

British Stance in the Abolition of Sati

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Abstract

Sati, the ritual of self immolation of widows in their funeral pyres of their husbands' was the first socio-religious issue which attracted wide public attention among the natives and the British in India. It evoked heated debates among the Indians who were influenced by the Western ideals. The British Government in India was pressurized by a variety of public drawing from India and abroad. Indian reformers who were influenced by western ideals, the East India Company officials, European missionaries and the public in Britain clamoured for British interference in the practice.

Key words: Self-immolation, victim, political expediency, sastric validity

Male reformers' enthusiasm about women related issues and their clamour for legislation to rescue women from anomalous practices brought the colonial government into the foray of debates. The debate throws light into the predicament that the British confronted in the issue of women's emancipation. As the rulers, they had the last word in controversial issue which stirred intense debate among the subject people. Their dilemma lay in drawing a line between their political expediency as colonial government and in their much publicized 'civilizing mission' among the less civilized natives. The British stance was articulated well through women centred issues such as sati, widow marriage and age of consent controversy. The article focuses on the British stand on sati, the Indian ritual of self immolation of widow in the funeral pyre of her husband.

Sati, the Indian ritual of self immolation of widow in the funeral pyre of husband, was taken by the British as the symbol of Indian backwardness. The British were well aware of the gruesome practice called sati long before their arrival in India. The European travellers and their accounts had detailed description of the spectacular incident. The depiction led the Europeans in romanticizing the conjugal love of Indian couples. It is generally believed in the West that widow voluntarily opted sati out of their intense and passionate love towards her dead husband.¹ But when the British came to India as traders, they started observing the ritual closely and it changed their impression on sati which was constructed on the accounts of travelers. Richard Hartley Kennedy who served as physician in India left a note of the demeanour of the mob thus –"All the rest were not only indifferent to the horror of the scene but seemed rather excited, talking with each other trifling, and unawed."² It was a spectacle to the native public, but the British found it deeply shocking. The British described the demeanour of the Indian mob which flocked to watch the sati as barbarity and it also convinced them the need of their presence in civilizing India. As they themselves believed in the superiority of their civilization, British assumed that it was their duty to rescue women from the barbaric native Indian male. The issue of sati was, thus a site of British subjugation of India. Madhu Kishwar observed the British tactics thus: They began their cultural invasion by deliberately targeting a few cases of young widows in Bengal who were forcibly burnt on their husbands' pyres, calling those murders sati, and banning it by law, so they could appear as agents of superior civilization rescuing victims from a savage culture.³

The British accounts portrayed 'suttee' as victim contrary to the Indian notion as 'virtuous wife.' Though the official records contain accounts of widows who voluntarily jumped into the funeral pyre and widows who resisted self immolation, the British constructed the 'would be sati' as perennial victim. The British were more eager to portray the barbarity of Indian male and did not project the instances of resistance from women. The defiance of women towards the custom was inferred from the depiction of men holding bamboo sticks to pull down the woman to the pyre to thwart her attempt to escape from the

flames. If she commits sati voluntarily, in the British accounts, she was depicted as victim of religion. Thus, in the opinion of Lata Mani, widows nowhere appear as subjects in action, negotiating, capitulating, accommodating, resisting.⁴ The barbarity associated with sati was a pretext for the British to interfere in the Indian society.

The British East India Company, however, was least interested to jeopardize their position in India by interfering in Indian society. The Company hoped that the natives, in course of time, would discern the fallacy of the principles which are given rise to the practice of sati, and that it would of itself gradually fall into disuse. The Company also stuck to the attitude that the British, especially the Company officials on their own, could persuade the Indian public from practicing sati. It was hesitant to take a stern action or legal move against the custom as it might, the Company thought, imperil its existence in India. The 'civilizing mission' was sidelined often for the more pragmatic existential needs of the British.

The Company was forced to recourse to affirmative action in the context of the mounting reported cases of sati. In addition to it, the missionaries operating in India were also clamouring for the abolition of the practice on humanitarian ground. The British referred the issue to Nizamat Adalat to probe into the *sastric* validity of the ritual. The British recourse to *sastras* was a clear indication of their priority in the issue-their concern was more on risking their survival in India than on rescuing women from the pyre. The consequence was that the inhuman practice was prolonged. Demetrius C. Boulger, the biographer of William Bentinck whose viceroyalty noted for its declaration banning sati, found the decision of the Company ridiculous. He opined that the practice of sati had been in force for many centuries that it was an archaic and useless question for the English administration to enquire whether it was really in accordance or not with the injunctions of early Hindu religion.⁵ The Circular issued in 1813 by Nizamat Adalat on the basis of *sastras* intended only to regulate the custom. It in fact, allowed voluntary sati to continue. In the opinion of Iqbal Singh it was already as bad as the ill it was supposed to cure.⁶ The Circular was in force till 1829, the year in which the British under William Bentinck banned the practice by law.

In spite of the Circular of Sati issued in 1813, the British were highly apprehensive of interfering in the self immolation of widows. This apprehension of the Company was brought out clearly in the reply to the letter sent by W.B.Bayley, the Magistrate of Burdwan on October 28th, 1813 immediately after the promulgation of Sati in 1813. Bayley's letter revealed that in spite of his order on the ground of the infancy of the child, the woman under the protection of her friends and the assembled crowd threw herself on the funeral pyre. As a result, he detained ten persons on security and requested the Registrar for further instructions to be followed in the case. The reply of the Registrar of Nizamat Adalat amply demonstrated the stance of the British, though they projected themselves avowedly against the practice. Bayley was instructed to abstain strictly from interfering in the conduct of the ritual. Registrar replied that the Circulation on Sati in 1813 did not authorize any interference on the part of the police to prevent the performance of suttee on the ground that the woman intending to burn in the funeral pyre of the deceased husband, had infant children and Bayley was accordingly desired to issue the strict injunctions to his police officers prohibiting their interference on such occasions.⁷ An obviously offended Bayley defended his position by pointing out that official interference of the police officers have already prevented the sacrifice of five women in the district of Burdwan. Of the five, four women were prohibited from burning on the sole ground of having infant children. Bayley argued that he resisted the performance of this abominable practice merely on the ground of the woman having an infant child; although numbers of people were assembled, and the preparations for the sacrifice were completed; he succeeded in preventing it without any hazard of popular tumult or dissatisfaction. He concluded his reply with a deep regret on the decision of the Registrar of the Nizamat Adalat annulling an Order which has already produced such beneficial effects, and which is so entirely consistent to the principles of humanity by which the British government in India was administered.⁸

The Circular of 1813 led to heated debates among the native public in favour and against sati. It helped immensely to form a public opinion against sati and helped ultimately to abolish it. The anti-sati

campaign was spearheaded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy whose penchant arguments against the evil practice were brought it into the attention of the British. During the commotion created as a result of the intense debates, the British hoped that western education and the effort of native reformers like Ram Mohan Roy would lead to its gradual disappearance. The Circular of 1813 and the British interference in the practice brought them into new issues. Widows who survived sati due to the intervention of the British asked for maintenance. They British were not willing to bear additional expenses in the form of giving maintenance to widows. Though British officials from various districts advocated complete ban on the ritual, the British government stuck to the Circular of 1813. The Nizamat Adalat unequivocally declared thus: It is not prepared to offer any suggestion for the absolute prohibition of the practice in any part of the country.⁹

The public opinion in Britain was also in favour of the abolition of sati in the second decade of the nineteenth century. Bedford in 1823 and the village of Crail, near Edinburg in 1825 took the lead in petitioning the British Parliament for the abolition of sati.¹⁰ In spite of the favourable factors, the British government in India refused to ban it completely as they were apprehensive of the wrath of the native public against them. That is why, Lord Amherst, two years before the abolition of sati, trusted the diffusion of knowledge among the natives for the gradual eradication of the detestable superstition.¹¹ It was under Lord William Bentinck that sati was completely banned in India. Demetrius C. Boulger has left a befitting note to the decision of Bentinck thus: There can be no doubt that even if there had been no native reformers, and no intelligent native opinion, the action of the British government could not have deferred¹²

Conclusion

The delay in the decision to put an end to the gruesome practice was seemed purposeful. Political expediency guided the British in India, as the prime importance of the British Government was to maintain their hold in India. Socio-religious issues and debates in India were closely surveilled by the British and the decision was taken cautiously. Consequently, the decision in controversial issues was always prolonged and protracted. Sati was the first controversial socio-

religious issue that the British forced to meddle with and the prolonged decision of the British in the issue amply demonstrated the insecurity of the British in holding India under their control. It also gives clear indication of the humanitarian and progressive drives of the British presence in India and demonstrated well that their grand project called ‘civilizing mission’ was steered by political motives always.

End Notes

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- 2 John Straton Hawley, sati. The Blessing and the Curse.The Burning of Wives in India.New York, OUP, 1994.p.45.
- 3 Madhu Kishwar. ‘Deadly laws and Zealous Reformers. The Conflicting Interpretations and Politics of Sati’Manushi.No115.24.
- 4 Lata Mani, Contentious Traditions. The Debate on Sati in Colonial India, Delhi, OUP, 1996.31
- 5 Demetrius C.Boulger.Lord William Bentinck, Oxford, University of Oxford, 1897. 84.
- 6 Iqbal Singh, Ram Mohan Roy. A Biographical Enquiry into the making of Modern India. Vol.I. Delhi:Asia Publishing House, 1983. 197
- 7 Bengal Judicial consultations,1812, 23.
- 8 Papers Relating to East India Company Affairs, viz , Hindu Widows and Voluntary Immolations, 1821: 37.
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- 10 J.Peggs. Suttees Cry to Britain. Burning Hindu Widows, London, Unwinbrothers, 1928, 93..
- 11 Anne Thackery Richie, and Richardson Evans,Lord Amherst, Oxford, University of Oxford, 1894. 48.
- 12 Demetrius C.Boulger.Lord William Bentinck, Oxford, University of Oxford, 1897. 80.

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