

**SATI TRADITION IN HIMALAYAN REGION;**  
**A CASE STUDY OF MANDI DISTRICT OF HIMACHAL**  
**PRADESH**

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**Abstract**

Sati tradition was a social evil associated with the women. A few instances related with this practice are also found in Mandi region of Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. There are many memorial stones and a few descriptions of sati in some books on the history of Mandi. There are mythical and religious causes behind this practice not only in Mandi but also all over India. A widow woman chooses her death willingly or by force and burns herself on the funeral pyres of her dead husband. My aim here is to research on this tradition in Mandi region and how this tradition affected the society. Also an attempt has been made to trace the connection between folk traditions and historical developments related to sati.

**Keywords**

***Barsile***- Memorial stones which were constructed in the memory of those queens and other women who burnt themselves on the pyre of their dead husband.

***Khwasi***- Caste of female entertainer

***Lokgatha***- folk ballad

***Rakhail***- mistress

***Sarrade-ri-dhar***- Name of a hill where a widow committed *sati*.

***Sati or Sarrada***- practice of widow throwing onto her husband's funeral pyre/widow burning.

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## Introduction

Women have always made significant contribution to society even if their importance has not always been fully recognized. The status that women enjoy in a society might be considered an important indicator of its culture. Much of this, of course, depends on the particular period, place or people that are being studied. In a diverse, yet traditional society, such as that of Himachal Pradesh, cultural traditions and the social status of women would vary according to the variety of social conditions and other factors. Not only in Himachal Pradesh, but almost everywhere, women have usually occupied a depressed social position and suffered neglect and demoralization.

In keeping with the conditions in many other parts of India, the social position of women in Mandi region was not very good during pre-colonial and colonial times. Traditional practices and customs, that were particularly disadvantageous to women, prevailed in the region. Early marriage was one such custom. Women were not expected to have the freedom of learning to read and write. Similarly, the position of widows in the traditional society of Mandi was also unfortunate. Widows belonging to the higher castes were not permitted to re-marry. As in certain other parts of India, upper caste widows of Mandi were frequently compelled to become *sati* with the dead body of their husband. It was perhaps, among the higher castes, the constant presence of the husband was considered the only security for most women. Women observed a lot of fasts and performed many rituals in order to ensure their husband's long life. Among them, even if widowed young, a women suffered widowhood her entire life and was not allowed to re-marry. Women who sacrificed themselves were called *sati*. *Sati* custom was not very well known among the common people of the region. On the contrary, widow remarriage in the form of *jhanjara* and *dharewa* was quite well known. *Sati* was a more common practice among the ruling class. The widow who burnt herself, or is burnt is generally called *sati* in India both in specialized literature and in popular English accounts.

For the research work, it will only become possible to obtain considerable material through personal interaction and field-work in the area. The efforts have been made to familiar with the traditions prevailing in Mandi region. During the field work, researchers have found that individuals belonging to different sections of society in Mandi still retain much information on *sati* tradition. The material so collected is correlated and analyzed. The government publications, books, identical studies in journals and gazetteers are of substantial use. Some personal

interviews of some singers of the *lokgatha* (folk ballad) have also been carried out. The study is conducted by applying both theoretical and empirical research, by engaging in survey studies and interaction techniques.

### History of its origin

The word *sati* is derived from sanskrit word *sat*. The history of the word *sati* is informative. It goes back to the root as, 'to be'. The more specific meanings like good, faithful, virtuous and honest can be derived from this word. *Sati* refers to virtues that are partly ascribed to both genders, but chiefly to women.

There are some religious and mythological reasons behind a woman becoming a *sati*. According to a legend, the goddess *Sati* was the wife of Lord Shiva. When *Sati*'s father, *Daksha* gave a large feast, he did not invite Lord Shiva. *Sati* went to her father and demanded an explanation from him, but he refused to change his mind. *Sati* then produced fire from within herself which consumed her. In this story, *sati* is portrayed as a woman who behaved in complete accordance with the ideal of *Sati*. She burns herself to death because her husband has been insulted, not because he has died. The tradition of widow burning adopted by those widows, who died by burning with their dead husband, possibly occurred relatively late, and, finally, the meaning of the word referred mainly to this act.

The oldest account of a widow burning, or *sati*, which is not a part of mythology was given by a Greek historian Diodorus in 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. He has found such an account in earlier Greek sources. His main source was a text by Hieronymus, who was probably an eyewitness to the event. After the death of Alexander the Great, conflicts broke out among his generals. In the battle of Gabiene in Asia Minor in 316 B.C., Antigonus won a victory over Eumenes, who had an Indian military general, named Ceteus, in his army. When this military general was killed in the battle, his two wives burnt themselves with his funeral pyres. The first established historical evidence of a widow burning after Diodorus is found in Eran inscriptions, now in Madhya Pradesh, of King Bhanu Gupt of 510 A.D. The military commander Gop Raj of Bhanu Gupt died at the hands of Huna at this place in a battle. When his wife learnt this, she followed him into death on his funeral pyre.

One another incident of *sati* described by Ban Bhatt in his writing Harchrit; When the ruler of Thanesar, Prabhakar Vardhan, died in 604 A.D., his wife Yashomti burnt herself with the dead body of her husband and became *sati*. In spite of these, Kalhan, Al Baroni, Evan Batuta

and many western travellers, mentioned the *sati* events in the different parts of India in their accounts. One thing is clear by their accounts that scattered throughout India there are many inscriptions, memorial stones, monuments and temples erected in honor of the widows who burnt themselves to death.

According to Jorge Fisch, 'In early medieval period, after the death of her husband, a widow had no right to re-marry. She had only to choose between two things- either to remain a widow as long as she lives or to burn herself, and the latter, eventually was considered the preferable, because as a widow she was ill-treated as long as she lived.'

Thus, it can be said that about thousand years ago, this tradition was set up or socially approved by the Indian community.

#### **A Case Study of *Sati* Tradition in Mandi Region**

In the hilly regions of Himachal Pradesh including Mandi has no such traditions in ancient period. But when the Rajput rulers of different parts of India started to come in this hilly area, such tradition also came in modern Himachal Pradesh. Before independence Mandi district had two princely states, Mandi and Suket state. The ruler of both states belonging to the Sen Dynasty of Bengal. The tradition of *Sati* was introduced in Mandi region after their influence in the region. But unfortunately we have no example of such tradition for a long time.

In Mandi state, Raja Suraj Sen's wife became *sati* in 1664. Though the *sati* tradition was old, this was perhaps among the first recorded examples of *sati* in Mandi.

In Mandi state, wives of the kings followed the custom of burning themselves whether they wished it or not. This was considered necessary as it prevented any of them from committing something unworthy of their deceased husband. Therefore, it was better for a widow to burn herself with the body of her husband than to live a miserable, shameful and frustrated life.

Not in Mandi, but throughout India widow burning or *sati* was a common practice that gripped the society. Though this practice was banned by- law by Governor General William Bentick in 1829 in India. But this practice was still prevalent in different parts of India, including Mandi. But after the first Anglo Sikh war, by the treaty of 1846, the princely states of hills including the states of Mandi and Suket that lied between river Beas and river Satluj came under the British influence. At that time the practice of *sati* continued in Mandi and Suket. The British

Indian government tried to rub out this tradition from both states and therefore they made a nine point treaty in March 1846 with the ruler of Mandi Raja Balbir Sen and another seven- point treaty in March 1846 with the Raja of Suket Ugar Sen. According to the *Gazetteer of Suket State* the 7<sup>th</sup> point of treaty and according to the *Gazetteer of Mandi State* the 9<sup>th</sup> point of the treaty, declared the practice of *sati* illegal and the practice officially came to an end. Along with this, Rajas of both states promised British government to put an end to other ill practices like slave dealing, female infanticide, etc.

William Moorcraft visited Mandi in 1820. His narrative regarding the *sati* in Mandi is mentioned in the *Gazetteer of Mandi State*. Near Mandi town, on the left bank of Suketi Nala, he saw several memorial stones. These were constructed in the memory of the queens and other women, who became *sati* along with their kings. These are 6-7 feet high and are carved with figures of *rajas* and *ranis* who became *Satis*. In addition to the queens, many *khwasis* and *rakhails* were also burnt with the *rajas*. For instance, with Raja Shyam Sen alone, who died in 1679 A.D., five *ranis*, two *khwasis* and 87 *rakhails* were burnt. According to the figures given by Cunningham in his archeological survey of India, from 1637A.D. when the list of such *rajas* is shown, 252 women were burnt alive with the *rajas* of Mandi. It means this practice was accepted as the social compulsion by the ruling class that some or all of the wives and mistresses were immolated with the husband. They all were treated as the property of Rajas and Ranas.

In local language, the memorial stones related to this custom are known as *Barsile*. Village Sukhar in Baldwara of Sarkaghat Tehsil of Mandi district is another place where we have few *sati* pillars or *barsile*. These *barsile* were buried under the private land of a local farmer Munshi Ram. In 2006 when he was digging the land to convert this into the proper fields, he saw some stone figures there and informed the archeological department of Himachal Pradesh. In earlier days this village was under the rule of Ranas of Hatli. There are some ruins of ancient forts nearby this village and about 22 km from this village; the famous Kamla Fort is also situated. So, we can conclude that these stones found here most probably belonged to the ruling class and this region must have been an important political centre of the Ranas. These stone figures were also constructed in the memory of those women who burnt themselves with the dead bodies of their husbands.



Memorial stones or barsile which were constructed in memory of those queens and the other women of roval family, who became sati in Mandi town.



Memorial stone or barsile in village Sukhar. Baldwada of Sarkaghat tehsil of Mandi district.

Strong evidence in connection with *sati* in Mandi has been given by J. Hutchison and J. Ph. Vogel in *History of the Punjab Hill States*, who described an event that was witnessed by Vigne.

‘One morning my munshi came to me, and told me that a *sati* or a widow who was going to burn herself on the funeral pile of her husband, was about to pass by the garden gate. I hastened to obtain a sight of her. She was dressed in her gayest attire; a large crowd of persons followed her, as she walked forward with a hurried and faltering step, like that of a person about to faint. A Brahman supported her on either side, and these as well as many around, were calling loudly and almost fiercely upon the different Hindu deities, and the name which was most repeatedly and most earnestly called upon was that of Jaggannath, but I do not know whether they alluded to the great idol of Bengal, or to some local divinity. Her countenance had assumed a sickly and ghastly appearance, which was partly owing to internal agitation, and partly, so I was informed, to the effects of opium and bhang and other narcotics, with which she had been previously drugged in order to render her less awake to the misery of her situation. She was not; however, so insensible to what was passing as to be inattentive to two persons in particular, amongst several others, who were stooping before her and were evidently imploring her blessing, – they were probably near relations. She was presented at intervals with a plate of moist red color, in which saffron was no doubt an ingredient, and into this she dipped the ends of her fingers, and then impressed them on the shoulders of the persons who stooped before her in order to be thus marked. In about half-an-hour, the preparations were completed. She was regularly thatched in, upon the top of the pile, whilst her husband’s body yet lay outside. It was finally lifted up to her; the head, as usual, and which is the most interesting part of the ceremony, was received upon her lap; the fire was applied in different parts, and all was so quickly enveloped in a shroud of mingled flame and smoke, that I believe her sufferings to have been of very short duration, as she must almost immediately have been suffocated.’

By the account given by Vigne, we come to know that during the reign of Balbir Sen A.D.1839, in Mandi town, a widow was going to burn herself with the dead body of her husband. She was given some opium or other intoxication so that she would remain unconscious. Hundreds of people along with the Brahman followed her. After some time all the preparations

were made and she was laid down with her deceased husband on the funeral pile. Then the fire was applied quickly and her body was burnt which made her a *sati*.

Locally, this practice is also known as *sardda*. Not only in Mandi town, but this practice was well known in the whole Mandi region. A local folklorist, Moti Lal Ghai argues that, 'Sati began with a jealous queen who heard that dead kings were welcomed in heaven by hundreds of beautiful women, called *Apsaras*. And therefore where her husband died, she demanded to be burnt on her dead husband's pyre so as to arrive with him in heaven to prevent the *Apsaras* from consorting with her husband.' He recounts tradition that are found in other places like *Satiya-ra-Galu* near Gurkotha and *Satiya-ra-Pipal* near Tanda, Ner Chowk in Mandi district, where *sati* took place. This suggests that the practice of *sati* was known in many other parts of Mandi region. He further says that in earlier times when people happened to pass through such places *Satiya-ra-Galu* and *Satiya-ra-Pipal*, they threw stones and prayed for that soul. But with the passage of time, places associated with *satis* turned into ruins and seem to have faded out of popular memory. We have another place in Mandi where *sati* took place. In village *Baturda* a small temple is dedicated to the *sati*. This temple was constructed on that place where this incident happened. According to Moti Lal Ghai earlier, people used to throw stones at this place in memory of the woman who burnt herself here on her deceased husband's pyre; but now a temple has been constructed which contains shrines of goddess *Sati*, wife of lord *Shiva*.



**Temple dedicated to *sati* in village Baturda of Mandi.**

Another folklorist, Kishan Sharma also throws light on places linked to similar practices. He informed that there was another place at Lohara near Nerchowk, in Mandi district, where



*sardda* took place. Bhup Singh, a resident of Shalla in Chachyot of Mandi district, refers to a place called Sardde-ri-Dhar at village Grohal of Mandi district, where such incidents had occurred. Even today, people who pass by this spot place green tree branches upon it and pray for that soul. He told an interesting story in this connection: About over hundred years ago, a person named Lird Ram of Rajput caste lived in village Jawal. When he died, his widow Shauni Devi burnt herself with the dead body of her husband and became *sati*. The hill where this happened is popular now by the name of Sardde-ri-Dhar. This shows that this practice was prevalent not only among the royal families, but also among the common people of the upper castes in the villages.



Sati place at Sardde-ri-Dhar near village Grohal, Chachyot of Mandi district

We have another *sati* place in Village Kot of Baggi of Mandi and another one where a living tradition of throwing stone on that place where the event of *sati* happened in the past, is at the Village Trammat near Chauntra town of Joginder Nagar Tehsil of Mandi. In both places, even today when the people who pass through, put a stone on *sati* heaves in the memory of those women who burnt themselves with their deceased husband and pray for that soul. People of Mandi have a strong belief that before made herself *sati*, she put a stone in that place where she burnt.



A temple and stone heap dedicated to *Sati* near village Taramat of Chauntra town of Jogindernagar Tehsil in Mandi

Even though *sati* is considered a Hindu custom, it was not practiced by all Hindus, but only among a few communities, especially ruling or upper classes. It was believed that the woman who committed *sati* blessed her family for seven generations after her. Temples or other religious shrines were built to honor the *sati*.

The practice of *sardda* or *sati* has been described in a *gatha* named *Bhanu Ka Jhera*, which is a popular *lokgatha* (folk ballad) of Mandi region. It describes the miserable death of boy Bhanu and is pathetic by nature. The last lines of this *gatha* tell us about this custom.

According to the *gatha*(Ballad), there was an epidemic of smallpox in Mandi at the time of Raja Ishwari Sen (1788–1826). On the good advice of his ministers, the raja called a team of doctors and vaccinators from Nadaun to get the people inoculated against this disease. They brought remedial material in the form of injections along with them. When the team of doctors reached Mandi, they started vaccination from the royal palace. Then second phase was started in the home of minister Duggal so that his family members could be protected from this deadly disease. After that the common people of Mandi, were to get inoculated against smallpox. But unfortunately the boy Bhanu, son of minister Duggal, refused to get himself inoculated. Bhanu unfortunately contracted this disease and died as a result of the infection. At his death his two wives burnt themselves on the pyre of their husband and became *sati*. The people of Tikkar

(where Bhanu died) and surrounding villages remember Bhanu and his two *sati* wives every year on the day of the Tikkar fair. The *gatha* (ballad) *Bhanu Ka Jhera* as follows:

*O, mulkha tere raja thandiya hoieya,  
O, dhaaga, chhopa karaya,  
O, mulkha tere raja thandiya hoieya.*

*Raje bole naa Ishwari Sena  
Lena chhopa karvaai  
Raje bole naa Ishwari Sena.*

*O ji o raje bole naa Ishwari Sena  
Laine saukle sadaai,  
Raje bole naa Ishwari Sena.*

*O ji o nadauna te raje saukle saade  
Dere cha seyo aave  
Nadauna te raje saukle saade.*

*Saare sauhra re jine naun jape  
Janchu japya ni jaave,  
Saare sauhra re jine naun jape.*

*Janchu re nauna bhala pani milya  
Pani ublee aave  
Janchu re nauna bhala pani milya.*

*O ji o bharya naa lota ek  
Bahne ri daali andar bedeyo lai jaave  
Bharya naa lota ek.*

*Dooja chhopa naa Duggle re gharaa  
Pheri parja jo saare  
Dooja chhopa naa Duggle re gharaa.*

*O ji o raja bole naa,  
O, sun Bhanua hath laina chhapvai,  
Raja bole naa.*

*Hath kaahe naa chhopna raja,  
Mane mere kaalhi hoye,  
Haath kaahe naa chhopna raja.*

*Baapu tera bole sun Bhaanua,  
Haath laina be chhapvai,  
Baapu tera bole sun Bhaanua.*

*Haath kaahe jo chhapana baapu,  
Kaal gayira mere aai  
Haath kaahe jo chhapana baapu.*

*Sajja hath naa jine madde chhopaya,  
Baaya naariye chhapvaya,  
Sajja hath naa jine madde chhopaya.*

*Saat suiya naa maddo saahar diya,  
Saat suiya naa maddo saahar diya.*

*Parja teri raja naahtiya dhotiya,  
Bhaanuo nikle nakaale,  
Parja teri raja naahtiya dhotiya.*

*O, birshu ri bahiya dhyade,  
Tryahiya dota Bhanu kaal vansh hoi jaave  
O, birshu ri bahiya dhyade.*

*Deya-deya saasuye gehne mhaare  
Aassa tikkara ri jatraao jana,  
Deya-deya saasuye gehne mhaare.*

*Saas tumhari bole ladiyo,  
Baithi khaava rajgeer  
Saas tumhari bole ladiyo.*

*Kand mhaara naa aaj uthi chalira,  
Aassa kaahe jo rehna,  
Kand mhaara naa aaj uthi chalira.*

*O, sauhra thaara bole suno laadiyo,  
Baithi khaava rajgeer,  
O, sauhra thaara bole suno laadiyo.*

*Kand mhaara naa aaj uthi chalira,  
Aassa kaahe jo rehna,  
Kand mhaara naa aaj uthi chalira.*

*Saahsa noohsa naa mildi lagi,  
Nain bhai bhai roye,  
Saahsa noohsa naa mildi lagi.*

*O jo chaldi chaldi naa jinhe dehal baandi,  
Naina bhari bhari roye,  
O jo chaldi chaldi naa jinhe dehal baandi.*

*O ji o aage aage naa brahman chalyaa,  
O, peeche Bhanu ri dono laadi,  
Aage aage naa brahman chalyaa.*

*O, Banirdiya re simblaa heth,  
Maava mildi aayi  
O, Banirdiya re simblaa heth.*

*Khari kiti naa suno betiyo,*

*Sati chali tuse jaava,  
Khari kiti naa suno betiyo.*

*O ji o moti purana shankh bolya,  
Parja kalhi hoye naa,  
Motipura na shankh bolya.*

*Saare shauhra re jine devte saure,  
O, rame-rame dhyada,  
Saare shauhra re jine devte saure.*

In the end of *Gatha* (ballad) few lines were spoken after the death of Bhanu, at a place named Baniridi (near Tikkar in Mandi District), where his mother came to meet his two wives. She suggested his wives that they should burn themselves on the pyre of their husband. The wives burnt themselves with Bhanu's body. The significance of these lines is that, *sati* was regarded an important part of tradition and custom. It was considered proper for the widows to burn themselves on the pyre of their husbands. The widows, who were not compelled to become *sati*, lived a life of loneliness. They could not get remarried as this was usually not permissible for those who were of the upper caste. Widow re-marriage was much more common amongst the lower castes. In these casts, if a man died, his wife was remarried preferably to one of his brothers or relatives. A widow could also be remarried to an unrelated man. These customs were locally called *dharewa* and *janjriara* respectively. In Mandi region, practice of *Sati* prevailed mainly amongst the higher classes i.e. in the royal families. The common people of the region did not follow such a practice; but some instances are found in some places where *sati* was followed by lower class people as well. There are many written records in terms of history books on Mandi like *Gazetteer of Mandi State*, *History of Punjab Hill States* etc. which describe the *sati* practice followed in the region. For a long time *sati* system prevailed in the upper strata of society but gradually the people became aware of this evil custom. With the passage of time, it was eradicated from the society. This tradition throws light on the customs prevailing in the society of the Mandi region and the complications associated with it.

### **Rituals and Beliefs Related to *Sati***

In many parts of princely state of Mandi are large heaps of stones lying by the roadside. These are *sati* heaps and beliefs say that when a widow resolved to burn with her husband on the

funeral pyre, she laid a stone at a certain spot. The people, who pass by this place, followed her example, throwing a stone on that place, partly in honor of her virtuous end, and partly to please her spirit, which, like the shades of all who meet a tragic fate, is of very doubtful benevolence. In some *sati* places, visitors use to put green branches on that place and pray for that soul. The Mandi state is very rich in the terms of *sati* places, while in the Suket state, memorial tablets are very uncommon and were confined only in the royal families. According to Krishan Chand Sharma, son of late Saraswati Devi, a *botin* (female Cook) in the royal kitchen of last ruler of Suket state, Lakshman Sen (1919-1948) told one interesting belief towards the memorial tablet that whenever a member of the ruling family died, his stone image called *barsile* was made and worshipped. It was then covered with a blanket and carried to a place at the bottom of the Tarambdi Hill. A *santri* (Security Guard) is placed on duty to guard the image for one week and a *pujari* (Priest) bathed and offered *bhog* (offering in the form of eatables) to the image everyday during the same period.

### Conclusion

The woman who burns herself to death with her deceased husband is generally referred to as the widow, sometimes as *Sati*. *Sati* combines an idea of devotion and fidelity transcending the love of life. *Sati* custom in Mandi region has been attested since 1664 A.D. There are *sati* pillars erected on a plot of land on the left bank of Suketi Naala in Mandi town. In a symbolic act, the widow has to confirm her devotion and attachment to her husband. *Sati* is the embodied ideal wife who is linked with her husband in a relationship of unshakeable devotion and subordination. Expressions of this relationship are found in Hindu mythology also. This mythological form of *Sati* was adopted as an ideal by the upper classes and the practice of *sati* became an acceptable socio-religious ceremony in many parts of India including Mandi. But there is no such account in any Hindu religious literature which says that the widowed wife has to commit suicide on her dead husband's pyre. The meaning of the word *sati* is righteous. But as written earlier the women named *sati*, in Hindu religious literature, did not commit suicide on her dead husband's pyre. Therefore the custom of widow burning probably did not emulate from religious background but from social interpretation. A *gatha* named *Bhanu ka Jhera*, which is a part of folklore of Mandi, is still prevalent in the society and this throws light on the ill practice of *Sati*. To conclude this article, in the end we can say that the widow's decision to burn to death, which by a rule she announced immediately after her husband's death, was generally voluntary, in the sense that, if

she refused to die, she could continue to live, even if it was under miserable conditions. On the other hand, there was a tendency among the participants to consider the decision and to demand that it be carried out even against the widow's will. So, even if in the last moments, the widow refused to go ahead, she was forcefully burned with her husband.

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