

THE ANTIQUITY OF THE CUSTOM OF SATI.¹

I.

The custom of Sati (सती), wherein a wife destroyed herself on the death of her husband, has been generally associated with India. The word Sati originally means "a virtuous or good woman (or wife),"² from sat सत् truth. Then, it latterly came to be applied to those women, who out of affection for, and loyalty towards, their husbands, sacrificed their lives on the death of their husbands and then to the act itself. The original word for the act was Sahagaman सहगमन which literally meant "accompanying" (the husband) and then "a woman's burning herself with her deceased husband's body; self-immolation of a widow."³ The act itself is also spoken of as sah-marana सह मरण and the woman is spoken of as sah-mrita सह मृता i.e., One who dies with (her husband), "a woman who has burnt herself with her husband."⁴ At times, women burnt themselves to avoid the doing of acts which they did not like. For example, Ranak Devi of Kâthiâwâd "burnt herself as a Sati at Wadhwan" to avoid marrying Siddh Râj who wanted to make her his queen.⁵

Though not generally practised, the custom was prevalent in India upto 1829, when Lord William Bentinck stopped it by legislature. It was ascertained, that before that time, in one year (1817.A. C.), in one part of India alone, in Bengal, about 700 wives had thus sacrificed themselves on the funeral pyres of their husbands. The custom had drawn the attention of

¹ This paper was read before the Anthropological Section of the eleventh Indian Science Congress held at Bangalore in January 1924. Journal of the Anthropological Society of Bombay, Vol. XIII, No. 5, pp. 412-23.

² Apte's Sanskrit-English Dictionary (1890), p. 1083, ed. 3.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 1111.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ The History of Kâthiâwâd, by Capt. Wilberforce-Bell (1916), p. 69.

that great ruler of India, Akbar the Great. He did not prevent it altogether, as Lord Bentinck latterly did, but prevented it when enforced by others against the will of the widow. He had set it down as one of the duties of the Kotwâls, who corresponded to our Superintendents of Police, that they should prevent compulsion in the matter of the Sati. If any woman committed it of her own wish, she was not interfered with, but no compulsion was tolerated.¹ There was an instance, when Akbar himself ran to the rescue of a woman. On the death of one Jaimall, a cousin of Râjâ Bhagwân Dâs, his widow, a daughter of Râjâ Udai Singh, refused to sacrifice her life. Her relatives, and among them, her son, who also was named Udai Singh, insisted that she should commit Sati. They were thinking of using physical force upon her for the purpose. When Akbar heard of it in the early morning, he immediately rode alone and unattended to the spot and prevented the act. "At first he was disposed to execute the guilty parties, but on consideration he granted them their lives and merely imprisoned them for a short period."² The Sati Burj in Mathura was built in 1570 to commemorate the self-immolation of a wife of Râjâ Bihâr Mall of Ambêr (Jaipur).³

Dr. J. Eggeling, in his article on Brahmanism,⁴ considers Sati to be a "comparatively modern innovation." He says: "The right of *suttee* (properly *sati*, *i.e.*, the faithful wife), or voluntary immolation of widows...seems to have sprung up originally as a local habit among the Kshatrayas, and, on becoming more and more prevalent, to have at length received

¹ V. Smith's *Life of Akbar*, p. 382.

² *Ibid.* p. 226. The Story is described at some length in the *Akbar-nâmeh*. "His feeling of justice and humanity made him fear that if he sent messengers to stop the proceedings, some delay might occur, so he mounted his horse and rode with all speed to the place" (Calcutta Ed. of the Asiatic Society of 1886 Vol. III, p. 402 l. 5 et seq. *vide* Elliot's *History of India*, Vol. VI, 69).

³ Smith's *Akbar*, *Ibid.*, p. 434.

⁴ *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Vol. IV, pp. 210-11 (9th Ed.)

Brâhmanical sanction. The alleged conformity of the rite to the Hindû scriptures has been shown to have rested chiefly on a misquotation, if not on intentional garbling, of a certain passage of the *Rigveda*, which, so far from authorizing the concremation of the widow, bids her return from the funeral pile to her home and resume her worldly duties.” The object of this paper is to examine this question, whether the custom is very ancient or later.

II.

It seems that the custom is very ancient. The very fact that it is referred to by ancient classical writers like Diodorus Siculus and Strabo, shows, that it prevailed in India before the Christian era.

Diodorus Siculus (*i.e.*, of Sicily), who had travelled in Asia and who lived in the first century B.C., in his history, refers to a case of Sati in the camp of Eumenès, the Private Secretary and general, one after another, of Philip of Macedon and of his son, Alexander the Great. Eumenès had accompanied Alexander to Asia. On the death of his royal master, by whom he was most respected and loved, when his dominions were divided, he was given Cappadocia and Paphlagonia. To secure and preserve these, he had to fight long with other rivals. After one of his successful battles against Antigonus, when he was arranging for a decent sepulchre for his soldiers who were killed in the battle, the case of a Sati in his camp came to his notice. It was the case of an Indian officer of his camp, named Ceteüs or Keteüs. Diodorus refers to this matter, and I will quote him at full length to present a full view of the case as seen and noted by the Greeks. If I do not mistake, this is the oldest recorded case of an Indian Sati, having occurred in the beginning of the 4th century B.C., Eumenès having lived from 360 to 315 B.C.¹

¹ Bk. XIX. Chap. X. English writers refer to it as Bk. XIX. Sections 33-34. I give my translation from the French version of Abbé Terrasson. “Histoire Universelle de Diodore de Sicile, traduite en Français, par M. L’Abbé Terrasson (1780). Tome VI, pp. 60-64.

“He (Eumenès) contented himself by burying his dead with suitable decency. It was during this time when he was doing this duty that he was the witness of an extraordinary fact, which was altogether opposed to the laws and manners of Greece. A certain Ceteüs, an Indian by nation and an officer in his army, had been killed in battle, after having fought valiantly. He left as widows two wives who had followed him in the war and who were in the camp—one whom he had married only a short time before, and another, older by some years, and both extremely attached to him. Now, there was a law among the Indians according to which marriages were performed independently of the wishes of the parents, only by the consent of the young couples. It resulted from this that quarrels and dissensions often occurring among deluded people without experience, they reciprocally repented of their choice. The young wives thereby fell in disorderly life and carried their attachment elsewhere. But, since the law of the country and public good did not permit them for that purpose to abandon their first choice, it occurred to many among them to get rid of their husbands by poison. The nature of the country supplied them with several species (of poison) among which there were several herbs, with which it was sufficient to touch the food or the drinking vessels to convey all their poison to them. This baneful practice having become much prevalent and the punishments themselves not preventing them, these people passed a law, whereby the wives were obliged to burn themselves with the bodies of their dead husbands, with the exception, nevertheless, of those who found themselves enceinte or who had living infants; and if some one did not wish to submit herself to this law, not only should she remain a widow during the rest of her life, but she must also be excluded, as impious and sacriligious, from all public assemblies. The obstinate among the women, then, turned themselves in another direction; because, not only the care for their own lives made them give great attention to the health of their husbands, but when death carried them away,

there was emulation among them as to who shall present the best grace of the honour of following her husband on his funeral pile ; and this is what has happened after that. Though the law has spoken of only one wife, the two (wives) of Ceteüs came forward, to dispute, one with the other, the advantage of following him. The youngest, at first, represented before the officers of the army who were their judges, that the eldest was actually pregnant and that therefore, she was excluded from her privilege by the very words of the law ; and the other maintained that her seniority alone assured her right, and gave her a prerogative which no other circumstance can render doubtful. However, the officers of war, who were their judges, being assured by the midwives that the elder was pregnant, decided for the second. Immediately, the one who lost her cause retired, shouting lamentable cries, destroying all the veils which she carried on her head and tearing her hair, as an expression of the greatest of misfortunes. The other, on the contrary, transported with joy, adorned in her apparels at the hands of all the women of her acquaintance, and with head loaded with ribbons and crowns, was conducted to the funeral pyre, as at the nuptial ceremony, by all her family who sang hymns in her honour. When she arrived at the foot of the pyre, herself removing all her ornaments, she distributed with her own hand all the different pieces to her relatives and to her friends, in order to leave with them a token of her affection for them and a motive to remember her. These ornaments consisted of a large number of rings, which she had on her fingers, all adorned with precious stones of all colours selected from among the most brilliant and the most fine. Her head was adorned with golden stars intermixed with stones of the same weight and of the same lustre as the first ones and she carried on her neck a multitude of necklaces which all had grown big in breadth and length. In the end, after having made her last adieu to all her relatives, her brother gave her his hand to mount over the funeral pyre and within the sight of an innumerable people who admired her firmness she threw herself in the flames in which she heroically lost her life. From the moment

that she arrived at the place up to that when she mounted upon the funeral pyre, the guard, (*i.e.*, the soldiers serving as guard) had (sufficient) time to make three rounds (round the pyre). The first thing she did on mounting was to place herself in her full length over the body of her husband. The violence of the fire which they lighted at the same moment did not allow her to utter a single cry. Among the spectators some were touched with a veritable compassion; others admired such a heroic firmness and a third set found in such practices, a fierceness of manners which could only suit the savage and the barbarous."

This example shows that the custom prevailed in India long before the birth of Christ and is not recent.

Strabo, (54 B. C.—24 A. C.) refers to another Greek who had accompanied Alexander the Great to India.

Strabo on the authority of Aristobulus.

It is Aristobulus of Cassandria, who wrote a history of his expedition with Alexander.

Aristobulus according to Strabo, at first refers to two Hindu sophists or ascetics whom he met at Taxila and then to "some strange and unusual customs of the people of Taxila."¹ Strabo then says: "The dead are thrown out to be devoured by vultures. To have many wives is a custom common to these and to other nations. He (Aristobulus) says, that he had heard, from some persons, of wives burning themselves voluntarily with their deceased husbands; and that those women who refused to submit to this custom were disgraced. The same things have been told by other writers."²

Thus, we see on the authority of two classical writers who lived before the Christian era, and who depended for their statements on the authority of two writers who had accompanied Alexander to India, that the custom of Sati prevailed in India in the fourth century B. C., and that it may have prevailed earlier.

Again, it appears, that the custom was not confined to India. It prevailed among some other people of the Indo-Germanic stock.

¹ The Geography of Strabo, translated by Hamilton and Falconer (1857), Vol. III, p. 112. Bk. XV (on India), Chap. I, 62.

² *Ibid.*, p. 112.

III.

According to Herodotus (484-406 B. C. Bk. V. 5), strange

Sati among the Thracians, according to Herodotus. customs prevailed among the Trausi, one of the tribes of the ancient Thracians. This tribe differed from the other tribes

of the Thracians, in the matter both of birth and death. Herodotus says: “The relations, seating themselves round one that is newly born, bewail him, (deploring) the many evils he must needs fulfil, since he has been born; enumerating the various sufferings incident to mankind: but one that dies they bury in the earth, making merry and rejoicing, recounting the many evils from which being released, he is now in perfect bliss.”¹ Then, Herodotus refers to a custom among a tribe of the Thracians which lived “above the Crestonæans.” He says: “Those above the Crestonæans do as follows: each man has several wives; when therefore any of them dies, a great contest arises among the wives, and violent disputes among their friends, on this point, which of them was most loved by the husband. She who is adjudged to have been so, and is so honoured, having been extolled both by men and women, is slain on the tomb of her own nearest relative, and when slain is buried with her husband; the others deem this a great misfortune for this is the utmost disgrace to them.”²

The Venedi or Winedi was an old German tribe. Tacitus³

Sati among the Venedi or Winedi according to Tacitus.

is doubtful whether to take it as a German tribe or a Sarmatian tribe. This tribe extended as far as the Baltic. “Their name is also preserved in Wenden, a part of Livonia.”⁴ It is said of these people that among them, “the wife refused to survive her husband, but killed herself in order

¹ Herodotus Bk. V. 4, Cary's Translation (1889), p. 308.

² Bk. V. 5, *Ibid*, p. 308.

³ A Treatise on the Situation, Manners, and Inhabitants of Germany, by C. Cornelius Tacitus, translated by Dr. John Aikin (1823), p. 117; Chap. XLVI.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 118, note m.

to be burnt on the same funeral pyre with him."¹ We also find in this part of the book of Tacitus a reference to a dislike towards widow-marriage. Tacitus says: "Still more exemplary is the practice of those states in which none but virgins marry, and the expectation and wishes of a wife are at once brought to a period. Thus, they take one husband as one body and one life; that no thought, no desire may extend beyond him; and he may be loved not only as their husband but as their marriage."²

Maçoudi, in his "Maruj al Zahb va Ma'adan al johr" refers to a similar custom among some of the early tribes living in the mountains of Caucassus. He says:³

"The domiciled pagans in this country are of several races, among whom are the Slavs and the Russians who are relegated to one of the two quarters of the city. They burn their dead placing upon the same funeral pile beasts of burden, their arms and their dress. When a man dies his wife is burnt alive with him. But if it is the wife who dies first, the husband does not submit himself to the same fate. When some one dies celibate, they give him a wife after his death. The women ardently desire to be burnt with their husbands to enter into paradise in their company. This custom, as we have already remarked, prevails in India, where, however, the wife is only burnt with her husband when she consents herself."

Maçoudi refers in the above passage to the custom prevalent in India also.

Yule, in his Anglo-Indian Glossary⁴ quotes a number of authorities whose statements seem to show that the custom

¹ *Ibid.* p. 52, note h.

² *Ibid.* page 52.

³ I translate from Barbier de Meynard's French translation Vol. II, p. 9

⁴ Hobson Jobson. Glossary of colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases by Col. H. Yule and Dr. A. C. Burnell. New Ed. by W. Crooke. (1903), pp. 879-882.

was also prevalent in countries other than India. We also learn from the Primitive Culture (Chap. IX) of Tylor that there were somewhat same or similar customs among other primitive people.

Indian scholars pointed to some texts of the Vedas as authority for the practice which was considered to be religious. But it has been said, that the passages referred to have been mistranslated or misunderstood. But, laying aside the question of the correctness and the authenticity of the texts, we find that, as pointed out above, the custom was prevalent among the Hindoos in times as old as that of the invasion of India by Alexander the Great.

The motive is attributed by some scholars to a particular belief about future life among the primitive people. The belief was, that in the life after death, there were the same material wants as those in this life, and that therefore, together with the household furniture and requirements, there was the want of a wife. So, she must be sacrificed. The belief, when thought of superficially, is, to a certain extent, natural. It follows even from what is said by the best of our divines and philosophers who say that, even after the end of one's life in this world, there is continuity in the other. The anniversary of one's death, is, as it were, his birth-day in the next. Death is no destruction of soul but mere transference. If that be the case, it is natural that, in what we speak of as “ the spiritual life of the world ” there may arise some wants and necessities. They may not be exactly similar but well nigh similar ; they may not be physical but what may be called spiritual. So, the vegetable and animal substances required in this life, for physical maintenance were believed to be required in the next life in their spirits for spiritual maintenance. We can quite understand from this point of view the customs of the ancients, for example the Egyptians, and even of some modern people who offer as sacrifice, vegetable

The Motive for Sati-ship.

and animal substances after one's death. But, to suppose that wives were also sacrificed with that view is carrying the matter too far in that direction. It is not possible to take that view of an Indian or an Aryan wife, when we consider the exalted loving position which an Indian or Aryan wife occupied in her Indian or Aryan home. Even after her husband's death, the wife had to fulfil many duties—duties religious as well as social—at home, duties towards the soul of the husband and duties towards his children. So, it is not proper to believe that the spirit of a pious Hindu ignored the well-being of his children and his family and expected his wife to follow him. That may be so in some primitive people, but that cannot be said of an advanced people like the Hindus.

So, we must look for some other motive for the commitment of Sati-ship at least in later times. That motive should be sought in the high ideal of love and affection among some wives. Marriage was no ordinary contract among the Hindus. It was a religious sacrament. It was thought that a pair once united was united as it were for ever. So, some wives, carried away, rather far, by that sentiment, sacrificed their lives to continue united with their dear husbands, their loving lords. Of course, it were not all the women who were guided by such a sentiment. Many may have been guided by the mere force of custom, but that should not prevent us from forming a true idea of the sentiment of the few. We are not justifying the custom in all its aspects, we do not recommend its revival or continuance, but we have to appreciate the motive which may have moved some.

The Parsees form a branch of the Indo-Iranian group of nations of which the Hindus are a principal people. There is no reference in their ancient extant literature to any prevalent custom of Sati. But a prevalent custom of theirs, which also is not enjoined in their scriptures, seems to be a relic, not of any custom of *Sati*, but of some higher idea of womanhood or rather wifehood. There is a custom

The Parsee view of performing the Funeral Ceremonies in double.

among them that when a husband or wife dies, it is not only of the dying person that the funeral ceremonies are performed but also of the surviving partner. If a wife dies certain religious ceremonies have to be performed. But together with these, exactly the same funeral ceremonies are at times performed for the living husband. The funeral ceremonies are known as the Sraosh ceremonies, and in the case, where they are performed in double, *i.e.*, for the husband also, they are spoken of as *Jorâni kryâ* *i. e.*, ceremonies of the (married) pair. Similarly, when the husband dies the same ceremonies are repeated for the wife. Whether the husband or wife is living or dead, this double set of ceremonies (*jorâni kryâ*) is celebrated. All the ceremonies are the same with this small difference that in the recital of their names which are mentioned in the funeral ceremonies, while the deceased is spoken as "anosheh-rawân" *i.e.*, the immortal-souled, the living (husband or wife, if he or she is living at the time) is spoken of as *zindeh-rawân* *i.e.* living-souled. Again a wife's name is recited in the ritual with that of her first husband, even if the husband died before marriage and after the betrothal.

Now, the original motive at the bottom of this double set of ceremonies, seems to be the same as that mentioned above in the case of a Hindu wife. Marriage being a religious sacrament, it is naturally believed that a married pair once formed is formed for ever. It is united (*jorâni*) for ever. Death cannot separate them.

Between what followed from the original high ideal among the Hindus and that among the Parsees, there are two points of difference: (a) The Parsee did not go to the extreme end of, what may be now termed, sacrificing one's life. He stopped short, and, not going to the inhuman extent of giving up his life, rested consolate with the double set of funeral ceremonies. (2) The second difference was this, that when among the Hindus it was only the woman that conceived this high ideal and it was

she alone who sacrificed her life on the death of her husband, and not the husband on the death of his wife, among the Parsees, it were both, the wife and the husband, that performed the double set of funeral ceremonies (jorâni kryâ).

Jehangir, in his Memoir ¹, thus refers to the custom of Sati :

The Custom, prevalent at one time, among the Mahomedans of India.

" It is the custom among the Hindus that after the death of their husbands women burn themselves, whether from love, or to save the honour of their fathers, or from being ashamed before their sons-in-law." It is in connection with the particular event of a Mahomedan mother who died after her son, that Jehangir refers to the custom. The very fact, that here, a mother, (the mother of Jalâlu-d-dîn Mas'ûd) " from excessive love " for her son, killed herself shows, that the motive for sati-ship was love and affection for the husband.

It seems that the custom continued among the Mahomedans who were converted from Hinduism and Jehangir complains about it. We read in the Wâkiât-i-Jehangiri (Ellot's History of India Vol. VI. p. 376) : " The people of Râjaur were originally Hindus. Sultan Firoz converted them. Nevertheless their chiefs are still styled Râjâs. Practices which prevailed during the times of their ignorance are still observed among them. Thus, wives immolate themselves alive on the funeral pyres of their husbands, and bury themselves alive in their graves. It was reported that, only a few days ago, a girl of twelve years old had buried herself with her husband. Indigent parents strangle their female offspring immediately after birth. They associate and intermarry with Hindûs—giving and taking daughters. As for taking, it does not so much matter ; but as for giving their own daughters—heaven protect us ! Orders were issued prohibiting these practices for the future, and punishment enjoyed for their infraction."

¹ The Tuzuk-i Jehangiri translated by Rogers and Beveridge Vol. I, p. 142.

Mr. Snell, in his "Customs of Old England," refers to some views prevalent in England, which show, that even in Old England, some people did not like widow-marriages and held the

Hindu view of "the culmination of duty and fidelity in life and death."¹ Mr. Snell says: "There is ample evidence that the indifference to the marriage of widows which marks our time did not obtain always and everywhere; on the contrary, among widely separated races such arrangements evoked deep repugnance, as subversive of the perfect union of man and wife."²

We find from an account of recent excavations in England that the custom at one time prevailed in ancient England also.³ The account confirms what Tacitus said that the pagan Saxon wives slew themselves when their husbands died.

¹ The Customs of Old England by F. J. Snell 1911. *Vide* ch. II Vowesses. p. 11.

² *Ibid*, p. 10.

³ Times of India 16th April 1923. Telegram from England.