

Sati through the Ages in Tamil Nadu

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The practice of Sati was popular among the Egyptians, the Greeks and the Sumarians. The general meaning of the word Sati is wife. The name of Parvathi, the wife of Siva, is Sati Devi. She became angry with her father Daksha, when he failed to invite Siva for the ceremonial sacrifice. So, she jumped into the sacrificial fire in the presence of the assembled celestials, thereby proving herself a faithful wife. Subsequently, the term was applied to those women who ended their lives in flames along with the dead bodies of their husbands.¹

The wife burning alive with her husband's dead body is called Sati. Some people had the opinion to burn their wives with their dead bodies to prevent their wives from others. There was misbelieving that instead of suffering after the death of their husbands, her death with him would take her to heaven. This foolishness was one of the reasons for spreading out this evil custom. Sati was encouraged by the upper strata of society. The relatives of the deceased encouraged sati for they wanted to inherit the dead man's property.²

There is considerable evidence to the prevalence of sati in ancient Tamil Nadu. In Ancient period, Vasudeva's four wives Devaki, Padrai, Rohini, Madirai were dead with him. Likewise Krishna's five wives Rukmani, Gandhari, Sahayai, Hemavathi, Jampavathi were dead in Sati on the death of Krishna.³ In Sangam period woman would do anything for her husband and loyalty was greater than their lives. Fidelity was divided as first fidelity, middle fidelity and last fidelity. When a woman died soon after the death of her husband was the first fidelity; a woman who died after the death of her husband by a few days of fasting was middle fidelity and a woman who shaved her hair, removed her ornaments and renounced the flower and goriness was called the last fidelity. From this only the evil practice of sati was started. The practice of sati was voluntary in the Sangam period in Tamil Nadu and it could also be deducted that the women who performed sati were held in high esteem

In Sangam Chola period, when Sundara Chola died in 973 A.D, his wife, Vanavan Madevi ended her life in flames. Marco Polo who visited Tamil Nadu towards the end of the thirteenth century, states that sati did exist in Tamil Nadu and the victims were held in high esteem.⁴ When Tirumalai Nayak was the ruler of Madurai died in 1659, out of his 200 wives, a few practised sati.⁵

The Jesuit letters make a mention of another Sati that happened in Trichy District. A woman wished to be consumed on the funeral pyre of her husband her relations desirous of saving the life of the infant in her womb, made every effort to dissuade her from it, their prayers and entreaties were useless, in vain the chief of the village came himself to fall at her feet and promised to take care of her till

her death. Nothing could conquer her obstinacy, sustained besides by the laws of the country which forbid the employment of force for preventing these barbarous acts.⁶

In 1689 A.D. Muthu Veerappa Naicker III died. His wife Muthammal tried to commit Sati, but her attempt was thwarted because she was pregnant. However after delivery she killed herself with poison inspite of Queen Mangammal's efforts to stop it.⁷ In the 18th century when Kizhavan Sethupathi who ruled part of Ramnad died in 1710 A.D. his 47 wives threw themselves in the funeral pyre and this incident is evidenced by the writings of Jesuit Fathers. Abbe J.A. Dubois in his book Hindu Manners, Customs and ceremonies writes of two incidents of Sati, that took place in 1794 and 1805 and that he had himself seen.⁸

Those who did not die with their husbands, should not beautify themselves, they should remove their Jewels. They should shave their head and should wear only white dress. If a woman, who lost her husband, was not allowed to do remarry.⁹ In this evil custom, when they pushed down the widow into the fire, they would be decorated nicely. They pushed her down with, chanting the Vedas and mantras. The Mughal king Akbar tried to abolish this evil custom but he could not succeed.¹⁰

Sati was not universal in Tamil country. It was confined mostly to Tanjore and Trichirappalli districts alone, though a few cases occurred in other districts too.¹¹ During the medieval period this evil practices prevalent many places in Tamil Nadu. In the beginning of the nineteenth century public officers were authorized to allow the performance of the rite, if it was applied for. The widow was administered intoxicating drugs to get her consent when she was in a state of drunkenness. Such conditions provoked the sympathy of some of the officers who wanted to exterminate this abominable rite.¹²

In Madras the proposal to abolish it was first brought forward by G.M. Lushington, who, as Magistrate of Tanjore in 1813 and of Trichirappalli in 1819 recommended its suppression.¹³ In a letter to the government, he described how a widow had burnt herself in Tanjore before it could be known to the police and he requested the government to authorize him to prevent the rite.¹⁴ Humanitarian and Missionary societies in England evinced great enthusiasm in curbing this practice and it was in such an atmosphere that enquiries on sati were instituted in Madras.¹⁵

Matters took a different turn when Bentinck became the Governor-General. He issued his famous minute on sati in 1829, by which the sati was made illegal. As soon as the Regulation XVII of 1829, prohibiting sati was announced, Stephen Rumbold Lushington, the then Governor of Madras, wrote a minute that the practice of sati, of burning or

burying alive the widow of Hindus, illegal and punishable in the criminal court. After 1830, the cases of sati became very rare and a thing of the past.¹⁶

As the result of the opposition, the **Commission of sati (prevention) Act 1987** was passed. Under this Act Commission of Sati and its glorification and for matters connected therewith or incidental to such an abatement is punishable with the maximum penalty i.e. death or imprisonment of life. Imprisonment for a term which shall not be less than one year but which may extend to seven years and with fine which shall not be less than five thousand rupees but which may extend to thirty thousand rupees. This Act is more effective for the abolition of the inhuman practice sati.¹⁷

References

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