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ANTI-SATI AGITATION AND ROOP KANWAR INCIDENT

History of sati:

Historical records tell us that sati first appeared between 320 to 550 CE, during the rule of Gupta Empire. Incidents of sati were first recorded in Nepal in 464 CE, and later on in Madhya Pradesh in 510 CE. The practice then spread to Rajasthan, where most number of sati cases happened over the centuries.

Initially, the practice of sati was confined to royal families of the Kshatriya caste and only later spread to the lower castes, becoming widely practiced among all social classes.

Sati was at its peak between the 15th and 18th centuries. During this period, as many as 1000 widows were burned alive every year, most commonly in India and Nepal. However, records show that the practice was also popular in other traditions and in countries like Russia, Fiji and Vietnam.

What does sati mean?

‘Sati’ originally meant a woman who performed the act of immolating herself after her husband’s death. The word is derived from the Sanskrit word ‘*Sasti*’, which means ‘she is pure or true’.

In mythological terms, Sati was the name of the wife of Lord Shiva. Her father never respected Shiva and often despised him. To protest against the hatred that her father held for her husband, she burned herself. While she was burning, she prayed to be reborn as Shiva's wife again. This did happen, and her new incarnation was called Parvati. People used to justify the practice based on this tale, but when Sati burned herself, she wasn't a widow, and thus the practice is quite unrelated to this tale.

Prohibition of sati:

If historical facts are to be believed, the practice of sati was prohibited many times between 15th and 18th centuries. In 1500, Mughal Emperor Akbar outlawed sati, and in 1663, Aurangzeb tried to end it again. Even the Portuguese, French and British, who came to India during the European colonial period, tried to stop sati. In 1850, the British hardened their rules against the practice. Sir Charles Napier ordered to hang to death any Hindu priest who presided over a widow burning. The princely states of India during that time were also pressurized to rule out sati completely.

Prevention of Sati Act (1987):

In 1987, in the village of Deorala in Rajasthan, an 18-year-old married woman named Roop Kanwar was forced to become sati when her husband died after eight months of marriage. She refused. Consequently, a group of men from the village forcefully drugged and immolated her. Police investigated the

case and those men were arrested. In lieu of this incident, the government created the Prevention of Sati Act, making it illegal to force or encourage a woman to commit sati, and anyone doing so would be punished by death. And yet, some widows still choose to become sati – at least four such cases were recorded between 2000 and 2015.

JAIPUR: Thirty-two years after 18-year-old Roop Kanwar was allegedly forced to perform Sati in Rajasthan's Deorala village, her case is still being heard at Jaipur's special court. It will come up for the next hearing on September 11, at the Special Court which was set up to handle trials related to sati cases.

Roop Kanwar was burnt alive on the funeral pyre of her husband Maal Singh, at Deorala village in Rajasthan's Sikar district on September 4, 1987.

The procession of Roop Kanwar's journey to the funeral pyre was attended by thousands of people, including some politicians of Rajasthan. Soon after, it became a matter of human rights violation and a case was registered under the **Sati Prevention Act (1929)** against the killing of Kanwar which has now reached the final stage.

A total of 45 people were charged in the Roop Kanwar Sati case, including her in-laws and the politicians who attended the procession on September 22, 1988. This includes Roop's father-in-law Sumer Singh, and three other relatives on charges of murder and a abetting suicide.

India's last known case of sati:

Thirty-two years after Roop Kanwar's death, just one of the nearly two-dozen cases filed in the wake of the sati remains, and is in its last stages at a special court in Jaipur. This case pertains to 1988 when, around the first anniversary of her death, 45 people allegedly held an event glorifying sati. This violated Section 5 (punishment for glorification of sati) of **The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987**, a law that was enacted after Roop Kanwar's death. Of the 45, 25 were acquitted in 2004 for lack of evidence, six have died, and five are absconding, while the case is being heard against the remaining nine. As many as 19 people, all police officials, were made witnesses in the case. The maximum punishment for glorification of sati is imprisonment up to seven years and fine of up to Rs 30,000.

Roop Kanwar's would become the last recorded case of sati in the country. It would also be cited as one of the reasons for the ouster of then Rajasthan chief minister Hari Dev Joshi of the Congress. Divrala also assumed a special place in Rajput pride, with some of those hailing from the village, such as Shri Rajput Karni Sena leader Narayan Singh 'Divrala', adding the name of the village to their own.

Over 150 persons were accused in the nearly two dozen sati cases, including the first case related to her death. Except for nearly 20 people who either died or are absconding, the others have been acquitted over the past three decades.

While the sati prompted questions about whether Roop Kanwar was coerced into the act or if she willingly sat on her husband's pyre, and pitted modernity against what many called "tradition", in Divrala, even after all these years, there is no doubt in anybody's mind that Roop Kanwar's was a "selfless act" driven by "agad prem (unparalleled love)".

In these parts, the Roop Kanwar story is told without any of the contradictions that time and modernity throw up; if anything, the legend has only been burnished with time.

Villagers say that on September 4, 1987, after her husband's death, Roop Kanwar recited the Gayatri Mantra, dressed up in solah shringaar (16 adornments) while thousands of villagers from Divrala and neighbouring villages took out her shobha yatra throughout the village, and then did sati. The folklore goes that her hair or clothes didn't burn at first, and that she didn't let out a single scream.

"Thousands stood guard with swords as she approached the pyre," says Anand Singh, a relative, who lives in Divrala. "She sat on the pyre with her husband's head in her lap. And she recited the Gayatri Mantra with one of her hands raised, blessing those who had gathered there," he says, while adding that he was not in Divrala that day.

In Divrala, Roop Kanwar is likened to Chittorgarh's Padmavati, the one who is said to have jumped into a pyre to escape Alauddin Khilji's advancing army. "As per Rajput traditions, it

is aged prem towards one's partner that makes one take such a step," says Rathore, adding that it is this love for which his sister Roop Kanwar, "a devi", is worshipped.

The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987, prohibits the construction of temples in the memory of someone who has committed sati, and empowers District Magistrates to remove them. Yet, in home after home in Divrala are photographs of Roop Kanwar that often share space with other gods and goddesses.

Asked about the shrines in people's homes, Sikar District Collector C R Meena says, "I don't have any such information yet but if it is so, then I will get it surveyed and serve them a notice."

At the tiny shrine in his home, Anand Singh too has two photographs of Roop Kanwar, one of her with her husband after marriage and another, evidently edited, of her sitting on his funeral pyre and surrounded by flames.

At her in-laws' home in Divrala, what was once Roop Kanwar's room is now a shrine. One recent afternoon, just as her father-in-law Sumer Singh sits up on his cot to recall the events of that day 32 years ago, he is interrupted by his son Bhupendra Singh, who forbids him from talking to journalists anymore. Bhupendra then proceeds to padlock the room. Sumer Singh spent three months in Neem ka Thana jail, accused of aiding, abetting and glorifying sati.

Residents say that like every year, on September 9 this year, when the Hindu calendar marked Shukla Ekadashi, hundreds gathered outside Roop Kanwar's residence to worship her.

“There were people from Gujarat too. Their mannat (prayer) gets fulfilled, why else would busloads of people come all the way?” says Prem Kanwar, a 65-year-old in Divrala, adding that she feels proud of what “sati mata” did. It was on a Shukla Ekadashi all those years ago that Roop Kanwar had allegedly immolated herself.

“Elders asked her not to go ahead with the sati but she would not listen to them. When they persisted, she went to her husband's body, whispered something in his ear as elders looked on, and he opened his eyes thrice. That is what changed the hearts of the village elders,” she claims.

At the site of the sati are two trishul (tridents) signifying Roop Kanwar's ‘shakti’, with the larger one swathed in layers of red chunri and adorned with a fresh garland. Next to it, within a small block of bricks, are two wedding photographs of Roop Kanwar and her husband, yellow stalks of burnt incense sticks, two coconuts, and a pile of grains. A smaller trishul behind this block of bricks signifies the spot where Roop Kanwar's statue will be established, if at all the site becomes a temple, which now mostly depends on the political traction the villagers hope to get.

Roop Kanwar devotees and her family object to the usage of “pratha (tradition)” while talking of the sati. “We had about 40-

50 widows in our village around that time (when Roop Kanwar immolated herself). Had it been a pratha, others would have committed sati too. But in this region, there were only three cases of sati before hers: Mitthu Kanwar, Kunan Kanwar and Jhumma Kanwar,” argues Jawan Singh, 74, a resident of Divrala.

With almost every retelling of the Roop story adding to the “devi” legend, there are as many versions of the “exact moment” when Roop Kanwar became a goddess.

Anand Singh has his own. “As she walked up to the pyre on her way to committing sati, she was in a ghoongat (veil), and thousands wanted to catch her glimpse. That’s when her father-in-law asked her to remove her veil and give darshan to locals. Because at that moment, she had ceased to be a woman. She had become a goddess.”

Reference: <https://theculturetrip.com/asia/india/articles/the-dark-history-behind-sati-a-banned-funeral-custom-in-india/>

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