Women, Atrocity and Reformation in Colonial India: The burning of *Satis* in Bengal, 1757-1829

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Abstract

In the eighteenth century, women's position in a male-dominated Indian society was discriminatory. Hindu widows were the worst victims of society's superstitious beliefs and practices. Neither their in-laws nor their parents' sides welcomed their presence in the family. The orthodox Hindus were required to burn their widows on the funeral pyres of their husbands, irrespective of their ages. During the East India Company's rule, the largest proportion of widows' immolations was executed in the Bengal Presidency compared to other parts of India. On most occasions, widows were immolated against their will. Thousands of Bengali widows were burned in the name of *Sati* rites until 1829. The Christian missionaries were the pioneers who raised their voice against this barbarous custom and urged the government for its abolition. A segment of British civilians, police officers, and members of the judiciary also made their efforts to stop this inhuman custom. Raja Rammohan Roy played a leading and glorious role through his writings and activities for the abolition of *Sati* rites. Among the Governor-Generals of India, Lord William Bentinck took the real initiative and passed the *Sati* Prohibition Regulation to ban this atrocious act against women, and the flames of the funeral piles of living widows in Bengal were extinguished.

Keywords: *Bengal, Widows, Atrocity, Sati, Regulation, Prohibition*.

Introduction

In eighteenth-century Bengal, the independent lives and livelihoods of women were frowned upon by society. For the women, the attitude of the men was disdainful, and the women were denied some of the most basic human rights. This tradition continued until the nineteenth century. It was a common practice to marry off girls in their early ages. There were very few cases of widows remarrying. Only some of the lower-caste Hindus would approve the remarriage of widows. The religious scriptures of Muslims support widow remarriage. But in reality, only the most charming and tender-aged widows were remarried in Muslim society. Polygamy was a common practice among the orthodox *Kulins*, and most of the time, there was a significant age gap between a *Kulin* and his wives. As a result, the proportion of widowhood among the *Kulins* was much higher. The practice of *Sati* burning was in vogue not only among the Brahmins but also among the Baidyas, Kayasthas, and other *Sat Sudras*.

On most occasions, the widows were burned on their husbands' funeral pyres by force or by exerting huge psychological pressure on them. The instances of *Sati burnings* in India were well documented by foreign travelers, European merchants, and Christian missionaries. This paper focuses on the general subjugation of widows in Bengali society, as well as the atrocities committed against them in the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries, when they were burned alive on their deceased husbands' funeral pyres.

Sati practices in India can be traced back to ancient times. It is said that Emperor Harsha's mother climbed her husband's funeral pyre before her death (Mallick 1935: 164). In the medieval period, Al-Biruni, the Arab Indologist, made reference to the burning of widows in India (Al-Biruni 1993: 252). Ibn Battuta, the Moroccan traveller, depicted a shocking description of widow burnings in India (Battuta 1976: 21-23.). Chaitanyadeva of Nadia was not in favour of *Sati* rites in society. It has been said that he hurriedly departed from the place of occurrence after glancing at the burning of a *Sati* during his lifetime (Mullick 1320 BS: 30). During the rule of the Mughals in India, *Sati* rites were executed in many parts of their kingdom. On one occasion, Emperor Akbar himself rescued a widow from the funeral pyre of her dead husband and saved her life. But the Muslim rulers could not prohibit this brutal custom (Collet 1914: 24). In the seventeenth century, French physician, Bernier witnessed the burning of *Satis* in different parts of India (Bernier 1826: 9-19). Job Charnock, the founder of Calcutta, rescued a charming widow from being burned on her deceased husband's funeral pyre and accepted her as his wife (Nair 1977: 28). In eighteenth-century Bengal, major instances of *Sati* burnings took place along the two banks of the river Bhagirathi. A few of the widows voluntarily became *Satis* to avoid the spiteful treatment of society. Others were brought to the cremation grounds by their family members and relatives forcefully, where they were thrown into the flames of the funeral pyres of their dead husbands.

In Indian society, women have ordinarily been forced to submit to the supremacy of the male family members. They have hardly received recognition for their contributions to the family and society. Manu writes: "Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence" (Manu 1886: 328).Yet we find Bengali women who excelled in their individual fields of activity. In the eighteenth century, Rani Bhabani of Rajshahi and Maharani Vishnukumari of Burdwan played excellent roles in their respective *zamindaris*. Among the women, widows were badly treated. The orthodox Hindu society could not even think about the remarriage of the widows. FeiHsin, the Chinese official who came to Bengal in the fifteenth century, recorded that when a husband had died in Bengal, his widow could not remarry (Hsin 1996: 76). In the early eighteenth century, Raja Raj Ballabh of Dacca and Rani Bhabani made an attempt to introduce widows' remarriage in Hindu society but could not succeed (Ghosh 1338 BS: 164–165; Karim: 115–116). The widows were required to wear only white clothes. They were prohibited from

wearing ornaments and using perfumes. They had to give up eating fish, flesh, or butter and live on plain barley or wheaten bread. They were allowed to eat only once a day (Forster 1798: 58). The Hindu widows were called *moonda*, a reproachful term that meant "shorn head," because every widow was supposed to have their hair cut off. When women in India quarreled, this offensive term, "*moonda*," was generally the first abusive word that they used (Dubois 1905: 352-353). When their spouses died, their in-laws usually sent them to their parental homes. After the death of their parents, widows were compelled to live with their brothers' family just like slave girls (Forster 1798: 57). The hardships imposed on the upper-caste Hindu widows were so severe that women with strong morale frequently preferred to burn themselves on the funeral pyres of their deceased husbands. It has been estimated that at least 70,000 Hindu widows were burned in India from 1757 to 1829 (Smith 1885: 285). According to statistical returns,the number of *Sati* rites in the Bengal Presidency was much higher compared to that of the Madras and Bombay Presidencies.From 1815 to 1826, the total number of *Sati* rites performed in the Bengal Presidency in twelve years was 7154, whereas their numbers in the Madras Presidency in eight years and in the Bombay Presidency in nine years were 287 and 248 respectively (Peggs 1832: 220). Because Sati burning was much more common in Bengal, the majority of the wretched women among these burnt widows were from the Bengal Presidency. A section of the widows renounced their caste and sought refuge in brothels in order to escape the harsh regulations of society (Hamilton 1828: 205).

In the twelfth century, Ballal Sen, the king of Bengal, restructured Hindu society into different classes and introduced the practice of *Kulinism* (Bhatta 1901: 8-12). The *Kulins* of Bengal maintained strict restrictions in marriage rules and widely performed *Sati* rites among them. In Bengal, the practice of widow burning was restricted only to some limited castes. Scrafton noted that the *Sati* practice was not common to all classes of Bengalis. Only the illustrious families of the province observed the *Sati* rite (Scrafton 1770: 10). Stavorinus, a Dutch East India Company captain, visited Bengal between the late sixties and early seventies of the eighteenth century. He recorded that the women belonging to some castes were obliged to sacrifice their lives either on the flames of the funeral pyres of their deceased husbands or by burying them alive with the corpses of their husbands. If the widows refused to submit to this atrocious custom, their characters would be stamped with the greatest infamy, and they would suffer the abomination and derision of their companions and relatives (Stavorinus 1798: 441). The upper class Hindu society taught their girls from their childhood that the happiness of a married woman would be staying with her husband in both the two worlds on all circumstances. Scrafton recorded about the social perception of women's position in the former half of the eighteenth century:

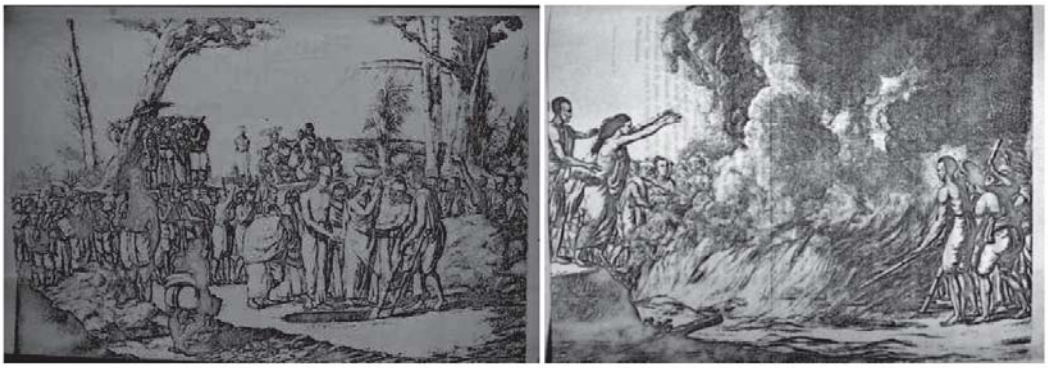
> "Another circumstance that contributes to form their general character, is, their ... burning with their husbands...they are brought up together from their infancy; the woman has no opportunity of ever conversing with any other man; her affections are centered solely

> in this one object of her love; she is firmly persuaded, that by being burnt with him, she shall be happy with him in another world; that if she neglects this last token of affection, he may take another wife, and she be separated from him forever."(Scrafton 1770: 9-10).

An impression was produced in the mental world of an orthodox Hindu woman that once her husband died, she had nothing left in this world. The widow of one Rhaam Chund Pundit was only 17 or 18 years old. It has been reported that she voluntarily sacrificed her life on her husband's funeral pyre at Cossimbuzaar on February 4, 1743 (Holwell 1767: 93-97). Forster recorded that: "The wives of the deceased Hindoos have moderated that spirit of enthusiastic pride, or impulse of affection, which was used to urge them to self-destruction on the pile of their husbands." (Forster 1798: 57). The Hindu women became *Sati* by burning or burying alive with their deceased husbands. Stavorinus recorded that a Bengalese woman was buried alive with her deceased husband on the 20th of October, and another was burned on the 25th of November with the body of her husband (Stavorinus 1798: 126). It seems that, towards the end of the eighteenth century, the instances of *Sati* burning in Bengal increased. Craufurd observed: "The practice of burning the dead is almost universal; and that of the widow burning herself on the funeral pile with the body of her deceased husband still exists." (Craufurd 1792: 14).

When pure Kulin Brahmins died, their widows were usually required to perform *Sati* rites. The sanctity of their *Kulinism* was jeopardised if the widows of the dead *Kulins* escaped *Sati* sacrifice. Where a family of the *Kulin* Brahmins supposed that the burning of a widow of the family was necessary to support their honour, the woman knew very well that her death was expected. She was aware that if she disagreed to burn herself, she would be treated with the greatest cruelty and continually reproached for the disgrace of the family (Ward 1815: 311). Around the year 1796, a shocking and atrocious murder of a widow was committed by her own son and members of her family when a Brahmin of Mujilupoor, about a day's journey south from Calcutta, died. The wretched widow fled from the funeral pyre of her dead husband so that she could save her life. When she was found out, she prayed for her life to her own son. But her own son, relatives, and others rejected her appeal for fear of losing their caste. At the end, the wretched widow's hands and feet were tied and thrown on the flames of the burning funeral pile, and the widow was burned alive (The Missionary Register 1816: 268).

Solvyns, a Flemish marine painter who stayed in India from the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century, left valuable accounts of trade, customs, and ceremonies in contemporary India. He witnessed *Sati* rituals being carried out in Bengal at the end of the eighteenth century. Solvyns recorded elaborate descriptions and drew illustrations of these horrible ceremonies that he witnessed. Following are two of his engravings of *Sati* rites, witnessed and elucidated by him:



Sati: Buried alive (Solvyns). *Sati*: Burnt alive (Solvyns).

Solvyns witnessed *Sati* rites being performed by burying the dead body of a Hindu with his living widow as well as burning the corpse together with the widow alive. He witnessed another form of *Sati* ritual where a widow burned herself alive with some of her husband's property, like his used apparel or footwear. These types of *Sati* rites were performed in a case where the husband died in a distant country (Solvyns1810: Onnoo-Gomon). Solvyns recorded that the *Sati* rites by burying alive with the dead were more frequent in Orissah and Maratta territories compared to Bengal and Behar. It is evident from Solvyn's engravings that the *Sati* rites of burying or burning widows alive were performed with the active participation of the Brahmins and their relatives.The widows of the Jugis (Yogees), a description of the weavers, were often buried alive with their deceased husbands (Ward 1815: 309). The following is Solvyn's description of *Shogo-Gomon* in the form of burying widows alive:

> "When the widows of a *Joogee* has signified her intention to bury herself with her deceased husband, her family dig a grave from six to eight feet deep, into which the body of the husband is let down, and placed sitting with the hands joined. The widow then approaches the grave, escorted as in the ceremonies ... by a solemn procession. She bathes before the public without giving occasion to the slightest scandal, being already considered, from the sanctity of the death she has chosen, as a supernatural being. At the edge of the grave she listens to the pious exhortations of the Brahmuns who accompany her, gives them her jewels, and after placing upon her head a *cudjery* or pot filled with rice, plantains, betel and water, makes her farewell salutations to the assistants with her hands joined. She descends into the grave by a ladder of bamboo which is instantly drawn up again. She sits herself by the side of her husband; at that moment all the instruments hired for the ceremony are heard, and the relations throw such quantities of earth upon the unfortunate widow, that she is soon suffocated and interred. The preparations for this ceremony are horrid, but it does not appear that the sufferings of

> the unhappy victim are of long duration." (Solvyns 1810: Shogo-Gomon: The wife of an Hindoo buried alive).

Captain Kemp also eye-witnessed the *Sati* rite of a young widow of sixteen years of age belonging to the Jugi (Jogee) caste with her deceased husband by burying her alive in 1813 (Peggs 1832: 259-260). Solvyns, in his other account of *Sati* sacrifice by burning in Bengal, narrated:

> "The woman who has made the vow of burning herself with the dead body of her husband, begins by bathing; after which she dresses herself in entirely new apparel; the priests then paint her face with *minium* or red oker, with which I have been assured they mix gunpowder and sulphur, no doubt to shorten the sufferings of the unfortunate victim of their superstition. When this is done, she takes in one hand an evergreen herb called *Cusa,* and some water in the other; and while the Brahmuns are repeating the word *Om, Om,* she distributes the *minium* among her relations, and her jewels among the priests. To those who assist at the ceremony, she throws some grains of rice as she proceeds three times round the pile on which the corpse of her husband has been deposed wrapt up in a white sheet. Two Brahmuns accompany her repeating texts of the sacred writings, and representing to her the inexpressible pleasures which await her in the next world. Even the whole family of the widow are to participate of the happiness which, according to their opinions, is to be the result of this sublime action; for the Brahmuns assert that all those who lead the widow to the pile will enjoy for every step they take many years of felicity". (Solvyns 1810: Shogo-Gomon: A woman burning herself with the corpse of her husband).

During the latter half of the eighteenth century, the practice of *Sati* burning in Bengal became unrestrained, rampant, and widespread. Child marriage, polygamy, and widow sacrifice became the general rule among the *Kulin* Brahmins. Numerous widows of the *Kulins* were murdered by burning them on their husbands' funeral piles. With the death of a polygamous *Kulin*, many of his surviving widows were burned alive. A horrible mass murder in the name of *Sati* rituals was committed at Bagna Para in 1799. On the death of Ununtu, a Brahmin with over 100 wives, 37 of his widows were burned with him in three days (Long 1846: 423; Peggs 1832: 219-220). Three widows were burned on the first day, fifteen on the second, and 19 on the third.[1]The Muslims of Bengal did not glorify the act of *Sati* among them. Nonetheless, isolated cases of *Sati* practice among them have been discovered. It was reported in the Calcutta Gazette of July 29, 1790, that a Muhammadan lady buried herself alive with the corpse of her husband (Majumdar 1905: 157).

The misery of the higher-class Hindu widows of Bengal became intolerable in the early nineteenth century because they were required to relinquish their widowhood by burning

themselves alive on the funeral pyres of their dead husbands. Even young wives of tender ages were not spared from burning with their dead husbands. Around the year 1794, a fifteen-year-old girl who had a three-week-old child was burned alive with her dead husband, Devee Charan, a Brahmin of Manirampur near Barrackpore. About the year 1804, a child widow of eight years old was immolated with her deceased husband, Huree Nath, a Brahmin of Elo, near Calcutta. In the year 1824, Mussummaut Dhun Munee Dossee, a fifteen-year-old teen-ager widow of Nadia district, was killed in the name of the *Sati* rite.[2] The orthodox Hindus did not spare the much older widows from observing *Sati* rites. Around the year 1791, an eighty-year-old widow of Gopal Nayalankar, a very learned Brahmin of Nadia, who was about 100 years old, was burned alive when he died. A similar incident occurred at Santipur in 1809 when the widow of Ram Chandra Basu, a Kayastha, aged between 80 and 85 years, was immolated with her dead husband (Ward 1815: 307-308). In contemporary India, the province of Bengal experienced more *Sati* burning incidents than western India**.** According to the estimates of *Samachar Darpan* dated March 27, 1819, one out of every seven cases of *Sati* burning in India took place in the Hooghly district of Bengal (Bandyopadhyay 1339 BS: 145). Tribeni was the most notorious location in the Hooghly district for *Sati* immolations. The inhabitants of Tribeni would hear the screaming of burning widows at night from a cremation ground north of its ferry *ghat*.[3]

Ram Mohan Roy himself witnessed the burning of his sister-in-law after the death of his elder brother, Jaganmohun, on April 8, 1810 (Collet 1914: 50). Nadia and Burdwan were the seats of "pure" Brahmins. For this reason, the number of widow burnings in these two districts of Bengal was high in comparison to other districts other than Hooghly. Ranighat (Ranaghat), Santipur, and Bagna Para were notorious places for *Sati* rites. However, the majority of *Sati* burnings occurred in the Hooghly district. An atrocious act of mass-burning of widows was committed around the second decade of the nineteenth century at Santipur in Nadia district. On the death of Chandra Banerjee, a *Kulin* Brahmin of Santipur, eight of his wives became *Sati* on his funeral pyre (Long 1846: 416). To occupy her property, helpless widows were often murdered in the name of *Sati* rites. In a report of the East India Company Government in Bengal, it was published that 706 instances of *Sati* burning had taken place in Bengal in the year 1817 and 650 instances in the year 1819. Among these 650 cases, 421 instances took place only in Calcutta Division (Kaye 1853: 531). In the District of Dacca, one hundred and ninety-five widows burned themselves on the funeral pyres of their deceased husbands during the period between the years 1815 and 1828 (Taylor 1840: 285). Between the years 1815 and 1826, in the Division of Calcutta, hundreds of *Sati* rites were performed. From the following data, we can compare the frequency of *Sati* immolation in Calcutta and other divisions:

Table I: Number of *Satis* in different Bengal Divisions of Bengal Presidency from 1815 to 1826

Division	Year											
	1815	1816	1817	1818	1819	1820	1821	1822	1823	1824	1825	1826
Calcutta	244	280	428	533	388	337	364	300	309	348	368	279
Cuttack	9	9	14	11	33	33	28	28	31	25	30	45
Dacca	31	24	52	58	55	51	52	45	40	40	101	65
Moorshedabad	11	22	42	30	25	21	12	22	13	14	21	8
Patna	20	29	49	57	40	42	69	70	49	42	47	65
Bareilly	15	13	19	13	17	20	15	16	12	10	17	8
Beneras	48	65	103	137	92	93	114	102	121	93	55	48
Total	378	442	707	839	650	597	654	583	575	572	639	518

Source: Peggs 1832: 220

The data shown in the above table indicates that the intensity of widow immolations was very low in the Dacca and Moorshedabad divisions, where the numerical strength of Muslims, Namasudras (Chandals), and Koch-Rajbansis was very high compared to the Calcutta division, where the demographic proportion of the upper-caste Hindus, including orthodox Brahmins, was much higher. In Bengal proper, the instances of Sati immolation were much higher compared to Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh. Among the total number of 575 cases of *Sati* burning in the Bengal Presidency in 1823, 234 *Satis* belonged to the Brahmin, 35 to the Khetry, 14 to the Vaisya, and 292 to the Sudra (Hamilton 1828: 205). By the third decade of the nineteenth century, the total number of *Sati* cases among the Sudra caste had surpassed the total number of *Sati* cases among the Brahmins. Baidyas, Kayasthas, and other *Sat Sudras* of Bengal had been performing *Sati* rites in large numbers in order to project them as ardent followers of Brahmanical Hinduism during this period.The instances of immolation of widows in the Bengal districts under Calcutta Division were in alarming numbers in the years 1823 and 1824. From the report submitted in the House of Commons, it was found that in the Calcutta Division, the total number of instances of *Sati* immolation in 1823 was 263 and in 1824 was 314 (East India Affairs 1827: 53–54). Even in the third decade of the nineteenth century, *Sati* instances were increasing in Calcutta Division.

The criticism of Christian missionaries about the atrocious treatment of women produced awareness among the Bengalis. The Baptist Missionaries of Serampore began their campaign against the *Sati* rites at the beginning of the nineteenth century. They learned that thousands of Hindu widows had been burning in Bengal as part of *Sati* rites. To collect reliable data on

Sati immolation, they deputed 10 persons of Hindu castes, under the supervision of the professor of Sanskrit and Bengali languages at the College of Fort William, to prepare a report regarding the number of *Sati* rites within 30 miles of Calcutta. These agents prepared and submitted a report of *Sati* rites for a period of six months in 1804. The report excluded the number of *Sati* cases in the districts west of Calcutta and places beyond 20 miles in other directions (Buchanan 1811: 41-42). Following is the report of the appointed persons:

Table II: Number of women who were burned alive on the funeral pile of their Husbands, within thirty miles round Calcutta, from 15th April to 15th October, 1804

Places with in 30 miles round Calcutta	Number of different Places	Women burned alive
From Gurria to Barrypore	11	18
From Tolly's Nullahmouth to Gurria	17	36
From Barrypore to Buhipore	7	11
From Seebpore to Balleea	5	10
From Balee to Bydyabattee	3	3
From Bydybattee to Bassbareea	5	10
From Calcutta to Burahnugur (or Barnagore)	4	6
From Burahnugur to Chanok (Barrackpore))	6	13
From Chanok to Kachrapare	4	8
Total of women burned alive in six months, near Calcutta		**115**

Source: Buchanan 1811: 41-42.

It was found that within a period of only six months, from April 15th to October 15th, 1804, one hundred and fifteen widows had been murdered in the name of *Sati* rites in and around Calcutta. William Carey, though his primary objective was to preach Christianity among the natives of British India, was sincere enough to save the wretched widows from being burned. Carey prepared a memorandum and sent it to Governor General Wellesley, seeking a ban on this inhuman practice. Later, George Udny, a friend and associate of John Shore, made an effort to prohibit this atrocious rite. When Lord Wellesley quit the government in India, he recorded a minute in favour of abolishing the rite, stating "that it was one of the fundamental maxims of the British Government to consult the opinions, customs, and prejudices of the natives, but only when they were consistent with the principles of humanity, morality and reason." (Marshman 1867: 52).

With the expansion of the British Empire all over India, the foreign rulers brought many changes to the administrative policies in British India. The influence of Western education infected some of the early Bengali intellectuals. Printed books replaced hand-written *punthis*. Newspapers have been published in the vernacular and circulated among common readers. Very soon, Calcutta became the epicenter of intellectual activity in India. From the beginning

of the nineteenth century, the Bengali intellectuals started raising questions on the superstitious beliefs and practices of the society. It was Raja Rammohan Roy who came forward to criticise the evil customs of society, including the burning of widows. It has been reported that Rammohan went down to the Calcutta burning grounds and exerted his efforts to avert the *Sati* sacrifices through earnest persuasion. He, often, would consume the displeasure and insult from the relatives of the *Satis (*Collet 1914: 50). Rammohan knew that religious belief was the root cause for the execution of this brutal custom. For this reason, he interpreted the Hindu religious texts and showed that they disapproved of the burning of widows. He wanted to abolish the *practice of Sati* burning in the country by creating public opinion against it. Rammohan condemned the *Sati* burning in his book, *A Second Defence of the Monotheistical System of the Vedas*, published in 1817. Bengali newspapers like *Bangal Gazettee* and *Sambad Cowmoodee* were made as platforms for criticism of *Sati* immolation. (Biswas 1373 BS: 342-343). Later in August 1818, when Governor General Hastings came back to Calcutta, a group of elite Hindus petitioned him to take more appropriate action against *Sati* rites in Bengal. The handiwork of Rammohan was behind this petition. Three months later, Rammohan published a booklet on the religious legitimacy of *Sati* practices. On November 20, 1818, he published its English version in order to attract the attention of the British. On December 26, 1818, the *Samachar Darpan* reported that Srj. Rammohan Roy of Calcutta had published and distributed a booklet on *Sati* immolation. The sum and substance of his booklet was that there was nothing about *Sati* rites for widows in the religious scriptures (Bandyopadhyay 1339 BS: 52). Rammohan dismantled the arguments of the orthodox Hindu supporters of the *Sati* immolation with his logical interpretation of the Hindu religious texts and refuted their contentions through his publications. The major and glorious contribution of Rammohan was the generation of awareness in Hindu society against *Sati* rites through his writings and activities. By 1828–1829, he had become a well-known personality in this respect. (Biswas 1373 BS: 343).

After Wellesley's administration, the effort at the government level for the abolition of the *Sati* rite in India lost its priority. Despite reduced government initiatives, the missionaries maintained their sincere efforts to end the *Sati* practice. The Charter Act of 1813 lifted government restrictions on missionary activities. The missionaries launched an offensive against *Sati* burning after obtaining legal approval. They began their campaign in India as well as in England. Serampore missionaries began their campaign against *Sati* in the *Samachar Darpan* and the Friends of India in 1818, both of which were published in Serampore. In its May to December 1818 issue, the Friends of India wrote about Bengal's *Sati* practice:

> "Considering as we do the British government to be the greatest temporal blessing which Providence has conferred on the contrary, we cannot give up the hope indeed that, ultimately, Government will abolish entirely a custom which involves the murder of the helpless and the innocent, almost without the shadow of support from the Hindoo superstition itself." (*The Friends of India*, Vol. I., 1818: 311).

Vernacular newspaper like the *Samachar Darpan* had also been publishing news about the inhuman act of *Sati* incidents and generating awareness among the Bengalis about this barbarous custom. In its August 16th, 1823 issue, citing the Calcutta Journal, the *Samachar Darpan* reported that an eighteen-year-old charming widow of Santipur sacrificed her life on the funeral pile of her dead husband (Bandyopadhyay 1339 BS: 146-147). In another incident, on the death of Somrah, a man of the Jugi (Jogee) or weaver caste, his widow went down to the grave with her deceased husband and became *Sati (*Peggs 1832: 260-261).

The enlightened Britishers serving in India were in favour of the cessation of *Sati* practices in India from the beginning. Sir John Anstruther, the Chief Justice of the Calcutta Supreme Court, immediately after arriving in Calcutta in 1798, ordered that these atrocious rites should not be permitted under the jurisdiction of his authority, and *Sati* practice ceased within its limits. During his tenure, the orthodox Hindus took 130 widows into the neighbouring territories of the East India Company and burned them (Marshman 1859: 404). In accordance with government orders of 1813, the magistrates of Bengal issued some instructions to police *darogahs*. The instructions stated that the widows could not be burned forcefully or by feeding on intoxicating drugs. Their age must not be under 16 years of age, and they must not be pregnant. The relatives of the widows often performed the *Sati* immolation, flouting the orders of the government. In 1824, Mussummaut Makhun Koomari, a widow from Jungle Mehals who had a one-and-a-half-year-old child, was burned as part of a *Sati* rite in the presence of the *darogha* despite his prohibitory order. Later, six of the deceased were fined 200 rupees each by the magistrate. They were unable to pay the fine and were imprisoned for a period of three months. The Court of Circuit confirmed this order.[4]

In 1818, the acting Superintendent of Police, Lower Provinces, W. Ewer, communicated to Mr. W.B. Bayley, Secretary to Government in the Judicial Department, by a letter dated November 18, that during the years 1815, 1816, and 1817, 864 *Sati* rites were performed in the five *zillahs* of Burdwan, Hooghley, the Jungle Mehauls, Nuddea, and the Suburbs of Calcutta. He shared his experience that voluntary act of *Sati* rarely occurred and widows sacrificed their lives mostly on being overpowered by force or by persuasions. A widow was "little prepared to oppose the surrounding crowd of hungry brahmins and interested relations, either by argument or force." He further observed that if this barbarous and inhuman practice were suppressed, there would be no dissatisfaction among the natives of Bengal (Accounts and Papers: East India Affairs Vol. XVIII. 1821: 227-229).

The newspapers and periodicals published in England began to bring out reports about the burning of widows as part of *Sati* rites and also suggested abolishing this inhuman practice prevalent in India. In its January to April 1824 issue, the Oriental Herald and Colonial Review reported:

> "The immolation of living mothers, burnt by the hands of their children, is at least quite as abominable, and yet, this frightful custom remains in full vigour to the present hour.

> The power of the English in India is now so great, that they might, by a mere decree, put an end to this cruelty forever; and no man would dare to resist their orders."

(Oriental Herald and Colonial Review, Vol. I., January to April, 1824: 552).

In the year 1826, one person, disclosing his or her name as "D," wrote a letter to the editor of the Christian Observer with his argument to abolish the widow burning rite in India by passing appropriate legislation (Christian Observer, Vol. XXVI., 1826: 470). The widow-burning controversy sparked heated debate at London's East India House. Ordinary people from all over England began to send petitions to put an end to this inhumane practice in India.

On July 4, 1828, the "straight-forward, honest, upright, and benevolent" William Bentinck assumed charge as the Governor General of India. It is learned from his private and confidential letter dated November 12, 1828, written to Lord Combermere:

> "Having had the suttee question very much pressed upon my attention in England, and feeling the great responsibility which under any view of the case, and under any decision must belong to me, both in my private and public capacity, I came to this resolution for my own future comfort, that as soon as possible I would come to a decision upon the question, in some way or other."
>
> (Philips 1977: 94).

He gathered secret information from military officers, judicial members of the Nizamat, and police officers. The majority of them reported that the natives would not resist any regulation prohibiting *Sati* practices. In May 1829, a group of Christian missionaries stationed in and around Calcutta sent a memorandum to Bentinck stating, "If the Hindu who burns his innocent mother brings himself to think it a religious action, the civil authorities, to whom the preservation of her life is committed, over which life he has not even a shadow of a right, are undoubtedly not obliged to think so too."

(Philips 1977: 191-192).

Around July 1829, Bentinck sought the personal view of Rammohan regarding ways to abolish *Sati* rites in India. Rammohan was not in favour of prohibiting the practice by passing regulations. He anticipated that the Indians would interpret such a move as an act of interference in their own religion. Rammohan's view was that "the practice might be suppressed quietly and unobservedly by increasing the difficulties and by the indirect agency of the police" (Boulger 1897: 101). Bentinck was disappointed by such an opinion from Rammohan but did not lose his courage. Because he realised that the disagreement with Rammohan was merely about the procedure for the prohibition of *Sati* rites and that there would be no formidable threats to his administration from the natives if a stringent regulation against *Sati* immolation was passed. Ultimately, on December 4, 1829, the *Sati* Prohibition

Regulation was passed, which declared the practice illegal and punishable as a criminal offense (Collet 1914: 148). Once the *Sati* Regulation was passed, Rammohan stood like an iron wall against those who vehemently pressed the British government to withdraw the regulation. When the petition of the orthodox Hindus seeking the repeal of the regulation reached the Privy Council, Rammohan himself arrived in London and submitted a counter-petition supporting the ban on *Sati*. During the hearing on the *Sati* question in the Privy Council, Rammohan was personally present there like a vigilant watchman. He breathed a sigh of relief when the Privy Council upheld the *Sati* prohibition (Biswas 1373 BS: 346-347). After the enactment of Bentinck's regulation, covert and isolated cases of *Sati* rites were performed in Bengal until the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Even at Cossipore, Chitpore, and other places in the vicinity of Calcutta, *Sati* burnings were executed up to 1882 (Carey 1907: 130). In the twentieth century, the horrors of the immolation of widows disappeared from Bengali society. But the determination of sex in mothers' wombs became widespread, and female foeticide, a new form of atrocity to females, turned rampant throughout India from the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Conclusion

For hundreds of years, Hindu widows from orthodox families in Bengal were required to sacrifice their lives on the funeral pyres or under the graves of their dead husbands. The widows, who could save their lives after their husbands' deaths, had to live an ignominious life in society. Their food, clothing, and social circle were definitely limited. Hundreds of widows were murdered under the guise of *Sati* rites. Infant, adolescent, and old widows were buried or burned with their deceased husbands. Widows with their breast-feeding children were also immolated. A son guided his own mother to the funeral pyre of his deceased father. The family members of the widows took an active role in the performance of *Sati* rites. The Brahmin priests officiated the *Sati* rituals and got huge amounts of money as their service charges. The orthodox Hindu society considered this atrocious activity as their religious duty. The Bengal Presidency committed the majority of these barbaric acts in British India, with Calcutta and its suburbs being the most common locations. Acting on the criticisms and demands of Christian missionaries, enlightened British officers, judicial members, and sensible Bengali intellectuals, the East India Company government passed regulations prohibiting the practice of *Sati* in 1829. The stringent provisions of the *Sati* Regulation of 1829 caused the cessation of the most brutal atrocities committed against humanity, saving the lives of thousands of wretched widows in Bengal.

End notes

1. Peggs recorded that Goopeenaut, a Brahmun employed in the Serampore printing-office, witnessed 22 of such immolations. Peggs, J. 1832. *India's Cries to British Humanity relative to Infanticide, British Connection with Idolatry, Ghaut Murders, Suttee, Slavery, and Colonization in India,* Simpkin and Marshall, London, pp.219-220; Long, J. 1846. 'The Banks of the Bhagirathi', *The Calcutta Review*, 6(2), p.423.

2. The incidents of immolation of child widows can be learnt from a return prepared in compliance to an order of the House of Commons, dated 21st February 1827. *East India Affairs: Hindu Widows immolated since the 5th July*

1825, May 17, 1827, p.54.

3. In the Hooghly district of the Bengal Presidency, the most *Sati* burning incidents were committed. The inhabitants of Tribeniwould hear the screams "*Pure molempati pelamnabaap"* (I died of burns but could not get my husband back) at night from the riverside burning *ghat* of Tribeni. Mallick, P. 1935. *Sachitra Kolikatar Katha* (in Bengali), Juno Printing Works, Calcutta, p.164.

4. The orthodox Hindus were so superstitious that widows having infant children were immolated, flouting the prohibitory orders of the police. *East India Affairs*, *op. cit.*, p.53.

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