

Burning Questions

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There are conflicting reports on what happened in Satpura. While the police maintain that Charan Shah committed suicide there are others who swear that hers was an act of Sati.

It was in Deorala village in Rajasthan on September 3, 1987 that the last incident of sati was reported. Then an 18-year-old Roop Kanwar had committed sati by jumping into the funeral pyre of her 23-year-old Rajput husband, Maal Singh. Over 11 years later, a 55-year-old Dalit woman, Charan Shah 'committed sati' in Satpura village in Mahoba district in Uttar Pradesh on November 11. Perhaps the only difference in the two cases is that while Roop Kanwar was forced to commit sati, Charan Shah had done it on her own.

Man Shah, Charan's husband, had been ill with tuberculosis for the last 32 years. A week before his death, his condition worsened and he died at about 9 am on November 11. His body was taken to the cremation ground nearly two furlongs away from the village. After his son Shishupal lit the funeral pyre, the men folk went for the ritual bath in a nearby nullah (water course). In the meantime, Charan, who was in the village along with the womenfolk suddenly got up and a coconut in hand rushed to the funeral pyre of her husband. It is said that a villager, Jageshwar, reportedly tried to stop her from going towards the pyre. But Charan managed to escape. She also dodged the village chowkidar, Amar Singh, and reached the pyre.

Charan reportedly went round (parikrama) the pyre once and broke the coconut. She then tied the pallu of her sari to her husband's leg and sat there. Soon she was engulfed in flames. By the time the villagers reached there on hearing Jageshwar's and Amar Singh's screams it was all over. This is the general description of the incident. The police reached the village only late evening.

Significantly the villagers are not upset over the sati. They feel Charan has brought fame to the village. No one reportedly wept in the village after the sati. Some people in

low voices even claimed that the woman had declared earlier that she would commit sati and earn a name for the village by her sacred act.

It proved to be true. The sleepy village has come into the limelight though it is around 180 kms from Kanpur. The village is inaccessible by any vehicle barring jeeps. The nearest town, Charkhari, is about 10 kms from Satpura. A bumpy and dusty road passing through fields connects Charkhari with Satpura, which is surrounded by hills lending a picturesque appearance. The district headquarters of Mahoba, known for its betel leaves crop, is 30 kms from the village. The village has 20 to 25 muddy houses and the total population is not more than 200, mostly Dalits.

Soon after Charan committed sati, hordes of people, especially from the neighbouring villages, descended in the village to worship at the sati sthal (site). The sthal became a sacred place. It was littered with coins, flowers and other offerings. People, particularly women, collected the 'sacred' ashes from the pyre. There was even an attempt by the people to build a make-shift sati temple there to pay respects to Charan, now being called mata, but it was foiled by the police who warned that glorifying sati was a crime. While the district administration and the police try to dismiss Charan's death as a case of suicide, people in Satpura and neighbouring villages call it sati. (However, villagers who earlier claimed the act as sati, are now changing their statements under pressure from the police.) Prakash Rani, Charan's sister-in-law (brother Munna Lal's wife) was more vocal and claimed that she (Charan) had lit three diyas (lights) near the pyre, had a bath, and then jumped into the funeral pyre of her husband in her bridal dress. Prakash Rani also said that after Man Shah's death, Charan cleaned his leg with water and drank it! She also dismissed the police statement that Charan was of unstable mind and claimed that though she was lean and slim, she was quite healthy. But Prakash Rani is not as forthcoming with her statements now as earlier. Other villagers like Jaipal and Prahlad are certain that Charan had committed sati. Quoting the Satpura villagers, Tillu of Basod village and Laxman of Chandi village assert that she had committed sati by jumping into her husband's funeral fire.

Padakhanda Shah Data, current head of Sat Saidata Dham, an ashram, about 17 kms from Satpura, claimed that Charan had committed sati. On the basis of the information he gathered, he stoutly refuted the police assumption that it was a case of suicide. The pontiff of the ashram is sure that Charan will attain the status of a sati. The general refrain of the villagers is that Charan had committed sati forlone after her husband's death. She was very close to Man Shah. She lovingly nursed him for the past three decades though even her relatives were afraid of going near him lest they catch TB. She knew soon after her marriage that her husband was a chronic TB patient but did not hate or desert him. It is said that no proper medical treatment was given to him as they

were very poor. Charan's son Shishupal was not forthcoming with any statement. He seemed to be afraid of disclosing the truth due to police pressure. In fact he was held by the police along with Munna Lal and Jageshwar, an eye-witness to the sati. They were, however, released soon. They made no comments after their release from police custody. They were obviously scared after their 'arrest'. Jageshwar, on being persuaded to speak, merely parroted the theory of the police that although he found Charan rushing to the pyre, he could not stop her. Charan's younger son Madan, however, has nothing to say as he was away in Delhi on the day of the incident. Her eldest son, Asharam, died a few years ago.

Though it is gathered that Charan might have done the deed in some kind of bridal dress, she may not have gone to the funeral pyre along with others or in a procession. There are also doubts whether the people, particularly Jageshwar and the chowkidar, sincerely tried to stop her from going to the pyre. It should not have been a difficult job for them to stop a woman of a small build.

The district administration and the police, however, tell a different story and deny that Charan had committed sati. According to the district police chief, Mr. L. Ravi Kumar, no ceremony was performed before she jumped into the funeral pyre for it to be described as sati. According to him, it was a case of simple "self-immolation by Charan in the funeral pyre of her husband out of anxiety". The station officer of Charkhari, Mr Sunder Lal Maurya, said that Charan had not performed the rituals before jumping into the pyre and as such it was a simple case of suicide. Mr Maurya, who is inquiring into the case, said that for the act to be described as sati, the woman would have to be taken in a procession to the funeral pyre in her bridal dress. Besides, before committing sati, the widow would have to take the body of her husband in her lap. He said that Charan had not done any of these acts before jumping into the pyre.

The police felt that she had committed suicide after the death of her husband as she felt forlone. The police, on the basis of their inquiry, have filed a case against the deceased woman under sections 279 and 309 IPC for committing suicide! Inquiries by this correspondent revealed that there was an attempt by the police to intimidate the villagers from giving their version to the public and the media. The villagers are apparently scared of the police. The police, however, deny these charges. They have set up a post in the Village and all entry points have been sealed. The administration has imposed prohibitory orders under 144 Cr.P.C. in the area to foil the attempts of people to glorify sati. The police have also removed the offerings and ashes from the sati sthal.

Blind Practice

The villagers in this area are highly superstitious. The sati committed by Charan Shah by jumping into the funeral pyre of her husband Man Shah in Satpura village on November 11 was not the first case of such an incident reported from this area.

A few cases of sati were committed here earlier but none of them, however, attracted public or media attention. In fact it is said that the village got its name Sat(i)pura (place of sati) because of these cases of sati.

Colonel Prem Pratap Singh's father was said to be one of the early settlers in this area. After his father's death, it is said, his mother had committed sati nearly two decades ago. Soon after Charan committed sati, the Colonel, however, reached the village and urged the people not to glorify the sati.

The villagers claim that after Charan committed sati, they saw the strange sight of her body disappearing into thin air as Mata! At the same moment, they further claim, miracles started happening as ailments of several villagers were cured. According to Balram, a villager, a lame boy started walking, infact running too, now after the sati incident. So Charan has now been deitified.

There was a total lack of health care and awareness in the village. Though Man Shah was a tuberculosis patient, he did not get proper health care. And if he had been provided proper health care, perhaps, he should have survived. The superstitious villagers virtually kept away from him leaving the job of nursing him to his wife alone as they felt that they too might contract TB. This is understandable to a certain extent. But strangely, the villagers were scared to even stand near the cremation ground for long as they feared they would contract TB if they inhaled the smoke from the funeral pyre of Man Shah!

The villagers in this part of the country are observing the tradition of the younger brother marrying the wife of the elder in the case of the death of the latter in a young age. The elder son of Shahs, Asharam, had died a few years ago. Later their second son Shishupal married his widowed sister-in-law! They considered this as a custom.