

Module 1, Discussion 2: Hindu Practice of Sati

Main Topic

Sati is portrayed as a divine and respectable act by the Brahmin and Hindu population. For the widow, the act fulfills a spiritual obligation to her deceased husband which "by this great sacrifice she would secure salvation to herself and husband, and to their families to the seventh generation. Be they ever so sinful, they would surely attain the highest bliss in heaven, and prosperity on earth." It is communicated to European observers that this act is an important and necessary part of practicing the Hindu faith. Within the assigned readings there were many examples of the Hindu peoples' malcontent, including the following lines within a petition in 1830 from orthodox Hindus to the Governor-General: "we are satisfied, and flatter ourselves with the hope, that your Lordship in Council will not regard the assertion of men who have neither any faith nor care for the memory of their ancestors or their religion: and that of your Lordship in Council will assume to yourself the difficult and delicate task of regulating the conscience of a whole people." Clearly, the tone of the petition at this point is one of incredulity and quiet outrage. The Hindu people do not believe that anyone should be able to interfere in such a way with their religious customs.

Opponents of sati feel that widows have the right to continue living an ascetic life, should they so choose. It is observed by the occupying authorities on numerous occasions that many widows perform self immolation solely because it is expected of them by their society and is not done by their own will. While efforts were made to outlaw the act entirely, this proved problematic and caused a great deal of unrest among the Hindu people which contributed to the instability of the region as a British colony. An interesting line can be found at the end of Bentinck's Minute on Sati: 8 November 1829: "When we had powerful neighbours and had greater reason to doubt our own security, expediency might recommend an indirect and more cautious proceeding, but now that we are supreme, my opinion is decidedly in favour of an open, avowed and general prohibition, resting altogether upon the moral goodness of the act, and our power to enforce it, and so decided is my feeling against any half measure, that were I not convinced of the safety of total abolition, I certainly should have advised the cessation of all interference. Perhaps the Hindu people would have had less interruptions in practicing sati, and in other areas of their lives, if British control over India was not so well established.

Re: Sati (by Chris Yoder)

"The supporters of sati viewed Lord Bentinck's Regulation of 4 December, 1829, as an attack of the British imperial government in India on Hindu religion and undue governmental interference in the realm of religious practice and family life. Their arguments raise key questions about the legitimacy of government control of social practices and customs that people claim are integral to their religious beliefs."

Denying people their faith is also a good way to incite a revolution. I'm sure Lord Bentinck and others from the British government only interfered when they felt that they could afford to.

Re: The Hindu Practice of Sati (by Nichole Martin)

I think it's pretty terrible, but the only way you might be able to get people to stop doing something is if you can convince them of your point of view.

Re: Module 1, Discussion 2 (by Thomas McCloskey)

"Women are in general inferior to men in bodily strength and energy; consequently the male part of the community, taking advantage of their corporeal weakness..."

This is an interesting excerpt and seeing it again makes me wish I brought it up in my initial post. I think it is safe to assume that women would not be barbecuing themselves for their deceased husbands if this were not true.

It's a touchy subject, however. There are more than a few examples of cultural rites in the world that really do nothing but create outcry and invite intervention from others. The ones I know about tend to involve women and how they are treated, like being married off at very young ages (also a part of the Hindu faith and culture). The practice of sati is another example of this.