I

"To die after one's beloved is most fruitless. It is a custom followed by the foolish. It is a mistake committed under infatuation."

-Sama, 7th century.

II

"Let those whose hearts are ablaze with the Fire of Love learn courage from this pure way:
Teach me, O God, the way of Love and enflame my heart with this maiden's Fire."

-Muhammad Riza Nau'i on a Sati, 16th century.
The 'debate' on Sati is no longer alive, but even now few people writing on it find it easy to write without emotion. And yet the extra-ordinary thing is that, for all the body of literature on it, one is still not certain of many things connected with it. This applies not to attitudes towards it but to the volume of facts that we have about it. It is reasonably certain that word comes from the Sanskrit root sāt, meaning "essential, or true being", leading to "the who refuses to live when her husband is dead" being described as a Sati, and the word being later applied, as 'Suttee', by European writers to the custom more than to the woman immolating herself. Again it would be widely conceded that in popular Hindu belief the word and the practice are related to the immolation of herself by Sati, the consort of Shiva, when she threw herself into the sacrificial fire lit by her father.

1. The subject of sati forms naturally a major theme in many a work that treats of early India, especially in its social and religious aspects, and one could cite a large number of works. But for one of the most perceptive and learned accounts of sati, one must refer to H.S. Aitken, The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization. In account like H.K. Latta's The Widow in Ancient India, or P.V. Kane's History of Bharhadeshvara contains a great deal of useful information and even P. Thomas in his Indian Women Through the Ages brings together many relevant facts. Among the studies devoted to the subject proper, must be prominently mentioned, Edward Thompson's Suttee: A Historical and Philosophical Enquiry into the Hindu Rite of "Widow Burning", and the more recent The History of Suicide in India by Bhendra Thakur.
as an act of anguish to protest against the insult to her ascetic husband who was not invited by her father to the great vayna. In this moving legend, which is concluded by Shiva destroying the vayna altar and going around with the burnt corpse of his wife on his shoulder wildly from mountain to mountain, nearly demented by grief, sati becomes the prototype of the devoted wife.

But there is so much that is controversial about Sati. Its origin, its antiquity, the extent of its prevalence as a custom, even the sanction or otherwise of religion behind it, have all, among other things, been variously written about. About its origins, the Greek Strabo came up with the curious explanation that the custom was invented by men to guard against the possibility of their being put to death by their wives through poisoning.

On the other hand the custom can be seen as belonging not

1. The story is well known and according to it the places were the various parts of the body of Sati fell eventually became the sites of now famous temples raised to the Devi. Jawalamukhi in the hills is believed to be the place where the tongue of the goddess fell.

2. Strabo was not the only Greek writer who wrote of the practice. Mention of it is made by many others like Diodorus and Justin. Interestingly, C.T. Vigne, Travels in Kashmir, Ladak, Iskardo etc., Vol. I, pp. 93-94 also takes note of the idea "that the performance of sati was originally enjoined for the purpose of preventing the crime of matricide, in consequence of its having been at one time common for Indian wives to murder their husbands by poison and other means."
only to India but, in one form or the other, prevailing in widely different parts of the world from northern Europe to China, and especially related to the Indo-European stock. On the one hand the sacrifice of a widow, with her slaves and maid-servants, at the death of her royal husband may be taken as a token in history of the absolute loyalty commanded by the Master, and a proof of his power; on the other it can be seen as "the last proof of the perfect unity of body and soul".

In India, the custom has been claimed by its champions as going back to the Rig-Vedic times, but the interpretation of the verse on the strength of which this statement is made has been called seriously into question.

1. See, thus, Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, Vol. II, p. 232a. Also: "World-wide primitive wage compelled a widow to be the wife of her husband's brother or near kinsman, or, if he had been of princely standing, to be immolated with his concubines, slaves, steeds, etc. at his tomb, to maintain his dignity in the next world." Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol. 21, pp. 624-25.

2. "The rite was probably common to Aryan-speaking peoples, while in a state of savagery, but abandoned as they progressed in civilization...." Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, Vol. IV pp. 428b-429a. The practice of the sacrifice of the widow among the Gauls, the Goths, the Norwegians, the Goths, the Slavs and the Thracians is well known, and frequently referred to.

The antiquity of sati does not perhaps extend that far into the past in India, but references to it do fairly clearly begin to come in from the 4th century B.C. The extent of the practice was apparently, however, slight because even though the Mahabharata mentions the immolation of Madra at the death of her husband, Pandu, thousands of other deaths in the great battle are described without the accompanying rite of sati being performed by widows. Much of the early Hindu religious literature is silent about it and it is only in the records left by the Greeks in the 4th century B.C. that we get firm references to the practice. By the beginning of the Christian era the references increase considerably and by about A.D. 400, the practice is taken fairly as granted among Kshatriya circles. It is, however, with the bursting of the Rajouts upon the scene of Indian history that sati emerges as a major social or religious observance. From then on the records become really full and one has to take up an account like Col. Tods¹ to read of the hundreds of women who burnt themselves with the scions of the noble houses of Chittor or Jodhpur or Bundi or Jaipur.

The practice was quite obviously not confined to the Rajputs in Rajasthan and obtained in all the parts of India in varying degree. The 'mastoeculli' in the South with their sculptured figures of upheld arms jutting out of the pillars under an eternal Sun and a Moon (figs. 1, 2, 3) or the masonry pillars throughout the Gangetic Plain and Central India, or the numerous notices of widows burning themselves in Bengal all bear testimony to this. From the Mughal times onwards the references to Sati in chronicles and accounts of travellers really become thick and it would be difficult to find a European who left an account of his stay in India without touching upon the practice of sati.  

1. The word Mastoeculli is probably derived from 'mahasan'. The monument commemorating a male dead was called a Viracull. Col. Mackenzie made copies of more than a hundred of the carvings on these monuments which are now in the India Office Library in London. See J. Ferguson, Sude-Stone Monuments, pp. 483-84

2. Numerous references to these can be found in the Archaeological Survey of India Reports for the years 1862-1884, 23 vols.

3. One finds, thus, long and detailed accounts in the writings of Bernier, Tavernier, Piero della Valle, Manucci, Abbé Du Halde, among a host of others.
In all these accounts, especially those left by European writers, sati is seen with much fascination and occasional horror. The most charitable of the estimates of this practice regard the women who become sati as objects of pity rather than of admiration; the most passionately 'moral' or 'rational' of these accounts shrink back from it in great disgust, and take it as final proof of the barbarism of the people of this sub-continent.

There is much that is pointed out about the cruelty of the practice in which widows find themselves obliged by social custom rather than by personal inclination to immolate themselves on the funeral pyre of their husbands. Detailed instances are available in which drugged women were dragged to the pyre and thrown upon it against all their efforts, their protestations being drowned in the music and clamour provided by the crowd that always gathered to see this ceremony. And yet, just at the point when one begins to believe in the cruelty of the practice, one comes upon a case like that reported by Sir Fredrick

1. The more astringent of the accounts of sati come from missionaries like 'Abbe Dubois, *Hindu Manners and Customs and Ceremonies*, who speaks constantly of this "ancient and barbarous custom."

2. A.K. Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva*, p. 120.
"Here also a widow resisted all dissuasion (from becoming sati), and finally proved her determination by asking for a lamp, and holding her finger in the flame until it was burnt and twisted like a quill pen held in the flame of a candle, all this time she gave no sign of fear or pain whatever."

There is naturally no certainty about the precise extent of the prevalence of the custom. Statistics do not become available till the 19th century and even then their reliability remains in some doubt. One can only reasonably conclude that the practice was much more in favour among the women of the ruling classes, especially in Rajput families, but sati among Brahmin families are frequently heard of and the incidence of the custom in Bengal outside of royal families is recorded as being remarkably high compared to neighbouring provinces. But if the impression one gains superficially is that the custom was universally accepted or tolerated, one again gains a corrective by referring to the words of the great 7th century poet, Bana:

1. Quoted in Alli kar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, op. 145-46. Contrast this with the reply given by the mother of King Harsha, patron of Bana, to her son who remonstrated with her not to take her life: "I am the lady of a great house; have you forgotten that I am the lioness-mate of a great spirit who, like a lion, had his delight in a hundred battles?"
"To die after one's beloved is most fruitless. It is a custom followed by the foolish. It is a mistake committed under infatuation. It is a reckless course followed only on account of hot haste. It is a mistake of stupendous magnitude. It does no good what so ever to the dead person. It does not help him in ascending to heaven; it does not prevent him from sinking into hell. It does not at all ensure union after death; the person who has died goes to the place determined by his own karmam, the person who accompanies him on the funeral pyre goes to hell reserved for those who are guilty of the sin of suicide. On the other hand, by surviving the deceased, one can do much good both to oneself and to the departed by offering prescribed oblations for his happiness in the other world. By dying with him one can do good to neither."

Individual opinions apart, there is even an attempt on the part of the state or authority to discourage sati. The third guru of the Sikhs, Amar Dass raised only a faint
voice perhaps against the practice, but first Humayun and then Akbar made attempts at legislation against sati. That they did not succeed to any appreciable extent is evident from the continuance of the practice in nearly all parts of India even though local governors sometimes made it obligatory that the widow intending to commit sati should obtain formal permission.

The clash between the two modes of thought, for these could be so called, however, culminates in the 19th century. The story is well known. 

1. Guru Amar Dass was obviously "mildly discomfitting" the custom when he wrote:

"They are not Suttees who perish in the flames. 
O Nanak! Suttees are those who die of a broken heart."


The case where the Emperor Akbar himself personally intervened to save the life of the widow of Jaimal is often cited.

3. This is the theme of many studies. See, thus, J.K. Najumdar, Raja Ramchurn Roy and Progressive Movements in India.
regulation of December 4, 1829, declaring in its preamble that “the practice of suttee or of burning or burying alive the widows of Hindoos is revolting to the feelings of human nature” comes into force throughout the British dominion in India.

But this still left large areas of India, the princely states under Indian rulers, outside the scope of these Regulations and it was only gradually that the British were able to exert pressure upon these rulers to enforce the ban on sati in their domains. Where new areas came under their control, like the Punjab which was annexed in 1849, or some districts in the hills, which passed under British authority in 1846, this presented no difficulty at all. But even with other states over which the British did not exercise direct authority, they were able either to bring about the ban by persuasion or incorporate it in the treaties which were concluded with the new rulers. Sati became, together with slave dealings...
female infanticide, and the burning or drowning of lepers, one of the practices putting an end to which became a pre-condition of the British extending their recognition to a new ruler. That the noble Ranjit Dev of Jammu had wanted in the 18th century came about in all the hills by the middle of the nineteenth.

After this one hears only rarely of a stray case of sati committed against the law, in India. A stir is caused when a case is reported, much as it is caused by an equally rare and reported case of ritual human sacrifice. But the practice and with it the passion, is clearly of the past. But the picture about attitudes towards it still remains unclear. Even in the twentieth century, a perceptive mind like that of Ananda Coomaraswamy goes on record in its effort to see the custom "more dispassionately than was possible in the hour of controversy and the atmosphere of religious prejudice". One finds it difficult

1. Ganesh Dass Badhers in his 19th century history of Jammu and Kashmir, Rajdarshani (British Museum, MS. Or.1634, ff.230-231) gives a vivid account of the wish of Ranjit Dev to end sati in Jammu. I am grateful to Prof. S.N. Goonworthy and Dr. J.G. Crewal who allowed me the use of their as yet unpublished English translation of this Persian work.

to agree with all that he has to say, and yet it is difficult to remain unaffected by his discussion of this "devotion beyond the grave".

"So far from being ashamed of our 'suttees' we take a pride in them; that is even true of the 'most progressive' amongst us. It is very much like the tenderness which our children's children may some day feel for those of their race who were willing to throw away their lives for 'their country right or wrong', though the point of view may seem to us then, as it seems to so many already, evidence rather of generosity than of balanced judgement. The criticism we make on the institution of sati and woman's blind devotion is similar to the final judgement we are about to pass on patriotism."

A modern painter like Nand Lal Bose who romanticizes the sati in a singularly sensitive work (fig. 7) one can see as being in sympathy with Dr. Coomaraswamy. So also can one understand the insistent wish of Hansa Devi, an old resident of the village Bushler in the Kangra district in the Panjab hills, who was kept back to burn herself four years ago with the body of her dead husband, Pandit
This is apt to leave one somewhat bewildered and wishing to know more about it from a limited area in which the memory of the custom is still remarkably vivid.

1. Villagers of Tika Muchler in Tehsil Palampur, District Kangra testified, during interviews in 1968, not only to the determination of Mansa Devi to commit sati but also to the "effective power" she now has to bless or curse people.