

Sovereignty and Social Reform in India: British Colonialism and the Campaign Against Sati, 1830–60

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Author:

Andrea Major

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Daniel Grey

The subject of *sati* – more commonly known to Anglophone readers as ‘suttee’, a term which was used by 18th- and 19th-century writers to signify the self-immolation of Hindu widows on the funeral pyres of their husbands [\(1\)](#) – has long been of interest to historians. The vivid and horrific image of a woman willingly consumed by flames was the subject of exhaustive documentation by Europeans in both official and personal accounts over a considerable span of time. Indeed, Pompa Bannerjee has argued that this discussion was so pervasive that ‘By the 1500s, representations of *sati* [...] were conventional, almost *de rigueur*, in travelogues of India’.[\(2\)](#) Although never widespread (indeed, Major observes that it was practically unheard of in some regions of India), the custom was frequently used as a shorthand way of depicting the supposed backwardness of South Asia in comparison with the West, stressing the fatal consequences that resulted for those women from being members of an ‘inferior’ race and religion, while being simultaneously fascinated by the notion of *sati* as a public spectacle. Paradoxically, this fascination could also sometimes lead to early modern writers explicitly praising the women involved for ‘wifely devotion’ rather than condemning it as barbaric, or Western observers claiming to view it ‘impartially’ as a cultural performance that needed to be understood in the context of Indian society, religion and culture.[\(3\)](#) During the early 19th century, discussion of the practice arguably reached its zenith from what were already high levels and in 1829, after several heated debates between colonial officials, missionaries and other interested parties over the best way to deal with this custom, *sati* was outlawed in Bengal, and this legislation was quickly extended across the rest of British India.[\(4\)](#)

From almost immediately after the law was passed, the abolition of *sati* was confidently and repeatedly

declared a resounding success. By 1885, for example, it was possible for *The Times* to report smugly to its readers that ‘The terrible rite of Sutte is now a thing entirely of the past’, holding up the ending of the practice as one of the notable successes of British imperial rule, a narrative of benevolent ‘civilising progress’ which continued to be used right up until 1947.⁽⁵⁾ The degree to which this eradication had actually been achieved was rarely questioned, despite the occasional reports of cases which cropped up over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries. Moreover, the methods used against *sati* became a template for a number of other Victorian ‘social reform’ legislative measures, such as the campaign against female infanticide.⁽⁶⁾

In fact, far from being comprehensively eliminated, *sati* has never entirely been abolished. This was perhaps most significantly demonstrated by the notorious *sati* of 18-year-old Roop Kanwar in Rajasthan in 1987, and the resulting battle in the media and the courtroom between liberal and conservative commentators on whether those who had either participated in or supported Kanwar’s *sati* should be prosecuted or not, and what the practice meant for culture and society in late 20th-century India.⁽⁷⁾ Nor, despite the insistent rhetoric of British campaigners and administrators from the early 19th century onwards (if not earlier), can the debates over the abolition of *sati* and the eventual decision to make the practice illegal be seen as an unproblematic humanitarian measure imposed to save the lives of vulnerable colonial subjects.

What makes Andrea Major’s new book such a valuable and innovative contribution to the discussion of this much-studied topic is that *Sovereignty* begins its narrative where most accounts end: the outlawing of the practice. Exploring the attempts by the East India Company to enforce this prohibition outside the limits of British India and stretching into the north-western Rajput and Maratha princely states that were formally set outside their jurisdiction, Major opens up important new avenues for historical debate. The ‘princely states’, which were theoretically independent regions of the subcontinent officially administered by sovereign rulers allied with the United Kingdom, had a complex relationship with colonial officials. Although the focus of the East India Company from the 1820s onwards was on subtly enforcing the indirect rule of these territories, the rulers themselves were never merely passive figureheads who slavishly obeyed British whims, but remained active participants in the contesting of ideas about how India should be governed even after independence and partition in 1947.⁽⁸⁾ The areas in question could range in size from as large as the kingdom of Hyderabad to as small as a few square miles, but, although until recently they have been relatively little studied, these states accounted for a substantial region of the subcontinent, covering approximately one-third of its landmass (p. 6). By charting the ways in which *sati* went from ‘[a] widely tolerated practice in 1830’ (p. 9) to being forbidden throughout the princely states by 1860, Major demonstrates the shaping of increasingly interventionist attitudes among colonial officials in the mid 19th century and how these were affected in turn by Indian ideas regarding the practice.

The depiction of *sati* in north-west India was reinvented by the British as part of the Rajput ‘martial tradition’, a discourse very separate from the representations of the custom in Bengal that have been comprehensively analysed by Lata Mani.⁽⁹⁾ While still condemnatory, this view was directly shaped by British beliefs that the Rajputs were fierce warriors worthy of respect, and drew directly on earlier constructions from the 18th century of the woman who committed *sati* as heroically fulfilling her wifely duty. Initially, East India Company officials assumed that they would be able to subtly persuade the princely states to follow their example (a theory presented, not for the first or the last time, as the unproblematic encouragement of a humanitarian and ‘civilised’ measure that Indian rulers would ‘naturally’ adopt once the British took a stand) and forbid it. As it became clear that this would not be either a simple or a swift process, however, arguments began to be put forward that a more direct intervention should be made, opening up a wider discussion ‘about the acceptable limits of British intervention in princely states’ (p. 42).

Never normally shy about concocting excuses for taking a firm interventionist line in defence of its interests, the Company was leery of sparking violent and widespread protests in the princely states against outside interference by making the abolition of *sati* by nominal allies a demand instead of a request. It was influenced in particular by the sharp contrast between colonial representations of ‘martial’ Rajput and ‘effete’ Bengali society, and the resulting assumption that Rajput nobles and princes would fiercely contest any perceived attempt to curtail their authority or customs. It was not until 1845 that it became a clear policy

in the Company to push rulers of the princely states – with a greater or lesser degree of subtlety – into abolishing *sati*, and the upheaval and trauma of the Great Rebellion in 1857 demonstrated the crucial importance to colonial officials of maintaining cordial relations with the princely states. However, over this 30-year period attitudes increasingly hardened against tolerating the practice beyond the borders of the Bengal, Bombay and Madras Presidencies, even as it was simultaneously acknowledged by the Company that extending and enforcing such a ban on *sati* ‘was in fact highly contingent on local circumstances, political expediencies and pragmatic considerations’ (p. 114).

Drawing extensively on unpublished archival material held in both India and Britain, as well as published sources, Major has crafted a well-written and meticulous examination of the ways in which the East India Company both attempted to exert its influence in the princely states, and was itself profoundly influenced in turn by Rajput ideas about *sati* and its meaning. That said, given the richness of the sources discussed here, at just three chapters (plus introduction and conclusion) comprising 152 pages, I was occasionally left with the feeling that some aspects of the narrative were cut short rather too soon – possibly, despite the substantial amount of primary and secondary material which has been added here, a holdover from the manuscript’s origins as two chapters of a doctoral thesis. It would, for example, have been interesting to explore in rather more detail the similarities and differences with the mid 19th century discourse on suicide in Britain, which might have had a bearing on this newly (re)valorised interpretation of Rajput *sati*; particularly since this comparison is something that Major has performed to great effect in her earlier work on early modern narratives of the practice.⁽¹⁰⁾ This is, however, a relatively minor quibble given the overall importance of this book for developing our understanding of both South Asian and imperial mid 19th-century history. In illuminating the complicated ways in which Rajput and British ideas regarding both sovereignty and *sati* influenced each other between 1830 and 1860, Dr Major has opened up entirely new avenues of enquiry regarding the reciprocal relationship between colony and metropole, and the finely nuanced distinctions drawn ‘on the ground’ in imperial policy and practice in 19th-century South Asia.

Notes

1. Major notes that this is a British interpretation of a Sanskrit term which ignores its different aspects, and additionally conflates *sati* as an act with the person who performs it (p. 1).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Pompa Bannerjee, *Burning Women: Widows, Witches and Early Modern European Travellers in India* (Basingstoke, 2003), p. 1.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Andrea Major, ‘A question of rites? Perspectives on the colonial encounter with *sati*’, *History Compass*, 4, 5 (2006), 780–99; Norbert Schürer, ‘The impartial spectator of *sati*, 1757–84’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 42, 1 (2008), 19–44.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. On these debates see variously Andrea Major ‘Eternal flames: suicide, sinfulness and insanity in European constructions of *sati*, 1500–1830’, *International Journal of Asian Studies*, 27, 2 (2004), 247–76; Andrea Major, *Pious Flames: European Encounters with Sati 1500–1830* (New Delhi, 2006); *Lata Mani*, ‘Production of an official discourse on *sati* in early nineteenth century Bengal’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 21 (1986), 32–40; *Lata Mani*, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India, 1780–1833* (Berkeley, CA, 1998); Clare Midgley, ‘Female emancipation in an imperial frame: English women and the campaign against *sati* (widow-burning) in India, 1813–30’, *Women’s History Review*, 9, 1 (2000), 95–121; Anand A. Yang, ‘Whose *sati*? Widow burning in early 19th century India’, *Journal of Women’s History*, 1 (1989), 8–33.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. ‘Social reform in India’, *The Times*, 13 November 1885, p. 13.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Veena Talwar Oldenburg, *Dowry Murder: Reinvestigating a Cultural Whodunnit* (2nd ed., New Delhi, 2010), pp.24–5; Daniel J. R. Grey, ‘Gender, religion, and infanticide in colonial India, 1870–1906’, forthcoming in *Victorian Review*.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. On Kanwar’s death and the controversy it generated see Dina Abbott, ‘Paying the price of femininity: women and new Hinduism’ in *Culture and Global Change*, ed. Tracy Skelton and Tim Allen (London, 1999), pp. 240–8; Ananya Chatterjea, ‘Dancing death by fire: In search of Roop Kanwar’, *Women & Performance*, 11, 1(1999), 81–102; Paul B. Courtright and Namita Goswami, ‘Who was Roop Kanwar? *Sati*, law, religion, and postcolonial feminism’ in *Religion and Personal Law in Secular India: A Call to Judgment*

- , ed. Gerald James Larson (Bloomington, IN, 2001), pp. 200–25; Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita, ‘The burning of Roop Kanwar’, *Race & Class*, 30, 1 (1988), 59–67; Lata Mani, ‘Multiple mediations: feminist scholarship in the age of multinational reception’, *Feminist Review*, 35 (1990), 24–41; Major, *Sovereignty*, pp. 1–4; Ashis Nandy, ‘Sati as profit versus sati as spectacle: the public debate on Roop Kanwar’s death’ in *Sati, the Blessing and the Curse: the Burning of Wives in India*, ed. John Stratton Hawley (Oxford, 1994), pp.131–48; Veena Talwar Oldenburg, ‘The Roop Kanwar case: feminist responses’ in *Sati, the Blessing and the Curse: the Burning of Wives in India*, ed. John Stratton Hawley (Oxford, 1994), pp. 101–30; Lourens P. van den Bosch, ‘A burning question: *sati* and *sati* temples as the focus of political interest’, *Numen*, 37 (1990), 174–94.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Barbara N. Ramusack, *Indian Princes and Their States* (Cambridge, 2004).[Back to \(8\)](#)
 9. Mani, ‘Official production’ and *Contentious Traditions*.[Back to \(9\)](#)
 10. Major, ‘Eternal flames’.[Back to \(10\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further, except to thank the reviewer for their thoughtful consideration of her work.

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[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/7866>