

## SATI SYSTEM IN ORISSA - AN INHUMAN PRACTICE ON HINDU SOCIETY

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### **ABSTRACT:**

Creation of woman is the wonderful phenomenon of Creator. She is mother, sister, Goddess, lover and wife in all. She is regarded as the better half of man and integral part of society. In spite of that, she has been bearing the brunt of all sorts of sufferings and exploitation since time immemorial in the male dominated society. Every rule - ethical, moral and social are applicable to woman only. When we look at the past scenarios, there were various man made customs and traditions in the Orissan society. Worst among them was the practice of Sati. It was an inhuman and obnoxious custom for the Hindu women. It was seen that whatever religious sacrament might have the practice of sati but it was machination of material gain not only for the member of family but also performable priests. However during the Governor Generalship of Lord William Bentinck and incessant endeavour of some of the social reformers of India like Ram Mohan Roy, the inhuman practice of sati was abolished in Regulation XVII passed on 4 December, 1829 A.D. and relieved to women. This system was vigorously practices in the Royal families, aristocratic and high caste people after the death of one's husband to prove her truthfulness.

**Keywords:** Sati, Hindu society, religious sacrament, inhuman practice, Bentinck

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## 1. Introduction:

Woman is the wonderful creation of the creator and is manifested as mother, sister, Goddess, lover and wife in all. She is regarded as the better half of man. She is not only the integral part of her counterpart but also indissoluble part of the society. Truly speaking, she is considered half of the body of man because we can find man in woman, male in female, he in she and he in her. So male and female are inseparable and complement to each other. That's why, the creation of the creator would have been incomplete without creating women. However, in the male dominated society, they were always considered inferior and subordinate to men. All rules and regulations of society and religious performances were only applicable to women but not to men. There were various customs and traditions on Hindu society of Orissa in nineteenth century. Among the most worst one was the custom of sati. Though it was an obnoxious and inhuman system which victimized the married women yet it was considered as sacred in religious point of view and continued till 1829 A.D. and thereafter.

## 2. Origin of Sati

The word "Sati" is a derivative word from "Sut" which means true, good, chaste or pure. Legends indicated that one of the daughters of Daksha Prajapati Brahma was named sati. She committed death when her beloved consort Lord Shiva was insulted by her father. Ergo, Sati was the very symbolism of truth and pure. By burning oneself in the funeral pyre of the husband the devotion and loyalty of a wife was vindicated<sup>1</sup>. Another reason to become sati was the hope of gaining privilege and respect in the society<sup>2</sup>. It was firmly believed

...When a woman performed the rite of sati with the corpse of her husband, her act was so meritorious that it ensured for her and her husband a place in heaven .....<sup>3</sup>

The women also believed that, the husband was their god on earth and thereafter. So, death with the husband was indoctrinated to them as sacred by the male dominated society not only in India but also in Orissa. Therefore, it said that, a Sati is one whose mind, body and word concentrated in her husband only.

### 3. Traces of Sati system in Orissan Society -

The exact period of Sati custom is not known. However, in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century A.D., the knowledge of Sati was known to have existed as evident in the writings of the great medieval odia poet Sarala Das, the author of odia epic Mahabharat.<sup>4</sup> The prevalence of Sati was at least not so widespread at that time and it was mainly confined to Royal families, aristocratic and high castes people. This system was not practising in lower caste women and other castes.

### 4. Practice of Sati in different areas of Orissa

In the middle part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Sati system had come into being in the state of Hindol where seven widows became Sati. Other instances were also found in different places of Orissa. The wives of the Raja of Jeypore committed Sati after his death (1713- 1752)<sup>5</sup>. Another instance of Sati performance was found in Koraput where a king used to marry everyday a new bride. All of the queens committed death after the death of the king.<sup>6</sup> In the modern district of Koraput, the debris of Sati stone in a temple complex are still found.

In the ruling of families of Ganjam also such inhuman practices were found in abundance.<sup>7</sup> Taking advantage of the mental condition of the widows and the social insecurities to which they were exposed, the relative and the priests generally persuaded them to become Sati. They also forcibly broke the glass bangles, disheveled their hair and effaced the vermilion mark from forehead and after that the priest prepared the pyre where the Sati was performed.<sup>8</sup> The unwilling widow was generally dragged to the funeral pyre for Sati.

The victim was at times intoxicated by applying opium. Most of the members of family were accomplished to such type of beastly deeds to relieve themselves of the liability of maintaining a woman. Often they were motivated by the greed for property succession of the deceased husband. The priest was interested for the performance of Sati so that he could get the precious jewels and other material possessions of the widows. Sometimes when intoxication did not affect the victim she was thrown into the flames those around her and violently held down, while the noise of drums and shouting multitudes drowned her cries.<sup>9</sup> By chance if she escaped from her ordeal, the low caste men caught the victim and used her as their own possession. In order to escape such curse and disgrace, the attendants and the relatives forced her back to the fire to save the family honour.<sup>10</sup>

The cases of becoming Sati in the heartland of Orissa were also found in Cuttack and Puri. A Telgu Brahmin lady immolated herself even if the government officials opposed her

to become sati.<sup>11</sup> At the cremation ground at Puri (Swarga Dwar, the gate of heaven) a Brahmin widow smilingly committed sati. In the aristocratic family of the Samanta the sati was observed not only by the queens but also by the slave girls too. However, the slave girls were not being burnt at the same funeral pyre of their lords.<sup>12</sup> It is notable that the slave girls died with some symbols. Two such instances are found in Pattia in 1827 and at Khandapara in 1842.<sup>13</sup>

In the Southern part of Orissa, the daughter of the Raja of Bodogoda became sati.<sup>14</sup> On 5<sup>th</sup> November, 1816, a sati was committed in the presence of a British Officer at Puri.<sup>15</sup> In 1823 in the district of Balasore the widow of Digambar Mishra committed sati with the conviction that,

....I burn with the hope of obtaining pardon of my sins along with the body of my husband, who took to my fancy is still alive, as by the death of my husband I consider myself as dead and consequently I feel no regret in committing myself to the flames, after due observance of rules prescribed by the Shastras, I shall obtain forgiveness for suicide, and free myself of any like attached there to .....16.

In 1824, three wives of Bhurut Narayan Deo, a relative of the Raja of Paralakhemidi became sati. The chief queen of the Raja was dissuaded from doing so on the ground that she was pregnant.<sup>17</sup>

In Keojarh also the chief queen pleaded that –

... Many Rannies of the former Rajas have burnt themselves with the bodies of their husbands in the family of this and other Rajas with a view to gaining merit .....I pray this reply may be sent to Governor General who will certainly confirm a practice enjoyed by our religion and former customs ...18

Instances of sati were also found in western part of Orissa like Deogarh and Patna, the feudatory states of Sambalpur group. In Deogarh after the death of the Raja Prataprudra Dev, his queen Chandra Kumari committed sati and the commemorative monument is still to be found near Deogarh. His son and successor Sarveswar was murdered by the spy of Rairakhhol. As a result, his queen performed the rite of sati at Kodarkote.<sup>19</sup>

In Patna, after the death of the Raja Ramachandra Dev II, his fourth queen became sati in 1820.<sup>20</sup>

## 5. Steps taken to stop Sati System

In nineteenth century there was a socio – religious reforms started in India. In this congenial ambience, William Bentinck, the Governor – General of India (1828-1835) had piloted the first wind of social change in British India. The president of Board of Control wrote to Bentinck, “We have a great moral duty to perform in India.” The attitude was a typical expression of the era of reforms for which the nineteenth century was so famous in the history of England.

William Bentinck, the prime mover of reform movement in India started attacking sati in the name of universal moral law. Thus, sati was declared illegal and punishable according to the Regulation XVII passed on 4 December, 1829.<sup>21</sup>

Surprisingly, there was little opposition from the orthodox section of India. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, a progressive Brahmin, supported the Government whole – heartedly along with his followers. In 1830, Governor Stephen Rumbald Lushington enforced the Regulation in Madras (Chennai) Presidency Prohibiting sati.<sup>22</sup>

## 6. Government Regulation and Practice of Sati

Notwithstanding, the Government Regulation, a strong feeling among the families of the Rajas prevailed for sati despite the Government Act. In 1839, the wife of the younger brother of the Raja of Mayurbhanj and the second wife of the Raja of Keonjhar had burnt themselves. The British Government ordered the Superintendent of the Tributary Mahals to take strong measures for the prohibition of sati. The Government also ordered the Superintendent to report what circumstances sati had taken place in Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar. Replying to the exploration of the Superintendent, the Raja of Mayurbhanj had explained:

...If the females in a Raja’s family do not voluntarily burn themselves with their husbands; a great sin is committed. They burn themselves of their own accord .....<sup>23</sup>

The senior Rani also strongly favoured sati as it was sanctioned by the Hindu religion but the superintendent resented and gave them stricture that it was prohibited by law and hence punishable as a criminal offence. By 1841, Parwanas were sent to the Tributary Rajas.

In 1842, the British Government made engagements with the Chief Officers of the Rajas to prevent sati. This stated,

.....in accordance with the commands of the honourable Government and the Governor – General, in clause 2 of the rules of practice issued by superintendent of Tributary Mahals that

the practice of “SUTTEE” or burning of Hindu females is altogether prohibited .We, therefore accordingly have forbidden this practice ...24

The officers also pledged themselves not to lend support or allow the performance of sati in any circumstances. Those who wanted to do it voluntarily or otherwise provided no excuse for the Government and action taken against the offenders and abettors had to be reported to the superintendent of Tributary Mahals.

In 1842, in Khandapara with the death of the Raja two Ranis and two girls sacrificed themselves. The Magistrate inquired into the matter and imprisoned two of the principal officers for aiding the acts of sati. Thus, the punishment of the officers remained an example to others.

## 7. Prohibition of Sati System in Orissa

The officials of Baramba, Hidol and Daspalla had to dissuade the widows of the Rajas from burning themselves in the funeral pyres. Mills, rightly observed that the “Terror of punishment “lowered the frequency of sati amidst superstitions. Thus, the death of Vikram Dev, the Raja of Jeypore was not followed by any observance of sati. By 1863, Lieutenant Smith and Captain Galbraith were posted at Jeypore as Assistant Superintendent of police respectively. With the abolition of sati in Orissa a heinous crime committed by women under duress finally came to an end, giving great social relief to the fair sex community.

## 8. Conclusion:

Sati system was unfortunate custom in case of women because if women committed Sati to prove her chastity, truthful, purity but why did not in case of men. Widow would not remarry and led a celibacy life but widower why was getting married again. It was purely injustice for women since time immemorial in the society. Practice of Sati in the society was vested interest of the members of the family to escape from maintenance liability and to enjoy the share of deceased person. So, if she committed Sati, inheriting property of her husband would be free opportunity for husband’s relatives. Another machination behind this system was the performal priests. If the women committed Sati, her wearing jewellery at the time of Sati ceremony would be the share of the priests. That’s why, Sati system was encouraged in the society.

Even in the in modern time also, in spite of providing facilities and privileges to women by Government, the disparity between men and women is seen every occasion of life.

Women have been considered enjoyable things and machine for producing children and taking care of household work. They have been victimizing and looking for their gender identity in the male dominated society since time immemorial but their demands are till unfulfilled. It is said that “jatra najyastu pujanya tatra ramyante devatah ...”(where women are honoured, there deities are pleased but where women are not honoured, there all acts are of no avail’ but it was pen and paper. In spite of abolition of Sati system in Regulation XVII passed on 4 December, 1829 by Lord William Bentinck till then, the relevance of Sati is continued in Hindu society. We should aware of the right of women and respect and honour them not only at home but also in the society because women are the integral part of men and major complement of the society.

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