

# DISCOURSE ON ABOLITION OF SATI

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## ABSTRACT

*The abolition of sati by the British colonial government in 1829 has been a defining moment which heralded a new era in the history of women's emancipation in modern India. One of the earliest of reforms that attempted to release women from the exploitative and hostile arrangement that made them subservient and servile to the established dominant order, the outlawing of this barbaric practice came after much hesitation on the part of the British colonial government who did not want any civil unrest by meddling in affairs of the religion of the indigenous populace. This paper seeks to explore the shared discourse on abolition of sati, mainly focusing on the official colonial approach, Raja Ram Mohan Roy's stance and the conservative reactionary response to the whole debate. It attempts to explore the foundation on which the abolition of sati was based.*

**KEY WORDS:** *sati, colonial discourse, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, conservative response*

## INTRODUCTION

The era of 19<sup>th</sup> century was marked by intense debates on reforming the status of women and the first sensational and controversial debate revolved around the abolition of sati. The issue raised a critical question about the condition of women, and also exposed how different participants in the contest glaringly omitted the consideration of the women involved. Though the British is credited with the abolition of this barbaric practice in 1829, what is also evident is the ambivalent approach that the British adopted towards this concern for the longest time. The Western reaction itself was characterized by a mixture of "admiration" to what was regarded as the ultimate symbol of wifely devotion while at the same time feeling uneasy about what they felt was a barbaric and uncivilized custom. This paper shall explore the discourse on the abolition of sati in order to examine what entailed the core concerns of various participants of the debate which includes the official British stance, the position of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and also, the conservative reaction.

The term 'sati' refers to both the practice of immolating a widow upon the funeral pyre of her husband as well as the immolated widow herself. This tradition predominantly practiced by the upper caste Hindus was at times voluntary and at other times coercive; and for a very long time, the British chose to not interfere in it as they believed that meddling in the religious affairs of the natives would lead to civil unrest and backlash from the natives. Despite this position, the colonial government could no longer turn a blind eye to the rising tide of criticism that saw the tradition as barbaric, uncivilized and anti-women. Thus, by The Bengal regulation 17 of 1829 also known as "The Bengal Sati Regulation, 1829", the British colonial government adopted a top-down-approach and legally abolished the practice of sati. This measure that was undertaken was not devoid of criticism; rather it invited a conservative counterattack as it was seen an attempt to interfere in the traditions and customs of the indigenous populace. Moreover, what is even more interesting is that the voice within the British colonial regime itself was not unanimous. So this makes the whole discourse and debate around the banning of sati a complex one.

### • OFFICIAL DISCOURSE

The colonial government's approach towards the indigenous customs and practices was largely that of non-interference. This was because the initial position of the British in India was a vulnerable one and thereby they tried to avoid any disturbance unless it was to maintain their own power. Nonetheless, there existed two main strands of thought amongst the British. The 'Anglicists' were the ones who initiated and defended 'progressive' measures like the abolition of sati whereas the 'Orientalists' were the supporters of promoting the indigenous traditions and cultures and advised against interventions. However, the outlawing of the sati in 1829 reflects how the practice had become incompatible with the modern European administration and its ideals.

The Governor General who is credited with the abolition of sati is Lord William Bentinck. Although deeply influenced by utilitarian and humanitarian thought, Bentinck tried to put off making a decisive choice favoring abolition till the very last moment as his earlier intervention in the customs of the local populace had not turned out well, and had resulted in a mutiny at the Indian garrison at Vellore in 1806. This then explains the extreme caution and timidity that Bentinck revealed while proceeding with this decision despite majority of British voices favoring the abolition, as for them it was a question of conflicting moral standards when it came to administration. Only the renowned Orientalist H H Wilson spoke against abolition as he feared that meddling with the local customs that are as deeply entrenched like the practice of sati may result in grave consequences for the colonial regime. So for him it was principle of absolute toleration and non-interference that was paramount.

Thus, when it comes to issue of abolition of sati on humanitarian grounds, scholars like Jorg Fisch believe that British cannot be credited with it as they were not pioneers, rather were very hesitant and reluctant to the very last. Fisch discusses how the British tried to delay the decision by first trying to regulate the practice by distinguishing between legal and illegal sati, the former being that which was lawful according to Hindu law and the latter that was not. This led to entrapment of the colonial regime as the distinction between what constituted legal and illegal sati depended on the interpretation of the local pundits who could not be expected to declare sati as a criminal act. This attempt to regulate therefore didn't really facilitate the modernizing project of British rule based on good governance.

Furthermore, scholars like Lata Mani argue that the whole official discourse or the colonial narrative on abolition of sati was not based on consideration of the status of women concerned rather the whole discussion revolved around whether the practice adhered to the legitimate religious belief based on Brahmanical texts. Thus, religion was equated with scriptures. The colonial stance presented the abolition as being consistent with upholding the indigenous tradition which derived its sanction from the authoritative texts of the Hindu religion.

#### • **RAJA RAM MOHAN ROY**

The Father of Bengal Renaissance was the Indian crusader who not just set out to propagate and enlighten the masses about the barbaric and horrific practice of sati, but also sought to reformulate Hinduism. The initiator of indigenous progressive discourse on sati, Ram Mohan too chose to ground his discussion of sati based on scriptures. The whole approach was based on whether the practice of widow burning was imperatively sanctioned by the Hindu religion. With the help of authoritative Hindu religious scriptures, he established that sati was not incumbent on the widow, and that ascetic widowhood was a more favorable option by citing requisite verses from the Vedas. Similarly he uses other scriptures and pointed out that sati was an inferior virtue as compared to ascetic widowhood; and in the process he conveniently avoided those texts that did not support his viewpoint.

Therefore, just like the colonial discourse, Ram Mohan Roy too based his arguments on scriptural foundations. He cited the paramount role of the scriptures and argued that the role of traditions and customs are secondary to it. Furthermore, Jorg Fische suggests that interestingly Ram Mohan Roy was not in favor of the colonial state outlawing the practice, as this he feared would lead to a setback for his own movement. Rather he wanted the barbaric tradition to be ousted from within by those within the Hindu fold.

#### • **THE CONSERVATIVE RESPONSE**

The ambivalence witnessed within the progressive and 'liberal' discourse is remarkably absent in the conservative one, as it was marked by openly eulogizing the custom undertaken by the devout Hindu widows. Although the conservative response too was shaped by basing their arguments in favor of sati by citing the scriptures, it however differed from the colonial discourse and that of Ram Mohan Roy by assigning greater weight to customs. They argued that given the antiquity of the Hindu religion, equal status had to be assigned to both scriptures as well as customs. Nonetheless, they tried to tackle Ram Mohan Roy's arguments by basing their arguments on the Brahmanical texts themselves.

They made references to *Manusmriti* as cited in *Nirnaya Sindhu* to counter Ram Mohan Roy's claim that it preferred ascetic widowhood to sati by arguing that the former was only a secondary option and should be adopted only if the widow is unable to perform sati. Secondly they countered Roy's argument that sati provided only a temporary bliss by asserting that sati meant only a short term suffering and bestowed heavenly blessings, whereas ascetic widowhood subjected women to laboring under austere conditions for long. Furthermore, they cite customary support for the practice by arguing that acts like *durga pooja*, *dola jatra*, etc are not sanctioned by scriptures, but not performing them would be regarded as sinful. Thus, they too like Ram Mohan Roy cite verses from the scriptures that support their arguments while conveniently overlooking those that cite the opposite.

#### • **ANALYSIS OF THE DISCOURSE ON ABOLITION OF SATI**

The above discussion points at certain key elements that constituted this shared discourse on sati. According to Lata Mani these are as follows: firstly, religion was the most fundamental and central aspect of Indian society, especially the Hindu life. Secondly, the indigenous populace was unreflective of their religiosity and were passive participants who blindly followed the dictates of the ruling priestly class, i.e. the Brahmins. Thirdly, the whole discourse was based on what constituted the authentic religious belief and practice based on Brahmanical texts. This then gave privileged position to scriptures over religious customs and traditions and those on each side of the debate assumed that their position was consistent with the "indigenous tradition" based on religious scriptures, thus preventing any social unrest or disturbances.

Moreover, it is important to question if the liberal progressive voices that supported outlawing of this practice kept the discussion centered on the religious scriptures and not on the status and condition of women because they may have believed that the latter would not be accepted as a sound argument; and such arguments for emancipation would be seen as a revolutionary thought process that was attempting to overthrow the existing religious and social order in the society. Thus, it may have been a safer bet to push these concerns to the secondary while arguing for abolition of such a barbaric practice. It would be much more practical to cite the religious texts and scriptures to argue in favor of outlawing it as that would imply sticking to the 'authentic' tradition and thus avoid any social unrest and backlash.

#### • **CONCLUSION**

To conclude, one can summarize this whole discourse on the abolition of sati as being centered on what constituted the authentic Hindu tradition based on scriptural sanction, i.e. whether or not widow burning was an imperative and fundamental practice of the Hindu religion supported by authoritative religious texts. The whole argument that supported the prohibition didn't concern itself with barbarity and cruelty of the practice. Furthermore, it showed no consideration for the status of women as they were merely seen as either the perennial victims or the heroic and virtuous wife, and never as "subject-agents" who negotiated, resisted, and accommodated the process. What is deafening is the absence of women's voices. Nonetheless, the abolition of sati was a decisive and seminal moment that marked the beginning and paved the way for women's emancipation in modern India.

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