-old Roop Kanwar in Deorala on September 4th, 1987, for which 37 men were put on trial and (after nine years) acquitted.¹ She was well-educated, her father ran a trucking company in Jaipur, the state capital, her husband Mal

¹ The account of the Deorala case given here and in the final section of this essay is based largely on Narasimhan (1990) and the relevant sections of Hawley (Ed., 1994). I have dispensed with page references, except when quoting directly.

Singh – who died suddenly under mysterious circumstances, quite possibly suicide – was a science graduate and the son of a village schoolteacher who himself had bachelor's and master's degrees. Deorala is a prosperous village of 10,000 with electricity and tap-water, a hospital, two secondary schools, and a literacy rate of 70%.

The court case polarised India. Westernised urban-dwellers believed the version of murder by a primitive mob; villagers believed that Roop Kunwar had made a glorious choice. Within two weeks of her death, three-quarters of a million people had come to worship at the site of her *sati*. 250,000-300,000 alone attended the "glorification" ceremony, or "Festival of the Veil" (*chunari mahotsav*) thirteen days after the event, at which the embers were doused with Ganges water and milk, and the crowd included state politicians and state MPs. When Rajiv Gandhi's federal government made it illegal to glorify *sati*, a crowd of 70,000 demonstrated in Jaipur against this. A poll in *The Times of India* in December 1987 showed 63.4% support for *sati*.

Religious leaders like the Shankaracharya of Puri – the abbot of one of the four most famous Hindu monasteries, there is no Hindu pope, but his Christian equivalent would be someone like a cardinal or archbishop – spoke out strongly against the new legislation, saying that *sati* was a recognised part of Hindu tradition and supported by scripture.

Actually, the Hindu scriptures are ambiguous on this subject. The earliest holy texts, the Vedas, contain references to widows remarrying, but no direct mention of self-immolation, except possibly one very controversial section of the *Rig-Veda* X,18,7ff. (c.1300 BC or later) which seems to describe the widow stepping forward to lie down beside the body on the pyre before being called back to the land of the living. This could be a ritual gesture of paying last respects; or a symbolic rejection of an yet earlier tradition of immolation; but in some versions it may also be a corrupt text, with the verb *-agne*, to "go into the fire" (from *agni*, fire), substituted for *-agre*, to "come forward". The result is an unclear reading, perhaps the result of a transcription mistake by a scribe or, in the view of the indologist Max Müller, a deliberate later corruption of the text by unscrupulous priests (Narasimhan: 14). The later *Atharva-Veda* XVIII,2,1 contains an appeal to a widow to get up from beside her husband's body and offers a prayer for her future life with wealth and children (*ibid.*). Kautilya's *Arthashastra* (300 BC or later) mentions widow remarriage; the *Laws of Manu* (2nd century BC-2nd century AD?), the basis of later Hindu lawgiving, do not mention *sati* at all (*ibid.*). The references to *sati* come in later works, and, as Narasimhan points out (*op. cit.*: 18), what can be observed is a process reflecting a chronological shift in attitudes to women (and not at all to their advantage) by which, first, remarriage of widows is allowed; then, celibacy is encouraged; then, celibacy and *sati* are suggested as alternatives; then, *sati* is encouraged; and, finally, in texts after about 700 AD, there is glorification of *sati*.

The logic of *sati* – the word properly refers not to the act but to the person carrying it out – is one of female devotion. *Sat* is "essence/inner truth/goodness/purity" – the good wife (*sati*) is true to her ideals of chastity, purity and loyalty to her husband, is a *pativrata*, who has made a vow (*vrata*) to her lord husband (*pati*), who sees him as husband-as-god (*patidev*) and joins

him in death. If a woman is completely devoted to her husband, she will die first. If he dies before her, she has failed him in some way. However, she can restore the situation by vowing to join him in death (*sativrata*). She is full of the moral heat of *sat*, and will ignite spontaneously and explosively on the funeral pyre. From now on until her death she is in a kind of mystic state, able to make terrible curses and utter commands that must be obeyed. In death she becomes *satimata*, a goddess who will protect her family from beyond the grave.

Not all Hindu groups indulged in *sati*, and *sati* was never a general obligation. In his account of India in the late thirteenth century, Marco Polo mentions *sati* (for which women can earn great praise) (Polo, The Yule Edition: 258), but also several cases of widowed queens, such as the ruling queen of Mufili (*op. cit.*: 265) or the widowed mother of the five kings of Maabar (*op. cit.*: 271). In the tantric tradition, which venerates the Mother Goddess, *sati* is absolutely taboo and women who become *sati* – and men who help them to – go straight to hell (Oldenburg 1994b: 171). *Sati* has also been very rare among the Jains, probably because Jain widows are allowed to become nuns (Narasimhan: 43).

Even those Hindu texts that encourage *sati* usually forbid it for Brahmin women. Possibly the priests were trying to protect their own womenfolk (*op. cit.*: 20), but the more likely explanation is that *sati* was a custom of the warrior castes, the *kshatriya*, who were concerned about the damage to their personal honour threatened by the violation of their women, especially defenceless widows, in a period of violence and confusion, the so-called Indian Middle Ages, that followed the collapse of the Gupta Empire in the 5th century AD, the invasions of the Huns and the brief empire of Harsha (605-647). (This is roughly the period in which positive references to *sati* begin to predominate.) Rajasthan was India's Wild West, the war front with invaders like the Huns and the Muslims.

The Western discourse of *sati*

From the Western point of view, *sati* has not always been merely a theoretical problem – the British ruled India for two hundred years, and had to decide what, if anything, to do about it. But *sati* was well-known in the West long before the British colonial period. Almost every traveller's account of India included a description – and often a picture – of *sati*.

In 1441 the Italian merchant Nicolò de' Conti reported what he had seen on his travels in India (Lach 1965: 61f.). In 1502, an Indian Christian priest, Joseph, travelled to Rome and told Pope Alexander VI about such customs as *sati* (*op. cit.*: 157). The Venetian merchant Cesare de Fedrici gave a detailed account of *sati* after staying in Vijayanagar in southern India for seven months in 1567 – he had lived near the gate through which the *sati* processions left the city (*op. cit.*: 471). The Dutchman Jan van Linschoten left a similar account about twenty years later, and both he and Fedrici repeat the explanation of *sati* that once upon a time wives had been so apt to get rid of their husbands by poison that the law had to be introduced which compelled a widow to be burnt with her dead husband (*op. cit.*:

485), a tale originally told by the Greek Diodorus Siculus, and quoted by Gandhi (Narasimhan: 57).

Westerners were fascinated by *sati*, and the accounts were turned to different uses in Europe. As Figueira (1994) has shown, European writers used *sati* as a means to criticise brutal, irrational religion (Voltaire, Herder), or to speculate about reincarnation, or as an expression of overwhelming love-in-death, e.g. Goethe's *Der Gott und die Bajadere* (1797), in which the woman burns herself on the dead god's pyre, and he returns and lifts her up into heaven. In non-Indian form it appears in Brünnhilde's self-immolation in Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* (1876), and perhaps also in Miss Havisham's in Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861). But the British colonial accounts are normally on a different level, of practical and personal involvement, and they need to be considered in the functional context of a handful of British wielding power over 100 million Indians.

Sati was a touchstone of native inferiority, and an excuse for British interference. Social horrors like *sati* were useful reminders to the Indians of the need for benevolent, civilising British rule – especially at times of vocal nationalism, like the 1920s, which saw the publication of books like Edward Thompson's "historical" study *Suttee* (1928) and Katharine Mayo's aggressive *Mother India* (1927) and *Slaves of the Gods* (1929). The central figure in British accounts is usually the male British protagonist who is drawn into a social drama and confronted with the need to respond emotionally and perhaps practically. The *sati* rescue was a theatrical opportunity for the Western male to demonstrate racial and moral superiority – the colonies as a stage for the kind of self-dramatisation that was much less easily achievable in Europe. It was an enactment of power that was both racist and sexist – as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak memorably if somewhat glibly puts it, "white men saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak 1988: 297; see also Jarman 1998: 86f.).

Even before the banning of *sati*, there was considerable leeway for local (British) authorities to intervene to prevent it. Some magistrates or officers would declare that they would permit the *sati* if the widow burnt her finger first – which might put a stop to the project (Narasimhan: 66), or might not (Weinberger-Thomas: 41-43). (This is reminiscent of Voltaire's *Zadig* (1747), in which *Zadig* suggests introducing a law to make widows spend an hour alone with a young man before they are allowed to sacrifice themselves.)²

Sir Charles Napier, conqueror of Sind, when told by local Brahmins that *sati* was an established tradition, replied that hanging people who burnt women was an established tradition among the British, and that both sides should therefore follow their traditions (actually, there was very little *sati* in Sind, which was predominantly Muslim) (Moon: 577). One magistrate saved a woman who had leapt from the flames into the Ganges from being forcibly burnt by the mob by telling them that since the sacred river had rejected the woman's sacrifice – the non-swimmer had not drowned (she was in fact rescued by a police boat) – then they should not intervene (Narasimhan: 96); more recently (1985) an Indian police

² A law "par laquelle il ne serait permis à une veuve de se brûler qu'après avoir entretenu un jeune homme en tête à tête pendant une heure entière" (chapitre XI : *le Bûcher*).

officer saved a *sati* from being burnt in front of a crowd of 20,000 by telling the participants in the ritual to wait for her to ignite spontaneously – after an hour, when it was clear that she was not a "true *sati*", he was able to send everyone home (*op. cit.*: 96f.).

In fairness to some of the *sati* rescuers, though it may well be that they acted for ethnocentric or hegemonistic reasons, surely there was also an element of compassion on the simple level of one human being to another, an emotional rather than a moral imperative. It need not have excluded erotic interest – human motivation, to my mind, is seldom straightforward. The proof of this would lie in the willingness of the rescuer to accept the consequences of his action, perhaps risking his life, or his job, or taking responsibility for the person into whose life he had intruded.

Thus Job Charnock, the later founder of Calcutta, and reputedly not a particularly nice man, rescued a beautiful fifteen-year-old widow, a Rajput princess, from the pyre in Bihar (c.1663) and then married her himself; they had several daughters, who married into English families of substance, and he mourned her by sacrificing a cockerel in her honour every year on the day of her death, a gesture – in the view of his contemporaries – of "unusual though innocent excess" (Moorhouse 1971: 29; Wilkinson 1976 / 1987: 30). Today, we are all expected to be cultural relativists – a position that is itself culturally determined rather than universal – and if you are going to say "No! Stop it!" to another culture, then it is far better for it to be for personal reasons rather than in the name of your own "superior" one.

Some modern commentators – for example Lata Mani (1998) – have approached the subject of *sati* as if it only existed as a British discursive construct. The British set the agenda by claiming that Indians were deterministically enslaved by religion, and that *sati* was religiously based. They supposedly gave structure and recognition to the custom by consulting only the spokesmen of the Hindu elite, and then following their recommendations. They exaggerated the significance of a regional, caste-restricted phenomenon, and distinguished between "good" *satis* that were voluntary, spiritual and noble, and "bad" *satis* that were coercive and engineered by greedy priests and relatives. The fate of the unfortunate woman burned to death was of little concern.

The approach adopted here smacks of self-deluding political correctness. The discursive manipulation of *sati* by Westerners need not exclude the fact that *sati* as a ceremony (and not the self-immolation of religious or political fanatics that you find in many cultures) was a well-established Indian tradition, reported on by visitors to India for two thousand years; that it took place in a religious context; and that it was homologous with the abuse and exploitation of women that was (and still is) characteristic of traditional Indian society. To state, as Lata Mani does, that "The discussion of the rights of women as individuals is [...] strikingly absent in the debate" (*op. cit.*: 77) may be true, but it is a rather strange, historicist thing to say – has she forgotten what conditions for women were like in Europe in, say, 1820?

In any case, having got themselves into the colonial situation, what were the British to do? If they interfered in *sati*, then it was ethnocentric meddling and racist assertion of superiority. If they didn't, it was opportunistic toleration of the oppression of women in the name of a religious tradition that they didn't properly understand. This is a "no-win situation".

It also seems questionable to ascribe a monolithic response to the British. There were different reactions, just as there were different agendas. Some British reactions were callous, along the lines of "Let them get on with it!" *Sati* could also be the object of sick humour, as in the mid-nineteenth century cigarette advertising slogan "With only a Suttee's passion / To do their duty and burn" (quoted in Harlow / Carter 1999: 68). Local administrators, as already indicated, were often left alone with their instincts and consciences to decide whether to intervene or not. Accounts of rescues, including fictional ones, were bound to focus on *them*, if only because the dynamic is usually more interesting dramaturgically than the acted upon. But there is variation in the way in which *sati* was portrayed in situations where there was no rescue. Some eighteenth-century pictures emphasise the dignified, noble aspect of *sati*, with the figures looking almost Classical in their robes; this is still true of the **tableau by Captain Grindlay** published in 1844.³ It is not true of such drawings that they "neglect" the victim. In



³ "A Suttee – Preparing for the Immolation of a Hindoo Widow," steel engraving by J. Redaway from a drawing by Captain Grindlay. After dreaming of the death of her husband, the woman burned herself near Baroda, in the princely state of Gwalior, after resisting the persuasions of both the British Resident, Sir James Rivett Carnac, and the local prince, Daulat Rao Scindia. (See Weinberger-Thomas: 103.)

the early nineteenth century the BEIC came under attack, for example from missionaries, who had been largely excluded from India, as compromising itself morally for commercial gain. The pictures in missionary pamphlets, however, tend to be naive or melodramatic.

The classic fictional account of a *sati* rescue is not even British, but French – the account of the rescuing of Aouda in Jules Verne's *Around the World in 80 Days* (*Le tour du monde en quatre-vingt jours*, 1873) – and at least certain elements of it are ironical. A few interesting points stand out:

- that Aouda's immolation is connected with the cult of Kali,⁴ although *sati* and Kali have scarcely any connection with each other, this being more a case of two Indian "horrors" being linked with each other automatically;
- that Aouda, who later marries the hero Phileas Fogg, is pale-skinned (Chapter 12: "blanche comme une Européenne"). Much Western fantasising about exotic sex has played safe by making the non-European woman either look or actually turn out to be white; in the case of films, she is often played by a white actress, as Aouda is played by Shirley MacLaine in the film *Around the World in 80 Days* (directed by Michael Anderson, 1956);
- that the central figure in the rescue is the white man. That is normal enough, but in this instance, ironically, the rescuer is Phileas Fogg's French servant Passepartout – this is after all a novel by a Frenchman!;
- and that Aouda shows deep gratitude towards and admiration for her "rescuer".

The two best-known modern fictional accounts of *sati* are both untypical. *The Deceivers* (1952) by John Masters, who was an officer in the British Army in India before becoming a bestselling novelist, is about *thagi* (thuggee), ritual murder in honour of Kali, another Indian custom that the British tried to eradicate, but there is an important plot element involving *sati*. At the beginning of the story the hero, William Savage, saves a widow from burning herself by means of a trick. The description of *sati* – voluntary *sati*, that is – is surprisingly understanding. At the end of the novel Savage, who has lived as an Indian in disguise, helps the woman to become a *sati* by lighting the fire for her himself. (She also dies at the end of the film version (directed by Nicholas Meyer, 1988), but he doesn't himself light the pyre.)

M. M. Kaye's *The Far Pavilions* (1978) was a huge bestseller. There is a *sati* scene, but it is not the heroine, Anjuli, who is to die but her spoilt, cruel sister Shushila. In the rather overwrought plot, Shushila wishes to exclude her sister from the honour of *sati* and from sharing the funeral pyre of their dead husband; she is to watch, and afterwards her eyes will be put out (in the television version, directed by Peter Duffell, 1983, this is on Shushila's orders, but in the book she is not quite so sadistic). Anjuli is rescued by her lover Ash, who agrees to shoot Shushila on the funeral pyre so that she will not feel the pain of burning.

⁴ Kali, "perhaps the most terrifying of all the manifestations of the Great Goddess" (Blurton 1992: 172), is a Hindu deity of frightening appearance and sinister reputation, whose cult has traditionally been associated with death, blood sacrifice and ritual murder. Her name means the "Black (female) One".

The feminist perspective

It is easy to make a case that South Asian society is male chauvinistic. The treatment of widows seems to be part of a nexus of female inferiority, expendability and abuse that also includes infanticide; child-brides; wife-beating; the rape of low-caste women or (in Pakistan) members of the Christian minority; honour killings, known as *karo kari* in rural Pakistan (Griffin 1996); dowry murders; and temple prostitution. Narasimhan quotes the ancient texts at length to support this view: "A man with a hundred tongues would die before finishing the task of lecturing upon the vices and defects of women, even if he were to do nothing else throughout a long life of a hundred years" (*Mahabharata*, c.400 BC-AD 200) (Narasimhan: 28); "women, low-castes, dogs and crows embody untruth, sin and darkness", they "have the hearts of hyenas" says another text (*Satapatha Brahmana*) (*op. cit.*: 29); and there is a proverb: "The drum, the village fool, the low-caste, animals and women – all these are fit to be beaten" (*op. cit.*: 51). The Laws of Manu declare that in childhood a woman should be in the charge of her father, in youth of her husband, and in old age of her son (*op. cit.*: 31). A woman's life only has meaning in the context of a man's, and a woman should be "used" only by one man – one 19th century religious commentator, Pandit Ghanashyamji of Bombay, even compared women with "one-way" crockery (*op. cit.*: 34) – so celibacy or suttee become logical. There was (is?) a fear of female sexuality – Hindu society, all those erotic temple carvings and sexy mythological stories notwithstanding, is extremely prudish. Ram Mohan Roy pointed out to the British how worried many Indian families were that a widow might "go astray" – *sati* removed that fear for them (*op. cit.*: 33).

Modern Indian society does not encourage equality between the sexes. At the centre of the problem is the phenomenon of dowry. On visits to India in the 1970s and 1980s, I noticed a strong difference to usual Indian practices when I spent time in villages of the "tribal" Bhils of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. The Bhils had a bride-price rather than a dowry system – the bridegroom "bought" his bride, and if she was unhappy she could return to her parents without any obligation on them to return his money. I observed how often women seemed to have the say in public situations, and was told that the Bhils attached no great importance to premarital virginity – it was accepted that older children would experiment with each other sexually – although a non-virgin tended to command a lower bride-price.

The dowry system on the other hand has encouraged the custom of female infanticide. In 1991, there were 945 girls for every 1,000 boys, in 2001 only 927 (Wadhwa 2002). Female infanticide is especially prevalent in the south of India – with Tamil Nadu where the problem hit the headlines in 1986, supposedly having the greatest incidence (Sen 2001: 78). It was calculated by the Community Services Guild of Tamil Nadu that in the areas they were studying around 44% of the female children born in 1991 had been murdered (Anonymous, *Gender equity and justice*). As in many other Asian countries, sons are more highly valued because of their greater physical strength, their role in the family cult – in India, the lighting of the funeral pyre – and because they remain within the family after marriage rather than leaving it (the years of upbringing are therefore a better investment than with girls). But a

major reason for the killing of newborn baby girls, perhaps the most important, is the huge burden of later having to provide a dowry for them.

The repertoire of baby murder covers a whole range of killing techniques (Wadhwa 1995; Venkatesan 2001), including strangling, snapping the spine, filling the baby's mouth with tobacco juice, fertiliser or black salt, feeding it hot, spicy chicken soup, poisoning with oleander, leaving the umbilical cord untied, suffocating the baby in a clay pot, or (a method I myself encountered in Calcutta in the 1980s) leaving the baby on a rubbish dump, to be eaten by dogs. But it is not only female *children* who are done away with.

There is also the phenomenon of dowry murder. In Delhi alone, there is a murder or attempted murder of a young wife, usually by her mother-in-law, at the rate of more than one a day, the motive being greed for yet another dowry payment. (Dowry was abolished by law in 1961, but is still overwhelmingly prevalent.) At Delhi's Tihar Jail, a separate barrack for murderous mothers-in-law has had to be built, and is already overcrowded (Anonymous 2000). These murders are usually by burning, and are often disguised as kitchen accidents or cases of suicide. They became noticeable in the early 1970s in northern India, and are apparently particularly common among the Marwaris (Weinberger-Thomas: 165). There are indications that they are beginning to spread to the South Asian communities in Britain, where the suicide rate among young South Asian women is suspiciously high (Prentice 2000). Not all Indians are as outraged about these attacks as Indian feminists are. Women who survive these attacks may be ostracised, after all, if the woman was abused or abandoned by her husband, she must somehow have provoked it, have been to blame by not being a good wife (Sen: 67) .

A few Indian feminists have adopted a more traditional, universalist position, questioning the emphasis on dowry as a motive and seeing these killings as examples of male chauvinist hatred and domestic violence, or have focused on inheritance laws rather than dowry as the root of the problem. Overstressing dowry creates "an erroneous impression that all of the violence in Indian homes is due to a growing greed for more dowry. And it makes the crime look peculiarly Indian, while the truth is that violence against wives is common to most societies, including those which have no tradition of dowry" (Kishwar 2001; but see also Agnes 2002, and the discussion in Sen: 181ff.).

Ironically, there has probably been less interest among Westerners in these very numerous dowry murders by burning than there has been about the tiny handful of *sati* cases. Is it because we can "accept" greed as a motive for killing far more easily than we can accept religious enthusiasm? The American indologist Ainslie Embree (1994) has suggested that the truly horrific and disturbing thing about Deorala was that many thousands celebrated it, and claimed religious sanction for it. This is a dichotomous culture in which, parallel to the abuses to which women are subjected, the different forms of the Mother Goddess are worshipped with tremendous enthusiasm. Indian defenders of *sati* will say that it glorifies the widow into a goddess, that it is an affirmation of female strength and power. *Sati* is an opportunity, if voluntary, for women to fulfil themselves magnificently in a society where

(admittedly) such role opportunities are very few. It is an Indian (Hindu) way, which makes sense within the logic of traditional Indian (Hindu) culture and cannot be understood and should not be criticised by non-Indians.

This might seem a seductive argument in the Indian context, and even of appeal to cultural relativists with a guilty conscience about the arrogance of colonialism, but it has been undermined by criticisms not merely by culturally chauvinistic Westerners but from within India as well.

For example, it is possible to analyse what occurred in Deorala in sober socio-economic terms. In the view of the feminist groups who led the protests against *sati* at state and national level, what happened to Roop Kanwar is very like what happened to another young widow, Om Kanwar, in 1980. Om Kanwar was murdered, and her killing disguised as a *sati* to the advantage of the three most powerful groups in Rajasthan, namely the traditional Rajputs, no longer a great military and landowning force, and in need of the ideological boost to their status of a well-publicised suttee; the Brahmin priests, who would gain in prestige and wealth by their administration of a holy event; and the Marwari merchants – an unholy alliance of feudal chauvinism, religion and money (see Oldenburg 1994a). After all, *sati* is big business. The immediate family, local shopkeepers and transport companies can make huge profits out of the crowds coming to visit the *sati* site, or *sati sthal*, selling them refreshments, incense and coconuts as offerings, and commemorative items like photographs. An annual fair may be started. If a temple is erected, huge sums may be collected in offerings. In Deorala they reportedly collected more than seven million rupees (=€160,000) (Narasimhan: 134). The site of Om Kanwar's *sati* is also a popular pilgrimage site.

Among the keenest supporters of *sati* are the Marwari businessmen and bankers whose families spread out from Rajasthan and who now control 60% of the Indian economy. Wealthy, but backward and superstitious, they are themselves middle-caste (*vaisya*), but tend to identify enviously with the warlike Rajput traditions. It happens that in the area from which most of them originate, Shekhavati, there is a town, Jhunjhunu, which is a famous *satimata* cult centre. A *sati* gives them the chance to network with their rural place of origin, make themselves important and make money. "Small desert townships, economically ravaged by several years of drought, sprout gaudy shrines and become booming pilgrim sites; impoverished petty Rajput families win god, gold, and glory by murdering their teen-aged widowed daughters-in-law; local politicians win another election" (Oldenburg 1994b: 161).

There may have been more personal motives at work, too. Roop Kanwar's in-laws stood to lose a lot of money if she had returned, with her dowry, to her own parents – which is apparently the local tradition in the case of young widows without children. Her dowry had been very substantial, consisting of nearly € 10,000 in gold, € 650 in other payments, a colour television, a kitchen stove, a refrigerator, furniture, clothes and gifts. Roop Kanwar's parents were not informed until after her death, something which seems to have happened in all the recent *sati* cases in that part of Rajasthan. Normally, when a young man dies his in-

laws will be informed immediately, and the Kanwars were only two hours away by car, but their presence at the cremation would have made it more difficult to carry out a *sati*. Even so, they caused no trouble afterwards, and even contributed 100,000 rupees [=€ 2,200] towards the celebration of the first anniversary of the *sati* (Oldenburg 1994a: 119).

Finally, the question needs to be asked: What, in a traditional Indian context, does "voluntary" actually mean? Given the nature of the pressures on Indian women in traditional rural areas, given that they have little part in the choice of education, career, or husband, and that they have their lives determined for them throughout by men, is it reasonable to talk in terms of free choice and coercion? Far from being wholly a modern perception, this is the conclusion that was reached in 1818 by Walter Ewer, who was Acting Superintendent of Police in the Lower Provinces (Weinberger-Thomas: 109f.). More recently, in the words of a report by the three women sent by the Women and Media Committee of the Bombay Union of Journalists to find out what had happened in Deorala (they concluded that Roop Kanwar had been murdered): "A choice can be made only between viable alternatives, for many women, there are no alternatives" (Sen: 30).

Soma Wadhwa (1996) has described how, during a great festival at the *sati* temple in Jhunjhunu, a slightly confused French tourist caused tremendous shock by asking whether women in India who wanted to commit *sati* had to come to this temple to do so. One of the worshippers told him: "India is a progressive country. Women are not burnt here. They are respected. To us they are mothers, devis, goddesses. We worship them." Soma Wadhwa's comment was: "Do women want to be worshipped? Or, would they rather have equal rights?"

Whatever difficulties may arise in the intercultural encounter, the truly unforgivable act of cultural arrogance is not that of the critic of such customs as *sati*, provided that the criticisms are honest, humane, context-sensitive, and explicatory in intention; it is the laziness of the knee-jerk relativist, who, paying homage to political correctness, substitutes indifference for involvement, and mistakes "tolerance" for understanding.

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Dr. Francis Jarman (jarman@rz.uni-hildesheim.de) teaches intercultural communication in the Institute of Applied Linguistics at the University of Hildesheim. He is a member of the Hildesheim Research Centre for Intercultural Communication.

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