

Sati versus Murder

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It is unfortunate that a measure of confusion has set in about the precise nature and ramifications regarding the immolation - whether self, sati, or otherwise of the 55-year-old Charan Shah on the funeral pyre of her husband at Satpura in Uttar Pradesh on November 11. It is even more unfortunate for believers in liberal discourse that frontline women's organisations, including the National Commission for Women, prominent feminist writers and other concerned citizens have spoken in discordant voices, further confounding an already murky situation.

Ms. Madhu Kishwar's article entitled "Murder versus Sati" in The Hindu (Dec. 1), the highly-publicised findings of the AIDWA's fact-finding committee headed by Ms. Subashini Ali which firmly declared that the incident was not sati, the completely opposite view of highly-reputed NGOs, including Saheli and Nirantar, which demanded (after visiting Satpura) that the incident be classified as sati, and yet another version expounded by the National Commission for Women through its Tewatia Committee have all resulted in the blurring and unnecessary distortion of a barbaric and uncivilised practice, utterly contemptuous of the status of women, that continues to exist at the very least as a perception or an issue for discussion in allegedly modern day India.

The issue requires to be squarely placed in its proper perspective. Though sati was officially abolished in India by Sir William Bentinck, by his Sati Regulation Code of 1829, over 170 years later, the issue remains topical. Throughout these eventful years, which witnessed the evolution of a nation - the Independence movement, Partition, adult franchise, rapid industrialisation, the test tube baby and even the nuclear bomb - the status of women has continued to be low and sporadic incidents of sati were reported from time to time from 317 BC in the Punjab, right up to Roop Kanwar in 1987 and Mathura in 1991, Banda in 1992 (the attempt was foiled by two policemen) and a teenaged girl named Pawan, on September 26, 1994, who was saved by the police in the nick of time.

In my view, unavoidable controversy was created by those who first went public with "findings" that Charan Shah committed suicide, not sati. In a very real sense, this vitiated a proper probe by the local authorities who had the jurisdiction, facilities, and responsibility to get to the truth of the matter. Premature publication of findings by women's organisations are bound to have the unfortunate effect of letting the local authorities off the hook, since this theory provides a non-messy finale to the whole problem. While it is nobody's case that a suicide should be blown out of proportion thereby fanning the flames of superstition, it is equally important not to preempt a full-fledged inquiry into the issue. In any event, whether sati or suicide, the fact remains that Charan Shah immolated herself on her husband's funeral pyre, and no virtuosity of semantics can justify or condone such an act of nihilism.

It is for this reason that certain sentiments expressed in Ms. Madhu Kishwar's article are worrisome. It is totally unacceptable to distinguish between forced sati as being criminal and voluntary sati as being cultural tradition. There was and never can be a cultural tradition that sanctifies the death of a human being. To take an extreme example, if human sacrifice was conducted, could that be called a cultural tradition ?

Let it be stated in no uncertain terms that no civilised society can possibly even regard sati as a cultural tradition, and those who advocate caution, instead of uncompromising ruthless action in stamping out this barbaric practice, are in danger of falling into the trap of apologists for sati, who exist in this country even today.

It is nobody's case that a dialogue should not be conducted with the people involved or concerned. But this is not a reason why proper legislation to prevent sati and its glorification should not be enacted, and why the state should not be held accountable for its failure to implement the law. It is difficult to see how the issue of rehabilitation of widows and gender sensitisation of society are at variance with the implementation of the Sati Prevention Law. It is clear that what is required is a multipronged strategy consisting of legal measures, effective - state intervention, rehabilitation and public education. In this regard, it is important to clearly define the responsibility of stakeholders, because there exists till today influential public opinion at the highest levels of government, business and society, that sati is an act worthy of reverence and a perfectly acceptable fate for a widow. This was the reason why, despite the hue and cry over Roop Kanwar, and the Anti-Sati legislation of 1987, all the 32 accused in Roop Kanwar's case were acquitted by the Courts due to "lack of evidence" and various chauvinistic acts of the then Government of Rajasthan.

The question of sati has undeniable economic consequences, and the element of commerce is today an integral part of any perception on the issue. There can be no doubt that sati brings about great enrichment of the local community - the Roop Kanwar incident is said to have generated over Rs. 1 crore by way of donations. Thus in addition to the fundamental problem of the low status of women, and patriarchal misconceptions, economic gain is a potent motivation for supporters of sati. This is a tough and vicious combination that can only be neutralised by uncompromising, multipronged action on all fronts, including governmental, legislative and social.

Consequently, semantic arguments about "colonial attitudes" cannot be allowed to dilute this issue.